



Kyngervi



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Kyngervi 2 (2020) 87-92.

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Published in the United Kingdom

www.kyngervi.org



**Review: Christopher Abram, *Evergreen
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[Content warning: climate disaster; language that evokes violence against trans people]

Evergreen Ash is a necessary book. Published in the last year of the warmest decade in recorded history,² *Evergreen Ash* uses ecocritical readings of Norse mythology to ‘foreground and interrogate ecological issues that are relevant both to the medieval past and to a future-focused ecocritical praxis in the present’ (26). Throughout the book, Abram draws parallels between Ragnarøk and the present-day climate crisis. Refreshingly, this book is not particularly concerned with accusations of ahistoricism. Abram states outright that he is not interested in revealing ecological truths behind the texts of the Prose and Poetic Eddas, but rather interrogating what these medieval Icelandic texts, written by a culture whose natural world is ‘perpetually on the brink of one disaster or another,’ (8) might be able to say to readers whose world feels on the edge of ecological

¹ PhD candidate, Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse & Celtic, University of Cambridge; kah78@cam.ac.uk

² Press Office, ‘Confirmation that 2019 concludes warmest decade’, *Met Office*, 15th Jan 2020 <<https://www.metoffice.gov.uk/about-us/press-office/news/weather-and-climate/2020/confirmation-that-2019-concludes-warmest-decade-on-record>> [Accessed 17/1/2020].

collapse. What follows is bleak but compelling reading. Time and again, Abram shows that the conditions for Ragnarǫk were ingrained into the ideologies of Norse myth, just as the conditions for climate disaster are in the present-day global north.

The first thing *Evergreen Ash* does is tackle what could be termed ‘green paganism.’ This idea was made famous by Lynn White Jr., who hypothesised that Christianity’s elevation of human ‘Society’ above an undifferentiated ‘Nature’ in Genesis sowed the seeds of the climate catastrophe (27-8). While Abram acknowledges that Old Norse textual sources were recorded post-Christianisation, he uses etymological analyses of Old Norse terms for the world such as *verǫld* (‘world,’ derived from *ver* ‘man’ and *ǫld* ‘age’) and structural analysis of Old Norse myth to argue that what can be gleaned of pre-Christian Norse culture was ‘hardly less anthropocentric than the Judeo-Christian world, as long as we read the Æsir as occupying the human subject position’ (61). Patterns of dualistic, hierarchical thinking regarding humanity and Nature cannot be pinned to the spread of Christianity.

Abram devotes the chapter ‘Trees, Vines, and the Golden Age of Settlement’ to discussing the sagas’ literary construction of settlement-era Iceland as a Golden Age of natural plenty. While Abram’s depiction of a medieval Iceland blighted by anthropogenic environmental degradation may be exaggerated,³ this does not damage his conclusion that nostalgia does nothing to improve present or future living standards (107). This is one of the most vital messages of the book: while climate despair may drive people toward nostalgia for the medieval period as a pre-industrial ecological haven, humans have always had the potential for harmful relationships with the environment.

As well as addressing the romanticisation of medieval Scandinavia, Abram also argues that both climate disaster and Ragnarǫk are linked to inequality. Key to this conclusion is Bruno Latour’s ‘modern constitution,’ which is built upon an absolute distinction between non-human Nature and human

³ Richard Streeter, Andrew J. Dugmore, Ian T. Lawson, Egill Erlendsson and Kevin J Edwards, ‘The onset of the palaeoanthropocene in Iceland: Changes in complex natural systems,’ *The Holocene* 25.10 (2015), 1662-75.

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Society that is strengthened by the construction and subsequent violent rejection and subordination of ‘hybrid’ figures and populations. To the Æsir, the *jǫtnar* and *dvergjar* are such hybrids (134-8). While Abram does address the representation of Indigenous peoples (the *skralingar* of *Eiríks saga rauða* and *Grænlandinga saga*) as another such hybrid group (114-21), this section is brief and lacks engagement with Indigenous Studies and Critical Race Theory regarding the portrayal of Indigenous and racialised peoples in modern and medieval literatures. Overall, Abram’s theories regarding modernity and Ragnarǫk/climate crisis are not wrong *per se*. However, greater attention to their connections to phenomena such as race⁴ and settler-extractivism⁵ is required.

Gender inequality and disaster is discussed in the fourth chapter, ‘The Nature of World in a World without Nature.’ A significant amount of time is spent critiquing earth-mother narratives and James Lovelock’s ‘Gaia hypothesis.’ These readings, Abram argues, are based upon the ever-present nature/society binary, which tends to place a feminine Nature one step below a masculine Society on the hierarchy of being (71-81). The analysis of how *Hákonardrápa* portrays the personified Jǫrð (“earth”) as a victim of sexual assault is a difficult but persuasive reading of how these binaries function alongside gender to justify the abuse of the environment.

Yet, while *Evergreen Ash* argues that the oppression of marginalised groups is central to both Ragnarǫk and climate disaster, it is in the call for social and climate justice that this book is most flawed. Abram repeatedly brings up aspects of ecological disaster that have been cited in eco-fascist manifestos, such as the theory that the Abrahamic religions are less ecologically-sound than Germanic paganism (21, 27-8); and the argument that climate disaster is related

⁴ Defined by Michael Omi and Howard Winant as ‘a concept that signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies.’ Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, 3rd ed. (New York and London: Routledge, 2015), p. 110. See also Geraldine Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 3.

⁵ The excessive extraction of natural resources for profit, carried out by colonial powers at the expense of indigenous communities. Anna J. Willow, ‘Indigenous ExtrACTIVISM in Boreal Canada: Colonial Legacies, Contemporary Struggles and Sovereign Futures’, *Humanities* 5, 55 (2016) <https://doi.org/10.3390/h5030055>.

to global overpopulation (65). These ideas are usually connected to the myths of ‘white genocide’ and ‘the great replacement.’⁶ Such myths also rely upon the representation of People of Colour as “hybrid” Nature/Culture figures that must be violently rejected and/or subdued, but this is barely addressed. As mentioned, Abram deconstructs the idea of green paganism, and he briefly touches upon the use of green paganism by eco-fascists to justify Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, and ethnonationalism in the conclusion (172-7). However, he does not challenge arguments concerning overpopulation, despite studies indicating that resource mismanagement under capitalism, not overpopulation, is the greater danger.⁷ Furthermore, certain passages of *Evergreen Ash* regarding apocalypticism in climate activism do not suggest urgency so much as they do survivalism (20, 125, 129), itself a heavily gendered phenomenon that places ‘masculine’ activities as the most conducive to disaster survival, and thus the abled man as the apex survivor, triumphant over Nature’s disasters.⁸ There is nothing to suggest that Abram sympathises with these viewpoints, but his direct criticisms of far-right ideologies are too little, too late.

In addition to this, Abram occasionally misuses terms without unpacking them. For instance, he labels the naming of Greenland ‘greenwashing,’ on account of it using the promise of abundant foliage to ‘market’ the new settlements (108). While the naming of Greenland may have misinformed Norse people regarding the Greenlandic climate, it is hard to put this in the same category as deliberately misleading climate-conscious consumers into buying an environmentally damaging product. Similarly, Abram calls the common skaldic kenning-metaphor of trees standing for humans ‘a cultural appropriation of a nonhuman phenomenon’ (102). This remark may have been intended as a suggestion that nonhuman life should be held in the same ontological regard as

⁶ A. Dirk Moses, “‘White Genocide’ and Ethics of Public Analysis”, *Journal of Genocide Research* 21.2 (2019), 201-13; Maria Darwish, ‘Green neo-Nazism: Examining the intersection of masculinity, far-right extremism and environmentalism in the Nordic Resistance Movement’, MA thesis (Oslo, 2018).

⁷ Evangelos D. Protopapadakis, ‘Environmental Ethics and Linkola's Ecofascism: An Ethics Beyond Humanism’, *Frontiers of Philosophy in China* 9.4 (2014), 586-601.

⁸ Casey Ryan Kelly, ‘The Man-pocalypse: Doomsday Preppers and the Rituals of Apocalyptic Manhood’, *Text and Performance Quarterly* 36, no. 2-3 (July 2, 2016), 95-114.

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human life, but as it lacks any such explanation, it comes across as somewhat dismissive of the very real harm caused by the cultural appropriation of *human* phenomena.

Among these ill-judged uses of terminology is the misapplication of queer ecology. In chapter 2, Abram queers the body of Ymir, the *jǫtunn* whose legs bring forth a son through what Abram terms ‘frottage’ (54). In his analysis of Ymir as queer, Abram confuses intersex and trans identities, arguing that Ymir’s masculinity and ability to reproduce on his own renders him “intersex” and yet describing the world as ‘dragged from the bloody and broken trans-body of the queer paternal-maternal ancestor’ (56). Purely on the grounds of terminology, this switch between intersex and trans suggests a lack of wider reading, and furthermore the hyphenation of ‘trans-body,’ rather than the use of ‘trans’ as an adjective, suggests that trans bodies are inherently different from other bodies, simultaneously erasing and dehumanising trans and intersex people. Furthermore, the fact that Abram felt the need to re-state the violence enacted upon the only body he queers in such a sensationalist manner, while probably entirely coincidental, is a shock to a queer reader.

Overall, it should be emphasised that *Evergreen Ash* is a necessary book. All disciplines desperately need to address the climate crisis. Yet, *Evergreen Ash* alone will not fulfil this need. It is a defiantly ahistorical text that engages with a broad spectrum of ecocritical theory to make some salient points, and it confidently challenges some core eco-fascist beliefs. And yet, it falls flat in essential areas of present-day environmentalist praxis. While Abram does acknowledge approaches like ecofeminism, it is usually brief, and he spends more time arguing against Lovelock and White than he does engaging with the many approaches that centre marginalised voices, particularly postcolonialism, Indigenous Studies, and Critical Race Theory. It feels uncharitable criticising a book that reads like one scholar’s personal meditation on the climate crisis, but we need to address the weaknesses mentioned here, as they are common in

climate activism both inside and outside academia.⁹ I hope that the publication of *Evergreen Ash* prompts more books in this vein, but I hope they place greater emphasis on the marginalised voices that need to be centred in the fight for climate justice.

⁹ Susuana Amoah, 'Reflections: Overpopulation and the Unbearable Whiteness of Green,' ONCA website (24th July 2019) <https://onca.org.uk/2019/07/24/overpopulation-the-unbearable-whiteness-of-green/> [Accessed 12th March 2020]; Ben Smoke, 'Room for Change: the Problem with Extinction Rebellion,' *Huck* (10th October 2019) <https://www.huckmag.com/perspectives/opinion-perspectives/room-for-change-the-problem-with-extinction-rebellion/> [Accessed 12th March 2020].