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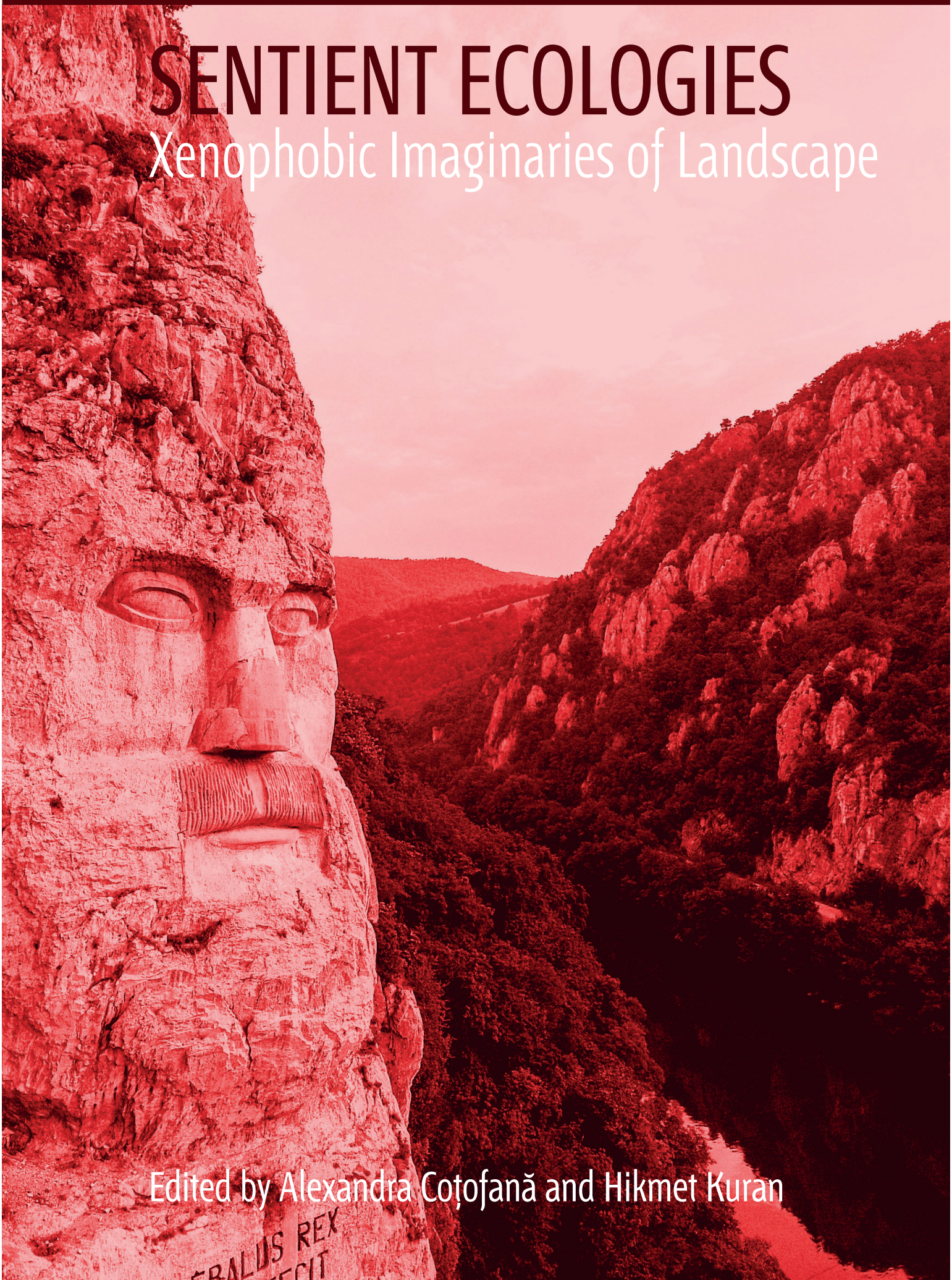
SENTIENT ECOLOGIES

Xenophobic Imaginaries of Landscape



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Epilogue

Why Is It Vital to Scrutinize the Connection between Landscape, Sentience, and Xenophobia in the Age of Deepening Crises of Democracy and Ecology?

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There is a rich and growing literature about the perception, conceptualization, and imaginaries of organic entities (flora, fauna) and inorganic entities (rivers, mountains, glaciers, rocks, landscapes, etc.)—a literature which indicates quite disruptive approaches elaborating those entities' roles, values, importance, or "sentience" (e.g., Povinelli 1995; Cruikshank 2006; Janowski and Ingold 2012; Rogaski 2018; Peterson 2011; Kohn 2013; Mathieu 2006; Backhaus, Reichler, and Stremlow 2008; Gordillo 2018). Methodological perspectives from the fields of political geography, environmental studies, anthropology, and their cognate disciplines are employed to explore alternative logics of sentient landscapes. These perspectives deal with human-nature interaction through political, ecological, and cultural dimensions, with specific interrogations or analysis focusing on concepts such as subjectivity, intentionality, indigeneity, and colonialism. Moreover, the scope can range from anthropological engagements to political considerations in spatiotemporal context.

Often romanticized as pure, good, and just, sentient landscapes are mainly imagined and analyzed as protectors of those who are powerless, Indigenous, and colonized. Yet indigeneity is a social construct that has traditionally been claimed by political factions with wildly different agendas. Arguments against romanticizing others and their political agendas have long been made in gender theory (Ortner 1995; Mohanty 2003; Mahmood 2005; Abu-Lughod 2013) yet are still in need of development

where human/nonhuman binaries are concerned. However, despite the field of sentient landscapes gaining attention in academia, the literature rarely seems to question their intentionality. Questioning the mainstream understanding and perception of nature and its entities as passive objects, many studies have criticized and countered the dualist essence of that perception by blaming the controversies and issues it involves. They have not only elicited a new way of thinking about nature but also created a new platform to discuss human-nature interaction through political and social imaginaries.

However, it can be stated that in a great majority of those studies nature's constructive, protective, peaceful, and friendly interaction with humans is taken for granted by sentient-based conceptualizations. Thinking forests, talking rivers or mountains, and helping deserts reverberate in the literature organized around this perspective, displaying a self-affirmative approach associated with natural entities. This volume, though, asks provocatively, What if they talk, think, help, or communicate in a way that asserts a content not at all positive or friendly? To answer this question to the full, the concept of "sentience" needs to be explained by tackling both theoretical and practical dimensions.

Reconsidering Sentience through Landscape

Coming from the Latin word *sentire*, sentience means "the ability to feel" and is employed "to characterize certain cosmologies, as in animism, where the status of personhood is extended to different categories of nonhuman beings" (Di Giminiani 2018: 11). While speaking about a sacred mountain called Paektu/Changbai, Rogaski (2018: 747, 749) defines a sentient being as "a thinking, emoting subject capable of benevolence and malice" and as "a sensing, thinking, powerful entity that command[s] awe, fear, and worship." By extension, the concept of sentient landscape refers to the natural entities bearing sentient characteristics. Sentient landscape is "sensuous to those who can recognize it and know it" (Biddle 2007: 12–13), "always potentially liable to act for its own reasons" (Povinelli 1995: 133), extending "the ability for intentional and affective action to topographic elements" (Di Giminiani 2018: 11). As such, sentient landscape is critical for rethinking the object-subject divide and human-nature dualism.

Going through another phase, new animism creates a distinctive perspective regarding human and nonhuman entities. It offers a recognition that avers that "the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human" (Harvey 2005: xi). From this point onward, new animism proposes an alternative discourse on the object-subject divide. This is the point

where discussions about intentionality—a concept that is related to the ethnic, Indigenous, colonial, and sentient issues—get on the stage. Contrary to Western modernity and the mechanistic worldview, new animism point to a broader perspective to rethink the anthropological, political, cultural, and ecological engagements regarding human-nature interaction by ascribing intentionality and agency, defining nonhuman entities as persons and "subjects."

According to Harvey, "discussion of these discourses, points of view, practices and possibilities aids attempts to understand worldviews and lifeways that are different in various ways from those typically inculcated and more or less taken for granted in Western modernity." Such discussions put in question false claims about the facts or assumptions that preserve colonialist and dualist worldviews (Harvey 2005: xi–xii; Peterson 2011: 169), and which are also undeniably linked with the dominant economical paradigm; capitalism. Speaking about a land commissioner from Australia who "thinks" through this mainstream paradigm, Povinelli (1995: 505) states that:

> The culture of progress, productivity, and political economy that subtends his evaluations remains, in the policy world, an unassailable totem. . . . [T]he cultural frameworks subtending political economy (not the disputable ways of assessing political-economic systems) were long ago transmuted into neutral, natural, and objective fact.

The social sciences and humanities still partly inhabit a tradition that imagines a dialectical relationship between an Indigenous culture, on one hand, and that of moderns/Westerners, on the other, where the latter is obstructing the natural development of the former. We treat this logic as universal, without analyzing what Western means. In the case of a political age like the one we are currently in, the death or corruption of Indigenous knowledge might look different. When we speak of Western values meddling in Indigenous affairs, we imagine a secularized or Christian West that aims to annihilate local beliefs, often deemed superstitious. But what happens when we turn the lens on landscapes where human political and military power has often found a home?

Therefore, this volume intends to reconsider the human-nature interaction from the standpoint of a sentient-based perspective that can be constructive in going beyond mainstream, deterministic, or reductionist discourse and overcoming the restricting dualisms.

However, it should be noted that the other side of the story might turn out to be problematic as well and create contestations especially in more popular political trends and discourses. With the dominance of a mechanistic worldview, the modern epistemological perspective began to be

shaped by pure "reason," through deactivating "sentience." Romanticism, an antithesis of the scientific perspective, claims that reason cannot explain every phenomenon by itself and glorifies sentience and intuition by asserting that those are the only way to reach the truth (Pepper 2001). As Zimmer (2010) and Fischer (2019: 134) point out, believing a "statement to feel true, even it is not supported by factual evidence," is one of the very basic elements of the post-truth era. Keeping the post-truth conceptualization in mind, we can see that the rise of a political and cultural ambience that prefers emotions over reason and scientific evidence (Groves 2019) can be traced back to the romanticized and racialized claims concerning nature. In this regard, it is reasonable to define another ontological bridge between fascist/ecofascist and far-right values, which are dominantly based on racial claims and the trivialization of "reason."

This connection might also be observed in climate change denials and their influence on far-right political discourse about environmental protection (Boussalis and Coan 2016; Jacques, Dunlap, and Freeman 2008; Fischer 2019; Cook 2019). For this reason, the threat of creating another dualism while trying to overcome one is a crucial and challenging issue, to which this volume also pays attention. In order to avoid that danger, the very "boundary" and "substance" of the sentience of natural entities should be clarified in both its theoretical and practical senses.

Suggesting the "mutual constitution of people and land as political subjects" (2018: 6) in a discussion of Mapuche land claims in Chile, Di Giminiani discusses the landscape's subjectivity by criticizing essentialist and constructivist approaches and by defining an alternative conceptualization. He offers the intersubjective relation as the pivotal understanding in analyzing land ontologies. Defining this intersubjectivity as "a relation between two subjects, land and people, both endowed with sentient abilities" (ibid.: 7), he emphasizes that it is critical "to grasp that territories are neither pre-political (that is, spaces where attachment is unaffected by the dynamic formation of new subjectivities and relations through politics) nor post-political (in other words, spaces signified exclusively through collective action)" (ibid.: 10).

Reconsidering Landscape Through Xenophobia

With regard to sentient landscapes, this approach can be fruitful to apprehend a way of thinking and understanding that avoids the limits or inefficacies of ascribing intentionality only to human beings. With this step, we can expect to create a more comprehensive perspective that deals not only with political economy issues, such as land claims or Indigenous property

rights, but also with nationalistic, far-right arguments and policies that might also include ecological issues.

While scholars have explored the field of sentient landscapes and political geographies (e.g., Povinelli 1995; Peterson 2011; Kohn 2013; Gordillo 2018), little has been said about sentient landscapes embodying right-wing values. What can we gain from analyzing the subversive politics of sentient landscape as siding with those who have historically used their power to abuse? Could we imagine cosmopolitics where the moral agent is a far-right, xenophobic, racist landscape?

In most ethnographic situations where landscape is understood as sentient, we see, on the one hand, moral panics surrounding the use and abuse of land by foreigners and corrupt local politicians (e.g., Cruikshank 2006; Bacigalupo 2018), and on the other hand, the affective geographies that terrain can create to express the tensions of this reality (e.g., Di Giminiani 2018; Gordillo 2018). This present volume aims to also explore the troubles with the way that concepts of "indigeneity" and feeling "colonized" are being used, particularly when they are claimed by the privileged population of a certain national space, or in the national discourse of countries that have traditionally been on the giving end of racial, colonial, and gender violence. In such cases, the classical terminology used in social sciences and the humanities does not fully cover all realities of the current world.

In the national spaces examined in this volume, the reigning histories and their relationship with the governing of others do not neatly fit the colonial model that scholarship has learned to think with, in terms of who abuses and who is being abused. Europe, for example, has a never-ending practice of creating hierarchies and shades of whiteness within its own geography (Bartlett 1993). While non-Christians have historically suffered the most from this racial othering, the recent Brexit referendum showed that those who find themselves at the physical margins of Europe are also perceived as being on the darker end of the racial spectrum—and with this, of course, comes a plethora of Orientalizations, stereotypes, and conspiracies. This further highlights the failure of the core/periphery model from the 1960s. Countries outside of the imagined West were to copy the model of the prosperous, industrialized countries, thinking this would advance the economies of all the nations. In this process, specific expectations and models were created for newly imagined regions such as Eastern Europe, the Balkans, and the Baltics. We see similar political chronologies taking place in former colonies of European empires, where entire racial imaginaries are being restructured and remodeled to mirror, or at least translate, European models.

The not-elsewhereness-and-not-insideness of many of the national identities in this volume makes classical models of postcolonial theory

hard to apply. The logics of indigeneity from interwar Germany call on very different political values than the logics of indigeneity of the Mapuche. The social categories that academics created by building their disciplines in colonized spaces have not been updated to help scholars speak about the realities of the land in nation-states where categories like "indigeneity" could be employed by social groups to further their xenophobia. Furthermore, these social groups are not historically subjected to the sorts of victimhood that anthropological research commonly sees associated with most understandings of the concept of indigeneity.

What counts as foreign for the national imaginaries examined here? What are the histories, the myths, the redrawn borders that inform who counts as a dangerous other? In the absence of traditional colonialism—where the people drawing up the institutional framework are from elsewhere and are occupying the land of an Indigenous, collective self—the conceptual grounds of the self/other binary and its hegemonic practices must be rethought. Bearing these points in mind, and with a close look at recent political events, it can be easily noticed that far-right parties and so-called populist promises are growing globally. Therefore, examining the theoretical premises of xenophobic natural entities is a sine qua non for analyzing existing—and growing—political discourse as well.

As Forchtner (2019) points out, in an age of two intersecting crises unfolding globally—the crisis of liberal democracy and the environmental crisis—the correlation and interaction between them are both critical and understudied. Considering the growth of far-right imaginaries and the rise of a particular brand of populism (see Bergmann 2020; Thorleifsson 2019; Pasieka 2017; Gingrich and Banks 2006; Hage 2000, 2017; Kalb 2009; Shoshan 2016), their association with the catastrophic ecological breakdown and destruction found in climate change, biodiversity loss, air pollution, and food security make the interaction between political actors and the environment a matter of importance, worthy of attention. Nature-based constructions of national identity and political knowledge, and their implementation in the far-right spectrum, are tied not only to historical conceptualizations but also to present ecofascist revulsions about ecological problems. As the far-right ruling parties employ and reimagine concepts of "historical heritage," they combine xenophobic claims with a racist perception of nature. Therefore, unraveling the "national" imaginaries of natural entities seems vital as well to comprehend such far-right political agendas.

Another essential objective of analyzing sentience is to reveal existing and shifting relationships between racism and xenophobic perceptions of nature. In other words, the examination of historic roots might lead the way to understand the role of environmental entities in far-right policies.

As can be seen in various chapters of this volume, the sentient bridge between nature and nation is constructed as racial othering, which is mainly the result of a mentality centering and at the same time romanticizing Indigenous identity, creating the very ground of racial superiority and hierarchy claims. Understanding this construction process is vital to illuminating the theoretical correlation between nature and nation.

As one of the very prominent examples of this construction process, the National Socialist reign in Germany (1933–1945) offers a substantial "data set," both theoretically and practically, to decode the connection points of otherness, racial hierarchy, national identity, and natural entities. The Blood and Soil approach, for example, exemplifies the historical construction of a correlation between natural and national identity in a quite clear ethnographic understanding that would later create substantial ground for Nazi ideology to build a fascist doctrine (Dominick 1992). The role of sentience is important in revealing social imaginaries employed by historical and political discourses, allowing us to rethink the self/other binary, ethnopolitics, and ongoing political discourse. To do that, not only the imaginaries but also the politics of nature must be taken into account since the "politics of nature is at the same time a politics of identity" (Olsen 1999: 29). As Di Giminiani (2018) reveals, in order to fully recognize and perceive the elements that affect landscape imaginaries, essentialist or constructivist approaches come short, especially in colonial agendas.

The process of self-making and relatedly "nation building" should be analyzed through a more comprehensive understanding than ones that produce or reproduce the self/other binary or are based on deterministic approaches to human-nature interaction, as briefly discussed above with reference to intentionality. Furthermore, we can observe via several case studies that it is not only the case for Nazi, colonial, or Indigenous imaginaries but also for European modernity. Jon Mathieu's (2006) study for instance, reveals the nexus between sacralization, nation building, industrialization, and landscape by focusing on the Alpine landscape. Therefore, reading human-nature interaction oriented around sentience and through situating intersubjectivity and reciprocity will serve as a critical step to reconsider the political context.

As Rogaski (2018) elaborated in her detailed study, the role of knowledge about sentient entities—in her case, Mount Paektu/Changbai—is historically conditioned by the political context. She explicitly investigates the role of imaginaries and knowledge about the mountain for national independence and resistance. Turning back to Di Giminiani (2018), the case of the Mapuche also points out the quite similar implication that "land and its dwellers have bodies that are continuously constituted" (84) and that "involvement of land in the process of self-making both preexists

and is produced with the very act of navigating the environment" (58). This perspective thus plays a vital role in overcoming the subject/object division and the deterministic perception of human-nature relations by emphasizing "the mutual affect between these two entities" (74), which indisputably puts forward the vitality of sentience.

This book takes a new stance on sentient landscapes with the intention of dispelling the denial of coevalness represented by their scholarly romanticization. At the end of the day, the big takeaway of the volume is this: if we truly engage with the idea that landscape is sentient (thus human-like), then we must also allow ourselves, as scholars, to imagine sentient landscapes as covering the entire spectrum when it comes to intentionality and political values. We argue that the denial of coevalness, a term famously coined by Johannes Fabian, works in this case as a social imaginary where sentient landscapes maintain a purely good, premodern logic, similar to how non-European societies were traditionally seen by European colonizers. This volume includes chapters from scholars in all fields engaging with sentient landscapes (anthropology, history, political ecology, environmental studies, etc.) to helps us deeply reconsider the theoretical basis with which we operate.

With its overarching multidisciplinary scope, this volume intends to touch on a wide range of conceptual, practical, historical, and contemporary considerations from colonial, Indigenous issues to environmental, fascist, far-right, and migration studies. Moreover, this volume takes a step further to better evaluate and analyze the aforementioned conceptualizations by also expanding the theoretical ground, defining and implementing a new perspective on human-nature interaction based on sentience and natural entities, namely landscapes. With these rewarding contributions, I believe several disciplines, such as anthropology, ecology, environmental studies, history, politics, and cultural studies, can benefit from this book, and it can also serve as a fruitful ground to further research and analysis discussing contemporary issues, especially ones in the nexus of environmental catastrophe and rise of the far right.

Unveiling the tangled relationship between sentient landscapes and xenophobia points out a crucial task in a world that is facing both an ecological crisis and an unsettling rise of far-right values and racist discourses. Taking the ecofascist assumptions claiming affinities between ecology and fascism into consideration, the task of unveiling and disclosure becomes more vital for two reasons. First, because those assumptions have been increasingly spoken out loud by several far-right organizations and entities.[1] And second, because of the increasing post-truth way of thinking that directly interacts not only with the liberal democratic establishment and its concepts but also with ecological crisis, which can be observed

through environmental skepticism, anti-vaccination, and climate denial. Given the urgency of tackling climate change and autocratic regimes, two of the most powerful threats humanity faces today, it is clear how relevant and vital it is to decipher the connection between xenophobia and sentient landscapes in our political and ecological affairs.

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Note

1. Please see an example in https://www.vice.com/en/article/wxqmey/neonazis-eco-fascism-climate-change-recruit-young-people.

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