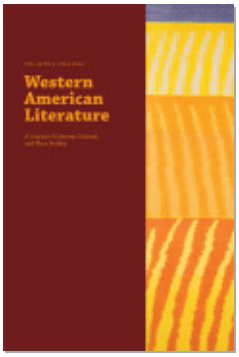
The Face of the Earth: Natural Landscapes, Science, and Culture by SueEllen Campbell, et al. (review)



Ann E. Lundberg

Western American Literature, Volume 49, Number 3, Fall 2014, pp. 315-317 (Review)

Published by University of Nebraska Press
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/wal.2014.0073*

in words different from Muir's. That said, the narrative has unexpected pleasures. Liebenow, who could probably afford to stay at the Lodge or even the Ahwahnee Hotel, instead—to his credit—camps during every trip and goes so far as to stay only at the frowzy, eccentric, famous Camp 4, the Haight-Ashbury of serious rock-climbing. He provides an informal sociological sketch of the place that is well worth reading.

Negatives? Nearly everyone reading this review has been hauled through the process of having a manuscript pummeled by a university press, three years of carping, proofing, editing, panicking, revising. Liebenow betrays the normal city-bred person's fear of mountain lions and bears. It appears tiresomely on every third page. Could not someone among all those editors and readers have noticed, during those three years, that *no one* has been killed by a bear or mountain lion in the entire history of Yosemite National Park? (The last bear I saw there displayed three ear tags and a radio collar and wore the expression of a convict on the way to the exercise yard.) I am inclined to cut Liebenow a great deal of slack, especially since he should have gotten some help during those three long years. On page 175 the famous speech by Chief Seattle appears, the one about the rivers being his brothers, and so on. This press specializes in Native American history. Why was no one aware that that speech was written for a corny early-1970s movie? Seattle never said any such thing. We should expect better editing from a major university press.

Scott Herring
University of California, Davis

SueEllen Campbell, et al., *The Face of the Earth: Natural Landscapes, Science, and Culture*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2011. 320 pp. $29.95.

The Face of the Earth, written and edited by SueEllen Campbell along with coauthors Alex Hunt, Richard Kerridge, Tom Lynch, and Ellen Wohl, applies ecocritical theory by demonstrating the interrelations of natural and cultural forces across the earth's surface. The authors use an organic form that knits scientific understandings of

geology, climate, water, and the life forces of adaptation and complexity together with an exploration of how those forces entwine with human evolution and cultural forms such as language, agriculture, art, religion, and literature that humans use to engage the natural world. They chose the term "natural landscapes" to suggest "that we are focusing on parts of the earth that are more given to us than shaped by us—'natural land'—and that we are the ones doing the seeing and understanding—'scapes'" (ix).

The collective voice of the book remains unified while evoking the corporate "we." The book contains five chapters: "Landscapes of Internal Fire," "Climate and Ice," "Wet and Fluid," "Desert Places," and a concluding chapter, "The Complexities of the Real," focused on grassland and forest ecosystems and the theoretical problem of trying to conceive of the earth as a whole given the necessity "of selection involved in creating representations" (278). One such selection is that the authors concentrate on terrestrial environments, stopping at low tide rather than wading into marine ecology.

Diversity is provided by "On the Spot" reports from authors across the globe, who survey such varied places as the Arctic tundra, an Australian billabong, the Irish Burren, the tallgrass prairie, the Costa Rican rainforest, the Chihuahuan desert, the Tibetan plateau, and so on. Each report offers a personal response to a specific place, thus grounding larger concepts. "In the Negev Desert" and "On the Burren" are among the most fully realized contributions.

These integrated reports, along with chapter subdivisions, enhance readability by breaking fact-laden chapters into manageable segments. For readers well versed in natural systems, the detailed overviews of topics such as plate tectonics and the hydrologic cycle may be unnecessary. However, the cumulative effect of seeing tectonics or climate reemerge time and again as discussion advances is rewarding. Facts often blossom into delight: a segment on harvester ants teaches us not only that they forage at temperatures between 86° F and 104° F, populate Australia's arid zone with a density of one colony every 1–2 square yards, and contribute to the fertility of desert soils, but that they play a key role in the sacred stories of the Navajo—stories that elucidate the consequences of disturbing the ants or their dwellings (225–26).

Referencing Yann Arthus-Bertrand's photographic *Earth from*

Above (2002) in the final chapter, Campbell writes: "The more time you spend studying his photographs, the more echoes you'll feel you're seeing, and yet the more you'll doubt the accuracy of your perception" (289). So, too, *The Face of the Earth* creates multiple echoes across its chapters. It could prove a useful text for courses in nature writing or environmental literature. The book's concept and execution are theoretically rich and manage a delicate balance between concern for the damage human beings are capable of wreaking on the earth and celebration of the human capacity for finding wonder, joy, and solace in contemplating natural landscapes.

Ann E. Lundberg
Northwestern College, Orange City IA

William deBuys, *A Great Aridness: Climate Change and the Future of the American Southwest*. New York: Oxford UP, 2011. 351 pp. $19.95.

If, as some cheerful souls like to say, there are winners and losers in the accelerating warming of our planet, then the American Southwest is clearly a loser. Midway in his timely and important book William deBuys compares the problems confronting this region to river rafting through the Grand Canyon, using his explosive plunge down Lava Falls Rapid, rated ten in difficulty on a scale of ten, as a central image. De Buys describes how members of his paddleboat contemplated the churning, rock-strewn stretch of white water minutes before the descent: "The new folks turned a shade paler under their sunburns," while the old hands had the "set-jaw look of a rider about to mount a horse known for nasty habits" (130).

Spoiler alert: the author's boat has a perfect run. The larger point, however, is that the equivalent of Lava Falls Rapid lies ahead for those of us living comfortably in the desert cities and pretty rural places of Arizona, New Mexico, Utah, Colorado, and parts of surrounding states. We are drifting in the flat water now just above those rapids, relatively unalarmed by some of the early effects of climate change. Importantly, our own imminent plunge will be without a guide. No one has scouted these hazards before. No one can tell us when to paddle fast and which rocks to avoid.

To some extent, however, the scientists and policy makers de-