

**Alexia Bloch and Laurel Kendall**, *The Museum at the End of the World: Encounters in the Russian Far East*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004, 231 pages.

Reviewer: *Petra Rethmann*  
*McMaster University*

*The Museum at the End of the World* works on several levels at once. Part ethnography, part travelogue, and part memoir, it sets up that kind of polyphony that works best for investigations set at the border of the descriptive and reflexive. In 1998 the two authors, Laurel Kendall and Alexia Bloch, both of whom are well versed in the ethnography of northern and East Asia, joined forces for six weeks to visit some of the places that served as both points of departure and arrival for the participants of the Jesup North Pacific Expedition (1897-1903). Launched by Franz Boas with the financial help of New York industrialist and American Museum President Morris K. Jesup, Boas and his collaborators (ethnologists Waldemar Bogoras, Waldemar Jochelson, Berthold Laufer and Lev Sternberg on the Russian side), the expedition produced a vast body of linguistic, ethnographic and physical anthropological data that laid the foundations for the anthropology of the Russian Far East. As curator of the Asian Ethnographic Collections at the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) in New York, Laurel Kendall decided to return some of the collected artifacts by way of catalogues and CDs. As some form of repatriation or another, the authors' efforts were met with a great deal of appreciation, although there remains the lingering question of why the real stuff still remains in the vaults of the AMNH. The descriptions of local peoples who see century-old images of their own way of life for the first time are moving, and descriptions of cultural institutions and the people who work in them are simultaneously poignant and upsetting. All of this is contrasted with the vagaries of travels in the Russian Far East—visa problems, damp rooms, broken down pipes and planes, and so forth. Altogether, *The Museum at the End of the World* makes for a lively if sometimes somewhat inveterate read.

At the heart of *The Museum at the End of the World* lie not, as the title seems to suggest, the politics of display and representation but the dialogue between the two authors who experience their journey through the Russian Far East in quite disparate ways. One of the authors, Alexia Bloch, has done fieldwork in Siberia before and speaks Russian. Laurel Kendall is an expert in Korean ethnography and has neither visited Siberia nor the Russian Far East before. These are differences that shape the experience of both authors in profound ways. While comments made by people in Chukotka on the conditions of everyday life resonate with the comments made by people Alexia Bloch knew during her fieldwork in the Evenk Autonomous Region, Laurel Kendall is more struck by the surreal qualities of post-Soviet life. The latter is certainly indicative of the experiences of many travellers in that part of the world, but she never allows this sense to overpower the

social criticisms and experiences offered by those whom she meets. The kind of reflexivity that informs this book is the kind that stands back to let local lives emerge.

If there is a problem with the book it lies, I believe, in its title. For too long the Russian Far East has been imagined as a "place at the end of the world," a place marked by endless darkness and forbidding cold, labour camps and the experience of exile, excruciating poverty and constant starvation. Indeed, some sort of gloomy fog seems constantly to hang about the place as if it consisted only of darkness and despair. To mark then the Russian Far East—an expansive region that consists largely of the Chukotka and Kamchatka Peninsulas, Sakhalin, and the Amur Region—as a "place at the end of the world" is to accentuate these imaginations, as well as its (imagined) parochial and marginalized place in this world. While there is perhaps some truth to these imaginations, such descriptions are problematic because they further stereotype understandings of the Russian Far East. Certainly with the emergent politics of perestroika and continuing market economy, the Russian Far East has joined the global world by establishing its own burgeoning tourism and marketization. The participants of the Jesup North Pacific Expedition may have marked the Russian Far East as a desolate place in the ethnographic imagination, but there is no need to further such representations. Like any other place in the world the Russian Far East has now entered what James Fergusson calls "The New World Order." It should also be described as such.

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**Lourdes Méndez**, *Cuerpos sexuados y ficciones identitarias. Ideologías sexuales, deconstrucciones feministas y artes visuales*. Sevilla: Instituto andaluz de la mujer, Colección hypatia, 2004, 182 pages.

Recenseuse: *Marie France Labrecque*  
*Université Laval*

Le livre de l'anthropologue Lourdes Méndez, professeure à la Faculté des Beaux Arts de l'Université du Pays Basque, se situe au confluent de l'anthropologie féministe et de l'anthropologie des expressions artistiques. L'approche est résolument critique. La construction du corps humain, et particulièrement celui des femmes, constitue le fil conducteur de l'ouvrage. L'auteure veut montrer les interactions entre quatre thèmes : la construction culturelle du corps et des techniques et habitus sexués qui l'encadrent; les idéologies sexuelles, raciales et de classe qui ont «pensé» l'infériorité naturelle des femmes, des «sauvages» et des ouvriers; la création d'une iconographie misogyne et primitiviste se centrant sur le corps nu de la Femme; la montée depuis 1970 d'œuvres visuelles dans lesquelles les réflexions sur les contenus hypothétiques des corps sexués occupent une place centrale (p. 13). Dans une large mesure, le propos porte sur la naturalisation des sexes, des genres et de l'hétérosexualité et montre que cette naturalisa-