

GOTHIC NATURE



GOTHIC NATURE II

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Bridgitte Barclay and Christy Tidwell (eds.), *Gender and Environment in Science Fiction*
(Lanham, Maryland: Lexington, 2019)

Andrew Todd

Bridgitte Barclay and Christy Tidwell's *Gender and Environment in Science Fiction* (2019) offers ten insightful readings clustered around the intersection of gender, ecocriticism, and the science fiction genre, in an attempt to 'address this gap in scholarship between feminist sf scholarship and environmental sf scholarship' (p. xvi). The collection is certainly well worth reading for any science fiction scholar. Similarly, scholars specialising in ecocriticism or gender studies, as well as those interested specifically in ecohorror, will also find compelling essays here to interest them. However, as many of the essays focus on *either* ecocriticism *or* gender studies, rather than both, such scholars will likely have less interest in the volume as a collective whole. The final impression is a collection of individually satisfying and insightful essays, but a less convincing sense of purpose underlying their compilation.

The introduction justifies the interconnection between the three areas of study through science fiction's posing of speculative, but scientifically based, questions of '*what if*' (p. xi). The intended overall vision of the book is that it:

'addresses the spectrum of human and nonhuman (animal and technological) subjectivities, the implications of race and colonialism, impacts of masculinities and femininities on historical approaches to "nature," and how those align with or subvert normative notions of gender and sexual orientation' (p. xi).

Already, this sets out a broad field of study, and the variety of media and styles covered adds to this breadth, creating difficulties for cohesion. The primary exigence or academic hole that this book seeks to fill is a perceived dearth of scholarship that combines science fiction, material gender studies, and material ecocriticism simultaneously and—as mentioned—there is little combinative analysis beyond the introduction. Potentially compelling are the moments where the editors make claims about what science fiction is specifically able to do politically, as they posit that 'sf may

offer special emphasis on the materiality of bodies and natures because of its scientific underpinnings’ (p. xi), and cite Eric C. Otto’s (2012) claim that ‘environmental science fiction has the ability to point the way toward “thinking and building a new way forward”’ (p. xvi). More consistent attention to sf’s generative capacity and perhaps a greater presence of it in the collection’s organisation would have been welcome. The introduction is rather short as well, and since there’s no theoretical or historical essay to start the collection, more from the introduction would be valuable, particularly for readers new to the field.

The collection is divided into four parts. The first, ‘Performing Humanity, Animality, and Gender’, focuses on the performance of humans becoming animal, and of humans becoming AI. The human-animal dimension is studied through camp, in Barclay’s ‘Wom-Animal Creature Features’, and through the character Anyanwu from Octavia Butler’s *Wild Seed*, analysed by Amelia Z. Greene. Barclay shows how the campiness of monsters from 1950s era B movies works as resistance to dominant discourses, turning the monstrous body into a site of possibility. Greene’s analysis of *Wild Seed* is one of the standouts of the collection, seeking to use Anyanwu’s ability in the novel to become other animals and read ‘flesh-messages’—that is, read a supernatural awareness of one’s body state—as a way to consider, in Tom Bristow’s (2015) terms, a ‘duty of care’ (p. 47). Greene reaches the conclusion that ‘by providing at least partial opportunities for such reconfigurations [of kinship and relationality], troubled and temporary as they may be, Butler’s protagonist promotes a position of caring-for-the-world’ (p. 60). The human-AI dimension is covered in Tidwell’s contribution to the volume, which considers the interrelationship between gender, nature, and technology in the films *Her* and *Ex Machina*. She effectively shows how the gendered nature of the technology in each film and their displays of human control over nature complicate the representation of the posthuman, showing the need to see the object as other than simply the next site of control.

Part II, ‘Gendering the Natural World’ has the two essays that are most likely of interest to readers of ecoGothic texts. In the first, Fernando Gabriel Pagnoni Berns and Juan Juvé study plant monsters in ‘Tendrils, Tentacles, and Flower Power: Speciesism in *Womaneater* (1958) and *The Gardener* (1974)’. While the selection of relatively unknown films in this essay might alienate some readers, the authors offer an interesting perspective on plants as rich sites of disturbance in

horror, due to their ambiguous position between ‘total passivity and full life’, and their sexuality occurring in a less visible way to an untrained human eye. This ambiguous vitality and less visible sexuality make plants frequently alien to human experience (p. 68). In the second, Steve Asselin’s “‘So Very Natural an Occurrence’: Engendering Nature’s Antagonism in Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man*’, the analysis centres on an early example of the science fictional postapocalyptic in literature, showing how the text anthropomorphises and sexualises nature.

The next section, ‘Contemporary Queering’, begins with Tyler Harper’s ‘Engineered Nature, (En)gendered Nature in Kim Stanley Robinson’s *2312*’. Harper gives a strong synthesis of ecofiction and gender studies, showing Robinson’s work as an affirmation of humanity’s place within nature. Harper argues that Robinson expands the meaning of both ‘humanity’ and ‘nature’, thus continuing the previous section’s emphasis on work that queers the human-nature boundary. Similarly, the second essay of the section, Stina Attebery’s ‘Ecologies of Sound: Queer Intimacy, Trans-Corporeality, and Reproduction in *Upstream Color*’ analyses a film of seeming body horror for its complication of the notion of family. With the similarities between this and the previous section, it’s unclear what the collection gets from separating them. The collection has many examples of both ‘contemporary’ and ‘queering’, so separating these two with just that title will likely create some confusion about their purpose in the larger collection.

The final section, “‘We Don’t Need Another Hero’”, includes three thoroughly engaging essays, though these are probably of least interest to readers coming to the text with interests in ecohorror and the ecoGothic. Here Jill E. Anderson discusses Atomic Age comics for hybrid figures of environmental stewardship; Michelle Yates offers readings of the Edenic and environmental nostalgia in *Soylent Green* and *WALL-E*; and Carter Soles looks at the trajectory of the Mad Max films in relation to petroleum. Finally, Tidwell writes a short closing epilogue. Here, the book returns to the political, which is a welcome and valuable conclusion, though it is unclear why the closing discussion is limited to examples solely from U.S. politics.

More attention to the collection’s organisation would have helped, particularly more purposiveness behind the essay groupings and order. A more extensive theoretical history would have been especially useful, either as an expansion of the introduction’s literature review, or as the

first essay of the collection. Ultimately, *Gender and Environment in Science Fiction* is an engaging set of essays, but a stronger through line would have made it a more compelling and cohesive contribution to the larger discourse surrounding the potential intersections between gender, environment, and science fiction.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Barclay, B. and Tidwell, C. (eds.) (2019) *Gender and Environment in Science Fiction*. Lanham, Maryland, Lexington.