Gothic Nature

Gothic Nature III: Haunted Shores

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Christy Tidwell and Carter Soles (eds.),
Fear and Nature: Ecohorror Studies in the Anthropocene
(Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2021)

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Ecophobia is a pervasive aesthetic and attitude in cultures and politics across the nations of the Global North. Following Estok (2018), ecophobia is not only a human psychological condition of fear about the natural world, but a pathology that allows humans to do harm to their environment. That is, it is as much a cause of the climate crisis as its result. This idea is not new, though it has been taken up with force in recent studies of literature and culture in the context of the Anthropocene. In his strident critique of the anthropocentric bias of Western culture, for example, philosopher Arne Johan Vetlesen (2019) quotes Whitehead's (1967 [1925]) proposition that '[a]ny physical object which by its influence deteriorates its environment, commits suicide' (p. 109). In response to this pathologically self-destructive trajectory of our society, critics in the humanities have taken up the urgent question of how narrative, fiction, and media representations of nature mediate human interrelationships with the environment, particularly those that, to borrow Carter and Soles' (2021) description, are 'ecohorrific' (p. 1). While Estok (2019) surmises that ecohorrific genres are 'always ecophobic' (p. 48), other critics are more hopeful about the ways in which representations of estranging, uncanny, horrifying, or fearful interrelationships with nature might allow for critique, provoke empathy, and even prompt changes in attitudes and behaviour. This latest collection of essays edited by Christy Tidwell and Carter Soles—examining a range of texts across media—is a timely reflection on emerging cross-disciplinary approaches to horror in the Anthropocene. Theirs is a thoughtful exploration of the pitfalls and potentials that inhere in ecohorrific representations of nature, and the book encourages dialogue between distinct theoretical approaches, a range of media, and diverse historical periods.

The introduction to the volume offers a helpful critical summary of different definitions of, and critical frameworks that have been applied to, what has become known as ecohorror. The authors contend that ecohorror is a mode defined by estrangement and that it has become 'the dominant mode in which we talk to ourselves about the global climate crisis' (p. 3). The evidence they offer for this is compelling, especially when one considers their suggestion that

ecohorror is not a genre, but a modality that pervades multiple genres and media. The authors also join the conversation about ecophobia, suggesting that not all fear is ecophobic, and that some instances of ecohorror might even be productive. They suggest, following young climate activists across the globe, that a negative affective response to the climate crisis might be required to create change. That is, ecohorror is both 'justified and necessary' (p. 5).

That said, the introduction to the volume avoids a too-easy celebration of ecohorror, recognising the ways in which it can present the planet as frightening, estranging and antagonistic. Indeed, Tidwell and Soles offer a nuanced approach to ecohorror that acknowledges the ways in which some texts may well have a paralysing effect whilst others might engage readers and viewers in a call to action. In their careful assessment of ecohorror, Tidwell and Soles move beyond dichotomous approaches—that is, whether the mode is 'good' or 'bad'—to consider its unique narrative and affective affordances. They explore how ecohorror texts disclose the interdependence of the human with the nonhuman, or more-than-human world, drawing on new materialist ideas such as entanglement, the assemblage, and transcorporeality; all of which undermine the notion of the human as an autonomous subject. For scholars new to the field, there is an instructive summary here of existing approaches to ecohorror, and of studies in related fields that inform the essays in the volume. Following the introduction are twelve chapters that explore distinct examples of ecohorror, with a varying range of affects, from across media. In this review, I focus on a sample that illustrate the overarching contribution of the collection to building a way of thinking interdependence and nonseparation between humans and 'nature'.

Dawn Keetley's essay 'Tentacular Ecohorror and the Agency of Trees in Algernon Blackwood's "The Man Whom the Trees Loved" and Lorcan Finnegan's *Without Name*' opens the volume with the formulation of a specific type of ecohorror; one that discloses the 'irreducible alterity' of nature whilst simultaneously entangling humans within it. Keetley's Levinasian reading of Blackwood offers a new approach to what elsewhere has been called the ecoWeird (see, e.g. Onishi, 2020), considering the ambiguity of a text in which the human subject appears to 'dissolve' in the mélange of the inhuman, but which also, as Keetley points out, reveals an 'animate nonhuman life that is not separate from but imbricated with human life' (p. 28). Keetley draws deftly on Levinas without becoming mired in dense philosophical discussion, making connections to more recent new materialist theories in her textual analysis.

Her account of tentacular ecohorror is both compelling and rigorous. Moving from tentacles that reach for the human to spirals that contaminate, Christy Tidwell's essay on horror manga, Junji Ito's *Uzumaki*, is another excellent intervention in the discussion of the modality of what we might name the 'ecoWeird'. As is common in many of the essays in the volume, Tidwell is interested in how such texts blur distinctions between the human and nonhuman, focusing here on the ways in which genre hybridity and exchange effect such blurrings. Her corpus offers a fresh way of understanding the interrelations and interdependencies between humans and 'others' from without a solely Western cultural imaginary. What is also useful in this essay is the connection Tidwell makes between ecohorror and body horror, asserting the ecological dimensions of the latter. As she states, 'bodies and environments come together' in ecohorror texts, and damaged or contaminated bodies intersect with damaged ecosystems (p. 52).

Part Two of the volume considers landscapes in ecohorror, with chapters on nineteenth-century poetry and fiction as well as science fiction cinema. Keri Stevenson's 'The Death of Birdsong, the Birdsong of Death: Algernon Charles Swinburne and the Horror of Erosion' is a stand-out chapter because of its absorbing reinterpretation of the work of Victorian poet Swinburne (1837 – 1909), who is typically associated with the decadent movement of the fin-de-siècle period. Applying an ecocritical lens, Stevenson identifies in Swinburne's 'disanthropic' poetry an ecological imaginary that discloses a world without us, to borrow Eugene Thacker's (2011) formulation, that is bleak, even polluted, but enduringly sublime. The landscape under examination here is the coastline, and Stevenson reads Swinburne's poem, 'A Forsaken Garden', to elaborate on a landscape that is 'free of the colonization of human minds and needs' (p. 97). The third chapter in this section of the book shifts period and media, considering the 1957 creature feature *The Monster That Challenged the World*, which takes its inspiration from a real-world ruined landscape, California's Salton Sea. Bridgitte Barclay's chapter on inter-relationships between this real-world landscape, environmental disaster and the science fiction film explores ecohorrific depictions of evolution and scientific hubris. The chapter gives useful insights into the 'de-extinction' subgenre of science fiction and horror film, which tends to be conflated with the creature feature. Her material-ecocritical reading of *The Monster that Challenged the World* also emphasises the ways in which loss and horror abound in extinction narratives, especially in relation to damaged or toxic landscapes. Her reading suggests a taxonomy of how institutional science is represented as a source of horror

in film and traces such mid-twentieth-century concerns into the twenty-first century; where, as she notes, we see their validity far more clearly (p. 143).

Part 3: The Ecohorror of Intimacy is a particularly generative section of the book for those readers interested in the paradoxical affordances of ecohorror: its simultaneously estranging and intimate effects. Herein lies the dimension of the uncanny, divested of its Freudian and humanist baggage, and reconfigured as a disposition towards the natural world that is both unbearable intimate and unnervingly strange. Brittany R. Roberts' chapter '"This Bird Made an Art of Being Vile": Ontological Difference and Uncomfortable Intimacies in Stephen Gregory's *The Cormorant*' is a fantastic exploration of this paradox through an analysis of an animal horror novel published in 1986. The focus here is on ecohorrific representations of companion animals and multispecies relationships, and of the 'ontological gulf' (p. 174) that persists between humans and more-than-human others despite their shared intimacies. The next chapter is also interested in human-more-than-human intimacies, though with a slightly more hopeful approach, and focusses on the representation of Amphibian Man in Guillermo del Toro's film *The Shape of Water* (2017). In this chapter, Robin L. Murray and Joseph K. Heumann position the film as a 'post-pastoral ecohorror' that blurs generic boundaries and 'combines the ecology of the pastoral with the horror of exploitation' (p. 196). The analysis considers the post-pastoral concerns of the film, particularly its depiction of the exploitation and silencing of women, gay men and African Americans, and suggests that such patriarchal, corporate oppression aligns with the human exploitation of the more-than-human world. At the same time as acknowledging these difficult contexts, Murray and Heumann stress the hopeful dimension of *The Shape of Water* and what they identify as the 'potential healing power of interdependence' apparent in the relationship between Elisa and the Amphibian Man. Their conclusions therefore look beyond the estranging effects of uncanny ecohorror to the production of different kinds of communities.

Part Four of the collection is concerned with the subgenre of animal horror and its theme of prey and predator relations. The chapters return to non-Western texts as Kristen Angierski reads Bong Joon-ho's *Okja* alongside other animal rights films, such as films such as *Free Willy* (1993). I found the final essay in the collection particularly shrewd for its analysis of the intersection between animal horror, depictions of race, and white supremacy in horror film. Carter Soles' reading of *The Shallows* (2016), a low budget shark attack thriller, is a deft

synergy of ecocriticism and critical race studies. The close reading of the modality of film itself, the ways in which the camera positions the viewer in relation to the whiteness of the shark and the whiteness of the heroine, exemplifies the need to consider the entanglement of form, content, and ethics in ecohorror. Soles also offers a rigorous unpacking of whiteness in this film, and other related animal horror, suggesting different kinds of whiteness that emerge in the depiction of white European characters, liminally white ethic groups, and white sharks.

This was such a rich, diverse collection of scholarly essays on ecohorror. The range of texts considered and the distinct, rigorously applied theoretical frameworks make this a must-read for scholars working across the Environmental Humanities. Ecohorror is an important modality through which to explore, negotiate and unpick ecophobia, as well as a productive space for challenging social oppression, racism, sexism, and economic inequality, alongside the destruction of the natural world. Indeed, as the essays in the volume show, such concerns are not distinct but interrelated. The essays also disclose the ways in which ecohorror functions not only as a mode of critique, nor only as a repository of social anxiety about environmental crisis, but as a future-oriented imaginary that looks to scope out different kinds of interrelationships, interdependencies and intimacies between humans and the environment in which they are enmeshed.

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