

Please cite the Published Version

Fitzpatrick, Teresa  (2023) Book Review: Haunted Nature: Entanglements of the Human and Nonhuman. Edited by Sladja Blazan. Gothic Studies, 25 (2). pp. 217-221. ISSN 1362-7937

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3366/gothic.2023.0165>

Publisher: Edinburgh University Press

Version: Accepted Version

Downloaded from: <https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/631766/>

Usage rights:  In Copyright

Additional Information: This is an Accepted Manuscript of a book review for the following book: Haunted Nature: Entanglements of the Human and Nonhuman. Edited by Sladja Blazan. (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021. 199 pages, £99.99 (hbk) £79.50 (ebk) ISBN 9783030818685. The final version of the book review appears in Gothic Studies, published by Edinburgh University Press. The Version of Record is available online at: <http://www.euppublishing.com/doi/abs/10.3366/gothic.2023.0165>

Enquiries:

If you have questions about this document, contact openresearch@mmu.ac.uk. Please include the URL of the record in e-space. If you believe that your, or a third party's rights have been compromised through this document please see our Take Down policy (available from <https://www.mmu.ac.uk/library/using-the-library/policies-and-guidelines>)

***Haunted Nature: Entanglements of the Human and Nonhuman.* Edited by Sladjja Blazan. (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021. 199 pages, £99.99 (hbk) £79.50 (ebk) listprices) ISBN 978-3-030-81868-5**

Haunted Nature brings together nine chapters exploring the growing interest in entanglements of human and nonhuman through the gothic and horror mode from contributors that include some well-known names in ecogothic/ecohorror scholarship. Focusing on the gothic trope of haunting in this collection, nature is shown as engaging with the cultural moment of ‘decolonization, globalization, capitalism, and climate change’ (3). Indeed, as I too have noted in my own research, the essays in this collection highlight how post-millennial speculative fiction is beginning to focus not on the extra-terrestrial alien as other but on the nonhuman of our own habitats. With the growing interest in ecogothic and ecohorror criticism as a way of reconsidering our relationship with nature during a time of heightened concern with climate crises, biodiversity loss and global pandemics, *Haunted Nature* is a timely publication.

While the title of this collection situates itself clearly within the ecocritical Anthropocene focus on *Entanglements of the Human and Nonhuman*, this by itself suggests an ambitious project but one that editor Sladjja Blazan’s introduction helpfully clarifies. For the contributors of this collection, the nonhuman confronts the predominant conception of ‘human’ as white, male, cis-gendered, heteronormative and able, in speculative (Gothic, horror, melodrama, fantasy, science fiction) narratives that either challenge or affirm this human category (7). Just as these essays confront the conceptualisation of ‘human’, speculative fiction also offers pathways for engaging with environmental issues and the collection equally explores and exposes the ‘normative conceptualizations of Nature’ (7). ‘[N]arratives of ecological devastation and the ensuing human transformation on dissolving, fragmentation, and disintegration’ (10) of the body engages with traditional gothic tropes that can expose those representations of ecology within the popular imagination. Moreover, using the gothic trope of haunting to ‘scrutinize Nature’, Blazan explains, ‘inevitably means to scrutinize stories of racial oppression, segregation, and exploitation’ (8). Indeed, what comes to the fore throughout this collection is how the natural world haunts humanity, spectrally threading its way from the tiniest to the global as landscapes and environments invoke colonial and cultural histories to challenge what it means to be ‘human’.

Beginning with what she terms ‘microgothic’, Davina Höll explores ‘[t]he microbe as an uncanny other that transgress[es] the limits of the body, knowledge, and even the imagination’ through analogy with a ‘monstrous apparition’ (24). Taking Mark Twain’s *Three Thousand Years* (1905), Höll asserts that the host character Blitzowski ‘becomes a veritable zombie with his body transformed into a gothic landscape’ (31). Höll focuses on the gothic aspects (grotesque, body transformation, zombie host) of Twain’s microgothic, arguing that microbes within contagion literature and zombie narratives have become overshadowed as apocalyptic devices rather than considered as the focal protagonists. In response, Höll posits that BioArt (scientifically-influenced art) ‘often envisions these realms [of micro- and macrocosms] as haunted and haunting natures’ (34) offering a microbial sublime that continues to challenge what it means to be human by underlining the permeable influences such human-nonhuman interactions have on each other.

With spores only slightly larger than microbes, Dawn Keetley explores ‘[n]arratives featuring black mold’ arguing that a ‘fungal weird’ reconfigures death as a ‘mycelial haunting’ (45) whereby the natural world encompasses stories of human extinction as ‘a *white* story’ (45, *italics in original*). As part of the fungal kingdom black mould is an apt gothic trope for death and the afterlife, flourishing as it does on dead and decaying matter, converting it into another life form. Illustrating how ghostly visitations in post-millennial narratives are preceded by, associated with, and directly exhibit black mould, Keetley argues it is a marker for human annihilation in both real-world and fiction within the context of climate crisis and the Anthropocene that all too often normalises the human as affluent white without regard to differences. As such (ostensibly white) human bodies in these narratives are transformed by black mould offering a ‘non-human post-death “haunting” that is a continuation of life in some form’ that ‘cannot be untangled from racism’ (60-1).

In further ‘mov[ing] the perspective away from the anthropocentric notion of ecophobia’ whereby ‘humans [are] haunted by Nature’ towards ‘Nature haunted by human pasts’ (69), Sladja Blazan explores the post-millennial popular narratives of *Stranger Things* (2016-) and Jeff VanderMeer’s *Annihilation* (2014) as environmental narratives that de-centre the human, drawing on indigenous North American mythology to open a new avenue of exploring ‘the ghosts of an imperialist ontology’ (86). Blazan argues the material entanglements of vegetative environments with human bodies asserts a ‘vegetomorphism’: the ‘alteration of humans with altered nonhuman parts’ (80) that applies ‘the speculative modes of the weird and the ecogothic

to questions of the Anthropocene' (81). Such physical blurring of ecological and corporeal boundaries destabilises the categories of human and nonhuman, nature and culture that sees Nature as haunting humanity through cultural appropriations of indigenous ecomonsters.

Drawing on the spectrality of an American Frontier Gothic, Alexandra Hauke explores 'the entangled realities of women and land' (93) in the context of physical space and social aspects of gender inequalities in relation to the Anthropocene. Exploring Shirley Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962) alongside Stacie Passon's 2018 adaptation of the same title, Hauke illuminates how the female characters act as binary markers 'of both Self vs. Other and nature vs. culture' (94) that haunts the texts' relationship with the 'American landscape through the juxtapositions of forest vs. town and domesticity vs. independence' (94) which continues to inform present-day narratives, politics and ideologies. The contrasting gender performances of the sisters, with Constance in a 'feminized role as maternal and wifely head of the house' and Merricat exhibiting 'masculine-coded behaviour, dress and work (102), are read through a frontier gothic that underlines ecofeminist politics. Binary ideology, Hauke asserts, 'dominates debates about climate change and discrimination in the twenty-first century, whence non-human nature emerges as both haunted and haunting' (98) illuminating 'the harmful dualisms that have come to define the Anthropocene' (111).

In Chapter 6, Johan Höglund explores *Crawl* (2019) focusing on the 'subterranean space and the jaws of the alligator [that] effectively strip Haley of all her white and human privileges and violently insert her into an ecology made weird and terrible by the climate crisis' (115). Arguing that Gothic and Horror offer a more suitable paradigm for tackling a universal climate change crisis, Höglund asserts how these 'genres and modes [are] more capable of representing the type of uncanny catastrophe that climate change is already creating in the Global South' (121) and recognising identities beyond predominant Anthropocene concepts. Rebecca Duncan concurs, arguing that speculative fiction can challenge 'the category of collective humanity on which the concept of the Anthropocene hinges' to include more fully how global ecological crisis 'affects women, the poor, and people of color' differently (136). Examining 'this haunting of Anthropocene discourse' (137) in Ng Yi-Sheng's *Lion City* (2018), Duncan demonstrates that the 'artificial technonature' or 'ecological engineering in present-day Singapore is inextricable from a colonial history' (138). Seen as a 'horticultural expression of [Singapore's] multiracial harmony' (142) that offers a novel human-nature entanglement, Singapore's 'eco-utopian representations' are haunted in Ng's tales by its 'racialized logic' and

colonial history (153) through a technonature that ‘unsettles the wider Anthropocene narrative’ (146).

Highlighting how ‘apocalyptic ecogothic’ narratives ‘have evolved in recent years, away from a conventional monstrous-nature paradigm to a more ecologically informed model of human-nonhuman entanglement’ (160), Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet explores trees in *The Happening* (2008) and *The End* (2018) through a ‘science-centred ecological model’ (160) as sentient beings with agency that are nevertheless ‘haunted by retrograde gender and race politics’ (160) that continue to inhibit positive actions and responses to climate crises. In the intervening decade of these two texts however, scientific understanding that has appeared within ecological discussions have become reflected in the speculative fiction narratives, with *The End* clearly referencing the work of plant scientists, Peter Wohlleben and Francis Hallé. Nevertheless, Monnet illustrates, these texts are ‘haunted by an inability to let go of old habits of thought, old racial and gender assumptions’ (173) that enliven the human-nonhuman interactions.

Tying micro and global gothic together, the collection concludes with a chapter from Simon C. Estok who establishes how the global ‘pandemic hauntings’ (182) of COVID-19 reminds us that this, and other zoonotic diseases that transgress the human-nonhuman boundaries, ‘is an environmental event’ (original emphasis, 182). Outlining that ‘war and disease both have been with humanity for time immemorial’ (184), Estok demonstrates that ‘[p]andemics encourage ecophobia’ (185) but that we need ‘to revisit nature-denying behaviors’ (185) in post-pandemic times. Demonstrating how the pandemic is portrayed with military vocabulary and metaphor, with disease and war closely tied to human hauntings, Estok offers a parallel between the impacts of COVID-19 in 2020 and those of Albert Camus’ novel *The Plague* (1947) to assert that ‘[r]acism haunts pandemic discourse, and a widespread amnesia haunts humanity’ (191). Nevertheless, science fiction has become the genre best equipped to tackle the immense global issues like pandemics, climate change, anthropogenic impacts on nature, that appear more readily accepted in film.

Throughout this collection the contributors have illustrated in various ways how Nature haunts humanity just as old cultural concepts haunt our perceptions of the nonhuman. In highlighting the spectrality of human-nonhuman entanglements, this collection challenges predominant conceptions of the Anthropocene and Nature, demonstrating the need to reassess these for a more robust understanding of how global environmental crises produce diverse impacts across different demographics. Focusing on how Nature haunts in these selected narratives contributes

to the ever-growing field of ecogothic and ecohorror scholarship broadening contemporary debates on oppression and exploitation within the fields of gender, race, class and the environment. Offering an alternative perspective on haunting, nature, and concepts of the human, this collection will interest scholars of the Gothic while researchers interested in the related interdisciplinary fields will also find this book a valuable reference.

Teresa Fitzpatrick
Manchester Metropolitan University