

Review:

Vakoch, Douglas A., editor. *Ecofeminist Science Fiction: International Perspectives on Gender, Ecology and Literature*. Routledge, 2021.¹

Julia Hahn-Klose, University of Cologne, Germany

"Science fiction serves to further valorize science as a tool for domination, not only of Earth but of the fictitious worlds beyond" (148), argue Lydia Rose and Teresa M. Bartoli in their contribution to *Ecofeminist Science Fiction: International Perspectives on Gender, Ecology and Literature* (2021). As Douglas A. Vakoch's edited collection proves, however, science fiction can also serve as a means to explore alternative—ecofeminist—forms of living. Mainly focusing on debates around technology, gender, and the environment, the 14 contributions to *Ecofeminist Science Fiction* examine examples of science fiction in literature and on screen. Each contribution foregrounds "alternative modes to help prevent the replication of oppressive patterns" (113) by presenting analyses whose structuring ideas can be adapted to read materials beyond those discussed in the assembled contributions. Vakoch does not claim to have collected essays that provide a definite reading- or watch-list for scholars interested in ecofeminism and science fiction; rather, the selected essays bring together established and new scholarly perspectives on gender, technology, and the nature/culture binary and offer insights into how discourses and debates surrounding this set of topics are projected into different, sometimes posthuman futures. The articles are clustered into four sections, whose titles do not

¹ Writing a review of an edited collection like this one that tries to do justice to all the contributions while also giving readers useful pointers about which essays to read for the content they are looking for was more of a challenge than I had initially expected. I would like to thank Judith Rauscher for workshoping this review with me.

always indicate precisely what the essays have in common. The essays differ in quality, some would have benefitted from more thorough editing. Still, Vakoch has delivered an intriguing volume on science fiction for the series Routledge Studies in World Literatures and the Environment.

Both the various primary works of literature and film discussed in the edited collection and the diverse approaches and concepts used to analyze the chosen works show that “no easy answers are proposed about environmental crises, interspecies ethics, or gender dynamics” (101) by science fiction. In the following, the contributions are ordered not as they appear in the collection, but according to shared themes that are not mentioned in the section titles but might be of interest to readers.

One recurring focus in the collection is that of relationality. This topic is introduced, amongst others, by Patrick D. Murphy, who discusses Karen Traviss’s multifaceted novel series *The Wess’har Wars* (2004–2008), suggesting that the author’s chosen emphasis on communities instead of individuals entails a shift towards representations of multispecies flourishing rather than remaining invested in one powerful species’ domination of other species. Furthermore, Murphy opts for the term “symbiosis” (107) in his analysis, rather than employing the often-used ecocritical concept of “entanglement,” because he considers symbiosis “the most basic form of relationality” of the world Traviss’s novels imagine.

Focusing on the environmental as well as the anti-colonial narrative of James Cameron’s *Avatar* (2009), Lydia Rose and Teresa M. Bartoli reflect on explorations of hegemonic masculinity in the blockbuster. Showing how pre-colonial Pandora realizes a “primary aim of ecofeminism” (152), namely social and ecological justice, the author duo reflects on Karen Warren’s “-isms of domination” (144). Evoking another recurring concept in the edited collection linked to relationality—that of vibrant matter—they analyze the visualization of relationality as vibrant matter in the film’s depiction of the culture of the Na’vi people. Sarah Bezan, in her article “*Speculative Sex: Queering Aqueous Natures and Biotechnological Futures in Larissa Lai’s Salt Fish Girl*,” offers a related argument by showing how relationality is made tangible with the help of water in Larissa Lai’s *Salt Fish Girl* (2002). Introducing the different levels of fluidity that come into play in the novel, Bezan adds a contribution from within the field of blue ecology to the collection and, in doing so, provides what seems to me the most thought-provoking article of the volume.

Perhaps surprising to some, the *Star Wars* movies are part of the collection’s ecofeminist assessment of science fiction as well. The canonical movie series is one of the few primary works addressed in *Ecofeminist Science Fiction* that does not itself present ecofeminist

themes, but in which feminist and environmental themes must be teased out through a feminist ecocritical reading. Başak Ağin starts her discussion of *Star Wars* with an analysis of three main female characters and, in the process, overextends a bit for my taste on a literature review of the conflicting arguments put forward by different scholars, a fact that distracts from the article's main topic, which is rather intriguing. Indeed, Ağin's take on the "Force" as vibrant and agential in a new-materialist sense and as yet another instance in sf in which relationality is made tangible resonates with several other contributions in the edited collection.

In line with the ecofeminist ideas of relationality or interconnectedness, ecofeminist concerns and the concepts employed to engage with them as they are presented in the collection appear themselves as a deeply entangled web, a circumstance illustrated by frequent cross-references. Lesley Kordecki, much like Bartoli/Rose and Değirmenci Altın, for instance, examines how one of the key aims of ecofeminism (as well as of feminist ecocriticism), that is, the critique of male dominance over both women and nature, is conveyed through narratives of meat-eating, animalization, and through the feminization of a foreign species in Mary Doria Russell's 1996 novel *The Sparrow*. As Kordecki suggests, *The Sparrow* plays with the naturalized association of certain species with one gender, imagining a world with a brutal power hierarchy between men and women with the aim of critiquing the very idea of the 'naturalness' of our binary sex-gender system. Addressing power hierarchies and processes of othering, Deidre Byrne, in turn, draws on Deleuze's and Guattari's theories of patriarchal elites to assess the work of sf-legend Ursula K. Le Guin. Reading Le Guin's early *Hainish Novels*, Byrne not only argues that "nonhuman and material elements" (201) represent Otherness in the book series, but she also highlights propositions of shared agency in the texts as a means to counter patriarchal logics of exploitation. Last but not least, she also asserts that the novels *Rocannon's World*, *Planet of Exile*, *The Word for World Is Forest*, and *Always Coming Home* build a crucial foundation for Le Guin's later works because of their introduction into her oeuvre of ecofeminist concerns.

Zahra Jannessari Ladani provides a close reading of a novel by Iranian author Iraj Fazel Bakhsheshi that links gender to the novel's literary geography. Ladani compares the phallic hierarchical construction of gender relations in *Men and Supertowers* (2006) to Foucault's theorization of the Panopticon as a "post-capitalist prison structure" (159). Unfortunately, Ladani takes up terms such as *civilization*, *man*, *primitive*, and *inferiority* in her discussion of gender representations, just as they are used in Fazel Bakhsheshi's novel, without critically reflecting on the use

of these terms. As a result, the essay reproduces what seem to be certain sexist and racist stereotypes evoked in the novel, even as it seeks to highlight those elements that may be considered ecofeminist. Besides repeatedly referencing well-known European theorists and classical ecofeminist concepts by such scholars as Karen Warren, Greta Gaard, and Donna Haraway, the contributions in Vakoch's edited collection also discuss a few lesser known, more recent concepts such as Izabel Brandao's and Ildney Cavalcanti's notion of the "ecodystopic body"—i.e. an exploited body becoming "alien when put into the natural environment" (Ladani 164). Meghna Mudaliar's article "Queering *Doctor Who* and *Supernatural*" elegantly employs a comparison of two characters to deconstruct a supposedly natural, Cartesian order opposing rationality and intuition as well as human and nonhuman beings.

Drawing on the work of different theorists that have been highly influential for ecofeminism, Imelda Martín Junquera invites readers to look at gender roles in the HBO series *Westworld* (2016-2022) with Donna Haraway's concept of the cyborg. Because quotations from and comments on Rosi Braidotti's *The Posthuman* (2013) take up a big part of Martín Junquera's article, the most interesting idea in the contribution is mentioned only at the very end: as Martín Junquera notes, notions of the posthuman are negotiated via a shared "symbolism of acquiring free will" in *Westworld* and the Mexican movie *Sleep Dealer* (2008), the other pop-cultural text briefly mentioned. In doing so, she touches on another key theme in the edited collection, that of artificial women and their relationship to technology and "nature," defined in different ways.

Analyzing visual (eco)media featuring artificial women like Martín Junquera, Katja Plemenitaš delivers a compelling reading of the US-American film *The Stepford Wives* (1975) and its 2004 remake. Discussing the historical and social factors that led to the development of those technologies that shaped U.S. land- and cityscapes during the first half of the 20th century, Plemenitaš demonstrates that the question of who should have and who has access to "natural" spaces matters for how the "categorical unification of women is imposed [...] through the destructive force of the main villains, the men of Stepford" (49) in the films' dystopian suburban spaces. These technological and environmental developments, she demonstrates, have important implications for the social role of (robot-)women in the movie, who are kept away from "natural" spaces and reduced to an "embodiment of consumerism" (56). Focusing on human-technology-nature relations and the figure of the robot in a slightly different manner, Asli Değirmenci Altın introduces Jeanette Winterson's "robo sapiens" from *The Stone Gods* (2007) as cyborg assemblages. She reads "the gendered practice of genetic fixing" (66) employed by Winterson's "robo sapiens" as suggestive of the drastic impact of humans

on nature and thus as a troubling consequence of anthropocentrism, although the novel, she notes, does not necessarily represent it as such. Moving away from the kind of anthropocentrism the novel can be said to critique, Değirmenci Altın argues, will allow humanity to move toward much needed queerer futures.

Providing the first essay in Vakoch's collection, perhaps due to the publication date of her primary text, Melissa Etzler discusses German folklore and early German science fiction. In her analysis of Hanns Heinz Ewers' gothic sf novel *Alraune* (1911), in which a female plant-monster-robot going by the name of "Alraune" raises questions about the reproductive rights of women in 1920's Berlin, Etzler makes an absorbing argument about the affinities that existed in the early 20th century—and arguably still exist—between sf and other fantastic genres such as gothic. These affinities, as her contribution proves, have led, for instance, to the crossing-over of the ecogothic trope of female-monster-plants into sf interested in breaking down gendered categories of the human, nature, and technology, making this another article in *Ecofeminist Science Fiction* that shows how sf can be used to challenge the dichotomies entailed in these categories.

Benay Blend's contribution stands out in the edited collection because it offers a compelling analysis of a work of sf from a marginalized perspective. Discussing two novels set in contested spaces between cultures, Blend explores issues of self-determination and sovereignty in different (settler-)colonial contexts. Focusing on the representation of racialized female bodies in Louise Erdrich's novel *Future Home of the Living God* (2017) as well as in Oreet Ashery and Larissa Sansour's collaborative graphic novel *The Novel of Nonel and Vovel* (2009), she discusses instances of resistance to colonial oppression by indigenous and Palestinian women respectively, highlighting the resonances between their exploitation and suffering and the dystopian landscapes both works are set in.

Peter I-min Huang, too, offers insight into non-western forms of ecofeminism, comparing the female protagonists of the Chinese novels *The Waste Tide* (2013) and *The Three-Body Problem* (2008) and their respective relation to notions of ecoterrorism. By analyzing how the *The Waste Tide*, a novel he classifies as more mainstream, depicts environmentalism as ecoterrorism and thus treats environmental concerns as "overrated" (135), if not dangerous, Huang comments on the difficulty of Chinese authors to discuss environmental matters in a political climate where such discussions are not always encouraged, or only encouraged in certain forms. An idea the article does not discuss but that may be of interest to some readers in this context is the Chinese

concept of “ecological civilization,” which describes the final stage of (communist) environmental and social reform. Peter I-min Huang, on his part, uses the second, lesser-known novel to demonstrate that ecofeminist sf can indeed be found in China, in this case, exemplified by a text that features a female environmentalist who is not represented as an ecoterrorist.

As Huang’s essay and some of the other contributions demonstrate, the editor has clearly made an effort to enrich the debates about ecofeminism and science fiction by including scholars from non-English-speaking countries and articles on non-English sources. However, these efforts at internationalization remain limited insofar as the theories and concepts used by the contributors largely remain the standard European and North American set (relationality, vibrant matter, cyborgs, etc.). While *Vakoch’s edited collection* thus provides a broad range of essays, it also highlights what is still missing from the debate.