



Book-Review:
*Imagining the Future of Climate Change: World-Making
through Science Fiction and Activism*

T. S. Miller

Streeby, Shelley. *Imagining the Future of Climate Change: World-Making through Science Fiction and Activism*. U of California P, 2018. ISBN: 978-0520294455.

Shelley Streeby's *Imagining the Future of Climate Change* is a unique and necessary book that bridges the too often too distant spheres of environmental activism and SF scholarship. The scope of book, however, remains somewhat narrower than even its more specific subtitle – *World-Making through Science Fiction and Activism* – would suggest, and a reader already well versed in the long tradition of ecological SF may find it strange, for example, that this monograph on climate change and SF mentions the name of so towering a figure in the field as Kim Stanley Robinson only in passing. But Streeby makes it clear from the outset that, rather than attempting to cover the vast subject of climate change as it has been represented in science fiction as such, she is more eager to foreground the ways in which Indigenous people and people of color use forms of speculative thinking “to remember the past and imagine futures that help us think critically about the present and connect climate change to social movements” (5). It is clear that Streeby hopes to reach multiple audiences with different degrees of familiarity with the territory the book covers – for instance, she even reserves several pages of her introduction for an admirably concise “Brief History of Global Warming” – and I am confident that she has succeeded in that ambition. Accessible in the extreme and relatively short for an academic book (the main text runs to fewer than 130 pages), *Imagining the Future of Climate Change* should, I expect, work very well in an undergraduate classroom setting, and it will certainly improve my own future teaching of climate fiction whether or not I decide to assign the text itself.

Streeby writes in an almost conversational style without sacrificing depth, although readers expecting new and original readings of particular texts in the emerging canon of climate fiction will, again, not find many here. Rather than advancing a series of new interpretations, the book reads more as a primer or guide to a set of interlocking issues as they play out across a tremendous swathe of cultural territory. Streeby repeatedly and

quite accurately describes what she is doing in the book as “telling a story”: “I tell the story of imagining the future of climate change by focusing especially on movements, speculative fictions, and futurisms of Indigenous people and people of color – work that is all too often excluded from the category of cli-fi and that extends beyond cli-fi in its rich and deep connections to social movements and everyday struggles and to other cultural forms such as film, video, music, social media, and performance” (4-5). This overarching story turns out to be grim at bottom, as so much climate writing must be, though not without notes of hope in the “networked local strategies, direct actions, and collective envisionings of the future” documented by Streeby (126).

Although Streeby groups climate activism and speculative arts of all kinds under the umbrellas of futurism and world-making, insisting that we miss a great deal “when the focus is only on nation-states, transnational corporations, research scientists, and politicians as significant agents and explainers of change” (6), in practice she organizes the book around a few central figures, texts, and movements. For instance, the first chapter, titled “#NoDAPL,” uses the Dakota Access Pipeline protests of 2016 – high-tech in its hashtags but with an emphasis on a politics of place – as an armature around which to build a much longer and broader history of Indigenous futurisms of various kinds, including the slipstream fictions of Gerald Vizenor and Leslie Marmon Silko, but also the much earlier activism of Hopi leader Thomas Banyacya and the 1990 Declaration of Quito. The second chapter, “Climate Refugees in the Greenhouse World,” chiefly uses the life and work of Octavia E. Butler to think about the prehistory of the current public discourse surrounding climate change. Streeby makes extensive and indeed striking use of the recently opened Butler archive at the Huntington Library, and her methodology differs intriguingly from the conventional ways in which authorial archives are so often deployed to support particular textual interpretations. Instead, Streeby invites us to consider Butler as a storyteller of another kind: an archivist and historian of climate change who scrupulously researched and documented climate change, climate-influenced disasters, and other ecological issues while working on her 1993 novel *Parable of the Sower* – which, as Streeby demonstrates, made considerably more explicit reference to climate change in discarded drafts. Streeby’s third and final chapter, “Climate Change as a World Problem,” emphasizes contemporary intersectional social movements and particularly the work of adrienne maree brown as an author and organizer, epitomized in her co-edited 2015 anthology of stories titled *Octavia’s Brood*.

If this mixture of activism and literary speculation from various groups and communities can seem eclectic, it should. Part of Streeby’s goal is to sketch possibilities for connection across, for example, black and Indigenous futurisms. Only one section in the book seems (to me) to cross the line from the productively eclectic into the possibly arbitrary, namely, the tenuously connected treatment of the Māori web series *Anamata Future News* that concludes the first chapter. It is not that I object to the inclusion of this particular piece of media for any reason, but its distance from many of the other texts and communities surveyed more broadly and deeply in the book necessarily led me to wonder why this obscure web series, rather than any number of other cultural productions, should appear here. I suppose the disappointment then lies more in all that Streeby had to exclude from this book. In general, however, I found Streeby’s chosen methodology – described by the author herself as building on “social movements and culture’ methodologies in American Studies” (6) – to be highly effective in how it links clear and concise historical summary and key political “flashpoints” with the development of ecologically minded SF before and after the landmark publication of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*. Certainly, parts of all the stories that Streeby tells will be familiar to different groups of readers within her wide audience, but everyone will also learn some new detail from the collective tapestry she weaves. I had no idea, for example, that in 1962 Monsanto produced and circulated its own SF short story to counter the radical futurism of Rachel Carson, which it called “The Desolate Year.”

The bigger picture that emerges in the book, however, is more important than any such details, and Streeby convincingly demonstrates the success with which artists and activists have begun decolonizing the climatological imagination: for example, she shows how the #NoDAPL water protectors imagined “a future connected to the past beyond the global fossil fuel economy” (40), and she contextualizes the protests using both past incidents of resistance against resource extraction and Traci Voyles’s concept of “wastelanding,” that is, the “extraction of resources in racialized spaces that combined with environmental racism renders ‘space marginal, worthless, and pollutable’” (44). One of the central – and most hopeful – tensions that she identifies at Standing Rock is the way in which the movement contributes to “a revitalized politics of place” while simultaneously showing how activist futurisms can “connect people who are widely separated geographically but bound together in confronting common antagonists and sharing common goals” (44). The third chapter expands on this point usefully in its profile of adrienne maree brown, an activist and thinker described as both “attuned to the particularities of place” while thinking about “climate change as a world problem,” and whose work points to “direct action as a crucial method” (105).

While one may disagree with certain individual claims or exaggerations in the book – for instance, that Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* was necessarily “one of the first to imagine possibilities in the wake of climate change disaster” (70) – the larger argument invariably holds. In this specific case, the argument is that Butler’s “memory work” collecting and annotating newspaper articles as she attempted to imagine new forms of symbiosis in her fiction both challenges neoliberal failures in the face of climate change and “models an interdisciplinary engagement with the sciences” (24), making Butler – along with Silko – major “intellectuals” of climate change. In fact, I would highly recommend this book to any scholar of Butler’s work, as that second chapter itself models a promising method of making sense of all “the unpublished fragments, blueprints, and drafts of . . . prequels and sequels” that fill the Huntington archive, which Streeby understands as “a kind of dreamwork” (81).

Equally stimulating are Streeby’s treatments of the many other “world-making projects” covered in the book, which are not necessarily utopian yet still challenge the fossil fuel industry through visionary futurisms (43). Of course, writing about climate change is always “timely,” always “urgent,” but *Imagining the Future of Climate Change* boasts a very useful bibliography that is almost shockingly current. And, despite the obvious speed with which this book was, for an academic title, conceived, written, and brought to print, I detected no real signs of overhaste save the minor mistake in Streeby’s brief reference to Supreme Court Justice Gorsuch with the first name “Adam” rather than “Neil” (88). Also, the lack of an index, which one suspects to be a time- and/or money-saving move, is offset by the other paratextual materials included in the book, such as a list of key figures, a more descriptive table of contents labelled “Overview,” and a glossary of important terms. That the first two entries in this glossary should happen to be “direct action” and “speculative fiction” perhaps tells us all we finally need to know about the mission of *Imagining the Future of Climate Change*: Streeby insists persuasively that our “answers about the future of climate change must not come solely from the sphere of science and technology, or they will be too narrow, not capacious enough,” and that we vitally need these “visionary fictions created by activists and artists who struggle to conceive of worlds that diverge from dominant narratives of power and privilege” (30–31).

Biography: Trained primarily as a medievalist, T. S. Miller (ts.tsmiller@gmail.com) has taught both early English literature and contemporary science fiction at Sarah Lawrence College and Mercy College. His current work explores representations of plants and modes of plant being in literature and culture.