



BOOK REVIEW:

*Fantasy and Myth in the Anthropocene:  
Imagining Futures and Dreaming Hope in  
Literature and Media*

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Oziewicz, Marek, Brian Attebery, and Tereza Dedinová, editors. *Fantasy and Myth in the Anthropocene: Imagining Futures and Dreaming Hope in Literature and Media*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2022.

This collection from Marek Oziewicz, Brian Attebery, and Tereza Dedinová provides a long-overdue contribution to the study of fantasy and myth. This is the first critical offering discussing the intersection of fantasy and myth with the environmental humanities and the Anthropocene, although at the same time it largely rejects the label of its title. The hubris of the term “Anthropocene,” and what is concealed under the blanket term “Anthropos,” is a recurring criticism in the collection. The typology as well as the political and cultural claims of fantasy have received the most academic attention, and they form the bulk of fantasy scholarship. This book’s stated purpose, on the other hand, is to contribute to the scholarly and creative archive by rejecting the determinism of the Anthropocene in favor of symbiotic modes of thinking and dwelling, and in this it succeeds admirably. However, this is not a conventional academic offering as the essays sit alongside poetry, visual art, and creative prose on topics ranging from the ecocentric potential of theme parks to a reading of radical impetus in children’s cartoons.

This whimsical turn is a decided effort, and Oziewicz says as much in his introduction. While the book’s focus is not only on fantasy *for* the Anthropocene, discussing these texts is necessary to elucidate forms of advocacy and problematic modes of engaging with the non-human world. It is the register of the mythic and fantastic that makes them apparent. Rather, the texts in the collection grapple with the fantasy *of* the Anthropocene, that is, the

fallacy of human supremacy, our supposed elevation above the natural world that is currently crashing down around us. To paraphrase the editor, conceptualizing alternative modes of inhabiting and engaging with the Earth is represented in the registers of the mythic and fantastic because the mythic and fantastic are precisely the registers in which it is possible to do so in the spirit of hope. Many of the essays in this collection take their cue from or draw on Donna Haraway's *Making Kin in the Cthulhucene* (2016). This heavy bias in favor of one theory ends up being both a strength and a weakness: such a concentrated study of a single text provides an in-depth exploration of Haraway's work and demonstrates its versatility, but it also does make for somewhat repetitive reading. On balance, it is an incisive and unique offering for scholars of speculative fiction and for the environmental humanities – extending beyond a purely scholarly contribution to encompass artistic, editorial, and fable elements that complement the scholarly discussion.

The academic essay collection is supplemented with two glossy sections of full-color visual art, and all of this is interspersed with poetry and prose from contemporary children's authors, creative non-fiction from the artists themselves, and snapshot fables from Attebery on the machinations of a generic hero-figure he calls "Anthropos," who bends the elements to his will in four vignettes. Overall, the book is looking to contribute to a storytelling archive that would provide hope-based alternatives to the norms and values of the Anthropocene. While it is beyond this reviewer to evaluate the technical merit of the art pieces, they provide a complimentary visualization of the themes discussed.

Oziewicz articulates the problematic of the Anthropocene in terms of "ecocidal" (4) ontologies which permeate Western story- and myth-making systems as represented by Attebery's Anthropos episodes. The critical essays are divided into four elemental-themed sections: the essays in "Trouble in the Air" ask structuralist questions about fantasy and myth, in the section "Dreaming the Earth" what Oziewicz calls the "biocentric turn" (7) in fantasy and myth is elaborated on as one of rooted yet fluid resilience, the chapters in "Visions of Water" concern humanity's relationship with the ocean, and finally the Anthropocene is interrogated in terms of extra-human and elemental forces in the articles collected under "Playing with Fire."

The book's title is somewhat misleading since its most prominent theme is precisely the inadequacy of the term "Anthropocene" to describe the most influential factor in this epoch, to apportion the responsibility, or to imagine some way of living that might lead elsewhere than to a crisis. I suppose this was a marketing choice by the publishers, but it does not convey the fact that the collection repeatedly criticizes the term "Anthropocene" for normalizing anthropocentrism and for obscuring the fact that humanity's contribution to climate change varies greatly across the globe. The collection most frequently offers the Cthulhucene in its manifold permutations as an alternative.

Oziewicz's concise and well-reasoned essay is, to my mind, the strongest of the collection. What he calls the "ecocidal unconscious" (58) is a state of mind that prevents us from fully comprehending and articulating the contradiction of modern life: that our existence depends on a fragile biosphere which we are doing our best to destabilize. Oziewicz argues that this limited, short-term thinking has infiltrated our story systems to the point that even tales told in defense of the planet perpetuate counterproductive narratives about climate

change. Much like Jameson's political unconscious or Patricia Yeager's energy unconscious, the thesis of the ecocidal unconscious discussed by Oziewicz renders the ideological underpinnings of the anthropocentric mindset visible.

Oziewicz makes those underpinnings apparent by contrasting the themes and representations of two graphic novels for children. In Marvel's *Captain Planet* series, environmental threats are represented as "anthropomorphic evil agencies" (63) and as the direct result of personal moral failings. Emergencies are confined to single locations, and they are always resolved through violence after which everything returns to business as usual. In contrast, *AstroNuts* follows the comic adventures of a group of superpowered animals on a mission to save the planet. Narrated by the earth itself, this story is set in motion not by a localized, and therefore confined, problem, but rather by the rising carbon dioxide level in the atmosphere – a global phenomenon.

Engaging readers through silliness and play in the spirit of Haraway's various riffs on "SF" (including "science fiction," "speculative fabulation," "string figures," and "so far") (7), Oziewicz posits that *AstroNuts* displaces the traditional emphasis on human characters through the representation of non-charismatic fauna engaged in collective action. The concept of the Goldilocks planet and our current ecological balancing act are the driving themes of the text, and Jon Scieszka, the author of *AstroNuts*, has also contributed art and prose to *Fantasy and Myth in the Anthropocene*. Thus, *AstroNuts* constitutes what Oziewicz calls a "planetarianist fantasy" (64) of refusing the ecocidal ideology in favor of articulating hope through storytelling.

Another article that deserves high praise is Prema Arasu and Drew Thornton's reading of hybrid ontologies in water-based fantasy films. Arasu and Thornton argue in terms of a littoral transhumanism, examining hybrid literary representations that destabilize established notions of human subjectivity, and they interpret the "ocean-chthonic" (150) human-monster hybrid figure as a rehabilitated romantic partner. Examining the representations of aquatic humanoids in *Ponyo* and *The Shape of Water*, the authors argue that the relationships between humans and ocean-chthonic hybrids in these films constitute playful and embodied efforts to re-entangle with non-human others which Donna Haraway calls "making kin" (8). The authors choose the designation "ocean-chthonic" for these characters because of their autochthonous supernatural watery origins, and "hybrid" for their melding of monstrous physicality with unmistakable human empathy. These characters defy classification and ordering by blurring the boundary between a beast that can't speak and a speaking person. In each of the fantastic worlds Arasu and Thornton examine, the ocean-chthonic hybrid represents a "debridement of human exceptionalism" (152) by exposing the falsehood of the supposedly immutable human-nature binary and the multifold possibilities for species co-existence. In both films, it is communication that makes kinship and staying with the trouble possible. Finally, Arasu and Thornton posit that the designation of ocean-chthonic hybrids as romantic shows a general move towards embracing more complicated embodied ontologies in real life.

Although not as strenuously argued and reasoned as the articles mentioned above, Kim Hendrickx's gloss on the ecocentric potential of cosmic horror as a "speculative figuration" (216) reflects on the current epoch and possible nomenclature, arguing that it is through Lovecraftian horror that we can best challenge the illusion of control that exemplifies the Anthropocene's

discourse. The author takes their cue from Jeff Vandermeer's *Southern Reach Trilogy* and Haraway's conceptions of H.P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu mythos, examining how the overlap between the discourse of ecology and the idea of truths beyond human comprehension can be used to formulate "responsibility" (Hendrickx 226) toward the environment. This starts with untangling ideas about the nature of narrative and our narrative(s) of nature. Hendrickx goes on to note that Vandermeer's trilogy represents how easily the natural world can become a source of cosmic horror: textually by defying all attempts at human measurement and therefore mastery, and thematically by highlighting the unstable foundations of our dominion over the earth. Cosmic horror, says Hendrickx, constitutes the "ultimate failure of control and rationality" (223). Much like the protagonist in *The Horror Over Innsmouth* retracing his own family's history, stories about nature, like *Southern Reach*, force us to realize with a creeping dread that we have never been modern.

While the aforementioned essays offer well-reasoned insights, the quality of the essays in the collection varies significantly. Oziewicz's contribution is particularly noteworthy for his description of the climate crisis as failure of communication and imagination – and for providing a discourse alternate to Haraway's. Unfortunately, not all the essays reach his level of insight or apply the same academic rigor. One of the essays goes so far as to argue for the conscientizing potential of a theme park, which this reviewer found to be something of a stretch given how bad they are for the environment (a concern that was not addressed). Since Baudrillard already used Disney's "Main Street, USA" to exemplify the simulacrum, a copy without an original, it would require more rigorous discussion than is provided to imagine a call to activism in such a place.

As discussed above, the second and perhaps more substantive criticism regards the choice of Haraway's *Cthulucene* as a central text. Since the collection under discussion is about imagining futures and draws heavily on the role of children's literature to do this, it seems an odd choice to center it around a theory that its own author pithily summarizes as "Make kin, not babies" (8). Simply put, Haraway's argument of rejecting reproductive futurism is flawed because if all the people who care about the future of the planet stop having babies, then only people who don't care about the planet at all will be left after a few generations. Therefore, the collection would benefit from an expanded theoretical basis. Only Lindsay Burton's essay addresses this contradiction, pointing out that it is in the liminal phase of youth that most people are conscientized into making sustainable lifestyle choices.

On balance, several articles in *Fantasy and Myth in the Anthropocene* provide strong academic discussion. While the theoretical basis of the essays is somewhat repetitive, Haraway's theory is clearly a generative thesis for the study of fantasy and our environmental future. The theories, stories, and art put forward within the pages of this book provide a solid foundation for building and imagining better futures. At the same time, it is difficult to decide where this book best belongs. The scope of its offering is so broad that parts of it would be useful in many places, but it is hard to imagine many contexts where all of it would be useful at once. Its creative elements are so rich and varied that to confine the book to the literary studies shelves of a university library would seem unnecessarily restrictive. Given the emphasis on Haraway's work, it would no doubt be very useful if assigned in a course on her works. However,

ultimately, its glossy pages of beautiful artwork deserve to be imbibed by young people themselves in addition to scholars.

*Biography:* Gemma Field obtained her Master of Arts in Modern English Literature from the University of Cape Town, South Africa, in 2022. She won the inaugural Stan Ridge Memorial Prize for Best Conference Paper at the University of the Western Cape, South Africa, in 2019 for “Asphalt Afrofuturism: Slow Violence in *Lagoon*.” She works in marketing.

## **Works cited**

Haraway, Donna J. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press, 2016.