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*Ecofeminist Science Fiction: International Perspectives on Gender, Ecology, and Literature* (2021)  
Edited by Douglas A. Vakoch

Review by Ruth-Anne Walbank

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## **ECOFEMINIST SCIENCE FICTION (2021) EDITED BY DOUGLAS A. VAKOCH**

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Vakoch, Douglas A., editor. *Ecofeminist Science Fiction: International Perspectives on Gender, Ecology, and Literature*. Routledge, 2021. 211 pp.

The new collection of essays edited by Douglas A. Vakoch, *Ecofeminist Science Fiction: International Perspectives on Gender, Ecology, and Literature* (2021), seeks to redress ecofeminism's neglected status in Science Fiction (SF) scholarship to date. As Vakoch highlights in their introduction, "proto-ecofeminist works, have been a staple feature of SF for several centuries," yet "the representation of female science fiction authors and ecofeminism [...] is utterly inadequate" (2). As such, this volume aims to bridge feminist, ecological, and SF criticism in a unique contribution to the field as part of the *Routledge Studies in World Literatures and the Environment* series.

*Ecofeminist Science Fiction's* geographical and temporal scope is broad, bringing together "a stellar international group of critics" to represent the perspectives outlined in the title (3). From early twentieth-century German SF *Alraune* (1911) by Hanns Heinz Ewers to the twenty-first-century Chinese SF of Chen Qiufan's *The Waste Tide* (2013), the collection challenges a Western-centric approach to SF scholarship. Vakoch clearly articulates this goal as the collection's editor, foregrounding how the organisation of the essays into thematic groups facilitates "an appreciation of the intertextuality of the many contributions as well as highlighting the kinds of topics and issues pertinent to understanding ecofeminist science fiction" (2-3). While such a wide-ranging, eclectic selection of essays orientates the collection towards covering a breadth of material rather than an in-depth, focused study, the resulting volume makes for an ideal introduction to new scholars and an expanded view of the field for existing academics.

The opening section demonstrates the collection's aims in full force, focusing on "Female Bodies" and their hybrid representations with animals, plants, and cyborgs through SF. For instance, Melissa Etzler's chapter on "Hanns Heinz Ewers' *Alraune* with an Ecofeminist Twist" examines how the mandrake-woman hybrid in Ewers' narrative represents emerging gendered stereotypes of the New Woman and the *femme fatale* in "Germany's roaring 1920s" (15). Similarly, Imelda Martín Junquera's chapter, "Reproduction, Utilitarianism, and Speciesism in *Sleep Dealer* and *Westworld*," focuses on how, in the series *Westworld* (2016-2022) especially, "Android women succeed in transgressing, traditional gender roles" following a growing awareness of "their condition as part human, part machine" (44, 41). In both chapters, the hybridity of a female-presenting body, enabled through the technological innovations imagined in SF, explores and transgresses gendered stereotypes. Within the volume's opening pages, the authors uncover the capacity for SF to facilitate discussions on

gender that sit outside neatly defined categories.

This hybridity extends from female bodies into the environment they inhabit, embodying that intersection of femininity and the environment the collection represents. For example, Lesley Kordecki, in their chapter on Mary Doria Russel's *The Sparrow* (1996), looks at how, when humans visit the alien planet Rakhat, they characterise the planet's ecology as reinforcing a stereotyped gender binary where the "lovely countryside" is feminised "in stark contrast to the masculinized trade city" (24). For Kordecki, it is only through the hybridity of the planet's "animal/human beings" that "combat the gendering double standards we live under" and "trouble our hierarchy of environment" (33). Similarly, Katja Plemenitaš offers "An Ecofeminist Reading of *The Stepford Wives*," which "highlights parallels between the domination of women and the domination of the environment" (49). The "cautionary tale" represented by this narrative warns against the patriarchal-led domination of women and the environments they occupy (49). Instead, this chapter and section advocates for valuing diversity and hybridity and challenging such narrow classifications; a lesson that this book's wide ranging, international scholarship seeks to enact.

Of particular interest to readers of this *Fantastika* special issue is the collection's second part on "Queer Ecologies." In allocating space for queer readings of ecofeminist SF, the book foregrounds the exciting potential within this field to extend the scope of ecofeminism beyond the categories of "men and women," as identified in the introduction (3). Instead, the "Queer Ecologies" section expands the definitions of gender and environment to include more indefinable, queerer aspects. Aslı Değirmenci Altın's analysis of Jeanette Winterson's *The Stone Gods* (2007) looks at queerness in terms of "non-normative" relationships (71), especially within an SF world where "same-sex relationships are quite normalized" (70). For Altın, queerness goes beyond the sexuality of the characters and into their law-breaking relations as an interspecies couple between "a human and a robot" that disrupts this imagined world's normative structures (71). As these two characters challenge the dominant anthropocentrism of their world, Winterson's novel seeks to "go beyond real and imagined boundaries of oppressive ideologies" to imagine a future outside ecological catastrophe (73). While Altın examines non-normative queerness in a future posthuman dystopia, Meghna Mudaliar questions the impact of associating queer women with the unnatural or unhuman in SF. Focusing on case studies from television, this chapter looks at Bill Potts in *Doctor Who* (1963-present) and Charlie Bradbury in *Supernatural* (2005-2020) to demonstrate both the "rarity of queer female characters" in SF narratives and their problematic characterisations (88). Mudaliar draws parallels between Bill and Charlie's deaths and reincarnations into something monstrous through their respective series, critiquing how such representations promote "essentialist ideologies that see queer identity as being 'against' the natural order of things" (97). Within this section, queer identities and ecologies become focal points for challenging prejudices and imagining homonormative futures within SF.

Sarah Bezan's chapter on "Speculative Sex" takes queer ecologies a step further so that the queer, oceanic representations of sex and birth in Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl* (2002) embody the slippery nature of queer women's fiction. Bezan's analysis centres on procreation and birth in

Lai's novel, where human-cyborg relations borrow on the "non-normative sexual and reproductive practices" of underwater creatures like fish to offer an alternative, oceanic vision in "resistance to the colonial traumas and dark powers of biotechnology" (81). In partnership with Lai's use of a stream-of-consciousness narrative, Bezan argues that "*Salt Fish Girl* emblemizes the fluidity and slipperiness of queer women's writing" (76). The story and narrative techniques encapsulate a subversiveness of gendered norms and hierarchical treatments of the natural world made possible through a queering of ecofeminist perspectives. Bezan's chapter signals an opportunity to examine SF alongside its contents to reveal queer readings and captivating ecologies that, while beyond the scope of the present volume, necessitate further study.

The third part of the collection, "War and Ecoterrorism," explores themes of conflict, activism, and resistance. Patrick D. Murphy's consideration of Karen Traviss's *The Wess'har Wars* (2004-2008) series is an ambitious chapter surveying these six novels from ecofeminist perspectives. Murphy expands from understanding the *Wess'har Wars* "at its most basic level" as a conflict between "the 'female' leaders" and "the 'male' Wess'har Aras" to explore how the series subverts "traditional dimorphism and gender binaries" (104, 105). Within this gendered conflict, Murphy considers how the series engages with moral questions around consumerism, commodification, and ethical veganism, suggesting that the series uncovers complexities in finding "ethically appropriate courses of action" within ecofeminism (110). Similarly, Peter I-min Huang's chapter on "Chinese Science Fiction and Representations of Ecofeminists" reflects on the moral and social implications of contemporary novels in approaching ecofeminism. Contrasting Liu Cixin's *The Three-Body Problem* (2008) and Quifan's *The Waste Tide*, this chapter considers how "these works of Chinese sci-fi reflect the two directions that sci-fi is taking in China today," with one perspective characterising activism as ecoterrorism and the other that defends the socio-political impact of ecofeminist awareness (135). While this section focuses on depictions of conflict, these chapters draw out the real-world implications of ecofeminist SF by highlighting the social, political, and ethical resonances such works consider.

Within this section, Başak Ağin's "A Material Feminist Approach to *Star Wars*" surveys a wide-ranging nine films focusing on the franchise's female characters and their connection to the Force. Ağin challenges ideas from existing criticism that "female heroes like Leia and Padmé" function merely as "the damsel-in-distress, [or] an object of romanticism for the protagonist" (114). Instead, their capacity as leaders, politicians, and logical decision-making "subverts the role attributed to a stereotypical female character" (115). Of particular interest is Ağin's comparison between the Force and its "resemblance not only to the concept of matter in material feminism, but also to Qi as the life force in Eastern philosophy", which "problematizes the segregating dualisms" by suggesting an interconnectivity between all things (121). With the increasing number of Force-sensitive female leads in recent *Star Wars* movies, Ağin presents a franchise "in a state of *becoming*" more ecofeminist in its development (117, original emphasis). In tandem with the other chapters in this section, Ağin's analysis demonstrates that SF is not static but in the process of developing nuanced ecofeminist outlooks and drawing on international perspectives enables scholars to bring these nuances to the fore.

To conclude the collection, part four examines “Capitalism and Colonization,” raising the intersections of ecofeminist SF with post-colonial theories. The chapters here highlight a wide range of authors, such as Zahra Jannessari Ladani’s consideration of Fazel Bakhsheshi’s novels whose “imaginative power encapsulates local/regional incidents” in a way that “the Iranian reader will immediately recognize” (158). Moreover, Benay Blend’s chapter draws on three novelists of Ojibwe, Israeli, and Palestinian nationalities to ask what happens “when Indigenous and Palestinian texts are read together” (171). In reading texts “across border lines,” Blend surmises that ecofeminist readings uncover how “science fiction serves as a vehicle for exploring issues like colonialism, racism, and climate justice,” making it a vital tool for voicing indigenous perspectives that challenge capitalist, colonial models of dominating the natural world (171). While highlighting these lesser-known authors and marginalised voices, this section also presents mainstream Western SF media in a new light using ecofeminist theories. For instance, Lydia Rose and Teresa M. Bartoli draw on ecofeminism to offer a fresh perspective on James Cameron’s *Avatar* (2009), revealing the film’s “cultural juxtaposition between the ideal ecofeminist society of the Na’vi people and modern Western ideology, as Pandora is being colonized by human Earthlings” (142). In the collection’s last chapter, Deirdre Byrne reads Ursula K. Le Guin’s early fiction as SF, which understands patriarchy as “the source of exploitation of women and nature” as an “ideology that creates and pursues war” (198). Collectively, these chapters present ecofeminist readings of an international selection of SF texts to demonstrate the exploitation and violence central to a capitalist-driven ecology. The contrast between American blockbusters like *Avatar* and lesser-known SF texts by indigenous writers makes this violent exploitation pertinent to the reader, while using the scope of the SF genre to imagine alternative models in a hopeful concluding note.

Overall, the book’s expansive selection of source materials across multiple centuries and nationalities offers an enticing introduction to possibilities for future ecofeminist SF scholarship. However, it also highlights the need for future volumes to provide in-depth case studies on specific periods or regions to expand the current critical perspectives on ecofeminist SF. Any of the book’s four parts could constitute a collection in its own right, containing a wealth of materials and themes to explore. While individual chapters often struggle to balance the multiple critical approaches encapsulated by international ecofeminist SF literature, the book collectively represents a wide range of perspectives on gender and ecology in a carefully considered manner. As the pressures of climate change and our present ecological crises become more pressing, the ideas in Vakoch’s *Ecofeminist Science Fiction* signal the need for further dialogue in this growing area of study.

## BIONOTE

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