Fear and Nature: Ecohorror Studies in the Anthropocene, edited by Christy Tidwell and Carter Soles

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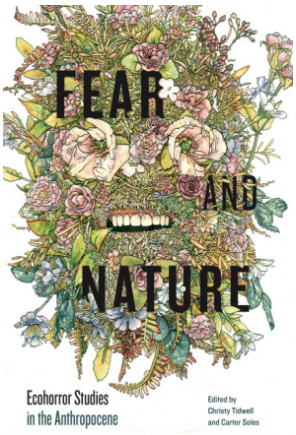
Christy Tidwell and Carter Soles. *Fear and Nature: Ecohorror Studies in the Anthropocene*. Pennsylvania State UP, 2021. AnthropoScene SLSA Book Series. Cloth. 300 pg. $109.95. ISBN 9780271090214.



Ecohorror is a long-standing genre in film and literature that is both immensely popular and woefully under-analyzed by academia. Christy Tidwell and Carter Soles's edited collection *Fear and Nature: Ecohorror Studies in the Anthropocene* is an attempt to remedy that dearth of scholarly criticism. What I love most about this book is the scaffolding that happens for young scholars here as well as the intellectual inquiry that naturally (pun intended) comes from many of these essays. The introduction helps to develop a language for discussing ecohorror. The early chapters work on showing the versatility of ecohorror. The later chapters showcase more specific applications of the theory earlier in the book. It is a book meant to be read from start to finish, and that is a rare treat in these edited collections. That scaffolding makes many of these topics approachable for rising scholars. And again, many of these chapters left me thinking for days and even weeks after reading. I will never see a bathroom scene in a horror film the same way again. I will never read Junji Ito without looking for an ecohorror implication. And I am confident I will have an excellent book to teach when next I teach an ecohorror lit class.

The editors spend much of the book's introduction in defending the title. In defining "ecohorror," a central term throughout the book, they examine the multiple ways that the book's authors approach ecohorror: "We fear science and its attempts to control the natural world; we fear the natural world and the way it exceeds our control. We also value science as a way of understanding the world, however, and return to it repeatedly in these narratives; we value the natural world and fear its loss at least as much as we fear nonhuman nature itself" (7). Clearly, "fear and nature" have a complex relationship in ecohorror, and this book works to unpack at least some of those complexities. What is perhaps more compelling than Tidwell and Soles's explication of ecohorror is their analysis of extant ecohorror scholarship. They examine each of the "four full-length critical works on ecohorror to date" and show the limits of those works (8). Tidwell and Soles envision *Fear and Nature* as adding to the discourse an "ecohorror-as-mode approach… a cross-generic and cross-media mode" (10). This interdisciplinarity is explored in

four parts throughout the book. The first part, "Expanding Ecohorror," focuses on "new types of ecohorror and seek[s] out connections between ecohorror and other types of horror" (10). The next section, "Haunted and Unhaunted Landscapes," prioritizes readings of the environment as literary landscape in ecohorror. "The Ecohorror of Intimacy," the third section, centers on "horror located in the home and/or family" (12). And the final part of the book, "Being Prey, Being Food," "examines narratives of food and predation between human and nonhuman in ecohorror texts" (13). Together, these sections work to explore the boundaries of both ecohorror and ecohorror scholarship.

The first essay, "Tentacular Ecohorror and the Agency of Trees in Algernon Blackwood's 'The Man Whom the Trees Loved' and Lorcan Finnegan's *Without Name*," by Dawn Keetley, argues that one type of ecohorror that does not get much attention is "tentacular ecohorror, which describes the terrifying encounter with a nonhuman nature that reaches out to grab and entangle the human" (24-25). She claims that the two titular works exemplify this narrative of facing alterity and the human being transformed by it. The essay excels in seating acute close reading inside comparatist contexts, comparing this kind of ecohorror to *Friday the 13th* (1980) or *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974). The writing alone would be a great model to rising scholars.

The final essay in the section, "'The Hand of Deadly Deca': The Rotting Corpse, America's Religious Tradition, and the Ethics of Green Burial in Poe's 'The Colloquy of Monos and Una,'" by Ashley Kniss, examines a rare example of buried-alive stories, "The Colloquy" by Poe. Kniss claims that, in its resistance of the religious resurrection narrative or typical horror of this kind of story, "The Colloquy" acts as a "mediation of the binary tension between ecophobia and ecophilia," rather than perpetuating either in isolation (71). What I found most compelling as Kniss's departure from Sara L. Crosby, arguing that the body's decomposition indicates an "actual physical merger with the nonhuman Other" rather than Kniss's claim that it signifies a "pretended merger with the other" (71). Due to the specificity of the text, however, and the lack of comparatist work, it is probably one of the least applicable or interesting-to-teach essays unless you happen to be teaching this one specific story.

The next part begins with Keri Stevenson's "The Death of Birdsong, the Birdsong of Death: Algernon Charles Swinburne and the Horror of Erosion." Stevenson characterizes Swinburne's poetry of erosion as "disanthropic," "'distinguished [from *misanthropic*] by [man's] absence from the future he envisages'" (93). As Stevenson later says, "time and the sea have destroyed only the human portions of the garden," noting that weeds, less romanticized birds, and thorns survive easily throughout the works (97). This focus on disanthropy is productive in considering ecohorror largely, so, even though the essay lingers on one author with whom the average reader might not be familiar, the reader can walk away with useful tools for analyzing ecohorror here.

In "An Unhaunted Landscape: The Anti-Gothic Impulse in Ambrose Bierce's 'A Tough Tussle,'" Chelsea Davis argues that some fictional landscapes "actively refuse to absorb, echo, or respond to us," and these "rejections might take the form of a parody, a hoax, or an empiricist dismissal

of ghosts in the wilderness" (111). I immediately thought of the ways the recent film *The Witch* (2015) did not make these rejections; just in a few pages, Davis' work challenges you to find examples and counterexamples. And then, she moves on to her own main case study, Bierce's "A Tough Tussle." Her analysis covers comparatist and historicist readings that move almost into philology and cultural studies by the end. I can easily envision teaching this chapter and this story in a class just on literary studies, as it takes from these different methodologies and weaves them together in provocative ways.

Bridgitte Barclay's "The Extinction-Haunted Salton Sea in *The Monster That Challenged the World*" is the final essay in the section and focuses on the titular SF horror film. While there is not much in the way of close reading, I appreciate the interdisciplinarity of the essay, with its work in both natural history and scientific history, which advocates for a specific way of reading ecohorror that is productive. Overall, this section of the book is easily one of the strongest just because it has that interdisciplinary feel that makes it great for modeling to students and allows for multiple ways to approach ecohorror as a genre worthy of literary analysis.

The third part, focusing on "the ecohorror of intimacy," begins with "From the Bedroom to the Bathroom: Stephen King's Scatology and the Emergence of an Urban Environmental Gothic," by Marisol Cortez. Definitely one of the more interesting titles in the book, this essay was also one of the more interesting ones to read. The essay begins with an in-depth defense of scatology in ecohorror studies. Cortez moves from an examination of "bathroom horror," starting with the original film *Psycho*, and uses theory to back up a reading of the toilet in these kinds of films not as just a fear of generally gross things but as a fear specifically of bodily functions, what goes on inside the body, and therefore a subset of ecophobia. Cortez then takes this well-established theory and situates it within King's *It* (1986) and *Dreamcatcher* (2001), focusing on the sewers in the former and the bathroom moments in the latter. The essay is cogent due to its structure, close reading, and practical application of theory. Despite its odd subject matter, this is an essay that will have you thinking long after reading.

Brittany R. Roberts's "'This Bird Made an Art of Being Vile': Ontological Difference and Uncomfortable Intimacies in Stephen Gregory's *The Cormorant*" focuses on ethical relationships and responsibilities in the titular 1986 ecohorror novel. Roberts reads into the tensions and anxieties of the novel underlying concerns about our relationships with pets. One major weakness the essay has, though, is its narrow focus. Most of the essay is in-depth close reading, and the author does not do much to try to make any takeaways applicable outside of this relatively obscure text.

The last chapter in this section is "*The Shape of Water* and Post-pastoral Ecohorror" by Robin L. Murray and Joseph K. Heumann. They generally provide a genre reading of del Toro's film, explicating the ways the film blurs and blends the genres of fairy tale pastorals and horror stories. Unfortunately, the essay does not have much depth to it. The first section of the piece is background: What is the film? Why did del Toro make it? What kinds of films does del Toro

generally make? Then, it moves on to a defense of what makes the film horror, then what makes it a fairy tale, and finally what makes it "post-pastoral ecohorror" (205) This last section is the most useful of the chapter, providing a new way to look at the film, "suggesting that embracing our interdependent relationships with nonhuman nature may save us all" (205). The essay as a whole felt like it had too easy or obvious of an argument, and it could have been a bit longer to give more depth to that final section.

The final section, "Being Prey, Being Food," begins with Kristen Angierski's "Superpig Blues: Agribusiness Ecohorror in Bong Joon-ho's *Okja*." I was immediately enchanted by Angierski's pivotal questions about ecohorror and veganism: "What is the relationship between ecohorror, vegan studies, and critical animal studies? How can the context of the slaughterhouse productively interrogate ecohorror's definition of resistance—of what counts" (219)? These are, of course, rather large questions, and Angierski seats them in a "close reading of the film's arguably most emotional denunciations of factory farming" (221). However, by that point, we are already a third into the chapter, and most of what follows feels less like a close reading and more like a comparative literature reading, one second going from a close reading of a quotation from a Mirando employer to a holistic reading of the film to biological journals to Peter Singer. The close reading never dives deep enough, and it constantly zooms out to talk about larger theories and systems, and then the essay is done far too soon! There are great questions being asked here, and the theory that is brought in is useful. However, the chapter is just too short and does not engage in the quality close reading promised at the one-third mark in the chapter.

"*Zoo*: Television Ecohorror On and Off the Screen," by Sharon Sharp, showcases everything that can be productive from a film studies paper. She takes on adaptation studies, reception studies, close reading, and film technology studies, all while bringing in the key theoretical aspects of animal studies and ecohorror studies. Her approach in this chapter is artful: the sections naturally weave together, so you don't experience any theory whiplash here, and you feel very fulfilled in reading it. If—when—I teach my next ecohorror class, I'll definitely be teaching *Zoo*, if only because of the case Sharp has made for it as the source of theoretical inquiry.

The book's final essay, "Naturalizing White Supremacy in *The Shallows*," by Carter Soles, deserves to have appeared far earlier in the book. It has always been a personal pet peeve of mine for editors to put the "diversity" chapters near the end of the book. (I would note though that this could have been a move on Soles's part since he was one of the co-editors to put other authors before himself out of humility.) The chapter excels at close reading the film The Shallows in terms of the white Final Girl and the racial vision suggested by the end. The reading is thorough and left me thinking about other similar films, too. My only critique here is that Soles spends a significant amount of time comparing what was happening in this film to other non-aquatic films, such as *Alien* (1979), *Halloween* (1978), and even *First Blood* (1982), that it felt more circumstantial that this happened to be an ecohorror film, and that the claims made here could have applied to a number of non-ecohorror horror films. That said, I am excited to read more of Soles' work!

For the most part, this book provides a lot of food for thought. The chapters here open up new dialogues, new ways of thinking of and analyzing ecohorror texts. The book as a whole would be an essential text for any course on ecohorror and would appeal to both undergraduate and graduate students. For the most part, too, many of the essays here would serve as great models for academic writing. This book is definitely going to be one of the more authoritative texts in the field for a while, due to its sharp, language-building introduction, the chapters' wide applications of ecohorror theory, and the scholars' tendency to use their work to open up conversations rather than simply proving a statement and walking away.

Jonathan W. Thurston-Torres is a PhD candidate in English and Animal Studies at Michigan State University. Their edited collection *Animals & Race* is coming out through MSU Press' Animal Turn series in 2022, and they also have a chapter forthcoming in Palgrave's *Spenser and Animals*. Their HIV work has appeared in TEDx, Weasel Press' *Blood Criminals*, and Fenris Publishing's *HIV isn't poetic*.