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Book Review

Blazan, Sladja (Ed.). (2021). **Haunted Nature: Entanglements of the Human and the Nonhuman**. Palgrave Macmillan.

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Horror has become an environmental norm.² As the planet grows warmer, pandemics surge, and hope for the future shudders, dangerous Nature³ pervades our hopeless human imaginations. Sladja Blazan’s (editor, she/her) *Haunted Nature* intervenes in the horror of the current environmental moment and its implications for planetary matter by introducing an alternative lens: haunting as the mode with which we may examine nonhuman agency during troubled times.⁴ Throughout the volume, haunting manifests as a spatial and temporal revisitation of elements “that [do] not necessarily rely on the human.” Instead, “[haunting] marks bodies including landscapes in interactive spaces where death does not mean decay,” (Blazan, 2021, p. 3-4) but exertions of Nature. However, *Haunted Nature* complicates haunting as its primary concept by framing it as something beyond Nature’s revenge; rather, both nonhuman matter and humans have the capability to haunt each other. Humans, either with their actions or ideologies, exacerbate environmental degradation for centuries to come. Equally, Nature, ranging from microbes to trees, threatens human health and livelihoods, often as a response.

The most poignant chapters that explicate Blazan’s definition of haunting are those on the microgothic. In the second chapter, Davina Höll chronicles the rise of metaphoric microscopic “monsters” 19th century Western media that rendered the human as a permeable subject. Höll’s chapter, like Simon C. Estok’s final chapter, reflects on the past two years of horror and angst that continue to arise during the COVID-19 pandemic, redefining the past anxiety of germs as an uncanniness of microlife that has revealed itself again in recent years. Simon Estok discusses the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of climate change and deals with “nature-denying behaviors” like eliminating microbes entirely. Specifically, he refers to the new wave after the pandemic that has taught us “what is ecophobia in one time and place is

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² For original phrase refer to Sara Crosby (2014, p. 514).

³ I use the capital “N” Nature as in line with Blazan’s use in the introduction. Nature denotes both the adjective and subject of discussion. Please note: I occasionally exchange environment instead of Nature.

⁴ Blazan here builds her conception of haunting from Jacques Derrida’s framing of hauntology to examine the gothic in the Anthropocene: “the concept of hauntology, a word with phonic similarity to ontology, came to designate ways in which seemingly overcome and terminated concepts continue to determine ideologies that replace them” (Blazan, 2021, p. 6). Derrida created this term to designate the influence of Marxism even after theorists like Francis Fukuyama contended capitalism serves as the last political-economic system and marked the “end of history.” Refer to Fisher (2014).



survival in another” (Estok, 2021, p. 185). Referencing Albert Camus’s *The Plague*, Estok refers to the hauntings as familiar to us. Yet, cultural amnesia makes them appear new in the twenty-first century, ending with the pedagogic value of haunting criticism as we approach new and evolving environmental catastrophes, both large and small.

The following chapters expand on the general human anxieties of microbes introduced by Höll with theoretical lenses that focus on specific community representation. For example, Dawn Keetley’s chapter, “Black Mold, White Extinction,” considers the racialized motif of black mold in three different narratives as it points to “anthropogenic fears about the extinction of the *white* race.” Mold in Keetley’s analysis reflects general discomfort regarding species extinction but has been utilized as a tool in literature to explain the concept of death as impermanent continuation of a multispecies assemblage, albeit in “predatory black mold” iterations (Keetley, 2021, 46). Unique to this chapter is the analysis of fungus as reflective of the change in life coupled with the author’s use of classic horror narratives, like H.P. Lovecraft’s “The Shunned House,” alongside Mike Flanagan’s contemporary Netflix series *The Haunting of Hill House*. The challenge “Black Mold, White Extinction” presents lies in the number of texts and films that are referenced. However, these multiple sources also provide support for the author’s thesis that black mold functions as a problematic metaphor for racist perceptions in the United States, and that this metaphor permeates various literatures and modern media today. Together with Estok’s chapter, Höll’s and Keetley’s explorations address frequently overlooked entities in ecocritical literature: the micro. Instead of specific attention drawn to the human characters and the climates in which they live, the microgothic chapters stress the return of familiar monsters who are nearly invisible without intentional microscopic awareness. This focus also pushes for greater attention to these microbes as alternatives to the analysis of the abstract, often implicit, understanding of ‘human,’ which has historically been white male characters in the Anglo-American canon.

Outside of the microgothic, *Haunted* approaches the multifarious modes haunting may take. This would include entities of Nature ranging from forests to weather phenomena. From pop cultural examples like Netflix’s *Stranger Things*, Sladja Blazan unpacks the evil gothic forest motif as a disruption of human conceptions of chronological, organized history. Instead, referring to several Indigenous traditional narratives of flora agency, she suggests that the character can be the environment, as evidenced by the Upside Down in *Stranger Things*. In such examples, the human characters amalgamate with the landscape, resulting in fluid boundaries between humans and nonhumans. This conclusion draws new implications for ecosickness; instead of the environment-human divide, both entities are undoubtedly connected, suggesting when Nature becomes sick, so can we. Blazan here postulates haunting as the result of human exceptionalism (we think we are not biological subjects) and of Nature’s repeated infiltrations of our lives, whether we want it or not.

Johan Hölgund and Alexandra Hauke employ literature and film to interpret the hauntings of human identities in connection with the landscapes in which they live. Hölgund reads extreme climate change, such as in his primary example *Crawl*, as a new formulation of the haunted house. Hölgund specifically emphasizes the unwillingness, even misperception, of the Global North to recognize that the so-called “haunting terror” (i.e., climate change) will never impact them. *Crawl*, Hölgund explains, portrays white, English-speaking, financially well-off characters as still subject to disturbed environments. In other words, the “lifeboats” of wealth, class, and race only protect certain humans for so long during global climate change.



Moreover, such speculative fictions highlight current, real weather phenomena that we may overlook because of the location of their impact. Additionally, in Alexandra Hauke's analysis of Shirley Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in The Castle*, national identity takes center stage as a category that shapes specific identities to specific, often abstract conceptions of environments. Hauke argues that Jackson's narrative negotiates binaries at the core of the Western patriarchal systems, which may "carry forward American foundational beliefs about the frontier" in addition to supremacy over the environment and women (Hauke, 2021, p. 93). She points to Frontier Gothic as a method with which segregation and inequality mark the identity of the western United States as a white, male landscape and Those who do not identify with this identity find themselves in horrific positions. Hauke's section cleverly compares the recent film adaptation of Jackson's novel to unpack the changing, yet similar, connection to idealized Nature that only becomes more complicated in the Anthropocene. Haunting in these chapters is not simply the consequences of long-term human mistreatment of the environment, but the ideologies (like racism or systems that encourage wealth disparities) that threaten communities. These entanglements of ideologies and Nature bridge topics that have been previously treated as separate, thus prompting greater discussions regarding systematic, perhaps even subtle, violence enacted towards vulnerable communities. Thus, such conversations invite more equitable discussions of human responsibility for climate change.

In a similar vein, Rebecca Duncan's chapter, "Haunted Technoculture," takes national identity and environment a step further in her analysis of Ng Yi-Sheng's *Lion City*. As a collection of short stories, *Lion City* formulates various technocultural developments that may be necessary for human survival. The chapter fascinatingly depicts the current technological biospheres in Singapore with the speculative biospheres of Ng's novel while also drawing the decolonial lens with which Ng engages. Duncan thus broadens the reach of the ecogothic beyond the Anglo-American to the other literary stages, framing haunting as the "ongoing socio-ecological degradations" (Duncan, 2021, p. 148) that only colonialism can provide. An engagement with Donna Haraway's (and other posthumanist) technofixes would have created a new layer to this already engaging piece that adds, along with Hauke's chapter, the intersectional lenses required of an environmental humanities text.

In a broader context, Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet's "Haunted Nature, Haunted Humans" combines the theoretical and topical trajectories of Blazan and Hölgund. This is achieved through their chapters that examine ecopocalypse via vengeful trees. Monnet's chapter redefines "haunting" to take gender and race into consideration. She argues that, far from motivational calls for environmental change, these ecopocalyptic, evil flora narratives utilize (and are haunted by) "retrograde gender and race politics" (p. 160). "Haunted Nature, Haunted Humans" unpacks the white-centric ecogothic narratives and indicates how these narratives do little to motivate proactive change, envisioning, rather pessimistically, no alternatives to global (white) extinction. Monnet, like Alexandra Hauke and Simon Estok, steers us to not simply ask who the victims of climate change in these ecopocalyptic fictions are, but also asks why the poltergeists of what we thought was the past continue today, often by our own actions.

Haunted Nature vitally adds to the ever-evolving theoretical landscape of the eco-gothic. Its sister text, *Fear and Nature* (2021), follows the postulation of ecohorror genre as a useful tool to examine human anxieties during the Anthropocene. *Fear* digresses from *Haunted* with its

primary explorations of macro environmental phenomena such as the representations of extreme weather in literature; without haunting as a guide, the text primarily concerns the consequences of environmental changes and not their reverberations over time as Blazan's volume does. Other eco-gothic explorations, such as Ruth Heholt's *Haunted Landscapes Super-Nature and the Environment* and Elizabeth Parker's *The Forest and the Ecogothic* (2020), center specific places such as landscapes and forests as gothic locales. Ruth Heholt's *Landscapes* employs memory studies to explore landscapes as ghosts using the 'affective turn,' or a

re-turn to the emotions, the body, the material and experience. [. . .] From the point of view of affect theory, therefore the landscape is no longer seen as a distant prospect to be looked at or painted or written about as something removed and external. (2016, p. 3)

Both *Haunted Nature* and *Haunted Landscapes* focalize the ability of Nature to act as an intentional subject in literature, though the former stresses the agency of matter outside of landscapes and moves away from affect theory. Blazan's edited volume shares a similar vision that Heholt explains in her introduction: the entanglement of nature and (human) bodies. *Haunted Nature* includes its diverse interest in locales, matter, and other species beyond specific places as well as its awareness of the microgothic, something not often addressed in complementary collections. While many of these volumes cite or extend on Jacques Derrida's framing of hauntology⁵ to examine gothic emergences in the Anthropocene, Blazan's volume in particular offers fascinating exploration of nonhumans in human ideological constellations. Further, this collection of essays uniquely invents a revolutionary microscope for us to envision both the visible and invisible horrors to create a new approach. Indeed, texts like Blazan's offer suggestions to the environmental humanities to decenter anthropocentric analysis in favor of a multimatter, intersectional examinations. Comprised of unconventional, popular speculative fictions, *Haunted* engages the reader with the serious, pressing, and yet seemingly familiar environmental changes of the creepy-crawly 21st century.

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⁵ Blazan describes Derrida's term "hauntology" thusly: "the concept of hauntology, a word with phonic similarity to ontology, came to designate ways in which seemingly overcome and terminated concepts continue to determine ideologies that replace them" (p. 6). Derrida notably utilized this term to designate the influence of Marxism.



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