

***Ecogothic in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, ed. by Dawn Keetley and
Matthew Wynn Sivils
(New York: Routledge, 2018)**

Ecogothic in Nineteenth-Century American Literature, Dawn Keetley and Matthew Wynn Sivils's 2018 collection, provides a space in which to examine human interaction with the American landscape in the long nineteenth century, at a time of huge environmental change due to colonialism, over-consumption of natural resources, plantation slavery, and industrialisation. In their introduction, Keetley and Sivils state that

Thus far, then, critics have established the ecogothic as (1) a repository of deep unease, fear, and even contempt as humans confront the natural world; (2) a literary mode that uses an implacable external 'wilderness' to call attention to the crisis in practices of representation; and (3) a terrain in which the contours of the body are mapped, contours that increasingly stray beyond the bounds of what might be considered properly 'human'. (p. 4)

Using these definitions as starting points, then, the editors go on to explore the main ways in which they propose to expand the landscape of ecogothic criticism. These three main areas – ecogothic time and space, the racial ecogothic, and the non-human ecogothic – are also touched upon, if more informally than in the introduction, throughout the collection's fourteen chapters. *Ecogothic in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* proposes to build upon the work of critics such as Simon C. Estok, William Hughes, and Andrew Smith, to determine to what extent ecocriticism can further challenge the already-blurring boundaries between humans and nature in American literature.

While the collection examines many of the mainstays of nineteenth-century gothic literature, including Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Harriet Beecher Stowe, it also focuses on lesser-known gothic authors such as Leonora Sansay and Charles Chesnut. One of the collection's running themes is an exploration of antebellum anti-slavery literature that, following Teresa Goddu's influential work *Gothic America* (1997), has been increasingly recognised as a core element in American gothic. This interrogation of the racial gothic includes Jericho Williams's examination of various antebellum slavery narratives, 'Ghoulissh Hinterlands: Ecogothic Confrontations in American Slave Narratives', which highlights the differences between nature in transcendentalist writing and slavery narratives. Perhaps most interesting of all is Williams's reading of Solomon Northup's narrative *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853), a reading which highlights the nuances and singularities of an often-overlooked text. In "'The Earth Was Groaning and Shaking": Landscapes of Slavery in *The*

History of Mary Prince’, Amanda Stuckey shows how literal surface readings – such as those focusing on the fractured and volatile volcanic literary landscape of nineteenth-century Bermuda and the Caribbean – can lead to new conceptions of slavery, by focusing on tactile experience. This argument ties in particularly well with Keetley and Sivil’s discussion of how the ecogothic explores ‘the direct physical connection between slaves, the land upon which they toil, and the fruits of their labor’ (p. 8).

The versatile nature of American ecogothic, which is found throughout the collection, often invites the reader and critic to recognise environmental issues in new and unexpected places. In “‘The Birth-Mark”, “Rappaccini’s Daughter”, and the Ecogothic’, Lesley Ginsberg, building upon Smith and Hughes, argues that, despite the tonal differences found in these stories, ‘nature in these tales is clearly “a space of crisis” linked to larger concerns about the status of humans in nature, a crisis refracted through gothic extremes of power and abjection’ (p. 115).¹ Ginsberg successfully demonstrates how ecogothic readings of the environment permit critics to make connections between seemingly disparate texts. Other chapters challenge the ability of humans to read their environments: ‘Failures to Signify: Poe’s Uncanny Animal Others’, Kate Huber’s chapter, is an examination of Poe’s ‘The Black Cat’ (1843) and ‘The Raven’ (1845), illustrating the limits and dangers of anthropomorphising pets and animals, a recognisable failing of Poe’s narrators. While Huber’s reading is often persuasive, there is no recognition of how animals and pets have often been used as racial signifiers in American literature, an aspect that may have added further dimension to her discussion.

Following on from the editors’ argument that the non-human turn in ecogothic discourse ‘disputes both human exceptionalism and the hegemony of social constructivism’ (p. 11), the collection reflects on the literary Earth as a place that is only occasionally hospitable to humanity. On a macro scale, Lisa M. Vetere writes, in “‘A Heap of Ruins”: The Horrors of Deforestation in Leonora Sansay’s *Secret History*’, that ‘[j]ust as the gothic mode explores the return of the historically and psychologically repressed, so too does ecogothic provide a theoretical lens through which to see how Earth itself has a traumatic past haunting its present’ (p. 38). Conversely, Cari M. Carpenter, in her chapter entitled ‘Bleeding Feet and Failing Knees: The Ecogothic in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *Chasing Ice*’, discusses how the ecogothic landscape has, on the micro level, ‘a relationship with the materiality of the human body’. Quoting from Nancy Tuana, she posits that the influence of oxygen on the human

¹ Andrew Smith and William Hughes, ‘Introduction: Defining the EcoGothic’, in *EcoGothic*, ed. by Smith and Hughes (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), pp.1-14 (p. 3).

frame leads to a gothic invocation in which the boundaries separating the self and the outside world are rendered porous.² The ecogothic can quite literally be found in the air we breathe (pp. 147-48).

Such readings come together in Tom Hillard's chapter "'Perverse Nature': Anxieties of Animality and Environment in Charles Brockden Brown's *Edgar Huntly*'. Hillard explores how the eponymous protagonist's 'strongest desires to maintain a grip on his Enlightenment-era sense of independent selfhood and agency crumble as he realises that the boundaries between the human and more-than-human world are penetrable and unstable – and may be entirely social construction' (p. 23). These chapters successfully argue for a non-human rereading of American gothic texts, in which the most basic of environmental assumptions is deconstructed.

One of the more surprising aspects of the collection is its depiction of nineteenth-century extinction. As demonstrated comprehensively by Jennifer Schell, in 'Ecogothic Extinction Fiction: The Extermination of the Alaskan Mammoth', extinction was a source of much rumination and shame throughout the period, something which is further illustrated in Jimmy L. Bryan Jr's examination of Buffalo hauntings in "'Give Me My Skin": William J. Snelling's "A Night in the Woods" (1836) and the Gothic Accusation Against Buffalo Extinction'. These chapters convincingly highlight how ecogothic strategies were employed throughout the nineteenth century to deal with the guilt of human-induced wholesale destruction of animal life.

Addressing a wide range of issues but exploring the same basic tenets of ecocriticism and American gothic studies, each chapter in *Ecogothic in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* represents a potential way forward for the study of this still relatively nascent field. There is certainly plenty of potential for further collections on subjects such as Sivils's 'vegetable gothic', Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock's 'hyperobjects', Michael Fuchs's human/animal boundaries, or the use of the elemental powers of fire and water in Poe's work, as explored by Liz Hutter. Ideally, and recognising the multiplicities involved, this will lead to a widening of our understanding of ecogothicism. Refreshingly, there also appears to be a willingness to engage in respectful debate: Estok, Hillard, and Sivils as leading names in the field are regularly cited and occasionally challenged. It's also interesting to note the collection's movement away from Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962). Other than Keetley and Sivils's introduction, which identifies Carson's text as 'instrumental in the emergence of

² Nancy Tuana, "Viscous Porosity: Witnessing Katrina," in *Material Feminisms*, ed. by Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), pp.188-213 (p. 198).

the modern environmentalist movement' (p. 2), there is no mention of *Silent Spring*. Maybe this a sign that American ecogothic, in moving away from one of its (if not *the*) anchor text, is moving into its next phase of development.

Indeed, throughout the collection there is significant scope for future exploration of the American ecogothic. Keetley and Sivils's books is therefore well placed to fulfil its aim of becoming

part of a much longer critical project, one in which we continue to challenge and reconsider the ways fear, guilt, trauma, the uncanny, and the grotesque factor into our understanding of how the spectral presence of the nonhuman haunts America's literary mind. (p. 17)

One of the next challenges of ecogothic criticism to be addressed in future collections is the daunting task of trying to identify what is *not* ecogothic, a challenge which is made all the more daunting by the blurring of boundaries inherent in the discipline itself.

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