



Book Review

Marek Oziewicz, Brian Attebery, and Tereza Dedinová (Eds.), *Fantasy and Myth in the Anthropocene: Imagining Futures and Dreaming Hope in Literature and Media*. Bloomsbury, 2022; ISBN: 9781350203341.

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I heard once the oxymoronic saying that whoever loses an argument is really the winner. This is because, unlike the winner, who has gained no new insights, the loser has come to see things differently. I believe that may be the case of my experience with *Fantasy and Myth in the Anthropocene*. In many ways it has helped me bridge a gap between my expectations of what a text on fantasy and myth in the anthropocene should be and what it could be. Throughout the book, my preconceptions and assumptions were repeatedly challenged, and in general the writers and artists drew me into a more appreciative awareness of how fantasy and myth can, indeed, lead to imagining futures and dreaming hope.

Starting with a 5,000-foot look before moving in for some details, three elements of the book as a whole stand out: the form of the essays, the division of sections, and the understanding of anthropocene. The texts themselves are different from what I am used to as a selection of essays. First, the texts are not all standard essays. Each of the four sections starts with a vignette about Anthropos, or Child of Man, as he is more commonly known dealing with an element of the environment. These are all written by Brian Attebery, one of the editors as well as a contributor. Then there are the essays themselves. While half of them are fairly standard scholarly essays, each is paired with a more subjective artistic essay. In addition to the print portions of the text there are two sections of colored plates that serve as essays as well. Before reading *Fantasy and Myth in the Anthropocene*, I would have put the term essay in scare quotes to make the point that they were not really essays. I attribute not putting them in scare quotes to the mind opening nature of this book.

In addition to the essayistic form, the division of sections caught me off guard. The sections are entitled “Trouble in the Air,” “Dreaming the Earth,” “Visions in the Water,” and “Playing with Fire.” To my uninitiated mind, I calculated that the sections would be based on the human affect on the air, soil, water, and the ongoing issue of energy. However, only “Visions of the Water” is particularly about the physical element of its sectional title.

Instead, these sections are more meaningful in a symbolic way. “Trouble in the Air,” for example, provides an overview of myth and fantasy in relationship to man’s dealing with the world overall, something like the 5,000-foot look I am providing in this section of the review. “Dreaming the Earth” is less about soil than it is about the biome in relationship to fantasy writing, while “Playing with Fire” is concerned with non-human agency and cosmic forces. Only “Visions of Water” met with my expectations of oceanic tales. That being said, I found these headings somewhat disorienting at first, although reflection led to a synergy between the elemental headings and their actual content.

Finally, I was surprised by the fact that the Anthropocene is not as fixed of a term as one might think. In the first place, I was surprised at Atterbery’s suggestion that the Anthropocene does not start, as I had assumed, at the beginning of the industrial era, but at the dawn of written literature (p. 16). It is this sort of assumption challenge that I found perplexing, instigating further thought throughout my reading of the text. Another aspect of the Anthropocene that runs through the book is the play on particular framings of our present era. There is the Capitalecene, dealing with our present capitalist culture; the Plasticine, invoked against our tons of plastic that will show up eons hence in Earth’s geological layers. Most intriguing however was the frequent mention of the Chthulucene. This rendition of our present era is evoked by nearly half of the print-based essays referring to Donna Haraway’s vision of sympoesis (creating with) over autopoiesis (self-creating); however, her vision goes well beyond this concept. It invokes the concept of things from the earth, especially things with tentacles, spider like limbs, and other creatures that come from within the Earth. Not only does Haraway invoke them; she also calls for us to make kin with them, not biologically, but in a more existential way as I understand it.

This discussion of Haraway’s leads to a closer look at some of the individual essays, although it should be noted that the volume is missing any direct contributions from Haraway herself. However, throughout the text, particularly in the more academic essays, Atterbery and Haraway are regularly cited for their contributions to the field of fantasy in connection to human activity. Atterbery, in addition to his short fables¹ of the Child of Man, also writes the opening essay in the first section, “Trouble in the Air.” In “From the Third Age to the Fifth Season: Confronting the Anthropocene through Fantasy,” Atterbery develops an understanding of the use of fantasy and myth through the ancient tale of Gilgamesh and through N. K. Jemisin’s *Broken Earth Trilogy*. The third age, the time of gods and giants, has given way to the fourth age, the anthropocene, the time of man. However, this age may be coming to an end, leading to the fifth age, or the fifth season as Jemisin puts it in the first volume of the trilogy. This is a time of the earth, a time of sentient planetary forces that will be taken up in the fourth section of *Fantasy and Myth in the Anthropocene*. Paralleling the movement of these eons is the history of fantasy, moving from the god killing epic of Gilgamesh, to the transitional eras of fairies, elves, hobbits, and man,

¹ I realize fables are by definition stories with animal characters but after reading this book, I am more able to see the apt appropriation of the genre.

to the domination of humanity. Atterbery completes his survey with an extended look at John Crowley's *Ka*. This story of a phoenix-like crow, Ka, and his human interlocutor, the final survivors of their kind on earth. While this might seem like a nihilistic end-times tale, Atterbery suggests that it is merely the beginning of a new, different period after the anthropocene.

Marek Oziewicz, who, like Atterbery, is an editor of this collection also conveys provoking concepts that shook up my worldview. In "Fantasy for the Anthropocene," Oziewicz delves into the "ecocidal unconscious" and "planetarianism." These concepts are applied to three juvenile/young adult texts: *Astronuts* (2019) by Jon Scieszka and Steven Weinberg, *The Fate of Fausto* (2019), by Oliver Jeffers, and *Wilderness Wars* (2018) by Barbara Henderson. The ecocidal unconscious refers to our ignorance, intentional or otherwise, of our ongoing environmental destruction. The concept falls in line with that of "hyperobject," which is developed in several other essays within the volume, particularly Marcus Laukkanen's "Literalizing Hyperobjects." Hyperobjects are those realities, such as global warming or global pandemics that are so great they lie beyond our scope of consciousness. It is possible to catch a glimpse of what these hyperobjects are, but it is unlikely that we will ever see the whole reality. So it is with the ecocidal unconscious: we tend to be unaware of all the effects we have on the ecological systems. As a means of attenuating this wall of blindness, Oziewicz promotes "planetarianism." His two-fold definition of planetarianism is "a biocentric commitment to stand up for the planet" and "the applied hope articulated through stories" (2022, p. 64). Unlike many didactic environmental stories, humans are not the saviors of the helpless earth in this hope. Rather it is earth that saves earth's self, and, in the case of *Astronuts*, mutant non-human earth species that assist humanity.

As an example of an artist's entry, Jon Scieszka, one of the creators behind *Astronuts*, writes an essay on how the project came to be founded, along with six pages of glossy plates from the series. Additionally, a double page glossy spread by Hatem Aly, "Together We Sail," includes a brief paragraph explaining the thought process that went behind coming up with the title.

Two essays stood out in the second section, "Dreaming the Earth." The first, by Tereza Dědinová, "Embodying the Permaculture Story," portrays the witchcraft in the Tiffany Aching series by Terry Pratchett as the practice of permaculture: observing how the world works and cooperating with its existent modes of operation. This witchcraft is much more along the lines of being present to the reality of the biosphere and geosphere rather than the conjuring of supernatural beings and powers. Dědinová's essay features a section on each of the ways this is done: "Care for the Earth," "Care for People," and "Limits to Consumption and Reproduction, and Redistribution of Surplus." As with Oziewicz's planetarianism, the earth is seen as an active agent. In the case of this series, the young witch Tiffany lives on the Chalk, land seen by the other witches as not particularly suitable for witching, but Tiffany's openness to the land allows her success.

Aneesh Barai's essay, "The Earth is My Home Too, Can't I Help Protect It?" brought

in a new viewpoint that, once again, caught me off guard. Although Barai's main argument focuses on ". . . why it is problematic to embody climate crisis as the terrifying Other that needs to be destroyed by force" (2022, p. 118), he also develops the role of queerness in joining the struggle against ecocide, capitalism, and colonialism. Through the animated worlds of *Korra*, *She-Ra*, and *Steven Universe*, Barai demonstrates how the inclusion of queer identities challenges social norms and power structures. These are compared to other children's shows that critique capitalist and environmentally damaging practices, yet they are exclusive of queer role models. Similar to Oziewicz's warning of ecocidal unconscious, Barai makes a point of addressing the exclusive unconscious framework in which many straight, cisgender live.

This section is rounded out by a series of short poems by Elin Kelsey, an educator and writer who set out to spend a month in the Finnish woods to work on a piece of non-fiction. Instead of her planned writing, she found that fully formed poems formed in her mind at a speed that was difficult to capture. Rather than simply taking this as the inspiration a place might bring, it seems to attribute an agency to the environment. Her poems capture the wonder of trees developing stresswood, the incredible migration of Siberian willow warblers, and the slow, intense movement of Ecuadorian palm roots. I once read that poems are like jokes in that you "get them." Indeed, I found each of these four poems engendered an "Aha!" experience of gained insight.

Having always lived in a river valley, I found another prejudice of mine challenged in "Visions of Water." It was all about oceans, and mostly about the Pacific Ocean. Not to be petty, but I felt an exclusion that pales in comparison to what Barai might have been getting at, but I would have liked a more expansive vision of water. The entire hydrosphere should be considered, even aquifers and, as scripture puts it, waters in the heavens and above the heavens. But I will get off my inlander soapbox and proceed to look at what is included the section.

Of the essays selected for this chapter, I found Prema Arusu and Drew Thornton's "Sleeping with the Fishmen" most telling. In this essay, the authors use Hayao Miyazaki's *Ponyo* (2008) and Guillermo Del Toro's *The Shape of Water* (2017) to explore the oceanic-chthonic nature of the sea creature to explore the human, non-human hybrid in relation to the world. Immediately for me, a picture of the "Creature from the Black Lagoon" surfaced in my mind, and I realized I had not seen any of these movies, including *Creature from the Black Lagoon*. However, as is generally true of all the essays, the summaries, overviews, and key points of the stories are deftly delivered providing the inexperienced reader with a clear depiction of the subject. The chthonic is related to Haraway's chthulcene in that these creatures are not alien, but from the depths. While these fishlike, tentacled, finned creatures are designed to be repulsive, Haraway's kinship calls for us to embrace the distinctly non-human. It is this human/oceanic chthonic creature relationship that drives this entry. However, beyond the gills and scales there is a deeper "otherness" that is explored. It starts with communications. Neither Asset, the creature in *The Shape of Water* nor *Ponyo* have human language in their beginning of human relations. However, these are developed as

part of the “humanification” of the creatures. The authors point out that this points to human exceptionalism. Furthermore, in *Ponyo*, fulfillment comes with having a soul. Unlike its forerunner, Hans Christen Andersen’s Little Mermaid has a soul is ethereal. The authors write that this disturbed Miyazaki in his youth, and his Ponyo has a soul that is much more earthy, tangled in with the environment and compassion.

Two other essays deal specifically with the indigenous people of the Pacific Islands. Christopher Foley’s “From Culture Hero to Emissions Zero” largely critiques the portrayal of Maui in Disney’s *Moana*. While Foley underscores the ecological awareness of Western, male driven, extractionist tendencies in the drive to capitalize on natural resources, he points out the misguided approach of appropriating the character of Maui, who is actually a great cultural hero akin to the Prometheus of Greek myth, to portray him as an arrogant scoundrel whose stealing of fire is associated with the dubious Western approach to the earth, its resources, and this very early technology. Unfortunately, this misappropriation took place despite the *Moana* creative team spending time in Polynesia to gain cultural insights.

The other essay on the indigenous peoples of the Pacific Ocean is “Reimagining Youth Relations with Moananuiākea (The Large, Expansive Ocean)” by Caryn Lesuma. After introducing the Western colonization that has widely done away with traditional values and teachings of indigenous Hawaiians, she introduces the mo’olelo, a traditional narrative form for reintroducing these concepts. Lesuma investigates the short story “All My Relations” by Bryan Kamaoi Kuwada and Lehua Parker’s trilogy *The Niuhi Shark Saga*. Both deal with the traditional character of a Niuhi, shape-shifting man-eating sharks. “All My Relations” is, in fact, narrated by a Niuhi, who in the human form teaches a boy to fish. As the boy grows older he takes more and more fish and eventually kills a shark for sport, straining the Niuhi agreement not to eat humans to the breaking point. Parker’s *Saga* also features a Niuhi as the title suggests, but in this case, he is a hybrid son of a Niuhi mother and human father. His background is hidden from him, and he is told he has allergies to meat and water to prevent him from realizing his true nature. He takes up arms against environmental devastation not through his five rows of shark teeth, but through art. In developing her argument for hopeful re-engagement in ancestral lessons through re-invented ancient forms, Parker also provides two traditional Niuhi mo’olelo for comparison.

This section also ends in a series of color plates providing visual essays on water. The first, “Orca in the Sky” is accompanied by an essay by its painter, Shaun Tan, who writes about its conception as well as a brief rendition of how fiction can help us imagine better futures.

The final section of this collection, “Playing with Fire” explores fantasy and myth that “revision nonhuman agency and imagine our interaction with larger planetary forces” (Oziewicz, 2022, p. 8). As one well-versed in the fantasy and myth of our day might guess, the essays in this section feature among other texts N.K. Nemis’s *Broken Earth Trilogy*, George R. R. Martin’s series *A Song of Fire and Ice*, and Jeff Vandermeer’s *Southern Reach*

Trilogy. In each case the earth takes on an agency: the earth breaks into disruptive seasons, a winter of indeterminate length and ferocity is approaching, something strange is happening on the southern coast. Themes of cyclical un-creation and recreation, the Chthucelene and embracing the Chthucelene, hyperobjects, and planetary agency are revisited in these essays. But for the final section I would like to focus on what I would have called the “less academic” essays a month ago, because now my vision of what counts as an academic essay vs a personal essay has turned quite grey.

For example, Grace L. Dillon’s “The Stepping Stone, The Boulder, and the Star: A Fable for the Anthropocene” seems to be a simple tale. A stepping stone embraces the comfort of a large, immovable boulder. But when it sees a star that is apparently getting closer, moving in a collision course with the boulder, the stepping stone grows alarmed. He enlists the support of fellow creatures including a stuffed animal. At first, they are pretty nonplussed. But at one point they seem to take notice, with fake fur turning real, but then “devolving back into simulated” and remaining “quiet about their true sayings, feelings, and thinkings” (2022, p. 219). Taking on the nature of a dream, although the author makes no assertion that this is anything other than real in its fable universe, the stepping stone becomes a bridge through the water as the light of the star runs its course into the boulder, which, Dillon cryptically notes had visited this planet “only once before” (2022, p. 219). Unlike what one might expect from the collision of the “descending-light-pressuring-Star-heat” (2022, p. 220), a total annihilation, the earth laughs and in doing so reshuffles its components and carries on. Following this is a series of questions, reminding me of the end of the Book of Job, in which God probes Job’s abilities to carry out works equal to his own creation. However, it is the last question that nearly made me shiver. After the series of questions concerning the remarkable events of the story, the fable asks: “may a mere daughter of human-persons bring about and share such a story?” (2022, p. 220).

This creative element, the invention of hope through the creation of story is at the heart of the writings of this text. As Oziewicz notes in an earlier essay, “Whatever the future holds, it must first be imagined in stories . . . Fantasy is the best tool we have to envision futures in which our current ecocidal practices have even replaced with a relationality that sustains all life” (2022, p. 68). This is a transformation away from the dire, dystopian ends one may imagine for the world following the anthropocene. As the book’s subtitle suggests, we should be “Imagining Futures and Dreaming Hope in Literature and Media.”