



ECOCENE

CAPPADOCIA JOURNAL OF ENVIRONMENTAL HUMANITIES



Volume 4/Issue 1/June 2023

Book Review



Book Review: *Ecologies of a Storied Planet in the Anthropocene*

Simon C. Estok

Sungkyunkwan University, South Korea
estok@skku.edu

ORCID: 0000-0002-9763-3087

Estok, Simon C. 2023. Review of *Ecologies of a Storied Planet in the Anthropocene*, by Serpil Oppermann. *Ecocene: Cappadocia Journal of Environmental Humanities* 4, no. 1 (June): 30–36. <https://doi.org/10.46863/ecocene.91>.

Book Review/ Received: 11.06.2023 /Accepted: 20.06.2023

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.



Book Review: Ecologies of a Storied Planet in the Anthropocene

by Simon C. Estok



About the Author

Dr. Simon C. Estok is a full professor and Senior Research Fellow at Sungkyunkwan University (South Korea's first and oldest university). He is editor of the A&HCI journal *Neohelicon* and is an elected member of The European Academy of Sciences and Arts. Estok teaches literary theory, ecocriticism, and Shakespearean literature. His award-winning book *Ecocriticism and Shakespeare: Reading Ecophobia* appeared in 2011 (reprinted 2014), and his much anticipated *The Ecophobia Hypothesis* (Routledge, 2018; reprinted with errata as paperback in 2020) has been translated into Turkish (tr. M. Sibel Dinçel) and is currently being translated into Chinese and Korean. He is co-editor of five books: *Anthropocene Ecologies of Food* (Routledge, April 2022), *Mushroom Clouds: Ecological Approaches to Militarization and the Environment in East Asia* (Routledge, March 2021), *Landscape, Seascapes, and the Eco-Spatial Imagination* (Routledge, 2016), *International Perspectives in Feminist Ecocriticism* (Routledge, 2013), and *East Asian Ecocriticisms* (Macmillan, 2013). Estok has published extensively on ecocriticism and Shakespeare in such journals as *PMLA*, *Mosaic*, *Configurations*, *English Studies in Canada*, *English Language Notes*, and others. He is currently working on a book about slime in the Western cultural and literary imagination.

Book Review

Simon C. Estok

Oppermann, Serpil. 2023. *Ecologies of a Storied Planet in the Anthropocene*. Morgantown: West Virginia University Press.

Dazzling. *Ecologies of a Storied Planet in the Anthropocene* is simply dazzling in its breadth of research, its nuanced theorizing, and its clarity of expression. Serpil Oppermann brings together an enormous body of research from across many disciplines to argue the material ecocritical position that matter (biological and non-) has important stories to tell us and that we ignore them at our own peril.

Before the rise of smart phones, before our students were glued to their screens and compulsively texting, they talked in class. In those days, I would do a little experiment on the first day of classes. I would walk in a minute or so late, say hello, put my books on the table, introduce myself, then walk out, close the door, and hover around the door until the chattering became audible. Then I would burst in and ask them what they were talking about. Of course, I didn't really want to know and certainly didn't want to seem prying and so told them that "it's okay, we love talking. We love telling stories. That's what we do, and when we're not telling stories, we are listening to them—because that's also what we do." From there, I would go on to discuss the importance of literature in the world—an important message when the Humanities are becoming less and less significant.

It is particularly important to listen now because facts are under fire: we are a post-truth time in which world leaders can claim with impunity that opinions carry the same weight as facts and that the sanctity of facts must give way under the pressure of "alternative facts." *Ecologies of a Storied Planet in the Anthropocene* is all about listening. The book begins with a broad introduction of the state of the field from a position of commitment "to modes of thinking beyond anthropocentricity," and argues "that the message our storied planet conveys about the ongoing disruption of its rhythms and

biocycles, species, materials, and ecosystemic processes is crucial” (Oppermann 2023, 7). In the first chapter, Oppermann asks, “what if we envision our world as a storied planet where all earthly entities (including the inorganic ones) produce meaning-filled encounters with everything else in ongoing processes of communication?” (13). The theoretical frame through which to ask and answer this question, Oppermann explains, is material ecocriticism. The first chapter thus begins with a kind of a primer on material ecocriticism and its role in prompting recognition of the agencies that reside outside of the human. What Oppermann defines as “the foundational premise of material ecocriticism” is the capacity of all things to communicate (24). This is not the same as saying that butterflies and jellyfish, rocks and fungi have language systems that people have, with complicated linguistic and cultural systems of syntax and linguistics and idiom; rather, it is a recognition that everything has a story, that “all vibrant materials are storied with different capacities of expressive creativity” (36). Oppermann is meticulous in explaining that “based on the premise that if matter is agentic, it must also be capable of expressing itself, and if it can express itself, then it is storied matter capable of producing narratives” (36). She explains further that “material ecocriticism claims that the world is an ancient site of narrativity whereby material agencies communicate intelligibly with other entities and produce meaning-filled encounters with everything else around them” (38). What is remarkable about *Ecologies of a Storied Planet in the Anthropocene* is how obvious it all seems. This is the talent and gift of Oppermann: she makes complicated material seem so easy and obvious, compelling the reader to wonder, “yeah, why didn’t we think of this before? How could we not have seen the importance of listening?” The importance can hardly be overstated: “heeding the stories of matter can help us to better understand fragile ecosystems, polluted landscapes, carbon-filled atmosphere, acidifying oceans, changing climate, species extinctions, and social crises” (Oppermann 2023, 43). The scales of relevance of *Ecologies of a Storied Planet in the Anthropocene* is immense.

The second chapter, appropriately, is all about scale. For Oppermann, scale is “a convenient conceptual device for the global scope of geobiochemical human activities” that are “dramatically altering the functioning of the Earth systems that sustain all life” (57). Of course, the problem with Anthropocene ecologies is that their massive scales challenge our conceptual abilities. I am reminded of a religious friend who was visiting my house not long ago, and, when I presented a 325-million-year-old fossil to him and kept telling him the age of the rock, he finally asked me to stop repeating myself and told me that he had heard me the first six times. I pressed the issue further and told him that he regularly insists that the Earth is five thousand years old, to which he said, “I can imagine five thousand. I can count to five thousand. Five billion is more of a challenge.”

For him, five thousand is like a map: the scaled down thing represents the bigger one. The problem Oppermann addresses is about conceptualizing things that are simply too big to conceptualize, and this has been the topic of a lot of recent work in the Environmental Humanities. Scholars have sought to address scalar issues in a variety of ways: Timothy Morton with “hyperobjects” (2013), Rob Nixon with “slow violence” (2019), Dipesh Chakrabarty with “species history” (2009), Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer with the notion of the “Anthropocene” (2000) and others. The sheer size of our issues presents conceptual and narrative problems.¹ Narratives help scale down and convey things that are otherwise difficult to conceptualize, and, building on the work that she has done with Serenella Iovino in material ecocriticism, Oppermann argues that the stories within matter *matter*:

Reenvisioning the Anthropocene in our living world with multispecies storytelling is thus a new horizon of inquiry to disclose the stories of human-nonhuman interdependencies. And the best way to *re-story* the Anthropocene is to see it as a site of narrativity from which multispecies storytelling emerges. The new Anthroposcenario can dissolve the dominant script that has so far shaped the constitution of our reality. (72)

Rather than simply theorizing and leaving matters there, Oppermann ends each chapter with an applied reading, sometimes of texts, and in this chapter of a Turkish art installation. Indeed, one of the characteristic strengths of this book is the deft movement from deep theorizing to close readings.

Another characteristic strength of *Ecologies of a Storied Planet in the Anthropocene* is the sheer breadth of the topics it covers in 213 pages. One of these topics is migration. With forced migration and climate refugees becoming more and more widespread and urgent, it is therefore appropriate that “Migrant Ecologies of the Anthropocene” is the topic of the third chapter—especially as it potentially points to a conflict in focus between human and nonhuman stories. Oppermann explains that “migrant ecologies do not efface the stories of nonhuman animals caught in the same crises but self-consciously acknowledge them as equally significant” (87–88). In this chapter, Oppermann explains that mobility presents a whole new suite of issues, as we have seen with “the highly mobile virus” that caused COVID-19 (92). While Oppermann does not discuss the role of meat here, the fact that the majority of people eat meat (some of which contains potentially lethal pathogens) is also a part of the mobility question, since the profit-driven mobility of dead animals clearly contributed to the spread not only of COVID-19, but also to the spread of many pandemics in the past. Jared Diamond succinctly explains that “questions of the animal origins of human disease lie behind the broadest pattern of human history, and behind some of the most important issues in human health today”

(1997, 197). For Diamond, disease is one of the prime movers of human society, along with war and industrialization—with which disease is intimately linked. Diamond reminds us that “the major killers of humanity throughout our recent history—smallpox, flu, tuberculosis, malaria, plague, measles, and cholera—are infectious diseases that evolved from diseases of animals” (196 – 197). But there are several others Diamond does not mention (some of which post-date his book): bird flu (in 2013), SARS (in 2002), Swine Flu (in 2009), mad cow disease (in 1996), Ebola (in 1976), and so on. Our chronically exploitative relationship with animals causes unprecedented mobility of dead, living, and infected animals, requiring recognition that the mobility of people *and* animals are important.²

Mobility, moreover, potentially enables global tragedy. Diamond has noted that “globalization makes it impossible for modern societies to collapse in isolation” (2005, 23). As Oppermann explains, “viruses like the novel coronavirus have the power to paralyze world economies, change history, influence social norms, immobilize humanity, and collapse everything that was considered normal, such as international travelling, attending school, driving or taking public transport to work, because it is” a global biological threat (2023, 92 – 93). Nicole Shukin similarly explains that “pandemic discourse speculates in the coming of an event that threatens to precipitate the collapse of the global economy and a hard reckoning with materiality” (2009, 185). Again, the topic of mobility seems to require some sort of comment about animals, since one of the most immediate things we can do both to remediate global pandemics and, indeed, climate change, is to stop the unsustainable hunting, breeding, and consumption of the hosts of these viruses for food, entertainment, or materials. These practices bespeak the very “species arrogance” that so much of *Ecologies of a Storied Planet in the Anthropocene* describes (Oppermann 2023, 93).

Part of living in the world today—a world some thinkers (such as Bill McKibben) term a “postnatural” one (1998), a term Oppermann accepts—is the need to “take into account the unheard voices of the disrupted nonhuman entities whose stories are inextricably grafted upon our stories, our lives, and our meaning-making practices” (2023, 107). Oppermann argues that “learning to pay more attention to more-than-human-environments, beings, and things that exist within, outside, and around us in an increasingly postnatural reality might help us better understand our entanglements in the world’s narratives of becoming and eventually enable us to find ways out of . . . [the] postnatural ecological predicament” we face (107). At the heart of the problem is the insatiable appetite of capitalism, and “if we do not want the ‘end of nature’ discourse to turn into a dreaded material reality in the near future, we need to find ways to

discontinue what seems to be a global allegiance to the capitalist logic of more profit” (113). The answers, Oppermann acknowledges, will not come easily.

One of the clearest take-aways from this book is that there are no easy answers to the problems we face and that it is difficult even hanging on to the thin threads of hope that we might happen to find. Oppermann states that “there is indeed no way out, and we are in trouble as significant changes in the biogeochemical cycles of elements in the biosphere today threaten the vital conditions for the existence of life itself” (119). Four pages earlier, she also explains that “succumbing to hopelessness is not an option” (115). This is a book about hope—the word itself appearing more than three dozen times. It is a book about resistance and about resisting hopelessness and “present systems of exploitation” (123), not from some starry-eyed position that all’s well or that all will be well but from a position of full cognizance of the horrors and the inevitabilities we have produced and that we face.

Oppermann’s final chapter is about color. Oppermann argues that color has the capacity to “cause emotional pain” and perhaps even to kill (153). She discusses “the pernicious influence of color” and how the birds on Midway Island are dying from plastic. Specifically, it is because of the colors of plastics that they are dying: “the deadly lure of plastic waste suffocating life in the oceans and lands—the colorful vibrancy of being alive turns to life-under-erasure as if it is gradually crossed out but not totally erased” (153). Plastic mimes food through its colors. Colors also become lethal, Oppermann notes, when they dim. She notes that “a dying organism loses its color” and that “the world’s prismatic geographies are in danger of being dimmed and reduced to monochromatic maps due to the increasingly dangerous human manipulations of the planetary systems” (139). Indeed, the dimming of colors and the food-miming effect of colors in plastic are terrifying, but as important—and perhaps more horrific—is a situation in which colors transgress boundaries, especially since “the colors of nature fashion the cultural imaginary and social discourses” by which we live (151).

As I write this review, the air quality in New York is the worst it has ever been and the worst in the world for the first time, due—according to CNN—to smoke from climate-induced wildfires raging out of control in Canada (Van Dam and Ramirez 2023). Earlier today, *The Boston Globe* ran a piece with the header “Orange New York skies draw comparisons to a ‘post-apocalyptic hellscape’ and ‘Blade Runner 2049’” (Larson 2023). Our responses to color are profound and visceral. “The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes” in T.S. Eliot’s “Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” (1915) disgusts because of the color as much as because the agency of the fog may stain whatever it rubs against: such is also true of “The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-

panes” a line later in the poem. Even more alarming is Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s utterly transgressive color in “The Yellow Wallpaper.” The story forces the reader to contemplate the madness of a color transgressing its visual domain, not only in becoming “a yellow smell” (1995, 612), but in being of a pattern that laughs and mocks. Colors need to behave themselves and stay in their right domain (of sight, not smell) and as we expect them (skies of blue are fine, but orange is not—unless it is a sunset or sunrise). The noon-time orange sky, the yellow smells, the perniciously corporeal rubbing of the yellow smoke and fog: these are border crossings that betoken nothing good.

As I near the end of this review, I feel that it is ironic to end with so much talk of dimming and blurring after having begun with the word “dazzling,” and it is not the way I wish to end this review. There is nothing dim or blurry about *Ecologies of a Storied Planet in the Anthropocene*: the book is shockingly revealing, honest, and persuasive. It shines. *Ecologies of a Storied Planet in the Anthropocene* is a “must-read” for anyone in the Environmental Humanities. There is no better way to end a review of such a book than to use Oppermann’s own words: *Ecologies of a Storied Planet in the Anthropocene* stresses the urgency of:

subverting the dominant vision behind the conventional representations of the planet as lifeless, voiceless, and mindless, and thus as a mere resource for human welfare. Behind such subversion lies a major shift in our ways of thinking about culture and nature; human, nonhuman, and material agencies; and the world. Such a shift in our mindset not only helps deconstruct human exceptionalism but also enhances the prospects for thinking with the storied planet. (2023, 162)

Notes

¹ Ursula Heise poses a series of questions in this regard: “If the Anthropocene indeed calls for a scaling-up of the imagination, how might that imagination translate into narrative? What characters and plot architectures would it involve? What models do existing narrative forms offer for telling the story of our climate-changed presents and futures? (2019, 279). Adam Trexler has posed very similar questions: “What tropes are necessary to comprehend climate change or to articulate the possible futures faced by humanity? How can a global process, spanning millennia, be made comprehensible to human imagination, with its limited sense of place and time? What longer, historical forms aid this imagination, and what are the implications and limits of their use?” (2015, 5). To address these questions means having a sufficiently broad scale—one big enough and small enough.

² Parts of this paragraph appear in my “The Global Poltergeist: COVID-19 Hauntings” (2020).

References

- Chakrabarty, Dipesh. 2009. "The Climate of History: Four Theses." *Critical Inquiry* 35 (2): 197–222.
- Crutzen, Paul J., and Eugene F. Stoermer. 2000. "The 'Anthropocene'." *International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme Newsletter* 41: 17–18.
- Diamond, Jared. 2005. *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*. New York: Penguin.
- . 1997. *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fate of Human Societies*. New York: Norton.
- Eliot, T.S. 1915. "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." *Poetry*.
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/44212/the-love-song-of-j-alfred-prufrock>.
- Estok, Simon C. 2020. "The Global Poltergeist: COVID-19 Hauntings." In *Haunted Nature: Entanglements of the Human and the Nonhuman*, edited by Sladja Blazan. 181–95. Cham Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. 1995. "The Yellow Wallpaper." In *Imagining Worlds*, edited by Marjorie Ford and Jon Ford. 600–12. New York: McGraw Hill.
- Heise, Ursula. 2019. "Science Fiction and the Time Scales of the Anthropocene." *English Literary History* 86: 275–304.
- Larson, Shannon. 2023. "Orange New York Skies Draw cComparisons to a 'Post-apocalyptic Hellscape' and 'Blade Runner 2049'." *Boston Globe Today*. 08 June.
<https://www.bostonglobe.com/2023/06/08/nation/new-york-draws-comparisons-post-apocalyptic-hellscape-blade-runner-2049-see-memes-reactions-smoky-scenes/>.
- McKibben, Bill. 1998. "Postnatural." *Aperture* (Winter).
<https://issues.aperture.org/article/1998/1/1/postnatural>.
- Morton, Timothy. 2013. *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Nixon, Rob. 2011. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Oppermann, Serpil. 2023. *Ecologies of a Storied Planet in the Anthropocene*. Morgantown: West Virginia University Press.
- Shukin, Nicole. 2009. *Animal Capital: Rendering Life in Biopolitical Terms*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Trexler, Adam. 2015. *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.
- Van Dam, Derek, and Rachel Ramirez. 2023. "New York City's Air Pollution among the World's Worst as Canada Wildfire Smoke Shrouds Northeast." *CNN.com*. June 7.
<https://www.cnn.com/2023/06/06/us/new-york-air-pollution-canada-wildfires-climate/index.html>.