

BOOK REVIEWS

Gendered Ecologies: New Materialist Interpretations of Women Writers in the Long Nineteenth Century, edited by Dewey W. Hall and Jillmarie Murphy, Abingdon, Clemson University Press, 2020, xii + 262 pp., £85.00 (hardback), ISBN: 9781949979046

This new collection of essays makes a fresh and invigorating contribution to the field of environmental humanities, and to the development of our understanding of the complex intersections between literary and scientific discourse within the long nineteenth century. In its focus on interventions made by literary women writers in the discourse of natural history, the book also enhances our awareness of the many and various, but often unacknowledged, contributions made by women writers to the field of natural history within novels, creative non-fiction and poetry of the period.

As the introductory essay points out, the primary aim of the collection is ‘to reconsider the woman-nature association from the critical perspective of new materialism’ and the collection is prefaced with a Foreword by Stacy Alaimo and concluded with an Afterword by Jane Bennett, whose *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2010) along with Alaimo’s *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (2010), might be considered as foundational new materialist texts, which develop many of the concepts and approaches underpinning the readings that are brought together here. In exploring texts from a new materialist perspective and in ways which focus on the materiality of environments over analysis of a discursive ‘nature’, the book also builds on and develops previous work by the two editors, and most overtly Dewey. W. Hall’s *Romantic Naturalists, Early Environmentalists: An Ecocritical Study, 1789-1912* (2014) and *Romantic Ecocriticism: Origins and Legacies* (2016).

Alaimo’s Foreword is followed by an Introduction by the two editors which establishes key critical concepts and frameworks for the collection, and points out that ‘women writers have been dismissed from the materialist tradition restricted mainly to the male-perceiving subject’ but ‘their attention to matter is vital and warranted, revealing a nuanced, personalized, and astute way of knowing’ (12). What this gathering of women writers suggests is that they ‘were avidly engaged in depicting the environs they inhabit’ and not merely as ‘detached observers’ but rather as ‘active participants, describing the vibrancy of matter and, in the process, making it more accessible to a less scientific readership’ (13-14).

Following on from the Introduction, the collection is made up of ten chapters and divided into two sections: Part One - British Female Voices (chapters 1-5) and Part Two - American Female Voices (chapters 6-10). As Alaimo points out, the selection of essays and the approaches they take are ‘not predictable’ and instead ‘define and trace the interrelations of gender and ecology in fresh and sometimes unexpected ways’ (2).

Within Part One the overarching focus is identified as the way in which British female writers ‘recast ecological space in juxtaposition to male writers’ (18) and the literary figures focused on engage in this process in a variety of ways. The section opens with Lisa Ottum’s fascinating reading of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) and *The Last Man* (1826) as ‘artefacts of the Anthropocene’ (26), and moves into an insightful discussion of the treatment of garden bowers in the work of female and male poets of the next generation by Heather Braun. Both Chapters 3 and 4 bring new perspectives on the work of Charlotte Brontë, but while Louise Willis explores the function and meanings of garden spaces in her work, Dewey

W. Hall, one of the collection's co-editors, considers the interactions between female body and matter in novels by Brontë and George Eliot. The section concludes with Adrian Tait's interesting exploration of 'trans-corporeal inter-actions' and 'manifold ecologies' (19) in Mary E. Braddon's 1862 sensation novel, *Lady Audley's Secret*. All of the chapters point to the ways in which the women writers recognise and explore what Louise Willis, drawing on Alaimo, refers to as the 'vital intersection between the human and nonhuman worlds' (75). Along the way the essays range around several concepts, including Timothy Morton's concept of the 'mesh' and Alaimo's 'trans-corporeality', drawing on these in creative and diverse ways to offer important new insights and readings of the literary texts under discussion.

In Part Two the focus shifts to American fiction and creative non-fiction with an emphasis on the 'vital role of American women as participants in natural history and natural philosophy, often manifested through literary and non-literary productions' (19). The section opens with an essay by John J. Kucich which explores place-writing through the 'competing stories of people who claim it' (19) in the work of Jane Johnson Schoolcraft, one of the earliest known native American writers, and her contemporary, the journalist and editor, Margaret Fuller. In Chapter 7, Jillmarie Murphy, the second of the collection's co-editors, turns to the idea of trans-corporeality of 'human bodies and ecological spaces as enmeshed in a complex, shifting ontology' in a fascinating discussion of Susan Fenimore Cooper's *Rural Hours* (1850), one of the earliest pieces of American nature writing and the first by a woman, and Celia Thaxter's *Among the Isles of Shoals* (1878). Both women writers are shown to produce examples of nature writing which explore 'non-gendered spaces that transform American landscapes into non-hierarchical vistas' (19). Chapter 8 moves us into the twentieth century with an illuminating discussion by Elif S. Armbruster of Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House* series, published between 1932 and 1943, and based on childhood experiences in a settler and pioneer family. Then Chapter 9 shifts us back in time to the first half of the nineteenth century, with Matthew Duquès's interesting consideration of the treatment of ancient Greek environments in writings by social reformers and abolitionists Frances Wright and Lydia Maria Child. Child is also the focus of the final chapter in the collection in which Lisa West examines the tale 'Chocorua's Curse', in relation to the tension between human and non-human beings within the story. As in Part One, a range of concepts are drawn on within this half of the collection, including Laura Dassow Walls's recent development of the concept of 'panarchy' (121) and Jane Bennett's theory of 'vital materialism' (141), leading to a range of creative and insightful new readings.

The 'diversity' of the collection, which is drawn attention to by Hall and Murphy in their Introduction, allows for a picture to emerge here of the many, complex and fascinating engagements with natural history made by women writers during the long nineteenth century. Their reflection that, in many cases, the writers' 'observations' are based on 'self-made discoveries while interacting with the environs' (7) is borne out by the book as a whole which, while drawing attention to the importance of acts of close-looking, is also indicative of the often limited opportunities for women writers within this period to explore a wider natural terrain.

Although the introductory chapter does flag a subtle difference in focus between the two halves of the book, it also suggests that the main emphasis in the collection as a whole is on the 'often disregarded literary women writers' (7) as opposed to 'science-based *natural history*' women writers (13). However, given the inclusion of women writers in Part Two such as Fenimore Cooper and Thaxter, who produce extended non-fiction discussions of

‘nature, geography, and natural history’ (141), it would perhaps have been useful to also include some non-fiction writers in Part One, such as Nan Shepherd or indeed Beatrix Potter, whose work helps to unsettle and destabilise that rather problematic dichotomy. Another woman writer not touched on in Part One but relevant to the focus of this section is the British poet Charlotte Smith, whose increasingly complex and detailed use of botanical and ornithological footnotes within her later poetry, would have offered a very interesting point of comparison with some of the more explicit engagements with natural history on the part of the American writers included in the second half of the collection.

Nonetheless, this collection of new essays contributes in important ways to our understanding of and creative responses to what Murphy calls, the ‘intra-connectedness of human and more-than-human’ (143) within a range of literary texts and creative non-fiction produced by women writers in the long nineteenth century. As Bennett points out in her ‘Afterword’, the essays ‘reveal these writers to have been highly sensitive to the animal, vegetable, and mineral influences operating around and within them’ (207). The scholars included here all themselves contribute to the extending of our ‘vocabulary for talking about nonhuman and transhuman forms of agency’ (210), but what perhaps emerges most clearly from this collection are the ways in which a wide range of women writers made their own important contributions to this process in their endeavours to ‘seek, discover, invent, and reinvent the words that might express the impressing vitality of things’ (212). Bringing together these writers in this way reveals their complex understanding and sensitive imaginative exploration of the interconnections which exist between an active participatory self and its material environments.

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