

Food, Foodways, and Environmental Crisis in Contemporary Speculative Fiction

This dissertation examines food and foodways as a lens for viewing the relationship between humans and their environment in contemporary works of speculative fiction. It focuses on creative and critical representations of climate-changed worlds in science and speculative fiction (SF) narratives. These narratives, by taking the future as their present, depict the day-to-day of climate-changed worlds in an emotionally evocative way. Through readings of the food imaginaries in these works, I explore issues of food ethics, food technology, and food sovereignty in the context of changing environments. My research capitalizes on a burgeoning interest in food as ecocriticism, ecocritical SF, and the use of narrative in environmental conservation.

Research into the convergence of SF and ecological concerns is a rapidly expanding field (see Gerry Canavan and Kim Stanley Robinson's *Green Planets* and Tania Lafontaine's *Science Fiction Theory and Ecocriticism*). However, one apt critical area for examining human interaction with the environment, food, has received scant attention. Food has been explored in SF primarily in film, and there with only brief and anthropocentric references to the environment. Two of the most notable explorations, Laurel Forster's "Futuristic Foodways" and Jean P. Retzinger's "Speculative Visions and Imaginary Meals," both identify food as having great analytical potential due to its multiplicity of meanings. Retzinger points to its position as both a base physiological necessity and a complex cultural object, while Forster describes its ability to link the external and internal, and the body and technology. Neither, however, focuses on complex human-environment interactions mediated through food. Retzinger does discuss the (willful) ignorance of characters about the origins of food, but ultimately concedes that "science fiction films rarely wrestle with the ethics of food production" (Retzinger 384).

My dissertation builds on Forster's and Retzinger's work in two ways. It transposes their discussions from film to the novel, and it pursues the ethical and environmental implications of their arguments in greater depth. While SF film may not often broach the ethics of food production, novels like Adam Roberts's *Bête* (2014) do so explicitly. I examine the way characters and societies in these types of novels conceptualize the relationship between food, ecology, and humanity, and how those conceptions are shaped by their varying social and environmental contexts, particularly those of dwindling ecological resources. Throughout

my project, I consider how these texts can act pedagogically to demonstrate how a more sustainable environmental relationship could be developed in our own world.

The dissertation is divided into four chapters: ‘Meat’ (examining the lines between person, pet, and food), ‘Plants’ (examining agricultural practices and technologies), ‘Water’ (examining resource management), and ‘Agricultural Architecture’ (examining the intersection of architecture and food systems). ‘Meat’ features novels such as Don LePan’s *Animals* (2009), in which I explore the retraction of the term ‘human’ to exclude neuroatypical people. ‘Plants’ includes novels like Paolo Bacigalupi’s *The Windup Girl* (2009), in which I interrogate the distinction between genetically modified cats and humans as abhorrent but GM foods as unproblematic. ‘Water’ feature novels like Emmi Itäranta’s *Memory of Water* (2012), in which I examine the ethics of the protagonist, a tea master’s apprentice in a world of water shortage. ‘Agricultural Architecture’ includes novels like Bacigalupi’s *The Water Knife* (2015) in which I examine wealth disparity in responses to climate change through the novel’s use of luxury ‘arcologies’, self-contained and self-sustaining eco-communities.

My research is conducted with an eye toward contemporary political debate on climate change and other impending ecological crises. As a timely exploration of food and the environment in the fictitious realm, my dissertation breaks new ground by uniting food studies, SF, and ecocriticism; as a discussion of ecological concerns, my research, facilitated by the networking, learning, and potential publishing opportunities afforded by this conference, has the potential to reach outside the humanities as part of the greater conversation about climate change and ecological disasters.

Works Cited

Retzinger, Jean P. “Speculative Visions and Imaginary Meals.” *Cultural Studies*, vol. 22, no. 3–4, July 2008, pp. 369–90, doi:10.1080/09502380802012500.