

Virginia Burrus, *Ancient Christian Ecopoetics: Cosmologies, Saints, Things*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019. Pp. viii, 298. ISBN 9780812250794. \$65.00.

In Plato's *Timaeus*, a long narration on the origins of the cosmos begins with the problem of sovereignty – the city's dependence on the countryside that surrounds it. This countryside, the *khora*, the fertile land that feeds and supports the city, becomes a centerpiece of the *Timaeus*, although in a different octave, as the elusive matrix of cosmic creation. This is the unsettled starting point Virginia Burrus selects in *Ancient Christian Ecopoetics*. It is unsettled because, as she observes via the work of John Sallis, the *Timaeus* progresses only through almost endless returns to an earlier beginning. Every beginning has its priors, so where do you start? It is also unsettled because the *khora*, in all its elusiveness, bespeaks a "dark ecology," an apophatic creativity, that never resolves into a happy pacific scene. This is the uneasy ecology Burrus wants to conjure.

Burrus' book can't be wrangled into any facile summary. As an "ecopoetics," it is, most succinctly, a set of self-consciously theological readings (carefully historicized) in the wake of Christianity's assumed place in the destruction of the planet. Borrowing from contemporary philosophy, Burrus touches moments of ecological thought, largely but not exclusively in late antiquity, that don't amount to strident environmental exploitation. Even Christianity's acclaimed anthropocentrism is undone if one looks closer: in Burrus' reading of Athanasius' *On the Incarnation*, for instance, she observes that Athanasius' own story of creation ties human exceptionalism to a uniquely human capacity to fail miserably. The divine logos, which infuses the cosmos, is necessarily made human for this very reason. "Humans, it seems, cannot ultimately save themselves. The very characteristics that make them distinctly human – not least rationality, language, consciousness, and a capacity for self-transformation – also render them vulnerable to self-destruction" (51). In noting this tension, she offers something of a brilliant aside: Athanasius and the modern geological concept of the Anthropocene, which also emphasizes the special hubris of people and the havoc they unleash, share a story of humanity (52).

Burrus is not only dealing with texts, however. Her book is divided into three parts (the cosmologies, saints, and things of the subtitle), which act as containers for clusters of material. And throughout, she engages art (ancient and contemporary, visual and performance), objects, practices, and physical spaces. Borrowing from thing theory, new materialism, and especially following the lead of political philosopher Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Burrus asks after the animate qualities of relics, icons, and other objects in order to decenter human agency. In a similar vein, she reads hagiographical literature as "queering creation," the saints themselves, for instance, exceeding and failing to be human, and lending value and beauty to the abased – especially the wounded or decaying body. Through this miscellany of sources, she begins to imagine the mess of ecological

wreckage differently. As she writes in response to the 5th century *Life of Syncretica* (one of the most memorable and moving sections of the book), “If we have, in some sense, ‘ruined’ the planet, then we must learn to love the ruins,” she writes (122).

Rather than a paced and linear argument, the logic of Burrus’ *Ancient Christian Eco-poetics* is associative. She offers a cabinet of curiosities, collecting ancient metaphysical reflection and modern ones, texts and art, objects and performances, historical analysis and her own poetic, sometimes zen koan-like reflections. She obeys no strict boundaries of time, place, identity, or discipline, even as the texts, places, and categories she evokes are familiar ones. She wants her readers to generate their own connections, for her work to gain force and resonance, even as its sections have no special order.

It is both lovely and unwieldy. It yields endless insights, but its deconstructed form left room for self-contradiction, if only occasionally or subtly. Her writing, which is indeed associatively rich, often relies too heavily here on clever recursions and paradoxical formulations for its poetry. At the same time, she delivers close readings of text and object and practice alike with equal parts inquisitiveness, playfulness, and care. What’s more, the self-revelations and poetic interludes in this book mark something new, a genuine presence and vulnerability from a writer whose earlier forms of reflexivity felt provocative but over-controlled.

What lingers, though, after reading *Ancient Christian Eco-poetics* is the question of politics with which Burrus begins. “We cannot simply conflate the mysteriously cosmological *khora* of Timaeus’s speech with the geopolitical *khora* of Critias’s speech. Yet we also cannot ignore their convergences,” Burrus writes (25). Her dark ecology is a “khoric politics” that “demands an attempt to think with and as the totality.” This politics of the totality is also where Burrus ends, with an injunction toward a dispersed sense of sanctity and “attunement to the liveliness of things”: “And what, finally, is not a thing, when a worm is a pearl and a human is a bone and a god’s power and presence saturates a splinter of wood? We are back to the all, then. To *all things*” (231).

But the politics for something like “the all” are tricky. Gender, queerness, and disability are analytical instruments in key places in the book; the political contingencies of Medjool dates in Palestine, for instance, get mention, and war and economic exploitation, as generalities, are threaded into some of her scenes. But how does such a renewed “democracy of all creatures” and all its attendant idealism proceed without more socio-political aspects of creation/destruction foregrounded? In a section on performance art ruminations on mortality, which she parallels with saints’ own physical boundary-pushing, Burrus refers to artist Ron Athey’s 1992 series *Martyrs and Saints*. Specifically, she cites a performance of blood-letting called, “Saint Sebastian” for which, she writes, “Athey’s own HIV-positive status is by no means incidental” (136), and yet nothing more is said. But the biopolitical dimensions of the AIDS crisis might actually be useful material for queering ecologies.

Although this reference occupies a marginal space in the book, it is in places like these that Burrus' khoric politics didn't satisfy. This context for Athey's art perhaps hints at an unstable foundation for the pan-creation reflections of the book – or even the recourse to a universal fate envisioned by the Anthropocene. Disease and destruction are, after all, differentially assigned. I wondered periodically if the poetic affection conferred on destroyed things and decayed bodies effected an aestheticizing erasure, or at least deferral, of their socio-political causes (ones more specific than “greed” or “aggression”) – even if socio-political causes aren't the sole ones.

Burrus is not unaware of the conundrum of speaking of the All. Neither is she alone in it, since so much ecological epistemology at the moment, politically engaged as it may be, is founded on a single trajectory of global crisis. As Kathryn Yusoff has pointed out, the concept of Anthropocene itself envisions ecological destruction as a new condition. As a specifically geological age, it is cast as planetary even as it is marked by whiteness: “The Anthropocene might seem to offer a dystopic future that laments the end of the world, but imperialism and ongoing (settler) colonialisms have been ending worlds for as long as they have been in existence” (*A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, xiii). The world has never been one. Perhaps for this reason, the disposition that Burrus' book shares with new materialism – an overarching awe at a newly awakened landscape, a longing for attunement with universalist aspirations – is what most distinctly locates and limits it. Is this ecology *dark enough*?

“All things arrive with a history – a history of relations and affect and sensation – and most of this remains unknown to us. Often we perceive things only in the melancholy moment of their disappearing, when they – and we too – have already begun to fall apart” (185). If this is true, one might then have to ask: does new materialism, with its constitutive wonder and melancholy, arrive as a form of nostalgia for a time when “the world” didn't seem, at least to some of us, to be dying? It might be solace then to learn through these gentle readings that for some in antiquity, it felt as if their worlds were passing before their eyes, in need of saving and reverence, too.

MAIA KOTROSITS
RELIGION DEPARTMENT
DENISON UNIVERSITY