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Carbon Footprints as Cultural-Ecological Metaphors by Anita Girvan

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***Carbon Footprints as Cultural-Ecological Metaphors* by ANITA GIRVAN**

Routledge, 2018 \$57.95 USD

Reviewed by **ALEXANDRA SIMPSON**

Anita Girvan's *Carbon Footprints as Cultural-Ecological Metaphors* investigates the carbon-footprint metaphor as a generative site to intervene in cultural-ecological politics and encourage public involvement in climate-change debates. Climate-change politics is often approached through a deconstructive lens, in particular when discussing energy systems and extractive industries. While it is absolutely necessary to deconstruct colonial, violent, and anthropocentric relationships within extractive regimes there is also an urgent need to construct visions and methodologies to help us imagine a sustainable and just future.

As a theatre creator and scholar working in the intersections of the energy humanities, activism, and performance studies, I often find myself contemplating the role of the arts in creating *real-world* change. In many ways, the political effectiveness of the arts undergoes a similar scrutiny as that of the left, which faces a large body of scholarship that critiques it as too abstract and/or apocalyptic to overcome environmental collapse (see Szeman's "System Failure: Oil Futurity and the Anticipation of Disaster" for example). I believe that scholars who find themselves contending with the deconstructive lens through which debates about climate change and energy often take place will be inspired by Girvan's use of the carbon-footprint metaphor as a world-making device that offers new opportunities for political intervention.

In chapter one, Girvan discusses carbon as an allotropic trickster, since carbon can be both a foundational element for life and a threat to the continuity of life. When the multiple understandings of carbon are brought together with those of a footprint, the resulting metaphor can decrease the cognitive dissonance between carbon-induced climate change and the day-to-day of modern life; it offers comprehensible ways to confront the crisis within the public sphere. In chapter two, Girvan draws on Jacques Ranciere's political aesthetics to demonstrate the role language plays in developing compositions—the frames in which politics take place. She ties this together with Jane Bennett's discourse on vitality in which nonhumans can play a critical role in the politics of climate change. The carbon-footprint metaphor in this context has intensified trickster qualities and opens up space to intervene in Western humanist, colonial, and neoliberal orientations of citizenship.

As a trickster, the carbon-footprint metaphor presents both risks and potentials through three contact zones: carbon subjectivity, carbon citizenship, and carbon vitality. These zones are laid out chronologically from 2007 onwards and illuminate how the metaphor has developed alternative uses and meanings over time. In this way, the structure of the book reinforces the idea that the carbon-footprint metaphor has shapeshifting abilities that are both a strength, as it can easily adapt, and a weakness due to its vulnerability to the forces of privatization, marketization, and aggressive nationalism. Girvan's invitation to engage with this complexity is a reminder that climate-change politics are not static and must be studied through methods that allow for movement and change. The carbon-footprint metaphor as a trickster has the

additional capacity to confront dominant Western narratives that are in themselves static, in particular those narratives of human ingenuity and success that surround extractive regimes.

In chapter three, Girvan explores carbon subjectivity, an awareness of an individual's own footprint fostered by the popularization of carbon-footprint calculators and reduction lists. The calculators and lists help to connect the individual to the larger issue of climate change. In chapter four, Girvan introduces carbon citizenship, which draws people together as part of a "global collective of carbon flows" (102). Nations can be compared against one another based on their per-capita greenhouse gas footprints, and citizens evolve from having individual experiences of their carbon footprints to understanding themselves as part of a larger political group. In chapter five, Girvan discusses carbon vitality to gesture towards the role of nonhuman actors in troubling "the partial vision of dominant human design" (143). Girvan uses the example of farmed shrimp and the large carbon footprint of this industry to connect consumers to a variety of human and nonhuman actors. In all three contact zones there are also risks: carbon subjectivity risks creating a "generalized orienting response to climate change" (72); carbon citizenship can create "nation-bound carbon citizens in opposition to global others by making these others into objects of carbon pollution and hate" (129); and carbon vitality is susceptible a liberal environmentalism that views nonhumans as service providers to humans.

While reading, I found myself skeptical of the carbon-footprint metaphor as a starting place to engage publics in climate-change debates. Dominant social narratives already lean towards neoliberal, individualized versions of citizenship. The creation of action-based initiatives that feed into and further stabilize this narrative, such as carbon-reduction lists, can become a distraction from collective, justice-based actions. The normalization of individualized emissions reduction can change societal expectations of ecological citizenship, so that some forms of environmental activism, such as direct actions, become increasingly radicalized and/or criminalized. In addition, Matthew Huber's work, which critiques the use of carbon footprints within the public sphere, reminds us that while individual habits do contribute to emissions, industry's contributions are far greater. As public concern for climate change grows, it becomes increasingly clear that political will plays a significant role in climate action. I would have liked to see how carbon subjectivity, citizenship, and vitality contend with the immense political and economic power of industry and governments.

Carbon Footprints as Cultural-Ecological Metaphors primarily engages a Eurocentric lens. I would recommend also reading Girvan's article "Trickster Carbon: Stories, Science, and Postcolonial Intervention for Climate Justice," which more directly engages a postcolonial approach to climate change interventions and Girvan's own experience as a multi-racial settler in Turtle Island/Canada, as well as carbon's relationship to Caribbean trickster stories. I do think this book presents an important and nuanced analysis through the bringing together of cultural-ecological politics, political aesthetics, and human-nonhuman relationality that scholars like myself will greatly benefit from. I deeply appreciate Girvan's intervention in an overly deconstructive field and believe this book offers a valuable discourse for scholars interested in avenues for constructive discussion within climate-change debates.

Works Cited

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