

Science Fiction and Technoculture Studies Book Prize 2019



Awarded by the Science Fiction and Technoculture Studies program at the University of California, Riverside, The Science Fiction and Technoculture Studies Book Prize honors an outstanding scholarly monograph that explores the intersections between popular culture, particularly science fiction, and the discourses and cultures of technoscience. The award is designed to recognize groundbreaking and exceptional contributions to the field.

This year's awardees are Natania Meeker, Associate Professor of French and Comparative Literature at the University of Southern California, and Antónia Szabari, also Associate Professor of French and Comparative Literature at the University of Southern California, for their *Radical Botany: Plants and Speculative Fiction* (Fordham University Press, 2019).

The judges recognize as runners-up Kara Keeling's *Queer Times, Black Futures* (New York University Press, 2019) and Xiao Liu's *Information Fantasies: Precarious Mediation in Postsocialist China* (University of Minnesota Press, 2019).

Committee Statement

Paweł Frelik (chair), Aimee Bahng, Steven Shaviro, Elizabeth Swanstrom

THE Science Fiction and Technoculture Studies Book Prize honors an outstanding scholarly monograph that explores the intersections between popular culture, particularly science fiction, and the discourses and cultures of technoscience. The award is designed to recognize groundbreaking and exceptional contributions to the field. Books published in English between 1 January and 31 December 2019 were eligible for the award. The jury for the prize were Aimee Bahng (Pomona College), Steven Shaviro (Wayne State University), Elizabeth Swanstrom (University of Utah), and Paweł Frelik (University of Warsaw), who served as jury chair.

After intense deliberations the jury announce that the eighth annual SFTS book award has been won by Natania Meeker, Associate Professor of French and Comparative Literature at the University of Southern California, and Antónia Szabari, also Associate Professor of French and Comparative Literature at the University of Southern California, for *Radical Botany: Plants and Speculative Fiction* (Fordham

UP 2019). From Aristotle's notion of the vegetal soul to the century's plant-centered philosophy of Julien Offray de la Mettrie to the 20th-century's fascination with carnivorous plants and alien pods, the study provides a wide-ranging and stimulating examination of all things vegetal.

One of the judges described the monograph as “a lucid and fascinating history of the representation of plant life in speculative fiction and philosophy,” which demonstrates “just how intricately such representations—like clematis on a trellis—are interwoven with the evolution of Modernity.” Another judge, calling the study “totally brilliant,” found it “also quite thought-provoking theoretically, for the way that it forces us to think about vegetative vitality in a somewhat different (and more disturbing way) than much recent neo-vitalism and new materialism has done.”

The judges also decided to recognize, as particularly strong runners-up, Kara Keeling's *Queer Times, Black Futures* (New York University Press 2019) and Xiao Liu's *Information Fantasies: Precarious Mediation in Postsocialist China* (University of Minnesota Press 2019).

Awardee Statements

Natania Meeker

University of Southern California / USA

I am truly honored to be a recipient of the 2019 SFTS Book Prize, in no small part because writing about science fiction at all meant, for me, taking a risk. As an early modernist, I felt like an interloper in a genre that had long been important to me personally but had never been part of my scholarly profile prior to undertaking work on *Radical Botany*. If I was able to make this leap into a new field and a new topic of research, it was thanks to my co-author, Antónia Szabari, who convinced me that together we could do (almost) anything. Given my initial hesitation, it is all the more gratifying, then, to have found such a generous reception from the scholars and critics at the SFRA. This award is validating in so many different ways. It inspires me to continue taking risks in my research and thinking; it gives me renewed confidence in the critical generosity and receptivity of my colleagues; and it encourages me to imagine an academy in which collaborative research can be the norm for humanists rather than the exception.

At the same time, this award is meaningful to me in my personal as well as my professional life. I have nurtured a love of fantasy, speculative fiction, and science fiction since I was a little girl. It has been such a pleasure to bring the joy and wonder (to use an early modern category!) that I have long found in this kind of reading into my scholarship, teaching, and writing. Delving into these genres forged by modernity has also given me a renewed sense of the vitality of early modern writing and thought, so often animated by the sheer enjoyment of speculation. Receiving an award for following where my pleasure leads is indeed a dream come true. I will remain grateful to all the colleagues at SFRA—including the members of the prize committee, Aimee Bahng (Pomona College), Steven Shaviro (Wayne State University), Elizabeth Anne Swanstrom (The University of Utah), and Chair Paweł Frelik (University of Warsaw), whose collective hard work and service should be acknowledged—for this incredible honor. Thank you also to Sherryl Vint and Sean Guynes for their graciousness and collegiality. I hope one day to be able to attend the SFRA conference and express my heartfelt thanks to all in person.

Antónia Szabari

University of Southern California / USA

IN *Radical Botany*, my co-author, Natania Meeker, and I set out to reveal a modern history of botanical research by underscoring the involvement of speculative thinking in this endeavor, which is usually treated within the narrower field of the history of science. With this gesture, we hope that we have not only contributed to the pre-history of science fiction but have also shown the vital role of a speculative tradition which, while existing on the margins of more robust naturalist and empiricist practices, is capable of animating them. It is a special honor to be a recipient of the 2019 SFTS Book Prize because today the role of speculation, imagining novel forms of the social and the political, from gendered and racial justice to new energy futures, is as vital as ever. At the same time, the history of botanical speculation shows us how to care for those distant or unlike us. I am especially excited to be recognized by the Science Fiction and Technoculture Studies Association because our book is joining the work that a large and diverse community is already carrying out in this field.

Last but not least, I thank our colleagues at SFRA, the members of the prize committee, Aimee Bahng (Pomona College), Steven Shaviro (Wayne State

University), Elizabeth Anne Swanstrom (The University of Utah), and Chair Paweł Frelik (University of Warsaw) as well as Sherryl Vint and Sean Guynes.