*Negative Life: The Cinema of Extinction*. By Steven Swarbrick and Jean-Thomas Tremblay: Northwestern University Press. 2024. 224 pages. 224 Pages. $28.00 paperback. ISBN: 9780810147195.

An invisible wall trapping you forever; a forest latching onto you, slowly piercing and dissolving your skin; a wildfire that devastates your last resource of hope; landscapes so polluted only self-annihilation seems logical. These are just some of the dark scenes *Negative Life* compiles across its pages, drawn from films in the genres of climate-fiction and ecohorror. A close analysis of such cinematic imagery, the book argues, pushes us to reimagine the *existential* experience of contemporary climate catastrophes. The central argument is that if life is always-already “fractured, lacking, death-driven,” (vii) that is, full of contradictions, then the ongoing climate crises accelerate this ‘negativity’ of life.

For Swarbrick and Tremblay, the invisible walls, piercing forests, and so on, present us with those moments – intensified by climate change – when the nonhuman world turns against human life, moments when people experience what they call “the horror of entanglement” (63). Much contemporary writing on climate crises, theysuggest, fails to take this horror seriously. Instead, it tends to promote a vision of the natural world as always available to human life, dispensing us with a pedagogy on how to live better in precarious times, and, more specifically, promoting an ontology and ethics in which “we are and should be one with a world of interconnection” (10). But what about the times when multispecies entanglement and harmony is either impossible or unbearable? What about the absences that make entanglement possible? And what if entanglement turns out to be an obstacle to thriving for some?

Whilst the book’s primary focus is on the environmental humanities, the stakes of its questions reach far beyond the narrow confines of any discipline, speaking in particular to our own subdiscipline of cultural geography. One challenge is that the book assumes a strong familiarity with a vocabulary of ‘death drives’, ‘lost invocatory objects’, ‘jouissance’, and more, requiring the cultural geographer without a degree in psychoanalytic theory to frequently interrupt their reading, and jump to the endnotes and extra literature. The effort is worthwhile, however, for *Negative Life* is deeply insightful in its critiques of books influential within cultural geographical thought, including Haraway’s *When Species Meet* and Tsing’s *The Mushroom at the End of the World*.

The book’s critique of entanglement pushes us to question what appears to have become lodged, subtly but rather firmly, within cultural geography: a series of assumptions about the nature of subjectivity, and of human-nonhuman relationality, as if we have reached a collective agreement and debate is no longer necessary. Few cultural geographers would today present the human as neatly distinct from its nonhuman others, or as the primary arbiter of meaning. Instead, it is now commonplace to maintain that the human subject is emergent from, and distributed across, more-than-human worlds, and that this is something to be embraced and crafted into an ethics of multispecies, more-than-human relationality. In their generative call to theorise, and make room for, the afterlives of entanglement, Swarbrick and Tremblay offer us reasons to pause in the face of these claims. They provide a conception of the human subject as much more subdued and fractured, and whose incoherence and contradictions cannot necessarily be easily resolved through more-than-human entanglement. As such, the book might be helpfully read alongside recent cultural geographical scholarship centred on the challenge of ‘negativity’ for theories of subjectivity.[[1]](#endnote-1) This work is never simply an intellectual exercise in theoretical development, but a timely invitation to come to terms with life’s intensifying contradictions in times of climate emergencies.

1. See for instance, D.Bissell, M.Rose and P.Harrison (eds), *Negative geographies: Exploring the politics of Limits* (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2021); T.Dekeyser and T.Jellis ‘Besides affirmationism? On geography and negativity’, *Area*, 53, 2021, pp. 318–325. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)