

*Cosmological Readings of Contemporary Australian Literature:
Unsettling the Anthropocene*

Kathrin Bartha-Mitchell

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Kathrin Bartha-Mitchell's *Cosmological Readings of Contemporary Australian Literature: Unsettling the Anthropocene* (2023) offers a timely exploration of cosmology's potential for addressing Anthropogenic challenges due to its "vast array of individual, cultural and more-than-human phenomena" (1). Drawing on six texts from Australian and Oceanic contexts, Bartha-Mitchell examines themes including colonization/exploitation, bioethics/technology and environmental justice/custodianship through the lens of cosmology. Her work enriches ecocriticism through interweaving essential First Nations' and transcultural insights and effectively demonstrates literary cosmology's capacity to offer "multi-scalar knowledge and perspectives, as well as an eco-systemic order that co-shapes cultural meaning" (81).

Cosmological Readings is structured into four parts, each addressing a distinct facet of the Anthropocene through a cosmological lens and introduced by a sub-section overviewing concepts and contexts. *Part I* provides theoretical foundation for the work and defines cosmology as "a narrative of wholeness and interconnectedness grounded in the planetary ecosystem that both the sciences and the humanities have a role in revealing" (2). Chapters One and Two engage with 'cosmos' within and beyond the Environmental Humanities alongside modern, transcultural and (dis)enchanted perspectives. Bartha-Mitchell proposes that the term 'transcultural' "expresses that cosmological thought likely exists in more cultures—albeit to various degrees," while '(dis)enchanted' "suggests the inevitably dialectic nature of the endeavour" that "seeks to enchant anew" and mitigates the "naïve sense that a holistic imagination is always unproblematic" (2).

Part II explores colonization and exploitation through a focus on agriculture and extraction in relation to Carrie Tiffany's *Everyman's Rules for Scientific Living* (2005) set in the Mallee Flats and Murray-Darling River, Victoria, and Tara June Winch's *The Yield* (2019) in Wiradjuri Country along the fictitious 'Murrumbidgee River,' New South Wales. The two case-studies together offer a fresh ecocritical perspective on destructive colonial and industrialized agricultural practices and the reclamation of Indigenous cosmologies.

In *Part III*, Bartha-Mitchell turns to questions of bioethics, technology and revised narratives of human mastery. A chapter is dedicated to Briohny Doyle's *The Island Will Sink* (2016) set in the Pitcairn Islands and another to Mununjali author Ellen van Neerven's novella "Water" from the collection, *Heat and Light* (2015), in a futuristic Canaipa/Russell Island, Queensland. These chapters explore

the limits of apocalyptic climate fiction and speculative fiction while envisioning alternative futures grounded in queer ecology and resilience.

Part IV addresses environmental justice and custodianship, with readings of Behrouz Boochani's *No Friend but the Mountains* (2018), investigating Australia's infamous immigration detention processing facility on Manus Island, Papua New Guinea, and Melissa Lucashenko's *Too Much Lip* (2018), set in Bundjalung Country, northern New South Wales. Both chapters offer a "cosmopolitical perspective" steeped in "'cosmic' consciousness" to "illustrate that political demands also emerge out of a sense of cosmological order" (145). Bartha-Mitchell concludes with a discussion of the Anthropocene's continued utility as a concept and the future of the Environmental Humanities, arguing that an expressly cosmological approach can better support creative fiction and literary studies' discussions of planetary change through "culturally specific and transcultural understandings of the environment" (192).

Ecocriticism is a multifarious discipline. Not only is it inherently interdisciplinary through bridging ecological science and literary criticism, but it requires immense scope to traverse holistic concerns as well as the minutiae of ecosystem components. Historically, ecocriticism has tended to navigate this challenge by either applying overarching ecological concepts to texts (whether that be within environmental ethics, environmental justice concerns or as thematic literary allusions) or by focusing on specific ecosystem components' presence within literary works. This renders dual breadth/depth of analysis difficult, if not impossible within the confines of singular studies. The role is perhaps even more challenging when converting a thesis to a monograph, given the PhD's requirement of unpacking all critical terms. Given these demands, *Cosmological Readings* does an excellent job of rigorously interrogating and interlacing numerous entangled ecocritical concepts under the organizing umbrella of cosmology.

Not only does Bartha-Mitchell amply demonstrate her eco-literacy, but she also offers crucial updated critical perspectives to the ecocritical field. Along with including Australian First Nations cosmologies, issues of land rights and sovereignty, "marginalised experiences of hybridity, displacement and transnationalism" (167) as well as animal agencies, kinship and queer plant ecologies, Bartha-Mitchell also effectively demonstrates Australia's importance as a case-study of colonialism's environmental and cultural legacy. As she states, "Australia is an especially interesting test case for exploring ideas of cosmos" due to its "long tradition of Indigenous land and water ethics," being the "third biggest exporter of fossil fuels in the world" and "having the highest extinction rates of mammals on the planet" (4). Her point that Australia was one of the last places to be colonized by the British, that this occurred *during/after* the Industrial Revolution, over such a vast scale and in a condensed time is highly pertinent and not often enough addressed. These factors, she suggests, reveal why the dual continent-nation is a "magnifying glass for seeing

processes that have led to the Anthropocene” (6) and continues to make climate changes impacts horrifyingly tangible, as evident in the devastating ‘Black Summer’ bushfires of 2019/2020.

Perhaps the work’s most novel and unique contribution to ecocriticism, however, is its focus on mining and industrial agriculture—particularly the latter. British colonial diet preferences later turbocharged through large-scale agribusiness have transformed the Australian landmass and its former extent of biodiversity. Despite this tremendous ecological impact, industrial agriculture is rarely, if ever, attended to within ecocriticism. Bartha-Mitchell’s inclusion of industrial agriculture is a testament to her understanding of the Australian context as a self-proclaimed outsider (xii). She focuses, though, on the Western Australian wheat belt and it would be interesting to see her future work engage with the more spatially impactful Australian pastoralism (including associated grain production), which occupies over half of the continent—a similar area to the entire European Union (Zeunert 2024, 111). Additional attention to postcolonial (livestock-dominated) western diets, Australia’s neoliberal production modes and more in-depth discussion of mining would further lend nuances. Furthermore, despite Bartha-Mitchell’s most valiant efforts, at times cosmology embraces so many critical concepts that it becomes slightly nebulous, though I appreciate that this is the intent of using such a capacious term. It is difficult at times, however, to determine cosmology’s advantages over the contested term ‘nature,’ given that it also encompasses culture, in a classical and early modern sense, includes cosmos, and in pre-modern and indigenous contexts, incorporates spiritual holism. Similarly, occasionally, it becomes a little unclear as to whether the Anthropocene or cosmology is ‘in charge’ as a governing critical construct.

Nevertheless, this ambitious and important work is to be commended for its scope and relevance. Writing of *The Yield*, Bartha-Mitchell terms the novel “epic, timely and urgent” (83) and the same may be said of *Cosmological Readings*. This is an important addition to any ecocritical collection and demonstrates literature and criticism’s power to enrich “human situatedness in the cosmos—one that is not just traditionally derived, but that is always in process, being negotiated, adapted and renewed within a modern context” (179).

Work Cited

Zeunert, J. “Bridging Rural and Urban Disconnections: Spatial Graphic Explorations of Australia’s Livestock Landscapes.” In R. Pernice, & Chen, B. (Eds.), *Australia and China Perspectives on Urban Regeneration and Rural Revitalization*, Routledge, pp. 110–143, 2024.