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Kathrin Bartha-Mitchell: *Cosmological Readings of Contemporary Australian Literature. Unsettling the Anthropocene*

London: Routledge 2023. 197 pp. ISBN 978-1-032-31962-9, EUR 168,35

The ‘Anthropocene’ has emerged recently in academic discourse in reference to a conceptual and critical lens through which scholars reflect on humanity’s lasting effects on the planet. As a concept, it weaves together ecological degradation with cultural, historical, and political dimensions, yet establishes human/nature and mind/body binaries. Kathrin Bartha-Mitchell, Postdoctoral Researcher and DFG Benjamin Walter Fellow at the Goethe University in Frankfurt, questions such binaries and the dominant discourse of decline in the Anthropocene by combining it with the concept of ‘cosmos’.

In ‘*Cosmological Readings*’, Bartha-Mitchell examines how cosmos in contemporary Australian literature challenges the narrative of decline and the destructive separation between human and environment in the Anthropocene, as “cosmos” sits at the “intersection of human construction and material eternity” (2). At the intersection of ecocriticism, cosmology, and postcolonial studies, the author interrogates how contemporary Australian literature responds to the ongoing ecological crisis while it confronts settler-colonial narratives that dominate the continent’s discourse. ‘*Cosmological Readings*’ provides a critical lens through which to rethink the Anthropocene beyond its Eurocentric framing by foregrounding Indigenous cosmologies and non-human agencies.

In analysing six cases of contemporary Australian literature through the concept of cosmos, Bartha-Mitchell (re-)imagines cosmological relationships beyond the Anthropocene and proposes ‘cosmological readings’ as an alternative concept to the Anthropocene. Her selection of published works represents an intriguing blend of genres, themes, and authors, which range from science fiction to realism, technology to agriculture, and includes Indigenous, migrant, and settler authors. Bartha-Mitchell’s interdisciplinary approach builds on extant scholarship, notably by Environmental Humanities scholar Rob Nixon, ecofeminist Donna Haraway and Australian Ethnographer Deborah Bird Rose. In so doing, she presents a distinct perspective on how Australian literature engages with local and global ecological, historical, and political concerns such as pollution and technology. Her work also moves beyond mere criticism of the Anthropocene to a broader rethinking of human/non-human relations.

The core chapters of ‘*Cosmological Readings*’ analyse a specific piece of literature challenging the Anthropocene. The introductory and first chapter provide a ‘mise-en-scène’, with helpful definitions of the Anthropocene and cosmos as a method in literary studies. Bartha-Mitchell engages with scholarship from

a broad palette of disciplines, which includes literary, postcolonial, historical, anthropological and environmental studies, to develop the theoretical framework of a “cosmological reading lens” (2). By applying this framework to her contemporary Australian texts, Bartha-Mitchell highlights the role of literature and the Humanities in “finding ways out of the Anthropocene” (4).

In addition, Bartha-Mitchell draws on and applies an Indigenous concept of Country to identify a gap in the recent scholarly turn to materialism.¹ She does so by demonstrating that scholarship, to date, neglects Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies. Although Indigenous thought is not homogenous and varies extensively from place to place, Bartha-Mitchell characterises Country by its collective agency that “designates a complex whole, [...] encompassing environment and social relations” (5, 47). As the “oldest continuing cosmology on earth”, she holds that Country is a useful concept through which to unpack the notion of cosmology (5).

Subsequent chapters comprise four parts, with each consisting of two literary pieces that Bartha-Mitchell analyses to unravel elements of the Anthropocene. Each pairing includes a non-Indigenous and Indigenous piece of writing, which leads to an almost-formulaic, yet well-structured, outline.

Chapters three and four shift the reader’s attention to the importance of language. Bartha-Mitchell applies her ‘cosmological reading lens’ to Carrie Tiffany’s ‘Everyman’s Rules for Scientific Living’ and Tara June Winch’s ‘The Yield’ to uncover the “co-dependent meaning-making between ‘humans’ and their socio-cultural [and] material ‘environment’” (63). Next, the author places primacy on Rob Nixon’s concept of slow violence to demonstrate that environmental degradation, such as soil degradation in ‘Everyman’s Rules’, is a form of violence. Here, Bartha-Mitchell argues that the main characters’ agrarian failures “can be read as resulting out of the oppression of certain kinds of people and knowledges and dualistic human/nature constructions” (75). ‘The Yield’ picks up these themes of land-use, commercialisation and language in its construction of a tin mine on Wiradjuri Country. Bartha-Mitchell contends that the novel presents an “alternative to [a] reductionist colonial order by reconstructing cosmological understandings of the world” (88). She supports this by contrasting the settler-colonial understanding of land as a commercial good with the Wiradjuri worldview of land as beginning of all life. This worldview is represented by the Wiradjuri word *manhang*. Literally translated as ‘soil’ or ‘earth’, it holds the cosmic worldview of “earth as an alive organism” (90).

The next two chapters shed important light on a discourse analysis of “narrating the Anthropocene” through climate change. Bartha-Mitchell contrasts two speculative fiction texts – Briohny Doyle’s novel ‘The Island Will Sink’ and Ellen van Neerven’s novella ‘Water’ – to explore how different forms of storytelling, such as dystopian, humorous or romantic, shape human capacities to interpret and find ways out of “this socio-environmental crisis” (107). Bartha-Mitchell holds that one can understand ‘The Island Will Sink’ as a “negative cosmology”

1 Like Bartha-Mitchell, I capitalize ‘Country’ here as it denotes the lands, waterways, and seas that Indigenous people connect to ontologically. See Aileen Moreton-Robinson: *The White Possessive*, pp. 3-8.

that foregrounds a technology / human and nature binary, thereby adding a new strand to her 'cosmological reading lens' (123). In 'Water', the protagonists do not enjoy the "privileged complacency of doomsday-thinking" and break through the dualisms of "either/or", rather advocating for "both/and" (138, 140). This is also evident in the novella's main character, Kaden, who identifies as queer. Literally "queering" Social Darwinist, colonial policies, Bartha-Mitchell praises van Neerven's more positive discourse on the environmental crisis that emphasises complexities of the more-than-human world and people's limited understandings of it.

In the last part of her book, Bartha-Mitchell expands upon the theme of the more-than-human cosmos and refers to the initial theme of Country. Bartha-Mitchell begins with an examination of Indigenous Sovereignty and custodianship through the more-than-human agency of cosmos, primarily through Behrouz Boochani's 'No Friend but the Mountains' and Melisa Lucashenko's 'Too Much Lip'. Bartha-Mitchell's inclusion of 'No Friend' demonstrates her transcultural and transnational perspective on Australian literature, as this text differs from the others in authorship (not by an Australian citizen), setting (not in Australia), and category (transcends genre). Boochani writes about his experiences in the Australian-run prison camp on Manus, Papua New Guinea, and introduces 'Kyriarchy' to describe the artificial, oppressive system behind the prison. Bartha-Mitchell contrasts Kyriarchy with cosmos, which is "implicitly portrayed [by Boochani] as a given eco-systemic order, and an essential element [...] that gives perspective and distance beyond the Kyriarchy" (159). His engagement with cosmos, Bartha-Mitchell notes, actually characterises it as an external order in which everything has its place and instils a feeling of belonging. In line with this understanding of the cosmos, Bartha-Mitchell foregrounds cosmos as a form of resistance and belonging that is not exclusive to one place, but to several so-called "cosmopolitics" (167).

In a similar fashion, Bartha-Mitchell expands upon scholarship by Nicole Watson and Larissa Behrendt on sovereignty in her close textual reading of 'Too Much Lip'. The focus for her here is on an inherent beauty and goodness in the cosmos, and the agency and "epistemic privilege of marginalised voices" without romanticising oppression (184).² In the novel, the Salter family fights for their custodianship of a river that is sacred to the family. Bartha-Mitchell identifies the protagonists' success in (re)gaining custodianship as lying in the agency of Country and the "magnetic pull of the river and its ability to 'move' protagonists" (173).

This success also implies a concept of sovereignty that goes beyond the legal definition of Native Title and custodianship. "Sovereign cosmopolitics", in actuality, characterize the family's custodianship as a mixture of various manifestations of the workings of the cosmos, political action, personal development, and

2 Bartha-Mitchell builds her understanding of this "epistemic privilege of the marginalised" on W. E. B. DuBois' 'double consciousness,' a term he uses to describe the development of several social identities by individuals experiencing oppression, aiding them to develop a "double vision, [which] enables an understanding of the consequences of policies", (p. 167). See also W. E. B. Du Bois: *The Souls of Black Folk*.

collective healing (184). Bartha-Mitchell concludes with an analysis of Lucashenko's work to reconsider key concepts such as Country, capitalism, nature and belonging, that she explored previously. In so doing, Bartha-Mitchell invites the reader to revisit and rethink the previous chapters with all the facets of Cosmos that she introduced in 'Cosmological Readings'.

A useful addition to the book's opening chapters might be a fuller exploration of Country and Indigenous Cosmologies as theoretical concepts vis-à-vis W.E.H. Stanner's characterisation of the Dreaming as 'everywhen'.³ The Dreaming is what constitutes Country, and embraces time past, present and future, "it was, and is, everywhen".⁴ Bartha-Mitchell uses this characterisation of time as non-linear in her analysis across all chapters, and Stanner's neologism might help make visible the relationality between time and place.

This omission notwithstanding, Bartha-Mitchell's inclusion of Indigenous worldviews is the key contribution of 'Cosmological Readings' and keeps what the book promises the reader: to unsettle – the rather Eurocentric concept of – the Anthropocene. Though her focus is on Australia and the Environmental Humanities, her concept of a 'cosmological reading lens' has broad application in different disciplines. Herein lies both the strength and challenge of this book, since weaving together the different elements of 'Cosmological Readings' might be demanding for readers outside of the academy or the disciplines to which the book corresponds. As a scholar in Indigenous studies and a curious researcher, though acknowledging Literary Studies as this research's primary discipline, one might remark on the many other forms of (Australian) Indigenous storytelling, which have a rich oral and performance tradition.

It raises the question whether elements of oral storytelling, yarning or performances might enable a deeper engagement with Indigenous worldviews, either by way of inclusion in the analysis beyond the text as medium, or as primary sources to strengthen the analysis.⁵ In a similar vein, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of English translations of Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies, which oftentimes fail to adequately capture the actual meaning or invoked feeling of the original word.

Regardless of these minor points, it is easy to appreciate the novelty of Bartha-Mitchell's research, even from a non-literary studies background. Through 'Cosmological Readings', she makes visible humanity's entanglements with nature and foregrounds the distinct and oft-overlooked Indigenous perspectives that literature offers on the material world and the environment. 'Cosmological Readings' presents, successfully, a timely and deeply thought-provoking contribution that is a welcome addition to Australian literary studies. In all, 'Cosmological Readings' is an essential reading for scholars of Environmental Humanities, (Australian) literature, and anyone with an interest in the intersections of decolonization, climate justice, language and power.

3 W.E.H. Stanner: *The Dreaming*, pp. 269-272.

4 *Ibid.*

5 On the importance of performance and storytelling as well as the text as a medium in Anthropology and Indigenous Studies, see for instance Julie Cruikshank: *The Social Life of Stories*.

References

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