

**Kathrin Bartha-Mitchell. *Cosmological Readings of Contemporary Australian Literature: Unsettling the Anthropocene*. Routledge, 2024. 212 pages. AUS\$227 ISBN 9781032319629 Hardback**

Bartha-Mitchell's monograph is part of the Routledge Environmental Literature, Culture and Media series edited by Thomas Bristow. It is a welcome addition to the critical landscape, particularly for those who are interested in the relationship between literature and environment. It comes from a fine PhD written under a cotutelle arrangement between Monash and Goethe universities. The book brings a certain European sensibility to its reading of contemporary Australian literature (focusing on novels) insofar as there is a slightly more systematic approach in the thought than we tend to produce locally. There was a more than usually valiant attempt to distil consistent premises from the writings of Bruno Latour, Timothy Morton, Deborah Bird-Rose, Timothy Clark, Isabelle Stengers, Donna Haraway, assorted new materialists and post-humanists, and proponents of Indigenous critique.

To encompass this variety, Bartha-Mitchell has recourse to the concept of cosmology. This, she acknowledges, is a calculated risk. Firstly, it adds one more term to a series whose existence attests to the inassimilability of the environmental real—of life, in short. The word nature was found by the middle of last century to be too hopelessly freighted with romantic investments, so instead we spoke of environment. But this word too, as Bartha-Mitchell notes, became all-too-quickly overdetermined and *passé*. Other terms came snaking in—ecological, more-than-human, Anthropocene, the planetary.

Bartha-Mitchell's preferred term *cosmos* (or cosmology, cosmological) also carries a little baggage, insofar as it tends to evoke a slightly sonorous everythingness or totality that militates against analysis. But Bartha-Mitchell shows us how to use the concept precisely and provides a spirited and insightful case for her choice of this term in the excellent opening chapters of this book. In the end, I was persuaded to accept its value, if not as a positive articulation, then at least in the spirit of a dialectic. Cosmos, as Bartha-Mitchell points out, should be viewed as a negative universal—the designation that Dipesh Chakrabarty gives to the Anthropocene. A negative universal is a shared predicament.

Against this negative universal, there are the concrete particularities of Bartha-Mitchell's chosen contemporary Australian texts. Here we see some works that are well chosen to illustrate the impingement of the cosmos—everything that goes beyond the signifier—into the imaginative experience of Australia. The book moves in pairs, beginning with Carrie Tiffany's *Everyman's Rules for Scientific Living* (2005) and Tara June Winch's *The Yield* (2019), then Briohny Doyle's *The Island Will Sink* (2013) and Ellen van Neerven's novella "Water" (2014), before concluding with a pivot towards environmental justice in Behrouz Boochani's *No Friend but the Mountains* (2018) and Melissa Lucashenko's *Too Much Lip* (2018).

In these exegetical chapters, Bartha-Mitchell accomplishes the difficult task of transforming a theoretical overview into a capable reading strategy. She uses the novels to illustrate certain accents that emerge in the cosmos. The woman's body, for instance, which has its designated role to play in the biopolitics of the farming frontier of settler colonialism, is brought into focus in the discussion of Tiffany's novel. In Winch's *The Yield*, Bartha-Mitchell underscores how it is the regeneration of Indigenous cosmology that underpins the book's deeper project. Both of these counter-narratives—the woman's body and Indigenous cosmology—are adroitly set against the negative universal of farming, which is the spiritual *raison d'être* of the settler colony.

As Bartha-Mitchell points out, the speculative fictions of Doyle and van Neerven are also broadly framed by the conditions of colonisation. Both works involve an island which

functions as a surrogate for the continental island of Australia. In Doyle's novel, the real island of Pitcairn, populated by the descendants of the *Bounty* mutineers, is collapsing into the sea. For Bartha-Mitchell, Doyle's novel is an astute exploration of the habitual impulse to apprehend the world through the framework of disaster. In van Neerven's novella, an island—known as "Australia 2"—has been manufactured off the Queensland coast. Van Neerven's book is a story from the queer Anthropocene that ties the diversity of human intimacy to a new emphasis in biological science on the diversity of relationality in the world of organisms.

The final section of Bartha-Mitchell's book moves into slightly different terrain and rests upon an additional layer of reasoning. On the face of it, as Bartha-Mitchell concedes, neither Lucashenko's nor Boochani's novel seems overtly ecological in focus. They are brought into the analysis, however, by invoking the concept of environmental justice. The concept asserts the connectedness of environmental and social problems. That is to say: poverty and injustice exacerbate environmental degradation, while collapsing environments distribute their consequence inequitably.

The prison is the face of inequality and injustice in both Lucashenko's and Boochani's books. *No Friend but the Mountain* famously mythicises the experience of the author in the Manus Island detention facility. In *Too Much Lip*, the threat to ancestral country comes from plans to build a new prison. In Australia, which was founded as a prison, it is state detention that institutionalises poverty, and the mass imprisonment of Indigenous people is the most striking fact of our carceral system, and the clearest sign of what Lorenzo Veracini calls the settler colonial present. Additionally, with the policy of offshore detention, those subject to global inequality find themselves demonised and consigned to Australia's gulag archipelago.

It is here, and most particularly in the case of *No Friend but the Mountain*, that Bartha-Mitchell's invocation of cosmos grants its affordances: "Boochani constructs the cosmos as a counter-force to the submission and violence of the prison" (145). The mystical elements of Boochani's text do indeed draw on the beauty of the natural world and contrast this with the casualised persecution being acted out with distinctively inhuman humanness in the prison complex. Drawing on Isabelle Stengers's cosmopolitics, Bartha-Mitchell notes how the cosmos arrives at this extremity to assert an alternative sovereignty. At this point, it does make me wonder whether we might not just call this God, since we have arrived at an idea of cosmos that goes well beyond a negative universal. This cosmos is now an order—a Law, in short—based in transcultural, sovereign goods and in transcendental authority. I can certainly understand the reluctance to take that step, because it would be the end of a certain necessary illusion.

Bartha-Mitchell's book is an impressive achievement. The theoretical field, which she traces with such consistent care and detail, is formidable and one where its voices often speak at unacknowledged cross-purposes. If nothing else, I have concluded that she has that rarest of scholarly virtues, which is patience. The book's value lies not just in its productive readings of contemporary Australian prose fiction, but as a concise map of environmental critique.

*Tony Hughes-d'Aeth, University of Western Australia*