Beate Neumeier and Helen Tiffin, eds., *Ecocritical Concerns and the Australian Continent*

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REFERENCES


1 As the book’s editors indicate, the volume is part of a concerted effort to enhance Australian studies internationally. Specifically, it results from a collaboration between European scholars and institutions (DAAD and the University of Cologne), and Australian scholars and public figures (Helen Tiffin is of *The Empire Writes Back* renown, Alexis Wright and Sandra Williams are acclaimed artists and respected Indigenous personalities).

2 The stated aim of *Ecocritical Concerns and the Australian Continent* is therefore to introduce students and scholars interested in postcolonial and ecocritical studies around the world to specifically Australian socio-economic, cultural and environmental issues. This aim is reflected in the care the authors have taken to make their work accessible by providing the reader with cultural context and terminological transparency.

3 Australia is concurrently home to some of the oldest living civilisations on Earth, whose members have learnt to practice self-restraint and care for an increasingly fragile environment since the last glacial age (Laudine), to some of the rarest and most endangered natural sites (Great Barrier Reef), and to a liberal democracy remarkably entangled by individual political selfishness and limitless corporate greed. These contrasts and paradoxes make Australia a fascinating object of study in its own right,
but also a “canary in the mine” exemplum for the rest of the world in the Anthropocene. As the editors make clear, their goal was not only to foster dialogue between different disciplines, but also, quoting Garrard’s definition of ecocriticism as “an avowedly political mode of analysis” (2012, 3) to build bridges between scholarship and activism (3–4). The volume itself serves as a political intervention, several chapters ending with an explicit call to collective moral indignation and political action.

The book is structured in five parts. Part I, “Politics of the Land and Indigenous Knowledge,” criticises Romantic non-Indigenous constructions of pristine wilderness and nomadism (Wright, Finzsch), and contrasts grounded Indigenous care for Country and neo-colonial resource exploitation (Laudine). Part II, “Colonial Legacies and Current Environmental Concerns,” focuses on local case studies: historic and contemporary violent-care conservation policies on Lord Howe Island (Tiffin), current destructive monoculture on Nyungar land and the need to decolonize botanical collections (Haebich), colonial botany in the letters of a South Australian colonist (Bischoff). Part III, “Ecocriticism and Fieldwork,” looks at how “Aboriginal tourism” at its best could introduce non-Indigenous visitors to a much-needed understanding of entangled transecology and co-becoming (Wergin, Tonnaer). Chapter 9 provides a very detailed case study of the complex “anchoredness” in language, kin and Country among the Indigenous populations of the Crocodile Islands off Arnhem Land (James, Brück, Adone). Part IV, “Ecocritical Approaches to Colonial Art,” considers how colonial representations of the desert (Cranston), the kangaroo hunt (Gelder and Weaver), and mining (Mead) reflect social systems and values. Part V, “Ecocritical Concerns across Contemporary Arts: Indigenous Voices in Fiction, Poetry and Performing Arts,” focuses on the ways Indigenous performance art and writing invite the Anthropocene viewer and reader to what Rose calls “big picture connectivity.” This is achieved through sensory expression and “muscular consciousness” (223) of the impact of human-related global warming, in the case of the Marrugeku dance company’s performance Cut The Sky (Gilbert), but also thanks to “minute micro-analyses” (247) of Australia’s multi-layered relationships to the mining industry in Alexis Wright’s Carpentaria and The Swan Book, as well as Ivan Sen’s Goldstone (Herche and Kern). Althans’s chapter shows how Sam Wagan Watson’s urban ecopoetry transcends Western/Indigenous and “nature”/city binaries. Instead of an impossible “conclusion,” the volume ends on Part VI, “Coda–Crossing Boundaries,” in which Sandra Williams and Helen Tiffin offer personal accounts of the Great Barrier Reef and its impending annihilation.

The chapters in this volume are of varying length and scope. Cranston’s chapter, which is by far the longest in the volume (even taking into account its lengthier bibliography and its inclusion of illustrations), rightfully occupies a central place in the book. Although it is set in the “colonial arts section,” it offers a fast-paced and thought-provoking exploration of how the “Two Cultures” of the humanities and science must collaborate to guide humanity towards a truly ecological world-view. Drawing from a wide field of representations, namely historical travel writing, the fine arts, film, fiction (from highbrow writing by Patrick White, Murray Bail, and Alexis Wright to cli-fi by Gabrielle Lord), Cranston usefully explores the divergence between biocentric (concerned only with the animate world) and ecocentric approaches, and signals how the latter, which grants humans and non-humans no special importance beside the way they influence the ecosystem, is “guaranteed to antagonize postcolonial feminists, especially third-world women of colour,” as well as “Animal Rights advocates” (173).
This cautious note on the philosophical and ideological differences in ecocritical approaches is indeed important. For if simple race, class, and culture binaries are repeatedly warned against in the volume, it is nevertheless occasionally implied that traditional Aboriginal ecological affectivity and anti-individualist moral discipline could serve as a post-capitalist model in the attempt to protect endangered ecologies – a conceit the most technically anthropological chapter of the volume, devoted to the Crocodile Islands Indigenous population, clearly shows the limits of. While Rob Nixon’s Slow Violence analysis of environmental injustice is frequently mentioned, Alexis Wright’s mention of Tracker Tilmouth’s portrayal of Indigenous Australians as astute economists rather than as cultural environmentalists is a useful reminder of the “practicalities of [Indigenous peoples’] need to survive in modern-day Australia” (22). The threat of ecological collapse and mass extinction can lead to a desire for quick-fix modes of thinking, but Ecocritical Concerns and The Australian Continent offers many varied avenues of reflexion, contributing usefully to the existing body of ecocritical literature.

One small caveat would be that while the editors are legitimately proud of the role played by Australian scholarship in spearheading the global development of environmental humanities (2), since the volume stems from an Australo-German partnership, a summary exploration of how social vs. deep ecological thinking might be usefully grounded in German philosophy (respectively in Marx’s and Heidegger’s work, in particular) would have been welcome.

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