

Ryan Hediger
Kent State University, Tuscarawas

Kylie Crane, *Myths of Wilderness in Contemporary Narratives: Environmental Postcolonialism in Australia and Canada* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 236 pp.



In her Epilogue, Kylie Crane discusses the roots of this project, her first book. It began with an essential question: What is nature? This is not an easy query, of course. As demonstrated by ecocritics like Timothy Morton in *Ecology Without Nature*, as revealed in many theoretical debates (deconstruction, gender studies, and so on), and as famously recognized by Raymond Williams, as Crane notes (11), the word “nature” stands in for vastly complex, conflicting, and important sets of ideas. “Wilderness” functions similarly. In Crane’s case, a college instructor had asked her and her undergraduate classmates (mostly German) about their ideas of nature. Crane’s answer involved “imaginings of vast, unexplored spaces, devoid of human traces,” but that “was not the answer the teacher was looking for.” The instructor, Crane writes, instead had in mind notions of “recuperation, regeneration, [...] and pleasant seasons,” conceptions more familiar to a continental European context. Crane thus began to recognize her view as distinctive, borne in large measure from her Australian background. In short, by way of ideas of nature, she faced a cosmopolitan’s problem of cultural difference, and this challenge led Crane to investigate the source of her views. She came to understand that her “ideas of nature were ideas of wilderness nature, and not pastoral nature” (182), notions particular to specific geographies, cultures, and histories.

This scenario reveals one of the most important strengths of Crane’s book. Although ecocriticism and other related discourses have done much to reveal the “constructed” character of wilderness and nature more generally, such arguments have little influence in the broader world. We cannot pretend that a set of scholarly publications have ended the power and impact of ideas of wilderness while SUVs named “Yukon,” “Denali,” and “Outback” rumble down our streets. Further, even among scholars cognizant of the constructedness of ideas of nature and wilderness, much work remains to be done to tease out the meanings of specific, real-world situations. It is one thing to recognize, in general terms, the historical and contingent reality of ideas of wilderness; it is something else to describe what roles ideas of wilderness play in specific places and times, especially outside the much-studied United States context. Crane’s book helps to fill this void, offering readings of texts thoroughly infused with questions of wilderness and nature.

More particularly, Crane has selected a body of texts written by members of settler and post-settler cultures in Australia and Canada, working to unpack how writers in such positions deploy ideas of wilderness. She has deliberately avoided focusing on indigenous-authored texts, partly to clarify how settler discourse works (9). Crane’s

point is not to celebrate such texts, but to unpack them, to study what they can tell us, particularly about the function of colonialism and imperialism and their connection to conceptions of nature. Indeed, Crane writes with an awareness of colonial and imperial histories that her texts do not themselves always share, an important interpretive step. That approach permits her (and readers) to reframe the meaning and maybe more importantly the *function* of those texts. Through Crane's book, we better recognize how wilderness narratives can tacitly reinforce regimes of power and ideology, especially with regard to ideas of territory, of place and space. For instance, Crane refuses naturalized accounts of the Outback in Chapter Three, showing instead the constructed character of ideas of that place, including essential settler/post-settler expectations of interaction, such as solitude and antagonism from the environment (e.g. 88-89). It is not somehow "natural" to confront a difficult Outback alone; it is a consequence of culture and history. While this argument is not new in general, it is valuable in this specific application.

Crane's book is comprised of an Introduction, establishing her methods and terminology, the Epilogue, and six more chapters, each focused on a specific text from Canada or Australia, read in a postcolonial frame. The texts she analyzes include fiction, nonfiction, and some that muddy the distinction—Crane writes in her Introduction that the fiction/nonfiction distinction is less valuable to her approach, since it "is not the only division to influence reader expectations" (23). Her first chapter studies Aritha Van Herk's *Places Far from Ellesmere*, underscoring that text's point that place is always partly textual. That is, our understanding of places involves both concrete materiality (the physical place) and discursive activities (the cluster of ideas and frames we use to see and understand the place), and neither can be excluded from a rigorous understanding. Chapter Two investigates Tim Winton's novel *Dirt Music*, set in Australia. Crane highlights the deep contradictions at the heart of ideas of wilderness deployed there. Those ideas, she writes, involve an "almost subliminal recognition of colonialist thought" (60). Chapter Three studies Kim Mahood's memoir, *Craft for a Dry Lake*, noting the ways that Mahood works to recognize and negotiate her complex history and its associations with the Australian Outback. Yet, Crane claims that "the way the Australian Outback is constructed is still under obligation to paradigms of Western colonial thought, specifically the frontier" (85).

In Chapter Four, Crane treats the nonfiction text *River of the Angry Moon*, by Mark Hume. Set in British Columbia, Canada, this text, focused on fishing, adheres to many nature writing conventions. Crane's analysis draws attention to the disconnect between the book's criticisms of "non-ecologically sound practices such as clear-cut logging and trawlnet fishing" and the failure of the writer persona to adopt environmentally sound practices for himself (110). Chapter Five extends the critique of ideas of wilderness and wildness, focusing in this case of Julia Leigh's novel *The Hunter*. This book centers upon a hunter in Tasmania pursuing and killing the last thylacine (or "Tasmanian Tiger," in common parlance). Crane argues that this extinction narrative, cloaked in mythology as much as reality about both the animal and wilderness, finally shows that "the reality of

wilderness as untrammelled, undisturbed, and without human (economic and political) interests is dead, extinct,” even though the *idea* of wilderness remains important (155). Chapter Six turns to Margaret Atwood’s work of speculative fiction, *Oryx and Crake*. I found this chapter especially interesting. It focuses on the complicated ways in which ideas of wilderness enter into this posthumanist, apocalyptic text. Atwood intensifies and extends present realities into the future, realities such as gated communities and radically unequal access to wealth. For Crane, Atwood’s post-apocalyptic landscape appears in the terms of the sublime, tinged with a notion of wilderness that refuses the separation of humans from nature and wilderness. Citing Gary Snyder’s argument that “the walls between ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ begin to crumble as we enter a posthuman era,” Crane shows how Atwood’s vision of the future reveals the *work* of maintaining such boundaries (177-78). That is, such distinctions, often taken to be natural, are very much artificial, produced by the labor of exclusion and separation, exposed by Atwood near their most destructive limits.

In each of these chapters, Crane applies (and often complicates) the categories laid out in the wilderness typology of her Introduction, working through references to ecocritical and postcolonial scholarship. There is much to admire in this approach. Indeed, in many ways, this book’s framework is one of its strongest elements. It establishes a route of inquiry into such texts, a route other scholars can and should follow. However, in her chapters, Crane does not always have the space to explore as many of the nuances of the texts she studies as one might wish. Often, we read a compelling introduction to a text but too little sustained new argument about it. In that way, as noted in its blurb, the book is often more taxonomic than analytic. Of course, if this is a weakness, it is also a strength, since it leaves room for Crane and other scholars to develop these ideas further.

More broadly, new problems are raised by the set of ideas Crane relies on, particularly those oriented around construction of places and ideas. Constructionism is increasingly being put into dialog with principles from new or vital materialism. For instance, as Jane Bennett writes in *Vibrant Matter*, the effort to denaturalize and demystify powerful ideas like wilderness often “tends to screen from view the vitality of matter and to reduce *political* agency to *human* agency” (xv). Yet clearly, as Bennett shows in her book, there are many forms of nonhuman agency that matter. Analyses of wilderness would be enriched by more of this sort of perspective. Perhaps human “constructions” of places would be better understood as conversations with places; places are real and have their own forms of agency that enter into human “constructions.” The Outback, for instance, is a distinctive region, and its unique attributes inform human ideas about it; it has a kind of political agency, therefore. Even though we must continue to historicize and problematize naturalized understandings, we should resist turning everything into a human creation, a form of anthropocentric solipsism buried in the “constructionist” metaphor, if it is incautiously deployed. Thus, it is not enough to call wilderness or nature “constructed” and then move on to other questions. We need to better investigate how ideas of nature actually work in the world,

using more tools, including such frameworks as postcolonialism, as Crane does here, to enrich our understanding. In that sense, Crane, following Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, and other postcolonial ecocritics like Bonnie Roos and Alex Hunt, has helped to illuminate new questions and approaches for future scholarship.

Works Cited

- Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010. Print.
- Morton, Timothy. *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007. Print.