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In *Outback and Out West: The Settler Colonial Environmental Imaginary*, Tom Lynch sets out to investigate the settler-colonial environmental imaginary as a way to “explicate or account” for the cultural resemblances between the American West and the Australian Outback (p. 8). The book is a wide-ranging, detailed, and much-needed addition to the ongoing conversation in western literary studies, and literary eco-studies more broadly. At the theoretical level, Lynch is focused on the ways that settler-colonial theory and eco-criticism can productively inform an analysis of the negative socio-environmental impacts of settler colonialism in each region. The work of Australian historian Lorenzo Veracini is utilized extensively, and to good effect, for the theoretical accounting of settler colonialism, as is the work of, at turns, Kate Rigby, Lisa Slater, and Mark Rifken, among others. At the level of literary analysis, the “project is an examination of the environmental consequences of the settler-colonial imaginary as manifest in the literature of settler culture” (p. 30). As Lynch concedes, the stakes of the project are mostly contained within the eco-studies conversation, rather than cultural studies more broadly (p. 27).

*Outback and Out West*, in Lynch’s own words, is then “primarily an ecocritical study concerned with how settlers and their cultures intrude upon, traverse, alter, damage, identify with, mythologize, and at times love and care for the land and ecology of the places they have claimed” (p. 27). Lynch’s readings are simultaneously in-depth and concise, managing to intrigue those readers familiar with the primary texts while also remaining accessible to those less familiar with them. This is even more essential, in this case, because many readers will find themselves less familiar with either the US or Australian primary texts. A central theme of the literary analysis, and one that animates the critical project overall, is the persuasive contention that “settler colonialism is not something we have moved beyond but is a continuing process that structures contemporary life in the West and in the Outback” (p. 26). Lynch astutely identifies and meticulously outlines example after example, from various genres of nature writing across myriad time periods and places, that display how it remains as “potent today as it was one hundred or more years ago and continues to shape both social policy and individual decisions…” (p. 26). In this way, the project of *settler belonging* is examined as a current and ongoing process of dispossession that can only be interrupted once it is recognized, examined, and purposefully transformed.

The format is somewhat unique and, overall, quite successful. Most strikingly, the book opens
with, and each chapter is preceded by, a short per-
sonal narrative intended to provide “visceral ac-
counts” of the places and themes discussed in the 
chapters (p. 31). Lynch’s reflections upon living 
and traveling on both continents, in these sections 
he terms “Fieldnotes,” add a personal element to 
the US West and the Australian Outback relation, 
and add to the theoretical project in subtle and 
worthwhile ways. Also, they are in themselves 
simply enjoyable anecdotes about traveling alone 
and with family (including, at times, bored teen-
agers). The traditional chapters, Lynch explains, 
are then ordered to account for the “stages of his-
torical settler-colonial progression”; thus the five 
focus, in order, on “exploring,” “naming and pre-
serving,” “herding,” “gardening,” and, finally, “be-
longing” (p. 31). Lynch is also helpfully forthright 
about several decisions regarding his analytic ap-
proach. Most significantly, while the project is “in-
debted” to scholarship on “the indigenous experi-
ence of settler colonialism,” this work is focused 
on the literature of settler culture itself (p. 30). 
Furthermore, “the book is written from the sub-
ject position of a settler,” and Lynch explains that 
he chooses to use the pronoun “we” to clarify that 
the author is himself is “a settler and someone 
who has benefited from settler colonialism” (p. 
30). Whatever one may think of this approach, 
most readers will appreciate the honesty and self-
reflection provided in the author’s explanation of 
these decisions.

Chapter 1 explores the literature of “retra-
cings,” in which contemporary authors record 
their attempts to reconstruct and reenact trips 
taken by early European explorers, and it is an im-
pactful and striking opening argument. While the 
first explorers were “reconnaissance parties for ... 
settler invasion” (p. 45), Lynch displays that these 
more recent texts, as homages to those events, are 
themselves relatively conscious and purposeful at-
tempts to forge a sense of ever-elusive settler be-
longing. In this way, these contemporary authors’ 
attempts to find the “very spot” where certain his-
torical events occurred during earlier colonialist 
ventures into Indigenous lands are revealed to be 
a renewal (or continuation) of the project of dis-
possession. Lynch provides an impressive set of 
examples to display how the original European expl-
orers and their tales of adventure and exploration 
become a founding mythology, a “pilgrimage of 
national identity” that provides “sanction to a [pres-
et day] settler claiming and belonging” (p. 44). This sanctioning, Lynch explains by drawing 
upon the scholarship of Eve Tuck and Rubén 
Gaztambide-Fernandez, is one key element in en-
suring “settler futurity” (p. 51). Within this fram-
ing, the current denizen of settler-colonial society 
who uncritically seeks to forge a sense of present 
belonging to a particular region, or piece of prop-
erty, is simultaneously endeavoring to justify the 
future of that society on the same colonized land 
(p. 49).

Chapter 2, “Strange Lands,” engages with the 
ways anglophone culture and language, built in 
the wet, green climate of England, inhibits adapta-
tion to the arid West and Outback; this “misfit” 
that leads to the eco-destruction of these “strange” 
(i.e., lesser) lands in need of remaking (pp. 94-95). 
Chapter 3, “Cattle Country,” tracks how alien 
sheep and cattle become naturalized into the pas-
toral landscape and cowboys (in the US West) and 
stockmen (in the Australian Outback) are made 
into cultural icons. Lynch explores how the settler-
colonial pastoral took the Old World’s idyllic al-
legory and “actualized” it, via westward expan-
sion and homesteading schemes, so that it became 
an “imperial pastoral” that destroys Indigenous 
people as domesticated animals replace wild 
herds and destroy native flora (p. 136). And 
chapter 4, “Nothing But Land,” tracks the role of 
women’s pioneer gardens as one part of the “new 
landscape regime” being imposed upon a sup-
posedly “empty” land (p. 180). Tracking the gar-
dens’ social and psychological importance and the 
intense labor they demanded, looking at US texts 
from Willa Cather and Bess Streeter Aldrich and 
Australian authors Myrtle Rose White and Ann 
Tully, Lynch makes the subtle case that “these ali-
en gardens serve to delay the inevitable adaptation required to develop an ecologically sustainable society” (p. 210).

It is the fifth and final chapter, “Becoming Native,” that most strikingly stands out as the culmination and fulfillment of the project’s contribution to, and stakes for, environmental and literature studies. Here the stakes of Lynch’s sustained analysis of settler-colonial assumptions, norms, and values become clearest. First, building upon Mark Rifken’s work in his *Settler Common Sense* (2014), Lynch argues that eco-memoir needs to be “unsettled” and “problematic” for how it erases Native peoples and land claims (p. 236). Through cogent readings of memoirs by US authors Wes Jackson, Sharman Apt Russell, and Jerry Wilson and Australian writers Peter Read and Kim Mahood, Lynch shows that while eco-memoirs have made certain important contributions to environmental thought, they are too often caught up in colonialist tropes and the erasure of Indigenous peoples and their rights. However, while Russel’s *Songs of the Fluteplayer* (1991) is skewered as emblematic of a deeply problematic “bioregionally inspired back-to-the-land movement,” (p. 247), the other texts are allowed to produce a more nuanced significance. In particular, Mahood’s *Position Doubtful* (2016) is read as an example of “settler uncanny” with productive potential. Lynch writes that in this text belonging becomes “a verb ... [and] an ongoing and never completed process that one must participate in. Doubt about one’s position is therefore productive” (p. 267). Instead of trying to “go native,” this eco-memoir allows the settler-colonial authorial voice, and therefore readers, to contemplate that “learning to live with an ever unsettled belonging is the price settlers must pay to belong at all” (p. 270).

Despite its purposefully narrow focus on literary representations of settler colonialism in the United States and Australia, the book provides an in-depth and extended analysis of settler thought, past and present, engaging with the damage done, the limits of a response based in an anxious, guilty liberalism, and, importantly, the fraught yet emerging discourses of recognition, accountability, and systemic action. The breadth, the detail, and the lucidity of Lynch’s readings of these two regions’ settler-colonial texts (aren’t they all such, the author might suggest) make *Outback and Out West* a must-read contribution to eco-literary studies.
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