

# TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

**Beate Neumeier and Kay Schaffer (eds), *Decolonizing the Landscape: Indigenous Cultures in Australia* (Rodopi: Amsterdam, New York, 2014)**

*Decolonizing the Landscape: Indigenous Cultures in Australia* is a timely publication. It arrives at a time when Australian Studies departments in several universities are producing some of their most creative offerings, despite the fact that many are facing closure. In Europe, meanwhile, Australian Studies continues to receive scholarly attention with flourishing departments in Spain, England, Denmark and Germany. Not least, the establishment of the Dr R. Marika Guest Chair for Australian and Indigenous Studies in the English Department of the University of Cologne in 2009 provides opportunities for Australian scholars to contribute new work in postcolonial, literary and cultural studies.

*Decolonizing the Landscape* addresses the question of how Anglo-European researchers respond to critical and creative works by Australian Indigenous writers, artists, filmmakers and performers, themes which are central to the development of Australian studies, particularly as the discipline continues the journey toward the inclusion of Indigenous perspectives across the curriculum and contributes to the ongoing dialogue about reconciliation. This collection arose from the international conference on 'Indigenous Knowledge: Issues of Cultural Transfer and Transformation', held in July 2011, which sought to acknowledge Australia's colonial past as a 'violent history of oppression', and, through a process of 'self-questioning and unsettlement', enter into a 'true dialogue' with, and provide a 'renewed ethical response' to, those creative and critical works (ix).

The nexus between the creative and the critical is important, as the works of Indigenous writers, poets, artists and filmmakers, in their own ways, offer anti-colonial cultural critiques and provocative new ways to read and contest dominant productions of Australian national identity, including the narrative of white possession that overlies the dispossession of Indigenous Australia.

*Decolonizing the Landscape* reminds us that the process of national meaning-making is not only social and internal, but also broadly intercultural and transnational. The 15 essays collected here bring together Australian, Indigenous and European scholars to debate the uses of decolonising methodologies as critical, ethical and creative practices. New critical readings of creative works by Kim Scott, Alexis Wright and Richard Frankland, among others, consider the need for non-Indigenous scholars to engage in border-crossing, while reflecting on constructions of white subjectivity and the capacity of white scholarship to contribute to respectful knowledge production about Indigenous Australia.

The book is organised in three parts: 'Sharing Across Boundaries', 'Ethical and Other Encounters', and 'Reading Transformations'. In 'Sharing Across Boundaries', essays by Kim Scott, Steven Muecke and Anna Haebich explore the limitations of Anglo-European knowing, whether in Muecke's work about the problems inherent in a 'whitefella' translating the songs of Kimberley people, Haebich's critique of the colonial archive's constructions of Aboriginality as expressions of 'racism, power and control' (42), or Scott's work on the tensions inherent in the cultural transfer and 'controlled giving' of Indigenous knowledges and cultures in order that those cultures be revitalised and preserved (18). Michael Christie calls for a decolonising methodology in project design, arguing that the politics of non-Indigenous knowing (and not-knowing) are central to a Western research tradition that privileges government knowledge-practices over Yolŋu knowledge-making (62). The closing essay in this section, by Eleonore Wildburger, mobilises Indigenous critiques of the

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epistemological work of art galleries and museums to rethink how Western European curators might better interpret and exhibit Indigenous Australian art to foster ‘cross-culturally appropriate communication and mutual understanding’ (85). This cross-cultural work is not only transnational, but remains important inside Australia if understanding about our shared colonial past is to progress beyond what remains, outside the academy, a frustratingly entry-level conversation.

‘Ethical and Other Encounters’ considers problems of Western framing and knowledge systems in the construction of Indigeneity. Bill Ashcroft explores how non-Indigenous readers might apprehend Indigenous knowledge, calling for a willingness to enter into ‘transcultural contact zones’ (113), which offer a form of ‘knowledge beyond words’ (108). These transcultural spaces generate new meanings and new understandings, to enable new processes of negotiation and exchange (111) between white ‘settler’ culture and Indigenous cultures. By contrast, Lisa Slater calls for a form of intercultural understanding that requires the white colonial subject to move beyond ‘anxious’ whiteness (144) to disrupt the peculiarly Australian ‘habit’ of ‘colonial amnesia’ (134) that forecloses any notion of Indigenous sovereignty. Kay Schaffer considers works by non-Indigenous writers Stephen Muecke, Margaret Somerville and Katrina Schlunke as reconciliation narratives, which unsettle dominant modes of ‘white settler belonging’ (151) through their respective engagement with Indigenous knowledges and ontologies. Schaffer is troubled by the ‘risks’ of appropriating ‘Indigenous lifeways’ (158) to examine white settler anxieties, but it is also important, she concludes, to ‘run the risk of being wrong’ to create new beginnings for the exploration of white settler subjectivity (165). Sue Kossew argues that a tendency to construct Kim Scott’s *That Deadmen Dance* as a post-reconciliation narrative acts out a form of temporary ‘postcolonial trauma therapy’ that only perpetuates colonialist views, seeking instead a coming-to-terms with history that acknowledges white guilt and ‘complicity’ (171).

These are important themes, but as designated Australian Studies departments dissolve into other areas of the Humanities, the question of where, and how, these will be taught remains. For scholars in literary studies, postcolonial studies and cultural studies, the final section of the collection, ‘Transformative Readings’, turns to the ethical and political dimensions of being Australian, to explore problems of white reading and misreading in the interpretation and critique of Indigenous creative works. Philip Mead considers power, the function of literary criticism, and the radical cultural critique of knowledge-making institutions offered by Alexis Wright in *Carpentaria*. Heinz Antor explores the suppression and reassertion of Indigenous cultures through Sam Watson’s novel, *The Kadaitcha Sung*, which catalogues colonial violence and white racism in the past and present. Anne Brewster examines the role of Aboriginal humour, situating it as a form of ‘gallows humour’ that critiques racialised violence, coloniality, and whiteness, to decolonise white signification of stereotypes about Aboriginality (249). Katrin Althans also considers the challenge to white signification employed by Richard Frankland, whose short film, *No Way to Forget*, appropriates and transforms the Gothic mode to tell the story of Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, locating institutional violence as a contemporary reality for Aboriginal people (271). Closing the collection, Beate Neumeier meditates on the ‘performative turn’ in the humanities, and the possibilities for ‘post-traumatic theatre’ to testify to the cultural trauma of racialised violence.

Together, these essays acknowledge and begin to work through the difficulties of Anglo-European academics encountering and entering into dialogue with Indigenous Australian texts, whether by being willing to risk the ‘inevitability of misreading’ or by facing the ‘discomforting recognition’ (xix) of their/our complicity in race relations. *Decolonizing the Landscape* is of value to scholars interested in the cross-cultural and critical endeavour of a praxis centred on decolonising

methodologies. For me, though, a true dialogue requires more Indigenous speakers. Adding a section in which Indigenous writers, artists and filmmakers respond to these essays would strengthen and complement the collection, and, perhaps, advance the conversation.

**Laura Deane**