

Beate Neumeier and Kay Schaffer, eds., *Decolonizing the Landscape: Indigenous Cultures in Australia*

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Beate Neumeier and Kay Schaffer, eds. *Decolonizing the Landscape: Indigenous Cultures in Australia*. Amsterdam/New York: Brill-Rodopi, 2014. xix, 296 pp. ISBN13 (hb): 9789042037946. €77

- 1 Beate Neumeier and Kay Schaffer's edited book, *Decolonizing Landscape: Indigenous Cultures in Australia*, examines the violence of Australia's colonial past to engage in an intercultural dialogue and call for a renewed ethical response. The multi-disciplinary character of the topic is clearly reflected in this volume which brings together 15 innovative essays that combine philosophical, ethnographic, psychoanalytical, postmodern, and postcolonial approaches. In their introduction, Neumeier and Schaffer indicate that the book is part of an international and cross-disciplinary project marking the establishment of a Chair for Australian Studies in 2009, at the University of Cologne. The guiding question of the book is "how to probe the limitations of Anglo-European knowledge-systems so as to lay the groundwork for entering into a true dialogue with Indigenous writers and critics" (ix).
- 2 Part 1, "Sharing Across Boundaries," presents interesting case studies and advocates a rethinking of current practices beyond cultural boundaries. Kim Scott explores the use of classical Nyungar culture and language to revive an Indigenous spirit, referring to "the activity of 'tracking'," of following the Songlines, as "a metaphor for reading" (5). Stephen Muecke extends this line of thought and supports the embracing of Indigenous traditions by non-Indigenous Australians. His Deleuzian approach and reference to the botanical metaphor of the rhizome, to apprehend multiplicities and surpass the usual

classifications and cultural boundaries, imply that translation operates in various ways, that languages or cultures “border” on each other to ensure continuity. Eleonore Wilburger refers to the affiliation of people with the land as part of Indigenous Law and demonstrates how “artworks express and represent individual and group identity” (74). The display of Indigenous art in museums, especially in Europe, tends to ignore this and to maintain instead a focus on cultural difference. Anna Haebich considers that the collection and conservation of historical sources require the active participation of Indigenous people; she emphasizes the necessity to “re-contextualize the records” (39), adding that this must come through Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians’ capacity to combine their efforts in assessing the past. Michael Christie’s essay concludes this part and calls for “an ethic for decolonization” with a focus on “a remote Aboriginal community garden” (57). He advocates an original methodology for social sciences that takes into account Indigenous sensibilities and approaches to the land so that “the garden would build the community rather than the other way around” (64).

- 3 Part 2, “Ethical and Other Encounters,” is concerned with narratives and the way Western ontology interacts with Indigenous discourse. Ian Henderson identifies an alternative form of modernism, coined “antipòdernism,” that engages with the construction of Indigeneity and white settler vision in various writings. His references to the works of Emile Durkheim, James Frazer and Sigmund Freud to analyse the entanglement of concepts such as “modernism,” “settler modernity” and “Aboriginality” are stimulating but would be best explored through more specific literary illustrations. Bill Ashcroft interrogates the transformative aspect of transcultural space through hermeneutics and epistemology. He examines non-Indigenous and Indigenous authors, with references to theoretical and philosophical texts, and calls for an intercultural dialogue. Despite a relevant analysis, his design and use of a diagram of the hermeneutic spiral is too abstract and opaque. Kay Schaffer posits the idea that the “future of reconciliation in Australia may require many moments of white-settler immersion in territories of confusion and contradiction on the re-writing of colonial history by non-Indigenous authors” (165). Her reference to reconciliation novels by Muecke, Somerville and Schlunke delves further into new ways of belonging to “country” with a keen interest in hybrid forms that operate on the intersection of theoretical and scientific approaches.
- 4 Part 3, “Reading Transformations,” traces the transformative power of fiction and the performance of cultural translations. Philip Mead addresses the geopolitical in Alexis Wright’s *Carpentaria*, demonstrating how the novel’s Indigenous and postmodern affiliations reflect the cultural and political reality of a distorted geography and idealized (post)colonial history. Heinz Antor argues that Sam Watson’s *The Kadaitcha Sung* “establishes transcultural postcolonial solidarity among the oppressed victims of white colonialism in Australia and beyond” (227). He contends that while the orality of Indigenous culture and story telling served the colonial purpose of objectifying Indigenous Australians, it is also an epistemic system that contributes to restoring their presence. The “transcultural and postcolonial solidarity” among the oppressed forms the crux of Anne Brewster’s discussion on the position of white readers towards Indigenous writings. Brewster’s focus on humour as an element of power and resistance establishes a fruitful parallel with American popular culture and the work of W. E. B. Du Bois and Paul Lewis on the effects of humour in cross-cultural encounters. Moreover, basing her arguments on the Freudian claim that “humour works cross-racially to critique racialized violence,” she stresses that the relation between teller,

listener and butt of the joke is nonetheless “modified through a destabilization of the structural hierarchy of whiteness and racial difference” (240). The process of undoing racist stereotypes, of challenging the legacies of colonization and the legal fiction of *terra nullius*, is examined in Kathrin Althans’s essay on Richard Frankland’s short film, *No Way to Forget*, on the issue of Indigenous deaths in custody. Althans analyses the subversion of the gothic genre, with the themes of trauma and haunting deriving from colonial representations of Indigeneity. Beate Neumeier takes up the themes of trauma, absence and identity in plays to examine how Indigenous performance decolonizes not only history but also the stage.

- 5 *Decolonizing the Landscape* takes up the sensitive double issue of belonging and of restoring historical facts through a decolonization of place and space. This well-structured volume succeeds in showing that the need to acknowledge the impact of Australia’s colonial past implies processes of mediation, negotiation, translation and a true understanding of otherness. It is a welcome addition to the field of Australian cultural studies.

AUTHOR

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Salhia BEN-MESSAHEL is a Senior Lecturer in English at the University of Lille. Her research focuses on Australian fiction, postcolonial literature and cultural studies. She is the author of *Mind the Country: Tim Winton’s Fiction* (U of Western Australia P, 2006), editor of *Des Frontières de l’interculturalité* (Presses du Septentrion, 2009), and co-editor of *Colonial Extensions, Postcolonial Decentring* (Peter Lang, forthcoming). She is currently completing a monograph on Australian fiction to be published with Cambridge Scholars Publishing. She is a member and the acting treasurer of the Société d’Etudes des Pays du Commonwealth.