

Zierott, Nadja, 2005. *Aboriginal Women's Narratives: Reclaiming Identities*.
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Whereas indigenous Australians have historically predominately been the object of white ethnographic representations, the 70s and 80s saw an ever-increasing range and popularity of Aboriginal autobiographic writing. Gillian Whitlock takes this changing role of indigenous life writing as an "important indicator of an ongoing process of cultural exchange where appropriation and decolonisation co-exist and contest in the aftermath of invasion and settlement" (Whitlock 2000:242). Interestingly, this emergent literary field exhibits a clear gender bias: out of the 100 published Aboriginal autobiographies counted by Tim Rowse in 2004, 65 have female authors. In the same essay, Rowse voices his surprise at the lack of Australian scholarship, which, he contends – apart from Anne Brewster's short monograph *Aboriginal Women's Autobiography* – "is in its infancy" (Rowse 2004). Nadja Zierott's *Aboriginal Women's Narratives: Reclaiming Identities*, a publication of the author's MA thesis at the University of Hamburg, thus constitutes a significant achievement. Based on an analysis of Ruby Langford Ginibi's *Don't Take Your Love to Town* (1988), Rita and Jackie Huggin's *Auntie Rita* (1994) and Alice Nannup's *When the Pelican Laughed* (1992), Zierott addresses the popularity of the autobiographic genre among female indigenous writers and its role for the identity formation of Aboriginal authors.

Why might writing based on the author's historicisation of his/her own unique development, provide such a successful model for indigenous writing and how might Aboriginal texts nevertheless differ from this Western model of autobiography? According to Zierott, a number of characteristics "sets [these texts] apart from Western models" (40) and makes them "uniquely Aboriginal" (68), among them the use of transcribed oral material, joint authorship and a predominant role given to the author's community (39-40). Of great importance for Zierott is the notion of a trajectory shared by all four texts, which reverses the western notion of 'life as a journey'. Contrary to accounts which start at the author's place of birth and then move out into the world, Zierott asserts that "Aboriginal authors tend to describe their journeys home to their traditional country, the place they were born, rather than venturing away from it" (33).

Tim Rowse's approach to indigenous life writing differs when he claims to "make no argument and [to] harbour no opinion about what is typically 'Aboriginal'." Contrary to the oppositional model suggested by Zierott, he "would rather not presume that Indigenous authors should follow (assimilation) or should not follow (resistance) that evolution" (Rowse 2004). It might indeed be more productive to ask, as Tikka Wilson and others have done, which writing positions and which sense of self the appropriation of the (western) model of autobiography has facilitated for indigenous authors. For Wilson, autobiography "opens an intimate space of mediated dialogue between Aboriginal narrators and non-Aboriginal readers" which – particularly with regard to accounts of past injustices – enables "the author to take the position of a witness" and which in turn "implicate[s] readers in a judicial metaphor that calls for a fair hearing and adjudication of the testimony" (Wilson 2004:84-5; see also Kennedy 2004 and Whitlock 2001).

The process of editing indigenous texts, another focus of Zierott's essay, has been the subject of augmented academic debate in recent years (see, for instance, McDonnell 2004; Jones, 2003). Aboriginal critic Mudrooroo (Colin Johnson) is highly critical of any form of mediation, which he equates with "capture, imprisonment, assimilation, surrender" (Johnson 1987 cited in Rowse 2004). Although Zierott concedes that "[t]he last few years have brought about a change that made respectful and productive cooperation [between editors and indigenous writers] possible" (69), she at least tentatively sides with Mudrooroo when she names control over the writing process as a vital prerequisite for the 'reclamation indigenous identities', the central topic of her essay. Alice Nannup, whose oral accounts were transcribed by her editors and, Zierott suspects, adapted to meet (White) reader expectations, "did not do the writing of her life story herself" and is therefore "excluded her from the last phase of reclaiming her identity" (116). As Rowse points out with reference to Philippe Lejeune's *On Autobiography* however, the very desire for the unmediated voice of the author is intrinsic to the (Western) genre of autobiography which is predicated on the reader's belief in the author's "singular, originating consciousness" (Rowse 2004). Indeed, other models for the relationship between editor and indigenous author might be imagined. Zierott grants that "some stories might never have appeared on paper without the engagement of White people" (67) and Rosamund Dalziell even goes so far as to describe the relationship between writer and editor as potentially productive of reconciliatory meaning (Dalziell 1999).

Zierott's main focus however, is to assess the role of autobiography in the process of indigenous identity formation. Here, her theoretical position – similarly to contemporary discussions on Aboriginality – oscillates between the concept of a re-discovery of identity which verges on essentialism ("[P]eople strive to reconnect with their physical and mental place of belonging ... literary productions in this genre need to be based on a physical return to one's home country if they are to be successful. Success in this respect means the author's liberation from imposed restrictions by the dominant culture." (117)) and constructivist notions of identity formation as fashioned in the act of writing itself. In this context, Susanna Egan and Gabriele Helms argue that recent discussions on identity as performatively constituted might be helpful in further theorising the relation between self and autobiography in shifting the focus to "the actual processes of making and unmaking identities and their cultural significance" (Egan and Helms, xiv).

Zierott's thesis surveys areas that beg research and discussion in the field of indigenous autobiography and constitutes a valuable first contribution in the German Australian Studies context. The LIT-Verlag's "Anglophone Literatures" series is to be congratulated for publishing the work of an early career researcher and thus making available new perspectives in Australian Studies to a greater readership.

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