

Gerd Dose and Britta Kuhlenbeck, eds. *Australia: Making Space Meaningful*. Tübingen: Stauffenburg, 2007, 203 pp. € 40,-. ISBN 978-3-86057-756-1, (KOALAS Vol. 7)

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Landscape is not simply formed by geology and geography, but by personal emotion. (Elizabeth Jolley)

Australia: Making Space Meaningful, edited by Gerd Dose and Britta Kuhlenbeck, brings together papers presented at the Ninth Biennial Conference of the German Association for Australia Studies in 2004. Thematically and methodologically the essays range from straightforward surveys of literary texts to a case study of the transformations undergone by an inner-city suburb in Sydney and an analysis of Tracey Moffat's photography. Perhaps because of its diversity, the collection works especially well at foregrounding the complex ways in which individual and place interact, and the importance of textual representation in this process.

Throughout, two key ideas unite this collection: the first, the sense of an emotional negotiation with place and landscape by a diverse body of individuals across historical periods; contributors such as Gerhard Stilz, Tony Hassall, Greg Manning, Alex Miller, Ihab Hassan, Vera Alexander and Anja Schwarz all examine how earlier settlers saw Australia as a place to which they had forcibly travelled and to which they could relate only by comparing it to what they had left behind; how, for more recent arrivals the alienation relates to a perception of dominant meanings of Australian place and space from which they feel excluded; finally, how, for Indigenous peoples Australia is both home and exile, at once a place they know intimately and not at all. For example, Stilz's analysis of a large body of poetry shows compellingly how emotionally conflicted the settlers felt, caught between the opportunities afforded by the new place and haunted by the familiarity of the old.

The second intellectual thread in the book is the assumption that "there is no place without a history; there is no place that has not been imaginatively grasped through song, dance and design, no place where traditional owners cannot see the imprint of sacred creation." (Deborah Bird Rose in Plate, 2007:103) This is an aspect explored with unique depth and insight by Cassi Plate herself in her essay, though one developed also in Uta Daur's piece on Tracey Moffatt's photography, Britta Kuhlenbeck's reading of Tim Winton's *Dirt Music*, and Alex Miller's meditation on his relationship to Australia as physical place and imaginative setting for his novels. Interestingly, moreover, Miller shows in his essay how closely similar the

concerns of contemporary Australians remain to those of earlier settlers, particularly in their interaction with Aboriginal Australia.

In *The Wide Brown Land: Literary Readings of Space and the Australian Continent*, Hassall also develops this issue, noting that much twentieth-century writing reuses almost wholesale the vocabulary which in the nineteenth century depicted Australia as an empty place from which little intellectual and emotional nourishment could be gained. The point he makes with reference to the writing of Patrick White, Thea Astley and David Malouf is one pursued also by Elizabeth Webby, who traces representations of natural and cultural environments in contemporary Australian film to work produced by the Scotsman Hugh Watt, notably *The Overlanders* (1946). Webby proposes that, its present critical obscurity notwithstanding, Watt's melodramatic treatment of Australian landscape continues to exert a strong influence on modern Australian cinema. Although their scope and intention differ greatly from Rose's, both Webby and Hassall uncover in their respective essays aspects of the 'imaginative grasping' of Australia by successive waves of settlers.

Perhaps not surprisingly given the event from which the essays evolved, much of the writing reflects an interestingly 'German' feel to it, either in the body of allusions made or in the perspective adopted. In many cases this results in especially rewarding essays, such as those by Anja Schwarz, Britta Kuhlenbeck and Norbert Platz, though occasionally in somewhat reductive examinations of certain cultural aspects of Australian society. Schwarz's essay on the beach and Australian national identity is both passionate and rigorous in its approach, tackling the hegemonic fusion of the beach with a more or less undeclared Whiteness meticulously and persuasively. The readings it offers of other critics too are informed and pointedly critical, the critical insights on particular examples especially illuminating. In contrast, in "Beyond Centre and Margin: Representations of Australia in South Asian Immigrant Writings" Vera Alexander seems so concerned with noting the unease of recent arrivals to Australia about their host country's understanding of place and space that she overlooks to consider how strongly it resonates with earlier views of Australia as an 'empty and meaningless place'. For however self-consciously they may do so, and I am not sure that this is the case, both Adib Khan and Chandani Lokugé create in *Seasonal Adjustments* (1994) and *If the Moon Smiled* (2000) narrators whose perception of Australia as place and space often is tiredly clichéd. The irony is that the challenge to see 'difference differently' seems as daunting to new arrivals as it did to the earlier ones, regardless of ethnic descent. She is on safer ground when discussing Yasmine Gooneratne's *A Change of Skies* (1991), a much more nuanced narrative,

perhaps because the author seems genuinely interested in cross-cultural exchanges rather than in sanctimonious recrimination.

To my mind Melanie Fasche and Boris Braun's study of Sydney's suburb of Newton in terms of a disappearing cultural moment is also a little affected by nostalgia. 'Gentrification' is one of those terms that cry out for Bourdieu's critical attention in its appeal to power masquerading as class and taste and beauty but it is also merely one of a series of steps in the palimpsest-like transformation of place that any society undergoes. Indeed, in Australia, much of the cultural memory erased by processes of 'gentrification' often is simultaneously a painful reminder to Aboriginal Australia of the violence of colonisation. Newtown was once upon a time ghetto for the rich, then a ghetto for the poor, more recently for gay and lesbian people, increasingly a cultivated enclave for the privileged service classes. What else is new? Beneath each successive stage remains the destruction wrought by colonial invasion on Aboriginal Australia; bemoaning the loss of Newtown as colonial artefact seems hardly the way to account for the complex histories of human interaction invested in physical space.

A richer response to the mutually generative relationship between self and place in Australian society is expressed in Alex Miller's essay, reflecting at once the viewpoint of a (fairly) recent arrival to Australia (from England) and of an artist. Miller's ongoing dialogue with Australia as place *and* space is all the more meaningful because he neither mythologises Indigenous cultures nor reduces mainstream Australia to a cultural desert in the way that even much of the writing by other recent immigrants does. At the heart of Miller's *Journey to the Stone Country* (2001), the writing of which the essay addresses, is an implication that 'New' or 'recent' arrivals would do well to consider also their own role in the ongoing processes of spatial and cultural transformation that frequently reaffirm the dispossession of Indigenous Australians. That may not be easy, for often they are reacting to what they see as White Australia's inability to accept them for who they are, but it should be the price of admission and enjoyment of a country that remains remarkably generous with its offer of a place to many and sundry. How one lets go of feelings of fear and alienation is crucial to Australians' sense of belonging, and equally to the nation's ability to make amends for the wrongs of the past. The essays collected in *Australia: Making Space Meaningful* constitute a significant intervention in this process.