

Russell West-Pavlov: *Imaginary Antipodes. Essays on Contemporary Australian Literature and Culture.* Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2011, pp. 238, EUR 31.00. ISBN 978-3-8253-5925-6. **Reviewed by Oliver Haag,** University of Edinburgh.

The study on Australia has never been an entirely Australian affair, despite the circumstance that Australian Studies is still often practised in a national frame. The increasing number of 'outsiders', especially Europeans, North Americans and, of late, Indians and Sri Lankans, are a clear sign for a shift from a purely national to an increasingly transnational practice of Australian Studies. Despite this tendency, it is still difficult for 'outsiders' to establish an academic reputation *within* Australia. This is not merely of consequence for individual academic careers but also has an impact on theoretical and methodological development. After all, challenging theories have seldom emerged out of national studies but rather out of cross-national engagement between networks of globally located scholars. Good scholarship knows to look behind categories – be they national, racial or gendered – yet not to confirm them. From this perspective, studies on particular nations, practised within concepts such as Australian, Canadian and New Zealand Studies – are always prone to re-establish the hidden yet powerful narrative of the nation. This is not to delegitimize Australian Studies but to stress the need to render visible the underlying concept of the nation instead of further nationalising its practice.

Imaginary Antipodes is a fresh and intellectually innovative approach to this dilemma: it is concerned with *Australian* literature and culture but conceives them as imagined from within and outside, thus not falling into the trap of confirming a national narrative of literature and culture. The book is a collection of previously published essays and articles which span almost fifteen years of West-Pavlov's writing, mainly done in Germany. It has four main themes which are interrelated: the production of

Indigenous literature with a focus on the textual construction of its white readers; white settler identities; the identities of immigrant groups and finally global imaginations of Australian culture and literature. The author also reflects on his own position as a white expat academic in Germany and the influence of this (decidedly trans-national) position on his writing about Australia.

The strongest part of the book is perhaps the last section on the translation of Australian literature. It discusses the usefulness and limitations of the concept of *Weltliteratur* in the context of Australian literature and - drawing on a preliminary bibliography of approximately 3,000 German translations of Australian literature - rightly argues for empirical research on the processes of translation (although the list of translated Indigenous literature is incomplete as recent publications in this area have shown). It also identifies areas for future research, an ambitious endeavour which hopefully serves as an incentive for scholarship - including bibliographies of translations and systematic studies on the processes of translation, publishing policies and reading practices. Clearly, as this chapter cogently argues, the field of translated Australian literature in a transnational world calls for collaborative, cross-national and decidedly multidisciplinary research: Literary and Translation Studies scholars as well as historians, sociologists and political scientists can all find a promising and almost endless field of research. It can only be hoped that scholars will respond to this incentive.

There are, however, a few shortcomings which are chiefly a matter of homogenising complex categories. One relates to the production processes of Aboriginal writing. Drawing on Colin Johnson's/ Mudrooroo's writing on Aboriginal Australian literature, which is fundamentally dichotomist, the author writes:

Aboriginal authorship has been elided by anthropologists passing the indigenous storyteller's name under the anonymous label of the 'native informant' and replacing it with their own. Traditional oral narratives have been recast by white writers in a flat prose which eliminates the context of the narration, its relationship with

the land, and reduces indigenous tradition to children's stories reciting 'primitive' platitude. (24-25)

It is astonishing why the author has chosen to follow Mudrooroo in his critique of white appropriation of Aboriginal texts, not least because the rest of his book is a cogent argument for why oppositions do not work. Clearly, the co-production of Aboriginal texts, especially autobiographies and biographies, has not been a simple replacement of Aboriginal authorship as with William Ramsay Smith's plagiarism of David Unaipon's work, for one. For all the justified critique of cross-cultural literary production of Aboriginal texts, the positive sides of this collaboration should not be underestimated and neither should the agency of Aboriginal authors who have successfully demonstrated that they, too, have been successfully appropriating 'white' genres and forms.

Another problematic opposition is the implicit homogenisation of Europe:

unlike much briefer episodes of hegemony and genocide at a continental scale, such as the ten-year Nazi domination of Europe, settler nations have been in place for several centuries and cannot possibly be dislodged. Any re-assertion of native title, or, more radically, re-establishment of indigenous sovereignty, must be negotiated within the framework of existing settler sovereignty, even if it is to radically question that latter sovereignty. (15)

Phases of hegemony were seen as brief in European History as this text suggests: the expulsion of the Sudeten Germans, people's loss of lands throughout the various forcible mass migrations in European History, issues of Sámi sovereignty in Scandinavia or tensions over sovereignty in the Basque and Catalan Territories are just a few instances for the diversity of European experiences which are at times perhaps closer to those of settler societies than West-Pavlov suggests. And even if they are not: oppositions are simply too limited and negate the complexity of historical realities.

Apart from these minor problematic aspects, *Imaginary Antipodes* is an excellent study with every potential to serve as a reference work for future studies. Everyone with a passion for transnational approaches to Australian Studies should read this book - and everyone wishing to embark on further studies should use it as a rich source of research questions, trends and themes.
