

Katrin Althans

Dorothee Klein: Poetics and Politics of Relationality in Contemporary Australian Aboriginal Fiction

Abingdon: Routledge 2022. 213 pp. ISBN 978-0-367-65521-1. GBP 120,00

Dorothee Klein's recent study of novels by Australian Aboriginal¹ authors focuses on form and how "a detailed analysis of formal elements *enhances* our understanding of these narratives as decidedly *literary* interventions into current debates" (3). As such, it offers in-depth narratological analyses of seven novels by Australian Aboriginal writers published between 1999 and 2017. At the heart of Klein's study is the idea that "contemporary fiction by Australian Aboriginal writers is one medium that raises awareness of the importance and implications of being part of such networks of relations that span the human and non-human realm" (2). It is indeed this emphasis on the connections between the human and the non-human which guides Klein's analysis throughout the book and which is the focus of her understanding of relationality. She identifies "'a poetics of relationality'" (4), i.e., a particular way of storytelling that originates in Country, which is constitutive for Aboriginal narratives and can, according to Klein, best be understood by looking at form and narrative techniques. Due to her focus on form and narrative strategies, Klein uses the ideas of "New Formalism and contextualised narratologies" (7) as her point of departure but develops an innovative approach to relationality by combining and bringing into dialogue the ideas of Edouard Glissant and Jean-Luc Nancy with Aboriginal texts and onto-epistemologies (11). For her, "relationality [...] connotes the interconnectedness of all elements of the universe. It is decidedly multidimensional and not limited to human relations" (19). In the context of Aboriginal narratives, the relation to land and place necessarily looms large in this understanding of relationality – something which informs Klein's reading of the novels she discusses and to which she keeps returning in the different chapters of her book.

The novels Klein analyses in her book, and which also structure it, are 'Earth' (2001), by Bruce Pascoe, 'Benang' (1999) and 'That Deadman Dance' (2010) by Kim Scott, Tara June Winch's 'Swallow the Air' (2006), Alexis Wright's 'Carpentaria' (2006) and 'The Swan Book' (2013), and 'Taboo' (2017), again by Kim Scott. In each chapter, Klein singles out one particularly important aspect of the novel(s) she discusses, which emphasizes the versatility of Aboriginal writing in terms of relationality. In the first chapter, on Bruce Pascoe's 'Earth', Klein draws our attention to the dialogic form of the novel and its relational ambiguities: whereas

1 Throughout the book, Klein uses the preferred name of the group a writer or scholar identifies with but uses the term Aboriginal as a collective term when referring to members of the different Aboriginal groups of Australia in general and the terms Indigenous/indigenous when referring to indigenous populations worldwide.

the fact that it is written completely in dialogue suggests a non-hierarchical relationality, the novel nevertheless introduces hierarchies by transferring narrative authority to (non-human) Earth and the ancestors (28 f.). This, she writes, invests the land with narrative authority and “requires a rethinking of Western ideas of (narrative) authority” (30). Klein here highlights the “unfamiliar epistemology” (31) with which a western reader is confronted and which challenges traditional western acts of classification and categories. At this point, her reasoning, it seems, is too enthusiastic: although the Earth and ancestors do not feature as prominently in western epistemologies as they do in Aboriginal ones, we still find anthropomorphized characters who have narrative authority in western literary traditions, something Klein does not take into account in her reading of ‘Earth’. Still, Klein quite rightly observes that “the contradictory poetics of *Earth* [...] represents a culturally specific figure of non-literary, non-human authority rooted in Country” (45). The reader of her book, however, is left wondering if it is really on the level of form that the novel challenges western perspectives, or if it is rather on the level of content.

Klein’s reading and line of argument are much more convincing in the next chapter, chapter 2, in which she reads both ‘Benang’ and ‘That Deadman Dance’ by Kim Scott in terms of spatial instead of temporal plot structures. She starts with the observation that a range of critics have described the plot structures of both novels as “unusual” (51) and proposes to move beyond the western privileging of temporality to get a grip on the narratives. Instead, she turns to reading the novels with reference to songlines, or Dreaming tracks, in order to more fully understand those “unusual” plot structures. She here very persuasively argues for reading the novels’ plot structures as following a place-based poetics. This chapter is a very impressive addition to the nascent field of postcolonial narratology: it not only questions the validity of western-centric narratological tools, but also introduces non-western narratological characteristics into the discourse. Always reflecting on her own position as a white western academic, Klein here acknowledges the limits of her own understanding of both Aboriginal epistemologies in general and songlines in particular (52). This position of being cut off from vital knowledge she contextualizes by referring to Glissant’s idea of “opacity”. Her reflections remind us to always re-consider our own positions carefully and to not thoughtlessly impose western frameworks on non-western epistemologies and concepts.

Whereas the novels discussed in chapters 1 and 2 affirm Klein’s working definition of relationality, chapter 3 shows that Tara June Winch’s short story cycle ‘Swallow the Air’ takes a more ambiguous, “less celebratory” (86), stance towards relationality: as Klein demonstrates, in ‘Swallow the Air’, relationality “is the result of a relational and participatory engagement with others, including the land and sea” (90). This, however, includes a constant re-negotiation of relations that may well turn out to be in vain (93). In this chapter, Klein once more discusses genre classifications and argues that categorizing ‘Swallow the Air’ as a short story cycle is ambivalent. On the one hand, such a categorisation re-affirms western taxonomies. On the other hand, the central element which makes ‘Swallow the Air’ a song cycle, the interrelatedness of the different stories

collected in that volume, illustrates “the significance of collective relations for Indigenous women’s writing” (85). Klein’s own approach to academic writing in this chapter deserves a special mention here, as her “reading ... mirrors and reproduces the cycle’s central concern with fluidity by organically moving from one possible interpretation of a particular short story or passage to another” (86).

Klein’s focus in chapter 4, on Alexis Wright’s ‘Carpentaria’, is on deictic markers, especially spatial deixis (133). The entire narratological analysis of this chapter is very thoughtful and in-depth, but this kind of close-reading for narrative techniques leaves me wondering about the de-colonization of the narratological toolbox itself: whereas in chapter 2, Klein offers a most convincing example of how western narratological ideas are undermined, in this chapter, she very much depends on both linguistic and narratological concepts developed and enunciated by western academics without questioning this dependence. I will happily admit that the issue of developing entirely new narratological and linguistic toolboxes is way beyond the scope of any study which focuses on literary representations and unquestionably not something a western academic should attempt – still, I expected to read a brief acknowledgement of this difficulty, especially so since it so readily lends itself to a reading framed by the idea of opacity in the sense of Glissant.

Another novel by Alexis Wright is at the centre of chapter 5, ‘The Swan Book’. Here, Klein once again draws attention to an unfortunate lack in scholarship, “the absence of an explicitly postcolonial intertextual theory” (141). To overcome this lack, Klein proposes to understand intertextuality in a postcolonial context as “a dynamic, non-hierarchical relationship between texts and its various inter-texts (including non-literary ones)” (142). By embedding intertextuality within her framework of relationality, she emphasizes its non-hierarchical nature, which is a very clever ploy indeed, as she does explicitly not maintain the centre-periphery binary, something the writing-back paradigm has been accused of. For Klein, it is the communal aspect which is conveyed through intertextual, and thus relational, references, and in her analyses she in great detail shows the extent to which “the Aboriginal text [becomes] the determining framework” for any intertextual references (160).

In the final chapter, Klein returns to Kim Scott, this time analysing his most recent novel ‘Taboo’. Again, the focus is on “the notion of stories abiding in place” (166), but also on language. Although this, at first sight, may seem repetitive – Klein herself concedes that we find the same techniques in ‘Taboo’ as she had already discussed in the previous chapters (180) – we find them dressed in entirely different clothes: we find different intertextualities, e.g., references to fairy tales and the Gothic, as well as a different premise, that of “a deeply rooted co-existence” (167).

Klein’s book is a welcome addition to the field of Australian Aboriginal Studies, as it offers both very detailed formal analyses of contemporary Aboriginal novels and much food for thought on the de-colonization of the critical toolboxes used in literary studies. At times these detailed analyses are simply overwhelming, but Klein’s very pointed findings more than make up for this.

There are, however, two issues which struck me as odd and slightly dissatisfying: for one, she introduces a whole new issue in her conclusion, one she has admittedly hinted at in the analytical chapters, but which she pursues in full in the conclusion only: the relationality of the reader. This distracts from the closure of the book, as it opens up an entirely new aspect instead of offering only a glimpse of future research possibilities. Secondly, I was surprised that Klein does not include a more detailed analysis of oral storytelling in her discussions of narrative techniques. In individual chapters, Klein mentions oral storytelling in passing but does not discuss its peculiarities in relation to the formal elements she identifies in the novels. This is all the more remarkable since reading those formal elements within the framework of oral storytelling instead of in the framework of a narratology of writing would have given her the opportunity to shift the frame of reference towards an Aboriginal centre even more.

As a whole, however, Klein's study is a very well-researched discussion which posits contemporary Australian Aboriginal literature within the broader framework of relationality by drawing our attention to its relation to land and Country. By focusing on form, Klein adds a valuable addition to the emerging fields of postcolonial narratology and intertextuality, one which steers away from western-centric origins and instead embraces non-western traditions. Always reflecting on her own position, Klein does not appropriate Aboriginal perspectives for her own ends, but respectfully presents her reading of how form is used to convey the relationality of stories and place in Aboriginal onto-epistemologies. As such, her study shows the ways in which Aboriginal literature contributes to current debates about Indigenous sovereignty and how it asks us "to engage with the notion of an inclusive relationality" (202).