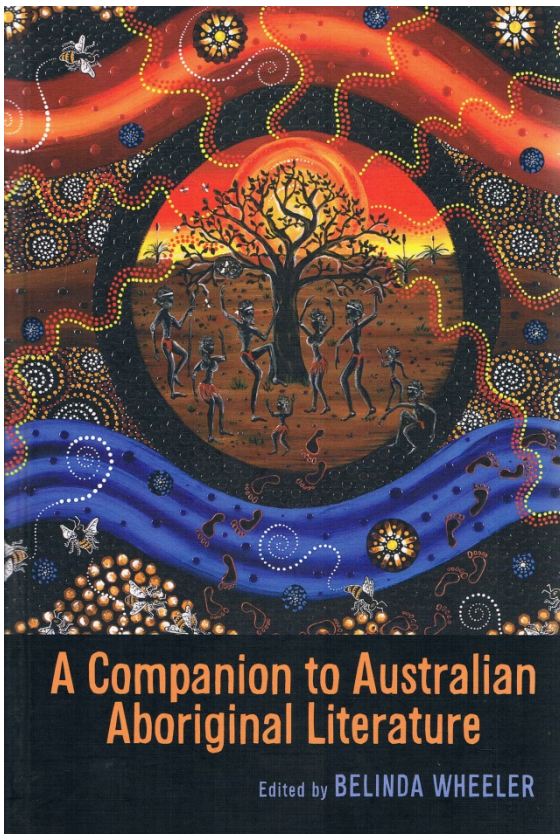


## REZENSIONEN / REVIEWS

**Belinda Wheeler, ed., *A Companion to Australian Aboriginal Literature*. Rochester NJ: Camden House, 2013. 216 + xx pp. ISBN-13: 978-1-57113-521-6. EUR 25.00**  
**Reviewed by Kerstin Knopf, University of Bremen, Germany.**



This book is a valuable asset to every library focusing on Indigenous Studies in general and Australian Aboriginal Studies in particular. It offers a comprehensive overview of Australian Aboriginal literature from its beginnings in print up to the present with a focus on a variety of topics and genres, including life writing, songpoetry, (young) adult fiction, gothic texts, drama, film and popular music. The book itself is aesthetically very enjoyable, with a beautiful painting on the cover mixing different Aboriginal artistic styles (it would

have been nice to get information on the artist and title), a superb (copy)editing, a pleasant font, and general handling. The editor provides a very helpful twelve page-chronology of Australian Aboriginal history and a ten-page index.

This book is an important and necessary contribution to scholarly texts on Australian Aboriginal literature and other creative expression, which are still rather scarce with the exception of a few books by Adam Shoemaker (*Black Words, White Page: Aboriginal Literature 1929-88*), Mudrooroo Narogin (*Writing from the Fringe: A Study of Modern Aboriginal Literature*), Esosa Osaghae (*Mythic*

*Reconstruction: The Study of Australian Aboriginal and South African Literature*), Eva Rask Knudsen (*The Circle & the Spiral: A Study of Australian Aboriginal and New Zealand Maori Literature*), Katherine E. Russo (*Practices of Proximity: The Appropriation of English in Australian Indigenous Literature*) and Beate Neumeier and Kay Schaffer (*Decolonizing the Landscape: Indigenous Cultures in Australia*) in print. It appears that after these and Wheeler's book, which contains only one article by an Aboriginal author, scholarship on Aboriginal literature needs critical studies done by Aboriginal scholars in Australia and elsewhere.

In her introduction, Belinda Wheeler gives an informative overview of Aboriginal history in relation to the development of Australian Aboriginal literature as well as a passage guiding readers through the eleven single chapters.

Much attention is given to Aboriginal life writing – three chapters, all of which, however, with a different focus. In an excellent first chapter, Michael Griffiths reads Aboriginal life writing as syncretic practice, an act of preservation and transformation of tradition, criticising colonialism and fulfilling the task of community and kinship connection. He provides a detailed history of Aboriginal life writing in stages from colonial presentation of Aboriginal lives and collaborative texts to decolonial self-representation and discusses texts by Sally Morgan, Doris Pilkington Garimara and Angus Wallam. Embedded in sound theoretical approaches, Griffiths analyses Aboriginal life writing as embodying Aboriginal notions of 'life' and the 'human subject', blurring the Eurocentric binary of *poēsis* and *praxis* and countering biopolitical practices, such as assimilation, eugenics, population management and destruction of kinship systems. He writes: "By drawing together and restoring kinship and community with self and individual Aboriginal lived experience, Aboriginal life writing challenges the colonial biopolitical notion of life and insists on the maintenance of a concept of kinship and belonging vested in country" (19-20).

Jennifer Jones critically examines life writing collaborations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal authors. She offers a comprehensive history of Aboriginal life writing and such collaborations, including fine summaries and background information on many autobiographical texts. She then ventures into a careful analysis of cross-cultural cooperations of Charles Perkins, Margaret Tucker, Monica Clare, and Ella Simmon with non-Aboriginal editors, with varying degrees of mutual understanding and editorial interference. Jones looks at the changes being made to the original texts as well as the copyright violations that occurred in a neocolonial publishing industry. She even includes original oral and printed versions of single passages of Ella Simmon's text in order to illustrate the interference of white editorship and reorientation of Aboriginal texts that should "meet the projected needs of white, middle-class audiences" (49).

A different, decolonial, type of collaboration in the production of life writing is discussed by Martina Horáková: intergenerational collaborations. Providing an overview of the most important texts, the author outlines the manner of collaboration in extended families in which a "younger member typically records, transcribes, writes, and edits orally transmitted life stories of his or her community elders, relatives, or even entire families and clans" (54). Both analysed texts, Rita and Jackie Huggins' *Auntie Rita* and Kim Scott and Hazel Brown's *Kayang and Me*, are 'classic' as-told-to texts. Yet they radically digress from this subgenre by including a dialogic double voice of the teller and interlocutor presenting both subjective perspectives on the story of an Aboriginal life. The intergenerational dialogue brings out two distinct voices, two different positions in Australian history and society and two different modes of speaking of the elder and younger, university-educated researcher and family member. This technique also makes the gaps and silences of an autobiographical text more obvious – for example, the silence about the cruel regime in native settlements.

Danica Čerče and Oliver Haag deliver an eye-opening chapter on the translation of popular Aboriginal texts into European languages such

as German, Italian, Dutch and Slovene. Concentrating on the seminal *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (Doris Pilkington Garimara) and *My Place* (Sally Morgan), they provide concrete text passages in English, the translation and a translation back into English. Through this excellent move, they expose the gaps between the English versions, give a sense of the contortions of the original meaning of certain phrases and draw attention to lexical translation issues, the missing colloquial style of the original text or the vanquishing of the oral character of a text passage. At times, Australian particularities such as 'vegemite' and the meaning of 'native settlement' get lost, or racist terminology and notions are introduced into the text translations. We also get examples of rather good translations – in general, however, "one of the gravest problems in the European translations" (86) is the loss of information on colonial history and Aboriginal culture. In his chapter on Aboriginal songpoetry, Stuart Cooke offers an enlightening discussion of the characteristics of traditional oral songpoetry and its performance before exploring this traditional heritage in contemporary Aboriginal poetry, e.g. Paddy Roe's *Gularabulu* (1983) and Lionel Fogarty's poetry. Oral poetry characteristics appear in modern texts, for example, through complex rhythms and repetition, cross-parallel phrasing, Aboriginal polyphony, dynamic movement and performative, multimedia semiotics.

With the example of John Muk Muk Burke's *Bridge of Triangles*, Melissa Lukashenko's *Steam Pigs* and Tara June Winch's *Swallow the Air*, Jeanine Leane offers rewarding discussions of young adult fiction – from an inside perspective, as she is an award-winning writer of Aboriginal young adult fiction as well. The Aboriginal Bildungsroman, according to her, brings to attention issues of identity construction, belonging, searching for a sense of place and other struggles of Aboriginal protagonists in complex (urban) settings. The novels challenge stereotyping, individual and structural racism and socially determinist views of Aboriginal people borne out through the characters' encounters with Australian society. Moving to adult fiction, Paula Anca Farca scrutinises humour in Aboriginal literature. Humor has sustained and helped Indigenous peoples throughout the

world to survive, deal with and overcome settler colonialism and its destructive impact on various aspects of Aboriginal life, cultures, social connections and economies. Novels by Vivienne Cleven, Gayle Kennedy, Marie Munkara and Anita Heiss closely look at women's and young adults' lives and complicate race relations by focusing on discrimination and violence based on gender, sexual orientation and age, including pointed criticism of representatives of Catholicism. Beneath the witticism, irony, parody and sarcasm lies a harsh critique of physical abuse and violence perpetrated by the settler regime as well as the damaging physical and psychological effects of stereotypes and determinist views that is transported with thought-provoking effect through humour.

Embedded in a discussion of European and Australian Gothic literature, Katrin Althans analyses gothic Aboriginal literature that turns the tables on the Gothic's demonizing abuse of Aboriginal culture by reversing colonial binaries, exposing gothic realities of everyday life and emphasizing subversive and transgressive elements. Man-eating beasts and vampire-like beings from Aboriginal Maban reality invade white Australian space, as much as a white vampire's attacks and infection of Aboriginal people serve to illustrate the settler colonial regime and its destructive impact. The pursued innocent maidens in the Gothic transform into raped and murdered Aboriginal women in the basement of a judge's home, and a murderer is compared to a perpetrator of the Myall Creek Massacre. The Kadaitcha and the mythical Red Feathers avenge unlawful deeds and actions against the wellbeing of Aboriginal society as much as blood-chilling ghosts manifest repressed settler colonialism, haunting the texts. Althans writes: "the Gothic tradition in Aboriginal literature turns to the many white shadows Australian history has attached to the life and experience of its Aboriginal people" (152).

Maryrose Casey engages with Aboriginal performance and drama, from first cultural shows performed for European settlers to a wealth of plays, starting in the 1970s, written and performed according to European theatre traditions as well as syncretic mixtures. She also

outlines the work of Aboriginal theatre companies and concentrates on monodramas, discussing a variety of plays that focus on consequences of the Stolen Generation policy, rural and urban experience, cultural clashes and tensions, homelessness, slave practices, poverty, violence and stereotypical notions. In an excellent chapter on Aboriginal Australian film, Theodore Sheckels outlines seminal non-Aboriginal films that deal with the Stolen Generations before entering into a discussion of the films and their critical contextualization of the Stolen Generations policy by two most influential Aboriginal filmmakers: Tracey Moffatt and Rachel Perkins. Also including information on their career and general work, Sheckels sees these films (mainly *Night Cries* and *Radiance*) partly as Aboriginal answers to non-Aboriginal films such as *Jedda*, *Rabbit-Proof Fence* and *Australia*, and as more effective in their indirect telling of the Stolen Generations story. Specifically *Radiance* speaks to white males' sexual exploitation of, and gender violence against, Aboriginal women that produced mixed-blood children that were taken away. In concert with Moffatt's unconventional short film *Night Cries*, Perkin's musical film *One Night the Moon* radically deviates from established feature film conventions, both films showing much influence from art, photography and music, engaging symbolic and metaphorical images, stark colors, songs contributing to the narration and the unconventional placement of song with sometimes jarring effects.

Finally, Andrew King provides an insightful outline of the history of popular Aboriginal music in three stages: the 1950s and 60s, the 1970s and 80s, and contemporary music starting in the 1990s. King connects an overview over the general development of the Aboriginal music industry, including music festivals, award shows like The Deadlys and radio and television as outlets with specific looks at seminal musicians. These are musicians in the areas of opera (Harold Blair), jazz (Georgia Lee), rock (No Fixed Address, Warumpi Band), reggae (No Fixed Address), music including traditional song and instruments (Yothu Yindi), R&B (Shakaya) and Hip Hop (MC Wire, Downsyde). Aboriginal music, he says, became increasingly political, specifically the rock bands, speaking about

sovereignty, land rights and political struggles. He also outlines personal struggles of the musicians, dealing at times with racism, police harassment and contempt as well as the major impact of some songs such as "Jailanguru Pakarnu", "Treaty" and "My Island Home", which, performed by Christine Anu at the 2000 Sydney Olympics closing ceremony, has now developed into "an anthem about Australia and an affirmation of Indigenous identity" (193).

This edition, looking at oral poetry, life writing, (young) adult fiction, gothic texts, drama, film and music indeed engages with different text forms and genres of Aboriginal literature. And yet from a companion to Australian Aboriginal literature one would have also expected a full-fledged discussion of seminal novels of the past two decades, such as Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*, Kim Scott's *Benang* and *That Deadman Dance* and Nicole Watson's *The Boundary*. This input is wanted and could be part of a revised edition of this elegant and fine scholarly book.