

Linda Westphalen: *An Anthropological and Literary Study of Two Australian Aboriginal Women's Life Histories. The Impacts of Enforced Child Removal and Policies of Assimilation.*

Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2012. ISBN 978-0-7734-1593-5. 452 pp. USD 49.95.

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It is rare that a cover illustration reflects so well the content of an academic study as in this case. Knowledge buried deep in earth, uncovered in a cross-sectional view as consisting of layers of different books. Linda Westphalen's study unearths such layers in published Aboriginal life histories. Her central argument runs that Aboriginal life histories follow their origin in discourse of Dreaming and re-connection with Country, thus constituting an Aboriginal practice of documenting histories and cultural narratives rather than emanating from a European tradition of documenting individualised trajectories. Aboriginal life histories, Westphalen contends, are

more than personal histories but interweaving with wider contexts of inter-generational story-telling and identity structures relating to Country, hence the author's preference to designate Aboriginal life writing as life histories rather than autobiographies, the latter associating them with European literary traditions and genre conventions.

This book challenges the view to consider Aboriginal life histories a European genre. Although scholarship has applied more than ten different genre categories to Aboriginal life histories, the question of a sovereign Aboriginal intellectual origin of this genre has not been rigorously addressed so far (Moreton-Robinson 2000:1; Haag 2011: 69-72). The continuity between so-called traditional story-telling and contemporary life histories counts among one of the most difficult

fields in Indigenous literary studies. Not only does it cover an array of different issues – including the continuity of form, content and style – but it is also complicated by various modes of both pre-contact and contemporary story-telling. Next to this, there are also two highly political questions relating to the issue of continuity. On the one hand, there is a discourse claiming that urban, so-called assimilated Aboriginal people would have lost their traditions, such as the links to their Dreamings and languages, and would therefore be lacking of cultural differences from settler society. On the other hand, there is a conservative discourse striving to represent and maintain Aboriginal communities and cultures as pristine as possible. Indicative of this is a fear of alien genres falsifying Indigenous knowledge and authenticity (Narogin 1990:14). In the light of assimilation policies, cultural conservatism did indeed help immensely in cultural survival. Yet at its most extreme, this view also runs the risk of disregarding Aboriginal literary cultures as fluid, living and innovative.

Westphalen is aware of these thorny discourses and does not try to negate European influences on published life histories but to detect their strong, yet often erased Aboriginal genealogical background, hence the palimpsest metaphor employed in her study. Focussing on the life histories of Ruby Langford Ginibi (Bundjalung Nation, NSW) and Alice Nannup (Yindjibarndi Nation, WA), she uncovers three major features indicating that Ruby Langford Ginibi's and Alice Nannup's stories were emanating from the discourses of the Dreamings (17, 77, 229, 243-244). First, they had the same underlying *intentions* as Dreamings, that is, education, connecting people with each other and their lands, and identification with the past (92-101); second, just as Dreamings are stories of the *creation* of landscape, so are the authors (re)creating landscape in a colonised space. Thus, the self-creation, how an author has survived invasion as an Indigenous person, has a parallel in creation stories (30-32, 100). Third, the process of story-telling, Westphalen's argument runs in this way, can be considered a form of *journey*, thus resembling creation movements (101-103). These journeys could be either real movements, as in the frequent theme of re-joining with the ancestral lands, or virtual movements, in the sense that both reader and author undertake a journey through story-telling (104).

Westphalen's arguments are well-considered and provide an innovative view to decipher the Aboriginal origin in life history texts. These texts are different from European conventions of the autobiography and, so the author furthers, need to be theorised according to Aboriginal intellectual discourses in order to be understood in their proper context, including history, re-connection with Country and genealogy. Aboriginal life histories are indeed not only histories in their own right but also distinct documents of cultural change, innovation and adaptation. With the palimpsest metaphor, Westphalen has devised a useful theoretical framework to understanding individual Aboriginal women's life histories in Aboriginal intellectual contexts. *An Anthropological and Literary Study of Two Australian Aboriginal Women's Life Histories* indeed lives up to Westphalen's strident critique of Eurocentric approaches to studies of Aboriginal literature.

The only problematic reading experience relates to the terminology. The term 'First Nation' is employed to refer to Indigenous people outside of Australia, but this is explained only on page 46, resulting in a confusion when reading about the differences between 'Aboriginal' and 'First Nation' discourses in the First Chapter. This could have been remedied by explanation of the differences in meaning between these terms right at the beginning of the book. Apart from this minor critique, Westphalen's analysis is a culturally sensitive and intriguing read which can be highly recommended as a guide for practicing research on Aboriginal life histories – or however this complex genre is called.

Works Cited

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