

Beate Neumeier, Boris Braun, Victoria Herche (Eds.)

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Nature and Environment in Australia

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Cover image: 'Meet and Greet' with protesters at Manari Rd corner.

Photo by Carsten Wergin, 2012.

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For the cover image we credit Carsten Wergin’s 2012 photography in conjunction with his contribution to this volume.

This acknowledgement pays respect to the traditional owners, past and present, and the continuing cultural practices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

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Nature and Environment in Australia: An Introduction

Beate Neumeier, Boris Braun, and Victoria Herche

1. Nature and Environmental Concerns

The cover image of this volume relates to the long battle over mining the rich natural resources in the Kimberley region in Western Australia. It captures the resistance against plans of Woodside Petroleum to build a 45-billion Australian dollar natural gas facility “on top of an Indigenous heritage site” at Walmadany/James Price Point on the Dampier Peninsula north of Broome (Wergin, in this volume). The photo, taken by Carsten Wergin in 2012, captures the unwavering persistence of this struggle with the campsite table and chairs, pots and cups in the foreground promising information and inviting conversation, and the tent in the background signalling sustained presence and determination. The catchphrases on the poster and on the banners displayed in the trees insist on the interconnectedness of issues in their local and global dimensions, stressing the links between the fight for “sav[ing] James Price Point from Woodside’s gas hub” and the continuous battle against “ecocide, ethnocide and genocide”. The banner’s motto “songlines are living heritage” emphasizes the inseparability of the political and the cultural struggle over the land stretching back into the past and forward into the future.

The plans for the project, initially proposed by Woodside Ltd. in 2006, provoked protests, which gained nation-wide publicity, and eventually led to a successful cancellation of the endeavour in 2013. However, the withdrawal of the company from the site did not end the struggle over natural resources in the area, but is extended to the use of fracking. Beyond its immediate context, the cover image also evokes the longer history of conflict over mining in the wider Kimberley area, which began in the late 1970s and culminated in 1980 when the exploration company AMAX started drilling for oil at Noonkanbah about 100 km southwest of Fitzroy Crossing on sacred sites of the Yunggora community. When the police stepped in, the protesters “blocking the path of the drilling rigs . . . [according to witnesses] started to sing while they were carted off to jail” (Bamford). While the drilling was eventually only stopped because no oil was found, “[t]he Noonkanbah dispute in Western Australia’s remote north put land rights on the national agenda and led to the foundation of the Kimberley Land Council”, which was instrumental in the recognition of Native Title over the land in 2007 (Bamford). Just now, in 2018, the national Native Title conference in Broome commemorated this protest, alerting to the ongoing battle of “40 years since Aboriginal protestors faced off against a convoy of police and miners to protect their sacred land” (Bamford).

These issues contained in the cover image recur in different ways in many contributions to this volume. In each contribution the global relevance of the local hi/story emerges as well as the necessity of a shift in perspective away from an anthropocentric split between human culture and natural environment in an age threatened by planetary degradation and destruction. The key terms of the title of this volume, “nature and environment”, invite inter- and transdisciplinary reflections in different but interrelated contexts at the intersection of the humanities and the social sciences. The contributions are based on presentations given at the biennial conference of the German Association for Australian Studies in 2016 at the University of Cologne, organized as a joint venture by colleagues from the English and the Geography departments. The wide scope of the volume includes contributions from anthropological (and ethnographic), historical, geographical (and urbanistic), as well as legal, linguistic, literary and media perspectives, highlighting the productive intersections between these different approaches. The overall goal is to show their inseparability in the concerted efforts to meet the environmental challenges of our time.

The specific situation of Australia in the context of the current global environmental crisis is connected to the effects of climate change in relation to the post/colonial destruction of the ecological balance through interventions in fauna and flora and the exploitation of natural resources. The nexus between ecocide and genocide is thus at the core of Australian postcolonial ecocriticism (Huggan and Tiffin), laying bare the links between and persistence of the ongoing histories of colonization, globalization and environmental destruction. The resistance against the continued destruction of ecological, social and cultural structures, which are most devastating for Indigenous communities, is of paramount concern in the contributions to this volume. In this context the increasing recognition of Indigenous knowledge systems on a global scale as alternative ways to conceive of the relation between the human and the non-human or other-than-human world can be read as a necessary corrective to the prevailing anthropocentric perspective, but can also imply forms of neocolonial appropriation. Hence, the exploration of Indigenous perspectives on nature and environment requires an “ethical dialogue between Indigenous knowledge systems and non-Indigenous people facing a shared and uncertain future in times of ecological crisis” (Neale and Vincent 426) and a concomitant revision of homogenizing notions of Indigeneity in terms of situatedness, diversity and hybridity without flattening out differences.

Three interrelated sections of chapters address the wide scope of concerns about nature and environment on the Australian continent: The first section centres on a broad range of historical and geographical issues and their political and ethical implications; the second section explores their legal and linguistic implications in relation to Indigenous cultures and languages; the third section investigates the negotiation of matters of nature and environment across different literary and art media, with a particular focus on the novel, on poetry and on the performing arts. In all three interrelated sections a main focus is on Indigenous cultures in Australia as they have been most destructively affected by the impact of post/colonial history.