

Book Reviews

Belinda Wheeler, editor. *A Companion to Australian Aboriginal Literature*. Camden House, 2015. Pp. xxiv, 240. US\$34.95.

In the last two decades, several notable anthologies and important critical studies of Aboriginal literature have been published. Yet *A Companion to Australian Aboriginal Literature*, the collection of essays edited by Belinda Wheeler, is the first book to offer a comprehensive study of what Wheeler's introduction presents as a still emerging canon. *A Companion to Australian Aboriginal Literature* acknowledges that accessibility to material produced by Aboriginal authors remains, for historical reasons of social and cultural marginalisation, limited. It is important to note that "literature" in the context of the collection's title must not be understood conventionally, in the sense of written works of art, but in a broader sense that includes a whole range of oral, visual, musical, and performative forms of expression. As writer and scholar Nicolas Jose puts it in the foreword to the volume, "Aboriginal literature has its own traditions, modes, and rhetoric," and as such should be "respected and valued on its own terms" (viii). At the same time, he insists that Aboriginal literature's capacity to "cross boundaries" and "share its making communally" (viii) enables it to reach out to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous audiences around the world and encourage a more generous form of cultural dialogue. Jose and Wheeler both highlight the political commitment that is almost always involved in the production of Aboriginal literature. As the collection's essays show, Aboriginal art bears witness to the violence inflicted upon the Indigenous peoples of Australia since the beginning of colonisation (unlawful killings, land-theft, economic and sexual abuse, the forced removal of children, discrimination and neglect), but it also expresses Aboriginal resilience, creativity, and the refusal to conform to stereotypical definitions of "black" indigeneity.

Although several of the essays highlight the intermedial poetics that characterize Australian Aboriginal literature thus defined, the collection implicitly abides by a generic approach. The first four contributions deal with the production, editing, and translation of "life writing" (personal narratives, autobiographical accounts), which has become the most emblematic genre of Aboriginal writing. Historically, as Michael Griffiths and Jennifer Jones show, collaborations between Aboriginal tellers and non-indigenous editors were often fraught with misappropriation and misunderstanding, but more recent

works are able to establish mutually respectful dialogues between Aboriginal elders who experienced colonial violence first-hand and their university-educated descendants, acting as editors. In their enlightening study of European translations of Aboriginal life-writing, Danica Čerče and Oliver Haag reveal how translators' lexical and editorial choices can betray unexpected but deep-rooted prejudices. Since all four contributions are well documented and researched, it is surprising that the reader must wait until the third essay (Martina Horakova's particularly thought-provoking "Contemporary Life Writing: Inscribing Double Voice in Intergenerational Collaborative Life-Writing Projects") for a formal definition of a genre that is so important within the Aboriginal canon.

The novel is the second most extensively studied genre in the collection, with three essays devoted to it. Jeanine Leane's "Rites/Rights/Writes of Passage" focuses on identity construction in young adult fiction, arguing that it "serves as a counterdiscourse to the colonial positioning of Aboriginals as primitive, exotic, lazy, simple, and isolated" (122). In "Humor in Contemporary Aboriginal Adult Fiction," Paula Anca Farca studies how female Aboriginal novelists resort to humour and satire (though the differences between the two modes are not made very clear) to counter negative stereotypes of Aboriginality. Although the generic distribution of the contributions in the collection does not encourage it, an interesting parallel could perhaps be drawn between Farca's study of the work of female novelists and Theodore F. Sheckels' analysis of the "strategy of indirection or insinuation" (183) used by film directors Tracy Moffatt and Rachel Perkins to approach the issue of the *Stolen Generations*. In "The Gothic Tradition in Australian Aboriginal Literature," Katrin Althans shows how Aboriginal novelists reverse conventional Gothic roles in order to reveal the "Gothic reality" (151) of colonial narratives. The other four essays in the collection deal with film, poetry, drama, and indigenous pop music. Stuart Cooke's "Tracing a Trajectory from Songpoetry to Contemporary Aboriginal Poetry" offers an enlightening analysis of the performative and intermedial nature of contemporary Aboriginal poetry, the radical modernity of which remains securely rooted in the cultural heritage of traditional oral Aboriginal poetry. In "Bold, Black, and Brilliant: Aboriginal Australian Drama," Maryrose Casey picks up on both the idea of intermediality also associated with poetry and on the importance of humour, which pays tribute to Aboriginal people's strength and endurance in the face of colonial cruelty. All the contributions in the book highlight the way in which Aboriginal literature seeks to engage with contemporary audiences, but the closing essay is the most encouraging of the collection: Andrew King's "A History of Popular Indigenous Music" shows how Indigenous musicians

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like Christine Anu and the Yothu Yindi band members have been integrated into the Australian mainstream without, however, having to give up the knowledge, experiences, and memories that are central to their Aboriginal Australian identities.

This is a valuable collection for scholars, students, and general—particularly non-Australian—readers, as it provides a wealth of information on a wide range of artists whose work is not always readily available. On the same note, the detailed chronology featured at the beginning of the book gives the reader a useful overview of the colonial policies aimed at Aboriginals and the increasing political and cultural recognition achieved by Indigenous Australians in the last decades. Although it is easy to understand why the editor of the collection chose not to begin the chronology with the arrival of the first Europeans, the reader may wonder why—in spite of existing archaeological data—a mere eight lines summarize 65,000 years of Aboriginal presence in Australia while some eleven pages are devoted to the three centuries since Contact and to the many awards won by Australian Aboriginals. But what the collection perhaps most successfully communicates are the complexities and unresolved social and political tensions that lie at the heart of the definition of Australian Aboriginality. Showcasing Aboriginal achievements in the chronology seems to stem from a desire to see the value of Aboriginal literature justly acknowledged, and this fact in turn proves how vitally important a collection such as this one is to defending and promoting the fields of Aboriginal Literature and Aboriginal Studies.

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