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A Companion to Australian Aboriginal Literature edited by Belinda Wheeler

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A Companion to Australian Aboriginal Literature edited by **BELINDA WHEELER**
Camden House, 2013 £50.00

Reviewed by **JOSÉ-CARLOS REDONDO-OLMEDILLA**

This rich presentation of Australian Aboriginal Literature offers a kind of accomplished comprehensive approach for *connoisseurs* and newcomers alike. It is an attempt to de-marginalize this cultural production and to make it more axial and core-like. In this sense the text behaves like a true *opus magnum* as it tries to articulate Aboriginal life and aspirations through contemporary productions. The foreword by Nicholas Jose reinstates and reinforces “Aboriginal creative expression in its capacity to cross boundaries” and presents the different array of materials set in the book as “collaborative interfaces” (VIII). It presents a new longing, recognizing that the study of Australian literature must start with Aboriginal literature.

In the well-structured introduction, Belinda Wheeler tackles the exciting issue of the canon. She pays attention to the important notion of the canon’s suppleness, but given equal space to issues of cultural reconciliation and how literature and culture can be interpreted as a loss waiting to be recovered, suggesting how writing might be deciphered as “a vehicle to overcome past injustices and start a healing process” (6).

In his chapter “Indigenous Life Writing: Rethinking Poetics and Practice,” Michael R. Griffiths recalls how westerners have taxonomized distinctions such as *poēsis* (making art) and *praxis* (ways of acting in the world and in the community) or the not so widely known distinction between the two words that the ancient Greeks had for life: *bios*, the form of socially conditioned, collective

and individuated life, and *zoē*, signifying the simple fact of living. This way of thinking has biased our interpretation of art and life. It is because of this that Griffiths contests and delegitimizes this vision. For him, Aboriginal life writing interprets *bios* in a more integrative way: it is both collective and individual and has more to do with “making life from and through community connections” (18), or it is neither and so challenges both *bios* and *zoē*. Griffiths demonstrates how Aboriginal life writing defies a “biopolitical notion of life” that was imported from the colonies by maintaining a concept of “kinship and belonging vested in country” (20).

In the second chapter, “Australian Aboriginal Life Writers and Their Editors: Cross-Cultural Collaboration, Authorial Intention, and the Impact of Editorial Choices,” Jennifer Jones traces the evolution of Aboriginal life writing as an accessible genre that “accommodates varying degrees of literacy” (36). One wonders if the editorial responses presented in the study, are more interested in presenting a romanticized version of the Aboriginal past as it is obvious that the approach taken by the different editors prioritizes some materials.

Chapter 3, “Contemporary Life Writing: Inscribing Double Voice in Intergenerational Collaborative Life-Writing Projects,” by Martina Horakova, reevaluates the prominence of subjectivity shifting and double voice in some Aboriginal autobiographies. This writing experience shows and teaches us that intergenerational Indigenous life writing, by enacting dual-voice narratives, presents a dissident character. But beware, this is not the kind of “Empire writes back” dissidence—it is beyond that, sometimes giving hybridized images

where we can find Aboriginal motherhood with modern urban experiences.

Chapter 4, “European Translations of Australian Aboriginal Texts,” co-written by Danica Čerče and Oliver Haag, analyzes the European reception of Aboriginal Literature. The authors work on German, Italian, Dutch, and Slovene translations of two texts to explore how teamwork from editors, authors, and publishing houses imperative for the authenticity of translated texts. It was André Lefevere in his work *Translating Literature: Practice and Theory in a Comparative Literature Context* who expressed the view that translators mediate between literary traditions, and that they do so with some goal in mind other than simply making the original available in a neutral, objective way. Čerče and Haag refresh some good old ideas and project them to the translation of Aboriginal Literature, aiming for a balance between comprehensibility and foreignness.

Extending care to poetry and song is dealt with in “Tracing a Trajectory from Songpoetry to Contemporary Aboriginal Poetry,” by Stuart Cooke. This chapter presents the basics of Aboriginal Songpoetry and adds core information on contemporary Aboriginal poetry. Cooke argues that “[l]iterary critics have seldom rigorously engaged with *oral* Aboriginal poetry, thereby failing to acknowledge the extensive Indigenous cultural heritage of contemporary Aboriginal writers” (89), even in spite of the fact that poets like Lionel Fogarty, Samuel Wagan Watson or Ali Cobby Eckerman have demonstrated exceptional poetic talent in recent times. Cooke’s study aims to link the poet’s voice with the written work, orality with written expression, and the performative quality of orality with the lived potentiality of the written text.

“Rites/Rights/Writes of Passage: Identity Construction in Australian

Aboriginal Young Adult Fiction,” by Jeanine Leane centers on the kind of transmigration that features in the change from adolescence to adulthood, through the work of three young fiction writers: John Muk Muk Burke, Melissa Lucashenko, and Tara June Winch. The two following essays, Paula Anca Farca’s “Humour in Contemporary Aboriginal Adult Fiction” and Katrin Althans’s “White Shadows: The Gothic Tradition in Australian Aboriginal Literature” are interesting representations of extended dialogues between these two facets of life, sometimes as counter-discursive spaces, but inextricably attached to the life, craft, and experience of Aboriginal peoples.

In “Bold, Black, and Brilliant: Aboriginal Australian Drama,” Maryrose Casey shows how drama still fills important functions in society, and how Aboriginal writers “faced a number of obstacles to break [the] silence” of Aboriginal voices in the Australian drama scene (156). Playwrights have a responsibility to represent a people and a history, but the prejudice to racialize and stereotype groups of people to conform to audience expectations can also be a real risk that writers must work hard to overcome.

The penultimate chapter “The ‘Stolen Generations’ in Feature Film: The Approach of Aboriginal Director Rachel Perkins and Others,” by Theodore F. Sheckels, illustrates the link (and some missing links) between Aboriginality and Australian cinema. The chapter takes stock of the complexity and richness of Aboriginal directors, especially focused on Rachel Perkins and Tracey Moffett. Sheckles argues that comparisons of the traditional Australian white Hollywood-like feature film with its Aboriginal counterpart illustrate striking aesthetic and political differences, but also

differences in the directness of the films. If Hollywood films are direct when offering a narrative, “indirection”—a label given by T. F. Sheckels herself—is key to understanding Aboriginal film narratives.

The essay that closes the book “A History of popular Indigenous Music,” by Andrew King, not only traces Indigenous music “across Australia for a wide range of audiences” (188), but reflects the kind of negotiation of changing degrees of “non-Indigenous criticism, patronage, and recognition” (187) explored throughout the text.

On the one hand, the book’s validity lies on its ranging over the present world context, one characterized by a maze of cultural diversity and by the global range of cultural production without ignoring the “refraction principle” of Australian Literature (Redondo-Olmedilla 41). On the other hand, the book reinforces and expands the canon of that momentous work, *The Anthology of Australian Aboriginal Literature* (2008) edited by Anita Heiss, Peter Minter, and Nicolas Jose. The added element is the new context and the continuous sense of abridgment with many cultural genres. *A Companion to Australian Aboriginal Literature* presents the value of analyzing kinship and the type of relationship between the oral traditions, rituals, and artwork of Australian Aboriginals and the westernized *melange* culture of our time. This is a book about indigenous culture, but it is also a book about cultural mating and fecundity, transgenerational collaboration, multiple voices echoing in our time, and the value of the collaborative impulse.

The contributors to this volume are “an international group of scholars” (2) including a number of fresh new voices in the field. But this freshness of scholarship is an asset and allows the text to address themes without atavistic fears.

The book taps into new trends in Literary Studies and, at times, goes one step further than postcolonial studies and well into transnational literary postcolonialism. *The Companion to Australian Aboriginal Literature* is not old style “self-punishing” postcolonial studies, but rather an analysis that goes beyond the level of nation and gathers momentum for a cultural continuum to be explored and rediscovered.

One criticism that could be made of the book is that it would benefit greatly from a digest of some maps, pictures, or other artistic material to balance and complement the rich and densely populated information in the book.

The Companion to Australian Aboriginal Literature is a work where Aboriginal culture is a catalyzing and refreshing ecological and ethical process. For many, Australian Aboriginal Literature may be a new field in academic study but this collection recollects and abounds in ideas and experiences that are real knowledge conduits across time, and presents core knowledge for the future primitive/primitive future that is/will always be here. Our warmest welcome for this new presentation of an ancestral staple—it is a huge achievement.

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