



A Companion to Australian Aboriginal Literature
Review by DAVID GUGIN

A Companion to Australian Aboriginal Literature, edited by Belinda Wheeler. Rochester, New York: Camden House, 2013. 201 pp. \$66.00.

Not often have I reviewed a book that challenges the very notion of literature itself, but *A Companion to Australian Aboriginal Literature*, edited by Belinda Wheeler, does exactly that. As Nicholas Jose points out in his Foreword to the *Companion*, shifting the study of the cultural expression of Australian Aboriginals from anthropology, which often disregards individual authorship, to literary criticism, also requires us “to think again about what is literature at its furthest limit and horizon [because] the term *literature* has not always been applied in oral cultures without writing as conventionally defined” (ix). The first important contribution of this book then is to insist on the literary quality and seriousness of Australian Aboriginal texts: life writing, novels, short story cycles, poetry, drama, film, or music. Just as the existence of Aboriginal literature problematizes the canonical definition of the phrase Australian literature, so too does its existence argue for a more multi-generic approach to the word literature itself, an approach that seems more and more appropriate in the contemporary, world context of multimodal (verbal, visual, performative) art.

A second important contribution of the *Companion* is the void it fills in Australian and Pacific literary and cultural studies. The first book published by an Australian Aboriginal was Unaipon’s *Native Legends*, but the 1988 Australian Bicentennial was the key moment for Aboriginal literature. Since then there has been an explosive growth in output and attention, coinciding with a rapid increase in interest in previously marginalized, indigenous literatures worldwide. This growth culminated in the publication of two widely respected collections that did much to disseminate Aboriginal literature throughout Australia, the Pacific region, and indeed the world – Anita Heiss and Peter Minter’s 2008 *Anthology of Australian Aboriginal Literature* and Nicholas Jose’s 2009 *The Literature of Australia*, which has numerous selections by Australian Aboriginals. However, Wheeler herself notes that “until now there has been no companion volume that summarizes and contextualizes the canon for scholars, researchers, and general readers” (2). I would also add students to her list, perhaps most critically, since without such a volume no literature can be effectively studied, which is what Aboriginal literature needs most right now.

The usefulness (and readability) of the book is enhanced by how Wheeler has chosen to organize it. The *Companion* opens with Aboriginal life writing, because of its “widespread national and international acclaim and because of its strong connection to the oral tradition” (7). Michael Griffiths offers a compelling historical analysis of the genre’s past, emphasizing in

particular its rejection of the traditional Greek binary of *praxis* vs. *poesis* while defining the central tension in life writing between “an enclosed individual and a self continuous with kinship and country [land]” (17). Jennifer Jones then provides an intriguing account of what she calls “the politics of collaborations” (typically one-sided) between Aboriginal life writers and their non-indigenous editors and audiences, collaborations that often resulted in final texts that were far removed from what the writers originally intended (35). Martina Horakova concludes the life writing essays by focusing on the proliferation of intergenerational, often mother/daughter, life writing, basing her argument for the “double-voice” narrative on a strong analytical reading of Rita and Jackie Huggins’ *Auntie Rita*. In fact, many of the essays in the *Companion* utilize close readings of individual texts and styles that would make any new critic proud. These close readings are another reason why this book could be so helpful in the classroom.

I am not a translation scholar, but anyone who is interested in translation studies, especially those involving the numerous Pacific languages, should read Danica Cerce and Oliver Haag’s essay on the challenges and rewards facing European scholars in their attempts to translate Aboriginal literature into languages such as Slovene, Italian, Dutch, and German. They are particularly good on the rhetorical and representational problems encountered when targeting audiences that often have “idealized, exotic views” of Australian Aboriginals (71), and they also correctly note the difficulties of writing formal translations of what are essentially informal, colloquial styles (77). The need for greater historical information and more historical context is clear. In a similar vein, Stuart Cooke follows with an excellent critique of Aboriginal poetics, one that directly relates Aboriginal song-poetry to its contemporary versions. This poetry is what I would call nomadic, characterized as it is by movement that, in Cooke’s words, “flows in a particular direction, maintaining enough flexibility to respond to changes in the environment without losing too much speed” (91). It is a poetry of relationships and constant change, a poetry of the “in-between” – cultures, land, languages, and subjects (97). In short, the best Aboriginal poets such as Lionel Fogarty are producing 21st century work within the context of a 30,000 year old tradition.

Returning to prose fiction, the *Companion* then includes three essays focusing on specific manifestations of and developments in that prose. Since many young Aboriginals are now bicultural and living in cities, Jeanine Leane clearly demonstrates that the burgeoning Aboriginal young adult genre is often concerned with issues of cultural and individual identity and the tension between the two, especially in urban settings. Thus this young adult genre tends to emphasize journeys across borders and boundaries, geographical representations of the transformative rite-of-passage from adolescence to adulthood (107). Paula Anca Farca next argues quite successfully that in recent years Aboriginal writers have begun to lighten their tone somewhat, relying on humor as a rhetorical and political strategy to move beyond subject matter that only addresses social and racial injustice. She claims that in addition to challenging the discriminatory stereotypes on which that injustice is based, humor also “attracts a wide variety of audiences to Aboriginal literature because [humor] teaches lessons about the creativity of the Aboriginal people and suggests that hope and optimism characterize Aboriginal life” (125). Katrin Althans concludes the essays on prose with a compelling discussion of the Gothic in Australian Aboriginal literature. She uses that discussion to connect Aboriginal literature to the Western tradition, but shows how in Aboriginal Gothic “dark shadows literally pale” (140), how Western Gothic is subtly but powerfully reversed, transformed and subverted.

The final three essays in the book deal with Aboriginal theatre, film, and music. Maryrose Casey points out that inherently collaborative, multimodal, and oral, drama has always served as a “pivotal point of encounter between Aboriginal and settler Australians” and continues to do so today (155). She also points out that newer Aboriginal theatre is focused less on the collective and more on the individual Aboriginal experience. However, Casey believes that Aboriginal theater remains locked into a “single genre of black,” and she makes a persuasive case that the time has come for a move away from a static, monolithic stereotype to a more fluid, authentic view of Aboriginals as diverse and individuated (157-8). Theodore Sheckels continues the *Companion’s* general (and timely) critique of Aboriginal “essentialism,” claiming that historically Aboriginals in film have been presented through a “filtering white consciousness” as dangerous or spiritual or as victims. Sheckels believes that by removing (rejecting) this white filtering process Aboriginal filmmakers, working typically in short forms as opposed to feature-length films, have been able to create a more genuine cinematic representation of Aboriginal experience, one especially concerned with the tragedy of the Stolen Generation (173-74). Finally, like the study of Aboriginal art as a whole, Andrew King states that the study of Aboriginal music is no longer primarily about the scientific, anthropological preservation of a dying cultural artifact (187). Having matured into an analysis of how personal and aesthetic pleasure can be derived from the music of a living culture, that study is indeed now more interested in the musicians who write, produce, and perform the music, musicians who are changing “the way we see, hear, and remember ourselves” (200). Promoting Aboriginal reconciliation and resurrection, Aboriginal music has gone from tribal voice to vital contributor to the emerging genre of world music.

A second virtue of the *Companion’s* organizational structure is the decision made by the editor and individual contributors to discuss in careful detail a relatively small selection of authors, translators, poets, dramatists, filmmakers or musicians (usually three) in order to provide the literary, cultural, and historical context of each genre. All of the artists chosen are also often doing something unique with the genre in question, and their work is available to both Australian and worldwide audiences as well. As Wheeler mentions, “Australian Aboriginal texts are often only published once with a limited press run, and few are distributed outside the country. The more readers from around the world seek out Australian Aboriginal texts, the greater their accessibility will become” (7). Nevertheless, in addition to the detailed examinations of relatively few, better known works, all the essays incorporate in various ways excellent, comprehensive catalogs of applicable writers, producers, and performers, making the book invaluable to newcomers in the field. The Works Cited pages at the end of each essay are also quite helpful to scholars and potential scholars, as are the *Companion’s* Index and Notes on the Contributors.

Of course, no book is perfect. The frequent use of footnotes might be distracting for some readers and much of the material they contain could have simply been incorporated into the text for better results. In addition, given the much broader definition of literature the *Companion* is working from, it is curious that chapters on Aboriginal painting and dance, for example, were not included, though perhaps there were time and space limitations. Most importantly, but understandably in some ways and with a few exceptions, the *Companion* tends to imply a certain degree of exclusivity in terms of both Aboriginal experience and literature. For instance, as mentioned, Stuart Cook’s discussion of Aboriginal poetry is insightful indeed, but the open form structure of that poetry, its reliance on breath-based lines, “cross parallelisms,” and the “communalizing of the lyrical I” (100), would appear to have much in common with the poetry

of Walt Whitman, Allen Ginsberg, and Anne Sexton. While avoiding the very real dangers of assimilation, future projects could possibly focus less on the uniqueness of Aboriginal literature and more on its connections to other traditions – Western, Asian or Pacific.

A strong affiliation with current environmental literary theory also suggests itself. Michael Griffiths argues that the purpose of Australian Aboriginal life writing is to “simultaneously restor[e] and rearticulate[e] kinship” (17). He believes that “in returning to Aboriginal tradition and narrating its dispossession and disruption by the colonizing process, life story does not simply reproduce a narrative of a static cultural form but rather forms a part of a complex regenerative process” (17). Such a process and purpose closely mirrors epistemologist Gregory Bateson’s conception of an “ecology of living forms” interdependent upon an “ecology of ideas, or of mind” and Serenella Iovino’s subsequent, related notion of “narrative re-inhabitation,” using literary texts to learn to “live-in-place in an area that has been disrupted and injured through past exploitation” (104). In fact, many of the essays in the *Companion* indicate close correlations with the eco-critical school of thought known as bioregionalism, in particular bioregionalism’s emphasis on re-inhabiting, rereading, reimagining, and renewal. These correlations seem fertile ground for further study.

Contemporary Aboriginal literature challenges the traditional opposition between collective identities and autonomous individuality, rejecting the view that any aboriginal is or should be forced to choose one or the other. According to Horakova, the writers of many of these texts are firmly rooted in their “mutual Aboriginality” but also quite determined to speak for themselves (66). This determination to be both political and personal, both communal and subjective, to be loyal to the community (the extended family, the ethnicity, the culture, the language) as well as faithful to one’s own dreams and aspirations apart from the group should be familiar to any reader of the *Companion* indigenous to Micronesia or the Pacific region. The centrality of intergenerational collaboration to Aboriginal literature, its promotion of young/Elder interactions and cross cultural experiences should also strike a chord with those readers. The genre of Aboriginal life writing especially has objectives and characteristic similar to what is occurring in places like Guam with its various collaborative literary and Chamorro language learning projects. Again, these connections appear to be worth more detailed exploration.

A Companion to Australian Aboriginal Literature is highly recommended. Ultimately, as Belinda Wheeler herself states, this literature is not a literature of blame but of reconciliation (13). Reconciliation begins with mutual respect and mutual understanding and this book is a great help in achieving both. It fills a large gap in Asia-Pacific literary and cultural studies. It will be of benefit to teachers and students, artists and critics, scholars and general readers, the indigenous and non-indigenous. I can give no higher praise to any book I review than to say that I would use it in my own classroom and my own research. I will surely be using this one.

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