



Dancing in Shadows: Histories of Nyungar Performance

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Dancing in Shadows: Histories of Nyungar Performance

By Anna Haebich. Perth: UWA Publishing, 2018. Pp. 405. A\$29.99 paper.

Anna Haebich's book is a richly researched and beautifully written study of Nyungar cultural history with a focus on performance. From the first the book challenges colonial narratives about what is and is not Nyungar performance. Habitually following colonial narratives about so-called primitive cultures, only performances that can be categorised as 'pre-contact' are seen as owned in any way by Aboriginal people. Other performances have been described as a sign of cultural contamination or degradation illustrating a loss of culture. At best the performances are described as hybrid or fusion rather than as part of Aboriginal modernity. As the eminent Aboriginal playwright and musician Richard Walley says in the Foreword, the response even in the twentieth century was 'Hang on this is not Aboriginal' ... 'Stay in the glass jar over there that's iconic Aboriginal' (xii). Even more pertinently, Walley continues with the endless message he and others like him received from white audiences, producers and critics, 'We don't want you to do anything else' (xii). Haebich's book is enriched by extensive archival research, interviews, detailed examinations of paintings and photographs and her own observations which offer a different perspective. Haebich has also included a valuable collection of images in the book.

Aboriginal Australian cultures are one of the most performance-based in the world. Nyungar theatre and performance is a prime example. As with all living cultures, they have continued to combine past practices with new. The chapters in the book cover corroboree performances in the days of early white settlement in Western Australia in the 1830s, performances for cultural tourism and at missions through to Noongaroke nights in the 2000s. Along the way Haebich engages with some seminal plays by Aboriginal writers such as Jack Davis and important collaborative works between Nyungar and white theatre practitioners, particularly *Bindjareb Pinjarra*. In the process she reveals hidden histories and histories that were in plain sight all the time but ignored.

However much performance can strengthen and sustain peoples and their

cultures, you cannot record the experiences of colonisation without also engaging with the cost. The chapter on the missions is a fascinating example of Haebich's wide-ranging research and the impact of the Christianising and so-called civilising projects of colonialism. As part of tracking the ways in which separating families and using music aided the colonising enterprise, Haebich offers an insightful analysis of the celebratory photos from the New Norcia mission. The Aboriginal congregation in the photos consists of women and children. The only males are young boys. There are no men in the pictures despite the fact that there were many men at the mission. The absence of adult males from the photos that were used to promote the mission opens up all sorts of speculations. The fact that only white male adults are shown reinforces notions of Aboriginal people as childlike or feminised in comparison to white cultures. As Haebich suggests, these photographs were constructed to 'celebrate missionary benevolence and success' (121). At the same time they depend on and reinforce a range of colonial narratives.

Haebich's work on Nyungar-only gatherings foregrounds an unknown history of performance and cultural strength and reveals the roles performance holds in healing trauma and grief. Drawing on interviews and oral histories, Haebich paints a rich picture of performances created for and enjoyed by communities in the bush outside the gaze of police, government officials and reserve managers. These performances included traditional dances with people painted up with whatever they could find, such as flour. They also included contemporary instruments and musical forms and dances from barn dances to the Charleston. Post-World War II, the Coolbaroo League created venues in urban areas where Nyungar people could gather to sing and dance as well as perform sketch comedy for their own people. The League and the club also acted as a base for protest and organising. Performance brings people together and focuses their strength.

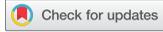
As Haebich states in the introduction, this book is the 'first comprehensive, historical study of the rich sophistication of Nyungar performance culture' (4). As such it is an important contribution that will have an impact in a range of disciplines and demand a different approach to Aboriginal performance across the country.

Haebich acknowledges how writings in performance studies were useful to her in approaching performance as history; this history in turn will inspire new ways of seeing within performance studies.

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Empire and Asian Migration: Sovereignty, Immigration Restriction and Protest in the British Settler Colonies, 1888–1907

By Jeremy C. Martens. Perth: UWA Publishing, 2018. Pp. 228. A\$39.99 paper.

On 13 January 1897, Mahatma Gandhi disembarked from the ship *S.S. Courland* in the southern African port of Durban and walked into the midst of an anti-Asian race riot. He was recognised by a group of young boys who yelled ‘Gandhi’, ‘thrash him’, ‘surround him’. A crowd formed and he was ‘kicked, whipped, stale fish and other missiles were thrown at him, which hurt his eye and cut his ear’. Close to losing consciousness, Gandhi gripped the railing of a nearby house for support. The crowd chanted, ‘we’ll hang old Gandhi from the sour apple tree’ (84).

The Durban attack is but one example of the systemic anti-Asian violence explored by Jeremy Martens in his expansive study, *Empire and Asian Migration: Sovereignty, Immigration Restriction and Protest in the British Settler Colonies, 1888–1907*. As Martens explains, the Durban incident was part of a much larger movement across the settler colonial world in the late nineteenth century which called for a ban on Asian migration to these colonies. From Sydney to Wellington to Durban, settler colonials lashed out at resident Asian communities, targeting Asians as they disembarked on shore, burning property, attacking Asian businesses and mobbing prominent community leaders such as Gandhi. Making sense of this mob violence, and placing it in a larger imperial context, is one of the many strengths of Martens’ book.

Empire and Asian Migration interrogates the causal relationship between the mass protest

movements against Asian migration and Asian peoples at the turn of the century, and the immigration restriction regimes which appeared in their wake. As Martens explains, closely following outbreaks of violence such as the Durban attack, ‘draconian race-based anti-Asian measures were often hastily introduced’ (3). Martens argues that these popular protests were as much about settler demands for sovereignty and self-government as they were about racial hatred. For as soon as settler colonies tried to impose bans on immigration through legislative measures, they were shocked to discover a fundamental constitutional weakness common to all British colonial states. Settler states could manage their internal affairs but ‘remained subservient to the United Kingdom for external or international issues, such as Asian migration’ (2). Unwilling to anger Japan, then an emerging world power, the United Kingdom refused the demands of the colonies to block Asian migration. A compromise was reached, and settler colonial parliaments introduced ‘immigration restriction laws that did not explicitly mention race but were nevertheless squarely aimed at non-white migrants’ (2). In Australia these laws culminated, of course, in the White Australia Policy. Through this focus on sovereignty, Martens breaks original ground on what is well-trodden territory, noting that ‘[t]he implications of this limited sovereignty remain under-researched by historians’ (7).

As Martens acknowledges in his book’s carefully written introduction, transnational histories on this subject are far from new. From Charles Price’s *Great White Walls* to Adam McKeown’s *Melancholy Order* and Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds’ *Drawing the Global Colour Line*, historians have long noticed the striking similarities between the racial regimes and immigration laws that emerged in parallel in English-speaker settler colonies. These similarities are evidenced in the names that settler colonials gave to their immigration restriction polices: White Australia, White New Zealand, White Canada, Chinese Exclusion Act. It is not surprising that historians of this ‘racial moment’ have adopted transnational, global and comparative methodologies to explain the emergence of anti-Asian sentiment. Doing this work requires an in-depth knowledge of the national histories of multiple countries, the patience to wade through dense archival collections relating to