

BOOK REVIEW:

PENNY VAN TOORN. (2006) WRITING NEVER ARRIVES NAKED: EARLY ABORIGINAL CULTURES OF WRITING IN AUSTRALIA. CANBERRA: ABORIGINAL STUDIES PRESS, AIATSIS. RRP \$39.95

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In Australia it has been a common practice to label every creative expression from Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists as the first of its kind. This first is usually located after white Australians have been celebrated as having accomplished the act first and laid the foundation for others to follow. In the case of Indigenous writers, it has been a point of benevolence since the 1960s to acknowledge the 'first Indigenous writers'. From nothing, from *terra nullius*, these writers arrive. This framing of writers since the 1960s depends on the imposition of the exclusive binary between oral and literature based cultures that has dominated the terms of discussion for decades. Compounding this binary is the effective erasure of Indigenous engagements with European style literacy and writing prior to white acknowledgement of the practices. Penny van Toorn's latest book *Writing Never Arrives Naked* challenges the exclusivity of the binary and the erasure of Indigenous engagements with European style texts prior to the mid twentieth century. Extending this challenge van Toorn, contextualises the standard notion that the coloniser's written culture superseded Indigenous oral cultures. She reveals a rich history of Indigenous communities developing their own cultures of reading and writing, involving a complex interplay between their own social protocols and the practices of literacy introduced by the

British. Van Toorn has published widely on the Indigenous literatures of Australia and Canada. Over much of the last decade she has contested the claim that Indigenous Australians had no 'writing' from a variety of perspectives. This book builds on and extends her earlier arguments.

From the first pages of the introduction van Toorn engages with the myths of representation, the literary and scholarly framing of Indigenous Australians as 'early man', only seeing drawings of fern roots in the writing on the page (p 1-2). She demonstrates how the claim that Indigenous Australians had no writing system was used to support the construction of them as primitive, in doing so she contests the evolutionary progress narrative that sees writing and literacy as something which begins in a pictographic stage, advances to an ideographic stage and finally becomes 'writing proper' (Van Toorn 2006:72). In this book, van Toorn sets out to study Indigenous Australian writing through a different theoretical lens by moving beyond Eurocentric concepts of authorship, looking at genres other than fiction and poetry and situating reading and writing within specific cultural contexts.

The result of this shift in focus is recognition that the first Aboriginal author in the European sense was Bennelong. Van Toorn reconstructs the

ways in which, from the early years of colonisation, Aboriginal people used writing to negotiate a changing world, to challenge their oppressors, protect country and kin, and occasionally for economic gain. In fact rather than, as represented by white authors, throwing away written pages in ignorance, shortly after settlement Aboriginal people were exchanging written texts as curiosities, and integrating letters of the alphabet into their graphic traditions. During the 19th and 20th centuries, Aboriginal people played key roles in translating the Bible, and made their political views known in community and regional newspapers. They also sent numerous letters and petitions to political figures, including Queen Victoria. Van Toorn extends her argument and analysis to frame Indigenous Australian, contemporary life-writing as actually part of 'an older discursive formation that dates back to early colonial times, and incorporates traditional indigenous paradigms and protocols of oral communication' (Van Toorn 2006:1).

The book is a fascinating reconstruction of the cross cultural exchange of writing systems. She examines the different types of engagements with the European alphabet and writing practices by Indigenous people. Occasionally, she focuses on colonial European settlers' recognition and engagement with Indigenous writing systems such as message sticks as 'blackfellows' letters' (Van Toorn 2006: 211). The strength in the book is van Toorn's careful reconstruction of Indigenous engagements, multiple uses and deployments of European writing in specific cultural contexts. In the process, she persuasively demonstrates the essentialist basis of the oral/literacy binary and the evolutionary progress narratives about culture and people developing from oral traditions to literate. This book is an important contribution to debates around the

dominant narrative that Marshall McLuhan expressed in the 1960s, that the 'phonetic alphabet, alone, is the technology that has been the means of creating' contemporary society (Van Toorn 2006:224).

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