

*Forgetting Aborigines* by Chris Healy. Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2008, pp. 250, AUD \$39.95, Paperback ISBN: 9780868408842.



Aboriginality is always there for settler and indigenous Australians. It haunts both those who are prepared to disinter unpalatable memories and those enamoured with amnesia, repression or denial. But Aborigines we can forget. In their place we might imagine friends, neighbours and strangers who live near and far; citizens marked by difference and sameness; people of varying predicaments, capacities and desires; people who, like all of us, live with the possibilities and constraints of being in history. (pp. 219-20)

With these words, Chris Healy closes *Forgetting Aborigines*, an astute exploration of a persistent cycle of forgetfulness and remembrance implicit in constituting Australian Aboriginality. Ultimately, alongside Indigenous academic Marcia Langton, he proposes that Aboriginality is akin to Durkheim's 'social thing', a space of social engagement rather than racial or cultural demarcation: 'Aboriginality is no more *about* actual Aboriginal people than it is *about* actual non-Aboriginal people ... Aboriginality directs me towards what happens interstitially ...' (p. 7). Examining the processes by which Aboriginality may be conceived as an 'intercultural space', Healy elaborates a 'small cultural history', in which Aboriginality has been constituted by recurrent acts of forgetting and remembering (p. 4). Utilising both academic argument and personal reflection, the author peruses representations of 'Aboriginality' in television; art; national heritage; cultural institutions and museums; and tourism. These include the 1962 ABC series, *Alcheringa* and the Walpiri Media Association's production of *Bush Mechanics*; 'old' and 'new' Aboriginal art, including non-Indigenous kitsch, pejoratively labelled 'Abo art', which is, Healy argues, informative of 'new' and immensely profitable Indigenous art; the post-Bicentennial national 'heritage crisis focused on the historical legitimacy of the nation' (p. 99) and the recovery of Aboriginality in 'vernacular' or idiomatic histories, or 'memory performances' (pp. 105 and 128); museums as sites of memory, containing objects such as Aboriginal breastplates, which 'seem to be doing what they should be doing, remembering for us' (p. 133); and Aboriginal tourism, engaged both in a rehearsal of the 'tropes of authenticity and primitivism', and the production of Indigenous 'cultural and economic autonomy' (pp. 175-179). In 'enumerating "the will to forget" in Australia' via these varied examples, Healy calls his readers to 'an ethical and political response – the will to remember' (p. 204).

*Forgetting Aborigines* joins a distinguished list of academic titles published by University of New South Wales Press on Indigenous issues, though framed as it is within 'the politics of memory' (p. 18), this book provides a unique approach to questions of Aboriginality; and a decisive answer to the banal and repetitious lament, 'Why weren't we told?' (pp. 18 and 63-4). For Healy, the 'endless (re)discoveries of, and about, Aborigines are only possible because non-indigenous Australians forget their own forgetting' (p. 203). Though argued in straightforward and decisive prose, the mode by which such forgetting occurs is, at times, unclear. Perhaps the most lucid example is provided in Healy's opening image of a 1940s board game, *Corroboree*,

which crudely depicts primitivist Aboriginality. Healy speaks of the immediate impulse of contemporary viewers to avert their gaze and conceal its images, ‘to hide from the past in the present ... to make Aborigines disappear ... to forget’ (p. 4). It is in this act of eschewing such imagery in the present that non-Indigenous Australians, Healy suggests, deny and forget the actual exploitation of the past. A more subtle example is provided in a series of Bicentennial commemoration stamps, in which the violence of the first British arrival is replaced by extraordinarily peaceful, exoticised imagery. Citing Leela Gandhi on the postcolonial condition, Healy suggests that this forgetting is indicative of ‘the urge for historical self-intervention or the need to make a new start’ – to forget violence and dispossession and forge a new national pride, cleansed of the colonial past (p. 22). Such sentiments are evinced in the author’s attention to the rise of the One Nation Party and its furtive discourse of historical closure (p. 119); and widespread critique of the party as an aberrant anachronism, not in keeping with the ‘safe and peaceful’ present (p. 124) – itself a further denial of the historical mechanisms which were formative of One Nation. Both actions, Healy argues, seal the historical archive by forgetting the pain of the past in order to emerge whole in an unblemished – and endemically amnesic – present.

A selection of images illustrate the text, including various artworks, film stills, museum and media photographs, tourism posters and personal shots from the Western Australian Lurujarri trail. These greatly enhance the arguments, being poignant examples of the frequency of such non-Indigenous forgetting. While, for Healy, forgetting and remembering occur in tandem, ultimately he suggests that the ethically redemptive act is the performance of remembrance, as ‘a communicative and shared cultural practice’ (p. 9). As a book that prompts the non-Indigenous reader to examine her own acts of forgetting and remembering, *Forgetting Aborigines* (dis)locates Aboriginality in this oscillating dynamic, in the ‘space of memory and the vernacular’ (p. 131).

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