

most significant obstacle to the formation of an ASEAN security community. However, this is ultimately more asserted than proven, as the book lacks broader comparisons. Instability or ethnic conflict in Southeast Asia is evidently not limited to Myanmar; and it is quite clear that ASEAN's problems in developing a collective identity extend beyond the specific dynamics and issues that have shaped Myanmar's ties with other ASEAN countries. Second, Roberts attributes the festering of the crisis in Myanmar in part to "the operative norms of ASEAN." While political and ethnic conflict within members has indeed normally not been collectively addressed by the grouping, it seems to me that the ASEAN states have with reference to Myanmar opted for so-called "enhanced interactions" that have not previously been pursued vis-à-vis other members, and Roberts perhaps makes too little of this in relation to the argument in question. To be sure, ASEAN has wielded little if any influence with Myanmar's leadership, but as Roberts recognizes himself, the more hard-edged policies of Western powers towards Naypyidaw have failed to yield superior results. Notwithstanding these points, Roberts offers a well-developed and important argument about how Myanmar matters in relation to ASEAN's efforts to build a security community.

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DREAMS AND NIGHTMARES OF A WHITE AUSTRALIA: Representing Aboriginal Assimilation in the Mid-twentieth Century. *Studies in Asia-Pacific "Mixed Race," v. 3.* By *Catriona Elder*. Bern: Peter Lang, 2009. 257 pp. (Illus.) US\$68.95, paper. ISBN 978-3-03911-722-2.

Dreams and Nightmares of a White Australia: Representing Aboriginal Assimilation in the Mid-twentieth Century is an analysis of the production of assimilation discourse, in terms of Aboriginal people's and white people's social relations through a small number of popular fiction texts from the 1950s and 1960s. Together these texts produce the white Australian story of assimilation. Elder's work illuminates sites of anxiety in assimilation discourses: interracial sexual relationships, the white family, people of "mixed" heritage, stolen children, violence and land ownership. Fictional stories of assimilation were a key site of Aboriginal representation. They produced discourses of "assimilation coloniser."

Carroll Smith-Rosenberg writes: "Novels ... have certain advantages that political speeches, legal documents and court decisions lack. They can play with the forbidden and momentarily indulge in the fantastic" (30). Elder's work explores the schism between such fantasies and Australia's perception of itself through the 1950s and 1960s as a white nation and the place of Aboriginal Australians in this discourse.

By the mid-twentieth century the various Australian states began changing their approaches to Aboriginal peoples from exclusion to assimilation. The policy change meant that Aboriginal peoples, particularly those identified as being of “mixed heritage,” were to be encouraged to become part of the dominant non-Aboriginal community. Elder explores texts that reflect the way assimilation was imagined in literary fiction. Drawing on a range of genres—Gothic, historical romance, the frontier and family saga—Elder skillfully and perceptively analyzes how these texts tell their assimilation stories.

Elder draws on the post-colonial theories of Homi Bhabha (1994) to probe notions of ambivalence, colonial fetishes and fantasies and mimicry. Ambivalence is a psychoanalytic term, suggesting both a longing for and a hostility towards an “other.” Elder uses this definition as a useful framework for analyzing Australian colonial relations, where the notion of “other” always takes on a very specific race-based meaning. Many of the ambivalences that structure assimilation discourses in Australia in the 1950s and 1960s are organized in terms of sameness and difference. Colonizers are both attracted to and repulsed by the colonial subject, the Aborigine. Through this lens, Elder probes the ambivalence of the “half-caste” figure in assimilation fiction.

The female Aboriginal body is identified in the works Elder analyzes as a site of assimilation and ambivalence. She writes: “Assimilation can be read as a project about ‘imagining the nation’s bodies and the national body’” (38). Assimilation narratives produce a vision of the new white nation, where the preferred national body is the white body, but they also produce anxieties about a stubborn Aboriginality, often represented by the trope of the “return to colour” or the “throw back.” White people both desire this stubborn trace and wish it away. Assimilation in Australia was a gendered and asymmetrical project where the white man’s desire for Aboriginal women is represented as having created the “half-caste” problem.

Paradoxically, the “half-caste” is also represented as a “solution” to this problem. Most of the narratives analyzed have their protagonist as a “half-caste” Aboriginal woman. Such characters are constructed as a site in which to map white masculine desire for sex with Aboriginal women. In this way the female Aboriginal body also comes to signify the erasure of Aboriginality. Elder observes a poignant absence in the literary landscape, in that neither Aboriginal men’s bodies nor white women’s bodies are coded in assimilation discourse as sites that produce inter-racial sexual desire.

Elder’s work analyzes the assimilation discourse through an array of novels that in their own time and context were iconic Australian fiction. E. Timm’s *Scarlet Frontier* (1953) is a eugenic romance, constructing Australianness as marked by a set of values which can accommodate certain differences, such as convict origins or gendered “otherness,” but only within the domains of whiteness; Gwen Meredith’s *Beyond Blue Hills: the Terna-Boolla Story* (1953), a classic assimilation story that traces through generational sagas the “making of white families”; Helen Henry’s *The Leaping Blaze* (1962), a tragic

portrayal of children and dispossession, where Aboriginal people of mixed racial heritage are the focus of violent punishment for past miscegenation; Leonard Mann's *Venus Half-Caste* (1963), which, of all the novels analyzed, best encapsulates colonial ambivalence towards Aboriginal women and has white men punished for their miscegenist desires; and Olaf Ruhen's *Naked Under Capricornia* (1957), which reconstructs raw frontier relations between white and black and posits an alternate vision of separate communities. Together, such works are an excellent snapshot of white Australian attitudes to and anxieties about Aboriginal Australians during the 1950s and 1960s.

Dreams and Nightmares traces the "shape" of white Australian reactions to the inclusion of Aboriginal people, particularly the "half-caste," into white Australia. This inclusion was an ambivalent project, as the literature reveals, both pleasurable and unsettling: pleasurable because it worked from a socio-economic perspective to legitimate white colonization, and unsettling because it challenged the concept of a "pure white Australia."

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GOSSIP AND THE EVERYDAY PRODUCTION OF POLITICS. *By Niko Besnier.* Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009. xiv, 243 pp. (Figures, maps, B&W photos.) US\$25.00, paper. ISBN 978-0-8248-3338-1.

Gossip, for Niko Besnier, is political action "from below." It is where individual agents attempt, in relatively private settings, to influence the distribution of influence and power and, of course, public events. In this book Besnier sets out to counter a traditional focus in anthropology on overt political action in meetings, courts, parliamentary debates, etc., by analyzing the subtle conversational mechanisms through which individuals on Nukulaelae, a tiny coral atoll in the Pacific Ocean, manipulate the affairs of a village society that also has outposts on a number of other atolls and Pacific island nations. This richly contextualized study of informal talk—its tacit aims and more or less direct effects—contrasts with and complements the numerous accounts we already have of public oratory in similar societies. It is best compared, perhaps, with Andrew Arno's insightful study of informal talk on a small Fijian island (*The World of Talk on a Fijian Island: An Ethnography of Law and Communicative Causation* [Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1993]). However, what makes this monograph stand out are the evident language skills of its author—his sensitivity to nuances of meaning in the local dialect and the technical expertise he displays in analyzing the fine detail of conversational interactions.

We know that gossip can have a broad range of important functions. It is capable of acting as an instrument of social control, thus preserving