

treated, with the exception of Ngumbarl and Warrwa. As the study radiates out from Dampier Land, so the documentation loses intensity and depth. Nekes and Worms also studied a few Pama-Nyungan languages spoken near Dampier Land, especially Karajarri. Further afield their work was brief and basic, with the exception of Kukatja, more intensively studied by Worms.

“Australian Languages” comprises five parts, as follows: Part 1: Grammar of Prefixing and Suffixing Languages of the Southern Kimberley; part 2: Dictionary: English-Native Languages; part 3: Dictionary: Native Languages-English (a paradigmatic syntax); part 4: Comparative Dictionary of Australian Pygmoid Languages; part 5: Aboriginal Texts. Only parts 1 and 5 appear in the text of the book. Parts 2, 3, and 4 are contained in a superb CD-ROM, which is to be found inside the back cover.

The major part of the book (part 1) consists of a word-based comparative grammar, some 250 pages, divided into rather Latinate sections as follows: (1) phonetics, (2) nouns, (3) adjectives, (4) pronouns, (5) verbs of prefixing languages, (6) verbs of suffixing languages, (7) adverbs, (8) exclamations. Each section is introduced by a skilful editor’s introduction, which situates the Nekes’s and Worms’s analyses in terms of modern-day Australian Aboriginal linguistic theory. In fact, the editor, William McGregor, a specialist in Nyulnyulan languages, states that “Australian Languages” is “perhaps best regarded as a pan-varietal grammar of the languages of Dampier Land and adjacent regions of the Kimberley mainland, with a generous scattering of comparative observations on languages from other parts of the continent” (29).

“Australian Languages” is very much a product of its era, when Australian linguistics was really just beginning. There are obvious defects, such as the fact that the authors often failed to identify morphemes, especially suffixes, regarding them as alternative forms of stems. Nekes and Worms adopt Capell’s classification of Australian languages into prefixing and suffixing, classifying and nonclassifying languages. They make no suggestions about genetic relations among languages, although they do regard the Nyulnyulan languages as a distinct group.

McGregor defends the quality of Nekes’s and Worms’s work on the Nyulnyulan languages, rating it as of consistently good quality, stating that their transcriptions of Nyulnyul, Bardi, Nyikina, and Yawuru words are reasonably accurate and that one can infer the same in regard to now moribund languages by comparison with extant languages. Bearing this in mind, it is obvious that “Australian Languages” presents a considerable amount of new data on languages never before and, in some cases, never since described.

Part 5, Aboriginal Texts, consists of three chapters containing 14 texts and 6 songs, the first of which is included in the accompanying CD-ROM. McGregor has taken great pains to ensure that the source and gloss lines are presented in a reader-friendly form.

Parts 2, 3, and 4 are contained in the CD-ROM which accompanies the book. Part 2 consists of an English-Native Languages finder list to part 3, a very extensive

Native Languages-English comparative dictionary containing numerous sentence examples of usage, originally six-hundred pages of the original 1000-page manuscript. To have this in searchable form is of huge benefit to researchers. Part 4, a Comparative Dictionary of Australian Pygmoid Languages, is a short wordlist of Dyirbal and neighbouring languages of the Cairns rainforest in Queensland.

William McGregor has done Nekes and Worms, himself, and Australian linguistics a considerable favour with his expert commentary, some 438 footnotes, and his skilful and lucid presentation of what must have presented a difficult editorial challenge. The fact that McGregor himself is an expert in the Nyulnyulan languages puts him in an unrivalled position to bring out the best in the work of Nekes and Worms and he does not disappoint. “Australian Languages,” in its modern form, will prove an invaluable resource for Australianists and indeed for the Aboriginal communities whose languages it documents.

Darrell Tryon

**Poirier, Sylvie:** *A World of Relationships. Itineraries, Dreams, and Events in the Australian Western Desert.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005. 303 pp. ISBN 0-8020-8414-1. (Anthropological Horizons, 28) Price: \$ 29.95

This book about the Aboriginal (mainly Kukatja) people of Balgo in Western Australia was first published in French in 1996 as “Les jardins du nomade. Cosmologie, personne et territoire dans le désert occidental australien” (Münster 1976). This English version of the book is not merely a translation of the original, since the author states that she has put the French manuscript through extensive revision, although the basic drift of the two books is apparently the same. I’m not sure how or why the cleverly titled “Les jardins du nomade,” which translates to “The Gardens of the Nomad,” became the more prosaic “A World of Relationships,” but something was certainly lost in the “translation.” For the metaphor of the garden (see p. 91) captures well the way in which this book is intended to communicate the primary idea that the Kukatja lifeworld is one formed as both cultivated and domesticated space.

Poirier identifies a handful of key themes within this overall idea. In keeping with contemporary paradigms, she emphasises the negotiability and changeability of the Kukatja world, as against older paradigms which, in her view, erroneously accentuated the prescriptive nature of Aboriginal social life. As she puts it, she is interested in the fundamental “‘openness’ and ‘flexibility’ inherent in the Aboriginal system of law and cosmological order” (5). In this regard her work is a welcome and erudite addition to the trend in Aboriginal ethnography which began in earnest some 30 years ago with the work of Fred Myers, whose studies of the Kukatja’s Pintupi neighbours are regularly referred to in “A World of Relationships.” Of particular importance for Poirier is the way in which a “sense of place” is inseparable from a “sense of events” (6); that is to say, place is modelled as

an outcome of happenings and relationships. It is these relationships, ancestral (or cosmological) and familial (or social), which, following a broad contextual history of the Balgo region in chapter 1, occupy her general attention in the weighty and revealing second and third chapters of the book.

While the first part of the book is an excellent historical and ethnographic account, it is somewhat standard fare in its descriptions of dreamings and social groups. For me, it is the second half of "A World of Relationships" (chapters 4–6) which really captures the imagination. These chapters concern dreams (or, as Poirier calls them, dream "narratives") and associated stories which frame knowledge of daily events; the sociological and communicative framing of these accounts; and the dynamic negotiability and exchange of ceremonies. It is here that one sees most clearly the nature of Poirier's break with overly prescriptive modelling. Much of what she describes in these chapters is not in general terms novel; while the ethnography is original, the descriptions are highly redolent of other historically minded ethnographic accounts by authors such as Myers, Françoise Dussart, Eric Kolig, and more than a few others from the last few decades of Aboriginal ethnography. But Poirier's account is also unique. Most particularly, her rich and insightful accounts of the character of Kukatja dreams go further than all others published to date and take us deep into the dynamic mindsets which structure Aboriginal cosmologies in the Western Desert and elsewhere in Australia.

This is an excellent ethnography; but it is not a "flash" one. One sees no heavy burden of theory articulating the pages of "A World of Relationships" and Poirier's prose is refreshingly free of heavy-handed academicism. There are no axes to grind; there is no bibliographic "packing"; and there are no loudly shouted allegiances beyond a somewhat informal commitment to a kind of phenomenology and to a classical tradition of ethnographic description and analysis. On all these counts, the book is an outstanding read.

On the other hand, "A World of Relationship" suffers from one particular and common ethnographic fault – it is an ethnography which assumes and privileges difference. For Poirier, the Kukatja are fundamentally "not-us." While "we" have a dualistic approach to "nature" and "culture," the Kukatja do not and are therefore "non-modern" (9f.). While "we" are Cartesian in outlook, the Kukatja are characterised as having an "ontology of dwelling" (10f.); while "we" are individualistic, the Kukatja persons are characterised as "dividual" (13). These contrasts, I think, should be read primarily as rhetorical devices reminding us that Balgo is not London, Paris, New York, or Toronto – anti-ethnocentric warnings symptomatic of an age of postmodern pluralism. I am not so sure they should be read as solid theoretical pronouncements.

It is unsurprising, therefore, that Poirier ends "A World of Relationships" with a brief consideration of the place the Kukatja might have as citizens in "modern" and "multicultural" Australia, and with a sideswipe against

the superficiality of "tolerance" in multicultural Australia. Unfortunately, however, there is no serious comparison at this point; only a sense that an alternative way of life is in danger of disappearing before the dualistic, Cartesian, individualistic juggernaut of late modernity. This is the ethnographer's lament. But how could it be otherwise when "we" and "they" appear to dwell in such hermetically sealed and radically asymmetric worlds?

John Morton

**Rack, Mary:** *Ethnic Distinctions, Local Meanings. Negotiating Cultural Identities in China.* London: Pluto Press, 2005. 166 pp. ISBN 0-7453-1938-6. Price: £ 16.99

This book by British anthropologist Mary Rack provides an interesting study of local culture in the context of the postreform Chinese state. Rack recounts – in a highly readable language – how a temple of the Celestial Kings in Hunan Province turns into an arena where official state discourses on ethnic identity and historical orthodoxy clash with villagers' religious beliefs. Although of different ethnic ancestry, villagers pray and offer to the same local gods in order to obtain their assistance in coping with the many challenges of living in rural China today. At the same time the representatives of the Chinese state in the guise of the local Minority Affairs Bureau attempt to appropriate the temple by defining it as a relic of ethnic minority culture; thereby denying its role as a place of worship. In spite of the villagers' religious concerns, the Bureau builds a new temple hall, has new statues made of the Celestial Kings and walls in the compound in order to collect entrance fee. Events similar to these are happening all over China today. What makes the conflict described by Rack fascinating is the ensuing reaction by the villagers: believing that, under these conditions, the Celestial Kings will not want to reside at the temple anymore, the villagers construct a new temple in flagrant opposition to the designs of the Minority Affairs Bureau.

Rack's field site is situated in the Xiangxi Tujia and Miao Nationalities Prefecture in West Hunan. The Miao and the Tujia are two of China's fifty-five officially recognised ethnic minorities. These "minority nationalities," as they are called in Chinese, make up almost 10% of the Chinese population; the other 90% is made up by the default ethnic category, the so-called "Han nationality." As Rack rightly points out, these state sanctioned categories are often disconnected from people's own perceptions of ethnic identity. The official label of Miao in China includes several different linguistic groups such as Kho Xiong, Hmou, and Hmong, some of whom are culturally related to the Southeast Asian Hmong. After entering her field site Rack discovers how preconceived ideas of ethnic identity based on the official Chinese scheme of ethnic classification can obscure a clear understanding of local identity and cultural praxis. This is an experience she shares with many other Western anthropologists engaged in so-called "minority studies" in China (this reviewer included). In order to approach the issues of ethnic identity in the local context of West Hunan, Rack rejects the