

Mary Gaunt and the Modern Waning of Affect

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Prolific author and inveterate traveller, Mary Gaunt (1865-1942) embodied her own ideal of the enterprising white colonial woman. She supported herself by her writing and sought to support the British Empire in the published observations of its colonies and its peoples. Her traversals of Britain's colonies are presented in the service of reinforcing their inter-relation and publicising their resource potential. However, as this essay argues, the lines of connection between the dominions of empire are arrested in Gaunt's writing by a failure of sympathy. Her modern sensibility prohibits the outmoded response of wonder to the New World but she is nevertheless caught in its capacity for disorientation and displacement. This failure is underscored, I propose, by the particular interconnections between her travel writing and her fiction and their respective qualities of transport and imaginative sympathy, a connection at the heart of modern fiction, and of the modern reading subject more generally.

The misalignment of sympathy and experience Gaunt records provides an enabling cleft, granting access to the operations of a more general dilemma regarding literature sympathy in globalised modernity. It may also identify new significance for Gaunt as an exemplar globalised economies of writing and reading. In this dual focus, this essay draws on the small but very useful critical body of work on Gaunt. A comprehensive bibliography of her writing and its criticism was compiled by Melbourne librarian Ian McLaren and is testament to her tireless production across many genres. Excellent critical readings of her career and the interplay of her feminist and imperialist agendas are provided in essays by Susan Martin (1998) and Angela Woollacott (2003). Martin's essay identifies a range of contradictions between Gaunt's performance of personal and literary conventionality directly in the face of her highly unconventional life and those of her fictional heroines. In this vein, Martin notes that although Gaunt's most enduring novel, *Kirkham's Find*, is dedicated to Gaunt's husband, it advocates female independence. As Martin writes: 'it seems ironic that Mary Gaunt chose to celebrate her married life with a novel about how well a woman can do without marriage' (188). Martin also identifies how the radical thinking of Gaunt's earlier writing persisted throughout her work but was redirected after 1900 when Gaunt began to write as her livelihood and needed to heed ideas of acceptability and marketability to ensure publication and sales (195). Evidence for the persistence of her progressive thought—often well-masked—is the citation of her novel *Harmony: A Tale of the Old Slave Days in Jamaica* (1933) in discussions by Caribbean commentators of slavery resistance narratives. Verene A. Shepherd and the pseudonymous "All Woman Writer" in the *Jamaican Observer* both cite Gaunt's novel as one of the few texts to represent female resistance to the slavery system (Shepherd 273-274; 'All Woman Writer').

As an historian, Woollacott's interest in Gaunt and her writing is in her representation of the ideology of her times. She draws our attention to Gaunt's continuing representation of Australia and Australianness after 1900, when she left Australia. Woollacott posits several key inferences from Gaunt's understanding of nation and empire, namely, that she showed

how ‘Australianness could be constructed in multiple parts of the globe’—that is was a mobile identity, and that, for many Australians in the early twentieth century, there was no contradiction between strident nationalism and loyalty to the empire (194). Further, and in common with other colonial women writers, Gaunt’s advocacy of women’s rights is bound up with the desire for ‘the racial and gender order that would shore up, at once, both nation and empire’ (195).

Gaunt has also been discussed in numerous surveys of women imperial travel writers, notably Dea Birkett’s *Spinsters Abroad* (1989) and in Gillian Whitlock’s ‘“A Most Improper Desire”: Mary Gaunt’s Journey to Jamaica’ (1993). In Australian literature her reputation rests mainly on her early writings, short stories and two novels, particularly *Kirkham’s Find* (1897), a highly consummate and compelling narrative of a young woman who defies convention and becomes independent via beekeeping.

The focus of this current study on Gaunt relates to a larger project that examines connections between the Anglophone Caribbean and Australia, reticulations between the first and last of the colonies established by the British, or as Paul Sharrad describes them, the circuitous ‘links between the beginning and end of Columbus’s legacy; that is between the Caribbean and the Great South Land—first and last of new worlds’ (58). Historians have begun the work of identifying the human traffic and trade between these two colonial sites but there has been little written on the literary and imaginative traffic between them, the notable exception being the excellent edition of *Australian Cultural History, To the Islands: Australia and the Caribbean* (2002) edited by Russell McDougall. Gaunt’s work augments understanding of the complex circuits of colonial history and writing that connect Australia and the Anglophone Caribbean, particularly in the discomfiture of its belatedness. Gaunt wrote three texts on Jamaica including two works of non-fiction: a history titled *Where the Twain Meet* (1920); a travel book titled *In Jamaica: Reflections* (1932); and one historical novel titled *Harmony: A Tale of the Old Slave Days in Jamaica* (1933).

The ensuing examination of these works, including Gaunt’s projections of herself as subject and author, argues for their significance to considerations of empire, travel writing and fiction in three related ways. The first concerns temporality and the operations of anachronism in Gaunt’s work, for she is writing at the fag ends of empire from a consciously belated position. The asymmetry of this relation locates her variously within and without the places and ideologies she seeks to connect. Further, while such ambivalence can regulate attachment and detachment, in Gaunt’s work it compounds the intensity of each, producing economies of excess and lack that may reflect back on colonialist relationality. A corollary of this temporal misalignment and the second organising focus of this discussion, is the disregulated affect of Gaunt’s work, which locates her variously too close to, and too distant from, the subjects of which she writes. She is excessively moved by certain kinds of experience—usually literary—and finds herself strangely unmoved by the world and people around her.

The third implication concerns the subject constructed by this temporal anachronism and disregulated affect. For the performance of this imbalanced subjectivity is integral to the colonial subject she embodies and celebrates as being the best equipped to exploit the

‘ungauged potentiality of resource’ (to transpose Furphy’s description of Australia), that is Jamaica, but who is, in fact, the exemplar of these temporal misalignments and disregulated affects. For although this subject has strong allegiance to the old world and the ethos of empire, she belongs more properly to the new. Gaunt and her work are thus marked by two related misalignments whereby the affective disregulation of too much or too little feeling is overlaid with the equally disjunctive temporalities of the outmoded and the modern.

Identification of these patterns in Gaunt’s work on Jamaica provides a gap or fissure through which to re-examine understandings of cosmopolitan colonialism in late modernity, which, in Gaunt’s case, are inextricable from the international passport of travelling and writing open uniquely to the white colonial subject. Accordingly, while she is resolutely imperial, she posits white colonial identity as greatly superior to that of the Briton at the metropolitan centre. Thus while the British Empire must continue to be expanded, its home subjects lack the wherewithal to do so. For Gaunt the manner in which they seek to transport old habits into new worlds renders them anachronistic and inflexible. So, too, in Gaunt’s account Jamaicans are compromised in their ability to realise prosperity. It is the modern colonial subject who is best placed to capitalise on opportunities, the subject, such as Gaunt herself, who is both at home in both the metropole and the dominions. It is the colonial who is best placed to shape and own the future.

Ultimately, however, I argue that the new lines of connection between the dominions of empire are arrested in Gaunt’s writing by a failure of sympathy. This failure is underscored, I propose, by the particular interconnections between her travel writing and her fiction and their respective qualities of transport and imaginative sympathy, a connection at the heart of modern fiction, and of the reading subject of modernity more generally.

Literary activity was Gaunt’s passport in a range of ways and she often makes connection between the triangulated structure of her literary subjectivity; the activity of writing by which she supported herself and her travels; and the experience which furnished her with new scenes for writing. These three domains of fiction, history and personal experience form and reform variously in Gaunt’s work, each in the service of the other. In her Preface to the 1915 collection of her previously published short fiction, *Ends of the Earth, Stories*, Gaunt makes explicit the connection between real events and writing fiction:

I do not know how other people write short stories, but for myself I seldom do it unless I come across an incident that interests me deeply or some scene that cries out to be illustrated. I know I never write a successful short story unless one of these conditions is fulfilled, so it comes that in collecting together this book I seem to be going step by step through my own life. (*Ends* 3)

She continues by outlining the direct connections between several of the stories and actual events of her life. This real-life anchor echoes the lessons in realist writing undergone by Laura in Henry Handel Richardson’s autobiographical novel *The Getting of Wisdom* (1910) where the nascent writer Laura is persuaded to abandon ‘second hand’ experience (the world of reading) to concentrate on her own environment and knowledge. The latter domain, which

is imagined as being unmediated by the artificial structures of fiction, is the proper subject matter for the modern writer. In this formulation, fiction derives from and follows reality.

Conversely, in the Preface to Gaunt's Jamaican memoir (1932) the reverse sequence is in play, whereby fiction supercedes actual circumstances and determines the course of her actual life:

I was once given to reading every book of travel I could lay my hands on. When I was a little girl a volume telling of the discovery of the Victoria Nyanza was in the book case beside which I was condemned to practise music three hours daily. Music was left out of my composition. The lure of the unknown was irresistible. I propped the book on the music rack and endeavoured to absorb it while playing my scales. To the detriment of my scales, as the voice of authority, calling me to order, reminded me pretty frequently. (vii)

This scene also directly echoes that in *The Getting of Wisdom* in which Laura avidly reads Ibsen while she practices the piano—but with telling distinction. Laura is transformed by Ibsen's dramatic realism to become a realist writer—an activity she has to literally travel elsewhere to realize at the end of the novel. Gaunt, on the contrary, is imaginatively transported by romantic travel tales that inspire literal travel, the experience of which is the basis for a literary rendition. In Gaunt's account of her early years, travel literature overpowers banal reality and spurs the young Mary to a life of adventure in reality: the imaginative transport propels the literal transport. The imaginative passport enabled by fiction is exchanged for, and fulfilled by, a passport in reality. Fiction is the spur to action and the literalisation of mobility. The young reader neglects her piano practice to be transported to other lands. As a result, another book, Gaunt's own memoirs, is now in place for the armchair traveller.

But Gaunt also points out significant differences between the travel writing of her youth and her own accounts, as a way of signalling her modernity. In accordance with Stephen Greenblatt's study of the 'marvelous' in early modern travel writing, the writings of Gaunt's youth were fantastical, and designed to inspire wonder in the reader (Greenblatt). Gaunt repeatedly rejects this form of travel writing as belonging to an earlier time. It is anachronistic precisely for the way it presents the experiences of the traveller as unmediated, and is relegated by her to an overdetermined understanding of the past: personally, it belongs to her childhood; historically, it belongs to the pre-twentieth century, to an earlier moment of empire. In place of this outmoded and fanciful practice, Gaunt claims simply to draw on both the world and the texts around her. In so doing, she authorises herself as a secular, practical realist, attuned and sympathetic to the present and its peoples.

She takes this refusal of naïve or semi-divine wonder to a telling extreme. In the opening pages of her Jamaican memoir she writes that her extensive travels have anaesthetized her and she no longer feels the surprise or wonder of travel. Certainly, the memoir records many irritations and discomforts of her travels—real or imagined, which caused great offence to Jamaican readers (*Mary's Little Lamb*). She writes of incapacity for wonder as an older woman, aged 67, in a moment where chronology, history and writing seemingly align. She is

both too old and too late for travel writing as wonder and transport. This belated subject, aligned with or embodying late British imperialism, is a colonial, a subject position that is thereby cast as part of the new world as well as wearing the faded mantle of the old. The colonial's dual allegiances to the imperial centre and its dominion construct a dual temporality where they can move between old worlds and new, and this is variously experienced as a form of mobility and a form of displacement.

Gaunt's representation of British subjects, those who know their home and who are not displaced, emphasises their unsuitability for the more mobile modernity. A stock trope of her descriptions is the British traveller who insists on imitating or replicating the circumstances of his or her own life while abroad. Where there are wonderful fruits for breakfast in Jamaica, they insist on traditional fry ups and then complain about their inferior quality. They favour the more cloistered interiors of Europe and so become hot, wear the wrong clothes and impose the same on their servants and workers. In all these ways they compare unfavourably with the colonial who can move across cultures without the presumed centrality of the metropole.

So, too, the colonial is better equipped to recognize potential for capital development in ways the Briton cannot. The manner in which Gaunt exploits and recycles her own life and writing is further testimony to her capacity for enterprise. She provides many instances of such economy with cross applications to both fiction and life (*Ends* 3-5). The metropolitan myopia, on the other hand, is a liability for empire. It is also outmoded. In their refusals or inability to engage with the New World, Britons are marked as pertaining only to the old. This is not the way that 'the twain shall meet'.

The non-white Jamaican is similarly marked as belonging to the past, though according to more conventional racism by which colonized peoples are cast as pre-historical and outside the temporalities of modernity. In Gaunt—and she shares this with many travel writers on Jamaica—the double pastness of those descended from slaves relates to both their African heritage, which precedes white historical account, and to the middle passage and slavery. Her identification is so strong with the past that she casts herself as a reborn slave or slaver:

Perhaps in a former life I too was a slave, or perhaps I was one of those careless folk who lived in one of the death-traps they called Castles on the Guinea Coast, and something in me made me wish to see them again, and having seen them, something certainly stronger than myself made me finish with Jamaica, the lovely island where Britain, though she does not seem to know it, is experimenting in negro rule.

Yes, surely, some haunting memory of a past life has shaped my career.
(*Where the Twain Meet* 2)

Her access to the past is rendered as occult and the association is so strong that Gaunt cannot see the people around her in the present but only in the past. In the opening pages of her Jamaican memoir she presents a bustling scene which includes a range of people engaged in various activities but she only sees the past: 'To me those pictures, coming one by one and ever changing, spoke always of the past. I saw the slaves moving down those excellent roads

which were only tracks between the sugar canes in the past days....' (3). Significantly here, the cinematic sequence of changing 'pictures' is produced by her greater mobility than those she observes, for she is being driven through the streets of Kingston. She writes: 'We drove on the evening because it was cool. As we came back it was dark and the lights from the car illuminated the sides of the road making there moving pictures framed by the darkness' (3). This explicit allusion to film also inserts a screen between herself and the world she observes as if in a darkened room of a cinema.

Another evening drive produces a more vivid encounter with the people in this conflation of their pastness and cinematic performance: She writes:

On the country roads of Vere it does not take the night and a motor light to bring back the past. It stalks along beside you in the broad daylight. The peasants step back from the roads with their hoes in their hands. They are road gangs, men and women, mending the roads, but I think of the slaves who came along when these roads were mere tracks. They hold in their hands uplifted as weapons, tools of a like description and cry 'Kill! Kill!'. (29)

The dramatisation of imagined events is more than deep feelings of connection or haunted sensations but repopulates the place with past occurrences, leaving no room in the landscape for the present to unfold. This relegation of people and place to an imagined past of course denies the present and the future. Gaunt hints that she glimpses her own failure in this respect. She tries to correct her vision of the slave rebellion:

Then I was ashamed of myself. Why should I picture these kindly folk doing as they might have done three generations ago when they had desperate wrongs to avenge—the wrongs there are bound to be when one man holds another abjectly as his chattel?

But I was always doing it—always wondering too what the dark people thought of life.

It is a very difficult thing to enter into the workings of the mind even of those we know best. Here in Jamaica I never could find out the point of view of the people who waited on me, never could discover why they told me the lies they did (30).

Gaunt's admission here is telling for she is conceding that her vision of the past, which shuts out the present, is offered in place of understanding the reality before her. Her reading about the past slave rebellions is more vivid to her than her own actual experience, indeed it limits and constrains that experience. Further, the present scene is not real to her because of an absence of imaginative sympathy. Sympathy belongs to the temporality of simultaneity, an alignment—or in spite—of space and time. For all her mobility she cannot cross over into the interior lives of the people around her. This is a repeated complaint in her writing on Jamaica: 'I tried to talk to them. I wished them well but I could not think, rack my brains as I would, of anything to say. There was no single point, it seemed to me, where our lives touched and we could meet on common ground' (45).

Where in the Prefaces to her short stories and memoir discussed above the reflexive or chiasmic exchange between literary transport and literal transport spurs and intensifies both domains, here in the record of embodied experience it diminishes both: the literary text prohibits full experience of the reality of the present, and the opacity of the scene and the people produces a silence, which in turn requires the substitution of text for reality. Part of the difficulty confronting Gaunt in her quest sympathetic connection with Jamaican people is her failure to differentiate between people and, as she observes: ‘To me it is a strange thing that I cannot explain to myself, that our pity is more easily aroused by the story of one individual case than by the tale of suffering in the mass’ (*Twain* 119). Sympathy is thus reliant on individualisation, which the operations of racism conventionally prohibit. Individualisation has also been the heart of realist fiction since the eighteenth century and Gaunt’s inability to sympathise with individuals reflects back on her own inadequacy as its bourgeois subject. As noted above, Gaunt constructs herself and her work within realist conventions yet it is as if she displaces the truth effect of realism onto herself as subject and admits to failure. If, as the *Daily Gleaner* asserts, Gaunt fabricated many of her realist effects (‘Mary’s Little Lamb’), why did she not fabricate connection with the people? Certainly the advertisement for the book claims that her depiction of the people is the strength of the book:

Indeed it is hardly a travel book, for travel sometimes suggests a dull page. It is a fascinating sketch of the life of the peasant people in that jewelled island in wood, in fruit, in spice and that valuable sugar cane which we, calling ourselves poor, ignore, is here set forth. Everyone in the book lives and moves (Times Department Store 4).

Gaunt herself begs to differ—from herself. This failure of sympathy provides another screen, keeping her at a distance from what may be an indecorous proximity from the Jamaican people. Both Gaunt and the advertisement for her Jamaican memoir distinguish in various ways between the dull affect of travel writing and that of the close and intense affect, namely fiction, such as the sympathetic identifications she invites in the fictional portrayal of Jamaica’s past in her swashbuckling romance of miscegenation, *Harmony: A Tale of the Old Slave Days in Jamaica* (1933).

In *Harmony*, Roger Thole, the owner of the Harmony Plantation, loves his illegitimate son, born to the slave Hesba, far more than his legitimate heirs. Thole is wary of his own excessive emotion: In an early scene, he comes upon his slave son on the plantation: ‘The planter picked him up with a croon of delight...he hugged him again before he set him down. He was beginning to realise that in all the world he loved no one as he did his little slave son’ (*Harmony* 26-27). When he looks at Hesba, he sees ‘the mother of the son he loved with a terrible love, a love that frightened him’. Furthermore, Hesba intuits Thole’s thoughts and the narrative asserts: ‘Their thoughts marched together’ (29). Here there is identification and sympathy across the boundaries of gender, class and race. Thole’s love leads him to pass off this little boy as the younger of his legitimate sons when the latter dies. It is this disorderly love and its consequences that propel the narrative. The end of the novel, beholden at least in part to the facticity of history and the sensibilities of its white readership, hastily separates the emotional entanglements from the imperatives of white genealogy in a manner that

requires the evacuation of all affective investment. But the ending cannot entirely belie the sympathies it has forged.

In the space of failed sympathy in her non-fiction, Gaunt interpolates fictional romance. The explicit performance of her failure and her deployment of textual replacement and reiteration simultaneously marks and covers the dilemma. It also returns us the temporality of belatedness. In her discussion of colonial travel writing on New Zealand, Lydia Wevers identifies the operation of a particular textuality constructed by allusions to earlier travel writing:

Most of the travel writing about New Zealand from the late 1870s was already overdetermined by the reiteration of travel routes, genre conventions and the expectations of a metropolitan reading public about what there is to see in the word and what to think about it. The Wonderland of the Antipodes was compared with Yellowstone, the Southern Alps with Switzerland, the Canterbury Plains with Kent to form what Mary Louise Pratt has called the ‘standard metonymic representation’ of iconic images of nature; a textual culture composed of layers of recorded journeys from which the topography and equivalence of New Zealand could emerge—reveled, recognized, mapped and brought home. (187)

As Wevers discusses, this reiteration occurs because of New Zealand’s relative belatedness as a ‘new discovery’. New Zealand, even more than other fabrications of travel writing, is a textual construction made by the rearrangement and re-calibration of circulating conventions. Writing even later, Gaunt’s work exhibits a similar overdetermination of performance, and her admissions of limitation testify to this anxiety. The result is a detached, collage-like travesty of earlier accounts of wonders. The privileged and mobile subject with access to international travel now metonymises that movement as cinematic sequences. They might as well stay at home and read or visit the cinema.

Gaunt’s sense of the breakdown taking place in her own texts is also, ironically, an incapacity to ‘distinguish between the author as a human being (whatever his self-characterization), the author as a producing writer, and his production’, which Edward Said identifies as a defining problematic of the modern writer (Said 224). Transposed into terms specific to Gaunt, Said’s three categories signal the impossibility for Gaunt of aligning the enterprising colonial subject who travels and writes, the realist subject who focalises the world and the people through intimate encounter, and the various genres she negotiated in both guises. The dilemma is marked by gender, a woman living by her writing: writing is a resource to shape a life and vice versa. As such and besides, Gaunt’s dilemma also folds into broader considerations of mobility, writing and sympathy.

In a discussion of literary globalization Simon During identifies the waning of the ‘literary subjectivity’ in globalized modernity, a particular subjectivity he traces from Laurence Sterne’s *Sentimental Journey* (1768) and which is founded on a nexus of privilege, mobility and social hope or progressivism—all qualities we see in Gaunt in belated form. During’s essay focuses on an exchange in Sterne’s novel when the English protagonist Yorick, in France, must obtain a passport because of the war between the two nations. It is a

characteristically humorous scene including a sequence of misunderstandings across the language and cultural divide. In effect, it involves the exchange of literature (Shakespeare) for the passport. For the French consul misunderstands Yorick's reference to his dramatic namesake in *Hamlet*, which he supplies as a attempted gesture of clarification. The Consul acts quickly to grant Yorick's request but not because of the universal language of literature, as Yorick supposes, but because the Consul thinks Yorick is the English King's jester in reality. As During charts, the exchange of literature for a passport, erroneously conceived and executed, is also founded on the imagined social privilege of Yorick and it is this privilege that ensures his safety and mobility across borders.

In his concluding comments During speculates on what he considers to be the corollary of the exchange of literary transport for actual transport, which is a waning of imaginative sympathy that underpinned the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novel. During advocates a revision of global literary writing and circulation, epitomised for him by Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* which, he argues, presumes that privilege and mobility are shared global characteristics. Accordingly, During suggests, these works shut off lines of communication between privilege and subalterneity at a global level; they diminish the capacity for identification or sympathy with others. He proposes another approach:

One form such lines may take is transportation by techniques of identification and sympathy. And those techniques are cultivated in literature as imaginative passport rather than literature as an exhibition of wonders; a developed literary subjectivity which today needs to be strategically marked off from literature in and for the globalized market. (39)

Gaunt and her work epitomise and perform this collapse of transport across genres and conceptions of authorship. She explicitly eschews the 'exhibition of wonders' for realist account but is stranded in the racist enclave that prohibits sympathy, a divide marked by the mobile and the immobile. When confronted by this impasse she fills the void with the wonders and horrors of the past, derived from past accounts and past fictions, underscoring the belatedness of her enterprise. Ironically, it is colonial mobility that enables her to represent her present time, even though she repeatedly rehearses her failure to be present in any given moment. The English may take their country with them, the Jamaicans belong to the past, casting the white colonial as the idealised figure of modern mobility - but this is the modernity that During identifies. Her rehearsal of its failures may prove the most productive site of her work.

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