

***Postcolonial Issues in Australian Literature.* Nathanael O'Reilly (ed). Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2010. Hardcover. pp. xii + 317. US\$114.99; E-book US\$61.99 ISBN 978 1 60497 711 0**

As a dedicated reader of postcolonial studies, I should know by now the importance of the local and its specificities. However, I took on the task of reviewing this book because of my immediate (local) reaction: 'This is new? Where are there NOT postcolonial issues in Australian literature?' The editor's Introduction quickly set me right: in the US, 'postcolonial' is not an established term, or if it is, it is regarded with more suspicion than in Australia (save for our occasional journalistic beat-up), and the location of Australian literature teaching in the academy is also not the same and not as tied to postcolonial discussion as here. There, the postcolonial is aligned with 'African, Caribbean, or South Asian literature' and teachers are often required to hail from those regions as well (3). O'Reilly suggests that Australia has also been marginalised within the field of postcolonial studies generally (perhaps a longer shot, but possible when one looks at the contents of 'postcolonial' journals). This collection of thirteen essays by Australianists teaching in the US, Japan, Spain, the UK, Korea, the Czech Republic and Australia attends to the particular complexities of Aboriginal and white settler relations and 'Second World' white colonial doubleness.

Bill Ashcroft's opening paper will be familiar to those who have followed his writing. He ranges across Patrick White, Peter Carey, David Malouf, Kim Mahood, Richard Flanagan and paintings by Louis Buvelot and Lin Onus, using José Rabasa's trope of mapping and his own 'metonymic gap' of localised language to suggest that Australia can be read as a site of 'alternative modernity' stemming from postcolonial struggle.

Nicholas Birns makes the unlikely pair of Jack Lindsay and Patrick White work to illustrate how Byzantium and other ancient / medieval cultures were deployed to create 'rival ancestries' that might break the habit of thinking that Western Europe was the inevitable source of colonial culture. Birns concludes with the *bon mot* that 'Postcolonialism differs from anticolonialism in that it insists things are not easy, that there are not binary dichotomies between colony and nation, oppression and liberation' and looks to the ironies of postcolonial medievalism as offering a creative reimagining of difference.

Per Henningsgaard extends his doctoral work in Western Australia to map postcolonial centre and periphery across national metropolitan and regional cultures. He presents Australia's cultural privileging of Sydney and Melbourne as a local instance of the global privileging of London and New York. The broad idea of postcolonial differentials of power applying across different levels of cultural production sound fine, but whether the 'regional' Tim Winton is 'postcolonial' relative to the Melbournite Christos Tsiolkas and both similarly regional/postcolonial in relation to the metropolitan Carey can be debated.

In "'Thick with Coded Testaments'", Turner Hospital's *Oyster* is subjected to a spatial analysis reliant on Martin Leer, Edward Said, Stephen Slemon, Graham Huggan, Homi Bhabha and some polysyllabic theorising of mapping. The novel self-consciously works images of space, boundaries and maps to both confess to the power of colonialist order and our complicity in it and look for modes of resistance to that

power by sliding ‘off the map’ and revealing the ‘magic’ of Western knowledge systems. White rural reticence mingles with Aboriginal difference to suggest an ambiguous ‘nuanced reading of potential futures’ (89).

Nicholas Dunlop’s reading of *Oyster* tidily abuts Lesley Hawkes’s ‘Spaces of Hybridity: Creating a Sense of Belonging through Spatial Awareness’, a more wide-angle view of white settler unease with Australia’s vast spaces that surveys *My Brilliant Career*, *Capricornia*, a story by Lorna Little and fiction by David Malouf and Alexis Wright to chart, with Paul Carter’s help, a process of approximation to the more integral relationship between Aborigines and the land.

This piece is echoed by Martina Horakova who reads Andrew McGahan’s *The White Earth* as an example of the white settler’s ‘Unbearable (Im)Possibility of Belonging’. Situating the book within post-Mabo anxiety, and resting on Linn Miller’s Kierkegaardian and Gelder and Jacobs’ Freudian ideas about troubled belonging, Horakova contrasts the pastoralist John McIvor’s obsession with possessing the land as a commodity with his nephew William’s more sensitive feel for place informed by awareness of Aboriginal tradition. However, she concludes that McGahan’s gesture towards Reconciliation fails: it shows how we need to hear all the contending histories of the country, but is sceptical about where that leaves us.

Rebecca Weaver-Hightower reads Carey’s *Oscar and Lucinda*, Greg Matthews’ *The Wisdom of Stones* and Kate Grenville’s *The Secret River* as ‘sorry novels’. The usefulness of her contribution is where she goes from pointing out the ambiguities in the texts: she uses Ana Freud’s ideas of defense mechanisms to argue that both writers and readers use the stories as ‘an arena for managing guilt, apology, and reconciliation’ (132) that acknowledge but also displace injustice onto the past and that (an interesting point that needed further elaboration) reading the stories itself ‘could act as an apology’ (138).

By this point, the reader may be wondering whether the postcolonial issues in Australian Literature only relate to British settlers, so Michael R. Griffiths’ look at Kim Scott’s *Benang* is a welcome shift, although it does concentrate on how the text exposes the colonialist ‘biopolitics’ of blood quotient and assimilation as promulgated by A.O. Neville. This is one of the more stimulating contributions in the book, combining close attention to the text with Foucault and the idea of iterability: the novel’s work ‘to reanimate the spectres of Aboriginal kinship buried between the lines of ... archival marks’ by repeating the archive, and the nation’s ‘repeating and reconstituting the problematic figures of its settler history’ (160) as a condition of its discovery of postcolonial dynamics that might lead out of past injustice.

Tomoko Ichitani considers how gender has been subordinated to race and class in Aboriginal writing and looks at Alexis Wright’s *Plains of Promise* and Melissa Lucashenko’s *Steam Pigs* as examples of attempts to correct such imbalance. Problems of the relationship between feminism and Black activism, Black activism and sexism are surveyed and the novels’ depiction of Aboriginal women determining their own identity amidst these tensions charted. I am not sure I go along with the more general conclusions drawn from the analysis, but the basic point is clear.

With all the talk of mourning and the uncanny, there had to be mention of the postcolonial gothic and this, courtesy of Katie Ellis who draws on Gerry Turcotte's work, appears in a reading of Jolley's *The Well*. Ellis's particular interest is the representation of disability in fiction, and she shows how this shapes Hester's dealings with Katherine and argues that the power dynamics can be read as correlative with the postcolonial. The textual analysis is strong and Jolley's use of gothic conventions made clear, but I felt the postcolonial connection needed further elaboration to be totally compelling.

Peter Carey's *My Life as a Fake* is one of his less commented-on books. Here Sarah Zapata tracks all the lies in its narrative arrangement, arguing that Carey deploys them in a theme of postcolonial exposure and undoing of fixed positions and official histories. Frankenstein-like McCorkle (Ern Malley) assisted by a Malaysian Chinese woman work to claim back identity from the Eurocentric creator Chubb (McAuley/Stewart). The ambiguity of 'true memory' and 'genuine forgetfulness' serve as means to escape from hegemonic colonialist knowledge.

Lies are the focus of the next essay, a reading of Rodney Hall's *The Second Bridegroom*, by Peter Mathews. With its forger convict protagonist and its devious female landholder, control of the text (of 'truth') is central to the novel, and the novel denies us firm hold on that. Its setting in convict Australia and colonised Isle of Man clearly connects the fictional struggle for ownership of the word with postcolonial issues, and the essay works to demonstrate Hall's ambivalence towards binaries of crude anti-colonial oppositionality. I enjoyed the analysis of the text but felt unsure about where the critic wanted to take us with the second bridegroom symbolism.

Lyn McCredden closes the collection with a survey of Australian poetry that takes part in a more widespread postcolonial process of 'dreaming another way of being and knowing' (274) that breaks with the violent imperialist past. She mounts a brief defence of McAuley (via *Captain Quiros*) as being more sensitive to the shortcomings of colonial dreams than he has been given credit for, asserts that Judith Wright's verse is more than an expression of white guilt and tokenistic gesture to reconciliation, and turns to poems by Tony Birch, Lisa Bellear, Sam Wagan Watson and Lionel Fogarty to map different strategies of resisting the imposition of colonialist systems.

The print production is good quality: the layout made for easy reading and I found only one typo. The editor did a good job of arranging the material, though there were moments where attention to detail lapsed: can a well be 'barren'; do we 'baffle a distinction'; and where in Australia is 'the sacred alligator'? A few times I felt that 'theory speak' had been let run too freely. The book has a collated bibliography at the end and an index that is accurate and useful. However, it is not as comprehensive as it ought to be: significant references and even central texts are missing—Bellear, Brewster, Fogarty, Gelder, Genoni, Huggins, Leer, Mahood, Moreton-Robinson, Neville, Slemmon, Sykes, Turcotte and Wagan Watson might well be included in any revised edition.

Reading this collection, one could come away with the sense that Australians all wander about shrouded in gloom, mourning our lack of belonging to the soil and haunted by guilt or loss. Martina Horakova does close her reading of *The White*

*Earth* with the point that Australian literature is transnational as well as postcolonial, and it would be at least light relief to have a chapter looking at our relationship with North America or with Asia; or one that recognises (as in McGahan's grunge writing) that many of us eke out our lives in cities and worry more about flat-screen TVs and partying. However, the focus on settler belonging does provide coherence to the volume, and one book can't do everything. Some of the general lines of analysis will not be new to most readers, but all the readings are sound and two or three articles do make significant contributions to existing work—which makes the whole volume a worthwhile addition to the bookshelf.

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