Postcolonial Issues in Australian Literature edited by Nathanael O’Reilly (Cambria Press, 2010)

Some years ago I opened the 1998 edition of the Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism and turned to the entry ‘Australian Theory and Criticism.’ This read: ‘Australia has produced no single critic or theorist of international stature, nor has it developed a distinct school of criticism or theory.’ Postcolonial content was listed under a section called Postcolonial Cultural Studies and there one found key names including Tiffin, Ashcroft, Stephen Slemon, and During.

Fortunately, time has moved on, but as Nathaneal O’Reilly demonstrates in his Introduction to Postcolonial Issues in Australian Literature the struggle to find a space for Australia in postcolonial studies in international academic institutions is not over yet. So this edition is a welcome intervention as the chapters demonstrate the diversity of research and approach in this area. The chapters move from the provocations of O’Reilly’s introduction and Bill Ashcroft’s ‘Reading Post-Colonial Australia’ to discussions of the work of Australian writers. It is a pleasure to read the creative work in Lyn McCredden’s concluding chapter ‘Colonial Knowledge, Post-Colonial Poetics,’ in particular Lisa Bellear’s poem ‘Mr Don’t Scratch my Rolex’ that McCredden says draws attention to the ‘bureaucratic circus’ that envelopes Aboriginal lives (270).

Ashcroft’s particular provocation is the ‘somewhat outrageous idea’ (17) of Australia as an alternative modernity. His position is that the field of Australian postcolonial studies could be pushed further than asserting the efficacy of postcolonial readings of Australian literary culture to deploying postcolonial theory to ‘make a claim for strategic value in coming to terms with the multiplicity of contemporary modernities’ (16). Claiming Australia’s position as a multiplicity of modernities may not be especially outrageous, given its Pacific Rim status, but Ashcroft’s account of the conflicts and transformation surrounding key discourses of place, history and language sets up a flexible framework for the following chapters that demonstrates that postcolonial studies, whatever ever else the field might offer, continues to represent important sites of anxiety for contemporary writers and critics. Several of the authors in this edition (see Rebecca Weaver-Hightower’s chapter) search for a subterranean stream of support for the ‘good settler’ even in works that famously critique colonist attitudes and institutions, noting that novels such as Peter Carey’s Oscar and Lucinda and Kate Grenville’s The Secret River are set in the past and so avoid a contemporary intervention in continuing postcolonial cultural tensions. Peter Mathews sets out a similar anxiety in his analysis of Rodney Hall’s The Second Bridegroom that reveals (for Mathews) a deep ambivalence beneath the paradigm of the denunciation of the excesses of colonial power.

The word ‘ambivalence’ is a constant refrain. The necessity for this refrain is clearly marked out however in ‘Need I Repeat?’ Michael Griffiths account of settler colonial biopolitics and postcolonial iterability in Kim Scott’s Benang. Griffiths argues that Indigenous culture is under constant threat of a colonial biopolitics that justifies the repetition of trauma in literary narratives. This threat extends to the history of tensions elucidated by Indigenous women writers and historians who have
tracked the way in which Western feminism privileged gender over race in Australia, with Tomoko Ichitani noting that the term post-colonial or post-colonialism has been criticised as inappropriate ‘to the conditions of Indigenous Australians’ (186).

Differing approaches are taken up in Nicholas Birns’s and Lesley Hawkes’s chapters. Birns’s in ‘Jack Lindsay, Patrick White, and Postcolonial Medievalism’ says that Australian writers such as Jack Lindsay and Patrick White thought ‘outside the historiographic box’ (41) and played with literary and philosophical traditions. For Birns, the process of postcolonial thinking can, and should, be widened to include Australian postcolonial medievalisms. Lesley Hawkes brings the postcolonial project back to the universal process of mapping in suggesting that spatial awareness, and its application, is critical to Australians attaining a sense of closeness and identity with the environment. The dislocation between how Australians experience the space of their environment and how this is represented on a map produces tragic results in narratives such as Capricornia. Hawkes shows how Indigenous writers, such as Alexis Wright in Plains of Promise, enter into this discourse via a different path. Nicholas Dunlop continues the references to spatial history as he searches for gaps in geographical realities in Janette Turner Hospital’s Oyster. Dunlop uses Paul Carter’s influential analyses of spatial history to consider Oyster and it would be interesting to interrogate Carter’s recent work in Ground Truthing: Explorations in a Creative Region in this context.

One of the successes of this volume is that it demonstrates the diversity of critical engagement in postcolonial studies. For example, Katie Ellis makes an interesting case for considering disability as a ‘narrative prosthesis’ in the context of the postcolonial gothic in the work of Elizabeth Jolley. There is a danger that such diversity produces a discourse so cross-grained that the concept of alternative approaches loses force, but the impact of this volume is that the various authors show just how much work there is left to do in Australian literature in relation to postcolonial issues. At the risk of adding to the complexity, it would be interesting to see a discussion of the role of demographics (admitting the problem that demography can be seen as another instrument of the colonial state) in relation to contemporary issues of postcolonialism.

The discussions are useful because they provide a succinct account of certain struggles in Australian writing and provide a valuable resource for thinking about the complex nature of Australian literary production and ‘elsewhere.’

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