Nettie Palmer’s South to South: Australia, Chile and Writing the Nation

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Abstract

This article explores Australian writer and critic Nettie Palmer’s presentation of the figure of Gabriela Mistral and vision of Latin American literature more generally. It compares changing experiences of women writers in the early twentieth century in Australia and in South America and connects these changes to their role in defining and developing concepts of national literature. Salter’s proposal for finding both national and international literatures via the echoes and resemblances between texts and authors is used as a starting point for identifying fruitful points of comparison in the specific case of Palmer and Mistral as well as the limits of the Australia-Chile association. The complex role of gender and race in the construction of postcolonial aesthetics is linked to differences and similarities in the colonial histories of the two nations and the instability of women’s identification with the evolving national discourse of the time.

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This article examines Australian critic, poet and diarist Nettie Palmer’s vision of Latin American literature and specifically of Chilean Nobel Prize-winning poet Gabriela Mistral. This moment of transnational engagement offers a point of departure for exploring the changing experiences of women writers in the early twentieth century and their agency in defining the nation. Nettie Palmer, a powerfully influential figure in Australian literary circles in her day, was a driving participant in shaping an aesthetic of Australian literature. She did so in dialogue with developments in international literature and emerging concepts of national cultures beyond Australia, an activity supported by her talents as a linguist. Her awareness of international culture was paired with active political solidarity at both a national and international level. Palmer’s use of Latin America as a comparison case is an interesting example of the role of the transnational in creating the national, both for its ongoing relevance today and as a way into understanding the diverse connections between creative cultures and colonial history.

Mistral, in addition to becoming a poet of global renown within her own lifetime, was a diplomat and a teacher who also wrote essays and letters on topics connected to Chilean and Latin American identity and the importance and nature of education. Palmer’s take on Mistral is relevant for understanding the connection between literature and the idea of the nation because of Mistral’s close, complicated association with Chile’s national culture in many areas of her life and work. Mistral is also useful to consider because of her poetic themes, including her ‘passionate engagement with ecology and geography’ in evoking Chile.¹ These provide grounds for comparison with the use of the land in Australian poetics. It is instructive to consider the close association of Mistral’s author-discourse with narratives around Chilean national identity, alongside her somewhat uneasy fit with emerging ideals of Latin American citizenship.

Artistic expression is increasingly understood as a mobile and multi-sited activity, reflecting alternative cultural geographies. Jacklin writes ‘critical connections between Australian and Latin American literature are few and far between’. This relationship is nevertheless an interesting one, with further attention coming not only from literary scholars but in many other areas. The comparison suggests valuable alternative perspectives on postcolonial cultures, referring not to the originating colonial power but to the processes of forming a relationship to place and to the repressed violence imbued in landscapes in the context of race and indigeneity. Reddaway suggests that, for New Zealand, Latin America provides a vocabulary to understand some of the surprising processes of postcolonial adaptation and reinvention of aesthetic traditions that were perceived to be exhausted in Europe itself. While Latin American and Australian/New Zealand comparisons have increased, they are not quite new, and decentring Europe in considering artistic transnationalism is far from unique.

Beyond those already mentioned, there are additional projects underway to trace historic and contemporary connections between the two regions, from early maritime routes through to economic partnerships, while others explore comparative politics, the history of international networks, and migrant experiences. Modes of considering history and culture across the Pacific rather than Atlantic and from South rather than North have begun to take root in a range of fields, even leaving aside the migrant artists and poets who have moved or continue to live between sites. Australia’s role in the global South is disputable, given its privilege and embeddedness in the cultural networks of the North. In looking at the first half of the twentieth century, Australia and South America are also in different stages in their relationship to colonialism, as well as being the products of divergent colonial processes. Australia was still deeply embedded in the British Empire, whereas Chile and its neighbours had already been through more than a hundred years of decolonisation, which included powerful threads of anti-Spanish sentiment within public discourse. However, colonial race relations and the position of Indigenous peoples in the process of nation formation, as well as the role of women in a masculinist modernisation still offer fruitful points of comparison, as Strodthoff has argued.

The ease of using the nation as a category for understanding culture entrenches the assumption that there is something called Australian literature. The national is convenient, however Salter proposed that instead of assuming commonality, literature be considered through a ‘network of similarities’. Salter uses Wittgenstein to argue that what makes Australian literature Australian are the “fibres” like themes, concepts and characterizations of individual works, that are then woven first as literary works and then as author-discourses. The “rope” then produced ... is Australian literature’. Extending this framework further gives us a relational approach to literature that goes beyond the nation. The foundation of international literature also emerges from echoes and resemblances in author-discourses, whence connections between the national and other literatures ‘will then reveal themselves’. Salter further writes that ‘the textual field of Australian culture is itself horizontal and does not simply end at Australia. The web of “family resemblances” that exists between the literary texts of any social group function in ways

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4 Irene Strodthoff, Chile and Australia: Contemporary Transpacific Partnerships from the South (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).
6 Salter 20.
similar to those that constitute Australian literature. Resemblances occur in texts, author-discourses, and frameworks of interpretation, supporting a transnational approach to understanding literature, especially when considering the relationship between texts, authors and the effects of changes that were global, even if uneven. Using this framework, international literature, just as national literature, becomes an outcome rather than assumption. Where the place of international literature might have been a no-place, a false universalism, examining it as the totality of a network erases the requirement for national literature to somehow both measure up to and distinguish itself from an abstract imagined standard.

The historical evolution of national identity in Australia and Chile is partly informed by gender and women’s participation in the early twentieth century. Women writers of the 1920s and 1930s still worked with a patchy genealogy of precursors. Part of their project had to be defining and justifying their position in the artistic culture and authorising their voices. Doll Castillo suggests that in Chile earlier women laid some foundations for women to participate in culture as writers of authority, but that generation brought about a previously unknown professionalization of writing for women.

Doll Castillo observes that strictly chronological interpretations of literary relations are limited, proposing instead more discursive analyses that consider sociohistorical context and also gender difference. Echoing the productive possibilities of Salter’s challenge to the national, her challenge to chronological literary criticism suggests that heterodox interpretation finds new relationships as well as new conflicts. The chronological connection made here, between 1920s and 1930s Chile and Australia, is not linked to the specific national setting. This expansion of focus allows the exploration of processes of change and similarities in the formation of postcolonial national stories in relation to global modernity. This, like Doll Castillo’s multigenerational approach, allows the consideration of not just context or individual experience, but writers as cultural actors and professionals who shaped their public selves according to the possibilities available to them. As cultural actors, furthermore, writers engaged with multiple cultural networks. Their lives and creations are locally situated, but that situation/location does not equal the nation. They can be at once profoundly more local and more transcendent than a national category would imply.

Cooke’s monograph on the Chilean-Australian comparison in the context of Indigenous poetry outlines a multi-site poetics. He accepts that texts are inextricable from the attachment to place, but argues that the relationship can be understood in more nuanced ways, rather than the place of production or place described defining a text and vice versa. He identifies nomad poetics as useful for comparing Mapuche and Indigenous Australian writers. Race is an essential component of national identity formation and is significant in the way both Palmer and Mistral create their poetics of place. However, the most relevant aspect of Cooke’s work for the present study is his adaptation of Ashcroft’s ‘transnation’ as that which escapes and exceeds the boundaries of the nation state, not easily limited within established categories.

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7 Salter 21-22.
8 Darcie Doll Castillo, ‘Escritoras chilenas de la primera mitad del siglo XX: trayectoria en el campo literario y cultural como criterios para una periodización de su producción,’ Taller de letras 54 (2014) 24.
9 Doll Castillo 25.
11 Cooke 21.
In applying this horizontal excess to literature, Cooke evokes Ramazani’s transnational poetics of ‘intercultural worlds that ceaselessly overlap, intersect, and converge.’ These concepts do not suppose displacement into a non-place, lacking specific roots. Indeed, Salter suggests that ‘post-colonial subjectivity’ is formed explicitly in relationship to place, and that art has a role in performing and reshaping the way that attachment is imagined, while refusing to fix it into permanency. An excess of ontological security in belonging, Salter believes, draws on mimicry of an imperial gaze. Cooke makes a similar critique of settler connections in Judith Wright’s landscape poetry, finding a profound sense of absence. Wright’s particular manifestation of post-colonial subjectivity is ‘the articulation of a progressive politics within conservative traditional structures’. It has been common in Australian poetry to speak about rather than from Australia. This connects to the repression of indigeneity in public discourse, and the racial aspects of articulating national difference are central to Chileanness and Australianness. Understanding the limitations of certain modes of post-colonial subjectivity can link to gender via the degree of radicalism or conservatism supposed in different writers’ positions within the national project and their roles in artistic culture.

As context for the analysis of gender, it bears repeating that as Mistral began her literary career in Chile, there had been a number of exceptional women antecedents and then a collective of women writers visible as a group and not only as individuals. Doll Castillo terms Mistral’s generation the modern group because they specialised as writers and engaged in a mature Chilean cultural field. This generation coincided with high levels of literary production, including by some middle class women, and a less limited cultural circle. In Australia this was a similarly active period in which, at least in novels, women were the most notable and productive writers working at the time, although many did so while residing abroad. The changing spectrum of publication possibilities coincided with the professionalisation of writing as a public office, with writers participating in a wide range of cultural activities. Nettie Palmer is not on the level of Mistral in Chile as a figure in the Australian literary landscape. She was a literary critic and minor poet largely recalled for fostering Australian literature as an editor, biographer, correspondent and critic who promoted Australian literary culture. That role, however, connects her trajectory to social change in Chile. Doll Castillo cites the increasing significance of the role of writers at that time as agents of wider culture, strengthening ‘the development of culture and mediating between cultural or artistic phenomena and the public or wider community’. Palmer was an active cultural curator, and her work in both literary and more general public debate combined a focus on the role of the writer, writers’ lives, and the ethical and social implications of cultural production. This aligns with the cultural activity reshaping Chilean society at the time. Palmer’s efforts to define Australian literature and personally encourage and publicly promote Australian writers contrast with Mistral’s use of

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13 Salter 16.
14 Cooke 38.
15 Cooke 70.
16 Doll Castillo 26. All translations my own.
17 Doll Castillo 33.
18 Drusilla Modjeska, Exiles at home: Australian women writers 1925-1945 (Pymble: A&R Classics, 2001 [1981]) 4–5. This, of course, was roughly the generation of Miles Franklin, Katharine Susannah Prichard, Christina Stead, and Marjorie Barnard and Flora Eldershaw, among others.
19 Doll Castillo 29.
20 Deborah Jordan, Nettie Palmer: Search for an Aesthetic (Melbourne: University of Melbourne, 1999) 120.
literature and self-fashioning of her image within the national culture. Palmer worked to invigorate Australian literary culture via a cultural network, which naturally influenced her evolving author-discourse and legacy but was not closely linked to her aesthetic project. Mistral shaped her own image and creative work in relation to Chile’s national discourse in ways that ended up altering the themes and preoccupations of Chilean literature as a national literature as a result.

Dixon notes that the idea of place ‘has been used in Australian literary criticism either to connect particular writers and their work with the idea of a national project and national canon, or to exclude them from it.’\textsuperscript{21} Palmer, and some like-minded contemporaries, sought to promote a concept of Australian national literature that contrasted with other more Bohemian, cosmopolitan or expatriate-minded writers of the time. She wrote that Australia’s meaning ‘lay in the hands of her writers, above all, to discover.’\textsuperscript{22} This emphasis on taking Australia as a creative focus seems to reinforce the division between a given national category and an international universal that Salter was critiquing. However, Dixon notes the nuance in Palmer’s position, describing it as a ‘strategic provincialism’ in vital contact with literatures from elsewhere.\textsuperscript{23}

Her focus on Australianness in Australian literature was connected to the urgent need she identified for a strong and systematic support system – critical, genealogical, editorial, and so forth – for Australian literature, so that authors need not repeat work already done nor labour in isolation. By putting so much energy into this secondary infrastructure for the dissemination and reception of Australian literature, her critical range created ‘an impression that the national literature exists in the same time and space as international writing, and that it can and should be judged from that broad perspective.’\textsuperscript{24} This vision is itself quite cosmopolitan, with an explicit local rootedness remaining the point of difference. Australian literature, while reflecting its location, should be considered as naturally in dialogue with the world. The value of idiom was to swiftly evoke Australian culture, but Palmer would readily compare such idiom to the nuances of reading Proust in France. Dixon argues that Palmer ‘locates herself as both a cosmopolitan and a provincial reader: she reads both Furphy and Proust from a local perspective, but also in dialogue.’\textsuperscript{25} Beyond critical egalitarianism, the secondary apparatus of a cultural industry also brought together the local and the global, positioning Australian literature in the same space as literature from elsewhere.

It is interesting to compare the complexity of this local-global artistic affiliation in South American relationships with Europe and especially France as sources of culture. France offered a more established genealogy of female participation in literary culture, and the international orientation of some women writers was partly a product of obligation rather than inclination, given the complexity of their reception at home and the limited domestic market. This reflects the general ambiguity of women’s ‘place in the nation, since their exclusion from national brotherhood meant that many ‘Spanish American women became heavily internationalist, and often antinationalist’.\textsuperscript{26} The place of Europe in South American and Australian literature echoes trajectories of racialised national self-definition, given the differences and the similarities in

\textsuperscript{22} In Dixon 13.
\textsuperscript{23} Dixon 13.
\textsuperscript{24} Dixon 14.
\textsuperscript{25} Dixon 14.
\textsuperscript{26} Pratt 31. Italics in original.
racial issues between Australia and Chile. For Chileans the mobilisation of race in national narrative was more complicated than for the generally Anglo-Celtic writers of Australia, who had more access to repression and denial – what Brantlinger terms the Great Silence in prevailing usages of indigeneity in Australian literary discourse.27 The racial tension in the Australia-Chile comparison is one major source of difference and of productive critique of white Australian writers’ engagement with colonial violence and with the land as the root of belonging.

Cooke’s postcolonial Australian-Chilean poetics challenges the engagement with the Indigenous past and present in the work of some of the most beloved and revered writers of both countries. However, the degree to which non-Indigenous writers of these decades engaged with the land as a space marked by displacement, violence, and alternative experiences and meanings did set out such questions as central to post-colonial culture, even if rarely doing justice to the contemporary living culture of their Indigenous contemporaries. Such writers contributed to the case for tackling the specificities of place in the construction of the nation.

The primacy of the land in national narratives is inextricable from ideas of masculine and feminine spheres of action. Jordan describes the way 1930s women engaged with national feminine ideals, either via reinforcing the pioneer image, or reappropiating it as ‘pioneering new fields’ of work and activity.28 Jordan identifies three modes of female nationalism: first, spiritual; second, resisting male nationalist essentialism; third, inevitably, as mothers. In their complex individual relationships to these available subject positions, Jordan suggests ‘white women were both colonised and colonisers – they took up a variety of positions in relation to the imperial centre and their own sense of spiritual and national identity.’29 Palmer downplayed strong imperialist sentiments when making editorial selections and amendments to others’ work, putting more emphasis on female citizenship in the public sphere, not only through mothering and family.

This considered reduction of overt imperialism and focus on areas of women’s public action facilitated a situated, historised view of culture, in which by ‘validating women’s active participation in their own culture and place, white women were developing the tools to come to terms with their colonial past’; Palmer’s particular inscription of this was through ‘environmental awareness, situated knowledge, validation of older women’s agency and a critical engagement with the evolving national culture’.30 Overall, this is not a strong action in favour of Aboriginal people but is gestures towards new ways of recognising the Indigenous past and present. Extending on these seeds of an alternative Australia, Jordan has also begun to reconsider Palmer’s own nature writing in the context of eco-criticism, one framework for linking the more positive aspects of Australia’s early and mid-twentieth-century landscape writing to the challenge that critiques of colonial violence make to the use of land in Australian national discourse. This approach suggests the limits of modernity as a totalising narrative; it is unable to absorb or negate all the subtleties of engagement with place. Modernity, Cooke suggests, fails to explain how to leave a place as well as how to be in it.31

The description of landscape and rural experience had similar importance in Chilean national discourse. Mistral’s contemporaries like Marta Brunet, Doll Castillo argues, had begun to pair

29 Jordan, Palmer’s present 108.
30 Jordan, Palmer’s present 109.
31 Cooke 27.
emphasis on nature with examination of the contradictions of colonial agrarian society. The treatment of land in the national imaginary – not always reinscribing an unalloyed colonialist geography – is an aesthetic common to Chile and Australia. Another similarity is the distinctiveness but not parochialism of local idiom, already mentioned among Palmer’s critical interests. Falabella finds in Chile too that analyses of the national in literature reinforced a distinctive idiom compared to the Castilian of Spain. Nineteenth-century Latin American thinkers had been preoccupied with how to understand their linguistic and cultural relationship to Europe without compromising their independence. One influential interpretation proposed contiguous language, not erasing Castilian from America but reconfiguring its limits and forms in order to make the language their own. Antipathy to Spain is stronger in 1930s South America than any ambivalence about Britain present in still-Anglophile Australia, but the drive to define Australia’s difference was accelerating.

Palmer is a particularly useful example for both the role of the land and linguistic distinctiveness. Her commitment to a kind of nature writing running somewhat counter to imperialist territorial projections complemented her interest in foreign languages as tools to explore literature and society in other cultures. Both infuse her engagement with emerging post-colonial cultures like Chile’s. Palmer’s suggestion that Latin America could provide a model for Australia serves as a starting point for the exploration of how resonances in texts, themes and author-discourses in post-colonial cultures work. Palmer, Jordan suggests, believed ‘the relationship between international and national literature could be seen in a third course, “to find out mankind for ourselves”’. A sense of the national arises from independent, non-subordinate perspectives that nevertheless feel themselves part of a global cultural network. Palmer is not alone in exploring such possibilities, and recent scholarship on 1930s Australia has revealed many transnational lives and cosmopolitan attitudes that inscribe interesting genealogies for Australia’s global connectedness.

She suggested Latin American literature offered a ‘prototype – a large-sized symbol of our own in Australia’. Palmer’s comparison presages Salter’s suggestion for international literature; acknowledging that some resemblances are superficial, she explains that by going into more detail ‘we come upon other resemblances, not so near the surface. But when once discovered all the more important for us. We too have had our problems of coming to terms with our environment.’ She finds in Latin American culture similar struggles to distinguish an independent literature in the modern era, throwing over the inheritance of established poetic diction and forms. The Latin American poet ‘had no wish to produce more pseudo-heroic poems about the past; that would be like purveying imitation antiques to adorn the bourgeois drawing-rooms of newly rich patrons, who didn’t know how to spend their money.’ How, Palmer asks, ‘was he to write in freshness and freedom?’ Though for the purposes of the present example it is more useful to say she.

Latin American culture had to move beyond Paris as inescapable cultural reference point. ‘What was the meaning of modernism if it had to depend on the passing phases of an alien culture?’

32 Doll Castillo 35.
33 María Soledad Falabella Luco, ‘Modernidad literaria y la entrada de las mujeres a la esfera pública en los discursos de Bello, de Hostos y Mistral,’ Revista chilena de literatura 82 (2012) 119.
34 Falabella 121.
35 Jordan, Nettie Palmer 135.
37 Palmer, Growth of Literature 116.
Palmer inquired. Excessive mimicry of European fashions supposed deliberate ignorance of the ground on which one stood. Palmer explicitly discusses the problems in evoking a mythic Indigenous past rather than the present, without, obviously, leaping out of her time and place to alight on Cooke’s more radical critique, and she still reproduced the racist trope of vanishing Indigenous cultures. She suggests, rather than mythic imagery, a land-based or ecological approach to understanding place. She lightly gestured towards the complexity of rural life without approaching the difficult interrelationship of the urban/rural dichotomy and racial politics in Latin America. The land, according to Palmer, allowed artists an escape from the mimicry inevitable in metropolitan poetics, though insights thus gleaned must then be brought to bear on the complexity of cities too. This process ‘would result in a general enrichment of national understanding’. As already suggested, there is scope for further work analysing the poetics of place in Mistral’s and Palmer’s poetry, along with that of their contemporaries, since the land is such a powerful signifier in the literary cultures of both countries. Mistral put forth a literary *mestizaje* in her poetic blending of pre-Colombian and Judaeo-Christian references, while melding both with the landscapes and living things of her continent. Further developing the ideas from Jordan’s initial essay into eco-critical interpretations of Palmer’s writing, both poetry and prose, we do find elements of the construction of the situated and specifically Australian self through reflection on the natural environment. The explicit engagement with the consequences of European presence in relation to Indigenous cultures is absent.

How do women writers work as subjects articulating the relationship between people and place and the meaning of this relationship in the national imaginary? Falabella describes the emergence alongside discourses of American difference of a new female subject, an educated woman with the authority to participate in the public sphere, and Mistral’s use of this subject position to promote her authority. A clear difference from Palmer was the importance for Mistral of establishing her credentials as self-taught and *mestiza* to fit the parameters of a modern Latin American subject. However, the image of Mistral in Chilean culture leads us into Palmer’s own take on Mistral. Palmer repeated the version of the poet as a symbol of Latin American culture, and interestingly she too phrased it as Mistral having ‘established herself’ as such, emphasising Mistral’s participation in public life, her consular postings, and ‘intellectual cooperation as a basis for international life’. Rather than exploring the thematic content of Mistral’s poetry, Palmer signals the possibilities inherent in Mistral’s dual positioning as a ‘devoted patriot’ who ‘was intensely aware of the world beyond the borders of Chile.’ This reproduces Palmer’s own combined focus on both home and away. Palmer, while mentioning a few qualities of the poetry – ‘personal and romantic’ with ‘tenderness of touch’ – mainly engages with the scope of Mistral’s life and the scale of her influence in Latin American culture. To understand Mistral’s role as a symbol of Latin America and as a travelling representative of Chilean culture, it is vital to consider the way she used national discourse in her self-presentation. She activated a series of racial identities deliberately and, some argue, strategically. Both racial and feminine markers she mobilised in her work and her image were an uneasy fit

38 Palmer, Growth of Literature 117.
39 Palmer, Growth of Literature 119.
40 *Mestizaje* is a culturally and historically specific term that refers both to the mingling of races in America and to the use of the idea of this new race in imagining Latin American identity. It carries with it the weight of the racial hierarchies established in the post-independence states, but as a critical concept also implies their instability and mutability.
41 Falabella 131
with Chilean national discourse, however, and the mother and teacher components of her author-discourse were adopted while other aspects of her life and work were ignored, but the use of racial identifiers at all is significant. Chilean literature’s more explicit if not always more successful engagement with colonialism’s foundational violence contrasts with whiteness and race as the repressed trauma of Australia. The idea of nature and the relationship to the land are central to national literatures in both countries; however, the extent to which this supposes an explicit appropriation or erasure of Indigenous histories is quite different. Cooke identifies in Chile simultaneous absorption and relegation, with acceptable indigeneity integrated into the whiteness of the Chilean nation while disruptive Otherness remains outside.\(^{43}\) Despite this variegation, the state itself is totalising, and Indigenous peoples are not permitted to retain their own boundaries and belongings, true also in Australia. Indigenous people’s cultures were employed where useful as signs of postcolonial difference, but denied their particularities. Race intersects with gender in defining national identities. Fiol-Matta’s *A queer mother for the nation* outlines elements that disrupted the conflation of Mistral with her public position, strategic though it may have been, as a symbol of Chile and representative of Latin American culture.\(^{44}\) Gender and queerness is one reason why the public and private lives of Mistral have often been treated separately.\(^{45}\) Mistral contributed to the parameters for belonging to Chile, but had an unstable belonging herself, and truly entered the Chilean cultural pantheon only after moving away to live abroad, reflecting once again women’s problematic and partial citizenship. Pratt writes of Mistral and her peers that they were ‘widely acclaimed, but never accepted’, and women more generally ‘were neither imagined as nor invited to imagine themselves as part of the horizontal brotherhood’ of the nation.\(^{46}\) Fiol-Matta argues Mistral’s queerness facilitated her assumption of a non-specific and encompassing maternity of the nation as a whole, and was in fact attractive as an additional entrée to primarily masculine spheres of activity.\(^{47}\) This maternal pose had a subsuming, totalising aspect, however, utilising indigenist discourse but tailoring racial identifications ‘to the state’s desire’, to promote *mestizaje* a la Vasconcelos, in service of unity and the maintenance of white power.\(^{48}\) Mistral’s identification with *mestizaje* and indigeneity is a form of queer pose, evoking the complexity of the citizen’s engagement with the state in Latin America.

Fiol-Matta’s critique echoes Cooke’s disruptive analysis of Indigenous themes in the poetry of Judith Wright, in that it constitutes a reinterpretation of an iconic figure in the national literary canon in terms of their racial politics and positioning, although Fiol-Matta is reinterpreting Mistral’s self-fashioning, rather than any modernist, totalising optic. Sepúlveda proposes a less radical critique of racial politics in her analysis of Mistral’s *Poema de Chile*, the nation-encompassing opus written largely from abroad.\(^{49}\) Sepúlveda, like Fiol-Matta, suggests that Mistral includes herself in an Indigenous or mestizo *we* (*nosotros*), but argues that she does signal the invisibility of the Indigenous past and present. Sepúlveda explores the problems of this invisibility in Mistralian poetics as a kind of unexpressed interior, something inside oneself

\(^{43}\) Cooke 3.  
\(^{44}\) Licia Fiol-Matta, *A Queer Mother for the Nation: The State and Gabriela Mistral* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).  
\(^{46}\) Pratt 36; 30.  
\(^{47}\) Fiol-Matta, *Race Woman* 493.  
\(^{48}\) Fiol-Matta, *Race Woman* 495.  
\(^{49}\) Magda Sepúlveda, ‘*Poema sin nombre, poema sin Chile: Mistral en Poema de Chile,*’ *Taller de letras* 43 (2008).
which is observing our failure to acknowledge it.\textsuperscript{50} Along a similar line, Pratt describes the way that a seeming infantilisation nevertheless incorporates an Indigenous character in a ‘dialogic, conflicted, continuously challenged’ relation with the poetic narrator.\textsuperscript{51} The unexpressed, the partial and the absent are essential elements of the construction of the national in literature. In analysing Mistral’s self-fashioning, Sepúlveda discusses her choice of the name Mistral, a cold European wind. Her poetry employs a wide variety of natural imagery, Sepúlveda writes, but to be a daughter of the wind is a particularly complex choice, it runs counter to unity and integrity.\textsuperscript{52} It moves and changes. Zaldívar finds a similar resistance to unity and feminine instability and duality in Mistral’s \textit{Locas mujeres} poems.\textsuperscript{53} Images she chose herself bring us closer to the multiplicity of Mistral. It is not possible to fix one image or story of her in place, in part because she has so been absorbed into the Chilean national imaginary – or inserted herself there. Like all symbols of national identity she is half-remembered and half-invented. While the choice to assume different roles and try on different metaphors is a cultural privilege, the mobility of the images on which Mistral alights, however momentarily, suggests the unresolved character of Chilean belonging.

In both her texts and her life choices Mistral engaged with the high-level construction of Chilean culture, both in its evocation in metaphor and in her direct negotiation with the powers of her day and education advocacy. She fused her artistic project with her civic one. In Chile, conditions that facilitated Mistral’s success and prominence were based on the convergence of artistic authority for women and modernising energies in a range of cultural industries. As Doll Castillo describes, new professional and political opportunities and educational reform meant that middle class women could make their voices heard in new spaces.\textsuperscript{54} Their authority had still to be negotiated, and the unevenness of modernity means this social change is not a total transformation.

Despite her advocacy, Mistral did not directly discuss the problem of uneven modernity for other women, though like Nettie Palmer she maintained correspondence with some number of her contemporaries. For Palmer, however, energetic participation in the women’s movement and promotion of women in both political and cultural contexts were central to her activity as an agent of the emerging national culture, and she wrote a lot in the women’s press and collaborated with feminists.\textsuperscript{55} Henry Handel Richardson even criticised Palmer’s political engagement for impeding her creative practice.\textsuperscript{56} Palmer saw with clear eyes that women’s increasing freedom would certainly be held up as the cause for a range of perceived social ills that emerged concurrently.

This difference in public feminism between Palmer and Mistral can be partly explained by the multiple elements feeding the national myths of Australia and Chile at the time. In engaging with problems of uneven modernity, Palmer had the luxury of taking women as a special category, whereas in Chile any critique around modernity and social participation immediately evoked issues of race in ways that remained more submerged in Australian discourse. The pioneering ideal allowed for white women to be partly encompassed in an emerging emphasis on resourcefulness defining the Australian character. Palmer identified adventurousness and coping

\textsuperscript{50} Sepúlveda 28.
\textsuperscript{51} Pratt 43.
\textsuperscript{52} Sepúlveda 29.
\textsuperscript{53} María Inés Zaldívar, ‘Gabriela Mistral y sus “locas mujeres” del siglo veinte,’ \textit{Taller de letras} 38. (2006).
\textsuperscript{54} Doll Castillo 34
\textsuperscript{55} Jordan, Nettie Palmer 128
\textsuperscript{56} Jordan, Nettie Palmer 124

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with hardship as parallel threads in Australian womanhood, finding the second was ‘woven into the textures of our life today.’ As can be inferred from the powerful influence of Arielism in South America, the self-definition under way there at the time incorporated a stronger emphasis of sensitivity and woundedness, alluding to the effects of domination. That allusion carries a forceful undertone of racial difference. National definitions in Latin America also incorporated to varying degrees radical liberatory political projects that informed concepts of the subject as citizen and continental inhabitant.

This is not at all to minimise Mistral’s significance as a woman who declared herself an important writer and demanded her work be taken seriously. Mistral did use her position to legitimise not only her own work but also literary possibilities for successors. She explicitly identified the need to contribute to a coherent genealogy of women writers and to promote women’s literacy and literature. In Chile, however, this legitimation necessarily drew on the rural and the mestizo as central elements of Chileanness, and in Mistral’s case of her Chilean maternity as a mother of national knowledge and national language. To tie this strategic self-presentation back to the challenge for women writers of authorising their voices in the public sphere, Cabello Hutt claims that Mistral inserted herself into the cultural centre as a letrado (man of letters), declining to occupy what had been women’s spaces: she was among the first women of letters. The simple teacher who occupied herself with educating her nation was a role she created, but in fact, Cabello Hutt argues, she was highly ambitious and engaged with public discourse from adolescence, using the spheres of public debate that were available to her to bring her name to prominence.

In Chile, Doll Castillo suggests, women of Mistral’s generation tended to join established cultural fields rather than remain outside or in conflict with the existing regimes because they could not afford to be on the margins. The increasing professionalisation available to women writers as cultural actors also meant, however, that they started to participate in supplementary activities such as diplomacy and conferences outside Chile, giving them more economic options. In Mistral specifically Cabello Hutt argues that this gives rise to a reformist rather than revolutionary social commentary. Mistral’s engagement with uneven modernity was focused on humanising its effects, rather than a more radical resistance, suggesting that industry should not exploit, oppress, nor leave behind the poorest citizens, and that children must be protected and culture fostered. In Cabello Hutt’s accounting of Mistral’s position, however, she promoted this ethical modernity at least in part by establishing herself as a model of ethics, integrity and hard work, in the accepted Latin American mode for the writer as public figure.

Palmer, in contrast, was neither a mother to nor model for the nation and did not aim to be, evaluating her personal literary powers more humbly, though her influence as a critic and letter writer is undeniable. She can be seen, however, as a precursor and advocate for the next generation of Australian writers. Palmer worked to establish a framework for Australian literature and culture more broadly, as a cultural agent and writer, as a critic of conservative government, as a feminist, and via active promotion of social justice. She was limited by a lack

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57 Jordan, Nettie Palmer 130
58 Falabella 135.
59 Falabella 137.
61 Cabello Hutt 54.
62 Doll Castillo 36
63 Cabello Hutt 59.
64 Cabello Hutt 64.
of personal wealth and the demands of supporting her family alongside husband Vance, whereas Mistral’s fairly swift acceptance as a writer and cultural actor, at least once she was safely expatriated, meant she could ultimately cast aside the financial concerns of her early years. Given Palmer’s smaller audience and lesser literary authority it was both more vital and more viable for her to organise politically and to try to shape the direction of the nation by promoting the voices of others. Palmer was engaged on the left, and did some work with Aboriginal Rights activists as well as for labour rights and the like, though obviously without employing the kind of racialised discourse of national identity-forming in Chile and other Latin American nations around mestizaje. Palmer worked and corresponded with those she felt could give voice to a national project she would support, whereas Mistral was already in her lifetime emblematic of the Chilean national project. The two women took different paths, with their different talents, but at parallel moments in terms of the emergence of women’s voices in the national imaginaries of their respective nations. As Modjeska outlines, analysing women writers from this era gives us insight into the ways people ‘were acting out their lives in a class and patriarchal society, [the] values and ideas by which they made sense of their lives, but which at the same time tied them to dominant social structure and values.’ This applies to race just as to gender. Their words give us a space to understand women’s voices in processes of postcolonial identity formation. The discourses surrounding particular authors allow us to interrogate sites of critique and change, and to find resonances beyond the national. Both Palmer and Mistral questioned the primacy of a masculine national image, and made substantial sallies in the struggle for interpretive power for women, though Mistral did so more directly in her own name. As Pratt describes in her analysis of Mistral, ‘patriotic writings by women ... cannot easily be read back into the domestic sphere, for they take as their very subject matter the impersonal entity of the nation-state; their authorial voice is that of the citizen.’ Palmer and Mistral, and others like them, used transnational change to support their right to imagine their nation.

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65 Modjeska 20.  
66 Pratt 42.
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