

INTRODUCTION

AUSTRALIAN LITERATURE AS POSTCOLONIAL LITERATURE

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Postcolonial Issues in Australian Literature presents thirteen new essays that address many of the numerous ways in which Australian literature is postcolonial and can be read using postcolonial reading strategies.¹ The collection addresses a wide variety of Australian texts produced from the colonial period through to the present, including works by, among others, Henry Lawson, Rolf Boldrewood, Miles Franklin, Xavier Herbert, Jack Lindsay, Patrick White, Francis Webb, James McAuley, Judith Wright, David Malouf, Elizabeth Jolley, Peter Carey, Richard Flanagan, Rodney Hall, Andrew McGahan, Kate Grenville, Tony Birch, Kim Scott, Alexis Wright, and Melissa Lucashenko. The chapters focus on works by Indigenous authors and writers of European descent and examine numerous postcolonial issues, including hybridity, first contact, resistance, appropriation, race relations, language usage, indigeneity, immigration/invasion, land rights and ownership, national identity, marginalization,

mapping, naming, mimicry, the role of historical narratives, settler guilt and denial, and anxieties regarding belonging. The essays emphasize the postcolonial nature of Australian literature and utilize postcolonial theory to analyze Australian texts.

The primary objectives of this essay collection are to emphasize and examine the postcolonial nature of Australian literature. Within postcolonial studies, literature from South Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean is privileged, causing the literature of settler societies such as Australia, Canada, and New Zealand (and to a lesser extent South Africa) to be marginalized, ignored, or excluded. This collection provides ample evidence that Australian literature is indeed postcolonial literature, that it deserves more recognition as such, and that postcolonial reading strategies provide immensely productive methods for analyzing Australian texts. Moreover, the collection hopes to fill a gap in postcolonial studies. While numerous collections of essays on Australian literature have previously been published, most of them have focused either on an individual author, such as Andreas Gaile's *Fabulating Beauty: Perspectives on the Fiction of Peter Carey*, or on specific themes, such as David Calahan's *Australia—Who Cares?* Essay collections focusing on the postcolonial nature of national and regional literatures have also previously been published, such as Violeta Kelertas' *Baltic Postcolonialism*, Joan Aaron's *Postcolonial Wales*, and Laura Moss' *Is Canada Postcolonial? Unsettling Canadian Literature*. However, *Postcolonial Issues in Australian Literature* is the first collection to focus exclusively on Australian literature as postcolonial literature.

This project developed out of my experiences as an expatriate Australian pursuing graduate work in Australian and postcolonial literature in the United States. When I began to seriously investigate Australian and postcolonial literature, it quickly became clear that both fields are marginalized within the American academy and that Australian literary studies is marginalized *within* postcolonial studies. Many English departments in American universities do not employ a single scholar who specializes in postcolonial literature. Moreover, I do not know of any scholars who are employed by an American university for the primary purpose of

teaching and studying Australian literature; Australianists in the American academy research (and occasionally teach) Australian literature as an adjunct to their primary roles as teachers of, for example, American, British, and/or postcolonial literature.² Moreover, to my knowledge there is not a single PhD program in the United States in which Australian literature is a formal specialization. To make matters worse for would-be scholars of Australian literature, it is not uncommon for senior faculty members to dismiss Australian literature as “not a real field of study,” “merely a branch of British literature,” or simply “not worth studying,” to quote just a few of the remarks I have encountered.

The marginal status of Australian literature within the American academy more broadly and within postcolonial studies specifically is clearly evident in the American academic job market. The 2009 Modern Language Association Job Information List (JIL) did not contain a single advertisement containing the word “Australian” or the phrase “Australian literature.” In 2008, the JIL contained two advertisements that listed Australian literature as one of several acceptable specialties; within the last half dozen years, I have not seen or heard of any other open positions at American universities that listed Australian literature as a possible specialty. Scholars of Australian literature who wish to work in the American academy are limited to applying for positions as specialists in postcolonial, world, or Anglophone literature.³ However, such positions often stipulate that the successful candidate must specialize in African, Caribbean, or South Asian literature and sometimes must be proficient in a language from one of those regions.

There is clearly a bias within postcolonial studies against scholars who focus on literature from the settler colonies, especially Australia, Canada, and New Zealand.⁴ The great irony of the situation in the American academy is that the United States is itself a postcolonial nation and a settler colony; however, for a great many reasons, none of which I have the space to discuss here, the literature of the United States is not often read as postcolonial. Although American universities are not legally allowed to stipulate in job advertisements that they seek to hire a candidate of a particular nationality, ethnicity, or race, there is much anecdotal evidence

to suggest that search committees seeking to recruit a postcolonial studies scholar often prefer to hire scholars who not only specialize in the literature of Africa, the Caribbean, or South Asia but also hail from those regions. A department chair confided in me that the search committee for a postcolonial studies position that was advertised as open to scholars specializing in the literature of any postcolonial nation had actually decided before the search began that the successful candidate must not only study African, Caribbean, or South Asian literature but must also be a native of one of those regions. Unsurprisingly, the successful candidate was an American-educated scholar from India.

The bias within postcolonial literary studies in favor of African, Caribbean, or South Asian literature is so pervasive that some postcolonial theorists, such as Robert J. C. Young, have gone so far as to attempt to define postcolonialism in a manner that excludes settler colonies altogether. Young claims that the “third world is the postcolonial world” (16), identifies the postcolonial world as being comprised of Africa, Asia, and Latin America (including the Caribbean) (4, 17), and claims that “tricontinental” is “a more appropriate term than ‘postcolonial’” (17). Young defines “postcolonial” in a manner that excludes settler colonies, despite the fact that he begins his book by posing questions such as the following:

Do you feel that your own people and country are somehow always positioned outside the mainstream?... Do you sense that those speaking would never think of trying to find out how things seem to you, from where you are? That you live in a world of others, a world that exists *for* others? (1; original emphasis)

Such questions surely resonate with many Australians, Canadians, and New Zealanders, who often feel marginalized and ignored, yet Young fails to acknowledge that the citizens of the postcolonial settler colonies share such sentiments with non-Westerners.

Young’s refusal to acknowledge the postcoloniality of settler colonies is nothing new; almost two decades ago, Alan Lawson pointed out that “so-called Third World critics and theorists” have been reluctant to grant

settler cultures “a place on the table of cultural repression, dispersal, and interpellation” (157). Interestingly, Young does not cite the postcolonial theorists Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (two of whom are Australian, and the third an Australian resident) despite the centrality to postcolonial studies of their work, especially *The Empire Writes Back*. Graham Huggan, a leading postcolonial theorist and critic who has written extensively about Australian literature, notes in his recent book *Australian Literature: Postcolonialism, Racism, Transnationalism* that “[i]t is sometimes forgotten that one of the foundational critical texts for postcolonial literary studies, *The Empire Writes Back* ... was written by three Australians” (28).⁵ Henry Schwarz, an American critic, argues that *The Empire Writes Back* “canonized” the term “post-colonial” in academia (14). Gaurav Desai and Supriya Nair, the editors of *Postcolonialisms: An Anthology of Cultural Theory and Criticism*, also present a version of postcolonialism that favors Africa, South Asia, and the Caribbean and largely excludes the settler colonies. The words “Australia” and “Australian” do not even appear in the index to Desai and Nair’s collection, and of the thirty-seven essays presented in the anthology, only one deals with Australia. Moreover, the essay that focuses on Australia, Pal Ahluwalia’s “When Does a Settler Become a Native? Citizenship and Identity in a Settler Society,” does not address a single work of Australian literature. The non-Australian neophyte student of postcolonial studies encountering Desai and Nair’s anthology could certainly be forgiven for believing that Australian literature is not postcolonial literature, for that is the message that the collection sends.

Anna Johnston and Alan Lawson argue that “the exclusion of settler colonies from postcolonial analyses” constitutes “an erasure of colonial difference and complexity” (367). They contend, moreover, that “[t]he argument that settler colonies are not admissible as postcolonial ... involves a privileging of one kind of colonial experience over others,” forestalling “an understanding of the various manifestations of colonial activity” and functioning as “a kind of postcolonial exoticism” (367). Thus, to exclude Australia from the realm of the postcolonial is to literally and metaphorically narrow the field, limit the breadth and depth of

exploration, and privilege a particular way of being postcolonial.⁶ Narrow definitions of “postcolonial” that exclude settler colonies such as Australia not only serve to marginalize rich bodies of literature and literary criticism, they also ignore and/or obscure the fact that there are many kinds of postcolonialism, many types of postcolonial societies, and many ways for texts to be postcolonial. One of the most prominent and influential postcolonial theorists, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, acknowledges that Australia is part of the postcolonial world and that Australia’s postcoloniality is complex (xv, xviii). As Brian Edwards argues, “[J]ust as there is no monolithic postmodernism there is no single post-colonialism and nor should there be” (142). In this volume, I adhere to Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin’s broad definition of “post-colonial,” which they describe as covering “all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day” (*Empire* 2). Thus, according to Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin’s definition, all Australian literature is postcolonial, broadly speaking, since all Australian literature has been produced in a culture impacted by “the imperial process.”

However, while insisting that Australian literature is postcolonial literature and deserves equal status with the literature of other postcolonial nations, such as India, Nigeria, and Jamaica, I wish to acknowledge that Australian literature can be both postcolonial *and* not postcolonial and feel that insisting that Australian literature as a whole is solely postcolonial or not is reductive and essentialist. Clearly, many works of Australian literature are postcolonial in terms of subject matter and technique, and Australian society is postcolonial in many ways. However, many Australian texts do not engage with postcolonial issues at all, and Australian society can legitimately be viewed as other than postcolonial; for example, many Indigenous Australians understand Australia as a colonial or neocolonial society. In her essay “Black on Black,” Indigenous author Melissa Lucashenko addresses colonialism and Indigenous land ownership, arguing that labeling Australia “post-colonial” is “the biggest crock of shit I’ve been asked to swallow in a long time,” since two years before the publication of her article, the Queensland government “used its legislative powers to put 12 percent of the state off-limits to

native title claims ... is that post-colonialism? Cos, if it is, it feels a lot like colonialism to the Indigenous owners" (115).⁷

Likewise, in his essay "Covered Up with Sand," Indigenous author Kim Scott expresses doubt that contemporary Australia can be considered a postcolonial society due to a number of factors, including the tiny percentage of Australians who are descendents of the Indigenous peoples, Australia's failure to become an independent republic, the lack of power afforded to Indigenous peoples within Australian society, and the lack of a truly hybrid culture that blends Indigenous and colonial cultures (120–121). Scott's argument reveals an interesting set of definitions for a postcolonial society and points to just one of the many ways the term "postcolonial" can be defined. As Huggan puts it, "[W]hile Australia is postcolonial with respect to its former British colonizers, it remains very much colonial or, perhaps more accurately, *neo*-colonial in its treatment of its own indigenous peoples" (27; original emphasis). In her essay "I Still Call Australia Home: Indigenous Belonging and Place in a White Postcolonizing Society," Indigenous scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson describes Australia as a "postcolonizing society" and notes that she uses the verb "postcolonizing" "to signify the active, the current and the continuing nature of the colonising relationship that positions" Indigenous Australians "as belonging but not belonging" (38). Moreton-Robinson acknowledges the complexity of attempting to define Australia as colonial, postcolonial, neocolonial, or postcolonizing, noting that "[t]here may well be spaces in Australia that could be described as postcolonial but these are not spaces inhabited by Indigenous people" (30).

However, a distinction should be made between Australian society and Australian literature. Just because Australian society is postcolonial (or not), it does not necessarily follow that Australian literature is postcolonial (or not). Thus, while it seems imprudent to declare that Australian literature as a whole is not postcolonial (the scholarship in this volume and many other publications clearly proves otherwise), likewise, it would also be a mistake to claim that all Australian literature is postcolonial (which is not the same as declaring that Australia is a postcolonial society). However, it seems reasonable to claim that *most*

Australian literature is postcolonial and most Australian literature can be better understood through the application of postcolonial reading strategies, regardless of whether or not one believes that Australian society is postcolonial.

In his recent article “After Postcolonialism,” David Carter questions the continuing usefulness and relevance of postcolonial literary studies and claims that “to some extent literary postcolonialism now feels like a discipline from an earlier historical moment” (114). Carter argues that “postcolonial theory ... has not proven sufficient (and in some cases not even necessary) to our studies and knowledge of colonisation, imperialism and their various ‘post’ formations” (116). Australian academics such as Carter are certainly not alone in questioning the contemporary relevance, ongoing usefulness, and future of postcolonial studies. In May 2007, *PMLA*, the journal of the Modern Language Association, published a roundtable discussion entitled “The End of Postcolonial Theory?” in which seven postcolonial scholars debated whether the field of postcolonial studies is “over.” Such a discussion seems remarkably premature, especially when one considers the large number of articles and books published in postcolonial studies each year⁸ and the fact that many English departments at American universities are hiring postcolonial scholars for the first time, adding courses in postcolonial theory and literature, and adding postcolonial theory and literature to their doctoral programs as a specialization and comprehensive exam field.⁹

One could argue that postcolonial studies is expanding and becoming more influential, despite its marginal status, rather than experiencing its death throes. The contributions in this volume and in numerous other recent publications demonstrate that postcolonial theory and postcolonial analyses of Australian literature continue to be useful, relevant, and innovative. In fact, the future direction of Australian literary studies and postcolonial theory and criticism are almost certainly closely intertwined. As Huggan argues in his conclusion to *Australian Literature: Postcolonialism, Racism, Transnationalism*, “[P]ostcolonialism has much to offer Australian literary studies” (146). Huggan notes that “the influence of postcolonialism on Australian literary studies” has already

“been significant” and suggests a transnational postcolonialism as the way forward, advocating for a “more nuanced” analysis of the literature of settler colonies (which, he notes, has been undertheorized) and the amalgamation of “postcolonial and critical race theory” (146–150). It is my hope that the chapters in this volume make a significant contribution to the ongoing development and future direction of postcolonial Australian literary studies.

While I have chosen not to group the contents of this collection into clusters of chapters focusing on named themes, such as hybridity, resistance, and indigeneity, I have ordered the chapters in a way that I hope will allow the reader to ascertain the volume’s main aims and to make interesting and fruitful connections between chapters. Thus, the collection begins with Bill Ashcroft’s “Reading Post-Colonial Australia,” which presents a detailed and important argument for reading Australian literature as postcolonial literature. By examining “postcolonial medievalism” and regional literature, Nicholas Birns and Per Henningsgaard both push the scholarship of Australian literature in new and fascinating directions, shedding light on underexplored topics. Nicholas Dunlop and Lesley Hawkes explore issues of postcolonial space, mapping, and belonging through their analysis of works by Janette Turner Hospital, David Malouf, Xavier Herbert, Miles Franklin, and Alexis Wright. Martina Horakova examines the issue of non-Indigenous belonging, while Rebecca Weaver-Hightower addresses notions of white guilt over the displacement and harsh treatment of Indigenous peoples. Michael R. Griffiths theorizes settler colonialism, race relations, and indigeneity in his analysis of Kim Scott’s *Benang*, while Tomoko Ichitani examines Indigenous subjectivity in novels by Alexis Wright and Melissa Lucashenko. Katie Ellis makes a significant contribution to the fields of disability studies, postcolonial studies, and Australian literature through her analysis of disability in Elizabeth Jolley’s *The Well*. Sarah Zapata provides a European perspective on Peter Carey, one of Australia’s most important contemporary novelists. Peter Mathews makes a subtly provocative argument about postcolonialism in his chapter on Rodney Hall’s *The Second Bridegroom*, and Lyn McCredden provides a fascinating

concluding chapter with her discussion of postcolonial poetry by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian poets.

The thirteen contributors hail from Australia, Asia, North America, and Europe, making the collection truly international and demonstrating the global interest in Australian literature. Clearly, Australian literary studies is not a field in which research is conducted solely by Australians or Australian-based scholars, nor should it be. A quick perusal of this volume's bibliography will provide ample evidence that scholarship on Australian literature is produced by researchers from many nations and published in many venues around the world. The seven non-Australian contributors to this volume provide a rich variety of fascinating perspectives and insights, demonstrating that Australian literature is a global concern (in every sense of the phrase).