



UNIVERSITY
OF WOLLONGONG
AUSTRALIA

University of Wollongong
Research Online

Faculty of Arts - Papers (Archive)

Faculty of Law, Humanities and the Arts

2009

Special issue: Australian Literature in a Global World - Introduction

Wenche Ommundsen

University of Wollongong, wenche@uow.edu.au

Tony Simoes da Silva

University of Wollongong, tony.simoedasilva@utas.edu.au

Publication Details

Ommundsen, W. & Simoes da Silva, A. J. (2009). Special issue: Australian Literature in a Global World - Introduction. *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature*, Special Issue 1-7.

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library:
research-pubs@uow.edu.au

Special Issue: Australian Literature in a Global World

Introduction

WENCHE OMMUNDSEN AND TONY SIMOES DA SILVA

University of Wollongong

This Special Issue of *JASAL* is based on the 2008 ASAL conference ‘Australian Literature in a Global World’ at the University of Wollongong, the conference theme in turn inspired by an ARC Discovery project, ‘Globalising Australian Literature’, currently conducted by a team of researchers at the same institution. The overall (and hugely ambitious) aim of both conference and research project was to explore the effects, on the national literature, of different aspects of globalisation: transnational flows of people, ideas and cultural forms; globalisation in the publishing and education industries; the global marketplace for cultural production. The papers tap into a vigorous and, by the time of the conference, already mature and nuanced debate about the future of Australian literature, a debate which had seen prophets of doom spelling the decline, or even impending demise, of the national literary paradigm pitted against voices of optimism hailing a new era of national/global interaction with unprecedented opportunities for readers and writers. These debates are not unique to Australia. British fiction has, according to James F. English, also had to reposition itself in a ‘world literary space’ which encompasses both the culturally diverse literature being produced within the UK, and increasingly transnational markets and circuits of critical and creative exchange.¹ The debates have been both productive and problematic, problematic because of a tendency towards hyperbole, political grand-standing and historical amnesia – a tendency Graham Huggan refers to as ‘globaloney.’ Huggan is not the only contributor to remind us of the dangers of generalisation and the limitations of any critical or theoretical category invented to make sense of the complexities of exchange across nations, language groups or cultural traditions. While responding to the conference theme, these papers in fact offer an important and timely correction to the globaloney and attendant anxieties which have crept into literary debates in recent years. They also provide ample evidence (if such evidence was ever needed) that the critical and scholarly conversations surrounding Australian literature are not confined to narrow ranges of cultural nationalism but engage with critical categories (including the national) from perspectives which are methodologically flexible and at the same time alert to historical, geographical, cultural and generic specificities.

Lydia Wevers delivered the Dorothy Green lecture at the ASAL 2008 conference, entitling her essay ‘The View from Here’, Wevers explores the conference’s focus on place, literature and nationalism through an analysis of reading positions and what she calls ‘categories of readers’. ‘Being a reader’, she states, ‘is a form of self-fashioning.’ Setting the scene for her paper through a quirky take on her own position as a New Zealander who reads Australian literature—‘that makes me just about a category of one’—Wevers aims to bring together in her essay the multilayered ways in which readers and writers meet, and fall away from each other. Of Green, for example, she remarks that she was equally passionate in her likes as in her dislikes, a characteristic that both drew Wevers to the Australian critic’s writing and made her aware of its inflexibility. She writes: ‘As a New Zealand reader, engaging with the problematic

idea of a ‘national’ literature, Green speaks to my own experience, though I have a greater catholicity than she appears to about what gets read.’ Wevers’ essay raises some provocative issues about the way readers *and* writers ‘fashion themselves’ but are in turn shaped by that process. She concludes the essay by noting that ‘[t]hough readers live in a global world which offers the illusion of boundlessness and the opportunity to fashion and refashion the self, the entangled economies that animate a national literature are necessary to the cultural and intellectual work of being a citizen.’

In the paper ‘Australian Literature Inside and Out’, based on his 2008 Barry Andrews address to the ASAL conference, **Nicholas Jose** recalls early efforts, by Barry Andrews, by Jose himself, and by others, to encourage the study of Australian literature in different parts of the world, from Europe to China and beyond, and speculates on the benefits of opening the national literature to scrutiny from the outside: ‘Different cultural contexts generate different textual readings that are valuable for just that reason.’ Pondering the well-publicised anxieties surrounding Australian literature in recent years he advances the hypothesis that these debates were caught up in the ‘coercive agenda’ which seemed to define the national culture during the Howard era and from which a great many writers and critics were keen to distance themselves. Among the dissident writers Jose refers to as the ‘black swans of trespass’, he includes several who because of their cross-cultural background find it difficult to identify with established traditions. In his discussion of Asian Australian (or Asian/Australian, or Asian-Australian) writing, he laments the ‘clumsy’ language we have invented to conceptualise such cultural formations, at the same time as he argues for a new Australian literary history in which the ‘energising inscription’ of this writing figures both inside and outside the national literary culture, calling into question national and transnational categories alike.

Lindsay Barrett draws on the memories of a visit to the *Alte National Galerie* in Berlin to undertake a comparison between the writing and lives of the American Stephen Crane and Australia’s Henry Lawson. Recalling his reaction to a painting by the German Impressionist Max Liebermann (1847-1935), one he describes as eliciting a sense of uncanny familiarity, Barrett proceeds to tease out the layers of meaning in the persistent work of ‘reading memories’ that rebound between the work of Crane and Lawson. Significantly, this focus on Crane and Lawson allows Barrett to map out an interesting array of connections between readers and texts, and the intricate, often unfathomable webs of relation that develop between them. Like Wevers and Jose, but also others such as Genoni, Barrett brings into relief the power of place, time and national ideology in the creation of a reading position. Barrett explores how the writing of two almost archetypally national(ist) writers resonates so strongly across geographical and cultural barriers. He concludes:

Stephen Crane and Henry Lawson have come to play definitive roles in the literary histories of the two nations in which they originated; Crane as the chronicler of America’s loss of wide-eyed innocence, both in the killing fields of the civil war and on the disappearing frontier; Lawson as the poet watching the seep of anomie throughout the once mighty Australian Bush. In this sense both were very national writers. But at the same time, in the broad sweep of the cultural history of modernity, the experiences of which Lawson and Crane told were also very much part of a shared story.

Arthur Upfield, writes **Carol Hetherington**, was ‘the first example in our literary history of a home-grown author with international status.’ In a carefully researched paper she examines the reasons for Upfield’s international success and in the process exposes as fallacies three frequently advanced theories about the reception of this work: that he was virtually ignored in Australia; that his American success came as a result of the US troop presence in Australia during World War II; and that his fame was due to the American ‘paperbacking’ of his novels. While Upfield’s Australian characters and settings are crucial to his stories, they were not, according to Hetherington, its unique selling point overseas. His international success came as a *crime* writer, not as an *Australian* writer: ‘Genre not geography was the central factor.’ Upfield, she concludes, is ‘essentially significantly as an Australian export, rather than an export of Australia.’

Elaine Minor, in her paper ‘Christopher Koch: Drawn to Comics’, points to an apparent contradiction between the writer’s opinions and his work. While deploring the effects of popular culture (‘films, comic strips and hopelessly bad contemporary novels with social messages’) on children, Koch in fact allowed his own childhood love of comics and boys’ adventure stories to inform both the narrative technique and the story-line of his novels. Tracing the debates surrounding comics in the 1940s and 50s, Minor points to parallels with the anxieties caused by popular culture in more recent decades: its detrimental effects on young minds, its potential for debasing literature, its ‘un-Australian’ fascination with America and hence its threat to the national culture. Koch, she argues, has made ‘the generational shift to the other side of the fence’ in these debates, and in his efforts to talk up the literary qualities of his work has found himself denouncing one of his key formative influences. Reading *Highways to a War* as ‘a nostalgic footprint from a lost childhood,’ Minor argues that the novel provides an outstanding example of Koch’s ability to skilfully ‘fuse together the seemingly contradictory natures of ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture.’

In her essay on Patrick White’s *Riders in the Chariot* (1961) and *The Solid Mandala* (1966), **Lorraine Burdett** explores the novels’ reflection, ‘both implicitly and explicitly [of] a preoccupation of postwar American literary fiction: the experience of the individual loner whose identity lies in peril at the hands of a collective narrow-minded consciousness.’ She focuses especially on what might be described, somewhat simplistically perhaps, as the Americanisation of Australia in the 20th century, and sets out some of the ways in which White’s writing engaged with these themes. Of particular note in Burdett’s essay is a detailed analysis of a tension in White’s writing between a debt to a European literary tradition and a growing recognition of the influence of American popular culture in Australia. As Burdett writes, White’s position reflects ‘fears of the rapid spread of suburbia, trends of mass consumption and the danger posed by invasive material matter, working alongside the existence of localized socio-bureaucratic organizations such as clubs, lodges, and church groups.’ In a comparison with Philip Roth, she proposes that both writers are concerned with the impact of synthetic culture on the human self, its veneer perhaps a metaphor for the increasing lack of depth in modern life.

In ‘Dreaming Phantoms’, **Laura Joseph** examines two recent works by Antipodean authors Alexis Wright and Elizabeth Knox. Her essay argues that Wright’s *Carpentaria* and Knox’s *Dreamhunter* series are works that ‘call up the matter of region and the waste of modernity to unsettle the form of nation’. Specifically, she proposes that the novels constitute significant interventions into an ongoing and widespread concern with the nation that characterises contemporary Australian and New Zealand fiction. The

originality of Joseph's thesis rests on its juxtaposition of works produced, respectively, by an Australian Indigenous author and by a white New Zealander, a Pakeha. The essay offers a nuanced and theoretically informed reading of two contemporary literary texts that have attracted a fair deal of critical attention, bringing into relief the politicisation of literature in postcolonial settings such as Australian and New Zealand.

Michael Jacklin, who works as the principal project officer on the multicultural subset of the AustLit database, opens his article 'The Transnational Turn in Australian Literary Studies' on a note of bemusement: 'I wonder why, in this transnational turn, multicultural literatures have not been accorded more significance.' Charting the decline of 'multiculturalism' and simultaneous rise of 'transnationalism' as critical paradigms, he is not so much concerned with critical terminology, however, as with the fact that with this shift an important dimension of literary transnationalism seems to have fallen by the wayside. Australian literary studies, he argues, persists in its neglect of the large body of texts emanating from non-English background communities. His illustrations from Arabic-Australian and Hispanic-Australian writing speak eloquently of the vast, but virtually untapped literary traditions awaiting critical scrutiny:

There is a wealth of literary material originating in this country, and circulating both locally within cultural communities and internationally across transnations, in languages other than English, to which Australian literary studies in its transnational phase can turn.

Addressing himself primarily to the conference's concern with a national literature, and its focus on the power of national critical networks to define certain forms of writing, **Paul Genoni** reads Gerald Murnane through a complex set of relations of production and reception that situate his paper within a well established tradition of reading Australian literature in relation to an international critical framework. Genoni is especially keen to juxtapose the reception of Murnane's writing in Australia and abroad, and in this way teases out some of the interesting echoes between contemporary Australian literary historiography and A.A. Phillips' pronouncements on a 'cultural cringe' (1950).² He takes on the confusing, often misleading and not particularly helpful attempts to read Murnane less through his novels than with reference to his political views or the company he keeps. Almost by default, Genoni highlights the enduring parochialism that continues to inform the response to Australian writing that opts for not engaging with the discourse of nation and national identity. Noting that '[t]he point of the paper is not to defend Murnane's reputation, either national or international, but to consider his international reception as an indicator of the possible future of national—or post-national—literary fiction', he sets up a comparison between the way Murnane is read within Australian critical circles and the reception his work has garnered in the US, the UK and Scandinavia. Genoni thus highlights Murnane's 'essential' Australianess—his fiction reflects intrinsically his experience of being Australian—while situating his work within a body of 'post-national' Australian literature.

Delia Falconer uses her paper 'The Poetry of the Earth is Never Dead' to reflect on the writing collected in her recent edited volume *The Penguin Book of the Road*, and its relation to the 'globalised architecture' of the road. Quoting Meaghan Morris, and with particular reference to the American road story as the inevitable generic touchstone for both writers and readers, she highlights the 'positive unoriginality' of a writing that

‘self-consciously and ironically foreground[s] the very process of borrowing and adaptation.’ Just as the road story maintains its productive dialogue with the road, so the Australian road story, through its original unoriginality, maintains an ambiguous, improvised and productive dialogue with its literary forebears. Peter Carey’s ‘American Dreams’, in which the performance of tired forms of national identity moves from cultural bricolage to tourist spectacle to fabricated nostalgia thus becomes a paradigm of sorts, a model for a new type of national expression in which in the very act of capitulating to the global recreates the national cultural space as cunning transnational interaction.

Scott Brewer notes in ‘A Peculiar Aesthetic: Julia Leigh’s *The Hunter*’, that ‘[e]cocriticism has lent much impetus to resurgent interest in place’ and draws on this observation to undertake a re-evaluation of the representation of themes of extinction and loss. Specifically, Brewer examines the complex ways ‘*The Hunter* articulates the idea of place (an idea which, in this instance, happens to be Tasmania) with a globalised ecological consciousness...’. Working within an eco-critical model, Brewer is especially concerned with the dialectical relationship between ‘place and ecological thinking’ and the novel’s representation of the themes of loss and extinction. In his essay Brewer ‘aims to show how, by intensifying metaphoric abstraction and pointing towards the gaps in our representations of place, *The Hunter* constructs a peculiar aesthetic of loss’.

In his essay, ‘Indigenous Australian Literature in German Some Considerations on Reception, Publication and Translation’, **Oliver Haag** offers a meticulously researched overview of the publication of Australian literature in European languages other than English. Haag focuses exclusively on the translation of Indigenous Australian writing, and takes into account a range of key indicators, notably genre, gender, dates of publication, language and publisher. At the heart of Haag’s project is a desire to show how Indigenous Australia is packaged, received and consumed internationally, a phenomenon particularly topical in the context of a European setting that looks increasingly multicultural. Haag shows how the success attained by writers such as Sally Morgan, Oodgeroo Noonucal and others often is possible only at the cost of an exoticisation imposed by the imperatives of European book markets. Such work of literary historiography should prove indispensable to anyone researching the reception of Indigenous Australian writing specifically but also Australian literature more generally. Translation is never a one-sided transaction.

C.A. Cranston spent from February to April 2008 in India, on an Australian Studies Fellowship from the Australia-India Council. Based at the University of Madras, in Chennai, Cranston was expected to teach a course on Australian writing and for this purpose drew on a curriculum of largely well-established works. In ‘From Shanty to Shanti—Teaching Australian Literature in India’, Cranston undertakes what is part critical reflection, part meditation on her experience as a teacher of Australian writing in India. In particular she draws on this experience to consider one of the conference’s main thematic threads, the idea of ‘selling Australian literature to the world’, questioning the premise that literary writing is an adequate means for that purpose. She proceeds to tease out the implications of teaching Australian writing to a body of students with a different cultural knowledge base. For Cranston, teaching Australian fiction and poetry in India made her keenly aware of the risks of cultural (mis)translation, and of the contextual framework that texts carry with them. Recalling

the reaction of her students to the strong Christian undertones that inflect some of the works, for example, she argues for a pedagogical approach that considers the complexity of teaching as an Australian in India, working with texts saturated in a seamless Australianness now under close scrutiny in Australia itself. She concludes: '[t]he challenges are real; and because the selling of Australian literature to the world is a proposed academic activity, it carries with it accountability far beyond textual boundaries.'

In 'The Locatedness of Poetry' **Lyn McCredden** questions the global/local dichotomy, and particularly the tendency, within a rhetoric that pits the cosmopolitan against the parochial, to overlook the interconnected and culturally porous nature of these seemingly opposing terms. She finds in the poetry of Tony Birch, Sam Wagan Watson and Lionel Fogarty a preoccupation with the particularities of the local which is crucial, she argues, 'as a measure by which to sift the high rhetoric of national, cosmopolitan, globalising discourses.' Reading the locatedness of these poets against a 'stately conjuring act for the nation', the Government's 2008 *Apology to the Stolen Generations*, she warns that the 'resounding rhetoric of the modern nation in its relation to a global audience' should not be allowed to overshadow the 'woundedness of the past' or the 'insistently located remembering' which through the Indigenous poetic voice returns to haunt the nation.

In the final essay, **Graham Huggan** revisits the gloom/boom hypotheses of recent Oz lit controversies, declaring that each side of the debate is afflicted by its particular variety of 'globaloney', the tendency to make sweeping and distorting statements about globalisation. The problem, as he recognises, is that 'it is often quite difficult to expose the workings of globaloney without perpetrating some version of other of globaloney oneself.' Acknowledging the complexities surrounding national / transnational interactions, he argues that while 'Australian literature has always been transnational,' it is also the case that 'cultural nationalism continues...to provide the ideological bedrock for debates about the future of Australian literature.' In Huggan's discussion of expatriate writers Germaine Greer and Peter Carey, local, national, transnational and global combine to produce the unsettling effects of shadow-boxing, raising thorny issues of authenticity, falsehood and, ultimately, undecidability. He concludes on a hopeful note, however, arguing that while the term 'global' has acquired some rather unfortunate baggage and thus has become 'less useful than it appears', the appeal to 'transnational literacy' retains a powerful explanatory force in relation to the national literature:

Australian literature isn't *everywhere* (how could it be?) but a sizeable part of it is *elsewhere* than Australia, and this particular recognition of its dispersal, which should at least provide some kind of safeguard against perceptions of its diminishment, can only be to the good.

As the editors of this special issue of *JASAL*, "Australian Literature in a Global World", we hope that the collection will prove a stimulating read and that it will contribute to ongoing debates about 'the future of Australian literature'. Having done so at the conference's closing session, we wish to acknowledge once again the support of the ASAL Executive, of CAL (Copyright Agency Limited) and of the Faculty of Arts at the University of Wollongong. To all the contributors, a big 'thank you' for responding to our requests promptly and always graciously. Finally, we would especially like to thank Jenn Phillips for her untiring work with

the organisation of the ASAL 2008 Conference and with the preparation of material for publication; and for her endless patience and forbearance.

NOTES

¹ James F. English (2006). 'Introduction: British Fiction in a Global Frame.' James F. English, ed., *Concise Companion to Contemporary British Fiction*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1-15.

² [Phillips, Arthur Angel](#) (January 2006). [A. A. Phillips on The Cultural Cringe](#). [Melbourne University Publishing](#). ISBN 0-522-85221-1. <http://www.mup.unimelb.edu.au/catalogue/0-522-85221-1.html>.