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Philosophy, Canonicity, Reading

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Abstract

The cover image for this issue of JASAL is a wall sculpture by Brisbane-based artist Donna Marcus, *From Alice Springs to Weipa* (1999), an installation comprising five colour-blocked grids made from discarded anodized aluminium kitchenware that has been painstakingly collected and reassembled. Each grid is named for a regional Australian city—Alice Springs, Mount Isa, Cloncurry, Normanton and Weipa—and the individual works are linked together in the work by their place in the colour spectrum, shading from red through orange, yellow and green to blue. The installation suggests a journey across Australia's remote northern region, from the heart of the Northern Territory, through a series of mining hubs, each denoted by a proper noun, to remote north Queensland, near the Gulf of Carpentaria. Marcus's work draws on the tenacious codings of cartography in our accounts of "Australia", and sets these alongside other kinds of coding—for instance practices of nomenclature and collecting, the aesthetics of the colour spectrum, the persistence or the opposition of domestic and primary industries and their relation to historically changing concepts such as landscape—to suggest something of their arbitrariness, as well as their surprising beauty.

Keywords

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The cover image for this issue of *JASAL* is a wall sculpture by Brisbane-based artist Donna Marcus, *From Alice Springs to Weipa* (1999), an installation comprising five colour-blocked grids made from discarded anodized aluminium kitchenware that has been painstakingly collected and reassembled. Each grid is named for a regional Australian city—Alice Springs, Mount Isa, Cloncurry, Normanton and Weipa—and the individual works are linked together in the work by their place in the colour spectrum, shading from red through orange, yellow and green to blue. The installation suggests a journey across Australia's remote northern region, from the heart of the Northern Territory, through a series of mining hubs, each denoted by a proper noun, to remote north Queensland, near the Gulf of Carpentaria. Marcus's work draws on the tenacious codings of cartography in our accounts of "Australia", and sets these alongside other kinds of coding—for instance practices of nomenclature and collecting, the aesthetics of the colour spectrum, the persistence or the opposition of domestic and primary industries and their relation to historically changing concepts such as landscape—to suggest something of their arbitrariness, as well as their surprising beauty.

We have chosen Marcus's work to introduce this general, or un-themed issue of *JASAL* in order to bring into play the ways it complicates and extends our responses to familiar objects, spaces and practices. Without wanting to claim anything as stable as an analogous relation with the artwork, we are nonetheless drawn to the ways it allows us to announce an editorial interest in the processes of collecting and ordering, and a concern with the ways that the field, whether disciplinary or more literally topographical, is construed differently at different times and by different agents, its contours becoming mobile and its subjects and objects changing. This sense of the field is suggestive for us of the disciplinary terrain of Australian literary studies, which has shifted fluidly and considerably over the past half century in response to changes in the larger discipline and the institutions where it is practiced, as well as in the broader cultural field signaled by the proper noun 'Australia'. To pursue a related analogy, this issue of *JASAL* provides a snapshot of the field of Australian literary studies in 2012-2013 in the diversity of topics and texts being considered at this juncture, the methodologies deployed, as well as with the range of authors and institutional bases producing this work. While the essays overlap only here and there in terms of subject-matter and thematics, there are nonetheless cross-overs and resonances, as well as stark divergences in the ways they approach and quantify the question of the matter of 'Australian Literature'.

The issue opens with two pieces addressing the work of contemporary novelist Gail Jones: Robert Dixon provides an attentive and expansive reading of *Five Bells* through its contexts and intertexts, as well, he explains, as through the connections that must be made with 'the theoretical issues that preoccupy [Jones] in her essays'. As one of the first scholarly examinations of this acclaimed novel, this important essay explores in revealing detail the resonances Jones's novel sets up with Slessor's iconic poem of Sydney, 'Five Bells', with Virginia Woolf's modernist exploration of bodies moving through the city, *Mrs Dalloway*, and with the mid-century epic *Doctor Zhivago*, then extends these through and in light of Jones's stated concerns with trauma theory, psychogeography and the cosmopolitan dimensions of Australian writing and World Literature. Maria del Pilar Royo Grasa's interview with Gail Jones provides a timely and fascinating extension of Dixon's critical study, drawing together the threads of Jones's always captivating philosophical thinking and

her lyrical prose. Royo Grasa's thoughtful questions engage Jones to comment further on her writing practice, in particular through her interest in poetry, questions of community, the aesthetics of trauma, and the place of the novelist's own memory in her work.

The concern with canonical authors shared by the next three essays in this volume is complicated by their divergent approaches. Bridget Grogan's essay revisits perhaps the most iconically canonical Australian author, Patrick White, subject of renewed scholarly and public interest in recent years, and most particularly in 2012, the centenary of his birth. Working from a focused and informed understanding of current theoretical work on the body and its significance for questions of narrative, ethics, and selfhood, Grogan's essay provides a tightly argued and compelling argument for the importance of the corporeal across White's fiction, tracing the differing modes of embodiment informing White's diverse cast of protagonists and dismantling in the process an imagined opposition between White's grasp of the material body and his metaphysics. Grogan's essay shares an interest in the capacities of fiction to work philosophically with Dixon and Royo Grasa's engagements with Gail Jones; this quality is also seen in Victoria Reeve's absorbing study of the role of 'heartlands' in the work of Kim Scott and Peter Carey. Reeve makes use of a range of theoretical and philosophical studies of what she calls 'narrative emotion' to examine the sense of place and the anxieties associated with being 'out of place' generated by *Benang* and *Jack Maggs*, providing gripping new readings of both these works, and arguing that Carey's novel generates a more constrained sympathy, while Scott 'offers the possibility of a wider perspective of heartland as the site for future reconciliation'. Michael Ackland's discussion of Murray Bail, on the other hand, takes up the novelist's interest in matters and persons philosophical, through a study of five characters from Bail's 2008 novel, *The Pages*, to argue that questions of human knowledge and individual conduct in the world 'must be deduced', as his essay puts it, 'from the life-choices [Bail's novel] depicts, as well as from the traditional link between philosophy and personal conduct—currently out of favour in the academy but not forgotten by Bail.'

Christos Tsiolkas's standing as a major—indeed canonical—contemporary novelist notwithstanding, the issue moves away from the Australian literary canon at this point with the next group of essays taking up the question the range and diversity of reading practices, from the category of the middlebrow, through the persistence of the cultural cringe, to popular modes and texts. Mandy Treagus reads Tsiolkas's hugely successful *The Slap* through the lens of its queer engagements which she argues are enacted not simply through the depiction of multiple sexual practices and lifestyles, but also through the ways the novel hovers between the literary domain and writing that is 'highly relevant to "ordinary" Australian life', taken up 'in arenas outside the strictly literary, such as in the columns of daily papers and on news television'. Michael Sharkey moves decisively into the terrain of popular fiction with his discussion of the writing and the writing lives of Margaret Fane and Hilary Lofting. His essay provides an intriguing overview of writers who have been completely overlooked until now by literary critics, but perhaps even more significant is the insight it provides into the field of popular and middlebrow writing, and the dynamics of overlooked and neglected writers within the national canon. Jay Daniel Thompson's discussion of the grunge fiction novels *Subtopia* and *The River Ophelia* focuses on the account they provide of urban and suburban space, abjection, and the edges of 'Australia', which is envisaged through the essay as an outside that is yearned for by the protagonists of these otherwise very different novels. Jan Zwar's essay diverges most palpably from the

established conventions of literary analysis in its engagement with non-canonical work. Zwar draws on the 'new empiricist' methodologies that have arisen around the emerging digital archives to examine quantitative data generated by Nielsen BookScan on the sales patterns of Australian narrative non-fiction between 2003-2008, and provides an absorbing account of how the literary marketplace operates in relation to larger literary (and non-literary) networks and institutions.

The final essay in the issue returns us in some sense to the canonical through its focus on Alexis Wright's acclaimed *Carpentaria*. Diane Molloy contributes to the growing scholarship on this important novel a discussion of *Carpentaria*'s treatment of the question of time and its use of humour through a consideration of its carnivalesque elements. And *Carpentaria* provides a link, finally to this issue's review essay, by Anne Maxwell and Odette Kelada. The essay provides an extended account of and response to Alison Ravenscroft's 2012 *The Postcolonial Eye*, tracing its arguments in relation to 'writing as a white woman to interrogate and make visible whiteness'. The complexities of voice, knowledge, ethics and reading inform both Ravenscroft's book and this critique of it, both drawing on the wealth of insights that postcolonial studies have brought to literary analysis, and refining the deployment of these in relation to writing and reading in Australia. The debates opened up by both the book and this review essay are in the end central to the field of Australian literary studies as it has shaped itself across recent decades, complementing and subverting discussions by and of white readers and writers in ways that are necessary and rarely without difficulty.

Finally, this issue sees the return to *JASAL* of 'Notes and Furphies', which was in the print incarnation of the journal and will now again become a regular section publishing short research notes and questions on Australian literature and literary culture. Items for this section will normally be a few paragraphs and will invite commentary from readers. It will be peer-reviewed like the rest of the journal. As *JASAL* editors we would like to take this opportunity to thank the new editors of 'Notes and Furphies', Frances Devlin-Glass and Susan Lever for the extensive support they continue to provide for the journal, most particularly this really valuable opportunity for research exchange. We hope that our readers take up this opportunity, and the other offerings of this issue.

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