

# Juxtaposing Australian and Canadian Writing

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During his visit to Canada, or as he termed it ‘Canadia,’ in June 2014, former Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott repeatedly emphasised commonalities between the North American country and his own: ‘We are such like-minded comparable countries. We are both multicultural, resource driven federations’ (Pedwell), he told a business roundtable in Ottawa. At the Canadian War Museum he reminded his audience: ‘Australians and Canadians have been comrades in arms in many of the great struggles of our times from Sudan to Afghanistan’ (Sibley). Abbott also used his trip to highlight that he and then Conservative Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper hold commensurate views on a variety of issues, including climate change. By presenting the country he governed as a familiar environment, Abbott smoothed the way for Canadian corporate investment in Australia, and by highlighting his and Harper’s similar stances on environmental issues he cemented an alliance dedicated to sabotaging international climate agreements.

In this essay, I argue that there are advantages beyond right-wing political expediency in drawing comparisons between the cultures and, more specifically, the literatures of Canada and Australia. Paul Sharrad is correct that ‘nations are like ships flying flags of convenience: crewed by people from everywhere and connected to all kinds of ports of call’ (26). Uncannily similar settler-colonial pasts, somewhat analogous contemporary political, economic and social presents, and, crucially, comparable geopolitical locations within the Western world mean that those who write of Australia or Canada can often be found navigating in congruent directions around some of the same obstacles. In consequence, juxtaposing literary work that emerges from these territories can produce off-kilter reflections that undermine entrenched notions of national exceptionalism, and draw our attention to textual and cultural phenomena that might otherwise go unnoticed. In response to Haun Saussy’s call for more scholarly work juxtaposing texts from outside Europe’s boundaries, the Australian–Canadian comparison can also contribute to current efforts to shift the parameters of comparative literary studies; as Ania Loomba points out, ‘large chunks of reality’ are currently excluded from the field (501). That literature is created in each country by a culturally diverse group of writers, whose collective linguistic range extends far beyond the officially recognised English, or English and French, also makes the Canadian–Australian conjunction a rich one.

Upholding the value of comparing Australian and Canadian literatures is an urgent task at present given that interest in this juxtaposition seems to be diminishing. Robert Dixon and Brigid Rooney note that: ‘Broadly speaking, the new world literature paradigm has seen a shift from comparative literature’s traditionally bi-national or bi-lingual comparatism to more transnational and even planetary forms of comparatism’ (xii). Even when thinking about writing emerging from two countries together is countenanced, the Australia/Canada conjunction tends to be dismissed. In her 2012 Dorothy Green Memorial Lecture, for instance, Elizabeth McMahan argues that the Australia/New Zealand linkage is of greater value on the grounds that the geographical distance between Australia and Canada ‘enables each modern nation to preserve its discrete boundaries in





## Growing up Indigenous

*Steam Pigs* appeared in the same decade as the final report of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (1991), the Mabo decision (1992), the Wik ruling (1996) and the landmark 'Bringing them Home' Report on the stolen generations (1997). Robinson's *Monkey Beach* was published four years after the five volume Royal Commission Report on Aboriginal Peoples (1996), which examined issues including the history of residential schools in Canada, and three years after the Delgamuukw court case (1997) which, like Mabo and Wik, addressed questions of Aboriginal title. As books that received significant national attention, including nominations for key literary awards, *Monkey Beach* and *Steam Pigs* participated in settler-national debates.<sup>5</sup> Concurrently, though, they interpolated Indigenous readerships and contributed to growing canons of Indigenous literature in both countries. Considering Melissa Lucashenko's *Steam Pigs* and Eden Robinson's *Monkey Beach* together facilitates consideration of the ways in which Indigenous writers intervene in what Chris Healy terms 'the intercultural space of Aboriginality' (5).

*Steam Pigs* and *Monkey Beach* both deploy elements of the *bildungsroman* in exploring the experiences of contemporary Indigenous women. The late-twentieth-century lives of their respective protagonists, Sue and Lisa, are presented as profoundly shaped by the legacies of colonial history. Important in both books, however, is an insistent challenge to what Philip J. Deloria identifies as a settler society tendency to assume that Indigenous people 'missed out on modernity—indeed, almost dropped out of history itself' (6). Lisamarie Hill, who grows up on Haisla territory, is named after Elvis's daughter, eats both soapberries 'whipped into a foam—Indian ice cream *uh's* in Haisla' (271) and Kraft Dinner, and loves watching *Dynasty*. Rather like the speaker in Anita Heiss's poem 'My Other,' Lisamarie is 'not preoccupied/with trying to understand/what its like—to be you/to be white' but she does not shun non-Indigenous culture either. *Steam Pigs'* Sue comes into Aboriginal consciousness only after years of immersion in contemporary white Australian urban life.

While the lives of both teenage girls are directly impacted by the legacies of forced separation of Indigenous children from their families, including widespread substance abuse and violence, their *bildung* take different forms. This is reflected and enacted in the literary choices Robinson and Lucashenko make. As critics including Castricano and Andrews address, *Monkey Beach* engages deeply with the gothic. Andrews rightly suggests that 'Robinson's text writes back to a Canadian gothic tradition in which Natives are marginalized, romanticized, or entirely absent from the text, creating a space for Native cultural revitalization that forcefully critiques the traditional association of Aboriginals with what is monstrous' (224). Lisamarie's development can be traced in terms of how she comes to grapple with the at times terrifying spiritual powers she has inherited from her Haisla ancestors. Coming to terms with her 'dangerous gift' (371) is even vaguely possible only because she and her extended family still live on their traditional territory and she is able, albeit in a haphazard and fragmentary way, to learn something of her Indigenous heritage. Her grandmother is important to this process. It is Ma-ma-oo who advises Lisa, 'You don't have to be scared of things you don't understand. They're just ghosts' (265). She warns her too, though, 'All the people knew the old ways are gone. Anyone else is doing it in secret these days. But there's good medicine and bad. Best not to deal with it at all if you don't know what you're doing' (154). Ultimately, Lisa does not abandon her quest but she must determine much of importance alone.















