

‘Deep Hanging Out’: Native Species Images and Affective Labour

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Living alongside native animal species is an aspect to living in Australia beyond that of keeping pets or raising livestock. There is a history of representing this human-nonhuman relation in poems by settler poets; the natural or problematic representation of the feelings described or evoked relate to the naturalising, or problematising, of representations of settlement. This history suggests, in settler terms, a ‘poetics of outside’, although (perhaps inevitably) aspects of the domestic(ating) also appear.

This article revisits ideas around affective labour and the kangaroo image that have been the basis for an article published as ‘Affective and Transnational: the Bounding Kangaroo’, in *JASAL* in 2013. I refer to some of the same poems: Barron Field’s ‘Kangaroo,’ Charles Harpur’s ‘The Kangaroo Hunt,’ and D.H. Lawrence’s ‘The Kangaroo.’ In extending this discussion into the later twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, I also consider poems by Eve Langley, Robert Gray, David Campbell and Gig Ryan. To use Mikhail Bakhtin’s term, the poems, and the consideration of affect, undergo ‘re-accentuation’ with regard to the image and to labour. Bakhtin writes that, ‘[t]he historical life of classic works is in fact the uninterrupted process of their social and ideological re-accentuation’ (421) (extendable to, I would argue, all works worth (re)writing about). In what follows, I am interested in theorising the image work of native species: what is this national literary work; how do—or might—these particularly Australian images work on (or for) Australian readers? These questions are implicated in the problems of settlement, representation, and human-animal relations, as well that of cultural capital. If we are reading for affects, which, as Elizabeth Wissinger notes, travel ‘faster than they can be subjectively recognized’ (260), are these, then, potentially, unsettleable, or is the writing and reading process necessarily a settling (domesticating) one?

I also briefly consider Judith Wright’s *Birds* for comparison, in terms of potentially iconic representations of native species: in Wright’s case, the black cockatoo, the black swan and the lyrebird. Birds are a significant aspect of Australia’s cultural capital, if we think of them as providing images for literature as well as vernacular discourse (think of ‘cocky’ or ‘galah’), but also for product and event advertising, tourism and so on. A selection of Wright’s birds and the kangaroo can offer representative case studies for thinking about affect, labour and image in Australian poetry, in relation to native species. In thinking about cultural capital, I am informed by John Guillory and Frank Kermode, if not directly citing their arguments.

What types of work, then, are poeticised Australian species made to do? We could consider representations of the basic activities that every animal does to survive. This kind of work is described in Wright’s ‘The Blue Wrens and the Butcher-bird’ (161-2). The wrens are described as ‘nest-building.’ Their efforts are in vain, however, as the presence of a butcher-bird forces them to abandon the nest; the poem ends with the blue wren ‘twitter[ing] to his anxious hen’ that he “‘know[s] another blackthorn-tree”.’ The two are permanently unsettled. The poem was originally published in *Birds*, a book that features a range of modes of representations of birds: some, like the one just quoted, feature bird speech (in English). The blue wren’s speech adds to the wrens’ pathetic aspect. The wren’s speech, then, is affective labour. It is also gendered.

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