

Editors' Note

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One of the first tasks for the organisers of the ASAL 07 conference in Brisbane was a meeting at the Liveworm Design Studio at Griffith University with students who would work on designs for the conference poster. This was an early and bracing confrontation with the question of what does *The Colonial Present mean?* The draft designs we received circled around various ideas, and all were prescient: they gestured to events in Iraq and Afghanistan; to the drought and other environmental issues; debates about Indigeneity; and graphic representations of Australia in comparative frameworks: across southern spaces, in relation to both Europe and the USA. The design we selected with its mutant flag and ornate traditional frame grasped the complex dynamics and contradictions of the concept “the colonial present” as it appears in Derek Gregory’s book of that title: an engagement with contemporary issues with a sense of how the legacies of the past continue to erupt and shape the present and produce engagements and relations beyond the nation. History, says Gregory, is always plural, always contested, and shot through with multiple temporalities and spatialities:

I speak about the colonial—rather than the imperial—present because I want to retain an active sense of the verb “to colonise”: the constellation of power, knowledge, and geography that . . . [continues] to colonise lives all over the world. (xv)

For ASAL 07, this title and concept indicated an interest in the ongoing preoccupation with the legacies of settler colonialism in Australian writing (as these affect all aspects of the environment and its creatures); the need to explore more comparative and cross-national perspectives and connections; and those anxieties that were the subject of much discussion at the conference itself in July 2007: the future of Australian literature itself in the academy. The subtitle of the conference and this issue: “Australian Writing in the 21st Century” indicates our interest in the distinctive articulations of these issues and debates at a precise point in time. The turn to Australian “writing” also

indicates our desire to open discussion to all kinds of contemporary work, including life narrative. Chris Masters's reading from his biography of Alan Jones, *Jonestown*, was a memorable highlight of the conference, and so too was David Malouf speaking autobiographically of the Brisbane River at the conference dinner, which was located as close as we could manage to 12 Edmondstone Street.

We begin this special issue of *JASAL* with an article derived from Mark Sanders's keynote address to the conference, with its first sentence that gestures to a comparative and expansive view of literature, history and race: "Facing each other across the Indian Ocean are two parallel histories of race, culture, and phantasy". Sanders's article draws representations of the Stolen Generations into a comparative perspective informed by the work of Melanie Klein; its focus—on the dynamics of paternalism, reparation and reconciliation—was discussed at ASAL 07 within a few weeks of the federal government's highly controversial intervention into Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory. This conjunction emphasises the resonance of the conference theme, and also the importance of framing our work on the legacies of colonialism in carefully contextualised studies that actively engage with the specific dynamics of history, colonialism and writing in this century.

These dynamics continue to emerge in Carole Ferrier's essay on Alexis Wright's novel *Carpentaria*, delivered to the conference as the Dorothy Green Memorial Lecture. Ferrier's article begins with Wright's own remarks: "I wanted to stare at difference right now, as it is happening, because I felt the urgency of its rule ticking in the heartbeat of the Gulf". The convenors of ASAL 07 could not have planned the magic of Alexis Wright's presence as one of the guest writers just a week after *Carpentaria* was awarded the Miles Franklin prize for 2007. Alexis Wright's readings from her work and her contribution to the conference amplified the concerns that energised the conference theme, and the engagements of both Sanders and Ferrier with the ongoing legacies of settler colonialism, for the Miles Franklin announcement was made on the same day as the federal intervention was "rolled out" and Wright was required to respond to both in interviews. Such synchronicities are rapidly forgotten, and yet they are essential to grasping the complex dynamics of the colonial present, as Ferrier's article on contemporary Indigenous women's writing suggests. Similarly Anne Brewster's article on the poet Romaine Moreton takes up the issue of Indigenous protest writing in Australia. Specific attention to poetry was a theme of ASAL 07, and accordingly David Malouf, Dorothy Porter and

Peter Skrzynecki were featured writers. Brewster's study of reading and writing and the "private and intimate identifications of race and whiteness" explores complex mediations of race in contemporary writing. Like Ferrier, she is concerned to write about contemporary Indigenous writing with a sense of its precursors in a tradition of Black writing, and with attention to the agency of literary discourse in debates about contemporary race relations. These issues emerged in a special session at ASAL 07 to launch the Black Words initiative for the AustLit database. In his article on David Unaipon's life and writing, Benjamin Miller also takes up these issues in a comparative framework. Miller's discussion of Black dandyism and minstrelsy situates Unaipon's apparent contradictions and complicities in the complex space between Aboriginality and colonial modernity.

Several articles here take up issues about history, fiction and the legacies of colonialism that have been the subject of intense and very public debate in 2006–7. In his essay on Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* Adam Gall discusses the particular legacies of settler colonialism in contemporary writing, and questions how spaces for recognition might emerge within settler cultural texts. As Gall remarks, the very grounds for debate about benevolence and dispossession were uncertain as we met for conference sessions. In her discussion of historical fiction and *Gould's Book of Fish* Jo Jones examines Richard Flanagan's approach to representations of the past in contemporary fiction, in particular his critique of Enlightenment notions of a stable, unified history of the nation. Both of these articles respond to one of the major debates that suggested the conference theme: how can literary texts respond to the unfinished business of the past?

Mark Sanders's keynote anchors one major theme of "The Colonial Present": the ongoing legacies of settler colonialism. Paul Eggert's article signals the second: a turn to new empiricism in textual and book history research in contemporary Australian criticism, which brings into this special issue of *JASAL* more by way of data and quantitative analysis than we may expect in an Australian literary journal. Eggert grasps the impetus of this research succinctly: certain empirical realities are relevant and important to understanding Australian literary culture. Furthermore he takes up the argument for expanded and comparative approaches to Australian literary culture: the Imperial book trade is an important cultural formation in his analysis of late nineteenth-century gender, writing and reading. Robert Dixon's response to "Australian Classics and the Price of Books" brings into this conference issue some of the dynamism produced by engagements with new empiricism and its "fact-driven questions" in conference sessions.

It also indicates other recent examples where the reading of Australian literature is enriched by this turn to reading *literature in Australia*.

The turn to new empiricism is taken up variously in the cluster of interrelated succeeding articles. In her study of The Carter Brown Mystery Series, Toni Johnson-Woods approaches the permutations of this “promiscuous global literary form” across different markets and languages. Over 300 books appeared in this series between 1951 and 1985, and the series was translated into nearly 30 languages. New technologies allow Johnson-Woods to begin to map this literary pandemic in mass market fiction, and to theorise about the international trade of generic fictions. Katherine Bode’s article is one of the first outcomes of ARC-funded research on new empiricism and Australian literature, also involving Robert Dixon, Leigh Dale and Gillian Whitlock, called the “Resourceful Reading” project. Bode argues for the importance of quantitative research and the use of eResearch resources and strategies (such as the AustLit database, for example) to further cultural materialist approaches to Australian literature. Like Johnson-Woods, Bode also suggests that quantitative research can open new perspectives on the national literature in the context of global literary culture, which responds to one of the key questions raised by the conference theme: how can comparative perspectives open new perspectives? In his article on new empiricism and Australian literature, Jason Ensor continues this theme and examines the publishing of Australian novels both locally and internationally using the AustLit database and statistical analysis, producing some new insights into publishing trends in Australian fiction.

Finally Laura Joseph considers the “queer, disturbing and sublime matter of contemporary Australian and New Zealand literature” in a comparative analysis of the fictions of the Australian writer Christos Tsiolkas and the New Zealand writer Elizabeth Knox. Joseph’s article questions how these two literatures might be read together, as the conference theme suggests we may well do. Her analysis of how *Dead Europe* and *The Vintner’s Luck* circle round impossible spaces of disintegrating subjectivity and questions of the human offers a highly original approach to transnational criticism.

Two articles in this special issue of *JASAL* are joint winners of the A. D. Hope prize, which is awarded annually for the best paper delivered at the ASAL conference by a postgraduate student. Paul Genoni and Peter Kirkpatrick were the judges this year, offering detailed and insightful referees’ reports on every submission for this award. One of the features of ASAL 07 was a clear sense of a generational change; many young scholars and postgraduates were energised by the topical conference theme, “The

Colonial Present”, and the submissions for this postgraduate award were many, and of a very high quality which made judging the prize a particular challenge. This year the prize is shared between two excellent papers that address the conference theme: Benjamin Miller’s article on David Unaipon and Jo Jones’s article on *Gould’s Book of Fish*. We congratulate them both and take great pleasure in publishing their work here in *JASAL*. The publication of articles by postgraduate students is a priority for the ASAL organisation and as such, ASAL 07 hosted a special postgraduate lunch seminar, featuring Drusilla Modjeska, who discussed her ARC-funded “From Thesis to Book Project”. Modjeska shared her practical tips and considerable wisdom gained from this manuscript-development partnership between the University of Sydney and Pan Macmillan Australia, as well as from her own career as a writer and academic. Rowanne Couch, recipient of the project-funded 2005 scholarship, also shared with postgraduate students her insights into the changing book market for literary non-fiction in Australia. Her talk raised the issue of publishing opportunities outside traditional academic outlets which postgraduates at ASAL were encouraged to explore.

ASAL 07 The Colonial Present occurred in uncertain times for our discipline, and turbulent passages in what we now know to be the last days of a long federal government administration. The conference theme turned out to have a resonance we could not have anticipated when planning began in 2006. The co-convenor of ASAL 07 was Dr Chris Tiffin, and the conference brought to an end his long career as an academic in English at the University of Queensland. The gathering of so many researchers and fine writers engaging in debate and conviviality was a fine tribute to Chris’s dedication to Australian literature. We would also like to acknowledge the constant support of the ASAL Executive in all things pertaining to the conference, including the preparation of this special edition of *JASAL*, and to thank Dr Kylie Cardell and Mr Matthew Willmott for their assistance in bringing this issue to press.

WORKS CITED

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