

RECONFIGURING THE NATIONAL IMAGINARY

Brigitta Olubas (University of New South Wales)

and

Tony Simoes da Silva (University of Wollongong)

The cover of this general issue of *JASAL* features a sculpture by Australian artist Louise Weaver, whose work has, amongst other things, explored the play between the domains of nature and culture in our interrelations with the world and the bodies of animals. Weaver's own name signals something of the bounded domestic labour involved in the production of her figures, which have become increasingly fantastical over the decade or so that she has been producing them. Weaver's Grey Forester Kangaroo is just under one metre in height, somewhat diminished from the dimensions of a wild (live, real) Grey Forester, which typically reaches double that; the stature, and possibly the aura of Weaver's specimen rests instead in the intricate knit of his pelt, and the glint of silver thread, announcing his presence as an object of fabrication, of attentive, perhaps even loving, detail. We chose this artwork in response to the essay by Michael Farrell, 'Affective and Transnational: The Bounding Kangaroo,' which aims 'to think about the word kangaroo as an affective construct, or, better, as an affective intervention in relation to English, in the context of poetry written in the long colonial era.' Deceptively and seductively eclectic, Farrell's essay homes in carefully on poems by Australian, English and American poets, and considers how the kangaroo both is and is not necessarily 'a metonym for place,' an idea Farrell develops from Michael Ackland. Working with and through the various usages of the word and the affective power it engenders in the poetry of Barron Field, Charles Harpur, D.H. Lawrence, Emily Dickinson, John Kinsella and Frank O'Hara, he concludes: 'The word 'kangaroo's transnational appeal to other writers of English is in both the figure it represents and its unusual rhythm, not to mention its rhyming potential; it is a poem in itself. Yet it remains a distinctly Australian word, and perhaps Field is not wrong in calling the *word* kangaroo a 'glory' and 'Happiest Work of finest Hand', indicating as it does a distinctly un-English, un-colonial, and un-prosaic sound whenever it appears.' This poetic kangaroo, with its traces of what Farrell calls 'racial and/or national divisions' and its shifting affects, which see it slide close to human form and meaning, provides if not a figure for this issue of *JASAL*, certainly something of a perspective on the diverse field of scholarship represented here, while Weaver's curious and alert Grey Forester may also be read as emblematic of the response we hope the issue, in its eclectic nature, will trigger among readers.

The issue begins with three essays which invite a reconfiguration of the reading of Aboriginal writing and representation in Australian literary studies. First of these is a discussion of Andrew McGahan's *The White Earth* by Norman Saadi Nikro, focusing on the novel's account of landscape, history and human bodies in order to delineate its ethical frame, the appeal it provides to readers to take up the question of 'to what extent has the "heritage of western civilization," ... worked to render some lives and deaths worthy of precarity [Judith Butler's term for "a condition of the value of life ... closely linked to a capacity to socially exchange and witness grief"], while rendering others unworthy, beyond the scope of grievability?' Nikro draws on Gerard Genette's notion of 'anachrony', which accounts for how 'narrative works to organize temporal continuities and discontinuities in which a story can be composed and told,' and argues that 'anachrony encompasses an ethos embodying critical and creative practices engaging the very capacity of narration to situate history as

past, which can potentially acknowledge alternative articulations of relationships between present and past.’ In a sustained exercise in close textual and discursive analysis, Nikro argues that ‘[t]he many figurative and literal registers of fire in *The White Earth* animate the dissonant, polyphonic tenor of haunting and historical exigency woven into McGahan’s novel, the narrative attuned to the present as a smouldering site of antagonism between political and imaginative sensibilities.’ He reads it thus as an engagement with contemporary Australia’s persistent struggle to come to terms with occupation, with belonging and indigenization. This compelling and at times brilliant reading of the novel’s ethics, its ‘haunting [of] Australians today’ (from the Miles Franklin judges) draws from the larger discursive context of the invoking of ‘Judeo-Christian values’ in the service of and at the heart of the nation—terms which resonate for Australian readers nearly a decade after the novel’s publication. This essay is followed by Rich Pascal’s fascinating discussion of ‘The Postwar “Half-Caste” Novel,’ which takes up a three of the ‘book-length narratives that focused primarily upon Aboriginal subjects [which] became a modest but nonetheless noteworthy publishing phenomenon’ in the decades after World War Two—FB Vickers’s *The Mirage* (1955), Gavin Casey’s *Snowball* (1958) and Leonard Mann’s *Venus Half-Caste* (1963).’ Through a careful close reading of the ‘textual exposure’ of white and half-caste characters in these novels, Pascall outlines the ways they reflect the changes taking place in racial attitudes and understandings in the post-war period, ‘culminating in the referendum of 1967 that for the first time endorsed federal authority to legislate on behalf of Aboriginal people, [which saw] mainstream Australians ... display an unprecedented willingness to incorporate within the nation’s body politic the descendants of the land’s original inhabitants, a process which he describes as ‘one of the most meaningful transformations in Australian history.’ Gillian Whitlock and Roger Osborne contribute to two growing areas of research in Australian literary studies: scholarship on the work of Kim Scott and the field of eResearch, with a ‘distant reading’ of Scott’s Miles Franklin-awarded *Benang*. Their essay examines the novel’s international publication and reception, including in translation, from the starting point that sees Scott himself as ‘the most “local” of writers, ... devoted to the language and country of the Noongar people [which] inspires the generic and linguistic innovation of his fiction’ and explores ‘some transnational scenes of reading that produce different communities of interpretation for *Benang* in venues such as conferences, classrooms and online sites where the novel has a distinctive career, and this history of the Noongar people speaks to other histories, and “memoryscapes” of dispossession, dispersal and genocide.’

Two essays address the transnational dimensions of the colonial period: Meg Tasker’s account of the life and work of William Pember Reeves and Helen Machalias’s study of Fergus Hume’s *The Mystery of a Hansom Cab*. Tasker takes the literary and political life of William Pember Reeves, ‘from his childhood as an English migrant in New Zealand being groomed to join the colonial ruling class, to his advocacy of Greek independence and chairmanship of the Anglo-Hellenic League in his last decades,’ as exemplifying ‘the kind of mobility across social as well as national and geographic borders that calls for the use of the term “transnational colonial” rather than “expatriate”.’ Tasker’s essay thus provides a substantial addition to the understanding of the historical bases of transnational mobility and the ways this played out in individual careers and lives, by focusing on a New Zealand colonial figure operating in London at the end of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth. This focus on the category of the ‘Australiasian’ arises, Tasker argues, because ‘much twentieth-century discussion of national identity fails to convey the full range of colonial, imperial, and British cultural identities and affiliation, a multiplicity which in the 1890s could be taken for granted.’ What Tasker’s study of Reeves’s life and career also

highlights is the ways that these transnational sites also saw the intersecting of an astonishing, and not always salutary, diversity of social and political views, from Reeves's activities in New Zealand aimed at excluding 'Undesirable Immigrants' on grounds of race or disability, while taking 'progressive ideas about socialism and [developing] them in the crucible of a "new society".' His move to London saw him develop a literary profile alongside his political career, creating a position which 'allowed him ... to liaise or mediate between the cultural positions of the colonial and the metropolitan.' Helen Machalias draws the title of her essay, '*The Mystery of a Hansom Cab: Locating Status Anxiety within the "Colonial Ware"*,' from Miles Franklin's 'assessment of the novel in *The Bulletin* in 1952 as one of the few Australian works "to make the grade in universality sternly demanded of colonial wares",' in order to tease out the text's somewhat unstable position in relation to the literary fields of Melbourne and London in the 1880s. Machalias builds on Ken Stewart's argument that 'although aware of their colonial remoteness, the Melbourne literati developed a confident belief in their own cultural identity,' to propose that 'this consciousness of both distance from the centre and an awareness of a burgeoning national culture define Hume's novel.' Machalias traces the textual citations—its 'allusions to popular genre fiction, Victorian novelists and mythical, biblical and classical references'—which create a picture of Melbourne as both a 'cosmopolitan metropolis' and 'resistant to high culture.'

The last two essays in this issue take up the work of two of Australia's most significant twentieth century writers: Christina Stead and Gwen Harwood. In 'The Modern Uncanny and Christina Stead's "The Marionettist," William Lane turns to Stead's *The Salzburg Tales* (1934), a work that has, he argues, largely been ignored by critics. Working partly *contra* what he believes is Michael Ackland's key idea that the opening story in Stead's collection, 'The Marionettist,' erases the motif of the uncanny as first depicted in E.T.A. Hoffman's 'The Sandman,' Lane proposes that the story is indeed concerned with the uncanny. This, he asserts, is central to his own reaction as a reader when faced with the story. It is also at the heart his thesis that 'The Marionettist' complicates representations of the uncanny. Identifying in Stead 'a debt to Hoffman,' Lane sets out to 'discuss the sources of the uncanny in 'The Marionettist' in terms of the three classes of the uncanny Freud identifies in his essay: the repressed, the surmounted, and the death drive.' Central to Lane's reappraisal of Stead's story is the premise that it articulates a peculiarly modern notion of the uncanny, and in so doing it calls attention to its distinct presence in the work of 'pre-modern authors,' concluding that the articulation of 'a distinctly modern uncanny becomes possible, without needing to exclude the uncanny from other epochs.' Sarah Golsby-Smith's 'In Her Father's House: Gwen Harwood As a Sacramental Poet' contributes to the work done in recent years on the question of the Australian sacred by Ashcroft, McCredden, and Devlin-Glass together with Noel Rowe's stunning theological readings of Australian poetry. Golsby-Smith takes as a starting point the insight that 'recent Australian thinking has drawn attention to the particular way that Australian writers have re-oriented their attention to insist upon the materiality of their work and, indeed, of knowledge itself,' and asserts that '[r]eading Gwen Harwood as a sacramental poet provides insights not gained through readings that emphasise the feminist possibilities of her poetry, or indeed her celebration of the quotidian without the particular focus that the Eucharist provides.' In addition, this reading extends our understanding of the important philosophical dimensions of Harwood's work.