

**Paul Giles. *Antipodean America: Australasia and the Constitution of U. S. Literature*.  
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Paul Giles is one of the leading Americanists of our time; an assertion paradoxical only because in being an Americanist, he has stretched the definition far from its traditional norms by challenging its exclusions: of Catholic writing, of writers who do not fit national stereotypes, and most of all of a transatlantic, especially British valence to an American sphere that had proclaimed itself autochthonous and self-sufficient. In *Antipodean America*, he turns his capacious attention to the Antipodes. It would have been easy for Giles, upon assuming the Challis Chair of English at The University of Sydney in 2010, to make a few gestures of interpretive thanks to his new colleagues, and continue in the transatlantic currents that have brought him to the top of his profession. Instead, Giles embraced his new geographical circumstances with brio and enthusiasm, and the excitement in this work is evident. Giles possesses an uncanny ability to mount a paradigmatic, discipline-altering argument while giving convincing, interesting close readings of books and careers, a feature that makes this book at once not just an interpretively dazzling performance but a book that teacher and student can have ready at hand, to consult for reference, and, since the book is written with flair and elegance, delight.

Readers of this journal should know that this is not in the first instance an Australianist book. Some Australian writers are certainly analysed. Towards the end, Australian writers such as Peter Carey, Thomas Keneally, Shirley Hazzard, and, in his later incarnation, J. M. Coetzee, are given treatments. Christina Stead also receives an ample and challenging discussion, though even here Giles's emphasis is on Stead's tweaking of the orthodoxies of both American liberalism and Marxism, while remaining in some ways a semi-participant in these projects. But actual Australian writers are mostly not the focus.

This is a book about seeing American literature from an Australian perspective, both in terms of finding specific references to Australia in canonical American writers and in seeing how looking at America from an unsettling, topsy-turvy Antipodean perspective can disestablish accreted, commodified notions of what American literature is, and lead to broader ways of reading. This has been a paradigm somewhat in the air, as evinced by Ian Henderson's work over the past decade, Ian Donaldson's earlier *The World Turned Upside Down* (1970), dealing with Antipodean themes in the early modern period, as well as my 'May In September,' essay published in 2002. But Giles has made it into a systematic principle of reading, and thus shows that Australianism, rather than a merely descriptive label for a local literature, can be as systematic a theoretical perspective as those with a more storied academic pedigree. In one of the book's most winning moments, Giles links his Antipodean with French theory by citing

Surrealist ideas of ‘geographic dislocation’ (31) as corollary to the ideas of Australia shaking up received ideas, providing a creativity-inducing disruption.

Theory, indeed, is at the heart of this project. In discussing the first generation of post-independence United States writers, those writing in the time of the First Fleet, Giles makes clear that theirs was a “theoretical engagement” (110) with Australia. It was not the reality of the earliest British settlement of Australia that Joel Barlow and Charles Brockden Brown responded to; it was the idea that, on the other side of the world, whether accomplished by the English or, as then seemed possible, the French, a new European nation was to be founded on what, by Enlightenment suppositions, was *terra nullius*. This *tabula rasa* could at once corroborate, emulate, or rival the fledgling American experiment. These early citations of Australia have in common a quasi-Freudian anxiety about an Anglophone younger brother succeeding in peacefully evolving *vis-à-vis* the parent country where America had failed. America, in proclaiming its independence, its solid identity, had renounced the more sinuous dilations of Anglophone empire. But what if those dilations produced a superior America in the Antipodes? What if America had lost out by leaving the Empire and seeing its filial prerogatives usurped by a more loyal younger sibling? On the other hand, Giles also pays attention to such virtually forgotten figures as John Ledyard, the Connecticut sailor—whose surname now graces a town famous for native American gambling casinos—who actually explored the South Pacific and whose love of the works of Laurence Sterne links the literal and the conceptual aspects of topsy-turviness. When Cornwallis surrendered to Washington at Yorktown in 1781, the tune played was ‘The World Turn’d Upside Down’; seven years later, the possibility of an Australian Anglophone commonwealth radically complicated the British-American dyad that the American Revolution’s outcome seemed to herald, broadening the canvas into the more multiple array that the song’s title connoted.

The nineteenth century is, as Giles notes, the prime era for Australian-American connections. It was in the era of Tocquevillian, smallholder America, with its sense of democratic possibility, that Australian republicans such as John Dunmore Lang looked to America for example and succor, a connection dimmed in the wake of the Civil War, what the New Zealand historian James Belich would call the ‘recolonial’ effect of the Suez Canal, which connected Australia far more with Britain than before, and the rise of an industrial America controlled by an oligarchy of capitalist magnates. Giles once again goes across the spectrum, from explorers such as John Wilkes to writers such as Herman Melville who actually, if erratically, explored the South Pacific, to those such as Edgar Allan Poe, who imagined the Southern Hemisphere, to, most astonishingly, writers like Emily Dickinson, who, within her small geographical compass, brilliantly resorted to the Antipodes as trope and metaphor. (In the case of Wilkes and Poe, one might argue that they are more part of an Antarctic paradigm, as has recently been delineated by Elizabeth Leane, than an Antipodean one, but Giles’s strategy is to be as capacious as possible, and besides, both regions were explored by Captain Cook). Giles discusses how Dickinson’s citation of Tasmania is a ‘gothic epiphenomenon of the transition from domestic and metaphysical’ (205):

If only Centuries, delayed,  
 I'd count them on my Hand,  
 Subtracting, till my fingers dropped  
 Into Van Dieman's Land.

Giles' ability to see the 'forced conjunction of radically disparate qualities' (205) in this poem as auguring the alignment of antipodean geographical placement with formal disruption is what marks out this book. It would have been easy, in the wake of the triumph of a transatlantic, transnational paradigm for US Literature in the twenty-first century, simply to expand the front westward, to rather mechanically open up a transpacific front, that the two-ocean navy of globalist literary discussion could seamlessly patrol, blazoned with the sort of bogus, world-girdling sublimity that characterised the 'globaloney' discourse prevalent in the late 1990s. Giles' reach may be encyclopedic, but his analytic touch is formal, and he pays close attention to the alignment, or disruption thereof, of form and topography throughout the book. Thus, as able as the Melville section is, it is the Dickinson part that is really revelatory, because we do not think of her as a Pacific writer; he makes us think of her that way; and yet the realignment is not forced, not insistent, and done via a close, patient reading of the citations and meanings that appear in Dickinson's poetry. In other words, the abstract is vouchsafed in the concrete; the sublime in the minute.

This book launches a field. It is that rare academic volume that, upon opening it, the reader knows it will still be cited in fifty years time. As everybody's disagreements, like Tolstoy's unhappy families, will be their own, to run through my own individual differences with nuances of interpretation would be a waste of the reader's time. One might note that New Zealand is not as prominent in this book as its title implies, and that some of the implications of US interest in the South Pacific, as limned by Christina Klein in *Cold War Orientalism*, are sidestepped. The biggest danger of this book would be to lose the interpretive thread in the twentieth century precisely because, for the reasons discussed above, Australia and the US actually become less alike then, and moreover because the emergence of an actually-existing Australia meant that concrete institutional realities were now in the way of the abstract fantasies in which the earliest US writers indulged. Giles saves the day here by 'repositioning Australia within a larger reach of international Modernism,' (398) showing how the fissures and ironies revealed by an Antipodean approach mirror those felt by displaced Modernist writers such as Joseph Conrad—whose own major fictional realm of portrayal hovered just to the north of Australia in the Dutch East Indies. These ironies meant that a unitary Australian nationalism was impossible: as Giles points out, one in ten Queenslanders at the time of Federation was of German descent, and Australia had a significant Roman Catholic minority that made the nation not just, as a writer such as Anthony Trollope would have envisioned, a kind of mimeographed England but with even more stability and democratic order.

But there is a change in the twentieth century, as Australia has to deal with the problem of being minor, obscure; of not being a place where world headlines or crises were generated. The anxieties of the early America writers that Australia would become a younger, healthier rival to

the US seemed at this point far away. In reality, these anxieties were for naught; topographical-hydrological considerations meant that Australia would never rival the US in size or geostrategic heft. But Giles's discernment of these references in early American literature and thought gives foundation to his argument that Australianist discourse in American literature has always meant something. This meaning is less the 'hearty frontier cousins on the other side of the globe' that among others C. Hartley Grattan and Joseph Jones championed, but rather pertains to a residual discontent with the same robust claims to centrality and exceptionalism that are supposed to link America and Australia. We have, incidentally, to remember that while today 'American exceptionalism' is a slogan associated with the Right, who scorn President Obama for not using the term, in the mid-twentieth century it was very much on the Left, as indeed was Australian literary nationalism. Giles is not just debunking US chauvinistic rhetoric but questioning a boisterous nationalism that, in both countries, working-class movements found rhetorically empowering. In other words, while Giles's position *vis-à-vis* the nineteenth century challenges, as it were, the Right, arguing against assumptions of manifest destiny, white supremacy, and national solidarity, in the twentieth century he takes on ideas of national identity that, using the British as a straw man for custom and privilege, argued for the empowerment of the working class. The American Studies work of Leo Marx, nearly as left wing as his namesake Karl, though more humanely so, exemplified this, as did groups such as the Association for the Study of Australian Literature. ASAL's founders were not rumbustious vernacular supremacists such as Henry Lawson and A. G. Stephens, but scholars in the 1970s—the interstice between modernism and postmodernism—who wanted a mature, democratic, and self-reliant literary culture. The politics of the individuals involved in its founding may have varied but on one could doubt that ASAL as a group joined Americanists such as Marx in being of the democratic left.

Internationalism thus can become a synonym for privilege. Giles works against this through powerful acts of individual reading. Though the section that concludes the book, on Coetzee's use of Australia as a provincial angle to question the certainties of the global, will, deservedly, be the most influential section of the latter half of the book, my personal favorite is the section of the Jamaican-born US poet Louis Simpson, who visited Australia in the late 1970s. His 'complex southern pastoral' (381) as envisioned in his poetic sequence *Armidale*, conjures an alignment between geographical displacement and personal reinvention and self-improvement. Coming from a displaced angle, Giles gives the best reading of this poet ever; registering how Simpson's austere yet quickened language expresses 'an ambiguous evasion of subjectivity' (383). This state, of renouncing the obvious agency of subjective identity while still, in a larger perspective, possessing integrity and imagination is what Giles' Antipodean perspective encourages. Americanists will read this book for the array of new perspectives and contexts it reveals. Australianists will read it for that, too, but will also be heartened by this cogent demonstration of how it is possible to do literary criticism in the twenty-first century armed with both conceptual reach and a sympathetic sense for the possibilities of individual perception in a Pacific space between Australia and the US that can be both gap and arena. Giles' book opens up the trans-pacific in Anglophone studies

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