Australian Literature / World Literature: Borders, Skins, Mappings

BRIGID ROONEY
University of Sydney
BRIGITTA OLUBAS
University of New South Wales

The essays in this issue of *JASAL* were developed from selected papers presented at the 2014 annual ASAL conference 'Worlds Within' held at the University of Sydney. Drawing on Vilashini Cooppan's book, *Worlds Within: National Narratives & Global Connections in Postcolonial Writing* (2009), the conference yielded diverse responses to the imperatives of conceptualising 'Australia' and 'literature' as categories, terms and entities in the world. The resulting essays here traverse questions about literature, nation and globe, about borders, skins and mappings. Suvendrini Perera's Dorothy Green keynote address 'Burning Our Boats' works unflinchingly with these categories as categories. Beginning with a point of disciplinary protocol—a pause, a hesitation in the face, if not of literature, then of the practice of national literary studies—Perera plunges her readers into what Joseph Pugliese calls, in his Afterword, the 'ground zero of state violence' of Australia's current border policies. Literature is here a point of departure, a vertiginous and immersive engagement with the excesses of state violence, the diabolical secrecies of 'on-water' activities, and the burning boats of Perera's title. The literary writings of Michael Ondaatje and Channa Wikremesekera provide Perera's essay with its methodology of fragmentation and diaspora; at the same time, they provide a compelling starting point for a dialogue that must take place between Australian literature and the world. In her keynote address to conference themes, 'The Corpus of the Continent: Embodiments of Australia in World Literature,' Vilashini Cooppan takes up with a purposeful obliquity and indirection the question of Australia in, or as, world literature, in an essay that thinks through a series of key interlocking categories of space, time, literary form and affective being. Crossing from Patrick White's *Voss* to her own intimate and personal archive of memories and images, to the European cartographic history and imagining of the southern continent, Cooppan's essay models and embodies the argument it makes, one that both registers and complicates the view of the whole typically generated from above, from a safe, scholarly distance. Instead, Cooppan advocates 'skinning' or 'fleshifying' the map—the map that is of the reified whole, whether of continent, nation or world literature. She argues for a method that resists the blandly universalising tendencies of world literature by becoming sensitive to what is carried in its scalar switching and operations and to the networked co-presences of sedimented memories and times, of hauntings, of interconnecting and transcontinental intimacies—of worlds within.

The parameters sketched by these two keynote engagements—stark, rich, nuanced—are properly capacious, providing striking possibilities for continuing engagements with the global terrain of the literary nation. A significant number of essays in this collection take up the opportunity to globalise Australian literature, through the patient and scholarly processes of articulating points of international affiliation or association; points where the familiar has always been touched by other worlds, inner or outer. Others take the matter of the Australian local as a point of expansion. Catherine Noske's 'Seeing the Cosmos: Ross Gibson's "Simultaneous Living Map"' takes up the fragmentary praxis and visual poetic of Gibson's *26 Views of the Starburst World* to think through a sustained and embodied encounter with place. For Noske, Gibson's attentive engagement with 'the relation between past and future within the

experience of place,' thickens the thread of time in place and expands its connections in ways that inform her own writing practice. Arnaud Barras's 'The Law of Storytelling: The Hermeneutics of Relationality in Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book*' responds to the aesthetic and political scope of Wright's extraordinary novel to imagine a reconfiguration of Australian literature. Barras argues that *The Swan Book* requires us to recognise that 'the field of Australian literature cannot be located . . . within the borders of the continent, but has to be understood transculturally and intertextually in relation to the world.'

Fiona Polack's 'Juxtaposing Australian and Canadian Writing' provides a productive starting point by comparing three pairs of Australian and Canadian texts: beginning with Indigenous bildungsroman, and moving through settler-nationalist historical fiction to novels of global dislocation and flow. These familiar/unfamiliar pairings make richly explicit points of connection between these two national literary fields, with their 'uncannily similar settler-colonial pasts, somewhat analogous contemporary political, economic and social presents, and . . . comparable geopolitical locations within the Western world.' Jackson Moore's essay 'Is Prowse's rectum a grave?: Jouissance, Reparative Transnationalism and Patrick White's *The Twyborn Affair*' attends to an ambiguously violent scene in White's late-career coming-out novel. Moore seeks to demonstrate how White's novel not only 'disrupts the coherence of the reading subject' but also 'consequently the fantasies of the nation state'; he aims to queer normative readings of White's novel by suggesting how White's novel itself queers the Australian legend. White is also the subject of Nourit Melcer-Padon's essay, which proposes a 'Hungarian connection' between White's final novel *Memoirs of Many in One* and the 1861 dramatic poem *The Tragedy of Man*, by Imre Madách. Melcer-Padon devises an intriguing thread linking White's strange and challenging novel, with its theatrical preoccupations and fragmentary characterisation, to the philosophical and spiritual, but also political traditions of nineteenth-century non-Anglophone Europe.

In 'Australians in Aspic: Picturing Charmian Clift and George Johnston's expatriation,' Tanya Dalziell and Paul Genoni turn their attention to the visual archive of literary culture in relation to the rich story of Australian expatriation. Here they offer both a meditation on the bi-directional nature of the photograph and a prehistory of the present cultural moment which sees a kind of saturation point of the visual image as a consequence of the convergence of digital photography and social media platforms. Their essay brings together the recently released tranche of James Burke's Time-Life photographs of the bohemian Hydriot community with the writings of Clift and Johnston themselves; it juxtaposes individual set-pieces with extant information to reconstruct and think about life on Hydra for the Clift-Johnston group. It does so in the context of the ideal and practice of expatriation during a transitional stage in both national and global history towards the end of the Cold War, on the cusp of international tourism and post-industrial globalisation. The practice of post-WWII expatriation resonates with other internationalist impulses, for instance in 'A Cosmopolitan Jindyworobak: Flexmore Hudson, Nationalism and World-Mindedness,' Jayne Regan's historical account of the literary writings of Flexmore Hudson, who argued in the immediate post-WWII years for 'world-citizenship' as a principle to which Australians might adhere. Of particular interest here is the unexpected collision between the cosmopolitanism of Hudson's outlook and the stark, idiosyncratic nationalism of the Jindyworobak literary movement with which he was long associated. The shared term of the 'cosmopolitan' suggests points of connection with Jessica Brooks's 'Subaltern Cosmopolitanism: The Question of Hospitality in Christos Tsiolkas's *Dead Europe*.' Focusing on the operations and ethical demands of hospitality, Brooks approaches the novel's driving internationalism through the lens of Tsiolkas's politics, his critique of capitalism and examination of the operations of human connection and productivity.

Within this rubric of globalising Australian literature, another group of essays takes up the ways that an understanding of Australian literature must engage with the diversity of Australian languages, a point eloquently put by Sneja Gunew in the panel discussion that concludes this issue (and to which we will return shortly). In 'Towards a Multilingual National Literature: The *Tung Wah Times* and the origins of Chinese Australian Writing,' Huang Zhong and Wenche Ommundsen present as a case study one of a cluster of Chinese-language Australian newspapers published during the early decades of the twentieth century under the White Australia Policy, thereby opening out an important site for the transnational study of Australian literary culture—literature written in languages other than English about Australian experience. As the authors point out, although the Australian literary canon has in recent decades opened to include multicultural works and voices, these have largely been in English. Writings in other languages, giving tongue to the experiences of diasporic and minority cultures in Australia have largely remained inaccessible and invisible to mainstream and scholarly readers of Australian literature as it is prevailingly understood. Huang and Ommundsen survey literary writing in the *Tung Wah Times* in the first two decades of the twentieth century, offering a glimpse of texts in translation that engage explicitly with Australian contexts and experiences. This potentially vast—although ephemeral and difficult to access—dimension of Australian literature challenges and unsettles definitions of 'national' experience and its monolingual canon. However rather than constructing an alternative national literature to be absorbed into an Anglophone canon, Huang and Ommundsen propose a model that can recognise 'multiple canons within the cultural space of Australian literature,' and speak simultaneously, and with difference, 'to other national canons and to cultural spaces outside that nation.'

Two further essays take up the challenge of a non-Anglophone Australian literature, both through the archive of Spanish Australian literature. In '*El Contestador Australiano* and the Transnational Flows of Australian Writing in Spanish,' Michael Jacklin traces the publication history of a collection of stories published in 2008 by Uruguayan Australian author Ruben Fernández. Jacklin's essay provides an attentive reading of several of the stories and insists on the importance of differentiation between Spanish-language writing traditions in Australia. Catherine Seaton's 'Salvador Torrents and the Birth of Crónica Writing in Australia' was awarded the A.D. Hope prize for the best paper by a postgraduate presented at the ASAL conference. Seaton's essay presents the work of Salvador Torrents as a writer of Crónicas, 'writings that comment on the happenings of daily life, social habits and the concerns of communities,' most often migrant communities. This essay makes a compelling case not only for the significance of these Crónicas, but also for an expanded and more rigorously inclusive sense of the matter of Australian literature.

The final group of essays returns us to the literal terrain of the nation, inviting reconsideration of its literary, imaginative or discursive terms of reference. Carole Ferrier's 'Christina Stead's Poor Women of Sydney, Travelling into Our Times' analyses the particulars of local and international 1920s intellectual discourses that inform Stead's extraordinary first novel *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*. Ferrier intervenes in long-running debates about the Marxist and socialist bearings of Stead's fiction, seeking to ground this novel in a very particular historical moment in which emerging developmental and experimental psychology intersected with international socialist discourse in the early post-WWI period. What emerges is a picture of Stead's novel as not only both acutely political and internationalist, but also as an 'imaginary psychic territory' that reappears as both strange and newly familiar in the contemporary global context. Imogen Mathew investigates the political dimension and reach of 'Chick Lit' in relation to the recent set of novels by Indigenous writer Anita Heiss. Mathew's treatment of Heiss's fiction, marketed for mainstream readerships, offers the first serious and extended critical analysis of Heiss's

endeavour and highlights her ironic and performative, political and pleasurable deployment of this genre. For Mathew, various elements of Heiss's narratives might productively be read as a strategic and subversively humorous recalibration of a globally popular genre for political ends, constituting 'a new form of resistance' that can be located 'within mainstream Australian culture, rather than . . . protesting outside.' In 'Worlds Within: Hayes Gordon, Zika Nester, Henry Szeps and the transformations of Australian Theatre,' Anne Pender presents an account of the international dynamics of Hayes Gordon's Ensemble theatre and two of its key actors at a pivotal moment in Australian theatre history. Invoking Cooppan in the effort to link understanding of individual lives with national life, Pender's essay argues that the Hayes Gordon Ensemble worked to expand theatrical repertoire beyond established Anglo-oriented models and contributed to the professionalisation of Australian theatre through European and American engagement.

Finally, we are pleased to present the texts of the four panel presentations delivered at the Scenes of Reading Plenary Panel, organised and now edited by Robert Dixon. Dixon presented panellists with the task of overviewing, addressing and commenting on the conference's major questions, questions also central to Dixon's ARC funded project, *Scenes of Reading: Is Australian Literature a World Literature?* Written versions of these presentations are published here as a coda to and commentary on conference issues. Dixon's contribution leads the set with the remaining papers presented in alphabetical order by author's name. Together these four succinct pieces define, explore, critique, debate and tease out key implications of the question Dixon poses, offering a rich bank of methodologies, concepts, questions and perspectives on the relation of Australian literature to world literature.

For Robert Dixon, as in another way for Vilashini Cooppan, metaphors of stretching or containment, inside and outside, local, national and global, pertain not just to the question of space—to the spatial dimensions of Australian literature or world literature—but to methodological questions of scale. What, he asks, '*is* the appropriate scale for the study of literature?' Is it to be undertaken at the level of the local, the regional, the national or the global, and what does rescaling across these different levels reveal or conceal? These are questions that frame, guide and direct 'scenes of reading' yet are rarely given explicit consideration by literary scholars. Drawing on the work of post-Lefebvrian social geographers such as Neil Brennan and Neil Smith, Dixon elucidates the long-overlooked importance of the concept of scale not only to what has governed and directed Australian literature and its study, as a national literature, but also to assumptions that continue, passively and covertly, to organise discourses of world literature, global literature and transnational literary studies. Dixon finds in the work of Nirvana Tanoukhi and Gregory Jusdanis, for example, timely correctives to the fetishisation and fixing of spatial containers still evident in discourses of globalisation and world literature. For even while decrying the national container as too narrow, these discourses may reproduce spatialised systems of relations; they may be prone, as Apter puts it, to ignore '"the deep structures of national belonging and economic interest contouring the international culture industry."' What Dixon, following Tanoukhi, recommends is methodological awareness that engages 'scale-sensitive' analysis capable of moving and thinking both above and below the nation.

From his standpoint as an American Australianist with wide knowledge of the field, Nicholas Birns poses the question 'Is Australian Literature Global Enough?' He offers a synoptic history of the nested series of problems associated with defining the boundaries of Australia, Australian literature, and Australian literary studies, and he shows how categories of continent, corpus and canon are internally riven. From Miles Franklin to Herbert C. Jaffa, Birns invokes debates about who and what is representative of the Australian literary canon, arriving at the structural

paradox produced by category stretching, making it 'on the plus side, less predictable and dowdy, and, on the minus side, less operable and internally consistent.' Yet, he suggests, an expansive, widening, pluralising view does not require relegation of the core or the local as retrograde: 'It is not global to see some parts of the world as more global than others.'

Paul Giles offers a trenchant critique of an historically inward-looking Australian cultural nationalism, one that he regards, for several reasons, as still at work, if residually, in shaping both national cultural debate and the domestic reception and conception of Australian writing. Among the dimensions he cites are the quirks of national secondary and tertiary curricula, the thinness and tendency to parochialism of Australia's media and literary cultures and inadequate disciplinary formation of literary studies, especially in the context of resource-starved humanities within a chronically underfunded university system. These conditions, in Giles's view, impair or stunt the autonomy accorded elsewhere, an autonomy essential to cultivate the depth and sophistication of literary criticism that is evident, for example, in the United States. In Giles's terms, Australian literature itself is highly sophisticated and robust, however, as exemplified in the works of some of its most prominent and sophisticated writers (from Henry Handel Richardson and Joseph Furphy to Les Murray and Peter Carey) and he calls for it to be studied in more open and expansive terms, with a view to its transnational provenance, global traveling and planetary address. He incites Australian literary specialists to think the role and connection of Australian literature within these broader contexts.

In concert with the work of Huang and Ommundsen earlier in this issue, Sneja Gunew meditates on what is perhaps the most profound and unsettling question of all for Australian literary scholars in universities, one that identifies and challenges Australia's prevailing monolingualism—a condition evident in the lack of interest in and resourcing of the study of Australia's multilingual heritage, its writings in languages other than English or even, until recently, in non-Anglo-Celtic writings. The global dominance of the Anglosphere in the study and production of world literature is a condition that prevails not only at national but also at global levels. Though often avowed in theory, monolingualism is typically disavowed in practice with the persistent reiteration of a world literary canon in a dominantly Anglophone market. This might be akin to the problem identified by Robert Dixon as 'all the world is America.' Gunew sees potential to develop 'intra-cosmopolitan multilingualism' and to recognise multiple inflections of English in the works of writers like Antigone Kefala, Kim Scott and Christos Tsiolkas. She calls on her personal experience of teaching Australian settler literature to Canadian students, noting the challenge 'to particularise these scenes of reading' by inviting them into comparative conversations about different settler and postcolonial contexts transnationally. Gunew ends with several evocative scenes of reading. These draw attention to the difficulties posed by monolingualism as inherently structured by what Vilashini Cooppan calls 'the phantasmatic contours of race.' Linking the troubling, wordless gesture of an Indian child in David Malouf's autobiographical story 'A Foot in the Stream' with the spectre of asylum seekers sewing their lips, Gunew asks us to persevere, despite the difficulties, and to ponder and interpret a widened range of acoustic variations and moments of eloquence.