

Unsettled and Unsettling: Negotiating Reconciliation, Recognition, Reparation

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This is the first issue of *JASAL* to be hosted by the University of Sydney Press. It is rather late appearing and for that I apologise both to contributing authors and to readers—thank you for your patience and support. The transition offers *JASAL* the opportunity to work with a prestigious and supportive partner, and we look forward to a fruitful collaboration with the press.

The present issue includes a wide range of work, from critical essays to a review essay that offers a considered critique of Andrew McCann's recent study of Christos Tsiolkas' writing, to a collaborative piece in 'Notes & Furphies' and a large number of book reviews. Some of these offer dense and critically original responses to the works under examination.

Serendipitously, for the essays were not commissioned, the issue comprises a number of works where Australia's history and the impact of that history on the present dominate. 'Unsettled and Unsettling: Negotiating Reconciliation, Recognition, Reparation,' captures some of the key threads in some of the essays in the issue, in discussions that veer between an explicit concern with Australia's colonial and postcolonial conditions, such as the essays by Maggie Nolan, Michael Farrell and Lyn McCredden, and others dealing with ongoing concerns about place and identity, society and culture, as in the work by Peter Kirkpatrick, Martin Leer and Norman Saadi Nikro.

In the opening essay, Peter Kirkpatrick posits that '[i]t is entirely possible that vaudeville never really died—at least not in Australia.' He continues: 'Susan Lever, for one, has observed that vaudeville-style, self-consciously performative "characters" have had a surprising afterlife in Australian culture.' In 'Literary Vaudeville: Lennie Lower's Comic Journalism,' Kirkpatrick sets out to examine this premise with reference to the work of Sydney journalist and sketch writer Lennie Gower, notably 'Lower's humorous journalism: those ephemeral pieces he wrote so prolifically throughout his career.' Kirkpatrick notes that '[i]n the seven years from 1933 that he worked for Frank Packer on the *Australian Women's Weekly* and, later, the *Daily Telegraph*, Lower wrote nearly three thousand columns.' Kirkpatrick is interested in Lower's use of language, a distinct Australian vernacular that reflect Lever's view that Australians prefer 'revue-style sketch comedy, as well as "character"-based variety shows.' Kirkpatrick himself speaks of Lower's 'brand of old-style "larrikin" wit.' The essay explores Lower's writing with passing reference to the work of the American S.J. Perelman, noting however that it unlikely that the latter could have been a source of influence on Lower. As Kirkpatrick writes, by the time Perelman hit the spotlight with the publication of *Strictly from Hunger* (1937) Lower 'had already established his style.' Besides, Kirkpatrick notes, Perelman's work 'was unabashedly elitist in his mockery of mass culture.' Taking the comparison farther, he goes on to remark that '[a]s well as vaudeville, what both men had in common was cinema as a central experience of modern life, and each regularly made fun of it in his columns.' Kirkpatrick concludes the essay thus:

For all his time at the *Women's Weekly*, Lower's humour was never really family-friendly—he could never inhabit the gentle 'funny-father' persona of later columnists such as Ross Campbell or Richard Glover—but belongs to an older, edgier, more boisterous and more masculinist mode of comedy. And yet his work continues to matter: not merely as a record of that bygone world, but because the mashups of his literary vaudeville still speak to the fragmented disposition of so much of the best Australian humour.

Norman Saadi Nikro's essay, 'Paractatic Stammers: Temporality in the Novels of Gail Jones,' sets out to explore how Jones' 'sense of fascination and wonder with the technology and culture of modernism informs the phenomenology and tenor of her novelistic style, especially the characters that emerge through the wave lengths of this style.' Addressing himself to Jones' literary fiction published to date, Nikro seeks to 'track the *duration* in her novels whereby memory, history and story are experienced by her characters as something like intersections, intervals nor spacings, taut and tense folds or pleats in which time is riven by "a strange accession to memory and speech," as the character Perdita comes to learn in Jones's *Sorry* (202).' Drawing in part on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin and on Gilles Deleuze's 'engagement with the work of Bergson,' Nikro examines in Jones the 'relational contiguity of parts whose variable movements and orientations to one another bring about a transfiguration of their subjective capacities (as in Perdita's realisation of her stuttering as a relational dynamic).' 'Paractatic Stammers: Temporality in the Novels of Gail Jones,' offers a rich and original reading of Jones' fiction, both sympathetic and critically rigorous. Echoing Jones' own views on modernity, Nikro traces in her novels a poetics of modernity that inflects both the writing and the thematics of the work. 'Jones's prose style,' he suggests, 'what she calls "a kind of prose poetics"' (Royo Grasa 1), calls attention to the gaps and intervals by which the temporality of narration is not only possible, but rendered a vacant site for the stammer of an interruptive image or voice encompassing an alternative engagement of time and its graphic imprints.' Like Kirkpatrick, Nikro too highlights the forceful way in which an Australian author develops a distinct narrative voice, in the case of Jones one informed by a constant intertwining of local and global aesthetic and political sensibilities.

Martin Leer begins his essay with a provocation: 'Can one be an *insider* in international affairs—or does being international condemn one to a kind of permanent outside, even within one's original nation?.' For Leer, this is a question he frames with reference to the city of Geneva, where he lives and teaches 'Anglophone postcolonial literatures' and the cosmopolitan setting of Frank Moorehouse's *Grand Days*. This is a city, he suggests 'that never ... made it into the nineteenth century, into nationalism; it is neutral even towards the rest of Switzerland; and its hard-fought accession to the Helvetic Confederation of 1815 was above all to avoid becoming part of France.' Drawing on this preliminary groundwork, Leer turns his 'attention to a time when *being international* was trendy, as it was when Edith Campbell Berry arrives in Geneva in the early 1920's to take up her new position in Internal Administration at the League of Nations.' Leer examines constructions of identity as they evolve in the novel and in his own critical practice. Identity, he posits, both for him and for *Grand Days*' Edith Campbell Berry, is 'a balancing act of survival in a situation where inside and outside are completely imbricated in each other, yet still active as opposites.' Leer's complex disquisition on place, belonging and international politics touches upon the shifting nature of national and personal boundaries, at times perhaps their erasure. In an ever-shifting world, allegiances and viewpoints once taken

for granted are abruptly undone. Thus we read at one stage: '(when President Obama can know from wiretaps of her private *handy* whenever Chancellor Angela Merkel makes plumcake for her husband, Germany no longer has national sovereignty in any meaningful way.' Perhaps, but then again much of the globe has lived under that peculiar dispensation far longer than Germany. Leer's critical take on *Grand Days* is distinct and engaging. As the essay comes to a close, he writes: 'It is Moorehouse's achievement to have made the fate of the League in Geneva during the War seem heroic rather than the pathetic failure it is usually seen as by the warmongers. But it is Edith who answers her own question: "We will *make* ourselves a place" (Moorehouse 2002, 657). In the post-Brexit moment, what kind of place might that be, and for whom? As Australia too prepares to vote, debates abound about the sort of Australia we want to create, to live in and to leave to future generations. In a roundabout way, Leer's essay suggests that Geneva's quirky place in the world is not a model for the 21st century.

Maggie Nolan's essay, 'Narrating Historical Massacre: Alex Miller's *Landscape of Farewell*,' might be said to focus on how the business of reconciliation may pass the baton to the business of recognition of prior occupation, neither of which is at present in the hands of Indigenous Australians. In an uncanny echo of another place and another time, much reconciliation and recognition remain essentially white business. When liberal white South Africans turned their compass towards justice and reconciliation, they were reminded by Black Consciousness leader, Steve Biko that such a decision was one they made essentially because they sought to control the meaning of such a narrative, and, crucially, the means of such a politics. Reconciliation, and recognition, should be in a settler society synonymous with reparation. Yet, having designed the colonial mission that made them Australian, non-Indigenous people are naturally more attuned to the risks associated with reparation and any forms of transitional justice. As Penny Edmonds recently noted, in 'settler nations—where issues of genocide; sovereignty; land, maritime, mining and cultural rights; "stolen" or "lost" generations; treaty calls and claims; and demands for legal redress and reparation are urgently contested—"reconciliation" serves multiple social and political functions, and resides within a political language and paradigm that frames processes of redress' (2016 1). While it is good to see that a discourse of recognition is increasingly relevant in the stories of white Australians, it is worth pondering why that should be so. Nolan turns in her essay to a recent example of the kind of work that reflects a concerted effort within some quarters of Australian society to come to terms with the impact and the legacy of colonialism. Focusing on Alex Miller's *Landscape of Farewell* (2007), and in passing on *Journey to the Stone Country* (2002), she writes of the first that it 'both emerges out of and responds to the difficult process of reconciliation. The word "sorry," apologies, regret and requests for forgiveness recur in the novel, and the narrative explicitly elaborates on key tropes of reconciliation discourse.' Nolan's reading, as noted in the essay's title, seeks to unpick what she sees as the novel's conflation of colonial-time massacres and the complex discourses of perpetrators and victims. She is particularly interested in the 'troubling implications of the novel's sustained analogy between the generational effects for Indigenous Australians perpetrators of a massacre and the children of Nazis.' Thus a key question the essay seeks to answer is, 'how does the novel bring together the Holocaust and the settler invasion of Australia?' Drawing on the work of Dominick LaCapra, Nolan's essay 'scrutinises the obfuscatory representation of the perpetrator, and the novel's seeming projection of a form of perpetrator guilt onto the Indigenous subject.' In a provocative reading of Miller's *Landscape of Farewell*, Nolan concludes by asserting that, 'perhaps, unwittingly, the novel reveals why reconciliation, which seems so often to be about settler Australians exploiting Indigenous

hospitality to come to peace with our own complicity, remains such difficult, risky and necessary work.’ Indeed; and the question that might follow on from this assertion is, ‘difficult, risky and necessary work for whom?’ As Edmonds asserts, ‘[i]n contemporary settler societies reconciliation has emerged as a potent and alluring form of utopian politics’ (2016 1).

Nolan’s nuanced reading of Miller resonates nicely with Lyn McCredden’s quest to shift critical debates about the work of West Australian author Tim Winton from less reductive engagements with his novels. Aware of a tendency among some critics to detect in Winton a mawkish and nostalgic regional narrative voice, McCredden sets out to complicate such responses. She writes of Winton’s work: ‘It remains highly recognisable in its use of Australian vernacular and its sun-filled, beachy Western Australian settings; but it has also taken some dramatic, dark and probingly self-questioning turns.’ McCredden goes on to note that, ‘[w]hile critics often look for common strands in an author’s oeuvre, it is revealing to consider developments and changes between individual works. How do the darker, more abject elements of Winton’s imaginative visions relate to the ‘wholesome’ if macho Aussie surfer image, or to the writer of plenitude somehow embarrassing to critics?.’ In ‘Tim Winton: Abjection, Meaning-making and Australian Sacredness,’ McCredden ‘examine[s] Tim Winton’s fiction and its critical reception in Australia in relation to the category of the sacred, as well as asking where Australian Literary Studies stands in relation to what some might consider an oxymoronic category: “The Australian sacred”.’ McCredden highlights Winton’s view of Australia as ‘resolutely irreligious,’ in words from an interview he gave Andrew Taylor in 1996, to argue that this a narrow assessment of what she sees as a far more textured picture. The essay aims ‘to move the debate beyond monoliths, and to deepen the concept of religion, I want to work with a category I have been examining historically and aesthetically for a while now: ‘the category of the sacred.’ I’ll consider the sacred under three headings: discourses of the sacred; the abject and meaning-making; and the possibility of Australian sacredness.’ Winton’s writing, McCredden claims, is much more complex in its take on the sacred than critical responses have allowed for. In a close reading of novels such as *Eyre* (2013), McCredden argues that in Winton’s *oeuvre*, ‘intimations of sacred meaning-making.... are about ways to acknowledge the abject, broken, fallen conditions from which all human meaning-making arises.’ She concludes her essay with the following words: ‘Religious and secular openness, a turning around and towards the other, are central aspects of the future for any contemporary Australian Sacredness.’

Michael Farrell’s ‘The Sheep’s Face: Figuration, Empathy, Ethics,’ consists of a deceptively simple analysis of ‘a number of Australian texts in terms of interspecies relations between humans and sheep, and considers the use of metaphor—and metonymy—and the place of ethics in this relation, with a particular emphasis on the face of both human and sheep: how sheep and humans look, in both senses of the word.’ In the process the essay performs a series of engaging and original readings of selected texts, teasing out their distinct relationship to Australian culture and history. Perhaps more interesting is the way Farrell draws on the complex tangle of primary and secondary texts to frame a broader discussion of postcolonial Australia’s uneasy relationship with its more recent past that resonates with Nolan’s work. Farrell’s methodology enables him to carry two parallel conversations, one with the texts he examines and another with the reader of the essay. While that is not an explicit claim, ultimately the essay offers up a meditation on what it is live on occupied land, as settler Australians and Indigenous Australians interact. In an instance where the two strands come together, he writes:

‘The metaphorical is situated differently in the context of Indigenous discourse and—while recognising that the discursive situation quoted above is not a Nyigina one, but rather an explication to two non-Nyigina people—as a record it also serves an ‘ethical or pedagogical function’ for those that are not present, for example, younger Nyigina readers (Gelder, 499).’ Side by side with Maggie Nolan’s discussion of Alex Miller’s *Landscape of Farewell*, Farrell’s essay underlines a tension that constantly unsettles the fabric of postcolonial societies.

In a review essay dealing with Andrew McCann’s recent work, *Christos Tsiolkas and the Fiction of Critique: Politics, Obscenity, Celebrity* (2015), Ali Alizadeh outlines a powerful critical response to McCann and Tsiolkas that sets the tone for a broader debate about much Australian writing. Although not overtly a defence of Tsiolkas’ work, Alizadeh’s essay picks up on the desire for complex and sophisticated critical responses articulated by other work in this issue of *JASAL*, such as McCredden’s and Nolan’s. ‘Christos Tsiolkas and the Antinomies of (His) Commitment’ explores McCann’s and Alizadeh’s own take on a tension between ‘popularity’ and ‘political engagement’ seen by some critics to weaken the political force of Tsiolkas’ more recent work, namely *The Slap*. As he writes:

It would not be an overstatement to say that Tsiolkas’s name is a sort of master-signifier for much of what exists in Australia in the way of what one may see, after Sartre’s possibly dated albeit foundational definition, as a ‘committed’ writing practice, a literary production with the aim of presenting ‘the subjectivity of a society in permanent revolution’ (Sartre 118).

Alizadeh reads McCann’s work as largely a response to ‘The Tsiolkas Phenomenon,’ a concern that a writer whose status as the ‘*enfant terrible*’ of contemporary Australian literature has been tamed by the market forces of celebrity culture. For McCann, Tsiolkas’s earlier novels were written in the shadow of Pier Paolo Pasolini, and typically were characterised by an irreverent and inflammatory treatment of cultural values and mores. McCann views his celebrity status, founded largely on the huge success of *The Slap*, as a selling out of that distinct position, and a loss of the force it imparted on Tsiolkas’ pronouncements on a range of topics.

The issue also includes a long essay by Aunty Barbara Nicholson, Friederike Krishnabhakdi-Vasilakis and Chloe Higgins, entitled ‘Unpenning Words: Releasing Literature From Within: *Dreaming Inside-Voices from Junee Correctional Centre*,’ included here under ‘Notes & Furphies.’ The essay details work the authors have undertaken in collaboration that involves the South Coast Writers Centre in Wollongong, NSW. Together, they have ‘developed a literary program with and for Aboriginal people that not only celebrates but also recognises Indigenous peoples and identities and addresses the fact that Aboriginal writing is elementary to Australian history and politics. The program further addresses the fact that Aboriginal literature is less prominent in the public psyche than its counterparts in visual arts and sports.’ The program draws on the support of established Aboriginal writers to mentor Aboriginal inmates of the Junee Correctional Centre. In addition to Aunty Barbara, the inmates are able to work with John Muk Muk Burke and in 2015 the SCWC extended its work through a ‘creative writing workshop with Aboriginal secondary school students in collaboration with a local high school’ and it ran its first ‘Indigenous Writer-in-residence program,’ hosting the writer Bruce Pascoe. This is a rich and fascinating account of a hands-on, activist form of cultural action that has real political impact, the men whose work the mentoring has nurtured emerging as the storytellers of their own experiences. Perhaps this is where the work of reconciliation and recognition begins, in the hands and the minds of those unsettled by colonial occupation, rather than in the benevolence of a settler society.

Finally the issue concludes with a large number of reviews, some of which of substantial length and often of great critical impact. The work of commissioning them was done primarily by Jay Daniel Thompson, who stepped down recently as *JASAL* Reviews Editor. Jay's work with the journal has resulted in a rich body of evidence of *JASAL*'s close engagement with scholarly publication and reviewing.

The next issue will be titled 'Australian Literary Networks,' and while it feeds off the excellent work presented at the Australian Literary Studies Convention that took place at the University of Wollongong in 2015, it includes also new work received in response to a 'call for papers.'

Works Cited

Edmonds, Penny. *Settler Colonialism and (Re)conciliation: Frontier Violence, Affective Performances, and Imaginative Refoundings*. London: Palgrave, 2016.