

## **Recentring the Region**

### **Introduction to the Special Issue of JASAL on the ASAL & ASLEC—ANZ Conference RMIT University, 4–7 July 2023**

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This special issue follows on from the Recentring the Region conference held at RMIT University in 2023, a partnership between the Association for the Study of Australian Literature (ASAL) and the Association for the Study of Literature, Environment and Culture—Australia and New Zealand (ASLEC-ANZ). As convenors of the conference (with ASLEC-ANZ), we have invited contributions from a diverse group of participants including regionally based writers, along with early career and higher degree scholars. Like the conference, this issue turns attention to “the region” in Australian literary studies and environmentally oriented critical and creative practice. In some respects, it’s a return to themes explored in the *JASAL* special issue of 2018 that we guest-edited, which explored the intersection of stories and place-making.

Regions pre-date colonisation in Australia, bringing them into tension with the nation and its structures. They encompass geographies, hydrologies, ecologies, networks and alliances. They are structural and affective, relational and fluid. They can bring entities together and move them apart. Regions are a way of thinking, narrating, and making, and they are continually being constituted by practices that encompass the literary and the artistic in all their forms. The papers published here take broad and inclusive approaches to “the region,” troubling the nation state as the primary regional frame.

Our own contribution to the issue derives from our literary history work in the Mallee region of Victoria over the past eight years. This research has shown genre fiction to be an active site of Australian fiction engaged with regional and rural places, communities, and histories. We take a look at Australian “cosy crime,” specifically the Rusty Bore Mysteries series by Sue Williams. Cosy crime is often positioned at the other end of the crime fiction spectrum to “rural noir,” which also engages with rural and regional locations. While rural noir is associated with blasted environments, closed-down towns and outsider male detectives, cosies are usually a series of narratives set in one place, generally featuring domestic, community or small-town settings, involving local, amateur female sleuths. Set largely in the Victorian Mallee region, in the tiny fictional town of Rusty Bore, Williams’s novels adhere to the conventions of the cosy, with its female, fish and chip shop-owning protagonist, attentive to the dynamics of her small rural town. However, it also exemplifies the critical capacities of Australian cosy crime fiction, in particular its attention to what has been termed “eco-crime,” alongside a commentary on the economic and social impacts of global capitalism on local communities. We argue that the cosy subgenre may be easily feminised and belittled, yet it also operates as a resonant site for exploring eco-crime.

Clare Archer-Lean and Sandra Phillips's article "Reading Beyond Extraction" leads the issue with their discussion of the novels of Goorie author Melissa Lucashenko. They argue that Lucashenko's novels are consistently read through the confluence between regions and gender. Lucashenko, who has always acknowledged her European heritage, creates work that disrupts patriarchal and colonial resonances of spatiality and place. Archer-Lean and Phillips's paper extends the critical insights into Lucashenko's oeuvre to consider how layers of regional specificity speak to relational interspecies and intraspecies complexity. Knowledge in and of a region is held and carried by many subject positions in Lucashenko's writing, and a deep waiting and listening beyond species boundaries intimates new visions of both history and future. Archer-Lean and Phillips's contribution is informed by Kombumerri writer Mary Graham's ontological and epistemological insights into Indigenous relationality, taking up Sandra Phillips, Larissa McLean Davies, and Sarah E. Truman's provocation to employ Indigenous relationality as a new frame for reading.

Theodora Galanis takes a fresh look at Alexis Wright's celebrated novel *Carpentaria* (2006). The fugitive castaway in *Carpentaria* discovers, in the wake of a "catastrophic" cyclone, that he has been "dumped onto an extraordinary floating island of rubbish." Where previous readings of the rubbish island have interpreted this figure as an allegory of the nation, the globe, or even the novel itself, Galanis ventures to ask: what could it mean to read the rubbish island as an encounter with planetary alterity? Attending to the Gothic tropes that wash up in the novel's cyclone sequence, the article explores the connections between waste and the abject, cast adrift and transformed by the sea. Along with the contents of the rubbish island, equally significant are the agentive watery forces that create this extraordinary setting; the swirling movement of the gyre offers another way to think about the novel's form and its expansive locality. In the flow of southern waters, *Carpentaria* glimpses itself as a vessel upon which readers can venture towards imagining this strange home: the planet.

Rees Quilford continues the focus on the oceanic, with a walking paper that undertakes a speculative exploration of the region known as the Bunurong Coast in Victoria's southeast. Designed as a "ramble," Quilford's piece engages with the complexities, violent silences and intrigues of intergenerational connections to a specific place. It attempts to disentangle and survey the sometimes thorny, often uncomfortable, and occasionally joyous layered meanings and knowledges embodied in the byways and trails of the Bunurong Coast. Through research, careful observation, and fusions of Polaroid photography, prose, and oral history, Quilford's essay aims to make a personal contribution to the rich and textured body of knowledge about this place.

Verity Oswin observes that "[p]lace-making is fundamental to the poetics of empire." A detailed exploration of the relationship between name and place in the region of Sunraysia in northwestern Victoria and southwestern NSW is revelatory of the "region" as a construct and the role of place names in furthering the colonial enterprise. Whilst regions can be said to coalesce around a unifying factor, whether or not a region prevails is contingent also on the poetic valency of the name used to describe it. Regional names, out of sight, out of mind, must command sufficient poetry to maintain a presence in the colonial imagination. Although founded on a false premise—a hydrocolony formed around an impermanent waterway—the Sunraysia topos was sufficiently evocative to conjure up an entire reality. The name and its region prevail. As Oswin observes, colonial places can "grow into" their skins. Karen Barad has theorised that the material and the discursive can be consubstantiating; however, colonial insistence on the "blankness" of pre-settlement history combined with a failure to acknowledge settler violence, ultimately cause these place-making narratives to fail. The history of Sunraysia reminds us that names are the means by which coloniality is enacted, iterated, and performed.

Elizabeth Smyth's paper examines the implications of establishing a genre of "the sugarcane novel." Using John Frow's *Genre* (2006) as a guide, she argues that the sugarcane plant rather than the land upon which it grows should be the core determinant. This allows the inclusion of novels set primarily in a town, or in other off-farm locations, and thus offers a way of curating a collection of novels to enable richer understandings of the social and environmental influences of sugarcane than by considering only those set on farms. Given that sugarcane grows in and symbolises a distinct geographical region, Smyth also asks how we might use the boundaries, interplay and entanglement of genre and region to move away from the anthropocentric conception of region as marginal.

Chrystopher Spicer's contribution centres Louis Becke whose literary oeuvre includes over sixty articles and stories concerning the natural environments and ecologies of the South Pacific region. In *The World in Which We Occur* (2007), Neil W. Browne uses the term "ecological writing" for the literary understanding of the interaction between human and natural worlds that is evident in Becke's South Pacific work. Here Becke observes and discusses not only animals (particularly fish and birds), as well as flora and fauna of various Pacific Islands and the Australian east coast littoral, but also human participation in those environments and ecologies that includes the Islanders' sustainable management of their natural resources. At the turn of the nineteenth century, at a time when Europeans and settler Australians alike knew very little about the South Pacific, Becke articulated in his ecological writing the complex interactions between the region's human culture and natural world within his own literary ecosystem of the imagination in which writer, reader, text, landforms, creatures, and humans were vitally entwined.

Barbara Holloway continues her research into E. O. Schlunke, author and farmer in the south-eastern Riverina region of NSW in the mid-twentieth century, who adhered to his stated determination to write only from his own experience. Schlunke adopted the perspective of a second-generation member of the Riverina's community of German-speaking Lutheran immigrants, who "took up land" alongside but separate from the Anglo-Irish Australian population. Close reading of his superficially conventional practice uncovers irreconcilable tensions and emotions across class, cultures, ethnicities and species. Holloway observes that First Nations dispossession is the ghost that appears in this essay, as it haunts all Schlunke's work. Holloway follows Tony Hughes d'Aeth's exploration of regional literature as an "interior apprehension of how life felt to people," to re-examine Schlunke's occasionally troubling contribution to Australian studies.

Rather than distancing or closing down difficult or challenging conversations about life in the regions, this collection of papers invites these conversations directly, emphasising the value of place and the local. Regions are not peripheral—they are in fact central to deep thinking about Australian identity, history, and place-stories, in all their complexity.

Finally, there are two engaging reviews to round out the issue. Barbara Holloway considers Sue Edney and Tess Somervell's edited collection *Georgic Literature and the Environment: Working Land, Reworking Genre* (2023) from Routledge's Environmental Literature, Culture and Media series, and Philip Mead examines Paul Eggert and Chris Vening's *The Letters of Charles Harpur and His Circle* (2023) published by Sydney University Press.

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