

**Graham Huggan. *Australian Literature: Postcolonialism, Racism, Transnationalism*. Oxford University Press, 2007. 187pp.  
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This is the fifth book in the 'Oxford Studies in Postcolonial Literatures' series. Other topics to date include Pacific Islands writing, the South Asian Novel in English, and West African Literature. The purpose of the series is both introductory (producing an authoritative and wide-ranging approach to areas and genres) and polemical (the methods and concerns of postcolonial literary criticism are key coordinates). Graham Huggan's acquaintance with Australian Literature is long-standing, authoritative and (significant here) offshore: he writes very deliberately in the role of the 'outsider'. One of Huggan's arguments is that those of us who work in the field of Australian literary studies onshore can be blinkered. In an Afterword, Huggan argues for a 'broadly comparative, transnational approach' to the field and a stronger sense that Australian literature and its criticism is an international affair. He makes the point that even arguments for postcolonial approaches by Australian scholars (his example is my own argument in 1999 for more comparative criticism) have the parochial edge of cultural nationalism: they tend to presume that debates about Australian literature are conducted amongst Australians. This book sets out to map the field in relation to the wider coordinates of postcolonialism and critical race theory, examining how Australian literature is both producer and product of racial tensions as a postcolonial nation in an increasingly globalised world.

Two questions about the correspondences between Australian literature and postcolonialism as fields of contemporary literary scholarship arise here: What does postcolonialism bring to current Australian literary criticism? How does Australian literature shape current formations of postcolonialism?

These may seem to be questions from a Powerpoint slide for an introductory lecture. However, answers are neither easy nor given and Huggan's book is a timely contribution to thinking about some possible answers. It recognises that the extent to which Australian literature might be recognised as postcolonial at all is a contested issue, and which 'it cannot quite bring itself to resolve' (vi). What might distinguish postcolonial approaches to Australian literary culture and scholarship? 'Settler' as a key concept and comparativism as a methodology come to mind, but there and again these shaped my thinking in that essay a decade ago, and a decade before that in the wake

of Ashcroft (et al.), in *The Empire Writes Back* (1989). Comparativism and settler studies trigger important new work in history (for example Reynolds and Lake, 2008), yet as Huggan remarks, settler studies remain relatively underdeveloped in literary criticism (although a new collection of essays edited by Annie Coombes was published recently, and new books by Daniel Coleman and Robert J. C. Young on race, whiteness and ethnicity relate to Huggan's concerns).

Huggan's current location, as Chair of Commonwealth and Postcolonial Literatures at the University of Leeds, represents one institutional legacy in a series of institutional and disciplinary shifts that reconfigured literary studies last century, and produced a new and dynamic context for Australian literary studies. The prime movers in the field of Commonwealth Literature in the 1960s and 1970s were also instrumental in institutionalising vigorous nation-based literary studies in 'the Dominions', Australia and Canada. In his recent survey of Australian Literary Studies and Post-Colonialism (*AUMLA* 100, November 2003), Robert Dixon makes an important point about this process. Although a number of scholars have been active across these fields, nevertheless journals, associations and curricula proceed in parallel with distinct protocols: we write differently and on different topics for journals like *Span* or *New Literatures Review* than we might for *Southerly* or *Australian Literary Studies*, for example. We present differently at ASAL and ACLALS. Each field maintains its own identity, journals, conferences, histories and bibliographies, and sometimes we move across these fields and mediate their different institutional spaces with difficulty, carrying baggage inappropriately from one to the other (Dixon 112).

There is then a long history behind Huggan's claim that Australian literary studies has much to gain and can be re-energised by going beyond the nation. By focusing on race, racism and the national imaginary he identifies an issue where, as Dixon suggests, Australian and postcolonial literary critics have found a common cause since 1988, the celebrations of the Australian Bicentenary. Huggan begins with remarks about the riots at Cronulla towards the end of 2005, late in the Howard-Ruddock era, as he was completing this book. These are a reminder of 'the dark side of the Australian Dream' that he approaches in terms of a transnational imaginary at the turn of the twenty-first century which, he argues, is captured powerfully in Christos Tsiolkas's *Dead Europe* (2005). This 'dark side' looks a little brighter now in the wake of the 2008 Apology to the Stolen Generations, major shifts in refugee policies with the change of government, and the appearance of Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* (2007) which carried all before it last year as a major new work

of indigenous writing. These events do not change the fundamentals of Huggan's argument, but one imagines that if he were completing this book on postcolonialism, racism and transnationalism late in 2007 his opening manoeuvre might circle round a different conjunction: the announcement that *Carpentaria* had won the Miles Franklin Literary Award on the very day that the Intervention was 'rolled out'.

What, then, are the 'politics of location' for Australian Literature from this postcolonial perspective? Huggan expands geographical and cultural horizons to define it as a 'medium-sized English-language literature that exists in semi-permanent tension with its larger American and British counterparts'; it is shaped as much by external and global market forces as by internal commentators and producers. As an English language national literature it invites comparison with other nation-oriented settler literatures such as New Zealand, Canada and South Africa, which share themes of long-standing interest to postcolonialism: the quest for belonging and identity, the pull between land and language, the attempt to recover and come to terms with a violent past. From this perspective, 'Australian writer' is a social category to be understood historically in terms of shifting readerships, markets and uses. Huggan's approach is, then, resolutely materialist and global, and consistent with his earlier landmark study of literature and commodification, *The Postcolonial Exotic* (2001). Huggan acknowledges the seminal role of *The Empire Writes Back* in establishing a lexicon for the inclusion of Australian literature in the postcolonial project. Now, some 20 years on, the task is to hold on to the strengths of a postcolonial approach amidst a very different milieu, 'its capacity to effect transnational understandings of social, cultural and political processes which . . . supersede . . . national frameworks'(xii) without resorting to the binary modes and models which organised earlier postcolonial methodologies.

So, for example, Huggan returns to literary histories and to the founding fictions of the Australian literary canon—Clarke, Gordon, Lawson, Franklin—to tease apart some of the mythic narratives and legends that are used to characterise the 'national' literature. Invoking Edward Said's distinction between 'origins'—divine, mythical and privileged—and 'beginnings'—secular, humanly produced and ceaselessly re-examined—Huggan uses the latter to shape readings of historical and neo-historical writings in terms of conflict, and an ongoing process of reimagining the nation. At times the question of what is postcolonial about his approach can be hard to answer—one imagines that these arguments about the ambiguities of the canonical texts and the fragility of the nation in the national history

would be readily recognisable to an ASAL gathering (to return to Dixon's point about the different institutional frameworks of postcolonialism and Australian literary studies), and in fact Huggan draws generously on the work of a number of contemporary Australian literary critics (Carter, Dixon, Nile, Schaffer, Sheridan, Turner) who have recognised, variously, the fragilities of the national narrative without necessarily invoking postcoloniality. However as the themes of racism and transnationalism begin to play out in the book, Huggan does move out to the larger networks of critical race theory and its cross-disciplinary scholarship on whiteness to recast some familiar debates about whiteness, modernity, and the suburban imaginary in Australian literature. Here he uses Australian fictions that are embedded in the white colonial racial imaginary—*Coonardoo* and *Capricornia*—to 'Interrogate Whiteness' and reflect back critically on the ways that the national literature has been 'white writing'. For Huggan, Australian literature is deeply bound up with the struggles of a settler society to free itself from the shackles of a white-supremacist past.

True to his word, Huggan uses this book to reflect critically on both Australian literary criticism and postcolonialism. For example as he examines the implications of race and ethnicity in his final chapter, 'Multiculturalism and its Discontents', he refuses to turn to a postcolonial celebration of hybridity, which was for some time the favoured resolution of the intractable dilemmas about race, identity and whiteness that emerge in postcoloniality. To return to those earlier questions about the relations between Australian literary criticism and postcolonialism now, Huggan suggests that this book emerges from a context where changes within each of these fields and in adjacent disciplines complicate the scene. Debates about 'making it national' have moved into Australian literary criticism, which has responded positively to feminist, postcolonial and poststructuralist critiques of identity politics. The emergence of critical race theory, and the surge in studies of cosmopolitanism and transculturation, have carved into what were in the past the preserves of postcolonialism. As the Commonwealth Literature project morphed into postcolonialism late last century the postcolonial project was easier to characterise as a distinctive enterprise. Now the turn to globalisation and cosmopolitanism as key concepts in literary and cultural studies has produced a turn to transnationalism in the humanities and the social sciences. Huggan concludes by looking to a 'new postcolonialism', which is a syncretic beast. This version of postcolonialism is open to adjacent projects, such as critical race theory, that are comparatist and energised by the globalisation of cultures, 'counteracting the reintensified parochialisms that are a flip-side of current globalisation processes' (151). If the 'old postcolonialism' derived its

energies from the internationalisation of English language literatures, the new model will be more open to adjacent fields in cultural studies. Huggan's book ends looking forward to a composite 'postcolonial literary/cultural studies'. Questions remain about how institutional formations—such as curricula, journals and scholarly organisations—will be on the move to meet this new project. Huggan's own institutional position as Chair of Commonwealth and Postcolonial Literatures remains hyphenated, and so, one suspects, does the field. But this book suggests that the work in progress has much to offer by way of creative critical approaches to Australian literature, and Huggan's argument for an Australian-centred postcolonialism sensitive to the articulations of settler, indigenous and migrant writing is compelling and persuasive.

*Gillian Whitlock, The University of Queensland*