

Field, Curriculum, Emotion

The theme of this issue of *JASAL*, 'Field, Curriculum, Emotion', was that of the July 2011 ASAL conference, held at the Graduate School of Education at the University of Melbourne. The conference aimed to draw attention to issues to do with the teaching of Australian literature, not just in the universities but also in secondary schools, especially at the higher levels. The National Curriculum in English was also being implemented at this time, and it seemed important to put the kinds of things academics at tertiary institutions do with Australian literature—as a field of teaching and research—into a productive and mutually-beneficial relationship with the kinds of things secondary teachers do with Australian literature as a matter of everyday classroom practice. ASAL 2011 opened with a plenary talk from the University of Melbourne's John Frow that was later published in a book that helped to give the conference its theme, *Teaching Australian Literature: From Classroom Conversations to National Imaginings*, edited by Brenton Doecke, Philip Mead, and one of the 2011 ASAL conference's co-conveners, Larissa McLean Davies—and released by the Wakefield Press at the end of last year. What we teach and how we teach it, what we do in the classroom with our students (and how our students' experiences impact upon us in turn), how we help to shape and reconfigure curriculum at both local and national levels, what we remember here and what we forget, what kinds of frameworks we draw on to make Australian literature meaningful in education: these kinds of issues seemed, and still seem, to be important both in terms of how we have already understood the field, and how we might come to understand it in the future.

One of the keynote addresses of the conference, by leading Australian educationalist Annette Patterson from the Queensland University of Technology, articulated closely with these issues and set out to 'take the pulse' of the field of Australian literature in the context of the National Curriculum. In the first of three essays in this issue on pedagogy, Patterson considers the plethora of current Australian literary prizes, reflects on the increasing support for the teaching of Australian material (through databases such as AustLit), and analyses senior secondary text lists from New South Wales and Victoria, to conclude that these things all suggest that the field of Australian literature—in terms of the way it is shaped, valued and put to use—is robust and expanding. Yet she also acknowledges that although there are many opportunities to study Australian texts, these opportunities are not always taken up. Drawing on the work of Terry Eagleton, Patterson argues that English teachers need to be clear about their reasons for studying Australian literature—a clarity, she notes, that is not provided in some existing curriculum documents. It also needs to recognise the role that English itself has in informing students about 'techniques for living, ways of behaving and responding, building empathy and developing responses to texts that are considered appropriate within current social and cultural contexts'. For Patterson, the diverse and developing field of Australian literature has a significant part to play in furthering this work of English teachers in Australian schools.

It is precisely this contemporary notion of English as a moral technology that Clare Rhoden argues has influenced the decline of Australian Great War texts on senior secondary school syllabuses in Australia. Rhoden's essay attributes this to the fact that Australian writing about the Great War uses 'a classical heroic tradition' that other Great War writing—from Britain, for example—had 'abandoned for a disillusioned style of narration'. While acknowledging the popularity of the anti-war sentiment apparent in the British literature favoured among teachers of

English, Rhoden points out the complexity of selecting such texts in isolation and argues that the unique experience represented in local writing about the Great War has a rightful place in a national English curriculum. The third essay in this section by Amanda Johnson departs from issues of secondary text selection and curriculum to focus on tertiary students as writers of Australian literature. Of key importance to Johnson, as a teacher of creative writing, is for students to draw on Indigenous histories in ways that do not have ‘recourse to political correctness and forced reconciliatory storytelling’. In this rich paper—which draws on the work of Marcia Langton—Johnson suggests we can learn from a range of contemporary postcolonial novels that take an ‘intercultural’ or ‘intersubjective’ approach to the Australian historical record.

The 2011 ASAL conference wanted to open up the question of field, to think about particular sites for research and commentary in Australian literature. So we also have sections in this issue of *JASAL* that look at late colonial writing, modern and contemporary writing, and poetry. The poetry section begins with John Tranter’s fascinating and detailed chronicle of the history of his remarkably influential online poetry magazine, *Jacket*: an invaluable archive that puts the work of Australian poets into continuous dialogue with a breathtaking array of poetry and commentary from around the world. The essays on poetry in this issue are all seeking forms of interpretation that enable some new political or aesthetic perspective; and to this extent they fall somewhat within the guidelines of the 2011 conference in their attempts to align pedagogy with what we termed ‘emotion’, that is, to facilitate new ways of interpreting and understanding the emotional dimensions of (in this case) poetry. Peter Minter and Kate Fagan both use the poetic form as pivot for a teachable opportunity, a didactic theory. Minter sketches the possibilities for an Indigenous ‘reading for country’, a poetic aesthetics founded on recentring nature as a legal and physical entity. He argues for a different understanding of literary influence and inspiration, based around the concept of composting and an Indigenous-based ‘decolonised Australian ecopoetics’. Kate Fagan reads Chris Edwards’ poetry via Derrida, Mallarmé and Christopher Brennan’s *Musicopoematographoscope*. The juxtaposition of Brennan and Edwards, through their different uses of Mallarmé, uncovers different poetic literary histories, highlighting their international perspectives and the trajectory from avant-garde to ‘post-avant-garde’; but Fagan also explores the way Edwards’ punning and use of hieroglyphs and symbols teaches us to doubt any system of writing.

Michael Farrell was winner of the 2012 A.D. Hope Prize for the best Postgraduate paper from the 2011 ASAL conference submitted to *JASAL* for publication. He also looks at the poetry of Christopher Brennan, but where Minter attempts to move the ecological from metaphor to concrete, Farrell pushes the other way. He uses ‘biodiversity’ as metaphor in juxtaposition with the metaphorical ‘field’ of the conference’s theme—in order to unsettle the settledness of that field, and to propose a ‘biodiverse ecosystem’ of poetry that again draws on Brennan’s barely-pronounceable *Musicopoematographoscope*—and that one might find realised by looking through the vast range of poetic material collected in John Tranter’s *Jacket*. Farrell wants to open up the definition of poetry. He refers to Brennan’s poem as ‘a model of assembling different forms, a shared space’ that ‘resists fusion and synthesis’. ‘Like the biodiverse ecosystem’, he writes, ‘it has not been reduced’. This idea of poetry as a model for coexistence and diversity informs all of the essays in this section, including Tranter’s chronicle; for all their differences,

they are all attentive to the circulation of poetry in the world and the fact that its impact can be both emotional and material.

Two essays in this issue turn to late colonial Australian writing to describe relatively neglected aspects of the Australian literary field. Elizabeth McMahon looks at Mary Gaunt as an experienced colonial traveler who is nevertheless unable to feel sympathy for the many predicaments and people she describes and exhibits: something that prevents her from giving expression to the ‘full experience of the reality of the present’. This is an essay about what McMahon calls ‘colonial mobility’, which enables remarkable encounters even as it diminishes the capacity for actual, transnational communication. Rachael Weaver looks at the relatively short-lived but remarkably vibrant late colonial magazine, *Cosmos*, founded in 1894. *Cosmos* committed itself to a national literature, but it also developed a cosmopolitan range of interests, immersing itself in *fin-de-siècle* modern life and turning especially to women’s issues—with Ethel Turner’s ‘Women’s Department’ pages distancing themselves from the figure of the ‘New Woman’, for example. Although it published the work of masculinist adventure writers like Ernest Favenc, *Cosmos* heavily invested in what Weaver calls ‘a cultivated and empowered colonial femininity’ that drew together a ‘loose canon’ of minor but energetic women writers that works to remind us that the field of Australian literature was perhaps just as ‘biodiverse’—and as broadly circulating—then as it is now.

Four essays in this issue look at modern and contemporary Australian novels. Anne Maxwell begins this section by turning back to Eleanor Dark’s *Prelude to Christopher* (1934), reading this neglected novel as a critique of social conservatism and the philosophies and practices of eugenics. For Maxwell, it offers instead a plea for ‘the finer emotions’ of compassion and empathy that she sees as especially important to our current social, and educational, predicaments. Lucinda O’Brien’s essay on Christina Stead’s *For love alone* (1945) returns to a more canonical modern novel that also functions as social critique. O’Brien examines the novel’s satirical treatment of the heroine Teresa Hawkins as she finds herself implicated in, and complicit with, ‘racist and imperialist ideologies’. *For love alone* literally plays with its protagonist’s emotions, which leads this essay to identify and discuss Stead’s novel as an acerbic work of ‘postcolonial satire’. Paul Genoni’s essay in this section looks at a number of novels that have registered the significance of Sydney Harbour Bridge for our sense of an emerging Australian modernity. He traces the affective, emotional role the Bridge has played as a memorial, a record of urban development, and as an image for Australia’s future-to-come: taking it, finally, as something almost phantasmagorical, speaking to Sydney’s identity as a ‘postmodern city’. The last essay in this issue, by Fiona Hile, looks at J.M. Coetzee’s *Elizabeth Costello* (2003) and responds to the complicated philosophical significance of this novel’s Postscript. Where does a Postscript take you? How can it be read? Hile takes us on a meandering philosophical journey to the end of Coetzee’s novel, to think about where it is possible to go and under what conditions it is possible to get there. We might very well see this issue of *JASAL* in a similar way, as a kind of postscript to the 2011 ASAL conference; we hope it takes you in some interesting, informative directions.

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