

Introduction: ‘Country: “It’s Earth”’ Special Issue

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In the Museo Carlo Bilotti, at the Villa Borghese in Rome, through the second half of this year (4 July–2 November 2014), there is an exhibition entitled ‘Dreamings: Aboriginal Australian Art meets de Chirico,’ curated by Ian McLean and Erica Izett from the Sordello Missana collection of recent paintings from the Western and Central Desert regions of Australia, housed alongside the Museo’s permanent collection of work by the Italian metaphysical painter Giorgio de Chirico. The exhibition brings together works representing the mysteries and intensities of space, place and location from (at least) two profoundly different aesthetic, spiritual, cultural and curatorial traditions. All the paintings in the exhibition are compelling in themselves, but as a collection or exhibition they bear a further point of interest in the ways they suggest a connection between the physical worlds in which they were produced and those where they rest and from whence they have been drawn for this exhibition. I want to draw on a number of claims made about this exhibition by curator Ian McLean. First, he suggests some plausible material points of connection between the landscapes of central Australia and the Mediterranean:

... one can speculate that the tastes of [collectors] Mr Sordello and Mr Missana, shaped by their upbringing in the Mediterranean, resonated with the visual poetry of Western Desert painting. The Mediterranean coastline around Antibes was a favourite spot of early modernists such as Matisse and Picasso, whose love of the energy and rhythms of African and Oceanic Indigenous art, as well as the Mediterranean climate and landscape, irrevocably changed the look of Western art. Like Matisse and Picasso, the Western Desert painters respond to their habitat—one also characterized by sun, light and colour—and paint with an intuitive confidence. They have an enviable feeling for the expressive possibilities of paint and its formal properties as a poetic visual language. This taste for colour and high energy in painting is very evident in the Sordello Missana collection. (140)

Further, in McLean’s view, the diverse cultural traditions of Indigenous artists from Australia and those of artists from Mediterranean locations over the past century have been ‘swept . . . into a common trajectory’ by ‘the global reach of modernity’ in dramatic and often violent ways, with modernity working to sever tradition (143) at both sites. The response of all these artists to place or location, to the ‘Country’ they represent, as well as wherever they are exhibited and viewed, thus also speaks to the diverse shifts of temporality, history and the matter of politics in all its forms. The third claim is that exhibiting this collection of Western Desert art alongside paintings by de Chirico highlights the metaphysical dimension of both bodies of work, to quote Ian McLean again: ‘[The exhibition brings together] the work of two metaphysical systems. Giorgio de Chirico is the master of modern western metaphysical art. Aboriginal art is also deeply metaphysical. Its every empirical encounter with the world opens onto a much larger cosmological reality, called “Dreaming”’ (142). The dialogue that the ‘Dreamings’ exhibition stages between the Indigenous artists and De Chirico is further mediated by the work of Imants Tillers, who, ‘[f]or over thirty years,’ according to McLean ‘has been developing a conversation with both the paintings of De Chirico and contemporary

Western Desert artists' (142) in his densely appropriative and highly verbal art. Tillers approaches the 'Country' in which he works explicitly through particular artworks, including a number from this exhibition. His sense of the metaphysical heft of the European and Indigenous Australian art with which he works is at once bound to the earth, sky and culture of both traditions, and through this to an apprehension of the density and layeredness of both, expressed in part through the characteristic breaking up of the plane of his works into a grid of smaller fragments, each painted individually. In his catalogue essay for the 'Dreamings' exhibition, Imants Tillers writes that grasping the connection between de Chirico and the Western Desert artists as a point of the shared centrality of metaphysics 'reminded [him] of Artaud's realisation that "the crucial thing is that we know that behind the order of this world there is another"' (120).

I've begun this Introduction to the 'Country' issue of *JASAL* with these very preliminary musings on the Museo Carlo Bilotti exhibition in order first to ground the sense of 'Country' in global terms, and also to suggest some of the richness of the concept and of the ways it might be—and indeed has been in the essays in this issue—addressed by senior, established and emerging writers and readers, both academic and creative. The 2013 ASAL Conference held at Charles Sturt University, Wagga Wagga, and convened by David Gilbey, invited participants to respond to an expansion of the word 'Country' from its first layer of reference to location and region through the rubrics of colonialism, cosmopolitanism and migration, through the vagaries and varieties of literary traffic across broad demarcations of the globe while always bearing the adamant impress of its meaning of Indigenous location and locatedness and the manifold connections to particular sites, bodies and practices that are bound up with this. Before moving on to outline the papers selected for inclusion in this conference issue, I want also to draw attention to a second point of entry to this topic: the image chosen for the cover of this issue, 'Longing belonging' (1997) by Hossein Valamanesh. This work articulates the mysterious affect of our ties to country, to specific locations as well as to the larger meanings of topography and the ways it is represented—coded, expanded, complicated, obscured—for us in the multiple forms and levels of culture—formal, official, national, domestic, familial. Valamanesh reminds us that memory and loss and displacement inform our every connection to place and that we apprehend the material forms of space and place through ceremony and distance as well as through the haptic encounters that preoccupy us *in situ*. The carpet in 'Longing belonging' (magically) transports us in and out of the gallery space, to an unnamed, photographed location where it was scorched by fire, reminding us that 'Country' is always about time as well as about place. Valamanesh's work speaks in compelling ways about the displacements of migration and the ways we fabricate a sense of home in response to dwelling. As he explained in a recent interview with Caroline Kha: 'It's earth. You have a connection, we can be a part of that land.' Here too, the metaphysical dimension of country is unavoidable, as is the observation of Artaud of another world always behind 'the order of this world.'

The abundant possibilities of 'Country' can be found in the range and variety of the papers selected for this issue as well as simply in their volume. In addition to the essays developed from papers presented at the 2013 'Country' conference, this issue begins with a special section, edited by Kerry Kilner and Peter Minter, of papers from the 'BlackWords' Symposium: 'The Past, Present and Future of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Literature.' This section includes a separate introduction by the editors, with seven essays selected from the proceedings of a symposium held in October 2012 on and around the BlackWords research and information project. While the particular focus of this section is the diversity of the intersections of research, creative practice and information in the field of

Indigenous studies, this section nonetheless provides a sound point of entry to this special issue of *JASAL* because of the ways it highlights and celebrates the increasing robustness of Indigenous writing and research in Australia.

Indigenous writing and research is a central overall concern of this issue, with four essays addressing Indigenous writing and culture directly and one further essay examining the representation of Indigenous experience. The first of these has been developed from the Dorothy Green Memorial Lecture, an annual feature of the ASAL conference, presented in 2013 by Indigenous author and scholar Jeanine Leane. Leane's essay 'Tracking our Country in Settler Literature' stages a critical engagement with key settler literary texts and their critics in terms of their figuring of Aboriginality. At the heart of the essay is a compelling insistence on the importance of standpoint, or perspective, in the practice of reading and criticism, and the imperative for settler critics to attend with care and thoughtfulness to new readings from Indigenous critics. The second keynote essay, Alison Ravenscroft's 'Sovereign Bodies of Feeling—"Making Sense" of Country' makes a parallel and responsive move from the perspective of a settler critic. Ravenscroft's approach is similarly attentive to standpoint, through its central mode of ethnographic self-reflection. These two keynotes work carefully and closely together to present a thoughtful account of the relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous spaces, bodies and cultures.

Jeanine Leane's work is itself the subject of Helena Kadmos's essay "'Look what they done to this ground, girl!": Country and Identity in Jeanine Leane's *Purple Threads*,' which argues that the form of the short story cycle operates to extend and complicate questions of identity and the experience of country in Leane's work, with 'Country' constituting a source of knowledge and enrichment as well as signalling a particular location. Natalie Quinlivan's 'Finding a Place in Story: Kim Scott's writing and the Wirlomin Noongar Language and Stories Project' examines the interrelationship between Kim Scott's ongoing work to support and sustain Noongar languages and communities and the ways his fiction presents ideas and practices of resistance and perseverance. Finally, in 'Why Raise Them to Die so Young?': The Aesthetics of Fatalism in *The Tall Man*,' Jane Stenning takes up Chloe Hooper's acclaimed 2008 true crime book about a notorious Indigenous Death in Custody case on Palm Island. Stenning identifies overarching narrative 'frames' in Hooper's text as a means to critiquing a 'discourse of fatalism' underpinning it, and which she argues works to complicate its representation of 'Other subjectivities.'

A second group of essays presents responses to country in the context of the colonial period. Elizabeth Webby's 'Representations of "The Bush" in the Poetry of Charles Harpur' takes Stephen Curtis's stage adaptation of Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* as a contemporary frame for a consideration of the attribution and publication of some of Charles Harpur's early writing through its focus on the ways Harpur was attuned to Indigenous practices of naming alongside the more fearful response of colonists. Peter Crabb provides an overview of the life and work of colonial author and journalist Charles de Boos with a focus on his activities in and around and his reporting of the goldfields; while Sarah Ailwood and Maree Sainsbury provide a detailed account of the development of Copyright Law in the Australian colonies during the nineteenth century, sketching the impacts on authors and readers.

More recent colonial and immigrant writings are the subject of a third group of essays. Susan Sheridan and Emma Maguire consider the ways that children's fiction of the 1950s understands and represents relation to the land, turning in particular to 'Aboriginal presence, actual and mythical, and the meanings which Aboriginal culture—and the bloody history of

colonial race relations—gives to country.’ In ‘Heriot’s Ithaka: Soul, Country and the Possibility of Home in *To the Islands*,’ Bernadette Brennan returns to Randolph Stow’s 1958 novel to investigate the imagery of its final line ‘My soul is a strange country,’ with its perplexing alignment of physical and metaphysical worlds. Kieran Dolin examines novels published in the wake of the 1992 High Court *Mabo* ruling, by Dorothy Hewett, Alex Miller and Andrew McGahan, tracing shifts in legal, cultural and ethical understandings of place and property reflected in each. In ‘Cannibalism and Colonialism: *Lilian’s Story* and (White) Women’s Belonging,’ Laura Deane examines the ways in which gender, race, class and the politics of colonisation and representation align, intersect and compromise each other in Kate Grenville’s first published (1985) novel, while Lachlan Brown brings together the work of Nam Le and Tim Winton through the rubrics of citation and ventriloquism to examine the question of what he calls a ‘quintessentially Australian voice.’

The final, large grouping of essays addresses what might be called a poetics of ‘Country.’ In ‘Country Escaping Line in the Poetry of Philip Hodgins,’ Stuart Cooke reads Hodgins in light of the sense of ‘an architecture of sight and seeing,’ a phrase drawn from the commentary of Martin Harrison, bringing together the ‘concrete presence’ of language with what is ‘*un-thought*’ or ‘*pre-linguistic*.’ Caroline Williamson’s ‘Beyond Generation Green: Jill Jones and the Eco-poetic Process’ won the 2014 A.D. Hope prize for best postgraduate essay presented at the 2013 conference. Williamson reads Jill Jones’ ‘Leaving it to the Sky’ in light of Walter Benjamin’s Angel of History, arguing for the ways that ‘time and place can be said to interact in a version of what it may mean for a poet to be environmentally concerned, that does not involve signing up to a charter of good behaviour, to certain political groupings, or even to labels such as “eco-feminist” or “eco-political.”’ Helen Ramoutsaki’s ‘A Continuity of Country: Enlivenment in a Live Evocation of Place’ brings together eco-poetics, performance poetry and photography in a work about and around the experience of living in Far North Queensland. Keri Glastonbury’s fictocritical ‘Lost Wagga Wagga’ engages with the specific topography of Wagga Wagga through an account of a series of historical episodes from the region and her own poetry. Julian Murphy takes up Heidegger’s notion of Being-in-the-World to engage the metaphysics of Gerald Murnane’s account of landscape in *Inland*, while Linda Weste brings together three verse-novels to examine the particularities of their first-person narratives to express relations to land. The main part of this issue on ‘Country’ closes with the third keynote essay, Brian Castro’s ‘Writing Country: Lightning, Agony, and Vertigo’—a resonant meditation on writing, memory, melancholia, family and exile, which provides compelling points of reflection and context for the essays across the issue, as well as in relation to Castro’s own work.

Finally, we close with ‘Notes and Furphies,’ with notes from Vijay Mishra on references to Australia in the Salman Rushdie archive, and from Peter Hayes on annotations to *Such is Life*. I would like to acknowledge the contribution of my co-editor for this volume, David Gilbey, and that of my fellow Managing Editor Tony Simoes da Silva.

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