

[Review] Emily Potter, *Writing Belonging at the Millennium: Notes from the Field on Settler-Colonial Place*, Intellect, 2019, 173pp.

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History, Emily Potter proposes in *Writing Belonging at the Millennium: Notes from the Field on Settler-Colonial Place*, ‘does not end when we stop telling a particular story of a particular time’ (146). The stories sit right here, in the ground. As Potter shows, they radiate in unpredictable ways. They continue to mark the present no matter how colonial culture attempts to encyst narratives of Indigenous knowledge, cultural practice and unextinguished connection to Indigenous Country.

‘Encyst’ describes one life form that burrows into another, enclosed in a cyst. Two entities become viscerally, and even fatally, fused. Potter repurposes this term from zoology to illustrate one way that colonial culture attempts to secure hold over land, affirm a sense of belonging to place, and confine points of crisis. We lock crises away, she says, ‘much like radio active waste, bunkered in the earth’ (134).

Tracing threads of Indigenous and materialist philosophers, throughout *Writing Belonging at the Millennium* Potter shows storytelling to be an imaginative and material practice. Stories and their meanings participate in the making of the world through dynamic enfoldings/unfoldings. The reality of the mingling, dynamic, enfolded and storied earth won’t uphold the colonial fantasy of a smooth stage made of concrete, or trampled soil. While the colonial I/eye fetishises ground levelled for unimpeded mobility, Potter applies her literary eye to the cracks that form in the ‘settled’ ground of national narratives. Everyday stories, literary texts and nation-wide narratives attend to questions of non-Indigenous belonging in Australia and ‘in turn, give shape to material ways of relating to and inhabiting place and its constituent parts’ (Potter 4).

Analysing narratives of place leads Potter to concentrate her attention on spatialised poetics and practices:

There is a strong link to be made between the colonizers’ narration of stolen lands through self-justifying spatial tropes of the frontier and the continued refusal of Indigenous sovereignty, as well as very alive cultures of fear of and hostility to difference in this country, something that our off-shore detention centres, inflammatory media coverage of the ‘Muslim threat’, and emboldened extreme right makes clear (Hage 2017). The colonizing project, in these terms,

is a poetic process, as much as it manifests in everyday events and structures (Wolfe 1999; Rifkin 2014). (4)

Writing Belonging at the Millennium documents a collection of non-Indigenous literary texts written during the millennial years—those stretching from the mid-1990s to mid-2000s. The novels—by Andrew McGahan, Nikki Gemmell, Thea Astley, Chloe Hooper, Janette Turner Hospital and Christos Tsiolkas—have been carefully selected as they address colonial unsettlement and unease during a time when non-Indigenous insecurities were given a ‘renewed public voice’ (Potter 2) in an attempt to re-stabilise a sense of cultural security and innocence in the face of Indigenous protests to the Bicentenary of 1988, the 1991 National Reports on the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, the 1992 Mabo decision that challenged the fiction and doctrine of *terra nullius*, and the 1997 *Bringing Them Home* report on the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families.

Refusing the idea that literature is a passive cultural product Potter foregrounds narrative as a significant player in the colonial project. It works, she writes, to help construct the ‘ideal national subject’ (34), circulate myths of threatening Australian landscapes—as in ‘scrub scare’ narratives that present certain places as ‘alien, spikey and unwelcome’ (82)—reinforce master-race narratives and quiet or deny discomfoting stories of Australia’s colonial violence.

To read Potter’s book is—if you have not already—to begin re-cognising an understanding of the way literary texts by non-Indigenous writers absorb, respond to, repeat and/or critically illuminate social discourses that co-construct historical moments. While Potter centres the millennial years as a unique and significant period of investigation, she recognises the dynamic mesh of temporal and spatial flows. She carefully and richly attends to the way the logics and violence of 1788 continue to erupt in the millennial moment and beyond. Influential to Potter’s thinking here is Patrick Wolfe’s idea of colonisation as a ‘continuing diffuse structure rather than an “event”’, and Indigenous American scholar Mark Rifkin’s point that ‘colonization is enacted in everyday practice and experience’ (cit. Potter 7). This diffuse structure is nourished by ‘quantum entanglements’ (Barad, ‘Quantum’), an idea that allows me to understand how 1788 is alive and at work in 1991 and 2020 (and beyond).

Since the end of the 1991 royal commission, coronial data shows that 424 Indigenous people have died in custody. Seventeen of these deaths occurred between 2018 and 2019. This information can be found online at *Deaths Inside*, a project which tracks ‘every known Indigenous death in custody in Australia from 2008 to 2019.’ As I write, details of the first reported death in Victoria in 2020, of a Yorta Yorta woman at the Dame Phyllis Frost Centre, have been released (Haymen-Reber). She died while in maximum security. She had

been put there for shoplifting. This is an ongoing colonial practice. Tracking the unrelenting momentum of colonial violence, Potter notes that there are now ‘double the number of Indigenous children in out of home care than at the time of the Apology’ (Wahlquist cit. Potter 146). So, of course, I can’t go past thinking about the subtitle of Larissa Behrendt’s film *After the Apology: Sorry Means You Don’t do it Again*. Not so in colonial culture.

These facts form part of the ‘blood story’ (Potter 112-116, 125) of this continent—a crime narrative of horrors to which Indigenous people and settlers connected. How are we, non-Indigenous writers, going to respond?

A figure appears in my mind as I read *Writing Belonging* and as I think about these ongoing blood stories. The figure is a white woman standing outside a house. She’s bent over, compulsively wiping the earth clear of all tracks that mark her connections to colonial violence. She’s trying to maintain feelings of ‘white-picket-fenced goodness’ to suppress the reality that there is ‘no solid ground on which an “innocent” can stand firm’ (Potter 121). I know that this woman is me, in part. Maybe she is/has been you too? She has not yet realised (not fully) that the certainties she carries from day to day have all walked away. She hasn’t caught onto the fact that there is no such thing as a smooth and settled narrative for the ground she claims as “her own.” History, she thinks, can be erased. Yes, she says to herself, the past will pass. As Potter shows, Australian literary history has been vital to the colonial project of denying, forgetting and suppressing. Let’s not forget *that*.

Throughout *Writing Belonging at the Millennium*, Potter argues that when engaged in linear chronological representations, the novel form *itself* re-enforces Western concepts of temporality, including ideas that the past can be put to rest through a process of reconciliation and redemption. Origins and ruins ‘are activated as icons of an irreducible movement forward’ (127). Novelistic forms such as the pastoral idyll and the ghost story are worked in service of white redemption—as a ‘narrative tactic of claim’ (ibid.)—showing non-Indigenous characters cleansed of their colonial stigma while constructing a new foundational narrative of their rightful belonging. When we tell ourselves—and each other—that damaging events remain contained chronologically *before* our lifetimes, we only embolden a nation that calls for people to ‘get over what happened’ (ibid.). Such calls can be read as a symptom of a haunted nation hell bent on finding a renewed connection to ‘our’ lands—as in the pastoral—or putting all that history to rest—as if it were a tired old spectre.

During the millennial years there was an explosion in what has come to be called ‘spectral studies’ and *Writing Belonging* appears connected to those years of thinking, as it is steeped in consideration of the ethical calls-to-justice made by spectres manifest as literature. Spectral theorists such as Jacques Derrida, Avery Gordon, Eve Tuck and Karen Barad recognise

ghosts as both temporally disjointed and destroyers of linear fantasies—emanating from the past, they also come at us from our futures. Ghosts tangle stories of the ground with Australian literary history. They trouble the desired encystment of colonial crises with their paranormal logics—‘para’ being a prefix with the meanings of ‘beside’, ‘near’ ‘alongside, beyond, issuing from’ (“para”). Paranormal logics, as I think of them, question the formation of knowledge by invoking what issues from, but stands outside of, it. Ghosts, hauntings are repetitive instances, they are returnings and re-turnings that ‘diffract’ place—as in break it apart—and make place, land and home different, unfamiliar (Barad, ‘Diffracting’). When you are haunted your bearings on the world are loosened. Literary theorist Ross Chambers has written ‘when the over-and-done-with comes alive’ (2), certainty blasts through walls; goes fugitive. The uncertainty we are left with—have always been with—offers possibilities for thinking, knowing and living on this continent in different ways. ‘Just what form this uncertainty takes,’ Potter writes, ‘is a matter of imaginaries, as we realize we’re all tangled up with each other. This is where hope lies, in rethinking relations with place from here’ (143).

For Potter, breaking with the poetic and spatial imaginary of colonial progress and redemption through belonging is an ‘ethical imperative beyond the service of non-indigenous storytelling’ (147). The imperative, she writes, is for opening stories and poetics up for decolonisation. This, Potter suggests, is one route towards turning over the colonial grounds of non-Indigenous writers to a new poetic imaginary—one that does not claim belonging at all cost.

As I write this, we are in the middle of an old/new colonial-ecocidal-extractivist-soil-forest-drought-grassland-aerial-enfolding/unfolding material narrative that may be touching you at the level of the skin. The short version of the story goes like this:

August 2019, bushfire season begins. Over the coming months, volunteer Emergency Services are stretched beyond exhaustion. The Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, responds with thanks, but declines any suggestion they will professionalise and pay the service (Davidson). By October, poet and novelist Alison Croggon has written in *The Monthly* that the same ideologies accelerating ecocide and political extremism are also destroying cultural memories through strategic funding cuts to the arts. December comes and the Prime Minister announces that we won’t have a department with a major focus on the arts anymore. The Department of Communication and the Arts is to be rolled into the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications. By January 2020, over 8.4 million hectares of Australia has burned. An estimated 1.25 billion animals are dead (O’Gorman). More are dying. NASA predicts that the smoke from these fires will travel east across the Tasman Sea, over the Pacific Ocean and, circling the earth, will return to us (Truu). And so it does.

I bring this time up now because these events are—in part—articulated through narratives of endings inflected with familiar settler-colonial nationalisms. Narratives of non-Indigenous belonging rooted through trauma as re-confirmation of belonging are turning up everywhere in the wake of this horrific summer. But how can we tell the stories of this time otherwise? How to show its dynamic enmeshment with the multilayered histories rooted in the grounds we have come to inhabit?

Many have called these fires a manifestation of colonialism—driven by the same people, systems and practices that incarcerate and kill First Peoples, destroy ancestral lands, waters, multispecies kin and air, and refuse to learn from Indigenous knowledges. Potter similarly acknowledges the colonial grounds of intensifying climate crises:

Australian rivers run dry and species disappear. At the same time, new generations of Indigenous activists and thinkers, building on the legacies of their forebears, are mobilizing unprecedented resistance to the prevailing settler-colonial paradigm still so informed by Howard's Australia, and behind this, myopic colonial visions of an empty land, passively open to exploitation. (146)

This summer—'savage,' is what historian Tom Griffiths calls it—demands old/new incendiary and regenerative imaginaries. This levels a huge challenge for any writer, like me, of non-Indigenous ancestry living on unceded territories. The challenge is: how, during a time of intensifying ecological disaster, are we to avoid reactivating narratives that re-install and re-naturalise non-Indigenous presence while reaffirming Indigenous dispossession?

Writing Belonging at the Millennium will not answer this question for you. But it will provide you with a map of some of what's been done, and to what effect. I urge you to read this book. It's clear. It's urgent. Potter's work is forensic and generous. There are no arrogant or generalist pronouncements here, no striding across the colonial stage.

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