

# Australian Literature and Place-Making

**EMILY POTTER**  
Deakin University  
and  
**BRIGID MAGNER**  
RMIT University

Much attention has been given to the representation of place in Australian literature (e.g. Gerster; Darian-Smith, Gunner and Nuttall; Haynes; Cranston and Zeller), but comparably little to this literature's participation in the *production*, or *making*, of place. This special issue brings together scholars working in a field that can be identified by various critical and historical movements in literary and cultural studies which constellate around questions of literature's intersections with the materiality of place. This field includes literary and cultural geography, psychogeography, critical regionalism, new materialisms, spatial history, and place-making studies. While diverse and dynamic, a commonality across these theoretical and methodological approaches is the understanding of place as an unbounded, non-geographically determined, and relationally constituted, real-world context for practices of living and meaning-making; and the recognition of complex, more than material, and more than human forces, in the ongoing constitution of place.

This special issue showcases the diverse ways in which Australian literature and place-making are brought together in contemporary literary scholarship. The seven essays, as well as the creative work by artist and scholar Ross Gibson, illuminate place as intimately constituted by narrative practice, and reflexively, show how geographies and environments inform literary forms, modes and, to use Jennifer Hamilton's productive term, 'tones.' Poetics and place-making are closely bound. This is of particular consequence in our national context, where ongoing cultures of colonisation, and the political potential of decolonising practices, are both enabled by the kinds of stories we tell both about and through our occupation of place. Storytelling is never neutral, nor is it dematerial. It is always, profoundly, active and has effects on the composition of the world; it is also collaborative, and not always with other human actors. Thinking about a potentially decolonised place requires an interrogation of what enables the enduring capacity of space to exclude and dispossess. It means understanding how words 'do' work. The essays included here understand this work in a range of ways and through distinct frames.

Meg Mundell's essay explores the production of literary place through creative writing practice, taking the fiction writer and scholar Tony Birch as exemplar to understand the sensorial and affective 'off-page' modes of place-knowing that feed textual forms. Jennifer Hamilton also focuses on textual practice; her concern is the complicity of literary works with capitalist-colonial cultures that underpin inequitable place relations. Hamilton's interest in 'tone' as a potentially resistant force for reimagining cultures of inhabitation offers a way to understand literary work as beyond the purely representational. David Harris also calls for new decolonising strategies through literary work: his comparative discussion of Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book* and Janette Turner Hospital's *The Last Magician* draws on new materialist insights to think through these novels' contribution to urban imaginaries, and in turn to suggest more ethical and sustainable modes of living in cities. The city space also concerns Toby Davidson and Donna Houston's account of a literary mapping project, *Words in Place* in

Sydney, Melbourne and Canberra. Their focus on the materiality of literary commemoration raises pointed questions about how literature and place come together through acts of public remembering, and to what effect. The vulnerability of commemorative practice to silences and exclusions offers a generative challenge to mapping projects and their political potential.

Two essays on Western Australian author Randolph Stow bring differing foci to the matter of place in this author's oeuvre. Tony Hughes D'Aeth reads Stow's 'Geraldton' novels as entangled with what he terms the 'material dynamics of colonisation,' particularly processes of agricultural colonisation. This approach pushes against a more conventional reading of Stow through the metaphysics of settler colonial alienation. Catherine Noske offers a complementary analysis of Stow's *The Suburbs of Hell* which approaches the transnationalism of Stow's thematics and poetics as a mode of place-making practice. Emily Potter and Brigid Magner's essay on Mallee literary history looks to Murray River literatures as affording counter narratives of the Mallee region that expand its social and poetic life and feed potentially abundant futures. Finally, Ross Gibson's digital artwork registers the interactivity of place and text performatively; 'Bluster Town' is an animated poem designed for public display at Wynyard Station in Sydney. Its recollection of the multiplicity of this place to, and in which, it speaks enacts the vitality of narrative place-making. In this piece, words flicker through time, calling out both the ephemeral and foundational nature of storytelling, re-making place as we narrate our world.

#### WORKS CITED

- Cranston, C.A. and Robert Zeller eds. *The Littoral Zone: Australian Contexts and Their Writers*. Amsterdam; New York, NY: Rodopi, 2007.
- Darian-Smith, Kate, Liz Gunner and Sarah Nuttall eds. *Text, Theory, Space: Land, Literature and History in South Africa and Australia*. London and New York: Routledge, 1996.
- Gerster, Robin, 'Gerrymander: The Place of Suburbia in Australian Fiction.' *Meanjin* 49.3 (1990): 565–75.
- Haynes, Roslyn. *Seeking the Centre: The Australian Desert in Literature, Art and Film*. Cambridge and Melbourne: Cambridge UP, 1998.