

NEW CULTURAL LANDSCAPES: AUSTRALIAN NARRATIVES IN LITERATURE AND FILM

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Australia. *Terra Australis Incognita*. Even before its official finding by Captain James Cook in 1770, the “land down under” already circulated in the European imagination. The giant mass of land necessary to balance a flat Earth (as antipodal to Europe) could only be home to a great many monstrous fauna and flora, as it was also the cultural counterpart to Europe. However, giant one-eyed monsters and sea serpents were not found by Captain Cook upon his arrival on Botany Bay, now part of Sydney. By declaring the land *terra nullius*, Cook ignored the many Aboriginal communities that had lived in Australia for over 75,000 years and such act has given way to one of the core elements in the development of Australian culture and history: the relationship between whites and Aborigines in the development of the nation.

Also, the fact that the individuals transported to Australia as part of the First Fleet in 1788 were, for the most part, convicts (Australia had been established as a penal colony following the loss of the American colonies in 1776, which had been used for that purpose by the English crown) whose criminal records ranged from murder to stealing cheese. In fact, as Robert Hughes reminds us, in his thorough study *The Fatal Shore: A History of the Transportation of Convicts to Australia, 1787-1868* (1986), “[n]ever had a colony been founded so far from its parent state, or in such ignorance of the land it occupied” (1). The ignorance of the land combined with the sociological beliefs of Georgian England that there was a “criminal class” being established in Britain turned Australia, in Hughes’s

words, into “a cloaca, invisible, its contents filthy and unnameable” (1-2). The gathering of British rejects in a faraway place, so different from the landscapes of Britain and Ireland, did not mean the relationship to an idea of Britishness was simply severed. In fact, it took the first inhabitants the best part of half a century for the acknowledgement and active development of an Australian culture that distanced itself, albeit slowly though not thoroughly, from its European origins (2).

Literature has been in the core of the early Australian settlements from the beginning. In part of the introduction to the *Macquarie PEN Anthology of Australian Literature* (2009), edited by Nicholas Jose, Elizabeth Webby reminds us that “[b]ooks arrived in Australia in January 1788 with Governor Phillip’s First Fleet, along with paper, ink, type and a printing press, though it was to be a few more years before the new British colony could boast a printer” (16). Next to the multiple travel reports that needed to be produced in order to both inform the British crown and feed the average British imagination, the first forms of actual literature produced in Australia dealt with the longing of home, the strangeness of the landscape, its fauna and flora, the praise of the convict, and the contact (not always peaceful) with indigenous Australians. The image of Australia as a nation in which only the strong would survive (given the complete lack of material resources and the initial difficulty of establishing agriculture in the early colonies due to the harshness of the land) and, thus, where the British would have to adapt and become Australians, can be seen in one of the



earliest poems published in the nation, Barron Field's "The Kangaroo" (1819), whose first two stanzas read:

KANGAROO, Kangaroo!
 Thou Spirit of Australia,
 That redeems from utter failure,
 From perfect desolation,
 And warrants the creation
 Of this fifth part of the Earth,
 Which would seem an after-birth,
 Not conceiv'd in the Beginning
 (For God bless'd His work at first,
 And saw that it was good),
 But emerg'd at the first sinning,
 When the ground was therefore curst;—
 And hence this barren wood

Kangaroo, Kangaroo!
 Tho' at first sight we should say,
 In thy nature that there may
 Contradiction be involv'd,
 Yet, like discord well resolv'd,
 It is quickly harmoniz'd.
 Sphynx or mermaid realiz'd,
 Or centaur unfabulous,
 Would scarce be more prodigious,
 Or Labyrinthine Minotaur,
 With which great Theseus did war,
 Or Pegasus poetical,
 Or hippogriff—chimeras all!
 But, what Nature would compile,
 Nature knows to reconcile;
 And wisdom, ever at her side,
 Of all her children's justified. . . . (in Jose 66-67)

Field's construction of Australia as a land created after Creation and, therefore, cursed by the Original Sin, whose lives must be made of combined, complex, mythological beings indicates the tensions in the construction of the environment which have permeated the literary and cultural representations of Australian land and people since. However, when gold was discovered in 1851, in New South Wales, and soon after, in Victoria, the initial perception of Australia as a dumping ground for convicts changed to that of a prospective El Dorado (Webby 17), and a great number of free settlers emigrated to the country in search of easy riches. Such a movement brought about two important elements to the tensions of building the Australian nation. Firstly, the massive influx of migrants looking

for gold allowed the modernization of the country, with the widening of the colonial frontiers. This, on the other hand, potentialized racial and ethnic conflicts within the country, both because the opening of the nation dispossessed several—if not all—existing Aboriginal communities, and because within the waves of migrants were thousands of non-Anglo Europeans and, most prominently, Chinese. The myth of white (i.e. Anglo) Australia, which still survives in culture somehow, has made it necessary to establish a cohesive and coherent cultural and historical narrative of the nation, which leads to the second important element. Towards the last decade of the nineteenth century, literary expressions of Australia ranged, basically, between the harsh, realistic representation of the dryness of land and people, represented, primarily, by Henry Lawson's poems and chronicles, and the romanticized, idealized life in the bush, represented, primarily, by A.B. "Banjo" Patterson. Reading side by side texts such as Lawson's "The Union Buries Its Dead", which describes in a direct, unemotional style similar to that found in Ernest Hemingway the country funeral of a unionized labourer, on the one hand, and, on the other, Patterson's "The Man From Snowy River", a poem which describes the heroics of the Australian-born title character, who risks his life in order to retrieve a runaway horse from the station he worked in, one might have the impression that both texts take place in two different nations.

The twentieth century begins with the moment of Federation, when Australia becomes a nation state, yet still part of the British Commonwealth. The sociopolitical elevation of Australia to the status of country brings, on the one hand, the maintenance of most—if not all—colonial tensions from the past and, on the other hand, a preoccupation with the construction of an official understanding of Australian history. How should Australians deal with their national origins as a penal colony, as a nation that has dispossessed Aboriginal Australians from their land, and as a culture that, despite all the material and cultural contributions from other European and Asian migrants, still wishes to retain (to a certain extent) its Anglo roots? Should history idealize the nation, as does "Banjo" Patterson's famous poem, or should it present its true harshness, as

do Henry Lawson's texts? The debates on how Australian history should or must be constructed and divulged, now known as the "history wars", have been one of the cores of any political project for the nation, moving from a more conservative, values-based approach as preached by Coalition (a political alliance of centre-right political parties), to a more liberal, questioning approach as preached by Labor governments.

Obviously, such tensions have seeped into Australian literature from the beginnings of the twentieth century onwards. In that century, two important milestones must be addressed. The first one is the literary reversal of the *vox nullius* condition imposed on Aboriginal peoples since Captain Cook arrived in the land (Heiss and Minter 2), with the publication of the first volumes authored by indigenous writers, beginning with David Unaipon's *Native Legends* (1929), a collection of traditional stories. However, it was not until the 1950s and 1960s that Aboriginal writing became more visible among Australian readers, following (and connected to) Aboriginal Australians' political organizations fighting for citizenship (only in 1963 were indigenous Australians given the right to vote, and only in 1967 did Aboriginal people become full Australian citizens, with the same rights as non-indigenous Australians, in a constitutional amendment passed via referendum) and land rights. Thus, literature and political activism, together with the need to build a sense of identity in relation to white Australia, have since been strong pillars in Aboriginal writing.

The second milestone worth mentioning is the development and consolidation of the academic area of Australian Studies from the 1970s onwards. Interdisciplinary in nature, its story, as Stephen Alomes writes,

could be told as a simple micro-story of institutional elaboration, specifically of Australian Studies programs, courses and journals (perhaps with a capital S). It might also offer a perspective on the essential role of Australian S/studies in general, confirming the importance of Australian S/studies at home in challenging the cultural cringe. Or, thirdly, it might offer an assessment of the intellectual developments in the study of Australia and the

relationship between Australian Studies and other work in Australian history, literature, and politics, etc., including Australian studies overseas. Looking more generally, the costs and benefits of different foci and modes of analysis might be assessed, including such subjects as images of Australia and social class, and of varying approaches including problem-oriented work and comparative studies. (7)

Australian literature and film, thus, can be seen as constitutive elements of the larger Australian Studies area, allowing, thus, better, deeper connections between the sociopolitical contexts of production and consumption, both foreign and domestic, given that the area also aims at establishing connections with other nations and cultures beyond the Anglophone world.

This is where the current issue of *Ilha do Desterro* stands. In being the first Brazilian (perhaps even Latin American) issue of a journal devoted exclusively to the discussion of Australian literature, film, and culture, the fifteen essays presented here show the complexities of dealing with all the previously mentioned tensions as they are (re)presented in different narratives. *Ilha do Desterro* has published for its Brazilian and world-wide readership thematic issues on national cultures, more or less distant from that of its own placement, such as, a thematic issue on *South African Literature and Media* (Gatti 2011) among other.¹ The present volume on Australian Literature and Film attempts to breach the gap separating Brazilian audiences and Australian narratives through specialized views on this subject so far in space though close in interest. The articles gathered here make clear what should not be surprising: that there are similarities between the historical past that shapes Australian culture and a Brazilian heritage, both deeply influenced by European colonization and processes of colonial encounter and divergence.

The opening article to this volume, "Resistance and Sovereignty in Some Recent Australian Indigenous Women's Novels", by Carole Ferrier, can be seen as an interesting summary of many of the tensions permeating contemporary Australian society and its representation in literature and culture. Ferrier discusses a number of Aboriginal women's novels published from the last decade of the twentieth century onwards to expose how

some of the main elements of Aboriginality have been represented: the forced separation from land and culture, the imposition of white Australian culture through the legacy of colonialism, and the search for sovereignty. By reading novels such as Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* and *Plains of Promise*, and Melissa Lucashenko's *Mullumbimby*, among several others, the author is able to show how Indigenous Australian epistemologies and ontologies circulate within contemporary Australia also as zones of resistance. Such displacements and zones of resistance can also be seen in "A whole alternative universe': Language and Space in David Malouf's "The Only Speaker of His Tongue", by Déborah Scheidt. The author analyzes a short story by Malouf in which a meeting between a Nordic lexicographer and an Indigenous Australian is imagined in order to reflect upon the effects, linguistic and cultural, of the decimation of Aboriginal communities and languages, which had been a direct consequence of the opening of the Australian frontier in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

It is important to note, though, that while the two articles discussed above represent contemporary tensions in relating to Aboriginality, such views are relatively recent, and can be contrasted with the views of the colonizers and their attempts to justify the taking of the land and destruction of Aboriginal culture. In "Exercising Dominion: landscape, civilisation and racial politics in *Capricornia*", Michael Ellis discusses the epic novel written by Xavier Herbert and published in 1937. Herbert's novel, dealing with the colonization of the Northern Territory, mostly represents Aboriginal people as non-entities and, by focusing on the issue of the land as a site of conflict, Ellis's analysis manages to discuss how a contemporary reading of the novel may expose elements of guilt in the colonial enterprise. Such a feeling, so present in the establishment of liberal representations of White-Aboriginal relations in Australia, is also part of what is discussed in "A Story Told in a Whisper, or the Impossibility of Atonement", by Sandra Regina Goulart Almeida. Her reading of Gail Jones's *Sorry*, an award-winning novel dealing with the Stolen Generations—Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who had been forcibly removed from their homes in order to assimilate culturally and

physically to white Australia—exposes the difficulties in addressing the aspects of colonization and decolonization (through the works of Gayatri Spivak and Walter Dignolo, among others) which leads, in the end, to the actual impossibility of reaching atonement, what is sought by the policies of apologizing to Indigenous Australians for the centuries of oppression and dispossession.

The migrant experience is, as mentioned before, also part of the construction of contemporary Australian culture and it is what is examined in "Postcolonial Issues and Colonial Closures: Portrayals of Ambivalence in Shaun Tan's *The Arrival*", by Renata Lucena Dalmaso and Thayse Madella. Tan's wordless graphic novel depicts the experience of a migrant in a nameless place, and the authors use the critical studies by Benedict Anderson and Homi Bhabha in order to discuss how a sense of Australian identity can emerge from the fractured transition from colonial to postcolonial tensions. A wider, more panoramic discussion of the migrant experience is the core of "Reffos, Wogs and Dagoes': The Immigration Experience in Post-World War II Australia", by Susan Jacobowitz, in which the author examines a series of literary and filmic narratives to construct a general idea of how migrants have been represented in Australia, the nation that concomitantly acts as both utopia and dystopia to non-Anglo migrants and refugees.

Besides Aboriginal and migrant tensions in a land not always welcoming, several other elements form the contemporary understanding of Australian culture nowadays. In "Manufactured By The Sun': Eve Langley's *The Pea-Pickers On The Move*", Nicholas Birns examines one of the long-forgotten, recently rediscovered novels of the mid-twentieth century that focuses on two sisters who assume male identities to work as pea-pickers and through whom a myriad of characters from different nationalities and ethnicities are presented, and also through whom aspects of transgenderism and sexuality can be analyzed. Birns focuses on the ways polyphony is constructed to represent a dynamic Australian culture in the making. If Langley's novel allows readers to experience, albeit critically, what the rural area of Gippsland, Victoria, was in the early

1940s, a totally different experience of the land is the core of “Traveling, Writing and Engagement in Robyn Davidson’s *Tracks*”, by Magali Sperling Beck, where the focus is on Davidson’s travel narrative, in which she describes the crossing of the deserts in west Australia in the end of the 1970s accompanied only by a dog and four camels. Beck argues that, more than a narrative around the conflicts between a human being and the inhospitable land of the Australian deserts, Davidson’s is a journey of self-discovery through an understanding of space as a catalyst for change.

The strangeness Australia may cause on non-Australians is symptomatic of the concepts of nation and country that circulate within the island. In “Your Country is of Great Subtlety”: Aspects of the Brazilian Translation of Patrick White’s *Voss*, Ian Alexander and Monica Stefani discuss the subtleties around the idea of country presented in White’s novel (from a colonial and postcolonial perspectives) and the effects (or loss thereof) of the Brazilian translation published in the mid-1980s. The international impact of Australian Studies and the potential the area of Book Studies in widening and renewing the effect of postcolonial studies in the Australian context is what is discussed in “Emerging from the Rubble of Postcolonial Studies: Book History and Australian Literary Studies”, by Per Henningsgard. In his article, the author discusses the intricate connections between the areas of postcolonial studies, Australian literary studies, and book history in order to see how the latter can contribute to a new construction of the former in an attempt to promote a transnational understanding of Australian literature.

The essays on Australian film here included deal with a critical and theoretical formation that could be compared to that of our own Latin American context, as issues of postcolonialism, national identity, revisionist history and hybrid subjective constructions are foregrounded in articles that cover significant historical periods and cultural landscapes configured in and by the Australian films analyzed. Within a Brazilian context, the films analyzed in this issue of *Ilha do Desterro* go far beyond the list of Australian films mostly likely to be known by a Brazilian audience, such as *Gallipoli* (1981, directed by Peter Weir), *Wake in*

Fright or Outback (1971, directed by Tedd Kotcheff) and *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994, directed by Stephan Elliott). These films have received a positive reception and have appealed strongly to Brazilian audiences. Furthermore, they are only some of those that have helped to create a local perspective of the vast Australian cultural landscape, from coast to coast, as a nation of diversity and differences. Such disparities and cultural asymmetries ring true as one continental nation, Brazil, considers its continental antipode. Recent Australian filmography brings within closer reach its nation of origin, as some of the films here analyzed offer possibilities of being compared to our own Brazilian filmic production, and indeed, one of the articles in this collection proposes a comparative analysis between *Mabo* (2012, directed by Aboriginal filmmaker Rachel Perkins) and *Terra Vermelha* (*Birdwatchers*, Marco Bechis, 2008).

As the essays suggest, the theoretical approaches to the various films, which include decolonization, new historicism, subjective and transversal identity formations, modes of genre production (from documentary to the western, and more international film narratives) are definitely part of the same globalized and cultural contexts in which we are all inserted. However, as the articles inform us, specificities within the Australian cultural landscape can also point to major differences, as for instance, the more marked presence and consciousness of aborigine element in the conception of the filmic literature, especially when compared to its counterparts in Latin America. The articles in this issue confirm the political potential of film medium in its portrayal of Australian Aboriginal peoples (Jacka 1998).²

In order to familiarize our readers with an Australian cultural filmic landscape the first essay in this section discusses one of its most popular films in Brazil, *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*. In “*Altjeringa* and *didgeridoo*: Australian Identity Devices on Polyphonic Spatiality of *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, Stephan Elliott”, Jorge Alves Santana analyzes, from a social and aesthetic perspective, the film’s engendering of Australian contemporary subjectivities, in its transversal forms

of mobility, conveyed by the protagonists' journey from Sydney to Alice Springs. According to Santana, between *Altjeringa* and *didgeridoo*, homoaffective and ancestral identities point out elements of convergence and negotiation in the collective and imaginary construction of the nation.

"Screening Indigenous Australia: Space, Place and Media in Frances Calvert's Talking", by Peter Kilroy, analyzes in Frances Calvert's documentary, *Talking Broken* (1990), the role of the media in the relation between indigenous communities in Torres Strait Island and the Australian mainland. The article further explores the role of indigenous media in the documentary's critical perception of the formulations involved in the "centre-periphery" relations between the Torres Strait Islanders and the Australian mainland, after the Australian Bicentenary in 1988.

Another article which deals with indigenous media, but from a comparative perspective, the Brazilian and the Australian situations and approaches, is Aline Frey's "Resisting Invasions: Indigenous Peoples and Land Rights Battles in *Mabo* and *Terra Vermelha*". By focusing on subjects such as indigenous cinema, environmental preservation and land rights, Frey compares and contrasts *Mabo* (2012) directed by Aboriginal filmmaker Rachel Perkins and *Terra Vermelha* (*Birdwatchers*, Marco Bechis, 2008). The former is deals with a legal battle about the ownership of Indigenous land in Australia, whereas the latter deals with the violence involved in the reclaiming, by contemporary Brazilian Indigenous people, of land occupied by agribusiness. The author finds parallels in the struggle for land in both Indigenous nations, Brazilian and Australian. From a rich theoretical background, which includes Kerstin Knopf's *Decolonizing the Lens of Power*, the article draws a larger panorama of contemporary problems faced by Indigenous communities and considers the role of media within a globalized world.

The other two articles on Australian film in the film section discuss the relations between indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in a violent and painful portrayal of the Australian frontier. In "*The Proposition*: Imagining Race, Family and Violence on the Nineteenth-Century Australian Frontier", Catriona Elder analyzes

John Hillcoat's 2005 film *The Proposition* in relation to a number of other Australian films from 2000 on that deal with violence in race relations in contemporary Australia. For the author, *The Proposition* not only reveals the trauma of the Australian frontier, but does so to revise forms of belonging to the nation of Australia.

In "Postcolonial Longing on the Australian Cinematic Frontier", Pauline Marsh's reading of *The Tracker* and *Red Hill* foregrounds these films as re-interpretations of Australia's colonial past. According to the author, both films raise arguments about historical truth and subjective memory intermingled with contemporary realities. Like Catriona Elder's article, Marsh's deals with Australia's colonial history to raise important issues about contemporary Australia.

In our new section "Review Essays" we are publishing two enlightening essays. The first is Daozhi Xu's "Australian Children's Literature: A Review Essay", which shows the importance of children's literature in contemporary Australia as a literary form that challenges colonial ideology and offers new perspectives on the Australian cultural landscape. The second essay, which closes our volume, is Professor Renata M. Wasserman's "Exile Island and Global Conversation: *Ilha do Desterro* Bridges Languages and Cultures". The essay covers the last ten years of thematic publications on Anglophonic Literature published by *Ilha do Desterro*. Wasserman's article shows the role of *Ilha do Desterro* in bringing the cultures of the Anglophone world to a Brazilian public, from its beginning, and focuses on some of the articles that illustrate the journal's engagement with its academic readership, important contemporary themes, and major critical perceptions of local and global contexts.

Notes

1. See *Ilha do Desterro: South Africa: Literature and Media*. Vol 61, 2011 (Jan/Jun), Ed. José Gatti.
2. For an in-depth discussion of film industry in Australia see Dermody, Susan and Jacka, Elizabeth. *The Screening of Australia: Anatomy of a Film Industry*. Sydney: Currency Press, 1987.

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