

LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Expanding Australian Literary History Through Geography: Repression, Recovery, Re-writing

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The term ‘place made after the story’ (Barton and Barton 2004; Carter 2015) acknowledges the power that stories have on emergent communities and their more-than-human worlds. It is a concept inspired by Indigenous place-making practices in Australia (and the land now called Australia), which are performative and ephemeral as well as material, understood as constellations of space and time brought into being by song, ritual, and other collective storytelling practices (Watson 2009). As this position paper will advance, place-making through narrative practice is not isolated to Indigenous Australian culture, but is, rather, a relation that is immanent to all acts of storytelling.

In line with this, the colonisation of Australia, and subsequent engagements with this history, can be understood as narrative, as much as material, processes. As we go onto suggest, the question of literary geography in Australia prompts a reconsideration of literary history that takes into account an expanded, geographically inflected, field of story-telling. These questions have come to light in the context of our ongoing project of literary history, in the Mallee region of south-eastern Australia. What happens if we consider the place-

stories that are generated by multiple acts of narration across time, beyond conventional literary forms, in our discussions of literary history?

As an example, recent global attention to the political nature of public monuments makes clear the connection between places, names and place-stories. The removal of statues of Cecil Rhodes in Oxford and Robert E. Lee in the American South, for instance, has fired debate around historical remembering, which is also a matter of the stories that get privileged in both the narrating, and making, of places. Public monuments are interventions into public story-telling, with uneven capacities for collective representation. Opposition to the continuing presence of these statues in places of significance speaks to the contested recognition that our lived material spaces are far from benign; rather they are structured by narratives of exclusion and inclusion, in which matters of inheritance are deeply embedded.

Australia does not sit outside these debates. Like other post-imperial contexts around the globe, Australia is also dealing with public spaces populated by problematic names and associated stories. In Sydney, conflict has recently erupted around a statue of Captain Cook sited in the centre of the city, with a plaque stating that Cook ‘discovered’ the ‘territory’ of Australia in 1770. Captain Cook, of course, was 40,000 years behind Indigenous Australians in terms of locating the continent, and the word ‘discovered’ elides this truth, covering it over with an imagined ‘year zero’ of colonial foundations (Rose 1997: 9). The protest against the statue – and the defensive reactions in response – caused a media storm that was as short lived as it was prominent, inducing a sharp reaction from the Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull, that any proposal to revisit the narrative of this statue, let alone remove it, was ‘Stalinist’ in nature.

Turnbull’s reaction is indicative of Australia’s endemic culture of reluctance to open up public discourse on the contested nature of the past and its remembrance, and to move this debate into a serious space of collective critical reflection. One reason for this is that any attempt to challenge normative views of history, embodied in public monuments such as Captain Cook’s, tends to come into conflict with the dominant place-stories that have supported the project of colonisation in Australia, a project still informing the logic of the supposed ‘postcolonial’ state.

Place-stories, in this sense, are narratives that provide poetic logic in the ongoing making of places. They give shape to a community yet to come, and materially inform the contours of a place, as well as what it might be. In this understanding, place-stories are more than narrative interventions into already existing places, or the imposition of a subjective historical narrative over a subordinated counter-story. They are, instead, forces of place-making, which, in the colonial context, requires the remaking of colonised space anew, inaugurating a temporal juncture that renders Indigenous sovereignty as past.

Australia’s self-conscious approach to its literary history might well be reconsidered through an engagement with place-stories. From early on, commentators (and others, most notably Charles Darwin in 1836) have remarked on the paucity of Australia’s literary culture, an attitude that still informs the discourse of Australian literary criticism. This criticism might be rebuffed as unfair given the relative youth of the nation, which was not even federated when Darwin made his visit. But it is fraught in other ways, too. An exclusive

understanding of literary history, defined in conventional Western terms, ignores millennia of Indigenous Australian narrative culture that continues to be practiced. It also fails to take account of the diverse narrative work undertaken by the colonisers, from their arrival, including the production of place-stories.

A further locus for this work are place names. Though less materially forceful than monuments, these have perhaps even more poetic power in public space – a power deployed to counter the anxieties of an ‘unwritten’, colonised space. Place names can be seen in light of an anxious colonial culture, self-conscious in its youth, and desiring to forge narratives that would strengthen its claim on stolen land. The procession of Australian place names associated with English monarchs and other elites, as well as colonial administrators and explorers, speaks to this desire to reproduce the centre of empire, rather than inhabit its margins. These gestures, as Paul Carter and others have theorised, do the double-work of rendering strange environments familiar and instating stories from elsewhere as the narrative conditions for ontogenesis – new place stories that reset history (Carter 1987; Arthur 1999).

Our current project of regional literary history is concerned with how places are made through their stories, and not only ‘literary’ in a fictional sense. The Mallee agricultural region – famous for its delicate indigenous ecosystem with highly variable rainfall – is strongly associated in broad cultural terms with the archetypal colonial experience of ‘battling the land’, and its existing published literary history reflects this. What is conventionally labelled as ‘Mallee literature’ is routinely limited to a handful of explorer accounts, and a similarly small number of nineteenth and twentieth century novelists and poets – all of whom are read through the transcendent narrative of the Mallee as a place of colonial failure or conversely in heroic terms, as one of hard-fought endurance. Existing literary histories are largely white and male, while Mallee literary history is positioned as beginning with non-indigenous settlement, tacitly excluding pre-colonial narratives.

In this kind of version of literary history, the place is passively fixed in understanding prior to its texts: that is, Mallee literature is seen as responding to the Mallee, rather than contributing to its making. Part of our ambition is to resurrect forgotten literary works concerning the Mallee, but also to expand what ‘counts’ in literary history. This necessitates paying attention to the stories that weave together in the making of a place. This opens up both a place, and its literary history, to the possibilities a dynamic and diverse account, refusing the capacity to be trapped or predetermined by a dominant or privileged place story.

As a case in point, the small town of Rainbow in the north-west of the state of Victoria offers an example of how colonising practices made place through the apparent imposition of narratives that have no logical genealogy in the land. In a sense, the place (which of course, was already a place – part of the country of the Wotjobaluk people who had inhabited it for millennia) had to be retrofitted to a structuring story, and remade in the process, as the territory of Empire. The town was established in 1900, along with many others that dotted the Mallee, as the railway line from Melbourne (340km away) brought hopeful wheat farmers to the recently surveyed lands – lands also significantly ‘cleared’ of

their traditional owners as they were displaced to missions or fell victim to violence or introduced disease.

In what is now a well-known story in southern Australia, years of struggle to make agricultural production successful in this region have resulted from prolonged periods of drought, related dust storms, vermin infestations, and an ecosystem depleted of many of its nutrients as well as indigenous wildlife. Although Rainbow's agricultural identity remains strong, its population of 525 — as recorded in the 2011 census — is less than half what it once was when it was known as the 'Metropolis of the Mallee' with a newspaper, hospital, timber merchant, hardware store, department stores and churches. It's a common story across the Mallee as populations and services diminish. What, then, does it mean for contemporary populations, to live with the name 'Rainbow', evoking not just optimism — the sunshine after the storm — but also *rain* itself, and the implied bounty of its fall? It is an identity that continues to make the place, despite water's unpredictable presence here: a large colourful metal rainbow flanks a central strip of parkland in the town's main street.

Names are promiscuous, despite their apparent singularity. Rainbow was initially named 'Rainbow Rise' (Victorian Places) after a property located on a sand lunette covered with wild flowers in the shape of a rainbow — the re-narration of what was there, prior to colonisation, through familiar frames of colonial reference. However, it's a story, too, of a local ecology, that — after the beginning of colonisation — will always be a place of Indigenous and global entanglements. This is how Australian places come to live with their stories, in the slippages between the colonial gaze that sought to erase, and the processes of inhabitants continuing to produce place where older and newer stories meet. We argue for the importance of looking for stories in these slippages: shadow place stories that instate a counter pulse to dominant narratives, remaking place in different ways.

In *Rethinking the Region* (Allen et al 1998) the authors propose that regions are 'a series of open, discontinuous spaces constituted by the social relationships which stretch across them in a variety of ways' (5) In other words, they are formed out of a nexus of relations and connections, much of which takes its shape from elsewhere. Like Allen and Cochrane (2007) we take a relational view of the Mallee region, seeing it as an assemblage which consists of human and non-human histories, including place-names and their shadow stories. Just as assemblages are always emergent rather than fixed, places, and their stories, are always composing, and producing communities anew.

Given the complexities and ironies of place-naming and place-making in the (post)colonial context which have been gestured towards in this paper, we argue that there should be greater confluence between Australian literary studies and the global field of literary geography which might serve to illuminate the diversity of narratives that continue to reconfigure places in Australia and beyond.

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