Globaletics and Radicant Aesthetics in Australian Fiction

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By

Salhia Ben-Messahel

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This book is for Bruce Bennett (1941-2012), a much-respected tutor and scholar in the field of Australian literary studies, and a valuable friend.

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PREFACE

STEPHEN MUECKE

French readers are among the best when it comes to Australian fiction, and with this book Salhia Ben-Messahel has gone a step further with the introduction of new theoretical perspectives. What is it about Australia for the French, or perhaps Europeans generally? For the English, Australia was merely a "colonial boy"; their wayward child caught stealing bread and transported "for the term of his natural life". As the original settler-colonists, the British were able to impose an imperial perspective that left the new nation (federated only in 1901) in a perpetual state of immaturity, always one step behind the "mother country", still with the Union Jack in one corner of the flag. This situation, shared somewhat by other second-world nations like Canada, New Zealand and Brazil, was a fertile one for a form of national psychosis to take root.

The Australian psychic counter-reaction to colonial repression tended to be a desperate and virile destruction of the environment in the name of agricultural "improvement", as well as a justification for ignorance and the dismissal of Indigenous resource-management that continues to this day. Fortunes were nonetheless made by the richer squatters, raising sheep and shearing wool, putting off the debt to be paid to the degraded land, putting off (again, to this day) any real political treaty with the traditional owners of the land. It is in the context that the European reader comes in, unblinkered by colonial and imperial dismissive *hauteur*, at least towards Australia. Europeans, who came first as lone pioneering adventurers and then *en masse* as "new Australians" in the mid-20th century, came with enthusiasm, a Rousseauian fascination for a set of surviving ancient cultures and a thirst for the kind of innovation that "new" or "young" countries made possible.

In some ways, the talking cure that Australian writers have been working through for 200 years is making progress, as charted by Ben-Messahel. Of course, the Indigenous writers she deals with, like Kim Scott, are curing themselves of another kind of psychic damage that has reverberated down the generations ever since invasion. Most Australian writers are yet to acknowledge the great traditions which are the real

foundations of Australian culture.[1] But many others, especially those of European heritage, have the necessary stereoscopic vision that enables a break from the psychotic dialogue the settler-colonials have been locked in with Indigenous Australia.

I now want to be more precise about the author's intellectual contributions to the fields of Australian literary studies, postcolonial literature and, more recently, eco-criticism. The concepts peopling her work (I will not cover them all) include *regionality, altermodernity, the radicant* and *spatiality.* Her reading of Tim Winton in terms of his *regionality* is absolutely correct; most of his fiction is devoted to imaginative extensions of Western Australian coastal life, including the Indian Ocean. He is like Robert Drewe in this regard. But Winton is the better writer, and Salhia Ben-Messahel has identified his genius for bringing out the organic unity of "ordinary" Australians, with their places and their often-marginalised status (child, outcast, working class, mad). Ben-Messahel captures Winton's ability to write from observation and inhabitation of his places and characters as well as his capacity to extend his relevance to more universal themes.

Borrowing *altermodernity* from aesthetic theorist Nicholas Bourriaud, Ben-Messahel turns it into a specific literary-critical tool to analyse trajectories of becoming rather than identities as essences. *Globaletics and Radicant Aesthetics in Australian Fiction* will thus considerably update scholarship in the field of Australian literature, with important analysis of Richard Flanagan, Christos Tsiolkas, Beth Yahp, Eva Sallis, Kim Scott, Alexis Wright, Nam Le, Gail Jones and others. *Altermodernity*, an alternative to postmodernity and anti-modernity, embraces alternative modernities as new political-aesthetic strategies rather than the oppositional or revolutionary ones of the past, as Ghassan Hage does in his recent work of political theory, *Alter-Politics*.[2]

Similarly, *radicant*, also a Bourriaud term for a being that puts down roots as it goes, seems derived from a synthesis of Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome and nomadology. In this book, it is put to use in literary analysis in an Australia where the famous multiculturalism has been dropped in favour of border protection, and the writers Ben-Messahel is analysing are also grappling imaginatively with a new set of problems about being in place when a knowable climate-changed future is crashing back onto the

[1] Stephen Muecke, "The Great Tradition: Translating Durrudiya's Songs," in Beate Neumeier and Kay Schaffer, eds. *Decolonizing the Landscape: Indigenous Cultures in Australia,* Editions Rodopi (Amsterdam) Cross-culture Studies Series, 2013, pp. 23–36.

[2] Ghassan Hage, *Alter-Politics.* Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2015.

present with the argument that we must imagine new ways of being (Judith Wright, Val Plumwood and other eco-critics).

Spatiality is another conceptual character walking this literary Australian continent. It is configured here in relation to the legal doctrine of *terra nullius*, to the older ideas of the empty centre, to the historical theorisations of Paul Carter and thence to a *multiplicité de natures*, a very important phrase that Ben-Messahel uses elsewhere. Thus, without being underpinned by a singular nature, Australia's postcolonial imaginary could be fragmented across almost as many "countries" the Aboriginal people identify as their own sovereign territories. In this complex scene, the author has to deploy a multiplicity of post-structuralist concepts in conjunction with the postcolonial ones forged by Said, Chakrabarty and others.

This particular conjunction is a practice that is perhaps more common in Australian academic life than in the French, and in this respect the author is both showing her international connections at their best and demonstrating that in order to describe the (deracinated and enracinating) Australian imaginary, a unique theoretical architecture has to be composed. This is her substantial project represented by this book. I'm sure it will lead to important future work, and I would like to thank the author on behalf of my compatriots for the substantial and helpful interest she has taken in the literature of our distant, increasingly troubled, land.

Stephen Muecke
Jury Chair of English Language and Literature
University of Adelaide

INTRODUCTION

Current debates around the sense of belonging in former settler countries such as Australia, Canada and New Zealand invariably bring to the fore issues of identity, culture and history. The multicultural tenet, which has illustrated Australian politics since the end of the 1980s, advocates shared values and cultural traditions that give Australia a competitive edge in a globalised environment. In her foreword to the new framework to the multicultural policy, former Prime Minister Julia Gillard refers to her arrival in Australia as a migrant and depicts Australia as the land of opportunities, insisting on the country's multicultural identity and community spirit but seeming to hint at the settler heritage rather than the inclusion of all other ethnic groups. Implemented in 2011, the new multicultural scheme encompasses the public anxiety about the former policies of multiculturalism and whether they were constraining social cohesion and integration at a time the nation was being confronted by global conflicts, issues of identity and the refugee question. Yet, the Labour Government's decision, beginning with the appointment of Kevin Rudd in October 2007, to move away from the term "multiculturalism" in favour of "diversity" ironically extends from the previous Liberal Government's approach to migration and the sense of belonging. Indeed, further to the removal of the term "multicultural affairs" from the title of the Immigration Department by the Howard Government in 2007, the Gillard Government also removed the term from the title of the new Parliamentary Secretary assisting the Minister for Immigration and Citizenship. Julia Gillard's decision met with criticism from the Federation of Ethnic Communities Councils of Australia (FECCA) on the grounds that it affected the definition of being Australian in the 21st century.

This political approach extends the former policies and approach of cultural otherness secured by four terms of neoconservative liberal policies under the government of John Howard, from 1996 to 2007, and interrogates the nature of belonging and cultural identity in Australia, especially for those Australians whose forebears did not originate from Britain or Ireland, or even Europe. The next governments, led by liberal prime ministers, ironically, if not tragically, sustained Julia Gillard's stance, emphasising the British heritage and maintaining multiculturalism within the perimeter of non- Anglo Australia.

Thus, the debates about multiculturalism that still animate Australian life evoke conceptual tensions and challenges, and bring to the fore the interaction of cultures, human rights discourses, inequalities faced by minority groups, the rise of religious extremism and nationalist discourse, the creation of the Border Force, the treatment of refugees and public scepticism. Taking into account these current and sensitive issues, this book seeks to examine the construction of narratives of nationhood and belonging in the works of a diverse range of authors, Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, whose exploration of space and place subverts the postcolonial nature of Australia in a post-Mabo era. It seeks to show this by taking into account Nicolas Bourriaud's *Radicant* (2009), his specific approach and claims about the emergence of a new modernity called the "altermodern", which is neither modern nor postmodern but configured in response to an age of globalisation:

> What I am calling altermodernity thus designates a construction plan that would allow new intercultural connections, the construction of a space of negotiation going beyond postmodern multiculturalism, which is attached to the origin of discourses and forms rather than to their dynamics. It is a matter of replacing the question of origin with that of destination. "Where should we go?" That is the modern question par excellence. The emergence of this new entity implies the invention of a new *conceptual persona* (in the sense that Deleuze and Guattari gave this term) that would bring about the conjunction of modernism and globalization. (40)

Thus, the ways in which the Australian authors examined in this book depict the nation as the "space of the immigrant, the exile, the tourist, and the urban wanderer – the dominant figures of contemporary culture" (Bourriaud: 58) show that cultural identity is reconceptualised around movement and nomadism, or radicant forms, in opposition to ethnic and other roots. Issues dealing with multiculturalism, postmodernism and cultural globalisation are the main elements that surface through their writings – even though they invariably refer to unresolved questions – and the depiction of Australia in a global perspective is discussed not from the usual sociological, political and economic points of view but rather "from an aesthetic perspective that affects the life of form" (Bourriaud: 58).

To begin with, it is essential to note that the intimate and variegated relationship with place, locality and history since the end of the 20th century has led to substantial debates and a redefinition of what terms like "Australian", "multicultural" and "postcolonial" mean. In her very first critical essays and works, Sneja Gunew explains that multiculturalism in Australia is defined in relation to a hegemonic and homogenised Anglo-Celtic centre rather than as a celebration of ethnic diversity. In her critical

work, she argues that the history of Australian immigration, while diverse from the very beginning of settlement, is hardly ever foregrounded when characterising the nation; she rightly questions the incorporation of the migrant and the cultural other, including Indigenous Australians, in the nation's history, highlighting their marginal position and status as intruders to the mainstream (Gunew, 1993).

This book takes Gunew's assertions and questionings through an examination of some recent Australian fiction, including the work of a variety of writers such as Richard Flanagan, Christos Tsiolkas, Beth Yahp, Eva Sallis and Kim Scott among others, to suggest that the past idea that the British settlement of the Australian continent was a worthy enterprise is still perceptible in society. The book, in fact, contends that the depiction of immigrant groups and Indigenous peoples often relies on an Anglo-Celtic approach to otherness, and even if postcolonialism presumes that Australians have resolved the colonial condition, stories published in the late 20th century and early 21st century suggest that Australia is somehow still a colony with the non-Anglo-Celtic subject cast away on the margins of the mainstream. As a matter of fact, Richard Flanagan and Christos Tsiolkas often voice their concerns that Australia does not entirely incorporate non-European migrants or the Indigenous Australians, and that the tenet of multiculturalism is a fake. Beth Yahp, Nam Le and Eva Sallis focus on the subjectivity of the cultural other to explore the cracks in the multicultural canvas, and include otherness from the perspective of the migrant rather than suggesting, like Helen Tiffin, that Indigenous literature stands in a counter-discursive relationship to white Australia like settler/invader discourses do in European narratives (Tiffin, 1995). The book then argues that recent Indigenous and non-Indigenous writing emerge as counter-discourse to the postcolonial nature of Australia and mainstream culture. It purports the idea that such discourse can be the resisting postcolonial voice of Australia, subverting Bill Ashcroft's idea that the use of the term "postcolonial" rather than "postcolonial" in the Australian context refers to post-invasion rather than post-independence, and it identifies neither a chronology nor a specific ontology. Bill Ashcroft in fact insists that the use of a dash to separate the terms "post" and "colonialism" is a way of reading the continuing engagement with colonial and neo-colonial power and does not signify "after colonialism" nor a way of being (Ashcroft 2012). His assertion that Australia is still in "a post-invasion phase" is a valid argument but it also interrogates the extent and effects of Australia's engagement with the colonial power or neo-colonial power considering that such engagement does not fully incorporate the

perception and interrogations of artists and writers from non-European backgrounds or non-Anglophone nations.

The book's examination of space and culture in the post-invasion phase, a phase which is best signified by the constitutional link with the British Monarch, who maintains the nominal title of Head of State and Queen of Australia, consequently interrogates the development of a discourse that, rather than stemming from an extension of imperial history, operates as a counter-discourse to postcolonialism. Of particular concerns are the ways in which fictional characters are enmeshed in and positioned by discourses of nationalism with a range of contradictions, tensions and exclusions, and how such individuals negotiate their place in a mechanism where postcolonialism and multiculturalism are in fact structured by colonialism. Therefore, the book argues that both multiculturalism and postcolonialism are floating signifiers, that they interact and mutually exclude one another not only in an Australian environment but also in a global perspective. The narrative address of the nation which, to quote Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture*, shows "a tension between the performative and the pedagogical, turns the reference to a "people" into a problem of knowledge that haunts the symbolic formation of social authority" (297).

The book's focus on geographical, physical and narrative space brings to the fore issues and discourses of identity and history, suggesting that while Australia is no longer *terra nullius*, the meaning of "country" remains critical, and belonging is either a complex or an impossible process. Attention is given to the critical work of Paul Gilroy, Sneja Gunew, Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs when discussing postcolonialism, nationalism and the definition of "home" so the distinctiveness of an Australia where the nation is experienced as homely and unhomely surfaces as a counter-discourse to official and postcolonial discourse. Nicolas Bourriaud's depiction of the individual of those early days of the 21st century as "a radicant", that is, "a plant that does not depend on a single root for its growth but advances in all directions on whatever surfaces it encounters by attaching multiple hooks to them, as ivy does", can be observed in the fictional construction of the character. Such "radicant" characters evolve and "develop their roots as they advance, unlike the *radicals*, whose development is determined by their being anchored in a particular soil" (Bourriaud: 51).

Part I of the book interrogates the multicultural ideal by first looking at the way fiction addresses the place of Indigenous people and how they fit into the Australian nation, the extent of their voice within it, and what power authors can exercise to discuss such central and unresolved issues in

Australian politics and nationhood. A special emphasis is laid on the use of the environment and how different authors relate to geographic space, how the Indigenous perception of time, place and space does (or does not) interact with non-Indigenous perceptions of the land and ownership, and how and why these authors incorporate such concerns and perceptions in their writings.

Indeed, Australian writing often interrogates the different forms of belonging, of relating to space and culture, with a critical view on the past and the present, especially at a time when Australia's rhetoric is steering further towards Anglo-centric nations, for instance, Britain or the United States, to confront what the multicultural nation sees as new challenges from neighbouring Asia with the migrant and refugee issues. The meaning of "Europe" and its supposed counter-term "Asia" and the "Asia-Pacific" with "Australia" is examined in the work of Christos Tsiolkas, Nikki Gemmell, Tim Winton, Richard Flanagan, Nicholas Jose and Gail Jones, drawing on Dipesh Chakrabarty's much-quoted postcolonial injunction to "provincialise Europe", which means deconstructing the universalist claims of European modernity (Chakrabarty, 2000).

Part II takes an interest in literary texts that illustrate popular and subversive cultural formations within the nation-state in order to retell the migrant/diasporic experience as versions not of the official history of the nation, which is hegemonic and exclusionary, but of the dynamic and multidirectional histories of individuals who are part of the nation but belong in displacement. The reconfiguration of hybridity and identity as the result of multiple enrootings in the space of the nation tends to exceed the concept of the rhizome and design radicant forms.

Critical engagements on issues ranging from racism, ethnicity and fundamentalism to cultural dislocation in a global environment investigate the complex (inter) cultural exchanges and diasporic geographies – spaces that supersede the configured nation-state and generate counter-discourse. The analysis of discourse dealing with land, identity and belonging suggests that the territorialisation of identity and the racialisation of geography are dismissed in favour of a diverse cultural cartography so that the nation is decolonised and Australian culture is postcolonial, no longer a hyphenated space or an extension from the colonial past.

While critics, like Vijay Mishra and Bob Hodge, argue that the term "postcolonial" should be reserved for the struggles of the Indigenous peoples, who continue internal battles against the descendants of the settler colonisers in those countries, the book looks at how some recent Australian fiction interrogates the extension of Australia from Britain and Europe, subverting form, genre, culture and nationhood. In its examination

of forms of telling, writing and representing the multicultural nation, this volume suggests that Australian authors are, in fact, “radicant artists” who construct “their paths in history as well as geography” (Bourriaud: 125).

PART I

POSTCOLONIAL DILEMMA

In his introduction to *Postcolonial Melancholia*, Paul Gilroy notes that the "imperial and colonial past continues to shape political life in the over-developed-but-no-longer-imperial countries" (2). This part examines various approaches to space and place, and seeks to question the unfinished business of the Empire that may surface in the shaky foundations of the nation. Such "unfinished business" may in fact pose a dilemma to postcolonial authors and seems to encourage some of them to dismiss a postcolonial space where cultural diversity surfaces as both a nexus and an extension from the United Kingdom or from any other European country. The focus on the environment is thus often envisaged from various perspectives, ranging from an Indigenous and spiritual attachment to place to an ecological perspective that binds Indigenous and non-Indigenous sensibilities to the land. Yet, while recent fiction relies either on Indigenous perceptions or ecological thoughts, it nonetheless shows an attempt to get rid of European discourse by integrating "other marginal others" so that intercultural exchanges initiating debates about Australian culture and the relationship to European history take place.

A number of intellectuals and critics, among whom Sneja Gunew, Marcia Langton, Henry Reynolds and Germaine Greer feature, have raised concerns that Australia was not only Eurocentric but also that it failed to embrace its cultural diversity, clinging to its British ethnicity. In her celebrated and daring essay, "Whitefella Jump Up!", Greer calls on Australians to embrace Indigenous culture as their own, to abandon the British heritage and go native. Commenting on Greer's essay, Marcia Langton (2003) makes a valid statement by insisting that non-Indigenous voices have already begun to express an interest in Indigenous issues in an attempt to deal with the past and restore Indigenous history at the heart of national culture:

> What about David Malouf (*The Conversations at Curlow Creek),* Richard Flanagan (*Death of a River Guide),* Tim Winton (*Dirt Music),* Rodney Hall (*The Island in the Mind* trilogy), Murray Bail (*Eucalyptus*)? Apparently, Greer has not noticed that a distinctive Australian settler voice that speaks

> of a deepening attachment to place and locality as the core of identity has emerged in Australian literature. While Greer boasts of her adoption by people of the Kulin nation, other Australians are trying hard to adopt their own backyards and take responsibility for their history, their environment and the inheritance of their own racism.

Langton refers to authors whose stories show an interaction between the individual and the environment and construct a space where a dialogue with history is made possible. A highly symbolic natural environment, on the margins of urban Australia, often operates as the signifier to reality while reflecting the dilemma of the postcolonial nation caught between the desire to expel the traumatic events of its history and embrace the multicultural dream.

The interest in landscape and space, as instruments of control and/or liberation, harks back to the perceptions of explorers and settlers. Indeed, when Australia became a federation of states in 1901, the Indigenous population was not part of the nation-building process, nor were the Asian migrants, particularly from China, who had settled in Australia from very early days. The sense of unity and independence that illustrated the federation celebrations extended to the appropriation of space echoed in the speech delivered by the first Australian federal PM, Edmund Barton, who said: "For the first time in history we have a continent for a nation and a nation for a continent" (Rutledge, 1979). Barton's statement, which associates exterior space with intimate space to spatialise Australian history, territorialises identity and belonging in *terra nullius* and reflects common features of Australian writing in the 19th and early 20th centuries. As a matter of fact, Australia's early literature focused on the uniqueness and vastness of the landscape and the settlers' integration in the colonies, responding to a readership in Great Britain and supporting the nationalist claims that the antipodean colony was a nation in its own right; despite the non-integration into the cultural landscape of Indigenous people and migrants from outside the United Kingdom and other Anglo-Celtic countries. Leading authors such as Henry Lawson, Miles Franklin and Vance and Nettie Palmer were influential in the development of an Australian literature that would celebrate essential Australian values and support a national identity forged on settler culture yet retain the ties with the United Kingdom. The ideal of a shared national identity, along with the consistent politics of exclusion of those "other migrants" who were "outsiders" or "trespassers", thus clearly affected social and cultural relations within the national borders and restricted culture to an Anglo-Australian perspective. In his celebrated book, *The Road to Botany Bay* (2007), Paul Carter notes that the development of Australian literature in

the 19th century supported nationalistic claims and encouraged the emergence of an Australian literary canon – a canon that in effect excluded so-called "cosmopolitan" authors and even modernist writers thought to be international and at odds with Australian issues.

Patrick White's exploration of the frontier as the epitome of identity in the 1970s marked a turning point in Australian literature and discourse as it encouraged authors to confront the reality of the wilderness and embrace the land as a feature of identity. In his essay "The Prodigal Son" (1958), White's attack on mainstream Australian writing as being the "dreary dun-coloured offspring of journalism" was meant to express his rejection of bush realism against modernism and paved the way for a new writing that would construct the nation and its social history. His social critique of the nation maintained a form of realism but rested on an interest in the spiritual nature of the land and the environment. Yet, by depicting Australia as a world untouched and a space of recovery and new beginning, especially in the aftermath of war, White somehow did not entirely jettison the Eurocentric approach he so much decried. He, among other writers, depicted Australia not as *terra nullius* but as a *terra incognita* to be discovered and experienced. Margaret Henderson and Leigh Dale argue that the contemporary binary approach to space and place by non-Indigenous people is nonetheless colonial:

> Since first contact and invasion, Europeans have imagined Australia in two related ways: as *terra nullius,* and as *terra incognita.* While Indigenous Australians have always known the fictiveness of these two modes of imagining this country, it took until the 1992 Mabo decision and legislation in 1993 for there to be legal recognition that Australia was not *terra nullius;* arguably, the allure of Australia as a mystery, as an unknown, still has a place in the white imagination. Foucault's analysis of the power/knowledge nexus makes explicit the connections between these two conceptions of Australia, and their role in justifying what could be done to Indigenous peoples. The land's supposed emptiness signals its mystery, which in turn allows free rei(g)n in the ways in which it may be known, and in the types of knowledges that can become authoritative. Thus, the way in which 'Australia' was known by the colonisers, and the ways in which this set of knowledges became dominant, have been crucial in securing control of the land and its people. (Henderson & Dale, 2005: 1–6)

Referring to the work of Michel Foucault, to his examination of disciplinary power as a regulation of space, time and individual behaviour, Henderson and Dale argue that Australia's uncanny and mysterious nature is still an object of fantasy and imagination. Their ideas surface in the writings that deal with the confrontation of an Anglo-Australian character

with the land – a character that is often depicted as a drifter. For instance, Tim Winton in *Dirt Music*, Nikki Gemmell in *Cleave* and Andrew McGahan in *White Earth* tackle land ownership and cultural belonging in an attempt to design their own "country". Writing in the years between the Mabo case and the reconciliation debates, these three novelists confront Indigenous and non-Indigenous perceptions of the land and the consequences of colonisation on Australian society. The effects of colonisation on Indigenous people and the way Anglo-Australians may virtually "go native" in the search for roots and identity in marginal places – places set in rural and isolated areas – bring to the fore the definition of history as writing back alternative but discomforting stories of invasion, dispossession, exploitation, institutionalisation and acculturation (and attempted genocide) of the Indigenous population. Winton's, Gemmell's and McGahan's stories clearly delve into the "great Australian silence" that anthropologist W.E.H Stanner dared denounce in 1968, and clearly show a difficulty for characters to come to terms with the past. Published a few years before or after Germaine Greer's injunction that Australia should "go native", Winton's and Gemmell's novels depict the nomadic lifestyle of an Anglo-Australian character in deserted areas, intertwining Indigenous perceptions of the land with Anglo-centric approaches to place. The desperate attempts to escape from the mainstream and modernity place characters in limbo between Indigenous and non-Indigenous territories. McGahan's story, however, with the double entendre of its title "*The White Earth*", examines the sense of belonging to the land felt by a racist and guilty farmer, John McIvor, depicting the sordid use that the character makes of an Indigenous gathering space and his (horrid) sense of belonging to place:

> The old man nodded, sombre again. 'There are folks out there who believe that the Aborigines are the only ones who understand the land, that only the blacks could have found a place like this and appreciated what it was. They think that the blacks have some magical connection that whites can never have, that we're just stumbling around here without any idea, that we don't understand the country, that we just want to exploit it. But that's not true. We can have connections with the land too, our own kind of magic. The land talks to me. It doesn't care what colour I am, all that matters is that I'm here. And I understand what it says, just as well as anyone before me, black or white. I found this ring, didn't I? So I deserve respect too.' (181)

This passage echoes the way territory and space were appropriated and embraced by white settlers, and is a reminder of Kim Scott's novel *Benang* (1999), in which the new country and the discovered "new" spaces encapsulate the opportunity for the white western settler to gain a new

identity, social recognition and the natural right to possess and rule. In McGahan's novel, the territorialisation and possession of geographic space are justified by a spiritual connection that McIvor claims to have, and by his suggestion that the national territory is not the state's subdivided political territory but a personal space that encapsulates the signs and traces of a people throughout its history, meaning his own. Moreover, McIvor resents land rights and expresses the settler experience of lost property – an experience that cynically mirrors (and even depends upon) the Indigenous experience of dispossession.

In *Why Weren't We Told?*, Henry Reynolds examines colonial crimes and frontier conflicts and refers to a "mental block" that, according to him, prevents all Australians from coming to terms with the past and moving forward (Reynolds, 1999: 114). Reynolds's arguments and view on Australian history could explain the complexity Anglo-Australian authors may be faced with when dealing with history. Indeed, in the attempt to re-instate what has been deliberately erased from the white pages of history, fiction often tends to iterate, even unconsciously, the ruthless binary logic of imperialism whereby Indigenous and settler cultures are separated spatially but bound to each other, being both at home and distinct. However, the Indigenous issue, often examined with a focus on the specificity of space and the environment, addresses the place of racism and multiculturalism in contemporary Australia, showing how literary and cultural (and political) dynamics can respond to a process of inevitable change. Thus, contemporary fiction not only openly dismisses the idea that "Australian culture" and "Australians" are presumed to be of British descent but also tends not to place otherness, non-Anglo-Australian voices, in alterity.

The discovery (or revisiting) of the country addresses its uncanny nature and highlights the distinctiveness of postcolonial Australia – a state where the nation is simultaneously a homely and unhomely space. In their study of sacredness and identity in the postcolonial nation, Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs (1994: 23) note that "in a new environment of determining rights over land, what is "ours" is also potentially, or even always already, "theirs", and a previously 'private' Aboriginal sacred enters the public realm in diverse ways".

Richie Howitt extends Gelder and Jacobs's ideas in his examination of social and cultural geographical spaces, dismissing the terms "frontier" and "boundary" in favour of "edges" that, to him, epitomise the relations between unbounded socio-physical and intellectual spaces and initiate a geographical and postcolonial knowledge that would take precedence over colonial understandings of land and people (Howitt, 2001: 233–245).

Howitt's views are interesting in the analysis of Australian writing considering that the reconfiguration of space designs new approaches to the environment and society based on intercultural exchanges and experiences. Indeed, when Richard Flanagan received the Man Booker Prize for his novel *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, he used the terms "edge" and "periphery" to insist that his writing stood furthest from a centre:

> […] novels are made in a republic of letters. It is a foolish and a crooked and a stupid republic, but it is still a republic and I would rather live here than in a tyranny. The novel is a much more subversive and free medium, and you can do more radical things in it. In movies, that isn't possible, as you have the monster of money seeking to destroy all the creative possibilities. Another thing about novels is that by nature they are the most powerful when coming from the edges of the society. Unlike other art forms, like theatre or painting, which come from the centres of power. The novel is the revenge of the periphery. (Gill, 2012)

Flanagan's writing designs an aesthetic of displacement and an ethics of exile, a space that Nicolas Bourriaud (2009: 185) describes as the place where:

> The random comes together with precariousness, understood as a principle of non-membership: that which is constantly moving from place to place, which weakens origins or destroys them, which viatorizes itself and proceeds by performing successive translations, does not belong to the continental world but to this new altermodern archipelago, this garden of wandering.

In his critical book, Bourriaud refers to Victor Segalen's plea for the diverse and the *exote*, rather than for national, ethnic or cultural identities. He thus argues for a reconstruction of the "modern" space, which he insists is a western concept, and argues in favour of another kind of modernity suited for a global world, which he defines as "altermodern". The art critic focuses on "the present experimentation, the relative (questioning the solidity of things) and the fluid (the struggle against reification)" (Elms, 2016), and thus considers that "cultural identity needs to reconceptualise around movement and nomadism, or radicantcy, in opposition to ethnic and other roots" (Bourriaud: 13).

While many Indigenous stories and knowledge have been deliberately erased from the national history of the country, a significant process from the second part of the 20th century onward has focused on bringing them back, challenging common views on the "colonised other" and decolonising the appropriation of space (physical, spiritual and imaginary) by mainstream

culture and politics. Writings by Kim Scott and Alexis Wright tend to push further the debate on history, belonging and place, and depict space as the subversive place of reality and history. Scott, for instance, uses writing as a space where an unofficial history is told and the Indigenous truth and memory restored. Kim Scott's work designs a liminal but Indigenous-Australianness, an inclusive space for transcultural identity. In an interview following the publication of *Benang*, the author refers to the purpose of writing but also space, discourse and identity:

> I work a bit in Aboriginal adult education, and when I say who I am, without many family connections, they can't click it in like normally happens. People respond to that by talking about the damage that's been done, and all the families that have been lost to us. I feel like if my role is to enable that sort of talk, and to still affirm a strong Aboriginal identity from that starting point—you know, from being of Aboriginal descent and not really knowing it all and building it up from that small thing—then it feels like good work to be doing. […] I want to inform or help people understand our shared history, and expose the psychosis in non-Aboriginal society that insists on being in power. I want to encourage diverse ways of being Aboriginal. Ways that are not just to do with social indicators, and not just the past ways. (Scott, 2000)

Scott wishes to reconceptualise Indigenous history and colonial history by means of reaching out to history beyond cultural boundaries. His stories combine Indigenous and European perceptions of landscape with a focus on pre-colonial and first-contact interactions, redefining discourses on otherness. Alexis Wright also deals with the reconceptualisation of Australia's histories but probably with a less positive or idealistic strain. As a matter of fact, Wright addresses the idealised cultural history of mining in rural Australia to conceive a counter-space to excavate a sense of darkness within Australian communities in her novel *Carpentaria* (2006). She depicts a cultural and social darkness which, when exposed, tends to thrust the idea of whiteness and postcolonial identity into another dark realm, or rather a blank space, where non-Indigenous subjects tend to become the shadows of colonial history. Thus, Scott's and Wright's penchant for history and remembering restores, albeit in a different way, Australia's hidden histories, concealed in myth/legend and that invariably address the dilemma of postcolonial identity and belonging.

Even though the colonial project's overlapping episteme is still visible through hegemonic practices in postcolonial Australia, Australian writers often use fiction as a device to decolonise the mind and subvert social and political structures. The postcolonial paradigm surfaces not as an extension but as the unfinished business of the Empire – it initiates a debate about

form and genre, identity and nationhood, place and the definition of "belonging" in mainstream Australia. Novels and essays by non-Indigenous authors show, in fact, an interest in the environment and a connection with the landscape. In his most recent work, *A First Place*, a collection of essays and writings, David Malouf deals with current themes such as multiculturalism, national history and events, geography and topography, showing a keen interest in the way cultures are time or space-oriented and the extent to which histories and geographies can influence the way individuals live and think. Malouf (2014: 9) discusses the topography of Brisbane and highlights the complexity of the urban space:

> Space, in this city, is unreadable. Geography and its features offer no help in the making of a mental map. What you have to do here is create a conceptual one. I ask myself again what habits of mind such a city may encourage in its citizens, and how, though taken for granted in this place, they may differ from the habits of places where geography declares itself at every point as helpful, reliable, being itself a map.

For Malouf, the idea of home and being in place consequently implies that geographic space is never static, forming culture and history, operating as an open physical and psychological landscape. Tim Winton, Richard Flanagan and, more recently, Cate Kennedy and Favel Parrett go further than Malouf as they tend to use geographic space as a narrative space incorporating a spiritual attachment to the land, and stories that involve non-Indigenous characters' experience of the bush and rural areas often hint at the Dreamtime and Indigenous culture. In her novel *The World Beneath*, Cate Kennedy, for instance, resorts to a recurrent theme in Australian fiction, which is the quest for and voyage to the heart of the country, the Tasmanian wilderness, to illustrate the ordeal of a father and daughter as they attempt to reconnect. In the novel, a harsh and wild geography takes hold of the characters' minds in such a way that geographical boundaries operate as invisible forms of internal otherness.

Questionings and debates on culture and personal history also often recur in stories that bring to the fore colonial heritage in order to reassess the migration and cultural heritage. Christos Tsiolkas often voices his concern for the way liberal nationalism, through an ideal of shared national identity and a politics of exclusion of "outsiders", impacts on bodies and social relations *within* national borders, fostering violence, fear and/or indifference to difference. His stories enter the Anglo-Australian space through the figures of Greek migrants and their offspring to expose the cracks in the multicultural framework and reinscribe the history of Greek migration and diasporas. Like Tsiolkas, Nicholas Jose also

addresses the meanings of "Europe" and "Australia" but by exploring their counter-terms "Asia" or the "Asia-Pacific" in an attempt to "decolonize" the postcolonial nation. When introducing art in Chinatown, Sydney, Nicholas Jose refers to the Chinese journalist, Sang Ye, using botanical metaphors to remind the public that Asia is part of Australia as much as Australia is part of Asia, just like Europe is:

> The Chinese-Australian writer Sang Ye calls Chinatown 'a flowerpot simply placed here', where no one puts down roots, because 'the soil in the flowerpot is segregated from the soil here' (*The Finish Line*, 1995). But that's only part of the story. That flowerpot has been in Australia as long as any European garden. (Jose, 2011)

Jose's claim thus echoes Nicolas Bourriaud's idea of "the radicant and the erasing of the origin in favour of a multitude of simultaneous or successive enrootings". It is then in the diversity of the Australian landscape and geography that writers design the space of "the radicant" and the "altermodern", exploring a world and contemporary culture that are no longer dependent on a single root or extensions of a root but "move in accord with their host-soil, adapt to new surfaces" and define subjectivity as an object of "negotiation" (Bourriaud: 51–52).

1. Excavating Darkness

The place and position of Indigenous people in both the physical geography and social landscape of the country is a major concern for Australia as a postcolonial nation. Moreover, central and unresolved issues in politics and national discourse, such as the legitimate appropriation of land and the integration of the first Australians in the mainstream, still affect the tenets of egalitarianism and multiculturalism. From the early days of federation, Indigenous people were not part of a policy and discourse that advocated the right for all citizens to fair treatment, most commonly known as the "fair go", and the Liberal Government's decision to reaffirm the significance of mateship and egalitarianism in the revised Preamble to the Australian Constitution, in 2003, did not bring any changes:

> Australians value tolerance, perseverance and mateship. These values form our spirit as a nation … We value the individual worth of every man and woman in our society. This is the essence of our egalitarian society and our identity as Australia and Australians. (DAFT, 2003)

The revised definition, with its desire to unite all Australians, clearly harks back to the construction of the nation and the ideology of the settler-

society. Despite the still common representations of Australia and Australians as egalitarian not only in social commentaries and political analyses but also in the Arts (films, television programmes, literature), Indigenous people or individuals from other cultural groups, Asian-Australians or migrants from the new diaspora (the Middle-East and Africa) are still rarely incorporated in such an ideal and national destiny. The unequal position of Indigenous Australians is certainly the most critical challenge to Australia's social and political ideals, even more so since the reconciliation years and the debates on land rights. In his Boyer Lecture, Manning Clark echoed Russel Ward's ideas when he said that "the most difficult thing of all for a historian is to learn how to tell his story so that something is added to the facts, something about the mystery at the heart of things" (Clark, 1976). Clark's interest in the rural nature and identity of the country inferred that history stemmed from the Australian outback and from it emerged the true-blue Australian character, despite recognition of course that the imposition of Western culture on Australia was tragic. Criticised for his "black armband view" of history, Clark was nonetheless supported by other intellectuals and artists in their commitment for the truth and the rewriting of history. Henry Reynolds, a leading authority on Indigenous history and the issue of land rights since his seminal book *The Other Side of the Frontier* (1981), still argues that the reconciliation process will only be complete when there is full acknowledgement of Australia's wars between the settlers and the original inhabitants, and in fact that Australia's history is not a history of settlement but colonisation.

A. Intersubjectivities and Divergent Histories

The new strand of Australian historiography and fictional writing that emerged from the late 1970s onward paid greater attention to the violence inflicted on Indigenous Australians by the British settlement of Australia, and the subsequent consequences on postcolonial Australia. It encouraged Indigenous artists to speak out to a large audience. Jack Davis, Archie Weller and Oodgeroo Noonuccal (also known as Kath Walker), for instance, played a significant role in writing back to an Anglo-Australian mainstream, interrogating the consequences of colonisation and celebrating Indigenous culture and its bond with the environment. In his writing, Jack Davis explores issues such as the identity problems faced by young Indigenous people in contemporary society, the sense of loss experienced in Indigenous cultures and the clash of Indigenous law with the law of non-Indigenous Australia. His work reflects a commitment to

the Indigenous cause and the denunciation of the trauma and violence brought about by colonisation. Davis subverts what is clearly understood as "white discourse" to replace the absent other in time and space, using language and the vernacular as power against authority. Oodgeroo Noonuccal, who was also involved in human rights and the recognition of Indigenous ownership of the land, joined the ecological movement prominent in the 1960s and became a key -figure in the writing of the land and the environment that confronts Indigenous spirituality with the dark reality of postcolonial Australia. Her work alongside artists and authors belonging to the ecological movement transcends political boundaries and encourages interdisciplinary and intercultural approaches to the examination of Australian society. In her poem dedicated to her relative Grannie Coolwell, "We are Going" (1964) – the title poem of the first book of poetry published by an Indigenous Australian – Noonuccal dwells on both the physical and spiritual geography of rural Australia as well as the political and cultural spaces of the nation:

> They came in to the little town
> A semi-naked band subdued and silent
> All that remained of their tribe.
> They came here to the place of their old bora ground
> Where now the many white men hurry about like ants.
> Notice of the estate agent reads: 'Rubbish May Be Tipped Here'.
> Now it half covers the traces of the old bora ring.
> They sit and are confused, they cannot say their thoughts:
> 'We are as strangers here now, but the white tribes are strangers.
> We belong here, we are the old ways. We are the corroboree and the bora ground,
> We are the old sacred ceremonies, the laws of the elders. We are the wonder tales of Dream Time, the tribal legends told. We are the past, the hunts and the laughing games, the wandering camp fires.
> […]
> We are nature and the past, all the old ways
> Gone now and scattered. …'

The poem insists that Indigenous people embody the true history of Australia and that the settler's perception of the land and history have negated not only Indigenous identity but also their presence as first Australians. The "white tribes" are clearly criticised for trampling upon sacred sites for the sake of progress and technology; they "hurry about like ants" and cannot read or see the land like Indigenous people, clearly disrespecting and destroying all traces of Indigenous presence, culture and beliefs: "Notice of the estate agent reads: 'Rubbish May Be Tipped Here'. Now it half covers the traces of the old bora ring."

The poem illustrates the effects of *terra nullius*, with the imposition of white perception on Indigenous reality, on Indigenous culture and identity. The direct reference to "the bora ground", the meeting place joined by a sacred walkway, where stories were handed down and initiations performed, suggests that the deterritorialisation of Indigenous space under the scope of colonialism silences what remains of a tribe and an ancient civilisation. The colonised are thus not only objectified but also thrust into nothingness: "They sit and are confused, they cannot say their thoughts … Gone now and scattered", and their silence is taken for granted. Much of Noonuccal's work was dedicated to the reclaiming of the old ways and places, and encouraged young writers to embrace their Indigeneity so they would no longer be "silent others" on the social and cultural landscape.

Recent fiction often tackles the issue of land rights and the Indigenous perception of the environment within an Anglo-centric environment from a quite different perspective. Indeed, since the Reconciliation years, stories dealing with cultural encounters, Australian history and Australia's identity and place in an Asia-Pacific environment either convey a feeling of shame or guilt for the past injustices or call for absolution on the part of the settler-society. The anxiety and trauma generated by territorial loss or the inability to entirely connect with the environment – natural, rural or urban – surface to excavate the darkness at the heart of Australian history (the oppression of Indigenous people) and geography (the appropriation of land and space). Yet, questions about where Indigenous people "fit" into the Australian nation, what role they have and what power they can exercise are indeed still central unresolved issues in Australian politics. In a critical essay, Sneja Gunew points out that Indigenous people are refused their share not only in lands but also in literature, raising questions not only about Australia's egalitarianism but also, and mostly, about the failure of the multicultural scheme to incorporate Indigeneity (Bhabha 2006: 99–120).

In his novels, Kim Scott uses fictional space to explore significant social concerns for Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in contemporary Australia. Born in Western Australia, Scott often refers to his mixed heritage – English on his mother's side and belonging to the Noongar community on his father's side – to explore the space of a country that is simultaneously destroyed and reconstructed by the colonising process. His first novel, *True Country*, is a semi-autobiographic story told from the perspective of an English teacher who attempts to connect with the true country he rather feels estranged from as a part-Indigenous Australian. The character's interest in the long-hidden cultural geography of the country is told from the perspective of an omniscient