

# Diasporic Identities and Empire



Diasporic Identities and Empire:  
Cultural Contentions and Literary Landscapes

Edited by

Anastasia Nicéphore

Guest Editor David Brooks

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**P U B L I S H I N G**

Diasporic Identities and Empire:  
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Guest Editor David Brooks

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This publication is truly a global effort, with contributors coming from various parts of the world—North America, South America, Europe, South Africa, the United Kingdom, Asia, Australia and Saudi Arabia. Each of the contributors not only writes on the complex nature of diasporas but, in some way, see themselves as diasporic. Whether explicitly affected by the constraints of globalisation on cultural contentions and personal identity, or bearing witness to this temporal phenomenon, there is much to be said on the impact of a new type of empire. More so, diasporas are critically engaged with the blurring of national boundaries rather than purely being refined by them, and for this reason studies on this strand of postcolonialism continue to be crucial within literary and interdisciplinary academic spheres.

It is also important to thank Professor David Brooks, whose wealth of experience, intellectual support and marvellous insights into the process of publishing have been invaluable for this publication coming into fruition. Further, David Brooks’ own perceptions of the concept of diaspora, and the diegetic and non-diegetic implications it carries, have assisted in developing a vital stance in this publication. Equally importantly, we must thank the scores of people who took the time to offer constructive criticisms, advice and personal experiences in order to offer greater clarity on some of the issues confronting the diaspora in the twenty-first century.

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*being held back* from a place or state we wish to reach ...

—*David Brooks*

## INTRODUCTION

Unlike traditional theories on hybridity which were generated in consideration of multicultural infusions, and at times profusions, of colonial migrations, postmodern literature illuminates neo-hermeneutics of what Gayatri C. Spivak calls segregated “subalterns ... the lowest strata of the urban subproletariat” (1995, 25). This collection, *Diasporic Identities and Empire: Cultural Contentions and Literary Landscapes*, investigates these ideas in nineteenth- and twentieth-century British, American, Eurocentric, Australian and Asian literature and modes of thought. The post-Enlightenment text is an unpalatable interjection of cultural shifters defying imperial homogeneity as well as political and economic unions. In *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (1995), Robert J. C. Young looks at such representations as the unconscious imperial structure which sets its descriptions on a “fixed centre.”<sup>1</sup> Each of the articles and academic papers in this book examines the manner in which authors not only attempt to write back to the “English” centre but further reflect, through their critiques, on the plight of the diasporic identity.

Whilst cultural hybridity has become a signature of the postmodern psyche, there is also much literature foregrounding the realities of the diaspora. The aim of this collection is to bring to light the complex relationship between the diasporic identity and the empire in which it resides. In the past the yearning to find meaning and value within patriotism allowed countries to remain as independent nations, but centuries of tensions have seen them politically weakened. Such opinion is a far cry from Benedict Anderson’s assurance that “the end of the era of nationalism, so long prophesied, is not remotely in sight. Indeed, nationness is the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time.”<sup>2</sup> Collaboration amongst international scholars and researchers reveals the uncertainty and cultural anxiety dominating the postmodern horizon. Within *Diasporic Identities and Empire*, arguments on Anderson’s “nationness,” inclusive of problems in defining Englishness and the insinuations of hybridity for the marginalised, are considered on a global scale as national borders are experiencing new kinds of contentions. Although postcolonial studies have largely been Anglocentric in focus, developments elsewhere have opened up other theoretical applications and new insights, and these are explored in this collection.

Work of this kind was formerly called “Commonwealth Literature,” however the field has been transformed by the use of diverse theories concerning language, gender, subjectivity and race. In the context of cultural production, “postcolonialism” as a theory is ascribed to “writing after empire,”<sup>3</sup> a reference to both colonial discourse and the writings of the ex-colonised. The proliferation of full-length studies, readers and conferences on the subject testifies to its importance over a range of cultural and interdisciplinary studies. Arguably, the two most important dates in postcolonial studies are 1947, which marks the beginning of a massive decolonisation of the British Empire, and 1978, when the founding text of postcolonial studies was first published—Edward Said’s *Orientalism*.<sup>4</sup> In it, Said proposed that a text is “handcuffed” to its cultural, social, political and historical contexts.

Said saw the importance of critics and theorists finding a way to “resist and recreate” meaning within texts in order to extract objective and less imperial convictions. The text is not only a reflection of the writer’s observations, but of the collective consciousness in its respective temporal realm. As a theory, “postcolonialism” permits the scholar and critic to recognise the environment (time and place) in which a particular text is made. Accordingly, Said insisted that a postcolonial critic should be willing to “develop a perspective, not just to postcolonial literatures, whereby states of marginality, plurality and perceived ‘Otherness’ are seen as sources of energy and potential change.”<sup>5</sup> Postcolonial theory, the position of the diasporic identity, establishes a need to reconsider and re-evaluate the text as a whole, and to therefore decipher any other cryptic truths it may possess. Foucault had referred to this process as “normalisation,” where “value” and “truth-content” could be extracted from a text.<sup>6</sup>

The term “postcolonial” has generated textual and aesthetic dynamics which provide a comparable element between territories which, in the past, were given little consideration in regards to their place within the postcolonial paradigm. For this reason, the consequences of empire and the role of the novel are now under closer examination than ever before. As Raymond Williams has asserted, even before the term “postcolonialism” came into literary studies<sup>7</sup> there was a perceived need to unlearn “the inherent dominative mode.”<sup>8</sup>

In the past century, mass migration, exile, diasporic repositioning, refugee reshuffling and certain re-evaluations on the predicament of the Indigenous mean that, in one way or another, the global has undergone a major geopolitical and cultural transformation. In Part I, “Diaspora and Colonial Discourses,” David Brooks’ chapter “Lionel Fogarty and a Note

on the Indigenous” offers a great deal in terms of methodically illustrating how colonial discourses reify a kind of “dispossession,” a paradoxical disposition. For the non-indigenous writer—the Australian poet, whom some may perceive as “invader”—there is a consciousness of one’s self as “handcuffed” to a dominative discourse. Aesthetically manoeuvring thought through writing, in a sense, pertains an understanding of “*being held back* from a place or state they (/we) wish to reach.” For the poet, academic, and/or writer, the necessity to bring forth some form, the dynamics of poetics—negotiating idiom and grammatical structures while “conscious of the manifold signs, actual and conceptual, tacit or vociferous”—is crucial to conjuring a temporal, and yet ephemeral oeuvre of a particular landscape.

This interchange of discourse and its potent connection to place, however, is refuted in Graciela Boruszko’s chapter “The Gam: ‘A Particular Place in the Transnational’.” Instead, Boruszko explores the consequences of discourse which is unaffected by national borders. The diaspora is forced to find some type of “normative” process through a language that has transgressed due to its implications of universals. Rather than defining the properties of the individual, private space, and/or national political borders, there is an opposing universal space which defies definition but invariably constructs functional and somewhat comprehensible discourses that “dangerously pry on each other.” The “gam” signifies a “linguistic transnational” in which limitations form a preoccupation with transgressed states and moments of ambivalence to attain an appreciation for the universal. Boruszko scrutinises the transnational space and its notions of transgression, and this posits a vital understanding into contemporaneous identities and subjects.

Maria José Canelo’s contribution delves into the consequences of “coloniality and power” as depicted in Ntozake Shange’s poem “Bocas: A Daughter’s Geography” (1983). Canelo intriguingly refers to Shange’s work as a vehicle of agency that carries an oppositional voice to a “spatial articulation of power” (Quijano 2008, 249). With reference to the Latin American critic, Argentinian Walter Mignolo, Canelo proposes that colonial and imperial relations have contributed to a type of discourse which has implicated the *disauthorisation* and *subalternisation* of specific forms of knowledge, or at the very least has been influential on the aesthetic re-presentations of such knowledge. Canelo places emphasis on the decolonisation of thought, achievable only through deconstructions on movements between places, rather than through preoccupations within the limitations of specific geopolitical landscapes. Irrespective of colonial and imperial infiltrations, Canelo explores the “spatial dimension of

genealogy” and its capacity to provide Deleuzian rhizomatic assertions of defining identity.<sup>9</sup> From this perspective, genealogy, the power of memory and the significance of ancestry are pivotal to the role of “spatial” discourses. Nonetheless, borrowing Paul Gilroy’s delineations of a “rhizomatic fractal structure” (1993, 4), Canelo notes the temporal implications of the post-ethnic turn and its disconcerting effects on intersubjectivity.

In the case of critiquing Western neo-imperialism, Creighton Nicholas Brown writes on the metaphorical implications of cannibalism in his essay “The Hunger: The Power and Politics of a (Post)Colonial Cannibal.” Juxtaposing discourses and their accompanying connotations, Brown makes a point for the ramifications of consumption, particularly with regards to distant peoples and cultures. Interweaving an analogy to Marcus Clarke’s epic novel *For the Term of his Natural Life* (1874), Brown reassesses contradictory approaches to terms such as cannibalism, and thus exposes overt double standards that are embedded within a Western and predominantly Eurocentric discourse. Such doubleness in applications of “otherness” is established through the exploration of the “monster” motif, notably projected in Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s introduction to *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*. Here, Cohen puts forth “that the monster is best understood as an embodiment of difference, a breaker of category, and a resistant Other known only through process and movement, never through dissection-table analysis” (1996, x). Brown draws parallels between British imperialism and its approach to abject peoples, who were stigmatised as “savage.” Tensions between the “savage” behaviour of the cannibal and the natural savageness of abject convicts are evident through the “doubleness” in discourse, and expose the marked differences in the interpretation of civilized and uncivilized worlds.

Part II of the collection is entitled “Schisms in National Spaces,” and the way in which, as Stephen Bell’s chapter indicates, identities within a given culture are palimpsestically construed. The diaspora emerges from within these pluralities, ideologically defying “purity.” Bell looks at Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*, where a multitude of identities, accompanied by a plethora of memories, come together to imaginatively reconstruct a “sterile, claustrophobic and oppressive land.” Building schisms in national spaces, to re-interpret an imperially constructed, fundamentally fabricated history, is a means of escaping from repressions of the past. In a conversation with David Brooks, Rushdie emphasises that: “India, if it means anything, means plurality. Although it also has different races, Pakistan feels much more like a singularity, because there is just one religion and there’s a much greater homogeneity both of language and

faith.”<sup>25</sup> Authors such as Rushdie, an Indian living in Britain, make use of writing styles that convey a counter-hegemonic vision, and determinately oppose the ones enforced by authority.

Such counter-hegemonic visions are taken a step further in Ren Denton’s thesis on Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, where political violence produces private transformation for the diaspora. This is indicative of the schisms that colonisation instills within a nation. Denton, however, deconstructs these schisms by applying Aadam’s nose as a signifier—a nose where “dynasties” wait “inside ... like snot” (*Midnight’s Children*, 8). Mikhail Bakhtin’s theorisations on the chronotope effectively establish the role of the novel, the predicament of the individual, and the ramifications imposed by sociopolitical and historical contexts. Denton reminds us of the distinct dialogical relationships between social and historical events, and the collocating philosophies of a “text’s imagined time and space” and the “space of the author’s real era.” Temporal-spatial relationships inevitably invite authorial interjections of abstract thought, materialised through the sign construct and producing meaning, since: “[c]onsequently, every entry into the sphere of meanings is accomplished only through the gates of the chronotope.”<sup>10</sup> As Saleem is “hurled into exile” there is an understanding of the need to assimilate: “[w]e must all become new people’ in the land of the pure” (*Midnight’s Children*, 355). In “Reflections on Exile”, Edward Said’s words ring true, as: “Nationalism is an assertion of belonging in and to a place, a people, a heritage. It affirms the home created by a community of language, culture, and customs, and, by so doing it fends off exile.”<sup>11</sup>

This is followed by work that elucidates the complexity of the term “(post)colonialism” as Anastasia Nicéphore’s thesis hones in on the relativity of the prefix “post.” Affiliating notions of “classic” colonialism, adjacency, and “late colonialism,” Nicéphore argues that cultural anxieties and the “urban subproletariat” (Spivak 1995, 25) are indisputable parallels between “the body politic and the body private.” Her discussion of Irvine Welsh’s post-Romantic Scottish novel *Trainspotting* disseminates a cultural *pseudo doxia* and, simultaneously, reveals the severity of colonial strategies, which continue to control fragile cultures. Welsh’s dystopic narrative looks at the consequential angst associated with policies of homogeneity and acquiescence when the body private remains “unconscious of empire’s civilizing pretensions.”<sup>12</sup> For postmodern Scots, the diaspora within a British imperial framework—the vices, assumptions, and prejudices exploited through (post)colonial policies—continue to underscore current dilemmas.

P. Jeyalakshmi observes that schisms in national spaces are, primarily,

affiliated to Western epistemology. In her chapter “Journeys Beyond Borders: Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines*,” Jeyalakshmi evaluates the provocations of visible borders. Schisms appear due to unnecessary material obsessions that can be dated back to Plato’s original iterations of an ocular-centrality of knowledge. Adapting Young’s assertion: “[c]olonialism may have brought some benefits of modernity, as its apologists continue to argue, but it also caused extraordinary suffering in human terms, and was singularly destructive with regard to the indigenous cultures with which it came into contact” (*Post Colonialism: An Historical Introduction*, 2001, 6), Jeyalakshmi situates schisms in Eurocentric disciplines whereby “boundary marking” perpetuates identity crises. Irrespective of this, Jeyalakshmi proposes that it is within these tensions that a unique neo identity advances, for: “[w]ithout space there is no art form.” It is in these so-called pockets, which might be defined as types of cultural enclaves, where divisions and subdivisions of space result in certain societies becoming “customized in their mindscape” and, in turn, “crav[ing] for a narrow, pin-pointed affiliation to space in the modern era.”

The third and final section, “Ethnic Tensions and Writings from Elsewhere,” extrapolates a mental search for pluralistic modes of selfhood. Spencer Tricker’s chapter on Andrew Salkey’s *Escape to an Autumn Pavement* ventures into the fragility of the diasporic condition, which is challenged by fractured notions of national, racial and even sexual essentialisms. Whilst Tricker identifies the role of Queer Theory in postcolonial studies, there is a deeper underlining sensitivity to the predicament of the bisexual persona, in regard to which modern theories remain rudimentary. Furthered by the stance of the Afro-Caribbean writer, Tricker bears in mind the porous spaces that persevere in a globalised and postcolonial clime. Seeing the black diasporic *lumpenproletariat* (a term borrowed by Brent H Edwards to define “the marginal, the drifters, eking out an existence, sometimes parasitically, on the edges of modern industrialized society”<sup>13</sup>), Tricker deals with “a certain performative identity” that is determined to challenge simplistic associations to the well-known South Asian postcolonial model.

Revisiting Bhabha’s “Signs Taken for Wonders,” Tzu-Yu Lin unpacks ideological presumptions on the impact of hybridity on the diaspora. Even though, simply taken, hybridity concentrates on the belief that a colonial subject is developed through a “discriminatory identity,”<sup>14</sup> Tzu-Yu Lin historically traces the empowerment gained by Caribbean writers who left for cosmopolitan cities such as London to forge their careers. Tzu-Yu Lin points out the ramifications of introducing hybridised discourses into

Standard Englishness that opened up new variations to understanding the plight of such subcultures as Creole plantation slaves. In recent studies, the term “diaspora” is referred to in plural form “diasporas” with the view of reflecting upon the differing categories and subcategories within such a context. Tzu-Yu Lin’s chapter aims to unravel the immediacy of “negative transparency” (Bhabha 1994, 160) and how this impacts upon writings brought from elsewhere which have managed to articulate new perceptions on ambivalent spaces. Distinguishing the diasporas from previous postcolonial subjects, Tzu-Yu Lin argues that, now more than ever before, the globalised identity cannot decipher its own genealogical roots as the rhizome is “deterritorialised,”<sup>15</sup> eradicated. Within an epoch that invites a post-ethnic stance, Tzu-Yu Lin questions the vulnerability of diasporas.

In “The Indian Gothic: Diaspora, Domesticity and Maternal Absence in Deepa Mehta’s *Fire*,” Lydia Saleh Rofail posits the aporia of whether voluntary diasporas are capable of dismantling paradigmatic imperial structures. Saleh Rofail’s thesis recapitalises the role of the diasporic narrator/persona who determines to engage with the sociocultural and political vices that redirect them from their homelands in the first place. Recognising that terms such as “diaspora” and “transnational” should not so readily be used interchangeably, Saleh Rofail tentatively investigates the discrepancies that distance identity from an eroding culture. For, while the transnational identity migrates with an awareness to the benevolence of relocation, the diasporas require physical and mental distancing from their homeland to make way for a kind of “metaphysical emancipation.”

Antony Goedhals offers the final chapter in this collection, and an ever important note on ethnic and religious tensions inexplicably attached to the composition of writings from elsewhere. In this instance, “elsewhere” is a non-Western mode of thinking. Through a biographical account, Goedhals traces the footsteps of Lafcadio Hearn whose findings on a “Buddhist set of axioms” provoked a new kind of discomfort for a predominantly Judeo-Christian Victorian society which, thus far, was nestling in a “quasi-scientific discourse of causation.” Goedhals propositions that it was to be this rigidity within the Victorian empire that pushed forth the individual’s search for identity through a “lonely search for an elusive, illusory self.”

It is, therefore, acceptable to deduce that postcolonial theory and, specifically, the plight of the diaspora can be applied to nearly any part of the earth. That said, some critics consider the term “postcolonialism” to be reaching inflationary proportions and losing its initial preoccupation with defining its effects on those peripheries submissively interlinked with the West. Even though many notable postcolonial studies have ascertained

that the role of the academic, critic, and writer is to “write back” to empire (Ashcroft), it could very well be that the diasporas are evidence that the dominant social strata has such a profound influence, a brutal rigidity, and to which the diasporas find themselves “*being held back* from a place or state they/we wish to reach” (Brooks). Nevertheless, our thoughts on global cultural relations have, over the years, been transformed through the adaptation of postcolonial theory which also extends itself into other fields of study such as anthropology, philology, history, politics, cybernetics (which has seen the development of the term “cyber-colonialism”) and cultural and political studies.

In our contemporary setting of what could be termed “post-postmodernism,” “post-capitalism,” or perhaps “meta-Marxism,” ever more regions around the globe fit into this dynamic. The Arabian world, the Caribbean, Latin America, and more recently countries such as Ireland and Scotland, have emerged as regions confronted with comparable power struggles. This collection, *Diasporic Identities and Empire: Cultural Contentions and Literary Landscapes*, brings together the works of scholars and researchers from a vast number of regions to critically converge on the contributions of this ever-evolving field of study.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Robert J. C. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (London: Routledge, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), 3.

<sup>3</sup> Bill Ashcroft, G. Griffiths & Helen Tiffin (eds.), *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London & New York: Routledge, 1989).

<sup>4</sup> Stuart Sim (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 336.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 198.

<sup>6</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College De France 1978–1979*, trans., Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave, 2008), 18–19, 60–62.

<sup>7</sup> Frantz Fanon’s observations were also crucial to the development of postcolonial studies.

<sup>8</sup> Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society 1780–1950* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1958).

<sup>9</sup> Deleuze & Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans., Brian Massumi (London: Athlone, 1988).

<sup>10</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes toward Historical Poetics,” in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 258.

<sup>11</sup> Edward W. Said, "Reflections on Exile," in *Reflections on Exile and other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 176.

<sup>12</sup> Peter Hitchcock, "Decolonizing (the) English," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 100 (3) (2001): 749.

<sup>13</sup> See passage in Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, quoted in Brent Hays Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard UP, 2003), 201.

<sup>14</sup> See Homi K. Bhabha, "Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority under a Tree Outside Delhi, May 1817," in *The Locations of Culture* (London & New York: Routledge, 1994), 159.

<sup>15</sup> Deleuze & Guattari, *Anti Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, (Minuit, 1977), 257.



**PART I—**

**DIASPORA AND COLONIAL DISCOURSES**

# LIONEL FOGARTY AND A NOTE ON THE INDIGENOUS

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## I. A Note on the Indigenous

A great many Australian poets are in an interesting and ironic state of dispossession, although perhaps only a very small proportion actually feels that way—that proportion, let us say, whose subjects and predispositions draw them towards the landscape, its flora and fauna, and their human experience thereof and thereupon. And perhaps we are speaking only of a proportion of this proportion, although even as we contemplate this we cannot exclude the possibility that some proportion of those great many who turn their backs upon such subject matter do so themselves out of some unacknowledged sense of impropriety or dispossession.

I speak of white Australian poets, or at least of non-indigenous Australian poets, for not all of these non-indigenous poets are “white.” “Invader” poets, some may prefer to call them (or “us,” since I am one of them). And “dispossession” might not be quite the right term. Let us say, instead, a *being held back* from a place or state they (/we) wish to reach, as if they were looking, from a ridge or a fence-line, at the field they want to go to, just over there, but find they have to travel a very long way round, or perhaps not go there at all and instead find somewhere else to want to go—to translate or re-site their desire. Nor am I suggesting that this is in any way like the dispossession that indigenous Australians have themselves experienced. Some non-indigenous Australians, it is true, have experienced something like it, in the homelands from which they have come as refugees, but this is not the case for most of those to whom I refer, though there are some minor yet tantalising points of comparison. We might see it, this new dispossession, as a kind of poetic justice.

Living all one’s life in a country, a landscape or set of landscapes, camping in them, walking through them, growing up with their sounds, their smells, having no other place so intimately available to one, no other place where one wants so much to be, knowing this as “home” and yet

knowing also—accepting, intellectually, as one must—that it is also an invaded place, and that one is a descendent of those invaders, or that one has been invited, accepted, hosted and made complicit by their descendants, one is already dispossessed or, since one did not possess, by right, in the first place, is in a state of not possessing. But I mean something other or more specific than that. I am thinking about writing or in other ways representing this state of being—or rather, since this state itself is not so difficult to represent, of representing one’s feeling about, one’s relationship to, that place, that landscape, which one loves, which has shaped one, and which one wants to, has no choice but to call home, and yet which one cannot “claim.”

Even here I have not quite got it right. “Claiming” is not what it’s about. Nor, really, is “possession.” Each of those concepts is something we should probably be trying to overcome, and we might eventually be grateful for this chastening spur. Let’s approach it yet another way. (This diffidence, this two-steps-forward-one-step-back, after all, is part of the poetics of this predicament.) Let’s say that the place, the landscape, *does* shape one, that it impacts upon one—that, if one has spent all of one’s life there (/here), or even only a part of that life, and found oneself deeply drawn, then it has somehow “in-formed” one, taught one how to feel and think about it, how to structure one’s feelings within it. One’s writing—one’s representing—may very well become, then, an attempt to express this place and these feelings, the things which one perceives in this place, which this place has taught one to perceive within it, as best one can. One might even say that some part of one’s writing, some part of one’s “poetics,” might seem to have *grown from* this place. And yet, of course, one has brought—has *been* brought—an alien language, alien forms, with which to perform the task, and one cannot expect that there will be a ready match between these things (the language of the place itself, and the language one has brought to it). Even when one has overcome all or most of the other cultural barriers and inappropriate behaviours and assumptions, the patterns and habits of other places that blinker and preoccupy an immigrant culture for so many generations, even when the living here has generated something of its own idiom, to make up for the insufficiencies of the imported languages and forms, there will not be a ready match, since it is not just a matter of terms and idiom, but of the deep grammars which deploy them.

There is always a path. Let us call it the “Indigenous Path.” We stare at it. It seems to stare at us. Some writers go down it with no qualms. Others may itch to follow it but, conscious of the manifold signs—actual and conceptual, tacit or vociferous—warning them against doing so, or

perhaps simply from their own senses of respect, difference and mis/appropriation, choose not to, no matter how much it might ease their way.

The indigenous peoples have been in this country, on this land, within these landscapes, many thousands of years whether this period be of forty, sixty or one hundred thousand years seems scarcely to matter when one is comparing it with the barely more than two hundred years of non-indigenous occupation. And if, as indigenous culture asserts emphatically, the land moulds the lives, ideas, languages and dreams of those who live upon it, then indigenous culture will be much more deeply steeped in these ways, will have been taught things by the place that it might take non-indigenous culture many thousands of years yet to learn. It is almost a ludicrous understatement to say that indigenous culture has a great deal to teach the non-indigene who would express his or her feelings and experience of that place truly. And, as already foreshadowed, there have long been non-indigenous writers and artists who intuited or understood this, and attempted to learn, from indigenous culture, habits of thought and feeling more appropriate to the place they were finding themselves loving and wanting to express. At least one school of Australian writing, that of the Jindyworobaks, was dedicated to following this path. One of its tenets, naïve and presumptuous, was the substitution, wherever plausible, of terms and concepts from indigenous culture for English images and concepts. And, as it happened, this school suffered the ridicule of its own white culture for so doing (“Jindyworobaksheesh,” “Jindyworobakwardness,” “the boy scout school of Australian poetry” [terms from James McAuley, R.H. Morrison and A.D. Hope respectively<sup>1</sup>]). But as indigenous culture becomes more and more articulate—and *articulated*—in the contemporary Australian and international environment, and better and more successful at asserting its rights, it becomes more and more clear that this path cannot morally be taken, or that earning one’s right to take it can take a long, long time.

And for non-indigenous poets this is a dilemma. If it is true, as indigenous culture asserts, that the land teaches, then those non-indigenous who are open and willing enough to *be* taught, by the land itself, without recourse to indigenous culture, will find themselves learning—find themselves inhabited by—things that, if they give them expression, will appear to have been appropriated from indigenous culture anyway. From a certain perspective, in other words, those who would learn and bear into their work the lessons of the place itself are damned if they *do* appropriate indigenous concepts, and just as likely to be damned if they scrupulously avoid doing so.

But already, this discussion has begun to take on a freight of assumptions and misconceptions. There are numerous under-examined issues here and I should take a little time to note some of them.

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There is, perhaps first and foremost, the issue of landscape itself—not exactly the field that the aforementioned dispossessed or, to put it more accurately, as-yet-unpossessing poets look at from over their fence, since that field, as we shall see, is a combination of actuality and concept, physicality and affect, thing inside and thing outside, but a large part of that field nonetheless.

The very term “landscape” is a difficulty, as much a way of not seeing as it is of seeing, as much a way of preventing our understanding as it is a way of enabling it. A collective noun. A version of “Asia,” say, that one term which at once attempts to designate and obscure that huge panoply of nations, “landscapes” and peoples that comprise it, each with their own specificities. Or of “the Animal,” a term which, as Derrida so clearly and simply explains,<sup>2</sup> not only performs in actuality an act of considerable intellectual violence in reducing to the abstract “One,” and so enabling us to hold at bay the countless differences of a vast array of distinct species, but also, since it bears so little relation to those to whom it is supposed to relate, says more about us and the way we wish to construct ourselves than about anything outside or beyond us.

From such a perspective there *is* no landscape. There are only *landscapes*, in the plural, in a multiple that becomes only the more so the more closely we approach it. Identify a landscape and you will find, as you look at it more closely, landscapes within it. Look at any one of these more closely and you will find landscapes within that. And no, it cannot be claimed that this is a problem unique to the way we relate to our particular environment. It is of course a problem inherent in language itself. Nor (at the risk of introducing a measure of paradox) need it necessarily mean that, cautiously, under erasure, we cannot use the term. The “landscape,” after all, as “nature” outstretched, has been and remains the greatest symbol and metaphor we have for that which is beyond us, outside and obscured by the systems that comprise our knowing. We can talk, as I have been doing, about a mode of writing that brings us closer to the landscape and is somehow more appropriate or faithful to it, but surely all that any new mode of writing can ever be faithful to is our own sense of a replica or simulacrum of our own current understanding of the landscape—the body of ideas and beliefs and intellectual/conceptual

fashions and frameworks that make up that understanding. To think that we are somehow getting closer to some actual “fact” of the landscape is a little troubling, if not actually paradoxical or absurd, and flies in the face of so much we have come to believe about the impossibility (given the nature of language and all other systems which compose our modes of apprehending anything) of our apprehending anything directly, of any actual, immediate and unmediated seeing or knowing. From this perspective, all is—can never be anything other than—gesture.

And then, of course, there is the question of just what it is that we want from it, this landscape home, elusive and perhaps ultimately impossible as it might be—or, rather, of what it is that we feel that we are not getting, cannot have, or cannot have access to. If it is just a matter of terms for certain feelings that we experience—terms for feelings of connectedness, say, or of our love of place, our sense of its somehow sacredness—and leaving aside the fact that our real unpossession might inhere not so much in terms themselves, or the lack of them, as in a sense that we do not have a “right” to the feeling in the first place, then surely it amounts principally and to no more than a kind of linguistic/artistic challenge. At first glance this should not be a great problem. The Australian land and its landscapes have generated many languages already—there were, it has been estimated, several hundred indigenous languages at the time of white invasion—and surely it can generate one language more. But, while particular words may be its surface—its most overt sign—it is not really a question of words. And here, again, we face a kind of chimera. There may be many different indigenous languages, but beneath them there is, arguably, one deeper, wordless language, and it is this language, if language is the right term for it, that is the problem. Words themselves are surface. The “home” we long for is something—a language?—beneath or beyond them. It is, we could say, *this* language we are kept from, *this* language that holds us at bay.

And *this* “home,” this deeper language, represents a problem in several ways. There is the problem of access *to* this language. There is the problem of appropriation *of* this language. There is the problem of the relation of this language to the language of those who are seeking it. And there is the problem of the relation of this language—just as there is of the language of those who seek this language—to language itself; of this language *as* language.

Non-indigenous Australian artists and writers—that proportion concerned to feel, explore and articulate their place—have the challenge not only of finding, opening themselves to, this new language in which to articulate the place of their real but nevertheless illegitimised belonging,

but also of relating that language to the language they already have. Or—and one can understand this thought even more readily—of releasing themselves in some manner from the grip (what I have already called the deep grammar) of that language.

Arguably, of course, some of these matters—of the definition and conception of landscape, or of the landscape's generation of or relation to language and culture—are not so much of indigeneity and the complications thereof as they are to do with our own evolving arguments concerning human capacities of perception and representation *per se*; emanations of an exploration of and struggle with our deeper structurations that have been preoccupying Western theory for decades, and that have already produced some significant propositions. Many, for example, in a readily understandable recourse, have seen this as a matter of reconceptualising that which does the conceiving, i.e. of finding a new way of handling and conceiving of ourselves within the places we find ourselves. We are offered (by Deleuze & Guattari, amongst others) release from that Freudian ontology which sees the individual constructed about a *lack*; we are offered a *rhizomatic* rather than an *arborescent* conception of knowing and arranging the known; we are offered, as a concomitant conception of *procedure*, the idea of a *nomadic* rather than a settled being. That the latter is an idea which has been seen to be so deeply sympathetic to and even to have originated within indigenous Australian culture strongly substantiates the assertion already made that the matter of the indigenous, for the *non-indigenous*, cannot readily be separated from matters of authenticity, language, perception and representation at the heart of our own cultural moment.

But these are perhaps ideas for a further stage of this discussion, not this one. *If* the land teaches and informs, then it will not be changing its lessons and languages to suit intellectual fashion. Somehow this idea of being in-formed and the idea of finding *new ways of being* don't seem to go too readily together. Even for those who pursue the latter in one or another of its various forms, the problem of language, the *grip* of language, and the releasing of that grip, will maintain. Central amongst and to the manifold epistemological adjustments to be made, there will still be the problem of the language in which they are made and discussed, and of how that may be opened and adjusted to accommodate and allow them, since the language itself, it must be presumed, carries within it the tentacular roots of many of those very things they will be seeking to change, and without substantial alteration to the one it is hard to see how there could be any substantial change in the other.

Poets who, for these or some other reasons, choose not to follow the

path of or into such ontological reconceptions will have an awkward and uncomfortable choice. To accept a kind of internal exile from their own home, as it were—or to haunt it, mute—or to give themselves over, open themselves to it, and take the consequences of being ridiculed, made to seem thieves when they know or feel that they are not. The poetry might be marked, as a consequence (as many would argue Australian poetry has been) by a diffidence, a guilt, an uncanniness (*unheimlichkeit*), or some later developments of the same. They may, on the other hand, chose *not* to use the words or the concepts that are there, in front of them, just over the fence or down from the ridge, but these words and concepts will still be there, absent, at the hearts of their poems. It's not, after all, as if it is not a price they—those of the tribe of they—have not already asked others to pay.

There is, of course, another way of looking at this. The poem (/poetry) is—is brought *about* by, exists because it is—a site of tension, a disagreement, a quarrel, a facing-off. Therefore, the poetry of this landscape is, and will be, a settling between the emanations of the landscape itself and those who are trying to express it. Were they able to mirror the landscape exactly—were it the idea that they *do* so—then it is likely that the poetry which *attempts* to do so would not exist at all, would not need to.

It may not all come down to grammar, but grammar, surely, is a large part of it. A grammar moulds us. To accept and learn and conform to it is, potentially, to let a very insidious thing into your mind. The *unheimlich* may be a matter of a grammar that has not released us—and perhaps cannot, will not—in the face of encountering a grammar new to us, emanating from this place, these landscapes of our invasion.

It is fraught territory. That much at least is evident. And, perhaps exasperatingly for those readers who have followed me this far, I am not going to push these notes (for they are nothing more) towards some sort of rhetorical conclusion. To get some of the questions right—or, rather, since the concept of rightness in this way is also part of the problem—to arrive at questions that make more sense of our predicament, may be far more important at this stage than to answer them. To appear to do so, to *attempt* to do so, would bring a specious and dismissive frame to what are in fact entrenched and serious challenges. Instead I would move to an example. It would be nice to be able to say of *what* this example is, but anyone who has been truly following so far will realise that this, too, would be pre-emptive and premature. It is the poem “Weather Comes” by an indigenous poet, Lionel Fogarty, and—since it seems to me that any other kind of reading would be ludicrous and very counterproductive—I would like to attempt a close reading.