

# Unsettling Stories



Unsettling Stories:  
Settler Postcolonialism  
and the Short Story Composite

By

Victoria Kuttainen

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

Unsettling Stories: Settler Postcolonialism and the Short Story Composite,  
by Victoria Kuttainen

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In modern Athens, the vehicles of mass transportation are called *metaphorai*. To go to work or come home, one takes a “metaphor”—a bus or a train. Stories could also take this noble name: every day, they traverse and organize places; they select and link them together; they make sentences and itineraries out of them. They are spatial trajectories. In this respect, narrative structures have the status of spatial syntaxes.

—Michel de Certeau *The Practice of Everyday Life* 115



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## INTRODUCTION

### DIFFICULT RELATIONS

The short story composite has many names: the *short story cycle*, the *composite short story collection*, the *short story sequence*, and even the *rouvelle*; but despite a large body of critical discussion and an enormous amount of writing that has been produced in this form, the genre lacks a real place in critical discourse—even though it has played and continues to play an integral role in the way writers have conceived of place, particularly in the postcolonial imagination. Perhaps this is because interconnected short story collections trouble boundaries of many kinds of narratives—not least narratives in which literary critics try to place them. In 1971 Forrest Ingram defined the composite genre—which he called the short story cycle—as a book of interconnected short stories that can be read independently, but which, when read in relation to the other stories in the collection, have a different, sometimes unsettling effect. The subsequent experience of each tale modifies the perception of other stories, Ingram observed, and alters one’s reading of the whole. Unsurprisingly, because this genre draws attention to the dynamics of collection and to the relationship between the singular and the collective, short story composites are often used to tell tales of families and communities, rather than charting a single hero’s progress through novelistic narrative. This is appropriate because short story composites are epitomes of difficult relations; they have boundary trouble. Surprisingly, however, until now the genre has itself been read within imposed boundaries that have limited the possibility of alternative interpretations and critical configurations. While there have been claims for the short story composite as a quintessentially American genre<sup>1</sup> or as a form appropriate to specific Canadian concerns,<sup>2</sup> these nation-based readings of the genre have seldom noticed that short story composites have a prolific publishing record in former colonies quite generally, and in the settler colonies of the USA, Canada, and Australia specifically.

Even though the nation has become a stable reading frame for national literary studies, the boundaries of the settler nation are by no means stable, and it is useful to remember all of these nations are troubled with

boundary issues, too. Each of them continues to be engaged in territorial disputes with Indigenous communities whose land titles remain in many cases unrecognized. Other disputes about boundaries within these nations also reflect the precariousness of cultural and territorial borders inside the nation-state. Those who argue that the mosaic model of Canadian multiculturalism is outmoded, for instance, are essentially concerned about the way it polices the geo-spatial and temporal borders of minority groups.<sup>3</sup> The rise of border studies in the USA reflects similar concerns with the limitations of certain cultural and conceptual boundaries. Until recently, these boundaries have hindered dialogue in and between diverse and often inequitable kinds of Americans and Americas, and many impasses remain. Australian scholars interested in discussing Australian identity mean something more complex than the version of “Indigenous Australia” as it is marketed to tourists and also something less absurd than the blokey show-Australian type popularized by Paul Hogan and promoted by the late Steve Irwin for consumption by American audiences. These scholars also remark upon the limits of multicultural models and the tenacity of settler stereotypes and preoccupations in Australia. After the attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center in September 2001, it has become clear how these first-world nations have attempted to police the limits of their own political borders at the same time as they have profited by the increasing flexibility of their reach into global trade markets. It is now indisputably the case that the USA can be regarded as an aggressively neo-imperial world power. Derek Gregory, drawing from Edward Said, observes that this “colonial present” has an evident history in the colonial past. The present colonizing practices of settler nations appear to relate to their shared history in the imperial-colonial project, but as a difficult relation, not as the product of a causal relationship or direct descent.

The premise of settler studies is that the imperial-colonial foundations of the settler nation have significant implications that resonate beyond the moment of contact and the place of the frontier. As David Pearson succinctly puts it, settler societies are “states of unease” (201). In the context of its history of invasion and subsequent settlement, the settler nation has never been an unproblematic category with set boundaries. *Unsettling Stories: Settler Postcolonialism and the Short Story Composite* explores what happens when the national and theoretical boundaries within which short story composites have been read are expanded to consider the genre within this wider context of settler colonialism and its aftermath. The history of settler colonialism has been germinal to all three of these nations in which the short story composite has been popularized,

although the persistent effects of settlement are widely unacknowledged. Until recently it has been difficult to read writing emerging from these nations through a settler framework. As they have gradually emerged (at different stages) from the shadow of Anglo-centric literary tastes, standards, and reading practices, Australia, Canada, and the USA have all been involved in national-canon building projects that have focused on the unity of the national voice and the expression of national identity. As a result of these national agendas, writing emerging from these countries has been read in terms of a national bildungsroman. For the Indigenous communities affected by settlement and for other cultural groups that have remained sidelined by these dominant narratives, however, the nation cannot be regarded as a progress plot. Rather, these projects of national consolidation can be seen as concomitant with certain de-colonizing phases in each of these settler states. Yet in settler colonial nations, any notion of de-colonization represses the nation's own continued status as a colonizing force. Narratives that are read along trajectories of national foundation and development in settler colonies have often served the interests of majority stakeholders in a project of national consolidation that was inaugurated by imperialism and which has continued the colonization of Indigenous peoples, even as nationalism in the recent past has attempted to distance domestic culture from, and even define itself against, its colonial origins and British forbears. Settler nations began with boundary trouble, and it is increasingly apparent that these nations and their national literatures remain haunted by boundary problems. Michel de Certeau, in the epigraph to this book, observes that narrative structures "traverse and organize places; they select and link them together; they make sentences and itineraries out of them" (115). This is particularly the case for short story composites that attempt to write and organize difficult relations between place, home, identity, and the past in the abidingly unsettled aftermath of migration and settlement in these settler nations. Many of the story composites that have emerged from former settler colonies are peculiar spatial syntaxes that foreground particular anxieties about difficult relations on, in, and to settler postcolonial territory, and this book reads and analyzes them as such.

In short story composite theory, current discussion concerns issues of unity, fragmentation, collocation and coherence.<sup>4</sup> These issues have also been discussed in settler theory, in entirely separate conversations happening on different theoretical and geographical turf.<sup>5</sup> Despite this overlap in interest areas, theorists of the short story composite and scholars of settler studies have yet to take notice of their shared concerns. Until recently, the large portion of work on the composite short story collections has

originated from the USA and its concentration has been on American narratives. It is understandable in this context that this research has tended to place its theoretical preoccupations within American national frameworks.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, comparative work in settler studies has been limited. Confined mainly to studies in and of Australia and Canada, even there work on settler literature and historiography has been received coolly on several counts. This is largely because settler studies remain an isolated outcrop of postcolonial theory that is regarded suspiciously for its insufficiently pure postcolonialism. Postcolonial theorists who equate the status “postcolonial” with “third-world subaltern” have been uncomfortable with a theoretical category that deals in in-betweens: simultaneously colonizing and erstwhile colonized. Often these rejections contain a tacit assumption that colonialism is an index of victim status which the “post” in postcolonialism can overcome. As Peter Hulme has suggested, these paradigms imply a chronological trajectory of development from occupation to independence and recovery, when it is instead clearly the case that the cultural aftermath of colonialism begins in the first gestures of colonization, and is tenaciously persistent long after the status of political independence has been conferred. Hulme also observes that these views unhelpfully invoke postcolonialism as “badge of merit” (120). This relies upon a narrative of the good and a notion of redemption which does not do justice to the complexities of the process of colonialism and its aftermath, which are perhaps nowhere more apparent than in settler colonies. On other grounds, settler postcolonialism has been approached cautiously by critics who are suspicious of its potential for an overemphasis on settlers and a re-inscription of settler cultural authority even as it seeks to understand the complicity of settlers in the colonization of Indigenous peoples.<sup>7</sup> And even those willing to go so far with settler colonial and postcolonial theory argue that the old centre-periphery model relied upon and perhaps made famous by one of postcolonial theory’s earliest critical bibles—*The Empire Writes Back*—which is invoked in settler studies is no longer relevant in contemporary multi-ethnic society, where migrancy and multiple diasporas have displaced the foundational Anglo-centrism upon which it relied.<sup>8</sup> Theorizing how the aftermath of settlement still inflects contemporary culture and literature in these settler colonies, if it does at all, has been scant.

And though there have been calls to import settler studies into the arena of American studies—and there has been a weak but steady pulse keeping these appeals on a lifeline since the 1980s, they have remained unheeded.<sup>9</sup> Part of the reason for this may be a resistance within some circles to include the USA. Laurie Hergenhan conjectures:

Perhaps it is a case of the Commonwealth and ex-Commonwealth countries sticking together not out of common interests but also out of a shared defensiveness against a new imperial power, a distrust heightened by the difficulties in freeing themselves from the old. (447)

Alan Lawson makes the obverse point, about the resistance *within* the USA academy to including America in discussions about the cultural aftermath of settler colonialism. Lawson suspects that this “overdetermined repudiation of invader-settler postcolonialism *in* the US academy” (“Postcolonial Theory and the “Settler Subject” 23; italics mine) suggests the existence of anxieties about America’s own illegitimate foundations:

[T]hese settler colonies might remind the US of the repressed memory of its own historical circumstance and of its painful and tricky need to negotiate its own idealized constructions of origin. (23)

The comparative thrust of this book places Canadian and Australian texts alongside American texts with the hope that comparative readings of Canadian and Australian short story composites might unsettle a few American discussions, which are only now becoming increasingly interested in their own imperial past and colonizing present in the wake of September 11, 2001, and the subsequent apparently unbounded “War on Terror.” It also proceeds from Leslie Monkman’s discussion of the “Anglo-American axis” (Monkman 129) and his sense of urgency for “internationalizing the United States” (130), as new hegemonies in the Anglo-American academy now uncannily mimic the way English Literature has been implicated in a process of universalizing cultural values and standards of literary taste that proceeded from heart of Britain’s empire. Infusing settler colonial theory into Canadian and Australian short story composite criticism has the potential to challenge the myth of American exceptionalism.<sup>10</sup> But a rigorous comparative study also has the power to challenge Canadian and Australian myths about their differences from the USA. Rather than producing a celebratory narrative about the one and the many, careful studies of the short story composite, as this book aspires to be, might draw our attention to the unsettling dimensions of the stories we tell ourselves, and to lingering anxieties about boundary management that register on several levels.

Including settler studies in general and the USA in particular within discussions about postcolonialism has clearly been one source of anxiety and discontent within scholarly debates. The short story composite formalizes related, though more general kinds of anxieties that characterize settler postcolonial culture and *its* discontents. One of these discontents, as

Hergenhan's remarks suggest above, is the status of marginality which has come to hold an almost talismanic quality in discussions about postcolonialism (Huggan 2005, Söderlind 1995), and which has curiously gained status as the USA has increased and consolidated its neo-imperial sway in the world. It could be said that marginality is a renewed form of "authenticity" that has been given a new measure of "authority" in terms of contemporary, postcolonial cultural capital. Another of these discontents concerns related anxieties about legitimacy, as Lawson's remarks suggest. Perhaps in their own bid to assert the legitimacy of settler studies within the arena of postcolonial studies, earlier discussions of settler culture and literature often overemphasized the sense of marginality felt by settlers as they were measured against perceived literary standards which emerged from the imperial center, whether this center was perceived to be Britain *or* the USA.<sup>11</sup>

Despite their flawed overemphasis on marginality, however, these discussions were important for highlighting how settlers negotiated the relationship between "imported" language and "new" places, and particularly for their insight into how distinctive settler literatures appeared to question "the suitability of inherited literary forms" (Ashcroft et al 16). The emergence of short stories and sketches in the settler colonies, at the time when the long novel was popular in England, has often been linked to such a questioning of and contending with received literary standards (Reid "Generic Variations"; Whitlock "The Bush") as well as to the material exigencies of production in the colonies (Johnson-Woods). This association between colonial writing and the genre of the short story has also produced important observations about their shared concerns with articulating marginality (*New Dreams*). Frank O'Connor is often quoted for his remarks about the suitability of the short story form to "submerged population groups" (18) and marginalized peoples. But although settler colonies may once have been deemed marginal adjuncts of the imperial center, Australia and Canada are now indisputably allies of the world's only superpower, the USA—and, curiously, all three nations continue to boast a strong output of short story production and short story composites in particular. Short story composite theory that celebrates narratives of "the one and the many" emblemized in the composite form has been over-invested in the narrative of a national bildungsroman for which the "new development" has been a postcolonial fetish for marginality. This marginality is, for settlers now, in many ways a thing of the past. And in consideration of the Indigenous peoples who have been and continue to be directly affected by settlement, it has always been relative. Nevertheless, in what appears to be a disguised bid for legitimacy,

and perhaps a concealed desire for the new postcolonial authority of authenticity, postcolonial settlers appear to desire to attach themselves to images of marginality, and in some ways now so more than ever. The short story composite is a genre in which settler postcolonial writers and readers have done so in a particularly curious and somewhat inscrutable form. Scholarly studies of the genre often classify it as a closer cousin to the genre of short story than its star-sibling, the dominant novel; but this awkward, defensive positioning of the short story composite only partially conceals an anxiety about the form as a hybrid which passes as marginal but which has what I call “shifty qualities.” These shifty qualities are part of the difficult structuring principles of the composite form, which will be considered here at length.

My central argument is that some of the difficult and inscrutable ways in which short story composites relate are well-suited to expressing the “difficult relations” that Alan Lawson has observed as defining characteristics of settler cultures and their poetics. Settlers are difficult subjects because they have an anxious colonial history; because they have a continued tense relationship to the Indigenous peoples who have been colonized by their settlement; and because their desires for authenticity are often bound up in concealed bids for cultural authority. Fundamental to Lawson’s thinking about “the complex nature of settler relatedness” (“Difficult Relations” 53) is his understanding that settlers are characterized by “a particularly doubled subjectivity” (50). As Lawson puts it, this doubled subjectivity is defined by “endless secondariness to *two* primaries” (ibid). One of these primaries is what Lawson calls “the First World of cultural origin and source of...cultural and political authority and authenticity (Europe)” (50). The other primary is the “geo-legal-temporal First World of aboriginal peoples” (50). Negotiating tense relations between the between the authority of the imperium the settler mimics (and denies) and the authenticity of the Native subject the settler both longs for and effaces, the settler subject as Lawson sees it emerges out of conditions of difficult relationality, and endlessly enacts irresolvable dramas of duplicity and anxious proximity. In particular, Lawson’s work has pointed out how settler writing encodes a double inscription of authority and authenticity, where settlers teeter between an established European authority which inscribes them as inferior colonials (but which they also mimic on new ground) and an indigenous sense of authenticity belonging properly to the Indigenous peoples whose “nativeness” settlers seek to appropriate and whose authority they seek to efface. The settler subject Lawson theorizes becomes the paradigmatic split subject *and* the quintessential revisionist historian, who is constantly shifting his relation

to himself, to the past, and to others, in order to inhabit the authentic with some authority. Not the least of these difficult relations concerns the relation between text and culture which settlers appear to complicate more than usual. In the spirit of establishing their own authority on their own ground, settlers misread textual precursors, and efface cultural precedents. On the other hand, and this is in the spirit of their doubleness—they imitate, appropriate, claim lineages that are untenable, and obsequiously defer to atavistic textual progenitors in their attempt to establish an authoritative and authentic native tradition. Gillian Whitlock has referred to settlers as “unpalatable subjects whose texts rest uncomfortably on the cusp of coloniality” (*The Intimate Empire* 41). One of the ways settlers have been unpalatable to recent postcolonial theory that has focused on the dispossession of Indigenous peoples caused by their settlement is the way in which settlers position themselves in shifting, and sometimes *shifty* ways alongside images of marginality or centrality, depending on what is at stake. The short story composite is a genre that shares a similar “shifty” status and which has been read through different frames at different times.

Lawson’s theorization of settler culture and poetics implies continuity between the postcolonial present and the colonial past that is not widely researched. In popular culture, issues relating to settlement are often relegated to the past, generally considered as “over and done with.” Settlement is thought of as history, often limited to pioneering times, and this implies a developmental phase that has been surmounted (like the covered wagons used to transport settlers and their goods to the frontier), and is which is no longer fashionable or relevant (like the outmoded frocks worn by pioneer women). Despite popular perceptions that settlement is a thing of the past, theorists have long understood settlement as complex process with significant and lasting cultural implications. Seminal studies on settlement such as the “Hartz Thesis” have laid the groundwork for other anthropological and sociological studies that point out how settlement has wide-reaching and long-term cultural effects.<sup>12</sup> But even as these theorists have been interested in pursuing the persistence of these effects, quite often their research has been limited to the direct aftermath of settlement and early colonial culture, *or* it has generalized the persisting effects of settlement into a single, largely un-interrogated version of settler history, poetics, and identity. Laura Moss’s edited critical collection *Is Canada Postcolonial?* is unique for bringing together research about the colonial past in Canada with questions about the persisting effects of settlement in the present, and ways in which a variety of postcolonial concerns and cultural anxieties presently manifest in complex and particular ways across Canada. In her study of settler romances in the

nineteenth and early twentieth centuries which looks at representations and cultural uses of the Australian Girl, Tanya Dalziell anticipates the position outlined here that elements of settler colonial culture persist in the supposedly multicultural, global, transnational and “post”-colonial present. As Dalziell points out, of the many boundaries settlement does not respect, one of the most indefinite and perhaps most important to note *because* of its inscrutability is this difficult relation to history (137). Settler postcolonial culture is structured on difficult relations to the past, to place, and to empire, nation, region, land, and home. It also bears traces of anxious relations to authority, authenticity, Indigeneity, narrative, and to community and structures of kinship and belonging quite generally. Reading composite fictions that elucidate these difficult relations can contribute to a deeper understanding of these dynamics in settler postcolonial societies and how they manifest in literature; closer attention to these aspects of settler postcolonial societies can also introduce new approaches to reading and interpreting writing, and particularly so in the composite genre—a form of writing organized and indeed premised upon a network of difficult connections between stories, characters, themes, places, time, meaning, and narrative.

There are several sets of “troubling relations” that have a place in a study such as this. One is the way different national literatures relate to each other. This involves the challenge of reading for cultural specificity as well as identifying the common cultural elements produced by a shared history of settler colonialism. Another level of difficult relations involves how we relate to the past and its texts. All of the short story composites considered here involve structural difficulties in locating core stories in a series, and trouble ideas of reading sequentially—corollaries of difficulties in locating traditional or canonical texts and in reading the past deterministically from the present. Dilemmas about reading and relating to cultural and textual progenitors are central problems in settler postcolonial theory. The short story composite is a particularly appropriate form to contemplate in this context. In studying how linked texts exist independently and how independent cultural products appear to cohere with other material co-located with it, the short story composite is *the* genre to go to. In thinking about whether it is *our* reading that imposes cohesion or the authority of the work that makes connections between texts, we find ourselves reading in a genre that textualizes difficult relations to textual precursors. In discussing these questions, as they relate to this genre, we also find ourselves discussing those problem relations that haunt settler culture. Many short story composites highlight ambivalent, tentative, and tenuous relations between past and present,

story and history, cohesion and fragmentation, independence and interdependence, authorial control and readerly invention. The critical reception of these books has been equally fraught—at times the genre has been sidelined altogether, at other times certain stories or composite fictions have been selected over and above others to represent features of the settler nation, and in recent times the composite has been praised as a marginal genre that retains its aesthetic integrity and its fidelity to realism in spite of market-driven tendencies to produce pulp novels that feed public demand and supposedly low-brow tastes for fantasy and escapism. Settler postcolonial literature is also characterized by awkward relations to market capitalism, high-brow tastes, literary canons, and popular culture, and particularly, as we shall see, by difficult relations to realism and romance.

This is not to argue that settler postcolonialism has an exclusive purchase on the short story composite. It is a form that suits many forms of expression and many cultural and personal circumstances. But it is particularly well-suited to meditations on the settler postcolonial condition. Further, this is not to argue that there is a single coherent phenomenon or category that can be identified as settler postcolonialism. Instead, I draw here from recent discussions about various postcolonialisms (Moss “Is Canada Postcolonial?”) which posit that settler postcolonialism is not a phenomenon or a stable quality that certain people or certain societies possess, but rather that it is a problematic, striated by a number of specific and local concerns that manifest in the literature this study reads. George Grant, whose *Lament for a Nation* Cynthia Sugars identifies as an important precursor to discussions about postcolonialism in Canada, observed in 1965 that “[t]he manifold waves of differing settlers must not be simplified into any common pattern” (5). The focus on the legacies of settlement considered here in close discussion of select short story composites from Australia, Canada, and the USA endeavours to contemplate some of the complexities of settler societies without oversimplifying them. It aims to do this with an attention to historical specificity to contextualize its readings, and also by its methodology of focusing on specific narratives without generalizing too broadly from them larger trends. Neither is the tri-national focus of this book—on the literatures of Australia, Canada, and the USA—meant to reify what Laura Moss has called that “unified notion of nation that is outdated and exclusionary” (10) at the expense of regionalisms, tensions, and multiple modes of belonging. And it is not to devalue the importance of inward-looking nation-based studies of various postcolonialisms which have recently gone far to illustrate the diversity of postcolonial problematics

within any singular nation-state. The comparative focus of this study does not pretend to be comprehensive in scope, as some earlier studies in the comparative postcolonial or Commonwealth tradition perhaps unwittingly implied. Rather, it takes single short story composites as particular case-studies that provide opportunities for close readings of specific settler problematics as they manifest in narrative. Earlier comparative studies, in the heyday of Commonwealth Literature, have been accused overemphasizing similarities between settler nations that were once colonies of Britain struggling to articulate a national identity after independence (Moss 1-2). This book looks instead at how the short story composite is useful for articulating certain inconsistencies in those national fictions and in the myths that these settler nations once told of themselves. Composite short story collections textualize the ways in which settler nations, like composite fictions, are comprised of many contending and congruent stories, not one single coherent narrative (Moss 7).<sup>13</sup>

In “Proximities: From Asymptote to Zeugma” (2000), Lawson (who has thus far theorized settler literature more extensively, and certainly more comprehensively, than any other postcolonial literary critic) suggests a project of cataloguing a stock of tropes that characterize difficult relations in settler literature and culture, and which are persistently redeployed in settler narratives at different times in history. This differs from the outmoded (and probably overly maligned) project of thematic analysis made popular by the likes of Margaret Atwood and Northrop Frye and others in the 1970s, where the aim was to come up with a list of qualities that inhere within a coherent national culture; which was a part of the nationalist project of coming to terms with national identity; and which used literature in a somewhat unselfconscious way as a transparent window on reality. In Lawson’s way of thinking, literature is not necessarily a privileged repository of culture, but rather, narrative in general is of interest in settler cultures because colonialism is intimately tied to the production of discourse and systems of representation; because settlers have anxious relations to texts and to self-representation; because their act of writing enacts a collision between “authentic” forms of native self-expression and the “inauthentic” authority of inherited literary forms and standards; and because they have a penchant for revisionism. According to Lawson, settler anxieties and tensions are fundamentally enacted in struggles over narrative:

The settler, it increasingly seems to me, is above all a teller of tales. It is in narrative that settler subjectivity calls itself into being and it is in narratives that it can be located and its symptomatic utterances analysed. The settler...is “essentially” a narrating subject. That is to say, I am drawn to

an analysis that is not so much located in “culture” and almost certainly not located in consciousness, but one located in texts, or more precisely, in various forms of narrative...I argue that settlers narrate themselves into subjectivity in the act of making particular narratives. And so conflict in settler colonies is frequently a conflict over narrative or representation. (“Proximities” 28)

As Lawson explains (in much the same way that de Certeau does, too), narrative tropes encode grammars of relating. They mediate, through language and representation, awkward relations of collocation and propinquity. They yoke one thing and another together, in complex ways. And they are particularly powerful for registering the difficult relations of doubleness that Lawson earlier theorized (in “Second World”) as structuring settlers’ self-positioning to (at least) two originaries: the European and the Indigenous. Tropes can be scrutinized in literary language which is explicitly figurative, but they also translate into everyday language where they become naturalized and where they often undergird implicit cultural assumptions. Unlike themes, which can be thought of as *properties* of a work of art (or more problematically, in thematic analysis—properties of a culture), tropes *move* a story; they are essentially a text’s underlying relational code. As Lawson explains, tropes are “rhetorical figures, because they *function* rhetorically—that is, they *turn* a history, a narrative” (“Proximities” 31). They are persuasive rhetorical structures that do the work of comparison and affiliation, and contrast and distancing. In settler literatures, tropes sometimes stake “polemical and tendentious” (31) claims and do so trickily and seductively, usually not openly drawing attention to themselves but constituting the deep structure of a text’s language. And on settler terrain, the claims staked by these tropes are fundamentally spatial; that is, they organize relations to history, belonging, legitimacy, and authenticity that bear directly upon how settlers position themselves to their land(s). *Unsettling Stories* does not attempt an exhaustive “A to Z” catalogue of these devices, as Lawson’s “Asymptote to Zeugma” proposal cheekily implies there is a need for, but it does look at a number of settler tropes used to organize several short story composites selected here for close reading. Because of their contending and collocated narratives, short story composites epitomize that “conflict over representation” that Lawson has pointed to as an index of conflict in settler culture, and these struggles also take the form of conflict over narrative space. In short story composites, tropes are fundamentally used to organize their difficult relations, and Gerald Kennedy has identified a similar need to catalogue the poetics of this genre based on their organizational topoi (Kennedy “Towards a

Poetics” 19). This book considers short story composites organized around the tropes of the family, the small town, home, history, and trauma.

Chapter One, “Tales about Family” considers short story composites organized around the trope of the family. It reads William Faulkner’s *Go Down, Moses* alongside Margaret Laurence’s Canadian classic *A Bird in the House*. These composites invoke the trope of family genealogy to trouble ideas about descent and lineage, particularly to deconstruct myths about filial descent. Myths about race and biological inheritance have been especially pernicious in settler colonies, where they once underpinned and bolstered national myths about authority, property, belonging, legitimacy and entitlement. Ideas about descent, in particular, contributed to ways in which settlers came to think of themselves as particular kinds of Britishers or national citizens. In this sense, the trope of the family has been deployed in settler colonial discourse as a model for civil society with universal and sacred values. Yet the myth of uniform filial descent from English forbears ill suits the need national writers also have to establish their own traditions on new ground. With recourse to Edward Said’s concepts of filiation and affiliation, this chapter shows how these composites are concerned with deconstructing myths about tradition and heritage that radiate beyond the family to settler society in general. But these composites also reveal persistent and troubling postcolonial and modernist investments in the trope, in which their own canonical literary sites and the national traditions they head-up become newly enshrined “sacred sites.” These composites become memorials of the past they simultaneously seek to de-sanctify and de-mythologize, and aesthetic emblems of a modernist quest for authentic national history. In their attempts to reconfigure old myths, these stories *about* difficult relations *become* models of difficult relations, specifically between the colonial past and the post-colonizing present. They display one of the governing tropes of settler postcolonialism—what Graham Huggan has identified as “characteristic postcolonial reversals” and repetitions—insofar as their attempts to deconstruct imperial-colonial myths of lineage betray troubled postcolonial attempts to indigenize settlers or put in place artificially coherent boundaries between awkward settler colonial forbears and postcolonial citizens at home in their nation.

Many of composites discussed throughout this book also feature the trope of the family, or settler genealogy—namely Thea Astley’s *It’s Raining in Mango: Portraits from a Family Album* and Sandra Birdsell’s *Agassiz Stories* (in Chapter Four). For the purposes of coherence, however, they are considered in other sections of this study, although the ways in which they connect with these other composites about family is

certainly commented upon. If objections might be raised regarding the basis for comparing these texts, particularly Faulkner's antebellum South, which has become an American classic, against more contemporary Canadian and Australian narratives, it might be observed that this project is not primarily concerned with the "good fit" but with awkward relations more generally. The dates of settlement across shifting frontiers in these three settler nations vary significantly. And in any case, a study that adhered to synchronic or diachronic models of objectivity and comparison might misleadingly appear to indulge in a false progress-narrative of "cultural development" that mapped stages from colonial fog to postcolonial redemption, which this study strenuously wishes to avoid.

Chapter Two, "Tales about the Small Town" looks at short story composites arranged around the trope of the small town. In this chapter, nostalgia emerges as a governing modality in many of these short story composites which feature the bucolic village. In this context, I call upon Stephanie Foote's notion that regional short story collections often involve a nostalgic and inward looking focus on a small region within national borders that fictionally construes relations between insiders and outsiders to consolidate a feeling of being at home in the whole nation. This chapter considers how composite stories of the small town have historically been read as metonyms for the composite nation. As mentioned earlier, readings of the short story composite have been involved in national canon-building projects even as they notice how the writing in this genre challenges traditional scholarly interpretations of nation-narration based on the dominant form of the novel or the long-poem. These readings reveal another level of difficult relations considered here: short story composites, because of their unsettling non-linear effects, often prompt multiple interpretations. As Gerald Kennedy has observed, the "ostensible unity of such works" can sometimes be seen as an intrinsic property of the narrative, rather than a product of one's own reading ("Poetics" 11). This is perhaps nowhere more relevant than in readings of composites which filter their material through the frame of the nation-as-unity. This chapter considers at length interpretations that have continued to favour the nation as the dominant frame for interpretation. It considers how the town-tale has been co-opted into fraught national narratives of group-based "folk history," progress, and development that are produced by the process of reading the past in a selective way. The small country town is an apt trope for the myths of independence these narratives require and develop. Reading the small-town composite in such a way lends itself to a form of "boundary drawing" that transforms complex narratives and scattered stories about life in the settler small-town to the level of nation-narration.

In this chapter I show how reading the composite in this way lends Stephen Leacock's Mariposa in *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* to be figured in Canadian literature as a metonym of the "peaceable kingdom" and how Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* becomes enshrined, too, as a seminal site of national literature that is so expansive that it includes visions of dissonance. I explain here why the short story composite of the small town is particularly well-suited to the purposes of nation narration and canon formation.

Chapter Three, "Tales about Home," considers how the trope of the small town has a slightly different function in home-town stories, which are particularly suited to the needs of second-wave feminist readers in the 1980s. The trope of home and the concept of a private female domain held a certain allure for feminists during this era, and this chapter considers how this domain is configured in the short story composite. Discussions about homeliness and un-homeliness also have particular relevance and a specific cadence in settler postcolonial domains, as they suggest ways in which settlers have made the "new" land their own, and ways in which settlers generations after settlement can still feel insecure in this land, or register anxieties about their place in the nation. Issues of homeliness and unhomeliness also relate to the place of Indigenous peoples whose homes settler nations have claimed, and the rhetoric and strategies of dispossession they have used to make Indigenous people seem strangers in their own homelands. This chapter looks at late-twentieth century modes of writing back to earlier nationalist modes of framing the nation seen in Chapter Two, as increasing attention to postcolonial theory and politics, particularly in Australia, made nationalism seem crass and outmoded, and as feminists made the charge that nationalist narratives had been patriarchal and exclusionary.

Returning to considerations about settler nostalgia, this chapter considers how the home-town composite registers a particular form of cultural nostalgia that uses the past in particular ways for the purposes of the present. Olga Master's *A Long Time Dying* is looked at for how it revisits 1930's Australia to consolidate a picture of the past that is particularly suitable for creating a myth of the postcolonial present. By focusing myopically on small, isolated details and fragments of story, the micro-narratives of Master's homely tales assemble, as if by pointillism, a picture of home as an idyll-in-miniature, a lost paradise that nurtures the myth of a separate female domain uncorrupted by metropolitan values and politics. These are settler postcolonial romances, where the lost idyll exits off-stage, and where the settlers are always-already victims of failed independence. But the myth of independence these stories rely upon and

nurture is integral to their attempt to conceal their own larger designs to redeem the postcolonial nation from its colonial and colonizing past by producing a new, allegorical national meta-narrative that emerges out of the accruing smaller fragments of story. These stories require a nostalgic myth of lost purity, and pine for a “separate sphere” in which the settler colonial nation was distinct from the Imperial metropolitan centre from which (in reality) it was never fully distinguishable.

The re-emergence of short story collections in the composite form in the late twentieth century itself has a nostalgic quality. After all, as Susan Garland Mann and others have pointed out, one of the early forms of short story collections were turn-of-the-nineteenth-century local color stories.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, the widespread publication of the short story collection genre is associated with the rise of modernism. The publication of no less than five scholarly books on the subject of the short story composite since 1989 (by Mann, Lynch, Nagel, Davis, and Lundén respectively) reveals a curious emergence of interest in short story composites at the end of the twentieth century, during the rise of postmodernism. The genre of the short story composite might be seen as a contemporary throw-back to narratives that were preoccupied with myths of lost union and purity that were popularized during these earlier eras. Short story composites organized around the trope of region particularly display nostalgia for roots and for a rootedness in place that the small country town and the home town—for all its boredom and backwater—seems to promise for these less certain, less rooted, and transient times, and for the largely metropolitan late twentieth century imagination. Fundamentally, nostalgia is an affective relation to the past; on settler ground, it stakes claims to land based on fantasies about history and narratives of historical romance of the kind Amy Kaplan has called in an American context “Romancing the Empire.”

Chapter Four, “Tales about History” focuses on settlers’ difficult relations to history. In the 1990s, the short story composite was often used by writers engaging in projects of historiographical metafiction—using fiction and multiple perspectives to question the grand-unified narratives of a singular national and nationalist past. When they were written, these composite fictional histories were invested with all kinds of cultural significance, as many emerging postcolonial critics turned to them as model for how new kinds of postcolonial history might be best approached. In contrast to these earlier celebratory readings, this chapter reads postcolonial historiographical composites as quests for settler redemption that attempt to come to terms with the unsettling legacy of settler colonialism. In this context, it looks at Scott Russell Sanders’ *Tales*

*about the Settlement of the American Land*, Thea Astley's *It's Raining in Mango*, and Sandra Birdsell's conjoined composites *Night Travellers* and *Ladies of the House* collected together under the title *Agassiz Stories*.

Birdsell's collection is another composite fiction organized around the trope of the small town, this time a fictionalization of Birdsell's own hometown, renamed "Agassiz." Birdsell's composite, like Masters' *A Long Time Dying*, uses the small town to organize a fiction of roots and authenticity. However, this composite is mostly concerned about the difficult relations between personal heritage, contained within family genealogy, and family cultural traditions, cultural heritage, and national heritage. Further, its particularly difficult relations between settler postcolonialism and the settler-invader past are emblemized in the difficult relations between the two discrete, but collocated composites that comprise the *Agassiz* series. While the first story collection within the series—*Night Travellers*—invokes the Canadian past in a nostalgic mode even as it appears to realistically portray its problems, Birdsell's subsequent composite in the *Agassiz* series—*Ladies of the House*—invokes hallmarks of postmodern aesthetics in a complex, "shifty" way that conceals an underlying modernist national myth-making project. Following Hayden White's central idea in *Meta-History* that history-telling fundamentally involves a series of identifiable narratives that are linked to ideological claims with important material effects, this chapter considers various different modes of relating history in a settler context. Within the different modes of relating and regulating relations to the past that this study uncovers, it identifies several different historical narratives and the relations between them: national meta-histories and various other official histories to do with governance, popular histories, genealogical and cultural histories, family history, regional history, natural history and heritage, and considers the various claims they stake.

The final chapter, Chapter Five, "Tales about Trauma" introduces the concept of the trauma fiction composite, and follows on from ideas about difficult relations to the past raised in Chapter Four. Anne Whitehead has defined "trauma fiction" as a troubled genre of writing that invokes the hallmarks of trauma-testimony in an uneasy, fictive mode. The composites looked at here—Tim Winton's *The Turning* and Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*—invoke the forms of trauma testimony such as fragmentation, dislocation, repetition, and belatedness in recycling historical material from the national past for the purposes of fiction. Again, these composites are often backward-looking. The fascination of the trauma narrative is that it routes the problems of the present back to an event, sometimes forgotten, in the past. As such, these narratives

emblemize “difficult relations” to the national colonial past because they produce realistic, traumatic narratives that convey a sense of authenticity, but which relate “reality” in a highly fraught way. Gao Xingjian’s 2001 acceptance speech for the Nobel Laureate in Literature, “Literature as Testimony: The Search for Truth” reveals a rising trend on the cusp of the new millennium to view literature as having a special purchase on the search for truth. In this view of literature, narrative becomes a privileged site for the relating of “authentic human feelings” (Xingjian 55), such that the testimonies of literature are often now regarded as “much more profound than those of history” (Xinjian 54). But the late twentieth century has also witnessed the rise of the cultural authority conferred upon postcolonial narratives of suffering and marginality. In light of these two values, these narratives present a particularly intensified form of *tricky* reading. It becomes difficult to tell if they are belated cultural testimonies of national trauma, or if they are mimicking traumatic modes of relating which belong more authentically (or perhaps—more ‘ethically’) to Indigenous peoples dispossessed by colonial settlement and the minority groups sidelined in and by dominant national narratives and cultural practices. This chapter asks if these are telling tales that reveal in a fictive format deep-seated and real cultural trouble, or rather, if they display more generally a crisis for settler narrative in the late twentieth century. It draws from Lawson’s observation that the role of an imagined England in colonial romances, as it functioned as “the key to the personal hermeneutic, the key to full intelligibility” (“Difficult Relations” 57) has been replaced in troubled postcolonial narratives with “a personal neurosis of incompleteness” (57) in which the quest—or search—for origins has become existential and psychoanalytic. The notion of belated or deep-seated cultural trauma offers, through its alluring explanatory powers—that is, through its *story*—the promise of the restoration of full subjectivity and recovered plenitude. In these narratives, then, the trope of “colonial trauma” vies with the trope of narration itself, to become possible keys to intelligibility. These texts represent a problematization of modes of knowing, a curious reversal of earlier colonialist tropes of certainty and authority, and they feature a large degree of indeterminacy that threatens to become a new form of authenticity.

Furthermore, this chapter returns to debates about whether postcolonialism is a reading practice or a feature within narratives, to consider the way in which colonialism becomes a very conspicuous and *shifty* trope in these collections, subject to a degree of narrative manipulation. By drawing attention to the ways these composites manage and manipulate the tropes of authenticity and colonialism, this chapter