Poetic Craft and White Settler Colonialism:
A Workshop on Australian and South African Poetics

Writing and Society Research Group, University of Western Sydney, Bankstown Campus,
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WORKSHOP STATEMENT

Disciplinary Context

This workshop aims to build on a conference held in Oxford last year, ‘Crafts of World Literature’ (http://craftsofworldliterature.wordpress.com/). The conference was conceived as a first step in a long-term project seeking to place questions of literary craft at the centre of postcolonial and world literary studies. While the eurocentrism of literary practices of representation has relentlessly been critiqued, and methods of deconstruction and discourse analysis developed in order to redress this; broadly speaking, the same categories and assumptions used in literary interpretation (terms such as ‘lyric’, ‘realism’, ‘tragedy’ and their histories) and aesthetic judgement (judgements such as good, bad, beautiful, inelegant etc) have either continued unaltered from earlier modes of practical criticism or been dispensed with altogether. We contend that if the literary craft of any given work is not approached in its context of intelligibility, then the kind of knowledge which is specific to it easily goes missing. By ‘context of intelligibility’, we mean that dynamic created by the community of writers, publishers and readers within which particular writers situate themselves and seek recognition, and those literary materials which are available to the writer in doing so.

More often than not, this approach will involve delineating and describing the field of practice within which writers work and make reputations, and these will tend to be regional in character. We are not, however, attempting to re-establish the nation as the necessary horizon for any given body of literature. We seek to fix our attention on the problems of composition that any given writer faces (simultaneously, what to write and how to write it), and such problems are often shared across literary communities with similar histories. For example, the poetic styles of the American Amiri Baraka and Barbadian Edward Kamau Brathwaite share many characteristics: the attempt to emulate or invoke the rhythms of New World black music, to cultivate a performance-focussed poetics, to draw on the tone and rhetoric of Pan Africanism and black power. Not only do Caribbean and American black poets share a historical predicament in the legacies of slavery, but also common problems when confronting and absorbing the traditions of verse writing in English. To focus only on commonalities in the theme and content in such works would be to miss the significance of the thinking involved in the myriad decisions involved in composing verse of the desired aesthetic. This project, thus, also hopes to
develop new modes of comparative research in postcolonial literary studies, which rest neither on generalisations about national characteristics nor some pervasive ‘postcoloniality’.

Poetic Craft and White Settler Colonialism

This workshop will focus on the poetics of poetry written in societies established through white settler colonialism, particularly South Africa and Australia. The emphasis will be on the ways in which the dynamic of literary fields in colonial and postcolonial communities with a white settler history create particular contexts of intelligibility for poetic craft. To give an obvious example, the pastoral, which arrives with the settlers, is not a fixed genre, but presents parameters for technical development as writers attempt to settle (or unsettle) it in the colonial territory.1

Writers in many colonial and postcolonial contexts have had a clear sense of the need for differentiation from the European cultures disseminated through colonialism, particularly where legacies of racial domination and alienation are felt strongly, and this has been a spur to forge new technical and formal means (as per the Brathwaite-Baraka example). For white writers, or writers who identify as such, in the white-settler contexts with which we will be concerned, the need for such differentiation can be fitful and more ambivalent; many continue to take their lead from the historic centres of English literature without having a sense of great separation from them. Local critical communities can speak of ‘international’ standards and recognition, which set seemingly objective criteria by which to judge the merits of local writers, only compounding the provincialism of aesthetic effort and taste. Others, concerned with the legacy of settlement, and the meaning of their work in relation to it, can strive for a transformation in the means of composition, but often motivated by the concern to avoid an inherited complicity.

For indigenous and non-white writers, or writers who identify as such, the approach to craft takes place within the dynamic of white-dominated white-settler society. The colonial relation, and its legacy, are internalised and so the situation does not easily fit the globe-spanning ‘metropole-periphery’ model that gets used for much commentary on colonial/postcolonial writing.

Confrontation, then, will be not only with an externally imposed canon and culture that we find, say, in much South Asian and African writing in English, but will also be conducted as an articulation and rupturing within the local field. This can often prompt work with an overtly political intent, introducing a political principle of hierarchization.2 Uncritical moral celebration, on the one hand, or pejorative judgements that use, without reflection, the ideals of literary autonomy borrowed from

European and/or international fields, on the other, can divert attention away from the specificity of craft’s intelligibility in such cases.

While the early histories of such societies are largely a Manichaean confrontation of settler and native, and the sense of this polarity is powerfully persistent, the workshop by no means seeks to limit attention only to writers who can neatly be allotted to these two identity categories. The subject is the craft of poetry in societies that have been created through this form of colonialism, and, so, concerns poetry that emerges from any social position: the social circumstances produced by immigration, whether indentured or economic, are as relevant as any other. Here we also encounter diverse cross-cultural networks which may or may not appear in a distinct light when viewed through the workshop’s ‘white settler’ conceptual focus.

The workshop is not primarily concerned to address racial identity: the whiteness, blackness, ‘hybridity’ or otherwise of writers – we do not seek to highlight a literary technique and link it to an identity or to ‘subject formation’. The central question is of how knowledge is created through craft, and the ways in which the settler context conditions the literary thinking of its writers. If race has so often been a central anxiety and limiting circumstance it will be found sedimented in the literary material; and it is at the level of their literary qualities that the truth-content of the works might be illuminated. Nor is the primary focus ‘language’ in general (or ‘discourse’). It is concerned, first, with the means by which language matter is shaped into significant form, and the way the horizon of possible means sets the parameters for expressiveness.

With that said, the categories used above to articulate the problematic – such as ‘poetry’, ‘verse’, ‘composition’, ‘significant form’ – are challenged by the historical circumstances of the societies in question. A restricted focus on the poetic genres and techniques settled by Europeans would present a much distorted account of the materials in play. Therefore ‘poetic craft’ here must include consideration of materials from the full range of literacies and utterances in such societies as might be considered relevant to the study of poetics. This is not to suggest that materials should be approached sceptically as ‘texts’ without qualities: it could be part of the workshop’s task to raise the question of what it would be to attend to the ‘poetics’ of material that is not immediately recognisable as verse.3

We focus on poetry and poetics because, in its practice, decisions of craft are that much more concentrated and exposed. Speakers by no means need to adopt the premises of this proposal, which, necessarily, has been abstract and somewhat ahistorical. No doubt, inaccuracies will be found when

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3 A challenge that has begun to be answered in Australia by the recent Macquarie PEN anthologies of Australian Literature and Aboriginal Literature and, specifically in poetics, by Michael Farrell’s doctoral thesis, ‘Unsettlement: A New Reading of Australian Poetics’
addressing the specific circumstances and histories here being brought together. It may be that the decision to foreground the concept of ‘white settler’ only re-emphasises tendencies which have blinded criticism to the problematics of literary technique in the societies concerned. Debate and dissension from the terms of this proposal are thus encouraged. The concern, though, is with poetic craft and technique, and all speakers and participants are encouraged to discuss specific significant instances of craft decisions in particular poems (or material which benefits from a poetic reading), rather than to pitch their arguments solely in general conceptual or historical terms.