Mark Davis

Assaying the Essay
Fear and Loathing in the Literary Coteries

THE ESSAY WILL SAVE US. Well, that’s the impression you might get from the claims, implicit and direct, made for some of the books of essays published lately. According to Morag Fraser, her recent anthology, *Seams of Light: Best Antipodean Essays,* “is a set of essays on Wik, although I doubt that word is ever mentioned.” Peter Craven doesn’t “know why, in any technical or volitional sense *The Best Australian Essays, 1998* is preoccupied with history … perhaps it is what you would expect at a time in the last two years when Wik and Black Armbands and One Nations have raged all around us.” If Craven is concerned with what he describes as “the Aboriginal question”, then Robert Manne’s collection, *The Way We Live Now: the Controversies of the Nineties,* too, starts off with a number of essays on Australia’s Aboriginal history, including the standout ‘The Stolen Generations’, which is also included in Craven’s *Best Australian Essays.* And *Two Nations: The Causes and Effects of the Rise of the One Nation Party in Australia* (which includes a Foreword by Manne) devotes itself entirely to race relations.

The race question is raised throughout the Imre Salusinszky edited *Oxford Book of Australian Essays* – as you might expect in a collection tracing the English language history of a postcolonial nation – by writers from D.H. Deniehy to the underrated Archie Weller. But the question is there, too, in its contemporary incarnation – anxiety – in essays such as Robert Dessaix’s ‘Nice Work if You Can Get It’. Dessaix’s own collection, *And So Forth,* makes mention of Orientalism, Bruce Chatwin and Aboriginality in passing. Even two of the pieces in *Secrets,* an anthology put together by Drusilla Modjeska, Amanda Lohrey and Robert Dessaix, touch on race matters. Helen Garner’s *True Stories: Selected Non-Fiction* does the same in the sharply implicit politics of ‘Mr Tiarapu’ (which is republished in Fraser’s *Seams of Light*). And Les Murray’s *A Working Forest* broaches the topics of Aboriginality and ethnicity, including his own Scottish background.

Perhaps the journalist Luke Slattery was right when, reviewing Salusinszky’s *Oxford Book of Australian Essays,* he said that the essay, in its Australian incarnation, “has been too much a vehicle for the working through of the postcolonial conundrum”.

All these books appear at a time when interest in the essay is unprecedented, amidst much talk of revitalizing non-fiction as a genre that the nation somehow needs to complete itself, and amidst laments about the lack of popular forums here – local versions of *The Atlantic Monthly* or *The New Yorker* – to facilitate the development of the form. But will the essay save us? I don’t think so. Not in the form presented here. Though the reasons for this, paradoxically, don’t have much to do with any lack of quality among the essays in these collections. And Slattery,
as usual, is wrong. Or perhaps not so much wrong as wrong-headed, having overlooked the real contractual terms being applied in these recent re-engage ments with the ‘post-colonial conundrum’. Re-engage ments which, like many contracts, have silent conditions.


There’s symmetry here. If the essay won’t save us, it’s got something to do with the situation I wanted to outline in Gangland. What we are witnessing in these collections isn’t so much an attempt at saving a nation via an expression of concern about the fate of minorities (though it is that too), as an attempt to save a small and dwindling clique by seeking to demonstrate its ongoing relevance. It’s the last-ditch stand of coterie liberalism.

A clique? Coterie? You can see what I mean in the way these collections were reviewed. Garner’s True Stories was reviewed by Morag Fraser, Peter Steele and Peter Craven. Les Murray’s book was reviewed by Peter Craven. Modjeska, Lohrey and Dessai sax’s Secrets was reviewed by Morag Fraser and Peter Craven. Fraser’s Seams of Light was reviewed by Peter Craven and Luke Slattery. It contains essays by Robert Dessai sax, Helen Garner, Kerryn Goldsworthy, Les Murray, Barry Oakley and Peter Steele. The Oxford Book of Australian Essays was reviewed by Morag Fraser and Luke Slattery. It contains essays by Robert Dessai sax, Helen Garner, Kerryn Goldsworthy, Les Murray, Barry Oakley and Pierre Ryckmans. Craven’s Best Australian Essays 1998 was reviewed by Kerryn Goldsworthy, Barry Oakley and Peter Steele. It comprises many essays previously published in Quadrant during Robert Manne’s editorship and Eureka Street, edited by Fraser, and includes essays by Helen Gar ncer, Robert Manne, Drusilla Modjeska and Pierre Ryckmans. Dessai sax’s And So Forth was reviewed by Peter Craven and Morag Fraser. Simon Leys’ collection of essays, The Angel and the Octopus, was reviewed by Morag Fraser and Peter Steele.

This is a culture that clearly fears being forgotten. One that somehow needs to validate itself. Gangs at work.

If what’s going on here is a resurrection of the essay within the framework of a coterie liberalism that’s attempting to re-invent itself as a relevant social force, then clearly that’s not all that can be said about these collections. There are some very good essays here. Margaret Simons’ ‘The Press Gang’ in Best Australian Essays is a stunner, especially the opening. Peter Walker’s ‘Maori War’, Denis Byrne’s ‘Intramuros’s Return’ and Bill Cope’s ‘The Language of Forgetting’ shine in Seams of Light. It’s good to see essays like Arthur Phillips’ ‘The Cultural Cringe’ and Manning Clark’s ‘Rewriting Australian History’, to name two among many useful essays, in the same volume, as they are in the Oxford Collection. Reading A Working Forest I always seemed to be learning something, and I don’t mean that rudely. Murray, for all his reputation as a self-fashioned ‘redneck’, turns out to be among the most democratic of non-fiction writers. His tone is often of collaborative information sharing: ‘Some Religious Stuff I Know about Australia.’

But none of these collections is simply about the essays in them. They’re about the wider claims being made for the essay as a form. It’s as a result of such claims being made right now, as an apparent necessity of this particular moment, that this spate of books has appeared. They’re a phenomenon.

A clue to just what kind of phenomenon this anxious pouring evidences is in the criteria laid down. The definition of the essay at work here is distinctly European, with a hint of belles-lettres, almost in spite of Simons, Walker, Clark et al. Fraser begins her introduction to Seams of Light with reference to Matisse in a Paris winter, adopts a notion of Antipodean hybridisation for her sense of place, then books a ticket straight back to Europe and Montaigne for her sense of style, lauding his “zig-zag between self and subject, between interior rumination and the exterior world”. Craven tries for a wider, less conservative definition (trying to define the essay is an obsession for the multi-author anthologies among these collections), though he, too, nods in the direction of Montaigne. Yet despite this flirting with more adventurous definitions, belles-lettres still creeps in through the back door. There it is, in Robert Dessai sax, in Chris Wallace-Crabelle, in Peter Steele, all in Seams of Light: the genteel turn from content to aesthetics, from politics to emotion, from worldliness to mostly banal interiority: epiphany, it was once called. There it is in David Malouf, in Pierre Ryckmans, fleetingly in Inga Clendinnen, tragically in Don Watson, all in Best Australian Essays. Mostly replete with old-world liberal arts reference points: Agamemnon, Mahler, the Bloomsbury set, Victor Hugo, Don Quixote,
Byron, Poseidon’s Trident. In The Angel and the Octopus, Simon Leys (who is really Pierre Ryckmans writing under a pen-name) can barely make it through a page without genuflecting to some canonical European artistic figure. What does it mean, this turn from the political to the aesthetic, at a time when “Wik and Black Armbands and One Nations have raged all around us”? The syndrome is there, even, in Richard Flanagan’s indulgent ‘Tapping a Cracked Kettle’:

But I am unable to read on. As the dull light of a grey Melbourne morning begins to seep into the hotel room my volume of Blake slips to the floor beside my bed and there drapes itself over Whitman’s similarly fallen Leaves of Grass and my heavy eyes finally close.\(^4\)

There’s a clue here to what the broad aesthetic turn across these collections might mean. Flanagan, elsewhere in the above piece, tells people how to write (he warns against narcissism). Dessaix in And So Forth, is keen to pass on similar lessons (Garner, on the other hand, simply tells readers how she writes). Murray also provides the odd writing tip, which, like Dessaix’s, are mostly aimed at academics working in the new humanities. For all the possible scope of the Oxford Collection it’s surprising how many essays turn out to be about writing and literature: Deniehy, Sinnett, Kendall, Gilmore, Vance Palmer, Phillips, White, McAuley, Oakley, Wallace-Crabbie, Murray, Murnane, Weller (where are the sciences?). Salusinszky, here, appears to subscribe to the trad-lit idea that literature is at the moral centre of the modern world. This collection also contains quite a few essays about writing, literature and their relationship with the university: Brennan, Knopflmacher, Buckley, Garner, Dessaix, Jennings – in the contemporary essays among these the lesson is the same: beware the dead hand. The other multi-author collections also focus on literature: Malouf on Victor Hugo, Wallace-Crabbie on the Bloomsbury set, Ryckmans on Don Quixote, Flanagan on everyone from Pirandello to Borges. Peter Goldsworthy self-consciously trying to buy into the (I think tedious) culture versus nature debate with an essay on the biology of literature. Like the introductions to Fraser’s and Craven’s collections, or the how-to-write lessons of Dessaix and Murray, such essays evoke an academic world that is fast fading from view: the era, perhaps, of Frank Knopflmacher and Vincent Buckley, praised by Manne in his collection. It’s like peering through a frosted window to a conservative nostalgia-world, the world as it once was: fireside academia. This is the academy that would have been, perhaps, if the clocks of social science and identity politics had been stopped, magic boomerang-style, sometime in the mid-1970s.

Europe. The place where real culture comes from.

The impulse at work here, I take it, is political, even as politics is often the very thing being disavowed. For all the gesturing towards questions of race and ethnicity, something else is being made safe. Not only do these collections look to the authorizing culture of Europe in what are difficult times for Australian identity, the self, here, emerges as a place of possible refuge. It’s the very place, after all, where all that difficult worldly stuff seemingly can’t intrude: the last refuge of unambiguous knowledge. As Salusinszky has said of the selection criteria for his collection, “the familiar essay is intensely personal”, which is “why political, or republican, or monarchist, or religious polemics belong to another genre”.\(^5\) Well, that’s true, at least, if we’re speaking of the classical liberal self, the ‘essential’ self that these collections tend to valorize. The moral-indexing self of Garner or Manne; the reflective self of Steele, Wallace-Crabbie or Ryckmans; the vainglorious self, even, of Dessaix. The problem being, of course, that far from being self-evident, the way selves are constructed and the uses to which they are put is intensely political. The auto-validated Eurocentric self that understands high culture is precisely a product of the coterie liberal tradition. In Australia the members of such coteries set themselves up as a clerisy that speaks the common good, arbitrating on moral and aesthetic matters, self-licensed by their superior powers of discrimination and erudition.

But this sort of genuflection to Europe, this late in the day in a postcolonial nation, has political effects that apply to more than just the rumination, personal essays in these collections, and that are themselves a commentary on the limitations of coterie liberalism. Among the essays in these collections, Manne’s ‘The Stolen Generations’ is perhaps the most compelling, with its suggestion that the practice of removing Aboriginal children from their families may have constituted genocide, much like the Holocaust. In a spirit of collaboration with Manne let me add that the federal government’s present response to Bringing Them Home: The Stolen Generation’s Report, and its reasoning that the practice of child removal should be judged by the standards and ‘laws of the time’, quietly recalls Hermann Goering’s response to the post-Second World
War Nuremberg trials, when he argued that the actions of him and his fellow accused should be judged by the German laws they lived under at the time. This isn’t to suggest the Australian government are akin to Nazis – they aren’t themselves responsible for genocide, only a defense against a charge of genocide (well, not unless you include their and previous governments’ failure to act on Aborigi

nal deaths in custody). But it’s worth being reminded that protestations against charges of genocide tend to follow a pattern.

And yet, there’s still something about Manne’s essay that bothers me. As in so much of his writing, Manne’s argument in ‘The Stolen Generations’ proceeds through occasional yet necessary reference to the Holocaust. Yet, for all the lessons of the Holocaust, part of me still asks, why Europe? In ‘The Stolen Generations’ Manne says that in his “thinking on the question of genocide certain concepts of Hannah Arendt in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* have been central…for her the crime of genocide is committed when one group decides that another group is unfit to inhabit the earth and takes action to eliminate them”.

Manne supplements this with Raimond Gaita’s idea that genocide need not involve ‘murderous means’, but seems limited by Arendt’s definition when it comes to thinking of socio-cultural assimilation as genocide – an idea Manne rejects. But admitting this last thing, it seems to me, is essential to any true understanding of what has happened, and continues to happen, to many Aboriginal peoples. Such an admission – that cultural genocide is real genocide – can be reached only by compassing the distinctiveness of Aboriginal cultures, and by acknowledging that instances of genocide each have specific characteristics, and that locally such genocide doesn’t only involve lives lost and peoples dispersed, it involves the dispossession of entire languages, cultures and lands. One danger of Eurocentric models of genocide is that by neglecting the possibility of a culture where life and land are inextricably linked, they potentially limit our ability to perceive present injustices.

Given the Wik-related claims made by some of the editors of these collections, it’s also worth recalling Veronica Strang’s line on the Europeanization of Australian culture in her recent *Uncommon Ground: Cultural Landscapes and Environmental Values*. Describing the colonization of Northern Queensland by pastoralists, she says “they rode into the Gulf country on the momentum of modern Europe”. There’s an obvious warning here about the dangers of European high intellectual culture as an imperial apparatus. It, too, thrived by learning to speak for others, which is in part where the machinery of high liberalism developed.

The exercising of what T.S. Eliot called the ‘European mind’ might also be seen in Dessai

x’s lionization of liberal-arts pin-up boy Bruce Chatwin in *And So Forth*. Chatwin the hand of tolerance. Chatwin the understander of Aboriginal spirituality. This, the Chatwin of *The Songlines*, is a ‘package’ that Dessai

x confesses to finding ‘irresistible’.

But as the writer Ruth Brown has shown, Chatwin’s ideas about an ideal marriage between (spiritual) Aborigines and (cultured) Europeans, while (racist) Australians are pushed to the side is not only Eurocentric, it conveniently ignores that Europeans dispossessed Aborigines in the first place. Chatwin’s view of Aborigines as primarily ‘spiritual’ is precisely the stereotype that was used to further these same colonial ends – they aren’t practical, lack utility, are childlike and unable to conduct their own affairs.

As Murray says in *A Working Forest*, “We aren’t Europeans any longer: some of us never were”. But there’s little evidence in *A Working Forest* to suggest that Murray understands that a truly democratic embrace of race issues involves changing the very structure of public institutions. The people and agencies involved in making those changes are the very things that he, like Dessai

x, seems most determined to resist.

All these assumptions about who the bearers of real cultural knowledge are have other unfortunate effects. For all the excellent essays in anthologies such as *Two Nations*, *Seams of Light* and *Best Australian Essays*, where are the non-white voices? Where are the Asian voices? Apart from Brian Castro’s ‘Auto/biography’ in *Seams of Light*, silence reigns. Where, even, after decades and decades of immigration, are all the
southern European voices? But how is it that in the three collections here that claim to deal with Wik in some way, there isn’t a single Aboriginal voice? Not one, among sixty-five essays. And why is it that those present in these three collections are the same old voices (a couple of token ‘yoo’ aside) who have been sponsored by newspapers, journals and publishers to speak for so long? What kinds of editing instincts are at work here? What is it here, finally, that is being preserved? Is it a speaking position – the tolerant benefactor?

The very criteria set up by editors and some contributors to these collections appear to foment such lapses. If contributors to *Seams of Light* were chosen for their insight into “how may we live together” so that the essays might “give some account of these cauldron years we are living through”, and given that there are no Aboriginal voices present, it seems that despite good intentions, representativeness, here, still means ‘speaking for’ people using only those voices already legitimized by the aesthetic framework Fraser sets up in her introduction. This aesthetic is already ideological in so far as it privileges the values and ‘tastes’ of a particular class, defining the essay accordingly. This tends to mean (but doesn’t always mean) that Aboriginal writing falls at the first hurdle, viz: ungrammatical/ unbeautiful/incoherent/directly biographical (as opposed to abstractly personal). Aboriginal peoples are descendants of many languages. They aren’t likely, however, to be ‘Montaigne’s descendants’.

As Dessaix suggests in ‘Nice Work If You Can Get It’, republished in the Oxford *Collection*, to be taken seriously, writers of non-English-speaking background should make sure their English (or their translator’s) is “as inventive, as playful, as historically conscious, as good as a native’s” before joining in the “conversations already taking place in the country they’ve arrived in”. By ‘native’, I take it Dessaix doesn’t mean Aboriginal.

The voice that no-one wants to hear here is the voice out of season. The voice that might come crashing in on all this. It’s perhaps fitting that the *imjim* totem figures Dessaix discovers in *Secrets* have no mouth, given that in the entire piece only one Aboriginal briefly speaks (to pass on culinary advice – the old multicultural token). In keeping with the first two sections of his piece, one of which deals with ancient Egypt, the other with ancient Greece, everything here is covered with the lustre of the past, as if Aboriginal civilization, too, is long gone.

This is where Slattery’s analysis comes unstuck. If there’s any working through here of the ‘post-colonial conundrum’, then its terms are strictly limited. Nostalgia for a certain aesthetic style and the extended apparatus of coterie logic that goes with it are among the very criteria that tend to limit such debate. Sometimes, even, this coterie logic is enacted almost against the arguments offered in particular essays, without apparent irony. As Bill Cope says in ‘The Language of Forgetting’, in *Seams of Light*: “Liberal sensitivity to difference is a white lie… Difference and sensitivity are nicer than the way things used to be done – a kinder, gentler, white liberal racism”.

But to claim that the essay has fallen into abeyance as a form, and to campaign to resurrect it – to proselytize it not only through endless editorials, but through endless reviews from within the same relatively small clique – is only possible if one has already demonstrated another, quite different kind of blindness.

The international trade in essays now is academic. It’s only possible to pretend that the essay has fallen into decline as a form by equally pretending that academics haven’t turned the essay into a multi-million dollar global industry. Or by ignoring the fact that academic publishers such as Routledge have, in the space of a decade, become multi-million dollar global conglomerates. Or by failing to acknowledge that academic theorists such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Foucault, are now available in mass-market Penguin editions. The essay is in an unprecedented boom period, yet all the definitions of the essay offered in the above reviews and editorials seem designed almost specifically to exclude the contemporary academic essay as a way of justifying this blindness. Even if it’s no longer necessary to mention Foucault’s given name, so much has he become part of the contemporary furniture. Even if the sorts of (independent) bookshops that might stock coterie collections of essays usually have a large and growing literary theory section. Even if books by some of the very academics derided as cloistered by the editors of these collections have sold well over 50,000 copies to an international audience. Even if few of the supposedly mainstream local essay collections sold well, or found a wide public. It’s no longer enough, either, to complain about academic prose (but then, the traditional liberal arts have always reserved the right to judge their writing by the best and the academy by its worst). The old guard of essayists might like to pretend this is still 1985, and that their clarity, therefore, has no peer. In some cases...
It's still true – set aside an afternoon before tackling more than three pages of Judith Butler. But Sedgwick and others, such as Greil Marcus and Andrew Ross, write like a dream. Marcus, whose *Lipstick Traces* is a contemporary classic, recently had a piece nominated among the one hundred top pieces of this century's non-fiction writing.

It’s like watching the inhabitants of a small but very industrious village go about their business of, say, building a wagon, oblivious to the fact that a very large and heavily trafficked freeway passes almost directly overhead.

Despite all the variations across the range of these recent collections, the single defining characteristic that almost all of them share is animus against the contemporary humanities. If it’s not Salusinszky talking about academic intellectuals disappearing up their ‘discursive formation’ (despite his own academic affiliations – in this respect he appears to be working in a long Australian tradition: academic self-loathing), it’s Murray wagging his finger at “a cabal that rules the intellectual life of the nation, promoting a received sensibility … cracking the whip for an agenda of causes and social attitudes”.

Or Garner describing academic feminists as “feminism’s grimmer tribes.” Or Manne expressing the ‘dismay’ he would have felt had he discovered a history of the Holocaust in Latvia had been written by a Derrida scholar. Or Craven pretending he got to Foucault first, and is done with all that. Or Fraser praising Montaigne’s amateurism as she valorizes those forms of essay written outside professional, indeed, pedagogical contexts. Dessaix’s work is full of small asides against academic ‘culture doctors’. “Even as you read these lines, they’re out there”, he warns. It seems to be the stuff that keeps his self-definition going, and in this respect his work is emblematic of these collections. These attacks, clearly, are one of the ways this dwindling ecology sustains itself, makes itself real. This is the way the 1950s world seen through the frosted window is kept whole and available. But if what emerges here is simply a kind of chauvinism, where definitions are contrived to suit certain ends, then this chauvinism, too, can be measured by absences. Where, in the multi-author anthologies, are writers such as John Frow, Sylvia Lawson or Meaghan Morris? Have they not made a contribution to wider cultural life?

If this might seem to be simply a defence of the academy, then my point is deeper than that (clearly the academy doesn’t have all the answers either). What these collections also share is a failure to notice changes in public space, and the way it operates. To put it bluntly, ‘others’, now, demand to speak for themselves. If the speaking positions taken up in these collections tend to evidence the old (monocultural) logic of centralized meaning at work, then they also hark back to the day, not too long past, when culture was vertically integrated and high culture was an end in itself, making available speaking positions with in-built, readily identifiable clout. Culture, though, is increasingly horizontally integrated, and appeals to meaning that rely on a high–low culture hierarchy are struggling for relevance in an era notable for the sheer number and variety of groups who claim to produce distinctive cultural meaning, as well as for the increasing variety of forums used. This isn’t to say that the old forms can simply be declared ‘dead’ – but nor do they have automatic force.

Rear-guard actions, though, have a habit of getting nasty. The essays and writers who are most valorized in this little star system (for that is what it is: check out the style of photo, for instance, that graces Dessaix, Garner, Manne and Murray’s books; proud yet wise in an era that cries out for seers) tend to suffer the ‘nineties disease’. They hold to the idea that those who speak out against ‘political correctness’ are proud ‘dissenters’ (despite the fact that everyone’s doing it), that such people run the risk of being censored by ‘thought police’ and becoming the victim of conspiracies of ‘organized opinion’ (despite their own high media profiles), but who nevertheless claim to be Clarion voices, whose business it is to announce some ‘expose’ of excess and scandal in a given area – feminism and multiculturalism are favourites (having systematically overlooked the self-critique that goes on within the field, whilst exploiting the fact that its on-the-ground exponents are unlikely to get mainstream media space to put a counter-view).
An effect of such criticisms is to pretend that energy for social change comes primarily from within the academy (if only), and is containable.

Yet it’s this very syndrome – the nineties disease – which, finally, mars A Working Forest, which is otherwise an eclectic and interesting read. Garner’s ‘The Fate of The First Stone’ is already looking like a relic, a leftover from the culture wars: a period piece that stands out as by far the weakest in True Stories, because the story it offers up of the writer as victim of ‘political correctness’ is already a nineties cliché: it otherwise lacks the undercurrents of other pieces in the anthology and tells nothing new. Yet there it is, published in two of these collections. Dessai’s ‘Nice Work if You Can Get It’ with its polemising about what might happen if state sponsored multiculturalism were abandoned (equality), with its digs at grants some non-Anglo ethnics are eligible for, its underlying logic of assimilation, and its assumption that only one cultural conversation is valid, has turned out to be little more than a forerunner of what was to follow in the race debate. Dessai is high in this star system: he graces four of these collections. Is this really what it takes?

Reading Dessai on how academics “lock writers into categories they have willed into existence in the first place” (multiculturalism) and how “the losers, as always, are the patients [multicultural writers],” I was reminded of another piece of writing:

The indigenous people of this country are as much responsible for their actions as any other colour or race in this country. The problem is that politicians in all their profound wisdom have and are causing a racism problem... until governments wake up to themselves and start looking at equality not colour then we might start to work together as one.

I think it’s safe to assume Dessai is no supporter of the person who made this second remark – Pauline Hanson in a letter to the Queensland Times. And let me immediately stress that in no way am I suggesting Dessai or his work are racist, or that either in any way manifest the kind of race-hatred and ignorance that I believe animates Pauline Hanson’s One Nation Party. But the similarities in logic are an uncomfortable reminder of how tied up sections of the cultural establishment have become in equality fundamentalism, with their own attacks on the ‘elite establishment’ of the social sciences, and through their own nostalgia for straightforward empiricism as the way of know-

ing. One function of what remains of the high–low culture hierarchy as a structuring device in public space, though, has been to shield the work of those who take the high culture road from this sort of comparison. It looks like blasphemy.

Would it be blasphemy too, to suggest that the version of the essay on offer here is primarily nostalgic for a culture where ‘literature’ still ruled as the form of moral knowledge, and that this form of cultural nostalgia, even as it fights against Hansonism and claims to offer something on Wik (offers which, I think, are sincere and often useful), is nevertheless making similar assumptions to Hansonism on the real origins of meaning and culture?

What the ideology of the essay form being brought into play here by the editors and publishers of these collections (but, as I’ve said, not necessarily by their individual contributors) does, finally, is ask contemporary criticism to give up its arms. It wants a muted, quietist criticism; not a complex, difficult criticism. One that can’t do anything. One that, most of all, doesn’t talk about difference. It’s time to get back to essentials, such voices argue; to the things that derail ideologies (Eros, direct experience in the form of “less Foucault and... more foreign travel”[29]. Pinker’s language theory – take your pick). This is where the writing lessons offered by so many of these collections come on stream. In And So Forth, for example, Dessai conducts a discussion on open and closed writing as if he were the Truer Democrat – the archetypal open writer. His bogey, of course, is the standard academic straw man. Yet even as he teaches “letting the reader in”, his own message about what happens to those who don’t (you turn into an authoritarian academic) couldn’t be sterner. In a wincing instance of false humility Dessai offers what is in fact a clerical lesson; a pedagogy no less authoritarian than a high-church sermon, complete with moral – but the irony seems lost on him.

Manne achieves something similar with his proposal that academics should give up talking about ‘moral panic’ at the same time as conservatives give up talking about ‘political correctness’. As a piece of reasoning, it’s not very clever. What he’s passing up here isn’t simply an opportunity to think about the difference between the two – the latter is a populist media product, the former a product of decades of detailed and systematic research – but Manne not only quietly erases this distinction with his formalist, indeed, relativist approach, he also gives up an opportunity to speak about what happens when issues such as
feminism, race or youth crime enter the mainstream public sphere.

In fact the wonder of these books is that they tell so little about the present. Where is the stuff on biotechnology, cyber-being, digitization, or the melding of life with technology? Everything here takes place in the old modernist world, where the twin spheres of production are simply culture and nature, man and the world, functioning as discrete entities. It’s the old existential-psychological ‘man’ of moral tendencies, not the ‘man’ of blurred subjectivities, that we find here. The Human Genome Project might be changing life before our very eyes – and the definition of life with it – but you wouldn’t know it to read these collections.

But will the essay save us? Certainly not in this form. Not while the old wrongs are still being practised, in ever more secret, quietly nostalgic ways. Which isn’t to say that watching these books being published and being party to their presence, isn’t to have witnessed a distinctive historical moment.

ENDNOTES

25. Murray, p. 185.
28. ibid.
29. Pauline Hanson, letter to editor, Queensland Times, 6 January 1996.

Mark Davis is the author of Gangland and is a PhD student in the English Department at the University of Melbourne.
Author/s: DAVIS, MARK

Title: Assaying the essay: fear and loathing in the literary coteries

Date: 1999

Citation: Davis, M. (1999). Assaying the essay: fear and loathing in the literary coteries. Overland, (156), 3-10.

Publication Status: Published

Persistent Link: http://hdl.handle.net/11343/34132

File Description: Assaying the essay: fear and loathing in the literary coteries

Terms and Conditions: Terms and Conditions: Copyright in works deposited in Minerva Access is retained by the copyright owner. The work may not be altered without permission from the copyright owner. Readers may only download, print and save electronic copies of whole works for their own personal non-commercial use. Any use that exceeds these limits requires permission from the copyright owner. Attribution is essential when quoting or paraphrasing from these works.