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Title:
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Date:
2021

Citation:
Clemens, J. (2021). Space, Place, Materiality in Contemporary Australian Poetry. Disney, D (Ed.). Hall, M (Ed.). *New Directions in Contemporary Australian Poetry*, (1), pp.145-157. Springer International Publishing.

Persistent Link:
<https://hdl.handle.net/11343/290666>

Space, Place, Materiality in Contemporary Australian Poetry

Justin Clemens

A “fringed Violet” by any other name would smell as

Where? What? Who? Why? Questions without answers provoke problems without solutions. The accompanying affect is anxiety: all reliable signposts are stripped away. Perhaps once one — who? — could have written authoritatively upon ‘contemporary Australian poetry.’ Lists would have been drawn up; names would have been named; descriptions would have been given; judgements would have been made; prizes would have been awarded. Perhaps these operations would also have been contested: after all, there is no polity without division or contestation, and even the most rigid of proper names cannot always guarantee that it denominates a stable or unique identity, not even an *id-ENTITY* if you — who? — will pardon the pun. Yet perhaps one — who? — could still have delineated persons and poems, structures and histories, zones of relative consistency or coherence. The world would have been shared — even if divided. Perhaps one once had a context, a corpus, a canon upon which we — who? — could have dis/agreed. If so, when was it? Where was it? What became of it? And why? Anxiety turns melancholic: a consciousness of loss, even before knowing what has been lost; perhaps without even being able to know what was lost; perhaps even if there was no real loss in the first place.

Almost exactly two hundred years ago the supreme legal officer in the British Colony of New South Wales — the improbably named Barron Field — published the first book of poetry in this country. The book was printed: that is, on paper; that is, with ink; that is, by movable type. The book was called, precisely, *First Fruits of Australian Poetry* (Field 1819). It contained two poems: ‘Botany-Bay Flowers’ and ‘The Kangaroo.’ One — who? — might note that these subjects are classic *topoi* of Australian verse, warrants of local singularity. Locality and singularity were of critical importance for Field who, in addition to his official position, had an interest in colonial science and in literary criticism (see Field 1825). Colonialism-law-science-poetry — all practices integrally concerned with *naming*. Naming is at stake, front and centre — in fact, naming *is* a stake. Claims are staked; fences are staked; private property is at stake. Field’s poems are obsessed with naming: who does it; how they do it; why they do it; what the consequences are of doing it, etc. The situation expressly concerns: colonial nomenclature, the appropriation of others’ territory; English law and language, which confront a largely unexplored and utterly unfamiliar topography; a civilizational heritage, older and larger than the English alone, supposedly stemming back at least to the Roman Empire; botany, the scientific discipline which gives to plants names of botanists with Latin endings. Naming as appropriation; naming as division; naming as knowledge; naming as founding. In Australia, however, Field knows it doesn’t quite work.

For colonialism, however, nominal failure is not a disaster but a goad. Field was perhaps the first person ever to rhyme ‘Australia’ with ‘failure,’ as he does in the second poem, ‘The Kangaroo,’ and his uses of

the toponym ‘Australia’ and its cognates in this book, from the title onwards, have sometimes even been alleged the first ever in verse (Brooks 2017; but see Robinson 1946, p. 55). The colony was then ‘New South Wales’; most people referred to the landmass as ‘New Holland,’ and would do so until at least the 1830s; *Terra Australis Incognita* had been the ancient Latin nomination. Field was also the first known formal promulgator of the doctrine of *terra nullius* (see Banner 2005; for the connections between Field’s literary and legal inventions, see Clemens 2018; Clemens 2019; Ford and Clemens 2019), despite his awareness of the priority and occupancy of the Indigenous peoples (see the papers in Field 1825; Higgins 2010). The act of nomination is military, scientific, legal and literary at once. Yet the local objects themselves object. If they can be grasped at all, it is as satire literally *realized*: the ancient Latin trope of the ‘black swan’ as impossible oxymoron is simply a fact in Australia.

Concerned with establishing British settlement by scriptural legal fiat and memorials in hard and durable materials, Field added four poems to the second edition of *First Fruits* (1823), none of which share the demented energies, material derangements or formal irregularities of the initial volume. On the contrary, Field returns to familiar modes, notably the lofty tones of iambic pentameter. Two of the additional poems are strict sonnets, that is, in a most familiar and established European form; these sonnets, moreover, engage the problem of establishing a glorious English future in the colony. Field simultaneously holds a narrative of invasion and the doctrine of *terra nullius* — which is, in his own terms, a contradiction — not only because he embodies the structural hypocrisy of the opportunistic British colonial judge, but because he believes that the Common Law cannot implant itself on foreign land by technical violence alone. Without the dangerous supplement of a marker of a real historical incident, accompanied by idealizing versification, the Law cannot hold. In the sonnets, the death and Christian burial of a freeborn Englishman’s body at the site of Cook’s landing is memorialized with a brass plaque in order for settlement to proceed with a *spiritual* justification.

Then Not Now What

The point is not merely historical, but structural and exemplary. ‘Australian Poetry’ — at least as it stems from this *pater fabulae* — retained the same key determinations for nearly two centuries. As enumerated, these include: English language, printed matter, codex form, indicatively masculine and Anglo-Celtic, Romantic in inspiration and execution, if with the peculiarly local twist that doubles down on the supposed nothingness of poetry with the enforced nothing of its occupied terrain. The body, the grave, and the tablet (of law) presented in the formed breath of the poem provide its ultimate materials. The Romantic paradoxes of colonial nomination remained primary, acknowledged by all the authoritative synthetic accounts and histories of Oz Po (e.g. see Kane 1996, 5; for an earlier announcement of this situation, see Heseltine 1962). Virulent Romanticism doubles down on an originary lack: melancholia and anxiety are accordingly its key affects, inscribed in the dissimulating symptoms of colonial settlement.

Certainly, there were countervailing movements. One — who? — might think here of a range of poets and practices. Take the *boutades* of the hoax poet Ern Malley, still outrageous and unsettling today, created in a situation in which the Australian population was 98% Anglo-Celtic (see Heyward 1993). Take Judith Wright, whose environmental and human rights interests — her recognition of the deleterious effects of colonialism upon Indigenous Australians and upon the natural world — led her to various non-English traditions in an attempt to circumvent and displace received verities of Australian verse. Take Jas H. Duke, whose experiments with sound and sense drew on European avant-gardist groups like Dada, and who translated work from French and Eastern European modernists. Take Oodgeroo Noonuccal — originally publishing under her ‘colonial name’ of Kath Walker — who became the first attested Indigenous Australian to publish a book of poetry, the bestselling *We Are Going* (1964). And there are very many poets who have impressed themselves and their visions of space and place upon the corpus of *Australian Poetry*, e.g., Robert Adamson (the Hawkesbury), Pam Brown, John Forbes, Dorothy Porter, Gig Ryan and PiO (who all give very different versions of an inner-urban Sydney and Melbourne), Jennifer Maiden (deracinated post-industrial sites and media), John Kinsella (Western Australia pastoral), and the recently deceased Les Murray (Bunyah).

Yet Romanticism remained ascendant, not least because Romanticism is a highly experimental and mobile phenomenon which takes contradictions as its bread and butter, and restlessly seeks to go beyond or transgress its own formal and material limits — but also because Romanticism in Australia is essentially integrated with the colonial state form and its institutions of education, publication, and policing. As Evelyn Araluen has recently put it: ‘If Aboriginal presence is considered in such work, it is a representation predominantly concerned with symbols of atavistic inconvenience to the colonial project, charged with psychic significance in the symbolic evocation of a ghostly spectre haunting land lost to Aboriginal people, but which ultimately clears space for the discovery and cultivation of that land by the appropriate settler’ (Araluen 2019). It is thus not a critique of the quality or inventiveness of Australian poetry from at least 1788 until approximately 2001 to say that it remained ‘a barren field indeed!’ (as one anonymous wag exclaimed), even as it produced many lush flowers of local rhetoric.

Today this foundational settlement is in the course of its irreversible displacement.

Decolonizing Multiplicities Indigenous Renaissances

Why? There are obviously many entangled and overdetermined reasons, but three key rubrics might be the internet, the environment, and biopolitics. The first indicates ubiquitous computing, global real-time connectedness, and the devaluing of the nation state as the primary fiscal and political agency of subjective identification and resource distribution. The second indicates the integration of ‘nature’ into a global economy, diagnoses of a brewing planetary catastrophe for many if not most higher life forms, and the resolute struggle to ignore, deny or repress this knowledge. The third indicates the absorption of life

at the level of mass populations and species into political and territorial calculations, driving interventions at unprecedented levels of command and control. With these phenomena comes an interest in the *materiality* of deracinated algorithms and codes, in their effects upon so-called ‘natural languages,’ and in the ‘natures’ into which they intervene.

Hence the strong homophonic strain in contemporary Australian poetry, where the materiality of the signifier itself is decomposed and reconstituted according to translingual punning, destandardized punctuation and experimental algorithms (see for example Biarujia 2016; Edwards 2011; Fitch 2018; Farrell 2017; Hecq 2009). Although there is a kind of Oulipean/Joycean aspect to much of this work, its new powers in the current situation derive not only from a now-globalized high modernist literature, but also from the enforced attentiveness to all aspects of materiality that digital technologies entail. The work of Mez Breeze is perhaps most revelatory in this context. Since the 1990s, Breeze been developing what she usually calls ‘mezengelles’ (confounding mez, mess, angles, angels..., etc.), proliferating avatars and heteronyms as she goes: Pass Parvenu, Ms Corruption, Mez Mangles, GoddessAeon, among others. Her reuptake of signs from computer coding — Breeze is also a game designer (see <http://mezbreezedesign.com/>) — brings to presentation the relation between language, code, signs, and effects, and where the gaps between software and display, wetware and hardware, the actual and the virtual, are staged and repurposed. Take the following (Breeze nd):

Real_Time_"1sts!" [or: PanoptiConned Imagery From The Scene]

06:30pm 19/04/2013

EDIT 11:26 EST: A photo of the alleged [double_plus_karma].

EDIT 11:27 EST: A XXXX Male in all black clothing ["first!" "i'm first!"].

EDIT 11:32 EST: XXXXX just reported the shots. No new info there [gamification of criminal activity on a MMO scale].

EDIT 11:33 EST: There was a XXXXX at a near by XXXX (XXXXX Skin XXXXX Male 5'11" 200lbs, black top). Could be related? [follow the yellow_brick_rabbit_hole].

EDIT 11:40 EST: XXXXXX reported on the ground screaming/crying. XXXXX that was with her just walked away. [Puppet(masta+mi)Stressing_while Boston_burns].

EDIT 11:42 EST: Image from the scene. Warning blood.

[warning:_panoptiConned_+cRowd(y)_sourced_lynchm(sn)obbery].

Read 2 – Post

One will immediately note the simulation of code, of time-marked electronic messaging, of the deployment of forms, neologisms, punctuation marks and acronyms that are today ubiquitous with computing (e.g., ‘gamification,’ ‘_’ ‘MMO’ Massively Multiplayer Online video games). The mezengelle,

moreover, pinpoints a specific event: the globally circulating images of an alleged suspect in the Boston Marathon bombing of 15 April 2013, where two home-made bombs were detonated near the finish-line, killing 3 people and wounding more than 250 others. On 19 April, Boston was in lockdown as the police undertook door-to-door searches for the suspects; there were many false sightings and reports. Jeremy Bentham's model for a surveillance system, the 'Panopticon' — famously revived for recent research by Michel Foucault (Foucault 1979) — is here merged with CCTV and online reportage of the manhunt.

As she picks out contemporary phenomena of global political importance (sporting events, transnational terrorism, real-time gaming, etc.), Breeze alludes to primal literary phenomena. Barbara Cassin, speaking the creation of the word 'den' by Democritus, shows how this reflexive word is generated by a complex conceptual operation deploying forms of linguistic negation: 'A signifier fabricated by means of an atopic cut in the writing of a subjective modal negation' (Cassin 2012). Such words are not-words and yet are also not-not-words — with respect to the *particular* language for which *they do not exist*. Breeze thereby contributes to a kind of contemporary Feminist Gothic, conjuring poetic monsters from the apparently purely technical demands of code (Benjamin 2018).

Or take Astrid Lorange's 'Ex.' The title is itself the nominalization of a prefix, that is, of a particle denoting a form of relation, here used to denote the status of the loss of a defining relation, that is, of a partner or lover (or indeed some other kind of intimate other). This inverts the standard usage: one often calls the other 'my ex,' whereas here 'I' has become the ex or an ex. Since this inversion also confuses the relation between definite and indefinite articles, we end up with a strange melange of the one-multiple and a switching of time and substance. The puns proliferate: Lex, Hex, Mex, Sex, and, algebraically, $x = ?$ Breaking up is also an algebra problem because one becomes un-known to oneself in the loss of such a defining relation, and this unknown directs us towards the problem of the molecularities of vanished-yet-abiding relations. *Ex* is a relation to a departed relation: gone, only not entirely. The governing metaphor is biochemical: 'When I wipe on pheromones/I get a sense of what's not my/body...'. The word *pheromone* combines *phero* (to carry) and *hormone* (a stimulus). A pheromone is an ecto-hormone, which biologists taxonomize as aggregative (i.e., sex/feeding hormones, which can be attraction but also castration); alarming (e.g. a warning to others); territorial (i.e., marking boundaries); epideictic (e.g., declamatory); and priming (i.e., triggering concatenations of neurological events). Apparently pheromones are the oldest phylogenetic system shared by all organisms, including bacteria; they may have been repurposed for endo-messages through interiorization of a prior relation to an *ex*. At the origin of the human affect system, such epidemiological and molecular chemical messaging renders the face or person no longer the primary or dominating function of ethics. Lorange thus proposes *pheromenology* as a semiochemical radicalization of phenomenology.

Ex-poetics or exopoetics: the art previously known as poetry, that is, at once outside-poetry and the art-formerly-known-as-poetry.

One extreme epitome of radical material questioning is Amy Ireland, proponent of ‘xenopoetics’ and key member of *Laboria Cuboniks*, an accelerationist feminist collective dedicating themselves to a techno-supersession of patriarchy. *Xenos* in Ancient Greek compacted a bundle of antithetical significations, including stranger, guest, host, enemy and friend. For Ireland, the ‘xenos’ above all designates an ‘outside’ of experience that can never be given within experience; to the extent, then, that this outside can manifest itself at all, it is in limit phenomena that cannot be reduced to packets of space-time, to clear and distinct lineations, or to any stable concepts. As a result, ‘technological excruciation, structural porosity, corrupted authorship, numerical incursion, inauthenticity, encryption, temporal leakage, formal horror, perverse topologies... these things all have their place in a xenopoetic arsenal’ (Carruthers and Ireland 2016, 94; see also Britts et al. 2016). Ireland’s ongoing ‘Bouequets’ are exemplary of her practice. *Boue* is mud in French, which exploits the homophony with *bouquet* — mixing the muck and the roots back in with the flowers. The *bouequets* typically take an original text, perhaps lines from Stéphane Mallarmé’s *Crise de vers*, which are then homophonically broken down into component sounds; these sounds are transcribed into the International Phonetic Alphabet; the phonemes thus created are thereafter modelled in Computer Aided Design (CAD) into 3-dimensional forms; these forms are then 3-d printed and reassembled into an aggregated construction about the size of the head of a rose (see Ireland 2016). They thereafter function as *objets d’art* or as mnemonic-spectacular performance aids: Ireland, for instance, can rotate the *bouequet* in her hands, singing out the phonemes as she feels their prickling on her fingertips. ‘Only extreme poetic experience,’ Ireland remarks, ‘that which disturbs our spontaneous sense of scale, chronology, complexity, and the desire to be entertained, replacing it with the vertigo of personal cosmic inappropriateness — is capable of delivering true exhilaration’ (Carruthers and Ireland 2016, 108). Mezengelle, Exopoetics, Xenopoetics — these neologisms denote ways in which contemporary Australian poetry meets the material challenges of our time, at once in excess of, or other than, ‘traditional’ forms of poetry. The context and corpus are not nationalist, but linked to new media technologies, to the chemistry of the trans-human body, or to concatenated derangements of poetic identities through linguistic dis-placement.

Perhaps the most extraordinary poetry in the current context comes from what is now sometimes called ‘the Aboriginal Literary Renaissance.’ First and foremost, the Indigenous peoples of Australia constitute by far the longest continuously existing civilizations on the entire planet; second, these civilizations forged unique relations to the country; third, these civilizations were disrupted by colonialism, where terra nullius became the fundamental British legal mechanism that foreclosed the Indigenous peoples from any belonging with their land, let alone as colonial subjects or citizens; fourth, this foreclosure simultaneously created ‘Aboriginals’ as a ‘single’ ‘race’ by attempting to erase tribal differences and languages, and

imposing English as the sole lingua franca across the continent; fifth, consequently Indigenous people still suffer the most extreme indignities of colonial state power, including the highest incarceration rates on earth, as well as lower life and health indices than all other Australian demographics; sixth, this foreclosure-by-invasion necessarily places Indigenous issues at the real and symbolic centre of *all* political and constitutional matters in this country. Taken together, such features mark a uniquely acute event in global imperialism. Moreover, as Michael Dodson put it: ‘Indigenous peoples have rarely come into a genuine relationship with non-Indigenous peoples, because a relationship requires two, not just one and its mirror. Our subjectivities, our aspirations, our ways of seeing and our languages have largely been excluded from the equation, as the colonizing culture plays with itself’ (Dodson 2003, 37).

It is such colonial figurations that this poetry contests (e.g., see Araluen 2018, Birch 2016, Fogarty 2017, Eckermann 2015, Harkin 2015, Leane 2018, Neerven 2017, Watson 2004, Whittaker 2018). Space and place are given matter through sovereign relation to country; the materiality of all other languages, not only English but all other immigrant tongues, are interrupted, delimited and pluralized by the mobilisation of tribal languages (e.g., AustList 2019 ‘BlackWords’ archive; Saunders 2019); figures and images without precedent emerge in the verse. No other subject or identity positions are capable of a comparable authority, in which poetry and politics, language and country, are fused in their refusal of imposed state forms. One strong line of this refusal involves a deconstruction of the operations of colonial archives (see Harkin 2015; Birch 2016). Here bureaucracy as a placeless place of surveillance, expropriation, inscription, and storage is put into question through the re-citation of its own historical operations. Simultaneously, we find the reconstruction of voices and singularities of times and places beyond the closures of settlement. Take Lionel Fogarty’s ‘Reviving Forms or Statics’:

Tell us your thought patterns
of desire in realities
Tell me the aboriginal lover
you’ve inherited
Tell us country and western
views on sanctions on
contemporary aboriginal songs
sadness lenses my defiance
anger curves my refashioning
My aboriginal life is dynamic
your static is in British Isles
Our heroes are those here
traditionally adapting
our heroes are those traditions

that stand with solidarity
your 'terra nullius' of this land
is primitive savage and ignorant
I will tell images of time
we will tell images of places.... (Fogarty 2017, 154).

In Ali Alizadeh's words, Fogarty 'ruptures pre-existing, multicultural notions of a postcolonial poetics by activating an unsettling, and anti-representative, subjectivity' (Alizadeh 2013, 130). Fogarty's work is at once radically experimental and immemorially ancient.

Non Sum New Mornings

A moment to conclude: contemporary Australian poetry expressly breaks with the legal and poetic foundations of post-1788 Australia, deranging space, place and materiality in doing so. It is no longer the materiality of the grave or the tablet, the book or the single proper name, not the projection of a colonial unity 'Australia' that is primarily at stake, but the multimediatic construction of new kinds of bodies, of collectives, of presentations, that are at once inter- and trans-lingual (Mead 2008). The structural affects are no longer predominantly anxiety and melancholy — but rage, shame, and joy. The multiplicities of communities, modes, means, and media often no longer even have any reference to the state and its nominations. We — who? — can no longer be assured of stable context, corpus, creators, or canon. Among the poetic consequences of such an event is the becoming-unsettled of inherited operations of transmission and evaluation too. Such is *-poetry*: a precarious placemaking-beyond-judgement through new namings in an obscure and unsettled place. As Harry Hooton once put it: 'What is necessary is what isn't: poetry today' (Hooton 1961, 12).

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