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Reference:

McCredden, L. (2009). The locatedness of poetry. *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature : JASAL, Special conference issue: Australian Literature in a Global World*, 1-10.

The Locatedness of Poetry

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In his 2005 essay 'Australia is not an Island' poet and critic John Mateer discusses some of Australia's more parochial (and dangerous) ideas about itself. He expresses his desire to have Australia open up beyond the *merely* local, writing that this nation needs a:

...new 'metaphoric' of travel and exchange... a rhetoric that reveals genuine histories and true geographical relationships, that we may open the borders of the Australian islands not only to Asia but also to all the other islands of the world. (Mateer 93)

Mateer argues that Australia has in fact already begun opening up, as it becomes increasingly multicultural (perhaps in stops and starts), part of an Asia-Pacific archipelago rather than being merely an island. However, he writes further that:

Many Australians of an Anglo-Celtic background, who are often now maligned in those intellectual, inner-city circles that emphasise the notion of cosmopolitanism and the politics of internationalism, display those other, older, classically 'insular' traits of conformity and caution in the presence of the strange. How could they not do so, having come originally from the British Isles, islands that at different times were raided by the Vikings, invaded by the Romans, menaced by the Germans, colonised by the English and dispersed to the Commonwealth? (91)

Of course one could argue quite the reverse, that such a set of historical dispersions and invasions experienced—and perpetrated—by Anglo-Celts might have prompted quite the opposite kinds of traits too—more cultural fluidity, more awareness of the 'elsewhere' in the 'here'. In fact both kinds of consequences of such migratory history are present in the social and cultural configurations of 'Australia': that is, some Anglo-Celts can be quite cosmopolitan, and at the same time I would agree that some of those intellectual, inner-city circles can be quite closed. (Nothing like a gaggle of inner urban academics for insularity).

So, cosmopolitanism and local insularity are often highly movable terms. This essay will argue that relations between signifier and signified in the global/local, cosmopolitan/parochial cultural debates are much more slippery and dynamic than this dichotomizing often rigidly indicates. The local/global nexus can be thought of as a continuous tug of war—often a literal one—in which members on each side keep slipping across to the other, or playing it on both sides. We know that *cultural* globalisation is but one of many overlapping kinds—economic, military, media, publishing, trade, migrations of people—and that debates about cosmopolitanism, internationalism and multiculturalism also overlap, but with different kinds of consequences at the local, lived, embodied level. Yet despite this awareness of the porosity of the terms, 'the local' so often in these debates is made to carry with it a set of danger signs or qualifiers—accusations of failure to think globally; being seen as

merely parochial, inward-looking, tribal and pre-modern, narrowly patriotic or nationalistic.

Indigenous poets have, over the past two decades, been complicating notions of the nation, asking it to re-imagine itself in the most intimate and disturbing detail. Writing from very different contexts, and in different poetic forms, the poetry of Tony Birch, Sam Wagan Watson and Lionel Fogarty has asked us to fracture old notions of the nation, to incorporate embodied, unofficial and haunting visions of 'Australia'. This essay will examine their poetry, together with a comparative account of the poetics of the 2008 Federal Government *Apology to the Stolen Generation*. It does this in order to examine just how culturally porous the terms local and global are, but also to make a specific claim for the role of literature—and particularly Indigenous poetry—in national and global debates: that the locatedness of poetry is crucial as a measure by which to sift the high rhetoric of national, cosmopolitan, globalising discourses.

Several critical premises undergird this essay's argument: firstly, such national signifiers as 'Australia', 'The United States', 'Britain', 'China', and including such groupings as 'Anglo-Celtic' or 'Arabic' or 'North American'—and even 'Indigenous' and 'non-Indigenous'—are merely clumsy fictions if we allow them to remain static or legalistic in the uses they are put to, monolithic descriptors of traits shared by blocks of citizens, merely an enactment by the deadening effects of signification again. But on the other hand it is important to grapple with such terms and their often clumsy attempts to describe global/local affiliations. As Henry Reynolds argues, in terms of Indigenous/non-Indigenous relations, if you 'remove the bridge to the global movement of Indigenous and tribal peoples...you drastically foreshorten the horizon for Aborigines and Islanders' (Reynolds 112). Reynolds is here talking about human, legal and economic rights. Further, he diagnoses Australia in 2006 as suffering from 'a reassertion of traditional Australian nationalism.' 'White Australia,' he writes, 'resurfaces with hostility to refugees...rediscovers explorers and war heroes [and] Gallipoli bids fair to becoming a national obsession once more' (112). Reynolds sees such a parochial national climate to be part of 'a global reassertion of nationalism and its historic mission of assimilation of minorities' (113). In the light of this reassertion Reynolds professed to be bleak about the future of Indigenous minorities.

But that was 2006, before what might be described as a new, post-Apology moment in Australian history. Is there a chance for real change in attitudes, as well as in cultural and material reality, in Australia today? How are the local, the national and the global related in this debates? This essay argues that there something we provisionally call the local, which is not toxic but salutary, and which must be acknowledged in the national discussions. A range of current theoretical and literary debates, often informed by post-colonial studies, is attempting to speak in ways that refuse, or see beyond, static nationalistic and globalising fictions. Bill Ashcroft has written recently of what he calls the 'literary transnation' in these terms:

The 'transnation' does not refer to an ontological object. It is not a formal reality in political space but a way of talking about subjects in their ordinary lives, subjects who live in-between the positivities by which subjectivity is normally constituted. Transnation is the fluid, migrating *outside* of the state that begins *within* the nation... [it is]... the 'betweenness' by which the subjects of the transnation are constituted.

...the in-between space—that carries the burden of the meaning of culture.
(Ashcroft, forthcoming)

Here Ashcroft complicates earlier post-colonial and diasporic notions of globalisation, as he suggests some of the ways—the local, the ordinary, the in-between—in which the literary is able to represent (imagine? nourish?) more fluid, local voices, and to think about their relationship to ‘the global’. These spaces of the transnation, he argues, refuse to be tied statically to what he calls ‘the positivities’ of nation, state, race or ethnicity; spaces in which, for example, the literary (symbolic, cultural, imagined, poetic) does make crucial contributions to the economic and political globalisation debates. It is possible, for example, to read the February 2008 Federal Parliament *Apology to the Stolen Generations* as one such negotiation between many local voices and concerns, and the idea of the modern nation as it looks ‘outwards’ to the global, acutely aware of and needing to respond to its global affiliations and responsibilities. Ways of reading the *Apology* will be considered further below, but it is firstly important to establish how the contemporary poetry of three Indigenous poets might be read as ways of measuring the claims of this national poetics of apology.

In Australia, Indigenous poets such as Tony Birch, Sam Wagan Watson and Lionel Fogarty write with specificity, immersed in local histories, but also alert to a future being wrought locally, nationally, globally. They are contributing to what I would call a locatedness in poetry. This locatedness is able to speak with earthy, experiential and historical authority, and to offer alternatives to the often too readily universalising, national and global discourses. Far from being simply parochial, inward-looking and hunched against such overarching discourses, the poetry of these three writers begins—differently—in the very particularities and locatedness of Aboriginal history, place, and even individuality. There is no rushing to the general, the universal, the archetypal or mythological in their work. Rather, their poetic codes are local, particularising, often replicating oral and colloquial rhythms and references. Flesh is put on statistics. Human emotions—often contradictory or unsettling—are allowed to emerge in thinking about crucial issues (with both global and local tentacles) of indigeneity and human justice.

For example, the opening two sections from Tony Birch’s 2006 poem/prose sequence, ‘The true history of Beruk’, begins with a speaking voice, and a specifically-imagined moment in colonial history:

‘My Words’, Beruk-Ngamajet—1835

Captain Cook marched—
in jacket and brass button
Buckley stood ragged
in possum skin at Muddy Creek
Batman came looking
with glass, beads, powder
and mirrors in a wooden boat
around the sea

Buckley spoke his old tongue—
the visitor is not ghost

he is not ghost
 look at Batman's face
 do not touch his skin
 his bread or his house
 do not touch his house

Beruk spoke the truth—
 whitefellow shoot us
 down like kangaroo
 whitefellow come
 by and by
 and shoot us
 shoot us down

whitefellow come
 and shoot us down

Coranderrk—1866

(i)

30 April 1866

[Cost of acquiring land from and incarcerating 'the blacks']

Flour	108,610 lbs.
Tea	2,991 lbs.
Sugar	28,617 lbs.
Tobacco	1,983 lbs.
Rice	3,024 lbs.
Oatmeal	450 lbs.
Soap	3,181 lbs.
Meat	787 lbs.
Blankets	1,175 pairs.
Serge Shirts	548
Twill Shirts	464
Jumpers (boys)	183
Petticoats	424
Chemises	111
Tomahawks	142
Pint Pots	180
Quart Pots	100

'The condition of the station is eminently satisfactory.'

As with another of his recent poems, the wonderful ten part 'Footnote to a History War' (Birch, 'Footnote'), Birch, an historian and a poet, works here with the particularities of local history—of place, time, materiality, individuals. He mimics individual voices, often listened for and mimicked from research in the archives by the poet. Of course Beruk stands for all displaced Indigenous people at one level; for tragically, genocide and colonial atrocities have occurred across the globe. But in Birch's poem we focus

on an individual, Beruk; and on his young son David who died in his arms. And we focus on the displacement of the Wurundjeri clan from their land—along Badger’s creek and the Yarra River, in Healesville—at Coranderrk as it was named, just outside Melbourne. The specificities of time, place, individual lives cede onto the global realities of Indigenous peoples across centuries, but this is a very particular way of not forgetting, of taking into the self as reader something of the grief and loss which should not be forgotten. It does something different to what lists of statistics denuded of context could do. The statistics of section two, and the brief, quote from the archive—‘The condition of the station is eminently satisfactory’—resonate differently here, inflected as they are in a context which draws, in the locatedness of the poetry, into the ambit of bodily, lived experiences.

The whole poem, with its prose and verse sections alternating, moves from 1835 to 2005, and we find a surprising, surreal, and moving finale to the poem, as Beruk’s ghost reinhabits the riverbed he once knew so well:

Beruk visits the riverbed—2005

Beruk moves quietly through the canyons of the city—all is stone still now. He passes the winking lights—imitating life. He listens for machines grinding to failure. Beruk observes his reflection in the flaws of glass, now inhabited by the petrified few. Women offer themselves. Men spit abuse. While dead children drift silently by, on a journey from the river to the ocean. Beruk slips into the water, beneath the heavy metals—the leaching arsenic, iron oxides, poisons and the death throes of toxic fish. Below the monster hulls of ships the current carries Beruk onward and down, to where the riverbed of the Wurundjeri awaits his return. Beruk calls into the darkness--singing his travels until his feet meet the floor of 100,000 lives once lived. In the beauty and blackness of the riverbed Beruk greets his son, David. He then greets his father, the Ngarnajet. They sing, feet raising a rhythm of shifting earth:

we will be gone
all gone soon
we will be gone
and we will come
we will come
and be

we will be

Is this simply the local as nostalgia? Memory struggling to hold on to a small and forgotten set of circumstances, to what is passed, impossible, no longer potent? The fact is we do, in 2008, have this poem as the material product of this time. We have the images, we have the imagined voices, and we have the poet’s will to ‘sing, feet raising a rhythm of shifting earth’, just as we hear Ngarnajet. and Beruk and David did. In an essay reflecting on his own poem, Birch writes about Port Phillip Bay and Melbourne, of:

... the recent dredging of the river—the Yarra River or the bay... Commercial interest, globalisation means that we're going to become a gateway city again in Melbourne and that we need to have a deeper channel to get bigger tankers into the port so that we can ship more goods into the hinterland as we would have said in the 19th Century. I was very interested when this dredging occurred, that in fact part of the exploration talked about the original pre-European Wurundjeri river bed, which is in Port Philip Bay and which exists today at about 115 metres in a ravine at the centre of Port Philip Bay. So I was interested in that Wurundjeri story which is deepest within the landscape here. I'm also very much interested in these stories reflecting contemporary landscapes. So I do not want William Barak's story or the story of the Wurundjeri people to be a historical story. I want it to be a story that resonates in Melbourne today, so that we understand it today. (Birch, 'First Person', <http://www.acmi.net.au>).

Staying with Birch's metaphor of what is 'deepest within the landscape', we can see that such imagined depth is different, but still in relation, to what is perhaps widest, those requirements of the modern state and its demands for commercial, global access of the waterways. In this way the local and the global are connected in the poem, because there are traces, resonances and inspirations of Indigenous depths in the contemporary landscape, and such traces form shards of memory, connections are re-made, and they continue to inform the present. This is not history as mere pastness. The poetry here removes us from the deadening of signification—the past written off, the mere turning of a page—offering potentialities: ancient and contemporary voices that will not be silenced, a powerful haunting and remembering for the modern state.

Often in the work of Sam Wagan Watson too, we find the insistent voices of local knowledges which can and must be traced. Watson often calls up the figures of ghosts or spirits, the murmur of long dead voices, which are resurrected into the contemporary world. In 'Kangaroo Crossing' we read:

kangaroo crossing

I know this stretch in my blood

this is where the *Megaleia rufa* song
cries louder than any car stereo

the dreaming that suddenly crawls onto the road
and takes it
out of the living—
the ones who fantasised constantly on their own immortality
behind the wheel

but this stretch of road...*this stretch*
is where the extroverted angels turn their heads
as the flash that is stronger than steel
launches onto the highway
and brings those of the present
forward to their own judgement day

refraction of light
 from split seconds
 to eternity (Watson 88)

The texture of this poetry is patently different to Birch's, more apocalyptic, but it has the same kinds of locatedness: this stretch which is 'in my blood', 'this stretch of road...*this stretch*'; the local as the particular, the familiar and the intimately understood. Wagan Watson places the ancient and the contemporary, the past with its dreaming the song of the Megaleia rufa, *and* the present steel age of high speed and car stereos, violently up against each other. It is the local, with its depth of knowledges and understanding of ancient presences which is imagined into, which speaks into, the present. The measurement of time is from seconds to eternity in an ungentle speech, but one which claims a sacred depth, pronouncing 'judgement day', signifying 'eternity.' It is when the local—what is here figured in the non-human, slow crawling but also launching 'stronger than steel' into the present—is ignored, not heard, or imagined, that the fictions of the moderns are undone.

Wagan Watson's poetry emerges again and again in the in-between space—Ashcroft's 'literary transnation'—carrying 'the burden of the meaning of culture'. It invokes a space of local knowledges, of the land known in the blood, and of voices which refuse to be mere memory, merely of the past. A poetic openness to such voices, and the reconstructing of the contexts of their power in the present, the negotiating of their power across a turbulent modern terrain, mark Wagan Watson's poetry. He is a translator from past to present, from deep local knowledges to present modern landscapes. Such openness produces a kind of hope, and not simply a turning or closing of the pages of the past, even as it is a sustained haunting we are introduced to.

Amongst Murri man Lionel Fogarty's poetry, one of the strangest, almost hallucinatory poems is 'Farewell Reverberated Vault of Detentions'. In it we find yet another version of the local, in tension with a more utopian hope, a rewriting of the future in dynamic, complex relation to past and present. The poem opens:

Today up home my people are
 indeedly beautifully smiling
 for the devil's sweeten words are
 gone
 Today my people are quenching
 the waters of rivers without grog
 Today my people are eating delicious
 rare food of long ago.
 Today a fire is made round
 for a dance of leisuring enjoyment
 where no violence fights stirs.
 Certainly my people are god given
 a birthright of wise men and women
 Our country is still our Motherland
 Our desires ain't dying in pitifully
 in lusting over contempt and condition
 Tonight my people sleep
 without a tang of fear

No paralysed minds
 No numbed bodies
 No pierced hearts hurt
 The screams of madness ends
 The madly stretched endurance
 are resisted with Murri faith. (Fogarty 40)

The perspective of the poem is relentlessly double. While it may seem a simple utopian vision of a time of plenty and harmony, the first three lines set this notion on edge. ‘Today up home’ speaks with intimacy of a known and loved place and people, but from a distance. The poem was published in 1994, in the aftermath of the Royal Commission into the Aboriginal Deaths in Custody which concluded in 1991. But more immediately, another local fact is important contextually: Fogarty’s 18 year old brother Daniel Yock died in police detention in 1993. We might hear the poem’s voice, which speaks of a healed and restored people as Yock’s voice, or as one of the many Aborigines who died in their ‘vault of detention’. But additionally, it is important to acknowledge the complex nature of the utopian vision being presented. The poetic vision is built on the bones of a people’s madness and fear— ‘The madly stretched endurance’—even as it simultaneously sings the possibility of a place of ‘leisureing enjoyment’, ‘delicious rare food’, a place where ‘my people/ are indeedly beautifully smiling.’

Fogarty’s spoken rhythms, his playful bending of the Queen’s English—partly mimicking oral Indigenous voices, partly idiosyncratic poetic production—and his double perspective—utopian/social realist—here create a poetry which is pitted with the violence and scars of local, grounded, material reality, but also singing with the prospect of change. It is a prospect that might speak to the split experiences of many Indigenous readers from many places, globally, but it is firstly and crucially grounded in the lived, historical experience and the specificities of the local context.

At this point we need to recall the words of historian Henry Reynolds, who warns of a current ‘reassertion of traditional Australian nationalism in Australia’. This reassertion so often thinks, in contrast to the specificity of this poetry, in categories employing a range of universalising and generalising discourses—‘refugees’, Australia’s gallant military past, assimilation of minorities. Even in the ‘poetics’ of the new Australian Federal Government’s February 2008 *Apology to the Stolen Generations*, it might be argued, the local has been diluted in favour of a stately conjuring act for the nation. The *Apology*, delivered by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd as his first Parliamentary act in the new Labour Government, begins:

Today we honour the Indigenous peoples of this land, the oldest continuing cultures in human history.
 We reflect on their past mistreatment.
 We reflect in particular on the mistreatment of those who were Stolen Generations – this blemished chapter in our nation’s history.
 The time has now come for the nation to turn a new page in Australia’s history by righting the wrongs of the past and so moving forward with confidence to the future. (www.abc.net.au)

The relationship of the local (what I have been calling the specific, the lived, the intimate and the familiar cultural and material realities) and the global (those needs and affiliations of the modern state, including important affiliations with international, global discourses and practices of social justice for minorities) needs to be read carefully here. The *Apology*, after the fact of its emotional performance, needs to be considered in a number of different contexts. Firstly, Australia's *Apology* emerged in the context of the global trend towards apologies to indigenous groups. Elazar Barkan, in *The Guilt of Nations: Restitution and Negotiating Historical Injustices*, a balanced account of the motivations and effects of such apologies, does not deny the positive effects of national apologies to minorities, in terms of 'enhancing their political and cultural claims on public space' (344). But Barkan further argues that the contemporary trend towards apologies globally also needs to be read in the light of how power hierarchies and state relations are rarely changed by such apologies. While the needs of local communities and individuals are represented in such a process, the question can actually be asked as to whether apologies do more for the nation state and the majority.

Australians, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, listened and were moved by Australia's apology. For many it represented a move forward by the nation, a change from the old colonial ideologies and policies. But the potential of this national 'poetry' is still to be measured in the many 'readings' and performances it will be given in material and cultural terms, into the future. How much power or potential does the nation have in righting the wrongs and blemishes of the past? At present, many are hoping that the nation can muster tremendous powers in the face of the differends of the colonial aftermath, although the ongoing national intervention into Aboriginal welfare in the Northern Territory and beyond is at present causing a multitude of debates about the nature of such power.

The inclusive pronouns of the *Apology*—'we reflect...we reflect'—together with its sense of new national agency, are stirring, hopeful, future-oriented, but also necessarily lacking in a certain self-reflexiveness and locatedness. To speak in the giant, resonant voice of the nation necessarily occludes the voices which might still need to speak from doubt, to ask how on earth the wrongs of the past could ever be righted. In the *Apology* 'we' are exhorted to walk into

A future where we embrace the possibility of new solutions to enduring problems where old approaches have failed.

A future based on mutual respect, mutual resolve and mutual responsibility.

A future where all Australians, whatever their origins, are truly equal partners...

The resonance and hopefulness of this rhetoric cannot be denied, as it is attested to by so many, but this does not undermine the need to question the location of its proposed future, and its relation to a past which can and should never simply lose its 'blemished'—or horrific—realities. Poetry, such as that of Tony Birch, Sam Wagan Watson and Lionel Fogarty, does not begin on a national stage, or in the use of universalising speakers. In different ways their poetry is necessarily entrenched in the local: intimate voices, places, knowledges. Rather than offering the resounding rhetoric of the modern nation in its relation to a global audience, this contemporary poetry is located, questioning, still needing to remember the woundedness of the past. We might, in the face of the *Apology's* seductive national rhetoric, again recall Ashcroft's deployment of the 'literary transnation' as 'a way of talking about subjects in their ordinary lives,

subjects who live in-between the positivities by which subjectivity is normally constituted. Transnation is the fluid, migrating *outside* of the state that begins *within* the nation.' Contemporary Indigenous poetry is emerging as a salutary, supplementary and crucial other set of voices from within, and for the nation.

This contrast between the poetics of the *Apology* and the located poetics of Indigenous poets is not made, in this essay, in order to negate the discursive (and hopefully wider) power and effects of the *Apology*. Rather, it is important to see the discursive range (and limits) of both poetic art and national rhetorics. But the literary, and poetry most extraordinarily, keeps us cognisant of the limits of national rhetorics through its insistently located remembering.

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