



Colonial Legal Imaginaries Southern Literary Futures

SUBJECT	Titles and abstracts
TIME/DATE	6-8pm AEDT, 7 September 2022
ONLINE	Zoom

Cultivating a Postcolonial Literary Legal Imagination: On Translating Sunil Gangopadhyay's *Beni Laskarer Mundu*

Debolina Dutta

Beni Laskarer Mundu – published in 1972 – is a Bengali short story by Sunil Gangopadhyay. It is written in the genre of historical fiction that Gangopadhyay's key works are renowned for. Set in a fictional post-enlightenment nineteenth-century British-India, the story revolves around the head of a man called Benimadhab Laskar. His head, through a series of events, turns into a prospective artefact for juridical and medical inquiry because of his unique ability to accurately foretell whether a client was guilty or innocent. This story is an invitation to think about jurisprudence from a postcolonial location as one that imagines law to be a body of knowledge formed through contradictory inheritances. It raises questions about law by unsettling the dualisms of reason/emotion, fact/fiction, science/supernatural, logic/superstition, modernity/tradition, religious/secular. At a political level, the story helps to think of Southern legal imaginaries as syncretic. It belies any nationalist claims to a pure past (in this case a Hindu one), ideas that are particularly significant for the current times in India, which is seeing a violent consolidation of Hindu nationalism.

Land(s) beyond the White World

Christopher Gevers

Within the intersecting traditions of Black Internationalism, from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards, Black radicals have repeatedly turned to novels to both imagine and craft the worlds they could not live without and dismantle the worlds they could not live within (to paraphrase Ruha Benjamin). My contribution aims to trace these poetic and political worldmaking and unmaking practices in the novels of Pauline Hopkins, WEB DuBois and Peter Abrahams in particular, and their shared insurgent sociopolitical, historical, and geographical imaginaries. Doing so, it aims to show, surfaces "alternative clocks and maps of global racial

resistance” (Mills) and suggests pathways to “lands beyond the White World” (DuBois) and its colonial legal imaginaries.

A World Where Many Worlds Fit: Utopia as Anti-Colonial Method and Practice in the Zapatista Tales of Subcomandante Galeano (formerly Marcos)

Luis Gómez Romero

Thomas More textually circumscribed utopia within the remit of the state and its official laws and policies. Utopia, however, soon exceeded its original enclosure as a noun – that is, an object – and deployed itself as a transformative colonial practice, for example, in the missionary work of Castilian lawyer and bishop Vasco de Quiroga (circa 1470-1565). Nearly five centuries later, on January 1st, 1994, the Indigenous Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN, Zapatista Army of National Liberation) rose up in arms from the forests of the south-eastern Mexican state of Chiapas, in response to the daily oppressions and injustices Indigenous Mexicans faced within neo-colonial political systems and juridical orders tailored to their discrimination and economic exploitation. The EZLN soon broadened its demands regarding local Indigenous Mexicans to encompass other social groups oppressed by global neoliberalism. The mestizo spokesperson of the EZLN, Subcomandante Galeano (formerly Marcos), accordingly displayed a global communication strategy involving the memory of Mexican revolutionary Emiliano Zapata (1879-1919), philosophical inquiries, social analysis, political satire and, above all, storytelling and myth-making. In the early stages of the Zapatista movement, Galeano developed two key series of stories, each with a different protagonist. One series of tales focused on Old Antonio, an elderly Maya Indian who grounds the insurrection on ancestral myths and oral Indigenous traditions. A second series featured Don Durito de la Lacandona, a speaking beetle who firmly opposes neoliberalism drawing from Western materials such as Don Quixote. This paper will show a transformative utopian method, capable of informing anti-colonial practices, emerging from the textual intersections between both series of stories, which ultimately envisage a world capable of holding other worlds by reinvigorating democracy and enriching our current conceptions of justice.

The Drover’s Wife, The Legend of Molly Johnson: Leah Purcell’s Truthful Reimagining of a Colonial Fetish

Honni van Rijswijk

Henry Lawson’s short story, *The Drover’s Wife*, has animated Australian nationalism since its publication in 1892. The story is much-loved, and has been perceived as representing a voice from the margins, the enduring archetype of the Australian frontier bush woman, a figure who is simultaneously vulnerable and stoic. This archetype organises other tropes in Lawson’s story, symptomatic of the national imaginary of the internal frontier – the unrelenting harshness of the Australian land, the resilience of the white frontier individual, and the civilising effects of those individuals’ labor on the landscape, as well as on Indigenous people, who are coded as part of “nature”, requiring “civilisation”. *The Drovers’ Wife* has been reimagined by numerous twentieth century white writers including Murray Bail, Barbara Jefferis, Mandy Sayer, David Ireland, Madeleine Watts and Ryan O’Neill. Russell Drysdale’s 1945 painting “The Drover’s Wife”, named by Frank Moorhouse as “our Mona Lisa” (2017), similarly extends the mythology of Lawson’s story. It is against this context of white colonial fetishism of both the story and of Lawson himself that Leah Purcell’s version/s – a play (2016), and now a film (2022) – are set.

Leah Purcell is a proud Goa-Gunggari-Wakka Wakka Murri woman from Queensland, and one of Australia's leading writers, directors and actors.

In this paper, I examine Purcell's radical reimagining of this foundational Australian text. In the original story, Lawson imagines the key antagonists of the frontier as belonging to the "natural world", including a bull, a poisonous snake, the isolation and harshness of the environment, and the presence of an "uncivilised" Indigenous man who appears as a stranger in the unnamed drover's wife's home. In Purcell's reworking, she upturns this narrative and its toxic tropes, giving a name to the drover's wife – Molly Johnson – and also truthfully naming the true antagonists the drover's wife must face on the Australian frontier: the imminent threat of violence and sexual violence against all women, and the violence of the frontier wars against Indigenous communities, which was followed by government policies of assimilation and intervention (Watson, 2009). Purcell's work reveals truths about the violence of the frontier, about forms of state and outlaw violence that not only led to the massacre of Indigenous people, but also created a false epistemology: that the land which Indigenous people have inhabited with peace and ease for thousands of years is "harsh," that Indigenous labor is "idleness", and that the colonist's work at the frontier is noble, rather than an act of ugly, violent theft. Purcell thereby critiques the role of particular Australian literary works in the creation of national mythology and in the papering-over of violent historical truths. Purcell's work both reveals and subverts the colonial epistemology of violence, gender, sexuality – and state law's complicity in these processes, from its foundational refusal to acknowledge Indigenous law, to the imposition of a thieving land law, to law's adjudication of frontier violence, and then to the "lawful" removal of Indigenous children. This paper will explore the radical implications of this work to both legal and cultural imaginaries.