

VISIONS OF THE ISLAND

The Mimetic and the Ludic
in Australian Postcolonialism

ILINCA-MAGDALENA STROE

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To my parents, Christina and Mircea Stroe

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Contents

Acknowledgments	7
2022 Foreword	11
Chapter 1	
Inter-sections: (Post)Colonising Mimesis and Ludic Renditions on Antipodean Grounds.....	26
1. In Search of Australian Postcolonialism: Unsettled Grounds	28
2. A Spectrum of Binarism: Recto, Verso, or the Logic of Mimesis	45
3. In the Ludic Act: Self-Othering Colonial Subjectivity	71
4. Historical Promotions: Postcolonial Re-visions	92
Chapter 2	
By Means of Holy Ghosts: Modeling Histories in <i>Oscar and Lucinda</i>	105
1. Founding Fathers, Founding Mothers, and Children Errant ...	108
2. Glassy Revisions and Other Appearances: (Con)Figuring Postcolonial Selves	124
Chapter 3	
On the Hero's Side(s): Composite Annotations in <i>Voss</i>	142
1. Estranged (Con)Texts: Miswriting Rival Histories	145
2. Reflections on Colonial Tracks: The (Un)Making of a Hero ..	167
3. Composing <i>Australia Ludens</i> : “Together is filled with little cells”	195
Chapter 4	
The Reparatory Scales: Figures of Justice in <i>Jack Maggs</i>	231
1. The Convict Collage: Deluding Misrecognitions	235
2. Immoral Figures: The “Convict Stain” Complex	254

3. A Mesmeric Treatment of the “Pathogenic Secret”	269
4. Comedic Scenery: A Background of Doubleness.....	295
Conclusion: Visions of the Island	328
Bibliography	332

2022 Foreword

Visions of the Island: the Mimetic and the Ludic in Australian Postcolonialism is a doctoral thesis based on research conducted by its author between March 1997 and September 2000 as a postgraduate student in the Department of English with Cultural Studies of the Faculty of Arts at the University of Melbourne, Australia. Submitted in September 2000, the thesis was examined by Professors Stephen Slemon (University of Alberta) and Alan Lawson (University of Queensland), and the candidate was subsequently awarded the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in October 2001.

The thesis undertakes the task of theorising, on the one hand, a ludic paradigm shift as post-colonial¹ Australia's response to its colonisation, and identifying, on the other hand, a set of tropes, narrative techniques and devices in three Australian postcolonial novels, as "empirical evidence" of the emergence of that paradigm in contemporary Australian culture. The end goal of the thesis is to propound the ludic postcolonial as a critical reading and hermeneutical method well worth exploring further for its potential to reveal novel ontological and epistemological propositions of present post-colonial cultures.

¹ In this text the hyphenated term "post-colonial" is used simply to refer to the years after the end of colonialism, i.e. roughly from the 1950s to today. "Postcolonial," instead, is meant to refer to a general ethos emerging in the cultures of the former colonies after the colonial age.

At the turn of the millennium, however, approaching postcolonial studies required a high degree of awareness of its multifarious sensitivities. While reports of colonial abuse had relegated the view of colonisation as a civilising force to the realm of propagandistic, therefore misleading history made mainly in nineteenth-century Britain, the field of postcolonialism was by no means consensual. Rather, its theorists' contributions differed widely around a number of historical, ideological, cultural and political issues.

One of these referred to the legitimacy of the former so-called *settler colonies*' claim to postcoloniality at all: of the former colonies of the British Empire, weren't India and West Africa, which had suffered the full impact of colonial rule, from territory appropriation to the destruction of local cultures and the infringement of individual liberties, more entitled to make postcolonial claims than Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa? And weren't indigenous Canadians, Australians, etc. a great deal more justified in coordinating postcolonial themes and theories than their non-indigenous, white fellow critics? Finally, in the particular case of Australia, how did its original status as a penal colony of the British Empire – one which started out by literally camping on Aboriginal land regarded as “virgin” territory – relate with and bear on its postcolonial identity?

Chapter I of the thesis, “Inter-sections: (Post)Colonising Mimesis and Ludic Renditions on Antipodean Grounds” sets out to address controversial issues like those summed up above, and position its central argument within the postcolonial theoretical framework.

Three basic concepts instrumental to the argument – namely, Australian postcolonialism, mimesis and the ludic – are discussed here, as well as the argument’s interest in, and investigation of the specific source texts (whether works of fiction, historical accounts or essays) on which the novels analysed draw.

Australian postcolonialism, the first core concept that the thesis uses, has been a highly debated area. In many important theorists’ view, colonisation implied a First World (Britain, Europe²) which imposed its rule on a Third World (India, West Africa) regarded as underdeveloped, uncivilised and customarily inhabited by races other than Caucasian/white European.

While these two terms provide the central axis of postcolonial theory – the coloniser/colonised dyad – they leave out what has gradually come to be termed “the Second World”: the colonies where allegedly no social organisation structures were in place prior to the arrival of the colonisers, where the incoming white Caucasians settled the land as agriculturists or graziers, and where colonialism did not end officially with the proclamation of new, totally autonomous and independent states, as in the case of, say, the Republic of India.

² Quite a few postcolonial theorists conflate Britain and Europe when referring to “the Coloniser,” hence Europe is generally held responsible for the effects of colonisation. While I acknowledge that a great deal of Britain’s colonising practices came from European thought, I also firmly believe that colonisation by Britain has got its own specific traits, which, unlike those of Spanish, Dutch or French colonisation, dominated “the making of the world,” if the phrase is not too ambitious, at the time of the British Empire. Thus, my own argument refers to *British* colonisation, rule and colonial mentality unless otherwise specified.

Second-World postcolonialism, however, has gradually been accepted within the postcolonial studies field, but with some major differences from Third-World postcolonialism. According to theorist Leela Gandhi, unlike the Third World, which suffered a “full degree” of colonisation, strongly opposes the ideology and practice of colonialism, and endeavours to recuperate at least in part its pre-colonial culture, the Second World experienced only a “half-degree” colonisation, is complicit in the colonialist agenda, and its protagonists, the white settlers, have a pre-eminently ambiguous status as both ideologically colonised by the First World, and oppressive colonisers, themselves, to the indigenous inhabitants of the lands they settled.

Australian postcolonialism belongs to this Second-World framework of postcolonial theory. The cultural, ideological colonisation³ that “white” Australia suffered resides in the projection, transmission and perpetuation, in the new lands, of a certain mentality, a certain pattern of thought identified later in this chapter as mimetic.

The critique of this pattern, as well as Australian postcolonialism’s other major trait, ambiguity or ambivalence, can be used *productively* to revisit colonial history⁴, internalise and overcome colonial binaries, trace and explore loci of intersection, of mutual comprehension between the coloniser and the colonised, and dismantle the tenets of the colonial mentality, in a critical process where

³ The notion of “ideological colonisation” seems to correspond to what we, in Eastern Europe, have customarily called “indoctrination,” in different - but not entirely dissimilar - historical (e.g. post-war) circumstances.

⁴ In, for example, “re-historical fictions,” as Stephen Slemon calls the postcolonial novels based on colonial source texts.

deconstruction yields reconstruction. This is the Australian postcolonial scope the thesis inhabits.

Mimesis, which is the argument's second core concept, has been commonly equated with imitation and, in this sense, its function in the colonising enterprise is overt and obvious: to become civilised, organised, educated and prosperous, the colonised necessarily had to copy the manners and habits, the administrative apparatus, instruction methods and business practices of the colonisers. Colonies were required to imitate the colonising "model country," the end goal of colonisation being, apparently, to clone Britain, to create replicas of it around the Empire.

A tremendously important theorist of mimesis, however, René Girard, maintains that the definition of mimesis as mere imitation is seriously truncated. According to him, mimesis is intrinsically linked to power assertion (a claim which a close reading of Plato's dialogue *Ion*, included in this second section, seems to support). It involves two protagonists and a desired object. Initially engaged in fighting over the object, the protagonists gradually drop it from view and end up fighting to annihilate each other. That is because subduing the other, one automatically reinforces him/herself. Hence, self-identification achieved by means of dominating the other is key to mimesis.

Furthermore, an interplay of identity and difference is inherent to mimesis, where the two protagonists, while striving to differ from each other, are essentially identical in their antagonism: fighting, they mirror each other's gestures, and they both act on exactly the same need to eliminate the other in order to assert him/herself. Thinking of themselves as adversaries, the mimetic protagonists are

unknowingly doubles, made identical by their very antagonism. And what appears as the crux of mimesis is the compulsion *to define oneself by prevailing over an "other" that must be your opposite*⁵ - while the realisation of their identity-in-difference is, because perceived as a barrier to the affirmation of "one's own self," so intolerable to the mimetic protagonists, that they deny it, push it to the margins of their awareness, keep it unconscious.

Colonisation seems to have taken mimesis from an inter-personal, micro level to a macro one: Edward Said's archive of Orientalism, for example, illustrates how colonial Britain fashioned itself in opposition to its colonies through a long series of binary opposites (civilised/primitive, scientific/superstitious, astute/retarded, etc.) - indeed, making of binarism itself a colonising tool.

This polarisation and the subsequent emergence of anti-colonial reversal paradigms in the former colonies, picturing Britain along the corrupt/immoral/backward line, while the now emancipated colonies identified themselves as fair/moral/progressive, indicate that mimesis may well have been the backbone of cultural and ideological colonisation. And that, once its logic and discourse were made, as Leila Gandhi puts it, "strategically available" to the colonised, colonisation can be said to have fulfilled its mission. The cycle was complete: the colonised now defined themselves in the mimetic terms and through the kind of mimetic logic transferred to them by the colonisers.

⁵ Tangentially, while Girard believes that this compulsion lies at the heart of the scapegoating mechanism, one of the "things hidden since the foundation of the world" which certainly founded our European identity, comparativist Mihai Spariosu thinks that it is simply a result of our understanding of (pre-quantum) physics, the central concept of which is force.

How does Australia fit in this scheme of colonisation by mimesis? Starting with the 6th century BC, *terra australis incognita* materialised in the European mind as a “great southern landmass” which *counterbalanced* the known world of the northern hemisphere (Anaximander of Miletus’s idea), an earthly paradise (in Thomas More’s *Utopia*, notably at a time when the author’s country was going through serious religious and political turbulences), and a fully rational, perfectly homogenous monoculture (in a few 17th and 18th century European utopias).

Paralleling Said’s Orientalism, a certain kind of “Antipodeanism” can be said to have helped Europe occasionally to define its own identity, whether positively or negatively, in opposition to the Antipodes, so when Britain started colonising *terra australis* the ground was laid for such mimetic (self-)identifications.

Thus, a late 18th century Britain whose prisons were overflowing with petty criminals and political prisoners was able to re-view itself as righteous and virtuous by sending its delinquent class off to the new penal colony which became its opposite: a place of vice and immorality. Unsurprisingly, in the 1920s there were Australian voices to declare the convicts innocent victims of a morally corrupt imperial Britain.

Such colonial self-identification by opposition and anti-colonial reversed binarisms illustrate that, in Australia’s case, too, mimesis, in its Girardian sense, with its will to opposition, its rejection of similarities and its scapegoating of “the Other” out of a self-assertion need that cannot seem to accept fulfilment by other, non-scapegoating means, transited from the colonisers’ mindset to the worldview of the colonised – completing the cycle of effective colonisation.

The concept of the ludic is approached next. Starting from Johan Huizinga's now classical monograph on play and recalling the original meaning of the term (*ludius* meant "stage player" in Latin), the argument focuses on the actor figure. Unlike mimetic protagonists, actors embrace "the Other" intentionally and achieve – in Huizinga's words – a "conscious oneness of the two" (themselves and the characters they impersonate). So while mimesis denies identity-in-difference, ludic performances do not. The ludic is doubleness assumed.

How does the ludic work in colonial settings? An excellent illustration is provided by Paul Carter, an Australian theorist whose work recovers historically documented colonial encounters which valorise ambivalence: in 1519, Hernando Cortés, the Spanish conquistador, and his soldiers reached Mexico. Montezuma, emperor of the Aztecs, asks an envoy to go and inquire what kind of men they were and what they were looking for, and two days later he sends someone to the Spaniards' camp to "make realistic full-length portraits of Cortés and all his captains...."

After one more week, Montezuma's official embassy to Cortés enters the Spanish camp. It is led by Quintalbor, "a great Mexican chief who in face, features, and body was very like our Captain. The great Montezuma had chosen him on purpose." The Spaniards start calling them "'our Cortés' and 'the other Cortés'" (but, symptomatically, *not* "their Quintalbor" and "our Quintalbor"). They fail to understand the meaning of Montezuma's choice of a Cortés-like emissary otherwise than as, perhaps, a sign of "weakness": Montezuma wants to please Cortés. He won't fight. He is submissive. He is ready to obey.

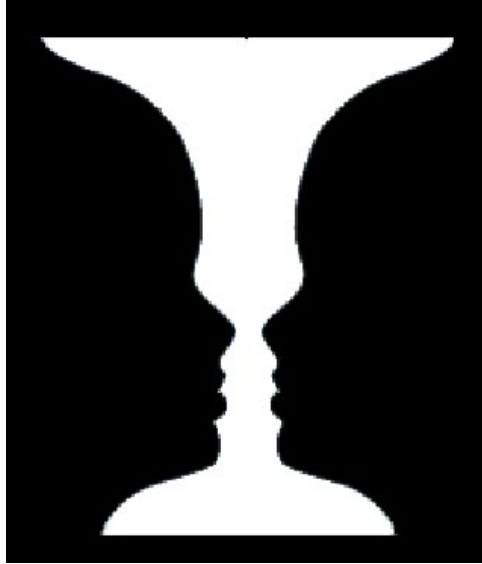
To a non-mimetic mind, however, Montezuma's so carefully prepared message may signify quite differently. Regarded as a ludic performance, Quintalbor's appearance at the head of the emperor's embassy to the strangers reveals, maybe, not Montezuma's willingness to be "civilised" or colonised, but his realisation of identity-in-difference. Here are two very different groups of people of distinct races, born thousands of miles away from each other, and yet when they first meet one of the Aztecs looks "very like" one of the Spaniards. Montezuma sees that and he shows it to the strangers, so that they can realise, too. His embassy is an appeal to (shared) awareness.

This example of a colonial encounter, as well as a similar one recounted by Carter and involving the Nyungar Aborigines and Matthew Flinders's marines on Australian soil, suggest that the postcolonial ludic is very well positioned to: a) unveil the concealed doubleness of mimesis; b) dismantle its power mechanism; and c) reveal potential reconfigurations of the so-called binary opposites by which the colonising mind enforced realities, systems, knowledges⁶.

The postcolonial ludic, its working and valences appear summed up in this image⁷:

⁶ The term comes from the more radical wing of postcolonial theory. It deliberately employs the plural with an uncountable noun in order to emphasise the fact that there isn't just "one knowledge," as the Empire made its colonised subjects believe, but as many different "knowledges" as there are post-colonial discoveries.

⁷ Due to limited technological competence at the time, I was unfortunately unable to include this illustration in the original thesis.



Conventionally called Rubin's vase and described as ambiguous bi-stable or reversing two-dimensional, the picture was designed around 1915 by Danish psychologist Edgar Rubin to demonstrate that, although it shows two intertwined shapes (the vase, here white, and the two black profiles facing each other) our retina can only retain one shape at a time. The image, Mihai Spariosu maintained⁸, is also illustrative of the co-existence and interdependence of "alternative worlds."

Within the framework of this argument, the illustration features two "mimetic antagonists": shape 1 (the white vase) and shape 2 (the black profiles). In order for one to be identified as (meaningful) shape, the other has to

⁸ In his study about play, liminality and literature, where he advances a ludic-irenic perspective to which I owe a great deal, conceptually speaking.