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Post-Colonial – NOT!

Anita Heiss

In terms of the academic world, the literature of African countries, Australia, Bangladesh, Canada, Caribbean countries, India, Malaysia, Malta, New Zealand, Pakistan, Singapore, South Pacific Island countries and Sri Lanka, is often defined as 'post-colonial literatures'. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin suggest,

The term 'post-colonial' is used generally to describe all cultures affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonisation to the present day. It is also considered as the most appropriate term for the new cross-cultural criticism which has emerged in recent years and for the discourse through which it is constituted.¹

They go on to say that the idea of 'post-colonial theory' is a reaction to equate European theory with what they term as post-colonial writing.² But it might also be suggested that the term post-colonial is simply a term used to describe much contemporary writing.

In terms of defining Aboriginal writing as post-colonial literature, it appears that there are two distinct views. Firstly, that of the literary establishment who use the term as a way of describing a genre in which Aboriginal people write; and secondly, that of most Aboriginal writers who see the term implying that colonialism is a matter of the past and that decolonisation has taken place, which of course is not the case. In this way, most writers do not even consider the term in relation to their writing at all, which makes this discussion difficult.

As comments by writers below show, the term 'post-colonialism' is largely meaningless to Aboriginal people, bearing in mind the political, social and economic status we currently occupy. Kathryn Trees, in a joint paper with Colin Johnson, asks the questions,

¹ W. D. Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literature*, Routledge, London, 1989, p.2.

² *ibid.*, p.11.

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Does post-colonial suggest colonialism has passed? For whom is it 'post'? Surely not for Australian Aboriginal people at least, when land rights, social justice, respect and equal opportunity for most does not exist because of the internalised racism of many Australians.

In countries such as Australia where Aboriginal sovereignty, in forms appropriate to Aboriginal people, is not legally recognised, post-colonialism is not merely a fiction, but a linguistic manoeuvre on the part of some 'white' theorists who find this a comfortable zone that precludes the necessity for political action.

Post-colonialism is a 'white' concept that has come to the fore in literary theory in the past five years as Western nations attempt to define and represent themselves in non-imperialist terms.³

Unlike some other Pacific Nation writers who accept the term 'post-colonial',⁴ claiming to write from a post-colonial experience, there are few, if any Aboriginal Australian writers who agree with or use the term at all, least of all in relation to their writing. Its relevance to Aboriginal people appears to be non-existent. As high numbers of Aboriginal people continue to be incarcerated and die in prison, and the community still experiences infant mortality rates the same as Third World nations, and we continue to need government assistance in attaining housing, education and basic health care, it is apparent that colonisation, as Aboriginal people interpret it, is alive, even before considering the current Liberal Government's approach to Native Title, and its failure to acknowledge the damaging effects of government policies that led to the Stolen Generations.

Sandra Phillips quite strongly believes that we are still colonised and that it makes those in the literary and publishing community feel better to think we're post-colonial. She adds,

But if only they'd realise the way in which they carry themselves in society today is still colonial. They take an ownership stand, saying if we didn't colonise these people they wouldn't be able to create this stuff.

Jackie Huggins is offended by the term post-colonial preferring the term 'neo-colonial' but feels that, along with the term 'post-modernism', they are all just yuppie buzz words which,

Convolute the whole process of writing that says there isn't a colonial mentality still in existence. In Queensland for sure you can see it. I think because we live so close to a certain member of Parliament here it's exacerbated unusually.⁵

³ Trees, Kathryn, 'Postcolonialism: Yet Another Colonial Strategy?', in *Span*, Vol. 1, no. 36, 1993, pp.264-265.

⁴ Albert Wendt, personal interview, 12 June 1997

⁵ Jackie Huggins, personal interview, 10 December 1997. The MP referred to by Huggins is Pauline Hanson of the One Nation Party.

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Lisa Belleair is straightforward in her reaction to the term, saying,

I know that if you are widely read and well-travelled then you would see the total inappropriateness of using that word [post-colonial] and the more that you try to justify using that word in a sense that you offer the definitions and framework, theoretical constructs, the more full-of-shit you are... . How can people use it when you know what's going on in this country.

Herb Wharton acknowledges the term but says he doesn't worry too much about or agree with a lot of the things academics say because,

When they're describing Australian literature, there's no cut-off date for the history of Australia. The literary history or the recorded history. 1788 is when Europeans came. But Australian history and its literature and stories were there all the time.

Cathy Craigie like myself, thinks it's hard to believe there is any such thing as post-colonial when you are the people who've been colonised:

We're still in Aboriginal time, Murri time, we're still in there doing the same things. For me it's a continuation of a culture that's thousands and thousands of years old. It's not something that you cut off because white man has come in.

For Craigie the term post-colonial only fits the white system, rather than acknowledging our own time-frame. She explains, 'my definition of time is endless, it's past, present and future.'

In contrast both Lucashenko and Laughton agree that their writing reflects the effects of being colonised. Lucashenko, who was born in 1967, says that everything in her life, including her writing, is touched by or has risen out of colonialism, not being able to grow out of anything traditional. She dissects the issue of post-colonialism, saying,

What's post-colonialism? Then you have to ask what's colonialism?, which is the process of coming in and taking people's land and sovereignty away from them. The process of actually taking that has almost ended, but it hasn't quite ended because of Mabo and Wik where it's politically still going on, and psychologically, because people in the bush are much closer to that stuff I think, than people in the city, so to them they are far more in the colonial period than we are. In some senses, people have discovered how to be Black living in Redfern, living the urban lifestyle, and that's sort of edging towards post-colonialism to me. I'm not saying that we're not oppressed, I'm saying that what I define as a colonial era is ending and now the oppression is still there, but the circumstances of our oppression are changing.

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Although not accepting the use of the term, Kenny Laughton can see why Aboriginal writing has to be called post-colonial. He says,

Let's face it, prior to the arrival of white man, our history, everything about us was recorded by mediums other than the written word. But our ancestors were prolific storytellers, they must have been; for these stories to be passed on from generation to generation, for hundreds of thousands of years. So the 'post-colonial' label is one that would sit comfortable with the anthropologists and linguists and historians, maybe even with some of our Aboriginal 'academics' as they would have been the first to use pen and paper to form their opinions on Aboriginal Australia.

But I don't necessarily accept it. Not as an Aboriginal author, especially knowing the depth, the intricate knowledge, and the elaborate ceremonies that were the blue prints for the Dreamtime generation stories. Our first form of written history may be classed as 'post-colonial' but our stories could almost be described as 'post-history'.

In her book *Literary Formations: Post colonialism, Nationalism and Globalism* (1995), Anne Brewster says post-colonialism may be,

Useful when describing certain aspects of post-invasion culture in Australia, (such as the relationship between Australia and the United Kingdom or the West), as a discourse it has not been scrupulous in distinguishing between the very different formations of colonisation and the decolonisation in 'settler' and Indigenous cultures.⁶

Brewster understands fully the irrelevancy of the term post-colonialism to Aboriginal people generally, and writers specifically, and says that though her own studies she realised that, 'the discourses of post-colonialism and feminism diverged from that of Aboriginality.'⁷

Muecke agrees saying, 'Australia seems to be caught in a post-colonial syndrome, because, unlike America, independence has not been fully achieved either historically, through war for instance, or symbolically; the Fourth of July.'⁸ And while some advocates of the definition, like Samoan writer Albert Wendt,⁹ write out of what they say is the experience of being colonised, it is hard not to agree with Bruce Pascoe who says that 'All our writing is influenced by the stories and culture which have developed for 200,000 years. Colonial we aren't. Colonised we are.'

⁶ Anne Brewster, *Literary Formations: Post-colonialism, Nationalism, Globalism*, Melbourne University Press, 1995, p.19

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ Stephen Muecke, *Textual Spaces: Aboriginality and Cultural Studies*, UNSW Press, Kensington, 1992, p.10.

⁹ Albert Wendt, personal interview, 12 June 1997.

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