The Sacred in Australian Literature: An Introduction

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There can hardly be a more entrenched myth about Australia than the myth of its secularism.
The characteristic of a society sceptical of anything spiritual lies near the heart of the stereotype of the Australian identity itself: laicist, anti-intellectual, practical, grounded. This is curious because at one level—the political—the presence of the sacred, in the form of religious affiliation, has been ubiquitous: In the cultural and political polarity of Irish Catholic and Establishment Anglican churches, in the vigorous and formative intervention of church politics into Australian political life, one definition might see the role of the sacred as fundamental to Australian history.

The myth of secularism has nothing to say about the deep sectarian divisions of contemporary Australian culture, nor about the continuous and ongoing struggle in Australian faith communities, of all kinds, with received notions of the sacred. It has nothing to say about sacred practices in indigenous culture, about the influences of diasporic communities upon Australian society since the Second World War, nor about the ways women activists within religious institutions, and without, have been reshaping ideas of sacredness.

However, while it is still the case that the "sacred," in the form of religion, does not figure prominently in Australia's cultural imagination, this volume explores where and how the sacred does emerge in contemporary Australia: in the diversion of spiritual imagination in Australia away from institutional religion towards creative production; in the effects of indigenous sacred forms and practices on the Australian psyche; in the usurping of the time-honoured tenets of received religion by the spatial realities of post-colonial life. But most importantly these essays reveal the absolute persistence of ideas, experiences, and transformations of the sacred in literary writing.

Why is it important now to investigate the sacred in Australian literature? One obvious answer might be the paucity of discussion itself. Why is there so little critical discussion of such a pervasive and intensely realized topic in the literature? But another compelling reason is Australia's post-colonial identity. During the 1990s, debates concerning the traditional and sacred beliefs of colonized, indigenous, and marginalized peoples increased greatly in importance to post-colonial studies. Since the Enlightenment, the sacred has been an ambivalent area in most Western thinking, which has uniformly tended to privilege the secular. Secularity, economic rationalism, and progressivism have dominated Western thinking, while "the sacred" has so often been relegated to primitivism and the archaic (Chakrabarty, Scott, and Simpson-Housley).

At the end of the twentieth century, this situation began to change. Debates about the sacred became more urgent as issues such as land rights and rights to sacred beliefs and practices began to intensify. A paradigm shift is occurring in this area, particularly in post-colonial theory, bringing a new consideration of the complex, hybrid, and rapidly changing cultural formations of marginalized and first-world peoples, but also of Western nations confronted by the phenomenon of Islam in all its complexity. The sacred has followed the trajectory of other "denied knowledges," as Bhabha puts it, entering the dominant discourse and estranging "the basis of its authority—its rules of recognition" (Bhabha 114). This is why Australia, a former colony—marked by the tensions, conflicts, and ambivalences of imperial influence, increasingly transformed by the cultural practices of diasporic groups—finds itself in a climate in which ideas of the sacred and practices surrounding faith and belief are growing in intensity.

A misleading direction was given in post-colonial studies by Edward Said's well-known preference for "secular criticism" over what he called the "theological" bent of contemporary theory (1-30). Although by "theological" Said meant schools of contemporary theory that were dogmatic and bounded, that encouraged devotees and acolytes rather than rigorous criticism, this seemed to suggest that the theological and the sacred were not the province of enlightened post-colonial analysis. Such an assumption reminds us of the gap that often exists between the theoretical agenda of the Western academy and the interests of post-colonial societies themselves. The sacred has been an empowering feature of post-colonial experience in two ways: on one hand, indigenous
concepts of the sacred have been able to interpolate dominant conceptions of cultural identity; and on the other, Western forms of the sacred have often been appropriated and transformed as means of local empowerment.

In a complex and intensely mediated way both these features have been true of Australian experience. The sacred occupies the region of the repressed in Australian cultural life, and moments of cultural trauma demonstrate a return of the repressed, sometimes, as in the case of the Lindy Chamberlain affair, in quite violent ways. Complicated by an intense fascination with indigenous mythologies, with its losing battle to localize received European and imperial forms of religious observance, and with its reliance on the literary imagination to tap into this repressed energy, Australian culture has, like many other post-colonial societies, begun to encounter the sacred as a region of difference, transformation and empowerment.

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The cover of this issue is a painting by Aboriginal artist Lin Onus called “Balanda Rock Art,” which we see as indicative of some of the issues addressed in this volume. Onus is well known for the humor he brings to the very serious issues of racism, colonization, and marginalization, and this painting is a humorous and satirical play upon the notion of inscription. Aboriginal art and spirituality are characterized by inscription on the land and the body rather than by pictorial representation, and “Balanda Rock Art” alludes to the desecration of that sacred land by the graffiti and the detritus of modern life. The painting cunningly alludes to the concept of palimpsest popularized by Paul Carter: the sacred dynamism of Aboriginal place might be read as being defaced by the consumerist, self-regarding, and rubbish-producing “inscription” of white society, but is it also possible that they signal an indigenous people at home on country and enjoying, and maybe suffering in it “two ways”? Michael Taussig once defined the sacred as “that which can be defaced” and here the sacred, and perhaps sacrificially inscribed Aboriginal place, is “overwritten” by the graffiti of Australian secularism and consumerism. “The sacred” itself may be a continual process of realization, inscription, defacement, and uninscription, but in contemporary Australia it is also a region of contestation, hybridization, and discovery.

But “Balanda Rock Art” suggests another reason that the Australian sacred needs to be examined at this time—the growing significance of the Aboriginal sacred. Onus’s painting positions the viewer quite differently from the aerial perspective of the dot-paintings we commonly regard as authentic Aboriginal art. His landscape might be described as dystopic, in the sense that it is “rubbish” and “rubbished” country, desolate and inhospitable, repelling to the settler because it cannot be made holy, or productive, because it cannot be farmed or exploited (unless for minerals). Webb’s Leichhardt (Ashcroft) or White’s Voss might understand its sublime terror, its requirement of sacrifice, but for most Europeans it is country that challenges survival at a fundamental level.

Simultaneously, though, the rocks signify something much more homely and vital, and potentially supervital. Onus speaks in a different verbal and visual language: out of the rocks grow, miraculously, meticulously cross-hatched gum-trees marked, presumably, according to the rituals of his ancestral Arnhem Land culture. Such designs appear in the rock paintings of, for example, Kakadu, but their meanings, signalled to Europeans as sacred and restricted, often remain unspeakable for cultural reasons, and this is true here. Outsiders find it difficult to penetrate the codes, but Balanda (the Macassan generic term for white men, a transmogrification of Hollander, and in general use in the top-end by Aboriginal people to designate European Australians of mainly British and Irish descent) have learnt to accept that the markings may well have specialized meanings—one of the strange contradictions for supposedly secular contemporary Australia (Gelder and Jacobs).

Onus’s rocky Aboriginal landscape is not “a spacious horizon,” not “horizontal,” incomprehensibly vast and sublime in Ashcroft’s formulation of the settler perspective. It is an embracing landscape, and what is astonishing about it is that it is alive with powers; it nourishes life, literally in vital ways, and potentially and depending on context, not contradictorily, in supervital ways: the rocks may be just rocks, but they may also be related, and kin (Tamisari and Bradley). The Yanyuwa atlas (Devlin-Glass) makes clear that such outcrops of rocks potentially embody a different cultural logic: they may be just rocks, or they may be sacred, or better, supervital, and invested with palimpsestic layers of symbolism and history, the latter achieved by being camped on for generations. As Deborah Bird Rose notes: “It is one thing to know that nothing is nothing, but it is quite another thing to know what any given thing is (31).

If indeed these rocks or trees are a supervital phenomenon (the marking suggests so), then their power (for good or evil) is to be negotiated with, and not merely or even an aestheticized experience of landscape, or of affect evoked by the sublime. The rocks would have their own Law and nature, be bound by sets of rules; they will belong to one or other clan grouping, be associated with particular body designs; and because of the inherent power of forms that may have connections to the dreaming ancestors, those who own or are guardians of the territory will seek to express that power relationship in human and relational terms (Rose 53–8): by rituals of well-being, in formal and informal rhetorical greetings, by taking responsibility for country, by celebrating it, by claiming identity (“I am that rock; that is my mother’s mother”), by creating artifacts (song, dance, artwork) which honor it.

What is unspoken in this landscape, barely hinted at, and what Onus’s title alludes to is not just the extraordinary phenomenon of the painting—led cultural revival of Aboriginal self-esteem; the painting’s title satirically points to what is invisible in the painting; a much longer
tradition of petroglyphs and polychrome rock-art, a tradition stretching conservatively in some sites to a minimum of 13,000, and in some places, 24,600 years ago (Flood 148–73). This tradition is figured, but only in a gestural way, in the cross-hatched eucalypts. Such rock art is one of the modalities that Balanda tourism can (and does) celebrate (and exploit), and exposure to it may help to generate for some tourists an experience of the earthed sacred.

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This volume of essays represents a number of the many debates about sacredness that are circulating in contemporary Western theoretical and creative productions. In the late twentieth century, deliberations about the sacred have re-emerged with urgency in the light of global religious conflicts. In the academy, these debates are shaped across the twentieth century, and into the twenty-first, by the work of anthropologists (Emile Durkheim, Georges Bataille, René Girard, Deborah Bird Rose, Michael Taussig, John Bradley); philosophers (Emmanuel Levinas, Maurice Blanchot, Jacques Derrida, Giorgio Agamben); postmodern theologians and biblical scholars (Cupitt, Mark C. Taylor, David Tacey, Stephen Curpkpatrick, Dorothy Lee, Roland Boer); feminists (Daly, Radford Reuther, Schuessler Fiorenza, Kristeva, and Clément); and literary scholars alive to the many discourses of sacredness arising in creative production. Many of these theorists inform the essays in this volume.

However, as Frances Devlin-Glass’s essay on the Yanyuwa people of Northern Australia makes abundantly clear, the heritage and claims of indigenous peoples in Australia and across the globe are significant spur to new debates about sacredness, dramatically impelling Western thinkers to rethink the sacred: How do Enlightenment discourses of the sublime speak to issues of sacredness in a post-colonial nation (Ashcroft)? In what ways can Western non-indigenous observer ever know indigenous histories, beliefs, and practices (Devlin-Glass, Jacklin)? How do biblical concepts of justice permeate the modern, supposedly secular nation of Australia (Rooney, Jacklin)? Where do poetic, private, even idiosyncratic expressions of spirituality intersect with a public that is not necessarily seeking sacred discourse (McCadden, Rowe)? And how should the category of the sacred be interrogated for the ways in which it relates to, and sometimes threatens to efface, the political and material (McCann, Brady, Devlin-Glass)?

How poignantly and humorously Aboriginal artist Lin Onus (1948–1996) represents to Australians of all races the complexity of sacredness. The three editors of this volume have meditated on the cover image, “Balanda Rock Art,” for quite a while but haven’t come up with one view of it. Is sublimity represented in Onus’s landscape, a terror, placement and humbling of the individual? Is there disgust at the desecration of country and the self-betilting acts of graffiti by the balanda? Is there humor in Onus’s post-colonial hybridizing image, with its slender eucalypts springing from the gorgeous hot ochre rocks, literalizing as they do indigenous sacred understandings of kin and country in the striped trunks of the trees? Is there ambivalence in the balance between desecration and beauty? The viewer’s eyes move between the seemingly inevitable defacement by the cans and graffiti, to the plucky indigenous trees, to a blue that melts your heart, and back again.

This blue is reminiscent of but not equivalent to the blue of the old European masters and their incandescent skies that illuminated announcements or saints. In an August 2005 paper on the history of the color indigo, anthropologist Michael Taussig spoke of color as "transformativ flux" pulling the observer into the observed, and color as potently a part of the magical sacred. He also spoke of the ways in which color brings its pre-history with it into the modern world, just as the desires of empires for color, spices, textures can be seen in the history of words: indigo from India, muslin from Mosul, damask from Damascus. Just so, Onus’s blue is a quotation from where? Georgione? Van Eyck? Vermeer? But Onus’s blue sky is (at least to this editor) a different, Antipodean gesture towards the sacred: wide, seemingly endless acres of sky, achingly beautiful, transfixing; but intimately, quizzically related to the hot, defaceable earth too, in the same frame as the cans and graffiti, the political and material and messy strivings of peoples. The sky here, in Onus’s post-colonial Australia, offers a new horizon—amazing, azure, offering the possibility of sacred transformation, but not simply “beyond” the politics of earth and world.

Works Cited