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THE END OF EMPIRE?
Colonial and postcolonial journeys in children's books


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To read children's books of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is to read texts produced within a pattern of imperial culture. Works of the past, such as Tom Brown's Schooldays, The Water-Babies, and The Secret Garden, readily disclose the imperial ideologies that inform them. Thus, Hughes's depiction of schoolboy life at Rugby is framed by imperialism, not merely because Rugby's régime constitutes a training-ground for imperial adventures, as in the case of Tom's great friend East, who leaves the school to join his regiment in India, but also because the conceptual world in which the boys are located comprises two parts: home and abroad, center and margins, as Hughes's depiction of the tribe of Browns demonstrates: "For centuries, in their quiet, dogged, homespun way, [the Browns] have been subduing the earth in most English counties, and leaving their mark in American forests and Australian uplands" (13). In The Water-Babies, Kingsley's mobilization of imperial ideologies is distinguished by its convergence of categories of race and class. When Tom climbs down the wrong chimney to arrive in Ellie's room and catches sight of himself in a mirror, he sees "a little ugly, black, ragged figure, with bleared eyes and grinning white teeth" (19). Here, the grime of the chimney, a signifier of Tom's lowly position within the domestic economy, is mapped onto the blackness of peoples colonized by British imperialism. Conversely, Tom's ascent to the middle class is coterminous with his transformation into a white imperial man: "[he] can plan railroads, and steam-engines, and electric telegraphs, and rifled guns, and so forth" (243–44). And in The Secret Garden, Frances Hodgson Burnett represents India as a space marked by disorder, danger, and sickness, so that Mary's return to Britain restores her to physical and psychic health (see Cadden; Phillips).
In these texts, the lands and indigenous peoples “out there” in the far reaches of the British Empire are “Othered” in order to produce and sustain an idea fundamental to colonial discourse: that Europe (and, in these three texts, Britain) is the norm by which other countries and peoples are judged. Not that the process of “Othering” is an unproblematic one—indeed, colonial discourse is shot through with anxieties concerning what Peter Hulme calls “the classic colonial triangle, . . . the relationship between European, native and land” (1). Thus, for example, discourses of Christianity, some of which promote the equality of all people as children of God, frequently clash with colonial discourse, which promotes the superiority of white over colored peoples, and so validates the appropriation of land (see Bradford). Nevertheless, despite their moments of uncertainty and their occasional resistance to dominant ideologies, colonial texts are by and large organized through such binary oppositions as self and other, civilized and savage, white and black.

Postcolonial texts are marked by a more complex and contradictory set of discursive practices, some of which this discussion seeks to identify and analyze. Although the post of postcolonial is sometimes read merely as a temporal marker separating a period of colonial rule from the time after it, many theorists have pointed to the cultural and historical differences that are concealed by such a monolithic term, and to the fact that in countries with colonial histories (such as North America, South Africa, India, Australia), the consequences of colonial rule are played out in contemporary struggles over power and especially over land (McClintock 9–14; Dirlik 503–4; Ghandi 1–5). Accordingly, my use of the term postcolonial recognizes the shifting and uncertain significances that attend references to the imperial project.

A feature common in newly independent states after colonialism is what Leela Ghandi terms “postcolonial amnesia” (4), in which painful events of the colonial period are “forgotten.” After Australia achieved nationhood in 1901, for example, there followed what the anthropologist W. E. H. Stanner described in 1968 as “a cult of forgetfulness practised on a national scale” (25), an eloquent silence regarding Aborigines and the violence and dispossession that they endured following white settlement. Most Australian children’s texts produced in the first few decades of the twentieth century omit Aborigines from accounts of Australian history or reconfigure historical events to produce stories of white heroism and black savagery, thus positioning child readers to see themselves as citizens of a white Australia and the inheritors of a tradition of pioneer endeavor. Such strategies seek to elide aspects of the past in order to produce a new national identity. But the past is not so easily forgotten, especially by peoples formerly colonized. For as Edward Said notes, interpretations of the present frequently involve the rereading of the past in an attempt to discover “whether the past really is past, over and concluded, or whether it continues, albeit in different
forms” (Culture and Imperialism 1). The colonial past is variously rehearsed, reinscribed, and contested in postcolonial children’s texts, and it is increasingly a site of tension, producing different and conflicting significances. There are two reasons for this: first, the influence of subaltern writing, which seeks to recover the voices of colonized people and tell their stories; and, second, the fact that strategies of silence and forgetting merely repress colonial memories, the recovery of which is frequently painful and confrontational.

Tropes of journeying and travel are prominent in postcolonial texts, many of which rehearse, reexamine, and parody the historical journeys of colonialism. In this discussion I consider two British texts: Roald Dahl’s Charlie and the Chocolate Factory (first published in 1964) and Penelope Lively’s The House in Norham Gardens (1974), books as far apart from each other as can be imagined but that thematize aspects of the relations between empire and colonies. As instances of “the Empire writing back,” I have selected two Australian texts, Pat Lowe and Jimmy Pike’s Jimmy and Pat Meet the Queen (1997) and Tobby Riddle’s Royal Guest (1993), and a New Zealand text, Paula Boock’s Sasscat (1994). In all five texts, characters undertake journeys to or from Britain: the Oompa-Loompas, in Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, travel from Loompaland to the imperial center, located in Willy Wonka’s chocolate factory; in The House in Norham Gardens, fourteen-year-old Clare becomes obsessed by the journey of her anthropologist great-grandfather to New Guinea in 1905. Both Jimmy and Pat Meet the Queen and The Royal Guest focus on visits by Queen Elizabeth to Australia, and in Sasscat, Win, a young New Zealander, travels to London, and her sister, Sass, dreams of becoming an astronaut. These journeys rework the themes of place and displacement that are so common in postcolonial literatures (see Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 9), but the ideologies of the five texts are far from uniform. For although postcolonialism might seem to be invested with notions of progressivism and transition to a brave new world, in fact postcolonial texts display the heterogeneity of postcolonial cultures, with their traces of colonialism, their mix of complicity with and resistance to colonial ideologies (Hodge and Mishra xi–xii), and their spasmodic irruptions of neocolonialism.

As Bob Dixon pointed out in his groundbreaking work Catching Them Young (1977), Charlie and the Chocolate Factory works as “a paradigm of imperialism” (110), with Willy Wonka exercising imperial power over the colonized Oompa-Loompas. Dixon is quite correct to see Charlie and the Chocolate Factory as adhering to the ideologies of nineteenth-century novels of colonial adventure, but there are important distinctions to be made: Dahl wrote Charlie in the 1960s, well after the disintegration of the British Empire; and though the heroes of Haggard, Marryat, and Henty travel from Britain to the strange and barbaric lands “out there” in the empire and back again to the safety of Britain, the Oompa-Loompas are brought from their home in Loompaland to work in Willy Wonka’s
chocolate factory. Dahl’s version of the journey thus involves the displacement of colonized people and their mass transportation to the imperial center, to be commodified as cheap labor. Indeed, the Oompa-Loompas signify two kinds of displacement: they displace the local workforce sacked by Willy Wonka, and they themselves are displaced from Loompaland. Dahl sidesteps the first kind of displacement by treating workers as mere cogs in Willy Wonka’s machine, not as people and even less as individuals. And the Oompa-Loompas’ displacement from their homeland is elided through Dahl’s representation of Loompaland, in whose jungles lurk dangerous creatures such as hornswogglers, snozzwangers, and whangdoodles, and where the Oompa-Loompas can find nothing but green caterpillars to eat. In this way, Dahl constructs the home of the colonized as a place characterized by absence and poverty (specifically of cacao beans), so that the Oompa-Loompas’ voyage to Willy Wonka’s factory, smuggled in “large packing cases with holes in them” (68), is an insignificant price to pay for the privilege of working for Willy Wonka and of being supplied with cacao beans and alcoholic beverages such as butterscotch and buttergin.

Dahl’s treatment of the Oompa-Loompas exactly conforms with Edward Said’s description of the ways in which the West has rationalized colonial processes with claims that colonized people were “provided with order and a kind of stability that they haven’t been able . . . to provide for themselves” (Culture 23). Within this fiction of Western benevolence and generosity, colonized peoples are represented as recipients of largesse; homogenized and robbed of individuality, they exist as a discursive figure, “them” as distinct from “us,” whose duty it is to appreciate the magnanimity with which they have been treated. Such a “leap to essences and generalizations” (Culture 24) effectively elides the variety and specificity of colonial experience, suppressing, for example, the histories of colonized peoples sold to the slave trade or exploited as cheap labor in various parts of the British Empire. Willy Wonka’s Oompa-Loompas are effectively enslaved, but through the mediating figure of Willy Wonka, Dahl positions children to read their enslavement as reward and privilege.

This strategy can be seen most clearly in the episode in which Willy Wonka relates the story of his discovery and “liberation” of the Oompa-Loompas. The children and adults who are taken on their tour of the factory first see the Oompa-Loompas from a distance, in a narrator-focalized sequence. The following exchange serves as a transition to Willy Wonka’s first-person narrative:

“Oompa-Loompas!” everyone said at once. “Oompa-Loompas!”
“Imported direct from Loompaland,” said Mr Wonka proudly.
“There’s no such place,” said Mrs Salt.
“Excuse me, dear lady, but . . .”
“Mr Wonka,” cried Mrs Salt. “I’m a teacher of geography . . .”

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“Then you’ll know all about it,” said Mr Wonka. “And oh, what a terrible country it is....”

Whereas Mrs Salt is incontrovertibly an adult, Willy Wonka, an “extraordinary little man” (57), his face “alight with fun and laughter” (57), is attributed with qualities intended to persuade child readers that he is one of them, aligned with them against adults (and specifically teachers) such as Mrs Salt. The contrast between Mrs Salt and Willy Wonka is an epistemological one as well: whereas Mrs Salt knows theory (the “facts” of geography), Willy Wonka’s knowledge is based on his practical experience of Loompaland. Through these strategies, Willy Wonka is established as a figure who speaks authoritatively to implied child readers about the Oompa-Loompas and their land.

Wonka’s depiction of the Oompa-Loompas (66–68) proposes a series of oppositions between himself (as ideal and idealized imperialist) and his colonized workforce. Wonka is, first of all, knowing, whereas even the leader of the tribe of Oompa-Loompas is unable to understand anything beyond his physical symptoms of hunger. Contrasting values attach to place: Wonka’s pride in the glories of his factory, compared with the Oompa-Loompas’ readiness to leave their homeland. Wonka is an adult, the Oompa-Loompas perpetual children; Wonka an amused observer, the Oompa-Loompas objects of his colonizing gaze. Above all, the Oompa-Loompas are promoted to child readers as ideals of how colonized peoples should behave toward their imperial lords: they are satisfied, hardworking, and grateful; moreover, they never forget their colonial place, wearing the clothing that marks them as primitives: “They still wear the same kind of clothes they wore in the jungle. They insist upon that” (68). Racialized and objectified as Others, the Oompa-Loompas are thus distinguished from the book’s implied readers, who are positioned as “normal” subjects, citizens whose clothing and way of life mark them as being at home in Britain in a way the Oompa-Loompas are not. Dahl’s representation of colonized peoples suggests, by inference, that native peoples who turn against imperial rule, or who reject the subservience modeled by the Oompa-Loompas, contravene a model of social and imperial interactions naturalized as correct and appropriate. Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, produced in the decade following a dramatic increase in the migration of West Indian, African, and Asian people to Britain, and six years after the anti-black riots in Notting Hill and Nottingham, thus proposes a social and economic structure that treats colonial workers as unskilled and poorly paid factory fodder.

In its promotion of colonialism, its homogenization of the colonized, and its strategies of Othering, Charlie and the Chocolate Factory harks back to texts of the nineteenth century; in contrast, Penelope Lively’s House in Norham Gardens displays many of the tensions and uncertainties of
postcolonialism, within a complex and subtle narrative. Both texts play with what Mary Louise Pratt refers to as the “contact zone,” the “space of colonial encounters” (6) where colonizers and those colonized meet and negotiate relations of power and influence. 

Charlie and the Chocolate Factory promotes the idea that colonial hierarchies are maintained “at home”—that is, in Willy Wonka’s factory—just as they were “out there” in Loompaland. The House at Norham Gardens, in contrast, sets one contact zone against another through its shifts in time and place, between 1970s Britain and colonial New Guinea. Clare Mayfield, the protagonist of the novel, lives with her two great-aunts in an Oxford house that constitutes a time capsule of imperialism, for it is filled with the objects and records of Clare’s great-grandfather, an anthropologist who “went to queer places and brought things back” (21). Clare discovers in the attic a tamburan, a carved shield from New Guinea, and becomes absorbed by the historical and cultural significances of this object, finally donating it to the Natural History Museum, where it is incorporated into the collection named after her great-grandfather. The tamburan is the central symbol within the novel’s exploration of cultural and historical difference, a strand of meaning that intersects with two others: Clare’s own sense of becoming an adult who is both like and unlike her fourteen-year-old self, and themes of aging, physical change, and death, centered on “the aunts.”

Within its contrapuntal organization, The House in Norham Gardens circles around symbols and ideas connected with space and time. The house itself, a nineteen-room Victorian marooned among new buildings and old buildings converted into flats, is remote from modernity, since Clare’s aunts live quietly in their library, reading and observing; the house is replete with the past in the form of old photographs, china, books and a lavatory “in brown mahogany with the bowl encircled in purple flowers and a cistern called ‘The Great Niagara’” (18). While the narrative chronologically follows a few months (from winter to spring) in Clare’s life, a series of flashbacks at the beginning of each chapter traces the process of colonization in the New Guinea village from which the tamburan originates: the coming of Europeans to the village in 1905, the destabilization of an ancient culture, the destruction of forests, the loss of cultural identity, the tribe’s journey to modernity. Or, rather, this is how the narrative represents colonization, and the how of Lively’s representation discloses the limitations of the epistemology on which it relies.

Whereas Dahl’s treatment of the Oompa-Loompas trumpets the inferiority of the colonized, Lively’s depiction of the New Guinea tribe is tinged with regret and nostalgia, as can be seen in the first of the novel’s descriptions of the valley:

There is an island. At the heart of the island there is a valley. In the valley, among blue mountains, a man kneels before a piece of wood. He paints on it—sometimes with a fibre brush, sometimes
with his finger. The man himself is painted: bright dyes—red, yellow, black—on brown skin. . . . The year is 1900: in England Victoria is queen. The man is remote from England in distance by half the circumference of the world: in understanding, by five thousand years.

The island, the valley, the mountains, the kneeling man, are objects of a Eurocentric gaze that describes and evaluates them in relation to their remoteness from England. The narrative itself, implying the existence of a knowing observer, inscribes the valley, and the painted man, as vulnerable to the encroachment of modernity. At the same time, the mobilization of a temporal contrast (“The man is remote from England . . . by five thousand years”) enacts a vast and unbridgeable gap between the narrator and the painted man. In its authoritativeness, its knowingness, its emphasis on difference, this passage mobilizes the discursive strategies of Orientalism, which, in Said’s terms, defines itself through “the whole complex series of knowledgeable manipulations” (Orientalism 40) through which it orders the study of the Orient. In Lively’s descriptions of the village, the New Guinea tribesmen are represented, in their pre-colonized state, as living in a coherent and ordered society—they “celebrate the mystery of life with ritual” (37). But their culture is defined and fixed through its difference. They have “known no influences, learned no skills” (37)—that is, they have known no influences and learned no skills defined as such by the narrator, whose knowledge and ideological stance are naturalized as normative.

The system of knowledge invoked here is that of anthropology—more specifically, the model of social anthropology prominent in 1974, when The House in Norham Gardens was published. The following comments by the Australian anthropologist Gillian Cowlishaw describe how anthropology was mobilized in Australia to “manage” what was commonly called “the Aboriginal problem,” but they refer more broadly to the uses to which it was put in former colonies: “From its establishment as a university based discipline there was an underlying, unstated moral task associated with studies of [indigenous] culture. This was that anthropology would supply expert knowledge about that culture that would be used to develop appropriate policy. . . .” (22). In exactly the same way, Lively’s description of the New Guinea tribe constructs an “expert knowledge” of what is in the best interests of the tribe. Here is the final episode in the story of the tribe’s colonization:

Houses are built for the tribe, and roads. They learn how to drive cars, use telephones, tin-openers, matches and screwdrivers. They are given laws that they must obey: they are not to kill one another and they must pay their taxes. They listen to the radio and they make
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no more tamburans, but their nights are rich with dreams. The children of the tribe learn how to read and write: they sit at wooden desks with their heads bent low over sheets of paper, and make marks on the paper. One day, they will discover again the need for tamburans, and they will make a new kind of tamburan for themselves, and for their children, and their children's children.

(165)

The underlying assumptions of this passage are that Western laws will prevent bloodshed (“they are not to kill one another”) and that the members of the tribe will embrace the icons of the Western lifestyle (houses, cars, telephones, tin-openers). If their entry into modernity precludes the making of tamburans, the gift of literacy will eventually enable the children of the tribe to “make a new kind of tamburan,” but this will be possible only because of their deployment of Western systems of knowledge.

This story of colonization intersects with a series of dreams in which Clare observes the tribesmen seeking the return of their tamburan. As her dreams increase in urgency and intensity, they symbolize Clare's own groping after subjectivity; more important for this discussion, they expose the error of her great-grandfather in taking the tamburan from the tribesmen, who had at first believed that their European visitors were tribal ancestors. Significantly, Clare seeks a solution through an appeal to anthropological knowledge. Her Ugandan friend John Sempebwa is established within the text as an authority on native peoples: he is himself, he says, a “detribalized African” (75); moreover, he is a student of anthropology. When he tells Clare that the New Guinea tribes “stop making tamburans ... as soon as they've jumped into the twentieth century.... They seem to forget how, or why they did it” (99), the principle of cultural discontinuity is promoted: that colonialism has effected a decisive split from the traditional culture of the painted man who created the tamburan. Clare's conclusion that “If it can't be where it belongs, then a museum is the best place” (169) implies that there is no longer any “where,” so that the museum, and the disciplinary formations of anthropology, become custodians of the object and its cultural meanings.

Lively's representation of the New Guinea tribe is, of course, a far more progressive representation of colonial relations than that encoded in Charlie and the Chocolate Factory. But twenty-five years after its publication, its faultlines are clearly visible. The New Guinea tribesmen (and the figures of Clare's dreams are, true to the phallocentric traditions of anthropology, always male) are consigned to the past of primitivism; the sense of loss and regret that permeates Lively's depiction of the tribe enacts the meaning, implied throughout the novel, that the painted man represents the true and authentic culture of the tribe, a culture preserved only through anthropological knowledge, and specifically by museums. In Lively's descriptions
of the colonization of the tribe, the New Guineans are attributed no agency, no capacity for reflexivity or adaptability, but wait passively for the return of the ancestors. Gillian Cowlishaw’s summary of anthropological models of the 1960s and 1970s is strikingly close to the mood and tone that permeate Lively’s depiction of the tribe: “The metaphor of destruction became intrenched, fixing the complex, ongoing events of colonisation into a one way process of collapse to which the appropriate response is passive sorrow” (25). The novel is thus caught between its contestation of the imperial past (exemplified by Clare’s great-grandfather) and its privileging of modernity as a dynamic, protean, complex state that, paradoxically, needs primitivism as its opposite term, objectified as the embodiment of stillness, simplicity, and fixedness. The House in Norham Gardens concludes with Clare looking intently at her aged and beloved aunts and realizing that what she is doing is “learning them by heart,” memorizing them against the time when they are dead. For the New Guinea tribesmen, on the other hand, there are dreams, but no memories; there is a dim consciousness of tradition and a nostalgia for it, but the culture is incapable of adapting and transforming itself.

In Jimmy and Pat Meet the Queen, written by Pat Lowe and illustrated by Jimmy Pike, colonization does not effect a rift of memory; instead, traditional knowledge, tested against the land of its production, constitutes a proof of tribal identity in contemporary Australia. Jimmy is “a Walmajarri man,” from the Great Sandy Desert in Western Australia; Pat, his wife, “comes from England.” The conjunction of histories and traditions exemplified in the partnership of Jimmy and Pat allows for broad comedy based on contrasted modes of speaking and thinking, but Jimmy and Pat is a hybrid text in other respects as well. It is at once a tract on land ownership in Australia and an illustrated book; its implied readers constitute a combination of older children, adolescents, and adults; its narrative combines the standard English of Pat with the Creole used by Jimmy in conversational exchanges; its illustrations draw on traditions of Aboriginal art but depict aspects of contemporary life. In these ways it exemplifies “transculturation,” the term used by Pratt to describe how colonized and formerly colonized people engage in negotiations between their own culture and that of their colonizers (6).

As I’ve noted, an important line of resistance to earlier literary and cultural studies of colonialism is embodied in subaltern studies, described by Leela Ghandi as “an attempt to allow the ‘people’ finally to speak . . . and, in so doing, to speak for, or to sound the muted voices of, the truly oppressed” (2). Jimmy and Pat Meet the Queen alludes to the dispossession experienced by Aboriginal people, but its insouciance and subversive wit are anything but muted. On learning that the land of his people is regarded by kartiya (white) law as Vacant Crown Land, Jimmy invites the queen to prove her ownership by one concrete and decisive test: that she knows where to find water in “her” desert. The queen agrees to travel to Walmajarri country,
and after a long search she concludes that she is indeed unable to locate any waterholes and that the land belongs to "the Walmajarri mob" (29).

In *The House in Norham Gardens*, tribal knowledge and traditions are represented as failing to survive colonization, so that they can be preserved only within systems of Western knowledge; in *Jimmy and Pat*, in contrast, Western epistemologies are pitted against the ancient and continuous traditions of the Walmajarri, whose knowledge is based on the land itself and on ritual journeys undertaken over many thousands of years. The nostalgia that informs Lively's depiction of the New Guinea tribe derives from an Orientalist emphasis on the primitive nature of their culture, which is quarantined in a past that is discontinuous with modernity. The Aboriginal culture promoted in *Jimmy and Pat* combines traditional beliefs and knowledge with elements of contemporary Western culture: Jimmy and Pat's letter asserting Walmajarri ownership of the land makes the sly suggestion that the queen "may be glad to get away from [her] family for a while" (9); the Walmajarri people follow their traditional journey in a Suzuki and a Toyota. This hybridity is a marker of a set of cultural forms at once fully Aboriginal and selectively modern.

*Jimmy and Pat* displaces colonial hierarchies through its juxtaposition of standard and Aboriginal English and its mobilization of intertextual references. Here, the queen meets Jimmy and Pat at their desert camp:

> Then a door in the [helicopter] opened, and out stepped the Queen of England.
> Jimmy and Pat walked forward to greet her. Jimmy held out his hand while Pat tried to do a curtesy in her King Gees.
> "Hello old woman," said Jimmy, and Pat gave him a hard nudge in the ribs.
> The Queen took Jimmy's hand. "How do you do?" she said, with her gracious smile.
> "Do what?" Jimmy asked Pat.
> "She means how are you going," Pat explained, on tenterhooks in case either of them said the wrong thing.
> Jimmy turned back to the Queen. "I'm right," he said.

(12)

For Australian readers, this episode evokes the newsreels, photographs, news reports, and verbal commentaries that have always surrounded royal visits to this country. In particular, it recalls the iconic moments when the queen emerges from car, plane or train, to be greeted by her Australian subjects. Usually, such moments are pictured within the broader context of a watching crowd or a line of dignitaries awaiting their turn to be blessed by the royal presence; here, the queen walks alone into the desert, so that the book's implied readers are interpellated as the observers of a scene at once
familiar and strange. The queen enacts the rituals of royal visits through the “gracious smile” that strategically ignores Jimmy’s “Hello old woman” and through the greeting “How do you do?,” but in taking the final “do” as a transitive verb, and responding “Do what?,” Jimmy subverts the queen’s reliance on a formulaic phrase intended to maintain social hierarchies and insists on locating speech within a context of interpersonal relations.

Jimmy Pike’s illustration of the camp where the trio sleep deploys an aerial perspective. For all its apparent artlessness, this picture subverts hierarchies of power and race through its positioning of the queen, in her swag, placed alongside the figures of Jimmy and Pat in their shared swag, and against the white ground of the page. If the queen is at the same level as Jimmy and Pat within a democracy of desert life, she is allowed a signifier of royalty in the tiara that is placed neatly by her, but this is not the only sign that distinguishes her from her companions: her two corgis sleep near her, while Jimmy and Pat’s hunting dog sleeps at Jimmy’s feet; and her high-heeled shoes, so inappropriate to desert use, invite comparison with the serviceable footwear of Jimmy and Pat. Pike’s deployment of a limited number of forms and participants is a feature common in traditional art, which “[uses] a minimalist system of classification to establish a complex network of connections that in Western traditions is associated with metaphor” (Hodge and Mishra 96). In this picture, the key elements are the human and animal participants, seen within a set of relations that displace Western notions of social status. The figure of the queen is smaller than those of Jimmy and Pat, suggesting that despite her tiara she is young in the ways of the desert and in need of the guidance of her companions.

When, finally, the moment of testing comes, and the queen must identify the waterholes that will prove whether she is the owner of the land, the broad humor of the following exchange relies on slippages and contrasts between registers:

The Queen put her lorgnette up to her eyes and gazed out over the country, but for the life of her she couldn’t see any water. “There are no waterholes!” she declared.

“Bullshit!” said Jimmy, and Pat grimaced into the bushes.

“There’s a waterhole that way, and another waterhole that way, and another waterhole right there!” He flung out his arm in different directions as he spoke.

“And cowpoo to you too!” said the Queen. “There’s not a drop of water to be seen! This is a desert!”

“Well, I’ll show you!” said Jimmy.

(27)

The queen’s declarations “There are no waterholes!” and “This is a desert” insist on the primacy of Western (and queenly) knowledge, but her
invention of “And cowpoo to you too,” in response to Jimmy’s “Bullshit!” traces a shift from “high English” to a demotic register, enacting a destabilization of hierarchies. Following the group’s collective action of digging in the region of a waterhole, her response to the discovery of water is a thoroughly colloquial one: “‘Well, I’ll be buggered!’ said the Queen” (29).

The quest for water, with its associated competition between the queen and the Walmajarri people, can be understood within schemata of Western folk literature; but the outcome of the quest, and the narrative’s validation of Walmajarri ownership of the land, are loaded with ironies that undercut notions of an ending in which all live “happily ever after.” This is signaled on the inside front cover of the book, where conventional statements concerning the truth or otherwise of narratives are parodied in the following words: “All the people and places in this book are real. The story is true, although most of it hasn’t happened yet.” With considerable lightness of touch, Lowe here alludes to the historical and political contexts to which the narrative relates: the stories of dispossession and appropriation that it evokes and the long struggle by indigenous Australians for recognition as the original owners of the land and for continuing rights to it. Most of all, Jimmy and Pat Meet the Queen insists on the capacity of Aboriginal culture to transform its repertoire of textual and artistic forms. This is a far cry from Lively’s representation of an indigenous culture reliant for its preservation on Western systems of knowledge.

Tohby Riddle’s The Royal Guest also tells the story of a visit by Queen Elizabeth to Australia, but this text discloses another set of postcolonial significances that refer to Australia’s history as a settler colony. Colonial distinctions between white settlers and Aborigines relied on hierarchies of value that placed Aboriginal people at the lower end of the Chain of Being and, following Darwin’s Origin of Species, as a race locked into an early stage of human evolution. But distinctions of a different sort always attended comparisons between British people who settled in Australia and who gradually came to see themselves as “Australians,” and inhabitants of the imperial center. Some of these distinctions manifest themselves in comparisons between the culture and refinement of Britain and a rough-and-ready Australian culture; others insist on the vitality and health of the New World, compared with an effete and exhausted Old World. Riddle’s story, which comprises an account of “the last visit of the Queen,” when “times were tough” and “people were wondering if the costs of such a visit could be managed,” alludes to these comparisons and dismantles them.

The queen in The Royal Guest is parodically represented as a collection of features: she wears a sensible blue coat, serviceable brown shoes, white gloves, and a benign expression, and she carries a handbag. Riddle’s narrative, unfolded in a deadpan style, tells how “a Mrs. Jones of Padstow” offers to billet the queen during her visit to Sydney: “She had plenty of room
and a comfortable inflatable mattress that the Queen was welcome to. She need only bring her sleeping bag.” The *faux-naïve* quality of Riddle’s text is replicated in the accompanying illustration, which shows the figure of Mrs. Jones performing a deictic function by pointing to her house, which is defined by the details of its exterior as a working-class home of the 1950s: its neat, bungalow-type style, the featured cactus in a pot near the door, the decorative butterfly under the house number, the diamond-shaped panes of glass set in the front door, and the metal gate behind which Mrs. Jones stands.

In the narrative that follows, the queen, carrying her rolled-up sleeping bag, arrives by plane and proceeds to the bus stop, where she catches the bus to Padstow, “go[ing] over her speeches to the nation in her head” during the trip. She spends the evening playing cards with Mrs. Jones and her friend; on the following day, after some moments of anxiety occasioned by the illness of Mrs. Jones’s cat, the queen gives a public address before returning by train to Mrs. Jones’s home. She is awoken the next morning by “the sound of cartoons on the television,” but the Jones children are sent outside to play so as not to disturb her. To thank Mrs. Jones for her hospitality, the queen gives her one of her old crowns, and the narrative concludes with the queen continuing the royal tour to Melbourne, “where she would be staying with the Bradley family of Footscray,” another working-class suburb. The comedy of *The Royal Guest* derives from the incongruities that it implies, particularly those between the queen’s wealth, fame, and social class and her relocation within the habitus of working-class life. Catching a bus to Padstow, and seated behind a small boy licking an ice cream and in front of a sleeping elderly man, the queen is represented as neither more nor less than an elderly woman, connected to the other participants in the illustration by their common use of bus travel, in which social status is subordinated to the physical organization of the public transport system. Similarly, the queen is incongruously incorporated into the Jones household, whose physical and social interactions are wildly different from those customarily associated with royal life. Thus, Mrs. Jones, her friend, and the queen sit cozily around the kitchen table playing cards; the queen is obliged to hold the family’s sick cat on her knee as Mrs. Jones takes her to meet the prime minister; and the Jones children perch on the end of the queen’s inflatable mattress as they watch their morning cartoons.

In different but related ways, *Jimmy and Pat Meet the Queen* and *The Royal Guest* construct ironic reversals of other journeys, colonial and postcolonial. In *Jimmy and Pat*, the queen is thrust into a landscape and culture that are alien to her and that expose the shallowness of her knowledge in comparison with the deep knowledge of the “Walmajarri mob”; shadowing the queen’s displacement are the colonial stories in which Aboriginal people were removed from their lands and forced to live in alien country. *The Royal Guest* builds its understated comedy out of the queen’s
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insertion into the frugal world of the Jones family, but through his deployment of 1950s settings, Riddle collapses two journeys: the triumphant progress of the young queen throughout Australia in 1954, following her coronation, and “the last visit of the Queen,” when “times were tough.” The scenes of adulation that surrounded the queen in 1954 thus shadow the surreal comedy of her visit to Padstow, plotting the social change that has seen a move toward republicanism and away from traditional associations with Britain. Nevertheless, the failure of Australians to approve the 1999 referendum on whether Australia would become a republic with an Australian head of state exemplifies the extent to which the colonial past signifies values such as “safety” and “reliability” at a time of rapid social change.

Most of all, both books insist on the radical instability of the sign “queen” in contemporary Australia. In Jimmy and Pat, the queen is associated with the legal category “Vacant Crown Land,” a phrase that reflects Australia’s dependence on the British legal system. In Jimmy’s terms, the land is not vacant (being occupied by the Walmajarri people), and the idea that it belongs to the queen is patently silly in the face of her inability to locate waterholes, so that the sign “queen” signifies powerful tensions between colonial history and Aboriginal traditions. In both Jimmy and Pat and The Royal Guest, the queen is relocated in settings devoid of signifiers of royalty, power, and social class, except for the tiara that she discards for her desert journey and the “old crown” that she gives Mrs. Jones. Without such signifiers, she becomes merely a person—a somewhat inept tourist in Jimmy and Pat and, in The Royal Guest, a temporary member of the Jones family. And this separation of the sign “queen” from signifiers relating to Australia’s historical links with Britain argues for a redefinition both of “queen” and of “Australia.” Whereas Dahl’s Oompa-Loompas are figures of fun within a schema that locates them at the margins of British culture, the Queen is displaced from the metropolitan center and reconstrued as a figure marginal to Australian and Aboriginal cultures.

Paula Boock’s Sasscat thematizes a journey from New Zealand to Britain that involves another form of postcolonial displacement. Sass and Win Abbott have always preferred to believe that they are adopted; their parents Madge and Pete, whom they call “the Pets,” seem to them to be so utterly ordinary, so devoid of sophistication and good taste, that the girls have invented for themselves elaborate histories to account for their sense of having been “cruelly planted in a low income, low IQ family in the backblocks of New Zealand” (8). In fact, Win turns out to have been adopted as an infant, whereas Sass finds, to her consternation, that she is the natural daughter of “the Pets.” Accordingly, Win journeys to London to search for her mother, while Sass remains at home through her summer holidays, which are a time of waiting: for Win to return, for the results of her School Certificate examination, for her developing sense of a subjectivity that does not depend on her relationship with Win. These months of apparent hiatus,
like the similar period during which Clare dreams of New Guinea tribesmen in *The House in Norham Gardens*, involve a sequence of significant moments when through empathy, self-assertion, and reflection Sass becomes an active subject in her world.

The narrative see-saw between Sass and Win, signaled through the letters and stories they exchange, enacts a set of comparisons and contrasts between New Zealand and Britain, Arawa (where Sass lives) and London, the Abbots and the Lowells, Win’s “other” family. Sass’s sense of imprisonment with “the Pets” is metonymic of her imprisonment within a New Zealand that seems parochial, backward, remote from the metropolitan center. Conversely, Win’s flight to discover her mother is that most postcolonial of quests, a search for origins and beginnings that promises her a sense of her own reality. In the following excerpts, Win writes of her discovery of her mother, and Sass responds:

They [the Lowells] live in Chelsea—it’s very posh there. All I know is that Edward works in ‘the City’—that’s finance, and the twins go to public (that’s private) school. Eleanor said of course you understand I was very young and it seemed the Right Thing to Do.... I love the name Lowell—don’t you think it’s much more literary than Abbott? Maybe it could be my pen name.... Anyway, I’ll write more about the E-Lowells after tomorrow. You can pass this on to the Pets if you like—it saves me writing twice.

I am thrilled your mother is infinitely superior to all other mothers you’ve endured in the past.... Lowell is indeed a far more literary, aristocratic and intelligent, cultured, English, snooty bloody polo-playing surname than the lowly Abbott you’ve suffered for the past eighteen years. It is of course the name of nobody remotely related to you, but then neither is Abbott.... Sasha Catriona Abbott (another pretentiously named peasant from the colonies.)

Win’s description of the Lowells discloses a set of implied contrasts with her New Zealand family: their “posh” Chelsea setting against the Abbots’ humble home in Arawa; their wealth and privilege against Madge and Pete’s occupations (respectively, cleaner and bus driver); the “literariness” that Win projects onto the name “Lowell,” against the “appalling Woolworths paintings” (13) with which Madge and Pete decorate their home. And, of course, this cluster of contrasts constitutes part of the larger contrast between Britain as metropolitan center and New Zealand as colonial outpost. Sass’s response ironically accords with Win’s view but dismantles it through
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her insistence on the slipperiness of signifiers. Thus, the “poshness” that Win admires is re-visioned by Sass, who sees “Lowell” as a “snooty, bloody polo-playing surname.” And Sass’s treatment of the signifier “mother,” which carries the colonial associations of “mother England” as well as of Win’s discovery of her birth mother, insists on Madge’s role as adoptive mother (guiltily sidestepped by Win) and, most tellingly, on Win’s appropriation of a name (that of her birth mother’s husband) to which she has no connection. Sass’s self-description as “another pretentiously named peasant from the colonies” is a characteristically postcolonial ploy, simultaneously acknowledging the marginality of the colonial and mocking the center’s pretensions. This exchange dismantles the colonial idea that self-realization can be achieved through a return to the ancestral certainty of Britain; moreover, Sass’s subversive reading of the name Lowell undermines the very notion of “center” and “margins.”

At the end of the novel, Win returns to Arawa, though temporarily, since she has obtained employment in London (ironically, through an old friend of Pete’s). To Sass’s question concerning which name she will use (Abbott or Lowell), Win responds as follows:

Sass gave a half-smile. “What’s wrong with Lowell?”
“What’s wrong with Lowell?” Win repeated. . . . “Lowell means classist, sexist, racist. Lowell means stiff upper lip and hide the illegitimate daughter. Lowell means what a shame about your accent dear, and here’s a nice, fat cheque to keep you at a safe, unembarrassing distance. . . . All in all, I think I had a lucky escape.”

Win’s revised reading of the name Lowell accords with Sass’s earlier interpretation and so privileges the latter’s view from the margins. But whereas previously the comparisons between center and margins (focused on the opposition of Lowell to Abbott) was incorporated into larger oppositions between England and New Zealand, Win’s decision to return to Britain discloses another possibility—that her return will not constitute a journey “home,” to a lost mother, but to a site where Win will develop a subjectivity no longer limited to a choice between opposites. This type of subjectivity involves a mixture and fluidity of elements: that is, Win can be an Abbott, and a New Zealander, at the same time that she lives in London and embarks on a career.

Sass’s realization of agency and self-determination involves a revisioning of herself and her world through her interactions with Win, her parents, her new neighbors, Hester and Jonathan, and a local “rich boy,” Trent. The closure of the narrative enacts a mix of significances, centered around
the moment when Sass receives her School Certificate results, which reassure her that she is intellectually capable of achieving her dream of becoming a scientist and of gaining a place in NASA’s space course for young achievers: “There was a small smile appearing at the edges of Sass’s mouth. Win grinned. ‘I’ll come visit you at NASA, promise.’ And the whoops that followed had the entire neighbourhood, including Hester, looking skyward” (108). In one sense, the closure of Sasscat affords a quite conventional resolution in that a gifted but insecure adolescent learns to value herself, but Sass’s projection of herself as an astronaut also constitutes a contemporary version of the postcolonial journey. While her dream of gaining a place at NASA seems to signal the substitution of one set of imperial relationships for another, the idea of space travel symbolizes a definitive escape from the smallness and remoteness of New Zealand, as well as from the fiction that Britain is the true psychological center for post-colonial subjects.

Colonialism is never over and done with, despite Dahl’s attempt to persuade his readers that the Oompa-Loompas love the chains that bind them and Lively’s nostalgic representation of a people who have lost their culture. There is thus no possibility of “the end of empire,” so influential and pervasive are the effects of imperial rule on its former colonies; and children’s books will inevitably continue to rehearse and revisit the events of colonization. Most significantly, the indigenous peoples of Britain’s former colonies continue to experience the effects of their displacement and of the appropriation of their land, and it is highly likely that subaltern voices will continue to provide child readers with stories formerly suppressed or elided.

Notes

1 Such intersections of race and class were common during the second half of the nineteenth century: “T. H. Huxley compared the East London poor with Polynesian savages, William Booth chose the African pygmy, and William Barry thought that the slums resembled nothing so much as a slave ship” (McClintock 54). When visiting Ireland, Kingsley commented on the chimpanzee-like appearance of the Irish poor: “to see white chimpanzees is dreadful; if they were black, one would not feel it so much, but their skins, except where tanned by exposure, are as white as ours” (McClintock 216). Apes were commonly seen as figures straddling the margins of race and class; blackness “naturally” distinguished black people from white, but a special horror surrounds the figure of the hybrid who is both white and notwhite, enough like “us” to serve as a reminder about how “we” might descend to this level.

2 Dixon points out that the original American edition of 1964 and the first British edition of 1967 depict the Oompa-Loompas as black and as “imported direct from Africa” (112), whereas the revised 1973 edition removes these references.

3 The word *swag* is derived from a British dialectal term and refers to a bundle or roll containing the bedding and personal belongings of a traveler through the bush.

4 *High English* is glossed in *Jimmy and Pat* as “a form of English spoken by kartiya people, using long words and difficult expressions” (30).

5 “I’ll be buggered” is a colloquial expression that means “I’ll be damned.”
Works cited


