Poetic Craft and White Settler Colonialism:
A Workshop on Australian and South African Poetics

Writing and Society Research Centre, University of Western Sydney
Room 3.G.55, Bankstown Campus

WORKSHOP PROGRAMME

Friday September 13
13.00-13.30 Arrival and Registration
13.30-15.20 Introduction and Session I
15.20-15.45 Tea
15.45-17.30 Session II
17.30-18.15 Reception (W&S lounge)
18.45 - Dinner at My Canh Restaurant
(29 Greenfield Pde, Bankstown)

Saturday September 14
10.00-10.30 Registration and Tea
10.30-12.15 Session III
12.15-13.15 Lunch (W&S lounge)
13.15-14.45 Session IV
14.45-15.00 Tea
15.00-16.15 Roundtable and concluding remarks

Sunday September 15
15.30-17.00 Poetry reading at Gleebooks,
Glebe Point Road
Session I
Jarad Zimbler: *Guy Butler Reconsidered: Poetics and Poetry in the South African Literary Field*
Respondents: Tony Voss and Sam Moginie
Chair: Ben Etherington

Session II
Michael Farrell: *Craft: An Unsettled Concept*
Respondents: Peter Minter and Robert Wood
Chair: Ann Vickery

Session III
Ingrid de Kok: “Why still imagine whole words, whole worlds?” *Between Parts of Speech and Body Parts.*
Respondents: John Mateer and Kate Middleton
Chair: Jarad Zimbler

Session IV
Ann Vickery: *Against Colony Collapse Disorder; or, Settler Mess in the Cells of Australian Poetry*
Respondents: Astrid Lorange and Rory Dufficy
Chair: tba

Roundtable
Kate Fagan (chair), Bonny Cassidy, Ben Etherington, Lesley Gissane, Lynda Ng (tbc)

Poetry Reading
Readings by Ingrid de Kok, John Mateer and Michael Farrell; introduced and hosted by Astrid Lorange.

FORMAT
The ‘lead’ paper in each session will be 40 minutes, and will be followed by two 15 minute responses. The responses may be a direct critical response to/engagement with the lead paper; they may present ideas on material which complements, expands on and/or contests the lead paper; or digress in such a way as to illuminate by juxtaposition. This format is adopted to encourage intensive dialogue and to allow space for lengthy contributions from all attending the workshop.
ABSTRACTS

Session I

Guy Butler Reconsidered: Poetics and Poetry in the South African Literary Field

Jarad Zimbler

In the aftermath of his confrontation with Mike Kirkwood at Poetry ’74, a conference hosted by the Centre for Extra-Mural Studies at UCT, Guy Butler seems to have diminished in stature from year to year. Yet he remains, amongst the cohort of South African English-language poets, the most dedicated to critical reflection on the challenges and demands posed by local materials. If his positions were rejected out of hand in the heat of the mid-70s, what is their status today? Do they have any relevance to contemporary South African poetry? Do they help us in any way to understand the achievements and failures of the local poetry scene after apartheid? For that matter, do they help even to make sense of the achievements and failures of Butler’s verse, and that of his generation? These are the questions that I will address in my paper, which will therefore consist of an account of Butler’s literary-critical output, his role in the formation of the South African literary field, readings of several of his own poems, and reflections on local poetry published in recent years.

Tony Voss: “Ars versus Ingenium in Colonial South Africa”: I want to propose that in the colonial situation the colonising poet associates herself or himself with *ars* and the colonised poet with *ingenium*. I will spend most of my time on the Scots/South African colonial poet Thomas Pringle (1789-1834); who will be contrasted with the twentieth century poets, Roy Campbell and Herbert Dhlomo. [Professor Voss is unable to attend in person, so his paper will be read in his absence by Ben Etherington]

Sam Moginie: This response wagers that Butler's poetics might be read productively in the light of two interventions in Australian poetics: Rex Ingamels's 'Conditional Culture' (1938) and A.D. Hope's 'The Discursive Mode' (1956/7). These two essays suggest that (so far) Australian poetry has been structured around an absence; in both, there is an appeal to ecology as the base of craft. Of both, I want to ask the following: When an ecology is invoked, whose ecology is it? What do these essays have to offer for thinking 'the material' in Australian poetry?

Session II

Craft: An Unsettled Concept

Michael Farrell

My paper looks at four different kinds of 'craft', in the context of white settlement and Australian poetry, with examples of issues and poems for each. The writing issues I attend to are: noun use and abuse; narration; the end of a poem; positive and negative space. Poets discussed will include: Oodgeroo, John Shaw Neilson, Kenneth Slessor, Judith Wright, Ern Malley, Gwen Harwood, Dorothea Mackellar, Adam Lindsay Gordon, John Tranter, Nigel Roberts, Banjo and Eddie Paterson (some referred to, some examined more closely). I might also deal with what I think of as 'conceptual criticism'.
Peter Minter: I will raise some thoughts on mobile craft, suggesting transcultural alignments between Charles Olson's projectivism and 1970s Papunya desert art, and brooding on ecopoetic form.

Robert Wood: My response will extend Farrell’s unsettling of notions of craft and settler poetics by considering native title testimony. I look at an excerpt of Daniel vs State of Western Australia; a case involving the Ngarluma-Yindjibarndi people of the Western Pilbara in Western Australia. Kenneth Goldsmith’s weather retranscriptions are enlisted to help think about acts of poetic reframing.

Session III

“How still imagine whole words, whole worlds?” Between Parts of Speech and Body Parts.

Ingrid de Kok

This presentation will engage with a range of compositional and ethical issues which confronted me as a poet – consciously and unconsciously – in a sequence of poems dealing with South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission. By looking at five poems in the sequence, I will reflect on how considerations related to my apparent positions as beneficiary, observer, white settler, ‘witness’ are enacted in the poems, through the craft of poetry itself. Why did I choose to write this set of poems? On what authority? What are the relations between the language of record, of redress, of poetry? I shall concentrate in detail on poetic choices in the following poems from my collection Terrestrial Things: Parts of Speech; The Archbishop Chairs the First Session; The Transcriber Speaks; The Sound Engineer; and Body Parts, and conclude with a reading and brief commentary on a recent poem, Today I do not love my country, ‘about’ belonging, and the distance between citizen and stranger.

John Mateer: As someone for whom the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was a deep insight into the past I share with other South Africans, among them "ex-whites", it was a linguistic operation, too, a recovery. If we are to make analogies between South Africa and Australia, there must be the questioning of whether there were crimes unspoken of in Australia's past, and of whether and how they may be brought into earshot. Is it through a 'poetic'? Or has that possibility passed?

Kate Middleton: I wish to address the language of settlement as influenced by the narratives of the European “discoverers” and explorers. In doing so, I will look specifically at the selectivity of language, through citation, omission and etymology, considering my own poetic practice but also looking to the work of other Anglophone poets.

Session IV

Against Colony Collapse Disorder; or, Settler Mess in the Cells of Australian Poetry

Ann Vickery

Colony collapse disorder describes a phenomenon whereby worker bees have suddenly and inexplicably disappeared from a hive. It has also been mobilised as a syndrome following the rapid vanishing of Western honeybee colonies across North America and Europe. Justin Clemens has also used the term to describe aesthetic collapse, whereby poets can only demonstrate their existence as
“being caught dead” given the fragile conditions of poetry and the inevitable, deadly effects of the past. This organic metaphor for the social as well as for the aesthetic figures the individual as having a singular function that is, nevertheless, integrally networked to other individuals. What I am interested in exploring in this paper is an alternative model of sociability that focuses on correspondences in otherwise unconnected ‘bees’ and the capacity for transformation in the face of a past that continues to contaminate and render the present ‘toxic’. In *Infidel Poetics*, Daniel Tiffany argues that lyric obscurity could be viewed as the ground or medium of negative sociability. The shrinking domain of modern poetry readership encapsulates a model of social hermeticism more generally. The materiality of language could be said to house a verbal underworld: the “privacy effects” of the poem is a structure of both lyric and social obscurity that works through generating a common knowledge dependent on expressive and reciprocal correspondences among its solipsistic readers. Poetry might be seen then as a way of activating ‘sleeper cells’ within the hive, underworlds of activity that may then inform what Foucault calls “new relational modes”. I am interested in exploring in this paper both the materials and the craft employed by generation X poets to generate a social and aesthetic hive in the wake of colonialism and late capitalism. It is envisaged that this paper would look at the poetry of Clemens himself, Sam Wagan Watson, Michael Farrell, Keri Glastonbury, Duncan Hose, and Fiona Hile but also possibly others. I will consider elements such as absurdity, symbolic analogy, “perpetually collapsing second-order allegory” (Nealon), camp, irony, the vernacular, use of the readymade, and grammatical disruption.

**Astrid Lorange:** Following on associatively from Vickery’s provocations, I will be looking at models for alternative kinships and affinities, touching on those suggested by Helene Cixous, Avital Ronell and Judith Butler at a recent panel in NYC, Lee Edelman in his post-Lacanian queer polemic *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, and recent critiques of the neo-colonial impulse in Australian poetry by Peter Minter and Bonny Cassidy. My response, building on Vickery’s call for cell-based networks, will suggest that the non-family, the archipelago, and the dysfunctional hive are worthwhile structures for a contemporary Australian poetics.

**Rory Dufficy:** Moving laterally from Vickery’s initial gambit, I will look to explore the conditions from which ‘colony collapse’ might understood as Clemen’s "being caught dead". Elaborating on thinking concerned with Black subjects in the United States and Africa, I will argue for the centrality of death in the formation of settler colonial sovereignty. Thus conceptualised, contemporary settler colonial poetics can be seen to operate in the ‘underworld’ Vickery delimits, a post-death poetics of jerry-built subjectivities. I will suggest that this is, too, a poetics of the wake: after the funeral, but still drunk on death.