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Editors' Introduction

Monique Rooney and Russell Smith, with Ned Curthoys

AHR54 BEGINS WITH THE FIRST OF TWO SPECIAL SECTIONS BASED ON THE *KEYWORDS* public lecture series convened by Dr Ned Curthoys at the Australian National University since 2011, which followed from a *Key Thinkers* series (2008-2011).

For the *Keywords* lectures, presenters were asked to take an approach inspired by and seeking to contribute to the legacy of Raymond Williams' epochal book *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (1976; revised 1983). As Williams suggested in his introduction, to discuss a society's keywords has little to do with the more neutral lexicographic enterprise of compiling a dictionary. There is no single academic discipline or methodology that lights one's path in evoking the contested significance of the vocabulary one has chosen to scrutinize; inevitably one must borrow from the insights of cultural history, historical semantics, the history of ideas, social criticism, literary history and sociology, and relate these areas of inquiry to broader domains of thought and experience. This is not a definitional exercise, but, as Williams points out, a 'way of recording, investigating and presenting problems of meaning' that both animate and haunt the contemporary cultural imagination.

Williams' own inquiries began after the Second World War when he felt that ambiguous and elusive terms such as 'culture' needed to be investigated in order

to try and understand ‘urgent’ contemporary problems to do with his society’s self-understanding and conceptions of value. In Curthoys’ reading of the composition process of *Keywords*, Williams’ own repeatedly-deferred struggle to compile an ethically controversial and critically stimulating cultural vocabulary drew on the ‘untimely’ philological energies of thinkers such as Giambattista Vico, whose groundbreaking historical inquiries took place against the backdrop of a rationalist age that much preferred to believe in a univocal language of clear and distinct ideas. As Williams argued, in order to persist with his *Keywords* project over a period of twenty years or more, he needed to experience not only the continuity of the past with the present, but also an unsettling disjunction, a sense of radical change, discontinuity, and a deep but inarticulate conflict of values and beliefs. In order to feel the pulse of history in the analysis of a keyword, Williams eschewed an impartial conception of semantic meanings and instead took it upon himself critically to explore what he believed to be a ‘crucial area of social and cultural discussion’ that could never congeal as a tradition to be learned, or a consensus that could be accepted. In that respect, Williams’ approach was dialogical, an analysis of meaning in which the insurgent claims of the new and other ensure the fundamental heteroglossia of collective language, in which established and emergent inflections, idioms, and coded worldviews challenge each other for supremacy in ethical and political deliberations.

The contributors to this issue’s special *Keywords* section—Hsu-Ming Teo, Frank Bongiorno, Nicole Moore, Gillian Russell and Monique Rooney—have admirably reaffirmed and extended Williams’ critical ethos by paying sustained attention to keywords that illuminate contemporary areas of social and cultural discussion.

Hsu-Ming Teo, in ‘Orientalism: An Overview’, has explored how a once accepted and putatively objective academic and aesthetic discourse about the Orient became a hotly contested index of geo-political power once postcolonial criticism began to impinge upon the Western academy. Still, as Hsu-Ming demonstrates, Said’s reduction of Orientalism to a mirroring of the speaker’s geopolitical privilege also potentially elides the possibility that in its time sympathetic and self-reflexive Orientalist discourse would also extend and challenge hegemonic power and normative vocabularies, hence the renewed critical interest in ‘reformist Orientalism’.

Frank Bongiorno, in ‘Sexuality: An Australian Historian’s Perspective’, shows how the study of sex and sexuality in Australia, taking its cues initially from European, American and British sexology, and later from Foucauldian histories of the discourse of sexuality, has been intimately connected with the rise of social history—a ‘history from below’—and has been particularly important to understanding the inter-implications of sexuality with race, class and settler-colonial heritage. He surveys the importance of theories of sexuality to

understanding colonial attitudes to Aboriginal people and to historical readings of convict life. Arguing that sexuality as a keyword emerged in Australia in the context of a self-conscious process of official regulation, but that it also simultaneously enabled the performance or ‘making’ of a particular sexual type, the essay closes on the idiosyncratic example of autodidact activist William Chidley, a colourful character who dressed in classical Greek costume while parading Sydney streets c.1912 circulating brochures on the un-naturalness of penetrative sex.

‘Censorship Is’, Nicole Moore’s incisive analysis of censorship historically and theoretically considered, is also informed by Williams’ desire to keep the discursive contest alive rather than accept normative critical vocabularies, even those that seem to have heuristic critical power. While a narrowly liberal conception of censorship as a regulative practice of state power is inadequate, the new censorship theory, with its neo-Foucauldian attention to the repressive and exclusive mechanisms of subject formation, threatens to distract our attention from more specific historical narratives in which regimes of censorship were put at the service of nation-building and the re-creation of national subjectivities.

The title of Gillian Russell’s essay, “Who’s Afraid for William Wordsworth?: Some Thoughts on Romanticism in 2012” riffs on a banner, ‘Who’s Afraid for Virginia Woolf?’, brandished during the 2011 Occupy Movement which protested cuts to higher education in the United States. Capital-R Romanticism, this essay argues, is a twentieth-century invention (an ‘ism’) that has its roots in a literary movement the origins of which are impossible to locate or describe in any precise way, but which has thrived and continues to exert authority as an object of study in English Literature departments worldwide. Drawing attention to the distinction between capital-R Romanticism and small-r romantic, Russell canvasses anxieties about the survival of Romanticism that have arisen in the face of diminishing public funding for the humanities and concerns about its precariousness as it competes for relevance in a crowded digital space. Russell contends, however, that uncertainty is an enduring feature of Romanticism and asks whether the future of this keyword might best be expressed not by the question ‘Is Romanticism finished?’ but ‘Will romanticism ever begin?’

The title of Monique Rooney’s essay, ‘*Voir Venir: The Future of Melodrama*’, also raises questions about aesthetics and futurity, but in relation to a keyword that is often theorised in terms of its ‘if onlys’ or ‘what ifs’—a subjunctive or conditional grammar that, it has been argued, produces melodrama’s self-indulgent affects and fantastical wish-fulfilments. Drawing on the work of Paul de Man, Jacques Derrida and Catherine Malabou, Rooney’s essay begins with Rousseau’s *Pygmalion* as *the* ur-melodramatic text and as the touchstone for her definition of

melodrama as a 'plastic' mode that synthesises differential elements (music, drama, action, gesture) and that brings together the philosophical and affective, the 'head' and the 'heart'.

The tensions between legacy and futurity also animate both essays in our general section. In 'Derrida Interviewing Derrida: Autoimmunity and the Laws of the Interview', Maebh Long considers the legacy of Jacques Derrida as it now plays out in what Tom Cohen has called the 'Derridawars', a term originally coined to describe the struggles between Derrida himself and his academic heirs, and now, towards the end of the first decade after his death, playing out in the struggle between those who seek to preserve the letter and spirit of Derrida's textual corpus in a loyalty to his signature, and those who view (have always viewed) Derrida's legacy as an open-ended deconstructive project that necessarily exceeds the sanction (textual or otherwise) of Derrida as author or master. As Long shows, Derrida addressed these questions at length himself, especially through his increasing, though always ambivalent, use of the interview through his career, as a means both of disseminating but also disciplining deconstruction. As Derrida was well aware, such interventions are highly problematic, and partake of the strange logic of 'auto-immunity', by which a measure that is ostensibly self-protective threatens also to be self-destructive. Nevertheless, as Long shows, interviews 'played a complicated role as alternating cause and symptom of a change of style and approach within Derrida's work. The result was an autoimmune relation at the 'heart' of deconstruction', a contradiction that endures as the competitive legacy of deconstruction/Derrida studies.

In '*Dead Europe* and the Coming of Age in Australian Literature: Globalisation, Cosmopolitanism and Perversity', Lynda Ng begins a wide-ranging reading of Tsiolkas's novel by situating the text within the familiar critical paradigm whereby settler societies such as Australia, Canada and the US are characterised as 'young' in relation to Europe, and thus supposedly free of the historical weight of bloody tribal conflicts, but also troubled by a sense of immaturity, a lack of cultural depth. Ng then goes on to show that this old/new binary is unsustainable in a world of globalised flows of capital and labour, that European nations themselves are, like Australia, incoherent assemblages of migrations and diasporas, engaged in impossible struggles for cultural self-definition against a perceived Americanisation, and that, in the novel's central irony, it is its 'young' Australian protagonist Isaac who carries with him the historical curse that will spread contagion as he travels through his ancestral Europe. Against the attractive vision of 'cosmopolitanism' as the *habitus* of an affluent, polyglot and culturally sophisticated elite, Ng argues that Tsiolkas presents a vision of 'vernacular cosmopolitanism' in which globalisation has created mobile and deracinated identities, not exotically multilingual as in Patrick White's vision of Europe two generations earlier, but now members of a strangely mono-cultural

underclass, defined by the linguistic and cultural improvisations of English as a global *lingua franca* and multinational capitalism as a franchised landscape of sameness.

We also include three book reviews in this issue: Guy Davidson on the theoretical and conceptual productivity that is the unruly scholarly object—orgasm—in Annamarie Jagose's *Orgasmology*; Nicholas Birns on two books, *Antarctica in Fiction* and *Old Songs in the Timeless Land*, that thematise European cultural and aesthetic impact in the furthest-flung southern region of the globe; and Rachael Weaver on Anna Johnston's *The Paper War*, a study of the voluminous archive of colonial missionary, activist and controversialist Rev. Lancelot Threlkeld.

Special thanks are due to Ned Curthoys, whose convenorship of the *Keywords* lecture series made the special section of this issue possible, and to Fergus Armstrong for his editorial assistance.

Finally, this issue we also welcome a number of new members to our editorial board: Lauren Berlant (Chicago), David Bissell (ANU), Claire Colebrook (Penn State), Steven Connor (Cambridge), Simon During (Queensland), Tom Ford (ANU), Meaghan Morris (Sydney) and Julian Murphet (UNSW): welcome aboard everyone, and we look forward to working with you on future issues of AHR.

As always, we invite submissions to AHR on any aspect of contemporary humanities research, especially those informed by contemporary theoretical perspectives, and we are especially committed to working with postgraduate students and early career researchers. Please send a 250-word abstract or proposal in the first instance to <ahr@anu.edu.au>. If we wish to consider your proposal we will invite you to submit the full text. Full guidelines are available at <[http://www.australianhumanitiesreview.org/about.html# submission](http://www.australianhumanitiesreview.org/about.html#submission)>.

Happy reading!