Pursuits of Settler Belonging in Contemporary Australian Memoirs

Martina Horáková

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Pursuits of Settler Belonging in Contemporary Australian Memoirs

Mgr. Martina Horáková, Ph.D.

Abstract

Pursuits of Settler Belonging in Australian Post-Millennial Memoirs examines various representations of settler belonging in Australia in the decades following the turn of the 21st century. This period witnessed a significant shift in public discourse concerning settler-Indigenous relations, which was largely driven by revisionist historiography that foregrounded the violent nature of colonization and Indigenous dispossession, as well as the culmination of Indigenous activism and the increasing visibility of Indigenous testimonies to state surveillance and assimilation. As a result, the Australian settler majority experienced a profound crisis of sense of belonging and responded in various ways to this unsettlement. The book explores how this condition of settler (un)belonging is narrativized within a specific literary genre—a memoir. The selected memoirs are written by Australian public intellectuals, such as historians, artists, writers, journalists, and cultural critics, who care deeply about their country's colonial history, who are unsettled by past injustices, and who remain concerned about the fraught relationship between settler and Indigenous Australians. Published between 1999 and 2019, these narratives, which I call "memoirs of settler belonging," share a central preoccupation: they grapple with the implicit question of how to belong as a white settler who bears witness to the legacy of violent colonization and ongoing Indigenous dispossession. Thus, they interrogate the moral and ethical implications of loving and claiming attachment to a land violently seized from First Australians. While personal in their expression of an individual's sense of belonging, they are also concerned with the ways in which colonial history and national identity are intricately interwoven with the process of place–making. In other words, they provide a link between self-exploration, homemaking, landscape, history and nation.

The book's individual chapters analyze different categories of memoirs of settler belonging, including historians' memoirs, white women's travel narratives, experimental and fictocritical place-writing, and eco- and landscape memoirs. The book advances the argument that over two decades, a discernible shift has occurred in the ways settler belonging has been represented. While earlier memoirs explicitly thematized settler

belonging in terms of crisis and actively sought ways to navigate the impasse of (un)belonging, the more recent memoirs—particularly those engaging with landscape and eco-memoir—have moved away from reflecting on settler unsettlement as a consequence of Indigenous dispossession. Instead, they increasingly justify settler belonging through employing several recurring motifs such as: an intimate knowledge of local landscapes, their histories, topography and ecosystems secures settlers' profound connection to the place; environmental protection and eco-activism legitimize affective attachments to the place and sensations of being claimed by the land; unwavering and explicit recognition of prior Indigenous occupancy and significance of Indigenous cultures and knowledges is voiced at the expense of engaging directly with present consequences of ongoing Indigenous dispossession.

Chapter overview

The first chapter provides a theoretical overview of the concept of settler belonging and settler anxiety, explaining the historical significance of the moment around the turn of the twenty-first century and the shift in Australian public discourse in relation to changing perceptions of Indigenous–settler relations as a result of several key events and movements in the 1990s. The ensuing discussion draws on the theories of settler colonialism (Wolfe, Veracini) and critical Indigenous studies (Moreton-Robinson) to explain how the Australian nation–state continues to manage and control, often in biopolitical ways, Indigenous peoples and their demands for political, economic and cultural sovereignty. It points to the paradox of the Australian public's concern for Indigenous wellbeing on the one hand (often using Indigeneity as a token of cultural diversity and the country's unique history), and suppression and evasion of Indigenous people's demands for political, land, and cultural sovereignty on the other. The chapter also explains how the genre of white intellectual memoir (Whitlock, Slater, Potter) has become a popular medium of intervening into the public debates on Indigenous–settler relations. The term 'memoir of settler belonging' is employed here to highlight the political and ethical dimensions of the genre, alongside its aesthetics. Finally, the chapter argues that the popularity of the memoirs of settler belonging at the turn of the twenty-first century owes much to the discourse of the crisis of settler belonging, manifesting as settler anxiety and guilt, which, since then, has gradually transformed into a less politically charged debate and has been, to some extent, accommodated.

Chapter Two examines memoirs of settler belonging by prominent Australian historians. It contextualizes their texts within the historians' autobiographical tradition (Aurell, Popkin) and within the tradition of the French *ego-histoire* (Nora), both of which resonated in early twenty-first-century Australia. The memoirs selected for analysis include Henry Reynolds' *Why Weren't We Told?: A Personal Search for the Truth about our History* (1999), Peter Read's *Belonging: Australians, Place and Aboriginal Ownership* (2000) and Mark McKenna's *Looking for Blackfellas' Point: An Australian History of Place* (2002). The chapter demonstrates how these memoirs employ specific tropes, such as asking destabilizing questions, using the metaphor of remembering and forgetting, relying on a real or figurative Indigenous guide, and implicitly developing a concept of 'mature belonging' as a way of transcending settlers' spatial anxiety into a distinct sense of settler belonging. Ultimately, the chapter argues that while these three historians' memoirs of settler belonging use their personal journeys to offer a sound critique of colonial histories and settler policies that sought to control and marginalize Indigenous peoples, they still remain embedded in the rhetorical appropriation of Indigenous belonging as a way of emplacing themselves in the land and the nation's history.

Chapter Three brings the aspect of gender into the discussion of settler belonging, demonstrating how the construction of Australian national identity has indeed been a gendered process. Contextualizing white settler women's memoirs within the personal turn in literary studies, whiteness studies, and feminist writing, the chapter then examines the tradition of white women writing about their travels to the Australian Outback. This tradition has thrived since the 1980s due to the influential and extremely popular travel memoir by Robyn Davidson, *Tracks* (1980), which, the chapter argues, functions as a master narrative for the forthcoming memoirs of settler belonging produced by white women. In the selected examples, Kim Mahood's *Craft for a Dry Lake* (2000) and Saskia Beudel's *A Country of Mind* (2013), I consider how exactly white settler women, who may function as a bridge between settler and Indigenous Australia because of their unique role in straddling both privileged and marginalized positions, articulate their sense of settler anxiety, desire, and (un)belonging. By analyzing tropes such as feminist ego-cartography, itinerant femininity and 'unfinished business,' the chapter argues that white settler women textualize a specific poetics of ambivalence, desire and unsettlement which informs their writing. They do that through a regenerated, embodied engagement with the Outback space (by being physically present, walking, touching,

sensually absorbing the landscape) and with the power of Indigenous presence inscribed in it (by establishing real, though complicated, relationships with Indigenous women).

Chapter Four explores another specific group of narratives that I call memoirs of settler belonging. They are more experimental and focus on the poetics as well as politics of place. The chapter provides contextualization within the Australian tradition of "place–writing" which goes back to colonial times and then frames these narratives within the literary tradition of fictocritical writing, a confluence of self-reflexive and academic/critical/ethical modes, which has become quite popular in Australia since the 1990s. The selected narratives, Nicolas Jose's *Black Sheep: Journey to Borroloola* (2002) and Katrina Schlunke's *Bluff Rock: Autobiography of a Massacre* (2005), are positioned as following the path of earlier texts by one of the founders of Australian fictocriticism, Stephen Muecke, particularly his *No Road (Bitumen All the Way)* (1997) and the collaborative *Reading the Country: An Introduction to Nomadology* (1996). Jose's and Schlunke's texts are shown to reveal a different approach to engaging with notions of settler (un)belonging: highly self-reflective and metatextual, characterized by ambiguity and epistemic uncertainty, these texts deconstruct settler colonial investments in establishing dominant stories of national settler belonging, probing more ethical ways of belonging as white settlers.

The final Chapter Five focuses on recent memoirs of settler belonging and points to a changing pattern in how settler belonging is represented. In the analysis of landscape memoirs, such as Tim Winton, *Island Home* (2015) and Kim Mahood, *Position Doubtful* (2016), and texts that I call eco-memoirs, such as Mark Tredinnick's *The Blue Plateau: An Australian Pastoral* (2009) and Angela Rockel's *Rogue Intensities* (2019), I argue that articulations of settler anxiety and unsettlement, visible in earlier memoirs of settler belonging from the turn of the twenty-first century, are gradually replaced by settler emplacement into the land, which is addressed now as Country—ultimately an Indigenous concept. This is done through employing tropes of acquiring intimate knowledge of the land, including detailed local histories of places, acknowledging the primacy of Indigenous occupation and Indigenous knowledges, and strong environmental concerns.