Imagined Homelands

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Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

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Imagined Homelands: British Poetry in the Colonies.

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I have argued throughout this book that poetry in British colonial spaces allowed emigrants to imagine new forms of belonging: new affinities, new relations to the landscape, new alliances with one another. The affective reality of these feelings was crucial, as was the communal nature of the experience. Beginning with the long journey, and through various forms of dislocation and settlement, these chapters have shown emigrant experience, alternately aspirational, confounding, and injurious, to be a communal endeavor. They have shown that poetic genre was central both to the circulation of feeling in British colonial spaces and to the sense of community that developed as a result of that circulation. Parodic shipboard publications, sentimental lyrics, dialect poetry, meditations on home and belonging, and patriotic songs—through each of these poetic forms, emigrants imagined the shared experiences of migration.

A comparable phenomenon is apparent in poetry of our present moment, distinct as the circumstances may be in cultural and political registers. Consider, for example, an immigrant rights rally in Amherst, Massachusetts, in May 2006, at which the poet Martin Espada (born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1957) read aloud a work honoring the deaths of immigrants both documented and undocumented in the attacks of 9/11. Espada dedicates his poem “Alabanza” (Spanish for praise) to the lost employees of Windows on the World, the restaurant that looked out over Manhattan from the top floor of the World Trade Center:

Praise the great windows where immigrants from the kitchen
Could squint and almost see their world, hear the chant of nations:
Ecuador, México, República Dominicana,
Haití, Yemen, Ghana, Bangladesh.
Alabanza.\(^1\)
Online videos from the Amherst rally show Espada reading his poem passionately, and the crowd responding in chorus to the repeated call “Alabanza!” In the poem, Espada imagines a broad synthesis of immigrant experience, varied according to the different nations from which individuals came, but united by the particulars of immigrant kitchen labor, by the ideals that accompanied immigration, and ultimately by the tragedy of 9/11 itself. The crowd’s responses to Espada—their choruses of the Spanish “Alabanza!” in a predominantly English poem—suggest another level of shared identity and shared experience, an emotional and linguistic connection among both immigrants and those, like Espada, who are sympathetic to immigrant rights. “Alabanza” marks less a specifically Spanish-speaking identity and more one located adjacent to English. Spanish-speaking immigrants from Ecuador, Mexico, and the Dominican Republic join in chorus with immigrants from Haiti, Yemen, Ghana, and Bangladesh to offer a communal form of praise: multilingual, multicultural, and united in the shared experiences of both dislocation and mourning.

We have seen that poetry enabled similar moments of communal identification throughout nineteenth-century British colonial spaces. In 1859 Alexander McLachlan addressed a “Scottish Gathering” in Toronto with poetry modeled on that of Robert Burns, and in 1869 the Scottish immigrant John Barr recited poems to a New Zealand crowd celebrating the birthday of the Scottish bard. Richard Hengist Horne’s poem on the settlement of Australia, *The South-Sea Sisters*, was performed with music for large audiences at the 1866 Intercolonial Exhibition in Melbourne. The many newspaper poems published on emigrant ships and circulating in early colonial cities offered yet more ways for settlers to identify as part of affective communities. In schoolrooms, churches, public squares, theaters, and elsewhere throughout the British Empire, Victorian emigrants turned to poetry as a vehicle for affective identification: a way of feeling together, if only imaginatively, the shared experiences of migration and resettlement.

In addition to shared feeling, the wary reader no doubt will also find in these communal experiences the mechanisms of empire that enabled the murder and displacement of Indigenous peoples throughout British colonial spaces. I find them there, too, and my work in the preceding chapters has in no way meant to cast settler poetry as naively reparative or redemptive. Instead, I have acknowledged the broad suffering entailed by settler colonialism while offering strategies for making better sense of colonial literary culture: strategies that take us beyond the copy-and-paste model of
replication that has too often shaped our view of the nineteenth-century colonial world. What emerges is both familiar and alien: mundane, everyday life under pressure from contexts outside the norm; emotions and life events transpiring much as they would have in Great Britain, but under the strains of profound dislocation; and emigrants, tremendously mistreated by the British class system, becoming themselves agents of an iniquitous colonial machinery.

British colonial poetry reflects these broader dynamics of the familiar and the strange. Part of the familiarity comes from a characteristic that largely defined nineteenth-century poetry: its investment in the communal and affective potential of poetic form, a subject I examined in my first book, *Electric Meters: Victorian Physiological Poetics* (2009). The present volume suggests why this communal mode of poetic experience had especial force, and especial significance, in British colonial spaces. The desire to belong, to be at home, is fundamental to human experience, and the affective registers of Victorian poetry meant that verse forms would play an outsized role in establishing for nineteenth-century emigrants the feelings of home. At the very least, poetry offered emigrants hints of familiarity amidst the dislocations of settler experience.

Consider as a final example one last colonial poem, a reprinting of Matthew Arnold’s “Dover Beach” published in the *Wallaroo Times and Mining Journal* in 1870. Wallaroo grew as a settlement through the 1860s, an important port to the northwest of Adelaide. Arnold’s South Australian readers, looking out at their continent’s rugged southern coastline, would have heard as well as anyone on an English shore “the gr[ra]ting roar / Of pebbles which the waves suck back, and fling.” The universality of that sound, of course, is central to Arnold’s poem:

> Sophocles long ago
> Heard it on the Ægean, and it brought
> Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow
> Of human misery; we
> Find also in the sound a thought,
> Hearing it by this distant northern sea.²

Colonial readers may have felt a certain comfort in the timelessness—and, ultimately, the placelessness—of Arnold’s sea, the recurring ebb and flow against the world’s shores: as in ancient Greece, and as in Arnold’s England, so too in South Australia. One column over in the *Wallaroo Times*, an article
on “Postal Communication with England” enthused that new ocean steamers were to result in cheaper and more rapid postal service between Britain and Australia. Just above that, a string of “Intercolonial Telegraphs” related news from Great Britain, Italy, Spain, France, and the adjacent colony of Victoria. The South Australian newspaper thus clearly situates Arnold’s global ebb and flow in relation to worldwide communication and connectivity.³

The circulation of Arnold’s lyric allows us to imagine on a global scale the communities of feeling that sustained nineteenth-century emigrant cultures. In the processes of feeling together, literally and fancifully, British emigrants found ways of imagining new homelands for themselves on alien shores. I have argued that the tools of this imaginative work were fundamentally generic, and that emigrant readers found comfort in that generic familiarity. Standing on the southern coast of the Australian continent, an emigrant reader in 1870 may well have heard in the ocean waters “the turbid ebb and flow / Of human misery,” and she may have imagined through those sounds, and through Arnold’s poem, a deeply consoling global collectivity.