

NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

Issue 17.3 (Winter 2021)

Hansord, Katie. *Colonial Australian Women Poets: Political Voice and Feminist Traditions*. London and New York: Anthem Press, 2021. 238 pgs.

Reviewed by Meghna Sapui, University of Florida.

<1>Katie Hansord's *Colonial Australian Women Poets: Political Voice and Feminist Traditions* is a well-researched and meticulously detailed archival excavation of Australian settler women's poetry, particularly the connections between this poetic tradition and colonial periodical culture. It contributes to a vibrant body of scholarship on colonial poetry of the global nineteenth century, a field whose most recent and most remarkable works include Jason Rudy's *Imagined Homelands: British Poetry in the Colonies* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017), Mary Ellis Gibson's *Indian Angles: English Verse in Colonial India From Jones to Tagore* (Ohio University Press, 2011), Manu Samriti Chander's *Brown Romantics: Poetry and Nationalism in the Global Nineteenth Century* (Bucknell University Press, 2017), and Nikki Hessell's *Colonial Literature and the Native Author: Indigeneity and Empire* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), to name only a few. Hansord's book "re-evaluates the political engagement of settler women's poetry" through a study of the periodical poetry of five Australian settler women—Eliza Hamilton Dunlop, Mary Bailey, Caroline Leakey, Emily Manning, and Louisa Lawson (1). Over the course of an introduction, five chapters, and a conclusion, Hansord demonstrates how these poets in their periodical publications present "an alternative networked tradition of imperial and transnational feminist poetics and politics beyond and around emergent masculine nationalism" (1). In this project of "critical remapping," Hansord argues for a recognition of "the politicized nature of colonial Australian settler women's poetry" and its complicity with Empire "in its engagement with imperial and transnational women's writing traditions and feminist discourses." (3)

<2>Chapter 1 shows how Eliza Hamilton Dunlop uses themes prevalent in contemporary Romantic poetry, such as motherhood, grief, and tropes of anti-slavery, sati, and Irish nationalism, to signal her political engagement as a settler woman poet in Australia. On the one hand, Dunlop's "The Aboriginal Mother" is an

emotionally charged critique of the Myall Creek Massacre of June 1838 where Wirrayaraay Aboriginal people were murdered by white men. On the other hand, Dunlop's 1849 poem, "To the memory of E.B. Kennedy," memorializes the death of a white explorer killed by Aboriginal people. In both instances, Dunlop positions herself as a settler woman poet, "in the processes and politics of grief" for a public event in the former and for a public figure in the latter (46). Hansord argues that Eliza Dunlop thus turns the gendered constraints placed on her as a settler woman poet to "acceptable spaces for women's political expression" (49) in ways that oppose the "emergent nationalist poetics...often understood as a political mode constructed as the domain of the white male poet" (44). Chapter 2 examines the poetic and literary output of Mary Bailey to analyze the role of antiquity in Bailey's work: "a positive counterpoint to various aspects of women's exclusions from intellectual, public and political participation in the nineteenth century" (62). Bailey's poetry and translations demonstrate how she invokes women from Greek and Roman antiquity, like Sappho and Zenobia, as "emblems of women's intellectual, poetic and political voice" (70). Bailey's engagement with Hellenistic models of women's intellect mediates her concerns with women's education and political participation (70). Overall, this chapter contends that while studies of Romanticism in Australia have overlooked the contribution of settler women's poetry, "in colonial Australian newspapers, women poets like Mary Bailey were highly visible, expressing dissent and strongly advocating for their rights through their literary presence" (76). The first two chapters, thus, analyze how settler women poets, like Dunlop and Bailey, appropriate public voice to express gendered political concerns in ways that would be acceptable in the male-dominated public and intellectual culture of colonial periodical publication.

<3>Chapter 3 analyzes the "more broadly feminist aspects" of Caroline Leakey's collection of poetry, *Lyra Australis* (1854). Leakey revives the trope of the fallen woman as a sympathetic figure (84). She does this by engaging with the tradition of British women poets, such as Caroline Norton and Caroline Bowles, who in poems like *The Sorrows of Rosalie* (1829) and *Ellen Fitzarthur* (1820) respectively, portray fallen and imprisoned women compassionately. Leakey further uses religious framing and content "to excuse the writing of poetry, perceived as 'masculine' activity" (100). In these ways Leakey speaks to "transnational and imperial women's traditions more than to emergent nationalist modes in settler Australian literature" (94). Chapter 4 traces the importance of occultism and mesmerism in Emily Manning's poetry, initially published in colonial periodicals and later collected in a volume titled *The Balance of Pain and Other Poems* (1877). Manning approaches "marriage and ethical questions of the age through spiritualism" (122), thereby drawing on the Anglo-American occult revival of the 1870s. Hansord interprets the

poems in this volume, poems which may appear “seemingly disconnected,” as “a group of integrated poems that depict the spiritual and moral journey of woman poet-as-seer” (130). Moreover, Manning also published correspondence and book reviews in colonial periodicals. In this, Hansord argues, Manning follows the example of Harriet Martineau (whose works Manning had reviewed) as a figure who was involved in contemporary periodical culture as well as feminist discourse (137). Thus, “Manning’s poems work to draw closer imperial networks and reproduce empire, as well as sometimes seeking a new emergent nationalist settler aesthetic,” an aesthetic that categorically excludes Indigenous people in the process of constructing a white settler “Australia” (117). Chapters 3 and 4, therefore, trace the complex networks of transnational influences on the periodical output of Australian settler women poets.

<4>Chapter 5 examines the poetry of Louisa Lawson who, as both poet and founder and editor of the *Dawn*, embodies the close entanglements of print culture and politics. Drawing on her own experience of estrangement from her husband, Lawson’s poetry predominantly deals with the figure of the woman failed by love and marriage (146). However, even as Lawson challenges sexual double-standards “with regards to women’s sexuality and access to divorce” (146), she “does not acknowledge the far greater extent of legal double standards in relation to Indigenous people” (149). Instead, she contextualizes the effects of such sexual double standards “as having a wider international and imperial relevance” (150). Hansord also traces the influence of the English Pre-Raphaelites in Lawson’s work, alongside the shared feminist concerns of American women poets, like Lucy Leggett and Ella Wheeler Wilcox. The book concludes by reminding us of how the imperial feminist poetic imaginary of the settler poets studied here was fostered within a genocidal colonial space. Thus, questions of white women’s rights could be explored only within the “legal fiction of terra nullius” (181). Hansord also attaches an appendix with some of Eliza Dunlop and Mary Bailey’s poems—a thoughtful addition for readers who might find the primary material difficult to access.

<5>This richly researched book is a valuable exposition for students and scholars of Australian settler women’s poetry. Its strength lies not in its argument but in its marvelous recovery of archival and intertextual materials and connections. It covers a truly vast territory of authorial biographies, chronologies, networks, publication histories, and reception. It would only be enriched by a closer engagement with the primary texts, where Hansord’s own argument is sometimes either overwhelmed by arguments made in other secondary materials or subsumed in favor of establishing intertextual connections and citing scholarship on these intertexts without categorically identifying the implications of such intertextuality. The book’s

engagement with imperial feminism restricts itself to the dominant Anglo-American feminist traditions, with occasional forays into the French Saint Simonians. A more capacious engagement with the established body of scholarship on gender and empire, particularly given the book's emphasis on the transnational nature of periodical publication, would further reinforce its argument of white settler women's complicity in the reproduction of imperialist discourse in their poetry. Despite the claim that the feminist concerns at work in this body of poetry do not acknowledge Indigenous rights, there is no further engagement with this rather central claim. It leaves the reader wanting to know more about the role of this ubiquitous absent presence, that unites the five poets surveyed here, in the white settler imaginary. Perhaps answering the questions of what work such erasure does and why its understanding is significant are ways to make any reading of this difficult archive a recuperative and inclusive practice. Overall, Hansord deftly uncovers the dense poetic networks and politics that only emerge when one considers the complexities of periodical publication which shaped colonial poetry. This book adds valuable material to an understanding of the role of gender, poetry, and colonial periodical culture in nineteenth-century Australia.