

Becoming National



Misery is the new black. It is the theme of next year's American Studies Association conference, it unfolds itself in dystopic TV melodrama, and wends its way onto conference agendas in panels that focus, as many do at ASA this year, on the many registers of dispossession, displacement, wildness, unsettlement, and dis-ease.

So Kathleen Donegan's book is right on target. Her beautifully written and carefully crafted book shows both the productivity and the perils of examining misery, catastrophe, and their textual productions, probing at the ways in which they catapulted their subjects into alternative realms of being that language could not quite reach, although they certainly tried to make it do so. Death, sickness, and violence; hunger, dislodgement, affliction, dispossession—of self and world—all had to be negotiated by the earliest waves of English settlers, who found themselves frequently incapable of addressing the tasks at hand. Such insecurity and devastation begat additional violence as brutal and frightened settlers strove to project their own catastrophes onto native peoples, but lacked the local knowledge, skill and—terrified and starving as they were—the mental acuity to do so. Although many scholars have written about these founding documents of American literature, Donegan has newly shown how their missives home forged an archive of woe that expressed,

among other things, the pain and suffering of deracination, the brutality of lament, fear, and hate.

Donegan's book allows us to experience, from the inside, the terrible moments of early American settlement. But then the historian and literary scholar are left adrift, waiting for ... what? What came next? What effects did these catastrophes have on futurity, however defined, in addition to serving—strangely—as a kind of weird template through which to understand the modern-day American character? Strange because these people were English, and America as a country lay hundreds of years away. Certainly settler catastrophe offers an easy fable about the founding of America that can be endlessly analogized and reflected even in contemporary dysfunction. But what did it *do*? What kinds of effects did it have on how empire and colonization were planned and executed by the English and then British, and then American, state?

Let's consider another scene, in another New World, some 300 years later, in 1788. In New South Wales, an insular British colony of convicts, governors, soldiers, and settlers is lodged on the edge of a vast continent only partially charted by Captain Cook and inhabited, in British eyes, by a "savage" and strangely incurious people. The official projectors assured all that the new colony of convicts and freeholders would plant the seeds of a mighty empire to become the new Rome, delivering inexhaustible "Funds of Wealth and Commerce" for the British that may exceed any derived from the Americas.

Needless to say, the opposite unfolded: grim and gut-wrenching years as officers and their families, convicts, and soldiers struggled with bad soil, poison grass (killing off much of the livestock), drought, disease, and a lack of agricultural expertise which led, among other things, to planting precious seeds in the wrong season and widespread theft of food supplies. Everyone was starving; over half were sick and dying. The wrecking of the supply ship *Guardian* off the coast of Cape Town en route with supplies to the starving colony only added mental distress to physical hardships. "Famine . . . was approaching with gigantic strides, and gloom and dejection overspread every countenance," Marine Captain Watkin Tench famously recorded. "I every day see wretches pale with disease and wasted with famine, struggle against the horrors of their situation." It was only the threat of flogging or hanging that kept the convicts to their tasks. Gothic horror unfolded amidst spectacles of death, deprivation, dispossession, captivity, and punishment.

Apparently, between the 1590s and 1790s the British appear to have learned very little about settling a colony. In sites across the Pacific, Indian Ocean, and Atlantic worlds, British explorers and settlers had tales of horror to relate as they "possessed" foreign lands as British, making similar mistakes, exhibiting the same hubris, and experiencing seemingly irrecoverable horror, grief and dislocation as native peoples and landscapes just as readily sought to expel them. Maybe we shouldn't be surprised; death and destruction are the first steps in transculturation, after all, according to Fernando Ortiz, so perhaps these were just the latest victims, necessary sacrifices to a seemingly

inevitable global expansion.

What am I suggesting, besides the obvious point that spectacles of colonial suffering suggest a historical problematic of non-change—the strange inability to learn from past mistakes that was duplicated in the English state’s modes of warfare—is that these episodes are integral to nation-state expansion and formation, and become recuperated as foundational to “national identities”—that performative, phantasmic set of characteristics that, for the English, were believed to consist of hardiness, restlessness, and perseverance, and for Americans, of the suffering that bequeathed us our selves.

Native relations support this view, as here, too, the British seemed not to learn from their pasts. In New South Wales, the first governor adopted a policy of kidnapping adult Aboriginal men in order to introduce them to the superior civility of British culture. This was a practice that, according to one historian, predated the Columbian exchange. The governor, Captain Arthur Phillip, called it “the kindest piece of Violence that could be used,” but the kidnapping incensed his own officers. The natives’ obvious terror and the screaming and crying of their distraught kin were traumatic to all involved; the captives, kept in iron ankle bracelets, escaped with alacrity if given the opportunity, if they did not die first of smallpox. Tame as this may appear next to, for example, shooting out the brains of Indian children thrown into a river in Virginia, as Donegan relates, kidnapping was the modest opening to the subsequent onslaughts of violence that spiraled across the next century almost to the point of aboriginal decimation. Here we can see at work Jodi Bird’s zombie imperialism, which wipes out the native over and over; or the humanism that first endangers and kills and then offers rescue, which Jack Halberstam referenced in his talk on wildness. Catastrophe, then, becomes an essential part of nation-building, whether that nation is imperial or colonial in inception.

Hence my final point has to do with the meaning of “becoming colonial,” which Donegan and others have suggested is the first-order result of these catastrophes, i.e., “crisis was a means of producing coloniality.” The settlers lost their English moorings (Englishness being another undefined yet key term that seems to be a synonym for “civilized”) and became something else, and that something else was colonial. Yet Donegan offers little guidance as to what that means or could entail. Is “becoming colonial” the state of being estranged from oneself? Being subordinate, unheimlich, alienated, abjected? Of being undecidable, disordered, speculative, ungrounded, i.e., what we used to call queer? The insidious logic of the nation-state is, again, at work in the use of these terms, in that becoming national seems the obvious and indeed only antidote. And although these scenes present an originary moment for American literature, it is worth reminding ourselves that these were English people, and the English nation was the first to process these tales of horridness into a national narrative that Americans would—much later—borrow and embellish, even as it worked to exculpate the perpetrators from the horrors they would continue to unleash.

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