

Sweet Traps: Feminist Fantasies of Domestic Confinement on the Cusp of Postcolonial Australia

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Olga Masters (1919-1986) was an Australian journalist and short story writer whose intimate and detailed portraits of rural Australia have often been praised for their realism. "Sweet Traps" reevaluates the realism of Masters' writing, appraising instead the fantasies of domestic entrapment that are contained within her collection A Long Time Dying, and considering the role played by ideas about feminine victimhood in the postcolonial fantasies she pens.

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Recent feminist literary and historical work has drawn attention to the trope of the suffering woman in nineteenth-century colonial writing and the function that this paradigmatic figure served in the development of a national imaginary.¹ Two particular relatives of this figure, the twin tropes of maternity and female domesticity, played central roles in nation narration. In its incarnation in colonial literature, the trope of maternity was often called upon in the service of a national bildungsroman; the maternal figured as a site which allegorised the natural development of a fertile colony labouring to deliver an independent nation and modernity. Curiously, and less observed, this trope enjoyed a popular resurgence in twentieth century so-called “postcolonial” Australia, particularly as the nation laboured anew to escape the stigma of its colonial past after Australia’s contentious bicentennial celebration.² In the late twentieth-century, much second-wave feminist writing returned the national imagination to the figure of suffering womanhood. The related trope of home—particularly the figure of the woman *trapped* within the home—and the concept of a private female domain held a certain allure for

feminists during this era. These figures were mobilised in feminist readings and in feminist literature quite generally in the call for second-wave liberation from various forms of oppression. The deployment of the suffering white woman so central to these narratives needs to be critically interrogated.

In addition to the rise of critical whiteness studies, recent postcolonial reading and theory has taught us to be cautious of a variety of white victim narratives. This turn toward a more critically self-conscious form of postcolonial studies is somewhat new, despite the fact that postcolonial theory emerging from and applied to Australia has always been conscious of the awkward ways in which postcolonial theory has applied in their case. From the beginning of critical discussions about postcolonialism in Australia, there has been an awareness of the limitations of postcolonial theory imported from elsewhere; this reflected a discomfort with the way some postcolonial scholars prostrated themselves before a star-system of European and American high theory—a phenomenon which seemed anathema to the central project of postcolonial liberation. It also signalled an awareness of how Australia’s status as a settler colony fits awkwardly with work emerging out of former colonies of Africa or India, for instance. Studies such as Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin’s *The Empire Writes Back* (which framed the first-wave of postcolonial theory in Australia) *did* differentiate settler colonies from other forms of colonisation, such as dependencies and plantation or franchise colonies. But their use of D.E.S. Maxwell’s two categories of “settler colonies and invaded colonies” (25) belies their inclination to disregard the fact that settlement was *always already* an act of invasion. Heavily influenced by this approach, the first-wave of postcolonial theory that emerged in Australia in the 1980s focused more on Australia’s status as a victim of British colonisation than on its complicit agency in the colonisation of Indigenous peoples and their homelands.³

Despite the fact that earlier waves of postcolonial theory have now come under scrutiny, as yet very little theoretical work has attended to the uncomfortable intersection of postcolonialism and feminism in Australia. The projects of second-wave feminism and first-wave postcolonialism were closely related there, and it stands to reason that the problematic impulses of first-wave postcolonialism are enfolded in another set of problematics that centre on that feminist project. The rekindling of popularity in the

tropes of suffering white womanhood, domesticity, and maternity in second-wave feminist writing in Australia suggests an uncanny way in which narratives of the seventies and eighties were bound up in a complex articulation of nationhood very similar to their colonial counterparts. These feminist narratives are nationalist articulations in which the domestic sphere signals not merely a female domain, but also a figure of domestic nation-space. The figure of nation-space within these supposedly postcolonial narratives is particularly problematic because they redeploy colonial captivity narratives in concealed and tricky ways.

In the 1980s, feminist readers framed female writing in terms of a project of retort to masculinist canon formations, which—it was supposed—marginalised, oppressed, and excluded women’s experience and female writing. A critical interest developed in the idea of writing “women’s space.” As Allison Blunt and Gillian Rose explain, this turn to women’s space depended on a feminist analysis of power relations that required a distinction between hierarchies of separate public and private spheres (2).⁴ Civic and public spaces became regarded as strongholds of masculine power. Accordingly, male-centred narratives were seen as valorising public, heroic, and monumental acts and sweeping arcs of history that chronicled the achievements of sometimes great, usually white, and often dead men. Feminist readings overturned this hierarchy, privileging instead women’s private and quotidian experience. The home and the female body—and female-authored narratives which focused on these subjects—were accordingly regarded as sites of authenticity and realism. Yet this created a paradox which was overlooked at the time, since women’s “homely” stories contained within them an implicit concern with the nation and with civic space even as they framed women’s writing in reaction to dominant figurations of the public, political, and national spheres. Further, second-wave feminist readings tended to view women’s experience as universal, and often they did not consider concerns about race, class, and culture that third-wave feminists would soon no longer be able to ignore. This meant that feminist readings during this period were mostly blind to their complicities with dominant nation-centred and homogenising discourses which had been the targets of their own critique. Further, the narratives they praised for their liberating or empowering gestures often contain a number of concealed investments in conserving the status quo.

For the purposes of this investigation into some of these concealed investments within second-wave feminism and first-wave postcolonialism in Australia, Olga Masters' short story composite *A Long Time Dying* (1985) provides an exemplum to read against this theoretical backdrop, particularly as it relies upon a fairly elaborate domestic captivity narrative. Masters' short story collection sets up the tropes of the small town and homely domestic space as "sweet traps" doomed to failure. Integral to this narrative is a conception of Australia in history as a captive victim of a fantasised British patriarchal imperialism that is exogenous to Australia but integral to its identity. That is, Masters conceives of Britain as a corruptive force located *outside* of Australia and external to Australian interests which traps the emerging Australian nation (imagined as a feminine bildungsroman) as a captive colony unable to reach full independence. Masters' correlative of this trapped nation is feminine domestic space in rural Australia. This female domestic space is portrayed as an alluring trap that holds out an ill-fated promise of independence to her female characters whose dreams of freedom are doomed to failure. My argument is that these twinned fantasies of domestic female confinement and domestic national entrapment are integral to the concealed and problematic *postcolonial* bildungsroman that Olga Masters constructs on the cusp of Australia's bicentenary.

Recent work on domesticity, home, and imperialism foregrounds how struggles over home-space in colonial domains are intimately bound up with the regulation of empire. As Amy Kaplan has observed, "studies of imperialism show how putatively domestic conflict is not simply contained in the home" (16). Her point is that it is unacceptable to continue to regard imperialism and nation-space in terms of a binary opposition between the foreign and the domestic "imbued within gender hierarchies that implicitly elevate the international to a male, public realm, and relegate the national to a female, private sphere" (16). This work asks us to reconsider figurations of domestic space that have misleadingly construed it as a site of homely innocence or refuge from the outside world. When second-wave feminist narratives are read along vectors of their concealed nationalist investments, Kaplan's observations are particularly salient. In particular, they call into question a favoured stereotype of home-space by second-wave feminists who often summoned the home as a prison-house of domestic damsels in distress who struggled to free themselves from exteriorised forces of oppression. This

work has significance for postcolonial struggles to articulate nation-space, as Masters' fiction demonstrates.

As a mother of six children consumed by child-rearing duties in her early years, Olga Masters came to fiction writing late in life. She was constructed as a romantic figure, a homely "genius" who wrote effortlessly and organically about real life in small-town Australia in plain language, with a particular eye for detail. As a woman writer, mother figure, and relative outsider to the literary scene Masters was feted by the Australian literati in a manner that presents a curious re-emergence in 1980s Australia of the celebrated colonial figure of the woman as an emblem of fecundity and marginality. Jennifer Henderson's work has underscored how categories of the nation and the woman writer during the colonial era were entangled in a dynamic of "mutual reinforcement" (5). The myth of Masters' organic, feminine genius represents a postcolonial confluence of these mutually entangled categories. Until now, an emphasis on the "homely" and "organic" features of Masters' writing has overlooked and obscured the way in which her masterful simulacra of authenticity masks carefully constructed nationalist investments. By focusing on discrete fragments of daily life and detailed portraits of miniaturised, confined domestic spaces, Masters' homely stories convey a patina of realism. Her thematic and structural emphasis on "breakdown" contributes to this sense of bare realism. But as a book of composite short fiction—that is, interconnected short stories that form neither a novel nor a collection of discrete short stories—*A Long Time Dying* triggers a double reading of the whole. That is, its use of the short story form suggests metonymic forms of fragmentation, but the composite can also be read as an accretion of stories that elicits metaphoric interpretations that are also encoded within the larger text. When read metaphorically, *A Long Time Dying* contains a concealed allegory of the postcolonial nation which depends upon many of the same the tropes of marginality, fertility, and exploitability that were integral to settler colonial writing. The point here is that Masters' composite fiction conceals its national allegory and its nationalist designs by cultivating a series of supposedly "innocent" bodies of particularised miniatures with a vividness that is designed to produce a semblance of authenticity, but which deploys nostalgic sentimentality with precision and control.

Masters' second-wave feminist readers responded to *A Long Time Dying* as part of the feminist project of reconfiguring homely, local space and liberating the figure of the woman from ostensibly male-centred accounts. The seventeen separate stories detail from multiple points of view the intertwined lives of an equal number of families settled in the Cobargo region of New South Wales to create an illusion of place as embodying fragmented, polyvocal histories rather than a coherent plot with linear, progressive development. These are hallmarks of the kind of re-writing techniques valued by second-wave liberal feminist readers. Totalising meta-narratives and dominant spatial discourses are apparently displaced by the provisional, multiple, fragmented, and hidden spaces in Masters' discrete, homely stories that detail private lives trapped in community. For such a project, the short story composite is particularly appropriate, because its discrete short stories seem anti-heroic in their humble narrative claims, and because the short story form allows intense, highly focalised portraits of isolated lives in a small-town milieu. Master's second-wave feminist readers praised the detail and accuracy of her narrative minutiae. Dorothy Jones, Masters' most prolific critical reader in the 1980s, observed that Masters' writing is "homely, remarkably specific, and...charged with emotional significance" ("Flies in the Milk" 4). Instead of focusing on the sentimentality of her work, Masters' readers concentrated on the way she seemed to faithfully detail the rich texture of complex daily lives. In Adrienne McClymont's words, Masters' writing demonstrated sharp "attention to the fine-print of everyday experience" (McClymont 56).

Other feminist readings of Masters focused on how she appears to liberate place from imagined masculinist imperial encodings.⁵ In *The Road to Botany Bay: An Essay in Spatial History* (1987), Paul Carter suggests a panoptic mode of surveying space that he equates with masculine and imperialist discourse. Carter characterises this perspective as the "panoramic eye before whose gaze the historical facts unfold" (xix). At the time of its publication, Carter's work was groundbreaking for the way it underscored the textual strategies through which the imperial annexation of "new" spaces was legitimated and enabled. In contrast to these imperial textual strategies of appropriating and inscribing space which were increasingly falling into disfavour at this time of emerging postcolonial critique, Masters' narratives seem unplanned, authentic, and consumed with details of real-lives narrated from a pedestrian point of view. Her stories appear to unsettle

authoritative and univocal delineations of space by outlaying a framework of what Carter calls “anastomosing” stories. In this model, as Jones puts it “each completed story contains within it the seeds of many others waiting to burst through the boundaries of narrative” (“Digging Deep” 35). “[L]ife at its most ordinary,” Jones observes of Masters’ fiction, “opens up to reveal a multiplicity of stories, one developing out of another” (“Digging Deep” 28). In a similar way, Masters’ writing is conflated with an organic kind of “birthing” process in which stories simply emerge out of other stories, without an overarching master-plan. Masters comes to be read not as a masterful writer of highly constructed and tightly managed prose, then, but as a fertile, organic, reproductive mother-figure. In fact, Masters also cultivated this romantic image of herself:

I write in a way that is quite difficult because I don’t plot, I simply don’t plot at all. I take a situation and write from there, letting the characters do what I think they should do, creating the characters as best I can and letting them run away with the story. (Masters qtd. in Jones, “Digging Deep” 32)

Noticing Masters’ obsession with managing the details and particularities of everyday life, her feminist readers confused a highly tended and constructed narrative economy for its mimetic fidelity to real life.

It is important to notice here how Masters’ feminist readers saw this miniaturising of everyday life as deeply associated with marginality and realism, and as documentary in its representation of these features of “Australian” life. Alternative readings need to concentrate on the nationalism and sentimentality of Masters’ work. Masters’ narratives *seem* like lifelike plotless sketches, but they are in fact meticulously plotted, and their tightly managed narrative economy is intrinsically connected to a similarly managed plotting of Australian national space. As Catherine Nash has argued, “the idea of place” very often concerns both the “sensual, lived experience of the local environment,” as well as “the abstract level of the nation” (228). Earlier feminist readings of Olga Masters’ *A Long Time Dying* collapsed these two categories. In such a way, and without realising

they do so, these readings call on the domestic sphere as a site to rejuvenate myths of an authentic Australia uncorrupted by, although circumscribed by, imperial, metropolitan, masculine, political evils fictionally conjured up and consigned to the “outside” of feminine domesticana. As Jones sees it, Masters’ “domestic world is also ‘distinctively Australian’” (“Flies in the Milk” 3). Adrienne McClymont observes that *A Long Time Dying* “[c]elebrates the lives of ‘ordinary’ Australians” (McClymont 48). Small-town Cobargo in these stories comes to be regarded then as a synecdoche for regional Australia, and its inhabitants are seen as representative citizens. Similarly, the local, fragmented, and polyvocal lived experience of place in Masters’ composite stands in for larger experiences at the abstract level of nation.

Crucially, these interpretations rely on the deployment of the figure of the woman as a damsel in distress, a woman who is ultimately associated with Australian small-town life and who dreams of freedom, but who is confined to the home where she is forced to attend to the daily drudgeries of life. Masters’ meticulous description of Mary Jussep stitching buttons (9) or of Jessie, the Rossmore’s maid, crocheting in *A Long Time Dying* (16) are typical examples of how such women are described finding solace in daily drudgery, and of how they fail to understand or escape larger systemic structures because they attend to these details.⁶ Jones notices that “Masters’ fiction contains several images of women and children looking longingly from the verandas of country houses at cars passing down roads” (“Flies” 6) and that her writing frequently expresses “the motif of domestic containment coupled with the urge to break free from it” (“Flies” 10).

In such a way, Masters presents the intimate sphere as both a site of retreat and containment. Significantly, Australian domestic life is portrayed as promising independence, but doomed to limitations and restraints imagined as imposed from without. Many of the stories in *A Long Time Dying* contemplate the interference of larger structures, such as the State and the Church in family life. But although Masters acknowledges the presence of governmental technologies in everyday life, she also positions these forces as intruders on the private sphere. As Jones observes:

Masters was able to portray the home as a predominantly female domain, yet at the same time, reveal how its nature is determined and restricted

through the pressures of society shaped by largely male concerns. (qtd. in McClymont 49)

Particularising what Jones has called “the insider’s account of domesticity” (“Flies” 1), Masters creates a mythical, nostalgic space striated with loss and melancholy, to show how domestic space is intimately—and crucially: always already—“corrupted.” The lives Masters describes with intimate particularity are thus portrayed as contaminated by larger political and economic forces which seem to have external origins, even as these forces are already thoroughly entangled in the domestic lives of her characters. Further, Masters’ pervasive use of a profusion of domestic detail engages the reader in metonymic readings which take the focus off the larger structures in which these lives are caught. In this way, settlers are portrayed with humanising detail that contributes to their characterisation as victims, rather than complicit benefactors of these larger structures. Such a reading is elicited by the text:

Masters... records not merely the details of domestic life, but what it actually feels to be enmeshed within them. Characters in her fiction constantly test or explore the opportunities open to them, and she reveals, sometimes with humour, always with compassion, how tightly individual lives are constrained by economic factors and social expectation. (Jones “Flies” 3)

Reportedly, Masters was deeply disturbed by the ways in which “home” was not the ideal retreat from outside forces that she had assumed it to be. The experience of grinding poverty during the Depression years left Masters with “an awareness of the ways in which the family—or ‘home’—failed to square with its ideology as purely private domain, offering refuge from the stresses and strains of life outside” (Coleman xix). For Masters, the home offered to women, especially, a broken promise of a private domain, which was sullied by negativism and unexpected interference. As Jones explains,

In her fiction, Olga Masters presents the domestic sphere as a place where women establish their own identity. It is revealed as a region of absorbing interest, frequently embellished by female skill and creativity, yet it is also restrictive, engendering in most women a desperation to free themselves. (“Flies” 11)

Julie Lewis remarks in her biography of Olga Masters that women trapped by circumstance were fictional representations of Masters’ own life in which her brief stint of independence in Sydney before marriage, the subsequent births of her six children, and the obligations of life as a country teacher’s wife would furnish her imagination with the “unconscious memory of liberation that failed, of the promise that was betrayed” (Marcuse qtd. in Lewis 91).

Central then to this portrait is a melancholic vision of freedom which is *already* lost. It draws contaminating forces as close as it can to its centre, in order to position them as outside impingements already corrupting the innocent heart in the hometown dream. This encodes a central metaleptic trope that structures the narrative such that failed independence is seen as an *effect* of empire’s insidious control of the Australian colony, rather than evidence of the way empire was from the very first intimately enmeshed in Australian life. This metalepsis obscures Australia’s collusive entanglement with projects of empire. In such a way, Masters portrays ordinary Australians as victims of externalised exploitation, which allows her to imagine not only a future free from colonial subordination, but also a version of the past that exonerates settler Australians from their role in colonisation. Surveying Masters’ newspaper career, Coleman remarks that for Masters, “the dependent status of women was intimately bound up with the servility of Australia’s colonial posture toward Britain” (34). On this count, Coleman points to Masters’ 1985 article “War gave women a first taste of liberation” (*Sydney Morning Herald* 13 August) in which Masters writes:

The tie with the Mother Country, as England was called then, gave so much significance to Victory in Europe. We were conditioned to revere her. She was more than the Mother Country—she was the Mother under

whose skirts we had sheltered for more than one hundred years, on whom we depended. (Coleman 41)

* * *

We were a pretty naïve lot in those days. Not only did we still believe if God saved the King he would save us too, we did most of the things our mothers did and their mothers before them, and nearly all of them came from the United Kingdom, the very name suggesting power, protection, and obedience. Our obedience. (Coleman 42)

Aside from the point that this passage emphasises Masters' deliberate association between mother and the allegorical figure of Mother England she alludes to in her stories, it is important to note here that Masters describes how settlers, and especially settler women, had been dupes of empire.

This “drawing near” of external forces of control allows Masters to detail a mythic process by which intimate lives, apparently duped by the “evil empire,” were not just controlled from without but tightly managed and constrained from within. As such, Masters details how her subjects have internalised external, British values that require them to repress elements of their life narratives which vex them, or which they cannot accommodate. This is a version of the “psychic colonisation” narrative that was integral to first-wave postcolonialism, and which posited a kind of “false consciousness” that had infected the colonial mindset from without. Integrally, in Masters' female-centred stories, psychological colonisation is a form of subordination that takes place at the intimate level of gendered bodies. In “The Brighter Arnold,” for instance, Masters describes in compact prose Fred Rossmore's foiled attempt to sexually molest Nancy Arnold by the river. At the end of the story, Nancy represses the episode, and as she is carried away by her father on horseback, her memory of the river next to which she stood comes to stand in for the more disturbing recollection of Fred's exposing himself to her:

Nancy closed her eyes when they moved off, letting the horse's flesh ripple into her flesh. She felt rocked, as if in a cradle, a gentle jerking rhythm. Worth a look, worth a look, worth a look, worth a look, she

said to herself...She saw in her mind the brown racing water, the floating twigs and foam, and the black, watching fence posts. Anything else she refused to see. (43)

This form of psychic management is used to shore up the notion that these characters are victims of a form of oppression they cannot even acknowledge, something that touches their lives so intimately that they have “refused to see.”

Insinuations of sexual abuse suffuse these stories, strongly suggesting that it is a realistic feature of small-town life at the dull and dysfunctional end of civilisation. But an alternative reading might notice how pervasive and troubling the “rape plot” is in colonial literature, as a narrative that stages external threats to female innocence and domestic integrity from the outside.⁷ In its settler postcolonial deployment, as I argue it is being articulated in Masters’ fiction, sexual abuse signals the exploitation and dysfunction of colonial life more generally, such that originally exogenous sources of corruption have been drawn so intimately near that domestic subjects are now victims even of themselves and their “own kind.” Here women, and specifically children, are figured as innocent subjects whose bodies are vulnerable to exploitation in a generally dysfunctional culture. Crucially, it is also suggested that these abused figures must also “manage” their own lives with psychological tools of repression and displacement. So every intimate part of Australian life is subject to control from without, but that control is insidiously internalised and omnipresent.

Tom Griffiths has noted that a key feature of Australian settler culture is a “psychological legacy of the frontier” (“A Haunted Country” 17) that leaves white Australia haunted by colonial violence and dispossession. In Masters’ stories, this psychological legacy is made out to be not the memory of frontier violence, but rather, the imposition of a British mindset and a troubling internalisation of imperialist values which is at once the cause of this violence and which simultaneously casts settlers as victims, even as they possess a compulsion to victimise others. Although Masters’ stories appear to express a desire to outgrow a repressive colonial mentality, her nostalgic treatment of the past simultaneously laments the early days of Australia and its simple, albeit primitive past. Settlers seem to be the subjects of Masters’ critique, but only as

ignorant dupes of larger systems of governance and control of which they are ignorant but also intimately controlled. In this, Masters absolves settlers of complicity in projects of colonisation, and in a related way she continues to consign Aborigines to the past and to the periphery of the Australian story. Although ostensibly deconstructing the hypocrisies of colonial life, Masters' stories reveal ongoing investments in myths of white settlement. Rather than a "free" space, "as peaceful and pretty as the trees," as the inhabitants would like to see it ("A Spread of Warm Blood" 136), the Cobargo community, as Masters portrays it, is a tightly managed and highly constructed space, a place of failed freedom.

The larger composite structure enacts a kind of entrapment that mirrors and reinforces the experience of many of the characters it portrays. Just as the community of Cobargo becomes representative of a more generalised Australian experience, and Masters' own narrative becomes organised by an apparent failure to break free from larger containing structures similar to those which entrap her characters. Although the narrative appears to defer conclusions, to create an organic, peripatetic mode of spatial reproduction, this is an illusion masterfully produced by its structural organisation. In fact, *A Long Time Dying* is a highly managed narrative, which—as early drafts reveal—was actually conceived as a novel, with the stories as set chapters, and an overarching narrative plot.⁸ Read together instead of as separate, discrete stories, an overarching narrative pattern increasingly shifts the narrative focus away from landed-gentry settler families to those who appear to be somewhat more marginal. The disintegration of what Carter calls the "Family-tree myth of history,"—an imperial history of cause and effect which privileged the lineage of "great men" of which the storyteller-historian becomes heir and inheritor of all (xvi) — is in fact only a masterful *effect* of the narrative. In fact, the composite reconfigures the intertwined narratives of marginal families so that they gradually come to merge with the pre-eminent founding households in the region. Gradually, narrative fragments assemble into an allegory of the postcolonial nation. Even though the composite stories each centre on a different family in the town of Cobargo, the Jussep and Rossmore families come to dominate the composite. The Jusseps are sharecroppers who rent property from the Rossmores, a gentrified "first family" of the Cobargo district. In contrast, the Jusseps represent struggling battlers. In "Scones Every

Day,” the Jusseps lose their mother, who dies suddenly while baking scones. This event crystallises their portrait as a working-class family constantly facing strife and loss. It also suggests the recurrent colonial trope of the absent mother. In addition, it stages the Australian colony as a place of lost or orphaned colonial children whose figuration expresses an allegory of absence and anxiety about displacement from the imperial mother culture, a trope Peter Pierce has discussed in *The Country of Lost Children*. As Mary Jussep finally marries into the Rossmore clan, a rejuvenated community is born out of the interbreeding of the vigorous working-class and the gentrified families.

In addition to this national allegory that emerges when the stories are read together, a romance-marriage plot which is almost nineteenth-century in its classic structure shapes the arc of the narrative. It is not uncommon that short story composites may be organised by framing stories, but in this case the Jussep stories provide a double frame for Masters’ *A Long Time Dying*. The two beginning stories—“Scones Every Day” and “Stan and Mary, Mary and Stan”—provide the opening bookends for which the penultimate story “Madge and Patty, Patty and Madge” and the concluding tale “The Wedding” are its closing pair. The overarching narrative provided by these four stories is the plot and background of Stan Rossmore and Mary Jussep’s courtship and subsequent marriage. The shape of this narrative also closely follows the theme of freedom-doomed. The final story, “The Wedding” is particularly revealing with regard to the theme of failed independence which produces sentimental effects. Though ultimately it is a story of union, the tale veers off-track halfway through. In a typical circuitous narrative style, it follows the path of Mary, who calls off the wedding just before the date. As the realities of her imminent marriage bear down on her, it seems to occur to Mary that marriage is “no fairytale” (304). Yet crucially Mary reconciles herself to her fate and marries in the end, anyway. Dorothy Jones reads this as episode of failed escape in the register of realism, as evidence of Masters’ acquiescence that there *was* no other way for Australian women of this era to escape the drudgery of small-town family life other than through marriage, which simply exchanged one form of servitude for another.⁹ In this “failed” romance plot, marriage becomes a flawed solution that dooms her female characters’ to bondage and servitude.

But although Jones reads these portraits of the Australian past as realism, these concessions to “reality” are actually narrative traps in which Masters consigns her characters’ dreams of independence to failure in order to bolster a vision of the Australian status quo. Masters designs an overarching literary Malthusian project, so that the subordinate sidelined sharecropping family can integrate with the Rossmore clan, and reproduce a homely vision of postcolonial Australia that is responsive to, and in fact based upon, its incorporation of dispossessed and marginalised subclasses of newcomers. In her famous article “Imperialism and Motherhood,” Anna Davin persuasively argued that Malthusian ideas were central to earlier colonial notions of an “imperial race” (32).¹⁰ Masters’ narrative might be regarded as a disturbing *postcolonial* fable of eugenics. In Masters’ fable, the impure imperial British racial stock of Australia is imaginatively strengthened and improved upon by selective breeding and good rearing, weeding out embarrassing and undesirable national traits, such as the squattocracy’s oppressive attitude to entitlement and privilege, and breeding in the ethics of a working, white underclass.

Such a highly constructed myth of syncretism, organicism, and development depends upon a concealed national allegory of a reproductive, regenerative Australia that naturally assimilates minorities, fragments, and marginalised groups into a healthy rejuvenated whole. The discrete stories that comprise this allegory shift the focus away from this overarching narrative that is being covertly assembled in the background. The use of particularised detail suggested by and compounded through Masters’ use of metonymic fragments suggests a mode of realist representation that detracts from the clandestinely assembled national allegory and romance. But this meta-narrative of Australian rejuvenation and redemption is a nationalist fantasy that relies on a questionable collocation of different marginalities. The narrative thus places women as marginal figures *alongside* another series of marginalised displacements: ‘ethnics’ and Aboriginals become equals of the redeployed figure of the “sympathetic white woman” who then posits their marginality as a sad “fact of life” while simultaneously concealing the *inequalities* between these supposed solidarities. The composite thus disguises its larger racial and cultural investments by pretending to privilege marginality and particularity.

One way these narrative tactics work at a structural level in *A Long Time Dying* is by the processes of selection, focalisation, and anecdote. Settler lives, and particularly women's lives, are the focus of these stories; Aboriginal and ethnic characters are consigned to the status of anecdote. Masters skilfully details how white settlers repeatedly block and repress Aboriginal inhabitants from intruding on their space. This is especially true in the story "In Cobargo Now," where the black character Wal and his family and all other traces of black inhabitants who live at Wallaga Lake are consigned to the sidelines not only of Cobargo but also the margins of Masters' Australian narrative, as well. It is revealing that this story and the subsequent story "A Spread of Warm Blood" are positioned centrally in the composite, since both stories appear to relate anecdotally instances of racism in small-town life. Because of their pivotal placement at the centre of the composite, Masters seems centrally interested in this treatment of Aboriginal characters, and she frames their marginalisation as one of the symptoms of the repressive colonial mentality she details. But importantly, even though Masters appears to focus on these Aboriginal stories by putting them at the physical core of her composite, she repeats this marginalisation by reducing these characters to the sidelines of the settler life she ultimately details more extensively. This anecdotal management of marginality is central to Masters' narrative design.

Again, this marginalisation of characters seems to be a tragic effect of the "real lives" Masters chronicles, but Masters' tragic fatalism is central to her mode of composition. Here I want to extend the point that the idea of failed liberty underpins *A Long Time Dying*, not just as a theme, but as an organisational trope. Masters' composite appears to detail and critique larger power structures that shape characters' lives and existence in outflung backwaters of the Australian nation. Yet, crucially, it also *inscribes* a mode of governance integral to careful deployment of narrative *and* national space. Carter suggests rhetoric is central to spatial narratives: "[R]hetoric, the whole range of figurative terms by which we denominate the world, attempting to translate it into plausible conceptions, is itself fundamentally spatial in nature... [it] brings distant things near" (30). While Carter invokes these principles in a spatial sense, in Masters' composite they function along vectors of space *and* time, laying out a sophisticated spatio-temporal grid that entraps readers within her sentimental vision of settler Australia.

As I have suggested earlier, Masters animates the past in the context of concerns and anxieties characteristic of late twentieth century Australia. Her pastiche of past and present seduces readers to accept a version of the past in which women appear to be victims of their husbands, husbands are victims of economic circumstances, economic circumstances are victims of a global situation in which Australia had been unable to establish independence from England, the innocent nation was a victim of an evil empire, and Aboriginals and ethnic migrants have simply fallen by the wayside as marginalised bystanders. To bolster this vision, Masters instrumentally shapes stories and fictional lives to make them speak seductively as historically “real” lives. This narrative strategy relies upon a strategic fragmentation of factors and subjects which in fact were historically collusive in settler colonialism: a complex symbiotic structure of empire and nation that attempted to strategically re-place earlier inhabitants and dis-place the immigrations of newcomers. A key factor of Masters’ narrative strategy is the fragmentation and compression of these elements of settler colonialism, and the metaleptic reversal of cause and effect.

In this context, de Certeau’s description of synecdoche and asyndeton, which he figures as central to descriptions of this pedestrian space, has particular bearing on how Masters’ writing practices place. The fundamental operation of synecdoche is commonly known: part is taken for the whole. Asyndeton is less understood, and requires a lengthier explanation:

Asyndeton is the suppression of linking words such as conjunctions and adverbs, either within a sentence or between sentences... it selects and fragments... space...; it skips over links and whole parts that it omits...It practices the ellipsis of conjunctive loci. (de Certeau 101)

De Certeau’s explanation of how the two figures work together to constitute a pedestrian rhetoric could very well describe Olga Masters’ narrative technique in *A Long Time Dying*:

Synecdoche expands a spatial element in order to make it play the role of a “more” (a totality) and take its place (the bicycle or the piece of furniture in a store window stands for a whole street or a neighborhood). Asyndeton, by elision, creates a “less,” opens gaps in the spatial continuum, and retains only selected parts of it that amount almost to relics. Synecdoche replaces totalities by fragments (a *less* in the place of a *more*); asyndeton disconnects them by eliminating the conjunctive or the consecutive (nothing in place of something). Synecdoche makes more dense: it amplifies the detail and miniaturizes the whole. Asyndeton cuts out: it undoes continuity and undercuts its plausibility. A space treated in this way and shaped by practices is transformed into enlarged singularities and separate islands. Through these swellings, shrinkings, and fragmentations, that is, through these rhetorical operations of space... the figures of pedestrian rhetoric substitute trajectories that have a mythical structure...a story jerry-built out of elements...an allusive and fragmentary story. (102)

Masters’ narrative relies on a contraction of space and time by the use of these “shrinkings” described by de Certeau and “swellings” characteristic of the violence of metonymic representation which are the signature of her prose style.

The whole lives that Masters often reveals in intimate minutiae are often betrayed by telling, metonymic details where whole characters or families are exposed and represented by their parts. Often these details involve suggestive body parts severed from their organic wholes. In “Stan and Mary, Mary and Stan,” Mrs Rossmore is described as having “a pair of little sausage lips” (16), Patty becomes known for her “fair hair” (3), Tom and Bernie, after their mother’s funeral, are described with “mouths working in white faces” (10). In “The Brighter Arnold,” the little girls awaiting the bus outside Fred Rossmore’s shop expose to his view “their young knees coming down from tunic hems” (35). Fred Rossmore is described “waggl[ing] his fists” (36), until the “edges of the buttons on his fly were suddenly exposed” (36). Nola has the “mole on her thigh...exposed in all its shame” (39); she later “slide[s] her red lips back to show little

fat teeth” (40). Trees, even, are described with “roots exposed like a mouthful of rotten teeth” (53). Mrs Churcher sits “with her knees spread” (54), and Mr Churcher stands “one hand near his waist, the fingers spread as if a cigarette was there” (58). Dorothy, in “Tea With Sister Paula” sits “on the grass exposing her legs, short as they were, like fat logs against the green” (67). Mrs. Faigen has “heavy legs flowing toward old slippers” (230). Similarly, Mrs Murchison, in “The Wedding,” is described as having ankles “now unfortunately no more than a mound of flesh like a serve of pale blancmange” (322); she sits joining “her puffy fingers on her lap” (324). The examples go on and on, but the point is that these excerpts demonstrate a fetishisation of fragments typical of Masters’ distinguishing style, and suggest a structuring composite economy of fragments cleverly managed to produce a naturalising, humanising effect which conceals its own highly constructed nature. Here we can also see how synecdochic figures are excessively invoked to do much of the work of representation in Masters’ writing. Parts and fragments are almost compulsively spliced together. In such a way asyndeton works to assemble larger composite pictures and narratives. Structurally, then, the text assembles overarching narratives and larger pictures using its compulsive accretion of fragments, when it pretends to resist meta-narratives and larger power structures more generally. In its very language and rhetoric, the text is complicit with power structures it pretends to critique, and it redeploys them in concealed structural ways. We can see here that asyndetic description is the hallmark of Masters’ writing. Revealingly it is a trope of doubleness, or duplicity; it chops up wholes into essential parts only to merge them again into larger more suggestive pictures. Using a parallel method, Masters’ narrative takes apart and fragments the settler colonial past into its smallest domestic components, and she deftly re-combines these elements into an overarching meta-narrative. This meta-narrative is defensive of aspects of the settler past, and as such it is invested in reconsolidating in the 1980s a “traditional” settler past that seems to be under threat. Master’s use of detail and micro-narratives convinces readers of her realism, and detracts from the larger project of managing narrative *and* both national and historical space.

In this way, we can see that Masters’ settler postcolonial narrative reconstructs aspects of settler colonialism it appears to deconstruct, and suggests ways in which the entire settler postcolonial project may be collusive with its imagined (and fictionally

externalised) object of resistance: empire. Here, the settler small town, the back-of-beyond—brought inward as if in retreat to the most cherished and private heart of domestic life—becomes a rejuvenation project not just for a flawed nation, but for an insidious and concealed colonising project in which the nation has always been intimately entangled. Integral to this narrative are second-wave feminist images of organicism and fertility; the structure of *A Long Time Dying* reveals how these images entice readers to accept larger structural claims. Troublingly, *A Long Time Dying* appears structured thus to resurrect and defend a version of settler Australia it pretends to sentimentally farewell. Olga Masters' fiction is, I would suggest, typical of fictions of feminine domestic space cordoned off from the national guilt just beginning to surface on the postcolonial horizon.

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NOTES

¹ See, for instance, Marilyn Lake's work on colonial women and nineteenth century feminism in Australia and also Jennifer Anderson's *Settler Feminism and Race-Making in Canada*.

² I employ the phrase "so-called postcolonial" to signal the freight this term carries in Australia. Critics who have worked on settler colonialism in Australia, specifically Alan Lawson, Gillian Whitlock, and more recently Tanya Dalziel have always acknowledged Australia's difficult positioning within classic models of postcolonialism, pointing to Australia's double role as a colony and as a colonising force. The 'post' of postcolonialism, cannot be regarded in this register as referring to a period of recovery 'after' colonialism, but rather to an ongoing cultural aftermath. More recent critical discussions have foregrounded the troubling way that postcolonial culture and theory itself exercises a colonising function. Aileen Moreton Robinson's introduction of the term 'postcolonizing' signals this:

In Australia the colonials did not go home and 'postcolonial' remains based on whiteness. This must be theorized in a way which allows for incommensurable difference between the situatedness of the Indigenous people in a colonizing settler society such as Australia and those who have come here. Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples are situated in relation to (post)colonization in radically different ways – ways that cannot be made into sameness. There may well be spaces in Australia that could be described as postcolonial but these are not spaces inhabited by Indigenous people. It may be more useful, therefore, to conceptualize the current condition not as postcolonial but as *postcolonizing* with the associations of ongoing process which that implies. (*Uprootings* 30)

Carole Ferrier—who discusses the usefulness of the more recently considered concept of *complicity*—has mentioned this work in the upcoming 2008 Special Issue of *JASAL, The Colonial Present: Australian Writing for the 21st Century* where she also usefully records Ann Curthoy's comment that:

Caught in that liminal, always undecided state between a colonial past and a possibly postcolonial future, 'Australia' is a land, a society, a history neither colonial nor postcolonial. The question that must be asked is, "Are we postcolonial yet?" (Curthoy 166).

Anne Brewster's comments on the subject are also worth considering: "Clearly white Australian culture is simultaneously post- and neocolonial; contemporarily it could be described as neocolonized and neocolonizing." (Brewster, online).

³ It should be said that by their reversal of the descriptors in the term 'settler-invader' made popular during the 1990s, recent scholars of settler studies who refer to the "invader-settler" colonies such as Australia, Canada, South Africa and the USA reflect a gradual change in emphasis from the acceptance of the settler colony's double role as a product of colonialism and an agent of colonisation to an awareness that settlement is always already an act of invasion and displacement of the colony's Indigenous peoples. Many of these studies acknowledge Len Findlay's call in his often cited 'Always Indigenize!' to put the long-undervalued and overwritten concerns and points of view of Indigenous peoples first. This move also reflects an understanding of how the doubly colonised and colonising role of the settler is not a balanced form of hybridity, but one that *primarily* privileges the settler at the expense of Indigenous forms of expression, culture, and geo-legal precedence.

⁴ Rose and Blunt single out Michelle Rosaldo's groundbreaking 1974 essay as influencing this view of female domestic space. See Rosaldo, Michelle. "Woman, Culture, and Society: A Theoretical Overview." *Woman, Culture and Society*. Ed. M.Z. Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere. Stanford, California: Stanford UP, 1974. 17-34.

⁵ See, in particular, Aritha Van Herk's "Missing Men and Unmothered Sisters" in *Autumn Crocus: Proceedings of the Olga Masters Conference 8-10 July 1988*. Ed. William McGaw and Paul Sharrad. Wollongong: New Literatures Research Centre, U of Wollongong, 1990. 66-84.

⁶ The following description of the Rossmore's maid epitomises these sorts of portraits:

She took off her apron and hung it behind the pantry door and went off to her bedroom to get on with her fancy work until four o'clock... climbing into her unmade bed and reaching for the wicker basket that held her tea cloth and cottons. She decided not to go on with the pansies in satin stitch, but to have a change and do some stem stitch on stems and leaves. She bit off the first thread from a silky skein, a lovely moss green, with a feeling of excitement. (17)

These are common visions in Masters' stories of a fictionalised version of Cobargo during the Depression era: girls confined at home making-do, longing for freedom from drudgery and yet smartly self-satisfied with the little independence they do possess.

⁷ See Jenny Sharpe's *Allegories of Empire: The Figure of Woman in the Colonial Text*. In particular, her observation that rape narratives generally proliferate in colonial cultures when borders and boundaries between the colonized and colonizers are unstable or appear to be under revision is most salient here.

⁸ Fryer Library, University of Queensland, Papers of Olga Masters, Box 2, UQFL32.

⁹ Jones posits the point this story thus: "Marriage cannot possibly yield, either to the bride or groom, the life of total bliss and fulfilment each expects. It may appear to offer the woman some prospect of a larger, more fulfilled life, but, in Master's fiction, it proves a very flawed solution, often imposing greater constraints than ever." (Jones, "Flies" 4)

¹⁰ Davin's larger argument is that the "civilizing mission" of Empire secured the attachment between motherhood, race, and the colonies by assigning to the domestic subject the task of maintaining and increasing the strength and purity of the "breed."