

CALL FOR PAPERS

The Uncommon Commonwealth

15-19 July 2019, submissions due August 2018

The University of Auckland Grafton Campus, Aotearoa New Zealand

‘The job of holding the center . . . is often done by the men from the provinces, from the outskirts. Contrary to popular belief, the outskirts are not where the world ends—they are precisely where it begins to unfurl.’

(Joseph Brodsky)

‘Is heaven also made in Taiwan? And does Jesus really know how to speak Samoan?’

(Sia Figiel, *The Girl in the Moon Circle*)

In its modern history, the Commonwealth has provided an uncommonly flexible set of social, political, legal and economic forms of association. Founded in British colonialism, it conducts its business in a more or less common language, English and, arguably, shares core cultural values. But the Commonwealth is marked by the distinct topographies, histories, ethnicities and indigenous languages of its member states, variously confronting post-independence, the legacy of Britain’s “masks of conquest”.

It is uncommon in that it survives — albeit haphazardly — as its members are drawn into new strategic alliances and loyalties. But how successful is this survival? Does this new Commonwealth matter, and how long will it last? How important are the traditional commonalities of language, legal systems and political values among countries of such different experiences and concerns? How does literature figure in this mix? Is it less or more truly the case that, as Rushdie asserted thirty years ago, “Commonwealth literature does not exist”? If so, does it not-exist differently? Has Commonwealth culture, including its literatures, been overtaken by new forms of transnational association driven by globalising forces? The Commonwealth now looks unfixed, in ways that mesh with notions of postcoloniality, yet it refuses to accommodate strictly to postcolonial theory. This Commonwealth, no longer dominated or unified by the traditional metropole, increasingly seems structured by rhizomatic connections, converting traditional passages of migration and commerce into reversals and redirections, speaking sideways or talking back.

How does this work out for language and literature? In particular, acknowledging the venue for this conference, how does this work out within the South Pacific? How does the South Pacific, including the settler societies of New Zealand and Australia, now relate to major continental Commonwealth neighbours like Canada, South Africa and India? Is the cultural orientation of India and Canada intra-continental, rather than intra-Commonwealth?

Within this re-shaping of Commonwealth identities lies another uncommonality: the various dismantlings of British colonies have resulted in new modes of regional alliance; paradoxically, perhaps, they also prompt efforts to articulate a new cosmopolitanism. Who is our neighbour? In an age of mass travel and unbounded popular culture, Commonwealth countries are inevitably engaged in globally current issues; new technologies give a place in popular consciousness to crises of famine, population displacement and massive inequality. Does contemporary literature work this way? Correlatively, it might be argued that cosmopolitanism, a new order of universal sympathy – including its claimed association with the novel – has emerged from the patched up history of this uncommon Commonwealth.

What we share may no longer be our unifying factor: commonly, now, we seek instead to restore, document, celebrate and develop our differences. To be uncommon in this fashion, however, may still be to participate in the unfurling of the world, with the peculiar support of Commonwealth histories of dismantling and re-formation. Or to be uncommon may be to speak with our own voices and to determine our own trajectories, to do “unheard of things” with English, our uncommonly common tongue.

We invite proposals for papers and creative submissions that tackle how new cultural and literary formations have emerged in the modern Commonwealth, or ways in which writing and culture address this pluri-form modern order. The following list of topics is indicative, not exclusive. We are keen to receive proposals for linked or associated papers from panels of speakers.

Topics:

- ‘Unheard of things’: Indigenous languages and literatures.
- ‘Imaginary Homelands’: migration, metamorphosis and nostalgia.
- Living on the edge: islands and beaches.
- Nationhood, nationalism and internationalism.
- Transnationalism, regionalism, south-to-south relationships.
- New migrants, refugees and cultural transplantation.
- Racism and tribalism.
- New definitions of race, ethnicity and language.
- Colonial vestiges and ruins: monuments, public spaces, architecture.
- New spaces, identities and/or hybridity.
- Cosmopolitanism, or ‘cosmopolitical community’.
- Travel writing: beyond mapping and canvassing empire.
- Sports alliances, rivalries and competitions.
- Redefining magic realism and fantasy; reclaiming myth.
- Building ‘houses’ of literature.
- ‘World’ and ‘Nation’ literatures.
- The multicultural text; or Comparative Literature within the Commonwealth.
- International and local publishing and national/regional/global book prizes.
- Creative and critical collaborations.
- Political transitions and new economic alliances.
- An eco-critical commonwealth.
- Post-imperial imaginaries.

Opening Keynote: Witi Ihimaera, Distinguished Companion of the New Zealand Order of Merit, Queen’s Service Medal /www.bookcouncil.org.nz/writer/ihimaera-witi/

Conference Contact: Brent Hemi: b.hemi@auckland.ac.nz

Conference Committee: Conference Convenor: Assoc. Prof Selina Tusitala Marsh: s.marsh@auckland.ac.nz; Professor Tom Bishop, Professor Malcolm Campbell, Assoc. Prof Paula Morris, Dr Claudia Marquis

Conference abstracts to be sent to: Dr Claudia Marquis: c.marquis@auckland.ac.nz

Submission deadline: 1 Aug 2018; Notifications: 31 Oct 2018

For more details: **WEBSITE to come!**