

Review of *The Transported Imagination: Australian Interwar Magazines and the Geographical Imaginaries of Colonial Modernity*, by Victoria Kuttainen, Susann Liebich and Sarah Galletly

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ON the cover of *The Transported Imagination: Australian Interwar Magazines and the Geographical Imaginaries of Colonial Modernity*, fashionably dressed men and women lean against the slip rail of an ocean cruiser, gazing at an island scene of sampans, palm trees, sandy beaches and soaring mountains. The image is from a full-page advertisement for P&O's 'Pleasure Cruises', illustrated by Australian graphic artist James Northfield and featured in a 1936 edition of *The BP Magazine* – one of the culture and leisure magazines that Victoria Kuttainen, Susann Liebich and Sarah Galletly take as the focus of *Transported Imagination*. In this tightly focused and engagingly written study, Kuttainen, Liebich and Galletly argue that culture and leisure magazines played a crucial role in encouraging interwar Australians' 'fascination with the world beyond Australia's shores, with overseas travel, and the Pacific in particular' (38). Although not all Australians could afford to partake in the kind of pleasure cruise depicted in Northfield's illustration, readers were nonetheless 'transported' to international locales through reading about and looking at images of travel destinations in commercial periodicals. These magazines 'transported the public imagination beyond dun-coloured outback scenes or insular Australian outlooks to international affairs, travel, [and] cosmopolitan style' through offering visual and written features 'set in a slick world of motion and mobility, awash with alluring new commodities and beguiling promises to consumers and readers' (12). Furthermore, publications such as *The BP Magazine* frequently expanded the 'geographical imaginaries' of Australian readers

beyond imperial Britain, pointing them towards other, newly available destinations such as ‘the Pacific, its islands, and the up-and-coming nation across it: America’ (19).

The introduction of *Transported Imagination* clearly articulates the scope of its study. The temporal range is the 1920s and 1930s; the research field is quality culture and leisure magazines produced in Australia during the interwar period, specifically *The Home* (1920–1942), *The BP Magazine* (1928–1942), and *MAN* (1936–1974). Each magazine ‘spoke to an audience that was either highly mobile or desired upward social mobility’ (3). For the authors of *Transported Imagination*, ‘mobility is not just a mark of actual movement, but of distinction, wish-fulfilment and class, race, and gendered affiliation’ (57). Fittingly then, the book is structured around three forms of mobility that interwar magazines offered to Australian readers: geography, cultural hierarchy, and temporality. Within each section, the authors examine particular components of interwar magazines, including non-fiction travel features, fashion advertising, book and film reviews, fiction, and illustrations. It is a structure that refuses to privilege more ‘literary’ cultural products such as fiction over more ephemeral ones, serving to illustrate the authors’ point that periodicals should be treated as heterogeneous and collage-like texts rather than as only repositories of fiction.

Although the authors pay some attention to magazine features written by well-known Australian literary figures such as Marjorie Barnard, Jean Devanny, Vance Palmer, and Katharine Susannah Prichard, this is by no means the key focus of *Transported Imagination*. Instead, Kuttainen, Liebich and Galletly direct our attention to other, lesser-known aspects of periodical print cultures, such as advertisements for shipping lines, photo features detailing the arrivals and departures of society figures, or reviews of popular films. The result is that the reader is introduced to a number of illustrators and writers whose names have largely faded from Australian cultural history. The discussion is supported by an appendix that features a generous selection of images from *MAN*, *The Home* and *The BP Magazine*, demonstrating the high production values that made these quality magazines such an enticing part of interwar Australian commercial culture.

In its careful archival work, *Transported Imagination* represents a substantial contribution to the growing field of Australian periodical studies, adding to such publications as Anna Johnston and Mitchell Rolls’s *Travelling Home, Walkabout Magazine and Mid-Twentieth-Century Australia* (2016). While *The Home* has garnered some scholarly attention for its contribution to modernist design in Australia, *The BP Magazine* and *MAN* have hitherto attracted limited attention beyond the articles formerly published by Kuttainen, Liebich and

Galletly (some of which form the basis of chapters of *Transported Imagination*). The authors are careful to distinguish between the distinct market segments to which these three magazines appealed: *MAN* spoke to a ‘modern, democratic, urban, leisured, and sophisticated man’; *The Home* targeted mostly female readers who were aspirational, urban and middle class; and *The BP Magazine* appealed to a colonial elite of both male and female readers from aspirational and upper-class backgrounds (5–6, 202). Providing a nuanced exploration of the intersections between gender and class, the authors show how each magazine promoted travel in ways that would appeal to their distinct market audiences. *MAN*, for instance, framed international travel as a form of ‘masculine escape’ from the demands of the Modern Woman, providing written features that emphasised ‘[m]anly virility and action’ (60, 201). Thus, while all three magazines can be linked to an Australian iteration of the middlebrow – ‘a cultural category associated with cultural products and practices somewhere between the modernisms of high culture and the assumed pulp of popular culture’ – they also demonstrate the ‘rapid differentiation and segmentation of the Australian magazine-reading public’ in the interwar years (25, 272).

In the broader narrative it provides about Australian cultural history, *Transported Imagination* contests the idea that the 1920s and 1930s were only constituted by economic austerity and national insularity, instead reframing interwar Australia as ‘international, outward-looking, and joyfully optimistic’ (271). In this way, Kuttainen, Liebich and Galletly’s argument resonates with those of other scholars who have similarly reinterpreted mid-twentieth century Australian history through the tropes of mobility, travel and transnationalism, rather than solely through engagement with cultural nationalism. These include historians Jill Julius Matthews, Angela Woollacott and Anne Rees, and scholars from literary and cultural studies such as David Carter, Liz Conor, Robert Dixon, Veronica Kelly, Peter Kirkpatrick and Elizabeth McMahan.

Underpinning the book’s account of interwar Australia, is a case for the importance of commercial and mid-range cultural products to Australian literary studies. The authors of *Transported Imagination* argue that the privileging of the ‘literary’ over the commercial has acted to promote or obscure particular kinds of authors, texts, and narratives about Australian culture; in particular, the valuing of high cultural products such as the novel has produced the idea that interwar Australia was primarily interested in questions of national identity. Through expanding the archival field to include a broader range of cultural products, a different image of 1920s and 1930s Australia emerges: one that is outward-looking and internationally engaged, rather than only interested in cultural nationalism. Commercial magazines therefore represent a largely overlooked archive, and periodical studies ‘promise to open up new understandings

of Australia's engagement with international modernity during a period typically considered as insular and isolationist' (32).

Such an argument can have the effect of reinforcing a false binary between a nationally-oriented high culture and an outwardly-focused commercial one, overlooking the instances when high culture artists also engaged with international ideas and aesthetics (in the novels of interwar writers such as Christina Stead and Eleanor Dark, for example). Kuttainen, Liebich and Galletly largely avoid such an oppositional approach, however. While their focus is on the 'outward gaze' of interwar Australia, they also acknowledge the ongoing relevance of questions of national identity in the 1920s and 1930s, arguing that culture and leisure magazines 'reflected and constructed an outward-looking, international, and cosmopolitan atmosphere' that often 'existed alongside notions of cultural nationalism' (6, 11).

This 'both/and' rather than 'either/or' approach also extends to the treatment of race in *Transported Imagination*. The authors argue that interwar Australia's Pacific-oriented gaze was not only constituted by attitudes of cultural imperialism and racial superiority, but also by curiosity, openness and desire. While acknowledging that *The Home*, *The BP Magazine* and *MAN* frequently drew on 'exoticism and Primitivism' to portray Pacific cultures, the authors suggest that these depictions also 'promote[d] diversity, inclusiveness and an emerging maturity in outlook that signifies ways in which Australians saw themselves as located within a Pacific neighbourhood' (22, 96). Commercial magazines therefore helped Australian readers 'form images of themselves as modernising citizens of the world, outward and forward looking' and 'encouraged Australians to get to know their international "neighbours"', even though their depictions were often 'replete with fantasy, and implied racial supremacy' (22, 101). In a similar way, Johnston has argued that the 'Pacific-minded' perspective of interwar Australians was not only a product of Australian neocolonialism in the region but also underpinned by affective states of 'neighborliness and curiosity' (92–93).

This effort to acknowledge the positive attributes of white Australia's encounter with otherness can be read as part of a broader move away from the binary approach associated with a more traditional postcolonial methodology, towards a less deterministic account. Although this makes *Transported Imagination* a refreshingly optimistic version of Australia's engagement with Pacific cultures, at times the discussion tends to veer towards the overly optimistic and utopian. Describing the Australian magazines as 'backdrops for cosmopolitan yearnings and harbours of dreams', for example, seems to fall short of one of Kuttainen, Liebich and Galletly's stated aims: 'to describe the various se-

ductions of these magazines without being seduced by them ourselves' (270, 31). While the authors make a sincere effort to point out some of the racist attitudes that underpinned Australian culture and leisure magazines, at times their study would have benefited from a fuller and franker acknowledgement of the ways in which these publications contributed to what Epeli Hau'ofa describes as 'derogatory and belittling views of indigenous cultures' by the West (3). As Rees cautions, the 'language of movement and flows is seductive and can too easily conjure an abstracted historical geography of unbounded connectivity and densely networked space', obscuring the ways in which practices of mobility are 'contingent, uneven, and exclusionary' (3).

Despite this, *Transported Imagination* is convincing in its emphasis on mobility as a key part of Australian modernity. It is not only the content of the book that convinces, but also the collaborative, multi-disciplinary and transnational scholarly approach of the authors. Kuttainen, Liebich and Galletly hail from different geographical and disciplinary backgrounds, and their institutional affiliations span James Cook University and Heidelberg University's Centre for Transcultural Studies. As the authors acknowledge, both the ideas and the writing process of *Transported Imagination* are testament to the ways in which ideas travel 'across disciplines and countries' in ways that are made possible by particular forms of opportunity, privilege and cultural exchange (xi).

## Works cited

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