

The Americanization of Peter Carey: A Study of Transnational Influences and Cultural Resistance in Australian Literature

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Abstract

Peter Carey, a celebrated Australian author and two-time Booker Prize winner, is renowned for his global perspective in his literary works. This paper investigates Carey's engagement with American culture and values, employing formal narrative analysis to examine his global mindset as reflected in his fiction. A review of several of his novels suggests that his incorporation of global themes sometimes overshadows his Australian identity. Specifically, the analysis reveals a distinct American influence in Carey's works, evident in the use of black humor, metafiction, and fabulation. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of Carey's literary identity and the complex interplay between national and global influences in his writing.

Keywords: American, Australian, fiction, global, formal

Abstrak

Peter Carey, seorang penulis Australia yang dihormati dan dua kali pemenang Booker Prize, terkenal karena perspektif globalnya dalam karya-karya sastranya. Makalah ini menyelidiki keterlibatan Carey dengan budaya dan nilai-nilai Amerika, menggunakan analisis naratif formal untuk memeriksa pola pikir globalnya sebagaimana tercermin dalam fiksi-fiksinya. Tinjauan terhadap beberapa novelnya menunjukkan bahwa penggabungan tema-tema global terkadang mengaburkan identitas Australiannya. Secara khusus, analisis ini mengungkapkan pengaruh Amerika yang berbeda dalam karya-karya Carey, terbukti dalam penggunaan humor hitam, metafiksi, dan fabulasi. Studi ini memberikan kontribusi pada pemahaman yang lebih dalam tentang identitas sastra Carey dan interaksi yang kompleks antara pengaruh nasional dan global dalam tulisannya.

Kata kunci: Amerika, Australia, fiksi, global, formal

Introduction

The influence of American literature on Australian literature has traditionally been intellectual, with notable American writers like Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and Mark Twain leaving their mark on Australian authors such as Christina Stead, Peter Carey, and J.M. Coetzee.

To understand the interconnected origins of both American and Australian

literature, it is helpful to view Australian literature as a potential alternative path American literature might have taken if the American Revolution had not occurred. Examining the American connections in Australian literature reveals deep-rooted transnational bonds that have always been integral to its formation. By revisiting both literatures within their historical and geographical contexts, from British colonial politics to transpacific spaces, we can better

understand how these two national literatures emerged in dialogue with a wider range of influences.

Peter Carey exemplifies an Australian writer who transitioned from realism to an international style, drawing inspiration from William Faulkner and Gabriel Garcia Marquez. His fiction, characterized by a blend of satire, fable, and fantasy, now aligns with the works of post-colonial novelists like Salman Rushdie and Michael Ondaatje. Carey's transformation is evident in his fantastical fiction, marked by improbable ideas, exotic scenarios, and unbridled inventiveness in storytelling, often playing with narrative and chronology.

This paper examines the global dimensions of Carey's literary works, focusing on the influence of American values. It argues that several of his novels exhibit a strong American influence, evident in the use of black humor, metafiction, and fabulation. This is particularly notable given Carey's relocation to New York City and his engagement with the American literary scene through teaching and writing. While Carey's incorporation of American elements enriches his work, it arguably comes at the expense of a distinctly Australian character in some of his fiction.

Method

This study employs a qualitative research methodology, well-suited to address the complexities of the research goals and questions. Qualitative research is particularly adept at understanding textual narratives and connecting fictional characters to real-life experiences, making it ideal for a critical analysis of class-oriented representations in Peter Carey's works.

This methodology allows for a deep understanding of the characters'

psychological emotions, behaviors, values, beliefs, and socio-cultural contexts from an Indonesian perspective. It excels at identifying the nuanced nature of human relationships, social recognition, and national identity, all of which are central to this dissertation.

Unlike quantitative research, the qualitative approach emphasizes socioeconomic status, gender roles, and the maintenance of class-based ethnicity. While acknowledging the challenges of achieving accuracy through inductive reasoning, this approach offers a more suitable way to understand Carey's global perspectives as presented in the selected narratives.

Discussion

The concepts of nationality and internationality are frequently debated in Australian literature, demonstrating to those outside Australia that it possesses unique qualities and can achieve universal appeal beyond its local context. Peter Carey, an Australian author residing in the United States, is celebrated as an internationally recognized Australian writer. His novel *Bliss* was lauded for its sophistication, elevating Australian literature beyond its often-perceived provincialism. Similar themes are evident in his other works, such as *Illywhacker*, which explores non-Australian nuances. Carey's writing is characterized by black humor, metaphysics, fabulation, and popular sub-genres like science fiction. While some interpret connections between Carey's fictional world and Australian society, these connections are more interpretive than literal, further confirming the universality of his work.

While this research focuses on the relationship between Carey's writing and American literary forms and themes, it's important to acknowledge that American influence isn't the sole external factor shaping his work. Carey and Marquez, as

writers from post-colonial cultures, share similar political stances towards dominant literary forms and exhibit comparable thematic and stylistic features. Both authors grapple with the issue of colonialism, and Marquez's works have been adapted to American traditions due to his connection with the country. Their works can spark discussions about post-colonial writing and the influence of American literary culture.

The influence of American literature is evident in Carey's work through elements like black humor, metafiction, and fabulation. Metafiction, where narrators or characters acknowledge their fictional existence, and fabulation, often used interchangeably with metafiction, emphasize the rejection of realism and the constructed nature of literature. These terms frequently describe the dominant writing style in the contemporary United States, acknowledging both external influences and original traditions.

Peter Carey's writing style aligns with the American context, particularly in his exploration of form to expose and examine the fictional status of his works. While less common in Australian fiction, this self-reflective approach has been prevalent in American fiction since Melville and gained prominence in the 1960s. In this new American fiction, mimesis has given way to a rise in fantasy and romance.

This complex concept is evident in the basic structure of stories. For example, John Irving's *The World According to Garp* disrupts the past tense with moments of future tense. Peter Carey employs a similar technique, often shifting between present, past, and occasionally future tenses. This narrative structure is prominent in his works like *Bliss* and *Illywhacker*.

Like Irving and other modern American authors, Carey employs metafiction to explore the role of storytelling and imagination in our lives.

In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, a character suggests that people need "wonderful new lies" to cope with life, an idea that resonates with Carey's work, particularly in *Bliss*.

This concept extends beyond fiction to encompass our understanding of history. The interest in fiction, fantasy, and questioning reality in modern American writing often leads to historical fiction. While not exclusive to American literature, as seen in the works of Borges and Marquez in South America and Fowles in England, American metafictionists like John Barth in *The Sot-Weed Factor* and Robert Coover in *The Public Burning* uniquely represent the tension between historical and fantastical elements.

Their novels aim to dismantle the distinction between fiction and history. *The Public Burning* incorporates fantastical elements into documentary and historical representation, while *The Sot-Weed Factor* constructs an absurd world to challenge traditional historical narratives. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the destruction of Dresden during World War II is presented as both fantastical and difficult to believe, akin to a visit from Tralfamadore aliens. The point is not to deny the reality of Dresden's destruction but to highlight how history's silence on the event makes it seem unbelievable. History is revealed as a selective and arranged narrative, a fictionalized account of the real.

The earlier quote isn't just about fiction; it's about how we perceive history itself. In modern American literature, the fascination with fiction, fantasy, and questioning reality has given rise to historical fiction. This trend isn't unique to America, as authors like Borges, Marquez, and Fowles have also explored this genre. However, as literary critic Richard Poirier noted, Americans tend to view reality as a construct. This perspective has led American metafiction

authors like John Barth and Robert Coover to emphasize the tension between historical events and fantastical elements in their novels, aiming to blur the lines between fiction and history.

In *The Public Burning*, Coover uses documentary-style writing to depict fantastical events. In *The Sot-Weed Factor*, Barth creates an absurd world to examine the unique nature of historical novels. Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* presents the real-life bombing of Dresden as so unbelievable it feels like an alien encounter. The point isn't to deny the event's reality but to highlight how the lack of historical attention makes it difficult to believe. This reveals history as a selective and curated narrative, essentially a fictionalized account of reality.

Peter Carey shares this interest in history. In an interview, he expressed admiration for Marquez's blend of fantasy and history, creating a magical and mystical effect. Like Barth, Coover, Vonnegut, and Marquez, Carey constructs extraordinary alternative worlds that offer alternative perspectives on historical events. He questions the nature of history, exposing it as a construct and arbitrary. Even *Illywhacker*, which begins in a conventional social realist style (a pattern that prioritizes history), eventually undergoes an extraordinary modulation, shifting to a style that views history as a construction. Similar to *The Public Burning* and *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the mythic quality of *Illywhacker* arises from this modulation and the tension it creates. For both Carey and Marquez, examining history as myth and fiction holds particular importance in post-colonial literature.

The earlier observations highlight the challenge of separating formal narrative techniques from their cultural context, which often involves history. Any analysis of form must consider the worldview and ideas the fiction

represents. Thus, an interest in fantasy or science fiction can also be an interest in how we perceive and construct our experiences. Even when authors play with unreal elements, their works can still be relevant to our understanding of history or reality.

In Peter Carey's writing, these connections aren't always systematic, like in allegories, but they're present in relation to Australian culture and mythology. These references are crucial for understanding Carey's fiction, which skillfully balances the fantastical and the historical. This balance is a major source of enjoyment for readers of his works like *American Dreams* and *A Windmill in the West*.

Todorov's work on the fantastic is valuable because it focuses on the reader's feeling of "hesitation." This hesitation is key to the fantastic genre, as it occurs when the reader is caught between natural and supernatural explanations. Todorov refers to the resulting feelings as "uncanny" and "marvellous." At these moments, logical explanations fall short, but the supernatural hasn't been explicitly confirmed.

This opens up a space for multiple possibilities, where the real and fantasy worlds must either be reconciled through a logical explanation (like a scientific explanation for a ghost) or convincingly separated (as a dream or a plausible fantasy). This speculative pleasure is often brief and resolved by the end of the story. For instance, in a mystery novel like *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, the fantastic is explained away, order is restored, and the hesitation becomes just a fleeting thrill in the text.

Carey often employs hesitation as a closing technique, leaving possibilities open rather than providing neat resolutions. Stories like "Peeling" or "Exotic Pleasures" exemplify this, while "Crabs" initially seems compatible with

the real world but ultimately challenges readers to connect its fantasy with reality.

The unresolved tensions in "Crabs" raise questions about the symbolism of the drive-in and the transformation of Crabs into a machine. These ambiguities create hesitation, leaving the reader unsure whether to interpret the story as an allegory or a purely imaginative creation. The meaning remains elusive, dominated by its structure and design.

In many of Carey's stories, narrative design and storytelling itself are significant. Characters like Harry Joy in "Do You Love Me?" and Herbert Badgery in *Illywhacker* use language to reconstruct their worlds and grapple with the nature of truth and lies. Reality is presented as a construction, and each person's construction is valid.

Similarly, history is viewed as another form of fiction. Our understanding of existence is just a more familiar version of the delusions experienced by characters like Carla in "The Chance" or the revolutionaries in "The Fat Man in History." The underlying fictionality of narrative structures aligns with the thematic idea that all life is constructed, all accounts are fictional, and all explanations are partial or biased.

This is not to suggest that Carey is a philosopher or an ideologue. His works do not seek to explain existence, nor is he overly concerned with metaphysical questions. Instead, his primary fictional structure is that of enclosure or entrapment, a concept that fascinates him. However, he is less interested in traps as political structures or tools for social critique, and more interested in them as a form of material. He seems drawn to exploring complexity, symmetry, and completeness. Carey's fiction doesn't aim to uncover the meaning of life as much as it interrogates how life is constructed to create meaning. Stories, lies, and fantasy aren't just formal constructs used to

generate meaning in his fiction; other types of construction abound.

There's the dome in "Kristu-Du," Herbert's compulsive house-building and pet shop in *Illywhacker*, the woodworking in "Williamson's Wood," the prison door in "The Chance," the barbecue pit in "The Fat Man in History," the fence dividing Australia in *A Windmill in the West*, the city model in *American Dreams*, the factory penthouse in "War Crimes," the drive-in turned refugee camp in "Crabs." Like fiction itself, these constructions are uncertain, and no matter how physically imposing, they rarely provide the desired stability or finality in the characters' lives. These are some of the connections between Carey's works and their formal models. They confirm his international profile, as Carey is a global literary figure who has, in some instances, moved beyond his Australian identity.

The use of formal strategies is more than just a matter of style; literary form cannot be separated from ideology or the mythology of its cultural context. Black humor, for example, can be seen as a distinctly American form, blending French existentialism and American pragmatism into what John Barth calls "cheerful nihilism." It's more than just a touch of American romanticism that embraces contradictory individualism. There's an assumption that Australian fiction isn't as romantic, absurd, or individualistic. Unlike Australian fiction, American fiction often champions the individual over the community, depicting characters who survive various challenges and obstacles, like Huck Finn, who "lights out for the territory" instead of perishing in caves like Heriot in *Voss* or disappearing like the girls in *Picnic at Hanging Rock*.

The difference between these two narrative traditions must be negotiated, not only formally but also thematically and ideologically. In Carey's case, this negotiation happens through his thematic

focus on colonialism and colonization. He often takes a nationalist stance, viewing Americans with suspicion as threats to genuine Australian culture.

Carey's works often depict isolated individuals or fragmented communities struggling against an exploitative system. This system is typically powerful, entrenched, and dismissive of the native culture it colonizes, often identifiable as Australian based on the details and context. In *Bliss* and *American Dreams*, the setting is clearly Australia, as it's the target of American colonialism.

While some characters in Carey's novels are colonized by others—like the Japanese in *Illywhacker* or the extra-terrestrial Fastalogians in "The Chance"—Americans frequently appear as the oppressors, tormentors, and invaders. In "The Fat Man in History," Americans are overthrown in a revolution, with the story's backdrop highlighting the slippage between the perception of all Americans as fat, greedy, and strange, and its application to Alex, an indigenous and overweight man. In *American Dreams*, the ideology of American capitalism infiltrates the local community's subconscious: "We all have dreams of the big city, of wealth, of modern houses, of big motorcycles cars: American Dreams, my father calls them."

In many of Carey's novels, America has colonized the very myths and forms of modernity. "Crabs" features the "American Dream" embodied in Frank's luxurious '56 Dodge; "Report from the Shadow Industry" showcases the latest American consumer goods; Nathan Schick lures Charles, a nationalist, with the promise of "the best pet shop in the world" in *Illywhacker*.

In *Bliss*, the allure of flashy advertising and the myth of success, symbolized by New York, clash with the values championed by Honey Barbara. The central, traditional conflict between nature and community is expressed

through a clash between original Australian values—represented by the bushman—and the "imported rubbish" of America, symbolized by petrol, cancer, and advertising.

However, this view isn't without ambivalence. As Herbert says in *Illywhacker*, "No matter how much he hated Henry Ford, he always loved Americans." Nathan Schick, for example, is both exploitative and charming (Charey, 1985)

Schick could talk a line of bullshit like I never heard before, and in this had the distinct advantage of being an American and therefore never hesitant about expressing an opinion. Australians, in comparison, lack confidence, and it is this, not steel mills or oil wells, that is the difference between the two nations. (p. 346)

In *Bliss*, advertising becomes synonymous with America. Bettina's affair with America is solidified through advertising, fueled by the allure of New York, and proves stronger than her affair with Joel. Her advertisements are captivating, showcasing her complete immersion in American advertising annuals. The narrator describes the ads she creates with a touch of amusement, as they are displayed in a mesmerizing circle around their living room, even arousing Harry.

A comped-up ad is not a final ad. It is, technically, a rough. It is the sort of rough that is done when a client has no imagination or, more often, when the person doing the ad is too much in love with it to show it in any way that is really rough and does everything to make it appear finished, taking 'rough' photography and getting colour prints, ordering headline type and sticking down body copy

in the exact type face (if not the correct words), carefully cut to give the appearance of the final paragraphs. And over all of this is placed a cell overlay, so that a comp. ad, framed with white, mounted on heavy board, covered with its glistening cell overlay, looks more precious to its maker than it ever will again. (p. 179-80)

In *Bliss*, the allure of advertisements and their enchanting appeal is celebrated. Much like Henry Ford and Nathan Schick, Carey's narrator seems to detest the underlying ideology but adores the outward forms.

This dynamic may accurately represent the relationship between Carey's works and their American inspirations. While his rejection of American dominance doesn't diminish his narrator's enthusiasm for advertising or Carey's own adoption of American narrative techniques, his use of American forms in his writing doesn't merely regurgitate outdated American ideology for his Australian audience. Instead, he modifies his models, tailoring them for local use, demonstrating a form of colonized resistance. As previously mentioned, individualism is easily bolstered by such formal models, but Carey's novel expresses ambivalence towards individuals and critiques society. Its portrayal of the natural world is romantic, echoing the naive appreciation for nature often found in American fiction. Yet, there's also a strong post-romantic preference evident in the Australian tradition. Additionally, while the influence of the fabulatory model is apparent in *Illywhacker*, we simultaneously observe the influence of Furphy's *Such is Life*.

This understanding leads to two central aspects of Carey's fiction. The first is how his works cultivate new types of popular readership, and the second is his deliberate efforts to fulfill the cultural

function of narratives in unusually self-aware ways.

Since the 1890s, Australian literature has increasingly distanced itself from its popular readership. This contrasts with American writers, who have traditionally been more at ease with popular forms and culture than their Australian counterparts. The modern and counter-cultural language of Vonnegut, Brautigan, or Tom Robbins exemplifies this trend, which is also evident in Peter Carey's works. Like them, Carey doesn't define himself as a writer by producing avant-garde or purely literary works. Instead, he chooses to write popular fiction, such as science fiction, and draw on popular mythology, as seen in *Crabs*.

Carey, unlike Frank Moorhouse, whose observations and perceptions exist outside of popular culture and who opts for literary forms characterized by their rejection of plot or sensation – key elements of popular entertainment, embraces these elements. There's a sense that Carey's fiction is anti-literary, which leads to an uneasy relationship with the academic world. Patricia Waugh argues that by incorporating popular forms, Carey challenges and alters dominant literary constructs of "good" literature, the author's role, and the very purpose of fiction.

Literariness isn't a fundamental aspect of Carey's initial appeal. His clear stance on plot and story can be seen as a shift in the prevailing definition of "good" literature. This also allows his stories and novels to be read within various reading conventions and on multiple levels, something not easily found in the works of David Malouf, for example.

Another consequence of the emphasis on plot is the elevation of the writer to a visionary figure in their own right. The mythologization of Kurt Vonnegut, for instance, exemplifies the potential for a writer to be not only a part of literary culture but also of popular culture.

Carey's involvement with films, through *Bliss* and *Dead-end Drive-in*, and popular music, through *The Rock-Opera Illusion*, seems to capitalize on this potential. These factors can significantly influence the nature of his readership.

Equally important are the characteristics of Carey's fiction that suggest the cultural function of narrative. Many post-structuralists believe that all narratives (films, fiction, myths) fulfill cultural functions. These narratives help individuals understand their experiences and struggles within a culture. Narratives have the potential to create and perpetuate mythology, to challenge or validate cultural explanations, and to resolve contradictions. This is of paramount importance because every culture possesses its own narrative.

Developments in narrative theory have proposed that narrative is an epistemological category. This doesn't mean that we simply create stories to understand the world, but rather that the world itself is presented to us in the form of stories.

In the context of the cultural function of narrative, myth is crucial. Peter Carey's works have been praised for their mythical quality, their ability to create stories with fable-like significance. In a story like "American Dreams," a myth emerges in the form of resistance to colonization and cultural dominance. This myth resonates more strongly within Australian culture than in British or American contexts. One way it manifests itself is through the image of "American dreams" – the colonization of characters' dreams by another culture. The image is potent, and its relevance is underscored by its presence elsewhere in Australian cultural production. In 1958, Tom Weir wrote an article advocating for the Australian film industry, arguing for the dissemination of Australian images and mythology through narrative feature films. He titled his article "No Daydreams

of Our Own: The film as National Self-Expression." Both Weir's and Carey's images of the colonized subconscious are mobilized to criticize the influence of foreign mythologies and to argue for the need to reclaim cultural ownership.

In Carey's novel, this effort is evident on literal and thematic levels. His thematic focus on storytelling, coupled with his sensitivity to native culture and its vulnerability to colonialism, presents fiction as a community-building activity and thus essential for cultural identity. His most detailed portrayal of this is through Harry Joy at the end of *Bliss*.

And he also gave value to a story so that it was something of work, as important in its way, as a strong house or a good dam. He insisted that the story was not his, and not theirs either. You must give something, he told the children, a sapphire, or blue bread from cedar ash. And what began as a game ended as a ritual. They were the refugees of a broken culture who had only the flotsam of belief and ceremony to cling to, or sometimes, the looted relics from other people's temples. Harry cut new wood grown on their soil and built something solid they all felt comfortable with. They were hungry for ceremony and story. There was no embarrassment in these new constructions (p. 277).

Here, fiction and myth intertwine as stories become rituals and ceremonies that bind the community together. While Carey's fiction demonstrates a clear American influence, these influences are repurposed for nationalistic ends. In *Bliss*, Carey advocates for the creation of stories that are rooted in and shaped by the society itself, rather than imported "American dreams." Harry Joy's final role in the new community in *Bliss* can be

seen as a representation of the author within Australian culture, a culture known for its yearning for ceremonies and stories.

Conclusion

A global perspective and approach, marked by American influence, is evident in Carey's literary works, particularly in the contexts of metafiction and fabulation. The reason for situating Peter Carey within the American context primarily lies in his writing style. His adopted style in his works mirrors American literary works, as they both experiment with form to reveal and examine the nature of fiction. Some of his fiction aligns with American style and form. *Illywhacker*, for example, demonstrates a style of modulation that views history as a construct.

Carey's works often depict isolated individuals or fragmented communities confronting an exploitative system. This system is typically powerful, comprehensible, and dismissive of the original colonized culture. This native culture is often recognizable as Australian, based on the details and accounts of colonization. In *Bliss* and *American Dreams*, despite the Australian setting, the subject matter is American colonialism. While some characters in Carey's novels are colonized by other forces—the Japanese in *Illywhacker*, the extraterrestrial Fastalogians in *The Chance*—Americans are most frequently the oppressors, tormentors, and invaders.

His critique of American power does not hinder him from embracing American narrative strategies and utilizing American forms in his literary works. However, he doesn't merely recycle outdated American ideology for his Australian readers. He also transforms his models and adapts them for local use.

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