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Communitarian Theory and Andalusian Imagery in Carmel Bird's Fiction. An Interview

ABSTRACT

Australian writer Carmel Bird writes fiction that, while being highly individual and varied, settles within the Australian traditions of both Peter Carey's fabulism and Thea Astley's humane wit. As William H. Wilde, Joy Hooton and Barry Andrews state (1994), Bird is a "witty writer with a wide but always highly original tonal range", who "raises what is often potentially sinister or horrific to something approaching comedy. Disease, deaths and violence are staples in her fictional world, which has similarities with Barbara Hanrahan's Gothic sensuality and feminist irony, although Bird's deadpan humour is a distinctive, determining element". The present interview focuses on an unexplored area in Bird—Andalusia, Spain—which, paradoxically, becomes the backcloth of some of her fiction—like the recent *Child of the Twilight* (2010)—and a prolific source of inspiration. The following pages explore Bird's Andalusian/Spanish visions as regards nationalistic, religious, and cultural constructions. To that end, the theoretical communitarian discussion of figures like Ernest Gellner, Ferdinand Tönnies, Benedict Anderson, Jean-Luc Nancy and Maurice Blanchot will prove useful in the structural framework of this interview. Bird herself clarifies that her contribution is not offered from an academic perspective; she speaks about herself as a writer largely unaffected by academic bias. However, communitarian theorisation will prove useful in clarifying her depiction of nationalistic and religious values, while, in the process, she sheds some light on the slippery concept of "Australian writing" and the construction of Spanish cultural values from the perspective of an Australian writer. This interview offers a fresh rendition marked by the humorous, spontaneous and truthful tone that characterises Bird's fiction.¹

KEYWORDS

Carmel Bird, Australian fiction, Andalusian images, Spanish culture, communitarian theory.

1. This interview complements two previous ones (Walker, 2004; Rodríguez-Salas, 2006) by adopting a communitarian, anti-essentialist, imagologist approach (see Rodríguez-Salas *et al.*, 2013).

RESUMEN

A pesar de la idiosincrasia de la narrativa de Carmel Bird, su producción se enmarca dentro de las tradiciones australianas del fabulismo de Peter Carey y la sabiduría humana de Thea Astley. Como afirman William H. Wilde, Joy Hooton y Barry Andrews (1994), Bird consigue combinar el lado más siniestro con la comedia. La enfermedad, la muerte y la violencia son centrales en su ficción conectándola con la sensualidad gótica y la ironía feminista de Barbara Hanrahan, aunque el humor socarrón es un elemento distintivo y determinante en Bird. La presente entrevista cubre un aspecto inexplorado en la autora (Andalucía, España) que, paradójicamente, se convierte en el telón de fondo de algunas de sus novelas (como su reciente *Child of the Twilight*, 2010) y en una prolífica fuente de inspiración. Las siguientes páginas exploran el imaginario andaluz/español en su construcción nacionalista, religiosa y cultural. Con tal fin, las discusiones comunitarias de figuras como Ernest Gellner, Ferdinand Tönnies, Benedict Anderson, Jean-Luc Nancy y Maurice Blanchot serán el eje teórico vertebrador de esta entrevista. La propia Bird aclara que su contribución no parte de una perspectiva académica puesto que habla de sí misma como una escritora que escapa del sesgo académico. Sin embargo, la teorización comunitaria demostrará ser de vital importancia para aclarar su aproximación literaria a los valores nacionalistas y religiosos, a la par que, en el proceso, la autora arroja luz sobre el escurridizo concepto de «literatura australiana» y la construcción de los valores culturales españoles desde la perspectiva australiana de esta escritora. Esta entrevista ofrece un fresco retrato de la autora marcado por el tono humorístico, espontáneo y sincero que caracteriza su ficción a la par que el marco teórico comunitario garantiza el academicismo del documento.

PALABRASCLAVES

Carmel Bird, ficción australiana, imágenes andaluzas, cultura española, comunitarian teoría.

Gerardo RODRÍGUEZ-SALAS. — I have recently analysed your novels in communitarian terms and this theoretical background has proved extremely useful in understanding nationalistic and religious essentialist depictions and transgressions in your fiction.² I will follow communitarian models in my interview to approach your personal rendition of Spain, particularly Andalusia, in your fiction. As a central figure in Spanish literature, Federico García Lorca is a powerful intertextual reference in your latest novel, *Child of the Twilight* (2010). Why did you choose this writer and in what way, from your perspective as an Australian writer, does he stand for Spanish values? Somewhere else you admitted how influential he was in your fiction (Rodríguez-Salas, 2006, p. 132).

Carmel BIRD. — It can be so hard to work out, and recall, how and why one loves a particular poem or poet, and when one first encountered the work. Even the term “Australian writer” leaps out at me in the question, and I begin to think:

2. See G. Rodríguez-Salas (2012).

"am I?" "What is an Australian writer?" "What are Spanish values?" Somehow, I really feel that someone like Lorca calls to me not along or across "national" lines.

Gerardo RODRÍGUEZ-SALAS. — Apart from the national identity that obviously defines a writer, there seems to be a connection beyond this national restriction which has led critics like Susana Degoy to compare Lorca with Chekhov (1999, p. 87), and which explains your previous words about crossing national lines. You have started this interview by adopting Benedict Anderson's viewpoint that nationality, nation-ness, and nationalism are "cultural artefacts" (1983, p. 4), or, in Ernest Gellner's words: "Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it *invents* nations where they do not exist." (1964, p. 169. Emphasis added.)

Carmel BIRD. — Exactly. Of course there are some nationalistic traits in particular writers—after all they are the product of the culture that created them—, but there are always some universal traits that go beyond what Gellner called "the invention of the nation". And that is what catches my attention in Lorca.

I am not an academic writer or thinker, and terms such as "the Other" do not come easily to me. However, I intuit that part of the attraction that Lorca holds for me—it is more than attraction; it is deep fascination, awe, love—is located in the attraction, seduction of the "exotic Other"—which Lorca accidentally placed in provincial Granada and Andalusia in general—coupled with a sense that something of this exotic other exists in myself. See? Again the transcendence of national boundaries and the capacity to connect.

Gerardo RODRÍGUEZ-SALAS. — Yes, this is what Jean-Luc Nancy called "being-outside oneself", connecting beyond mere immanence and national essentialism.³ You and Lorca communicated in that acceptance of the alterity in each other, or, again in Nancy's words, the *clinamen* or "inclination from one toward the other", which is mainly encountered in the direct confrontation with death (1991, p. 3).

Carmel BIRD. — Yes, Lorca and I felt a clear connection in that transcendence, I guess even in the death that you mention. I once sewed a quilt in honour of the Australians who died in 9/11, and there I inserted a Lorca reference—a link in the confrontation of death beyond our national scope (New York). There is the feeling that Lorca is articulating something I know already—or perhaps that he has the secret that I was seeking.

Gerardo RODRÍGUEZ-SALAS. — This idea of the secret connects with the communitarian model of Nancy that I just mentioned, and that you seem to embrace in your link with Lorca, only that from Maurice Blanchot's perspective it also implies an "unavowable secret" that links its members (1988).

Carmel BIRD. — Yes, I think you are right. It is that "unavowable secret" that brought Lorca and I together. This can all sound like romantic nonsense, but I am

3. For Nancy, immanence implies a thoroughly fulfilled existence within the boundaries of the ego, with no need to open up to alterity.

trying to identify what it was in the first place that made my heart leap to Lorca's poetry. I read it first in Spanish with a parallel English text, and it was the Spanish I responded to, not so much the translation. But when was this? I think it must have been when I returned to Australia after my first visit to Spain in the mid nineteen sixties. I learnt some of Lorca's life story when I was in Spain, and I sought out his poetry when I came home. It was not easy to find it in Australia then. A bit later, in the seventies, I began to study Spanish at university, and I had greater access to poetry.

His poetry is so bound up with his life, and his life was so exciting to me and ended so very horribly and tragically, so young. He was very handsome too. I suppose he became one of my obsessions, in a way. I have continued to follow him in my heart, and, of course, it was *he* who was the link between you and me in 2001. I overheard at a party in Granada that you had taken someone on a visit to Lorca's house, and I asked you if you could take me there too. So without Lorca I suppose we would not be doing this interview. You sent me to the house, and your brother gave me beautiful books and pictures which I still treasure. All this is a roundabout way of saying that it would only be natural that Lorca would become an intertextual reference in my work, particularly in *Child of the Twilight*. I do find it difficult to explain where things come from and how they get into my fiction. I have a box of a hundred postcards sent to me by Dr Susan Ballyn from the University of Barcelona. Each card began as an image of a particular photograph of Lorca, and every card is different because a hundred Spanish artists have added their own "decoration". What a treasure.

Back to the writing, I do know that the specific inspiration for *Child of the Twilight* was the newspaper report of the theft of the Roman statue of the Bambinello. This took the Australian women off to Europe in a kind of mad attempt to look for the statue, and one of those women was an ex-patriot (Diana) who had married a Spaniard, and who was a collector of Black Madonnas. The Australians in this novel are linked to Europe by their religion, and the character of Rosita, who is a childhood friend of Diana, is the clear Lorca reference: *Doña Rosita la Soltera or the Language of Flowers*. I was not exactly drawing a parallel between the play and any events in the novel, except to comment that Rosita's parents had named her after the play, and that she grew up to be a "spinster", a cruel scripting of her life by the giving of the name.⁴ There is in the novel some attention given to the "naming" of children. Of course Lorca's full name—Federico del Sagrado Corazón de Jesús García Lorca—strikes me as one of the best names ever.

4. Susana Degoy offers a very interesting analysis of Doña Rosita as standing for Lorca's obsession with provincial spinsters (1999, pp. 87–102). The whole book presents a thorough study of women's roles in Lorca's drama. Similarly, Roberta Johnson's study of Lorca's theatre and Spanish feminism (2008) offers an interesting approach to this topic.

As for Lorca standing for Spanish values, I see him as an emblem of Spanish Republicanism of the thirties,⁵ and I admire that. I suppose I have always felt that “Spanish” was akin to “wildly beautiful”. I am quite frivolous in many ways, and when I am asked about “values”, I suppose I get a bit bored by the idea. I am critical of bullfights in spite of the code of honour that they represent in the Spanish psyche.⁶ So I suppose I do have some Anglo-Saxon values guiding my principles and attitudes. I went to one bullfight in the sixties and I thought it was horrible and filthy—I do sound like an English spinster, suddenly, but it was not glamorous at all.

Gerardo RODRÍGUEZ-SALAS. — It seems that, in this particular, you differ from Lorca. His passion for bullfighting led him to compare it with a dance which has an extra element: tragedy (quoted in Schneider, 1998, p. 126), as he clearly depicted in his “Lament for Ignacio Sánchez Mejías”⁷.

Carmel BIRD. — It is a dance, certainly, and I am a great lover of dance. But it is also very disturbing and confrontational, such a raw demonstration of unequal power, so much cruelty and blood and mob behaviour. I know Lorca loved it.

Gerardo RODRÍGUEZ-SALAS. — You said once that the meaning of Europe is important to Australians of your generation. What is the role of Europe in your fiction?

Carmel BIRD. — When I was at school, we had history books published in Hobart by the Education Department of Tasmania. They were called *The Tasmanian History Readers*, and they were in a series called *The Royal School Series*. This fact tells you quite a lot about the culture, sensibility, imagination of the society in which I was nurtured. I lived in Tasmania, and the books were specifically made for Tasmanian children. They were carefully containing the Tasmanian-ness of things, but they were looking, not at the history of Australia—of which Tasmania is a region—, but at Europe, with a British bias in the perspective⁸—I retain only one volume from the series; it is Book Four, which goes from “Earliest Times to 1603”. Tasmania had not even been “discovered” in 1603. The island was first noted in 1642 by a Dutchman called Abel Janzen Tasman. He named it Van Diemen’s Land, after Anthony van Diemen, who was the Dutch colonial governor. Later on the name was changed to Tasmania, which obviously honours the “discoverer”.

5. Homero Serís (1945) offers a revealing connection between Lorca’s Republicanism and the historical outcome that led to the Spanish Generation of 1936. Arthur Koestler (1937) agrees with this idea when, quoting a Spanish lawyer, he presents Lorca as “the leading spirit of the younger generation of Spanish writers” (p. 88).

6. The code of honour mentioned by Bird is elaborated by Carrie B. Douglass (1984), who explores honour as the structuring value for most Spanish society and studies the relationship between the torero and the bull in bullfighting as homologous to that of male and female in Spanish culture.

7. Lorca seems unable to separate bullfighting from Spanish aesthetics, just like other writers and intellectuals such as Ortega y Gasset, Cela, or even Hemingway.

8. This British bias confirms Rudolf Bader’s theory about Anglo-Australian literature (1992), which is later contradicted in this interview by Bird’s own fiction.

The Earliest Times chapter, titled “How the Ancient Britons Lived”, begins by referring to the Celts, who “invaded our islands some seven or eight centuries before the birth of Christ”. Note the term “our islands”, meaning the British Isles. Perhaps you can begin to see how very deep the prejudice towards Europe—so far I have spoken only of Britain—was in the mind and sensibility of a child born in Tasmania in 1940—note also the key date of the first year of the Second World War. The chapter headings are Anglo-centric. Even Chapter 12, which is headed “A Visit to Normandy”, begins by describing the Normans as the “fourth and last conquerors” of England. But on page 190 Chapter 38 is called “Philip and Mary”, and the first paragraph introduces Mary, the English queen (who reigned from 1553 to 1558) “who married a Spanish prince, and thus gave England a Spanish king”. Mary was, of course, the daughter of Katherine, daughter of Ferdinand and Isabella. Further on, “Philip’s father was the great Emperor Charles the Fifth, the most powerful monarch of his time”. And “when the English Protestants learned that the son of this man was to be their king, they were greatly alarmed”. After the death of Mary (1558), Spain became the enemy and Philip developed his Armada. In 1588 the Armada was defeated by the English at Calais. 1603 marks the end of Book Four with the death of Queen Elizabeth the First of England (Mary’s half-sister).

I can’t quite explain why the 1500s exercised such a fascination over me. From way back I have loved reading about the period, and have naturally been interested in the Spanish stories. The last thing that was taught in Tasmanian schools at the time was Spanish language—there was French, Latin and German. My father had some old French books, and I had older cousins and a sister who all learned French at school. I longed to get to high school, where I could learn French from “a real French lady who didn’t speak English”, and I had a clear ambition to go to France. This might sound ordinary to you, from your European perspective and from your era, but then, and in Tasmania, it was a weird thing to want to do. I saved pocket money to that end. Australia was at that time utterly loyal to the British crown, and people of my parents’ generation still spoke of England as “home”. People took long sea voyages to go “home” for lengthy holidays. There was great nostalgia for English culture and customs. Literature, film, etc. were mostly all British. American too, of course, but not significantly Australian. When Queen Elizabeth II was crowned in 1952, Australia was very thrilled. The Australian national anthem was, until 1984, “God Save the Queen”. I still don’t know the words of the present anthem, which is “Advance Australia Fair”—and makes very little sense to me, actually. There has been a republican movement here in recent years—and in due course Australia will become a republic. I am a republican. I still find the monarchy fascinating. A lot of Australians of my generation are still monarchists. David Malouf has published a wonderful essay on Australia’s British heritage.

As I said, there was a French bias in my thinking as a teenager, and I studied a lot of French painting and poetry and novels. France was Beauty and Sophistication. Spain was off to the side somehow—one thought of castles in Spain as far off romantic unreal places. The term “Spanish Gipsy” was implicated in this romance as well. I think Spain was a place of ultimate romance and mystery. I became interested

in the Spanish Civil War mainly through the writing of George Orwell and Ernest Hemingway. And, of course, Dalí and Picasso and Miró. And Gaudí. I remember loving the work of Murillo and el Greco and Velázquez when I was in high school. I was sixteen when my father wanted a mural painted on the wall of the arcade where he worked as an optician, and I suggested they copy a Miró. And they did. How funny.

In the mid-sixties I was in Paris and went to Spain for about six weeks and everything fell into place. I knew that Spain was *it*. After that, when I returned to Australia, I started to learn Spanish. Of course, I have never attained any degree of mastery of it. One thing I can tell you: when I go to Spain, I see women who remind me of my mother and grandmother. The background is Irish—and I suppose that there was a Spanish element there, but I have never even tried to trace it. I think I am too busy with other things to concentrate on genealogy. But the resemblance was striking. When I was very little my mother used to take me to a weird little shop (in Launceston) where they sold Maja perfume. I still have a strong cardboard Maja box that used to have talcum powder in it. I loved the black and red design of the stereotype Spanish lady in her mantilla.

So, what is the role of Europe in my fiction? My story “Kay Petman’s Coloured Pencils”, included in my recent collection of short fiction, *The Essential Bird*, might give you the answer. Kay is an Australian schoolgirl who is good at Art. Her family is very proper and conventional and would imagine she is going to stay in her home town and marry a nice boy and have a pretty house like theirs. She might do that. But the artistic streak in Kay puts her in touch with a very vital and seductive woman who shows her the possibility of another way. Kay could escape from the bonds of her upbringing in Australia and become an artist somewhere wonderful, colourful such as Europe. At the end of the story she is lining up her coloured pencils like cannons with which she will mount her campaign. The mysterious breach in the story comes when she glimpses a little image of a Black Madonna at the art teacher’s house. This dark and spiritual icon marks the entrance to another reality. And that is another thing: the Black Madonna has fascinated me forever—not that we have much of her in Australia. For me she is a signifier of what I can only describe as a deep European spirituality which lies behind the romance of European places and art and literature and music. So in my fiction the characters look to Europe, go to Europe. Incidentally there is a Tasmanian Black Madonna at the end of *Child of the Twilight*—she is the portrait of an indigenous Tasmanian, reconstructed as a European figure. I invented her, by the way.

Gerardo RODRÍGUEZ-SALAS. — Here, I would like to refer to Rudolf Bader’s imagological study about Europe in Anglo-Australian Literature (1992). It is not possible, Bader argues, for a literature in English to be separated from the properties of the English literary tradition. Rather, it is the bipolarity between acceptance and rejection of the mother country that gives Australian literature its distinctive and definitive character. The Australianness of Anglo-Australian literature, Bader contends, is to be found in the dialogue between derivation and deviation from

British models, in the tension between the mere transplantation and the deeper transformation of these models, and in a complex cultural dependency which is finally no more shameful or inferior than Shakespeare's dependence upon the Italian Renaissance (quoted in Wright, 1993, p. 140). I do not think this is the case with your fiction, where Europe is more encompassing than just British models.

Carmel BIRD. — Acceptance and rejection—I like that. The characters in my fiction seek what is old and beautiful and romantic in Europe, not just England. There is much that is old and beautiful and romantic in Australia too, but I suppose it is the layers of civilisation and the lure of history that draws me to Europe. I find all this quite difficult to articulate. I have the important background of *The Tasmanian History Readers*—there is another book I have called *Arithmetic for Tasmanians*. I satirised these books in *The Bluebird Café*. Diana in *Child of the Twilight* is an extreme example of the character who leaves Australia and tries to merge with Spain (Europe). There is a story, “The Sea is Going to France”, in *The Common Rat*, which expresses, albeit through madness—a useful trope after all—the longing for the romance and dreamland of France. It is a strange little story.

So in very simple terms, in my imagination, and in my fiction, Australia is the everyday and Europe is romance. In Australia I respond to the romance and beauty of the landscape and the vegetation and the history, ancient and modern.

Gerardo RODRÍGUEZ-SALAS. — Religion often plays a central role in your writing. How do you use the Spanish religious imagery in your novels *White Garden* and *Child of the Twilight*? Why is the Spanish mystic ethos such a useful constructive tool in your fiction?

Carmel BIRD. — St Teresa of Ávila and St John of the Cross have always been figures of great interest to me. Not originally because they were Spanish, but because they were fascinating. Perhaps to them can be attributed much of my focus on Spain and its history and culture.

Gerardo RODRÍGUEZ-SALAS. — And, curiously enough, the only Spanish figure in *Cape Grimm* is Jesus the Jesuit, where the Catholic background and its link with Spain turns up again.

Carmel BIRD. — Oh, yes, I had kind of forgotten about him. I once had a friend who was a Spanish Jesuit called Jesus, but I have lost touch with him. I suppose he inspired the character in some way—well, his name and his origins did. The ethos of Tasmanian life and culture in the 1940s was such that religion mattered. The society—and Australian society in general—was marked by distinct religious divisions. Australian writers of my generation often touch on it, as I have done. Since 1788 (revolution brewing in France), the dominant religion in Australia had always been that of the English Church—the officers and their class belonged to the Church of England. Many of the convicted criminals who made the settlement possible were Irish and Catholic, and so, not for the first time, the Protestant religion dominated. In Australia it was never the “established” church, as it is in

England, but it was certainly the church of the ruling class who made life difficult for Catholics.

Gerardo RODRÍGUEZ-SALAS. — Suddenly Patrick O'Farrell's essay (1976) about Irish Catholicism in Australia and the Irish as creating a separate Australian identity comes to mind, and, of course, in opposition to that, David Malouf's controversial essay stating that Australia was made in England (2003).⁹

Carmel BIRD. — Yes, O'Farrell's is a seminal essay regarding Catholicism in Australia and its Irish background. In a colony such as Australia (Tasmania) the classes and faiths quickly began to cross boundaries, so that there was probably much more of a mixture here than in England, for instance. My family is predominantly Irish and, by the 1940s, it was a blurry mixture of Catholic and Protestant and in many cases the two elements didn't speak to each other. It could be confusing for a child—it was often unclear why some relatives were in and others were out. What had they done? What had happened? There were no answers; indeed, there were no questions. So you see lurking there is the dark and attractive trope of conflict and mystery—nectar to a fiction writer. Going back to Bouma's essay, yes, by the late 1960s secularism was probably dominant, but I am talking about Australia in the 40s and 50s.

The colour and mystery that attracted me was found in Catholic iconography, and many of the arts (which were my interest) were located there too. The story *Kay Petman's Coloured Pencils* explores the Protestant (respectable, local, English)—Catholic (European, mysterious, mystical, wild, colourful, dangerous) divide that existed in Tasmania (Australia) at the time. After the Second World War the population of Australia changed dramatically with the arrival of immigrants, particularly Italians. Food and culture in general changed for the better. And the Italians brought a charge of European vitality to the largely dour Irish Catholicism of Australia. This fact somehow plays against Bouma's theory, which might be a bit too simple in some ways. So naturally, when I began to write serious fiction, all this was a treasure trove of constructive tools.

Gerardo RODRÍGUEZ-SALAS. — Yes, and James Jupp's *Story of Australian Immigration* (2002) is highly illuminating in that sense. Generally speaking about your fiction, what aspects do you embrace and/or criticise in religion?

Carmel BIRD. — I suppose I highlight the artistic and ritual and beautiful—the awe and wonder that religion can bring forward in people—for the world is a wonderful place, and people can be assisted to see that by some of the elements of religious practice (I am wandering from the fiction here—thinking more about my own ideas and feelings on these matters). The other aspect of religion(s) that I see as

9. This idea contrasts with recent opinions, like that of Gary Bouma, who considers that in 1960s and 70s Australia, secularism was the norm and religion was “a contradiction in terms or at best an embarrassing legacy of the forgettable past that is not so now” (2006, p. 1). His 2006 study is a very interesting approach to religion in 21st century Australia.

limiting the human response to the wonders of life—this is the rigidity, the lust for power, the hypocrisy—that is found in (among other places) the Catholic church, but in my fiction I think the main example is Caleb in *Cape Grimm*. The same thing is in Dr Goddard (Dr God) in *The White Garden*, not a religious figure, but a psychiatrist—I suppose they are sometimes the priests of today.

It will come down to the binaries of kindness and cruelty. When religion foregrounds cruelty—paedophiles come to mind—I will be critical, but when it nourishes wonder and demonstrates kindness, I'm OK with it. There is a great deal of nonsense put forward in the name of religion. Organised religion generally seems to go wrong, like so many human attempts at organisation, but I do still respond positively to graceful ritual and great music and singing and painting and so forth, and architecture. But ultimately I do think that human institutions are too small to explain the wonders of the universe—or whatever it all is. So does any of this translate into my fiction? It does, but I am not the best person to analyse it.

What is privileged; what is demonised. I tend to construct characters as broadly good and bad. Not in a formulaic way you understand, but there are definitely good and evil people in the work. So I ask myself who is “good” in *Child of the Twilight*, for instance. I think Roland is good. Sometimes the good ones come to a sticky end and he did: he is an innocent in a bad world. Cosimo is misguided, not bad: he is good but he does a *mad* thing. The fact that these are two priests: what does that signify? The original inspiration was the theft of the statue, so I was inspired by a religious artefact, and so the world of the novel was partly going to be a religious world. The tone of the novel is not really respectful of religion, though. Sydney the narrator is above it all: she is telling the story as a story, but a lot of the characters are still living in a quite Catholic ethos. Diana is extreme with her collection of statues. Working away behind all this is the question of fertility: the Black Madonna is a fertility goddess and Sydney is the new fertility, the product of sperm and egg donation from unknown sources. She will never know *who* she is. Primitive religion and fertility are bound up together. I am just having thoughts here. Not very coherent. I seem to have trouble with your word “values”. In life and in religion what I value is kindness. And optimism.

Gerardo RODRÍGUEZ-SALAS. — In what way do you use Spanish (mainly Andalusian) religious imagery as the basis to offer a more universal approach to mysticism? Somehow, I have the impression that when you portray Catholicism, you show a dark side that is then superseded by a more general religious feeling that goes beyond labels and that seems to be the answer, and that is kind of universal.

Carmel BIRD. — Yes, the dark aspects of religion—and life for that matter—are, in the spirit of optimism, generally superseded by light. I have said somewhere else that I don't really observe national boundaries, although I do of course give in to stereotypes—Spanish, French, English, American. I suppose I am always hoping to construct a universal image. All this analysis is foreign to me. I just hope in and write stories and the imagery springs from my nature and my history.

Gerardo RODRÍGUEZ-SALAS. — I guess we all play with images in the sense that John Berger uses the term in *Ways of Seeing* (1972), the image as “a sight which has been recreated or reproduced. It is an appearance, or a set of appearances, which has been detached from the place and time in which it first made its appearance and preserved—for a few moments or a few centuries” (pp. 9–10).

Carmel BIRD. — Yes, and yet, although I seem to work unconsciously with those universal images or stereotypes, I consciously try to disrupt them in my fiction. But, going back to mysticism, I suppose much of my writing is working towards a mystical approach to life. All the elements we are discussing build towards that. But then I think it sounds too elaborate and grand and even arrogant and foolish. I will try to say what I am doing when I write fiction: I am probably suddenly gripped by a little idea or image or even a plot of a kind, and then I start to see characters who work with that thing, and then the characters interact and the plot develops, and as I work with those things my *attitudes* to life—to what is good and beautiful and what works against goodness and beauty—emerge within the fabric of what I am writing.

In *The White Garden* Spanish mysticism is important—Teresa and John of the Cross. I wanted to construct a narrative that went back to Vita Sackville West and her white garden at Sissinghurst. And *she* had written a book about the two Teresas (Ávila and Lisieux) called *The Eagle and the Dove*. This idea played into my fiction-making hands in that the two Teresas were/are one of my interests. So there is certainly a Spanish bias in the imagery of sections of this book. Ávila isn't Andalusia, but my artistic notion of Spain is Andalusia-focused, both from stereotype and also from my delight in the visits I made to Granada and Córdoba.¹⁰ I fell in love with Granada in the sixties—my honeymoon was in the Parador of San Francisco.

Gerardo RODRÍGUEZ-SALAS. — What is the difference between Spain and Tasmania in your fiction?

Carmel BIRD. — Tasmania is home, the location of comfort and love, goodness and beauty, the familiar, my personal history, family history, memories, and I do return to it in my fiction. There are the people called O'Day and Mean, who find their way frequently into the narratives, and they belong in Tasmania.

But Spain is foreign, exotic, abroad, the wider world, the wild world, old civilisation, exciting culture, the painters and writers and buildings that inhabit the romantic spaces of my imagination—this is how it is in my life and in my fiction. Perhaps Diana's marriage in *Child* is a clue here: she is the Tasmanian girl who marries the Spaniard in Madrid, and it is all so glorious and exciting and romantic

10. Bird's generalisation of Andalusian stereotypes as standing for artistic Spain coincides with the opinion of American Professor of Anthropology Stanley Brandes who, back in the 80s, spoke of an “accurate” but “crude” generalisation of Andalusians “as poetic, musical, and artistic”, mainly due to the “enormous cultural achievements of world-wide figures whose lives and work are intimately associated with their Andalusian background” (1980, p. 4), and he mentions Alberti, Góngora, Lorca and the Machado brothers in the literary field.

in the extreme; then it all goes wrong and her husband and child both die, but she won't return home. She collects around her the dark signifiers of old Spain, the Black Madonnas.

Gerardo RODRÍGUEZ-SALAS. — What is your opinion, as an Australian, about Andalusian imagery becoming a widespread imagery for Spain as a whole?

Carmel BIRD. — The images of flamenco and bullfights and elaborate mantillas and guitars and Arabian tiles, Arabian arches, paella, oranges, fountains, the sun: they are key images that signify romantic Spain in the global (as I understand it) popular imagination.¹¹ Something that often follows the word "Spanish" in Anglo speech is "Inquisition". The image of the Holy Week is also very Spanish. I really wanted to see a Holy Week procession when I was in Spain the first time. I went to Valladolid because I thought Seville would be glamorous and I wanted to see dark events. Saetas are also a key image, and fans and lace too. And the gipsies. When I was about thirteen I embroidered a tablecloth for my cousin's wedding and it was the image of a Spanish gipsy woman with a tambourine beside a gipsy caravan. So there I was working away with the needle on a Spanish stereotype. These are all historic stereotypes—they are key images that draw people (tourists?) to Spain. I suppose it happens to all countries—the foreign perception is skewed. Does it really matter? Tulips for Holland (also diamonds and smuggling and drugs). I don't suppose so. I don't fit any Australian stereotype. Or I think I don't. When I travelled in Spain the other regions were a fantastic revelation to someone who expected Andalusia more or less all over the country.

Gerardo RODRÍGUEZ-SALAS. — Here, again, John Berger's theorisation about the image comes handy.

Do you find any connection between the Spanish religious ethos and nationalism? In *Child of the Twilight* there is a brief allusion to Franco's regime.

Carmel BIRD. — Oh heavens yes! Going back to Katherine of Aragon, there are the religion and the politics all densely woven together. They are always together in my mind: Spain and the Church. And Franco and the Church were very closely identified together as far as I understand. I realise things are different in Spain now, but I would still see a strong link between Spanish nationalism and the Church. This could be wrong, but stereotypes die hard. Spanish spirituality and the national identity are twinned in my vision/version of things.

Gerardo RODRÍGUEZ-SALAS. — What is your approach to nationalism in your fiction? How are nationalisms portrayed in your novels?

Carmel BIRD. — I don't really think in those terms. However, I do sometimes focus on the indigenous people of Tasmania. Their tragic history was a genocide in the nineteenth century. No, I don't think I foreground nationalism in my fiction. I set stories *in* Australia. That is where my sensibility is located, but I am not really

11. Once again, Bird proves her link with Brandes' Andalusian stereotyping.

conscious of supporting (or undermining or subverting) the nation or the national identity or anything like that.¹²

Gerardo RODRÍGUEZ-SALAS. — I guess your representation of indigenous people meets Terry Goldie's representation of the indigene in Australian literature as "a signifier for which the signified is the Image. The referent has little purpose in the equation" (1989, p. 4). This idea takes us back to our previous discussion of the image (Berger) as a detached depiction of reality, which, in the case of your fiction, clearly breaks this idea by showing an alternative vision of the Australian indigene. The case of the aboriginal ghost-girl Mannaginna in your novel *Cape Grimm* comes to mind, and how, through the protagonist Virginia, this aboriginal girl reveals an alternative story of genocide of the indigenous race to the canonical history of Tasmania, thus breaking traditional representations. This is a practice that I find recurrent in your fiction: how you might use national stereotypes but then systematically break them.

Carmel BIRD. — You put that very well. I realise that is exactly what I often do. Fiction is such a powerful and plastic medium in which to explore, for example, the story of Tasmania's genocidal past.

Gerardo RODRÍGUEZ-SALAS. — If I say the word "Spanish" to you, what associations come to mind?

Carmel BIRD. — I actually think of *language*. Maybe because in English the noun means the language; when it is an adjective it has a noun lurking somewhere: Spanish shawl, Spanish festival, etc. But I do mainly think of the beauty of the language, written and spoken. You realise I don't actually have much in the way of thought processes, but I will try to sort out what drifts into view when I hear the word. This is like conducting a séance, closing the eyes and saying: I see a beautiful lady in a black mantilla; she has a message for you. Do you know anyone who is about to sign an important document? A blue-eyed person? An uncle perhaps? Or no, a scientist. Is there a scientist, perhaps an astronomer in your family, your street?

I do think of nineteenth century women in mantillas—black or white—and fountains, Generalife, and the Alhambra, and men in sombreros, on horseback. Oh yes, Hollywood has a lot to answer for. You did ask me about stereotypes. I have been fully indoctrinated. Pottery. Actually I think the pottery I imagine is really Portuguese. I do have a little blue and green bowl from Granada. When I was in Granada in 2001, I wanted to buy one of these, but I figured I had enough weight in my luggage, so I didn't. Then when I arrived home one of the first things that happened was one of these bowls appeared in the window of a local second-hand

12. Bird deconstructed her Australian identity from an early state, highlighting her sense of national displacement: "As a young child I knew Tasmania was a state of Australia, but I did not feel it was part of Australia, and I did not try to imagine Australia. In my imagination the world contained Europe, America and the British Isles, with Tasmania as a displaced section of the British Isles that had come adrift and lay in secretive exile near the South Pole" (1989, p. 251). Even a tiny speck like Tasmania proves to go beyond nationalistic boundaries in her fiction.

shop. So it had travelled without me. I have memories—real things—speaking at a conference in the room with the big photograph of Lorca. Talking to the photograph—I suppose the audience thought I was talking to them. And meeting you, and the time we had dinner at the hotel. The beautiful linen and lace in the room at the Parador of San Francisco, and the perfection of the laundry they did. Being in Toledo and going to a restaurant (honeymoon time) that was entered by a dark cobbled little courtyard. There was a well in the courtyard, and beside the well was an ancient crone in black. She came towards me and took my hands and said a blessing on me “For the Promised One”, by which I understood I was pregnant—and I was. In Ávila I bought a rosary that was supposed to be made from the rose petals of bushes planted by St Teresa. Years later I had stored it in a vase (careless) and had put water and flowers in and the beads dissolved. I still have the chain with the little relic intact. You can see why I went to stay at the Santa Inés hotel in 2008, chasing stereotypes. I also think of Barcelona and the Gaudi places. Also pavements in Granada with the pomegranate.

So it's all visual and romantic and emotional—I think Spanish and I think romantic and emotional. I do think of Lorca's plays. I set them sometimes for the girls I was teaching in the 2000s. They performed *The House Of Bernarda Alba*. I also remember a lovely time I had in the Canary Islands. I went to a restaurant that often comes to mind when I am writing—very simple, white walls, beautiful green chairs. I could just ramble on here—is there anything useful I have said? Lines from Lorca do often drift into my mind. For instance: “Ay, muchacha, muchacha”; “Cuánto barco en el Puerto de Málaga”; “A las cinco de la tarde”—I often think of that. And “Verde, que te quiero verde”, of course. That came into *Child of the Twilight* when it was titled *The Green Language*—when there was a *Green Language*—I will explain shortly why the title was changed.

Gerardo RODRÍGUEZ-SALAS. — To conclude with this interview, I think that the protagonist of *Child of the Twilight*, Sydney, is the perfect epitome of the way you depart from particular national imagery but then transcend all of it in favour of a more universal approach. Sydney, as standing from your Australian viewpoint, flaunts pre-established notions of religion, nationalism and science. Why did you choose that name for the protagonist? Does it have any symbolic or allegorical connotations?

Carmel BIRD. — Sydney is named after the Australian city of Sydney, which is where she was conceived. You will find that several of the characters are named after *places*. The surname is Kent. But really I am having a little quiet fun with a currently popular fashion—at least in the English-speaking world—of naming children after places. They are usually exotic places—such as India or Montana (is that exotic?) or Paris (of course) or Siena—and I am subverting that, because I don't actually think anybody would bother to call a child after the city of Sydney. There are people named Sydney or Sidney of course, but that is because there is already a name historically established. And of course Sydney town was named after Lord Sydney. Sydney's mother in the novel is Avila—her sisters were Fatima and Lourdes.

So these are highly religious names, unlike Sydney. These are all little jokes you know. Nothing hilarious, just tickles. Sydney is totally without symbol or allegory as far as I know, apart from the Opera House and the bridge, maybe. But they are not, I imagine, objects people would choose for naming a child.

Gerardo RODRÍGUEZ-SALAS. — And yet, after reading the novel and keeping in mind all this debate about religion and nationalism, Sydney is to me the symbolic vehicle that overcomes essentialist beliefs, who epitomises you as an Australian writer, a visionary who is capable of transcending labels of any kind. Maybe I'm interpreting too far.

Carmel BIRD. — Sydney Kent is, as you say, flaunting notions of religion, nationalism and science. She is presented as a specimen because of the way she was physically constructed—drawing attention to fertility science. Her grandmother accuses her grandfather of seeing her as an insect to be studied, he gives the binary of that: she is the future, the child of the twilight of time, the new dawn. The title of the book was *Child of the Twilight of Time*, but the publisher's marketing department said it was too long. In fact, the title *Child of the Twilight* makes no sense to me. The original title was *The Green Language*, but the marketing department said people would confuse it with a book about the environmental movement and so they (the marketers) would not be able to sell it as a novel. I took out most of the stuff about the Green Language as a result; it was a whole other dimension to the novel, locating the thinking back in the Middle Ages (Europe, of course), where the Language of the Birds or the Green Language was a secret language of wisdom. I couldn't really call the novel *The Language of the Birds*, because of my name.

Gerardo RODRÍGUEZ-SALAS. — Maybe that is what the book is really about. Maybe Sydney Kent is your fictional alter ego, maybe your fiction is, like Sydney Kent, the new dawn, a truthful attempt to overcome restrictive, essentialist notions such as nationalism or religion. Maybe *The (non-nato) Green Language*, with its Lorquian innuendo and tragic fate, is the answer to this pseudo-autobiographical novel, where Spain and Australia are exquisitely united.

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