A DICTIONARY OF POSTMODERNISM

NIALL LUCY

WILEY Blackwell
A Dictionary of Postmodernism
In memory of Niall Lucy, 1956–2014

“...I am very impressed with your ‘Dictionary’ project. It seems to me that it is both a sharp and an exhaustive project and, of course, I want to say how grateful I am … Thank you for … keeping me informed about these beautiful projects in which I am proud and grateful to have a place.”

Jacques Derrida
(Letters to Niall Lucy)
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One of Niall’s final wishes was that this book be completed, and I cannot thank John Hartley enough for accepting Niall’s deserved trust in him to make it so, and for his dedicated and caring stewardship throughout. Niall would be honored that his longstanding friends Rob Briggs, Claire Colebrook, Tony Thwaites, Darren Tofts and Ken Wark also willingly and generously contributed their talents on his behalf. Thanks also to the team at Wiley-Blackwell for your professionalism across this and previous collaborations with Niall, especially Emma Bennett and Ben Thatcher for putting up with him for so long.

Niall was blessed to have many friends and colleagues who always supported his endeavors: thanks to Kerry Banting, Jill Birt, Peta Bowden, Paddy Buckley, Martyn P. Casey, Len Collard, Chris Coughran, Tim Dolin, Joseph Fernandez, Sean Gorman, Angela Glazbrook, Gillian Greensmith, Glynn Greensmith, Lisa Gye, Jane Hemery, Adrian Hoffman, John Kinsella, Monique Laves, Judith Lucy, Johnny R. Lucy-Stevenson, Alsy MacDonald, Jesse McGrath, Steve Mickler, Jane Mummery, Marnie Nolton, Dick Ounsworth, Pieta O’Shaughnessy, Cheryl Passmore, Elizabeth Pippet, Susan Pippet, Georgia Richter, Kim Scott, Mark Smith, Mark Snarski and Robert Snarski.

And finally, with thanks, love and pride to Niall’s greatest legacy, our children: Dylan, Hannah and Jakeb.

Sam Lucy-Stevenson, January 2015

John Hartley thanks the co-contributors for their generous gifts of thought and talent, and thanks Sam Lucy-Stevenson for invaluable editorial assistance. The “Introduction” and “Culture” are reproduced from Niall Lucy’s “The Acropolis of the Dragon,” first published in VLAK 4 (October 2013), by Litteraria Pragensia, Prague: our thanks go to editor-publisher Louis Armand.
This book is something of a postmodern hybrid. It’s Niall Lucy’s book, imagined, planned and executed by him, but it’s also a collage, involving other writers. Niall wasn’t able to complete it, but he was keen to see it finished. At his request, the contributors – friends and colleagues of his – have undertaken that task on his behalf. We have sought to keep Niall’s project and his unique style in mind, but his mixture of erudition, wit, defiance and firm views on certain topics was all his own. An inevitable consequence of this is that our entries will sometimes reflect the contributor’s interests and opinions rather than Niall’s directly. Also, there are occasions when Niall has quoted work published by one of us. Thus, we have “signed” each entry, so that readers can avoid mistaking those passages for self-citation, or mistaking the parts he did not write for Niall’s own work. The book is laid out as an encyclopedia, with entries in alphabetical order. Each entry is a short essay. In most cases each one has been completed by a single hand (rather than by collective authorship), in order to preserve Niall’s characteristic mode of argument by example. The largest number of entries is by him, with the six contributors taking between four and six each.

The project has been a labour of love for all of us. This book is offered as Niall Lucy’s Dictionary of Postmodernism, but it’s also a Festschrift to him by a group of individuals whose lives and work have intersected with his, and in several cases with each other’s too. We’ve all enjoyed his company, benefited from knowing and arguing with him, and feel confident that you, dear reader, will do too. For this is a working book, designed for readers to use and enjoy, and to dispute where necessary. In order to do justice to what Niall was attempting, we have tried to do justice to the topic.

There are varying views on postmodernism. In his *Postmodern Literary Theory* (1997) Niall Lucy wrote that it could be seen as the outworking of a
literary–philosophical tradition that goes back to the Romantic movement in Germany and elsewhere. Postmodernism was what happened when that tradition, including its critics, eventually abandoned the idea that there was something central and intrinsically valuable about literary texts, and began to apply its considerable analytical, emotional and political resources to the consideration of any text, in a universe of knowledge where, to the perceiving subject, everything presents as a text, including context (as Derrida famously remarked, il n'y a pas de hors-texte – roughly translatable as ‘context is everything’). Thus, postmodernism may be another way of discussing the historical experience, philosophy and practice of general textuality:

What was once the romantic space of the literary becomes, for postmodernism, a general plane of human existence, on which concepts of identity, origin and truth are seen as multiple and structureless assemblages rather than as grounds for understanding human “being” and culture … I think “postmodernism” refers to the generalization or flattening out of the romantic theory of literature, which marks it as a “radical” theory of the nonfoundational, structureless “structure” of truth. I do not think postmodernism is all that radical, in other words. (Lucy, 1997: ix–x)

Postmodernism, therefore, poses historical, political, theoretical and even “romantic” problems. Here, we set out to explain some of them. But as Niall wrote in the Preface to his Derrida Dictionary, “this will not have been a dictionary.” Instead, as he put it: “My aim here has been to provide a series of outlines and interpretations of some … key ideas and arguments, rather than fixed definitions. I discuss these … within the widest context of Continental thought” (Lucy, 2004: xii).

Some of us may have strayed a little beyond the Continent in question. Niall had views about this. When he asked me to “see this through to publication,” he warned me that compromise was needed:

John, you’ll need to tighten up a little. This can't be an opportunity to crack twee jokes, or to show that Lyotard and Barthes, say, know nothing about the world, which is best explained by a hard-nosed, street-smart approach. You have to pay at least some respect to theory and theorists, or this just won’t work. (email, 8 May 2014)

Having spent some instructive and informative time working on the book with all those concerned – Niall himself, co-contributors Robert Briggs, Claire Colebrook, Tony Thwaites, Darren Tofts and McKenzie Wark, as well
as Sam Lucy-Stevenson, Niall’s wife and our colleague at Curtin University’s Centre for Culture and Technology – I can say that it has worked. We have paid every respect to theory and its all-too world-knowing theorists, perhaps with one or two hard-nosed street smarts thrown in. Watch out for the jokes though.

John Hartley, January 2015
Author

Niall Lucy was Professor of Critical Theory at Curtin University where he co-founded the Centre for Culture and Technology. His books include: *Debating Derrida* (1995); *Postmodern Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1997); *Postmodern Literary Theory: An Anthology* (ed., 2000); *Beyond Semiotics: Text, Culture and Technology* (2001); *A Derrida Dictionary* (2004); *The War on Democracy: Conservative Opinion in the Australian Press* (with Steve Mickler, 2006); *Beautiful Waste: Poems by David McComb (The Triffids)* (co-ed., 2009); *Vagabond Holes: David McComb and the Triffids* (co-ed., 2009); *Pomo Oz: Fear and Loathing Downunder* (2010); *The Ballad of Moondyne Joe* (with John Kinsella, 2012).

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