

Transnationalism and National Literatures: The Case of Australia

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Transnationalism should best be understood as a critical method, not as a description of inherent cultural forms, and so it is relatively easy to take a transnational approach to Australian or indeed any other kind of literature. Just as considerations of Medieval English literature have been enriched recently by a critical discourse that has elucidated points of crossover between Latin traditions and emerging vernacular languages, so Australian literature can productively be understood as both a nexus within, and a resistance to, larger orbits of globalisation. The key question here is not whether Australian literature itself is transnational, but what might be gained or lost in approaching the subject through such a critical matrix. Such an approach would of course cut against the assumptions implicit within the title 'The Association for the Study of Australian Literature,' a scholarly organisation based clearly upon a national paradigm, although in historical terms it is easy enough to understand the rationale behind its emergence. Writing in 1991, Sara Dowse attributed the founding of ASAL in 1978 to the attempt by a 'band of stalwarts' to resist 'the domination of the British canon in key university English departments around the country' (42), and in this sense the field of Australian literature has long been engaged professionally in an effort to carve out and consolidate space for itself from under the hegemonic shadow of English literature.¹ The process here is very similar in kind to that which American literature underwent when it began to be established as a legitimate subject on university curricula during the first half of the twentieth century, with F.O. Matthiessen titling his famous 1941 book *American Renaissance* in a specific attempt to prove to his sceptical Harvard colleagues that his chosen five authors (Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Whitman and Melville) were as good as any produced by the Renaissance in England.

But even while recognising the pragmatic usefulness of such interventions, it is also important theoretically to be aware of what tends to be elided or overlooked through such a nationalist template. Australian literature as a discursive field has been shaped by a wide range of social and political pressures, including British colonial settlement and the postcolonial reaction against it, the apparatus of Federation and the development of national consciousness in the early twentieth century, and the various experiences, traumatic and otherwise, associated with Indigenous culture. More recently, it has also been shaped pedagogically by Cultural Studies approaches that have now become firmly embedded in both secondary and tertiary education. This latter pressure has brought about specific opportunities, but, in terms of literary studies, also significant drawbacks. One of the great strengths of Australian literary studies in recent times has been the breadth of its intellectual engagement, encompassing dimensions—from economics and sociology to psychoanalysis and gender studies—that might, in other countries, have been sequestered under different disciplinary formations. In this way, the general paucity of institutional support and funding for literary studies has forced collaborative and interdisciplinary enterprises that may well, at least for some aspects of the subject, have been energising. On the other hand, Peter Carey has complained with some justification that Australian students typically learn how to 'decode' texts before they learn how to read them, and one of the risks associated with the introduction of Foucault as early as high school is to position literature itself as an irredeemably secondary phenomenon, something to be drawn on only for instrumental or exemplary purposes.

3 There are, of course, many undergraduate programmes in American Studies and similar interdisciplinary formations, although these have become less popular since the heyday of area studies in the mid-twentieth century. UCLA introduced an undergraduate major in 'American Literature and Culture' in 2011, and there are many undergraduate degree programmes in English and American Literature, but none, so far as I know, in American Literature *per se*.

4 Chadwick Allen, *Blood Narrative: Indigenous Identity in American Indian and Maori Literary and Activist Texts* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2002), and *Trans-Indigenous: Methodologies for Global Native Literary Studies* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2012). For comparative scholarship between South Africa and the United States, see for example Deborah Seddon, "'Be a Mighty Hard Message': Toni Morrison and the Exploration of Whiteness in the Post-Apartheid Classroom." *Safundi* 15.1 (2014): 29–52, and various other articles in *Safundi*.

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