

# National Literatures, Scale and the Problem of the World

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One of the leading figures in world literature today is the Harvard scholar David Damrosch. His 2003 book *What is World Literature?* has been widely influential, and might be said to have established the new, US-centred field of study known as world literature. In a 2010 review of three later books edited or co-edited by Damrosch—*How to Read World Literature* (2009), *Teaching World Literature* (2009) and *The Longman Anthology of World Literature* (2009)—John M. Kopper describes them as Damrosch's aleph. The reference, which I take to be ironic, is to the title story of Jorge Luis Borges's collection, *The Aleph* (1949). The aleph is a mysterious gadget that apparently allows the narrator, who is also named 'Borges,' briefly to experience an all-encompassing vision of the universe. It is a parable about the madness of desiring a total or 'encyclopedic vision' (Echevarria 125). To describe world literature as Damrosch's aleph is to imply that it is fundamentally misguided to seek a total vision of literature or to read books at the scale of the world. 'If the aleph stands for the totality of literature,' Kopper writes, then today's rich and expanding bibliography of works *about* that immensity, along with the increasingly massive anthologies that seek to encircle it, show that we have lost our fear of the unbounded object that we study' (408).

What we are dealing with here is a problem of scale. What *is* the appropriate scale for the study of literature? This is another way of asking, where is literature best *located*? Is it desirable or even possible to study a text or the phenomenon of literature in general on a world scale? What are the consequences of approaching a national literature like that of Australia, or the literature of a city like Melbourne or Sydney, from the scale of 'the world'? Do texts invite being read at different scales? In a slightly different sense of the word 'scale,' what are the consequences for the degree of resolution or accuracy that we might achieve from such a perspective? If an American critic, for example, reads an Australian novel as world literature, is he or she likely to get the details right? Will they know enough? In the end, it is a question of professional expertise.

Scale has long been pervasive in the study of literature, yet even when they are most preoccupied with questions of space, as in the writing of literary histories, literary scholars tend to treat both space and scale as passive terms, an aspect of the subject that we take for granted or as given, rather than as a problem to be explored or a part of our approach and methodology. This is not the case in many other disciplines, especially in the social sciences, which have very sophisticated tools for thinking about questions of space and scale (Dominguez). In human geography, for example, scale has long been at the forefront of methodological considerations, and it is there that I'll turn initially as a way of refocusing on the problem of scale in literary history and literary criticism. My purpose is to ask how scalar thinking might illuminate the relationship between Australian literature, conceived both as a body of writing and as an academic discipline, and world literature.

## The Problem of Geographic Scale

Beginning in the 1970s, and following the publication of Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* in 1974, human geographers have argued that space and, by implication, scale, are both

material and discursive categories that are ‘constructed’ or ‘produced’ by social processes and the intervention of human agents (Sheppard and McMaster, ‘Introduction’ 15). Some of the major theory-building was done by geographers Neil Brenner, David Harvey, Neil Smith and Erik Swyngedouw, drawing especially on Lefebvre. Lefebvre was not himself concerned with questions of scale, but the usefulness of his argument about the social production of space was that it contravened Euclidian and Newtonian conceptions of space as the given dimension in which things happen. As Neil Smith puts it, ‘it is not that . . . events and processes take place “in space” but rather that space and spaces are produced as an expression of these social and natural processes’ (‘Scale Bending’ 196). It follows from this that we cannot take for granted the prior existence and methodological neutrality of the geographic scales usually invoked in human geography—or in literary history and criticism. A constructionist approach to scale ‘seeks to ask how particular scales come into existence for particular phenomena’—such as literature—and ‘how their relative importance changes over time’ (Sheppard and McMaster, ‘Scale’ 261). That is to say ‘[that] scale is made, and not an ontologically given category; that scale is not a preordained hierarchical nomenclature for ordering the world, but rather a contingent outcome of the tensions between structural forces and the interventions of human agents’ (Marston 172).

According to *The Dictionary of Human Geography*, a representative ‘cascade’ of such scales, hierarchically arranged, would include the human body, the household, the neighbourhood, the city, the region, the nation-state, the continent, and the world/globe/planet (Gregory 665). We might think about how such scales operate in any given text. At which of these scales is its subject matter located? Does it demand to be read on more than one scale? If so, how are the different scales related? Is the nation more important than the body or the household or the region? Is the world more important than the nation? Even then, we are still thinking hierarchically—that is, seeing one scale as more important than others. Geographers, in fact, have argued over whether such cascades are organised hierarchically at all, or whether they might be structured recursively, or as mosaics of equal but overlapping scales.

Once we introduce questions of space and scale to thinking about literary history and literary criticism, other questions follow. Australian literature, like English or American literature, has traditionally been thought at the scale of the nation. But is this natural and inevitable, or is it merely a consequence of the social values that have shaped literary study over time, like nationalism? Might we be better to ask instead how certain writers or texts relate to the world scale, or to the local scale? Do Peter Carey’s novels, for example, belong to a *national* Australian tradition, or do they belong, as Paul Giles suggests (429), to trends in world literature like the magical realism of his friend Salman Rushdie, or the metafiction of American writers like Don DeLillo? Does the new Aboriginal writing, like the novels of Kim Scott and Alexis Wright, belong to a *national* tradition, or is it best located at a more local scale: Scott’s novels to the SW of West Australia, Wright’s to the Gulf Country? Or yet again, are these very local texts now enjoying such success world wide that they are best considered as part of world literature? Have Aboriginal writers effectively by-passed the scale of the nation altogether, going immediately to the scale of the world?

Once we introduce questions about the social construction of space and scale into a national literature, we are potentially undoing what seemed like the natural connection between Australian literature and the scale of the nation. This is to throw open almost everything we might normally ask about an Australian text. At what scale does an Australian novel ask to be read? Does it belong in a local, a national, or a transnational context? What are the consequences of reading a novel at the wrong scale? That older scale, the scale of the nation,

which we have so much taken for granted, is known as ‘the epistemology of nation- or state-centrism’: that is to say, a way of knowing things that is governed by the central idea of nation. But leading theorists of geographic scale regard this way of thinking as a fallacy.

In *New States Spaces* (2004), the Harvard geographer Neil Brenner offers a cogent summary and critique of both nation-centred theories and the theories of globalisation that for a time in the 1990s seemed to replace them. According to Brenner, the epistemology of state- or nation-centrism has three implicit spatial and scalar assumptions, each of which is a fallacy. These general principles have important implications for the application of scalar thinking to the category of national literature:

. . . (a) [that] space [i]s a static platform of social action that is not itself constituted or modified socially; (b) . . . that social relations are organized within territorially self-enclosed spatial containers; and (c) . . . that social relations are organized at a national scale . . . The first assumption results in a *spatial fetishism* in which space is seen as being timeless, and therefore immune to historical change. The second assumption results in a *methodological territorialism* in which territoriality—the principle of spatial enclosure—is treated as the necessary form for social relations. The third assumption generates a *methodological nationalism* in which the national scale is treated as the ontologically primary locus of social relations. Taken together, these assumptions generate an internalist model of societal development in which national territoriality is presumed to operate as a static, fixed, and timeless container of historicity. (39)

These principles, which naturalise the modern state’s territorial forms and jurisdictions, underpinned the modern development of disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, including history, sociology, anthropology and literary studies, especially during the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth. Brenner stresses that such cultural-nationalist epistemologies are not merely a ‘fantasy or ideological projection,’ but a reflection in the humanities and social science disciplines of the very ‘power containers’ that dominated the social worlds they were studying. This involves a ‘misrecognition’ of the historical *tendency* toward territorialisation on a national scale as its successful historical *realisation*, which is often partial at best (43).

In Australian literary history, there have been two periods dominated by the epistemology of nation-centrism: the period of Federation, from 1880–1920, and the period from the second world war to the Bicentenary, from 1945 to 1988, when Australian literature was established as a discipline. Federation was essentially a question of scale. Should Australia be constituted as seven separate colonies—or ‘colonial nations,’ as they thought of themselves (Atkinson xix)—or should it aggregate upwards in scale to being a federated if not homogeneous nation? Again, during the era of post-war reconstruction, as Tim Rowse has shown, the Federal Government embarked on a series of nation-building schemes—the Commonwealth Bank of Australia, the Snowy Mountains Scheme, the Australian National University. Australian literature as a subject of study owes its origins to these two periods. Australian literature was thought to have come of age with Federation as an expression of national identity. As an academic discipline, it was first established during the 1950s and 1960s. The foundational histories of Australian literature were also written in the mid-twentieth century, and they all operate at the scale of the nation. In Vance Palmer’s *The Legend of the Nineties* (1954) and Russel Ward’s *The Australian Legend* (1958), for example, Australian literature is defined as

expressive of the national character and the study of that literature is located at the national scale. This cultural nationalism was, in Brenner's term, a 'scale-specific project' (44). Palmer attributes the emergence of an authentic Australian culture in the 1890s to its insularity, its geographic isolation from foreign cultures. He mistook the nationalising aspirations of both the 1890s and the era of post-war reconstruction as an achieved fact expressed in Australian literature. In reality, however, the cartographic imaginary of Australian literature might be seen as 'multi-scalar' and transnational: it includes the distinct colonial, national and imperial allegiances of the pre-Federation era, our contemporary awareness of literary cities and regions, and the global reach of contemporary Australian writing. The older spatialities of that time before the nation seem to have re-emerged today in what Philip Mead calls a 'post-national' (551)—though I would prefer to call a post-nationalising—Australia, and they already have names: Far North Queensland, Sydney, Melbourne, island Tasmania, Central South, the West, and so on. This is in some respects a return to a pre-Federation spatial imaginary in which localities, city-regions, and 'colonial nations,' as well as Indigenous forms of 'country,' have replaced the scale of the continental nation, while also being directly linked in to supranational networks. This is a spectral return of polities that are visualised in historic maps such as the sequence of 10 maps showing the chronological subdivision of Australia into states and territories between 1787 and 1908 in *The Lady Northcote Atlas of Australasia* (1908) (Robinson 18).

Since the 1970s, Brenner argues, there has been a pervasive re-scaling of social space from the national to the world scale. This corresponds with the era of globalisation and the rise of globalisation theory, which flourished during the 1990s. Globalisation theories take one of two forms, each of which, according to Brenner, is also conceptually flawed and can again be described as a kind of fallacy. I call these, first, 'all the world is America'; and second, the 'even playing field.' The first operates through 'an analysis of the global scale in implicitly state-centric terms, as a globally stretched territorial grid.' The second assumes that globalisation brings the end of nation states 'through an emphasis on processes of deterritorialization that purportedly trigger the erosion of national state territoriality' (Brenner 45).

The first of these fallacies, 'global territorialism' or 'state-centrism on a world scale,' is worth considering for the implications it has for the homogenising, neo-imperialist tendencies of US-centred World Literature programs, with their often explicit agenda of replacing the study of national literatures. This is to see global space as itself a 'pre-given territorial container or as a form of territoriality stretched onto the global scale.' Brenner cites as examples such concepts as 'world society,' 'a single society and culture occupying the planet,' 'global culture,' and 'transnational civil society,' to which we might add 'world literature' itself. In each of these instances, the adjectives 'world,' 'global' and 'planetary' betray a tendency to universalism, the stretching of a single, homogeneous space on to the world scale. In this way, Brenner argues, 'the question of the qualitative sociospatial organization of world-scale processes is essentially foreclosed through a choice of conceptual grammar' (49).

The second form of globalisation theory, and the dominant paradigm of the 1990s, was to see the nation as a redundant form of territoriality that was being replaced by the new tropes of circulation and borderless flows. These were purportedly post- or supra-territorial to the extent that 'they effectively do not have a territorial location, apart from the broad sense of being situated on the planet earth' (49). Examples include Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's equalisation or smoothing of social space, Fredric Jameson's post-modern hyperspace and Arjun Appadurai's global flows. The advantage was that we could posit alternative

conceptual geographies to the nation, and Brenner acknowledges that this was ‘an important accomplishment’ which explains the immense impact of books like Appadurai’s *Modernity at Large* (1996) and Hardt and Negri’s *Empire* (2000). At the same time, he identifies further problems with these new theorizations of borderless space that again have implications for the spatial turn in literary studies:

1. The historicity of [national] territoriality is reduced to an either/or choice between two options: its presence or absence.
2. The relation between world space and national territoriality is viewed as a zero-sum game in which the growing importance of the former is presumed necessarily to entail the decline of the latter. . . . This dualistic conceptualization cannot adequately theorise the essential role of subglobal transformations—whether of supranational political-economic blocs, national state territories, regions, cities, localities, or places—in contemporary processes of global restructuring. (57)

Geographers like Neil Smith now dismiss the ‘smooth world’ conjured by globalisation theorists in the 1990s as ‘a fantasy of spacelessness’ (‘Spaces of Vulnerability’ 72). While conceding that ‘Globalization was the *Zeitgeist* of the 1990s,’ sociologist Justin Rosenberg began an important paper in 2005 by announcing that ‘The “age of globalization” is over’ (‘Post Mortem’ 2), and he has elsewhere catalogued ‘the follies of globalization theory.’ These critiques in the social sciences coincide exactly with the scalar turn from nation to world or globe in the field of world literature in the early 2000s—Damrosch’s aleph—and a similar critique of the legacy of globalisation theory has since been taken up within world literary studies: Emily Apter’s *Against World Literature* (2013), for example, is a dramatic reconsideration of her earlier formulations in *The Translation Zone* (2005).

While generally endorsing the scalar extension from nation to world that has taken place in the period of globalisation, Brenner therefore points to the methodological dilemmas associated with ‘the problem of the world’—that is, with thinking at the scale of ‘world.’ In particular, he is critical of what he calls ‘methodological territorialism,’ in which the newly expanded scale of analysis nonetheless reconstitutes space and scale as fixed or pre-given containers, though now at world scale—all the world is like America or Paris or Berlin, but never like Sydney. Brenner calls instead for a remapping of world space that is ‘scale-sensitive,’ attending to the ‘multiscalar’ interplay in contemporary culture:

Contemporary state institutions are being significantly rescaled at once upwards, downwards, and outwards to create qualitatively new, polymorphic, plurilateral institutional geographies that no longer overlap evenly with one another, converge upon a single, dominant geographical scale or constitute a single, nested organizational hierarchy. These developments undermine traditional, Westphalian models of statehood as an unchanging, self-enclosed national-territorial container and suggest that more complex, polymorphic, and multiscalar regulatory geographies are emerging. (68)

### **The Problem of the World**

What implications does this have for our thinking about the role of scale in Australian literary studies? Should we still be studying literature at the national scale? Should we be placing it in the global context of world literature? What warnings does Brenner sound for us, regarding

the fallacies of both national and global space, in approaching Australian texts at either national or world scale? Brigid Rooney and I surveyed these questions in the introduction to *Scenes of Reading* in 2013. The rise of world literature, with its call to see national literatures from global or transnational perspectives, might mean that we are replacing old fallacies like nation with new ones like world or globe. From this perspective, the turn to world scale is not a neutral or natural phenomenon, nor an inevitable outcome of internal developments within the disciplinary field of Australian literary studies, but a crucial moment of ‘scalar transformation’ and perhaps of ‘scale fixing’ that will almost certainly have profound epistemological, institutional and political consequences. We need to proceed with caution.

Nirvana Tanoukhi’s 2008 article, ‘The Scale of World Literature,’ is a powerful intervention within and against the field of world literature that reframes its leading debates by shifting the focus from space and scale *per se* to the *production* of geographical scale and its politics. Tanoukhi describes the recent revival of the concept of world literature within the US academy as the staking of ‘a *cartographic* claim to scale’ (599). In the shift from nation to world scale, it is claimed that the discipline can reveal ‘zones, paths, and crossroads obscured by strict adherence to “national traditions”.’ With this ‘cartographic commitment (and its poetics of distance),’ literary studies can be said finally to have entered the globalisation debates that prevailed in the social sciences during the 1990s. One positive consequence of this disciplinary critique of scale is that it requires us to think of ‘space’ as an epistemological frame rather than an ontological category. The danger is that ‘world literature,’ so called, ‘threatens to become a hardened (albeit enlarged) image of the old literary history, where *geography* evokes a figurative solidity that assumes the guise of materiality’ (599–600). In other words, no sooner had globalisation theorists drawn attention to the previously invisible operation of scale as methodology in national literatures than the concept of world literature threatened to renaturalise space at the scale of ‘the world.’ This is the fallacy that Brenner terms ‘global territorialism,’ in which global space itself operates as a ‘pre-given territorial container or as a form of territoriality stretched onto the global scale’—all the world is America. This is a mirror image of the earlier spatial fetishism—all the world is the nation. Just as the cultural nationalists of the mid-twentieth century mistook the *tendency* toward national consolidation for its *realisation*, some proponents of world literature today mistake the tendency toward globalisation for its full historical realisation.

There is therefore a problem with world literature’s poetics of distance and it is a problem of scale. In the spatial imaginary of this emergent and potentially hegemonic subdiscipline, Tanoukhi suggests that we have hit ‘a *chronotopic* limit,’ a point at which the spatial imaginary will continue to ‘harden,’ and beyond which ‘the simple logic of distance begins to disintegrate’ (614). By ‘harden,’ Tanoukhi means that the scalar categories that had previously organised literary history, and which were briefly thrown into relief by the spatial turn in literary studies in the early 2000s, will once again become naturalised as pre-given ontological categories that overdetermine literary criticism and history. One problem is that the world scale, in particular, is a scale of analysis so immense, so unbounded, that it threatens to occlude the scalar politics that are invariably at work in the production and application of all such scales of analysis. As Apter argues, the world scale ‘projects a denationalized planetary screen that ignores the deep structures of national belonging and economic interest contouring the international culture industry’ (*Against World Literature* 177). Where, exactly, is the ‘here,’ the Archimedean point from which the practitioner of world literature adopts the perspective of a ‘transcendental witness’ upon the ‘world?’ (Tanoukhi 612). The answer might well be Boston or New York or Paris, but not Sydney or Bourke or Hungerford. What are the relations, both political and epistemological, between

that ‘here,’ that ‘world,’ and such places elsewhere? Damrosch’s *What is World Literature?* abounds with ill-defined spatial tropes; in a searching review, Gregory Jusdanis suggests that Damrosch’s ‘world’ is conceived on such a sublime scale that it has no internal topography or spatial resolution. The challenge that Damrosch sets himself but fails to meet is, ‘how to conceptualize the literary text once it enters the global world of literary exchange.’ In other words, ‘how do we imagine what this world literature looks like? What metaphor are we going to use to help us understand it?’ Jusdanis argues that ‘by not formulating a theoretical model to navigate through world literature, Damrosch effectively abandons his readers to the vagaries of globalization as they search for unrelated texts’ (113). While Tanoukhi describes the view from ‘here’ as a ‘transcendental witnessing,’ Jusdanis warns of the danger of ‘falling through a thin-ice universalism’ (114); of adopting ‘the attitude of a detached engagement with a world beyond our own’ (116).

Following the work of human geographers in the 1990s, including Neil Smith and Neil Brenner, Tanoukhi also calls for a more scale-sensitive procedure in literary studies. This would involve an awareness of the production of scale by the methodologies of literary criticism and literary history, and within the texts they take as their subjects. ‘If we can indeed imagine a literary history that is entangled in the history of the production of space,’ she writes, ‘it is time for comparative literature to develop both a critique of scale, which would examine the spatial premises of comparison—and, eventually, a phenomenology of scale, which would help us grasp the actually existing landscapes of literature’ (614). All literary histories subject space to scale—that is, to what Smith calls ‘scalar fixes’ and ‘scalar transformations’—and these in turn are embedded in spatial systems of relation. ‘As comparatists,’ Tanoukhi argues, ‘we must approach “spaces” wherever we find them, as the articulation of distance within a particularly spatialized system of social relations’ (614). The *institution* of literary studies in all its unevenness and diversity on a world scale—from the MLA to ASAL; from *PMLA* to *JASAL*; from the English Department at Harvard to those at the Universities of Melbourne and Sydney—is just such a ‘spatialized system of social relations.’ The moments at which a regionally identified literature encounters the space of the nation, or a nationally identified literature encounters the space of the world, are two such moments of articulation, when a spatialised system of social relations, including disciplinary and institutional relations, is brought into play, whether covertly or overtly.

Tanoukhi’s ‘The Scale of World Literature’ originally appeared in *New Literary History* in 2008. In 2011, it was reprinted in *Immanuel Wallerstein and the Problem of the World*, which Tanoukhi coedited with David Palumbo-Liu and Bruce Robbins. As its title indicates, the point of intervention in her critique of world literature shifts here to the work of American sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein, and the influence of his world-systems theory on models of world literature, especially in the work of Franco Moretti and Pascale Casanova. In the coauthored introduction to that collection, Tanoukhi’s reservations about the world literature project have themselves ‘hardened.’ Since the 1990s, she acknowledges, there has been a steady ‘ratcheting up’ of our work ‘to the world scale’ with which ‘we’—that is, ‘We Euro-American cultural critics’—have been ‘more or less happy to comply.’ As landmark works, she cites Wallerstein’s *The Modern World System* (1974), and the influential works it inspired, including Appadurai’s ‘Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy’ (1990), Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* (1993), Moretti’s ‘Conjectures on World Literature’ (2000), and Casanova’s *The World Republic of Letters* (1999; translated 2004). While literary critics, historians and cultural anthropologists have been ‘more or less happy to comply’ with the globalising imperative, Tanoukhi *et al.* admit to reservations and ‘uncertainties.’ They arise, for example, from a concern that ‘subtle or not so subtle varieties of exploitation may be built

into it,' and 'whether non-European writers and thinkers will see themselves as benefitting or not' (3–4). The intellectual responsibility of attending to these 'more or less' overt reservations challenges humanities researchers to adopt a critical and monitory stance toward the 'globalizing imperative':

At a moment when we are . . . trying on various world-scale identities, it offers us both a well-developed vision of what the world scale means and the challenge of reinspecting our customary interpretive practices in its harsh but revealing light. We may end by re-affirming our loyalty to those practices. In the end we may agree . . . that analysis in terms of the world-system entails a fatal disrespect for culture, or subjectivity, or difference, or agency, or the local . . . But if so, these objects and values will have been exposed and argued through in a new way, and they will no longer be quite the same. (5–6)

While Tanoukhi goes some way toward examining her own apprehension of the negative effects of a US-centred world-scale analysis on peripheral disciplinary formations, she nonetheless speaks primarily for 'we Euro-American cultural critics.' Even in critiques of world-scale 'universalism' in the work of Brenner, Jusdanis and Tanoukhi, in other words, their criticisms are still bounded by a politics of the global North and its powerful institutions. Even *their* criticisms seem to take place as part of a North-North dialogue whose 'outside' or global South extends perhaps no further west or south than China. Symptomatically, one paper at the 2015 MLA Convention, which was otherwise concerned to open that institution to new contexts, was titled 'Sounding the Limits of the "South": Nonlocational Geographies at the Limit of a Concept' (Armillas-Tiseyra).

As Emily Apter, Theo D'haen and others have remarked, the spectacular rise of the world literature paradigm and its transnational methodology is shaped by influences that it does not openly declare or perhaps even fully comprehend. 'Oneworldedness,' according to Apter, might be described as 'a relatively intractable literary monoculture that travels through the world absorbing difference' (*Against World Literature* 83). Its rise has much to do with the re-evaluation of America's position in the world after 9/11, and with globalisation and the rise of neoliberalism, and it is strongly connected both ideologically and pedagogically with the institutional logic of the United States humanities academy and the idea of the global university. Paradoxically, this re-evaluation has involved both a new-found vulnerability and openness to others, and a revived sense of the US imperium. D'haen, who is based in Belgium, warns that 'Notwithstanding the best intentions . . . American proponents of world literature always risk turning the practice of what they are doing against their avowed aims, thus perhaps unconsciously and almost against the grain upholding a cultural hegemony they consciously profess to be combating' (93–94). In light of these criticisms, my instinct as an *Australian* critic of Australian literature is to endorse world literature's argument against the limits of nationalist reading practices, with their 'spatial fetishism' and 'methodological nationalism' but I am equally wary of the more extreme arguments about world literature, which imply the transcendence of all scales of analysis and all categories of determination by a global or planetary system. What seems useful in all this is the call for a 'scale-sensitive' analysis, in which all scales are in play, and in which there is movement above, below and around the national level.



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