Australian Literary Studies Now

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This article was drafted on the land of the Yirrganydji People, traditional owners and custodians of the Cairns region, and completed on the land of the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people. I pay my respects to the Traditional Owners of these lands and acknowledge their elders, past and present.

Australian literary studies has been shaped by crises in both its own development and in the history of literary studies in higher education. As the study of a "national" literature at the university level it had both assertive and disputed beginnings, a varying but impressive history of establishment and legitimacy, and ongoing challenges in the present: uncertain educational frameworks and pedagogical practices, the continued under-funding of the humanities in universities, and the effects, on disciplinarity and employment, of repeated institutional restructuring. A determining aspect of those challenges is the constantly evolving nature of its object of study, Australian creative writing, which literary studies needs constantly to adapt to and engage with. Also on the disciplinary side, things are equally shifting. Australian literary studies, as a field of knowing, is "neither pure nor autonomous: it exists in relation to a series of distinct though overlapping domains that together make up the total field of knowledge production in the humanities" (Dixon, "Boundary Work").

To reach into this history at a relatively recent point: 2007 was a disruptive year for the study of Australian literature. That was the year of the retirement of Elizabeth Webby from the chair of Australian literature at Sydney University. Peter Pierce had retired from the Chair in Australian Literature at James Cook University late the year before. Responding to these retirements Rosemary Neill published two articles in the *Australian* (one in December 2006, one in June 2007) about the "declining status of Australian Literary Studies in universities" (Hassall; see also Brooks). The story of Neill's reporting on what these retirements meant, the numerous criticisms of her articles, the roundtable supported by Minister for Education Julie Bishop in the Howard government, and the eventual, bipartisan establishment of the Chair of Australian Literature at the University of Western Australia is well known. Tony Hassall, previously a professor of English Literature at James Cook University, published an article following these controversies in 2011, in *Quadrant*. Hassall told a familiar story about the contemporary fate of literary study: the derogation of English/literary studies within the humanities and the ascendancy of cultural studies and theory in universities over the decades leading up to 2010, and the breakdown of traditional literary disciplinarity at the tertiary level. The "chequered" history of Australian literary studies in Hassall's story was a casualty of these specific disciplinary affairs as well as of broader institutional shifts in humanities and social science. His story, though, was entirely oblivious to the ways in which literary studies, including Australian literary studies, also evolved in that era, in response to theoretical engagements and institutional responses to significant questions of nation, gender, colonialism, indigeneity and disciplinarity.

In the more than 15 years since that bipolar disruption, there have been other shifts in the university profile of Australian literature, including the major disruption of Robert Dixon's retirement, in 2019, from the Sydney University Chair of Australian Literature and that institution's decision not to fill the position, to disappear it.[1] Ramifications from this decision are still felt throughout the Aust Lit educational system, bound up with the general sense of the

fate of the humanities in tertiary education and the whittling away of majors in Australian literature and in literature more generally at all universities (see Rooney, "Memento Mori'; Lamond; Yager). A lamentable recent instance of this is the decision by the University of New South Wales Canberra at ADFA to discontinue its major in English and Media Studies by the end of 2026.[2]

What was unpredictable about this scenario was the intervention of government endowment and private philanthropy. There are now three nominal positions in Australian literature in the country, all of them the result of interventions in universities from the outside: the Chair in Australian Literature at UWA, founded in 2009 by federal government co-endowment, and currently held by Tony Hughes-d'Aeth; the Boisbouvier Chair in Australian literature, founded in 2015 by private donation, and currently held by Tony Birch (previously Richard Flanagan and Alexis Wright); and the John Rowe lectureship in Australian literature at Sydney University, founded in 2018, also by private donation, currently held by Meg Brayshaw. There is also the generous Roderick bequest, in 2023, that established the Roderick Centre for Australian Literature and Creative Writing at James Cook University and which supports positions in Australian literature at JCU as well as visiting fellows and literary prizes (Westwood n. p.). Both the Boisbouvier chair and the Roderick Centre endowments include creative practice in their understanding of Australian literary studies. The Kidman Chair in Australian Studies at the University of Adelaide, founded by endowment in 2018 is very broad in its disciplinary focus, but is currently held by Anne Pender, a literary studies scholar who is also Director of the J. M. Coetzee Centre for Creative Practice. All these endowments eventuated in the first two decades of the twenty-first century.

We might also include in this list the position of Director of AustLit held by Maggie Nolan, a position specifically dedicated to Australian literature and digital cultural heritage, although supported by the University of Queensland rather than endowment or donation. These individuals may be working with a narrowed curriculum of Australian literature and within restricted institutional contexts, but they are also doing new and different things: Tony Hughes-d'Aeth, in addition to his own research and teaching, is director of the Westerly Centre and Chair of the board of UWA Publishing, so is connected to creative and critical production in influential ways. Although it is not formally associated with the John Rowe lectureship, Meg Brayshaw is series editor of Sydney University Press's Studies in Australian Literature series. Tony Birch's Boisbouvier position has no formal link to Melbourne University Publishing, but he has published critical as well as creative work (poetry and novels) and is running a 3-year program with Preston High School about creative writing and Australian literature, as well as First Nations educational programs with other secondary schools, and a partnership with the Narrative Medicine program with the Medical School at Melbourne University. Roger Osborne and Victoria Kuttainen oversee the Roderick Centre's various fellowships and research in environment and region. Maggie Nolan's position as Director of the world-leading bio-bibliographical AustLit resource is part of a research environment that is creating collaborations, including international ones, in cultural heritage between universities, libraries, other literary databases and relevant educational contexts. Another significant research project in this environment is Katherine Bode's ARC funded "To be continued" project that has enormously expanded the content and understanding of early Australian fiction and its readership with its "identification of over 21,000 publications of novels, novellas and short stories in 19th- and early 20th-century Australian newspapers" (see Bode, "to be continued"; Bode, *World of Fiction*). This project has significant connections to another resource for use in Australian literary studies, the National Library of Australia's Trove database with its mass-digitisation of historical Australian newspapers. These projects have been influential in the disciplinary directions of Australian literary study, reformulating the theory and methods of

Australian literary history in their understanding of textuality, readership, community outreach, transnational circulation, and authorship.

The library network continues to make a significant contribution to Australian literary studies in its support of research and literary prize culture. Fellowships and scholarships offered by the Fryer Library (University of Queensland), the National Library of Australia, and the State Libraries of New South Wales, Victoria and Western Australia all provide resources to support explorations in and publication about their archival collections. The major literary prizes are all significantly supported by the public library system. The Fryer Library sponsors an annual lecture from an Australian writer and its journal, *Fryer Folios*, publishes research articles about Australian writers and literary researchers. It may not be widely recognised but the rare book community also contributes to the breadth of interest in Australian literary study, particularly book history, with its Rare Book Weeks and fairs, and its association, the Australian and New Zealand Association of Antiquarian Booksellers. In an analogous space, the Bibliographical Society of Australian and New Zealand supports a journal, *Script & Print*, that publishes bibliographical studies, a newsletter *Broadsheet*, and annual conferences where specialist and general work in bibliography, the history of the book, rare book studies, and developments within the GLAM sector are presented.

A casualty of the decades-long depredation of core literary studies at universities has been the disparity between the surviving study of Australian literature and the commercial publishing of Australian literary heritage. The publisher at Text, Michael Heyward, was vociferous in his lament about the study of Australian literary classics, in the midst of the fallout from the changes in Australian literary studies: "Those of us who choose and influence what people might read have done a lamentable job of curating the primary materials of our literary history. In 2011, in not a single course in the whole country were students asked to read Henry Handel Richardson's *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*. This is the equivalent of not one Russian university teaching *Anna Karenina*, of *Madame Bovary* not being offered to French students. It is a rampageous scandal, to borrow a coinage from HHR herself. If I tell you that Patrick White's *The Tree of Man* was prescribed on two courses last year, or *The Man Who Loved Children*, which MUP recently put back into print, on just one, you start to see the extent of the problem" (Heyward; see also Menzies-Pike). Text publishing's series of "Australian Classics," launched in 2012, now runs to 135 titles and is an outstandingly successful commercial publishing venture in Australian literature.

No doubt those "special" Australian literature academics have to contend, along with the briefs and roles that accompany their endowments, with the disrupted version of Australian literary study, with what Meg Brayshaw refers to as the "rationalization of the curriculum," the push to fewer courses/subjects and the reduction and restructuring of majors (n. p.). This is the specific effect of the crisis in the humanities felt at probably every institution in Australia and most acutely at the junior level, where postgraduate and early career academics have to mobilise around serious workplace, research and teaching challenges.[3] With regard to those younger scholars and writers in the Australian literature field, it's hard to know how much of an influence it has had on the philanthropic thinking behind Australian literary studies endowments, but those benefactions happen to coincide with a diaspora, prompted by shrinkage and under-funding of the field, of talented and qualified younger Australian literary intellectuals to Asia and the UK: Dan Disney to South Korea, Corey Wakeling to Japan, Amelia Dale and A. J. Carruthers to China, Jaya Savige to London.[4] But like other English and Australian literary studies academics, those endowed positions (two of them senior) in Australian literature are productive researchers, influential contributors to conferences, enablers of creative writing within higher degree work, broadly focused on non-professional reading communities outside the university (contributors to literary prize work and literary festivals), effective collaborators with libraries, and very actively involved in the secondary-

tertiary professional and teaching interface. They work within institutional contexts where there are complex and shifting equations of literary study and local knowledge. At the level of disciplinary formations, there are the effects of a dynamic expansion in Indigenous literary studies, and a steady demand for creative writing, particularly at the postgraduate level—both developments impacting the study of Australian literature in mostly positive and energetic ways, and on its genres of research and accreditation.[5] The individuals in those positions are also negotiating the shifts in Australian literary studies in response to a complex set of glocalised pressures on the tertiary curriculum, from governments, for example, about the qualifications of graduates—how useful are they in relation to the jobs market; how much do they complement government policies; how much are IT, digital, media, and profit-making technologies dominating the knowledge producing and transmitting functions of universities? In a more positive register, those positions in Australian literary study are responding in their different ways to the pressures pushing English literary studies into non-traditional modes like "world literatures in translation, . . . ecocriticism and environmentalism . . . digital humanities, medical humanities and the kinds of Creative Writing and self-expression students need in a globalized, digitised world" (Gagnier 8).

I have only anecdotal information about the success, and near success, of our disciplinary fields in ARC research grant funding—the FoRs of 470502, 360201, 450109; there are only occasional flurries of attention and data analysis in this area. I think this raises the issue of what we might be doing now to improve our research funding outcomes, which are suboptimal. We certainly need a collaborative, easily accessible database of successful grant outcomes in our fields—literary studies, creative writing, ATSI literary studies and writing—and this is something that the professional association ASAL might develop more coherently and consistently in collaboration with other relevant associations like the Australian Universities Heads of English. The AUHE, in this connection, have made lobbying the ARC on outcomes in literary studies as well as evaluating the research rankings for Australian literary studies journals part of their mission. Also, in our thinking about the research funding regimes in Australia, we might reflect on the fact that our fields have never had a Laureate fellowship, while the History, Linguistic, Anthropology and Indigenous Studies disciplines have had a number. We might think about how we could identify potential Laureate fellows and how they can be mentored and supported in research. It would be to everyone's advantage in such a project to collaborate across institutions.

But there is no doubt about the excellence and vibrancy of scholarly publishing in Australian literary studies. The publication of scholarly works on Australian literature by Australian publishers tends to be localised or occasional, the Sydney University's Sydney Studies in Australian Literature series have taken over leadership of this aspect of Australian literary studies from the University of Queensland Press, although UQP continues to publish important original literary work, like their First Nations Classics series. But UWA Publishing, Melbourne University Publishing, NewSouth Books and Allen & Unwin also publish literary and critical work. Notably, investments by major international academic publishers like Anthem Press, Virago, Bloomsbury, Palgrave Macmillan, Oxford University Press and Cambridge University Press in critical work on Australian literary culture demonstrate how unequivocal they are in their valuing of Australian literature. [6] An entirely personal reflection: a revived survey of the year's work in Australian literary studies, as in the ALS Annual Bibliography of Studies in Australian literature, including blog and other online critical forms (like Martin Duwell's *Australian Poetry Review*), would be a welcome resource, perhaps as a subset of the AustLit resource. There might also be more allowance for the radical and activist critical writing evident in some of our smaller magazines in the more mainstream journals of literary critical work, like this journal and *Australian Literary Studies* (see for example Varatharajan, "In Situ Poetics").

So the last 20 years has seen some seriously negative events, and on-going deficits, often as part of a larger story about developments in the humanities. But there are significantly positive directions too. The ways forward lie, I think, within the strengths and modes of the discipline Australian literary studies (including creative practice), that are locally and transnationally engaged and innovative, whatever the vagaries and depredations of the humanities in higher education, and the evident indifference of universities in supporting literary studies projects of significant interest and value to students, members of the public, the international community, and to scholars. Responses to the remarkable advent of philanthropic interventions in Australian literary studies at the tertiary level are perhaps a source of ambivalence in some quarters: does it represent an Americanisation of our higher education system, including a reinforcement of the hierarchies of universities (predominantly Go8)? Does it exacerbate the instrumentalist tendencies in higher education, the sense that literary studies will be taken care of by means other than core university curricular and funding commitments?[7] The evidence of the philanthropic interventions in the Australian literary studies field, though, is a sign of the strength and adaptability of humanities education in Australia and of the collaborative response from those outside the university who value Australian literature in education, as an essential expression of the public humanities, and who are willing to provide significant material support for their educational survival and development.

Situated knowledge 1

Australian literary study, at various levels, and in various formal settings, follows the predictable critical genres: historical survey (colonial, modernity, postmodernity etc), national thematics, author study and biography, genre, textuality, close reading, comparative, etc. But one of the most generative perspectives on Australian writing derives from questions of place, space and locale in relation to all those other critical modes of analysis. An influential paradigm of reading and teaching in this respect was that of world literature from the early 2000s, with its emphasis on Australian literature's international contexts and transnational critical practices (see Dixon, "Australian Literature"; Dixon and Rooney, *Scenes of Reading*; Mead, "Proust at Caloundra"). This had been preceded by work on Australia's multilingual literary traditions.[8] Some of the thoughts and ideas about the current state of Australian literary studies were inflected by such perspectives on situated knowledge and literary spatiality, including literary regionalism I discussed with students and colleagues at the Roderick Centre for Australian Literature and Creative Writing on the Cairns and Townsville campuses of James Cook University in July 2024. The view from a region, like North Queensland, follows the pre-existing sociocultural assumptions of regionality; at the same time it raises questions about the equal complexity of the "non-regional," the metropolitan and the outer-urban. How is the region's version of locale and situatedness, including its worldedness, different from the non-regional? Literary representation is a complex, recursive form of metageography, where place and space can be fascinatingly localised, even if the intrusive meanings of the national and the continental are never absent.

During these conversations I also had in mind the experience of the MOOC course, "Australian Literature: A Rough Guide" that I had designed and taught for the Coursera platform in 2015 (see "UWA Takes Australian Literature to the World"). That course was an opportunity for innovative pedagogy in Australian literary study, in its use of digital, visual and textual modalities for a global community. It was designed around the literature of specific places—the wild, Indian-Ocean-facing West, the Indigenous centre (the white dead heart), explorer country, the insular south, the pastoral New England tableland, expatriate outer-suburban Melbourne, the criminal country and city, the Pacific-rim East coast. The participants in that course signed up from all around the globe: from Canada, to Uzbekistan, to New

Zealand, to Germany, to Japan. What they were all interested in was Australia the place, a place where many of them, I assumed, would not be able to visit. The lessons about the literary texts were filmed in the various locales they related to: Cottesloe and Darlington, Hermannsberg, the Tasman Peninsula, the Moonbi Range, Sydney Harbour (Farm Cove), Palm Beach (Home and Away). The participants' interest was equally in the literary representation and my videographied locations. There was obviously a geographic and socio-cultural frame or arc over my lessons, that could be called "Australian," but I tried to articulate all my references to this in relation to the locales and literary texts I was presenting. Relatedly, the locales of Australian literary studies in non-Australian sites, often under the interdisciplinary rubric of Australian Studies, have a different institutional and subjective dynamic. In China, Japan, Korea and Europe, where most of this activity takes place, and to a lesser extent in North America, the emphasis is on the remote locational, on home and away and their topics and questions, although with the pervasiveness of online forums and communications in this space, where home and away are, is always in relational process.[9]

The conversations in Cairns and Townsville, though, ranged from the specifically locational to the theoretical and for all their individual inflections, discursive detours and irresolutions those conversations were shaped in response to an awareness of First Nations' ownership and understanding of Country and sea that is now, in numerous ways, a dynamic core of Australian literary studies. The local and situated, though, was always ghosted by the national context. Sometimes we were able to move into a comparative space, that included usefully other-nationally positioned theory and different national history and literary expression, like the work of Martha Schoolman, one of the authors in *Mapping Region in Early American Writing*. Schoolman writes of the recent intervention of a critical regionalism

> focused on reading regionalisms for what they spatially exclude and temporally repress [that] have proved enormously productive as contributions toward the "worlding" of regionalism, especially in their efforts to discern a relation between regionalism as a deliberately bounded tradition of intranational self-description and the resistant porosity of a transnational and multiethnic United States. (81)

Whatever the points of departure for our conversations, both intra- and transnational, they often circled back to the multi-faceted writing of Australian regions, like the island of Lutruwita Tasmania, the West Australian wheatbelt, the Wotjobaluk Nations' Wimmera, the tropical north and its oceanic and island extensions, as well as specific forests, wetlands, currents, archipelagoes, trails. The discussion was about the historical limits and cultural complexities of such regional literary emphasis, as often as it was about the attractions and value of literary knowledge about place.

Literary and critical regionalisms offer distinctive perspectives, then, for Australian literary studies, and from sometimes unpredictable (and potentially stimulating) angles. The blue geography of Randolph Stow's fiction, for example, ranges in an arc from the far north of Western Australia, in *To the Islands*, to Melanesia, in *Visitants*, in its linking of Australian place and national perspectives to colonial and racial histories. Stow's coastal thinking also includes the mythographic understanding of the West coast Batavia incident as a counter to the foundational, East coast narratives of white Australia in the voyages of James Cook (see Mentz). A reading of Nicholas Jose's novel *The Idealist* alongside Luis Cardoso's *The Crossing* suggests a transnational understanding of Australia and its historical and geographical ties to Timor-Leste. The literature of Tasmania provides many examples of a densely layered literature of insularity, from colonial times to the present (see Mead, *Literature of Tasmania*; McMahon). Such reading is also a reminder that literature is something that happens all around us, wherever we happen to be, all the time. And thinking about how to be critical about literary

regionalism, rather than merely descriptive, encompasses models, theories and histories of literature and place, including how ideas of place (and space) are formed and reformed by literary representation. It also leads to subjective and social understandings about the role of place in readings of literary texts, in different educational settings. There are always, also, Indigenous perspectives where regionalism is understood in radically different linguistic and existential ways. Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* and its stories of Aboriginal cosmography and contemporary life in the Gulf, and Bill Neidjie's narratives of the relations between inner states of being and the outer world of Country are just two examples of regional understandings that offer real challenges to the assumptions of non-Indigenous reading (see Wright, *Carpentaria*; Morrissey). Such Indigenous perspectives also invite comparison with the irredentist and oceanic studies of a critic like Alice te Punga Somerville (*Two Hundred and Fifty Ways*). But there are also important recent examples of critical literary regionalism in the Australian literary studies field, like Tony Hughes-d'Aeth's *Like Nothing on this Earth: A Literary History of the Wheatbelt* and "The Three Ontologies of Regional Poetry"; Barbara Holloway's "'Just Growing up in A Paddock': E. O. Schlunke and Modes of Relationship in Regional Literature"; Brigid Magner, Emily Potter, Jo Jones and Tony Hughes-d'Aeth's "Australian Regional Literary History: Rethinking Limits and Boundaries"; Vilashini Cooppan's "The Corpus of the Continent: Embodiments of Australia in World Literature"; and Alexis Wright's "Odyssey of the Horizon." These studies exemplify some of the constitutive differences of critical literary regionalism.

Situated Knowledge 2

As I became aware of the directions suggested by those conversations I was reminded how critical regionalism can provide one generative and supple optic for Australian literary studies generally. Regionalism is a word with a range of meanings that mostly relate to its partialness, its connotation of a whole that it is part of, its historico-critical relation to something larger. Its starting point is a question about the idea of the whole, which might be spatial or geographic. The whole, or the over-arching context, both geographical and abstract, is already explicit in my title, the indication of a national perspective inherent in the word "Australian." But it is a perspective on that whole from different regions, divisions, specific places, or locales. Such regional perspectives can also be, simultaneously, worlded, transnational or international. The perspective from the north, perhaps also the west, of the Global South, to deploy a related spatial vocabulary. The perspective on the whole, of what the region is part of, or belongs to, is complex and overlaid: the nation, the state, Australia, the country, the continent, the global South, the hemisphere, Oceania. For some time now, we have learned to be critical, or at least wary, of unexamined nationalist assumptions in literary and cultural reference—aware as we are of the unavoidably racist, identity, violent and ecocidal assumptions that persist in narratives of nation. These political deficits are evident for some writers even in the *name* of the nation—think of Ania Walwicz's prose poem "Australia," for example, or Evelyn Araluen's "Index Australis," both caustic critiques that simply have to use the word "Australia" or "Straya" to voice their oppositionality to the idea of nation. Nevertheless literatures remain fundamentally, fluctuatingly national, whatever the disavowals and critiques of their writers. However useful the perspective of regions and regionality might be, there is a world of reading and research beyond.

Up against literary texts like Walwicz's, Araluen's, and others, the word "nation" has been shaped into a powerful weapon, especially during and after the Voice to Parliament referendum. But despite such historical developments the language of nation is not uniformly negative. And in some ways the word "nation" may be an easier word than "Australia," or at least capable of different historicisation. The name Australia, for example, is always tied to the

specific place and its history, while the word nation is part of a discourse of nation and narration, in many different global contexts, that often recognises the "Janus-faced" ambivalence of all national history and meanings. In this context "nation" includes a reliance on myth but also the recognition of recesses in national cultures of "alternative constituencies of peoples and [how] oppositional analytic capacities may emerge—youth, the everyday, nostalgia, new ethnicities, new social movements, the 'politics of difference'" (Bhabha 3). While the term "nation" has northern-centric meanings that do not connect to Indigenous millennia-old legal and social organisations across a whole southern continent (and its islands), for the vast majority of its human history the Australian state has been a continent of first peoples' nations, in the Indigenous sense. When Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples use the word "nation" they are thinking in terms of Country, language group, mob, and communities, even if the English word nation remains a treacherous approximation. Non-Aboriginal settler Australia tends to think of "nation," to use the *Macquarie Dictionary* definition, as "an aggregation of persons who identify themseleves as forming a group, as by common descent, customs, history, and language, whether or not occupying and controlling their own territory."[10] "Territory" is the telling word here, a politico-spatial term imbued with settler Australia's obsession with borders and biopolitics, markedly evident in the exclusionary possessive pronoun as well.[11] This ambivalence about history and geography in relation to the word "nation" and its referents is an active aspect of Australia's present, including its literary present. Even though it defines settler Australia's idea of nation, the *Macquarie Dictionary*'s sense of the word occludes fundamental aspects of Australia as a nation today—its residual colonial ties, and its contested sovereignty. (That idea of "common descent" also certainly needs some revision.) Australia is not a republic in the tradition of modern independent nations, as the *Macquarie* definition seems to assume. We're well aware that as a constitutional monarchy, its head of state is in fact the King of England. And for an increasing number of Australians there is the sense that its constitution is outdated, prejudiced, or incomplete. It's more accurately thought of as a problematic first draft. The nation's settler sovereignty may be mainstream and dominant—enshrined in its foundational documents like the Constitution, in English monolingualism, and in cultural expressions of racial possessiveness like Dorothea Mackeller's "My Country"—but its legitimacy is certainly not unquestioned.[12] Some Aboriginal people even think of it as illegal. Regions, parts of the whole, are political in myriad ways.

The study of Australian literature had an understandably nationalist focus at its various outsets, including the colonial ones, and that's been both an asset and a liability. There was always a tension between the readerly valuing of the work of Australian writers and the assumptions of "nationalism," a network of allegiances and identity, which literary history often subscribed to. The same is true today, though in different and important ways. Apropos this discourse of nation, and how the recursive models of literary study are shaped by the linguistic force of literary texts themselves, I draw attention to Australia as a unique element in David Wallace's "National Epics" project, a contribution to what he calls an emergent *critical nationalism* that "acknowledges the nature and dynamics of nationalism, and the [literary] texts that serve or subvert it" (n. p.). Wallace's perspective is about the idea of the literary epic, specifically, but it has a wider generic applicability:

> Some national epics long predate the nations that come to claim them, exfoliating in multiple and regional forms of telling, with scant regard for later, "national" boundaries. Their adoption, editing, and regularization may marginalize other, contemporaneous narratives; their internal heterogeneity (linguistic, ethnic, and cultural) may be downplayed for strategic, homogenizing, nationalizing purposes. Precarity may be disguised. National epics are not discovered as such, but are

> rather adopted, groomed, and cultivated. Some national epics, losing caché . . . come to be supplanted; others, through critical re-readings, are repurposed in ways that outrun the intentions of their first adopters. Any given national epic, never static, is forever gaining or losing cultural and curricular relevance. (n. p.)

This is a persuasive understanding of how literature—in the form of national texts, epic or otherwise—functions historically and culturally. For white Australia, literature has no static, natural, or unchanging place in a national culture, whatever the contingencies of its absorption into, or marginalisation by, the discourses and temporality of the national, particularly national literary history. By analogy, Australian literature as it is called has a history of national definition, but no unchanging or unambivalent place in national culture, not even a geographical place. Part of the reason for that is that what constitutes Australian literature is also constantly changing. The Indigenous understanding of the nation's literature, for example, is radically different and has hardly been assimilated to its latter-day, non-Indigenous parallel. As Alexis Wright writes:

> The Traditional Owners who occupied the entire continent had one of the most highly developed and sophisticated ancient law and governance systems in the world that cared for the country in its entirety—as holy places, the whole country forming the biggest law cathedral on earth. This was a library land, its knowledge stored in and created from the country itself through epical stories from ancient times. An almost unimaginable massive archive, cared for by its people through their spiritual connections to various parts of the physical landscape. ("Odyssey" 114)

The evidence of such an understanding of literature in relation to spirituality, temporality and region (country), as a mode of situated knowledge, casts a shadow over non-Indigenous understandings of literary creativity and history that necessarily emphasise their radical differences. These differences are something contemporary literary and cultural criticism in Australia is wrestling with (see Langton, Corn, and Curkpatrick).

The study of the cultural calculus of national literatures is also shaped by the powerful framing model of humanistic thought in the idea of globalism. This "has become a default mechanism of academic discourse and literary history: e. g. global antiquity, global modernity, the global Middle Ages" (Wallace n. p.). Within the "macro-picture of global and world Englishes" there is ostensibly no constraint of literary study within national boundaries (Gagnier 4). And this global paradigm of literary study includes eco-criticism, blue criticism, and creative writers' perspectives. Alexis Wright has insisted, along with many other contemporary Australian writers, that globalism, a nation-occluding term, is the relevant one in relation to the climate crisis of the present, which is simultaneously global and local. Although they might prefer the word planetary, perhaps less academic, or global north in tone, than global. More than one of Wright's novels addresses the planetary and local realities of climate change directly, if not in realist modes. Likewise many Australian authors, particularly of fiction, represent the climate crisis in various generic and locational modes. John Kinsella's poetry and poetics, which also addresses ecological realities, is underpinned by what he has argued for as international regionalism, a privileging of belonging over ownership in international dialogue ("Polysituated(ness)"). These over-arching terms, along with the subset regionalism and its cognates, are all generative in complementary ways. In relation to our reading and understanding of literary texts they constitute a calculus of political and cultural change: of centre and periphery, globe and planet, metropolis and province, nation and region, home and exile, locality and homeland, bioregion and country, sovereignty and state,

community and locality, geography and topography. This calculus of literary spatiality is not essentially dichotomous in its make-up, although I've listed them here as binary elements; but they do have affinities and dynamic associations. They can also be driven by other social and cultural kinetics: sovereignty and homeland, periphery and bioregion, for example. There is nothing bounded about the spatiality of the literary imagination, nor about the reading of literary texts. It's worth recalling that there are many non-Australian forums for the critical reading of Australian literature, from *Antipodes: A Global Journal of Australian/New Zealand Literature*, to *English Studies*, to *Angelaki*, to the *International Journal of Critical Indigenous Studies*, to the *Journal of the European Australian Studies Association*.

These perspectives on Australian literary studies—the economics of the discipline, critical regionalism, the difference of Indigenous literary knowledge, digital heritage, critical nationalism, global and planetary—are all rich in disciplinary history, cultural value and heuristic potential, and at the moment they shape many influential readings, re-readings and understandings of literary texts, literary production and literary culture. They are also informed by multiple relations to the literary communities and fields of knowledge intersecting with the disciplinary domain. They are historically and politically contingent paradigms of recent personal experience, and are processual, institutional, spatial, geographical, and theoretical. But they are not the whole discipline. This article does not pretend to be an objective or even comprehensive overview of the current state of Australian literary studies. There are always surprising and unforeseen energies in the teaching and research of literary studies. It's hard to tell where innovative and transformative reading and critical thinking will spring from, where the practice of literary criticism will shift to. No doubt there will continue to be institutional challenges, but for those who care about Australian literature it will always offer engagements with the multifarious language of lived and imagined experience.

I would like thank Ann Vickery for her comments on an earlier version of this article.

NOTES

[1] Dixon's chair of Australian literature, established in 1962, was originally the initiative of a public subscription, plus subsidy from the University of Sydney (see Dale; Lever; Ng). Nevertheless Sydney University maintains a Chair in Australian History. What's the difference?
[2] UNSW ADFA (and previously Duntroon) has a significant Australianist legacy, including a professor of English appointed in 1913, important and productive scholars of Australian literature from the 1960s to the present and an extensive, important archive of Australian literary papers.
[3] See for example the journal of the *Limina* collective: https://www.uwa.edu.au/limina/journal-information
[4] See Louis Klee for an important argument about how the phenomenon of travelling and emigrant Australian writers is "far more complex . . . than our existing critical vocabularies suggest" (254).
[5] Whatever the design and setting of individual research and writing projects, the institutional and disciplinary context here is not necessarily an easy one: the relations of Indigenous studies and creative writing to literary studies is subject to pressures from government about vocational training for teachers, the decolonising disciplinary objectives of Indigenous studies, and the historical tensions and divisions between literary studies and creative writing at a number of institutions.
[6] See Vickery, ed., *Cambridge Companion to Australian Poetry*; Carter, ed., *Cambridge History of the Australian Novel*; Oxford UP (Paul Giles's monographs on Australian literary culture); Anthem Press (monographs by Jason Ensor, Andrew McCann, Anna Dimitriou, Katie Hansord, and edited volumes by Geoff Rodoreda and Eva Bischoff; Nicole Moore and Christina Spittal; and Ian Henderson and Anouk Lang); Sydney Studies in Australian Literature. See also, for example, *Antipodes: A Global Journal of Australian/New Zealand Literature*; Wakeling, "Martin Johnston"; Disney and Hall, eds., *New Directions in Contemporary Australian Poetry*.

[7] There are many other "philanthropic" interventions in non-Australian literary studies humanities fields, like the Hansen Trust positions in History at the University of Melbourne, and the Paul Eliadis Chair of Classics and Ancient History at the University of Queensland. The Paul Ramsay Foundation's support of the Ramsay Centre for Western Civilization was controversial: see for example, Redden, "Controversy Over Western Civilization Funding in Australia"; Davies, "Ramsay Foundation May Cut Ties with the Centre for Western Civilization.".
[8] See Christopher Hogarth and Natalie Edwards, eds., *Journal of Multilingualism* Special Issue: Australia's Multilingual Literary Landscape 2 (2024).
[9] See the *Journal of Australian Studies*, which "pursues disciplinary diversity, publishing articles from across the full spectrum of humanities fields that critically engage with all aspects of Australia" (https://www.tandfonline.com/journals/rjau20/about-this-journal). Literary studies articles in this journal include, for example, Lamond, Morgan, and Burton, "Hansard as Literary Reception: The Uses of Poetry in Australian Political Debate, 1901–1950." (20 Oct 2024).
[10] *Macquarie Dictionary*, sense 2 of "nation."
[11] In his arguments for Aboriginal sovereignty, Henry Reynolds draws attention to the centrality of the word "territory" in Emerich de Vattel's classical European juristic *The Law of Nations* of 1758: "The territory which a Nation inhabits, whether the Nation moved into it as a body, or *whether the families scattered over the territory came together* to form a civil society, forms a national settlement, to which the Nation has a private and exclusive right" (*Aboriginal Sovereignty* xviii).
[12] The final draft of the Constitution was approved by a vote of the people in referenda held in each colony between June 1899 and July 1900. An Australian delegation travelled to London to present the Constitution, which was part of the Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Bill, to the British Parliament. It was passed by the British Parliament as part of the Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act 1900 and approved by Queen Victoria on 9 July 1900 when she signed the Royal Commission of Assent.

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