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The Decline of Regionalism in Australian Literature and Culture

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AS AN AMERICAN LIVING IN AUSTRALIA, AUSTRALIANS are constantly trying to place my accent. If they are polite, they usually ask, "Where in Canada are you from?" Then, if I am feeling equally polite, I respond, "No, I'm from the States, but I grew up not far from the Canadian border. I'm told I have a bit of a Canadian accent." I have only ever been told this by Australians, who wouldn't know a Canadian *eh?* from a New Yorker's *ay, whatchoo lookin at?* But I see no harm in a little white lie that makes everyone feel good about themselves. I feel better, given the current political climate and widespread feelings of anti-Americanism, identifying myself with Canada. The curious Australian equally feels like he (they are usually male) is finally catching on to the differences between various North American accents.

In time, our curious Australian will become a confident Australian. He will claim, as I have heard so many of his fellow countrymen claim, to be able to distinguish between a Canadian and an American accent, as well as identify someone based only on their accent as from either New York, the South, or the West Coast. Interestingly, I have heard these particular regions named many times by confident Australians in my highly unscientific survey of friends, friends-of-friends, and the occasional overly friendly "guy standing next to me at the pub." It would seem these are the accents (supposedly) most familiar to Australians.

Yet, in spite of their often parodic representation in movies and television shows, regional dialects in North America are frequently so understated as to be indistinguishable to the casual listener. Sure, there is the tobacco farmer from South Carolina who will be interviewed on the ten o'clock news when a locust plague strikes the region, and he will exhibit all the speech characteristics commonly associated with someone of his position; but his neighbor is just as likely to have an accent which could be mistaken for that of a Vermont tax accountant. There will be differences, but they will be subtle and often confined to the space of a few vowel sounds or a handful of words hinting at a localized vocabulary—something most Americans, much less Australians, would never pick up.

With this in mind, I say to our still curious Australian, "You remember the Coen brothers' film *Fargo*? Well, that's where I'm from. Not Fargo, but Minnesota, where most of

the movie was set." It is now his turn to respond, "Oh, wow! Yeah, I remember that movie. They had such great accents in that movie. Can you do that? Can you do that accent?" Or, worse, he claims that he could tell I was from Minnesota; he picked my accent. Considering I have lived in Australia for nearly two years, and for five years previous to this I was living in New York, I hope you will forgive me for thinking this is unlikely. I do not tell our Australian as much. Instead, I smile obligingly and give him my best, "Ya, sure. Ya betcha. You're darn tootin!"

I relate this anecdote as a way of introducing a couple of main themes of this essay. Firstly, the perception Australians have of North America, and the United States in particular (if only because it claims a greater share of media attention), as a geographically and culturally diverse entity. I am not referring to diversity in the sense of multiculturalism, though, of course, Australians recognize the United States as a multicultural nation. Especially in its larger cities, such as New York City and Los Angeles, it is thought to possess examples of every imaginable type of diversity: racial, religious, ethnic, cultural, linguistic, etc. But then, Australia regards itself as a multicultural nation, even if such events as the election of Pauline Hanson and the One Nation party to the House of Representatives and, more recently, the Cronulla riots in December 2005, have raised questions about the extent to which a sense of a multicultural Australian identity has permeated the Australian population. Rather than address this most controversial brand of diversity, I am interested in a different type: regional diversity. In other words, a diversity within the geography of the nation. This type of diversity necessarily extends beyond the superficial reaches of regional dialect to encompass all the various permutations of a regional identity.

The second reason I relate this particular anecdote is to acknowledge the significant influence of the modern media, and particularly those forms of creative media such as movies and television (but also literature and the visual arts), in shaping our perceptions of other countries and their populations, as well as of ourselves. Because Australians have seen representations of regional diversity within the United States, it has become a valid mode for discussing the geography of the nation and the character of its inhabitants.

No one would expect an Australian to be able to name all 50 states—strangely enough, many of the Australians I have spoken to about this matter are convinced that the United States is comprised of 51 states—and yet it is *de rigueur* for Australians to speak knowledgeably about the East and West Coasts of the United States, as well as the South.

You will have (hopefully) noticed by now, that in my discussion of regions in the United States, I have neglected to mention certain regions that occupy at least as large a geographical area as those mentioned more often. Perhaps the most notable of these neglected regions—at least as far as this Minnesotan is concerned—is the American Midwest. This oversight should come as little surprise, however, since the specific topic of discussion up to this point has been the perception Australians have of the United States as comprised of any number of geographically and culturally diverse regions. As I mentioned earlier, this perception is derived from representations of these regions and their associated regional characteristics in the movies, television and books. Thus, it is no accident that many Australians are unfamiliar with the term “Midwest” and the geographical area it represents; it is infrequently represented in the cultural record, much less in those aspects of the cultural record that are transmitted overseas. As Frank Moorhouse once noted,

In the United States during the twenties and thirties the Mid-West and the West Coast and the South fought against the cultural domination of New York. I'm not in the position to estimate what happened, although I think we can assume that the Mid-West, at least, did not survive as a regional identity in literature. (65)

This excerpt demonstrates both the Australian awareness of regional diversity in the United States (though Moorhouse's knowledge of this matter could hardly be said to be representative), and the lack of a “regional identity” in the Midwest as a result of insufficient creative representation. The latter statement is as true now as it was when Moorhouse made it in the 1970s, though it is perhaps now more important than ever to note that this neglect extends beyond the realm of the literary.

How many books, movies and television shows can you think of that are set in the American Midwest, or whose creators can claim residency in the Midwest? Now, how many can you think of from the East Coast, or even just New York City? If this was a poll and the answers to these two questions were compared, no one would be surprised to discover that the balance swings in favor of the latter alternative to a degree that is disproportionate in both population size and land area. If this same poll regarding the perception of relative creative output in the American Midwest versus the East Coast was conducted in Australia, I suspect the answers would reveal an even greater disparity between the two regions.

Why might this be? Because regions are at least in part defined by their ability to participate in what Pierre Bourdieu has deemed the “field of cultural production.” In an article published in the 2005 edition of *Westerly*, “Tim Winton,

Cloudstreet and the Field of Australian Literature,” Robert Dixon describes Bourdieu's theory:

When Bourdieu talks about a field of cultural production, he means to identify the entire set of institutions, personnel, practices and dispositions that work in combination to shape its possibilities and outcomes. In the case of print culture, these include the publishing houses that produce and distribute books; the bodies that award literary prizes; the government departments that give grants and frame cultural policy; the shops that sell books; the reading groups in which books are variously discussed; the mass media that report on books and writers, including newspapers, radio and television; and the schools and universities, which set courses, select some books and writers above others, and publish literary criticism in scholarly journals. (245)

Each element of this “set of institutions, personnel, practices and dispositions” can be individually regarded as an “instrument” (my term, not Bourdieu's) of cultural production. The aforementioned instruments are among those that work together to shape the life of a book, from its production to reception. As a sociologist of culture, Bourdieu uses case studies from the visual arts as well as literature. Yet, from here on, we will be concentrating almost exclusively on literature and literary production.

Access to institutions such as publishing houses and literary magazines is tantamount to access to the public imagination. By engaging with contemporary literary theory, including Roland Barthes's ideas about “the death of the author” and reader-response criticism, it is possible to assert that the public imagination is of great importance in any study of literature. Such assertions become significant when discussing literature from the American Midwest, for example, since the Midwest does not control many of the instruments of cultural production; therefore, its access to the public imagination is inhibited.

To briefly illustrate what I mean about “control of the instruments of cultural production,” I will refer to an Australian example. As recently as 2004—the most recent year for which figures are available on this subject—94% of all books sold in Australia that were published by Australian publishers came from publishing houses based in New South Wales or Victoria (Australian Bureau of Statistics 6). Furthermore, “40% of Literature Board grants go to writers resident in New South Wales,” fully 10% more than New South Wales represents as a proportion of the Australian population (Taylor 12–13). To argue that such factors do not have an influence on the development of a literary culture in, for example, Western Australia and Queensland,

is to display ignorance of the conditions of production of Western culture through history, of the financial factors involved in the production of both popular and “non-popular” literature today, and of the production and market factors operating within the Australian publishing industry. (Taylor 4)

Also, such an argument would represent a retreat to the Romantic idea of the writer as a “lonely individual struggling for self-expression,” which has long ago been discredited as a blinkered view of the processes involved in the production of a literary work (Bennett, *Cross Currents* ix).

The sorts of inequities I have described with regard to control of the instruments of cultural production contribute to a sense of regional identity. This “sense of regional identity” is enhanced by a variety of other factors, including those as various as “physical geography, regional administration and functional land-use” (Bennett, “Concepts” 79). Also, sport plays a significant role in the establishment and reinforcement of regional identity in Australia. In fact, it is one of the most significant contributors to the predominance of the state-as-region formulation in Australia. While geographical regions within states, such as Gippsland in Victoria and the Wheatbelt in Western Australia, have some relevance for the residents of those regions, their existence is not reinforced by the multitude of factors supporting state identification. As Dennis Haskell and Hilary Fraser note in the introduction to *Wordhord: A Critical Selection of Contemporary Western Australian Poetry*, “It may be argued that ‘Western Australia’ is an artificial, politically determined concept, which has nothing to do with literature. However, such boundaries, once formulated, become a part of people’s lives” (13). States boundaries in Australia may have been politically determined, but their relevance in the debate about regionalism in Australia is supported as much by state-based sports teams (and the relative popularity of Australian Rules Football and rugby in different states) as it is by state governments.

The contributions of creative artists to this formulation of regional identity should also not be underestimated. Unfortunately, these contributions have been largely overlooked. When viewed from the United States, Australia appears to be a giant culturally and aesthetically homogenous landmass. After all, common knowledge would have it that Australia is both a continent and a country—the world’s smallest continent and seventh-largest country, to be more precise. This seemingly innocuous fact hints at a degree of uniformity, which is belied by my experiences of traveling Australia from Sydney to Perth. While, as discussed above, most Australians recognize the existence of regional diversity within the United States, the same cannot be said of Americans with regard to regional diversity in Australia. In fact, even within Australia, while writers in particular continue to express an interest in a regional conception of Australia, this interest is largely ignored in the dominant literary-critical conversation.

However, even in recent history this was not always the case. In order to understand the devaluation of regionalism in modern Australia, it is first necessary to relate in as brief a manner as possible the story of a time when regional interests in Australia had a much higher profile.

The conversation about regionalism in Australia, and especially with regard to Australian literature, did not begin

to take shape until the late 1970s. Certainly, regionalism in Australia could be alleged to have been a topic of interest even earlier, as state-based literature anthologies were published throughout the twentieth century; though, perhaps surprisingly, none were published in the nineteenth century. However, the conversation beginning in the late 1970s showcased an increasingly sophisticated understanding of the historical and contemporary influences at work in any conception or reception of regional literature, which the earlier anthologies lacked, especially as they did not engage in any form of intertextual debate.

It was not until October 1978 that the elements necessary to spark a substantial critical debate on the subject of regionalism in Australian literature finally began to coalesce. This landmark event occurred at a seminar organized by Fremantle Arts Centre Press, a publishing house that had been founded only two years earlier in the port city of Fremantle, Western Australia. The three-day gathering of Australian writers and interested locals was organized to explore the theme of “Time, Place and People: Regionalism in Contemporary Australian Literature.” The speeches delivered at this seminar by such luminaries as Frank Moorhouse, Thomas Shapcott, Elizabeth Jolley, Peter Cowan and T. A. G. Hungerford, were later reprinted in an edition of *Westerly* magazine, which gave them greater circulation and cultural currency. The published versions of these speeches are as close to foundational works as can be found on the subject of regional literature in Australia; they provided the basis for much future discussion, as well as formally introduced the terms and ideas against which many future critics reacted.

But even then, the conversation did not really gain momentum until the early 1980s, when Bruce Bennett began actively promulgating regionalism as a critical framework for understanding Australian literature. Bennett was the most prolific advocate of

a study of regions from the ground up: commencing with particular places, the biographical connections of writers with these places and their literary references to, or recreations of these places, together with a study of their intellectual and cultural milieux. (“Concepts” 81)

It was around this time that significant numbers of state-based or regional literature anthologies first began to be published. On this subject, Bennett writes in his chapter on “Literary Culture since Vietnam: A New Dynamic” in *The Oxford Literary History of Australia*:

Regional anthologies have been more numerous in contemporary Australia than any other kind. Frequently published in the state or region which provides their focus, these anthologies have often been designed to raise awareness of the landscapes, people and ways of living of the region. Western Australia has been the leading contributor to a regional literary consciousness, but all states and territories, and a number of sub-regions have been represented, especially those from outside

the “golden triangle” of Sydney–Melbourne–Canberra. (258)

Regional anthologies do not receive any attention in earlier chapters of *The Oxford Literary History of Australia*, as regionalism and regional literature do not become an Australian preoccupation until the late 1970s and into the 1980s. However, during these two decades, twelve regional literature anthologies were published in Western Australia, for example, whereas only two had been published in the previous 150 years of white settlement. Since the 1980s, six anthologies of Western Australian literature have been published; however, these books were titled and designed to appear generically Australian or organized around themes such as “childhood.” The decision to market them as something other than a regional anthology clearly marks a new phase in the debates surrounding regionalism and regional literature in Australia.

By the early 1990s, the conversation about regionalism in Australia had largely died out—perhaps because those who had campaigned so actively for its notice felt that, in the few years it had enjoyed a spotlight of Australian literary criticism, it had managed to accomplish its goals. Only the smallest of whimpers was heard on the subject in the decade of grunge rock and grunge literature, and there has been veritable silence in this regard with the dawning of the twenty-first century. Without even the dignity of an obituary, the matter of regionalism in Australian literature has disappeared from the literary and critical landscape.

But what were the reasons for its disappearance? Why did the critical attention paid to the theme of regionalism in Australian literature in the 1970s and 80s, flag so suddenly with the arrival of the 1990s? And, perhaps most importantly, why has Australia not been able to sustain a recognizable culture of regionalism, similar to that found in the United States? The answers to these questions can be found in the changing dynamics of the “field of cultural production” in Australia beginning in the 1970s and going through the late 1980s.

In particular, changes in government policy with regard to literature and the arts played a significant role in shaping a critical interest in the subject of regionalism and regional literature in Australia. David Headon discusses this theory in the introduction to a regional anthology, *North of the Ten Commandments: A collection of Northern Territory literature*:

The Literature Board of the Australia Council, since its inception during the Whitlam Labor Government years (1972–1975), has played a major role in the encouragement of cultural diversification. One important by-product has been the . . . interest in “regional” literature. (xix)

The most notable change that accompanied the shift from the Commonwealth Literary Fund (CLF) to the Literature Board in 1973 was the sudden influx of funds. “The CLF in its last financial year had a budget of \$250,000. The Literature Board began with a budget increase to just over one million

dollars” (Shapcott, *Literature Board* 8). By 1986, a mere thirteen years later, this amount had more than doubled to \$2,882,783 (Shapcott, *Literature Board* 8). In addition to the obvious shot in the arm this source of new money gave more generally to Australian writers and writing, it came with an expectation that it would be distributed equitably among the citizens of this vast nation.

New avenues for publication were opened with the help of Literature Board funding, including several specifically devoted to the promotion of regional interests. For example, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, a publishing house exclusively dedicated to the publication of works by Western Australian writers, was established with Literature Board funding and published its first book in 1976. Furthermore,

within Australia, important new dimensions have been added in the 1980s by the emergence of regionally based literary magazines such as *Island Magazine* (from Tasmania) and *Northern Perspective* (from Darwin), thus complementing a pattern of regional variation proposed by *Westerly* since 1956. (Bennett, *Australian Compass* 216)

Clearly, as Laurie Hergenhan once observed, “magazines can be made or marred by the times” (85).

Even more money poured into the regional literature coffers at the time of the Australian bicentennial. In Western Australia, for example, four state-based literature anthologies were published in the year of the bicentennial, 1988, and the following year. All of these anthologies received Literature Board funding; two of them received additional funds from the Australian Bicentennial Authority.

The years leading up to and including 1988 (and perhaps also 1989), marked a high point of nationalistic fervor, but also of interest in regionalism and, in particular, regional literature in Australia. However, this interest could not sustain itself. Perhaps it had been overindulged in the lead-up to the bicentennial celebrations; more likely, it found that with the bicentennial finally behind it, the typically antagonistic relationship regionalism had enjoyed with nationalism (e.g. regionalism was commonly regarded as “the advocacy and advancement of the interests, functions, and competence of parts of a nation-state as against those same aspects of the whole state” [Preston 3]) was suddenly seen as irrelevant.

Internationalism or universalism (like “parochialism” and “provincialism,” these terms are used almost interchangeably by critics of regionalism in Australia) replaced nationalism as the most significant challenge to regionalism in the 1990s, just as regionalism began to fade from the popular critical imagination. Of course, internationalism was not a self-generating literary culture, but rather was abetted by changes in the “field of cultural production.” Allaine Cerwonka details one of the most significant changes that occurred during this period:

Although Australia’s economic relationship with Britain gave way to increased trading arrangements

with the United States and Asian countries through the 1970s and 1980s, it was during Keating's leadership [1991–1996] that significant political rhetoric was directed toward “recognizing” Australia's geography as part of Asia. . . . He promoted the idea of Australia as a multicultural nation located in Asia by funding cultural and economic links between Australia and Asia, promulgating liberal immigration policies, and nurturing a better relationship with Indonesia. . . . Since the racial content and civilization of Australian identity were defined in part by its imagined distance from Asia, the need and desire to allow more immigration from Asia and to increase economic ties has functioned to deterritorialize the settler Australian nation. Imagining Australia as part of Asia was not merely a change in economics or immigration policy; it led Australians to reconceptualize ideas like race and civilization central to Australian identity. (16)

The effects of “recognizing” Australia's geography as part of Asia” are clearly far-reaching. In particular, the “funding [of] cultural and economic links between Australia and Asia” contributed significantly to the rise of interest in internationalism amongst Australian literary critics. Nonetheless, a single event such as this could not be said to be solely responsible for “unsettling the territorialization of the Australian nation-state” (Cerwonka 8).

Indeed, Cerwonka goes on to detail three issues that have contributed to this occasion: “Aboriginal land rights, Australia's redefined relationship with Asia, and multiculturalism” (8). He claims that each issue “challenges the imagined connection between people, place, and culture upon which the settler nation-state has been premised” (8). As a result (either directly or indirectly) of the challenges presented by these events and the corresponding actions taken by governments and individual organizations, Australian literary critics in the 1990s began to look outwards from the nation and, thus, necessarily also from the region. They embraced different ideologies such as post-colonialism, which almost by definition draws attention away from the specifics of the nation and the region, and towards certain “universalizing” themes. Clearly, the aforementioned conventionally “political” events can also be understood as instruments of cultural production, which abetted in the rise of internationalism as the most influential and penetrating criticism of regionalism as a popular 1980s critical framework.

Writing in the late 1990s, Bruce Bennett summarizes the change that occurred:

The shift in one generation from local to global has been astounding. In the culture of literary criticism and theory, this shift has been signified by a move from an interest in physical “place” or “setting” to notions of a “site”, where ideologies clash and compete. (Bennett, *Home* 241)

The interest in “physical ‘place’ or ‘setting’” that Bennett

refers to is, of course, the interest in regionalism, while the interest in a “site” is more typical of internationalism or universalism.

In the 1990s, literary and cultural critics in Australia began taking internationalism and universalism seriously as critical categories. Having already supposedly shed the burden of the “cultural cringe” during the 1960s, or perhaps with the inception of the Whitlam government in 1972, Australia was now endeavoring to rid itself of the “cultural strut.” The bicentennial celebrations of 1988 were regarded by many as the last hurrah of an overly nationalistic posture born of insecurity and self-doubt. In order to rectify the imbalance, these individuals began making all sorts of unfavorable comparisons between Australia and the rest of the world: it was not as internally diverse as other countries and, in particular, the United States; it had been mired for too long in a nationalist tradition, especially with regard to its literary and cultural critics; it should look to Southeast Asia for a new sense of itself and its place in the world; and so on.

Clearly, the Australian literary-critical community has largely overlooked the role played by regionalism in the movement of critical interest from nationalism to internationalism. However, it should now be clear that nationalism merged with or fragmented into (depending on your perspective) regionalism in the 1980s, before coming out the other side in the 1990s as internationalism or universalism. In other words, regionalism was a liminal state in the evolution of Australian literature from a national to an international literature—or, at least, in the critical appraisal of Australian literature by Australian critics.

But what exactly is the transition that is alleged to have occurred? What is the substance of this change, beyond the introduction (or popularization, as the case may be) of a new term for use by the literary-critical elite? Arguably, it is that regionalism (and nationalism, to a lesser extent) was primarily a cultural articulation of place, identity and belonging; this changed with the advent of internationalism, which is a political and economic (rather than cultural) formation.

While regionalism has political and economic components, it is subject to a variety of factors that could not possibly be contained within such narrow categories. Regionalism is a cultural phenomenon that can be best understood as comprising “a sense of ‘identification’ or ‘consciousness of kind’ which the inhabitants of a particular regional area feel for that region and/or for their fellow inhabitants of that region” (Matthews 17–18). It also necessarily includes the full range of factors contributing to this “sense of ‘identification’,” such as sports teams and local landmarks. All together, these pieces form a cultural articulation of place, identity and belonging. This means that even the creative facets (there are many other facets) of regionalism, regional literature, and “the region” cannot be defined only by the writers and artists resident in that region. Rather, they demand input from all the region's residents, as they are all consumers of art (especially if we widen the definition of “art” to include

the totality of all cultural forms), even though some may “consume” art in less typical ways—not by purchasing a book or literary magazine, for example, but rather by reading a book review in the newspaper or overhearing a conversation in a café about a local author. Even by choosing *not* to read a book by a local author.

Internationalist critics, however, make little or no allowance for collective cultural identification or “consciousness of kind.” For them, nations and regions (both in the sense of within a nation and as a collection of nations) become merely a convenient way of packaging a people and a place that share a political and/or economic function. Political and economic regionalism make sense in the internationalist model, because they result in a distinctive output in state and local terms (e.g. Western Australia produces uranium, while Tasmania produces wood products); there is none of the relativity associated with cultural studies and a “sense of ‘identification’.” Economic regionalism in the South Pacific is also seen to be alive and well, since proximity means the potential for increased trade revenue for Australia, a country that is accustomed to finding itself at great distances from its trading partners.

However, it is notable that the Australian Federal Government seems to think this initiative is not enough on its own, and so (as noted above) has undertaken to supplement it with a form of artistic or cultural regionalism. It has done this largely through its arts funding and advisory body, the Australia Council, which funds artist- and writer-in-residence programs in Southeast Asia, joint art exhibits of Southeast Asian and Australian art, anthologies of Southeast Asian writing, etc. In the 1980s and especially around the time of the Australian bicentennial, it was common for the Australia Council to fund state-based literature anthologies, but this is no longer the case.

This new version of regionalism, masquerading as internationalism or universalism, is sometimes presented as a positive development; the “old” regionalism, critics say, was little more than an excuse to promote the majority culture’s interests (i.e. the white, Anglo-Celtic, male perspective). However, there are many critics who would contest the claim that 1980s Australian regionalism obstructed or denied the voices of minority and marginalized community members. If regional writing is not viewed as a monolithic entity, whereby specific traits are said to embody the regional, then it can be said that regionalism encourages diversity, rather than limits it. To briefly illustrate this point, we need only note that arguably the most visible, in literary terms, Indigenous group in Australia are the Noongars of southwest Western Australia, who boast such talents as Kim Scott, Jack Davis, and Alf Taylor. It is no accident that the three writers I mentioned have published their works, which have gone on to national (and, in some cases, international) acclaim, with Western Australian publishers—Fremantle Arts Centre Press and the Broome-based publisher of Indigenous literature, Magabala Books. Diversity would seem to be alive and well in Western Australian and, by inference, regional writing.

By identifying this sort of ethnic or cultural diversity as occurring specifically within the bounds of Western Australia, it points to a diversity within the geography of the nation. In other words, Western Australia has fostered this particular expression in the form of Indigenous literature, which is something no other state or region has done so successfully. The knowledge of this achievement then becomes part of the “consciousness of kind” felt by residents of Western Australia. So we have previously shown that nationalism is not the ruling construct of Australia (how could it be when there exists a Liberal Federal Government amidst an undivided sea of Labor State Governments?), and that internationalism is not an entirely desirable replacement, but now we have hinted at the existence of regional diversity in contemporary Australia.

Admittedly, there is not the equivalent of the dialectical diversity found in the United States—though I have already argued that I believe this diversity to be exaggerated, or at least the importance of it in determining regional identity. Still, some Australians allege that they can pick a South Australian accent—they are said to sound more “pommy” than their interstate counterparts, a consequence of not having convict heritage—and a book has been published, titled, *Words from the West: A Glossary of Western Australian Terms*. However, both are widely (and convincingly) discredited. Even where a grain of truth might be shown to exist in these claims, its significance is doubtlessly small.

Instead, meaningful diversity exists in Australia, just as it does in the United States, in the minds of its residents—in their feelings of identification with the specific state or region in which they reside. Also, in their identification with fellow residents of that state or region—a particularly significant factor when it comes to the support of regional literature and regional arts, writers and artists. Feelings of nationalism will always surge in the lead-up to a national sporting event, such as the Australian cricket team playing England in the Ashes series, or the Socceroos in the World Cup. Furthermore, news stories such as those relating to the ongoing refugee crisis in Australia and the deployment of Australian troops in East Timor, will necessarily emphasize the role of the nation over that of any other constituency. But the region is an everyday and lived reality, whereas images of the nation are often only received through secondary means, such as the news media.

Nonetheless, the example of Australia in East Timor says a lot about the new image of Australia that is being broadcast to the world. The Keating-era policies mentioned earlier, including those related to “Aboriginal land rights, Australia’s redefined relationship with Asia, and multiculturalism,” have continued to grow under the Howard administration and further impact upon “the imagined connection between people, place, and culture.” However, they have been supplemented by increasing international concerns. In an effort to identify itself as a key player in international politics, Australia has had to make certain concessions, some of which have resulted in a popular perception of Australia as the obedient charge of the United States. Australian literary

critics have made similar concessions, conceding in the 1990s a vision of regional diversity and national self-importance for a secondary role on a much larger stage.

Perhaps it could even be said that the allegations that Australia is overly nationalistic have never been more wrong than they are today. A truly nationalistic country is secure in its place in the world, and yet Australia's overconfidence belies insecurity. Australia and Australians are notoriously obsessed with their own artists and achievements, and there have been accusations of plentiful navel-gazing. They are also quick to claim even the successes of New Zealanders as their own. Americans, on the other hand, seem to believe that everything good comes from the United States; while this is an obviously narcissistic point of view, it is also quite clearly not an insecure one. Rather than understanding itself as a nation, present-day Australia seems to view itself as a region in the international sphere. Consequently, Australia can be seen attempting to protect its own interests in a fashion similar to that of more conventional regions (e.g. Western Australia, the American Midwest), which feel they must protect what is uniquely theirs from the looming threat of cultural monopolization by the centers of cultural production. Since the notion of geographical or regional diversity within the nation would challenge the idea of Australia-the-nation-as-a-region, the former concept must be quelled.

Australia will only begin to perceive itself as various when it creates (and can sustain) enough media to support this formulation, and also to deflect the attempts at cultural monopolization made by overseas cultural centers. Literature is a good place to start the pursuit of this goal, since Australians read more books per capita than most other nations. The production and publication of literature in regional areas, in particular, is a significant piece of a much larger puzzle concerning the way in which Australia is represented and received in the arts and culture sectors. After all, regional diversity is a large part of the reason the United States is seen as such a vibrant country. Admittedly, there are certain geographical limitations to Australia achieving a comparable diversity—in particular, the lack of rivers equal to the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers that open up the interior to settlement. But geography is only one instrument of cultural production, and we have seen evidence of many more. Until Australia resumes consciously fostering its regional diversity—or recognizes its already existing achievements in regional diversity—it will always be viewed (from both within and without) as secondary and inferior, as homogenous. □

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