Section 1

Transpacific: National Literatures and Transnationalism
ANTIPODAL PROPINQUIITIES?
ENVIRONMENTAL (MIS)PERCEPTIONS IN AMERICAN AND AUSTRALIAN LITERARY HISTORY

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Since the mid-1800s, American literati have evinced recurring pulsations of interest in Australian writing and in Australia generally, even if Australia culture has rarely been for them a primary concern. Herman Melville’s second novel, *Omoo*, makes an Australian doctor his footloose autobiographical hero’s closest companion. Marcus Clarke’s *For the Term of His Natural Life* was reprinted by the leading American publisher almost immediately after its appearance in book form. Mark Twain, the first American literary celebrity to visit Australia, at the turn of the twentieth century, praised Clarke and others of his generation for having brought into being ‘a brilliant and vigorous literature’ that ‘must endure’—and understandably so, since Rolf Boldrewood’s *Robbery Under Arms* (1882) had recently accomplished something like Twain himself by infusing national fiction with the twang of vernacular speech.

Elsewhere in this same book, *Following the Equator*, Twain makes much of what he takes to be the affinities between Australian and American character. The Australians he met, he declares, ‘did not seem to me to differ noticeably from Americans, either in dress, carriage, ways, pronunciations, inflections, or general appearance.’ Both, unlike

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the English, like to socialise ‘without stiffness or restraint’. All this would have been music to Yankee ears as well as to Australian, since the United States at this time was still suffering from almost as heavy a dose of postcolonial cultural legitimation anxiety, although—to adapt A.A. Phillips’ famous distinction—it expressed itself more often as ‘strut’ than ‘cringe’. Even Bernard O’Dowd did not approach the decibel level of Walt Whitman’s rhetoric at its most jingoistic.

Twain was referring to white Australia, of course. He claimed that he’d never even seen an Aborigine. Scrolling forward a century to the contemporary dispensation of ‘multi-cultural’-mindedness, however, the *prima facie* cross-national analogies continue to look strong, however differently framed. Anne-Marie Willis’ diagnosis of Australia as one of ‘those European colonies of settlement that developed an unfulfilled attachment to the lands they settled, an inadequate peace with the peoples they displaced, and an incomplete break with the cultures that gave rise to them’ largely holds for the cultural history of the United States as well, even if not wholly.

Willis’ first proviso speaks to the origin of my own interest in Australian literature in the 1980s, when as background for a book on the literary history during the long nineteenth century of America’s New England region—the country’s far northeast—I spent a great deal of time researching what Franco Moretti might call ‘the atlas of the provincial imaginary’ in the US, the UK, and the Anglophone world at large. I was struck by the ubiquity of texts (especially fiction) from the mid to late nineteenth century onward about lives led in isolated locales remote from metropolitan centres imagined as culturally quaint and thin to the point of grotesquerie—caught in premodern time-warps.

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2 Twain, pp. 495–96.
Two early examples from Australia and the US that lodged in my mind as especially provocative counterparts were Miles Franklin’s autobiographical novel *My Brilliant Career* and a short tale by the contemporaneous American Mary Wilkins Freeman, ‘A New England Nun’—not that these two works are much alike stylistically. Franklin’s narrative rhetoric is mercurial and tempestuous, like her narrator-protagonist Sybilla, whereas Freeman’s is tightly modulated and understated, like her titular heroine, the fastidiously reclusive Louisa Ellis. Both texts share, though, with variations I needn’t belabour, the motif of extruding the ultimately rejected suitor to the opposite antipodes—a plot device that by limiting its reference to that event to the most laconic of allusions further underscores the remoteness of both protagonists and their home contexts. The imagined patches of American and Australian ground are each made to seem like the ends of the earth, and even more so in each other’s eyes: the American text’s image of Australia, and vice-versa. Each in the imagination of the other might as well be Mars. America is little more than a vast space for Harry Beacham to rush around in after Sybilla rejects him; Australia is the place where Freeman’s faithful Joe Daggett must toil for fourteen years to make his fortune—we never learn how—during which time Louisa basically forgets him. This terseness becomes, in turn, a marker of the limited mental horizons of the figures—and communities—in the foreground.

The trope of socio-environmental enclosure that drives this kind of provincial imaginary—the image of sometimes secure though always somewhat culturally impoverished personal and community isolation at or beyond the verge of modern society—continues to run strong in both literary histories down to this day, as suggested by the striking family resemblances between, say, Thea Astley’s *Drylands*, co-winner of the 2000 Miles Franklin Award, and the winner of the 2008 Pulitzer Prize for fiction, Elizabeth Strout’s *Olive Kitteridge*, both of which take the form of a series of interlinked tales in which the most prominent figure is a prickly, sarcastic, self-focused, yet also vulnerable and not unkindly aging woman: a thinking person simmering in a small town outback, perpetually disaffected by its small-mindedness and general barbarity.
The persistence of this formation in both literatures seems explicable at least in part as, first, an after-effect of Euro-settler diaspora conditioning its subjects to conceive themselves as denizens of a frontier or periphery rather than as a centre of anything. Beyond this, and I suspect relatedly, it seems to follow from a subsequent, partially shared socio-geographical evolution of the cultural imaginary such that the dramatic history of techno-economic transformation from hardscrabble beginnings to advanced metropolitan society gets conceived not as a cosmopolitan triumph—or not merely that—but as another kind of de-realisation. To state this more plainly, both the United States and—to a still greater extent—Australia have developed as countries where the great majority of people live in urban enclaves near some coast with vast sparsely populated hinterlands into which relatively few of those metropolitan denizens venture for very long. Yet in both cases, Australia perhaps especially, that hinterland, whether we call it ‘the bush’ or (as Americans do) ‘the heartland’, has persistently maintained an iconic status as definer of the national.

Indeed for this Yankee critic, the landscapes refracted in Australian literary texts often seem to present themselves as a kind of limit case in this respect—that is, as an iconic formation basically familiar to me but extended to unfamiliar limits. Consider for example the sardonically bifurcated schema of A.D. Hope’s much-quoted poem ‘Australia’, of ‘cities, like five teeming sores’ contrasted with ‘desert’ so ‘savage and scarlet as no green hills dare’. Hope could hardly have picked a more backhanded way of affirming the hinterland as the place from whence future prophets might come. Aversion both to hinterland and to metropolis are familiar themes in US literary and intellectual history as well; but one looks in vain in our canonical literature to find anything approximating this pitch of toxic intensity, except for some of H.L. Mencken’s satirical asides or Thoreau’s wry dismissal of the victims

of the Puritan work ethic run to excess: ‘From the desperate city you go into the desperate country, and have to console yourself with the bravery of minks and muskrats.’

So far I’ve been discussing Euro-settler imagination exclusively, of course, for that’s where the print culture history in each case effectively starts; but obviously that’s not where it remains.

At first, the figures in the foreground, in canonical Australian writing particularly, appear racially quite homogeneous, meaning in most cases also white, with exceptions, like Barbara Baynton’s ‘Billy Skywonkie’ and the fiction of Xavier Herbert. Quantitatively the same still holds for both literatures, *Olive Kitteridge* being a good example on the American side. But for the cultural avant-gardes if not the average citizenry of both countries whiteness has long since ceased to stand unproblematically as the ‘unmarked’ ethnicity any more than ‘he’ can be deployed unselfconsciously as the default pronoun for humankind at large. Much of the strong recent Australian fiction seems to have paralleled—whether or not intentionally—the multi-ethnic turn in modern and contemporary white American writing by using that old trope of the enclosed remote enclave of white settlers in ways that evoke the repressed history of violent aboriginal displacement to undermine its retrogressive solidarity—as in Thea Astley’s *Drylands*, David Malouf’s *Remembering Babylon*, and Andrew McGahan’s *The White Earth*.

No less striking than the performance in these texts of the fragmentation from within, of the image of the closed community’s tranquil or stagnant or asphyxiating self-containment is their co-ordinate strategy of reconceiving their chosen locale as networked within wider and increasingly multiplex loops, ultimately not just national but planetary, so as to create a kind of double vision whereby the remote place in the foreground oscillates between seeming the end of the earth and a nodal point at which world-historical force fields converge. In recent Australian literature, perhaps the *ne plus ultra* is Alexis Wright’s *Carpentaria*, which parodistically plays upon the image of the woebegone northwest Queensland town of Desperance as one of those intractably provincial outposts that from the standpoint of...

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of the metropoli to the south scarcely exists, but reconceives it transformatively, first as the ancestral home ground of Aborigines like the Phantom family, threatened with displacement by the white encroachers; then as an the site of ‘the biggest mine of its type in the world’\(^9\) with repercussions that extend worldwide to the transnational conglomerate’s headquarters in the ultimate metropolis of New York. After evangelist-incendiary Mozzie Fishman and his impetuous protégé Will Fishman blow up the mine, the locale metamorphoses yet again into a mythic prototype of anagogic proportions as the town gets swept away—amidst glimmerings of hope that a new generation might build better—by a gigantic cyclone and flood that is seen literally as the work of the region’s notoriously volatile and extreme weather patterns but infused with a larger-than-life sense of the wrath of autochthonic deific forces and (or am I imagining things?) a hint of anthropogenic climate change.

*Carpentaria*’s grandly extravagant transformation of the benighted remote community into the centre of the universe seems all the more notable to an Americanist grazing through the realm of Australian letters for its cousinship to such contemporary stateside classics as Leslie Silko’s *Ceremony*, a cornerstone work of the so-called Native American Renaissance. In that novel, what at first seems an isolated case study of a traumatised, dysfunctional war veteran returning to a homeland nearly as remote and immiserated as the Aboriginal shantytowns on the periphery of Desperance is likewise made to blossom into a drama of epochal import and global scope—partly with the aid of an offbeat Native shaman reminiscent of the weird cross-cultural charisma of Alexis Wright’s Fishman, with his ‘Clint Eastwood face’\(^10\) and his zest for popular American music, and partly by the historical contingency of the particular tribal lands in Silko’s novel having once been the epicentre for another key extractive industry: uranium ore, for the atomic bombs dropped on Japan.

Even if the affinities in the deployment or inversion of the remote outpost trope in these two novels aren’t a matter of influence, neither


\(^{10}\) Wright, p. 136.
are they happenstance. Among other significances they bespeak an increasingly confident and sophisticated grasp of the creative opportunities for writers aware of being positioned at what was traditionally thought to be the sociogeographical margins to become the leading figures in what one Americanist critic has called the new ‘global literary pluralism’ by reconceiving the histories of place-based minoritised cultures in planetary and world-historical terms. Key to this process for both Silko and for Wright is an insurgent reinvention of aboriginalism. Such revisionist practice is by no means limited only to the US and Australia, either. Within Anglophone literature alone one could just as easily look to New Zealand (e.g. Keri Hulme), Western Samoa (e.g. Albert Wendt), India (Amitav Ghosh’s The Hungry Tide)—indeed, all the way back to the first postcolonial Anglophone text to achieve classic status, Nigerian novelist China Achebe’s Things Fall Apart (1958). Imagined indigeneity, however, surely need not be a requisite for all literary projects undertaking to renegotiate ‘margin’ as ‘centre’. As Wright herself states in her essay on how Carpentaria came to be, although

the characters are Indigenous people in this novel, they might easily have been any scattered people from any part of the world who share a relationship with their spiritual ancestors and heritage, or for that matter, any Australian—old or new.12

Thinking similarly about the ultimate horizon of possibilities for place-centric fictions of an ecocultural memory built upon a sense of dispersal or displacement, one wonders if it might prove to be the case that writers across the board from a country like Australia where the dominant cultural group remains conscious of the effort required of settler culture to free itself from the long-embedded practice of thinking of ‘home’ as elsewhere might be especially well positioned to take the lead in this way of re-imagining the global stakes of the local.

To that hopeful-sounding prognosis it might be replied that Australian literary culture has to deal with a second elephant in the room: the spectre of the US as the new imperium, which *Carpentaria* also acknowledges by locating the mining company’s headquarters in New York. Although *that* book conjures up corporate America only to humiliate it, obviously American cultural capital is not so easily exorcised, nor such capital’s attendant literary networking and publishing infrastructures. The eviscerating effect of such dependence is showcased in Peter Carey’s hilarious but also rather mordant and hangdog tale ‘American Dreams’, a rueful allegory of Australians having to perform for American audiences, if they wish to get a hearing at all, by fashioning quaintly retro simulacra of bygone small-town life. In order to attract tourists from the America of their fantasies, the characters in the story contort themselves into nonstop reenactors of themselves in conformity with the eccentric Mr Gleason’s amazing miniature model of the daily life of the community, which an enterprising local purchases from his widow and ‘charges five American dollars admission’ to behold.\(^\text{13}\) Yet a special kind of originality might also be claimed for such self-referentialness: as more likely occur to an Australian writer than an American, where the propensity for reinventing paradigmatic bygone small towns in slightly satiric but basically straight-faced ways seems unstoppable, even to the point of generating actual planned community projects like the Disney Corporation’s Celebration, Florida. Even when Americans import iconic Anglo-European place-forms wholesale, we seem to do so shamelessly—creating imitation German villages in Wisconsin; neo-Elizabethan Globe theatres in Stratford Connecticut, and elsewhere; and reassembling the original London Bridge stone by stone as the centrepiece for an imitation English theme park in Arizona.

Yet these pilferings also attest to a certain ongoing anxiety on the American side apropos the sufficiency of its own national iconography. Jean Baudrillard’s cartoon reduction of the national landscape in his 1986 *America* to two paradigmatic place-forms—metropolis and desert—can’t be dismissed simply as Gallic magisterial hauteur

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masquerading as high theory. It has its counterpart in a longstanding tendency among the American intelligentsia. A prime instance, which will be the springboard for the rest of these reflections is the dramatic shift since the turn of the twentieth century in the cultural imaginary of America’s vast trans-Appalachian central plains—meaning much of the drainage basin of the Mississippi-Missouri river systems from Ohio and Indiana to the east, westward to the Rocky Mountains from western Colorado north to Montana. Roughly speaking, the story of the evolving national imaginary concerning the non-urban portion of this territory—which includes much of the national farmbelt as well as much of its arid land ranching country as you move farther west—is a story of drastic image-recoding as the twentieth century unfolds from virgin land of infinite promise not only as breadbasket but also as cultural and population centre to the image of cultural and potentially also ecological wasteland. So, for example, when the New England poet William Cullen Bryant—the so-called American Wordsworth, writing a little before his Australian counterpart Charles Harpur—beholds a prairie for the first time he conjures up a split image of ‘unshorn fields, boundless and beautiful’ and a future wave of well-behaved, energetic agriculturalists who ‘soon shall fill’ and cultivate ‘these deserts’, as he calls them.\footnote{W.C. Bryant, ‘The Prairies’, in Poems (Philadelphia: Carey and Hart, 1845), pp. 218, 221.} A half-century later, Walt Whitman celebrated ‘The Prairie States’ in his poem of that title as:

A newer garden of creation, no primal solitude,
Dense, joyous, modern, populous millions, cities and farms,
With iron interlaced, composite, tied, many in one,
By all the world contributed—freedom’s and law’s and thrift’s society,
The crown and teeming paradise, so far, of time’s accumulations,
But since the 1900s, this image—which lay behind Chicago’s aspirations at the time to become the nation’s first metropolis—has been completely dethroned. Especially since Sinclair Lewis’ 1920 novel *Main Street*, which satirically portrays his eastern heroine’s misadventures trying to negotiate the small world of Gopher Prairie, Minnesota, the mid-continent plains region from Ohio westward to the Rocky Mountains has become stereotypically imaged as insipid, lonely, and retrograde. During my two decades of teaching American studies at Harvard, which is located on the North Atlantic seaboard and attracts an overwhelmingly bicoastal clientele, I’ve repeatedly contended against an entrenched skepticism of any meaningful cultural life in the vast expanse of territory that lies between the Appalachian Mountains of the east and the Sierra Nevadas of California, with the possible exception of a few urban pockets such as Chicago, Minneapolis and Denver. I exaggerate slightly of course, but not much. These prejudices have been seconded by generations of flat-country self-deprecations, by its literati: such as North Dakota-born William Gass’ story ‘In the Heart of the Heart of the Country’ (1968), which begins with a wry inversion of Yeats’ ‘Sailing to Byzantium’: ‘So I have sailed the seas and come … to B … a small town fastened to a field in Indiana’.

Or Wright Morris’ novel *Ceremony at Lone Tree* (1959), whose Nebraska landscape looks like this: ‘To the east … a lone tree, a water tank, sheets of rain and heat lightning: to the west a strip of torn screen blurs the view … As a rule, there is nothing to see, and if there is, one doubts it.’

The reasons for this image shift are multiple. One contributory factor has no doubt been land abuse and deterioration through overfarming and overgrazing, which of course applies to Australia too. As early as America’s so-called Dust Bowl years of the 1930s, dramatised in John Steinbeck’s novel *The Grapes of Wrath*, Australian biologist Francis Ratcliffe was prophetically warning that even the best-balanced Australian pastureland couldn’t withstand ‘the strain … placed on it’.

by pastoral settlement’\textsuperscript{18} But a related and doubtless more significant long-run cause of the cultural recoding of the American plains is the demographic shift ensuing from transition from predominantly agricultural to industrial economy between the late nineteenth century and the mid-twentieth—of which authorial outmigration has been one tiny sliver. Industrialisation also contributed to the hyperconcentration of the Australian population in a handful of urban metropoli, although the extreme aridity of Australia’s ‘dead heart’ ensured a much less serious hearing and shorter shelf life for the fantasy of an interior populated by numerous white settlers.\textsuperscript{19} In the United States, where hinterland ecological conditions are less harsh, the transition from industrial to information economy combined with new-found oil and other mineral wealth has arrested and even reversed the outmigration effect in certain districts, but with little net benefit thus far for the central arid plains and still less for the ‘plains imaginary’. Today a huge north-to-south oval district from the Canada line down through the western Dakotas and eastern Montana almost to Texas has become so depopulated as to have fallen below the two-person-per-square-mile density level required for the American frontier to be declared closed in 1890, leading to calls by one group of American environmentalists that a tract nearly half the size of New South Wales be set aside for nature preserve as the ‘Buffalo Commons’.\textsuperscript{20}

Little is likely to come of a plan so grandiose. It warrants mention simply as one instance of counter-cultural transvaluation of the American plains imaginary after the golden age of agriculture—or what was supposed to be such. The midwestern creative writers mentioned before actually participate in this to some extent, reacting as it were against the image of a vacant, featureless landscape where nothing


much happens that they themselves have helped perpetuate. They seek to convert that nothing into dreamscapes of various kinds—as with the opening scene of Morris’ novel, which pictures an old man peering through a smudged window from inside the Lone Tree Hotel at the plains landscape beyond, but mainly beholding ‘the scenic props of his own mind’, such that ‘the emptiness of the plain’ becomes a ‘metaphysical landscape’ of austere but surprising plenitude. This kind of move calls to mind the two contemporary authors from our two respective countries who seem to me to have done the most fascinatingly intricate work of plains re-imagination: the American environmental writer who publishes under the name of William Least Heat Moon (a.k.a. William Trogdon) and the Australian metafictionist Gerald Murnane.

Least Heat Moon’s massive *PrairyErth* (1991) is the most ambitious literary effort of the past quarter century to take American rural Great Plains eco-culture seriously. It’s a 600-page literary ethnography and natural history of a single, depopulated hardscrabble district in the state of Kansas: Chase County, which lies at the geographical centre of what we Yankees call the lower forty-eight states. For Murnane, the key books are of course *The Plains* and *Inland*, the former more widely read but the latter the one I especially wish to seize upon here, both as the more complex albeit less concentrated achievement and as recurringly invoking the same topography and almost the very same locales that Morris and Least Moon evoke, as *Inland*’s split-personality narrator imagines himself in correspondence or rivalry with various American counterparts, at one point even projecting himself vicariously into that setting.

As the foregoing mini-description of *PrairyErth* implies, its stylistic register differs sharply from *Inland*’s. It is encyclopaedic rather than minimalist; it leans toward neo-realist documentary rather than Calvinoesque fabulism; it’s packed with anecdotes of encounters with earthy local characters granted far more autonomy than the spectral figures in Murnane’s monodramas; and the narrative voice has a hearty, populist-vernacular twang quite unlike Murnane’s fastidiously

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intellectualised voice. Taken together, the two books tend if anything to exaggerate the (considerable) difference in the degree to which settlement of the two continental hinterlands was and remains dominated by an oligarchy of land barons. But all these discrepancies only add piquance to the complementarity.

An Australian literature specialist might at this point wish to delve into the paradoxes of Murnane being at once ‘perhaps the most fully manifest example of a persuasive Australian Internationalism in fiction’22 yet so tenaciously lococentric as to refuse almost all forms of travel; and, secondly, as idiosyncratic to the point of solipsism yet also exemplary in ‘the extent to which he embeds his quest for self-discovery in images that convey a rich sense of meaning associated with being “Australian”—“associated with landscape, exploration, space, emptiness, home.’23 As an Americanist of ecocritical bent, though, what I shall pursue instead is the transnational eco-logic behind Inland’s palimpsest of converging plains narratives from around the world: most especially Hungary, the United States, and above all Australia.

Perhaps the book’s recurring preoccupation with American landscapes, place names and, tangentially, literature might up to a point be diagnosed as a variant case of Peter Carey’s Australians dreaming American dreams. But two related considerations suggest otherwise. First, the crucial landprint animating Inland’s sweeping vision of grasslands as the dominant terrestrial ecology is clearly the storied tract of Australian territory stretching northward from Victoria through western New South Wales and Queensland.24 Inland’s primary, more autobiographical narrator makes a virtue of his self-positioning at the southern metropolitanised verge in the process of encroaching on this iconic territory, and thus peripheral both spatially and historically.

which befits his project of fashioning a phantasmal version of that inland sharply different from, say, the native daughter approach of Jill Ker Conway’s memoir *The Road from Coorain*, a no less haunting evocation of interior grasslands landscape in its own much more literal vein. Murnane’s deployment of his narrator’s marginal position via a strategy of discursive metafiction allows him at once to de-realise through the filter of suburban fantasy and to reinstate through the magnifying lens of balked desire this particularly iconic subset of native hinterland, such that in *Inland* physical territory montages into dream, yet dream opens up into grand fantasy of an all-encompassing planetary grassland.

A second and related consideration that argues against imagining Murnane as particularly daunted by American or anybody else’s cultural capital is his extraordinarily idiosyncratic reading of American literature and film. Devouring western movies as a prepubescent, what fixated him—so he recalls—was the ‘seemingly empty land’ in the background ‘all but overlooked by the makers of American films’. Later on, Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* hit him, so he writes, ‘like a blow to the head that wipes out all memory of the recent past’; but the way Murnane actually read this book, or so he claims, was not for the fast-paced plot, not for the soft-porn Beat Generation bohemianism, but for the landscapes—and not the featured urban settings, either, but the wide open spaces the characters rush through glancing at occasionally, so that in his imagination Murnane placed Kerouac ‘not in New York City or San Francisco but somewhere between the Mississippi and the watershed of the Rocky Mountains’. This is a truly bizarre reading of *On the Road*. Even I, who also often raise collegial eyebrows by my insistence on looking disproportionately at setting relative to everything else in a literary text, can barely force myself to read Kerouac that way. But the point that deserves stressing here isn’t the perversity of Murnane’s reading but its congruence with *Inland*’s main narrator’s vision of America as ‘so vast and so richly patterned with streams and towns and prairies that I will never have time for sea’.26 This seems to

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express not envy but delight at having found (as also on the plains of Hungary and the disparate fictional landscapes of Hardy and Emily Brontë, and with the same obsessiveness as when reading Kerouac) that *Inland* conflates the landscape into ‘one huge grassland’—an ur-landscape glimpsed beneath and past the human, re-engineered, actual landscape near home.

This comparative grasslands consciousness starts to make *Inland* look a bit like a latter-day counterpart to Mark Twain’s *Following the Equator*—not for any assertion of national character parallels, which seemingly interest Murnane not at all, but for the perception of kindred landform. This landform possesses dual ontology as both phenomenological space—‘prairie-grasslands [as the space] where you and I dream of coming into our own’—and as ecological space that, when you begin to gaze at it, has a way of evanescing to the vanishing point. This is apparent in *Inland*’s lingering near the start and then at the very end on graveyards as remnant sites of once-virgin but now much-diminished prairie: first, the Hungarian narrator musing about his suppositious expatriate editor in a South Dakota graveyard looking for native species; then, in the final scene, the Australian narrator visiting the spot where he himself plans to be buried. But the phenomenological prairie of infinite promise and the vestigial factual prairie reduced by urban sprawl to a few plants in a graveyard also hint at cultural affinity, insofar as they gesture both toward the history of frontier era grasslands as a site of infinite desire and to the ecological upshot of that desire, that is to say violent large-scale land transformation or land abuse. Unexpectedly relevant here is what the primary narrator claims to be ‘the chief pleasure of my life’: ‘to see two places I had thought far apart lying … in one place.’

One way he indulges this pleasure is through toponymic puns, relishing for example that ‘the name of a city north of Melbourne County might also be the name of … the county seat of Rock County, Nebraska’—which is true to geographical fact although the text doesn’t state the

27 Murnane, p. 119.
28 Murnane, p. 64.
29 Murnane, p. 123.
actual placename: Basset.\footnote{Murnane, p. 85.} Whether purposefully or not, such motions of the mind conjure up the prehistory of antipodal settler cultures consanguinely familiarising hitherto nameless landscapes by christening them with the same repertoire of placenames—and forcing their presence on the landscape in more exploitative ways in the process. A related settler fantasy that *Inland* evokes and incipiently subjects to metacritique is the stereotypical masculinist metaphorisation of land as female body anatomised by ecofeminist critics of American frontier discourse such as Annette Kolodny and Louise Westling—although *Inland’s* reminiscences of prepubescent sexual urges often seem more self-indulgent than ironic.

Turning now to *PrairyErth*, we find a much more emphatically outdoor book than *Inland* (or for that matter *The Plains*). Whereas Murnane’s dreamers prefer to behold landscape from indoor sanctuaries, Least Heat Moon is a travel writer who has his persona saunter seriatim through the ten townships of Chase County, Kansas, site of ‘the last remaining grand expanse of tallgrass prairie in America’\footnote{W. Least Heat Moon, *PrairyErth: A Deep Map* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1991), p. 12.}. Landscape takes on more topographical and also historical specificity than Murnane gives even to the near-home Melbourne neighbourhoods of *Inland*.

Yet in *PrairyErth* as well, landscapes have a way of continually dissolving into dream spaces proffered as counter-intuitively charismatic in the face of the orthodox aesthetic preference, as both writers see it, for seascape as opposed to dry flatlands. Rather like *Inland’s* narrators immured in their respective studies and surrounded by books about grasslands, *PrairyErth* starts each major section with a plethora of *Moby-Dick*-like extracts from what the persona calls the ‘Commonplace Book’, which immediately define landscape as an artifact of competing constructs. This point gets further reinforced throughout by hyperconsciousness of the landscape arrangements of today as the upshot of Thomas Jefferson’s late-eighteenth-century survey of the trans-Appalachian US into an immense grid of rectilinear
land parcels—a quintessential act of Enlightenment hubris that created the checkerboard pattern of settlement everyone notices flying over the continental United States on a clear day. Chase County is microcosmic of this enormous macro-region, including its profoundly ambiguous ecological and civilisational effects—to which the book pays a combination of homage and parody by making the narrator’s journey studiously follow the ‘grain of the grid.’

As a result, even though *PrairyErth* saturates the reader with lococentric landscape detail in a way quite unlike *Inland*, it too becomes a *mise-en-abîme*. Near the end, the persona achieves a flickering consummation in the form of momentary escape from settler-culture rectilinearity and linear historical time when he discovers a few traces of the aboriginal primordium. He meets up with the district’s remnant Indian population and finds the old Native trail that cuts across the grid. For the first and only time he experiences a sense of liberation from it. But he’s also forced to realise that his book has been driven much more by a mental ‘gestalt’ than by the *is*-ness of the place itself, and that ‘Ninety-nine-point nine to the ninth decimal of what has ever happened here isn’t in the book’. This elusiveness he ascribes not only to his project but also to the region inherently. ‘The prairie’, he declares, ‘is not a topography that shows its all but rather a vastly exposed place of concealment.’ So *PrairyErth* too becomes a book that simultaneously mystifies and de-realisates the space it evokes.

Least Heat Moon’s encyclopaedic documentary panorama offers a far more strenuous and complex engagement with environmental memory at the sociohistorical level than does Murnane, who leaves it almost wholly to the reader to posit the link between his solipsistic narrators’ overcharged plains fixations and the lure of the plains for settler imagination. But *PrairyErth’s* accomplishment also comes at cost of hyper-concentration on the intra-national story of grasslands vicissitudes to the exclusion of *Inland*’s more cosmopolitan rendering of grasslands ecology and also grasslands topophilia.

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33  Least Heat Moon, p. 615.
34  Least Heat Moon, p. 28.
Tim Flannery’s compelling environmental history of Australasia *The Future Eaters* will help us begin to put these contrasts in a broader comparative frame. Like many other contemporary environmental historians and critics, Flannery rightly insists on historically nuanced ecological literacy as crucial to the fashioning of a viable sense of national identity for the future’s sake. By this criterion, Least Heat Moon rates far above Murnane. But no less crucial to Flannery’s argument is his insistence that eco-cultural imaginaries transcend national borders—as in this comment on the striking durability in Australian imagination of the mythic figure of the stockman.

Give [the stockman] a moustache and maté … and you have an Argentinian gaucho. Give him fringed leggings and a six shooter and you have a North American cowboy. It is no coincidence that stockman, cowboy, and gaucho all come from newly settled continents. For just as the Australian grasslands were cleared of their diprotodons by the first invaders, the prairie and the pampas lost their native [animals] when the first Indians arrived … Thus, the grasslands of all three continents presented a bounty that had not been reaped for millennia. The stockman/gaucho/cowboy arose to take advantage of a particular, short-lived ecological niche which resulted from this situation.35

Murnane’s forte is precisely the gift of envisaging this landscape of desire as a landscape at once national and planetary in scope, and furthermore with the power to maintain its hold as obsession that lingers on beyond the dispensation of the stockman into the dispensation of suburbia.

Perhaps fortuitously, these contrasts between our two grassland geniuses tally with the fact that the conference that served as launching pad for this symposium on ‘Reading Across the Pacific’ back and forth between Australia and the United States should have been held in Sydney rather than New York. For it is certain that American writers and American American-ists are both much more likely to be

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oblivious to their Australian counterparts than vice-versa—with rare exceptions like environmental historian Thomas Dunlap on the subject of comparative parkland policy in the Anglophone world or ecocritic Tom Lynch, who studies the phenomenon of ‘xerophilia’, or attraction to dryland cultures, in both the US and Australia. As long as the relative political and cultural capital remains as it now is, this asymmetry will likely persist; but to the extent it does, the American literati and professoriat will likely be the losers, not only because of missing out on exceptional talents like Gerald Murnane, Alexis Wright, David Malouf, Thea Astley, and many others but also on the advantage of the aesthetic, psychosocial, and ecological revelations that come from seeing one’s homeground even—or at times indeed especially—in so tantalisingly oblique and encrypted a way as *Inland* does through the lens of the antipodal other.

But it is misleading to imply that the discrepant strategies of plains imagination in *Inland* and *PrairyErth* are finally understood as symptomatic of their respective national-cultural imaginaries. Quite apart from and extending beyond that, they suggestively anticipate turn-of-the-twenty-first-century debates as to the desirability and viability in a globalising era of place-attachment, whether on the local or the planetary scale. The valorisation of small-scale bioregional place-attachment by ‘first-wave’ 1990s ecocriticism is under challenge from advocates of an ‘eco-cosmopolitanism’ that, as Ursula Heise puts it in the most forceful statement of this position to date, would ‘attempt to envision individuals and groups as part of planetary “imagined communities” of both human and nonhuman kinds’.36 On the face of it, *PrairyErth* might seem to be trying to model that traditional model of intensely local place-attachment, as against *Inland*’s much more abstruse and free-ranging reconnaissance of grasslands across continents. Yet the very opposite could be argued with even greater cogency. *Inland*’s primary narrator, for all his mental globe-trotting, remains far more doggedly attached to the Melbourne locale the text foregrounds than *PrairyErth*’s chronicler of Chase County—neither his birthplace nor his

residence. In declaring primary and overriding ecological allegiance to grasslands neither text fits either within an old-style frame of traditional place attachment or an eco-cosmopolitan frame. On the contrary, what gives them special claim to extended examination here as representative acts of contemporary environmental imagination (despite their pronounced idiosyncrasies and their likely unfamiliarity to many who peruse this essay) is their sinuousness and inventiveness. They elegantly explore, without premature foreclosure, a number of questions about the meaning and ethics of place-attachment, of inhabitance, of environmental consciousness and belonging that are of the greatest import to those for whom neither the stolidity of lococentrism nor the abstraction of planetary citizenship will suffice.