Introduction

Reading Across the Pacific is the first book-length study of literary and cultural engagement between the United States and Australia from a contemporary interdisciplinary perspective. Previous studies have been specialised, un- or under-theorised, and spoke to a narrowly bilateral context. Reading Across the Pacific, by contrast, is fully enmeshed in contemporary methodological debates: it does not just link the United States and Australia in a one-to-one dialogue but brings in the ambient circumstances of the Pacific Rim and Oceania. Importantly, it participates in a clearly identified ‘transnational turn’ in the study of both American and Australian literatures to which it is designed as a both a response and a provocation.

The few books and scholarly articles previously addressing US–Australian literary and cultural connections are now the work of previous academic generations, and are out of print or limited in approach.¹ And yet, as evidenced by the torrent of American students visiting Australia, the continuing wave of Australian novelists publishing in the United States, the substantial presence played by Australia in international

popular culture, the academic excellence and growing international orientation of Australian universities, and the seminal role of Australian scholarship within the worldwide study of postcolonial Anglophone literatures (notably in Britain, Canada, South Africa, and South and East Asia), there is an urgent need for dynamic, sophisticated new research and criticism addressing US–Australian literary and cultural relations.

These trends were confirmed by the publication in 2009 of *The Macquarie PEN Anthology of Australian Literature*, which was launched simultaneously in Sydney and in two important centres of Australian Studies in the United States: Georgetown in Washington, DC, and the Australian Studies Centre at Harvard University. The anthology is published in Australia by Allen & Unwin and in the United States by Norton as *The Literature of Australia*. At nearly 1500 pages, this unprecedented survey of Australian literature presents selections of more than 500 primary sources by over 300 Australian authors, and is being widely adopted by schools, universities and university libraries in both the United States and Australia. *Reading Across the Pacific* addresses the new demand for freshly conceived critical, historical and interpretive material generated by the international success of the *Macquarie PEN* collection of primary sources.

In the twenty-first century, both American and Australian literatures are experiencing important new challenges to the very different paradigms of literary history and criticism each inherited from the twentieth century. In American studies, the long-prevalent belief in American exceptionalism—the sense that the United States has a unique mission and destiny, and thus, inferentially, that its literature is also distinct or embodies distinct archetypes and identities—has been countered by demonstrations of an extensive array of connections to other literatures and cultures; demonstrations that these external currents have indeed impinged on American texts and their producers. Although American exceptionalism is still a live factor in the larger culture—even President Obama, elected partially on his promise to pursue a more multilateral and dialogue-oriented foreign policy, has reaffirmed his belief in American exceptionalism, as if it were a necessary tenet of a US secular faith—its stranglehold over academia is not what
it was in the days of the founders of modern American literary studies such as Leo Marx and R.W.B. Lewis. As Paul Giles observes, American literary space is ragged or porous at the edges and to understand such a space we need to extend its conceptual geography in a series of ellipses as it touches and overlaps with the space of other ‘national’ literatures and cultures. In recent years, a number of studies have invoked the importance of America’s transatlantic connections—Giles’ own *Virtual Americas: Transnational Fictions and the Transatlantic Imaginary* (Duke University Press, 2002) and *Atlantic Republic: The American Tradition in English Literature* (Oxford University Press, 2006) are exemplary here, as is the work of Wai-Chee Dimock, Paul Gilroy, Joel Pace, David Shields, William Spengemann and Robert Weisbuch. In this context, *Reading Across the Pacific* is unique in invoking the United States’ Anglophone transpacific connections.

In Australian literary studies, too, scholars such as Nicholas Birns, David Carter, Leigh Dale, Robert Dixon, Ken Gelder, Graham Huggan, Philip Mead, Wenche Ommundsen and Gillian Whitlock, among others, have begun to see Australian literature in ways that exceed or evade the space of the nation. Australian literary studies, unlike American

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literary studies, always acknowledged that Australian literature was comparable to others, but the cultural nationalist critics of the mid-twentieth century registered the relevance of individual literary works in so far as they expressed an emergent Australian national identity that would declare its uniqueness by its maturity or difference from the parent English literature. Yet the rise of the internet and the ideological world of post-communism in the 1990s, instanced by the multinational conglomerates that took over most Australian publishing houses, meant that any supposed independence of Australian literature was over. If Australian literature is now irrevocably imbricated in a wider world, then so should its criticism and historiography. Like Giles’ formulation of American literary space, Australian literature is also ragged at the edges, best seen in a series of relations with other literatures, not least American. Huggan begins his recent overview of Australian literature with the observation that ‘Australian literary criticism continues to be hindered by its reliance on national(ist) tropes’. And yet, he argues, the ‘postcoloniality’ of national literatures such as Australia’s is always effectively transnational, either derived from the apprehension of internal fracture … or from a multiplied awareness of the nation’s various engagements with other nations, and with the wider world.5

In the twenty-first century, then, critics and historians of both American and Australian literature are being challenged to find languages


5 Huggan, pp. vii and ix.
that attest to these new, polyvalent dimensions while not becoming lost in the rhetoric of what Huggan calls ‘globaloney’, and while still attending to nuanced, responsive analyses of literary texts. The essays in *Reading Across the Pacific* are written at this turning point in perceptions of American and Australian literatures. Both a product of and response to these new challenges, they seize the opportunity to reassess and reconfigure the conceptual geography of national literary spaces as they are re-formed by vectors that evade or exceed them, including the transnational, the local and the global. One of these vectors we call the transpacific.

The United States–Australian cultural relationship has often simply been assumed rather than theorised or empirically grounded. *Reading Across the Pacific* examines the concrete interaction between the two nations, shifting the emphasis from the broad cultural patterns that are often compared, to the specific networks, interactions, and crossings that have characterised Australian literature in the United States, American literature in Australia, and the many mediations and adjacencies that have accompanied this interaction. This entails shifting the characteristic perspective from two monadic nations facing each another across the Pacific to understanding the Pacific as a thread across which the two cultures have read each other, and focusing away from matters of direct literary influence to a broader range of responses, provocations and dialogues. Taking advantage of new interdisciplinary and theoretical possibilities, the essays nonetheless emphasise reading as a practice, whether done individually or collectively as a consumer, reviewer, or editor; whether performed in a private or public context. Principal questions to be considered are: why has the relationship, though always close and in some ways very obvious, always seemed under-scrutinised? Why has Australia received so little attention in US literary circles? What cultural factors (assumptions, fears, and inhibitions) are in play here? How have they changed over time as affected by political changes, or stylistic or genre transformations?

While each essay is individually conceived, they are collectively designed to reflect—and reflect upon—the following key topics applied to Australian–United States intellectual histories:
Like *Shades of the Planet: American Literature as World Literature* (2007), edited by Lawrence Buell and Wai-Chee Dimock, *Reading Across the Pacific* takes American and Australian literatures out of the nationalist frameworks of the past and looks at them in a global context at once broader and deeper, while remaining critical of euphoric clichés about global culture. The essays are divided into five sections:

1. Transpacific: National Literatures and Transnationalism
2. Poetry and Poetics
3. Literature and Popular Culture
4. The Cold War
5. Publishing History and Transpacific Print Cultures.

‘Transpacific: National Literatures and Transnationalism’ includes essays by Nicholas Birns, Lawrence Buell and Paul Giles, and is concerned with how cultures of literary communication across the Pacific transcend or transgress national boundaries, being linked by
other vectors such as Anglophone imperialism, environmental and
eccritical convergences, and individual cultural ambassadors with
the daring to breach fixed discursive borders, such as the Americans
C. Hartley Grattan and John Hope Franklin, or the Australians Shirley
Hazzard and Randolph Stow. Australian and American authors
discussed range from Benjamin Franklin to Gerald Murnane, from
Mark Twain to Thea Astley, from Mary Wilkins Freeman to Christina
Stead and Peter Carey.

‘Poetry and Poetics’ includes essays by Kevin Hart and Paul Kane, and
focuses on how avant-garde poetics have provided a particularly fecund
current with which to ferry ideas across the reaches of the Pacific. Issues
featured in this section include communication and miscommunication
between literary networks in Australia and America; the role of Asian
poetries in both literatures (essential in their relation to innovative
practice); and the inspirational role played by the New York School in
the poetry of the Australians John Forbes and John Tranter.

‘Literature and Popular Culture’ extends from Benjamin Miller’s
study of African-American entertainers in colonial Australia and
Elizabeth Webby’s study of the role of newspapers in transmitting
nineteenth-century popular fiction, to Paul Genoni’s essay on the
presence of Elvis Presley in transpacific popular culture, showing how
music, visual culture and performance have been a major medium of
cross-hemispheric contact, even when literary communication was
intermittent.

The fourth section, ‘The Cold War’, includes essays by Michael
Ackland, Bruce Bennett, Robert Dixon and Fiona Morrison. Too often
discussion of globalisation concentrates on either the present or on
periods long established as nodes of literary and cultural history—such
as the ‘long’ nineteenth century—and often sidesteps the nearer past,
which is a crucial precedent of present-day interactions. The essays
in ‘The Cold War’ reveal the covert yet fascinating role Australian
discourses played in the Cold War: the left politics of Christina Stead;
the relation of Shirley Hazzard’s fiction to the growth of area studies
and the post-1945 vision of ‘Asia’; the relation of Christopher Koch’s
spy fiction, including The Year of Living Dangerously and The Memory
Room, to fears of Asian invasion and the strange relation between Australia and the United States in Cold War constructions of Southern Hemisphere geostrategic space.

The final section, ‘Publishing History and Transpacific Print Cultures’, shows how nationalist rubrics are being replaced by a methodology that Katherine Bode and Robert Dixon have termed ‘resourceful reading’ or ‘the new empiricism’: concrete studies of the production, circulation and reception of books that yet do not eschew a literary framework, the place of the aesthetic, or the mandate of reading closely. Drawing on important new-empirical and archival research projects in transpacific publishing history, chapters by David Carter, Carol Hetherington, Roger Osborne, and Louise Poland and Ivor Indyk provide new maps of Australian–American literary space. Furthermore, they address the concrete reception of books within that space from historically informed perspectives.

Although the material contained in these essays is as vast as the territorial expanse of the two countries combined and the even vaster ocean between them, certain themes do emerge. One is an increasingly globalising Australia. However much Australia may have wished to avoid opening itself up to the Pacific, and rather seeking to garrison itself from it—from fears of Russian naval invasion in the 1890s to later fears about Japanese and Chinese expansion—the twentieth century saw the Pacific emerge as a powerful arena for globalisation, however reluctantly embraced by still-colonial Australian attitudes. But globalisation did not always bring a more liberal, more tolerant, or more understanding point of view.

A number of the essays here see a US bias against Australia which, though less obvious and less racially tinged than West–East condescension, is nonetheless palpable, and has seriously limited attempts to read across the Pacific in a fully ramified way. As David Carter illustrates, the 1980s was arguably the golden age of Australian visibility in the United States, and what comes before and after raises the

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spectre of an arid plain of publications that, however trumpeted at the
time, possessed neither short-term nor a long-term impact. Birns’ essay
points to some encouraging macro-political developments that may in
time alter these conditions. But the aspiration to read across the Pacific
has had to contend not just against the misunderstandings always latent
in cross-cultural encounters but also an additional factor of indifference,
of benign neglect. One way out of this may be to ventilate its existence
rather than, as has been done in the past, bury it in politeness. Australia
and the United States have not understood each other well enough, and
the relationship has often been one-way. This needs to change.

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