LITERATURE, LINGUISTICS & CRITICISM | RESEARCH ARTICLE

From the national/cosmopolitan divide to the transnational poetics in modern Australian narrative

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Abstract: The article explores the divide between the national and the cosmopolitan in Australian literature, describing its importance and evolution as it formed a contemporary transnational poetics, illustrating how this divide and its manifestations have articulated the personality of Australian literature across time. It tracks important Australian authors within this framework and analyses the sensibilities of expatriate writers and their roles as communicating vessels. Finally, it discusses important influences, such as Indigenous literature and multicultural and transnational literary production that mark new trends in recent Australian narrative production and demonstrate a new movement in Australian literature. It is a new transnational poetics that marks a discursive articulation between the heritage of postcolonial interpretation and the plurality of global particularities of world literature.

Subjects: Sociology & Social Policy; Urban Cultures; History; Cultural Studies; Literature;

Keywords: Australian literature; national/cosmopolitan; transnational; world literature; postcolonial

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

José-Carlos Redondo-Olmedilla’s current research analyses contemporary “new” narratives, mainly from Latin America, Australia and those within the frame of postcoloniality and decoloniality. His research interests and publications focus on comparative and cultural issues. He is currently working on transnational/cosmopolitan poetics and flows in new postcolonial and decolonial literatures in the English and Spanish languages. He heads the Applied Linguistics and Literary Studies research group at the University of Almeria, Spain.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

The opposition between ‘the cosmopolitan’ and ‘the national’ has been present in many cultural manifestations. In most cases, they have been thoroughly analysed in established cultural traditions, such as the Western tradition. Nevertheless, this opposition has not been examined in depth in Australian literature. This struggle and dialectics of conflicting attitudes, far from representing a collision of differences and worldviews, has been a constructive element in the Australian cultural continuum. If at the beginning Australian culture was tied to the figure of the metropolis, the desire for openness towards other places will act as a communicating vessel for new sensibilities and experiences. Both attitudes, which were initially interpreted as monolithic and distant but rich in cultural elements, will naturally converge in our time. They will allow the cohabitation of Australian identity forms with the flexibility of openness towards the cosmopolis. This convergence will be clearly seen in Australian transnational literature, where these new cultural forms transcend the mythology of unitary national spaces.
1. A nation of literature, a literary nation
To speak about national literature is to bear in mind a series of relationships among diverse realms without forgetting creativity, publishing processes or the ability to communicate through literature. From an obvious pragmatic perspective, literature does not exist in the absence of writing, publishing or reading, as Elizabeth Webby noted: “Without the writer, there is nothing to print or read. Without the printer, the writer cannot reach the audience. Without readers, the efforts of both writer and printer are merely ink marks on paper” (113). For many, the concept of Australian literature means that Australian literary production has a close link with the fact or experience of being Australian. This link has been so powerful that even an imaginary Australia was historically considered authentic if its link with literary production was suitable. In the twenty-first century, Australian artistic and literary creation is no longer based so much in the value of being Australian as in the fact of making us understand the Australian soul and experiences. Australian literature need not be intrinsically national: as it is known, literature is valued not because of its origin or nation but through the richness and creativity it projects upon human beings.

Although seemingly paradoxical, the fact that literature carries a label of “Australian” or anything else may strengthen the contradiction that national literatures, in the particular and as a whole, can be exclusive in practice, but are inclusive in principle. When discussing Australian literature, a literary identity that includes nation and imagination must be proposed, but above all a coexistence of native and foreign elements containing a series of critical commitments and where diversity is preeminent, without forgetting the triangle of writers, readers and publishers that “invents and continually renews the concepts of coherence in literatures and in nation” (Nile and Ensor 524). Despite their reputation as outback adventurers, soldiers and pioneer heroes, Australians have always keen readers, one of the largest per capita book-reading publics in the English-speaking world. According to Richard Nile and Jason Ensor, Australians “constitute a literary nation or, at the very least, a nation of readers” (524).

That is why these dialectics between the national and the cosmopolitan possess a good part of the features that configure the characteristics of many Australian artistic and cultural productions, as is the case in literary works. To determine this dialectic, the present work will use a comparative methodology that will gather important contemporary figures within Australian literature that show the existence of this duality between the national and the cosmopolitan. Afterwards, it intends to analyse how this dialectic has been enriched by the incorporation of current Aboriginal literature. These new cultural productions and the new interpretative context beyond postcolonial poetics should allow us to see that the barrier between the national and the cosmopolitan has eroded. This should help us determine whether Australian literature today has moved beyond the postcolonial promise and is in a new space of enunciation, the transnational, a space that integrates much of the dialectics of our time.

This account, initially cumulative at the gathering of information to show evidence of the division between the national and cosmopolitan, will proceed a step further into the pathos of recent postcolonial ideology and criticism. With that intention, it will visit recent indigenous Australian production and transnational narratives. This will not suffice, however, as it also presents an aspiration to show that the new poetics of Australian literature is ahead of the postcolonial and into the transnational. Nowadays, there is a panorama where the old division between the national and the cosmopolitan is fused and naturally converges into the transnational.

2. Colliding and mutually dependent national and cosmopolitan attitudes: Stead, Palmer, Franklin, White and their contemporaries
One of the most important figures of Australian literature is the writer Miles Franklin, a woman who spent 21 years abroad between 1906 and 1927. She clearly represents a link between the last decades of the nineteenth century—she met Henry Lawson and John Furphy—and the literary creation of the first half of the twentieth century. Franklin is and was in her time considered a cult writer by all social classes of Australia, even in Australian power circles. Her commitment to
Australian culture was so strong that she established through her will the Miles Franklin Literary Award, Australia’s oldest and most prestigious annual literary prize. Franklin’s impressive legacy worked both as an antidote to those who despaired or underestimated Australian literary production and as institutional support for Australian literature, although this would not become evident until 1973, with the establishment of the Australia Council Literature Board. Until Franklin’s Award there was no philanthropic tradition in Australia that could support literary creation, as in, for example, the United States. Franklin’s legacy would become a foundation stone in the reputation of Australian literature.

From its first winner, Patrick White, for his work Voss (Hansson, 2020) through later representative winners like Alexis Wright and her work Carpentaria (2006), the Miles Franklin Award has served to mark and canonise Australian literary production. This literary recognition and Australian universities have been influential elements in filtering, orienting and critically educating readers, literary festivals, book clubs and literary discussion groups with respect to Australian literature. In the words of Nile and Ensor, “The creation of the Miles Franklin Award registers a small but significant shift in literary consciousness and reading practices” (528). On the other hand, the apparently clear line, practically a national literary project, of Australian literature at the beginning of the twentieth century, especially in the twenties and thirties, was in some ways interrupted by the cosmopolitan aspirations of more globally successful writers like Eleanor Dark, Henry Handel Richardson and Christina Stead, something that other Miles Franklin Award winners like Patrick White, Thea Astley and David Ireland appeared to lack.1 Writers like Christina Stead and Nettie Palmer were contemporaries who shared some life experiences in Europe but represented different ways of inhabiting their identities as Australian writers. Both attended, as Australian representatives, the International Congress of Writers for the Defence of Culture, a mass congress of intellectuals against fascism that took place in Paris in June 1935. It is known, as Dixon reports, that they spent a good deal of time together during the five days of the congress, but “did not warm to each other” (223). Nettie Palmer, 52 years old at the time, was impressed by the cosmopolitan character of the 33-year-old Stead, who had a different style and literary orientation. For some, Nettie Palmer’s vision of Australian literature was short-sighted and provincial, but she also advocated more independent and identity-based literary production for the Antipodes.

She and her husband, Vance Palmer, supported an essentially Australian culture and literature: Nettie Palmer stated that “the future of Australian literature depends on ourselves as critics and enthusiasts” (“Our Own Books”). Stead represented the opposite position: she was an internationally recognised writer with cosmopolitan tastes. In the competition between the national and provincial and the international and cosmopolitan, Stead prevailed. This cosmopolitan attitude had previously dominated in the republic of letters, as its inherent outward-facing nature facilitated communication to and from other realities. Still, the publishing world was far from Australia; its centres were London and New York. Between 1890 and 1950 London was the major cultural arbiter as well as the commercial hub of the English-speaking literary world: it was what Richard Nile and David Walker called “The Paternoster Row Machine.” (2001) The London area around Covent Garden, the Strand and St. Paul’s was the location of the great publishing houses of the time. To Australian literary production this meant cultural and commercial dependence on London, a dependence about which writers like Nettie Palmer complained: “We are content to be consumers, returning nothing to the world from which we import so freely. […]What then will temper the world’s verdict on us as a mere desert fed on tinned literature from overseas?” (“Will Dyson”). She was right about some features of the cosmopolitan attitude: some writers acted as vassals to the great economic lords of London and New York, to which Australian literature and culture had to adapt if they wanted to emerge and prosper. There were tithes to be paid in a world where the metropolis exerted its primacy on both economic and cultural levels. In this context, if an Australian author wanted to promote him- or herself, he or she had to pay this practical and psychological tariff to the (ex)metropolis. No matter how great their talents, Australian authors were of no consequence until recognised abroad.
Christina Stead can be considered an outlier in this sense, and hardly a representative case, as she lived away from the national literary space most of her life—46 years—leaving Australia in 1928 at the age of 26 and not returning until 1974, at age 72. Still, few can deny that she is one of Australia’s most famous writers. Hazel Rowley notes the paradoxical nature of Stead’s recognition: “No major writer of any nationality has been more truly cosmopolitan than Christina Stead […] and yet, as an Australian expatriate who set her novels in Europe, New York and […] England, she was rejected by her compatriots as ‘un-Australian’” (viii). Within the same framework, Miles Franklin described Stead’s first novel Seven Poor Men of Sydney (Franklin, 1934) as “Seven Poor Men of Bloomsbury,” implying, according to Franklin, that Stead “was too much influenced by overseas fashion” (172). This ambivalent attitude of marking in but looking out, however, loving from a distance, and the mutual dependence of longing and gratitude, although difficult to translate, sometimes produces bountiful literary harvests.

Another Australian writer who represents these embedded dialectics between the national and the cosmopolitan identities is Patrick White. For many he is the most clearly cosmopolitan Australian writer, but further analysis can partly “de-stereotype” him to show the important nuances of “Australianness” in his writings. Robert Dixon admits that when White returned to Australia in 1930 there was no obvious sense that his style or subjects related to the notion of Australian literature (249). David Marr concludes that his English education “left him untouched by, almost ignorant of, the writing which made up the Australian tradition” (99-100). White studied French and German literature at Cambridge University and then moved to London, where he decided to become a writer. In London he met the Australian-born painter Roy de Maistre, who introduced him to artists, mostly modernist ones. The way was laid for White’s signature stream-of-consciousness style, which first appears in his work Happy Valley (White, 1939). This work, dedicated to Roy de Maistre, was awarded the Australian Literature Society Gold Medal and praised by V. S. Pritchett, Herbert Read and Graham Greene. This modernist attitude led Henry Handel Richardson—the pseudonym of Ethel Florence Lindesay Richardson—to describe White’s work as “Australia—or a bit of it—seen through Joyce’s spectacles” (qtd. in Ackland 225).

For some people Stead and White’s attitudes towards the motherland appeared mercurial. For example, The Living and the Dead (1941) was published to good acclaim in New York, but British reviews were mixed and Australian ones hostile. America, however, seemed receptive, and the New York Times commended White’s style, praising its stream-of-consciousness and modernism and laying the stepping-stones for his literary style in the coming years. Although Harrup in London had rejected The Living and the Dead, New York was now the driving force in publishing. During (6) and Dixon (250) agree that White’s reputation was first established in New York, then London, and only then imported back into Australia. When White returned to Australia in 1947, the time seemed right to be back at home. During this period, he wrote to his lover, the Spanish diplomat Pepe Mamblas, “I landed here after fourteen years absence, and immediately realised how Australian I have been all the time underneath” (qtd. in Marr 245). It was during this period that White wrote his most important work, novels that clearly embraced modernism and strongly exuded “Australianness,” such as the pastoral saga The Tree of Man (White, 1939), Voss (1957) and A Fringe of Leaves (1976). The Tree of Man features many of the stereotypes of Australian fiction—pioneering, isolation, floods, drought, bushfire and taciturn and uncommunicative people—but this is not the classical fiction that, for example, Henry Lawson could have written. These are stereotypes open to readers as “opportunities for the exploration of the ‘extraordinary’” (Matthews 355). In his work White differentiated the extraordinary from the ordinary and the epic from the quotidian, something that probably, as Brian Matthews said, “had been prompted by reactions he had experienced in the years following his return to Australia from Europe” (355).

This re-encounter with Australia, enriched by his experiences in America and Europe, enabled White to address Australian topics and realities from an original and expansive vantage point. The author’s return to his homeland and decision to remain there, despite his increasing disappointment with it, was a singular experience that “set him apart from the three other prominent
expatriate Australian novelists in the twentieth century: Henry Handel Richardson (1870–1946), Martin Boyd (1893–1972), and Christina Stead (1902–83)” (Barnes 5). These feelings of emptiness, tediousness and meaninglessness would mark a turning point for White. In his case, perhaps the extremes met: perhaps nothingness suggested everything and vice versa. In 1958 he spoke about these “productive” anxieties and *The Tree of Man*:

> It was the exaltation for the “average” that made me panic most, and in this frame of mind, in spite of myself, I began to conceive another novel. Because the void I had to fill was so immense, I wanted to try to suggest in this book every possible aspect of life, through the lives of ordinary man and woman. But at the same time I wanted to discover the extraordinary behind the ordinary, the mystery and the poetry which alone could make bearable the lives of such people, and, incidentally, my own life since my return. (37)

White denounced the provincialism of Australian cultural life, as in his essay “The Prodigal Son” (White, 1939), but his cosmopolitanism demonstrated that Australia could produce great writers and that its cultural infrastructure was changing and could offer world-class products. White’s ambivalence about his homeland is best described in his comments from a late interview:

> It’s the country of my origins—that, I think, is what matters in the end, whether one likes it or not. Certainly, I had to experience the outside world and would have felt deprived if I didn’t have that behind me. But it’s from the Australian earth, Australian air, that I derive my literary, my spiritual, sustenance. Even at its most hateful, Australia is necessary to me. (qtd. in McFadden)

In this dialectical process between the elements of national identity and cosmopolitanism, two works positively tilt towards the national and can be considered as two milestones in the layering and configuration of Australian culture: P. R. Stephensen’s *The Foundations of Culture in Australia* (1936) and Eleanor Dark’s *The Timeless Land* trilogy, a set of three novels, *The Timeless Land* (1941), *Storm of Time* (1948) and *No Barrier* (1953). During the interwar period, some writers began to appreciate that Australian culture and literature carried enough weight to claim a place for the nation in the global republic of letters. This is precisely what P. R. Stephensen claims in his work, in which he distinguishes between the creation of national cultures and their appreciation abroad. Stephensen repudiates the new, imported, middlebrow culture instead proactively defending cultural nationalism against the commercialism blowing in from America. Stephensen’s work is a call to create a strong national literature that would spread internationally.

Eleanor Dark’s *The Timeless Land* was the first in a planned trilogy of historical novels about early-nineteenth-century Australia. For many its importance is most clearly manifested in education, as the novel was on the curriculum for high school students in Australia in the mid-twentieth century. Its dominant values taught a generation of readers about Australian history, and it was plural and culturally modern in its perception, settling a balance that was difficult to achieve in that time.

Through these authors a process of contradictions and apparent continuities can be perceived, but in some ways they collectively pursue a sense of Australian literature. Miles Franklin’s intention was to claim a sense of Australian literature, but this intention was received negatively. The nationalist project was important, but things would change, at least relatively, with the literary production of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Nationalist authors were ascendant, but the coming generational change would usher in new dimensions and a cultural renewal. Baby boomers’ diets would include old-style nationalists like Miles Franklin, Xavier Herbert, Vance Palmer and George Johnston, but also David Malouf, Thomas Keneally, Patrick White, Peter Carey, Helen Garner and Sally Morgan. In this sense the answer given by the Miles Franklin Awards is not so much to provide examples of Australian literature or Australian canonical texts as to offer a sense of what Australia is capable of doing through art and literature. Its intention is to map Australian literary creation both inside and outside the global map of letters. Its value lies both in
paying attention both to old useful maps and acknowledging the new territories of Australian cultural production.

It is both a paradox and a dialectical process that two contradictory needs shape the continuum of Australian literature. In his study on groups and mavericks in Australian poetry, John Kinsella employed the term “international regionalism,” a term he claimed to have having used in former discourse but whose first appearance was in fact in the anthology *Landbridge: Contemporary Australian Poetry* (1999). For him the expression has a distinctly positive angle: the creation of international communication conduits between regional spaces, but with an emphasis on respecting regional integrity. It is about language and preservation in the face of globalism: creating a universal language of resistance on the one hand, but a language of cooperation and cooperation on the other. (476)

Kinsella’s term goes further than poetry; it applies to the whole of literary creation in Australia. The creator is at first glance an individual, no matter he or she belongs to a group. On the other hand, Australian writers, precisely because of the melange of former and present realities, sail these days upon a sea of cultural intertexts. One example is the author Kim Scott, whose hybrid intertextual position allows him to communicate realities that are both convergent and divergent in the Australian experience and that are sometimes motivated by an attempt to capture the contemporary Aboriginal world. This awareness of intertext yields cohabitations, as in the case of *Benang* (1999): cohabitations, for example, between the western concept of linear time and the Aboriginal concept of cyclical time, between the western distancing man-land and the Aboriginal integrated man-land or between the dominant western sense of “I” and the Aboriginal social sense of “we.” These and many other dichotomies are integrated in the intertext.

This hybrid intertextual nature occurs not only in writers whose work contains a visible “ethnic” element but also in the work of authors like John Mateer and Ania Walwicz, a migrant from Poland who transmits different realities and places, sometimes in a creole that is neither English nor Polish but which becomes a universal experience through topics like feminism, cultural transition, displacement or belonging. She represents the kind of writer whose work extends from the most intimate and particular to the transcultural and international.

Overall, these colliding but mutually dependent attitudes have not only played an essential role but also layered a firm ground for the configuration of Australian culture and its continuum to the extent that apparent contradictory terms such as “international regionalism” are now a reality and a practice. This is the manifestation of practices that are simultaneously convergent and divergent but speak of the integration of the Australian and the cultural expression of the Australian ethos.

3. Expatriates as shapers, shapers as expatriate

One element shaping the character of Australian literature has long been its relationship with expatriates. If Britain had always existed in the Australian collective psyche, at least from the first wave of white settlers in the twentieth century, the end of the British Empire and the spread of globalisation changed many Australian issues and positions regarding it. Australia had been independent since 1901 but had continued a long alliance with Britain in many international initiatives. After World War II Australia began to walk alone and open up to the world, although of course the United States began to replace Britain as the Anglophone superpower. The Suez fiasco also made it obvious that operating as a kind of shadow Britain offered no advantage to Australia, which should take the reins of its own presence in the world.

It is equally true that this colony–metropolis relationship was determining for the shaping of Australian culture and literature and that the requisite visit to London operated as a kind of European tour for many Australian writers, but whether this stay in the metropolis was an essential part of the sentimental education of the Australian writer is worthy of further analysis.
Even Peter Morton posed the question of whether there was an inverted Darwinism, as the best Australian creators undertook this “out of home tour,” leaving behind the least capable. In other words, “the fittest exported themselves, opening a niche in which the smug, the mediocre, and the dullards prospered” (Morton 279). Apart from this consideration, what is clear is that important writers, including Clive James, Robert Hughes, Barry Humphries, Geoffrey Robertson and Germaine Greer, left Australia for Britain and the United States in the 1960s and contributed to Australian literature throughout their careers. On this “abroadness” issue, Ihab Hassan noted that many Australian artists, intellectuals and writers found something essential, perhaps a principle of Australian identity, regardless of whether they remained abroad or returned home (94). The cases of Henry Handel Richardson in Leipzig, Patrick White in Alexandria, Cristina Stead in London, Martin Boyd in Pisa, Manning Clark in Oxford and David Malouf in Tuscany, illustrate this fact. They present a dialectical relationship with not only colonial domination but also some cultural interactions that ultimately form a more diverse and enriched fabric. Things become even more complicated with the consideration of writers like J. M. Coetzee, who deliberately stresses his acquired “Australianness,” but whose ouvre, on the other hand, persistently interrogates divisions between cosmopolitan centres and provincial peripheries and whose work resists upfront categorisation.

All this leads us to see the reality of our time, a time in which, despite globalisation and the new coordinates and means of the book trade and literature, this idea of the expat writer, whether Australian or otherwise, is almost diluted. This does not mean that there is no hierarchy or hierarchical relations but simply that a new order has been established. The new “colonial” relations are socioeconomic, and the new metropolitan centres in this landscape are the mass media, networks and powerful lobbies that exert their power in this shiny mediasphere through new weapons like the manipulation of observable behaviours or dataism (Harari 444–6), imposing a new narcotic servitude upon a humanity with uncertain prospects.

In the meantime, this expat tradition has been crucial throughout all Anglophone literature. James Joyce’s best output was made away from his native Ireland, and so too with D. H. Lawrence and his sojourns in Italy, France and New Mexico, R. L. Stevenson and his travels to the South Seas or many other examples including Joseph Conrad, Ezra Pound, Henry James and V. S. Naipaul. Not by accident does Drusilla Modjeska remind us that Miles Franklin wrote her novels about pioneer Australia “over a 10-year period at a desk in the British Museum library” (156), something that Peter Morton echoes when he reminds us that Miles Franklin chose the alias of Brent of Bin Bin when writing her saga of Australian pioneering families, offering her “address” as S9 in the British Library’s reading room (281).

Nowadays, few can doubt that Australia’s expatriate tradition is another layer in the culture of the country. Exposure to other cultures contributes and has contributed to its enrichment. These authors and their works demonstrate that the expatriate perspective involves an increased awareness of the importance of a sensed connection with the land of birth without ignoring the fact that critical distance and alienation may convey a different knowledge that enriches and is self-enriching.

4. National universalism and the case of indigenous literature
National literatures have been considered as corpses that bring interests together, mainly discourses from the national culture or from some cultural or even socio-political institutions. Analysis of the relevant hierarchical elements involving the idea of nation or national culture is complex, so the concept of national culture is key to orient properly in the cultural realm. In essence taxonomies are needed, they are a commitment to naming and operating in terms similar to those of Carl Linnaeus by formalising nomenclature. Taxonomies can be understood as the fulfilment of a need to understand the world around human beings. Related is the need for identity, which can sometimes be non-natural, but which regardless soothes human beings naming and identifying egos. Therefore, there is a need to define or at least prefigure the idea of nation-centred literature, but this idea of nation is also a cultural construct—a wish. This strain,
this Angst to be inclusive of the Australian nation as well as Australian literature, must respect the innate human atavistic wish to possess, a desire that every settler carries into new lands, and which carries the Trojan horse of a new identity or, as Philip Mead describes it:

This will to nation, driven more than anything by an unassuageable hunger for the identity in possession of the land, was political, social, psychological and mythic. It was also divided between an anxious sense of being displaced and inferior and a confidence in being independent and distinctive. (549)

The challenge, in the case of Australian culture and literature, is probably dual: on one hand, coping with official history and problematic inheritances and, on the other hand, struggling with memories by rescuing the ignored and misunderstood past and setting a compass and consensus for a plural future. It means accepting the old inner forces of an nation's anxious narrative while accepting that today, more than ever, narratives of a nation or a nation of narratives must be spoken about. All this as an export-import phenomenon forcibly obeys the socio-economic imperatives of globalisation and the new forms of state power.

The revival or “emergence” of the Indigenous Australian novel is one of the important tesseræ in the mosaic of recent Australian literature. Its contribution is critical, as it is deeply rooted in the traditions of indigenous cultures and their cohabitation with western narrative forms, which can be understood and interpreted as a bridge among and synthesis of different cultural forms, though in many cases the multidimensionality of some spans a broad range of topics and styles, impeding their categorisation. Few Indigenous authors were published before the mid-1970s; this represents a noteworthy corollary of the oppression of colonisation. Still, a kind of change, driven in part by more progressive politics (a kind of global civil-rights movement imported partly from the United States), activism by Indigenous individuals and groups and the growing number of non-Indigenous supporters, enabled Aborigines to vote for the first time in 1962. Other significant landmarks were an act punishing racial discrimination (1975) and the first land-rights legislation (1976). Favourable winds were blowing, so Aboriginal cultures of Australia were revitalised through public manifestations and legal initiatives of this kind. Peter Minter and Belinda Wheeler (284) discuss the controversy over which work of recent Aboriginal literature should be considered foundational. For some it is Colin Johnson’s 1965 Wildcat Falling, a work focusing on the experiences of a young Aboriginal youth struggling in a white society, but now many scholars refer to Monica Clare’s posthumous novel Karobran: The Story of an Aboriginal Girl (1978), in which Clare narrates her own experience of being removed from her family and community.

The 1980s saw a positive flow of testimonial stores and represented a breakthrough decade for Aboriginal authors: Shirley Perry Smith, Glenyse Ward, Eric Willmot and Sally Morgan, among others. In many cases their works represented an aspirational balance between Aboriginal languages and culture and the dominant official and widely accepted literary register. Luckily, it was a time of unprecedented acceptance and the inclusion of new realities allowing multi-levelled expressions, where identity could be bound to authenticity, passion, character or even philosophy. Some works focus on the Stolen Generation, in which thousands of Aboriginal children were stolen from their families. Others concentrate on testimony and the autobiographical voice, sometimes synthesising the dialogic orality with the autobiographical voice and in many cases presenting a quest full of symbols and allegories—what appears an experimental style but is actually a traditional convention of projection to national and international markets. Good examples of this include Karobran (1978) by Monica Clare, as well as Who Am I, The Diary of Mary Talence, Sydney 1937 (2001) by Anita Heiss. The last two decades of the twentieth century saw a development in Aboriginal literature that was capitalised upon by publishers and catered to by a variety of authors like Ruby Langford Ginibi (Bundjalung), Philip Mclaren (Kamilaroi), Doris Pilkington Garimara (Mardu), John Muk Muk Burke (Wiradjuri) and Melissa Lucashenko. It was a time not only of a search for identity and the challenges and analyses of assimilative practices, but also a search for the cultural and spiritual connections to the land and the country.
Today most readers see many Indigenous Australian novels as conduits of real knowledge across time, a different kind of experience and even a catalysing and refreshing ecological and ethical process. Their recent success was heralded by Kim Scott, the first Aboriginal writer to win a Miles Franklin Award—his first for Benang (2000) and his second for The Deadman Dance (2010). Another winner of this prestigious award was Alexis Wright for her novel Carpentaria (2006), a novel of fusion that integrates Aboriginal culture with contemporary realities and where magical realism and tough social realities mark a new space for the Aboriginal novel. This emergence also brought to public attention other original authors like Bruce Pascoe, Terri Janke, Vivienne Cleven and Tara June Winch.

One could argue that the success of this revival of Aboriginal literature is a way of whitewashing guilt about the past, a means of sympathtic indigenising tactics for constructing an integrative Australian identity. Aboriginal writing enriches, defines and validates former orphanages by accepting foster parents and recognising biological motherland. It may have begun as a fourth-world cultural expression, but it has advantaged ties to the earth, something the first and second worlds lack.

5. Beyond post-colonial poetics: multicultural and transnational narratives

It has been some time since Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin argued that postcolonial literature arose “out of the experience of colonisation and asserted [itself] by foregrounding the tension with the colonial power, and emphasising […] differences from the assumptions of the imperial centre” (2). To discern the reality involved in post-colonial poetics and multiculturalism is sometimes likened to unbinding an inextricable compound, despite the provision of some nuance. One desire is to understand the plenitude of the cultural world, but the yin of postcolonial poetics cannot exist without its yang: colonial poetics. Harmful as it can be for many, it does exist and is defined because of it. Lyn MacCredden notes how the loose dogs of imperialism paradoxically “gave birth to fruitful understanding of the diversity and plenitude of the material world” (255). This recognition, this embedding of the colonial world in postcolonial poetics, is key to objectively understanding what it is and was. A scientific approach to postcolonial thought acknowledges its ambivalent and double-edged nature in which the compression of former colonial desires cohabitates with comprehensive postcolonial criticism. It should consider that not only grandeur, but equally an excess of guilt and defilement, could slant the objectiveness of a true poetics. Polarising is good if the dialectical exercise appears later to grant the same attention to the elements involved; otherwise it is an incomplete exercise. Postcoloniality as a space of hybridity is enormously interesting, as it creates true awareness, but the hurdles of trends and temporal distance must be overcome. Nobody can ignore the myopia of the colonial discourse or that postcolonial poetics is mainly a subversive process, so theory presents it as a promising ideological space, but its practice reveals it to be a binarised reading of reality.

Perhaps the postcolonial promise has helped us understand the past because of its relationship with colonialism (e.g., hybridisation, interlocking, juxtapositions, displacement formulations and epistemologises), but it has not configured a reality of its own and, with its work undone, it faces a new reality: the contemporary multicultural and transnational world, a reality sped up thanks to globalisation and its affinity with the cross sectional spaces. There is a transitional rupture between the postcolonial and the new realities it is shaping. If so, the new poetics undoubtedly contains elements and traces of the postcolonial poetics, but there is a desire for new emotional spaces where identity is as varied as experiences. Things have changed since Edward Said, drawing on the work of Gaston Bachelard, pointed out the process of the “poetics of space” (54). Today, subversion is again on the move and new vectors complicate the cultural space and its boundaries. Postcolonial poetics allows a syncretic spatial framework to try to build a third space of enunciation, but its cultural signifiers, though often insightful, cannot balance resistance and acceptance, its binomials are not fluid enough in the interchange and, probably because of this, the strategies of renegotiation are monolithic. Homi K. Bhabha was clear about the reformulation of nation, a new idea sustained by a disjunctive narrative, where modernity lived in the margins and cultural
difference was necessary for living and writing with this idea of nation in mind (161). Things have changed since then, and it may be that today there is a more authentic postcolonial future, but to accept this requires transgression, so perhaps this (post)colonial wrestling match must veer into the transnational literary space.

Over the last decades “non-Anglo writing” has been accepted into mainstream Australian literature and represented a triumph of the multicultural project. It challenged the mythology of a unitary Australian literature by consolidating core culture while accepting some marginal adjuncts. On the other hand, however, as Nicholas Birns states, “the 1990s saw a lapse of much of the postcolonial rhetoric of the 1980s, when Australian literature had frequently and fruitfully been compared with the literatures of other former British colonies in South Asia, Africa and the Caribbean” (10). At first the idea of what James Bennett called “the Anglosphere” worked well, thanks to the thrust of postcolonial production, though there were previous Australian sowers of literary contacts, such as Shirley Hazzard, Cristina Stead, Miles Franklin and Patrick White. What is implied is that the “postcolonial trend” was determining and prepared for the leap into the transnational, but there remained a former breeding ground that cannot be ignored. The internet was another key element in the movement, but in the internationalising of Australian literature, other conduits, such as the Booker Prize, reviews in the New York Times and the Times Literary Supplement, publications in Granta and fictive Anglo capitalist prosperity created a readership interested in this Australian exposure.

It is certainly possible that the millennium required a turn towards the transnational or the “global.” Australia was globalising and, according to Birns, “had a definite place in world literature” (12). A clear illustration of this movement was that even books by non-Australians featured Australian characters and themes, as with Claire Messud’s The Emperor’s Children (2006) and that Australian writers like Kirsten Tranter offered contexts that could be located equally in both Sydney and New York, for example. Greater international connections appeared everywhere, and they activated the cultural vitality and intellectual climate as never before. Transnationality presents Australia today as a crossroads for people, whose price is probably hypercapitalism. Whether this is just an illusion or a real transformation in progress is something the history of the future will tell, but for the moment this “late modernity” abounds with these features in world literature(s), including Australian literature.

Transnationality is still fuelled by issues of belonging and citizenship, but there has been a shift away from migrant and diasporic writing towards a visibility that extends the agenda. Anglocentrism could not deny the expression of new pluralities, so it intended to integrate marginalities into new pluralities represented in Australian literature, among others, by authors like George Papadelas, Angelo Loukakis and Antigone Kefala. Nevertheless, to be truly transnational means no longer to distinguish between periphery and metropolis: it means to recognise Sydney, Mumbai, Singapore, London and New York as existing at the same level. For the moment Christos Tsiolkas could be a good example of this transnational turn in Australian literature, as he recognises the sharp edges of the different communities: class, nation, family, ethnicity and sexuality, while admitting them within nationhood. But this is not simple multicultural nationalism or contemporary multicultural writing; rather, he is using his own breathing spaces to highlight the differences in the Australian nation via the national literary space and to transcend boundaries into the “transnational.” The post-diasporic, post-ethnic and post-commodified “takes into consideration internal vectors cutting through and complicating that space and its boundaries” (Morris 308). It is a space where Australian writers are situated both nationally and internationally (Gelder 7). In this turn there is an acceptance of “migrant writing,” as Anglocentrism recognises that Australian society has changed and that new “non-Anglo” pluralities can create not only a diffusion but also a revitalisation of Australian culture to its advantage. Multiculturalism within Australian literature is now a national space as long as it is connected to the world. Asian Australian writing can also represent this new shift that works to reshape the nation’s self-image. Writers like Hsu-Ming Teo and Simone Lazaroo deal with national imagery from a different viewpoint: cultural heritage is envisaged through dislocation and intertextuality, but there is a new interweaving that accepts otherness within the Australian cultural ego. Teo’s Behind the Moon (2005) and Lazaroo’s The Australian Fiancé (2000) in some ways reevaluate nationality through otherness. In a critique beyond the debates of Eurocentrism
and Anglocentrism, they respond to the global by representing subjectivities both inside and outside the boundaries of nation. This fiction that resurrects difference, transculturality and transnationality is also present in writers like Hoa Pham, Adib Khan, Alice Pung, Nam Le, Tom Cho, Michelle de Kretser and Merlinda Bobis. They show, above all, that transcultural and transnational writing does not stop at linguistic or cultural borders. Wenche Ommundsen stated that this “transnational turn” of Australian literature has altered the alignment of writers, readers and critics, “making them more willing to turn to the world” (6). Herbert Jaffa noted ca. 2000 an apparent crisis in Australian literature, which had been destabilised under neoliberalism (Birns 21), the dangers of which could be grouping, atomisation, cupcake fascism and subterranean infantilisation through the sometimes-tragic, sometimes-over-optimistic teleology of the postcolonial. Things are different now, as illustrated by John Kinsella’s term “international regionalism,” a desire for preservation of the local in the face of globalism. It is an optimistic view, but at least one thing is clear: Australian literature today is broader geographically than it was, and to understand old and new anxieties, its reception must be responded to within the context of the global movement of people and cultures. Today writers in Australia can stage Australian-based work, but for global recognition they must go beyond it and perform transnational realities.

Gayatri Spivak remarked that our context deals with heterogeneity on different scale and imperialism on another model (85). The time has come for the transnational to global on the way to planetary. It is a new co-existence and there is a new adequacy in the interliterary process. In it alterity and the detranscendentalizing of origin are they keys.

6. Conclusions

This leads to the present state of affairs, different from what was originally a manifestation of the opposition between the national and the cosmopolitan. These conflicting but mutually dependent attitudes build the configuration of Australian culture and its continuum to the point that seemingly contradictory terms such as “international regionalism” are now a reality and a practice. This is the manifestation of concurrently convergent and divergent practices that speak to the integration of Australian cultural expression. This opposition and integration is also visible in Australian literature through its expatriates, a collective that is part of the Australian psyche and essential to understanding Australian identity.

Similarly, this dialectical “national universalism” and its corpus, in the case of Australian literature and culture, has been expanded and modified. Nowadays, it encompasses the conduit of the ancestral but revitalised Aboriginal literature and culture and the transnational move in literature. All these elements must reformulate the idea of current Australian literature as a space that is not only multicultural and transnational but also definitely challenges the mythology of the unitary. It is a national space connected to the world and is a national heterogeneity in coexistence with the interliterary and the intercultural.

It may be that world literature studies, as Fritz Strich once mentioned, are trying to resolve “the battle now raging between the idea of the nation and that of the humanity” (48), but transnational literature is a step beyond the postcolonial perspective. It is a representation of a decentred world where former postmodern imperialism is trespassed. It belongs to Shaobo Xie’s aspiration “towards a truly decentred, deimperialized world” (899). It is clearly writing and reading beyond nation, sharing David Damrosch (2004) and Franco Moretti’s ideas (Moretti, 2000) of replacing models of national culture. It is overall a reconnection with world literature, as it rehearses “different strategies of sampling and collating” (Walkowitz 924). Therefore what one day started as an aspiration for the colonial has definitely evolved into the transnational in the case of Australian literature.

In 1957 the theory of parallel universes appeared within quantum mechanics, stating in essence that the universe branches out into many new and diverse alternative universes. In 2014 Michael J.W. Hall, Dirk-André Deckert and Howard M. Wiseman, researchers from Griffith University (Australia) and the University of California, Davis, argued that multiverses not only exist but interact. For us this is just what happens with the universe of Australian literature and with the different literatures of our cultural universe. The worlds within Australian literature do not evolve
independently but rather mutually influence each other through a subtle dance of attraction and repulsion. This effect, interpreted in many cases as a dialectical process, goes beyond the canonical to integrate new elements of creation into a broader geographical system, where old and new anxieties seek responses to the global movement of people and cultures.

Funding
The author received no direct funding for this research.

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Citation information
Cite this article as: From the national/cosmopolitan divide to the transnational poetics in modern Australian narrative, José-Carlos Redondo-Olmedilla, Cogent Arts & Humanities (2021), 8: 1938817.

Notes
1. It is curious that the Nobel Prize organisation, in Karin Hansson’s presentation of the prize to Patrick White, alludes to the author’s conflicting loyalties through the heading “European or Australian.”
2. According to Harari: “Dataism too began as a neutral scientific theory, but is now mutating into a religion that claims to determine right and wrong.” The supreme value of this religion is “information flow.” He adds that freedom of information must not be confused with freedom of expression, which is an old liberal ideal, while freedom of information is “not given to humans. It is given to information.”

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