

## CHAPTER 3

# A POSTCOLONIAL PERSPECTIVE ON REGIONAL LITERATURE IN AUSTRALIA

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### INTRODUCTION

A recent survey of thirteen thousand works of adult fiction published in the United States revealed that London and New York City are used as the settings for more novels than any other cities in the world (“New York”).<sup>1</sup> It is no coincidence, of course, that London and New York City are also centers of book publishing. In cultural centers such as London and New York City, or the “golden triangle” of Sydney–Melbourne–Canberra, the concentration of publishing houses and other elements of the field of cultural production results in the perception that the local and specific of these places constitutes “the universal” (Bennett, “Literary Culture” 258). Pierre Bourdieu devised this theory of a field of cultural

production, but Robert Dixon provides a particularly succinct summary of Bourdieu's theory: "When Bourdieu talks about a field of cultural production, he means to identify the entire set of institutions, personnel, practices and dispositions that work in combination to shape its possibilities and outcomes" (245). Each element of this "set of institutions, personnel, practices and dispositions" can be individually regarded as an instrument (my term, not Bourdieu's) of cultural production. These instruments work together to shape the life of a cultural artifact from production to reception. In the case of print culture, they include writers, literary agents, editors, publishers, government arts organizations, the media, schools, book clubs, and book retailers, just to name a few.

Of course, Bowker is also an instrument in the field of cultural production, inasmuch as it "shape[s] [the] possibilities and outcomes" of every book it tags with an ISBN. However, unlike the example of publishing houses in London and New York City contributing to the universalization of these two locales, Bowker could conceivably be discussed as an instrument of cultural production that acknowledges the significance of the local and specific. Its decision to conduct the aforementioned survey, for example, most likely resulted from a popular interest in cities as sites of the local and specific. Nonetheless, the frequency with which London and New York City are represented is out of proportion to either city's population or land area, thus abetting the popular belief that writing which does not take into account the local and specific version of *their* reality (that is, the reality of the cultural centers) is necessarily neglecting some "universal" value.

This chapter undertakes a closer examination of this issue of the field of cultural production, though it shifts the focus from the cultural centers to outlying areas. In other words, having already briefly considered the manner in which "universal" value is produced, it looks to the local and specific. In particular, the first half of this chapter studies the field of cultural production as it shaped (and continues to shape) the development of a regional literature in Australia. The interaction between this regional literature in Australia and its national literary culture is, furthermore, shown to be governed by a dynamic similar to the one that governs

the national literary culture's negotiations with the international literary community. This last point leads onto the consideration that occupies the latter half of this chapter: the parallels between this dynamic and the dynamic responsible for producing postcolonial literature. In short, these two dynamics have at their root a common concern with the influence of one culture over another (especially as this relates to control of the field of cultural production). It is the contention of this chapter that the conversation about regional literature in Australia, which has been languishing since the early 1990s, could be reinvigorated by the judicious application of insights gained from the study of postcolonial literature and theory. Furthermore, by emphasizing the postcolonial nature of Australian literature and analyzing Australian texts from a postcolonial theoretical perspective, this chapter aims to support the introduction of a regional perspective that will diversify popular understandings of Australian literature.

### REGIONAL LITERATURE IN AUSTRALIA

It has already been maintained that within Australia, the concentration of the literary field of cultural production in Sydney, Melbourne, and Canberra (though the latter's inclusion in this company is debatable) results in the perception that to represent the local and specific of these cities is to represent the universal. Accordingly, any attention paid to the local and specific in the cultural products of other Australian locations, such as Western Australia, therefore constitutes the regional. The former is, of course, seen as the norm and the truth, while the latter is a lesser variant, perhaps even a willful rebellion. Clearly, the clustering in the aforementioned three cities of literary agents, editors, publishers, government arts organizations, and so forth creates an effect whereby the regional is subject to a different set of rules than the universal. Gareth Griffiths reminds readers how this imbalance is created:

It is a fact often forgotten in cultures which have publishing traditions running back hundreds of years that books are not made by writers alone, and that "literature," as opposed to the act of

narrative or writing is constructed not only by “authors” but by a complex economic and social institution of “publication, distribution and exchange” (to appropriate the Marxist dictum in a new but perhaps quite appropriate way). (132)

The “complex economic and social institution” that Griffiths identifies as responsible for constructing “literature” closely resembles Bourdieu’s field of cultural production.

Due to the strong correlation between the location of certain elements of the field of cultural production and what is deemed universal, the regional is widely thought to be germane only for those located outside the centers of culture and influence. Bruce Bennett recognized this fact when he wrote, “I tried to extend notions of regionalism which I had been developing in Australian terms to the neighbouring countries of South-east Asia, whose cultures, like those of Western Australia, and Australia itself, had been too glibly passed over” (“Home and Away” 236). Bennett uses the expression “cultures ... [which] had been too glibly passed over” to describe “those located outside the centers of culture and influence” (236). Moreover, he understands it is only these cultures, which can lay no convincing claim to the universal, that are seen to produce cultural records of the local and specific—that is, of the regional.

Of course, as Bennett briefly mentions above, Australia itself is one of these marginal spaces that “ha[s] been too glibly passed over.” There is ample evidence of this neglect: “Far more foreign books are distributed here than Australian books distributed overseas; more knowledge is imported than exported; and popular culture sees the most successful products as coming from the USA” (Wheelwright 16). The significance of these observations can only be fully appreciated when one is reminded of the fact that

the nation-state’s geographical relationship to political communities beyond its borders is an important component in defining the collective political identity of the people within national borders. Australia’s identity has been defined through spatial practices that position the Australian nation-state in the larger international community. (Cerwonka 197)

Allaine Cerwonka's statement need not apply only to Australia's political identity, as it has been elsewhere observed that "'Aust.Lit.' evolved as a category through its own provincial relations to the western European literary canon" (Gelder 113). More recently, of course, the contexts in which Australian literature defines itself have changed and diversified. Nonetheless, in the international literary sphere, Australian literature still constitutes the regional rather than the universal, since the relatively greater concentrations of instruments of cultural production in locations such as London and New York City indirectly confers upon them the latter title.

Of course, it is uncommon to hear the positioning of "the Australian nation-state in the larger international community" conceptualized as a sort of regionalism. The scarcity of this concept is perhaps symptomatic of the paucity of informed commentary on regionalism in Australia. Nonetheless, there is an undeniable parallel between the dynamic that governs Australia's negotiations with the international literary community and the dynamic that governs the negotiations of a more conventionally conceived region (such as Western Australia) with its national literary culture. The commonalities in these two dynamics had especially profound implications when Australian literature first "began to be disseminated on a world scale in the 1980s" (Birns and McNeer 1). On this scale, the only role Australia could convincingly play was that of a region. So while Australian nationalism undoubtedly flourished in the 1970s and 1980s and manifestations of the nationalist myth *within* Australia trafficked heavily in the sentiment, Australia could make no pretence to represent the universal in the international literary community where there were so many more influential literary cultures.

One outcome associated with this dynamic is that "by the 1970s and 1980s ... Australian writers were praised for having specifically Australian content" (Birns and McNeer 4). Or, put another way, "The Australian novels that go well in the current global market are those acted out against an unfamiliar backdrop, that is a backdrop unfamiliar to an international audience, which basically means an English or American audience" (Modjeska 209). Andrew Wilkins, publisher of *Bookseller+Publisher*

magazine, offered a similar explanation for those occasions when the Australian book industry has enjoyed success in the export market: “[h]e feels many overseas markets ‘are looking for something that is slightly different and Australia is seen as a place that is slightly different’” (qtd. in Neill 1). The identification of Australia by overseas audiences as somewhere or something “slightly different” is an example of Australia’s regional identity—an example of Australia functioning as the variant rather than the norm.

Australian literature’s focus during this period on the local and specific—a focus that necessitated Australian literature’s function as a region in the international literary community—perhaps also made it possible for literary cultures within Australia to entertain other aspects and manifestations of regionalism, such as literary regions within the framework of a formerly overwhelming nationalist literary tradition. Thus, a more conventionally conceived regional literature in Australia flourished beginning in the late 1970s and extending through the 1980s in locations such as Western Australia, Queensland, and South Australia.<sup>2</sup> Australian literature’s shifting focus in this period seems to have also led to the temporary dismissal of the notion that the regional is germane only for those located outside the centers of culture and influence.

However, Nicholas Birns and Rebecca McNeer observe a “waning of the appeal of the specifically Australian” in the 1990s (5). They speculate that “the decreasing salience of the specifically Australian angle ... meant that Australian writers, having gained a new sense of common ground with the other world writers, increasingly lacked the marketing niche available to their predecessors” (5). Birns and McNeer clearly connect the international commercial success of a certain type of Australian literature with its attention to issues of place, thereby aligning Australian literature with the local and specific—that is, with the conventions of regional literature—rather than with the universal. Accordingly, both Western Australia (for example) and Australia can be understood as peripheries dominated in their different spheres (the national and the international, respectively) by cultures residing elsewhere.

## A POSTCOLONIAL PERSPECTIVE

There are parallels between the aforementioned dynamic and the dynamic responsible for producing postcolonial literature, a literary movement that “emerged ... out of the experience of colonization and asserted [itself] by foregrounding the tension with the colonial power, and emphasizing ... differences from the assumptions of the imperial center” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2). It has been argued that all postcolonial societies are “constituted by their difference from the metropolitan and it is in this relationship that identity both as a distancing from the center and as a means of self-assertion comes into being” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 167). Of course, this postcolonial impulse is similar to Australian literature trading in the local and specific in order to attract an overseas audience. Nonetheless, there are a number of differences between literatures that are traditionally held to be postcolonial and those labeled regional. Arguably, the most important difference is that race is often a dominant factor in the former, while geography is more important in the latter. In both postcolonial and regional literatures, however, power or the influence of one culture over another are particularly influential factors in establishing these categories.

Lip service has been paid to the power of place and region, but those employing the phrase have rarely bothered to critically examine the power of which they speak.<sup>3</sup> Ken Gelder and Paul Salzman, in their 1989 publication *The New Diversity: Australian Fiction 1970–88*, noted parallels in the emergence of regional literatures in Australia and that of other “minority” literatures: “Looking back over the last twenty years, the shifts in the construction of Australia and its regions parallel the historical development of many social groups defined against the mainstream” (82). Gelder and Salzman use the phrase “social groups defined against the mainstream” to describe ethnic minority writers as well as writers whose work belongs to categories such as women’s literature, queer literature, and experimental literature. The literatures of these groups have been explicitly shaped by the concept of power and by their relations to the centers of power. Furthermore, it seems the development of these

minority literatures in the 1970s and 1980s was paralleled by “shifts in the construction of Australia and its regions”—in other words, the growth of interest in regional literature. Yet, regionalism and regional literature have almost never been framed in reference to this larger conversation about power, which is one reason why Australia’s regional literatures are not more widely recognized or appreciated.

Australia’s national literary culture, on the other hand, found arguably its most potent articulation in a dialectic of power. It is no small coincidence that the timeline describing serious scholarly interest in postcolonial literature, which addresses structures of power as well as its distribution, closely mirrors the rise of international interest in Australian literature in the 1970s and 1980s. The similarities in these two timelines suggest that international interest in postcolonial literature may have contributed to Australian literature being taken more seriously as a regional contribution to the international literary community.

The parallels between postcolonial and regional literatures are not frequently remarked upon, though it has been noted by at least one scholar that “regionalism surfaced in Australian art discourse at roughly the same time it emerged in literary debate, as part of a widespread anti-modernist, postcolonial critique” (Roberts 2). Furthermore, an American scholar remarks that “local-colorists,” a 19th-century manifestation of the regional writer, “evinced the ‘double vision’ characteristic of the postcolonial author who has one eye on the hegemonic audience and the other on their native subjects. Translating from the latter to the former is what local-color literature does” (Donovan 7). This idea of regional literature “translating” from the region’s “native subjects” to a “hegemonic audience” located in the cultural centers is particularly significant since it has strong parallels in postcolonial theory:

Ideas and images of self and place for peoples in the former white colonies of the British Empire have always been produced for others, that is, for a metropolitan market (in the first instance, the place where the white settlers came from). Lacking a self-sustaining critical mass of population or financial capital, the settler society was shaped by forces dictating that whatever is produced must also



be exportable. This demand is not merely economic but cultural. In such places it determines the articulation of self, of identity. (Turner 218)

In this excerpt, Stephen Turner astutely observes that the demand in postcolonial (and, it could be added, regional) societies to produce “ideas and images of self and place ... for others,” rather than for the “native subject,” is “not merely economic but cultural” (218). Indeed, the entire literary field of cultural production contributes to the power imbalance between regional areas and the cultural centers, between postcolonial societies and the metropolitan.

One outcome associated with writing for others rather than for the “native subject” is that

celebrated postcolonial writers are typically situated in relation to a number of underdeveloped locales, such that what Brennan calls the “banners” of geographical affiliation are always in sight: “Being from ‘there’ in this sense is primarily a kind of literary passport that identifies the artist as being from a region of underdevelopment and pain.” ... In fact these writers in part succeed because of their ostensible attachment to specific locations. (Brouillette 38)

Sarah Brouillette’s comment is similar to the observation that one of the few things “each of these [postcolonial] literatures has in common” is that each possesses “special and distinctive regional characteristics” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2). Apparently, success as a postcolonial writer is often associated with the writer’s “ostensible attachment to specific locations,” since place and location are accorded great significance by “the institutions and circumstances that make up the field of postcolonial literature” (Brouillette 2). Once again, this calls to mind the observation that “Australian writers were praised [in the 1970s and 1980s] for having specifically Australian content” (Birns and McNeer 4). It also bears a strong resemblance to the pressures associated with the production of a regional literature, such that it should be no surprise that Tim Winton is Western Australia’s most famous literary export—his work is deeply

engaged with the local and specific of the Western Australian landscape. Winton has, for this reason, contributed immeasurably to the production of a regional literature in Western Australia. Indeed, he is the first writer most people think of when Western Australian literature is mentioned, and his descriptions of Western Australian locations have shaped the perceptions of locals and visitors to Western Australia alike, not to mention influenced a generation of Western Australian and Australian writers.

For the purposes of this chapter, the anecdote about Winton and, indeed, the larger point about regional and postcolonial literatures functioning in similar ways, serve as examples of how,

if we are to fully understand the power and effect of texts on shaping what we call objective reality, we need to consider the texts not only in themselves as formal constructions through which our ideas are shaped but also as themselves products of large-scale institutions through which the particular shape and form they assume is determined. It is clearly a lot more difficult to continue with the myth of the independent author in the context of a scenario such as that of Heinemann's influence in Nigeria in the late 1950s and 1960s than in the context of the much more obscured force of such institutions in societies such as Britain, America, or even Australia. (Griffiths 133)

Similar institutions to those that determine the "particular shape and form" of postcolonial literatures can also impact on the production of regional literatures. As the above excerpt makes clear, publishing houses function in any marginalized culture (whether postcolonial, regional, or other) as particularly significant symbols (and, of course, literal manifestations) of the field of cultural production.

Of course, various scholars of postcolonial literature have noted that "the Manichean binaries of coloniser-colonised, centre-margin, active-passive and so forth, have become increasingly untenable in the face of the different forms and contexts of post-coloniality" (Lo 124). These scholars are concerned with emphasizing that these dichotomies are not stable but rather subject to constant negotiation; this is not something

that is disputed by the analysis contained in this chapter, even as it uses terms such as “center,” “margin,” and “marginalized.” Indeed, as Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin note in their seminal work *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*, the process of identifying a marginalized culture might be complicated by the existence of “conflicting postures of the dominant society which might itself be subtly dominated by another power” (31). The authors elaborate this point:

In Australia ... Aboriginal writing provides an excellent example of a dominated literature, while that of white Australia has characteristics of a dominating one in relation to it. Yet white Australian literature is dominated in its turn by a relationship with Britain and English literature. (31)

So, while Western Australian literature as it is popularly conceived (and as an example from the field of regional literature) perhaps more comfortably accommodates Indigenous literature than (again, for example) the national literary tradition, there clearly still exist plentiful examples of Indigenous literature being marginalized within the field of regional literature. Indeed, Indigenous literature is marginalized within the field of regional literature, just as regional literature is marginalized within the national literary tradition and Australia’s national literary tradition is marginalized within the international literary community. Even within a regional literary tradition, it could be argued that a hierarchy is constructed (or replicated) within a larger social context, typically presenting cultural centers as the dominant elite, with regional centers and rural outposts occupying lower levels of the structure, respectively.<sup>4</sup> Finally, in the context of this discussion of a postcolonial perspective on regional literature in Australia, it should be noted that Australian literature, as the product of a settler society, is arguably marginalized within the field of postcolonial literature, in favor of more “exotic” postcolonial literatures such as African, South Asian, and Caribbean literatures.

## CONCLUSION

Proximity to certain elements of the field of cultural production, which is often equated with access (or a lack thereof) to these elements, clearly plays a significant role in establishing and shaping an identity for each of the aforementioned marginalized constituencies. Indeed, it is often the very thing that subjugates one community to another. Proximity does not fully explain, however, why regional literature was seen as a particularly relevant concern at a specific moment in Australian history, while in the next moment it appears to have been deemed irrelevant.

Earlier, Griffiths was quoted on the subject of the publishing house Heinemann and its role in the 1950s and 1960s in shaping a postcolonial Nigerian literature and, indeed, cultivating interest in postcolonial literatures more generally. Oxford University Press also contributed to the popularization of postcolonial literatures, most notably in Africa in the 1960s and 1970s. Its involvement and the involvement of publishing houses like it has been attributed to “the new African nations’ investment in education” and the money these publishing houses expected could be made from this development (Davis 229). In other words, changes in the larger (nonliterary, or at least not specifically literary) field of cultural production spurred this development.

Similarly, the election of a Labor government and the appointment of Gough Whitlam as prime minister in 1972 resulted in changes in government policy with regard to literature and the arts that played a significant role in shaping critical and popular interest in the subjects of regionalism and regional literature in Australia. For example, the formation of the Literature Board in 1973 brought a fourfold increase in literature funding to just over one million dollars (Shapcott 8). Literature Board funding “played a major role in the encouragement of cultural diversification” in Australia, and it was particularly effective in encouraging interest in regional literatures (Headon xix). New avenues for publication opened with the help of Literature Board funding, including several specifically devoted to the promotion of regional interests.

This chapter is not, however, exclusively concerned with history and historical detail; it also aims to make a case for the contemporary relevance of the ideas it has raised concerning regional literature. Yet, there have been no recent changes to the field of cultural production that would make these ideas seem particularly relevant to the present moment—or at least no changes comparable to Africa’s investment in education or Australia’s investment in literature, which sparked an interest in postcolonial and regional literatures, respectively. Instead, the contemporary relevance of regional literature in Australia depends on factors similar to those that gave rise to arguably the most famous example of regional literature in the world—the literature of the American South in the 1920s and 1930s:

The regionalists of the interwar years were not the first to awaken to the possibilities of a regionally differentiated nation.... But it was under the pressures of modernization and industrialization, especially in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, that the personal landscape of the region began to assume for a long line of artists and intellectuals a certain utility as a device for art, social commentary, and political expression. (Dorman xiii)

Regional literature first emerged in the United States in a form roughly approximating a genre in the period following the conclusion of the Civil War, a time of great change and, more specifically, rapid modernization. There was a resurgence of interest in regional literatures in the United States in the 1920s (carrying over into the 1930s), another period of concentrated modernization following the conclusion of World War I. Indeed, regional literature has been characterized as “an early expression of what became a widespread cultural resistance to the colonizations of modernity” (Donovan 8).

The contemporary relevance of regional literature in Australia is not located as a “resistance to the colonizations of *modernity* [emphasis added]” per se, but rather as a resistance to and critique of the processes associated with globalization. Of course, both modernization and globalization represent challenges to the notion of “cultural pluralism” (Dorman xii). Modernization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in

the United States was strongly associated with industrialization, which was perceived as a threat to local cultures since it placed a premium on efficiency resulting from regulation and homogenization. Globalization is seen as fulfilling much the same role in the early twenty-first century, though its methods differ. In response to these forces, the “regionalist ethic of pluralism” is invested in “commenting on the distribution of power among and within the various sections of the nation, and upholding heterogeneity over homogeneity” (Dorman xii). The concept of “upholding heterogeneity over homogeneity” is, of course, paramount to the concerns of both regional and postcolonial literatures.

One possible response to homogeneity (in whatever form it presents itself—globalization, modernization, and so on)

is resistance and even a kind of cultural reversion.... Surrender to the laws of the global village is not the only available option. On the contrary ... one viable response to feelings of being marginalized is to *build* on the margins, to root one’s thinking precisely in the sense of being disempowered and different. (Gray 6–7)

This excerpt could be interpreted to suggest that the literary field of cultural production in Australia, and especially its regional book publishing industry, would benefit from re-creating that “sense of being disempowered and different”—that is, re-creating its regional identity. Individuals associated with this industry often place too much emphasis on the influence of other instruments in the field of cultural production, such as changes in government funding and book retailing practices, and not nearly enough on the very significant contributions publishing houses themselves are capable of making as instruments of cultural production. A publishing house committed to presenting an image of its native region and the inhabitants of that region as different and somehow special is going to contribute to the establishment and direct the future growth of a larger culture that values that difference. And not just *that* difference, but a culture that values difference more generally, which is an objective that should be common to the producers of both regional and postcolonial literatures.

## ENDNOTES

1. This survey was conducted by Bowker, a leading source of bibliographical information and exclusive distributor of ISBNs in the United States.
2. For a more detailed description and analysis of this timeline, see Henningsgaard.
3. This phrase, “power of place and region,” was used in the call for papers for a February 2008 conference titled Critical Regionalism: Realizing the Local, which was sponsored by the Association for the Study of Australian Literature. However, the convenors of this conference are certainly not alone in employing this phrase; it is also used, for example, in the following scholarly article: Love, Glen A. “Nature and Human Nature: Interdisciplinary Convergences on Cather’s Blue Mesa.” *Willa Cather’s Ecological Imagination*. Ed. Susan J. Rosowski. Vol. 5. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003. 6. Print.
4. Anecdotal evidence of this phenomenon comes in the form of anxieties expressed during interviews I conducted with residents of the town of Broome in Western Australia’s far north Kimberley region. These anxieties concerned recent depictions of the Kimberley region by noted Western Australian writers Tim Winton and Robert Drewe (in their novels *Dirt Music* and *Grace*, respectively). The residents were only too happy to claim Winton and Drewe as Western Australian writers and expressed a considerable affinity for this category, so long as these two writers did not venture too far from the geographical areas with which they have well-known associations, namely Perth, its suburbs, and the southwest of Western Australia. Within the aforementioned hierarchy, it would seem it is acceptable to write from a more marginalized to a less marginalized (or even central) position, but the inverse is less acceptable. A white Australian writing a story with an Indigenous narrator might elicit a similar reaction, although the intensity of the response is variable depending on the communities involved.

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