

Coolabah, No.13, 2014, ISSN 1988-5946, Observatori: Centre d'Estudis Australians, Australian Studies Centre, Universitat de Barcelona

Pacific Studies: Quo Vadis?

Anne Holden Rønning

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Abstract: Looking back to the past this paper discusses why Pacific studies and in particular Australasian studies became an area of interest in tertiary education in Europe. What subject areas initiated these studies, and how do past legacies shape the present?

With cutbacks in higher education over the past two decades the future of interdisciplinary studies and the humanities looks bleak. At the same time due to global business and increased political communication across borders there is a vibrant interest in and need for such studies among businesses and students. For most Europeans the literature of settler countries, with their European legacy, makes access to ways of thought and culture easier than studies of countries with other mythological backgrounds. In today's multicultural environment such studies can provide knowledge for an understanding of other cultures and increase tolerance of the 'other'. Area studies have relevance to our situation in Europe with increased migrancy, not least as a result of Schengen and EU regulations.

Keywords: area studies, Australia, New Zealand

Based on ideas and realities of contemporary globalization, and political and economic facts many critics, not least the media, consider the twenty-first century as that of the Asian-Pacific area. The theme of this conference, *Looking Back to Looking Forwards*, is, therefore, particularly apt. Since it is organised by the Australian Studies Centre at the University of Barcelona, it is timely to reflect on the status of studies from the Pacific area, and possible ways of ensuring their survival. The latter part of the twentieth century witnessed a surge in interest in world literature with postcolonialism as a common theoretical feature, following seminal works by critics such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Edward Said and Homi Bhabha, and books such as Ashcroft et al. *The Empire Writes Back* (1989/2002), as well as a wealth of other theoretical studies of literature, and the sociological consequences of the postcolonial era. Now in the twenty-first century much of the binarism of such studies is felt to be passé and there is a move to transculturation, and globalization. In this paper I will discuss why Pacific studies are an area of interest in

tertiary education in Europe; what subject areas initiated these studies, and how past legacies shape the present. Are Asian-Pacific area studies in Europe today a move forward or merely a looking back?

Looking back

Following independence in former colonies an increasing interest was shown in the 60s and 70s in Commonwealth literature, and courses were taught in many countries in Europe. In Norway, where I reside, such courses were started in 1976. However, courses in Commonwealth literatures in English were often dominantly on African literature, (the Heinemann publications making these texts readily available), or Canadian, with the link to Native Americans/Indians, and American studies generally. Only later, in the 80s, did Australia and the Pacific area become a centre of interest in literary studies, though the area had long been a focus of social and anthropological studies. Studies of Maori culture and language, and of Aborigine life and culture, had grown in strength from the 1920s onwards, as numerous research publications indicate.

One of the first courses on Australian literature in Europe was given as early as 1958 by Greta Hort in Aarhus, Denmark and in Barcelona, Spain, Doireann MacDermott started courses on Australian literature in the 1970s. The appointment of Bruce Clunies Ross to Copenhagen, and Anna Rutherford to Aarhus in the sixties put such studies firmly on the map. Although Anna Rutherford herself was adamantly Australian as Lars Jensen describes: “[she had] a never wavering sense of being an ex-pat Australian in Denmark, complete with kangaroo bumper sticker on the four wheel drive, which was an identity marker and a necessity in order to negotiate the muddy track to her cottage in outback Denmark” (2009: 3), she was a staunch supporter of Commonwealth studies, and not special Australian Studies courses. From a European perspective the diversity of Commonwealth literature and its links to empires was important to her.

The economic support given by the Australia Council for the establishment of the Menzies Centre in London in the 1980s, as well as various scholarships for study in and on Australia led to an increasing interest in Australian studies in Europe. Several of the first presidents and members of the Board of EASA (European Association for Studies of Australia) had such scholarships, and in the early stages the Australia Council did give some funding towards conferences, as I understand. These scholars returned to Europe and promoted Australian studies, whether in literature, film or other subject areas, especially in the humanities. In the wake of various European conferences dealing with aspects of Australian studies, the European Association for Studies of Australia (EASA), to promote the teaching of, and research in, Australian culture and studies at European tertiary institutions, was founded at a meeting in 1989 at the Sir Robert Menzies Centre for Australian Studies in London. From the start the Association and its conferences have aimed at interdisciplinarity, and members have covered a wide range of subject areas across the disciplines, though the consistent element has always been literature. This legacy presents a problem when trying to encourage interdisciplinary area studies in Europe, which was the

idea behind the formation of EASA. Within Europe some countries such as Britain and Germany have their own associations for Australian studies, and the former has published the *Journal of Australian Studies* since 1988. EASA now has its own publication, *JEASA*, under the auspices of *Coolabah* at the University of Barcelona. New Zealand Studies, on the other hand, though it does have an organization, leads a vicarious life, lacks funding and is often person-oriented, though two journals are published and conferences held. In other words there is not, as far as I am aware, any joint organization promoting Asian-Pacific or Pacific area studies as of today. Of the many universities where Australian studies courses have been taught there is a dominance of such courses in Germany, France, Italy, Spain and the UK, where a full undergraduate degree programme in Australian Studies was launched in 1997 at the University of Wales, Lampeter, drawing on staff expertise in the areas of geography, history, anthropology, archaeology and English. However, with amalgamation of universities this course seems to have disappeared.¹

One of the hindrances facing Pacific area studies is that so far many courses in area studies do not necessarily give credits, and seldom can Australian or New Zealand topics be taught as separate courses. In literature texts by Australian and New Zealand authors are often included in courses with their base in theories of transculturation, multiculturalism, or post-colonialism where the luxury of having a course only with texts from the one country is often not possible within the European university system. A concentration on Pacific studies rather than separate Australian or New Zealand studies, since they have much in common, would make this area stronger and more viable.

Such is the situation today, where the lack of interdisciplinarity is a key problem in furthering area studies. In Bergen, Norway, for instance, most of the books about Australia are in the social sciences library because of anthropological research, and attempts at cooperation, as in many other universities, and in EASA, have failed. Lars Jensen has suggested that one of the causes is in part “an at least partially inflated provincial cringe” in Australian studies in Europe, a sort of inverted cultural cringe, a feeling that Australian studies must be done according to what is relevant in Australia rather than how Australian literature and research is interpreted from a European point of view (Jensen 4 and 6). One example is the Pauline Hanson dominance at one EASA conference—of relatively little interest to European scholars other than as yet another example of right wing fanaticism. Should we, as Jensen suggests, rather concentrate on “the reflective European scholar reflecting on his/her engagement with Australian material”? (4) If so then it must be from a wider perspective than that of the humanities. But this raises a very salient problem that we need to discuss—what is the justification for Pacific area studies?

An important element in keeping studies of the Pacific area on the map has been the establishment of Australian Studies Centres, at the University of Barcelona, at Copenhagen, and in 2007 the Institute for English and American Studies, at the University of Debrecen, Hungary became a designated Australian Studies Centre and part of the Australian Studies Regional Network (ASRN). The aim: “We envisage our role as a disseminator of information for academic research, coordinator of joint projects in study, teaching and research, and facilitator of an increased awareness of Australia and the Asia-Pacific in our

region.” For the first time the link between Australian studies and Asia-Pacific has been made specific.

Looking forward

Given the legacy outlined above what is the future for Pacific studies in Europe today? The Asia-Pacific area is seen as the centre of global economy in the 21st century, and to cope with this Australian universities have been increasing their cooperation with China according to *Forskerforum* (December 2012). This raises numerous problems since, whereas English is the common language, in the Pacific area there is no common heritage, nor language in the Asia region. In Europe, Australian and New Zealand studies have benefited from the fact that English is the first foreign language in continental Europe, hence knowledge and research is readily available. This raises the question of whether a European approach to Pacific studies must distinguish between the Pacific area, and the Asian-Pacific area with a concentration on China. It seems to me this is the case. This could be a useful starting point for relooking at how we do Pacific area studies. In his book *Unsettling Australia* Lars Jensen takes up the need to expand the concept of Australian studies to fit the reality of society in Australia today, including a strong Asian perspective. Wenche Ommundsen links such thoughts to the concept of multiculturalism. She posited in 1996 that the imagined peaceful model of cohabitation in Australia should be the source of debate (153), and cites Brian Castro:

Far from seeing multiculturalism as a set of humanistic platitudes concerning culture-bridging [...] I see it as an idealisation of pluralism. And the ideal pluralism is when everybody exists on the margins, because the centre, which is like the centre of writing itself, is an absence.ⁱⁱ (Cited in Ommundsen 154)

We need to look at literature, history, geography and culture in a wider perspective, as since the 1980s debates on national and cultural identities have been key issues in contemporary literature and politics (cf. Hall). Since the dominant migration to the Pacific area was from Europe, Pacific studies can be a tool in the understanding of identities, our own and those of others, in contemporary society. The migration of many peoples to a country results in a mixing of heritages and cultures, and marginalization, whether of theme, or because of race and ethnic origins, is a prime area for study. The role of literature as a dissemination of values and knowledge of other peoples and cultures is increasingly important, both as a portrayal of contemporary cultural identities and issues which are dominant in the global discourse, but also as a source of debate on these issues within society. As Ashcroft writes: “The concept of the border is disrupted in many ways in postcolonial literatures, but most powerfully in the relationship between memory and place: memory rather than nostalgia and place rather than nation” (JEASA 1: 2009). We need to ask questions such as: Why are people marginalized? What effect do transcultural border-crossings have? How does any form of ‘cultural cringe’ affect our view of our own culture? What is the importance of transcultural aesthetics in such writing?

Comparative criticism, postcolonialism and, more recently, transculturation have highlighted theoretical ways of looking at the aesthetics of literature. Not least seminal works such as those by Tiffin, Ashcroft and Griffiths have made theoretical understanding more accessible, and put Australia on the map as a source of postcolonial theory—a position it has maintained to a great extent. To illustrate one way of looking forward I shall, therefore, briefly give some examples from literary studies. The European cultural and historical legacy in the Pacific area provides easier access for European students to ways of thought and culture in settler literature than studies of countries with other mythological backgrounds, such as texts from India, and Africa where most students do not have the necessary con-text required, and need far more background reading and secondary research.

Since Australia and New Zealand are countries with indigenous populations, a study of the two countries' literature provides a varied perspective on cultural identities and understanding. The families of most peoples in these countries have at some time moved from one place and culture to another with the consequent border-crossings and adaptations that evolve from such a situation. Australian and New Zealand immigrants, however, were far from a homogenous group, socially and culturally—even more so in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In Australia many of the early settlers were forced immigrants originally mainly from one culture, (except for the Chinese miners) and of the lower classes bringing with them their own regional and local subcultures and languages, as is illustrated by the scholarly interest in convict studies. Late twentieth century immigrants arriving from Europe and Asia are all reflected in the wealth of multicultural writing, and the attempt to express what it means to be an Australian, New Zealander or Polynesian. The ensuing diversity (some would say multiculturalism) gives to Pacific literature an element of the transcultural, crossing borders back and forth, writers expressing their heritage through a fictional presentation of cultural difference. This approach can be linked to that of considering the global 'glocal'. Priscilla Ringrose uses this term when investigating the clash of identities in literature (in her case Beur literature,) when the protagonist or author has a bi- or multicultural background (Rønning and Johannessen, 2007: 22-23). Through an understanding of the differing facets of the glocal we can more readily comprehend the influence of the global.

Transcultural literature in settler countries is also often marked by texts taking the past and applying it to the present, or through an investigation of the past coming to an understanding of present issues and situations by examining the 'routes' that have led from 'roots' to quote Stuart Hall (1996: 4). Thus literature is particularly useful as a teaching tool when approaching issues of ethnicity, race, and cultural difference. The transcultural nature of Pacific writing can be summed up in the words of Albert Wendt in *nuana: pacific writing in english since 1980*: "[a]ll cultures are becoming, changing in order to survive, absorbing foreign influences, continuing, growing. (...) For me the post in post-colonial does not mean just *after*, it also means *around, through, out of, alongside, and against*" (3, emphasis in the original). Many of the extracts from longer texts and poems in *nuana* illustrate clearly Wendt's point, for example, the ironic poem by Jon Jonassen "Saved" (48) and the sarcastic "Darkness within the light" by Kauraka Kauraka from the Cook Islands. Wendt's ideas could be linked to the concept of a 'cultural cringe', the feeling that your

inherited culture is inferior in some ways to that of the dominant group. Since New Zealand has not suffered from a 'cultural cringe', and relationships with Maori, although troubled at times, have never been as negative as Australian attitudes to Aborigine, studies of these differences could yield some interesting results. The reasons for the difference in New Zealand are many—Maori are today over 12% of the population, teaching nest programmes have raised awareness of education and there are an increasing number of Maori in tertiary education; Maori have positions of importance politically and socially. Not least the Maori Renaissance in writing, culminating one might say so far in the *Te Ao Marama* five volume Maori writing, edited among others by Witi Ihimaera, including texts in Maori by young writers, texts in English, criticism and even a children's literature volume, has raised awareness of cultural heritage.

A comparative studies approach in cooperation with anthropologists would have an added dimension since, whereas indigenous peoples have been in Australia for centuries, everyone has come to New Zealand, from the Moriori (the original Polynesian inhabitants of Chatham Island) and Maori to the Scots, Irish, English, and Chinese. Whaling and sealing brought many Europeans to these waters in the nineteenth century, some staying on as is seen in the book *Old New Zealand: A Tale of the Good Old Days by a Pakeha Maori*, by Fredrick Edward Maning 1863, who was born in 1811 in Dublin and emigrated with his parents to Hobart in 1824.ⁱⁱⁱ The full title of this book was *A Tale of the Good Old Time, together with a History of the War in the North of New Zealand against the Chief Heke in the year 1845 as told by an Old Chief of the Ngapuhi Tribe, also Maori traditions*. Interestingly, this book was obviously very popular. There are Australian editions in 1876 and 1893, and even a Colonial edition in 1900! Maning, who was very anti-colonialist and defied British law as having rights in New Zealand, would hardly have approved. This text is in contrast to early Australian texts in that it has a strong focus on Maori customs, whereas early Australian texts largely ignored the Aborigine as savages. The hierarchy system in Maori culture and their ownership of land was more comprehensible to Europeans than was the case with the Aborigine in Australia.

Today there is an increasing interest in the 'storying' of other identities, whether expatriate, immigrant or migrant writing. This can be seen as a continuation of a long tradition in British literature, if we bear in mind travel writing by men and women in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Mary Louise Pratt's use of the term 'contact zones' emphasizes border-crossings but may also be linked to 'migration memory', and its unreliability despite its informative nature. These 'contact zones' are diverse, ranging from early Australian writers who wrote to bring Australia to the eyes of the British as illustrated so clearly in *From a Distant Shore*, the book published recently by Bruce Bennett and Anne Pender, to contemporary writers of various ethnic origins. Bennett and Pender's book attempts to answer questions such as why did these writers leave and when did they leave—the importance of the age of leaving; but it also raises the question of patriotism in expatriate writers (24), and issues of assimilation, since many of these writers become 'insiders' rather than 'outsiders'. It raises a seminal contemporary question as to what constitutes belonging to any one nation—childhood, language, topic? For the older generation of writers leaving their country had a finality because of distance, yet they retained a kind of

loyalty to the place of their birth. Katherine Mansfield, for instance, felt the need, despite spending her adulthood in Britain, and being critical of the colonial life back home, “to make our undiscovered country leap into the eyes of the Old World.” One of the interesting points which comes out in this book is to what extent writers feel attached in some way to the country which they have left. Bennett and Pender make a clear distinction between those of the late nineteenth century such as Catherine Helen Spence, Miles Franklin, and Rosa Praed, who wrote, “Always have I had the sensation of being an alien in London crowds whether fashionable or vulgar, and have in my fancy borne the stamp of the Bush” (16). Bennett and Pender contrast these early writers with such as James Turner and Peter Porter who do not see the necessity of keeping in touch with their origins, as they do not see that as an essential part of their creativity. This raises a salient issue: to what extent does the place you are born and spend your childhood influence the rest of your life? Do you need to return to the centre to understand the periphery? I would posit that late twentieth and early twenty-first century Europeans look to literature from elsewhere as a way of understanding cultural aspects of migrant and immigrant life in their own country.

The interest in migration stories has been strong in the Pacific area. An aspect of settler literature that is relevant to contemporary global debates is the change from settlement to migration (see Lars Jensen *Unsettling Australia* 2005). In earlier times, border-crossing, moving from one place to another with a slight chance of return, had a finality. The social-historical views presented in migrant and exile literature open up the possibility of crossing and re-crossing those boundaries, and give fluidity to the topic/theme. Examples of authors who take up issues of migrancy and its consequences are Yvonne du Fresne, Amelia Batitsch, Brian Castro, even Beverly Farmer in *The Seal Woman* –with its emphasis on why the Norwegian protagonist never manages to settle in Australia.

To exemplify such discussions I shall refer to some few texts that I consider especially helpful in presenting Pacific area studies. My starting point would be thematic. Take David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon*, and especially the character of Gemmy. He provides us with the debate on the issue mentioned above: to what extent upbringing influences the rest of your life, and the question of cultural identities. At the same time the text illustrates ‘migration memory’ in the description Janet's mother has given of their life back in Scotland:

She [Janet] was in love with this other life her parents had lived; with Scotland and a time before they came to Australia, before she was born, that was her time too, extending her life back beyond the few years she could actually recall, and giving reality to a world she had need of; more alive and interesting, more crowded with *things*, with people too, than the one she was in. (49)

Castro has observed that “writing [...] always involves displacement—of voice, experience and identity” (cited in Ommundsen 1996: 149). This is clearly seen in Castro's *Birds of Passage*, where the protagonist is confused about his identity, being an ABC and blue eyed Chinese person. Castro elaborates on these attitudes in “Writing Asia”. Marion Halligan is an author who has spent much time in France. In *The Living Hothouse* the stories

frequently juxtapose Australian and French cultural differences, and are a wonderful source for discussions on European versus Australian customs. In “Trespassers or Guests?” Halligan displays a cultural misunderstanding which only those in the know could avoid, when the protagonist purchases a bunch of chrysanthemums as a house-warming present, because she likes them and always gets a bunch on her birthday in Australia. On reaching their destination she notes that they did not seem to be appreciated (58). Later she discovers that in this village chrysanthemums are flowers for the dead and to put on graves (64). What a faux pas! Halligan’s French stories could also be compared to Kathleen Mansfield’s stories set in France.

A writer whose texts deal with displacement and the emigrant and immigrant experience is Yvonne du Fresne, especially in her trilogy *The Book of Ester, Frédérique* and *Motherland*. Here du Fresne fictionalises her Danish-Huguenot ancestors who went to New Zealand in 1860 and 1890, flitting in and out of the past to illustrate the complexities of migration, cultural identities and the feeling of expatriation. The use of Danish words in Yvonne du Fresne’s texts can be seen as a wresting of power and a restoring of identity and purpose. The ‘insider’ ‘outsider’ concept becomes central here. That *Johanna’s World*, a translation of Øystein Molstad Andresen’s book *Uredd ferd til ukjent land* about the journey of a poor Norwegian emigrant family via South America to New Zealand and their life in New Zealand in the 1870s, topped the best seller list in New Zealand in 2001 for many weeks is illustrative of the current interest in migration and immigration history and life. Environmental issues are frequently the theme of texts from this area, not surprisingly since in particular New Zealand is very active in this global debate. Such a theme also lends itself to interdisciplinarity, not least given the extensive anthropological studies done on the Pacific. In literature texts such as Patricia Grace’s *Potiki* is an obvious choice with its emphasis on the conflict between developers and locals, a highly topical issue all over the world, and only one of many dealing with cultural displacement. Oodgeroo’s poetry would come into the same category, a critique of the establishment and of what it does to the environment physically and psychologically, and how both parties can learn from each other.

The Future

Cutbacks in higher education over the past two decades make the future of interdisciplinary studies look bleak. And this at a time when young people are increasingly taking part of their studies in Australia or New Zealand. Many of those teaching Australian and New Zealand studies are retiring or have retired, and are not being replaced, confirming yet again that research in specific areas is often person-oriented. At the same time, due to global business and increased political communication across borders, and given the importance of economic growth in the Pacific-Asian area, there is a vibrant need for, and interest in, such studies among business people and students. Ahistoricism and lack of cultural knowledge, for example, has led to many unnecessary failed business and diplomatic negotiations, so the socio-cultural value of area studies should not be underestimated in a transcultural world. What is needed is an active website for Pacific area

studies, and the creation of networks. Research possibilities which are either ongoing or could be the basis for further research are European reactions to Australian films and television series, the treatment of refugees, environmental studies, especially in New Zealand, or gender relations within indigenous peoples. Much research can be done to highlight how often it is the women who are the guardians of culture, and the ones who save the family and the tribe. For example, Alan Duff's book *Once were Warriors* is usually interpreted as about cultural loss, crime and disillusion, but from another point of view it is the women who are the strong ones. The same applies in several books about and by Maori. Yet another method of critical approach would be an investigation of whether the triple bind, that is, being a writer, a Third World person (or indigenous) and a woman (Trinh Minh-Ha *Woman, Native, Other* 4), often seen in other Asian countries, also applies in the Pacific area.

In conclusion, we live in a multicultural world, and we need to come to grips with this and instil in younger generations ideas of harmonious cohabitation with other groups. No society is exempt from facing its cultural diversity, and area studies, especially of the Pacific, which has faced such issues for over 100 years, is a fruitful source of study for the next generation of leaders. To Europeans such literary texts open up for a more objective point of view—we are not socially nor politically directly involved in the identities/culture debates presented, so it becomes a useful stepping-stone to a discussion of our own local or national situation in connection with immigrants and refugees. Spivak's discussion of the subaltern and the issue of "who can speak for the other?" is also related to that of who can speak *about* the other, and issues of authenticity.

This article has attempted to shed a little light on the situation for studies of this area and on possible ways forward. Since this paper was part of a debate panel, the lack of a conclusion is deliberate as it is up to us as critics and scholars to take these threads and weave them into something bigger and greater on the cultural cost of immigrants and emigrants. To quote the epigraph to Wenche Ommundsen's enlightening essay in *From a Distance* where she cites Castro: "Language marks the spot where the self loses its prison bars—where the border crossing takes place, traversing the spaces of others" (149).

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ⁱ <http://www.llas.ac.uk>.

ⁱⁱ Castro “Necessary idiocy and the idea of freedom” in Sneja Gunew and Kateryna O. Longley (eds.) *Striking Chords: Multicultural Literary Interpretations*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1992. 7.

ⁱⁱⁱ Maning’s work is a classic of New Zealand literature as it is one of early accounts of life in New Zealand by someone who after settling on the Hokianga river, the chief place of European settlement at the time, become in reality a Pakeha Maori.

Anne Holden Rønning is Associate Professor Emerita at the University of Bergen, Norway. Her research interests and fields of publication are Women’s Studies and postcolonial literatures and cultures, especially from Australia and New Zealand. She was co-editor of *Identities and Masks: Colonial and Postcolonial Studies* (2001); and *Readings of the Particular: The Postcolonial in the Postnational* (2007); and author of “*For Was I not Born Here?*” *Identity and Culture in the Work of Yvonne du Fresne* (2010). In 2012 she was visiting professor at the University of Barcelona.