

Proximate Reading: Australian Literature in Transnational Reading Frameworks

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I want to introduce the notion of what I call proximate reading: a way of thinking about reading practices broadly speaking, but in particular, a way of conceptualizing reading and literary writing in contemporary transnational frameworks. Proximate reading opens up a number of aspects of reading and literary practice that are to do with the way readers negotiate place, position and what can be called literary sociality (that is, relations between readers, texts and the meanings that bind these relations together), where these things are understood and evaluated in terms of degrees of closeness and/or distance, that is, proximity.

We know, of course, about *close* reading: a reading practice that can either distance literature from its point of origin by privileging its destination (think, for example, of I.A. Richards or American deconstruction), or that can tie closeness to a full understanding of that original site of production: its historical and geographical contexts, the author's life, the material we use to guide what Kenneth Burke (talking about John Keats) had called 'our speculations as regards correlations between poem and poet' (76). The cultural capital of this second kind of close reading relies on the demonstration of one's intimate relationship—one's familiarity—with literature's site of production and it is a reading practice that routinely stages itself in university English departments, academic literary journals, and so on. But this relationship is always provisional and often contingent, itself vulnerable to shifts in time and space between origin and destination. Burke, after all, advises us to 'use whatever knowledge is available' in order to guide what can only, as he notes, be 'speculations'. Close reading is itself a matter of proximity, remembering the derivation of this word from the Latin *proximare*—to approach something—and *proximus*, meaning *near* or even *neighbour*. One cannot be one's neighbour, of course: the best one can offer here is something close to an *approximation* of neighbourliness to the text that one is reading. But if literature is already remote from us, then close reading becomes doubly difficult and perhaps requires a different approach altogether.

Franco Moretti, as we also know, has talked about *distant reading*, a way of beginning to comprehend the ever-growing body of what he calls 'world literature', literature from remote sites of production and in original languages with which we may be unfamiliar. World literature poses a conceptual problem to do, precisely, with the proximity of its readerships: 'the ambition', Moretti says, 'is now directly proportional to the distance from the text: the more ambitious the project, the greater the distance must be' (Moretti 'Conjectures'). Distant reading can seem to carry within it a kind of melancholic longing for close reading as it once was or might have been—and Moretti himself has been a remarkably close reader of literary writing. In his essay 'Serious Century', he examines nineteenth-century European realism, demonstrating its dependence on precision, on the close and elaborately described ties

between people and nation, people and place, people and things and their meanings: the proximity of one thing to another, in other words, and one's level of familiarity *with* those things. But European realism did not survive the experience of both modernity and modernism, which made this kind of proximity, and the levels of familiarity it takes for granted, impossible to sustain. 'In taking our leave' of this literary form, Moretti writes, 'we should not forget how narrow it could be'; even so, he calls for a 'certain respect for this old frame of mind' ('Serious Century' 400). Close reading as a matter of precision (people and texts) might also be understood these days as the expression of an 'old frame of mind', narrow in its range. For Moretti, it survives primarily in the context of national literatures—'The United States is the country of close reading', he writes in 'Conjectures'—which is where local expertise flourishes precisely because readers are, or should be, familiar with literary writing in their immediate proximity.

This is also the view expressed by the imaginary Australian novelist Elizabeth Costello in J.M. Coetzee's 2003 novel, when she tells a literary audience on board a luxury cruise liner—that includes a Nigerian writer with whom she is already familiar—'The English novel ... is written in the first place by English people for English people. That is what makes it the English novel. The Russian novel is written by Russians for Russians'. But then she adds: 'the African novel is not written by Africans for Africans. African novelists may write about Africa, about African experiences, but they seem to me to be glancing over their shoulder all the time they write, at the foreigners who will read them. ... Yet how can you explore a world in all its depth if at the same time you are having to explain it to outsiders?' (51) Here, Coetzee's Australian novelist expresses Franco Moretti's distinction between European realism-as-precision ('depth')—tying people and place close together—and other literatures elsewhere, where those ties are undone by global or postcolonial predicaments (that is, by modernity). How does she come to understand this point? Because, she says, 'we in Australia have been through similar trials and have come out at the other end. We finally got out of the habit of writing for strangers when a proper Australian readership grew to maturity, something that happened in the 1960s' (51). Here, Australia is made proximate to Africa through an imaginary Australian novelist's sense of shared literary predicaments (rightly or wrongly, precise or imprecise).

But what about Elizabeth Costello's idea that Australian literature has somehow transcended this predicament to tie itself, instead, to a properly local readership—like the English novel for English people—as if this is its proper and final destination? In fact, her own literary career completely contradicts this point. Her best-known novel, published in the late 1960s, has as its main character Molly Bloom, 'wife of Leopold Bloom', the novel tells us on its opening page, 'principal character of another novel, *Ulysses* (1922), by James Joyce': a novel that has nothing to do with Australia at all (Coetzee 1). Costello in fact spent most of the early 1960s in England and France. A 'small critical industry' built around her work 'is based in Albuquerque, New Mexico, which puts out a quarterly *Elizabeth Costello Newsletter*' (1-2). Her most devoted readership—the one, presumably, that reads her most *closely*—is inexplicably remote. She spends only a small part of the novel in Australia; for the rest, she participates in the framework of something close to the sociality of 'world literature', receiving awards in provincial USA, speaking at a conference in Amsterdam, travelling on the cruise liner from New Zealand to Cape Town via Antarctica, and ending her days in a

Kafka-esque scene in a remote Italian village. In a review of the novel for the British newspaper, *The Observer*, Adam Mars-Jones complains that chapter (or ‘Lesson’) 7 in the novel ‘is the only part of the book in which Elizabeth Costello is at home in Melbourne, rather than shuttling between centres of culture, but the effect is no less disembodied. Nothing local impinges’.

The sense that Elizabeth Costello is a ‘disembodied’ Australian novelist cuts across her own interest—and perhaps the novel’s interest, too—in ‘embodying’ (‘The notion of *embodying* turns out to be pivotal’ (Coetzee 9))—precisely the thing that Franco Moretti had identified as underwriting the European realist novel: the establishment of a close and intimate connection between people and things, people and other people, things and their meanings. In fact, Costello’s public lectures are often about precisely this, an attempt empathetically and imaginatively to bridge the gap between self and other: a humanist attempt that this essentially modernist novel unravels, and that Costello herself may not even believe in. ‘The word-mirror is broken, irreparably, it seems’, she says to one of her audiences, rejecting realism’s necessarily precise link between words and things and meanings. ‘The dictionary that used to stand beside the Bible and the words of Shakespeare above the fireplace ... has become just one code book among many’ (19). She tells an interviewer about her most recent novel, ‘It is the otherness that is the challenge. Making up someone other than yourself. Making up a world for him to move in. Making up an Australia’. To which the interviewer asks: ‘Is that what you are doing in your books, would you say: making up Australia?’ (12) In Coetzee’s novel, Australia is also just one ‘code book among many’: both proximate and remote, occasionally important to the protagonist’s biography (and at various moments, to her ‘position’), but hardly explanatory of anything in particular and generally marginal to the novel itself, which barely even bothers to ‘make it up’ and mostly forgets about it anyway.

The dismantling of the national ‘code book’ is well underway in transnational literary studies which—just as Coetzee’s novel does—breaks down the proximity of a national literature to both its readerships and itself. This is what Paul Giles does in *Virtual Americas: Transnational Fictions and the Transatlantic Imaginary* (2002), which begins from the premise that ‘national histories, of whatever kind, cannot be written simply from the inside’ and goes on to look at what he calls ‘transnational interferences and reversals’ along the ‘national grid’, the various ‘crossovers’ between (in his case) American literature and British literature (2, 5). A more ambitious example of transnational literary studies—one less tied to metropolitan centres in the west—is Wai Chee Dimock’s *Through Other Continents* (2006), which also begins with a critique of the prevailing insular view of American literature as ‘the product of one nation and one nation alone, analyzable within its confines’. ‘Rather than being a discrete entity’, she writes, American literature

is better seen as a crisscrossing set of pathways, open-ended and ever multiplying, weaving in and out of other geographies, other languages and cultures. These are input channels, kinship networks, routes of transit, and forms of attachment—connective tissues binding America to the rest of the world. (3)

Dimock develops a notion of ‘deep time’ to account for these ‘connective tissues’, tying American literature not just to world capitalism, but world religions,

vernaculars, world genres and categories of experience, as well as ‘global civil society’. Her book has a benign cosmopolitanising imperative, putting American literature—in a context after 9/11 and, we might even say, after modernity itself—into a kind of neighbourly proximity with the rest of the world, ‘weaving our lives into a semantic network, at once localized and endlessly extended’ (Dimock 8). This is the sociality she wants to produce for a national literature: quite a different imperative to the one we find in Coetzee’s novel with Australian literature, which remains underexplained as a ‘form of attachment’ to the rest of the world.

Proximate reading can provide a way of thinking through these newer ‘forms of attachment’, these transnational ‘connective tissues’, insofar as it relies on the reader’s negotiation of relationships between origin and destination, what is close and what is distant. As a literary trope, Australia is itself ‘just one code book among many’, routinely criss-crossed by other literatures, localized in some instances and woven into transnational semantic networks in others.

Julia Leigh is a contemporary Australian novelist who was awarded a Rolex Arts Initiative fellowship that took her to Princeton University in the USA where she was mentored for a year by Toni Morrison, who came to provide the blurb for Leigh’s second novel, *Disquiet* (2008), which reads: ‘Julia Leigh is a sorceress. Her deft prose casts a spell of serene control while the earth quakes underfoot’. Morrison is thus the first point of proximity in this novel: remote in some respects, but familiar (as a globally recognized American novelist) in others. The novel itself introduces Australian characters—a mother, Olivia, and her two children—but it is set in France and in fact begins with the jetlagged characters literally arriving at and entering a remote place: ‘They stood before the great gateway, all around an empty and open countryside, ugly countryside...’ (Leigh 1). This is an example of what we might call *proximate literature*, in other words. The children speak some French, as well as English; inspired by them, a character tells Olivia, ‘Imagine if we could be children again. I would speak five languages. Mandarin. Even Hungarian’ (Leigh 34).

So this Australian novel mentored in the USA and set in a French chateau releases for a moment the kind of cosmopolitanising imperative Dimock entertains in her book, the urge to weave in and out of other languages and cultures. Australia itself functions as a distant place that can nevertheless become close again in this context. The mobile phone is a key motif in the novel, lost and found at various points, with one of the children keen to use it to call Australia. Sleep is the other thing in the novel that makes Australia proximate to France: ‘And in sleep they looked just the same as they had looked the last time they’d slept, in another country, under another roof, as if the sleeping state were one to be returned to—effortlessly transcending timelines and territories—rather than encountered’ (Leigh 42). For some readers, too, proximity can mean the sheer interchangeability of locations, as if remoteness and closeness are the same thing. In her review of the novel in Melbourne’s *Age*, Sophie Gee complains, ‘But it’s not made clear why *Disquiet* needs to take place in France. ... Nothing seemed to happen in Bourdeaux that could not have happened on the Mornington Peninsula [in south-east Victoria]’. Gee wants to localize the remote setting of this novel; in doing so, she makes Australia and France proximate to each other, just as Elizabeth Costello had made Australia proximate to Africa in Coetzee’s novel. Or rather, Gee’s review turns proximity into *proxy*, where the one (Australia) now substitutes for the other (France), as if one can indeed be one’s neighbour. But Gee

also provides a number of literary citations in her review of Leigh's novel—that it recalls Kazuo Ishiguro, Virginia Woolf, the British novelist Edward St Aubyn, and so on—all of which then send *Disquiet* back into a criss-crossed transnational framework. A review in Britain's *The Observer* by the expatriate New Zealand writer Kirsty Gunn also invokes Virginia Woolf, making Australia now seem entirely remote in the process:

Her 'story' of a Frenchwoman returning from Australia to the family chateau in France, is there simply as a kind of *To the Lighthouse* conceit—an impulse, a metaphor—that makes possible the whole literary experience. In one sweep, this writer puts her homeland in the heart of Europe, like the mobile phone with its messages from Sydney that beeps incessantly in the formality of Maman's dining room.

Perhaps Australia *occupies* France in this peculiar account by a transnational reviewer, as if it could not be any closer: the writer's homeland in Europe, the 'messages from Sydney' announcing themselves in the middle of a French drawing room.

Citations are themselves an expression of proximity, of literary sociality, where texts are put into relationships with other texts, just as places are put into relationships with other places, with varying degrees of precision and imprecision. Citational reading is a form of proximate reading, where Julia Leigh, an Australian novelist, is situated alongside Virginia Woolf, for example, as well as Toni Morrison: these writers helping Leigh to be recognized and understood in transnational (as well as transhistorical) frameworks. As a literary trope, Australia is also in one sense merely a matter of citation, as Coetzee's novel demonstrates. The Japanese writer Haruki Murakami's short story 'Shidoni no gurin sutorito' (1983) is set in Sydney, a place where all the characters 'are, apparently, Japanese or at least speak Japanese'; where Australia itself, as Rebecca Suter argues, is simply one among many other transferable codes or signs (Suter 84).

Australian writers, we generally assume, create a closer, more precise and proximate set of connections between place and meaning: this is what Franco Moretti had suggested about any kind of national literature. But there are many exceptions to this rule. What can we say, for example, about Australian novelists who never seem to cite Australia at all? Who never seem—we might say—to pick up the mobile phone and call home? David Malouf's *Ransom* (2009) is what we might in fact describe as a citational novel, a re-reading of, and a tribute to, Homer's *Iliad*. In terms of proximity—geographical, historical, and so on—it could not be more remote from Australia. The Afterword to the novel does establish a contingent kind of proximity as Malouf recalls listening to his teacher read what he calls the 'Troy story' at school when he was a boy in Brisbane, in 1943: when Australia itself was at war and Brisbane was occupied by American troops. In this account, Australia is criss-crossed in at least two ways: by Troy and the *Iliad*, and by America. In contrast, the novel itself seems to have banished Australia altogether. Reviewing *Ransom*, Peter Conrad can find 'only one possible allusion to national origins' (Conrad). But then he recalls Peter Porter's poem, 'On First Looking into Chapman's *Hesiod*', where Porter had famously remarked that 'Yes—Australians are Boeotians/Hard as headlands' (Porter 71-2). We have seen Australia made proximate to Africa and to France; now, in what

Conrad calls a ‘colonialist insult’, it is proximate to provincial classical Greece. But Conrad is thinking of both Malouf’s Trojan novel and the Wolfgang Petersen film *Troy* (2004), a post-9/11 film in which the triumphant Achilles is played by the American actor Brad Pitt and Hector is played by the Australian actor Eric Bana. For Conrad, this provides a more relevant, contemporary kind of proximity: ‘it would be truer and timelier’, he writes, ‘to say that we [i.e. Australians] are Trojans, the leveled victims of a conquest that is cultural, not military’ (Conrad).

Proximate reading is a kind of allegorising practice, an act of proxy where one thing can be made to stand for another: Troy, from a certain reading position (an expatriate Australian in Oxford in sympathy with classical literature, Australian literature and popular culture), *is* Australia. Allegory itself is a form of proximate reading, where a position is taken and something is made to invoke something else that might otherwise normally be utterly remote from it (in which case, unlike realism, allegory always necessarily *lacks* precision).

We might think about this by looking for a moment at another film where, this time, ‘Australia’—as a trope, a transferable code or sign—could not be any closer to home: Baz Luhrmann’s *Australia* (2008). The title of this film makes Australia seem in fact *too* proximate, embarrassingly close at least as far as Australians are concerned (see, for example, Naglazas), even though its remoteness is simultaneously signalled by the name of the film’s cattle station, Faraway Downs. But its primary citations are mixed and in some respects contradictory: the Australian novelist Xavier Herbert’s *Capricornia* (1938) on the one hand, and the almost contemporary film *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), on the other. A film about Australia is thus in part criss-crossed by a film that begins in Kansas and then goes to some other place altogether: it literally approximates *The Wizard of Oz* as characters try to remember and perform, however imprecisely, the film’s title song. For Philip Kemp in the film journal *Sight and Sound*, *Australia* is almost nothing *other* than citational, a ‘barefaced act of cinematic grand larceny’ in which Luhrmann ‘mixes and mismatches elements of *Gone with the Wind*, *The Overlanders*, *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, *Out of Africa*, *Pearl Harbour* and half a dozen other assorted films into one vast romantic splurge’. For David Denby in *The New Yorker*, the film’s closing scene where Nullah leaves his white adoptive family to go with King George into the bush is ‘framed as a triumphant anti-colonial moment’; but the accompanying music from Elgar’s ‘Enigma Variations’ ‘confuses the issue’ by linking the scene to ‘the composer perhaps most closely associated with the glories of empire’. *Australia*—the film, the trope—runs the risk here of becoming incoherent, not only criss-crossed but stratified with citations from a transnational range of sources, all of which work to make this film difficult to read ‘from the inside’, to recall Paul Giles’s phrase. The dominant sentiment among reviewers of the film is that in fact ‘Australia’ signifies too much, that it is over-abundant or excessive: exactly the opposite to ‘Australia’ in Coetzee’s novel, which barely signifies anything at all.

The two most interesting and diametrically opposed readings of this film to date—by the indigenous Australian Marcia Langton and the expatriate Australian Germaine Greer—each negotiate, in very different ways, issues of proximity to and in their text. Marcia Langton enjoys the colourfully idealised ‘alternative history’ the film provides, taking it away from the kind of precision one might expect to find in a work of realism. But it is precisely because of the fact that 1940s Darwin is criss-crossed by

The Wizard of Oz that Langton is provided with a sense of her own proximity to this historical moment. ‘The Wizard of Oz has come to town’, she writes, ‘and Dorothy’s escape from Kansas to the dream world is a metaphor for Luhrmann’s own artistic struggle with the prosaic facts of history’. It might seem at this point as if Langton is registering the *loss* of her proximity to the film, as it veers away from historical reality to cinematic fantasy. But in fact, the exact opposite occurs: ‘In his imagined cinema of the 1940s’, she writes, referring to the scene in the film set in the Darwin cinema (as well as to the film itself),

the spatial and social shape of racism is reconstructed with such exact detail, I felt I had been transported back to my own childhood. His white townfolk are in their designated whites-only seats in back rows under the roof and the Aboriginal and Chinese members of the audience are in the front rows under the open sky, and I found my eye drawn to the location of my own seat on a bench in the cinema of my childhood in western Queensland.

This could not be a more precise evocation of one’s proximity to a text: where Langton actually imagines herself occupying the film, sitting on one of its benches and participating in the ‘spatial and social shape of racism’ that she recognises as historically accurate. Langton’s review is titled ‘Faraway Downs fantasy resonates close to home’; Germaine Greer’s review, by contrast, is titled ‘Once upon a time in a land, far, far away’, emphasising distance, not closeness. For Greer, ‘Faraway Downs ... is a cattle station like no other’, utterly unrecognisable and unrealistic. The film is a travesty of Australian history that ignores the cattle industry’s exploitation of Aboriginal people and reduces its Aboriginal characters to underdeveloped stereotypes or ‘trademarks’. ‘The only history Luhrmann seems to care about is the history of movies’, Greer concludes. What had brought Langton *into* the film is precisely the thing that alienates Greer from it, giving us readings that are incommensurable, from strikingly different reading positions: ‘indigenous multicultural’ on the one hand, we might say, and ‘expatriate nationalist’ on the other, with only the former registering the possibility that ‘making up Australia’ (if we recall the phrase from Coetzee’s novel) can provide the means by which one gains one’s proximity to the text.

I have been talking about close and distant readings, issues of proximity and precision, the transferable signs of nation (what they can stand or be substituted for, what they can be woven into), and the way we can come to define proximate reading in terms of things like citationality and proxy. Citations, as I have noted, are a way establishing one’s proximity to a text; at the same time, they criss-cross or stratify a text, turning it into something else altogether (which is what happens when *The Wizard of Oz* comes to Darwin in Luhrmann’s film). A fascinating contemporary example of citationality as a *transnational* reading practice can be found in Alberto Manguel’s *A Reading Diary: A Year of Favourite Books* (2005), which I want to discuss for a moment before I go on to a discussion of Nam Le’s remarkable collection of short stories, *The Boat* (2008).

Manguel, an anthologist and novelist and man of letters, is literally transnational: born in Argentina, growing up in Israel, living in Paris and London and, later on, Tahiti, and then moving to Canada to become a Canadian citizen, and most recently living in

provincial France. His work has often focused on the practice and history of reading; his many books include *A History of Reading* as well as *A Dictionary of Imaginary Places* (Manguel was influenced by, and in fact personally close to, Borges) and a study of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. (In fact, he reviewed Malouf's novel *Ransom* in the *Australian Literary Review* in April 2009, favourably.) In *A Reading Diary*, Manguel re-reads twelve literary works—popular fiction and literary fiction, contemporary and historical, sometimes in English, sometimes not, sometimes globally recognised, sometimes peripheral or what is sometimes called 'non-cosmopolitan'—each in a different place, a different country, often in fact while he is in transit as a guest speaker at various literary events, rather like Elizabeth Costello. Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*, for example, is re-read in France, while Goethe's *Elective Affinities* is re-read in Canada, a predicament that allows Manguel to think about the proximity of writers to place in a way that precisely recalls Elizabeth's Costello's thoughts about national literature which I quoted earlier. He writes,

Goethe suggested, in one of his many letters to Wilhelm von Humboldt, that national languages reflect the national character, and that English writers share with the Germans the same ways of thinking and the same sense of what is precious. This would explain why Shakespeare is part of the German tradition; it does not explain why Goethe never became part of the English tradition'. (Manguel 126-7)

In another chapter, Conan Doyle's *The Sign of Four* is re-read in Germany, although Manguel tells us he had first read the Sherlock Holmes stories in a beach house south of Buenos Aires. 'For me', he writes, 'no German city ... ever had the reality of Conan Doyle's London: the gaslit rooms in Baker Street, the evil winding streets, the genteel foggy squares. Years later I travelled to London, convinced that I would find that memorable geography. My first shilling-metered bed-sitter above a fish-and-chip shop disabused me' (93).

A Reading Diary can be compared with Franco Moretti's study, *Atlas of the European Novel 1800-1900* (1998) through its interest in literary geographies (made-up and real places) and the actual circulation of literary works, except that it is more transnational in its range. In fact, Manguel thinks just as Moretti does about the problem of distant reading as, for example, in this thought about Sei Shonagon's tenth-century Japanese classic, *The Pillow-Book* (which he re-reads in France): 'What tone', he asks, 'should we lend to a text written ten centuries ago, in a language we cannot read, by a woman whose circumstances are perhaps beyond our imagination?' (Manguel 203) Distance, destination and proximity characterise Manguel's re-readings of various works in various, often apparently incongruous places remote from that work's point of origin. His re-readings are often political: the book is published after 9/11 and is conscious of both global and local shifts in political and military predicaments, and the positions he takes here also colour the readings he provides. But his book is also citational. Manguel speaks at one point of his 'habit of thinking in quotations' (132), and in fact he quotes a remarkable number of writers in his book, again from a variety of different locations. To make sense of *The Pillow-Book*, Manguel invokes Jane Austen, Schiller, Borges, Cervantes, Erasmus, Stevenson, Kafka, even Saddam Hussein who, Manguel says, 'wrote a novel under a pseudonym, but everyone in Iraq knew who the real author was' (207): a point which returns us to Elizabeth's Costello's remarks about the proximity of national literatures to their local readerships. I found myself

looking for Australian novelists in Manguel's book—they are, incidentally, absent from Moretti's collection of essays on world literature—wanting some local familiarity, given my own location/position as an Anglo-Australian reader. A short, banal quotation from Patrick White's *The Tree of Man* turns up at the end of a chapter about Kipling's *Kim*, also re-read in provincial France: a single Australian novel woven into this elaborately criss-crossed reading experience. As an anthologist, Manguel seems to enjoy combining things that might indeed otherwise seem remote from each other. A chapter about the Italian novelist Dino Buzzati's *The Tartar Steppe*—the plot of this novel, incidentally, influenced Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980)—is re-read in Newfoundland, Canada. In the midst of this re-reading Manguel for some reason produces a list of his favourite cities around the world. I was vaguely surprised to see Hobart sitting in between Venice and Madrid.

The reading method that unfolds in Manguel's book—if we can call it a method—seems to me to be useful to think through if we are properly to consider how we might better understand our relationship as readers to both national and transnational literatures (assuming there is still a workable distinction to be drawn between these two things). I now want to consider Nam Le's collection of stories, *The Boat*, in precisely this framework, bringing to bear upon it some aspects of what I've been calling proximate reading. Nam Le is a Vietnamese-Australian writer, who came to Australia with his parents as a refugee in 1978 when he was just one year old and went on to graduate from the University of Melbourne with an Arts/Law double degree. In 2004 he went to the USA to study creative writing at the prestigious Iowa Writers' Workshop and was later appointed fiction editor of the eclectic *Harvard Review*. *The Boat* is Nam Le's first literary collection, a kind of anthology of short stories, each of which is set in different locations around the world: Iowa, New York, Colombia in South America, Tehran, Hiroshima, provincial Australia, and Vietnam and the refugee boat that makes its way south towards land in the final title story: some metropolitan locations, and some peripheral locations. Structurally, in other words, Nam Le's collection is exactly like Manguel's *The Reading Diary*, or perhaps Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello*: all books in which Australia is a kind of trace woven into a larger, often incongruous transnational fabric. The collection begins (after its dedication to Le's Vietnamese family) with two epigraphs, that is, two citations. The first is from W.H. Auden's long poem, *New Year Letter* (1941), part of that poet's reflection on a writer's proximity to political and other urgent 'causes', given in italics in the context of the original passage:

Around me, pausing as I write,
A tiny object in the night,
Whichever way I look, I mark
Importunate along the dark
Horizon of immediacies
The flares of desperation rise
From signallers who justly plead
Their cause is piteous indeed...

The second epigraph—'How strange that when the summons came I always felt good'—seems to answer the first, and is from a story by Frank Conroy, 'The Coldness of Public Places' (1967). Conroy was the director of the Iowa Writers' Workshop in the United States from 1987 to his death in 2005, so the epigraph also works to

establish Le's proximity to an American writer and no doubt a mentor and teacher that he clearly admires, rather like Julia Leigh's relationship to Toni Morrison.

The first story in Le's collection, 'Love and Honour and Pity and Pride and Compassion and Sacrifice'—which takes its title from William Faulkner's Nobel Prize speech in Stockholm in 1950—is in fact about a writer named Nam who is studying at the Iowa Writers' Workshop in the United States. This quasi-autobiographical story self-consciously puts author and narrator into proximity with one another and stages the sentiments of the two epigraphs as the narrator is woken from a dream in which he is typewriting a poem by the arrival of his Vietnamese-Australian father, whom he has not seen for three years and who has just flown in from Sydney. The narrator's problem is to do with finding appropriate topics and locations about which to write, wanting in fact to *avoid* being autobiographical: that is, wanting not to write about the things to which he is most proximate, the things with which his readers might expect him to be most familiar. Preoccupied by his ethnic identity, he recalls another writer, 'a Harvard graduate from Washington, DC, who had posed in traditional Nigerian garb for his book-jacket photo'. Nam seems instead to want to distance himself from the protocols of national literature or what one character in the story calls 'ethnic literature'. 'It's a license to bore', a friend tells him. 'The characters are always flat, generic. As long as a Chinese writer writes about *Chinese* people, or a Peruvian writer about *Peruvians*, or a Russian writer about *Russians...*' (Le 8). These remarks of course precisely recall Elizabeth Costello's comments about national literatures in Coetzee's novel ('The Russian novel', she had said, 'is written by Russians for Russians'), except that in this story they now entirely lack conviction: the friend's voice trails away as if he hardly believes in what he is saying. In the meantime, Nam finds himself becoming closer to his father, recalling his father's account of his horrifying experience during the 1968 My Lai massacre in Vietnam and then asking his father to recount his life up to the point of his escape from Vietnam in 1979. This complicated story opens up the possibility of writing an authentic (and harrowing) 'ethnic literature', only to utterly refuse that possibility at the end, in a final scene that severs the narrator's proximity to what another character in the story calls 'Your *background* and *life experience*' (8).

The story that follows—the second story in the collection—then radically shifts its location to Colombia and begins by evoking a place to which a now-very-different narrator has never been, a place whose geography may be more imaginary than real, the northern Colombian-Caribbean coastal city of Cartagena, the name of which is the story's title. The sense that one can become 'authentically' close to the realities of a place in the first story is undone in the second, where place is now both imagined and remote, but in another sense, no less proximate.

This collection of stories in fact plays out its proximity to remote places: like Cartagena, or Hiroshima, or Tehran. In 'Tehran Calling', an American woman, Sarah, arrives in Tehran—these are often (although not always) stories about people in transit, arriving at remote places—where she is linked to a friend who is more familiar with Tehran than she is (but who disappears), and an Iranian guide who is meant to show Tehran to her, to enable her 'to see exactly this—the city as it was—the proof of this place unthinkable outside herself' (216). But the story keeps her remote from what she sees: quite literally at the end, when she smokes marijuana with her Iranian guide and everything (even when he tries to be intimate with her) seems increasingly

distanced, ‘far off, acoustic’ (263). Remoteness and closeness sit alongside each other in these stories, although some of the book’s reviewers have tended to emphasize the latter over the former, as in Michiko Kakutani’s *New York Times* review, which talks of Le’s ‘ventriloquism’ and tells us that Le ‘conveys what it might be like to be a young American woman visiting Tehran. ... He conveys what it might be like to be an Australian teenager. ... He conveys what it might be like to have the Vietnam War as an inescapable fact of daily life’. For Neel Mukherjee in *The Times*, Nam Le occasionally seems inexplicably *close* to the remote worlds he writes about: not so much speculative (‘he conveys what it *might be like*’) as exact or precise: a contemporary transnational version of the localised precisions of European realism. ‘These are dazzling exercises’, he writes, ‘with each world intensely inhabited’. Speaking of the story ‘Hiroshima’, he wonders, ‘How does Le know that the onomatopoeic call of the rare Japanese cicada, “tsukutsukuboshi”, sounds like a birdcall: “chokko chokko uisi”? Details such as these move each story from the diligently researched to something more extraordinary’. We might recall Elizabeth Costello’s comment at this point: ‘It is the otherness that is the challenge. Making up someone other than yourself’. The stories in Le’s collection do indeed seem to ‘intensely inhabit’ a series of otherwise unconnected, remote places, putting the issue of proximity into play in each case. Even the Australian story—by virtue of being placed alongside these other various locations—becomes just one act of ‘ventriloquism’, one code book, among a number of others.

The apparent lack of any connection between each story—with the partial exception of the first and the last (even though these, too, are remote from each other, literally separated by *other stories*)—suggests that Le’s collection is governed by a literary technique called *parataxis*: from the Greek *para* (meaning ‘alongside’) and *tassein* (meaning ‘to arrange’ or ‘to classify’, as in *taxonomy*). *Parataxis* is generally taken to be a modernist literary technique, something we find in T.S. Eliot’s *The Wasteland*, for example, where images or fragments are placed alongside each other with no explanation for their proximity. Alberto Manguel’s list of his favourite cities, with Hobart sitting in between Venice and Madrid, is a *parataxis*, a term which also well accounts for his love of inventories and anthologies. *Parataxis* is effectively a way of re-engaging with the issue of proximity, providing a ‘criss-crossing set of pathways’ that may also in fact *not* criss-cross at all. Susan Stanford Friedman is one critic who has taken up the notion of *parataxis* in a transnational literary framework. ‘To develop a new kind of transnational approach’, she writes,

I propose a reading strategy I call cultural parataxis, by which I mean a juxtaposition of texts from different times and places for the new light this geopolitical conjuncture sheds on each ... it means examining writers from different nodal points of modernity, recognizing the heterogeneity and stratifications of many centers around the globe as well as the reciprocal influences and cultural mimesis that result from transnational cultural traffic and intercultural contact zones. (245-6)

The sentiment of this approach is much like Wai Chee Dimock’s cosmopolitanising, Enlightening imperative, offering up a sense that *parataxis* enables one point in the transnational inventory to illuminate another. But proximate reading is about distance as much as proximity, about the ways in which being proximate to one thing can mean being remote from another: so that what Dimock had called the ‘connective

tissues' are there and not there simultaneously. This seems to be a lesson that even the homeliest story in Nam Le's collection, the story set in coastal country Australia—the most 'non-cosmopolitan' story in the collection—tells us simply by virtue of the fact that it sits alongside a set of other stories to which it nevertheless seems to bear no relationship whatsoever.

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