

## *Questions of Identity*

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In 2015 I was invited to Hungary to give a talk at the European Association for Studies on Australia conference. The invitation meant a lot to me as my parents were Hungarian—they left during the 2nd world war—and I was in the process of obtaining Hungarian citizenship. Hungarian was my childhood language and Hungary then a mythical country.

*Where are you from?* That simple, standard, frequent question, asked socially or officially, curiously or dutifully, is one I was asked all my life in Australia. They never meant which suburb do you live in or which part of the city did you grow up in. These days I do not take for granted the wonderful simplicity of replying “Australia”.

Once upon a time there was a real Australia to which I could not belong and therefore had no right to speak about.

That was the Australia that was.

*Asked while in India*

I first talked about Australia to students of Australia in India in the mid 1990s, and realised that the Australia they studied from their anthology of literature was not the Australia I came from but the one constructed by the anthologists and filtered through their Indian perceptions. When I answered their questions I became, in effect, an addition to the anthology, a writer from Australia whose personal history was not found in Australian history.

I was a representative of Australia in a more formal sense than the usual visitor/tourist/traveller who represents their country.

To say Australia is my country was not something I could take for granted.

Some of the questions I was asked by Indian students:

“How would I be treated if I went to Australia? I mean, is Australia racist?”

“Does Australia really look like it does on television, like on *Neighbours*?”

“Do Australian writers take a post-colonial subject matter?”

“What is the situation of Aborigines?”

“What is the Australian identity?”

*It is a complex fate to be an Australian.*

Henry James said it was a complex fate to be an American

James was a Europhile who scrutinised and wrote about Americans away from their homeland. His observation went like this:

It's a complex fate, being an American, and one of the responsibilities it entails is fighting against a superstitious valuation of Europe. (Letter to Charles Eliot Norton, 4 February 1872).

I have long remembered this as it always made me think, it's a complex fate to be an Australian, if not in quite the same way.

I might say that our responsibility as Australians is to fight against a superstitious valuation of lands abroad, England, Europe, the USA, (Asia for some) for, to leap into generalisations about Australia, it can be a country that has both an exaggerated or unrealistic idea of its own importance along with a certain inferiority complex—at least, that used to seem to be true and preparing to give my talk was an opportunity to rethink this along with other ideas about Australia .

The complex fate is more to do with the idea of one's identity as an Australian, and the ways we think of and represent Australia.

*Self description is called for*

Even the least self-examining of us is often called upon to provide self-description—when, for example, submitting an abstract to an academic conference, or a paper to a journal.

In such cases, to state our affiliations with educational bodies and to provide a list of publications is all that is called for. We have these degrees from these universities, we've published this and that, teach here, are working on that.

Sometimes more personal and individual details might seem appropriate: mini biographies for book covers or press releases for example. Your birthplace, your partner, your collections or passions or favourite places might colour these resumé's.

Sometimes to supply our few lines of biography requires some thought about a succinct self description. Recently I described myself as:

*An English language writer of Australian citizenship, immigrant background, transnational culture, cosmopolitan temperament.*

It occurred to me that this condensed self-description might provide a way to reflect on Australia, and so to contribute to the conversation about the study of Australia. I have a sense that if Australian Studies is feeling in need of a transformation, the reasons are tied up with ideas about what Australia is and how to talk about it, about what items and what aspects of its cultural production should be chosen for study.

*These days, I describe myself as an English-language writer*

These days, I describe myself as an English-language writer.

The reason I make a point of this is because I feel an expectation or imperative to describe myself firstly as an Australian writer.

I don't object to being called an Australian writer, it's neither incorrect nor objectionable.

Still, there are writers who are considered and consider themselves as distinctively and even typically Australian, as above all Australian, and I cannot be classified among them.

The writers who do this, who proclaim their nationalism, and the Australianness of their language, are considered to speak for and about Australia, and are commended specifically for their Australianness and for representing Australia.

A nation's possessiveness toward its artists works as a *small-context terrorism* that reduces the entire meaning of a work to the role it plays in its homeland. (Milan Kundera, 2007)

When my work first began to be published in the 1980s, it was in anthologies of feminist, experimental and multicultural writings—and so I would joke that these new publishing categories had been invented to give me a place.

There is no meaningful way I could describe myself as a multicultural writer today—that vexed term has had to bear so many meanings that it does not have a single one we can all agree on.

But we must have categories.

I have come to think it's more meaningful to count myself as among English language writers, for the English language has no nationality.

*Translated men; many Englishes; foreign everywhere*

There were so many Englishes, this I noticed as a child, trying to figure out why; in a different way these days I insist that English is not a single language. (Interesting how much affront you still can cause by introducing the idea that there is no one correct version.) There was a different Australian speech in the working-class suburbs of my childhood homes than in the posh private schools I attended for some not all of my school years; there were different accents even among the Hungarians and among the other migrant kids' parents; there was the way they talked on the ABC inside and the way they talked out on the street on the transistor radios screeching about horseraces and football matches played by men in singlets washing their cars. And of course this is about class differences as well as ethnic origin differences but it takes a while to gain that vocabulary.

Salman Rushdie talked about being "translated men". No matter whether or not you lose your first language (I can't speak Hungarian at all now) one thing you never lose is a sense of living a translated life.

I was given elocution lessons at age 13 when a schoolfriend's alarmed mother noticed my adoption of the local dialect ("t's gunna rine") and I soon could sweep around the room reciting Shakespearean sonnets with round vowels and precise consonants, but also I came to find that the way I spoke changed according to the context. More contexts, more variations. We all code-shift.

*the change in the Australian accent*

My generation saw the change in the Australian accent; the cultural nationalism of the 1970s—the Australian new wave in cinema and theatre—meant that announcers at the ABC and actors in the theatre no longer had to sound British.

(In fact an exaggerated or pronounced Broad Australian became popular in some circles where I rubbed shoulders, while some Australian actors had to un-learn their cultivated British-sounding speech.)

We speak Australian English, which has its own variants, even while some variants are considered more typically or authentically Australian than others.

My own Australian accent is unmistakable Australian to some and to others it doesn't sound Australian at all because I don't speak with certain cadences that once we called Broad Australian.

We all live among various levels and types of English. It has the world's highest number of users as a second language and I am constantly struck by its variations, flexibility and neologism.

I love living in English; this language is my home. I love all its registers and accents. I love the range and variety and flexibility of English. I love its use by writers from a range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

In one of his essays, the late Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe stated that “[let] no one be fooled by the fact that we write in English, for we intend to do unheard-of things with it.” That “we” is, in essence, an authoritative oratorical posture that cast him as a representative of a group, a kindred of writers who—either by design or fate—have adopted English as the language of literary composition. (Chigozie Obioma, 2015)

*of Australian citizenship*

I describe myself as a writer of Australian citizenship:

This is different from saying of Australian nationality.

I have always been asked, and I mean growing up in Australia, what nationality are you? It's because I don't have an Anglo name.

People with Anglo names were not constantly asked, formally or socially: what nationality is that?

The word nationality can be used in a range of ways and is variously defined, but citizenship has a more definite meaning. It's an official identity; it might not clarify your origins, residence, or loyalty but no descriptor does all that.

The granting of citizenship of course in itself is not sufficient in providing a sense of being Australian. But my own citizenship means more to me than the passport I hold. It means being part of something more, well, more national, a conversation about your country, its politics and policies, what's going on in its culture. It's listening to the ABC, it's subscribing to Australian independent news sources, it's the fellow feeling with other Australians.

*of immigrant background*

I describe myself as a writer of immigrant background.

For some Australians this is the primal scene of their identity.

While I was growing up in Australia, people like me were not counted as Australian. It was a world where the migrant experience was undergone in much more isolation and unconnectedness than is possible today.

This is an identity formed flavoured with the idea that twists of fate—random chance—led to your current nationality. Many migrants, refugees, asylum seekers had little or no say in where they went. My parents were officially displaced people after the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War. My first name is a Spanish name, and why? “Because my parents expected to migrate to Argentina”. And why didn't they? “The next boat went to Australia.” I now have no idea exactly why, how, one expected destination turned into another and I don't think that even if my parents were still alive they would know any more. Migrants don't speak of the past, they must concentrate on the present and the future, and because of that so many memories are not renewed and becomes atrophied.

This immigrant background has inevitably and obviously informed all of my writing, even if I am not always the best person to see just how.

The immigrant writer has been the Other of Australian writing, and if this is changing, or has changed, or still needs to change, it is a shift worth taking notice of.

*of transnational culture*

I describe myself as a writer of transnational culture.

Back in the 1970s one of my radical friends in Sydney pointed out “my community is not geographically based”. This seemed to be an articulation of something not then obvious or widely acknowledged. We quarreled with this word Community which was gaining such currency. Once, it seemed, a community was identified by its location—people of a certain town or district. Now the word was employed in phrases like “the christian community”, “the gay community”. “I’m gay but these people are not my community” said my friend, opposing certain capitalistic and authoritarian ideas. Our shared politics gave a sense of connection that could be seen as forming a community. But it had no name.

These things are very different in today’s connected, online world, where it is commonplace to find your people, your tribe, in ways that have nothing to do with the geographic location of the computer you’re using.

During my travels in India I became conscious of the fact that I had more in common with Indians of middle class and similar education than either they or I had in common with people in our own countries of different class, sub-cultures, values or political sympathies. I explored this idea when as a novelist I created an Indian character, who I felt was not more removed from my experience than male characters, characters of an age I had not yet attained, or characters of a temperamental make up different from my own. Or any character not strictly autobiographical.

There exist certain middle class values, which at best are ideals of civilisation and at worst bourgeois snobbery or limitations, which make possible a level of understanding and communicative sympathy across national divides.

And of course as individuals and groups construct and give allegiance to value systems of their own, they become connected to, allied with, people whose nationality is immaterial, except of course in the case where the elective affinities are based on nationalistic expression.

Once you start noticing this, the fact of identity being supposed to be primarily that of your nationality seems increasingly inadequate to the point of being false.

The term transnational is widespread now—these days I am classified by some as a transnational writer, and I cannot object when this provides a framework for my body of work to be understood in ways that seemed to be out of the question when Australian writing needed first and foremost to demonstrate its credibility, its worthiness, its noticable-ity, by its Australianness.

Even now Australian texts are discussed and judged by a criterion “what does it say about Australia, what does it tell us about who we are” and that *we* always sounds like one that excludes those of us who have never been told *who they are* by the novels and films that are embraced as part of the national family portrait.

As Kundera says of the art of small nations

what handicaps their art is that everything and everyone (critics, historians, compatriots as well as foreigners) hooks the art onto the great national family portrait photo and will not let it get away. (Kundera, 1995, 193)

A transnational writer is still identified by nationality—an Australian transnational writer is not likely to be similar to, say, a Jordanian transnational writer.

Sometimes the most obvious things bear pointing out. Those of us involved in some way in the study of Australia and ideas about Australia will find ourselves of several nationalities, various first languages, diverse communities—but this one connection we share, the study of Australia, gives us a common place, a place where the intellect and imagination can roam and play and get serious. The study of Australia is itself a transnational occupation.

*Study of Australians by non-Australians*

The work being done by my colleagues in Çanakkale and an international team on the diaries and letters of soldiers from all sides during what Australians call the Gallipoli campaign has made me wonder about work being done on Australian Studies in many countries, and to wonder what particular insights and perspectives are brought to Australia by non-Australians.

There might be a new tension between nationalism and transnationalism in the understanding and representation of Australia.

I'm not sure there can be a "transnational Australia"—isn't that a kind of contradiction?

Australia itself exists as a kind of fiction—it is a set of ideas and associations in all our separate minds.

What is a shared conceptual Australia? Is it made of agreed on historical facts? Is it the case that "Real" Australia is found in specific historical facts ... while an international / global Australia has not been so real?

*world literature*

I want to raise the question of something called *world literature*.

We could debate this term, but let's say we're talking about literature that gains in meaning read outside its country of origin, that might be read with more interest or empathy out in the world.

When I say literature here, I mean all text-based forms including film and television, as well as creative fiction and non-fiction.

If a text of some kind of Australian origin is counted as world literature, is it considered as less Australian, as of lesser value for the study of Australia?

To mention translation at this point can only be to point at another area in which the question of understanding Australia through literature is problematised. I don't know how much Australian literature is studied, rather than read, through translation, how desirable this is, and what its effects can be. (I'm pretty sure that all writers welcome translations.)

Is there a paradox: Australian texts chosen in Australian Studies courses for their Australian-ness become, by being studied outside of Australia, part of this world literature?

*as for multiculturalism ...*

One of the better uses of the term transnational is to set aside the term multicultural. The multicultural was from the start used to denote Other. People called multicultural were by definition not the mainstream or Real Australians.

I still like what Ghassan Hage once said:

The White multicultural 'we' which appreciates diversity seems continuous with the old Australian 'we' that did not appreciate it. Diversity simply does not affect

the nature of the White ‘we.’ It remains extrinsic to it. [. . .] [If we really were] diverse there would be nothing to ‘appreciate’ and ‘value’ other than ourselves. This is the difficult imaginary domain of the multicultural Real. (140)

Multiculturalism—oh I am sick of that word—does not require the critics and gatekeepers of Australian writing to *contend with* other traditions and sensibilities, but only to acknowledge an “identity” which is defined by being set against the mainstream.

Once, some of the real Australians could talk of “new Australian” as a single language, a single kind of food, a single identity defined only by what it was not. In the 1950s and 60s Australia was still a British colony, *de facto* if not in name, and foreign languages, garlic, and travel to anywhere but Britain were all *de trop*.

As Amartya Sen has identified, what policy makers created was not multiculturalism but “plural monoculturalism”, a system in which people are constantly herded into different identity pens. (quoted in Malik)

Multiculturalism became the new fashion for intellectuals, sociologists and social engineers, a theology rather than a demographic fact. Anglo-Celtic, we then learned to say; we learnt that Anglos were not at all part of a monolith.

At some point in the late twentieth century, what with the Bicentennial, the internet, and genetic testing (you can’t ignore history; you can find out anything easily; you can discover your true origins) just about everyone’s tracing their family tree, not ashamed of convicts on the branches, mixed Indigenous and non-Indigenous ancestors not a necessary indication of identity. Some fantasies of exotic origins were doomed to disappointment. Some people found out things about themselves that explained everything.

Me, never wanted to do it. I find my ancestors in literature. My country too.

*of cosmopolitan temperament.*

I describe myself as a writer of cosmopolitan temperament.

The cosmopolitan ideal is traced back to ancient Greece as if there always existed an ideal to be a citizen of the world rather than of a particular state.

The desire or affinity for what I now call cosmopolitanism always existed in me before I knew the term for it, it is an instinct, a sense I feel is intrinsic.

I was always attracted to stories and accounts of life where people made their homes in foreign places, or lived in cities swarming with multitudinous types.

And in my own past, this seemed to be a desire, a preference, a sympathy that was quite at odds with any idea of being Australian.

Now I think that cosmopolitanism, like provincialism, are transnational categories.

I live in a provincial city in Turkey now and it has more in common with other provincial places I’ve lived in than it does with my life in the ancient vast cultural and former political Turkish capital Istanbul.

I like this:

Cosmopolitan individuals are those self-conscious of that fact that there is never a single criterion of identity. While the traditional identity categories of nationality, religion, gender, class and race survive, there are also new vocabularies of identities at the intersections and exteriors of those age-old categories. Many people now have real autonomy in deciding for themselves what each of those

identifications means to them, and how much value they wish to assign them. Identity is always a composite in a unified whole. (James McAuley)

What are these new vocabularies of identity? It's a question I'm exploring here to some extent but it's wide open too.

Can a sense of marginality and outsidership become an identity?

Can an Australian become a sub category of the cosmopolitan, rather than the other way round?

What's the difference between a cosmopolitan Australian and an Australian cosmopolitan?

Are hierarchies of identity inevitable—one identity always having to be a sub category of another?

What does this mean for the way we look at Australian texts?

We have to choose Australian texts in our Australian studies courses. What gives them their identity as Australian texts? Does their identity as Australian texts have to be their dominant identity.

If the identity of a text is not glaringly obvious, is the text less useful for a study of Australia?

(I must admit that I'm finding "teachable" Australian texts are texts that trade in—or have created—the stereotypes and received ideas about Australianness; for example, among friends I might not be a great admirer of Baz Luhrmann's film *Australia* but it is a useful piece to show to students.)

*identity is an inevitable topic*

In one of my earliest published pieces, I say *we're all sick of the debate on national identity*—and that was in the 1980s. Identity: that inevitable topic for Australia, whether looking at itself or being examined from outside.

Is Australia British? My first passport said "British passport, Australia" and that was in the 1960s.

Is Australia not British? Much of Australia seemed to think that becoming a Republic meant leaving the Commonwealth. The pro-Republic side had to point out that it was not so, but the next issue is, what *is* this Commonwealth association, is it of any relevance or value any more?

Is there any meaningful, useful sense in which countries historically part of the British Empire form a community?—even the English language is not theirs alone to inherit or employ.

When did Australia stop becoming a colony? What do we call the continent we know as Australia when it was populated only by Indigenous inhabitants? Should we insist that the arrival of Europeans—in this case a term that includes the English—was an invasion? Britain, Great Britain, United Kingdom, England, they don't all mean the same thing, does it matter very much when we're talking about the early colonisation of Australia? Why do they hold Australia Day on 26 January? That is Invasion Day to many, are Indigenous Australians really meant to celebrate?

How can we talk about Australia and not talk about invasion, colonisation, and must we not go on to today's urgent issues of refugees and racism?

Many, maybe most, countries and nations focus on the question of identity, with more or less attention or focus at different times ... wondering about this, I typed a few words into a search engine to find that not only Australia has an identity crisis; I see that "Britain has a permanent identity crisis", that the Belgians aren't of one mind about what it is to be Belgian



while the English are no longer are sure of what being English is. The French never stop talking about what it means to be French. The Arab states have not succeeded in evolving a national identity. Ireland discusses its own identity crisis. There is an African identity crisis. Pakistan is a country suffering from an identity crisis. Belarus has an identity crisis.

*Indigenous Australia of most interest outside of Australia*

The history and the literature of Indigenous Australia is of most interest to my Turkish students and I have found that to be the case wherever I have been asked about Australia outside of it.

There's a brilliant kind of poetic justice in this. A people who were invaded and who were considered doomed. Government policy planned their extinction. But the oldest living culture in the world refuses to die.

There's a story of struggle and defiance as Land rights were won, bit by bit. There was conquest, devastation and brutality, there was also respect and engagement at cultural, intellectual, personal levels.

I hopefully expect to see more creative literature about the early encounters, the people of the invading culture who did approach Indigenous people with curiosity, respect, openness, who learnt from them and exchanged world views and influences; the experience seen from Indigenous perspectives.

*in Turkey at the gateway*

Currently I am based in Turkey ... which is having an identity crises, several of them, and not its first, by several accounts. Turkey's had an identity crisis for the last 100 years.

I could also describe myself as a writer of Turkish residency, for the time being anyway.

The town I live in is at the gateway to the place Australians call Gallipoli, the peninsula of land made mythical by decades of nationalist myth-making, by Turkey as well as Australia.

I was first invited to this distant campus to talk about Australia.

I talked about land. How the land must have looked to the explorers and invaders, about what white Australians had to learn about the meaning and importance of land to Indigenous Australians. You have to imagine how different the land was from anything familiar to the early invaders, settlers, colonialists, and successive waves of immigrants, how strange and harsh and forbidding and also to some how fascinating and beautiful.

It is experience of land that makes you Australian. Once you've slept under those immense skies in the land beyond the suburban, beyond the town's outskirts, out in the bush, out in the outback, out in the wilderness, out in the desert, out by the river, out in the islands, you're never the same again. It's something understood by other Australians. And you can be basically an urban dweller, or you can be a foreigner in Australia, you can be there for a really short time, and you could have that experience, there are testaments.

As non-Indigenous Australians we learn, from art and literature and radio and people, some thing about the immense and central place that land has in Indigenous culture.

You've had a glimpse. You get what a different ancestry you have, ancestry not rooted in this land with roots deeper than any other living culture.

I would have said something like that.

*because Anzac Day*

I remember speaking carefully about Anzac Day and Gallipoli in the Australian imagination, wanting to be both diplomatic and truthful. What could I say, here and now,

about my attitude to Anzac Day during my years of growing up in Australia, and my attitude now. To Turkish students and teachers, and the Australian Consul.

It is because of Anzac Day that Australia keeps a Consul in Çanakkale, the main town across from the Gallipoli Peninsula. The focus of his work is the annual commemoration on the site of the battles that were made into Australia's founding mythology.

When I was growing up in the western suburbs and inner city of Sydney, Anzac Day commemorations seemed bound for imminent extinction.

I was doubly disinclined to give the day much credibility or even attention let alone respect. One, Anzac day was for really straight old people who "glorified war", and we were bent young people who really didn't. Two, Anzac day was for them, those Australians we immigrant kids could never be part of, who had a history we could never share.

Once upon a time there was a real Australia to which I could not belong and therefore had no right to speak about. While, as I have indicated, the discourses on multiculturalism and transnationalism have altered that sense ... still, meanwhile, the people who come to Gallipoli for Anzac Day somehow seem to be, or are taken as, more authentically Australian than I, my friends, our tribes.

*the Australians must have won*

"I thought the Australians must have won," said a Turkish friend in Istanbul, who meets people from everywhere in her shop in the Spice Market, including Australians travelling to Gallipoli. Like many of us, she needed to brush up on the particulars of a related nation's history, and her own; who doesn't. Long before the war was won, battles were lost. No, Australians didn't win at Gallipoli, and the defeat strangely enough seems part of what is celebrated.

The annual pilgrimage to Gallipoli has famously become a huge event, a meeting place for young Australians; no-one had predicted the growth and popularity of this gathering, the re-invention of Anzac Day as, or seen as, a massive tribal party at Gallipoli for young Aussie backpackers. (The statistically typical Anzac Day visitor is an Australian woman in her 20s working in London, according to the current Consul.)

Anzac Day has been re-invented and aches with a new immense a burden of meaning, and the term Anzackery has been usefully invented for a short hand for all the exaggerated nationalistic triumphalism and absurd claims of a nation leaping into jubilant being out of those brutal trenches, full of Anzac spirit among the fallen and their sacrifice.

*Gelibolu stories I'd like to see*

The Gallipoli peninsula—Gelibolu—is sacred ground for Turks, also; they lost many times more in the World War One battles there.

Wars and their causes and consequences are part of the legacy we share, while everything about them is subject to mythmaking and concealment, to glorifying and discrediting, to re-telling and interpreting, to shifts in perspective and purpose. Ours is a liquid legacy.

Many of my students as volunteer helpers for Anzac Day visitors meet the visiting Australians. How much encounter, what possibilities of embarking on new collaborations, are possible?

If new meanings are going to be created and accepted for our common sacred ground it might start with a new kind of engagement. Today the encounter with Gallipoli is with inherited identity and inherited memory, leaving us the possibility or, could I say, obligation to encounter Turkey anew on a personal level, not as parts of a category of identity, or a vigil of commemoration which stops time and overlays the past event of war over the present of

Gallipoli, but as individuals seeking empowering encounter and shared human identity in the present with Turkey now, with Turkish people now.

I would like to see art made from these ideas.

*the real Trojan horse*

On the waterfront of Çanakkale you can see the Trojan Horse, a popular meeting point. It's the real Trojan Horse, the one Brad Pitt went inside in the film. (The simulacrum becomes the real.) The one in the old old story might or might not have been real; the place near here that we call Troy might or might not have been the one the Trojans built and inhabited.

In any case all those stories are a legacy I share, part of the culture that formed me. And I think this is true for all of us here, wherever we grew up. As a child I don't suppose questions of what was *real* troubled me while I was listening to the ABC children's radio show called The Argonauts. When I finally read Homer part of the sensation was the filling in of something like a blurrily known family history.

I am a writer whose cultural inheritance is found here, among the ghosts of the Odyssey fleet, as much as in my country of citizenship, my country of birth, the country of my grandparents.

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