

*Australian Studies in Europe and the Omnipresent Elephant*

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**Abstract:** This article discusses the current status and the *raison d'être* of European Australian Studies. It begins with a short history of the evolution of Australian Studies in Europe with a focus on Denmark, which happens to have one of the longest records of Australian Studies. It then moves to consider the interconnections between Australian Studies and Commonwealth Studies/Postcolonial Studies in (continental) Europe, and points to different possibilities that have been available to European based scholars. The article finishes with some considerations concerning the future developments of EASA and European Australian Studies, suggesting the best way forward may lie in developing more European based perspectives on Australian Studies and urges the need to find ways of establishing more sustained collaborations across Europe, with a particular view to make the most of the interdisciplinary reality of European Australian Studies.

**Key words:** past, present and future status of European Australian Studies, nation, multiculturalism

A Festschrift is an occasion for the celebration of an achievement in academic life. It is also a testimony, a personal tribute to the preoccupations and the vested interests of an academic life. As retiring chairman of EASA this moment also constitutes an occasion for my own reflections on how EASA has evolved, and where it is heading. I have met Werner Senn only on a few occasions, so my article here can be read most productively as an opportunity to map out where European-based Australian Studies are today, compared to where they began and how they evolved during the decades of Senn's involvement. The mapping is mine and will reflect the ways in which my own academic involvement in Australian Studies has developed from a later date than Senn's, but nonetheless constitutes a similar, substantial investment in 'studies of Australia'. As such the history of my involvement to some extent parallels Senn, and I hope he will find its reflections useful to his own considerations, when he looks back at his own commitment and record in Australian Studies. Australian Studies has been used as a label to signal specific approaches to studies of Australia. I use it in this article in the broadest possible sense.

Australian Studies in Europe must have one of its longest established records in Denmark, where it dates back to the arrival of Greta Hort at Aarhus University in 1958. Probably longer than its record at some Australian universities, who were still at that time laboring to free themselves from the burden of British literary history as the

ultimate measuring stick for an Australian literature, deemed to be provincial and even parochial both in British and Australian academia. With the recruitment of Bruce Clunies Ross to Copenhagen University and Anna Rutherford to Aarhus University in the late sixties, Australian Studies in Denmark could by today's standards in the field have amounted to a centre. However, the necessary level of collaboration was never developed, for various personal and academic reasons. I will dwell only on a few of those that I consider important to my broader argument here. In the academic department the main reason for the non-event of an Australian centre was the view of Australian Studies in Europe as part of Commonwealth Studies, which was at least in Denmark, but I suspect also elsewhere, partly conditioned by the difficulty of justifying Australian Studies as a unit within English Departments. Accumulating Commonwealth countries as a focus in English studies made redundant the argument that Australian Studies were too peripheral, which is not to say that Commonwealth (or Postcolonial Studies are) enthusiastically embraced by English Departments which on the European Continent tend to be language departments struggling to create an intellectual space outside the immediate field of language instruction and learning. Rather, Commonwealth Studies' evident scope made it impossible to ignore. Both in Aarhus and Copenhagen Commonwealth Studies through the efforts of Clunies Ross and Rutherford came to be seen as the critical framework inside which Australian Studies should be articulated. This demarcates certainly a significant difference from the way Australian Studies emerged and developed in Australia itself.

Commonwealth Studies in Aarhus and Copenhagen followed a parallel path, rather than becoming a space for mutual engagement. As an old Aarhus University student I am more familiar with the events here, and it is fair to say that Anna Rutherford, who remained fiercely Australian, put her main focus on developing Commonwealth Studies at Aarhus, but also became a pioneering figure in the rise of Commonwealth—and later Postcolonial—Studies through her many years of involvement in ACLALS, and of course, *Kunapipi*. Her editorship guaranteed a significant component of Australian content in the journal. If this is evidence of a sustained academic involvement in Australian Studies, and a never wavering sense of being an ex-pat Australian in Denmark, complete with a kangaroo bumper sticker on the four wheel drive, which was both an identity marker and a necessity in order to negotiate the muddy track to her cottage in outback Denmark (less than 10 km from Aarhus), she had little time for EASA when it was set up. In fact, she told me that when she refused to join EASA, she was made what must be the organisation's first honorary member. Her reasons for not joining EASA were several. One reason was her assessment that Australian Studies were already covered through Commonwealth Literature/Postcolonial Studies. I suspect an affiliated reason was her fear that any 'nation' studies within Commonwealth Studies might amount to a too unqualified celebration of that country's literary and cultural merits. The critical space offered by Postcolonial Studies has arguably worked most poignantly through its cross-cultural referencing. Related to her concern might also have been a too narrow focus on literature in Australian Studies, a situation which in a European context would have been strengthened by the location of Australian Studies within English Departments, where the division of language studies and literature studies have worked to preclude the opening of a wider range of interdisciplinary approaches to cultural histories. The necessity of establishing a curriculum in literary history has made it difficult to create a space for the critique of national canonization at the same time. I think Anna saw this inherent problem (certainly she saw it practised at

Aarhus University with a stunning lack of hesitation) and felt that Postcolonial Studies enabled the critique alongside the curriculum building in ways that Australian Studies did or could not.

When Werner Senn hosted the inaugural EASA conference in Berne in 1991, Commonwealth Studies had to all purposes and intents become Postcolonial Studies in Europe. While Australian Studies in Australia were different fields, Australian Studies in Europe became quickly associated with Australian literature Studies. This is clear both from the published conference proceedings from the first conference as well as the special issue of *ALS*, both of which were published in 1991. The latter, *European Perspectives: Contemporary Essays on Australian Literature*, which Giovanna Capone edited with Werner Senn and Bruce Clunies Ross, was published to showcase the European talent in Australian Studies, and it was overtly literary even if also framed within a broader discourse on Australian cultural identities. In the Introduction we find the following observation by Capone on Europe/Australia and how she sees it played out in the volume:

The collection 'says' (in the sense of 'telling', not of stating) how a group of European intellectuals (first and second generation scholars of the field in Europe) entered into intellectual involvement with Australian literature, and says what the 'elective affinities' are today. This is a cross-section and a sampling of *our* way of receiving Australian literature – *our* Australian literature – an idiosyncratic way, if you like. (Capone ix)

The 'we' in this quotation appears to be a fluctuating 'we' that can both refer to European scholars, in which case it relates back to an earlier point in the Introduction about joining 'the debate on Eurocentricity, which it admits and does not circumvent' (p. ix). It also of course refers both to the contributing scholars, and to their collective take on Australian (literary) Studies, as well as the editors and their choices. Regardless of the referent, however, the choice of the term Eurocentricity strikes me as slightly odd in this particular context. Admittedly, there have also in the later years been controversies over European scholars' handling of sensitive cultural issues in relation to Australian Studies, but it seems to me that other than in the form of a lack of detailed knowledge and an unwillingness to recognize this limitation, Europe has been provincialised (to use Dipesh Chakrabarty's term) for a long time when it comes to Australian Studies. I would argue that the problem for European scholars has been the question of how to connect themselves to Australian Studies without on the one hand reducing themselves to secondary interventionists (i.e. trotting out trajectories already established in Australian academic discourse), while on the other hand also recognizing the necessarily broader scope of debates over Australian Studies in Australia. Online access to Australian journals and media, cheaper flights to Australia, online ordering of relevant books have all contributed to alter this situation in some ways, but debates are also located in ways that escape the ready identification across space. Space in the disjointed field of Australian Studies in Europe has not been, nor is it about to be, annihilated.

In *European Perspectives* there is little evidence of the reflective European scholar reflecting on his/her engagement with Australian material. It remains at best implicit, and it is an open question whether a collection of articles written by scholars in

Australia would in fact have looked very different. Yet my point here is not to identify the Europeanness of the collection, or bemoan its absence, even if it is the declared intention of the editor(s) to stipulate the importance of the European point of enunciation. I wish instead to make the observation that this overtly European collection of essays on Australian literature is published at the moment in which Australian literature's Anglo-Celtic centrality is being questioned, somewhat ironically, by migrant writing which is predominantly European. Interestingly, Clunies Ross's reflections on the inaugural EASA conference in his article "On the Inaugural Conference of the European Association of Studies on Australia, University of Berne, 25-27 Sept. 1991" draws attention to this broader scope, and Senn and Capone's edited volume from the conference, *The Making of Pluralist Australia 1950-1990*, (1992) includes non-literary articles. The European migrant literature, premises itself at times, such as in the notable case of Ania Walwicz, precisely on a provocative Eurocentricity in response to what it sees as an Australian parochialism disguising itself as nationalism. Knowing nothing about the discussions around *European Perspectives*, I do find it odd that the accompanying cultural-literary critique such as Sneja Gunew & Jan Mahyuddin (eds), *Beyond the Echo: Multicultural Women's Writing*, UQP: St. Lucia, 1988, has not been granted a space given the introduction's stated interests. Why does a collection of essays overtly concerned with national identity formation in Australian literature not reflect this watershed in Australian Studies towards the recognition of a wider multicultural shift in Australian society? Perhaps an impossible question to answer definitively, however, I would venture a couple of observations. The first is that the framework of Australian Studies within Europe reflects preoccupations in Australian Studies in Australia, and their overt historical concern with establishing a study of national Australian literature, as a deliberate strategy of liberating Australian literature from its previous status as inferior to British literature. Although Australian literary Studies have now long been well established, it seems clear to me after attending recent ASAL conferences that it is struggling to redefine itself in the wake of a rapidly changing multicultural Australia. The accommodation of other voices, now predominantly Asian—rather than continental European, is sought but escapes being worked consistently into its frame. Part of the reason for this is, in my reading of the situation, the unresolved problematic around the question of nation as a positive identity marker for Australian *literary* Studies in its process of liberating itself from the dominance of British literature. Once Australian literary Studies in its concern with the nation became the established view it forgot to ask itself what happens to those who cannot identify with either a conservative, British orientated nationalism, or the radical nationalism, which has been radical in the sense of breaking away from British derived models of conceiving Australian society, but whose track record with feminist, indigenous, and non-Anglo-Celtic migrant literatures has at best offered a belated recognition. There is obviously much more buried in the highly complex processes of this particular evolving settler nation, but my concern here is with the implications for European based scholars, and how they can respond to this tricky situation.

The questions I am raising here transcend the specific engagements at various EASA conferences and other outlets for European based discussions on Australian culture and Australian Studies and become a fundamental question about the nature, the justification and the point of doing Australian Studies in a European context. European scholars working in Australian Studies occupy a most peculiar space in relation to such domestic Australian debates. 'We' (by which I include all European based scholars,

though it does leave Australian ex-pats in a highly ambiguous position, which they will have to work out for themselves) can comment on whether Australian identity discussions are sufficiently multicultural, actually accommodate indigenous Australians or not, but what are our credentials? At the heart of this lies an extremely difficult question: Do we believe that the closer one is placed to the centre of the nation, the better equipped we become to critically engage with its productions? Or do we believe that the closer we come to the centre, the blinder we become? Although this question does not have an answer, it is also unavoidable, if one wishes to understand one's position in relation to Australian Studies in Europe (and actually also in Australia, even if in a different way). Thus even if everybody recognises the unproductive nature of a productive discussion of merits through proximity, i.e. the longer time spent in Australia, or the increased frequency of one's visits, the bigger credentials, the question of European distance to Australian Studies has remained a stumbling block for developing this field in Europe. This is even more interesting given the European traditional emphasis on literature studies, which does not entail the same grounded approach, as say more empirically orientated studies of migrant experiences. Let me be very clear here: I am not interested in a discussion about Australian identity patrolling, where European based scholars have to show they serve all their time in Australian Studies. But I do insist that the nation exists as a 'nagging elephant' in the room at Australian Studies conferences, both in Australia, and in Europe, including EASA. And I am suggesting that we find a way of dealing with this elephant, that we make it the focus of our discussions rather than the omnipresent absence.

## **Going forward**

It should be clear from my argument so far that in my view Australian Studies in Europe needs to find its own footing if it wishes to become more and other than secondary criticism. This footing must continue as a discussion between European based scholars and visiting Australian scholars at EASA conferences, but it has also to become a discussion where European based scholars engage each other on Australian Studies issues. This happens at an informal level at EASA conferences, but has been shied away from during the actual conference proceedings. EASA suffers from an at least partially self-inflicted provincial cringe, which is why I think the label of Eurocentrism in Capone's Introduction is a mislabeling of the position of Australian Studies in Europe. We need to develop our own platforms for a discussion of Australian Studies, instead of waiting for the agenda to fly in from down-under. Otherwise, European Australian Studies remains a secondary, and a belated discussion platform that makes redundant European perspectives developed from another contextualization. We obviously should not ignore what happens in Australian Studies in Australia, but we need to find a platform from which we can develop European perspectives on these discussions. I find it difficult to see that this can take place without acknowledging a few basic points about Australian Studies in Europe and its environment and working conditions. A) Australian Studies is most often carried out by scholars in Europe who quite often are doing it as just one component in their teaching and research load; b) Australian Studies is primarily carried out by scholars in isolation from one another, apart from the communal participation in conferences; c) Australian Studies in Europe must, if it wants to create a sustainable basis for future collaboration find a way of accommodating interdisciplinarity. One of the important changes that has taken place since the inauguration of Australian Studies in Europe is the move away from an overt,

almost exclusive focus on literature studies to anything from studies of indigenous tourism, over environmentalism to sociological studies. This actually also creates a more versatile environment for discussing Australian Studies from an interdisciplinary perspective, rather than from within traditional disciplinary boundaries that also seem to be struggling in Australia itself to generate a sufficient support base. In that sense EASA may actually provide an opportunity to reinvigorate some fields of Australian Studies within Australia itself.

Finally, 'we' who practice Australian Studies in Europe need to come to terms with our own 'tyranny of distance', our self-imposed cringes. Rather than suggesting one way out of this conundrum I would like to propose that it will depend on one's own specific location, both in terms of region of Europe, one's own academic location, and also how one thinks about why one does Australian Studies. Permit me to use my own trajectory as an example. I began in literature studies under the wings of Anna Rutherford, although even my Master's thesis was a hybrid between literature studies and Cultural Studies. After an invigorating walk in the academic wilderness, I landed myself a job in a Cultural Studies program in Denmark, where for the first time I had to teach in Danish. I found that I had to translate my thoughts, the theories that inspired me to fit my now seemingly permanent Danish academic context, and I became yet another hybrid academic, situated between Cultural Studies and Postcolonial Studies with a research platform investigating postcolonial Denmark. This platform appears far from any interest in Australian Studies. However, my new focus on rooms and Danish elephants, also brought me to refocus my gaze on Australian Studies. One example of this is my introduction to my own translation of Benedict Anderson's, *Imagined Communities*, where I compared the then recent deaths of the Danish Queen Mother and Donald Bradman in terms of their symbolic significance as national icons. Later on that same year, both the Danish and the Australian parliament went through what can only be described as race elections, and it struck me how extremely parallel, yet historically differently premised, was the rhetoric and the imagery, and the total lack of moral integrity which characterized the two right wing, neo-liberalist political platform that took power in both countries at the end of 2001. It is the comparative approach to similarity and difference that I find productive for my engagement in Australian Studies, but obviously there would have been few immediately comparable other European situations to the Danish (and Australian) election(s) at this moment in history. The devil is in the European detail, even if at a general level it is easy to identify the sacralisation of the nation as a mythological space, rather than a mundane political territory, where the continued practice of ostracizing the Muslim 'other' is the symbolic action of demarcating that mythological nation space. Yet at the more specific, or contextualized level, the question remains how to engage with one another across the very heterogeneous experiences of Europe, when comparing with an Australian context. My German or Spanish colleagues with an interest let us say in environmental and indigenous studies will find it difficult to relate to the details of the Danish components of my account of the race elections. Where we meet, what constitutes our common ground, is the shared interest, but, because we come from different fields, not our common knowledge of Australian Studies. It is this that binds us together, and it is this common interest that we in Europe need to work through to create productive platforms for discussing Australian Studies. But to develop this we need more than the biannual conversational space of the EASA conference. We need smaller events, scholarly get-togethers in the intervening periods between conferences, closer collaboration in smaller

units, with a sharper defined focus, which can be framed within the thematic umbrella of 'the nation': It is hard to think of an engagement with Australian Studies that is not simultaneously an engagement with 'the nation'. Also, in our research in Australian Studies, there is always the question of one's own location, one's own nation space. How does the question of environmentalism in Australia relate to the question of environmentalism in Spain, or Germany? Why not use this as a productive way of asking different questions about Australian Studies than those that come out of Australia? In fact, I think many Australian scholars coming to Europe would welcome such a move, because it would open up their research to new types of questions. This is where I think, EASA should find its departure for the next 20 years. Werner Senn is one of the people who have enabled us to have this wonderful space for productive engagement. It is up to us to use it and to develop it. Had I been in the position to bestow upon him the highest Danish order, he would have received the Order of the Elephant.

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