

***Transcending the National in Australian Studies
Bruce Bennett's Influence on a Discipline***

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There was something peculiar about meeting Bruce Bennett. Chances to see Bruce in Europe were much higher than getting hold of him in Australia. The first time we met was neither in Australia nor in Europe, but in Kolkata, India. This was at the 2008 IASA conference, one of the biennial meetings of the Indian Association for the Study of Australia. Bruce was surrounded by a bevy of Indian scholars, especially students, eager to ask for his advice or simply having a chat about their papers over coffee. Bruce had always had an open ear for everyone. He was interested in talking to students and emerging scholars alike. An eminent authority on Australian literature and culture, Bruce was not only preoccupied with 'big' names. He also engaged with young scholars of Australian studies.

When I first met Bruce, I remember, we both wore flower wreaths that student helpers had put over our shoulders. Mesmerised by the warm welcome of our hosts, I smiled at Bruce who was about to give his keynote address. 'I think we don't know each other yet', he replied to my smile. I wished him good luck—as if he needed any luck. He confessed that, for all his experience, he was still nervous before delivering his presentations; a good dose of stage fright that everyone should have, he explained. In hindsight, I think it was his modest and gentle attitude which made me instantly comfortable—a not so frequent attitude among senior academics in his position. Bruce was amazed to meet an Austrian Australian studies scholar in India. Surprising as my position might have been, he never treated me as something less 'important' or 'exotic'. The more Australian studies scholars the world has, the better, seemed to be his stance. Bruce really listened to us 'overseas Australianists', I had the feeling.

Australian studies is still often conceived of as a field of national research; this affects not only scholarly methods and theories but also the position of researchers. Transnational approaches to Australian studies are relatively rare and Australia—unlike Canada, the United States and Latin America—is far less an established part of European research (Stilz 9-13). This parochial tendency in scholarship is problematic, for it tends to suppress scholarly diversity and creativity. It is after all not easy for European researchers to gain a foothold in Australia, especially so when it comes to national subjects, such as Australian literature and history. The tendency to take 'foreign' scholars less seriously, to be sure, is not a particularly Australian phenomenon. In Australia, however, it has a special connotation: Europeans, it is my experience, are

often considered uninformed, lacking basic knowledge, and thought to be unconsciously influenced by an exotic and romantic view of Australia. Partly because Australian studies constitutes a niche in international scholarship, the weight of the national origin of its practitioners might be stronger than in more globally researched fields, such as French or German studies.

Bruce's unbiased stance towards my origin did not reflect mere kindness but needs to be understood within the problematic weight of the 'national' in Australian studies. Bruce was aware of this problem. He was actively supportive of Australian studies scholars from overseas. He was keen to hear different perspectives because he knew they could only add to the intellectual diversity of a discipline. Good scholars do not uphold, let alone establish, national boundaries in their respective fields. Good scholars understand the need to transcend and demolish national boundaries. Intellectually inspiring work deconstructs nationalist practices of exclusion by highlighting the mechanisms abetting the processes of nation formation. Scholarship, especially so in relation to history and literary studies, has been an integral part of nation building and nationalism (Anderson 198, 201; Walter 13). As Nira Yuval-Davis argues, nations depend on a history and literature that imagine their origin, existence and destiny as unique and different from one another (19, 27). Australian historians, for one, have played a constituent part in construing the Australian nation, especially by practices of inclusion and exclusion. One of the most obvious forms of the very practices was the different modes of placing Indigenous Australians within the narratives of national history (Rolls 7-10). The national background of scholars exerts a substantial influence on this narrative. European scholars are certainly no less prone to engage in processes of exclusion and inclusion than their Australian colleagues. But they do so differently, with distinct aims and effects on construing the nation. Indigenous Australia, for example, constitutes a firm part of Australian studies in the German-speaking countries, mirroring the self-conception of the German and Austrian nation respectively. Considering the German-speaking practices of Australian studies is thus a good approach to illuminate the very practices within Australia. It is worthwhile to look at Australia from a distance in order to understand its construction at home.

Not only did Bruce know the importance of international perspectives on Australian studies but lived up to this awareness. He tirelessly promoted international research on Australia. After India, we met in several European countries, including Spain and the United Kingdom. Only once did our paths cross in Australia, at the 2009 ASAL conference in Canberra. Bruce was perceived by many as a quasi ambassador of Australian studies. He was not naive, trying to expunge the 'nation' from Australian literary studies. The nation exerts a considerable influence on authors and publishers, playing out its formative effect on literature production. Questioning the nation is thus a very different endeavour from rendering it invisible. For all its global influence, Australian literature and culture need to be understood primarily within their local dimensions not least because the nation determines their place and confines in global contexts. To increase the understanding of this literature and culture, in all its pluralism, researchers on their part need to be as pluralistic as possible. They need to transcend the nation, recognising it as an important analytical category without homogenising intellectual work with reference to national divides.

Bruce was such a researcher: open-minded and supportive of emerging scholars from around the world. Next to his critical work, the active support of international scholars is one of the indelible legacies that Bruce has bequeathed to generations of future Australianists: Australian studies cannot have enough scholars and diverse perspectives. Bruce showed us how to achieve this goal. Hopefully his ambitions continue to serve as an incentive for Australian studies scholars.

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