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TWENTIETH ANNIVERSARY COLLOQUIUM: CULTURAL AND COMMUNICATIONS

STUDIES SECTION

Australian cultural studies in an 'Asian century'

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The organizers of this Colloquium provided a number of prompts to help shape our conversation. These included a theoretical question—which agendas are most promising for the future development of the discipline?—and some political ones: What political concerns—within Australia, and internationally—shaped cultural studies' practical engagements in the late 1990s? How have these changed? And which are now the most pressing? This short article attempts to respond to these two clusters of questions with reference to Asia-related cultural studies work.

Let's begin by looking back to 1996 and the publication of a watershed article by Jen Ang and Jon Stratton: *Asianing Australia: Notes Toward a Critical Transnationalism in Cultural Studies*.¹ I set this essay for many years as one of the 'bookend' think-pieces for an Honours seminar I used to teach, *Cultural Studies in Asia*, because it was (and remains) one of the few pieces that thinks through, carefully and explicitly, what it will mean to do Asia-engaged cultural studies from the perspective of Australia. The article was written during the Keating prime ministership with the impetus of considering the implications of, and elaborating alternatives to, that administration's rhetoric about the economic desirability of an Australian 'push into Asia'; and in the process (re)thinking the spatial dimensions of cultural studies, especially how the locatedness of Australian cultural studies matters for the work we can do. The authors proposed three key, interlinked points. First, they argued that we needed to elaborate a *critically transnationalist* form of cultural studies, which would critique the privileged position occupied by the nation-state, both 'out there' in public culture and within cultural studies as a scholarly formation. Second, they argued that we needed to *deconstruct the binary divide of 'Asia'/'the west'* which they saw underpinning the 'push into Asia' rhetoric; and third, they proposed that one way to do this was to *recognise 'Asia' and 'Australia' as co-*

participants in discrepant but linked modernities arising from the aftermaths of colonialisms and imperialisms, and the contemporary conditions of global (and Asia-Pacific regional) capitalism. The article ends with some specific suggestions about the kinds of comparative transnational work that might be done by the type of cultural studies the authors were imagining.

What has happened since then, in terms of Asia-engaged cultural studies work in and from Australia? A review of publications, conferences, grants, and institutional formations over the past 20-odd years reveals that a lot has happened. Broadly, incompletely, imperfectly and probably tendentiously, the field might be mapped into five or six key concentrations. First, there is an Asian Australian studies cluster which began to take form in the 1990s, and whose methods and objects of analysis align it closely with cultural studies traditions.² Second, there is a cluster working on industrial, policy and regulatory formations of creative and media industries in and across Asia.³ Third, there is a group of scholars formally trained in, and in some cases institutionally located within, older formations of Asian area studies, but who engage regularly and deeply with cultural studies methods, questions, and projects.⁴ Fourth, there is a cluster focussing on transnational sexuality studies and especially queer and trans studies in and across the Asian region.⁵ Fifth, there is a large group working on Asia-related media studies; this work focuses on media texts, audiences and everyday practices as distinct from media industries; and largely on screen media including TV, film and mobile networked media but also popular music.⁶ Finally, there is a vaguer grouping with a focus on regional human—and to some extent non-human, non-media—mobilities today, which overlaps significantly with a number of other areas and disciplines, especially anthropology, migration studies, international education studies.⁷ However imperfect this mapping, it at least gives some sense of all the work that's going on; hopefully, things have come a long way since 2003 when Peter Jackson remarked, not without justification, that:

*Thailand, or anywhere else in Asia, is a long, long way from the minds of most Australian cultural studies practitioners, who [...] still inhabit a colonial-era universe in which their imagined virtual Australia is located somewhere on the mid-Atlantic ridge half-way between London and New York.*⁸

Returning to Ang and Stratton's hopes for the field, I think we see clear and sustained engagement, in the clusters of scholarship summarised above, with exactly the kinds of approaches the authors envisaged. A critical transnationalism that both links Australian and Asian sites and undoes any presumed essential opposition between them is most evident in the large transnational-Asian-media studies cluster. Consider for example Jinna Tay and Graeme Turner's book on *Television Histories in Asia*; Larissa Hjorth's various team projects on mobile digital media in everyday life in and across locations in North-East Asia and Australia; Meaghan Morris's work on transnational Hong Kong action cinema; or Crystal Abidin's research on transnational influencer culture and micro-celebrity across Australia, Southeast Asia, and the globe. Asian-Australian studies, too, has maintained, alongside its proto-national framing of 'Asian Australia', an interest in transnational flows and formations that sets it apart from older work in migration and multiculturalism studies. As Jacqueline Lo argued in 2006:

Whereas Multicultural studies focused on ethnicity, biculturalism, migrancy and modes of arriving into Australianness, Asian Australian studies focuses on tropes of diaspora, hybridity, heterogeneity, and transnationalism. Rather than Australianness as a single and final destination (however contested), Asian Australian studies emphasises mobility and traveling as major tropes for unpacking the identity formations and knowledge productions

*of diasporic communities with cultural allegiances and political connections across a number of sites within and beyond the nation.*⁹

Underlining this, in 2015, the Asian Australian studies conference took Mobilities as its theme, as does the 2017 special issue of *Australian Studies* that grew out of the conference proceedings.¹⁰ The clusters of work on transnational sexuality studies and on human and non-human mobilities between Asia and Australia also clearly have a transnational approach at their heart.

Indeed, cultural studies approaches to Asia-related topics have been so successful that some scholars working in the more established field of Asian Studies have suggested a turn toward cultural studies as a means of addressing a perceived 'crisis' in Asian Studies itself, variously attributed to globalization and the rise of poststructuralist theory. Scholars including Chris Burgess (Japanese studies), Peter Jackson (Thai and SE Asian studies), Tessa Morris-Suzuki (Japanese studies), and Ariel Heryanto (Indonesian and SE Asian studies) each, in different ways, made such a call.¹¹ Each of them was keen to retain the specific skills training offered by Asian area studies—especially detailed training in Asian languages, histories, cultures and politics—while drawing on cultural studies approaches as a means of productively complicating the cold war rubric of geo-cultural 'areas' that underlies their field. Tessa Morris-Suzuki's call for a new formation she provocatively called 'anti-area studies' was particularly interesting. She defined anti-area studies as the study of 'anti-areas': its aim would be 'not to plot the communal trajectory of a civilisational area within the march of global progress, but to observe major global forces from a variety of positions which are as far apart as possible.'¹² We hear here an echo of Ang and Stratton's call for transnational comparative work. It's notable, though, that in practice this kind of multi-sited transnational comparative work is quite rare (it's expensive and logistically extremely challenging); but some examples include Rosemary Overell's work on extreme music scenes in Australia and Japan, and Minoru Hokari's work on Japanese and Australian nationalisms.¹³

If there's a somewhat positive outlook in the academic world of Australian cultural studies for critical, Asia-engaged transnationalism, then what about in the wider world of public culture? In 2012, the Gillard government's release of its report, *Australia in the Asian Century*, occasioned some reflection on this point. From the economic opportunism of Keating's 'push into Asia' to a similar logic underlying Gillard's representation of Australia as being 'in the right place at the right time' to cash in on the expansion of Asia's middle classes, it seemed not much had changed. In 2015, Ien Ang's own reflections on the discrepancy between the government rhetoric of Asia-as-economic-opportunity and the reality of everyday transnational entanglements on the ground in Sydney's Chinatown led her to reiterate much of the spirit of her earlier critique with Jon Stratton:

Australia's efforts to come to terms with its geographic location will remain affectively deficient [...] as long as Asia remains stubbornly defined as a space 'out there', separate from 'us here'. Current governmental discourse [...] illuminates that despite talk of the advantages of geographical closeness Australia's sense of psychological remoteness from Asia—its 'distant proximity'—remains solidly in place (Ang, 2010). In this regard, Australia is incontestably not (yet) at home in Asia.

If Asia is ever to be Australia's regional home, the fundamental insular imagination (Perera, 2009) that has underpinned Australia's national sense of identity would need to be overcome. Australians would need to start thinking and feeling Asia and Australia as intimately entangled rather than separate. This would require cultivating transnational

*relationships and networks which have social and cultural substance, recognising both commonalities and differences in a condition of intertwined coexistence and the sharing of space.*¹⁴

In a co-authored article the same year that grew out of the Cultural Typhoon Melbourne project (a transitory offshoot of Cultural Typhoon Japan), seven of us reached similar conclusions:

*At the root of our discontent with the currently dominant frameworks for thinking about Australia in relation to Asia is our recognition that these frameworks entail a serious impoverishment of the concept of culture. [...] We have tried to underline the importance of recognizing the inherent values of everyday (inter)cultural experience. In the social life of our cities and towns that is fundamentally shaped by the presence of Asian International student and migrant communities; in our media diet that has long been deeply flavoured by Asian content and genres; and in many people's life stories that are defined by lines of movement between various locations across our region, we see rich possibilities for reconceptualising the definition and meanings of cultural life in and beyond Australia today. To realize those possibilities, the conceptualization of (Asian) 'culture' as simply a bundle of linguistic skills and specialist knowledge and capacities to be mastered in the service of economic gain is clearly inadequate. [...] Rather, our stories highlight both the organic, mutable character of culture, and the need to take everyday life here, in Australia, as an object of analysis.*¹⁵

Our shared concerns then were in response to the less-than-ideal form of government-level calls to 'engage with Asia.' But if, as Ang points out, the public-cultural imagining of Australia's relationship with Asia pivots on a bipolar axis of opportunity/ threat, then over the past couple of years, we have seen an even more worrying pivot-back to the pole of Asia-as-threat. Especially since early last year, the dominant Australian public-cultural framing of 'Asia' has been in terms of the threat supposedly posed to Australian national security, democracy and 'way of life' by the 'rise of China.' In the realms of international relations, national security, and regional politics, this is of course not a hollow issue, and it is impossible to argue with the fact that cultural and social (and academic) life within China under President Xi's rule is becoming subject to ever tighter controls, restrictions, and state violences. It is obviously urgent to think seriously about all this.

But what concerns me here is the media storm over the past two years or so, gaining momentum with the publication of Clive Hamilton's book *Silent Invasion* last year, over allegations of a concerted program of CCP-led soft-power influence in Australia. We see with these developments a revivification of a cold-war style discourse of anti-communist paranoia that could not be less helpful in dealing with the real issues at hand. Several core claims have been made about Chinese influence in Australia; I leave aside claims about Chinese military, economic, and trade incursions, and focus on claims about the actions of ethnically Chinese people in Australian society.¹⁶ The most serious and worrying of these include allegations about the supposed allegiance of Chinese-Australians to a foreign power, and claims that Chinese international students are spies and not to be trusted. Wanning Sun has been one of many vocal and effective critics of the ways in which the current China panic casts Chinese-Australian communities under suspicion and fuels racist fantasies.¹⁷ I won't belabour that point here, but will focus more specifically on the claims made about Chinese students. At the most recent count, over 190,000 students from the mainland PRC are currently studying in Australia, making them the largest group of international students by a very wide margin

(outnumbering students from India almost two to one). They have been welcomed onto our campuses, let us recall, in response to a financial imperative that has arisen in universities due to federal government dis-investment in the higher education sector. But the issue here is not the danger that criticism of them equates to biting the hand that feeds us; rather, it is at a more fundamental level about basic pedagogical ethics and our responsibilities to our students. Based on four reported cases (at Monash, Sydney, ANU and Newcastle), in which students from China questioned content being taught by their lecturers (in passing: since when, we might wonder, is it ominous or reprehensible for students in the humanities classroom to disagree with their lecturers?), we are now effectively being asked, by Australian government and media spokespeople, to distrust a specific, ethno-nationally defined group of our own students: to interpret them as *more* misguided, *more* victim to false consciousness, *more* in need of political enlightenment, and *more* duplicitous than domestic students or students of any other national background; indeed we are invited to assume that they are sleeper agents of an enemy power intent on destroying Australian academic freedom.¹⁸ Suffice to say that in response to the question of what are the most pressing political issues confronting us as cultural studies practitioners today, in my view, developing an ethical, well-informed, and socially engaged response to the China panic that is today taking our own students as its targets, ought to be high on our list.

In closing, then, how as cultural studies practitioners can we continue to respond positively and effectively to this and other questions concerning the Asia-Australia nexus and the need for critical transnationalism in cultural studies? I offer two brief points. First, we need to remain committed to cultural studies *methods*—that is, close, materialist engagement with actually existing texts, sites, practices ‘on the ground’ of contemporary cultural life: on our streets, on our campuses, in our classrooms, on our screens. Responsibility to the specificities of actual instances of cultural practice can mitigate against the magnetic pull toward tendentious generalization and abstraction that characterise current public-cultural thinking on Asian threats and opportunities. In particular, we should continue to pay close attention to the material practices of everyday translocalisms: how people—students, migrants, and all of us, to different degrees—live between and across locations; how mobile lives articulate with super-diverse urban cultures; and how geographically distant locales may become experientially near-at-hand in everyday practices. Second, we should continue to work in *collaboration and solidarity* with cultural studies intellectuals in our immediate region. I am thinking here of the participation of many of us in the Inter-Asia Cultural Studies project; of multiple smaller-scale project-based collaborations; also of developing trans-institutional agreements between departments at Australian universities and counterparts at institutions in Asia. This could lead to more team-based comparative work with others who are grappling with issues related to the ones we face. Indeed, ‘the rise of China’ and the forms this discourse (and practices) take in different parts of the region (including *inside* the PRC) could itself be an excellent topic for collaborative comparative research with our colleagues outside Australia—including those within China itself.

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Endnotes

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2. Each of these clusters encompasses scores of works by large groups of scholars which cannot be listed exhaustively here; the following citations are intended as a broad indication only. For a critical overview of the development of Asian Australian studies, see Jacqueline Lo, 'Disciplining Asian Australian Studies: Projections and Introjections,' *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 27(1-2), 2006: 19; see also <https://aasrn.wordpress.com/>.
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