Chapter 14

Australasia

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"Australasian Cultural Studies"

It makes geographic sense to deal with the development of cultural studies in Australia and New Zealand through the label of "Australasia." However, it would be wrong to allow this to carry with it an assumption of uniformity or homogeneity among either the various practices of cultural studies within Australia or New Zealand or between the dominant traditions in the two countries. Despite their geographic proximity to each other (and their lack of proximity to just about anyone else), and despite their common colonial origins, the Australian and New Zealand traditions have been very different. While Australian cultural studies has benefited from a range of fortuitous developments both within the university system and the media industries, cultural studies in New Zealand has had to deal with a less hospitable university environment and an extremely limited potential market of students and readers. Both traditions have been determinedly local or national in their focus, and have accepted the responsibility to make their academic knowledges matter to their societies. However, this task has been much easier for those working in Australian conditions than for their New Zealand counterparts and this is reflected in the scale of cultural studies' development in Australia and its implication in international debates. Interestingly, however, Australia's level of participation in New Zealand debates has not been high. Contrary to what one might expect, there has not been a thriving intellectual trade between the two countries in cultural studies or related fields and only infrequently has there been a sense of their contributing to a common, postcolonial or "Antipodean" counterdiscourse to northern hemisphere orthodoxies. While each might claim such a contribution for their own, there have been few moments of solidarity in a common cause.

This means that one cannot deal with Australian and New Zealand cultural studies as a joint enterprise. What follows will necessarily privilege Australian cultural studies as the larger, more developed, and more complex academic and intellectual field which also enjoys more widespread international recognition as

a specific cultural formation. There are good reasons for this. It should be understood, since one can't rely on this being known outside Australasia, that there is an enormous disparity in the size of the populations of New Zealand and Australia (3 million in New Zealand to 19 million in Australia) which significantly affects such things as the size of the university system, the potential market for academic books and student textbooks, and the opportunities for a group of like-minded scholars to develop the critical mass required to make their work visible and significant.

The character of the two university systems is significantly different, too. The vast majority of universities in New Zealand reflect the Oxbridge traditions which have shaped most postcolonial university systems and remain overwhelmingly discipline based, even in instances where they serve what are clearly cross-disciplinary vocational objectives. Their counterparts in Australia have comfortably accommodated inter-or multi-disciplinary programs for more than two decades, so that there is a wider range of structural models in place – and, of course, the scale of the sector allows for this more easily than can be the case in New Zealand. The academic environment confronting cultural studies scholars in New Zealand has been, and is still to some extent, a little hostile; even a respectable but relatively new field such as film studies finds itself having to justify its existence against more traditional and established disciplines. As we shall see, New Zealand's massive political investment in economic rationalism – the deregulation of social institutions and the widespread application of the logic of the market to the provision of government services, in particular – has, somewhat ironically, improved matters over the last decade as cultural studies has demonstrated its attractiveness to the market. However, the scale of the operation possible, even in the most positive of environments one could imagine for New Zealand, makes it very difficult for scholars there to develop the kind of community most would like to see.

There are other, related, contextual considerations. Australia still owns its media industries, some of its films are able to return their budgets purely through local exhibition, and the export of Australian television productions has been on balance extremely successful. The existence of a film and media sector that is both sizeable and culturally significant has a direct relation to the comparative success of media and cultural studies programs within Australian universities, and to the public access enjoyed by academics from these disciplines to the newspaper opinion pages, talk radio, television news and current affairs programs, and to government institutions, reviews, inquiries, and other policy-making forums. While New Zealand academics are no less able or motivated, and while there are clear examples of certain New Zealand academics performing the role of the public intellectual to the hilt, the absence of the conditions outlined above means that they generally enjoy less widespread cultural or political influence than their counterparts in Australia.

An answer to some of these problems, one would think, would be for Australia and New Zealand to think of themselves as one community of scholars, one

market for an Australasian or antipodean cultural studies. Something like that has happened, for instance, in communication studies through the peak professional body, the Australian and New Zealand Communication Association. It has not happened in cultural studies, for a variety of reasons. The most fundamental is that a key concern for media and cultural studies in both countries is the analysis of their specific national contexts – for the interrogation of the meaning of the nation, of the dominant constructions of national or racial identity, the examination of and participation in government sponsored processes of nation formation, and so on. This constitutes an impediment to collaborating with those working with another national tradition, even one so physically and historically close to one's own. Such an impediment is implicated in and strengthened by the current political relation between Australia and New Zealand. There are cultural issues – the trade in television programming across the Tasman Sea, for instance – upon which the interests of the two countries are opposed through what could easily be seen as a neocolonial politics. There have been a number of scholars on both sides who have been keen to break through this politics and extend academic debate across the Tasman – New Zealander Geoff Lealand wrote the chapter on New Zealand in Stuart Cunningham and Elizabeth Jacka's *Australian Television and International Mediascapes* (1996), for example – but such collaboration is still in the earliest stages and much development remains to occur. While theorists such as McKenzie Wark (1992) may talk of an "Antipodean" cultural studies, his examples are always drawn from two or three exponents of Australian cultural studies and provide no sense of ever having looked at the New Zealand tradition. To my knowledge, there is only Tara Brabazon's (1999) so far unpublished manuscript, *Tracking the Jack: A Retracing of the Antipodes*, which takes the comparison on directly as an intellectual project – and the fact that it is so far unpublished suggests what kind of obstacles confront such a project.

The Origins of Cultural Studies in Australia and New Zealand

The establishment of a local version of cultural studies in Australia was made possible by a variety of enabling conditions. These include a renewed interest in the analysis of Australian culture and Australian histories through an emerging field of Australian studies over the 1970s; the development of a nationally focused tradition of media and film studies supported by the establishment of government agencies for film and (later) television production; the introduction of a new sector in tertiary education which sought interdisciplinary and vocationally oriented programs to offer to a student base that was growing dramatically in response to the abolition of tuition fees; the 1980s influence of a group of British émigrés trained in what became known as cultural studies; the opening up of a publishing market for Australian cultural studies initially in Australia and then, eventually, internationally; and, finally, a degree of incorporation of

cultural studies academics into government policy-making processes within a series of state and federal administrations.

The universities in Australia came rather late to the consideration of their own nation's literature, history, and culture. For many years, Australian history was taught as a footnote to British imperial history, while the idea of an "Australian literature" was regarded as an oxymoron. Increasingly, certainly from the mid-1960s onwards, this situation changed as history and literary studies in particular addressed their attention to issues of national identity, the delineation of "the national character" through national cultural production. In many cases, newly introduced theoretical perspectives from structuralism and narratology proved useful as scholars moved from defining the national character as an idealist or empirical exercise, and embraced the notion that such a character might be the product of cultural construction, of narrative, of invention, or a Barthesian notion of mythology.

By the early 1980s, scholars within history and literary studies were no longer in search of "the truth" about the nature of Australian society or its typical citizens. Rather, they found themselves addressing their analysis towards Benedict Anderson's "imagined community," and thinking about the meanings attached to the national culture, the patterns of inclusion and exclusion, and the interests served. Initially leading to a productive alliance between literature and history, these were new questions for the humanities in Australia which were ultimately about how "Australia" was or had been represented in all kinds of forms and media – and about the consequences and effects of these representations. To deal with these questions adequately, one had to think about the whole field of meanings within which the nation-building project made its sense and the systems of production and distribution that regulated the flow of meanings. What had come to be called "Australian studies" led to an inquiry into the operation of culture itself, into how the processes of cultural formation worked.

Clearly, if they were to gain any purchase on this, literary studies, history, and Australian studies were in need of some new advice. While these disciplines have never been comfortable with this fact, the raggedly hybrid version of Australian cultural studies which was developing out of Birmingham Marxism, Saussurean semiotics, and French poststructuralism turned out to be the best source of that advice. What cultural studies had, that Australian studies lacked, was a theory (or more correctly a repertoire of theories) about the way cultural processes worked, about how culture generated and shared its meanings, and ultimately how this affected the distribution of power. Cultural studies provided a rationale for the analysis of Australian culture that was more flexible, integrated, and critical than the multiperspectived but essentially descriptive approaches taken by Australian studies.

There is an alternative tradition running in parallel with the one just described. Since the government-funded revival of the Australian film industry in the early 1970s, a local tradition of film and media analysis had been developing. Initially dominated, again, by nationalist or at least antiimperialist

arguments aimed at defending the production of local cinema for local audiences, film and media studies benefited from the close temporal alignment between its development as a discipline and the film industry's commercial and critical legitimacy. Journals such as *Cinema Papers* and *The Australian Journal of Screen Theory* are creatures of the 1970s, and attest to the strength of interest in Australian film, as well as the level of theoretical sophistication of a critical tradition which was drawn towards Metzian film semiotics and Lacanian appropriations of Freud. Some contributors worked at a slightly more grassroots level as well; Meaghan Morris spent some years as a film reviewer for the mainstream press during this period. The concerns of this tradition were not, by and large, canonical in the way many film studies had been elsewhere; the connection between film and culture, and the cultural politics of the film text, dominated Australian screen theory at the time and directly informed the growing number of film and media studies courses becoming available. (For a discussion of the development of Australian film cultures, see Tom O'Regan 1996.)

Over time, it is probably this tradition – that of a political and cultural analysis of film and media texts and industries – which has been the most powerful influence on the directions cultural studies has taken in Australia. It is certainly directly implicated in the development of a specific form of cultural policy studies, because the analysis of media policy had been a fundamental component of Australian cultural studies, film studies, and media studies from the very beginning. Over the second half of the 1970s through to the middle of the 1980s, these two traditions – film and media studies, and studies of Australian culture – worked in a sometimes uneasy alliance which helped to push the field beyond the analysis of representation towards an understanding of the institutional and industrial means of cultural production while retaining the more traditional concern with texts such as film and television programs. The mix of approaches is well represented in Susan Dermody and Elizabeth Jacka's (1987, 1988) cultural history of the Australian film revival which divides its two volumes into treatments of the film texts and the film industry.

A key support to these developments came from changes to the structure of higher education in Australia. In 1972, tuition fees for tertiary education were abolished and shortly after a new sector of tertiary institution was established – the colleges of advanced education (CAEs). The result was a revolution in the academic structuring of humanities and social science teaching within Australia. The CAEs were intended to be more vocationally focused than the existing traditional universities, and were asked to offer geniune alternatives to their predecessors. At the same time, a group of new universities explicitly dedicated to interdisciplinary teaching and research further accelerated the pace of change and fueled interest for new academic and pedagogic projects. Among the most significant beneficiaries of these changes were the new interdisciplinary areas of media studies, communication studies, Australian studies, film studies, and, ultimately, cultural studies. A number of these institutions went on to play an enormously significant part in Australian cultural studies. Murdoch University

and Curtin University in Perth, Griffith University in Brisbane, and the University of Technology (UTS) in Sydney all developed strong identities around cultural studies over these years; among those who worked in these institutions are John Frow, John Hartley, Tom O'Regan, Ien Ang, Meaghan Morris, Stephen Muecke, Ian Hunter, Stuart Cunningham, and Tony Bennett. Early journals such as *Interventions* (UTS), *Continuum* (Murdoch), and the *Australian Journal of Cultural Studies* (Curtin and Murdoch), which later became the Routledge Journal *Cultural Studies*, came from these institutional locations.

The expansion of the higher education system brought other benefits. As new programs in media, television, film, and cultural studies were planned, developed, and implemented, opportunities for new staff appointments opened up. Many of these programs had their counterparts in the UK, where the process had started much earlier and where the combination of the Birmingham Centre's publications, the Open University Popular Culture course readers, and the Methuen New Accents series had already established a readership as well as a much more sophisticated understanding of how this kind of material could and should be taught. A number of key appointments from the UK – among them, John Tulloch, Tony Bennett, John Fiske, and John Hartley – contributed significantly to course planning and to the development of both national and international publication opportunities for Australian scholars on Australian material.

The British theoretical influence was significant. Fiske, in particular, brought the Stuart Hall model of cultural studies to the attention of many Australians interested in new ways to teach popular culture. However, it would be wrong to see this as the only, or even an uncontested, influence. Certainly among those working at Murdoch University and Curtin University (then, the WA Institute of Technology), the Birmingham models were strongly influential. Even there, though, were countervailing pressures from what came to be called social semiotics, from phenomenology, and from Marxist literary theory. On the other side of the continent, it was the French influence which was most pronounced. For Sydneysiders working in media and communications studies in the early 1980s, the term "cultural studies" was itself suspect. Their alignments were more with Baudrillard than Stuart Hall, and their interest much less in analyzing cultural forms than in theorizing the politics of representation. A little later, those working at Griffith University in Brisbane were to champion a version of Foucauldian discursive analysis as the dominant mode of practice for cultural studies. There was, then, no single tradition of cultural studies in Australia over this period – or at any time since, for that matter – nor was cultural studies universally accepted by the full range of scholars working across critical and media theory at the time.

A common element within the various approaches, however, has been the focus on the local, the national, and contemporary politics. The nation has been a consistent but often bitterly contested term within Australian cultural studies. This, in all its guises: as idealist principle, as cultural construction, or as

a regressive and essentializing force. Given the physical isolation of Australia, and given the brevity and accessibility of its white history, the category of the nation inevitably figures – either as the object or as the analytic ground – in large cultural debates. In the history of Australian cultural studies, that has been the case as well. Whether in arguments about the textual regimes of Australian films or the structure of the policy regimes which make them possible, definitions of the nation play a central role. (For further developments of this idea, see the introductory essays in both Frow and Morris 1993; and Turner, 1993.)

It is hard to move from this account of the origins of Australian cultural studies without making the account of New Zealand cultural studies seem like the negative version. Perhaps the point to emphasize is how arbitrary and fortuitous the enabling conditions in Australia have been, and how cruelly their absence in New Zealand has impacted on the development of the field. There was no parallel in New Zealand to the way the expansion of the Australian higher education system aligned itself with new interdisciplinary pedagogic and academic objectives. Cultural studies had to establish itself within existing disciplinary environments as a contribution to those disciplines. It was a different raft of disciplines, though. New Zealanders, at this point, tended to come to cultural studies from sociology rather than from film, media, or area studies – or even from English or history. As a result, there was a lot to argue about: about cultural studies as poor sociology, about the need for cultural studies within sociology, about "imported" sociology, and so on. Further, cultural studies came to New Zealand in a relatively singular form; the work of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies was taken as a very explicit point of departure and the evaluation of this paradigm occupied those working in New Zealand for most of the 1980s. There seems to have been no counterpart to the competing poststructuralist traditions that complicated matters in Australia – perhaps because the discipline of English had kept cultural studies pretty much at arms' length until the 1990s.

For most of the 1980s, while Australian cultural studies was developing new programs and attracting new students, cultural studies in New Zealand consisted of a group of academics centered around the journal, *Sites*, established in 1981 at Massey University in Palmerston North. According to Tara Brabazon's account (1999), the *Sites* project was explicitly an application of the work of the Birmingham CCCS to the New Zealand context, but it was also a relatively exclusive project to which contributions from other universities were discouraged. Intellectual trade between Australia and New Zealand was almost non-existent and the increasing emphasis on text and context, or issues of nationalism and identity, which marked Australian work at the time do not seem to have traveled across the Tasman. Indeed, where they did, they were held up as an example of what cultural studies in New Zealand must not become (Lealand 1988). In contrast, it is probably race – the central problem for this bicultural society – which has remained the core issue for New Zealand cultural studies (particularly in its more

sociological guises) through arguments around the structures which produce the identities of Maori and Pakeha (the Maori term for white settlers).

The lack of an expanding institutional framework to encourage a more outward looking perspective, or simply a larger number of colleagues and students, held back cultural studies in New Zealand until the late 1980s. Until that time, the stranglehold of the disciplines had maintained a relatively conservative range of offerings within the university system and resisted the antidisciplinary ethic implicit in cultural studies. It is a deep irony that the aggressive economic rationalism of successive New Zealand governments through the 1990s, with the emphasis on market-driven services exerting a heavy influence over the university system's promotions to prospective consumers, actually assisted in the development of interdisciplinary subject areas such as cultural, media, and film studies. The academic conservatism of the universities was only overcome by economic necessity as government policy provided universities with little choice other than to pursue directions which were attractive to students. As a result, programs in film, cultural studies, and media studies have become much more familiar parts of the tertiary landscape – although there is evidence that they still have to combat entrenched opposition from traditional disciplines who are prone to regard them as cash cows rather than as legitimate and respectable enterprises in their own right. That said, it is also the case that cultural studies is now finding a place in a broader range of disciplinary locations than sociology: it is in English, politics, communications, and so on – much more like the models found in the US and the UK than had previously been the case.

The improvement this represents for the institutional location of New Zealand cultural studies is reflected in the fact that, over the 1990s, New Zealand-based cultural studies scholars have become far more visible internationally: the work of Roy Shuker (1994), Geoff Lealand (1996), Nick Perry (1994), and Claudia Bell (1996) not only contributes to the development of a national cultural studies tradition, but also to major international debates – including those with Australia. The position at the end of the 1990s for cultural studies in New Zealand was much improved, then, although there is still a sense of slight embattlement that is reflected in such things as staff promotions and research resources. There is now something approaching a critical mass in terms of the individuals now involved in New Zealand cultural studies, but institutional respect or support cannot always be taken for granted.

There are some signs, too, of a growing intellectual trade between Australia and New Zealand particularly around issues of broadcasting regulation policy and local content in film and television production. In 1993, the Institute of Cultural Policy Studies (later to become the Australian Key Centre for Cultural and Media Policy) held a conference in Brisbane aimed at cultural studies scholars from Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, entitled "Postcolonial Formations." As that title implied, the assumption behind this conference was that these postcolonial Commonwealth nations confronted similar issues in the

formation of cultural policy, and that there was a need for some event at which this projected commonality might be further explored. This assumption had, in turn, emerged from the experiences of the Australian and Canadian delegates at the famous 1990 conference at the University of Illinois, "Cultural Studies: Now and in the Future," which eventually produced the Grossberg, Nelson, and Treichler collection, *Cultural Studies* (1992). These experiences had emphasized the difference between the kind of work required within the postcolonial national context, and that being done within the British and American contexts. This difference was taken up by a conference organized in Perth in 1991 by John Hartley and Ien Ang aimed at "dismantling" the sense of homogeneity perceived in Anglo-American cultural studies; it primarily addressed Australian scholars and resulted in a special issue of *Cultural Studies* called "Dismantling Fremantle" 3(6), 1992). The "Postcolonial Formations" conference took this initiative one step further, by offering the first direct invitation for cultural studies scholars from Australia, Canada, and New Zealand to meet and exchange ideas about the specificity of cultural studies in a postcolonial context.

The role of the state in the formation and implementation of cultural policy was a major theme in this conference, and it has underpinned something of a dialogue between researchers in Australia and New Zealand around broadcasting policy in particular. New Zealand's broadcasting sector, once dominated by traditional public-service broadcasters, is now one of the most radically deregulated in the world. Australia has moved some way towards deregulation without ever quite removing the distinction between the public and commercial sectors. The comparison between policy regimes and their effects in the two countries has proved to be a productive one and there is now a reasonably strong relationship between the research literatures from both countries.

Although the common thread which links studies of cultural policy in both countries is their resistance to cultural domination, especially, from the northern hemisphere, there have been occasions where the politics of the relation between Australia and New Zealand have themselves sparked debates. Currently, arguments over local content rules within the film and broadcasting industries have sparked considerable exchanges between Australian and New Zealand scholars – each defending what is ultimately a strategic but nationalist case (see, for example, the panel on "Project Blue Sky" in *Media International Australia*, Britton et al. 1997).

The Contribution of Australasian Cultural Studies

As the objective of the "Postcolonial Formations" conference implies, the primary contribution Australasian cultural studies made to international cultural studies in the first instance was to challenge the unspoken but nevertheless unmistakable assumption to emerge from the northern hemisphere boom in cultural studies during the latter half of the 1980s: that Anglo-American cultural

studies was universally useful and exportable. Once challenged, of course, this assumption was quickly disavowed and the field responded very positively to the suggestion that cultural theory might itself be culturally specific. Australasian cultural studies writers were among the first to put this challenge and provide this suggestion by insisting on the difference of the Australian context, and the need for extensive modification of theoretical models developed elsewhere if they were to be useful in an Australian cultural studies (Turner 1992a, 1992b). Such a suggestion would now seem a truism as cultural studies has vigorously embraced the idea of its own decentering (see Ang & Stratton 1996), but this was not the case in 1990. The speed with which it was taken up in the northern hemisphere is reflected by the appearance in the one year of two Australian cultural studies readers – one published in Australia (Frow & Morris 1993) and one published by Routledge in the UK (Turner 1993) – as well as the Routledge *Relocating Cultural Studies* collection edited by a group of Canadians who had attended the "Postcolonial Formations" conference: Valda Blundell, John Shepherd, and Ian Taylor (1993).

Meaghan Morris (1988: 241–87) offered a model for the construction of an Australian cultural studies which indigenized materials taken from elsewhere in her discussion of the appeal of the 1986 Australian film, *Crocodile Dundee*. Seeing it as an example of the Australian, hybridizing, tactic of "positive unoriginality," Morris pointed out how the film both stole from and parodied its American models, admired and disdained American power, and asserted and undermined Australian nationalisms. In her account, appropriation of this level of complexity (or as she puts it, "dead cleverness") acquired the attributes of a measured resistance, even a postcolonial politics. To find such a politics ambivalently articulated within such a populist text is characteristic of Australian cultural studies, but the potential for such a politics remains fundamental to its work. Ironically, it is a potential which is released by maintaining some strategic interest in the idea of the nation – not as an ideal but as the most pragmatic point of focus for critical and political action – and this has also been acknowledged within New Zealand cultural studies (Horrocks 1995; 1996).

Strategic nationalism and cultural policy tend to go together in this history, and it is probably under the label of cultural policy studies that the contribution of Australasian cultural studies has been filed in recent years. The convenience of that location possibly slightly overestimates both its importance and its novelty, but it is certainly true that a strong body of research developed around the work of Tony Bennett (some of which is collected in Bennett 1998), Ian Hunter (1988, 1994) and Stuart Cunningham (1992) at what became the Key Centre for Cultural and Media Policy, which was jointly located at Griffith University, Queensland University of Technology, and the University of Queensland in Brisbane. As I said earlier, film and media policy had always been a concern within Australian cultural studies, but the range of interests broadened under Bennett's influence – coming to include the policy frameworks established for national museums and art galleries, schooling, and tourism, to name some.

The fortuitous alignment between the development of a highly sophisticated theoretical framework for cultural policy studies and the incumbency of a series of state and federal Labor governments – reform governments under whom both the established policy units and the demand for independent policy advice expanded dramatically – certainly played a part in the success of the cultural policy studies agenda. However, despite the initial, slightly heady, claims for it to be the *ur* discipline for cultural studies which offered the perfect opportunity to balance theory and practice, politics and policy, cultural policy studies has perhaps settled back into a more realistic role as a fundamental contributor to the mainstream of cultural studies research and practice.

The word "practice" here ushers in another consideration. In their editorial to a recent issue of *Continuum* 13(1), April 1999), Henry Jenkins, Tara McPherson, and Jane Shattuc (1999), described "the next generation" of cultural studies work in the US by, among other things, pointing to its preference for more case-oriented research – the models of practice taken from cultural history, say, rather than cultural theory. Australasian cultural studies is very sympathetic to such a redirection of cultural studies because so much of the work it has done in the last two decades has been applied, case studies aimed at uncovering a particular problem or arguing a particular position through a specific and detailed instance (see, for instance, Morris 1992; Johnson 1993; Turner 1994). The effect of the British influence – which seems to me to have this applied inflection too – may be responsible for this, or it may simply be that so much of the work is conscious of a national agenda and has a specific problem as its target. As I suggested at the beginning of this account, one of the key attractions to cultural studies in the first place was that it enabled Australians to study their own culture. It is not surprising that this, although in widely varying ways, is exactly how it has been put to use.

Developing a national profile for cultural studies – either within the academy or more broadly – has not been easy in either Australia or New Zealand. As is the case elsewhere, cultural studies' residual populism, its preference for the contemporary and the ephemeral, and the sophistication of its analytical discourses, makes it an obvious target for critiques of academic knowledges, of intellectual fashions, or simply of the usefulness of the academy. Establishing an international profile for individual researchers or for concentrations of researchers in Australasia, when so much of the work being done is advisedly culturally specific and explicitly local in its application, and when publishers selling primarily into European and American markets express understandable caution about Australian topics, has been a challenge. It is a testament to the energy and relevance of so much of Australasian cultural studies that so many of its contributors are well-known names in the international literature. It is also a testament to the ethical orientation of so many of the gatekeepers in cultural studies that they have remained alert to the appeal of what I have called elsewhere "central ideas from marginal places" (Turner 1993: 4).

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