

HIST 451E (90038)—3 credit

## The Lucky Country: The Construction of Australian Identity

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Office Hours: Wed. & Friday 1:00-3:00 PM or by appointment

In 1964 the journalist and public intellectual, Donald Horne, published a book titled *The Lucky Country*. Horne did not intend the title—or the book—to be complimentary. His argument was that Australia’s success as a prosperous liberal democracy was largely down to its abundant land and natural resources, its British heritage, and its distance from the world’s trouble spots rather than the energy, enterprise, and intelligence of its leaders and population as a whole. As if to validate Horne’s critique, many people started to use the phrase “the lucky country” without irony. Thus where Horne saw the country’s success as the result of dumb luck, others—particularly those on the political right—twisted the phrase to denote the good fortune of being Australian, as in “aren’t we lucky to live in such a great country.” This tension between criticism and complacency has defined Australian identity and continues to act as a cultural cleavage. In this course, we will explore the construction of Australian identity through history, literature, art, and music. What are Australia’s founding myths? What has it meant to be Australian at various points in time? How have Aborigines and successive waves of immigrants from all over the world challenged the White Australia policy that defined the country for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century? Professors from Sydney universities will visit some classes to discuss their areas of expertise, and there will be a field trip to the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

### Texts

- Robert Hughes, *The Fatal Shore: The Epic of Australia’s Founding*
- Donald Horne, *The Lucky Country*
- Peter Carey, *True History of the Kelly Gang*
- Alexis Wright, *Carpentaria*
- Christos Tsiolkas, *The Slap*
- John Stratton, *Multiculturalism, Whiteness, and Otherness in Australia*

Additional readings (articles and book excerpts) will be posted on Laulima.

## Course Organization

The course will be taught as a seminar. It will be divided into four equal parts:

### **A Nation of Convicts**

One of the few things that most people know about Australian history is that its initial British settlers were mostly convicts. This fact is the butt of many jokes, but it nonetheless plays an important role in the formation of Australia's identity. This section will delve into this convict past, which is more complex and multi-dimensional than most people—including Australians—realize. We will then explore how this history subsequently shaped Australia and its cultural identity.

### **The Bush**

Despite being one of the most urban societies in the world, Australia's identity was long shaped by images and stories from its vast hinterland, colloquially referred to as "the bush." Early explorers, pioneer families, and farmers who illegally occupied land (known as squatters) were celebrated in the culture, and much 19<sup>th</sup> century art and music reflects this bush mythology. The bush was also the stage on which sectarian and class battles (Irish Catholics vs. English Protestants, the Eureka Stockade mining strike, for example) took place. But how does one square this mythology with a nation whose population largely resides in the bland, comfortable suburbia characterized by places such as Sydney's sprawling western suburbs?

### **The White Australia Policy**

Like the United States, Australia's history is characterized by a constant fear among its white majority of being overwhelmed by nonwhite—or even just non-Anglo-Saxon—hordes. The White Australia Policy was not a single law or document, but refers to a series of policies—as well as a general attitude—designed to keep non-white people out of the country. The last vestiges of the Policy remained in place until 1973, but its cultural and psychological fallout lasted long beyond that. Successive waves of immigrants, initially from Southern Europe and later from East Asia, Vietnam, India, and Africa, have made Australia one of the most multicultural countries in the world. Does that mean that the White Australia Policy has been entirely expunged? The answers are complicated.

### **Multicultural Australia**

Australia is now a thoroughly multicultural country. I experienced the first flowering of this multiculturalism—and contributed to it—as a son of immigrants growing up in Melbourne in the 1970s and 1980s. How did these immigrants experience "The Lucky Country"? I have my own memories of how it played out for me and my non-Anglo friends with European backgrounds. But what about Chinese, Vietnamese, and Arab-Australians? And how do Aborigines fit into this new narrative? While the White Australia Policy may have become anathema in the broader culture, its historical residue is not so easily wiped clean. As a result, tensions between older white working class

communities and new immigrants have flared from time to time, particularly in Western Sydney, and populist politicians have tried to exploit them. Not surprisingly, writers, filmmakers, and other artists have explored the tension between White Australia and Multicultural Australia, and we will examine some of the most important works emerging over the past few decades and how they have further shaped the country's identity.

### Assessment

Students will write four 1,500 word essays (one for each of the above sections). Each will be worth 20% of the final grade. Class participation will constitute the final 20%.

### Student Learning Outcomes

Throughout this course, students will be expected to develop:

- a general familiarity with Australia's historically constructed identity, and a more detailed engagement with key aspects of that history;
- awareness of the work of prominent scholars in the discipline, and of a number of the most significant debates shaping cultural identity in Australia;
- a degree of confidence using literature from the social sciences and humanities to inquire into cultural issues, including identifying, evaluating and working with primary sources;
- an ability to write fluent, engaging expository essays that distill complex social phenomena into concise and readable papers.