

Introduction

The Cultures and Literatures of Micro-States

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IN TAKING UP the challenge of co-editing this special issue of *ARIEL*, a major question we faced was how to arrive at a working concept of “micro-state.” The call for contributions published in *ARIEL* lists the names of around thirty states that share common features of small land-mass and population.¹ These features are drawn from conventional criteria for defining a “micro-state” seen, for example, in Charles Taylor’s essay for UNITAR in 1969, and restated by Edward Dommen in 1985. Taylor was quick to point out that such criteria and the definitions they lent themselves to were arbitrary, and that the thresholds of physical and population size and other categories like GNP did not reflect natural breaks between states classified as “micro” or between them and other more or less “small” states. To Dommen, Taylor’s criteria were by his own arguments demonstrably unstable and frequently breached. Complicating Taylor and Dommen’s quantitative measurements, Philippe Hein characterized micro-states in terms of their poor economic infrastructure and remoteness from world markets.

More recently, Christopher Clague, Suzanne Gleason, and Stephen Knack argue from studies of data on classification of political regimes for 168 countries that “micro-states” are those with populations less than 100,000. This special issue takes the population count more flexibly to include states with populations a little more above the 100,000 mark. Some of the articles published here in fact focus on states that may be arguably described as “small states” rather than micro-states. Among the territories the special issue will be focusing on are, as from July 2000, Hong Kong

with 7,116,302; Papua New Guinea with 4,926,984; Singapore with 4,151,364; New Zealand with 3,819,763; Fiji with 832,494; Guyana with 697,286; Malta with 391,670; and New Caledonia with 201,816. In the West Indies, Jamaica weighs in at 2,652,689; Trinidad and Tobago at 1,175,523; Barbados at 274,540, St. Lucia at 156,260; and Antigua and Barbuda, the smallest, at 66,422. This micro-state issue thus includes articles on states ranging from under 100,000 to over 7 million in population. The inclusion of "small states" in addition to what is more narrowly defined as micro-states has something to do with the more recent arrival of micro-states on the world stage and hence with the relative newness of their cultural production and the paucity of scholarship on it.² But it also points to the arbitrariness and instability of the term. Indeed, in attending to material realities, the earlier scholars were likewise necessarily wary about the instability of their own prescriptive criteria. This wariness took a deconstructive turn when Jennie Hindmarsh described Taylor's approach as positivist, and argued that "implicit in [it and other] ways of conceptualizing 'small states and islands' is an ideological content and a set of organizing metaphors for ways of not only making sense of the world but also of behaving and structuring practice" (36).

A major nuance to the nature of micro-states is that "ministates and microstates are on average more democratic than other LDCs [Less Developed Countries] but the results suggest that small size itself is not conducive to democracy, while being an island is" (Clague et al). To Neal Ascherson, however, micro-states are "mad and dangerous, and anachronistic . . . and, happily, inevitable" (31). Many observers also interpret the increasing presence of micro-states as a dangerous fragmentation yet welcome counter-hegemonic formation of political entities, related to the decay of the traditional nation-state. The political formation, post-Independence, of many micro-states was influenced by their histories as colonies under British rule.

In fact, this special issue is attentive to the fact that many "micro-states" are islands, and that this geographical situation interacts with the historical experience of colonialism. In a major article in this special issue, Elizabeth DeLoughrey argues that we cannot

deny the imperatives of political autonomy for which many in the colonial islands have struggled and which continue to inspire collective national endeavours in the island-states. At the same time, however, the “aquatic” links between these separate states predate colonialism. Bonded by the ocean, the historical and material realities of inter-island exchanges and communication generate rich theoretical and conceptual potential.

The history of micro- and small states as visible political entities underlines their increasing presence and significance in global politics and culture. Ascherson has argued that for most of the Cold War, “microstates were dismissed as a sentimental joke or, at worst, as dangerous germs of chaos. . . . It was only after about 1970, especially after the end of the Cold War, that microstates and rebel regions struggling to become microstates began to multiply” (31).

In 1945, for example, the United Nations had 51 founder members, but, by 1999, according to Ascherson, “it had 192 [members] and 45 of them (46 if you count the Vatican) were ‘microstates.’ In other words, something like a quarter of the sovereign states in the world have fewer than a million people” (31). Small island states have also been usually viewed as poor economic performers. Their miniature scale and remoteness from major financial centers result in weak commercial abilities, exposing them to global economic strains, military tensions, and environmental degradation. Smallness, thus, is “synonymous with being powerless, vulnerable, and non-viable” (Ascherson 31).

Of course, it has also been claimed that smallness has its advantages. Small nations may enjoy quicker mobilization of response and greater social cohesiveness, and so gain a competitive edge. Political scientists such as Barry Bartmann support the sovereignty of micro-states which allows very small economies to take advantage of globalization. Sovereignty proves to be “an international green card” admitting micro-states to global boardrooms for the first time (3). That is, paradoxically, globalization constructs a virtual dialectic that protects the independence of tiny states. As micro-states (and small states) proliferate, they are participating in a global dialectic of postcolonial, geo-specific, ethnocentric, corporate, post-Fordist, and postnational discourses.

These conceptual shifts of the term “micro-state,” to be more inclusive of small states and more particularly to associate them with an island territorial status, bring to mind similar changes in our understanding of the cognate term, the “nation.” The origins of the term as a cultural phenomenon, the problematics of such origins already implicit in Ernest Renan’s classic essay and their ramifications in contemporary theorizing have been explored by numerous social, political science, and cultural critics. Bhabha’s project, promulgating an interdisciplinary and cross-national research agenda on the subject of the “nation,” has since been moved in different directions of the discursive and geographical compass by differently located theorists such as Aijaz Ahmad and Paul Gilroy. At the same time, poets and fictionists from island territories, these small and micro-states, have also contributed to a wholesale re-imagining of history, location, and geo-territory. The subject, its relations to that microcosmic state and to global institutions, including the institutions of colonial rule, postcolonial and independence powers, and global cultural flows, pre-occupy the representational stage in the works of Wilson Harris, Derek Walcott, and Caryl Phillips which are discussed in the issue.

Moreover, the tensions between the subject and state ideology, and between the subject and colonial history and indigenous culture form the sub-text if not the overt theme of much of the creative work included in this issue. We are proud to feature poets from a range of chiefly island territories, including Cyprus, Fiji, Hong Kong, Malta, and Singapore. Among these Anglophone poets are citizens from diasporic Indo- (Sudesh Mishra of Guyana, Mohit Prasad from Fiji, Kirpal Singh in Singapore) and Sino-communities (Wendy Gan and Leong Liew Geok of Singapore), as well as poets who may be constructed as “indigenous” (Oliver Friggieri from Malta, Kyriakos Haralambidis from Cyprus, and Louise Ho and Agnes Lam from Hong Kong). Many poems express an island identity, an island landscape and details. Haralambidis’s vivid images of tortoise hunting, of a country where one climbs aboard a “bateau mouche,” are juxtaposed with Gan’s poignant narrative of a sea-burial, where the mourners “behave as if on a picnic” in the presence of the “murky brown cur”

of water that devours the grandmother's ashes. Many poems treat the isolation of islanded existence. Friggieri's characters and narrators are strangers who lug "a sack of solitude" in an "indifferent" globe. Travel is both necessary yet ultimately unsatisfactory and alienating. Traditional culture is dismantled, as in Leong's image of the wayang stage; and the passing away of "sea warriors" leaves "lapses" in memory and a subject "left standing crow cocked on one foot" (Prasad), whose tentative resistance is more a moment of mourning than of celebration.

Poets from these vulnerable states also tend toward a figuration of the conditions of such particular nationhood. Lam's seemingly gentle poem "White Dust" offers a more satirical account of colonial history, even as "The Rape of a Nation," like Ho's "Cock-a doodle-do," explicitly critiques present-day state and patriarchal repression. Kirpal Singh's address to "My Friend the Accountant," like Haralambidis's "The Line," negotiates a delicate balance between idealism and the *realpolitick* of separate, incommensurable values. "The two sides" in Cyprus collecting "their dead" are irreconcilable, as are the accountant's world of numbers and the poet's world of dreams. Such poems, coming from small and micro-states, appear more conscious of dividing "line" than of unified integrity.

The special issue, taking its cues from cultural theorists of state formations such as Louis Althusser, Benedict Anderson, Stuart Hall, Bhabha, and Ahmad, among others, explores the "micro-state" as a cultural and ideological configuration of shifting sets of powers rather than as fixed and stable political phenomena. Though we had to begin with certain assumptions about the "micro-state," we would like this special issue to be an inquiry into the cultures of and across "micro-states" in order to complicate received assumptions of these cultures' marginal, minoritized, fractionalized status. We received many submissions influenced by postmodern and postcolonial concepts and the corpus of related scholarship and criticism concerning the relation between subject and state power, between history and representation, and between local indigene and global corporate forces. Some of these submissions challenge how the literary productions of the micro-state can be read in the light of contemporary Euro-American theories even while these literatures are actively negotiating, problematizing, and

rupturing a neo-imperial process of discursive inscription. Given the fact that many micro-states were formerly colonies, this counter-discursive reading forms an inalienable part of our project.

If the theoretical paradigm for postcolonial discourse was often Bakhtinian, we have to remember that Bakhtin's arguments about heteroglossia were never meant to be purely formal and concerned only with internal properties of texts. Hence we have looked for articles that address texts as complex exchanges of the past and present location of the "micro-state." In the articles by Curwen Best on "Barbadian aesthetics," Jennifer McMahon on "Hong Kong" in Timothy Mo's *An Insular Possession* and Xi Xi's *My City*, Susan Najita on the construction of Pakeha history and identity in *The Piano*, and Regis Stella on "PNG Literature at the Crossroads," the problems with received definitions of the "micro-state" are clearly evident. If the "micro-state" is taken to mean an autonomous political and national entity, then Hong Kong is clearly out-of-place; so too is Pakeha identity and history. In terms of land-mass, Papua New Guinea and Barbados can hardly be comparable though they share the experience, as described in our call for contributions to this issue, of "difficulty establishing themselves in an international literary marketplace."

From our point of view, the inherited problems with definition are actually fortuitous opportunities for mobilizing the concept of the "micro-state" and keeping it open and fluid. Location, like a sense of place, does not and need not mean an affirmation of boundaries, fixed communities, or exclusionary or essentialist identities. We are interested in ways of conceptualizing the "micro-state" so as "to hold on to that notion of spatial difference, of uniqueness, even of rootedness if people want that, without it being reactionary" (Massey 64). In their varied choice of texts, these essays underline what Doreen Massey, a geographer, describes as "a progressive sense of place," that is to say, "place" as "articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings" (66). Our task, in enacting these essays as a cross-state, multiply-voiced dialogue, is to give recognition to these critics' shared conceptual outlook while acknowledging the incontrovertible differences and heterogeneity which the "micro-states" they speak of display.

If there is a constant point of reference — which transmigrates, at times, into an inarticulable haunting — in this issue, it is the experience of being sidelined and marginalized in global terms. This is an experience common to “micro-state” creative writers, and literary scholars and critics. For the latter, writing on the former is an act of solidarity and self-identity. From this perspective, “micro-state” appears as a coalition of interested authors working towards the recoding of marginalization as a term of positive value. “Micro-state” literature thus bears similarities with Deleuze and Guattari’s definition of “minor literature” (1986) in this recoding, and in naming a phenomenological desire contrary to the will-to-dominance embodied in many national, neo-imperial, and neo-colonial literatures. As an illustration of this minoritizing operation, Helen Johnson’s article, “Questioning the Fantasy of Difference,” is a timely exposé of how anthropological research and scholarship on New Caledonia, while paying courtship to contemporary notions of cultural difference, actually suppress the plural voices of native women storytellers.

In the Foucauldian concept of “heterotopia,” DeLoughrey’s essay engages with Euro-continental theory, but it is an engagement that is open to the multiple voices articulating two oceanic domains of knowledge: the Caribbean and the Pacific. One of the most resonant of these voices, which we register in Michelle Keown’s interview, is that of Epeli Hau’ofa, the novelist, academic, and social critic from Papua New Guinea who now directs the Oceania Centre for Arts and Culture at the University of the South Pacific in Suva, Fiji. Hau’ofa has long been a critic of the integration of the South Pacific island economies into those of metropolitan Australia and New Zealand, and of the cultural ramifications this has for the region. In an article published in 1987, he contested conventional studies of South Pacific island cultures that rest on oppositional terms of tradition and modernity. He argued instead that economic integration has produced a culturally homogeneous elite class whose common language is English, while the persistence of indigenous cultures in all its diversity is to be found “among the under-privileged classes especially in rural areas” (3). For the economically marginalized, traditional cultures are valuable and often the only available resource; and the opportunity,

open to the privileged, for deciding which cultural traits are worth preserving and observing in daily life, is simply not an option. Hau'ofa's class and culturalist intervention does not merely break open the meta-narrative of modernity and economic progress in its global reach over the South Pacific. More important, Hau'ofa reorients scholarly investigation and public debate away from the view of traditional cultures as recalcitrant and towards exploration of how indigenous diversity can seek renewed expression and re-identification in contemporary realities.

The conceptual strength of Hau'ofa's work comes from its recognition of the multivalent island-ocean paradox: how island-centered social networks and tight kinship bonds are not only extended, but also unfixed, through population mobility; how the ocean, fluid and impenetrable, is also a bridge of crossing, integrating separate island societies, communication and knowledge domains. More recently, as Keown's interview reveals, Hau'ofa's energies have been channeled through the cross-disciplinary institute he set up at the University of the South Pacific where cultural workers from different island-states gather to study, research, and perform. "Oceania" names Hau'ofa's institute and project. Rather than the integrative economic model which micro-states in the region have little power to resist, "Oceania" celebrates metonymically a cooperative venture justified in a common history and present reality. It is a site where cultures seek diversification through enhanced contact and exchange within the region, and where an inherited and indigenous diversity explores common futures.

"Oceania" is bounded and unbound; as a geographical and epistemological site, it names not only the South Pacific, but also that other historical nexus of diversity, exchange, and contact — the Caribbean. Submissions generally fell into two interest groups: those on Pacific writers who are lesser known outside their region, and those on Caribbean writers, many of whom have fully established themselves as landmarks on a global literary geography. On the one hand, to include essays on the latter group of writers seems to go against our original intention, as indicated in the call for contributions, to give visibility to literary productions from micro-states which experience "difficulty establishing themselves in an

international literary marketplace.” To exclude them would mean, on the other hand, an unacceptable decision to reject some fine scholarly and critical work from contributors. Curwen Best’s essay on “Barbadian aesthetics” showed us the way forward. Acknowledging the pluricentricity of Caribbean literary culture, it begins by referencing the writing of Derek Walcott and Wilson Harris — two writers from different locations in the Caribbean. It moves on to talk about their legacies in shaping more recent literary and popular productions, and their functions as points of departure for a younger generation of Barbadian writers. Best’s essay serves as a window on the micro-state of Barbados. At the same time, it shows how in their work and fame, the St. Lucian Walcott and the Guyanese Harris have pooled together considerable cultural capital for the entire Caribbean region which new and lesser-known writers may put to imaginative use.

Such is the argument running through — though not always overtly explicated in — Lance Callahan’s essay on Derek Walcott, Nouri Gana’s on Harris’s *Palace of the Peacock*, and Bénédict Ledent’s on Caryl Phillip’s *The Nature of Blood*. The Jamaican anthropologist M. G. Smith has called attention to the operations of “contexts in which cultural differences are juxtaposed so repetitively and variously that the nature, significance and variability of culture are brought fully into the consciousness of all those involved” (14). These essays show how Walcott’s, Harris’s, and Phillip’s works, although coming from divers locations, acutely represent and constitute such contexts of difference and variability. In their work, the “micro-state” as discrete political entity, bounded geographically and culturally, melts into air. Instead, the “Caribbean” emerges once again criss-crossed by communication lines and cultural axes, its shifting literary horizons contractable to what is perceptible from island topographies, and expandable to take in the vast cultural expanse of the “Black Atlantic,” to borrow Paul Gilroy’s valuable term.

The mapping of the South Pacific and the Caribbean, separately and onto each other, requires more detailed theoretical and critical work than can be undertaken in this special issue. At the same time, the inequities in being culturally and economically

marginalized need to be addressed with continued rigor. In contributing to these urgent tasks, we also look forward to their enhanced visibility in scholarly discourses and better dialogue across regional and disciplinary activism.

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NOTES

- 1 The call for contributions was written by Pat Srebrnik, then Acting Editor of *ARIEL*, who proposed this special topic and has worked with us in preparing this issue. We thank her for her patience and assistance, which made this issue possible.
- 2 The states that fall within the strict numerical definition for a micro-state include Qatar (71,000), Kiribati (52,000), Maldives (97,000), Antigua and Barbuda (71,000), Dominica (76,000), Grenada (97,000), St. Kitt's and Nevis (66,000), São Tomé and Príncipe (59,000), Seychelles (42,000), and Vanuatu (80,000). Palau, with a population of a little over 15,000, is one of the newest members of the United Nations.

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