Westwards across the Pacific

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Westwards Across The Pacific

The Pacific is defined by its limits -- to the east, the Americas, to the west, the Asian landmasses and Australia. Paradoxically, from the perspective of the Pacific, the Far East is west, the Western world east. This paper deals with the media images the eastern, North American rim of the Pacific, and in particular Mexico, have of the south eastern rim, Australia.

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Australia looks east across the Pacific. From our perspective, the Pacific is further away from Europe, even more east than the Far East. It is exotic, remote and different. Yet, for those on the eastern borders of the Pacific, the Pacific is "west", with all that implies. One is often reminded in the United States that Australia is seen as just the next step of a traditional trek: "Go west, young man". Australia is young, vibrant, underdeveloped, and less corrupt than the older states of the union: the place for a fresh start. In this iconography, the Pacific is just another mountain range, with its noble savages prepared to allow civilization across.

For the countries of the Spanish sea-borne empire, on the other hand, the Pacific was a traditional possession, now lost. Spain controlled the Pacific route to Asia. The Philippines was a great entrepot, with trade crossing the American continent at various points, notably at Panama, and the profits extraordinary. The Philippines still bears the distinctive marks of the Mexican connection. All that, of course, changed with Drake's startling success in rounding the Cape. The familiar story of the British domination of the Pacific, and indeed of the entire world, followed. This century the Pacific has become, if anything, an American lake.

Certainly, Mexico, and all Latin America, looks north to the United States for guidance on a role in the Pacific. Even now, Asia is seen from the eastern edge of the Pacific looking westward as a great, but distant, economic power. Investment from Japan, Korea, Malaysia and China in infrastructure in Latin America is both necessary and somehow more distant -- perhaps less colonial -- than the massive North American and European ties.

As if in a fit of pique at the loss of the Pacific trade, Mexico has turned its back on the Pacific and views it as an impenetrable wall. As the sailing ship, the Cuauhtemoc, a training ship for the

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Mexican navy, set off via Tahiti to meet other tall ships in Sydney last year, families came from all over the republic to bid their sons a tearful farewell. For them, Australia was impossibly distant, the Pacific a dangerous and unknown sea. Yet the voyage was little longer than the cruises to the Baltic which the seamen and their families take in their stride. There is a sense of distance, of otherness, partly inspired by the sheer improbability of the International Date Line -- it is already tomorrow there! -- part by the fact those who travel go north to the US, south to South American, and, if very successful, to Europe. Going west just does not seem an option.

Nor is it an easy option. Some thirty years ago, Qantas ran the Fiesta route to London -- Sydney, Auckland, Papeete, Acapulco, Mexico City, New York, London. It was a truly Pacific route, in which there was no option but to stop en route. Should one choose to return through the US, there were layovers in Honolulu and Nadi. In the advertisements for the route, there was a pervasive odour of frangipani, of silver towns like Taxco and of hidden possibilities. All that stopped in 1975.

Now the great airlines jump the Pacific with their passengers locked in a haze of film and jet lag induced stupor. The Qantas flight from Sydney to Los Angeles is always full; the indirect route that has a midnight stopover in Honolulu less so. Air New Zealand, Malaysia Airlines, United and Continental jump the Pacific. Japan Airlines takes a route from Sydney to Mexico via Tokyo and Vancouver. No flights from Mexico cross the central Pacific -- to go southwest it is necessary to go north to the US and across; or south to Buenos Aires, or Santiago and across the Pole.

The Pacific itself, and more particularly Australia, is a place of strange animals and events, of exotic vegetation, of reversals and oddities. It is a country where the very rich now honeymoon. One Australian/South Pacific honeymoon booked for October 1998 cost $US50,000. Australia has replaced the exotic destinations of Egypt and India as the ultimate in original travel and, even better, safe. The iconography of the Pacific looking west is as of the dark side of the moon -- a space that must exist, by scientific deduction, but for which most evidence is indirect and highly tinted.

This is as we might expect. How Australia and the southern Pacific are seen from the Americas is a function of distance, the lack of major trade and cultural links, and of the multitudinous but unpredictable processes of the mass media. Films such as South Pacific set a tone for the imaginative understanding of the Southern Pacific in the second half of this century, just as W. Somerset Maugham's tale Rain and Gaugin's vivid bodies served to capture the imagination of earlier generations. New Zealand will be...
interpreted through Jane Campion's eyes, as she expressed her vision in *Piano* and *To the Island* for many years, in the US as in Latin America.

Turning then to what are specifically Mexican images of Australia, *Crocodile Dundee, Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* and *Oscar and Lucinda* have reinforced images of Australia as a country of the exotic. Australian nature films and series, so common on the Discovery Channel -- *The Ten Deadliest Snakes, Blue Water Dreaming* -- portray an abundant and alien nature, and an unsophisticated, if brave and burly (and largely white) populace. Such images have an immense impact. We were in a boat in Xochimilco when some students, seeing our obviously Anglo-Saxon style, yelled derisively “Jesse Helms”. I was concerned to dissociate our group from right-wing US senators, and explained that we were Australian. “Skippy” they countered. I was pleased, but on reflection I wondered whether a stereotype of wild animals in a children's program is really a great image.

Much that is Australian is recognized in Mexico, but thought of as American or more broadly English language. So, for instance, the immensely popular Crowded House and Savage Garden are regarded as anglophone, not Australian; *Heartbreak High* and the children's program *The Wayne Manifesto* are likewise regarded as generic global products. Even the Australian icon, the song, 'Bananas in pyjamas' is dépaysé. Where a film such as Baz Luhrman's stunning *Romeo and Juliet* is set in Mexico, those settings register but not the Australian nationality of the producer, despite his defiantly non-Hollywood style.

Such remarks are of their nature anecdotal. The way that Mexico and Mexicans view Australia is such a complex matter that simplistic models of content analysis of the press are scarcely likely to capture the meaning or impact of press articles. Press images both reflect and form attitudes of those who read papers, but attitudes are already partly set through films, personal experience, friends who have visited, childhood events. To use the jargon, readers, like TV viewers and those who watch film, are “active” audiences (Palmer 1992; Nightingale 1993), literally transforming messages.

There is a further factor which influences press images of a nation -- the global stereotypes, which press agencies are required to tailor their reports to if they wish to be published. Even more than in the case of the television industry, the gatekeepers of the press allow certain types of images through. Joelle van der Mensbrugge's (1996) longitudinal study of European press images of Australia in late 1994 describes the stereotypes which Europeans have of Australia. She mentions Australia as a lazy
country and as a country of strange nature and danger. She found that the location of Australia in the Asia-Pacific area was scarcely noted in the European quality press. Our joint study (1996), after the Australian protests over nuclear testing in the Pacific, showed that Australia had, to some extent, been relocated in the European imagination. Australia was no longer a country of the other, in the mythic south; it was now at least somewhere between Singapore and Tahiti.

It is all too evident in the Mexican press that certain stereotypical images of Australia persist. Kangaroos, koalas and deadly spiders proliferate. Over the years of 1994-5, where a press clippings service was employed by the Australian Embassy, stories ranged from a study of gender allocation of roles in Australia (remarking that Australian men do far more than Mexican men) to more familiar tales of Australian stock and quarantine laws, dry land management, mineral wealth and, inevitably, the stock in trade of Australian oddity. Over the period of 1995-7, for which there is no systematic data, the issues included negative commentary on Australia’s stance on French testing -- Mexico has long been an opponent of nuclear non-proliferation on the grounds that nuclear states should give up their capability for fair control of nuclear weapons. The Northern Territory euthanasia laws were also widely discussed in the media. The financial world continues to watch Australia’s role in Asia -- as a member of APEC, Mexico is aware of Australia’s role in that organization and there has been a sustained attempt to focus Mexican and Latin American eyes on Australia as a doorway to Asia.

Nevertheless, however hard lobby groups and diplomats introduce new images of Australia, the stereotypes dominate. To give a more precise example, in one week recently there were reports of flooding in Wollongong (Reforma, 19 August 1998), debates about Australian moves to make the southern ocean safe for whales (Mexico City Times, 18 August 1998), and a story about kangaroo meat being sent to feed starving Indian tigers (The News, 20 August 1998). All other stories that mentioned Australia in the quality Mexico City press were sport stories. The wildlife, sport and feature story stereotypes are ubiquitous. Australia, however, is far enough away, and little enough known, to remain a paradise in Latin American imagination. It is a paradise of oddity, admittedly, and a highly unsophisticated place, but the image is positive. Perhaps all this is best summed up by a Mexico City gleaning. It is the photo of nudists borrowing videotapes in a video store in Melbourne which appeared in the local newspaper, and then moved on to the television evening news. The stereotypes are obvious – odd, alien but white, and safe!

I received an email from Mexico City on 30 August 1998
noting that Australian "biologically grown" spinach, produced in the outskirts of the City, is for sale in the trendy restaurant area of Condesa. I can only conclude that she means biologically engineered spinach -- we cannot after all regrow Australian spinach in Mexico State. The point is, ironically enough, given the saga of Sydney water, that the use of "Australian" implies that the product is internationally recognized as non-contaminated. Australia is a byword for western safety, in Mexican iconography -- the pure and unsullied. The southern Pacific too shares this range of associations: an untouched paradise in which it is possible, still, to be free. This is not true, of course, of the Philippines, which is seen as just as corrupt, sophisticated and Roman Catholic as Mexico; nor really of Hawai`i, which is regarded as a tropical extension of mainland US.

One other major factor in the view from across the Pacific is, of course, the Olympic games. Australia has always been regarded as a sporting nation -- in Mexico as well as elsewhere. Even in this country of fanatical soccer players, Fox cable network broadcasts Australian rules football, and Mexicans talk knowledgeably of the rules. Indeed, on one of several screens which broadcast to a Planet Hollywood style restaurant in Mexico City, the 1998 Geelong vs Port Adelaide match loomed large. With the Olympics, the focus on Australia has sharpened. Indeed, as commentators on earlier Olympics have noted, the Games are a media event par excellence:

Not only does the Olympics as a television event reach across virtually all political and cultural borders of the world -- however unevenly -- but its nature as an event produced and participated in by an unprecedented number of international constituents suggests that it may produce unique and shared "meaning" (Moragas Spa 1995:3).

It would be natural to expect that the images of Australia as a nation in the Asia-Pacific region might be projected through the games. So far, unfortunately, images projected by SOCOG publicity are familiar and fairly stereotypical:

Sydney, Australia's oldest and biggest city, will welcome the world to the Olympic Games in the year 2000. As one of the world's most beautiful cities situated on perhaps the world's most spectacular waterway, Sydney is sparing nothing in its preparations. Sydney is a cosmopolitan, multicultural city: its 3.9 million people come from 140 different countries. SOCOG intends to make the celebration "... a distinctly Australian event. After all Australians have a love of sport, a commitment to freedom and social fairness, and live amid ... a multicultural society" (SOCOG, 1998). There has been no recognition, except by journalists (Marris 1995), of the potential for a relocation of
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Australia through the Olympic process. At best, there is lip service to multiculturalism, but none to what we might call regionalism.

Australia's images as seen abroad are a matter for great concern – for our trade, for our international competitiveness, for attracting students, for creating our self image. Alexander Downer, the Australian Foreign Minister, is well aware of the dangers of stereotypes. He remarked: “One of the old images of Australia is of a colonial outpost: a European country sitting uncomfortably on the other side of the world …”, but he goes on: “From Australia’s point of view, we want to ensure that the modern image of Australia ... is not just of a country packed to the brim with sporting enthusiasts but one with very sophisticated technology” (1997). He advocates images of: “an educated, skilled workforce, a large and sophisticated domestic market ... a strategic location close to Asia Pacific markets, first class infrastructure, a world class research and development base and relatively liberal foreign investment and ownership rules” (Downer, 1997a).

Perhaps it is time for Australians to look east across the Pacific to new trade partners and intellectual possibilities. If we do that we should be thinking carefully about how we will be seen. We are more than a strange country full of sporty types, dangerous animals and people who watch video in the nude – we are a highly educated, technologically advanced nation.

The Australian Tourist Commission takes the other view. Recently we saw in Honduras an advertisement designed for the US market and relayed by cable through Central America which begins: “We think you Americans work too hard”. The advertisement goes on to show blonde bimbos on beaches, akubra-laden men in pubs, desert, water scenes, and aborigines in corroboree against a setting sun. One would be forgiven for thinking that Australia had one city which is mainly harbour; no Asian population, no high or even popular culture to speak of, no universities and no industry, light or heavy. Of course, tourists won’t come to look at heavy industry, but it is not necessary to be quite as simplistic as these advertisements. If we wish to promote Australian educational institutions in the US and Latin America, Australia’s trade and high-tech skills, its proximity to the Americas and its regional identity, there are better uses for government funds than reinforcing outdated stereotypes at enormous expense.

The ad is explained in a film boasting the achievements of the tourism advertising campaign (Brand Australia, 1997). The preamble takes us from platitudes of the advertising industry (don’t give contradictory messages; keep the message simple; have a brand identity) to the need for a logo and a brand concept of Australia. The brand, which emerges as the basis for a $100 million campaign aiming at attracting 14 million tourists over three years
(since the global economic crisis, a vain hope), is of a great place for 18-35 year olds to have an adventurous “different” holiday -- beaches, rafting, desert, aborigines. For the Asian market, shops; for Europe, space. Every stereotype is reinforced.

National images, pace the *Brand Australia* campaign, are not like images of cars; and selling a country should not mirror the selling of beer. Australia should be drawing on the multiple ways we come to have an image as a nation -- not just press and media, but also personal contacts, family understandings, cultural links, regional understandings, links through diaspora and across indigenous groupings. This is not just a matter of strategy but also a matter of validity. The truth is that we are various, changing, mixed and developing. As our Pacific neighbours look back to us, westwards across the Pacific, we should hope to be perceived in our true diversity, in all the rich and unpredictable muddle of reality.

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