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Australia as America's "Little Brother": A Satiric Reading of John Howard in Andrew McGahan's *Underground*

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Abstract: In this article, I read Andrew McGahan's novel *Underground* as a criticism of the Australian government under the leadership of John Howard in the era following the September 11th attacks on the World Trade Center. I draw out the satire of Howard's perceived role as President George W. Bush's little brother, which becomes a synecdoche for Australia's relationship with America. I situate the novel in the context of America's cyclically neo-colonial history in Australia and draw upon the work of Homi K. Bhabha to suggest that McGahan portrays Australians as an "in-between" people who are guilty of adopting American policies—and thereby relinquishing control of their nation's sovereignty to America—without compunction. I further suggest that, in the tradition of satire, the novel could be read as a warning to Australians against following the United State too closely. With the rise of the self-proclaimed Islamic State, Australia has witnessed the re-emergence of the political climate that is reflected in *Underground*, renewing its relevance to contemporary audiences.

The United States of America has been a substantial influence in Australia since the establishment of the first colony and, throughout its settler history, scholars, historians and political leaders have invoked the metaphor of Australia as America's "little brother." That influence continues today and much of Australia's foreign policy is dependent upon America's economic and military power. While America's overt influence in Australia waxes and wanes, the period following the September 11th attacks on the World Trade Center witnessed an intensification of the alignment of Australia's domestic and foreign policy with America's. More than a decade on, the rise of the self-proclaimed Islamic State and the threat of terrorism on Australian soil has reinforced the convergence of American and Australian

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foreign policies; Australia's current political climate seems to be mirroring that which prevailed in the wake of the attacks of September 11th. As it was then, when John Howard was Australia's Prime Minister, some of those who are raising their voices in opposition to the current political climate have partly blamed Australia's continual acquiescence to the will of the United States. It is a situation that has affinities with the bleak future that is portrayed by Andrew McGahan in his novel *Underground*. In this article, I argue that the novel can be read as a criticism of the Australian government under John Howard—satirizing Howard's perceived role as George W. Bush's little brother and America's "deputy sheriff" in the region—and as a warning against following America too closely.

Kerryn Goldsworthy concludes that *Underground* "has the feral quality of good political cartooning, a willingness to caricature in bold strokes, to make laconically savage fun of solemn hypocrisies, and to go straight for the throat" of Australia's political culture (9). Set in what was, at the time of the novel's publication, the near future (around the year 2011) it tells the story of Leo James, the narrator, and his twin brother Bernard, the Prime Minister of a futuristic Australia. In the novel, Australia is under martial law due to a state of emergency, which is declared because Canberra has been supposedly destroyed by a nuclear bomb. The premise of the novel is that Leo is awaiting his execution as an enemy of Australia, and is writing his "memoirs," partly out of a sense of boredom. They will be read by his captors, American secret service agents, who seem to be in command in Australia. In his "memoirs" he describes a series of harrowing experiences: being kidnapped by terrorists, rescued by the government, and being taken hostage again by the Oz Underground, a resistance movement that is trying to overthrow Bernard's government in Australia. These experiences and his time as his brother's prisoner are responsible for Leo's growth as a character, allowing him to see the dangers of Australia's increasing culture of fear, racism, and political ambivalence. As a relatively recent novel, little has been written about

Underground and the question of it representation of American influence in Australia has only been lightly touched upon.[1] In view of the novel's continued popularity and renewed relevance to Australia's current political climate, a more thorough discussion is justified.

I contend that McGahan's *Underground* parodies Homi K. Bhabha's position that the world dis-order and "in which we are mired . . . is principally defined by a surveillant culture of 'security'" (xvii), which he attributes to "a sharp growth in a new Anglo-American nationalism" that disregards the "independence and autonomy of people's and places" (30). While Bhabha is specifically complaining about America's involvement in "the Third World" in the quoted passage, his comments resonate with, as it will be discussed, the feeling of academic and public figures in Australia, and it is my contention not only that Australia is located "on the rim" of what Bhabha calls the "in-between," but also that McGahan's novel represents Australians as an "in-between" people. As Bhabha argues, "in-between" people are not just an oppressed group, but a group that lacks "autonomy, subjected to the influence or hegemony of another social group" (85). Of course, Australia does, theoretically, have autonomy; however, questions about the practical side of that autonomy have been raised again and again since its federation. For example, John Howard's embrace of the label the "deputy sheriff" of the region caused many to question Australia's independence from the United States (Brenchly 22), and in McGahan's bleak future, Australia's subject position has been pushed to a hyperbolic limit. Moreover, American hegemony and its influence in Australia have been the subject of a number of scholarly works. Norman Bartlett in *Australia and America through 200 Years*, Ray Aitchison in *Thanks to the Yanks* and *The Americans in Australia*, and David Goodman in *Gold Seeking*, for example, argue that America played a key role in the prosperity of the early Australian colonies, dramatically changed the country during the gold rushes and the Second World War, and influenced the location and design of its capital city. Bruce Grant in *Fatal Attraction*, Humphrey McQueen in *Temper Democratic*,

John Langmore in *Dealing with America*, George Megalogenis in *The Longest Decade*, Bell and Bell in *Americanization*, and Don Watson in his essay "Rabbit Syndrome" all criticize the hegemonic influence that America has had in Australian culture, politics and foreign policy. Erik Paul in *Little America* specifically rails against the influence America has had in a post-9/11 Australia. So while Bhabha may never have envisioned Australia's settler population as an "in-between" people, the term's connotations are reminiscent of Australia's position in its relationship with the United States and as it is portrayed in *Underground.*

One of the most conspicuous qualities of McGahan's fifth novel is the over-the-top tone of its satire, a quality which one might associate with the work of earlier satirists like Jonathan Swift. While some might question the literary merit of *Underground*, the novel fits into the long-established satirical tradition. In *The Anatomy of Satire*, Highet argues that there are two chief categories of satirist based on the perceived purpose of the satire. In both, the satirist is telling the truth. One, however, likes his audience, but believes that they are blind or foolish and for these satirists the purpose of the satire is to cure the audience of its ignorance. The other detests humanity and writes with the intention of exposing scandals which will horrify readers. The aim is not to cure, but to punish (234-235). McGahan's novel, as this essay will show, belongs to the first category, inasmuch as the text promotes a belief that, "folly and evil . . . are diseases which can be cured. They are mistakes which can be corrected. . . . If we show our fellow-men the painful and absurd consequences of certain types of conduct . . . [the perpetrators of this conduct] will suffer when they are pinned down and dissected, but . . . most people can be cured" (Highet 236).

Likewise, *Underground* can be read as satire because it "cannot be separated from the shapes, textures, and political struggles of a particular land and landscape" (Fabricant 60), is "intended to shock contemporaries into a realization of the enormity of the current crisis"

(Kelly 139), and leaves the reader with the feeling that "only fools can remain placid under such provocation" (Reilly 134).

Underground's Historical Context

While *Underground* primarily traces the conditions of its future Australia back to the 1990s, the Prime Ministership of John Howard and the events of September 11th, 2001, there is also a sense that history is repeating itself, that Australia is caught in a cycle of being overrun by American citizens in the country, American culture, and American foreign policy—a cycle that started during World War Two. To this day, the alliance with the United States "has been an article of faith in the Australian foreign affairs and defence establishments" in the minds of many Australians—like former Diplomat Lisa Mackey—"lest we forget what Americans did for us in World War II" (qtd. in Broinowski 25). As a result of this allegiance, Australia has "cut and pasted" much of its foreign and defence policies from the United States and also went to war with America in Korea in 1950, Vietnam in 1962, the Persian Gulf in 1991, Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003. Australia's commitment to the United States in the war in Iraq, however, seemed to cross a line, as it was the first time that Australia had participated in starting a war (Broinowski 12-13). Broinowski argues that, for Australians, the invasion of Iraq "was, first and last, Howard's War" (1).

Prime Minister Howard was in New York when the World Trade Center was attacked and he "was conscious immediately that [the events of that day] would alter the course of modern history and behaviour" (DeBats, McDonald and Williams 238). On the following day, when all air traffic in America was suspended, Howard and other senior members of the party were flown back to Australia on Air Force Two, the US Vice-President's personal aircraft. On that flight, Howard telephoned Foreign Minister Alexander Downer and

suggested that, for the first time since its inception, they formally invoke the ANZUS treaty (Sheridan 36). It could be argued that, "Although, in strictly legal terms, invoking the ANZUS was unnecessary, the symbolism underpinned the Government's commitment to, as Howard put it, 'identify with the Americans'" (DeBats, McDonald and Williams 243). Howard's belief—that Australia was "destined" to be close to the United States—resulted in Australia's support of American actions in pursuit of bringing retribution to those responsible for the attacks of September 11th. Another result was the close relationship that developed between George W. Bush and John Howard, causing some critics to suggest that Bush had too much influence over Howard (Paul 223).

The movement to depose the Taliban in Afghanistan—the government believed to have supported the terrorists who were behind the September 11th attacks—was supported strongly in Australia, and the result of Howard's commitment to America was that by October 2001, Australia was involved in America's "war on terror" (Baldino 196-197; Megalogenis 280). One year later, on 12 October 2002, a nightclub in Bali was bombed, killing 202 people, among whom were eighty-eight Australians. In a reflection of the terrorist attacks of September 11th, the media proclaimed that the Bali attack had caused Australia to lose its innocence. The attack also prompted Howard to announce his own version of "the Bush doctrine," stating that Australia would adopt a policy of pre-emptive attacks against any nation in Southeast Asia without notice if that nation had terrorist connections or if Australia had knowledge that terrorists therein were endangering Australia's interests (Garran 192; Megalogenis 256; Paul 19; Poynting et al. 44). These Bali bombings, then, were portrayed as a smaller version of the terrorist attacks on America and, as Broinowski argues, Howard's response seemed like "United States' policy faxed, cut and pasted into" Australia (20).

As portrayed in McGahan's novel, however, the Australian government under John Howard appeared to be amplifying America's emerging policies for combatting terrorism.

According to McCulloch and Poynting et al., Australian citizens have, under the ASIO Legislation Amendment Act of 2003, given up the right to remain silent, as the punishment for refusing to answer questions is up to five years in prison. Moreover, the legal definition of terrorism was expanded to include any knowledge of a terrorist act, and new powers were given to the ASIO and the Australian Federal Police (AFP) to detain anyone "suspected" to be involved in or to have knowledge of terrorism acts (Poynting et al. 175; McCulloch 402, 409). Broinowski argues that the initial draft of this legislation was a "virtual photocopy of the 'Patriot Act'" in the United States (45). Along with these new security measures that limit personal freedoms, in 2005 the Department of Immigration seemed to be operating without safeguards. Two Australians, Cornelia Rau, a permanent resident, and Vivian Alvarez, a citizen, had been detained because the Department suspected them to be illegal immigrants, and Ms. Alvarez was deported to the Philippines (Simon 14-15). These new governmental powers were born out of the terrorist attacks of September 11th, and McCulloch's work suggests that they are an exaggerated imitation of security measures adopted by the United States in response to those attacks. It was these political and social events, under the leadership of John Howard, that spawned the Australia in which Leo James, the narrator of *Underground*, now finds himself.

John Howard as George Bush's "Little" Brother

As the novel opens, readers are introduced to the narrator, Leo James, who is holed up in an unfinished Queensland resort during a cyclone. Leo presents himself as a careless, insensitive, alcoholic, drug using, and womanizing opportunist. He is fifty-nine and admits that he is fat, contrary to the image of the ideal Australian (White 79-84; Ward 2, 229). As Goldsworthy argues, Leo "ought to be a repulsive character," but as the novel progresses, he

becomes "extremely charming" (8). Later on in the novel, Leo goes on to say that after his death, no one will miss him, not even his own daughters (McGahan 38). This characterisation of the narrator serves two purposes in the novel. The first is that it reinforces the ironic tone of the novel, keeping it aligned with the features of classic satire. The point being that if even a man as "repulsive" as Leo can see that there are major drawbacks to Australia's dependence upon the United States, then the average Australian should have no difficulty recognizing them. The second is that it allows Leo's character, as the novel's protagonist, room to grow; he learns from his harrowing experiences and becomes an "extremely charming" and respectable character. He is the hope that Australians, in the words of Highet, "can be cured" (236).

The novel's action begins at the end of the first chapter as Leo is abducted by armed men driving a postal van. Then, suddenly, the action is interrupted by a chapter that is less than two pages long because Leo wants to give the readers more background. He tells them that he is locked away and that his current predicament "is linked to a much wider history . . . to September 11 and the Twin Towers" (McGahan 12). This disruption to the action and the length of the chapter function to focus the reader's attention, to emphasize the revelations given therein. It is here that the novel's scrutiny of American influence in Australia first begins. Leo is, after all, in an extremely bad situation; he has been kidnapped and is being held as a prisoner by, as far as the reader suspects, a terrorist organisation. This dire situation, he tells us, is directly related to an event that happened in America. While one could argue that the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center was a global event, such an argument would reinforce America's place in global affairs, and it is this importance that the world—Australia in particular—places on America that the text decries.

A revelation in the second chapter, which is key to my reading, is that Leo is the fraternal twin brother of Australia's current Prime Minister, "The Honourable Bernard

James," who is later described in the novel as almost a clone of John Howard (McGahan 144). Despite being his twin brother, Leo remarks parenthetically, "By the way, I reserve the right to insert 'little' before any term of abuse that I throw at [Bernard] in the following pages. . . I mean it because he's my 'little' brother. I was born fifteen minutes earlier. And resent it though he does, there's nothing the little shit can do about it" (McGahan 15). This passage, while it might seem a bit esoteric, is the first allusion in the novel to John Howard and sets up a critical theme in the novel: that the leader of Australia suffers from a kind of "little brother syndrome." It resonates with the work of critics who often portrayed John Howard as a "little" version of George W. Bush, as Bush's "little brother:" a concept illustrated, for instance, by the cover of Erik Paul's book *Little America*. The tone of the passage, which is reinforced later in the novel, makes it clear that Leo sees his "little brother" as intolerable. In this light, Bernard James could be read as a sarcastic portrayal of John Howard's perceived role as Bush's "little brother."

As Leo begins detailing his brother's rise to power, the more obvious criticisms of John Howard's character emerge. Leo describes his brother as a "man born to wear suits. So bland and nondescript a figure that he might have been a low-grade bookkeeper" (McGahan 16-17). Bernard is not the kind of "visionary" man whom Leo would typically associate with the Prime Ministership of Australia. Instead he describes Bernard as "a bean counter," and in naming a list of Prime Ministers who would have been severely disappointed that someone like Bernard had taken the job, he starts with Gough Whitlam (McGahan 147), which reinforces the novel's anti-American sentiment. For it was Whitlam who not only stood against American foreign policy—withdrawing Australian troops from Vietnam, ending conscription for the war, releasing "conscientious objectors" from prison and sending an Australian ambassador to China (Bell and Bell 187; Paul 40; Whitlam 6, 18; Oakes 208)—but he also limited American investment in Australia's uranium mines and other new mining

projects (Churchward 183). The reference to Whitlam is likewise evocative of the myth of a "new world order" and the "suspicious" circumstances of Whitlam's removal from power, which many still believe was due to the intervention of the United States (Dahlstrom 36). The fact that Whitlam is listed first as one who would not like Bernard suggests that Bernard is not capable of challenging the United States' power. Through his government's adoption of American foreign policy and the close and personal friendship he had with Geroge W. Bush, John Howard, who is being "pinned down" and "dissected" in this satire, certainly gave the impression that he was not.

Australia's overt adoption of American popular and counter culture is further satirized in McGahan's reenactment of American-style conspiracy theories that flourished in the wake of the September 11th terrorist attacks. The characteristically Australian reenactment begins when Leo's captors proclaim that they were responsible for the destruction of Canberra and Leo relates the details that led up to it. The tone of this section is remarkably blasé and anti-climactic. Three days' warning is given to evacuate the city and the terrorists do not make any demands. No one has any idea from where the bomb comes. Cameras are only allowed to film from fifty kilometres away, and the blast from the bomb is "disappointingly small" (McGahan 30), despite the widespread belief that it is supposed to be over a hundred times the size of the bombs dropped on Japan and extremely radioactive. Leo writes, "We've cut poor old Canberra out of our lives like it never existed . . . [it was] simply erased" (McGahan 30-33). It is true that one could read in this a joke about the apathetic attitude that Australians have about Canberra; it has been dubbed "a snooze-invoking" city (Buckmaster) and "Australia's greatest obscurity" (Bryson 129).

However, there is also a sense that the event itself is sensationalized in order to turn something that is relatively insignificant into a major issue. In an episode that parallels Howard's handling of the *MV Tampa* affair (Jupp 180-181; Megalogenis 258, 272), Bernard

takes advantage of the situation to prove his leadership and to declare a state-of-emergency. Prior to this crisis, his brother's approval rating in the polls was the lowest of any sitting Prime Minister—another reminder of John Howard. However, he is one of the last to leave before the city is destroyed and is dubbed Bernard "Last Man Out" James. "A month after the bomb," Leo explains, "[Bernard]'s approval rating was at seventy-five percent" (McGahan 29-31). As Megalogenis points out, Howard's ratings dropped to 30 per cent prior to his handling of the "boat people" which then put him in "Super Hero" territory (259). Considering the revelation at the end of the novel that Canberra was not actually destroyed, this seems more like a criticism of the "foolish" Australian public, its sensationalizing media, and its leaders, particularly John Howard, for manipulating the public for personal gain. This too, as Leo finds out at the end of the novel, was orchestrated by the United States, again satirising America's hegemony and influence in Australia.

The state of emergency described by Leo is yet another example of a fear that Australians were too eagerly embracing American ideals and American domestic policy on terrorism. The American-inspired hyperbolic reaction to terrorism in Leo's Australia is witnessed as he shifts back to the action of the story and tells his readers that the terrorists have decided to take him for a drive, which presumably means that they are planning to kill him. However, just as he begins assessing his life, the postal van in which he is being driven is ambushed by the Australian Federal Police (AFP). According to Leo, "between the massive recruitment since Canberra, and the subsumption of all the state police forces into one body—there's over eighty thousand in the AFP. . . . answerable to only one man. The Minister for Freedom . . . the Prime Minister" (McGahan 40). Not only is Bernard's title "Minister of Freedom" suggestive of America's image of itself as a champion of freedom (Altman 6; Baldino 199; Megalogenis 282), but also the excessive force that the AFP use in the novel and their ability to skirt due process is an exaggeration of the powers granted to the

AFP under Howard's leadership, which for some scholars seemed like an Australian version of the Patriot Act (Paul 25; Broinowski 45). The connection to America is reinforced as Leo discovers that the man who is in charge of the ambush is an American: "from the CIA—or from some other such secret service" (McGahan 43). So while it is Australians who seem to be destroying the country, they are willingly doing so under the command of the Americans, thereby illustrating their status as "in-between" people.

As the "heroes" of McGahan's novel are introduced, the concept that Australia is subordinated to the cultural, political, and military influence of the United States is reinforced. The terrifying state-of-emergency authority granted to the AFP, which seems to be commanded by the American CIA agent, is demonstrated when they hand down an onsight death penalty to one of the terrorists, Nancy Campbell. The revocation of her right to a fair trial parallels the way that death sentences that are handed down from the United States through the use of drone strikes in countries like Pakistan, Afghanastan, and Iraq. Just as the AFP are about to impose this death sentence upon her, shots are fired and, for the third time "in as many days" (McGahan 47), Leo is ambushed. As he later learns, these ambushers are a part of the OZ Underground, a group of Australians from "all strata of society" (McGahan 66) who are prepared to fight to save Australia "From itself. Or at least from its government. . . . from [Leo's] brother" (McGahan 65), and as Leo's adventures become more outrageous, it becomes evident that the members of the OZ Underground are the real heroes of the novel. They are ordinary Australians risking their lives to free Australia from the tyrannical rule of Bernard James. Thus, when the Americans are listed as the "sworn enemy" of the OZ Underground (McGahan 112), the reader is again left with a sense that America is the driving force behind the society that has developed in Leo's Australia: an exaggeration of Australia under John Howard's leadership.

In order to give the reader more background and strengthen the novel's focus on Australia's adoption of American tactics, Leo disrupts the action again just after a close call with a fake identity card he is using. In explaining how the terrorist attacks of 11 September affected Australia, the novel's criticism of John Howard loses its ambiguity. Leo specifically mentions, "the rise and fall of [Pauline Hanson's] One Nation" political party, but then goes on to say,

> Like the Howard team, they [Bush and his staff] were floundering about in search of direction. What both governments badly needed, Australian and American alike, was a defining purpose. Hey presto—September 11. . . [and] the wave of refugees that had begun to break across our unwilling shores, most of them Muslim. John Howard was joyfully whipping up hysteria about the invasion, and playing hard ball with the refugees themselves, locking them away or stranding them at sea. . . But then the planes crashed into the USA—all of them piloted by Muslims—and that was game, set, and match. Suddenly the Prime Minister was shoulder to shoulder with George W. Bush . . . *That's* when John Howard the political giant was born. (McGahan 98-100)

What this passage shows is a direct connection to the United States; the suggestion is that Howard stayed in power because of his solidarity with George Bush, because of the influence of the United States. And as it is Howard whom Leo ultimately holds responsible for the disaster that his Australia has become (McGahan 146-149), one could likewise place the blame on the undue influence that America has on Australia.

History Repeating Itself

After Leo's scrutiny of John Howard, he reverts to his own adventures, and the slightly more subtle message of Australia's subservient history repeating itself is introduced into the novel. The members of the OZ Underground believe that Nancy and Leo have information that could be critical to their resistance movement. So, in an attempt to get them to the leaders of the organisation, the pair is brought to Brisbane. Part of the plan is that they will meet their next contact after they watch a game of cricket at the Brisbane Cricket Ground: "Australia versus the USA . . . a demonstration match . . . Although it wasn't a real American team—it was a military one, made up of players from the various US bases around Australia." Leo complains that while the Americans probably had some intensive training, they still played the game too much like baseball, and in the end "get walloped" (McGahan 104-113). This scene might provoke notions of America's distance from the Commonwealth, from the Empire, supporting the perception that America does not really belong in Australia. It is, however, also a reproduction of a game that was played during the Second World War in May 1944 at the Brisbane Exhibition Ground. The Australians overwhelmed the Americans so that two top bowlers withdrew to level the contest. Even then, the Australians won by ten wickets (Potts and Potts 160). Thus, Leo's cricket match brings to mind a time in Australia's history when Prime Minister Curtin endorsed America as Australia's salvation (Bartlett 197), and as the text seems to suggest, it is here that Australia's settler population began moving into an "in-between" space.

McGahan's novel not only recognizes the history of Australian subservience to the United States, but it also ironically reveals the continued feelings of subjectivity that have been expressed by scholars like McQueen and Paul. The cricket match described above ends early after a bomb goes off, and in the ensuing confusion, Leo meets the members of the OZ Underground that are meant to take him on the next part of his journey: Australian soldiers.

Leo expresses surprise that any soldiers would be a part of the resistance movement, and Daphne, a member of Australia's army, responds that Australia is being occupied by the United States, and that the Australian military is suffering "the ultimate indignity—being at the beck and call of the US, as if we were just an auxiliary arm of their forces" (McGahan 131). The language of occupation is reminiscent of a statement by Tom Dougherty of Townsville and the president of the Australian Labor Party C.G. Fallon who, early in 1943, protested "against the usurpation of [Australia's] industrial and civilian rights by the American authorities. Australia has not been defeated and is not entitled to suffer the degradation of an army occupation" (qtd in Potts and Potts 218).

The feeling that Australia is in a subject postion to the United States, as described above by C.G. Fallon, is a consistent theme in *Underground* and the irony is that the complaint comes from military figures who—according to Greg Sheridan's book *The Partnership*—would be most likely to value Australia's alliance with America. For example, Daphne also argues that Australia lost World War II, saying to Leo that "We [Australia] *owed* them [America] big time after [World War Two], and they've never let us forget it. We've trotted off to every dodgy war of theirs ever since" (McGahan 133). One can read in this passage a reference to America's wars in Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq, which were fought with the help of Australian soldiers, often against the will of its citizens and in which the Australian government changed its policies to meet America's needs (Bell and Bell 99, 140; Altman 5, 30). It is also suggestive of a destructive cycle of American influence—evidenced by several other passages in the text as well —in which Australia has been caught; history keeps repeating itself and Australia's leaders are not learning the lesson. McGahan, in the words of Harry, makes that point that during World War II Australia may not have been capable of real independence, but "things have changed. We *are* capable now" (McGahan 133). Thus, Australia's mistakes "can be corrected" and the solution to Australia's social

issues, which comes from the mouth of someone who gives his life to try to save Australia, is true political independence from the United States.

The demonstration of America's influence in Australia comes with the crescendo of the reenactment of the novel's American-style conspiracy theory and its hyperbolic suggestion that Australia is secretly being governed by the United States. Leo discovers that Canberra was never destroyed. Instead, it has become the secret capital of the mythic new world order. Leo tells his readers that "[this new world order] was connected—with the Republicans, with the White House, with US security. And in the new world order, there was no connection more useful or more important" (McGahan 125). Thus, it appears that Bernard is willing to give up an entire city to please America and to provide a place from which, according to *Underground* and the myth of the New World Order, the world's richest and arguably most evil people could keep the world economy running smoothly by coordinating incidents of terrorism and sustaining the war on terror (McGahan 261-267; Fotopoulos). In Leo's Australia, America's influence has brought the country to a new low, completely destroying its identity and dignity.[2] Through his use of this hyperbole—as well as Leo's reaction to learning that Canberra is the seat of power for this New World Order—McGahan is implying that part of the "cure" for Australia's social ills is a move away from its location "on the rim" of the "in-between": independence from the political influence of United States.

McGahan's most conspicuous contestation of Australian leaders, like John Howard, who seem to sycophantically adopt American domestic and foreign policy comes at the end of the novel. Nancy and Harry are killed and Leo is jailed by his brother in Canberra's new Parliament House. Using the contrivance that he and Bernard are twin brothers, Leo chooses to sit and write his "memoirs" in the seat where the opposition party leader would have sat, a demonstration of the two brothers as opposing forces. Leo also makes reference to Dumas' *The Man in the Iron Mask*, leaving the reader with the sense that the wrong brother is leading

Australia. The reference again reinforces the irony in the novel: that, as bad as Leo is, he would be a far better leader than Bernard, that someone like Leo would be a better leader than John Howard. When Leo is not writing, he spends his time reading the Hansard and reviewing the changes the country has been through over the last fifteen years of his life. He mourns the loss of the old Australia with its clear identity,[3] and complains that "Nowhere, anywhere, do I see the Australian people saying no" (McGahan 275). Even here, he reminds his readers how absurd it is that America should have such a powerful influence over Australia when, most "Americans will probably know nothing" about Australia's history (McGahan 275). Thus, *Underground* can be read as criticism of "lazy old Australia's" (McGahan 166) willingness to just go along with whatever comes its way, but also as encouraging Australians to act before it is too late, which is often the aim of satire.

The danger that the acceptance of American domestic and foreign anti-terrorism policy poses to Australia is ultimately allegorized in the figure of the narrator, Leo James. Over the course of the novel, Leo is represented as an average Australian who is just trying to enjoy the life he had, but who unwittingly got caught in the country's political turmoil. In the final scene, Leo has been sentenced to death by his brother and hears the footsteps of the firing squad at the door, and realizes that, in an event symbolizing the fate of a self-governing Australia, he is going to be killed there, in Parliament House. His last poignant words are, "And God help them, they sound Australian" (McGahan 294), leaving the reader with the feeling that Australians, partly because of their willing submission to America, are behind the downfall of their own country.

Nevertheless, it is a narrative that provides hope. Leo himself changes and grows because of his experiences. He becomes the kind of citizen that he thinks Australia needs if it is going to succeed, free from America's influence. Likewise, the final premise of the novel is that one of his interrogators, someone who also believes that the world is heading in a

destructive direction, somehow smuggles Leo's "memoirs" out of the building and publishes them so that the truth can come out. It is a gesture that gives meaning to Leo's death and offers hope: if there are people who are willing to stand up for themselves and for what is right, then Australia is not totally lost. The story of Leo's experiences is an example meant "to cure the audience of its ignorance" (Highet 235) the way that Leo was cured of his own ignorance. His final dream before his death, that he is able to actually destroy Canberra and all of the leaders of the mythic "new world order" with a nuclear weapon (McGahan 285-291), seems to provide hope that, even though it may require something truly extraordinary, the "infection" of America's influence in Australia is "eradicable" (Highet 236).

Conclusion

Underground is based on a period of time in which Australia was seeing massive changes that seemed to be the result of America's influence on the country. The perception it gives is that Australia is in danger of losing the last shreds of its autonomy to American hegemony. There is a sense in this novel that history is repeating itself—something that seems particularly relevant to the recent political climate—and that, since World War II, Australia has been caught in a destructive cycle of blindly following the United States. The Australia that *Underground* portrays is a direct result of Bernard's need to be validated by America's leaders, which concludes with disastrous consequences for the country, its dignity on the world stage, and its ability to govern itself. As a piece of satire, the novel exaggerates Australia's social and political climate under John Howard, and tries to point out the absurdity of the fear of Muslims and asylum seekers in Australia. It suggests instead that Australians should fear leaders like John Howard, Pauline Hanson, and my suspicion is that McGahan would include Prime Ministers Tony Abbott and Malcolm Turnbull. It illustrates how these

leaders have kept Australia in the "in-between" space theorized by Homi Bhabha, implying that if Australia ever wants to be respected on the world's stage, it must be truly autonomous of the United States and critical of America's leadership. Ultimately the novel implies that if readers of *Underground* can be "cured of their ignorance," then Australia's "mistakes can be corrected." After the re-election of the anti-Islamist and xenophobic Pauline Hanson and her One Nation political party in 2016, the lesson McGahan is trying to teach seems more relevant now than ever.

[1] See Bennett "Of Spies and Terrorists;" Carr "A World of;" Luebke "A 1984 for Our Time;" O'Reilly "Government, Media and Power;" Smith "The Literary Destruction of Canberra;" Vernon "Underground;" and Webb "Distant Context, Local Colour."

[2] There is also a historical reference to Bush's visit to Canberra, which, as Goldsworthy argues, was accurately described earlier in the novel; this reference reinforces the novel's tie to John Howard, showing the absurd degree of submission Howard, and other Australians, showed to Bush.

[3] I am not suggesting that Australia has ever had a "clear" identity. Richard White, in *Inventing Australia*, cogently argues that Australian identity has been a continual process of invention and reinvention and that idealized or iconic identities often serve the needs of a fraction of the population. Instead, I am arguing that Leo (and perhaps McGahan) holds a nostalgic view of Australia's identity.

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