The ‘Literary Selfie’ Meets Literary Studies: Reading *The Permanent Resident* (2016) with Roanna Gonsalves and Students of Writing Australia 2017, Queensland University of Technology, Meeanjin–Brisbane

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The following interview with Dr Roanna Gonsalves provides insight into her writing process and the inspiration for her characters and stories in the award-winning short story collection, *The Permanent Resident* (2016). The interview was born from a series of questions posed by QUT Creative Writing and Literary students and the support of unit coordinator, Associate Professor Sandra Phillips (Wakka Wakka and Gooreng Gooreng) in 2017. The class consisted of creative writing students, students of literary studies and education students who were all involved in the design of the questions. In this way, each student was able to provide input into a question which they felt reflected their reading of the text. Students offered competing ideas around the meanings and morals we read and discussed in class, thereby enriching the group’s perceptions of fellow students and Australians. These thoughtful conversations were carried over into journal responses and end of semester essays.

The Permanent Resident writes back to dominant narratives around the Indian–Australian and Indian–Goan Australian diaspora within contemporary Australian society. This collection of short stories by Roanna Gonsalves adds more nuance to a growing body of work by Australian women writers of diverse backgrounds. These stories by award-winning writers such as Mirandi Riwoe of Chinese, Indonesian, European and Australian heritage challenge colonial tropes perpetuating stereotypes such as the Eurasian hussy or submissive Chinese–Australian woman (Riwoe 2017, 2020). Indian–Australian author Zoya Patel also addresses the problem of a lack of diversity in *No Country Woman: a memoir of not belonging* in which she ‘write[s] about everything from [arranged] Indian weddings, to my love of animals, to the issue of cultural appropriation. It’s everything I wish I had been able to read growing up, and I hope it is having some impact on young migrants today’ (Patel 2018). These female authors are expanding what Marion Rankine calls a country’s cultural capital.

In an *Overland* (2010) article titled ‘Sometimes it takes a writer,’ Rankine points to the ongoing historical legacy provided by fictional writers which, she argues, enhances a country’s cultural capital by offering a bank of alternative perspectives: ‘Original writing … confronts our expectations head-on. It describes the world [or place] in ways we have never heard it described before, and thus transforms our understanding’ (36). In an interview with the *Times of India*, Gonsalves stated: ‘It’s wonderful that white people write about us but it’s also really important that we write about ourselves. *The Permanent Resident* is an attempt at self-representation. It’s a brown woman writing about brown women’ (Gonsalves *Times* 2016).

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In *The Permanent Resident*, Sydney is revealed as a complicated and disruptive site of what anthropologist Steven Vertovec has described as: ‘super-diversity’ (Vertovec 2007) for both male and female characters. This is revealed through the socio-cultural patterns of everyday life depicted in the narrative spaces of these short stories. Moreover, Sharifian and Musgrave suggest that ‘migrant communities in super diverse situations also exhibit high levels of diversity within themselves’ (361). This super-diversity is evident within the collection as the author fleshes out tensions bubbling beneath the surface of this super diverse city of Indian–Australian and Indian–Goan Australian citizens. Lonely mothers in suburbs such as Campsie and Seven Hills feel equally alienated within the home as they do in public spaces and places. In the lounge rooms of middle class permanent residents we witness families replicating the lives of middle class Bombay residents, often harbouring and perpetuating ancient ideologies around class and religion while shopping for Ikea furniture in their everyday lives. We view a mother absorbed nightly in the cult of MasterChef, seen as the pillar of western cuisine, while her incestuous husband poisons the main bedroom across the hall. We meet transient students surviving and working part time in Indian Restaurants, navigating internal staff hierarchies from kitchen hand to waitress, and who, after long shifts rely on leftovers and tips to ease the financial strain on their family back home in Karwar. There are the Mangalorean Goans and Brahmin Goans whose transnational faith does not shield them from guilt or the hypocrisy of the churches’ sins and its congregation engaged in the weekly process of simulacrum. Internal biases, hidden violence and racism are ever-present as in every other Australian community. The story ‘Cutting Corners’ (245) provides a vignette on one such life:

> My mother and father, who finally got the family reunion visas to live here with me permanently, are Catholics of the first order. They go to Sunday Mass as an investment in the afterlife. They want to make sure they have a spot in Heaven, close to all the popes and the bishops and their sanctifying motions and their footstools.
>
> My friends have been stewed in similar stock. They are all middle-class Indian Australians displaying their Catholic shields in this old country with new colours hoisted on a cross. They are conservative voters, schooled about Australia by strident political campaigning that promises faster growth, higher levels of secrecy, stronger borders. …They encounter Indigenous Australia only when they help their kids with school projects. They buy obedient pictures from Ikea and Adairs, choosing them carefully to match the tack and tone of their brick-veneer houses on the hemlines of Sydney. Not for them the provocation of intellectual engagement through art. (247–48)

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Language is also an essential literary device in Roanna’s work. Power or an inability to step into one’s power is another vein running throughout the stories within *The Permanent Resident*. The female characters quite often discover their power through language and voice which provides them with the ability to navigate power structures, to read a room, and arm themselves against violent and sexist attacks.

It is also through various Indian–Australian and Goan–Australian accents and word choices that Roanna’s characters can decipher how long an immigrant has been in Australia, whereabouts in India they are from or whether they are first or second generation Indian–Goan Australian. In the story ‘CIA Australia’ (83) this decoding of accent is delivered as one might do when appraising a fine wine: ‘I heard the unmistakable buff of a Bombay convent education. She probably went to St Joseph’s or maybe Apostolic Carmel, I thought. I was willing to bet she was a Bandra girl, probably living near St Peter’s’ (104).

In the same story the female protagonist profiles an Indian man she smiles at while waiting for a train at Central station before also finding power in language to rebuff his unwanted advances:

> 'You from India?' From the way he hit hard on the'd' in 'India' and lengthened the 'a' like it was the Yamuna river, I knew he was probably from the north. (84)
>
> … 'Where are you coming from?' He asked.
>
> 'Bombay,' I said. I could count on the Bollywood effect. (84)

They chat some more about commonalities from home and places they know. Then she extends her hand to say goodbye:

> While our hands were still in each other's grip, in that moment before withdrawal, I felt his little finger stroking my palm. At the same time he said, 'Bondee beach aaoge mere saath? Bahut maza aayega.' 'Will you come with me to Bondee Beach? We will enjoy.'
>
> I yanked my hand away and I could feel my face contorting with disgust. (86)
>
> … 'I'll call the police you fuckwit. This is not India,' I said, looking straight into his eyes, adding *'sala behenchod' for effect, to make sure he understood. I contemplated in that split second whether to yell louder to teach him a lesson in public. (86)
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> *Sala behenchod is an offensive Hindi slur.

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In the story, 'Curry muncher 2.0,' settler-Australians also do not escape Roanna's astute characterisations. Travelling on a train late one night after work, a female waitress sizes up the four well-dressed youths looking for trouble: 'They were saying fuck and spitting freely as if somehow their mucus were mightier than any vocabulary on God's earth' (55).

Her male workmate quickly becomes the object of their entertainment, much to her relief, as they ask him: 'Gottni smowkes mayte?' (57) and then launch into a racist tirade beginning with calling him the champion cricketer's name Tendulkar and quickly sliding into 'Fucking motherfucking curry muncher'(57) before physically assaulting him. After the brazen attack her female protagonist debriefs with a humorous internal monologue: 'Later, I wondered how could one possibly munch curry? The way I understood it, curry, being a liquid, could be eaten with rice or one could even drink it as one did rasam and even sambhar. But there was no way one could munch curry as if it were a biscuit' (59).

This aside renders the attackers powerless and impotent in the eyes of the reader, they lack intelligence and courage, something the waitress discovered when she used her voice to warn them off:

> 'Fuck off' I said to them, pretending to be filled with the fearlessness of someone who has nothing to lose—I, who once told my best friend she should wash her

> mouth out with Holy Water when she called a bus conductor stupid behind his back. (60-61)
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> 'Fuck off,' I said again, enjoying the power those words gave me, using their language, a new language to me against them. (61)

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'Easter 2016'

Along with humour, Roanna Gonsalves has this ability to nest her stories in the everyday habitus while simultaneously connecting them to universal themes. There is a Garneresque quality about her female characters who are striving to find something poetic or meaningful in their daily routines of child rearing, cooking and living in suburbia. A quick trip to source Sichuan peppercorns in Campsie becomes a journey through the super-diversity and layers of Australia's immigration history for one female character in the story, 'Easter 2016.' A foreboding line might easily be missed amongst the richness of descriptive language as our homemaker watches her husband drive away: 'The car is a molten stream flowing down to a new Pompeii as I turn to absorb, minute by minute, the open road that is Beamish Street' (191).

In this story, the unnamed female protagonist who is married to Ronnie and has a ten-year-old child called Noah, slowly works her way through the main shopping precinct in search of the Sichuan peppercorns Ronnie insists on having, rather than making do with the black ones in their pantry at home. Like the ageing patriarch Manolis in Christos Tsiolkas's novel, *The Slap* (2008), who walks the streets of Richmond as an old man defeated, this young mother dutifully traverses the layers of continents and countries embedded in Campsie while on her quest for peppercorns. She observes a cool dude at the lights: 'He's Asian and like cool dudes everywhere' (191), she spots 'The *Sydney Korean Herald*, housed above a Vietnamese takeaway' (191) and momentarily tracks 'A Korean man and a Tongan woman [who] walk side by side' (191). People are catalogued by colours and objects: an orange T-Shirt with a grey fringe walking her Chihuahua, two teenage girls walk by holding large drinking cups, as a red Camry pulls out followed by a silver Hilux Ute. A woman in a black t-shirt with glitter stars stops to chat with a couple. Another woman passes in a tiger-print top and on it goes. Time has slowed as she moves through space looking for the Sichuan peppercorns that she can't replace with black ones on this Easter in 2016. She thinks to herself: 'Ronnie expects complicity or, at the very least, silence from me. It is his money, after all, and he should have the freedom to decide how to spend it' (193). Ultimately, upon finding the Sichuan peppercorns she remembers her past self and reclaims the future on her terms.

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In 2020, *ASAL's* (virtual) conference was titled *Reading and Writing Australian Literature*. Four of the themes were: 'Teaching Australian Writing,' 'Literary Criticism,' 'Representing Diversity' and 'Writing Australia.' In this treacherous neo-liberal era, the humanities are clinging to an ever-diminishing post within Australian universities (see Eltham, 2020). As informed scholars, we need to demonstrate why our literature is worthy of its place within the academy. Instead of being viewed as an expensive delicacy, it must remain a staple for interdisciplinary students across myriad schools. Educators have an opportunity and a duty to demonstrate why collections such as *The Permanent Resident* are important to not only creative writing and literary studies students, but also to our future teachers, engineers, nurses and all graduates working within Australian society. Critical thinkers are created and informed by reading alternative viewpoints about the societies in which they live. Now, more than ever, literary texts chosen for class discussions will have to really earn their place on a reading list. *The Permanent Resident* as a collection of 16 short stories illustrates the super-diversity existing within Indian–Goan–Australian groups. These groups are too readily assigned to one homogenous population in a country where, according to Gonsalves: 'Whiteness is the norm against which everything is judged' (Gonsalves 2016). This is her interview.

Interview with Roanna Gonsalves

Q. Where do you source your ideas from?

RG: This is an important question and I'm not tired of answering any questions, so thank you for asking it ☺ The idea with this collection, right from the start, was always to play with language in order to write characters and places I didn't often see reflected in contemporary Australian literature. I'm one of those writers for whom the idea for a story emerges not through character or image but through language, through a fresh cluster of words that sound and look good to me. The structuring and sculpting come after the first draft, once the first rush of ideas have been branded on the page with the iron of excitement over good-looking sentences. Some stories are based on newspaper articles, some are based on conversations I've had, some are based on observations of life around me, and some are just made up.

Q: We were interested to read of bias within the Indian community towards members of other classes or religious backgrounds, for example in your first short story 'Full Face.' As a Goan Catholic, have you encountered much hidden bias while living in Australia from the Indian Community?

RG: Just like the myth of the classless Australia, there seems to be the myth of a classless or homogenous immigrant population. However, class, ethnic, and religious differences abound amongst immigrant groups. Rich Goan immigrants, like other immigrants with money, often have a much easier time anywhere in the world because they don't need to work at the coalface of immigrant life. Goan immigrants who are fluent in English have a slightly easier time. Our surnames are Portuguese, or Iberian if you want to be hoity-toity, or Brazilian if you want to be sexy. I think in the eyes of many, this makes us less alien than the 'brown hordes' with Hindu/Muslim surnames. We can also leverage our Christianity, the religion of the mainstream, or at least the cultural affinities of the mainstream with their roots in Christianity, to our advantage. However, if you have very little money, speak English with an accent that's not easily understood, and don't fit in with middle-class pretensions e.g. discussing the value of your property in India, if you don't have access to these privileges, then it's a different story.

In relation to the Indian diaspora in Australia, often the dominant narrative is the North Indian Hindu Brahmanical patriarchal story, and British colonisation. Other histories are left out of this dominant narrative. The Goan story of Portuguese colonisation for over 500 years, much longer than British colonisation, is often relegated to the footnotes of Indian history, and those who are not of Hindu background, such as Muslims and Christians, are sometimes not taken seriously, not considered the right kind of Indian.

One important thing though is that we as immigrants be aware of whose land we are living on, particularly with the experience of Goan and Indian history of land being taken by various colonisers and corporations over the centuries. This [referring to Australia] is Indigenous land that has never been ceded, but taken by force. This is the land on which we build our houses and have our weekend parties. That's all good and essential in a place where one doesn't have a support system. But I think we also need to consider the deep wound of Australian history, that of Indigenous sovereignty and settler colonialism in which we are all implicated, and of which we as immigrants are beneficiaries.'

Q. Irony plays an important part in your storytelling as does humour. How important are these devices when writing about human suffering?

RG: I think humour and irony in a piece of text help open out the work, layer it with networks of meaning, and increase the bandwidth of empathy. This is because both these devices encourage us as readers to see and to understand more than what is being said on the page without hitting the reader on the head. These devices are often also used towards subversive ends, to reveal the banality, the cruelty and the ruthlessness of our current political climate or the story world of that particular piece of text. While one can render human suffering on the page in a straightforward way, and this has its place of course, I personally feel that an ironic tone charges the work more powerfully with more layers of implicit meaning that is contextually dependent, relies on the reader's own interpretation more fully, and ultimately invites the reader to co-create meaning with the writer.

Q. How prevalent or common is the potential for harm against Indian Australians as in the case of Vincent in the story 'Curry Muncher 2.0'?

RG: Harm or abuse of Indian Australians, and particularly of women in hijabs, of brown and black people is very common in Australia. 'Curry Muncher 2.0' is based on the numerous incidents of racial abuse against international students particularly in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane some years ago. I wrote and narrated a radio documentary about this. If you like, you can listen and read the manuscript here:
http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/360doosra-thelife-and-times-of-an-indian-student-in/3117374

Now, the abuse, violence against, and oppression of those with little power happens all over the world, in every society, including India. However, the Australian experience is particular because of the history of colonisation, of dispossession of land and genocide of Indigenous communities and cultures. Read against this experience, it is tragic but not implausible that Australia's ethnic minorities will also experience abuse and violence, because Whiteness is the norm against which everything is judged. That said, in *The Permanent Resident*, I have tried to explore the complexities of life in a country like Australia, writing not just about the dark underside, but also the kind underside of Australians which I have personally experienced on a number of occasions.

Q. As a class we focused on 'Easter 2016' which facilitated a fantastic discussion as it is so vivid with imagery, metaphors and cultural references. There were some unresolved issues for some of us however! Is the female protagonist contemplating a drowning suicide as she moves through the town towards a borderless grave?

RG: I'm so happy to hear you focussed on reading 'Easter 2016.' Yes, you decoded this story in the way I encoded it. I wanted to get into her head as she was attempting to withdraw from her family towards possible suicide, and liberation into a different afterlife. In this story I also hoped to pay tribute to the work of W.B. Yeats and to the memory of the Easter Rising in Ireland and, drawing attention to the devastating internal rising taking place for one person wandering the streets of multicultural Sydney, particularly the energetic suburb of Campsie which is not often seen as a place worthy of literary representation. I used the transcript or field notes method, which I have used extensively in my scholarly work, and which writers like Susan Schultz (*Dementia Blog*) have used to great poetic effect.

Q. Your short stories reveal how the 'practice of everyday life' (De Certeau 1974) within suburban and city spaces are valid experiences worthy of literary representation. How important is writing about domesticity and suburban life to you?

RG: In my opinion, every human experience is worthy of literary representation. The hegemonic idea of what is worthy of literature has often only been issues that are familiar to and that concern rich, white, able-bodied cis men from the first world. The highest literary value has often been placed on their stories, excluding many readers around the world. I see myself as part of a long tradition of writers who write outside of this hegemonic idea. I'm reminded of a poem by Eunice De Souza, my teacher at university and one of India's most skilful poets in the English language. Sadly, she passed away [in 2017], but her words are immortal:

> **My students**
> My students think it funny
> that Daruwallas and de Souzas
> should write poetry.
> Poetry is faery lands forlorn.
> Women writers Miss Austen.
> Only foreign men air their crotches.

Q. The middle classes appear to be portrayed as people who are attempting to reinvent themselves whether they are Australian or Indian. How similar do you find the aspirational classes to be in both countries?

RG: There are many similarities, and also some key differences. The similarities are that in both countries, the aspirational middle classes want to be seen as being refined, sophisticated and having good taste. As the French thinker Bourdieu told us 'taste classifies and it classifies the classifier.' We know that taste, sophistication, refinement are never neutral but are socially constructed, inscribed with one's educational background, upbringing etc. The difference is that while in Australia the aspirational classes want to be rich, in India the aspirational middle classes want to be rich and White. This is because of hundreds of years of colonisation; we see White people as superior. You can see examples of this everywhere, from billboards in urban India where products are advertised using white models, to the obsession with fairness and fair cream.

Q. 'Christmas 2012' ends with a literal slap in the face. It takes a while for the end to sink in and I re-read this several times. Until the story's ending I found that it was quite an innocuous tale but I now found it shocking. Is this story a comment on how people tend to ignore some unconventional truths because they are perpetuated by senior clergymen and other people of the church?

RG: Yes, absolutely. I'm honoured with your extremely perceptive reading of this book and this story. Thank you! Priests in all religions, godmen of various kinds have wielded so much power in world history. Thankfully in our networked open environment today they are less likely to continue their abuse with impunity. In this story I was also trying to explore the log in our own eyes while criticising the speck in our neighbour's eye.

Q. We have students who are studying to become secondary teachers in our mix Roanna; how important do you think it is for schools to include contemporary texts which feature the migrant diaspora?

RG: It is crucial to include contemporary texts about migrants in Australia and written by migrants in Australia. This is because such texts represent what Ghassan Hage calls 'the multicultural real.' Such texts provide an alternative, more inclusive and realistic view of what it means to be Australian. Such texts empower the minority students in class (in terms of race, ethnicity, class, gender, ability etc) and validate their own stories, making them feel like they share in the status of White Australia. I call this taking a literary selfie of a country. If anyone is interested, I've written about this a lot; links can be found here:
https://roannagonsalves.com.au/on-selfies/

Q: We also have creative writing students. Can you give us an insight into your daily writing routine?

RG: I've interviewed a lot of writers about this. One thing successful writers have in common is that they write every day. Some set a time limit, e.g. a few hours every day. Some set a word limit e.g. 1000 words a day. I try to write 500 words every day. It doesn't always happen because apart from being a writer I also teach to pay the bills and I'm a single parent. So life gets in the way all the time, as I'm sure it does for you too. But it's important that we steal time back to do what matters to us, to write our stories. Beginnings are hard, and I procrastinate like a champion. But once I start I don't want to stop. I find that once I have a sense of the story then it gets easier to continue, to get into the flow of things. Also, turning off the wifi helps. I have deleted Facebook and Twitter from my phone. This has increased my productivity. I still use them on my laptop but not constantly checking social media is a huge time-gainer. There are resources like Write or Die:
http://www.theguardian.com/technology/shortcuts/2014/oct/07write-or-die-software-for-struggling-authors-david-nicholls

One thing I can definitely recommend is writing with peers. I used to run a Shut Up and Write group at UNSW. We'd meet every Wednesday for an hour or so. I wrote the first draft of 'The permanent resident,' the final story in my book *The Permanent Resident* every Wednesday, at these sessions. This is how I completed that story. It was forced writing time, under pressure to stay focussed because everyone else looked like they were focussed. No checking emails and social media. It was tremendously useful. It felt like an indulgence. It also felt good to have got some words down in a short span of time. Once I had a first draft down, after six or seven Wednesdays, I worked on polishing the story over a few days at home.

With the story 'Easter 2016,' I went to a café in Campsie and just wrote down whatever I could observe in front of me. I then went back and began to weave those very specific details into the story I wanted to write. This 'transcript style' as I mentioned above, is extremely useful for adding specificity to a story.

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