

Transnational Imaginaries: Reading Asian Australian Writing

Introduction

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When did ‘Asian Australian writing’ come into existence? Answering this question is almost as difficult as deciding when people from the regions now known as Asia first arrived in Australia. We know, for example, that Chinese settlers filed petitions protesting their treatment by colonial governments as early as 1855 (Broinowski 11), and that autobiographical writing appeared in the 1920s (Shen 2001). Creative writers started publishing in the 1950s (Mena Abdullah), 60s (Chitra Fernando) and 70s (Ee Tiang Hong, Brian Castro) – and when we know more about publications in languages other than English, these dates are likely to be pushed back further.¹ However, as a *category* of writing, Asian Australian writing did not emerge until the 1990s, and its currency within literary scholarship dates back not much more than a decade², following in the footsteps of ‘Asian American writing’, which had developed as a successful and influential field of literary and critical production since the 1980s (see articles by Dorothy Wang and Mridula Chakraborty in this volume).

The recent and rapid blossoming of Asian Australian creative writing should come as no surprise. Australia’s Asian population remained small until the White Australia policy was finally abandoned in the 1970s, but has grown rapidly since the first influx of refugees from post-war Vietnam. Asian Australians on average have a higher level of education than the Australian population as a whole (*Australia in the Asian Century* 101), and while many first-generation migrants, especially those from Vietnam and mainland China, arrived with little English, migrants from countries like India, Sri Lanka, Singapore and Malaysia often had native or near-native English proficiency. For the second and ‘1.5’ generations of migrants³ who are currently coming onto the scene, language and education present no barrier, and (perhaps) inspired by an ‘Asian boom’ in diasporic cultural production across the globe, they have enthusiastically turned to writing as well as other art forms (film, visual arts), in many cases with considerable success.

At the same time, the growing academic interest in diasporic writing world-wide has been embraced by Australian scholars, and scholars of Australian literature in other locations, to the extent that Asian Australian writing is now a lively and diverse field of literary scholarship, and one that is developing its own critical and theoretical debates surrounding terminology, legitimacy, taxonomies, and, frequently, the place of this writing within national literary traditions such as that of Australian literature.

Yet, for all the critical and creative energy it has released, Asian Australian writing remains a contested category, as does the related category of multicultural writing. What exactly do we mean by 'Asia', and to what extent does the term gloss over and neutralise the huge differences (cultural, linguistic, historical) between writers from separate parts of this vast continent and their diverse heritage? Does the label further marginalise texts and writers who may already have encountered discrimination and cultural stereotyping in Australia? Does it draw attention away from the writing itself to focus primarily on the identity of the writer? Conversely, if such questions tend to expose the negative potential inherent in critical categorisation, one must also ask what alternatives are available if we want to discuss literatures that do not fit neatly into the national categories which have been the dominant system of literary classification to date, but which are coming under increasing pressure.

'Diasporic writing', 'world literature', 'transnational' or 'transcultural' literatures: these are only some of the more recent concepts mobilised to account for the growing realisation that writing does not stop at national or linguistic borders, but spills across nations, cultures and languages in today's ever more globalised cultural economy – moreover, that it always did. Scholarship on Australian literature has in recent years increasingly turned towards its transnational dimensions (Dixon 2007, Carter 2007, Gelder 2010), and while the 'transnational turn' has not gone unchallenged (see Huggan 2009) it nevertheless signals a shift in critical thinking towards an enquiry into the global, national and local interconnectedness which feeds into the literary experience both at the point of creation and the point of reception. From this perspective, it is not just the 'Asian' in 'Asian Australian' that comes under scrutiny, but 'Australian' as well, for we may ask what it means to read a text as Australian rather than, say, part of 'world literature in English'. It is a shift that enables new modes of critical engagement. For example, Nicholas Jose, in this volume, reads Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* as an Australian novel while conversely, Nam Le's *The Boat*, also discussed by Jose in his article, is read in a recent publication by the Canadian scholar Christopher Lee as Asian American (2010). Turning the critical eye away from a rigid focus on the classification of literary works and towards taxonomies of reading practice is another shift which in the last decade has enabled new insight into the nature of the literary experience, and, in the case of Australian literature, renewed attention to and understanding of its reception in different national and cultural contexts.⁴

What are the consequences of the 'transnational turn' for the reading of Asian Australian writers? If *all* Australian writing is transnational, is there no special case to be made for writers whose recent experience of migration and resettlement, whose more direct connections with other languages and other cultures, define their writing in ways that clearly has appeal to readers and scholars alike? And why is it, as Michael Jacklin has argued in an earlier *JASAL* article, that at a time when the discipline of Australian literary studies is said to be going global, 'there is no accompanying assumption that the corpus, or the canon, of Australian literature will be radically altered.' (2009) Why is it that, in spite of this shift in critical attention, the dominance of Anglo-Celtic writers remains largely unchallenged? These are some of the questions and debates that animate discussions around Asian Australian (and other diasporic) writing today, many of them raised by the contributors to this collection.

In a recent paper in which I speculated on what makes Asian Australian writing *Australian* (as opposed to, for example, Asian American writing), I made a couple of bold, no doubt contestable generalisations (Ommundsen 2011). One was that what Christopher Lee calls Nam Le's 'metacritique of cultural politics' is what marks *The Boat* as not only typically Asian Australian but also typically Australian. I also argued that while the question of

identity figures large in Asian Australian writing, as it does in most writing from Asian diasporas, the politics of representation which informs the Asian Australian texts makes identity politics much less straight-forward than it appears to be in the work of influential diaporic writers such as Amy Tan. Cultural identity is not something which exists independently of the imagination, not something that can be found or retrieved through a search for cultural roots, but a site of instability and metamorphosis, something which has to be constantly invented, written into being. Sometimes referred to as ‘post-identity’, such formations inform the work of many of the best-known Asian Australian writers: Brian Castro, Nam Le, Ouyang Yu, Hsu-Ming Teo, Michelle De Kretser, Adib Khan, Tom Cho.

These hypotheses clearly do not hold for all Asian Australian texts and writers: they would not, for example, be of great relevance in elucidating the Vietnamese texts discussed by Michael Jacklin in this volume, or the Iranian writers who are the subject of Fiona Sumner’s article. It is instructive, however, to note the frequency with which the articles in this collection observe such meta-critique at work in the texts and authors they discuss: the identity of the writer and its implication for the reception of the text; cultural stereotypes and their role in literary experiences; literary/critical theory and its application to Asian Australian writing; avant-garde as opposed to traditional form in diasporic writing; the role of language, and of translation.

Tara Goedjen in her article ‘Local Myths in a Global World: Merlinda Bobis’ “White turtle” reads Bobis’ story as a *mise en abyme* for the reception of transnational writing which unsettles conventional literary norms, creating ‘a compelling initiation into the unknown—that mingling of familiarity and unfamiliarity—which, like story-telling, carries such a weight in the world.’ Bobis’ story stages a transnational literary encounter with great potential for misreading and rejection—a Filipina oral storyteller chanting her story, in her own language, to an Australian audience at a writers’ festival. The audience is unsettled, their familiar modes of reception rendered irrelevant. Some react negatively: ‘Cowboy’, a novelist, fingering his book, seeking reassurance from a printed text, which he regards as a superior form of literary expression. However, Lola’s mesmerising chant brings about a moment of magic in which a new kind of transnational imaginary comes into being: communication which transcends intellectual exchange to touch her listeners at a different level, somatic and psychic. Figured as the magical realist intrusion of the giant white turtle, the subject of Lola’s story, into the festival venue, the spell holds the audience in a suspension of disbelief, and, when it is finally broken, something remains—a recognition that a literary experience of a different nature has taken place. Even the policemen brought in to take care of the displaced turtle are sensitive to its power. It is this moment when the unfamiliar intrudes into the familiar, unsettling but enriching the literary exchange, that spells the potential inherent in cross-cultural literary encounters such as the ones afforded by the texts and authors discussed in this collection.

Discussions of multicultural or diasporic writing in Australia, as elsewhere in the Western world, have tended to focus on writing in the language of the host nation (in this case English), and the writing has been assessed primarily in terms of the writer’s fluency in English, as well as her/his assimilation of the conventions which mark writing as ‘good’ or ‘literary’ in the English tradition.⁵ More recently, however, inspired by lively theoretical debates on the nature of literary and cultural translation as well as research in other immigrant nations, especially the US, on writing in the migrant writer’s native language, some critics have started to acknowledge that Australia’s transnational literary heritage is also *multilingual*, and as a consequence, reading and assessing such writing may need to draw on

multiple literacies, and on different sets of formal conventions and criteria for what is literary and what is good. A transnational reading practice thus becomes more than simply recognising the different cultural influences which inform the writing at the level of contents: it means acknowledging linguistic, formal and generic influences from other traditions – as often as not, traditions with which the reader/critic is not familiar.

‘Distant reading’—reading texts from cultural traditions very different from one’s own—calls on a certain openness, a willingness to suspend disbelief, to postpone judgement, and to acknowledge the limits to one’s own cultural literacy. Playing in the space between the familiar and the unfamiliar has its own rewards, and it is this space that many transnational writers have made their playground. Thus, Michelle Cahill in her exegetical piece in this volume discusses her own poetry as a combined outcome of the Eastern (Buddhism, Hinduism) and Western (deconstruction, postcolonialism) intellectual traditions that went into its making, arguing that linguistic and cultural displacement becomes a source of reinvention:

The textual encounter permits for me a fantasy of identities, riven by migration, linguistic exile, economic and cultural subordination. Yet however symbolic the dominant language might appear, its semantics and its logos are a construction like the pages of a book that is falling apart even as we read it.

Translation—of languages, of cultural forms, of individuals—is a major concern for several of the contributors, as it is for the writers they discuss. Citing Salman Rushdie (‘Having been borne across the world, we are *translated men*’), Wang Guanglin reads the transnational writer as translator in Brian Castro’s *The Garden Book*. There are many translators in the novel: Swan Hay, who ‘translates’ the 18th century Chinese poetess He Shuangqing through her work as well as her own life in early twentieth century Australia; Jasper A. Zenlin, who translates Swan Hay’s poetry into English, Norman Shih, who later pieces together Swan’s life from fragments. Dorothy Wang discusses another of Brian Castro’s novels, *The Bath Fugues*, together with an Asian American text, Pamela Lu’s *Pamela: A Novel*, focussing on the way these minority writers inhabit the host language. Characterising their aesthetic as the subjunctive mode, she argues that in these texts, language ‘is inseparable from...subjectivity and worldview’—it is ‘*how* something is said rather than *what* is being said’ that makes these texts diasporic. Nicholas Jose, in his reading of Michelle de Kretser’s *The Hamilton Case*, refers to the novel’s ‘adaptive mismatch of English literary modes to an incommensurate world.’ ‘The possibilities and impossibilities of translation’ (Sumner) are also taken up by Michael Jacklin, Fiona Sumner, and Michelle Cahill, each offering a different perspective on what is lost, and gained, in the gap between languages and the bridges that writers construct to connect them.

Cultural politics, and the politics of culture, figure prominently in any discussion relating to emerging categories of writing. Critical activism in the latter part of the twentieth century brought into being categories such as women’s writing and postcolonial writing; indeed, Australian literature itself owes its existence as a distinct tradition to tireless lobbying by critics, reviewers, teachers, researchers, librarians and historians, as well as their pioneering work in mapping the new tradition and defining its place within wider systems of classification. Writing ‘Asian Australian literature’ into being, today’s scholars follow in this activist tradition, arguing that its earlier invisibility has caused critical neglect and misreading, blaming the custodians of established categories for protecting vested interests. Thus Mridula Chakraborty in this volume invokes Ien Ang’s concept of the ‘psycho-

geography of white Australia', which, she argues, has served to protect Australian literature from potential Asian 'invaders':

The literary continent exhibits the same 'racial/spatial anxiety' (Ang 126) as its geopolitical imaginary, allying itself to the putatively European or Anglo-North American models, or at the very least a generic and purportedly neutral whiteness.

Other contributors focus on particular groups of texts and writers which they contend have previously been neglected even within current scholarship on Asian Australian writing. Stefano Mercanti and Mridula Chakraborty both argue that South Asian Australian writing has not received systematic critical attention; Michael Jacklin calls for further research on Vietnamese Australian writing, and on diasporic writing in languages other than English; Fiona Sumner introduces writers and texts from Iran, raising questions about what counts as 'Asian'. Tamara Wagner calls attention to the 'dual diasporas' inhabited by writers from Southeast Asia such as Hsu-Ming Teo, while Dorothy Wang questions the politics of the turn to diaspora in discussions of minority literatures:

The 'diasporic'...could be used, usually unconsciously, as a means to circumvent dealing with the continuing traumas and discomforts of American (and Australian) domestic racial politics and racism.

Mridula Chakraborty, comparing Asian Australian writing to similar formations in the US and Canada, argues that it remains a rather 'nebulous' and under-theorised category, which cannot be simply mapped onto an American model, as has sometimes been attempted. She concludes by calling for further articulation of ideas around diaspora and transnationalism in literature 'in scholarly articles that make them meaningful in Australia.'

In these examples, as in most critical engagement with Asian Australian writing over the last decade, there is a strong awareness that a new literary category is being written into being, and that the ways it is constituted will have consequences, not only for how these writers and texts will be read, but also for our understanding of the wider critical and cultural geography. Nicholas Jose sums up the potential for critical reorientation:

Whether in relation to personal or national identity, or established literary genres or conventions, or even the language that is in play, Asian Australian writers re-interpret antecedent Australian literary and cultural traditions through a contemporary, portable articulation that illuminates different pasts and connects them to comparable currents elsewhere. In this way Asian Australian writing triangulates between Australia, ancestral Asian homelands and global English, and in that process Australia can be a disappearing point.

Mridula Chakraborty concurs:

There is the opportunity in the here and the now to map out a field, to engage in productive contention around the portable label of Asian Australian that might actually revitalize the entire field of Australian literature.

Australian writing in the Asian century

It is one of the great ironies of recent Australian history that while the nation has never been more multicultural, it seems to be more ambivalent than ever before about multiculturalism. After a period of bi-partisan support for multiculturalism in the late '70s and '80s, the '90s saw growing and vocal opposition, most notably from Pauline Hanson and the One Nation Party, but also infiltrating the rhetoric of mainstream politics. However, at the same time as the Howard government removed the term multiculturalism from policy documents and names of departments and government agencies, they oversaw a large increase in immigrant numbers, with a shift towards Asian countries as the main sources of immigration. The Labor government has since 2007 cautiously reintroduced multiculturalism into their public rhetoric, but has been much less reticent in reorienting its international focus towards the Asian region. The 2012 government white paper *Australia in the Asian Century* not only spells out the vital importance of Asia to Australia's economic prosperity, but also argues for closer social and cultural bonds between Australia and its northern neighbours. Asian diaporas in Australia are named as resources that will facilitate economic, social and cultural interaction between Australia and their Asian homelands, and as a vital force for transformation within Australia.

Cultural change, however, takes longer than the reorientation of a nation's economic compass; it also lags behind shifts in the composition of the population. The discrepancy between Australia's largely monocultural literary tradition and the nation's increasingly multicultural population has been the subject of fierce debate since the 1980s⁶, and is still, as evidenced by some of the essays in this collection, a subject of critical contention. There are several reasons, I believe, for this delay. One is that Australian literature is itself a recently established critical category and its advocates were reluctant to rethink its parameters, and those of the national culture it defined and reflected, so soon after its inception. More is at stake in redefining cultural identity than in finding new markets for coal or iron ore, and the defensive, gate-keeping attitudes of Oz-lit's nationalist phase were at the same time indicative of a desire to protect a precious (and hard-fought) heritage and a degree of insecurity surrounding the legitimacy of that very heritage.

Some critics (see for example Mead 2009) have suggested that we have now reached a 'post-nationalist' era in Australian literary studies, and while I believe any proclamation of the 'death of the nation' in literary criticism and classification is at best premature, it also seems clear that the 'transnational turn' referred to above has altered the orientation of writers, readers and critics alike, making them more willing to turn to the world – a world which increasingly includes Asia – as its cultural horizon.

The place of Asian Australian writers within this cultural tug-of-war is ambiguous. Many of them participate willingly in the debates, and in their creative writing stage the complexities of the transformative processes which affect individuals as well as nations. But most are reluctant to play the part of cultural warriors: as *writers* first and foremost they insist on their right to speak for themselves, and to let their writing speak, without the constraints of social or political agendas. Their cultural allegiances, moreover, are mixed and unstable, moving between home and host in ways that make many uncomfortable when expected to *represent* their particular cultural or national origins. Indeed, many have deliberately distanced themselves from the agenda of well-meaning critics pleading on their behalf, and by incorporating their scepticism into their writing (see in particular Michelle de Kretser, Hsu-Ming Teo, Brian Castro), offer an ironic commentary on the nature of literary communication and its tenuous relationship to non-literary realities.

The ‘Asianisation’ of Australian culture and literature is not something that will come about through a government white paper, or, for that sake, by the canonisation of particular writers or categories of writing. And yet, it is unmistakably under way, with every new diasporic writer who makes it into print, wins prizes and finds a readership, with each non-Asian Australian writer who develops Asia-literacy and incorporates it into her/his writing, with every critic, reviewer and teacher of literature whose transnational horizon informs their practice, with every exchange and partnership between universities and cultural institutions in Australia and Asia in which students, teachers and artists learn to see themselves and their culture from the other’s perspective. Australian literature in the Asian century won’t be Asian, it will, and should be, confidently Australian. But both Australian literature and Australian literary studies will inevitably, like the nation itself, become increasingly transnational – with distinct Asian inflections.⁷

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¹ Research currently under way for the Multicultural subset of the AustLit database has revealed large numbers of LOTE texts and writers previously unknown to literary scholars.

² My first edited collection in this field (Ommundsen and Boreland 1995), produced out of curiosity as well as considerable ignorance, is worth revisiting if only for the sake of recognising how fast Asian Australian writing, as well as its scholarly commentary, have grown in less than two decades.

³ Term used for migrants who arrived in their host country as children and who have been educated in the host culture and language.

⁴ I would like in this context to acknowledge Robert Dixon, who has shared with me thoughts on his current ARC-funded project 'Scenes of Reading: Australian Literature and the world republic of letters'.

⁵ See for example Robert Dessaix's essay 'Nice Work if You Can Get It' in which he dismisses most multicultural Australian writing as 'not very good' because of the authors' insufficient command of English (1991).

⁶ For an overview of the early decade of this debate, see Gunew 1994.

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