

There Goes the Neighbourhood!: The (Indian)- Subcontinental in the Asian/Australian Literary Precinct

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This article intervenes in the ongoing debate about the nature of Asian Australian Writing, a debate that started sometime circa 2000s and seems to have gathered some force with the putative rise of global Asia and especially with regards to Australia's own growing realisation of its geographical positioning. In its early stages, the referent for this academic debate was Asian-American Studies and whether or not it made sense for such a trans-Atlantic term to be applied to the Australian region. In the last decade, Australia's position within the Asian geopolitical region has been increasingly articulated with respect to bilateral exchange with its immediate neighbours, mainly in the arena of trade and security. Writing this article in 2012, it seems that the two strands, the academic and the geographical, have strategically merged to define the parameters of Asian Australian Writing. This is not a new merging of course. Australia's relationship with Asia has been filtered through its political relationship with the United States of America since the 1960s, and some of the debates regarding Asianness in the US academic model have been received as well as resisted in Australia's own engagement with Asia. To pose the question of Asian Australian Writing at this moment, as the geopolitical equations of the globe *seem* to be shifting, is to resurrect those old questions, and to rearticulate them in a manner that makes sense in the here and the now. But far more importantly, to raise the question of Asian Australian Writing is to raise, yet again, the prickly canonical question of a national literature in Australia, while locating it within the transnational flow of academic trends. As Tseen Khoo notes in her 'Introduction' to *Locating Asian Australian Cultures*, 'as with any emerging "studies" field, Asian Australian studies' constant features will include deliberations over its own definition, boundaries and purpose' (2). This article is an acknowledgement of those deliberations and an attempt to assess the general place of the 'Asian' in Australian literature and, more particularly, the specificity of one oft-neglected constituency in the Asian Australian imaginary: the Indian/subcontinental.

In a recent book titled *There Goes the Neighbourhood: Australia and the Rise of Asia*, Michael Wesley, current Executive Director of the Lowy Institute, a think tank for international policy, argues that the much-vaunted 'rise' of Asia is unprecedented and radically challenges Australia both in terms of its past economic/technological advantage and its future population relativities. Preferring to deem this challenge as *Indo-Pacific*, the book refuses to limit Australia's prime geopolitical relationship only to China and bemoans the lack of any robust interest or debate in the region as a whole. Reading a review of the book in the *Weekend Australian Review* section (Sheridan), I was intrigued by the title, and struck by how Wesley, inadvertently, had zoned in upon two intimate and constant preoccupations of the Australian national mindset. For Wesley, the 'neighbourhood' referred to the national entities that Australia shares waters with, in the Pacific and Indian Oceans, as also its commitment to other, faraway allied nations not remotely in the Asian geographical region. Wesley's book riffs off an earlier study conducted by Michael Dugan and Josef Szwarc for the Australian Institute of Multicultural Affairs in 1984, *There Goes the Neighbourhood': Australia's Migrant Experience*, but Wesley's concern is more with international relations

rather than national population build-up. In the age of globalisation and ever-increasing transnational migration, the two issues get interlinked.

For me, and for the purposes of this article, ‘there goes the neighbourhood’ assumes the force of an Ozzie idiom, a metaphor for the national phobia against migration, which in turn affects its other national obsession with the pedigree of domestic real estate markets. I take the title of Wesley’s policy-speak as a provocation to think about the ‘Asian’ *arriviste* in the literary neighbourhood of the Asian/Australian territory. This article has a three-pronged approach: a) to understand what the idea of ‘Asia’ does to Australia’s national discourse and its imagined audience for a ‘national’ literature; b) to trace a comparative etymology of Asian Australian Writing with Asian-American and Asian-Canadian Studies; and c) to offer a reading of three contemporary Sri-Lankan Australian novels that use the trope of ‘neighbourhood’ to ‘settle’ Australia, in both senses of the word, as also to argue for specificities of the umbrella term ‘Asian’. In conclusion, the article will make an argument for understanding the two-way traffic that literary transnationalism necessarily entails.

Part A: Location, Location, Location: Where is Asia in Australian Literature?

Ien Ang in *On Not Speaking Chinese: Living Between Asia and the West* provides a cogent analysis of transformations of Australia in its imagined community and in relation to its neighbours since the formation of Federation in 1901. That year also coincided with the *Immigration Restriction Act*, thereby making migration part of Australia’s foundational narrative. The other originary myth of Australia is its *naturalisation* as an island continent, as a separate and distinct space that ‘absolutizes the disconnection of the territory from the rest of the world and downplays the fluidity of [its] border zones’ (Ang 129). Ang explains that ‘the idea of Australia as an “island-continent”’ is a ‘collapsing into one of physical geography and human geography’ which has the effect of creating a ‘psycho-geography of white Australia’ (126). The consolidation of a white settler-nation serves to legitimize ‘the boundaries of the nation-state of Australia as we know it today’ and provides some populaces with a claim to ownership and sense of entitlement that confer upon them the privilege of hospitality and hosting in this land (129). Following upon Ang’s argument, I contend that the establishment in hegemonic Australian literature operates in the same way, gatekeeping its boundaries and tracing its genealogy to the same ‘meta-geographical imagination’ from which the European ‘idea of “continents” had sprung’ (Lewis and Wigen quoted in Ang 112). The literary continent exhibits the same ‘racial/spatial anxiety’ (Ang 126) as its geopolitical imaginary, allying itself to the putatively originary European or Anglo-North American models, or at the very least a generic and purportedly neutral whiteness. While hegemonic Australian canon’s own experiments with dismantling metropolitan European categories of analysis and aesthetics may be garnered as evidence of a ‘minor’ literature approaching maturity, anything harnessed with the label ‘Asian’ is deemed instantly illegitimate, ticking nothing more than the category of ‘resident alien’ (Gunew, ‘Aliens’ 28), forever relegated to the status of ‘minority’ or peripheral literature.

I want to emphasise the distinction between minor and minority here: ‘minor’ in the Kafka sense makes mainstream Australian literature a supplement (*not* in the Spivak sense) to ‘the magnificent body of writing to which our lucky stars destined us to be heirs’ (Turner quoted in Carter 262) whereas ‘minority’ literature necessarily intrudes upon, infiltrates and occupies an oppositional stance to the British lineage. The very elision of any adjectival qualification for hegemonic writing other than the ‘Australian’ is a sign of its irrefutable right to a national literature status, while those with extra-national adjectives can only make a secondary claim. Leon Cantrell traces such enduring myths to an ‘Anglophile sentiment’ [that] ‘still pervades

Australian literary and cultural studies, which with equal relentlessness recuperates the mythic egalitarianism of white working-class men as the central element of national identity. What is brought into being as distinctively Australian is not a set of cultural practices, a landscape, or a different set of histories, but a single figure, the typical Australian, whose accents and attitudes stand in for the population at large' (151). Therefore, Australian literature, despite its myriad creative answers to the question of 'who has the right to belong' to this canon, continues to be animated by it (Huggan vii).

One manifestation of the racial/spatial anxiety about the authentic Australian is the endless obsession with hoaxes and fakes in the Australian literary imaginary, as evidenced by the high profile controversy over the Demidenko affair in the 1980s. This is not to suggest that entry by Asian writers in the literary scenes of Europe and Anglo-North America were seamless, untroubled affairs. To the contrary, canonical wars have been fought tooth and nail in the annals of postcolonial and diasporic literature globally. However, the central place that such an obsession occupies in the Australian audience is testimony, as Maria Takolander and David McCooney argue, to its continued privileging of 'real authors and literature' (57, 59). Thus, while an Ern Malley hoax might represent 'a nationalist suspicion of European modernism through the character of a working class man, the Demidenko affair was decidedly 90s in its use of multicultural ideology' (60):

The Demidenko hoax also reignited curiously old-fashioned ideas about Australian cultural identity. In the judges' report, the Miles Franklin judges wrote: 'Novels about migrant experience seem to us to be seizing the high ground in contemporary Australian fiction, in contrast to fictions about the more vapid aspects of Australian life' (qtd. in Jacobson 15). As Howard Jacobson put it, quoting Ern Malley, this observation houses an old complaint: 'that life is trivial and unreal in Australia, that the real thing is somewhere else, that the black swan trespasses on alien water' (15). Similarly, Peter Craven suggests Australian cultural vacuity when he writes that 'For what seems an age now, Demidenko has looked like a symbol of the void around which our cultural life flitters' (17). The Demidenko hoax, in an unexpected sleight of hand, exposed the relationship between anxiety regarding authorial identity and anxiety regarding national identity in the public sphere. (60-61)

Wenche Ommundsen argues that in the aftermath of the Demidenko affair, Asian diasporic writers in Australia have developed a 'defence mechanism, deflecting criticism that they are seeking to capitalise on exotic difference, affirming their right to be considered as writers first and Asian Australians second' (509). Such defensiveness has meant that while earlier non-prefixed writers (though tracing their biological lineage from non-European or mixed quarters) might have had the luxury of establishing their difference from Europe, exploring the 'vacuity' of Australian life on its own terms (David Malouf's first novel, *Johnno*, 1972, comes to mind), post-multicultural 'migrant' writers may not be accorded the same freedom. These 'newcomers' are to be forever tarred with the brush of exotic remove, never mind that their own experience of their writing might not be exotic to them at all. Defensiveness it may be for all the right (or wrong) reasons, but it is also ultimately a sad acknowledgement of the refusal of the mainstream to admit the myriad histories that migrant writers arrive with, stories that seem to have no space in the Australian literary imaginary, unless always already qualified as those of the outsider, and therefore suspect and not proper to the national field.

The most acute issue at the heart of this search for identity is the settler-nation's own suspect claim to the continent itself.

Part B: What Is In a Name? Or Which 'Asian' Are We Talking About?

In this section, I am clearing the ground for my understanding of what Asian might mean within the literary Asian Australian Studies context. I do so from a comparative frame. I came to Australia three years ago after spending nine years in Canada. That northwards journey had been my first introduction to critical mass nomenclatures in academic and activist fields. I do not claim that I did not know interest-group politics before I left India to study in Canada, but my understanding was issue-based rather than numbers- or constituency-based. Being in the Anglo-North American academy introduces one very quickly to questions of voice, presence, representation, and the need for a critical mass to make these claims explicit and political. The context of minority or peripheral cultures in contestation with majoritarian ideologies gave a great boost to literary studies in Anglo-North America from the 1970s onwards, which is when an immigrant intelligentsia that had been allowed entry into the nations since 1965 came into its own in the academy. Recruited from the erstwhile third world countries, now known as the global South, these elite new members of the university derived their consciousness from anti-imperial struggles and had been inducted into the academic culture of the US mainly in order to counter the threat of communism in the Eastern bloc. Crucially, they were astute pawns in the game of the cold war, but their arrival in what feminist scholar, Mary E. John, calls 'our new metropolis' followed the 'dwarfing of Britain' as the colonial centre (11). These were also the heady days of the Civil Rights Movement accompanied by solidarity between the US women of colour and third world feminists that led to what Chela Sandoval calls an oppositional politics. What happened next is *literally* literary history: the spectacular rise of postcolonial studies and diaspora literatures within the Anglo-North American academy became instrumental in interrogating the assumptions of multicultural white settler nationalisms. It is in the context of these interrogations that the category of Asian-American derives significance, and also acts as a means of differentiating itself from African American studies. As a field of study, Asian-American thus owes its origin to the area studies model that international relations carved out in the US, in a managerial model of multicultural policy.

It is clear that such an originary tale holds no purchase in Australia. As Dugan and Szwarc contend in their 1984 *There Goes the Neighbourhood*, the Golden Outpost of the Empire from 1851-1900 led the way to a land more British than the British till the Second World War. Alison Broinowski suggests in her essay 'Orange Juice or Great Western: Indian and Australian Mutual Perceptions in the 1940s and 1950s', that even mid-century, Australia chose to be 'part of the indivisible West' instead of opting to be part of a new Asia (77). Even as late as the 1970s, when Australia had 'made the British monarch Queen of Australia and done away with racially discriminatory migration', it was not ready to answer the question, 'Is it possible that at last Australia is joining Asia?' (92). Broinowski cites Bruce Grant, Australian High Commissioner in New Delhi at the time, as saying that 'his diplomatic staff in New Delhi did not know what kind of nation they represented' (92). Ending her essay for a millennial special issue in the journal *South Asia*, Broinowski concludes, 'Australia's identity remains no less equivocal twenty years later, and still for the same reasons' (92). Of course the story of Australia's position in the region is a complex one and I do not mean to reduce it to moralistic pieties, but even Wesley's commentary in 2011 argues that Australia's relationships in the Asian region are largely mediated via Washington, and overwhelmingly

so through economic considerations. This is where this lengthy preamble on the nature of Asian Australian Writing poses questions for me.

The question I want to ask is this: Is there such a thing as Asian Australian Writing that might constitute a critical mass of study? It seems to me an incipient field: the same names keep cropping up in bibliographies. This field cannot be seen as mere mapping onto an American model that does not bear testing out *in situ*. While hyphenated Asian-American categories arise in the context of postcolonial, multicultural and area studies, the very space of the 'Asian' and the 'Australian' unlinked by a hyphen, attests to a separation of identities, which may not be a bad thing, unless it is a deliberate and effective means of actually keeping Asian Australian Writing forever out of the realm of a national literary corpus. Despite these fields having had early emergences in the Australian literary arena, notably in *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin), and despite having influenced the Canadian model of multiculturalism and postcolonialism, it seems to me that the conversation around diaspora has not really taken off here, thereby making Asian Australian a somewhat nebulous category. It has been rightly argued that the category of a national literature itself is a problematic one; however, all kinds of institutional and market forces continue to mitigate in its continued favour even in the age of transnationalism and globalisation. Here I pose a set of rhetorical questions to bring out the contrast between Asian American and Australian studies. Is Asian-Australian part of the internationalisation of American studies in the Pacific Rim as Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong suggests? Is Asian Australian a rethinking of race, ethnicity, and nationalism here as it is in the US according to Jane H Yi? Is it a politics out of trauma as Yasuko Kase says? Or have these hyphenated mono-ethnic identities taken on a transnational character, as Karen Har-Yen Chow argues? Jeannie Yu-Mei Chiu counters that questions like these are clustered around nationalism and repression. Shirley Geok-Lin Lim's work in the sites and transits of transnational literature would suggest that the answer to all these questions might be a resounding yes, but what I would like to see are articulations of these ideas in scholarly articles that make them meaningful in Australia.

In order to begin to answer this question, we may have to ask an older question: Is Australia in the Pacific Rim meaningful, that is, in the spirit of an engagement that goes beyond trade and security? Alison Broinowski and others in the same special issue of *South Asia* suggest that Australia itself does not have an idea of what its identity is or should be. While such an equivocation can be productive if it leads to the interrogation of a nation or a literary field, for example of the kinds evidenced in Laura Moss' *Is Canada Postcolonial?* or Cynthia Sugars' *Unhomely States: Theorizing English-Canadian Postcolonialism*, it does not seem to me that Australian literature has undertaken similar exercises. If I am emphasising the place of postcolonial and multicultural theories in this scenario, it is because the hyphen does not make sense without either. Even if the hyphen travels transnationally, we still have to interrogate what work it does in the local national space? As we have seen, the question of hyphen has not entered the Australian stage. Moreover, energetic work done in the arena of Australian multiculturalism by cultural critics like Sneja Gunew, Jan Mayhuddin, Fazal Rizvi, came to a standstill by the mid-nineties. As Wenche Ommundsen commented during the workshop that led to this special issue, much of the energy of such theorising was focused on Europe anyway, even if opposing the Anglo-Celt.

So after a litany of what the label Asian Australian does not do, let me shift gears and spotlight what I think it does. I am arguing for a specificity of the site of Australian literature as very different from the one occupied by Asian-Americanness or Asian-Canadianness, even

though there might be theoretical parallels and derivations. At the workshop that prompted this special issue, Hoa Pham suggested¹ that Vietnamese literature is now being mainstreamed into the larger Australian body and Michael Jacklin traced² a longer itinerary for language writing. My sense is that the geographical factor might have a larger role to play here. The European cosmopolitan questioning of a colonial Anglo-Celtic state by Gunew et al. was an attempt to capture their profound sense of ennui in the aftermath of traumatic separation from Europe. But for Asian arrivants to Australia, the unsettling of relations with the mainstream is subversive *as well as* settled. When the seas brought these arrivants to alien land, it was also familiar by sheer factor of proximity. Here I find extremely useful Tony Simoes da Silva's suggestion that 'contemporary Australian texts have undertaken to explore the complex modes of negotiation of characters caught between identities at once firmly anchored in the past—distant yet strangely familiar—and, [this is the most exciting suggestion] in the dizzying mood of the present, familiarly strange, but known' (66). In an essay titled 'Rethinking Marginality: Class, Identity and Desire in Contemporary Australia Writing', Simoes da Silva persuasively argues that the diasporic turn is a kind of 'conscious "intentional" hybridity' that is also politically articulated as opposed to an unconscious organic kind of hybridity posited by a Barthesian 'lived experience' (Werbner quoted in Simoes da Silva 47). This brings me to the literature I want to focus on, where no easy answers are available, where the ambiguity of meaning itself is salutary and necessary to an understanding of Australian literature.

Part C: Who's New in the Hood? Or the Show in the 'Show and Tell'

Considerations of Asian Australian Writing prioritise one aspect and effect of Asia, namely, the one with which the Australian nation has traditionally had major trade and economic relationships. When Australia imagines itself to be in the Asian region, it thinks of its fraternity with China first and foremost, and then extends it to Indonesia, Japan, Vietnam, the Philippines, etc. In the realm of culture/literature, the only substantial volume on Asian Australian studies (edited by Tseen Khoo) does not have any entries from/on South Asia. When I submitted my abstract for this special issue, I wanted to fan out the claim of Asian Australian literature to include writing that derives its *raison d'être* from the nations of the Indian subcontinent. I had made up my mind that what is known as South Asian or East Indian in the US or Canadian context respectively, seemed to slip under the radar of scholarly attention in Australia. But in the process of writing this article, and teaching these texts in undergraduate courses, I have come to the conclusion that the appeal to 'me-tooism' is not important in Australian literature. Going by the Anglo-North American paradigm alone, these nations have predominantly made their literary and cultural arguments based on postcolonial and diasporic studies. They have a very different colonial history, one that is based predominantly on their relationship with Britain, unlike most of South East Asia. For example, Bruce Bennett in an essay titled 'A Family Closeness? Australia, India, Indonesia' analyses the work of writer, Yasmine Gooneratne, and filmmaker, Safina Uberoi, and declares that writers and cultural producers from the Indian subcontinent have a mastery over English 'with a sense of its performative power and its nuances' which lends them a family resemblance based on their long affinity with the English language and its literary traditions. This might be a contentious claim, which has its grains of truth nevertheless. But this is not the aspect that is interesting about Australian literature by writers hailing from the Indian subcontinent. The possibilities of inhabiting the neighbourhood are far more exciting. I locate the Asian in the Australian literary neighbourhood in the ubiquitous and desired Australian suburb, with its red-tiled roofs, its backyard with the barbeque, and its front lawns with

lemon fruit trees as much as mangoes. There might even be a curry leaf shrub in there with the camellias, gardenias, and magnolias. Not to forget the stunning jacaranda!

This section takes up for analysis the work of Yasmine Gooneratne, Suneeta Peres da Costa, and Michelle de Kretser to argue for the valency of a subcontinental presence in Australia which narrates its history of migration and tells the story of its literature in a distinct way. More specifically, it argues that particular waves of migration in Australia make for writing that intervenes directly into the question of the literary nation. Unlike in the UK or the US, where Indian writing in English proliferates and predominates, making the Indian nation hegemonic in the global publishing arena, the subcontinental nation most prominent in Australian creative expression is Sri Lanka, as evidenced by Gooneratne and De Kretser, as also the better known cookbook writer, Charmaine Solomon, herself a force of culinary cultural transformation in the nation. The three novels under consideration trace an itinerary for the subcontinent from *A Change of Skies* (1991) to *Homework* (1999) to *The Lost Dog* (2007), but ultimately make an assured claim to both the quintessential Australian neighbourhood, the suburb, and the Australian literary space, ‘nationally, notionally’ to use Simoes da Silva’s words again (48).

Yasmine Gooneratne’s acclaimed 1991 novel, *A Change of Skies*, is seen by Meenakshi Mukherjee as ‘typical of the 1990s’ when ‘language and loyalties tend to spill over national boundaries, when histories and identities do not always remain contained within tidy geographic boundaries’ (quoted in Schmidt-Haberkamp 216). Even as the novel traces a history of colonial Sri Lanka in the voice of the seemingly naïve, but naughty, housewife Navaranjini, we are confidently taken into the heart of liberal Australia, where their acquaintances belong ‘to a new breed of Australian diplomats’, the ‘Asianists’ who were ‘representing a country that was just becoming Asia-literate’ (Gooneratne 29). The Australian High Commissioner in Sri Lanka discusses ‘meat exports with Japanese businessmen’ one week and flies off to Florida the next ‘to give a paper on Asian writers in Australia at a conference of the American Association of Australia Literature’ causing Navaranjini to exclaim: ‘Are there any Asian writers in Australia?’ (29).

The rollicking tongue-in-cheek narrative of the supposedly meek domestic wife from the benighted backwaters of Serendip pulls no punches as she tells the transformation of Navaranjini into Jean and her husband Bharat into Barry in the exclusive residential address of Vaucluse. No prickly question of ghettoisation here. Amidst the many jokes of settlement, the writer makes her most pointed comment on the White Australia Policy through two remarkable devices. The first is a diary ostensibly kept by Barry’s grandfather aboard a ship in 1882 that brought the first Sri Lankan migrants into the country, along with stowaway mynah birds, that then go on to assume pestilential numbers in Australia. The second is Jean’s comedy of manners exchange with a right-wing talkback radio show host, where every Oz stereotype is brought up and uproariously subverted. At the end of the tale, Barry and Jean, ‘true blue fair dinkum Aussies’ die in a plane-crash, NOT on their way back to the enchanted island of Serendip. Theirs is not the impossible fantasy of Return with a capital R that diaspora theory has made infamous, where ‘dying in a strange country’ is the ultimate anathema to migrant life. They die on the way back to Sydney from a Christmas holiday in Queensland with their suburban neighbours, Bruce and Maureen from number thirty-two. The novel ends with Barry and Jean’s daughter, Edwina, undertaking a field trip to Sri Lanka, but there is no way this is a narrative of *Framing Marginality*. Instead, Veena, her subcontinental choice of a shortened name, understands that the ties of the parental country

left behind really have been replaced by friends in this new one, where the distinction between friends and family cannot be understood by the hierarchical rules of social conduct in the old country. In the *Australian* newspaper on board, Veena notes that ‘Asia’s all over the front page’ (314) and that her home is unmistakably Australia.

Considerations of home are equally on the backfoot in Suneeta Peres da Costa’s 1999 novel, *Homework*. In this coming-of-age narrative, six-year-old Mina undertakes a journey of losing the abnormal nodes that she was born in. Shrugging off the burden of heritage, Mina is at one with the other migrant children of her suburban Sydney home. Like Veena in *A Change of Skies*, Mina in *Homework* refuses to be an exotic spectacle for multicultural consumption. Instead the novel deftly explores the psychological relationship between self and place, where individual traumas are never far from the surface, where ethnic, class, and familial roots are deeply entwined in both the nations, of origin and adoption. The particular baggage of a Goa annexed by India is a preoccupation that Mina’s father is invested in; her schizophrenic mother is inflicted by a recalcitrant womb that refuses her solace, but Mina herself emerges from her *bildungsroman* ‘young and free’ to experience the pleasures and pains of her own life. The inevitable betrayals of adolescence for her are not triggered by the shadow of the old country, but in the here and now of her Jewish migrant neighbours. Peres da Costa uses the trope of the mother, both biological and geographical, only to conclude: ‘We begin at a time beyond the womb, a disjunct moment; and we love after having survived the unnameable and unmasterable miseries of the past. And on and on each one of us arrives and advances, flying with her face forever gazing at the nebulous, sometime hidden and occasionally divine shapes of history from whose thigh she sadly slides’ (259). The writer does refuse to name or master these shapes of history; instead, her freedom lies in a delicious revelry of what Simoes da Silva calls ‘the very banality of existence in a cross cultural Australia’ (50).

My third novel is Michelle de Kretser’s 2007 *The Lost Dog*. Set ‘in the orbit of contemporary Melbourne, with its jagged skyline and Skipping Girl Vinegar sign, its narrow alleys, art galleries and universities’, this tale is a definite move to the ‘here-and-now’ after so much ‘there-and-then’ as Fiona Gruber notes in an interview with De Kretser (par. 8). This is a novel of residues, of the flotsam and jetsam of a century of migrations, mixed histories and melees that come to their final resting place either in ‘a dull suburban existence’ or in the unexcavated mysteries of bush Australia (par. 5). De Kretser’s work is a meditation upon modern cities and technology, in bodies and their disgusting smells, in histories and their irretrievabilities; she is interested first and foremost in what people throw away and what they hold on to. In this, she is definitely a voice of modern Australia, which awakens anew on the refuse of history and haunting. But De Kretser is also a novelist deeply interested in history. Starting with *The Rose Grower*, a psychological exploration of the French Revolution, and going on to *The Hamilton Case*, a postcolonial whodunit set in Sri Lanka, De Kretser’s latest novel too is a meditation on a history of our vanishing present. It is a document of all our Australian homes, where the next-door neighbour harbours just as many traumas and tales as us. The novel, in its irrefusable history, gives us the promise of a future in which all of its characters are transformed and that is the final assurance of Australian literature.

Conclusion: What Neighbourhood is This?

The idea of the neighbourhood is an enduringly vexing one for Australia. Even in 2012, the overwhelming perception of Australia in the region is that it continues to be motivated by

undivided Western interests. The situation becomes complicated when it wants to avail of the economic boom of the region, and calls itself Asian only in that context. Part of this imperative has to do with the problem of globalisation. However hard we might insist that globalisation knows no borders, it remains true that only certain aspects of globalisation are truly borderless, capital being the most obvious example. Culture continues to be mediated by national borders, be it geographical or cultural. In such a context, it might be worthwhile to pay attention to Bennett's suggestion that the notion of a 'critical regionalism' might be developed in Australia through 'cultural and educational relationships even ahead of economic imperatives' (57).

Paul Sharrad in a very comprehensive essay in a special issue of *Southerly* on India in 2010 argues that a kind of transnationalism permeates Asian Australian Writing and that this is a distinctive characteristic increasingly of writers like Inez Baranay. Sharrad starts his essay by reporting that there might be ten thousand students of Australian literature in India. I think globalisation begins to be meaningful here if we can make a claim for even a hundred students of Indian literature in Australia. This is obviously not the case. The number of literary scholars on the Indian subcontinent in Australia can be counted on fingers. This is a kind of disinterest that I find very difficult to fathom and which compels me to ask what may constitute a global traffic in Asian perspectives on Australian literature without having any kind of reverse flow at all? What kinds of histories and legacies are brought home to us when we take up Asian Australianness for consideration?

The specific question of the Indian subcontinent has been articulated in the field of Asian-American literature by scholars like Ketu Katrak, Roshni Rustomji-Kerns, Susan Koshy, Shilpa Dave, Malini Johar Schueller etc. Rajini Srikanth suggests that South Asian American literature comprises a world next door, while according to Lavina Dhingra Shankar, South Asian American literature is 'off the turnpike' of Asian America. This kind of profusion of theoretical exposition is yet to be discovered in discussions around Asian Australian Writing. 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 revitalise the entire field of Australian literature itself. Race, hybridity, ethnicity, authenticity, the history of American imperialism, these are the politics that animate American conversations around Asianness. We might have to think whether these are the same questions in play in Australia. How may we open them up in a site-specific manner? And if Asian Australian is a category that offers completely new, perhaps contrary, ways of configuring Asianness in the Pacific Rim, what might they be?

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¹ Editor’s note: The author is referring to an oral presentation Hoa Pham gave at the *Asian Australian Writing Workshop* held at The University of Wollongong in September 2011.

² Editor’s note: The author is referring to an oral presentation Michael Jacklin gave at the *Asian Australian Writing Workshop* held at The University of Wollongong in September 2011. A version of this paper appears in this edition of *JASAL*.