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Article

Title: Introduction: Realigning the margins: Asian Australian writing

Creators: Wilson, J. M. and Lokuge, C.

DOI: [10.1080/17449855.2016.1235572](https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2016.1235572)

Example citation: Wilson, J. M. and Lokuge, C. (2016) Introduction: Realigning the margins: Asian Australian writing. *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*. **52**(5), pp. 527-532. 1744-9855.

It is advisable to refer to the **publisher's version** if you intend to cite from this work.

Version: Accepted version

Official URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2016.1235572>

<http://nectar.northampton.ac.uk/8798/>



Realigning the margins: Asian Australian writing

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This special issue of the *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, the result of a collaboration with the South Asian Diaspora International Research Network (SADIRN) at Monash University, Australia, engages with Asian Australian writing, a phenomenon that has been staking out a place in the Australian literary landscape since the 1950s and 1960s. It has now burgeoned into an influential area of cultural production, known for its ethnic diversity and stylistic innovativeness and demanding new forms of critical engagement involving transnational and transcultural frameworks. As Wenche Ommundsen and Huang Zhong point out in their article in this issue, the very term “Asian Australian” signals a heterogeneity that rivals that of the dominant Anglo Australian culture; just as white Australian writing displays the lineaments of its complex European heritage, so hybridised works by multicultural writers from mainland China, Vietnam, Hong Kong, the Philippines, Indonesia, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Singapore and Malaysia can be read in terms of their specific national, ethnic, linguistic and cultural traditions. Nevertheless, this category’s primary location within the space of the host or Australian nation has determined its reception and interpretation. Marked by controversial representations of historical and present-day encounters with white Australian culture, debates on alterity, representational inequality, and consciousness of its minority status, Asian Australian writing has become a force field of critical enquiry in its own right (Ommundsen 2012, 2).

Collectively the seven articles and one interview in this special issue examine how this varied and culturally diverse body of work intervenes into contemporary representational politics: for example, in questioning the ideology of Australian multiculturalism, the core/periphery hierarchy, the perpetuation of Orientalist attitudes and stereotypes, and white Australian claims to belong as seen in

its myths of cultural authenticity and authority. Ameliorative multicultural discourses are also identified, reflecting fiction's power to imagine more positive realms of potentiality and healing: Chandani Lokugé claims that Sri Lankan Australian fiction assumes an intermediary role in developing "intercultural conversations in Australia as a conduit into national harmony", Dolores Herrero argues that the novel *Fish-Hair Woman* by Filipino writer, Merlinda Bobis, whose heroine's monstrous hair "encodes the melodrama of transnational subjectivity", opens up space for a "transformative dialogue" that might compensate for the violence and trauma of the colonial past, while Stefano Mercanti identifies a reconciliatory mode in novels by the Australian Bangladeshi writer Adib Khan, whereby diversity is seen as enriching cross-cultural dialogue and fostering interaction. Articles by Janet Wilson and Paul Giffard-Foret identify the hopeful formation of alternative communities – for example, of vulnerable migrants or children of migrants linked by ties of affection and empathy -- in Hsui Ming Teo's *Behind the Moon* and Merlinda Bobis's novel *The Solemn Lantern Maker*. Yet tensions due to issues of official entry, visas, citizenship, and limited acceptance of the Asian subject by the Anglo Celtic majority also persist. Alongside the strict controls on immigration into Australia, the branding of refugees as illegal, and the struggle to gain citizenship, are other signs of subtle discrimination: the misinterpretations and misappellations of the cross-cultural encounter, subject of Yasmine Gooneratne's seminal novel *A Change of Skies* (1991), and a continued "masked racism" -- nuanced forms of stereotyping by which Asian migrants and their descendants are exoticised and "othered" (Ang 2001, 146). Informing the critical positioning of most articles here is the problematic history of Asian Australian relations that can be traced to the White Australia policy of 1901 in which Asia was demonised as Australia's "utterly distrusted Other" (Huggan 2007, 131, citing Ang 2001, 130), while also representing its "most fertile imaginative territory" (Huggan 2007, 132); as Herrero points out, even today Australia's self-location outside Asia comes from having "no deep affinity for the region". The current upsurge in Asian Australian writing, as well as the critical discourse which flows from it, can therefore be seen as an attempt to overturn and rewrite this damning legacy.

Recent novels by writers like Alice Pung, Hsu Ming Teo, Simone Lazaroo, Merlinda Bobis, Chandani Lokugé, Adib Khan, and Michelle de Kretser develop the cross-cultural approach implied by the compound “Asian Australian”, by creating temporal and spatial complexity and new kinds of subjectivity and community through transnational and historical perspectives. They draw attention to the ongoing plight of new communities exiled due to the political upheavals that erupted in many Asian nations throughout the second half of the 20th century, conflicts and disasters which provide historical contexts to narratives of suffering and hardship: the civil war between the Government and Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka (Michelle de Kretser’s novel *Questions of Travel* and Chandani Loguké’s novel, *Softly, As I Leave You*), the ravages of the Vietnam War and the Australian and US presence in Vietnam (Adib Khan’s *Homecoming* and Tsui Ming Teo’s *Behind the Moon*); the US control of the Philippines, the Total War of President Marcos in the Philippines of 1987-1989 against communist insurgency, and the post 9/11 US-led global War on Terror (Merlinda Bobis’s *The Fish-Hair Woman*, and *The Solemn Lantern Maker*). Such writing points to the layered, intersecting genealogies of global diasporas, and issues that are specific to the Asian Australian context can be mapped onto universal themes that emerge in representations of the fate of migrant, refugee communities: poverty, religious fundamentalism, trauma, inequality, racial discrimination. These underpin stories of chance survival, quests for reconfigured identities and new opportunities, questions about belonging in the lives of professionals, refugees, exiles and asylum seekers who arrive at an alien society and into radically different circumstances, and whose descendants seek to adjust to their inherited problems of location and their tangled genealogies.

Asian Australian writing also takes its place on the stage of world literature due to its persistent focus on the dilemma of the exile and outsider, ranging from the diasporic double consciousness to a more universal, existential angst. It can also be read as transnational, globalized writing, like other fiction about populations displaced from nations like Lebanon, Egypt, and India. Questions of how to create home in diaspora and discover new ways of belonging for the dislocated subject who is affected by memory, trauma and distance as well as the unpredictability of the new, are common to all diaspora writings. Representations of migrant liminality, of the predicament of being “neither here nor there”,

of inhabiting “a third space” (Madsen 2006, 120), are constructed round questions about home and homeland return. For the second generation these issues take a different form, as Alexandra Watkins discusses in her article: the children of migrants may reduplicate the ambiguous sense of belonging of their parents through their negotiations between two cultures , or more dramatically fail to live up to the expectations of the first generation. Yet both migrants and their descendants share a “homing desire”, and engage with new identifying practices by which to reinvent home in the diaspora (Brah 1995, 180). These can include return visits to the country of origin, driven by nostalgia and longing, and the wish to reconnect, renew and sustain cultural and ancestral roots as Stefano Mercanti’s study of Adib Khan’s novels *Seasonal Adjustments* (1994) and *Spiral Road* (2007) shows. Khan’s protagonists who return from Australia to Bangladesh, have to renegotiate the relationship with the past, and gain a more distanced perspective on both worlds, while for the elite cosmopolitan heroine of Dewi Anggraeni’s novel *The Root of All Evil*, who returns to her original homeland of Jakarta, the shock comes from a miscalculation, as Paul Giffard-Foret points out, that her well-intended hospitality would improve the material circumstances of subaltern women. Both Giffard-Foret and Dolores Hererro situate “Australia in Asia”, examining the plight of white Australian travellers and displaced citizens in the transplanted settings and cosmopolitan frames of recent novels: the war-torn zone of the Philippines in Merlinda Bobis’s *The Fish-Hair Woman* and *The Solemn Lantern Maker*, and the neo-colonial touristic setting of paradisaical Bali in Simone Lazaroo’s *Sustenance*. Michelle de Kretser, by contrast, in her global novel *Questions of Travel* depicts the multiple foreign destinations of her vulnerable, globe-trotting Australian heroine, but omits any reference to the Australian presence in the parallel narrative set in Colombo, Sri Lanka. Nevertheless, all such novels, whether set within or outside national borders, confirm that fictions about exile are a way of dealing with the consequences of migration, for as Yoon Sun Lee (2016) says, “through embracing the diasporic imaginary the novel tries to find new ways to affirm unbridgeable distances in the world” (133).

The modes of production and diverse readerships that underlie the canon-formation of Chinese Australian writing -- the largest of the Asian Australian sub-genres -- is the subject of Wenche

Ommundsen and Huang Zhong's opening article. The Australian Chinese novel, *The Poison of Polygamy*, serialised in the Chinese language newspaper, *The Chinese Times* (Melbourne) in 1909-10, is, the authors claim, the very first Australian Chinese novel, preceding by seven decades the first significant narrative in English about the Chinese in Australia, Brian Castro's *Birds of Passage* (1983). To compare two such founding moments and seminal works about Asian Australian relations, is to discover changes in self-definition, and the growth of ironic self-awareness within the Chinese Australian community and its descendants that Castro's novel demonstrates. The lurid tale of polygamy, murder and sexual betrayal of *The Poison of Polygamy* is interspersed with the narrator's commentary on China's decadence during the Qing Dynasty which drove its citizens into exile: foot-binding, illiteracy, opium addiction and other rebarbative practices are found surviving in rural Australia. The novel's criticism of imperial China is "self-orientalising" and it perpetuates the same stereotypes of the Chinese by which they were demonised by white Australians. By contrast to the semi-collusion with Anglo Celtic racist prejudice that marks out this critical, reformist, anti-imperial text, Castro's narrator in *Birds of Passage* deliberately defies categories of national and racial identity and is able to "negotiate a space for himself between other people's imprisoning definitions of him" (Huggan 2007, 135).

In her article, Janet Wilson examines the ways in which Asian migrants and their descendants destabilise the core/periphery binary of the multicultural nation by undermining the space of Anglo-Celtic Australians within the nation state. Hsu Ming Teo's youthful characters in *Behind the Moon* undertake practices of not-being-at-home as Teo queers normative Australian categories of identity and belonging in order to address the problems of multiculturalism and expose white Australian vulnerability. The white Australian, Gibbo, one of three young "multicultural rejects", empathetically identifies with Asianness, recognising "the other" as part of himself -- like the Sri Lankan narrator of Channa Wickremesekera's novel *Asylum*, who absorbs the consciousness of an Afghan boy. Michelle de Kretster's novel *Questions of Travel* implies even greater dilution of white Australian homogeneity and belonging. Her Australian global traveller, Laura, who works for a global travel company, lives an unsettled life of travel and tourism, whereas De Kretster's other protagonist, the traumatised Sri

Lankan, Ravi, a refugee in Australia, grieving for his murdered wife and child and longing to return home, decides to leave, despite being granted permanent residence, to face an uncertain life in his war-torn country.

Chandani Lokugé and Alexandra Watkins identify a challenging new territory in contemporary Asian Australian culture -- the identity fluctuations of the second-generation migrant growing up in Australia, as a result of what Watkins calls, the “diasporic slide” defined as “the slip of the diaspora from parent to child”. As Watkins theorizes, the second generation migrant treads the tightrope between parental homeland expectations and the bicultural, blended and multicultural identities that they develop from their acceptance of the diversity of culture within which they grow up. While Watkins explores the comic and tragic consequences of the “diasporic slide” in Yasmine Gooneratne’s *A Change of Skies* and Chandani Lokugé’s *Softly, As I Leave You* and *If the Moon Smiled*, Lokugé investigates the fluidity with which the second generation migrant crosses cultural borders into cosmopolitanism in Channa Wickremesekera’s novels, *Asylum* and *Tracks*. Lokugé also discusses Michelle de Kretser’s novel *Questions of Travel* and attributes the protagonist, Ravi’s inability to settle in Australia to the limited acceptance of migrants, the undermining of aspirations to multicultural interconnectedness, and Ravi’s educated, middle-class differences from the stereotypical refugee. She sees hope only for the second generation in the novel’s dystopian vision. Given the emphasis on De Kretser’s acclaimed novel in the articles by the co-editors of this issue, it is particularly appropriate that we have been able to include an interview with Michelle de Kretser herself, conducted by Alexandra Watkins. Watkins focuses on *Questions of Travel*, and De Kretser discusses issues such as Ravi’s character, the political crisis in Sri Lanka which forced her family to leave for Australia in 1972, and the treatment of Sri Lankan migrants in Australia.

Dolores Herrero and Paul Giffard-Foret both turn to the works of Filipino novelist Merlinda Bobis in examining stories that subvert the commonplace Asian-Australian-Asian migrant narrative by using overseas settings. Herrero argues that in her novel *Fish-Hair Woman* Bobis aims to reconstruct and overturn the painful past of those who disappeared in Marcos’s Total War in the Philippines. Her experimental fiction superimposes a realist narrative about the history of oppression in the Philippines

on a magical realist one in which multiple stories of the silenced voices of those raped and tortured by Marcos's private army reappear as a way of overcoming the constraints of history, death and trauma. In her "palimpsestuous reading", Herrero shows Bobis challenging the "causal paradigm" of history by drawing attention to "the play of domination". The heroine's multiple story-telling, symbolized by the waving tentacles of her hair, opens up to others' trauma, allowing her "to represent what ultimately transcends the limits of representation", lay the question of justice to rest, and enable cross-cultural understanding and possible new forms of community.

Giffard-Foret claims that top-down strategies of hospitality and forms of transnational cosmopolitanism are seen to fail in novels by East-Asian Australian women writers. Using the model of grass-roots cosmopolitanism and "subaltern hospitality", he traces a bottom-top structure, via "a ladder of privilege. In Simone Lazaroo's novel *Sustenance*, about the neocolonial tourist industry, Australian tourist elites at first control the behaviour of the Balinese villagers, but when terrorists enter the resort hotel and the guests become hostages, "subaltern cosmopolitanism" in the form of local hospitality and cuisine emerges. In Bobis's *The Solemn Lantern Maker*, Giffard-Foret finds a similar "wretched cosmopolitanism" in the mutual bonding between four people, two of them children, who come together after accusations of kidnapping an American tourist lead to threats against them when the Filipino government proposes to bulldoze down their slum in Manila. Cosmopolitanism, he concludes, is only likely to bring about a more just and democratic society when it is "subaltern", that is, anchored in communities of women from poor countries.

The question of Asian Australian writing's marginality in relation to the national canon continues to be raised; for example, Herrero notes that Bobis's novel, being set in the Philippines, was at first rejected by Australian publishers. These problems are reminiscent of anglophone Asian diaspora writing in multicultural Canada and the USA, where the Asian presence has been both more pervasive, and long-lived, but equally slow to find a distinctive voice and establish a presence. Nevertheless questions about the canon point to other forms of exclusion or dislocation that this type

of writing displays: marginality in the cross-cultural encounter, difference and discrimination, ethnic hybridization, new forms of identity, the search for cultural heritage, the meaning of home and belonging. Like Canadian and American Asian writing, the questions this new literary category raises as it gains purchase in national and global marketplaces, concerning its distinctiveness, *raison d'être* and national boundaries, are familiar to all emergent minority literatures (Chakraborty 2012). The answers might lie in the field's diversification and continued growth as it challenges the gatekeeping boundaries: the margin/centre borderline is porous, as developments in the literary landscape of Canada and the USA show, and Asian Australian literature may not be destined to remain a marginal genre, categorised as ethnic/migrant literature. Recently there are signs that it is beginning to reshape the Australian mainstream (it is now taught in schools) and several of the novels under discussion have won national prizes or been highly acclaimed – suggestive of slow acceptance into the canon as its themes and debates become more recognizable and new ways of reading take hold.

Notes on contributors

Janet Wilson is Professor of English and Postcolonial Studies at the University of Northampton, UK. She has published widely on the literature and cinema of the white settler societies of Australia and New Zealand, and most recently “Discoursing on Slums: Representing the Cosmopolitan Subaltern” in *Reworking Postcolonialism: Globalization, Labour and Rights*, which she co-edited with Pavan Malreddy et al. (2015). She is Deputy Chair of the Katherine Mansfield Society, a member of the South Asian Diaspora International Research Network (SADIRN) at Monash University, where she also holds the position of Adjunct in the School of Languages, Literatures, Cultures and Linguistics, and she is co-editor of the *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*.

A former Australian Commonwealth Scholar from Sri Lanka, Chandani Lokuge is Associate Professor of Literary Studies at Monash University. She founded and directed the Monash Centre for Postcolonial Writing from 2002-2012 and currently coordinates the South Asian Diaspora International Research Network (SADIRN). She has published 14 books, including the *Oxford Classics Reissues* series of Indian women's writing, and three novels, of which *Softly, as I Leave You* was awarded Sri Lanka's Godage National Literary Award in 2013. Among co-edited special issues of journals are those in *Moving Worlds*, *New Literatures Review* and *Meanjin*. She has held visiting Professorial/Chair positions at Freie University, Berlin (2012), Le Studium, Advanced Studies Institute, Loire Valley (2012-13), Goethe University, Frankfurt (2015) and Harvard University.

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