

## Aporetic Australia in *The White Tiger*, *The Boat* and *The Hamilton Case*

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Three of the most celebrated works of contemporary fiction from or about Asia happen to be by writers of Asian background who have sustained links to Australia: *The Hamilton Case* (2003) by Michelle de Kretser, *The Boat* (2008) by Nam Le, and *The White Tiger* (2008) by Aravind Adiga. These books are admired for the stylish way they extend the possibilities of Asian literary fiction. In this article I want to ask what their Australian horizon might signify. If, arguably, they are examples of Asian Australian writing, how do they extend the scope of Australian literature too?

Asian Australian writing has concerns in common with much recent Asian and Asian diasporic writing. It addresses questions of social and economic mobility, family, generational conflict, the movement from country to city, modernisation and urbanisation, materialism and spirituality, dislocation and freedom, and the struggle between old and new values. It shows Asian communities in and outside Australia as layered and transnationally defined. In doing so, Asian Australian writing pushes the boundaries of Australian literature and society. Produced by a growing population of Australians with Asian backgrounds, and other Australians closely implicated in experience of Asia, it marks change. These writers turn and face the world from a new perspective.

It can be argued that Australian literature is aporetic in relation to world literature, a minor literature within major Anglophone literature (after Deleuze and Guattari), and that Asian Australian writing is a further aporia within the Australian literary field: an opening up. But what happens when Australia is not the focus, as in these works by Michelle de Kretser, Nam Le and Aravind Adiga? Is it still possible to read their writing in an Australian literary context? Garlanded gloriously elsewhere, what effect do these works have on that minor literature?

*The Hamilton Case* won the Frankfurt Literaturpreis in 2007, having won the UK Encore Award and the Commonwealth Writers Prize (South East Asia and Pacific) in 2004, when it was named among *Time Magazine's* Best Books of the Year. It was shortlisted for major Australian prizes and longlisted for the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award. *The Boat* won the Dylan Thomas Prize for young writers in 2008 and a slew of major Australian awards. Among many other commendations, it was a *New York Times* Notable Book that same year and received a PEN/Malamud Award in 2010. *The White Tiger* won the 2008 Man Booker Prize and made the *New York Times* bestseller list. Such success is remarkable, especially for first books (Le and Adiga), or even second (De Kretser). The three books are not only internationally recognised, but continue to be read and studied. The success is almost unprecedented for fiction writers from Australia, where all three authors finished their secondary education. That is one reason to group them together. All published in the first decade of the twenty-first century, by authors who migrated from Asia to Australia early in

life, educated in English, the three books variously seek to move on from existing models of writing about their countries or communities of origin, while nevertheless returning to that subject from a new position. In doing so they are acclaimed as a new kind of Asian writing, global in reach and appeal. That is another reason to group them together. If they can then be read in an Australian literary context too, they will have something else in common, which makes for an intriguing case study, as I hope to show.

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When Aravind Adiga won the Booker prize for his debut novel, a dispute over ownership broke out as the several domiciles listed in the author's biography—Bombay, Sydney, New York and London—laid claim to the smart world citizen. Meanwhile others disowned him for coming from nowhere with a depiction of India so shockingly dark that it could only be the superficial view of an outsider, a tourist (see Chakraborty, Suri, Overdorf). It mattered where the story came from.

*The White Tiger* (2008) begins audaciously as the narrator, a self-made Indian entrepreneur, writes a midnight letter to the premier of China, setting out his trajectory from the 'Darkness' of rural poverty to the prosperous 'Light' of his Bangalore office. The man's tale is a warning lesson to the authoritarian Chinese leader, on the eve of a state visit to India, about the triumph of the entrepreneurial spirit in the world's largest democracy: a self-help manual that, bypassing America and the white man, speaks directly between the two contenders for the future of the world in 'the century ... of the *yellow* and the *brown* man. You and me' (5).

'Sir,' the entrepreneur's letter boldly begins, 'Neither you nor I can speak English ...' (3). Yet those words *are* English, the language not of the narrator, Balram Halwai, nor of Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao, but of the novel's author. It's a set-up. Adiga's narrator bluntly repeats the phrase he has heard his employer's wife use: 'There are some things that can be said only in English ... *What a fucking joke*' (3, 7). The vernacular punchline targets English-language readers in its crude comedy. The appeal to China at the opening of *The White Tiger* projects a pan-Asian space from which the West is excluded. Inclusion in intra-Asian exchanges is an Australian policy aim, through arrangements such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum, for example, where Australia, as a middle power, might mediate. Adiga plays knowingly on Western anxiety from a position of discomfiting not-quite-proximity.

*The White Tiger* is the story of a 'Country Mouse' who makes his way in the world with native wit and calculating opportunism. Balram, pulled out of school to pay his family's debts, becomes driver to the landlord's son and moves with him to Delhi where the task is to bribe officials. Keeping his eyes open and his mind in gear, the driver comes to understand the system of servitude, obligation and crony corruption as a self-imprisoning 'Rooster Coop' (173) in which all are animals, even those higher up the pecking order. Any awakening of human concern only creates vulnerability, an opening for predators.

Balram takes advantage of the bond he develops with his master to murder him in cold blood. If we enjoy our narrator's sharp, cynical take on his society, it's because we grant the force of what experience has taught him. Where we dissent, it is in hope that the logic of his journey is a satirical extreme. Finally Balram succeeds in providing transport for call centre workers

who are outsourced labour for multinational corporations. Adiga's success, as author, lies in taking that story from its Indian source to the world.

*The White Tiger* is an animal fable in a tradition that is ancient to both India and Europe. Such tales often combine with the kind of satire in which servants plot against their masters, as in Ben Jonson's *Volpone* (1606), or, on a different scale, George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945). Adiga updates this lineage through the self-realising voice of an invented 'native informant' narrator. Tropes of Indian life familiar from reportage and tabloid journalism are reworked with cartoon-like energy. Animal caricatures co-exist with real animals in a world where the water buffalo is 'the most important member' of the village family and a white tiger in a zoo cage conveys the wisdom of the ancient Urdu poet: 'You were looking for the key for years/But the door was always open' (253). Balram, ridiculed with the nickname White Tiger during his short school career, is thus prompted to slay his master and escape to a new life, leaving his unloving family to pay the price for his criminality and insubordination. He prays to the multiplicity of gods to shine light on his dark story, all 36,000,004 Muslim, Christian and Hindu deities, having a bet every way. 'The Indian entrepreneur has to be straight and crooked, mocking and believing, sly and sincere, at the same time', he advises, exultantly making himself an 'orphan', free of the ties that bind (9).

Adiga's novel remixes Indian English fiction for a new cutthroat era of economic dynamism. He is a generation away from Anita Desai's fastidious cultural melancholy or Salman Rushdie's rich magic realist rendering of history, to name two of his Booker-named Indian predecessors (*Clear Light of Day*, 1980; *Midnight's Children*, 1981). The Darkness is Balram's term for the impoverished rural Bihar he comes from, the India that will suck a person down like the black mud of Mother Ganga: 'Everywhere this river flows, that area is the Darkness' (15). He echoes here the title of the book in which V.S. Naipaul first ventured into his ancestral homeland: *An Area of Darkness* (1964). Adiga confesses that 'when I was growing up in a small south India town in the 1980s, I was told to keep away' from that book, so negative was the Trinidad-born, British-educated Indian's depiction of Indian society, a mimic rewrite of another failed passage to India in the backwash of E.M. Forster (Adiga, *The Monthly*). Naipaul won the Booker in 1971. Adiga's Darkness is cruder, tougher, imagined both from within and from below 'to capture the voice of the men you meet as you travel across India ... their sense of humour, their cynical intelligence', as the author puts it (quoted in Suri par. 7).

*The White Tiger* is closer to another novel of India, Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* (1995), which was shortlisted for the Booker, but the differences are also instructive. Both books offer an unremitting analysis. Mistry does so through patient, microscopic attention to social injustice, while balancing the account (as in his title) with a recognition of human resilience and dignity. In careful prose he patiently etches an urban panorama during the crisis of the Emergency declared by Indira Gandhi in 1975 (the year the author left India for Canada). Like *The White Tiger*, *A Fine Balance* was accused of pandering to Western audiences with an unduly negative account of India. (Both novels have a villain named Thakur.) *A Fine Balance* has a popular reputation as 'the most depressing novel ever'. *The White Tiger* is an obverse. It is a comedy; mocking, discordant and broad-brush, taking the reader's disbelief for granted: it is market-oriented in a way that ironically matches the neo-liberalist India it satirises. For some critics this is a new form of Orientalism (Mendes). Comparing Adiga's novel with the film *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008, directed by Danny Boyle), Mridula Nath Chakraborty calls both works melodrama (Chakraborty forthcoming).

Adiga's rags-to-riches picaresque is about India, but from which perspective? The novel's funny, caustic anger derives from a conviction that things could and should be otherwise, an attitude it shares with much new Asian fiction. It can be read in overlapping frames as an Indian English novel, an international novel in English, a work of contemporary Asian fiction. Can it also be read as an Australian novel?

The question would look peculiar were it not for Adiga's relationship with Australia, where some of his early writing first appeared. When he won the Booker Prize, his former teacher at James Ruse Agricultural High School in Carlingford in north west Sydney, proudly recalled him. 'I thought actually he might do something with the United Nations', she said (McKenny). He came first in the state examinations in Ancient History in his final year at high school, and third in English. That ancient historical knowledge may have contributed to Balram's long and ironic view of the rise and fall of civilisations in *The White Tiger*. There's only one reference to Australia in the novel, but it's a significant one. In explaining the Rooster Coop that keeps Indians in their place, Balram identifies the trustworthiness of servants as the measure of internalised subjection. Their imaginations are imprisoned:

Every day, on the roads of Delhi, some chauffeur is driving an empty car with a black suitcase sitting on the backseat. Inside that suitcase is a million, two million rupees; more money than the chauffeur will see in his lifetime. If he took the money he could go to America, Australia, anywhere, and start a new life. ... Yet he takes that suitcase where his master wants. (174)

Australia here is an unrealisable destination, a secondary alternative to the United States, an anywhere that is nowhere, because seemingly out of reach: an imaginary life. Yet that is where the author has gone and that anywhere/nowhere is part of the position from which he writes. *What a fucking joke*. The humour also sounds Australian, a tone that deflates hierarchy, an underdog register, fuelled by exclusion and a sense of injustice, the same democratic insistence that finds the hit-and-run killing of a child, and the sense of entitlement that allows it to be covered up, the most morally affronting thing of all. Australia appears here as an aporia, a key to something different, a moral as well as a narrative alternative. If *The White Tiger* is read with Australia as a site of departure, its vision sharpens. Read against the ground of Australian literature, its cheeky anti-hero becomes kin to the jolly swagman who nabs a sheep in the song 'Waltzing Matilda' and the outlaw Ned Kelly, except he's smart enough to be alive at the end. Adiga is a trickster author who, despite his disclaimers, extends the possibility of writing with an Australian accent in his new Asian fiction.

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*The Boat* (2008) is a collection of carefully sequenced short stories that display the virtuoso skill of the author, Nam Le, in writing from a range of positions that both do and do not align with his own biography. The stories are set in Cartagena (Colombia), Hiroshima and Teheran, but also in Iowa, New York and Australia. The last story, 'The Boat', is about the refugee journey from Vietnam, a journey also taken by Le with his parents, from Vietnam to Australia, as an infant. Le graduated from Melbourne University before he went on to the prestigious Iowa Writers' Workshop, which has a history of mentoring writers with Asian backgrounds. His stories first appeared in literary journals in the United States and Australia.

My focus here is on the first story in *The Boat*, originally published in *American Zoetrope* in 2006 and re-issued in 2012 as a stand-alone Penguin Short ebook, *Love and Honour and Pity and Pride and Compassion and Sacrifice*. The narrator is a young Vietnamese Australian man from Melbourne called Nam who is trying to write a story at the Iowa program. Grandly, cheekily taking for its title a phrase from a 1950 Nobel acceptance speech by William Faulkner, the story makes an issue of all the issues that surround contemporary diasporic Asian writing. It quickly became an iconic discussion point for the transition of ethnic writers from minority to mainstream, identity politics to world literature. The story concludes with a sonorous sentence that enacts the transformative move by which one order is broken open by another: ‘And it occurred to me then how it took hours, sometimes days, for the surface of a river to freeze over—to hold in its skin the perfect and crystalline world—and how that world could be shattered by a small stone dropped like a single syllable’ (30) (this from a narrator who comes from a climatic zone where no rivers freeze). Le’s brilliant story is ‘crystalline’ itself, a work of art that is prismatic with refractions and reflections. Yet it’s also a demonstration of how language can be used to fracture that crystal, making us ask again of literature where it comes from, to whom or what it is responsible, where it goes and what it does.

The story begins with the young writer searching for words. It goes on to insert itself in an illustrious short story tradition, echoing James Joyce’s ‘The Dead’, evoking American greats such as Hemingway, Fitzgerald and Cheever in cadences of pitch-perfect emulation, mentioning Kafka Vintage Classics in passing. But there’s something else: ‘The sound of the rain filled the room—rain fell on the streets, on the roofs, on the tin shed across the parking lot like the distant detonation of firecrackers’ (2). With those ‘distant detonations’ memory intrudes, not Nam’s own, but his father’s, as traumatised survivor of the My Lai massacre during the Vietnam war.

Struggling with his assignment, Nam must decide whether to use that ‘ethnic’ story to which he has a familial right as his way to the ‘old verities’ that Faulkner insisted were essential for great literature. ‘Ethnic lit’s hot’, Nam knows, and so is writing based on personal experience (8). ‘If I write a true story ... I’ll have a better chance of selling it’, he tells his father who arrives unexpectedly from Australia (25). But his father doesn’t want his story told or sold. If only that past could be forgotten. They speak Vietnamese, parent to child, as Nam again seeks words, this time for his conflicted, self-justifying motivations. His writer self must find a way to acknowledge the weight of filial inheritance if he is to prove himself to his estranged father, and to himself: ‘We forgive any sacrifice by our parents, so long as it is not made in our name’, he declares as creed and conundrum (20). That’s the frozen, burdened writer’s impossible predicament. The story we read ends with an act of severe Buddhist instruction by father to son. It is ethnic lit at its most moving and sophisticated, American lit in a great tradition, and touches all the old verities. Is it also Australian lit?

Melbourne and Sydney are mentioned in the narrative as points of departure, places on the way. But there’s a nod to Australian insiders. Before Iowa, Nam worked as a lawyer where he ‘hated knowing it was my job that made my father proud of me. ... Every twenty-four hours I woke up at the smoggiest time of morning and commuted—bus, tram, elevator, without saying a single word, wearing clothes that chafed and holding a flat white in a white cup ...’ (24). Could be anywhere? No, it can only be Melbourne. The narrator has translated the Australian ‘lift’ to the American ‘elevator’, but he has left ‘tram’ and has added the uniquely Australian name for a coffee in which the milk is not frothed. ‘Flat white’ must puzzle outsiders. Along with ‘short black’ for espresso, and ‘long black’ for what Italians

would call *caffè lungo*, ‘flat white’ is a cute but non-trivial linguistic coinage in a society where migrant European café culture helped to dismantle the aspiration to a White (white-bread, tea-drinking) Australia in the postwar period, opening space in turn for other anti-racist movements, including Aboriginal rights. That changing context helped the acceptance of 90,000 Vietnamese refugees from the mid-1970s, who have contributed their own café culture to Australia.

‘We are Vietnamese boat people’, Nam’s father insists to a tramp they meet by the river, who replies, ‘Welcome to America’ (12). It is a paradoxically defining but diasporic identity that Australia has allowed. Australia figures as enabling ground.

The placement of the story at the head of the collection confirms its significance as springboard, at once the site and expression of transition. The rest of the stories range widely, through different narrative voices, generally of people at the edge for whom community is unstable. The longest story, ‘Halflead Bay’, is set in an Australian coastal town where troubled teenagers confront peer and family problems. Mainstream Australia becomes other in this frame. The final story, called ‘The Boat’, turns harrowingly to the journey of migration itself: the perilous, heavily freighted space of transition from one life to another. It marks the collection as a configuration of crisis narratives from different parts of the world, including Australia, in which Australia is at once destination and stepping-off point.

‘Love and Honour and Pity and Pride and Compassion and Sacrifice’ continues an Australian literary tradition, even if it’s not signalled. ‘A Child in the Dark and a Foreign Father’ (1902) by Henry Lawson speaks ahead to Nam Le across more than a century. Lawson’s grim story isolates an estranged man and wife in a bush hut in the ‘smothering darkness’ of a hot night, as they are remembered by their anxious son. The primal scene of deprivation and discord has a formative effect on the boy which, as a mature writer, he must re-form as art. Lawson’s father was Norwegian, a migrant to Australia. The father in the story, called Nils, is not so much culturally foreign as foreign to the world altogether, appearing ‘as if in the glimmer of a faint ghost light in the darkness’ (Lawson 213). He is tender with his son’s ghostly imaginings in a way he finds it impossible to be with his disturbed wife’s literary compulsions. Her poem is called ‘Misunderstood’. She too, as a woman, is foreign in this ungiving environment. Migrant and settler alike share the burden of displacement and of being mismatched, which the child of the next generation must survive. ‘And so the New Year began’, Lawson’s story ends with terrible irony (219).

‘We were locked in all the intricate ways of guilt’, says Nam Le’s narrator (24). The relationship between child and parent, often involving painful conflict as the child struggles for his or her own identity and independence, is complicated through migration by the relationship between the old culture and the new, and the transmission of stories that are incommensurable, traumatic, ultimately unknowable. Deep, difficult emotions become part of the relationship, and must find expression in writing. The way forward is also the way back. The theme recurs through Australian writing, where second generation immigrant children are troubled by parents whose experience does not easily translate. In Judah Waten’s *Alien Son* (1965), for example, the children are embarrassed by their immigrant mother’s behaviour in a Melbourne music store when, with no money to buy anything, she asks the assistant to play recordings of performances that are part of their Russian and Jewish cultural heritage, though to the children the thin sound quality of the gramophone sounds like ‘a ventriloquist mimicking far off musical instruments’, an unsatisfying substitute for the real thing (183).

Such stories run through Australian literature, forming a line, a migrant solidarity that is contrapuntal to expressions of feeling at home, of coming to belong.

Wenche Ommundsen, a leading scholar of Australian migrant writing, argues that Nam Le's *The Boat* is important for its 'metacritique of cultural politics', noting that 'the intrusion of theory, the deconstruction of diasporic identity and the cultural politics it represents and enables' distinguishes 'much recent writing by Asian Australian authors', making it different from its Asian American counterpart (501, 507). Ommundsen goes on to suggest that 'the profoundly ambivalent attitude towards the personal and national past ... is a characteristic that [Asian Australian writers] share with numerous other Australian writers' (507). She recognises these concerns in an abiding preoccupation with boats, working back from Nam Le's collection to include Alice Pung's memoir *Unpolished Gem* (2006) and Shaun Tan's graphic novel *The Arrival* (2006). Pung's engaging account of growing up in a Chinese Cambodian refugee family in Melbourne begins, 'This story does not begin on a boat' (1). That migrant boat journey occurs in what is considered the first Asian Australian novel, Brian Castro's *Birds of Passage* (1983), and, as Ommundsen observes, throughout Australian culture

from the First Fleet to the 'children overboard' affair, from the 'dream' or 'ghost' ships observed by Indigenous Australians at first encounter to the recent film *Ten Canoes*, boats have haunted the cultural imagination of the island continent. (506-7)

'We are ALL Boat People', say a group of Australians who support asylum seekers, following the usage of Aboriginal activist Rebecca Bear-Wingfield in 2001 when she called all white Australians 'boat people' (<http://rascalsrascalsrascals.tumblr.com/> accessed 13 Dec 2012).<sup>1</sup>

As with the trope of the boat, Asian Australian writing takes the Australian literary and cultural preoccupation with identity in a new direction. These authors 'write their identity into being', suggests Ommundsen, in the knowledge that 'identity is always, and by necessity, a site of instability and metamorphosis' (511). 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.

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No recent novel recasts the means of fiction more effectively in the service of re-visioning personal and national history than Michelle de Kretser's murder mystery of decolonising Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) *The Hamilton Case* (2003). This intricate novel charts the life and afterlife of Sam Obeyesekere, a local man, Oxford-educated, with a distinguished legal career, who finally disappoints. The Sri Lankan born author, who emigrated to Australia when she was fourteen, notes that her father 'is one of the ghosts that haunt these pages' (369).

The first part of the novel is Sam's account of himself. It is self-justifying, elegantly circumlocutory, and alive to the finest gradations of status and slight in an old, hierarchical, colonial society. He remembers his childhood elocution lessons from a Dutch Burgher woman who guarded the 'European purity of her race ... with the zeal that brands all lost causes', and his mortification when she said: 'Don't you ever, *ever* touch my belongings with your *black* hands' (22-3). He has never thought of himself as black in a world where grades of colour and shades of ancestry matter, and where racial hatred will become the engine of politics, as manipulated by his ambitious brother-in-law Jaya. Sam is on the wrong side of history in his fealty to British justice and fairness, which he seeks to administer in exemplary manner, 'without fear or favour', which is never as straightforward as it sounds (26).

Part two recounts, in the third person past imperfect beloved of crime writers, the investigation into the murder of a British tea planter, Hamilton. While it might have been easy to pin the blame on a Tamil worker, Obeysekere brilliantly prosecutes the guilt of the dead man's English friend, his wife's secret lover, who becomes 'the first Englishman in the colony to be tried for murder' (133). But Sam's success loses him a promotion: 'That a native should hang an Englishman was unthinkable' (146).

The third part, the bulk of the novel, provides the larger picture of Sam's life, going deep into family relationships in which his extraordinary, beautiful, talented and difficult mother Maud looms at the centre. The prose becomes more ornate, qualified and slippery in its balances, as the faux-omniscient narration spirals to another mysterious death, of Sam's baby brother, for which his boy self becomes 'only the first for whom he had found no forgiveness' (337). The plot is managed through shuffling and substitution: 'A cushion that replaced a pillow: that was the crucial detail' (291). As with the planter's death, different scenarios produce different victims and culprits, and the shadow of supposition extends its malformation through the lives of the characters. In De Kretser's alert language, such uncertain identifications are inherent in the colonial situation, in which substitution and pretence are pervasive and make impossible any true, just apprehension of things. The native trees with tulip-shaped flowers planted by the early Dutch colonisers only made the settler alienation worse: 'The scent of cinnamon, the approximations' (72). Sam's mother Maud, a writer, is extravagant, a traveller who aspires to cosmopolitan glamour. She uses literary English as a medium of conversion to sanitise the violence of imperialism: 'In a country where night arrived with the haste of a curtain lowered on a flop, she insisted on *twilight*' (192). De Kretser is the less deceived, with an aphoristic style that favours ironic equilibrium:

There is an old instinct, at work in bordellos and the relations of East and West, to convert the unbearable into the picturesque. It enables a sordid existence to be endured, on one side, and witnessed, on the other, with something like equanimity. ... That same evening she could sit at the dining-table, its scratched varnish sticky along her bare arms, and evoke the intoxicating scent of jasmine or the emerald flash of a parrot's wing. The prose that thousands before her had applied like antiseptic to the island flowed from her nib. Rats thundered in the rafters. Did you know, she found herself writing [for her distant admirers], that according to legend this was the Garden of Eden? (187-8)

As language glosses, so does wounded self-image in a provincial situation. 'Envy is the soul's rust; and the corrosion is nowhere more evident than in small towns, where men clamp on their petty ambitions like armour', opines Obeysekere disdainfully and without self-reflection (107). To which the narrator later adds, as if she were Jane Austen: 'Success



exposes a man's true nature while adversity encourages dissimulation' (129). As Sam seeks, and misses, forensic truths, his gaze is refracted by self-interest and self-love, which make self-knowledge elusive. 'He gave no sign of understanding that his life had been a series of substitutions', the author observes, diagnosing a condition of inauthenticity that resonates well beyond local circumstances (181).

What verdict Sam's son Harry can come to about his father concludes the novel's investigation. The surprising coda takes the form of a response to a query from Harry to Shivanathan, former district judge in Galle, now an expatriate writer in Canada, who knew all the players and has published his own version of the Hamilton case as fiction. Shivanathan's story, which Sam read at the end of his life, suggests that Obeysekere might have been tricked by Jaya, former classmate, former brother-in-law, subsequent minister in the victorious Sinhalese People's Party government. Writing to Harry, Shivanathan distances himself from the veracity of his fiction, leaving competing accounts open, deflecting and destabilising any hope of a neat ending. Yet unlike *Rasselas*, Samuel Johnson's Eastern tale, this is not 'a conclusion in which nothing is concluded'. De Kretser's postmodern scepticism is historically grounded in a postcolonial sensibility that wants to find meaning, across gulfs of time, space and cultural change, and that insists on seeking a just reckoning, however difficult that may be:

Life is bearable only if it can be understood as a set of narrative strategies. In the endless struggle to explain our destinies we search for cause and effect, for recurrent patterns of climax and dénouement; we need beginnings, villains, we seek the hidden correlation between a rainy afternoon remembered from childhood and a letter that didn't arrive forty years later. (311)

Words are the medium of conversion, by naming, as when Maud teaches her grandson Harry the indigenous names of things: 'In bed at night the names of trees burst in his mind like stars: *hingul, tammana, keena, sapu*' (282). What do they become in English? Or do they resist translation? The conversion can de-nature, turn a thing into something it is not. Everywhere in *The Hamilton Case* the work of literature in life involves the adaptive mismatch of English literary modes to an incommensurate world.

Among the many literary intertexts in De Kretser's novel, detective fiction is key, from *The Woman in White* (1860) and the Sherlock Holmes stories (Sam is proud of a photograph of himself captioned as 'Our Sherlock Holmes'), with Agatha Christie as the prize exhibit. Shivanathan admits to borrowing unconsciously from *Hercule Poirot's Christmas* (1938) for his version of the Hamilton case, falsifying his conclusion under the spell of Christie's narrative potency: 'I had fallen for an old enchantment. I had mistaken the world for a book' (352). That, on a much larger scale, is the ambition and also the mistake of colonialism, and a hazard of provincial life, in which culture is felt to be centred elsewhere.

Agatha Christie can claim to be the world's bestselling author across all languages (with allowances made for the Bible and Shakespeare). While the claim may be of dubious merit, and the reasons for it complex, it remains the case that this mid-twentieth century middle class English woman writer of crime fiction has sold more than 4 billion books. To judge merely by the number of her titles in Chinese in Shanghai's largest bookstore in a celebratory display in 2009, a reversal in her fortune is unlikely any time soon. In any discussion of world literary phenomena, Christie must surely rank.

In her acknowledgement of *Hercule Poirot's Christmas*, placing her own novel in the genre of detective fiction, De Kretser does two things. She enters a zone of readerly familiarity, and she uses those shared expectations to show where they fail, where convention is inadequate and even destructive. Her novel is transformative in conception, impetus and execution. She engages with world literature insouciantly, to expose its limits: her vision goes to the subtlest, most sensory, sharpest and saddest details of the locally lived life, in a place that is, actually, the centre of the world: Sri Lanka, that used to be called Serendip.

What is that place, 'where the world ends in plunging blue'? (376). Australia? Not quite. But Australia makes an aporetic appearance here too, as an alternative destination. Where does the implicated policeman go: 'To Australia ... [or] Rhodesia. At any rate, a country waiting to be invented' (147). (Or uninvented in the latter case.) Nagel, a Burgher of distant Dutch East India Company ancestry, wants a less complex role in a more trustworthy world: 'One day I'm going to breed horses. The Cape. Or Australia. Wonderful animals. Never let you down'. In that moment the place he and Sam seem to share becomes 'as insubstantial as a mirage', substituted by the radically different scene that enchants Nagel: 'A stallion thundered over a scorched plain. On a bald hilltop a knock-kneed colt lifted its head and whickered at the moon' (106).

The ageing Maud is glimpsed roaming the dilapidated family estate in faded finery, giving rise to strange tales. Allied soldiers stationed there during the war against Japan

carried home the tale of a woman with eyes like cold yellow gems who wandered the jungles of Ceylon dressed for a ball. In the torn light under the trees she had the aspect of a young girl, barely marriageable; then she turned her head to reveal a grinning crone. Variants of this narrative surfaced in Solihull and Nairobi. It was elaborated on an expedition to the Amazon, footnoted in an ashram in Poona, disputed on a farm near Dubbo. ... She glided on six inches of air, she crept on all fours, she walked abroad on moonless nights, or at that hour when the last star still glimmers palely above the horizon. (256-7)

So the story spreads, orally, fugitively, recast in the telling, as Maud and her 'different order', her vanished 'older, organic world' (211), float into the literature of the world with a new life. As the story travels, she joins with other avatars, such as Miss Havisham, in *Great Expectations*, another belle denied her desired match, and thought to be inspired by the Sydney recluse Eliza Donnithorne (born Bengal, c.1827, jilted on her wedding day, died Sydney 1886). The fancied association with Dickens has given Donnithorne an afterlife too. It continues in the music theatre piece by Peter Maxwell Davies and Randolph Stow, *Miss Donnithorne's Maggot* (1974, dedicated to Patrick White), and again in *The Recluse* by Evelyn Juers (2012), who considers the story a myth. Those debating De Kretser's Maud's story near Dubbo in western New South Wales might have thought of the Nullarbor nymph, a current legend in which a naked blonde appears fleetingly to travellers across the treeless Nullarbor plain. The geriatric matriarch in Patrick White's novel *The Eye of the Storm* (1973) floats into view, her mind alive with an old memory of having found a phantom lover in the tropics, a Flying Dutchman.

Shape-changing and revenant, stories swirl with the movement of people and the making of culture in a post-imperial world. Ceylon is written from Melbourne, with proleptic knowledge of the violence to come when Sri Lanka will be rent by civil war. Of the decolonising politician who fanned those ethnic divisions, Sam says, 'he taught us to hate',

setting ‘us well and truly on our course’ (39). That’s an indirect explanation, in part perhaps, of Michelle de Kretser’s own fate as a teenage migrant, becoming a writer in Australia, from where this beguiling novel produces a postmodern, feminist, Sri Lankan extension of postcolonial literature, under the sign of detective fiction.

There are, then, points of connection between these three new century writers, De Kretser, Le and Adiga, in the capacity of their work to move through shifting, overlapping, not always compatible literary contexts. That enables a powerful expression of personal and social transformation. Different readings produce different vanishing points. In the process minor can modulate into major.

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<sup>1</sup> Suvendrini Perera further discusses the highly charged significance of ‘boats’ in the formation of the Australian state in *Australia and the Insular Imagination: Beaches, Borders, Boats, and Bodies* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).