

## SOMEONE ELSE'S ZOO: ASIAN AUSTRALIAN WOMEN'S WRITING

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At present, there is a dearth of critical analysis of Asian-Australian women's writing for it seems that this area falls between the established areas of literary and multicultural studies. Further, reviews and readings are carried out against a backdrop of the Australian popular cultural perception of Asia as economic frontier, and Asian peoples as tourists or potential business partners, if not refugees. With an attitude of 'learning-for-profit' perpetuated in educational and other governmental discourses, and in the focus of many vocational courses, I examine what happens to the cultural perception and reception of Asian-Australian women's writing.

Australia's xenophobic history and its current multicultural policies problematise readings of Asian-Australian women's writing, or indeed any literary work by non-Anglo-Celtic authors. Specificity of experience and historical and social contexts should always be taken into consideration when studying aspects of literary production; otherwise, the fascination that the Western world has for the Other culminates not only in cultural voyeurism but, as described by Susan Hawthorne, a form of "cultural cannibalism" (267) where the Other culture is consumed figuratively into the artistic production of the West. Or, as Trinh T. Minh-ha says: Other cultures always become "someone else's zoo" (82).

In a time when pastiche and 'borrowing' from various cultures has become apparently fashionable, even deemed an aspect of postmodernity, cultural property or ownership is a pressing issue. An example of this would be the Helen Demidenko-Darville affair, where her novel, *The Hand that Signed the Paper*, was awarded several prestigious Australian literary prizes before her fabricated identity was unravelled. When Darville was exposed as non-Ukrainian, the work of fiction was then considered by some readers in an entirely different light. Its anti-Semitic aspects were even more damning as now, Darville had no 'sources' with which to defend herself, losing her mantle of truth-speaking along with her ethnic identity. Because of the perceived 'duping' of the Australian literary set by a so-called ethnic writer, one possible result of Demidenko-Darville's actions, according to Bronwen Levy, "has been to delegitimise the demands of migrant groups, in the sense that attempts to explore or construct aspects of migrant identity in literary forms will now, to some, seem clichéd, less feasible or even desirable" (114).

For Asian-Australian women writers, the ability to see and express themselves as 'Australian' or as part of the Australian people is affected by the country's racist past, the White Australia Policy being, perhaps, the most obvious example of this. Few instances of how it felt to live in this period of Australian history are readily available. I focus on Simone Lazaroo's novel, *The World Waiting to Be Made*, as it engages with complicated questions of identity formation in these alien, often hostile, spaces. It is set in 1970s-1980s Western Australia,

and examines the prejudice and dislocation of living here as a Eurasian girl and woman. The book discusses the lack of identity placement, or in some cases, 'over-placement,' where the narrator is pulled in many various directions by parts of her background and personality. Different aspects gain primacy at different stages in her life. Her father's way of coping with prejudice is to show his Australian potential by planning to live in a real Australian house, perhaps internalising the 'great Australian dream' of home ownership. This gesture is one of seeking admittance to white Australian society by making himself 'like them,' and showing his willingness to forget his own ways and to adopt theirs.

His subsequent divorce from the mother of his Eurasian children, and association with the "frosted prospective wife, Dawn" (207) also underlines his attempts to take on "Australian-ness." For him, this involves removing evidence of his past, and denying the present, of his own colour. His Eurasian children are constant reminders of where he came from, while his Anglo-Australian wife is still too much a part of his previous life. His traditional cooking and conservative sexual mores, however, especially with regard to how his daughters should act, remain intact and jostle ironically with his trials at building an Australian self. His habits also hinder the narrator's attempts to claim a new self, one that she was sure she needed, one that was distanced from all things Asian. She compares most things to the perceived norm of her blonde friend Sue, a 'friend' who is quite oblivious to the alienation and desperate ploys used by the narrator to get accepted, and who says of a lilly-pilly-stained Barbie: "That's how they dress in Oobla Oobla land where you come from" (29).

The Asian attitude of supposedly not-making-waves feeds the much-lauded, well-disseminated discourse which earns them the title of "Model Minority" (Chow 370). The 'good' migrant is one who tries to fit in without causing trouble, without affecting others, who goes on to be successful in business and therefore, it is assumed, examples of proper, 'cheap' assimilants (that is, not funded by government handouts). As Trinh says of coloured communities in a predominantly white Western world:

From 'forget who you are and forget me not' to 'know who you are and copy me not,' the point of view is the same: 'Be like us.' . . . Yet, being accused of 'ignoring one's own culture' and 'looking whiter than Snow White herself' also means taking a trip to the promised land of White Alienation (52).

Having been officially rejected by Australia in the past, Asian identities still find themselves presented rigidly as threatening. An Australian inquiry into racist violence found that "there generally seems to be little distinction made by those holding prejudices or perpetrating violence between different Asian groups" (Human Rights Commission 141), and that second or third generation Australians of Asian descent are just as likely to be targets of violence. The study concludes, however, that "[i]t was their ethnicity to which exception was taken, not their nationality" (141). While it is partially true that the violence perpetrated against Asian people in Australia is directed through a parochial sense of 'Australian

nationalism,' it is hardly "ethnicity" which is targeted in these cases. It is 'race,' the so-called visible difference.

Lazaroo refuses to name the narrator of *The World Waiting To Be Made*, and when the depth of racist feeling to which this character is subjected constantly in her teenage years is considered, the not-naming strategy allows her to function as an allegorical figure, an unplaceable coloured person in a land where white is right. In the conservative suburbs where the narrator grows up and goes to school, her foreign looks, which are not immediately identifiable as Asian but only as non-Australian, allowed others' presumptions to be framed around her. These presumptions are key examples of the issue of 'overplacement' mentioned earlier in this paper. She was Arabian, Mauritian, a native of South-East Asia, "I was any wog people wanted me to be" (81). Unaware of what precise stereotypes to which she was being fitted, she internalised the signal markers of ethnicity and foreign-ness, altering her habits to suit. For her, the irony remains that she never knew what it was that was reacted against, beyond the colour of her skin, and yet she tried so hard to shed its hold on her. She considers herself "jagged from years of being judged but being unable to express my own judgements" (261).

Lazaroo's prose is very critical of white Australian society and its behaviour towards people of other races but, perhaps even more so, she emphasises the destructiveness of internalising the racism and exclusion displayed by surrounding society. As William Yang says to the perceived white Australian reader of his short story, "Snapshot": "You are my mirror." Yang's realisation that he is Chinese is brought about when he is 6-years-old and other children at the playground start calling him racist names (68). From that point onward, Yang's thoughts about Chinese-ness and being Chinese in Australia are associated with ridicule and negativity.

The "visible similarity" mentioned earlier also leads to Chinese writers being compared to one another globally with superficial consideration of where they were born, in what circumstances they live, or from which generation they come. Since winning a New South Wales State Literary Award for *The Crocodile Fury*, Beth Yahp has been consistently referred to as Australia's answer to Amy Tan [*The Joy Luck Club*, *The Kitchen God's Wife*, and *A Hundred Secret Senses*]. When interviewed during her book-signing rounds, Yahp was accidentally called "Amy" by an unnamed reporter (Dwyer 20). Such a mistake echoes the stereotypical 'they all look alike' attitude that renders Asian people a mass of unknowables. Rosalind Chao, an actor in the film version of Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*, was approached by a friend and asked: "Won't it be confusing, with such a large [Asian] cast? . . . Well, you know, you all sort of resemble each other" (Ms 95). I would argue that the imposed visual stereotype of 'all Asians look the same' is conflated often with cultural expectations that all Asian women necessarily *write* the same way.

The category of ethnic writing, still regarded as fringe-art by mainstream Australia, reinforces the place of canonical works at the centre and as the only referents. Linda Carroli suggests:

It seems that the policy process and arts funding programmes continue to site artists and artforms from non-Anglo cultural traditions as an agglomeration of minority and esoteric experience that has no real value to the professionalized arts of the dominant culture (333).

The process of this agglomeration serves to defuse the threat presented by the myriad ethnic groups and their cultures. 'Value,' as Carroli observes it, is an item that is highly changeable, depending from where you are speaking, though an assumption is made about the universality of the term and its currency in Western societies. A white Western consideration of artistic value purportedly speaks for all, while Other groups speak about themselves. The issue then regresses to 'Them' (multicultural exotics with traditionally wrought arts) and 'Us' (Anglos who have moved beyond merely resounding traditionalism towards creative and 'higher' arts). If anything, the attributes of exoticism are co-opted by these "professionalised arts of the dominant culture" (Carroli 333) within frames of mimicry and 'borrowing'.

In the previous quotation, Trinh highlights the figure of the Asian Other who should provide entertainment, amusement, and education. The paradox apparent in these formulations of identity for Asian peoples, and 'ethnic groups' in general, is the unresolvable question of being 'Australian'. If you are too close to Australian hegemonic society, too assimilated, you are accused of abandoning your roots. To maintain your community links, cultural history, and ethnic customs is to remove yourself further from being an 'Australian'. If you are already visibly different, must you also be deliberately culturally different?

In *The World Waiting To Be Made*, the narrator's behaviour towards Eddie, a Chinese boy at school, embodies her feelings towards herself at different times in her life. The first time we meet Eddie, he has just corrected a teacher on the history of the cardigan (80), and then he is one of two to ask her to the school social. He was refused because he was Chinese, but the other was also unacceptable because he was an 'ethnic'. As the narrator emphasises: "Pressing was my embarrassment at the thought of appearing at the door of the school hall with Eddie or Franco, and thus reinforcing in the eyes of Sue and her friends how far away from blonde nonchalance and Dr Scholls scuffs I really was" (85). Later, when she hears of Eddie's illness, the narrator does not even talk about it with anyone with whom she works because "wouldn't [she] just prove herself more foreign in their eyes by revealing [her] association with him?" (188). Her aversion to discussing Eddie with anyone is doubly enforced due to the socially taboo nature of his illness, AIDS. Having to explain why he was sick would then tap into the onus to explain "how," a stereotypical response to HIV-positive people (judging them on whether they were 'innocent' or complicit victims), which would mean telling everyone that Eddie was gay.

She needs to denounce 'Asian-ness' and 'foreign-ness' to promote 'Australian-ness.' To her, these are mutually exclusive categories; an Asian-Australian does not exist. Eddie's Australian accent and confidence with the English language earns him the scorn and dislike of Chinese restaurant owners:

"He's a smart-alec with a Chinese face trying to be Aussie. He gives us a bad name" (101). To her, he looks too Chinese and foreign; to the restaurateurs, he speaks too well for them to accept him as one of 'them.' In this rejection of Eddie by people from several groups for various reasons, the process of cultural acceptance is shown to be much more complicated than speaking or looking right for any one group. Such processes of exclusion or inclusion, and attempts to influence each of these, suit Abdelfattah Kilito's "Dog Words" examples where pursuing entrance to another group requires learning its language and risking forgetting the old tongue. Having become a Westernised Chinese boy (and being homosexual as well, the 'ultimate corruption' from the West<sup>3</sup>), Eddie is viewed as one who imitates the dog's barking but, because he is seen to be in the process of imitation, he can never be what he mimics. Kilito states: "Imitation lives on the rupture between being and seeming. An imitation, even if it attains perfection, will never abolish the difference that occasions it in the first place" (xxvii). The painful, often hypocritical, process of assimilation for Asians in Australia, then, is for naught. To continually copy in action and speech what they think 'Australian' means, gains them nothing but recognition of imitation.

Part of Lazaroo's narrator's problem exists in finding an Australia which accommodated her. On finishing her studies in teaching, she asks for a posting at a remote school north of the Kimberleys, taking with her supplies of her childhood foods, even as she continues to deny the Asian half of herself. In a sub-section titled "The Asian Disease," the narrator thinks herself consumed by repressed 'Asian-ness.' She spent a lot of time trying to change herself from who she was, and, when her appendix almost ruptures and is removed, she assumes it is the Asian in her trying to get out and destroy her in the process (110).

Attempting to map a new self in the perceived emptiness of the isolated place, away from the routine and familiar distractions and presumptions, she thought a new, real her would emerge. Instead, it only accentuates the alienation of her position and the complications of finding space for herself that was not already overlapping, or outside of what was offered by the people surrounding her.

The community that exists around the school is presented as a pathetic one: labouring over little patches of lawn in the desert, 'keeping up appearances' by cleaning and vacuuming incessantly, trying to keep the red dust out, and holding wilted Melbourne Cup Day sweeps deemed mandatory for community spirit. She is advised not to associate with the Aboriginal community (to whom she was teaching "the way Australians were supposed to live" [180]) as they are "more trouble than they're worth" (178). For the narrator, the desert space occupied by the Aboriginal families is yet another part of Australia where she does not fit in and only serves to rekindle her feelings of not-belonging.

The ironies of the narrator's visit to Singapore in adulthood underline the fragility and self-imposition of the assumptions and stereotypes under which she had laboured. Her perception of what traditional sensibilities about women were prompted her to drop the hems of her skirts and dresses, only to have these dismissed by her cousin back home as "old-fashioned clothes." She was then told

to dress more like a “pretty girl and an Australian” (243). Being an Australian she had to be seen to be different from those in Singapore, and in her clothing she was expected to be much more Westernised, much more revealing and elusively modern.

Issues involved in the agglomerated identity of Asians hides many complicated prejudices and hierarchies that affect migrant and ethnic people from within their own or associated communities, not just from the monolithic, mythical white ‘majority.’ Lazaroo has written of multiple identifications for the narrator, none of which are any more true or comfortable than each other. The main protagonist spends most of her time reacting to the stimulus of Australian society, through her friends and teachers, workmates and lovers, and she strives for what she imagines to be the desirable form which she must embody. The last sentence of the novel remains strongly ambiguous:

There was a great struggle and shedding of our ways within our houses and outside them, and the chium was unused though not quite forgotten, and so much of our past was not shared with anyone, and never handed down to our children, who play and skip in the surf with the neighbours’ children, and are not torn so much by a feeling of belonging elsewhere (275).

Helen Heritage chooses to read this last paragraph as a positive event (that of not feeling like belonging elsewhere) and ends her review of *The World Waiting to Be Made* with “Let us all hope this is so” (24). While finding a level of comfort, relative acceptance, and confidence in your surroundings is a better state than perpetual discrimination and fighting familial boundaries, Lazaroo’s ending is hardly a paean to assimilation. The price of feeling this comfort is the suppression of a past that is “not shared with anyone”.

A more detailed view of Asian-Australian women’s identity construction and their strategies in coping with a relatively antipathetic social environment is needed, one that considers more than the specificity of the author, one that turns its eye to deconstructing the way Asian-Australian women’s work is looked at by looking back. Through their fictional works and the focus of their particular gazes, Asian-Australian women express an ever widening range of viewpoints for seeing themselves and their societies. This focus leads to a critical turning of Australia and Australians into subjects for scrutiny.

Asian women’s writing as a discernible and critically focussed area leaves many avenues still to be researched. In many readings of Asian-Australian women’s works, critics seem to offer readings on the path to ‘becoming’—becoming more Western, and therefore more liberal and free; shaking off those restrictive Asian cultural burdens. The end-point is to be considered on par with global (read: Western, Eurocentric notions of) literature, moving away from what is considered to be the inferior, highly specific prose of multicultural literature.

Negotiating a wider range of subjects and narrative registers, not allowing people to know how they will write or from where they are writing, not having to

explain themselves or what they are and do: all these are part of establishing the area of Asian-Australian women's literature as less novel and titillating. Asian women's writing has the power to alter perceptions of who they can be and, perhaps, who they want to be; but they must always be read with the knowledge that one piece of work is but one Asian-Australian woman's story, and so is not every Asian-Australian woman's tale.

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