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The Political Imagination: Postcolonialism and Diaspora in Contemporary Australian Poetry

This issue considers the relationship between contemporary poetry and the political imagination. We see the imagination as a means to explore possibility or transformation, but also a vehicle by which to envisage or think *otherhow* to normative Western "forms of social explanation" (Bhabha 248). Postcolonial studies as a disciplinary field has long investigated the complex cultural and political relationship between self and place. Yet, since its revolutionary inception in the anti-colonial struggles of the twentieth century, it has been increasingly viewed as "an explicitly deterritorialising discourse in something close to the Deleuzian sense – a discourse so fragmented, so hybrid, so as to deny its constituent elements any sustainable specificity at all" (Hallward 22). While many of the essays collected in this issue challenge established modes of postcolonial thinking, they also offer new, even supplementary, ways of imagining a politically and ethically charged contemporary poetics.

In "Why Waste Lines on Achille?: Tracing the Critical Discourse on Postcolonial Poetry through Untimeliness to the Present", Lucy Van notes that the scholarship on postcolonial poetry has tended to be somewhat belated to postcolonial studies. Whereas postcolonial studies emerged in the 1980s, it would not be until the twenty-first century that Jahan Ramazani's *The Hybrid Muse: Postcolonial Poetry in English* (2001) was published, followed by Rajeev Patke's *Postcolonial Poetry in English* (2006) and Ashok Bery's *Cultural Translation and Postcolonial Poetry* (2007). Van investigates this 'lag-time' and suggests that the generic form of the novel is perhaps perceived as less 'messy' than poetry, particularly in its secured origins within the scriptive tradition. Danijela Kambaskovic discerns that none of the three most successful migrant writers from

former Yugoslavia are poets, but is unsure as to whether this is due to some difficult crossing between language and experience, or whether it says more about the tastes of a broad readership (100). Unlike the novel, poetry emerges out of a tradition of orality and may require attention to aspects of sound and performance. It may focus on mood rather than narrative or story. As Van points out, scholarship to date typically examines the *writing* of postcolonial poets and focuses predominantly on Western canonical poets. In this respect, poetry "is useful when it functions like the novel" and when it most approaches an institutional form (23). Van notes Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's approach as an example of a tendency to treat "poems as smaller-than-novel-sized compartments for the transmission of the themes and attitudes found in the larger postcolonial novel" (24).

For Van, instead of attempting to produce a canon of postcolonial poetry, with a regressive reliance on classical poetic tropes and conventions, the task of today's theorists is to locate the work of postcolonial poets in a national milieu, and by so doing, view the poem as a site for the interrogation of nation and national literatures. Ramazani discerns that a nation is often defined and expressed through its poetry, that is, poetry is viewed as "the ultimate embodiment of the *Sprachgeist*" (*Hybrid* 2). Anthologies add to this perception, in packaging poetry predominantly as 'national product'.

Lyn McCredden contends that one mode of responding to popular discourses of national identity and nation "with their attendant jingoisms, militarism and exclusions" is to "ignore or repudiate the concept of the nation" (43). This might be equated with "writing as if one is from New York, or London, or Hicksville, or somewhere supposedly beyond the nation" (43). While one possible stance is to claim to be writing "from nowhere," an alternative is to write from a "cosmopolitan everywhere" (43). In *Transnational Poetics*, Ramazani sees two trends in poetry, the first emerging out of a modernist tradition and the second from postcolonial poetry. Following a 1996 editorial in *New American Writing* by Susan Schultz, Rob Wilson also delineates a similar division between what he views as a local-based poetry that wants to align itself with forces and forms of imagined identity that have since come to be called postcolonial, and an experimental, postmodern poetry

where there is an emphasis on depthlessness in the scene of writing, "a kind of perpetual displacement and deferral of the self being housed or contained by any ongoing identity with space of place"(122). Yet these are not mutually exclusive; indeed, Lyn McCredden notes that they may be seen to have "tangled threads of influence and counterfluence" (48). She cites Ramazani, who develops his argument away from a simple either-or map of poetry:

> Postcolonial hybridity 'confirms yet alters,' reworks yet revalues modernist bricolage. It thus re-begets a poetic mode that helped beget it. Only by breaking out of exclusionary models of tradition as either Eliot's 'mind of Europe' or its postcolonial obverse ('an autonomous entity separate and apart from all other literatures') can we begin to grasp the continuous remaking of 'traditions' by one another across the twentieth century and beyond, the mutually transformative relations between the poetries of metropole and margin. (*Transnational* 115)

Popular discourses and anthologies (which often present themselves as museum-like cabinets) typically seek to 'fix' or reduce particular views of nation or ways of belonging. Indeed, nation might be thought of as a juridico-political entity formed by a population within a given territory. It necessarily has regimes of power that are hierarchical and exclusive in terms of citizen rights and access to institutional structures. In her earlier study of global epic, Lucy Van focuses on how 'identity papers' have mattered for subjectivities delineated by identities other than race or ethnicity. She cites Hélène Cixous' analysis of gender:

> Right from the moment they venture to speak what they have to say, [women] will of necessity bring about a shift in metalanguage. And I think we're completely crushed, especially in places like universities, by the highly repressive operations of metalanguage, the operations that see to it that the moment women open their mouths – women more often than men – they are immediately asked in whose name

> and from what theoretical standpoint they are speaking, who is their master and where they are coming from: they have, in short, to salute… to show their identity papers. (353; qtd. Van at 190)

Anne Brewster contends that both migrants and Indigenous people occupy a position of marginality in Australia because they "do not stand in the same relation of otherness" to the dominant white Anglocentric culture (16). A number of essays in this issue examine how and why potentially infinitely incoherent subjectivities have been fixed and limited to being read as an articulation of a specific racial or ethno-cultural identity. Ali Alizadeh and Penelope Pitt-Alizadeh acknowledge that positive essentialism can strategically challenge and disrupt racist, unfavourable and subordinate representations of the Indigenous people, as well as of migrants. Citing Aileen Moreton-Robinson's statement that "self-representation by Indigenous women is a political act," they suggest that claiming a particular identity may galvanise "a sense of solidarity within their respective communities at key historical moments" (61). They agree with Brewster that, at these moments, the concept of Aboriginality or Aboriginal culture provided a valuable means to harness cultural capital "in order to produce a nation-wide sense of solidarity and common interest among Aboriginal people, who had previously differentiated themselves into groups according to kinship or in relation to specific areas of land" (Brewster 6).

The civil rights movement of the 1960s led not only to the rise of Indigenous identity politics but also to the recognition of a broad range of ethnic minority groups. The poet Antigone Kefala who migrated to Australia in the 1970s found that policies advocating a multicultural Australia "tried to recognise the place and needs of a large group of people who were disadvantaged because of language or cultural differences. […] In my case I felt it was a very positive thing, because before everyone was outside" (Digby 198-99).

Yet, extending the scholarship of Beverley Skeggs, Alizadeh and Pitt-Alizadeh discern that Indigenous and minority writers "do not usually have influence over how they are positioned and therefore how their work is positioned" (62). A poet may, in fact, be assumed to speak for an

ethno-cultural group, reproducing a chimeric vision of similitude for that group, at the exclusion of differences. An idealised presumption of authenticity is then implemented as a regulating tool by which actual individuals are measured. As Moreton-Robinson states, "The traditional woman is the woman against whom all Indigenous women are measured, yet in her pristine state she does not exist" (88). While privileged individuals can move between identities, Alizadeh and Pitt- Alizadeh argue that this becomes more restricted for those less privileged. Indeed, Indigenous and migrant writers can be ghettoised by their racial or ethnic identity. They cite Antigone Kefala in interview: "We ethnics are constantly being compared to other ethnics, but not to Australian writers. Have you ever read anything in which some comparison was made between my work and that of Les Murray, for instance?"

Alizadeh and Pitt-Alizadeh mobilise the philosophical method of Alain Badiou in demonstrating how a poem by Western Australian Wajarri-Bardimia poet Charmaine Papertalk-Green might produce a reading that views the abandonment of the black female speaker by her black partner as not ascribed to any one particular factor (racial, sexual, or economic disadvantage) but perhaps as a result of interconnected social factors that together create the material conditions that produce such a destructive act. Badiou's approach therefore offers a generative interpretative alternative to the reductive lens of identity politics, an approach that might articulate more of a Truth, and therefore be viewed as a radicalising metapolitics.

In his essay, Timothy Yu reflects on both the limitations and possibilities of identifying poetry as "Asian Australian". As Yu points out, the term "Asian American" was "a pan-ethnic coalition formed in response to the racism of a white-dominated society" (79). That is, it's about "claiming place for Asians within America, rather than viewing Asians only as foreigners" (75). While the strategic use of an "Asian American identity" enabled "diverse Asian groups to understand [their] unequal circumstances as being related," Lisa Lowe warns that it "risks particular dangers: not only does it underestimate the differences and hybridities among Asians, but it also inadvertently supports the racist discourse that constructs Asians as a homogenous group, that implies we are 'all alike' and conform to 'types'" (1037).

Similar to Alizadeh and Pitt-Alizadeh, Jacqueline Lo has shown how the strategic use of a category like "Asian Australian" unites "people of various Asian ethnicities thereby enabling a degree of political solidarity and critical purchase" (15). Yet following Lowe's American-focused caution, "Asian Australian" might still prove more limiting than liberating as a category. Poets like Michelle Cahill have preferred to call themselves migrant writers. Others, like Lia Incognita, identify themselves as persons of colour (80). Others again may prefer to be aligned to a specific ethno-cultural background like Chinese-Australian or Vietnamese-Australian. Hoa Pham claims there has not been an "obvious 'cohort' of writers engaged in a 'thing called Asian-Australian poetry'" (qtd by Timothy Yu at 79). Yet, as Timothy Yu points out, this may be changing in light of new interpretative frameworks such as Adam Aitken's "rhizomic (or de-centred) model of reading that can complement a more Australo-centric view" ("Asian-Australian Diasporic Poets: A Commentary" 81). As Aitken notes in "A poetics of (un) becoming hybridity", hyphenated categories like "Asian-Australian" "can highlight relational descriptions of identity and […] interrogate traditional, or essentialist formulations of 'Englishness,' 'Thainess,' and even Anglo-Australianness". For Aitken, the "gap between East-West creates a third space that splits the binary that separates self and Other" ("(un)becoming" 125).

In "On Asian Australian Poetry," Timothy Yu focuses on the case of Ouyang Yu who continually negates an identitarian focus. As Ouyang Yu's speaker declares in *Loose: A Wild History*, "I am a poet. Not an Australian poet. Not a Chinese poet. But a poet who temporarily lives in Kingsbury" (151). Ouyang Yu sees himself as a bilingual writer, who moves not between two nations or cultures but between two languages. As his speaker in *The Kingsbury Tales* notes, "you can never be *a* tongue / Never be armed with the right tongue to teach the chosen" (italics added, 19). This is a negation of a particularist, identitarian focus, and gains power in its antagonism towards Australia's "long-history of anti-Chinese racism" ("On Asian Australian Poetry" 84).

The movement between two cultures or between two languages is often not one of choice. Susan Schultz suggests that diaspora is usually "an economic reality, a cultural tearing apart, often born of political

turmoil" (qtd in Aitken, "Commentary"). In "Cut Tongue and the Mechanism of Defence", Ania Walwicz enacts trauma through the embodied process of writing:

> A particular gratification of instinct is repressed, some substitute is found for it (13). I cannot tell the truth. I am not allowed. I am forbidden. Verboten. I don't want to know what I know or think what I think. It is too bad. I censor that. I delete that. It is removed, erased. I forget that I forget. What happened – why nothing happened to me, nothing at all. Don't tell them anything. No. Quiet as a mouse. I hide in the house. I am hidden. I am not allowed to come out.
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> The act of orality; speaking, eating, reading out aloud – as a form of displacement, repression. Teaching, yes, even teaching. Anything, anything at all. Any thing. I cross something out. Block it, stop it. I forget to eat. I just write and write now. (91)

For Walwicz's speaker, the speaker is always already a subject in process. Just as much as being a "projection made by the reader", the speaker is written by language. That said, the poet–speaker also claims some agency to reinvent herself, although there is a constant slippage between her performed selves:

> Words come to me. Dreams come to me. I will think about this tomorrow. Fiddlesticks, I say. I am Vivien Leigh in Gone with the Wind. I am the contorted Sabina Spielrein in A Dangerous Method. I am Gloria Swanston descending the grand staircase in Sunset Boulevard. My speech is cut up, disjointed. I incorporate errors and breakages of language and body. (93)

Walwicz's writing is episodic, fragmented, associative, and dream-like. As Walwicz herself elaborates, it is surrealistic, mixing aspects of dream and the Real, revealing both conscious and unconscious desires and anxieties. The cut tongue (of the migrant body) is reflected by the cut-

up style of Walwicz's prose poem. There is a shift between the speaker's empowered riffing on and playing with words (a sense of language-games putting pressure on words), and a sense of loss and the emptying out of meaning. This is made emphatic upon oral performance of the work, where the voice gains then loses momentum, is cut short, but empowered by repetition.

Significantly, Walwicz's speaker does not situate the trauma as linked to an identity of either gender or ethnicity, but as emerging from social constraints that are resonating within the immediate everyday (as signalled by the construction of a continual present in her work) and from the creative and critical force of its audience.

In "Breaching the Social Contract: The Migrant Poet and the Politics of Being Apolitical", Danijela Kambaskovic writes of the difficulties of returning to poetry in another language and the loaded presumptions surrounding the figure of the migrant poet. Coming to Australia from former Yugoslavia as an adult, she reflects in her auto-ethnographic piece upon her decision to reinvent herself, but also upon the continuing presence of a 'ghost identity'. Kambaskovic contrasts the comforts and control of intellectual distance with the daunting, confrontational spectre of trauma and nostalgia, contending that the migrant's desire to be apolitical often stems from trauma. Traumatic experiences have no verbal equivalent and can seem impossible to talk about. And if there are attempts at articulation, there is always the question of inauthenticity. The migrant exists in a double bind, inauthentic if not speaking in the first language, but unheard if she does. Beyond the politics between speaking and silence, there are also the affective shifts between a sense of luck and survivor's guilt. As Kambaskovic points out, the struggle to signify oneself as a subject "becomes even harder when one must show feelings in an assumed language" (104). She cites fellow former Yugoslavian poet Tatjana Lukic in describing the difficulty in 'fitting' experience to language or vice versa: "a needle that I thrust into a thick coat to sew a button, but the needle emerged in a different spot on the underside of the cloth, too far from the damn button" (14). (The metaphor of sewing for writing is one that Walwicz has also used.) There is the further conundrum that mistakes made in the second language, which would actually

reveal a genuine foreignness, will often make the poem less publishable because it does not 'sound right' or 'look right' (106).

Kambaskovic writes powerfully of the pressures to perform a particular role, to claim a particular voice as a migrant poet, and of winning awards when she did so successfully. The performance of an *authentic* pain and dislocation is the way the migrant writer honours the social contract between themselves and the reader from the host-country. This is similar to but not quite the same as Timothy Yu's questioning of the Asian-Australian writer as "a kind of middleman figure, interpreting and explaining rather than being heard creatively" (75). Adam Aitken also notes that too often multiculturalism becomes a kind of colonial paternalism where the dominant or host culture manages minority cultures, imposing an editorial process on what the minority can be. Accordingly, it becomes more about what the dominant or host culture benefits from the migrant and becomes associated with the idea of cultural accretion like 'fusion food' or festivals of world music ("(un)becoming" 123).

Aitken suggests that in "talking about coming from 'two different worlds,' the subject ironically reproduces an ideological reductiveness" (130). Both Walwicz and Kambaskovic question particular renditions of ethnicity and gender, preferring instead to present complex subjectivites that are in flux and responding to a dynamic spectrum of social factors. Bill Ashcroft has argued for the concept of transnation to capture this sense of flux:

> Transnation is the fluid, migrating outside of the state that begins within the nation. This 'outside' is geographical, cultural and conceptual, a way of talking about subjects in their ordinary lives, subjects who traverse the various categories by which subjectivity is normally constituted, who live 'in-between.' The transnation occupies the space we might refer to as the 'nation', distinct from the political structure of the state, which interpolates subjects as citizens. These subjects may indeed identify themselves as national, particularly in sport and war, but the transnation describes the excess of subject positions swirling within, around, and beyond the state. (19)

Is this "excess of subject positions swirling within, around, and beyond the state" what Aitken calls cultural hybridity? Aitken argues for the need to "decouple hybridity from race-based identity", citing as examples Pico Ayers' global soul and Édouard Glissant's Creole-Caribbean poet of relation (127). To this, we might add Michael Farrell's Australian neobaroque. Thinking laterally from the Latin American creolisation of the European baroque, Farrell considers the possibility of a counter-conquest mode in Australian poetry that incorporates local histories, subaltern knowledges, and Indigenous aesthetics.

Aitken argues that hybridity "is more than identity, it is a poetics of Being without no dominant template". He declares:

> I would like see 'hybridisation' as a portmanteau term for a whole range of cultural exchange that carries a positive potential for social change, while at the same time posing a possible critique of how standards of 'authenticity' are made and who is entitled to call whom authentic.

For Aitken the 'Asian-Australian' poet "is a metaphor that could be used to describe a space of creative practice that lies aslant to or outside, but not detached from, the Australian context" (131). In "A poetics of (un)becoming hybridity", he employs Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of intentional, as opposed to organic, hybridity which deploys an aesthetic expression which is provocative and challenges an identitarian lens. As Pnina Werner notes, it "may also from a different social position be experienced as revitalising and fun" ("Dialectics" 5). For Aitken, such aesthetic expression would be "multi-vocal" and create "a fluid trans-subject" (16). Accordingly, a hybrid poetics would be "adulterated, bastardised, inauthentic, dis-placed and resistant to grand narratives and ideological schema".[1] It would "explore a counter-discourse to the bourgeois romance of happy multiculturalism" (Aitken, "(un)becoming" 134). Kambaskovic finds a freedom in trans-

1 Ramazani has also developed the concept of 'artistic hybridisation' from Bakhtin, although he focuses on Bakhtin's concepts of dialogism, doubleness, and the carnivalesque as reading strategies of postcolonial poetry.

lating her own work, a process of transcription. In moving between two languages, the poem is "taken apart or rewritten," takes on variation (119). As Spivak contends, the translator "must solicit the text to show the limits of its language, because that rhetorical aspect will point at the silence of the absolute fraying of language that the text wards off" (193).

Aitken cites Susan Schultz who suggests that "Diaspora is rarely shared, or shared easily, because there are so many versions of it" (128). Aitken prefers to think about "specific localisms and how they connect at a micro-level" (132). Accordingly, his poetry is "about *where I come from* as much as the shifting terrain of *where I am at*" (132). In some respects, this reflects Robert Dixon's notion of "situated cosmopolitanism", which, he argues, recognises "the strategic value of self-fashioning, of embracing a range of cultural identities and national affiliations" (72). Yet Aitken also puts continual pressure on such cultural identities as containing shifting modalities of Being. In *Transnational Poetics*, Ramazani argues that, "For global and transnational studies of poetry, we need, in short, dialogic alternatives to monologic models that represent the artifact as synecdoches for a local or national culture imperilled by global standardization, a monolithic orientalist epistemology closed to alterities within and without, or a self-contained civilizational unit in perpetual conflict with others" (12).

In thinking about this dialogic alternative, it is vital to consider "the *material conditions* of both nationalism and transnationalism that produce poetic material" (Lucy Van, italics added). It is worth noting how Aitken's cosmopolitan is shaped by his work, that he is part of "a world-wide phenomenon of Asian and part Asian Anglophone teacher/writers who could live anywhere where a school can support them" (132). Ramazani argues that "Metaphor and postcoloniality are both conceived of in terms of movement, transference, or alienation of discourse from one place to another, a movement that involves not only a one-way shift but inevitably a bi-directional hybridisation"(*Hybrid* 73). Is this overlooking the material conditions that may make bi-directionality uneven?

Van states that "it is important that notions of established transnational cultural 'routes' do not preclude further investigation in the

less-traditional, unexpected transnational and transcultural connections we might encounter in late-twentieth century poetry" (34). As Werbner points out, "Some environments are more cosmopolitan than others" ("Vernacular" 498). Van suggests that the "attempt to reconcile hybridity with a sensitivity to local history is made perhaps at the cost of reinstatement of regional categories" (29). There is a need in scholarship of postcolonial poetry to consider, then, a geopoetic mosaic. This includes the possibility of "shared trajectories and/or political commitments between writers who have had no direct contact" as much as attention to the political sensitivities of the local (Jennison 132). Farrell reinforces this in his call for a focus on considering the application of the neobaroque style that is nevertheless attentive to the specifics of place.

In "Archipelagos of sense: thinking about a decolonised Australian poetics", Peter Minter expands on Les Murray's line that "the whole world is an archipelago", proffering an archipelagic sensibility where "locations on the surface of the planet can be understood as earthly temporal and spatial archipelagos" (156). The archipelagos could "describe a set of relations between outcrops or nodes of intensity" amidst "oceans of inscrutability, or what Caribbean poet and theorist Édouard Glissant termed the *chaos-monde*" (156). Each node would be a domestic, vernacular, and intimate island of habitus in a constantly evolving network. In this respect, Ouyang Yu's Kingsbury might be viewed as a node or island with its own intensity, as much as Michael Farrell's Melbourne, or Les Murray's Bunyah. As Minter argues, "[T]hey are all real" (160). For Minter, the archipelagic model "upsets normative ideas about nation, cultural, and ideological homogeneity". An archipelagic sensibility might be viewed as an "aesthetic response to place" but also could refer to the "spatialised network of poetry and poetry communities" (160). Minter's idea of archipelago developed from John Mateer's envisaging of Australia as "an archipelago, culturally porous and edgeless". In "Australia is Not an Island," Mateer elaborates:

> For the artists of the Australian archipelago, the mistaken belief that Australia is one enormous island has the disadvantage that it constantly forces them to talk about their

> practices as if there were real commonalities that they all shared, as if the art forms of the various islands could be effectively grouped under the one cultural discourse, that of the nation. Australians seldom have the opportunity to talk about themselves as islanders, and yet this is one of the first things that strikes the curious visitor: each island's isolation from the others … the richness of Australia resides in the cultural differences between the islands. … If Australia is appreciated as a network of islands, the colonial metaphor for acculturation – that is, the development of the Land with all its attendant technologies of picturing the landscape, clearing the bush, dispossessing the Natives – can be replaced with another, more ethical set of metaphors, a collection of terms more in keeping with current experience in this region. Those metaphors would be those of travel: art as magical and commercial cargo, culture as the trading of information and values, galleries as airports or trade fairs, the practice of the artist as a means of diplomacy and as a technique of survival after marooning or shipwreck. (qtd. in Minter at 165)

Lucy Van has noticed that a good deal of postcolonial poetry refers to fluidity in relation to place and home ("Epic" 301), and Minter has argued that in an archipelagic model, representability is that which coheres "at the edges of ever shifting shores" (156). In "(Un)belonging in Australia: Poetry and Nation," Lyn McCredden draws attention to John Forbes' "On the Beach: A Bicentennial Poem" in which he considers "what model of Australia / as a nation could match the ocean, / or get your desk / to resemble a beach" (qtd. at 50). This littoral between representability and the perceived, and the unknown or invisible, contains both attention to the vernacular, to local histories, as well as looking outward, elsewhere. It is the site for a poetics of relation. The beach is a predominant trope in Australian culture; it is a place that is simultaneously there and not there, stable and unstable. It is further associated with pleasure (leisure-time) and risk (of being beached or stranded), both temporalities beyond the everyday routines and labours.

The political imagination is one that can be enjoyable, as Adam Aitken suggests, but it can also be borne out of the pain of trauma, as a number of contributors reveal. Emotions are nested together and form part of the complexity of contemporary subjectivities. As Peter Minter argues, there is still a need to decolonise reductive aesthetics of nation. The essays in this collection consider how contemporary postcolonial and diasporic poetries often present the reader with an ethical charge. They link experience and aesthetics in ways that provoke, that are porous, that incorporate or engage with the Indigenous or local, that are hybrid without being co-opted to a cultural dominant, that are constantly unbecoming as much as they represent a coming community. And as such, they provide an expression of possibility and social transformation in radical, nuanced, infinitely generative ways.

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