

***Contemporary Asian Australian Poets* edited by Adam Aitken, Kim Cheng Boey & Michelle Cahill (Puncher & Wattmann, 2013)**

There was such a buzz about this ground-breaking anthology when Nicholas Jose launched it at the Sydney Writers Festival, that I was reminded of that 1960s pop song: ‘I’m Gonna Knock on your Door’.

Contemporary Asian Australian Poets is rousing wider Australia with a ringing shout: don’t ignore *us*. If you don’t come out tonight when the moon is bright I’m gonna knock and ring and tap until you do.

Does Australia still need this kind of persistence from its margins? Yes, if the most recent edition of *Australian Poetry Journal #animal* is indicative of the poetry establishment’s unconscious Anglo-centrism. Its plethora of roberts, davids, judiths, sarahs and anthonys give no hint that Australia is embracing its ‘Asian century’.

The poets in *this* anthology guarantee to shake us into a more profound, informed global alertness. The editors and publisher can rejoice in their initiative of showcasing 37 poets connected to 15 Asian countries. A distinguishing feature of the anthology is that each of the three editors contributes a distinctive and challenging essay to stimulate the kind of richly rewarding discussion that matters, both in academic circles and to general readers: identity, belonging, diaspora, race, sexual orientation, gender, patriarchy, colonialism, assimilation, resistance and linguistics.

As a (sometime) high school teacher, I have a particular interest in poetry that speaks to the formative minds of Australian youth – a significant proportion of whom identify with Asian ancestry. In focussing on the question: how useful and accessible is the anthology to a youthful readership? – I offer these observations to the reader and editors alike.

In ‘Airforce Ones’, Omar Musa, a performance poet from Queanbeyan, contrasts the dilemma of developing identity in the material culture of the West with filial duty in the setting of a Foot Locker retail store. The narrator hugs a pair of the latest Nikes jubilantly until he thinks:

Before they were in the box, they were getting packed up in a factory.
 Before that, they dyed the hide.
 Before that, they were [*sic*] moulded the rubber for the soles.
 Before that, they had the rubber in a large rectangular vat.
 Before that, before that, there was an old lady tapping rubber from a tree,
 in a Malaysian jungle somewhere.
 And she’s working for something like two dollars a day,
 And she’s something like 64 ... (169)

The narrator then remembers his father’s challenge earlier in the day when he left to snap up the new release: ‘300 bucks? You should send that to your grandma in Malaysia’. Chastened by the memory of his grandmother, he concludes, ‘I got choices to make.’

Difficult choices brought on by the duality – if not multiplicity – of identity is a central theme.

Here is Sunil Govinnage’s ‘White Mask’ quoted in its entirety.

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Under
A sixty year old gumtree
A plaque remembers
An unknown soldier
In Kings Park.
He sits and scribbles poetry
In English.
Burying
Two thousand and five hundred years
Of metaphors, images
Metre and rhyme now
Heard only at night
In dreams of Sinhala verse. (118)

For some poets, the quest to explore identity vacillates between a dichotomy of a (misunderstanding) European-Australian culture and a (misunderstood) Asian culture. Some are more nuanced, such as Kim Cheng Boey's 'Plum Blossom or Quong Tart at the QVB', a meditation on the complex development of a worldview for his daughter. He attends an exhibition about the life of Quong Tart with her:

... the Chinese
pioneer who made it good in White
Australia. A tea merchant,
he married a Scotswoman, sang
Border ballads and wore tartan kilts;
he fed the Aborigines
and played cricket with the whites. (69-70)

Many poets make use of the traditions of home in fresh ways. Michelle Cahill, born into a Goan Anglo-Indian family in Kenya and now in Sydney, and Subhash Jaireth, born in India and now in Canberra, are but two examples of poets who use Eastern spiritual and philosophical references. In 'Kali from Abroad', Cahill addresses the Hindu goddess:

I'd argue for your cosmopolitanism,
a global denizen, you're adroit in drugs and aphrodisiacs, a nude
dominatrix, a feminist export with a sadomasochistic bent. (74)

The collection wisely refuses to privilege 'home land' in a knee-jerk way. Debbie Lim, a poet whose grandfather was born in China, writes sometimes to subvert sentimentality about lost old ways when they are patriarchal and oppressive. Her how-to instruction for foot-binding, 'How to Grow Feet of Golden Lotus', is heartbreaking. Lim begins with the old Chinese saying:

*A mother cannot love her daughter
and her daughter's feet at the same time*

and proceeds to fix an unflinching gaze on the ‘ulcer, gangrene and necrosis’ that bandaged feet bred – the price a girl once paid to achieve the ultimate in desirability and beauty. Yes, she would be regarded as an erotic object and therefore treasured and waited on and but the odour of rot means she must:

Always wash the feet in private
Always wear slippers in bed. (140-142)

From these excerpts, it is easy to see that the anthology contains the kind of material teachers will dive into with alacrity. A school lesson isn’t likely to focus on poets, as the anthology does, but if a teacher sifts through the offerings s/he will discover particular poems about identity, gender, globalism and race that fit curriculum needs.

Now to some of the disappointments of the anthology. The first is the lack of satisfying definitions for both Asia and the Asian Australian poet. The second involves editing.

In the traditional definition of Asia, Asia starts at the Bosphorus and is not limited to the Indian subcontinent and north, south and eastern Asia as the editors inadvertently convey. While the Chinese diaspora is privileged, many voices – from Turkey to Timor – are in silence. The title *Contemporary Asian Australian Poets* promises an Asian journey, so why does it begin with Adam Aitken’s ‘Alexandria’? Aitken is a fine writer. His introductory essay is instructive but leading the anthology with a poem about Egypt in Africa struck a wrong note, for me at least.

I wish the editors had explained how living in an Asian country during childhood, or having a mother born in Hong Kong makes a person of European origin into a ‘contemporary Asian Australian poet’. Isn’t this person simply an Asian-influenced Australian poet? Yes, engaging with Asia changes a person, but can the engagement change a European into an Asian? If the feeling of being ‘connected to Asia’ is the criterion for inclusion, then why not feature haiku writers, since haiku is the most popular and arguably most consistently accomplished form of Asian writing in Australia today?

If some of the poets actually *have* Asian ancestry, then it is puzzling that these connections are missing from the biographical notes. A number of male poets with Anglo-Saxon names leave the reader with the discomfiting question: is it mateship that helps garner a place in this collection? Had the editors omitted such poets, would space for the poets of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Indonesia, Japan and Timor – to name a few – who are currently missing from the anthology, have opened up?

The second disappointment relates to editing. Many poems are brilliant and impeccably presented but some are uneven. The grammatical mistake/typo, for example, in ‘Airforce Ones’ by Omar Musa quoted above should have been picked up. A stronger anthology would have resulted if the editors had challenged particular contributors to rethink the detail of their works – many of which had been published before – instead of accepting the incorrect use of vocabulary and punctuation, inexperienced stylistic choices such as beginning each line with capital letters, and cultural references so obscure that they detract from meaning. Brave editorial nurturing is essential to the development of writers.

Despite such weaknesses – which may not bother some at all – *Contemporary Asian Australian Poets* is set to knock on doors and wake mainstream Australia up to the richness of the Asian voices in its midst. We tend to remember the poems we study in high school.

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Teachers who engage with this anthology will find much to inspire younger minds. One can imagine a future when, as adults, today's students recall the poets who influenced them: Balasubramaniam, Bobis, Boey, Ho, Jaireth, Lim, Musa, Pham, Raffel, Ratnasingham, Shen, Ten.

In all, a remarkable contribution to Australian literary and cultural life.

Lesley Synge

Dear Gillian

As one of the editors of the Contemporary Asian Australian Poets Anthology, I would like to say I appreciate the journal for publishing a review of the book. It is encouraging for the contributors to gain the attention of your readers. Although the reviewer Lesley Synge was warm about some of the writing and I acknowledge her questioning about the vagueness of the category 'Asian-Australian' poet, I was disturbed and perturbed to read the following comment:

"I wish the editors had explained how living in an Asian country during childhood, or having a mother born in Hong Kong makes a person of European origin into a 'contemporary Asian Australian poet'. Isn't this person simply an Asian-influenced Australian poet? Yes, engaging with Asia changes a person, but can the engagement change a European into an Asian? If the feeling of being 'connected to Asia' is the criterion for inclusion, then why not feature haiku writers, since haiku is the most popular and arguably most consistently accomplished form of Asian writing in Australia today?"

I will quote one of the contributors Andrew Carruthers, one of the poets demeaned by the reviewer because he has an Anglo-name:

"This is directly offensive, not because of some attachment I have to any fixed identity, but because it erased everything about what it means to be Asian Australian: as if to "engage with Asia" is what makes one Asian Australian. If I'm not Asian-Australian what am I? It's not an "engagement" with Asia but a set of social and material circumstances that determines who I am (not only my inability to fit in with most aspects of white culture but also my scholarly and technical determination, these are all implicit or explicit markers of my racial-social experience, etc.). To be Asian Australian of course has multiple markers, positive and negative. These can be direct racism, covert exclusion, determination, gender problems, right up to avoiding identity-markers altogether ("I'm not Asian or White, just me"). Being Asian Australian doesn't make me want to write Haiku, it's a set of social and cultural markers that you can't avoid. Do I have to show her my mother to prove she looks Asian? Recount to her what it meant to see the racism heaped on my own mother? Do I have to tell her about the times that marked me as a kid in China and Hong Kong, my grandparents and their secrets, histories and the politics of those histories? No, just read the poems. These are material mountains and we belong to them. I'm a proud contemporary Asian Australian poet. Andy"

Secondly the reviewer slights my knowledge, my editorial integrity, and skills. Synge writes:

"[i]f some of the poets actually have Asian ancestry, then it is puzzling that these connections are missing from the biographical notes. A number of male poets with Anglo - Saxon names leave the reader with the discomfiting question: is it mateship that helps garner a place in this collection? Had the editors omitted such poets, would space for the poets of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Indonesia, Japan and Timor – to name a few – who are currently missing from the anthology, have opened up?"

The connotations of this paragraph are very problematic. First, I would have expected the reviewer to have referred to Kim Cheng Boey's rationale, as stated in his essay, that the anthology worked within constraints of funding and resources. We would have preferred to open up the geographical net to include Middle Eastern poets but decided it would make for a less manageable book. As for poets from many other Asian backgrounds, we would have included them and increased the book's diversity, and we hope that future anthologies will do so. Unfortunately a lot of Asian Australian poetry requires the resources of a team of translators who should be paid for their work, and we were not provided with resources to do this.

The anthology has published many new Asian Australian poets who benefit from having their work compared in these pages. Could the reviewer have considered that the definition of Asian-Australian poet emerges from readings of the three introductory essays, as well as the poems themselves, and that biographical notes are supplementary (not primary) sources of identity construction? The anthology selection was made by myself, Michelle Cahill and Kim Cheng Boey, and so it is offensive to be accused of being a male chauvinist editor who operates through "mateship" nepotism, when in fact it was a collaborative project with the female editor Michelle Cahill, whose initiative brought to the attention many of these new Asian Australian male (and female) poets. As far as I know Cahill made no objection to publishing any of the male poets with 'Anglo-' names included here. I should also point out that surnames like Carruthers, Aitken, and Stuart have Scots-Celtic roots; but what does it matter? What then is the significance of singling out male poets of Asian heritage who happen to have been christened with Anglo- names? What ground does the reviewer have for casting doubt on our integrity here? The male poets all have Asian heritage that informs their work: Aitken (Anglo-Celtic Thai background), Carruthers (Chinese-Australian ancestry), Cyrill (Indian ancestry), Dawson (Anglo-Asian), Savige (Indonesian father and Anglo-Australian mother) and Stuart (Anglo-Celtic-Vietnamese background). When informed about this review, Stuart's comment (posted to me) about the review was this: 'Would it have helped if I had written an "Asian grandmother poem" and printed my middle name (Anh-Binh)? Would that have been authentic enough?

The reviewer seems to have missed the point that this anthology defines Asianness for those who do have Asian parents or grandparents, but this is merely a starting point. What matters is that the contributors have something important to say about this and are emotionally invested in what this means for their lives, their sense of being, and their poetry. Our anthology must necessarily draw a frame or limit, but as a constraint it allows a certain kind of focused reading on poems that resonate with each other, but also interrogate the stereotypes that still restrict discourse on Asian Australia. The review seems to lack the closer reading of poems that would shed more light on this cultural context. To place so much emphasis on Anglo- nomenclature misses the whole point that Asia-Australian identity, among the poets selected here, is a contested and fluid category that does not fit easily with a more restricted range of definitions and skills, like having fluency in an Asian language; or having grown up and been educated in an Asian country. These poets are also represented, but does that make them more authentic? Indeed Syngé re-enforces essentialist stereotypes and comes close to vilifying hyphenated identities on the grounds that the poets with Anglo- names are not authentic enough. This seems awfully similar to Andrew Bolt's sneer about the 'whiteness' of certain Indigenous writers, and his comment was found to be a case of vilification in the Federal Court in 2011.

While I appreciate any critical response, it was disappointing in its lack of reading and depth. I would have expected better from a reviewer published in Transnational Literature.

Sincerely

Dr Adam Aitken, University of Technology, Sydney.

To the Editor, *Transnational Literature*.

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to criticism of my review of *Contemporary Asian Australian Poets* (published in *Transnational Literature*, November 2013).

First let me state that no offence was intended. The review celebrates the anthology as rich, inspiring and shaking us 'into a more profound, informed global alertness', and concludes that it's a 'remarkable contribution to Australian literary and cultural life'.

The anthology's focus is on the poets – the title makes this clear. It did not occur to me that the poets or editors wished their biographies to be read as lesser texts, i.e. 'supplementary' to their poetry. I read the biographies avidly to understand the wellsprings of their lives and careers. In doing so, I was struck by the absence of information by a small number of poets with Anglo-Saxon names regarding their Asian origins and/ or heritage.

My question was in the context of wishing that the editors had provided more 'satisfying definitions for both Asia and the Asian Australian poet' *in general*.

As the mother of a son whose father is Indian and also as the aunt of two nieces whose father is Thai, I know something about the hurt of racism and the complexities of identity. These, and other life experiences, prompted me to offer to review the anthology.

May this book continue to enjoy the accolades it deserves.

Lesley Synge, Feb 2014