



Australasian
Association
of Writing
Programs

TEXT SPECIAL ISSUES

Number 60 October 2020

ISSN: 1327-9556 | <https://www.textjournal.com.au/>

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To cite this article: Webb, J (with B Padhi) 2020 'Between Odisha and the ACT: poetry, community, connectedness', in J Sarangi & A Walker (eds) *Indian-Australian exchanges through collaborative poetic inquiry*, TEXT Special Issue Number 60, *TEXT: Journal of writing and writing courses* 24, 2 (October):

<http://www.textjournal.com.au/speciss/issue60/Webb&Padhi.pdf>

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Between Odisha and the ACT: poetry, community, connectedness

Abstract:

During 2019, prompted by the editors of this Special Issue, Bibhu Padhi and I began talking to each other via email, exchanging poems, and also exchanging snippets of our lives, our interests, and our thinking. A question posed by the project organisers was: *What did involvement in the project help you understand about similarities and differences between India and Australia?*, which led me to reflect on the twentieth-century notions of world poetry, and cross-cultural communication. Despite my anxieties about the widely recognised risks of such communication, the exchanges between us suggest that the shared experience of wrestling with image, concept, and language that is a feature of the writing of poetry provides a fulcrum for poets: a possibly contingent and consistently productive common ground.

Biographical notes:

Jen Webb is Distinguished Professor of Creative Practice, and Dean of Graduate Research, at the University of Canberra, ACT. Originally from South Africa, she came to Canberra by way of New Zealand, Canada, the UK, the WA outback, and central Queensland. She is a poet and cultural theorist, whose recent academic works include *Art and Human Rights: Contemporary Asian Contexts* (with Caroline Turner; Manchester UP, 2016); and *Publishing and Culture* (ed, with Dallas Baker and Donna Lee Brien; CSP 2019). Her recent poetry collections include the poetry/photography volume *Watching the World* (with Paul Hetherington; Blemish Books, 2015), *Moving Targets* (Recent Work Press, 2018), and *Flight Mode*, a forthcoming volume of poetry (with Shé Hawke; Recent Work Press, 2020). Her scholarly work focuses on the field of creative production; her poetry focuses on material poetics, prose poetry, and collaboration.

Bidhu Padhi has published fourteen books of poetry. His poems have appeared in distinguished magazines throughout the English-speaking world, such as *Contemporary Review*, *The Poetry Review*, *Poetry Wales*, *The Rialto*, *Stand*, *American Media*, *The American Scholar*, *Commonweal*, *The New Criterion*, *Poetry*, *Southwest Review*, *TriQuarterly*, *New Contrast*, *The Antigone Review*, *Queen's Quarterly*, and *The Toronto Review*. His poems have been included in numerous anthologies and textbooks. Five of the most recent are *The Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Indian Poets*, *Language for a New Century* (Norton), *Journeys* (Harper Collins), *60 Indian Poets* (Penguin), and *The Harper Collins Book of English Poetry*.

Keywords:

Cross-cultural communication – poetry – environment – intersectional identity

Introduction

When Amelia and Jaydeep approached me to be part of this project, I was simultaneously honoured/delighted, and anxious. The former is obvious – delight in the opportunity to participate in an exciting project; honour in being paired with Bibhu Padhi, a poet of exceptional standing. The latter was the product of my longterm research into cross-cultural communication and globalisation, which brings to light the misunderstandings and potential harm that can ensue. Because, productive as communication across cultures can be, there are always risks that the operations of power will be ignored; that expressive language may be unwittingly a kind of ‘excitable speech’ [1] (Butler 1997); or that the tensions formed in the interplay of the unreconstructed ‘hegemony of national cultures’ and the inadequately acknowledged ‘neocolonial universalism of the West’ (Schirato & Webb 2003: 161, 197) will remain unresolved.

But set against this – which is very much a perspective of globalisation as cultural imperialism – is a view offered by the poet Charles Bernstein, who argues that there has been a change in the politics of such interactions. This he dates to twentieth-century European crises, particularly the horror of World War 2, which ‘undermined ... the belief in virtually every basic value of the Enlightenment, insofar as these values are in any way Eurosupremacist or hierarchic’ (1992: 198), and initiated, for artists, ‘an entirely different psychic registration’, one concerned to ‘find a way out of the Western Box’ (192: 205). This would be evident in contemporary efforts to achieve a genuinely cross-cultural approach to thought and practice, and in the decisive move away from the appropriative modes deployed by Modernist European artists in relation to, for example, Chinese poetry or African sculpture. It is registered too in the many studies that acknowledge difference within and beyond sameness; that attempt to build bridges between cultures without associated patterns of cultural imperialism; that accept Marie-Bénédicte Dembour’s position that ‘universalism cannot exist without relativism, and vice versa’ (2001: 73); and that recognise the emptiness of any social axioms that frame identity ‘along a single categorical axis’ (Crenshaw 1989: 140).

The India-Australia poetry project seems to fit well within this framework, since it encourages poets from different cultural, political, and linguistic histories to connect in ways that recognise the specificities of their worldview and their poetic traditions, while accommodating the something-shared that is poetry; and does this by affording a generative connection that enriches understanding between the interlocutors. Poetry is a good site for such interaction because poets across the globe favour collaborative thinking and attitudes, engage in social and professional interactions (Webb & Carroll 2017), and demonstrate a commitment to the sorts of connectedness that galvanise creativity (see Fischer et al 2005; Glăveanu 2011). It is also a good project for a community of poets who are also researchers and teachers, because the record of knowledge production shows the importance of chains of personal connection being forged and maintained (Collins 1998).

With these issues in mind, and with a smidgeon of hope shadowed by a larger portion of philosophical doubt, I emailed Bibhu Padhi, nervously sending him a small group of poems on my local environment. He responded, with a larger package of poems about his local

environment; and with that we found connection in our differences. We differ widely on the fundamental features of identity: gender; citizenship; ethnic identity; date and hemisphere of birth, first languages, et al. But we have commonality in our identity as poets; in our background as teachers; in our shared experience of living in the world, living with others, living with our own selves. And we began the process of getting to know each other by exchanging poems about our experiences of the lived world.

Stage one: meeting

‘Spring’ by Jen Webb

Storm clouds above the Brindabellas. Cockatoos shrieking into the wind. I move through the house, noting leaves on the tarmac, smears on the glass; there’s a wasp-nest on the east wall, and the gutters are sagging on the south. While I help spiders out of the bath, you swallow the drugs, draw your hat down over your eyes. Pain knows more than I do, and though philosophy can teach us how to die, it knows nothing of how to live. I pick up the broom; sweep up feathers and dust; close your door, gently.

‘On Northbourne Avenue’ by Jen Webb

It is dark tonight and the rain is on the road and the rain is on the screen and cars funnelled through the roadworks are pouring their lights into your eyes. Haltingly is how you proceed, driving by best guess, hoping to avoid the worst. The centre line has gone, and the shoulder. Hang like a remora off the backs of other cars; watch for bollard or truck that might signal your last bad move. If bats can do it you can. Close your eyes, launch yourself into the night.

‘Autumn in the garden’ by Jen Webb

We have harvested the last of the basil, and all the tomatoes save those left for the birds. Nasturtiums are still throwing up buds, as is the lemon tree. The old folks next door invite us to pick their lemons and pomegranates and quince. I won’t, but you scramble through the fence because good manners et cetera. Honeyeaters and flurries of finches are stripping the last blossoms from the gum trees, and at night the cat brings mice inside to play. It’s not the game they would have chosen, but who among us gets to have our say?

'Night Lives' by Bibhu Padhi

What is seen are shadows
that approximately determine
the lines of my sleep.

Nothing may be given over
to the night and stars.

The image of the goddess
wanders in the open fields,
the empty road lying

in front of my
borrowed house.

Even in sleep, shadows
and dreams have to be
seen as my light and darkness.

Nothing else seems to be
where I hid bits
of paper from letters

received long ago
from friends and lovers.

The earth sits still
on its own ground

even as the night and stars
look for their place

in the sky's furrowed space.
Fulfilment lingers at the edge
of the muted dark.

'Looking for Answers' by Bibhu Padhi

The towns have grown
into cities, whose roads
finally lead to dead ends.

People disappear like
the sun, the sun's yellow.

Youth stands deserted
in the narrow lanes
and by-lanes of Cuttack, Puri

Dhenkanal, and Bhubaneswar.
Today the urge to dance
in the heart and mind

is always short of a step.
Is there something
beyond my years?

The question remains
unanswered except by
the great trees who shall live

long beyond that age, and too
the sluggish turtles on the eastern beach.
The old sand and snow deserts

holding all time,
might answer.

'November' by Bibhu Padhi

Cold light falls on the grass;
the grass trembles, listens
to winter, its long tale.

Under the cold light,
there are the rough
edges of the mind,

of time. I wait.
When shall I hear from you?
Time doesn't seem to move.

Continuously
it intercepts thoughts.
I wait.

‘A Difficult Day’ by Bibhu Padhi

It was never so difficult
to talk to you as it is today;

your celebrations were never
so heart-breaking too.

The evening is muddy under
the ill-timed rain;

The fields are friendless,
like a blank-eyed wanderer.

I didn’t know how to
console you.

Although I knew all about
the seasons, their deliberations.

My eyes are heavy under winter,
its forbidding air.

Your celebrations are still there,
with noises and port wine.

It was never so difficult
to talk to you.

Give me your hand,
your shining hand

‘Caves’ by Bibhu Padhi

The meditative caves wherein
the ancient *rishis* offered their prayers

in the dark, are like the nights.
We close our eyes.

Whose breath comes in

and goes out, as if it were life?

In the midst of speechlessness,
I invite my ancestors.

They are here, almost
touching me, their

light breath falls on my
brown skin, digs out histories.

The caves are here, will
always be there.

Deep under the sea water,
far from the diver's mask.

Whose wandering voice
takes hold of me wherever I am?

Who plays his dark games
far inside the body's mysteries?

Stage two: exchange

Letter from Jen Webb to Bibhu Padhi:

Dear Bibhu

You have such a beautiful voice, full of numinous impressions, and with a sense of being only lightly connected to the earth (while at the same time, so very aware of the earth, of your surroundings).

I have three poems here that try to respond to yours.

The first one lifts off the earth and follows the Russian dog Laika, who was sent into space, where she died. This doesn't respond to any specific poem of yours, but rather to the mood of disconnection, of 'lostness' in some of your lines – a mood I find so haunting.

‘Лайка; c.1954 – 3 November 1957’ by Jen Webb

Another day has ticked past, with just enough food to keep her alive. She’s done 60 orbits of the earth now, and though she can sleep, and cock an ear for unexpected sounds, all she wants to do is howl. Wolves need a pack. She can’t live like this, she can’t know whether anyone will greet her when her capsule shatters the atmosphere, and brings her home. She licks the glass and watches the stars outside as they tumble and roll across the palette of the sky.

In the next poem I am directly referencing your ‘Looking for Answers’, where ‘people disappear like / the sun’, where ‘the urge to dance / in the heart and mind / is always short of a step’ – thinking about how human beings struggle so with the longing to know more, be more, ‘only connect’.

‘Looking for answers’ by Jen Webb

Bring jacaranda blossoms. Petals drift along the ICB and I do too, driving past Kay Gee while you say *I’d rather be in Venice*. This city of hard ground and liquid sky. Of fly-away streets, where roads burrow under rivers, all knot and weave, a city crocheted by grandmother. We are going nowhere. It is 3,400 kilometres to Darwin and *let’s go*, you said, grabbing me, *let’s light out of here and head north*.

Just past the Wivenhoe I lost heart. In the mornings, now, I cut carrots into strips, pick fragments of shell off my boiled egg, put my lunchbox in my bag and lock the door and wait for a bus, any bus.

Somewhere else another me, all misplaced faith, is with you in our small blue car, lighting out, driving north.

In the last poem, I am thinking of how you handle the sense of time and the feeling of place in several of your lines (‘The caves are here, will / always be there’; ‘The earth sits still / on its own ground’; ‘The old sand and snow deserts / holding all time’).

‘Digging out histories’ by Jen Webb

Monasteries looted by a king. Remnants of European castles. Rocks at Stonehenge, red ochre on Jabiru caves. I linger nearby, waiting to feel time’s weight. All I feel is space. Time means less now than the first poem I heard, the first song we sang, the first time you loved me or I you. Means less than the last time you drove me to the airport when the leaves blew across the road, autumn stained. *It’s nearly winter*, you said. We have become banal. At Departures, we parted: you pulled out into the traffic; I picked up my bags and walked in through the doors. No sound fits this spectacle No sound

Stage three: reflection

Bibhu Padhi's poetry speaks of place, and space, and time, with that beautiful melancholy that is often the tone found in poems that are aware, alert; where the poet is fully conscious that 'the world is too much with us'; where the desire to connect is interwoven with the knowledge that we humans never quite achieve our aims. But this recognition of necessary incompleteness need not lead to despair; writers and (other) scholars across the centuries have reflected on what poetry can achieve. Twentieth-century thinking points, on the one hand, to the need to confine ourselves to local truths and contingent stories (Lyotard 1984); and on the other to the need to understand universals like 'world poetry' (Feinsod 2019). These two ends of the same continuum indicate, perhaps counter-intuitively, that the greater and more expansive our networks of communication and exchange, the more local and contingent are our meanings and values. (Like the old Greens slogan: *think global; act local.*) This project, relying as it did on dyadic and temporary relationships, provides the opportunity to test out meaning, learning, and knowing with the recognition that we are achieving not universal truths, but contingent ideas, local stories.

The editors ask: *What did involvement in the project help you understand about similarities and differences between India and Australia?* Tricky, that one. We understand that we are human, in each of the grids of latitude and longitude where we reside. Or that, as Nietzsche would say, we are *all too human* (1996/1878) [2]. Whether Indian or (adopted) Australian, we struggle for the freedom to say in words what the world is to us. We claim the freedom of expression that expression never fully permits. We slow down our articulation, listen to the pulse of nature.

While we were writing to each other, we were each confronting the unanswerable demands of nature – in my case, what the media called 'unprecedented' bushfires; inexplicable hailstorms; the natural world fighting back against the depredations of western exploitation. In the first set of poems I sent Bibhu I came nowhere near anticipating what my experience of this part of the world might be, just a few weeks into the future. His response to me was patient, generous. He did not counter my panic with stories of the violence of nature in his own part of the world, but I have seen the news, over decades, know that wherever we are, on whichever continent, our dominance over the natural environment is frail.

As we share this state of being, perhaps we share, too, an attitude to poetry, and I think here of the strong thread of narrative in Bibhu's poetry; of my own use of prose poetry form to smuggle in story. In 1776, Richard Herd offered a 'recipe' for poetry that contained just two elements: '*that licence of expression* which we call the *style* of poetry, and *that licence of representation*, which we call *fiction*. The *style* is, as it were, the body of poetry; *fiction*, is its soul' (1776: 11, emphasis in original); and this, it seemed to me, expressed something about the approach we both take to poetry: story; style.

And we definitely shared stories, in the emails we exchanged, about what is formally outside poetry; our personal lives, our homes, our histories; our partners who participated by sending greetings to and fro, in an example of that tender investment in the life of poetry made by the

generous people in the immediate environs of poets, those who tolerate our anxieties, our different way of seeing the world, our need to render it in language.

As humans, we are entirely the same. As products of our cultures, there are differences. Before reading Bibhu's poem, for instance, I could not have envisaged

The meditative caves wherein
the ancient *rishis* offered their prayers

And though I fully share the sensibility behind the issue that

Nothing may be given over
to the night and stars

(living as I do in the suburb of Giralang, the name of which is 'star' in the Wiradhuri language), my Western atheism could never have conjured up the lovely lines:

The image of the goddess
wanders in the open fields

The only gods to whom I have been exposed are the wildly abusive members of the Greek and Roman pantheons, or the terrifyingly labile Judeo-Christian one; I can't imagine any of them being so open to time and possibility and the non-instrumental to give themselves over to the pleasures of wandering in a field, absorbing the world as it is through their senses. I have not lived in India; I don't know the scent of evening, or the impulses of tradition. And being as I am the product of British imperialism (though tracing my own lineage to its colonies, not to its own islands), I am cautious about making any assumptions that I can feel the affect Bibhu traces through his poems. But I can say with him:

It was never so difficult
to talk to you.

Give me your hand,
your shining hand

And say that though we are poets in different parts of the world, with different linguistic and religious and historic pools from which to draw, poetry itself is a nation, and I am so pleased to have met and connected with a fellow citizen.

Notes

1. This is 'speech that wounds'; while one would hope that poets trained in the art of articulation, and sufficiently empathic to find ways of expressing the world from various perspectives would not fall

into hate speech or clumsy expression, this does of course happen, and particularly when communicating crossculturally, because the interlocutors in such a situation will not necessarily be sensitive to subtle insult or local patterns of abuse.

2. From the title of Nietzsche's volume, originally published in 1878, where he characterises the effect of his philosophy: 'human, all too human? It is with this sigh that one emerges from my writings, not without a kind of research and mistrust even in regard to morality, not a little tempted and emboldened, indeed, for once to play the advocate of the worst things' (1996: 5).

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