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# Writing Across/Between Borders: A Transnational Approach to Creative Writing in the Asia Pacific

Abstract:

When postcolonial studies made its debut in Western academes, it was, to use Stuart Hall's words, 'the bearer of such powerful unconscious investments—a sign of desire for some, and equally for others, a sign of danger'. It is a similar reaction of apprehension and excitement that Creative Writing generates in the Asian Pacific academes and cultures, especially in countries with a colonial history. This essay explores some of the difficulties facing the introduction of Creative Writing in the region, namely how it may be perceived as another form of Western cultural imperialism. It proposes a corollary study of transnational writers as a mediating influence and suggests that what Jahan Ramazani calls 'transnational poetics' may help resolve the binaries of colonial/postcolonial, east/west, local/global, and uncover new ways of looking at borders for writers/readers in the region.

Biographical note:

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Reading is an act of border-crossing, moving or being moved across from one world into another. For a few hours, days or weeks even, we inhabit a world not ours, drawn into a transcendental reading or writing time, our shabby quotidian shelves erased, transformed into something other in the state of reading. Through the words on the page we dwell in an in-between state where borders meet and merge, a liminal zone where reading crosses into writing and writing encounters its readers. If travel, or the act of moving across borders and states, is the metaphor that aptly describes the act of reading, then it is equally or even more apposite in mapping what happens in the process of writing. As the writer translates the world that is unfolding in the poem or the story, he is stepping across the threshold into another state, another world where his identity is lost and found, his old self effaced as a more liminal self appears.

It is passage across borders, the translation and transformation the writer experiences that is the seminal moment of writing. The idea of the border is vital to the writer, especially in our post-modern, post-postcolonial, and post-everything world, when conventional notions of borders have been eroded, where, as the compelling photographic witness of border-crossings, Sebastião Salgado, says: 'The border concept must change completely, and quickly to accommodate the reality of human movement' (2005). If being rooted, being anchored in one place was the essential condition for writers in the past, as it was for Patrick Kavanagh, who declared: 'I made the Iliad / From such a local row' (1964: 136), the experience of being displaced or being in between places is a prevalent condition of contemporary writers, negotiating their way in a world where not only geopolitical borders have been proven contingent but cultural and linguistic borders have been made porous and fluid, and disparate subjectivities consort in hybridised spaces and formations. Even as borders are being redefined in the Europe with the introduction of the Union and the common currency, the economic, cultural and political boundaries in Asian are shifting with the tide of globalisation and the economic boom. The idea of Asia and the notions of a Chinese, Indian and other cultural identities are increasingly re-defined by the large diasporic Asian populations with the result that each culture is no longer the contained, intact entity it was perceived to be. In 'Cultural China', Tu Wei-Ming argues that Chineseness is no longer the province of the mainland Chinese but is increasingly being determined by the large populations of diasporic Chinese all over the world (1994). Ien Ang comments: 'Chineseness becomes an open signifier, which acquires its peculiar form and content in dialectic junction with the diverse local conditions in which ethnic Chinese people, wherever they are, construct new, hybrid identities and communities' (2001: 35). Tu and Ang's observation are equally applicable to other diasporic Asian communities. Thus there are Chinese or Indians, or indeed Asian or Pacific Islander migrants living in the US, UK or Australia, who are challenging and revising what it means to be Asian or Pacific Islander, who though reinventing themselves as Asian-Americans or Asian-Australians are still bound by memories and ancestral ties to their original homeland. In an age of spatial mobility and advanced technological communications, they shuttle with ease between cultures and countries, and are routine border-crossers. They thrive on transnational 'overlapping networks of communication, travel, trade, and kinship' and live 'in a lived tension, the experiences of separation and entanglement, of living here and remembering/desiring another place' (Clifford 1997: 269–255). This is an

'empowering paradox' (Clifford 1997: 269) that allows migrants to move between places and cultures, and provides writers of migrant backgrounds access to a bifocal or even polyphonic vision.

This essay explores the issues involved in the introduction of Creative Writing into the Asia Pacific region, especially in the Asian part of it, which has seen unprecedented changes in the last two decades, and the role diasporic writers of Asian origin can play in the process. As most of these Asian countries have had a history of colonial invasion and occupation, and an ensuing period of decolonisation, the import of Creative Writing may be regarded as yet another form of Western cultural imperialism, another cultural institution from the metropolitan centre to be imposed on the peripheral areas. One can anticipate the same reaction that postcolonial studies received when it made its debut in the Western academy; it was, as Stuart Hall observes, 'the bearer of such powerful unconscious investments—a sign of desire for some, and equally for others, a sign of danger' (1996: 242). Likewise, the arrival of Creative Writing in the Asia Pacific academy and cultures will trigger the same unease and excitement, if it has not done so already. It will necessitate re-alignments, revising the postcolonial modes of perception, and discovering new territories and borderlands that will open up new horizons for the developing writers in the region.

The essay proposes transnational studies as a corollary of Creative Writing in the Asia Pacific. The presence of American or Australian writers of Asian/Pacific origin or descent can allay fears of cultural imperialism and mediate the passage of Creative Writing into the region. These are writers who routinely cross borders in real and imaginary terms; they possess ties to the ancestral homeland and are reshaping the notions of Americanness or Australianness as much as what it means to be Chinese, Indian, Malaysian etc. They are what Aihwa Ong calls 'flexible citizens' (1999) with shifting, hybrid identities, for whom 'diasporas always leave a trail of collective memory about another place and time and create new maps of desire and attachment' (Appadurai & Breckenridge 1989: i). These 'new maps of desire and attachment' can provide useful co-ordinates for Creative Writing to locate itself in a world where borders can be re-imagined and new imaginings of Asian/Pacific identities kindled.

## Post-Postcolonial?

In his introduction to *Sharing Borders: Studies in Singapore-Malaysian Literature*, Gwee Li Sui identifies an issue common to all postcolonial literatures:

> As postcolonial theory—with its arsenal of concepts such as orientalism, the subaltern, hybridity, diaspora, and transnationalism—fuels the excavation for what largely proves its case, the irony stands that it contorts the growth of new literatures by forcing them to stagnate along lines of a colonial past and its aftermath (2009: 12).

Implicit in this argument for liberation from the hegemony of colonial and postcolonial narratives is the premise that we have advanced beyond the postcolonial age and the new literatures of the erstwhile colonial countries should accordingly move into new modes of perception. It broaches the question that Ania Loomba asks: 'Is postcolonial studies redundant in this new world?' (2005: 1). If postcolonialism is

'the contestation between colonial domination and legacies of colonialism' (Loomba 2005: 16), is it obsolete in the global age, when influences and forces that mould our perceptions of self and the world are more likely transcultural in nature than tied to the binaries of white/non-white, colonial self/imperial other, centre/periphery?

Gwee's observation is especially pertinent in countries like Malaysia, where the anti-colonial movement has created a resistance to the language of the imperial master and seeks 'a rediscovery and repatriation of what has suppressed in the natives' past by the processes of imperialism' (Said 1994: 210). This involves reclamation of the native language and culture, the legitimatization of vernacular traditions, the critique of colonial representations of the colonies and subjects, and countering Eurocentric narratives of Africa and the Asia Pacific written out of the metropolitan centre with local perspectives. The rejection of English language and its literary traditions becomes part of this decolonizing movement, as exemplified by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's farewell to English and avowal to explore African traditions in *Decolonising the Mind*. Often the anguished postcolonial wrestling with the imperial language becomes co-opted in a nationalist awakening, 'a separatist, even chauvinist and authoritarian conception of nationalism' (Said 1994: 217) that can be racially exclusionist and hegemonic in a multi-ethnic society. In Malaysia the nationalist elevation of Malay language and literature has led to the marginalisation of literatures in English and other languages. Muhammad Salleh, the editor of *Anthology of Contemporary Malaysian Literature*, in which only Malay writers were represented, is unapologetically nationalistic in his agenda, declaring the Malay writer as 'an elder or conscience of his society' (1988: xiii). Malaysian writers in English have felt disenfranchised, and many have chosen an expatriate and émigré life, like Ee Tiang Hong, who sees a 'new colonialism' in which 'writers in English languish on the periphery of national development, spurned by those in control of the production and distribution of knowledge, excluded from participating in the politics of consensus, from contributing to the weaving of a rich and variegated fabric of national life' (1988: 19). The sense of disenfranchisement and discrimination experienced by the English writer is not confined to Malaysia but also exists in other erstwhile colonies of Britain. Even in India, which has produced the most successful non-white English writers in the last two decades, the dichotomies exist. In a survey of Indian English fiction, Salman Rushdie writes:

> For some Indian critics, English-language Indian writing will never be more than a post-colonial anomaly, the bastard child of Empire, sired on India by the departing British; its continuing use of the old colonial tongue is seen as a fatal flaw that renders it forever inauthentic (2005: 148).

Indian English writers are accused of betraying or being ignorant of their roots and pandering to the global audience. Those who live outside of India are regarded as non-Indian and too cosmopolitan in their outlook, suffering from what one critic calls 'Rushdie-itis' (Rushdie 2005: 150).

In his review of the *The Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Indian Poets*, Michael Scharf identifies a similar divide in Indian poetry. He sees the nationalist position that advocates static and purist notions of Indianness as not only an attack on the erstwhile

imperial language but also 'on the Indian poetic diaspora, which largely relies on the cosmopolitan dominant—English' (Scharf 2010). On the other hand, some of the pro-English faction are too rigidly defensive in their stance, such as that exhibited by the *Bloodaxe* anthology editor, Jeet Thayil, who 'spends a significant chunk of his introduction rehearsing and shooting down vernacular critiques of Indian poetry in English' (Scharf 2010), concentrating on the new literature in English and excluding regional voices that could have complemented and enriched the Indian English ones. Thayil's forwarding-looking agenda is similar to Gwee's; both call for the liberation from postcolonial hang ups, for the new writing to move beyond the English/native tongue debate. This is where the Creative Writing program can intervene; it can quicken the new writing and reveal new directions, and at the same time defuse suspicions of any imperialist agenda by fostering interactions with the national and vernacular languages, as well as the different varieties of English such Singapore English or Singlish, Chinglish, Malaysian English and other hybrid varieties that have sprouted all over the region.

How can Creative Writing, a Western cultural formation, accommodate such plurality and diversity? This is where a transnational approach can play a vital mediating role. The plurality and hybridity transnational writers embody can offer an instructive paradigm for fledgling Creative Writing programs in the Asia Pacific region, especially in countries with a history of colonial rule. Because their writings traverse borders, they draw attention to how borders can be sites of dialogic interaction and creativity than means of geopolitical control. They are routine border-crossers with ties to two or more cultures and countries, embodying 'heterogeneity, hybridity, and multiplicity' (Lowe 1996: 60) in their hyphenated make-up. In an essay on postcolonial Malaysian literature, Mohammad Quayum calls for a 'spirit of dialogism and syncretism' (2007: 27); it is a way 'of keeping one eye on history and casting the other towards the future; of harnessing and negotiating past, present and future; between alien and the inherent, the imported and the indigenous, in order to forge and fashion a new self and nation' (Quayum 2007: 27). This is a bifocal vision that the transnational writers possess amply and which is necessary in a racially and cultural plural society like Malaysia or Singapore, or indeed any Asian country with a colonial history.

It is this dialogic dynamism that a transnational Creative Writing program can foster, creating borderlands where English can converse with different traditions. A writing program with a transnational perspective can accommodate diversity, ethnic pluralism and promote inclusivism, 'rather than binarism, cultural hierarchy and dichotomous relationship between the different ethnic/religious/racial groups' (Quayum 2007: 44).

## Transnational Poetics and Exemplars

We live, read and write in a postnational, transcultural world where everything is in a state of transit and movement. Travel and translation are terms that have gained currency, describing the experiences of moving across borders and living in borderlands, real and imaginary. James Clifford seeing travel as a mode of being that in the transnational moment is also a form of dwelling. For him travel is 'a figure for

different modes of dwelling and displacement, for trajectories and identities, for storytelling and theorizing in a postcolonial world of global contacts' (Clifford 1989). Clifford proposes the idea of travelling cultures, envisaging them not as complete and stable wholes, but as mobile, evolving entities engaged in interactions and contacts with other cultures and histories. In 'Ethnography as Self-Making' he examines the pioneering works of Joseph Conrad and Bronislaw Malinowski and traces the modernist self-reflexive consciousness that interrogates the impulses and procedures, the cultural mores and assumptions underpinning their representations of the Africans/Malays and Pacific Islanders respectively. Though their narratives stem from the imperial metropolitan centres and are complicit in the colonialist ventures that they critique, the 'cross-cultural comprehension' they attempt is 'traversed by ambivalence and power' (Clifford 1986: 160). What understanding Marlowe and Malinowski attain of the natives is at best 'a cultural fiction' (Clifford 1986: 158) that the novelist and anthropologist fashion. Underpinning the fictional and anthropological narratives is a reflexive consciousness and openness to the alterity of the other, an approach that is 'more dialogical and open-ended in narrative style' (Clifford 1986: 161).

It could be argued that Conrad and Malinowski are alert to the complexities of cross-cultural interactions and eschewed imperialist and Eurocentric hegemonic narratives because of their cosmopolitan make-up. They are both displaced persons, two Poles who crossed linguistic, cultural and political boundaries and became British citizens, polyglots conversant in more than two languages and cultures. In a sense they are the first transnationals, precedents for contemporary writers like Pico Iyer and Jhumpa Lahiri, who are the new cosmopolitans, living and writing across borders in the age of transnational mobility and multinational capital. Conrad and Malinowski are among the Modernists who are border-crossers, whose creativity is bound up with their displacement. Among the pioneering Modernist diaspora who make of the in-between state a placeless place for their writing are T.S. Eliot, W.H. Auden, Ezra Pound, and Gertrude Stein, who proclaimed: 'I am an American and I have lived half my life in Paris, not the half that made me but the half that made what I made' (1970 [1940]: 62). Displacement can be empowering and creatively productive, as exemplified by these Modernists. It entails discarding old habits and practices, and acquiring new ways of seeing. Being outside or 'stranger to ourselves' (Kristeva 1991) grants us the temporal and spatial distance that engenders new perceptions of place and identity.

The phenomenon of voluntary and involuntary expatriation among writers has become increasingly a norm rather than the exception it was in the Modernist age. At no other time in history have there been such widespread migrations and movements of people across borders, and at no other time in world literary history have there than been more writers who live away from their place of origin. Inhabiting imaginary borderlands between the lost home and the adopted country, émigré writers acquire a bifocal vision that telescopes disparate cultures and geographies, and 'thus mediate, in a lived tension, the experiences of separation and entanglement, of living here and remembering/desiring another place' (Clifford 1997: 255). Because they shuttle back and forth between countries and lives, their writings weave transnational networks of possibilities, ties and memories that span time and space to sustain their ongoing

explorations of identity and belonging. They practise what Jahan Ramazani calls 'transnational poetics' (2006), which accommodates the tensions, uncertainties, ambiguities, the hybrid strains that result from living and writing across cultures.

## 'Translated People' 1: Pico Iyer

Pico Iyer is an embodiment of transnational fluidity, one of Rushdie's 'translated' people 'in whose deepest selves strange fusions occur, unprecedented unions between what they were and where they find themselves' (Rushdie 1992: 124). Born in England of Indian parents, brought up in the UK and the US, and living an expatriate life in Japan, he is a 'Global Soul' who is 'born to several cultures' and whose 'challenge in the modern world is to find a city that speaks to as many of our homes as possible' (Iyer 2001: 125). Iyer's biographical displacement, coupled with his extensive travels, confers on him a global perspective on the way the world works. Home for him is no longer a given, a fixed point of reference, but is made up of itineraries, a range of geographies and cultures that answers the pluralistic outlook in him. Iyer reveals: 'As a British subject, an American resident and an Indian citizen, I quickly became accustomed to cross-cultural anomalies and the mixed feelings of exile. Nowhere was home, and everywhere' (Iyer 1988: 34).

In *Video Night in Kathmandu*, Iyer takes a penetrating look at Asia in the 1980s, as it stood on the threshold of transformation into the economic power bloc it is today. He encounters contact zones or borderlands that are neither East nor West, but a promiscuous mélange, a range of fluid, evolving hybrid phenomena that defies labels. At the start of his odyssey, Iyer laments the new cultural imperialism of the West. He discovers that 'Rambo had conquered Asia' and as he 'crisscrossed Asia in the fall of 1985, every cinema that I visited for ten straight weeks featured a Stallone extravaganza' (1988: 9). From Bali to Kathmandu to Manila he sees 'America's pop-cultural imperialism spread through the world's most ancient civilizations' (1988: 11), the Asian countries and their cultures swamped and transformed by Madonna and Rambo. But as Iyer digs deeper he finds the resilient Asian cultures fighting back, sustained by deep springs of tradition and history: 'every Asian culture I had visited seemed, in its own way, too deep, too canny or too self-possessed to be turned by the passing trade winds from the west' (1988: 409). In Bali he glimpses the natural grace and otherworldly charm that had made it an earthly paradise for earlier travellers, and in Kathmandu, Bangkok, Rangoon and Manila he meets individuals who are still anchored in their culture, despite the Western influences. Iyer discovers that Asian cultures are not just mimicking the West, but transforming the 'Coca-Colonizing forces' into something new—arresting conjunctions of abroad and the local. In the end, it is Asia as much as America that Iyer encounters: 'I went to Asia, then, not only to see Asia, but also to see America, from a different vantage point and with new eyes' (1988: 11). Iyer's diasporic subjectivity allows him to see beyond cultural imperialism and resistance to the creative interactions between cultures and witness how it is 'only in the eyes of another culture that foreign culture reveals itself fully and profoundly' (Bakhtin 1990: 7).

In *The Global Soul*, Iyer takes stock of the millennial zeitgeist and finds that it is no longer the case of Asian cultures being invaded by western influences, but the traffic is two-way and even multi-directional, as globalisation takes hold and ensures that no culture is autonomous, but all are drawn into polyphonic interactions that generate new syncretisms. In monolingual Japan he finds a menagerie of phenomena that reflects not so much the invasion of the West but a Japanese appropriation of Western icons and images, such as 'Marilyn Munroe telephone cards and hand puppets in the shape of Buddha' (2001: 284). In Toronto Iyer encounters multiculturalism in unfettered expression:

> Toronto, by comparison (with Singapore), seemed to me a much more hopeful and witty vision of a world not conforming to the old categories without dwindling into a universal Nowhereland: layer joined upon layer here to form a kind of palimpsest, as in Kensington Market, where what had begun as a Jewish area, and become a place for Ukranians, Hungarians, and even Portuguese from the Azores, was now a pell-mell mix of Abyssinian, Middle Eastern, and West Indian stores (2001: 145-6).

At the Toronto Harbourfront Writers' Festival Iyer discovers 'the new international writers—the writers of Harbourfront—were actually creating visions for the postnational future, inspirations, in way, for Toronto' (2001: 167). The world citizen that Iyer is, he embraces all the evidence of multiplicity and hybridity that he finds. He concludes: 'Such minglings are more and more the fabric of our mongrel worlds, as more and more of us cross borders in our private lives, or choose to live with foreign cultures in our arms' (2001: 292). He is an exemplary border-crosser and dweller who has no fixed abode but who is at home in between places and cultures.

## 'Translated People' 2: Jhumpa Lahiri

Jhumpa Lahiri's transnational background closely resembles Iyer's. Lahiri was born in England of Bengali parents who had made the trans-Atlantic passage and settled in Rhode Island. Despite their double migrations, Lahiri's parents still consider India their home, as Lahiri reveals:

> It's hard to have parents who consider another place 'home'—even after living abroad for 30 years, India is home for them. We were always looking back so I never felt fully at home here. There's nobody in this whole country that we're related to. India was different—our extended family offered real connections (Patel 1999).

Lahiri grew up with strong affiliations with her Bengali heritage, which conflict with her American self, rendering problematic the sense of belonging; she says: 'No country is my motherland. I always find myself in exile in whichever country I travel to, that's why I was tempted to write something about those living their lives in exile' (Rifat: 2001). It is this sense of exile that gives her what Bakhtin calls 'outsideness', which in 'the realm of culture' is 'a most powerful factor in understanding' (1990: 7) and which makes Lahiri an astute observer of the migrant and human condition.

In mapping out the dilemmas and daily negotiations of migrants, Lahiri explores the borderlands between cultures, between the past and present, the new and old countries. Her stories capture the difficulties of assimilation, the complexities of cross-cultural understanding, the sense of displacement and loss of homeland. Her characters are caught in an in-between zone; they are recent arrivals who have yet to assimilate, or characters who have been long-term migrants-turned-citizens but still feel tethered to India; then there are the second-generation characters who feel rootless, unable to fit into mainstream American society or their ancestral culture. Lahiri's stories are crisscrossed with movements between continents, underscoring a troubled and complex sense of belonging or not-belonging. In the three connected stories revolving around Hema and Kaushik in *Unaccommodated Earth*, the characters shuttle restlessly between places and lives. Kaushik's parents move to India after years living in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and then return to Cambridge again after Kaushik's mother is diagnosed with cancer, while Hema's parents return to Calcutta at the end of the story, after a lifetime in the States. Both Hema and Kaushik grow up to be rootless individuals, Kaushik becoming a wandering photo-journalist obsessed with documenting atrocities and Hema is involved in an affair with a married man. In the last story they meet in Rome by chance and fall in love but separate, as Kaushik is unable to commit, and Hema returns to Calcutta to marry someone she does not love. The relentless movements of the characters conclude with the 2004 global tragedy, and the news that Kaushik, on his return to Asia, is one of the tsunami's victims.

Another recurrent motif in Lahiri's work is that of transit; many of her characters are on their way to somewhere else, either in the process of establishing a new life or returning to an old one. In 'The Third and Final Continent' the Bengali narrator-protagonist arrives in Cambridge, Massachusetts, to take up a position at MIT, after spending five years in London. He rents a room from Mrs Croft, who was born in 1866, a world 'filled with women in long black skirts and chaste conversations in the parlor' (1999: 189). The reader is led to expect an unbridgeable gulf between the centenarian whose values seem stuck in the previous century and a new migrant altering the notion of American identity, but an ineffable connection happens. Indeed, it is Mrs Croft who becomes the agent of the narrator's acculturation, easing his passage to his newfound identity. In 'When Mr Pirzada Came to Dine', the narrator Lilia recalls a Mr Pirzada who in the autumn of 1971 is a frequent visitor to her parents' home. Like Lilia's parents, Mr Pirzada is a Bengali, but from Dacca. Over the period of Pirzada's visits, the family and Pirzada watch the news as the turbulent birth of Bangladesh occurs, and Pirzada, whose watch is 'set to the local time in Dacca' (1999: 30), worries about the family he has left behind. To the child-protagonist, Mr Pirzada comes to stand for ties to the old homeland, a conduit to Bengal and a past that she never had. She begins to explore Indian history, even as she is being taught American history in class. After Pirzada's return to Dacca, the narrator feels his absence and for the first time 'knew what it meant to miss someone who was so many miles and hours away, just as he had missed his wife and daughters for so many months' (1999: 42). Pirzada fades out of her life, and she throws out the last of the sweets he has given her, suggesting a loss of the ties to her heritage that he has come to represent. One expects Lilia to become like Hema and Kaushik, children of

migrants who live their lives in contradiction and conflict, adrift between places and cultures.

## 'Translated People' 3: Li-Young Lee

The themes of exile and homelessness are also recurrent motifs in the poetry of Li-Young Lee. Lee was born in 1957 in Jakarta of parents who had fled Communist China, and then had to flee Indonesia because of persecution by Sukarno's regime. The family eventually settled in the US, after a few years of diasporic wandering. Lee's experiences as a refugee and immigrant left him with a sense of displacement and exile that informs his poetry. In 'The City in Which I Love You' the dislocation is palpable:

> Past the guarded schoolyards, the boarded-up churches, swastikaed
> synagogues, defended houses of worship, past
> newspapered windows of tenements, among the violated,
> the prosecuted citizenry, throughout this
> storied, buttressed, scavenged, policed
> city I call home, in which I am a guest... (1990: 51)

The tendency for many migrant writers, when faced with marginalisation and discrimination, is to revert to their cultural and ethnic heritage and assert ethnic markers of their roots and identity. But Lee eschews clichés redolent of exotic Asia and the conscious use of cultural markers that affirm his Chinese heritage; he wants to 'escape all stereotypical views of what an Asian is in America, what an immigrant is...' (Lee 2000: 275). Instead, he seeks to graft his heritage onto his Chinese-American self, which though intersecting with other Asian-American categories, is distinctly his own. Zhou Xiaojing contends that many readings of Lee 'attempt to explain his poetry by emphasizing his Chinese ethnicity' and neglect the 'rich cross-cultural sources of influence' on his work (Zhou 1994: 113). Zhou argues that Lee's poetics of self-invention engages in dialogic interaction with other immigrant cultures and the dominant host culture, as exemplified in 'The Cleaving'. Set in the Chicago Chinatown, the poem pivots on an encounter with a Chinese butcher chopping a roast duck for the poet. The butcher's 'sorrowful Chinese face' triggers a moment of identification and connection with his Chinese roots, but the poem moves on a train of culinary images to encompass the diversity of the American landscape and culture:

> The terror the butcher
> scripts in the unhealed
> air, the sorrow of his Shang
> dynasty face,
> African face with slit eyes. He is
> my sister, this
> beautiful Bedouin, this Shulamite,
> keeper of Sabbaths, diviner
> of holy texts, this dark
> dancer, this Jew, this Asian, this one
> with the Cambodian face, Vietnamese face, this Chinese

I daily face,
this immigrant,
this man with my own face (Lee 1990: 86-7).

It is a liminal, epiphanous moment that embraces multiethnic heterogeneity. The poem devours this multitude of ethnic, religious, cultural and national markers and demonstrates the instability and necessary inclusiveness of the label 'Asian-American'. The self reaches an understanding and acceptance through the encounter with alterity, demonstrating 'the processes of poetic innovation and identity invention beyond the boundaries of any single cultural heritage or ethnic identity' (Zhou 1994: 131).

In focussing on the conversation between the Chinese and American constituents of Lee's make-up, critics often overlook his Indonesian strand. This is in part due to the absence of overt references to his Indonesian childhood in his poetry. But Lee's Indonesian childhood is a constant that underpins all that he is and writes, a background often overlooked because it is an inherent context of his life and work. There are few allusions to his Javanese origin in his poems in his first three collections; 'Furious Versions' announces: 'That means I was born in Bandung, 1958; / on my father's back, in borrowed clothes, / I came to America' (Lee 1990: 13). It is only in his memoir *The Winged Seed* that Lee makes an imaginary return to his childhood in Jakarta, part-idyllic, but mostly traumatic because of his father's imprisonment by Sukarno and the consequent sufferings of the family. The lyrical narrative relives the family's plight as his father is thrown into prison, recalling their later escape to Hong Kong and then the settlement in America. It is also a genealogical quest; it uncovers the parents' roots in China and then in the later half of the book recalls his six years as a Java-born Chinese boy looked after by Javanese servants. Lee reveals his closeness to Lammi, the nineteen-year-old girl who nursed him. The details of her are intimate, erotic almost; he recalls 'her maroon, fruit-skin-dyed sarong darkening in stripes down her back, her ribs, between her breasts' as he 'rode on her hip', her sarong, 'tight around her legs, plucked like a drum as she walked' while his 'thighs grew wet' (Lee 1995: 102-3). This physical intimacy reflects Lee's absorption in the native culture, as he is exposed to native superstition and stories. Thus Lee's Chineseness has been determined by a Javanese context and any reclamation of his Chinese roots entails a return to his Indonesian beginnings.

## 'Translated People' 4: Miriam Wei Wei Lo

Miriam Wei Wei Lo also makes a return to Asia in her poetry. In 'Bumboat Cruise on the Singapore River' (2008), she returns to the place of her formative years, Singapore. Born in Canada to a Malaysian father and Australian mother, she spent the first sixteen years of her life in Singapore, before relocating to Western Australia. Lo's diasporic trajectory renders her a veritable transnational hybrid with affiliations and attachments to multiple cultures and locations. But transnationality can also imply an ambivalent and riven relationship to place. Her return visit to Singapore, a postcolonial city that has catapulted itself from a British colony to a global city, far

from affirming a sense of roots or attachments, mirrors an ambivalent connection to the past.

Right from the start of the poem, the tone is one of a detached observer, betraying little sign of affiliation or homecoming. A 'Singaporean voice with a strong American accent' gives a running commentary on the sites, reflecting the confused nature of the city that has shed its past and embraced globalisation. There are no markers of identification in the first strophe: 'The Grand Copthorne. The Miramar. All glass / and upward-sweeping architecture' (Lo 2008: 168). Instead of a homecoming poem where the returning poet reconnects with the familial and spatial memories, the speaker registers no affectionate response to the landscape; she is more a tourist in her country. Lo has chosen as her point of homecoming the historic site where Singapore history was born, where Raffles established the beginnings of the colony that would become a strategic location in the Empire and after independence turn into an affluent global city-state governed by a single party. The historical hub has been turned into a tourist site, the Singapore River and the sights along it commodified into a tour package.

Lo suffers 'a reverse culture shock' or 'the feelings of displacement a person might experience upon returning to their culture of origin' (Ritivoi 2002: 116). She interrogates her relationship to a place that has paid the price for globalisation and been transformed into a tourist site that is much like another:

> How did I ever live in this place? Sixteen years of my life
> afloat in this sea of contradictions, of which I was, equally, one:
> half-white, half-Chinese; the taxi-driver cannot decide
> if I am a tourist or a local (Lo 2008: 168).

As a hybridised transnational, she inhabits an indeterminate space between Australian, Singaporean, Malaysia, and Canada. The poem subverts boundaries and allegiances, ending in a 'neither here nor there state': 'this island, caught between sinking and swimming. / As I am caught now. As if rhetoric mattered. / As if this place gives a name for myself' (Lo 2008: 169). The returnee-visitor negotiates the dialectic between the past and present, home and alienness, here and there with unease.

It is in the imaginary return to Kuching, the home of her paternal grandmother, that Lo achieves a sense of homecoming. In her debut collection *Against Certain Capture* (2004), she delves into the twin aspects of her make-up: Anglo-Scottish on the Australian side and Chinese on her Malaysian side. The first half of the collection reconstructs the life of her father's mother, Liang Yue Xian, retracing her diasporic route from Canton to Kuching, her life during the Japanese occupation, her son's marriage to an Australian woman and emigration, and her old age. Into the narrative Lo inserts Chinese script, including Liang's name, thus affirming her Chinese lineage. The embedding of Chinese characters also introduces a bicultural element, underlying the complex linguistic and cultural inheritance. Having established her grandmother's identity, Lo tracks her life in Kuching as she performs her quotidian chores:

> She clings to routine, walks the same path

> to the market each day, closing her eyes to the people
> who whisper and wave. Down Carpenter Street.
> Up to Gambier Road. She buys bread
>
> from the same stall. She fingers the dry ikan bilis
> almost bought yesterday and then lets it fall.
> The butcher slaps pork on the counter.
> As they always have, the vegetable sellers call –
>
> "Sweet cucumber! Fresh fern leaf from up-country!"
> Above her head, the swallows wheel and return (Lo 2004: 13).

The present tense and the vivid spatial mapping evoke a sense of immediacy, revealing an empathic identification with a grandmother who lived in another era and place. Lo repossesses her Chinese heritage and attains a homecoming that is not possible in Singapore.

## 'Translated People' 5: Nam Le

Nam Le is another Australian transnational who seeks to reconcile the different elements of his subjectivity. Like Li-Young Lee, Nam Le was a refugee, part of the flotillas of boat people who fled Vietnam in the late '70s. Ironically, his prize-winning debut collection was written at the Iowa Writers' Workshop. Significantly too, the collection is global in scope and agenda; only one story is set in Australia, the rest traverse Japan, Iran, Vietnam and America. The global range radically challenges the spatial structure of conventional short fiction collections, unapologetically asserting its transnational outlook. In the opening story, 'Love and Honour and Pity and Pride and Compassion and Sacrifice', the Iowa workshop provides the narrative background and structure; the protagonist-narrator has left Melbourne and his career as a lawyer to be a writer. It is his last year at the workshop; with only three days left to write his last story he is experiencing a block. He discusses his dilemma with his workshop-mate, who suggests: 'You could *totally* exploit the Vietnamese thing. But *instead*, you choose to write about lesbian vampires and Colombian assassins, and Hiroshima orphans—and New York painters with haemorrhoids' (Le 1998: 9), stories which all end up in *The Boat*. This is part of the narrative reflexivity that mirrors the workshop framework and also underscores the difficulties of writing the story about his past. The narrator wants to avoid ethnic literature that is 'hot' with publishers and readers; a slightly mocking reference is made to a Chinese workshop graduate who has secured a huge contract. Part of his refusal comes from his reluctance to exploit his family's traumatic past as refugees, an experience that finds full narrative form in the last story of the collection.

The arrival of the protagonist's father from Sydney provides the trigger that releases the past and enables the protagonist to finally learn about his father's experiences in the turbulent years during and after the Vietnam War. The rift between father and son heals as the father relates the stories he has held back: the atrocities committed by the Americans, his imprisonment in re-education camp after the fall of Saigon and the

boat people experience. Involuntarily, the narrator writes it down and completes the last story for his portfolio:

> For a moment, watching him, I became my father, watching his sleeping son, reminded of what—for his son's sake—he had tried, unceasingly, to forget. A past larger than complaint, more perilous than memory. I read my notes through once, carefully, all forty-five pages. I reread the draft of my story from two nights earlier. Then I put both aside and started typing, never looking at them again (1998: 28).

In situating his story in Iowa, Nam Le brings Australia, Vietnam and America together in a transnational framework. The foreign setting allows a painful history to be translated into narrative, while the workshop background sustains a subtle reflexivity that suggests the intractability of the subject-matter and reveals at the same time the dialectic between the writing process and real life, between narrative demands and ethical restraint. The phenomenon of Nam Le reflects how an American cultural institution like the Iowa Writers' Workshop has become a site of hybridised creativity, transformed from a predominantly white establishment to a cosmopolitan cross-cultural site where a Vietnamese-Australian has come to discover his own past and story.

## Conclusion

In his essay 'Step Across the Line', Rushdie says that we live 'in a frontier time, one of the great hinge periods in human history, in which great changes are coming about at great speed' (2005: 380). In such a time of seismic shifts, the writer's work should engage with the 'crossing of borders, of language, geography, and culture' and explore 'the permeable frontier between the universe of things and deeds and the universe of the imagination' (Rushdie 2005: 273). This is precisely what the Asian-American and Asian-Australian writers assembled here have done; they are exemplary border-crossers re-defining the boundaries of what it means to be Asian, American or Australian, and also re-shaping cultural and literary borders even as they traverse them. Since their lives and works encompass the spectrum of global, transnational movements, a 'whole range of phenomena that encourage multilocale attachments, dwelling, and travelling within and across nations' (Clifford 1997: 249), they can play a vital role in the migration of creative writing across borders. They represent an 'imagined community', to use Benedict Anderson's phrase, whose multilocale, transnational poetics tacks back and forth between cultures, revising the concept of regional and national borders with their fluid sense of home and identity. Further, all except Iyer are graduates of Creative Writing programmes. Thus they are well-placed to demonstrate how Creative Writing in the Asia Pacific can be a new frontier, a site of heteroglossia and multiplicity, where different languages and traditions can meet to animate the new writing, where old antagonisms and postcolonial issues can be engaged in dialogic interactions with new modes of perception. The workshop in the Asia-Pacific can be a site where borders can be re-imagined and maps redrawn to uncover new borderlands, where cultures, languages and literatures can avoid separatist, nationalistic narratives and meet across borders in an encounter that opens up new horizons.

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