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'Voice-Niche-Brand': Marketing Asian-Australianness

By **Merlinda Bobis**

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The key words of this panel cause me discomfort: MARKET and ASIAN-AUSTRALIANNES. According to Mexican poet and Nobel Laureate Octavio Paz, 'The market has no soul.' He writes:

Today literature and the arts are exposed to a different danger: they are threatened not by a doctrine or a political party but by a faceless, soulless and directionless economic process. The market is circular, impersonal, impartial, inflexible. Some will tell me that this is as it should be. Perhaps. But the market, blind and deaf, is not fond of literature or of risk, and it does not know how to choose. Its censorship is not ideological: it has no ideas. It knows all about prices but nothing about values. (144)

In the twenty-first century, right after your book comes out, the computerised Nielsen BookScan tallies how many copies you sell, much like a bean counter. Publishers refer to this 'infernal machine' to assess your fate as a writer, and awards are not significant if they do not translate into sales.

The other word that I am ambivalent about in this business of writing is ASIAN-AUSTRALIANNES. 'Asians' cannot be lumped into one heap, like a hyphenated brand of jeans, because Asia is a large continent of diverse cultures. Moreover ASIAN-AUSTRALIAN evokes a broken, halted negotiation between the Asian and the Australian in the writer; and/or between the Asian writer and the Australian reader. This state of play is anathema to the fluid delivery of a story or a poem.

So how do I sell my hyphenated sensibility? This question may be answered using the framework of VOICE-NICHE-BRAND, the inevitable progression of a writer's career.

VOICE is the timbre of the text that is created by the writer's style. Style is how the writer writes what literary theorist Frederic Jameson describes as 'a certain type of sentence'. About Hemingway, for instance, he argues

it is a mistake to think . that [his books] deal essentially with such things as courage, love, and death; in reality, their deepest subject is simply the writing of a certain type of sentence, the practice of a determinate style. (409)

My 'certain type of sentence' springs from how I sense and live the world, influenced by the culture of my first home, the Philippines, where I spent my first thirty-one years before I came to Australia. The streets, birds, colours and flavours, the sound and feel of the air, the inflections of affection and grief, the voices around me, the myths that I heard as a child—all these left an indelible mark on my sensibility. These experiences cannot be erased, not even by a Western university education in English that tells me I have to write a sentence in a particular way. My voice is culturally specific: it is *not* Asian-Australian. It is a Filipino sensibility cross-pollinated by Western writerly strategies, and of course by the rules of the English language, with which I play and which I even break to accommodate my Filipino sensibility. However, what if the resultant voice is too alien to the Western ear?

In my short story *White Turtle*, a Filipina chanter performing at the Sydney Writers' Festival conjures a white turtle in her poetry, and a real leatherback materialises in the festival room. The chanter and the giant turtle sing in a voice frighteningly alien to the audience, and eventually the turtle is taken away by the police. At this point, the story makes a case for migrant writers in Australia:

[The chanter] wanted to explain to the men in blue that it did not mean to cause harm or any trouble . She wanted to plead with them to be gentle with it. It was very tired after a long, long swim. But how to be understood, how to be heard in one's own tongue? (52)

This is the perennial difficulty encountered by the migrant writer: how to be understood, how to be heard in one's own tongue? By *own tongue*, I mean native sensibility more than native language. The migrant writer transplants her sensibility, shaped by the mythologies of her first culture, in the new home. But how to be understood here-how to be accepted?

The answer is embedded in this argument of Filipino writers Cordero-Fernando and Zialcita:

A myth makes up the unwritten charter of a people; the model for their everyday behavior; and the embodiment of their most basic values, ideals and aspirations . it is accepted on faith. (28)

How can I, as migrant writer, be accepted on faith by this new home, Australia, when it has its own sensibility, shaped by its own mythologies so alien to mine? The migrant writer has to work extremely hard to woo and win this faith of the publisher, the reading public, the critic, the writers' festival directors. Eventual success in this 'long courtship' means that hopefully the writer will be accepted not as a token ethnic in a gathering of the mainstream, but because the mainstream has truly connected with her sensibility.

A few years ago at writers' festivals, Asian writers were sometimes lumped together to speak on being Asian-Australian or a migrant writer, while mainstream Australian writers discussed narrative, politics, voice, etc. In this instance, I wanted to put my hand up and say, 'Please, I can also address those writerly topics quite well'.

My Filipino voice, written in English, is peculiar to many Australian readers, and was once critiqued as 'Not English!' I thought in this so-called postcolonial era we were over such a discourse. But then again I wonder if the danger sometimes for the monolingual speaker is that hearing can become just as impregnably monolithic as speaking. Sometimes I also sense an Australian wariness about my 'big emotions'. Years ago, an Australian poet explained that Australian readers are suspicious of emotion; he advised that I should keep 'training their ear' to my different voice. The worst comment was from someone editing my work, which afterwards bled with endless marks from his red pen. He asked, 'Who wrote this shit?' This, of course, reduced me to tears. So what did he want me to do? Write with Australian inflections, phraseologies, or with a British stiff-upper lip in 'The Queen's English'?

I have been in this business of writing for a long time. I have stuck to my guns despite the piles of rejection slips that come with the market's fears: this is too literary, too culturally specific, it does not quite fit our list of titles. Why not name the biggest fear? This is too alien. However, in the face of these fears, the 'alien voice' can strategise, perhaps through the second stage of my framework: the NICHE.

In practical terms the way to market your voice is to make it accessible to your audience, before they can learn how to enjoy it-hopefully with as little damage to or betrayal of your artistic and cultural integrity. A word of caution, though: when you turn your voice inside out to suit the fickle market, it can keep asking you to change according to its whim. When you play into the market's game, you will inevitably betray the voice of your grandmother, or the boiling of the rice-pot before rice cookers were invented.

In the 90s I built my niche, not by changing my voice but by performing it-bringing to my audience *the body with the text*. A body-to-body encounter. They 'tune' their ear to my tongue in a direct and immediate process. The sensory impact of a performed text is sudden and surprising. At the moment of delivery the audience has a more immediate surrender. After all, it is harder to re-read the bodyword in performance. Of course the audience/critics/scholars can pick my story to shreds later on: conceptualise, re-conceptualise and problematically negotiate through the usual cultural hyphen. After all, critics and scholars also want to tell their *own* stories.

If it is a good show, the hyphen becomes a delicious bridge for these readers and following creators of narrative, not just in sensory but especially in conceptual terms. However delivering the text with the body that is obviously inscribed by its ethnicity and gender has its own problems. The body is in itself a text which might be misread, but that is another sticky story. Let me proceed now to the final stage of my framework: the BRAND.

A niche is small and snug, and you can be content to play in it. Then a big publisher picks you up and wants to turn you into the next big thing: the brand.

The brand of ASIAN-AUSTRALIAN. What is it to the market?

- A little Asian flavour but set in Australia will sell, thus there is a market for the Asian migrant story-but keep it simple, easy and with exotic flourishes that are comfortably *knowable* to the reader.
- A story set in an Asian destination for Australian tourists has also a good chance. The Australian reader *knows* this space.
- A story about India or by an Indian writer is marketable, because of the Rushdies, the Mistrays and Roys who have

paved the way for Indian literature's place in the international literary canon. Readers *know* this landscape now.

In these examples, the reader wants the easy passage through that cultural hyphen in 'Asian-Australian'. No doubt passage is 'easy' if the Asian part of the brand coincides with how they have framed 'Asia' in their imagination-this generic, amorphous, vague 'Asia' that I do not recognise anymore, because of the way the market has turned it into a one-size-fits-all, ready-to-wear garment.

To make it even easier for the reader, if you write about 'your Asia', do so in a voice that is close to the tunings of the Australian ear. Perhaps sound more Australian despite the Asian content? At least you can sell more books before you win that international award. When you do, the mainstream will claim you as an Australian writer and drop the 'Asian' bit of the brand.

Make sure you change your voice to suit the market's ear.

It is sad that some writers, who have blown readers away with their early books and distinct voices, now repeat themselves. I wonder if it is because of publishers breathing down their necks with the big cheque, saying, you have done that so well, so do it again, and do it again. This is your voice now, your *only* voice.

Nothing is more terrifying than when the imaginative limbs atrophy in the safe and narrow path. Fewer muscles are used; the others forget their function. When such atrophy hits the heart, creative embolism is inevitable. Then, paralysis. Even if we flail the imaginative limbs, how can we be saved from the same fate? The safe road, too worn or grooved by constant passage, could give way. The groove could capitulate into a grave. Death and burial.

There are writers who find a particular voice or style or story that perfectly fits the teat of the market and they milk it for all it's worth. They repeat themselves and repeat themselves and repeat themselves. Find your own niche, build your own cliché-but maybe there is no death in this comfort zone; instead, endless nourishment by a market made lazy in its satiation. No diverse tastes, please. Focus the palate. Give us *one* safe, easy text. As Octavio Paz writes, the market's trend is towards uniformity:

The ideal is one and only one public: readers who all have exactly the same taste, who all read the same book. That book is many books: a new book by a different author may be published every day, but they are all really the same book. (113)

Thus, a Filipino, Chinese, Indian, Malaysian book is only one Asian-Australian book? Has the market hijacked our identity into a brand? In our giving ourselves this hyphenated label, have we in fact been complicit in our own branding? What is our chance to keep the integrity of our own voices?

I would like to cite a case study of an Asian-Australian book and the market: my first novel, *Banana Heart Summer*, which I thought I wrote to subvert the market. I wrote it under a different title, *Not Hunger*, a protest against hunger, poverty and child labour. These social issues and the wish to write the old street from home were my major concerns-but I believed I could also accommodate the desires of the market. If I write about hunger, of course I cannot but write about food. So the novel is also a 'food book', a popular genre. It is highly flavoursome, sensory and exotic to those uninitiated to Philippine cuisine. It will sell, surely.

My initial intention was to strategise: to lull the readers into 'exotic delectation', then hit them with social issues-in my own voice. I decided I would not write about the Australian landscape at all. This would be a Filipino food book. I would play with food imagery and metaphor, and tell a good story, but the dream did not proceed as planned. My original subversive intent was, in fact, 'subverted' by the stronger need to get published and to please a difficult market, if not to crack it.

Soon the wheels of the market began to turn. My agent and publisher asked me to change the original title *Not Hunger*, because it was too negative. I chose *Banana Heart Summer*, not my favourite title but at least I could live with it. Besides, it promised easy, safe fun (especially for readers who are suspicious of difficult books), and 'it's funky', a friend assured me. Then the book was packaged into this beautiful pink artwork. Do not get me wrong-I am very grateful for this 'little gem', which was what the publisher promised in the hope that the novel would become a bestseller. It never did. Worse, it barely got reviewed. As the publicist said, 'They [the media] do not want to talk to you.' The book's short-listing for the 2006 Literature Society Gold medal did not translate into sales. Then my Australian publisher pulled out of our agreement to publish my proposed second novel.

After a year, though, a little miracle happened. I received a call from the fiction editor of Bantam, Random House in New York, telling me that she was 'utterly enchanted' with my novel and that she wanted to publish it-and what else was I writing? The advice of my American agent, who had primed me for this call, was: 'If she asks about your other writing plans, give her something closer to the current book that she's buying, *Banana Heart Summer*.'

The market's wheels were turning, so I had to pitch my proposed second novel, *The Solemn Lantern Maker*, along the lines of the first. However, this next novel wrote itself out differently. The style turned out spare, the content grim, so unlike the lush, lyrical and playful rendition of the first book. Moreover, the narrative became highly political and critical of American foreign policy. I was biting my nails, wondering how my US publisher would respond to this different voice. Had I shot myself in the foot, in my biggest break?

This little story has a happy ending, though. After I signed the US deal for *Banana Heart Summer* and the as-yet unwritten *The Solemn Lantern Maker*, my Australian publisher decided to bring me back to the fold: they signed up to publish the second novel that they had rejected. *The Solemn Lantern Maker* has now been launched in Australia. My US publisher is happy with the new book, which they will publish in 2009 after the publication of the first novel this year. Moreover I now have a UK literary agent who likes this second book more than the first, and who wants to sell both in Britain, as well as a third novel that I have just finished. In this respect, the story has not ended.

The wheels of the market are still turning, and will continue to turn. I will write more books, new books. I will receive new rejection slips. In order to get my voice into print, I will vacillate between the demands of the market and my literary, cultural and political convictions. But I will eventually keep my own voice and play with new voices. I will shed off the Asian-Australian brand. I will write books which, at my deathbed, will not accuse me of betrayal of the things I hold dear: social and political issues, basic decency and human rights, and 'the suppressed C word' in our terrified discourse in global politics: compassion. I will try not to forget that the unguarded surge of empathy for the other, this fluid connection, is not hyphenated and has no price tag.

Merlinda Bobis has written prose fiction, poetry and drama. She has received the Prix Italia and the Australian Writers' Guild Award for Rita's Lullaby, the Steele Rudd Award for the Best Published Collection of Australian Short Stories, the Judges' Choice Award (Bumbershoot Bookfair, Seattle Arts Festival) and the Philippine National Book Award for White Turtle or The Kissing, and the Philippine Balagtas Award, a lifetime award for her fiction and poetry in English, Pilipino and Bicol. Her poetry book Summer Was A Fast Train Without Terminals was short-listed for The Age Poetry Book Award. Her plays have been performed in Australia, Philippines, France, China, Thailand and the Slovak Republic. She has published two novels: Banana Heart Summer (2005), which was short-listed for the Australian Literature Society Gold Medal, and The Solemn Lantern Maker (2008). She teaches creative writing at the University of Wollongong.

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