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Migrant Writing: promising territory

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Migrant Writing: promising territory

Abstract

Kristeva is referring in this essay to the entry of the child into language and, as a consequence, to control over its environment. It may be valid to ask in which instances migrants, who are often positioned as children, are permitted to grow up? When may they gain their cultural franchise? What space may migrants name and hence claim? Professor Kiernan's paper this morning referred to Australian culture as one composed of 'the outcasts and the rejected'. In that case, what should those groups construct who have so far, in turn, been excluded even from such a territory? Is 'culture' indeed predicated upon the process of exclusion?

Migrant Writing: promising territory

...the archaeology of *spatial naming* accompanies the development of autonomy of the *subjective unit*.

(Julia Kristeva, 'Place Names')¹

Kristeva is referring in this essay to the entry of the child into language and, as a consequence, to control over its environment. It may be valid to ask in which instances migrants, who are often positioned as children, are permitted to grow up? When may they gain their cultural franchise? What space may migrants name and hence claim? Professor Kiernan's paper this morning referred to Australian culture as one composed of 'the outcasts and the rejected'. In that case, what should those groups construct who have so far, in turn, been excluded even from such a territory? Is 'culture' indeed predicated upon the process of exclusion?

For the most part this will not be a discussion of specific migrant writers so much as an argument for their automatic inclusion in any consideration of Australian writing and, in addition, a discussion of the terms under which they might be included. For the sceptics who are unaware of the existence of this group I can brandish bibliographies² and other publications including one anthology which I've compiled for a Deakin University course. By migrant writers (a term I prefer to ethnic minority writers)³ I don't mean only those who write in languages other than English but also those who, like myself, grew up bilingually and who developed, long before encountering Saussure and the semioticians, a scepticism towards the so-called 'natural properties of language'. In this paper, I will concentrate on those writers who emerge from languages and cultures other than English but who choose to write, predominantly, in English. One of the benefits accruing from acknowledging migrant writers in general is that it reminds us that all of so-called Australian writing is of course migrant writing: possession by naming, an import culture which isn't quite, as yet, a lucrative export commodity.

This last figure, as well as the 'us', in the previous sentence, gestures towards another necessary preliminary, the one of contexts: of countries, of cities, of forums, indeed, of market places. This conference is not being held off the planet. We are meant to be selling 'Australian Literature' here, but to whom? To speak of Australian writing in Scotland, in the United Kingdom, encloses a certain area where we may barter for meanings in ways quite different from speaking on this topic within Australia itself. In this particular context Australia is a 'supplement' to British writing and here I am deliberately invoking, as I have elsewhere,⁴ Derrida's 'dangerous supplement'.⁵ To protect myself from charges of gratuitous hermeticism I would explain this concept, in part, as the notion of any excess or addendum which, by qualifying a plenitude, in fact re-defines and re-places that plenitude. Thus Australian writing, especially here, functions as a supplement but not a 'supplement' (in Derrida's sense) to British writing. 'We', those who are representing Australian writing, need to fight for the latter definition which would construct British writing as that particular instead of as the ubiquitous and undifferentiated 'English Literature'.

Note here the binary opposition of 'writing' and 'literature'. The latter term is haunted by notions of standards past, of excellence, in which 'literature' is re-cycled whereas 'writing' is not. We can amuse ourselves later in debating these terms. For my own part, I regard the term 'literature' as a discursive formation (in Foucault's sense) which operates distinctively within the education system as another term of territorial imperatives. It is used often to perpetrate exclusions without having to justify them — a White Australia policy, if you like, of culture. I can also vouch for the fact that the term 'literary excellence' when magisterially employed by, for example, members of our funding bodies in the arts, creates a great deal of anxiety amongst migrant writers themselves who fear the stigma of reverse discrimination. Their fears remain impervious to arguments relating to the politics of publishing and, as I've indicated, the politics of terms like 'literature'. The discursive formation 'English Literature' will, in this age of specificities and sub-cultures, be increasingly subdivided, one hopes, into suburbs rather than remaining a fortified country. Why should we hope for this? In Australia, for example, there exists the journal CRNLE devoted to 'new literatures in English'. It could as well, for my money, define itself as being concerned with New English in literature (or writing) because increasingly we have become aware (through the work of sociolinguists for example) of the constantly changing nature of language at the same time that language is revealed as constructing us, that is, as a prime factor in the process of

acculturation, of socialisation and that it is a territory invested with the politics of nomenclature relating to class, to gender, to race, to name a few.

Having set up this endless series of supplements which re-define I will now concentrate on migrant writing in relation to Australian writing. To my mind there are three ways in which it would be useful to explore migrants in relation to writing: migrants as characters, as writers, and as readers.

I. First, migrants as characters, or, as they have been constructed or represented by Australian culture and writing, a process which migrant writers themselves have of course in varying degrees internalized. In any case they must take up positions in relation to this tradition or mythology. The analogy here is with women's writing in which any so-called *écriture féminine* (writing as a woman) is constrained by a tradition of representation. This would be the place in which to examine such concepts as 'multiculturalism' along the lines, for example, of Edward Said's study of orientalism.⁶ One could begin, for example, with such texts as Rorabacher's short story anthology *Where Two Ways Meet*⁷ written for the most part by Anglo-Celtic Australians about migrants, or one could explore, as one of my doctoral candidates is doing at present, the ways in which a writer like Patrick White (the apparent daimon of this conference) uses notions of the Greek. This area could also include an analysis of the critical reception of migrant writers, for example, a recent series of reviews of the Greek Australian poet Dimitris Tsaloumas.

II. Migrants as writers (which also falls into sub-sections).

(i) Dual-language texts. This is an enormously complex but very necessary area for, as Franco Schiavoni points out in a recent *Meanjin* devoted to immigration and culture, 'authentic multiculturalism cannot but coincide with multilingualism'.⁸

(ii) Related to the dual-text issue, is the whole field of translation studies and may I draw your attention to the recent appearance of Susan Bassnett-McGuire's book of that name in the New Accents series. In it, pertinently, she quotes Octavio Paz as stating that all texts, insofar as they form part of a literary system are 'translations of translations of translations'.⁹ In other words, this would provide another means of opening up the study of English Literature to new theoretical frameworks.

(iii) Oral history. Here I must sound a cautionary note. Much of what continues to be marketed as migrant writing falls under this heading of

oral history or first-person accounts. One thinks of the Lowenstein and Loh collection *The Immigrants* and of Morag Loh's *With Courage in their Cases*.¹⁰ I do not wish to denigrate (and have argued for it elsewhere) the importance of personal histories as a way of extending notions of history but I am worried about restricting migrant writing to this thematic function. In these cases migrant stories are examined for *what* they tell rather than *how* they tell (needless to say, looking at the 'how' changes the 'what'). In such cases the justification or authority for speaking seems to rest on the migrant voice as synonymous with victim and/or social problem. Let us indulge in some of the implications of this. Perhaps we could call it part of the mythology or burden of metaphor I mentioned earlier — the way the migrant is constructed in Oz culture. I quote here from a paper I delivered at last year's ASAL Conference in which I was arguing for the inclusion of migrant writing within an *Australian* context:

By definition Australia existed as a refuge and a promise to those waves of European emigrants who were fleeing the known world during and after the second World War. How different already, figuratively speaking, was this metonymy compared to those projected by the self-styled legitimate residents of this country who located their national origins in institutions relating to that legitimacy: the prison, the penal colony, the fallen. For one group then, the raising of barriers, the crossing of boundaries, for the other, the boundaries had always been there and in that period of migration, of inundation (the image recurs), had to be re-stated, inscribed in different ways. The boundaries of the penal colony had been internalized to constitute procedures of normalization. The *emigrants*, who at some mystic Neptune's line became immigrants, had to be made aware that they were crossing boundaries and that, indeed, they would never stop crossing boundaries all their lives. By definition, to be a new Australian, was to be a boundary crosser, a transgressor, in the eyes of those who like to think that they had always already been there.

In themselves, those new Australians represented boundaries or margins, those marginal voices which bordered the known country and were themselves hybrids comprising both the known and the unknown. Insofar as they functioned as representatives of the post-war world, the world of the fallen, they could be used as the second half of a structuralist binary equation in which, by definition, Australian was now, finally after the inundation, unfallen. After the *Sinnflut* of fire and brimstone and the human flood of immigrants, here were the survivors of a regenerated new world. The penal colony was on its figurative journey towards redemption and reincarnation into the promised land, the lucky country.¹¹

The rhetoric in that Australian context is noticeably different from the one employed in the present British one. What I am suggesting in this extract is that if migrant writing is only perceived as autobiographical accounts of suffering it then functions primarily to position 'Australia', gratifyingly, as the eternal promised land, even when some of the suffering occurs within Australia.¹² Worse still, in terms of a necessary

theoretical sophistication, the first-person mode is perceived as an unproblematically autobiographical one. Any migrant writer who dares to use this mode (and even, say, the third-person) risks being read as autobiography and, often, as unrehearsed autobiography. The attraction of such writing to the dominant culture has been analogous to that found in naïve art.

But of course migrant writers themselves also play with this burden of metaphor, in this case the trope of the promised land, and turn it to their own advantage, as the Hungarian-Italian-Australian writer Sylvana Gardner has done in the following poem:

HOPE

Another land with stranger customs
yet the promise that this is where
we will stay. Where is the garden
my father promised and the orange trees
laden with fruit for my picking?
He tells me to be patient
and brings me a bagful of apples
from the fruit shop on the corner.

Again we huddle together
on this footpath of no nationality
and I listen to the man who hopes
to find a job without knowing the language.
I interrupt with a compliment
'you look just like Tarzan!' and wish him luck
to make it from vine to vine.

My father winces
at the association of dagoes with ape men
and threatens to take away my comics.

Everyone hopes to make money.
I hope for my orange tree
and the name of the street spells H-O-P-E,
a good omen to think about
on Saturday afternoons when we learn English
at the pictures.¹³

(iv) In the fourth sub-category of migrants as writers we have those writers who, like Gardner, subvert the stereotypes, the way the migrant has been constructed by Australian culture. Poets like πΟ. and Ania

Walwicz create the 'new English' mentioned earlier by playing with notions of the naïve and the so-called broken English of those positioned as linguistically incompetent.

don yoo tel dem troowth
dai dozn belif yoo.¹⁴

before they were big i was small they could do things more than me they were something now they are nothing he was a doctor of animals now he was learning to speak properly he talked funny they made mistakes she was clumsy she works in a factory he cleans the floors of the serum laboratory now life can be everybody clean and nice and we are all wrong here i was the translator i was the mother of my mother they were more helpless they were useless nervous didn't know what to do i was too serious for me it was too early to be like this we walked lost on the street we were looking for john street i was bigger than them my parents were again small old children they were heavy for me they couldn't do much you are helpless useless.¹⁵

In Walwicz's poetry there is the recurrent image of the migrant as child, that is, positioned as helpless and incompetent by paternalistic institutions.

What such writers achieve is to extend received notions of Anglo-Celtic culture and of Australian English in ways that (I would imagine) resident black and Asian writers are doing here in Britain.

III. Migrants as readers. There is of course an overlap with the previous categories since to write means always to read or to re-read, i.e. all texts are translations. What I mean to focus on here is reading as a self-conscious process, in this case, from migrant positions. I am gesturing here toward the complexities of reader response and reception theory (not just to Wolfgang Iser but also to Halliday and to the work of numerous feminist critics). Here the emphasis is on the way migrants read (and notate) Australian culture, that is, from *their* standpoint construct Australian culture. For example, πΟ., Ania Walwicz, Anna Couani, Antigone Kefala reveal Australian culture, like all cultures, to be a network of arbitrarily constructed codes. In other words, they interrogate concepts of the 'natural' and reveal it to be a series of choices. And one of the major elements within this system of codes or cultural sign-system is that of language. Here is an example of the kind of opening up of language that I have been talking about. It is from a tale 'for advanced children' and in this scene the eponymous heroine is having a meal at her teacher's home:

'Are you happy?'

Alexia went immediately into a panic. For she felt HAPPY to be an Enormous Word, a word full of flamboyant colours, which only people who had reached an ecstatic state had a right to use. She saw it as the apotheosis, so to speak, of a series of events which, as far as she could see, lay totally outside her life. But she could not explain this, for everyone on the Island kept asking, as if this Fantastic Word was the basic measure of their days —

...

And the more she thought about it, the more confused she became. Did Miss Prudence mean:

Was she happy eating her mashed potatoes?

Being in the house with the grandfather clock chiming?

Happy living on the Island?

or

Happy living in the world?

There she was, with the salt cellar in her hand, which she had been asked to pass on to Mary, not knowing what to say, getting more and more confused between Happiness and Salt.¹⁶

I hope I have convinced you that migrant writing is indeed promising territory.

NOTES

1. Julia Kristeva, 'Place names', *Desire in Language* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1980), p.288.
2. The third edition of Lolo Houbein's pioneering bibliography will shortly appear. There is now also *Diversity and Diversion: an Annotated Bibliography of Australian Ethnic Minority Literature*, ed. P. Lumb and A. Hazell (Hodja, Richmond, 1983). The latter does not however include poetry.
3. The term 'ethnic minority' suggests a majority whereas I would prefer to see Australian writing fall into a proliferation of ethnic groups. After all 'Anglo-Celtic' is also a misnomer.
4. See, for example, 'Discourses of Otherness: Migrants in Australian Literature' forthcoming in *New Literature Review* and 'Migrant Women Writers: Who's on Whose Margins', *Meanjin*, Vol. 42, No 1, March 1983, pp.16-26.
5. J. Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Johns Hopkins Press, Baltimore, 1976). In particular Part II, ch. 2.
6. Discussed in 'Migrant Women Writers', op. cit.
7. Louise Rorabacher, *Where Two Ways Meet* (Cheshire, Melbourne, 1963).
8. Franco Schiavoni, 'Multiculturalism and Multilingualism', *Meanjin*, Vol. 42, No 1, p.143. The whole issue is reviewed in the August issue of *Australian Book Review*. David English, 'Zorba! Zorba! Have you failed us?', *ABR*, pp.20-21.
9. Susan Bassnet-McGuire, *Translation Studies* (Methuen, London, 1980), p.38 (echoed by Terry Eagleton, p.104). An interestingly related article appeared in the second issue of *LTP*, Ulricke Meinhof, 'The Splitting of the L', *LTP*, No 2, 1983, pp.34-45.
10. Bibliographic details in *Diversity and Diversion*, op. cit.

11. From 'Discourses of Otherness', op. cit.
12. The editors' justification for producing *Diversity and Diversion* is that it would promote greater tolerance, for example, in schools. If one carries this to its logical conclusion then possibly even more sensationalist accounts of suffering need to be included in curricula in order to sensitize blunted sensibilities and to restore Australian humanitarianism. Something like that, I think, has happened with the marketing of the Jewish holocaust. It seems a very limited (indeed pernicious) way in which to study textual productions.
13. Sylvana Gardner, *When Sunday Comes* (University of Queensland Press, St. Lucia, 1982), p.33.
14. πΟ. Untitled poem in S. Gunew (ed.), *Displacements: Migrant Story Tellers* (Deakin University Press, Victoria 3217), p.135.
15. Ania Walwicz, 'helpless' in *Displacements*, op. cit., p.2.
16. A. Kefala, 'Alexia', *Mattoid*, No 13, pp.42-43.

This paper was given at the conference on Australian literature held at the University of Stirling, Scotland, in Autumn, 1983.