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### **Multilingual Writing in a Monolingual Nation: Australia's hidden literary archive**

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## Multilingual Writing in a Monolingual Nation: Australia's hidden literary archive

### Abstract

Australian literature has over the last fifty years witnessed the gradual inclusion of writers and texts formerly considered marginal: from a predominantly white, male and Anglophone canon it has come to incorporate more women writers, writers of popular genres, Indigenous writers, and migrant, multicultural or diasporic writers. However, one large and important body of Australian writing remains excluded from mainstream histories and anthologies: literature in languages other than English. Research conducted at the University of Wollongong under the auspices of the AustLit project has revealed the immensity of this gap in knowledge: hundreds of writers in dozens of languages writing and publishing in Australia and overseas; lively literary exchanges of great relevance to Australian history and culture known only to specific language communities; a veritable treasure trove of neglected archives at great risk of being permanently lost.

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*24 July, 2018*

## Multilingual Writing in a Monolingual Nation

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### Australia's Hidden Literary Archive

Australian literature has over the last fifty years witnessed the gradual inclusion of writers and texts formerly considered marginal: from a predominantly white, male and Anglophone canon it has come to incorporate more women writers, writers of popular genres, Indigenous writers, and migrant, multicultural or diasporic writers. However, one large and important body of Australian writing remains excluded from mainstream histories and anthologies: literature in languages other than English. Research conducted at the University of Wollongong under the auspices of the AustLit project has revealed the immensity of this gap in knowledge: hundreds of writers in dozens of languages writing and publishing in Australia and overseas; lively literary exchanges of great relevance to Australian history and culture known only to specific language communities; a veritable treasure trove of neglected archives at great risk of being permanently lost.

The above paragraph is taken from an application for a 2013 Australian Research Council Discovery grant. Entitled 'New transnationalisms: Australia's multilingual literary heritage', our project aimed to trace the history of Australian literature in four languages (Spanish, Arabic, Vietnamese and Chinese), at the same time promising to 'rethink the nature of transnationalism and multiculturalism in the Australian literary context, acknowledging the extent of the cross-national, cross-lingual and cross-cultural traffic that feeds into the literature of a migrant nation, shaping while at the same time challenging the category of the national.' This project, on which I work, along with Nijmeh Hajjar, Michael Jacklin and Tuấn Ngọc Nguyễn, while still incomplete, has resulted in some extraordinary findings, along with numerous frustrations about the different ways in which Australia's entrenched monolingualism has impacted our national literature.

It is over four decades since Australia declared itself to be a multicultural nation, and we are gradually becoming more so. [According to the 2016 Census](#), over a quarter of Australian residents are born overseas, and half have at least one overseas-born parent. As the proportion of migrants from non-English speaking countries grows, we are also becoming more linguistically diverse: One in five speaks a language other than English at home and we speak more than 300 languages, with Mandarin now the most commonly spoken after English. However, rather than taking advantage of our linguistic diversity, Australia seems to do everything to discourage it. A report produced in 2015 for the Australian Council of Learned Academies offers a thought-provoking frame for thinking through issues of language, especially in relation to Australia's engagement with Asia. [Smart Engagement with Asia: Leveraging Language, Research and Culture](#), by Ien Ang, Yasmin Tambiah and Phillip Mar comments on the much-lamented fact of Australian monolingualism, offering some alarming statistics: in New South Wales, the proportion of students studying a foreign language for HSC is now less than a fifth of what it was in the 1950s, and only 1.3 per cent of them studied Chinese. Repeated government initiatives to increase these numbers have clearly failed, and this at a time when Asian language literacy is more important than ever to Australia. Studies also show that diasporic bi- and multilingual capabilities tend to be lost within two or three generations, as migrant parents focus on the importance of English as a key to success and integration. In spite of the fact that Australia's Asian population is proportionally twice that of the US and four times that of the UK, Australia, with its stubborn English monolingualism, is out of step with developments in the rest of the world, where multilingualism is on the rise: 'Globally, the monolingual native English speaker is in retreat'. Referring to another report, by Kent Anderson and Joseph LoBianco, the authors write: 'There are two disadvantages in the arrangements of current global communication: not knowing English; and knowing only English.'

What might be the consequences of all this, for Australian literature, and for Australian literary studies? For at least a decade now, there has been a move away from the national, sometimes nationalist, focus which tended to dominate earlier Australian literary scholarship, and an increased emphasis on transnationalism. But what kind of transnationalism has been embraced? What, if any, changes has it made to the language of literary expression? Robert Dixon, in his programmatic 2007 article 'Australian literature: international contexts', stressed the importance of non-Anglophone traditions to the study of Australian literature, as well as the need to acknowledge what Emily Apter calls the 'translation zone', the two-way street of literary translation, but it seems to me that the consequences of such a shift have never been fully recognised. As my colleague Michael Jacklin argued in 2009:

**although the scope and reach of Australian literary studies may expand as the discipline goes global, there is no accompanying assumption that the corpus, or the canon, of Australian literature will be radically altered.**

This means that knowledge of the large body of literary texts written, in Australia, in languages other than English, is minimal, and that translation of such texts, which would make them available to a wider readership, remains rare. It also means that diasporic or multicultural writers, those who work between languages and between cultures, need to write in English in order to find a readership in Australia (and many, as we know, have done so successfully). But writing in English does not always mean that they leave their other language(s) behind, or that they write like native speakers of English. This may put them in a position of disadvantage with a readership unaccustomed to versions of English different from their own. Having an 'accent' in writing has often been deemed unacceptable in Australia. It is difficult not to remember Robert Dessaix's assessment of multicultural writers in his 1991 *Australian Book Review* essay 'Nice work if you can get it' in which he argued that the English of these writers was not good enough to produce texts of sufficient complexity and sophistication, proffering the gratuitous advice that 'Many so-called multicultural writers would do better to take up ceramics, market-gardening, photography or, perhaps, even to return to their countries of origin'.

In her recent book *Not Like a Native Speaker*, Rey Chow argues that speaking, and writing, in a language not one's own, is generally constructed in terms of a lack:

**Because the native speaker is thought to occupy an uncorrupted origination point, learning a language as a non-native speaker can only be an exercise in woeful approximation. The failure to sound completely like the native speaker is thus given a pejorative name: ‘(foreign) accent.’ Having an accent is, in other words, the symptom precisely of discontinuity – an incomplete assimilation, a botched attempt at eliminating another tongue’s competing copresence. In geopolitical terms, having an accent is tantamount to leaving on display – rather than successfully covering up – the embarrassing evidence of one’s alien origins and migratory status...The speech of the native speaker, in contrast, is deemed so natural that it is said to be without – or shall we say outside? – an accent.**

But what exactly is a ‘native speaker’ and what constitutes ‘good’ English? In her book *Beyond the Mother Tongue: The Postmonolingual Condition* (2011) Yasemin Yildiz writes that while multilingualism has attracted considerable scholarly interest in the last two decades, it is often considered to be a recent development, brought about by globalisation and international migration. Yildiz instead argues that it is monolingualism that is the more recent paradigm, emerging in Europe in the late eighteenth century as a result of universal education, the development of the modern nation state and the wide acceptance of the gendered, affectively charged concept of the mother tongue. ‘The “mother tongue”’, she writes, ‘is the affective knot at the centre of the monolingual paradigm and therefore a knot worth unravelling.’ Within the monolingual paradigm, the ‘mother tongue’ has become ‘more than a metaphor; it constitutes a condensed *narrative* about origin and identity’. However, the highly emotional and biological connotations of the ‘mother tongue’ are themselves historical artifacts, and their effect is to obscure the possibility that languages other than the first can take on an emotional meaning. Yildiz offers examples of alternative affective connotations: the ‘mother tongue’ might be associated with exclusion, alienation and trauma rather than belonging, and might thus stand as an obstacle to healing, whereas new languages can open up ‘new intellectual and affective pathways.’ The problem is not that we associate our first language with affective baggage linked to first memories, family and home; it is the exclusivity it is granted over others, equally capable of shaping our affective and intellectual horizon.

Rey Chow offers a more political reading of the effects of linguistic encounters. Taking her inspiration from Derrida’s account of his relationship to the French language in *Monolingualism of the Other; or, the Prosthesis of Origin*, she describes the relationship between language and cultural value, in particular the ways in which languages have been made into ‘indexes of cultural superiority and inferiority’ in colonial encounters. She goes on to dismantle the notion of the native speaker as occupying a position of privilege:

**By making it possible only for some people to impose their native tongue (say, English) on others, for whom this tongue exists more or less as *an external graft*, the colonial situation has, if unwittingly, conferred upon the colonized the privilege of a certain prescience – the grasp of how artificially and artifactually, rather than naturally, language works and can work in the first place. The fact that so many people around the world are now wearing this external graft means that those who happen to speak English as a native tongue are simply one variant in an infinite series, in which there can be any degree and any number of fits or misfits between the speaker and the prosthesis.**

The real advantage, she thus argues, lies not with the coloniser but with the colonised, who 'is much closer to the truth of the mediated and divisive character of all linguistic communication.' Based on this affirmation of linguistic plurality, she posits what she calls the 'xenophone', a 'creative domain of languaging...that draws its sustenance from mimicry and adaptation and bears in its accents the murmur, the passage, of diverse found speeches.' This is the domain of postcolonial and transcultural writing and its 'vast, wondrous troves of xenophonic *énoncés*.'

In Australia, the most enthusiastic advocate for this utopian view of the xenophonic domain is undoubtedly Brian Castro, who in his 1996 essay 'Writing Asia' laments the absence, in Australia, of polyglot writers like James Joyce and Samuel Beckett:

**But the benefits of being able to speak another language are manifold. Language marks the spot where the self loses its prison bars – where the border crossing takes place, traversing the spaces of others. When one speaks or translates Chinese, one metaphorically becomes Chinese; when one speaks Japanese one 'turns' Japanese. Each language speaks the world in its own way. The polyglot is a freer person, a person capable of living in words and worlds other than the narrow and the confined one of unimagined reality. When we translate from one language to another we not only reinvent ourselves but we free up the sclerotic restrictions of our own language. We feel free to transgress, to metamorphose, to experience the uncanny, where we are receiving what Wilson Harris has called the *quantum immediacy* of another culture. Other cultures and languages reinforce and enrich us by powerfully affecting and destabilising our familial tongue. We gain by losing ourselves.**

To Castro, bi- and multilingualism provides an avenue out of 'crippling essentialist categorisations' such as identity and nation; it serves as a prophylactic against parochialism and nationalism. In Australia, where foreign languages are undervalued and English 'preciously protected', he writes, literary discourse has become 'the last bastion of conservative appropriation' and canons are defended along 'predominantly patrician lines.'

Classifying an author, or a text, as bi- or multilingual does not in itself say much about it from either an aesthetic or cultural perspective. Just as authors acquire their multilingualism in different circumstances, so texts vary greatly in the way different linguistic registers are incorporated. Authors may, like Samuel Beckett, or, in Australia, Ouyang Yu, write in more than one language. They may write in a non-native language which somehow carries echoes of other linguistic sensibilities. They may actually mix different languages in the same text, use 'weird English' to signal linguistic variations and disjunctions, or they may in diaspora continue to write in their first language, often inflected by structures of more recently acquired tongues. Not surprisingly, language is often thematised in diasporic texts, becoming the focus for an ongoing exploration of its affective, cultural and political dimensions, as well as its creative potential.

Brian Castro employs a range of techniques to signal the multilingual environment in which his own linguistic sensibilities were formed, and many of his characters share. The notion of 'native' language or 'mother tongue' is not a given in his texts, but the paradigm which links language to identity and belonging nevertheless persists as a shadow haunting his characters. Seamus, his twentieth-century character in *Birds of Passage*, an Australian-born Chinese who grows up knowing nothing about his ancestry, not only discovers in the story of Shan, a nineteenth-century Chinese gold-digger, a possible ancestor, but in his search for cultural and ethnic roots also teaches himself Chinese, the language he believes will bestow on him the coherent identity which eludes him. Similarly, in *The Garden Book*, Swan, another Australian-born Chinese, writes poems in Chinese, which is not her first language. When asked why, she answers that she has no interest in communication. Her calligraphic inscriptions on fragile leaves clearly serve other purposes, such as signalling her own tenuous hold on any sense of origin or identity.

Language is a major preoccupation, perhaps *the* major preoccupation in the work of Ouyang Yu. The struggle between the native and the adopted tongue is graphically illustrated in this untitled poem in *Songs of the Last Chinese Poet*:



**as a writer you feel that your own language is essential**  
...  
**like your own penis**  
**biologically and racially determined**  
**that will only enter the tunnel**  
**of the same language**  
**prepared generations before**  
**by your knowing ancestors**  
**once you are without that language**  
**you are a linguistic eunuch**  
**who will know all the essentials and ingredients of love**  
**like a book**  
**but not the pleasure of it**

Language here is not only somatic, it is also gendered and sexualised. Both the penis and the 'tunnel' are of the same language, fashioned by ancestors to provide sexual and linguistic pleasure; its absence is equated with castration. In his second novel in English, *The English Class*, Ouyang's protagonist Jing (later Gene), who has focused on learning English for most of his life in China, moves to Australia only to find himself suffering from a mental condition diagnosed as 'Chinese-English linguistic and cultural conflict' which not only leaves him unable to swallow most food but also emasculates him. The conflict between languages is played out within the body, and in most of Ouyang's work, causes suffering, mental as well as physical. Interestingly, Ouyang himself does not seem to share the fate of his characters. '[L]anguage is my life/and sexperience', he declares, and this 'sexperience' is carried out in a wide variety of formats in both English and Chinese. Language is his playground, an inexhaustible treasure trove of xenophonic acrobatics:

**For years, living and writing in Australia and imagining China or vice versa as I am, I have never ceased to be amazed by the brilliant sparks that rub off at language contact points, creating a new language.**

Both Ouyang and Castro, like many other diasporic writers, can thus be seen to partake in seemingly contradictory diasporic language practices. On the one hand, an allegiance to the monolingual paradigm is played out in mournful laments for a lost, or never found, organic mother tongue untroubled by other linguistic interference, within which origin, identity and belonging are seamlessly rooted. On the other, the very idea of such a language is deconstructed, through the illusory nature of its premises but also through an aesthetic practice which puts on display a confident multilingual juggling in which the mother tongue, if there is one, is *made strange* and

pathways to somatic, affective, intellectual dimensions of other language experiences are explored. It is a contradiction which may well exist at the heart of all diasporic language experience.

For writers who choose to write (or continue to write) in their first language after migration language takes on new meanings and new functions. Signalling their position outside the mainstream culture, the use of a minority language means addressing a diasporic readership, in some cases also a homeland readership while deliberately excluding the wider host community. *The Poison of Polygamy*, the first Chinese Australian novel, published in instalments in the Chinese language newspaper *Chinese Times* in Melbourne from 1909 to 1910, follows the lives of Chinese gold diggers who came to Australia in the 1850s, but its message is squarely aimed at the diasporic community at the time of writing, in the lead-up to China's republican revolution of 1911. Denouncing polygamy, foot-binding, opium smoking and other practices associated with traditional Chinese culture as represented by the ailing Qing dynasty, the novel (like the newspaper in which it was published) preached the republican cause and warned that such practices were the cause of the poor image of the community within mainstream Australian society. Literary writing frequently serves the function of debating conflicts within diasporic communities or political issues in the homeland; language in such cases becomes a way of signalling that this not a matter for a wider readership. Language also becomes a means of binding the community together, of preserving a culture under pressure from the homogenising force of Anglophone society. Literary societies, publication outlets and online groups are often based on the desire to maintain language as a proxy for culture, heritage and identity. The fact that such initiatives tend to be small and short-lived, rarely surviving into the second and third generation, is an indication of the power of monolingualism within Australian multiculturalism.

There are exceptions, however, and one in particular demonstrates that diasporic writing can create literary communities well beyond national borders. *Việt* (founded 1998), the first Vietnamese language journal in Australia and its successor, the *Tiền Vệ* literary webzine (founded 2002), became the most widely read literary magazine in the Vietnamese diaspora world-wide and although prohibited, has gained a large readership in Vietnam as well. Its importance can be measured by the frequent attempts by the Vietnamese government to hack into and disable its website. As Tuấn Ngọc Nguyễn reports, the journal and webzine, by creating a new readership, allowed some Vietnamese Australian poets who had previously published in English to revert to their mother tongue in their writing.

As we suspected when starting our research, the archives of Australian writing in languages other than English are fragile and easily lost as authors and editors die and copies of journals and books are lost or discarded. A lucky rescue was the journal *An Nahar*, which contained an important body of writing in Arabic. The only surviving

copies of the journal were located in the garage of its editor, and on his death, the family was at a loss as to how to dispose of them. Fortunately this came to the knowledge of my co-researcher Nijmeh Hajjar, who negotiated with the State Library of New South Wales to take over the archive, which is to be digitised and made widely available. Similarly, a PhD student associated with our project, Catherine Seaton, was able to interview Guillermo Hertz shortly before his death. As 'El Gato', Hertz had published some 2000 crónicas in Spanish language newspapers from 1994 to 2006. Through their correspondence, Seaton was given insights into his perspective on a migrant's sense of linguistic and cultural belonging in multicultural Australia. However, for each of these 'rescues', by members of our research team and others, they are numerous losses, as well as large un- or under-explored archives, and an important part of our ambition is therefore that our work will stimulate further research into the literature of other linguistic communities. We are more than grateful to those researchers who, without funding, agreed to contribute to a forthcoming multi-lingual issue of *Australian Literary Studies*, offering an overview of the development of Australian writing in six languages other than those covered by our ARC-funded research. (Apart from the researchers and languages named in our project, the contributors are: Mary Besemers (Polish), Konstandina Dounis (Greek), – Nataša Kampmark (Serbian), Sonia Mycak (Ukrainian), Laetitia Nanquette (Iranian), Gaetano Rando (Italian).)

Will our research, and that of numerous others keen to preserve the archives of multicultural and multilingual writing in Australia and argue for its relevance to the national literary heritage, open another cultural gate to previously barred newcomers? Will Australian literature become multilingual as well as multicultural and will it come to embrace versions of English too 'accented' to be accommodated within narrow definitions of what constitutes a 'native' competency in writing? Will Australia ever overcome its entrenched monolingualism to truly reflect its status as one of the most multicultural nations on earth? While more modest in our aspirations, more aware of the powerful forces behind the monolingual English paradigm than we were at the start of our work, we have been encouraged by the enthusiastic response in part of the literary community, and by the tireless, largely unacknowledged work of writers and scholars toiling to keep literary and linguistic traditions alive. If, as we suspect, this work, creative as well as scholarly, will remain a modest niche within Australian literature, it is a niche emboldened by global cultural developments, a niche we hope will become increasingly visible as Australian culture gains a better understanding of its transnational potential.

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*This essay was first presented as part of Provocations, a new public forum initiated by the J.M. Coetzee Centre for Creative Culture at the University of Adelaide tackling controversies in the arts and humanities. The theme of the first series was 'Who Shot the Albatross?: Gate-keeping in Australian culture'.*

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