Forever elsewhere

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Abstract

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The final poem in the book explores an aging mother's illness, through the lens of a poinsettia plant changing across the seasons. At the outset, we learn that the mother "daily... chides/her mirror" hoping "the love of red will save her" (63). Perhaps the red symbolizes the essential life blood leaving her, but the poinsettia metaphor leaves something out. Whereas language embraced the unknown in the afore-mentioned poems, this poem seems to confine itself to the realm of the elegant: "If only some of [the poinsettias'] fire could stay for her," the mother wishes as she undergoes operations (64). Flowers here seem trivial in light of impending death. Ultimately, they create an emotional distance between the mother and her illness, the speaker and the mother, and the readers and the speaker. What's more, the poem does not extend this metaphor to its fullest and ends with yet another image—one of bread loaves the mother has baked, "cooling/to [their] own shape" (68). Bread in this context seems to stand in for the mother's vulnerability that the poem shies away from.

The emotional landscape again feels shortchanged in "Tijinderally Odyssey," a poem depicting Aboriginal women "keening tribal songs/shuffling hours, histories... after they were taken away/to be 'educated'" (55). The language explores, in eloquent detail, the brutality of British colonization, but I do not see how it transcends mere description. Perhaps I take issue with the detachment between the speaker and the picture the poem paints. The speaker never shifts focus, for example, to detail the women's expressions or her relationship with the women. Rather, the poem simply ends with the Aboriginal women "angrily plaiting their stories" (55). Gallagher's collection sets us up to imagine the persona as one who laments her own removal from those around her. "I was a pair of eyes/traveling across Asia," she confesses early on in the book, in a poem about the distance a camera creates between oneself and the world (11). If only that self-awareness was consistent—particularly in a poem that deals with indigenous culture in the poet's home of Australia—I could better visualize her tigers of cultural divide.

A love left behind, a mother's kneading hands, and grieving Aboriginal women are all compelling subjects, but their poetic frameworks in this collection do not fully satisfy. Gallagher's language begins to portray the external and internal obstacles of discovering one's place in the world. However, the lack of a consistent vulnerability results in emotional detachment between speaker and subject, and between reader and speaker. The poems therefore come across as attempts to isolate some idealized, pure experience. One could argue that a purpose of poetry is to isolate such moments and call our attention to them. To do so effectively, however, the work must show us why we as readers should invest ourselves in exploring that isolation. Perhaps other readers will sense the vulnerability that eludes me, and encounter some tigers on this enchanting Silk Road.

POETRY

Forever Elsewhere
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Thirteen years after his first poetry-collection, Elsewhere could be regarded as 'the best of' John Mateer. What it also is, is Mateer's autobiography: a lyrical, emotional, traumatic and problematic account of the wanderings of a migrant poet, looking for a home. Most of it is there on the page: the childhood and return trips to South Africa, where Mateer was born, and reflections on his many travels, from Asia to Europe and the Americas. Interestingly enough, there is one continent missing here: the place where Mateer migrated to with his family at age 17, and where he now lives: Australia.

The omission of Mateer's country of residence is a telling sign of the poet's current state of mind, and, as far as I can see, a turning point or maybe
even an endpoint for his art. Its genesis lies in the fact that Mateer was born in South Africa, as a white English-speaker. Especially in the “new” South Africa, it has been difficult for white writers to find a comfortable position to speak from. People like André Brink, Breyten Breytenbach and J. M. Coetzee have struggled with guilt, shame and a loss of power for years now, resulting in books that portray white people, especially men, as emasculated losers without a clear identity or belonging. And white South African writers have got another problem: that of language. For white South Africans, there are two languages. Afrikaans has the strongest connection to the land, the continent, and its history. Afrikaans, though, has also been a tool of repression, tainted by Apartheid. English, on the other hand, is the language from elsewhere, the colonial tongue. Both languages, in a way, have got blood on their hands, and are therefore “corrupted.” For Mateer there is another problem as well, that of the migrant writer. Not just because Australian-English is yet another language to master, but also because the experience of being from (his specific) elsewhere has thrown Mateer into another level of non-belonging.

All these problems are more than apparent in Elsewhere. The first section, ‘Azania’, deals with Mateer’s relationship with South Africa, although the country and its emotional associations seep through the cracks of some of the poems in the other sections, on Asia and the Americas, as well. “Azania” starts with an epigraph, “My soul is from elsewhere,” which is not only an explanation of the book’s title, but also a guideline on how to read it. It is almost an allusion to the Flying Dutchman, unable to dock in any harbor even remotely called home. Mateer is troubled by memories that are as vivid as they are complicated. Even during times of civil war and violence, he describes, there are pockets of normality “in my aunt and uncle’s garden” (16), although “they tell me Joburg’s just awful/full of blacks, an African city, dangerous” (16). Politics has invaded memory, turning remembering into something perilous, especially because it is a white South African remembering. There is the filial instinct to protect the mother, for instance, by telling part of her story, realizing at the same time that he is talking to a hostile audience: “What do they know about the life you lived” (8). Mateer starts here, but then has to conclude that everything “must be forgotten” (8): there simply is no space for the white South African story in the current political and literary climate.

Another issue Mateer examines in Elsewhere is language. His English poems are littered with shards of Afrikaans, mostly untranslated, and even words in one of the many languages used by black South Africans. Ultimately, though, this quest for a usable way of communication gets him nowhere. Speaking has become “vomiting” (18) and “there is no voice” (30) left. Mateer’s narrator has turned into “the living ghost” (32); “a poet, another name for emptiness” (38). With “inherited nostalgia” (35) weighing on his mind, and realizing that he has an “African being” without a proper “home-and heartland” (45), he has become “Makwerekwere” (33): a foreigner, somebody that can neither speak or be heard.

And traveling the world obviously does not provide relief either. Everywhere Mateer goes, he tries his surroundings out for size, describing the landscape, the people, the words, hoping that somewhere he will find the niche that has his name on it. In the end, though, there is nothing but emptiness. “The translated man I am is becoming numerical: zero, ok” (68), and even worse: “I am a poet/of every invisibility; desiring to become a la Mexicana/I have inadvertently been born as karaoke” (119).

A review in Antipodes of Mateer’s previous poetry collection, The Ancient Capital of Images, called Mateer “a poet of the Global South,” with a “sense of unusual cosmopolitanism.” After reading Elsewhere, I am less optimistic. With words getting stuck in his mouth wherever he goes and apparently none left for his only physical home, Mateer seems to me less a poet of the world than a lost writer: forever elsewhere.

**CRITICISM**

Ouyang Yu sheds light on representations of Chinese in Australian fiction


Steve Brock
South Australia

Chinese in Australian Fiction, 1888–1988 fills a gap in Australian literary studies, in that it is the first comprehensive analysis of representations of Chinese in Australian fiction. What makes this book all the more unique is that Yu is numbered among those Asian-Australian writers at the forefront of challenging "the traditional representation of the Other by white Australian writers" (353). Since the early 1990s, Yu has published prolifically across genres, including poetry, novels and literary criticism, in both English and Chinese. In addition to being a significant contribution to Australian literary studies, Chinese in Australian Fiction provides a context for re-evaluating Yu's creative output as a poet writing back to Empire.

Chinese in Australian Fiction begins with a brief historical overview of the Chinese in Australia, followed by a chapter outlining the book's theoretical approach. The main theoretical basis for the study is the swinging pendulum of Orientalism, from its negative to positive depictions of the Other. Yu argues convincingly for the retention of the categories ‘racism’ and “stereotype” in his analysis, and by keeping theoretical deliberations to a minimum, he allows adequate space to discuss the novels, poems and literary debates that have shaped representations of Chinese over a century. His clarity of language and argument make the book a pleasure to read, and stylistically, it will appeal both to the specialist and general reader. While negative stereotypes abound and persist in Australian fiction from 1888 to 1988 and beyond, there are a minority of writers throughout who

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