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Encountering the 'other': multiculturalism in contemporary Asian-Australian women's fiction

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In considering some recent novels that revisit issues around multiculturalism in Australia, this paper alludes to Ien Ang who noted in 2001 that a masked racism exists , a form of acceptance through difference, inclusion by virtue of otherness a form of ambivalence (neither fully accepting or excluding) which makes] the immigrant feel neither one this or another, condemned to a life of in betweenness. The ambivalent positioning sums up one of the questions that is asked of multiculturalism; is this a marginal reality in the anglo celtic core or does it belong to the identity of the nation? Similarly the burgeoning field of Asian Australian novels/fiction which seems to be located as ex-centric to the Australian anglo celtic canon- as an alternative field-- but individual novels such as Simone Lazarus *The Pirates Fiancee, The World Waiting to be Made*, and those by Hsu Ming Teo register an impact which might in time become canonical --as a contestatory discourse to white Australian values that are embodied in the canon.

In this paper I compare two novels: *Behind the Moon* by Hsu Ming Teo (2005) and Michele de Kretser's *Questions of Travel* (2012), to ask how their representations of diversity inherent in cross cultural encounters impact on constructions of Australianness and on the national imaginary. That is how far [they move the national project away from homogeneous core/ as strategic interventions into contemporary representational politics do they challenge assumptions of homogeneous identity, by contesting its myths of

authenticity and its narratives of discrimination. [Madsen] . In particular I am interested in the construction of the white settler subjectivity ; for whiteness has traditionally been positioned as a marker of power in the white Australia myth and strengthened by continued definition in relation to other white nations in ways that affect its relation to its non white others and justify its assertion of power to its non white others within- Yet has traditionally been threatened Asian by otherness and both novels expose these insecurities and suggest it as under threat - certainly whiteness becomes both more reduced and more conflicted when represented in the transnational character of such writing which constantly moves beyond the nation to alternative geographical locations, and which has a historical specificity, in detailing the past lives of migrants and the violent forces mobilizing their migration such as the Vietnam War, Pol Pot in Cambodia (in Alice Pungs novel *Unpolished Gem*), the civil war in Sri Lanka.

Secondly is the question of home and belonging which both novels grapple with in presenting characters who test out their positionality and constantly reshape identities both at home and abroad, showing different constructions of national belonging . Hsu-Ming Teo's novel, *Behind the Moon* is a multicultural narrative of inner city life in Australia with a transnational reach – reaching back to Vietnam War and with travel of one character to the USA; de Kretser's *Questions of Travel* might be defined as a 21st c global novel with contemporary settings in the UK and Sri Lanka, as well as Australia where most of the strategic action occurs. I suggest that de Kretser's narratives of the distinct yet overlapping trajectories of wandering white Australian protagonist and a dislocated Sri Lankan refugee who meet briefly in Sydney—two images of estrangement and travel—moves the multicultural novel into a different space

from Teo's novel. The very narrative structure-giving equal narrative space to the two stories—hints at an attempt to symbolically realign/create a new alignment between the white Anglo presence with the multicultural marginal Asian one.

Being at home- the issue which preoccupies the character of both novels so extensively (whether seeking or becoming alienated)- is a state that is constantly infiltrated by its opposite –not being at home, or The freudian concept of unheimlich, according to Ruth Mummery in her article 'Being Not at Home: A Conceptual Discussion'

Mummery points out that most hyphenated diaspora communities differ from other communities in that they are constituted in terms of practices and actions of not-at-homeness- e.g. they are not at home in any attempted definitions of them by the 'they', whether the they is the host, the homeland or the wider diasporic community – and this in turn means they also hold onto more complex even idealised senses of at-homeness. So not at homeness is associated with non acceptance or alienation within the host society ,and at-homeness is tied to a sense of continued identification with the ancestral society. But this is true not just of migrant communities but also for the white settler who has traditionally been identified through what Stephen Slemon,(REF) identifies as an 'ambivalence of emplacement' – not really belonging to either the indigenous culture of Australia which they had colonised and dispossessed, and now removed and distanced from the Anglophone metropolitan homeland form which they came, but whose acts of exclusion have traditionally been committed in order to protect this tentative/ acquired emplacement. [

Mummery suggests in considering hyphenated states of migrant communities and individuals, that these should not be configured as an alternative identity in diaspora (which runs the risk of being closed off), but, to in the form of a practice of not-at-homeness in terms of potentiality and becoming). This I believe has relevance for both the novels, in that their characters try to practice not-at-homeness, but ultimately seek ones that will give them the illusion of being at home, in each case becoming fixed positions, and it is the difference between these idealisations of home and belonging that constitutes one of the shifts that I identify between the two novels.

Beyond the Moon ends with the formation of an alternative community based on what Vijay Mishra calls the affirmation of the hyphen, that is it is a complex multicultural space, whose rationale of belonging resists co-option to white Australian norms and expectations (and therefore seems a fixed position) It consists of three characters live in Sydney: the gay Chinese Australian Justin, who suffers extreme victimisation as he is beaten up by white Australian racists and anti-gays and remains in a coma at the novels end; and the multiracial Tien HO, a refugee who is part Vietnamese, part black American, and at novels end who returns from her failing marriage to be at Justin's side. The third is the white Australian boy, Nigel Gibson, or Gibbo whose lack of social skills makes him an outsider and who speculates that he might have some Asian ethnicity, in order to better explain himself to himself and find greater belonging in this community than that offered by the white Australian one. Their interrelationships contribute to the novel's overturning of the stereotypes of gender and heteronormativity in order to emphasise / demarcate a difference from white Australianness: They have known each other from school days but

their decision to remain together at novel's end is a consequence of violent homophobia and racism suffered by Justin- this contingency urges their articulation of alternative affiliations and loyalties, and involves rejection of the norms of heterosexuality and marriage..

When they are together even if they're steeped in fear and pain and confusion, they are no longer living on the fraying fringes of a difficult and hostile world, They are at the stable centre of the universe and life is simply the way it should be. 363

This suggests a practice of difference and differentiation - -but All the same risks being closed off.

Teo's critique of the normative Anglo Australian core goes further than anonymous right wing homophobes like queer bashers . The novels stresses insecurities and the increased need to belong which underpin white forms of exclusion, as experienced by Bob Gibson, Gibbo's father, who had been a Vietnam veteran. At a dinner party offered by Justin's parents he feels outnumbered by the Asians, and resentful of what he perceives as their patronizing attitudes towards him he explodes into racist hostility, calling them chinks, Later in the novel he is made to feel even more not at home by the extreme experiences of the three children including his own son -whom he loves- and wishes to lash out

Bob couldn't help but feel bewildered by what had happened to this society, to the kids he once knew. And under his hurt and confusion there was a growing need to strike back and stake out his own territory, otherwise how was he ever going to feel at home again in the very place he'd lived in all his life. (283)

In de Kretser's *Questions of travel* both white Australian and Asian characters are associated with the archaic concepts of homeland that Mummery sees as

distinctive of diaspora communities. The itinerant protagonist Laura, who travels from Sydney to England on her aunt's inheritance, embodies the restlessness associated with most white settlers societies and affirms ancestral belonging. The narrator points out how being in England suits her ethnically: as she is 'a large white girl, firm-fleshed, the flesh rose flushed, and fine grained. The bloom that would have begun to wilt, in Sydney was ancestrally suited to England's damp cold' (83)

The Sinhalese Ravi Mendise comes from a comfortable, middle class home in a town near Colombo in Sri Lanka but is dislocated when his wife and child are brutally murdered and he leaves on a temporary visa for Australia. His origin and identity are positioned in opposition to Laura, as the narrative structure suggests: at the end of the first half of the novel she ends her exile in Europe and returns 'home' and he leaves his home and begins his exile as a refugee in Australia. **Laura** is the cosmopolitan, tourist/observer who roams the world as an always belated traveller embodying ambivalence and uncertainty; in Sri Lanka which she visits as a tourist destination, she is the observer and Sri Lankans like Ravi are the observed. He seems to occupy a multicultural space in Australia by contrast to her cosmopolitan global one, especially as he soon finds himself in the company of a group of Ethiopian migrants although they are unable to provide him with answers to his problems or help him find a place.

Unlike Ravi Laura never really seems to find the circumstances of belonging and not-belonging as an issue, even though she is constantly reminded of being an Australian while she is in Europe. After her prolonged separation from her country she returns to as a stranger, and she views Sydney both as an insider and a foreigner. Ravi by contrast never comes to terms with his exile

and driven by increasing homesickness, and nostalgia at the end of the novel he decides to return to Sri Lanka despite the dangers and risks of being killed by his wife's nameless murderers or of finding himself a stranger there.

De Kretser introduces cases of racial discrimination and 'othering' of Ravi as Chandani Loguke pointed out yesterday- of acceptance through difference and inclusion by virtue of otherness – Ravi has to work in a menial job in a western suburbs nursing home, and is aware that his specific ethnicity and religion (as a Sinhalese) Buddhist are not recognized in Australia, where all Sri Lankans are seen under the one banner of difference, for example. But he is also greeted with hospitality and acts of kindness on arrival, is taken in by a family who give him somewhere to live. Later through a network of influence, he is appointed an IT administrator for Ramsay the global travel guide publishing company where Laura works, and where their paths finally cross. Despite hints at the negativity of the official line on refugees in Australia at the time the novel was written [in 2012 over 5000 Sri Lankan refugees sought asylum in Australia but were branded as illegal immigrant and taken to detention facilities like Christmas Island or were returned], he is surprisingly granted permission to reside, although it was an agonisingly protracted process and possibly comes too late.

But de Kretser stresses that his lack of belonging is mainly due to his inability to break the psychological impasse of grief at his wife and child's murder or to communicate the reasons for his refugee status to anyone he meets. His homesickness is reinforced by the death of his mother, his communications with his sisters about what will happen to the family home and the discovery of a

website constructed by his IT friend in Sri Lanka which is a memorial to his wife and child, create feelings of loss and nostalgia . Ravi's sense of not-at-homeness, therefore, is not just associated with alienation due to the various forms of intolerance or mild discrimination, ranging from non acceptance to affectionate exoticisation as they are for characters in *Behind the Moon* and in Hsu-Ming Teo's earlier novel, *Love and Vertigo* (2000) as well as novels such as Arlene Chai's *On the Goddess rock* (1989) and *The Last Time I Saw Mother* (1995) but also with recognition of essential loss and a fear of losing his originary identity. His idealization of the ancestral home is reinforced by the global technological revolution of the internet that expand all horizons in the novel, which facilitates frequent communication with Sri Lanka enabling him to create a virtual homeland.

At a more theoretical level, [if we return to Mummery's advocation of **constructing hyphenated identities** as practice to be negotiated or a performance, stresses] Ravi is unable to move beyond his historical circumstances to develop and practice this more complex sense of not-at-homeness; he returns to Sri Lanka guided by the wish to recapture an earlier version of home, entering into a totalizing horizon of identity, a form of revived ethnic essentialism - countering sensations of grief, absence, loss and distance with a belief in prior constructions of family and home.

CONCLUSION: In figure of Laura who displays an almost willful alienation and rejection of belonging, and whose career as a travel writer for the global corporate firm of Ramsay allows her to create a lifestyle based on international travel and tourism, can be read as further weakening of the national ties (and

maybe the authority) within the Anglo Celtic core by contrast to Bob Gibbon in *Behind the Moon* whose conflict over perceived threats to his authority push him towards a strengthening of his place ‘at home’: furthermore there are hints of her victim status on grounds of gender and ethnicity: her twin brothers try to murder her when she is baby, Ravi has murderous thoughts when he considers her as tourist in Sri Lanka: ‘He saw the rooms of childhood forced open, despoiled, laid bare to the light . She loomed over him, sly and suggestive and—I’d like to kill you he thought’ (490) ; and in the hand of god ending, fate deals the final blow: it is hinted that she is swept away in the 2004 tsunami that hits Sri Lanka when she is travelling there..

The structure of the novel and the parallel narratives invite certain readings. In place of the socially divisive, conflictual discrimination and ugly racism that is represented in other Asian Australian novels, Laura and her peers/generation represents a greater tolerance for the Asian outsider as well as more limited belonging and attachment, as global values / connections infiltrate national ones. Nor do the syncretic affiliations and potential solidarities of the diaspora communities that characters in *Behind the Moon*, work for Ravi in the other multicultural figures he encounters. His decision to turn his back on the forms of cultural inclusiveness he has found-]the right to stay on, employment with the global family firm of Ramsay-- and return to Sri Lanka shows the view of diaspora as one of loss, dislocation , and idealization of homeland. But in contrast to Laura’s mobility with its hint that the white Australian takes national belonging for granted, this suggests a revaluing of home and belonging, a renewed appreciation of originary place, family and society. De Kretser’s novel

might reflect the changes in Australia towards a greater tolerance and acceptance of Asian migrants after the rise of global anti-terrorist rhetoric in the first decade of this century (and increased right wing hostility toward muslim groups as find in the UK). Then again, de Kretser is very likely to be cognizant of the debates on multiculturalism and may have been inspired to take up/identify different positions that shift/reposition the cultural boundaries beyond the black and white divisions of Teo's novel. The fact that the novel won the Miles Franklin Award in 2013 suggest that when perspectives of white settler unbelonging are relativised alongside the experience of the alienated , dislocated diasporan, who nevertheless it is hinted, take something of Australia with him (inside him) 'Australia had entered Ravi. Now it would keep him company no matter where in the world he went (264) – then there is some potential for accepting plural diverse perspectives. The Asian figure is less of marginal reality and although he does not succeed in belonging to the core, perhaps can be identified with the rebranding of Australian identity that this novel presents, as both global or transnational and national.

