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Writing about Asia from Australia: notes towards avoiding a firm view

Abstract:

This discursive essay – part exegesis, part literary analysis – analyses the act of writing about Asia from Australia (and from the west). I use the circumstances of my early childhood to frame my interest in ‘Asia’, suggesting that Australia is a genuinely diverse nation that is engaged with the region but that it also retains and values a monocultural outlook. In turn, I analyse several novels by westerners about Cambodia and the Khmer Rouge (including my own novel, *Figurehead*) to reflect on, first, cultural appropriation, and, second, the limits of empathy in fiction.

Biographical note:

Patrick Allington is a Lecturer in English and Creative Writing at Flinders University. His novel *Figurehead* (Black Inc.) was published in 2009, and his essays, short fiction, critical writings and columns have appeared widely. He was formerly Commissioning Editor for the University of Adelaide Press.

Keywords:

Creative writing – Australia – Asia – Cambodia – Khmer Rouge

1

Yes, sure, I know, I get it: there's no such thing as 'Asia'.

2

Australia is fond of claiming an Asian identity. I don't dismiss this claim: despite the economic and political expediency of the aspiration – as in, 'it's the Asian century isn't it, so we'd better call ourselves Asian' – Australia *should* think of itself as connected to Asia, and not just in the context of trade missions. As Allan Gyngall's study of Australian foreign policy since World War II clearly shows, Australia's modern engagement with Asia is complex and multi-faceted (2017). But what we sometimes appear to want is an Asianness that we can order online from Amazon, with free shipping and maybe a 20% discount on future purchases. Australia is a multicultural country – it truly is – but in 2017 the spirit of our multiculturalism seems at times threatened and at other times tokenistic. In summary, Australia is genuinely diverse, open-armed and filled with Asian-Australians and all sorts of other Australians *and* Australia is racist and reactionary.

3

At one point in *Johnno* (1975), David Malouf's novel about growing up in Brisbane, the character Dante says, 'What *is* Australia, anyway?' Reference needed for this essay: find the authoritative quote that says, 'What the hell *is* Asia, anyway?'

4

My birth mother was an Anglo Australian woman. My birth father was Thai. I know almost nothing about my natural mother – a name, plus a guess or two – and nothing at all about my birth father. To be clear, I'm not complaining: I have never chased people or information. Maybe I never will.

When I was six weeks old, my mum, dad, sister and brother adopted me. The South Australia of 1969 was a whitewashed sort of place. America and her allies, including Australia, was at war in Vietnam. The day my family collected me (makes me sound like a container of takeaway butter chicken, doesn't it? With rice and garlic naan and a bottle of fizzy drink), they stopped at a shop for supplies: cloth nappies, formula, whatever. Mum was wheeling me around the shop in a pusher when a woman came up and had a good long hard look at me: 'Will he eat normal food?' she asked eventually, 'or will he only eat rice?' Perhaps it is a slight stretch for me to claim that my particular interest in writing about Asia stems from this moment. The main participant with no memory of participating ... now a citizen of a nation with a fine capacity for forgetting and avoiding.

5

My interest in Asia, whatever 'Asia' is, revolves around the way Australians (and the west) engage with, or don't engage with, the Asia-Pacific region. For example, my novel *Figurehead* (2009), a political satire, is largely about a fictional Khmer Rouge leader albeit based on the real-life historical figure, Khieu Samphan. Kiry's role is to

be the carefully crafted public face of Khmer Rouge, the bloke who other world leaders can bear to shake hands with, have their photos taken with, negotiate with. *Figurehead* is also about an old leftist reporter, Ted Whittlemore, who is inspired by the Australian journalist Wilfred Burchett. Ted is an outsider but he becomes an insider of sorts, until ill-health sends him wincing and moaning back to Adelaide.

6

Once, at a writers' festival somewhere in Southeast Asia, I read a passage from *Figurehead* to a small audience in a tiny bar. It went okay. Then, while rehydrating with a local lager, I listened to a tall, hulking, billiard ball-headed bloke, who came from the hinterland of the mainstream, performing his idiosyncratic, funny, sharp, explicit poetry: another Australian being his strange self in a strange land.

By the time the readings were done, it was dusk. I rushed to my hotel room to change my sodden shirt before another festival dinner, because you never know who you might accidentally on purpose bump into at a writing festival in Asia and because if you want to come across as 'engaging and open' and 'comfortable and relaxed' and 'gone native', it's important to be seen to be able to handle the humidity. Also, any good writer – this is certainly true for Australian writers, or at least South Australian writers, or at least Adelaide writers – knows that you need different outfits for reading aloud to a live audience and for eating finger food while standing up.

But in my haste to change my shirt – I was running, literally running late – I stepped into a hole. Bloody Asian footpaths (yep, sure, there's no such thing as an 'Asian footpath'). I wet my shoes; I ripped my jeans; I scraped my leg; I felt no pain. Embedded in the earth – like a backpacker marooned on a bamboo mat after trying opium, pretending to experience a moment of profound cultural awareness – I looked around, embarrassed. A nearby group of local men, corralled by their motorbikes, eyed me, their faces a mix of concern and amusement and friendly disdain: clearly, my 'gone native' qualities were not fully on display. I pulled myself out of the hole. 'I'm fine,' I said, which means, when translated from Australian English into Asian, 'Don't laugh at me.'

Back in my hotel room, I peeled off my pants and found I'd gashed my leg below the knee. Truly, it was like a war wound. A doctor came and inserted stitches inside and outside my leg, while a volunteer from the writers' festival watched and fed me paracetamol. And the next morning, before I went on stage to do some bookchat, Thomas Keneally fussed, fetching a spare chair so I could elevate my leg. Tom probably saved my life that day.

7

From the edited transcript of reporter Liz Jackson's interview with then Prime Minister John Howard during the 1996 Australian election campaign. *Four Corners*, ABC Television, first broadcast 19 February 1996:

Q. Can you give us a John Howard vision for the Year 2000 to the Australian public, such that they will see yes, this is the person we would like to be PM? A. Let me respond to your question by saying this, I would ... by the Year 2000 I would like to see an Australian nation that feels comfortable and relaxed about three things: I

would like to see them comfortable and relaxed about their history; I would like to see them comfortable and relaxed about the present and I'd also like to see them comfortable and relaxed about the future. I want to see an Australian society where the small business sector is providing more jobs for young people. I want to see an Australian society that sees this country as a unique intersection of Europe, North America and Asia. Australia is incredibly lucky to have a European heritage, deep connections with North America, but to be geographically cast in the Asian/Pacific region and if we think of ourselves as that strategic intersection, then I think we have a remarkable opportunity to carve a special niche for ourselves in ... in the history of the next century.

Q. But do you think... to pick up on those words, comfortable and relaxed, do you think that's a dynamic enough vision to inspire Australians as they move into the next millennium? Do you think people think, well – I want to feel comfortable and relaxed? Is that dynamic enough for Australians?

A. I think ... I think people do want to feel comfortable and relaxed.

Q. They don't want to feel excited?

A. Well you can't possibly hope to feel excited about something unless you feel comfortable and familiar with it. If you really want to drive Australians away from interest in something, you ... you disturb their sense of ... of sort of comfort about it and you will succeed in driving them away from it. (Jackson: 1996)

8

There's a 'comfortable and relaxed' feeling on offer for those of us who choose to dwell on the dichotomy of Australia as racist and yet genuinely diverse. Sure, we have the extremist, racist, anti-science, anti-humanist pronouncements and posturings of Pauline Hanson and other politicians and anyone who openly supports them, votes for them or flirts with them. But don't forget – never forget – that the current Shadow Minister for Foreign Affairs, the ALP's Penny Wong, was born in Malaysia. She's also gay: Christ almighty, wowie, as a footy commentator might say, how bloody advanced are we to be okay about that? But the existence of Penny Wong doesn't cancel out Pauline Hanson or citizens who publicly cheer her or give quiet, private thanks for her, any more than the existence of Penny Wong cancels out, say, the federal ALP's recent refugee policies.

9

Extract from Pauline Hanson's maiden speech to parliament as the Member for Oxley, 1996:

I and most Australians want our immigration policy radically reviewed and that of multiculturalism abolished. I believe we are in danger of being swamped by Asians. Between 1984 and 1995, 40 per cent of all migrants coming into this country were of Asian origin. They have their own culture and religion, form ghettos and do not assimilate. Of course, I will be called racist but, if I can invite whom I want into my home, then I should have the right to have a say in who comes into my country. A truly multicultural country can never be strong or united. The world is full of failed and tragic examples, ranging from Ireland to Bosnia to Africa and, closer to home, Papua New Guinea. America and Great Britain are currently paying the price. Arthur

Calwell was a great Australian and Labor leader, and it is a pity that there are not men of his stature sitting on the opposition benches today. Arthur Calwell said: 'Japan, India, Burma, Ceylon and every new African nation are fiercely anti-white and anti one another. Do we want or need any of these people here? I am one red-blooded Australian who says no and who speaks for 90 per cent of Australians.' I have no hesitation in echoing the words of Arthur Calwell. (Hanson: 1996)

10

Arthur Calwell notwithstanding, I believe that sweet and sour pork gets a bad rap these days. And sometimes I pine for macaroni cheese: so yellow, so shiny, so gluggy with nostalgia. And for spaghetti from the tin. And for twenty cents of mixed chocolate lollies. And for fish and chips on Friday night. And for garlic salt in a cheddar cheese sandwich, toasted in the vertical grill.

11

Did crossing the Tonle Sap – the vast lake in Cambodia's west – by tinny change the way I wrote *Figurehead*? Did going to a town called Pailin, populated by ex-Khmer Rouge, and eating my lunch in the market there change the way I wrote *Figurehead*? Did scribbling a first draft while watching a sunset and having a beer by rivers and beaches, surrounded by backpackers, change the way I wrote *Figurehead*? Yes to all of that, but in intangible ways, and in ways I prefer remain intangible. I do not claim authenticity for the novel – and if I was foolish enough to try to do so, people who know better would be quick to point out my folly, if they could be bothered.

The Cambodia in *Figurehead* is as much an imaginary place as it is a foreign place. It's recognisable, perhaps – the capital city *is* Phnom Penh, the great river *is* the Mekong, and the legacy of the Pol Pot period hangs over everything, like a statue in a town centre that nobody wants to look at. But – for me, at least – the Cambodia of *Figurehead* exists as if in a parallel universe. That's as close to realism as I can manage ... as I want to manage. And yet I want it both ways: *Figurehead* does still rely on the real world, on the historical record, on real places and people: when a fiction writer writes, say, 'Mekong River' – or, say, 'New York City' – it already means something to the reader. When a fiction writer uses the name 'Pol Pot', as I do in *Figurehead*, it already means something to many readers, even readers with a sketchy knowledge of recent Cambodian history, because Pot Pot's name is synonymous with a time of unfathomable brutality, when his Khmer Rouge controlled Cambodia from April 1975 to January 1979.

Swedish writer Peter Fröberg Idling's novel *Song for an Approaching Storm: a fantasy* (2015) includes a portrait of a young would-be revolutionary called Sar, a fictionalised version of the man who later became known as Pol Pot. Idling's Sar seems laconic, but there is turbulence behind his carefully constructed façade. At times, Sar is compassionate, which is confounding for the historically aware reader. At other times, his single-mindedness is chilling, which partly reflects Idling's skilful characterisation and partly reflects the pre-existing potency of the historical figure-in-waiting. While Sar is one of three primary characters in the novel, his story and presence dominate because Idling's version of Sar mingles with the reader's awareness of the historical figure of Pol Pot. Idling's portrait is acutely unsettling in part because of this: Sar is a love-struck young man who, a couple of decades after the

events depicted in the novel, becomes one of the most reviled figures in human history.

12

I once started, but never finished, a short story about a man called Tom who falls into a ditch beside a road in a town in Asia. Tom, unlike me when I fell into a real-life ditch in real-life Asia, cannot climb out. His foot lodges between two tiles of an ancient and long-forgotten cave temple. (I'm not sure what religion. It doesn't matter for the purposes of the story. Maybe some sort of combo: a bit of Buddha, a bit of Vishnu, a bit of Muhammad, a bit of animism, a bit of Sihanouk, a bit of lemon chicken.)

In what passes for a plot in this abandoned short story, the authorities — sub-committees of locals and multilaterals, of engineers and ethicists and tourism chiefs and international lawyers – debate how to free Tom without damaging the roof of the temple. Years pass. A team of medical experts keep Tom healthy, keep the blood in his leg flowing. A cook keeps him well-fed (and Tom's favourite food, over the years of his captivity, shifts from veal schnitzel and chips to spring rolls with a sweet chilli dipping sauce to anything with kimchi). Tom marries a local girl, Mye. He knows it's true love because he's always said – ask his mates from back home – that Asian chicks don't really do it for him. Not in a sex tourism way.

13

I really should quote something from that Benedict Anderson book (2006).

14

In some novels written by westerners and set in Cambodia, the main character – a principled, head-in-the-clouds white bloke, an adventurer, a seeker of the deepest truths – meets a sticky end. In Margaret Drabble's *The Gates of Ivory* (1991), novelist Stephen Cox dies of malaria in the Cambodian jungle. In Christopher Koch's account of war journalism, *Highways to a War* (1995), Khmer Rouge soldiers crucify the Australian photographer, Mike Langford. In William T. Vollman's unpleasant but sometimes tender and often brilliant *Butterfly Stories* (1993), the anti-hero commits suicide by sneaking across the Thai-Cambodian border and into the clutches of underage soldiers: 'Are you imperialist lackey of traitor? a boy shouted. – Yes, he beamed. I am a traitor' (276).

I admire each of these novels. Drabble tries to grapple with some of the complexities of the Pol Pot period, and shows Cambodia as an international as well as domestic catastrophe. In that sense, I disagree with Milton Osborne, who suggests that *The Gates of Ivory* 'is more concerned with the inner lives of its London-based characters than with the exotic world of Thailand, Vietnam and Cambodia where they briefly find themselves (2008: 177). Koch offers a keenly observed and evocative portrait of a war photographer, inspired by the life of Tasmanian Neil Davis (see Tim Bowden (1987)). Vollman's character 'Butterfly Boy' is misguided and at times repellent, but Vollman's picture of a Cambodia limping to peace with the 'help' of the international community is startling. But what all three central characters in the three novels have

in common – something they share with some other novels set in Cambodia – is that the central character wants desperately, even obsessively, to empathise with the plight of the Cambodian people. But how do you share the burden of a people who have experienced decades of war, with a people who endured the Pol Pot period when an estimated 1.5 million Cambodians, out of a population of something like 8.5 million, died of starvation, overwork, disease or murder? It seems from these novels that you display your empathy by also suffering and by also dying. Because anything less is a hollow gesture. Koch perhaps goes furthest here. While there are accounts of the Khmer Rouge employing crucifixion, for Mike Langford to die in this way has unavoidable connotations with Jesus Christ dying to save the sins of the world.

15

Figurehead is, at least as I see it, not only about Cambodia, but Cambodia and the world, Cambodia and Australia, Cambodia and Adelaide. Ted Whittlemore drifts into a coma and dies in bed at the Concertina Rest Home in North Adelaide, still raging against America's crimes, still rooting for the underdog. Adelaide suburbia damns Ted Whittlemore, and Ted damns Adelaide suburbia right back, even as he takes minor solace from getting to know his son and granddaughter. Ted believes that everyone is a partisan, a propagandist, most especially those people who feign neutrality or hide behind the need for balance or delude themselves into believing that their personal politics are moderate or centrist. Ted understands that Adelaide is a world-class place to be if you want to avert your gaze.

After Ted retreats to the Concertina Rest Home – by now Drabble, Koch and Vollman's characters have become martyrs by proxy – the Khmer Rouge movement carries on fighting and negotiating its way back towards national, regional and international relevance and respectability. It's not only Ted Whittlemore's broken body that sinks into suburban obscurity; it's his life and times, his philosophy. Nhem Kiry – Khmer Rouge cleanskin – outlasts him and barely raises a sweat doing so. Ted's final days, including the horror Ted feels at Nhem Kiry's longevity, winks at the sturdiness of the West's collective 'innocence' and the potency of our wilful and well-crafted naivety.

16

Recently, writer and journalist Bonnie Tsui went out to dinner:

One Friday night at a bar in San Francisco, I took a look at the menu and found myself face to face once again with the curious modern-day ubiquity of the Asian salad. The 'Asian Emperor Salad,' with its '31 ingredients representing the tastes, textures and flavors of Asia,' stirred something other than hunger in me. (2017)

Tsui tracks the history of appropriation of certain ingredients ('adding ginger and soy sauce') and cuisines: 'This use of "Oriental" and "Asian",' she argues, 'is rooted in the wide-ranging, "all look same" stereotypes of Asian culture that most people don't really perceive as being racist.' In writing *Figurehead*, am I engaging in the literary equivalent of fusion food, adding ginger and soy sauce to my words? How about Drabble, Koch, Vollman or Idling? I ask this not to condemn myself – I make no

apology for writing and publishing *Figurehead*. I ask this not to condemn these other novelists, whose imperfect novels inform and enthrall me. I ask it because if my discussion here dwells on dichotomies (Australia is part of Asia *and* it is not part of Asia, Australia is diverse *and* it is racist), on the use of (dire) historical events and (infamous) people to drive narrative in fiction, on the limits of empathy, and on the false comfort that can come from engaging with the complexities apparent in all of this, I want to at least acknowledge that I stand in the midst of all this messiness, not apart from it.

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