

The Self, the Place and the Others: the literature of migration broadcast on *Books and Writing*, ABC Radio National, November 1989

Inez Baranay: But it's early days and I go about my research job and the taxi drivers tell me what they think of Coming-Soon Multicultural Television. It's them & us, them & us. If it's *us* they're glad to hear what they'll be watching if they come from a country with a film industry that makes films that were in the package that the buyer liked that won't stir up politics. If it's *us* the taxi driver stops the cab in crowded Parramatta Road so overcome with emotion because not only do I now know about Oum Khalsoum, I promise he'll see her on TV and the date. If it's *them* the driver says with some belligerence: 'They should be learning English, shouldn't they?' and I say: 'Not all Australians speak English as their first language', really believing this, believing *in* this. 'Not all Australians have English origins.' And he stops the car in the middle of the crowded Harbour Bridge. He doesn't want to drive me any more. I feebly resort to: 'They'll learn English from the sub-titles.'

So this lunch, that day, a few years later, a few years ago. We have shrugged off our disillusionment with multicultural TV; we've got other things on our minds. Though remember, we did think at the time at last at last, this is *us* and for us and made for us to do.

It is a beautiful day so lunch is al fresco, smoked turkey and salad on rye, looking at the glittery Harbour of the best city in the luckiest easiest country in the world.

Diana Giese: Inez Baranay was reading at the Post-Colonial Literatures and Language Research Centre at Macquarie University. The Centre is the culmination of a research initiative that has been gathering strength for some sixteen years, its field earlier identified as Commonwealth writing or new literatures in English. Now it's settled, for the time being at least, on 'post-colonial', implying, rather contentiously, that colonialism has now been safely discarded. The terminology subsumed under the title of the recent conference at the Centre, *A Change of Skies: The Literature of Migration*, proved equally contentious throughout a stimulating and well-organised weekend, overseen by Rosemary Colmer. Terms such as the self, the other, displacement, dislocation, home, exile, centre, margin, assimilation and multiculturalism recurred. Critical papers spoke to one another and across one

another. There were bravura displays of technique and painstaking explications. Migrations of every sort were discussed: from one language to another, from one culture to another, from one political system to another; from village to city, from country to country.

Fiji Indian scholar Satendra Nandan asserted that to read a line or a page is to enter into an imaginative migration and, citing Grass, Naipaul, Kundera and Rushdie, that the migrant could be seen as the central defining figure of the twentieth century.

Professor Edward Baugh, Commonwealth Visiting Fellow from the West Indies, said that resorting to 'the notorious binary opposites' in speaking of migration and the migrant means speaking of the kinds of tension between movement and rest, home and homelessness, rootedness and disconnectedness that are in fact part of the human condition, even of the lives of those who never move from a given little village from birth to death. We shouldn't universalise the migrant experience until it becomes meaningless, he said.

Eddie Baugh: Who is the margin? Who defines the margin? Who defines the centre? It's largely a matter of how you see yourself. Though of course there are real political, economic, material aspects of a question like that. After all, a person who is at the bottom of the economic ladder in a society is quite clearly marginalised in some way...The question is: does it matter whether we categorise people in this way or not? If it matters, to the extent that it matters, might it not be that it suits some people to categorise others by terms like 'migrant' as a useful way of dealing with those other people?

Diana Giese: Power relations between academics and the migrant subjects of their critical work were raised in discussion. Vietnamese Australian author Uyen Loewald drew the useful distinction between working *with* and working *on*, noting that feminists, for instance, have been concerned with working in solidarity. Inez Baranay again:

Inez Baranay: Then we are thirty or thirty-five and we meet for lunch near the television station where we all work or have worked. Multicultural Television. Double-You-Oh-Gee Tee Vee.

I had my job there when I'd just come back from Europe, back to be an Australian. It was a new decade and there was going to be a new Australia and multicultural TV. I worked with real Australians and the men (don't stop me there, of course men) who ran the station, made policies, bought programs and said what-was-what, had English names and were real Australians too. They made jokes like: 'It's now the able-bodied heterosexual white Anglo male who's discriminated against.' (What's discrimination—calling a bluff, losing?)

'Wogs, women, Abos and cripples become boards, units, projects and fat public money salaries. And politer ways of saying it. And the pragmatic truth is' (I listened to this), 'all the new reffos and boat people are a bunch of in-fighting factionalised sub-divided gang-war lot, and Luigi, Abdul, Loh are building their own empires, manipulating the divisions. And we real Australians divide and rule, divide and rule as our Englishness makes us so naturally able.

'So you can't have them running these things, though they are welcome to write in or be elected to something.'

Diana Giese: Setting the literature of migration in the context of wider social and political debates means taking into account that people are often forced to move for the most basic reasons: to survive, to find work, to seek a better life for their children. What can literature add to the analyses? Two of the most interesting papers presented at the conference dealt with exile as Cortazar's 'terrible mirror' in which one sees a reflection of the self stripped bare of the comforting fictions of everyday life.

The particular sort of exile that Michele Grossman of Monash discussed in her paper on Nadine Gordimer's *July's People* is exile in one's 'own' country. Grossman noted how Gordimer balances the dramatic exile of her white protagonists from the war-torn Johannesburg of an imagined future with 'the present perpetual and pervasive exile of its blacks...manifested daily'. Like the book, Grossman's paper moves towards the confrontation between former servant and mistress, when the black man addresses the white woman who is 'not his mother, his wife, his sister, his friend, his people'—in his own language. The novel's narrative provides a strategy enabling those banished from the old order to become pioneers of the new. Grossman suggests that the final exiled figure is the reader who, like the woman, experiences a nostalgic

desire for an unattainable future akin to that of the reader for narrative closure 'which the speculative future of South Africa does not accommodate'.

Brent MacLaine's paper, paired with Grossman's, dealt with Japanese Canadian Joy Kogawa's 1981 novel *Obasan*. This 'story that needed to be told' chronicles the psychological effects of the seizure of property and internment of Japanese Canadians during World War II. The book moves beyond calls for social and moral correction; it deals, rather, with 'abuses to the soul'. 'When one is a victim of dislocation and dispossession; when one is exiled and forbidden the usual sources of communion, familial, social or spiritual' said MacLaine, 'a visionary realm of discourse' may be the only way of reaching understanding. Work in this difficult area is rare, and many who attended the weekend expressed interest in seeking out Kogawa's book.

The conference brought together several scholars such as MacLaine who migrate temporarily from country to country, carrying with them their own cultural baggage. He is currently offering an honours course in Canadian literature at the National University of Singapore, with colleagues who teach Southeast Asian and Malaysian literature, and Chinese and Japanese literature in translation. Of the course, he says:

Brent MacLaine: It's necessarily a survey and an introduction. And I have to begin with a map. Size, for instance, is a great problem. I don't think my students understand the sheer size of Canada. I tell them that it takes twenty minutes to drive from one side of Singapore to the other if the freeway is not too crowded, whereas if I were to do the same thing in Canada, it would take me six days. It shocks them: they don't have that sense of scale. That's important, because it affects the literature that they're reading. To speak of Canadian literature is to speak of different kinds of literature in the country, and one of the things it's governed by is the space, the geography. Eastern Canadian experience is going to be quite different from French Canadian, and different again from Western Canadian.

Diana Giese: Eddie Baugh described how part of West Indian literature has moved to Canada.

Eddie Baugh: The society was in fact built on migration, which happened two or three centuries ago, largely forced migration in the sense that most of the people in the West Indies that constitute West Indian society now came from Africa as slaves

and from India as indentured labourers. But latterly, of course, we have to deal with the sense of migration outwards: emigration. So in literature, there is the development, especially in London, beginning in the 1950s after the War, of a West Indian literature that was immigrant into England and operating from there...and, more recently, in Toronto. People don't emigrate from the West Indies to London any more; it doesn't make sense. But some go to Canada, and Toronto is now a kind of centre of a migrant West Indian literature.

Diana Giese: Some West Indian writing has also migrated to Australia, to the Universities of Wollongong and Flinders, where Professor Baugh has been teaching since he's been in this country, and to Newcastle, where V.S. Naipaul, the Oxford Brahmin, has made it on to the mainstream course in contemporary literature.

How far the literature of migration has reached beyond the universities was a question underlying the panel discussion of *The Self, the Place and the Others*, chaired by Professor Yasmine Gooneratne, the Macquarie Centre's Director. While some panel members were academics, she said, all were creative writers, but only occasionally did the roles of critic, teacher and writer meet and merge. The disputed distinction between critical and creative writing implies that while academic criticism is directed at a specialist audience, creative writing is open to everyone. Certainly the two sessions of readings were immediately accessible in a way some of the papers were not. Uyen Loewald commented:

Uyen Loewald: Everything can be simplified so that the person to whom the subject matters, can understand and therefore interact...Somehow jargon hinders democratic process. I cannot see how migrants, how people who have basic education, could participate in this type of conference. And yet the conference is about them.

Diana Giese: Few readers or listeners would have difficulty, however, in participating in poet Peter Skrzynecki's memories:

Peter Skrzynecki:

After thirty-three years
I returned to the site of the camp
where we first lived in Australia—
on the Orange Road, outside Parkes
at the turn-off to the airport.

Remains of foundations lay in red dust
and burned in the autumn sun—
Pieces of concrete, cement, tin
overgrown by bushes and weeds
that reached a shoulder height in places.
Under my feet, the dry grass crackled.
Grasshoppers and butterflies flew out in panic, hid deeper
in the prickly waste.

At the far end of the site
I found the old sewage works
Where a playmate had fallen in
and drowned in one of the tanks—
a Russian boy, one of hundreds
of children at the camp,
brought by parents
to start a new life in Australia.

I started talking aloud to myself
about it
 our two years at the camp
 the accident
 what the boy's parents
 may have come to feel—
 as if I desperately had to hear
 my own explanation of it
 and come to an understanding
 of why I'd chosen to return.

Tadpoles and mosquito larva
swam in stagnant water
in slime, bird droppings
and a host of floating dead insects—
trapped by sludge cake cement walls
that frost and rainstorms now belonged to.
The silence of rusted machinery
stared back and said nothing.

On the way back to the car
I still continued talking
as though I hoped to remember something
a long time forgotten—

though I no longer pleaded
with grasshoppers and butterflies
not to scatter at my approach.
But gave them warning of my direction
and wished them well
in their new place of shelter.

Diana Giese: Considerations of accessibility also relate to what kinds of work publishers are making available to different sorts of readers. In his paper, Professor John Stephens of Macquarie looked at some Australian fiction since 1972 aimed at ten-to-fifteen-year-olds. In common with much of the literature of migration, it concentrates on the development of an individual with whom the reader is meant to identify, and advocates a generalised tolerance.

John Stephens: The plots, the outcomes, the morality constructed in these books is all very much a matter of advocacy...Racism becomes an issue. It's something which has to be combatted and put aside in favour of multiculturalism.

Diana Giese: Stephens noted that most of these books are written by authors from the Anglo-Celtic community, and that it's quite rare for characters from other cultures to be allowed a position as subject in the text. Paradigms of racial prejudice, using older-established (so more familiar) communities—German Australians in World War I or Irish Catholics in Protestant towns, for instance—are often used.

John Stephens: David Martin's novel, *The Chinese Boy*, is set last century in the goldfields. So it plays through Australian-Asian conflicts, but they're distanced, back then...

...

Diana Giese: There was much discussion of how a nationalist view of literature can exclude 'outsiders'. If they write about their country of current residence, for instance, they may be criticised for misunderstanding or ingratitude. If, on the other hand, they fail to write about the new country and concentrate instead, like Uyen Loewald, on their country of birth, they're not considered part of the new country's literature. Such a writer may also be condemned from the original country as being out of touch, even a deserter or a traitor. One has only to consider the Rushdie affair.

Before reading from her work, Chitra Fernando described how liberating she'd found it to transplant her middle class Sri Lankans to Alice Springs, before allowing them to discuss equality and class.

Professor Gooneratne assumed the ironic disguise of an assimilating housewife in her story which comments on both Australian and Sri Lankan racism:

Yasmine Gooneratne: 'Look,' my husband told me, 'we're Asians; they're Australians. When Australians meet us, that's what they notice first. Difference.' 'But we're not Asians here,' I said. 'When Australians say 'Asians', they don't mean *real* Asians, not like us. They're just talking about...'

My husband looked very hard at me and I stopped myself just in time. 'I've told you a hundred times: don't say those racist words,' he said crossly. 'Australians can't make fine distinctions between one kind of Asian and another, stupid. Australians never had an empire.'

You see, at home, in Sri Lanka and I suppose in India too, which is the centre after all of the real Asian world, we always call Far Eastern people—Ching-chongs. My husband says it's a racist way of speaking. He says we learned racism from the British in our colonial days and we must discard it totally now that we are free. But coming from such a Westernised family as his, he just doesn't understand. There's nothing racist about saying—that word. Racism is unknown in India; it's unknown in Sri Lanka. Race, caste, colour: they just have their appointed places in a divine scheme of things in which everything moves in a beautifully-regulated order.

Everyone knows that.

Diana Giese: Post-colonialism may be defined, as Brian Edwards of Deakin argued in his paper, 'not by local homogeneity, but by difference, in its attention to race, gender, language and production'. Against Michael Wilding's amusingly cynical view of global manipulation by men in button-down shirts sending lines around the world, 'one set of lines to one person per major language group, more or less', it's clear that insistently particular voices are coming from within and without national literatures.

Eddie Baugh suggested that an aim of the literature of migration should be to bring 'the Self, the Place and the Others' into some sort of 'dynamic, creative relationship...to feel oneself into the physical Place, but a Place with the Others in it'.

He quoted West Indian poet Derek Walcott, sitting in a room in Oklahoma, in winter, listening to the exiled Brodsky reciting to him in Russian lines from Mandelstam:

Eddie Baugh:

What's poetry if it is worth its salt
But a phrase men can pass from hand to mouth?
From hand to mouth across the centuries
The bread that lasts when systems have decayed.

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