

Australia in Asia – Asia in Australia: An Intercontinental Cultural Discourse

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Cynthia vanden Driesen and Adrian Mitchell, eds. *New Directions in Australian Studies. Papers of the Inaugural Conference of the Asian Association for the Study of Australia (AASA): “Creative Configurations,” Kerala, India, 1997.* New Delhi: Prestige Books, 2000. ISBN: 81-7551-084-6.

Cynthia vanden Driesen and Satendra Nandan, eds. *Austral-Asian Encounters: From Literature and Women’s Studies to Politics and Tourism.* New Delhi: Prestige Books, 2003, 440pp. ISBN: 81-7551-131-1.

Cynthia vanden Driesen and Ralph Crane, eds. *Diaspora: The Australasian Experience.* New Delhi: Prestige Books, 2005. ISBN: 81-7551-176-1.

In December 2007 the Association for the Study of Australasia in Asia (AASA) published a “Special Issue” of its *AASA Newsletter* to celebrate more than ten years of its existence and to announce its fourth conference to be held in Colombo, in December 2008. Looking back to more than a dozen years of conferences, publications and the establishment of ever-closer links among scholars from Australia, India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Singapore and New Zealand, the Association’s inaugural meeting in Colombo in 1995 deserves to be remembered and celebrated by having members return again to its founding city.

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The “Special Issue” of the *AASA Newsletter* contains a wealth of information on the development of the organisation apart from references to conferences and meetings, reports on publications and exchange programmes, lists and photographs of many members, addresses and obituaries and a brief interview with Cynthia vanden Driesen, President of the ASAA and without doubt one of its most if not the most active member. She points out that born in Sri Lanka but having taught in Australia for many years, she considers it of prime importance to improve the “understanding of Australian culture in Asian countries” as most “Asians do not perceive anything distinctive about Australian culture,” while a better understanding would “take the edge off the tensions that periodically surface between Australia and her Asian neighbours.” She therefore pleads to set up Australian Studies centres in Asia to assist in promoting an “intercultural understanding within our region.”

An outside observer like myself would be more than interested in being told a bit more about the connotations of “intercultural” because the impression I have gained from going through three conference volumes is that the promotion of knowledge of Australia in Asian countries is not matched by a reverse promotion of Asian countries in Australia. I may be mistaken since the *Newsletter* after all does not only refer to Asian scholars visiting Australia but also tells us about the three important conferences that took place in India with the 2008 Colombo conference coming up in Sri Lanka: all of them are certainly wonderful opportunities for Australian visitors to share their ideas, views and writing with their hosts, but certainly similarly great occasions for them to also listen to their hosts.

To probe into the Association’s engagement in furthering an intercultural – an intercontinental dialogue – or to put it in today’s scholar speak, discourse, it cannot but be instructive to have a look at the three conference volumes published between 2000 and 2005, albeit, I shall merely glance at them and offer brief comments rather than closely examine almost 1500 pages: a documentation that in itself is an astonishing achievement in black and white, immaculately produced by Prestige Books in New Delhi and immensely carefully edited by Cynthia vanden Driesen and her co-editors, Adrian Mitchell, Satendran Nandan and Ralph Crane, respectively. Here I notice that a group of dedicated scholars has evolved who together with the editors have formed a consistent and dependable centre of Asian-Australian studies over the years. Names like Bill Ashcroft, Kateryna Longley, K. Radha, R. Kamala, R.K. Dhawan or Glen Phillips re-occur, as do those, incidentally, of several universities like Murdoch, Edith Cowan, Delhi, or Sydney or the Universities of Kerala, Canberra or New South Wales. But let me proceed by spelling out my observations on the first volume that was based on the 1997 Kerala conference on “Creative Configurations” and is entitled *New Directions in Australian Studies*.²

² Cynthia vanden Driesen and Adrian Mitchell, eds. *New Directions in Australian Studies*. Papers of the Inaugural Conference of The Asian Association for the Study of Australia (AASA): “Creative Configurations,” Kerala, India (1997). New Delhi: Prestige Books, 2000, 485pp, Rs. 700; US\$ 30. ISBN: 81-7551-084-6.

Apart from “Acknowledgements” and vanden Driesen’s “Introduction,” the book contains three dozen contributions including three “Keynote Addresses.” It is rounded off by biographical notes on “Indian Writers at Conference” and “Authors from Australia,” participants who read from their work. Arranged in seven sections, papers written by Australian and Indian scholars, including several who were residing and teaching in Australia, and one or the other from Bangladesh and Spain, address a wide range of topics which the editors have subsumed under the book’s title, *New Directions in Australian Studies*. I’d like to ask straight away, whether these essays actually fulfil our expectations of pointing out, developing or offering “new directions.” Not all do, I think, and some do not seem to mind that they don’t. Which, of course, raises the question why the editors did not stay with the conference theme. Does not the double claim of “new directions” and “Australian Studies” raise expectations as to the Association’s academic objectives, its geographical epicentre(s) and its envisaged scholarly membership? Perhaps an answer is to be found in the *AASA Newsletter* of December 2007. The inaugural meeting of scholars, it says, took place in Colombo in 1995 (at the time of the Triennial Conference of the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies, ACLALS) and was followed by setting-up the first Australian Studies Institute in India at the University of Kerala. Almost two years later, in January 1997, the Asian Association for the Study of Australia (as it was called initially) held its first conference in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala. It appears then that both an Indian, or better a South Asian interest in Australian Studies formed the basis of these undertakings because apart from its organiser, Professor Radha, it was due to Cynthia vanden Driesen’s initiative of creating the link with Australia. As an additional observation, it does not appear coincidental that quite a few scholars from Western Australian universities participated in the inaugural conference who are duly represented in the present volume: a fact that may have caused the Association to rename itself now as The Asian/Australasian Association for the Study of Australia. But to return to *New Directions in Australian Studies*.

Many Australian participants, as indicated, focus their attention on their own literature and culture encompassing such topics as approaching and defining it from methodological perspectives or focusing on one of three text corpora: Aboriginal, migrant and female writing. Such critical concerns direct our attention to the ongoing taxonomic process of grounding the term “Australian.”³ Questions raised refer on the one hand to possible links between Asia and Australia (35), the perspective of overcoming national borderlines under conditions of globalism (56), or the relationship of popular and high culture (68). On the other hand, it is being argued that the term “Aboriginality” requires further reflection vis-à-vis the Mudrooroo “affair” (135); that distinctions need to be kept in mind between male and female

³ See my critical survey of this discourse, “Literary Criticism in Australia: A Change of Critical Paradigms?” *ALS* 15.2 (1991): 184-201.

Aboriginal writing (142); and that the role of the media in employing racial stereotypes requires close observation (151). And as far as the contribution of (im)migrants towards shaping Australian literature goes, comparative studies offer as interesting insights (201) as women's writing opens new perspectives on the "Australian" vis-à-vis the postcolonial experience (281-83).

Nevertheless and by contrast, the volume also contains less "narrowly" centred Australian literature papers. For example, the important issue of relating Australian Studies to the outside world, especially to neighbouring Asia, is taken up by critics of such long-standing as Dennis Haskell and Adrian Mitchell even if they focus on the works of just a single writer (Bruce Dawe and J. Koch, respectively). And Asian scholars make their presence also felt here by responding to Australian writing and criticism on Indian, Asian and European "topics" or to the (literary) reception of Australia. Yet in spite of all this, it appears to me, it is no more than a tentative beginning of an intercontinental critical discourse, which incidentally reminds me of an earlier attempt that can be read up in the special issue of *Australian Literary Studies* on "European Perspectives."⁴ Does the next volume then offer an answer as to whether and how the Association has followed Cynthia vanden Driesen's wish to bring(ing) Asia and Australia closer?

Based on the "Austral-Asian Encounters" conference held in Mysore in September 2000, the Association's second publication, as voluminous as the previous one, was released in 2003⁵ and encompasses a much wider range of topics than the previous collection. Carefully edited and printed, it testifies to the ongoing if not increased interest of Indian, Asian and Australian scholars as well as of various educational and ministerial institutions to expand the field of Asian-Australian cultural cooperation. Dedicated to Anna Rutherford (1932-2000), whose presence in Mysore is being noted here as her last attendance at an international conference, the Association's driving forces have now, it appears, created a firmer and much broader basis for an enriching intercultural exchange by having drawn in participants from areas outside literary studies. This, I feel, has proved an important step towards creating a sound platform for an Asian-Australian cultural discourse.

In contrast to the previous volume, *Austral-Asian Encounters* is headed by "Tributes," here to three recently deceased outstanding literary figures: A.D. Hope and Judith Wright from Australia and R.K. Narayan from India, and instead of "Keynote Addresses" we are now being presented with "Overviews" that draw our attention to the expanded agenda of the Mysore conference on "Bi-Partisan Relationship(s)" by respective comments on its/their historical, diplomatic and

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Cynthia vanden Driesen and Satendra Nandan, eds. *Austral-Asian Encounters: From Literature and Women's Studies to Politics and Tourism*. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 2003, 440pp, Rs 700, US\$ 30. ISBN: 81-7551-131-1.

political nature. Each of the five presentations aims at contextualising this relationship by supplying us with facts, figures and views on historical and political events of the recent past as well as by pointing out lacunae that need to be addressed in future. Another new feature is the remarkably close connection between academic papers and their author's personal involvement in their projects that mark many contributions; a fact, which I feel, is especially noteworthy in Lekkie Hopkin's "Working with Poststructuralist Feminist Theories of Difference: Making Connections between India and Australia," and in the presentation of a natural scientific analysis. Here, "The Genetic Perspective on the South Indian Tradition of Consanguineous Marriage" introduces a research topic that could very well be employed with reference to other regions, countries and cultures and would create a sound basis for comparative "nature-culture" studies. Finally, four New Zealand contributions represent a perhaps dubious geographical widening of Austral-Asia. Though no convincing reasons are given, I am certain that the discussion of works by various New Zealand literary and film figures is not a late attempt at incorporating the country into Australia. But the widening of the field takes us back to the question of the Association's understanding of its own status and goals. For example, could the term "Australasia" perhaps enclose not merely New Zealand but also the South Pacific which, after all, is represented by Chris Griffin's stimulating paper on "Tribe, Indigene and Nation: Towards a Comparative Analysis of Aboriginal India, Australia and Fiji"? I think that the process of further reflecting on the Association's geographical-cultural parameters has not come to an end; the more so since the pursuit of cross-cultural studies is deeply rooted in our present-day general concern with migration, including the specific situation of Asian immigrants not only in Australia but also in the adjacent territory of New Zealand. Under these circumstances, would it not be worthwhile asking whether the Association's geographical orientation should not be subsumed to the overarching issue of cross-cultural studies?

Returning to the book's seven sections following "The New Zealand Contribution" we are back on the familiar ground of the previous conference's collection of papers as we encounter Indian commentaries on Australian Literature and Australian responses to Indian literature; further, essays on Asian-Australian and on Aboriginal writing; on Australian writing on India and on contributions of a more general theoretical nature. These neatly drawn boundary lines are only abandoned towards the end when a few "less-classifiable" essays are assembled under the heading of "Expanding Horizons: Science, Social Anthropology, Tourism": a veritable collection of diverse approaches and topics ranging from genetics via tourism and research methodology to questions of poetic identity. But then "horizon" signifies a diversity of signs quite appropriately.

As there is no space to comment on each and every one of the 35 pieces, I shall confine myself to a few examples, and here I would like to point at comparative studies as particularly inviting and cross-culturally relevant; for example, Suneetha

Rani's comparison of Dalit and Aboriginal poetry, or Bill Ashcroft's juxtaposition of Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* and Peter Carey's *Oscar and Lucinda*. Both papers highlight cultural differences as well as enquire into possibilities of bridging them by directing our attention to common anthropological features and characteristics that may very well create a sustainable basis for a mutual cross-cultural understanding. Of much interest also and even excitingly so because of its sustained archival pursuit, I found Chandani Lokuge's research into nineteenth century Indian women writing in English because the author questions and corrects often repeated and subsequently copied judgements on their work; judgements, Lokuge demonstrates, more noteworthy for their inaccuracy than an in-depth research pursued over half a century. Adrian Mitchell's thesis of shared attitudes and values and "way of life" among the professional class of administrators in nineteenth century Australia and India (306), which he explores by looking at John Lang's writings of the 1850s, is yet another example of historically-oriented research of a comparative nature that strikes me as a hitherto neglected field within the ambience of the "new" English language literatures. Last but not least, the juxtaposition of John Gates's deconstruction if not ruthless demolition of the *Lonely Planet* version of India and Carmel Kelly's "Mysore" offer a fortuitous opportunity of comparison. While Gates reminds us yet again of the effectiveness of the colonial or Western discourse on "the other," an effectiveness that appears totally unaffected by our critical endeavour in postcolonial deconstructive strategies, it would be interesting to hear of readers' responses to Kelly's poems.

My focusing on comparative studies should not push other papers to the periphery, among them those dealing with the relationship and a possible definition of one's own minority situation, place, difficulties, understanding and literary task, which is being spelt out in terms of caste, class or "ethnic" background: a problem facing ever so many immigrants from Asia in Australia but also Indian writers. Ralph Crane's discussion of Hugh Atkinson's *The Pink in the Brown*, R.K. Dhawan's piece on Arun Joshi's *The Foreigner*, Chandani Lokuge's *If the Moon Smiled* and Babli Gupta's study of Adib Khan's *Seasonal Adjustments* reveal these writers' inner turmoil and anxieties translated into and finding expression in their creative work, as does Erica Lewin's problematisation of "In-betweenness" in the writing of Anglo-Indian women living in Australia. Here we have already a few pointers that lead us to the central topic of the following ASAA conference on living and writing in the diaspora.

Nearly fifty papers read at the third ASAA conference in July 2004, which was organised again at the University of Kerala in Thiruvananthapuram, compose the by far most comprehensive volume published as yet by the Association.⁶ They address multiple meanings of the "diaspora" concept from a very wide perspective. As we

⁶ Cynthia vanden Driesen and Ralph Crane, eds. *Diaspora: The Australasian Experience*. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 2005, 544pp, Rs. 900. ISBN: 81-7557-176-1.

are informed in the “Special Issue” *Newsletter*, nearly 150 delegates from India, Australia, New Zealand and Singapore “participated in the three-day deliberations,” and looking at the yield of their presentations it must be admitted that the choice of the conference topic has proved to have been not only fortunate but also especially fruitful; which is not to say that the introductory remark about the present “large baggy monster” (13) is far from the truth. But it must have been a thankless job to assign such a diversity of papers to one or the other of the seven sections of this compilation.

As we might expect from the choice of the conference theme, the taxonomic aspect of “diaspora” did not only invite almost every speaker to point out their own parameters but also one or the other to adopt a more general approach: a task tackled in the first section, “Theoretical and Philosophical Issues.” For example, examining the psychological dimension of “Being Not-At-Home,” Jane Mummery argues that this existential state suggests that practices of hyphenation, like diasporic experience, “are exemplary of the human condition itself” (42). The ontological angle of this perception may be debatable but its very abstract nature endows the status and the experience of “diaspora” with a degree of insubstantiality that invites us to fill it in: an invitation readily responded to by virtually all speakers, for example by Bill Ashcroft who focuses on “horizon” or by Dennis Wood who talks about “experience of community.”

The following six sections alternate between those that encompass papers of a broader nature, written from a socio-cultural, socio-scientific or simply “Broader” perspective, and those where literary texts are targeted, or writers or specific literary constellations in Indian, Australian or New Zealand writing. Here the section “The Literary Artists’ Contribution” deserves special mention because the inclusion of literary texts, though often embedded in commentaries, does not merely give us a welcome respite from densely analytical or informative presentations but lends them flesh and blood. It is a very welcome move on the part of the volume’s editors who must have felt with the readers’ waning strength while trekking through more than 500 pages.

To illustrate the wide variety of articles assigned to the more general sections, I’d like to mention just a few. While Kateryna Longley talks about the defining and self-assuring acts of “Story-telling” for the diasporic person and thus gives rare prominence to the oral or audio dimension of the Asian-Australian cultural discourse, Ameer Ali’s comments on “The Muslim Diaspora in the West” justifiably expose prejudices against Muslims professed “in the West,” but at the same time the author also points out that for political reasons internal dissensions of this particular diaspora need to be taken into account. Stephen Alomes argues that our often overt critical concern with loss and exile should be balanced by noting that living in the diaspora might as well be seen as “the Promethean journeys of liberation, and discovery, celebration and recreation” (134). The most interesting “Socio-Cultural Commentary” to my mind though is contained in Adrian Mitchell’s personal, lively,

witty, well-researched and informative talk on the 19th and early 20th century German diaspora in South Australia: an exemplary essay of a quality which He Wei Gu's "Chinese Cultural Schema" unfortunately cannot match.

A further half dozen essays dealing with "Perspectives from the Social Sciences" expand the discourse on diaspora by focusing on one or the other ethnic group of immigrants and by discussing the pros and cons of Australian migration policy and legislation over the years. All are of high informative value, statistically or otherwise, and more often than not focus on human and economic relationships between the First and the Third world. Robert Imre, for example, explores Australia's attitude to the threat of terrorism against the country's "diasporas [being] regarded as suspicious and problematic" (317) while Trudy Hoad and M.A.B. Siddique relativise this attitude by foregrounding that illegal immigration confronts Australia with political, economic and financial problems. Finally, Serge Walberg discovers yet another meaning of "diaspora" by having a look at "New Communications Technologies." Here globalised working conditions have brought about what he calls "live-in diaspora[s]" for a cyberproletariat that is working "abroad" without leaving its home country" (520): yet one more "variation" of diasporic identity and community which we can add to Mummery's taxonomic deliberations.

Nonetheless, the importance granted to "non-literary" aspects of diaspora experience does not marginalise exploratory and analytical essays dedicated to its literary representation, and as in the previous volumes we encounter again a large variety of cross-cultural, comparative and individual studies. Here the section "Insights through Literature" is especially remarkable for the number of Indian and South Asian scholars addressing diasporan Australian texts and thus balancing the impression I had gained from the earlier volumes with their noticeable presence of Australian scholars talking about their own literature. Discussing the work of diaspora writers as different as Mena Abdullah and Suneeta de Costa, Satendra Nandan and Christopher Cyrill, Adib Khan or Yasmine Gooneratne, a critical discourse is being developed further that adds to our more conservative definition of cross-cultural studies since in these instances critics 'at home' and writers 'in the diaspora' basically belong to the same culture. It is a constellation we also encounter in the section "The Literary Artists Contribution" where diasporan critics-writers like Antonio Casella, Simone Lazaroo, Satendra Nandan and Serge Liberman talk movingly about their loss and their own or their families' personal fates in their often "grey drabness of my newer home" (496). All in all, a picture of diasporan living emerges here that in spite of its individual variety coalesces to a patchwork of shared emotions, memories and hopes in Australia from which the two New Zealand essays remain strangely excluded. Looking back at earlier contributions from here we must admit that New Zealand continues to make a strange bedfellow of Austral-Asia.

Where have we arrived? Which conclusions can be drawn from the Association's engagement in an Austral-Asian cultural discourse? And where may we expect to be led to in the future? If the three conference volumes reflect the work done over a decade – and why shouldn't they? – the move from literary to interdisciplinary studies is certainly a laudable step since the expanded scope of cultural concerns has drawn in and brought together scholars from different disciplines to set up a "mobile" Institute of Studies that enables them to meet and exchange views and ideas at differing places. There should be no reason then why the next conference could not be organised in Australia and following it in another Asian country. In any case, participation by more South East Asian scholars would be desirable to lend further weight to Asian perspectives against the somewhat imbalanced past Austral-Asian encounters, I mean here because of the predominance of Australian and Indian voices. Similarly, the Association's efforts at aiming at a better understanding of Australia by Asians should not exclude inviting Australians to become more knowledgeable about Asia though I do not want to suggest that such interest has been altogether absent at the previous conferences. Admittedly, a topic such as diaspora would lend itself less to explore conditions in Asia than Australia, but the country's cultural concerns abroad and in their widest sense definitely deserve the critical attention of an Association for the study of Australasia in Asia.

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