Multiculturalism has been government policy in Australia since the early 1970s, when it was recognised that the earlier expectation that migrants from non-English speaking backgrounds quickly assimilate into the mainstream culture was both unrealistic and undesirable. Exactly what multiculturalism means, and what its implications are, or should be, for the national culture have been subjects of lively, sometimes heated debate ever since. The nature of multicultural writing and its relationship to the overall category of Australian literature have become important issues in this debate.

‘Multicultural writing’ is only one of a number of different terms used to designate writing by Australians from backgrounds other than the English and Irish mainstream; others include migrant writing, non-Anglo-Celtic writing, ethnic writing, NESB (Non English Speaking Background) writing, ethnic minority writing. All of these terms have, for various reasons, proved problematic: ‘migrant’ does not accurately cover the experience and work of second-generation writers; ‘ethnic’ and ‘multicultural’ have been taken to suggest that only ethnic minorities can lay claim to ethnicity and multiculturalism (the mainstream being somehow ethnically and culturally neutral). One objection, sometimes voiced by the very writers for whom these terms were coined, is that they have the potential to ‘pigeon-hole’ them, confine them to ‘ethnic ghettos’ and thus impose arbitrary limits on their writing and its audience appeal. On the other hand, the fact that these categories (especially ‘multicultural writing’) have survived seems a clear indication that the reasons why they were invented in the first place have not gone away: writers from non-Anglo backgrounds are still under-represented in, and often considered to stand outside of, the national literary tradition, and a considerable number of people (‘ordinary’ readers as well as students and researchers) take a special interest in writing informed by a diverse cultural experience and find these labels useful, in spite of their limitations. It should be noted, however, that most Aboriginal writers prefer not to be included in the category of ‘multicultural writing’, which, they argue, still carries the ‘immigrant’ connotation and thus does not recognise their special status as the indigenous culture, and original inhabitants, of the land.

Research aimed at making ‘visible’ writers of ethnic minority backgrounds and their contribution to Australia’s literature started in the late 1970s and gained momentum in the 1980s. Identifying these writers was not always easy in the early days. ‘[I]t was
a case’, Sneja Gunew writes, ‘of having to sift through old journals and anthologies in order simply to come up with the names of writers and examples of their work.’ (1994:6) The names themselves were not always reliable indicators of ethnic origin: some writers had anglicised their names and others had changed their names through marriage. The research was further complicated by the fact that many of these writers published in journals, periodicals and anthologies unknown to the mainstream literary institutions, often in languages other than English. Many published most of their work outside Australia. The researchers made use of their own linguistic and cultural competence, information from community organizations and writers’ groups as well as advertisements in the ethnic press and direct communication with writers. Our current knowledge of Australia's multicultural literary heritage would not have been possible without the important contribution of these researchers: Lolo Houbein, Serge Liberman, George Kanarakis, Con Castan, Gaetano Rando, Alexandra Karakostas-Seda, Sneja Gunew, Jan Mahyuddin, Marian Boreland, Rodney Noonan, Tseen Khoo, Sonia Mycak. A Bibliography of Australian Multicultural Writing, compiled by Sneja Gunew, Lolo Houbein, Alexandra Karakostas-Seda and Jan Mahyuddin in 1992, lists close to a thousand writers; in 2003 the web-based bibliographical database AustLit: Australian Literature Gateway identifies over 1400 writers in the ‘multicultural’ category. Austlit provides readers and researchers with research tools that were virtually unthinkable at the time of the earliest research into multicultural literature. It is now possible to search for authors and texts by language, ethnic heritage, date and place of birth, as well as genre and date and place of publication; and the thesaurus enables research by means of keywords and themes. Moreover, the multicultural subset makes it possible to limit a search to writers of ethnic minority background only. To give a couple of examples from recent research projects undertaken by postgraduate students at Deakin University: one student, who is both a literary scholar and a medical practitioner, is interested in autobiographical writing by migrants from eastern Europe dealing specifically with ‘culture shock’, the psychological trauma of migration and exile. Austlit has enabled her to locate both primary and secondary sources for this research. Another student is doing work on recent Australian short fiction and wants to devote one chapter of her thesis to short stories by Chinese-Australian writers. Her basic bibliography was only a few clicks away, and a few more advanced searches revealed more authors and texts than can possibly be covered in a chapter – in fact, made it obvious that this body of work was large enough to justify a PhD thesis in its own right! A few words of caution are nevertheless in place: while Austlit endeavours to offer as comprehensive a coverage of texts and authors as possible, and is updated daily by bibliographers in universities across the country, the task of ‘catching up’ with all types of publications is enormous and still far from complete. This problem is particularly acute in the case of multicultural writers, who in many cases publish in outlets and places outside the mainstream and are thus more likely to be missed by the routine searches undertaken by the Austlit team. Writing in languages other than English presents a particular challenge in this regard. Writers and researchers with access to information currently not available on the Austlit database are therefore encouraged to contact members of the project team and alert them to any material which may be missing (at the same time as they should be warned that the team receive large amounts of information every day which it takes time to check and process). It should also be noted that Austlit has to respect authors’ wishes in the case of information that is considered to be personal: biographical data, including ethnicity, are only included if this information is available from published sources, or if the author him/herself has given permission for its publication. Austlit has made an undertaking to remove such information if requested by authors to do so, which means that in some cases, details such as the author's ethnic heritage are not specified and so not available for the purposes of research.
The history of multicultural additions to the national literature closely reflects trends in Australian immigration since World War II. Apart from the (relatively small) number of non-Anglo writers who had made their home in Australia before this time, the first writers identified as multicultural belonged to the (predominantly European) migrant groups who arrived in the country in large numbers in the 1940s and 1950s: Greeks, Italians, Balts, Poles, Jews, to name just some of the larger groups. In more recent decades, Australian-born and -educated descendents of these migrants, conversant with the languages and cultures of both their parents and the Australian mainstream, have added a further dimension to the multicultural literary tradition as they in truly contrapuntal fashion explore transformations and tensions in both immigrant and host communities in response to the experience of multicultural co-habitation. At the same time, they are joined by writers belonging to more recent migrant groups, coming from places such as Vietnam, the Middle East, India, China and South-East Asia and adding even greater diversity to a previously European-dominated literary culture. Australian literature has thus become something of a movable cultural feast: constantly enriched by new arrivals, at the same time as the ‘conversation’ between different literary and cultural traditions (including, of course, the Anglo-Celtic mainstream) gains depth and produces a national literature increasingly marked by hybrid or ‘creolised’ cultural forms. Although there can be little doubt that Australian culture is still dominated by the cultural traditions brought to the country by British and Irish immigrants, the nature of that domination has changed: Australian literature today reflects an engagement with other cultures which would have been unthinkable in the period preceding the waves of non-British migration in the last half century.

Multiculturalism does not mean the same thing in all places or at all times. In Australia, according to Jon Stratton, ‘multiculturalism was constructed as a policy intimately connected with the cultural problems allied to migrant settlement.’ (1998: 66) Unlike the American version of multiculturalism, he argues, it is concerned with cultural pluralism, but does not address the question of race. Along with a number of other critics (see for example Ang 2001 and Hage 1998 and 2003), Stratton also argues that official multiculturalism, which is essentially a ‘top-down’ policy aimed at managing cultural diversity, should not be confused with everyday multiculturalism, or ‘the lived experience of cultural diversity’ (206). While official multiculturalism constructs the nation according to a model of centre and periphery, everyday multiculturalism is characterised by constant evolution and creolisation in which neither mainstream nor minority cultures and ethnicities remain stable or discrete. The very notion of culture thus takes on different values according to circumstances. ‘Multiculturalism in Australia’, writes Sneja Gunew, ‘is acceptable as a celebration of costumes, customs and cooking. It is not acceptable as high culture.’ (1994: 22) In the context of multicultural arts, she argues, there is ongoing tension and confusion between two ways of defining culture: on the one hand the ‘many elements which symbolically organise life, such as food, language, religion, and rite-of-passage ceremonies’ (22), on the other artistic productions granted the status of ‘high art’. Ethnic minority artists have commonly found themselves associated with community rather than mainstream and high arts, their work assumed to derive more directly from their cultural ‘roots’ than that of other artists. In the case of writers, the assumption is that their writing will deal with issues of migration and cultural heritage in a straightforward manner, without the stylistic and structural sophistication associated with, for example, European modernism or postmodernism. There is also, argues Gunew, an on-going suspicion that multicultural writers have insufficient language skills and so are incapable of producing work that can be counted among the finest in Australian literature. The problem with such assumptions
is that many ethnic minority writers find themselves with nowhere to go, especially if they want to claim their cultural roots and at the same time seek to produce innovative and formally complex writing which aspires to ‘high art’ status. Not surprisingly, many have chosen to disassociate themselves from the multicultural ‘label’, and instead seek recognition simply as ‘Australian’ writers.

The backlash against multiculturalism which has surfaced at various times during the last two decades, most memorably in the rhetoric of Pauline Hanson and the One Nation Party, has also found echoes in the context of multicultural writing. The debate between critics and writers who argued for the ongoing need to encourage and promote ethnic minority writing in Australia and others who accused them of critical distortion and bad faith came to a head in 1991 with the publication of Robert Dessaix's essay ‘Nice work if you can get it’ in the *The Australian Book Review*. Dessaix does not accept the view that migrant or multicultural writers are marginalised because the category ‘Australian literature’ has been too narrowly defined to include non-Anglo cultural perspectives; the reason this writing is overlooked, he argues, is that ‘it's often not very good’ (1991:26), and for the obvious reason that the writers’ English is not good enough to produce texts of sufficient complexity and sophistication. He even offers the (perhaps deliberately) provocative advice that ‘many so-called multicultural writers would do better to take up ceramics, market- gardening, photography, or perhaps even to return to their countries of origin’ (26). The real target for his criticism, however, is not the writers themselves but rather what he calls ‘the multicultural professionals’ (22), those academics and critics who, he argues, make a career out of promoting these so-called marginalised writers and attacking the mainstream literary establishment for being culturally exclusive. Not surprisingly, this attack prompted a heated debate. In her response, Sneja Gunew (arguably the main target for Dessaix's criticism) not only defends the work she and her colleagues are engaged in but seeks to correct the many ‘misconceptions surrounding multiculturalism’ (Gunew 1991: 46) which to her view inform Dessaix's essay. For example, she counters his assertion that ethnic minority writers have insufficient language skills for producing fine writing by arguing that ‘multicultural writing’ is not only produced by recent migrants but by writers who are proficient in English as well as in other languages, and who are perfectly capable of the kind of complex meaning-production that to Dessaix is a prerequisite for ‘good’ writing (46-7). Other contributors to this debate (conducted primarily in the letter pages of the *Australian Book Review*) either congratulated Dessaix for his courage in standing up the multicultural ‘lobby’ or, conversely, took him to task for his ‘scurrilous’ attack (Walwicz 1991: 47). The more nuanced responses voiced their concern about the divisive and potentially damaging effects of these accusations and counter-accusations and cautioned all parties to the debate against seemingly deliberate misreading of each other's motivations: ‘The more sophisticated of the writers on difference … are not in the business of creating or exploiting or exacerbating divisions within Australian society; on the contrary I would see them as in the business of healing these divisions.’ (Spencer 1991: 56)

In 1995, multicultural writing made headlines throughout the Australian media in the context of the infamous ‘Demidenko affair’ which, to Sneja Gunew, epitomised ‘the parade of pathologies’ (1996: 166) associated with multiculturalism. The scandal broke when a multi-award winning novelist was revealed to be more fictitious than her novel: the author of *The Hand that Signed the Paper* was not, as previously claimed, Helen Demidenko but Helen Darville, and her cultural background not Ukrainian but British. The issues thrown up by the affair were complex and far-reaching: the relationship between fiction and historical facts, and between an author
and his/her work; anti-Semitism and a writer's moral obligations; the nature of ‘good’
writing and the impartiality and standards of the judges of literary prizes; questions of
plagiarism. The nature of Australian multiculturalism and the reception of ethnic
minority writing underpinned several of these issues. In promoting her book, Darville
had played on expectations of ethnic ‘authenticity’ by displaying easily recognisable
markers of ethnicity: Ukrainian inscriptions, costumes and folk dancing; the
readership responded by demanding that the book provide authentic (only slightly
fictionalised) accounts of ethnic experience. The initial celebration of what one
commentator called ‘the authentic authorial voice of contemporary
multiculturalism’ (quoted in Gunew 1996: 164) quickly turned to anger and
embarrassment as this authenticity was revealed as an elaborate hoax – but it could
be argued that readers, critics and prize judges were caught out just as much by their
own stereotyped expectations as by the author's machinations. The Demidenko
debacle left a bitter aftertaste. While opponents of multiculturalism gleefully cited the
case as ‘proof’ of the corrupting influence of political correctness and its promotion
of ethnic minorities, others were more inclined to regard it as a demonstration of the
pernicious effects of stereotyped and simplistic perceptions of minority cultures. The
time had clearly come for rethinking the nature of multicultural writing and its
relationship to Australian literature as a whole.

The controversy over multicultural writing has been muted in recent years, at the
same time as the principles and policies of multiculturalism have been under pressure
in a prevailing populist political climate. In the ‘everyday’ life of Australian
literature, however, multiculturalism is alive and well, as ever more ethnic minority
writers are appearing on the scene, slowly transforming the national literature. The
high levels of education and literacy among many recent migrant groups mean that
more first-generation migrants engage in literary activities than was the case in the
post-war wave of migration. The Chinese-Australian community provide an
outstanding illustration of this: the first novel by a Chinese-Australian writer (Brian
Castro's *Birds of Passage*) was published in 1983; only twenty years later we know
of over 80 Chinese-Australians who have published in English, and according to
estimates based on membership of writers’ organizations, some 200 write and publish
in Chinese. Most Chinese-language writers, however, are unknown within Australian
literary institutions (including Austlit), a clear demonstration of the fact that
multicultural Australia is still stubbornly monolingual. Writers who publish in any
language other than English remain unknown outside their own ethnic communities;
indeed, many are unknown also *within* their own communities as they tend to seek
publication outside Australia in order to reach larger audiences in their countries of
origin or in the wider diaspora. However, the (small number of) bi-lingual
publications and translations available make it abundantly clear that this is writing
which not only engages with Australia but offers interesting cross-cultural
perspectives, perspectives not always available in English-language works. The
greatest challenges for research and development in the area of multicultural writing
at present therefore lie in the areas of literary translation and multi-lingual
bibliographical work.

In the context of an increasingly globalised world, multicultural literary traditions
play important roles as mediators between local (or national) and global cultural
forces. Multicultural Australian writing represents the global within the local; it
responds to pressures and change within Australian society and culture, but is also,
and increasingly, in tune with global developments such as rapid international
communication and travel, postcolonial and diasporic literary traditions and
transnational popular culture. While multicultural writing undoubted can, and should,
lay claim to be an integral part of Australia’s literary heritage, it also belongs to those forces (sometimes called post-national) which put pressure on this and other national traditions, challenging any sense of a unitary, unchanging and normative culture.

References


Further reading

Australian Multicultural Book Review

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