



TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

VOLUME 12, NOV 2020



Book Review: *To Gather Your Leaving*, eds. Cheng, Fong & Chia. Nicholas Jose.

*Transnational Literature*, vol. 12, November 2020

URL: <https://transnationalliterature.org/>

***To Gather Your Leaving: Asian Diaspora Poetry from America, Australia, UK & Europe, Edited by Boey Kim Cheng, Arin Alycia Fong, Justin Chia (Ethos Books, Singapore 2019)***

**Reviewed by Nicholas Jose**

An anthology is by definition a gathering – sometimes seemingly random, a miscellany of beautiful things, at other times more systematic, assembling work from a place or a period, or in a certain form, or by a particular group, usually with an agenda. That kind of anthology draws attention to writers who haven't been seen this way before. It showcases, claims space, challenges existing canons. At 662 pages this one is a big book, ranging across territory with a wide scope of selection as it charts an elusive category: "Asian diaspora poetry". The editors of *To Gather Your Leaving* admit they "found it impossible to encompass the plenitude of styles and multitude of voices, the sheer diversity and heterogeneity among the literary communities of Asian diaspora" and acknowledge that "labels... have proven inadequate, inherently flawed... homogenising" in a world and at a time when the "Asian diaspora has itself become globalised." Parameters are indeed necessary, and boundaries have been drawn "with the focus on South, and East and South-East Asia," specifically to Singapore, where the editors, Boey Kim Cheng, Arin Alycia Fong and Justin Chia, are based and where the book has been produced. The view from Singapore is one of the project's strengths.

With its multi-ethnic, multilingual population, Singapore has deep connections to the neighbouring parts of Asia and also to China. It has close ties to Anglophone centres too, especially London, the old colonising capital, and Australia, only a few hours away by plane. For Singapore as a transit hub, mobility is a way of life: not only the movement of people and the exchange of goods, but the rich cultural mobility that characterises the island nation. The view from Singapore is confident and generous. Despite the disclaimer, the editors have given us an anthology with plenitude and multitude aplenty.

There are 65 poets here, with several poems each. They are given space, which is

important since space is always a concern. Poems expand into long lines, or move as if uncontained across and down the page, pushing against margins or creating voids of empty space. Poems lengthen, break or build into sequences, or appear as paragraphs of prose poetry aligned both left and right in another manifestation of in-betweenness.

The poets are grouped somewhat awkwardly by region and then alphabetically. This obscures chronology and the ancestral and language backgrounds from which the writers' exilic journeys have begun. The bio data given for each poet at the back of the book is not always helpful. Sometimes it reveals: "Wendy Xu is a poet born in Shandong, and based in New York City." Other times it conceals: "Lachlan Brown lives in Wagga Wagga." There are generational shifts within the book that indicate lineage and the making of what the editors call "literary tradition", as path-breakers become mentors. Meena Alexander and Agha Shahid Ali, the two poets who happen to open the book, have both passed away now, while Will Harris, who appears towards the end of the book, has his first major poetry publication forthcoming this year. Li-Young Lee, "born in 1957 in Jakarta," appears in his own right and as an exam question in Kimiko Hahn's "Asian American Lit. Final" and subject of homage in Eileen Chong's "Chinese Singing". It is good to see Malaccan-born Ee Tiang Hong (1933-1990) included in the Australian section with his subtle poems of memory. Described as "one of the first generation of writers in English in Malaya," he migrated to Perth in 1975. He has been recovered today as the harbinger of a new generation of transcultural writers. Overwhelmingly the poets in the anthology are contemporary, with publications and prizes in the last couple of years. In that sense the book documents a moment.

Mostly the poems speak for themselves. There are many thrilling discoveries. Recurrent themes emerge strongly, as if the selection of poems has been made with that in mind. Populating the book is the grandmother poem. The editors list 17. The transformation from an ancestral past in a place with its own traditions, customs and history carried on in a language other than English to a culturally mixed, seemingly historyless Anglophone present elsewhere takes the span of the two generations between grandparent and grandchild to occur. The grandmother is both a cliché ("We read poems about silent grandmothers in the kitchen," writes Timothy Yu) and an enabling gendered, cross-generational, translanguistic link ("My grandmother's blood courses through me," responds Andy Quan). A continuous grandmothing of what she stands for is at the heart of this book.

Other recurrent themes are the journey out and the journey back, from and to a home that is often a site of trauma where past and present come painfully together; the experience of difference, displacement and discrimination on arrival; and the role of language as marker, barrier, or new potential. These Asian diaspora poets all write in English (some are also translators and others are polyglot in their work, such as Merlinda Bobis and Eunice Andrada, both from the Philippines). It is seldom an easy fit. John Yau, in his poem "Ing Grish", calls it Ang Glish: "Anguish is a language everyone can speak, but no one listens to it." Debjani Chatterjee addresses her poem "To the English Language", "the barbed lines that drew me." Cambodian-American Bunkong Tuon's poem "Reciting Alphabets" repeats the Khmer words he recited in the camp.

Beyond the everyday language there is the language of poetry. These poets have also moved into the varying poetic territories of the communities that host them. By that I mean that the styles and textures of their poetry reflect the different poetic contexts of the geographic

territories by which they are grouped: America, Australia and UK & Europe. It's possible to detect the different local habitats at work here, suggesting the mediating role of the community of reception. To generalise, the poets in America utilise recognisable modernist and experimental American poetic modes including those associated with the transfer of ideas and aesthetics from Asia: Timothy Yu names some in "Chinese Silence No. 39" – Ezra Pound, Marianne Moore, Jack Kerouac, Gary Snyder. The rhetoric is mainstream. The poets in the UK, proportionally more from South Asia, inherit an imperial legacy in a relaxed but sceptical way, as when Romesh Gunesequera writes: "I wonder if this is a city, or whether I am the city / that I recognise wherever I go." The poetry from Australia has rough edges, by comparison, with all the humour and anger of outsider agitation. Sydney-based Michelle Cahill's poem "(In)Visible" concludes pointedly: "Nothing which is not political."

Boey Kim Cheng, one of the editors of *To Gather Your Leaving*, collaborated with Cahill and Adam Aitken (also included here as a poet) on the ground-breaking *Contemporary Asian Australian Poets* in 2012 and there is some overlap. It is fascinating to observe how poetry operates institutionally across the different English-speaking domains. To risk further generalisation, the writing from Britain reflects an environment in which poetry has a place in education and community; the American writing relates more closely to the academy, especially Asian American studies; the Australian poets are participants in something like a self-supporting collective. There are writers missing too, of course: Jeffrey Yang in the US, Kit Fan in the UK, Dipti Saravanamuttu and Jessie Tu in Australia, and other settler destinations—Canada, New Zealand—are probably underrepresented.

A current flowing through the book that catches my attention is the notion of the unfinished or unresolved. It appears as a verbal hovering, a hesitation, a rocking back and forth, a double glance, as in the title phrase itself, adapted from Ocean Vuong's lines:

Here's the man  
whose arms are wide enough to gather  
your leaving.  
(“Someday I’ll Love Ocean Vuong”)

There are many other examples:

the mind making its focal adjustments  
between foreground and context, present and past,  
as well as it can.  
(Rick Barot, “UDFJ-39546284”)

Not much lives on, from one generation  
To the next. Not much, but not  
Nothing:

(Suji Kwock Kim, "Translations from the Mother Tongue")

out to finger the invisible  
gap we would inhabit, pulsing always  
in between

(Pimone Triplett, "Driving Eye")

...the rest of her blurs as she stares out  
a refugee in her own face

(Debbie Lim, "The Beautiful Woman with a Burnt Face")

How do you fill the missing spaces?

(Omar Musa, "The Great Displaced")

The low-slung ferry, white above green,  
Piloting the harbour's carpet of stars,  
Turned always home, you can no longer see.

(Sarah Howe, "Crossing from Guangdong")

...Turn, counterturn, stand.

(Jane Yeh, "Paris, 1899")

In a dark and empty pub on a chilly winter's afternoon in Adelaide during coronavirus lockdown I am asked why I am reviewing this book. It has taken so long to reach me, has travelled far and taken a while to work through. Am I the right person for the job? Is it possible for a non-Asian diaspora critic to make any sort of useful assessment? Who is the book for – and the review? The questions have a double edge. Am I being set up to valorise or critique something I am not qualified to judge? Such concerns bedevil the afterlife of literature, once the poem is done. This anthology belongs to the group of people who have contributed to the making of it, their achievement, their resource. Beyond that there is another less identifiable readership for whom the fine, varied, resilient poets assembled here can be a stimulus and a source of pleasure: readers interested in poetry and the changing contours of contemporary culture, readers who will be attracted (so it is hoped) to the latest iteration of *Transnational Literature* that this new issue launches. The book wants to satisfy both insider and outsider audiences and that's a juggling act. Yet there is more than enough in *To Gather Your Leaving* to gather in, even as the moving on never ends. "Writing is sewing," as Adam Aitken says.

Nicholas Jose

Nicholas Jose was co-editor, with Xianlin Song, of *Everything Changes: Australian Writers and China, A Transcultural Anthology* (2019) and general editor of the *Macquarie PEN Anthology of*

*Australian Literature* (2009). He spoke at the launch of *Contemporary Asian Australian Poets* in Sydney in 2013 and his essay "Writing Asian Poetry in English" appeared in *Mascara Literary Review* in the same year.