Poetry and Cultural Bridges: Beyond Politics and Economics

Authors:
Dr Ioana Petrescu
Senior Lecturer, University of South Australia
Director, Poetry and Poetics Centre, UniSA

Dr Kit MacFarlane
Lecturer, University of South Australia

In his *Living in a Dark Age*, Rick Salutin finds "a little poetry" in the role of physical bridge spaces that unite the disparate and enable people to "feel connected and build a society together" (Salutin 1991, 4), suggesting that the tangible real-world pursuits of values of inclusiveness, equality and community, through railroads and iron bridges, are, at their core, a "concrete poetry of human aspiration" (Salutin 1991, 3). In this light, poetry is seen as not confined to pages and relegated to niche areas of marginalisation, but as an essential element of inter-connectedness and community-building that permeates life, politics, economics, and social aspiration. As such, poetry is also at the heart of what is commonly seen as the "multicultural experiment" and its potential successes and failures. In our view, this "little poetry" is more than simply a convenient metaphor, therefore this paper endeavours to look into the specific discourse of poetry itself as having the power and potential to shape attitudes and understanding, and create cultural "bridge spaces" that extend and solidify communities.

In this context, we also consider the role of the "ethnic" or "migrant" poet and their role in creating bridges both in local communities and between countries in ways that may not be accessible to dominant discourses, such as politics and economics.

Also, the economic and political values of the Arts environment itself need to be in accord with the truth of the artistic phenomena they support, in order that the bridging project is not compromised by needs and values independent to the artistic and poetic process and discourse. Without this care, the political and economic realities of the Arts may impose their own preconceived values upon the multicultural poetic discourse rather than supporting the actual multicultural voices it aims to represent and distribute.

"Ethnic" writers themselves may, in fact, be very aware of the political and economic realities of the Arts as, by their very status as "Ethnic Artists," they are the embodiment of the actual issues and tensions at play and may view their own output, expression, and discourse in relation to the expectations and existing understandings that are placed upon them by the multicultural Arts environment.

Nevertheless, the issues and tensions between the political and economic realities and the authenticity of the migrant voice can be transformed into advantages if the focus on the "ethnic" poet can be transformed from one of mere display – the fact of ethnicity – to one of evaluation of individual qualities; cultural bridges between countries and cultures can be strengthened by focusing on good writing and translation, both having the potential to elevate the role of the ethnic writer/artist from one of paraded marginality to one of centrality and independent value.

By taking the "ethnic" voice out of the postmodern dispute around silencing ethnic voices, and removing the implication of the possible contemporary spin on the "noble savage"-like perspective when presenting these ethnic voices, the Arts can be elevated into a space of integral and integrative multiculturalism exhibiting true "ethnic" voices of quality and distinction.

Multiculturalism and Ethnic Poets

Mostly unaided by direct organised financial support, the role of poetry in building and maintaining cultural bridges as part of a multicultural society may encounter both a beneficial independence and a counter-productive marginalisation. Within a context of limited public funding emphasising a kind of "sanctioned" ethnicity, authentic multicultural bridges may be mainly maintained by a volunteer base of poets working as multicultural voices; paradoxically, they may remain free from the necessity of meeting pre-determined and sanctioned notions of multiculturalism, specifically because of receiving little organised support, thus the pressure to ensure a continuous stream of funding being largely removed. The result, more often than not, is the presence of an authentic multicultural voice. However, a necessity remains for the multicultural poet to chart a course between expected displays of established multicultural values and the opportunity to present uninhibited multicultural experience independent to economically driven mores and expectations. Such multicultural "migrant" voices can thus emerge without reaffirming dominant or blatant multicultural positions, and the "volunteer" process enables a bridge-building that is not beholden to any particular political viewpoint.

This is not to suggest that the "authentic" multicultural voice is apolitical – simply that its values may not be able to be contained within a rigidly defined cultural and political notion of multicultural values. Direct political engagement from multicultural poets is displayed in organisations such as PEN (http://www.pen.org/), which champions the cause of imprisoned writers around the world and, in the words of Arthur Miller, "is the voice of cultures truthfully addressing one another rather than governments or armies in confrontation" (PEN 2011).

For example, the work of Chilean-born Australian poet Juan Garrido-Salgado displays ethnicity directly through political history, drawing on his time as a political prisoner under Pinochet in much of his poetry. In "Poems of justice, love and land", the role of the poet is tied to the oppressed and defined as a "refugee with prison bars in his eyes":

> Pinochet is under house arrest for more than 503 days
> The poet is a refugee with prison bars in his eyes,
> Forever. Pinochet has kept next to his pillow
> A letter of support from the Pope.
>
> The poet keeps a letter from the mothers of the disappeared. (Garrido-Salgado 2005, 52)

Political history does not define identity in "Learning English", but Garrido-Salgado nevertheless finds his former culture and the "Spanish sound" in his "wounded heart" uneasily transposed into the "new vowels" of his new home and language:

> The English language in my new verses was a deep ocean.
> In the afternoon I went with my family to Henley Beach
> My kids were playing on the shore, and together we began
> collecting vowels and consonants from somewhere.
> My mouth was like an old paper-boat navigated into its last dream,
> without the Andes Cordillera.
> Only with the Spanish sound beating in my wounded heart.
>
> We were lost without route on the horizon of this language
> I heard an aboriginal baby crying somewhere

> from each vowel's sound what I learned – how to write my new poems,
> To read the new life. New vowels sound away from my culture. (Garrido-Salgado 2005, 21)

Such a transition of place and culture unavoidably brings with it a transition of language and sound, and the inescapable problems for the migrant poet of "using a language that has been inherited, imported to a new country, and the pressure that results from working with language in new contexts" (Petrescu 2004, 294).

Bridge-Building, Drive and The Ambiguity of Power

The frequent repression of artistic voices through imprisonment by some governments around the world suggests a highly ambiguous status for the "authentic" voice of the poet, particularly in that voice's relation to the cultural and ethnic values of its government. Though frequently marginalised, the poet's voice nevertheless exhibits enough power through its presence to be considered a threat to national hegemonic values on some level: enough to repress through direct imprisonment, in too many cases.

It is this kernel of power that provides poets with their position of fascinating ambiguity; though the marginalisation of poetry in general – not merely migrant poetry – may see the poet's sphere of influence removed from the masses, the expressive power of the medium cannot be seen as dis-empowered by this fact alone. Rather, the niche area of reception and the receptive nature of those who do engage with the poetic discourse allows for its own kind of political awareness and affiliation that, though not widely dispersed, may be no less potent for it. Art, in this sense of marginalisation, combined with direct targeting of the receptive, accentuates poetry's capacity to be a major political discourse.

Constructive bridge-building through the Arts often comes from a "passionate" engagement rather than a purely practical one: conferences, blogs, and ties through social networking enable exchange of ideas through channels that do not rely on – indeed, can completely bypass – traditional notions of organised support and social infrastructure. It is the nature of poetry that it finds itself in these loose and transient ties that permeate culture without being grounded to a single institution or discourse.

This concept of a passionate engagement with communal activity and community building is increasingly being noticed in economic circles, with the notion of "drive" and independently quantified "mastery" being explored as a motivator beyond financial "reward." Such notions upset the typical value given to reward-based and formally-sanctioned relevance in the public sphere: for example, Daniel Pink cites freely distributed community-based software like Linux – now a major presence in corporate and personal information technology – that reaches a peak of success and community creation outside the typical realm of "work". Pink notes that, in their "limited discretionary time," some workers "do equally if not more technically sophisticated work, not for their employer, but for someone else for free" (Pink 2010).

Such an understanding of independent work, and, in the poet/writer's case, publication, is also offered in a November 2007 report by Kate Freeth for the Small Press Underground Networking Community, which suggests that small press publication is defined by "the personal and cultural rewards it offers, rather than financial ones" (Freeth 2007, 3).

Such exploits exist as a "passion": an out-of-hours pursuit of "challenge and mastery, along with making a contribution" (Pink 2010). Such a motivational impulse exists, and thrives, beyond formally sanctioned workspaces, and we might suggest that the bridge-building poet's work is a

kind of poetry version of Linux: a passion-based construct that builds its own community and, though not supported by traditional financial means, flows freely – and powerfully – into the community.

More Than Just Food: The "Authentic"

Part of the difficulty in finding and presenting a multicultural voice marked by a personal sense of authenticity is in the conflict between social expectations and understandings of multiculturalism and the poet's own experiences, values, and positions. Social and political comprehension of multiculturalism can frequently lapse into a food-centred understanding, where the benefits of a multicultural presence are presented, but only in a way that is fundamentally non-threatening and potentially provides little in the way of direct personal engagement. As Ghassan Hage puts it, this brand of multiculturalism eschews real multicultural presence and offers merely "more diversity in the restaurants of the neighbourhood" (Hage 1998, 18).

In this environment of food-centred diversity, the notion of multiculturalism is inevitably compromised by a limited social perspective that treats the topic too "easily" and finds reaffirmations of its own positions in the easy subservience of the multicultural presence.

Nevertheless, such conceptions can still be seen as partial, if compromised, bridge-building, and may be claimed as a springboard for multicultural poets and voices to further expand on the role of varying ethnic voices in society. The expectations of a typical multicultural discourse can be combined with the triggers and tensions inherent in the poet's own voice, filling in the focus on "food" with further details of the migrant experience and making it a powerful representation of "difference".

For example, Malaysian-Chinese-born Australian poet Shen, in his poem "Noodles" draws on the easy association of food with his Chinese heritage, but in doing so also explores further issues relating to his own past and experience as a migrant. Indeed, the non-migrant perspective is not considered at all in the poem – or, if it is, it is embodied in Shen himself, who has, in his mother's eyes, lost the link to the "Chinese" part of himself.

> *"Eating noodles"*, mother says,
> putting down her coffee cup,
> *"....the only thing Chinese about you."*
> I look up from the steaming
> bowl of noodles, eyes half-slit
> at dawn. Too tired to argue,
> I slip into old habits;
> an inscrutable smile
> and a filial, obedient nod. (Shen 2001, 6)

The tension between Western and Chinese is encapsulated in Shen himself, as a migrant voice, rather than between migrant and non-migrant; in the poem, food becomes a point of subjective identity tension in itself rather than merely serving as a lure of an unmediated link to the "other's" culture.

Methods of Distribution

While outlets exist for multicultural voices, presses supporting migrant poetry are relatively scarce,

with specialist presses rather than a multicultural presence integrated into mainstream publishing. As well as isolating the multicultural voice, this may also place further expectations on the multicultural poet, with an expected emphasis on "migrant" rather than more general themes and topics that might detract from the poet's easily-understood and marketed migrant identity.

Without mainstream endorsement from main publishers, poets in general, not just multicultural ones, may find themselves dealing with small presses, and aligned with independent networks such as SPUNC (The Small Press Network), "formed in 2006 to promote independent publishing and support the principle of diversity within the publishing industry as a vital component of Australian literary culture" (SPUNC 2011).

Freeth suggests that, despite the problems faced by independent Australian publishers, there is a "widespread sense of dedication and devotion to … maintaining the diversity of published work, where multinational publishing corporations may not be so supportive," though publication outlets are primarily based in the eastern states and the difficulties relating to widespread distribution and mainstream publicity remain one of the key problems (Freeth 2007, 1). Thus, maintaining a regular space in a popular or widely distributed newspaper or magazine was one of the report's recommendations (Freeth 2007, 23).

Of the presses surveyed by Freeth, 26 of 46 respondents published poetry (with another 4 noting an intention or past experience of doing so), this number being second only to short fiction (Freeth 2007, 27). Nevertheless, the lack of viable publishing outlets is accentuated by the financial constraints of the presses themselves: though these outlets exist for migrant poets, the niche nature carries the risk of an over-saturated market. Reliance on these outlets may mean waiting for months, if not longer, for submissions to even be considered as the presses deal with varying levels of intake over time; Freeth reports that, of presses surveyed in her report, the majority "published between one and ten titles in the past year" and "have an average print run of fewer than 2000" (Freeth 2007, 7). The move towards self-publication or collaborative publication may serve as a necessary outlet in such case. Though such publication is often considered "vanity publication", and marginalised as such, presses like Ginninderra Press (http://www.ginninderrapress.com.au/) offer publication as a co-operative venture, where submissions are still assessed and, though the poet is expected to cover publishing costs, sales returns are ultimately expected to recuperate these costs.

In fact, just as poets may find themselves underpaid and having to work alternate jobs to make ends meet, the publishers that make their work available may in fact be working under the same conditions, with "publishers and staff who are often required to multi-skill and are usually low-paid or not paid at all" (Freeth 2007, 3). As such, the financial and cultural marginalisation is felt not only by the artist, but also by the primary means of making the non-mainstream poet's voice available. Freeth reports that, of presses surveyed, the majority "receive funding of less than 5% of their income (half receive no funding at all)" (Freeth 2007, 3).

Organisations such as PEN for example, rely heavily on online distribution and also contribute to the generation of social capital through the online realm – based around "networks of civic engagement, norms of reciprocity, and trust" (Stolle 1998, 497); online sales and event-based sales play a key role in distributing books from independent presses (Freeth 2007, 3) as opposed to more mainstream sales and distribution methods:

> The small and independent publishers surveyed already successfully host launches, appear at events and promote themselves and their publications to the established writing and reading community, but find marketing to booksellers and getting media attention difficult. It's also hard to ensure good support and point of- sale merchandising once a title gets stocked in bookshops. Many respondents commented on the enormous energy and dedication needed

for good publicity – and most of them just don't have the resources to do it. (Freeth 2007, 9)

Additionally, one respondent noted a "lack of support" from "[m]edia that isn't always receptive to new voices. Almost no one will stock poetry, except for the usual suspects" (Freeth 2007, 54). As such, multicultural poets may find themselves working as marginalised voices within an already highly marginalised discourse, and adjusting – both consciously and unconsciously – to these dual levels of marginalisation. Though one level of marginalisation may lie in multicultural identity, a broader level of marginalisation comes with the discourse of poetry itself.

Conclusion: The Integrative and the Demonstrative

And yet, though a seeming undertone of tokenism may seem to parade merely the multicultural presence rather than the authentic multicultural voice, this nevertheless thrusts the migrant poet back into the position of tension, whereby the opportunities of display and expected ideological demonstration can be met with the presence of the authentic ethnic experience.

The poet can find spaces for an authentic voice within token displays of inclusiveness, or maintain an "inclusive" presence while simultaneously working on more "passionate" unsupported and unsanctioned bridge-building through various community networks and forms of distribution. These may include small presses and co-operative publishing, as well as online media and organisations committed to presenting alternate voices and enabling a free exchange of values and ideas in multicultural voices.

Until such independent bridge-building is itself considered an integral part of a multicultural society, the creation of cultural bridges through ethnic voices will still be partially hindered by lack of substantial financial support. Nevertheless, society will continue to benefit from – and be confronted by – such bridge-building. Though less visibly integrated into mainstream discourses, the role of the migrant poet as both a "passionate" bridge-builder, and a poet bound by personal history and expression, continues and reaffirms values in multicultural Australia as well as around the world.

References:
Bhabha, Homi K. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. New York: Routledge.

Freeth, Kate. (2007, November). A lovely kind of madness: Small and independent publishing in Australia. Report written for Small Press Underground Networking Community. Available at: http://spunc.com.au/static/files/assets/ae9c26cd/FreethSPUNCReport.pdf

Garrido-Salgado, J. (2005). *Collected poems*. Melbourne: Five Islands Press Pty Ltd.

Ginninderra Press. (2010). About Ginninderra Press. Available at: http://www.ginninderrapress.com.au/

Hage, G. (1998). *White nation: Fantasies of white supremacy in a multicultual society*. New York: Routledge.

PEN American Centre. (2011). About PEN. Available at: http://www.pen.org/page.php/prmID/142

Petrescu, Ioana. (2004). A lyrical bridge across hemispheres – Australian poetry in the Romanian literary magazine *Vatra*. In Sue Williams, Dymphna Lonergan, Rick Hosking, Laura Deane, and Nena Bierbaum (Ed.), *The Regenerative spirit volume 2: (Un)settling, (dis)locations, (post-)colonial, (re)presentations – Austalian post-colonial reflections*. Adelaide: Lythrum Press.

Pink, Daniel. (2010). Drive: the surprising truth about what motivates us. Presentation for *RSA 21st Century Englightenment,* 8 April 2010. Available at:
http://comment.rsablogs.org.uk/2010/04/08/rsa-animate-drive/

Salutin, Rick. (1991). *Living in a Dark Age*. New York: HarperCollins.

Shen. (2001). *City of my skin*. Wollongong: Five Islands Press Pty Ltd.

SPUNC: Small Press Underground Networking Community. (2011). What is SPUNC? Available at:
http://spunc.com.au/what-is-spunc

Stolle, Dietlind. (1998, September). Bowling together, bowling alone: The development of generalized trust in voluntary associations. *Political Psychology* (special issue: Psychological approaches to social capital), 19(3), 497-525.