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RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Political Radio Poetics: Ouyang Yu's Poetry and its Adaptation on ABC Radio National's *Poetica*

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Abstract

'Ouyang Yu' was an episode that aired on ABC Radio National's *Poetica*, a weekly program broadcast across Australia from 1997 to 2014. The episode featured readings of poetry by the contemporary Chinese-Australian poet Ouyang Yu, read by the poet and by the actor Brant Eustace. These readings were embedded in rich soundscapes, and framed by interviews with the poet on the thematic contexts for the poems. In this article I treat 'Ouyang Yu' as an adaptation of Ouyang's work, in Linda Hutcheon's sense of the term. I examine how Ouyang's poetry has been adapted for a national audience, and pay particular attention to how contemporary political discourses of nationhood have influenced the episode's adaptations. For *Poetica* existed within an institution—the ABC—whose culture had a bearing on its programming, and the ABC was in turn influenced by, and sought to influence, the wider social and political culture in Australia.

Keywords

Australian poetry; Ouyang Yu; multiculturalism; Australian national identity; adaptation; Australian Broadcasting Corporation

This essay uses an episode of radio poetry on ABC Radio National to examine how adaptation functions within a public service broadcasting context. Adaptation—as theorised by Linda Hutcheon in *Theory of Adaptation*—is often understood as a process of aesthetic and thematic modification, when a source text is represented artfully in another medium: book to film adaptations are commonly studied in this way.¹ However, such a process can also entail the adaptation of a source text through institutional frameworks, which may themselves be informed by wider political discourse. In this essay I examine an adaptation of poetry on ABC RN's *Poetica* to shed light on these dimensions of adaptation within a public service broadcasting context. The episode in question is on the life and work of the contemporary Chinese-Australian poet Ouyang Yu, and was broadcast on *Poetica* as 'Ouyang Yu' on 23 August 1997.²

Before proceeding to an analysis of the adaptive process in this episode, I will first describe the format of *Poetica*, in order to show that the program did in fact adapt poetry to radio. *Poetica* was pre-recorded and broadcast across Australia every Saturday at 3.05 pm, from 1997 to 2014; it also had a repeat broadcast, first on Wednesday, then on Thursday, evenings. The program had a large audience for poetry in any medium in Australia, with up to 90,000 listeners per Saturday afternoon broadcast.³ The majority of *Poetica*'s episodes drew on poetry published in books, anthologies and journals, with a minority based on recordings of live spoken word and slam poetry. In other words, *Poetica* usually adapted poetry from the page to radio, leading to an experience of hearing the poems that was quite distinct from reading them in their original print formats. The program often used actors to read the poems (under direction from each episode's producer), instead of or as well as the poet, so the poetry was interpreted vocally for the audience. This was one aspect of the program's adaptation of poetry: adaptation through voice. Each of these readings was embedded in rich soundscapes made up of music and sound effects, to suggest particular moods or places drawn from the poems. Many episodes also contained interviews with the poet, their peers or experts on their work. These interviews provided the adapted poetry with literary-historical, biographical, and formal contexts. In short, contemporary Australian poetry in print (the majority of *Poetica*'s content) was adapted by the program into the sonic materiality of the radio medium.

The term adaptation is not usually applied to radio poetry, but I contend that it is an apt description of the form, and one that allows a fruitful examination of how poetry has been added to, through production, by an institutionally situated radio program. A theoretical issue that needs to be addressed here, however, is the suitability of the term 'adaptation' for individual episodes of *Poetica*, given that its episodes were comprised of a number of adapted poems interspersed with commentary. Hutcheon alludes to this matter when she states, 'defining an adaptation as an extended, deliberate, announced revisitation of a particular work of art [for instance, one poem] does manage to provide some limits: short intertextual allusions to other works or bits of sampled music would not be included'.⁴ In light of this, it is most accurate to describe 'Ouyang Yu', and other episodes like it on *Poetica*, as an episode containing adapted poems. While I recognise this, I do refer to the episode as a whole as an adaptation, to convey that the totality of the episode—including its sequence of adapted poetry and contextual interviews—offers a coherent and artful perspective on the poet's work.

I also note here that my analysis of the episode, and of the institutional ethos that shaped its production, is informed by my own involvement with *Poetica* (although not with the creation of 'Ouyang Yu'). Before undertaking academic research on *Poetica* I was a freelance producer for the program, from 2008 to the final year of its operation in 2014. Over this time I approached my projects mostly with aesthetic and literary-thematic preoccupations (which poems to select from a poet's body of work; whose voices to feature in the show; what

soundscapes would best suit the poetry). Conversations with my supervisors—Ladd and Justine Sloane-Lees, another full-time producer on *Poetica*—rarely centred on how to frame the work in terms of contemporary social and political contexts, with the assumption that this would emerge organically from the material—if the material engaged directly with social and political themes—and from my imaginative rendering of it. Our conversations tended instead to be about aesthetic matters, particularly voice in relation to content.

What was not discussed in conversations between ABC producers and me was *Poetica*'s institutional grounding. As one of the ABC's stable of programs, *Poetica* existed under the ABC Charter of 1983, which is a set of guiding principles for programming. Two of the charter's clauses that are most often discussed in relation to the ABC's mission are that its programs should 'contribute to a sense of national identity' and 'take account of ... the multicultural character of the Australian community'.⁵ These stipulations position the ABC as an institution that both absorbs and shapes contemporary discourses of national identity, which circulate powerfully through media in a banal nationalist mode—to use Michael Billig's term.⁶ *Poetica* worked to a quota of 60 per cent contemporary Australian poetry, as set out in its own program brief, and this was an obvious way in which it sought to meet the cultural requirements of the ABC Charter, by selecting poetry from the many books, journals and anthologies published in Australia each year—some of which pointedly addressed what it meant to live in Australia and to be an Australian.⁷

The producer of 'Ouyang Yu' was Ladd, who has an intimate knowledge of *Poetica*'s Brief (which he drafted himself) as well as a good working knowledge of the ABC Charter. In an unpublished section of an interview I conducted with Ladd in 2016, I asked him: 'To what extent did you engage with the ABC Charter? Did you consult it often, or sometimes, or rarely? Did you have it in mind when you were producing and commissioning shows?' He replied:

When I first joined in 1983, we all had to read the Charter as part of our induction. I don't know if they even do that these days! I can say in over 30 years of making episodes I never consulted it directly to see what to do next. However, I was aware and I think philosophically guided by some of its key ideas: 'innovation', 'comprehensiveness', the Reithian principles [after the first General Manager of the BBC, John Reith] of 'inform', 'educate', 'entertain'. I also had in my mind the concepts of 'cultural enrichment', and 'cultural diversity' and to form a 'sense of national identity'. But it was in a vague, idealistic sense, rather than being very focused.⁸

Here we have a broad account of Ladd's engagement with the Charter as the head of *Poetica*. The aim of this essay is to present another perspective on the relationship between cultural policy and programming, through a close reading of a particular episode of adapted poetry on *Poetica*. This is a bottom-up approach, reading a radio adaptation of poetry for traces of institutional and wider political influence that may have worked through an individual program maker such as Ladd. I intend the essay to gesture outward from this particular adaptation, and extend thinking on how contemporary politics may shape the aesthetics of artful adaptations in public service broadcasters like the ABC.⁹

'Ouyang Yu' (1997) and contemporary politics of nationhood

'Ouyang Yu' includes ten adapted poems by Ouyang, as well as three of his translations of contemporary Chinese poets (to recognise the fact that Ouyang is not only a poet but also a prolific translator), with the latter read in both Mandarin and English.¹⁰ Roughly half the readings are by Ouyang, and half by the actor Brant Eustace; the episode also features

generous commentary from the poet on his work and life. Ladd's selection of poetry and interview clips for 'Ouyang Yu' focus on the poet's bicultural identity, as he was, at the time of the episode's broadcast, a recent Chinese migrant to Australia. This particular focus of Ladd's was arguably shaped by the identity politics contemporaneous with the episode's airing. For the episode was broadcast at a time when multiculturalism was being hotly debated, four months after the formation of Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party in April 1997, and following Hanson's anti-Asian and anti-multiculturalism rhetoric. Prime Minister John Howard suppressed multicultural discourse in response to Hanson's rhetoric, as Deirdre Howard-Wagner has noted.¹¹

Jon Stratton argues that despite our image of being multicultural at this time (in the late-1990s, after two-and-a-half decades of official multiculturalism), representations of national identity in much of the media had tended to feature images that excluded certain ethnic groups. He writes: 'While Australia has had a non-discriminatory migration policy since the early 1970s, it is only in the 1990s, and only really in the problematic portrayal in *Romper Stomper* (1992), that any Asian people have been narrativised as a part of Australian society.'¹² Stratton uses this observation to argue that it was not until the early to mid 1990s that Asians entered the national imaginary as Australians, which he claims is when the Anglo core of the nation started to see Asian-Australian-ness as a way of being Australian.¹³ He suggests that it is partly the context of Asians finally appearing on screens that inspired the backlash by Hanson and Howard, and their calls for a return to an Anglo Australian identity. Indications of this were Hanson's famous maiden speech in parliament, where she urged the abolition of multiculturalism,¹⁴ and Howard's talk of 'battlers'¹⁵ in his election campaign before taking office as prime minister, and of 'mateship'¹⁶ in the lead-up up to the republic referendum of 1999, both of which appealed to nostalgic, Anglocentric images of Australianness.

There is a historical context for the lack of Asian representation in popular media during the first two decades of multiculturalism. This lack was arguably a result of the historical particularities of white-Chinese (and more broadly white-Asian) relations in Australia. As Wenche Ommundsen has argued:

Whatever notion of Chineseness is included in the migrant's baggage on arrival, it will have to negotiate powerful Western discourses and constructions. China has the doubtful privilege of functioning as the West's favourite 'other'; burdened with an 'excess of meaningfulness', it translates into accumulations of stereotypes, Orientalist dreams and racist fantasies. In Australia, where China, more precisely anti-Chinese discourse, has been 'explicitly connected with the cause of nation-building', such constructions still exert a powerful influence after almost three decades of multiculturalism and anti-discriminatory immigration policies.¹⁷

Ommundsen is referring to a history of cultural relations going back to the gold rush era in the nineteenth century, when anti-Chinese discourse functioned through exclusion to shore up a sense of a unified Australian identity. It is precisely in this context that Stratton claims that, 'the "yellow race" has always been Australia's most important racial Other'.¹⁸ Under Australian multiculturalism, however, difference was downsized to ethnicity rather than race: "culture" [was] located at the site of ethnic communities ... The more flexible concept of ethnicity (which can include sexuality, religious beliefs, cultural practice and moral beliefs) re-presents difference as enriching the national body.'¹⁹ Jacqueline Lo claims, however, that for a long time multicultural discourse had to do with ethnic differences within the category of whiteness. Towards the end of the twentieth century, she argues:

Multiculturalism ... was seen primarily as a way of including non-Anglo-Celtic European migrants (such as Greeks and Italians) into the 'Australian way of life'. As Jon Stratton points out, ethnicity during this period, 'meant, in the first place, cultural diversity *within* a single white race'.²⁰

Despite these conservative aspects, multiculturalism did substantially shift public discourse on Australian identity; it also had a marked effect on programming within the ABC leading up to the Howard era. Between the early 1980s and the late 1990s, there was a push within the ABC for more cultural diversity to be represented in programming. *Lateline*, which operated in the mid 1970s on Radio 2 (the station that was renamed Radio National in 1985) is an early example of a program that made space for diversity, as Allan Ashbolt notes:

The significance of *Lateline* was that it tried to shift the ABC, in just one nightly program, outside prevailing opinion, outside those messages and utterances issuing from the corridors of institutional power. Metaphorically, and sometimes actually, it gave Aboriginals a voice.²¹

Virginia Madsen also highlights that 'cultural radio' stations like Radio National have always tended to be more diverse in their representations than other stations. For Madsen, cultural radio is characterised by:

channels devoted to the liberal arts with their roots firmly embedded in the period prior to the introduction of mass television: the BBC's Third Channel (1946–1970) or its inheritor, Radio 3, or ABC's ABC Classic FM, now devoted largely to the European classical music repertoire ... [Cultural radio is a form in which] the arts remain critically important, but where we can also recognise the sector's role in the continuing development of public discourse and a pluralist democratic culture.²²

In explaining the pluralism of cultural radio, Madsen highlights the form's inherent transnationalism, with its staff tending to absorb ideas and aesthetics across national borders.²³ Due to these characteristics, Radio National/Radio 2 was earlier attuned to representing diversity of Australian identity, compared to other stations and networks on the ABC. Indeed, this was recognised in the National Advisory Council's commendation to Radio National for its more successful adoption of multicultural programming, compared to ABC TV networks and to metropolitan and regional ABC radio stations.²⁴

The 1980s saw a series of government-commissioned policy reviews that were critical of the wider ABC's interpretation of its national identity representations, however, and which sought to push the institution as a whole into more diverse programming. These were the Dix Inquiry (1981), the National Advisory Council (NAC, later simply called the ABC Advisory Council)'s *Multiculturalism and the ABC* (1987), and The Mansfield Report (1997). The Dix Inquiry and the Mansfield Report were initiated by the Malcolm Fraser and John Howard coalition governments, respectively. They were prompted by Liberal–National Party (LNP) perceptions of inefficiency and a lack of focus in the broadcaster, and became nodes of debate about the functions of the ABC in relation to national identity.²⁵ *Multiculturalism and the ABC: A Report to the ABC Board* was an internal response to the Dix Inquiry, prompted by Dix's criticism that the ABC had until that point promoted a monocultural white national identity. In fact, the ABC released a cultural diversity statement at this time, attempting to address Dix's criticisms on this front.²⁶

Ashbolt has argued that these criticisms of the ABC were heavy-handed, and failed to acknowledge that the ABC reflected the wider societal and political norms of the time:

What the [Dix] committee calls ‘cultural bias’ was built into the organisation by a succession of conservative governments from 1932 to 1972, as well as by the imperial patriotism engendered during wartime. In other words, Anglocentrism arose not quite from the ABC itself but from the political, social and cultural environment in which the ABC was placed by government ... For instance, in its neglect of Aboriginals and migrants (which Dix so roundly and rightly castigates), the ABC was accurately reflecting a particular Australian reality—the reality of prevailing opinion as exemplified in the nation’s judicial, academic, financial, mercantile, military, ecclesiastical, bureaucratic, media and parliamentary institutions.²⁷

The general trajectory within the ABC in the last two decades of the twentieth century was a move to culturally plural representations of national identity. *Poetica’s* own program brief broadly implies an engagement with diverse cultures as stipulated in the ABC Charter. It states that its target audience is: ‘A broad national audience of diverse social and educational backgrounds’, and that it seeks to ‘engage a wide range of listeners in the experience of poetry through broadcast, on-line streaming and podcast where possible’.²⁸ In my interview with Ladd we discussed the extent to which *Poetica* presented Australian poetry as being diverse. Ladd stated:

Poetica was internationalist and multicultural. We did approximately 40 bi-lingual programs, in dozens of languages including Greek, Italian, Chinese, Japanese, Bahasa, but also languages such as Persian, Slovenian, Navajo, Welsh, Catalan and even Mayan! These were mainly poets from outside of Australia writing in their mother tongue, that then different language groups within Australia could appreciate. We also regularly focused on contemporary Australian poets with a non-Anglo heritage. Ouyang Yu was one of those, but there were many more: Roshanak Amrein, Lidija Cvetkovic, Afief Ismail, Dimitris Tsaloumas, Pi O, Ali Alizadeh, Omar Musa, Miriam Wei Wei Lo, to name some. We did a program on Middle-Eastern and African refugee poets, and another on young writers from ‘NESB’ (non-English speaking backgrounds) as it used to be called. We also featured indigenous poets: Samuel Wagan Watson, Ali Cobby Eckermann, Oodgeroo, Kevin Gilbert and many others. We featured contemporary Asian Australian poets introduced by Adam Aitken and Michelle Cahill. One of our final programs was to be ‘Southern Sun, Aegean Light’ on the poetry of second generation Greek Australians, but we were axed before we could get it to air. A shorter version ended up on the RN feature program Earshot which became the new home for some poetry features after the demise of *Poetica*.²⁹

The two-and-a-half decades of multiculturalism prior to *Poetica’s* founding arguably had a significant effect on its programming. Ladd speaks of *Poetica’s* selections of poetry, making it clear that they intended to include poets from ethnically diverse backgrounds. It is my objective to go beyond this account of *Poetica’s* editorial policy. In focusing on the *adaptive process within* an individual episode, I seek to show how adaptation in the radio medium, and within an institutional context, may further shape representations of Australian identity given to a national public.

‘You put everybody to a multicultural sleep’: critical reflections on Australian identity at the end of the twentieth century in ‘Ouyang Yu’

‘Ouyang Yu’ opens with a long instrumental track featuring a Chinese mandolin, which leads into a reading of the poem ‘moon over melbourne’. Over the opening bars of mandolin, and before the poem’s title is announced, we hear the sound of dogs barking, and people walking

over paved streets, speaking in muffled but recognisably Australian accents; the sound of a train passing over train tracks; and the pulsating sound of a green pedestrian light.³⁰ Through these sounds we learn that the setting is urban and Australian; however, the mandolin signals a significant element of difference in this episode. The opening sequence alludes sonically to themes that will be explored in the following half-hour: bicultural identity, Chinese ethnicity, multiculturalism and the displacement or dislocation of migrants in urban Australia.

In this opening poem the poet expresses discomfort about his cultural identity in contemporary Australia, which is a seed for the episode's themes. Following the opening sonic sequence, an actor, Brant Eustace, announces the poem and reads the opening lines:

in a night without time
 when I mourn over the loss of
 an ancient Chinese poem
 a thousand years ago about now

 but moon over melbourne
 that knows nothing of *that*
 a young one just 200 seconds old
 ... you mooch over melbourne³¹

The authorial voice of the poem is made strange through the actor's Australian accent, reading a Chinese poet's words, and this uncanny effect of voice translation suits the poem's theme of cultural displacement. The poet experiences a sense of temporal as well as spatial dislocation—'in a night without time'—as the city of Melbourne reminds him of Chinese landscapes and poetry from across thousands of years. Although the poem is set in Melbourne, the city is experienced as being less significant to the poet than China, with its long cultural history that feels present to him; it is for this reason that in the print version of the poem 'Chinese' is capitalised while 'melbourne' and 'australia' are relegated to lower case. The Melbourne moon being 'just 200 seconds old' is a reference to settler Australia being not much more than 200 years old, from 1788 to the moment of the poem. And the italics (which the actor conveys in his vocal emphasis) in 'but moon over melbourne / that knows nothing of *that*' suggest disgust at the Melbourne moon's ignorance of other moons, other cultures, other times. This becomes more evident as the poem unfolds. I highlight these aspects as they establish a binary between China and Melbourne/Australia, which the episode builds on.

The poet's self is diminished in this foreign landscape: having listed off the moon's significance for Chinese poets over the centuries—'Li Bai with your nostalgic light at his bedstead' / 'Li Yu with emotions so entangled he could hardly cut loose / because of you,'—he arrives at himself: 'ouyang yu, with you wandering lonely across a heavenly desert'.³² In Melbourne the poet has lost his cultural identity—this is symbolised by his own name being relegated to the lower case (putting it on the same level as 'melbourne' and 'australia'), in contrast to the other Chinese poets he cites—which produces melancholy. However, this note of sadness and loneliness is immediately followed by one of anger at the Melbourne moon, as the poet starts to look for the causes of his alienation. In the following stanza Eustace highlights the anger in the poem, by putting particular hostile energy into his reading of the words 'bloody australian', all of the laid back Australianisms, and the first 'sick':

moon over melbourne you bloody australian moon
 you hang on you all right you no worries mate
 you make me sick home sick for sure³³

The poet proceeds to locate the source of his alienation and loss of cultural identity in the next stanza, which effectively grounds the poem to contemporary Australian politics in relation to migrants and national identity; this is a context that underpins not only this poem but the episode as a whole:

[moon over melbourne,] you put everybody to a multicultural sleep
 who knows not what is meant by
 one dancing with oneself and one's shadow under you³⁴

The sense here is that multicultural Australia is supposed to be interested in other cultures, but that it is ignorant about aspects of other cultures that go beyond the superficial. 'How can Australia be multicultural if no one knows what the moon means to the Chinese? If no one cares that I am dancing with my identity under it?' is the implied question here. In an essay titled 'Lost in the Translation', Ouyang has addressed what he sees as the superficiality of Australian multicultural engagements with the other:

When one's culture is only represented [in Australia] at its most superficial level—in the Chinese case, in lion and dragon dances, takeaway food, Peking Opera, acrobatics or simply as anything ancient, one is left with a sense of hopelessness that no one will ever go beyond this, not in 100 years.³⁵

In 'moon over melbourne' the poet does in fact offer ancient images of Chineseness, through his list of Chinese poets across the centuries, and grounds his identity to these images, but these are specifically about poetic beauty in the Chinese tradition, and not the more generalised sense of ancientness that he criticises as superficial. The final stanzas emphasise an absence of meaningful cultural engagement, which in Ouyang's view is a flaw of multiculturalism. In the episode's adaptation of 'moon over melbourne' the Chinese mandolin builds to a frenzy—signalling distress—under the actor's voice, which is both plaintive and aggressive:

moon over melbourne
 mourn over melbourne
 for the irretrievable poems lost to you
 for the sleepy souls who wouldn't care less
 for the nights that are so displaced here
 for the dogs that bark so loyally

 for me
 for me
 who refuses to go out again
 dreading the sight of you
 dreading the slightest suggestion of a memory
 dreading so bloody dreading to see
 the bloody bastard moon

 over melbourne³⁶

The word 'sleep' is used twice in the poem, in ways that reinforce the poet's critique of multiculturalism. It is used first in 'you put everybody to a multicultural sleep', and second in 'mourn over melbourne / for the irretrievable poems lost to you / for the sleepy souls who wouldn't care less'. Multicultural Australia is depicted as being asleep to the cultural riches that have arrived at its doorstep. The dominant emotional tones of this adapted poem in 'Ouyang Yu', then, are sadness for a loss of cultural identity through migration and anger at Melbourne/

Australia for the alienation produced in the poet. In the penultimate line the poet uses the derogatory term ‘bloody bastard’ to turn an Australianism back on Australia, and to convey that the Melbourne moon is a bastard moon for him, that it is illegitimate.

Following the actor’s reading of this poem, we hear Ouyang talking about when he arrived in Australia (in 1991); he and the interviewer/producer Ladd then move off the street and into a Chinese restaurant.³⁷ Ladd now prompts Ouyang: ‘You’re still pretty ambivalent in your poetry about Australia, about cutting yourself off from China, the culture’, and we hear a response from the poet which acknowledges and endorses the Australia/China binary set up in ‘moon over melbourne’:

Yes ... I *was*, and I *am* still somewhere in between, not belonging *entirely* to Australia nor *entirely* to China. Because I’ve got my permanent residency, and I haven’t made up my mind to become an Australian citizen *yet*. So you see, this is where I’m standing.³⁸

This is followed immediately by the adapted poem ‘Seeing Double’, in which Ouyang develops the theme of displacement and loss of identity, describing it as leading to a sense of self-fracture. In the episode the poem is read by Eustace with the sound of a typewriter in the background, and this combination of voice and sound emphasises that what is being addressed is the fracture not only of the self through migration to a foreign culture, but also of the authorial voice in writing. We hear that:

wherever you go
china follows you

like a shadow
its ancientness

recast in australia
you gaze at your own image

on the computer
its chineseness

becoming strange
like an imported antique

newly painted with foreign colour
a being of two beings

you can’t help but
translate everything back and forth so many times

that it becomes unrecognisably
fascinating as a doubled, tripled, multiple double³⁹

The poem and its performance in ‘Ouyang Yu’ again emphasise the cultural identity binary between Chineseness and being in Australia. The choice to have the poem read by the Australian actor and not Ouyang again gives the reading an uncanniness, which heightens the sense of self-translation between cultures in the poem.

Significantly, at the end of the poem the ‘being of two beings’—that is, a being of two national cultures—becomes more than two in the process of translation between ‘chineseness’ and ‘australia’. The poet’s identity becomes ‘unrecognisably / fascinating as a doubled, *tripled, multiple double*’. There is a play with numbers in this poem in relation to self-identity as it is affected by migration overseas, specifically through migration to multicultural Australia. By the

end of the poem it is suggested that the poet has moved beyond the China/Australia binary to a sense of self that is 'tripled', or a 'multiple double'. This, I suggest, is an end trajectory for the poet, where individual cultural identity, as it is shaped by national identity, can be multiple in a way that Ouyang argues (in an interview clip that I address below) is not possible in multicultural Australia in the moment of the broadcast.

This first section of the episode, including 'moon over melbourne', the interview clip on when the poet arrived in the country and where he now stands in relation to China and Australia, and 'Seeing Double', establish the binary between Australia and China. Voice is crucial in establishing this binary, in the alternation of the actor's Australian accented voice with Ouyang's. With the juxtaposition of these two accents—Eustace's speaking in laid back Australian tones, Ouyang's eloquently speaking its Chinese identity—the episode insists that there are two national dimensions to Ouyang's poetry. Through this vocal alternation, the listener is primed to keep in mind the China/Australia binary as the episode develops, and as poems appear that address this binary thematically. It is telling that the Australian voice speaks first in 'Ouyang Yu', uttering the poet's experiences of alienation in Melbourne: this tells the listener that the nation that is the prime object of critique and discussion (reflecting the poet's current experience as a recent migrant) is Australia rather than China.

The episode establishes this dichotomous relationship in ways that both cohere with and depart from the poet's treatment of this in his creative and critical writing, and in ways that are revealing of how the episode draws on contemporary narratives of national identity. Following the adaptation of 'Seeing Double', and then a bilingual adaptation of an untitled poem set at Flinders Street Station in Melbourne, the poet goes on to discuss the China/Australia binary in his work and its relationship to multiculturalism.⁴⁰ In this discussion the poet frequently cites an article he first published in 1997, which was re-published as 'Turning from a Pictographic Person into a Phonetic One' in 2007. Ouyang speaks in the interview about 'pushing forward' into English and Australian culture, in trying to leave China in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and being forcibly pushed back into his Chinese ethnicity upon arriving in Australia:

I wrote an article and presented it as a speech in a regional festival here in Melbourne. That article discuss[es] the problems I am facing ... To sum up, what I mean is that to be an English major [in China], we try to push into the area of English so that when one masters the language, one forgets about one's culture. That I take to mean the push forward. So [when] we are in China, we're pushed forward *into* English. However, as soon as we came overseas, we found that's not the case, because our features and our racial features ... we are recognised right away by Australians, and people from other countries, as Chinese. And there's no mistake about it. And they will, even if you criticise your own country for many things that you found unpleasant at home, they will say: 'look, this is a multicultural country. You should be proud of your cultural heritage, and China's good in many ways'—that sort of thing, people will say to you, which you won't hear people say in China. So in a way, when you are pushing forward, you're pushed *back*, by things like that, positive things.

And ... on the other hand, you also find that it's hard to survive in this country. Even when you get your doctorate in English, it's hard to find a job in academe. So you're sort of pushed back too in that sense, meaning being rejected. Then ... the absurd thing is that, when you go back to China—which I did last year—I find that people do not accept me ... If you want to apply for a job in university in China, they won't accept you because: 'you look Chinese, mate, you're still Chinese, but you've got an

Australian citizenship. We'd prefer to have someone who is a native speaker, like an Australian. Pure, 100% Australian, white Australian—or white American, or white English. If we give him a job, we pay him *double*. But when you come here to take up a position, we can only pay you a Chinese salary.⁴¹

After sharing his experience of a 'double rejection' by the two nations, Ouyang anchors this in the Australian case to multiculturalism. He highlights the 'push back' as a paradox of Australian multiculturalism at this time: we welcome those from non-white backgrounds, but want them to retain their ethnicity, so that we can celebrate it as different within the white mainstream.⁴² In the article he cites in this interview, he puts it this way: 'My Chinese identity ... was not accentuated until I arrived in Australia ... Where is the way out for people such as me? Is our future predetermined to be Chinese no matter how long we reside overseas?'⁴³ Multiculturalism's focus on ethnicity, in celebrating difference, produces a sense of alienation in Ouyang's work. Towards the end of the interview clip in 'Ouyang Yu' the poet tries to imagine a 'third alternative' to multiculturalism and to white nationalism (as exemplified by the White Australia Policy), which have constructed identities based on ethnicity and racialisation, respectively. He says:

So eventually you try to find a third alternative. Maybe there's something somewhere out there for you. But what is it? You don't know. That for me is the predicament. I don't know what that third alternative is. It's better than multiculturalism. It's certainly better than One Nation, as proposed by Pauline Hanson. Because multiculturalism has its own problems: you know, the whole country is divided into many, many enclaves, so that people don't really interact with each other, except in a business sense.⁴⁴

Here Ouyang offers another criticism of late-1990s multiculturalism, which is that it does not necessarily facilitate meaningful non-economic dialogue between people of different cultural backgrounds. This is where the conversation ends in 'Ouyang Yu'. Ouyang's prosaic commentary on multiculturalism ceases here, and beyond this point in the episode there are only adapted poems. But, in the cited essay, Ouyang alludes to a personal means of escape from the ethnic/white-Australian binary that he argues exists within multiculturalism:

Gradually, I found my push forward turning away from its original direction, pointing towards somewhere uncertain, where neither culture could exert much control on me, and, in so doing, it became something like an inward push back on my own part.⁴⁵

Ouyang gestures here towards a personal identity that is not grounded in the nation. 'Ouyang Yu' does not focus on developing this non-national trajectory, because it is embedded within contemporary discourses of identity—including celebratory discourses of multiculturalism—which emphasise ethnicity and map in onto country of origin.

'In Lieu of Autobiography', which immediately follows this interview clip, emphasises the multicultural dilemma of feeling between two national cultures, as a migrant. This autobiographical poem is read by the poet—which gives it a sense of intimacy and confession—and with sound effects evoking the Yangtze river. Having sketched a childhood spent 'on the wide sandbar / that emerged deep from the yangtze in winter', the poet offers a sort of nutshell autobiography of his adult life.⁴⁶ The poem speaks to the poet's statement earlier that he has suffered a 'double rejection', in its lines, 'i seem to have become / a free agent of unwantedness writing forever with two tongues / twisted together in love and hate'.⁴⁷ As in 'Seeing Double', migration is represented as a traumatic experience, fracturing the poet's sense of self as defined by his cultural identity. There are two strands to the story in this poem: one about migration, and one about feelings of cultural difference exacerbated by the state, which

with their combined emotional pressures result in a sense of self-fracture. The poem continues the narrative of alienation following the poet's migration to Australia in the 1990s, and his sense of being rejected by both his home and his host country because of a fixation on his identity, vis-à-vis his place of residence and his ethnicity, respectively.

The remainder of 'Ouyang Yu' plays out as an analogy of what may occur when a nation is fixated with ethnicity through the framework of multiculturalism. Such a state can unwittingly contribute to racism, through the paradoxical othering of those deemed different in the very act of welcoming them. The structure of 'Ouyang Yu' (including the selection of poems from Ouyang's body of work, and their chronology within the episode) may be read as a story of how racism is kept alive, a story of cause and effect that starts with essentialist national impulses and ends with ugly cultural outcomes. The adapted poems 'Word Prison: A Lesson' (read by the poet) and 'A Lesson on Eyes' (read by Brant Eustace) deal explicitly with racism, and the later poems 'Alien' and 'A Different Moon' deal with Ouyang's sense of being an outsider in Australia, of being made to feel alien. 'A Lesson on Eyes', read by the poet with no background effects or music—which makes it sound stark—addresses racism most forcefully, responding to the Australian/Western stereotype of 'Asians' being identifiable by the shape of their eyes: 'slit-eyed almond-eyed slant-eyed and slopes / that unchanging view of the Western image of the East'.⁴⁸ Having canvassed some Australian perspectives on Asianness at this time, the poet responds with irony by being intentionally vague in his own categories based on hair colour:

you told your audience of blonde hair, yellowish hair and black
that in your language there are at least a hundred ways
of describing one's eyes ...⁴⁹

He then goes on to list some of these: 'red-phoenix eyes'; 'rat eyes'; 'bulging eyes'; 'golden-fish eyes'; 'thousand-li eyes'; 'watery eyes'; 'scar eyes'; and many others—and concludes: 'now look at me / which eyes have *I* got?'⁵⁰ This adapted poem calls for listeners to pay closer attention to the diversity that exists within a category of people such as 'Chinese'. The poet's impassioned reading of this poem is a provocation to the listener, that they be more nuanced in observations of cultural difference.

Overall, there is a clear thematic trajectory in 'Ouyang Yu' that has to do with essentialism in multiculturalism leading to othering, intolerance, the perpetuation of racism and alienation. 'Ouyang Yu' contributes to discourses of critical multiculturalism, which envision a better way forward for Australia by revealing multiculturalism's faults, but not discarding it altogether as Hanson and Howard sought to do. As Sneja Gunew incisively puts it:

The reason for continuing to focus on *critical* multiculturalism is precisely because multiculturalism is so intimately bound up in many parts of the world with those practices and discourses which manage (often in the sense of police and control) 'diversity'. Within critical theory it was an embarrassing term to invoke partly because it was perceived as automatically aligned with and hopelessly co-opted by the state in its role of certain types of exclusionary nation building ... In theoretical debates it was often associated with an identity politics based on essentialism, and claims for authenticity, which automatically reinstate a version of the sovereign subject and a concern with reified notions of origins. Thus it became difficult to mention multiculturalism and socially progressive critical theory in the same breath. But because it is a contested term it is crucial to scrutinize the discourses and practices mobilized in the name of multiculturalism.⁵¹

Howard-Wagner argues that Australia had moved toward critical multiculturalism by the early 1990s—that it had moved on from seeing multiculturalism as a way to celebrate difference superficially, by ‘eating ethnic foods and watching ethnic dance’, to treating it as a means to empower minority groups and facilitate equality.⁵² However, ‘Ouyang Yu’ suggests that multiculturalism still had a long way to go to be truly inclusive and just to all Australians. The episode engages contemporary identity politics that were being stoked by Hanson and Howard; it critiques multiculturalism and suggests a way forward from some of its failings. Although this way forward is not clearly defined in the episode—recall Ouyang saying that he does not know what the ‘third alternative’ is, after multiculturalism and White Australia—the adapted poems suggest that the nation needs to be more hybrid, and to go beyond the dualisms of multiculturalism to embracing a true pluralism such as at the end of ‘Seeing Double’.

It is instructive at this point to review Ouyang’s approach to cultural identity in his writing, compared to the way it is framed through adaptation in ‘Ouyang Yu’. Writing a decade after the broadcast of ‘Ouyang Yu’, the poet claimed:

I have, or I think I have, long resolved the confusing but enriching identity issue, as evident in a poem I wrote years ago: ‘my name is a crystallization of two cultures/my surname is china/my given name australia/if I translate that direct into english/my surname becomes australia/my given name china’. The border has been crossed and recrossed so many times that it does not seem to be there any more.⁵³

While Ouyang claims that he has ‘resolved the confusing but enriching identity issue’—by citing the poem ‘The Double Man’, published in *Two Hearts, Two Tongues and Rain-Coloured Eyes* (2002)—so that national borders do not define him, this *Poetica* episode of 1997 is very much concerned with his identity in terms of nation. This is partly because Ouyang was grappling with this in poetry then—in contrast to some of his later writing, particularly in *Reality Dreams* (2008) and *Fainting with Freedom* (2015), where he moves beyond national binaries and inhabits a cosmopolitan life of the mind—but it is also, significantly, because of the way narratives from multicultural Australia tended to operate at this time, mapping ethnicity onto national origin. In this sense the episode folds contemporary discourses on multiculturalism, as a popular story about life in Australia at the end of the twentieth century, into its structural and thematic preoccupations. The episode does this through its selection of Ouyang’s poems on the subject of cultural identity from his body of work, through the way it adapts these sonically to suggest a clash between Chineseness and Australianness, and in how it frames the poet’s preoccupations as relating to multiculturalism. As an adaptation of a poet’s work, it shows how contemporary political discourse can have a significant effect on how an artist’s work is framed and presented to a national public.

About the author

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Notes

1. Linda Hutcheon, *Theory of Adaptation*, Routledge, New York, 2006, p. 8.
2. While I refer throughout this article to the original broadcast of ‘Ouyang Yu’ in 1997, which had no podcast, readers may access a podcast of the episode that the ABC made available in 2013: <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/poetica/4607072>.

3. Prithvi Varatharajan, 'Interview with Mike Ladd on ABC RN's Poetica (1997–2014)', Long Paddock, September 2017, p. 6.
4. Hutcheon, p. 170; my emphasis.
5. Australian Broadcasting Corporation, Australian Broadcasting Corporation Act 1983, Attorney-General's Department, Canberra, 1983, p. 4.
6. Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism*, SAGE, London, 2010 (1995), pp. 6–8.
7. Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 'Poetica Brief,' ABC, Adelaide, 2012, p. 1.
8. Varatharajan, 'Interview with Mike Ladd on ABC RN's Poetica (1997–2014)', May 2016 (unpublished), p. 3.
9. The essay is also intended to add to research on the aesthetics of radio poetry by unpacking the sonic materiality of the program. There is substantial scholarship on radio drama adaptation, but radio poetry adaptation is an understudied phenomenon, despite poetry—particularly more sound-focused poetry—being an excellent match for voice- and sound-focused media like radio and podcasting. For scholarship on radio poetry adaptation see Michael Ladd, 'Notes Towards a Radio Poetics', *Southerly*, vol. 71, no. 3, 2006, pp. 163–9; Michael Ladd, 'Radio as a Medium for Poetry', in *More Than a Music Box: Radio Cultures in a Multimedia World*, ed. Andrew Crisell, Berghahn, New York, 2006, pp. 213–27; Seán Street, *The Poetry of Radio*, Routledge, London, 2012; Martin Spinelli, 'Not Hearing Poetry on Public Radio', in *Communities of The Air*, ed. Susan Squire, Duke University Press, Durham, 2003, pp. 195–214.
10. The translated poems are 'Morning of 21 June at Flinders Street Station', by Zhang Yougong (9'23 – 11'18), 'Train Journey Across the Yellow River' by Yi Sha (17'38 – 18'58), and 'The North' by Shi Xiaojun (25'33 – 26'43). The authors' names are credited on the episode's website.
11. Deirdre Howard-Wagner, 'Governing through Neoliberal Multiculturalism: Reconstituting Australian Culture and Cultural Diversity in the Howard Era, 1996–2007', in *Unveiling Whiteness in the Twenty-First Century: Global Manifestations, Transdisciplinary Interventions*, ed. Veronica Watson, Deirdre Howard-Wagner and Lisa Spanierman, Lexington, Lanham MD, 2015, p. 89.
12. Jon Stratton, *Race Daze: Australia in Identity Crisis*, Pluto, Sydney, 1998, p. 17.
13. He uses popular film—a widely consumed medium—as a barometer of this, in the vein of Billig's work on banal nationalism. While there had been popular representations of southern European migrants in popular Australian media, such as in the television series *Acropolis Now* (1989–1992) on Channel Seven—as opposed to more pervasive representations of Asia on the less popular Special Broadcasting Service (or SBS, established in 1979)—the representation of Asians in popular television, radio and film in Australia came late. Stratton, p. 17.
14. Pauline Hanson, 'Pauline Hanson's Maiden Speech to Federal Parliament', 10 September 1996, Museum Victoria, <https://museumvictoria.com.au/immigrationmuseum/discoverycentre/identity/videos/politics-videos/pauline-hansons-1996-maiden-speech-to-federal-parliament/>.
15. Judith Brett, 'The New Liberalism', in *The Howard Years*, ed. Robert Manne, Black Inc., Melbourne, 2004, p. 79.
16. Howard-Wagner, p. 89.
17. Wenche Ommundsen, 'New Birds of Passage? The New Generation of Chinese-Australian Writers', in *Alter/Asians: Asian-Australian Identities in Art, Media and Popular Culture*, ed. Ien Ang, Sharon Chalmers, Lisa Law and Mandy Thomas, Pluto, Sydney, 2000, p. 93.
18. Stratton, p. 12.
19. *Ibid.*
20. Jacqueline Lo, 'Beyond Happy Hybridity: Performing Asian-Australian Identities', in *Alter/Asians: Asian-Australian Identities in Art, Media and Popular Culture*, ed. Ien Ang, Sharon Chalmers, Lisa Law and Mandy Thomas, Pluto, Sydney, 2000, pp. 158–9.
21. Allan Ashbolt, 'Bagging the Town-Criers: Dix and the ABC', *Meanjin*, vol. 40, no. 3, 1981, p. 305.
22. Virginia Madsen, 'Cultural Radio at the Crossroads', *Southern Review*, vol. 39, no. 3, 2007, p. 18.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
24. ABC National Advisory Council, *Multiculturalism and the ABC: A Report to the ABC Board*, ABC, Sydney, 1987, p. 10.
25. While the Dix Inquiry has been described as 'entirely appropriate', occurring close to the fiftieth anniversary of the broadcaster as a corporation, and 'a fruitful exercise, feeding into a process that culminated in a restatement of the ABC Charter and a bipartisan commitment to the ABC's institutional role', the Mansfield Report has been criticised for having the ulterior motive of providing grounds for the Howard government to cut funding to the broadcaster. See Rodney Tiffen, 'ABC Efficiency Review Must Not Be a Stealth Attack on Effectiveness', 5 May 2014, *The Conversation*, <http://theconversation.com/abc->

[efficiency-review-must-not-be-a-stealth-attack-on-effectiveness-25853](#), and Bernard Keane, 'Why History Says the ABC Review Will Give it a Tick', 31 January 2014, Crikey, <https://www.crikey.com.au/2014/01/31/why-history-says-the-abc-review-will-give-it-a-tick/>.

26. See ABC National Advisory Council, p. 6.
27. Ashbolt, pp. 300–5.
28. ABC, 'Poetica Brief,' p. 1.
29. Varatharajan, Long Paddock, p. 5.
30. Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 'Ouyang Yu', *Poetica*, 23 August 1997, 0'00 – 1'02.
31. Ouyang Yu, *Moon Over Melbourne and Other Poems*, Papyrus, Melbourne, 1995, p. 8; ABC, 'Ouyang Yu', 1'03 – 1'31.
32. Ouyang, *Moon*, p. 8; ABC, 'Ouyang', 1'47 – 2'26.
33. Ouyang, *Moon*, p. 8; ABC, 'Ouyang', 2'28 – 2'37.
34. Ouyang, *Moon*, p. 9; ABC, 'Ouyang', 2'39 – 2'48.
35. Ouyang, 'Lost in the Translation', *Australian Review of Books*, vol. 2, no. 9, October 1997, p. 10.
36. Ouyang, *Moon*, pp. 9 – 10; ABC, 'Ouyang', 3'50 – 4'20.
37. ABC, 'Ouyang', 4'41 – 5'02.
38. ABC, 'Ouyang', 5'04 – 6'06.
39. Ouyang, *Moon*, p. 36; ABC, 'Ouyang', 6'09 – 6'56.
40. While unnamed in the episode, this is one of three poems by other contemporary Chinese poets, translated into English by Ouyang Yu; it appears from 9'23 – 11'18. In print this poem is titled 'Morning of 21 June at Flinders Street Station', by Zhang Yougong.
41. ABC, 'Ouyang', 11'19 – 14'06.
42. ABC, 'Ouyang', 14'28 – 14'49.
43. Ouyang Yu, *Bias: Offensively Chinese/Australian*, Otherland, Melbourne, 2007, p. 115.
44. ABC, 'Ouyang', 14'10 – 14'49.
45. Ouyang, *Bias*, p. 115.
46. Ouyang, *Moon*, p. 38; ABC, 'Ouyang', 14'18 – 16'26.
47. Ouyang, *Moon*, p. 38; ABC, 'Ouyang', 14'49 – 16'02.
48. Ouyang, *Moon*, p. 78; ABC, 'Ouyang', 27'56 – 28'11.
49. Ouyang, *Moon*, p. 78; ABC, 'Ouyang', 28'23 – 28'36.
50. Ouyang, *Moon*, p. 78; ABC, 'Ouyang', 28'44 – 29'32.
51. Sneja Gunew, *Haunted Nations: The Colonial Dimensions of Multiculturalisms*, Routledge, London, 2004, p. 15.
52. Howard-Wagner, p. 89.
53. Ouyang, *Bias*, p. 15.

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