

## Book Review: *Of Indian Origin*

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Perhaps one of the least examined Indian diasporas of our time are *desis* who have migrated to or have been born in Australia within a tide of racist and xenophobic violence against them. Given its particular colonial history, ostensible deference to the British monarchy, and appalling racialised bias toward Indigenous/Aboriginal communities, the publication of *Of Indian Origin: Writings from Australia* is a both timely and much-needed addition to the existing literature on the Indian diaspora and its fraught negotiations with postcolonial [assumptions], xenophobia and the challenges of identity-based violence in the idyllic land Down Under. Though Australia has a long history of shocking racism, the murderous violence targeting South Asians has flared up in contemporary times with the harassment and murder of Indian students since 2009.

Despite contributing to a relatively new genre of South Asian diaspora studies, *Of Indian Origin* joins key publications, including *In This Desert, There Were Seeds* edited by Elizabeth Tan and Jon Gresham (Margaret River Press, 2019) and *Wave After Wave: Writers from the Indian Ocean* edited by Robert Wood (Center for Stories, 2019). These important texts collectively expand the global scope of the literary and cultural representations of Asians in Australia with innovative stories detailing South Asian experiences in Oz. As an integral text that serves this panoramic and global function, Sharrad and Padmanabhan's edited volume vitally fills a gap in scholarship on the Indian diaspora that is greatly ignored and/or minoritized by most Indian diaspora writing focused on the Northern Hemisphere.

The co-editors' introduction to *Of Indian Origin* is particularly instructive for readers who are not savvy with the history of Indians in Australia and the need for such a genre to "write back," so to speak, to the particular social articulations of casual racism and Aussie nationalism that place both South Asians and Indigenous/Aboriginal communities in the crosshairs of violent bigotry due to our skin tones. Indeed, even socialist movements in 21st century Australia have blindly defaulted to casual racism and nationalist xenophobia to naturalize bigotry and arguments for treating South Asian immigrants like flora and fauna – a reference to a 1967 act of the Australian Government that describes a widespread social attitude that justifies institutional and epistemic violence against Indigenous/Aboriginal people on the continent.

In moving away from the reductive taxonomy of "Asian Australian" deployed by most governmental and institutional entities, "Writings by Australians of Indian heritage assert specific differences from Chinese and Southeast Asian ethnicities" including "reaching Australia by fishing boat as a refugee" (1). Rather, the coeditors write, "Australia is a nation that has had a long history of interaction with India, right from the arrival of the first shipload of settlers in 1788... Indians have been in Australia since before the 1840s. British families given land grants in the colonies, after service in India, brought with them their Indian servants. Later, Indians went as contracted Labor on sugar plantations and vegetable farms [sic]" (3). Due to Australia's need for an influx of imported labor, the restrictive policy was repealed in 1947 – the same year of the woeful Partition of the Indian subcontinent.

In narrating their excellent introductory history of Indians in Australia, the co-editors state that “Until the 1970s, relations between Australia and India were framed by policies and attitudes derived from the British Empire. As a ‘white settler’ colony anxious to protect its relatively high standard of living, Australia at the Federation of its various colonial states in 1901 instituted protectionist Labor and immigration laws that borrowed from Durban’s legislation to control the influx of cheap ‘coolie’ workers. This set of laws became known as ‘The White Australia Policy’... The number of Anglo-Indian writers represented in this collection shows the effects of ‘The White Australia Policy’” (5). In addition to examining the vicissitudes of colonialist racism and xenophobia through a formidable kaleidoscope of writings, this assemblage of voices from India moreover excavates the generational dynamics of “diasporic homes” (8).

Against the backdrop of this comprehensive introduction to Australian Indian writing are a number of creative highlights that extend and complicate the history of this emerging genre. For example, the extract from Amitava Ray’s “Journey” documents the magical rhythm of train travels. In Suneeta Peres da Costa’s “Dreamless” the author describes the alienation onset by migratory movements: “The city to which I had moved was a monolith on a piece of land so tiny that it felt at any moment that it might disappear like Atlantis. It was clear that no one care for anyone else; it was clear that people were dreadfully alone and empty, whether rich or poor, young or old – and the new city was full of piercing contradictions” (130). These words indeed evoke the complicated relationship that Indian Australians daily negotiate in forging diasporic homes, and what I have elsewhere argued are anti-racist and anti-heteronormative “homelandings”.

Such concerns also erupt in pieces including Roanna Gonsalves’ “Curry Muncher 3.0”, a response to the Melbourne student attacks that punctuates how people can be othered by the food that they eat, and Rashida Murphy’s “The Moon Still Speaks”, in which the author signifies Shiraz as both an Iranian town and the name of a popular red wine. The name thus suggests geography and drink while also invoking the religious alterity of Murphy’s Muslim protagonist Sohrab. Both short stories excavate the fluctuations of diasporic homes through food and drink metaphors that punctuate the alienation sparked by lack of comfort food or a profusion of alcohol culture in Oz. I would moreover note that, as stories by Australian Indian women of color, these metaphors invoke the manacles of domesticity that sexist society in both India and Australia attempts to normalize. Finally, Robert Wood’s lyrical poetry conveys the infusion of myth and dreamscape in relation to the Anglo-Indian body through physical spaces that emanate identities of difference.

A wonderful addition in the volume is that each creative voice is preceded by a short biographical note that historically situates each piece. *Of Indian Origin* is thus a welcome addition to the evolving pantheon of Indian diasporic texts. To be fair, the introduction might have been longer and more consistent (for example, editor Meeta Chatterjee Padmanabhan’s name is listed as Meeta Chatterjee inside of the volume, which may cause confusion for some readers). Despite such quibbles, *Of Indian Origin: Writings from Australia* makes a significant contribution to postcolonial literary studies by establishing a genre of Australian Indian writing. Perhaps most importantly, it speaks back to the colonialist racism, xenophobia, and heteronormative nationalism that continues to haunt the lives of Indian Australians while articulating possible common grounds for anti-racist alliances with other non-whites who shoulder daily, casual racism in contemporary Australia – even as it smolders in climate change denial and the mass incineration of endemic species.

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