

## THE BORDERLINE POETICS OF TZE MING MOK

JACOB EDMOND<sup>1</sup>  
*University of Otago*

### Re-accentuating Borderlines

Self-described 'fiction writer, poet, freelance journalist, and sociopolitical commentator' Tze Ming Mok (莫志明) crosses and questions the boundaries not only between literature and politics but also between identities such as 'New Zealand', 'Chinese', and 'Asian', between various languages, including Chinese and English, between private and public space, and between media and genres. Like the American literature for which Yunte Huang calls, Mok's practice 'transcends cultural and linguistic boundaries', proposing 'a national literature rooted in transnationalism and committed to translingual practices' (5). Mok's writing points to the need to pay attention not just to explicit political assertions and overt interplays between cultures and languages within the negotiation of identity in Aotearoa/New Zealand, but also to the forms, media, and genres in which they are conveyed. Her writing, I argue, complicates ethnic, cultural, and national identities not just through her polemical rhetoric and her thematizing of multiple, hybrid identities, but also through form, through the way in which she plays with and across the borderlines between genres, media, and modes of self- and literary representation.

Mok's work is particularly suited to addressing the changing role of literature and the writer in contemporary culture. Writing recently in a special issue of *New Literary History* focused on the question 'What Is Literature

---

<sup>1</sup> Jacob Edmond (jacob.edmond@otago.ac.nz) is senior lecturer in modern and contemporary poetry in the Department of English, University of Otago. His recent publications include *Russia*, spec. issue of *Landfall* (213 [2007]), co-edited with Gregory O'Brien, Evgeny Pavlov, and Ian Wedde; *Unreal City: A Chinese Poet in Auckland* (Auckland UP, 2006), by Yang Lian, co-edited and co-translated with Hilary Chung; and articles in *Poetics Today*, *The China Quarterly*, *Russian Literature*, and *Avant-garde Critical Studies*. He is currently working on a book on cross-cultural encounter in contemporary poetry. He would like to thank Tze Ming Mok and the two anonymous reviewers for their comments on drafts of this essay. He also thanks Mok for granting him permission to cite her unpublished writing and personal correspondence.

Now?’ Eric Gans suggests that ‘It is the *archival* aspect of contemporary society that compensates us’ for what he calls ‘the loss of the literary myth’ (38). Within this tendency, Gans suggests, ‘there have emerged more specific substitutes for literature: the personal Web page and its variants such as MySpace and FaceBook, and most importantly, the *blog*’ (38). The question of the role of literary production and the relationship between life-experience and art in this post-literary-myth world can be explored through authors like Mok, who moves freely between the blog, the personal webpage, FaceBook, the group email, and more traditional journalistic and literary forms, such as the newspaper column, the poem, and the short story. As Gans recognises, ‘a world where the literary myth survives only in muted forms is not a world without literature, merely a world where literature knows its place, a world of stories that we need not believe in as the universal story’ (40). But precisely because of this situation, the interplay between stories and, by extension, between genres becomes particularly important, and, in the case of Mok, a central element of her poetics.

Mok’s writing provides an opportunity to consider this multi-genre, multi-media approach and the mixing of art and autobiographical life-experience that Gans describes in relation to another challenge facing contemporary discussion of literature and indeed culture at large, one that, although Gans does not note it, may be considered an equally important part of the changes in the nature of writing and literature that he describes. In Mok’s writing, the interactions between languages and cultures play a fundamental role, reflecting the fact that these interactions, like those that Gans notes between media and genres and between personal experience and art, contribute significantly to the complexity of the present situation for literature. Such interventions as the special issue of the *PMLA* on ‘Globalizing Literary Studies’ bear witness to the necessity of considering transcultural and translinguistic encounters and exchange in rethinking literature in the present (Gunn). Without attention to such encounters, even those interventions that seek to address questions of language and culture threaten to assume *a priori* terms and identities that are in fact inseparable from such encounters. For example, the terms of discussion that provide the starting point for this issue, the representations of ‘New Zealand’ and ‘Asian’, and in particular the notion of ‘New Zealand culture’ occlude the ways in which such terms are always the products of hybrid, cross-cultural, and transnational interchanges. In this regard, Jahan Ramazani has recently described a ‘translocal’ poetics that seems particularly apt to Mok:

Neither localist nor universalist, neither nationalist nor vacantly globalist, a *translocal poetics* highlights the dialogic intersections—sometimes tense and resistant, sometimes openly assimilative—of specific discourses, genres, techniques, and forms of diverse origins.

Located in translocation, transnational and cross-ethnic literary history thus differs from ‘postnational’ or ‘postethnic’ history, in which writers are viewed, when these terms are used most broadly, as floating free in an ambient universe of denationalized, deracialized forms and discourses. (350)

Through its deployment of multiple genres and discourses, its highlighting of encounters between ethnically and geographically diverse peoples, its ambiguous autobiographic interplay between life-experiences and art, Mok’s work both instantiates a translocal poetics and describes the conditions that give rise to such writing strategies.

Just like Ramazani’s ‘translocal’ poetics, Mok’s emphasis on generic, linguistic, and identity boundary-crossing, while to some extent reflecting a global phenomenon, is not free floating, but can be read in part as reflecting and responding to the specificities of public discourse within Aotearoa/New Zealand on representation, identity, and culture. Mok’s writing career to date spans a ten-year period during which this discourse and the assumptions it embodies have been in flux. For example, in the symposium that led to this special issue, Shuchi Kothari recalled how, in dealing with the New Zealand Film Commission over the past decade, she initially experienced the denial of ethnic and racial diversity within official conceptions of ‘New Zealandness’ such that a film with Indian characters was rejected because it did not fit the brief for a New Zealand film. Kothari described a subsequent shift towards an officially sanctioned conception of diversity in which identities such as ‘Indian’ or ‘Chinese’ took the form of static representative types. In this new climate, a film was turned down because it was ‘not Indian enough’; that is, because it portrayed Indian New Zealanders outside their stereotyped representations. In both cases, the Film Commission employed constative models of identity, invoking, on the one hand, a static, limited, and exclusive notion of ‘New Zealandness’ and of how New Zealand should be represented through cultural production, and on the other, an ostensibly plural notion of New Zealandness based ultimately on the same static, limited, and exclusive understanding of identity and representation.

As I will argue, perhaps partly in response to this tendency to conceive of identity and political representation in such static terms, Mok’s writing in all its forms depends crucially on its exploration of the borderlines of identity, language, and genre so as to reconceptualise all three not as, in B. Honig’s words, “‘indisputable,’ univocal, and constative ‘fact’” (229), but rather as what Judith Butler calls ‘performative acts’. In this way Mok recognises that identity, language, and genre, as Butler writes of gender, do not impose themselves on a ‘lifeless recipient’ who is ‘passively scripted with cultural codes’, but neither does anyone ‘pre-exist [. . .] cultural conventions’ (‘Performative’ 526). Thus in Mok’s borderline poetics, agency is located in

performances that, as I shall argue, involve what Mikhail Bakhtin describes as the process of ‘deliberately mix[ing] genres from various spheres’, a process he terms ‘re-accentuation’ (80). According to Bakhtin, re-accentuation allows genres to function outside their conventional roles in a ‘parodic-ironic’ way (80). Through re-accentuation, genres, and in Mok’s case languages and identities as well, are deployed against their conventional or stereotyped usages. In this way, Mok’s borderline poetics also resembles Hannah Arendt’s ‘politics of performativity that, instead of reproducing and re-presenting “what” we are [. . .] generates “who” we are by episodically producing new identities’ (Honig 226).

The emphasis on contested boundaries in Mok’s writing perhaps better exemplifies, however, the ‘sense of the contingent agency for our postcolonial age’ that Homi Bhabha, by developing the theories of Arendt and Bakhtin in a more antagonistic direction, articulates in *The Location of Culture* (190). Bhabha reads Bakhtin’s theory of ‘speech genres’ as an ‘attempt to individuate social agency as an after-effect of the intersubjective’ (188). For Bhabha, however, while ‘Bakhtin acknowledges this double movement in the chain of the utterance, there is a sense in which he disavows its effectivity at the point of the enunciation of discursive agency. He displaces this conceptual problem that concerns the performativity of the speech-act—its enunciative modalities of time and space—to an empiricist acknowledgment of the “area of human activity and everyday life to which the given utterance is related”’ (188). Departing from Bakhtin, Bhabha wants to elaborate the ‘modality through which the speech genre comes to recognize the specific as a signifying limit, a discursive boundary’ (188). Bhabha finds in Arendt an attempt to bring a similar acknowledgement of the importance of the intersubjective realm to the sphere of the political, describing Arendt’s assertion that ‘it is the realm of representation and the process of signification that constitutes the space of the political’. For Bhabha, however, ‘Arendt’s form of social mimesis does not deal with social marginality as a product of the liberal State’ because it is ‘grounded in a notion of community, or the public sphere, that is largely consensual’ (190). Bhabha’s conception of agency thus draws on both Bakhtin and Arendt but emphasises discursive or signifying boundaries and the contested rather than consensual nature of the public sphere. Hence Bhabha develops a conception of political agency involving ‘hybridity as camouflage, as a contesting, antagonistic agency functioning in the time lag of sign/symbol, which is a space in-between the rules of engagement’ (193).

The relevance of Bhabha’s point about social marginality to the situation of a writer from a minority ethnic community, such as Mok, is well illustrated by Kothari’s account of how in the late 1990s, a government-funded cultural institution denied that a film involving Indian characters could be a ‘New Zealand’ film. At the same time, Bhabha’s insistence on ‘hybridity’

and ‘antagonistic agency’ resists the equally problematic counter-pressure for writers such as Mok, illustrated by the other response from the Film Commission that Kothari cites, to represent their ethnic identities in static, constative terms in order to avoid being effaced from public discourse entirely. Nevertheless, Bhabha’s solution also comes at a potential cost, in that it generalises agency in linguistic terms possibly at the expense of specific cultural and historical contexts. As Revathi Krishnaswamy argues, Bhabha’s theory threatens to ignore particularities and undermine agency by locating a generalised “‘intransitive’ resistance’ in ‘the vicissitudes to which all language is intrinsically liable’ (112). Equally, however, to reject Bhabha’s “‘intransitive’ resistance’ would seem to lead back to the position of ontologising and naturalising identity and so shut down the possibility of a performative, transitive sense of agency.

The tension between Bhabha’s and Krishnaswamy’s positions and the dangers involved in each inform the interplay between the deployment of and resistance to generic, linguistic, and identity boundaries in Mok’s writing, providing a deeply serious undercurrent to the often playful surface of her work. Like Bhabha, Mok emphasises boundaries, but in exploring the borderlines of identity, language, and genres, she deploys a model of agency that in some ways resembles the apparently more static models of Arendt and Bakhtin. She thus appeals to an outside, ‘outcast’, or ‘pariah’ position, which opens up the possibilities of ‘re-accentuation’ in a way that might seem more enabling than Bhabha’s generalised theory of postcolonial resistance. Yet, this outsider position is never entirely free from an equally powerful pull inwards, that is, from the desire to assert and represent collective identities. Like Bhabha’s resistance, therefore, Mok’s writing occupies an in-between, inside-outside space between the assertion of and escape from identity.

### **Identity Borderlines**

The inseparability of the personal and political and of the political and literary is particularly striking in Mok’s work. On the one hand, Mok blurs the boundary between the personal and political by deploying autobiography to explore the possibilities and problems of representation, of self-identity and various terms designating group identities, including ‘Asian’, ‘Chinese’, and ‘New Zealand’. On the other hand, she challenges the boundary between the political and the literary by not only engaging in both spheres often simultaneously but also by linking her political and her personal position as a representative of an ethnic minority in New Zealand to the outsider position she attributes to herself as a writer.

Mok has repeatedly emphasised her own autobiography and problematic position as a representative of ‘Asian’ and ‘Chinese’ communities

within New Zealand to highlight the limitations and potentials of political representation. Such autobiographical elements not only assert the author's identity and her claim to a collective voice; paradoxically, they also challenge the assumptions upon which such a politics of identity and representation is based. In this way, Mok addresses her own ambivalent situation, which she describes as being 'known for publicly defining what "Asian" is supposed to mean for mainstream use, while not being wholly inside the ethnic communities [I am] expected to "represent"' (Mok and Rasanathan 42).

Mok begins her essay 'Race You There', which first brought her to prominence when it was selected as the co-winner of the 2004 *Landfall* essay competition, by describing her experience of growing up in the Auckland suburb of Mt Roskill and attending a primary school that she characterises as 'an ethnic microcosm of the projected population of New Zealand come 2051' (18). In the essay, Mok's foregrounding of this personal experience functions in two ways. On the one hand, it emphasises the individuality of experience, of Mok's description of the 'comforting and very stable [. . .] balance of differences' of 'Mount Roskill's laissez-faire brand of multiculturalism' (18). On the other hand, the autobiographical anecdote is also deployed to reject a naïve 'colour-blind' multiculturalism (20) by pointing to the 'affirmation of identities through negation of others [. . .] the infrastructures of a system' that leads Mok to assert that 'there are parts of this country where the promise of my passport's protection isn't enough to put me at ease' (19). The essay at once asserts a utopian desire for alliances engineered by 'the people; not unions of convenience, but of love' and points to the necessary role played by identity politics and ethnic minorities' shared experiences of repression in forging such alliances (26), such as the one she proposes between New Zealand Chinese and Māori towards the end of the essay.

Similarly, in her 'Going Bananas' talk, Mok uses autobiographical details to assert a sense of collective identity:

But we're Chinese right? Not 'Asian' [laughter, supportive noises]—but at the same time, when I think about it, to get to this country my family went through Thailand, Vietnam, Malaysia, Burma and Singapore. And my parents' generation of relatives have spread out to the Philippines, Taiwan, Cambodia, and... oh yeah, Australia. So yeah—I'm Asian! And you're Asian too—Chinese people are actually Asian, China is in Asia. So if there is a collective slander, we shouldn't just 'dissociate' from other Asians—let there be a collective response [. . .] (description of audience response in parentheses is part of Mok's transcription)

In this case, Mok deploys autobiographical detail to assert and implicitly make a claim to represent a collective identity, 'Asian', but at the same time, she

uses autobiographical details to undermine a singular sense of collective identity, challenging the boundaries between ‘Chinese’ and various South-East Asian identities in particular. Indeed, the final words of Mok’s transcription of her talk, framed as a response to criticism of her use of the term ‘Asian’, are ‘I do have a broader “Asian” identity, and am not just Chinese’. Thus autobiographical, personal detail is deployed both to assert and undermine notions of collective identity and, by extension, a politics based on the claim to represent such a collective.

Mok’s deployment of autobiography to both assert and undermine identities evidences a conception of agency as the process of what Juliana Spahr, drawing on Butler, calls ‘resignification’. For Spahr, ‘postmodern autobiography is about both the subject and the possibilities and limitations of the genre through which that subject is constructed or made manifest’ (141). By highlighting the political, contested nature of the autobiographical and the multiple ways in which it can be made to signify, Mok’s practice supports Butler’s argument ‘that the political and agency are the “effort to resignify the subject as a site of resignification”’ (qtd. in Spahr 144). Mok deploys identity positions even as she undermines them, enacting a performative politics that allows her, as Butler puts it, to ‘continue to use [agency and subjectivity], to repeat them, to repeat them subversively, and to displace them from the contexts in which they have been deployed as instruments of oppressive power’ (‘Contingent’ 17).

Equally significant to Mok’s mixing of the personal and the political is her related problematising of the relationship between art and politics, including the politics of representation and identity, and between literature and everyday life. Mok’s occupying of a borderline position between art and politics is evident in the trajectory of her writing career to date in which various genres of literature and political and popular commentary have all played a role. Mok’s education and employment already reflect the mixing of literature and politics. Mok completed a BA (1998) and MA (2000) in politics at the University of Auckland, during which time she also took the English Department’s creative writing course and began publishing poetry (‘Hegel’s Holiday’ and ‘Westward Ho!’). She subsequently worked for the New Zealand Immigration Service as a refugee status officer in New Zealand, as a refugee legal advocate in Cairo, and as programme coordinator for the Equal Employment Opportunities Unit of the New Zealand Human Rights Commission, and she is now living in Geneva, where she works for the UN Secretariat of the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction.

Mok’s professional engagement in areas relating to international politics and ethnic identities and human rights has run in parallel with the development of her career as a writer. At the same time, her writing career has itself been characterised by the combination of the literary and the political. From 2002, Mok’s poetry and short fiction began to appear in major New

Zealand and Australian literary journals, such as *Landfall*, *Sport*, and *Meanjin*. One of her poems published in *Landfall* was included in ‘Best New Zealand Poems 2004’, and an extract from a still unpublished novel appeared in *The Best New Zealand Fiction* in 2005. In 2006, Mok guest-edited an issue of *Landfall*, under the subtitle ‘borderline’. Mok’s increasing presence on the New Zealand literary landscape coincided with the rise in her public profile as a sociopolitical commentator particularly in relation to the politics of cultural identity, ethnicity, and race in Aotearoa/New Zealand. In this latter capacity, she has undoubtedly reached a much wider audience. She came to prominence as a commentator through her essay ‘Race You There’ and, subsequently, through her blog ‘Yellow Peril’ (Apr. 2005–Dec. 2007) on *Public Address*, a high-profile left-leaning website for New Zealand sociopolitical commentary. In 2006, she wrote a regular column focused largely on Chinese and Asian issues for *The Sunday Star-Times*, New Zealand’s largest circulation Sunday newspaper.

The explicit assertion of the interplay between the sociopolitical and the literary is also evident in the way Mok mixes the literary and the political in her writing, as in her call for submissions for her ‘borderline’ issue of *Landfall*, a publication that since its founding has itself been notable for its blending of arts and culture with social commentary:

‘It is a flood, it is a flood.’—Rt Hon Winston Peters. The abandoned Landfall citadel has been besieged [sic] and looted by marauding barbarians. They don’t look right. They don’t talk right. They climbed in through the windows. Now the silverware is bent, the hinges are missing, the lips cross-stitched, and all the early Madonna has been recovered. (‘Border Crossing’ 3–4)

The claim to ‘barbarian’ status as a source of innovative strength (here implicitly drawing on the military origins of the term ‘avant-garde’) is intertwined with a parody of anti-immigration, racist rhetoric (‘They don’t look right. They don’t talk right’) within the specifically New Zealand context signified by Winston Peters, leader of the political party New Zealand First, and by *Landfall*, New Zealand’s best-known and longest-running literary journal, envisaged by its founder Charles Brasch as a key instrument in the creation of New Zealand culture. There is thus an implicit linkage between popular racist sentiment and the ‘high cultural values’ of *Landfall*. This linkage makes Mok’s call for submissions simultaneously a parody of those, like C. K. Stead, who wish to defend such values (‘the early Madonna’) against what they perceive as the threat to these values from multiculturalism (see Stead, ‘Masks of Catullus’ 77 and ‘Wedde’s Inclusions’), or from popular culture, as suggested by the pop icon of the 1980s alluded to here. ‘For my generation’, writes Mok, ‘Madonna IS canon’ (personal correspondence).



The blurring of the lines between the ‘literary’ and the uses and abuses of the politics of representation and identity is equally evident in Mok’s apparent rejection of representative identities in favour of a literary one:

‘what are you first?’ A New Zealander first? Chinese first? Southeast Asian first? An Aucklander first? Well I’ll just sidestep all of that and say for the next fifteen minutes, I’m a writer first. (‘Going Bananas’)

While the call for submissions seemed to position a politics of identity against notions of ‘art’ or ‘literature’ as a separate realm of indisputable cultural values, here Mok appears to take the opposite position, claiming the ‘literary’ status of the ‘writer’ as a realm outside ethnic or geographical identities. Significantly, however, for the rest of the talk from which this quotation comes, Mok repeatedly discusses issues of identity and places herself at the centre of the discussion, referring to ‘我们汉族, 我们华人’ (we Chinese people)<sup>2</sup> and discussing her experience of being Chinese in New Zealand, even though right at the end of the talk she disavows definitive positions by again withdrawing from her position as a representative of an ethnic group or a cultural identity in favour of a literary one: ‘I’m a writer, and as Chinua Achebe says, writers don’t give prescriptions. They give headaches’. Yet while Mok here seems to draw a distinction between literary non-prescriptive identity and cultural, racial, or ethnic identities, in this talk she actually aligns the two, claiming: ‘We are *lucky* to be ethnic minorities. [. . .] Does that sound crazy? Have I gone bananas? [. . .] We’re already outside the square. Instead of trying to get back to the mainstream, we should be pleased at least, that because of our marginality, we’ve inherited a privileged thinking-position’. Thus the ‘privileged thinking-position’ that Mok associates with the ethnic minority closely resembles the outsider position of the writer as described by Mok, recalling the avant-garde artistic posturing of her claim to ‘barbarian’ status in her call for submissions for *Landfall*. Her claim that an ethnic minority occupies a privileged ‘thinking-position’ also echoes Arendt’s reflection upon, as Svetlana Boym puts it, the ‘dimension of self-distancing which constitutes the precarious freedom of the outcasts and their unique weapons of independent thinking (*selbstdenken*)’ (Boym, ‘Poetics’ 601). In this way, Mok describes a borderline position between ‘literary’ rejection and ‘ethnic’ reclamation of identity, in which the writer’s disavowal of identity and representation turns out simultaneously to represent more appropriately the very identity that is disavowed. This tension between the disavowal and assertion of identity is also played out in the multiple audiences for her

---

<sup>2</sup> The phrase translates as ‘we Chinese people’, but, significantly, is repeated using two entirely distinct words for ‘Chinese’, thus linguistically pluralising what appears to be a singular identity.

writing and the way in which Mok plays with and against addressees. In the literary context of her *Landfall* essay ‘Race You There’, for example, the main audience is the New Zealand literary and artistic community, but Mok complicates this and acknowledges the problem of addressee by explicitly stating that she is addressing not ‘white people’ but ‘my own people’ even as she asks incredulously: ‘Will “we” really be reading *Landfall*?’ (19). Conversely, when she addresses a presumably predominantly Chinese audience in her talk ‘Going Bananas’ at the ‘Crouching Tiger, Hidden Banana’ conference, she reverses her position in ‘Race You There’ by asserting her status as a writer and rejecting the ‘we’ that she so forcefully claims elsewhere. As with Arendt, it is not just ethnic minority status that enables, for Mok, a ‘privileged thinking-position’ but implicitly the multiplicity of cultural fluencies implied by ‘going bananas’. A ‘banana’ is an often derogatory term referring to a person who is Chinese (yellow) on the outside and white on the inside. Here the transitive, unfinished process of ‘going bananas’, rather than the constative state of being bananas, is reclaimed as a positive term signifying fluency in western and Chinese cultures (the latter signified by the use of Chinese in the talk) while not being entirely accepted in either and so able to critically examine both. Here Mok echoes Bakhtin, who argues that ‘In order to understand, it is immensely important for the person who understands to be *located outside* the object of his or her creative understanding—in time, in space, in culture’ (7). As has been seen, however, in Mok’s case this is complicated by a simultaneous assertion of identity associated with a time and place, so that identity is not simply rejected but, rather, as Butler envisages, redeployed subversively.

### Language Borderlines

A Bakhtinian connection between freedom in thought and understanding and cultural and linguistic border crossing is also evident in the thematic focus on multiple languages and cross-cultural encounters and misunderstandings in Mok’s writing. In addition to blurring the boundaries between the autobiographical and the political and between the political and the literary, Mok’s writing enacts a similarly performative re-accentuation and concomitant blurring of linguistic and cultural borderlines. Her writing frequently highlights the mixing of languages, cultures, and geographical settings, as, for example, in the titles of the poems ‘A Czech Poetry Lesson in China’ and ‘An Arabic Poetry Lesson in Jakarta’. In fact, the mixing of language and related issues of communication plays a central role in most of Mok’s literary writing, from the mixing of Mandarin Chinese and English in ‘Three Represents’ and ‘Xia yu’ to the misunderstandings between speakers

or writers of English, Taiwanese/Hokkien, Mandarin, and Cantonese, which is the central theme of ‘Daily Special’.

The poem ‘Xia yu’ highlights the role that language plays in the performance of a conception of identity that occupies an unstable borderline realm, a realm created through the instabilities of language. Thus the poem, like several of Mok’s, is based on a pun, in this case on the words for ‘rain’ (*yu* 雨) and ‘language’ (*yu* 语) such that ‘xia yu’ might be both the everyday phrase ‘it is raining’ (*xia yu* 下雨) and ‘down with language’, as Mok translates it, although it might more likely be interpreted as something like ‘getting off language’ by analogy with ‘getting off the vehicle [train, bus, bicycle, etc.]’ (*xia che* 下車). The childlike nature of the pun is to the point, because the subject of the poem is precisely the loss of language experienced by the children of migrants, like Mok, who have come ‘down with / out their dialects’ and ‘look at each / other in english’. Ironically, here loss of language is recorded through its recovery, but also through its misuse, signifying a position locatable neither wholly in Chinese nor in English, a borderline linguistic and cultural position.

Similarly, Mok’s “‘Three Represents” for the Communist Party of China’s 16th National Congress’ uses wordplay as the starting point for an exploration of the ambivalent position of diasporic Chinese vis-à-vis the Chinese motherland. The position of linguistic and political in-between-ness occupied by the Chinese diasporic subject is highlighted by the combination of language mixing and play, on the one hand, and political engagement, on the other. Here the role of language in representation is again accentuated and is used to instantiate formally issues relating to political representation and rhetoric. The title of the poem refers to Jiang Zemin’s doctrine reiterated in his speech at the 16th Communist Party of China Congress, November 2002, when his ‘three represents’ were incorporated into the official Communist Party charter (see Fewsmith 13), and when Hu Jintao was, as expected, officially named as his successor. The Congress was thus the climax of Jiang Zemin’s political career and the beginning of its end, as the new wave of Chinese leadership represented by Hu began to take control. Alluding to the dual meaning of the occasion, the poem begins with a linguistic mishearing, misunderstanding, or wordplay on Jiang Zemin’s words:

*the new beginning is coming*

it’s a double header this  
 ‘*xin/g gao chao*’ — as a  
 billion and a half might  
 have heard offscreen

‘The Communist Party  
is leading our nation to  
wards a monumental  
orgasm’ Jiang Zemin

is talking dirty again  
the next wave is coming  
all over his face and  
the machine can’t lie (95)

This opening part of the poem plays on the Chinese ‘*xin/g gao chao*’. The phrase Jiang Zemin used in his speech, ‘*xin gao chao*’ 新高潮 (new wave), is misheard as ‘*xing gao chao*’ 性高潮 (sexual climax/orgasm). The opening italicised line is an attempted English rendering of this pun. The following line is also a double entendre and, simultaneously, points to the ‘double’ meaning of the word ‘head’. In this way, the poem immediately challenges the official political line by drawing attention to the problems lurking in linguistic representation, here in relation to a speech on ‘representation’, in which Jiang Zemin asserts the right and ability of the Party to ‘represent’ the Chinese people. Regional variations in spoken Chinese are critical to the effect of the pun. As Mok recalls, ‘*everyone* heard that line as “orgasm” in Chengdu, the whole country hated that guy’s Shanghai accent’ (personal correspondence). Even as regional variations in accent produce the pun, these variations themselves undermine the official conception of a united Chinese people by highlighting the country’s linguistic diversity. The interplay between Chinese and English representations also allows the poem to stand outside attempts made by the Party for discursive control, attempts made in the Chinese language through Jiang Zemin’s representation of reality and his claim, as representative of the party, to represent the people. At the same time, the poem’s (mis)use of Chinese positions it outside a solely English-language context. In the final lines of the poem, this battle over representation is made more explicit in the quoted lines from CCTV-9 which purport to speak for ‘Overseas / Chinese’ such as Mok who are said to have watched Jiang Zemin with ‘their hearts / beating to the rhythm / of their motherland’ (98).

The short story ‘The Beach’ provides a more complex but not atypical example of the centrality of the interplay between languages to Mok’s writing. It not only mixes standard and broken English and includes some brief passages in Mandarin Chinese (in pin-yin transcription) but also includes references to several other languages which also highlight the role of the writer as a translator-interpreter. ‘The Beach’ includes, for example, a ‘Recorded statement’ from an Arabic speaker as translated by an interpreter, whose presence is noted in the final lines, in such a way as to make the reader wonder whether what we are reading is the interpreted version or the

‘original’ ‘translated’ by the author for the reader’s benefit (145–46). The account also includes a few words of recounted speech in Arabic and itself tells the story of an encounter that caused confusion over linguistic and ethnic identity. This encounter is between the Arabic speaker, who, it turns out, has some knowledge of Turkish, and a speaker of another Turkic language from the Chinese province of Xinjiang, who, to add further linguistic layers, describes himself as being from ‘Turkestan’, a name referring generally to the Turkic peoples of Central Asia with obvious implications of the desire for the independent political representation of ethnic identity for a group subject to political domination (145). The Arabic recorded statement goes on to give an account of a conversation conducted in Turkish and another Turkic language, most likely Uygur. National and ethnic confusion in relation to Chineseness, highlighted here by the Turkic Chinese national, is further enhanced in ‘The Beach’ by references to different Chinese dialects or languages, including an unidentified southern Chinese dialect language (‘Cantonese? Fujian dialect?’ [142]), and Chinese writing that is ‘classical or, at least, complicated’ (146). Significantly, in ‘The Beach’, as elsewhere, the mixing and confusion of languages is accompanied by a mixing of genres. Only about half of the short story comprises the primary narrative involving an unnamed ‘you’, and even this narrative is divided into largely distinct dialogue and descriptive sections. The rest of the piece is made up of the recorded statement in Arabic and the found ‘Notes for Zhuan’, apparently in Chinese (146–49). Thus this genre switching is as integral to the story as the linguistic and ethnic mixing, suggesting a relationship between the two that I will discuss in more detail below.

A similarly complex mixture of histories, ethnic identities, and languages occurs in the short story ‘Hereditary Fiction: The Mok Tapes’, in which Manchurian, Malay, Cantonese, Australian, British, European, and Hindi identities are brought into encounter with one another and their terms implicitly questioned. Language is an explicit theme: ‘This is why my English is superior’ (197); ‘I didn’t speak a word of any Chinese dialect, or any Malay. I didn’t speak for months. They called me the Mute’ (197); ‘I stayed for a month, and still speak fluent Hindi’ (198); ‘Everyone knows the best way to get around a Chinese customs official if you are Chinese is to speak English’ (199); ‘Mok is a Manchurian name from the north’ (199). This complex mixture of languages and lack of language is recounted by the elderly Mok, simply called EMM (‘an elderly Malaysian male’). The mixing of languages and cultures in the account is paralleled again by a playful mixing of genre and, significantly, a mixing of fact and fiction, and autobiography and fiction, which involves the confusion of both genre and identity. The genre of the piece is initially identified by its title as ‘fiction’. This label is, however, complicated in a number of ways. The subtitle presents Mok not as the author but as the recorder of a ‘conversation between an Australasian interviewer of

indeterminate age or gender and an elderly Malaysian male'. This position as recorder is itself undermined by the 'transcription', which through its quasi-academic style presents the author as 'discoverer' of a 'fragment of apparent interview with elderly male, putatively Malaysian' recorded on a 'magnetic cassette tape'. The asserted genre thus shifts from fiction to recorded interview to archival documentation within the opening lines. The effect is further complicated as the 'fragment' is described as having been recorded over the top of the entirely different genre of rock music, a 'recording labelled "INXS"'. The faux naïve archival presentation of the letters here marks again a genre shift between 'popular' culture and 'serious' archival work.

The identity of the characters and their relation to the author are also confused in the piece. Although in both the title and the subsequent 'archival' frame the author/recorder/transcriber is differentiated from the two characters, this differentiation is placed in doubt in the dialogue itself, where it emerges that the conversation recorded is between relatives both of whom are, like the author, Moks. Furthermore, the younger Mok is strongly associated with the writer in the following passage:

EMM: We used to be noble imperial officials, and now look at our lost potential, our sown seeds trailing off into the indulgences of the arts, wasted, dispersed ...

AIIA/G: Actually zhu fu, I am also a civil servant (199)

The passage alludes to Tze Ming Mok's career as a writer ('indulgences of the arts') and her work at the time for the New Zealand Immigration Service ('I am also a civil servant'). Here then, the status of the work as autobiographical, an account of the author's family history, is played against the insistence on the work's fictionality, raising the question that is asked explicitly by the younger speaker but which remains unanswered: 'What is your opinion of [...] the responsibility of truth-telling in postcolonial fiction?' (199). The piece refuses to fit either option easily. Its hilariously elaborate quasi-scholarly frame seems to flaunt its fictionality through its very insistence on veracity. Indeed, the author's own name, which seems to guarantee a connection to the world of fact and 'truth-telling', also asserts its fictionality, so that behind 'the Mok tapes' the 'mock tapes' punningly lurk, suggesting the fictionality of the author herself as a definable entity and again pointing towards a more performative conception of the subject.

'Hereditary Fiction' thus reveals and highlights its own artifice through what Robbins terms the 'mockgenre, in which a work apes the conventions of another genre' (161). Of course, in this case there is another layer of metafictionality in that the text seems simultaneously to mock several different genres and thus complicate even the genre of 'mockgenre'. At one level, the conventions of scholarly genre are parodied; at another level, the

conventions of the mock-scholarly found text (in the nineteenth-century tradition of Walter Scott and others) are also mocked. At a further level, the hybrid identities and magical realism (here in the story of the hereditary split toe) central to some ‘postcolonial fiction’ are also targets of the genre-mocking strategy of the piece. This is not to say that these genres are simply rejected. Rather, the multiple mock genres formally instantiate the multiplicity and uncertainty of the hybrid multiple identities described. The focus on the interplay of genres highlights and questions textual identity. As Patricia Waugh writes, ‘by studying metafiction, one is, in effect, studying that which gives the novel its identity’ (5). But in this case, by questioning its own identity as fiction, autobiography, or scholarly transcript, the text also draws attention to the role of genre, storytelling, and writing in general in the construction of identities. Through its formal strategy of defamiliarising genre and its thematic undermining of identity, ‘Hereditary Fiction’ functions, in Viktor Shklovsky’s words, as a means of returning ‘sensation to life’ by imparting ‘a sensation of a thing as vision and not as [habitualised and conventionalised] recognition’ (13; my translation). While Waugh sees this process, through her reading of Shklovsky, as releasing ‘new and more authentic forms’, authenticity, like identity, is less certain in ‘Hereditary Fiction’, as elsewhere in Mok’s writing (65). That is, as with Shklovsky, who, Svetlana Boym has argued, dreamed of life imitating art, ‘not the other way around’, Mok’s use of the estrangement device of the mockgenre does not so much reveal an authentic identity concealed by our habituation but rather provides an alternative model of identity based on unstable generic boundaries—what Boym calls ‘Estrangement as a Lifestyle’ (‘Estrangement’ 515). As Boym notes in introducing this idea, Benedict Anderson’s account of ‘imagined communities’ leaves out ‘the stories of internal and external exiles, misfits and mixed bloods who offer digressions and detours from the mythical biography of a nation’ (‘Estrangement’ 512–13). Mok’s ‘Hereditary Fiction’ functions in just this way, using ‘alienation itself as a personal antibiotic against the ancestral disease of home in order to reimagine it, offering us new ways of thinking about home, politics, and culture’ (Boym, ‘Estrangement’ 513).

### **Genre Borderlines**

As ‘Hereditary Fiction’ highlights, in addition to her exploration of the borderlines of identity—personal, political, and literary—and of languages and cultures, Mok investigates the borderlines of genres. Her writing uses the strategy that Bakhtin calls genre ‘re-accentuation’, whereby genres are mixed and deployed in ways that work against their conventional usages. Mok’s use of multiple genres also relates to the multiple addressees of her work. As

Bakhtin also argues, the question of whom a speech act, including a literary work, addresses plays a critical role in determining its genre and the nature of the ‘utterance’ as a whole.

The use of multiple genres is one way in which Mok’s work formally instantiates a borderline poetics and one way in which the formal strategies of her writing address and respond to the problem of political agency. In ‘Genre as Social Action’, Carolyn Miller describes genres as ‘the typical joint rhetorical actions available at a given point in history and culture’ (158). As John Killoran points out, ‘As a general principle, human agents’ performance in a discursive environment is contingent not just on their private competence with that environment’s technological infrastructure or with its verbal and multimodal languages, but also on the availability of public discursive precedents’, that is, on the availability of genres (71). Thus while Mok’s work explores the relationship between language and communication, it also points to the way in which our discourse is limited by our ability to use various genres. As Bakhtin notes, ‘Many people who have an excellent command of a language often feel quite helpless in certain spheres of communication precisely because they do not have a practical command of the generic forms used in the given spheres’ (80).

Genres thus both enable rhetorical actions and limit their availability. Just as a given language enables and restricts the terms in which one can express oneself, so too the rules of genre create borders within which expression is contained. Understood in this way, the codes of genre provide a structure for and limits to expression like those of identity and language. We cannot escape language and enter into some world of ‘direct’ expression; so too with genre. The limits on freedom inherent in genre are, therefore, also the structures enabling freedom of expression. Bakhtin argues that one measure of ‘free speech’ might indeed be our fluency with genres:

The better our command of genres, the more freely we employ them, the more fully and clearly we reveal our own individuality in them [. . .], the more flexibly and precisely we reflect the unrepeatable situation of communication—in a word, the more perfectly we implement our free speech plan. (80)

As with identities and languages, fluency and flexibility in the use of genres could thus be said to have a relationship to freedom of expression.

In Mok’s poetics, a model of freedom within restriction is articulated through the re-accentuation and mixing of identities, languages, and genres. I have already pointed to Mok’s mixing of genres in her crossing of the dividing lines between political essay and literary genres, itself related to her re-accentuations of identity, and in the interplay of genres in works like ‘Hereditary Fiction’, in which fluency in multiple languages is implicitly



compared to the piece's mixing of autobiographical, archival, and fictional genres. In all these cases, it is not identity, language, or genre per se that is disavowed, but rather their limits or borderlines become the site for new models of freedom that allow Mok's writing to exceed the restrictions of any one genre, identity, or language.

Mok's writing deploys a range of genres, including a variety of new web-based genres. Her writing ranges across the conventional literary genres of poetry and short stories discussed above and other conventional print genres such as the essay and the newspaper column. Web-based genres are, however, equally important, most prominently her 'Yellow Peril' Public Address blog, but also other established Internet genres, such as the personal website. Her writing is also particularly striking for its exploration of unusual, marginal, and paratextual genres, which she frequently uses in unexpected ways—employing the technique that Bakhtin calls 're-accentuation'. Mok's 'call for submissions' for her special issue of *Landfall*, cited above, for example, re-accentuates a highly conventionalised genre as an opportunity for direct engagement with political, literary, and identity issues. In the 'borderline' issue of *Landfall* itself, Mok employs the genre of 'references' or 'notes' as a text in its own right ('References') and, again playing with 'borderline' genres, she innovates with a new genre based on translation, what she calls a 'translation game' (Yang, Edmond, and Mok). In other cases, she transforms the 'summary' of an article into a work in its own right (Mok and Rasanathan 45) or she mixes a marginal genre within a conventional one, as in her 'Chinese Diaspora Emergency Survival Kit' in her *Sunday Star-Times* column, which combines the conventional genre of the journalistic columnist with the marginal genre of the emergency survival kit list, usually found only on the back of telephone books and the like and not generally associated with news, entertainment, or literature ('Burn, Chinatown, Burn'). Similarly, in her web-based work, Mok takes advantage of new popular web genres, such as the online picture library and the web-based test, re-accentuating them to explore issues of politics and identity ('Asian Invasion'; 'Test Scores'). The use of popular and web-based genres also potentially reaches out to a different audience, exploiting the borderline between 'popular' entertainment genres, such as the quiz or slideshow, and 'serious' sociopolitical commentary or literature.

Mok's recently created website, [tzemingmok.com](http://tzemingmok.com), highlights the importance of the interplay of genres to her work and her self-presentation, while simultaneously demonstrating her exploration of the potentials of yet another genre. In its early 2007 version, the homepage of the website was divided into four categories: the 'archive of sociopolitical writing, speeches & journalism', the 'archive of literary writing and reviews', 'the emergency invasion kit: resources & diversions on New Zealand Asian issues', and a link to her 'blog | Yellow Peril on Public Address'. While the newer version of the

website places ‘the emergency invasion kit’ within the now renamed ‘political’, it keeps the basic generic distinction between what are now called simply ‘political’ and ‘literary’ writing. This distinction is, however, undermined within the categories. ‘Race You There’ appears in the ‘literary’, for example, even though Mok herself has categorised it as a piece of ‘populist, political polemic’ (‘Tze Ming Replies’). In the newer version, the interplay between these apparently clearly demarcated genres is acknowledged by the inclusion of ‘Race You There’ in both categories. In the older version, the sociopolitical writing includes items that might be categorised under the ‘invasion kit’ genre, such as the ‘Chinese Diaspora Emergency Survival Kit (issued to all Chinese minorities at birth)’ (‘Burn, Chinatown, Burn’). Some of the reviews appear under both ‘literary writing’ and ‘socio-political writing’ or in ‘political’ (now within the subcategory ‘Dissidents’). Thus the semblance of generic order is quickly revealed to be full of slippage.

This incessant crossing of the borderlines between genres is implicitly associated with issues of identity, place, and ethnicity, since the full title of the website in the earlier version was ‘Tze Ming Mok: Whereabouts Disputed’ (after June 2007 the subtitle was removed). The position of ‘Tze Ming Mok’ could be ‘disputed’ in multiple senses: in terms of cultural identity; in terms of physical location (the website could be hosted anywhere); in terms of language (her name appears on the website in Roman script and in Chinese characters, and in the newer version, also in the form of a Chinese seal); in terms even of existence. This last possibility was raised when the *National Business Review* (*NBR*) suggested in its anonymous ‘In Tray’ columns that her real name was ‘Lena Mok’, implying that Mok’s use of a difficult Chinese name was an affectation and also perhaps questioning her ‘Chineseness’ (31 Mar. and 5 May 2006). The suggestion was picked up by Jane Bowron, who, writing in the *New Zealand Listener*, asked why ‘Chinese letters’ appeared in place of a picture of Mok in her weekly *Sunday Star-Times* column and implied that the ‘threats’ cited by Mok as the reason were fabricated or exaggerated, insinuating, like the *NBR*, that Mok’s self-presentation was partly fictional. According to Mok, writing in her Yellow Peril blog (‘Identity Crisis!’), the suggestion that Lena was her real name came from the journalist David Cohen, a regular contributor to the *NBR*, who subsequently also questioned the reason why Mok refused to have her picture printed in the *Sunday Star-Times* (‘Thirty-one’ 21 Jul. 2006 and 11 May 2007). Mok has recalled: ‘Cohen and I had an email exchange in which he was reluctant to accept the truth, due to his uncovering of a birth certificate of a “Lena Mok” (possibly a Dutch name, funnily enough). Hence, I posted my own birth certificate online’ (personal correspondence). Thus in this case, the disputation of Mok’s existence forced Mok to respond in the terms set by her critics, by asserting the authenticity of her identity even as elsewhere her

writing works to playfully undermine such notions of authenticity. The ‘Lena Mok’ case thus demonstrates again the dangers and possibilities posed by both the undermining and the assertion of identity and the political pressures that Mok’s writing reflects and responds to by operating in-between these positions.

But ‘whereabouts disputed’ could also be read as referring in part to genre. This genre uncertainty relates to the question that, as noted above, Mok raises about her identity and self-presentation as a ‘writer first’ or as, amongst other identities, ‘Chinese first’, an uncertainty depicted visually on her website homepage by the image of a bowl of rice with pencils instead of chopsticks, an image that she also uses as the icon for her ‘Yellow Peril’ blog. The generic, linguistic, and identity borderlines all highlighted and problematised on her website homepage point to the inextricability of all three forms of boundary crossing in Mok’s work.

As evidenced by her personal homepage, the possibilities of re-accentuation and re-assemblage that digital media and the Internet offer seem particularly amenable to Mok’s approach. These media favour the techniques that, as Killoran observes, are particularly suggestive of Claude Levi-Strauss’s concept of *bricolage*: ‘the personal home page author, like the *bricoleur*, assembles text and graphics from different sources’ (75). Mok’s website exploits these possibilities, presenting multiple texts, genres, and images simultaneously so as to highlight and question the borderlines between them.

The importance of the mixing and re-accentuation of genres to Mok’s borderline poetics is particularly evident in the unconventional writing genres identified on the website by the category ‘the emergency invasion kit: resources & diversions on New Zealand Asian issues’. This section of the website contains a variety of different genres, including a photo essay (‘Asian Invasion: Birth of a Movement’) and a variety of tests, or mock tests. The interactive nature of these genres exemplifies what Katherine Hayles describes as ‘the reimagining of the literary work as an instrument to be played, where the textual dynamics guide the player to increased interpretive and functional skills’, a reimagining that she sees as one of the implications of digital media for contemporary literature (121).

The ‘Chinese Identity Problem Test’ within Mok’s ‘Invasion Kit’, for instance, includes the following mock-serious test:

**Question 1: Do you have a Chinese identity problem?      Yes/No**  
Thank you for taking the test.

The main part of this test is not the test at all, but a ‘Chinese Identity Card’ that lists ten reasons ‘why I have never had Chinese identity problems’. The text functions differently to the genres of the political essay, speech, and blog, which in general appeal to the idea of a Tze Ming Mok as a forthright political

crusader (though, of course, with appropriate self-deprecation). Instead, here Mok presents a text to be enacted in everyday life, to be ‘played’ in Hayles’s terms. Readers are invited to print out a ‘small card to efficiently hand out to people who answered “Yes”, so you never again have to talk to anyone for hours about their Chinese identity problems when all you really want to do is have a drink and/or go to bed, with them/with someone else/by yourself/two hours ago’. The test is equally and self-consciously distanced from the ‘literary’ genres of poetry and fiction, explicitly when the test taker is told ‘If you answered “Yes”, try not to write poetry about it. It probably won’t end well for anyone’. At one level, this is simply a caution against the tendency of such efforts to result in uncrafted outpourings; that it is not that the topic itself is inappropriate, but that poetry is something more than this. Given Mok’s propensity to play on the expectations and boundaries of different genres, however, this answer can, at another level, be read as highlighting the widespread assumptions that lyric poetry is a vehicle for self-expression and as simultaneously and self-reflexively drawing attention to the less conventional genre chosen here for the exploration of identity problems. By implying that identity problems are not an appropriate subject for the genre of poetry, the answer also refers self-consciously and ironically to the fact that issues of identity are prominent in Mok’s own poetry. For example, in ‘Xia yu’, discussed above, a pun on ‘falling rain’ and ‘down with language’ is used to assert both Chinese identity and the falling down of dialects into the ‘puddle’ of English. Here again, then, the relationship of writing to identity is asserted even as it is denied through the tension described and enacted here between ‘literary’ and ‘non-literary’ genres. On the one hand, the test rejects the notion of an ‘identity problem’, but it does so through a confident assertion of Chinese identity that simultaneously involves a disavowal of its association with any ‘essential’ qualities and an assertion of its performative potential through points such as ‘anything I say, believe, or do, is something that a Chinese person is saying, believing or doing’. In this way, the appeal to identity and the autobiographical ‘I’ paradoxically gives the writer poetic licence to exceed the boundaries of any one identity or genre.

Apart from the personal homepage, Mok’s usage of another web genre, the personal blog, the exemplary genre of ‘anything I say, believe, or do’, provides a particularly acute site for her to explore the generic relationship between literature and autobiography and the politics of representation and identity. As Eric Gans argues, Proust has recently ‘become the principal literary icon of the twentieth century’ (37), and with it his ‘weakly narrative, “intermittent” life story’ (38), supremely achieved in that contemporary discursive form, the blog, has become the model for the mixing of literature and life in the texts of writers such as Mok. More than her highly public self-presentation on ‘Yellow Peril’ and [tzemingmok.com](http://tzemingmok.com), Mok’s writing on her personal blog (and recently also on Facebook) is a liminal space between

public and private. Mok's personal blog is freely accessible on the Internet, though it is not indexed on popular search engines, and registers this in-between position in its subtitle: 'A More Private Kind of Public'.<sup>3</sup> Its personal nature is ironically registered in its anonymity (her name appears nowhere on the site and one is told 'If you're reading this, you should already know me in real life anyway'). These writings, though intended for a limited audience of acquaintances, nevertheless often overtly display their literariness. Her private blog, for example, is entitled 'A Thousand Miles, Thinking', an allusion to the final line of Ezra Pound's translation of the Chinese poet Li Po's 'Exile's Letter'. The reference not only refers to the author's absence from New Zealand but also implicates the blog in the politics of cross-cultural representation. By referring to Pound's controversial and influential representation of Chineseness through the poems of *Cathay* and his other Fenellosa-influenced writings on Chinese poetry and the Chinese language, the blog's title points to Mok's own role in 'representing' Chineseness and her ambivalent literary affiliations with Western poetics, suggesting the complicated nexus of cross-cultural readings and misreadings that is at the heart of her political and literary writing. Even the assertions of difference from her 'real', 'political' writing or the qualities of good writing made in the blog simultaneously serve to highlight its self-conscious literariness. For example, Mok captions a picture included in one post: 'see how I don't even care that I haven't cropped the picture properly? Now that's freedom'. This can be seen as an example of what Christopher Robbins describes as "'outing" the artifice implicit in their medium's constructs', so that the medium is deconstructed and roles are created 'for elements usually unnoticed or taken for granted' (161). Here a literary role is created for the caption, a genre usually overlooked, by drawing attention to the illusion of transparent representation of the image and by 'outing' the artifice involved in cropping an image so that it fits seamlessly into a blog. It is also significant in this regard that the image quite overtly has no direct relationship to the text except as an example of Mok's claim to the freedom 'to post random pictures of things'. This example represents what Robbins identifies as one of the processes by which such highlighting of artifice operates, an 'acknowledgment and deconstruction of medium-specific elements' (Robbins 161), here the 'random' posting associated with blogging and the necessity of digital cropping.

Such blurring of the private and the public in 'A Thousand Miles, Thinking' reflects the 'confusion of the textual and lived life' that Laurie McNeill sees as characterising the 'Diary on the Internet' (39). Mok's usage of the blog with its crossing of generic expectations between private diary and public performance, both literary and journalistic, might seem to confirm

---

<sup>3</sup> Mok has subsequently changed the subtitle to 'The Exile's Better'.

Killoran's assertion that 'since the new media environment is so different from traditional environments of self-presentation, prospective Web authors [. . .] [are] prompted to employ their familiar but out-of-place genres—embodying an out-of-place cultural rationality—freely and flexibly' (72). Nevertheless such utopian views of the possibilities of the Internet must be tempered by the way in which new genres, such as the blog, are now established to the point where they provide a framework for thinking, just as 'traditional environments of self-presentation' do. The blog does not, therefore, provide the absolute distance from convention and absolutely free thinking that Mok's title might seem to propose. As Mok's title also suggests, such utopian ideas are equally embedded within social and cultural contexts. Nevertheless, like Pound's creative misreading of Chinese poetry, Mok's deployment of various genres in unconventional ways and in unexpected combinations opens up possibilities for at least limited freedom and agency.

Mok's experimentation with genre is not, however, limited to the Internet. Mok also explores a variety of marginal genres, as underutilised sites for re-accentuation. One example of this is Mok's experimentation with what Gerard Genette calls 'paratexts', those genres, such as dedications and notes, which exist on the margins of a work, as in her use of the article 'summary' as a site for literary play mentioned above. Another example of Mok's use of paratexts is the 'References' section of her 'borderline' issue of *Landfall* (Ferrier, Chuang, and Mok 148). This 'References' text comprises thirteen numbered endnotes to the issue, none of which refer back to places in the preceding texts. This then is paratext without text, a form which Genette describes as only occurring 'by accident' (3–4), but which, Craig Dworkin notes, has 'also been written quite intentionally' and indeed constitutes 'a remarkable trend in contemporary writing' (1). In particular, the genre of notes without text has been widespread in experimental poetry since the 1960s and 'continues to be attractive to poets and artists' (Dworkin 8). As Dworkin observes, 'books of notes without text isolate one element of the textual apparatus in order to lay bare and better understand the poetics of the note and its function as a device'. As Dworkin puts it, they 'focus attention on what the Russian Formalists might have called "the note as such." Or, to put this in the terms of more recent linguistics, these works move the notes away from *use* and toward *mention*' (8). Again, as in 'Hereditary Fiction', this is a form of 'mock genre'; the genre is re-accentuated by being mentioned and mocked, rather than used.

The 'borderline' issue's 'References' section involves Mok's characteristic mixing and re-accentuation of genres. The 'References' consist entirely of transcriptions of graffiti, collated by Finn Ferrier, Ronsard Chuang, and Mok herself, which because they do not have a defined text to which they refer are open to placement within multiple genres. They could be read as 'found poems' sighted around Auckland. They could also be read as a

commentary on the process of annotation since in a sense they annotate themselves, by giving the location of each instance of graffiti cited. In another sense, they annotate Auckland city, suggesting they are notes to a map rather than a text. The absence of a text or map to which the notes refer perhaps signifies the absences within the Auckland cityscape highlighted and filled by the graffiti. In addition to this generic uncertainty, the 'References' occupy a borderline position between 'high' and 'low' culture. As Dworkin notes one writer of footnotes as primary text believed, scholars in part 'acquire their cultural capital through footnotes that explicate other works rather than through writing "primary" works themselves' (8). In this case, however, the footnote is derived from the genre of graffiti, undermining claims to cultural capital. The shift from public urban space to literary review also highlights how switching contexts and genres affects the audience for a text and the way in which that text is read.

The 'borderline' issue 'References' are both inside and outside the text, inside and outside the issue of *Landfall* and Auckland itself. Similarly, Mok's writing as a whole inhabits an inside-outside space between the assertion of and escape from identity, negotiating the borderlines of genres, languages, cultures, and media. Dworkin describes the genre of the note as a 'dangerous supplement', in that it is both 'subservient' to the text and yet 'possesses an authority to trump the text that would seem to master it' (9). Seen in this way, the note genre is exemplary of Mok's borderline poetics as a whole, which, like Jacques Derrida's 'supplement', establishes 'the problematic limit between an inside and an outside that is always threatened by graft and by parasite' (196). Mok's writing plays constantly on that limit, challenging established notions of the boundaries of identity, language, and genre by continuously grafting new forms of identity, new mixings of languages, and new combinations and accentuations of genre that extend and re-imagine their limits.

Such a borderline poetics presents challenges for the literary critic, most obviously, as I have tried to show, because it undermines notions of the primacy of the 'literary work' and the secondary nature of 'extra-literary' genres. In Mok's writing, it is precisely the crossings between such borderlines that are central. Nevertheless the distinctions between genres, and also languages and identities, remain critical to Mok's poetics, which does not so much erase these borderlines as re-accentuate them through repeated performances, so that they become not a source of restriction but, through recombination and re-imagination, a reservoir for new ways of writing and living.

## References

- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. Trans. Vern W. McGee. Ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: U of Texas P, 1986.
- Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- Bowron, Jane. 'Watching Brief'. *New Zealand Listener* 29 Apr.–5 May 2006. Archived at <[http://www.listener.co.nz/issue/3442/columnists/5949/watching\\_brief.html](http://www.listener.co.nz/issue/3442/columnists/5949/watching_brief.html)>.
- Boym, Svetlana. 'Estrangement as a Lifestyle: Shklovsky and Brodsky'. *Poetics Today* 17.4 (1996): 511–30.
- . 'Poetics and Politics of Estrangement: Victor Shklovsky and Hannah Arendt'. *Poetics Today* 26.4 (2005): 581–611.
- Butler, Judith. 'Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of "Postmodernism"'. *Feminists Theorize the Political*. Ed. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott. New York: Routledge, 1992. 3–21.
- . 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory'. *Theatre Journal* 40.4 (1988): 519–31.
- Cohen, David. 'Thirty-one Burning Media Questions'. *National Business Review* 21 Jul. 2006, sec. 1: 27. Archived at <[www.knowledge-basket.co.nz](http://www.knowledge-basket.co.nz)>.
- . 'Thirty-one Burning Media Questions'. *National Business Review* 11 May 2007. Archived at <[www.knowledge-basket.co.nz](http://www.knowledge-basket.co.nz)>.
- Derrida, Jacques. 'This is not an Oral Footnote'. *Annotation and Its Texts*. Ed. Stephen A. Barney. New York: Oxford UP, 1991. 192–205.
- Dworkin, Craig. 'Textual Prostheses'. *Comparative Literature* 57.1 (2005): 1–24.
- Ferrier, Finn, Ronsard Chuang, and Tze Ming Mok. 'References'. *Landfall* 211 (2006): 148.
- Fewsmith, Joseph. 'The Sixteenth National Party Congress: The Succession that Didn't Happen'. *The China Quarterly* 173 (2003): 1–16.
- Gans, Eric. 'Qu'est-ce que la littérature, aujourd'hui?' *New Literary History* 38 (2007): 33–41.
- Genette, Gerard. *Seuils*. Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1987. Trans. by Jane E. Lewin as *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997.
- Gunn, Giles, coordinator. *Globalizing Literary Studies*. Spec. issue of *PMLA* 116.1 (2001).
- Hayles, N. Katherine. 'Intermediation: The Pursuit of a Vision'. *New Literary History* 38 (2007): 99–125.



- Honig, B. 'Toward an Agonistic Feminism: Hannah Arendt and the Politics of Identity'. *Feminists Theorize the Political*. Ed. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott. New York: Routledge, 1992. 215–35.
- Huang, Yunte. *Transpacific Displacement: Ethnography, Translation, and Intertextual Travel in Twentieth-Century American Literature*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2002.
- 'In Tray'. *National Business Review* 31 Mar. 2006, sec. 3: 20. Archived at <[www.knowledge-basket.co.nz](http://www.knowledge-basket.co.nz)>.
- 'In Tray'. *National Business Review* 5 May 2006, sec. 3: 20. Archived at <[www.knowledge-basket.co.nz](http://www.knowledge-basket.co.nz)>.
- Killoran, John B. 'The Gnome in the Front Yard and Other Public Figurations: Genres of Self-Presentation on Personal Home Pages'. *Biography* 26.1 (2003): 66–83.
- Kothari, Shuchi. 'Small Films Large Anxieties: Telling My Stories in New Zealand'. Representing Asia, Remaking New Zealand in Contemporary New Zealand Culture: An Asia-New Zealand Research Cluster Symposium. University of Otago, Dunedin. 2 June 2007.
- Krishnaswamy, Revathi. 'The Criticism of Culture and the Culture of Criticism: At the Intersection of Postcolonialism and Globalization Theory'. *Diacritics* 32.2 (2002): 106–26.
- McNeill, Laurie. 'Teaching an Old Genre New Tricks: The Diary on the Internet'. *Biography* 26.1 (2003): 24–47.
- Miller, Carolyn R. 'Genre as Social Action'. *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 70.2 (1984): 151–67.
- Mok, Tze Ming. 'An Arabic Poetry Lesson in Jakarta'. *Landfall* 207 (2004): 87.
- . 'Asian Invasion: Birth of a Movement'. Online photo gallery. 5 Dec. 2007 <<http://flickr.com/photos/tzemingdynasty/sets/567745>>.
- . 'The Beach'. *Landfall* 206 (2003): 142–49.
- . 'Border Crossing'. *International Institute of Modern Letters Newsletter* 7 Oct. 2005: 3–4.
- , ed. *Borderline*. Spec. issue of *Landfall* 211 (2006).
- . 'Burn, Chinatown, Burn'. *Sunday Star-Times* 30 Apr. 2006. Archived at *Tze Ming Mok*. 5 Dec. 2007 <<http://www.tzemingmok.com/sstselectedcolumns/burnchinatownburn.htm>>.
- . 'Chinese Identity Problem Test'. *Tze Ming Mok*. 5 Dec. 2007 <[http://www.tzemingmok.com/test\\_scores/The\\_Chinese\\_Identity\\_Problem\\_Test.htm](http://www.tzemingmok.com/test_scores/The_Chinese_Identity_Problem_Test.htm)>.
- . 'A Czech Poetry Lesson in China'. *Landfall* 207 (2004): 85–86.
- . 'Daily Special'. *The Best New Zealand Fiction*. Vol. 2. Ed. Fiona Kidman. Auckland: Vintage, 2005. 161–68.
- . 'Going Bananas'. Speech notes from Crouching Tiger, Hidden Banana Conference, Auckland, 5 June 2005. *Tze Ming Mok*. 5 Dec. 2007 <[http://www.tzemingmok.com/study\\_notes/going\\_bananas.htm](http://www.tzemingmok.com/study_notes/going_bananas.htm)>.

- . ‘Hegel’s Holiday’. *Trout* 4 (1998). 5 Dec. 2007 <<http://www.trout.auckland.ac.nz/journal/4/tzem/hegel.htm>>.
- . ‘Hereditary Fiction: The Mok Tapes’. *Meanjin* 63.2 (2004): 197–99.
- . ‘Identity Crisis!’ Weblog entry. Yellow Peril. *Public Address*. 3 May 2006. 5 Dec. 2007 <<http://www.publicaddress.net/default,3134.sm>>.
- . Personal correspondence. Email to Jacob Edmond. 9 and 11 Mar. 2008.
- . ‘Race You There’. *Landfall* 208 (2004): 18–26.
- . “‘Three Represents’ for the Communist Party of China’s 16th National Congress”. *Poetry NZ* 28.3 (2004): 95–98.
- . ‘Test Scores’. *Tze Ming Mok*. 5 Dec. 2007 <[http://www.tzemingmok.com/test\\_scores/test\\_scores.htm](http://www.tzemingmok.com/test_scores/test_scores.htm)>.
- . ‘A Thousand Miles, Thinking’. Weblog. Mar.–Dec. 2007. [URL suppressed for privacy reasons.]
- . *Tze Ming Mok*. May–Dec. 2007 <<http://www.tzemingmok.com>>.
- . ‘Tze Ming Replies’. Weblog entry. Tumeke: Current Affairs and Culture. 14 Jul. 2005. 5 Dec. 2007 <<http://tumeke.blogspot.com/2005/07/browns-land-of-light-weight-crowd.html>>.
- . ‘Westward Ho!’ *JAAM* 11 (1999): 24–28.
- . ‘Xia yu’. *Sport* 29 (2002): 64–65.
- Mok, Tze Ming, and Kumanan Rasanathan. ‘Should We be Pushing for a Ministry of Asian Affairs, a Ministry of Ethnic Affairs, or Neither? A “Socratic” “Dialogue” between Two “Asians”’. *Aotearoa Ethnic Network Journal* 1.1 (2006): 41–45.
- Ramazani, Jahan. ‘A Transnational Poetics’. *American Literary History* 18.2 (2006): 332–59.
- Robbins, Christopher. ‘Crossing Conventions in Web-Based Art: Deconstruction as a Narrative Device’. *Leonardo* 40.2 (2007): 161–66.
- Shklovsky, Viktor. ‘Iskusstvo, kak priem’ [1917]. *O teorii prozy*. Moscow: Federatsiia, 1929. 7–23.
- Spahr, Juliana. ‘Resignifying Autobiography: Lyn Hejinian’s *My Life*’. *American Literature* 68.1 (1996): 139–59.
- Stead, C. K. From ‘The Masks of Catullus’. *Classic New Zealand Poets in Performance*. Ed. Jack Ross and Jan Kemp. Auckland: Auckland UP, 2006. 76–77.
- . ‘Wedde’s Inclusions’. *Landfall* 155 (1985): 289–302. Rpt. as ‘At Home with the Poets: *The Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse* (1985)’. *Answering to the Language*. Auckland: Auckland UP, 1989. 133–45.
- Wagh, Patricia. *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*. London: Methuen, 1984.
- Yang Lian, Jacob Edmond, and Tze Ming Mok. ‘Whispers’. *Landfall* 211 (2006): 64–72.