

## Reflection Statement

The western cultural discourse suffers from a frequent misrepresentation of East-Asian individuals, resulting in the formation of several obvious and limited tropes. *Weapons in these Teeth* is an anthology of poems which engages with the paradoxical nature of such depictions through three distinct historical contexts, each section demonstrating how the colonial and post-colonial attitudes towards Asian interaction in the west have simultaneously shifted and solidified over centuries of literature. The conceptualisation of this work began in a rage of frustration. I have always been an avid consumer of texts, however, have never been able to resonate with depictions of my cultural background - being Chinese Australian. After aching through the bland tragedy of Disney's *Mulan* -the only Disney Princess who receives less lines than her animal sidekick-, crying from frustration at the pathetic portrayal of Cho Chang as the mostly-silent, romantic objective of two *Harry Potter* films, to then be showered in the coming years by a series of anti-Chinese propaganda that still saturates our media, was a slap in my slant-eyed face.

These contrasting notions of muted, hypersexualised women and the constructed understanding of East Asia as a cesspit of immigrants or a genesis nuclear warfare left me in a state of confused devastation. Searching for a better illustration of my culture as something beyond this misguided archetype I began investigating the characterisation of East-Asia across European and American literature, only to repeatedly encounter variations of the personas that sparked my inquiry. This led to my in-depth analysis of a collection of

academic texts including *Orientalism* by Edward Said, and Daniel Vukovich's *Postcolonialism, Globalisation and the Asia Question*. From these texts I hoped to gain perspective on how these unflattering depictions were conceived and then maintained. *Weapons in these Teeth* is my attempt to reclaim the 'oriental' title, creating opportunity to bring light to voices that previously have been ignored due to authorial laziness and an ignorant appreciation for categorisation of people of colour. This piece serves to salvage my own self-perception, manipulated by the repetitive simplicity of Asian depictions, and in turn is intended to be read by those who have experienced the same relationship between their cultural identity and how it is expressed within literature.

Selection of free-verse poetry as the form for my major work was an obvious choice. The medium originated and continues to blossom in periods of 'spiritual chaos' within a culture, as it relies on the concept of freedom – implying prior entrapment – and therefore is built on the grounds of questioning societal perspectives. Free-verse poetry must break from the previous designs of what establishes a text as poem, justifying the removal of rhyme and set metre which was what traditionally separated creative writing from prose. However, free verse is not a structureless form, rather an opportunity for authors to employ their own structure through arrangement of poetic techniques including rhythmic value, iambs, mode and rhyme. In order to ascertain a deep understanding of form, I investigated the work of Maria Sukharnikova, *Reflections on the Nature of Free Verse Poetry*, and Phillip Hobsbaum's *Metre, Rhythm and Verse Form*. These texts further confirmed my choice of medium and contributed to the development of my conceptual focus.

My initial poem contests the exaggerated mangling of English in the mouths of Asian characters, which typically is exploited for comedy or to undermine a foreign presence. Often

involving the switching of L and R sounds, removal of tense and lack of articulation, the perpetuation of this trope results in the elimination of Asian intellectual authority. Inspired by the subversion of language to reject the tropes of colonisation explored throughout *Hag-Seed* by Margret Atwood and Shakespeare's *The Tempest* within the Textual Conversations module, this piece demonstrates the ability of linguistics to establish tone, concept and character. The concept of the noble savage was further explored in W. H Auden's *The Sea and the Mirror*, specifically through chapter three, which explores Caliban's understanding of art. Through hybridisation of form through a loose metre and cadenced free verse – as delineated by Hobsbaum to be the medium used throughout the bible – the presence of my character is defined as both divine and fragmented by the interference of Western ideals within China. Montaigne and his theories of cultural relativity encouraged my use of constrained writing to eliminate the letters L and R, demonstrating the racial differences which has increased the difficulty of Asian assimilation. This establishes the restriction placed upon those who speak English as a second language through pronunciation-based oppression, while articulating the academic ability of such people to eliminate these aspects of their behaviour as a method of survival and revolt. Restricted writing is a post-modern convention explored in my study of the Literary Worlds module and Italo Calvino's *If on a Winters Night a Traveller*. More specifically it was the author's association with the literary group Oulipo<sup>24</sup> and their fascination with the blending of mathematics and literature through the concept of constrained writing that inspired the first poem of my anthology. This module and its texts further influenced the structural choices made within my major work through ideas of fragmentation and variation of metre to personify multiple caricatures.

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<sup>24</sup> a loose gathering of (mainly) French-speaking writers and mathematicians who seek to create works using constrained writing techniques.

The attitudinal shift towards Asian women in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century developed from a combination of the Chinese Exclusion act of 1882 and an increased demand of East-Asian prostitutes throughout America and Europe. This required a specific function to be served by those women both within and outside literature in order to maintain their place in society, hence the rise of the ‘Dragon Woman’ trope. Illustrated by Milton Caniff in his comic series *Terry and the Pirates*, depictions of the erotic antagonist dressed in traditional Chinese attire began to soak Western plotlines in an attempt to simultaneously demonise Asians and justify their sexual objectification. My portrayal of this character draws inspiration from the Critical Study of Literature module and analysis of T.S Eliot, as I employed a true free verse metre. Relying on a combination of mid-line rhyme and syntactical consistency to establish rhythmic security, as opposed to iambs or couplets, consolidated the erratic tone of this poem and encouraged increased focus on non-metric conventions. The motif of bestial imagery accentuates the dehumanisation of East-Asians through a combination of melopoeia<sup>25</sup> and logopoeia<sup>26</sup> in: “...warping women into dragons, / Magic-wielding temptress Lions, / Beasts of trickery, sleeves stuffed with / Crinkled paper-crane aces...”. The extended metaphor coupled with accumulated adjectives and consonant-vowel patterns implies cheapening of both culture and character through the perpetuation of this stereotype in literature. This poem’s concluding stanza exemplifies the conflicting attitudes towards Asian immigration in the logopoeic reference to “red rats” as a synecdoche of communism, while maintaining the core concepts of my major work.

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<sup>25</sup> when words are altered beyond their normal meaning via musical properties such as sound and rhythm of the speech.

<sup>26</sup> Use of words for more than just their direct meaning, stimulating the visual imagination with phanopoeia and inducing emotional correlations with melopoeia.

Western consumption of a literary cocktail which combines previously established archetypes, politically driven fear and a modern application of the stereotype of sexually subservient Asian women, has produced the most convoluted depiction of East-Asia in history. Increased fetishization of the 'submissive' Eastern world has blended with the rise of Sinophobia due to headline driven media and fake news, resulting in a spectrum of Asian portrayal equally dangerous at both ends. Through a structure which alternates stanzas between a strong established pulse in rhyming couplets and prose poetry, this juxtaposing application of medium delineates the jarring tonal contrast of modern Asian representation. Regulated metre of my 'insipid' character voice serves to recognise the pigeonholing of East-Asian women via idolisation of an assumed introverted obedience, an idea brought to me through reading *Made in the U.S.A: Rewriting Images of the Asian Fetish* by Maggie Chang. Employing a blend of sensual, gustatory imagery and childish verbs and nouns reinforces an uncomfortable association with underage Asian women and arousal, commenting on the current popularity of Asian school-girl sexualisation and pornography. Contrastingly, the removal of rhyme and metre to illustrate the media's influence over western attitudes towards Asia encourages the alternate stanzas of this poem to create an audience sense of realism, diverging from the artificial description of the previous character. Inspired by the use of unscripted footage in Lucy Walker's *Waste Land*, studied in the Texts and Human Experiences module, I chose to incorporate additional realistic components through the cento-style stanza made from disjointed tweets by Donald Trump. This intertextuality demonstrates the threats of a post-truth society on marginalised groups and emphasises the negative perceptions interactions with hostile governments in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

*Weapons in these Teeth* is an embodiment of the East-Asian literary experience which has pushed my ability as both a researcher and writer in my efforts to obtain a result I can submit

proudly. The Extension Two course opened opportunity for holistic exploration of my cultural identity, to then be expressed in a sophisticated creative response.

## **Bibliography**

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