

Michelle de Kretser's *Scary Monsters*: A Teratology of Global Racism

In *Scary Monsters* (2021), the Australian (but Sri-Lankan-born) writer Michelle de Kretser pursues her reflection on the migrant experience and its multifarious implications. While *Questions of Travel* (2012) confronted the perspectives of two very different protagonists – a cosmopolitan white Australian woman journeying through the Old Continent and a Sri-Lankan refugee seeking asylum in Australia – before finally allowing their itineraries to intersect, her latest fictional production goes one step further insofar as it juxtaposes the trajectories of two main groups of characters who never get to meet, in two distinct narratives that can be read independently and respectively start from the novel's front and back covers.

In this context, the text's form is highly significant, not only because it reflects a sense of disorientation which is inherent in the process of migration, but also because the book itself, with its reversible format, can arguably be viewed as a Janus-faced creature that aims at coming to grips with the various guises under which global racism can appear and, in particular, with the numerous effects some brands of racism, discrimination and xenophobia can have on non-Anglo Australians, be it in Australia or abroad.

In this essay, I will engage with the subtle and complex ways in which de Kretser may be said to question her adoptive land's supposed multicultural modernity. For instance, I will focus on the great lengths to which those who migrate (especially from Asia) to a near-future Australia, where Muslims are outlaws and migrants risk repatriation, are prepared to go in order to try and integrate into an Islamophobic and racist – yet allegedly modern – society, as attested by Lyle and his wife's relentless quest for invisibility and assimilation. Through the author's depiction of Lili, the other protagonist of Asian descent, and her experiences as a young woman in 1980s Europe, I will also address the need, for a country that promotes multiculturalism and purports to look to the future, to enlarge current cultural paradigms so as to accommodate non-white Australianness into any (re)definition(s) of national identity.

Next to its explicit yet enigmatic title, the novel's unusual form, which one reviewer aptly described as “a two-headed creature” (Silcox), serves as a fitting starting point for the author's wide-ranging meditation on monstrosity. In a 2022 interview with Yang Chen, de Kretser herself extensively commented on the monstrous quality of this dual narrative, whose “form” crucially “embodies its content” (577). Regarding the various reasons why she opted for this “flip format,” she explained the following:

The novel is narrated by two [Asian] migrants [to Australia], and migration turns lives upside down. So I wanted the reader to experience that on a micro level: to have the usual experience of reading a book turned upside down, to experience the bewilderment of narrative discontinuity. And the “broken” form of the novel reflects the “broken” lives of immigrants. One definition of the monstrous is that which is singular, that which departs from the norm – so the flip format referenced that notion as well, announcing: here is a different kind of novel. (de Kretser in Chen 577)

In spite of her wish to play with form and break with the traditional conception of “the novel [...] as a continuous narrative,” she was originally concerned about the possible negative reception of her own “radically discontinuous” text, which, she feared, might be perceived as ‘gimmicky’ by the general public (de Kretser in Chen 577; see also Williams). Her engagement with scholarly discussions on the gimmick, in particular Sianne Ngai's book *Theory of the Gimmick: Aesthetic Judgement and Capitalist Form*, soon dispelled her initial fears. As expressed in the aforementioned interview, she became convinced that the gimmick, as an

object of ambivalent worth (i.e. both valuable and inauthentic) could operate as a potent metaphor for immigrants, one that could mirror their “experience of not being seen as real [i.e. as fully authentic] Australians” (Anon. #AWWfiction):

Despite all [the] reasons for adopting the flip format, I was a little uneasy about it, fearing that it might seem ‘gimmicky’. So I was delighted when, a couple of months ago, I came across the *Theory of the Gimmick* by the American cultural theorist Sianne Ngai (2020). Ngai suggests that we call something a gimmick when we have doubts about its value – when we ask ourselves, does this object enhance my life or not? I’m simplifying a complex argument, but that’s her gist. It was very exciting to me, because as I read, I realized that migrants function as gimmicky citizens. Our value to the nation is constantly in doubt. On the one hand, we are said to enrich Australian society with cultural diversity; on the other, we are said to dilute traditional values. On the one hand, our labour and spending are necessary to the economy; on the other, we’re stealing Australian jobs. And so, I decided that a “gimmicky” form was the perfect one for a novel that focuses on migrant lives. (578)

The novel’s peculiar form should also be read in the light of its inscription into a twofold timeframe, which invites readers to ponder a question that figures prominently in the text (and may provide a key to its interpretation): “which comes first, the future or the past?” (*Scary Monsters* 16). While it is tempting and even conventional to conceive of the former as an extension of the latter, and thus as coming second, it is equally true to assert the hermeneutic (rather than chronological) primacy of the future, insofar as it supplies – in retrospect – a vantage point without which the past cannot be interpreted with the necessary critical distance. One of the main consequences of the disorientation experienced by migrants when changing countries and enacted by the book’s reversible format is that it heightens the disruption of customary temporalities. While 22-year-old Lili, who – like de Kretser herself – settled in Australia as a teenager, notes that migration, for her family, “felt as if we’d been stood on our heads” (*SM* 17), middle-aged Lyle states, even more explicitly, that “the past was no longer a reliable guide to the future,” adding that “surely the past only reveals itself when we look back at it from now” (*SM* 16).

Although both these first-person narrators are given a chance, as they reminisce on recent or more distant experiences, to make sense of their past lives, de Kretser’s readers are, in fact, in the best position to imaginatively reconnect the novel’s timeframes and realise, with the benefit of hindsight, that the monsters of the past have grown far more terrifying in the Orwellian future the author depicts.

Among these monsters, which include ageism and sexism (topics that can only be addressed tangentially within the limited bounds of this essay), racism emerges as a multi-headed hydra that was already lurking in the darkness of the past (the late 20th century, more specifically) but has shamelessly inflated out of all proportions in the mid- or late 21st. As de Kretser declared in an interview with Roberta Trapé, “racism – like travel – is a vast and multifaceted phenomenon as well as a subject that makes people deeply uncomfortable,” which “makes it an ideal subject for literature” (de Kretser in Trapé 30). As Nietzsche’s quotation from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* cited as the novel’s first epigraph reminds us, “the state is the coldest of all monsters,” whose most salient trait is its systemic racism. This deeply dysfunctional state has in turn shaped a monstrous, dystopian society in which anti-Muslim and, more generally, anti-migrant sentiments are pervasive. Inevitably, this Australia of the near future, which is both slightly unfamiliar and disquietingly recognisable, has spawned its own peculiar monsters, embodied by immigrants who have fully and all too docilely internalised

their adoptive country's dubious values. As migrants of colour with an Asian background, Lyle and his wife Chanel provide two main responses to the racist forces that threaten their lives in Australia, namely: amnesia and assimilation. As pointed out by de Kretser, Lyle's "narrative [...] isn't a story of the struggle to adapt but its opposite: the narrator readily embraces Australian values as he understands them – materialism, selfishness, greed" (de Kretser in Chen 577). Since the past is no longer useful to make the future – or, for that matter, the present – intelligible, Lyle comes to relinquish his Asian past in Australia: "there's no joining past to present," he says. "My old self was gone for good. Immigration breaks people. We try to reconstitute ourselves in our new countries, but pieces of us have disappeared" (SM 15). In order to honour Australia, "a modern country that looks to the future" (SM 15), he and Chanel decide to reinvent themselves (through a name change) so as to become "ordinary Australians" (SM 78) and "modern person[s]" (SM 16), even though they are aware that their racialised identities can never be entirely erased. In Lyle's own words,

people like us will never be invisible, so we have to make a stupendous effort to fit in. Chanel grasped this much sooner than I did – as I said, I merely followed her lead [– and] chose new names for us as soon as our application to immigrate was approved. (SM 14)

The quintessential modernity they associate with Australianness also involves acquiring and renovating property, which Lyle – who sees "household debt and home improvements" as "key Australian values" (SM 33) – describes as "a fundamental step forward in our journey to belonging" (SM 32):

Real estate is another way to say Australia. Acquiring it, changing making a profit on it, on short, managing the property cycle with confidence – it's the story of our nation. Chanel and I have always found it an affirming theme, one that both energises and soothes. (SM 106)

Again, their relentless quest for assimilation emphatically implies the obliteration of previous histories. Not only do they proudly live in "a place free of history" (SM 31) called Spumante Court (SM 31) and located in peri-urban Melbourne but they also make a point of discarding the original owners' furniture from their newly bought house:

Chanel saw the danger at once: starting life in a new country with furniture from the old one could give rise to conflicting loyalties. Those big, dark sideboards and bedheads would loom over our lives like grim-faced ancestors. The past should weigh less than a photograph – we abandoned or deleted most of those as well. (SM 32)

Whereas Chanel is portrayed as the most "ruthless declutterer" (SM 71), Lyle faintly realises, at times, that "memories are the stuff you can't declutter" (SM 72) and that "the past crouches and waits," ready to "spring[...] from the long grass" (SM 74), just as Australia's traumatic (post)colonial history is likely to resurface until it has been properly confronted. Disturbingly, however, Lyle keeps applying his obliterating logic to objects and human beings alike. In a country where "advocating for Aboriginal rights" has become one the (many) "activities that attract surveillance and could be banned at any time" (SM 85), he is, for instance, convinced that "the problem with Aboriginal people" is that

they're a living reminder of the past. Who feels comfortable facing up to old mistakes? [...] If I knew any Aboriginal people, I'd tell them, 'Please stop reminding everyone that you belong to the oldest civilisation on earth. Don't you see what a disadvantage that is? You're *history*.' The whole point of Australia is a bet on the future. (SM 43)

In this Australia, "the only way forward is forgetting. [...] Has it ever truly been otherwise?" (Silcox), a reviewer laconically asked.

Additionally, he works for a governmental body called the Department, where he contributes to identifying unlawful citizens ("former Muslims," for example, are "coded red" (SM 57-58)) for arrest and repatriation. Even if he only sees himself as "an administrator," this clearly makes him "complicit[...] with [the] police state" (SM 39) he plays a part in sustaining.

Another, more personal, reminder of a cumbersome past is Lyle's elderly mother Ivy, who lives with the couple and ultimately annihilates their colossal efforts to blend in. On the occasion of a dinner with her CEO and his wife, Chanel had been careful to prepare Thai food, which every Australian supposedly enjoys cooking and eating, to avoid being labelled as Asian migrants, which allows de Kretser to subtly criticise potentially stigmatising multicultural policies that tend to lump together distinct categories of immigrants into a single, undifferentiated and stereotyped multicultural community. As Lyle stresses,

'We're real Aussies – we love all ethnic food. Our favourite just happens to be Thai.' Naturally, we never, ever cook food from our homeland for other people. That would be a blunder comparable to wearing traditional dress. Where would it get us? Into a mural that celebrates multiculturalism – flat, colourful figures to be marvelled at, assessed and never mistaken for the human race. Here's a test: has a Dane ever featured in a mural like that? (SM 102)

However, Ivy's utterly unmodern presence in the family house has a totally counterproductive effect, whereby Lyle and Chanel, who insist on describing Australia as "an egalitarian place" (SM 22), end up being excluded from the national 'we' by her boss's wife's racist statement:

'Intergenerational living's one of the fantastic ethnic things,' Gavina informed us. 'It's like being able to squat on your heels – it comes naturally to people like you. Westerners lost the knack before... microwaves. Our culture is completely different, I'm afraid.' (SM 105)

This event possibly radicalises Chanel's assimilationist ambitions, leading Lyle to face "a choice between [his] mother and [his] wife" and, by extension, "between the future and the past" (SM 112). Eager as Chanel is to buy a more "upmarket" (SM 107) place (recommended by Gavina) without selling their current home, which she regards as their children's inheritance (even if it is still being paid off – see SM 110), she capitalises on Ivy's suspected bowel cancer and urges Lyle to persuade his mother to take the so-called Amendment, a new ageist law aiming to facilitate euthanasia "by doing away with [...] superfluous bureaucratic regulations" (SM 47). Chanel's shameful goal, which she eventually achieves, is to speed up Ivy's death in order to finance their new place – which they are requested to do in the next year and a half – with the sale of "Ivy's house back home" (SM 111).

Beyond the intriguing Janus-faced structure of the novel (see *supra*), de Kretser has striven to resist the realist mode in other, more circumscribed ways. She has explicitly verbalised this need for a defiance of realism in a previously quoted interview with Yang Chen, in which she has deplored the frequent – tough lazy – association between realism (to which

Australian literature has often been reduced) and a stereotypical take on what might be branded 'ethnic' writing:

My subject doesn't always have to be Australia or immigration – in fact, I enjoy defying the expectation that as a Asian Australian writer, I should only write within pre-approved boundaries. Those boundaries apply to mode and form as well as to subject matter. Realism is still considered the most fitting mode for fiction writers of colour – and of course many of us do embrace it, as an apt vehicle for conveying the voices and experiences of immigrants. But we should feel free to play with other forms, other modes of literary expression. Indigenous writers have done this – they lead the way, as in so many things. (573).

In a 2015 essay titled "Beyond the Flaming Walls of the World: Fantasy, Alterity, and the Postnational Constellation," Robert T. Tally Jr. pinpointed a "planetary turn in literary and cultural studies" which may have contributed to "insert[ing] the intertwined matters of spatiality, fantasy, and postnationality into the critical discussion," identifying "the radical alterity of fantasy" (194) – "a discursive modality [...] that is marked by its fundamental attention to otherness and otherworldliness" (195) – as being "well positioned to foster a postnational and thus planetary oriented perspective" (194-95). Drawing on some of China Miéville's insights, according to which "fantasy is superior to realism when it comes to getting at the truth of 'the real world,'" (200), he borrowed, in particular, "the label 'the literature of alterity'" to define "this intensive regard for *otherness*, whether presented in terms of the past or the future, the earthly or the interstellar, the monstrous or the alien, [...] shared by all forms of the fiction of estrangement, including some, like *Moby-Dick*, that are inexpressively 'strange' even while featuring absolutely realistic (or, at least, possible) persons and events" (203, italics in original). He further argued that

an *empowered* imagination, one that would set out to map a planetary space rather than limiting itself to its local or national subsets, would need to come to grips with the radical alterity of the world, specifically with the fantastic otherworldliness emerging in conjunction with an altogether unfamiliar perspective [...]. (199)

The phrase 'literature of alterity', or 'estrangement', seems more than applicable to the dystopian fantasy and brand of imagination de Kretser develops in certain parts of *Scary Monsters*. In the section dedicated to Lyle especially, she deploys variants of a defamiliarising device that creatively allows her to transcend limiting realistic (as well as 'ethnic' or national) boundaries – a form of literalism that "enable[s] a radically different vantage point from which to view the 'real world'" (203) – and, potentially, change it – through the biting satire of a reality that has become alien, even monstrous, i.e. that of an Australian society in which rampant racism has become so engrained as to infect non-settler populations.

For example, Lyle and Chanel's monstrous wish to conform and belong, which leads them to go to ethically unacceptable extremes, is literalised, in the narrative, by a stylistic strategy that consists in having these characters affected by a mysterious physical condition. Despite similar symptoms, this disease seems to differ from "an autoimmune condition called vitiligo that causes loss of pigmentation," for which "Chanel had tested negative" (*SM* 70). Yet, it keeps mystifying "doctors and laboratories" (*SM* 139), as no other dermatological abnormality can be detected. Chanel quickly contaminates Lyle, who – unlike his wife – feels less empowered than scared (see *SM* 137). De Kretser's literalist strategy arguably illustrates the protagonists' disease of wanting to be accepted: by dint of mimicking white society and gesturing towards an ideal of whiteness, they internalise white Australia's racist intimations

and become, quite literally, ‘whiter than white(s)’. As one of the commentators has contended, “this whitening, deracinating disease [...] is ultimately a physical manifestation of what they inwardly desire: to become unremarkable and untethered from their past” (Fisher). In other words, this chameleon disorder” demonstrates that they are “incapable of finding an inner point of reference or cultural framework” (Dagnino 165). Ironically (and yet tragically), then, their desperate need to escape racism at all costs turns them into (scary) monsters of sorts, i.e. into *agents* and *catalysts* for the racism they were at first the helpless *victims* of. The price to pay is high, as it entails the immoral decision to eliminate Ivy from the surface of the Earth.

Another literalist device, namely the recurring trope of Chanel walking backwards, could be construed along similar – rather pessimistic – lines, since backward movement might, as a leitmotif, seek to question ‘linear’ progress (both at personal and collective levels) and point, instead, to moral and historical regression.

In the other narrative, the character of Lili, who spends seven months (in late 1980-early 1981) in Montpellier to teach English to high schoolers, can be said to foreshadow the kind of modernity de Kretser is interested in writing about (see de Kretser in Chen 573). Indeed, Lili is a precursor of “the contemporary world” as we know it in the 21st century, namely “a world of movement, of travel” (de Kretser in Chen 573), insofar as she has been displaced twice: at 15, she migrated from Asia to Australia, then travelled to Europe (France, in particular, but not only) at 22. With this female protagonist, this author thus further “enlarges the image-repertoire of the migrant as represented in Australian fiction” (Chen 569). As de Kretser has emphasised, Lili,

having left Australia, is not back in her homeland but working in Europe. A third term is introduced – it’s no longer a see-saw between old and new homelands. I was keen to show the migrant as cosmopolitan; to present an Australian of colour living and travelling in Europe. (in Chen 577)

As a mobile Asian Australian, who seems to have migrated by choice – although we know little about the circumstances that caused her family’s migration to Australia, they appear to have chosen this option in search of a better life for themselves and their children – and to travel for essentially professional reasons, Lili subverts expectations and transcends the habitual binary between tourism, seen as “a mark of privilege” (de Kretser in Chen 573) concerning the (generally white) individuals who travel for leisure, and forced migration, which is usually reserved for migrants of colour.

When living in Australia, she responds to the threat of racism in ways that are similar to Lyle and Chanel’s reactions. On the one hand, she is convinced – as was still the case after her French stay – that her personal history can be jettisoned for the sake of integration: she notes that “she didn’t think of the forces that took [her] family to Australia as history or even politics” (*SM* 27), but only in terms of lives turned upside down by the unsettling experience of migration, and believed, “in those days [, ...] that the past could be left behind like a country” (*SM* 147). On the other hand, she points to a quest for invisibility that recalls Lyle and Chanel’s – one that thus seems inherent in trying “to be a model immigrant” (Silcox) – when she expounds that “for a very long time after arriving in Australia, [her] instinct had been to creep and pass unnoticed. [...] It was pure ostrich magic – not seeing and hoping not to be seen,” as a result of the “underlying immigrant dread of punishment for being in the wrong place” (*SM* 91). In France, however, she wishes to be seen and even desired, although she still lacks self-confidence – her hunger for recognition, then, sharply contrasts with Lyle’s yearning “for complete anonymity” (Burns).

At the time, she also (mistakenly) “believed that the monsters had been put to rout” (*SM* 152) but her narrative clearly shows that some of them, like the hydra of racism (see *supra*),

were lurking in her reality, in more or less visible ways. The racism she witnesses or experiences for herself is often quite overt, although it can take slightly – but significantly – different shapes. In Montpellier, for instance, the city “streets were left to foreigners who had nowhere to go” (SM 15), mostly “North African men” who

ended up working in construction or building roads. Many were *harkis*, Algerians who’d served as auxiliaries in the French army during the fight for independence. Afterwards they’d fled Algeria to avoid reprisals, but France had no use for them now. (SM 33)

It then occurs to Lili that “[her] degree had included a compulsory course in French history” (SM 34) but that French colonialism was not integrated into the official historical record, let alone called into question in her textbooks: “the Algerian war didn’t come into it,” she proceeds to explain; “everything we needed to know about Algeria could be found in Camus” (SM 34), whose “most celebrated” postwar novel, *L’Étranger*, was (still) “celebrated” (SM 97) in France. However, “it was Meursault’s execution [the French] mourned, not the death of the Arab” (SM 73) Meursault murders in the book; “no thought” was given “to that or to why the French were in Algeria at all” (SM 73). Lili thus comes to the realisation that rampant racism – Arabs are viewed as “Muslims” who “don’t integrate” (SM 71) – is more than likely to underpin France’s unexamined colonialism and historical denial.

While North African men were systematically herded into a police van when their papers were checked in the public space (more particularly at the flea market where Lili likes to go and browse), the latter “was always asked for ID, but as soon as she showed [her] passport, she was waved on. Australians were not *ang-ter-es-ung*” (i.e. ‘interesting’ with a Southern French accent – SM 16). As this episode exemplifies, Lili, as a female immigrant of colour, is perceived as an outsider, not only in Australia but also in Europe. As de Kretser has observed, “the world’s view of Australia is [still] terribly out of date on the whole,” so that “the first image of an Australian that prevails in [the UK, Europe, and the States] is the image of a white person” (in Chen 572). One of the consequences of this “all-pervasive image,” which was cast and has persisted “in the long shadow of the White Australia Policy,” is that “doubt hovers over Australians of colour, the sense that we’re not fully or authentically Australian” (de Kretser in Chen 572). Accordingly, Lili is not identified as Australian by the French police on the basis of her confusing looks, but on that of her passport. In accordance with de Kretser’s previous suggestion, the French people’s inability to pigeonhole Lili is not only due to her dark-skinned Australianness but also to their more general ignorance about Australia, a country in which they are not particularly interested, whether their vision of it is “imbecilic” (SM 50), condescending or purely derogatory – for instance, Rinaldi, Lili’s creepy downstairs neighbour, regards Australia, with its migrant society and cultural plurality, as “*un pays poubelle*” (SM 23). Interestingly, the character who most reluctantly recognises Lili as an authentic Australian is Derek, a white Australian man met on an excursion who mistakes Lili’s white-skinned, European friend Minna for an Australian and is clearly not prepared to envision Australia’s future as racially plural:

When his mistake was revealed, Derek looked at me. Wonder flitted over his face and was succeeded by dismay. For the moment it lasted the look said, as crudely as a neon sign, Not a Real Australian. I’d never seen that look in France. The French, knowing nothing about Australia, wouldn’t have thought it strange if my skin were striped [...]. All his life, Derek had believed one thing about Australians, and now people like me were showing up and taking that belief apart. How could he not look

on us as a gimmicky trick? I felt kindly towards Derek. He was stuck in the spider web of the past. Future Him was Dead. (*SM* 125-26)

In an interview with Roberta Trapè, de Kretser remarked that “casual (often middle-class) racism [...] is more widely spread than is acknowledged” (30). In this particular case, she was referring to an Australian context – in which, she insisted, it doesn’t represent everyone” (in Trapè 30) – but her writings do suggest that this phenomenon can be observed elsewhere, not least in Europe. Importantly, she further argued that many “middle-class progressives” tend to “conceive of racism as overt, often brutal acts of discrimination,” which “they sincerely condemn,” while overlooking their own covert, ordinary racism, which amounts to “self-deception”:

What these white liberals revel in is a scenario in which people of colour are in need of assistance of one kind or another, so that they can provide it and confirm their image of themselves as “good people.” That kind of goodness is basically patronage, and it’s predicated on inequality. (in Trapè 30)

When Minna tells Lili that “[her] skin’s the *most* beautiful colour[,]’ a crack of disappointment opened inside [the latter]. Minna might as well have said, See? I find dark skin attractive – congratulate me! (*Ce n’est pas ang-ter-es-sung,*’ [Lili] told her. It was their most cutting criticism)” (*SM* 45). Here, Lili’s disappointment may derive from a casually racist assertion that reduces her to her skin colour – which may contribute to her later feeling that “something like trust was over” (*SM* 59) with Minna – and from her perception of Minna’s diffuse need to improve her self-image (or *ethos*), i.e. “to think of herself as a decent and blameless person, to demonstrate her essential goodness to the world” (in Trapè 31). In de Kretser’s view, “the danger [precisely] starts with the self-congratulatory ‘I’m not a racist.’” (in Trapè 30).

In *Scary Monsters*, de Kretser’s attention to detail and nuance is such that she is careful to expose migrants of colour’s own racial prejudices. In the same way as Minna is mostly unaware of her white privilege (for instance, she fails to understand what it means to be “asked to produce [your] papers at the flea market” (*SM* 108) and keeps forgetting that “only one of us was the most beautiful colour” (*SM* 145)), Lili’s conviction that her friend’s “white skin” was “the *most* beautiful colour” (*SM* 102) is equally suggestive of her own unconscious reverence for whiteness. Similarly, her burning desire to live in Montpellier’s *centre historique* (less for its physical and material qualities than for the ‘cultural capital’ it emblematises, to which racialised or de-centred individuals may have limited access – see *SM* 145) and her propensity for looking up to white feminist models (she wants to be “Bold, Intelligent Woman” and “Sexy, Modern Woman” (*SM* 44) like French intellectual Simone de Beauvoir and American singer Debbie Harry but “no women of colour inspire her” (Paramaditha)) reveal unexamined Eurocentric biases that may stem from, and have been shaped by, the systemic racism of the Western states in which she has lived and been educated from her teenage years onwards.

The overall picture de Kretser paints with her eighth book may look quite bleak. Yet, the author seemingly has no wish to sound overly pessimistic: when interviewed, she submitted that “things [were] changing for the better” in Australia (even if “we’re not there yet” (in Chen 572)) and – despite her lack of “illusions about the limitations of literature to effect real change” – clung to “the idea that we still have time to create the future we want” (Anon., “This New Aussie Novel”). In this sense, the novel could be read as a cautionary tale since

one of the purposes of a monster is to act as a warning. “The word ‘monster’ comes from [...] Latin and is related to ‘demonstrate,’ showing something as a warning. (Anon., “This New Aussie Novel”)

A way of “working towards a different future” (Anon., “This New Aussie Novel”) and shunning the regression Chanel’s backward movement appears to symbolise might consist in growing an awareness that “the nonracist is a chimera” (de Kretser in Trapè 30). Since “we are all capable of sliding into racism [...],] no one can afford to be complacent about their conceptualization of or address towards others” (de Kretser in Trapè 30). This simple guiding principle might help both to broaden Australia’s current cultural paradigms with a view to incorporating non-white Australianness into any (re)definition(s) of national identity and, more generally, to tame, as far as possible, the monster named global racism.

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