Area of study 2: Creating and presenting
Context: Exploring issues of identity and belonging

*Growing up Asian in Australia* (edited by Alice Pung)

Introduction

The anthology *Growing up Asian in Australia* covers a wide variety of genres, styles, philosophies and experiences. The one thing they have in common is that each of the story tellers brings into their Australian stories their own Asian heritage, and they are able to examine what effect that has on their total identity. And that is the key to looking at this text in the context of “Identity and Belonging”, the stories are not just about people deciding if they are Asian or Australian or somewhere between the two. These are tales of young men and women (the youngest contributor is 16 years old) who are struggling with issues of identity much broader than just culture and race, they deal with family, with sexuality, with their roles as son, daughter, grandchild, and cousin.

In the book’s Introduction the editor, Alice Pung, tells us two key things about this text. The first is that “Asian-Australians have often been written about by outsiders, as outsiders. Here, they tell their own stories.” Essentially this text gives an authentic voice to the fastest growing cultural group in Australia. The stories do not suggest homogeneity however, while there is a common thread of Asian influence there is a vast range of individual identities, cultures, beliefs and values embedded in these stories. This is assisted by the broad definition of ‘Asian” that Pung adopted – she has chosen to use the more British definition that includes the “sub-continent” India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka as well as South-East Asia - Vietnam, China, Malaysia and the Phillipines.

The second point is that the issues of growing up are universal, that in the words of the Greek poet Horace “Change only the name and this story is also about you.”
Growing up Asian in Australia succeeds on this level because we can all identify with one or more of the stories it tells. The tale of the death of a grandparent and the subsequent knowledge that a chance has been lost resonates as much with a middle-aged Caucasian woman as it does with the Asian protagonist. The horrors of teenage repression, confused sexuality and seemingly unreasonable parental expectations strike a chord with all readers old, young, Asian, Australian or other. We’ve all been through experiences just like these.

The compilation is divided into sections which use coolly ironic Australian slang words and phrases to identify the aspects of life they deal with. Thus the section “Strine” looks at the role of language in migrant life and how it assists in establishing both individual identity and the feeling of belonging to a community.

The role of the editor

“When I was growing up, we were called Power-Points.” Alice Pung (p.1)

Alice Pung’s previous best-seller was Unpolished Gem her autobiographical tale of growing up in Melbourne’s Western Suburbs. Pam McIntyre has described the book as “a beautifully written, painful search for identity between two cultures, [which] is also very funny and life affirming”. Pung’s credentials, then, to edit this collection of tales about growing up as an Asian-Australian are impeccable. Pung is one of her contributors in the sense that she is familiar with their formative influences. She has seen, heard, experienced or can at least empathise with many of the incidents and accidents her contributors outline in their own tales of adolescent emergence.

The role of editor is an important one as it is the editor who is in charge of choosing and shaping the material at her disposal. An editor will commission some material or ask writers to reshape previously written material so that it fits the brief of the book. Pung outlined the process to Peter Mares (15 June 2008) on ABC radio:

Peter Mares: Alice, the stories in the collection range very widely. We’ve got filmmaker Tony Ayres retelling a confrontation he had with skinheads, Diana Nguyen, an actor, talking about five ways to disappoint your Vietnamese mother (a very wrenching story, I found, that one), Benjamin Law’s account of coming out as gay, and the youngest writer
is 16 years old. How did you choose the stories? Was there a guiding principle? Did you put it out to tender or did you contact people you know?

_Alice Pung_: How we did it was we put advertisements in all the major newspapers. We had a call for submissions and we received from about 170 to 185 submissions. For some of the chapters...for example, the chapter called ‘Tall Poppies: Inspirational Asian Australians’ I interviewed a lot of the people….But for the other chapters we put out a call for submissions. I didn’t have many criteria for Black Inc, but the most important one was I said to my publishers, can you please send me the pieces with the names blacked out because I wanted to judge the pieces on the story and not on the person who is recognisable or a name I could identify with.

It was Pung’s job to choose the articles and arrange them in thematic groupings. Use these groupings to think about how identity is shaped and a sense of belonging is achieved (or not). Pung is able to show us that the contributors understanding of themselves is constantly evolving and that identity can be a fluid state depending on understandings of both yourself and the cultures you bring with you, even if it is an unconscious adoption.

**The groupings**

**Strine**

“I didn’t see the point of speaking Chinese. We lived in Australia.” Amy Choi

This section concentrates on the role of language in establishing both our identity and where or to whom we belong. Language is important because it is the means through which we articulate who we are and negotiate cultural differences.

**DIY**

1. How do these stories examine the role of language? Make a table in which you list the various roles that language plays in the lives of the participants.
2. In what ways does language both limit and empower these individuals.
3. How does a lack of fluency in English (or another language) incite prejudice?

Pioneers

“The sum total of what I knew about Australia came to three things: it had an opera house, kangaroos and Australians spoke the dreaded English.” Simon Tong.

Each of the stories in Pioneers looks at the first members of the family to leave the homeland and journey to Australia. Each comes with differing hopes, dreams and reasons for their leaving their homeland. What they expected and what they have lost become major themes in the tales.

DIY

1. Do the second generation of migrants have an easier time than the first?
2. Why do the pioneers choose to come to Australia? Do you think that their reasons are always clear, even to them?
3. How do the pioneers’ lives change when they come to Australia?
4. What elements do they choose to bring with them when they migrate? And which do they reject? Why?
5. What tricks do the pioneers learn to assist them in belonging to Australian culture?

Battlers

“Right there was the divide between the old world and the new.” Hop Dac

Once immigrants arrive their battles are not over. There is still the challenge of finding work, making a living and supporting you and your family in a strange land. The tales of migrant efforts to survive and thrive, and what their children learn from these efforts form the core of this section.
DIY

1. Discuss the notions of humiliation, honour and the need to survive. Do you lower yourself if you work at menial tasks in order to help your family? What does this have to say about those who do not take “any job” in order to work?

2. What sense of resourcefulness does the text give you? What do you have to do to belong and thrive in a new land?

3. Make a list of the challenges faced in this section and the emotions they invoke in the participants. Why do they go on trying?

Mates

“I watched everything from the aluminium bench. It was far enough away from the kids to avoid their attention, but close enough to watch their activities.” Aditi Gouvernel

Without the normal support networks available to them, immigrants must establish new connections. Sometimes these are fraught with misunderstanding and intolerance and children mirror the behaviours and ignorance of their elders. Both sides have to overcome their preconceptions in order for friendships to flourish.

DIY

1. How important are friendships to these characters?

2. Different expectations of friends and enemies are revealed in these stories. What are they and how do they contribute to the character’s understandings of relationships with their peers?

The folks

“If ever there was someone I wanted to stab in the heart with a chopstick, it was my cousin David.” Vanessa Woods

For many immigrants Australia represents a land of hope and a desire for a better life for their children. This can often place unrealistic expectations on the children to succeed in order to vindicate their parent’s sacrifices. In this section the children
reflect on the ways in which their families helped form their identities and their sense of belonging.

**DIY**

1. For each of the characters map their struggle to balance family expectations and their personal goals. You could use a mind map or “T” chart to help organise this.
2. What burdens do the families pass on to their children? How do these affect who they become?

**The clan**

“The Sunday of the quarrel begins in a promising fashion. As often happens, there is a large gathering of family and friends.” Ken Chan

The ebbs and flows of emotion in an extended family affect all participants, regardless of how involved they actually are in the “conflict d’jour”. These stories tell of divorce, of religion, of gender roles and ancient conflicts and how the younger participants saw and understood them.

**DIY**

1. How do new circumstances affect the old ways?
2. What long term effects can there be from family conflict? On an individual? On the family?

**Legends**

“He is my dad. And I want to grow up to be just like him.” Chin Shen

All young people have role models, someone they look up to and wish to emulate. For those who have the added complication of living between one or more cultures adopting a role model can be both confusing and affirming. Shalini Akhil, for example, worships Wonder Woman, but happily accepts her Grandmother’s assertions about how the super-heroine would adapt if she was Indian.
DIY

1. What role do heroes play in myth-making and establishing identity.
2. Who in your culture is presented as a role model?

The hots

“Being Asian helped. People never suspected you could be a racial minority and gay. Of course you’re not gay: you’re foreign.” Benjamin Law

Becoming a sexual being is a time of confusion and upheaval from many people. This is sometimes compounded when family expectations and demands cannot be met. For the characters in these stories the issue of sexuality is one that transcends race.

DIY

1. How does sexuality inform identity? Is it a major or minor part of who we are?
2. What other factors help influence the identity of each of the narrators in this section?
3. What reactions do the narrators get (or expect to get) to their “coming out” announcements.

Un-Australian

“We were half-half, and for a long time we didn’t belong anywhere.” Joo-Inn Chew

This section looks at those who don’t quite fit in anywhere. It examines notions of belonging and acceptance and where/when/how these might be achieved through effort and time. Caught between two cultures, these narrators share with us their challenges and triumphs as they journey back and forth between the cultures that define them.

DIY

1. Make a list of key quotes from this chapter that demonstrate these challenges.
Tall poppies

These diverse stories tell of the Asian Australians who have achieved in their chosen fields. Alice Pung has spoken to each contributor and they reveal through the interviews the challenges they have faced in their lives.

DIY

1. Make a character profile of each of the participants, listing achievements, challenges, background, key quotes, etc.
2. How important will these people be as role models for future Asian Australians?
3. Can you think of, or do you know, any others who could have been added to this collection?
4. What is the meaning of Tall Poppies and how do Australians interpret the phrase?

Leaving home

“I am Australian. I am second generation Australian Vietnamese. My mum would stress that I am Vietnamese Australian. All my life I have had this mixed idea of who I am and what my role is.” Diana Nguyen

Being Asian in Australia is not the only challenge that these authors face. In this section they detail home lives that are less than perfect and subsequent personal choices that reflect this upbringing. Leaving home is a universal theme, and cultural impetus is only one reason that young people fly from the nest.

DIY

1. What can result from the situation where young people absorb the expectations and desires of “Australian” peers but parents stick to the “Old ways”? Outline the kind of consequences we are shown can occur in this section.
Homecoming

“I had fully acknowledged my Asian-ness and was proud of it.” Blossom Beeby

The rich tapestry of identity is often composed of a number of different threads. Family history, culture, personal choices, a sense of physical comfort and philosophical belonging all contribute to a final sense of who we are. Knowing where you have come from helps you to determine where you are going. In this section the participants “go home” and in the process make discoveries about where home really is and where they belong.

DIY

1. Why do you think that Pung chose “Homecoming” as the title for the final section of the book? What effect does this have on the reader?
2. What is “home”? Where do we find it and how does it shape us? Is it necessarily a physical place? What else can it be?
3. Why do some of the narrators feel the need to trace their ancestral roots? What do they get from this knowledge?
4. Some of the participants learn that they really are the product of two cultures, how is this shown in the text?

DIY - Research

1. Use the Publication Details from the back of Growing up Asian in Australia (p. 341/2) to help you find one of the original pieces of writing that were re-edited/re-written for inclusion in the anthology. Write a short review comparing the two pieces. You should be able to explain what changes/additions were made and why there were necessary.
2. Find out more about Alice Pung at http://alicepung.com/blog/.
3. Read the original introduction for Growing up Asian in Australia at http://alicepung.com/blog/.
4. Write your own introduction to Growing up Asian in Australia highlighting the issues of identity and belonging raised in the text. Why should other school study this text?

5. Read the interview with Alice Pung and Shalini Akhil at http://www.abc.net.au/rn/bookshow/stories/2008/2273571.htm and make notes about the issues of identity and belonging that are raised there. Share your notes with a classmate and see if you picked up on the same points.

6. Go to http://www.immi.gov.au/living-in-australia/values/statement/long/ and read the Australian Values Statement. It is compulsory for each applicant for Australian Citizenship to sign this statement. What do the ideas and values expressed in it say about the “official” Australian identity? Do you recognise this version of Australian identity in the society you see around you?

7. Try and find examples of these “official” values throughout one or more of the stories in Growing up Asian in Australia. Are they necessarily about being Australian or are there broader issues at play?

8. Write an imaginative piece in which one of the characters in one of the stories is attempting to gain Australian Citizenship. Have the character reflect on how the values are embodied in their established identities.

9. Write a piece of prose in which you reflect on the role of “Australian” values in your own life. How do these values contribute to your identity?

Sample practice assessment tasks

1. Create a conversation between two siblings who are looking back on their childhood. Focus the discussion on the importance of how each of them established their own identity in the face of the obstacles they faced.

2. Write a persuasive response to the following contention: It is dangerous to be different.

3. Speaking different languages is the most difficult barrier to overcome. Is this true?

4. Imagine you are one of your forebears arriving in Australia. Write a 500 word piece describing your emotions on leaving the “old country”.

Sample practice assessment tasks
5. Is there an artefact or piece of family lore that dates back to your family’s arrival in Australia? Why does the family value this item or story?

6. Write short piece to be published in a weekly magazine that reflects on the role you play in your family and how family expectations have affected you.

7. Design a new role-model / super-hero for the twenty-first century? What attributes must such a being have in order for young people to identify with him or her?