This is a timely book. Anxiety about the security of Australia’s borders has rarely been so widespread. But this collection of sixteen essays is mainly concerned with how Australian culture is challenged, threatened but also enhanced by the Asian presence here rather than with terrorist attacks or the arrival of asylum seekers in rickety boats. The other major theme is the creation of distinctive Asian–Australian identities. Two straws in the wind are a chapter that reflects on how the Australian media depicted the fall of Suharto and how the Asian press dealt with the rise of Hanson and One Nation. The issues covered include the reception of manga and anime, the significance of SBS’s embrace of lowbrow film and the dilemma of characterising the work of Asian–Australian artists like William Yang, but this is just a sample. This impressive panorama is not matched by interpretive insight or methodological rigour. Many essays are afflicted by an unreflective and uncritical use of postmodernist vocabulary and ideas.

One purpose of this book is to continue the battle against the depiction of Asians in Australia as outsiders/others (xvi). This sounds commendable. In the introduction, Ien Ang argues that both within and outside the academy Australians and Asians are now ‘thoroughly intertwined’ in many ways (xvi). One problem with this is the word ‘thoroughly’. The other is that if intertwinement is already complete then the battle against ‘otherness’ is over.

The essay by Allan and Carmen Luke is about attitudes to and practices of Asian language and culture learning and retention in the children of families where only one parent is Asian. Their empirically based study found that there were many kinds of resistance and barriers to bilingual competence within most families which was reinforced by the prevalence of the English language and white Australian mores in the public realm. In this case intertwinement was not thorough at all. But an interesting conclusion was that culture endures, both privately and publicly, even where Asian language use atrophies. In most of the essays, however, the concern about entwinement is that Australian culture and traditions are invariably dominant. Melissa Chiu argues that this occurs even in artistic exhibitions that purport to allow Asian–Australian voices to be heard. Good intentions are usurped by unconscious feelings of superiority. Similarly, Mandy Thomas criticises Australians who accept Asian pop cultures ‘only when they are mediated’ through the local traditions (215).

All of the authors understandably reject essentialising Australia/Asia and Australians/Asians as binary opposites. The hybridity that Dean Chan discerns in William Yang’s photography is grounded in Chinese and Australian sources. But Jacqueline Lo offers a stern warning against a ‘happy hybridity’ whose cultural merging is too painless and simple. It seems that we have to suffer to achieve authenticity in our cross-cultural production. This gets close to the nub of the problem with most of the essays. They want to both defend difference and reinforce the barriers that are necessary for its protection yet simultaneously applaud the creativity of multiculturalism. The key to understanding this contradiction is the perception that in the battle of ideas, images and arguments the Anglos usually prevail. A more fruitful and enlightening way of looking at these issues is the Gadamerian hermeneutic approach. Understanding always involves the merging of the horizons of the interpreter and of the thing understood whether it is a text, painting, movie or whatever. There must be mediation in every act of understanding and the result will be largely determined by the horizon of the interpreter. Pluralism and tolerance are solid principles of Australia’s political culture that help sustain multiculturalism against the recent attacks. They have also provided bridges between Anglo and Asian in this country.

On the whole the authors are reluctant to acknowledge the real gains of Asians and for Australia in this country’s multicultural experiment. A useful antidote to the pessimism of this book is Miriam Dixson’s theoretically sophisticated and historically informed The Imaginary Australian. But I suspect that the contributors to Alter/Asians would not accept the argument that the Western institutional framework has long been the foundation for cultural achievement and toleration. The urge to push further with cross-cultural encounters, tolerance and appreciation is understandable and appropriate. But where does it all end? Are absolute tolerance, complete agreement and eternal peace realistic goals? Utopias are precious even if, by definition, they exist
nowhere. Plato showed in *The Republic* that political utopias cannot be realised. The important thing is to keep moving, thinking and striving for our impossible goals.

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One of the startling things about the University of Melbourne is its self-obsession. The University has an almost mediaeval sense of self-containment and self-fulfillment and it is quite possible to undertake a degree there, pass from student activist to academic and end up dean. The University even possesses its own history unit, which is surprisingly active. These books add to the ‘mystique of Melbourne’ by taking its past as their topic; surely no other Australian university has produced so many books about itself.

Having declaimed against Melbourne’s narcissistic tendencies I should explain that these books are collections of the work of emerging historians deliberately writing history for publication. Their exploitation of the University of Melbourne’s archives and their investigations of topics derived from their student experience is a display of pragmatism rather than parochialism. The decision to allow the easily available University sources to direct the overall subject of the books was wise. Although the skill displayed in putting together the narratives contained in these books tends to disguise the range of primary sources used, a glance at the footnotes for each piece reveals hours spent in the archive and crouched over microfilm. The University of Melbourne’s archivists must have been delighted at this flurry of activity.

The subjects investigated by these authors vary widely. There are a number of well-written pieces of women’s history contained within the collection. Women’s early involvement within the University receives attention and the University’s first woman graduate, Bella Guérin, MA, is accorded an article of her own. These pieces are notable because they avoid anachronism. Their authors are aware of the danger of misunderstanding historical figures by applying inappropriate titles, a point well-made by Rebecca Wilson in her article about Dame Ada Norris. Interesting women are retrieved and the role of women at the University of Melbourne receives examination. These books are evidently too brief to contain the definitive history of women at the University, but they do contain useful portions of that history.

Other characters are also retrieved from the recent past. Professor Maurice David Goldman emerges as a sympathetic character and a talented academic. By examining his contribution to both the University of Melbourne and Melbourne’s Jewish community Georgina Meyer exposes the outside forces acting on the University, contradicting any perceived imperviousness of the University of Melbourne to world events. During the 1930s and 1940s the University of Melbourne gained a number of Jewish academics forced to flee the war in Europe. The University’s debt to these refugees can be seen as a theme running through these books – Leonhard Adam and Frank Knopfelmacher also have their considerable contributions to the University explored.

Jeanette Krongold, who explores his personal collisions with both fascism and communism in his native Czechoslovakia, treats Knopfelmacher sympathetically. Her skill in

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