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Author(s)	Angelia Poon
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The “swaying sense of things”: Boey Kim Cheng and the Poetics of Imagined Transnational Space, Travel, and Movement

Angelia Poon

National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University

In his poem, “Kelong”, Singapore-born poet Boey Kim Cheng describes a childhood weekend spent with his father watching fishermen at work on a *kelong*—an offshore structure built standing over the sea on stilts and part of a traditional method of fishing common in parts of Southeast Asia. In his mind’s eye and memory, the *kelong* with its “aerial walkways” (19) is a “floating world of water and air” (18); it is a liminal structure neither fully of the land or of water that metaphorically echoes the nature of memory as a series of intensely remembered, suspended moments in time.¹ To walk and orientate himself in this floating world, Boey’s persona notes how his young boy’s feet had to get used to the “swaying sense of things” (19). This phrase strikes me as a particularly apt way of capturing Boey’s self-conscious pre-occupation with travel and movement in his poetry. From his first collection *Somewhere-Bound*, published twenty years ago now, to his more recent collection of new and selected poems, *After the Fire*, Boey has wrestled with the idea of travel as an inevitable part of poetic being and negotiated the multiple meanings of place as geographical location, private memory, personal association, and past fragment. Ranging far and wide, across continents and national boundaries, the material act of journeying provides for Boey an occasion for poetry. At the same time, and more crucially, an ambulatory mode of signification allows him to *figure* as well as to *figure out* the complexities of the craft of poetry-writing itself. While travel and poetry have also proven to be a productive and creative association for many of the younger generation of cosmopolitan Singapore poets like Yong Shu Hoong, Toh Hsien Min, Paul Tan, and Felix Cheong (to name a few), it is Boey who has most consistently, persistently and strikingly sought to explore and probe the different and multiple forms of travel—its different registers—and to use the particular spatiotemporality afforded by travel and motion to finesse

¹ All page numbers for Boey’s poems cited in this paper refer to his collection, *After the Fire*.

the interplay between identity, memory, and physical and psychic location.²

In ironic keeping with travel as a border-crossing activity, Boey's work is resistant to readings through critical frameworks that might pigeonhole his work too neatly within conventionally understood postcolonial or national categories. His poetry hardly exemplifies, for example, the concept of hybridity that scholars like Jahan Ramazani in *The Hybrid Muse: Postcolonial Poetry in English* see as a defining characteristic of a postcolonial poetry concerned with the historical, cultural and linguistic legacies of colonialism syncretically and synergistically mixed with other native cultural traditions. Rajeev Patke has commented on the inevitable expiry date of the "postcolonial" label, noting how it refers to a period of transition and is "like a name that is meant to become a misnomer, or a ladder that will be drawn up when the climbing is done" (239). This certainly appears to be the case with Boey Kim Cheng. Born in 1965, the year of Singapore's political independence, Boey's formative years were spent in the fast-industrializing and modernizing phase of the island-nation's history where the institutionalization of English as a first language was part and parcel of a blueprint for economic success. Concerns about excessive materialism and over-development as well as the erasure of history through the displacement of peoples and the alteration of the physical landscape as captured in poems like "The Old-Timers" (169-71), "The Planners" (173) and "Placenames" (21), for example, would arguably have registered more urgently than questions about the use of the colonizer's language for poetic expression. Despite his migration to Australia in 1997, Boey is often claimed as a Singapore poet given the fact that he writes and continues to write about the island nation and all his four books of poetry were published in Singapore.³ While Boey and his poetry-writing contemporaries born after 1965 evince little interest in any poetics of the nation associatively understood in terms of nation-building—a term that has since lost much of the political and cultural cachet it once had when it was the natural, fervently embraced corollary of newly-minted nations—they continue to allow a national consciousness to animate their work often in explicit or implicit contention with state-created culture, official history, and doxological versions of Singapore.⁴ Boey, for example, has registered in numerous

² Robbie Goh identifies two phases in the history of Singapore Anglophone poetry from independence in 1965 with earlier poets engaged in the cultural work of an "emergent nationalism" and younger poets in the late 1980s and 1990s showing a more cosmopolitan and individualistic sensibility in their work.

³ Boey published his most recent collection of poems consisting of revised and new poems, *After the Fire*, in 2006 with firstfruits, an independent and local press that has brought out the work of many of the younger contemporary poets in Singapore. His collection of essays, *Between Stations*, however, was published in Australia in 2009. Both *After the Fire* and *Between Stations* represent Boey's work published after his move to Australia. They may be said to be more self-consciously directed at an international audience, including of course Singaporean and Australian readers.

⁴ Some examples include Alvin Pang's "Upgrading" (14-15), Paul Tan's "August 9th" (38), Daren Shiau's "How to Fly the Singapore Flag" (20), and Alfian Sa'at's "Singapore You Are Not My Country" (37-41).

travel poems how Singapore, despite its affluence and progress, is the uninspiring and dreaded place of work and daily living.

Yet in so far as many contemporary Singapore poets continue to stake out a more publically-oriented stance on the nation and formally articulate a critique on some assumption of national representativeness, it is clear that, on balance, Boey is uninterested in commentary on the nation with a self-consciously public voice, however qualified. While many postcolonial and/or self-consciously national poets have used the act of voyaging or displacement in a foreign place as a way of apprehending the mother country and home community anew, Boey's poems on travel and movement conjure up transnational spaces and liminal time that elude attempts to recuperate them for discussion solely in terms of an overriding national consciousness or totalizing Singaporeanness. Something of this resistance to strictures national or otherwise may be gleaned from the titles of his four poetry collections which defy the confining specificities of place and time: *Somewhere-Bound*, *Another Place*, *Days of No Name*, and *After the Fire*. These are deliberately vague, enigmatic-sounding titles that disrupt the fettering determinates of any specific time-space nexus, gesturing provocatively towards imaginative possibilities and the freedom from set meanings that accompany the unknown, and the ill-defined. Thus the national alone may not be the most powerful or enabling optic with which to view many of Boey's early poems which focus on travel and movement, as well as his more recently-published ones that clearly show a preoccupation with a new thematic of migrancy and memory. His latest work, *Between Stations*, a collection of travel essays and autobiographical reminiscences published in 2009, further serves to confirm the significance of these issues for him as a poet.

In this paper then, with reference to selected poems from his oeuvre, I want to examine the way notions of travel and movement are appropriated as part of Boey's vision of the "swaying sense of things" and the ways in which the traveling self is fashioned as the private lyric poet self-consciously struggling with the demands of his vocation. In his latest poems published more than ten years after his third collection, travel is cathected in specific relation to the situation of an immigrant in a new country trying to connect past and present time-place, and link memories of the past with a legacy for the future. I am in this respect less interested here in how Boey's poems are *about* travel as in how the material act of travel imaginatively represented with its attendant processes, consequences, and vocabulary is used to provide a metatextual commentary on the act of writing. There is, in other words, a turning away from the "outside" or from referentiality into the inside and into self-reflexiveness about the very conditions of poetic existence and the workings of poetry. E. Warwick Slinn, building on Paul de Man's notion of "referential aberration" (de Man 10)—the figural ambiguity of language that answers not to logic and is central to poetry and indeed literature itself—explains that in poetry

“referentiality” can become “reflexive, enacting the narrative folding back which de Man labels allegorical, a second-order reference where the poem refers to its own processes” (59). Instrumental to the self-reflexivity of Boey’s poetics of travel is his forging of, first, a chronotope of travel time and culturally-other places in his early poems and then later an individualized and personal chronotope of memory and imagined space to make sense of selves, roots and family dispersed by travel and death.⁵ In addition, Boey’s travel poetry also lends itself to notions of the transnational. As an analytical tool and working concept, a critical and historically situated transnationalism admits the continuing constitutive significance of the nation and the need to negotiate with on-going recuperations of the national episteme even as communicational circuits and traveling subjects across multiple national borders continue to proliferate.⁶ In Boey’s case, I argue that his travel poetry deliberately evokes a transnationalism, first in his attempts to elude the nation and its official culture in search of alternatives through travel and then as a migrant responding to past ties and present connections brought about by his particular trajectory of movement between the specific historic and material sites of Singapore and Australia. While the bulk of this article focuses on Boey’s poetry, I will end by turning to *Between Stations* which, as his first prose offering, significantly extends Boey’s preoccupation with the transnational while also deepening the confessional tone and enhancing the performance of his poet persona.

Boey’s travels as depicted in his poetry span the globe: he writes, for example, about traveling to such diverse and far-flung destinations as India, Thailand, various parts of America (San Francisco, New York, Boston, Iowa), Germany, and Australia. In these poems, Boey combines an emotional expressiveness and interiority typical of lyric poetry with narrative elements and mimetic detail about the journeying process and specific places visited. Through the itinerant poet-persona, we typically confront a foreign scene, a moment of transit, or a cultural encounter as it is mediated by the poet-speaker’s powers of observation, consciousness, and/or memory. Such travel poetry has a long literary tradition of course with Wordsworth’s descriptive lyric “Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey” (1798) famously illustrating the representational complexities and possibilities of such poetic utterance.

In a number of Boey’s travel poems, the poet-speaker is figured specifically as a pilgrim as he uses one of the oldest forms of travel to draw on time-honored associations of the poet as a vatic seer on a

⁵ The notion of the chronotope is borrowed from Mikhail Bakhtin who describes it literally as “time space”: “it is the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” (84). Primarily concerned with the chronotope in relation to the novel form, Bakhtin’s discussion does nevertheless have salience for other literary forms as well. He argues that “[i]t is precisely the chronotope that provides the ground essential for the showing-forth, the representability of events” (250).

⁶ See for example, Ng and Holden, “Introduction”, 1-13.

spiritual quest, one for whom the process of journeying might confer insight, unique experience, and hence, relatedly, poetic authority. Yet, often, Boey invokes this figure only to subvert it so that far from radiating spiritual certainty or unshakeable faith in self-renovation, Boey's poems often reveal instead an unsure pilgrim/ poet-speaker, unmoored from his vocation and craft by what he sees. Instead of a consolidation of the seeing and traveling self over and against racial, cultural, or just differently-situated "others", the persona finds that travel "others" him. In two poems about traveling in India, for example—"The Howrah Station" and "Sudder Street, Calcutta" in the collection, *Another Place*—the poet-speaker finds himself in a land of shocking poverty. He expresses the difficulty of writing and creating amidst the indisputable signs of human deprivation. There is considerable irony here as the poet-speaker mocks himself as the feckless pilgrim discombobulated by the sight of suffering bodies "littering with travail" (136) the path before him like some sort of grotesque obstacle course. The poet-speaker compares himself to "an adroit footballer" who has to "dribble" his "laundered self" (136) past destitute souls begging for help. The image, formed by the superimposition of incongruous contexts and underlined by self-mockery at the poet-speaker's own fears and sense of self-preservation, would be comic if it were not so tragic. There is no opportunity for an elevation into enlightenment through suffering here on this pilgrimage, only uneasy and bathetic embarrassment. Wrenched from any sense of operational equilibrium with regard to his perceived useless vocation, he asks rhetorically, "But who eats poetry?" (136) Similarly, in "Sudder Street, Calcutta," the unfolding images of "deformity and need" (138) confound the poet-speaker who, like an anthropologist thrown into epistemological and ontological confusion by a totally alien society and sign system, must struggle to devise a language of representation from scratch:

I come from a race that has no word for despair,
its culture purged of poverty's germs, its language
a propaganda of faith in absolute health.
I even doubt my ABC. (138)

The dilemma—simultaneously linguistic, cultural, existential—can be posed but not resolved and the poem ends as best it can on a note of provisional and necessarily short-lived solidarity: "But tonight let me take my place/ among the forlorn angels of Sudder Street" (139).

In the poem "Déjà vu", Boey further undercuts the pilgrimage as a teleological form of travel, its structure paralleling an accumulatively developmental notion of the self and a way of thinking that privileges truth and final meaning. "Suddenly the quest for whatever grinds/ to a halt" as "[a] masterstroke of oversight", we are told, has momentarily scuppered plans of onward travel and "landed" the poet-speaker "in the middle of nowhere, an interim/ of lost connections, an unplanned

pause” (150). If, as we’ve seen above, foreign sights can shock the transnational traveler into self-doubt, here the unexpected liminal moments of travel can prove both destabilizing yet uncannily familiar. The poet-speaker describes a “[stumbling] into déjà vu” “into the embrace of places and people/ from many births and deaths ago,/ into the spirit’s home” (151). The self is not so much displaced but dispersed by this “suspension of time and space” (150); the poet-speaker’s reflection on his situation suddenly enlarges into an insight about cosmic time as the feeling of déjà vu ushers in a different dimension, summoning the idea of reincarnation, itself rather befittingly a form of spiritual travel and transmutation. Reincarnation, an idea underlined in the poem by the persona’s gently comic encounter with the stray dog that seems sufficiently apprised of his situation to view him “with piteous recognition”, enables this interstitial moment to be subsumed into a larger temporal chain of such (cyclical) moments and be thus given provisional meaning. The moment, however, may also be read in allegorical terms, simultaneously alluding to the process of poetry-writing as one that seeks to create meaning through a colligation of the unexpected and the familiar.

Despite the allure of linearity and the hope of arrival that travel seems to offer, the provisionality of meaning is all there is. It is but a temporary equilibrium, the “pause/ on the path” (“Bodhgaya” 49), which also recalls Robert Frost’s definition of poetry as “a momentary stay against confusion” (qtd. in Guimond 1800). Thus in “Varanasi Dawn”, Boey writes:

No need of words here, apart
 from the slow syllables of the dipping oars
 staying us in the middle
 of the river, of our lives. The quiet glow
 on the water tells us we are home,
 in a place where the world is home. (142)

The careful balance of the lines, symmetrically weighted with repetition, constructs an exquisite equipoise as journey and life, home and world, local and global are rendered isomorphically. This then represents the *raison d’être* of art, “the point of stillness/ mature art directs us to” (“Past Midnight” 168). This moment is also registered as transitory, however—a fragile moment that quickly dissipates as a result of doubts and the return to the norms of non-traveling life. Here and elsewhere there is a provisional quality about Boey’s poems of travel; the provisional coalescence of events, experience, and being in travel has a metatextual dimension, paralleling as it does the felicitous coalescence of words in poetry to form meaning. This provisionality is picked up again in the poems from *Days of No Name* where the poet-speaker finds himself amidst an international cast of like-minded poets and artists he meets at a workshop and a writing seminar.⁷ These “days

⁷ Boey attended the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa in 1994.

of no name” represent, to use a term from James Clifford, a kind of “dwelling-in-travel” (36). The poet-speaker celebrates his new-found camaraderie with this band of fellow travelers, chronicling life within the ever fluid formations of ad hoc communities and families resulting from travel and temporary displacement, while always knowing that departure and separation is never far away. The last meal, the last cigarette, and the last night have heightened significance since they mark the last gasp before return to certain dearth of inspiration. Thus he writes in “Iowa Cooking Lessons”:

And I will stack
the poems away like these utensils, and brace
the mind for famine, for a return
to the country of money and work. (79)

Boey connects the indispensable nature of travel to the creative process in poems like “Letter to His Brother,” “Letter to His Mother,” and “Letter to Himself” where he fashions—especially ironic of course in the third poem—invisible, mute and silent auditors to his argument. Despite their confessional tone, the poems are in effect clearly performative, enacting rather than just reflecting the poet-speaker’s coming into being as a poet. In “Letter to His Brother” the tension between a rooted identity that fits in with the national and a more peripetatic cosmopolitan one that suits the poetic sensibility is brought to the fore as the poet-speaker addresses a brother in Singapore who has stuck to a more conventional route in life, acquiring in the process “A job, wife and home/ For trophies” (161). In contrast to his clearly-located brother whose security and achievements he views rather uncharitably as rewards from a state in exchange for implied compliance, the poet-speaker’s voice appears “free”, in a transnational space unhampered by the requirements and responsibilities of place. Nevertheless, the decision to eschew his brother’s tried and tested path, to run “cross-country” rather than “clock the track” (161), has not been made lightly. Travel can offer a heady, unadulterated sense of liberation from familiar physical and cognitive confines, and unleash a torrent of words. Yet this is almost immediately contradicted by other moments where travel leaves one at a loss for words. The poet-traveler strains for a vocabulary to capture what he sees and feels and there is frequently a sense of pushing against boundaries, and of wanting to go beyond: beyond maps, beyond poetry, beyond words. In so far as the world seen in travel is a text, it often remains hermeneutically opaque, impervious to scrutiny. There is no hope of salvation in the form of unified or coherent meaning as the persona discloses:

The truth is
such beauty leaves me cold.
Like churches with shut gates.
It is a text I cannot read, a score
I cannot translate into music. (161)

The poet-speaker travels only because he knows that he cannot do otherwise. The desire to be on the move is very much an inexplicable curse or a form of travail—the word from which ‘travel’ is derived (Wallace 18-19)—that one is unconsciously and haplessly forced to seek. It is also a decision easily ridiculed in the context of what a life should be as the poet-speaker suggests when he sardonically describes his “periods of sojourn/ in inferno, purgatory and paradise” in anti-heroic and anti-epic language as a “three in one package” (161), that familiar modern reference to the efficient bundling of goods and services. The “letter” ends with a wish for his brother: “Hope you keep the flag flying at home” (163). It is a last sly and bemused dig at his brother, the poster-child for the model citizen-subject of the nation. In “Letter to Himself”, the tension between the two brothers is internalized in a splitting of the poet-speaker’s self. Less jokey now and grimmer in mood, the poet-speaker describes watching himself return to Singapore alienated. Both parts of him fit into an uneasy whole: the more careful watchful self is powerless to stop the traveler from leaving again, being unable to offer anything firm by way of advice or the path to take, only “perhaps proposals/ in uncertain terms,/ for ways of acceptance,/ ways for staying on, or going further” (167).

In his new poems in *After the Fire*, the poet-speaker’s position as an immigrant in a new country (Australia) means that the preoccupation with travel is now inflected by different concerns about memorializing family members and a past life left behind, as well as choosing a legacy for the future. He has to negotiate the consequences of travel, the far-reaching consequences of a migratory journey, rather than the process and more immediate experience of traveling itself. In his elegiac poems about his father and his grandmother written from a point of distance that migration and death jointly confer, Boey uses the images and physical symbols of travel as well as the associated lexicon of landscape and terrain to give shape to memory and inchoate absence. The traveler’s gaze of inquiry in this case is directed to the past rather than outwardly to geographically removed cultures and scenes. Paying tribute to his grandmother in the poem “Her Hands”, for example, Boey renders his grandmother’s body in topographical terms. Thus her body becomes a rich and variegated terrain which the persona recalls traversing lovingly and fondly as a child, following an idiosyncratic and private itinerary,

Hands that I explored,
 each craggy knuckle and crevice
 travelled along as I lay beside her
 my five-year-old body, my hand
 roaming her slumbering body
 on the straw mat, riding the crest
 and dip of the gentle mountain,
 walking the wrinkled incline of her arms,
 tugging the slack flesh at the elbows, reading
 the ravines of the callused palms, the weave and cut
 of her toil-and-strife-hewn life,
 on her mottled skin a broken history
 to be gleaned. (22)

The persona imputes to his younger self an explorer's interest in his grandmother's body which manifests the scars of old age and a hard life of toil. Overdetermined as a sign, at once icon, index, and symbol in relation to her life, her body is thus both a varied landscape embodying her life as well as serving as a map for it; it is a life that the young persona has no immediate access to and about which he must read and "glean" information. In rendering his grandmother's body thus, the persona constructs a distinctive and highly personal spatiotemporal order: the "lost country" of time where he can magically awake to find his grandmother's jade bangle transformed into the "river of emerald dream" (25).

Again working at the nexus of space and time as part of a process of poetic memorialization, Boey imagines his father, in the poem "Placenames", as a series of places and street names long gone or altered beyond recognition in Singapore. In his old age, his father, the persona notes, chants the names of places he has known:

as if piecing together the alleys,
the streets and neighbourhood
of his body, reassembling
the ruined city
of his vanished self (21)

It is as if, at the end of life as a journey, the individual subject ceases to be a traveler and becomes place itself. The act of naming in this context is a paradoxical one, at once an act of creation in the performative sense, as well as an act of mourning and a forewarning of death. The effect of conceiving the self as a city in this case also works to suggest that this is a place which no traveler can reach or explore. The metaphor emphasizes not only the finality of death but the emotional distance between father and son. Yet the business of chanting place names—like prayers intoned as part of a funeral rite—is a gesture of memorialization for his father that serves at the same time as the poet-speaker's legacy. Thus he says:

and I will take over the chant:
Raffles Place, Change Alley,
calling the dead places
and my father home. (21)

The complexity of Boey's troping of travel and movement is further evident in his weaving of geographical spatiality and intergenerational links in the poems, "Plum Blossom or Quong Tart at the QVB" and "Stamp Collecting". Boey invokes a diasporic consciousness in the first poem as he extrapolates from the simple act of his daughter's learning to write her Chinese name the routes of transnational migratory travel that could have led to this moment. Now rooted along with his family in Australia, "the new country" ("Her Hands" 25), he laments the fact that he can only bequeath by way of a family tree to

his daughter “the withered branch that is/ her dead grandfather” (33). There is “[s]o little history/ to go on” (33). Instead of history, however, other imaginative connections may be forged and it is in this way that the poet serves as a translator as he embeds his own particular journey within a larger history of migratory travel. Thus the poet-speaker imagines how he may be descended from the same clan in China as Quong Tart, the legendary Chinese immigrant pioneer who made good in Australia. “Perhaps Great-grandfather sallied forth/ with Quong Tart on the same junk,/ and disembarked in Malaya, while Quong Tart/ continued south” (34). The result of this difference in travel plans, which could so easily have been otherwise, is for future generations a rhizomatic model of connection and transnational identity—anti-genealogical in nature—which will replace the stunted family tree.⁸ This is seen in the poem’s climactic staging of the crucial moment of recognition when the persona’s daughter realizes that the ideogram or Chinese character “Mei” that is her name belongs as well to Quong Tart’s name. The moment effectively underscores what Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari note about the difference between trees and rhizomes as structures: “The tree is filiation, but the rhizome is alliance, uniquely alliance. The tree imposes the verb ‘to be,’ but the fabric of the rhizome is the conjunction, “and...and...and...” (27). The poem celebrates a sense of imaginative and creative possibility as Boey recognizes how past travel and transnational migration emerge in the present as links forged by name and language across time and space. The poem registers this awareness symbolically in its focus on different kinds of movement including the act of writing. Thus, for example, the persona draws attention to his daughter’s labored writing strokes as she learns to write her name in Chinese, strokes which seem to resonate in an encapsulated and intensified fashion with the long-distance migratory movement of her ancestors and forebears. When his daughter points out the character “Mei” below the portrait of Quong Tart, Boey writes how “the tap of the finger” is “wiring us, connecting us/in a tremble of recognition” (35). Standing for the poetic imagination, we see how the finger and the pen are instruments that serve to conjugate past and present/presence.

As “Plum Blossom or Quong Tart at the QVB” shows, Boey is in his latest poems interested in the way travel may be embodied and translated, hence the recurrent images of compression where bodies, objects, and gestures are re-made symbolically to carry the weight of distances traveled. This may be seen as well in the poem “Stamp Collecting”. Here, the poet describes how looking through a stamp album with his daughter, he is reminded of his early exultant sense of the world, “of a time when the world arrived/ in a philatelic queue”. Of his stamp album, the persona notes:

⁸ Deleuze and Guattari privilege the rhizomatic over the root-tree system as a model of thought. The rhizome, they contend, is “an antigenealogy” (23); it is open and multiple, non-hierarchical and made up of lines rather than points.

Those were my first travels,
transported on those serrated tokens
beyond the one-room flat
in Geylang Bahru⁹
to the origins of those couriers. (38)

Some of the stamps belong to nations that no longer exist or that have re-emerged as new entities with new names. But drawing upon the metaphorical and metonymic potency of stamps, the persona effectively bequeaths his daughter the world when he bequeaths her his incomplete boyhood stamp album. The stamp as an image of condensation and compression reinforces the power of language to alter and configure time and space and one is reminded of how, in John Donne's poem "The Sun Rising", "the world's contracted thus" and the globe is shrunk to a room. Poetry concentrates while history disperses and scatters. Like stamp collecting as an act of reassemblage, poetry is a form of world-making.

The centrality of travel as concept and trope to ponder the related dilemmas of home and away, old and new attachments, and past and present selves, surfaces again with much urgency and poignancy in the elegantly-written essays which comprise Boey's *Between Stations*. In this seamless blend of travel narrative and memoir, Boey ruminates upon his numerous journeys to a myriad of places while also traveling back in time and memory to his childhood to contemplate his relationship with both his father and a lost Singapore in a complex gesture of mourning and memorialization. The essays underscore how travel, as Shirley Lim has noted in her review of the book, is for Boey "a condition, the condition of an afflicted spirit, as well as its hoped-for salvation" (Lim unpag.). They provide the "back story" for many of his poems which, from this particular perspective, loom into view as crystallized distillations of intense experience and emotion. All the poems about his father, for example, acquire more resonance as Boey discloses to the reader facets about his father's troubled life: his debts, his violence, and his manic depression. There is a raw quality about the moving prose less easily found in the polished equanimity of poetry. Within the "looser" parameters of the lengthier essay form, Boey can also afford to excavate more of the past in an allusive, ruminative, and exploratory manner. In this way, the literary nature of his prose style notwithstanding, Boey also assumes the mantle of a historian whose project is one of documentation. Thus, not only is he interested in probing the crevices of his childhood and the impact of his often absent father on his life, using old family snapshots that provide visual immediacy and suggest unplumbed depths of sadness, he also maps a past Singapore now altered beyond recognition by the wrecking ball of

⁹⁹ To a Singaporean reader, the mention of "Geylang Bahru" is immediately striking for its specificity of location, for its "localness" and local meaning as it conjures up images of the heartland, that overdetermined space of public housing in the cultural imaginary.

urban renewal and redevelopment. He adopts a Proustian attitude towards the past in the way he evokes the senses, especially that of smell, in order to remember more keenly. This is seen most strikingly in the essay about Change Alley, a place that signified to Boey as a child “the entrance and threshold to other worlds” (132). The essay itself is many things: an occasion for nostalgia, a detailed documenting of a geographical sliver of old Singapore, an attempt to come to terms with his father, an account of his artistic awakening, and as the end of the essay suggests, an opportunity to undo (or re-do) the past. In this and other essays, Boey shows how Singapore has become another country altogether, thus giving the term “transnational” a twist by ironically rendering the Singaporean reader unmoored and “transnational” without her even leaving the country.

The definitive physical act of leaving Singapore and settling in Australia leads to Boey occupying liminal and shifting spaces which he variously characterizes as a state figuratively akin to the overlapping portion of a Venn diagram (305) and as a state of being “between stations”. He writes of how in that moment between stations “you dwell in an autonomous state, a resting place between memory and imagination, between forgetting and remembering, between home and home” (313). The use of the second person pronoun interpellates the reader as a fellow traveler as Boey offers the nebulous and ill-defined space of liminality as a productive one of possibility and equilibrium. In this position/ moment, like the “swaying sense of things” (19), even landscape is fluid as he notes in the essay “Place of Many Winds” how in his mind’s eye, the physical reality of the Australian geography he sees merges with a remembered scene from the past: “Then the trail debouches into the stretch of water, and I am in both places at once, something trembles into focus, Berowra Creek joining the waters of the Peirce and MacRitchie reserves in Singapore” (294). Significantly too, the space between stations is both the hospitable and inevitable space for the writer and poet who “seek[s] a possible dwelling place between memory and imagination, fact and fiction” (306).

As his prose confirms, Boey Kim Cheng shows how poetry as an aesthetic form embodies and crystallizes particular configurations of time and space in response to transnational travel while re-imagining connections and affiliations. It is poetry created in and through travel that ultimately allows Boey to dissolve the boundary between poem and external world, language and referent, thus re-vivifying questions about the very means of meaning-making.

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