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Author(s)	Angelia Poon
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Postcolonial and Cosmopolitan: Teaching Anglophone Singapore Literature for Nation and World

In the recently revised *Literature in English Syllabus* for secondary schools issued by the Ministry of Education in Singapore, four desired student outcomes in the study of Literature are explicitly stated. Underpinned by broader ethical, aesthetic and intellectual aims, the stipulated outcomes involve cultivating the nation's students to be the following: Empathetic and Global Thinkers, Critical Readers, Creative Meaning-makers and Convincing Communicators (Ministry of Education, 2019, p.6). The last three desired student outcomes have arguably been around in some shape or form in previous syllabi (see Loh, 2013; Palaniappan, 2013). To varying extents of course, Literature teachers in Singapore have long sought to teach critical close reading in their lessons, encouraged forms of creative expression in responding to literary texts, and emphasized the need for engaged, persuasive and informed written responses. Some variant of the first desired outcome has traditionally been understood to mean that Literature has universal appeal and applicability. Historically, such universalism has often proven false to nations that were former colonies, serving instead as a cover for imperialism, and leading readers to a particular, namely Eurocentric and hegemonic Western, view of the world. So what *does* it mean to be an empathetic and global thinker today

given the specific exigencies of the moment and recent historical developments that include but are certainly not limited to the prevalence of populist politics, anti-immigrant sentiment, and xenophobia?

Cultivating empathetic and global thinkers almost inevitably invites consideration of cosmopolitanism as an ideal. The emphasis on empathy reflects a familiar even conventional understanding of literature's ability to spur imaginative identification with others near and far; at the same time, it also underscores the importance of affect and emotional engagement when it comes to the cosmopolitan imaginary and global 'thinking'. Much has been written about cosmopolitanism and how in the new millennium it seems an especially urgent and ethical human goal to have in order to combat conflict in all its guises as well as to help heal deep social, cultural, and moral divisions plaguing the world. From the term "kosmopolitēs" by Diogenes the Cynic in ancient Greece, to be a cosmopolitan is often glossed as being a "citizen of the world". It carries within it a tension between detachment from the particular and an avowed sense of belonging to a larger collective. Proclaiming one's self a citizen of the world has been used as a rallying cry against provincialism and narrowness. Conversely, the term has also historically been criticized as elitist, associated with a blasé sense of detachment and an often apolitical and consumerist world view. Reconciling this tension has

been a key goal for many scholars. Perhaps the most well-known attempt lies with the Ghanaian-American philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah's idea of "rooted cosmopolitanism". In Appiah's view, a "cosmopolitan patriot" exhibits rooted cosmopolitanism by being "attached to a home of his or her own...but [also] taking pleasure from the presence of other, different places that are home to other, different people" (91).

Another approach to accommodating these two opposing tensions has been to acknowledge the presence of competing versions of cosmopolitanism, to recognize in short a cosmopolitics involving ideological differences that one needs to confront and negotiate. From this perspective, scholars have sought to insist on the presence of multiple cosmopolitanisms such as a vernacular cosmopolitanism, a cosmopolitanism from below, or a cosmopolitanism of the poor. Anthropologist and historian James Clifford, for example, used the term "discrepant cosmopolitanism" (Cheah & Robbins, 1998, p.365) to remind us of different types of travelers including the many porters and servants who have historically accompanied imperial entourage and so-called heroic explorers. In this way, cosmopolitanism is not just the province of the privileged but a more inclusive term that allows for the experiences of the migrant worker and the refugee, for example. In their most recent edited book tellingly entitled *Cosmopolitanisms*, Bruce Robbins

and Paulo Lemos Horta note how a “plural, descriptive understanding” (2017, p.3) of cosmopolitanism has taken root in contemporary thought through more empirically-inflected scholarship in the fields of the social sciences, history and cultural studies. The plurality of cosmopolitanism is also apparent once we complicate the term’s conventionally-conceived Western and largely secular genealogy from the Greeks through the European Enlightenment by considering the histories of Christianity, Islam and Judaism as world religions with their stories of spread, contact with other cultures, conflict and/ or conversion.

At the same time though, Robbins and Horta also see the need to consider cosmopolitanism in a “normative singular” (2017, p.1) form. They write, “As it is pluralized and democratized, becoming a larger part of the status quo, cosmopolitanism can less comfortably serve as a criterion by which the status quo is judged” (2017, p.3). This is a good point, one especially pertinent to the multi-faceted domain of education, schooling and teaching where cosmopolitanism is perhaps most meaningful as a “strenuous aspiration” (Robbins & Horta, 2017, p.16). The force of cosmopolitanism as a singular idea embodying a normative idealism is apparent in a chapter of *Cosmopolitanisms* contributed by legal scholar Jeremy Waldron who points to how universities, science, and the law have a kind of institutional authority and moral prestige based on a long history of universalism

and sense of community and consensus that often exceed the specific sociopolitical context of location and the local. Thus one could think of scientists, for example, familiar with each other's work and able to speak with certainty about a common and shared body of knowledge and fact. Their existence reflects a cosmopolitan notion of community, "a civilization-wide community taken for granted among humans working together in their ordinary lives in the pursuit of knowledge" (Waldron, 2017, p.234). In showing how cosmopolitanism is interwoven into the ordinary life of many, Waldron argues, "Cosmopolitanism is an ethically weighted concept. We have a responsibility to respond to the ethical values that the term embodies and make sure that they are not overwhelmed or disparaged in the name of particularistic attachments. Most of all, we have a responsibility simply to bear witness to and participate in the cosmopolitan life of the world" (2017, p.238). In the spirit of these words and in the name of a strategic essentialism for pedagogical and educational purposes, it is important then in this article to define cosmopolitanism while not denying the presence of multiple cosmopolitanisms. To me, cosmopolitanism constitutes fundamentally a dispositional openness towards, acceptance of, and sense of solidarity with others outside of the self. It implies a wider civic responsibility to humanity at large, particularly to the stranger and the outsider. Harnessing the normative force of singular cosmopolitanism allows us

then to fruitfully pursue such questions as those asked by Suzanne Choo, for example, who in exploring how best to cultivate a “hospitable imagination” has done much significant work on cosmopolitanism and Literature education (Choo, 2013).

With the cosmopolitan ideal thus in sight as a goal for education and Literature education today, a potential dilemma arises when educators and teachers who almost invariably work within national school systems are also called to fulfil the demands of the nation and the local. This may be addressed, I suggest, by turning to postcolonial studies, an established and foundational theoretical school in Literature and other Humanities disciplines in most Anglo-American and Commonwealth universities for four decades now. In this article, I make a case for postcolonial literary studies and its continued role in the on-going dialogue about cosmopolitan Literature education. Having significantly redrawn the overall contours of literary study in the twentieth century, postcolonial studies as an interdisciplinary critical tradition provides us with a conceptual vocabulary, analytical lens and interpretive protocols with which to interrogate rigorously many salient aspects of contemporary globalization in our world today. In this regard, its many internal debates and disagreements have proven especially fruitful sites. There are at least three main areas in which I think postcolonialism’s contribution

remains vital: i) in critical discussion about the nation and nationalism, ii) in countering Eurocentrism, and iii) in the examination of form, style and literary poetics or aesthetics. I explore each of these areas first before suggesting ways in which Singapore literature may be taught and read through these critical emphases, with the ultimate goal of answering nation-centered goals while also fulfilling the national curriculum's desired outcome of growing empathetic and global thinkers" and cultivating cosmopolitan sensibilities. Although my examples are drawn from mainly Anglophone Singapore literature, the ideas and issues raised apply to the study of Literature elsewhere as well, not least to other places which also share a history of British colonialism.

i) Postcolonial Studies and the Nation

One of the criticisms of postcolonial studies and a reason perhaps why it appears to have been superseded by today's catchwords of cosmopolitanism and world literature has been its penchant for what Ato Quayson has termed "methodological nationalism," the assumption and use of the nation as the "preferred horizon for elaborating social, political, and cultural history" (2013, p.141). Quayson's point is an important one, interrogating the 'naturalness' of the nation as the necessary container for understanding literary and cultural activity. At the same time, it is perfectly understandable why many postcolonial societies

that have fought hard to shed the yoke of European colonialism and imperialism would want to continue asserting the primacy of the national as a sign in determining its cultural affairs. The high human cost of armed anti-colonial resistance for many former European colonies like Indonesia, Vietnam, Algeria, and Zimbabwe to name a few, also meant that nationalism was not to be so easily dismissed (see Sivanandan, 2004). Indeed, it made the subsequent phase of nation-building all the more disappointing for many societies when corrupt and inept postcolonial elites assumed the colonizer's oppressive and expropriative role instead of uniting and improving the lives of ordinary citizens. The all-too-common resulting problems of ethnic strife, chronic poverty, social and economic inequality that continue to this day means it is imperative that we seek to understand rather than dismiss the failed promises of nationalism.

At the same time, it is true that an exclusive focus on the nation risks drawing our attention away from other conceptual formulations like transnationalism and diaspora which may point among other things to a pre-colonial history, traditions of movement and mobility, and ways of thinking of identity in terms of routes rather than roots. One example of a transnational approach pertinent to Southeast Asia and Singapore may be found in literary and cultural scholarship focused on the trope of the 'Nanyang' or Southern Seas in mainly Sinophone but also Anglophone

writing by ethnic Chinese authors spread across the region. In *Writing the South Seas: Imagining the Nanyang in Chinese and Southeast Asian Postcolonial Literature*, Brian Bernards reframes national cultures within an archipelagic imagination which prioritises “contact, exchange, heterogeneity, and creolization instead of racial, ethnic, or linguistic uniformity and singularity” (2016, p.13). This more complex, layered and comparative approach allows us to see how writers using the Nanyang as a trope navigate “between different national literary contexts to renegotiate the boundaries of (but not disavow) national literature as a meaningful postcolonial project” (2016, p.9).

In the 1990s and early years of the twenty-first century, predictions about the demise of the nation-state in the face of intensified globalization abounded. These proved premature. If anything, postcolonialism has drawn attention to the resilience of the nation-state concept even as it also disclosed the nation’s precarity in the course of its performative re-iteration and re-articulation. One productive strand of postcolonial criticism has directed critical attention to what Laura Chrisman has described as “nationalism as a dominatory formation” (2004, p.188). Underlying this idea is the recognition of the many competing interests of different groups within the nation struggling for power, including the power to represent and define it. Thus scholars have shown how the interests of postcolonial urban

and bourgeois elites have often clashed with those of the rural poor, subaltern and minority groups, and indigenous communities, for example (see Spivak, 1995). Feminist postcolonial scholars have also interrogated and questioned the patriarchal basis of many nationalisms, pointing out especially how women tend to be figured symbolically as representative of the nation while being systematically deprived of a voice and political and economic power in many a national dispensation.

In the 1990s, Homi Bhabha drew attention to the ambivalent discursive and narrative construction of the nation when he wrote about the “double inscription” of a nation’s people as “pedagogical objects” and “performative subjects” (1990, p.302). According to Bhabha, “[the] scraps, patches and rags of daily life must be repeatedly turned into the signs of a national culture, while the very act of the narrative performance interpellates a growing circle of national subjects” (1990, p.297). There is a structural ambivalence in the discourse on nation based on the rhetorical force of ‘the people’ as representative that allows for contestation on a cultural terrain between totalizing nationalism that looks back to history and other modes of the national which point to inequalities, minority experiences, and heterogeneous identities. The dual idea of the pedagogical and performative modes of nationalism has been useful for thinking about the possibilities of

resistance and counter-narratives in postcolonial nations such as Singapore where a deterministic, highly centralized state exists and where the official narrative of the nation is reinforced at every level of the school system. At the same time though, Bhabha's implied suspicion of political unity and his skepticism of nationalism as essentialist, inherently homogenizing and anti-plural have been criticized by Marxist and postcolonial scholars who fault his work for its dehistoricized, totalizing and fatalistic depiction of nationalism.

Led by Benita Parry and Neil Lazarus, materialist postcolonial scholars counter Bhabha's more culturally-inflected, abstracted textualist, and poststructuralist emphasis, stressing instead the materialist politics of anti-colonial struggle, self-determination, and nationalism. While acknowledging the uneven returns of various nationalist projects historically, Parry and Lazarus nevertheless recognize the liberatory potential of nationalism. As Lazarus has written, "it is only on the terrain of the nation that an articulation between cosmopolitan intellectualism and popular consciousness can be forged" (1994, p.216). Parry rejects a wholesale disparaging of nationalism as retrogressive by calling for informed debate to be conducted instead on "the more consequential differences between moderate nationalist movements for independence within the status quo, and which were directed at entrenching the hegemony of the native bourgeoisie,

and revolutionary anti-capitalist nationalisms” (2004, p.10). The disagreements between various factions in postcolonial studies over nationalism and the nation-state may at times have been bitter but the result has been instructive and worthwhile scrutiny of the nation.

The insights we gain from postcolonial scholarship on the nation and nationalism remain urgently relevant when current geopolitical problems include the rise of populist governments in the US, Europe and elsewhere, increasingly authoritarian national governments, and extreme polarization in views about migration. The diverse experiences of nationhood and nationalism continue to require careful contextualized and historicized study as a necessary first step towards a realistic and persuasive ethical cosmopolitanism that includes the forging of international solidarity and shared goals among diverse nations and citizens.

ii) Countering Eurocentrism

Besides its critical scrutiny of the nation and nationalism, one of the central axes of postcolonial scholarship has always been the critique of Eurocentrism. Edward Said’s now-classic study, *Orientalism*, ranged across a wide range of historical sources, to examine the discursive construction of the Orient or the East by the West (Said, 1979). It underscored the importance of questions to do with

the cultural imaginary and representation, not least, literary representation. Besides exposing the vested nature of European imperial power which appropriates other realms and peoples for the projection of its own fantasies and anxieties, de-centering Europe has also taken the form of sensitive and critical attention to the material and cultural conditions of the production of texts, often by those in or from the so-called colonial peripheries. Indeed, we are indebted to the historicized analysis of cultures in specific localities and geographical regions by postcolonial scholars all over the world whose scholarship undermines the coercive and homogenizing universalism of Eurocentric values and provides the spade-work necessary to laying the ground for more equitable and meaningful cross-cultural analysis.

Dislodging Europe as the lens through which the world is viewed and measured however is by no means easy or even always entirely possible. In his examination of Matthew Arnold's influential notion of culture, for example, Simon Gikandi has shown how Englishness paradoxically informed the intellectual formation of anti-colonial African and West Indian intellectuals and nationalists. The latter group may have been disenchanted with British colonial rule but their own political ideals were nevertheless "a continuation of the intellectual tradition [...] inherited from an Englishness that had become almost a political unconscious"

(2007, p.189). In *Provincialising Europe*, Dipesh Chakrabarty also recognizes the centrality of Europe and the West to modernity for historical subjects halfway across the globe. He articulates the undeniable significance of the European intellectual tradition to fundamental concepts of political modernity like democracy, the state, citizenship, and human rights. But as Chakrabarty points out, in relation to a place as culturally and socially heterogeneous as India, sole reliance on this tradition will not help us understand and represent the reality of colonial and postcolonial political modernity for peasant and subaltern subjects. These subjects have consciousness and life-worlds experienced in different languages, practices, religions and cultural traditions. The idea of “provincializing Europe becomes the task of exploring how [European] thought—which is now everybody’s heritage and which affect us all—may be renewed from and for the margins” (2000, p.16). In referencing the margins, Chakrabarty seeks to right the balance of power; he calls for a method of critical inquiry which investigates and interrogates the ways in which European or Western cultural and intellectual traditions intersect with other non-Western categories of thought. Exploring this nexus carries implications for education more generally and over the long term. It requires of course a comparative perspective and knowledge of other languages, cultures, and practices. Indeed we could also say that countering Eurocentrism and provincializing Europe

is methodologically relevant to the very project of this special issue as we seek here to delve into Asian and other intellectual and cultural traditions to expand our understanding of cosmopolitanism and to trace its other cultural genealogies.

In resisting Eurocentric paradigms and Western hegemonic thought, a critical thrust of postcolonialism remains its alertness to forms of neo-colonialism and the legacies of colonialism persisting in today's globalized world including such pressing problems as environmental destruction and climate change. In his essay "Postcolonial Remains," Robert Young argues that we do not need "the regular production of new theoretical paradigms: the issue is rather to locate the hidden rhizomes of colonialism's historical reach, of what remains invisible, unseen, silent, or unspoken. In a sense, postcolonialism has always been about the ongoing life of residues, living remains, lingering legacies" (2012, pp. 20-21). Postcolonialism is in effect a continuation of the decolonizing process for which overthrowing European colonial rule was only a necessary first step. What Gayatri Spivak refers to as colonialism's epistemic violence requires a long process of recovery.

Such a decolonizing of the mind means that in our contemporary moment, the status of English as a dominant world language and the unrivalled lingua franca of such fields as commerce, science and technology, and literary culture should give us pause. Aamir Mufti notes how the rise of the Anglophone is too easily seen as a

“transparently universal good, not accompanied by a critical self-examination about its own conditions of possibility” (2018, p.13). The globalization of English as a literary language also means its role as a vehicle to World Literature itself is assured. Thus English-language cultural products enjoy high levels of prestige and the Anglophone perspective frequently prevails as definitive norm. Education towards cosmopolitan ideals must confront the hegemony of English in all its forms including the fact that English seeks to present itself as having a monopoly on cosmopolitan exchange. Rebecca Walkowitz shows us one way of challenging the dominance of English in her book, *Born Translated*, where she gives centerstage to the concept of translation, stressing the importance of focusing on texts that from their inception have had multilingualism and translation built into them. According to Walkowitz, translation needs to be seen not as an after-thought--the next step after publication for example--but as that which intrinsically shapes the narrative structure and organization of many contemporary global texts. She writes, “Literature in dominant languages tends to ‘forget’ that it has benefitted from literary works in other languages. Born-translated fiction, therefore, engages in a project of unforgetting” (2015, p.23). Besides destabilizing and defamiliarizing English, born-translated texts challenge our conventional understanding of reading, literary history, national literatures, and political community, widening the scope

of literary study to include multiply-situated audiences and negotiations involving a plurality of languages and cultural traditions.

iii) **Postcolonial Studies and the Question of Aesthetics**

The question of aesthetics and artistic form has often sat uneasily in postcolonial literary criticism. Postcolonial scholars have just cause to be wary of the aesthetic implying a universalism of shared taste or judgement that has traditionally served as a camouflage for Eurocentrism and imperialism—something, as we have seen above, postcolonialism has steadfastly repudiated through its attention to power, cultural difference and specific historical and cultural contexts. Aesthetic questions regarding style, form and literariness are inevitable however in Literature education, which has a disciplinary commitment to close and careful reading. In advocating for an aesthetic education rooted in the ethical and the political, Gayatri Spivak has asserted, “What happens in literature *as* literature is the peculiarity or singularity of its language. Paradoxically, it is through attentive practicing of the singular rhetoricity of language that the imagination is trained for flexible epistemological performance” (p.353) (author’s emphasis).

Postcolonial literary scholars have sought to ask how poetics and politics can work together—with poetics being enlisted to draw closer attention to the political agenda of a text while also deliberating over how politics is always searching for

effective form. One might also see this in terms of how “narrative form” and “ideological content” are “co-determined” where co-determination “implies a dynamic in which the formal articulation of ideas, speech, and action in and through the literary work can also be a transformation of meaning” (Dwivedi, Nielsen, & Walsh, 2018, p.15). Indeed one can already identify an aesthetic at work in the common political preoccupations of much postcolonial writing. Postcolonialism’s paradigmatic interest in contact zones, cultural hybridity and syncretism as part of understanding the distinctive dynamics of power in colonial and postcolonial contexts often entails a close examination of formal issues such as the presentation of time and space in a novel, for example, or the use of voice in a literary work. Deploying the Frankfurt School’s Marxist dialectical understanding of aesthetics, Deepika Bahra approaches the postcolonial literary text as both aesthetic and sociopolitical cultural artefact to strive towards “a more nuanced appreciation of the significance of figuration in representation and of the aesthetic as a code in the scheme of utopian thinking” (2003, p.6). Thus, in this way, the aesthetic strategies for depicting subalternity, for example, assume importance in a literary work for any hermeneutical-political project for social justice interested in elucidating what *can* be rather than just what is.

Elleke Boehmer's most recent book, *Postcolonial Poetics*, addresses the lacuna of the aesthetic in the field of postcolonialism. She establishes postcolonial poetics on a general level as "a set of (often unconscious) procedures that we as readers of postcolonial texts work through as part of our creative involvement with texts, or as part of our interpretative, exegetical and, above all, imaginative engagement" (2018, p.21). Poetics are the creative principles in a work which involve readers wrestling with texts, responding to and negotiating with potential meanings as these unfold while they are led to read in certain ways and prompted to re-read, eventually building their own interpretations. From a close and critical analysis of various postcolonial texts from different genres and cultural contexts, she articulates a postcolonial poetics as one that pays attention to "transverse or lateral interactions, exchanges, and juxtapositions, and hence to what may be metaphorically designated as borderlands, shadow-lines, and interstices, such as those explored in diasporic, migrant, and otherwise displaced and de-territorialized writing, and in the cross-border reading it encourages" (2018, p.164). In earlier work, Boehmer has also pointed to the interlacing of form and content and the effect of this on the reader when she argued how postcolonial texts like a "creolized or polyglot story or poem both recalls the way in which cultures are syncretically interlinked, as they always have been, *and* provides a gateway to *feeling* otherness,

experiencing how it might be to be *beside one's self*' (2005, p.258) (author's emphasis). Here, the idea of being beside one's self suggests a de-centering of the individual and a reaching out to another subject congruent with an empathetic and cosmopolitan disposition.

The attempts within postcolonial studies to accommodate aesthetics and politics seek to move beyond aesthetics as necessarily always an imperializing gesture or, at best, empty formalism. Indeed, the attempts challenge us to think of ways in which the radical energies of postcolonial critique may be *interwoven* with formal concerns that are fundamental to literary analysis in Literature education. Together, this braided approach lies at the heart of seeking to understand, dissect, and problematize the textual representation of Self and Other with the aim towards seeing in others, new possibilities of self.

Teaching Anglophone Singapore Literature

Leveraging on the critical energies provided by postcolonialism, several possibilities in the teaching of Singapore literature in English with the aim of cultivating empathetic and global thinking among secondary school students become clear. A postcolonial lens would equip students to critically evaluate official national narratives, especially the narrative of progress that has served as the

doxological understanding of the nation's history. It encourages instead the understanding of Singapore's continued historical development as "a series of projects, comprising acts of representation and counter-representation, erasures and appropriations, avowals and disavowals" (Tay, 2011, p.12). By that logic, interrogating the nation's past becomes part and parcel of imagining and figuring out possible futures for the nation that can potentially encompass openness to the rest of the world.

The short story collection *Hook and Eye*, currently a text on the 'O' level Literature syllabus, provides a good starting point for getting students to consider the values by which they think the nation should be governed. Using Balli Kaur Jaswal's story "Everest", for example, students could be asked to contemplate the problem of equity, minority subjectivities, and those whom the relentless march towards a certain vision of national progress tends to leave behind. Told from the point of view of a girl whose brother, Mahesh, has learning difficulties, "Everest" portrays an immigrant Indian family struggling to adapt to life in Singapore. It provokes difficult questions about the place of immigrants in Singapore as well as that of people with special needs. When the public debate about immigration in Singapore has tended to revolve around a profit and loss calculus, where does that leave migrant subjects who cannot so obviously and directly contribute to the

country's economic growth? Faced with Mahesh's determination to climb Mount Everest and to train for this by regularly running up twenty-five flights of stairs in the family's HDB block, students could thus be asked to weigh the importance to the nation of having seemingly unattainable but nevertheless intrinsically worthwhile goals. "Margarine and the Syrian Refugee Project" by Koh Choon Hwee is another story that lends itself well to encouraging global thinking among students. Here, the narrator is a secondary school student who, together with her friend Nabilah, is placed in the same group for a class project about Syrian refugees as Marjorie, a rich ethnic Chinese girl new to the school. Marjorie, who calls herself Jo but is referred to by others who cannot pronounce her name as 'Margarine', is a somewhat opaque and ambiguous character, whose true intentions could be debated by students. Does she have empathy for others? Or, do we as readers agree with Nabilah's rhetorical question to Marjorie: "You know what it's like to be somebody other than a rich Chinese Singaporean?" (Koh, 2018, p.55). Is it hypocritical for Marjorie to privilege the Syrian refugees over the poor in her own country, as Nabilah certainly seems to think--"[...] after all, how can somebody who doesn't care about her friends truly care about people she doesn't know?" (2018, p.56) In this way, the story embodies the classic question of cosmopolitan ethics

which students need to wrestle with in order to deeply engage with and formulate what an empathetic response to distant others means.

As these two short stories also show, globalization with its multiple flows of people has transformed Singapore in many ways and raised new connections, questions and dilemmas for deliberation. Like many major cities of the world, Singapore has become a transnational space traversed by citizens, immigrants, permanent residents, expatriates and myriad temporary workers. Contemporary cultural production in Singapore, as Cheryl Narumi Naruse and Weihsin Gui point out, “increasingly interrogates the intersections of social inequality, capital and migrant labour” (2016, p.474). Indeed, Singapore poetry offers numerous texts that seek to problematize our reliance on migrant labor and interrogate the country’s role in an exploitative capitalist world-system. The poem “Made of Gold” by Alvin Pang is one such text. The poem starts with a line that echoes the conclusion of Edwin Thumboo’s iconic poem, “Ulysses by the Merlion”: “This too, is an image of ourselves” (Pang, 2003, p.38). Students could be instructed first to read Thumboo’s poem and describe the latter’s “image of ourselves” before turning to Pang’s poem. Reading the first half of “Made of Gold,” they can discuss how Pang counters Thumboo’s pastoral image of Singapore as a diverse people living together in relative harmony, seeking a common identity and prospering. In the newer poem,

waves of migrants are described as “a babel sea of/ dreamers on our shores”; they come to build “our homes” and “our temples” (2003, p.38). Following this comparison of images provided by both poems, students read the second half of “Made of Gold” which consists of the broken though no less powerful words of suffering spoken by an unnamed and invisible migrant worker whose dreams of riches in Singapore have been crushed:

...If only someone told
me the walls of Tekka
not made of gold. (2003, p.38)

Closely examining the poetic form of “Made of Gold”—how it draws from different discourses, how it juxtaposes lofty rhetoric with the raw pain of disillusionment, and how it arranges the lines on the page--students could be asked to consider the poem’s effectiveness in eliciting an empathetic response towards the invisible and unseen migrant worker who underpins Singapore’s success.

Similarly, a poem by Loh Guan Liang called “Displace” could also be used to draw students’ attention to migrants in our midst. The poem is a snapshot of an ordinary and common scene in Singapore—a Filipino domestic worker chatting on her mobile phone with her family far away while waiting to bring her “Little Mam” (2012, p.30) home from school. The poem illustrates the emotional labor performed by domestic workers—a form of labor that cannot be quantified and is

perhaps for Singaporeans the most disquieting kind of work because it involves migrants themselves having to be separated from their own homes and families. Students could be prompted to consider the significance of the title and its possible meanings as well as unpack the reservoir of emotions behind the spare lines. In selecting these poetic texts to engage students, we align ourselves with Suzanne Choo's call to view Literature not "merely as the critical study of language and its effects but as primarily a space for ethical encounters with others through language" (2018, p.232).

Even as we use these poems by Singapore poets for self-reflection and build empathy for different others, it is crucial that we also bring the voices of the latter into the classroom wherever possible. Some migrant workers, especially those in the construction industry, have begun to express themselves creatively in poetry. Their creative endeavors are found in the collections, *Migrant Tales: an anthology of poems by migrant Bengali poets in Singapore* and *Songs from a Distance: Selected Poems from the 2015 and 2016 Migrant Worker Poetry Competition*. The poems render visible the thoughts, feelings and aspirations of a largely unseen workforce in Singapore; these workers are everywhere doing the dirty work Singaporeans shun yet still invisible to many. Besides these collections, single-author works translated from Bengali into English include *Me Migrant* by Md Mukul

Hossine and *Stranger to Myself: Diary of a Bangladeshi in Singapore* by Md Sharif Uddin. Transcreated by Singapore poet Cyril Wong, Md Mukul Hossine's poems disclose the feelings of alienation, loneliness and homesickness of migrant workers. The poem "At Midnight" explores how the migrant worker's nighttime dreams constitute the only space and time available for intimacy with loved ones left behind. The title poem "Me Migrant" turns the Self-Other construct on its head by expressing an interiority for the persona who refers to himself in the third person as 'Me Migrant' rather than 'I'. It ends with the spare yet powerful lines in a direct, pointed address to the reader:

Me migrant
Live outdoors

Outside from you (2016, p. 16)

In his poem "Velu and a History", Md Sharif Uddin presents a migrant worker's perspective on the Little India Riot which occurred in 2013, focusing on the victim of the tragedy. By way of comparison, students could be asked to research and read newspaper accounts of the riot to consider how the event was primarily represented and imagined in the public consciousness. Armed with that contextual knowledge, they can turn to "Velu and a History" and discuss the various ways in which the poet seeks to appeal to the reader's empathy. What, for example,

do we not know about the worker who died? Which questions can never be answered? Questions about historiography and who gets remembered or erased from the historical record could be raised to provoke further discussion. And finally, students could be asked if they felt whether the persona's sober observation in the lines below is justified:

Nothing will stop in this busy city
in the tearful hour of a sweat-drenched worker. (2017, p.135)

The voices of Sharif Uddin and Mukul Hossine constitute a vernacular cosmopolitanism that compels Singaporeans to re-assess their national values and vision of the nation. Reading these texts is to some extent analogous to reading contrapuntally--Edward Said's proposed method in *Culture and Imperialism* where he advocates "a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts" (1994, p.51). The concept of the contrapuntal which Said borrows from music renders visible hitherto suppressed narratives, allows for the emergence of alternative or new narratives determined by suppressed narratives in literary texts. Yet even as poems by migrant workers provide a valuable perspective that should be studied, the texts also raise essential questions about literariness and the creative process given their translated nature. They draw

attention to the potential and pitfalls of creative collaborative efforts, and students could be encouraged to consider the various dimensions of the politics of translation including its relation to voice and cultural authenticity.

The question of translation is also at the crux of any discussion of the hegemonic position of Anglophone Singapore literature, which technically is but one of four official literatures of the nation.¹ The four literatures in English, Mandarin, Malay and Tamil have tended to proceed apace separately, with only more recent sustained attempts at translation to bridge them. There is no gainsaying the global status of English as a literary language. The prestige enjoyed by global Anglophone literature including access to greater funds, resources and literary prizes means that it is more likely that Singapore literature in English be seen on the world stage as representing the nation and as part of world literature. The dominance of English in Singapore is at risk of being too easily naturalized rather than seen as the result of deliberate policy. For once Singapore embarked irrevocably on a path towards national sovereignty and independence in 1965

¹ The decision by the Singapore government to adopt a bilingual policy with English as the first and working language for a polyglot multiracial country in 1966 when only a minority of the population spoke the language at that time has had far-reaching consequences. As of 2010, 79.9% of the population have adopted English as a language of use compared to 21% of the population before independence, thus making English the indisputable lingua franca of the nation (Alsagoff, 2012, p.150).

following the failure of merger with Malaysia, a developmental trajectory for locally-produced literature in English was set. If left unquestioned, Anglophone Singapore literature will be naturalized as hegemonic norm and the social inequalities underlying its rise and the increasing entrenchment of English as a native language for the nation glossed over. We risk engendering a historical and cultural amnesia borne out of ignorance of the other lifeworlds which the other official languages represent.

One way of mitigating this might be to pair and read a Singapore literary text written in English together with a text originally written in Malay, for example.² An example of the latter now available as a translation in English is the novel *Penghulu* by Suratman Markasan which offers a view of the historical past that many non-Malay Anglophone readers of Singapore literature would not know about or have access to. Markasan's novel traces the dislocation experienced by a Malay village headman when he is re-located from his home in one of the nation's southern islands to public housing, a flat built by Housing Development Board (HDB), on the mainland in the name of development and progress. Set adrift by this move, Pak

² To appreciate how texts in other languages offer us a perspective denied the Anglophone reader limited by monolingualism or a lack of sufficient competency in another language other than English, we need only consider how differently the nation and the past can look in these texts (see Poon, 2015).

Suleh has to face the loss of his patriarchal identity and sense of purpose. As a meditation on loss, the novel also offers a more nuanced understanding of the disappearance of the *kampong* or village space for the Malays especially, a loss often elided in current public discourse intent on recuperating *gotong royong* or the spirit of cooperation for present-day community building efforts. In the novel, Pak Suleh likens his desire to live on the land that belonged to his ancestors to the plight of dispossessed Palestinians in the long-running Arab-Israeli conflict. Like the Palestinians seeking a return to their homeland, he stakes a claim on the land that had been in his family for “hundreds of years” (Markasan, 2012, p.132). This is a significant textual moment that could be used to train students’ gaze on seemingly far-away conflicts which yet have particular resonance for Singapore in order to critically connect and evaluate local and global histories.

A dogged and stubborn Pak Suleh, together with his wife and daughter, eventually returns to live on the island he once governed. Miraculously, all three disappear without a trace along with their hut when the authorities arrive to evict them. Besides provoking questions about formal experimentation less apparent in socio-realist Anglophone works, the magical realist ending of *Penghulu* lends itself to discussion about state power and cultural loss, and students could be asked if they think the ending is to be read allegorically. The final chapter of the novel

entitled “Fate” presents various opinions speculating on what might have happened to the family including the view that news about the incident should be stopped for fear of the negative impact it might have on the “formation of mainstream thoughts and minds” (Markasan, 2012, p.243). This ironic, self-reflexive moment in the text could serve to prompt discussion of censorship and the place of literature and literary ‘truths’ in society.

For comparison, *Penghulu* could be read alongside Suchen Christine Lim’s novel in English, *The River’s Song*, which dramatizes the emotional and social cost of cleaning up the polluted Singapore River. Often heralded as a successful national campaign of the late 1970s and the decade of the 1980s, the great clean-up of this major waterway resulted in a mass displacement of squatters, hawkers, coolies, vegetable-sellers, lightermen, and other people who made a living there. The human cost of this forced relocation which includes the toll on the identity of the people it affected and the destruction of the economic as well as culture ecosystem the river supported is usually not the focus of official accounts. If *Penghulu* captures the alienation of Malays forcibly evicted by the state, *The River’s Song* seeks to convey in English the upturned world of the Chinese-speaking people by the river. It also conveys the tensions between the English-speaking and Chinese-speaking ethnic Chinese in Singapore best embodied in the failed romance between the main

protagonists, Ping and Weng, as it charts the different life paths of Singaporeans educated in English and Mandarin Chinese. The highly political nature of language and education in Singapore is tellingly conveyed in this moment in the novel when Weng contrasts the history he learns in English during the school day with the history he learns in Chinese: “The history taught by Mr Rodrigues was different from the history taught by Mr Lee at the Water Transport Workers’ Union night school. Mr Lee’s history class conducted in Mandarin referred to Chinese history books, which mentioned Singapore way before Raffles and the British did” (Lim, 2013, p.116). Reading Markasan and Lim’s novels would deepen students’ historical understanding of the politics of language and the various perspectives on national events that speakers of different languages have. Students could be asked to compare the conclusion of Lim’s novel with its tentative suggestion of reconciliation between Ping and Weng with the ending of *Penghulu* and consider the possibilities (or not) for inter-cultural understanding and shared spaces implied by both.

Anglophone Singapore literature needs to be situated and taught within a broader context of multilingualism that affirms the presence of non-English literary texts also produced in the national space. Only then can one be fully apprised of how Singapore literature in all four languages maps out a rich and varied affective

landscape lying beneath official narratives about modernization, and unyielding trajectories from Third World to First. Anglophone Singapore literature now encompasses texts produced by diasporic writers originally from the country as well as creative work by migrant subjects who have settled to work and live among us. Less rigidly and monolithically defined, Singapore literature challenges us to constantly think about what the nation can and should mean, while at the same time, leading us to draw lines of connection between the nation and other parts of the world.

To nurture empathetic and global thinkers who are at the same time active and participatory democratic citizens, it is imperative we assemble an educational toolkit of theoretical concepts and methodological approaches grounded in the intellectual histories of diverse disciplines. Postcolonialism's many theoretical insights and its commitment to historical, social and cultural justice ensure its relevance to the pressing problems of our globalized world. It is this belief that compels me to articulate the ideal of a cosmopolitan nationalism built on the intellectual and critical foundations of postcolonial studies and achieved through the vehicle of Singapore literature.

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