
Title	Constructing the cosmopolitan subject: Teaching secondary school literature in Singapore
Author(s)	Angelia Mui Cheng Poon
Source	<i>Asia Pacific Journal of Education</i> , 30(1), 31-41
Published by	Taylor & Francis

This document may be used for private study or research purpose only. This document or any part of it may not be duplicated and/or distributed without permission of the copyright owner.

The Singapore Copyright Act applies to the use of this document.

This is an Author's Accepted Manuscript of an Article published in Poon, Angelia M. C. (2010). Constructing the cosmopolitan subject: Teaching secondary school literature in Singapore. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, 30(1), 31-41, as published in the Asia Pacific Journal of Education, 2010, ©Taylor & Francis, available online at: <http://www.tandfonline.com/DOI:10.1080/02188790903503577>

Notice: Changes introduced as a result of publishing processes such as copy-editing and formatting may not be reflected in this document. For a definitive version of this work, please refer to the published source.

AUTHOR QUERIES

Journal	<i>cAPE</i>
Issue	30-01
MS #	450783
Author	Poon

# in MS	Query
1	No queries.

Constructing the cosmopolitan subject: teaching secondary school literature in Singapore

Angelia Mui Cheng Poon*

English Language and Literature Academic Group, National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

(Received 12 May 2009; accepted 5 August 2009)

This article discusses the ambitious educational reforms of the Singapore government in response to the challenges of globalization vis-à-vis the specific issues arising from the case of teaching Literature in secondary schools. It shows how the Singapore state is invested in a particular view of globalization and argues how recent scholarly moves to recuperate the notion of cosmopolitanism may provide an alternative view. Turning to cosmopolitanism as an intellectual and ethical goal when considering curricular changes to Literature may also help revitalize the subject and garner a more significant role for it in the scripting of Singapore as a nation and global city for the future.

Keywords: literature education; secondary schools; Singapore; globalization; cosmopolitanism

The idea of cosmopolitanism variously as a principle, ethical concept, ideological stance, and way of life has enjoyed a resurgence in recent years among scholars working in a range of disciplines including literature, anthropology and philosophy (see Anderson, 2001; Brock & Brighouse, 2005; Cheah & Robbins, 1998). Historically, the term or its cognate before the nineteenth century, “citizen of the world”, has always enjoyed a close connection with education. Often, to be educated was to be cosmopolitan, in other words, well-travelled, culturally sophisticated, and knowledgeable about the ways of the world. In contrast, one could say that the development of English literature as a discipline proceeded along a path somewhat at odds with this. From its very institutional beginnings, the study of English literature was inextricably tied to the British colonial and imperial project and notions of Englishness. Thomas Macaulay’s “Minute on Indian Education” in 1835 laid an early foundation stone in what was in effect the establishment of English language, culture and literature as curriculum knowledge that could be taught selectively to Indian subjects as part of a calibrated process of Anglicization and more effective colonial control (see Viswanathan, 1989). In the nineteenth century, with the increasing dominance of the middle class, English developed as a discipline in British universities as a desirable, more accessible and more relevant alternative to traditional subjects like the Classics, which bore the particular class and religious baggage of an older education system dominated by the aristocracy and landowning class. Significantly informing the nature of the new discipline was Matthew Arnold’s notion of culture as “the *best*

*Email: angelia.poon@nie.edu.sg

knowledge and thought of the time” (Arnold, 1994, p. 48). Despite the fact that Arnold’s thinking in *Culture and Anarchy* (1868) was nothing if not opposed to the narrowness of English society, the central role of English as a subject in the construction and maintenance of English national identity was sealed with the publication in 1921 of that influential educational document, *The Teaching of English in England*, perhaps more commonly known as the Newbolt Report. English, as the report writers led by Sir Henry Newbolt put it so evocatively, was to be the “keystone” in the “arch” of education and a national curriculum (Bacon, 1998, p. 296). The post-War nationalist mood is captured in the report in no uncertain terms as its writers aver how it is

an incontrovertible primary fact, that for English children no form of knowledge can take precedence of a knowledge of English, no form of literature can take precedence of English literature; and that the two are so inextricably connected as to form the only basis possible for a national education. (Bacon, 1998, p. 302)

The impact of post-colonial studies over the last 40 years, however, has resulted in a destabilization of this colligation between English literature and Englishness. The boundaries of English literature have been re-drawn to include works in English from writers working in former colonies and in diasporic communities in metropolitan areas and elsewhere. Not only has such creative work irretrievably undermined the myth of a white England and homogeneous island-nation, it is clear that what is now a more multicultural and multinational literature in English increasingly requires an analytical and pedagogical framework that is not limited to the national but one which would encompass the transnational, the global, and revised notions of cosmopolitanism. Singapore, a former British colony with global city ambitions, is a logical site for exploring the ways in which a critical cosmopolitanism might enable us to re-envision the teaching of English literature. Situating Singapore’s specific educational goals and overall vision for survival in a global world alongside key arguments in the current debate about cosmopolitanism, my ultimate aim is to prise Literature out of the rut in which it is so often caught and apprehended as marginal and irrelevant to life in Singapore.¹ With this end in mind, I want to first consider the state’s ambitious educational reforms articulated over the last decade or so, and the significance of these on literature, before concluding with ways of re-thinking literature education so that it can play a more pivotal role in how Singapore views its place in the world.

Remaking education in globalized Singapore and the case of the vanishing subject

That the Singapore state, led and dominated by one political party – the People’s Action Party – since independence in 1965, has always valued education and made it a strategic investment in its governing mission is a statement even its fiercest detractors would be hard-pressed to deny. Announcements about policy changes and adjustments to the education system are made routinely, and Singaporeans have grown accustomed to living with an ever-morphing educational landscape. In the last 12 years, the state’s reforms, like those of other East Asian governments, have stemmed largely from its understanding of the relationship between education and economic development, and its negotiation of the tension between globalization and nationalism (Green, 2007; Lee & Gopinathan, 2005). Perhaps its most ambitious reform plan, the crystallization of comprehensive reviews of the education system, or what S. Gopinathan has called the “big bang in Singapore’s educational reforms” (2001, p. 11), came in June 1997 with the unveiling by then Prime Minister of Singapore, Goh Chok Tong, of the “Thinking Schools, Learning Nation” (TSLN) initiative (Ministry of Education, Singapore, 2009). This was an overarching and

radical blueprint for the Singapore education system directing it towards the building of a culture of continued learning in Singapore that was holistic and which would extend beyond the school into every facet of life. If the primary objective of mass schooling in the decades following political independence in 1965 was economic efficiency, an attempt to reduce the attrition rate and fashion economically productive citizen-subjects, the impetus now, still reflecting an instrumentalist and pragmatic ideological turn of mind, was the maintenance of economic competitiveness through direct intervention in curriculum and pedagogy rather than sole reliance on decentralization and school diversification (Luke, Freebody, Lau, & Gopinathan, 2005, p. 10). Singapore's place in the new economic order could only be assured if it could successfully foster the conditions for innovation, creativity and entrepreneurship while firmly repudiating in the process the problems of rote learning and high-stakes exam-centred learning that were the corollary of its hitherto highly efficient education system. Process rather than product was to be the focus. Informing the TSLN vision was the fundamental recognition that students had different talents and strengths which needed to be harnessed rather than homogenized. To this end, the four main thrusts of TSLN were the emphasis on critical and creative thinking, the use of ICT, national education, and administrative excellence in schools.

Within the broad framework of TSLN, more specific initiatives were enacted to diversify the education map by allowing different learning pathways for students, to clear space for creativity and experimentation, and to reduce curriculum content. These included the proposal in 2002 to establish the so-called "integrated programme" schools, which would do away with the 'O' levels, as well as the themes for action like "Innovation and Enterprise" in 2003 and "Teach Less, Learn More" in 2004. That the Singapore state has been carrying out educational reform throughout the 1990s and into the twenty-first century does not make it unique among other national governments in the rest of the world. Neoliberal efforts by many Western governments have led to the increasing marketization of education and the commodification of teaching. Within this context, Singapore remains a developmental state that has embraced some forms of neoliberalism and discarded others. What does perhaps make its efforts notable however is its commitment and single-minded determination in terms of political will and economic muscle to ensure educational success. Overall, the Singapore state's educational initiatives may be described as a mixture of neo- and post-Fordist measures. With such post-Fordist features like the emphasis on creativity and innovation, the state has secured its place as a "strategic trader": it is closely involved in the direct sculpting of the economy by encouraging potentially lucrative industries through educational policy and infrastructural investment (Sharpe & Gopinathan, 2002). The Singapore government's decision for the country to be a technopreneurial and biomedical hub, for example, has led to considerable investment in life science research and pharmaceutical industries, the aggressive courting of foreign talent and companies to set up base here, and importantly for education, changes to the science curriculum in schools to support the new emphasis (Ong, 2006). Thus, in terms of educational policy, the state may be seen to be stronger than ever.

Following TSLN in 1997, a revised Literature syllabus was implemented in 1999. This explicitly identified various areas of study for Literature, and included for assessment an unseen poem or prose extract to enhance students' critical thinking and skills of analysis. As part of the "Teach Less, Learn More" move to reduce content for study across all subjects, the number of texts students had to study for literature was reduced from three to two (Poon, 2007). In 2007, Singapore literature became a permanent and more prominent feature of the Secondary Literature in English Syllabus, with a guaranteed question in the 'O'-level examination paper on Singapore or Malaysian literature for either the "unseen" poetry or

prose section (Singapore Examinations and Assessment Board, 2009).² Alongside these educational reforms pertaining to Literature since the 1990s must also be placed other more broadly cultural policies adopted by the state as part of its thoroughgoing response to the perceived challenges of globalization. These include policies aimed at transforming Singapore into a Renaissance city and a global city for the Arts. In 2000, the *Renaissance city report: culture and the arts in Renaissance Singapore*, a manifesto detailing the state's ideal of Singapore as a global city for the Arts and creative industries, was published. The report made clear the intention to marshal the Arts to establish an overall climate "conducive to innovations, new discoveries and the creation of new knowledge" (p. 5) that would support newly identified areas of economic activity and thus sustain growth (see Wee, 2002). The state has since devoted considerable resources to the support of the Arts in Singapore including the construction of state-of-the-art performance venues like the Esplanade theatres and the setting up of the School of the Arts, although it is notable that in this more encouraging environment, the literary arts often appears overshadowed by its more visible creative cousins like theatre, film and design.

Despite all the changes to the education system and to the Arts scene, Literature has continued throughout the 1990s and this decade to be a vanishing subject in secondary schools in Singapore. Literature suffers from a low take-up rate at the 'O' levels as students not competent in the English language often view it as a difficult and largely irrelevant subject to be avoided. This is not to say, however, that there have not been valiant efforts by committed and enthusiastic teachers to resuscitate the subject in some schools. The subject also enjoys a notable presence in mission schools, proud of their traditional emphasis on arts education.³ More direct reasons for the decline of Literature may however be pointed out. These have been discussed elsewhere (Holden, 1999; Poon, 2007) and so need only be raised briefly here. Firstly, there was the decision to rank schools in the early 1990s in a controversial move to ostensibly improve competition among schools and to provide parents with more choice. Widely perceived as a subject that was difficult to obtain high marks for, Literature was an immediate, if not unexpected, casualty. The next dip in the numbers occurred with the introduction of Social Studies into the curriculum. Social Studies was to constitute "half" of a subject with History, Geography or Literature completing the subject. Again Literature was perceived as irrelevant, a subject not particularly hospitable to such a hybrid coupling since a transference of skills and content matter between the two halves was not immediately apparent.

In addition to these explicit policy changes, other more historically sedimented associations may also play a part. Following political independence in 1965, the post-colonial Singapore state justified its choice of English as the first language of the country by ascribing to it a neutrality not allegedly present in the other languages used by the multiracial population of Singapore. English was to be a bridge language linking the four official racial groups of Chinese, Malay, Indian and Others. It was also the world language of business, of commerce, but not, in other words, of culture. Such functionalism, part of the DNA of language policy since the nation's birth, continues today and informs consciously or not the marginal position literature or literary language has occupied vis-à-vis the English language. Thus in the newly launched English Language Syllabus 2010, the section on "English in Singapore" reads:

English operates at many levels and plays many roles in Singapore. At the local level, it is the common language that facilitates bonding among the different ethnic and cultural groups. At the global level, English allows Singaporeans to participate in a knowledge-based economy where English is the lingua franca of the Internet, of science and technology and of world trade.

English education is important since “a proficient command of the language will enable pupils to access, process and keep abreast of information, and to engage with the wider and more diverse communities outside of Singapore” (p. 6). There is no sense here of the language being used as part of literary and cultural production or of Singapore actively contributing to global English and global English literature.⁴ Something of the problem may also be seen in the way some schools have rejected the study of Singapore literary works currently on the text list, like Daren Shiau’s novel, *Heartland*, and Haresh Sharma’s play, *Off Centre*, because of the use of Singlish in these texts. Certainly while it may seem inevitable that literature is yoked to language learning to some extent in Singapore, no one could possibly condone such a crudely reductionist view of literature existing only to serve as a prop to language learning. The functionalist view of the English language in Singapore society seems nevertheless more entrenched and naturalized than it might initially appear.

Although the causes for the decline in student candidature for ‘O’-level Literature in the last 2 decades are quite specific, it is nevertheless the case that the TSLN slate of reforms has not reversed the situation. The changes that have been made to the syllabus within the ambit of these overarching reforms (e.g., introducing an “unseen” assessment component as part of enhancing critical thinking and reducing the number of texts studied from three to two) have also tended to be piecemeal rather than thoroughgoing in their questioning of fundamental assumptions and their rethinking of the subject in curriculum terms. There has, in other words, to be a better fit between the historically contingent national goal of wanting to become a global city, the need for specific curriculum changes, and the evolving nature of what constitutes literary thinking and analysis.

Literature and cosmopolitanism: a strategic partnership

The desire for Singapore to be a global city is part of the state’s view that globalization is an inevitable historical and planetary process: to a small dot of a nation, the wider world moves inexorably and Singapore is vulnerable to global economic trends and market changes. This kind of survivalist rhetoric has been a feature of the post-colonial state’s official pronouncements and narrative of the nation since independence, determining the conditions of possibility of thought, and shaping the terrain of choice and action. But the Singapore state’s discourse on globalization, as in the case of all states, must be seen for what it is: selective, partial, and strategic. The Singapore state is a good example of what Hallak (2000), Pierre (2000) and others have described as modern states that have co-opted and appropriated globalization discourse to justify political action and strengthen their capacity for control, often through more discreet and indirect means. Within this particular state paradigm, the scope of state activity or action may appear to be reduced but this may not be tantamount to a reduction of state capacity (Mok, 2007). As Gopinathan has argued with regard to the state’s educational policies over the last 2 decades:

These steps are not those of a state pushed to the wall by globalization; they are the responses of a strong state acting with a view to strengthening the local and the national in order to deal better with the regional and international. (2007, p. 65)

Any avowed move by the state towards transformation of the nation into a global city must also take into account, it seems to me, the implications of having a more cosmopolitan citizenry. In Singapore, it is clear that there is much anxiety about the

decision to go global. In 1997, for example, National Education was introduced into the school curriculum to develop “national cohesion” and instil in students the message that “Singapore is our homeland; this is where we belong” (p. 7). The anxiety over a loosening of national ties arises primarily from the state’s understanding and construction of the national and the global in mutually exclusive terms. In 1999, in a well-known National Day Rally speech, former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong made a distinction between cosmopolitan citizens and “heartlanders”:

One group I call the “cosmopolitans”, because their outlook is international. They speak English but are bilingual . . . They produce goods and services for the global market . . . The other group, the heartlanders, make their living within the country. Their orientation and interests are local rather than international. Their skills are not marketable beyond Singapore. They speak Singlish . . .

One can read this as an admission by the state of the inherent contradictions and potential conflict between being national and global. The binary logic of “heartlander” and “cosmopolitan” established in this speech-act of carving up the population into two clearly divided groups has implications for how Singaporeans think of themselves in relation to the world. Certainly it forestalls thinking about how, as Saskia Sassen (2007) has argued, the global is partly constituted from within the frame of the nation while also simultaneously exceeding it. Globalization, according to Sassen, is a complex multi-scalar phenomenon not reducible to analysis by conventional hierarchies and dichotomies.

It is easy to see how the problem of Literature as a so-called “elite” subject and its low take-up rate in neighbourhood schools can be drawn into the very contours of the cosmopolitan versus heartlander debate outlined by Goh. Yet such a polarized way of thinking would negate the potential that Literature has for teaching *all* students about aspects of globalization that tend to be elided by the state’s version of the phenomenon and about the representational complexity of the interaction between the national, the local, and the global. Increasingly, given the rate of labour, capital and cultural flows under this global dispensation, there will be a need for students to respond with agility to local contexts and transnational forces as national and global citizens (Suaréz-Orozco & Qin-Hilliard, 2004). Providing students with the opportunity to explore and examine these ways of being and seeing in school through a subject like Literature would help prepare them to negotiate differences in diverse contexts and to participate more fully in a democracy, critical educational challenges in a globalized world that have not featured so visibly in Singaporean public discourse. One first step towards harnessing Literature in this way may lie, I would like to argue, in a consideration of what cosmopolitanism can offer.

Recent scholarly attempts to recuperate cosmopolitanism and privilege the term for use in our present historical moment have sought in the main to trace the word’s genealogy in the West and to understand its historical meanings in relation to the conditions which gave rise to these meanings. Often linked back first to the Stoics and then to Immanuel Kant in the tradition of Western philosophy, the term has been used to describe an openness to other cultures, freedom from certain affiliations and their attendant identities, a detachment from home, rootlessness, cultural sophistication, and a moral obligation to distant others, all of which meanings have been deployed at different times positively or derisively. Thus cosmopolitanism can suggest a worldliness that is anti-parochial and often anti-ethnographic, or mean a debilitating lack of attachment and hence commitment to place, and relatedly, politics. In the nineteenth century in Britain and Europe, cosmopolitanism was often used in negative opposition to nationalism. To the increasingly dominant middle class, the word suggested an elitism borne of older class privilege and

wealth since travel was (and still is) such a critical component of what it means to be cosmopolitan. In this regard, too, the bourgeoisie saw an opportunity to exclude foreigners and groups of people like the Jews whom they perceived as dangerously “cosmopolitan” from aspects of national life.

In a move to think more flexibly and openly about the term, contemporary appeals to cosmopolitanism have sought to eschew any monolithic understanding of it and instead to conceive of it in its plural form – as “cosmopolitanisms” (Pollock, Bhabha, Breckenridge, & Chakrabarty, 2000). Anthropologist James Clifford coined the phrase “discrepant cosmopolitanisms” (Cheah & Robbins, 1998, p. 365) to capture the fact that people in various societies have always travelled for different reasons and in historically divergent circumstances. The cosmopolitan traveller cannot only mean, in other words, the well-heeled traveller of leisure, the heroic explorer on an adventure, or the Western-educated anthropologist doing field work in a remote village. Clifford’s term has the advantage of making us aware of groups of marginalized travellers who have traditionally been rendered silent and invisible. In the context of today’s global flows, for example, the notion of “discrepant cosmopolitanisms” would allow us to view migrant workers eking out a living in poorly paid jobs as cosmopolitan, even if their host nation-states deliberately try to mark them otherwise and routinely discredit their claims to knowledge. Traversing multiple geographical locations and the *longue durée* of world history, Walter Dignolo has steadfastly argued against an ethnocentric type of cosmopolitanism oriented along a conventional centre-periphery or West-and-the rest axis. What is needed is a more nuanced and pluralistic cosmopolitanism, one bleached of its exclusionary meanings and ties to imperializing global designs. In his view, only a “critical and dialogic cosmopolitanism”, attentive to the way coloniality is constitutive of modernity and accommodating of subaltern perspectives, can direct us to an ideal of “diversality”, or the idea of diversity as a universal project in a “pluricentric” world (2000, pp. 743–745). Amanda Anderson, in taking stock of recent strategic claims for cosmopolitanism, has noted how the term has gained especial currency in the search for ideals after the false dawn of Enlightenment universalism. As post-structuralist and post-colonial scholarship have demonstrated over the last few decades, Enlightenment universalism has often served throughout history as a smokescreen for forms of cultural imperialism, and exclusionary and discriminatory practices. Cosmopolitanism, Anderson points out, is useful at this historical juncture of cultural complexity and epistemological doubt not least for its capacity to be analytically meaningful on both intellectual and ethical planes. She celebrates “its linking of self-conscious positioning to the tasks of translation, receptivity to otherness, and the ongoing project of universalism” (2006, p. 92).

The self-reflexive critical approach to self and openness to Otherness that a reconfigured cosmopolitanism brings to the table certainly has direct pertinence for literature as a subject still often justified for study according to its suitability for revealing the abstract and universalizing liberal humanist notion of “the human condition”. Such reification of an ahistorical and depoliticized understanding of subjectivity may be seen in Singapore, too, where the current Literature in English syllabus document states, for example, that the “study of Literature in English can be an effective means for students to explore moral and social issues”, before proceeding to elaborate further with general statements like: “Literary works provide an effective way for students to appreciate and understand the different aspects of human nature, values and perspectives” (p. 1). Curricular statements like these are too vague and fail to capture a sense of the pressing social, political, ethical and cultural concerns energizing the world today. In contrast, Literature taught with the aim of cultivating a critically cosmopolitan sensibility should

and can aim instead to embrace the challenge of negotiating difference and multiplicity in a globalized world as these are represented in texts along the lines of class, race, ethnicity, national identity, sexuality or gender. Navigating difference and understanding how the frames and scales of the local, national, regional and global are constructed will, I think, be increasingly important demands on students in the future. Allan Luke has argued for a model of the teacher as a cosmopolitan to counter the by-now normative ways in which education systems of developed economies have appropriated marketing, business and corporate strategies of managing and assessing teachers. What he has written presents not only an ideal model for the Literature teacher but the Literature student as well. He notes,

What is needed is nothing short of the reenvisioning of a transcultural and cosmopolitan teacher: a teacher with the capacity to shunt between the local and the global, to explicate and engage with the broad flows of knowledge and information, technologies and populations, artefacts and practices that characterize the present historical moment. (2004, pp. 1438–1439)

The ideal teacher (and student) envisioned here is one who is adaptable and intellectually nimble, adept at sizing up the demands of context and history, as well as handling change and diversity. She is an active social agent rather than a passive onlooker swept away by the tide of ideas, information, and intercultural products.

In illuminating the ethical and intellectual pressure points of our historical moment, the ongoing attempts to recuperate cosmopolitanism disclose what the Singapore state's discourse on globalization, with its overwhelming focus on economics and high-end capitalism, tends to gloss over: a view of globalization as a highly uneven process that stratifies nations, communities and cultures. The resultant inequities and asymmetries in power relations are sources of conflict as well as opportunities for local and transnational alliances. Viewing globalization through this particular optic raises pressing questions about identity, democracy, social justice, national affiliation, and global citizenship. With this view of the global, one where individual, cultural, national and religious frameworks for meaning-making are constantly stress-tested, where migration, inequalities, cultural contradictions, ruptures, synchronicities, connections, and the politics of representation in a multi-textured world are brought to the fore, the study of literature as part of an indisputable component of the humanities starts to acquire some urgency. As Cathy Davidson and David Theo Goldberg, two leading scholars of the humanities and interdisciplinary study in the United States, put it, the humanities offers most vitally and critically "ways of comprehending world making" (2004, p. 60) as political conflict and technological changes accentuate the need for historical perspective, cultural knowledge, as well as a deeper consideration of the nature of the human and human action.⁵ In this case, the question of what makes us human (and humane) is different from the traditional assumption that there is an unvarying human condition in the first place due to its implicit recognition through its very formulation of the historicity of humanity and the historicity of thought. In a similar vein, the late Edward Said stressed the continuing relevance of humanist endeavour since "change is human history, and human history as made by human action and understood accordingly is the very ground of the humanities" (2004, p. 10).

Literature in Singapore, with its multicultural text list including Singapore writing, has the potential to allow for the cultivation of a critical cosmopolitanism.⁶ Because cosmopolitanism describes a disposition – as evident from Ulf Hannerz's well-known definition of it as "an orientation, a willingness to engage with the Other" and as "an intellectual and aesthetic stance of openness towards divergent cultural experiences..." (1990, p. 239) – it allows us to go beyond a discourse of skills cultivation as ultimate curricular and pedagogical goals.⁷ The Literature curriculum for secondary schools in

Singapore specifies, for example, lists of skills that students have to acquire as part of “doing” literature but these have the unhelpful effect of making the student of Literature appear disembodied and disengaged from any kind of social and cultural context. As an ideal disposition to strive towards, cosmopolitanism seeks to describe an attitude and an orientation towards other societies, cultures and perspectives that may be developed in the Literature classroom but which must surely outlive it. In one sense, it might appear that the cosmopolitical thinking that I am arguing for contradicts the long-awaited move of including Singapore writing as part of the Literature curriculum. This is hardly the case and the inclusion of Singapore texts on the syllabus is undeniably laudable. Teaching with a critical cosmopolitan perspective presents one with a good opportunity to re-engage rather than abandon the national by exploring the discursive construction of the local and the global. In a text like *Heartland*, for example, and in the work of many of the contemporary Singaporean poets who exhibit a cosmopolitan sensibility, teachers will face questions about the nature of attachment and belonging.⁸ Cosmopolitical thinking provides us with a way for interpreting, analysing and understanding the struggle in much contemporary writing in Singapore with the past, with increasingly de-territorialized notions of identity, and with a re-imagining of community and the nation informed by travel and global flows. Whatever the text chosen for literary study, a critical cosmopolitan approach would set it in conversation with other worlds, cultures and contexts as part of an emphasis on “glocalized literacy” (Luke & Carrington, 2004, p. 63) that can certainly use as one of its resources the fact that Singapore classrooms are becoming more multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-religious than ever before.

Conclusion

If we take seriously the state’s mission of wanting Singapore to be an open global city, we need to consider cosmopolitanism, conceived in its plural, self-reflexive and discrepant senses, as an ethical and intellectual ideal and to think of the pedagogical implications of having such an ideal. An open, dialogic Literature classroom where dealing with Otherness on all levels with a stress on the use of language, contextual knowledge and relational perspectives is encouraged must be an essential part of the architecture of the subject. Teaching literature with the broad goal of critical cosmopolitanism in mind can allow us to re-make the nation and the world. Only then, perhaps, can we lay to rest the ghost of irrelevance that has haunted Literature education in Singapore over the last 2 decades.

Notes

1. I capitalize the “I” in “Literature” when referring to it as a subject in Singapore schools.
2. It remains to be seen whether this recent move to include Singapore writing will eventually lead to a higher take-up rate for the subject.
3. Mission schools in Singapore traditionally refer to the missionary schools set up in the 19th and early 20th centuries by Christian missionaries representing the different Christian denominations. Today, these schools are part of the wider national school system; they are allowed to conduct prayers and provide religious instruction unlike other government schools which must be secular.
4. The English Language Syllabus 2010 may nevertheless have at least an indirect impact on literature education eventually as it makes a more explicit move to encourage the use of literary texts to impart language competency and fluency. Complementing the syllabus, the STELLAR (Strategies for English Language Learning and Reading) programme also seeks to broaden and intensify young students’ experience of language by employing an array of reading material including more children’s literature.

5. In Singapore's case, it is symptomatic of the peculiar invisibility that has dogged secondary school literature, that it is often not automatically seen as part of the Humanities. History and geography tend to assume the mantle of the Humanities more comfortably than literature, which sometimes falls through the gap between language and the Humanities, overlooked in subject descriptions and school department organizations – all bureaucratic arrangements which nevertheless reflect and perpetuate a particular compartmentalization of knowledge. I am grateful to my colleague, C. J. Wan-ling Wee, for highlighting this point.
6. Here is a sample of the Literature texts currently on the list: Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, Anita Desai's *Games at twilight*, Witi Ihimaera's *Whale rider*, Harper Lee's *To kill a mockingbird*, Daren Shiau's *Heartland*, and William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Note that the syllabus document does not spell out its principles of text selection.
7. Gunther Kress has also argued for an English curriculum that gives students "certain dispositions: confident in the face of difference – cultural, linguistic, ethnic, ethical – and confident in the everyday experience of change; able to see change and difference as entirely usual conditions of cultural and social life; and to see them as essential productive resources" (1995, p. 3).
8. *Heartland* is a Singaporean coming-of-age novel by Daren Shiau where the main protagonist, Wing, negotiates his emerging adult identity and sense of self in relation to the public housing or "heartland" neighbourhood of his childhood and a changing circle of friends.

References

- Anderson, A. (2001). *The powers of distance: Cosmopolitanism and the cultivation of detachment*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Anderson, A. (2006). *The way we argue now: A study in the cultures of theory*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Arnold, M. (1994). *Culture and anarchy*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Bacon, A. (Ed.). (1998). *The nineteenth-century history of English studies*. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate Publishing.
- Brock, G., & Brighouse, H. (2005). *The political philosophy of cosmopolitanism*. UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Cheah, P., & Robbins, B. (Eds.). (1998). *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and feeling beyond the nation*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Davidson, C., & Goldberg, D.T. (2004). Engaging the humanities. *Profession*, 42–62.
- Goh, C.T. (1999, August 22). *First-world economy, world-class home*. Prime Minister's National Day Rally Speech, Singapore. Retrieved November 18, 2009, from STARS (Speech-Text Archival and Retrieval System): <http://stars.nhb.gov.sg/stars/public/>
- Gopinathan, S. (2001). Globalization, the state and education policy in Singapore. In J. Tan, S. Gopinathan, & W.K. Ho (Eds.), *Challenges facing the Singapore education system today* (pp. 3–17). Singapore: Prentice-Hall.
- Gopinathan, S. (2007). Globalisation, the Singapore developmental state and education policy: A thesis revisited. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 5(1), 53–70.
- Green, A. (2007). Globalisation and the changing nature of the state in East Asia. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 5(1), 23–38.
- Hallak, J. (2000). Globalisation and its impact on education. In T. Mebrahtu, M. Crossley, & D. Johnson (Eds.), *Globalisation, educational transformation and societies in transition* (pp. 22–45). Oxford, UK: Symposium Books.
- Hannerz, U. (1990). Cosmopolitans and locals in world culture. In M. Featherstone (Ed.), *Global culture: Nationalism, globalization and modernity* (pp. 237–252). London: Sage.
- Holden, P. (1999). The great literature debate: Why teach literature in Singapore? In S.H. Chua & W.P. Chin (Eds.), *Localising pedagogy: Teaching literature in Singapore* (pp. 79–89). Singapore: National Institute of Education.
- Kress, G. (1995). *Writing the future: English and the making of a culture of innovation*. Sheffield, UK: National Association for the Teaching of English (NATE).
- Lee, M., & Gopinathan, S. (2005). Convergence or divergences? Comparing education reforms in Hong Kong and Singapore. In J. Zajda (Ed.), *International handbook on globalisation, education and policy research: Global pedagogies and policies* (pp. 253–278). The Netherlands: Springer.

- Luke, A. (2004). Teaching after the market: From commodity to cosmopolitan. *Teachers College Record*, 106(7), 1422–1443.
- Luke, A., & Carrington, V. (2004). Globalisation, literacy, curriculum practice. In T. Grainger (Ed.), *The RoutledgeFalmer reader in language and literacy* (pp. 52–65). New York: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Luke, A., Freebody, P., Lau, S., & Gopinathan, S. (2005). Towards research-based innovation and reform: Singapore schooling in transition. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, 25(1), 5–28.
- Macaulay, T.B. (1999). Minute on Indian education. In B. Harlow & M. Carter (Eds.), *Imperialism and orientalism: A documentary sourcebook* (pp. 56–62). Oxford, UK: Blackwell.
- Mignolo, W. (2000). The many faces of cosmo-polis: Border thinking and critical cosmopolitanism. *Public Culture*, 12(3), 721–748.
- Ministry of Education, Curriculum Planning and Development Division. (2010). *English Language Syllabus 2010. Primary and Secondary (Express/Normal [Academic])*.
- Ministry of Education, Singapore. (2009). *Mission and vision statement*. Retrieved November 18, 2009, from <http://www.moe.gov.sg/about/>
- Mok, K.H. (2007). Globalisation, new education governance and state capacity in East Asia. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 5(1), 1–21.
- Ong, A. (2006). *Neoliberalism as exception: Mutations in citizenship and sovereignty*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Pierre, J. (2000). *Debating governance*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Pollack, S., Bhabha, H., Breckenridge, C., & Chakrabarty, D. (2000). Cosmopolitanisms. *Public Culture*, 12(3), 577–589.
- Poon, A. (2007). The politics of pragmatism: Some issues in the teaching of literature in Singapore. *Changing English*, 14(1), 51–59.
- Renaissance city report: Culture and the arts in Renaissance Singapore*. (1999). Singapore: Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts.
- Report of the Committee on National Education*. (2007). Singapore: Ministry of Education.
- Said, E. (2004). *Humanism and democratic criticism*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Sassen, S. (2007). Introduction: Deciphering the global. In S. Sassen (Ed.), *Deciphering the global: Its scales, spaces and subjects* (pp. 1–18). New York: Routledge.
- Sharpe, L., & Gopinathan, S. (2002). After effectiveness: New directions in the Singapore school system? *Journal of Education Policy*, 17(2), 151–166.
- Shiau, D. (2006). *Heartland*. Singapore: Ethos Books.
- Singapore Examinations and Assessment Board. (2009). *Literature in English. GCE Ordinary Level (Syllabus 2014)*. Singapore: Author.
- Suaréz-Orozco, M., & Qin-Hilliard, D.B. (2004). Introduction. In M. Suarez-Orozco & D.B. Qin-Hilliard (Eds.), *Globalisation: Education and culture in the new millennium* (pp. 1–37). Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Viswanathan, G. (1989). *Masks of conquest*. New Delhi, India: Oxford University Press.
- Wee, C.J.W.-L. (2002). National identity, the arts, and the global city. In D. da Cunha (Ed.), *Singapore in the new millennium: Challenges facing the city-state* (pp. 221–242). Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.