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Literature Review on Singapore Literature in English

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This necessarily partial and selective report is offered in solidarity to fellow scholars of Singapore literature in English, Malay, Chinese and Tamil who may occasionally find the journey a lonesome one as they pursue their specific interests and contribute to scholarship with no guarantee of readership. This project may be viewed as part of the work of tracing an intellectual genealogy, one which situates present and future scholars in an ongoing conversation so that all may gain from the historical moorings we find in our intellectual antecedents and draw from a shared conceptual arsenal as we collectively seek to advance the field.

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Literature Review on Singapore Literature in English: Literary Criticism

Introduction

Literary criticism is, by its nature, a belated enterprise, coming as it must only after the creation of literary works. Singapore's anglophone literary tradition may be traced back to the nineteenth century, with the bulk of the writing in English about the Malayan region produced by British colonial officials and administrators such as Frank Swettenham and Hugh Clifford. Between 1897 and 1907, the quarterly periodical *The Straits Chinese Magazine* edited by prominent Straits Chinese personages, Lee Boon Keng and Song Ong Siang, featured poems, fiction and non-fiction, representing some of the earliest locally-produced works in English.

The first long poem in English by a writer from Singapore, *F.M.S.R. A Poem*, was published in London in 1937. It was written by Teo Poh Leng under the pseudonym Francis P. Ng. Teo was later killed in 1942 when the Japanese army invaded and occupied Singapore during World War II. After the war, literary writing in English was mainly undertaken by undergraduate students at Raffles College, which would eventually merge with the King Edward College of Medicine to become the University of Malaya in 1949. Their creative efforts were published in student magazines such as *The Cauldron* (1947-1949), *The New Cauldron* (1951-1956), and *Write* (1957-1959). As Edwin Thumboo notes, mentioning the poetry of Wang Gungwu and Goh Sin Tub, "The nerve to knock English about, and re-tune it for creativity, came with the founding of the University of Malaya in Singapore in October 1949" (1990, xvii). English, however, was the language of an educated elite and was not widely spoken by the mainstream population. Whatever commentary on literature at that time which existed tended to be caught up in the pressing debates about decolonisation and nationalism, and to centre on the cultural imperative to express and articulate a Malayan identity in writing, its many challenges notwithstanding. In 1950, Wang Gungwu was the first Malayan writer to publish a collection of poems in English, which he entitled *Pulse*, while Edwin Thumboo

published his debut book of poems, *Rib of Earth*, in 1956. Sinnathamby Rajaratnam's short story "The Tiger" appeared in 1958. Also appearing in 1958 was the poetry anthology *Litmus One*, a collection of university verse written between 1949-1957 by thirteen poets including Wang Gangwu, Edwin Thumboo and Oliver Seet. It is significant for gathering in one book for the first time some of the early attempts at poetry in English by Malaysians.

The writer Wong Phui Nam paints a stark picture of the impoverished cultural context of the 1950s and early 60s for Anglophone writing when he discusses poetic developments in that era following the establishment of the University of Malaya in Singapore in 1949. He writes:

For outside of the campus at that time there were no readers of poetry except a few isolated graduates from the university, no publishers, no language and literature institute of the newly independent Malaya giving encouragement and support to writers in English, no English departments in any university teaching or offering postgraduate courses in new literatures that included Malayan poetry in English, no interest from foreign universities in Malayan writing, no academics to convene international conferences where papers on Malayan writing would be read, and no scholars or critics who publish critiques on Malayan poets in any literary magazine or journal.

(92)

As Wong makes clear, the overall paucity of readers, teachers, scholars, and critics as well as the relative absence of institutional support meant that the conditions for literary production were hardly encouraging. Nevertheless, literature in English was slowly but surely in the process of taking distinct shape and form, especially with a second generation of English-language writers--Arthur Yap, Kirpal Singh, Robert Yeo, Wong May,

Chandran Nair, Goh Poh Seng, Catherine Lim, Lee Tzu Pheng, to name the main creative actors--who started publishing their poetry and fiction in the 1970s.

As creative writing in Singapore picked up pace, so then after a time and fashion did literary scholarship. In this regard, several historical milestones which testify to the growing presence of institutional support vital to national literary scholarship should be noted. The University of Singapore was set up in 1962 following the relocation of the University of Malaya campus to Kuala Lumpur. In 1980, this became the National University of Singapore (NUS) with a new campus at Kent Ridge. An English language and literature department has existed in Singapore since 1929 and it should be no surprise that many of the writers actively producing literature in Singapore in the post-war and post-independent period were also academics. Growing in tandem with the literary scene over the decades, the pool of literary scholars hailing from different universities locally and abroad who undertake research in anglophone Singapore literature has also slowly increased.

Literary criticism, it must be noted, is historically contingent and very much a product of its particular political and sociocultural moment. Scholars produce and offer their work in different publication venues and with diverse audiences in mind. Scholarship may also range from broad cultural matters of public interest to more specialised studies of particular significance only to students in the discipline and fellow academics in the field. In their commentary, literary critics and scholars often strive to illuminate the tradition from which the text emerges and the broader creative and literary landscape in which it is embedded while also paying close and sustained attention to the wide variety of historical, formal, stylistic, and theoretical issues that may affect the particularity of any given text.

In this report, I have adopted a largely chronological approach when it comes to presenting the scholarship on Singapore literature in English beginning with literary criticism in the 1970s to 1990s and then scholarship from the last two decades, 2001-2021. Early forms of criticism, broadly defined, were rare in the post-war period up to the 1970s. They were often impressionistic essays and book reviews rather than scholarship

as we tend to know it today—close studies of literary texts, literary history and culture written in formal academic discourse, subject to peer review, and mainly published in academic journals and scholarly books, the latter either monographs or edited critical collections.

Besides the critical work found in academic journals and books, literary scholarship encompasses a whole range of other practices such as editing, curating, anthologising, providing the critical apparatus of texts in the form of footnotes, interviewing creative writers, as well as writing book reviews, forewords, prefaces, encyclopedia entries and introductions to literary texts and anthologies. Such practices are valuable for contributing to a greater appreciation and understanding of a nation's literature and spurring further creative expression, even if they are not highly regarded or typically seen as 'research' by institutions of higher learning when evaluating an academic's professional achievements. Introductions to specific poets' books of poems or writers' prose works were and are often undertaken in the spirit of mentorship by more established writers themselves and/or academics. At the same time, introductions typically strive to locate the writer's creative output within a tradition of writing to orientate a readership encompassing the casual reader as well as students and scholars of Singapore literature. As far as possible and wherever relevant in this report, I have referenced critical introductions to certain milestone anthologies and single-author works. In discussing edited critical collections, many but not all individual chapters will be singled out for specific mention and discussion. In general, I have not included any book reviews and only a select number of seminar and conference proceedings, focusing instead on academic journal and book publications.

In presenting my account of the literary critical landscape, I owe a substantial debt to pioneering efforts and previous attempts at the same task—namely, Rajeev Patke's survey of a decade's worth of scholarship by National University of Singapore (NUS) academics (1985-1995) in his chapter "Singapore Literature in English" (1999) for the volume, *Singapore Studies II: Critical Surveys of the Humanities and Social Sciences*, edited by Chua Beng Huat; and the chapter surveying criticism of poetry, drama and

fiction before 1985 written by Arthur Yap, Max Le Blond and Kirpal Singh and published in *Singapore Studies I* with Basant K. Kapur as editor. Both chapters provide detailed bibliographies of literary criticism in the period before 1995. More specific mention of these chapters and their contents will be made at various points throughout the report. I also relied on Tim Yap Fuan's compilation of the literary criticism available in the National University of Singapore library collection, *Singapore Literature: A Select Bibliography of Critical Writings* (2000). This bibliography is divided into four main parts: Singapore literature, Singapore fiction, Singapore poetry and Singapore drama and theatre.

For literary criticism in the postmillennial section, I have organised and sub-divided the material into smaller segments (Overviews and Surveys; Monographs, Edited Collections and Special Issues; Author-centred Scholarship; Themes; Publicly-accessible Literary Criticism) in an attempt at greater clarity and coherence while also seeking to tease out as far as possible significant intellectual patterns and recurrent preoccupations. I conclude the report with some thoughts about possible avenues for future research in the field.

Literary Criticism: 1970-2000

Literary criticism and scholarship of Singapore literature in English in its recognisable modern form really only starts to emerge in a meaningful albeit tentative way in the 1970s. A bibliography of creative writing in English in Singapore compiled by the University of Singapore library in 1976 lists only seven entries under the category of 'History and Criticism,' and even then, not all the entries could be said to have been accurately classified.

In his section on early literary criticism of Singapore poetry in the chapter, "Singapore Literature in English" (1986) for the book *Singapore Studies I*, poet and linguistics academic Arthur Yap provides a comprehensive survey of the types of criticism written in the 1960s and 70s. He mentions numerous book reviews, introductions to writers and their work, introductions to anthologies, articles in university journals like *Focus* and

Commentary as well as essays in the bi-annual publication *Singapore Book World*. Max Le Blond's brief survey of relevant critical work on drama in the same chapter is perhaps telling for his forthright comment that "[t]hose working in the Singapore theatre [at this point] do not give a hoot for academic literary criticism" (478-479) although he does direct the reader to opinion pieces and papers by Robert Yeo and David Birch on drama and theatre. For his section in the chapter, Kirpal Singh provides a survey of prose fiction, declaring at the end when he predicts a more promising future for prose fiction:

Survey-type articles (of which there appears to be an abundance!) and ruminations on the more general, polemical issues connected with writing in English (of which there is also an abundance!) will have to give way to serious considerations of individual works or individual writers or of themes embodied in the fictions produced. (486)

As Singh mentions, a significant number of articles published in the 1970s and 80s provide literary surveys or expound on cultural development in Singapore, understandable enough given the relative newness of the nation's literature in English. Within such a milieu, the critic and scholar's priority and immediate aim must rather predictably be to introduce the literature to the local--and not even foreign--reader. One early example of an overview essay is Yap's *A Brief Critical Survey of Prose Writings in Singapore and Malaysia* published in 1971 by the Educational Publications Bureau where he presents fiction and non-fictional writing from the late nineteenth century to the present.

Edwin Thumboo's introductions to the pioneering literary anthologies *The Flowering Tree: Selected Writings from Singapore/ Malaysia* (1970), *Seven Poets: Singapore and Malaysia* (1973) and *The Second Tongue: An Anthology of Poetry from Malaysia and Singapore* (1976) constitute important attempts in the decade of the seventies at chronicling literary history, charting the challenges of navigating different linguistic and cultural traditions, and analysing the relatively young field of Singapore poetry in English

by home-grown poets for distinctive characteristics and shared features of national particularity. In his introduction to *Seven Poets* which features Ee Tiang Hong, Wong Phui Nam, Goh Poh Seng, Wong May, Mohammad Haji Salleh, Lee Tzu Pheng and himself, Thumboo acknowledges the literary debt of Singapore and Malaysian poets writing in English to canonical poets like Dylan Thomas and W.B. Yeats but notes that some “managed to absorb the influences into a distinguishable style without losing their own creative individuality” (xiii).

Singapore Writing edited by Chandran Nair and published in 1977 is a collection of poems and short stories either written in English or translated from Malay and Chinese into English. It contains three introductory essays that variously provide a history of Singapore literature and its current state in the late 1970s: “Creative Writing in Singapore” by Chandran Nair, “The Role of Writers in a Multi-racial Society” by Edwin Thumboo and “Poetry in English in the Seventies” by Robert Yeo. The essay by Thumboo urges translation of literary works in Malay, Chinese and Tamil into English so that this “will, in due course, open possibility of the literature in each language, reflecting not merely the life of its language community, but also the communities around them” (13). In *Creative Writing in Singapore* (1977), a volume edited by Nalla Tan and Chandran Nair which includes the proceedings of a seminar on developing creative writing in Singapore held in 1976, Edwin Thumboo discusses the issue of style among Singapore writers and the social responsibility of the writer in two essays respectively, “Developing A Distinctive Style in Local Writing: Notes and Speculations” and “The Role of the Writer in Society.”

Kirpal Singh also produced many essays in the 1970s championing Singapore literature and more particularly, analysing its poetry in English. These include “Achieving Maturity: Singapore Poetry in English” published in the Australian journal *Westerly* in 1976 and “Singaporean and Malaysian literature in English” published in the journal *Southern Review* by the University of Adelaide in 1977. Australian academic Bruce Bennett also produced work on Singapore poetry during this period—for example, his essay, “The Subdued Ego: Poetry from Malaysia and Singapore” (1978) where he notes the general reticence and self-censorship of poets from these two countries.

The three volumes of the *Anthology of ASEAN Literatures* dedicated to Singapore poetry and fiction and edited by Edwin Thumboo deserve particular mention for juxtaposing creative work written in all four languages with translations into English from Malay, Chinese and Tamil provided. In his general introduction to the multi-lingual volume on Singapore poetry published in 1985, Thumboo predicts, “While the four poetries had quite different starts and will always retain their distinctiveness, a degree of convergence, especially in theme, preoccupations, and perspectives will vary but the overlap will increase” (12). Following the volume on Singapore poetry, the two books showcasing Singapore fiction in four languages were published in 1990.

Reflecting the main concerns of this early period of nationhood when economic development was paramount, many scholars sought to explicate and account for the role of the Arts in a nation caught in the throes of rapid modernisation. This may be seen in Koh Tai Ann’s article, “The Singapore Experience: Cultural Development in the Global Village,” published in 1980 in *Southeast Asian Affairs*. Koh’s chapter in 1981, “Singapore writing in English: the literary tradition and cultural identity” published in *Literature and Society in Southeast Asia*, describes the cultural history and literary scene of Singapore from 1947 to 1980, beginning with the appearance of the student magazine *The Cauldron* published by the Literary and Debating Society of the Medical College Union. Koh surveys the efflorescence of poetry in the 1960s and 1970s, contrasting that with the paucity of prose writing in the 1970s. She also discusses the influence on local poetry of D.J Enright, professor of English at the University of Singapore, who first arrived in Singapore in 1960. Kirpal Singh argues for “An Approach to Singapore Writing in English” (1984) in an article published in *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature*. Quoting mainly the poetry of Edwin Thumboo, Lee Tzu Pheng and Arthur Yap, Singh concludes, “My own feeling is that the time has now come for Singapore literature to be examined and studied the way any other literature is examined and studied: no ‘special’ allowances need be made beyond context” (24). An earlier article by Singh—“Towards a Singapore Classic: Edwin Thumboo’s ‘Ulysses by the Merlion’” (1980)—analyses Thumboo’s poem, published only a year earlier, for the journal, *The Literary Criterion*. Jan Gordon also examines “Ulysses

by the Merlion” in “The Second Tongue Myth: English Poetry in Polylingual Singapore” (1984), observing, “One suspects that Singapore poetry will become much better when it stops judging itself against another ‘purer’ standard of English which is neither purer, nor better, nor worse, for creative purposes, only different” (56). Lee Tzu Pheng surveys Singapore poetry in her introduction to the *Anthology of ASEAN Literatures: The Poetry of Singapore* (1985), noting that “it would not be possible to claim that the poetry has made much of an inroad into the consciousness of the nation as a whole” (463). Nevertheless, as she argues of the poetic voices in Singapore literature, “Small as they are, in terms of their contribution to a literary tradition that can only in many generations to come take firmer shape, they are the beginnings of a new speech” (464). Shirley Lim also discusses questions of authenticity and identity in Singapore writing in her article, “Finding a Native Voice—Singapore literature in English” (1989) for the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*.

Koh Tai Ann discusses and compares *If We Dream Too Long* by Goh Poh Seng and Paul Theroux’s satirical expatriate novel, *Saint Jack*, which references Goh’s work, in her book chapter, “Intertextual Selves: Fiction-Makers in Two ‘Singapore’ Novels” (1984), in the edited collection, *Tropic Crucible*. According to Koh, both texts represent and comment on the social and cultural milieu of Singapore in the 1960s from different perspectives. Koh also compares the nationalist dilemma faced by postcolonial societies in her chapter, “The Empires’ Orphans: Stayers and Quitters in *A Bend in the River* and *Scorpion Orchid*” (1986).

Australian academic Anne Brewster considers literature of the postwar period of the 1950s and 1960s in two papers, “The Discourse of Nationalism and Multiculturalism in Singapore and Malaysia in the 50s and 60s” (1987) and *Towards a Semiotic of Post-Colonial Discourse: University Writing in Singapore and Malaysia, 1949-1965*, published by NUS’s Centre for Advanced Studies in 1989. Literature’s representation and evocation of the past, in particular the World War II years, is the focus of Robert Yeo’s paper, “Lim Thean Soo’s Fiction and the Japanese Past” (1987), and Arthur Yap’s short chapter, “Three Novels on Singapore’s Past: Description as a Narrative Feature” (1987), both

published in the edited collection, *The Writer's Sense of the Past: Essays on Southeast Asian and Australasian Literature*. Shirley Lim compares literature from Singapore and Malaysia in various articles such as "The Peranakan tradition in English language writing from Malaysia and Singapore" (1986) and "Voices from the Hinterland: Plurality and identity in the national literatures in English from Malaysia and Singapore" (1988). In his essay, "History, Language, Paradigms, Lacunae" for the collection *Literature and Liberation: Five Essays from Southeast Asia* which he also edited, Edwin Thumboo contemplates the idea of gradual liberation rather than dramatic political liberation for former colonies turned new nation-states. He writes that the latter notion "diverts attention from the fact that, as Third Worlders, we are liberated *from* a dispensation neither of our making nor of our choosing, *into* a dispensation of our own making" (124) (emphasis in original). Using his own poems as well as those from Muhammad Haji Salleh and Arthur Yap as illustration, he explores the difficulty of transforming society and mindsets, expressing cultural distinctiveness, and managing tensions such as those between national and individual interests.

Scholars in the 1980s often discuss anglophone Singapore literature in relation to the history and evolving place of the English language in the nation. They frequently note for example the discomfort felt by the English-language writer when the language is not his or her mother tongue. They also invariably discuss the failed experiment with EngMalChin, that attempt by writers in the 1950s to create a hybrid language for local expressive possibilities, as well as the increasing use of what we would now unanimously call 'Singlish' in Singapore literature as a marker of authenticity. Lee Kok Cheong considers the indigenisation of English in Singapore and the impact of this on creative writing in his book, *Language and Language Education* (1983). Articles that examine the local variety of English in poetry include John Platt and Kirpal Singh's "The use of localized English in Singapore poetry" published in the journal *English world-wide* in 1984. David Birch employs stylistics in his discussion of Singapore poetry in his chapter, "Cunning Beneath the Verbs: Demythologizing Singapore English Poetry" (1986), for the collection, *Discharging the Canon*. An account of developments in locally-written and produced drama is provided by Max Le Blond in his chapter for the same book, "Drama

in Singapore: Towards an English Language Theatre” (1986). In a paper “Singapore English on Stage” (1987), Robert Yeo also examines English-language theatre in Singapore from the 1960s to the present.

Related to English language development is the specific position and role of the English-language writer in Singapore which many scholars examine. Kirpal Singh considers the relationship between the Singapore writer and readership in his essay, “The Writer and His Audience in Singapore” (1986) for the journal *Solidarity*, musing over the implications of writing for different popular and serious readerships. The ideological tensions underlying the place of the English-language writer in Singapore is considered by Shirley Lim in her chapter for the collection *Management of Success: The Moulding of Modern Singapore* (1989). Here, quoting the poetry of Edwin Thumboo, Arthur Yap, Chandran Nair and Goh Poh Seng, she discusses the issue in relation to cultural identity, language policy, the state’s nation-building agenda, and extra-national literary concerns. Koh Tai Ann’s chapter in the same book, “Culture and the Arts,” provides a sociocultural context for understanding literature by considering more broadly arts and culture policies and the overall climate for creative expression in the nation.

Kirpal Singh’s edited volume, *Critical Engagements: Singapore Poems in Focus* (1986), published by Heinemann Asia brings together a group of scholars and writers each interpreting and explicating a chosen Singapore poem. A total of fifteen poems are discussed. Notably, Yasmine Gooneratne comments on Edwin Thumboo’s “Ulysses by the Merlion,” Shirley Lim on Arthur Yap’s “2 Mothers in a HDB Playground,” Anne Brewster on Yap’s “Dramatis Personae,” Kirpal Singh on Chandran Nair’s “Lallang,” A.V. Krishna Rao on Kirpal Singh’s “Palm Reading” and Robert Yeo on Wong May’s “The Shroud.” In focusing on close and careful reading of specific poems, the book is described as the first to be “wholly devoted to a serious discussion of poems written by Singaporeans” (back cover).

Centred around the theme and idea of exile, a collection of essays by Australian scholar Bruce Bennett published in 1988 includes several chapters discussing Singapore

literature. These include Edwin Thumboo's "Exile to Native in Singapore Poetries" that briefly seeks to compare Singapore poetry in the four official languages and Leong Liew Geok's analysis of World War II novels in "Alienation and the Pacific War: The Fiction of Lim Thean Soo and Chin Kee Onn." In this period, essays on Singapore literature could be found in collections that typically made use of the larger organising and conceptual logics of Commonwealth literature, Asian literature, Asia-Pacific literatures and postcolonial literature.

In "Self, Family and the State: Social Mythology in the Singapore Novel in English" (1989), Koh Tai Ann argues against adopting a solely evaluative approach towards Singapore fiction that would result in peremptory dismissal. Instead, she discusses six prose works—*If We Dream Too Long*, *Ricky Star*, *Rice Bowl*, *A Son of a Mother*, *The Serpent's Tooth*, *Raffles Place Ragtime*—and examines how they are "ideologically embedded in local circumstances" (287). In "Centers and the Fringe: Novels in English from Malaysia and Singapore" (1989), Shirley Lim discusses eight Malaysian and Singapore novelists "to interrogate how national identity is problematized through explorations of ethnicity, history, language, and social success" (137). Among the novels she examines are those published in the 1970s and 80s like *If We Dream Too Long*, *Ricky Star*, *Rice Bowl* and *Raffles Place Ragtime*.

Rajeev Patke's chapter for *Singapore Studies II* contains a comprehensive bibliography of critical interpretive work on Singapore literature in English from 1985 to 1995. Entitled "Singapore Literature in English" (1999), it is a survey of critical work by, among others, Koh Tai Ann, Kirpal Singh, Edwin Thumboo, John Kwan-Terry, Arthur Yap, Leong Liew Geok, Ismail Talib, Shirley Lim, and Anne Brewster. His bibliography extends to encyclopaedic entries, introductions to creative work, and newspaper articles. Patke notes that "the body of individuals associated at various times and for varying periods with the Department of English Language and Literature has produced the bulk of the significant critical and scholarly work in the field for the decade (46). Some of the entries which appear in Patke's bibliography are looked at in greater detail below.

The 1990s saw the publication of significant work more sustainably dedicated to Singapore literature in English. Scholars in this period analyse and write about literature in relation to a wide range of issues, adopting eclectic critical lenses. Survey-type essays also continue. Koh Tai Ann, for example, considers the production of fiction by Singapore writers in her 1990 article in the journal *Tenggara*, “Telling Stories, Expressing Values: The Singapore Novel in English.” Robert Yeo reviews the short story in Singapore in his article for *Tenggara*, “The Singapore Short Story” (1990), where he notes the lack of experimentation among short story writers in their adherence to social realist styles. He discusses the impact of censorship on drama and dramatists in Singapore in his article, “Theatre and Censorship in Singapore” (1994). In their introduction to the two volumes of the *Anthology of ASEAN Literatures* dedicated to Singapore fiction, Dudley de Souza and Arthur Yap provide a literary history of imaginative prose written in English, commenting on writers’ background, available avenues for publication, and common themes in the writing. In “Conversion of the Tribes: Societal Antecedents and the Growth of Singapore Poetry” (1990), Edwin Thumboo traces the dynamic between a writer’s individual self and the collective self in the development of Singapore poetry. In addition, the decade of the nineties also saw more than thirty entries on Singapore literature in English contributed to the multi-volume *Encyclopedia of Post-Colonial Literatures in English* published by Routledge in 1994.

Several chapters of *Perceiving Other worlds* (1991), a critical collection edited by Edwin Thumboo and based on a symposium held in Singapore in 1989, are devoted to Singapore literature in English. There are chapters on Singapore poetry like John Kwan-Terry’s “Ulysses Circling the Merlion: The Invention of Identity in Singapore Poetry in English and Chinese,” “A Problematic of Identity: Margaret Leong in Singapore” by Shirley Lim and “‘People, Traffic and Concrete’: Perceptions of the City in Modern Singaporean Poetry” by Dennis Haskell. This edited collection also contains several personal essays by writers contemplating their identity, creative work, and place in Singapore, for example, Robert Yeo’s “Coming Home: Perceiving Others and Finding Self,” Stella Kon’s “Cross Cultural Influences in the Work of a Singapore Writer,” and Catherine Lim’s “The Writer as a Cultural Anomaly.”

Literary scholarship in this last decade of the twentieth century and about twenty-five years after English was adopted as the country's first language continues to focus on the relationship between the language and its literature. In "Second Tongue to Mother Tongue: A Look at the Use of English in Singapore English Drama from the 1960s to the Present," Jothie Rajah and Simon Tay closely examine the language of several plays including Robert Yeo's *One Year Back Home* and Stella Kon's *Emily of Emerald Hill*. In "Singapore Writing in English: A Need for Commitment" (1993), Edwin Thumboo takes stock of literary developments, citing his poetry and that of Arthur Yap and Geraldine Heng to assert that English "is now growing into our likeness" and that a viable literary tradition in the language continually sustained by and sensitive to the local is being forged. Ismail S. Talib provides a linguistic and historical account of English language development and use in Singapore before examining Rex Shelley's employment of what he calls "Singaporean English" in *The Shrimp People*, in his article, "The Development of Singaporean Literature in English" (1994). An introduction to Singapore literature in English from a literary stylistics angle may also be found in his chapter, "Singaporean Literature in English" (1998), for the edited book, *English in New Cultural Contexts: Reflections from Singapore*.

Koh Tai Ann, Leong Liew Geok and Shirley Lim are three scholars who have consistently highlighted writing by Singaporean women in their criticism. In her article, "The National Canon and English-language Women Writers from Malaysia and Singapore, 1949-1969" (1990), Lim attempts to chart a tradition of women's writing, "to light up an area of invisibility" (159). Explaining the social and cultural conditions which may lead to a neglect of women writers, she examines the work of early women writers like Hedwig Aroozoo, Cecile Parrish, Wong May, and Margaret Leong. Lim has also considered women's war writing in her article, "Up against the national canon: Women's war memoirs from Malaysia and Singapore" (1993). Koh Tai Ann provides a brief survey of Singapore women's writing in "The Sun in Her Eyes: English by Singapore Women" (1994) while Leong's 1997 conference paper, "Situating Gender, Evolving Identities", later published in *Singaporean Literature in English: A Critical Reader*, considers fiction by Catherine Lim

and Suchen Christine Lim, drawing especial attention to their representation of modern Chinese women and their struggles with patriarchal demands at work and in marriage and family matters. Other articles on Singapore women writers by Koh include "Sing to the Dawn: Novels in English by Singaporean Women" (1994) and "History/His Story as Her Story: Chinese Women's Biographical Writing from Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore" (1995). Leong compares the poetry of Lee Tzu Pheng, Shirley Lim and Wong May in her essay, "The Poetics of History: Three Women's Perspectives" (1995), writing, "The sense of history is irrevocably linked to a felt and experienced sense of place, positively attested to by Lee Tzu Pheng and Shirley Lim, and negatively, by default, in Wong May" (441). In her chapter for *Interlogue*, "The extravagance of our need: Lyrical Poetry and Community in the work of Lee Tzu Pheng," Anne Brewster examines Lee's construction of an inner life for the self.

The relationship between Singapore anglophone literature, the nation, and national identity is a central stand in much scholarship. Kirpal Singh, for example, considers this theme in two book chapters, "Singapore English literature: Regionalism and the question of national identity" (1990) and "Inter-ethnic responses to nationhood: Identity in Singapore poetry" (1992). In his chapter "Staying close but breaking free: Indian writers in Singapore" (1992) for *Reworlding: The Literature of the Indian Diaspora*, Singh considers the work of writers in Singapore with South Asian heritage including himself, Edwin Thumboo, Chandran Nair and Gopal Baratham. Koh Tai Ann discusses the relationship between literature and the wider society in her chapter for the book *Malaysia and Singapore: Problems and Prospects*, "The impact of literature on society in Singapore" (1992). Ruth Morse's article, "Novels of National Identity and Inter-National Interpretation" also published in 1993 is a rare piece that attempts to articulate what "outsider criticism" might look like when it comes to scholars from other literary traditions commenting on the country's literature. Seeking to go beyond the idea that "critical discourse and aesthetic evaluation [is] merely a trick of Western imperialism" (60), she undertakes analysis of Catherine Lim's *The Serpent's Tooth*, Suchen Christine Lim's *Rice Bowl* and Stella Kon's *The Scholar and the Dragon*. Focusing on the work of Philip Jeyaretnam, Philip Holden critiques the patriarchal and masculinist ideologies of the ruling

party's nationalism in "Resisting Colonial Masculinity in Philip Jeyaretnam's *Abraham's Promise*" (1998). In "Dissenting Voices: Political Engagements in the Singapore Novel in English" (2000), Leong Liew Geok examines narrative interrogations of oppressive state power and one-party dominance in three novels: *Fistful of Colours*, *A Candle or the Sun*, and *Abraham's Promise*.

Shirley Lim's monograph *Nationalism and Literature: English-Language Writing from the Philippines and Singapore* (1993) discusses the implications of postcolonial theory for Southeast Asia, in particular the Philippines and Singapore. She considers the place of the English-language writer in Singapore and discusses the poetry of Edwin Thumboo and Arthur Yap in two separate and substantial chapters. She sees both poets as engaged in responding to the forces of nation-building but Thumboo "writes a discourse of cultural conversion" while Yap writes one of "cultural subversion" (156). Lily Rose Tope's work, *(Un)Framing Southeast Asia: Nationalism and the Postcolonial Text in English in Singapore, Malaysia and the Philippines* (1998), compares Singapore writing to literatures from Malaysia and the Philippines in terms of decolonisation, nationalism and nation-building.

A scholar who has done substantial work on colonial writing in Singapore and the early beginnings of literature in English in nineteenth-century Singapore is Philip Holden. He is the first to examine *The Straits Chinese magazine*, an early English-language publication, produced and circulated in the last decade of the nineteenth century in "Colonial Fiction, Hybrid Lives: Early Singaporean Fiction in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*" published in the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* in 1998. Holden sees the magazine as a crucial starting point in the growth of a distinctly Singaporean voice in literature. Holden's monograph, *Modern subjects/colonial texts: Hugh Clifford & the discipline of English literature in the Straits Settlements & Malaya, 1895-1907*, (2000) considers Clifford's dual position as a colonial administrator and a writer of Malayan novels, short stories, and sketches. Using the Foucauldian notions of governmentality and technologies of the self, he discloses how Clifford attempts in his fiction to discipline his readers to establish a normative colonial masculinity. In his article, "On the Nation's Margins: The Social Place

of Literature in Singapore" (2000), Holden examines the institution of literary studies from colonial times to the immediate decades after Singapore gained self-rule in 1959. Contributions to scholarship on Singapore's literary history during this last decade also include Koh Tai Ann's chapter for the book *Chinese Adaptation and Diversity*, "Literature in English by Chinese in Malaya/ Malaysia and Singapore: its origin and development" (1993). Also adding to and widening Singapore's literary history, Robbie Goh's article, "Composing the Modern Nation: Mission School Magazines, Literary Models and Cultural Typologies in Colonial Singapore" (2001) analyses Christian mission schools in Singapore and school magazine discourse to disclose the didactic and dialogic impulses present which suggest continuity with colonialism as well as emergent nationalism.

Critical scholarship on various writers but especially Edwin Thumboo also gathers pace in the 1990s. Ee Tiang Hong's close study of Thumboo's poetry in *Responsibility and commitment: the poetry of Edwin Thumboo* was completed in 1989, just before Ee's death a year later. Ee's manuscript was edited by Leong Liew Geok and published in 1997. Other articles focused on Thumboo include Leong Liew Geok's article, "'We must make a people': The Lyric Enterprise of Edwin Thumboo" (1999) and Bruce Bennett's "Edwin Thumboo—The Poet as Traveller" (1999) both published in *Interlogue: Studies in Singapore Literature*, Volume 2: Poetry. Leong describes Thumboo's lyrics as "authoritative, vigorous didactic; at times rhetorical, at others strident and sentimental" (46) while Bennett moves away from the nation-building focus of Thumboo's poetry to explore the poetic representations of himself as a traveller. Rajeev Patke analyses Thumboo's canonical poem, "Ulysses by the Merlion," alongside Lee Tzu Pheng's response in "The Merlion to Ulysses" in his critical essay, "Singapore and the Two Ulysses" (2000). Other writers whose creative work attracted literary criticism during this period include Robert Yeo, Arthur Yap, Lee Tzu Pheng and Gopal Baratham. In "The Poetry of Robert Yeo" (1996), Michael Wilding reads Yeo's poems as personal ones marking moments in individual consciousness together with historical developments in Singapore as a young nation.

A series of books called Times Prizewinning Writers published by Times Books features close analysis of the work of writers such as Lee Tzu Pheng, Catherine Lim, and Gopal Baratham. Besides a long critical essay about the writer in focus, each book also contains an annotated bibliography and interview with the writer. *Women in Bondage: The Stories of Catherine Lim* (1999) by Lim Yi-En delves into Lim's feminist politics in her treatment of variously oppressed and enslaved women. In *Silences May Speak: The Poetry of Lee Tzu Pheng* (1999), Felicia Chan argues that Lee's poetry creates "a third space out of the interaction between the opposing positions" (63) of speech and silence. In *Of Memory and Desire: The Stories of Gopal Baratham* (2000), Ban Kah Choon discusses Baratham's interest in spirituality, politics, and art.

The series, *Interlogue: Studies in Singapore Literature*, published by local publisher Ethos Books over the period 1998 to 2009, and with Kirpal Singh as the General Editor, is significant for its attempt to promote scholarship about anglophone Singapore literature. As Singh explains in "A Note on the Series," "A nation's history is reflected in its Literature. As such the Literature must be studied, and studied not only by those who 'belong' to the nation in terms of citizenship, but also by those who 'belong' in terms of affinity, encounter, imagination and scholarship." The series is divided into several volumes dedicated to studying creative output in the three main genres and specific writers. Volume 1 (1998) is devoted to Fiction, Volume 2 (1999) to Poetry and Volume 3 (2000) to Drama. The other volumes published after the year 2000 will be mentioned in the next section of this report.

Interpretive criticism on Singapore fiction in Volume 1 (1998) focuses on writers like Lim Thean Soo, Rex Shelley, Catherine Lim, Suchen Christine Lim, Gopal Baratham, Colin Cheong, and Tan Mei Ching. Two chapters in the volume by Rajeev Patke and Dennis Haskell consider the novel *Abraham's Promise* by Philip Jeyaretnam from different critical perspectives. Syed Nasir Raza Kazmi considers memoirs about the war and immediate post-war years including those by British army personnel in "Memorial Reconstructions: Trends in Biography and Autobiography" while Kirpal Singh ends the volume with an interview with writer, Hwee Hwee Tan.

Volume 2 of *Interlogue*, published in 1999, is edited by Singh and focused on Singapore poetry. The poets considered include Edwin Thumboo, Lee Tzu Pheng, Arthur Yap, Robert Yeo and David Leo. There are essays such as Rajeev Patke's "Voice and Authority in English Poetry from Singapore" and "'Authority' in Modern Singapore Poetry" by Dennis Haskell. In the latter, Haskell argues that "Singapore poetry in English grows to a large extent from awareness of the limitations of language, prodding at silence, reaching for emotional and metaphysical meaning" (32). Tope Omoniyi considers "elements of Singaporeanness" in the poetry he examines in his chapter, "Island in Verse: Constructing Identity from Singaporean Poetry." In his chapter, "Dirty Green: Reflections on Contemporary Singapore Poetry in English", Chelva Kanaganayakam examines poetry from Leong Liew Geok, Nirmala Purushotam, Koh Buck Song and Simon Tay, discerning in their work "the confidence of having forged a local idiom that is capable of capturing the complexities of contemporary experience" (148).

The volume on drama (2000) contains essays about the development of Singapore theatre, the cultural politics of theatre-going in Singapore and studies of individual plays like Ovidia Yu's *The Woman in the Tree on the Hill*. Other chapters provide studies on playwrights such as Kuo Pao Kun, Stella Kon, Robert Yeo and Eleanor Wong. David Birch discusses forum theatre in relation to the theatre company, The Necessary Stage, in his chapter, "The Necessary Stage and the Cultural Politics of Redefining the Audience", while Tan Chong Kee and Roger Winder consider the politics of representing AIDs and homosexuality on the Singapore stage in their respective chapters.

The collection *Singaporean Literature in English: A Critical Reader* edited by Mohammad Quayum and Peter Wicks (2002) is in many ways a fitting way to end this section. It is a compilation and re-printing of various articles of literary scholarship published in different venues and mainly from 1980 to 2000, with a few essays from the 1970s included. I have mentioned and discussed some of these articles earlier in this section. The editors divide literary criticism according to specific genre focus--poetry, drama and fiction. Additionally, the book also features interviews with authors Edwin Thumboo, Robert Yeo, Catherine Lim, Kuo Pao Kun, Kirpal Singh and Lau Siew Mei. It highlights scholarship devoted to

these writers and to others like Rex Shelley, Gopal Baratham, Suchen Christine Lim and Philip Jeyaretnam.

Literary Criticism: 2001-2021

In the new millennium, a younger generation of literary scholars at universities in Singapore and abroad have begun to add to the corpus of literary criticism. The amount of literary scholarship has in a sense grown considerably with an array of critical approaches and inter-disciplinary methods employed as well as texts and writers studied. One notable development is the increased publication of literary criticism in a wider range of peer-reviewed and international academic journals and academic presses beyond Singapore and the region.

a) Overviews and Surveys

Critical surveys and historical overviews of the literary landscape continue to occupy an important place in literary scholarship. They may come in different forms such as journal articles covering specific areas of genre or theme, anthology introductions, and bibliographies. Gwee Li Sui's article, "Poetry and the Renaissance Machine in Singapore" published in *Harvard Asia Quarterly* in 2005 attempts to account for poetic developments in the economically pragmatic nation-state. Beginning with Edwin Thumboo, he also discusses Lee Tzu Pheng, Boey Kim Cheng, and a subsequent younger generation of poets born after political independence in 1965 like Alvin Pang, Cyril Wong and Alfian Sa'at. He concludes his historical survey by asking, "Will the gloriously stupid pursuit of common literariness ever be deemed worthwhile in Singapore especially if it demands much schematic back-peddalling, even if it may prove advantageous at length only by accident?" (39). In 2008, *Singapore Literature in English: An Annotated Bibliography* compiled and edited by Koh Tai Ann, was published by the National Library Board (NLB) and the Centre for Liberal Arts and Social Sciences, Nanyang Technological University (NTU). The "first annotated and most comprehensive bibliography to date [up to end 2007] of the entire body of 'Singapore Literature in English'" (5) comprising entries on novels,

short stories, poetry and plays, the annotated bibliography has since gone digital as one of NTU Library's Digital Projects (<https://blogs.ntu.edu.sg/singaporeliterature/>) with the aim of being a complete and continually updated archive of Singapore literature in English in order to facilitate further research.

The book *Sharing Borders: Studies in Contemporary Singaporean-Malaysian Literature II*, edited by Gwee Li Sui, contains three essays which provide surveys of particular genres in Singapore literature in English in the later decades of the twentieth century and early years of the twenty-first. In "Singaporean Fiction after 1965: A Critical Survey" (2009), Eddie Tay considers the way post-independent fiction "engages with originary cultures, everyday social-political discourses, and issues pertaining to transnationalism" (197). Authors considered include Daren Shiau, Wena Poon, and Colin Cheong. Cyril Wong's "Nationalism and Interiority: Reflections on Singaporean Poetry from 1980s to 1990s" (2009) and Gwee's "The New Poetry of Singapore" (2009) are two chapters which consider the work of poets like Leong Liew Geok, Paul Tan, Angeline Yap, Alvin Pang, Aaron Lee, Eddie Tay, Yeow Kai Chai, Cyril Wong and Koh Jee Leong.

In their guide, *The Routledge Concise History of Southeast Asian Writing in English* (2009), Rajeev Patke and Philip Holden include an account of the history of Singapore literature in English, considering its specific linguistic context while also surveying the country's contemporary fiction, poetry and drama. Also in 2009, Angelia Poon, Philip Holden and Shirley Lim co-edited the first ever historical anthology of Singapore literature in English entitled *Writing Singapore* and published by the National University of Singapore (NUS) Press. In the book, each co-editor provides a comprehensive introduction to the three periods of literature under review focusing mainly on fiction and poetry with some mention of theatre—Section 1: Literature in English before 1965; Section 2: 1965-1990; and Section 3: 1990-present. A more recent critical survey published by Weihsin Gui in 2017/8 entitled "Contemporary Literature from Singapore" provides an overview of the field's most pertinent issues including discussion of relatively less well-researched areas like LGBTQ-themed writing, the role of anthologies in the country's literary tradition, and the increasing prominence of genre fiction in Singapore writing. It is

published online in the *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature*, a digital encyclopedia.

A few differently-organised anthologies published in this period also contain introductions which provide varying extents of literary history and analysis. *Gaspp: A Gay Anthology of Singapore Poetry and Prose* (2010) offers a brief history of queer literature in history by editors Ng Yi-Sheng, Dominic Chua, Irene Oh and Jasmine Seah. *An Anthology of English Writing from Southeast Asia* (2012) includes representative texts from Singapore literature in English from all three genres of poetry, drama and prose fiction. Divided according to ten themes like “Place, Religion and Folk Culture,” “Country and Nation,” “Gender and Sexuality” and “Travel and Diaspora,” each thematic section of the anthology begins with a critical introduction in which Singapore literature is juxtaposed and compared with English writing mainly from the Philippines and Malaysia but also from Thailand and Myanmar. An unconventional anthology which chronicles not literary history but the Singapore nation’s history through selected extracts of literary texts is Gwee Li Sui’s *Written Country: The History of Singapore through Literature* in 2016. In 2018, a primer about the histories of Singapore’s literatures in the four official languages (English, Malay, Mandarin and Tamil) entitled *Literature* was published by Straits Times Press as part of its Singapore Chronicles series. The main editor and one of the writers, Koh Tai Ann, explains that the book is “the first book to narrate in English, within a handy volume and the same time-frame, the parallel literary histories of the four literatures to date” (8). Koh’s brief survey of anglophone literature charts the development of Singapore writing in English beginning with its first generation of writers and ending in the year 2017 to highlight the work of a younger generation of writers like the poet, Theophilus Kwek.

Focused solely on the Singapore novel in English, Philip Holden provides a brief historical overview of the form and its development in the country in his chapter for the *Oxford History of the Novel in English in South Asia and Southeast Asia* (2019). Citing Sandi Tan’s *The Black isle* and Sonny Liew’s *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye*, he concludes that “As Singapore’s unique social and political model faces new stresses, challenges, and opportunities, one of the most significant developments has been the reinvention of

the novel as a way of narrating national pasts and imagining futures” (350). Also in the same book as Holden’s chapter is Ismail Talib’s overview of English language use in the Singapore novel and the challenge of representing multilingual societies entitled “Language in the Malaysian and Singaporean Novel in English.”

Although not an overview or survey in the same sense as the above articles and books, volumes 4 and 8 of the *Interlogue: Studies in Singapore Literature* series initiated by Kirpal Singh are collections of interviews with a broad range of key Singapore writers. Edited by Ronald Klein, they were published in 2002 and 2009 respectively. There are sixteen interviews in the first volume with such writers as Gopal Baratham, Catherine Lim, Suchen Christine Lim, Eleanor Wong, Rex Shelley, and Koh Buck Song. Volume 8 contains twelve interviews with writers such as Felix Cheong, Madeleine Lee, Yong Shu Hoong, Ovidia Yu, Alfian Sa’at, Ng Yi-Sheng and Cyril Wong.

b) Monographs, Edited Collections and Special Issues

As an important sign of developing scholarship in the field, monographs, edited critical collections, and special journal issues devoted substantially or entirely to Singapore Literature in English also make a more frequent appearance during this period. More often than not, at least in the beginning decade of the new millennium, Singapore literature and Malaysian literature in English tended to be studied and discussed together as a result of the two countries’ shared history and cultural traditions.

Tamara Wagner’s monograph, *Occidentalism in Novels of Malaysia and Singapore, 1819-2004: Colonial and Postcolonial Financial Straits and Literary Style* (2005), discusses a wide range of fiction including colonial writing and postcolonial popular texts produced by Singaporean, Malaysian and diasporic writers. She examines the concept of occidentalism, distinguishing between its “emulative” and “revisionist” forms, while also disclosing how writers deploy occidentalism alongside and against orientalism or Graham Huggan’s “postcolonial exotic” in Singapore and Malaysian novels. Occidentalism is also related to the representation of commercial and financial values in these fictional texts. As

Wagner explains, “[w]hat links all these very different analysed texts together is an interest in money and its symbolic roles in conflicting value systems and their literary representations—an interest that capitalises very pointedly on the vexed issue of (a) literature’s value(s)” (14). Some of the Singapore novels Wagner considers are Daren Shiau’s *Heartland*, Claire Tham’s *Skimming*, Wee Kiat’s *Women in Men’s Houses*, Suchen Christine Lim’s *Fistful of Colours*, Lau Siew Mei’s *Playing Madame Mao*, Catherine Lim’s *Following the Wrong God Home*, Gopal Baratham’s *Moonrise, Sunset* and Rex Shelley’s Eurasian spy-novels. In his Preface to the book, Ismail Talib hails Wagner’s monograph as “the first book-length thematic analysis of Singaporean and Malaysian fiction in the language [i.e. English] written by a single author and published by an international publisher” (xvi).

In her 2009 book, *Different Voices: The Singaporean/ Malaysian Novel*, published with the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Rosaly Puthuchearry focuses on the linguistic strategies of writers in their representation of character speech and speaking within the multilingual environments of Malaya, Singapore and Malaysia. She considers a total of twelve novels including Suchen Christine Lim’s *Rice Bowl*, Rex Shelley’s *The Shrimp People*, Philip Jeyaretnam’s *Abraham’s Promise* and Fiona Cheong’s *Shadow Theatre*. Eddie Tay’s *Colony, Nation, and Globalization: Not at Home in Singaporean and Malaysian Literature* published by NUS Press in 2011 examines the politics of home and the attendant questions and anxieties about identity that are raised. In three sections arranged chronologically, he covers a wide range of texts starting with works by British colonial administrators and travel writers to writing in the newly independent nations of Singapore and Malaysia and finally to contemporary fictional texts which address the impact of globalisation on the meaning and sense of home. Works of different prose genres considered by Tay include *Abraham’s Promise*, *A Candle or the Sun*, *Mammon Inc.*, *Alien Asian*, *Breaking the Tongue* and *Playing Madame Mao*. Considering ideas of displacement, deracination and denaturalisation, he writes, “By engaging with debates pertaining to colonialism, nation formation, and globalisation, I argue that Anglophone literary works about colonial Malaya and independent Singapore and Malaysia are projects that invariably narrate a condition wherein one is not at home” (1).

The journal *Moving Worlds: A Journal of Transcultural Writings* hosted a special issue entitled “Reviewing Singapore” in 2010 mainly focused on Arts and cultural development in Singapore as well as the role and priorities of the state. Contributions to the issue include essays about Singapore film, theatre and contemporary art with one article on poetry by Neil Murphy, “‘A way of happening, a mouth’: Public Transactions and Interior Spaces in the Poetry of Singapore.” Here, Murphy considers the poetry of Arthur Yap and Boey Kim Cheng, arguing that the “silences, and interior musing, the self-reflexive fascination and sophisticated grasp of the lyric mode” in their writing “were derived first and foremost from an aesthetic sense of the form in which they worked” (182). A thirtieth anniversary special issue focused on Singapore and Malaysian literatures was also published in the journal, *SARE: Southeast Asian Review of English*, in 2010/ 2011 and edited by Koh Tai Ann, Neil Murphy and Susan Philip. Specific articles from this special issue will be mentioned in subsequent sections of this report.

Edited volumes of critical essays by a cast of academics and writers contribute to the growing scholarship in this period. A two-part collection comprising a total of twenty-nine essays entitled *Sharing Borders: Studies in Contemporary Singaporean-Malaysian Literature* was published by the National Library Board of Singapore in 2009, with Edwin Thumboo as General Editor. Both books are part of the *Writing Asia: The Literatures in Englishes* series. The first book is edited by Mohamad Quayum and Wong Phui Nam and contains literary historical accounts of the beginnings of Malayan literature in English as well as critical essays focused on writers like Goh Poh Seng, Edwin Thumboo, Gopal Baratham, Stella Kon and Rex Shelley. Two chapters in the book which focus on early literary history are Neil Khor’s “A History of the Anglophone Straits Chinese and their Literature” and Wong Phui Nam’s “In the Beginning: University Verse in the First Decade of the University of Malaya” where he considers pioneering poets Thumboo, Wang Gungwu, Ee Tiang Hong and Oliver Seet. Edited by Gwee Li Sui, the second volume continues the literary historical and critical work of the first and is solely focused on writers typically designated as either Singaporean or Malaysian rather than Malayan. It contains chapters devoted to Arthur Yap, Lee Tzu Pheng, Boey Kim Cheng and Philip Jeyaretnam.

Further mention of specific chapters from both books will be made in the following sections.

In 2016, a special issue on Singapore literature co-edited by Weihsin Gui and Cheryl Narumi Naruse was published in the journal *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*. In their introduction, the editors outline the ways in which scholars might productively investigate the intersections between neoliberalism and postcoloniality in Singapore, an especially important and fraught site of study in view of the country's embrace of globalisation together with its attendant, often exuberant, discourse. At the same time, current concerns about social inequality, race relations, and migrant labor complicate the interactional dynamics involved. Specific articles from this issue will be discussed in subsequent sections below.

A critical collection devoted solely to Singapore literature, *Singapore Literature and Culture: New Directions in Local and Global Contexts*, comprising work by scholars based in Singapore and abroad, was edited by Angelia Poon and Angus Whitehead and published by Routledge in 2017. It contains chapters examining different genres, themes and various writers of Singapore literature. Writers considered by scholars in this book include Gopal Baratham, Goh Poh Seng, Philip Jeyaretnam, Simon Tay, Sinnathamby Rajaratnam, Claire Tham, Wong May and Catherine Lim. Some individual chapters will be discussed in the sections below.

Lastly, mention must be made of Ismail Talib's annual compilation and review of Singapore literary publications in the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* since the year 1999. The annual reviews for the years 1999 to 2003 pertained only to Singapore literature in English. From 2004 onwards, the review surveyed the anglophone literatures of both Singapore and Malaysia published each year.

c) Author-centred Scholarship

Surveying the secondary literature produced about the nation's anglophone literature, it is clear that certain writers have become the privileged focus of scholarly attention and assumed canonical status. Poets whose work have been subject to critical scrutiny include, not unexpectedly, Edwin Thumboo, Arthur Yap and Boey Kim Cheng. Literary scholarship in this regard helps maintain and undergird these writers' continued canonical status.

Several essays on Edwin Thumboo may be found in the edited collection, *Ariels: Departures and Returns* (2001), a book published in tribute to him and focused on the thematic of cultural hybridity in language and literature. The essays include Dennis Haskell's "Singapore from the Battlements: Edwin Thumboo and the Yeats Connection," "Thumboo's *David*" by Jonathan J. Webster and "Edwin Thumboo and A.D. Hope: Island Men and their Communities" by Bruce Bennett. Volume 7 of the *Interlogue* series is a study of Edwin Thumboo and his work by Peter Nazareth; published in 2008, it is entitled *Edwin Thumboo: Creating a Nation through Poetry*. Patke considers the work of Edwin Thumboo in his chapter, "The Poetry of Edwin Thumboo" in the 2009 book *Sharing Borders: Studies in Contemporary Singaporean–Malaysian Literature I*, concluding that Thumboo's poems are those of "a humane humanist" (189). The book, *Reflecting On The Merlion: An Anthology Of Poems*, published in 2009 contains four prefaces and thirty-seven poems written in different languages responding to Thumboo's classic poem "Ulysses by the Merlion" which first appeared in 1979.

As part of a special issue on Thumboo in the journal *Asiatic*, Gwee Li Sui examines the major poet's image, status, historical place as well as his own creative beliefs in "Understanding Edwin Thumboo" (2013). Also in the same issue, Chitra Sankaran makes a case for reading Thumboo as an ecological poet in her article, "Ecology, Nature and the Human in Edwin Thumboo's Poetry" (2013). In 2020, Nilanjana Sengupta published *The Votive Pen: Writings on Edwin Thumboo*, a literary biography of sorts which interweaves interviews with the poet and his poetry, and which seeks to shed light on Thumboo's life including his childhood and his literary influences.

Another widely-studied poet is Arthur Yap. Scholars adopt multiple critical frames to explore and analyse his work, testifying to the complexity of his poetics. Rajeev Patke examines Yap's poetry in his chapter, "Ambivalence and Ambiguity in the Poetry of Arthur Yap" (2003), explaining his style thus, "Things and persons and events and non-events simply are, like bits of sharp glass that the poem tilts, kaleidoscope-fashion, into momentary shapes laden with the knowledge that they are random, fortuitous, and always liable to fall back into their constituent and unconsoling bits" (173-174). In another essay, "Modernist poetic practices in English poetry from Southeast Asia: A comparison between Jose Garcia Villa and Arthur Yap" (2007), Patke compares Yap's poetics with that of Filipino poet Jose Garcia Villa. Boey Kim Cheng argues that liminality is "central" to any understanding of Yap's work, calling him "the most elusive of the Singapore poets" (22) in his chapter, "From the Tentative to the Conditional: Detachment and Liminality in the Poetry of Arthur Yap" (2009). Lim Lee Ching in "Sounds in the Key of Light: Reticence as Soundscape in the Poetry of Arthur Yap" (2010/2011) examines what he calls the "auditory architecture" of Yap's work to explain how it is that "we *hear* his landscape rather than perceive it merely through the immediacies of visual perception" (111) (emphasis in original).

Weihsin Gui's edited collection of critical essays on Yap's poetry by various academics, *Common Lines and City Spaces* (2014), recognises and establishes the latter as "a pioneering Singaporean poet" (9). The essays about Yap are written from a range of critical perspectives including postcolonialism and ecocriticism. In their respective chapters, Zhou Xiaojing focuses on Yap's ecopoetics, Cyril Wong on Yap's gay aesthetic, and Angus Whitehead on the use of place and specific locations in Yap's poems. Boey Kim Cheng examines Yap's poetry alongside his abstract paintings in his chapter, "'the same tableau, intrinsically still': Arthur Yap, Poet-Painter," observing how Yap's poems both "gravitate towards the non-representational and non-verbal spaces that Yap's paintings inhabit" and "[pull] away from this centripetal force of abstraction" to provide "an ironic commentary on the painting" (43). Editor Weihsin Gui's chapter considers Yap's modernist poetics but also how "Yap's poetic vision turns the English language itself from an objective medium of communication into an opaque thing that, in disrupting the smooth

flow of our comprehension, enables a critical imagination to take shape” (15). Critical essays on Yap may also be found in the introductions to two compilations of his work—*The Collected Poems of Arthur Yap* (2013) edited by Irving Goh and *Noon at Five O’Clock: The Collected Short Stories of Arthur Yap* (2014) edited by Angus Whitehead.

Considerable scholarship has also been devoted to the poetics of Lee Tzu Pheng although perhaps to a smaller extent than that of Thumboo and Yap. Lily Rose Tope discusses Lee in her chapter for *Sharing Borders II*, “Poetry on the Brink: The Indeterminate Persona in the Poetry of Lee Tzu Pheng” (2009), focusing on how her poems “conflate internal and external worlds” (49). Wernmei Yong Ade’s article for *SARE: Southeast Asian Review of English*, “Re-visioning: Lee Tzu Pheng’s Feminist Poetics” (2010/2011) examines Lee specifically as a woman writer to understand the feminist politics informing her poetry.

Boey Kim Cheng’s poetry about travel and memory is the focus of Angelia Poon’s 2009 article, “The Swaying Sense of Things’: Boey Kim Cheng and the Poetics of Imagined Transnational Travel and Movement.” Anne Brewster considers a thematic movement in Boey’s work from questions about home and belonging to those about diasporic identity in her chapter for *Sharing Borders II*, “‘The Traveller’s Dream’: Nation and Diaspora in the Work of Boey Kim Cheng” (2009). Joanne Leow examines the motifs of journeys and crossings in Boey’s poetry in “‘Between home and home’: Crossings and Coastlines in the Poetry of Boey Kim Cheng” (2010/2011), suggesting how he redefines borders and countries through his fluid conceptualisation of place and belonging. In her book chapter, “‘A Kind of Pursuit’: On Boey Kim Cheng’s Poetry” (2017), Shirley Chew meditates on the trope of walking in Boey’s poems, using it to explore its connections to memory, writing, loss and the meaning of home.

Eddie Tay discusses the poetry of Boey Kim Cheng, Yong Shu Hoong, and Toh Hsien Min as well as the poetry collection, *A Luxury We Cannot Afford*, when he considers how poets respond to the “pragmatic and logical-positivist approach to things” (64) in Singapore culture. The poet Wong May who left Singapore in the 1960s but who

continued to write and publish is the subject of Angus Whitehead's book chapter, "'we who have no country but our century': Wong May, Singapore-stateless Poet," in *Singapore Literature and Culture* (2017).

As a novelist and poet, Goh Poh Seng has also attracted considerable critical attention. Aaron Lee's chapter, "Caught between Earth and Sky" in *Sharing Borders I* considers Goh's life and multi-genre creative work including his last novel, *Dance with White Clouds: A Fable for Grow-Ups*. While Goh's novel, *If We Dream Too Long*, is the text many scholars have written about, Sim Wai Chew examines another novel by Goh in "Fear of Falling: Existentialism and Class Consciousness in Goh Poh Seng's *A Dance of Moths*" (2010/2011) for SARE's special issue on Malaysian and Singaporean literatures. In a subsequent article, Sim compares Goh's work with that of Sinophone Singaporean writer, Yeng Pway Ngon, in "Nietzschean Existentialism in the Work of Pei An Ying and Goh Poh Seng" (2014) published in the journal *Literatures in Chinese* (Hua Wen Wen Xue).

Other writers who have received close scholarly attention include Robert Yeo, Haresh Sharma, Rex Shelly and Gopal Baratham. Ismail Talib and Mohammad Quayum have analysed Yeo as a poet and dramatist in "Robert Yeo's Poetics and Politics" (2002) and "Postnationalism and Hybridity in Robert Yeo's *The Singapore Trilogy*" (2002) respectively, while George Watt studies Yeo's multi-genre oeuvre in Volume 5 of *Interlogue* (2005). Volume 6 in the *Interlogue* series is written by David Birch who examines the creative output of playwright and dramatist, Haresh Sharma, from his early plays right up to 2006, both in relation to and outside of his work with The Necessary Stage (2007).

Eddie Tay discusses Rex Shelley's four novels about the Eurasian community published between 1991 and 1998 in relation to the emergence of a "new" Eurasian identity in his chapter for *Sharing Borders I*, "The Dispersal of Eurasian Identity and the Ethics of Remembrance: Rex Shelley's Eurasian Quartet" (2009). Lily Rose Tope examines Baratham's novels as "parables of the 'religious' quality of love and redemption" (208) in her chapter, "The Parables of Gopal Baratham." Steve Clark also focuses on Baratham's

writing in his chapter for *Singapore Literature and Culture*, “A City Without a Name: Personal and Collective Memory in the Fiction of Gopal Baratham” (2017).

Women fiction writers whose work have received critical attention include Catherine Lim, Wena Poon, Suchen Christine Lim, and Balli Kaur Jaswal. In his chapter, “Who’s Afraid of Catherine Lim?” (2009), Philip Holden examines three works—*Little Ironies*, *The Woman’s Book of Superlatives* and *Following the Wrong God Home*—reading them as “symptomatic of changes in Singaporean society and indeed the place of the English-language writer in Singapore” (81). Wena Poon’s short stories, with their emphasis on complex transnational identities, have been examined by Stewart Chang in his article for *SARE*, “‘Flexible Citizenship’ in Wena Poon’s Short Stories: Writing at the Interstices of Asia and America” (2010/2011). The work of novelist Suchen Christine Lim and her Singapore Literature Prize-winning novel especially, *Fistful of Colours*, have been critically examined and discussed by many scholars. In a chapter in his book, *Writing the South Seas: Imagining the Nanyang in Chinese and Southeast Asian Postcolonial Literature* (2016), Brian Bernards analyses Lim’s novel alongside works by Sinophone writers Yeng Pway Ngon and Chia Joo Ming to show how each writer invokes the Nanyang or South Seas to comment on the politics of racialisation and the racial category of the ‘Chinese’ in Singapore. Angelia Poon examines gender and sexual politics in Balli Kaur Jaswal’s novels, *Sugarbread* and *Erotic Stories for Punjabi Widows*, discussing how Jaswal leverages on her positions as Singapore writer and diasporic writer in an article for *Postcolonial Text*, “(S) pacing Female Education in the Punjabi Sikh Diaspora: Negotiating Gender and Female Sexuality in Balli Kaur Jaswal’s Novels” (2021).

Scholarship on other dramatists during this period includes Wong Soak Koon’s *Sharing Borders* chapter on Stella Kon, “Nation and Belonging in Stella Kon’s Plays” (2009), where she discusses the latter’s critique of state narratives about the nation. In Singapore literary and cultural studies, C.J. Wan-ling Wee has been a key scholar examining the work of multilingual dramatist and theatre-practitioner, Kuo Pao Kun. In “Creating High Culture in the Globalized “Cultural Desert” of Singapore” (2003), Wee considers the tensions and contradictions in the state’s cultural policies as it seeks a global city identity for Singapore, discussing Kuo’s play, *Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral*, within this

context. Other articles on Kuo include Wee's "Introduction: art, culture, capitalist development and Kuo Pao Kun" (2020) and "Beyond national identity: Kuo Pao Kun's contemporary theatre and an open culture" (2020) in the journal *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*. In an earlier article "Staging the Asian Modern: Cultural Fragments, the Singaporean Eunuch, and the Asian Lear" (2004) published in *Critical Inquiry*, Wee compares the theatre practices of Kuo and Ong Keng Seng. A revised version of the article may be found in Wee's subsequent monograph, *The Asian Modern: Culture, Capitalist Development, Singapore* (2007), a book in which he explores the development of Singaporean modernity in relation to its specific cultural expressions, tensions and contradictions. Dramatist Alfian Sa'at's plays have also been collected and published in three volumes, each with a critical introduction. In his introduction to the third volume, Nazry Bahrawi discusses the plays, *Nadirah* and *Parah*, arguing that both plays "express the complex interlacing of identities that define the region," showing that "SingLit cannot be divorced from SEALit" (20).

Adding to Singapore's literary history and tradition, previously unknown writers or less known aspects of a writer's oeuvre were also (re)discovered in this period as a result of some literary detective work and scholarship. Angus Whitehead collected and edited the short stories and essays of little-known writer, Gregory Nalpon, who wrote in the 1960s and 70s, publishing it as *The Wayang at Eight Milestone: Stories and Essays* (2013). Whitehead also unearthed the short stories of poet Arthur Yap which are published as *Noon at Five O'Clock: The Short Stories of Arthur Yap* (2014). Teo Poh Leng's 1937 long poem F.M.S.R. published under his pen-name Francis P. Ng was re-issued by Eriko Ogihara-Schuck, who also chronicled her journey to discover the writer's identity in *Finding Francis: A Poetic Adventure* (2015). Philip Holden's article on the academic Patrick Anderson who taught poetry at the University of Malaya from 1950 to 1952-- "Somewhere Foreign Enough to Belong To': Patrick Anderson, Cosmopolitanism and Its Discontents" (2016)--sheds further light on Singapore's literary history in the post-war period.

d) Themes

In this section, I seek to categorise literary scholarship of this period according to certain distinctive thematic foci, cognizant of the fact that such categories are never truly self-contained silos and are at best a useful heuristic.

i) Examining Subjectivities: Race, Gender, Sexuality, Class

A number of literary scholars read writers' works as cultural texts in order to better illuminate the latter's vision of or perspective on central issues of Singapore society and culture like the inter-related questions of race and multiracialism. For example, Angelia Poon examines Alfian Sa'at's exploration of Malay-ness and national identity in her article, "Performing National Service in Singapore: Re-imagining the Nation in the Poetry and Short Stories of Alfian Sa'at" (2005) published in the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*. Poon extends her analysis of Alfian's depiction of Malay dislocation in his flash fiction, *Malay Sketches*, in her article for *Interventions* entitled "Writing Home: Alfian Sa'at and the Politics of Malay-Muslim Belonging in Global Multiracial Singapore" (2016). In his article, "Writing Conspiracy: Race and Rights in Two Singapore Novels" (2006), Holden critically examines Gopal Baratham's *A Candle or the Sun* and Lau Siew Mei's *Playing Madam Mao* to show how both novels interrogate the events of the so-called 1987 Marxist Conspiracy including the arrests of activists while maintaining blind spots over the discursive construction of race and culture in Singapore. Chitra Sankaran in "'The Sounds of Silence': An Analysis of Two Stories by Singaporean Women" (2003) discusses the way silence can be a form of resistance in the short fiction of Suchen Christine Lim and Denyse Tessensohn. Sim Wai Chew also examines Baratham's novel in his chapter, "Tomorrow's Brother: Contesting Orientalisms in Gopal Baratham's *A Candle or the Sun*" for the book, *Re-Orientalism and South Asian Identity Politics: The Oriental Other Within* (2011).

Two book chapters by Philip Holden and Matilda Gabrielpillai published in the edited critical collection, *Race and Multiculturalism in Malaysia and Singapore* (2009), also focus on race and Singapore literature. In "A literary history of race," Holden sees literature in

English as “an interstitial space of intercultural translation which has the potential to dislocate the discrete cultural categories on which racial governmentalities are based” (19-20). This view underpins his analysis of short stories in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, the writings of S. Rajaratnam and Wang Gungwu, as well as Goh Poh Seng’s novel, *If We Dream Too Long*. Gabrielpillai, in her chapter “The Singapore Indian woman,” examines the representation of the Indian female subject in two novels and a sitcom, paying particular attention to the dynamics of inter-ethnic relations between her and the Chinese majority in Singapore. The two novels are Suchen Christine Lim’s *Fistful of Colours* and Fiona Cheong’s *Shadow Theatre*. In her article “Not Here, Not Now: Remaking Singapore’s Chinese Diaspora in *The Inlet*” (2021), Annabeth Leow problematises the view that Singaporean Chinese subjects are automatically part of a universal Chinese diaspora through her study of Claire Tham’s novel, *The Inlet*.

One notable strand of literary criticism in this period has focused on the literary representation of marginalised and minority groups, including most prominently, sexual minorities. Paul Leonard Yeoh examines two pioneering novels focused on gay subjectivity and desire, and the challenges of coming out, in his article, “Writing Singapore Gay Identities: Queering the Nation in Johann S. Lee’s *Peculiar Chris* and Andrew Koh’s *Glass Cathedral*” (2006). Ng Yi-Sheng provides a historical survey of Singapore’s LGBT literary scene and key LGBT-themed texts from pre-1987 to 2015 in his chapter, “Burning in Your Hands: Singapore’s Queer Literary Tradition” (2016). He concludes confidently that “The nation’s queer literary tradition burns on in our hands. It will not burn out” (277). In her chapter, “Self-conscious and Queer” for the edited collection, *Translational Politics in Southeast Asian Literatures: Contesting Race, Gender and Sexuality* (2021), Angelia Poon compares *This Place Called Absence* by Singapore-born author Lydia Kwa with Malaysian writer, Tan Twan Eng’s *The Gift of Rain*, as they raise questions about the past in their respective historical fictions through their exploration of queer subjectivities.

Joanne Leow examines the portrayal of foreign domestic workers across three different creative media/genres--Wena Poon’s short story “Development”, Haresh Sharma’s play *Model Citizens* and Anthony Chen’s film *Ilo Ilo* in her chapter for *Singapore Literature and*

Culture, "Strangers, Surrogates, Lovers: Foreign Domestic Workers in Contemporary Singapore Texts" (2017).

ii) Interrogating the Nation: History, Nationalism and Transnationalism

Nationalism and the continued role that anglophone literature, especially poetry, plays in the evolving national consciousness remains an important strand of literary criticism. In "Imagining the Nation: the Role of Singapore Poetry in English in 'Emergent Nationalism'" (2006), Robbie Goh examines poetic nationalism in the work of Edwin Thumboo, Goh Poh Seng, Arthur Yap and Lee Tzu Pheng. Equally significant in Singapore literary criticism is how scholars closely examine the way literature interrogates official and doxological history, often disclosing alternative perspectives about the past. One example of such work is Holden's article "Rajaratnam's Tiger: Race, Gender and the Beginnings of Singapore Nationalism" (2006). Angelia Poon examines Suchen Christine Lim's interest in invisible histories and marginalised narratives in her article, "Mining the Archive: Historical Fiction, Counter-modernities and Suchen Christine Lim's *A Bit of Earth*" (2008).

A move away from orthodox historiography and conventional national narratives about Singapore based on Sir Stamford Raffles and Lee Kuan Yew is Holden's book chapter, "The Littoral and the Literary: Making Moral Communities in the Straits Settlements and the Gold Coast in the late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries" in the edited collection, *Singapore in Global History* (2011). In her 2010 article, Joanne Leow examines the politics of nostalgia and memory in poetry and film when it comes to Singapore's past in "The Future of Nostalgia: Reclaiming Memory in Tan Pin Pin's *Invisible City* and Alfian Sa'at's *A History of Amnesia*". As part of a critical assessment of Singapore's bicentennial celebrations commemorating the country's colonial beginnings in 1819 when it was 'founded' by Sir Stamford Raffles, Leow's contribution to the collection *Raffles Renounced* (2021) examines how Alfian Sa'at play, "Merdeka/ 獨立 / சுதந்திரம்" and theatre in general can offer creative possibilities for decolonization. Angelia Poon examines the way *If We Dream Too Long*, *Abraham's Promise* and *City of Small Blessings* question state

patriarchy and masculine success in her chapter, "In Praise of Failed Men (and the Woman Writer): Gender Politics in the Singapore Novel" (2017). She concludes with Catherine Lim's novel, *Miss Seetoh in the World*, which stages its opposition to official gender ideology through its celebration of female self-sufficiency.

A notable contemporary text that has generated considerable scholarship is Sonny Liew's graphic novel, *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye*. In his 2016 article on metahistory and the artist in *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye*, Holden explores and discusses the way the graphic novel text uses metatextual strategies to raise questions about historiography, the narrating of stories and the agency of the artist/writer in Singapore. He argues that the text intervenes in the construction of historical memory by "drawing attention to the manner in which historical narratives are made" (512). Jini Kim Watson discusses the graphic novel together with the Malay-language novel *Confrontation* in "Separate Futures: Cold War Decolonization in Mohamed Latiff Mohamed's *Confrontation* and Sonny Liew's *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye*" (2018). She argues how both texts show that "decolonization, as it unfolded under the shadow of the global Cold War, produces less the anticipated reunification between nation and state than a reconfiguration of separation/incorporation that inserts the former colony into a new U.S.-dominated, capitalist world order" (168). Paying specific attention to the specific artistic strategy of braiding, Weihsin Gui examines Liew's graphic novel alongside Koh Hong Teng's *Last Train from Tanjong Pagar* in his article "Braiding Stories and Affordances in the Graphic Novels of Sonny Liew and Koh Hong Teng" (2019). He shows how Liew and Koh use braiding, a kind of visual strategy for connection across image, text and panel in comics form to produce layered meaning and to raise questions about the representation of history and Singapore's past. The following year, Joanne Leow examines Liew's work together with Tan Pin Pin's banned film, *To Singapore with Love*, as alternative archives to the official one which produces the orthodox nationalist narrative we are meant to imbibe.

In dialogue with developments in other disciplines and globalisation studies, literary scholarship in this period has also sought to locate anglophone Singapore literature in

relation to key ideas of our historical moment such as cosmopolitanism, postcoloniality and transnationalism. An example of such scholarship is Philip Holden's "Histories of the Present: Reading Contemporary Singapore Novels between the Local and the Global" (2006) as well as his article, "Interrogating Multiculturalism and Cosmopolitanism in the City-State: Some Recent Singapore Fiction in English" published in the journal *Mobilities* in 2010. The latter is a study of in and out-migration with respect to Singapore in several novels (*Fistful of Colours*, *Beyond the Moon*, *This Place Called Absence* and *Mammon Inc.*) while offering ways of thinking about mobility that elude the contours of state nationalism and the commodification of cultures under global modernity. In "Postcolonial desire: Placing Singapore" (2008), Holden critically analyses what Singapore and its literature—given the nation-state's historically specific socio-cultural circumstances—may offer postcolonial studies as a critical field as well as how postcolonial theory may be applied to Singapore literature, using Boey Kim Cheng's poetry by way of illustration. He argues that "elements of postcoloniality refigured within a Singapore context are useful ways of understanding some contemporary literary and cultural production in Singapore" (346).

Analysing Singapore literature in relation to the social and cultural impact of globalisation, Robbie Goh focuses on the work of two writers, Colin Cheong and Hwee Hwee Tan. He discusses the trope of restlessness in the former's work in his article, "The Anxiety of Influences: Dis-Locating Authority, Culture and Identity in the Novels of Colin Cheong" (2007). In a book chapter, "'Writing 'the Global' in Singapore Anglophone Fiction: Language, Vision and Resonance in Hwee Hwee Tan's Fiction" (2008), Goh examines Tan's representation of Singapore within global circuits and flows of language, capital, and religion. Cheryl Narumi Naruse analyses the relationship between genre and neoliberal subjectivity in Tan's novel with her article, "Hwee Hwee Tan's *Mammon Inc.* as Bildungsroman, or the Coming-of-Career Narrative" in *Genre: Forms of Discourse and Culture* (2016). Weihsin Gui's article in the special issue of the journal *Interventions*, "Renaissance City and Revenant Story: the Gothic Tale as Literary Technique in Fiona Cheong's Fictions of Singapore" (2016), interprets Cheong's historical fictions as an interrogation of the state's neoliberal rationality and its related technologies of subjectivity

and subjection, offering instead other ways of imagining the self and alternative modes of social relations.

Also interested in Singapore's negotiation with globalisation, Angelia Poon examines the binary between "heartlander" and "cosmopolitan" in Singapore society and its cultural texts by comparing Daren Shiau's novel, *Heartland*, and the film *Eating Air* in "Common Ground, Multiple Claims: Representing and Constructing Singapore's Heartland" (2013). In "Super-Diversity and Its Implications in Two Singapore Texts" (2017), his chapter for *Singapore Literature and Culture*, Sim Wai Chew provides a comparative analysis of Claire Tham's novel, *The Inlet*, and the semi-fictional memoir written in Chinese, *Bai He: A China Mother's Singapore Love Affinities*. Focusing on class antagonisms, he uses Steven Vertovec's idea of super-diversity to show how the texts represent the increasingly complex diversity of a Singapore society open to global flows of people and labour.

iii) Singapore Literature vis-à-vis Other National Literatures

Scholarship adopting a comparative international approach gained further ground during this period as scholars analysed Singapore literature along texts written by regional Southeast Asian authors especially in order to, among other aims, throw into sharper relief historical and cultural specificities as well as stylistic differences. Philip Holden, for example, compares short stories from Singapore and the Philippines about these countries' respective modernisation processes in "Between Modernization and Modernism: Community and Contradiction in the Paracolonial Short Story" (2007); in another article, "Colonialism's Goblins: Language, Gender and the Southeast Asian Novel in English at a Time of Nationalism" (2008), he reads across three regional novels including Goh Poh Seng's *If We Dream Too Long*. In her article, "Boutique multiculturalism and the consumption of repulsion: Re-disseminating food fictions in Malaysian and Singaporean diasporic novels" (2007), Tamara Wagner analyses food metaphors in novels by Teo Hsu Ming, Vyvyanne Loh and Josephine Chia to show how repulsion may serve to resist pressures to self-exoticise and self-Orientalise. In "The Indigenised West in Asian Multicultures" (2008) for the journal *Interventions*, C.J. Wan-ling Wee discusses

Tan Hwee Hwee's *Mammon Inc.* alongside Malaysian writer, Huzir Sulaiman's *Notes on Love and Life and Painting* to examine the similar and different dimensions of the global west manifested in the multicultural societies of Singapore and Malaysia.

Jini Kim Watson's monograph *The New Asian City: Three-Dimensional Fictions of Space and Urban Form* published in 2011 adopts an interdisciplinary perspective by considering literature alongside urban geography and architectural space. She compares the literatures of the so-called Asian tigers—Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan—during the nation-building years of intensified economic development when the physical landscape in these places was greatly transformed by urban renewal and widespread construction. In the case of Singapore, she analyses the poetry of Edwin Thumboo and Arthur Yap, as well as the novels *If We Dream Too Long* by Goh Poh Seng and *Fistful of Colours* by Suchen Christine Lim.

Weihsin Gui's article in 2014, "Tactical Objectivism: Recognizing the Object within the Subjective Logic of Neoliberalism in the Fiction of Tash Aw and Lydia Kwa," makes the case for how the work of these two writers, one Malaysian-born and the other Singaporean-born, critiques the hegemonic neoliberal subjectivity endorsed by the Malaysian and Singaporean states and suggest alternatives to it. Rather than read these texts in terms of the ways in which they might thematise a counter position to neoliberal subjectivity, he pursues instead a more nuanced argument to show how they problematise neoliberalism's subjective logic through their literary aesthetics.

In his article for the journal *Asiatic*, "'we... head back to English': Anglophone Lyric in Hong Kong, Singapore and the Philippines" (2015), Dennis Haskell compares poetry by Kirpal Singh with the work of Agnes Lam in Hong Kong and Isabela Banzon in the Philippines. Bill Ashcroft compares the status of the English language, its variants, and anglophone poetry in Malaysia, Singapore and Hong Kong in his book chapter, "English Futures: The Function of English" (2016), published in *The Future of English in Asia: Perspectives on Language and Literature*. In a monograph with chapters that use examples from Singapore literature entitled *The Englishized Subject: Postcolonial*

Writings in Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia (2019), Kwok-kan Tam analyses 'Englishized' subjectivity in these three multilingual societies, paying special attention to how writers express hybridised identities through bilingual and bicultural strategies.

Comparing novels from different national literary traditions through an ecocritical lens, Chitra Sankaran and John Nkengasong examine the relationship between nature and culture in Linus Asong's *Crown of Thorns* and Meira Chand's *A Different Sky* in their article, "Forests and eco cultural disequilibrium in two postcolonial novels from Cameroon and Singapore" (2018). A bifocal approach across national borders is also evident in Angelia Poon's article, "The Spatial Politics of Nation-Building: Minority Women Writers in Anglophone Malaysian and Singapore Literatures" (2021) for the journal, *Contemporary Women's Writing*, where she compares Balli Kaur Jaswal's Singapore novel *Inheritance* with Preeta Samarasan's *Evening is the Whole Day*.

iv) Literature, Urbanism, Space

A notable area of scholarly focus has been on how literature exists alongside—commenting on and sometimes subverting—Singapore's strictly-planned urban environment and culture of city living. Rajeev Patke examines the spaces of poetic creativity and experimentation in the ordered urban environs of Singapore in his chapter "'To frame a City': The Singaporean Poet in the Postmodern City" (2002) in the book, *Postmodern Singapore*, edited by architect William S. W. Lim. In his article, "The Road People: Poetry and Urban (Im)Mobility in Singapore" (2008), Gwee Li Sui examines the impact of the experience of speed, roads and urban life on poetry by Lee Tzu Pheng, Boey Kim Cheng, Paul Tan, Alvin Pang, Aaron Lee and other poets.

In her 2015 article, "'A delicate pellet of dust': Dissident flash fictions from contemporary Singapore," Joanne Leow draws on spatial theory to examine how Alfian Sa'at's *Malay Sketches* seeks to resist the state's intense urban planning and overwhelming use of space for capitalist ends. Starting with a discussion of Singapore's construction in history and much public discourse as a strategic location, Cheryl Narumi Naruse explores how

two novels resist such an instrumentalist understanding of the nation in her chapter, “Singapore as Strategic Location: Setting and Positionality in Goh Poh Seng’s *If We Dream Too Long* and Lydia Kwa’s *Pulse*” (2016), published in *Singapore Literature and Culture*. In another article entitled “Bodies That Map: Overseas Singaporeans and the Urban Imagination” (2016), she examines representations of Overseas Singaporeans and suggests how these “do the work of situating Singapore as a global city; the Overseas Singaporean is meant to serve as a traveling sign of Singapore’s globality” (48).

Weihsin Gui’s article, published in *Textual Practice* in 2021 and entitled “Public transit and urban poetics: Singapore’s Moving Words poetry project and anthology,” considers poems featured, read and experienced while riding the country’s ubiquitous mass rapid transit system as providing alternative ways of imagining time, space and social relations in contrast to neoliberal dictates about efficient and productive time. The article offers insight into how we might think about literature in relation to urban form, suggesting a methodological model for both Singapore literary criticism and cultural studies.

Spatiality in relation to Singapore’s conceptualisation as a garden city or as the paradigmatic green city driven by advances in technology has been a notable pre-occupation of recent literary scholarship. In “Here’s to the grass we step on!”: Complicating the spatial dynamics of the Garden City in Singaporean historical fiction” (2017), Samuel Perks examines Simon Tay’s *City of Small Blessings* and Suchen Christine Lim’s *The River Song* to disclose how these novels counter the state’s neoliberal fashioning of spaces and national history. In “Reading New Asian Tropicalities in Contemporary Singapore” published in *positions: asia critique* in 2020, Joanne Leow grapples with the contested understanding and spaces of Singapore as a tropical city. She trains a postcolonial ecocritical lens on Kevin Kwan’s *Crazy Rich Asians*, Sandi Tan’s *The Black Isle* and Ng Yi-Sheng’s short story, “Agnes Joaquim, Bioterrorist” to interrogate the city-state’s “green, neocolonial development” (898) and suggests alternative ways of conceiving environmental futures.

v) Other Themes

There are also what one may call more niche areas of criticism about anglophone Singapore writing such as the focus on autobiography and life writing by Philip Holden, for example. Holden examines Lee Kuan Yew's memoirs in his paper, "A Man and an Island: Gender and Nation in Lee Kuan Yew's *The Singapore Story*" published in *Biography* in 2001. He analyses stories which call into question the hegemonic national narrative by Lee Kuan Yew in "Tears and Garlands: Lim Chin Siong, Coldstore, and the End(s) of Narrative" (2016) published in *Life Writing*. In 2020, his article, "'Do the Write Thing': Writing Schizophrenia in Singapore", seeks to examine the representation of mental illness.

Rare for its focus on Christian culture—including Biblical symbolism and tropes—in anglophone Singapore literature, Robbie Goh examines Christian influences in the work of two major poets in his article, "Of New Covenants and Nationalisms: Christianity and The Poetry of Edwin Thumboo and Lee Tzu Pheng" (2003).

In a *Journal of Postcolonial Studies* article published in 2018, Angelia Poon examines the figure of the government scholar in Singapore literature and two novels in particular, Claire Tham's *The Inlet* and Jolene Tan's *A Certain Exposure* in "Narrating Privilege: Meritocracy and the Portrait of the Scholar in Singapore Anglophone Literature."

Scholarship has also focused on the material conditions directly or indirectly governing the production of literature in Singapore, literary activism, the social life of literary activities, and the role of the state in promoting and controlling culture and literary education. Ronald Klein's chapter for *Sharing Borders II*, "Robert Yeo and Kirpal Singh: Singapore's Literary Activists" (2009) documents the behind-the-scenes contribution to the development and promotion of Singapore literature by these two writers. Eddie Tay adopts an auto-ethnographic approach in his article, "The Singapore Writers Festival: Global Identity, Cultural Policy and the Post-Independence Literary Landscape" (2010/2011), as he discusses the poet Alvin Pang's activism in the literary sphere and a particular edition of the Singapore Writers Festival—its 2009 one—in order to better understand the national literary landscape. Poon's book chapter "The Singapore Writers Festival and the Promotion of Literary Culture" (2019) presents a history of literary and

cultural developments through the lens of the Singapore Writers Festival, linking the festival to developments in the culture industry globally and detailing the fraught relationship between artists and state sponsorship of the Arts in the country. An essay calling for an interrogation of certain “myths” about Singapore literature including the hesitance to define it and the need “to confront framing agendas and grounding troubles” (60) is Gwee Li Sui’s “Demythologising Singaporean Literature” (2017) for the collection, *Living with Myths in Singapore*. In their article for the special issue on Singapore for the journal *Interventions*, “Liberal Arts for Asians” (2016), Petrus Liu and Colleen Lye discuss the challenges of liberal arts education in Singapore, examining the design of Yale-NUS’s literature and humanities common curriculum course.

In terms of aesthetics, literary form and genre-specific studies in Singapore literature, it is not unexpected that poetry and the novel should be the dominant forms studied. But the Singapore short story in English has also come under critical scrutiny. Holden’s chapter, “Unmaking Sense: Short Fiction and Social Space in Singapore” in the 2013 edited collection *The Postcolonial Short Story: Contemporary Essays*, discusses the way the form is used to critique the past and reframe national history. In “The Social Life of Genres: Short Stories as a Singapore Form” (2017) in the edited book, *Singapore Literature and Culture*, he examines Ann Ang’s *Bang My Car* and stories from Amanda Lee Koe’s *Ministry of Moral Panic* to argue how “short stories participate in the making of a social world rather than simply recording it” (100). In his article, “Global Modernism in Colonial Malayan and Singaporean Literature: The Poetry and Prose of Teo Poh Leng and Sinnathamby Rajaratnam” (2017), Weihsin Gui examines the writing of both authors between the 1930s to the 1950s to show how Euro-American modernist aesthetics shaped their nationalist and anti-colonial political imagining. In an online article, “Short Story Collections and Crowded Selves: Madeleine Thien’s *Simple Recipes* and Jeremy Tiang’s *It Never Rains On National Day*” (2017), Gui uses Shameem Black’s notion of ‘crowded style’ to discuss how these two short story collections by a Canadian and a Singaporean writer respectively may be read as Asian/American narratives.

In an article for *Textual Practice*, “Becoming Other: Literary Multilingualism in the Chinese Badlands” (2020), Sim Wai Chew compares the bilingual and multilingual aesthetics of

Vyvyane Loh's *Breaking the Tongue*, written primarily in English, and Joo Ming Chia's novel in Chinese, *Exile or Pursuit*. He argues that the texts point to both an Anglo-Chinese cultural hybridity as well as a syncretism between Chinese and local Southeast Asian cultures in Singapore and Malaysia which suggest an alternative to the dominant East-West narrative of cultural exchange.

e) Publicly-accessible Literary Criticism

Increasingly, literary criticism of Singapore literature in English may also be found online, often undertaken by writers and some academics, on websites and online journals hosted by literary organisations not affiliated with any of the Singapore universities. The *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore (QLRS)*, founded in 2001, is a non-profit volunteer collective that publishes criticism online mainly in the form of book reviews alongside poems, short stories, essays and interviews. Its mission, as stated on its website (qlrs.com), is to “promote the literary arts in Singapore, to stimulate the feedback mechanisms in the literary scene, and to develop Singaporean writers to international standards.” Reference databases with biographies, bibliographies and selected publications of and critical introductions to a comprehensive list of Singapore writers may be found at poetry.sg and prose.sg, both supported by literary non-profit organisation, Sing Lit Station. While both websites feature mainly Singapore writers who write in English, they aim to include Singapore literatures and writers in Malay, Chinese and Tamil as well. The electronic encyclopedia run by the National Library Board called Infopedia (<https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/>) also contains useful biographical and publications information about prominent Singapore writers. *SP Blog* run by Singapore Unbound, a literary non-profit based in New York which organises a biennial Singapore Literature Festival, is an online platform for the publication of different forms of creative writing and book reviews that deal with Singapore literature, although not exclusively. Collectively, these websites and online portals complement the available academic scholarship published in more traditional and conventional venues to make literary criticism more accessible to the public and contribute to a thriving literary culture.

Conclusion: Areas for Future Study

Scholarship on Singapore literature in English is varied and rich. With close and critical reading of texts at its centre, the field encompasses literary history, cultural theorising, linguistic analysis, aesthetic criticism, biographical criticism, and the examination of the material conditions of literary production. Scholars approach writing in Singapore from a variety of theoretical perspectives and most are informed by developments in critical and cultural theories from the Western, namely Anglo-American and European, academy. Inter-disciplinary approaches to literary study typically include a consideration of Singapore literature together with insights from such disciplines as history, sociology, cultural studies, film studies, linguistics, politics, theatre, geography, ecology, and the visual arts.

As this report makes evident, a number of writers and specific texts are regularly scrutinised and mentioned in studies of Singapore literature in English and it is undeniable that literary criticism has a key role to play in the conferring of canonical status. Looking ahead, there is no doubt that literary criticism will continue to attend to the growing corpus of work by new writers as they emerge and make their mark on the literary scene. At the same time, portions of Singapore's literary and cultural past and the work of many of Singapore's established writers still await interpretation and evaluation. There is scope, for example, for more scholarship on writers like Chandran Nair, Catherine Lim, Alvin Pang, and Cyril Wong, just to mention a few. Comparative and intermedial approaches to studying Singapore culture which would include its literature are also most likely to continue. By this I mean studies which juxtapose literature with film, visual art, theatre, multi-media work as well as other forms of discourse.

There exists a crucial need, I would say, for more cross-cultural and comparative literary analysis to bridge the four literary traditions in Singapore. To this end, increased translation of texts into different languages--especially from Malay, Chinese and Tamil

into English--as well as the presence of bilingual comparative literary scholars who can read and examine literature in different languages would be salutary.

On a larger scale and moving away from what has been called methodological nationalism, there is much scope for comparative work between Singapore literature and the literatures of Southeast Asia, East Asia, and South Asia. Singapore literature in English could also be profitably studied as part of the larger geographical and conceptual rubrics of Indian Ocean studies, Nusantara studies, Nanyang studies, postcolonial literature, global anglophone writing, and of course, world literature. In this regard, Singapore literature in English would likely be co-articulated with ongoing concerns and debates in transnationalism, globalisation, cosmopolitanism, and global diasporas. Of particular salience to literary studies in general would be how anglophone Singapore literature contributes to critical fields like postcolonialism, queer studies, ecocriticism, ethical criticism and the digital humanities.

Ideological critique of Singapore literature pertaining to late capitalist formations and neoliberal discourse which may well include the consideration of class tensions and working-class writing is another area of study that could be productively cultivated. Besides the traditional, so-called 'high' literary genres of poetry, prose fiction and drama, other areas of literature that would include more popular forms of writing (e.g. ghost stories, crime fiction, dystopian writing) and children's literature in Singapore also constitute grounds for potentially insightful scholarship. The recent boom in speculative fiction on the Singapore literary scene calls for scholarship attentive to the dynamics of form, experimentation, current social realities as well as fast-moving changes in the conditions and modes of literary production.

Finally, literary criticism in the foreseeable future looks set to continue contending with the changing and porous boundaries of what constitutes Singapore literature in English given the growing presence of diasporic Singapore writers and writers born elsewhere who reside in Singapore, including diverse communities of migrant workers. With so many areas of the literary critical field left to chart and illuminate, there is reason to hope that

future scholars will continue to find research about Singapore literature in English a fulfilling and meaningful endeavour.

More than forty years ago, the novelist, lawyer and former Professor of English at the University of Malaya, Lloyd Fernando, sought to articulate the role of the literary critic in this part of the world in his essay, "The Social Imagination and the Functions of Criticism in Asia" (1976; re-printed 1986). He notes how the literary critic "should be some kind of seismograph" who is "sensitive to the impulses of native creativeness before they are cosseted prematurely by attitudes and approaches developed solely in response to provincial concerns in other parts of the world" (121). Fernando writes,

[Literature] involves one in the culture out of which it originates, and brings that into a dialectic with one's own. It is very much more difficult to put that kind of lesson in any appropriate form of words, but that must be the critic's proper function: to elucidate the ways in which literature appeals directly to the understanding. The reader's understanding is the critic's objective. (126)

In this same spirit, the best literary criticism remains, as ever, that which is self-reflexive and historically specific while also cognizant of and committed to the goal of contributing to ongoing intellectual debates, always opening up rather than foreclosing future areas of inquiry.

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