

## The Periphery Writes Back: Reading Two Plays by Joel Tan

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### Abstract

This paper aims to quantify the pressure exerted by inherited aesthetic rubrics on recent Singaporean theatre. It takes, as its premise, the stipulations of world systems theory, which depicts Singapore as a peripheral price-taker in an unequal, global economy of cultural exchange. However, it goes on to challenge the theory's deterministic insinuations that dramatic taste must always flow from more dominant, developed sites of production elsewhere, to smaller literary sites like Singapore. Drawing on the work of an up-and-coming playwright, Joel Tan, it demonstrates that a peripheral writer may disrupt this pre-set transference of value, by writing work that speaks specifically from the fringes, for the fringes. In Tan's hands, a play becomes "good" by taking full advantage of its peripheral condition; ultimately, his work appeals by being self-consciously situated outside of the world's literary centres, and expounding on this situation intelligently.

### Keywords

World systems theory, Immanuel Wallerstein, transculturalism, post-colonial theatre, new Singaporean writing, Joel Tan

### I

In March 2015, a young playwright named Joel Tan launched the following complaint about Singapore's theatre industry. He described watching a panel presentation on the state of local theatre, which included

a simple powerpoint slide that compiled production images and/or marketing images from professional theatre production in Singapore between January 2014 and February 2015....

... even before seeing the slides, I already... suspected what I'd see.... image after image of big, splashy productions, American plays, British plays, Western

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repertory, big, gauche musicals, the high-speed flickering of billboard lights... and then just a tiny cluster near the end of new Singapore writing....

... it seems the ghosts of foreign theatres have found small passes across the threshold and emerge here in a dazzling aspect. (“Questions on My Mind,” para. 5)

Tan had already voiced similar claims elsewhere about the strain borne by local playwrights, given how strenuously they had to compete with “Western repertory” for ticket sales. Claiming that this competition had led some companies to offer “local adaptations of the classics,” he lamented that this hybrid genre lacked a “spark [of] recognition” so that its output was typically

a play (a very *bourgeois* play) drawn from the life and times and contexts of... [a] culture in many ways very different from ours... no matter how local the idiom, the well of cultural codes and understanding at the heart of the play – *recognition* – exists in some other centre. (“Dealing with the Bourgeois Play,” para. 26-28)

In the burgeoning theatre scene of a young nation like Singapore, it is not uncommon to encounter complaints like Tan’s. English-language playwrights often comment on what, elsewhere, Itamar Even-Zohar has termed the asymmetrical state of “interference... between literatures” (54): where a nation’s dramatic output can occupy only a marginal space in the global marketplace of culture, and is obliged to take uncomfortable “loans” of aesthetic sensibility from other shores. Singaporean playwrights are, moreover, aware that they stand to be ignored by foreign centres of prestige, so that they lack reciprocal influence on global standards of good drama.

These concerns cast a long shadow over national rhetoric, producing anxiety about how local drama – and local literature more broadly – can be “enhanced” so as to become “internationally competitive.” Ministers of state have repeatedly described the need to “discover the VS Naipul or Gao Xingjian in our midst,” thereby “promot[ing]... a Singapore literature which will be appreciated not only in Singapore but abroad” (Sadasivan, para. 13). Likewise, 2010 saw the implementation of a “Literary Arts Plan” worth S\$24 million that aimed to groom more playwrights and writers into existence, so as to “develop writing talents to... give voice to our unique national identity” (Poon and Choo 15). Fears about the global reach of Singaporean writing have only intensified in the past half-decade, following revelations about dwindling “O” level literature enrolment; as one newspaper article put it, “With Singapore aiming to be a global arts hub... it is even more crucial that efforts are made to develop the country’s own arts and literary scene” (Lee, para. 23). Clearly, there exists a strong feeling that English-language writing in Singapore still labours under a strained, unequal relationship

with offshore sites of aesthetic power, so that local authors are struggling endlessly to “catch up.”

Recent scholarship has offered several explanations for this situation of imbalance that afflicts the Singaporean dramatist. Theorists like Walter D. Mignolo, for instance, have posited that it stems from how contemporary aesthetic standards were first formulated in eighteenth-century Europe, then disseminated and naturalised around the world via colonial power in subsequent centuries. According to this traditional, postcolonial framework, the Singaporean dramatist suffers because they are impinged upon by an alien and unfamiliar rubric, which their artistic offerings cannot perform under quite as well as drama from the “West” can; their “own” aesthetic codes have been overridden by “a normativity that enable[s] the disdain and the rejection of” alternative “forms of aesthetic practices, or, more precisely, other forms... of sensing and perceiving” (Mignolo and Vázquez, sect. 2).

Models like this one, however, quickly become problematic. For one thing, how valid can any attempt to reference a so-called “essential” Singaporean culture be, given that culture has always seeped across communal borders so that all “tradition was once an innovation” (Appiah 107)? One must, moreover, consider the specific circumstances of Singapore: “an exceptional postcolonial space” that only came into existence as a multi-cultural, immigrant port under colonial rule, and therefore lacks a “ready-made high cultural pre-colonial past to summon” (Holden, “Postcolonial Desire” 345). In this instance, it is difficult to argue that the discomforts faced by local dramatists stem from a conflict between imported colonial aesthetics, and indigenous cultural traditions. For over the years, these traditions – if at all extant as coherent facets of some essential cultural identity – have become wilfully intertwined with the intellectual, economic and cultural legacies of colonialism (a fact proven by how the state still embraces a figure from the East India Company, Thomas Stamford Raffles, as its legitimate “founder”) (Holden, “Interrogating Multiculturalism” 277-78). For Singapore, an evaluation along traditional postcolonial lines thus risks committing the very act of equivocation that, according to Simon Gikandi, makes up “one of the key terms in the narrative of modernity – the assumption that cultures are, by their nature, national in character” (635).

Instead, it is perhaps more fruitful to consider an approach that can explain imbalances of cultural power as a modern phenomenon, rooted in ongoing situations of global flux and exchange. This leads us to a relatively under-theorised but interesting province of criticism: world systems theory. Grounded in the sociological principles formulated by Immanuel Wallerstein, this framework holds that all economies around the world essentially constitute one large, interstate system, united by a division of labour that prioritises “the *endless* accumulation of capital” (23-24). A situation of unequal exchange thus arises between global sites of production, so that “there is a constant flow of surplus-

value” from small production sites to quasi-monopolised ones that produce “core-like products” and are therefore more capable of dominating exchanges (Wallerstein 28). Because dramatic writing is one of the countless goods afloat within this system, it also operates under what the Warwick Research Collective has termed “the sign of combined and uneven development” (17) – which is to say that it also exhibits systemic disjunctures between core and periphery regions, so that some groups of practitioners possess more adjudicating power to decide what constitutes good drama, while others are mere price-takers in the world economy of taste.

World systems theory thus differs from older models of postcolonial thought in one significant respect, which leaves it far more applicable to the particular case of Singaporean theatre in English. The post- or de-colonial critic would argue that Singaporean dramatists feel uneasy because they have been imposed upon by an aggressor culture and its assertions of value. In contrast, the critic of world literature would modify the terms of this allegation by claiming that in actual fact, *both* cultures have been imposed upon by something beyond their control: a single system of “socio-economic modernization” (Anderson 97) responsible for the disjunctions of power that exist between them. Singapore, thus, bears a peripheral place in the global ecosystem of drama not because its “native” aesthetic values have been overwritten, but rather, as the natural result of its place as a relatively small producer of economic goods.

It is of course worth noting that Singapore occupies a peculiar place within this model, given its exceptional economic status vis-à-vis other postcolonial states. Widely acknowledged as a frontrunner of the “East Asian economic miracle,” Singapore has transitioned very quickly from a low-income economy to a high-income, developed one. While its GDP per capita was typical of a developing country’s in 1965, the decades since have heralded so much growth that, as of 2009, its GDP per capita had reached First World standards, and was 87 per cent higher than that of four neighbouring countries combined (Chia and Sng 4-8). But this economic strength has only very recently begun to translate into what Pierre Bourdieu has termed “cultural capital” – a phenomenon that is unsurprising, given the slow rate at which this capital accumulates. Bourdieu points out, for instance, that good breeding or “embodied capital” “cannot be transmitted instantaneously,” but only via unconscious inculcation over generations; likewise, the cultural capital objectified in works of art takes time to acquire, given that what is directly transmissible is only “legal ownership” of this capital, “and not... the possession of the means of ‘consuming’ a painting” (48-50). Even institutionalised cultural capital has only just started to seep into popular Singaporean consciousness, given that state discourse has only recently turned from a “hard” model of higher education oriented towards vocational goals, towards a “softer” approach emphasising creative thought and literary self-expression (Hoofd 295).

There is, thus, good reason for classifying Singapore as a peripheral state within the world economy of dramatic literature, despite its financial prowess. Post-independence, the country's unnatural economic growth has not resulted in commensurate ability to produce and delineate dramatic taste – a fact attested to by its relative paucity of literary infrastructure like prestigious languages, professional translators and globally influential critics (Casanova 14-23). Indeed, one might argue that for Singapore, economic growth has actually come at the cost of cultural clout, by necessitating a pedagogical outlook highly focused on the development of technological skills, at the expense of literary fluency. In the unequal world economy of literature, Singapore's English-language dramatists thus feature as peripheral price-takers who are always "under duress" (Moretti 80), struggling to fulfil a perceived standard of global literariness that emanates from distant sites of power.

## II

In theory, this model provides an enlightening glimpse into how power circulates between sites of production, thereby explaining the woes faced by Singaporean dramatists vis-à-vis their foreign counterparts. However, the careful critic cannot help but notice that it is dogged by certain unanswered questions. One of these has to do with its deterministic presumptions: in mapping what might be termed "a diagram of symbolic power" (Moretti 80), it seems to assume that taste can only flow uni-directionally from sites of prestige in the English-speaking world, to peripheral communities with smaller deposits of literary resources. This leads us to question if a playwright from the literary fringes can do anything at all to meaningfully succeed within, or even surpass, the foreign standards that they labour within. As Joel Tan articulates it:

If the naturalistic play is a cultural transplant... and if as a result it exists in an odd relationship with the actual social history of its transplant host-culture, then beyond saying that there are no possibilities for the form in that culture, what can (and have) [we] do/done with this... form? ("Dealing with the Bourgeois Play," para. 13)

In critical writing on the subject, one argument posits that writers like Tan can negotiate power by infusing inherited literary formula with "the weight of [their] national heritage" – that is to say, with the exoticisms and aesthetic sensibilities particular to their own experiences, as denizens of the global South (Casanova 35-40). This allows them to "take their part in a collective lesson for... readers of a global pluralism" (Brennan 203), and thereby claim a unique foothold in international literary space. But this stratagem must be deployed within strict limits if it is to really accomplish its aims. For although peripheral dramatists must draw on their own versions of the local to succeed, they still need to present this

information in “world-readable” (English 319) terms that render it interesting – or at least accessible – to central literary communities. This means that practitioners from a country like Singapore are obliged to perform a precarious balancing act, in order to achieve the epithet of “good author.” On the one hand, they need to deploy all the linguistic and stylistic quirks of their local communities to appear as culturally representative, and therefore valuable, contributors to world writing. But on the other hand, these quirks need to be subject to a practice that we might term “glocalisation”: carefully repackaged according to terms of “subnational and extranational articulation” (English 312), so that they can attain comprehensibility beyond local shores.

As one might expect, there has been vigorous debate surrounding these processes of glocalisation, and the attitude of acquiescence that they seem to demand from dramatists at the periphery. Nowhere is this debate more clearly crystallised than in one of Joel Tan’s short plays, *Hotel*. First performed in 2014, this tells the story of Anthony and Germaine, a wealthy Singaporean couple vacationing at the presidential suite of an expensive hotel. When an item of luggage fails to be delivered to their room, Germaine reacts by assuming that the Indonesian bellboy must have stolen it; this, in turn, prompts Anthony to label her a “racist” (282) who is unable to treat denizens of the Third World as equals. Eventually, Germaine turns the tables on him by pointing out that he, too, is “racist” (286), since he offers women differential treatment based on whether they hail from developed parts of the “Western” world, or developing countries elsewhere – an accusation that, ultimately, leads to the revelation of Anthony’s infidelity and deals a major blow to their relationship.

In an interview, Tan has explained that *Hotel* is about “the politics of being Asian... [and] relating to Western visions of modernity” (“An Interview with Joel Tan” 397-98). Rephrasing this claim in the vocabulary of world systems theory, one might say that in *Hotel*, Tan explores the politics of being a subject from the global peripheries, who must negotiate a suitable way to relate to core communities situated in the so-called modern or Western world. To this end, Anthony and Germaine embody two very different types of strategy. Anthony, for his part, has chosen to embody the glocal ethos, repackaging his demotic identity into a more cosmopolitan form that people from the global core can admire, or at least understand, on their own terms. His speech is free from colloquialisms, and littered with borrowings from the standard register of global media – to give just one example, his phrase “Dumb hick of an air stewardess” is a conspicuous Americanism that stands out against Germaine’s equivalent abbreviation, “The SQ girl,” a Singaporean slang phrase so obscure as to require explanatory footnotes (275).

As a peripheral subject seeking validation from the world’s most powerful centres, Anthony demands a version of presentable exoticism from himself, and more problematically, from the woman who completes his self-image as his

partner. On the one hand, he wants Germaine to stay Singaporean enough to be handled like his “little Asian dalmation, like an Lanvin oriental tie pin, like one of [his]... silk ties printed with jasmine flowers” (287). But on the other, he also demands that she know better than to commit rustic crimes like “say[ing] ‘hor’ or ‘lah’ or ‘eeyer’ in proper company,” or “chew[ing] with her mouth open like an off-the-boat Fu Manchu” (288). Anthony, then, illustrates a typically glocal response to systemic inequalities – by strategically reformulating, or even minimising, any traits that would mark him (or his partner) out as subjects of the world’s cultural fringes, he strives to surpass the global core on its own terms, and master its norms.

Germaine represents a different approach. At the play’s beginning, she seems almost haplessly parochial – her speech is liberally peppered with Singlish discourse particles, creole vocabulary and topic prominence (as when she asks “go Batam how to find all these expensive things?” instead of “how does one find all these expensive things in Batam?” like another English-speaker might) (280). Parochialism also inflects her general demeanour: unlike the coolly urbane Anthony, she remains garrulously impressed by the luxury around her, pressing Anthony to try all the “good stuff” provided by the hotel, and gushing “Ooooh... Aesop leh” over expensive soaps (278). For all her travels and acquaintance with foreign luxuries (as when she mourns the loss of her “Penhaligon perfume”) (280), Germaine appears not to have gained much distance from the stereotype of an under-travelled, under-exposed Singaporean, who lacks what Bourdieu would term embodied capital.

But as the play progresses, it becomes evident that for Germaine, this localism actually functions like a kind of sharp-witted and self-conscious resistance, which enables her to defy Anthony’s imperious demands for glocal behaviour. Gradually, Tan makes us aware that if necessary, Germaine is more than capable of savvy internationalism – as when she deploys a whole range of cutting American references out of nowhere, accusing Anthony of treating Tracie like “a Midwestern pony” or “field of corn, plow it and thresh it and pop it” (286). Elsewhere, we see her snatch at sophisticated registers of speech to give her arguments bite (alliteratively demanding “Expiation. Elaboration”) (285) – even abandoning Singlish altogether (as in her crowning monologue, where she draws on registers of poetic speech to dramatically accuse Anthony of being a “hybrid cultural freak show”) (287). Subtly, then, Germaine admits a degree of familiarity with the global Anglophone core, encouraging us to read her fidelity to local tropes elsewhere as a calculated gesture – a deliberate challenge to the standards of sophistication so imperiously imposed on her by Anthony, and more broadly, by the sites of power that he represents.

If Germaine embodies the rejection of compliant, centrally-readable glocalisation, then it is interesting to see that Tan’s play ultimately shifts in her favour, holding her up as its vindicated (albeit unlikeable) protagonist. If initially,

Anthony presumes to possess a larger degree of moral and intellectual authority in their relationship, it is Germaine who finally has the last word, by demonstrating that Anthony's cosmopolitanism is as influenced by the unequal world economy as her own, allegedly more parochial, worldview. It is true, as Anthony points out, that she struggles to treat the bellboy as a peer because he hails from a country on the world's economic fringes, rendered peripheral by global distributions of power. But by the play's end, it has become obvious Anthony's attitude towards his mistress is just as affected by the hierarchies set in place by a combined and uneven world economy. Because his mistress Tracie comes from Ivy League America and he, from the global fringes, he can only see her as a token of power who, through sex, validates his successful transition into the global centre by helping him to feel like he is "coming all over those white pricks who called [him] names in school" (288). Eventually, it is Anthony who is rendered speechless by Germaine, as she deconstructs his broad-minded pretensions to reveal the inequality that underlies them.

*Hotel*, thus, displays a profound mistrust of glocalisation and the unsatisfactory compromises that it demands from peripheral subjects like Germaine and Anthony. Tan's bickering couple illustrates the possibility of questioning – if not resisting – the glocal's equation of sophistication with presentable, universally palatable, exoticism. Besides being described formally, one might say that this theme is also enacted more viscerally, at the level of performance. Consider Tan's deployment of mesolectal Singlish, for instance. On one hand, this performance register serves purposes at the level of what one might call the play's formal content, by embellishing in-text characterisation – notably, it demonstrates to us that Anthony is deliberately rather than naturally cosmopolitan, since he is able to understand lower verbal registers, and even make occasional concessions to them (as, for instance, when he starts using the more colloquial "Yah" [277] instead of his usual Americanism, "yeah" [276], in order to placate Germaine). Here, his use of Singlish leads us to see him as a self-styled sophisticate, who puts conscientious effort into rejecting his origins.

But at another level, this use of Singlish also fulfils a non-narrative purpose that relates directly to the play's "contextual life" – that is, to the way in which it is "circulate[d]," "transmitted and reproduced" as a socio-political object at the moment of performance (Lucey 125). *Hotel* was written for the anniversary of The Arts House (Tan, *Hotel* 273), a prestigious performance space in Singapore frequented by a well-travelled, middle- to upper-class milieu not dissimilar to the one represented by the play's characters. This creates a nice parallel between the play's in-text, thematic content and its hermeneutic operations: for just as Anthony is forced to admit his local origins in the act of responding to Germaine's slang, so is Tan's cosmopolitan audience made to concede familiarity with mesolectal Singaporean idioms in the very act of watching his play. They must, for instance, draw upon reserves of local knowledge in order to fully



appreciate the drama of the play's opening lines – Anthony's reply of "This has already cost us" becomes patronising only when one can see that it echoes the syntax of Germaine's earlier sentence, while school-marmishly stripping away its Singlish use of the word "eh" and substituting its syllable-timed, staccato feel for a more stress-timed rhythm that lays didactic emphasis on the word "already" (275). Likewise, it is difficult to grasp the import of Anthony's purebred English unless one is prepared to read it against local context – only then does it stand out as an immediate, ostentatious signal of economic privilege and foreign education.

*Hotel* thus challenges cosmopolitan frameworks of value not only at the level of its narrative, but at the level of direct audience engagement. By ensuring that its nuances are best appreciated by those viewers willing to decode it according to – and thereby admit familiarity with – mesolectal linguistic tropes, *Hotel* exploits the inequalities of world literature to privilege local over cosmopolitan, or glocal, viewership.

The same might be said of another play by Tan, *People*, which opened in 2013. *People* ties together eleven vignettes concerning Singaporean characters, which are all centred around the 2011 earthquake disaster in Tokyo. It spans an impressively diverse range of languages including Japanese ("Alex"), Singaporean Mandarin ("David" and "Francis"), mainland Mandarin ("Qing"), standard English ("Hock," "Nicholas" and "Lily") and Singlish dialects from across a broad socio-economic spectrum ("Regina," "David," "Valerie," "Missy," "Natalie" and "Francis"). In this sense, it is a "particularist" (Walkowitz 33) piece of theatre – privileging a relatively small segment of viewers who are local enough to operate in several regional dialects, while excluding more privileged, cosmopolitan individuals who have been rendered monolingual by the need to speak English cross-culturally.

In several vignettes, this process of selective exclusion manifests with particular force. In "Francis," for instance, viewers are rewarded for having the ability to slip seamlessly between Singaporean Chinese, English and Hokkien; moreover, these scenes resist easy comprehension by drawing on what Emily Apter has termed "untranslatables" (581) – words that struggle to retain their semantic insinuations across languages, because they are so utterly rooted in local cosmologies of meaning. In one scene, Francis' original phrase "人比人气死人" is completely denuded of its idiomatic certainty, when its structural homology is replaced by the bland and loosely strung-together English phrase, "If we keep competing there'll be no end to it" (167). Here, Tan has no qualms about exploiting the fact that the linguistic "noncarryover that carries over nonetheless" can only "[transmit] at a half-crooked semantic angle" (Apter 587), so that it loses some of its original impact and immediacy.

"David" uses a different tactic to privilege the multilingual viewer who can access clues from across the sociolect spectrum: relying on code-switching to

manifest its characters' relational dynamic. Viewers will need to understand how language signifies social stratification in Singapore, if they are to fully grasp that the onus for patching up lies with Kong, since it is he who must switch "up" the sociolect spectrum (from Hokkien to Singaporean Mandarin) to communicate with his son. Likewise, David's position as the aggrieved party is communicated by his refusal to switch "down" to Singaporean Mandarin – for by hovering within a realm of acrolectal English that is inaccessible to his lowly-educated, taxi-driver father, he uses language to reinforce a position of superiority and untouchable moral rectitude (129-30). Here, as elsewhere, Tan's multilingualism is a calculated strategy that validates local modes of aesthetic comprehension – to adopt a phrase from Mary Louise Pratt, his "heterolingualism appears not when realism calls for it," but when he "undertake[s] to explore linguistic difference as a social force, a site of power, and a source of knowledge" in relation to his audience (289).

In a broader sense, then, Tan's multilingualism allows him to assert the local by reproducing the nationalist ideal of Singapore as a single, united amalgam of diverse constituent parts. If Benedict Anderson has argued, more generally, that print culture can generate an imagined community by allowing disparate people to share an experience of "meanwhile" (25), we might say that this effect is deepened by the temporal framework of Tan's play, since its revolution around a single historical event creates the impression of simultaneity between Singaporean characters who would, otherwise, be far-removed from each other linguistically, socio-economically, and (therefore) in time and space. Additionally, the intensely fragmented linguistic register and hodgepodge narrative of Tan's play compel us, his viewers, to step up and ourselves provide some organising principle to hold it all together. As Tan puts it, "that play was always for me about audiences making meaning along with the play, stringing together allusions, metaphors, images, and seemingly disparate crises and predicaments and try[ing] to make sense of it as a whole" ("An Interview with Joel Tan" 389). It is we – his viewers – who finally verify the play's nationalist message that diversity can coherently signify, if one is willing to "[press]" it all "together" (Tan, *People* 117).

The careful critic will, moreover, note that although *People* draws on a huge range of languages and local dialects, its principal language is still a standardised version of English that functions like a broadly comprehensible tool for generating nationalist unity. Elsewhere, Rebecca Walkowitz has described how the "accented novels" of Henry Roth and Monique Truong borrow the sounds of non-English languages, but relegate these sounds to dialogue so that they "seem to belong to some of the characters, but they do not belong to the novel" (37). In a similar vein, *People* uses standardised English to articulate its central thematic content, so that non-English seems to belong to some of its characters, but not constitute the language of its internal world. Thus, for instance, its chief metaphor of "two magnificent roots holding two slabs of concrete together,"

appears in two scenes that take place almost entirely in standardised English – namely, the play’s prologue (117) and penultimate scene (186). Likewise, although the play’s dialogue features various strains of colloquialism, its stage directions are generally drawn from a very sophisticated range of poetic diction that, in one instance, has a character pegged as “desultory,” “full of adolescent spunk and loathing” (122). The play’s dramatic offerings might cross a range of linguistic registers, but its narrative backbone is always expressed in a so-called universal language that can tie everything together; mimicking state-building policy, it frames English as a “unifying working language for politico-operational integration at the national level” (Kuo 34).

At this juncture, one might ask if these attempts to generate dramatic unity should be read as concessions to glocalisation, rather than as assertions of coherent national identity. Given that Standard English makes up people’s working language, could we not argue that the play transmutes local colour into what is, ultimately, a world-readable form? Plausible as this idea might seem, I would argue that it is actually difficult to defend given a more careful look at the play and – in particular – its subplot entitled “Qing.” This concerns two mainland Chinese immigrants named Jiok and Qing, who work as hosts at a sleazy KTV lounge in Singapore. Notably, it is the only storyline that is pre-translated for us, so that it manifests the traits of “born translated” literature – writing that “approaches translation as medium and origin instead of as afterthought” (Walkowitz 3-4). In all three of Qing’s scenes, her most private and intimate thoughts “pretend” (Walkowitz 4) to take place in the more accessible medium of Standard English, instead of in the mainland Mandarin that is clearly her mother tongue. This is certainly true of her addresses to the audience, which convey all the raw emotions that her job requires her to suppress – as when she turns to us and announces “Fuck” in English, after having insincerely “coo[ed] with delight” at a client’s request to “screw around” (146). Similarly, although the subplot’s most crucial word “走” initially appears in Mandarin, Tan eventually translates it for us by having Qing ruminate, in English, “‘Go.’ As if it were that simple” (177).

“Qing,” then, does not ask us to make that same leap of exegetic effort required by other scenes that take place in Hokkien or Singlish. Unlike “Alex” or “Francis,” it does not plunge us into long passages of untranslatable dialogue, or otherwise compel us to perform the intellectual equivalent of that radical, self-forgetting transcendence dramatised by the play’s final scene, where Akiko “reaches her hand out” to Alex “[a]cross [a] gulf” (187). As the play’s only major non-Singaporean protagonist, Qing is not encompassed by Tan’s linguistic appeal for cross-border empathy – and thus, provides proof that this appeal is limited to groups within the bounds of the imagined nation-state. Tan might have adopted a linguistic strategy typical to glocal writing, but ultimately, he puts it to use in asserting a carefully delineated, strictly exclusionary sense of the local.

### III

Writing about the ethical implications of comparative literature studies, Djelal Kadir points out that

The onus is on us, the practitioners of comparative literature, to examine the degree to which recurrent patterns of historical coincidence, between what we do and what is happening in the world, might entail a necessary complicity on our part. While we cannot deny that we are in the world, we can and do differ on how we are of it. (1)

Kadir's comment pertains especially to world systems theory, given its deterministic insinuations. Operating under the belief that cultural authority flows from generative sites in New York or London, to receiver sites like Singapore, a critic might struggle to recognise occasions when the world's periphery is trying to "write back" – that is, when writers from the global fringes are attempting to disrupt existing power dynamics and assert themselves as legitimate producers of aesthetic taste. Critics thus risk contributing to the very system of inequality that they presume to describe: where dramatic writing from the global fringes attracts scant critical attention, and is subsequently, construed as less endowed with literary worth.

In reading Singaporean plays, critics are therefore obliged to ask how a text might be trying to complicate – even challenge – its place as a passive price-taker in the world economy of culture. In *Hotel* and *People*, Joel Tan offers an interesting twist by suggesting that for a savvy peripheral text, it is *precisely* this price-taking role that becomes its most fertile ground for inquiry, and correspondingly, its agentic contribution to global standards of dramatic taste. In the 1960s, John Barth wrote that the best postmodern authors managed to overcome "the felt ultimacies of [their] time" by cleverly turning this feeling of exhaustion itself into a source of creative inspiration, the "material and means for [new] work" (71). In a similar vein, it is possible to argue that Tan represents a particularly self-reflexive, paradoxical strain of authorship, which overcomes the limits of its peripheral status by turning this status itself into rich, workable thematic fodder.

For its part, *Hotel* ruminates on its own glocal-local tensions by embodying them thematically in its characters' relationship. Performativity, as well, demands a style of viewership that is aligned with demotic norms, and so challenges the assumption that aesthetic authority always inheres in ostensibly sophisticated or glocal modes of perception. The same might be said of *People*, where Tan employs multilingualism and a diffuse plot structure to prompt us, his viewers, into mirroring nationalist strategies of unification. Both plays, essentially, thrust the local into the spotlight – both in terms of "in-text" narrative content, and in terms of the linguistic and hermeneutic demands that they make of viewers. Far from capitulating to predetermined flows of taste, Tan has turned the experience

of subjugation into a fruitful creative source that is most relatable to, and readable by, audiences at the fringes. Watching his plays, local viewers find themselves empowered to speak back, and confidently pass judgments about “good” drama that might lie beyond the reach of their more cosmopolitan counterparts.

All this suggests some direction for future research, which might help to add nuance to the nascent field that is world systems theory. Having questioned the shape of relations between the world’s “core” and “peripheries,” it is perhaps worth asking how these categories of “core” and “periphery” could themselves be problematised, given that they comprise relative comparisons, rather than absolute descriptions, of a given community’s literary power. It is worth noting, for instance, that an ostensibly “peripheral” literary community like Singapore still exerts considerable influence over the subaltern, migrant voices that reside domestically within its borders – a consideration of some importance, given that the nation is witnessing yearly increases in short-term labour inflow from China, South Asia and other Southeast Asian countries. As these processes of immigration evolve, what it means to experience, and perform, authentic “Singaporean-ness,” one can only expect that the conceptual lines separating foreign from local aesthetics will become more fluid with time – already, cultural institutions have started including migrant writers within the scope of local arts collectives, poetry competitions and publishing initiatives, demonstrating willingness to rethink traditional conceptions of the so-called Singaporean literary voice.

Perhaps, then, there is some value to formulating a more flexible framework for world systems theory, capable of addressing the complexities of transculturalism in a Jamesonian age where power is no longer organised according to singular hierarchical relations, but rather, as a “force that circulates horizontally, on a lateral and flattened plane... many-sided, with deviations occurring at every turn” (Sandoval 72). If – as Tan believes – it is the job of dramatists to grapple frankly with the “feeling of living in this country” in all of its modern contradictions and complexities (“An Interview with Joel Tan” 402), one might say that it behooves critics to do the same.

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