

Cosmopolitan Pedagogies: Revisiting Shirley Geok-lin Lim's Short Fiction

Philip Holden¹
National University of Singapore

Abstract

This paper explores the author's experience in teaching Lim's short stories in Singapore over the course of two decades. Lim's short fiction has often been seen as subordinate to her poetry and to her longer works of prose fiction and memoir, and it has been read as a part of a career that evolves from a specific politics of location in Malaysia to an engagement with larger questions of feminism, minoritisation and cosmopolitanism identity in the United States. Such a historicist reading needs to be balanced by the reading perspectives on Lim's fiction of newer generation of Singapore students to whom their settings are now often unfamiliar. Far from being a portrait of a now vanished past in another country, however, Lim's fiction may fruitfully be read within the context of contemporary Singapore, especially in its questioning of doxologies concerning racialisation and sexuality and its promotion of what may initially seem a paradox: a local cosmopolitanism. Recent critical work on the short story as genre, indeed, suggests that questions regarding a local cosmopolitan ethics may be made particularly acute by the formal features of the short story, features of which Lim makes skilful use.

Keywords

Malaysian literature, short story, cosmopolitanism, pedagogy, Singapore literature, racialisation

In 1994, when I arrived in the city-state, something was stirring in Singapore's higher education landscape. The old whitewashed and red-roofed campus on Bukit Timah Road, successively the site of Singapore's key Anglophone higher educational institutions – Raffles College, the University of Malaya and then the University of Singapore – had been taken over by the National Institute of Education, now part of Nanyang Technological University, and thus able to offer its own degrees. The Division of Literature and Drama, where I taught, offered an alternative to the National University of Singapore for undergraduate

¹ Philip Holden is Professor of English, National University of Singapore, where he teaches courses on autobiography, modernism, postcolonial literatures and Southeast Asian literatures in English. He is the author of many articles, many on Malaysian, Singapore and Filipino literatures in English, and a number of books, including *Autobiography and Decolonization* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2008) and – with his colleague Rajeev Patke – *The Routledge Concise History of Southeast Asian Writing* (2010).

study in Literature in English. Its faculty were a mixture of experienced teachers from the Institute of Education, migrants from NUS, and a group of younger faculty, like myself, with freshly minted doctorates. There was a sense of possibility in the air and, if we disagreed on many things, we were united by a strong commitment to literature from Singapore and the region. We were keen to teach literature that might resonate with our students' experiences and life worlds, not only in specialised courses in Singapore and Malaysian literature, but also, and most crucially, in introductory courses in literary studies. Our hope was also for wider changes: our students, when they went out to teach themselves in secondary schools and junior colleges in Singapore, would have had experience of literatures of Singapore and Malaysia, and would thus be able to use these texts in their own teaching, and draw on others by the same authors. Shirley Lim's short stories were a natural choice here: internationally known, crisply written, and readily available in anthologies. While students responded enthusiastically to stories such as "Mr Tang's Girls" because of their setting, I found two other elements of interest. The gender politics of this story and others by Lim appealed both to women students who were thinking through such issues in their own lives, and also to young men who were questioning established gender roles. Second, Lim's own skill in storytelling gave me a rich menu of teaching opportunities in terms of craft and aesthetics. Short stories, in contrast to novels, might be read quickly and then subjected to exhaustive analysis: they were in this respect closer to poetry and less like the novel, which at first sight seemed to be a cognate genre.

While our stress on the local and on feminist readings did, I think, excavate something very useful in the short stories and engage students, I'm also conscious in retrospect of how our teaching was very much a product of its time. For many of the older teaching staff born in Singapore and Malaysia the world of the stories, in particular Malacca in the post-War period before the economic take-off of the 1980s, was familiar territory. To our students, it was already a remote world, encountered, if at all, largely through childhood memories or more likely parents' stories. The geography of Malacca of the 1950s and 1960s, marked by the easy strolling of Lim's protagonists to school, church, or the beach and back, contrasted with a Singapore of the 1990s in which the built environment had been almost totally reconstructed in the service of development. Lim's stories marked a hybrid culture that included residual objects of British culture on the cusp of decline: tins of Cadbury's Roses chocolates, Ovaltine jars, packets of Birds blancmange. Our students' worlds, in contrast, were full of cultural goods from America, greater China and Japan.

The sexual and cultural politics of Lim's texts, too, were more complex in our students' recognition than we at first might have thought. All of the lecturers on the team that taught the introductory course had done their

graduate work outside Singapore: in the United States, Canada, or Australia. In reading the short stories and working with our students, we made use of perspectives that we had encountered and absorbed in our graduate work and subsequent research. We were interested in postcolonial contestations of the colonial past that paralleled feminist contestations of patriarchy. It was thus easy to read “Mr Tang’s Girls” and other short stories by Lim as enacting and challenging a congruent series of oppressions. In this reading, we saw in “Mr Tang’s Girls” the overthrow of a nameless Chinese patriarch who also made strategic use of a colonial world order and colonial notions of respectability: we saw Kim Li’s confrontations with her father as an expression of female and anticolonial agency. We tried to be good teachers, of course, and not to impose a single reading. But I, for one, did at least attempt to steer my students in this direction, while hopefully always remaining open to other interpretations.

For all this, however, there was something disturbing about “Mr Tang’s Girls,” and indeed of much of Lim’s other fiction set in Malaya, something that resulted in a continued sense of unease in class regarding the finality of any interpretation. If Lim’s short story was simply an allegory for the overthrow of traditional patriarchal and colonial values, why was Ah Kong such a compelling character? Why, in particular, did Lim give us as readers so much access to his consciousness, and let us inhabit his point of view, only to be repelled by his combination of judgmental moralism and prurience? This uneasiness, now recalled after twenty years of teaching, suggests to me some of the ways my teaching of Lim’s short stories has developed. Two decades later, in Singapore that has gone through further dizzying changes under globalisation, the world that Lim’s characters occupy is even less familiar to my students: at best it is the world of their grandparents, but it may lie even further back, or indeed not be present, in family history. And yet the stories still have impact. This essay suggests that the power of the stories for contemporary young readers in Singapore comes not from their familiarity, but their strategic place as neither fully familiar nor unfamiliar. Lim’s stories offer neither a fantasy world for escapism, as an international novel might do, nor a simple reiteration and description of the present environment, as in some contemporary Singapore fiction eager to establish local authenticity. They remain important for students in Singapore, I’d like to suggest, because of their potential to defamiliarise: to challenge normative assumptions regarding sexuality and race that students have learned, feel discomfort with and seek to overcome. Thus Lim’s stories offer the Singapore university classroom the possibility of enacting what Angelia Poon has recently characterised as an important aim for literary studies in the city-state: the fostering exploration of the possibilities of cosmopolitanism, a “self-reflexive critical approach to self and openness to Otherness” (37) which paradoxically finds its expression through an intensive re-acquaintance with the local.

Whereas it is important to engage Lim's text as literary texts and not as transparent sociological or historical documents, some social and historical background is useful in explaining the possibilities they offer within a Singapore classroom. The first context to consider is the development of literary studies in Singapore. A number of factors, including an increased marketisation of education that stresses quantitative scores above qualitative measures of achievement, have resulted in the number of students taking "O" level Literature in English to decline sharply in Singapore over the past two decades, from over 16,000 in 1992 to 3,000 at present (Chia). In the literature "A" and "O" level classroom – where the vast majority of university-bound students exposed to literature at secondary school and junior college study – syllabi have been revised to give greater representation to "Singapore/Malaysian" texts. Many teachers of literature in schools are advocates of Singaporean and regional writing, and indeed active participants in writing communities. However, the texts chosen for teaching, with some honourable exceptions, have historically often been "safe" texts that only tangentially raise important questions regarding politics, sexuality, or the ethnicity in Singapore. Such texts often appear dull compared to the British, American and world literature texts that students encounter, in which no restrictions are placed on such discussions. Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*, for instance, was included in the "O" level syllabus in 2006, at the same time as Singapore texts that used similarly colloquial language were excluded for "profanity."² Students are exposed to literature in other contexts: it is taught in lower secondary school, for instance, and is also made use of in subjects such as National Education. While interdisciplinary uses of literary texts are important, the teaching of literature in these contexts can, however, often result in an instrumental approach, in which the literary texts are used to support messages rather than explored in more open-ended dialogue. Recent work by scholars in education in Singapore has critiqued such instrumentality, and indeed urged a more open approach to the teaching of literary studies in schools, as a self-acknowledged "politicising process predicated on the 'subversive' potential of creative and critical thinking" (W. Liew 71).

As the discussion above suggests, the teaching of Literature in English in schools takes place against a larger background of multiracial pedagogy and social doxologies regarding sexuality. Singapore's unique history as a colonial entrepôt that has become a city-state means that issues to do with the cultural context of literary texts are phrased differently from those in multiculturalisms elsewhere. In explaining state multiracialism in Singapore, Daniel Goh has distinguished between postcolonial societies, such as Britain, the United States,

² The quotation comes from a 2005 conversation I had with an officer from the Curriculum Planning and Development Division, Ministry of Education, when approached to recommend Singapore texts for the "O" level syllabus.

Canada and Australia, and postimperial societies such as Singapore and India, in which the colonisers departed and were replaced by a “transcultural” elite (246). Such elites, Goh notes, took over the mechanisms of a state that operated through racial difference: in the case of Singapore, the plural society of colonialism in which different communities were encouraged to maintain traditional ties and given cultural autonomy, but that met through mechanisms of governance and the marketplace. During the years of decolonisation, there was a discussion in Singapore, and in particular Malaya, of the formation of a hybrid and syncretic culture. Yet the structures of governance of the colonial state were firmly embedded, and indeed represented by separate interest groups. After the end of colonialism, national elites maintained their power by continuing pluralist policies and claiming transcultural authority both to keep the peace among competing racialised interest groups, and to superintend national development.

The result in Singapore is the familiar CMIO system, in which Singaporeans are divided into the categories of Chinese, Malay, Indian, or Other (or in reality, a plethora of others – possible designations include “Arab,” “Pakistani,” “Caucasian” and “Eurasian”). A citizen’s race is inscribed on her identity card, and in turn influences the manner in which she addresses the state: the “mother tongue” she learns at school, for instance, or the distribution of populations in public housing. More broadly, the result is – as in Malaysia – a racialised society in which a range of issues from academic performance in standardised tests through to social deprivation and exclusion are often seen first through the lens of race, rather than through a range of possible perspectives. While pluralism for many years worked as part of an implicit social contract between citizens and government, in which civil liberties were attenuated in exchange for economic growth, it has come under pressure in the last two decades. Many more Singaporeans are now of mixed “racial” heritages, either through intermarriage or simply through the pursuit of cultural interests and affiliations that move outside the category designated on their identity card. Yet pluralism cannot be easily abandoned, since to do so would result in a loss of transcultural authority on the parts of the elites, and also a loss of authority of those who are designated as community representatives or leaders.

The result is something similar to what economists call path dependency, in which a chosen system continues, reinforced by its own logic despite inherent flaws. Multiracialism presents itself as a pragmatic response to the reality of race, deferring a loosening of racial affiliation until an indeterminate day in the future. Yet at the same time it incites racial categorisation, causing the horizon of a society that is no longer racialised to perpetually recede from view. An example of the problematics of multiracialism, and its struggle to adapt to social changes, was demonstrated in series of 2010 announcements by the Ministry of Home Affairs offering “double-barrelled race options for

Singaporean children born to parents of different races” (Immigration and Checkpoints Authority). The regulations produced respond to a genuine need, but the attempt to accommodate it within the framework of multiracialism results in absurdities. Those choosing the “double-barrelled” option must choose one of the racial identities as primary, and this will then be used to classify the child. Racial identity can only be double, not triple-barrelled, and elaborate mechanisms have been devised to specify and possibly change one’s race that reach an absurd level of detail (Immigration and Checkpoints Authority), and which thus implicitly undermine all claims to the utility of race itself as a classificatory category.

Everyday life in Singapore is thus a complex negotiation between the everyday common sense of racial categories and a growing sense of their inadequacy, an impatience with the manner in which a racialising shorthand is present in everyday life, and yet a frequent inability to think of a new language to replace it. In many ways, a parallel situation exists regarding sexuality. While much international attention has focused on Singapore’s maintenance of colonial era criminalisation of homosexuality in Section 377A of the Criminal Code, the debates around potential decriminalisation are, in fact, part of a much wider ideological package.³ As in many societies, Singapore’s postimperial elite gained legitimacy, we have seen, through superintending a process of economic development. Goh is right that the elite claimed transcultural authority, and thus the ability to arbitrate between racialised groups, yet it also increasingly gained authority through culturalism – through a stress on an abstract Asian identity in contrast to a reified West. This Orientalist binarism has a complex series of roots and branches. In one sense, Singapore’s experience parallels Partha Chatterjee’s account of the growth of nationalism in India, in which nationalists divided the world mentally into external and internal spheres. The external sphere was the public sphere of commerce, technology and modernity, which was coded as Western; the inner sphere was the private, concerned with cultural practices. In Chatterjee’s account, nationalist elites challenged colonialism by claiming authority over the inner sphere. Such a move successfully challenged colonialism’s legitimacy, and yet it left an awkward legacy since the formation of new citizens “was premised not on a conception of universal humanity, but rather on particularity and difference” (75).

In Singapore this production of difference from the West has ebbed and flowed – from the campaigns against “yellow culture” of the 1960s, through concerns with “hippism” later in the decade and into the 1970s, and then to the discourse of Asian values promulgated by Lee Kuan Yew and Malaysia’s Mahathir bin Mohamad in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In this discourse,

³ For a ground-clearing discussion of one ideological context, see Ho, “How to Bring Singaporeans Up Straight.”

liberal Western views on sexuality are contrasted to an essential and imagined Asian conservatism. Thus sexuality education programmes in Singapore schools, despite recent discussions on potential reform, continue to promote abstinence, and to see this position as “reflecting the conservative social tone of our Asian society where liberal values on sex are not espoused” (Singapore, Ministry of Education; Ng). Sexuality as imagined by the Ministry of Education is largely a construct of the early years of the developmental state: it does not fit with historical reality, and increasingly diverges from contemporary sexual practices and identities in Singapore and the surrounding region. Films, graphic novels and popular music from East Asia, increasingly consumed by Singaporeans, are as likely to express fluid and queer sexual identities as “Western” sources. Yet the idea of Asian conservatism, like the racial categorisation of multiculturalism, has become doxologically fixed: it is difficult to contest because it forms a naturalised discursive common sense, even as it clearly – as with the racial categories of multiracialism – increasingly lacks a fit with contemporary Singaporean society.

Before we move to looking at Lim’s stories, it is perhaps worth dwelling on the status of literary texts themselves, and the nature of the short story as a genre. Literary texts are, like other texts, the products of a discrete historical moment – or, if they are revised, a number of moments. They arise from a particular historical milieu and an individual’s or a group’s experience of that milieu, and they are directed towards a particular audience. Yet literary texts emphasise an aspect of writing that many other kinds of text do not: rather than aiming for direct referential communication, literary texts aim for a very precise and focused form of ambiguity. Such ambiguity enables a reader from a different historical or social situation to reanimate the text using his or her own experience: in this aspect, all texts which make use of literary devices are to a degree “writerly” texts, since “the goal of literary work... is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text” (Barthes 4).

Short stories are a genre in which issues of literary form and their effect on readers are often neglected. As Mary Louise Pratt has argued, short stories are not simply miniature novels: their shortness has distinct consequences that connect formal qualities, narrative content and effects on the reader. One, Pratt notes, is the sense of fragmentation and sampling that a short story frequently suggests, with the genre frequently offering a “countergenre” to the fullness associated with the novel (99). As Pratt points out, the short story is frequently literally not a text on its own, being bound in an anthology, magazine or collection. It is thus attached to other texts, and the experience of reading a series of short stories is less one of immersion and entry into an autonomous literary world than a series of entries into story worlds marked by surfacings into the world of the reader. The endings of short stories thus become more important than those of novels, since they represent liminal spaces between the

fictional world and the world of the reader. Per Winther has further remarked that short stories frequently exhibit a tension between formal narrative closure and “thematic and heuristic closure” (146): this tension troubles readers, and asks them to rethink the story as it concludes, to return to it, or to ponder the issues or contradictions that it foregrounds. In this sense, the short story is perhaps a uniquely defamiliarising genre, featuring what V.S. Pritchett called the “curious combination of the reporter and the poet,” and allowing readers “to isolate certain things in present day life” (qtd. in Hughes, 423, 424).

Pritchett's combination is very evident in Lim's story “Native Daughter.” On the one level, we have a form of reportage, a documenting of the life of the Peranakan community in a Malacca caught up in the process of change. The trishaw ride taken by Mei Sim, the protagonist of the story, provides a fullness of detail unobservable from a motor car, and anchoring in the sights and sounds of a multicultural landscape:

What interesting things to see that she had missed on their evening car rides! Here was a small stall with bottles on *cencajuk* and *belacan* neatly moulded on the shelves. She glimpsed through an open door a red and gold altar cloth and bowls of oranges and apples before a dim sepia portrait. Two *neneks* in shabby sarong and *kebaya* sat on a long bench by the covered front of another house. Each woman had a leg pulled up under her sarong, like one-legged idols set for worship. Here was a pushcart with a tall dark *mamak* frying red-brown noodles in a heavy *kuali*. How good it smelled. (15)

Here we have a spectacular vision of a multicultural society, with Chinese, Indian and Malay elements mediated through the hybrid Peranakan culture of the townscape and the observer. Yet any simple celebration of the hybrid identity of a “native daughter” is undercut by elements that, following Pritchett, we might think of as poetic: in particular, narrational perspective, and the use of recurrent motifs.

There are perhaps two levels on which the poetry of Lim's story is expressed: one that is readily apparent from the beginning of the story, and a second that is muted, almost unnoticed, until its troubling end. The manifest theme of the story concerns gender. As she frequently does in her short stories, Lim draws on autobiographical experience to create a child focaliser, here Mei Sim, still short enough to shower under the “tall tap” in the open bathroom at the rear of her home (14). Mei Sim undergoes a pedagogy in the story regarding gender roles. This occurs both directly – for instance, when she is told by her mother not to sit or lie with her legs apart – and indirectly, through her overhearing a long conversation about marriage and women's place in society between her mother and her grandaunt. The effect is clear: the naivety of the child focaliser, who finds elements of socially sanctioned customs and attitudes

towards sexuality both curious and perplexing, distances readers from social norms. The effect for a reader is thus one of a defamiliarisation from gender doxologies: painfully, we also learn that the process of internalisation of these assumptions is often performed by women themselves. A larger discursive challenge seems impossible for the characters in the story: women must “accept [their] fate” and then develop tactics to survive and take what control is possible within the boundaries marked out for them (21). At the end of the story, Mei Sim herself enacts what she has learned, avoiding her mother’s anger at immodest and unfeminine behaviour in play with a boy her own age by blaming the boy, claiming that he “pulled at” the dress which she had offered him to touch (25). Readers take away a different lesson: how subjects internalise elements of sexuality at a young age, and how the social world works to make these elements appear natural.

The effect on the reader of Mei Sim’s focalisation is enhanced by a chain of imagery that runs through the story. Lim has commented in interview that she does not outline short stories, but rather allows them to develop following “the shape of the sentence, by the words being strung, like a poem” (qtd. in Quayum 94). Images in “Native Daughter,” indeed, link together sections of the story by association, cutting across the narrative movement from cause to effect, and from rising action to climax and denouement. The most prominent is an opposition between clothing and the body. The short story begins with Mei Sim’s mother’s focus on her shameless daughter’s legs, and legs in particular reappear throughout the story: the “bare brown legs” of the trishaw man, or the legs pulled up by the *neneks* under their sarongs (16). These images are part of a larger opposition, in which clothing encloses and tames the body, and prepares it for a social role. The poor tenant who arrives at Mei Sim’s grandaunt’s house is followed by a “boy dressed in starched white shirt and khaki shorts” (23). The school uniform here adds formality to the occasion. The main focus of the cluster of images, however, is on women’s clothing, and the way that it hides the body and enables a performance. A description of Mei Sim’s “party frock, an organdy material of pink and purple tuberose with frills on the bib” contrasts with her nakedness in the shower, and is followed by a longer description of her mother’s clothes in contrast to the body (14):

Gold and diamond *kerosang* pinned the *kebaya* tightly together, and the gold-brown sarong was wrapped tightly around her plump hips and stomach. She had to hitch herself up onto the trishaw and, once seated, carefully smoothed the sarong over her knees. When Mei Sim climbed in, Mother gave her a push to keep her from crushing her sarong. (14-15)

Clothes are beautiful but also imprisoning, pinning up the body, preventing easy movement and also reducing intimacy. They thus provide a metaphorical

parallel – suggested, explored, but never explicitly stated – with the practices of femininity that Mei Sim is encouraged to learn.

Lim's story thus proceeds smoothly, bookended by two scenes of shame: in the first Mei Sim is taught something about the regulation of sexuality, while in the second she begins to practice what she has been taught, and to gain power from doing so. Most readers, indeed, might anticipate such a denouement to the story: what is not anticipated, however, is its wider reference to race. The tenant's son whom Mei Sim allows to touch her dress is Indian. There is a clear class difference between the tenant and Mei Sim's grandaunt, shown in the way that he brings her gifts almost in a feudal manner. This difference is also racialised in two stages. At first, Mei Sim's view of the Indian tenants seems purely descriptive, without any negative connotation: she sees the boy and his father innocently as "dark and shiny," giving a surface description without interpretation just as she has described other people seen on the rickshaw ride. Yet when she interacts with the boy she emphasises the class differential by calling him *orang jakun*, using the term's pejorative connotations regarding aboriginality to produce difference. It is this racialisation that opens up the possibility to Mei Sim of attempting to displace her mother's anger onto the boy.

The short story's ending thus exhibits some of the tensions that Winther identifies between "thematic and heuristic" – and indeed, we might add, poetic – closure. Mei Sim's mother's reaction is still uncertain, yet there is a symmetry between the two scenes of shame that open and close the story. The newly foregrounded elements of class and race, however, throw the reader back into the story, to other comments that may have passed unremarked: an observation from Mei Sim's mother, for example, that the woman her husband is having an affair with is "a bitch – black as a Tamil and hairy all over" (18). And this in turn begins to raise questions about filiations between race, class and sexuality. The story offers neither simple parallels nor ready solutions, but it does make use of the formal qualities of short fiction to disturb the reader, to suggest both renewed examination of previously unremarked elements in the story itself and a parallel series of recognitions in the extratextual world of the reader.

Lim's short story "Hunger" follows a similar pattern in miniature. The story again draws on settings and autobiographical elements from Lim's childhood in Malacca. The schoolgirl protagonist, Chai, finds the order of her world slowly disintegrating after her mother leaves home. She walks to school each morning unfed, and thus experiences the hunger of the story's title: her clothes remain unwashed, and she only has a single meal in the evening. As Chai adapts to this rhythm of life, the narrative becomes less realist in tone and takes on a hypnagogic quality. The topography of Malacca recedes, and we are left with a train of images: the blue eyes of Chai's doll and of her teacher Sister Finnegan, and the matching, remote blue of the sky; the lusciousness of fruit

and cooked food just outside her reach; a sense of life as a mechanism, of one's body and mind no longer being under conscious control; and also an increasing sense of dirt: the "grime" of Chai's fingers, the "stinking revolting mud" inside the seawall, and seahorses that metamorphose into "grey grubs" and die (10-11). A reader does not immediately sense the connection between these images, but does feel a growing disquiet. Chai's consciousness of her situation is growing increasingly divorced from its objective reality, and it appears that only some form of violent intervention from her or from another agent will bring them together. The denouement, when it comes, unites the image-chains: Chai is sexually abused by an old man, whose flesh drapes "like spotted grey cloth on his body," and who lures her to him with a succulent ripe guava. She experiences his touches like an automaton, without expressing any emotion. In the final paragraph, the narrative turns again. The man approaches Chai again, this time with money, rather than food. She refuses him, yet the refusal is not presented as an assertion of resistance or agency, but rather an indulgence in the "terrible pleasure of ignoring his pleading eyes and wavering hand" (12).

"Hunger," then, finally resists a single definitive reading – the oxymoron "terrible pleasure" throws a reader back into the text, and also into a world outside in which a transnational moral panic concerning paedophilia has been given a particular local inflection through a history of moral panics in Singapore (Kong 104, Liew & Fu 100). The indeterminate, troubling ending of the story raises a series of questions regarding sexuality and its relationship to power, and invites the questioning of a model of sexuality based on what Michel Foucault calls the "repressive hypothesis," in which a pre-existing desire is counterposed by regulation. Again, the story gives no easy answers to these questions.

What, then, of "Mr Tang's Girls," the story to which my students responded, and continue to respond to, most strongly? In this story, Lim also makes full use of the formal elements of the genre: a carefully patterned plot that moves through an apparent resolution to a further crisis and a final denouement, and a series of chains of images that are woven into the narrative. The presiding motif in this case is the house in Malacca where the second family of one of the central characters, Mr Tang (here only named through the family's perspective as Ah Kong) lives. The house's various rooms represent an imagined social order regulated by sexuality, class and a cultural imaginary bound up with a Bourdieuan notion of taste or distinction. Thus Ah Kong on his weekend visits is pleased with the order of the house and the various visions of perfected femininity it contains. The house is divided into public and private spaces, to all of which he claims access. In the sunroom and other public rooms he relaxes, and rituals such as family high tea are performed for him. Private spaces include the Spartan back room in which the servant, Ah Chee, sleeps on a "narrow board bed," the rooms of each of his four daughters, and his wife's room, centred on the marital bed. In a key scene in the middle of the story, Ah

Kong surveys each private room at night, disturbed at the manner in the process of “daughters... becoming women” (29) results in a collapse of previously stable boundaries. The smell of “talcum and hairspray” from the room of his second daughter, Kim Mee, reminds him of brothels he has visited: he wonders that his daughter, whom he has thought of as a child, now spends “her allowance on lipstick, nail polish, Blue Grass Cologne” (32).

Race in “Mr Tang’s Girls” is addressed in a different manner from “Native Daughter.” There is no othering here, and indeed little reference to other communities outside the house. The issue at hand is Chineseness and Chinese identity: Ah Kong is criticised by members of the congregation at the Methodist Church as being “so Chinese,” and Kim Mee worries about her sister’s forthcoming marriage to one of Ah Kong’s employee’s, “a capable, China-born, Chinese-educated worker” who “only speaks Chinese” (38). Ah Kong worries about the Westernisation of his daughters, but enjoys “watching his daughters eat like European mems” (28); Christianity, defined in contrast to “pagan” traditional belief, operates as a force of conservatism. Any close reading of the story, then, starts to challenge binarisms regarding culture and sexuality.

As with other of Lim’s short stories, the conclusion of “Mr Tang’s Girls” brings together form and content. Again there is the promise of an epiphany that never quite arrives, a blurring of a dreamlike quality caused by repetitive chains of imagery, and the more realist progress of the narrative: the result is another hypnagogic state, in which Ah Kong is suspended between sleep and waking. Thus in the penultimate paragraph the *ciku* seeds from the tree which features in the opening scene of the story return, but Mr Tang finds that, though he peels them with care, juice “splatt[ers] onto his pyjamas.” His hands are “sticky with pulp”: the scene both mimes ejaculation and attaches to a larger discourse of contamination and purity that surrounds sexuality in the story (40). The final sentences of the story, in which Ah Kong feels a “knife between his ribs” are again indeterminate. His final vision of “the gleaming fish-eyes of the fishwoman” in the *kelong* has no antecedent in the story proper, in which the only mention of a *kelong* is as property he plans “to be shut and the machinery moved to a new site” (33). The effect is again one that the short story commonly produces at its best: Winther’s tension between formal and heuristic closure, and a concomitant reaching out by the reader back into the story and out into the world.

Any course on Singapore and Malaysian Literature in English can, and should, include writers of younger generation who address questions of racialisation and sexuality directly, notably Alfian Sa’at, Ng Yi-Sheng, and Teng Qian Xi. Yet texts from another, proximate time and place, such as Lim’s short stories, also have an affective and pedagogical power. My experience of teaching Lim’s stories over twenty years in Singapore has taught me something about the

ways in which their politics relates to their formal qualities as short fiction. In my early teaching career, I was tempted to read the stories as allegories, as responses to specific cultural and intellectual environments. Such a historicist reading remains valuable, and yet the stories continue to be effective today, even as the world in which they are set becomes more and more remote for new generations of students. Students respond to them not because of some transcendent humanist appeal to universals, but the manner in which the stories continue to attach themselves to the local.

In an essay published some three years ago, Walter Mignolo returns to an earlier concern in his thought – the possibility of “cosmopolitan localism” in which connections between societies are not always routed through the universalising categories of Kantian cosmopolitanism, which he sees as marked by the “universalization of Western Nativism/Localism” (126). Mignolo proposes a de-colonial cosmopolitan ethics and practice, stressing pluralism, and yet also the continued presence and development of “many multiple memories and colonial wounds infringed by racism, ways of life, languages, beliefs, experiences connected to the West, but at the same time, not subsumable to it” (127). The short story’s unique formal characteristics and its portability in terms of publication outlets and translation make it an appropriate vehicle for such a practice, in which a cultural artifact from elsewhere enters a specific society and is remade by readers into something new.

Works Cited

- Barthes, Roland. *S/Z*. Trans. Richard Howard. Oxford: Blackwell, 1990.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1984.
- Chatterjee, Partha. *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1993.
- Chia, Stacey. “Big Drop in Number of Students Taking Literature.” *Straits Times* 25 Feb. 2013. <http://www.straitstimes.com/breaking-news/singapore/story/big-drop-number-students-taking-literature-20130225>. 13 Aug. 2013.
- Goh, Daniel P.S. “From Colonial Pluralism to Postcolonial Multiculturalism: Race, State Formation and the Question of Cultural Diversity in Malaysia and Singapore.” *Sociology Compass* 2.1 (2008): 232-52.
- Ho, Aaron K.H. “How to Bring Singaporeans Up Straight (1960s-1990s).” *Queer Singapore: Illiberal Citizenship and Mediated Cultures*. Ed. Audrey Yue and Jun Zubillaga-Pow. Hong Kong: Hong Kong UP, 2012. 29-43.
- Hughes, Douglas A., “V.S. Pritchett: An Interview.” *Studies in Short Fiction* 13.4 (1976): 423-32.

- Kong, Lily. "Music and Moral Geographies: Constructions of 'Nation' and Identity in Singapore." *GeoJournal* 65.1 (2006): 103-11.
- Liew Kai Khiun and Kelly Fu. "Conjuring the Tropical Spectres: Heavy Metal, Cultural Politics in Singapore and Malaysia." *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 7.1(2006): 99-112.
- Liew, Warren Mark. "Valuing the Value(s) of Literature." *Commentary* 21 (2012): 57-71.
- Lim, Shirley Geok-lin. *Two Dreams: New and Selected Stories*. New York: Feminist Press, 1997.
- Mignolo, Walter. "Cosmopolitanism and the De-colonial Option." *Studies in the Philosophy of Education* 29 (2010): 111-27.
- Ng Eng Hen. "Remarks by Dr Ng Eng Hen, Minister for Education and Second Minister for Defence on Sexuality Education Programmes in Schools." Ministry of Education, Singapore, 21 May 2009. <http://www.moe.gov.sg/media/speeches/2009/05/21/remarks-by-dr-ng-eng-hen-on-se.php>. 15 May 2013.
- Poon, Angelia Mui Cheng. "Constructing the Cosmopolitan Subject: Teaching Secondary School Literature in Singapore." *Asia Pacific Journal of Education* 30.1 (2010) 31-41.
- Pratt, Mary Louise. "The Short Story: The Long and Short of It." *The New Short Story Theories*. Ed. Charles E. May. Athens: Ohio UP, 1994. 91-113.
- Singapore, Ministry of Education. "Scope and Teaching Approach of Sexuality Education in Schools." Ministry of Education, Singapore, n.d. <http://www.moe.gov.sg/education/programmes/social-emotional-learning/sexuality-education/scope/>. 10 May 2013.
- Quayum, Mohammad A. "Shirley Geok-lin Lim: An Interview." *MELUS* 28 (2003): 83-100.
- Winther, Per et al. "Introduction." *Narrative* 20.2 (2012) 135-70.