

## “Old Marley Married a Chinese Writer”: Towards an Aesthetics of Confident Intertextuality

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### Abstract

In exploring how intertextuality functions in two Christmas tales published in Suchen Christine Lim’s recent collection of short stories, *The Lies that Build a Marriage: Stories of the Unsung, Unsaid and Uncelebrated in Singapore* (2007), this article aims to reassess recent developments in Singaporean writing that promise to open up an aesthetics of intertextuality. This new aesthetic engagement with literary legacies forms part of an important move away from the increasingly problematic issue of postcolonial self-exoticisation. Instead, such self-reflexive fiction critically and often self-ironically dissects the multifarious potential of literary traditions. “Christmas Memories of a Chinese Stepfather” and “Christmas at Singapore Casket” play with an established genre in order to render this interpretative adaptation a vehicle not so much simply of current issues, but of their careful interrogation.

### Keywords

Singapore fiction, postcolonial revisionism, intertextuality, Victorian literature, literary history, diaspora

It is in a tongue-in-cheek twisting of established metaphors of authorship and authority – the fathering of fictional texts – that the daughter of a Singaporean woman writer pinpoints her father’s manipulative exploitation of curiously conflated, imported, textual and economic traditions in Suchen Christine Lim’s short-story “Christmas at Singapore Casket”: “My father was absolutely right when he told the divorce judge that Scrooge was not my mother’s name and therefore she didn’t own half of the company, Mah-Li & Scrooge” (139). Combining in his own family

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history a complication of Irish and Southeast Asian forms of colonisation, her father, Marley, or Mah-Li, O’Connor, “had read Charles Dickens in school, and had been colonised by his English Literature teacher” (138). But this is more than a simple stab at typecast narratives of colonial appropriation and re-appropriation. On the contrary, that “old Marley married a Chinese writer” (137) simultaneously plays with a marriage of genres and an amalgamation of familiar tropes, inverted clichés, and complementary points of view. The conversation in which the first person narrator begins to muse on her heritage of mixed, contesting, economic and literary value systems – an admixture that becomes the story’s pivotal point – symptomatically takes place at Heathrow airport as she returns to Singapore for her father’s funeral. The story thus starts off at an emblematic space of the “in-between,” neither here nor there, while it is also deeply familiar. From there, the tale radiates out into the past, into shifting margins, and the ultimately reshaped, newly adapted frames and frame-stories of economically exploited traditions. The business of manipulative appropriation frames the story’s intricate interrogation of personal and cultural memories with an appropriateness that is asserted with a pointed self-irony:

I might as well set them right about my parents. My mother is the Chinese writer, I tell them, but she writes in English. She left my father, Ma-Li O’Connor, years ago. There’s no Scrooge in my father’s company. He invented that when he started the company with my mother’s savings. (Lim, “Casket” 138)

A classic tale of business values reconsidered and transformed into a notoriously sentimental economy of exchange has been deliberately misread to be redeployed as the excuse for a particularly miserly transaction. The tale of Dickens’s most famous hardhearted businessman becomes not only the pretext, but the machinery, of Mah-Li O’Connor’s twofold exploitation of a world modelled precisely on the economic value system that this classic Christmas tale exposes. In Lim’s adaptation, a range of readings and exploitative misreadings form a texture of intersecting levels of self-reflexive borrowings that engenders a new aesthetics of intertextuality. The story opens up with a lengthy quotation from Dickens’s 1843 *A Christmas Carol*, introducing Scrooge’s dead business partner: “Marley was dead – to begin with,” while “Scrooge’s name was good upon the Change, for anything he chose to put his hand to” (Dickens 60). In the original text, Marley is condemned to haunting other worldly businesspeople in order to warn them of the ultimate results of their hardheartedness. This reminder of an often elided detail of an otherwise largely familiar storyline compels an intertextual reading. At the same time, Mah-Li’s own reference to a businessman’s return from the dead is at first interpreted in a misleading amalgam of competing traditions: that he vows “he would rise up from his coffin if anything were to happen to his company” denotes him, to unspecified bystanders, as “more Chinese than he thought he was” (Lim, “Casket” 137), but since this threat is prefaced by the promise of Scrooge’s visitation by Marley, there clearly are various legacies to be dissected at this businessman’s end.

In taking a close look at two Christmas stories included in Suchen Lim's recent collection, *The Lies that Build a Marriage: Stories of the Unsung, Unsaid and Uncelebrated in Singapore*, published in Singapore by Monsoon Books in 2007, I seek to explore developments in Singaporean writing that open up what I term an aesthetics of confident intertextuality. This new aesthetic engagement with literary legacies forms part of an important move away from increasingly problematic postcolonial self-exoticisation. Instead, such self-reflexive fiction explores the multifarious potential of literary traditions. It does so critically and often self-ironically, and yet with a new confidence in the intertextual that abjures the self-consciousness of traditional postcolonial inversion. Before analysing "Christmas Memories of a Chinese Stepfather" and "Christmas at Singapore Casket" in more detail, I shall therefore first briefly discuss why especially diasporic fiction set in Southeast Asia, but published abroad, has been among the most vexed issues for contemporary Singaporean writers. In a reassessment of what has likewise been perceived as an impasse in the current, increasingly satirical engagement with competing modes of narrative, I shall situate recent trends in Singaporean writing within a new craze for markedly different forms of postcolonial revisionism in world literature at large.

### **The Frames of Postcolonial Victoriana: Beyond Projection and Inversion**

Postcolonial revisions of the "classic" exponents of the once so easily recognisable, largely unquestioned canon of English literature have become an established strand of post-war fiction. Once first and foremost a symptom of the postcolonial enterprise of re-appropriation, such a reworking primarily manifested itself in the form of projection and straightforward inversion: villains became victims; the origins of heroes and heroines or of their wealth questioned; marginal, silent characters given a voice, reclaiming places and their stories. The classic example is Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), now among a still growing plethora of ongoing rewritings of Charlotte Brontë's mid-Victorian *Jane Eyre*. Loosely based on references in the original text to generate the frameworks of a prequel, Rhys's novel retells the story of Jane's double, her ethnic "other," from a postcolonial perspective. In the same vein, J.M. Coetzee's *Foe* (1986) has been read as a sequel to Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and *Roxana* and as a postcolonial "gesturing toward the impossibility of restoring the history of empire" (Spivak 183). The proliferation of such inversions has necessarily all too quickly saturated the market, although the trend is by no means abating. In her "Preface for a Post-Postcolonial Criticism," Erin O'Connor pinpoints this reworking through repetition as a form of "Victorientalism": a "mining of a distant, exotic, threatening but fascinating literature to produce and establish a singularly self-serving body of knowledge elsewhere" (227). Among a swathe of late twentieth-century novels, Peter Carey's *Jack Maggs* (1997), O'Connor further suggests, formed a fictionalisation of a "by-then stock critique" (225) rather than a sequel to Dickens's 1861 *Great Expectations*. In a recent study, Cora Kaplan

similarly sums up twentieth-century cultural interpretations of *Jane Eyre* as narrative Victoriana themselves. They threaten to reduce the novel to "a mnemonic symbol for American-based feminist critics in the 1970s" (Kaplan 23). "For Spivak," we remember, *Jane Eyre* was "one of the exemplary fictions of its time about the Empire at home" (Kaplan 28).<sup>2</sup> Yet as more recent reworkings of these texts show, neo-Victorian fiction (and its criticism) has now constructively left behind the all too easily typecast structures of straightforward inversion. Lloyd Jones's *Mister Pip* (2007), for example, is less a rewriting of *Great Expectations* set in a former colony than a thematisation of reading and the retrieval as well as the remaking of cultural heritage beyond self-conscious appropriation.<sup>3</sup> This marks an important shift in the consideration of literary legacies in world literature, but what exactly does this mean for the contemporary Singaporean writer publishing locally, and yet influenced both by global market forces and by new developments in English-language fiction in general?

Decades of postcolonial rewriting have significantly set the scene for an intertextual re-engagement with the narratives of the past. Growing self-reflexivity has opened up new opportunities for both writers and critics to mine continuously reworked structures. This development compels us to revisit the literary potential of intertextuality across narrative modes as well as across the various shifting boundaries that mark out literature, or "the literatures," in English. Lim's "Christmas at Singapore Casket" does far more than simply set *A Christmas Carol*, Dickens's first Christmas book and the first in a tradition of annual, largely secularised, publications for the season, into present-day Singapore. In this alone, it would simply join an important, ever growing list of adaptations, in both film and fiction. Much more importantly, it integrates cultural anxieties common in recent Singaporean fiction into a familiar, yet consciously reactivated narrative structure that questions these issues by defamiliarising their contextualisation: cross-ethnic marriage, cosmopolitan, or hybrid, identities, the difficulties specific to a self-defined multiethnic nation-state like Singapore, as well as the more widespread difficulties generated by globalised movements that structure (or force apart) families across the globe. These preoccupations are regularly mapped out as meetings and overlaps of various diasporic communities and the ways in which they enmesh individuals and their relationships. In contemporary Singaporean literature, the self-consciousness

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<sup>2</sup> In tracing readings of *Jane Eyre* as an account of changing feminisms, Kaplan shows that criticism, like the imaginative literature it analyses, is itself propelled by critics' "powerful affective response," generating an emotive history of interpretative reading and retelling. In what can be seen as "*Jane Eyre*'s critical genealogy," Spivak's interpretation consequently needs itself to be read as "a sign of the cultural effects of postwar decolonisation" (29).

<sup>3</sup> The veritable onslaught of neo-Victorian writing alone ranges from works as different as Jasper Fforde's series of highly intertextual and pointedly self-ironic novels based on characters from various classic novels, beginning with its intriguing sequel to *Jane Eyre*, *The Eyre Affair* (2001), to Lloyd Jones's *Mister Pip*, which offers a particularly good contrast to the limitations critics such as O'Connor have located in earlier postcolonial revisionism.

intrinsic to postcolonial economic, linguistic, and more generally, cultural structures, however, also meets the encompassing power of an overriding work-ethic that leads us back to the country's foundation as a British commercial port in the nineteenth century and hence, in the most intriguing reworkings, to Victorian texts. In "Christmas at Singapore Casket," the Singaporean writer links together the competing claims of these divergent issues by foregrounding her own precarious positioning: "the Chinese writer [who] writes in English" (Lim, "Casket" 138) is mocked by that other combination of imported elements, Mah-Li O'Connor, the partly Chinese, partly Irish, product of interlinked migrations over the centuries. In a parody of literature's adaptation for specific agendas, he has modelled his business values on a fictitious English miser, notoriously condemned in one of the perhaps most persistently exported and adopted cultural products of the British Empire.

This twofold condemnation, however, operates as a double negative not only in reinforcing a need for revisionist adaptation, but conversely also in cancelling out the negativity itself in the process. Precisely in wrenching apart the misappropriation of familiar narrative elements by business (in a literalisation of its commodification), Lim's Christmas tale can replenish an otherwise emptied framework with new meaning. In asserting an unselfconscious aesthetics of intertextual re-appropriation, I shall show, it does so in an essentially twofold realignment of meaning created through narrative. In an intriguing use of dynamic repetition, it forms an excellent example of the simplicity with which the dead ends generated by increasingly more and more (bitterly) self-ironic, revisionist projection may be worked out. As literary traditions are reactivated through their transposition, these very impasses are constructively channelled into a new, in Erin O'Connor's terms, "post-postcolonial" aesthetics. Mah-Li's exploitation of a widely familiar imported narrative structure can therein be seen to stand in as a synecdoche for cultural appropriation. His manipulative reuse, in other words, can "re-present" just such self-ironic condemnation of literary legacies. A new confident aesthetics of intertextuality thus suggests itself as the means to displace the self-conscious play with projection or inversion that is always in danger of reducing the newly produced text to an exoticised object of consumption itself, to a mere vehicle of neo-orientalism, as influential critics including Ien Ang, Stanley Fish, and Graham Huggan have amply pointed out. What is vital to note here is that this is exactly why especially diasporic fiction set in Southeast Asia, or Asia more generally, has formed such a vexed issue for the local Singaporean writer.

Deploring identification with any "Chinese writer [who] writes in English," an identification that entirely obscures Southeast Asia's multicultural heritage or makeup, Singaporean novelist Hwee Hwee Tan, for example, virulently explodes expectations engendered by the global marketplace. Tan refers to "Chinese Chick Lit" in her suggestively titled review of Anchee Min's 2002 *Wild Ginger*: "Ginger Tale: Yet another Chinese heroine faces political adversity – will they ever stop?" Contemporary Singaporean culture, Tan emphasises, is far removed from the

problematics showcased in populist fictionalised histories targeted at a general readership presumably little familiar with either Chinese history or women’s lives in Asia, past or present. Indeed, Tan goes further to assert that the preoccupations faced by Min’s heroine are “completely removed from the experience of the contemporary Asian woman” (66). This is hardly surprising given that Min aims to write a historical novel. What is more, what Tan proceeds to outline as her own personal interests may be as much overgeneralisation, but she makes an important point in highlighting the distorting machinery of a mass market that encourages the repetition of a successful set of paradigms: “Ever since Jung Chang’s *Wild Swans* became a global publishing sensation, booksellers have decided that the Beautiful Chinese Literary Heroine is a golden goose” (Tan 66). Even when it foregrounds Singapore’s complex history and its multicultural legacies – necessarily simplified for its target readership – diasporic fiction re-presenting Southeast Asian history within a field of neo-orientalist marketing strategies is shown to weave a double-bind for local Singaporean writers.<sup>4</sup> More recently, in an interview by Mohammad A. Quayum, published in 2006, Suchen Lim has stressed that Singapore’s multiethnic legacies could indeed form an opportunity to transcend the confines of precisely such neo-orientalism:

We are very blessed in Singapore and Malaysia in that no one accuses writers of cultural encroachment. The Singaporean or Malaysian writer writing in English need not be confined to his or her cultural ghetto.... We are producing multicultural works – plays and novels – not seen in the West. This could be our contribution to world literature. (Quayum 153)

Locally, or regionally, published fiction certainly has the advantage over diasporic works at a global marketplace in that it avoids orientalisation and, in Stanley Fish’s memorable terms, “boutique multiculturalism”: “the multiculturalism of ethnic restaurants, weekend festivals, and high profile flirtations with the other” (378). Perhaps most influentially, in expressing her disillusionment with “the chorus of celebrating the idea of diaspora” (12) in *On Not Speaking Chinese: Living Between Asia and the West*, Ien Ang condemns the fabrication of an at best limited

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<sup>4</sup> Diasporic novels about Singapore published in the last five years include *Shadow Theatre* (2002) by Singapore-born Asian American Fiona Cheong and *Breaking the Tongue* (2004) by Malaysia-born Vyvyan Loh, who grew up in Singapore before emigrating to the US. *Love and Vertigo* (2000) and *Behind the Moon* (2005) by Malaysia-born Asian Australian Hsu-Ming Teo, who features both Singapore and Singaporeans in the diaspora, *Joss & Gold* (2001) and *Sister Swing* (2006) by the likewise Malaysia-born Asian American Shirley Geok-Lin Lim, Malaysia-born Josephine Chia’s two most recent and also most insistently Singaporean novels, *Frog Under a Coconut Shell* (2002) and *Shadows Across the Sun* (2005), as well as Hwee Hwee Tan’s own *Foreign Bodies* (1997) and *Mammon Inc* (2001) tap into this market. For discussion of the complexities of their diasporic modes of representation see Wagner (“Syndrome”; “Boutique” *passim*). A more complicated example is Catherine Lim’s most recent historical romance, *Song of Silver Frond* (2003), which appeared abroad, whereas the short romance *A Leap of Love* (2003), set in contemporary Singapore, and the autobiographical *Unhurried Thoughts at My Funeral* (2005) were published in Singapore. In sharp contrast, Suchen Lim’s historical novel, *A Bit of Earth* (2001), is an epic tale based on detailed research and targeted at a readership within Southeast Asia.

set of identities. They are “strait-jackets” manufactured by the fashionable rhetoric of identity politics in the 1990s: “many people obviously need identity (or think they do), but identity can just as well be a strait-jacket. ‘Who I am’ or ‘who we are’ is never a matter of free choice” (Ang vii). In *The Post-Colonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*, Graham Huggan similarly analyses what he terms the “alterity industry”: a “global commodification of cultural difference” (Huggan vii). The “post-colonial exotic,” Huggan argues, operates in a “general mechanics of exoticist representation/consumption within an increasingly globalised culture industry” (x). Especially the most panoramic Singaporean novels, however, have nevertheless come under criticism for a related danger: the conscious exoticisation of likewise all too easily typecast local diversity in a similar realisation of “boutique multiculturalism.” Stephanie Yap refers to a “United Colours of Benetton cast of characters” (25). Writing for *The Straits Times*, Yap praises Lim’s *Fistful of Colours* (published in 1993; reissued in 2003), the novel that was awarded the inaugural Singapore Literature Prize in 1992, as “a work of local literature which has attempted to incorporate the history of all four of the city’s main racial groups within its two covers” (25). What is felt as a shortcoming nonetheless is that, Yap maintains, “[t]his fiction-meets-history work feels somewhat like a social studies textbook, with each present-day character presenting his or her racial history in the form of a family story” (25).

It is through various modes of revisionist and increasingly intertextual rewriting that Lim’s more recent work successfully reaches beyond the impasses created by the difficulty of providing a panorama of contemporary society without lapsing into a rehearsal of established categories that reduce cultural complexities to mere typecasting.<sup>5</sup> *A Bit of Earth* (2001), Lim’s so far most recent fully-fledged novel, is an ambitious historical epic that eschews the simplistic identity politics of the day to map out alternative, fictionalised accounts of colonial Malaya. This narrativisation of nineteenth-century history has been complemented by Lim’s venture into non-fictional history-writing in her 2005 *Stories of the Overseas Chinese*. More recently, however, Lim has turned to the medium of the short story in order to explore specific slices of contemporary Singaporean society in what are both poignant vignettes and pointedly provocative takes on topical issues. Curiously, in *The Straits Times*’s account of Lim’s work in May 2008, markedly little is said about her latest publications. While it briefly references her non-fiction book, it entirely ignores her collection of short stories, *The Lies that Build a Marriage*, published in 2007, and this despite the fact that a television adaptation of “The Morning After,” featuring a divorced mother’s coming to terms with her son’s gay identity, was screened on the local television channel *Arts Central* on 30 December 2007. Instead, Yap only asks

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<sup>5</sup> From *Fistful of Colours* onwards, it has to be noted, Lim writes against the Singapore government’s language policies as well as the general streamlining of ethnic groups encapsulated by coinage of CMIO to divide the country’s population into Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Other individuals.

us to remember Lim as the prize-winning author of *Fistful of Colours*, an important testimony to Singapore’s continuing literary culture certainly, but one from which Lim (and Singaporean literature generally) has surely moved on. Most importantly, Lim’s collection evinces the variety and diversity the Singaporean short story can achieve. In pairing two Christmas stories, I wish to show how they rework the genre as a literary legacy that can be retrieved and newly negotiated.<sup>6</sup>

### **The Spectral Business of Intertextuality in Suchen Lim’s Christmas Stories**

“Christmas Memories of a Chinese Stepfather” works through dynamic repetition with a self-conscious emphasis on excess that renders the narrated process of retelling at once tongue-in-cheek and peculiarly tragic. What links together the series of domestic tragedies it maps in a society driven by work is a tracking of Christmas Eves over the years, across generations, and cultural boundaries. Briefly, one Christmas Eve, at the weekend, the first person narrator is “minding [his] own business” (87) in his office when he is startled out of his absorption in work by the daughter of a recently deceased employee. The punning on business is seconded by the reiterated invocation of the employee’s death of work: “A workaholic. Work, work, work” (88). More importantly, as the daughter walks in with her two sons in tow, they embody a tale of a father’s threefold loss or abandonment. While Alice George laments her own father’s death, she also deplores her children’s practically fatherless state after their parents’ divorce, reminding the first person narrator of his own father’s desertion. A flashback repeating this loss is embedded as another Christmas story gone wrong: “It was just before Christmas. My father didn’t come home that year, or since. I was eight and Kit was six. The first time that our father was not around on Christmas Day” (91). As in Scrooge’s case, a case that has become emblematic of the businessman’s absorption in work over Christmas, his attempt to ignore the season (by working during weekends and on Christmas Eve) becomes traced to unhappy memories of the Christmases of the past.

The iteration of a detrimental past Christmas, however, is more than simply updated to suit contemporary topical issues. The “same old story” of marital disharmony, domestic abuse, divorce, children abandoned at Christmas – and that the narrator’s family celebrates Christmas without being Christians is inserted in parenthesis as if to remind us of the secular nature of the traditional Christmas tale – links together families across generations and ethnic divides. It is a markedly disconcerting link: “I held her tight, her breasts heaving against my chest. What else could I do? It was the same old story. Her guy had left her and the children for another woman. The divorce was followed by a bruising custody battle” (93). The woman with the heaving breasts reminds the first person narrator of his mother because, he stresses, of their similar circumstances. This is why he offers her, first,

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<sup>6</sup> “Christmas at Singapore Casket” was first published in *The Straits Times* for Christmas 2003.



her dead father's job and, then, marriage. But there is no easy closure as the cyclic nature of the ruptured family repeats itself as well. What is particularly important to note is that the incorporation of specific cultural, "racialised," issues is two-pronged, eschewing any sleight-of-hand streamlining. It is not merely that the same pressing issues operate across ethnic boundaries, but that racialisation itself is exposed as a form of projection, an easy farming out, as it were, of marital problems. While Alice's first and second husbands are both non-Christian Chinese, her family are carefully defined as "staunch Tamil Christians in the Methodist Church" (94). To them, her remarriage really is the same old story: "In their eyes I was another bloody Chinese man and a non-Christian" (94). Its rewriting has to work against an overpowering sense of repetition: "'Not all Chinese are racists.' She was smiling and crying at the same time but she let me kiss her again.... But, I told Alice, not all men are cads" (93-94). If the new domestic arrangements perhaps all too predictably engender yet again the same impasses, resulting in temporary separation, the self-reflexivity ingrained in the conscious repetition can ultimately provide a breaking out of the cycle.

What is the most significant within the story's local context is that previous excuses are exposed as red herrings precisely through their recurrence. Although this is where domestic conflict manifests itself at first, it is not (just) about language barriers: "Hokkien and English. Neither could understand the other. I fired the Filipina maid and got a Sri Lankan maid. Even worse.... It wasn't just language. There was Ma's altar and her pantheon of Chinese gods" (102). In an emphatic denial of the power of the same old story, the narrator's mother from the beginning refuses to see affinities with her daughter-in-law: "'And she has two sons like you, Ma.' 'She is not like me!'" (95). Ultimately, however, its expected reiteration is replaced by a literal rewriting. The story ends with the narrator's inserted email to his brother at Christmas, describing his paternal feelings for his stepsons in a self-conscious assertion of a sentimentality that is traditionally given licence within the Christmas tale. Its conclusion echoes Scrooge's moral awakening in Dickens's narrative: "It's just a day after Christmas. It's still Christmas" (106).

If the end of "Christmas Memories of a Chinese Stepfather" is primarily a reassertion of family values across various ethnic and cultural divides as well as beyond traditional definitions of family structures, it also successfully breaks through a circle of repeated break-ups. What makes it more than a rehashed sentimental tale couched in the traditional confines of the Christmas story is the deliberate, pointed rejection of the cross-ethnic, or "multiracial," relationship as the bogeyman of collapsing families, individuals, or nations. Despite the seeming endorsement of multiculturalism as an ideal, numerous Singaporean narratives over the last decades, in fact, have tended to undercut just this ideal by detailing almost exclusively the problems associated with its realisation. Catherine Lim's romances regularly recur to the forbidden relationships between coloniser and colonised in the past, a dynamic that is projected into 1980s Singapore in the pointedly titled *Following the Wrong*

*God Home* (2001).<sup>7</sup> Suchen Lim’s own *Fistful of Colours* already grapples with various impasses. Perhaps most explicitly, the heroine, Suwen, realises the limitations of a cross-cultural relationship when she attempts to imagine a white male friend naked:

A white nude male, white as death, with a thick fat organ dangling between his white hairy thighs. And at this point, she had turned resolutely away and stopped her mind from fantasising such nonsense. She could never go to bed with a white man, she told herself. She was too much of a Chink. She put it down to her own innate Chinese snobbery, an irrational memory of the race which inhabited Chung-kuo, the Middle Kingdom. So, she would never dream of marrying outside her own race. She simply could not see herself locked in copulation with a white hairy body. But the minute she admitted this thought, she was filled with shame, ashamed that she, Suwen, was capable of such prejudice against one colour and one race. (Lim, *Fistful* 140)

The probing inversion of different forms of sexual exploitation (such as of the foreign, white, male teacher by a local, ethnically Indian, female artist, Suwen’s rival) becomes, in the novel’s wide social panorama, juxtaposed with marriage across different religions (including that of a Chinese woman converting to Islam to please her future Malay husband). Despite the intricacies with which their dilemmas are explored, they ultimately also contribute to the proliferation of cross-cultural relationships that are blatantly doomed to go wrong. The functioning multiethnic family is indeed a marked absence in Singaporean fiction. Among a plethora of repeated identifications of cultural backgrounds as epitomes of certain value systems (or their rejection), Wee Kiat’s *Women in Men’s Houses* (1992) dramatises this deadlock with a particular acerbity. The end of a marriage is blamed at its multiracial composition in a sneer at the erstwhile idealism that certainly is a bizarre reason for a relationship: “When I married your father I had this naïve notion I was, in my own way, contributing to international peace” (209). But if the fact that an exoticisation of a white male expatriate has propelled the marriage is merely embarrassing, its break-up even more disconcertingly generates a xenophobia that encompasses the children’s openly rehearsed racism:

I can tell you Dad will definitely marry again if you give him the opportunity. [...] Who will it be the second time around? It will be another intermarriage you can take it from me. [...] Don’t you think we kids already have a tough time combining two cultures? Don’t burden us with the possibility of another mix in our family. (Wee 214)

The multiracial family’s offspring in Wee Kiat’s novel is a xenophobic denunciation of any “mix in our family.” Albeit less explicit, such an explosion of

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<sup>7</sup> Compare Wagner (“Syndrome” *passim*).

multiculturalism or diversity at home is peppered throughout representations of the region, providing in their very excess a distorted picture.<sup>8</sup> This is why it is so important not only that Lim's eponymous Chinese stepfather's story can ultimately come right in a reworking through repetition that elides local specificities to allow this reconsideration. More significantly still, the nevertheless detailed specificities therein operate as false clues or red herrings. In the process, the tale of the flawed multiracial family can be successfully ruptured through the repetition of the "same old story." Recourse to the genre of the Christmas tale allows it to leave behind the bitter endings that characterise often thinly fictionalised social critique. And it does so in a self-reflexive, unashamed endorsement of the narrative structures of a traditional sentimentality: "Shall I send it [the email] to Kit? Not the sort of thing you send your brother. But hey, what the heck? It's just a day after Christmas. It's still Christmas" (106).

The resolution offered by Lim's Christmas stories may yield to the genre's demand for a happy end, and yet through the concomitant transposition of topical issues, this signals a revision of what has become an even more ossified set of formulae. I shall now turn back to "Christmas at Singapore Casket" to suggest that its contextualisation within the framework of Dickens's well-known narrative even more effectively facilitates what thus becomes an essentially twofold reworking. The quotation with which the story opens up has in itself a dual function. While it establishes an intertextual frame, it also conjures up competing traditions and their misreading. The discussion of the supernatural in business, moreover, then becomes juxtaposed with another kind of haunting. The dead father's appropriation of textual echoes continues to reverberate throughout the narrative, eliding temporal and geographical distances: "'Your mother is a heathen and writes rubbish.' His opinions and pronouncements on Mother are popping into my head above the roar of the plane" (140). If the marriage of genres becomes the crux on which the reassessment of various legacies turns, it becomes ironically apt that it is introduced through the invocation of a divorce. That he is "absolutely right" in asserting that there is no Scrooge in the company (139) is a hilarious exposure of a deliberate exploitation of traditional frameworks as well as, with a particularly pointed irony, of assumed ignorance (of the fact that there is no Scrooge). Scrooge acts as the epitome of exploitative business and, by extension, specifically of neo-imperialist appropriation of colonial structures for further exploitation. Yet this twofold association with all Scrooge stands for in the original *A Christmas Carol*, and which becomes transformed in one of the best-known conversion scenes in literature, needs to be exorcised.

Lim's version notably does so not by repeating, but by recasting, one of the original's most disturbing scenes: as Dickens's miser is visited by three spirits (the Ghosts of Christmas Past, Present, and Yet To Come), the visions with which they

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<sup>8</sup> The competing altars of variously imported gods are likewise a common trope in Singaporean literature. In *Following the Wrong Gods Home*, it becomes a leitmotif that can be comically evoked.

confront him include the spectacle of his deathbed. Scrooge witnesses a ghoulish feasting on the dead that includes even the appropriation of his clothes and bed-sheets during his body’s preparation for a cheap burial. In Lim’s version, the first person narrator returns for the funeral of the Scrooge/Marley/Mah-Li figure to rethink such a recycling as part of a larger reconsideration of different forms of legacies or heritage. This rethinking becomes a laying to rest of the intertextual echoes that identify Mah-Li with both Marley and Scrooge. At the same time, it issues the reunion of the mother (“the Chinese writer [who] writes in English”) and her children at his casket as they simultaneously engage in the same revision of memory. It is achieved through a reworking of the intertextual references that have been written on the family as well as on the family business: “We must have thought of it at the same time. Mah-Li & Scrooge. Our father was Scrooge, after all. Generous in the end” (144). Mah-Li, it transpires, has “donated his body to science..., donate[d] all his organs away” (143-44). This is the generous giving that replaces the turkey at the end of the original text. If its adaptation in a contemporary Singaporean context taps into current debates on organ transplants, these intertextual echoes nonetheless leave a disconcerting aftertaste of a feasting on the dead.

The marriage of genres is thus much more intricate than a mere resolution through the sentimental promises of the traditional Christmas tale might at first suggest. It is, after all, accomplished by a curious identification of Scrooge’s generosity (the sponsoring of the feast) and his nightmare visions of death (the ghoulish feasting on the body). Undercutting any easy sentimentalisation, it instead prompts a more critical approach to the topical issue at hand (organ transplants), while emphasising the nevertheless constructive reuse of various forms of legacies. Making up for the manipulative invocation of a spectral, indeed fictitious, Scrooge in the family business, old Marley becomes Scrooge in signalling the reuse of organs as a selective remaking of the legacies of the past. The intertextual echoes form a haunting that can be turned to good account. Lim’s recent Christmas stories, I have sought to show, constitute an important development in Singaporean fiction in that they play with an established genre, reaffirming the values it embraces in the face of their at times obfuscating misreadings – as exemplified by the business operations of a self-styled imitator of a notoriously condemned fictional figure – while at the same time rendering this interpretative adaptation a vehicle not so much of current issues, but of their careful interrogation.

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