

Lydia Kwa, *Pulse*. Singapore: Ethos Books, 2014. 251 pp. ISBN 978-981-09-0681-8.

Lydia Kwa's novel *Pulse* returns to familiar territory for its author. Like Kwa's first novel, *This Place Called Absence*, *Pulse* bridges Singapore, where Kwa grew up, and Canada, where she has lived for most of her adult life. Like the earlier novel, it yokes together two different historical moments. *This Place Called Absence* connected the life of a Singaporean-born Canadian living in Vancouver, through a process of historical research and re-imagination, to the lives of sex workers in Singapore nearly a century ago. In *Pulse*, historical filiations are more tightly drawn. Its protagonist, Natalie Chia, whose family has migrated from Singapore to Toronto in the late 1970s, returns to Singapore in 2007 after the suicide of Selim, the son of her schoolmate and first love, Faridah. The novel then takes us on two journeys. In the first, we follow Natalie in her quest to understand the reasons for Selim's death. Yet we, as readers, find that this quest draws us into a journey of our own: to a series of discoveries about Natalie's deep past concerning lesbian love, intergenerational affiliation and paternal abuse within the context of Singapore of the 1970s, and then to her contemporary relationship with Selim, fostered through digital technologies that bridge the Pacific to connect Canada and Singapore.

Two presiding metaphors structure *Pulse*. The first is expressed in the novel's title, and in the repeated iteration of the character 脈 (*mai*), or pulse, at the beginning of each chapter. Natalie's grandparents run a Chinese Medicine dispensary in Joo Chiat; after her migration to Canada, she practices TCM (traditional Chinese medicine) as an acupuncturist, and takes the English name of the medicine shop, Cosmic Pulse, as an online moniker. The novel is thus suffused with reference to a cosmology derived from such roots, which are never far from the surface. When she receives Faridah's letter announcing Selim's death, Natalie calms herself by pressing the acupuncture pressure points that she maps effortlessly on her body. Much later in the novel, fearing assault from Faridah's husband, Adam, she reaches out and touches a meridian point, causing him to recoil in shock. From the body, this remapping of space spreads outward to a spirit world Natalie, as a child, discovers in reflections in the water on the surface of a well, and in practices of divination passed on to her by her maternal grandmother.

The second metaphor is derived from the first. Natalie and Selim both practice *kinbaku*, a Japanese form of erotic bondage, in which the body is tied up in intricate patterns by ropes that are gradually tightened. While Selim is willing to be bound, Natalie, remembering an incident of domestic violence in her past when her father tied her up and assaulted her, cannot bear to be restrained, and instead serves as *nawashi*, the partner who crafts the rope pattern

and then ties the knots. *Kinbaku* in the novel becomes associated with a series of submissions and sacrifices. Through her confrontation of a past of paternal abuse, and her recognition that Selim was also abused by his father, Natalie learns that openness and vulnerability are not the same thing. At the very end of the story, returning on a plane to Canada, she opens a package from Faridah containing a long-lost letter, and belatedly realises that Faridah's abandonment of her was not simply an act of social conformity, but motivated by a genuine desire to spare Natalie from suffering at her father's hands. Metaphors are useful, in that they stitch narratives together in ways that cut across the grain of plot and causal narration, but they also carry perils. The metaphor of surrender of self that *kinbaku* suggests works well in much of the novel, but to me it produces a concluding epiphany which, while rhetorically neat, perhaps lacks full emotional resonance. Faridah's letter, evidence of her love, produces a flood of "warm energy" in Natalie, who concludes the novel with the statement "I surrender, without a trace of resistance." Yet the evidence of trauma in the course of the narrative suggests, to this reader at least, that such surrender is not so easily achieved.

What is remarkable about *Pulse* is not so much the presiding metaphors, or the careful revelations of a well-structured plot, but Kwa's representation of landscapes, and in particular soundscapes, of Singapore in the 1970s. Natalie wanders with Faridah into Katong News agency, where Tom Jones is playing full volume of a portable radio; years later, leaving Faridah in Joo Chiat, she hears Mandarin songs from the 1930s playing on the radio in a *keopitiam*. At the end of the novel, sitting quietly in the Memorial Chapel at Changi, Natalie recalls the past in her grandparents' house in terms of pure sound:

I hear Kong-Kong's voice, his stern tone summoning Hwi to pour out the brew. The sound of water splashing against the stone where clothes are being washed, the slosh and squeeze of water-laden clothes, the dripping of the tap faucet into the well. The radio is on... I walk down the narrow hall, drawn by the sound of Mah-Mah's chips striking the table. (233)

Soundscapes are unlike landscapes in a crucial way: landscapes are about sightlines, about what is seen and what is cordoned off, whereas sound seeps everywhere, just as Natalie's own experience is hybrid, seeping across imagined divisions between Asia and the West, and across the racial and familial compartmentalisations of the developmental state.

It's tempting, indeed, to think of the soundscapes and physical landscapes of *Pulse* in terms of a new literary landscape. The republication of *Pulse* in Singapore, with its recent launch at the Artistry Café, is part of a larger trend, and a movement from postcolonial to world literatures. Asian Canadian writers in the 1980s and earlier often attempted to place their own experiences within national narratives, and to excavate histories of violence and racism hidden

beneath dominant stories of multicultural benevolence. The paradigmatic novel of this type was surely Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* (1981), which brought the internment and dispossession of Canadian citizens of Japanese origin in World War 2 into the popular consciousness at a time when the political movement for redress was growing. Changes in migrancy, residence and communication media over the last thirty years, however, have radically changed processes of belonging: literary texts may often have a global readership, but they may also attach themselves to very specific local contexts.

There are difficulties, of course, in bridging Canada and Singapore, and speaking to two different reading publics. At times Kwa has to halt the narrative to gloss facts for a non-Singaporean reader. At such moments, conversations between characters veer rather implausibly onto the terrain of history, with discussions of the East India Company's occupation of Bencoolen in order to explain Selim's online username "Bengkulu bound," or mentions of familial connections to Munshi Abdullah. Yet there are also startling resonances there with other Singapore texts. The novel, although initially published in Canada, parallels the emergence of a strand of queer writing in Singapore that connects issues of social homophobia and LGBT rights to larger social issues. Indeed the plot structure of *Pulse*, in which efforts to comprehend the suicide of a gay male character lead from individual trauma out into a much wider social critique, has similarities to two recent Singapore novels with LGBT themes: Cyril Wong's *The Last Lesson of Mrs De Souza* and Jolene Tan's *A Certain Exposure*.

Kwa's novel, indeed, hints at the possibilities that historical fiction offers in redrawing the past. Natalie, we learn, was born in 1959, the year of Singapore's achieving self-rule, a date less often celebrated than 1965, the year in which Singapore left Malaysia. The latter date has become firmly entrenched in a national narrative of survival against the odds, a story which is enacted in the visual spectacle of the National Day Parade that Natalie watches on her television in her hotel room, a "flamboyant display" that reminds her of "those flashy Broadway musicals of the '50s" (220). Yet the earlier date, marked by Natalie's birth, is arguably more significant, marked by the election of a democratic socialist government with a commitment to radical social reform. Through the soundscapes of the novel, and through the careful acts of listening promoted by them, readers are confronted with other historical logics that supplement and challenge a narrative of development.

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