"we… head back to English"[1]: Anglophone Lyric in Hong Kong, Singapore and the Philippines

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Abstract

English has become such a widespread international language that it has spawned Anglophone literatures in many countries. The spread of English has been one of the largely unintended benefits of empire, including in Hong Kong. For most countries the era of empire sufficiently belongs to history that literary "postcolonial" studies now seem to have largely run their course, to be replaced by the more open "transcultural" studies. This signifies the English language's loss of the stigma of empire as it gains a local habitation and a name. However, English often remains a minority language and a minority literature in a specific national context. These literatures are certainly minority ones in global terms, routinely ignored in the Norton, Oxford and other major anthologies of modern English literature. This makes all the more important a possible fraternity, or sorority, of such immigrant Anglophone literatures and the reading of them in relation to each other. Such writing will be, in the words of the editors of the first anthology of writing in English from South-east Asia, "separated by distance, cultural diversity and differing historical trajectories" (Patke et al, xv). What the writing will have in common are the characteristics of English, thereby encouraging an attention to the aesthetic qualities of the writing as well as the socio-political issues which have dominated literary criticism over the last fifty years in reaction against New Criticism.

This paper attempts such a glocal study through a comparison of the work of established contemporary poets from Hong Kong, Singapore and The Philippines, each an Asian place with a recent but now strong enough Anglophone poetry to mark the foundations of a tradition. For practical purposes, this is a sample of countries and of poets, the three being Agnes Lam (Hong Kong), Kirpal Singh (Singapore) and Isabela Banzon (The Philippines).

[1] Isabela Banzon, "Toast," *Maybe Something*, University of the Philippines Press (forthcoming).

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Hong Kong poetry, Singapore poetry, Philippines poetry, lyric, Anglophone poetry

This essay is an attempt to discuss Hong Kong poetry in a comparative, and for practical purposes, very limited way – through examining poems by three contemporary Anglophone Asian poets. Each of the poems is a lyric, as most contemporary poetry is, and the three poets are Agnes Lam (Hong Kong), Kirpal Singh (Singapore) and Isabela Banzon (the Philippines). I should mention at the beginning that each of the poets is a good friend of mine – or at least was before I wrote this paper!

In the "Introduction" to the Poetry volume of his *Interlogue* series of critical studies of Singapore literature, Kirpal Singh laments that, as Anglophone Singaporean poets,

> we almost immediately compare our writing with those [sic] from England and America. The numerous understandings of the colonial versus the post-colonial, or the canonical versus the non-canonical notwithstanding, I believe we in Singapore… have generally tended to pooh-pooh our own literature and continued, blindly, to value 'the other' which… continues to come to us from afar. (9)

By "afar" Singh does not mean Hong Kong and the Philippines, and it seems to me that there is a value in drawing comparisons between different Anglophone writings from Asia (I would like to add "including Australia" but that's another issue). Certainly the British and Americans will not do so: poetry from Asia is routinely ignored in the Norton, Oxford and other major anthologies of English verse.

This writing from Asia will be, in the words of the first anthology of writing in English from Southeast Asia, "separated by distance, cultural diversity and differing historical trajectories" (Patke et al xv). If the literatures were entirely different there would be little point in considering them together but there are also similarities between the countries and the poets. Each country is an ex-colony, Hong Kong and Singapore of the British, and the Philippines of the Spanish and then of the Americans (i.e. of the USA); each is a relatively new nation, in the case of Hong Kong not legally so since it is part of China, but it developed substantially while separated from China when the British leased it as ransom and it is now a special economic zone within the PRC. All are small places, with the arguable exception of the Philippines which is an archipelago of 7,100 islands; however, Filipino Anglophone literature is firmly dominated by Manila so that its functioning resembles the functioning of Anglophone literature in Hong Kong and Singapore. The writing is thus city-based, although the Filipino writers may draw on rural experiences, as Hong Kong and

Singapore writers sometimes do in memory. Each has a climate of heat and humidity, and occasional torrential rain, with Hong Kong and Manila both subject to typhoon seasons. In Hong Kong it can actually get cold, and this is true in Singapore and Manila only inside their Antarctically air conditioned buildings. All three were invaded by the Japanese during World War II but this does not seem a subject for the contemporary poetry of any of the three countries. The three poets are of the same generation of writers, so each had some degree of experience of nature in childhood and migrated to the city, or else saw the city migrate to them in its expansion. Each lives in the country of her or his birth but has travelled internationally and so has experienced other cultures. (I first met Agnes Lam in Singapore and Isabela Banzon in Spain.) Each is an academic working with literature in English or with the English language, and each was educated in English. The newness of their nations – if I can call Hong Kong that for the moment – and their Anglophone literatures means that patriotism and the relation between the individual and the collective society are issues for their poetry or for critical discussion of their poetry. Benedict Anderson in his famous *Imagined Communities* talks of "the imaginative power of nationalism" (22), and the role of literature "to 'think' the nation" (22) into being is stronger in communities without a long established literary tradition.

What the three poets most significantly share is the English language; it provides a long literary tradition that has been established elsewhere and thus for the writer can function on the one hand as a resource and on the other as a daunting Mount Olympus. Since, in each place, English was brought to the society by a colonial power, the language has had socio-political implications. While the communities are new enough for writers to have a say in their identity formation, the question of whether English can organically contribute has been a vexed one in these multi-racial, multi-ethnic and multi-cultural communities. To varying degrees it may still be so and a range of views can be discerned. Writing in 1999 Chelva Kanaganyakam says of Singapore that "English is both inevitable and necessary, but it also remains a foreign tongue" and the "ambivalent relation between language and identity has inevitably affected the use of Engish as a medium for poetry" (Singh, *Interlogue* 9); while in the same volume Kirpal Singh argues that "English is fast becoming a kind of 'native' language for most Singaporeans" (9). In 2003 Mike Ingham wrote of Hong Kong, "it is clear that for the population at large and for the burgeoning Chinese-language literary scene, local English writing must be seen at best as an irrelevance, at worst an irritating excrescence generated by the colonial era" (2). However, Ingham goes on to say that the "English poetry scene in Hong Kong is remarkably vibrant and diverse" (7). Ingham's former comment is captured poetically in one poem included in the Southeast Asian anthology, by the Filipino poet Alffredo Navarro Salanga:

For Edwin Thumboo and All the Rest of Us Who Suffer Through English in Asia

A travesty, they say,
a tapestry, we contend,
as we worm verses

into languaged
silk.

Or silt,
they say, these cocoons
are empty anyway –
Cotton, they add
cotton
is the cloth of the people.

…

"Poet,
can verses in your language
feed me?"

…

"Poet,
can verses in my language
feed me?"

Can they build
a cocoon
large enough
to weave
my anger?
Or
will your verses
remain
food for the few

who love tapestries
who love silk
who love butterflies

and flowers
on their tables? (Patke et al 310-11)

However, the poem dates from 1982 and in the anthology Isabela Banzon, who is one of the editors, confidently or perhaps defiantly declares: "the future of the writing in English in Southeast Asia has come" (291). In her poem "Toast," set in Barcelona, "we" as tourists are presented as mock-conquistadors who "ransack" museums and tourist sites where signs and speech are in Spanish, then "we… head back to English" where she and her friends are at home. She feels (and this is the right verb) that poets such as her can, as Singh puts it, "express themselves in a voice which is distinctly not in tune with inherited voices from a colonial past" (Singh, *Interlogue* 11).

The issue with English is, of course, one of authenticity, since for poets especially it is not just a way of representing experience but a way in which society, ideas and emotions *are* experienced. This much we have learnt about the nature of language from the great English Romantic poets. Lam, Singh and Banzon would concur with the Indian writer Raja Rao that "English is not really an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make-up" (Singh, *Interlogue* 59). The Singaporean poet Edwin Thumboo brightly asserts that the "sun has set on the British Empire, but continues to shine daily on English" (Thumboo, *Cultures* xxi).

The English language Filipino poet and literary theorist Neil Garcia thus argues that "English per se does not condemn its postcolonial user to an irredeemable colonial-mindedness: what matters is the intricacy of its usage and… the purpose or 'service' to which the usage is pressed" (Garcia, *At Home* 15). Unlike Thumboo, who finds the conception of Singaporean literature as postcolonial patronising, Garcia thinks that in the Philippines and elsewhere "postcolonial history is still unfolding" (*At Home* 12). Thumboo sees the postcolonial experience as only a part of Singapore's history, and argues that Singaporean literature should not be defined by colonialism and its aftermath. Following this line of thought and because of the homogenising impetus of postcolonial theory some postcolonial theorists now prefer to speak of transcultural studies. Garcia claims that "postmodern and postcolonial theories have cogently argued" that "identity is a fictional positioning in language… a dynamic process of identification that, precisely because it is linguistic, is ever-shifting, relational, and never fully realized" (*At Home* 12-13). An identity that is a linguistically determined fictional positioning would, I think, accord with New Criticism but Garcia argues for postcolonial conceptions of the new literatures in English and against "cross-hatchings of Romanticism and New Criticism" that involve "universalist theories of poetic appreciation" (*At Home* 12). He argues that "Philippine literature in English would… be largely incomprehensible when decontextualized from the histories" that engendered it (*At Home* 9-10). Garcia wants to turn Filipino poetics "away from the mystical credo of universalist (or even nativist) humanism toward… undeniable materiality and specificity" (Garcia, *Postcolonialism* xii).

If there is a site for the conception of identity which Garcia attacks it is surely the poetic lyric. "Lyric" is one of those terms, like "evening" and "love," which is difficult to define even though we generally have a fair idea of what it means. I am happy to accept lyric as composed of the elements – or in an individual poem at least most of the elements – recounted by David Lindley in his study of the genre: a short, musical poem in which a first person speaker deals with immediate experience and expresses individual emotion. The lyric, Lindley writes, "places the poet's subjective consciousness firmly at the centre" (73) but he also notes that the "identification of poet and persona, the requirement for a lyric to speak the personal feelings of the poet is as much the product of the desire of readers as it is of the purposes of poets or even of the nature of texts" (74). Yet even the great theorist of impersonality, T.S. Eliot, in "The Three Voices of Poetry" described lyric, which he found an unsatisfactory term, as "the voice of the poet talking to himself [sic]" (89). This suggests solipsism and the reader's role that of eavesdropper, although an eavesdropper is just the sort of person to generate readings themselves! It does not, though, concur with Lindley's view, whereby the reader sees the poet as determining meaning. The question of the addressee, in lyric poetry especially, is itself complex. When Wordsworth contemplates the sleeping city in his sonnet composed upon Westminster Bridge the city is asleeep so he is meditatively talking to himself but he is also talking to us. The Malaysian poet Wong Phui Nam insists that "the writing of poetry, however isolated the poet may be, is still a social, communicative act" (Thumboo, *Writing Asia* 38). Agnes Lam writes in a poem titled "To the teacher who cried" that "A poem is not a poem/ until it is heard" (101). In recent decades we have become accustomed to literary theories that Garcia wants to argue for, theories that see reality as socially or socio-linguistically constructed. The lyric, placing the poet who expresses individual emotions in response to immediate experience at the centre, provides the sternest test for such claims.

The great anthropologist Clifford Geertz said "I grow uncomfortable when I get too far away from the immediacies of social life" ("Preface"). Perhaps because I am a poet myself I grow uncomfortable when I get too far away from the immediacies of actual poems – unlike almost all literary theorists. So let me turn to the three poets.

Agnes Lam writes many poems that are explicitly set in Hong Kong and speak patriotically: "Please don't be disappointed/ or say Hong Kong is dead/ because there are no riots…" (58); Hong Kong "A child born of political assaults/ legitimized by a treaty, returned by another" (60); "this is my city./ This is my home./ God is still here./ I'm not alone" (62). These lines of simple, explicit statement are lyrics but might be classified as public poems; they rely on their simplicity and direct address. Direct address is apparent in the very title of the poem "You Say":

You Say

we do nothing right,
we abuse human rights,
refuse Tibet independence,
order tanks on unarmed students,

steal scientific information,
export too much, import too little,
pollute the air and rivers,
destroy tropical forests.

You say we are communists,
a political nuclear threat,
an environmental time bomb,
a looming economic disaster.

But how often do we invade
other countries in alliance,
drop bombs on civilians,
demolish national treasures?

Our head of state or his children
have no mistress on television.
We find adultery illegal,
prostitution distasteful.

We love our parents and
children, respect education,
are open to co-operation,
international visitation.

I could go on –
but if I do,
I shall sound
just like you. (83)

The last stanza, with its nursery rhyme-like form – short, two-stressed lines, fourteen monosyllables and a rhyme on "do" and "you" – verges on doggerel but that is its strength. It is a courageous bit of writing, outwardly as simple as possible but actually highly rhetorical and artfully clever. The simplicity and the unadorned "I" suggest honesty and the whole poem uses "we," which can be a very presumptuous word, in a very relaxed way. The poem is conversational in manner and tone even though its statements are very definite.

Lam's work also includes poems on economics which take her characteristic turn:

> A few million lost on paper,
> I am spending money as usual,
> hoping to boost the economy
> with my little expenditure.
>
> How can I complain? (19)

In a poem titled "The Wealth of Nations" after Adam Smith's book that founded the discipline, Lam ends:

> If we are willing to exchange life for life,
> we shall all have more, the wealth of nations
> being founded on the value we give
> to output from lives other than ours. (21)

Economists might be shocked to find their whole study summed up in four lines, especially four lines expounding a philosophy of generosity; classical economics is founded on the notion of self-interest. The poem actually begins with Lam saying that she's no economist and asking her husband to explain economics to her. Generosity is characteristic of Lam and of the voice in her poems. This poem is marked at the end with the date and place where the poem was written, or conceived of, as are Lam's other poems: Kent Ridge, Rodrigues Court, Yanan University, Senior Common Room, Bus no. 33. There are many poems to, for or about another person. The effect is to locate the poems with a particular person. Lams' poems are poems of compassion, empathy and social connection. The poems avoid a dramatisation of the "I" and elide any space between "I" and the author. If you wanted to read that "I" as politically and socially determined no one could prove you wrong; you certainly could read it as Confucianist, the individual respectful of authority and achieving value through proper relationship to others. However, this wouldn't tell you much about the poems as poems and seems demeaning to the author-speaker who appears to have more active intelligence and ethics – more "agency" – than a mere site of intersecting linguistic, cultural and political forces. These lyrics even when speaking of social issues utterly depend on the sense of an honest, compassionate voice; they seem to me always deeply personal and make me want to turn away to terms eschewed by all professional critical theory from New Criticism onwards and invoke concepts of sincerity and common humanity.

The most self-dramatising of these three poetic voices is that of Kirpal Singh. His collection *Cat Walking* is subtitled "and the games we play." A certain

amount of sardonic self-awareness is apparent in that subtitle, and the "we" is important. The book is dedicated "for all of us" and declares "somewhere/ these words/ from these frames/ will allow honesties." Singh, throughout the book, doesn't exempt himself from the sense of playing roles partly or even fully divorced from the centre of thoughts and feelings we call the self. I would hesitate to immediately mark this as a difference between Hong Kong and Singapore – not least because one poet can hardly represent a whole country or region's work – but there may be some truth in it. Certainly, Singh's work exhibits Western much more than Confucian values and accords with Rajeev Patke's argument that in Singapore "Poets and nation have coincided in struggling with a project in self-definition" (Singh*, Interlogue* 90). Singh's poetry presents an individual voice that sits uneasily in his society, a society whose ruling party has felt uneasy about individualism and expressed as a core value "Community over self" (Quah 91). *Cat Walking* is divided into three sections, "Love games" and "Power games" before we get to "Non games." These sections are preceded by an untitled poem that begins:

> catwalking. the art of cunning. the art of
> living cunningly.
> we all catwalk. we all live. or try to.
>
> catwalk. walk like a cat.
> act, live, live-act.

For Singh to live is to act and the book offers "the catwalk of many years."

This is a project that could easily tip into Jacobean cynicism but Singh's work is too poised – too cat-like – to allow that. It may be a surprise to learn that the title poem – a prose poem – is about playing with a cat that joins "you" as "you walk in the park." The speaker recognises that "there is kinship in the game" until "she stops and knows she cannot follow you forever." Moreover, "you know you cannot follow her forever." At the poem's ending "as you walk away, you think about this beautiful catwalk, this rhythm of exchange. this bond of being" (22). The use of second person claims an authoritativeness for the speaker and makes the reader almost a recipient of instructions. There are no capitalisations and lots of full stops, the short sentences imitating the sudden, abrupt movements of a cat. A cat is a teasing creature, always the animal image of mystery, and the poem itself is teasing; a literary critic or psychoanalyst could go to town, seeing the cat as representing a child, childhood itself, libido, illness, willpower, what in another poem is called "the confusion in our midst" (52), death, the life force et cetera. It *is* striking that the bond of being is achieved with a cat rather than with another person.

As if to make up for the absence of "I" in "Catwalking" its facing poem begins by asking "how do I introduce myself?" It posits the futility of offering name and occupation before concluding:

> should I speak of my citizenship, then?
> take pride in the country of my birth
> define the specific time and place
> and expect you'll understand, you'll know
> that I was born on a street that's no more
> in a hospital that got bombed and urbanised,
> at a time they call the post-war boom?
> my citizenship is your intimacy, the flesh
> hidden in your bones beneath the skin. (23)

The appeal here is to the authority that is in intimacy, and to lyric poetry as the language of intimacy – that is, authority is internal, not externally imposed. In Singapore this could be read as a political statement. Singh shares with his contemporary, Lee Tzu Pheng a sense of poetry as an effort "to find peace" in a "dehumanised world" (Lee in Singh*, Interlogue* 71).

The poetry of Isabela Banzon sits between the two poles presented by Agnes Lam and Kirpal Singh, and she often consciously writes as a Filipino. The Philippines differs from Singapore and Hong Kong in that its colonial connection is with the USA, and many Filipinos now live or work there. Banzon's poem "Balikbayan-in-the-Box" depicts the end of a visit to a Filipino friend now living in Green Bay, Wisconsin:

> **Balikbayan-in-the-Box**
> *for Lina Kestner*
>
> Lina was punctual—she was my guide, the first Filipino
> to settle in Green Bay, a medical technologist now
> retired, and I at the end of a short winter visit. She asked
>
> if I had started packing, and I pointed to a suitcase still
> empty but ready as usual for the long haul home. *Only one?*
> she asked. *My loyal companion,* I laughed on our way out
>
> the door. But Lina was serious. *Hey, what kind of Filipino*
> *are you*? And I answered, *Travelling light?* She nodded,
> adjusting her seat. *But how many boxes to follow?* When I
>
> said, *None*, she gave me a what-kind-of-Filipino-are-you-
> without-a-balikbayan-box look. And I thought, since when
> did I need one to become one, meaning as much the box

in relation to my national identity as her telling me off.
But she was already driving past squirrels foraging in
the snow and going on about garage sales that come with

lilacs and the rest of spring. *Too bad you won't be around,*
she said. She and her American husband would have
driven the three hours to Chicago to drop off my box

to save on time and the delivery charge, and did I know
I could cram in whatever I wanted to send home to family
and friends – like hers in Ilocos who prefer walking/

running shoes, shampoo and soap over Spam and Libby's
corned beef – so long as it fit into one cubic meter, more
or less? She showed me the neighborhood consignment

shop where a good-as-new, black-and-white couch
at the window would have fit perfectly in my Quezon City
condo, but Lina said it wasn't the collapsible/DIY kind

obviously. And she could show me how to line my box
with 300-thread-count-in-100%-cotton bed linen and
matching bath towels from T.J. Maxx that was just beside

the Dollar Store where she would go for greeting cards
and gift-wrapping paper. She taught me to bundle small
items of clothing like shirts and bind them with rubber

band to cram between a microwave oven/blender/grill
and the Corningware dinner set, in original packaging, plus
milk and dark chocolate bars in family-size packs, on sale.

She brought me to St Vincent de Paul's, the Christian
thrift shop, and three Goodwill stores lit brightly and done
up section by section, by color, by size, until the ice started

thawing, and as we were heading for Lambeau Field, home
of the Green Bay Packers, I asked Lina, *Where can I find*
this box? Which she had in the pickup, still folded, a spare.

"Balikbayan" has a couple of meanings but in the poem it refers to a box which is filled with goods to send or take home for Filipino relatives or friends. Even more than the Chinese, theirs is a gift giving culture. It is also a gregarious one; like many of Lam's poems this poem is dedicated, "for Lina Kestner," presumably the punctual friend who half-jokingly questions the speaker's

Filipinoness. It is a chatty poem, recounting interactions between them and as such hardly presents the alienated individual one might perceive in Singh's poems and which some theorists claim is the inevitable state of modern being, notwithstanding the existence of Twitter, Facebook and numerous friends you'd have in Nigeria if only you'd send them your bank details. The poem, though, is a recounting – it presents a memory and the lyric's element of a solitary speaker is adhered to. Nevertheless, it seems a conversational poem; Banzon could be telling us the story over coffee. It is also very good humoured, and when we're told "she gave me a what-kind-of-Filipino-are-you-/ without-a-balikbayan-box look" it is hard to know whether the wonderfully extended adjective is mocking the speaker or Lina, or both. Filipino economics and American consumerism come into play and remind us of comparative wealth. The passive speaker finally acquiesces but her uneasiness is readily apparent, as is the sense of "home" being a "long haul away." The depiction of Lina's determined generosity is quietly satirical so that the poem does seem to speak up for the Philippines in an indirect way even though Banzon does not speak up to her friend at all. I say "Banzon" because the dedication and the conversational tone strongly suggest that it is her own experience which the poet is recounting. Nevertheless, this is an "I" dramatised to some extent and the poem works through its imagery and details, much of the time drawing attention away from the speaker. Lina, the poem tells us, has partly imbibed an American identity and this is the most postcolonial poem discussed in this paper.

Tope Omoniyi quotes a Singaporean poetry anthologist as saying:

> … it is literature that gives the most comprehensive expression of both individual and collective life-experience of a people. And of literature, it is poetry which makes a special contribution through its reach, resonance and ways of seeing, remembering and capturing. (Singh, *Interlogue* 52)

This, I believe, is true but it is difficult to draw firm, positive conclusions from even a more extended comparative literary study. Each of these three poets seems perfectly comfortable writing in English and the language in itself is no longer freighted with colonial values. Banzon is perfectly comfortable injecting Filipinoisms into it. The poets seem to me to have enough independence and free will to stand apart from the socially constructed reality around them and to judge it. Neil Garcia's complete denial of "a single, unproblematic, and homogeneous human nature" because it is "a colonialist myth" (*Postcolonialism* 63) does not seem to me justified because the poems ask us to bring a degree of common humanity. Rajeev Patke quotes Theodor Adorno's "basic thesis" that "'the lyric work is always the subjective expression of a social antagonism'" (Singh, *Interlogue* 95) and while there is something in each of the poet's work to

support such a view, that "always" gives me pause; might not the lyric poet sometimes just go wandering as lonely as a cloud?

In a recent paper Banzon says, "I am drawn to seemingly simple and effortless written expression, which I think is the hardest kind of writing… what I would like to highlight artistically in our poems is our interconnectedness, our capacity for empathy, our humanity."[3] One thing that does draw the poets closer to each other and to us is their contemporaneity. We all live in a globalised world and their use of English is one feature of it. We are all hybrids in a dominantly secular world, as is the English we use. I would like to end by quoting Kirpal Singh in the "Introduction" to his *Interlogue* volume in which he quotes a poem, or a piece of doggerel, by the Singaporean horror writer Damien Sin which suggests this contemporary state of being. His whole poem "The East is Red" reads:

> The East is Red,
> The West is Blue,
> Elvis is dead,
> Confucius too. (12)

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