

## “had to laugh today”: Arthur Yap, Singapore and “Blind Faith”<sup>1</sup>

Angus Whitehead<sup>2</sup>  
NIE, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

Article Received: 15 April 2016; Article Accepted: 15 October 2016

### Abstract

In this paper I identify a key source for Arthur Yap’s early and rarely discussed poem “news”: Steve Winwood’s lyrics to Blind Faith’s rock song “Had to Cry Today” (1969). Yap’s curious and sustained appropriation and reworking of this experimental English “hippy” text is set in the contexts of, first, the poet’s other literary responses to popular music of the 1960s and, second, the Singapore state’s increasingly hostile response to the hippy movement during this period. Informed by discussion of Winwood’s cryptic lyrics, and an exploration of the Singapore state’s expedient introduction and regulation of televised news broadcasts during the 1960s, I present a reading of Yap’s “news,” highlighting the poet’s adroit reworking of “Had to Cry Today” in the context of mass communication in a culturally conservative Asian city state. Yap, I argue, exploits tensions in Winwood’s lyric between both reality and representation, authoritarian diktat and personal-plebeian response. Parodying the Singapore state’s pragmatism, Yap reduces the polysemous possibilities of “Had to Cry Today” to mundane, unambiguous statement. I conclude by suggesting that Yap’s deployment of satire via subtle parody of a hippy source till now unidentified by the majority of Yap’s readership, materially extends Rajeev Patke and Philip Holden’s recent characterisation of Yap as a poet with an “obsessive interest in... mimicry... and subversion.” I conclude by suggesting that Yap in his early engagements with hippy culture reveals a conspicuously less ambiguous stance toward the emerging postcolonial city state than has been previously suggested.

### Keywords

Yap, Singapore, poetry, hippy, Winwood, Blind Faith

In their recent history of Southeast Asian writing in English, Rajeev Patke and Philip Holden identify in Arthur Yap’s poetry, “some... resistance to social norms,” and a “deliberate habit of seeming to go against the stream in the genteel

---

<sup>1</sup> My thanks to Weihsin Gui, Angelia Poon and Joel Gwynne for reading and commenting on an earlier draft of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Angus Whitehead is an Assistant Professor in the English Literature department at the National Institute of Education, Singapore. *Singapore Literature and Culture: Current Directions in Local and Global Contexts* (Routledge), the first globally published collection of critical essays devoted to Singapore literature, co-edited with Angelia Poon, will be published in 2017. Email: richard.whitehead@nie.edu.sg.

and well-heeled conformism and docility of Singapore” coupled with an “obsessive interest in... mimicry... and subversion” (Patke and Holden 118). Patke and Holden go on to suggest that Yap’s “vocabulary and syntax are drawn from books; its rhythms are remote from ordinary speech or song” (118). In this paper I will demonstrate that Yap’s strategic deployments of subversion and a range of mimicry in his first poetry collection *Only Lines* (1971), partially written and published in an increasingly culturally conservative Singapore, reveal other, more democratising sources for Yap’s early poetry. While “[m]odernist attitudes drive the tone and syntax” (Patke and Holden 118) in the majority of Yap’s poetry, his earlier verse is often informed and shaped by a more recent, and less elitist, cultural movement, one that at the time Yap was writing, was outlawed in Singapore. Patke and Holden suggest that in Yap’s poetry, “[i]rony becomes the principal cognitive instrument, humour the chief antidote to boredom, passivity and despair” (118). As we shall see, while Yap’s early poem “news” does indeed engage with “boredom, passivity and despair” as experienced in late 1960s Singapore, instead of deploying irony and humour it does so principally by appropriating and carefully reworking a hippy text identified for the first time in this paper. “news” suggests a supposedly “self-preoccupied” (118) poet exploring the social fallout of Singapore’s *realpolitik*. However, to set that exploration in context, I will begin by exploring both the city state’s increasingly negative responses to the hippy movement and Yap’s more ambiguous responses to the hippy phenomenon.

By the end of 1973, Singapore’s national newspaper in English, the *Straits Times*, had carried scores of often sympathetic reports about worldwide manifestations of hippy culture, notably in London. For instance, as early as 23 October 1966, many Singaporeans (if they had not already heard the Swinging Blue Jeans’ version of Chan Romero’s “Hippy Hippy Shake,” released in 1964) would have encountered the term in British journalist Virginia Ironside’s syndicated article “Me and My Lodger – and no ho ho’s about it,” in which Ironside imagines a female flat mate “bringing in strings of groovy hippies” (Ironside, 1966). Over half a decade later, in another *Straits Times* article, Harry Miller asked “And where will... the long haired hippies and the appropriately named skinheads loiter at night for their particular kind of fun in a new [Piccadilly] Circus which will be devoid of alleys and street corners?” (Miller 32). Despite the *Straits Times*’ recurrent coverage of hippy culture, c. 1966-72, the paper makes no mention of hippies on Singapore street corners. Indeed, by 1970 there were none to report on. The reason for a “hippy” absence in the city-state had much to do with the new Republic’s anxieties about the movement, and the subsequent pre-emptive measures taken to prevent its spread to Singapore’s shores. On 6 July 1969, Singapore’s Minister for social affairs, Othman Wok, in a speech at the Singapore Lion’s Club asserted that “Beatniks and hippies could

destroy social discipline and must not be allowed to become part of Singapore life” (Anon, “Hipitaph” 17). In his speech, Wok observed that,

One of the unfortunate trends of urban life today in many countries is the increasing tendency of people to resort to unproductive pastimes to while away their time.... The extreme has been the coming about of the beatniks and hippies and their effect on social values and norms.... They show no discipline and readily surrender in the face of problems and difficulties, especially in a competitive situation, and become destructive critics and elements of society. (Anon, “Hipitaph” 17)<sup>3</sup>

Wok went on to predict that if hippies “became a prominent feature of life in Singapore the rot would set in and spread like a cancer, destroying the values of hard work and social discipline the Republic needed for progress” (Anon, “Hipitaph” 17). Writing two years later in the University of Singapore’s literary magazine, *Focus*, and addressing a predominantly academic Singaporean audience, Malaysian-Singaporean poet Ee Tiang Hong, shared similar views concerning the simultaneously “ineffectual,” and “positively dangerous” hippy:

As for hippies, I don’t think we deserve them yet, and I hope that our elders and leaders in their wisdom will not bring them upon us by creating the conditions in which it is possible, and natural for them to surface, as in some of the highly complex, materialistic, technologically sophisticated, and urbanized societies, where the individual, unable to accept the challenge to change or unable to change a monolithic structure, in which they have no place, either seeks to destroy that structure, as in the case of the revolutionary, or simply opt out, like the hippie [sic]. And if they do surface, there is nothing the poet can do; the responsibility is with the social welfare and law-enforcement officers, and the law-makers in the beginning. (Ee 22)

Ee, like Wok, was clearly anxious to maintain a healthy distance between Singapore’s citizens and hippy culture because the movement was deemed likely to jeopardise the “hard work and social discipline” still deemed necessary for Singapore’s “progress.” For these reasons, while the United States, Western Europe and much of the rest of the “western” world permitted and to some extent engaged positively with a sixties and later hippy counterculture, Singapore, conservative and Asian, adopted and perpetuated a policy of robust hostility toward any local manifestation of “hippy culture,” until the 1980s. That policy was most evident in Singapore’s treatment of men with long hair. During much of the period 1969-1979, posters were displayed at post offices and government offices island-wide informing patrons that “Males with long hair will be attended

---

<sup>3</sup> See also “Govt Says it Again: No Hippies,” *Straits Times*, 5 June 1970.

to last.”<sup>4</sup> On the same posters, “long hair” was unequivocally defined as “Hair falling across the forehead and touching the eyebrows... covering the ears [or] reaching below an ordinary shirt collar.” Principals of secondary schools went from class to class checking on the length of male pupils’ hair. Men with long hair could only enter Singapore if they submitted to a haircut. For this purpose barbers were installed at all border checkpoints as well as at Paya Lebar airport (Anon, “Singapore: Undiplomatic Cut” 13). Even after having their hair cut, Singaporeans’ and non-Singaporeans’ passports were initialed “LH.” The ban appears to have been more strictly enforced from the spring of 1970. Jim Gibbins’ *Straits Times* article of 9 May 1970 claims that “hippies were banned from Singapore... because of drug taking and the frequenting of red light districts” (Gibbins 8). The ban on long hair also affected Singaporeans’ access to contemporary live and recorded music from the West as no artiste with long hair was permitted to appear on TV Singapura. In order to fulfill engagements at Singapore’s Kelong Nightclub and National Theatre, 10-12 February 1972, the male members of Glaswegian pop group Middle of the Road good-humoredly agreed to have their hair cropped (Loong 25). However, just two days later, Led Zeppelin – due to play a concert in Singapore en route to their Australia tour on 14 February 1972 – on refusing to cut their hair were not permitted to leave their plane on the runway at Paya Lebar (Lewis and Pallett 74). The veteran, more mainstream Cliff Richard and the Shadows, whose concert in Singapore in November 1961 had first introduced many Singaporeans to rock n roll, in also refusing to have their hair cut, were not allowed to enter the republic, resulting in the cancellation of a large show at the National Theatre in September 1972 (de Silva 69). As late as March 1978, Minister for Home Affairs and Education, Chia Sian Chin told parliament,

Last year 591 students with long hair were warned and their parents informed, and 59 musicians were told to cut their hair short.... 620 people were refused entry to Singapore for having long hair and 801 were allowed to come in after they had shorn their locks. (Anon, “Long Hair” 77)

As we shall see, Arthur Yap’s response to manifestations of hippy culture in Singapore are somewhat more ambiguous.

### “in passing”

In “in passing” Yap describes the poem’s addressee, an American jet-setting visitor of the mid-late 1960s, bringing his Singaporean hosts, “from a friend, an l.p. for us to share/ with regards” (Yap, *Only Lines* 22). This representation of young adult Singaporeans receiving one long playing record, presumably

---

<sup>4</sup> A reproduction of the poster may be viewed at the website [yesterday.sg](http://yesterday.sg/detail/long_hair_not_allowed/) [http://yesterday.sg/detail/long\\_hair\\_not\\_allowed/](http://yesterday.sg/detail/long_hair_not_allowed/) accessed 10 August 2011.

unavailable in the city state, “to share,” from a fellow Singaporean in New York is perhaps suggestive of Singapore’s distance from, limited exposure to and desire for the more experimental and potentially subversive aspects of Western popular culture during the “swinging” 1960s. Yap’s writing features other, more specific, references to contemporary popular music. In “Poetry in Motion,” published in the St Andrews School magazine in November 1961, the eighteen year old Yap uses the title of a recent popular American number 1 hit by Johnny Tillotson as a title for his own poem celebrating kampong life in Singapore (Yap, *St Andrew’s School Magazine* 60). In Yap’s short story “A Silly Little Story,” published in *Focus* (1964), the narrator informs us that the middle-aged Wong Loo, originally “from China”:

In an unreasonable frame of mind... always thought Singapore was a no-man’s land: his reasoning was most illogical – Singapore, a Malaysian state; he himself, originally, a Chinese; every one speaks some English; and his unredeemable son hopped about to American pop-songs. (Yap 15)

Yap appears to gently mock Wong Loo’s coupling of American pop culture and the waywardness of younger members of the Chinese community during the comparatively brief period Singapore was “a Malaysian state.” During the mid-late 1960s, Yap makes more sustained references not to “American pop-songs” but rather pop music from England, the recently ousted colonial power. In Yap’s poem “sunny day” the opening lines, “sunny day/ comes through the window/ and sits on the table” mimic Scottish folk singer-songwriter Donovan’s early psychedelic pop song “Sunshine Superman”: “Sunshine came softly through my window today” (Donovan, ‘Sunshine Superman’). Yet while in “Sunshine Superman” the speaker brags of his superhuman powers (“Superman and Green Lantern ain’t got a nothing on me/ I can make like a turtle and dive for your pearls in the sea”), Yap’s poem develops into a cold, minimal elegy, in a relentlessly hot climate, for the male victim of a car crash and its aftermath. Yap, then, appears to first appropriate Donovan’s song and then subvert a pop lyric which for all its psychedelic trimmings, mirrors the bland commerciality of Tillotson’s song of five years earlier.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, while it is sometimes uncertain whether Yap regards Tillotson’s, Donovan’s and other pop songs as

---

<sup>5</sup> Similarly, a repeated phrase in Yap’s poem “it rains today” (itself perhaps a reference to Randy Newman’s widely covered song of the period, “I think its going to rain today” [1966]), includes the lines, “the trees are wet with rain today... the child is wet with rain today” (Yap, *Only Lines* 19). The lines appear to play on a line from Van Morrison’s “Sweet Thing” a song from Morrison’s cult album, “Astral Weeks” (1967): “And we shall walk and talk in gardens/ All misty and wet with rain.”

original, “witty” art forms,<sup>6</sup> or as a target for parody, “news,” Yap’s most sustained engagement with contemporary pop-rock, does appear to show the poet positively engaging with the wittiness, creativity and liberal views of a youth culture banned and strategically misrepresented within Singapore.

In contrast to Singapore’s unsympathetic response to hippy culture in its backyard, the speaker of Yap’s “old photographs” – a poem that explores the paradox that photographic images are often deemed more “perpetual” than personal experiences and memories – reveals an alternative, more ambivalent Singaporean response to hippies. The speaker cites his sister’s epistolary eye witness description “from London” of “hippies loitering along the streets,” a description that echoes the state sanctioned Singaporean conception of the hippy outlined above. The speaker then offers his own take on hippies:

i’ve also seen them everywhere  
 in *Life* and *Time* they appear  
 and its difficult to tell if they loiter (Yap, *Only Lines* 17).

Unlike his sister, a resident in London, the Singaporean-based speaker has seen hippies “everywhere,” but only in the pages of American photo magazines.<sup>7</sup> During the late 1960s and 1970s Singapore was fairly unique in not merely criticising hippies but also banning them outright.<sup>8</sup> But even while their presence was proscribed in the city state, writings about and images of hippies published in the *Straits Times* as well as *Life* and *Time* were consumed by Singaporeans in the kind of mediated encounter with “hippydom” Yap describes in “Old Photographs.” Nevertheless Yap’s capitalisation of “Life” and “Time” in this poem clearly goes beyond a reference to these American magazines. Any capitalisation by a poet like Yap who uses words and punctuation so economically and so tellingly demands we sit up and take notice. Indeed, it might be argued that Yap’s deployment of capitalisation here causes “hippies” to seem larger than “Life,” or “Time”-less, not merely appearing on the pages of these magazines, but looming out of the very metaphysical concepts the magazines take their names from. Yap’s employment of “Life” and “Time” might therefore connote

<sup>6</sup> Donovan’s relative originality and complexity is set in relief when compared with Singapore’s most original pop group of the period The Thunderbirds. See for example “You were made for me to Love” (Philips: Philips is the recording company who released this single in Singapore).

<sup>7</sup> See for instance *Time* articles of the period, complete with generous photo spreads, e.g. “Youth: Hippies” (7 July 1967); “Hippies: Where Have All the Flowers Gone?” (13 August 1967); “Nation: Love-In in Boss Town” (12 July 1968); “Hippies: Paradise Rocked” (20 June 1969); “Woodstock – The Message of History’s Biggest Happening” (29 August 1969); “Nation: Happiness and Violence” (12 December 1969). Yap’s elder sister Jenny was a nurse in London during this period (Interview with Jenny Yap, 15 May 2009).

<sup>8</sup> Hippies were also banned from Mecca and Mt Athos in 1970.

something suprahuman or eternal about hippies, in spite of the Singaporean state’s publicly characterising them as idle vagrants.

Nevertheless, unlike the Singaporean politician or poet, or his own sister, the speaker in “news” does not pronounce judgment on “hippies” as a homogenised mass, and remains ambivalent: “its difficult to tell if they loiter.” As poet and future University of Singapore lecturer in linguistics, Yap, in 1969, is likely to have been sensitive to the nuances of both the noun “hippy” and the verb “loiter.” Compared to Wok and Ee’s representations cited above, *The Oxford English Dictionary*’s definition of “hippy” carries a significantly different denotation: “A hipster; a person, usually exotically dressed, who is, or is taken to be, given to the use of hallucinogenic drugs; a beatnik” (Online). *The Oxford English Dictionary* definitions of loiter, however, do seem to tally with the word’s use in late 1960s Singapore: “In early use: To idle, waste one’s time in idleness. Now only with more specific meaning: To linger indolently on the way when sent on an errand or when making a journey; to linger idly about a place; to waste time when engaged in some particular task, to dawdle” (Online). Whereas the more general application of “loiter” suggests the word refers to procrastination rather than efficiently working, and therefore an activity permitted the leisured classes but prohibited to the lower orders, the legal definition of “loiter” appears to carry more ominous connotations, of an action threatening civic order and regulation: “Freq. in legal phr. to loiter with intent (to commit a felony).” “Loiter” in this sense conveys late nineteenth and early twentieth century English and American civic anxieties concerning individuals on the margins, specifically vagrants, the poor, foreigners, and their unregulated presence and lack of constructive purpose in urban public spaces. Wok and Ee, like the speaker’s sister in “news,” express comparable anxieties in their portrayal of “the hippy” as a person who is lazy and ineffectual, yet for that very reason a threatening figure in a society privileging order, duty and progress. In “old photographs,” Yap deflates those anxieties by playing upon “loitering,” “loiter” and their ambiguous, class determined connotations.<sup>9</sup> While the verb “loiter” usually connotes prolonged impractical and/ or suspicious inaction in one place, the speaker’s sister’s phrase “loitering along the streets” suggests sustained movement about the streets of London, more closely resembling the activities of a middle class loiterer or flaneur, than the suspicious stationary inaction of the lower orders. Yap therefore playfully subverts Singapore’s easy othering of the hippy as lazy, unproductive and lower class.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> In his 1970 *Straits Times* article on hippies banned from Singapore, “Lions and Hippies,” Jim Gibbins seems bemused to encounter upper class, public school educated hippy Aubrey Wenfield in Kuala Lumpur: “His accent was English old school tie – in fact he said he went to Wellington – his shoulder length pointed to hippiedom” (24).

<sup>10</sup> For another example of Yap’s engagement with hippy culture, see his poem “the performance” (Goh and Yap, eds. *The Collected Poems of Arthur Yap*)

In “news,” Yap makes a sustained allusion to the lyrics of a song generated by hippie culture: “Had to Cry Today,” the opening track on a groundbreaking and in many ways controversial rock album by supergroup “Blind Faith,” a collaborative project featuring Steve Winwood, Eric Clapton, Ginger Baker and Rick Grech.<sup>11</sup> The eponymously titled “Blind Faith,” released in the UK in August 1969, must have reached Singapore shortly after. Though the lyrics of “Had to Cry Today” are not easy to decipher, the song as interpreted by writer and singer Steve Winwood’s brooding, plaintive vocals, coupled with an “elongated, hypnotic groove” (Mc Dermott 9), freewheeling and complex, are suggestive of loss, pain, disconnect and protest. Blind Faith’s inventive and sustained music (“Had to Cry Today” lasts almost nine minutes) is unlikely to have received airplay in Singapore during 1969-70. It seems probable therefore that Yap would have encountered “Had to Cry Today” either through purchasing the album himself or hearing a friend’s copy of “Blind Faith.” The album would almost certainly have been on sale in Singapore in an unbowlderised state, free of the excision of songs containing suspected references to LSD encountered on Singaporean pressings of the Beatles’ “Sergeant Pepper” and “White Album.” Tracks on “Blind Faith,” such as “Do what you like” with its calls for listeners to “Open your eyes, use your head, realize that you’re not dead,” and “Can’t find my way home,” allegedly Winwood’s paean to a friend suffering the throes of drug addiction which features the lines “I’m wasted and I can’t find my way home... and I ain’t done nothing wrong” were clearly not identified as drug laden or seditious by Singapore’s customs authorities.

While the *Straits Times* carried no review of “Blind Faith” on its release, the band and record are briefly mentioned a year later by the paper’s rock critic Jeffrey Low. Low in his column of 24 October 1970 dismisses “Blind Faith” along with “Cream” as examples of “super aristocratic musicianship” (Low, “POP Goes the Band” 7). Less than a month later Low recalled, “And then came the saga of the Blind Faith [sic], who did not survive long” (Low, “And Traffic Decided to Reform” 5). In these passing allusions, Low in dismissing the perceived elite and self-indulgent nature of a group like Blind Faith appears to privilege the mainstream and commercially orientated music of later Clapton as well as Winwood’s band Traffic’s “John Barleycorn must Die” over the multifarious, experimental, “hippy” nature of Clapton and Winwood’s earlier collaboration. It seems likely that the very qualities of “Blind Faith” that Low disparaged for his Singaporean readership were the ones that attracted Yap to the album featuring “Had to Cry Today.”

---

<sup>11</sup> The original front cover to the album featuring a topless adolescent girl holding an arguably phallic steel model of a spaceship was substituted for another cover in the US. See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blind\\_Faith](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blind_Faith).



### Had to Cry (laugh?) Today

In the remainder of this paper, I will provide a brief discussion of Winwood’s lyrics to “Had to Cry Today” before exploring how in “news” Yap appropriates and strategically alters Winwood’s song for, I would argue, tellingly satirical effect. As the lyrics to “Had to Cry Today” are just ten lines long, I quote them here:

It’s already written that today will be one to remember  
The feelings the same as being outside of the law

Had to cry today  
Well, I saw your sign and I missed you there

I’m taking the chance to see the wind in your eyes while I listen  
You say you can’t reach me but you want every word to be free

Had to cry today  
Well, I saw your sign and I missed you there  
And I missed you there  
Had to cry today.... (Winwood, “Had to Cry Today”)

By juxtaposing two familiar phrases, Winwood’s song begins by framing the present (“today”) in terms of both past (“already written”) and future (“one to remember”). The first line simultaneously introduces a paradox and begs a question: if “[i]t’s already written” that “today” will be “one to remember,” can “today,” as actually experienced, be genuinely memorable? Winwood’s second line also raises more questions than answers: it is left unclear how “the feeling” can be “the same” as “being outside of the law,” especially since the precise nature of both “feeling” and “law” are not elaborated upon. However, even if any explicit interpretation of the first verse of Winwood’s song seems impossible, the lines connote a sense of authoritarian, possibly religious or political imposition, causing the speaker to feel an alienation resembling that of the apostate or outlaw.

At the beginning of the refrain, the words “Had to cry today” seem suggestive of the speaker’s involuntary, and therefore genuine, grief. But the repetition of “today” also recalls the first line and the just identified tensions between the authoritatively predicted and the personally memorable. The second line of the chorus suggests that the speaker “had to cry” because he “saw your sign and... missed you there.” The juxtaposition of the speaker seeing the addressee’s “sign” but at the same time “miss[ing] you there” reveals a further tension. The mere “sign” of the addressee is not just unsatisfactory to the speaker, it also brings to mind the absent addressee, and thereby provokes longing and grief. In verse 2, the speaker in “taking the chance to see the wind in your eyes while I listen” appears able to both see and hear the addressee, but presumably only as a “sign.” Could the speaker therefore be encountering the

addressee via technological means such as cinema or television? By “taking the chance to see the wind in your eyes,” the speaker who is presumably expected to merely “listen” to the absent but somehow present addressee (a figure of authority, perhaps), takes a risk and a leap of imagination in an attempt to read against the text and “see.” By not merely listening but also attempting to “see” the speaker appears to privilege the “wrong” message. The speaker’s seditious act of unauthorised interpretation, i.e. seeing, suggests that the unnamed addressee is delivering a suspect oral message, while potentially letting slip a more authentic truth through his/her eyes. But line 6 reveals a third tension, which complicates this reading. The speaker repeats (using indirect speech) the addressee’s claims that while s/he “can’t reach” the speaker either physically or metaphysically, s/he desires that every word be (politically? linguistically? financially?) “free.” In summary, Winwood’s lyrics suggest lamentation for the loss of, but also potential sedition against, the addressee. A similar torn anguish in the addressee (articulated through mediated claims of being unable to reach the speaker but wanting every word to be free) reinforces the ambiguity.

In his early poem, “news,” Yap strategically appropriates and reworks Winwood’s lyrics. At first glance the poem appears to be one of Yap’s “meditative” (as opposed to “dramatic”) poems, which Patke and Holden describe as “vocaliz[ing] the poet thinking aloud in print” (118), and deploying a “style that range[s] from the prosaic to the pedantic” (118). Indeed, in “news,” we appear to encounter a bemused Singaporean observer-citizen speaker, which we might presumably equate with Yap, reflecting upon a recently reconfigured city state’s use of a technological means of instilling in its citizens a unifying national credo. However, as I will demonstrate, “news” also contains elements of the dramatic: several Singaporean voices are rehearsed in the poem.

That Yap did not include “news” in his 2000 selection of poetry, *the space of city trees*, may perhaps suggest both the very topical and time bound nature of the poem. As C.M. Turnbull observes, in Singapore, “[b]roadcasting and television were under direct official control, and soon after independence the government declared its intention to use these means ‘to continue to inculcate national attitudes and political understanding’” (Turnbull 323). As Shirley Geok-lin Lim observes, those national attitudes included “efficiency, rationality, high achievement” (Lim 523). The officially controlled news media was therefore deemed an effective means of rapidly carrying out en masse what Singapore’s founding fathers described as social engineering. Indeed, Minister for Culture S. Rajaratnam’s chief motivation for introducing TV to the island in 1963 at a cost of \$3.7 million (see Ng 472) was to “strengthen Singapore’s propaganda capabilities” (Ng 470). In order to ensure television delivered the greatest political impact, Rajaratnam ensured that television sets and license fees prices were affordable for almost all Singaporeans. As Rajaratnam’s biographer Irene Ng observes:

[Rajaratnam] saw the equalizing and transformative power of television as it entered into the everyday life of the masses. Its primary aim was to be nation-building, as Raja sought to marshal its unifying power to unite an essentially migrant, illiterate population, and to imbue in them a national consciousness.

Raja was quick to use the exciting new medium to showcase the country’s progress under the PAP. For the first time, through the goggle box, people could see their political leaders opening factories, schools, community centres, visiting constituencies, and speaking at political rallies. This was an eye-opener for the people, an entirely novel experience. (Ng 472)

Radio Television Singapore, or *Television Singapura*, gave its first broadcast in grainy black and white at 6 pm on 15 February 1963.<sup>12</sup> The first image viewers encountered was Rajaratnam’s “beaming face” (Ng 471), informing the nation that “Tonight might well mark the start of a social and cultural revolution in our lives” (Ng 471). In a January 1963 cabinet memo, Rajaratnam insisted that television was “a most important medium of communication between the Government and the people” (Ng 474). But the medium by its very nature ensured a means of communication between government and people that was both mediated and regulated, one-way and top down. Singapore’s Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, previously coached by Hugh Burnett of the BBC, effectively utilised national television to tearfully reveal and explain to the nation Singapore’s “separation” from Malaysia on 9 August 1965. However, on a day to day basis the government utilised a more mediated engagement with the masses, via professional newsreaders. During the late 1960s and early 1970s Yap and other Singaporeans encountered news bulletins in English presented by newsreaders such as Myrna Thomas, Tan See Lai, Shirley Hew, T.C. Koh, Vernon Palmer and Steven Lee. As Singaporean writer and lecturer Patricia Wong recalls, Singaporean newsreaders during the late 1960s,

were certainly stiffer [than current Singaporean newsreaders]. Because TV had just been in our living rooms for all of 5 or 6 years by 1969, whatever the audience perceived of news was it’s serious purpose... we didn’t take it with the cynicism we do today. It helped that the newsreaders were perceived as reliable, who spoke well. They didn’t necessarily *communicate* well... but because there was a no-nonsense air about them, they were taken seriously. News then, if often rather boring, was more high-purpose and more comprehensive than today’s touch-and-go style. (Wong)

Wong’s representation of an uncritical and accepting mass audience for TV Singapura’s “high-purpose” if rather ponderous news broadcasts, serves as a

---

<sup>12</sup> 1963 saw the beginning of TV Singapura’s Channel 5 broadcasting in English but including some Malay programmes and Channel 8 broadcasting predominantly in Chinese but also featuring Tamil programmes.

useful context in which to discuss Yap's "news." As Yap's first collection of poetry remains out of print, I quote the poem here in full,

"news"

it is already announced  
today will be one to remember.

had to laugh today.

saw your face neatly  
reading from the screen,  
the feeling is the same  
as in all the other days  
which were (also) ones to remember.

had to eat today

your words:  
here's your news report  
I'm your straight face for today,  
sorry if it's short  
i've to get away  
and be very busy,

and the weather's hot.

I'm deceived by what i fear  
by words I've yet to hear  
by the news that's over  
and the words which scuttle  
after. after this, bring on  
words which do not kill the ear

Following our earlier discussion of "Had to Cry Today" it should be clear just how heavily Yap draws on Winwood's lyrics in the first half of "news." Yap's appropriation of "Had to Cry Today" may have something to do with the poet's response to an atypically challenging "pop song." Winwood's juxtaposition of personal spontaneity and authoritarian prescription probably struck a chord in Singapore c. 1965-69. As in most of his poems, Yap, in "news," follows the modernist tradition, producing "difficult" (intellectually challenging) poetry. Yap, like Winwood, equips the reader with next to no specifics of time, person or place. Indeed, it is unclear whether Yap is ventriloquising a) a skeptical speaker aware of state news' selectively scripted and therefore monotonously predictable

representation of actual events on a small regulated island, or b) an unenlightened citizen in the process of being potentially short-changed and hoodwinked by state “news.” But whereas Winwood in “Had to Cry Today” offers the listener-reader an imaginative, dramatic lyric (“wind in your eyes”) with no indication of when or where “today” is occurring, Yap’s abstract poem seems a jaded vignette of the quotidian. While Yap’s title, “news,” and the lines “saw your face neatly/ reading from the screen” denotes a context of local-national televised news, the poet’s awkward deployment of “screen” (“saw your face... *from* the screen” [my italics]) suggests not only a television screen, or less likely in this early period, autocue, but also “screen” in the sense of censorship and a discriminative reportage of news. While, as we have seen, television in Singapore was initially conceived as a propaganda tool, Yap’s poem suggests that through national television the everyday life of citizens has to a certain extent become conveniently and inevitably scripted, (“already announced... read... from a screen”) even before it happens.

In the first line of “news,” Yap appropriates the first line of “Had to Cry Today” verbatim, but tellingly substitutes one word. Whereas Winwood’s “It’s already written” suggests a “sacred” text written in a distant past, Yap’s “it is already announced” connotes an oral and more immediate and democratised method of dissemination, with a suggestion of a political (as opposed to divine) origin. Yap therefore reduces Winwood’s original gesturing toward sacred prophecy to one of everyday bureaucratic diktat. While Winwood’s song title and chorus, “had to cry today” suggests a speaker recounting a personal emotional response that is involuntary and therefore genuine, Yap’s deployment of “had to laugh today” is more ambiguous. The initial speaker in “news” could be recounting an involuntary, genuine response of laughter, perhaps in mirth at the intentionally amusing, or mischievously (or in scorn) at the accidentally funny nature of a local news broadcast. But “had to laugh today” also carries the suggestion of a speaker obliged to be seen laughing. Whether voluntary or involuntary, the speaker’s reported laughter is suggestive of television media’s power to shape and regulate the nation-state’s actions and mindset.

Elsewhere in the poem, Yap deftly deploys borrowings from and subtle reworkings of Winwood’s song. As we have seen, the second line in the chorus of “Had to Cry Today” (“Saw your sign and I missed you there”), connotes the metaphysical (“your sign”), and a tension derived from the juxtaposition of the simultaneous presence of “your sign” and the absence of “you.” Yap’s altering of Winwood’s line to “saw your face neatly/ reading from the screen” tellingly carries the implication that the televised and scripted news reader (both “sign” and “face”) is unmissable and unequivocally, predictably, all too present. Here in closing down the polysemous possibilities of Winwood’s line, Yap perhaps parodies one possible side-effect of carefully regulated state television: the nation’s utilitarian, unequivocal and pedestrian use of standard English. Yap’s

shift from “sign” to “face” suggests the importance of the role of faces in the process of televised news: the televised heads and upper torsos of professional newsreaders, competent speakers of English perhaps dull but not too hard on the eye, are utilised by the state to persuasively convey to the nation its reading of events at home and abroad.

As we have seen, while the precise meaning of Winwood’s line “the feeling is the same as being outside of the law” is elusive, it does perhaps connote the speaker’s feelings of alienation and exile from a mainstream social system, accompanied by the risk, danger and excitement involved. Winwood’s lyric might seem unnuanced here: one of Singapore’s numerous experts in linguistics might point out that the speaker’s feeling cannot be “the same as” but rather “similar to” living outside the law. However, Yap cannily picks up on Winwood’s (mis?)use of “the same” and audaciously runs with it:

the feeling is the same  
as in all the other days  
which were (also) ones to remember.

Yap’s poem suggests that the feeling induced by the monotony of standardised and very local televised news, far from being the same as living outside the law, is the same “as in all the other days,” despite their official classification as “(also) ones to remember.” Again, as he had done with Donovan’s “Sunshine Superman” in his poem “sunny day,” Yap takes the open, polysemous possibilities of Winwood’s lyrics to “Had to Cry Today” and in a Singaporean context unambiguously shuts them down. Both the news read by the newsreader and the viewer-speaker’s reaction to the news are represented as being as uneventfully unsurprising, and therefore as unnecessary as a Singapore weather report: “and the weather’s hot.” It is perhaps for this reason that while Winwood’s speaker attempts to “tak[e] the chance to see the wind in your eyes while I listen,” Yap’s passive viewer-speaker makes no effort to separate facts from state rhetoric.

Later in the poem Yap again plays with Winwood’s title: “had to cry today,” now becomes “had to eat today/ your words.” Here the play on the commonplace “had to eat my words” (traditionally denoting a person having to humbly acknowledge being wrong) is suggestive of the viewer-speaker being force-fed the “wrong” words of a state television newsreader. Yap’s reference to the newscaster’s “straight face” in this context suggests more than merely the “high seriousness” or tedious formality identified earlier by Wong, and gestures to the possibility that the newscaster is complicit (“in on the joke”) in the propagation of a “tall” if commonplace and politically expedient national tale. Thus while the speaker-viewer of “news” “ha[s] to laugh,” the newscaster is perhaps struggling to keep a “straight face.” Yap’s wordplay here troubles

Rajaratnam’s description of television as a means of communication between government and people. The communication is indeed only one way: in an age of exclusively terrestrial television, the idea is reinforced that the viewer-speaker has no conception of any alternative, and therefore no choice but to swallow a message suspect in style and content. Toward the end of the poem, while the newsreader is apologetic for the apparent perceived brevity of the news report, both his or her own personality and the weather are privileged over “news”:

here’s your news report  
I’m your straight face for today,  
sorry if it’s short  
i’ve to get away  
and be very busy,

and the weather’s hot.

Here, Yap perhaps echoes Winwood’s “You say you can’t reach me/ But you want every word to be free” in which the speaker indirectly reports the message of the unnamed addressee. In Winwood’s lyric there is a tangible tension: the addressee is unable to reach the speaker, but wants *every word* to be free. In contrast, Yap appears to cite the news reader verbatim. Unlike Winwood’s addressee, Yap’s newsreader, intent on being elsewhere (a possible reference to the fact that Singapore’s first generation of newsreaders were not professional journalists but merely, literally, read the news on a part time basis), seems blasé as to the kind of message s/he is conveying and indeed whether that message reaches its audience. While “sorry if its short” may refer to the initial fifteen minute slot allotted to Singapore’s daily national and international news during the 1960s, the line may also suggest the news’ *short* sightedness, *short* changing its audience through a cavalier expurgation of real life. In these lines, Yap may also be tentatively exploring the attitudes of the shapers and scriptwriters of news. By 1969, Singapore, once a state of many parties and opinions, had become a one party, authoritarian state. The easy victory and complete compliance from the population after the landslide election result of 19 April 1968 appears to have generated in Singapore’s leaders what C.M. Turnbull describes as “an arrogance of power” (325). Yap’s lines may therefore reflect a critique not only of Singapore’s government but also the people’s easy “voluntary abdication of authority... into the hands of one political group” (325).

Despite Yap’s ending “news” by ultimately abandoning the lyrics to “Had to Cry Today,” his earlier appropriations of Winwood’s song contextualise the final section of Yap’s poem,

i’m deceived by what i fear  
by words I’ve yet to hear

by the news that's over  
 and the words which scuttle  
 after. after this, bring on  
 words which do not kill the ear

“deceived by what i fear” suggests a link between the authoritarian state and the monotonous but deceptive news bulletins the speaker is subjected to daily. That the speaker is also being deceived by “words I’ve yet to hear” suggests such pretexts will continue for the foreseeable future. Toward the end of the poem the speaker differentiates between “news that’s over” and “words which scuttle after,” thereby begging the question: is “news” the event happening or the subsequent representation and dissemination of the event? In the context of local news, Yap may again be hinting at a slippage between event and representation.

While Winwood’s speaker tells the addressee that as well as listening s/he is “taking the chance to see the wind in your eyes,” in the last two lines of “news” Yap’s speaker requests of an addressee (the newsreader, television or whoever is responsible for local programming?) “after this, bring on/ words which do not kill the ear.” On one level “after this, bring on” refers to whatever programme will follow the news. But, in a wider sense, Yap’s use of “after this” might also indicate the speaker suggesting, indeed calling for future, alternative political Singaporean landscapes.

According to Cyril Wong, Yap in his poetry,

ultimately promotes a position of uncertainty and scepticism in relation to ... social issues, in which often contradictory attitudes toward such issues are juxtaposed and left without one winning out over the other. Instead, Yap seems to encourage dwelling within this ambivalence, and to leave alone the tension between opposing attitudes.

However, Yap’s early “news” appears to reveal less ambiguity in the poet’s mediated critique of the condition of the fledgling nation state. While Shirley Geok-lin Lim has described Yap’s “2 Mothers in a hdb playground” as an example of Yap’s “darker criticism of individual and familial aspirations” (Lim, “Introduction” 175), the “news,” composed almost a decade earlier, contains a decidedly unmediated social critique of both Singapore citizenry and state delivered via unSingaporean “genuine wit” (Patke and Holden 118).

Yap’s “news,” defines itself in sustained mimicry of and in dialogue with Winwood’s lyrics to “Had to Cry Today.” However, it is unlikely that many of the poem’s first readers would have picked up on Yap’s appropriations of “Blind Faith.” The poet’s presumed presupposition that a very select few would recognise his appropriations of “Had to Cry Today” bestows upon “news” further, covert levels of connotation. At this level, the poem operates as coded satire that evades state censors and targets both televised state propaganda’s



ability to masquerade as news through the “blind faith” of a progressively disenfranchised, regulated and therefore apathetic Singaporean populace in the late 1960s. But “news” does not merely intimate Yap’s “self-preoccupied” (Patke and Holden 118) disenchantment and disengagement with postcolonial Singapore. Through his plea to those responsible for Television Singapura’s content to “bring on” words which “do not kill the ear” of the nation, Yap’s viewer-speaker concludes by imagining alternative Singaporean historical, political and media trajectories.

### Works Cited

- Alfian Sa’at. “Pariah.” National Library Drama Centre Black Box Theatre, 25 June 2011.
- Anon., “Hipitaph, or Why Beatniks Have No Place in Singapore.” *Straits Times* 6 July 1969: 4.
- Anon., “Long Hair: Action Taken Against 348 Government Workers.” *Straits Times* 18 March 1978: 8.
- Anon., “Singapore: Undiplomatic Cut.” *Time* 31 August 1969: 13.
- Boey, Kim Cheng, “From the Tentative to the Conditional: Detachment and Liminality in the Poetry of Arthur Yap.” *Sharing Borders; Studies in Contemporary Singaporean-Malaysian Literature II*. Ed. Gwee Li Sui. Singapore: National Library Board, 2009. 22-35.
- de Silva, Gerry, “Cliff Kept his locks, But EMI lost \$10,000.” *Straits Times* 22 August 1972: 15.
- Donovan. “Sunshine Superman.” London: Epic Records, 1966).
- Ee, Tiang Hong. “The Poet and his Role.” *Focus* July 1971: 20-22.
- Fitzgerald, Harvey. “You Were Made For Me to Love” (The Thunderbirds, Singapore pop group). Philips (record label) EP, 1967.
- Gibbins, Jim. “Horses and Hippies.” *Straits Times* 9 May 1970: 8.
- Goh, Irving and Jenny Yap, eds. *The Collected Poems of Arthur Yap*. Singapore: NUS Press, 2012. 178.
- Ironside, Virginia. “Me and My Lodger – and No Ho Ho’s About It.” *Straits Times* 23 October 1966: 14.
- Lewis, Dave and Simon Pallett. *Led Zeppelin: The Concert File*. London: Omnibus Press, 1997.
- Lim, Shirley Geok-lin. “Introduction” [Section 2; 1965-1990]. *Writing Singapore: an Historical Anthology of Singapore Literature*. Eds. Angelia Poon, Shirley Geok-lin Lim and Philip Holden. Singapore: NUS Press, 2009. 173-81.
- . “The English-Language Writer in Singapore.” *Management of Success: The Moulding of Modern Singapore*. Eds. Kermal Singh Sandhu and Paul Wheatley. Singapore: Institute of South East Asian Studies, 1989. 523-51.

- Loong, Rita. "Out Goes Their Mane Attraction and This Could be Their New Look." *Straits Times* 11 February 1972:12.
- Low, Jeffrey, "POP Goes the Band but the Beat Goes On." *Straits Times* 24 October 1970: 7.
- . "And then Traffic Decided to Reform....." *Straits Times* 14 November 1970: 5.
- Mc Dermott, John. "Blind Faith." Deluxe Edition. Polydor, 2001: 9.
- Miller, Harry. "Goodbye Piccadilly." *Straits Times* 16 May 1972: 12.
- Morrison, Van. "Sweet Thing." *Astral Weeks*, 1967.
- Newman, Randy. "I Think It's Going to Rain Today." A track from Randy Newman. Reprise Records, 1966
- Ng, Irene. *The Singapore Lion: A Biography of S. Rajaratnam*. Singapore: Institute of South East Asian Studies, 2010.
- Oxford English Dictionary*. Online edition. <http://www.oed.com>. 19 August 2011.
- Patke, Rajeev S. and Philip Holden. *The Routledge Concise History of Southeast Asian Writing in English*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2010.
- Tillotson, Johnny. "Poetry in Motion." Cadence Records, 1960.
- Turnbull, C.M. *A History of Modern Singapore, 1819-2005*. Singapore: NUS Press, 2009.
- Wong, Cyril. "Uncertainty and Scepticism in Arthur Yap." *Quarterly Literary Review of Singapore*. 1.4 (July 2002). <http://www.qlrs.com/essay.asp?id=212>. 11 August 2011.
- Wong, Patricia. Email, 13 July 2011.
- Yap, Arthur. "A Silly Little Story." *Focus* 1964: 15-16.
- . *Only Lines*. Kuala Lumpur: Federal Publications, 1971.
- Yap, Chior Hong [Arthur Yap]. "Poetry in Motion." *St Andrew's School Magazine* 12 November 1961: 60.
- Yap, Jenny. Personal interview with author, 15 May 2009.