

# Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature

## **Contemporary Literature from Singapore**

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## **Summary and Keywords**

## Contemporary Literature from Singapore

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Literature in Singapore is written in the country's four official languages: Chinese, English, Malay, and Tamil. The various literatures flourished in the late 19th and early 20th centuries with the rise of print culture in the British colony, but after independence in 1965, English became emphasized in both the education system and society at large as part of the new government's attempts to modernize the country. Chinese, Malay, and Tamil were seen as mother tongue languages to provide Singaporeans with cultural ballast while English was regarded as a language for administration, business, and scientific and technological development. Correspondingly, literatures in other languages than English reached a plateau in terms of writerly output and readership during the 1970s and 1980s. However, since 1999, with the state's implementation of the Renaissance City Plan to revitalize arts and culture in Singapore, there have been various initiatives to increase the visibility of contemporary Singaporean writing both within the country itself and on an international scale. Translation plays a key role in bridging the linguistic and literary divides wrought by the state's mother tongue policies, with several works by Cultural Medallion winners in different languages translated into English, which remains at present the shared language in Singapore. Literary anthologies are also invaluable forms through which the concepts of a national literature and national identity are expressed and negotiated. A number of anthologies involving Singaporean authors and those from other countries also highlight the growing international presence of and interest in Singaporean literature. Several anthologies also focus on the topic of urban space, city life, and the rapid transformation of Singapore's physical environment. Writings about gender and sexuality have also become more prominent in single-author collections or edited anthologies, with writers exploring various inventive and experimental narrative forms. A number of poets and writers are also established playwrights, and theater has historically been and continues to be an extremely vital form of creative expression and cultural production. Graphic novels, crime and noir fiction, and speculative and science fiction publications are also on the rise, with the awarding of the Singapore Literature Prize to Sonny Liew's *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* signaling that these genres merit serious literary consideration. A number of literary publications and materials related to Singaporean literature can be found on the Internet, such as the journal *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore*, the website Singapore Poetry, and the database Poetry.sg. Various nonprofit organizations are also working toward increasing public awareness about literature through events such as Singapore Poetry Writing Month, the Migrant Worker Poetry Competition, the Singapore Writers Festival and National Poetry Festival, and also through projects that exhibit poetry in train stations and on public thoroughfares.

Keywords: Singapore, Southeast Asia, poetry, fiction, translation, anthology, postcolonial, global, city, urban

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# Language and Literature in Modern and Contemporary Singapore

Modern Singapore arguably came into being after a general election in May 1959 brought internal self-government to an island-city that had been a British colony since the early 19th century. Full independence and national sovereignty came in August 1965 after a two-year merger with Malaysia proved unsuccessful. If one were to link national and literary modernity, then a standard approach to studying modern literature from Singapore since 1965 would schematically examine the poetry and fiction written in all four of the country's official languages: Chinese, English, Malay, and Tamil. English is considered the language of administration and is taught to all schoolchildren, who also learn one of the three other languages as a "mother tongue" corresponding to their officially designated ethnic group: Chinese, Malay, or Indian.

The conflation of Singaporeans' race with officially designated "mother tongue" languages (Mandarin Chinese, Malay, Tamil) and the role of English as a common or bridge language can be understood as an important feature of Singapore's modernizing and nationalizing logic: race, language, and culture are efficiently managed and depoliticized into highly personalized and communal attributes. A contemporary, as opposed to a modern, approach to literature and literary culture from Singapore might depart from the standard four-corner categorization of literatures in English, Chinese, Malay, and Tamil and instead trace contemporary developments and new directions since 1999 for three reasons. First, in 1999, the Renaissance City Plan, a state-sponsored initiative to turn Singapore into "a Distinctive Global City for the Arts, was implemented. Arts and culture would make Singapore an attractive place to work, live and play, contribute to the knowledge and learning of every Singaporean, and provide cultural ballast for nation-building efforts."<sup>1</sup> While literary creativity does not necessarily march in lockstep with government initiatives, it cannot be denied that the National Arts Council, which plays a key role in implementing and developing the Renaissance City Plan, has in the past two decades provided substantial financial incentives and infrastructural support for the literary arts. This organization offers mentorship programs, writing residencies, and media exposure to assist established and aspiring poets and writers and to foster an active reading public. The state-driven renaissance also coincides with a gradual increase in efforts to expand Singaporean literature's global footprint during the 1990s. Poets and writers from the city-state began to engage in more visible collaborations with their peers in other countries and to participate in international literary festivals and creative writing residencies abroad. Second, as Singaporeans become savvy Internet users and spend more time on social media platforms, a substantial amount of literary activity now takes place on the Web. Resources such as Poetry.sg and Singapore Poetry are entirely online, while signature events such as Singapore Poetry Writing Month (SingPoWriMo) and the Migrant Worker Poetry Contest are conducted entirely on Facebook or have a very strong online component. Booksellers and publishers such as BooksActually and Epigram Books

## Contemporary Literature from Singapore

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are also doing most of their publicity and advertising through social media rather than through print; and many writers, poets, and playwrights maintain active social media accounts to engage their audiences. Third, the Institute of Policy Studies at the National University of Singapore is compiling detailed histories of the literature in each language as part of its *Singapore Chronicles* series commemorating Singapore's fifty years of independence. These are scheduled for publication in late 2017 and 2018. In addition to various critical texts, histories of the literature in each language along with biographies of important writers and poets and summaries of their key works are available in *Singapore: The Encyclopedia* (published in 2006) and also in *Literary Singapore: A Directory of Contemporary Writing from Singapore* (published in 2011 by the National Arts Council).

Broadly speaking, the publication of literature by writers living in British colonial Singapore began in the late 19th century when periodicals, magazines, and newspapers in all four languages proliferated thanks to the increasing availability of printing presses. For writers working in Chinese, Malay, and Tamil, the first three decades of the 20th century were a fecund period as literature became infused not only with local color but also with nationalist aspirations: poetry and prose expressed not only personal emotions and religious devotion but also desires for social reform and political change.<sup>2</sup> Literature in English was at the time influenced by British literary styles and tastes; strong and distinctive local and national identities only began emerging in the 1950s.<sup>3</sup> After World War II and a brief political merger with Malaysia followed by formal independence in 1965, the English language gained prominence both in the educational curriculum and in society at large as the government adopted a technocratic approach toward national development, which was premised on creating a skilled workforce proficient in English that would be attractive to businesses and investors from Europe and North America. As a result, writing and reading literature in languages other than English began to wane or reached a plateau during the next two decades.

The Singapore state's official mother tongue language policy also created a silo effect, resulting in minimal cross-linguistic exchange between students of Chinese, Malay, and Tamil who relied on English as a common means of communication. The bilingual policy's enforced connection between one's ethnicity and one's mother tongue also meant that Sinitic languages besides Mandarin such as Hokkien, Cantonese, and Hakka; and South Asian languages besides Tamil such as Bengali, Hindi, and Gujarati became marginalized. It cannot be denied that English is an increasingly dominant language; on this front, Singapore is in the same predicament as many former British colonies that were originally multilingual polities and must now contend with a similarly multilingual populace after independence. According to the 2000 census, the percentage of Singaporeans using English as the main language of communication at home rose from 19% in 1990 to 23% in 2000.<sup>4</sup> The 2010 census offers a more detailed breakdown, showing that among those who identify as Chinese, Malay, and Indian, 32.6%, 17%, and 41.6% respectively report using English as the main language at home,<sup>5</sup> with the numbers expected to rise in future. This description of the prevalence of English in Singapore and in its literary and cultural scene is not meant to herald or encourage the demise of other

## Contemporary Literature from Singapore

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languages. Rather, it highlights the inherent difficulties in performing a thorough and comprehensive study of Singaporean literature in all four of its official languages, a task that even scholars based in Singapore find daunting due to sociocultural and infrastructural obstacles preventing robust communication and collaboration among writers, artists, and critics working in different languages. Two examples serve to illustrate this point: the National Arts Council's 2011 *Literary Singapore: A Directory of Contemporary Writing in Singapore* lists 60 authors in the English section, 35 in Chinese, 24 in Malay, and 20 in Tamil. While this publication does render non-English author and book title names in the original languages (with English translations), all biographical introductions and textual summaries are in English, which is currently the only language capable of bridging such linguistic divides. Even in theater, which is perhaps the most polyphonic and multilingual of Singaporean performing arts, similar problems arise. As one of the contributors to *9 Lives: 10 Years of Singapore Theatre* notes with regret, the collection lacks "a consideration of local Indian theatre,"<sup>6</sup> and Chinese-language and Malay-language theater are limited to one chapter each in the form of interviews with playwrights and actors. Many plays written and performed in Chinese, Malay, and Tamil are often translated into English when published in order to reach a wider Singaporean audience. However, since the 1990s, literatures in these languages have gradually become rejuvenated through the work of a new generation of bilingual writers. Also, as more funds and opportunities are becoming available for translation work, there has been an increase in the publication of multilingual literary anthologies and translations of important prose and poetic works into English.

# Building Bridges and Creating Capacities through Translation

One relatively new yet pivotal organization that is actively promoting translation in Singapore and creating conducive spaces for collaboration between writers of different languages and cultures is the Select Centre. Founded in 2015 by William Phuan and Tan Dan Feng, the aim of this center, as Phuan states, is “to develop and raise the capabilities of writers and translators here [in Singapore], increase public awareness, and to promote an exchange of literature and translation between Singapore and its neighbouring countries.”<sup>7</sup> In this key capacity building role, the Centre organizes a wide range of events and activities such as translation workshops and residencies, public discussions of literature and education in its Literally Speaking series, and a yearly Translate Singapore festival consisting of a keynote symposium, a series of public talks, and workshops for students and young children.

What is remarkable about the Select Centre’s approach is its broad cultural and aesthetic understanding of translation and its interest in translation between Singaporean languages aside from English. The former can be seen from the center’s involvement with the 2015 Singapore Writers Festival, where, in addition to the standard slate of events focused on literary translation, it organized dramatic readings of newly translated plays and a multilingual rendition of poems accompanied by classical Indian dance to mark the launch of the memoirs of K. P. Bhaskar, a renowned pioneer of Indian dance in Singapore.<sup>8</sup> Translation bridges not only languages and cultures but also reaches across literary genres and performative modes. Select Centre’s theme for its 2016 Translate Singapore festival was “Mari Kita Berbual-bual,” which is Malay for “Let’s Talk.” The highlight of this festival was a “Forum on Chinese-Malay Intercultural Exchange” consisting of four panels dealing with past and present translation work between these two Singaporean languages.<sup>9</sup> Such a focus arguably provincializes English as the widely accepted dominant and common language among Singaporeans, recalls an earlier sociohistorical moment when a form of creolized or bazaar Malay was the lingua franca on the island, and opens up possibilities for future translation work in these and other non-English languages both locally and regionally.

Yet English still plays a crucial role in increasing the visibility of Singaporean literature both within the country and beyond it. In 2011, Epigram Books republished as part of its Singapore Classics series several English-language novels that had gone out of print and were hard to obtain, such as Lloyd Fernando’s *Scorpion Orchid* (first published in 1976), Goh Poh Seng’s *The Immolation* (first published in 1977), and Lim Thean Soo’s *Ricky Star* (first published in 1978). In addition to reissuing these by-now canonical English-language novels in paperback form, Epigram also made them available as electronic books for Amazon’s Kindle reader, thus making these historically important Singaporean titles available to a larger, worldwide readership.

## Contemporary Literature from Singapore

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In the past decade, Epigram Books and other local publishers such as Math Paper Press and Ethos Books have been instrumental in bringing out translated works by winners of Singapore's Cultural Medallion, the country's highest award for arts and letters. Yeng Pway Ngón's novel *Trivialities About Me and Myself*, a co-winner of the 2008 Singapore Literature Prize in the Chinese-language section, was published as both a paperback and a Kindle ebook.<sup>10</sup> *Trivialities* is a first-person account of a selfish and lustful man debating with and searching for his moral self as he moves tortuously through different phases of his life and goes from fortune to failure. Two of Yeng's other novels, *Unrest* and *Art Studio*, have been translated and published by Math Paper Press; Yeng's poems spanning his writing career from the 1960s to the 2000s have been published in a five-volume set of chapbooks by The Literary Centre in collaboration with Ethos Books.<sup>11</sup> Other Chinese-language authors whose translated works have appeared through Epigram Books include You Jin, whose short story collections *Death By Perfume* and *Teaching Cats to Jump Hoops*<sup>12</sup> draw on the author's experiences living in Saudi Arabia and her career as a secondary school teacher respectively. Also published by Epigram is Xi Ni Er's short story collection *The Earnest Mask*.<sup>13</sup> This collection was the other co-winner of the Singapore Literature Prize in 2008; it contains short stories and microfiction spanning the author's career from the 1980s to the 2000s, exploring aspects of daily life in Singapore through a variety of styles ranging from social realism to acerbic satire.

In terms of Malay-language fiction, the English translation of Isa Kamari's first novel *One Earth* was published by Ethos Books in 2007.<sup>14</sup> The novel recounts the story of Aminah, an ethnic Chinese girl originally named Tan Swee Mei, who is adopted by a Malay family when the Japanese military occupied Singapore during World War II. The novel tacks between Aminah's fateful life from the 1940s up to the 1960s and her grandson Irman's visit to her grave on the eve of its exhumation, possibly because the land is being repurposed by the state for redevelopment. Isa's other novels that have appeared in English translation include *The Tower*, *Intercession*, and *Nadra*.<sup>15</sup> Fellow Malay writer Mohamed Latiff Mohamed has also won the Cultural Medallion and the Singapore Literature Prize three times. His novel *Confrontation*<sup>16</sup> brings to life the adventures of a Malay boy, Adi, who witnesses the racial and political turmoil of the 1950s and 1960s affecting his village community as Singapore sheds its status as a British colony, joins the Federation of Malaysia, and then separates to form its own independent nation-state. Although Latiff emigrated to Australia in 2015, he still considers Singapore his home and, as a doyen of Malay letters, laments that "the vision and concept of Singapore's Malay literature is unclear, especially for younger writers: nowadays whatever they write is considered literature. They should be committed to context and figure out which side they are on. National identity and tradition should be the basis of writing."<sup>17</sup>

Writing in Tamil, Singai Ma Elangkannan's novel *Flowers At Dawn*<sup>18</sup> also explores the fraught nature of national identity in colonial Singapore during the years of the Second World War. A work of historical realism, the novel follows its protagonists Anbarasan and Manimekalai as they meet and fall in love, witness the fall of Singapore to invading Japanese troops, and decide to join Subhas Chandra Bose's Indian National Army to liberate India from British rule. Shifting from the colonial past to the national present, the

## Contemporary Literature from Singapore

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short stories in Latha's collection *The Goddess in the Living Room*<sup>19</sup> feature a range of Indian women as protagonists, from an overworked immigrant domestic helper to a grandmother saying goodbye to her family home. The stories focus on these women's quotidian experiences and the challenges they face as an ethnic minority in Singapore. As Latha herself states in an interview, "I wanted to talk about their sensitivities and response to the varying situations in life and being part of the minority I felt I could honestly talk about it."<sup>20</sup>

## The Importance of Anthologies

Given the wide range of Singaporean writing in different languages, literary anthologies are often used to illustrate or invoke a national literary tradition or to gather a diverse group of writers exploring a particular theme from various perspectives and through varying styles. Multilingual anthologies such as *Journeys: Words, Home, and Nation* in and *Rhythms: A Singaporean Millennial Anthology of Poetry*<sup>21</sup> set the stage for two subsequent anthologies both published in 2010: *&Words: Poems Singapore and Beyond* and *Tumasik: Contemporary Writing from Singapore*. *&Words* follows the rubric of *Journeys* by arranging its constitutive poems in four thematic sections: Identity, Homeland, Living, and Words. However, it goes one step further by including a final section on four short forms favored by Singaporean poets, namely, the couplet, the haiku, the quatrain, and the pantun. As anthology editor Edwin Thumboo argues in his introduction, *&Words*, like other anthologies from postcolonial countries, is "shaped by national and regional factors linked to the desire to recover, reassemble, and assemble the past, repair disruptions in history as well as restore major institutions that ensure the continuity of the people," albeit expressing such desires on a literary rather than a political register.<sup>22</sup> Eschewing overt thematic structuring or clustering of writers by linguistic milieu, *Tumasik's* editor Alvin Pang organizes the authors in his anthology alphabetically by name. Pang's reasoning is provocatively straightforward: "these are all writers from Singapore—their work deserves to be read as contributions to our collective intellectual, cultural, and social discourse as a nation; they ought not to be pigeonholed in treatment or scope to the concerns of one particular group or community."<sup>23</sup> While this rationale might appear at first glance as lacking in rigor, it does shed light on how these authors are contemporary: they exist within the same temporal and spatial framework of a Singaporean national consciousness, and what is distinctively Singaporean about them is left for readers to figure out through implicit connections between the authors' pieces rather than explicit delineation spelled out in an editorial statement.

Alvin Pang has also played a pivotal role in collaborative anthologies between Singapore and other countries. Pang, together with Aaron Lee, Ramon C. Sunico, and Alfred A. Yuson, coedited *Love Gathers All: The Philippines-Singapore Anthology of Love Poetry*; with John Kinsella, *Over There: Poems from Singapore and Australia*; with Ravi Shankar, *Union: 15 Years of Drunken Boat, 50 Years of Writing from Singapore*.<sup>24</sup> Pang's editorial



## Contemporary Literature from Singapore

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perspective in these international collaborations eschews fixed or normative visions of Singaporean identity or literature; instead, he sets up thematic and textual dialogues between the Singaporean authors and their featured works with those of their international counterparts, contemporaneously expanding on and negotiating what national identity means on both sides. As Pang states in the introduction to *Union*, as his collaboration developed with Shankar, who is founding editor of the international electronic literary journal *Drunken Boat* and based in the United States, they “wanted to explore pluralities and polyphonies (both within and across [their] communities), even if these may not necessarily prove harmonious nor conducted with ease, trusting that they might nevertheless be fertile and meaningful.”<sup>25</sup>

The shifting contours of literature and nation can also be seen in *Get Lucky: An Anthology of Philippine and Singapore Writings*.<sup>26</sup> The title is a reference to a poem by Eric Tinsay Valles, one of the anthology’s editors, which in turn describes the Lucky Plaza shopping mall where many migrant workers from the Philippines congregate over meals on their days off and remit money to their families back in the archipelago. Although this anthology mainly features poetry, short fiction, and essays about OFWs (overseas foreign workers) from the Philippines, Singapore clearly serves as both backdrop and catalyst for these writings, and several pieces in the last section of the anthology express the close literary and sociocultural relationships between the two countries. The historical and emerging ties between Singapore and India are also the occasion for another anthology, *A Monsoon Feast: Short Stories to Celebrate the Cultures of Kerala and Singapore*.<sup>27</sup> The anthology interweaves stories by Singaporean and Indian authors, only a few of which explicitly feature Indians in Singapore or vice versa. But what emerges from this binational juxtaposition are common concerns about tradition and modernity as well as cultural memory and heritage shared by both postcolonial societies. Urban space and city life are the focus of another comparative anthology, *Tales of Two Cities*, containing twenty-three short stories by contributors from the Hong Kong Writers Circle and the Singapore Writers Group arranged around the themes of The Changing City, The Historic City, The Mystical City, and The Capricious City. As the editors explain, “writers were encouraged to explore an aspect of their home city to best capture its spirit” and its “multitude of connections and possibilities.”<sup>28</sup>

The myriad connections with and possibilities of space seem especially important for writers in Singapore, a country with only about 280 square miles or 720 square kilometers of land mass. Perhaps because of the island-nation’s densely packed and intensely urbanized milieu, its writers are often acutely aware of the social and cultural significance of physical spaces and the multitude of associations arising from and lingering within them. This is evident in *No Other City: The Ethos Anthology of Urban Poetry*.<sup>29</sup> As they organized a series of public literary events during the late 1990s, editors Aaron Lee and Alvin Pang noticed that the participants, mostly younger people, saw poetry as “a way to grapple with the issues of growing up in a city that was changing before their eyes, and far too quickly.”<sup>30</sup> Featuring both new and previously published works, the poems are arranged thematically so as to “generate the strands of a kind of seminal dialogue . . . leading to a discernible tapestry across the entirety anthology.”<sup>31</sup>

## Contemporary Literature from Singapore

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Taking a slightly different approach, Daren Shiau and Lee Wei Fen issued a call for writing exploring one particular geographical term, producing what they call on the book cover a “mono-titular anthology” that includes works of poetry, prose, and drama all entitled, like the anthology itself, *Coast*.<sup>32</sup> In his foreword to the anthology, Gwee Li Sui observes that “the title refers to a certain geographical area especially significant to islands,” which “makes the endeavour suitably Singaporean”; however, the editorial vision includes a “more radical invitation to contributors to *act on* the word’s most direct meaning and use, to extend, disrupt, or transform them, by any stretch of referentiality.”<sup>33</sup> References to specific neighborhoods and housing estates in Singapore appear in *Balik Kampung: Stories of Connection and Disconnection with Different Parts of Singapore*.<sup>34</sup> Balik kampung means “return to village” in Malay; it is fitting that the authors whose works are anthologized in this volume include a short meditation about their ties to the particular neighborhood, often where they spent their formative years, described in their story. According to editor Verena Tay, the idea for this anthology arose out of a personal reflection that her “identity as a Singaporean” had been formed through “experiences of existing in various spaces across the country” and that “surely there are other writers out there who have lived at least ten years in the same district of Singapore who might wish to draw inspiration from their experience of living at that same spot” to pen a story.<sup>35</sup> Finally, even though *A Luxury We Cannot Afford*<sup>36</sup> is not premised on experiences of actual places, it endeavors to imagine and create spaces for literature in Singapore. The poems in this anthology respond to and are inspired by a 1969 pronouncement made by then prime minister Lee Kuan Yew, who declared that “poetry is a luxury we cannot afford” because Singaporeans should prioritize science and technology to modernize the nation. According to editors Christine Chia and Joshua Ip the anthology, which contains a “broad range of perspectives on a figure so polarizing and complex,”<sup>37</sup> is not only a reflection on Lee’s life, legend, and legacy, it is also a thoughtful exploration of the possibilities for and even the necessity of poetry in a technocratic society.

## Affirmations of Gender and Alternative Sexualities

The culturally constructed affinity between socioeconomic reproduction and biological reproduction has by now become almost axiomatic, especially in a small country such as Singapore where procreation and population growth are considered key issues requiring persistent state exhortation and no small amount of social engineering. Geraldine Heng, Janadas Devan, and Esha Niyogi De have examined the valorization of certain idealized images of women and their gender roles in Singapore's national imaginary and the strategies that women writers use to address and contest them. Latha's *The Goddess in the Living Room*, Grace Chia's *Womango* and *Cordelia*, Tania De Rozario's *Tender Delirium*, and Teng Qian Xi's *They Hear Salt Crystallising*<sup>38</sup> are some of the more recent prose and poetry collections articulating, among other topics, female and feminist perspectives on contemporary issues. Teng's collection in particular has a number of poems presenting canonical literary works and well-known folktales such as King Lear and the legend of Madam White Snake from a female protagonist's point of view. There are also two notable literary anthologies of women's writing: the first, *More Than Half the Sky*,<sup>39</sup> was published in 1998 and includes previously unpublished writing in English by thirty Singaporean women. As editor Leong Liew Geok points out, the title alludes to a famous Chinese saying by Mao Ze Dong about women holding up half the sky or playing an equal role alongside men in modern society. The anthology aims to go beyond mere parity by showcasing "the presence, variety and richness of women's voices in Singapore" in a society where "many women find themselves doing a double shift, bearing the brunt of domestic responsibilities even as they work outside the home."<sup>40</sup> Sixteen years later, *Body Boundaries* emerged out of a literary event held by Etiquette SG, "a multidisciplinary showcase of art, writing, and film created by and about women."<sup>41</sup> Responding to a salutary but provocative comment from an audience member that the writing shared during the event was surprisingly uncliché, editors Tania De Rozario, Zarina Muhammad, and Krishna Udayasankar brought together the twenty-seven women writers in *Body Boundaries* to offer "a glimpse into the way female-identified and female-bodied individuals articulate what being, becoming and behaving as a woman means in this frenzied, cacophonous world that we live in."<sup>42</sup>

Kenneth Paul Tan and Audrey Yue have shown how even though the Singapore state's attempts to make the city a global hub for the creative industries and attract the "pink dollar"<sup>43</sup> has created some latitude for alternative sexualities, the physical and cultural spaces where such sexualities can be expressed are carefully policed in the name of protecting the sensibilities of Singapore's heteronormative and conservative moral majority who are called "heartlanders."<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, the state has steadfastly refused to repeal a law criminalizing sexual acts between two men even though it is a relic of British colonialism.<sup>45</sup> Nonetheless, beginning with Johann S. Lee's *Peculiar Chris* and Andrew Koh's *Glass Cathedral*, which were published in the early 1990s, LGBTQ writers

## Contemporary Literature from Singapore

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and works about alternative sexualities have been and continue to be an important presence in Singapore's literary scene. Alfian Sa'at, whose most recent collection *The Invisible Manuscript* deals with affection and desire between men, has also published his Asian Boys trilogy of plays dealing with the gay community in Singapore: *Dreamplay*, *Landmarks*, and *Happy Endings*, the latter being a dramatic adaptation and extension of Johann Lee's novel *Peculiar Chris*. Tania De Rozario's *And The Walls Come Crumbling Down*<sup>46</sup> is a prose work drawing on some key moments in the author's life; she writes powerfully and poetically about the challenges of seeking a stable home and negotiating affectionate yet fraught intimacies between women. Casting a wider net, *GASPP: A Gay Anthology of Singapore Poetry and Prose* anthologizes a range of fiction and poetry about gay and lesbian perspectives, some of which were originally written in Chinese and Malay, in an "attempt to showcase both the quality and diversity of [the] country's queer literary communities."<sup>47</sup> The *GASPP* editors' introduction also offers a detailed account of the history and development of LGBTQ literature and drama in Singapore from the mid-1980s to the early 2000s.

## From Page to Stage: Theater and Drama

Kuo Pao Kun, Singapore's most respected playwright, dramatist, and cultural critic, once commented that "theatre is by its very nature challenging to current politics. It is a combination of performing arts and literature."<sup>48</sup> Kuo founded The Substation in 1990, transforming an abandoned electrical substation into a black-box theater and art gallery with various residency programs for individuals and groups to engage in exploratory and experimental projects that continue to this day. The 2002 opening of Singapore's mammoth performing arts center Esplanade—Theatres on the Bay, known locally as "the durian" because its architecture resembles the famous tropical fruit, further highlights the importance of theater and the performing arts in the Renaissance City. Quite a few Singaporean poets and writers are also critically acclaimed playwrights; unfortunately, a good number of these plays are not available in published form. Cultural Medallion recipient Goh Poh Seng was one of the earliest playwrights to bring Singlish to the Anglophone stage in the 1960s through his plays, such as *The Moon Less Bright*.<sup>49</sup> Another poet and novelist, Robert Yeo, has also penned a *Singapore Trilogy* consisting of plays spanning the 1970s and 1990s: *Are You There Singapore?*, *One Year Back Home*, and *Changi*.<sup>50</sup> Ng Yi-Sheng, whose debut poetry collection won the Singapore Literature Prize in 2008, has written *Georgette*, a play based on renowned Nanyang Style painter Georgette Chen; and *251*, about the porn star Annabel Chong. Stella Kon, author of two novels, is perhaps best known as the playwright of the monodrama *Emily of Emerald Hill* about a Peranakan (Straits Chinese) woman recounting her transformation from a young bride to family matriarch.<sup>51</sup> The character of Emily is often considered to be the first distinctively Singaporean voice in post-1965 English-language theater. Although she has not written a play, Pooja Nansi, who became Singapore's inaugural Youth Poet Ambassador in 2017, often performs her poetry as dramatic texts, because she believes

## Contemporary Literature from Singapore

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that “music, storytelling, theatre” are “labels [that] can be quite artificial. What matters is that experiencing a poem in different ways can give it new life.”<sup>52</sup> Working in both Tamil and English, Elangovan has published three poetry collections and written numerous plays, a number of which contain dialogue in multiple languages and represent oppressed and marginalized social groups in Singapore. Three of Elangovan’s scripts, published in *The Good, The Bad, and the Ugly*, were banned from public performance by Singapore’s Media Development Authority (MDA) due to what were perceived to be controversial or sensitive subjects. *Talaq* (Divorce), for instance, highlights the predicament of Indian Muslim women caught in patriarchal social and family structures, while *Smegma* is a collage of scenes, some of which depict underage prostitutes, a Malay transsexual, and a Muslim woman suicide bomber.<sup>53</sup> Although he has written three poetry collections, Alfian Sa’at considers himself someone who has “worked mainly in theatre” and uses English and Malay as “hybrid languages, languages filtered through various kinds of registers.”<sup>54</sup> His plays, such as *Fugitives* and *Cooling-Off Day*, often highlight the hidden fault lines beneath Singapore’s multicultural facade and raise questions about the climate of consensus in Singapore’s politics and society. Quah Sy Ren, an essayist and scholar of modern Chinese literature and drama, has also penned or cowritten several plays in Chinese, among them *Invisibility*,<sup>55</sup> which is about the alienation and anonymity engulfing inhabitants of the modern city who try to retain their sense of self and search for meaning while withdrawing into private spaces. Quah is also the general editor of the multivolume collected works of Kuo Pao Kun, who died in 2002.<sup>56</sup> Kuo’s monodramas and multilingual plays written and performed in the 1980s are undoubtedly an important milestone in the development of theater in Singapore, and his astute insights about Singapore’s society and culture have important implications for both literature and the performing arts. For example, in the 1990s, Kuo employed the term “cultural orphan” to describe Singapore’s brief history as an independent country and its apparently rich but also rootless multicultural milieu. As another eminent theater practitioner T. Sasitharan argues, the term is “a provocation, to make you think about what your past is, and what it should be. If you do not have a parent, then you are free to invent anyone as your parent.”<sup>57</sup> Kuo’s concept generated intense debate in the public sphere and creative responses by playwrights and writers over the following decades. Although Kuo Pao Kun and a few others have attempted to create multilingual works, theater in Singapore often suffers from the same linguistic “silo-effect” as its literature. English-language performing groups are dominant, among which are Singapore Repertory Theatre, TheatreWorks, The Necessary Stage, Action Theatre, W!ld Rice, and Checkpoint Theatre. Chinese-language groups include The Theatre Practice, Toy Factory Theatre Ensemble, Drama Box, Nine Years Theatre; Malay-language theater is performed by Panggung Arts, Perkumpulan Seni, Teater Artistik, Teater Ekamatra, Teater Kami; Ravindran Drama Group, Avant Theatre and Language, Agni Kootthu are stalwarts of Tamil theater.

While playwrights and performers often present resistant and radical views on sociopolitical issues, their groups’ dependence on state funding through National Arts Council grants often requires them to seek some degree of compromise and negotiation with state power. Broadly speaking, drama in Singapore can be understood according to

## Contemporary Literature from Singapore

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three distinct but overlapping topic clusters: history, memory, and tradition; race, society, and politics; gender roles and sexuality. As a country that achieved self-government in 1959 and full independence in 1965, Singapore's postcolonial history is comparatively short. A number of plays have drawn on historical material, whether factual or reimagined, in order to recover the past and connect it with the rapidly changing present. In 1995, TheatreWorks staged Ong Keng Sen's *Broken Birds: An Epic Longing* based on a historical study of Japanese sex workers or *karayuki-san* in late 19th- and early 20th-century Singapore.<sup>58</sup> That same year, Kuo Pao Kun's *Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral* was also staged by TheatreWorks; it draws on the story of Admiral Cheng Ho from the Ming Dynasty and uses castration as a metaphor to discuss the sociopolitical attitudes of present-day Singaporeans. Kuo's *The Spirits' Play* and *One Hundred Years in Waiting*,<sup>59</sup> performed in 2000 and 2001 respectively, also draw on historical material. The former, inspired by Kuo's visit to a Japanese cemetery in Singapore, brings to life five Japanese ghosts who must contend with the violence and atrocities committed by their country during World War II; the latter focuses on the relationship between the founder of modern China, Sun Yat-sen, and his long-time lover Chen Cui Fen, juxtaposed with a present-day Singaporean actor portraying Dr. Sun who is struggling to make wedding arrangements with his fiancée. Sir Stamford Raffles, the British East India Company official who laid the foundations of colonial Singapore, appears in two plays: Robert Yeo's *The Eye of History* (1992), where he converses and debates with Singapore's first prime minister Lee Kuan Yew;<sup>60</sup> and Ng Yi-Sheng's *The Last Temptation of Stamford Raffles* (2008), where, on his deathbed, he relives his colonial adventures in fits and starts. In Goh Boon Teck's *Long House*, performed by Toy Factory in 2006, a deceased mother's legacy of an old family house to her three children and their spouses reveals long-submerged sibling rivalries and tensions between those who want to preserve the house and its estate and those who seek to modernize and refurbish it.<sup>61</sup> Alfian Sa'at and Marcia Vanderstraaten's *Hotel*, staged by W!ld Rice in 2015, is set in one room in an unnamed hotel in Singapore. However, the multilingual, two-part play's time frame spans one hundred years, from 1915 to 2015, with each decade performed in a different style and presenting multiple sets of characters that enter and depart the hotel room against the backdrop historical events.

Given Singapore's small size and dense population, the heavy hand of the authoritarian state often has a strong grip on matters of race, religion, and social divisions. Kuo Pao Kun's plays from the 1980s, *The Coffin is Too Big For the Hole*, *No Parking on Odd Days*, and the multilingual *Mama Looking For Her Cat*, all deal to some extent with individuals' encounters with unrelenting bureaucracy and the rapid modernization of urban life, with its corresponding enervation of social relationships between different ethnic groups. Kuo's *Lao Jiu—Ninth Born* (1993) takes a critical look at society's emphasis on competitive meritocracy and academic achievement, while *Sunset Rise* (1999) deals with questions of old age and death through another multilingual cast of characters in a retirement home.<sup>62</sup> The Necessary Stage often produces plays by Haresh Sharma, whose work takes up a whole range of social issues: *This Chord and Others* (1991) presents three men—one Chinese, one Indian, and one Eurasian—whose friendship is strained due

## Contemporary Literature from Singapore

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to racial tensions and career rivalry; *Off Centre* (1993) is written from the perspectives of two characters suffering from depression and schizophrenia and highlights the stigmatization of mental illness; *Model Citizens* (2010), performed in English, Chinese, and Malay, explores the fraught relationship between three women—the Chinese-educated wife of a member of Parliament who has been stabbed, an Indonesian maid who is the girlfriend of the man who stabbed the politician, and the maid's Peranakan employer whose son committed suicide.<sup>63</sup> Race relations are also addressed in Tan Tarn How's *Six of the Best* (1996), which uses the caning of American teenager Michael Fay in 1994 as a springboard to show contrasting social attitudes between Singaporeans and expatriates from the United States and United Kingdom, all of whom work for the same international advertising agency.<sup>64</sup> Afian Sa'at raises questions of race and religion in *Fugitives* (2002): the father of a Chinese Singaporean family has frank and thought-provoking conversations with his former Malay employee, while his son who is serving his mandatory military service strikes up a friendship with a Malay boy from the same army camp. Meanwhile, the mother, who has recently become a Christian, has to contend with a church friend pressuring her to convert her ailing father-in-law.<sup>65</sup> The army is also the context for Chong Tze Chien's *Charged*, staged by Teater Ekamatra in 2010. Told through multiple flashbacks from different points of view, the play explores the racial tensions underlying the murder-suicide of two Malay and Chinese soldiers during the Chinese New Year holidays as the investigating officer, a Eurasian, tries to reconstruct what happened.<sup>66</sup>

Questions of gender roles and sexuality in a society that is still predominantly phallogentric and wary of its LGBTQ communities emerge in several plays. Stella Kon's landmark *Emily of Emerald Hill* presents a strong and resilient Peranakan woman who learns to negotiate and work within the patriarchal social system to become matriarch of her family, but at great personal cost. Singapore's squeamishness about sex is highlighted in Tan Tarn How's *The Lady of Soul and Her Ultimate "S" Machine*, staged by TheatreWorks in 1993. A closeted, gay civil servant in charge of finding ways to make Singapore more soulful and creative encounters the sexy and inspiring Madame Soh/Soul, but his ensuing ideas for a more liberated and artistically adventurous society run afoul of ministerial conservatism.<sup>67</sup> Ovidia Yu's *Three Fat Virgins* (1992), *Breastissues* (1997), and *Hitting (On) Women* (2007) discuss body-negative and sexual stereotypes affecting women, the fetishization of women's bodies and the trauma of breast cancer, and the haunting emotional and physical violence in lesbian relationships respectively. Similarly, Eleanor Wong's trilogy, *Invitation to Treat*, consists of three plays centered on Ellen Toh, a lesbian lawyer: *Mergers and Accusations* (1993), *Wills and Successions* (1995), *Jointly and Severably* (2003).<sup>68</sup> The first two plays, performed in the 1990s, are remarkable for their refreshingly bold portrayal of a lesbian woman during that period; the entire trilogy was performed in 2003. The plays trace Ellen's life as she goes from enjoying a marriage of convenience to becoming a mother to dealing with her religious and moralistic sister to contending with a love triangle involving her daughter's best friend and her own lover. Another trio of plays, Alfian Sa'at's *Asian Boys Trilogy*, consists of *Dreamplay* (2000), *Landmarks* (2004), and *Happy Endings* (2007).<sup>69</sup> In the first play, a goddess descends from

## Contemporary Literature from Singapore

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heaven to try and make gay men straight during different time periods in Singapore's history; the second is made up of eight short, intimate scenes in which various characters discuss and debate aspects of gay life in Singapore, ever mindful of the state and society's hostility toward homosexuality; the third play is an adaptation of Singapore's first gay novel, *Peculiar Chris* by Johann S. Lee, with the addition of several extended scenes dramatizing how the characters in the novel turned out later in life. In Goh Boon Teck's Chinese-language monodrama *Purple*, staged by Toy Factory in 1995, a transgender woman narrates her life story and her numerous relationships with various men, in particular her father's difficult but gradual acceptance of her psychological and physical transition.<sup>70</sup>

## Graphic Novels and Genre Fiction

The awarding of the 2016 Singapore Literature Prize for the very first time to a graphic novel, Sonny Liew's *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye*,<sup>71</sup> suggests that this narrative genre blending visual and literary art has come of age. Liew's graphic novel purports to be an account of the life and career of an unsuccessful Singaporean artist, the eponymous Chan Hock Chye. But not only does the text represent various important moments in Singapore's history in relation to Chan's artistic career, it also speculates what might have happened to the country if some politicians rather than others had risen to power at certain key moments in the past. Because of its portrayals of political figures such as Lim Chin Siong and Lee Kuan Yew, the National Arts Council withdrew funding for Liew's book on the grounds that this was "sensitive content."<sup>72</sup> This incident drew considerable media and public attention to Liew's graphic novel that has received both national and international accolades, winning three 2017 Eisner Awards in addition to the 2016 SLP.

But not all Singaporean graphic novels attain such notoriety. One of the first full-length graphic novels is Gwee Li Sui's *Myth of the Stone*,<sup>73</sup> in which Li-Hsu, a young boy, is transformed into an imp when his curiosity gets the better of him. In order to regain his human form, Li-Hsu embarks on several adventures in the High Worlds, a fantasy setting that blends and features creatures from both European and Asian mythologies. Oh Yong Hwee and Koh Hong Teng's *Ten Sticks One Rice*<sup>74</sup> also delves into Singapore's history through the eyes of Neo Hock Seng, an aging satay seller who was once a triad gang member. As Seng arranges the funeral of his former sworn brother in the triad, he recalls in flashbacks his earlier life at different stages from the 1960s to the 1980s in a rapidly modernizing Singapore, culminating in his decision to leave the triad and start his own business selling satay. Koh is also the author of another graphic novel steeped in Singapore's past, *Last Train From Tanjong Pagar*.<sup>75</sup> This work, which is based on guided tours conducted by architectural historian Lai Chee Kien, uses the railway lines that connect Singapore to Malaysia and two key train stations in Bukit Timah and Tanjong Pagar to explore local history and geography through Lai's narration. Interwoven with Lai's heritage walks is the story of Chye Huat, who as a young boy took the train from



## Contemporary Literature from Singapore

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Malaysia to Singapore every day for school and now, as a successful white-collar executive, longs to reunite with his former lover and return to his childhood home. The question of going home and finding a place where one belongs is central to Troy Chin's ongoing series, *The Resident Tourist*,<sup>76</sup> which is up to its seventh volume. Chin's graphic novel is largely autobiographical, drawing on his experiences of reverse culture shock when he returns to Singapore after almost a decade in the United States. Grappling with familial and social expectations of how he should lead a successful and productive life when he would rather be creating art and music, Chin deftly illustrates some exasperating constraints of life in modern Singapore along with a few tender moments of friendship and affection that form between Singaporeans who do not fit the national mold.

Breaking from the national image of an efficient and orderly city-state, crime and noir fiction present darker and disturbing sides of Singapore. *Crime Scene Singapore*<sup>77</sup> is a case in point, with stories ranging from a student poisoning her teacher with lead-laced traditional Chinese medicine to the mass possession of Singaporeans by spirits of old buildings torn down for urban development. As editor Richard Lord observes, "crime that occurs in a nation where the law is largely respected and adhered to tends to rock our sense of order more; it somehow seems a greater transgression and thus a more fertile field for writers of fiction."<sup>78</sup> Similarly, *Singapore Noir*,<sup>79</sup> which is part of American publisher Akashic Books' series of global noir anthologies, showcases what editor Cheryl Lu-Lien Tan calls "the quirky and dark complexities" of Singapore that "rarely seem to make it past its borders."<sup>80</sup> Thematically arranged in four sections—Sirens, Love (Or Something Like It), Gods and Demons, and The Haves and Have-nots—the stories range in subject matter from a money-laundering scheme hatched by a Chinese Communist Party official and his femme-fatale girlfriend entangling a hapless Singaporean lawyer to the spellbinding words of an ageless, mysterious woman who rescues a daughter from her abusive mother. The stories in these two anthologies are not fixated on the sensationalism of criminal activity or supernatural horror. Underlying the grim and chilling events are the frustrations and anxieties of a society confronted with relentless pressures to modernize, conform, compete, and succeed.

Claire Tham's novel *The Inlet*<sup>81</sup> also begins with the death of a young woman in a swimming pool in a luxury estate on Sentosa, one of Singapore's tourist attractions. Based loosely on a real incident that occurred in 2010, the novel is told from the multiple perspectives of characters involved in the investigation, which in turn offers opportunities for the author to explore and comment on how Singapore's society and culture has changed dramatically in the past decade. Tham, in an interview, states that she sensed how the "nation was at a turning point" during the 2011 general election and she "wanted to capture some of that ferment and that change" by using multiple narrators who gave her "freedom and flexibility in propelling the story forward."<sup>82</sup> Capturing the complexities of political intrigue, Wong Souk Yee's novel *Death of a Perm Sec*<sup>83</sup> begins with the apparent suicide of Chow Sze Teck, a senior civil servant holding the post of permanent secretary in Singapore's Housing Ministry. As his family members delve into the murky circumstances surrounding his death, they discover that Chow was a former

## Contemporary Literature from Singapore

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ally of Prime Minister Edward Wee and had helped Wee destroy both the career and life of a formidable political rival, Lim Min Tong, during the early years of the country's struggle for independence. The echoes of actual Singaporean politicians' names in some of the novel's characters (Edward Wee, Lim Min Tong) suggest that Wong, who was detained without trial in 1987 under the Internal Security Act, is offering a pointed commentary on governance and power in the country.

Another genre that has gained popularity in recent years is speculative or science fiction. When June Yang and Joyce Chng issued their call for submissions for *Ayam Curtain*, they began with a simple yet thought-provoking premise: "if birds could travel between universes and timelines, what might they see in alternate versions of Singapore?"<sup>84</sup> The resulting anthology is divided into two sections, the former containing tiny microfiction vignettes of a few hundred words while the latter is made up of flash fiction pieces or extremely short stories that do not exceed a thousand words. The brevity of such writing allows both established and aspiring writers to experiment with what the editors calls "the potential of speculative writing here" in Singapore as "a rich tool for expressing our inner flights of fancy as well as for exploring local issues people care about."<sup>85</sup> Appearing in the same year, *Fish Eats Lion*<sup>86</sup> is a playful reference to Singapore's signature waterfront landmark and statue, the Merlion, which has the head of a lion and the body of a fish. Singapore's deliberate and concerted attempts at making national myths, of which the Merlion is a good example, inspired editor Jason Erik Lundberg to tap the "inherent strangeness in constantly telling your own story that lends well to the writing of speculative fiction."<sup>87</sup> Pointing out that there is a tradition of speculative fiction in Singapore often wearing the guise of "more 'literary' magic realism or fabulation,"<sup>88</sup> Lundberg assembled twenty-two stories by emerging and established authors that run the gamut of science fiction, fantasy, and combinations of other genres. From reimagining horticulturalist Agnes Joaquim as a bioterrorist to describing feng shui masters diagnosing MRT subway tunnel disturbances to following a grandfather diving in search of caches of NEWater in a flooded, post-apocalyptic island-city, the stories in this anthology, similar to those in *Ayam Curtain*, speculate what alternative Singapores might look and feel like.

# Word on the Street, in the Rain, and on the Web

The most exciting and promising developments regarding contemporary literature from Singapore are the numerous efforts to demystify literature and its study both in the classroom and in the public eye. Although literature in any language is no longer a required subject in Singapore's secondary school curriculum, efforts have been made to pique and sustain the interest of not only students but also teachers in Singaporean writing. Gwee Li Sui has authored *Fear No Poetry!: The Essential Guide to Close Reading*<sup>89</sup> as a guide for students to learn about and practice close reading through detailed analyses of Singaporean poems rather than those from the British or American canon. Primary and secondary school students are also encouraged to try their hand at creative writing through events such as Read! Singapore's flash fiction contest organized by the National Library Board in 2012, 2013, and 2015; the winning entries are collected in *33 Flash Fiction Stories*.<sup>90</sup> The Teacher-Writers Network established in 2012 also provides teachers of literature a chance to pen their own poems as part of a reflective pedagogical process, some of which are collected in the anthology *Sound of Mind: A Teacher-Writers Anthology of Poems and Prompts*.<sup>91</sup> Drawing on existing research, Philip McConnell, one of the editors, suggests that teachers who are writers themselves can adopt "a co-constructive approach" and use "the interactive nature of collaborative learning" to heighten "students' awareness of the diversity of possible responses to rich language."<sup>92</sup> Combining the study of history with literature, Gwee Li Sui has also edited *Written Country: The History of Singapore Through Literature*,<sup>93</sup> an anthology that connects crucial moments in Singapore's sociopolitical history with literary texts that both represent and expand upon them. As Gwee notes in his introduction, as the anthology's "texts enter specific [historical] moments, they effectively give back to events their emotions and, in this way, generate reflections and commentaries from within."<sup>94</sup> The literary texts offer contrapuntal rather than alternative articulations of the past, and can be profitably studied alongside standard historical accounts of the specific events, which include the Great Bukit Ho Swee Fire in 1961, Operation Coldstore that detained left-wing political figures and activists in 1963, the opening of Singapore's Changi Airport in 1981, the caning of American teenager Michael Fay in 1994, and the Little India Riot in 2013.

Another endeavor to raise public awareness about Singaporean literature, #BuySingLit is a weekend-long event that began in February 2017 encouraging Singaporeans to purchase works of literature at participating bookstores and associated programming such as dramatic readings, hidden book drops, and walking tours for all ages. Going from the bookstore to the subway, The Literary Centre initiated Moving Words in 2011, a multilingual public poetry project displaying works by well-known Singaporean poets on MRT train station platforms and concourses. Based on entries for an accompanying poetry competition that was open to the public, twelve more pieces by new poets were

## Contemporary Literature from Singapore

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subsequently showcased. Photographs of the poetry displays can be found on the Moving Words Facebook page, and several entries were thematically anthologized in *Moving Words 2011: A Poetry Anthology*.<sup>95</sup> The Singapore Poetry On The Sidewalks (SPOTS) project, organized by Sing Lit Station and inspired by a similar project in Boston, inscribes Singaporean poems at public venues in a special paint that only becomes visible when it rains. This, however, is a common occurrence in a tropical country such as Singapore where there is plenty of precipitation. Currently six poems have been painted in two venues, with more to follow in the near future. Like the Moving Words project in 2011, SPOTS is an effort to imbue public spaces with a sense of literature; the spirit behind these initiatives is that fiction and poetry should not be the sole province of an elite literati and can be appreciated by the general public once the urban environment becomes (to coin a phrase) *literated*.

In addition to offering manuscript consultations and writing workshops, Sing Lit Station, a nonprofit literary organization, maintains the Poetry.sg website that serves as a biographical and scholarly database and organizes the annual Singapore Poetry Writing Month (SingPoWriMo).

Poetry.sg, launched in 2017, “hopes to be the first online venue that people think of when they think of Singapore Poetry—be they scholars seeking critical analysis, teachers looking for rich multimedia resources to engage their students, or just a curious lit-lover wanting to find out more about a poet they came across.”<sup>96</sup> SingPoWriMo, now entering its fourth year, takes place entirely on Facebook in April and is modeled on the National Poetry Writing Month (NaPoWrMo) in the United States, with daily writing prompts set by a changing roster of moderators. SingPoWriMo offers a venue for new poets to share their work in a generally supportive and congenial environment and for everyone to challenge themselves by responding to the daily prompts that vary in topic, form, and seriousness or whimsy. The moderators also select outstanding contributions to be published in a crowd-funded anthology with Math Paper Press. A Chinese version of SingPoWriMo, 一首的时间 *Yishou shi de shijian* (Time for One Poem), began in 2015 and also takes place on Facebook.

The *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore (QLRS)* has been published online since 2001 with a stated mission “to promote the literary arts in Singapore, to stimulate the feedback mechanisms in the literary scene, and to develop Singaporean writers to international standards.”<sup>97</sup> While earlier literary journals such as *Singa* have ceased publication, *QLRS* remains a vital resource for creative writing, reflective essays, book reviews, and author interviews regarding Singaporean literature. Another literary website, Singapore Poetry, run by U.S.-based poet Koh Jee Leong, sees its purview as “all things poetic about Singapore.” In this spirit, the website publishes book reviews, author interviews, event notifications, as well as critical scholarship about Singaporean culture, fiction, and poetry. Singapore Poetry also tries to facilitate more international contact and collaboration by inviting American and Singaporean authors to review each other’s books.

## Contemporary Literature from Singapore

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Although the Migrant Worker Poetry Contest, which began in 2014, is open only to non-Singaporeans, the presence and contributions of immigrant workers in many different professions constitute an essential part of what Singapore is today. Beginning with submissions from South Asian workers, the contest has gradually expanded in scope to include entries by workers from the Philippines, Indonesia, and China. As Shivaji Das, the organizer of the latest contest, points out, the official contest has inspired “some of the Bangladeshi workers” to “hold impromptu poetry readings among themselves at East Coast Park or outside the National Library. Occasionally, they would also invite Indonesian and Filipino domestic workers to join in these readings,” a gesture that is reciprocated by the other communities.<sup>98</sup> One collection of poems by Md Mukul Hossine, *Me Migrant*,<sup>99</sup> has been published; other winning and short-listed poems can be found on the Migrant Worker Poetry Competition website and Facebook page.

Finally, Singapore hosts two multilingual literary festivals: the Singapore Writers Festival, which began in 1986, occurs over the month of November; the National Poetry Festival, inaugurated in 2015, is held over a weekend in July. The National Poetry Festival also organizes a national poetry competition as a lead-up to the festival itself, with an annual theme such as “Home, Nationhood, and Identity” (2015), “Reflections” (2016), and “Regardless of Race” (2017). On the other side of the world, the Singapore Literature Festival in New York City is an independently funded event that takes place every two years. This festival is part of Singapore Unbound, a literary and cultural initiative headed by Jee Leong Koh, with the goal of giving Singaporean writers a “prominent and independent platform for open and free expression of their views” and “protecting and advancing the literary culture of a country that has not always supported free speech.”<sup>100</sup> Tapping into the community of Singaporean artists, writers, and poets based on the east coast of the United States, Koh’s project also organizes monthly readings and offers a two-week residential fellowship to writers from Singapore.

## Discussion of the Literature

Since the 1990s, scholarship about literature from Singapore has flourished with a growing number of critics engaging the field and an increasing range of theories and methodologies applied to literary, visual, and cultural texts. The cultural politics of language, race, and ethnic identity in Singapore and the history of the development of literatures in all four official languages have been treated extensively. Angelia Poon, Philip Holden, and Shirley Geok-lin Lim’s *Writing Singapore: An Historical Anthology of Singapore Literature* provides a historical overview of literature in English; Chinese-language literature is discussed by Wong Yoon Wah’s *Post-Colonial Chinese Literatures in Singapore and Malaysia*; *Modern Malay Literary Culture: A Historical Perspective* by Ungku Maimunah Mohd Tahir examines literature written in Malay; A. Mani’s chapter

## Contemporary Literature from Singapore

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“Fifty Years of Singapore Tamil Literature” in the collection *50 Years of Indian Community* offers a history of Tamil-language writing since national independence.<sup>101</sup>

The landmark 1989 anthology published by the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, *Management of Success: The Moulding of Modern Singapore*, contains essays that are often cited in later scholarship: Nirmala Puroshotam’s “Language and Linguistic Policies,” Shirley Geok-lin Lim’s “The English-Language Writer in Singapore,” Koh Tai Ann’s “Culture and the Arts,” and Edwin Thumboo’s “Self-Images: Contexts for Transformation.” Another important anthology, *Imagining Singapore*, appeared in 1992, with a second edition published in 2004. Although this anthology is not strictly about literature, the essays’ various studies of “the internal landscape of Singapore, how that landscape came about, was conceived and conceptualised” and “the way these imaginative energies are deployed, invested and used in creating the notion of Singapore”<sup>102</sup> have implications for the study of Singaporean literature and literary culture in the 21st century. A similar multidisciplinary anthology, *Reading Culture: Textual Practices in Singapore*, appeared in 1999, with an emphasis on “the disentangling of multiple layers of context, of subtle traces of subtext as well as historical and synchronic intertexts of texts of Singapore culture.”<sup>103</sup> Shirley Geok-lin Lim’s two books, *Nationalism and Literature: English-Language Writing from the Philippines and Singapore* and *Writing Southeast/Asia in English: Against the Grain*, published in 1993 and 1994 respectively, also contain important chapters and essays on literature in English from Singapore examined in a comparative, transnational framework. The late 1990s also saw a series of monographs focused on single authors, most of them writing in English, such as *Responsibility and Commitment: The Poetry of Edwin Thumboo*; *Women in Bondage: The Stories of Catherine Lim*; *Silences May Speak: The Poetry of Lee Tzu Pheng*; *Of Memory and Desires: The Stories of Gopal Baratham*, with *Common Lines and City Spaces: A Critical Anthology on Arthur Yap* appearing in 2014. *Singapore Literature in English: A Critical Reader*, published in 2002, also collects key essays and author interviews published in various venues from the 1980s and 1990s in one volume.

1998 also saw the inauguration of an important critical series with Kirpal Singh as the general editor, *Interlogue: Studies in Singapore Literature*, the most recent volume being published in 2009. The first three volumes contain essays on English-language fiction, poetry, and drama respectively; Volumes 4 and 8 contain interviews with various authors and playwrights such as Philip Jeyaretnam, Suchen Christine Lim, Alvin Pang, Alfian Sa’at, and Ovidia Yu; Volumes 5, 6, and 7 are critical studies of the works of Robert Yeo, Haresh Sharma, and Edwin Thumboo respectively. The two-part essay collection *Sharing Borders: Studies in Contemporary Singaporean-Malaysian Literature* appeared in 2009, with Gwee Li Sui editing the first volume and Mohammad Quayam and Wong Phui Nam editing the second. The following year saw the publication of Rajeev Patke and Philip Holden’s *Routledge Concise History of Southeast Asian Writing in English*, which offers a detailed history of writing in English from Singapore alongside that of Malaysia and the Philippines from the colonial period of the 19th century up till the globalizing turn of the 21st century. A special issue of *SARE: Southeast Asian Review of English* published in 2010/2011 also features several essays on Singaporean writers and literature, such as

## Contemporary Literature from Singapore

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Joanne Leow's study of Boey Kim Cheng's poetry, Sim Wai Chew's analysis of Goh Poh Seng's fiction, and Eddie Tay's discussion of the Singapore Writers Festival in relation to the state's cultural policies and globalizing initiatives. Another 2010 special issue of *Moving Worlds: A Journal of Transcultural Writings* focuses on "Reviewing Singapore" through a multidisciplinary set of essays, including Kenneeth Chan's analysis of the portrayal of foreign domestic workers in Singapore film, Quah Sy Ren's discussion of Kuo Pao Kun's plays from the 1960s and '70s in relation to his political activism, and Neil Murphy's examination of interior spaces and linguistic play in Singaporean poetry. *Singapore Literature and Culture: Current Directions in Local and Global Contexts*, edited by Angelia Poon and Angus Whitehead, highlights "the dynamism, diversity, and accelerating efflorescence of the literary scene in Singapore" and presents it "as a new, rich field for literary, cultural, postcolonial and other scholars' consideration, exploration, and debate,"<sup>104</sup> with essays on fiction, poetry, drama, as well as representations of gender politics, alternative sexualities, and migrant labor.

In general, Singaporean theater has been discussed in several scholarly monographs, and theater in each official language has also been the subject of a handful of critical surveys and histories. In *Theatre and the Politics of Culture in Contemporary Singapore*, William Peterson examines the impact of Singapore's state policies and debates about national identity on theater as a sociocultural practice, the position of raced and gendered bodies on the stage, and the growing internationalization of the performing arts to cater to a global audience. Jacqueline Lo's *Staging Nation: English Language Theatre in Malaysia and Singapore* focuses on four theater English-language texts and productions (two each from Malaysia and Singapore) during the 1980s. Lo's discussion of the Singaporean texts (Kon's *Emily of Emerald Hill* and Kuo's *The Coffin Is Too Big for the Hole*) teases out the multiple and ambivalent narratives surrounding questions of national identity and social policies. Terence Chong's *The Theatre and the State in Singapore: Orthodoxy and Resistance* adopts a sociological and ethnographic approach to study not only the performance of dramatic scripts but also the mindsets and beliefs of theater practitioners and the arts community in Singapore.

Theater in different languages has been studied in monographs such as Quah Sy Ren's *Scenes: A Hundred Years of Singapore Chinese Language Theatre 1913–2013*; Puvenswari Arumugam's *Singapore Malay Theatre: Issues of Cultural Identity*; and S. Varathan, S. Hamid, and Abdul Majeed's *Development of Tamil Drama in Singapore*. Two pioneering theater groups formed in the 1980s, TheatreWorks and The Necessary Stage (TNS), are the subject of Koh Boon Pin's *From Identity to Mondialisation: TheatreWorks 25* and Tan Chong Kee and Tisa Ng's edited collection *Ask Not: The Necessary Stage in Singapore Theatre* respectively. A critical study of TNS playwright Haresh Sharma appears in Volume 6 of *Interlogue: Studies in Singapore Literature*, while those of Robert Yeo are featured in Volume 5 of the same series.

From a cultural studies perspective, the essays collected in the 2004 anthology *Beyond Description: Singapore Space Historicity* "consider the ways in which the architectural comes to have specific meanings, and must thus go beyond descriptions of its empirical

## Contemporary Literature from Singapore

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forms” through “the key intersection . . . between space and history.”<sup>105</sup> Robbie Goh’s monograph, *Contours of Culture: Space and Social Difference in Singapore*, published the following year, also examines spatial and “dialogical contestation in the city [that] can refer to and account for a wide range of cultural manifestations such as architectural form, verbal discourses, performances and representations, as well as the culture of social praxes.”<sup>106</sup> A 2010 special issue of the journal *Mobilities* on “Mobile City Singapore,” edited by Natalie Oswin and Brenda Yeoh, also unpacks “the primacy of place accorded to the project of imaging the city-state as global” and the essays in the issue “critically respond to efforts to harness movement for the purposes of Singapore’s city- and nation-building projects by offering a series of alternative approaches to the politics of mobility.”<sup>107</sup> Jini Kim Watson’s *The New Asian City: Three Dimensional Fictions of Space and Urban Form* places Singapore in a comparative framework with Seoul and Taipei; her chapter on Singapore “explores the way forms of a statist, developmental landscape are taken up in both Singaporean political and poetic discourses,” specifically the poetry of Arthur Yap and Edwin Thumboo.<sup>108</sup>

C. J. Wan-ling Wee’s 2007 book *The Asian Modern: Culture, Capitalist Development, Singapore* uses Singapore as an indicative case study to discuss alternative, Asian conceptualizations of modernization and development and the intersections of capitalism, cultural representation, and literary and performing arts within these configurations. The topic “Singapore at 50: At the Intersections of Neoliberal Globalization and Postcoloniality” is the subject of a 2016 special issue of the journal *Interventions*, edited by Cheryl Narumi Naruse and Weihsin Gui. The essays, covering a range of written narratives and visual texts that “map and interrogate Singapore as an exceptional yet indicative space where national, postcolonial and global discourses intersect in both determinative and discordant ways” and “explore the intersections of Singapore’s postcoloniality . . . and neoliberal globalization.”<sup>109</sup> A different approach to examining Singapore’s modernity appears in the edited collection *Figures of Southeast Asian Modernity*, which contains a section on Singapore about various social personas such as “the Malay Gangster,” “the Woman Activist,” “the People’s Filmmaker,” and “the Schoolteacher.”<sup>110</sup> Essays about race and ethnic and cultural identity appear in the anthology *Race and Multiculturalism in Malaysia and Singapore*. As two of the editors, Daniel Goh and Philip Holden observe, “multiculturalism in Singapore and Malaysia should . . . be read in the historical context of a scripting and re-scripting of colonial and postcolonial cultures,” and the anthology’s essays examine how these “racializations, having formed the field of discursive knowledge and action . . . have to be engaged by social actors who seek political credibility, or simply, meaningful identities for themselves.”<sup>111</sup> Adeline Koh and Yu-Mei Balasingamchow’s edited collection *Women and the Politics of Representation in Southeast Asia: Engendering Discourse in Singapore and Malaysia* offers “an overview of the ways gender and representation come together in the histories and contemporary cultures of both nations” and argues that “the contest over the meaning of ‘acceptable’ masculine and feminine roles for men and women in Singapore and Malaysia is derived in many ways from [a] shared history and continued cultural and economic connections.”<sup>112</sup> Another anthology edited by Audrey Yue and Jun



## Contemporary Literature from Singapore

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Zubillaga-Pow, *Queer Singapore: Illiberal Citizenship and Mediated Cultures*, is “the first lengthy academic analysis on how contemporary queer Singapore has come to light against a backdrop of sexual repression and cultural liberalisation” and “show[s] how LGBT subjectivities and their attendant claims to representation and cultural production are produced in and through a logic of queer complicity” and governmental illiberal pragmatism.<sup>113</sup> Eng-Beng Lim’s *Brown Boys and Rice Queens: Spellbinding Performance in the Asias* has a chapter that analyzes Alfian Sa’at’s *Asian Boys Trilogy* to discuss how the “exotic sexuality” of “the global Asian queer boy” is “differently staged through queer scenarios vis-a-vis the Singapore father-state” that “serve as critiques of discursive formations about Asian (auto) exotic and erotic positions.”<sup>114</sup> Finally, a successor to the multidisciplinary 1989 ISEAS anthology was published in 2010. Edited by Terence Chong, *Management of Success: Singapore Revisited* has a concluding section about Singaporean literature, culture, and civic life, with essays by C. J. Wan-ling Wee on globalization and the commodification of local culture and the arts; Koh Tai Ann on the dominance of English in Singapore; Daniel Goh on the need for a new multiculturalism model to address changes wrought by globalization and immigration; and Lawrence Leong on the imbrication of state policies, economic development, and attitudes toward sex and sexuality.

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**The Select Centre:** Nonprofit organization dedicated to facilitating translation and training translators.

**#BuySingLit:** An industry-led initiative to raise awareness about and encourage the public to purchase works of Singaporean literature.

**Etiquette SG:** A platform for written and multimedia work by and about women.

**Moving Words:** Facebook page for Moving Words 2011, including photographs of the poetry displays in the MRT train stations.

**Singapore Poetry On The Sidewalks (SPOTS):** Sing Lit Station's project to paint excerpts of Singaporean poems in public spaces.

**Sing Lit Station:** Nonprofit organization serving as a portal for all things literary in Singapore.

**Poetry.sg:** A biographical and critical database of Singaporean poets and poetry maintained by Sing Lit Station.

**Singapore Poetry Writing Month (SingPoWriMo):** Facebook group for this annual event taking place in April.

**一首的时间:** Facebook group for the Chinese version of SingPoWriMo.

## Contemporary Literature from Singapore

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**Quarterly Literary Review Singapore:** Singapore's Internet literary journal published since 2001.

**Singapore Poetry:** Website featuring essays, interviews, reviews, and news about Singaporean culture, art, film, and literature.

**Migrant Worker Poetry Competition:** Annual poetry contest for migrant workers.

**Migrant Worker Poetry Competition Singapore:** Facebook group for the above contest that includes some multimedia materials.

**Singapore Writers Festival:** Annual literary festival held in November.

**National Poetry Festival:** Annual poetry festival held in April.

**Singapore Literature Festival in New York City:** Biennial literary festival in New York City.

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- (8.) Select Centre, "Book Launch & Performance: *A Quest for Dance*," Select@Singapore Writers Festival 2015, <http://www.selectcentre.org/translatesg/selectswf15.html>.
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- (11.) Yeng Pway Ngon, *Unrest*, trans. Jeremy Tiang (Singapore: Math Paper Press, 2002); Yeng Pway Ngon, *Art Studio*, trans. Goh Beng Choo and Loh Guan Liang (Singapore: Math Paper Press, 2014); and Yeng Pway Ngon, *Poems Volumes 1-5*, trans. Alvin Pang, Judith Huang, and Goh Beng Choo (Singapore: Ethos Books, 2012).
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