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Gui, W

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Crowded Selves

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“Short Story Collections and Crowded Selves: Madeleine Thien’s *Simple Recipes* and Jeremy Tiang’s *It Never Rains On National Day*”

by Weihsin Gui

Introduction

How does a short story collection create connections between the different stories contained between its covers? And how do these connections represent the knotted relationships between North American and Asian cultures and the people who live and move between them? This essay examines two short story collections, *Simple Recipes* by Madeleine Thien and *It Never Rains On National Day* by Jeremy Tiang. Thien, whose parents came from Malaysia and Hong Kong, is a Canadian writer whose latest novel *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* was shortlisted for the 2016

Man Booker Prize. Tiang is a Singaporean currently living in both the USA and UK who has translated several works of fiction from Chinese into English and whose debut short story collection was a finalist for the 2016 Singapore Literature Prize.

Drawing on formalist short story criticism and Asian American literary studies, this essay proposes that Thien's and Tiang's short story collections imagine an ethical relationship between oneself and others through what Shameem Black, in *Fiction Across Borders*, calls the "crowded self." The crowded self is not an actual state of being but rather "a metaphor for subjectivity, [where] the borders of the self jostle against the edges of others" and "characters attempt to see the world as another does without wholly letting go of their original vision, because this perspective-taking exercise may alter that initial point of view" (47). Certain late-twentieth-century Anglophone novels, Black argues, "work toward representations that seek to avoid reinscribing socially repressive hierarchies of value: their practices are fundamentally *relational*, not solely descriptive. Such an ethical, as opposed to positivist, view of another visualizes that other as having the capacity to engage and alter the self" (46, original emphasis). Black's insights, although derived from contemporary novels, are applicable to short fiction, especially since Thien's and Tiang's stories contain multiple protagonists who find their worldviews altered when they encounter different and sometimes diverging perspectives of other characters. The sequentially arranged stories in these collections create a crowded text whose significance expands beyond a single story or character but does not sacrifice the importance of the individual, because "as the adjective 'crowded' pulls us in the direction of the expanding and unknown multitude, the noun 'self' asserts the importance of a specific individuality" (47).

Such push-and-pull interactions between the multitude and the individual are also crucial to this essay's positioning of Thien and Tiang as Asian/American writers and their short stories as Asian/American narratives (as distinct from the more commonly used term "Asian American"). In *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier*, David Palumbo-Liu explains that the slash in Asian/American functions as the slash "in the construction 'and/or,' where the solidus at once instantiates a choice between two terms, their simultaneous and equal status, and an element of indecidability," implying "both exclusion and inclusion"; thus "'Asian/American' marks *both* the distinction installed between 'Asian' and 'American' *and* a dynamic, unsettled, and inclusive movement" (1, original emphasis). For Laura Hyun Yi Kang, writing in *Compositional Subjects*:

Enfiguring Asian/American Women, “the intervening slash in Asian/American women is a diacritically awkward shorthand for the cultural, economic, and geopolitical pressures of the continental (Asian), the national (American), and the racial-ethnic (Asian American) as they come to bear on an implicitly more solid gendered ontology (women)” (2). The connecting yet also excluding character of the slash or solidus in Asian/American allows Kang to formulate her idea of “*compositional subjects*” who “clench the tension of these three qualifiers: composed, composite, and compositional” (27, original emphasis).

Palumbo-Liu’s and Kang’s glosses of Asian/American as connoting various overlapping, pressuring, and inclusive-cum-exclusive socio-political and cultural forces help us understand Thien’s and Tiang’s short story collections, which highlight or foreground Asian protagonists whose lives overlap with American spaces but do not appear to be substantive bases for claiming an individual or collective Asian or Asian American subjectivity or community. Instead, the Asian characters can be read as an effort to imagine crowded selves: an act of literary imagination putting pressure on incorporative forms of multiculturalism promoted by the neoliberal nation-state, which celebrates racial differences in order to present and package them as cultural identities and objects for enjoyment or consumption. Critical discussions of Canada’s “mosaic” and Singapore’s “Chinese-Malay-Indian-Other (CMIO)” official multicultural policies have been presented elsewhere (for Canada, see Driedger and Perry; for Singapore, see Chua and Goh). What is important here is that in both modes of multiculturalism, race is regarded as a personal characteristic that allows a person to fit into a designated census category or community, which in turn is incorporated into a larger national body. In the crowded selves emerging out of Thien’s and Tiang’s short stories race becomes more than just a personal attribute; it is a point of departure for a relational engagement with others’ perspectives and lived experiences. While state-driven multicultural policies understand race in a linear fashion (both in terms of an individual’s ancestral lineage and in terms of aligning an individual with a category or group and a nation), in *Simple Recipes* and *It Never Rains On National Day* race opens up an imaginative space for thinking about social and political questions that might be neglected in personalized but depoliticized modes of multiculturalism.

In interviews both Thien and Tiang suggest that fiction has a provocative capacity to inscribe composite and overlapping spaces for intellectual dialogue and dissent. While Thien does

not “go to literature in the role of activist” she does regard literature “as a space to open up new ways of thinking, imagining, and existing”; although she doubts that socio-political “mechanisms” and “cycles are going to change” easily, Thien nonetheless “hop[es] that literature from other places [...] is going to keep opening up the space” for meaningful dialogue and difference (Leow). Tiang describes his short story collection as one that “tries to break down the boundaries we draw around ourselves, including those of nationality” (Koh). A translator as well as an author, Tiang traces his linguistic and cultural boundary transgressions to his experience “growing up in Singapore” where he “had to constantly move in and out of English- and Chinese-speaking worlds” that are overlapping; more recently, living overseas in Britain and the USA has made him “good at moving between cultural contexts” (Lee).

We can relate Thien’s and Tiang’s remarks about composite and compositional literary spaces and boundary crossings to Shameem Black’s concept of the crowded self. Their short stories create spaces where characters try to adopt or glimpse others’ perspectives, having their own point of view altered by another’s field of vision without collapsing their identity into the other person’s. At the level of literary form, as we read the collected stories their boundaries becomes porous as we discern topical and thematic connections between them, which often involve overlapping North American and Asian cultural contexts. In Thien’s collection the first and final stories feature characters who are identified as Asian immigrants in Canada; the stories sandwiched in between are thus framed by these Asian immigrant perspectives. Tiang’s stories are threaded with a handful of recurring characters, most of whom appear together at an event in Singapore in the concluding story; they comprise what Maggie Dunn and Ann Morris call a “composite novel” where the whole is more than the sum of its individual pieces.

Both formalist and Asian American short story criticism are consonant with the idea of a crowded self and the short story collection as a crowded text. In Dunn and Morris’s explication of short story cycles as “composite novels,” each short story or “text-piece is a story-space” and these story-spaces not only “intersect” but also “overlap” with one another, “so that a depth of field develops” (117); in this way, “a reader’s perspective must shift from distance to depth, from the individual to the field, and back again, in a dynamic process” (120). This productive tension between distance and depth brings to mind what Valerie Shaw calls the parallel between the modern short story and Impressionist art. For Shaw, “the impact of many modern short stories

resembles the effect of looking at an Impressionist canvas because it leaves a sense of something complete yet unfinished, a sensation which vibrates in the reader's [...] mind" (13). Just as Claude Monet's Impressionist brushwork creates a "natural vibrating effect" and suggests "a three-dimensional plane" through "softer edges and blurred boundaries" (Wolf), the concentrated impressions produced by the short story blend or blur the boundaries between individual selves. Formally, as readers we tack between a single text-piece and larger, overlapping story-spaces as we cross narrative and textually paginated boundaries. As one story ends and another begins we are pulled in the direction of an expanding and unknown literary multitude while yet respecting the importance of a specific, individual story.

The question of multiple characters and perspectives also appears in Rocio G. Davis's *Transcultural Reinventions*, the only book-length study of Asian North American short stories. Davis argues that Asian American and Asian Canadian writers favor the short-story cycle because it "illustrates the general process of multiethnic literature toward plurality, multiplicity, polyphony, and fragmentation" (17). Davis argues that the hybrid character of the short-story cycle (i.e. a cross between a long-form novel and a single piece of short fiction) is suitable for the hybrid identities of Asian North American authors, thus "the ethnic short-story cycle" is "a hybrid within a hybrid" (20). We should be careful about conflating ethnic identity with literary form in this manner, especially since neither Thien nor Tiang nor their stories make discernable claims for hybridity either in terms of identity or genre. But Davis's point about character development and mutable, multiple perspectives in a sequence of short stories accords with our interest in the crowded self: characters develop in "an accumulative rather than a continuous process [...] through apparently random glimpses," which "serves to emphasize the idea of a personal and culture identity as a collective self" (22). The crowded self as metaphor describes both Thien's and Tiang's treatment of their Asian characters as well as the formal logic of their short story collections and the way they unfold.

Madeleine Thien's *Simple Recipes*

Madeleine Thien's *Simple Recipes* begins and ends with two stories about immigrant families. In the

first story, “Simple Recipes,” the narrator is the daughter of Chinese Malaysian parents who immigrated to Canada before she was born. She has an older brother, whose “body covered with dirt” (9) and perpetually “angry face” (10) suggest his unhappiness with both Canada and his family. The narrator-daughter fondly remembers her childhood days cooking with her father but also recalls a deeply traumatic event: at dinner one night her father physically strikes her brother for spitting out his food. The brother calls their father “a fucking asshole chink” (14), probably repeating a racist insult he suffers in school, and is painfully caned by their father with a bamboo pole. After witnessing this caning, the narrator-daughter realizes that “this violence” will “break” their family “apart” and “turn all [her] love” for her father “to shame and grief” (18), more so because she cannot “reconcile” the “simple” affection between herself and her father with his violent punishment of her brother (19).

While this may seem at first glance like a conventional clash between first- and second-generation immigrants, the narrator-daughter seems able to cross this generational boundary and understand how her father thinks and feels: “while I was born into the persistence of the Vancouver rain, my father was born in the wash of a monsoon country” (7); when her parents speak, it is in a language she “can’t understand” but “full of soft vowels, words running together” (11, 12) like the “warm water running over” her “hands” when her father taught her how to wash rice for dinner (19). She understands but does not excuse her father’s actions, and wishes there were some way to change things: “If there were some recourse, I would take it” (19). This initial story is centered around members of an immigrant family from Asia, who, as Eleanor Ty points out in *The Politics of the Visible*, in Canada are considered “visible minorities,” a term “coined by the Canadian government [...] in the 1960s and 1970s to designate those persons, ‘other than aboriginal peoples, who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour,’” and by this label “one is marked as racially different, rendered obvious, vulnerable, non-major” (4-5). Thien acknowledges the discriminatory nature of this racialized visibility but also seems to make a virtue out of necessity: her story also makes visible the thematic and affective threads of regret and longing, often involving a family’s loss and failures, that weave together the other stories in her collection.

The five stories that come after “Simple Recipes” may surprise readers expecting more accounts of Asian immigrants in Canada as the characters in these stories are not ethnically identified or racially marked. This situation might be understood as Thien’s deployment of what

Christopher Fan calls a “postracial aesthetics” that does not disavow race and racism but is “concerned with the ‘outline’ of race” produced by socio-political forces. In other words, although postracial aesthetics appears to eschew problems related to race and racism it strategically and critically invokes them without conforming to what another critic, Yoonmee Chang, calls the “ethnographic imperative” (13). This imperative regards Asian American literature as documentaries of immigrant life and the writers themselves as native informants about their particular communities. The traces of familial distress and regret made visible in “Simple Recipes” also appear in the subsequent stories with non-Asian characters, thereby undermining readerly expectations that *only* Asian immigrants experience such distress and regret as their lives unfold in Canada. After all, one assumption underlying the designation of Asians as visible minorities is that this racially coded visibility is an added obstacle to their assimilation into mainstream Canadian society, which is normatively understood as white and Anglo-French. By beginning her collection with “Simple Recipes” rather than placing it in the middle, Thien establishes this story as a point of departure for the rest of her stories, compelling readers to recognize the feelings of loss and estrangement experienced by the Asian narrator-daughter as a formative rather than a complementary or an additive part of Canada’s society and culture.

We see this in the fourth story, “Dispatch,” which is both narratively and textually in the middle of the collection’s seven stories. The story is unique in its second-person narration, the “you” of the story being a woman who discovers a letter written by her husband to his old friend, Charlotte, confessing his love and willingness to abandon his marriage for her. About a month later, husband and wife learn that Charlotte has died in a car accident travelling from Saskatoon in the middle of Canada to Vancouver in the west. The protagonist-wife then begins imagining Charlotte’s last days on that fateful journey, staging mental conversations with the dead woman while she and her husband try to salvage their marriage. For this unnamed woman, Canada as a “country is a mystery,” and in her imagining of Charlotte’s final road trip she “has to make everything up as” she goes (Thien 80). When her husband finally acknowledges his fear and shame during a late-night walk in a small city park, she finds no satisfaction even though “his private grief” is now “laid out in view of the world”; instead, her “heart is bursting with sadness” because they “are not the only ones affected. There is still the woman who haunts” them (98). Because she is standing on the other side of the park, at the end of the story her “husband comes to look for [her], through the dark and the trees. One perilous crossing after another” (98).

While the pain experienced by the Asian family in “Simple Recipes” is not the same as the suffering of this married couple in “Dispatch,” there are ways in which the former story informs the latter. The “shame and grief” the narrator-daughter feels in the first story reappears in the husband’s grief and shame and the wife’s sadness in “Dispatch” (18); both Charlotte’s fateful road trip and the brother’s brutal beating are powerfully haunting memories. The narrator-daughter crosses generational boundaries to look for a way to explain but not excuse her father’s violent behavior; the husband crosses spatial and visible boundaries (“through the dark and trees”) in the park to look for his wife so they can “walk home together not because it is expected or even because it is right” but “because [they] have come this far together” (98). This may not offer a satisfactory resolution but does express a sense of commiseration. Perilous crossings are made, on different emotional registers and geographical scales, by both sets of characters as they take on others’ points of views and find the borders between themselves and others becoming porous and traversable. The unusual use of second-person narration (“you”) in “Dispatch” also situates the focalization of the story in the space between the protagonist-narrator’s point of view and our readerly perspective.

Thien’s concluding story, “A Map of the City,” bookends the collection with a generational conflict within an immigrant family that recalls “Simple Recipes.” The narrator, Miriam, is the Canadian-born daughter of Chinese Indonesian immigrants. She has an especially conflicted relationship with her father, who leaves her mother and Miriam to return to Indonesia after a string of unsuccessful jobs. As Miriam reflects, “we had failed each other in so many unintended ways and then we had drifted apart. My father seemed lost in the past and I did not trust myself to guide him into the present” (166). Like the family in “Simple Recipes,” there is a language barrier between the narrator and her parents: “at home they spoke Indonesian and Chinese only to each other, never to me,” and even after they moved to Canada, “no other country” besides Indonesia “will ever do” (179, 203). In contrast, the Canadian-born Miriam “loved Vancouver” and “longed to be free of” her parents and their nostalgia (213, 192).

But Miriam’s self-centered wish for freedom becomes crowded as she starts understanding her parents’ predicaments through observations and reflections. She recognizes that Indonesia is “the country that loomed so large in [her father’s] imagination” and “finally drew him back” (198), but his subsequent return to Canada because of political unrest in Indonesia reveals “the tragedy of

place. To always be in the wrong country at the wrong time, the home that needs you less than you need it” (201-2). Miriam also realizes how her mother’s “warm hands on [her] forehead” once offered her “protection” and “security,” but that “was fast disappearing” (193) as her own Canadian life increasingly departs from her mother’s memories of “those humid nights, that once-spoken language” in Indonesia (203). But her father’s attempted suicide near the end of the story brings the three of them back together. And the last impression Miriam has of her family—of “the three of us traversing the empty roads on our Sunday drives” (226), of them “piling into the car, my father losing us in side streets” (180)—illustrates their interconnected subjectivities and perspectives: “There is my mother, the navigator, a map of the city unfurled on her lap. Me in the back seat, watching my father’s eyes as they glance in the rear-view mirror, the way he searches for what might appear” (181).

Like the protagonist-wife in “Dispatch,” for Miriam and her family Canada also appears as a mystery, and they have to map it out collectively during their Sunday drives as a family. The result of this geographical and emotional mapping, however, is not assimilation into a Canadian multicultural mosaic nor a glib universalization that Canadians all share some form of immigrant experience. The ending of the story may appear inconclusive, but as Valerie Shaw reminds us the short story’s impressionistic effect is “a sense of something complete yet unfinished” (13). And within the context of the collection as a whole, “A Map of the City” is a fitting final story because its treatment of places and spaces highlights (to recall Madeleine Thien’s own remarks) the importance of fiction “as a space to open up new ways of thinking, imagining, and existing” (Leow). Read as an Asian/American text, *Simple Recipes* contains stories wherein Asia does not fit nicely or fall neatly into Canada. With “Simple Recipes” and “A Map of the City” beginning and concluding the collection respectively, the collection as a whole places Canada within the framing parentheses of Asian immigrant stories (Asia-Canada-Asia) rather than fitting these stories into a Canadian multicultural mosaic. Asia stands as a “simultaneous and equal” presence and the presence of Asian characters represents “a dynamic, unsettled, and inclusive movement” between Asia and North America that also informs the stories in the middle of the collection (Palumbo-Liu 1). The boundaries between Asia and Canada become porous and blurred as the fictional selves and story-spaces representing them intersect and overlap, even as each one remains a distinct entity.

Jeremy Tiang's *It Never Rains On National Day*

Unlike Thien's stories, which are all set in and around Vancouver, Jeremy Tiang's stories in *It Never Rains On National Day* depict Singaporeans sojourning in North America and Europe or returning to Singapore. But it is productive to think of Tiang as an Asian/American writer, given the growing prominence of fiction by Singaporeans in the USA such as Kirstin Chen's *Soy Sauce for Beginners* and Kevin Kwan's *Crazy Rich Asians*. Like Thien's *Simple Recipes*, Tiang's collection has two stories, "Sophia's Honeymoon" and "Sophia's Party," featuring the same set of characters placed as textual bookends. The concluding story brings together all the characters who appear and occasionally re-appear in the earlier stories: they are gathered for a National Day viewing party at Sophia's apartment in Singapore. Thus, Tiang's collection more closely resembles a composite novel as fictional lives cross the borders between stories and jostle against each other. By setting several of his stories in Europe and North America, Tiang also deflects the ethnographic imperative to act as a native informant about Singapore as his Singaporean characters often find themselves in transnational and cosmopolitan situations.

In the opening story, "Sophia's Honeymoon," we see the Chinese Singaporean Sophia, who is sophisticated enough to know "what shades to wear to set off her honey-coloured skin and straight black hair," on her honeymoon with her white British husband Nicholas in Zurich (Tiang 3). Nicholas, an investment banker, is keener on spending time with his business associates than his new wife. The story is focused on Sophia, who tries to do her duty by "emphasi[zing] how much of a financial hub [Singapore] is" to Nicholas's banking friends, "mindful that Nicholas suspects people of thinking he has relegated himself to a backwater" by marrying Sophia and moving to the island-city (5). But even though Sophia and Nicholas have tied the knot and bought an "adorable new flat [...] with teak furniture imported from Myanmar" (5), Sophia feels "a twinge of loss for the girl" she once was, who was "still capable of losing control" (10). In one final act of rebellion she runs away in a middle of a concert they are attending and gets lost in Zurich's streets. When Nicholas finally locates her, she "leans into him" and feels that "everything will be all right, now that Nicholas has found her" (11).

Sophia and Nicholas are the hosts of “Sophia’s Party” at the end of the collection, but whereas our sympathies are with Sophia in the earlier story, this time the narrative is more centered on Nicholas. We learn that several years have passed since their honeymoon, and at some point Nicholas tried to leave Sophia and go back to Britain because Singapore “suffocates you, if you aren’t careful” (183). Although he eventually reconciles with Sophia and stays in Singapore, Nicholas finds it disconcerting to watch his wife and her Singaporean friends enjoying the National Day parade on TV, which is the occasion for the party. As an outsider Nicholas understands, although he cannot identify with, the parade’s “shameless manipulation of expertly designed proselytising” and the “stirrings of patriotism and belonging” the visual spectacle produces in Singaporean hearts (177, 180). But Nicholas’s muted observations also suggest something more profoundly amiss: “all the Singaporeans in this room have spent a few years abroad, and all have returned, the idea of greener pastures seeming not to occur to them at all” (180). And none of the Singaporeans seems to find anything troubling about the spectacle of state-sponsored multiculturalism on display: as the parade announcer declares, “*so many different cultures coming together seamlessly [...] That sums up everything that’s special about Singapore*” (179, original emphasis).

Nicholas’s unease about such glib multiculturalism in “Sophia’s Party” is compounded by the story that immediately precedes it, entitled “National Day.” In this story, a group of migrant construction workers from South Asia enjoy a day off on Singapore’s National Day, which is an official public holiday. As they take a ferry to one of Singapore’s tiny offshore islands for a picnic, they see the waterfront buildings of Singapore’s central business district and begin “calling out what we’ve made, office buildings, skyscraping banks, the Gardens by the Bay [...] *That’s mine, I built that.* Despite ourselves, we feel a flicker of something at being part of this machine, and having operated the cranes and laid the bricks that brought the great city into being” (153, original emphasis). The story is narrated in the first-person plural, “we,” and this choice of pronoun heightens the divide between the migrant workers who construct Singapore’s physical spaces and the Singaporeans who inhabit those spaces with scant regard for the workers. For these migrant workers, the National Day parade hypnotizing the Singaporeans at Sophia’s party “doesn’t hold much interest for us” because it is a patriotic spectacle “telling some version of a story that doesn’t include us” (160, 161).

Although the South Asian workers and the Singaporeans at Sophia’s apartment appear to be

segregated in separate stories, as readers we are able to see the connections and the disparities between the two groups when we cross the paginated borders and move from one story to the other, from “National Day” to “Sophia’s Party.” We understand the two stories as taking place simultaneously: the migrant workers, glad for a respite from their labors, glimpse the National Day parade from a distance while the Singaporeans, full of patriotic fervor, watch it on live TV. In his discussion of the postcolonial short story in Southeast Asia, Philip Holden observes that although “the short story was frequently part of nationalist projects” and “provided the possibilities of reframing and making use of a useable past through the re-presentation of folk stories” and snapshots of everyday life, “by its very form, the short story appears as a fragment [...] an experience of reading that, unlike the novel, does not have discrete boundaries. In its brief pages governmental rationalities are not so much trained into analogies, but rather split apart” (456). The governmental rationalities invoked by Tiang’s stories are symbolically represented by the quotidian experiences of someone like Sophia, her almost desperate desire to impress Nicholas’s colleagues about Singapore’s status as a global financial hub, and the spectacle of apparently seamless multiculturalism in the National Day parade. But Tiang’s stories also indirectly perform an analysis—a literal splitting apart—of these rationalities at the level of literary form. The intersecting and overlapping stories create a “depth of field” as our readerly “perspective must shift from distance to depth, from the individual to the field, and back again” (Dunn and Morris 120).

In the last two stories, it is through the eyes of characters such as Nicholas and the South Asian construction workers (characters who are living in Singapore but are at some distance from identifying with it) that we gain a deeper understanding of the socio-political forces at work in the country. Nicholas, as a white British man enjoying a privileged social status, articulates his misgivings about Singaporean patriotism as an individual, keeping his thoughts mainly to himself but sharing them with the readers. The South Asian workers offer a more in-depth critique of the National Day festivities through their shared and seemingly innocuous commentary about which key buildings they had a hand in constructing. Their field of vision takes in the entire Singaporean waterfront with its iconic skyscrapers and office buildings, and they are literally a part of this signature view because their blood and sweat has gone into its construction. By virtue of their nationality, race, and class position, the migrant workers are marginalized: a Singaporean man leading a church event nearby considers them “dangerous” and threatens to report their picnic and

campfire to the police as “illegal activity” (Tiang 161). The workers’ perceptions and experiences in “National Day” lay the ground for our encounter with the Singaporeans’ patriotic sentiments and Nicholas’s muted misgivings in “Sophia’s Party,” thus creating a critical depth of field that would be lacking if each story were read on its own.

It must be stressed that Tiang’s stories do not offhandedly deride Singaporeans; rather, their epiphanies about Singapore’s constraints often occur when they have achieved some distance from it. An unnamed teacher who suddenly abandons her job and runs away to Europe and North America confesses to another Singaporean her desire “to escape” from her home country despite her parents’ admonishment that “teaching is an iron rice-bowl” (23); when she reappears in a later story she is happy to be “travelling, just travelling with no objective” (97). Another Singaporean teacher, leading a school trip to Germany, meditates on the appropriateness of certain German compound terms, particularly “Schwellenangst, the fear of crossing thresholds or boundaries” (65). According to his publisher, Tiang originally wanted to title his collection *Schwellenangst* (Ye); the term certainly recalls Tiang’s own comments that his stories attempt “to break down the boundaries we draw around ourselves” (Koh). Tiang’s stories illustrate how boundaries can protect and demarcate our lives but also restrict and delimit our choices. Rather than condemning Singapore and assimilating into Europe or North America, Tiang’s Singaporean characters cross geographical and social boundaries in order to figure out other ways of recognizing and understanding their home country. The stories attempt other ways of enfiguring Singapore through a set of Singaporean characters who are compositional subjects rather than using state-sponsored spectacles and expertly designed proselytizing. These characters are often fearful but willing to step across boundaries and adopt someone else’s perspective without necessarily discarding their own. The stories reveal intersections of fictional lives and socio-political faultlines that, on the one hand, affirm Singapore’s economic achievements, but, on the other hand, highlight the social and human cost of such achievements unremarked in celebratory narratives of seamless multiculturalism and sentimental patriotism.

Conclusion

In *The Lonely Voice*, Irish writer Frank O'Connor famously characterizes the short story as a genre that is “remote from the community—romantic, individualistic, and intransigent” (21) and by these virtues particularly suited to representing a “submerged population group” whose members are “figures wandering about the fringes of society” (18, 19). In a similar vein, Maggie Awadalla and Paul March-Russell, the editors of *The Postcolonial Short Story*, argue that the short story emerges in postcolonial societies “as an expressive medium for themes of fragmentation, displacement, diaspora and identity” (3). These observations about the genre’s marginality and fragmentation may hold true for short stories read singly, but they might not be helpful when we encounter a short story collection, a set of discrete narratives patently not composed as a novel yet having thematic and topical connections reaching across textual boundaries. Both Thien and Tiang published their stories in *Simple Recipes* and *It Never Rains On National Day* as individual pieces in various venues, but their decision to assemble these stories together (story-collection rather than story-telling) is more than a simple act of collation. To return to their own remarks, we might say, after Thien, that story-collection transforms remote and individualistic fragments from other places into a broader story-space opening up new ways of thinking, imagining, and existing; following Tiang, we might observe how the boundaries drawn around each story are broken down and crossed over as both characters and readers traverse the collection’s composite text.

Rather than lonely voices or fragmented identities, and in contrast to the linear logic of official multiculturalism, the push-and-pull interactions in *Simple Recipes* and *It Never Rains On National Day* create depth-of-field effects through characters whose perspectives become crowded and relational. Instead of being fringe wanderers, Thien’s and Tiang’s characters “attempt to see the world as another does without wholly letting go of their own original vision, because this perspective-taking exercise may alter that initial point of view” (Black 47). Even if the characters themselves do not undertake such perspectival shifts, as readers our own field of vision is deepened and extended as the stories unfold. Like an Impressionist painting that offers the viewer a sense of something complete but unfinished, these stories in collected form depict a profound sense of loss and longing or lurking discontent modulated across different fictional lives and story spaces without completely resolving the contradictions within them.

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Weihsin Gui is Associate Professor of English and a member of the Southeast Asian Studies Program at the University of California-Riverside. He is the author of *National Consciousness and Literary Cosmopolitics: Postcolonial Literature in a Global Moment* (2013), editor of an essay collection on the Singaporean painter and poet Arthur Yap entitled *Common Lines and City Spaces* (2014), and co-editor (with Cheryl Naruse) of a 2016 special issue of the journal *Interventions* on neoliberalism, globalization, and Singaporean literature and culture. He is also the current section contributor for Southeast Asia for the *Year's Work in English Studies*.

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