

EDITORIAL: “Connectedness”

This year, 2020, marks the fortieth anniversary of *SARE*'s inception as a journal. Plans for a celebratory issue were quickly, and resolutely, dispelled by extraordinary events. It was as if the whole of humanity had gone to war, and at one point it looked as if it was going to be a war with no end, and perhaps in a sense it will be one even if we emerge as survivors of the current coronacrisis. Though the call for submissions and the shortlisting and selection of critical essays and creative content took place before the outbreak of the global pandemic, the evaluation, writing, revisions and the preparation of our July volume were carried out at a time when restricted movement orders and national lockdowns were rewriting the scripts of daily life and constructing new ways of living in more than 200 countries. The advantage of being a digital-only journal is that, albeit being delayed, distracted, and deeply affected by the human tragedy that was rapidly unfolding across the globe, work could continue to be done from home even though offices and libraries were out of bounds. The world of 2020 is not the same as that of 1980. Despite the border controls in a time of Covid-19, our July issue has been able to bring together contributors from East and West Malaysia, Singapore, Bangladesh, Japan, Australia, the USA, Canada, Brunei, France, and the UK. This connectedness would not have been possible if not for the circulatory network of the internet.

Indeed, now more than ever we are reminded that connectedness matters. The public threat posed by Covid-19 has made a new norm out of “social distancing”, but social distancing measures as a response to emergency situations have quickly been interpreted as “social othering” with the stigmatizing, first of ethnic Chinese and Asian populations and then of migrant workers. In Malaysia and especially in Singapore, the former of which quickly superseded the latter as a “success story” in its management and containment of the crisis, Covid-19 has not only uncovered but also reproduced glaring class and economic inequalities. In societies that are deeply racialized, polarizing vitriol about a “Chinese virus” persists, although it is clear that viruses respect neither

boundaries nor nationalities and that the epicentre of the virus has shifted from the East to the West. We are living in particularly distressing times.

Something of this unprecedented, “unreal” and dystopian situation is echoed in our special volume on speculative fiction. In planning their issue, the guest editors, aware of the current robustness of the genre and its proliferating sub-genres, were interested to find out if there were any specifically Asian iterations of speculative fiction. Turning away from the problems of origins and classifications, their resulting collection dwells on the “what if” worlds conjured by speculative writing across Asia. The construction of a distinctively “Asian” form of speculative fiction is one of course that will continue to be under constant pressure in the same way that making sense of what is “Asian” is an ongoing process. This Special Issue, then, cannot, and indeed does not, represent Asia in any simplistic way. All that the essays and stories that appear in the collection can do is convey a sense of the current discussion around the following questions. What kinds of nonrealist narrative strategies, devices, settings and forms of storytelling do speculative cultural forms enlist to conjure Asian concerns, emphases and realities? What deeper social need do they signify? I wish to thank Susan Philip and Surinderpal Kaur for serving as joint Guest Editors for this Special Issue.

The general section opens with an essay on the short story in Myanmar (formerly Burma) as a form of dissidence toward autocratic power structures. In his reading of “Clean, Clear Water” by acclaimed Myanmar writer, U Win Pe, Jamie Scott argues that the story makes ironic use of Buddhist tropes and topoi to satirize Myanmar’s authoritarian regimes and their claim to proper governance. As one of *SARE*’s primary goals is to bring to an international audience scholarship on literary writings and other cultural texts from Asia, Scott’s examination of the culture, history and literature of Myanmar immeasurably aids us in meeting this objective. So much of Myanmar has even been left out of the Southeast Asian story.

The second essay explores aspects of “self-Orientalization” in Mayao Hiyazaki’s historical film, *The Wind Rises*. Travis Merchant-Knudsen utilizes the representational medium of anime to explore the tensions and contradictions between Japan’s brutal imperial past and the film’s

eulogizing of the individual's dedication to his craft, even if that craft entailed the designing of the fighter plane used by Japan in Pearl Harbour and other World War II assaults. We are very pleased that Merchant-Knudsen's article not only looks at aspects of Miyazaki's work that have been under-researched but that it also enriches our journal through its analysis of a cultural text of and from East Asia, an area that still needs greater representation in *SARE*.

Elsewhere in this issue, poetry reminds us that infinite universes and forests of the imagination are not the preserve of speculative fiction. We are privileged to present this space to John Thieme, whose poems, inspired by the raw and rambunctious energy of Caribbean oral storytelling, enthrall us with the fantastical tales spun by Papa Legba and those that are told of Dougl, denizens of Massiah's world and equally cavernous barbershop. We are also delighted to feature Arin Fong's short story on Eurasian identity, Catholicism, repressed sexuality and the forgotten mother tongue of Kristang that pivots on magical realism to uncover the silenced lives and shared intimacy between a woman and her dying grandmother.

We also feature two interviews with award-winning writers Beth Yahp and Heidi Shamsuddin conducted by Show Ying Xin and Sharifah Aishah Osman, respectively. The conversational exchanges afford us a close critical look into the writers' minds and writerly lives, as well as their lives outside of fiction.

Book reviews are also an important component of the journal, which should be approached, by reviewers and readers alike, with the seriousness it deserves. They provide a forum where research and creative writing are evaluated, contexts elucidated, ideas praised or critiqued, and trends identified. This issue brings to our readership several important recent publications in Asian literary and cultural studies. Tan Sooi Beng's volume on Peranakan cultures is assessed for us by David Neo; Leonard Jeyam evaluates Asian diaspora poetry – and its meditations on home and belonging in disparate locations – anthologized by Boey Kim Cheng, Arin Fong (whose short story we are carrying in this issue) and Justin Chia; Carol Leon looks at a compilation of poetry by the late K.S. Maniam that was composed over a lifetime of writing, from 1964 to 2019; Looi Siew Teip appraises Beth Yahp's memoir and her collection of short stories; and Nicholas Pagan

considers for us Sze-Wei Ang's exploration of racial language in selected Asian American and Malaysian fiction within the context of the homogenizing culture of globalization and the power of the nation-state.

Bernard Wilson brings our July issue to a close with his obituary on K.S. Maniam. Maniam, who wrote short stories, novels, plays, and poems, some of which were published in *SARE*, died in February this year after a short illness. Wilson's tribute celebrates Maniam's life and his writings, traversing all those aspects about his imaginative vision that contributed so decisively to the telling of the Malaysian story.

Before bringing this editorial to an end, I wish to express my appreciation to our peer reviewers for the time and effort that went into their assessment of manuscripts, especially considering the disruptions to their schedule caused by the pandemic. *SARE* relies on their goodwill and generosity, as well as their expertise, for its name and reputation. I also warmly thank Susan and Renukha for their help in getting this issue ready for publication.

As we speculate on the future to come in our special "birthday" issue, and as we brace ourselves to meet the daunting challenges of the weeks, and potentially months, ahead, let us take a moment to consider the particularly alienating and disproportionate effects of social isolation on marginalized and vulnerable communities. Let us also acknowledge our shared responsibility to each other. *We are in this together*. Physical distancing and social othering are not the same thing.

We wish you resilience, and connectedness.

Sharmani Patricia Gabriel