

EDITORIAL: Humanities Matters

At the time of writing this editorial, the world is still in a state of disruption. The discovery of a new variant of the coronavirus has thrown us into further disarray. Health officials have warned that if we underestimate the new variant we do so at our peril, for even if Omicron does cause less severe disease, the sheer number of cases could once again overwhelm unprepared health systems.

The pandemic is not the only phenomenon that has disrupted and destabilised our world. Ecological devastation and climate change, the waning of democracy and its institutions, the rise of neoliberal capitalism and its focus on profit rather than resilience and sustainability, escalating religious conflicts, the refugee crisis, ethnocentric nationalism, xenophobia and racism, and the continuing oppression of minority groups signal a world in deep crisis.

In this time of fundamental disruption and discrimination—of crisis and contagion, transmissions and virality—of what worth is the humanities? With everybody focused on the need for medical expertise and scientific intervention and in a time that stresses the importance of economics and the other social sciences, has the humanities been rendered irrelevant and obsolete?

Indeed, the humanities has itself entered a profound state of crisis with higher education facing threats from the utilitarian and instrumentalist logic of the neoliberal market. Reducing the study of literature to the marketable skills it imparts (such as writing, for example) shortchanges both the student of literature and literature's value as a humanities discipline. How to keep alive the role played by the humanities in traditional higher education systems is the question that confronts us today. With its dependence on language and text, the humanities is underpinned by the imperative to examine cultural and political discourse and meaning-making systems, and by doing so to help us understand society's cultural processes and modes of social change and transformation. Now, more than ever, we need the humanities to articulate public discourse and attention away from the language of business and finance and toward ethical, critical, creative, and contemplative thinking. Now, more than ever, we need to honour the fundamental thinking points of the humanities — how to critique systems of inequality, how to live with and identify empathetically with otherness, including our “animal others”, and how to imagine a multispecies world where we can build coalitions and solidarities with others so that we can together fight the imperatives of neoliberal global capital and imperial power.

I am delighted that many of these humanities imperatives, including cultural connections and ecocritical considerations, are the focus of this issue of *SARE*. Our Special Issue on Transpacific American literature examines the specific ways in which the United States has emerged as a global superpower in the Pacific and how its economic and military expansions have been negotiated, appropriated, and resisted by the people of the region. It was a pleasure to work on this special issue with my co-editor, Yuan Shu, an Associate Professor of English and Director of the Asian Studies Program at Texas Tech University, USA. The many conversations between us, with me in Kuala Lumpur and Yuan in Lubbock, as we planned for this special issue and worked together to bring it to fruition add a nicely personal touch to the special issue's call for the exploration of transpacific connections and solidarities.

In the general section, in an important article exploring questions of “postcritique” and the production of scholarship on Malaysian literature in English, David Lim argues that readings of Malaysian texts are largely based on the methodology of critique, and that postcritique can supplement the field with other forms of reading and interpretative practices. In attempting to find new forms of interpretation that go beyond critique, postcritique as a methodology has important implications vis-à-vis the broader role and purpose of the humanities. The argument made by proponents of postcritique is that interpretative practices based on ideological interrogation and critical theory, for example, run the danger of yielding overfamiliar readings of texts, which might be better served by emphasising affect and other aesthetic dimensions of the reader's experience. However, insofar as “postcritical” does not equate with “uncritical,” postcritique need not be read as a repudiation of critique and therefore need not be seen as antithetical to the humanities project.

Also on Malaysian literature, and serving as a response, albeit unintentional, to Lim's critique, the paper by Agnes Yeow offers a fresh reading of the fiction of K.S. Maniam by foregrounding its impulse to “animalise” the diasporic individual's struggle for national belonging. By drawing attention to the “presence” (in a cultural sense) of other marginalised species in Maniam's texts, Yeow argues that migrant and animal lives are closely interlinked. More than metaphor and metonymy, the animals in Maniam's fiction are profoundly implicated in diasporic human suffering. By approaching animality structurally, in terms of social, cultural, legal, and linguistic practices, and not as an essentialist idea, Yeow reformulates the question of the ethical status of animals as a political question and as a matter of injustice.

In another article, Debasree Ghosh turns to the literature of the Indian subcontinent to explore the previously unarticulated relationship between India-born British novelist, Rudyard Kipling, and Indian novelist of British

ancestry, Ruskin Bond. In doing so, she implicitly traces the evolution of “Anglo-Indian” as a term and identity category in the Indian context.

In our interview section, National Laureate Muhammad Haji Salleh converses with Sharifah Aishah Osman about his life and work as a poet, translator, literary critic, and scholar. He also talks about the impact of the routes of his travels on his poetic and aesthetic choices, the current state of literary studies in Malaysia, his writing projects (including his latest work, *Seeking Hang Tuah*), and his decision to write poetry in Malay even though his early formation as a poet was primarily shaped by the transethnic underpinnings of the English language in Malaysia. The conversational exchanges afford us a close look into the mind and preoccupations of a distinguished figure in Malaysian letters.

We also feature a wonderfully comic short story by Ciara Mandulee Mendis who invites the reader into the world of her first-person narrator, a bumbling charlatan who is caught up in a larger and more ludicrous situation of incompetence and corruption all around him. Mendis delineates her narrator and his circumstances with such warmth and tenderness and with such careful attention to voice and atmosphere that her character’s social context and his place and predicament in it become all too palpable.

SARE also provides a forum for book reviews—of both creative writing and literary and cultural criticism—as an integral part of the journal’s work and knowledge dissemination process. I am delighted that this section of the journal has expanded with the years and that we are in this issue able to evaluate for our readers several important new publications in the field. *Though I Get Home*, YZ Chin’s debut collection of short stories, set in Malaysia, and also part of Asian American literature based on the politics of cultural production is reviewed for us by Stephanie Tan; Christian Benitez shines his own poetic light on his reading of Marlon Hacla’s book-length poem, *Melismas*, translated from the original Filipino; Murari Prasad assesses for us Mohammad Quayum’s latest edited volume on Tagore’s ideas about nationalism and cosmopolitanism; Lillian Tong’s anthology of Penang Straits Chinese memoirs and short stories documenting a resplendent—and in parts hidden—world gone by is examined for us by David Neo; Looi Siew Teip draws our attention to the difficulty of providing a proper assessment of Suon Sorin’s sole published work of fiction, *A New Sun Rises Over the Old Land*, “one of the first Cambodian novels to appear in English translation,” without a proper contextualization of its place in modern Khmer literature; Jason Lee mines his own trajectory of diaspora and the crossing of multiple boundaries to consider for us Malaysia-born, UK-based Cynthia Miller’s stylistically innovative debut poetry collection, *Honorifics*; and Keith Jardim brings his own writerly life and imagination to bear on his review of Volumes One and Two of *A Tapestry of Colours*, Anitha Pillai’s wondrously ambitious compilation of stories from Southeast, South, and East Asia.

As always, I am very grateful to our peer reviewers for the key role they play in advancing scholarship and contributing to the quality of the journal. I thank them for so generously lending their time and expertise to this important endeavour. I also wish to thank our editorial and advisory board members for their support and affirmation of the *SARE* project. My warm thanks are also owing to Susan Philip and Regina Yoong for sharing with me the many responsibilities of running the journal.

In a time of divisive rhetoric and disruption, *SARE* believes that literature can provide a powerful and enriching counterpoint by emphasising the capacity to see the world from other vantage points and by shoring up greater understanding through an ethics of care and radical empathy, testimony, historical awareness, and creativity.

Now, more than ever, we are reminded that the humanities matters.

Sharmani Patricia Gabriel