

LITTLE QUEER DOT II: AN EXPLORATION OF SINGAPOREAN AND ASIAN-AMERICAN RACE
AND GENDER POLITICS

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My first Laidlaw summer in 2018 focused on researching the LGBT+ theatre scene in Singapore and its interaction with the government. I mainly did secondary research where I looked at queer theory and the illiberal pragmatism framework of the government, and applied these theories to selected plays that are influential in the theatre scene, and concluded that such plays are overly-dramatic and exaggerated to reflect the performativity of the Singaporean government in their superficial acceptance and promotion of queer theatre. This year, I extended my research on the theatre scene to that of literature and theatre in the Asian-American community in the East Coast of the USA, specifically Washington and New York City. I travelled to Washington to attend the Asian-American Literature Festival, and to New York City to meet up with a few Singaporean playwrights that are currently living and working in the city. In doing so, I was hoping to gain insight into the differences, similarities, and complexities between an Asian-American identity, a queer Asian-American identity, and a Singaporean identity that has been influenced by living in a different culture, or as Gaudy Boy founded Jee Leong Koh puts it, Singaporeans who are “doubly displaced”, and how these identities affect their works and portray intersections of race, gender, and identity that differ from the themes found in works I analysed last summer. This essay will firstly detail the key points of the ethnographic study that I conducted of the Asian-Literature Festival. Secondly, this essay will apply conclusions gained from the Literature Festival onto Singaporean politics. Thirdly, this essay will talk about Marcus Yi, a Singaporean playwright and immigration lawyer, and his works, and attempt to compare and contrast them to the plays analysed for last year’s Laidlaw project. Lastly, this essay will conclude with my critical reflections on my research project.

I attended the 2019 Asian American Literature Festival, organized by the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center in Washington, DC, and attempted to conduct an ethnographic study of the festival. The festival spans across three days, inviting academics, publishers, students, and the general public to participate in talks, workshops, and book fairs while contributing to this community-led cooperative space for sharing and developing Asian American literature. The theme for this year is “Care + Caregiving”, featuring a range of talks and workshops such as Arthur Sze’s and Monique Truong’s ‘Intimate Lectures’ of their favourite Asian American literature, the lectures on ‘Secret Histories: Remembering Lost Voices’, which focused on less well-known poets that influenced and shaped the artistic community, and the workshop on ‘(Re) Centering Sensitivity’, which introduced the approach of creative writing as a medium to navigate issues of trauma, sensitivity, autonomy, and anti-racist education. The bulk of the festival was held in Eaton DC, which is a hotel that seeks to provide

interdisciplinary experiences to its guests, offering creative spaces, such as a literary lounge that stocks works by authors of colour and provides educational videos on historically significant events, music recording studios, and radio stations, and thus served as an apt location for such a social and intersectional event. Two of Eaton DC's shareholders also came to Gaudy Boy's booth, the Singaporean-American publishing firm that I was shadowing on Day 3, and explained the hotel's cultural ambitions to us – that the hotel's vast resources are being funnelled into important causes, organisations, and artists to provide a space aiding activism and education. In this section, I will document the notable events that I have participated in and my experiences during the festival, and relate what I have learnt to the issues that are significant to Asian Americans in the US and how such observations can be applied to the political climate in Singapore as well.

One of the first talks I attended was a talk on 'White Fragility and the Lyric', mediated by Dorothy Wang and Prageeta Sharma. The talk was structured around an analysis of Jane Shore's poem 'Possession' (2005). In July 2003, Indian immigrant and prize-winning poet Reetika Vazirani murdered her son and committed suicide in Jane Shore's home in Vermont, and 'Possession' was about the trauma that Jane Shore experienced having such a tragic event happen at her home. Dorothy Wang stated that the reception of the poem was split into two broad camps: the white community sympathised with Jane Shore – with the tragedy that happened in her personal home, with the trauma that must come when a safe space is violently violated, and with the difficulty of returning to normal life post-tragedy; and the Asian community sympathising with Reetika Vazirani – with her depression that was so evident yet so neglected, with her helplessness that forced her to commit such a direct, and with the Asian body being racialised to express the pain of the white persona. Through a racial lens (which is the automatic lens that myself and most people in the room analysed the poem through), the exoticification and Othering of Vazirani was clear. The enumeration of "black hair", "yoga mat", "spices", "herbal teas" construct Vazirani's body as Other and different, and such an exotic body, despite it being a literal corpse, is sexualised in "her dress is pressed up on my husband's pants", and looked at in disgust in the description of the kitchen holding the smells of her clothes, the white soap being caked with black hair, and the clearance and purification of the house through throwing away of her things. In the same vein, there is an appropriation of Vazirani's body and culture in the way that the persona retains desirable elements of Vazirani's, such as her gold ring and yoga, presenting the paradox that comes with white colonisation – that is, the Asian body is always commodified, Orientalised, and Othered, yet the same things that they are being Othered for are the same

things that has been re-appropriated and re-packaged as interesting and desirable, but only on a white body and in a white space.

I also helped out Gaudy Boy, a small publishing firm based in New York City that publishes Asian voices, to inform and promote the firm and their texts. Gaudy Boy is founded by Jee Leong Koh, a Singaporean poet and author that lives and works in New York City. Speaking to the Editor-in-Chief, Kimberley Lim, I expressed my highlights of the past few days, such as the Intimate Lectures series that highlighted underappreciated poets and artists of colour like Shreela Ray and Mark Aguhar, and the Queer Ghost Stories that featured Afro-Caribbean, Latinx, and South Asian experiences that I am unfamiliar with. As Kimberley was also Singaporean, most of our time was spent relating the Asian-American political climate to that of Singapore, and we found similarities in Singapore's political climate with the struggles that Asian-Americans face. For example, the recent Preetipls and E-pay brownface controversy saw the media and politicians echoing and privileging the majority Chinese race in Singapore over the needs of the Malay minority. Preetipls is a Singaporean rapper/ Youtuber who responded to an advertisement by E-pay, which portrayed a Singaporean-Chinese actor Dennis Chew as four different races. Preetipls responded by rapping about racial stereotypes faced by Indian and minority groups in Singapore and attacks the Chinese majority. The controversy escalated as the police started investigating Preetipls's video for offensive content, yet the company that created the advertisement that portrayed a Chinese man as a Malay woman and an Indian man is unscathed¹. Furthermore, the law and home affairs minister, K. Shanmugam, issued a condemnation of the rap video, stating that it was an attempt to rile up minority groups against the majority Chinese community, and thus portrays the state's privileging of Chinese desires over handling this racist act against the minority².

My experiences in Wang and Sharma's talk/ discussion and interacting with different publishers, authors, and scholars at the Gaudy Boy booth led me to see similarities between racial tensions in Singapore between and Chinese majority and Malay and Indian minorities and the racial tensions between Asian-Americans and white Americans in the sphere of the media and literature. Although white Americans are not to be compared with

¹ Channel News Asia, 'Police investigating Preetipls' video on controversial E-pay ad for offensive content', *CNA*, (2019), < <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/preetipls-brown-face-ad-dennis-chew-police-investigation-11765362>>.

² Bhuvan Jaipragas, 'Singapore's "brownface" saga sparks debate on race as Preetipls rap video condemned', *South China Morning Post*, (2019), < <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/society/article/3020844/singapores-brownface-saga-sparks-debate-race>>.

the Chinese majority in Singapore hierarchically, as white people in Singapore still occupy the highest social sphere in Singapore, the racial tensions of the two countries still draw parallels. The discussion at Wang and Sharma's talk brought up issues of publications and the media reproducing white voices over minority ones. A central point of discussion was the essay written by poet Bob Hicok called 'The Promise of American Poetry', which argued that his career as a well-known white poet is being threatened by the priority of minority voices and implied that poets and authors of colour such as Ocean Vuong and Layli Long Soldier are successful mainly because they are minorities³. Poet and scholar Timothy Yu was a driving force in this discussion, and spoke about Hicok placing his needs and feelings as a privileged white poet at the centre of the conversation while his career continues to be successful, such as his tenth collection of poetry being published by a prestigious publishing firm⁴. At the Gaudy Boy booth, I spoke to Timothy Yu and discussed more about academia and the media publishing essays such as Hicok's and reinforcing systemic oppression that prioritises retaining white privilege and framing the success of people of colour as threats to that privilege. This is also reinforced by the supposed neutrality of poetry, which is made un-neutral by the politics surrounding who gets published and on which platforms. For example, Jane Shore's 'Possession' was published by *The New York Times*, and yet the subject of her poem, whom she is profiting off of and who is also another poet, remains unseen by *The Times*. Similarly, in Singapore, opinions that favour the view that Preetipls' video was racist towards the Chinese are more published and echoed by publications such Singapore's national newspaper *The Straits Times*, but minority voices that express the racism they felt from the offensive advertisement are relegated to social media websites like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram.

To compare playwriting as a Singaporean in New York and that of the plays I analysed last summer, I organised semi-formal interviews with Marcus Yi and Damon Chua, two authors/ playwrights that are in the Gaudy Boy's community. Damon Chua unfortunately cancelled the interview at the last minute, so I only conducted an interview with Marcus Yi, who is a 35-year-old playwright, musician, and immigration lawyer residing in New York City for eight years and counting. He left Singapore when he was 22, and attended law school, music school, and theatre school in the US. As an immigration lawyer, his plays deal with issues of identity struggles,

³ Bob Hicok, 'The Promise of American Poetry', *UTNE Reader*, Summer (2019), < <https://www.utne.com/arts/new-american-poetry-zm0z19uzhoe>>.

⁴ Timothy Yu's article responding to Hicok's essay can be found here: Timothy Yu, 'The Case of the "Disappearing" Poet', *The New Republic*, (2019), <<https://newrepublic.com/article/154694/case-disappearing-poet>>.

immigration, and immigration reform. Hence, his works are completely different from those that I looked at last summer – the plays that I analysed last summer largely portrayed the Singaporean Chinese majority, and commented on the Singaporean government’s lack of support and acceptance, whereas Marcus Yi’s plays displace the Singaporean to a foreign country and navigates issues of identity, race, and immigration. For example, in the 2014 Singapore literary festival, he wrote a comedy musical about Singapore sinking to the bottom of the ocean and everyone died except for Joseph Schooling because he is a national swimmer, and Malaysia was elated, which is a nod towards cultural tensions between Singapore and Malaysia. In the second half of the musical, he portrayed Singaporeans in different parts of the world that represented different parts of Singapore, such as those who want to escape their government bonds, those who were pro-People’s Action Party (the ruling political party in Singapore), and those who had no sense of belonging post-sinking. He stressed the importance of amplifying immigrant stories in this political climate and in connecting the huge divide between Americans and immigrants in stereotyping and understanding immigrants. Writing and performing plays are ways that can amplify these voices, and his workshop PlayLab invites people to write a short ten-minute play surrounding a prompt. However, showcasing immigrant voices also pose a challenge as a lot of the immigrants that he helps are unable to converse in English.

I then interviewed Marcus Yi on his own immigration story that he expressed through a play, *The Procedure*. *The Procedure* is a play with autobiographical elements, and is about a man, working as a lawyer and married to a loving husband, trying to become a US citizen. His path to citizenship is obstructed when he learns that it requires a microchip implant in his eye, and thus brings the central conflict towards morals versus practicality: there is a cost to moving to a different country, and are you willing and able to pay that emotional cost? *The Procedure* is Marcus Yi’s first play in the US featuring Singaporean characters, which is a luxury that he has earned after years of playwriting and performing in the US and creating a platform to be able to delve into more “niche” areas. We spoke about the benefits and challenges of creating and putting up this play and other similar plays and musicals. Comparing the theatre climate to that of Singapore, Marcus confirmed that the freedom in the US allows him to experiment with themes and plots, where he can “tell crazy stories”, but such stories are restricted in Singapore. However, the challenges seem to outshine the pros of writing about the unique situation of immigration mixed with the nuanced and difficult to understand Singaporean identity. In Singapore, there is a shared understanding of the Singlish language, tone, and slang, as well as cultural practices and traditions, and

hence the nuances of his play's dialogue would be more easily understood by a Singaporean audience. Although, the same could be said about writing a story about an Asian-American Singaporean – Yi's last big musical was about that, but he was unable to sell it to the Singapore Repertory Theatre, and there is limited resources and time to put up a musical like that in Singapore. Yi also mentioned that as Singapore is more exposed to world culture and hence different playwriting styles, he can be more experimental and diverse in his storytelling palette. There is also an added challenge of the types of audiences that he can write for in the US. Yi retains a self-awareness that not many people would want to watch it, and stated that there has to be a certain level of self-censorship as the play cannot be "too crazy or too expensive" in order to appeal to a wider audience amidst the already culturally-specific themes and characters. In Broadway, the audience is generally mid-western people who are not looking for edgy plays or for their minds to be expanded, and they just want to be entertained. Hence, a play like *The Procedure* would not sell well.

On reflecting on my research, I have realised that my research has evolved and diverted from the original research plan and topic. I originally had a narrower point of focus, which was to look at Singaporean playwrights in New York City writing about LGBT+ issues and how their environment has affected the themes and nuances of their playwriting, and then compare that to the plays that I looked at last year. However, due to the challenges of such a niche scope of research, I was unable to find many Singaporean playwrights in NYC, and the ones that I found were either unwilling to speak to me or had stopped writing plays. Therefore, my research lacked the depth and nuance that I wanted. However, attending the Asian-American Literature Festival has expanded my experiences and hence research scope to include Asian-American artists and authors. Comparing them to that of Singapore, Asian-American poets, playwrights, and authors are able to write about trans and non-binary experiences more freely, while Singapore artists who wish to do that are heavily censored, such as Jee Leong Koh's, the founder of Gaudy Boy, poem "April 13, Wednesday", which starts with the line "Come on, straight boy, and make gay love with me", and hence is banned in Singapore. Being exposed to works and experiences like that at the Asian-American Literature Festival was the tip of the iceberg, and I would like to have been able to read more works by such authors and go further in-depth with comparing such works to the ones in Singapore. Over the summer, I have also noticed a development in the Singaporean literary and theatrical scene, whereby it is becoming more progressive and showcases more traditionally taboo topics. For example, *Pretty Butch* was performed as a staged reading at *Late Night Texting*, a series of plays and

programmes held at Centre 42 during the Singapore Night Festival. It is about five non-binary characters grappling with their identity in a largely gender binary world and explores the complexities of being neither “manly” nor “womanly”. Similarly, in the US, what I have gathered was that the climate is changing, and poets and writers of colour are being given credit where credit’s due, and more people are listening to the importance of diversity and representation. Thus, a positive trend in becoming more open is seen, and I have hope for more groups of people being represented in theatre, academia, and the media.

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