

SingLit: To Singlish or not to Singlish is just a, not the, question

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Several recent factors, including the global success of Singaporean novelists like Amanda Lee Koe, Balli Kaur Jaswal and Sharlene Teo, as well as my forthcoming climate-crisis novel, have me thinking again about how much we writers write as global versus national citizens.

In my native Canada, few writers seem as Canadian as Margaret Atwood, yet what aspects of *The Testaments*, the long-awaited sequel to her novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, are Canadian? Around the world, when women dress up in the now iconic red-and-white handmaids' costumes outside of legislatures, they do so to protest about gender inequity, not to invoke maple syrup, hockey or official bilingualism.

As if to pressure-test these global versus national concerns, one of the panels I'm on at the ongoing Singapore Writers Festival (SWF) is a joint reading of Singaporean and Canadian writers. The SWF event description begins, "We're multicultural, we're multilingual, we have red and white flags and

great writers."

Like so much in writing, though, when a country claims its writers, how much of that citizenship is real and how much of it is fiction? Do Singaporean writers, who were once discouraged from writing in Singlish, now feel bound to?

Internationally, it is a great time to be a Singaporean writer. Jaswal's already popular novel *Erotic Stories For Punjabi Widows* enjoyed another sales boost when actress Reese Witherspoon chose it for her online book club. Jaswal is one of a handful of Singaporean writers currently popular around the world.

Koe's debut novel *Delayed Rays Of A Star* enjoys the kind of success most writers, and certainly we postgraduate writing programme directors, dream about. Not only was the novel bought by one of the most respected literary imprints, Nan A. Talese at Doubleday, it was Koe's thesis novel, and she sold it before she'd even graduated.

Sensibly, both Jaswal and Koe speak in interviews of the necessary freedom of not always writing stories set in Singapore. In her *Electric Lit* interview with Emily Ding, Koe argues: "I think the question about obligations and origins is one that needs to be reconsidered in our globalised,

wired age: What are origins, in the first place? So often this gets conflated as place of birth, or colour of skin, but what does that really mean today? For example, I might be racially read as Chinese, but what does that even mean in my middle-class, Anglophone context, where my first language is English, and I grew up reading *Virginia Woolf*?"

Aren't we, these contemporary writers seem to ask, also citizens of the art and books that we love, not just the legal country that issues our passports?

This year's Singapore Writers Festival theme, "A Language of Our Own", also raises the fact that not all national literatures reckon with a national language as clearly, as audibly, as SingLit does.

Canadian English has a handful of phrases unique to Canada, but you couldn't fill a book like Joshua Ip's *Sonnets From The Singlish* with "toque" (a knit cap), "loonie" (a one-dollar coin with an image of a loon) or "two-four" (a case of 24 bottles or cans of beer). Our "eh" is your "lah", but not used as frequently.

Canada's regional lexicons are even smaller. In one province, and only one, Saskatchewan, a hooded sweatshirt is called a "bunny hug". While Canada, like any country, has

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a small English vocabulary that is nationally unique, only one of our French dialects, the Acadian dialect of my wife, has the kind of unique and polyglot grammar of Singlish.

Both Acadian and Singlish are formed by fusing multiple languages, by reaching across and within borders, and they carry a kind of cartographical tattoo, a reside of the land they're from.

Gwee Li Sui's *Spiaking Singlish: A Companion To How Singaporeans Communicate*, published last year, is almost *hao lian* (Hokkien for boastful) at how futile it is to try to corral a language, any language, let alone one in busy, cosmopolitan, multicultural Singapore.

However, the language of the street can evolve more rapidly than that of a national literature. I've been delighted to twice host playwright Haresh Sharma here at Lasalle College of the Arts as a writer-in-residence.

National University of Singapore linguist Lionel Wee's new book *The Singlish Controversy: Language, Culture And Identity In A Globalizing World*, also published last year, describes how revolutionary Sharma was in the 1990s for including Singlish on stage.

Where the Singaporean plays of Sharma and his contemporaries have been including Singlish for 25 years, some argue that it took Cheryl Lu-Lien Tan's 2016 novel *Sarong Party Girls* to really bring Singlish into fiction.

Interestingly, it is the dialogue of Teo's *Ponti*, not its first-person narration, that includes Singlish. Impressively, Tan's first-person narrator Jazzy even thinks in Singlish. No one, however, least of all my writing-professor self, wants to see Singaporean writers feeling they are locked into writing in Singlish.

Koe's new *Delayed Rays Of A Star* is set around Europe and North America, from Weimar Berlin to Los Angeles' Chinatown. Its author

speaks Singlish, but her narrator need not. To Singlish or not to Singlish is a question, not the question for a contemporary Singaporean writer.

Recently, Pulitzer Prize-winning American writer Michael Chabon wrote a bracing, worried, amorous essay entitled *What's The Point?* to announce his stepping down as chairman for America's famous arts incubator *The MacDowell Colony*.

He concludes, "And what is that truth, the truth of art, that freeing blade, that slaking drink in the desert of the world? It's this: You are not alone. I am not I; you are not you. We are we. Art bridges the lonely islands. It's the string that hums from my tin can, over here looking out of my little window, to you over there, looking out of yours."

SingLit and the Singapore Writers Festival will certainly give us plenty of chances to make this island, any island, a little less lonely.

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