

## **EDITORIAL: Connections and Divisions Across Borders**

This editorial piece is my last one as Chief Editor of *SARE*. I inherited a thriving journal from my predecessor Sharmani Gabriel, and am now passing it on to a new editorial team, which will be headed by Sharifah Aishah Osman. I am glad to see the commitment towards taking *SARE* onwards and upwards still holds strong.

Despite being called the Southeast Asian Review of English, this journal's focus has been on literature and culture from South, Southeast, and East Asia. I am happy that the final issue that I am overseeing represents articles and reviews which cover all three of these geopolitical areas – the articles, book reviews, and poem look at the Philippines, India, Pakistan, the Malay World, Malaysia, Japan, Indonesia, and Vietnam. The range of articles mirrors the cover art for this issue - Lyne Ismail's intriguing 'Expanding Space', which sees a galaxy scribbled over with what look like candles and flowers expanding inexorably upwards. Interestingly, despite the geographical spread in the submissions for this issue, there are many common threads which can be drawn among them, highlighting possibilities for unity in a world which has recently seen increasing fracture and division.

Christian Jil R. Benitez has written an article entitled "Flowers From Afar: *Mayflowers* (2021), "A las flores del Heidelberg" (1886), and Epiphytic Communities" which resonates with several of the other offerings in this issue. Writing about a virtual performance which allowed Filipino women migrant workers to connect virtually during the COVID-19 pandemic, and drawing connections to a poem by José Rizal, as well as to Thai poetic forms, Benitez draws the reader's attention to experiences of isolation and longing. He reads the flowers present in the virtual performance and Rizal's poem not as abstract symbols, but as agents vital to building connections and community.

Attributing agency to natural elements such as flowers links to the idea of ecological entanglements, as put forward by Anna Tsing. Broadly, the idea removes humans from a position of dominance over nature, instead arguing for a network rather than a hierarchy: humans are part of the ecosystem, they are not in control of it. This idea is explored through Azalea Ahmad Kushairi and Zainor Izat Zainal's article "Reimagining Animism: The Ecocritical Psyche in Malay Folklore", which underscores how the natural and spiritual worlds, tied with the life of the community, are necessary to wholeness and harmony, both in terms of the psyche and the ecology, in the Malay cosmos.

This focus on nature as a uniting factor, as well as the importance of nature in de-centering humans in the Anthropocene, also ties with Donna Haraway's 'Cthulhucene', with its notion of tentacular connections, a network rather than a hierarchy. However, as Fatima Hassan, Shalini Nadaswaran, and Sharifah Aishah Osman show in their article "The Economics of Oppression: Domestic Servitude in Uzma Aslam Khan's *The Story of Noble Rot*", rigid hierarchies rooted in class, economics, and gender still govern many lives. Given that the protagonist of the novel is a domestic servant working for privileged families, this article links with Benitez's piece. But rather than focusing on how communities are built, Hassan, Nadaswaran, and Osman analyse how the novel highlights structural inequalities which work at many levels. The protagonist, Malika, is rendered largely powerless by her socio-economic position, as well as by her gender. She is able briefly to wrest power from her socially and economically more advantaged employer, Mrs Masood, but ultimately returns to her former marginal position. Mrs Masood herself, despite her wealth and social position, is disadvantaged by her gender and her powerlessness in relation to her husband. In spite of the similarities in these women's experiences, there is no sense here of connection, of unity – only of struggling to gain the slightest advantage.

The idea of a community beyond borders does, however, surface not only in Benitez's

article (which shows how a transnational Philippine community was built during the lockdowns of 2020-2021) but also in Kushairi and Zainal's article – although there, the community is a wider Malay one which expands beyond today's national borders. Joseph Salazar's article "Comedians Performing the Margins: The Philippines' Tito, Vic & Joey (TVJ) and Indonesia's Dono, Kasino & Indro (Warkop DKI)" draws links between comedy shows from Indonesia and the Philippines, showing how the seemingly defiant content of both shows emerged from the privileged position of the members of the two comedy groups. Both shows, despite being from different countries and cultures, cover rather similar themes and both, ultimately, do little to dismantle the dominant political structures of their time. In this, despite the linkage between two different societies, the author shows that the distinctions based on class and social position (similar to what is seen in Hassan, Nadaswaran, and Osman's article) remains firmly in place. An interesting point about Salazar's article is that the content of the comedy shows is linked to the leadership and politics of the time – in both Manila and Indonesia, strongman politics were in evidence: a point which perhaps renders the article all too relevant to today's global situation.

Ngoi Hui Chien's article "Japan in the United States Reverse Course: An Inter-imperial Analysis of Kazuo Ishiguro's *An Artist of the Floating World*" focuses on a novel set in post-WWII Japan, but many aspects of the novel resonate today. The strongman politics referenced in Salazar's article links peripherally with Ngoi's analysis of United States interference in both Japan and Korea, as both situations suggest a fundamental desire for power. But the rejection of personal accountability suggested by the attitude of Ishiguro's protagonist is also troublingly visible on today's global stage.

Arthur Neong's self-translated poem "Gagak Hitam" ("Black Crow") is a deceptively simple piece, spoken by a crow. The poem is presented with the original version (in Malay) printed next to the poet's own translation into English. The translation is fluid, with each

version slipping between the two languages in a way that is reminiscent of how many Malaysians actually speak, casually moving from one language to another. But this is no happy poem about easy hybrid Malaysian identities – Neong also references erasures of ‘other’ identities, as well as the anger and resentment towards an unspecified ‘them’. The whole is leavened with instances of cutting humour.

The two book reviews featured in this issue also feature minority voices. Brendan Smith reviews *The Colours of April: Fiction on the Vietnam War’s Legacy 50 years Later*, edited by Quan Manh Han and Cab Tran. This is an anthology that focuses on Vietnamese and Vietnamese-American authors, who present stories which dismantle the dominant narrative coming out of the United States. Lucy Keneikhrienuo Yhome also reviews a book referencing war, namely Mmhonlumo Kikon’s *His Majesty’s Headhunters: The Siege of Kohima that Shaped World History*. Yhome notes that this study foregrounds the contribution of the indigenous Naga to the outcomes of World War II. The Naga voice is given a platform which counters silencing and marginalization not only by the British but also in contemporary India. Overall, this issue reflects the geographic and socio-political range and connection that this journal hopes for.

As Sharifah and her team take over, it only remains for me to thank Sharmani Gabriel, who worked so hard to bring SARE up to its current position; Farid Mohammadi, who has been invaluable in helping me get SARE out on time over the past couple of years, despite his own heavy workload; Looi Siew Teip, who stepped up to help at a crucial juncture; and Sharifah Aishah Osman, who is also stepping up to ensure that the legacy of SARE continues. Sharifah, I wish you and your team nothing but the best in the future.

*Susan Philip*

**Works Cited**

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