

## EDITORIAL: “Sites of Possibility”

In the past few decades, children’s literature has gained much prominence as a distinct field of academic inquiry. Children’s writings have always existed of course but today they must be seen as a dynamic force for change. We are delighted in this issue to feature scholars located in many different places across the globe and their work on children’s literature, film, and animation from China, India, Malaysia, and “Asian/American” sites of cultural production — a subject that has had less coverage in journals of this kind than it deserves. I am grateful to Bernard Wilson who proposed this idea and agreed to serve as Guest Editor. It was a genuine pleasure working and interacting with him over the past several months, and I cannot thank him enough for his unfailingly exuberant very-early morning e-mails from Tokyo!

It is evident from the exciting range of energies, interests, traditions, and methodologies presented in this Special Issue, as Bernard also makes clear in his Introduction, that scholarship on Asian children’s literature and other cultural forms is asking fresh questions of the field and moving in exciting directions.

In our general section, Shirley Geok-lin Lim offers a valuable retrospective on Universiti Malaya’s Department of English under the distinguished stewardship of Lloyd Fernando from the vantage point of her intellectual and literary formation as an undergraduate and tutor from 1964 to 1969. Delivered originally in November 2018 as a public lecture under the aegis of the department’s Lloyd Fernando Seminar Series, which was inaugurated in 2015, Lim’s essay throws light on a crucial phase in the department’s history, when it had to navigate narrow nationalist politics that threatened its very survival. It was Fernando who founded *SARE* just after he left UM in 1980. *SARE* was distinct for its time in that it encompassed both scholarly and literary writings, standing apart from its antecedents, *Write* (1957) and *Tenggara* (1967), also founded by Fernando, which were exclusively literary journals. More intriguingly, Lim sets up a conflict between Fernando as Professor of English and Fernando as novelist, pointing to the acute tensions between the decolonizing impetus of the nation’s first Malaysian Professor of English and the humanistic impulse that underpinned his fictional work. In so doing, she skilfully uncovers the aporia upon which postcolonial Malaysia is founded.

In her research article, Li-Ru Lu retrieves a number of narratives – that she compellingly designates as “coal texts” – from the archive of imperial travel writing to uncover a crucial yet overlooked eco-geopolitical chapter in Taiwan’s complex history. Lu’s effort to reclaim from the shadows Taiwan’s place in the imperial – and ecological – imagination through its appearance in the nineteenth-century British travelogue highlights the paradigm of cross-cultural encounter inscribed by the dynamics of East-West power relations. This is a salutary undertaking especially in the East Asian context, whose primary geographical focus has tended to be China and Japan.

We are also thankful for John Thieme’s manifestly insightful obituary on V.S. Naipaul, who died in August this year. Not only alert to the disjunctions that marked the dividedness between the man and his work, as well as the contradictions lying at the heart of the latter, it takes us on a masterful tour of his oeuvre so as to get us inside Naipaul’s unique, and unsparing, vision. Naipaul, as Lim tells us, was among the first authors “canonized” in the Commonwealth Literature course introduced by Fernando at UM in 1966. This was when Malaysian university students of literature in English encountered for the first time characters, such as the embattled protagonist of Naipaul’s *A House for Mr Biswas*, whose insecurities, stemming from his historical and cultural displacements, came closer to mirroring the former’s own confounding complexities. *SARE* is grateful to Thieme for memorializing for us the life and works of a novelist who was indeed canonical for generations of students of postcolonial literature.

*SARE* dedicates several of its pages to reviews of contemporary writers and scholars, and in this issue Susan Philip assesses for us M. Shanmugalingam’s debut collection of short stories, which exposes the foibles of those who belong to Malaysia’s Jaffna Tamil community — and their author’s endless empathy for them. Indrani Karmakar explores the cultural politics inherent in Elizabeth Jackson’s study of the intricate interplay between privilege and powerlessness that defines the lives and literary productions of Muslim women writing in English in India.

In our creative writing section, Saba Bashir’s assured control of the poetic form is evinced in her sequence of two poems, “Medusa Love”, a quietly explosive portrait of female containment, voicelessness, and impending disembodiment. Leonard Jeyam’s deft translation from the original Malay of the poem by National Laureate Muhammad Haji Salleh offers an intensely meditative insight into the embattled life of the Indonesian poet Chairil Anwar. Elsewhere, Anthony Cummins’ short fiction, told from a young boy’s point of view, brings into sharp relief a child’s elemental apprehension, and appreciation, of his world in contrast to his mother’s fixation with social acceptance. The humour, and pathos, derive in large part from Cummins’ sensitive handling of the story’s emotional centre.

We are also privileged to feature two poems by a novelist of such stature as K.S. Maniam, who has published in most genres (short stories, plays, essays as well as novels) except for poetry. In “Leave of the Mind”, Maniam brings his poet’s indignation to bear on the “politics of colour” that cast him as an outsider in his homeland although he’s “been rooted in its earth for centuries”. Maniam denounces as “unnatural” these man-made discourses of exclusion in contradistinction to “our billion-years old receptive earth”. In “Two Heartbeats Away”, a darkness of another kind, by turns suppurating and soporific, engulfs the mind and imagination of Maniam’s persona as he is driven to despair and destruction.

When read in conjunction with each other, the essays, interviews, poetry, fiction, and reviews convey the nuance and intimacy of the dialogue that *SARE* makes possible. They also remind us of the power of

scholarship, and of fiction and poetry, to question, complicate, and bring into productive entanglement the meanings by which we have come to know and understand our world.

As always, we are deeply grateful to our contributing authors, whose work provides *SARE* with its content. We are also profoundly indebted to our peer reviewers, without whose generosity of time and spirit none of our work can be done. Our appreciation also goes to members of our editorial and advisory boards, and we must when giving thanks single out Renukha Devi for doing the work that is so necessary for *SARE* to perform as an online journal.

We warmly welcome submissions for the general section of our July 2019 issue, which I am very excited to announce will also feature a Special Issue guest edited by Dr Chris Mooney-Singh (Lasalle College of the Arts, Singapore) and Dr Scott Grant (Monash University, Australia) that will comprise selected scholarly papers and creative writing from the Lit Up Asia-Pacific Festival 2018 held in Singapore this past October.

In closing, I want to take this opportunity to stress that the categories that *SARE* wishes to be associated with – the transnational, diasporic, postcolonial, the multicultural, cosmopolitanism – are not immovable but open to ever new spaces of creative and critical engagement. We view these terms above all else as ways of articulating imaginative sympathy and the value of reaching out to *the other*.

As we approach the end of 2018 and stand on the threshold of “the new”, may we keep ourselves open to new sites of possibility — both for our forms of *thinking* and ways of *knowing* and *doing*. In a time of puerile political rhetoric built on polarities to incite revulsion and fear of others, cultural dialogue remains as crucial as ever.

*Sharmani Patricia Gabriel*