

EDITORIAL: “World *is* Story”

This issue of *SARE* calls up the importance of building alternative worlds, universes, and societies. When we first discussed “worldbuilding” as the subject for this special issue back in June 2020, we did not know – could not, of course, have known or perhaps even dared to imagine – that our world would still be reeling from the ramifying consequences of the coronavirus more than a year later. Indeed, this issue arrives at a time when the numbers of infections are surging so sharply despite the austere measures put in place to battle the virus. And with political systems more focused on consolidating power and attending to the behests of the business elite rather than on working to resolve existing injustices and inequalities, what the coronacrisis has uncovered is a discrimination, whether blatant and conscious or subtle and unthinking, that is pernicious and deeply alienating for those in the margins. Social isolation has also become more pronounced at the level of human relations. Though purposeful use of technology has allowed communication to continue despite the pandemic curbs on human mobility and movement, the increasingly digitised – and distanced – modes of human interaction and connection have further unravelled fraying social sensibilities and fragmented relationships. Not only the pandemic, but other issues of global significance – among them, poverty and social inequality, religious conflict and war, racism and other forms of discrimination, terrorism, lack of government accountability, ecological devastation, financial and political corruption – signal a world in deep distress, lockdown, and catastrophe. Issue 58.1’s emphasis on “worldbuilding” is a worthy reminder that the most terrifying and dystopian of worlds is the one we currently inhabit.

In her overview of the approaches, methodologies, and strategies exemplified by her collection, our Guest Editor Gabriela Lee describes worldbuilding as an “act of curation”. In the scholarly articles, interview, and fiction that she herself has so carefully curated for this issue, *SARE* emerges as an alternative world that pivots on the meaning of a story. In insisting that world *is* story, Gabriela and her team of scholars and writers summon attention to what it means to live in storied worlds. As our stories change so does our world. Building a world, then, takes not only imagination and ideas but also a commitment to learn how we can inhabit *other* stories so as to be able to participate in the creation of more equitable and inclusive spaces. The attentiveness is to the telling of a different story, one where we can find an agency and a voice, especially for the forgotten, the oppressed, and the marginalised. Seen in this light, the acts of worldbuilding curated for this special issue serve variously as commentary, catharsis, retrieval, resistance, and reclamation of hope.

In our general section, Susan Philip talks to Jo Kukathas, a leading figure in Malaysian theatre. The conversation draws out Kukathas’s views on a range of issues from the opportunities as well as travails of her

peripatetic youth to the practice of interculturalism as already embedded in “Malaysian” identity to the story of English – and Malay – as the “coloniser’s language”. As part of its ongoing commitment to publishing creative writing, *SARE* is delighted to offer a platform for poems by Jonathan Chan. The throbbing and richly allusive intensity of his lines flits between exhilaration and drudgery, the familiar and the unfathomable, and past and present worlds. In the reviews section, Keith Jardim, Sonia Ghalian, Carol Leon, Ann Ang, Loo Hong Chuang, and Angus Whitehead assess for us recently published books in their areas of research or general interest, which in this issue comprise two novels, a collection of short stories, an anthology of poetry, and two works of scholarship in literary and film studies.

As always, we warmly thank our contributing authors, whose work provides *SARE* with its content. We are also profoundly indebted to our peer reviewers who perform, often so generously, such an important task for us. I also thank Susan Philip and Renukha Devi for their help in putting this issue together. I am delighted to take this opportunity to welcome Regina Yoong to our team as *SARE*’s Journal Manager. The energy and fresh constellation of interests and concerns that she and a younger generation of scholars will bring to the table will be critical as *SARE* continues to develop its vision and aspirations for the future.

We hope the talents, registers, voices, and insights in this issue’s mix of essays, reviews, interviews, and fiction and poetry will convey *SARE*’s abiding interest in the nuance and complexity of cultural formations. We also hope that the contents presented here will stimulate new contributors to make submissions. Our December issue will feature a special collection on Transpacific American literature. Our aim in framing cultural analysis of literary and other writings through a lens that reconfigures transpacific studies is to guard against rigidity and to keep *SARE* flexible and alert to new and entangled ways of thinking about “Asia”, ourselves, and our world.

May we keep building better worlds, may we keep telling better stories.

Sharmani Patricia Gabriel