Root(ed) : a collection of poems

Atifa Othman

2019

Atifa, O. (2019). Root(ed) : a collection of poems. Master's thesis, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

<https://hdl.handle.net/10356/85501>

<https://doi.org/10.32657/10220/48264>

**NANYANG
TECHNOLOGICAL
UNIVERSITY**

SINGAPORE

**ROOT(ED): A COLLECTION OF
POEMS**

ATIFA BINTE OTHMAN

SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES

2019

Root(ed): A Collection of Poems

ATIFA BINTE OTHMAN

School of Humanities

A thesis submitted to the Nanyang Technological University in partial
fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts

2019

Statement of Originality

I certify that all work submitted for this thesis is my original work. I declare that no other person's work has been used without due acknowledgement. Except where it is clearly stated that I have used some of this material elsewhere, this work has not been presented by me for assessment in any other institution or University. I certify that the data collected for this project are authentic and the investigations were conducted in accordance with the ethics policies and integrity standards of Nanyang Technological University and that the research data are presented honestly and without prejudice.

20 January 2019

.....

Atifa Binte Othman

Supervisor Declaration Statement

I have reviewed the content of this thesis and to the best of my knowledge, it does not contain plagiarised materials. The presentation style is also consistent with what is expected of the degree awarded. To the best of my knowledge, the research and writing are those of the candidate except as acknowledged in the Author Attribution Statement. I confirm that the investigations were conducted in accordance with the ethics policies and integrity standards of Nanyang Technological University and that the research data are presented honestly and without prejudice.

20 January 2019

.. ..

Boey Kim Cheng

Authorship Attribution Statement

This thesis contains material from 0 paper(s) published in the following peer-reviewed journal(s) where I was the first and/or corresponding author.

20 January 2019

....

Atifa Binte Othman

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To Boey Kim Cheng, for your guidance as a supervisor to my project. Thank you for your respectable insights into the world of poetry, for your time and effort the past two years, and for your patience. Your advice helped me develop my poetry in ways I never could have imagined, and your sensitivity to details in my poetry, even in their initial drafts, was much appreciated.

To Divya Victor, who brought this project to fruition when I did not know what to make of the mess in my head. Thank you for the initial conceptualisation of this project. Your encouragement during my undergraduate years drove me to explore poetry, a genre I used to feel distant from. I will always remember how thought-provoking and woke your classes were. You motivated me to embark on a long and arduous journey of stepping out of my comfort zone, and it is a journey that is still in progress.

To my family. Noorlia Binti Mohamad Noor, for your strength and fiery spirit that could energise any space. Othman Bin Rahmat, for the jokes I secretly find very amusing, and eccentric ways of showing concern. Diana Binte Othman, for always putting the family's well-being first, for being the quiet Superwoman in the house. Amelia Binte Othman, for your steadfastness despite your light-heartedness and lovable Sagittarius air. Mohammed Yusri, for taking wonderful care of my sister and for your hardworking spirit. Not to forget, Rayan Nabiha, for being the most intuitive ten-year-old I have ever met. I would not be where I am now without each of you, and you have supported me in your own way.

To my late grandparents, the people who inspired most of the poems in this collection. Haji Rahmat, Hajjah Jariah, Chee Abdullah and Mohamad Noor. Thank you for the tangible memories that still come back to me in bits and pieces. To Mohamad Noor, we never had the chance to meet, but thank you for showing so much affection to my mother. I feel like I know you just by listening to her vivid recollections of the times you spent together.

To Ida Suhaila Binte Ismail, Salimah Alias Binte Hassan, Nuzul Furhana Binte Amran and Ong Hwee Yee. Our friendship of over ten years is something I will always cherish. Being around each and all of you is never lacklustre. Your voices and stories have inspired a lot of my written work.

To Sarah Siow Daud, Kylie Chan, Jasvinder Kaur Pannu and Wong Shu Min. I will never forget the moment we had on top of a sand dune in Abu Dhabi, gazing at the sunset. We had a dynamite bonding experience in a such a short span of time, and in those short-lived five days, I felt like we were family. You played a huge part in making me realise I needed to start trusting the world more.

To Nursheena Parveen Binte Katermeran, my partner-in-mostly-crime. Thank you for the confidence you had in me for this project. For your assurance that the world has its beauty and the reminders to give it the benefit of the doubt. For the comfort and warmth you give during my hardest times, and the never-ending support even when I reveal my ugliest side. Your love knows no bounds, and nobody else could have introduced the concept of *joie de vivre* to me without cynical resistance.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

SUMMARY	ix
LIST OF FIGURES	x
 ROOT(ED): A COLLECTION OF POEMS	11
(s)	12
Dayang Senandong.....	13
Little Buffalo.....	14
Ahmad.....	15
Barking up the wrong tree.....	16
Root(s).....	19
Watashinonamaeha.....	21
Clogged.....	22
Chee.....	23
wedding guests.....	24
Festive Bites.....	26
Footsteps.....	28
Pregnant pause.....	29
(ed)	30
Lava Crust.....	31
intertwine.....	32
Attached.....	33
sakhi.....	34
hidden.....	35
mama's love.....	36
My name.....	37
Learning to eat.....	38
Dirty.....	40
Relationship to.....	42
Peony meditates.....	43
 NOTES ON POEMS	44
ROOT(ED): AN EXEGESIS	47
1. THEMES.....	48
2. POETICS.....	58
WORKS CITED	67
BIBLIOGRAPHY	69

SUMMARY

Root(ed) is a collection of 23 poems, accompanied by an exegesis exploring its themes and poetics. These poems are divided according to two sections— (*s*) and (*ed*), each based on suffixes to be added to the word “root.” *Root(ed)* was conceptualised because of a desire to go back to my roots, and make sense of how my ethnic and cultural experiences interact with other strands of my selfhood.

The poems in this collection reflect upon being composed of disconnected angles, a term borrowed by American poet Adrienne Rich. Rich writes: “Sometimes I feel I have seen too long from too many disconnected angles: white, Jewish, anti-Semite, racist, anti-racist, [...] split at the root that I will never bring them whole” (481). She describes the fragmented selfhood one feels when made up of several identities that contradict each other.

This collection is based on a similar feeling of being split at the root. The poems written are fuelled by the need to reconcile the disconnected angles in my identity. *Root(ed)* examines the extent to which I am rooted in each part of my identity. It addresses themes of race, family, queerness and nationhood, delving into how these different strands entangle into each other and require a constant unravelling.

The poems in *Root(ed)* thus question whether a marginalised individual can feel fully immersed in their¹ roots, responding to my anxiety of constantly feeling trapped in a cutthroat and fast-paced world that values capitalist productivity.

¹ My exegesis will use “they”, “their” and “them” as singular, gender-neutral terms to refer to the generic individual. *Oxford Living Dictionaries* explains that using “them”, “they”, or “their” is a way to avoid making an assumption of gender of an individual as there is no gender explicit in these pronouns.

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. A visual poem in the Malay language, “Palestin”, by Malaysian poet Abdul Ghafar Ibrahim. From his poetry collection, *Takkan Hilang*.

Root(ed):
A Collection of Poems

(s)

Dayang Senandong

I was born with the colour of a moonless night,
gleaming warm undertones singing in sunlight.
You don't know that I am the moon nobody sees, ash black
invaded by the brightening scorch of the sun. I never knew my skin

was a curse until I learnt that the fair and worshipped
were shunners. All I had was my voice, singing melodies
into the empty forest of trees dripping leftover rainwater. Enslaved
for the dirt they associated my skin with, labouring
on the dirt beneath their linoleum tiles. But I sang,

I sang into the night that watched over dampened souls.
Their dark limbs imprinted muddy earth, grass damp.
Stretch of skin sealed taut above running rivers of blood, protecting.
Unread parchment vandalised by belts and whips of the wrongly righteous.

Organ cloaking the existence of flesh my masters denied,
that the man I married desired after I coaxed him with sickly,
saccharine tunes of love at first sight.

Present retellings of my life use me to market liquids that erase
my skin. You don't understand— my skin was never a curse. Mouths
just thought they should unsheathe me. So I died with the translucence the sun
forced onto the moon. But my skin was my voice, my voice my skin,

craving change within my means, singing freedom. I live on
in the reduced hearts of the restless, peach pits discarded after
the content devouring of flesh. Your mothers say:

Do not point at the moon, or your ear will get cut. They are wrong.
It's just my moon-crust finger stroking the organ that listens, leaving a line of
ash.
Pleading you to remember me when you regard the burning sun.

Little Buffalo

The little bright-eyed buffalo,
small horns sharpened by the villagers
till as lethal as knives,
grunts for milk.

Thirst propels him towards
the sturdy bull sent by the
powerful enemies
who live among golden statues;
the bull turns a blind eye to his
unworthy opponent.

But the little one grunts
softly, thirsting
for milk.

He fumbles towards the bull.

Searching for the udder,
he lifts his head to suck.

A piercing cry
fills the air—
his knife-horns slice
the tender stomach,
bleeding the bull dry till
he lies in a pool of
red.

Minangkabau!
exclaim the villagers,
celebrating their victory
over the opposing tribe,
their saviour the buffalo
peering curiously by a
carcass,
its blood flowing
from a stomach that once appeared
impenetrable.

Waiting to be nourished,
he watches the ecstatic villagers
applaud him with their
cheers and laughter—
the meek baby buffalo
that saved a village
from violence.

Ahmad

Crater pockmarks on wrinkled brown skin. Yellow
pebble teeth. Scrawny limbs dangling loosely

with the laze of a lion after a filling meal,
its deer mauled by wheel-clamp teeth. Tearing

parking tickets for the gleaming Mercedes, which rests
stationary. There's a joke about a Malay man

behind the wheel of a Mercedes. The punchline is
his name.

Muhammad Ahmad bin Rashid, Ahmad,
"My Ahmad." This Ahmad never chauffeured,

but by night hoists boxes the size of baby cattle
with bare hands into hippopotamus trucks

that lumber across the causeway. There's a myth
about a Malay man who lifted a boulder the size of an elephant.

Mighty Badang— hands calloused, skinny, his touch like granite.
Not from uprooting trees, but from toiling day and night

for a moralistic king on a golden throne. Freed one day
on the premise that he would use his newfound strength only

for good. Cunning water-demon in his blood, whose
river bile he tasted to gain brawn. The stench forever lingers,

reminds him of fingertips wrinkled from catching whole fish. Each served
on one silver plate to the royal family, who fed him palmfuls of plain rice a day.

Ahmad returns every night when roads are barren, family asleep.
Cold ikan kuning and rice left over from the nasi lemak packet,

bought twelve hours before his limbs rested. Legs stiff as a bench.
There's a joke there.

Barking up the wrong tree

I: Sundal

They told me not to go barking up the wrong tree but
I am
the wrong tree

My bark has the essence dogs
love and are made of but
I can't
touch them—
or myself

*You can't touch dogs or sluts
when you aren't supposed to
it just is
you're not
humanly possible*

These thick
roots anchor my creaturely form
brown rough weathered
to the ground where filth lies
always still or swaying
never moving but
I grow
too tall for them to see more than
my bark

II: Binatang

Tied to a tree
like a naughty dog
for sleeping with another

the cold blade
penetrates

pierces Mahsuri's heart

pumping organ bursts it bleeds
white

pure white
oozing pouring down
full creamy breasts

punished for wronging her lover

wrongly punished
for loving
a man who
loved

III: Setan

She lingers
by the looming banana tree
fruiting
the scent of jasmine
trailing as she glides

Through the night
pounding music
floods into the ears of
girls beckoning with their hips
boys' hands moving in response
bodies pushing against each other
in an unsynchronised dance to quench
undying thirst

What better way
to respond to a rude mating call
than lunging without warning

Soft lush lips that emit a voice
as sweet as flowers
rip apart
bare sharp fangs
grinning in the face
of horror

Its facade crumbles
as it unfolds into
a cackling monster
teeth piercing his skin
to feed on blood

Perhaps
the empty space in her womb
where new life could have been
can blossom again

Root(s)

Alongside your raging brown roots
lies a drop
of your tofu-white Nenek's blood,
whose fading eyes
pictured her Amma's weathered arms
gently lifting her from the
cold, damp earth
where she was left among
withered potato plants.

You wonder how a spit of saliva
can explain your roots—
roots you may not have ever
heard of or liked,
that don't surface
on the skin or the
tone of the voice,
that dissolve when
warm bodies melt
into each other.

A spit of saliva that
explains the Mandarin words said
to your confused Nenek,
the disappointed guest at the hostel
you worked in who thought you were,
quote, 100% Indian,
and perhaps the persons from three continents
who spoke to you in their tongues
in transit,
glimmer of hope in their
lost eyes.

A spit of saliva the root
of mourning lost customs that raised infants
into exemplars,
of rage at the slightest hint of
difference,
of dismay at the taint
of a pure race with roots tracing back to
generations of forced penetrations,
of a spit of saliva
in the face of an Other
for the sins of their people.

A \$150 spit of saliva
carefully into a glass tube,
\$150 spit
tracing priceless bloodlines
across the oceans,
\$150 spit
paying tribute to
the child left alone
for the mark on her eye
the root of bad luck,
left alone
to be raised
not by the hands
that held her,
soaked in blood,
but the hands
that carried her
from the cold, damp earth.

Watashinonamaecha

Frosty air on my tongue and the warmth of a chocolate shop.
My hands hold a square box. Navy blue,
neat, rounded print of “Nama Chocolate” in the centre encasing
velvety squares sliced with the sharp
precision of a cookie cutter. Powdered with
dust. Rich Ghana bitter, hint of the trademark sweetness of
Japanese candy in the centre. A little bit like your taste in
chocolates, a little bit like you. Except your sweetness
was only visible to nenek on your good days.
Bitter was your face when I chased my cousins around
your three-room flat, the alluring smell of gravy
masking the musty air everytime we visited. Bitter
were your unsmiling, taut lips and
rotan threats at the slightest hint of playtime
becoming too rowdy. Sweet was her face that calmed
the stubbornest of tantrums you threw, her slow yet fluid
plump body jiving to music in P. Ramlee movies
on a grainy television screen, you scowling
at female dancers uncovering their skin.
Bitter was the taste of bile in her mouth, her skin paling
at every round of cancer purging Sweet out of her.
Alone in the winter chill of Tokyo with boxes of chocolate
nestled in my bag, I imagine what you sounded like speaking
to Japanese soldiers during the war, and wonder why I never asked. Maybe
by the time I pondered you were waking up from your sleep to scream
at invisible attackers, warn ghostly civilians about threats, call out
for your dead wife. You knew the Japanese and Malay language
share four romanised letters that point to the same meaning.
It was one that plagued the years you spent alone with a Bitter
not even medicine could purge.
Day after day you looked at me, asking, “Nama siapa?”,
sometimes addressing me, most of the time yourself.
Every day I answered with photo albums until,
instead of your descendants’ names,
you began to demand mercy in the middle of the night,
shielding your face from the dark.

Clogged

1985

Somewhere outside, cement is kneaded like playdough by metal hands,
truck bodies filled to the brim alongside skeletal buildings
taller than trees he grew up with.
A bird's eye view of clock gear, the ones ticking to be nestled within concrete
walls.
The last sounds he makes before his soul leaves the hospital are wheezing
coughs,
lungs clogged. His wife's lips as tight as her hand around his.
She hears the bog try to rise
to his throat, spill out of his mouth. Sees his clammy skin and thin
middle-aged body convulse before his eyes close for the last time, and knows—
he would rather die than let tar touch the tip of his tongue.
As his hand becomes limp in hers and her lips lose control,
she remembers why she chose their children
over becoming an English school principal.
The first time she saw a body of rainwater clogged with debris and muck
behind freshly painted bricks, she pictured the country drowning in gunk.

1975

Somewhere outside, her eleven children took turns to ascend
trees with bark as rough as gravel, avoiding evidential scratches on their thighs.
A decision was to be made, and it resolved itself when her sons returned home,
their eyes like blooming hydrangea buds. Pale knees scraped
with watercolour pink lines,
encircled by damp, grey dirt instead of earthy soil. At that moment,
she vowed to help her loved ones learn to breathe among sped up clockwork.
Before their windpipes began to be clogged with concrete.

Chee

Between her thumb and index finger she rubbed
thick orange paste before sliding it above my upper lip.
Harsh balm's scent wafted into my leaking nostrils—
not the cooling menthol that lingers in the throat after a long
inhale of a muted cigarette, but one that fired up the
senses like the heat of a burning stove beneath bubbling brown
of ayam kicap in a metal pot.

Her papery skin never seemed to sweat, almost as
pale as the sparse strands of hair plastered to her scalp.
Always pacing around the house finding things to meddle with,
but what I remember are expressions not conversations, thin-lipped
scowl at how fast I rushed my prayers in our shared room and slight twinkle
in her glaring greyed eyes when she refused to be the one sleeping on

the bed, tucked and smoothened repeatedly each day
as if guests were expected in our room at any time. In her better moods
she braided my hair so it would grow longer and smoother with skilled
hands that once struck her daughter for climbing trees in her underwear.
On weekends she started my mornings with a thick brew of Milo
and crispy bread biscuits on the side, keeping a watchful eye for

antics like slurping a gleaming bottle of pink cough syrup. My mother
tells me I remind her of Nenek Chee now, always smelling of Tiger Balm
lathered across my forehead which throbs on random nights. She chuckles
whenever she says so, the same way she did when I asked her what her mother's
full name was.

Just Chee, she said,
without the surname of the parents who didn't raise her—the bigger question
the date of birth missing on her headstone.

wedding guests

observe the halal whoring

of petite girls clad in bright
pinks whites and oranges
modest necklines concealing
calvin kleins and la senzas

long sleeves carress
tops of ankle-grazing skirts
some hugging hips
more than others

my mother
reading youthful intention
like definite morality in
cryptic scripture
fixes her gaze on

eager boys clutching kompangs
palms staggering to tap hollow hide
flurry of rhythms echoing their heartbeats

wandering eyes dart in quick rhythm
to the reverberating thumps

holy chants of the zikr crescendo
as their hands tighten their grips
beating their drums with increasing vigour
while watching clothed girls before them

groom and bride on the dais
look ahead
as the beats come to a silence

catching the boys' eyes
mother demands in her voice
that can alert an estate
which one you want
brash humour inviting
unrestrained laughter
of those from generations past

chattering girls
lower their eyes on cue
giggles trapped by fragrant palms
scents of fruits and flowers laced on their wrists
awaiting the collective decision
as silence ensues

the one in orange

next to me
whose smooth hair tickles
covered shoulders
that were bare yesterday
and met the sun's scorch

rolling her eyes at the click of tongue
she thinks

god forbid i show my legs
but let these fools picture them

after marriage

Festive Bites

1. After slicing a long, ripe banana into
petite pieces,
tear a big stalk of kale into
blendable bits,
then add two dollops
of Greek yoghurt.
Blend in the Magic Bullet.
2. When the ingredients amalgamate
into an icky moss-green liquid,
your kale-banana yogurt smoothie is ready.
3. With your fingers that have added clumsy
touches of salty, preserved powder
to bowls of instant Maggi,
help Mama stir the huge metal pot.
By the time Mama scurries back
to check with widened eyes,
the thick, brown gravy's
chocolatey colour darkens
into a mahogany tint.
4. Beef chunks shrink from high temperature,
leaving dense, chewy pieces with
an aftertaste of coconut milk and turmeric
to feed the guests' empty stomachs.
Mama told me once to chew slowly,
so even rendang will be digested well
and speed up the metabolism.
5. Kak Mira, your cousin, brings her potato salad.
Petal-soft potatoes
drenched in white mayonnaise,
tossed with diced apples and turkey bacon bits—
a hit with your younger guests,
mouths smeared with white,
tiny pastel bits stuck around their cheeks.
6. Small hands shove tapak kuda cakes
with generous blobs of Nutella wedged within them
into stained mouths,
their faces smeared with more and more chocolate
after every bite.

7. The sound of the takbir on the radio lingers
as the chatter in the air dissipates.
Mama lifts the rice cooker lid to reveal
the somewhat familiar scent of brown rice,
scooping a portion to accompany
a lone piece of leftover rendang meat.
8. The two of you eat at the dining table,
discussing the benefits of brown rice over white,
Mama's eyes shining everytime the word
'healthy' pops up. By our side,
the tray of Nutella tapak kuda cakes
sparkles, protected by cling wrap.

Footsteps

Slow, heavy footsteps
like mallets striking a timpani but
softly,
restraining its full sound—
her broad, bare feet
bring her towards
the kitchen
where she sighs
at the
absence
of bread
for breakfast.

Ambling past her
younger sister's room,
that wallowing literature student,
syncopated stomping from inside
echoes in her
tired eardrums.

Instead of the morning sun,
Mama's bright face and
robust presence
burst into her silent bubble.

With a sharp staccato beat those
calloused pale feet follow each other
in quick succession as they merge
together with the sound of
sizzling oil in a pan.

The footsteps come to a halt—
the aroma of garlic fills the air,
along with muffled cheers and the voice of
football commentators,
spectated by the silent
man of the house.

Pregnant pause

When the doctor saw measles splattered across her stomach,
spherical canvas splashed with red paint,
he told her I wouldn't be born—

Hell reigned day after
day in her life, itches gnawing deep nooks
in her sleep, possibly futile childbirth after
mornings of dizzy spells eating at
part of her heart she had saved for an
unborn foetus—

But in the slimy black pit I squirmed my way out,
seed fingers wriggling as my head searched for the face of home.
Doctor, stunned, positioned me in my mother's arms,
faded sketches of pink on her cheeks.
Examining me under harsh light, he declared typewritten warnings of
deafness and blindness—

Years down, seed fingers branched into twigs. Fate cursed me with
ears alert to snarking and eyes too quick for calm nerves.
Perhaps when a medical professional was certain my spirit
would linger above a shoebox mound of earth, he didn't know that
my mother never lets people have their way—

There was always a pregnant
pause before she struck anyone who challenged her words,
mainly me with my sharp teenage mouth,
that a fate-sealed diagnosis could have avoided—

Some days I wonder what would change if I was not born
into robotic reality. What colours would splash themselves
on my skin instead of the red that cloaked me in that cold hospital ward.
As twig fingers branched longer and longer, home began to split into two units,
greyed by laws promoting childbirth for new concrete walls to call home—

Still, when I think of home I remember
the warm womb of the fiery woman I trusted
to clip my nails close enough to the edge, so they would not
bleed nor scratch. God knows how glad I am to learn that skill from her,
for she understood how much my fingers colour and caress
the meanings of the world better than my eyes or ears.

(ed)

Lava Crust

“O my Lord! help Thou me against people who do mischief!” (Surat al-Ankaboot: 30)

Chewing on crust she tells me she loves the crispiness of the dough. It's my least favourite part of the pizza, I say, feet propped on the bed, knobby knees facing the pink ceiling. I like the cheese best. The molten cheese that lengthens into cheese strings and melts in the mouth better than blue M&Ms do. But what about lava crust? Resting her head on my sucked-in stomach, she looks me in the eye with her chin up so that I remember how her eyelashes are the tips of shining stars. Yes. Crust stuffed with cheese that oozes out of the crisp dough, oozing down the throat before the warm goodness soothes your belly. The sunlight bursts through the window and falls on her crust-chewing face. I wonder how cheese encrusted in dough maintains its gooey texture. Doesn't it harden? She rests her head on my lap; I trace imaginary constellations on her back. Science was never my strong suit but try explaining to me the science of encrusted human bodies, perfectly intact, from centuries ago. Burnt and crisp to the bone, yet visibly human. If lava could encrust the flesh of sinners perhaps we should remain silent. Chew slowly, I say. God might hear us. I wipe the crumbs off her chin.

intertwine

behind locked doors
beige and brown
limbs
tangle on hard bed

blank eyes open
she spreads her legs
reveals a desert
waiting

his bony pale hands
untuck
grey eyes glimmer
under faint moonlight

after every push his quivering lips
release rapid breaths
deeper quicker irregular
moans ridden with
guilt

slowly
her mouth opens
answers quietly
his desperate call

at his final release
her heavy eyelids
close
lips slightly parted

outside
a slight
creak
paralyses them both

he leaps off her
grabs camo garments
sheathes
his trembling body

draping herself
in loose nightgown
her feet meet carpet
as fist knocks door

Attached

My father sings verses about love
outside in the living room.

Gripping the Quran, he lilt each foreign word
like the curves in their letters,

the hesitant, flat tenor echoing
into the thin gap beneath my closed

door, words attaching themselves to
my bruised skin like velcro strapping

across my blackened primary five shoes
that solved the loose tangling of laces.

My skin bruised by the polished surface of a
brass pole with the scent of blood

from lovers' lips, abraded by thighs squeezing to hold
weight away from the ground, palms

blistered by finding weightlessness in the air
with tighter death grips of the solid,

skin attaching to sin detaching
within.

My father's soul attached to God's words,
God's words attached to my skin, my soul

half-heartedly finding meaning in
textures that bite till blue.

sakhi

no words. bodies sit in lines on two ends,
barricading them, watching.
limbs tangled in limbs. the tinkle of silver
anklets takes a long break. they embrace,
arms around each other, green and brown cloths
becoming one. soft curves lit by the harsh white
torchlight held by an audience member in the dark.
kohl-lined eyes glimmer above golden nose rings,
eyes feeding after one tore the trust
of the other with disheveled hair, lip paint smeared
more messily than usual. her sakhi, or as they say,
female companion. but her lips have tasted more
than her smooth supple cheeks.
let the people do what they want with our shared space,
say their interlocked eyes as hands grip flesh,
lips parted. in the background the mellow lilt of the
classical tamil singer pours notes that drizzle over the fire
of their reconciling shadows. the last person with the torch
turns it off, refusing to shine the light.
sakhi and sakhi in love away from the margins,
absent bodies united in darkness. somewhere, one gazes at
the other, whispering consolations with the feather glide of fingers.

hidden

i.

wrinkled fingers shake
he grasps his wife's hand outside
red dots on skirt's hem

ii.

faint creaking noises
lipstick kisses graze her wounds
footsteps halt outside

iii.

moonlight on wet cheek
shadow of writhing body
soft cries sleep over

iv.

in the roaring crowd
those who pray and condemn cheer
her scarred skin bleeds blue

mama's love

in response to "Love Poem" by Louise Glück

gliding thread into needle
with pale, stubby fingers
once blissfully blistered by climbing
coconut trees,
her mama shakes her head,
fine inai-dyed strands of hair
flipping back to balding scalp.
she stitches her daughter's torn pants
one after another, cloth ripped by
violent leaps away from burly
boys. mama purses her lips, kain batik
cleaving to chest heaving slow breaths,
a sensation felt whenever she raced
barefoot in the kampong,
grass tickling her then soft soles,
shoulders kissed by sunlight before
cloth-covered skin and hair brought
her bold spirit to her mouth, and her heart
to scripture inked on paper.
perhaps that's why she knows now
but doesn't speak—
her daughter, skin bared more than she allows
treads slowly with revealing her heart,
but already let in a sweet natured woman
with scripture inked on skin.

My name

The last sounds I heard
before I fell out of the tuk tuk were the
gushing river rapids that carried our raft,
stalling of the vehicle's rusty rotors
and the repetition of my name.

Not *Atika*, as in generous,
because Mama didn't want me
to be associated with carpets you can walk over,
but *Atifa*, as in sympathy,
like the popular fabric brand in Egypt,
woven and stitched to clothe bare skin.

Three originally Arabic syllables,
the first "A" as in "oar" without the "r",
five romanized letters,
and one inch away from
decapitation.

The slipping grip of my sweaty hands
from a cold brass pole,
body flung downhill, tiny rocks
scraping skin as I rolled away
from a stone engraving to be remembered by.

Affectionate in Arabic but withdrawn in persona,
shocked screams of three vowels, two consonants,
tongues like my own glossing over
the first two letters of what we paddled our raft with,
the face of my lover in the distance
blurred by the last guilt-ridden words
I didn't say.

Learning to eat

In frumpy layers of cotton and fleece
we sit in silence by the table,
clanging of silverware on ceramic
the background music to my parents'
fumbling hands.

Sharp silver slices tender meat,
bringing back scenes of
well-fed cows and fluffy sheep on
lush grass
staring at the human-filled Forester.
We exclaim “Hello”,
the chilly Dunedin air in our faces.

Mama jabs the steak with her fork—
red jus bleeds onto the
white plate.

There are also
fluffy mashed potatoes
less salted than back home and
a goulash of unidentified vegetables
the shape of art decals.

Her eyes narrow as she wonders—
could bleeding steak
result in salmonella?

She was not fond of following recipes,
throwing in salt based on her gut,
tasting the gravy regularly.
The most important thing, her mother once instructed,
is that any meat cooked is empuk.

Beside her, Papa sulkily attempts
his towering burger,
deconstructs it with fork and knife,
refusing to use his once flour-dusted
factory hands
the way he would with
a double cheeseburger or
nasi ambeng.

Mama releases a resonating burp,
breaking the silence.
Papa *tsks* and shakes his head,
then stares
at the large cream napkin
blanketing Mama's stomach.

Laughter erupts among my sisters and I,
Mama looks pointedly at us.
Papa urgently tells her:
The napkin goes on your lap.

The approaching waiter stifles a giggle,
his hazel eyes glancing over my mother.

Gesturing to my empty plate,
he enunciates with the clarity
of a Hi-5 member—
How was it?

Papa gives a thumbs up for
“gourmet experience”,
flashing him a tight, sauce-stained smile.

Dirty

After a week absorbing the rays of the sun,
he puts his golden arm next to mine.

It lingers above my striped flats
before he says with a pout,
“I’m black now, like Malay.”

My lips lift a little,
eyes unblinking,
in that moment of a colour—
communities of colours he does not know
being reduced
to a disappointment.

Some say it’s hard
not to be afraid of black
because black is the colour of dirt
unless it’s used as part of sleek European decor,
because black is scary like the night sky
unless it’s the K-Pop swag aesthetic of your wardrobe,
because black wasn’t what Nabi Muhammad was
unless Cik Rosmah decides you look good enough to be hitam manis,
because black is darkness and uncertainty
unless you want to sound cool throwing shade.

He says “I’m black now”,
implying that’s what I am
when it is really a people I am not a part of—
a people who are not dirt but were surrounded by it in history
as they built America on their backs,
a people told to be silent when their loved ones
could be shot for turning a corner,
a people whose voices are drowned by a refusal to see black
as nothing more than a colour diluted in a paint pot of “All”,
a people whom not even sun rays darkening your skin can make you
understand.

He pouts about being “black”,
when even I know nothing of what that would be.

What I do know is
I try to appear smaller in some spaces
after every word of Mandarin I vaguely understand,
I tie back my natural lion's mane before job interviews
to look presentable according to "etiquette",
I swallow every word that cues an interruption
to watch people wave my injustice like a hollow brass trophy,
and one night, donned in a hijab with my mother,
I wriggled my feet inside my thin flats and thought,
sneakers are easier to run in.

Relationship to

Behind the Armani glasses resting on her nose, her discerning eyes squint at the stapled pieces of paper in her hands. My fingers tap repeatedly on my nylon skirt beneath the table as she frowns at the final work I just submitted to her. My final work. Or so I thought. My title rolls on her tongue, her tongue with an accent shaped by years of reading literature's canonical authors. *Relationship with*, she mutters to herself. Dramatising the grammatical error she perceives with her calculating eyes, she slowly raises her head to stare at me— *it's relationship to, not relationship with, isn't it?* Her words come slowly, carried by a deep, aged voice that moves with sureness of itself. I second guess my instinct. That's a statement, not a question, isn't it? *Yes, I think so*, I mumble. But the jumbled thoughts in my mind thud against the back of my head, an internal, metered banging that fails to reach my vocal chords. Is my relationship to the English language as legitimate as hers? Or, perhaps, I have a complicated relationship to writing in that I may have believed some rules to be right when there is always the importance of context. Its relationship to language is an important one. The author's relationship to the work must always be considered. Relationship to not relationship with. Relationship to or relationship with? What is my relationship to literature like? Or is it relationship with? What is my relationship with literature like? Someone raps on the door twice. Another student comes in and hands her more stapled pieces of paper. I glimpse the time on his Tissot, then pack my bag to indicate I should get going to meet the person I'm in a relationship to. He leaves. Then, so do I.

Peony meditates

In rhythm to the gentle notes of the sitar, Peony takes deep breaths,
eyes closed, cross-legged on her lululemon mat.

Beads of sweat roll down her slender arms, trickling
from the crook of her elbow to her blue-veined wrists,

the juicy blueberries from her acai bowl lunch travelling
up her windpipes, leaving as a concealed burp.

As instructed, she repeats her mantra in her head:
I will become a better person. I will become a better person.

In the lush forests of her mind she is a winged fairy. Rainbow wings caress
foaming currents next to a waterfall of honey. Standing tall,

mouth agape tasting sweet gold. Slender girls with pink and chocolate
petal breasts melt into each other's warmth by the bank. But the river is hers.

No one commands her but the wind, whispering where to turn her wet, bare
body. She writhes with glee in her honey pool. Heads coated in hardened honey

gently bob down the stream, each tightened taut by the hardened syrup
from her fingertips, eyes widened, lips stretched to the sides. White pearls

glistening in warm sunlight, glittering grass by the waterside dripping dew.
Candy heads grinning for her, each prized for an exotic trait.

She scoops one gently, handsome dark head with sharp nose. Next to his love,
chiseled cheeks and grey eyes, full lipped mouth never met a woman's.

Peony cups them both, large, slender fingers tracing their lines.
How pretty they looked after she detached them from their bodies,

mind and soul, about to be one with her veins. Hands the size of water lilies feel
the hard coat before she bites into one, then the other, crunch shattering

caramelised case, white teeth mawing juicy fruity flesh she holds dear to her
green kingdom. Two today to fill her stomach, maybe three tomorrow.

River carries the rest of her sweet trophies. Satisfied, she wades through sticky
sweet to soft grass, paper white body lies down in Shavasana.

Breathing in the scent of Jannah, beloved heads floating before her.
She tries to sleep but hears muffled cries, strange vibrations in her stomach

finding their way out her mouth, pleading for her to let them out.
She relents. With a stinging jolt in her gut, her eyes open.

NOTES ON POEMS

Dayang Senandong

1. According to Malay folklore, Dayang Senandong was cursed with black skin and had a beautiful voice that won a king over. They married and the curse was broken after she gave birth to his child.

Little Buffalo

1. Literal translation of “Minangkabau”: Victorious buffalo. Also the name of an ethnic group indigenous to West Sumatra, Indonesia.

Ahmad

1. Ahmad: a name sometimes used as a derogatory term to generically refer to the Malay chauffeurs of rich families
2. Well-known Singaporean racist jokes—

Q: What do you call a Malay man who drives a Mercedes?

A: A chauffeur.

Q: What is the difference between a bench and a Malay man?

A: A bench can support a family.

3. ikan kuning: yellowstripe scad
4. nasi lemak: a Malay dish with rice cooked in coconut milk as its main component

Barking up the wrong tree

1. The three section headers mean the following in the Malay language.
Sundal— Slut, Binatang — Animal, and Setan— Demon.
2. According to Malay folklore, Princess Mahsuri from Langkawi was wrongly accused of adultery by a vengeful woman, Wan Mahora, who was

jealous of her beauty. Wan Mahora spread a rumour about Mahsuri's adultery. Mahsuri was thus sentenced to death by stabbing and no one, even her husband, would believe her when she pleaded for innocence. As a sign of her innocence, the blood that flowed out of her wounds was white.

3. The third section references the pontianak, a mythical creature well-known to the Malay community. They are women who died in childbirth, returning to the world as vampire-like creatures who often target men or pregnant women. They are said to appear beautiful at first before revealing their true menacing form. They are associated with fragrant floral scents like jasmine or frangipani, and are said to lurk near banana trees.

Root(s)

1. nenek: Malay for grandmother
2. amma: Tamil for mother

Festive Bites

1. takbir: an Islamic prayer, often recited in mosques to celebrate the end of Ramadhan
2. tapak kuda cakes: cakes that are vaguely shaped like horse hooves

wedding guests

1. halal: lawful according to the Islamic faith
2. zikr: short series of prayers repeated to show devotion to Allah

Watashinonamaecha

1. Watashinonamaecha: "My name is" in Japanese
2. "Nama siapa?": "What's your name?" in Malay

Chee

1. ayam kicap: a Malay soy sauce chicken dish

sakhi

1. This poem was inspired by a Bharatanatyam (a form of classical Indian dance originating from Tamil Nadu) performance by Teater Ekamatra. It is titled “Sakhi”, conceptualised and choreographed by Ruby Jayaseelan and Aarthi Sankar as part of Pink Fest 2018.

mama’s love

1. kain batik: batik cloth. In the past, it was often wrapped around the body like a towel by Malay women in villages.

Learning to eat

1. empuk: term used to describe meat that is cooked to enough tenderness
2. nasi ambeng: Malay mixed rice dish

Dirty

1. Nabi Muhammad: The last prophet in Islam
2. hitam manis: a term used to describe dark people who are beautiful “in spite of” their skin colour

Peony meditates

1. Jannah: Islamic heaven

Root(ed): An Exegesis

1. THEMES

Root(ed) explores the multiplicities of the word “root”, and how its meanings encapsulate parts of an individual that both protect and entrap. To be rooted is to be deeply “fixed or entrenched” (*OED Online*) in something, whether a belief or culture. A tree’s roots anchor it for stability, yet fixate it in unforeseen danger. Similarly, the notion of one’s ancestral roots is not as stable or fixed as its linguistic description. One might say that they want to go back to their roots out of a desire to immerse themselves in a cultural practice characteristic of their visible ethnicity. However, a cultural experience alone is insufficient to define or encompass one’s ancestral roots, which interact with various events such as wars, political changes and colonisation. Recognising one’s ancestral roots in a Westernised world is the basis of various oppositional experiences, such as familiarity and estrangement, inclusion and exclusion, harmony and strife. *Root(ed)* was conceptualised with the desire to investigate the differences between roots and rootedness, and responds to the dangers of reducing one’s ancestral roots to a two-dimensional construct related to visible traits and cultural practices.

Two meanings of “root” are central to my poems: firstly, ancestry, secondly, the extent to which one is deeply and firmly established in a culture (as in “rooted”). In developing *Root(ed)*, I sought to explore my own roots not as a form of return to a stabilised core of being, but as a discovery of the interconnections between identity and race.

Naomi Shihab Nye, a Palestinian-American poet whose father was a Palestinian refugee, writes in her poem “Steps” from *19 Varieties of Gazelle*:

“Paint dries more quickly in English./ The thick swoops and curls of Arabic letters/ stay moist and glistening” (42). In this poem, she represents the diversity and richness in Middle Eastern culture by focusing on the beauty of the everyday. She also draws attention to the differences between the tactile experience of two languages, in which writing in Arabic dries more slowly because Arabic letters are thicker and bolder than English letters. This reflects minute details that are ingrained into the experience of languages. In a similar vein, *Root(ed)* employs languages in a way that pays attention to their sonic aspects. Some of my poems combine various languages, such as English, Malay and Arabic, with the consideration of how different words sound next to each other. *Root(ed)* allows the sounds of different tongues to intertwine rather than remain alienated from each other.

Nye’s collection also consists of poems depicting the violent hardships people from different parts of the Middle East face. In the poem “Her Way”, she writes: “And the soldiers flipping ID cards,/ the men who editorialized blood/ till it was pale and not worth spilling,/ meant nothing to her” (23). She portrays the dehumanising omission of sufferings Palestinians face in a war-torn country when it comes to one-sided news publications. *19 Varieties of Gazelles* is full of sensuous details bringing out the beauty in small things, but also captures the reality of violence occurring in parts of the Middle East. By depicting hardships alongside everyday gems, Nye conveys the palpable brutality of stripping an ethnic group of their humanity.

I struggled to conceptualise *Root(ed)* because my Singaporean-Malay identity also traces back to a history of disputes over a people’s rightful land,

but I live in a more sheltered present. I live in a time and place where the worst forms of discrimination I face are often covert or verbal. I was lost about how to portray familiar cultural experiences and traditions in my poems with precision, and address my experiences as a postcolonial subject in the bigger world too. Nye's work inspired me to treat the development of *Root(ed)* as a process of detailing imageries, experiences and reactions— from the beautiful everyday down to the grotesque. Nye's work also guided me by showing that one's positionality— the way in which their identity is tied to their context— can evoke empathetic reactions towards experiences and details of different times and places. This is reflected in some of my poems, such as "Dirty" (40), which deplores the devaluation of dark skin. "Dirty" details the problematic treatment of dark skinned individuals by contrasting the experiences of Malay individuals with those of African descent, both of whom are labelled "black" with a negative connotation to it in the Singaporean society. *Root(ed)* progresses from exploring my Malay roots and Muslim upbringing in the first section, to portraying the complications that rise when these roots interact with other facets of my identity in the postcolonial world.

In *The City in which I Love You*, Li-Young Lee writes several poems about language, family, ancestry and the different cultures he was brought up in. Lee is an American poet born in Jakarta, who lived through a tumultuous time of Anti-Chinese sentiments in Indonesia. His poem "Persimmons" details the persona's classroom experience, where he does not know the difference between the words persimmon and precision. He is told off by his teacher, Mrs.

Walker. He then traces his Chinese roots by detailing his memories of persimmons with his family:

Finally understanding
he was going blind,
my father sat up all one night
waiting for a song, a ghost.
I gave him the persimmons,
swelled, heavy as sadness,
and sweet as love. (*Poetry Foundation*)

Despite his inability to properly distinguish between persimmon and precision, the persona's understanding of persimmons goes deeper than Mrs. Walker's curt dismissal of his linguistic error. He connects the word "persimmons" to an emotional memory about gifting his father these fruits before his father became blind. He also remembers the precision needed to choose ripe persimmons based on experiences with his family; his recollection of how to choose ripe persimmons contrasts with the unripe persimmons Mrs. Walker gives to her students. Lee's poem highlights how an Othered individual who has immigrated to a White-centric country is at a crossroads when it comes to the English language. "Persimmons" poses how the recollection of memories is more meaningful to the persona than Mrs. Walker's description of persimmons as Chinese apples, drawing attention to how vivid, subjective memories can sometimes describe one's depth of knowledge better than

reductive language can. Inspired by this, *Root(ed)* details some of my own personal memories and family portraits, portraying experiences specific to my ethnicity that are tied to the Western(ised) world. For instance, “Learning to eat” (38) contrasts dishes familiar to Malay culture, with Western dishes and dining etiquette, to explore the tensions faced between these two worlds. Essentially, this collection of poems uncovers the challenges I face trying to grasp and accept the English language as a part of my identity; it is a language I still cannot comfortably call my own, but also a language that I want to reclaim with the depiction of ethnically and culturally specific memories.

Being a queer, Malay-Muslim woman and university student from a lower middle class background, writing *Root(ed)* undoubtedly involved the acknowledgment of disconnected angles in my identity. Adrienne Rich, an acclaimed American poet who has written various essays on radical feminism, comments:

Sometimes I feel I have seen too long from too many disconnected angles: white, Jewish, anti-Semite, racist, anti-racist, once-married, lesbian, middle-class, feminist, exmatriate southerner, *split at the root* that I will never bring them whole. (481)

These disconnected angles describe social categories that make up her identity yet contradict each other to an extent. In her essay, she highlights the ways these categories fail to complement each other despite their intersections, because there are varying social expectations that pervade each of them. Her

split at the root thus draws attention to how her Jewish identity, although still a part of her, exists in contradiction with some of the other social categories she identifies with.

Root(ed) is driven by a similar split at the root in my identity. Growing up in a Malay-Muslim environment meant listening to specific details in my childhood madrasah² about the rapists and/or homosexuals you can find in neraka³. Oftentimes, the queer identity is linked to the Westernised individual, and is assumed to reflect White liberal politics. When it comes to being queer and being Malay-Muslim, there are already contradictions between what politics I am supposed to stand for when people assess me. Various strands of my identity are seen as diametrically opposed to each other even though they coexist. These disconnected angles continuously entangle themselves with each other to inform me of who I am. They are parts of my identity, yet I am rooted in each part to different extents. *Root(ed)* reflects upon the necessity to unbind these fixed ascriptions to achieve a constant state of equilibrium between disconnected angles.

Root(ed) also rebels against a reductive approach to understanding an individual from a minority ethnicity. Minorities are often reduced to having easily definable characteristics so that they are not seen as complex human beings. They are understood in binary categories, either the best or the worst of their kinds. Syed Hussein Alatas addresses this in *The Myth of the Lazy Native*, where he explains the colonial history of the stereotype that people from the

² School of Islamic education

³ Hell in Islamic terms

Malay Archipelago are lazy. He speaks about the British perception that the Malays were indolent, cunning and treacherous during colonial times:

It arose because the Malays avoided colonial capitalist plantation labour. There is no doubt that a proportion of Malays were lazy, but these were usually from the upper classes. [Upper class Malays back then had domestic slaves.] Similarly[,] there were Malays who were cunning and treacherous[,] but their cunning and treachery were linked to their profession and situation. (117)

Alatas proceeds to explain that these generalisations “served to justify conquest and domination” (117). The stereotype of Malay laziness traces back to an indigenous population’s resistance to their colonisers’ principles and customs. This stereotype maintained itself over the years when Malays refused to assimilate themselves into colonial interests. *Root(ed)* deals with my inability to accept the dissolution of my Malay roots into one-dimensional and straightforward caricatures, and speaks out against the fetishisation of colonisation. It is a collection that delves into the difficult clashes between my disconnected angles, with several poems pondering upon how rooted I can really be in a nation that takes pride in its colonial history.

Subsequently, *Root(ed)* also reclaims some of the negative stereotypes about Malays in Singapore. At present, one of the stereotypes of Malays is that they lack “key cultural and biological attributes that would enable them to succeed in the modern Singaporean economy” (Lyons 181). These stereotypes

ground themselves in the collectivist kampung⁴ life Malays used to have during British colonisation; stereotypes that were carried over to the present so that menial or blue-collar tasks are associated with inherent laziness. The distaste towards the idleness of kampung life (or activities associated with it) is also displayed in modern Singaporean Malays. Lyons further explains that there is a reluctance to view the kampung lifestyle, which is still practised in countries like Indonesia or Malaysia, positively. Among more privileged members of the Malay community, there is an evident desire to assimilate into a society that encourages nationalistic progression and financial productivity. As a response to this, *Root(ed)* puts various idle subjects and activities in the spotlight, whether it is the female slave in “Dayang Senandong” (13), the parking ticket officer in “Ahmad” (15), or the leisurely atmosphere of a day during Hari Raya in “Festive Bites” (26). It commemorates voices and situations that are overshadowed by the ruthless need to attain capitalist success. It celebrates idleness and slow-moving, intimate spaces as a form of rebellion towards the dismissal of interiority in postcolonial and/or minority-race subjects.

Root(ed) also addresses feelings of marginalisation in a nation with bureaucratic rules aimed at optimising its citizens’ capitalist productivity. The late first Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, believed in the importance of preserving SAP (Special Assistance Plan) schools in Singapore— schools dedicated to honing students’ skills in both English and Mandarin. In explaining the goals of having SAP schools, Stephanie Ho states: “[T]raditional Chinese values— such as courtesy, discipline, respect for authority, social responsibility

⁴ village

and awareness of one's cultural roots— imparted to students in these schools would help to strengthen the Singapore society” (*Singapore Infopedia*). These schools were also preserved in hopes of contributing to Singapore's reputation as a competitive Chinese-centric society in the world: “With the strengthening of the Chinese economy, Lee was of the view that Singapore needed a group of professionals who were not only bilingual but also bicultural” (*Singapore Infopedia*). As such, non-Chinese people in Singapore are clearly separated from the Chinese majority and implied to be culturally inferior. The nation's institutional efforts to nurture Chinese culture, and Chinese bilingualism, creates a clear racial separation between the Chinese majority and minority races in Singapore. It privileges the cultural values of the country's dominant ethnicity in its bid to succeed in a Westernised, capitalist world. *Root(ed)* digs into feelings of marginalisation— of not feeling rooted in nationalistic sentiments— and demands the visibility of minority individuals. Several poems in the collection lend a voice to the underrepresented, marginalised subject— such as the working-class Malay man in “Ahmad” (15)— challenging more privileged readers to delve into these subjects' complexities as individuals.

Furthermore, Lyons and Ford explain that Singaporean individuals are “encouraged to think about themselves using racial categories” (175) because of the CMIO (Chinese, Malay, Indian or Other) racial categorisation in Singaporean citizens' identity cards. This creates clear boundaries between the different ethnicities in the country, encouraging tolerance as a means of preventing racial tensions, instead of acceptance and understanding. *Root(ed)* challenges a reductive approach to diversity, acknowledging how this threatens

to compartmentalise rather than unify the citizens of a multiracial community like Singapore.

In his book *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson explains that the concept of nationhood and national boundaries developed after an elaborate history of people desiring economic power and imperialism. He writes:

[There was] a conception of temporality in which cosmology and history were indistinguishable, the origins of the world and of men essentially identical. [...] The slow, uneven decline of these interlinked certainties, first in Western Europe, later elsewhere, under the impact of economic change, 'discoveries' (social and scientific), and the development of increasingly rapid communications, drove a harsh wedge between cosmology and history. (36)

Dispersed communities in the world only came about as a result of economic change and imperial conquests. This contrasts with how the world was once interlinked, and individuals were not seen as belonging to a distinguishable community. This is not to say that the diverse cultures, customs and traditions at present are arbitrary. However, Anderson highlights how differences between communities in the world do not define them completely. Heritage and ethnicity may shape a person's identity and their experiences, but have also become immediate justifications for the insufficiency or backwardness of communities that are not economically or globally successful.

Anderson further explains that nationalism came about as “responses by power-groups [...] threatened with exclusion from, or marginalization in, popular imagined communities” (109-110). The construct of nationalism developed over the years to foster the need for individuals to be productive citizens. Consequently, this develops a pressure for citizens to contribute towards the advancement of their nation’s global reputation. This necessitates competition and the privileging of faster-paced, wealthy communities in the world. The richness of ethnic communities that do not align with capitalist success is thus deemed irrelevant in the present world.

Root(ed) addresses ethnicity and nationhood not as definitive concepts, but as constructs shaped by various political, historical and geographical occurrences. It reflects upon a desire for a world that is free of simplistic categorisations; a desire to go back to the roots of an interlinked world that contrasts to the present one, where communities are separated by degrees of global status.

In the second part of my exegesis, I will illustrate how *Root(ed)* speaks to the poetics of dramatic monologues⁵ and Malay-Muslim texts, by comparing a few of my poems to works written by Alfian Sa’at and Abdul Ghafar Ibrahim.

2. POETICS

Root(ed) begins with a dramatic monologue titled “Dayang Senandong” (13), based on the Malay legend of Dayang Senandong. Dayang

⁵ A dramatic monologue, according to M.H. Abrams, refers to a poem where the writer adopts a persona that is blatantly not the poet, oftentimes a character in canonical literature, or a mythical figure.

Senandong is a slave who was cursed with black skin. In the legend, her melodious singing attracted a prince who ended up marrying her, after which the curse of her skin colour was lifted.

In 2017, an advertisement by Watsons⁶ Malaysia came under fire because of its representation of this legend. In the advertisement, several women from around the world try to win over the heart of a prince. He falls for the melodious voice of a girl who is revealed to have black skin. She eventually washes off her skin, explaining that she was cursed with dark skin. The advertisement then ends with the quote, “Only at Watson’s you’ll be beautiful” (*Channel NewsAsia*). In a nutshell, the advertisement demonises the darkness of her skin, emphasising the prince’s horror after the revelation of her face, then proceeds to associate her newly fair complexion with beauty.

My poem “Dayang Senandong” adopts the persona of Dayang Senandong herself, but re-imagines the legend by showing her embrace the curse of her dark skin instead of wallowing in its social connotations of ugliness. She speaks:

You don’t understand— my skin was never a curse. Mouths
just thought they should unsheathe me. So I died with the translucence the sun
forced onto the moon. But my skin was my voice, my voice my skin,
craving change within my means, singing freedom.

This opening poem introduces a persona who embraces a position of Otherness, which is what permeates *Root(ed)*. Dramatic monologue was deployed in this

⁶ A health- and beauty-care store chain

poem to re-invent a figure of myth, changing the connotations of skin colour in its re-telling. It gives a voice to Dayang Senandong, re-imagining her existence as a woman who becomes comfortable in her skin that is seen as a curse.

In a book titled *Dramatic Monologue*, Glennis Byron explains: “The dramatic monologue is exploited not simply to animate the past but also to interrogate history and the historical subject” (5). In “Dayang Senandong”, I wrote about a persona who speaks from the margins. She exposes the problems in the society she is in that are similar to the problems that pervade present reality, urging a reframing of the way dark skin is perceived. Her reclaimed voice introduces *Root(ed)*’s refusal to let marginalised subjects remain silent.

Alfian Sa’at adopts the use of dramatic monologue in several poems from *A History of Amnesia*. Sa’at is a Singaporean writer who has written works in both English and Malay. *A History of Amnesia* digs up moments in history that were forgotten and erased, reclaiming Singapore’s history. There are a few poems in this collection that explore Singaporean Malay myths. These poems are titled “(Name of main character in a myth) Speaks.” One such example is “Badang Speaks”, which adapts the Malay myth of Badang into poetry.

In Malay mythology, Badang is a slave who works for a wealthy master. One day, he encounters a demon who eats a fish Badang had just caught. Badang threatens to kill the demon for stealing his fish, but it pleads for its life by allowing Badang to be granted any wish. The only criteria for the wish is that Badang has to swallow the demon’s vomit. Badang agrees to this, and wishes to be the strongest man alive. His wish is granted, eventually leading to

his liberation from his master's enslavement, on the grounds that he only uses his strength for good deeds.

In Saat's "Badang Speaks", the persona, Badang, states:

Like everyone else, I was afraid of death.

I could only move heavens, not claim them.

Which weakling would dig my grave for me?

What frail flowers whose colours are pounding

In the air, louder than my heartbeats?

What worms tickling my cracked spine?

My strength returns only to haunt me.

I am appearing here: no muscle, no will, all legend. (62)

The persona reveals his vulnerability despite his once insurmountable strength, showing a fear of death and weakness. He metaphorises heavens as the heaviest things he could move on Earth, conveying the ecstasy felt in experiencing these physical moments. He loses the ability to have these physical experiences, caught in an intangible limbo. Lightness and non-tactile experiences deny Badang the opportunity to use his physical strength. Heaven is not just a place he cannot claim, but one that he cannot grasp due to its ethereal aspect. Sa'at's Badang emphasises his extreme reliance on brute strength. Without his strength, he is a vulnerable man who struggles with finding his interiority.

In a similar vein to Sa'at's Badang, the persona in "Dayang Senandong" bemoans her personal worries. However, *Root(ed)*'s "Dayang Senandong" reflects the persona embracing her marginal position, while Sa'at's Badang feels nostalgia towards the power and pride he once had that eventually turns to dust. The personae in these two poems both wish to be remembered. Badang wants to be remembered for his infamous strength, while Dayang Senandong seeks to be remembered in a more nuanced way in the present. *Root(ed)* thus speaks to Sa'at's poems that revive figures lost to history, and additionally necessitates the reader to listen to the voices of those in positions of less power.

One of the collections of Malay poetry I read during my research was *Takkan Hilang* by Abdul Ghafar Ibrahim (also popularly known by his acronym, AGI), a contemporary Malay poet from Malaysia. His collection is a combination of verse and visual poems. He addresses themes of religiousness and also explores the crises of Muslim refugees all over the world, such as the Rohingyas and the Palestinians. In the introduction, Henry Avelling, the English translator of the book, states:

To be a Malay is, by definition, to be a Muslim. AGI writes of personal devotion and acceptance of the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) as a way of individual sanctification. Beyond this, however, his compassion reaches out to those Muslims who are suffering persecution in other lands: Burma, Kosovar, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Palestin. (x)

This segment from the book's introduction makes a clear link between the Malay identity being attached to the religion of Islam. In his collection, AGI explores the sufferings of Muslims in different parts of the world who are subject to the likes of genocide and murder. These are issues that inevitably trouble me due to the Muslim part of my identity. At the same time, I am not a religious person. *Root(ed)* is fuelled by the inability to accept the violence that happens to each identity group I am a part of even though they are unfathomable in their coexistence. The poems that address both my queerness and religion are resonant of my need to let these seemingly opposing strands intertwine.

Figure 1. “Palestin” by AGI

The poem in Figure 1, “Palestin”, is one of AGI’s poems in *Takkan Hilang*. He conjures violent metaphors in this poem to portray the war-torn country of Palestine. He writes, “Palestin IALAH DURI DALAM DAGING ARAB/ YANG MENJADIKAN DUNIA MENGGELEPAR DAN BANGSA ITU/ NANAR” (80). (Palestine is a thorn in the side of the Arab’s flesh, erupting the world, rendering its people lost.) The crescent moon in the poem resembles those found in the logo on top of mosques. The rage-filled uppercase words on the page stand in stark contrast to the peaceful crescent moon. “Palestin” is a poem driven by an urgency to resolve senseless violence, ending with the desperate repetition of the country’s name, as if in prayer. The tone of the poem has a jarring contrast to the crescent moon depicted. This emphasises the inaction of nations governed by a religion that advocates peace while a war-torn country suffers in their region.

Root(ed) uncovers a need to resolve feelings of alienation towards the Muslim part of me. It unearths the extent to which one can feel rooted in their ethnic group’s beliefs and cultures if they deviate from certain rules that are considered acceptable. One of the poems where I explore the clash between my queer and Muslim identities is “Lava Crust” (31), in which I quote a verse from the Quran about the fall of Sodom and Gomorrah before the start of the poem. “Lava Crust” is a prose poem that depicts two lovers in an intimate setting. It mulls over the demonisation of the queer identity by zooming into harmless details characteristic of romantic love, such as watching how a lover eats their food. Beneath its easygoing, slow-moving pace, it carries an undertone of desperation to reconcile two disconnected identities in the persona’s sense of

being, exhorting a listening ear from the Muslim world in a similar vein as AGI's "Palestin."

In *This Bridge Called My Back*, Andrea Canaan, a Black feminist writer, states in her essay "Brownness":

I could see my enemy as my brownness, my community, my mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers. This is logical, given my patterns of self oppression. I could isolate myself from the brown community, claiming my right to be me without concern for our growth and development as a whole. I would, however, be cutting off an essential part of my development to nurture another. I would simply be acknowledging the oppression of my brownness and not that of my femaleness. They are both essential and important, however. (234)

Canaan explains that to her, being brown is not just about a singular identity. For instance, being a Malay wife could mean that you are expected to do all household chores alone, an expectation based on some sexist interpretations of what a good wife is according to the Quran. One's racial identity interacts with the various other identities they are a part of, and the oppressions they face could come from more than one angle. Canaan thus highlights the importance of understanding these intersections between identities in order to speak up for a community. A Malay individual speaking against racism does not nurture the fellowship of their community if they also discriminate against their queer Malay peers. *Root(ed)* thus urges the reader to demolish boundaries between the

different identities I am rooted in, and asks for the acceptance of their coexistence.

And so, I, a Malay-Muslim, Singaporean queer woman, an entanglement of disconnected roots of varying sizes, lengths, corrugations and textures, invite you to uproot the identities that trap me in the ground. Unravel me.

WORKS CITED

- Abrams, M.H. "Dramatic Monologue." *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 8th ed. Boston: Thomson Wadsworth, 2005. 70-71.
- Alatas, Syed Hussein. *The Myth of the Lazy Native. A Study in the Image of the Malays, Filipinos and Javanese from the 16th to the 20th Century and its Function in the Ideology of colonial Capitalism*. London: F. Cass, 1977. Print.
- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. New York: Verso, 2006. Print.
- Byron, Glennis. *Dramatic Monologue*. Taylor and Francis, 2014.
- Ho, Stephanie. "Vernacular education." *Singapore Infopedia*, eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_2016-10-03_094744.html. Accessed 23 Aug. 2017.
- Lee, Li-Young. "Persimmons." *Poetry Foundation*. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43011/persimmons>. Accessed 14 Oct. 2017.
- Lyons, Lenore, and Michele Ford. "Singaporean First: Challenging the Concept of Transnational Malay Masculinity." *Reframing Singapore*, 2009, pp. 175–193. JSTOR.
- Moraga, Cherrie. *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. Berkeley, CA: Third Woman Press, 2002. Print.
- Nye, Naomi Shihab. "Steps." *19 Varieties of Gazelle*. New York: Harper Tempest, 2005. Print.

- Rich, Adrienne. "Split at the root: An essay on Jewish identity." *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose, 1979–1985* (1986): 474-482.
- "root, n.1." OED Online, *Oxford University Press*, June 2017, www.oed.com/view/Entry/167363. Accessed 6 October 2017.
- Sa'at, Alfian. *A History of Amnesia: Poems*. Ethos Books, 2008.
- Sim, Cheryl. "Special Assistance Plan schools." *Singapore Infopedia*. http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_2016-07-21_154021.html. Accessed 23 August. 2017.
- "Using 'They' and 'Them' in the Singular." *Oxford Living Dictionaries*, en.oxforddictionaries.com/grammar/using-they-and-them-in-the-singular.
- "Watsons Malaysia under Fire for 'Blackface' Ad." *Channel NewsAsia*, 8 June 2017, www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asia/watsons-malaysia-under-fire-for-blackface-ad-8927270.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

“1835 English Education Act.” Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/English_Education_Act_1835)

English_Education_Act_1835. Accessed 24 Aug. 2017.

Ahmad, Dohra. ed. *Rotten English: A literary anthology*. WW Norton, 2007.

Print.

Abrams, M.H. “Dramatic Monologue.” *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 8th ed.

Boston: Thomson Wadsworth, 2005. 70-71.

Ahmed, Sarah. *Living a Feminist Life*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017.

Print.

Alatas, Syed Hussein. *The Myth of the Lazy Native. A Study in the Image of the Malays, Filipinos and Javanese from the 16th to the 20th Century and its*

Function in the Ideology of colonial Capitalism. London: F. Cass, 1977.

Print.

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. New York: Verso, 2006. Print.

Anwar, Chairil. *The complete poetry and prose of Chairil Anwar. / Edited and translated by Burton Raffel*. Albany: State University of New York

Press, 1970. Print.

Barnard, Timothy P. “Sedih sampai buta: Blindness, modernity and tradition in

Malay films of the 1950s and 1960s.” *Bijdragen to de Taal-, Lande- en Volkenkunde*, vol. 161, no. 4, 2005, pp. 433–453.

Boland, Eavan. *New Selected Poems*. Exeter: Carcanet Press, 2013. Print.

Bryson, Bethany. ““Anything but heavy metal”: Symbolic exclusion and musical dislikes.” *American sociological review* (1996): 884-899.

- Byron, Glennis. *Dramatic Monologue*. Taylor and Francis, 2014.
- Clifford, James. *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997. Print.
- CNN. "Meet the Cape Malays of Cape Town." *CNN*, <http://edition.cnn.com/videos/world/2016/06/20/inside-africa-the-cape-malays-spc-b.cnn>. Accessed 23 Aug. 2017.
- Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *Between the World and Me*. New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015. Print.
- Darwish, Mahmoud. *Unfortunately, It Was Paradise: Selected Poems*. University of California Press, 2013. Print.
- Darwish, Mahmoud. *The Butterfly's Burden*. Copper Canyon Press, 2006. Print.
- De Rozario, Tania. *Tender Delirium*. Math Paper Press, 2015.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Monolingualism of the Other, or, The Prosthesis of Origin*. Stanford University Press, 1998. Print.
- Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. London: Pluto Press, 1986. Print.
- Freire, Paulo. *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc, 2005. Print.
- Glück, Louise. *Poems 1962-2012*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux: Ecco Press, 2012.
- Sequeira, Joyna and Aniket Tari, directors. *Gudiya*. Blush Originals, 20 July 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=D05dN06w4yY&feature=youtu.be. Accessed 23 Aug. 2017.

- Hamzah, Amir. *Mysticism & Poetry: A Hermeneutical Reading of the Poems of Amir Hamzah / Md. Salleh Yaapar*. Trans. Yaapar, Md. Salleh. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1995. Print.
- Ho, Stephanie. "Vernacular education." *Singapore Infopedia*, eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_2016-10-03_094744.html. Accessed 23 Aug. 2017.
- Hongo, Garrett. *Coral Road: Poems*. Knopf, 2013. Print.
- Hongo, Garrett. *Volcano: A Memoir of Hawai'i*. Vintage, 1996. Print.
- hooks, bell. *Ain't I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism*. London, Pluto Press, 1982. Print.
- Ibrahim, Abdul Ghafar. *Takkan Hilang*. Trans. Aveling, Harry. Kuala Lumpur: Dawama Sdn. Bhd., 2008. Print.
- Jamil, Nurhaizatul Jamila. "Madrasah education." *Singapore Infopedia*. [http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_1661_2010-04-07.html?s=madrasah %20education](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_1661_2010-04-07.html?s=madrasah%20education). Accessed 23 Aug. 2017.
- Jenkins, Barry, director. *Moonlight*. A24, 2016.
- Kato, Tsuyoshi. "Change and Continuity in the Minangkabau Matrilineal System." *Indonesia*, no. 25, 1978, pp. 1–16. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/3350964.
- Kenny, Kevin. *Diaspora: a very short introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. Print.
- Knight, Etheridge. "The Idea of Ancestry." *poets.org*, <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/ideaancestry>. Accessed 23 Aug. 2017.
- Lee, Li-Young. *Rose*. Brockport, NY: Bookslinger, 1986. Print.

- Lee, Li-Young. *The City in which I Love You*. Brockport, NY: BOA Editions, 1990. Print.
- Leung, Constant, et al. "The Idealised Native Speaker, Reified Ethnicities, and Classroom Realities." *TESOL Quarterly*, vol. 31, no. 3, 1997, pp. 543–560., www.jstor.org/stable/3587837.
- Lim, Shirley Geok-lin. *Joss and Gold*. The Feminist Press At CUNY, 2002. Print.
- Lim, Peng Han. "English Schools and School Libraries before the Second World War: A Singapore Perspective." *Singapore Journal of Library & Information Management*, vol. 37, 2008, pp. 61–80.
- Lyons, Lenore, and Michele Ford. "Singaporean First: Challenging the Concept of Transnational Malay Masculinity." *Reframing Singapore*, 2009, pp. 175–193. *JSTOR*.
- Macaulay, Thomas Babington. "Minute by the Hon'ble T. B. Macaulay, dated the 2nd February 1835." *Columbia University*. http://www.columbia.edu/itc/meac/pritchett/00generallinks/macaulay/txt_minute_education_1835.html. Accessed 23 Aug. 2017.
- Michaels, Walter Benn. *The Trouble with Diversity*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007. Print.
- Moraga, Cherrie. *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. Berkeley, CA: Third Woman Press, 2002. Print.
- Moyers, Bill. *The Language of Life: A Festival of Poets*. New York: Doubleday, 1995. Print.

Nye, Naomi Shihab. *19 Varieties of Gazelle*. New York: Harper Tempest, 2005.

Print.

Nye, Naomi Shihab. "Boy and Egg." *Poetry Foundation*. [https://](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46439/boy-and-egg)

www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46439/boy-and-egg. Accessed 23

Aug. 2017.

Nye, Naomi Shihab. "Yellow Glove." *Poetry Foundation*. [https://](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/48601/yellow-glove)

www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/48601/yellow-glove. Accessed 23

Aug. 2017.

Ondaatje, Michael. *Running in the Family*. New York: Vintage International,

1993. Print.

Phelps, Teresa Godwin. "Language, Violence, and Oppression." *Shattered*

Voices: Language, Violence, and the Work of Truth Commissions,

University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004, pp. 38–51, [www.jstor.org/](http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt3fh8vr.6)

[stable/j.ctt3fh8vr.6](http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt3fh8vr.6).

Rahmat, Hadijah. *In Search of Modernity: A Study of the Concepts of*

Literature, Authorship, and Notions of Self in "traditional" Malay

Literature. *Kuala Lumpur: Academy of Malay Studies, University of*

Malaya, 2001. Print.

Ramazani, Jahan. *The Hybrid Muse: Postcolonial Poetry in English*. Oxford;

New York: Oxford University Press, 2006. Print.

Ramlee, P, director. *Ibu mertuaku*. Shaw Brothers, 1962.

Rich, Adrienne. "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence." *Signs*,

vol. 5, no. 4, 1980, pp. 631–660. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/3173834.

Rich, Adrienne. *Diving into the Wreck*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2013. Print.

- Rich, Adrienne. *Midnight Salvage*. New York: Norton, 1999. Print.
- Rich, Adrienne. *On Lies, Secrets and Silence*. New York: Norton, 1995. Print.
- Rich, Adrienne. "Split at the root: An essay on Jewish identity." *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose, 1979–1985* (1986): 474-482.
- Sa'at, Alfian. *A History of Amnesia: Poems*. Ethos Books, 2008.
- Sa'at, Alfian. *Malay Sketches*. Singapore: Ethos Books, 2012. Print.
- Sai, Siew-Min. "Educating multicultural citizens: Colonial nationalism, imperial citizenship and education in late colonial Singapore." *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. 44, no. 1, 2013, pp. 49-73. doi:10.1017/S0022463412000616.
- Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon, 1978. Print.
- Shange, Ntozake. *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide / When the Rainbow Is Enuf*. Scribner, 2010. Print.
- Shellabear, Rev. W.G. *The Autobiography of Munshi Abdullah*. Singapore: Methodist Publishing House, 1918. Print.
- Sim, Cheryl. "Singapore's Bilingual Policy." *Singapore Infopedia*. http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_2016-09-01_093402.html. Accessed 23 August. 2017.
- Sim, Cheryl. "Special Assistance Plan schools." *Singapore Infopedia*. http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_2016-07-21_154021.html. Accessed 23 August. 2017.
- Sole, Kelwyn. "Culture, Politics and the Black Writer: A Critical Look at Prevailing Assumptions." *English in Africa*, vol. 10, no. 1, 1983, pp. 37–84. *JSTOR*, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/40238758.

- Song, Cathy. *Cloud Moving Hands*. Pitt Poetry Series, 2007. Print.
- Spivak, Gayatri. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Macmillan Education: Basingstoke, 1988, pp. 271-313. Print.
- Swettenham, Frank. *Malay Sketches*. Kuala Lumpur: Silverfish Books, 2016. Print.
- Tanner, Nancy Makepeace. "THE NUCLEAR FAMILY IN MINANGKABAU MATRILINY: THE MIRROR OF DISPUTES." *Bijdragen Tot De Taal-, Land- En Volkenkunde*, vol. 138, no. 1, 1982, pp. 129–151. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/27863410.
- Tatum, Beverly Daniel. Beverly Daniel Tatum, *"Why Are All The Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?" And Other Conversations about Race*. New York: Basic Books, 2003. Print.
- Tonouchi, Lee A. *Living Pidgin: Contemplations on Pidgin Culture*. Tinfish Press, 2009. Print.
- Tupas, Ruanni. *Unequal Englishes: The Politics of Englishes Today*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. Print.
- "Using 'They' and 'Them' in the Singular." *Oxford Living Dictionaries*, en.oxforddictionaries.com/grammar/using-they-and-them-in-the-singular.
- Vuong, Ocean. *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*. Vintage Books, 2017.
- Wikkramasinha, Lakdasa. "The Poet." *Bomb Magazine*. <http://bombmagazine.org/article/6246/the-poet>. Accessed 24 Aug. 2017.
- Witek, Terri. *Robert Lowell and Life Studies*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1993. Print.