The broken bodies of language and history in Vyvyane Loh' s breaking the tongue

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**THE BROKEN BODIES OF LANGUAGE AND
HISTORY IN VYVYANE LOH'S *BREAKING
THE TONGUE***

**LUI JIA YI, KAREN
SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES
2020**

**The Broken Bodies of Language and History in
Vyvyane Loh's *Breaking the Tongue***

LUI JIA YI, KAREN

School of Humanities

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

2020

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Lui Jia Yi, Karen

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SUMMARY

This paper addresses the entanglement of language, history, and mutilated bodies in Vyvyane Loh's *Breaking the Tongue*. Set in Singapore during the 1940s, *Breaking the Tongue* presents a fragmented, disorderly third-person narrative of Claude Lim, an Anglicised Singaporean-Chinese who experiences life under the British and Japanese Empires. His interactions with family members such as his father, Humphrey, and Grandma Siok, and encounters with new friends like Han Ling-li and Jack Winchester influence and shape his perspective on his precarious identity as a Singaporean-Chinese. The third-person narrative is interrupted by the seemingly arbitrary presence of Chinese characters and a dream-like second-person narrative of Claude the Body's torture by the Japanese. This dissertation explores the role of language and mutilated bodies in isolated passages or scenes in redefining notions of identity and history.

Touted as "a revelatory book of both novel and history", *Breaking the Tongue*'s revelatory quality is subjective as Loh engages in withholding through cryptic dreams and the Chinese language. This project examines the ability of languages to provide specific frameworks that allows a community to make meaning of the world and establish their position in it. However, languages are not all-encompassing. While another language may be able to convey specific nuances that are absent in other languages, it remains fluid due to the subjectivity of interpretation that resists fixed definitions.

Introduction

序: On Postmodern Historiography and Singaporean Literatures

In the first chapter of Vyvyane Loh's *Breaking the Tongue*, there are two distinct accounts of what a character goes through on a specific day. Version 1 reports what happened in a public setting while Version 2 appears to be a conjecture of what could have happened in private later. The novel returns to this logic and indeed shows how the historical novel itself is just a 'version' amongst others where the boundaries between visible observations and questionable fabrications blur. *Breaking the Tongue* is Loh's postmodernist take on a longer tradition of the novel in the setting of Singapore in the 1940s. Even in a classical account of the novel, literary theorist Ian Watt observes experimentation with narrative contingency as early as the 18th century (3). In the postmodern novel, multiple endings and forking possibilities have become some of the central sites for innovation. This paper examines how Loh capitalises on such postmodern features to rewrite her Singaporean World War II story to investigate the larger questions of subjectivity in history, language, and personal experiences.

In order to set up the problematic and contextualise this thesis on a contemporary writer, this introduction will start with a more elaborate version of my close-readings of the two versions in the first chapter. It will then be followed by my close-readings of Loh's reinvention of a well-known Singaporean legend that traces the founding of Singapore to the arrival of Sang Nila Utama, an Indonesian prince, in the late 13th century. Next, I will situate the novel's ambiguous place in Singaporean literatures and examine how Loh and other authors approach the topic of writing about home whereby home is not necessarily affixed to a tangible, geographical location. Finally, I will offer a preview of what the subsequent chapters cover.

Besides third person narration, Loh uses second person narration to achieve a number of purposes that I will further elaborate on in my paper. Unlike the conventional treatment of “you”, Loh gives the persona of “you” much more agency, allowing it to repeatedly question the credibility of history and accounts by complicating the story-telling process and furnishing an irresolute ending in *Breaking the Tongue*. The fragmented, disorderly nature of the narratives and ambiguity surrounding who “you” are makes it difficult to impose some form of chronology and pinpoint the exact ending. The one that Loh offers is yet another vague dream-like sequence that does not correspond to a traditional ending of a realist novel. Literary critic Linda Hutcheon notes that John Fowles provides multiple endings to *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* in *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (13) to destabilise the dominance of conventions. Loh builds on Fowles’s technique by offering an alternative version of the sub-narratives to accompany the dominant and allegedly more plausible version. The presence of multiple versions shed light on how she adapts Fowles’s technique to evoke scepticism in conventional historiography and dominant historical narratives.

The two story versions in the first chapter focuses on an experience of Han Ling-li, a Singaporean-Chinese young woman who is a member of the Singapore China Relief Fund. Loh opens a passage with “One version:” (Loh 86) about Ling-li’s attendance at the Singapore China Relief Fund rally that occurs before her scheduled meeting with Tan Kah Kee, the leader of the Relief Fund. Loh gives an alternative version of the event in a separate passage that opens with “Maybe:” (94) about Ling-li’s private meeting with Tan Kah Kee. The first version takes place in a public setting and Ling-li’s attendance confirms her support of the overseas Chinese community and by extension the British imperialists against the Japanese imperialists. However, the “maybe” version happens in a private setting where nobody, except the two of them, is privy to the details of the meeting. Furthermore, the lack

of distinction between that scene and the Fifth Columnist's writing of the report makes it difficult to ascertain the credibility of this "maybe" sub-narrative. The scene ends with a paragraph that "the Fifth Columnist writes on" as she mulls over "the complications of fictional histories, historical fictions" (98). This scene offers the only form of suggestion that Ling-li was working as a spy for the British yet Loh subverts the authenticity of this report by insinuating its questionable credibility. As a result, Loh rejects any "definitive interpretation" (Waugh 13) of Ling-li's alleged espionage activities and keeps it open-ended.

Ling-li's sub-narrative is not the only part where Loh explicitly calls attention to its credibility (or lack thereof). In the third chapter, Loh interrupts the narrative about the torture of the Body by introducing "Another story—to pass time while they manipulate the Body, to define, if you can, the beginning" (Loh 183), which is the legend of Sang Nila Utama's founding of Singapore. Loh's choice to mark "the beginning" with a legend whereby the historicity of the events and Utama's existence is contestable signals to her refusal to ground her narrative in any form of 'real' historical events that historians and other figures of authority endorse. The legend is familiar to a Singaporean reader but may not be the case for a typical Anglo-American reader. Loh opens the story with "You know the legend" (184) that suggests she is addressing a reader who is most likely Singaporean and/or is familiar with local legends. However, she still proceeds to narrate the legend, which shows that she keeps the unfamiliar reader in mind and ensure they are on the same page as the Singaporean reader to allow "the defamiliarization [to proceed] from an extremely familiar base" (Waugh 13). In addition to imposing the assumption of knowledge onto the reader, the phrase "you know" establishes this version of the story as the dominant and well-known legend to the non-Singaporean reader, which she later contend against.

Similar to Ling-li's sub-narrative, Loh offers a far less flattering version of Sang Nila Utama's story in a separate passage, which unseats the dominant narrative, by opening with

“The truth is” (198). Instead of the self-sacrificing prince who surrenders his crown to the sea to save his ship and crew, the alternative version depicts Sang Nila Utama as an irresponsible prince who accidentally drops his crown into the sea and grumbles about his loss as a passive victim. The phrase “the truth is” serves as a preamble to the dismantling of the dominant narrative that hides the ugliness of the truth and results in disillusionment. It also alludes to an author’s note of sorts at the beginning of the *Malay Annals* (1821) from which the legend of Sang Nila Utama originated whereby “the author of this work commences with stating, that he will declare sincerely what he regards as the truth, according to the best of his information” (Leyden 1). Contrary to the alleged faithfulness to ‘the truth’, the mystery surrounding the identity of the author(s) and the fact that the *Malay Annals* “come[s] across as a blend of the hagiographic and a subjective rendering of the past” of questionable ‘veracity’ (Chong 89-90) undermine this flimsy promise of truthfulness. Nonetheless, the *Malay Annals* retains scholarly value to both literary scholars and historians alike in their efforts to piece together a more cohesive narrative of the past. Loh parodies the tropes of an anonymous author with unverified credentials and a literal, unfounded assurance of truthfulness to illustrate the constructed origin of histories and the blurring boundaries between history and literature.

Loh divides the alternative narratives into two separate passages to highlight the key differences — the agency that Sang Nila Utama plays in losing the crown to the sea and his experience upon his arrival to Singapore. She undermines her depiction of her alternative version as ‘the truth’ by choosing to keep the lion instead of changing it to an animal that is historically native to Singapore. Her portrayal of the lion as weak and malnourished contrasts with the might and majesty of the lion in the dominant narrative. This contrast alludes the figurative nature of the legend, which reiterates the sight of the lion as an interpretation rather than an observation. The second half of the alternative narrative depicts the beast that Sang

Nila Utama encounters as a “forlorn creature, not fit for hunting” (Loh 243) who almost drowned in the river unlike its fierce and regal manifestation as a lion who magically grows a fishtail in the dominant narrative. Scientific studies have shown that lions have never existed in Singapore and some believe that the beast was most likely a Malayan tiger, golden cat, or masked palm civet (Koh 87). Despite the other changes to the legend that Loh takes the liberty of making, Loh describes the beast as having a mane (Loh 243), which keeps the lion in the narrative but changes the way Sang Nila Utama perceives it. Instead of its questionable veracity, international relations scholar Alan Chong posits that the value of the traditional legend stems from its “colour and tone [that] amount to an artefact that captures an existing mentality” (Koh 89). Loh’s decision to keep the lion but change its disposition reinforces Chong’s point about capturing a mentality. Hence, Loh reiterates Chong’s point by suggesting that the lion should be interpreted figuratively, not literally, as a representation of Sang Nila Utama’s hopes for the new city that he has founded.

Crediting the dominant narrative of the legend to the elder in Sang Nila Utama’s entourage draws attention to the role of the witness in contributing to the narrative of the protagonist. In Loh’s alternative version, an elder in Sang Nila Utama’s entourage invents an admirable narrative to explain his unjustified absence to his father, the king. The role of the elder as the unofficial author of Sang Nila Utama’s narrative is similar to Loh’s establishment of “you” as the author of *Claude the Body*’s sub-narrative whereby Claude Lim, the protagonist, is tortured by Japanese soldiers. Likewise, Loh repeatedly acknowledges the presence of the Fifth Columnist who participates in writing her version of Ling-li’s story that manifests as intelligence reports. All three examples show that an external figure beyond the protagonist of the specific narrative creates another version of the story beyond the one that the protagonist typically subscribes to. The elder’s invented narrative that is “dramatic enough to hold interest . . . seeded with myth and prophecy” (Loh 244) that are “makings . . .

of a good story” (245), in turn, manifests as the dominant narrative of the legend that everyone knows. Loh’s juxtaposition of the traditional legend and her less flattering version exposes the constructed nature of narratives that can easily be masqueraded as the truth and “undermine the authority of the omniscient author” (Waugh 13).

Although there is no comic effect in Ling-li’s sub-narrative, Loh employs an element of parody in the Sang Nila Utama stories. Literal theorist Patricia Waugh explains, “The parody of these ‘languages’ functions to defamiliarize such structures by setting up various counter-techniques to undermine the authority of the omniscient author, of the closure of the ‘final’ ending, of the definitive interpretation” (Waugh 13). Like Fowles whom Waugh and Hutcheon discuss in their respective works, Loh sets up numerous counter-techniques to achieve the same effects of defamiliarising these traditional dominant structures. Some of these techniques include blatantly drawing attention to the questionable accuracy of the narrative and interrupting the narrative with Chinese characters with minimal or vague translation. As a result, “the reader is thereby distanced from the language, the literary conventions and, ultimately, from conventional ideologies” (13). This distancing from the language allows the reader to view the pitfalls of such literary conventions that promote conventional ideologies that Loh debunks. Examples of such conventions include the assumed production of a single meaning or truth in a text that reinforces the reader’s blinkered vision and the expectation of being able to fully understand the text without the hindrance of foreign pictograms.

In addition to destabilising the dominance of traditional structures, parody also allows historiographic metafiction to approach history and fiction on a level plane. Hutcheon notes, “it is a kind of seriously ironic parody that often enables this contradictory doubleness: the intertexts of history and fiction take on parallel status in the parodic reworking of the textual past of both the ‘world’ and literature” (Hutcheon 124). The source of the Sang Nila Utama

legend, the *Malay Annals*, straddles the “textual past of both the ‘world’ and literature” as a historical artefact about the founding of Singapore and a legend. Loh’s ironic parody of the *Malay Annals’* author(s) allows her to expose this “contradictory doubleness” of history that reveals its similarity to literature.

Through the character of Ling-li, Loh illustrates the precarious position that the muted female presence holds in history, specifically during the colonial period. My research builds on both Waugh’s and Hutcheon’s commitments to foregrounding the voices of women in postmodernism. In *Feminine Fictions: Revisiting the Postmodern* (1989), Waugh quotes fellow critic Richard Harvey Brown’s definition of a postmodern author and points out the fallacy in his representation of the postmodern author “through the ‘universal’ use of the pronoun ‘he’” (Waugh 6). She adds, “It is interesting . . . that . . . where the discussion focuses on *traditional* (as opposed to postmodernist narrative), the pronominal deictic shifts and Brown refers to the ‘form through which the author realizes his or her intentions’.

Authors may, it seems, be male *or* female, but *postmodernist* authors are, actually or necessarily, male” (6). She makes a convincing argument by citing postmodern women writers such as Angela Carter and Margaret Atwood, but her examples are limited to those from the American and European regions. Similarly, in *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (1988), Hutcheon borrows Graham Clark’s words and cites the postmodern desire to “make and unmake meaning, effect a simultaneous creative surge and destructive will” that gave rise to the new voice of black women and men (Hutcheon 62). While Hutcheon covers other forms of marginality beyond gender, she speaks mostly for the American region. Thus, I aim to supplement Waugh’s and Hutcheon’s arguments through my analysis of Loh’s *Breaking the Tongue* to shed light on the marginalisation and physical violence that a colonised Singaporean woman face during the British and Japanese colonialism during World War II.

Before I proceed further with the analysis, it is imperative to locate the novel's position in Singapore literature and how it fits in with the broader conversation about national literatures. *Breaking the Tongue* is set in Singapore during the 1940s when it was still a British colony shortly before the Japanese occupation. Would it be classified as Malayan, Singaporean, Malaysian, or English Literature? Do the current politics and individually-recognised nations determine what constitutes to national literature? Loh is a Malaysian who wrote an English language novel that is set in Singapore. How does one navigate through a world where nations with intersecting histories continue to dispute over the shifting lines that demarcate territories?

On April 13, 2020, The Straits Times published an article that reports the “growing appetite for home-grown historical fiction” (Bock). Journalist Hannah Bock cites the longlisting of Singaporean writer Lee Jing-Jing's *How We Disappeared* for the Walter Scott Prize for Historical Fiction in March 2020 as the reason for the recent spotlight on the genre. Bock also notes, “Both SG50, which marks the 50th anniversary of Singapore's Independence, and the Singapore Bicentennial, which marks the 200th anniversary of its founding by the British, have also generated more interest in historical fiction”. The article focuses on “home-grown historical fiction”, specifically those written by Singaporean writers about Singapore's history. Bock includes a compiled list of relevant fiction that fits this genre, which excludes Loh's *Breaking the Tongue* (2004), my primary text of analysis that is also a historical fiction novel set in Singapore during World War II. Bock's list may be a reflection of her personal curation but it also hints at the contestability of *Breaking the Tongue*'s place in Singaporean literature.

Born in Ipoh, Malaysia, Loh grew up in Singapore before moving to Boston to pursue a Bachelor of Arts in Biology and Classics, followed by a medical degree. She left her full-time medical job in 1999 to enrol into the Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing (Fiction)

programme at Warren Wilson College in North Carolina. After the success of *Breaking the Tongue*, Loh was awarded the Radcliffe (Bunting) Fellowship in Fiction in 2005/2006 and a Guggenheim Fellowship in Fiction in 2008 to work on two unpublished novels. Board-certified in Obesity Medicine and Internal Medicine, Loh currently runs her own practice in Massachusetts as the medical director. As a Malaysian of Chinese ethnicity who grew up in Singapore and currently lives in America, Loh's international background begets the questions — Does *Breaking the Tongue* qualify as Singaporean, Malaysian, or perhaps American literature? What constitutes national literature?

In *Decolonising the Mind* (1986), Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o illuminates the difficulty of ascertaining what qualifies as African Literature. Although the questions that he poses are specific to African Literature, they are useful in approaching the characteristics of national literature. Ngũgĩ shares his experience of a debate on 'What is African Literature?' in a conference:

Was it literature about Africa or about the African experience? Was it literature written by Africans? What about a non-African who wrote about Africa: did his work qualify as African literature? What if an African set his work in Greenland: did that qualify as African literature? Or were African languages the criteria? OK: what about Arabic, was it not foreign to Africa? What about French and English, which had become African languages? What if an European wrote about Europe in an African language? (Ngũgĩ 6)

Ngũgĩ's questions draw attention to the criteria of national literature, which include the narrative content, author's background, narrative setting, and the language that the narrative is written in. The repeated questions of "what if's and "what about's underline the difficulty of drawing the lines to mark out what counts as national literature.

The questions that Ngũgĩ raises continue to plague the local contemporary literary scene in Singapore as readers, authors, and editors alike negotiate their individual preconceived notions of what counts as Singaporean literature that may be driven by personal bias or commercial interests. A recent example of this debate features Epigram Books' fiction editor Jason Lundberg who published a Facebook post on 25 March 2020 to announce a call for submissions for Epigram Book's upcoming Volume Five of Best New Singaporean Short Stories. Lundberg's post, which is no longer accessible for public viewing¹, contained a controversial statement about what he considered to be Singaporean literature, "A book written by a Singaporean author that has nothing to do with Singapore or Singaporeans is not Singaporean literature". Local writers Joshua Ip and Daryl Lim Wei Jie responded to the post, expressing their disagreements with the problematic statement and identifying conventional touchstones of Singaporean literature in their respective replies.

Ip asserts in his Facebook comment, "everything I write is [S]ingaporean literature regardless of whether it is 40 degrees, 100% humidity, has [S]inglish or durians in it, or is or is not an extended complaint about the oppression of the Singapore government". Ip identifies climatic conditions, iconic colloquialism and fruit, and political criticism of the Singapore government as recognisable tropes in Singaporean literature. Although Ip is known for his employment of Singlish in his poetry, he emphasises that such superficial features alone or the lack thereof do not form the basis of Singaporean literature. Lim problematises the close-minded nature of Lundberg's statement in his comment, "Just because we've closed our borders doesn't mean we need to close our minds", paralleling the closure of Singapore's borders to all short-term visitors on 22 March 2020 amidst the heightened risk of imported COVID-19 cases with Lundberg's demonstrated close-mindedness regarding what

¹ My last access to the post was on 11 July 2020. As of 23 July 2020, the post is no longer visible on Lundberg's public Facebook page.

qualifies as Singaporean literatures. Lundberg apologised and retracted the “unfairly reductive” statement from his post, clarifying that Epigram’s exclusive interest in stories that “take place in Southeast Asia or feature Southeast Asian characters” stems from their goal to be competitive locally and cater to their primarily Singaporean readership. This online debate surrounding Lundberg’s Facebook post sheds light on how a local publisher like Epigram Books negotiates the criteria of national literature, specifically Singaporean literature by isolating the narrative setting and characters’ origin as markers.

Besides Lundberg, Ip, and Lim, other local writers have also voiced out their opinions on Singaporean literature and their positions in the local literary scene. In an interview with Harper’s Bazaar Singapore in 2019, Amanda Lee Koe shares that she had no expectations about how Singaporeans would react to her debut novel, *Delayed Rays of a Star*, as it “has nothing to do with Singapore, Asia, or the postcolonial”. Koe demonstrates her awareness of how her debut novel deviates from the typical Singaporean literature that local readers may expect from a Singaporean writer like herself. The association that she draws between Singapore, Asia, and the postcolonial suggests a pattern that she identifies in Singaporean literature that she refuses to limit herself to in *Delayed Rays of a Star*. Koe states, “I’m not willing or able to see myself as any one nationality or ethnicity . . . when I write, I am just an amorphous storyteller whose personal biography is moot”. She acknowledges that her Singaporean background and experiences “inherently seep into and inform the work” such as her short story collection, *Ministry of Moral Panic*, that is either set in Singapore or features Singaporean characters, or both. Koe’s response was prompted by the question about how she keeps “a balance between having an international flair with [her] work while still keeping true to her] Singaporean roots”. It unveils the expectation of local writers to maintain some form of distinctively Singaporean quality in their writing. However, Koe’s resistance against allowing her nationality and ethnicity to dictate the scope and setting of her works supports

Ip's views that Singaporean literature should not exclude works by Singaporean writers that are not recognised as quintessentially Singaporean literature.

Koe is not the only Singaporean writer who chooses to venture beyond setting her narratives in Singapore. In an interview with Business Times Singapore in 2019, Balli Kaur Jaswal shares about how after setting her first two novels, *Inheritance* and *Sugarbread*, in Singapore, she chose to set her third novel, *Erotic Stories for Punjabi Widows*, in London, and her fourth novel, *The Unlikely Adventures of the Shergill Sisters*, in India. Although *Sugarbread* was about “a Punjabi girl’s experience with racism in Singapore,” Jaswal admits that she hesitated to submit the manuscript for publication as she had concerns about the “volatile topic” that may provoke negative responses from the public. She cites this instance as an example of how she was affected by the “fear of free speech” and criticism that constrains writers and investors in the literary scene from “exploring certain truths”. In an earlier interview with Scroll in 2015, Jaswal identifies as a Singaporean writer and considers *Inheritance* a Singaporean story. Nonetheless, she notes that some bookshops still shelf *Inheritance* under “Indian Literature” and some “readers did not see it as a Singapore book” despite the glaring image of an HDB block on the cover. Jaswal’s experiences exemplify the obstacles that she faces as a writer of an ethnic minority whose work was not immediately recognised as Singaporean literature — a problem that other Singaporean writers, especially those of Chinese ethnicity, do not encounter. She also expresses her anxiety of writing about the oppression that a minority community grapples with due to endemic racism, which is a topic that makes Singaporeans feel uncomfortable and may not respond well to. Jaswal gives insight into the other invisible parameters that people may judge Singaporean literature on, which makes the criteria of Singapore literature such a contentious topic.

In *Imagined Communities*, political scientist and historian Benedict Anderson speaks about the nation as a concept without referencing to any nation in this point. He argues that

“the nation is imagined as *limited* because even the largest of them, encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations (7). The word “finite” underlines that the limited number of differences between nations to reinforce this boundary. The elasticity of these boundaries highlights the flimsiness of the constructed partition that separates the nation from its neighbouring nations. In the case of Singapore and Malaysia, the two nations were not officially separate until Singapore gained its independence and sovereignty in 1965. Despite the separation, Singapore still shares a considerable amount of culture and history with Malaysia, which are not material assets that can be clearly divided and ignored after the separation. As a result, the overlap of cultures and histories attests to the finiteness and elasticity of the established distinctions between nations. Born in Malaysia but having moved to Singapore at the age of five, Loh’s background is not vastly dissimilar from Singapore’s or her characters. In a world where nationality can be changed and is no longer dependent on one’s place of birth or descent, it seems reductive to impose any label on Loh and her fiction.

Loh’s response to her ambivalent identity that extends to her book echoes Anderson’s sentiments in an interview with literary journalist Robert Birnbaum, “I was born in Malaysia. I grew up in Singapore . . . I grew up in Southeast Asia, and growing up there, there weren’t a lot of writers writing about the area—even people from Southeast Asia”. Instead of emphasising on the distinction between Malaysia and Singapore, Loh expresses her intention to represent Southeast Asia in the English-language fiction world that is dominated by Western hegemony as a writer who originated from Southeast Asia. Jaswal expresses similar sentiments as Loh, albeit on a far more localised scale in the 2015 Scroll interview. Despite growing up abroad, Jaswal wanted to contribute to the meagre collection of Singaporean South Asian English-language novels and address the issues of dislocation and alienation that minority communities face. As a Punjabi, which is a minority within the minority

Singaporean-Indian community, Jaswal bases *Sugarbread* on her past experiences of being a Singaporean who was treated like an outsider due to her ethnicity. Sharing a common goal, both Loh and Jaswal succeed in cracking the international market and representing Singaporean voices in the highly-competitive world of English-language novels.

Similar to how people may have different markers for what defines Singaporean Literature, the notion of home comes with a different set of markers such as geographical territory, typically the land of one's ethnic group or ancestral family. Loh's characters, Claude, Ling-li, and Jack, negotiate their individual positions in Singapore in different ways and in doing so, situating where their home is. In addition to anchoring one's identity and roots, home and history are intertwined as one recognises a place as home based on the history they had spent there. It is unsurprising that another reason behind Loh's writing of *Breaking the Tongue* is, "after living abroad for years, I wanted to write about 'home'; I wanted to write about a country that had deliberately set out to create a national identity from its ashes"². Loh's emphasis on 'home' that she encloses in single quotation marks draws attention to the ambiguous notion of home that she explores through her protagonist's reconnection with the Singaporean-Chinese community. Despite not being Singaporean, Loh's experiences in Singapore were clearly influential enough for her to write about it and acknowledge its ability to evoke feelings of home in her.

In "Writing Back Home: Tash Aw's *The Harmony Silk Factory*, Vyvyane Loh's *Breaking the Tongue*, and Lau Siew Mei's *Playing Madame Mao*" (2011), Eddie Tay acknowledges that Loh's novel targets "Anglo-American locales" and argues, "The act of writing about home is not the same as writing *back* home, for it does not direct itself to the purpose of critically loosening the hold of dominant narratives of the present" (145). Tay's italicised emphasis on "back" as an adverb reinforces the author's geographical location as a

² Quotes are extracted from the About the Author page at the back of *Breaking the Tongue*.

marker for the critical destabilisation of present dominant narratives in Singapore, which he suggests is the purpose of such writing. However, an author's geographical location, specifically in what she may consider her home country, does not accurately reflect if she is dedicated to such a purpose. Furthermore, Loh did not express any intention to fulfil the purpose that Tay states. Despite the narrative setting in Singapore, the critical value of Loh's novel should not be based solely on its ability to dismantle the dominant narratives in present Singapore, which is not necessarily related to the author's geographical position.

Koe echoes Loh's difficulty of location and defining home geographically as they both regard it as an abstract concept beyond physical parameters. In the Harper's Bazaar interview, Koe touches on the topic of home when asked to compare her experiences of book tours in different cities. Koe responds, "There's an element of homecoming [in Singapore], even if I don't necessarily know where or what home really is—I tend to locate home more in situations and people than in countries or nationalities". Like Loh, Koe views home as a fluid space that is not anchored by geographical locations and is better understood as an abstract feeling of homeliness in a specific situation or in the presence of certain people. Hence, Loh avoids specifying the country she wanted to write about as Singapore despite explicitly referencing to Singapore in her narrative. Her statement denies any intention to write about Singapore and emphasises her focus on the phoenix-like country narrative of creating "a national identity from its ashes" that was inspired by Singapore's history. She reiterates her claim in her interview with Birnbaum that while the book is set in Singapore, it is "about a search for a national identity". Her refusal to declare that her book is about Singapore pulls *Breaking the Tongue* back into this liminal space of ambivalence that resists any claim by governing authorities of national literatures based on the locational setting of the narrative.

In addition to the author's biography, the conception and influence of the novel offer useful information on the target readership and her choice to write in the English language

that is crucial in my close-readings. Written under the aegis of an American MFA programme, *Breaking the Tongue* (2004) is an English language novel published by W.W. Norton & Company, an American publishing company. It was selected as one of the Top 25 Books of 2004 by the New York Public Library and shortlisted for the International IMPAC Award (now renamed the International Dublin Literary Award) in 2006, which attests to its notable presence in the Anglo-American literary circles. These facts establish that even though *Breaking the Tongue* is set in Southeast Asia about Southeast Asians written by a writer who grew up in Southeast Asia, the target readership is predominantly Anglophone communities in America and Europe.

Loh demonstrates awareness of her Anglophone target readership when she addresses the lack of translation of the Chinese paragraphs at the end of the novel. She clarifies that she intends for the book to “literally [become] impenetrable to the English reader” and “that experience of being unable to cross a linguistic barrier was one I wanted my readers to wrestle with”³. The phrase “the English reader” refers to an Anglophone reader who is presumably unable to read and understand Chinese characters as she explicitly expresses that she deliberately sets up an “impenetrable” language barrier. Loh's strategically bilingual text continues to offer different challenges depending on the individual reader's Chinese literary levels. In my paper, I examine how the inclusions of Chinese characters, as well as the discussions of grammar, are encountered in different ways. The typographically ‘foreign’ may be superficial, opaque markers of difference or the invitations for a practice of translation as reading, producing an illusive sense of insider knowledge or mastery.

Loh's narrative techniques that shape and influence the readerly experiences correspond with what Hutcheon terms ‘historiographic metafiction’. Historiographic metafiction refers to “well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive

³ Quotes are extracted from the From the Author page at the back of *Breaking the Tongue*.

and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages” (Hutcheon 5). Loh demonstrates the novel’s self-reflexivity by imposing the role of the self-conscious narrator onto “you” who doubles as both the reader and Claude, the protagonist and consistently reinforcing the constructed nature and unreliability of the narrative. Setting the narrative in Singapore during World War II and referencing historical personages like Tan Kah Kee do not pressure Loh with the burden to produce a convincing fictional representation of that period as she suspends the narrative in a dream-like realm manifested through Claude’s mental revisiting of his past trauma. Loh’s incorporation of all three domains of literature, history, and theory facilitates her imposition of a “theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs (*historiographic metafiction*) is made the grounds for its rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past” (5) on to her reader.

Loh furnishes the illusion of agency on the reader by blurring the lines between the figures of the ‘author’ and the ‘reader’. Prior to Hutcheon’s conception of historiographic metafiction, Waugh establishes the basis of metafictional novels as texts that “reject the traditional figure of the author as a transcendental imagination fabricating, through an ultimately monologic discourse, structures of order which will replace the forgotten material text of the world”. Loh explicitly establishes “History: the Detour. And you, its author” (Loh 43) in the first chapter whereby “it” refers to the narrative titled “History: the Detour”, dismantling the traditional distinction between the ‘reader’ and the ‘author’. Loh’s imposition of the role of the author onto the reader exposes the malleable and constructed nature of the author, which bolsters Waugh’s assertion that “the ‘author’ is a concept produced through previous and existing literary and social texts but that what is generally taken to be ‘reality’ is also constructed and mediated in a similar fashion” (Waugh 43).

In addition to metafiction, language is a key feature when examining Loh’s chosen setting of imperialised Singapore with a postcolonial lens. Waugh posits that metafictional

novels “expose the way in which these social practices are constructed through the language of oppressive ideologies, by refusing to allow the reader the role of passive consumer or any means of arriving at a ‘total’ interpretation of the text” (13). Loh establishes the English language as “the language of oppressive ideologies” due to its role as the colonial language in British Malaya, which Singapore was a part of. The English language appears to provide interesting information about the culture that the Singaporean-Chinese characters grew up being exposed to in the beginning. However, it becomes apparent that the explanations in the English language are interpretations of the Chinese characters, which eventually renders it useless in capturing Ling-li’s raw trauma-induced emotions during the graphic torture and execution scene at the end. Loh exposes these oppressive ideologies by drawing attention to their perpetuation through the English language and integrating Chinese characters into the narrative. The fragmented narrative and absence of translation for the Chinese passages contribute to this persistent refusal “to allow the reader the role of the passive consumer”. This effect, in turn, permits a more open-ended interpretation of the text and provokes the reader to take on a more active role in interpreting the narrative.

Loh's work has received little scholarly attention to date. In a 2009 article, Sally E. McWilliams argues that Loh’s representation of trauma experienced by the diaspora problematises the attempt to stabilise cultural and national identities but much of the novel's complexity remains unaccounted for. In a 2018 book chapter, Jane Y.C. Wong looks at the versions of Chineseness in the novel and how Claude develops a Singaporean-Chinese identity that embraces Chinese customs without forging an expected connection to China. Eddie Tay shares both McWilliams’ interest in Loh’s representation of diaspora and trauma, and Wong’s examination of exhibited Chineseness in Loh’s novel. In a 2011 book chapter, he argues that Loh’s lack of engagement with present dominant narratives undermines the critical force of her narrative. The stress that these scholars place on Chineseness and trauma

affirms the significance of my paper, which expounds on these issues surrounding identity, culture, history, and bodily violence that Loh discusses in her narrative.

Building on the pre-existing criticism about Chineseness and trauma in Loh's novel, some of the close-readings in my paper feature numerous scenes detailing graphic torture and rape. In *Breaking the Tongue*, the recurrent and extreme depictions of violence indicate language's insufficiency to represent trauma; in spite or because of their affect (for characters and readers) they also are Loh's most direct statements about breaking, of language, of bodies, of history. In the following two chapters, I look at how language and history influence each other and, in turn, are manipulated by the colonisers to indoctrinate and colonise the locals.

Chapter 1 examines the different ways that language (re)defines the Singaporean-Chinese identity in British Malaya during the 1940s in *Breaking the Tongue*. Before Claude's explicit account of Ling-li's torture, the Chinese characters are sparse and scattered throughout the novel, and their role in the narrative does little to disrupt the general readerly experience. To readers with poor Chinese literacy skills, they manifest as unreadable symbols with translations or explanations that vary in terms of clarity and specificity. However, the appearance of these Chinese characters marks important moments in the book that are worth scrutinising. The first moment is a passage that breaks down the components in the Chinese character for endurance with constant reinforcement of its connection to Ling-li. The second moment focuses on an idiom about patriotism that Ling-li identifies herself with at a young age. Loh summons this idiom again towards the end of the novel by associating it with the English title of the final chapter, and by extension the novel. The third moment features young Claude trying to learn more about Chinese war-related idioms from Grandma Siok who refuses to spoonfeed him but encourages him to learn it from the ground up instead. The juxtaposition between Claude's interaction with Grandma Siok and his interaction with his

English friend, Jack Winchester, brings out the different perspectives of the foreigner and the ethnic Chinese on the Chinese language. Finally, the fourth moment manifests as an incoherent mishmash of single Chinese characters and English words that the grieving Claude wishes to convey to the deceased Ling-li. Unlike the previous moments whereby lexical information for those idioms is easily found, this fourth moment is less straightforward and stands out from the earlier moments due to its resistance against a single dominant interpretation beyond lexical meaning. Language in the form of Chinese characters affects the readerly experience regardless of the reader's Chinese literacy level in different ways, especially Loh's strategic position of specific Chinese characters in these isolated moments.

Chapter 2 investigates the characters' manipulation of literary and visual images in promoting a perspective that reflects a specific cultural interpretation of the world and/or to establish hierarchy. Grandma Siok's comparison of language to a world illustrates how language conjures images that frame the world within cultural nuances that would be lost in translations. Other than through the written language, images of the world manifest as literary and pictorial maps in *Breaking the Tongue* that play a role in imperial mapping. These maps expose the instability of accounts or histories due to factors such as political affiliation, traumatic memories, and subjective representations. The instability blurs the distinction between history and fiction, which Walter Lippmann asserts is a subjective representation instead of a lie and supports Loh's suggestion that anyone can make history. Through the illustrative representation of the territories or battle routes, imperial mapping reinforces the power of the empire by tracking their progress and conquests. Loh further complicates the idea of imperial mapping by including the scenes of a Japanese soldier carving a map into Claude's skin and the Japanese soldiers' torture of Ling-li. These scenes liken the vulnerability of the colonised body to the colonised land that strengthens the absolute

manipulative control that the Japanese colonisers have over the colonised locals, particularly with the use of the phallus. I extend this discussion to include Freudian ideas on castration flesh out a framework to consider how the phallus is able to conjure traumatic images that are as powerful as words with knife-like precision and strength to oppress the victim and witnesses. Loh's usage of the second-person pronoun "you" in these scenes underscores the dream-like landscape, raises the question of "your" role in the narrative, and muddles the distinction between Claude and the reader. Beyond language, representations of the world manifest as images, dreams, and markings on bodies, that remain subjective and deeply-influenced by perspectives and interpretations.

"A revelatory book that is both novel and history" is part of a longer quote by Shirley Hazzard, the author of the award-winning novel, *The Great Fire* (2003), who praises *Breaking the Tongue*. Amongst the numerous quotations by novelists and book reviewers that praise Loh's novel, Hazzard's quote was chosen to grace the front cover. Hazzard's quote captures the Loh's spirit of wordplay that facilitates her exploration of various interpretations and meanings. "Novel" refers to the book as a fictitious prose narrative of a considerable length and represents Loh's innovative and unusual approach of writing. "History" posits the book as a record of important past events in Singapore and acknowledges Loh's study about past events, specifically questioning its representation and the exclusivity of historiography. The novel's revelatory quality is subjective as Loh engages in withholding through cryptic dreams and the Chinese language. This paper examines the ability of languages to provide specific frameworks that allows a community to make meaning of the world and establish their position in it. However, languages are not all-encompassing. While another language may be able to convey specific nuances that are absent in other languages, it remains fluid due to the subjectivity of interpretation that resists fixed definitions.

Chapter One

华言巧语: Outlining Singaporean-Chinese Identity

CHINESENESS: STIGMA OR AUTHENTICITY?

What does it mean to identify as Chinese yet refusing to speak the Chinese language? In the first chapter, Loh presents a scene where Claude's father, Humphrey, encounters a youth giving out pamphlets to gather funds to support China's efforts in the war. "I'm Chinese, but I don't speak the language," Humphrey responds as he takes "two steps up the stairs . . . so that the boy has to look up to him" (Loh 64). His statement draws attention to how Chineseness is influenced by factors such as ethnicity, national identity, class division, and language proficiency. Humphrey and his family come up with multiple terms for the other Singaporean-Chinese people who live in Singapore to differentiate themselves from them and assert their superiority. Under the influence of the British colonisers, the colonised Singapore-Chinese embrace the English culture and language to varying extents while adhering to their own respective culture and languages, which results in their straddling of both spheres. Hence, Humphrey's attempt to draw the line between his family and the rest of the ethnic Chinese community manifests as a form of tactical superiority that reveals their confusion surrounding their identity.

In chapter one, Loh breaks down the components that make up the Chinese character 忍 into 刀 and 心 (60). Contrary to her statement that 忍 is made of 刀, 忍 is actually made of a slightly different Chinese character, 刃, which has a similar meaning to 刀, despite the additional stroke on the left. The relationship between 忍 that is pronounced *rěn*⁴ and its

⁴ I have translated the Chinese characters in *Breaking the Tongue* wherever necessary in my analysis. The Chinese script accounts for numerous spoken Chinese dialects such as Mandarin, Cantonese, Hokkien, Teochew, etc. The spoken dialect that I am proficient in is Standard Mandarin like most contemporary Singaporean-Chinese readers, hence my interpretations are based on how I read it in Mandarin. Within the dialect of Mandarin alone, different characters share the same pronunciation and a single character occasionally has different pronunciations. The pronunciation differences are much more complex when other dialects are

loosely homophonic component, 刃 that is pronounced *rèn*, alludes to the ‘similar yet distinct’ quality of the Singaporean-Chinese identity in relation to Mainland Chinese due to their shared origins. 忍 is made up of two characters – 刃 and 心, the Chinese characters for ‘knife’ and ‘heart’ respectively. While the top component, 刃, guides the general pronunciation of the character, 忍, the latter in its entirety is pronounced differently from the former. 忍 is pronounced with a different intonation, which makes the pronunciation sound similar but distinct enough to set it apart from 刃. Likewise, the Singaporean Chinese identity consists of its diasporic connections with Mainland China, the early Malayan settlers, as well as the British and Japanese colonisers. The derivative nature of the Chinese character, 忍, parallels the *rojak* nature of the Singaporean Chinese identity that emerges from the convergence of its Mainland Chinese origins and the influence of the other settlers of various nationalities, including the colonisers.

This *rojakness* of the Singaporean-Chinese identity becomes a topic of debate amongst the various characters in the novel. The dialogue between Ling-li and her teacher reveals the misconception of a person’s identity due to the ambiguity of the commonly-used English term, ‘Chinese’. Ling-li questions her identity by asking her teacher, “What’s my country?”, which results in a short dialogue with her teacher, “Why, China, of course. / But I don’t live there. / You’re Chinese, aren’t you? Then China is your country” (37). Ling-li’s response that she does not live in China reveals that she views a person’s country as a place to which one belongs. Her teacher’s insistence that China is Ling-li’s country based on the fact that she is “Chinese” illuminates the ambiguity of the English term that blurs the lines between ethnicity and place. According to the teacher, Ling-li’s Chinese ethnicity translates

considered. Due to the limits of my dialect proficiencies and the prescribed scale of this paper, I will focus on Mandarin-based interpretations, which in no way insinuates that Mandarin is superior to the other dialects. In addition to the literary nature of the novel, Loh’s general omission of a pronunciation guide welcomes readings and interpretations by readers of various linguistic backgrounds.

to her belonging to her ethnic group's place of origin, which is China. Thus, her teacher exaggerates Ling-li's relationship with China and imposes her assumption of Ling-li's identity on to Ling-li.

Unlike the English term 'Chinese', the distinction between the *rojak* Singaporean-Chinese and Mainland Chinese is much more pronounced in Mandarin. While nationality and ethnicity are markers of differentiation between Mainland Chinese and non-Mainland Chinese in the Mandarin terms, the lack of specificity in the English term results in a generalization based on assumption. Sociologist Chua Beng Huat states, "The ethnic-Chinese population became formally 'named' *Huaren*⁵ and the language, *Huayu* (华语), to signify the difference in national identity between themselves and the citizens of the PRC" (240). The term *Zhongguoren* (中国人) literally means 'person of China' in Mandarin and clearly identifies the person's nationality. However, the term *Huaren* acknowledges a person's Chinese descent based on its association with the Chinese language without asserting any nationality due to the absence of the 国 character, which means 'country' or 'nation'. As a result, Chua asserts that "*Huaren* is defined by language" (Chua 240) based on its correlation with *Huayu*. Hence, the term is not exclusive to Singaporean-Chinese and can refer to any person of Chinese descent who are not "citizens of the PRC" regardless of their ability to speak in any Chinese dialects. Nonetheless, the different Mandarin terms help distinguish between the Singaporean-Chinese and the Mainland Chinese in Mandarin conversation. However, there is less transparency in the English language. Chua adds, "Unfortunately, the term 'Chinese' continues to be used in English in Singapore, unnecessarily extending the emotional link to 'China' as 'homeland', when the overwhelming majority of the contemporary *Huaren* are local born and for whom Singapore is home" (240). Chua notes the

⁵ Although Chua insists on using the term *Huaren* in his paper to refer to Singaporean-Chinese people, I will use the term 'Singaporean-Chinese' in my paper and adhere to Loh's choice of the English term 'Chinese' to refer to the ethnic Chinese in Singapore in *Breaking the Tongue*, a primary text of my analysis.

ambiguity of the term ‘Chinese’ that refers to a person’s nationality or mother tongue as a marker of ethnicity but is oftentimes interpreted as the former. As a result, the term exaggerates the Singaporean-Chinese’s connection to China.

Loh further demonstrates the implication due to the ambiguity of the word ‘Chinese’ through the various scenes that Claude participates in. Claude’s family distinguishes themselves from the other Singaporean-Chinese by isolating traits that they associate with the latter that they do not share, which justifies their alienation from the community. Humphrey and Claude refer to Singaporean-Chinese of lower classes and less privileged backgrounds by using labels such as “hard-core” Chinese” (Loh 63), “Hwa Ming boys” (62), and “‘local’ Chinese” (80). Conversely, Grandma Siok uses the term “real Chinese” (59) to shame their family’s inauthenticity due to Humphrey’s deliberate rejection of his Chinese heritage in order to “be accepted by the British . . . as their equals” (63). These markers illustrate how Claude’s family alienates themselves from the ethnic Chinese community whom they view as riff-raff and do not wish to associate themselves with such people.

Cultural critic Rey Chow explains how naming is a racialisation through the experience of language. Claude’s family are of the same ethnicity as those people whom they name. However, their naming is a form of racialisation that reinforces their privilege, which allows them to distance themselves from embodying specific undesirable traits such as nationalism, low socio-economic status, low intelligence, and poor cleanliness. Chow applies Walter Benjamin’s ideas on human language to explain how the naming of others recognizes their existence in the community and their relationship with the namer:

This potential of a continuum . . . between humans and the mute world of things makes naming an incomparably powerful, performative gesture: by naming something, we confer upon it an identity it does not otherwise have - an identity by which what is named becomes *animated* as *our* relation, *our* equal, *our* community;

an identity by which what is named can touch (and affect) us as much as we can touch (and affect) it. (4)

Claude's family's naming of others is "an incomparably powerful, performative gesture" as it demonstrates their recognition of these people in their community and establishes a relationship with them. Although the Littleton boys see themselves as superior to the Hwa Ming boys, naming them 'Hwa Ming boys' acknowledges them as equals in the community. The family's vehement rejection of these people in their community ironically anchors their position in the community and their power to mutually affect the family in the same way.

In the first example, Humphrey cites the Communist political leanings and boorish behaviour of the "hard-core" Chinese to justify his family's dissociation from the ethnic Chinese community. Humphrey avoids "any contamination from the 'hard-core' Chinese—especially the flag-touting, fund-raising ones with Communist leanings" (Loh 63). The enclosure of the word "hardcore" within quotation marks implies that he borrows the term coined by someone else who was either British or an English-educated, privileged upper-class Singaporean like Humphrey. "Hardcore" hints at the aggressive, stubborn approach of these people towards politics that makes them unlikely to change and difficult to deal with. Humphrey's viewing of their behaviour as "touting" reinforces this aggression, specifically in terms of pushing their agenda of raising funds by selling flags. Humphrey further cements this negative impression of what he perceives as fanatical and uncompromising in their political pursuits by referring to them as "zealots" (63). Instead of admitting his personal choice to not socialise with those of the lower echelons of society, he shifts the blame to those people for behaving in an undignified manner to justify his refusal to associate with them. His belief that any interaction with them would cause a "contamination" insinuates an unpleasant consequence that arises from his exposure to such people and shows how Humphrey perceives them as harmful to his goal to being accepted as an equal of the British.

Hence, Humphrey justifies his family's estrangement from the ethnic Chinese community by citing their dissimilarities in political leanings and disgraceful behaviour that reflects their inferior status.

In the second example, Claude differentiates himself and his peers, the privileged English-educated "Littleton boys" (67) from the Chinese-educated "Hwa Ming boys" (62). This distinction demonstrates how social segregation occurs at a young age that encourages the upper-class boys to favour an association with the British to elevate themselves above their peers from the lower classes. The term "Hwa Ming" refers to the name of the Chinese school that the Chinese-educated boys attend that differs from Littleton, "the top school for English-educated students" (66). Hwa Ming boys are regarded as "a disgrace—the way they speak, the way they dress" (66). Superficial factors such as attire and speech further reinforce the distinction as they are indicative of a boy's educational background that is linked to his socio-economic background. Claude further underlines the class disparity by noting that they speak to each other "not in Chinese, but in patois" (66). "Patois" refers to how Claude associates the Hwa Ming boys' colloquial speech with low status. The Littleton boys' regard of the Hwa Ming boys' appearance and speech as a "disgrace" is a projection of their stigma of looking and sounding like a Chinese-educated person from the lower classes. As a result, Claude learns to perpetuate this divide between the classes within the local ethnic Chinese community that his family is estranged from.

In addition to the terms "hardcore" and "Hwa Ming boy", Claude's family rejects the label of being 'local'. Coupled with Humphrey's idolisation of the British, the family's rejection of such labels underlines the stigma of being perceived as a typical un-Anglicised Singaporean-Chinese who is inferior to the British. When Lucy quotes her friend's claim that "the Chinese are stupid and poor, and very dirty" (79), Grandma Siok points out that Lucy herself is Chinese too. Humphrey then intervenes and clarifies that Lucy is Chinese but "not a

‘local’ Chinese” (80), which acknowledges Lucy’s stereotyping of her own ethnic group but rejects any identification with them. The inverted commas draw attention to the emphatic tone that Humphrey uses and the irony of his statement. Lucy is of Chinese ethnicity and is born and raised in Singapore, yet he claims that she is not ‘local’. His statement that she is not ‘local’ does not mean that she is completely foreign. Instead, it emphasises that she, and by extension himself and the rest of the family, is different from the locals due to their privileged access to the British expatriate lifestyle. The family’s rejection of the term underlines the negative connotations of a ‘local’ that is Chinese-educated and of the unprivileged lower classes, which is vastly different from the glamorous British that they aspire to emulate.

The upper-class, English-educated Singaporean-Chinese characters like Humphrey’s family who are more Anglicised and enjoy more privilege reject being identified as locals/natives. Yet, they are also unable to identify as ‘Westerners’ or colonisers due to their non-European ethnicity. Instead, they occupy this liminal space as a unique class that bridges the gulf between the colonisers and the colonised. Thomas Babington Macaulay describes this specific class in “Minute on Indian Education” (1835) as “interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect” (1612). Macaulay’s argument is set in an Indian context but is useful in a Singaporean context as well, specifically when examining Humphrey’s family who remains Chinese “in blood and colour”, which underlines the difference in their ethnicity from the British colonisers. The conjunction “but” establishes the contrast between ethnicity and the way that they conduct themselves that distinguishes them from the rest of “the millions whom [the colonisers] govern”. Being “English in taste, . . . opinions, . . . morals, and . . . intellect” elevates Englishness as superior above Chineseness, Indianness, or any quality that is regarded as characteristic of the colonised ethnicity. The

phrase dismisses and debases the colonised people's tastes, opinion, morals, and intellect, that is seen as inferior to the English. Although Macaulay separates this class of "interpreters" and places them above the other colonised people, he does not group them together with the colonisers like himself. Despite Humphrey's family's attempts to assert Englishness in his taste and behaviour in order to be welcomed as equals by the British, he will never transcend beyond this class of interpreters who are Chinese "in blood and colour" and remain part of the colonised community.

Regardless of how Claude's family chooses to position themselves in society, the British do not treat them as equals as they are not English but are Singaporean-Chinese who are born and raised in Singapore. Despite the different Chinese terms for the Singaporean-Chinese and Mainland Chinese in Singapore that Chua highlights, these groups still share a common written language in Singapore. The Chinese characters in *Breaking the Tongue* draw attention to the pivotal role that the Chinese language plays in tethering the ethnic Chinese to their heritage. With the exception of 忍, the pronunciation and explanation of the characters in the Chinese idioms are not provided. 忍 reinforces the strength of Claude and Ling-li, the representative Singaporean-Chinese characters, as the backbone of the novel but eclipses the cultural origins and associations of the idioms that flesh out the narrative.

THE WITNESSING AND MARTYRDOM OF PATRIOTISM

Besides alluding to the compositeness of the Singaporean-Chinese identity, the passage on 忍 consistently reiterates Ling-li's association with the character and the value of endurance that she embodies. The Japanese soldiers allegedly capture and torture Ling-li to death on the basis that they believe that she is a spy for the British. They mutilate her with a knife after gang-raping her, causing her to bleed to death. As a result, the knife manifests as an oppressive weapon against her. Yet, 刀, the Chinese character that means 'knife' forms an

essential component of the passage on 忍 that recognises Ling-li's resistance against such oppression:

Consider this: knife, poised, over heart.

Ling-li, drawing knife: 刀. A threat, perhaps? The lingering death of sharp edges?

Ling-li, revealing heart: 心.

Ling-li: For what is endurance but the strength of the heart under knife-blade?

Pronounced like a growl held back in the throat, dipping first downwards in despair, then upwards in challenge. Ren 忍. (Loh 60)

The double-edged nature of the knife motif proves how such an assertion of autonomy through a demonstration of endurance is impossible without provocation from the source of oppression. Founding the idea of endurance on the notion of a “knife, poised over heart” bolsters the pivotal role that the knife plays in testing the strength of the heart. Contrary to Ling-li's oppressed and compromised state during the torture scene, she exemplifies endurance in that scene by maintaining a connection with Claude and refusing to submit to the Japanese soldiers despite the traumatic experience. Her martyrdom is exemplary of 忍, which ultimately, strengthens the empowering edge of this double-edged knife more than the oppressive one.

While Loh demonstrates awareness of her target Anglo-American readership's ignorance of the Chinese culture and language, she aims to only provide the necessary information about the narrative but withhold specific information related to language and sometimes culture. Instead, she consistently keeps them at a distance that requires more work on their part to understand. For example, *Breaking the Tongue* consists of six chapters with titles in English as well as in Chinese. The English titles are mostly accurate translations of their Chinese counterparts but Loh does not indicate this connection between the two or offer

any guidance on how to read and interpret the Chinese characters. The English titles are “Ciphers”, “The Employment of Secret Agents, Generals”, “Civilians”, “Terrain”, and “Breaking the Tongue” respectively. Unlike the single-word titles, Chapter II’s title is slightly longer. Instead of having a longer Chinese translation to account for the longer English title, its Chinese translation, 用间, retains the same double-character format like those of Chapters I to V. The short translation illustrates the economy of the Chinese language that compresses longer English phrases into shorter Chinese characters. Loh does not explain how the economy of the Chinese language works, which does not affect the storytelling process but reinforces the Anglo-American readers’ position as outsiders.

While the Chinese titles of chapters I to V consist of two Chinese characters each, the Chinese title of the final chapter, “Breaking the Tongue” is “精忠报国”. The combination of these characters does not literally translate to the phrase “breaking the tongue”. 精忠报国 is a Chinese idiom that Loh translates to “The Ultimate Loyalty Is to Serve Your Country” (36). The origins of “精忠报国” trace back to Yue Fei, a Chinese military general, calligrapher, and poet from the Song dynasty. A summary of Yue Fei’s story and his connection to the idiom appears in the first chapter, detailing how he allows his mother to carve the four characters into the flesh on his back with a knife before he rides into his first battle (36). Yue Fei’s story illuminates the sacrifice of a soldier’s life and body “to serve his country with his body” (36). Establishing “精忠报国” as the Chinese title for the final chapter that shares the same title as the novel itself creates a connection between the age-old idiom and Loh’s contemporary historical fiction. This connection presents *Breaking the Tongue* as the modern version of Yue Fei’s story about patriotism and invites the Singaporean-Chinese reader to also reconnect with their Chinese roots as Claude does in the novel.

Besides being a crucial figure in Loh’s modern rewriting of Yue Fei’s story, Ling-li adapts Yue Fei’s narrative to suit her own identity and purpose that her teacher had defined

on her behalf. Ling-li's childhood idolisation of Yue Fei causes her to mull over the phrase in the idiom translation, "*Serve Your Country*" (37) and what is her country based on the presence of the character 国 in the idiom. However, 国 does not clearly distinguish between country and nation and can be used to refer to either of the two. Loh's favour of 'country' over 'nation' as a translation emphasises on the geographical territory associated with the community rather than the community itself that the 'nation' represents.

Ling-li's confusion surrounding her country prompts her to consult her teacher who insists Ling-li's country is China based on her Chinese ethnicity instead of the place of inhabitancy. Six-year-old Ling-li accepts her teacher's answer and embraces China as "Yue Fei's country, and hers" (37). The possessive as marked by the suffix "-s" and pronoun suggests that Ling-li's takeaway message was that China belongs to Yue Fei the same way that it belongs to her. Although both Yue Fei and Ling-li are ethnically Chinese, Yue Fei feels a sense of belonging to the community that he was raised in, which is closely connected to the territory. His commitment to protecting the land that he considers his home drives his loyalty to serve his country in war. Unlike Yue Fei, Ling-li does not have any connection to the China's territories beyond her ethnicity and customs. Her admiration of Yue Fei and romanticising of his martyrdom during her childhood becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy in her adulthood. Like Yue Fei, she demonstrates this "ultimate loyalty of serving her country" by choosing death over treason. However, Ling-li does not die for China, the country of her hero Yue Fei and the country she initially believed was hers due to her teacher's conviction. Instead, she dies to protect Singapore, the land that she has come to accept as her own. Although she does not entirely follow in Yue Fei's footsteps by demonstrating her loyalty to China, she channels the same patriotic spirit and asserts her loyalty to Singapore.

Jane Y. C. Wong expounds on the connection that Ling-li's teacher forges between country and ethnicity and customs. In "Contesting Chineseness in Vyvyane Loh's *Breaking*

the Tongue” (2018), Wong elaborates on the role of China in one’s perception of Chineseness. Wong compares Amah, a servant from China who works for Claude’s family, and Grandma Siok, to exemplify the differences between rooting one’s Chineseness in a country as opposed to in history and culture. To Amah, “‘Jia’⁶ is still China, not Singapore” and “Chinese identity is necessarily bound up with country and customs”, whereby “country *precedes* customs” (Wong 92). The precedence of country over customs resonates with Ling-li’s teacher who believes that China is Ling-li’s country because she embraces Chinese history and customs as an ethnic Chinese, tying “country and customs” together. Conversely, for Grandma Siok, “Chinese culture and its customs seem to exist by virtue of their long history; China, the country, is abstract” (Wong 93). Although Grandma Siok shares her knowledge about Haw Par Villa, Sun Tzu’s *Art of War*, and the Chinese language with Claude, she never “regard[s] China as a *place*, as Amah does” (Wong 93). Instead, Grandma Siok detaches the country from the customs, on which she founds her Chineseness. While Amah grounds her Chineseness in China in a similar way that Ling-li’s teacher imposes China onto Ling-li’s Chineseness, Grandma Siok separates China from the customs to reconcile her rootedness to Chinese customs and her disconnection from China as a Singaporean-Chinese.

Loh’s literary technique of borrowing Yue Fei’s famous idiom for the Chinese title of her last chapter and her novel is not new. While other writers quote certain famous lines to debunk the message they promote, Loh uses the same tactic to draw a connection between the ancient figure, Yue Fei, and her contemporary character, Ling-li, to bolster the significance of her sacrifice that stems from her deep-rooted Chinese cultural values. English war poet Wilfred Owen names one of his poems, “Dulce et Decorum est”, a phrase that means “it is

⁶ ‘Jia’ is a romanization of the Mandarin pronunciation for 家, which means ‘home’, that Amah “says over and over” (Loh 128).

sweet and meet” in Latin. He derives it from a much longer line in Ode 3.2 of Roman poet Horace — “Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori”, which means “It is sweet and meet to die for one’s country”. “Patria” literally translates to ‘fatherland’, which focuses on the territory itself and is similar to what country refers to in Ling-li’s conversation with her teacher. Owen draws attention to “The old Lie” (Owen 27) to condemn war propaganda for glorifying the act of dying for one’s country during World War I without promoting the inevitable harsh brutalities. While Owen quotes Horace in an attempt to write against the alleged glory of fighting for one’s country, Loh rewrites Owen’s irony as sincerity and quotes Yue Fei for a different purpose. Instead of criticising Yue Fei’s message, Loh uses it to underline how Ling-li’s Chinese cultural values underpin her commitment to protect the land that she considers home, even in the face of suffering and death at the hands of the Japanese soldiers. The idiom encapsulates Ling-li’s loyalty to Singapore that is strengthened by her strong connection with the Chinese culture and values that forms the essence of *Huaren*.

Other than singular Chinese characters like 还 and 忍, and four-character idioms like 重整旗鼓, in the final chapter Loh includes longer and more intricate paragraphs that are fully in Chinese. The absence of tenses in Chinese creates a temporal ambiguity in those paragraphs, blurring the boundaries between the past and present. A more comprehensible yet dream-like account of Ling-li’s torture prior to her death is revealed through the perspective of Claude who is detained and tortured by the Japanese soldiers, albeit in Chinese in the titular final chapter. Although Ling-li’s death is alluded to earlier in the novel, it is difficult to tell if those passages in Chinese are narrated in the present or past tense as the Chinese language “has no strict sense of tense”, “traverses time and history, [and] intrudes upon the present” (Loh 479).

The absence of a “strict sense of tense” accentuates the lack of emphasis on temporal boundaries in the Chinese language. The Chinese language developed with an emphasis on

conveying ideas and concepts. Unlike in the English language where the tense of the verb indicates the time of the action, time is regarded as a separate entity from the action itself. Hence, in this passage, the events of Ling-li's torture scene are sequenced with chronological terms such as “下一个”, “接下来”, or “然后”⁷, as well as “当”, or “时候”⁸ (483). While the terms “了” and “已经” (484) suggest an action or event that has been done, it is still difficult to translate the verbs from Chinese into past or present tense in English based on these terms. For example, the lines “我昏倒了。痛苦已经结束。” (484) can translate to “I have/had fainted. The pain is/was over,” whereby the “/” reveals an ambiguity of tenses that eludes translation in the Chinese language. While there are Chinese terms to give a semblance of an order of events, the only way to accurately discern if it is in the past or present is when specific terms such as “现在”, and “以前”⁹ are used. The flexibility of the Chinese language imbues a presence to Ling-li's voice that conveys the enduring effects of trauma that remain much later. As a result, the absence of tenses injects a specific sense of timelessness into this incident that the rigidity of the tenses in the English language cannot achieve as Claude revisits a past traumatic event that he has repressed after her death.

The lack of tenses in Chinese imbues a scene with an ongoingness that is not traditionally associated with historical fiction. As a result, it facilitates the revival of a past event to promote the idea of bearing witness during the traumatic experience rather than after it, which reinforces the persisting effects of the event. Hutcheon attributes “part of this problematising return to history” as a response to the modernist movement and claims, “If the past were invoked, it was to deploy its ‘presentness’ or to enable its transcendence in the search for a more secure and universal value system” (Hutcheon 88). Her description of the

⁷ All three terms translate to “next”, “then” or “after that”.

⁸ Both the two terms translate to “during” or “when”.

⁹ The two phrases translate to “now” and “last time” respectively.

novelists' return to history as "problematizing" provokes an inquiry into the issues that plagued the past in efforts to improve the present and future. She reaffirms the relevance of past events to the present and future through the deployment of its 'presentness'. The enabling of its transcendence alludes to the experience beyond the normal or physical level, which corresponds to the presence of a retrospective "you" in the dream-like scenes during Claude's interrogation. Hutcheon credits the value of returning to the past to "the search for a more secure and universal value system", which signals to a failure or fault in the system that provokes a need to revisit and reflect on it.

Trauma studies scholar Marie-Luise Kohlke demonstrates how certain narrative strategies show how "witnessing becomes constitutive of rather than consequential" and "an ethical obligation to recognize harm done" (65). In addition to recognising that witnessing is a part of the traumatic experience, Kohlke's argument about the constitutive nature of witnessing also means it has the power to establish or give organized existence to the traumatic experience. The third-person narration in *Breaking the Tongue* positions the narrator and the reader as passive witnesses outside of Claude's and Ling-li's scenes of trauma. The change to second-person narration in the passages about Ling-li's and Claude's torture hints at the importance of active witnessing in these scenes. As a result, it imposes the role of active witnesses on to the reader and post-interrogation retrospective Claude who shares this role as a narrator through the pronoun "you". The present tense bolsters witnessing as a constitutive process rather than a consequential one, especially in the context of wartime trauma.

Similarly, *Breaking the Tongue* endeavours "to negotiate a shift from a position of [the] overwhelmed sufferer 'stuck in past time' . . . to a subject capable of bearing witness to the self and/or Others for the future" (Kohlke 53). The gerund in the phrase "bearing witness" alludes to an ongoing process that corresponds to the present tense in the passages that

pervades Claude's experiences as a prisoner. His experiences, including Ling-li's torture scene, discourages readers from viewing Ling-li as a character of the past who is irrelevant to Claude's present. *Breaking the Tongue* highlights the constitutive nature of witnessing in order to remind all of its readers, regardless of their familiarity with Chinese culture and language, of the necessity to recognise the trauma inflicted on Claude and Ling-li even after the event has passed. Loh's drawing of a connection between “精忠报国” and *Breaking the Tongue* by establishing them as titles of her final chapter underlines the importance of Ling-li's sacrifice in epitomising the strength of 忍 and embodying the figure of patriotism in Loh's narrative as a whole.

THE DISCREPANCY IN SPEECH AND WRITING

Despite its alienation of non-Chinese speaking readers, the written Chinese language unites Chinese readers regardless of their various dialect groups. Wong notes, “for the contemporary Singaporean reader, the Chinese passages . . . are presumably in Mandarin because Chinese dialects were practically outlawed in Singapore in 1979 with the Speak Mandarin Campaign, where Mandarin was imposed in the official language of the Chinese community” (Wong 100). Loh encourages the contemporary Singaporean reader's inclination to read in Mandarin by establishing the pronunciation of 忍 as ren. However, Wong argues that “none of the Chinese characters . . . is communicating in Mandarin” as even after the Japanese Occupation (1942–5), only a small minority of Singaporean Chinese — 0.1 per cent of the population — spoke Mandarin as mother tongues (101). Wong's observation draws attention to the complexities of the Chinese language, specifically the variety of dialects that vary phonologically but rely on the same writing system. The shared writing system blankets the diversity of Chinese spoken dialects that read the characters differently. In addition, it makes it difficult for the reader with inadequate Chinese literacy skills to notice the different

ways of reading the same Chinese characters, which can also induce an alienating effect on him/her. Nonetheless, the written form of the Chinese characters welcomes a more open-ended interpretative approach from the reader regardless of their Chinese literacy level and/or preferred spoken dialect.

The subjectivity of the spoken dialect based on the reader's linguistic abilities and/or preference reveals Loh's interest in how the reader interprets the pictograph by verbally projecting a specific sound, or none at all if he/she has no idea how to read it. The Chinese passages in Ling-li's torture scene are part of a spoken dialogue between Ling-li and Claude. The dialect in which they converse depends on which dialect the reader speaks in but the meaning generally does not deviate drastically regardless of the dialect. Wong suggests that Mandarin is least likely to be used in this conversation if one takes historicity into account. However, historicity is not something that Loh prioritises in her narrative.

Hutcheon reiterates the priority of postmodern writing of history to shed light on the systems that the past is grounded in over adhering to historicity. She asserts, "meaning and shape are not *in the events*, but *in the systems* which make those past 'events' into present historical 'facts' (Hutcheon 89). Loh focuses on the dominant "systems" that we rely on to derive "meaning and shape" of the past in order to question or overturn "present historical 'facts'". She rewrites the past to expose the flaws of the "systems" that influence records of the past such as the unreliability of memory, especially one tainted by severe trauma, and the fixation with the ability to read every single word and symbol. For example, Ling-li and Claude's conversation occur in a scene that supposedly appears to Claude as a dream or vision — an imaginative space that is not bound by space, time, and history that accommodates multiple ways of reading the scene. In another example, the ability to read the Chinese idioms that Grandma Siok and Ling-li write in their respective scenes is secondary. In those scenes, the pictograms of the idioms and their meanings take precedence over the

reader's preferred spoken dialect and pronunciation. Instead of attempting to achieve maximum historical authenticity, Loh deliberately distances herself from such an objective in order to problematise this notion of historical authenticity.

The written Chinese in Loh's novel that promotes unity amongst Singaporean-Chinese readers resonates with one of the goals of the Speak Mandarin Campaign in 1979, which aimed to reduce the barriers between the distinct dialect groups. However, it also simultaneously conceals the plurality of the Chinese dialects that readers, including those who are contemporary Singaporean-Chinese, are prompted to consider. Chua observes that the polyglot *Huaren* community that speaks a multitude of spoken dialects "share[s] one written script" (Chua 240). The shared written script facilitates a "convenient way of grouping them . . . through the Mandarin language", hence "dialects were abolished in all public broadcast media, with the aim of uniting the *Huaren* through *Huayu*" (240). Despite the polyglot *Huaren* community, *Huaren* and *Huayu* are Mandarin terms, which further encourages the Singaporean-Chinese to identify themselves in and with Mandarin. The literary nature of the idioms in Grandma Siok's game and Loh's novel in general highlights the drawback of the shared script that makes it difficult for the reader to experience the various dialects through the book, let alone gain a greater awareness of their presence. As a result, the common Chinese script groups the dialects and achieves the goal of uniting the ethnic Chinese through the suppression of this plurality. The effect of this phenomenon parallels that of the standardisation of the Chinese language in Singapore to abolish the division amongst the dialect groups to create a uniform Singaporean-Chinese identity.

Loh's usage of simplified characters instead of traditional aligns with the post-war standardisation of the Chinese language in Singapore. As a result, the simplified Chinese characters guide readers to read in Mandarin and hint at the retrospective nature of the narrative. The standardised Chinese logographic writing system in Singapore makes it

difficult to discern among the dialects. However, the modern simplification by the People's Republic of China divides Chinese-speaking territories and their respective dialects in Asia. In the Chinese-speaking region beyond Singapore and Malaysia in East Asia, the writing systems come in two varieties — traditional and simplified. Despite the various dialect groups in Mainland China, Simplified Chinese is the standard script and Standard Mandarin is the official spoken language. Similarly, Singapore has adopted Standard Mandarin as its official spoken Chinese language and simplified Chinese as its official Chinese writing system and phased out traditional Chinese after 1969. Traditional Chinese retains its relevance in countries like Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau where the respective dialects are equally or more predominantly used than Mandarin, which distinguishes them amongst each other and Mainland China. Hence, Loh's decision to use simplified Chinese encourages readers to read in Mandarin in the perspective of the Singaporean-Chinese and draws attention to itself as the product of the post-war standardisation of the Chinese language in Singapore, which follows in the footsteps of Mainland China.

Loh's suggested reading of 忍 as 'ren' reflects her preference for the dialect, which she bases her interpretation on, but she does not restrict readers from interpreting the Chinese characters in other dialects. Cultural critic Walter Benjamin's analogy of vessel fragments elucidates how Loh's omission of romanised pronunciation facilitates the reading of the Chinese characters in various Chinese dialects that are just as capable of conveying the meaning. Benjamin likens various translations and the original itself to "fragments of a vessel which are to be glued together [to] match one another in the smallest details, although they need not be like one another" (Benjamin 78). He asserts, "a translation, instead of resembling the meaning of the original, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original's mode of signification, thus making both the original and the translation recognisable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel" (78). Benjamin acknowledges that

translations are distinct and separate parts that come together to form a larger whole. He does not discount their value as valid interpretations and components of the greater language of which the original is part as neither is more superior or inferior to the other. Loh anchors her interpretation of the 忍 character in the Mandarin pronunciation that does not necessarily extend to the other Chinese characters that are not accompanied by a pronunciation guide. Romanising the Chinese characters would help the reader to read them without necessarily understanding, but it would also impose a specific Chinese dialect on to him/her. Instead, Loh chooses to keep the characters in its pictograph form and avoids excessively intervening in the way that the reader chooses to read (or not read) the Chinese characters beyond the 忍 passage.

There are many ways of interpreting the Chinese characters that vary based on one's familiarity with the written Chinese language and their preferred spoken dialect, if any. To the reader with poor Chinese literary skills, it is a foreign language that embodies the foreign culture of the characters such as Claude, Ling-li, and Grandma Siok. The reader's inability to comprehend the Chinese characters also illustrates the incoherence of memory, especially when marred with intense trauma. The reader with more advanced Chinese literacy abilities is able to gain a more nuanced understanding of the narrative due to his/her familiarity with the Chinese language. In addition, the Chinese characters facilitates reading and interpretation based on his/her preferred spoken dialect without any prescriptive romanisation to dictate a specific dialect of reading it.

CHINESE DIALECTS 101: A LECTURE BY AN ENGLISHMAN

Loh showcases the spoken dialects in Singapore in a conversation between Claude and his English friend, Jack Winchester. In this scene, Jack demonstrates an awareness of the Chinese dialects that Claude has not “even considered . . . before he brought it up” (Loh 328).

Jack claims he “can pretty much tell one dialect from the other” (329) and mistakenly assumes Claude can do the same. Jack shares his opinions on the various Chinese spoken dialects in Singapore such as Hokkien, Cantonese, and Mandarin. This passage draws the reader’s attention to the plurality of spoken dialects in Malaya during the 1940s and Jack’s knowledge about it. Jack represents the dominant white coloniser that is often the centrepiece in fictions set during British imperialism that Loh problematises to expose his seemingly unconscious oppression of the locals such as Claude.

Despite being an English expatriate, Jack appears more knowledgeable about the Chinese dialects than Claude who is a Singaporean Chinese. Similar to the scene with Grandma Siok and Claude, the reader with insufficient Chinese literacy skills shares Claude’s ignorance of Chinese dialects in Singapore and learns about them at the same time. Unlike Grandma Siok, Jack is not Singaporean and cites European writers such as Carstairs Douglas (328) and J. Dyer Ball (329) instead of Singaporeans as sources of his information about the local culture. His reliance on European writers for information reveals the distance that Jack maintains from the locals that prevent him from gaining first-hand knowledge despite having the freedom to do so in the country itself. While it reflects his access to education and studiousness, it also attests to the value of books as a source of knowledge that informs the reader about culture, history, etc. In *Knowledge as Culture: The New Sociology of Knowledge* (2005), sociologist E. Doyle McCarthy asserts, “Reality is as variable as the knowledge that people have about it. We have no ‘reality’ at all, unless we have knowledge to tell us about it” (2). McCarthy stresses the subjectivity of social reality that varies based on each individual’s pre-conceived notions and the founding of one’s perspective of social reality on the knowledge that one derives from books or word of mouth. The documentation of knowledge in print makes it accessible for repeated reference and distribution to others, which cements the validity and value of the content. Loh demonstrates awareness of this

phenomenon in her inclusion of a bibliography at the end of the book that reaffirms the intertextuality of her narrative. Jack's sharing of knowledge educates Claude while reinforcing the authoritative nature of a text.

Jack explains to Claude how he differentiates the Chinese dialects by characterisation. Although he cites personal experience as a source of his information, he implies that he had picked up some of it from a reference book, *Things Chinese* by J. Dyer Ball (329). He posits that Cantonese is "quite different—more stately, formal" and "old" with "quite a few true dialect forms" while Mandarin is "softer than the other dialects, more sibilant, more elegant, despite it being the youngest" (329). In *Things Chinese*, Ball establishes that Cantonese is "more akin to the ancient language of China" than Mandarin, which he claims is the "youngest" (Ball 167). Ball also states that Cantonese "has numerous dialects" (171), which Jack clearly recalls in his description. As Ball does not describe the sounds of the Chinese dialects as such, the descriptions of how each dialect sounds are Jack's interpretations filtered through his experiences and based on the Anglophone standards of sound textures in languages. His interpretation imposes a Western aesthetic that determines what stateliness and elegance sound like in order to distinguish amongst the mass (or mess) of gibberish that the dialects may sound like to the reader who has little to no Chinese literacy.

Jack does not only pick up the content from reference books but also the way that reference books simply and explain these foreign languages and cultures to an unfamiliar 'English reader', similar to the one Loh identifies. Jack describes Hokkien as having "something of the Cockney in it . . . [with] that jaunty feel, a certain brazen quality" based on his experience of working with Hokkien-speaking Chinese in London (328). Ball does not discuss much about the Hokkien dialect in *Things Chinese* but he demonstrates a habit of drawing comparisons to European counterparts in order to offer more clarity to his target 'English reader' who is presumed to be located outside Asia. For example, he claims that the

Amoy dialect “has about the same affinity to the Swatow [dialect] that Spanish bears to Portuguese” (Ball 172). Jack adopts Ball’s habit of connecting this foreign dialect to a European counterpart, specifically English in this context, that he is familiar with as a reference point to help him to discern it from the other dialects. This reference point also allows Loh’s ‘English reader’ who is most likely more familiar with Cockney than Hokkien to develop a better idea of what Hokkien sounds like. Unlike Grandma Siok, Jack is familiar with Western concepts and drawing a connection to those concepts to gain clarity. As a result, the ‘English reader’ may find Jack’s explanation a lot more helpful than Grandma Siok’s.

Jack’s love for books is not limited to reference books as he is also an avid reader of novels. He romanticises his experience in Singapore by likening himself to Flory, the protagonist of George Orwell’s *Burmese Days*. Jack identifies with Flory who finds himself stuck between the colonisers and colonised as he wishes to gain acceptance in both communities. When Jack decides to stay in Singapore instead of return to England during the Japanese invasion, he cites the passage about Flory’s acceptance of the colonised country “which he hated” as “his native country, his home” (qtd. in Loh 260) to justify his reluctance to leave. Like Flory’s friendship with a local named Dr Veraswami, Jack founds his belief of his successful integration into the local community that he embraces as his home on his friendship with Claude. Jack distinguishes himself from Orwell’s “brutal” representation of the other Englishmen (140). He recalls a passage that details the English characters’ racist discrimination of the locals that unsettles him but finds solace in his conviction that he would do the “decent thing” unlike the characters (141). Jack’s rejection of the villainised portrayal of racist Englishmen further reinforces his conviction that he is not the mean stereotypical coloniser who hates the locals, which leads him to develop a false sense of belonging to the local community in Singapore.

Grandma Siok imparts linguistic knowledge about their mother tongue on to Claude who is a natural inheritor of the information. However, Jack's demonstration of knowledge to the ignorant native, Claude, imposes their definition of the natives onto the natives themselves, reinforcing the colonial authority. In Said's analysis of British politician Arthur James Balfour's lecture about Egypt in 1910, he asserts that Balfour "speak[s] for [the Egyptians] in the sense that what they might have to say . . . would somewhat uselessly confirm what is already evident: that they are a subject race, dominated by a race that knows them and what is good for them better than they could possibly know themselves" (Said 34-5). In the conversation between Jack and Claude, Jack ignores Claude's response "continues smoothly, as if Claude [had not] spoken" (Loh 328), which shows how he insists on speaking for the ethnic Chinese about dialects and overriding the opinions of Claude who is an ethnic Chinese. Furthermore, Claude's ignorance of the complexities of his native language further cements his position as the "subject race, dominated by a race that knows them . . . better than they could possibly know themselves". Jack asserts his colonial authority to speak for the natives and their characteristics and educate natives like Claude about themselves.

Hutcheon elaborates on the significance of Loh's decentring of the dominant white male character that Jack represents. She states, "Intertextual parody of canonical American and European classics is one mode of appropriating and reformulating—with significant change—the dominant white, male, middle-class, heterosexual, Eurocentric culture. It does not reject it, for it cannot" (Hutcheon 130). Jack's lecture on dialects parodies the way that writers like Douglas, Ball, and Orwell define the colonised locals from a coloniser's point of view ways that the colonised themselves do not endorse. Loh's writing of Jack who embodies this "white, male, middle-class, heterosexual, Eurocentric culture" is an inversed parody of these "American and European classics". Rather than reject such dominant conventions, she "appropriate[s] and reformulate[s]" Orwell's protagonist into a decentred shadow version

in the form of Jack. Unlike Dr Veraswami's unwavering admiration of Flory and the British, Jack's influence on Claude wanes when he eventually gains clarity of his oppression by Jack and the British upon his disillusionment.

BACK TO BASICS WITH GRANDMA SIOK

Loh's omission of information about the Chinese words in the scenes during Claude's younger days illustrates Claude's estrangement from his culture and mother tongue, which parallels the difficulty for the reader with little to no Chinese literacy to grasp a deeper understanding of the Chinese language in relation to culture. Claude views the Chinese characters in Grandma Siok's invented game during his younger days as "strange designs . . . that look like 重整旗鼓 and 鞠躬尽瘁" (Loh 40). The "strange[ness]" stems from his unfamiliarity with the written language of his ancestors due to his estrangement from his roots. The word "designs" suggests his perception of the characters as patterns that mean nothing to him. The reproduction of the Chinese characters in the narrative without the accompaniment of or substitution with romanised pronunciation hints at his inability to read, let alone understand them. His first impression of the characters and inability to comprehend them mirrors the unfamiliarity of the 'English reader' with the Chinese language. At the same time, readers with sufficient Chinese literacy are able to read and understand the Chinese idioms without any guidance of any form. Hence, the lack of explanation for the Chinese words shows Claude's unfamiliarity with the Chinese language, which sheds light on his experience as someone with insufficient Chinese literacy.

Claude receives some clue about what the strange designs mean from Grandma Siok. However, the conversational style of the scene and Claude's usage of vague phrases like "this one" make it difficult for the reader to understand which character or idiom he is enquiring about. Nevertheless, Grandma Siok's reductive approach to answering Claude's enquiry does

not offer much clarity about what he is asking about or the meanings of the characters either. The reader only has access to the conversation between Claude and Grandma Siok whereby he refers to his subjects of enquiry as “this one . . . and this?” (40). The conversational structure of the scene and Grandma Siok’s brief explanations remain insufficient in helping readers with poor Chinese literacy to understand what Claude is enquiring about and what any of these “strange designs” mean. The reader with adequate Chinese literacy, however, would be able to identify the two single characters, 重 and 尽, that Grandma Siok explains. Regardless if Claude is actually asking about those specific characters or the entire idiom, Grandma Siok’s explanations alone do not elucidate the meanings of the individual characters or idioms in any substantial way for these readers.

Grandma Siok’s incomplete explanation about a specific character does not offer enough clarity to help to bridge the language barrier for the ‘English reader’ and Claude. Instead, her explanation demonstrates the complexity of the language that makes it difficult to define a character accurately, especially when viewed on its own. Each idiom, such as “重整旗鼓”, is a composite of four Chinese characters. A character may possess more than one definitions. The meanings that each character encapsulates differ from the other three and the idiom as a whole. As demonstrated in the example of “忍”, each character can also be a combination of other characters with their own distinct meanings. While Grandma Siok defines a vague meaning of “重” as “Heavy, weight, importance” (40), she does not clarify that ‘重’ has two pronunciations in Mandarin, which allows it to possess two different meanings. Grandma Siok’s definition applies when the character is read as *zhòng* but in this idiomatic context, it is pronounced *chóng*, with a clear difference in intonation and opening consonants. When pronounced *chóng*, ‘重’ loosely translates to ‘repeat’ and ‘again’. While ‘重’ can be used as an adjective as a single character on its own when pronounced *zhòng*, the

chóng variation functions like the English prefix ‘re-’ and is combined with another Chinese character to create a more precise verb. While Grandma Siok’s definition of that specific Chinese character is not wrong, it alone is insufficient to fully account for the other meaning more relevant in this context.

The pronunciation of idioms such as ‘重整旗鼓’ does not help in informing the recipient of the meaning. Instead, they rely on knowledge of the cultural significance of the literal meaning. Like ‘重’, the precise meaning and usage as an adjective or verb also vary for the second character in the idiom, “整”, depending on the Chinese character with which it is combined. It has only one pronunciation in Mandarin and roughly translates to ‘tidy’ or ‘put in order’. Together, “重整” as a single entity means to rectify or revitalise a project, group, or place after failure or devastation. Finally, “旗” and “鼓” refer to flags and drums respectively. As an idiom, “重整旗鼓” literally translates to reorganising the flags and drums but figuratively means to rally one’s forces after a setback. To arrive at the latter meaning requires some knowledge on Chinese history and culture. In the olden days, flags and drums were essential in battles as the flags led the troops in the right direction and the drums set the pace at which the troops march. Upon defeat, the flags fall and drumming ceases. Hence, the image of reorganising flags and drums reflects the figuratively rallying one’s troops and picking one’s self up after initial defeat. This idiom is relevant to both Claude and Singapore who attempt to recover after suffering at the hands of the Japanese colonisers. Thus, the pronunciation or meanings of the individual Chinese characters alone do not inform the meaning of the idiom.

In addition to “重整旗鼓”, Grandma Siok also briefly defines a character in “鞠躬尽瘁” as “to burn to ashes, to exhaust” (Loh 40). Unlike her definition of “重” that is straightforward enough that of the second character seems more of a subjective interpretation.

Like “重”, “尽” also has two pronunciations — *jǐn* and *jìn*. However, the meanings are not as distinct as those for “重” and some overlap. “尽” loosely translates to ‘to the greatest extent or within a limit’, ‘to prioritise’, ‘to use up or exhaust or finish’, ‘all or completely’, or ‘to die’. Although “to exhaust” corresponds to one of the meanings of “尽”, “尽” as a single character alone is insufficient to be associated with the meaning, “to burn to ashes”, let alone carry such a loaded meaning. For Grandma Siok to arrive at that definition, she would have to combine it with another character to form ‘烧尽’, which literally means ‘to burn completely’ but can also translate to ‘incinerate’ or ‘to burn to ashes’. However, the idiom does not contain that pictogram and she does not mention it either. Her response is no longer an attempt to provide a general definition of the character. Instead, she slips in her interpretation of what the specific Chinese character means to her. The lack of clear distinction between her interpretation and a general definition that is more relevant to Claude’s enquiry reinforces the subjectivity of translation.

Loh’s choice of these two specific idioms alludes to the tragic ending and sets the tone of the narrative takes. While “重整旗鼓” applies to Claude and Singapore in their recovery after suffering at the hands of the Japanese soldiers, “鞠躬尽瘁” hints at Ling-li’s tragic end. Like “重整旗鼓”, the literal meaning of “鞠躬尽瘁” is not exactly the same as its idiomatic meaning. “鞠躬” means ‘to bow’, while “尽瘁” means to ‘completely exhaust one’s self to the limit’. Upon combining the characters, the idiom “鞠躬尽瘁” means ‘to perform a task conscientiously and to the best of one’s abilities’. The idiom originates from a much longer line, “鞠躬尽力，死而后已” in *Later Chu Shi Biao*¹⁰, the second memorial of Zhuge Liang, the Imperial Chancellor and regent of the state of Shu during the Three

¹⁰ The original title in Chinese is 后出师表.

Kingdoms period. In the same vein as the Yue Fei-inspired idiom “精忠报国”, the additional part of the idiom translates to ‘until one’s death’, which intensifies one’s commitment to the task at hand. Zhuge uses the idiom to convey his patriotism and dedication to leading the Shu state’s military campaigns against the rival state of Wei. Although his efforts were futile and resulted in a stalemate, he died from an illness in camp during the fifth expedition, fulfilling his stated promise to his country. This idiom reveals the relevance of Chinese history in informing its meaning. The significance of the idiom becomes more apparent much later in the novel during Ling-li’s death. While Claude illustrates the ongoing process of “重整旗鼓”, Ling-li demonstrates the dedication of achieving “鞠躬尽瘁” in a similar fashion as Zhuge by not giving away any information despite the pain and humiliation she suffers until death.

THE INCOMPLETE RE-

Although the dialects are not prominently alluded to in other parts of the novel beyond Jack’s mini-lecture, there is a scene in the final chapter where Claude understands a comment in Hokkien made by a stranger he encounters on his way to Chinatown. That scene also features the only Traditional Chinese word in the book. My observation illuminates Loh’s conscious choice of simplified Chinese that aims to guide a contemporary Mandarin retrospective reading of the novel. Claude grows pensive as he witnesses a scene of a Japanese soldier ordering white Europeans to perform road repairs with an unnamed Chinese youth translating the Japanese instructions into English. In the same scene, Claude thinks of Ling-li and the narrator describes what Claude will draw if he can write to the deceased Ling-li:

Incomplete circle, 不, travelling 之. Recompense, repay, restore; still, yet, continue. If only she were here still, if only she could continue to be, if she could be restored. All of this contained in one word: 還 Return. (Loh 473)

Amongst the three Chinese characters, one of them, 還, is in traditional Chinese instead of simplified Chinese. Like the word “Hokkien”, the traditional Chinese character reinforces this sentiment of returning to the past. This scene demonstrates that the usage of simplified Chinese in the novel is a purposeful decision that Loh makes in order to reaffirm the belated retelling of her World War II narrative.

This paragraph also contains two other Chinese characters that are cryptically integrated into the narration in English. They interrupt the sentence in a way that makes it difficult for readers with advanced Chinese literacy skills to understand, let alone those who lack such skills. Upon first glance, the reader may be inclined to directly translate but it does not make sense if interpreted on a superficial level. The key to decoding the message lies in the third Chinese character 還, that appears unrelated in its traditional Chinese form. Yet, when converted to its simplified Chinese form, 还, 不 and 之 are the components that form the character, 还, that Loh disguises by using its traditional Chinese form. The usage of the traditional Chinese character may imply but is not limited to Claude’s nostalgia. The 冢 component in 還 that is pronounced qióng is an obsolete character from classical Chinese that means solitary with no one to depend on. Other than encapsulating his desire for the “return” of the past and Ling-li, 還 is more effective at representing his solitude after Ling-li’s death. Loh’s mixture of both Chinese characters and English characters in the same sentence makes it difficult not just for the reader to make sense of its meaning, which prompts him/her to try to decipher, to varying levels of success.

The passage on 还 is tricky to grasp on a superficial level. It requires the reader to spend some effort analysing it in order to be able to decipher the enigmatic phrases that Loh includes in that passage. In addition, it marks the point in which Claude gains sudden fluency and no longer experienced a language barrier. The character, 不, literally translates to ‘no’ and is used as a negative response or as a prefix to denote a negation or absence of a quality. Although its literal meaning has no association with circles of any kind, the presence of commas on either side suggests that 不 is an appositive of the noun, “incomplete circle”, which defines it. As demonstrated earlier in the novel, Loh demonstrates an interest in highlighting the different pronunciations that a Chinese character can have. Like 重, 还 also has more than one way of reading it. In this context of an ‘incomplete circle’, Loh is alluding to *xuán*, an obsolete pronunciation of 还 that means ‘revolve’. 不, thus, represents an “incomplete circle” upon removal of the logogram 辶 from 还 to create 不. While it is challenging for the reader to deduce the passage’s meaning without adequate Chinese literacy, the passage illustrates Claude’s development in his Chinese skills and encourages the reader to read deeper into the text and consider other interpretations of the character beyond face value.

While the “incomplete circle, 不,” enigma relies on knowledge of the Chinese language to decipher, the “travelling 之” focuses the reader’s attention on the physical appearance of the character. The meaning for “之” is a lot less straight-forward than “不”, especially as a stand-alone character, which makes it more challenging to translate. Predominantly used in classical Chinese, its meaning varies depending on its position in the sentence, which can refer to the subject or location. In this context, “之” refers to ‘辶’, the exact character in ‘还’ that looks like a more horizontally stretched out version of “之”. While 之 is read as *zhī*, 辶 is read as *chuò*. Despite the similarities in appearances, 辶 does

not originate from 之. Instead, 乚 originates from the radical 辵, which also shares the same pronunciation. However, the etymological relationship between 之 and 乚, or lack thereof, is irrelevant as Loh's purpose is to emphasise their shared resemblance to an illustration of a person walking upright with one foot in front of the other. While the "incomplete circle" prompts the reader to consider other pronunciations and meanings of the 还 character, "the travelling 之" draws attention to the physical appearance of the character that does not necessarily rely on linguistic proficiency.

The resistance of this riddle-like statement against any straightforward translation allows it to be more open-ended and mysterious and makes Claude more inscrutable. The air of mystery that shrouds this statement alludes to the Western perception of the Orient as inscrutable. Cinematic studies scholar Homay King notes that cinematic orientalism often illustrates riddles of "voices speaking in tongues" and metaphors of "Chinese boxes, being shanghaied, Chinese walls" that "lie outside of rational systems of knowledge and communication" (3). As a result, they "implicitly draw an association between Asian things and things that defy traditionally Western modes of rational cognition" (King 3). Loh's riddle-like statement in the passage on 还 reinforces this typical Western impression of Asian culture, specifically Chinese, as an impenetrable, complex mystery. King's specification of "modes of rational cognition" underlines that they are not exclusive to Westerners and can be adopted by non-Westerners too. *Breaking the Tongue* sets up the reader to approach the text with traditionally Western modes of rational cognition regardless of their linguistic background. The statement resists interpretation based on such a mode with its scattered single Chinese characters placed in between English words that do not make much sense when interpreted individually or as a whole. Hence, a high Chinese literacy level alone may not be sufficient for the reader to interpret the riddle. Its resistance to being definitively

translated or decoded acknowledges and cements King's notion of the Orient as "the site of enigmatic indecipherability" (King 2).

The phrase "還 Return" is much more straightforward than the other two and does not leave much room for speculation of 還's general meaning. Readers with adequate Chinese literacy are able to recognise that 還 is the traditional Chinese version of 还, which is the composite of 不 and 之. It reiterates the multiplicity of meanings that a Chinese character can take on, like the earlier example of 重. Loh introduces the second pronunciation of 还, *huán*, by guiding the reader with the meaning of the word "Return". Like the word "return", the meaning of 还 when read as *huán*, accounts for both the spatial repositioning of a person back to its previous location or a temporal or physical restoration of a situation back to its original state or condition, as well as giving an object back to a place or person from which it was taken. 还 represents each of the three words in the phrase, "Recompense, repay, restore". Loh does not forget about a third pronunciation of '还', *hái*, which she represents in a way that does not involve Chinese characters. When pronounced *hái*, 还 functions as a translation of each of the words in the phrase "still, yet, continue". Her separation of the two meanings using the semi-colon illustrates the close relation of the two clauses due to the sharing of the single character and the independence of each clause whereby a different meaning and pronunciation distinguishes one from the other. The words "recompense" and "repay" hint at the wrongfulness of Ling-li's torture and murder by the Japanese soldiers while the word "restore" illustrates Claude's desire to return to when Ling-li was still alive. The phrase "還 Return" embodies Claude's mixed feelings of desiring some form of redress for his sufferings and the return of Ling-li whose life was forcibly taken from her. Claude's bilingualism allows him to express the triple meanings of 还 without flattening the meanings' co-existences.

Loh's literal deconstruction of the separate components of the Chinese character 还 illuminates the multiple meanings that it represents. Philosopher Jacques Derrida's concept of *différance* elucidates the different ways of interpreting a sign in the form of a single character as demonstrated in the example of 还. Loh's passage on 还 reinforces the economical nature of a Chinese character and the discourse guides the reader to prioritise a specific interpretation over others. Derrida explains the concept of deconstruction in his example of the word, *différance*, which is based on the French word, *différer*, which can mean 'to defer' or 'to differ'. He compares two French words, *différence* and *différance*, that have different spellings but share the same pronunciation, emphasising the word as the signifier. There is a grammatological inversion in Loh's example whereby writing and speech swap places and the sound becomes the signifier. The character, 还, remains the same regardless of the different pronunciations associated with each distinct meaning. Nonetheless, Derrida asserts the word *différance* is to "compensate economically — this loss of meaning, for *différance* can refer simultaneously to the entire configuration of its meanings", allowing it to be "immediately and irreducibly polysemic . . . [and] in its polysemia this word, of course, like any meaning must defer to the discourse in which it occurs, its interpretive context" (Derrida 7). As Loh demonstrates in her novel, the Chinese character is also able to "compensate economically" as it can take on more than one meaning. Similarly, in order to discern which meaning is the most relevant in its respective context, one must "defer to the discourse in which it occurs". Hence, Loh illustrates the ways that Derrida's concept can be flipped to achieve the same economic polysemy through Claude's deconstruction of 还.

This notion of multiple interpretations aligns with Hutcheon's point about postmodernist decentring that permits a multiplicity of alternatives to the dominant central idea. She asserts, "The contradictory nature of postmodernism involves its offering of multiple, provisional alternatives to traditional, fixed unitary concepts in full knowledge of

(and even exploiting) the continuing appeal of those very concepts” (Hutcheon 60). Hutcheon argues that the contradiction stems from its constant reliance “on the centres it contests for its very definition (and often its verbal form)” (59). As a result, postmodernism clarifies the more obscure concepts and destabilises the dominant concept without eliminating it. In *Breaking the Tongue*, the English language is established as the dominant language but the Chinese characters cause a disruption that challenges the dominance of the Western canon and alienates the reader with poor Chinese literacy. Loh’s decision against translating every Chinese character promotes more flexible and varied interpretations without making this primarily English-language novel completely inscrutable.

Hutcheon raises some questions about how historiographic metafiction change how we think and write about writing, “Does the linguistic sign refer to an actual object— in literature, history, ordinary language? If it does, what sort of access does this allow us to that actuality?” (144). The phrase “refer to” itself can be interpreted in more than one ways, which draws attention to the arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign. I can interpret it as ‘mentioning or alluding to’ something else, which means the signifier precedes the signified, or as ‘deriving information from a source’, which means the signified precedes the signifier. Loh’s 还 enigma demonstrates that the access that the sign provides to “actuality” is fully dependent on one’s interpretation.

Chapter Two

画皮成图: Fleshing Out World(s)

COMMUNICATING CULTURE THROUGH LANGUAGE

Continuing in the same vein as Ling-li who refuses to reveal any information, readers with sufficient Chinese literacy are able to gain more clarity into the situation while those who lack are alienated. Upon Claude's enquiry about two of the individual characters, Grandma Siok gives accurate albeit brief explanations of each character, which are insufficient in deriving the meanings of the idioms. Claude attempts to understand by asking, "Is this a verb? A noun?" (Loh 40), to which Grandma Siok replies, "It's a world, just like every word, every character. An image of the world" (40). The words "verb" and "noun" illuminate Claude's understanding of languages through an Anglicised lens, specifically through English grammar. While verbs and nouns mostly manifest as single words in English, they are not limited to single characters in Chinese. As a result, Grandma Siok dismisses Claude's reductive way of perceiving the language and insists each Chinese character and word is "a world" to emphasise its complexity and distinguish the world as experienced through the Chinese language as different from the one experienced through English. Furthermore, the different determiners, "a" and "the", imply that while she believes that the Chinese language exists as a separate system, it remains a subset of the larger world that people of different cultural and linguistic backgrounds co-exist in.

The conversation between Grandma Siok and Claude signals to the problematic nature of the colonial child's estrangement to his native language, which postcolonial critic Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o discusses in *Decolonising the Mind*. The implications of such estrangement are not only limited to the colonial child's familiarity with his native language but his culture, both of which he trades for those of the coloniser. Ngũgĩ demonstrates awareness of language's duality as "both a means of communication and a carrier of culture"

(13) and “culture carries . . . an entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world” (16). In addition to being “a means of communication” as Claude’s first language, the English language is also a carrier of British culture that cements the superior position of the English colonisers and the subordinate position of the colonised locals — a belief that Claude has embraced since he was a child. Claude demonstrates this belief in his description of his native language as a “cacophony, . . . , the language of barterers and peddlers” (Loh 330). “Cacophony” encapsulates Claude’s rejection and his perception of the language as an unnatural, disharmonious din. In an earlier scene, Claude expresses his distaste at the lower-class “barterers and peddlers” when he encounters a hawker peddling knick-knacks “in the European plaza, disgracing him and all other natives” (139). Claude’s statement about his native language illustrates his association of his native tongue with low status and unsophistication. His demonstrated disdain for his native language that stems from his upbringing as a colonial child justifies his sustained estrangement from it and its culture, which even Grandma Siok alone is unable to help reconcile.

Grandma Siok repeatedly stresses the importance of learning and memorising each word and character in Chinese, implying the lack of correlation between the written sign and the sounds that differ from the phonetic system that English adheres to. Unlike the phonetic system with which the Anglophone reader is more familiar, the Chinese ideographic system reflects the approach of the ancient Chinese people to language and communication. Philosopher Liang Shuming sheds light on his perspective as a Chinese scholar and addresses the unphonetic yet economical nature of the Chinese language. He argues, “The Chinese language’s dependence on a script that consists of pictographic symbols allows a wealth of meaning to be extracted from a scanty pictogram that can be expanded for a multitude of purposes. However, the Western script is nothing but a representation of the sound, namely it

operates on the basis that the text is attached to the sound”¹¹ (Liang 269). Liang’s juxtaposition of the Chinese and European scripts differentiates their respective approaches to language. While the European script functions as a medium to represent the speech that expresses specific ideas, the pictograms in the Chinese script represent the specific ideas themselves and remain largely independent of speech that varies in different East and Southeast Asian territories. As a result, the Chinese script was widely used during the early twentieth century across China as well as in other parts of Asia such as Japan, Korea, and Vietnam even if the spoken language sounds different (269). Liang’s point illuminates the influence of culture on language that results in the different systems.

Grandma Siok’s comparisons of the Chinese language to a world and an image of the world resonate with philosopher Martin Heidegger’s assertions, “Only where is language, there is world”, and, “Only where is world, there is history” (199). The connection that he draws between language and the world illuminates how language is essential in constructing the world that people come to know. Without language, it would be difficult to navigate and perceive the world and record the events of the world that manifest as history. Heidegger’s conviction that language is the foundation that precedes the world and history, which implies that in order to understand a community’s world and history, one needs to first know language. Claude’s lack of familiarity with the Chinese language prevents him from understanding the way that Grandma Siok views the world, which differs greatly from his world view that he inherits from his father, Humphrey.

Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf propose a hypothesis of linguistic relativity that echoes Grandma Siok’s sentiments about how language creates a world for the community that is distinct from the rest. Sapir and Whorf underpin the connection between

¹¹ The original sentence in Chinese that I have translated is, “因又有寄于图像符号之文字发生，以济其穷而广其用。顾西洋文字仍不外代表声音，即是以文字附于语言而行。”

language and culture that mutually influence each other. According to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, “the real world is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group [of people and] . . . the worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same worlds with different labels attached” (Sapir and Whorf 69). Sapir and Whorf suggest that “the real world” consists of “distinct worlds” that are distinguished from the language habits of the individual societies. “Habits” attest to the consistent repeated usage of the language by a community reinforces the specific perspective that the language promotes about the world that is passed through the generations. The unconscious way that the world is built on draws attention to the subtle way that language impacts the way in which a community perceives the real world that creates its own sub-world. As a result, it is easy for people to overlook the co-existence of one world with other worlds they are not exposed to or are familiar with. Sapir and Whorf’s insistence that the worlds are not “merely the same . . . with different labels attached” recognises that the traditions and culture of each community influence the language that allows each world to break out of the restrictive and reductive confines of a “label”. The syntax and vocabulary of language represent each community’s perspectives that conveys more meaning than just being the same word in a different language, demarcating a community’s world from another’s.

The Chinese approach to language offers insight into why it developed into an ideographic system instead of a phonetic one. Literary scholar Ming Dong Gu pinpoints the standardisation of script as one of the strategies to unify China during the Qin dynasty, “Because the various kingdoms subjugated by the Qin spoke different dialects, the standard scripts could not represent sounds, because there would be total chaos” (702). Gu’s observation suggests that the meaning in speech preceded script, which evolved to convey meaning rather than sounds to accommodate the various dialects in the kingdom of Qin. With

less emphasis on the way that the words sound, an ideographic system allows ideas to be more easily conveyed across the land of various dialects.

The success of Qin's standardisation of script across different spoken dialects attests to the effectiveness of using pictographic representations over phonetic elements as a way to overcome the conventional barrier amongst spoken dialects. The sharing of a standard script across the various dialect communities in the kingdoms illustrates how pictographs can unite and facilitate some form of communication amongst communities who are not able to understand each other's speech. Loh and Grandma Siok's refusal to advise Claude, and by extension the reader, on how to read and interpret the Chinese characters signifies a valuing of heterogeneity, of different worlds. Besides Chinese characters, another visual medium that is capable of communication across language barriers is maps. Like Chinese characters, maps reflect a specific perspective of the world through graphical representations that do not fully rely on linguistic proficiency.

MAPPING THE BODY

Maps offer a general geographical reference for people to situate themselves in relation to others spatially as well as socially. They facilitate a deeper understanding of the lands through graphical representation that can be skewed a certain way based on the cartographer's perspective and choice of representation. Geographer J.B. Harley explains, "Both in the selectivity of their content and in their signs and styles of representation maps are a way of conceiving, articulating, and structuring the human world which is biased towards, promoted by, and exerts influence upon particular sets of social relations" (53). The word "selectivity" elucidates the limits of representation that prevent it from achieving comprehensiveness and results in a curation of the elements and their assembly that hints at a specific bias. This bias is manifested through the map's illustration of a specific way of

“conceiving, articulating, and structuring” the world, which allows it to be used as a tool to exert “influence upon particular sets of social relations” and impose a hierarchical order.

“Intimately intertwined within imperial power relations”, *Breaking the Tongue* illustrates how mapping remains “a site of contestation between the colonisers and the colonised” (James Akerman 3). This contestation stems from the differing views regarding the ownership of a territory that maps may reflect differently depending on the cartographer’s choice of representation. Claude, who is known as “the Body”, in the scenes where the Japanese soldiers torture and interrogate him becomes a human canvas for them to map the Japanese invasion in Malaya, which dehumanises him and reinforce the Japanese soldiers’ power over him. In chapter three, the Japanese soldiers “have begun the dangerous game of mapping out the Body with knives” and “cut rivers and roads in its skin” (Loh 187). The “game” bolsters Claude’s status as their pawn while “mapping” positions Japanese soldiers as cartographers who wield the authority to define the land however they see fit. The “baritone” in particular commands a lot of authority as none of the other soldiers object to his wish to take over the marking of the Body and instead hands him the knife, “bowing deeply in that exaggerated way”, which indicates that he is most likely the commander. The baritone looks at Claude, “surveying as a road engineer would” (187), which reinforces the parallel between Claude and a worksite — a local land that is subjected to their manipulation whereby the marks attest to their possession of the space. This mapping game underlines his physical vulnerability to the Japanese soldiers’ assertion of dominance and dehumanisation of him.

Loh dismantles the idea that the map as a mere representation of the destruction of Malaya. The way in which the lines of the passage alternates between the baritone’s verbalised narrative about the invasion route and his act of disfiguring the Body likens Claude to Malaya as a territory that the Japanese control. The baritone stops the other soldiers from aimlessly marking Claude with the knife. Instead, he takes over from his subordinates

and decides to update him about the progress of the Japanese invasion in Malaya at the same time:

—A brief history of the Japanese liberation of Malaya, he declares to the room. A little refresher course for you, my friend. Let us say this is Kota Bharu ... He places the knife in the narrow pass between the right temple and earlobe. When the Body flinches, he uses his other hand to grasp its chin. A pair of hands clamps down on the sides of its head.

—December eighth, 1941, he drones on. There are two other landings that day, in Thailand, at Singora and Patani.

The knife marks the crown of the head, where the soft spot grew in after birth, and then another point beside it, to the right.

—The troops at Singora then advance down the peninsula through Jitra.

His knife carves a line from Singora, the crown of the head, down the forehead, veering—just—towards the outside of the left eye to rest on the high ridge of the cheekbone. Blood stings the eye and obscures its vision.

—Meanwhile the troops from Kota Bahru move westwards towards Kroh. We are met by British troops—codename Krohcol, I believe.

He has carved downwards from above the right ear and has reached the nose.

—December tenth, Japanese Fifth Division, with tanks, versus Krohcol. A quick battle, he adds before slicing the tip of the nose.

Screams, a terrible wailing. Whose voice?

—The sounds of battle are just beginning to grow, he says. Onward, Fifth Division, to Jitra.

The knife moves again to the left cheekbone.

—Are you following me? He asks, mock concern in his voice. You'll stay with me, won't you, as I work my way down the Jitra line on the west, down your very, very good

British road, the spine of Malaya, down to Singapore? (188-9)

The baritone marks the route that the Japanese soldiers have taken in their invasion of Malaya on Claude's head and face, resulting in Claude's personification of a map. The baritone's intrusive disfigurement of Claude represents the soldiers' intrusion into Malaya. The bloody lines that the baritone carves into Claude and the inevitable bleeding as a result of slicing his nose tip mirror the bloodshed due to the Japanese soldiers' invasion. Likewise, the noises of pain that Claude makes resonate with those of the soldiers in battle who are also hurt by Japanese soldiers. The sentences, "Screams, a terrible wailing. Whose voice?" implies the difficulty of "you" to discern between the screams and wailing of the fallen soldiers, tortured Claude, or another prisoner. The overlapping narratives within the passage — the one told by the baritone and the main narrative told by "you"/Claude — adds to the confusion in the scene and difficulty of establishing who is screaming. The overlapping narratives further illuminate the parallel between Claude and Malaya as territories that can be seized and his role as an object upon which the soldiers physically mark and record their successful invasion of Malaya.

The baritone's narration constructs a literary map provides information on the strategic routes that the Japanese soldiers had taken to invade Malaya. It also establishes the power relations in the interrogation scenes that "you" appears to participate in towards the end. Anders Engberg-Pedersen posits, "the literary map establishes a varied series of productive tensions, of dependencies and complementarities, but also of exclusions and frictions . . . that . . . raise fundamental theoretical questions about representation, fiction, and space" (2). These "productive tensions, of dependencies and complementarities" establish an interdependent power relationship between the Body and the baritone. Although the Body's fate is fully dependent on the will of the baritone, the baritone also needs the Body as a medium to assert his dominance.

The Body's weakened and outnumbered state reinforces his subservient position and the baritone's access to a weapon like a knife accentuates the power that he wields over him. Both parties contribute to the "exclusions" that question the skewness of representation and fiction. The Body excludes his own voice in the baritone's crude attempt at historiography through his lack of verbal interruption or objection as the baritone describes the routes. Although the baritone cites Krohcol as an example of one of Japan's victories, he excludes any losses that the Japanese army have suffered in his narration. Although the Body does not put up any resistance against the baritone's oppression, "you" creates a little "friction" that manifests in "a small useless act of defiance" (Loh 189). Instead of heading "down the Jitra line" with the baritone to track more of the Japanese soldiers' triumphant battles, "you refuse to stay west, refusing for now to head down the Jitra line" (189). The literary map facilitates the establishment of power relations between the Body and the baritone but "you" are also able to exert some form of resistance, albeit not in any way that would improve the baritone's treatment of the Body.

The deviation of "you" from the west side, along the Jitra line frees "you" from burden and difficulty of witnessing such brutality. The scene is "too much for you to bear, too much to stay and watch the destruction" (189). This line encapsulates the struggle of witnessing such a heinous act. The repetition of "too much" sets up a parallel between the immense burden of bearing and the act of staying and watching the destruction. It explains the fuzziness of "your" memories of a woman being tortured in the background that is eventually clarified through the extremely graphic scene of Ling-li's torture. This small act of defiance allows "you" to acknowledge the difficulty of being a witness and not being able to intervene or help the tortured victim in any way.

In addition, the return of "you" to the "east . . . to Kuantan" (189) offers "you" some temporal respite from the baritone's brutal disfiguring of the Body that alludes to Ling-li's

torture scene in the final chapter. Going east to Kuantan stems from “your” insistence “to stay as long as you can away from the knifelines at Jitra” (189). “The knifepoints at Jitra” refer to the intersection of lines carved on the Body’s “left cheekbone” (188) that represents Jitra where the two Japanese troops convene and where the baritone leaves his narrative hanging. Staying away from the knifelines symbolises the reluctance of “you” to hear more about the Japanese troops’ triumph and witness how the baritone will represent the bloodshed on the Body. However, it also alludes to his and Jack’s position during Ling-li’s torture.

In Ling-li’s torture scene, Claude realises that Jack is present on his “right” (479), which correlates with the eastward direction when viewing a map. Jack keeps his “eyes resolutely closed” to block out the trauma of witnessing Ling-li’s torture. As a result, going east is associated with the act of avoidance. In “your” fuzzy memories, “you” focus on your attention on the ants on “the ceiling” (355), which provides a distraction from Ling-li’s torture under that ceiling, which correlates with the southward direction of the map. Thus, going “down the Jitra line” with the baritone reflects Claude’s and “your” decision to witness Ling-li’s torture. On the surface, “your” deviation from the baritone’s path may seem like an act of defiance but it is actually an act of cowardice disguised as self-protection.

As the interrogation scenes are recounted by Claude through the mental revisiting of his memory, it is difficult to ascertain if the Japanese soldiers’ disfigurement of the Body is a meticulous mapping of the Japanese invasion of Malaya or if it is Claude’s attempt to negotiate and understand the trauma of enduring such torture through a constructed event. The map is a metaphor upon which Claude makes meaning of his traumatic situation. Literary studies scholar Peta Mitchell notes, “In a world in which the real is no longer a given, the map becomes a key metaphor for the negotiation (physical and cognitive) required in order to derive meaning from our environment” (3). The world in which these interrogation scenes take place is part of Claude’s traumatised and fragmented memories

where “the real is no longer a given”. The response of “you” to the baritone’s carving of the map on the Body is a metaphor for Claude’s initial persistence to block out the traumatic scene of Ling-li’s torture. Imposing the motive of mapping the Japanese invasion route on to the baritone’s disfigurement of the Body facilitates this “negotiation”, both “physical and cognitive”. Claude’s cognitive mapping of his trauma translates into the baritone’s physical mapping into his skin, which allows him to make meaning and reconcile with his post-trauma state.

INTERPRETING A SCHEMATIC MAP

Regardless of whether the markings on Claude’s head and face correspond to the invasion route, Loh provides cartographic material as a paratext, which appears before the title page of the novel. The map offers visual aid to the reader to signpost their entry into Malaya between December 1941 to February 1942 and to compare with the markings on Claude. Engberg-Pedersen observes, “To ground fictional space, to visualise sites and movements, to help readers get their bearings in the imaginative world conjured by the text, authors have frequently included cartographic material either as paratexts or as inserts in the narratives themselves” (1). The novel is based on the Japanese invasion of Malaya, which is a historical event. The map further grounds the novel in the historical landscape by allowing the reader to visualise the different locations that are mentioned. The disjointed and disorderly nature of the narrative hinders the reader from navigating this space, especially without much historical context and knowledge. Loh does not instruct readers on how to use the map and its position outside of the narrative makes it susceptible to being ignored by the reader. Nonetheless, the map helps the reader to visualise the military sites and movements in the novel and grounds the narrative in a specific territory temporally and spatially and compare it with the baritone’s version of the same map that he carves into Claude’s skin.

Loh's inclusion of the map at the beginning of the novel offers the reader some direction on how to approach the narrative without interrupting the flow or undermining the fragmentation of the narrative.

Figure 1. The Malayan Campaign and Japanese Advance map illustrated by Jacques Chauzaud that occupies an entire page before the title page

Walter Lippmann offers a way of approaching Loh's fictive landscape. He notes that the representational and constructed nature of fictions, "By fictions I do not mean lies. I mean a representation of the environment which is in lesser or greater degree made by man himself" (Lippmann 95). Lippmann blurs the boundaries between fictions and representations by revealing the spectrum of fictions and the grey area that does not necessarily make all of them deceptive. Loh expounds on this idea by premising in the first chapter, "You too can make history, write it down . . . Tell them [Ling-li's] past as no-one else would know it . . . except you" (Loh 33). Besides reducing the distance between the author and the reader, Loh debunks the historiographer's exclusive authority to make history by claiming that anyone like "you" can do it too. The ability to provide information about someone or something "as no-one else would know it . . . except you" gives "you" the power to dictate history even if "you" are not an established historiographer. "Your" representations may not account for all sides of the entire story but it does not make them "lies". Loh extends Lippmann's assertion that all representations are "made by man" to historiography, which questions history's supposed credibility over fiction.

Lippmann draws a connection between schematic models such as maps to fictions by asserting their common function to simplify and facilitate understanding of complex concepts without requiring it to be accurate or realistic. "The range of fiction extends all the way from complete hallucination to the scientists' perfectly self-conscious use of a schematic model" (Lippmann 95). His analogy of a "schematic model" draws attention to how simplistic representations of the environments in pictorial or prose form help others understand the bigger picture without any need to convince them of its accuracy of representation. Like the scientists, Loh self-consciously uses a schematic model that is *Breaking the Tongue* to relay her point that "You too can make history" (Loh 33), which gestures to the fictive nature of the narrative. Loh reaffirms Lippmann that "to traverse the world men must have maps of the

world” (Lippmann 95) by emphasising the presence of maps that intervene in men’s negotiation of the world.

Loh credits the cartography of the Malayan Campaign and Japanese Advance map to Jacques Chazaud. Chazaud’s map is a graphical representation of the territory that functions as a pre-campaign plan and/or a post-campaign record of the invasion in Loh’s fictional space. The cartography in English implies that the map could be created by the British to reconnoitre the enemy’s movements. However, it could also be created by the Japanese commanders to survey the territory they are planning to conquer and plan their invasion strategies. Chazaud’s map puts the reader in the position of a Japanese commander looking at the campaign plan. This resistance extends to the map as there is no clear indication if one should perceive this map as a pre- or post-campaign document.

Breaking the Tongue is not the only book Chazaud has done cartography for. He has done similar work for other books such as a true crime book, two travel books on French Canada and Hawaii respectively, and a military history book, Bevin Alexander’s *How Great Generals Win* (1993). The maps that Chazaud produces for *How Great Generals Win* are similar to the one he makes for *Breaking the Tongue*, which shows the route of a military campaign. Peta Mitchell asserts that traditionally, “the map is viewed as a purely scientific document, having as its condition an empirically knowable territory that can be represented objectively and realistically” but it is “always-already a graphical re-presentation of a geographical territory; that is, a distortion” (2). Chazaud’s map is a representation of an “empirically knowable” territory during a specific time period. However, there are other versions of the Malayan Campaign map that include more details on location names and dates, especially those regarding the British troops, that are omitted from Chazaud’s map. Chazaud’s map shows how maps are distortions due to their nature as a graphical re-presentation. Despite the empirically knowability of the territory and the ability to represent

the territory “objectively and realistically”, the map remains a “distortion” due to its representational nature.

Engberg-Pedersen believes maps are present in literary narratives as they “entice and fascinate, and they whisper implicit promises of comprehension, of clarity, of transparency, and of order” (1). Chazaud’s map “entice[s] and fascinate[s]” the contemporary reader, especially one who is not familiar with Southeast Asia, with the historical world of 1940s British Malaya. It also “whisper[s] implicit promises of comprehension, of clarity, of transparency, and of order” that Loh’s narrative does not deliver due to its fragmented and disorderly nature. On the other hand, the literary map that outlines the baritone’s specific carvings of Claude the Body’s skin “entice and fascinate” in a sadistic manner and casts doubt on this promise of “clarity, . . . transparency, and . . . order” that conventional maps offer. Although Claude suffers from permanent disfigurement due to the knife wounds that the baritone inflicts on him, it is Ling-li who illustrates the power of the knife and its symbiotic relationship with the phallus.

DISSECTING LING-LI WITH THE PHALLUS

The components of 忍 have their own independent meanings and their combination offers a different interpretation on its own. The two components that Loh separates 忍 into are the “drawing knife” and the “revealing heart” (Loh 60). In the phrase, “drawing knife”, each of the words “drawing” and “knife” possesses its own individual meaning. However, the combination of the two offers two ways of interpreting it—a traditional woodworking hand tool and the knife’s extraction from its sheath. The interpretation of a traditional woodworking hand tool illustrates the significant influence that the colonisers have in shaping the enduring Singaporean Chinese identity without completely killing it. The interpretation of the knife’s extraction from its sheath focuses on the phallic nature of the

knife, which alludes to the weaponisation of both the knife and the phallus against Claude and Ling-li during their imprisonment. Hence, the figure of the drawing knife embodies the colonisers' emasculation of the Singaporean-Chinese community by imposing their racial and cultural superiority and/or employing brute force in the form of the phallus and the knife.

The former interpretation of the "drawing knife" as a traditional woodworking hand tool represents the insidious fashion by which the influence of the colonisers erodes the foundation of the Singaporean Chinese identity. The blatant Anglophilic and Anglicised nature of Humphrey, Claude's father, and Claude himself illustrates this idea of abandoning their Chinese heritage and embracing the British tastes. Nonetheless, such erosion occurs under both the British and Japanese imperialism. Loh describes the "drawing knife: 刀. A threat, perhaps? The lingering death of sharp edges?" (60). The question marks illustrate the lack of confirmation surrounding its potency as a weapon. The drawing knife's inability to make deep incisions makes it a doubtful weapon if used to inflict major harm that is visible immediately. However, its prowess lies in its delivery of a "lingering death" (60).

Like how the drawing knife works, which is not by chopping wood quickly but by shaving the surface bit by bit, the "threat" follows the same technique of a delayed and slow death. The drawing knife's shaping ability parallels the colonisers' influence in moulding the Singaporean-Chinese to fit in with their culture and values. The colonisers' efforts to slough off the Chinese cultures and values, causing the Singaporean-Chinese to take on an unrecognizable shape that is neither "real Chinese" (59) nor British or Japanese. Thus, the warning of a "lingering death" of this "drawing knife" alludes to the stripping of their loyalty to Mainland China that leaves a void and lack of sense of belonging. Some like Humphrey fill this void with pseudo-Britishness due to the inherited perception of inferiority regarding local culture and values from the colonisers.

The latter interpretation of the "drawing knife" refers to the extraction of a knife from

its sheath, which is as a phallic symbol. According to Chinese cultural studies scholar Kam Louie, an unsheathed knife represents an erect penis and “conjures up images of both potent masculinity and the destruction of this masculine potency” (88), which are contradictory aspects of the knife. Citing examples from author Zheng Wanlong’s ‘Strange Lands and Strange Tales’, Louie observes that the heroes show off masculine prowess more prominently when they carry knives instead of guns and demonstrate their expertise in battle with knives (Louie 88). However, he notes that the characters’ usage of the knife to remove or injure the reproductive organs of male animals in those stories illuminates this “double function” (88) as a tool of castration, which symbolises a form of masculine impotence. Louie sheds light on its relevance in masculinity and gender concerns that intertwines with the Chinese culture, specifically language, and validates this double-edged nature of the knife in *Breaking the Tongue*.

The phallic nature of the knife that Louie points out is not unique to *Breaking the Tongue*, which reinforces the weaponisation of the phallus in psychological warfare. Mary Lynn Bracht’s narrator compares the pain of rape to a stabbing knife in her historical novel, *White Chrysanthemum*. Like *Breaking the Tongue*, *White Chrysanthemum* is set in the 1940s under the tyranny of the Japanese Empire, albeit set in Korea and Manchuria. It documents the life of Hana, a Korean *haenyeo*¹² who is kidnapped from her family and forced to be a ‘comfort woman’ in Manchuria. Her first sexual experience manifests as rape by Morimoto, a Japanese soldier during the ferry journey from Jeju island to mainland Korea. The narrator describes Hana’s pain as “like a knife stabbed into the tender space between her toes” (Bracht 75). Likening the pain as a stabbing knife reaffirms the phallic nature of the knife and illustrates the intrusiveness and power of such sexual violence, especially when she compares

¹² The Korean term literally translates to “sea women” and refers to female divers in the Korean province of Jeju who harvest seafood directly from the ocean for a living.

the target of the knife to “the tender space between her toes”. The word “tender” amplifies her sensitivity to the pain of rape as a defenceless sixteen-year-old against an older, stronger man who has acquired complete control over her. The phrase “space between her toes” specifically pinpoints a small part of her body that is easily overlooked and appears to be a strange site to injure someone, which underlines her struggle to comprehend the ordeal and displace trauma. The consequential bleeding at the end of the scene (76) illustrates the violent nature of rape, and accentuates the ability for the phallus to inflict physical and psychological harm like a knife.

Ling-li experiences bleeding during her gang rape by the Japanese soldiers prior to their mutilation of her with the knife. A Japanese soldier mutilates her with a knife, prolonging her suffering until she bleeds to death. As a result, the phallic nature of the knife bolsters the Japanese soldiers’ power not by its ability to deliver a fatal blow but by its ability to inflict immense pain onto another to assert dominance. After the last soldier has had his turn, Claude describes how he lacerates Ling-li’s genital region with a knife, “他从身边拿起一把刀，迅速地切开了伶俐的阴部”¹³ (Loh 483). The Japanese soldier’s penetration of Ling-li’s genital region with a knife following the repeated sexual penetration of all the soldiers collapses the metaphor and distinction between the phallus and the knife. Although the sharp edge of the knife is capable of causing more severe physical harm than a phallus (or multiple phalluses), the Japanese soldier’s usage of it does not accelerate Ling-li’s death and shorten her misery. Instead, the entire process of bleeding to death takes approximately six hours¹⁴, which suggests that the soldiers deliberately intend for her to suffer unnecessary pain. While Louise claims that the knife empowers characters because its phallic appearance

¹³ The line translates to “He takes hold of a knife from his side, swiftly cutting open Ling-li’s genital region”.

¹⁴ Towards the end of Ling-li’s torture scene, Claude recounts Ling-li’s voice saying, “我流血至死。前后有六个小时，然后，结束了。” (484), which roughly translates to “I bleed to death. Approximately six hours, then it ended.”

that exudes masculine power drawn from the figure of the phallus, Bracht and Loh invert this metaphor and show that the phallus derives its power from its resemblance to the knife, which allows it to be weaponised to inflict sexual violence.

Both the phallus and the knife represent masculine intrusive weapons that the Japanese soldiers use against Ling-li whose lack of both the body part and object reinforces her femininity-associated weakness. Like the phallus, the penetration of the knife emphasises the absence of the male body part in Ling-li and cements her vulnerability as the colonised and castrated female native. According to Sigmund Freud's "The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex" (1961), this anatomical difference establishes the two possible roles in intercourse— an active, masculine one or a passive, feminine one (176). Freud notes that females experience a different effect of the castration complex in "Female Sexuality" (1931) that results in her "acknowledge[ment] . . . of her castration, and with it, too, the superiority of the male and her own inferiority; but she rebels against this unwelcome state of affairs" (Freud 229). This rebellion manifests as the desire to become a man and possess a penis (229) — a phenomenon he terms 'penis envy' (243). Ling-li's lack of a phallus marks her sexual difference from the Japanese soldiers. The parallel between the knife and the phallus further reinforces the activity position of males. Conversely, the vulva lacks the same intimidation due to its non-threatening shape, which establishes the passivity of females. The vulva that represents the absence of a phallus is regarded as a form of castration associated with deprivation of power. Thus, the Japanese soldiers' violation of Ling-li is an external display of their masculine power, which contrasts against Ling-li's vulnerability.

The Japanese soldiers' focus on Ling-li's physical femininity, specifically her body parts, underlines how the Japanese soldiers objectify and dehumanise her. According to Marie Mulvey-Roberts, "Women have been identified primarily through the body which, throughout history, has been associated with monstrosity", tracing its origins to Aristotle and

its persistence in the Gothic (106). She observes that such identification of women “by parts of their bodies, whether it be mouth, breast or genitalia, which have all too often been separated from the whole in an erasure of individuality and denial of integral personhood” (Mulvey- Roberts 111). Unlike their torture of Claude that is not targeted at his gender, the Japanese soldiers target body parts of Ling-li such as her genital region, anus, nipples, and mouth, to inflict harm. This “denial of integral personhood” through her objectification allows them to establish their dominance and abuse her. Contrary to the first five chapters that flesh out Ling-li’s history and character, the identification of Ling-li by her body parts strips her of the individuality, wholeness, coherence, and personhood, that she demonstrates earlier in the novel. Instead, it manifests as a pre-mature autopsy that reduces her to her individual dismembered body parts — a medium upon which the soldiers assert their dominance and authority.

The Japanese soldiers sexually assault and rape Ling-li prior to killing her yet there is no explicit usage of the English word “rape”. Instead, it manifests as two different Chinese terms that highlight the nuances that reflect different attitudes towards war-time rape that are not as well-illustrated in English. The word “sodomised” (482) gestures to a specific sexual activity performed by one of the soldiers but the word itself does not indicate the forced nature. However, upon examining the Chinese sections, the Chinese translation for rape, “强奸”, is repeated — at least once for the description of each individual soldier and what he did to her, except for the third soldier. Instead of “强奸”, her description of the third soldier uses a euphemism, “施暴” (482). Although both terms mean rape, they possess different connotations. The individual characters of “强奸” zeros in on the forcible and corrupt nature of the act respectively. However, “施暴” literally translates to inflicting violence and can refer to any act of violence not exclusive to rape alone, which focuses on the violent aspect of rape. Such differences elucidate the different mindsets that the perpetrators have towards

war-time rape, specifically in the case of the third soldier.

The term “施暴” encapsulates the attitude of the third soldier that differs from his comrades. Unlike the other soldiers who display more enthusiasm in raping Ling-li, the third soldier is reluctant to touch her and raped her because he was ordered to rather than deriving any sexual pleasure from it. The phrases “小心翼翼地试着擦去我身上的血”¹⁵ and “仿佛我极肮脏”¹⁶ suggest that his aversion to her stems from the filthy condition that she is in that is worsened after the first two soldiers raped her (482). Furthermore, the phrase “指挥官命令他继续向我施暴” (482) reveals that the commanding officer orders him to continue the gang rape despite his reluctance. As a result, the term “施暴” reveals his intent to inflict violence rather than derive sexual gratification and how he views the act as obeying an order to torture the enemy. The nuances of the Chinese terms in this scene show how the soldiers objectify Ling-li to assert their power, gain sexual gratification, and inflict violence to show their solidarity and obedience to the commander.

With the exception of the second soldier who gives the readers with poor Chinese literacy a glimpse of the horror that Ling-li endures, the observations and interpretations that Ling-li makes about each soldier’s treatment of her body are mostly in Chinese. Loh’s deliberate playing on the language barrier that exists for the ‘English reader’ denies their and ostensibly the Japanese soldiers’ access to Ling-li’s thoughts. On one hand, the language barrier shields these readers from the obscene and graphic details of Ling-li’s ordeal. On the other hand, Ling-li’s personal feelings and trauma are kept private. Nonetheless, the details are inaccessible to these readers, which illustrates their distance from Ling-li’s situation and inability to understand the trauma that she feels as a victim. This scene foregrounds the numerous obstacles that hinder an outsider’s understanding of the victim’s trauma that Loh

¹⁵ It translates to “carefully wiping off the blood on my body”, narrated in the perspective of Ling-li.

¹⁶ It translates to “as if I were extremely dirty”.

illustrates by emphasising these readers' inexperience in language, culture, time period, and the specific trauma.

(UN)CASTRATING THE MALE GAZE

The third soldier's participation is crucial due to the ritualistic nature of gang rape that offers the opportunity for the soldiers to assert their individual masculinity in the form of brute force and bond over feelings of power. Being both a witness and participant at the same time encourages the soldiers to feed off each other's enthusiasm and match up or outdo each other. For example, the first soldier approaches Ling-li "slightly sheepishly" initially but becomes "emboldened by [his fellow soldiers'] festivity" as they "begin jeering and laughing" (Loh 481). Political scientist Dara Kay Cohen notes the ritualistic nature of gang rape whereby "the intended 'audience' of the performance is the other perpetrators, with the victim serving as their 'vehicle'" (464). The mutual display and witnessing of violence against Ling-li "enables [them] to establish status and reputations for toughness" (Cohen 464). This toughness reaffirms the connection between masculinity and a display of dominance and control through brute force. Furthermore, gang rape "improv[es] group morale through inducing feelings of power and victory" (463). As a result, Ling-li is objectified and reduced to a prop for the soldiers' individual violent performances of masculinity and a vehicle to promote unity through feelings of power.

In addition to demonstrating their masculinity and facilitating a bonding opportunity amongst the fellow soldiers, the gang rape also re-establishes each soldier's position in the team. The Japanese soldiers "watch each other and organize an order of their participation" (464), even joining in when it is not their turn wherever possible¹⁷. Cohen claims that gang

¹⁷ After the third soldier's attempt at raping Ling-li, she uses the collective masculine pronoun "他们" instead of a singular masculine pronoun "他" when describing how her head is kicked aggressively, suggesting the intervention of the other soldiers.

rape assists in “maintaining social order among existing members (465). The commanding officer’s refusal to allow the third soldier to be excluded from the gang rape by turning it into an order that he must obey attests to this maintenance of social order that is achieved in the process at the same time. Regardless of the reasons behind the third soldier’s reluctance to rape Ling-li, he only complies when he receives the order from the commanding officer, which illustrates the maintenance of social order among the soldiers and the pressure to assert his masculinity through brutality.

The intense violence that the Japanese soldiers exert upon Ling-li is one of the horrors that civilians are vulnerable to upon foreign invasion. Rape of the enemy women “in the ancient world functioned as part of [the soldiers’] ritualised triumph” (Webb and Oeste 101). It “enacted defeat at a far deeper psychological level . . . [and] ritually reenacted the invading army’s earlier penetration of the city gates” that manifests as “phallic penetration, thrusting, and ejaculation within the most protected ‘territory’ of the enemy” (101). The ritualistic nature of rape in celebrating the colonisers’ triumph and power over the subdued locals reinforces Ling-li’s status as a proxy for the soldiers to reenact the violence they had unleashed on the colonised “‘territory’ of the enemy”. The “phallic penetration” concentrates their power on their maleness and display of masculinity. The combination of Ling-li’s lack and her status as the colonised local makes her the ideal subject that amplifies the impact of this ritualised phallic penetration.

The Japanese soldiers force Claude to watch Ling-li’s torture to highlight their emasculation of the male member of the local community. William J. Webb and Gordon K. Oeste note that wartime rape of the enemy women represents the invaders’ “ritualised triumph” of their successful conquest of the land and results in collateral emasculation of the enemy men (101). While viewing the violent spectacle shames Claude for his failure to protect his friend, the spectacle reflects the Japanese occupation of Singapore and

overthrowing of the British rule. Cohen posits, “rape is a crime that allows men to inflict psychological harm on women and their communities . . . [and] shames not only the victim but also her . . . male relatives, who have failed to protect her” (Cohen 463). Claude may not be a direct relative of Ling-li but they are both a part of the Singaporean-Chinese community and seeing Ling-li suffer attests to his failure to protect her from harm. In addition to Claude’s failure to protect his community and land from ravages of the Japanese soldiers, the soldiers torture, rape, and kill Ling-li to assert their successful territorial acquisition. Hence, the Japanese soldiers reduce Ling-li to an object to illustrate his helplessness to protect both his people and land.

While the Japanese soldier’s torture and disfigurement of Claude do not result in any explicit evidence of physical castration, Freud’s definitions of castration and the castration complex are useful in examining Claude the Body’s torture scenes. Freud’s preoccupation with castration and its implications can be traced back to *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899) but it was his essay, “Analysis of a Phobia in a Five-year-old Boy” (1909) that Freud explicitly discusses the ‘castration complex’. Freud defines castration as “the loss of what he regards as an important part of his body” (Freud 8) and cites the withdrawing of the mother’s breast from the baby, the excretion of faeces, and the act of birth as examples. However, he clarifies that the term ‘castration complex’ should be “confined to those excitations and consequences which are bound up with the loss of the *penis*” (8). In The “Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex” (1924), Freud emphasises that it is the boy’s sight of the female genitals that bolsters the threat of castration and make the loss of his penis imaginable due to the absence of a penis “in a creature who is so like himself” (Freud 176). While Freud cites the girl’s absent penis as the trigger for the castration complex, Claude’s witnessing of Ling-li’s rape and genital mutilation that is “bound up with the loss of the penis”. Thus, Claude’s witnessing of Ling-li’s slow and painful death manifests as the castration complex.

Claude's initial avoidance of witnessing the scene reaffirms the traumatising effect of the gang rape on a witness. Ling-li guides Claude to re-examine his position in a different light and to regard his sense of sight as empowering rather than disempowering. Ling-li's voice addresses Claude directly by his full name, "Claude Lim: 你看不看¹⁸?" (Loh 480) and remarks, "As you can see, I was blindfolded and gagged" (481) shortly before the gang rape commences. The phrase "as you can see" and the Chinese character 看 attest to Claude's presence in the room and his visual access to the gang rape, unlike Ling-li's deprivation of sight and speech as she "was blindfolded and gagged". Ling-li explains that the soldiers do "not want [her] to see their faces and to speak". Hence, Claude is obliged to hear her account, witness the scene, and tell her about their "distinguishing features" and "erase their anonymity" (481). Her "blindfolded and gagged" state perversely strengthens the power of the male gaze and the male voice to speak for the female while her ability to witness her own trauma is. Loh contests the male gaze by exposing its unpleasant implications by having Claude be the reluctant eyewitness for Ling-li and the reader who views the scene from his perspective.

Literary critic Mary Devereaux breaks down the notion of the "male gaze" in the context of films, "In literal terms, the gaze is male when men do the looking, . . . both as spectators and as characters within the works. In figurative terms, [it] refers to a way of seeing which takes women as its object. In this broad sense, the gaze is male whenever it directs itself at, and takes pleasure in, women, where women function as erotic objects" (337). The situation whereby Claude represents the male gaze and Ling-li, the female object, fulfils both the literal and figurative terms that Devereaux establishes. However, it problematises the male gaze in the broad sense in which pleasure is often taken and women function as erotic objects. Despite the sexual nature of the ordeal that Ling-li is in, Claude

¹⁸ It translates to "Are you watching or not?".

does not take any pleasure in viewing Ling-li as an erotic object. Instead, he exhibits strong discomfort, which is shared by the participants and reader regardless of their (un)willingness, in watching Ling-li and the process unfold.

Cindy Sherman, a female postmodern artist, shares Loh's preoccupation in subverting the male gaze through photography. In *The Politics of Postmodernism* (2003), Linda Hutcheon notes that in Sherman's self-portraits, "the social construction of the female self, fixed by the masculine gaze, is both presented and ironised, for she herself is the gaze behind the camera, the active absent presence, the subject and object of her representation of woman as sign, of woman as positioned by gender - but also by race" (152). Her replacement of 'male' with 'masculine' stems from Sherman's position as "the gaze behind the camera", which suggests that the person behind the camera need not be biologically male to project socially-constructed gender conventions. Like Hutcheon, Devereaux distinguishes the three different gazes that participate in the male gaze: "that of the film-maker, the characters within the film and the spectator" (Devereaux 339), which identifies the gaze as the point of convergence for the author Loh, the characters Claude and Ling-li, and the reader.

As the author, Loh is 'the film-maker' in a novelistic sense and "is the gaze behind the camera, the active absent presence". The phrase "active absent presence" corresponds to Loh's active presence through the construction of the scene as the mastermind despite absenting herself in a proxy trauma with Ling-li. As a colonised local woman who is at the mercy of the Japanese colonisers, Ling-li is "the subject and object of [Loh's] representation of woman as sign, of woman as positioned by gender [and] . . . race". Being raped and tortured by the soldiers makes Ling-li the passive object but Ling-li's agency in collaborating with Claude to expose these soldiers and their offences against her makes her the active subject. Claude is 'the character' in the narrative whose gaze Ling-li summons to the forefront of the scene while the reader participates in the gaze as 'the spectator'. Loh

constructs a scene whereby the male protagonist does not feel comfortable or empowered watching other men engage in sexual activities with a female character against her will. Instead of being a source of pleasure and power, the act of watching the soldiers degrade Ling-li is traumatic and intrusive, which is a kind of castration of the local men. Like Sherman, Loh presents and ironises the masculine gaze, albeit in a different way.

Claude is not the only witness present at the scene. Ling-li's voice draws Claude's attention to Jack's presence and explains that the Japanese soldiers "thought that if [Jack] had to watch [her] torture and humiliation he would yield and beg them to stop in exchange for information" (Loh 479). Although it is not explicitly mentioned in the sixth and final chapter, a scene in the fifth chapter quotes one of the soldiers saying to Claude, "Perhaps seeing [Ling-li] in this ... position ... will jog your memory?" (356). This earlier quote suggests that Claude was subjected to the same pressure that Jack endured from Japanese soldiers to watch them abuse Ling-li as a means of extracting information. Both Claude and Jack choose to avoid watching the traumatic scene but Ling-li remains far less concerned about Jack's response.

Like Claude, Jack remains in the same room as Ling-li and the soldiers but he "shut[s] out the scene before him" with "his eyes resolutely closed" (479). Claude also suppresses his traumatic witnessing of Ling-li's gang rape that repeatedly interrupts the general narrative in the form of vague snippets. This scene, where Claude finally confronts the trauma, acknowledges his acceptance of his identity as a Singaporean-Chinese over an Anglicised British subject. The Japanese soldiers capture Claude and Jack to extract information from them but the implications of Ling-li's rape impacts Claude more than Jack. Ling-li's voice states, "Jack can afford to close his eyes, [and] turn away . . . he will return to his country, glad and relieved to be home . . . You're different. You have no other home but here. If you won't witness this, who will?" (480) — a reminder to Claude about his Singaporean identity

that differs from Jack's. The phrase "can afford to" isolates Jack as the English expatriate-outsider with financial privilege and no obligation to care for a local in a country he does not belong to and may not remain long in, especially in such tumultuous times. The statement "You're different" reminds Claude of his identity as a Singaporean instead of a pseudo-British that Humphrey had raised him to be. She beseeches him to witness "our history" (480) based on his having "no home but here". While Claude remains deeply tied to Singapore, the place he was born and raised in, Jack views Singapore as one of the colonies that is "a last resort . . . to make [his] fortune" (352).

Although Ling-li's torture and execution occur behind closed doors, the Japanese soldiers arrange for Claude and Jack to be witnesses to the process, a demonstration of their dominance and authority. In *Discipline and Punish* (1977), Michel Foucault asserts, "The right to punish . . . is an aspect of the sovereign's right to make war on his enemies: to punish belongs to 'that absolute power of life and death'" (48). He discusses the ceremonial nature of a public execution that calls for witnesses as the aim is not "to re-establish a balance". Instead, it displays "the dissymmetry between the subject who has dared to violate the law and the all-powerful sovereign who displays his strength" (Foucault 49). Ling-li is the enemy and subject who allegedly violates the law and the Japanese soldiers represent "the all-powerful sovereign" who has "the right to punish", "make war on his enemies". In addition to being outnumbered, Ling-li is "bound, gagged, blindfolded" (Loh 481), which attests to the absence of a balance or any intention of the soldiers to re-establish some form of balance. Having Claude and Jack witness the public execution affirms the Japanese soldiers' "absolute power of life and death" of the three of them. The trauma of viewing such a horrifying scene also makes it a form of punishment for Claude and Jack. However, they are not the only spectators of this public execution.

Like Claude and Jack, the reader witnesses this spectacle as a form of punishment.

Foucault notes that the punishment “is carried out in such a way as to give a spectacle not of measure, but of imbalance and excess; in this liturgy of punishment, there must be an emphatic affirmation of power and of its intrinsic superiority” (49). The juxtaposition between “spectacle” and “measure” underlines the lack of restraint in order to create the emphatic visual impact that promotes power and superiority. On a superficial level, the Chinese passages create a visually striking display on the page that stands out from the rest of the English language narrative. Prior to this scene, the Chinese words were few and add some visual and linguistic texture to the narrative without overwhelming readers with poor Chinese literacy. This scene reverses the visual balance between the written scripts across four pages. This disruptive excess of Chinese words provokes confusion and frustration as they obstruct these readers from obtaining a clear reading of the scene. The reader with sufficient Chinese literacy is not spared from this ‘punishment’ as the ability to understand Chinese uncovers a shockingly graphic and repetitive recount of the brutalities that Ling-li endures until she dies. Thus, the wall of Chinese words is Loh’s display of an emphatic affirmation of power over the reader regardless of their linguistic background. The Japanese soldiers could have easily killed Ling-li by inflicting a fatal knife wound with a single strike but they choose to turn it into a longer spectacle to assert their power. Similarly, Loh could have shortened Ling-li and Claude’s recount of the scene to a paragraph or a page. Instead, she chooses to present it as a spectacle to the reader who also suffers from this punishment in one way or another.

Freud draws a connection between castration anxiety and dreams in “The Uncanny” (1919) that further reinforces the pivotal role that the sense of sight plays in triggering the castration complex. His close-readings of E. T. A. Hoffmann’s “The Sandman” and Sophocles’s *Oedipus Rex* lead to his conclusion, “A study of dreams, phantasies and myths has taught us that a morbid anxiety connected with the eyes and with going blind is often enough a substitute for the dread of castration” (Freud 7). Claude experiences “a morbid

anxiety connected with the eyes” that manifests as his reluctance to confront the Japanese soldiers’ brutality against Ling-li during the dream-like interrogation scenes. However, Claude’s blindness is self-imposed as it stems from his refusal to witness Ling-li’s plight due to the castration complex. Hence, it is not the anxiety “connected with . . . going blind” but this anxiety of catching sight of Ling-li’s torture and murder that is the “substitute for the dread of castration”. Claude’s eventual compliance with Ling-li’s demand for him to “open [his] eyes” and witness her torture is his uncastration that represents his confrontation of his dread of castration and the imaginable result of such castration that haunt him.

Unlike Ling-li’s tragic fate, Claude survives the torture and lives to tell the tale as a disfigured victim due to the scars on his face. His scarred Body, stylised with a capital ‘B’ in the novel, attests to his struggle and survival against the Japanese soldiers’ brutality. Yet Ling-li who sacrifices her life to protect Singapore does not enjoy the same honour. Although Claude’s family and her uncle, Hong Seng, received news about Ling-li’s death, he tells Claude that they “never got her body back for burial” and there was no funeral or altar for her (Loh 474). On the other hand, Claude “the Body” leaves the torture room with his life spared and body intact. However, his mental state suffers from the trauma he experienced, which results in his retrospective reflection of the ordeal as a distanced spectator.

NAVIGATING (CLAUDE) THE BODY WITH “YOU”

Unlike Ling-li whom the Japanese soldiers objectify by her individual body parts and whose corpse remains missing, Claude retains his wholeness even as a prisoner-of-war. In the interrogation scenes, the narrator refers to Claude as “the Body”, short for “Claude the Body” (22). This re-naming can be read multiple ways. The name illuminates the Japanese soldiers’ stripping of Claude’s personhood and masculinity, and their objectification of him as an insignificant unnamed ungended prop upon which they can exert their control. It is also

Claude's conscious dissociation of himself from his physical body in order to compartmentalise the intense pain related to his time as a prisoner-of-war as he mentally revisits the traumatic incident.

In "A Woman's Beauty", Susan Sontag points out the distinction between the judgment of physical appearance in men and women that greatly disempowers women. According to Sontag, "Women are taught to see their bodies in parts, and to evaluate each part separately . . . each in turn is submitted to an anxious, fretful, often despairing scrutiny" (Sontag 645). On the other hand, men are regarded as "a whole, something taken in at a glance" without the need "to dissect his appearance, feature by feature" (645). The juxtaposition between "scrutiny" and "glance" illustrates the excessive attention that people pay to women's bodies compared to men's, which suggests that the expectation for women to uphold certain beauty ideals of their bodies. Women's inclination to "evaluate" their bodies implies that they subject themselves to a superficial self-assessment based on an arbitrary socially-constructed ideal. Sontag's suggestion that women have to "dissect [their] appearance" bolsters their objectification by likening them to cadavers whose value revolves solely around their dissected anatomy. Despite being both prisoner-of-wars whose personhoods are unrecognised, Claude is perceived as a "whole" Body "taken in at a glance" while Ling-li is dissected into body parts.

The interrogation scenes remain in the same present tense that the narrative predominantly adheres to. Examples of the present tense such as "You look at yourself" (Loh 2) and "The Body drinks greedily" (123) reflect the persisting effects of trauma that trap Claude in a time loop as he continues to revisit the same scene. The disorderly narrative that simulates post-trauma disorientation confuses the reader and hinders them from interpreting it in chronological order. Upon closer examination, the pronoun "you" refers to both the reader and retrospective Claude who attempts to negotiate the trauma he suffers while shielding

himself by separating himself from “the Body”, his body during the interrogation.

In addition to being a plaything in the soldiers’ sadistic mapping game, the Body is a vessel for “you” to possess and manipulate. “Your” ability to do so indicates that the world that the interrogation scenes occur in is separate from the rest of the novel as it does not obey conventional temporal and spatial boundaries. In the first scene, “you look at yourself, . . . your bloody face” after the Japanese soldiers turn the Body over to reveal a “swollen face and split mouth” (22). The peculiarity of the second person pronoun blurs the distinction between subject and object, which facilitates this self-scrutinising of “yourself”. There is no mirror to allow one to see oneself, implying that “you” exist outside the Body such that “you” can observe “yourself” from the perspective of an onlooker. Yet, “you” also use the Body as a mouthpiece, “through the Body’s hiccoughs, you tell him you don’t know what is required of you” (122). The Body’s involuntary physical responses to the torture such as hiccoughing do not affect “you” who are able to communicate with the Japanese soldiers and respond in a way that suggests that Japanese soldiers are addressing “you”. The ambiguity surrounding “your” presence in the scene illustrates how the second person pronoun brings out the other-worldliness of the scenes and facilitates the temporal displacement as Claude revisits of his past trauma through memory.

Loh shifts the pronouns of the narrative voice so the second person merges the reader and retrospective Claude. In the first chapter, Loh establishes the volatile position that “you” occupy in the novel even though “you” demonstrate more agency than Claude. Her description of “you” as “weightless” and “light as a floating cloud” (39) pervades the narrative. In John Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* that Hutcheon and Waugh cite in their respective works, the narrator manifests as a physical character whom one of the main characters, Charles, encounters in a train. However, in *Breaking the Tongue*, “you, its author” (43) do not physically manifest in the narrative. Loh’s description acknowledges the

reader's presence that remains intangible and invisible to the characters, except in Claude's interrogation scenes where "you" are able to communicate using the Body. Loh establishes Claude as the protagonist by stating, "you are drawn to the body below: Claude" (39). The word "below" places "you" in a God-like position above the characters and suggests the omniscience that comes with a bird's eye view. Loh then proclaims "you" as the "possessor of a broken arm and cracked ribs, the English-educated boy from Bukit Timah" (39), which immediately reduces the gap between "you" and Claude and merges them into one entity. While this statement blurs boundaries between Claude and "you" in the interrogation scenes, "you" remain the subject who possesses the object, Claude the Body.

The presence of "you", the reader, is not limited to that of a witness. Instead, "you" are also the author of history, which shifts "you" from a passive object to an active subject. Loh first asserts that "you are witness to all that has brought about the fall of the city, the many and petty English foibles that have changed the course of history. Or obeyed it" (39-40). This statement explicitly states the role of "you" as the witness to the events that cause "the fall of the city", which is the gist of the narrative. She blames the English for dictating the course in history, in which "you" have no hand. However, she soon contradicts her earlier statement, "these memories come unbidden to you, these revelations and half-dreams that have been lived out by others and the Body. Or made up by you" (43). This updated version regarding the role of "you" suggests that "you" play a far more crucial role than just a witness in the narrative events. Loh draws attention to "the memories" of you as the main inspiration for these "revelations and half-dreams" that form the narrative that may be "made up by you", which elicits doubt and scepticism of the reliability of the narrative as well as marks her claim of the space as her own. Her final two sentences, "History: the Detour. And you, its author" (43), presents a possible title of the narrative, of which "you" are the author. Loh asserts her authorial power by forcing both the reader and Claude to (re)examine and

question the account of his trauma.

Contrary to Loh's (misleading?) suggestion that the narrative is made of the memories of "you", Hutcheon argues that "there is no such thing as the reproduction of events by memory" (Hutcheon 154). She reaffirms a claim that Hayden White made about historical narratives and states that "historiographic metafiction does not pretend to reproduce events, but to direct us, instead, to facts, or to new directions in which to think about events" (154). Her acknowledgement that events cannot be reproduced by memory affirms the subjectivity of memory. Loh's likening of memories to "revelations and half-dreams" proves Hutcheon's point that historiographic metafiction like *Breaking the Tongue* exhibits awareness of such impossibility. Instead of directing the reader to facts, Loh dissolves the line between truths and untruths. Instead, she opts for a "detour" that is an unconventional alternative to the beaten path but not one that is off-limits. The varying versions of interrogation scenes in second-person that interrupt the third-person narration present different ways of looking at the same event, which reaffirms Loh's interest in "new directions in which to think about events".

Sharing the pronoun "you" with post-interrogation Claude recognises the empathy that others can develop for the victim, which attests to how trauma can be shared within a community. However, the distinction between "you" and the Body maintains the reader's distance from the visceral pain and trauma that only Claude is able to understand as the victim, which marks out the limited extent to which the trauma can be shared. Historian Malem Ningthouja discusses the politics of pain and tortured bodies, "Torture . . . becomes social and transcends the confines of the personal, metamorphosing into the pain-experience that is shared by the community" (257). Loh's strategy of having Claude refer to himself as "you" bridges the gap between the reader, which can potentially allow his torture to transcend "the confines of the personal" on to the reader. However, she does not turn it "into the pain-

experience that is shared by the community”. Instead of imposing the pain on to “you”, Loh limits all violence to the Body who “flinches” and feels “blood sting[ing] the eye” (Loh 188). Loh’s differentiation of the Body and “you” map out the boundaries of the reader who is able to learn of Claude’s narrative as a witness but the pain and trauma that Claude suffers as a victim remains impenetrable to anyone, except him.

In *Metafiction*, Waugh explains the effects of Loh’s emphatic establishment of “you” as the author of the narrative world:

[T]he tension breaks down, the balance between the construction of realistic illusion and its deconstruction gives way; the metafictional tension of technique and counter-technique is dissolved, and metafictional elements are superseded by those of surrealism, the grotesque, randomness, cut-ups and fold-ins. (130)

Waugh captures the overwhelming confusion upon revelation about the constructed nature of the narrative world, specifically when Loh reaches out to the reader and imposes the authorial responsibility onto them. The combination of the phrases “breaks down”, “gives way” and “is dissolved” reflect the crumbling of conventions with which the reader is familiar. As a result, Loh’s assertion of “your” presence and influence disturbs the conventional passivity of the readers and triggers their hyperawareness of their active interpretation.

Conclusion

尾: The Broken Tongue

Claude's initial resistance against witnessing Ling-li's torture reaffirms the "substitutive relation between the eye and the male member which is seen to exist in dreams and myths and phantasies" (Freud 7). Freud asserts that the "the threat of being castrated in especial . . . excites a peculiarly violent and obscure emotion, and that this emotion is what first gives the idea of losing other organs its intense colouring" (7). Claude's recurring dream of losing his tongue started when he was a child and persists during the Japanese invasion, which connects this fear of losing his penis to the fear of losing his other organs. Other than the phallic appearance of the tongue, Freud also acknowledges the sexual utilisation of the mouth, which includes the lips and tongue, (Freud 16) in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905). The recurring dream of losing his tongue represents Claude's anxiety of losing his manhood and masculinity. It also symbolises his anxiety surrounding his complete dependence on the British and the English language to validate his worth and forge his identity that worsens his estrangement from his Chinese roots and mother tongue.

The second last passage of *Breaking the Tongue* features a recurrent dream about the severing of Claude's tongue. The scene is a literal illustration of the book title but it does not explain the significance of Claude's removal of his tongue, which leaves it open to more than one interpretation. The dream first occurs when he was a boy in the first chapter. It "starts with the man being held down by others" where Claude is "all the people in his dream at once" as he narrates the sensation of cutting someone's tongue as well as the pain of having his tongue cut (Loh 76). Claude has the same dream during his time as a prisoner-of-war in the fifth chapter where he is pinned down and "wriggle[s] like a dying carp as it's scooped out of water" (76). Claude continues to resist this mutilation in subsequent dreams and wishes to "fight the imaginary knives" in his mouth" and insists on "keep[ing] this part of him

intact” (344), albeit futilely. Yet, in the dream in the final chapter, Claude finds the strength to “shake off” the people holding him down and willingly asks for the knife (487) and cuts his tongue out of his own accord. There are at least two ways of interpreting this scene — it reflects Claude’s desire to forsake the English language in order to pave the way for his reconnection with his Chinese heritage, or it is a self-reflexive gesture to the end of the narrative to set both reader and Claude free. In order to provide a more elaborate reading of the tongue-cutting scene, I will refer back to earlier scenes of the Body’s interrogation by the Japanese and Claude’s conversations with Jack that contribute to the awakening of Claude’s political and linguistic conscience.

Claude is only able to speak in English and his tongue represents his connection to the English language. Cutting the tongue out reveals his desire to re-define his identity in his own way beyond the limits of the colonial language and colonial influence that he believed imbued him with superiority but actually oppresses him. Loh does not explicitly mention lizards but alludes to their ability to regrow their lost tails that is absent in this case, “No miraculous new tongue will sprout in the old one’s place, no regeneration of what has been lost” (488). The word “miraculous” cements the impossibility of the growth of a new tongue to replace the old one. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud notes, “The appearance in dreams of lizards—animals whose tails grow again if they are pulled off—has the same significance” (370) of warding off a castration. The lack of a lizard-like regenerative ability suggests the permanence of Claude’s castration. This castration reinforces the inability for Claude to regain the power he derives from his English language skills.

After his estrangement from his Chineseness, his subsequent rejection of the British leaves him in a space of muteness that detaches him from both his Anglicised habits and his Chineseness. However, he remains relieved by his inability to promote the British coloniser’s influence. The result of the removal manifests as “nonsense syllables, the building blocks of

new speech” (488), which illustrates the difficulty of comprehending him and the necessity to devise a new way for him to express himself that is neither Chinese nor English. Claude regresses back to his younger self when he perceives the Chinese characters in Grandma Siok’s game as foreign symbols. The predicted experience of “only a muteness—at best, a stunted form of speech, that will make children laugh and tease you mercilessly” symbolises his difficulty in reconnecting with his community, even on a rudimentary level with children. His conviction that “they will not be contaminated by that old tongue” (488) draws attention to the harmfulness of the English language to the local community. Despite suffering from the consequences of embracing the English language and culture in favour of his own mother tongue and culture only to reject the former later, Claude is able to “laugh along” knowing that the next generation will not be raised to abandon their heritage.

The character of Friday in Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) is arguably one of the most well-known and influential representations of a colonised native in English literature. J.M. Coetzee’s *Foe* (1986) is amongst one of the numerous adaptations inspired by *Robinson Crusoe* that offered a different perspective of Friday. Both Defoe’s and Coetzee’s Friday demonstrate their agency by selecting two different paths. Claude initially embarks on a similar path as Defoe’s Friday but later chooses to follow in the footsteps of Coetzee’s Friday. In “Theory in the Margin: Coetzee’s *Foe* Reading Defoe’s ‘Crusoe/Roxana’” (1990), Gayatri Spivak describes Friday in Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* as “the prototype of the successful colonial subject” who “learns his master's speech, . . . happily swears loyalty, believes the culture of the master is better” (14). Unlike Defoe’s Friday, Spivak notes that Coetzee’s Friday resists against Susan’s teachings as the “unemphatic agent of withholding” (16). Nonetheless, both Fridays demonstrate their individual agency despite the contradictory outcomes. Humphrey raises Claude to be “the successful colonial subject” like Defoe’s Friday who “learns his master's speech, . . . happily swears loyalty, [and] believes the culture

of the master is better". Claude eventually chooses the path of Coetzee's Friday and cuts off his tongue that is only able to speak the colonial language. This scene exhibits Claude's desire to let go of his identity as a colonial subject based on his choice of muteness over speech that reinforces the colonial power.

The absent tongue in both Coetzee's Friday and Claude in the ending dream scene raises the question if *Breaking the Tongue* is a narrative told by Claude or if it is a narrative about Claude that Loh or "you", the reader and alleged authorial figure, constructs. Spivak notes that Susan Barton, the narrator of *Foe*, "wants to know" Foe's Friday, "to give him speech, to learn from him, to father his story, which will also be her story", which includes "the orchestration of her desire to construct Friday as subject so that he can be informant" (13). Susan's "orchestration of her desire" underlines her meticulous planning of her narrative. The questions of who gives whom speech and who is telling whose story are prevalent across the novel. Did Loh or "you" give speech to Claude and tell his story, which is their story? Did Loh, "you", or Claude give speech to the Japanese soldiers in the "revelations and half-dreams" (Loh 43)? Did Loh or "you" orchestrate Claude's desire to construct Ling-li as subject so that she can be the informant? Did Loh orchestrate "your" desire to construct Claude as subject to be the informant? This ambiguous last scene where Claude removes his own tongue suggests his distancing from his alleged account of events and further amplifies the indeterminable nature surrounding who did what to whom, for whom.

The tongue plays a major role in communicating images of the world to perpetuate the continuity of culture such as the segregation of Asiatics and Caucasians. In a scene prior to his enlightenment, Claude did not question being labelled an Asiatic, which reflects his acceptance of being denied the privileges that Caucasians enjoyed. In *Decolonising the Mind*, Ngũgĩ emphasises the impact of the images that the colonial language conjures:

Since culture does not just reflect the world in images but actually, through those very images, conditions the colonial child to see that world in a certain way, the colonial child was made to see the world and where he stands in it as seen and defined by or reflected in the culture of the language of imposition. (17)

The phrase “reflect the world in images” refers to a superficial representation of the world through images that recur enough such that cultures “conditions” someone to behave a certain way or adopt a certain mindset. Claude proves the success of conditioning when he declines Jack’s invitation to join him for lunch at the Cricket Club. Claude wonders, “Didn’t [Jack] know that Asiatics were prohibited from entering the Cricket Club except under special conditions? Why was this not common knowledge to him as it was to everyone else on the island?” (Loh 322-3). The first rhetorical question shows Claude’s awareness that he cannot enter the Cricket Club because he is “not Caucasian” (323) and the assumption that Jack knew as well. Claude adheres to the rule quietly without questioning or drawing any attention to it until Jack presses him for a reason, which reflects his acceptance of it as a social norm. His viewing of this rule as “common knowledge . . . to everyone” reveals that both Caucasians and Asiatics accept it as a factual, indisputable part of the local culture that reinforces the gulf between the colonisers and the colonised. Prior to his enlightenment surrounding his identity as a colonial subject, Claude saw the world as a division between Asiatics and Caucasians and his lack of privileges as an Asiatic reinforced his subordination to Caucasians.

Claude questions his role as a British subject in a conversation with Jack, hiding in Amah’s hut when war broke out. Contrary to Spivak’s concept of a “colonial subject”¹⁹, Claude calls Jack “a British subject” (271), which sparks a debate surrounding the ambiguity

¹⁹ Spivak suggests that the term ‘colonial subject’ refers to the colonised person rather than the coloniser in her Friday example.

of the word “subject”. Prior to the British Nationality Act in 1948, “everybody in the British Empire and Commonwealth was a British subject” (Mark Pearsall), which validates the accuracy of Claude’s reference to Jack in the early 1940s. Jack responds with “So are you”, followed by a rhetorical question about Claude being “equally entitled to a passage to England” (Loh 271). Jack’s response furnishes the illusion that they are equals in the Empire that he further reinforces. However, Claude is “taken off-guard” as “the thought has not occurred to [him] and he is at a loss as to how to respond” (271). Claude’s reaction shows that he had not regarded himself as a British subject who shares equal entitlement with Jack. The conversation with Jack provokes Claude to think about what “British subject” constitute and to scrutinise the differences between Jack and himself.

This scene marks the beginning of Claude’s awareness of how English oppresses him by analysing the word definitions. Instead of being encouraged to be the successful colonial subject like Friday, Claude uses the colonial language, English, to deconstruct Humphrey’s ideal of being a valued British subject on par with the English and show how English defines his identity and place in the British Empire. A disclaimer about Claude’s source accompanies the ‘subject’ definitions, “the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the definer of all things contained in and sanctioned by the Empire” (271). The *Oxford English Dictionary* is a synecdoche for the English language, which suggests that it is a symbol and a part of the whole. Claude’s disclaimer acknowledges its power as the “definer of all things” to ensure that the colonies adhere to the same way that the colonisers perceive the world.

Claude provides four definitions of the word “subject” in total and structures them like verbatim extractions from the dictionary. The first definition, “Subject: the person or thing being discussed, the topic” (271) is broad and neutral that can refer to anyone or anything that is the topic of discussion. The first definition draws attention to the subject of the scenes in the narrative, specifically “you”. In the interrogation scenes, the distinction

between the subject and the object, which is “you” and Claude the Body respectively, is not always maintained. Although the dictionary definition uses the passive voice, the subject does not necessarily occupy a passive position in English grammar and can take an active position by doing or performing an action. However, the object is the noun that receives the action or is manipulated in an action. For example, when “you” “whisper[s] through the Body’s lips” (122), “you” are the subject and the Body is the object. The subject “you” demonstrates agency that the object, the Body, lacks due to its passivity in the sentence, which reinforces the agency of “you” as the authorial figure and the Body’s physical helplessness against the Japanese soldiers’ torture. The first definition that Claude isolates marks the moment when he sees himself as an active subject who has agency as opposed to a passive object who is just a pawn in someone else’s game.

The second definition gives more insight into Claude’s thoughts about being a colonial “subject”, “Subject: a person under a particular political rule, a person owing obedience to another” (271), accentuates the political connotations that apply to both Jack and Claude. The act of “owing obedience to another” appears to be in the active grammatically but the state of being under an obligation to do something puts the subject in a passive position, further reinforced by being “under a particular political rule”. Claude questions the correlation between owing obedience to an English person like Jack and being under the same political rule. The first definition acknowledges the authority of the colonial language and the second definition provokes Claude to confront the similarities and differences between Jack and himself despite them both being British subjects. Thus, Loh shows the slippage between the two.

Claude’s citing dictionary definitions emphasises the immense influence that language has in understanding and perpetuating culture, and reveals his reliance on books for information, similar to Jack. Ngũgĩ elaborates on the influence of language, “We . . . learnt to

value words for the meanings and nuances. Language was not a mere string of words. It had a suggestive power well beyond the immediate and lexical meaning (Ngũgĩ 11). The fact that words develop more “meanings and nuances . . . beyond the immediate and lexical meaning” suggests that connotations beyond the lexical meaning differentiate words that share a similar meaning. This multiplicity alludes to the invisible power of words that can be harnessed to achieve specific effects beyond just being “a mere string of words” that facilitate a basic, superficial understanding of what someone says. Claude reinforces the *Oxford English Dictionary* as the site of “suggestive power” and legislation through his reference to the book as a source of information. Claude’s scrutiny of the ‘subject’ definitions stresses that “nuances” hint at the speaker’s attitude and attests to the directive influence of books, specifically a dictionary.

“British subject” refers to both the colonisers and the colonised people in the British Empire except the ruler. However, Claude does not immediately identify with the term due to his assumption that British subjects were English who “knew a lot of important people” (271). Claude eventually clarifies what he means, “But I’m not English. A British subject indeed, but not English. There is a difference” (271). His clarification draws attention to the marked difference between a non-English British subject and an Englishman who is also a British subject. Claude silently translates his spoken words to “the colonised vs. the colonisers”, which is easily distinguished by “the difference in their skin colour” (272) in Singapore but is not categorical throughout the Empire such as in the context of the Irish. As an Englishman, Jack naturally embraces England as his home that he is “entitled . . . passage to” (271). However, Claude is not entitled to such a privilege as he is not English. Instead, their common status as British subjects does not bridge the gap between them and ironically reinforces Claude’s inferior status to Jack in the Empire. Claude’s status as a colonised local is the only recognition he receives as a subject of this Empire. Unlike Jack who is able to

travel to the colonies and live out his book-inspired fantasies, Claude's access to England is limited to the dictionary. Language is "not a mere string of words" and has power beyond its lexical meaning. Claude acknowledges their hierarchical distinctions and his status as a colonised Singaporean by following up with a third straightforward definition that shifts from a noun to a verb, "Subject: to bring under one's control" (271).

In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud records a case whereby a man "dreamt that *he was a pregnant woman lying in bed*" and "*found the situation very disagreeable*" (Freud 421). "*Behind the bed there was . . . a strip of wood*", which the man "*tore . . . down by catching hold of its two ends. It did not break across but split into two halves lengthways. This action relieved him and at the same time helped on delivery*" (421). Claude persistently dreams of having his tongue cut off against his will by an external manifestation of himself, a situation he found "*very disagreeable*". In the final dream, he willingly cuts off his tongue himself. Instead of "*splitting into two halves lengthways*" like the strip of wood, Claude cut it across. According to Freud, "If one of the ordinary symbols for a penis occurs in a dream doubled or multiplied, it is to be regarded as a warding-off of castration" (370). Since Claude did not cut the tongue lengthways, the double penis symbols are absent. Such absence implies that instead of warding off the castration, he inflicts it upon himself. Unlike the man who believes he "had got the better of the threat of castration which had led to his adopting a feminine attitude" (421), Claude chooses to perform this symbolic castration to eliminate the source of his language anxiety — the tongue that attests to his fluency of the English language from which he initially drew his confidence.

Unlike the first three definitions that appear in the same paragraph, the fourth definition appears in a separate paragraph, "Subject: (Philos.) the conscious self as opposed to all that is external to the mind" (Loh 271). It marks the moment of Claude's apperception and introspection, which alludes to the separation of "you", his conscious self, from "all that

is external to the mind” including the Body in the interrogation scenes. In “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function” (1949), Jacques Lacan elaborates on the mirror stage whereby the subject identifies with the specular image, which “symbolises the *I*’s mental permanence, at the same time as it prefigures its alienating destination” (Lacan 76). This “mental permanence” allows “you” to alienate the Body as a separate entity and recognise it as “Claude” and “yourself” (Loh 22) at the same time. The Body remains whole until “you” remove the tongue in the dream-like sequence at the end. Lacan claims that the manifestation of “the fragmented body” as “organs exoscopically represented” in dreams occurs when there is “an aggressive disintegration of the individual” (Lacan 78). Hence, one way of interpreting the tongue removal scene is the “disintegration” of Claude’s forsaken identity as a “successful colonial subject”.

While the first two dreams are in third-person whereby “you can do nothing but let it pass” (Loh 344), “you” are the subject in the last dream. “You” have a lot more agency in this tongue-cutting dream as opposed to the previous dreams and interrogation scenes where “you” do not have control over the Body. “You” cut the tongue despite the pain due to “a ragged determination to complete your task and free yourself” (488). The “freeing” refers to Claude’s liberation from both his roles as a colonial subject and Loh’s protagonist. A similar gesture is observed in William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* whereby the protagonist, Prospero, beseeches the audience, “release me from my bands / With the help of your good hands” (5.1.9-10). Prospero distinguishes himself as “me” from “you”, the audience who has the power to release him from his imprisonment on stage. Loh blurs this distinction with a single pronoun “you”, which implies that both the reader and Claude are imprisoned and can only free themselves by removing the tongue that is the source of the narrative, which staunches the flow of speech. Thus, there are two other ways of interpreting the scene — the unity of “you” and Claude the Body can also be interpreted as Claude’s conscious self

regaining his agency to redefine his identity independent of the British Empire, and the tongue removal frees both Claude and the reader from the confines of Loh's novel at the end.

In *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, Hutcheon exemplifies the ambiguity of the word "subject" that Claude explicates. She notes that postmodern fiction "investigates how . . . the subject of history is the subject in history, subject to history and to his story" (Hutcheon 177). Her play on the multiple interpretations of the word "subject" is both contextual and semantic. She forms a coherent sentence by repeating the word "subject" twice with different definitions for each of them using only prepositions as clues. The first refers to the 'branch of knowledge' and the second refers to 'the thing that is being discussed or described'. The third is an adjective that can be interpreted in two ways — 'likely to be affected by' or 'under the authority of'. Loh affirms Hutcheon's point about the "multiple and heterogeneous" (177) interpretations that postmodern fiction promotes through the embodiment of the subjectivity of the word "subject" in *Breaking the Tongue*.

Ultimately, *Breaking the Tongue* is a form of postmodern art that "merely foregrounds the fact that we can know the real, especially the past real, only through signs, and that is not the same as wholesale substitution" (Hutcheon 230). Such "foreground[ing]" underlines the presence of a frame that focuses our attention and suggests that it is not the author's intention to present a comprehensive picture of understanding the real. Hutcheon's emphasis on "the past" illustrates the dependence of retrospective reflection on signs that facilitates the interpretation that is distinct from the text itself that renders it an ineffective "wholesale substitution".

As Hutcheon postulates, "all we have ever had to work with is a system of signs, and that to call attention to this is not to deny the real, but to remember that we only give meaning to the real within those signifying systems" (230). These "signs" can appear visually as pictographs in the form of writing and maps or be expressed verbally that differ amongst the

diversity of languages and dialects. Without the visual or verbal cues that establish the “system[s] of signs”, the real eludes meaning outside of the structure of these systems.

Witnessing the torture of Claude the Body causes “you” to realise that “the heart can yield under the knife . . . [b]ut silence, even at knifepoint, cannot be dissected [and] . . . possesses an armoured will that has its own language” (Loh 429). The possibility of “the heart . . . yield[ing] under the knife” reflects the ideality of endurance that makes it difficult to achieve. The “armoured will” attests to the infallibility of silence as defence against “dissect[ion] and external interferences”. Having “its own language” implies that silence stands outside the established signifying systems that facilitate its power of withholding. In a world of silence “where bodies are their own signs[,] [i]t is the home of Friday” (Coetzee 157) and “you”.

Home is another subject of subjectivity in *Breaking the Tongue*. Ling-li was told that China is her home because she is ethnically Chinese, Claude believed England was his home because he was raised to be an Anglophilic British subject, while Jack wanted to make Singapore his home because he felt a stronger sense of belonging and value here. The three characters reconcile their own respective assumptions of what constitutes to their home, and by extension their identity, that includes the geographical location where their cultural or ethnic group originated, mother tongue, and personal feelings. According to writer Ng Yi-Sheng, “Perhaps the most SG²⁰ thing of all: that constant sense that you are never quite at the centre of history”. Like Loh, her characters feel like they are never quite at the centre of Singaporean history and perhaps that this shared feeling is exactly what qualifies them as Singaporeans.

Loh discloses that *Breaking the Tongue* allowed her “to explore how history is made up of many narratives” and encourages “the reader, like the interrogators, to try to sift out the

²⁰ The quote is reproduced exactly from a Facebook post; “SG” is an abbreviation for ‘Singaporean’.

‘truth’” amongst the various accounts²¹. The individual experience of the same historical event varies, depending on factors such as pre-conceived assumptions, cultural perspectives, trauma, and interpretation. Hence, the multiplicity of narratives is inevitable in history. Loh questions the notion of a single and absolute truth by using inverted commas and any attempt to “sift out the ‘truth’” favours credibility that becomes a measure of prioritising one version over others. Such emphasis on credibility interferes with the appreciation of *Breaking the Tongue*’s artistic and intellectual value as a literary work. Instead of taking Loh’s words at face value, the act of “try[ing] to sift out the ‘truth’” functions more as a Godotian gesture to signify the impracticality of doing so in *Breaking the Tongue*.

²¹ Quotes are extracted from the From the Author page at the back of *Breaking the Tongue*.

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