

INTERVIEW

# **Five Questions with Shawn Hoo: On Singaporean English, Writings from Asia's Queer Mecca, and Ecopoetry**

by Sam Dapanas



Shawn Hoo

Shawn Hoo is the author of *Of the Florids* (2022), winner of the Diode Editions Chapbook Prize. A writer and editor from Singapore, his poems are anthologised in *Exhale: An Anthology of Queer Singapore Voices* (Singapore: Math Paper Press, 2021) and *New Singapore Poetries* (New York: Gaudy Boy, forthcoming) and can be found in *New Delta Review*, *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore*, *Queer Southeast Asia: Literary Journal of Transgressive Art*, *Voice & Verse Poetry Magazine*, *OF ZOOS*, and elsewhere. His translations appear in the *Journal of Practice, Research and Tangential Activities (PR&TA)* (Sing Lit Station & The Chinese University of Hong Kong - Department of English) and *Exchanges: Journal of Literary Translation* (University of Iowa - MFA Literary Translation Program). He is Assistant Editor at *Asymptote*, where he curates the Translation Tuesdays showcase. Find him on Twitter (@hycshawn) or on his website (<https://shawnhoo.wordpress.com>).

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**Alton Melvar ‘Sam’ M Dapanas:** Linguists say that Singaporean English and by extension, Singlish, its colloquial version, are in constant contact with three other languages: Malay (the national language and the language of the original inhabitants), Mandarin Chinese (the official language of the largest ethnic group of the population), and Tamil (the official language of the Indian population). Apart from literature, you’re also interested in translation (being part of *Asymptote*, a journal of world literature in translation) and even cinema. How do these multilingualisms surface in your work?

**Shawn Hoo:** I find it difficult to write in Singlish, which is primarily an oral language; it is almost reflexive to write ‘good’ English the moment I pick up the pen. At home, languages like Hokkien and Mandarin are used regularly (in fact, the boundary between them is never so clear), and I hear even more languages when I step out of the house, so how come the reality of these multilingualisms are so hard to translate into writing? I am certainly very interested in how others wrest with their own Singlishes on the page, ranging from the contemporary poetics of Hamid Roslan’s *parsetreeforestfire*, a form of what I call ‘Singlish modernism’, to Han Suyin’s novel *And the Rain My Drink*, written during and about the Malayan Emergency in 1956, which predates Singapore’s independence and aspires to a kind of realism in its depiction of a Malayan multilingualism.

But my own awareness that the language I speak is not the language I write, a form of diglossia or simply reflexive translation, informs my poetics deeply because alienation is my first relationship to writing and language, and maybe then there is no need to insist on writing in Singapore English or Singlish but to write from the alienation that is already part

of being in such an estranged relationship with language.

In my new chapbook, *Of the Florids*, there is a poem titled “Deferred Sayings for the Next Century” which riffs on a Hokkien proverb that my grandmother shared with me. My poetic response to the proverb is not to express its cultural truth but to translate and proliferate it in the English such that there is something creative (rather than additive) in the encounter between languages.

I am interested in how all language, like Singlish, is already a kind of creole, that is, a kind of contact language. This, I think, is the spirit of Singlish (alongside global Englishes) for me as a poet. I am learning to be conscious of the many languages I come into contact with such that new language keeps arising from the mix.

**Dapanas:** In your chapbook *Of the Florids* (2022), winner of the 2021 prize by Virginia/Qatar-based Diode Editions, a lot of the poems have linguistic alliteration, as well as unapologetic usage of non-English words, all alluding to natural history, topography, and Asian mythology, mostly. There’s also a textual-visual interplay using collage and found/erasure poetry. But what I’m curious about is what made you interested in ecopoetry, distinct from environmental or (lyric) nature poetry as demarcated by the ecocritics.

**Hoo:** My own approach to ecopoetry is not thematic but a guiding poetics that gives us the tools to articulate our relationship to ecology and the world at large. When I began writing the poems in *Of the Florids*, I was very disenchanted by my own relationship to this island city I grew up in my whole life and so writing about place was a means of *enchantment*. The more I wrote — and a lot of this book was written on the trail, as it were, through the city, museums, parks, islands — the more I noticed that this place was teeming, and now this practice of *noticing* has become part of my own vision. In my understanding of ecopoetics, I am looking for something that is neither in the sloganistic Garden City way nor to approach nature as something transcendental or external. What’s between is language, history, the archive, or built environment. And “between” as in what mediates, not what compromises. Etymology, I think, should be a branch of natural history.

Shawn Hoo

Shawn Hoo © Victoria Oliha

A big part of ecopoetics is also to share this world with others through language. And so in the visioning and revisioning of *Of the Florids*, I found myself returning to the works of Arthur Yap, Cole Swensen’s *Ours* and *On Walking On*, Kulleh Grasi’s *Tell Me, Kenyalang* (translated by Pauline Fan), D. A. Powell’s *Useless Landscapes*, Craig Santos Perez’s *Habitat Threshold*, Lawrence Ypil’s *The Experiment of the Tropics*, Derek Walcott. Some of

these poets might not appear outrightly ‘ecological’, but they all attend to place, language and media in a way that to me is absolutely ecological. They all understand that, while a species of bird is on some level a bird, it is also constituted by the names we give them, the ways we choose to illustrate and represent them, the stories we tell about them (as myths, as companions, as colonial knowledge).

**Dapanas:**

So much paradox when we historicise the queer social movements in Singapore, a nation-state that has very recently repealed Section 377A that criminalised sexual activity between consenting male adults, remnants from British colonial era. Veering away from Anglocentricism, Queer Studies within Singaporean academia is flourishing although still very young. Despite all that, it has been dubbed, albeit contentiously in *AsiaPacifiQueer* (2008), as our continent’s “queer Mecca.” But Yi-Sheng Ng in *Singapore Literature and Culture: Current Directions in Local and Global Contexts* (eds. Angelia Poon & Angus Whitehead, 2017) wrote that, “[Singaporean] queer literature is ... caught in a web of contradictions: it is both mainstream and marginal, alternately praised and proscribed.” What can you say about this?

**Hoo:** One of the first queer books from Singapore I read was surely Alfian Sa’at’s *The Invisible Manuscript*. I wrote the poem “Precocious” about what encountering this book when I was seventeen meant; in a way the poem is about the erotics of the library, because I was soon reading Cyril Wong’s *Unmarked Treasure*, Tania de Rozario’s *Tender Delirium*, Jerrold Yam’s *Scattered Vertebrae*. All of these collections, by the way, were published in Singapore around 2012 or 2013, so you can imagine how I came of age in the library — if that isn’t a quaint thing to say in the age of TikTok — and found myself such queer plenitude. This, of course, was a world apart from the silence around sexuality in regular life. I mean, a year later there was a whole kerfuffle about the National Library wanting to pulp two children’s books that did not promote “family values”. This is one way I experience the paradox that you mention: abundance and deprivation all at once.

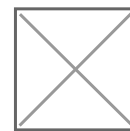
Perhaps the most recent touchstone anthology to get a glimpse of queer writing is *Exhale: An Anthology of Queer Singapore Voices*, which I am honoured to contribute two poems to. At over 500 pages, the book contains works from English, Malay, Mandarin and Tamil and from a swathe of zinemakers, spoken word artists, Lambda Literary Award finalists, playwrights, novelists... it’s an unruly amalgamation that is testament to the sheer plurality of queer writing made public.

**Dapanas:** I actually relate to a lot of what you said: learning English and (Tagalog-based) Filipino from school and the media, and speaking Cebuano Binisayâ (most of the time, with

Hokkien, English, and Spanish in the mix) at home and in the community. As someone getting published abroad — something I prefer because of the pervading parochialism and *padrino system*, a form of patronage politics, within the local literary scene of both languages I write in — there's this perpetual danger of my literary works being *white-washed* or 'Anglo-washed' if that's even a term. Sometimes, my attempts at writing enmeshed with Philippine English, part of the World Englishes Paradigm like Singaporean English, end up being misconstrued as a technical exercise, experiment, or being proclaimed a linguistic avant-garde, when in reality, that's how I speak, how I think. I feel like the safest spaces for my creative nonfiction pieces and poetry are journals, magazines, and anthologies based in non-native English-speaking countries. As a poet, prose writer, critic, and translator born and based in Southeast Asia, what have been the challenges so far, for you, in getting published in the West?

**Hoo:** I'm not sure if I can articulate the challenges, but I will say this: the global Anglophone draws a lot from American or English poetics, but the reverse is not true. I'm grateful that my publisher took the chance on a work about natural history in Singapore, for their belief that there is something in it that can reach across borders. It's still too early to know how different audiences might react but of course I hope that readers everywhere, including the U.S., will engage with it—if only because I too have inadvertently found myself reading their literature.

That said, there is a *world* of Anglophone writing coming out of Asia itself — including works in translation — and I am always dreaming about a world where we are reading, writing about, participating in each other's literatures in a way that makes the notion of a 'national literature' if not archaic then at least a little



Shawn Hoo's 'Of the Florids'

sillier. To take literary translation as an example, how different would bookshelves look if we took into account the kinds of literature Anglophone readers in Asia want to read and translate them? What kinds of Englishes will they be translated into? These are questions I don't think we have sufficiently answered or perhaps even ventured to ask. Literary magazines like *Queer Southeast Asia*, *Mekong Review*, *Cha: An Asian Literary Journal*, and *PR&TA* contain an ethos of regionalism that I think is nascent to that world.

**Dapanas:** You were formerly the Editor-at-Large for Singapore of *Asymptote* (now an Assistant Editor and the curator of the *Translation Tuesdays* weekly series) so you have a grasp of the literary landscape. Two questions: Where is Singaporean queer writing in the larger Southeast Asian and Asian literary terrain? And where do you think you stand or at least, the place of your works are, in the landscape of Singaporean queer writing?

**Hoo:** How to talk about such a vast, discontinuous but nevertheless connected geography? Perhaps in a more unified tradition you can draw a line from, say, James Baldwin to contemporary queer novel from the United States. But to think about something as open and capacious as “Asia”, I can’t help but think about a book by the Taiwanese writer and scholar Chi Ta-wei which I read and reviewed last year. In *The Membranes* (translated by Ari Larissa Heinrich), the protagonist’s identity, we slowly realise, is composed of a cosmopolitan melange of cultural texts that do not conform to a straight line of “tradition” or cultural inheritance. Similarly, there’s this cosmopolitanism in the queer writing I love: like Amanda Lee Koe’s *Delayed Rays of a Star* (which spans three continents and half a century of film history), like Norman Erikson Pasaribu’s *Happy Stories, Mostly* (translated by Tiffany Tsao), like your translation of Stefani J Alvarez’s *The Autobiography of the Other Lady Gaga*. But it’s not cosmopolitanism as in homogeneous stories or glocalised prose that I’m after. The possibility of queer writing (or, really, just writing) is its capacity to reference, absorb, and remake for one’s purposes the cultural forms that we encounter, forms that promise so much more to us than the life without these texts. To read and reference each other is simply to make available more ways of connecting and living.