

Interrogating Diaspora: Wang Gungwu's *Pulse* Philip Holden

In June 2000, the British entertainment company Altitude introduced one of the first of a now growing number of the multiplayer online game universes. Altitude's universe enabled participants to pilot spacecraft between planets and build up communities of "guilds," if not ethnicities. The game proved exceptionally popular, its denizens engaged—surely rather schizophrenically—in "trading, killing and socializing" while exploring what was at the time one of the largest environments ever created. In such a globalized utopia, transnational capitalism was not neglected—the game, as initially described, had a full range of advertising and sponsorship options available, from "bladerunneresque" ship sponsorship through banner ads to 3D branding of the bars on different planets ("Games Oasis"). Searching for a name for its new environment, Altitude chose a word that had gained increasing currency in both academic and popular circles in the previous decade: *Diaspora*.

In the global community of literary and cultural studies, the term diaspora had enjoyed a similar explosion in popularity. Initially used largely in the context of the dispersal of Jews from Palestine, and by analogy to describe the forced migration of African peoples to the Americas, the term has gradually widened in scope. Since the late 1980s it has been common, for instance, to write of the Indian and Chinese diasporas, and, from the middle of the 1990s, diaspora has been increasingly divorced from the description of a single community: diasporic consciousness is, it seems, something that we all share in an increasingly transnational world.

Diaspora clearly answers a critical and theoretical need in cultural studies as the area has developed over the last twenty years. After the failure of the emancipatory projects of the new nations born from anti-colonial nationalism in many areas of the world, the idea of a national

culture has come under sustained critique. National cultures may homogenize, neglecting minority or subaltern traditions and lived realities within the nation, or alternatively commodifying and essentializing them within various “multicultural” frameworks. The production of a national culture may also cauterize and seal off cultural flows which existed before the nation, and which continue to exert powerful forces: the use of a national culture as an explanatory framework, especially in the context of a past marked by the disruption of colonialism, may result in a neglect of the importance of migrant or regional cultural forms. Thus if the creation of specifically national cultural traditions now holds less appeal, diaspora seems to answer a ready need—it looks beyond the nation in a world that we perceive as increasingly globalized.

Like postcoloniality, a critical concept that preceded it and is now perhaps losing some of its critical edge, diaspora thus enables a critique and deconstruction of the national and regional cultural traditions which much commentary on Commonwealth Literature from the 1960s to the 1980s sought to construct. In the case of Singapore, for instance, it has become much more difficult to establish a coherent canon of Singapore and Malaysian writing in English, a project that was readily feasible twenty years ago. The two nations have taken very different developmental paths and stressed the use of English differently in their educational systems. Neither country now has a recognizable small élite of “English-educated” younger writers similar to those who produced the seminal works of the Singapore/Malaysian Literature canon in the 1970s and 1980s: in Singapore, the use of English is more widespread than during that period; in Malaysia less so. At the same time, it has become increasingly difficult to define a Singapore literary text, as recent examples may show. Ming Cher’s *Spider Boys*, set in the squatter camps of Bukit Ho Swee, Singapore, in the 1960s, is written in a synthetic interlanguage by a long-time New Zealand resident who grew up in Singapore—it has attracted criticism from some quarters for “inauthentic” use of Singapore English. Lau Siew Mei’s *Playing Madame Mao* (2000), a novel that has proved popular in Singapore and makes

deft comments on its political system, is written by an Australian citizen who migrated from Singapore in 1994. In a recent interview, Lau has commented, "I don't think it is for me to judge my place/position/category in literature. I don't know. Do I belong anywhere? Should it bother me?" (444). Finally, Shirley Lim's *Joss and Gold* (2001), written by the Malacca-born writer who is now resident in the United States, includes a concluding section on Singapore written during Lim's visit to Singapore on a Fulbright Scholarship in the 1990s and engages deeply with the history of Singapore and Malaysia. Yet, Lim is now often studied under the rubric of Asian American writing. In the case of all three of these novels, a reading solely within the bounds of a national or regional literary tradition seems inadequate.

Diaspora, as opposed to postcoloniality, seems to have an additional valence when applied to these texts. Unlike postcoloniality, diaspora is neither bound by a continued reference to colonialism as an origin nor prematurely celebratory of the apparent end of colonial power. Most crucially, as part of a critical project in the late twentieth century to question the colonial legacy of notions such as "tribe," "race," and "ethnicity," diaspora provides a non-essentialist means of talking about ethnicity and cultural community. In the new manner in which the term is deployed, diaspora describes a community defined not by a core identity but a boundary. Like de Saussure's Paris to Geneva express, which remains the same train even if all the carriages are changed, diasporic identity is defined relationally, by situation, rather than essence.¹

What diaspora gives as a critical concept, however, it also can easily take back. The refurbishment of diaspora as a critical term in the late 1980s in the work of cultural theorists such as Paul Gilroy is not merely concerned with discussing ethnicity in a new way. Rather, diaspora is a term that is uneasily but inextricably embedded in—and that promotes a "double consciousness regarding"—two other frameworks of perception in the modern world: the nation and capitalism. This dimension of diaspora seems, however, to have been lost in many recent deployments of the term. If diaspora becomes only a non-essentialist way of talking about ethnicity—as titles of critical essays such as "Two

Chinese Women of the Diaspora” or “Three Diasporic Women’s Texts” might suggest—it will lose much of its critical purchase: like Altitude’s gamers, we disavow the nation for imaginary guilds, and fail to register the advertisements for Coca Cola and McDonalds plastered on the bars at which we drink. This essay, then, will first examine the refurbishment of diaspora as a critical term in the last decade or so, and then move to a consideration of the applicability of the concept in reading the early poetry of Wang Gungwu, poetry that has mostly been read within a national literary tradition in Singapore. While “diaspora” gives useful insights into Wang’s poetry, I would like to argue, it only does so if it is deployed in the sense in which Gilroy uses it—neither as a non-essentialist way of discussing ethnicity, nor as a synonym for hybridity and performativity, but rather as a way of meditating on the uneasy cohabitation of nation, community, and capital in societies under the processes of “modernization.”²²

In a seminal article written in 1995, James Clifford notes the difficulty in defining diaspora. It is etymologically connected through a Greek root to “dispersion,” and in common understandings also implies the notion of a return. Diasporic peoples, in William Safran’s summary of traditional notions of diaspora, are dispersed from an original homeland and maintain a continued relationship to it, seeking to return to it in the fullness of time. Clifford notes, however, that even Safran’s “‘ideal type’ of the Jewish diaspora” (qtd. in Clifford 218) does not fully conform to this model. Many historical Jewish societies have been ambivalent about the notion of return, and indeed Sephardim after their expulsion from Spain in 1492 might see a Spanish city as the promised land (218). To supplement Clifford, one only has to look at the identity of Singapore’s first Chief Minister, David Saul Marshall. Where, one might ask, was Marshall’s Zion? Baghdad, the city from which his Sephardic Jewish family had migrated to Singapore? The Spain from which his ancestors had been expelled centuries previously? The new state of Israel? Or the new state of Malaya and later Singapore to which he dedicated his life?

An area of diaspora that Clifford does not explore is its close—and paradoxical—association in the nineteenth century with the growth of the nation state. Notions of return, of gathering together a scattered people into a homeland, provided an energizing myth for the creation of a modern nation state in Israel. Yet, the experience of expatriation, prolonged residence abroad, and then return—diaspora within the confines of a single individual's lifetime—was foundational to the creation of many other nation states. The creation of modern China was arguably the work of a Chinese diaspora in this sense. Revolutionaries solicited funds from Chinese overseas in North America and Southeast Asia; key figures in the May Fourth Movement studied abroad. When the 1911 Revolution commenced in Wuchang, China, the future Republic's provisional president Sun Yatsen was abroad, as he had been for most of the two previous decades, raising funds among the Chinese overseas. The lives of many African nationalists, such as Jomo Kenyatta and Kwame Nkrumah, were marked by long years of sojourn abroad. At the end of the twentieth century, the Ukrainian and Armenian diasporas, among others, have played important roles in the reconstitution of national polities after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The notion of the diasporic thus has a history of complex association with, rather than a simple polar opposition to, the rise of the nation state.

In contemporary cultural and literary studies, however, diaspora is now associated with transnationalism, and explicitly disregards the notion of return upon which the older understanding of diaspora was predicated. This critical refurbishment of diaspora has been associated the work of British sociologists Paul Gilroy and Stuart Hall, and the American-based Hong Kong cultural theorist Rey Chow. Gilroy's engagement with the term is the earliest: it commenced in a series of articles in the 1980s and culminated in his radical reconfiguration of black ethnicity and modernity in *The Black Atlantic* (1993). Previous conceptualizations of black culture and identity, Gilroy argues, have fallen back "on the idea of cultural nationalism" (2), either emphasizing essentialist notions of African tradition (Afrocentrism) or subordinating cultural development to that of the nation state (the Afro-

American tradition). Gilroy's new way of perceiving culture takes as its central motif the ship in motion across the Atlantic connecting Europe, American Africa, and the Caribbean, "a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion" (4). Expressed in terms of creolization and hybridity, this black Atlantic culture occupies a central, not a peripheral, place in Euro-American modernity.

Gilroy's work does not merely reinvent diaspora as a contemporary critical concept—in the manner, for instance, of Homi Bhabha's discussion of hybridity—but also actively investigates how generations of black cultural theorists made use of the term in drawing parallels between the Bible and their own community's history. Thus Gilroy's careful genealogical inquiries do not make diaspora synonymous with hybridity or creolization—indeed, his writings are punctuated by warnings against "lazy, premature postmodernism" ("Diaspora" 211). In an essay published two years before *The Black Atlantic*, Gilroy critiques essentialism on the one hand but also the semiotic "saturnalia which attends 'the dissolution of the black subject'" ("It Ain't" 5) on the other. Diaspora here is not a space of free play, but rather part of a constitutive "counter culture of modernity" (10). Black diasporic culture represents a double consciousness which simultaneously seeks fulfillment—the social utopia that modernity might provide—and transfiguration—the sublime, "struggling to repeat the unrepeatable, represent the unrepresentable" through "the mimetic, dramatic and performative" (12). Crucially, Gilroy's diaspora undercuts capitalism in that "social self-creation through labour is not the core of emancipatory hopes" (13). Thus for Gilroy the analysis of the popularity of diasporic Caribbean artists in the United Kingdom cannot be theorized without "developing a new perspective on British culture *as a whole*" ("Diaspora, Utopia" 340). Diaspora does not so much transcend capital or the nation as require new perspectives on the connections—and contradictions—between the two, and the possibilities of individual or collective agency with respect to either.

Such caution is, if anything, magnified by another cultural theorist whose name is associated with the word "diaspora," Rey Chow. Chow's

series of essays engaging with the notion of diaspora were largely written in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and were published in the 1993 collection *Writing Diaspora*. Although she is often credited with popularizing the term “Chinese diaspora,” even a cursory glance at Chow’s work reveals her profound reservations regarding such terminology. Chow, indeed, deploys the term “diaspora” to critique the position of migrant intellectuals such as herself and their performance of ethnicity: for her the “goal of ‘writing diaspora’ is [...] to *unlearn* that submission to one’s ethnicity such as ‘Chineseness’ as the ultimate signified” (25), to negotiate cultural identity. The challenge for intellectuals, Chow maintains, is to “write against the lures of diaspora,” for the writer to be aware of how his or her own ethnicity is placed within “historical conditions [...] of articulation” (119).

The most widely cited and anthologized new articulation of diaspora, however, throws some of Chow’s caution and Gilroy’s careful definition to the wind. Stuart Hall’s “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” published three years before Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic*, makes a sharp distinction between essentialist and constructionist notions of cultural identity and then places diaspora firmly on the constructionist side. In describing the culture of the Caribbean, Hall concentrates upon culture as process, “not a fixed origin to which we can make some final and absolute Return” (395). With some deft second-hand use of Jacques Derrida via Christopher Norris, Hall defines Caribbean culture as marked by *différance*, by a continual slippage of cultural grounds between the three “presences” of Africa, Europe, and the New World. The complex interrelation of these identities, Hall argues, is the beginning of “diaspora, of diversity, of hybridity and difference” (401). Worried, perhaps, by the apparent substitutability of these terms, Hall then proceeds to define diaspora more closely:

Diaspora does not refer us to those scattered tribes whose identity can only be secured in relation to some sacred homeland. [...] The diaspora experience as I intend it here is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary het-

erogeneity and diversity; by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by *hybridity*. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference. (401-02)

While Hall's detailed analysis of his own experience as a child in colonial Kingston, and his discussion of reggae and other popular Caribbean and black British cultural forms is sensitive and specific, this concluding definition is troublingly imprecise: diaspora, hybridity, difference, and the performance of identity are conflated. More troublingly, Hall concludes his essay with a quotation from Frantz Fanon which speaks of culture as "the whole body of efforts made by a people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify and praise the action through which that people created itself" (qtd. in Hall 403). This passage from *The Wretched of the Earth*—which Hall mistakenly attributes to *Black Skins, White Masks*—is, however, antithetical to any notions of transnational diaspora. Fanon here is certainly arguing for a non-essentialist identity, but one based upon the anti-colonial "struggle for freedom" (Fanon 44) in the "building of a nation" (52) which will "play its part upon the stage of history." For Fanon, in marked contrast to Hall, "it is the national consciousness which is the most elaborate form of culture" in the post-colonial world (51).

Hall's essay, then, if it does not exemplify, at least encourages a tendency that has become common in the use of the term diaspora in cultural studies over the last decade. Conflate diaspora with a series of similarly imprecise terms which all refer to a non-essentialist notion of ethnicity or community, mix in some second-hand poststructuralism and quote an anti-colonial nationalist out of context, and you have a theoretical apparatus that can be applied, in a modular fashion, to most cultural texts. The rhetorical appeal of Hall and Gilroy's writings result in a series of memorable phrases—"routes not roots," "becoming not being," "it ain't where you're from, it's where you're at"—which are useful heuristics, but do not obviate the need for careful political, cultural, and social loca-

tion. Indeed the critical praxis exemplified by Chow, Gilroy and Hall—despite my criticisms here—show, in Clifford's words, how "*diaspora* is a signifier, not simply of transnationality and movement, but of political struggles to define the local, as distinctive community, in the historical contexts of displacement" (308). Too many applications of diaspora spread Hall's theoretical *mélange* to cover any number of literary texts through analyses in which "diasporic identities [...] slide into equivalence with disaggregated, positional, performed identities in general" (Clifford 324).

A contemporary example of how diaspora quickly loses its specificity is readily available in the recent discussion of "queer diasporas." Queer theory and diaspora theory potentially offer much in terms of cross-fertilization, as Gayatri Gopinath's 1998 dissertation "Queer Diasporas" demonstrates. Gopinath's discussion investigates "gendered and sexualized discourses of nationalism in South Asia" (2) and their origin in anticolonial movements that stressed respectable sexualities, and carefully maps out how contemporary diasporic queer South Asian sexualities call such discourses into question. Clifford's demands for location and historicization are clearly met here. By the time of publication of Cindy Patton's and Benigno Sánchez-Eppler's edited collection *Queer Diasporas* (2000), however, the critical purchase of the concept has been considerably reduced. While essays such as Martin F. Manalansan's discussion of Filipino gay transmigrancy and the slippage in mapping the Filipino identity of *bakla* onto the North American "gay," are certainly enabled through a discussion of diaspora, in the majority of the essays diaspora seems to stand merely for ethnicity or other performative identity positions. It is unclear, for instance, what might be diasporic about imperial or contemporary Japanese sexualities, or a 1960s popular American lesbian novel. The concept of diaspora may well be useful here, but it needs to be actively put to work: left in abeyance, it becomes substitutable for hybridity, difference, performativity, and a non-essentialist way of discussing ethnicity.

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As an example of the perils and possibilities of diaspora, I wish to turn now to the early “Malayan” poetry of Wang Gungwu. Wang was the most prominent of a group of poets at the University of Malaya in Singapore in the late 1940s and 1950s, and his writing is often seen as the first example of a distinctively Malaysian/Singaporean Literature in English. A member of the Anglophone social élite who was also, almost uniquely, fluent in written Chinese and in Malay, Wang published a number of poems in the student society journal *The New Cauldron*, collecting some of these and adding new material in his published poetry collection, *Pulse* (1950). Wang’s poetry has been evaluated critically almost exclusively within a national tradition that melds easily into a postcolonial perspective and, while certainly stressing important elements, it has suppressed others. Reading Wang’s poetry as diasporic, I would argue, frees us from some of these constraints, yet to read it as either an expression of “Chinese diaspora” in comparison with other “Chinese diasporic” texts, or as merely a hybrid and performative text, reads out Clifford’s concern with how the transnational is uneasily located in the community, in the local. Taking diaspora seriously as a concept, I would argue, involves examining how the cultural space which Wang’s texts occupy negotiates uneasily between lived experience of community, nationalism, and the demands of capital—in a way that is strikingly prescient of such negotiations in contemporary Singapore.

Wang’s poetry collection, *Pulse*, on which most of the ensuing discussion will draw, consists of twelve poems on a variety of topics. A few, such as “The Vision of No-Love” and “My Ruins,” are intensely personal lyrics with little reference to landscape or locality. The majority, however, develop their subject matter from initial descriptions of Malayan landscapes or cityscapes (“To Tigerland,” “Municipal Prose-Poem,” “Three Faces of Nights”) or Malayan characters (“Ahmad,” “Investment”). While in most of the poems the persona appears close to the poet himself, Wang does experiment with the adoption of different speaking voices—a country-dweller visiting the city in “Municipal Prose-Poem,” for instance. Wang’s vocabulary is unashamedly hybrid, Malay and various Chinese language words and phrases mixing into

an English base that incorporates both popular and high cultural references. The form of the poems also shows considerable variation—from free verse to intricate rhyme schemes, from regular stanzas with some metrical regularity to verse paragraphs. Throughout the collection, there is a sense of a tension between the demands of form and the attempt to express meaning within a specific location which is resolved perhaps in only a few of the best poems, such as “Ahmad.” Wang also wrote poems in Chinese and other poems in English which appeared in the *New Cauldron* but not in his poetry collection.

Pulse has become a foundational text in critical writings that plot the evolution of a joint Malaysian/Singaporean national literary tradition. Most accounts of this tradition commence after the Second World War and the return of the British to Malaya in 1945. The process of decolonization in Malaya was part of a transnational post-war anti-colonial movement, made more acute by the specific Malayan experience of the years of the Japanese occupation and the realization that British rule was neither permanent nor invulnerable. Malaya achieved its independence in 1957, later than India or Ceylon, but in tandem with Ghana, the first of Britain's African colonies. Singapore had to wait almost a decade more for its final destiny as a political unit to be realized: it achieved limited self-rule in 1959, entered the newly-constituted Federation of Malaysia in 1963, and in a famous “moment of anguish,” left the Federation two years later to become an independent nation.

In the University of Malaya in Singapore at the mid point of the twentieth century, however, such developments could not be predicted, and indeed, in the judgment of many, lay outside the realm of possibility. Wang and his contemporaries thus thought of giving birth to a “Malayan” culture. Readings such as Kirpal Singh's thus describe the poetry of the University of Malaya students as “initial attempts” in the construction of a distinctive local tradition, in which “Wang, especially, made a conscious effort to strike a ‘local’ chord” (957). Anne Brewster goes further, seeing in Wang's poetry a “progression from a misrecognition of the English landscape” in the Keats-saturated poem

“Moon Thoughts” “to the recognition and interrogation of a local symbol” (21), rubber, in his later poem “The Drip” (21). Both of these comments place Wang as the member of a first generation of writers within a narrative of a Singaporean/Malaysian national literary tradition which draws its force by comparison with other newly emergent national literatures, such as those of Canada or Nigeria. Here pastiche and imitation of British literature are replaced by a growing engagement with the Malayan landscape and the production of a “native voice” (Lim 30), eventually to be followed by greater confidence and an expansion of subject matter. Even analyses that problematize such a progressive narrative, such as Shirley Lim’s “Finding a Native Voice”, tend to nonetheless accord Wang foundational status.

Any analysis of Wang’s poetry clearly has to acknowledge nationalism: the poems were part of a cultural project to bring a new national culture into being. The title of *The New Cauldron*, indeed, suggests the model of national cultural evolution Wang and his fellow poets envisioned, in which “the different parts [might] be welded into a whole” (“The Way to Nationhood” 3), in a “courageous attempt at synthesis” of different cultural traditions. Yet there remain problems with seeing Wang’s poetry as the beginning of a national tradition. The cauldron of the Malayan nation of which the University poets dreamed—marked by hybridity, code-switching, even the creation of a synthetic language of expression, *Engmalchin*—would not be realized in either Malaysian or Singaporean nationalisms.³ In Singapore, for instance, national cultural development has stressed “multiracialism” and the management of ethnicity and the solidifying of communal boundaries. In what has become known as the CMIO model, citizens are assigned to racial communities and encouraged to have cultural “rootedness” in that community, learning a designated “mother tongue” at school, while leaving English as a culturally empty bridging language.⁴ Post 1969 Malaysia has followed a different path in managing ethnicity which is still very far from the Malayan culture appealed to in *Pulse*. Wang’s poetry is thus not so much representative of the beginnings of a national culture as the failure of a particular national project.

Some of the problems associated in identifying Wang with a national tradition can be overcome by reading through the lens of postcolonialism. Paradoxically, given that the national and the postcolonial are often seen as antithetical, the placing of Wang's poetry within a national tradition can also be easily modified to see his poems as products of a "postcolonial" consciousness. In this reading, the national literatures account is supplemented: the final terminus is not a purely national tradition, but an opening to a complex negotiation of different cultural influences. In Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths's and Helen Tiffin's well-known account, the "subversive manoeuvres" and "counter-discursive [...] practices" of "postcolonial literatures/cultures" succeed the "construction of *essentially* national or regional alternatives" (196). Wang's poems may thus be placed early in a narrative of postcoloniality which is at this point similar to that of the emergence of national literatures: they represent an inability to fully appropriate English forms for local use, an ability that will develop in the fullness of time. In their use of hybrid linguistic and cultural forms, Wang's poems might indeed be seen as startlingly prescient. A strain of cultural criticism in the last decade, in Singapore, for instance, has seen culturally hybrid forms as constituting resistance to the rigid racial categories imposed by the state, and has thus merged easily with a central concern of postcolonial criticism.

The placing of Wang's poetry within either the rubrics of a national tradition or postcolonial progression, however, prematurely closes off further avenues of enquiry. In the heat of desire for the origins of a pure national tradition purged of colonialism, or a celebration of a progression to a contemporary postcoloniality as a space of free play, both readings would ignore, or reshape, literary history in Singapore. The pre-War production of local identities through English-language writing produced in Singapore before the Japanese occupation, the short stories in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, for example, or Lim Boon Keng's novel *Tragedies of Eastern Life*, clearly show a local consciousness before the War, and their expression is frequently hybrid, at times curiously "post-modern."⁵ Writing half a century before Wang, Lim and the group of

Straits Chinese writers wrote short stories and cultural essays expressive of an élite “Straits-born” identity in the pages of their quarterly journal. In the 1930s, writers in the *Malaya Tribune* attempted to give voice to the “domiciled communities” of Malaya through the medium of English. Much of this writing was journalistic and non-fictional, and, as Gareth Griffiths notes with reference to West African Literature, a focus on a high cultural national literary tradition that defines literature narrowly will, in effect, read a large body of non-fictional writings out of literary history.⁶ At the same time, these writings are also often hybrid, polyphonic, emerging from an environment that is perhaps closer to the present than the period of nationalism’s first ascendancy: they thus problematize the developmental schema of postcolonial texts such as *The Empire Writes Back*.

In addition, reading Wang as attempting to throw off the influence of English tradition and acquire an authentic “local” voice misreads an important third cultural space in his poetry: the influence of both classical Chinese poetry and Chinese popular music. An example of this comes in Anne Brewster’s analysis of “Moon Thoughts.” Brewster notes that after an initial engagement with the local landscape, the poem moves to images from “a European classical, pastoral tradition” (12). A closer reading of the poem, however, suggests otherwise:

The Truly Great adorn these green arcades,
Marble images, idols, now but shadows,
Spectre-like in the moonlit glades
Have-beens; the night returns, but their lives
Come no more.
Think no more, home appears nearer;
The moon, impure as ever, becomes clearer. (8)

Certainly some of the imagery and diction here—“moonlight glades,” “marble images,”—does speak of a European pastoral setting, echoing perhaps Marvell or Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. The final couplet, however, in its association of the moon with home, clearly draws upon Chinese Classical tradition, and in particular the well-

known concluding couplet of the Tang Dynasty poet, Li Bai's "Jing Ye Si" or "Thoughts on a Quiet Night":

I lift my head and look at the brilliant moon;
I lower my head and think of my hometown.⁷

Indeed, the central theme of the poem can be seen as a reworking of the Li Bai poem to indicate the cultural dislocation of Malaya. Wang's Chinese poems published in *The New Cauldron* exhibit a similar process of cultural cross-cutting. "Nen Ya" ("Tender Shoots"), for example, draws upon traditional—and popular—Chinese images of the spring wind and new growth to meditate upon a landscape in which neither is present.

Finally, we might note that both national and postcolonial readings require a narrative of progression from imitation of foreign forms to an eventual appropriation of them within the context of the local. Wang's poems seem to exhibit, however, an uneven success in indigenizing non-Malayan poetic forms unrelated to their time of composition. "Moon Thoughts" and "The Drip," which for Brewster encapsulate a cultural progression from passive imitation of English high cultural forms to the recognition of the local, were, in fact, published almost simultaneously. Brewster's imposition of the framework of a national tradition thus leads her to argue, implausibly, that poems written at best a few months apart represent a seismic shift in cultural consciousness.⁸ The poem which now seems most successful in its representation of the local is "Ahmad," which uses Malay phrases and a pared-down diction in contrast to the overly-allusive vocabulary of many of the other poems in *Pulse*. In the context of Wang's collection, it represents one of a series of experiments, not the terminus of a developmental process.

A reading of Wang's poetry as the product of a Chinese diasporic experience eliminates the need to interpret the poems in order to fit the template of a national tradition. Wang's own life has exemplified diaspora, both in terms of his personal migrancy (birth in Indonesia,

further study in London, residence in Australia, Hong Kong, and now Singapore again) and a lifetime of intellectual concern with China and the Nanyang Chinese. His most recent publications, indeed, now deploy diaspora as a critical concept.⁹ Wang's poems, written a half century early, show the creation of a diasporic consciousness that, in his own words, constructs "a composite image of what it means to be Chinese" from the "many mirrors" available in a non-Chinese environment ("Among Non-Chinese" 136).

The poem "Plus One," for instance, describes Chinese New Year celebrations in Malaya, and the title itself is a rather oblique translation of the name of the first day of the first month of the Chinese calendar, *chu yi*. References to "[A]ntique rites" (5) and "paper gold" (6) establish the continuity of Nanyang Chinese culture "beneath a foreign sky/ In this alien night" (5). This culture, however, is undergoing a process of translation into English. In the poem "Three Faces of Night," some dialect expressions are preserved in transliteration (Mandarin "fun" for thin rice noodles, the Cantonese "kung-hei" new year greeting, Hokkien "kuey teow"(14) for flat rice noodles), but others are translated literally into English, creating linguistic estrangement. Thus the Hokkien phrase *jiat hong*—(going for a ride—literally, eating the wind) becomes "tasting the wind," while the Mandarin *liang cha* (a kind of herbal tea) is literally translated as "cool-tea" (14). This process of cultural translation is common in much English-language writing of the Chinese diaspora, and indeed in much postcolonial writing in general. Here Wang both abrogates standard English and appropriates it for use in a Malayan setting, negotiating "cross-cultural" space "in which the simultaneous processes of abrogation and appropriation continually strive to define and determine their practice" (Ashcroft *et al.* 39). Our analysis here could, of course, fit into both the rubric of "postcolonial" and "diasporic," but the use of diaspora perhaps gives a certain freedom, in that readings do not have to be fitted into an evolutionary narrative.

We might extend an application of diaspora beyond a constructivist account of ethnicity to the notion of hybridity and performative iden-

tity. Like Hall's Caribbean, Wang's Malaya is marked by a number of different presences. Apart from the Chinese presence, there is a distinctive Malay presence, marked by Wang's excursions into Malay vocabulary—"baju biru" for "blue shirt" in "Pulse" (2), and linguistic switching in "Ahmad." Wang's poetry also features a less prominent, though still persistent, Indian presence, and, in the medium it is written and in subject matter, it addresses the English presence of colonialism. Hybridity occurs in the splicing of these different presences—in the juxtaposition of "Orient paper red, King George's head" (5) during Chinese New Year celebrations, in phrases such as "Gunong Blanc" (9) (Mount Blanc, employing the Malay word for mountain) and in descriptions of such as:

Saxon cut and Mongol shape
Dravidian red
Flows as the bandsters ape. (14)

Set on a dance floor, the passage above from "Three Faces of Night" describes the cheongsam or *qipao* of the dancer, its collar and fastening based upon Manchu (not Mongol, although the mistake is understandable) designs, its cut following a tight-fitting Western model, and its bright colour influenced by South Indian culture. The dancer's identity, indeed, like that of many of the characters who appear in Wang's poems, appears performative: it is difficult to separate the person from the performance, the dancer from the dance. In many of Wang's poems, indeed, an adjective does the work of a proper noun: "tailored New Looks" for fashionable women in "Pulse" (2), "sandalled squats" for durian eaters crouching by the road in "Three Faces of Night" (14). Identity here is performed, defined not by essence but by clothing or gesture.

The difficulty with such analysis, I think, is that while it recognizes elements of Wang's poems which are important, it does not place them within a specific historical context. In a sense, a diasporic reading here, while gaining some freedom of analytic framework, becomes merely a dehistoricized postcolonial reading. Performativity and hybridity as

manifestations of diaspora might be earnestly desired at the beginning of a new millennium, but Wang's poetry is, at the very least, profoundly ambivalent about them. Wang's poems, and those of others, often see hybridity as a symbol of degeneration, not of cultural invention:

We are bastards, all,
Claiming Synthesis.
I am a nondescript
In a baju-sam or falsied sari
There is no race or nation
For us bastards" (Wang, qtd. in Brewster 7).

Here form and meaning merge: the hyphenation of Malay and Chinese words for shirt in "baju-sam" produces neither linguistic nor cultural synthesis. Similarly, Wang's characters do not perform identities in a celebratory fashion, but are rather a series of automatons controlled by external forces, in the "machine-life" of modernity (*Pulse* 3). The "tailored New Looks" of "Pulse" are thus symptomatic of a cultural vacuousness mediated through an alienated persona: none of this is celebratory.

In reading Wang's poetry as a manifestation of diaspora, we need to return to Gilroy's location of diaspora as a problematic "double consciousness" in modernity. Wang's poetry negotiates between culture, a dying colonialism and its antithesis in a nascent nationalism, and the presence of capital. Nowhere is this more clear than in the poem "The Drip," a poem which Wang chose not to include in *Pulse*:

Where the latex drips,
Latex semen,
Dripping into the glazy womb,
Dripping after the painless wound,
What draught of fertility!

I rise to my knees
And pray that life is dripping more.

I kow-tow till my lips
Touch the cup wet of the bleeding sore

The cup of milky life,
Life from the drip
Life producing, sustaining
Life of the multi-tongued,
Overbrims but little. (28)

As Brewster notes, “The Drip” addresses the issue of colonialism and capitalism, but it perhaps does so in a more subtle way than her suggestion that the poem shows “ironic awareness” of “submission to the process of industry, a process managed by the colonisers” (20-21). The poem is unique, I think, in that it also refuses the simple binarism between spiritually pure country and corrupt city which is present in most of the other poems in *Pulse*. Rubber is here, in the country, as a distinct phenomenon of late colonialism: almost all the rubber estates in Malaya were carved out in the twentieth century. Rubber also offers the possible foundation of the economy of an independent, modern Malaya. The description of latex collecting from the incisions in tapped rubber trees is unerringly precise: what provides estrangement here is the metaphorical landscape in which it is placed, which sustains itself through a series of paradoxes. How can “semen” and associated fertility emerge from a wound? Is the persona in the second verse paragraph empowered or cowed into submission? Is the “little” of the last line enough? Will rubber, and capital, provide a fullness of life and fertility in the new nation, or merely keep citizens dependent on a continuously parsimonious drip? And what will the role of tradition be here—demonstrated in “The Drip” by “kow-tow,” an atavistic reference to Imperial China, and by the Chinese-influenced parallelism of the second verse paragraph? Will it liberate, or will it provide new possibilities of restriction and control for capital?

What a contextualized diasporic reading can gain for us here, I think, is an appreciation of the “double consciousness” of the poem. Gilroy’s

use of this term is derived ultimately from W. E. B. Dubois's description of black Americans in *The Souls of Black Folk* as being both the subjects and objects of modernity, "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" (ch 1. para. 3). The doubts expressed in Wang's poem, the shifting of subject positions, seem to mirror this consciousness. On the one hand, the gendering of the image of impregnation seems to urge an appropriation of the "hard" masculinity of colonial modernity in the service of the nation, to produce the "strong, robust, rugged" subjects of the new nation which Lee Kuan Yew would speak of fifteen years later (Lee 393). Yet, on the other hand, there is a sense of being a passive object of modernity's project, rather than an active subject.

Wang's best poetry, then, gains effect not through the precision of its metaphors, but rather through producing a Shklovskian defamiliarization which causes the reader to perceive the object in question in a new light. It is diasporic in its double consciousness—its hope of fulfillment through the nation, and yet its continual attempts at transfiguration, at escape from capital's corrosion of community ties, its search for fullness, and its discovery of but "little." Such a diasporic consciousness makes Wang's poetry curiously predictive of Singapore today, in which economic progress through the nation's astonishing development has brought no fulfillment but rather exhortations to further sacrifice, and in which transfiguration seems increasingly less possible in an ever more socially atomized nation state. Thinking of diaspora beyond ethnicity and hybridity also, I think, impels us to look with a double sight beyond national citizens, the proud subjects of modernity, to the sojourners who now construct Singapore's urban and social landscapes—Bangladeshi construction workers, Filipina maids—under the confines and possibilities of capital, to see Singapore still marked—as in Wang's time—by an incommensurability between different "world[s]" (*Pulse* 15).

In conclusion, very properly in any discussion of diaspora, I'd like to urge a return, a return that is twofold. First, a return to the nation, the community that haunts the older conception of diaspora, and that

is exorcized by the new. Second, a return to the crucial term in the first moments of that second articulation of diaspora, a term that very quickly grows spectral—capitalism. No return, diaspora has taught us, can be on the terms of the initial departure: there is always a reiteration, a slippage, a new shadow of meaning. Returning from diaspora to capital and nation, then, might ask us not to think of diaspora so much as cultural free play, the performance of ethnicity, as a peculiar form of dialogue between nation and capital. The nation arises from and indeed gains its sustenance from capital, even as it proudly proclaims itself the only community that can resist capitalism's rapacity. Diaspora then, might be this space of contradiction between the two common sense elements of cultural life: in this usage, it opens up possibilities of critique through praxis. Finally, let me return to Wang Gungwu. In one of the most ambitious poems in *Pulse*, "Three Faces of Night," Wang's persona negotiates between three worlds—the glamorous dance hall, the earthy city streets, and a less clearly defined domestic space. In "rush[ing] around/ To see the others" the protagonist seeks a "mirror" to reflect his identity, but finds only a "prism," splitting light into a spectrum, rather than consolidating it into a single image (15). Diaspora here is marked by fragmentation, not hybridity, multiple vision rather than performance.

notes

- 1 "We assign identity, for instance, to two trains ('the 8.45 from Geneva to Paris'), one of which leaves twenty-four hours after the other. We treat it as the 'same' train, even though probably the locomotive, the carriages, the staff etc. are not the same" (Saussure 107).
- 2 See, for instance, Gilroy's discussion of the understanding of "Negro Culture" at the second congress of Negro Writers and Artists in Rome in 1959. Gilroy notes that "the unity of culture was not thought to be guaranteed by the enduring force of a common African heritage" but rather heritage, where identified, would be discussed in parallel with the "colonial experience" as a source of "synthesis and convergence." Gilroy notes that the term was broad enough in use "to include slavery, colonialism, racial discrimination, and the rise of national(ist) consciousness(es) charged with colonialism negation." Finally,

the conference was also centrally concerned with the “technological, economic, political and cultural dynamics of modernization” (*The Black Atlantic* 195). Gilroy contrasts this attention to the dynamics of diasporic identity favourably with essentialist Afrocentric notions of black culture, but it might equally favourably be contrasted with uses of the term “diaspora,” derived from a hasty reading of Gilroy, as merely a synonym for “transnationalism” or “hybridity.”

- 3 The name is taken from the first syllables of the names of three languages: English, Malay, and Chinese. Ismail Talib explains some of the reasons for its lack of success (5).
- 4 “CMIO” is a phrase coined by Singapore sociologist Sharon Siddique to describe racial categorization under state-sponsored multiracialism: it refers to, in descending order of population size, the four main racial groups: Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Other. Of the considerable critical writings on the topic, Geoffrey Benjamin’s and Siddique’s are the earliest. English has not, of course, remained a culturally empty language in Singapore, and indeed is now the only *lingua franca* shared by Singaporeans born after independence.
- 5 For the short stories, see Holden. Chua Ai Lin has recently demonstrated that a Malayan consciousness existed among the “domiciled communities” (i.e., non-Europeans) in Singapore and Malaya in the 1930s, and was not, as much historiography suggests, a largely post-World War Two creation.
- 6 See, for example, Griffiths’s discussion of the importance of Kobina Sekyi’s journalism and other non-fictional writings on the Gold Coast, or his acknowledgement of the influence of missionary life stories on the nationalist texts of Jomo Kenyatta (68).
- 7 My translation. “Jing Ye Si” can probably claim to be the best-known poem in the Chinese Language, and Wang would doubtless have learned it as a schoolboy. There is a useful discussion of the poem for non-Chinese speakers at the Society for Anglo-Chinese Understanding’s web site <<http://sacu.org/poetry.html>>. Accessed 3 September, 2002.
- 8 Brewster here may well be influenced by Wang’s retrospective evaluation of the two poems in his account of the ultimate failure, in his view, of the University of Malaya poets’ attempts to create a distinctively Malayan idiom. Here, Wang mentions that “Moon Thoughts” was his first poem in English and was written in 1949 (“Trial and Error in Malayan Poetry” 6).
- 9 For example: *The Chinese Diaspora: Selected Essays*, ed. Wang Gungwu and Wang Ling-Chi (2 vols. Singapore: Times Academic P, 1998); “A Single

Chinese Diaspora? Some Historical Reflections," in *Imagining the Chinese Diaspora: Two Australian Perspectives*, ed. Wang Gungwu and Annette Shun Wah (Cambridge: Centre for the Study of the Chinese Southern Diaspora, Australian National University, 1999): 1-17.

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