

English as Racial Embodiment in Shirley Lim's *Joss and Gold*

Michelle O'Brien
University of British Columbia

In 1989, Shirley Geok-Lin Lim identified the emergence of a “counter tradition” of Anglophone Singaporean writing, which involved a shift from primarily aesthetic concerns to a focus on identity politics and social critiques that directly opposed state authority (“English” 534). Lim’s first novel, *Joss and Gold* (2001) is, unsurprisingly, exemplary of this tradition. It takes place over a twelve-year period; the first section, “Crossing,” takes place in Malaysia both immediately preceding and during the 1969 race riots, while the last section, “Landing,” takes place in industrialized Singapore in 1981. *Joss and Gold* thus exceeds this counter-tradition’s association with Singapore through this inclusion of Malaysia, and offers a powerful critique of racial organization in both nations. The text explores their rapid social shifts through the experiences of the Chinese Malaysian protagonist, Li An, from her relationship with a white American man living in Malaysia, to her eventual migration to Singapore. Crucial to this engagement is the narrative’s focus on how Western imperialism occupies the ideological space formerly occupied by the British colonial presence, as how its authority is cathected through the white Western body.

As *Joss and Gold* expresses these racial anxieties, it narrativizes the significant role that English plays in shaping these exchanges. The novel traces English’s effects on racial embodiment in post-Independence Malaysia, as well as its normalization throughout Singapore’s hyper-development. It expands on well-established critiques of postcolonial English in these nations, however, as it establishes a vital connection between language and racial embodiment across these contexts. As Katrina Powell describes, Lim associates English with her “corporeal experience” and “intellectual freedom” in her writing, while expressing how her body is defined by both English’s productivity and dominance (165). This article focuses on this vexed relationship between race and language, and draws out how English in particular persists as a key mediator of racial identity in Lim’s work. It proposes that Lim’s depiction of English’s affective work in *Joss and Gold* conveys not only the colonization of individuals’ psyches, but also that English makes vital space for them to renegotiate their prescribed racial figuration amidst new legislation

that reinscribes between language and racial communities. Lim thus crucially contends with English's ambivalence in both Singapore and Malaysia. Her writing is especially productive here, as she self-reflexively critiques English *in* English.

"Special Rights" and Language Policy

Lim's preoccupation with language's social purchase and affective work—as well as English's ambivalence—emerges from the rapid shifts in language policy in both post-Independence nations. Throughout Malaysia's British colonial history, English was the language of administration and education, but after Independence (1957), its position was eventually de-emphasized in favour of Malay. Article 160 of the Constitution, which affirms special rights for the Malay population, defines a Malay as "a person who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language, conforms to Malay custom" and is domiciled in Malaysia (Art. 160 Sec. 2). The National Education Policy—as outlined in the Education Act in 1961—also confirmed that Bahasa Melayu (Malay) would replace English as the medium of instruction, which, as Gill describes, would provide the "education and administrative capital that would lead to [Malay's] development as a language of higher status" (81). This development would, ideally, officialize a language closely linked to Malay racial identity, and provide the Malay ruling class with the social capital afforded to fluent English speakers. Despite this investment in Malay, English remained the language of education and domestic administration for a ten-year transition period to help train the future overseers of the new postcolonial nation, and was positioned as an ostensibly race-neutral medium since it did not "belong" to any of Malaysia's three dominant racial groups. However, it was not the Malay majority in general that benefited from English's ongoing salience, but "non-Malays—largely the Chinese and the Indians who had professional mobility" and some "elite Malays" educated in English (46).

This rescripting of the linguistic field underscored pre-existing racial conflicts between the Malay elite class—who felt excluded from the nation's economic and political spheres—and the Chinese opposition, whose access to English education aided their socio-political influence. These conflicts over language policy were central to the May 13th race riots of 1969—a key moment of sectarian violence between the Chinese and Malays. The main opposition parties, Parti Gerakan and the Democratic Action Party (DAP), a party with a large Chinese base, advocated for a multilingual national identity that would elevate English, Mandarin, and Tamil to official languages. The United Malays National Organization (UNMO) however, argued that the

National Language Act (1967) had not ensured Malay's primacy as the national language. After the DAP and Gerakan eradicated the Alliance's majority in Parliament during the 1969 elections, victory parades devolved into violence, in part due to the Alliance's belief that the other parties had "betraye[d] the Alliance formula by voting for an opposition that had revived fundamental questions of language and Malay special rights" (Hwang 77-78).

Following the riots, Malay was swiftly implemented as the medium of instruction and policy, while English was gradually phased out. But by the mid-1970s, English's productivity as the language of international commerce and education demanded further revisions to the linguistic field. More recently, Malaysia's multi-ethnic elites have made use of English's institutionalization to take advantage of its relationship to capital (Kachru and Nelson 190). But English still retains its tenuous relationship with Malay. For instance, due to their competency in English, graduates from private universities in Malaysia have become more sought after by private-sector companies, while students from public universities—particularly Malays—are less employable. Today, English may not "belong" to any of the three predominant racial groups, or carry the same associations with sectarian violence as Malay, but its historically contested relationship to Malaysia's racial grid persists through its associations with global capital and postcolonial administration.

In Singapore, English is similarly coded as a language of global capital, but is also the nation's lingua franca. In a move characteristic of Singapore's emphasis on pragmatism, after Independence English was retained as the national language with the hope that it would help "kee[p] Singaporean society open to global and regional forces, whilst retaining a sense of stability and connection to a historic past, however imagined" (Lim *et al.* 3). English is thus inscribed as a language "that essentially marks a non-Asian 'other,' and therefore cannot be bestowed the status of official mother tongue" (6). But the state's positioning of English against mother-tongue languages as a "race-neutral" and common medium obscures how Singapore's racial hierarchy figures into individual success. Since it is also the language that "must serve the entire country," the state has attempted to ideologically detach English from its charged history as a colonial language so it can function as Singapore's lingua franca and assist with global communication (6).

This emphasis on English complicated Mandarin's association with Chinese dominance. The state's subsequent focus on promoting Mandarin reflected the desire to suppress dialects and "reassemble" those Chinese communities "hewed from different provinces" by adopting Mandarin as the only official language associated with Chineseness, which also obscures the complex ethno-racial backgrounds of its speakers (Chua 5). All of Singapore's mother-tongue languages are dictated by the state's CMIO (Chinese, Malay,

Indian, Other) scheme, where every citizen is categorized as belonging to one of the four ethno-racial categories. To this end, Singapore's mandatory bilingual policy (1966) was developed with the hopes that learning mother-tongue languages would help reify these categories by grounding individual racial identity and resisting, as Wee and Stroud describe, the "(undesirable) Western values that supposedly come along with learning English" (30). This emphasis on mother tongues also marked the state's attempt to counter how English as the common tongue had resulted in it surpassing the use of prescribed mother tongues at home.¹

Lim's critique of language develops amidst these tensions that transect both nations, and its fraught position in both locales. It is figured as a racially neutral language required for economic competitiveness, but it threatens the social function of mother-tongue languages that help define racial categories. Personal identification with English is inevitable, given its position as a language that many citizens learn alongside their prescribed mother tongue, and as one that is used habitually at home (Bokhorst-Heng *et al.* 134). But as this identification also reiterates English's neocolonial and imperialistic associations with Western dominance, it also underscores the limits of its ostensible neutrality.

Lim's Critiques of Racial Embodiment Through Language

Lim immigrated to the United States in 1969, which provides her critique of English with a distinct vantage point; her writing is at once embedded in these shifting postcolonial politics surrounding English, and attuned to its creative possibilities when distanced from them. *Joss and Gold's* focus on language extends from Lim's earlier writing that negotiates her mixed patrilineal Hokkien Chinese and matrilineal Peranakan background. Sneja Gunew provides vital insight into the historical grounding of the linguistic complexities that motivate Lim's literary techniques:

Embedded in the turbulent politics leading to the 1969 race riots in which her ethnic group, the Chinese Malaysians, were targeted, Lim hangs onto the aesthetic core of art as a way of transcending the continuing and brutal pressures of the political. In her account the English language provides an alternative to the problematic relations she has with the Hokkien Chinese dialect of her father's family, a language in which she feels alienated and forever trapped in infancy, and the Malay transmitted by her mother, who eventually abandons the family and becomes erased from its collective history. Malay is thus an abjected mother-tongue... (60)

To extend this, as Lim evades the primacy of her mother-tongue languages (and her conflicted relationship to Malay) in her writing in/on English, she also touches on her reliance on a language that,

despite its productivity, is part of a legacy of the racial body's (neo)colonial alienation from language.

Lim explores this issue in her memoir, *Among the White Moon Faces* (1996), through her discussions of studying English literature. She details her British-influenced early education and the development of English as her working language, along with the changes in her relationship to English writing after her immigration to the United States in 1969. Lim contrasts the “too many names, too many identities, too many languages” in Malaysia and Singapore against what she reads as canonical English literature's relatively univocal approach toward identity construction (20, 16).² Aware of how the state's racial management is entwined with language legislation, Lim approaches English as a problematic external to these nations' racial schemas given its distance from the three predominant racial groups.

Crucial to my reading is Lim's evaluation of how her affective responses to English shape her embodiment: “The physical sensation of expansion in the chest, even in the head, as I read a profoundly beautiful or mindful poem was conclusively and possessively subjective. The literature may have been of Britain, but my love of literature was outside the empire” (198). Here, Lim describes a deeply personal relationship to English writing and how its affective work produces a corporeal response—that is, she simultaneously experiences it psychically and physically. I consider this focus on the embodied dimensions of English to be characteristic of Lim's approach to narrating language's effects, even when Lim reworks this assertion. Elsewhere, she describes that, even prior to her move to the United States, her valorization of Western ideals and English writing were also embodied: “Every cultural change is signified through and on the body. Involuntarily the body displays, like a multidimensional, multisensorial screen, the effect of complicated movements across the social keyboard...My Westernization took place in my body” (89).³ English's significance is again bound to the body through the “social keyboard” that Lim traverses, which suggests a reworking of her cultural identity through her identification with English; but her possessive and personal relationship to English is complicated here, as its relationship to Western hegemony produces *involuntary* affective-embodied responses that exceed her control.

Characteristic of English's fraught role in her life, even though English in Malaysia and Singapore provided Lim with an option outside of her prescribed familial tongues, in the United States her “British colonial accent,” “brown colour,” and “Asian features” marked her as “alien” to the study of English language and literature (275). Lim also addresses her growing disillusionment with English writing while teaching young minoritized students in 1970s New York. She remarks that, in order to remain a “decolonizing intellectual,” she had to “critique her own ideological formation” and “jilt her first loves” in her writing after concluding that her work paralleled

“colonialist versions of higher education” (183). As Gunew proposes, Lim’s preoccupations with English’s effects on her corporeality reflect her “rebelliousness against the ideological impulse behind the induction into English” alongside a recognition that she is “seduced by the aesthetic power of both the language and the texts it has produced” (58). Lim thus expresses the ambivalence and the “psychic and the physical, effects/affects of exposure” to English language and writing. *Joss and Gold*, I propose, expands on these variegated affective responses to this colonial language, and narrativizes how bodies made vulnerable to English’s social purchase in Singapore and Malaysia negotiate their relationship to its shifting position.

To a greater extent than in her memoir, in *Joss and Gold* Lim’s evaluation of English’s position in Malaysia and Singapore emphasizes its ambivalence. That is, even as the narrative privileges English as a vehicle to support multiracial relationships, it also interrogates individuals’ claims to the language. Given Lim’s academic background, her critique unsurprisingly resonates with classic anticolonial evaluations of language and racial embodiment, including Frantz Fanon’s oft-cited description of the racial body being interpellated by the colonizer’s language when discursively marked as inferior. I find Sylvia Wynter’s reading of Fanon’s intervention especially helpful here, since it expands on his engagement with French by discussing the work of dominant languages more generally (40). Wynter traces other moments in Fanon’s writing where vulnerability to certain language forms binds the body to a history of racial inferiority, and asserts that, common to all these instances, he is “called upon to experience” an “other self” he describes—one constructed by white bodies that had “woven [him] out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories” (91). As Wynter describes, “the ‘mental contents’ of [Fanon’s] new qualitative view of his body... are non-arbitrarily linked through the mediation of those ‘anecdotes,’ those ‘stories’ out of which he had been woven; stories which elaborate the very historico-racial schema and ‘corporeal malediction,’ whose negative meanings imposed upon his being” (41). What Wynter crucially articulates here is that the narrativization of the social writing of race profoundly shapes the vulnerable colonized body; it incites emotive reactions that redefine their understanding of their corporeality—their “sense of self” (40). She further suggests that the fact that these narratives are spoken in prevailing (post)colonial languages is crucial to this process, and that English functions similarly in the postcolonial world (35). As such, the ongoing management of its use by particular dominant bodies still possesses the potential to influence and disrupt an individual’s racial embodiment. I propose that this critique aligns with the relationship between language and embodiment that Lim takes up in *Joss and Gold*, but that she does so by using her postcolonial writing to narrate interactions between

subjects made vulnerable to these “stories” and those who use English to “weave” the racial body out of these socio-political discourses.

Critiques like Wynter’s also convey how a racial subject is *affected* by these utterances from a dominant body, but is unable to *effect* power and cohere their racial identity. Denise Ferreira da Silva, writing from the same tradition of humanist critiques of race as Wynter, expands on this form of affectability. She analyzes how, in globality, the institutions of dominant whiteness produce the racial body as *affectable*—that is, as a body whose racial distinction signifies a vulnerable consciousness that lacks the stability and self-determination needed to rule a postcolonial nation (29). The identities of these affectable racial bodies are thus vulnerable to and destabilized by the self-determined power, juridical reasoning, and moral dictums of the (white) Western subject, and these individuals struggle to harness this power for themselves.⁴

What I find especially provocative in relation to Lim’s writing is that Ferreira da Silva maps how this process—this writing of the racial body by dominant whiteness—occurs even in postcolonial nations that lack a distinct white presence. In her comparative analysis of modern raciality in the United States and Brazil, she argues that in the United States, prevailing racial discourses often articulate non-white racial others (the “others of Europe”), as “always already affectable thing[s]” to instantiate their absence from the nation’s development (234). In Brazil, however, the ideological “whitening” of Brazilians through the influences of and adoption of European colonial ideologies (alongside miscegenation) results in a type of onto-epistemological obliteration of Indian and African racial others from Brazilian embodiment and consciousness (238).⁵ In other words, despite their distinct social configurations, both contexts produce racial subjects whose “spirits” are European, even though Brazil does not possess the same significant population of dominant white bodies that signify Western hegemony (23). Ferreira da Silva thus identifies a circulating ideal of the modern human subject whose Westernized “spirit” and self-determined consciousness indelibly defines racial embodiment across postcolonial sites.

This critical trajectory might overlook some of the nuances within categories of whiteness, but nevertheless identifies how neocolonial whiteness is—within particular contexts—conflated with colonial whiteness. Ferreira da Silva’s critique has immediate bearing on Lim’s engagement with these concepts, particularly as Lim explores how English’s mediation of racial embodiment is bound to the global circulation of dominant whiteness in postcolonial Singapore and Malaysia that lack significant white populations. And even though Ferreira da Silva focuses on the ideological and biological writings of raciality, like Fanon and Wynter she also considers language to be one vital method of inscribing race difference. For instance, she proposes that Fanon’s reading of race and language suggests the modern effects

of the “analytics of raciality” that produce the racial body as irreducibly different from whiteness, and that also renders them as affectable and vulnerable (19). English, too, bears this legacy of colonial mastery and the spirit of hegemonic whiteness across postcolonial contexts, where Anglo-European bodies are still read as possessing an inherent and superior relationship to the language. This process occurs in Malaysia and Singapore—formerly colonized nation states that had English imposed upon them, but that now use English strategically for its global competitiveness and because it continues to communicate a certain developmental trajectory associated with a prevailing ideal (Anglo-European) subject. But its historical role in the psychic colonization of certain racial bodies in both nations means that it retains its potential to (re)write and disrupt the racial body in everyday contexts. And it is precisely the everyday effects of this complex negotiation between this global circulation of affectability, the work of language, and the use of English in Singapore and Malaysia that Lim takes up in *Joss and Gold*.

English’s Ambivalence and Racial Mediation in *Joss and Gold*

Lim’s preoccupation with how—even with the absence of a dominant white population—Westernization and raciality itself can be embodied through language is expressed most clearly through the cross-racial relationships and conflicts that develop throughout *Joss and Gold*. To explore this tension, throughout the narrative, Lim stages encounters between individuals from different racial groups that articulate the ways that the fraught socio-legal and national discussions of language play out in these rapidly developing postcolonial nations. The text’s approach to describing particular racial conflicts through these conversations is, at times, contrived, with characters directly stating the dominant concerns of their racial group for the uninformed. But Lim’s approach also conveys that these issues overdetermine every aspect of social relations in Malaysia and Singapore. Lim then narrates the effects of these conflicts through Li An’s perspective, and in doing so, homes in on the everyday embodied effects of language on her sense of self. The narrative also suggests that even as English becomes a key part of an individual’s self-proclaimed hybrid identity, the bearing it has on their racial figuration can still be rescripted by dominant bodies that assert their right to dictate which bodies can claim English as their own.

The first section, “Crossing,” develops a narrative framing for these conflicts by envisioning how the strident race distinctions that characterize Malaysian social dynamics and led to the race riots play out in everyday life. Throughout “Crossing,” Chester, the white American Peace Corps worker, and his two Malay friends, Abdullah

and Samad, express their essentialist views on Malaysian race relations to Li An. Abdullah and Samad's totalizing views are evident when they discuss two of Li An's friends, Gina and Paroo, who are Chinese and Indian respectively, and who attempt to kill themselves due to the prohibitions placed on their interracial relationship. As Abdullah describes:

Very difficult this interracial affair...Better that like stay with like. Indian and Chinese cannot mix, too many differences—food, custom, language...Malay and Chinese also cannot mix, like oil and water. Malays have many adat⁶, Islam also have shariat...Of course Chinese also have their own religion. But they must become like Malay if they want to marry Malay. (58)

Mohammad Quayum proposes that these sentiments exemplify the “sense of cultural purity/rigidity and isolationism/monologism” that characterized a common exclusivist sentiment: that the nation should be “built with the Malay people and culture at the centre” (19). Comments like these exemplify elite Malays' desires to assert a claim to the postcolonial nation, and reiterate how the state's rigid racial schema is upheld by racial distinctiveness—and its relationship to language—which occludes the presence of intermixed/intermarried communities like Lim's Peranakan family.

Lim depicts the coexistence of Malay authority alongside Western influence in Malaysia by juxtaposing Abdullah and Samad's comments alongside Chester's. While Chester claims to take a more voyeuristic approach to the nation's sociopolitical dynamics, his characterization marks how the influence of Western whiteness in Malaysia extends from, and is deepened by, the legacy of British colonialism. To this extent, although Chester's country of origin aligns him with American Imperialism and hegemony rather than British colonialism, when they first meet, Li An associates his body with “promise” and “the great Romantic poets and novelists” (29). She also conflates his body with colonial authority, including “governors and other colonial officials,” and her sense that “[e]very white person” on her campus “seem[s] to be superior and aloof” (29). Li An's reading of Chester's body here signposts the text's preoccupation with the ways that certain bodies are more easily read as having an elite and dominant relationship with English. Yet even as Chester immerses himself in Malaysian culture and demands its authenticity, he refuses to take responsibility “for anything [in Malaysia],” including his Western influence (37). His attempts to keep Malaysian culture “pure” also exemplify his hegemonic impulses. He explains to Li An and her husband, Henry, that “Malay is the only real culture in this country” as racial groups like the Chinese could “as easily be in Hong Kong or even New York's Chinatown,” and are therefore not as “original” to the nation or as significant as Malay cultural influences (33-4). These comments exemplify Chester's attempts to dictate foreign development in Malaysia, which anticipates the United States' intensified influence

through economic and cultural partnerships. His characterization thus allows Lim to draw together British (neo)colonialism with American imperialism and express how these problematics intersect and inhere in the Western body's distinct position in Malaysia.

By staging these encounters between Chester as the figure of Western dominance and Li An, Lim also imagines a moment where individuals in the postcolonial nation might have reworked these reductionist critiques. Li An is positioned against Chester's views through her identification with the metaphor of "rojak," or "mixed." She informs Chester: "Everything in Malaysia is...mixed, rojak. A little Malay, a little Chinese, a little Indian, a little English...Give us a few more years and we'll be a totally new nation. No more Malay, Chinese, Indian, but all one people" (34-5). Li An in particular feels that she is "not Chinese" but Malaysian—a designation that exceeds the nation's racial categories (90). Following this, she writes that "[a]ll this talk about Chinese rights makes me sick...Malay rights, Chinese rights...I am Malaysian, I don't exist." Her comments, while idealistic, express a desire for racial harmony through cultural transference, and contradict Chester's figuration as an agent of Western dominance who simply reiterates the racial categories that were implemented under colonialism. Her emphasis on "rojak" as a metaphor for Malaysian hybridity is crucial. It marks a turn away from English alone through this critique of Chester's reassertion of racial categories that were entrenched under the nation's colonial history. Rather, she draws from a markedly localized term to envision a different trajectory for the postcolonial state's development.

Lim further develops this narrative microcosm of the racial complexities that defined these post-Independence nations through Li An's characterization as the matriarch of an atypical and cross-racial family unit. Li An and Chester have an affair that produces a child, Su Yin, who is read as Eurasian or a "mixed-up devil," and who cannot find a space within the nation's racial categories. Though Henry and Li An eventually divorce, Henry, aware that Chester is Su Yin's biological father, still claims her as his daughter. Li An moves to Singapore to raise Su Yin with two women: her best friend, and the second wife of Henry's father. While Li An becomes decidedly less idealistic about the actuality of a harmonious hybrid national identity, Lim's narrativization of this familial unit symbolizes the creolized "rojak" racial identity that Li An valorized in her youth. Through this, Li An embodies the ideal of the "New Malaysian," which Quayum defines as the "vision of forging a new and inclusive national identity, which accommodates all people and imagines a community on the basis of the shared values of all ethnic groups" (21). The irony for Li An's family is that they can only become "New Malaysians" after they move to Singapore, but part of this shift is due to the nation's relentless development and pragmatism. Although Li An moves to Singapore for "big city tolerance and anonymity," this move also parallels Lim's

description of a “third-world expatriate” who “withdraws from her native country upon recognizing the historical discontinuities and the psychological violence” that characterizes the histories of these colonized nations (249, “First” 17). Su Yin also describes Singapore as “money and home,” which defines modernized Singapore as a space whose racial grid is equally defined through its CMIO formulation, but where capital pursuits can temporarily override the importance of ethno-racial divisions (233).

From this narrative framing of the complex race relations of this era, Li An’s preoccupation with English becomes central to *Joss and Gold*’s deeper exploration of the tensions between a composite view of the nation and the spectre of state-influenced racial conflicts. More importantly, it allows Lim to address the ways that the racial body is made to experience these tensions in daily life through language. Li An does not rely on hybrid language forms like Manglish and Singlish to express her own hybridity. Like Lim, she finds English to be potentially productive as a language of inter-ethnic communication that—given its ostensible race-neutrality—counters expectations that she will identify with racially determined languages and culture. It becomes the language she teaches to her racially diverse classes, and she draws on Standard English by selecting the literary histories that help her envision a dynamic and unbounded racial identity. Li An, overlooking how her idolization of Anglophone writing reflects its postcolonial influence, is initially “dazzled” by her study of English literature, and feels that being a student of English is the “most enviable position in the world” (4-5). Like Lim, she uses it not simply for its social purchase, but because it connects her to literary sentiments that emotively emphasize the individual’s composite sense of self over state authority.

Despite Li An’s initially positive associations with English as the language of “rojak” rather than its ability to uphold colonial dominance, the narrative also expounds on its threat to post-Independence Malaysia’s fraught racial schema. Abdullah contests Li An’s appreciation of English language and literature, identifying it as a “bastard language” whose colonial history and exteriority to Malaysia’s core racial groups and the Malay majority means that it cannot be a “national language,” since it risks upsetting national unity. For Abdullah and Samad, English signifies a “loss of [their] language” and is tainted by its colonial history; they agree that the “one percent” in power should speak English, but that Malay is “good enough” for the majority (63). This formulation, as Li An notes, means that those who desire upward mobility still must learn English. But Abdullah and Samad’s violent resistance to such critiques are unsurprising amidst the turbulent changes in language policies that attempted to make English accessible to elite Malays, but still subordinated to Bahasa Melayu to uphold its associations with Malay authority. These comments also exemplify the stark limits of English’s neutrality in everyday

interactions: as soon as it is placed in relation to Malay, it becomes a politically charged language of otherness—and one that is, in Abdullah and Samad's estimation, decidedly external to Malaysia's developing social landscape.

These painstaking discussions of language policies ground the narrative's turn toward the ways that English is bound to corporeality in these nations through its ambivalence. And from this broader narration of the social effects of the state's management of language, Lim homes in on Li An's affective-corporeal responses through her experience of being made vulnerable to these conflicts. For example, following this encounter, Li An wonders:

What would happen if they all suddenly switched to Malay right now? How would she express herself?...Her world was lit by language. The English ingested through years of reading and talking now formed the delicate web of tissues in her brain. Giving up her language would be like undergoing a crippling operation on her brain. (56)

Lim begins to unpack the spatial and physical presence that English can have on individual identity as Li An parses the effects of these restricting comments on her corporeality. English here is ambivalent, at once parasitical and personal. Li An depends on English to understand the world since she has “ingested” its influence through her studies; and, despite its ostensible neutrality, she has developed a deeply affective relationship to the language which shapes her sense of self. Amidst the tension between the state's attempts to instrumentalize language and harness it for its ability to mediate the racial grid, Lim figures Li An as a necessary reminder of how the body responds to these conflicts. As she contemplates whether she should focus on Malay rather than English, Li An describes how

[h]er body felt stranger and stranger each day. Her nerve ends vibrated on a strangely immediate and vivid plane, but everything else was distant. When she talked about the poems to her students, there was no longer a singing connection between the language and her body. Instead, there was talk, slow and difficult... Then there was her new body, singing to itself, without any form or language. She could not reach it with her mind. (60)

As English's utility becomes overdetermined by state critiques of language, these conflicts inhere in Li An's vulnerable body, and eventually begin to destabilize her self-defined racial identity as Malaysian Chinese—an identity that is configured through English's cross-racial potential. The shift from a “singing connection” to a “new body” that lacks this intimate relationship with English thus marks a fracture in the harmonious relationship that Li An once experienced between the “web” of English in her mind and the way it shaped her hybrid corporeality. This professed dependence on English is again mired in its hegemonic work, but as she faces continual demands from those dominant (Malay) individuals trying to shape Malaysia's

postcolonial racial field, the connection—however problematic—that English helped her make between her sense of self and her body is disrupted.

To extend this description of English's productivity within its ambivalence, while Li An has, in a sense, been colonized by English, it remains a locus of her composite identity that allows her to navigate the shifting racial polemics of post-Independence Malaysia, and later, Singapore. Li An's descriptions are reminiscent of how, as Rey Chow discusses, racial embodiment is construed through language, where "racialization demands to be grasped first and foremost as an experience of language, not least because lingual relations are themselves caught up in the aggressive procedures of setting apart that racialized naming and interpellation ineluctably intensify" (7). Li An's attempts to avoid the acts of "racialized naming" associated with her prescribed mother tongue and initially finds that (post)colonial English is a necessary retreat from Malay's constraints, but it merely supersedes the work of these other forms on her embodiment. As she reflects on this exchange, and what would occur if non-Malay Malaysians were forced to leave after contesting the nation's racial hierarchy, she wonders if "China would want [her]," and feels pressured to retreat into the nation and languages associated with her racial signification. The way that English is insinuated into her sense of self means that she cannot "suddenly switch" to the language of racial dominance in Malaysia, or easily retreat to a prescribed mother tongue like Mandarin. Although Abdullah and Samad have no legitimate authority over Li An, their assertions exemplify how dominant Malays in "new Malaysia" can reconfigure language use, which shifts how embodiment for certain individuals is entwined with English. This does not deny the vital role that reframing colonial languages plays in decolonizing efforts, but that the use of Malay to contest English's race-based significance simply supplants English's hegemony.

It is Chester's mediation of the connection she draws between English and her hybrid racial identity that most profoundly destabilizes Li An's racial corporeality. Rather than focus on mastery, Chester uses nationality to designate which bodies have any legitimate claim to English—including its canonical literary lineage. His effect on Li An is apt given his aforementioned typification as (neo)colonial authority and the prevailing Western whiteness that she interacts with in her academic life. In other words, he exemplifies how Western authority over language persists alongside the Malay dominance represented by Abdullah and Samad. When Chester learns that Li An teaches English, he contests her belief that English writing might have bearing on Malaysian interests. He asserts: "it's no good teaching these kinds of poems any more. This is all British culture...we had a revolution and threw them out with the tea bags, so I know what I'm talking about. You've got your own culture. That's what you should be teaching"

(33). As Chester homogenizes Li An's culture and negates the colonial influences of English writing in the region (including how it is adapted and reconfigured), the presumed authority of a white Western body subtends his comments. That is, he references a conflict between two forces that, through the effects of colonialism and imperialism, have both influenced Malaysia's development, and assumes insight into each of these events that he views as lacking in Malaysian citizens. He also assigns a particular culture to Li An while ignoring her self-defined "rojak" identity. Though Chester's characterization as a figure of Western imperialism seems overwrought during interactions like these, it serves as a foil against which Li An meditates on her corporeal responses to this management of language. By returning to this tension throughout, Lim also explores how affective vulnerability to English can, over time, profoundly destabilize an individual's understanding of their racial embodiment in Malaysia.

In response, Li An initially resists the expectation that she should identify with a prescribed culture and its associated language, and explains that she is not teaching culture, but "language, words, images, feelings," which reiterates her perception of English's affective-embodied work (41). She directly critiques Chester's supposed expertise and hegemonic impulses by asking: "Aren't you speaking the English language too? Did you throw it out with your tea bags? How come you don't have your own American language? What would it be? American Indian?" (33). But Chester remains convinced of his insight into what is best for Malaysia's national identity, and his belief that English subverts Malaysian cultural purity. He suggests English should function as a universal language of power insofar as it does not undermine Western readings of non-Western cultures, and, following this, as long as its use is still managed by a particular ideal Western form.

This supposed authority Chester possesses over who should use English continues to shape Li An's embodiment throughout their relationship. While Li An initially associates Chester with colonial authority and British Romanticism, later in their relationship, this body that she "revered" signifies "nothing" (179). In other words, Li An begins to realize the history that subtends the ways that certain bodies signify a dominant relationship with English, while others, including hers, are distanced from its use. Li An then asks herself: "in the authority of such nothingness, how could she continue to believe in its meaning?" (179). Li An's sense of "nothingness" is grounded in Chester's professed desire to remain external to Malaysia's socio-political landscape, even as his supposed appreciation of Malaysian diversity relies on tropes of ethno-racial authenticity that simply reify the nation's racial hierarchy. In this moment, Li An must contend with the limits of the legal and political scripting of these nations' linguistic fields that mediate individual identification with language, but cannot erase the influence of dominant white bodies. Returning to the

allegorical structuring of their relationship—him as the figure of Western imperialism, and Li An as the “new Malaysian”—this discrepancy between their approaches is symbolically underscored by the timing of their tryst, as the night when they become physically intimate is also the night of the race riots. As a result of this relationship, and her conversations with Abdullah and Samad, Li An feels that her life is “an aimless spinning sensation, passive and pushed about by all sorts of people” and that she is “caught in the current” of these authoritative statements (77). Here she finally vocalizes her understanding that she is vulnerable to these competing claims of linguistic authority; she realizes that what she is feeling is her affectability and inability to stabilize her place in the nation’s narrative when her racial identity as Malaysian Chinese remains unrecognized, as does the role that language plays in shaping her conception of her racialized corporeality.

This intensification of Li An’s affectability and linguistic alienation culminates in her move away from both Malaysia and her study of English literature. After her move to hyper-capitalist and rapidly developing Singapore, she becomes an Editor-in-Chief and Communications Director at “BioSyn-Sign” (217). Although Li An’s racial signification shifts from the Malaysian to the Singaporean context, since she is figured as a member of the dominant Chinese race, the influence of dominant Western whiteness continues to affect her, as she has internalized its influence. Years after their meeting, Li An reflects that from “[t]housands of miles away, Chester unwittingly continues to school her in the lessons of growing up. She no longer read significance, merely the act...No ideas but in things” (179). Li An’s tone here reads as markedly different from her once impassioned engagement with social critique, including her lively descriptions of English as a language that shapes individual consciousness and that is woven into her perception of the world and her identity. Her former desire to navigate the affective psychic/embodied role that English played in her life is refigured, as she now uses her study of language as solely a “thing” or tool to her corporate job in Singapore, where English is the nation’s pragmatic lingua franca. This dramatic shift underscores the fracturing of the once intimate relationship she maintained with English to define her sense of self. Rather than use English to connect her to ideas that might help her reconsider Singapore’s rigid racial grid, as she did in Malaysia, she forecloses her former claims to—and identification with—the language. Her new relationship to English is grounded in her internalization of Chester’s sentiments, but also parallels how the state’s attempts to refute personal identification with language acts on a body that defined itself through English’s influence.

It is not until Chester returns to Singapore to forge a relationship with Su Yin that Li An is able to contest the authority that he has continued to hold over a significant part of her racial identity. As she

confronts her past with Chester, she also revisits her disillusionment with her earlier relationship to English, which is enacted through her revived interest in her *Oxford Book of Modern Verse*. As she reconsiders the place that English has in her life, she realizes that “nothing she lived through was finally over,” and experiences a “muse of feelings she thought she had forgotten” (265). Through this emotive return, she symbolically revitalizes the “web” of English that once shaped her corporality and connects her past and present, her dream for Malaysia and the reality of her life in Singapore, her family’s racial complexity and her envisioning of a new future.

This return does not deny how English is still used strategically alongside Malay and Mandarin and other mother-tongue languages to concomitantly mediate these nations’ racial fields. Rather, Lim turns to the ambivalence she identifies in her own relationship to English, and suggests that Li An reclaims English’s ambivalence as a language that helps ground her composite identity, even as it subjects her understanding of her raciality—and her corporeality—to ruptures and revisions. In other words, at a time when the rapid shifts to language policies within both nations remain in an uneasy relationship with the social effects of language during everyday interactions, Lim foregrounds the usefulness of linguistic ambivalence within Singapore, as well as Malaysia. As Powell asserts, “[r]ecognising th[e] duality (indeed, multiplicity) of language, Lim cautions against absolutism on either side...[She] asks readers to reconsider the forgone conclusion of English as only constraining [and] troubles several positions about the constraints of language” (23). In effect, for a body like Li An, whose relationship to language may have been primarily shaped by her academic experience, but is also perceived as an acutely affective problematic mired in her racial embodiment, ambivalence is a potentially powerful position. Like for Lim, this ambivalent relationship to English allows Li An to draw from English language and writing to define her sense of self outside of the linguistic fields associated with her racial background. But, as she discovers through her interactions with Chester, she has no choice but to remain attuned to her vulnerability to its effects, particularly when its (neo)colonial work can be deployed against her.

While English’s pervasiveness is key to its neocolonial work, *Joss and Gold* suggests that its ubiquity means it has always already circulated across imposed ethno-racial lines in both nations. Further, as Li An’s understanding of English indicates, its significance, rather than its codes and conventions alone, can be psychically or mentally rewritten so that it becomes a method of denaturing linguistic hierarchies where English’s dominance is de-emphasized or contested by the state. If Li An—as a woman with access to class mobility through her education and migration—is marked as an affectable racial body whose embodiment can be disrupted through Chester’s imperialistic claims to English, then what results when this type of

racial mediation through language is levied against those more vulnerable to these processes? Lim only gestures toward this possibility in instance where Li An's sense of self is subject to erasure, particularly when Abdullah and Chester use her relationship with English as a method of exerting race-based authority over her subjectivity. Whether its role as a language of hybridity is actually successful is less significant to individuals like Li An. Its importance ultimately lies in how it shapes her embodiment and her intersectional raciality as a Chinese Malaysian in both Malaysia and Singapore.

English in Lim's writing therefore retains its ambivalence as a productive language of composite raciality that resists prescribed mother tongues, and also as a crucial method of racial exclusion that subjects affectable racial bodies to the prescriptive work of dominant Western whiteness. Following Ferreira da Silva's reading of the racial body, unlike the stability of the ideal human form, the affectable racial body signifies certain truths about its vulnerability to problematics like English. As part of this counter-tradition that depends on the cultural capital of writing in English, *Joss and Gold* grapples with the same circulating ideologies that inscribe language's material effects—including the violent fragmenting, and shifting sense of embodiment experienced by particular affectable bodies—and locates these ideologies within the multiracial landscapes of Malaysia and Singapore.

Notes

1. Even in 1965, virtually no Chinese Singaporeans primarily spoke Mandarin at home, and only 60% of Indians used Tamil as their home language.

2. Lim retains ties to Singapore both through her work there and because her mother resided there.

3. Minhao Zeng argues: "It is not that Lim feels her Malaysian world through a Western lens," but that English "help[s] her get close to the things that give texture and depth to her Malaysian experience" (84).

4. Ferreira da Silva focuses on the global writing of blackness, but also considers how other racial groups, including Asian migrants, also experience this affectability (214).

5. Both of these methods of ideological and social whitening signify a "consciousness endowed with the productivity that resulted in the building of modern social spaces in Europe and in the United States" and enable the view that the Brazilian subject would eventually "fulfill a European desire" (234, 238).

6. Adat refers to the unwritten and customary codes of traditional Malay communities.

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