

Floating Languages: Loh's *Breaking the Tongue* and the Consequences of Postcolonial Historical Fiction

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The cover of the first edition of Vyvyane Loh's *Breaking the Tongue* is typical of popular Asian-American historical fiction: the author's name is in both English and Chinese beside a partial Asian face featuring a neutral expression. Below the title, a traditional Chinese opera dancer wields a bamboo stick against a backdrop of incomplete Chinese characters. To be fair, there are some brief references to Chinese opera in Loh's text—mostly in connection to the shrillness of the singing. For example, the protagonist Claude “thinks of the high-pitched shrieks of Chinese opera and shudders” (331). The cover, however, reveals none of Claude's distaste for the performers, instead marketing the novel to Western readers using flagrantly exoticist emblems to emphasize the book's perceived foreignness. As Ursula Kluwick observes, “[f]or the benefit of Western consumption, postcolonial books are translated into the familiar—and unthreatening—category of the exotic. As a result, prospective readers are encouraged by the books' exoticized covers to approach such literature in terms of exotic cliché” (86). This exoticism—what Graham Huggan defines as “a particular mode of aesthetic *perception*” (13)—also translates in historical fiction as escapism. Part of the appeal that Western readers might find in historical fiction of the “Far East” is satisfied by the aesthetic perception of entering a world that is foreign and mysterious.

In his examination of *The Historical Novel*, György Lukács argues that the genre emphasized the progress and disintegration of opposing elements in society through “mediocre” or “middle-of-the-road heroes” and their interactions with extraordinary people in the midst of historical turmoil and a homogeneous vision of history, providing readers with an escape from modern individual life (36, 231). While others have since amended Lukács's vision, the primary elements remain consistent today: readers of historical fiction expect to feel as if they have gained knowledge about historical events or figures, while also being entertained. They embrace the genre's “serious respect for historical accuracy and detail” and feel that the “goal of authors of Historical Fiction is to bring history to life in novel form” (Saricks 291).

The reader's expectations to find information and escapism in historical fiction are magnified in postcolonial literature, which carries the additional weight of exoticism. As Huggan points out, while the postcolonial critical/literary industry encourages “fruitful alliances,” it

can also provide “a rationale for the kind of intellectual tourism that meanders dilettantishly from one place to another in search of ill-thought goals” (2). In keeping with escapist ideals, historical postcolonial fiction can create a protected environment for tourist-readers to encounter and exoticize the Other, employing a rhetoric that allows the tourist industry “to promote and market the myth of innocuous pleasure. Exoticist aesthetics, and the exoticist mythologies from which the tourist industry derives its profits, disguise the real differences they help to cause by appealing to ones of their own imagining” (Huggan 178). Translating this tourist-centric perspective to the genre of historical postcolonial fiction means privileging exoticist aesthetics under the guise of historical “accuracy.”

In fact, while Loh’s novel tells the story of the fall of British Malaya to the Japanese during World War II, the book is far more than simple historical fiction. In this article, I argue that Loh’s text troubles the genre’s conventions by confronting and disrupting reader’s expectations of exoticism and escapism, as well as factual accuracy and authority. The novel incites readers to query the nature and usefulness of historical details to the extent that both historiography and language become inadequate and unreliable. Additionally, responding to exoticism’s power to “render people, objects, and places strange even as it domesticates them” (Huggan 13), the novel confounds escapist impulses by first discomforting readers and then using the discomfort to destabilize the readers’ privilege and demands for complete and domesticated historical narratives. To assess how and why Loh does this, I explore reliability—first in the characters of the protagonist Claude, his friend Han Ling-li, and then in a seemingly minor character known only as the Fifth Columnist. In the first section, I show how Loh’s focus on escape forces readers to contend with their exoticist impulses when reading historical fiction. I then examine Loh’s challenge to reliability as it relates to language and to reader expectations of historical fictions as filling in the gaps of history. Ultimately, through the depiction of these characters, Loh’s novel asks readers—and even writers—of historical fiction to contend with the consequences of their literary interactions, demanding that they assess their motives for turning to this popular genre in the first place.

Reliable Readers: Confessions and Collaborations

Breaking the Tongue joins other historical novels by Malaysian and Singaporean writers that focus on World War II and the Japanese Occupation of Malaya such as Tan Twan Eng’s *The Gift of Rain*, Tash Aw’s *The Harmony Silk Factory*, and Meira Chand’s *A Different Sky*. This trend is certainly not due to there being a sudden surge in Singaporean and Malaysian authors writing in English. Rather, national divisions and controversies related to the use of the English language are prominent in both countries, coinciding with the dearth and suppression of official accounts of the fall of British Malaya to the Japanese, which have slowed literary growth (Quayam 152-4; Tan 66,

Wong 227). Nevertheless, the interconnectedness of Malaysian and Singaporean literatures has also helped both countries contend with their related histories and cultures (Talib 603-4). This shared collective memory is key to understanding the resurgence of historical fiction that takes the horrors of the Japanese Occupation as its starting point. For instance, Ronald Klein contrasts the more nuanced characterizations of Japanese characters in Philippine literature with that of Malaysian and Singaporean literature in order to highlight “the depth of the trauma and the need of writers to expunge their own feelings” (177), while Diana Wong points out that nation-building is the cause of the sudden reemergence of narratives about the war into education and the public consciousness (230). Thus, many of the aforementioned texts create narratives of nation-building that emerge specifically as a reaction to British and Japanese interventions.

Loh’s novel distorts history in order to nuance and critique these narratives, forcing readers to question factual authority and accuracy. At first glance, *Breaking the Tongue* appears to present an accurate and immersive depiction of British and Japanese occupation of Malaya in the 1940s. Or, as Tan contends, the novel “recreates the struggle of the Nanyang Chinese in wartime Malaya to claim the Japanese occupation as a rupture from and catalyst for the articulation of a postcolonial Sinophone Malaysian identity” (68). Certainly, the primary narrative moves between protagonist Claude’s torture by Japanese soldiers and flashbacks to his life as a young man trying to define himself as part of a Peranakan family in Singapore. His identity diverges across two lines representative of the cultural crisis facing people like Claude. On the one hand, Ling-li and his grandmother Siok encourage him to explore his ethnic Chinese roots. On the other hand, his father Humphrey admonishes him to embody all things British, in the hope that the colonizers may regard them as equals (51). In fact, Humphrey goes so far as to bar Claude from learning or speaking any language other than English.

However, the sheer variety of narrative perspectives extends far beyond this Chinese-Anglophone binary to present World War II in Southeast Asia as a complicated web of alliances and adversaries. For example, unbeknownst to Claude, Ling-li is a spy for the British, claiming she prefers their occupation to that of the Japanese, despite her fundamental loyalties towards China (187). Meanwhile, the novel suggests that the British lose their foothold in Malaya partly as a result of their inability to trust and respect their own local Chinese and British spies (128, 353), and their underestimation of the “barely civilised” Japanese forces (161). The story shifts perspectives, adopting the point of view of Singaporean civilians and house servants, British generals, and secret agents and military members representing the interests of Japan, Britain, India, Australia, China, and Malaya itself. Loh’s choice to present a profundity of detail and diversity of perspectives suggests a larger goal of challenging assumptions of reliability and diametric opposition in postcolonial historical texts.

In the middle of this drama is Claude, a character Lukács would call typical and “mediocre” in that he is not a historical figure, but also because Claude lacks any of the remarkable qualities attributed to someone who “makes history.” Far from being charismatic or self-possessed, Claude is timid, often silent, and notoriously unsure of himself. For instance, as a way of minimizing Claude’s reticence with their British guests, the Winchesters, Humphrey excuses his son as being “always in his own head” (94). Humphrey’s justification is actually ineffective with readers, whose insight into Claude’s “head” at this point in the book prove him to be far from confident or heroic, even in the mind space Humphrey believes him to occupy with alacrity. Claude has been agonizing over what to say to their guests and is so preoccupied with his own tentativeness that he is unable to follow basic conversation.

Such a lack of heroic qualities would not move the reader to conclude that Claude is manipulative or decisive, and yet Claude evolves into a character who forms a stronger sense of himself and his ability to deceive others against the backdrop of his persecution. The novel opens with what readers soon realize is the scene of Claude’s torture at the hands of the Japanese, who are incensed with Claude partly because he cannot speak Chinese. When Claude finally realizes that the torturers are demanding that he speak, Claude, as expected, goes silent. The next scene reveals Claude’s method for dealing with the torture and the demands of speech. An announced narrative break in the novel reveals Claude’s usual coping strategy: as his “escape to Bukit Timah” suggests (19), Claude refuses to engage with what is in front of him, instead mentally fleeing to the world of his boyhood before the Japanese attack.

The narrator’s use of the word “escape” is deliberate; the jarring opening pages are fragmented, disorienting, and reveal very little. It is only in retrospect, for instance, that the reader knows the identity of Claude’s torturers and the reasons that they are holding him. All that can be initially surmised from the opening scene is that there is a body—Claude’s body—beaten and bloodied, and in the distance is heard a woman’s scream. Claude’s idea of escape from this disconcerting moment is certainly in line with his evident cowardice. Additionally, in terms of the reader’s experience, escape may be a form of respite from the disorder brought about in the opening scene.

Loh’s reference to the notion of escape plays upon the popular appeal of historical fiction as a way for readers to immerse themselves in worlds that do not resemble their own, to forget their problems and cares by ogling the exotic worries of another. By moving away from the protagonist’s beating, the author allows readers a feeling of relief, but at a psychological cost. In the white space between passages, Claude is left suspended, beaten, without answers. Shown in the next few scenes to be passive and cowardly, Claude’s initial inaction in the face of extreme distress thus indicts the reader’s own desire for escapism and exoticism, mirroring in both instances an unwillingness or inability to deal with the brutalities of Claude’s present torture.

Exoticized escape in this sense becomes a luxury and a privilege, though not in any way valorous or admirable.

In fact, appealing to the exotic connects the reader not only to a cowardly Claude at the novel's opening but also to his companion Jack Winchester, a British outsider whom Ling-li equates with the colonizers, despite Jack's attempts at camaraderie. Towards the end of the novel, Ling-li tells Claude that "Jack can afford to close his eyes, he can afford to turn away. In a few years, it will be over, and he will return to his country, glad and relieved to be home at last. He will be able to put his memories behind him, especially things he did not see. It will be as if they never existed. He and others like him will be able to convince themselves of that" (398). At another point, Ling-li confronts Jack, saying that "this place has never been—and never will be—home to you English.... You refer to this place as if it were a prison to which you've all been exiled... This is a tactical resource, a commercial treasure, one of the jewels of your empire" (289). She reminds Jack that she and Claude do not have the same luxury of escape that the British white man—and, by implication, the reader—enjoy. Jack, meanwhile, exoticizes Ling-li and Malaya, deeming them unworthy of his lasting concern. Ling-li's accusations become justified when Jack's fellow Britons leave the peninsula in the face of inevitable Japanese victory, escaping to their home country. While Jack and Ling-li argue, Claude remembers his former life of school plays, exams, and sports—things he had actually once dreaded—and realizes that he too was privileged with escape, a happy ignorance of the problems outside his compound. His later torture further renders the pleasures of this former life as meaningless extravagance.

By starting the story with this traumatic occurrence in the distant future, Loh challenges the linear way we view and experience history, drawing attention to the narrative assumptions that we impose upon history itself. Starting with Claude's torment and then shifting between the past and the present disrupts the effect of readers seeing Claude's "exotic" boyhood in Bukit Timah as part of a causal relationship to his later torture. In fact, rather than showing how his past has brought him to this moment, the effect is more circular: Claude's torture in the present allows him to see his past in a new light, which in turn influences him and the novel's readers to rethink Claude's current view of himself and his capabilities. He realizes that his sullenness as a child—represented by a moment in his boyhood when he pretends to ignore the servants' chatter so that he can stay, listen, and attempt to interpret—could be dismissed as mere laziness or passivity, but could also be viewed as an active deception. This new sense of agency, wrought in unreliability, causes Claude to decide that he may be able to reenact this deception in order to spare his life, or at least to stave off further agony by "confessing" stories that will spark his jailers to listen.

We can extend this disruption of linearity to history itself. Nonlinear novels like *Breaking the Tongue*—as well as other Asian-American works like Kathleen Tyau's *A Little Too Much is Enough*, and Nora Okja Keller's *Comfort Woman*—establish timelines of their

own, connecting events along trajectories that ignore conventions of place and chronology. Thus, while Stephanie Athey suggests that Loh's novel can give us new insight into the current debates on torture (180), we can also say that more recent occurrences, like the treatment of detainees at Abu Ghraib or the suspension of habeas corpus in Guantanamo Bay, can inform our view of past events such as the treatment of prisoners and acquisition of intelligence surrounding the Fall of Singapore. Claude's approach to his own personal history can therefore influence readers' perception of history at large: while historical postcolonial fiction can tell readers something new about themselves, it can also reveal, from our present space in time, something fresh and different about the past. Despite the book's exoticist cover, it is worth noting that a US-based company published and distributed *Breaking the Tongue*, suggesting that Loh chose to draw the readers' attention to lesser-known aspects of World War II, asking US readers to contemplate intelligence acquisition and national identity now and in the past. Claude's conflicting experiences with both concepts and his revised perspective on his personal history move him to act in ways that incite readers' awareness of their own attitudes to the past.

The torture scene that opens the book begins the text's frame narrative, with many of the remaining passages told as flashbacks meant to resemble Claude's various "confessions" to his persecutors. Claude's recognition of his moment of passivity made rebellious, and his subsequent decision to speak in order to save his life, thus colors the way readers are meant to view both history and the rest of the novel. Claude's Grandma Siok, an avid follower of Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*, reads to him at one point that "all warfare is based on deception" (qtd. in Loh 81). In his merging of fact and fiction via confession, Claude engages in his own form of linguistic and narrative warfare as deception. When Claude decides that he "can make history... Give them what they want, tell everything" (27), he overtly alerts the reader to his unreliability as a narrator.

The phrase "make history" foregrounds construction; the scared and tortured Claude chooses to make *up* history, to perform this "creative task" under his newly authoritative role as "the sudden Possessor of All Memories" (27). As Eddie Tay points out, "the version provided by Claude and Ling-li is, after all, a version" (143). Readers who acknowledge this admitted unreliability must accept that confessions wrought from torture cannot and do not necessarily represent truth (Athey 192). Other historical fiction novels destabilize the idea of truth as Loh does, by presenting multiple narrators. For instance, the three protagonists of Aw's *The Harmony Silk Factory* show their unreliability as narrators by revealing how no one person can access all of the knowledge about one event or issue. Meanwhile, Claude's historical revisionism shows how unreliability may prompt an ethical response in readers. He is, in a sense, multiple narrators in one body: the Claude who is silent and reticent prior to the scene of torture becomes effusive in his so-called confessions in order to escape additional personal harm.

Readers must then also acknowledge that, to the extent that postcolonial historical fiction gives us a window into the past, this past is also similarly unrepresentative of any larger sense of Truth. Thus, passages in Loh's novel start with indicators such as "One version:" or simply "Maybe:" (71, 77) to suggest that, not unlike the Chinese language itself, "meaning is designed by relative position" (90), and that everyone is "exotic" to someone else. In the world of this novel, the term "historical fiction" becomes redundant; all history is a series of "fictions, versions, variations" (35). By adding the designator of "fiction" to their descriptors, novels like Loh's present themselves as straightforward in their constructedness. Readers can thus trust the writing of historical fiction to a degree not as evident in historiography itself; at the least, historical fiction writers are explicit about what Hayden White calls the "narrativity" of their portrayals (1).

While the novel problematizes the notion of historical accuracy, it also destabilizes the very idea of the unreliable narrator in order to further confound readers' use of the novel as a form of exotic escapism. While most unreliable narrators misconstrue aspects of the storyline either out of a deliberate attempt at subterfuge or due to misinformation or lack of information—what Henry James calls "inconscience" (qtd. in Booth 159)—Claude instead is compelled to unreliability by the very nature of confession. As the text disrupts the genre's characteristics of immersion, exoticism, and escapism, the confessional mode of the passages further indicts the reader: Claude's audience includes not only the novel's readers, but the Japanese soldiers as well, who demand more narratives. When a torturer dismissively says that Claude's stories are "all very interesting, but now tell me something more" (184), one gets the sense of an impatient reader or listener wanting satisfying and immediate answers. Claude's response of his own fiction—and history-making—comprises the bulk of the novel, showing that Claude's unreliability as a narrator is brought out by nothing more than the compulsion to narrate at the behest of an insistent and treacherous audience. Or, to put it another way, the seemingly exotic Japanese soldiers—alongside readers who keep the book open—demand that the story continue. Thus, Loh's readers implicitly buy into (or even require) the intrinsic unreliability of the narrator, as well as his own sense of self-marginalization. Just as the modifier "historical" in "historical fiction" becomes redundant within the world of the book, the idea of the narrator as "unreliable" becomes superfluous. Because Claude is forced to narrate under these conditions, his narration can be nothing but unreliable.

If the reader of *Breaking the Tongue* is not already perturbed by association with a privileged colonizing force, the narrator structures the torture itself in order to further discomfit the reader and preclude any notions of exoticism or escapism. Told in the second person, the torture scenes reveal a split between Claude the Body and "you"—evidently Claude the Mind. Thus in that first scene, "you look at yourself, your broken arm, your bloody face, the caved-in ribs, and you almost feel sorry.... Tell me, you want to say. Tell me why you're doing this, why this urge to hurt, to maim.... The Body gives no

answers" (18). Any relief the reader may derive from the realization that the "you" in this scene does not appear to be the "you" of the reader is dispelled in a later scene where that "you" becomes legion. This litany of the "you" representing "an entire people all at once"—the laborers, Claude, Ling-li, Claude's mother, gangsters in Chinatown, and others (32)—rejects the notion of "you" as solely representing Claude's mind separated from his body via the trauma of torture, as a split between the colonizer and the colonized, or as a single idea of an exotic self who does not resemble the reader. Instead, the "you" becomes "the sometime Voice of a confused and cantankerous city... witness to all that brought about the fall of the city, the many and petty English foibles that have changed the course of history. Or obeyed it" (32). Riffing on Homi K. Bhabha, E.K. Tan points to the unsettling nature of the "you" as "not an actual participant but... caught between Claude the Body and the omnipresent narrator. He is almost Claude, but not really" (57-8). Claude's confession thus constitutes a narration that is unreliable, whereas the "you" occupies a narrative perspective that is omniscient and multifarious, transcending language and occupying minds (105). In that sense, the "you," or what is later called the "myriad you's" (404), become as closely aligned with the reader as they are with Claude the Body, an active witness of what the narrator is willing to reveal.

Despite its confrontational nature, this "you" that Loh invokes establishes the closest connection between her fiction and the reader. If the alignment of the reader with "exotic" torturers or colonizers is meant to alienate or distance, the "you" is further meant as a covenant, a contract by which reader and writer can reach common ground. Unsurprisingly, Loh finds that common ground in language. In the end, Claude finally confronts his site of torture. Inadvertently likening himself to Jack, Claude the Body formerly believed: "You can't change the world, but you can choose to see what you want of it. Disregard the rest" (316). However, in these concluding scenes, after allowing himself to learn Chinese, Claude finally opens his eyes to Ling-li's account of her own torture. The "you" implicated as witness reemerges through a common vocabulary, with Ling-li asking, "If you won't witness this, who will?... If you won't remember and record this, who will? This is how our history starts and is transmitted, Claude. Witness and transmission of Story. 事实的见证和传述是历史" (398). The role of witness, shared here by Claude and the reader, becomes central to history and the story, and integral to both is language. Interspersing English and Chinese, now both understood by Claude, does not signal the beginning of truth, something we have already established as unattainable. While the Chinese characters in the passage can be translated to mean, "History is the witnessing of the truth and its transmission," the fusion of words calls for "another language" that allows one to "outwrite death" (405).

Loh's intermingling of Chinese and English implies that this other language must first recognize the violent colonialist origins of English itself. In the concluding pages, Ling-li reveals to Claude details of her

own torture in both Chinese and English, of which the quoted passage is only a conservative example. The passage, beginning in English, expands to include gradually contextualized Chinese phrases, and finally evolves into whole paragraphs of untranslated text (398-401). Ling-Li's refusal to translate for Claude and the reader—what Julia Lovell calls a “linguistic blockade” (n.p.)—draws attention to the limits of reader knowledge when confronting any postcolonial historical fiction. In other words, the novel's language suggests that all of us are “exotic,” or none of us are. To truly understand the whole of the scene as it is presented, readers of English must literally learn another language or connect with someone else fluent in language, knowledge, history, and experience. Claude's strenuous efforts at the conclusion to learn Chinese illustrate this necessity quite well; Claude finds the means by which to begin healing from both his physical and emotional convalescence through his language lessons.

The bilingual pages further draw readers' attention to their membership among a larger network of readers around the world, some of whom will have a vastly different experience of the text than others. While he does not provide a direct translation, Philip Holden reveals that the untranslated sections include, among other things, a candid description of Ling-li's genital mutilation at the hands of the torturers (n.p.), something that readers of Chinese would be able to comprehend more clearly than others. Loh, who refuses to provide a translation for the section, here adds to the discomfort of readers who do not understand the Chinese language. If the novel's content associating readers with exotic Japanese torturers and British colonizers is not enough to suggest escapism as an inferior reason for reading historical fiction, the untranslated sections force readers to consider the link between colonization, exoticization, and language—to get a sense of the marginalization experienced by others for whom English is not a first language. Speaking of the linguistic choices of African writers, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o does not censure the use of English, but rather “lament[s] a neo-colonial situation which has meant the European bourgeoisie once again stealing our talents and geniuses as they have stolen our economies” (xii). The theft which Ngũgĩ finds represented in and by language is in Loh's text literalized as a theft of the body—of Ling-li's mutilation and Claude's trauma—told in a language other than the one in which the book is primarily written.

Claude's ability to finally understand Chinese, and his subsequent recognition that he will need to know more than his “native tongue” to understand his history (398), further inaugurate a new relationship with the “you” in the story. Discussing the interplay of memory and trauma, Sally McWilliams notes, “what non-Mandarin readers come to understand is that knowledge can only ever be produced and transmitted across and through differences, across and through the conjoining of the past with the present” (157). Indeed, at the end of the novel, Claude is finally able to invoke the “you” at will, accessing previously disregarded parts of his memory. The newfound ability marks a union between Claude the Body and the “you,” suggesting

that, in order to achieve a similar understanding, the reader must collaborate with the author to work towards the new language to which Claude refers in the novel's conclusion. Readers—witnesses of Claude's aspiration for knowing this other language—must also make themselves over to not avert their eyes in the face of vivid torture, and to be aware of the unreliability of the many versions of history they may encounter in this and other texts.

Minding the Gaps

Loh's passages and vignettes—Claude's flashbacks, but also accounts from the points-of-view of British and Japanese soldiers and spies, laborers, servants, and other working-class citizens of multiple ethnicities and nationalities, Ling-li, Jack, and other characters—mimic the attempts of postmodern historical narratives to create the appearance of authenticity by presenting a sense of truth-told scope. However, by meditating on unreliability in language, Loh compels readers to be suspicious of this technique. Notably, the numerous storylines are often left open and without closure. The reader is introduced to characters who may never reappear, are sometimes unnamed, and appear unrelated to the “main” narrative threads.

Some characters are introduced primarily for context and emotional effect. We can see an example of this practice in the unnamed “Indian girl” who appears on only one page of the novel, a witness who finds herself in the middle of Free India protests and the subsequent police retaliation. The passage gives readers a glimpse of other ethnic identities vying for acknowledgment and assistance in this time period as well as an example of someone like Claude who is disoriented in a world where “usually there are no ambiguities” (298). At the same time, however, the narrative function of the girl and the passage is foreclosed; it is unclear whether the white soldiers (the presumed “they” referenced at the end of the passage) assault the girl, or whether she does indeed make it home.

The effect of such hit-and-run characterizations and encounters is dizzying, as readers are unsure which characters and plotlines will resurface in the course of the novel. Another representative example is the character (and real-life historical figure) Air Marshal Sir Robert Brooke-Popham, who appears on page 36, and then only reappears once again on page 144. Brooke-Popham exists on the sidelines of the novel as one of many recurring but infrequent signs of the disorienting militaristic world outside of Claude's experiences. Aside from self-conscious verisimilitude, the effect of such techniques is twofold: first, given the reminders of the imperfections of their *own* memories through the course of reading, readers are further encouraged to distrust the reliability of historical memory and accounts, whether these are forced confessions or willful remembrances. The mind can only hold so much information, and the vastness of Loh's cast of characters ensures that someone or something will flit only temporarily in readers' memories. Secondly, the lack of clarity over

which characters and situations are important to remember demand that readers assess their own inclinations to automatically sympathize with the protagonist. By keeping the identities of the central characters ambiguous for the opening half of the book, Loh leaves readers to conclude that either every character is important, or none of them are important. If every person is the protagonist of his or her own life, then Loh's inclusions of apparently minor storylines throughout the text emphasize this dispersed centrality.

Loh also addresses the tendency of historical fiction readers to depend on these works to fill in the gaps of history, or offer alternatives to the stories told to us in school, while at the same time making these histories more personal and relevant. Hayden White writes about the narrativity we impose on our reality and history—an inclination to storytelling not always supported by the historical annals he cites. For example, looking at a period of time from 709-734, White notes multiple years in which apparently nothing of note was recorded, while recorded events themselves “seem merely to have occurred... There are too many loose ends – no plot in the offing – and this is frustrating, if not disturbing, to the modern reader's story expectations as well as his desire for specific information” (7-8). While narrative in nature, we can thus read the loose ends of many of Loh's vignettes as a critique on the inclinations of historical fiction readers and writers to impose discrete teleological narratives upon history that fully describe both the individual and the movements surrounding the individual.

In contrast, Loh dares readers to leave the gaps of history unfilled and undetailed, and maybe even to embrace the gaps themselves. By doing so, we readers make the blank spaces between passages manifest in understanding historical events, and honor the impossibility of narrative and language to capture history's full spectrum. Doing so is in direct contrast to the attempts that both the British and Japanese made to control public memory and understanding of events through commemorations and other forms of public narrative, methods which Wong states were next taken up by Singapore in order to formulate a new national identity in their wake (234). Having reverence for the unexplained historical spaces constitutes part of the new language that Loh, in collaboration with her readers, hopes to create in order to destabilize these official narratives.

Readers are not the only ones asked to change their methodology when it comes to historical fiction. While Claude's unreliable storytelling disrupts narrative authority and historical accuracy, the novel introduces another unreliable character who, I argue, represents Loh's alter ego, a recorder of history and story who signifies a direct commentary on the dangers and responsibilities of writing. The unnamed Fifth Columnist spies for the Japanese, providing them with regular reports on the Youth Leaders of the Relief Fund, a group whose membership includes Ling-li. Ostensibly, the Columnist's reports lead to Jack, Claude, and Ling-li's capture by Japanese soldiers. The Fifth Columnist recognizes that receiving pay for every disclosed name can lead to dishonesty, but she initially takes pride in the accuracy of her reports, which are the most detailed of the

columnists. Despite her own directives from the Japanese, she begins—out of jealousy over a male youth leader who tries to win the attention of a disinterested Ling-li—to focus her research and reports on Ling-li herself, whom she bitterly calls “Miss Competence.” When these distractions cause her to fall behind on her work, the Fifth Columnist decides to combine fact with fiction to maintain her own appearance of competence and to give her reports a semblance of thoroughness and completion (77, 81). For example, one report names a store near Ling-li’s clinic. The store and store owner’s names—the only genuine facts from this report—are combined with more scintillating details of Ling-li’s receipt of a mysterious parcel, proving in the Fifth Columnist’s mind how the “building blocks of fictions are always more satisfying when cemented with facts” (126). It is no coincidence that this description of technique resembles elements of historical fiction, and even of Claude’s unreliable confessions. By focusing on real settings and events, as well as including characters who were actual players in the drama (British army captain Patrick Heenan being the most famous example), Loh herself practices what the Fifth Columnist relishes as “the art of the blend” (227)—that is, the inclusion of just the right amount of facts interspersed with fiction to justify the generic marker of “historical fiction” in readers’ minds.

The portrayal of the Fifth Columnist is both a self-indictment and a self-defense of writers in the genre. The Fifth Columnist—and by association, Loh herself—extol the power, honor, and danger of historical fiction writing, showing that fiction has the capacity for both good and evil, and destabilizing the factual authority of historical accounts. It is no coincidence that the storytellers of Loh’s novel—Claude and the Fifth Columnist, but also Claude’s Grandma Siok, Jack (his embrace of George Orwell’s *Burmese Days* in turn affects his view of Claude and others), and Ling-li herself—all recognize the real and potential impact of stories. They see that stories can change minds over to a different way of thinking or can provide information that may expose treason and other war-related intelligence, regardless of whether that intelligence is honest or not. By the end of the novel, Claude, Ling-li, and the Fifth Columnist come to learn that the stories they tell about themselves and others can be hazardous and potentially life-altering, revealing storytellers’ power and responsibility.

What sets Loh and the Fifth Columnist apart are their attitudes about and towards readers. Initially, the Fifth Columnist—brightened by her new creative approach to her profession—valorizes her work even above that of the life-saving nurse Ling-li. The Columnist trusts that “nothing compared to this task of writing, of composing a life out of humdrum instances. No public acts of heroism, no forced compassion or moments of glory. Every word typed out in seclusion like some clandestine birth. It’s a lonely vocation” (302). Her reverence for her job’s loneliness embodies the kind of writing that Loh works against. Part of the Fifth Columnist’s viewpoint has to do with the nature of her occupation; her immediate audience is not meant to know the work involved in her invention. The Japanese military expect her reports to be fluid, appear effortless, and not have an

evident authorial voice. Her version of historical recording thus requires that no one knows of her creation's imposed narrativity and that she strike the balance of "[j]ust so much fiction in that many facts" (227) in order to herself appear invisible—a defining factor of many texts in popular historical fiction. Loh offers up her own text—which showcases the creative process both through Claude's unreliability and through the Fifth Columnist's own acts of creation—as a counter to this generic structure.

Actually, through the novel's crowded cast of characters and its deliberate engagement with the creative process and reader-text interactions, Loh shows how the writing of historical fiction should be far from a lonely vocation. The text implies that the Fifth Columnist herself begins to recognize this when, in an instance of free indirect thought, she is shown to consider "[t]he point of convergence: of history and fiction, of one mind and another, of what's real and what's imagined, of Fifth Columnist and—" (323). The sentence, left open-ended, invites the reader to collaborate with Loh by guessing how it ends. The immediate answer, as provided by the main subject of the next passage, would be Ling-li. Indeed, in terms of ulterior professions (if not employers), attitude towards men, and even race and gender, Ling-li and the Fifth Columnist have a lot in common, despite their obvious conflicts of interest. However, they do differ in intentionality and effect, revealing what for Loh may be the prime considerations for all storytellers. While Ling-li is sometimes partial in her attitudes towards the Japanese and British (198-200), her personality and her principal training as a nurse lead her to focus on the health of others (as opposed to herself), and to work from a place of care.

In contrast, the army of Fifth Columnists as a whole is reported as releasing "fear... like a poison, leak[ing] noxious gases into the atmosphere" (156). Our Fifth Columnist specifically engages in written embellishments for selfish reasons. When, after being injured, she seeks treatment from Ling-li, the writer is delighted to observe her subject up close and feels none of the guilt that one would think might come from someone whose own fanciful writings lead to Ling-li's death. In fact, at the same meeting, she meets both Jack, whom she regards as "harmless," and Claude whom she finds "boring and unappealing—just the thing to keep her records realistic and balanced" (329). Despite her lack of interest in Claude and Jack, her need to create believable embellishments lead to their capture and torture. The Fifth Columnist is later revealed to have familiarity with Chinese, a language in which "all statements are colored by the Subjunctive. Possibilities, suppositions. It's a language she fully exploits in her reports" (337). Through the Fifth Columnist's form of historical fiction, Loh shows the subjunctive as having real consequences within her created world. She uses her novel to draw attention to the unreliability, not only of the intelligence-derived torture highlighted by Athey, but also of spying and other forms of covert intelligence acquisition, historical fiction, and other historical accounts. Loh appears to ask readers: if a commingling of history and fiction—in the hands of a novice, no less—has the power to cause this level of

destruction, what effect can historical fiction have when shifted toward more productive objectives?

We can extend the Fifth Columnist's unreliability to view the process of historical recording itself as simply a matter of unavoidable bias wrought by the very nature of story and language. To borrow from Shaw, "[i]f you focus on one part of the spectrum... you will neglect others" (175). The Fifth Columnist's preoccupation with Ling-li, brought on by the most juvenile of excuses, leads her to concentrate her attention on Ling-li at the expense of intelligence about other individuals or groups. Similarly, while a multitude of writers have written about Singapore during the Japanese invasion, adding to what Karl Hack and Kevin Blackburn call a "never-ending post-mortem" of the historical moment (131), the facts they include and the sources from which they derive those facts inevitably influence the historical narratives that they tell. Holden notes that Peter Elphick's 1993 and 1995 studies on Singapore, cited in Loh's bibliography, privilege the British perspective as opposed to the ethnic Chinese or Malaysian perspective. Unfortunately, many other books on the Fall of Singapore, including Peter Thompson's *Battle for Singapore*, Alan Warren's *Britain's Greatest Defeat: Singapore 1942*, and Noel Barber's classic *Sinister Twilight*, share this inclination. As possible alternatives to Elphick, Holden suggests James Francis Warren's *Rickshaw Coolie: A People's History of Singapore 1880-1940*, which shows colonial Singapore through the eyes of Chinese immigrant rickshaw pullers, and Brenda Yeoh's *Contesting Space in Colonial Singapore*, which looks at the way British forces designed Singapore's very infrastructure to conflict with the lifestyles and value systems of the city's Asian communities.

It is notable that both Warren and Yeoh's accounts, as well as more personal remembrances of the era by writers such as the first Prime Minister of the Republic of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew, differ in focus and perspective from the other texts. (Loh told Robert Birnbaum in an interview that Yew's biographies influenced some aspects of her own novel.) These divergent viewpoints give us insight into the spectrum of stories and perspectives that the texts hope to cover. For example, while possibly providing, of the former group above, the widest range of viewpoints and eyewitness accounts, Thompson boldly subtitles his text *The True Story of the Greatest Catastrophe of World War II*. Aside from the attention-getting word, "greatest," the claims for truth and the suggestion that Thompson holds the monopoly on that truth (the book claims to be *the* true story, and not one of many possibilities) show the fallibility of historical writings that fail to foreground the constructed nature of their narratives, and the impulse of marketing trends to cater to that fallibility. In a commentary on the field of historical writing in general, we can note, too, that Elphick's work, along with that of Warren, Thompson, and Barber, was released by London-based publishing companies, while many of Yew's texts and the studies by Yeoh and Warren were first published in Singapore. The split along national lines shows an obvious interest in history seen from the perspective of the countries publishing the work. Historical

fiction, often relegated to a subgenre of fiction and/or historical writings, in contrast oftentimes shows its ability to cross these lines of affiliation.

The appeal of a novel about an Anglicized Chinese boy in World War II Singapore to an American publisher becomes apparent once we consider the varied audiences of historical fiction. As Saricks notes, avid readers of historical fiction may seek out specific time periods (for example, World War II), geographical regions (like the Asia Pacific), or historical figures on which to focus their entertainment, displaying a range of interests far beyond those of specialized audiences of investigative studies like the ones mentioned above (Saricks 289-90). But with the wider audience, Loh seems to argue, comes greater responsibility.

Even after the Fifth Columnist receives characteristically efficient and effective care from Ling-li, and even after she realizes that “no amount of investigative work could yield” wholly accurate and useful reports, she cannot stop writing the words that lead to the disasters opening Loh’s novel—Claude’s torture as well as Ling-li’s screaming from her own torture and mutilation nearby (240, 337). However, the implied narrator, who may in this instance be Claude or Loh herself, gives readers a hint of how the Fifth Columnist could have changed her words over to a different effect: “Chinese is a language that floats,” the narrator states. “No tenses, no moods, no declensions or inflexions, syntax malleable. Read left to right it can mean one thing, right to left another. A Chinese character is flexible...an actor comfortable in all parts” (90). While the focus here is on Chinese, the passage—only a paragraph long and surrounded by white space—reveals the nature of this other, adaptable language that best functions when readers and writers work together, actively assessing the motives and intentions behind their work, presenting both with honesty and flexibility, and working from a place of care.

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