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Forging National Identity through Iconic Landscapes: Poetic Cartography of Edwin Thumboo

Prof. Nina Caldeira*

Abstract

Landscapes, both natural and built, however timeless they may appear, like the evolving nature of identity, evolve, and even those few structures which are retained for heritage value are subject to periods of prominence in historical periods. As a practice in planning, design, management, and nurturing of the built and natural environment, landscape is closely connected to national identity. It is invested with cultural processes and is therefore, a discursive construct through mediations and meditations. It is not only a geographical but also an aesthetic concept produced through memories, visualizations, imaginations and myriad modalities such as painting, poetry, prose, photography and the like. Landscape becomes an affective bond between people and the land and is therefore, an icon of identity.

This paper investigates how the evolving landscape of the city-state of Singapore reflects the evolving national identity of Singapore from being a Third-World shipping and manufacturing centre to being a Global city of finance, knowledge and innovation, on into the cyber present. It investigates how the evolution is reflected in the poems of the Singaporean poet, Edwin Thumboo, an eye-witness poet-cartographer who has lived through the times and has witnessed the momentous changes in the city-state.

Keywords: National Identity, Landscape, Poetic Cartography, Memoryscape, Global Urbansim.

Introduction

Gaining independence from the colonial rule in 1959 and being ejected from the Malaysian Union in 1965 after a brief merger, Singapore had to stand alone, challenged with the task of forging a new nation and a new identity. The city-state was challenged with incorporating and assimilating diverse peoples and their cultures into its body-politics like all other culturally plural states. The geographical space of Singapore had to be foregrounded on the idea of a multiracial level playing field, right from the time of its inception.

The 1970s and 1980s saw the rapid urbanization of the natural landscape and by 1988, 49% of the land was built up to suit commerce and industrialization. At the same time, the Government made efforts to build parks and gardens by planting ornamental trees and plants to the extent that Singapore came to be known as a Garden-city.

The transformation is echoed in many of Edwin Thumboo's poems. The poet could not help writing about nature being born on a tropical island originally covered by rainforest and fringed with mangrove swamps, lagoons and estuaries. Some of his poems speak about the tropical landscape but many of his poems are based on the

places vivid in his memories, the remembered emotional heartlands, but now transformed by the modernizing forces. Some other poems are certainly nostalgic. Yet, some others reflect the cosmopolitan architecture of the city- state as a global city. If Thumboo has written a poem like 'Little India' and 'Arts House, Smith Street, Chinatown,' he has also written poems such as 'Ulysees by the Merlion' and the 'Double-Helix Promenade.' Tropical landscape, cosmopolitan and modern architecture, all reflect in his poetry.

Widely regarded as the unofficial poet laureate of Singapore, Edwin Thumboo has had a versatile professional profile. He worked in the civil service for nine years before he could join the National University of Singapore. From 1957 to 1961, he worked in the Income Tax Department and from 1961 to 1965, for the Central Provident Fund Board. From there, Thumboo moved on to serve in the Singapore Telephone Board where he remained till 1966.

His excellence in civil service is proven by the fact that he was awarded the *Bintang Bakti Masyarakat* (Public Service Star) in 1981 and the *Pingat Jasa Gemilang* (Meritorious Service Medal) in 2006. His excellence in Literature, Culture and Academics is proven by the fact that he bagged the National Book Development Council of Singapore Book Awards for Poetry in 1978, in 1980 and in 1994, the inaugural S.E.A. award in 1979, the first Cultural Medallion for Literature in the same year, the ASEAN Culture and Communication Award for Literature in 1987, the Raja Rao Award in 2002 and Yakir Tarbut Israel Award in 2006.

Thumboo is an Emeritus Professor at the National University of Singapore since 1998 and has the distinction of being the first and the longest- serving Dean of NUS (1980-1991). He was instrumental in the creation of a Singaporean literature in English. As one of the pioneers of English Literature in Singapore, he has been keenly involved in the literary development of the nation. He has compiled and edited some of the first anthologies of English poetry and fiction from Singapore. His own collection of poetry include *Rib of Earth* (1956), *Gods Can Die* (1977), *Ulysses by the Merlion* (1979), *A Third Map* (1993), *Still Travelling* (2008), *The Best of Edwin Thumboo* (2012), *A Gathering of Themes* (2018). Thumboo is also to be credited with conceptualizing the first National Poetry Festival for Singapore in 2015. He is veritably 'the *pater familias* of English poetry' (Patke 8).

While Singaporean literature is written in four official languages, namely, English, Chinese, Malay and Tamil, the current paper addresses the Anglophone poetry of Singapore and its contribution towards the making of national literature especially in the wake of Singapore making English the main official working language and medium of education in 1979.

Thumboo can be said to belong to the first generation of Singaporean writers along with other poets such as Arthur Yap, Goh Poh Seng, Lee Tzu Pheng who wrote immediately after independence in 1965. The major concerns of the first generation of Anglophone poets was development of a national literature and capturing the process of nation formation. In so far as their poems reflected the history, polity and culture of

Singapore they created Singaporean literature albeit infusing English with the local idiom, a symptomatic feature of postcolonial literature. Poets belonging to the later generation are often self-reflexive focussing on cosmopolitanism and transnationalism. Singapore has been travelling. In the words of Rajeev Patke,

Singapore has travelled through the burgeoning legacies of Raffles, through the dark and tense years of Japanese Occupation, through the wrenching separation from the Malayan mainland, to the transformation of an island economy into a modern, multi-cultural nation treading the cautious path to modernity, ever changing as it participates in the circulation of global energies and economies, always still travelling (Patke 8).

Landscape and Memoryscape

As an eye-witness poet cartographer who has lived in the pre and post-independent days of Singapore, Thumboo records places of Singapore from the days of *kampongs* to the high-rise buildings. Many of his poems are documentaries of places, memoirs of the spirit of old Singapore. Thumboo's landscape poetry can be classified into those reflecting on the pre-developmental rural stage and the latter, reflecting on urbanized Singapore. With people's attachment and bonding, landscape assumes a definite meaning. It is this world of meaning that the poet engages with. Thumboo's poem 'The Road' is certainly representative of an iconic terrain: "A walk from parking lot to Dreanery:/The slope is pleasing, trees and shrubs/Look ruminant//Outside, bougainvilleae seek/Assurance between red and pink" (lines 13-20). As an affective bond between people and the land, the poet has dedicated many a poem on the landscape of Singapore, giving it a distinctive character. Man and nature speak to each other in some of his poems. In 'Singapore River, 1962,' the river speaks to the poet: "You have seen me, time and again, in painting/sketch, and passing glance" (lines 1-2). The poem 'Yeo Landscape' addresses the landscape painter, Thomas Yeo: "For you, dear Thomas, colour/and shape are lyrical, discreet./ Nature's shifting calculi /Of skies accosting hills, echo/ Along receiving valleys, up/ Interlacing slopes, enriching/ The `nuance of a waterfall" (lines 1-7).

Probably, the poem 'Evening by Batok Town' maps an iconic landscape drawn from the poet's memory, having lived in the town and seeing its development from a mining quarry to the Bukit Bakot nature park which was redeveloped as Little Guilin. The poet feels nostalgic as his memory anoints earlier days. The town is invested with attachments from multiracial and multicultural peoples. Thumboo writes:

*La Cha about to quantum
Leap; a grey-gold dragon transmutes
Receding blue into flared vermilion as
Its claws etch the first stars. Further
East, Krishna's chariot stands resplendent
While Arjuna, cleansed of doubt, now arms,
Reluctantly (lines 14-20).*

The changing landscape of Bukit Bakot witnessed by three generations “These shifting runes/that touched my father, now my son”(lines 22-23), to “Bukit Batok topped by radar; MRT accompanying Avenue 5; Four-point blocks, JC, food-centre” (lines 25-27), suggests modernizing of the region from green slopes of hills to “high-rise and high-way,/The new breed in search of /Gleaming jobs, the computer-mind”(lines 44-46).

The changing landscape is also suggestive of the changing character of the city-state, from being a Third World to being a First World city-state.

Landscape images are also thought of as one way in which the social history and distinctiveness of a group of people is objectified through references to the physical settings. The history of these landscape images, therefore, parallels the history of nation formations. Landscape visualization reinforces the link between history and the state, giving the state a definite historical materiality.

The identifying paradigmatic poet such as Edwin Thumboo, locates landscape as an icon, as a perceptual geography. Thumboo's evocation of geography is best seen in his poem 'Cough of Albuquerque.' The distinct durian-hot terrain is unmistakably recognizable.

*No – just durian-hot,
Lallang trimmed by fire.
Iguana far from ooze
Creepers loose their coil
Merbak, mateless on the branch,
Nonya bought her fan
To milk the little shade (lines 65-71).*

However, the poem is not a mere romanticization of an idyllic landscape. It is invested with Singapore's colonial history and an affirmation of a new beginning for the city-state, free from imperial powers.

*The cough of Albuquerque,
Wind stiff with remorse:
A new beginning touch my shoulder (lines 158-160).*

Place is invested with power as it is place wherein identity is constituted. In his long poem 'Bukit Panjang: Hill, Village, Town' Thumboo records the historical events of the nation that he experienced residing in Bukit Panjang. The national, regional and the personal coalesce. The poet witnessed the transition of Bukit Panjang from a hill to a village to a satellite town. The soul of the land and the soul of its peoples are intertwined. Thumboo uses multi-lingual images to represent the multi-ethnic community comprising the Chinese, Malay, Tamil and Eurasian in 'Bukit Panjang: Hill, Village, Town III’

*English bounces off the wall; Chinese via PRs;
Tamil chanted between pealing temple bells.
Days start with Majula Singapura, shared
By long cherished neighbours: Kum
Kit-Fatmah, Cecil-Thana, James-Lee Fah,*

And others on this walk with you, sub-city (lines 80-82)

Negotiating between multiple cultures, the poet taps the potential of multilingual images and symbols. Many key cultural forms and social practices that contribute to sense of identity are profoundly territorial-

We locate ourselves with reference to a nation, region, city, neighborhood; we use concepts of class, race or ethnicity that imply certain correspondence between the members of groups and localities or points of origin...For a number of writers the dynamics of modernity and the processes of modernization (the two not necessarily coinciding) have led by the disruption and dislocation, but also to the reaffirmation, of such place-based identities (Negus and Velázquez 331).

A sense of disruption and dislocation coupled with a strong reaffirmation resonates in most of Thumboo's poetry, for the poet is aware that the change is not merely inevitable but essential. He had to yield to nature and nature had to yield to the sculpted topography. The pull between love for nature on one hand and dedication to its progress on the other, find a balance. His poems mirror this 'double -vision.' In 'Renovation' he writes: "I want to feel pure the wind/Glazed by dark narrating shadows/Among casuarinas tempered by sea-salt//To hold the village in my mouth" (lines 1-15). The sense of place is complex and linked with people's lived experiences, memories, histories, battles, political struggles, folklore, myths, cultural icons and all events that took place in the particular place.

Cultural Heritage Landscape

While late nineteenth and twentieth centuries valorized heritage as the mythical past, the shift in focus since 1980s has been more on heritage as a cultural practice. Post 1980s, witnessed a shift in understanding and using the past. Heritage began to include both the tangible and intangible aspects of a culture. It gained paramount significance in the construction of the cultural identity of a region and began to be seen as a dynamic design which entails a voyage into the past to see its continuity in the present. "Heritage is a new mode of cultural production in the present that has recourse to the past" (Gimblett 369). It is a way of giving a second life to sites or ways of life. "Heritage is a cultural process which engages with acts of remembering that work to create ways to understand and engage with the present" (Smith 2). Heritage should be the subject of active public reflection, debate, and discussion. What is worth saving? What can we, or should we, forget? What memories can we enjoy, regret, or learn from? Who owns "The Past" and who is entitled to speak for past generations? Active public discussion about material and intangible heritage-of individuals, groups, communities, and nations is a valuable facet of public life in the multicultural world ("What is Heritage"). The process of protecting, of "adding value" speaks on and to the present, even if it does so in terms of past. (Gimblett 370). The business of heritage is to conserve and interpret the past for both, the sake of the present and the future. Bojan Djuric believes that the effect of the past on the present takes place in the field of archaeology discernible in the sphere of creating new

meanings, new knowledge, and new monuments explaining the past and renovating the present and therefore the demand to open archaeology to the public based on the right to know one's past (Djuric 26-27).

It is in such a cultural practice patented in its cultural icons and evidenced in its archaeology, architecture, historical sites, natural landscapes, practices of social value such as heritage art and folk practices, are conserved. Heritage interpretation is performed at historic sites, museums, art galleries, parks, botanical garden and the like, and its modalities may include guide walks, discourses, exhibits, heritage performances, art festivals all of which collectively transform a location into destination, most often for tourist attraction.

Most colonial administration fostered a system of heritage protection. The post 1980s shift in focus can be largely attributed to the rise of Postcolonialism and Postmodernity. As Marie Louise Sorensen and John Carman sum up,

Postcolonialism made it possible to recognize new voice and increased appreciation of alternative claims about the past, including challenging controls over access and representations...post-structuralism and post-modernity inspired critique of knowledge claims and authority...Our relationship to and practice of 'heritage' shifted from being taken-for-granted field of meanings and practices to becoming an area of calling out for investigation and analysis aiming to understand how heritage becomes constituted, what it is and does, and how different groups engage with it (Sorenson and Carmen 17).

In 'Discourse of Heritage' Smith focuses on the discursive nature of heritage and asserts that it is not so much a 'thing' as a set of values and meanings. "Heritage" is therefore ultimately a cultural practice, involved in the construction and revaluation of a range of values and understanding (Smith 11). The discourse takes its clues from the grand narratives of nation-building. Smith links the origin of the dominant heritage discourse with development of nineteenth century nationalism and liberal modernity.

'Preserve the past, ensure the future' (line 33) asserts the poet in his poem 'The National Library, nr Dhoby Ghaut, Singapore.' While the National Museum of Singapore tells stories of Singapore dating back to 1849, the Asian Civilisation Museum showcases the cultural heritage of China, Southeast Asia, South Asia and West Asia. The Peranakan Museum showcases the Peranakan culture of mixed Chinese and Malay/Indonesian culture. Singapore Art Museum showcases contemporary visual arts. The intangible cultural heritage most notably the Hawker Culture which developed from Street Food Culture has been recognized by UNESCO as Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity on Dec 16, 2020. The tropical Botanical Garden is The First World Heritage site of Singapore recognized by UNESCO in 2015. The Indian Heritage Centre, the National Gallery, Art Gallery and other centres recognized by the Heritage Board of Singapore resonate in Thumboo's poems which are memoirs of Singapore's cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible. In poems like 'Little India' or 'Arts House, Smith Street, Chinatown,' Thumboo uses monuments to speak of the past and their relevance to the present. In 'National Library, nr Dhoby

Ghaut, Singapore' the poet speaks of the amalgamation of the west and the east in the city-state: "Who could have known/ this edifice, this heart,/ humming with the voice of Western ages,/ Was there, waiting beyond our/ Father's hopes and Eastern dreams."(lines 1-5). Dragon, Krishna's gopis, Warring Alexander, Confucius, Buddha, Christ and Muhammed reflect a landscape which is a testament to multicultural co-existence.

La Cha irritates the Dragon

King and a lesson

While sporting softly with the gopis,

Krishna makes a garden bloom

Warring Alexander starts his Asian tour,

Where Confucius, Buddha, Christ,

Muhammed urge the betterment of Man (lines 23-29)

The traditional architecture seen in Little India and China Town includes vernacular Malay houses, local hybrid shop houses and black and white bungalows, worship places of different ethnic and religious communities and the colonial, civic and commercial architecture in the European architectural styles, predominantly Neoclassical, Gothic and Palladian. "A/ geography infinitely more than meets the eye, testifying/ as icon-idea-text-axis-tourist label, / Assured by temple bells,/ rows of devout heads and rippling conch-held octaves, your /self-renewing heart is sanctified by spirits who maintain/ the rooted heritage" ("Little India" lines 2-7). The Hawker Food Culture which has been recognized by UNESCO as intangible heritage of Singapore further adds to the quintessence of Singaporean landscape. In the poem 'The Sneeze-Hock Lam st, by City Hall' Thumboo states: "That hawker there, / Selling *mee* and *kway-teow*/ Is prosperous, round, /Quick moving" (lines 1-4).

A vivid picture of the confluence of traditional set-up with the shophouses, and the colonial style is vividly reflected in his poem 'Bras Basah.'

Where the first Rendezvous brooded

By a row of old shophouses, since sadly slain,

A special road began. A point of colonial

Confluence: Dhoby Ghaut, the YWCA with

Manicured tennis lawns for memsahibs who

Then took tea and scones. Across a Shell kiosk

Where Papa parked his Austin Seven, then off

(lines 1-7)

The black and white bungalows are reflected in Thumboo's poem, 'Quarters Monk Hill Terrace. Newton Singapore.' 'The National Gallery', 'The Victoria Concert Hall' are reminders of the city's colonial legacy.

Landscape Architecture and Global Urbanism

Landscape architecture certainly participates in the construction of national identity as collective identity is reflected through material culture and landscape

architecture is one such expressive medium. The city-state is famed for its spectacular high-rise buildings in international architectural styles while being equally famed as a garden-city. The spectacularity of Singapore lies in its landscape architecture. Marina Bay Waterfront Promenade includes high-rise structures like the Merlion Hotel, Raffles Hotel, Marina Bay Sands Towers, Esplanade Theatres by the Bay, which are set alongside the Gardens by the Bay and the Merlion Park. The National Gallery, Asian Civilization Museum and the Lim Bo Seng Memorial, with its walkways and pedestrian zones, reveal its unique landscape architecture. If the Marina Bay Waterfront can be considered as a microcosmic representation of the macrocosm of Singapore, then the National Identity, reading from its landscape architecture, includes the postmodern spatial image of Singapore as a global financial hub alongside the quintessential local image that of a city garden built by a mélange of cultures; Chinese, Malay, Tamil and Eurasian.

The poetry of Edwin Thumboo reflects the architectural landscapes of Singapore to create its national identity that includes both; global urbanism and traditional architecture that includes the postmodern and the historical. The spectacular civic and public spaces of modern Singapore reflect the optimistic collective psyche of the island-state. Just how buoyant the nation felt is echoed in his poem, 'Ulysees by the Merlion.'

*They hold the bright, the beautiful
Good ancestral dreams
Within new visions
So shining, urgent,
Full of what is now
(lines 37-41).*

With gaining independence in 1965, Singapore had to create images about itself to project itself as a successful global city with ultra-modern architecture in international-styles. In 'Double Helix Promenade,' the poet speaks of the architectural feat; the double helix promenade. It is a commentary on the highly modernized topography: 'So flying cars, people with propellers, some compute/Spread over a City in a Garden, Hands of the Nation/Transform circuits of a micro chip into a maze, and pulsate'(lines 17-19).

Michelle Heng, in her introduction to *The Singapore Word Maps: A Chapbook of Edwin Thumboo's New and Selected Place Poems* (2012) informs that the poet had to revise the titles of some of his place poems such as 'The Sneeze, Hock Lam St, By City Hall' which was originally titled 'The Sneeze.' The change in title was to 'remind readers of places which may no longer exist or have since assumed a look so different from their pre-urban-renewed identity (Heng 6). informs, Hock Lam Street, one of Singapore's best eating places, a bustling alley of century-old houses, has since gone down memory lane to make place for urban renewal. Standing in its place is the Funan Digital Life Mall near City Mall MRT Station. Probably the 'before and now' is best represented in his twin poems 'The National Library, nr Dhoby Ghaut, Singapore' and 'National Library, 2007, Bugis.' Both poems speak about the National Library but

the atmosphere has changed from the first to the second. In the poem 'The National Library, nr Dhoby Ghaut, Singapore' teachers teach “As you uncoil the spirals of each mind, /Words become colour, image, question/To push the imagination, yet again” (lines 11-13) but in the poem 'National Library, 2007, Bugis' “endless knowledge besiege in giga bites. Galaxies, /Kingdoms, Affluent and Ultraman, a little finger click away” (lines 34-35). The transition is obvious. The consciousness has shifted. The gigantic external structure of the Library has affected the internal consciousness. However, the 'internal' is conditioned by the 'external' which they have to conform to, resist or negotiate. *The Singapore Word Maps* carries photographs of places the poet talks about, before and after urbanization, amply illustrating the intent of the place poems.

While every landscape has its own identity with people's interaction and meaning that they attach to it, the city-state of Singapore has created a unique spatial identity that is unmistakably Singaporean, interweaving ethnic traditional, modern and cosmopolitan architecture that is a typical feature of multicultural postcolonial urbanism.

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