

'Between home and home': Crossings and Coastlines in the Poetry of Boey Kim Cheng

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In writing about the black Atlantic¹, Paul Gilroy contrasts “the sea’s liquid contamination” which “involve[s] both mixture and movement” with the land “where we find that special soil in which we are told national culture takes root” (2). He emphasizes the importance of “crossing experiences and other translocal histories” which can “summon some of the tough, conceptual problems that can imprison or ossify the idea of culture” (2). In my reading of Singapore-born, Australia-based Boey Kim Cheng’s poetry, I want to suggest an alternative way of looking at Singaporean writing in English which privileges precisely the kind of “mixture and movement” that Gilroy describes. Examining a selection of Boey’s poems across his career, I will consider the repeated motifs of journeys and crossings which are frequently associated with the sea and the coastline. His literal and figurative portrayals of these waterscapes produce an idea of Singapore literature that sees place and belonging as fluid and filled with possibilities that are larger than a nationalist project. Although the Singapore poet and scholar Edwin Thumboo argues that “[p]oetry is but one of the forces working towards a collective psyche”, Boey’s work has firmly stepped moved beyond this ideal (66). Perhaps a more productive way to consider his work would be to explore how he has redefined the ideas of countries and borders in his poetry, and within a larger literary and historical context. His poetry locates meaning in disparate parts of global culture and enacts a form of cosmopolitanism where there are “ways of living at home abroad or abroad at home – ways of inhabiting multiple places at once, of being different beings simultaneously, of seeing the larger picture stereoscopically with the smaller” (Pollock and Bhabha 587). Angelia Poon makes a similar argument, noting that “Boey’s poems on travel and movement conjure up transnational spaces and liminal time that elude attempts to recuperate them for discussion solely in terms of an overriding national consciousness or totalizing Singaporeanness” (3). I find that while it can never avoid Singapore, Boey’s poetry conveys a new conception of the country and its significance in his personal biography and in the larger histories of transnational crossings.

Casting himself first as a traveller and then as an immigrant, Boey has attempted to move beyond a nationalist and/or postcolonial poetry that is tied to

ideas of land, soil and territory. Evading the nation and its territory, his poetry returns regularly to the sea and its potential as a metaphorical device that eschews fixed maps, spaces and histories. Even his relationships with his ancestors, parents and offspring become ways for him to forge bonds that repudiate existing nationalist connections by creating and imagining a multiplicity of trans-oceanic attachments. His poetry is not encompassed by national boundaries but shifts its focus to liminal locations, and emotional, imaginary spaces where confabulations of past and future occur. By considering these aspects of Boey's writing, we are able to move beyond holding writers like him ransom to what Sarah Brouillette calls the "burden" of "the association between an author and national authenticity" (177). Graham Huggan makes it clear that this is a "burden" that gives rise to what he calls "the postcolonial exotic" which is "a pathology of cultural representation under late capitalism—a result of the spiralling commodification of cultural difference" (33). Whether for nation-building projects or for capitalist reasons, much of the work done in the area of Singapore literature has focused on "cultural difference," using writers and their work as bearers of essentialist definitions of Singapore culture and nation. This is an insufficient response to writers like Boey who bring to the table multiple cultural attachments and affinities. Given Singapore's historical and contemporary contexts of migration, immigration and change, Gilroy's concept of "routes" to replace "roots" is useful here in suggesting how culture is created through journeys and crossings, and not by emphasizing a fixed, territorial identity. Boey is cognizant of these complications in his work, looking beyond Singapore to the intersections where culture comes to be constructed and consumed in the seas surrounding it and beyond.

In analyzing a sequential selection of Boey's work, I will focus on his later writing as his poems and autobiographical essays culminate in larger epiphanies through his travels and migration. His first book, *Somewhere-Bound* (1989), was written when he was poised to depart upon a series of voyages, while his second book, *Another Place* (1992), sees him writing extensively about his travels, but with a greater sense of dislocation and alienation. His third collection, *Days of No Name* (1996), chronicles his time in North America and Europe. The poet then left Singapore for Australia and his most recent set of new and selected poems in *After the Fire* (2006), which appeared after a decade's hiatus, reflects the change in setting and audience, even though it was published by the Singapore-based Firstfruits Publications. His latest essay collection *Between Stations* (2009) consists of personal essays which extend in prose his negotiation of a transnational identity.

Land and sea are already portrayed as antithetical in one of Boey's early poems, "The Old Timers" from *Another Place* (1992). Here the image of "the advancing land" (referring to reclaimed land from the sea) is placed in direct conflict with "the ancient mariners" (51), suggesting the historical precedents of

more fluid conceptions of belonging and cultural knowledge. Singapore's rapid and overwhelming expansion of its land for industrial and urban development, however, leaves these seafarers unable to cope. Where there were once liminal spaces of possibility and heterogeneity on the coast and the riverbank, there is now only "progress" which "eats into their lives / filling with concrete the space / between the quay with a new face-lift / and the brackish water / where their boats huddle, / marking a different time" (51). Here progress is equated with the fixity of concrete and its brutal artificiality and aggression. In the poet's view, the possibilities for fluidity and productive exchange have been relegated to "art galleries" where the boats or "tongkangs / they once lived in are floating, / decorated with nostalgic hues" (51). Yet, as his later poetry implies, it is only by considering the importance of the sea (which the Singapore River directly flows into) and these floating dwellings that we can come to a more complete and complex understanding of identity and belonging.

The complicated trajectory of travel and exile that leads Boey to further explore these insights begins in India and sees him journeying across Europe and finally, the United States, where he finishes a year on the Iowa Writing Program by crossing and re-crossing the American continent. He sees each of the places he visits as holding important keys to "a whole library of meaning" (*Another Place* 80); the specificities of each city and country are essential to the poet as he re-examines his place in the world, whether through social awareness in India or a spatial and historical reorienting in America. At the height of his early career, Boey's poems on these notions of flux and motion find some of their most poignant epiphanies in the vast cosmopolitan American landscape. This is where a major part of his collection *Days of No Name* (1996) is set. The book is separated into two sections with the former set in America while the latter, entitled "Home, Elsewhere", encompasses Singapore and other locations outside the United States, in Europe and Asia. Through the poems in "An American Journey," the poet sketches a journey that takes him from the centre of the country to the East Coast and finally to a revelatory conclusion in San Francisco, a city that comes to signify both a destination and starting point. America dominates *Days of No Name* for it is there that he finds others like him writing on the borders between cultures and countries, and questioning the reifications of ethnicity and nationality.

The landscape and geography of America have affected Boey's poetry in profound ways. In poems like "Falling", "The Art of Seeing", "San Francisco Again" and "Flowers Flaggging on Haight-Ashbury", his meditations on landscapes, cityscapes and his observations of the people around him shape his perceptions of his place in the world. From the change of seasons to urban topographies, his poems develop a progressive sense of space and direction. While his poems about the American East coast are imbued with melancholy, his poems about the West coast speak of the multiple ways of exploring connections, histories and the

futures. In particular, his images of the city of San Francisco suggest a fluidity in the placement of its streets and districts. In “The Art of Seeing” he writes:

The different districts, the different lives
 drew us on; straight, queer, left
 or right, hip or down, all directions
 taken, we were on the way. Crossing the streets
 at a bias, or going with the flow, we saw
 seeing whole is seeing differently, swinging
 from part to part to whole, at peace
 with the pieces. (*Days of No Name* 96-7)

An intellectual understanding of cosmopolitanism, where culture is syncretic, is superimposed on the physical map of San Francisco, creating a visual representation that links the urban landscape with the cultural (Posnock 809). Boey’s poem acts against the logic of a fixed land-based map and suggests the mutability, the “flow” that is inherent in his perception of the possibilities of San Francisco. However, it is only when he returns to the city again that he further sees its districts as vessels, creating a moving network of meaning that brings together the fringes of the city into a coherent whole:

[...] the climb
 and plunge of the streets, the decentred districts,
 Castro, Mission, Haight and Tenderloin, afloat
 on their own meanings, these scattered lives settle now
 and cohere in the language we found
 to speak to the darkness in each other. (102)

The wave-like “climb /and plunge of the streets” where the “decentred districts” are “afloat” provide a sea-like context for the multiple aspects of San Francisco. Earlier in the poem, as he stands at a characteristically liminal space, a “long wooden pier / striding into the bay, drenched in morning light” (101), Boey makes one of his final revelations about his time in America and “why this end of America ended /a story and started others writing” (101). Here life, poetry and travel merge as he connects the stories of the immigrants, explorers and artists who sought out the American West before him and those who have settled there to start new paths. He makes a crucial choice to situate the poem here on the border of America, looking “Pacificwards” as he puts it. This destabilizes the idea of a one-way journey westwards and instead points to the destination of the American West as an illusory one. Instead the American West coast is Janus-faced, looking one way towards America and the other towards the Pacific and beyond, full of possibilities as “the uncertain waters of a blank page” (101).

The poem ends with a moving portrait, one that is aware of preceding cosmopolitans who have marked their way in a world where borders seem arbitrary, and piers, coastlines and sea crossings hold the greatest significances:

An old Chinese man shuffles to the pier's end, pauses
and begins the slow breaths of tai chi. His hands
begin to weave the wind and light into tracks
moving beyond time. Our long walks
through the city, the stumbling into reconciliation
on this pier, seem now part of the story,
the story of the distance I have travelled
between here and here. (102)

In this extract, the poet-persona moves even further beyond his immediate ancestry, complicating his origins with the reference to "an old Chinese man" and envisaging the man's unknowable but necessarily transnational past. The liminal space of the pier becomes a place of revelation and epiphany as the poem suggests an awareness of the histories and pathways that San Francisco both conceals and reveals. Boey places himself with greater certainty in one of these tales, "between here and here," eliminating the idea of "there" as something separate and foreign, recalling Pollock's and Homi Bhabha's ideas of being able to inhabit multiple places simultaneously. Thus the piers in Singapore and San Francisco seem conflated in this poem when the poet's childhood walks with his father along the Singapore seafront are alluded to.

In his later poetry and essays, Boey returns again and again to the liminal space of the pier and port in Singapore. In "Change Alley" in *Days of No Name*, during a reverie inspired by a trip to modern downtown Singapore, he journeys through his memory to a seafront bazaar that is vibrantly cosmopolitan and, in a sense, both at the heart and the fringe of the country. Recalling how his father walked him through this narrow alley that leads to the waterfront, he provides a simultaneously familiar and disorienting memory:

[...] the trade of tongues,
the bazaar of puzzling scents and smells,
an underwater world of sailors
stale from the sea and travellers
drowned in dreams of home.

Floating through its length skined
with striplights and bare bulbs, the stalls
spilling over with imitation wares
for the unwary, watches, bags, gadgets and tapes,
in each recess he heard the conspiracies

of currencies, the marriage of foreign tongues
 holding a key to worlds opening on worlds
 for the waking sense of the child. (56-8)

The poem becomes a catalogue of past possibilities of Singapore as a port and crossroads, before these routes became “buried or closed” and the streets “empty into loss” with a forgotten past and a sterile, singular future (58). It is a dream-like sequence that singles out the importance of the “sailors” and “travellers” who flooded the country. Land and sea are superimposed on each other, as the bazaar becomes “an underwater world” open to the potential of “worlds opening on worlds”. This dream-like fluidity enables Boey to effectively create a palimpsest of his memory of Change Alley and its modern development into Singapore’s business district. By plunging into the heart of this change, Boey comes away with the revelation that “the map [is] useless / for navigation in the lost city”, again signaling that land-based methods of orientation are insufficient, especially for returning citizens (58).

“Change Alley” heralds a new stage in Boey’s poetic themes, building on his earlier realizations that his departures and arrivals have begun to merge and that the idea of a single “centre” has become irrelevant. Sheldon Pollock and Homi Bhabha argue that “cosmopolitanism is not a circle created by culture diffused from a centre, but instead, that centres are everywhere and circumferences nowhere” (587-8), noting that this points to cosmopolitanism’s previous and continuing existence. For Boey, these multiple centres have been created and cultivated by travel and his poem emphasizes Singapore’s longstanding cosmopolitan history. The poet comes to a realization that for him, there is no fixed idea of culture or belonging, but that the “foreign” and the “abroad” co-exist simultaneously in the “local” and at “home”. The strong elements of nostalgia and regret that are inherent in his writing suggest the difficulties in depicting a democratically de-centred, utopian idea of free cultural exchange and movement. However, his work does find a degree of success in destabilizing ossified ideas of “home” and “abroad”.

This sense of flux and liminality is also apparent in another poem about Boey’s father from *After the Fire*, entitled “Kelong”. Here, in an intimate memorialisation of a childhood fishing trip, Boey uses the space of the *kelong*, a fishing outpost built on stilts out at sea, as the site for an intense memory and to challenge the idea of the boundaries between land and sea:

My father carries me into the hut
 where I sit and find equilibrium
 on a floating world of water and air.
 The smell of salted fish everywhere
 and through the gaps of the worn timber floor

you can see the threadwork of the tossing tides
 and imagine the kelong's legs stretching
 miles to the ocean bed. You feel the pulse, the tug
 of the depths at the kelong frame and wonder
 if it will hold (18-9)

In this "floating world of water and air," Boey is at once rooted in a comforting sense of unrootedness, where the floor only conceals "the threadwork of the tossing tides". Angelia Poon notes that the poem "metaphorically echoes the nature of memory as a series of intensely remembered, suspended moments in time" and emphasizes that in order to make sense of this world, Boey must learn "to trust the aerial walkways, / fit my tread to the swaying sense of things, / the planks bending but holding firm with each step" (1; 19). I would add that the significance of the *kelong* itself is also important: unlike a moving vessel on the sea, the *kelong* is barely rooted to the ocean bed and Boey hints at the constant tension of the belief in its ability to "hold". He sees the structures as "hovering in a realm / neither water nor land", in a space that counters the traditional borders of a country (19). It is in this space where he truly finds his father, "buoyant, free / from debts, going for the big catch" (18). The borderless, mutable sea is where he hopes to "cast about for the word / that will reel in the sea hoard in one haul: / starfish, seahorses, and my father" (20).

This moment of revelation also brings to mind the Christian references that run deep through "Kelong" and the preceding poem "After the Fire" where Boey writes about "walking on water" and, surely, on some unconscious level sees the similarities between the fishermen in the *kelong* and those in the New Testament when the "nets are reeled in, like a retiarius / ceiling, and there is a heaven of fish / heaving, thrashing scales, and mouths / agape in hosannas of death" (20). Life and death are seen as intrinsically linked with the bounty of fish coupled with their necessary death – the undercurrent of mortality becoming all the more evident in this poem about his late father. There is also the redemptive idea behind this fishing that is tied to the apostles and their role as "fishers of men". The poet's use of Christian imagery here and throughout the rest of his work, provides a layer of imagery and meaning that carries the work beyond particular ethnicities, and speaks to the multiplicity of cultural syncretism and hybridities that the sea evokes. Furthermore, Boey seems aware that at this point in his career, he no longer writes just for a Singaporean audience and has developed strategies to prevent cultural translation from being obtrusive in his work. One sees this impulse when he chooses to use fish names like "trevally" and "whitebait" whereas the fishermen of his childhood would have used the equivalent terms in Chinese dialect or Malay.

While Boey's poems about his father necessarily look backwards, he also writes about his daughter in an exploration of what kinds of cultural belonging

and identity can exist moving forwards. In another poem in *After the Fire*, "Plum Blossom or Quong Tart at the QVB," he writes about his daughter "discovering the sound of her name / the new old country revealed under / her tiny preschool tentative hand" (32). He complicates her learning of the Chinese script with the history of the Chinese diaspora in Australia as told in an exhibition at the Queen Victoria Building in Sydney. Boey considers the possible links between the Chinese immigrant Quong Tart and his own daughter and envisions a whole network of histories and meanings, where he is

No longer emigrant, foreign
 but recalled home, and not to the country
 left behind, but further back
 beyond the South Sea.
 Vague lost connections
 somewhere south of the Yangtze.
 Karst country, paddies
 and mountains the colour of jade (32)

The poet sees these "vague lost connections" as based on bodies of water and sea crossings² where the trajectories of his ancestors crisscross with those of his own and his children. Thus, the poet brings a historical understanding to these spatial journeys, and goes further by plotting alternate possibilities and potentialities created by these sea voyages as he confabulates a family history to replace one that is "buried, irretrievable" (33). In this way, he chooses to create his own identity, his own history with a free hand, coming to terms of acceptance that are wholly his own and of his own imagining. He recreates a specific possible history involving his grandfather and a "Chinese / pioneer who made it good in White / Australia" (34), where he postulates, "[p]erhaps Great-grandfather sallied forth / with Quong Tart on the same junk [...] Perhaps they were brothers" (34). The sea crossing becomes the site of an alternate history:

I see my other life my father could have had
 staring out from the sepia shots,
 if our forbear had travelled on
 down-under. I could not explain
 to my daughter the *déjà vu*. (34)

Boey evokes the larger Chinese diaspora and how its sea routes have resulted in further mixing of cultures and histories. In migrating to Australia himself, the poet sees himself in the line of earlier Chinese immigrants who found a free space where it was possible to have "married a Scotswoman, sang / Border ballads and wore tartan kilts; / he fed the Aborigines / and played cricket with the whites" (33-4).

It is a fantasy of vividly hybrid origins, one that sees his father as "Mandarin of the Fifth Order, costumed in silk tunic and plumbed hat" (34), a status quite different from the "pig-tailed coolie in the new colony" (33). Boey is borrowing a history here and claiming it as his own almost in opposition to what he feels is the actual subaltern gap in his paternal heritage.

In his article "A Transnational Poetics," Jahan Ramazani notes that "although national labels impute singularity and coherence, poets make and remake their often-interstitial citizenship" (354). An exemplar of Ramazani's theory, Boey constructs and reconstructs his life in between borders to find a home in motion, crossing territorial boundaries and refusing to adhere to strict ideas of nation. The poet's focus on liminal spaces on the shores of islands, piers, coastlines, and the possibilities of the sea itself, cohere with Ramazani's ideas of "interstitial citizenship." Furthermore, Boey's most recent collection of essays *Between Stations* ends with a piece on the space of contemporary crossing which has come to replace seafaring vessels: the plane journey. Here, Boey identifies the in-between quality of travelling between places as one that makes both origin and destination "interchangeable":

Somewhere between stations you forget the name of the place you have left behind, and the name of the place coming towards you is still indistinct. For that moment, you dwell in an autonomous state, a resting place between memory and imagination, between forgetting and remembering, between home and home. (313)

It is not difficult to see the similarities between this liminal state and that of the sea crossings and coastal spaces that recur in Boey's work. His experience of crossing here gives rise to a reorientation of what one considers as "home," simultaneously situating it in both the point of departure and the destination. In focusing on their interchangeability, he focuses our attention on the journey itself, and the liminal space becomes "a resting place" located "between memory and imagination" where the potentialities multiply. In an earlier essay from the same collection, "Place of Many Winds," Boey evocatively conflates Australian and Singaporean waterscapes: "the trail debouches into the stretch of water, and I am in both places at once, something trembles into focus, Berowra Creek joining the waters of the Peirce and MacRitchie reservoirs in Singapore" (294). Even though the creek and the reservoirs are inland, Boey seems to pinpoint again the potential for bodies of water to be interchangeable and even fundamentally connected through waterways and cycles, challenging conventional concepts of place. Here as in much of his other writing, he has embodied a cosmopolitanism that looks to multiple attachments and centres, moving beyond the constraints of a fixed idea of "home" or "origin" and from the obligations of constructing fixed national and ethnic identities through his work. Boey sees himself as both "emigrant" and

"immigrant" to those around him, but more crucially as "uncertain" as "the tags fall off" (*Between Stations* 305), since it is impossible to label or categorize his identity by nationality or citizenship. Yet, his idea of being "in-between" is not to exist in an indeterminate third space that is devoid of specificities. Instead, the poet grapples with the realities and illusions of finding his way in a world where he sees everything through multiple perspectives, vacillating between Australian and Singaporean cultures, between being Kim Cheng Boey and Boey Kim Cheng³. These changes in the placement of his family name signal a more profound tension between being an emigrant who is haunted by the destruction of Singapore's past and an immigrant who is open to the possibilities (and disappointments) of a new Australian life.

For the most part, critical work on Boey has invariably focused on how he "write[s] back to Singapore" (Poon 375). Philip Holden acknowledges this phenomenon and sees himself having been complicit in this instinct to demand that "these poems speak overtly of nationhood, or proclaim their postcoloniality" (356) when he admits to his initial disappointment that the poet's later poems were set outside Singapore. Holden comes to an acceptance of the significance of Boey's later work in terms of "the importance of memory and a reconstruction of the past that is urgently important in the present at both a political and a personal level" (356). But more crucial is his emphasis on the fact that Boey refuses to fall into "the temptations of a nostalgic reconstruction of the past" (356). The issue of temptation is there as well for scholars involved in Singapore studies to burden Boey with nostalgia for his past so that it constitutes the entirety of his present-day identity. Shirley Lim provides one such example in her review of the poet's collection of essays *Between Stations*, as she sees Singapore as the lynchpin to all of his musings and that his main purpose in the book is "to find a permanent solution to the restlessness in [himself], to [his] quarrel with Singapore and with [him]self" (*Between Stations* 4). For scholars with ties to Singapore like Lim, there is often an oversight that leads them to avoid addressing how important Australia and the rest of Boey's travels are to his work. Yet it is clear that he sees both his past in Singapore and his present elsewhere as equally important: his struggles occur "between home and home" (*Between Stations* 313). It is also essential, when reading his work, to take into account his travels away from Singapore and his reception in and relationship to Australia (particularly through his interactions with his children). These are issues that scholars of Singapore literature often gloss over as they exert themselves to place him within a canon of transnational Singaporeans like Simon Tay and the late Arthur Yap, but where, despite their travels, Singapore remains at the centre of their work. However, unlike Tay and Yap, Boey has chosen to permanently leave Singapore and is, I would argue, more concerned with seeing his old life through the lens of his new one and to consider the possibilities of the journey between the two. His awareness of the multiple threads that pull at

him, lead him to more nuanced meditations on his place in the world. Singapore is no longer the centre of this discourse – in many ways it never was. There are as Homi Bhabha and Pollock argue, many centres and no circumferences. Instead of seeing Singapore as a homogenous, self-generating state whose history follows an uncomplicated line directed firstly and colonially by Sir Stamford Raffles and since then post-colonially by the People's Action Party, Boey's poems encourage a view of history that is directed by the many immigrants who passed through the ports and markets of Singapore, "the marriage of foreign tongues / holding a key to worlds opening on worlds" (*After the Fire* 108). It is a rich legacy that certainly did not begin in 1819 with the "founding" of Singapore or come to a neat and tidy end in 1965 upon Singapore's achieving Independence. Boey's confabulations of memory and history in the liminal spaces of sea and coast show his awareness of, as Arif Dirlik puts it, "the constructedness of ethnicity and culture, which also makes [him] available for articulation to new circumstances" (225-6). It is the possibilities of these "new circumstances" that are the most promising as we look for new ways to approach these writers who would see culture not as a "prison-house" but as a gateway to new routes of remembering, discovering and experiencing (Dirlik 226).

Notes

¹ Gilroy defines the black Atlantic as "a system of historical, cultural, linguistic and political interaction and communication that originated in the process of enslaving Africans [...] It had profound cultural consequences in all the territories it touched. As it evolved, New World slavery threw together diverse groups of people in complex combinations they could not have anticipated. Their histories, languages, religious outlooks, their divergent understandings of phenomena like nature, time and space mutated and combined in a living, dynamic pattern that was not the simple product of any single one of its many sources."(1)

² The Yangtze, a river flowing into the South China Sea, part of the Pacific Ocean, would be the only way to reach Singapore and Malaysia by sea from China .

³ Names in Chinese usually put the family name first, in this case "Boey", whereas Western names put the family name last; thus the order of Boey's name depends on the context he is in.

⁴ 1819 was when Sir Stamford Raffles, the founder of "modern Singapore", landed in Singapore. 1965 is the year that Singapore separated from Malaysia and saw an independent government dominated by the People's Action Party first elected in 1959 when Singapore achieved self-government, but not full independence from the British.

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