

“GASPP-ing” for Water

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GASPP: A Gay Anthology of Singapore Poetry and Prose. Eds, Ng Yi-Sheng, Dominic Chua, Irene Oh, and Jasmine Seah. Singapore: The Literary Centre, 2010. 223 pages. ISBN 9789810868086.

GASPP is Singapore’s first anthology of writing – mainly poetry and short fiction – by gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and queer (GLBTQ) writers, ranging from the pioneers of queer writing in Singapore, such as Johann S. Lee, Alfian Sa’at, and Cyril Wong to Lee Yew Leong, Adrianna Tan, Jasmine Seah, Ng Yi-Sheng, and others less known although not less skilled, such as Michael Corbidge, Desmond Kon, Mint Hong, Grace Chua, and Dominic Chua.

On the book’s cover is a man in swimming trunks in goggles and with a ring float, a sign behind him forbidding football in the void deck (a vacant ground floor space unique to Singapore’s public housing blocks). The swim gear cleverly alludes to Singapore as an island, historically known as Temasek (“sea town”). The man, obviously, is nowhere near any water; clearly, he does not belong, and is made more conspicuous by his being in a *void* deck – a no-place – with a prohibitive sign, signifying the dearth of official public spaces for the GLBTQ community in Singapore. Like a fish thrown on land, he is not in the water he is geared for. *GASPP* is such a gasp for pelagic air, a yearning for water.

There is indeed little space for GLBTQ islanders to breathe in their own sea town. During Singapore’s 2007 Penal Code review, in which Section 377A (which criminalises homosexual sex acts) was retained, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong observed that “section 377A has become a symbolic issue”, adding that while homosexuals as such would not be criminalised, its retention symbolises the views of the conservative majority. However, it could also be seen as symbolic of the denial of space for the GLBTQ community. The community, however, has created its own spaces to breathe, like Pink Dot, an annual gathering of people who stand for everyone’s right to love, and the annual IndigNation, which reaffirms GLBTQ islanders’ participation in Singapore’s intellectual and cultural life, reminding

everyone that they are as much a part of its waters as any other islander – an affirmation which *GASPP* is a part of.

Not surprisingly, aqueous imagery ripples through *GASPP*. Water is imagined to be a place of reprieve in Alfian Sa'at's "Seven", a respite from the pursuit of happiness in "the waters of [his] dream", or as a unifying space, in Jason Wee's "Adopted Son", where "[t]he water will be absent of shatters" – racial and genealogical differences that divide the speaker from his adopted son. At other times, it is associated with death, since society's conservative waters are unwelcoming of GLBTQ islanders. Thus the speaker in Ng How Wee's "I Buy Ten Insurance Schemes for Longing" goes to the sea to terminate the restive longing s/he has been guarding for so long: "I ... take longing to the sea ... and in silence I push [him] off a cliff." Such guarded longing is finally killed off because it is a queer longing that mainstream society renders impossible to realise.

The resultant desire to leave these ruinous waters for the unknown deeps is seen in Jasmine Seah's "5 Postcards From Space" where the persona leaves home to "charter the unchartered" regions of "35 million miles of dark river", while in Michael Corbidge's "Paddling Pool Library", a partner is challenged to "[g]et out there and chart the fathoms" of "the whale nation". Not everyone is afforded this opportunity, however: in Tata So's short story, "Little Fish", Xiaoyu ("little fish") is trapped in a financially ruinous marriage to a gambler and when free of her marriage, cannot escape to the vast ocean; but she could continue "to swim free in her little stream and ponds", liberated by finding her own waters within the entrapping environment. Similarly, in Dominic Chua's "Psalm Concerning the Heartland (*after Denise Levertov*)," the heartland (public housing estates in Singapore where over 80% of the population lives) is a place where homosexual familial love can thrive; the *heartland* is wherever one's heart desires it to be, not a space demarcated by urban planning or legal sanction, while in "24," home is a personal paradise created by two people in love.

GASPP is thus part of continuing seaworthy efforts to affirm that Singapore is as much a home for the GLBTQ minority as it is for everyone else. It is a gasp, too, of astonishment at the quality and range of writing collected – from Ovidia Yu's "The Abomination of the Blue Hibiscus", where the flower is a clever metaphor for genetic queerness, to Lee Yew Leong's "I'll Tell You One Day" where the footnote functions as a meta-narrative device, to Ng Yi-Sheng's "Lee Low Tar", a deliciously mischievous parody of an arts entertainment licence application, to Desmond Kon's unconventional "ekatra iva alambana aneka utkranti utara utpanna" and Johann Loh's "from Entropic Symmetry". There are also notable pieces by newer writers, like Mint Hong's "People of the Seventh Month," Geraldine Toh's "Between Breaths," and Grace Chua's "Mountain Time".

Neither polemical and didactic nor activist, the anthology manages to negotiate between giving the GLBTQ community a space to imagine itself positively, albeit differently, from the official discourse, and doing so creatively and well. It may not immediately cause a sea change in society's attitudes toward GLBTQ islanders, but it is certainly another important free stroke forward. As Pink Dot is to the Little Red Dot, as IndigNation is to the island-nation, GASPP can be seen as another symbolic cultural counterpoint to the symbolic legal retention of Section 377A. It is, to appropriate Geraldine Toh's words, "a drowning in reverse."