

## Teaching Queer Theory beyond the Western Classroom

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Recent scholarship on transnational sexualities emphasizes the pitfalls of projecting Western paradigms onto non-Western cultures. In this essay, I consider the implications of this insight for teaching queer theory in post-secondary literature classrooms outside the Western world. I draw on my experience as a faculty member in the Department of English Language and Literature at the National University of Singapore (NUS) from 2013 to 2016, where I taught required modules on Victorian literature and culture to undergraduate and postgraduate students. In these courses, I discovered that the most powerful way of decentering Western assumptions about sexual politics was to encourage my students to think of themselves as doing queer theory whenever they brought their own distinctly Singaporean insights to bear on literary analysis, rather than relying solely on concepts offered by Euro-American queer theorists and critics to authorize their interpretations. Given Singapore's status as an especially globalized, multilingual, and culturally hybrid postcolonial state with deeply ambivalent attitudes toward liberal political values, I suggest that the approach described here can be applied to developing a decolonial queer pedagogy, one that avoids reductive binaries through attentiveness to the nonliberal tendencies of thought that persist in both colonial and postcolonial cultures.

Beginning with Martin Manalansan's (1995) work on the queer Filipino diaspora and continuing with key interventions from Jasbir Puar (2001),

David Eng (2010), and Madhavi Menon (2018), among many others, scholars have identified how Anglo-American discourses of sexual liberation have reinforced a neoliberal, neocolonial agenda. In his account of attempts to teach queer studies in non-Western contexts, Donald E. Hall (2010: 74) remarks that such approaches tend to portray non-Western sexualities and sexual politics as “primitive” and “backwards” compared to Western models of progressive queer practices: “It is as if we are living out a twenty-first-century update of a Victorian imperial fantasy,” he writes, “in which we imagine finding a lost tribe of Foucauldians writing densely worded queer theory in a remote valley of central Borneo or in a volcano crater in the Andes.” At the same time, attempts to identify Indigenous sexualities risk reproducing “Western primitivist stereotypes of non-Western cultures” and “creat[ing] false binaries between tradition/modernity and East/West” such that one is “unable to account for the effects of imperialism and globalization in the production of ideas about sexuality,” as Deborah Cohler (2008: 26) writes.

These issues are exemplified and exacerbated by the case of Singapore, which is both one of the planet’s most globalized nations and a place where male homosexuality remains at least nominally illegal. Modern Singapore was essentially created in 1819 by the British East India Company to serve as an *entrepôt* between the East and the West. During the years of British rule until 1963, the city-state’s population grew from one thousand to nearly 1.8 million, mostly owing to an influx of immigrants from China, India, and Malaysia, whose descendants make up the current population of 5.6 million. After a brief, failed attempt to merge with the federation of Malaysia, Singapore became an independent republic in 1965 under the authoritarian, paternalistic leadership of the People’s Action Party (PAP), which continues to rule to this day. Since achieving independence, Singapore has become one of the world’s most economically prosperous nations, an international trading hub with a highly developed free-market economy. While it is a multilingual country, the colonial legacy means that English is designated as the official language of public life, government, and education and serves as the primary language of instruction from primary school through the postsecondary level.

Singapore’s history makes it *prima facie* impossible to identify purely Indigenous forms of sexual identity—from its very origins within the British colonial system, all aspects of Singaporean life have been thoroughly globalized. Eng-Beng Lim (2005: 384) has argued that Singapore’s situation demands that queer theorists rethink “the dominant tendency to use singular

binaries or reductive trajectories (e.g., West to East, first world to third world) to map out global queer lives in the so-called non-Western world.” Audrey Yue (2012: 2) expands on Lim’s point to assert that Western discourses of sexual liberation do not have any purchase in Singapore’s contemporary political culture. Section 377A of the Singapore Penal Code, the law prohibiting male homosexuality, is a holdover from Victorian imperialism. Its language of “gross indecency between men” actually derives from the 1885 Labouchere Amendment, under which Oscar Wilde was punished. It was originally imposed on the island by British authorities “as a moral code to deter homosexual behavior so that their subjects would not be ‘corrupted’ by the ‘unnatural’ practices of the natives in their settlements. Today, even as Singapore strives to seek out and piece together its identity as an independent nation of 50 years, the penal code is retained, ironically, to preserve so-called Asian values against Western corruption” (Wong 2016: 509). Consequently, rights-based arguments grounded in liberal discourse, which eventually won the repeal of many antigay laws in the United Kingdom and other Western nations, do not play a significant role in the island’s queer politics.

Yue (2012: 2) asserts that queer life in the city-state has instead been shaped by what she calls “illiberal pragmatism.” The PAP maintains power by unilaterally making hardheaded, businesslike decisions for the practical benefit the nation, rather than upholding abstract theoretical principles. This is why the government has decided to keep 377A on the books, while taking the official position that it will not be actively enforced, in a bid to appease both religious conservatives and the LGBTQ population. This policy creates a political “ambivalence” that nevertheless “forms the foundation for the emergence of a queer Singapore,” that is, according to Yue, “not one based on the Western post-Stonewall emancipation discourse of rights, but through the illiberal pragmatics of survival” (5). By foregoing the liberal logic of seeking state recognition of one’s civil liberties, Singaporean queers find innovative ways to manipulate contradictions created by illiberal pragmatism through strategic complicity with and resistance to neoliberalism—for instance, by aligning themselves with burgeoning creative industries to prove themselves economically beneficial to the nation-building project. Lynette Chua (2014: 5) argues that Singapore’s gay movement deploys “pragmatic resistance” to survive and thrive, strategically embracing their role in maintaining the nation’s status as a node in the network of transnational capitalism, rather than directly challenging the authoritarianism of the state.

Petrus Liu (2015: 7) argues that US-based queer theory struggles to recognize and properly comprehend such nonliberal varieties of sexual

politics because its “conception of social differences remains restricted by a liberal pluralist culture of identity politics that is distinctively American.” He suggests that queer theorists should look beyond the Western world for a “nonliberal alternative to the Euro-American model of queer emancipation grounded in the liberal values of privacy, tolerance, individual rights, and diversity,” and stop viewing non-Western LGBTQ communities “as belated versions of post-Stonewall social formations in the United States under a singular logic of neoliberal globalization” (7). Such a perspective can only be gained by rethinking queer theory as a global phenomenon that is not necessarily tied to certain influential figures in the Western academy, and instead understanding it to be a “transnational and transcultural practice of which its US instantiation is only part” (15). This means taking “non-Western materials seriously as intellectual resources rather than local illustrations of theoretical paradigms already developed by the canon of [Western] queer theory” (15).

My teaching at NUS was guided by what I take to be a corollary of Liu’s statement: that when analyzing Western historical materials like Victorian literature, Singaporean students should have opportunities to draw on their experiences and insights living in an illiberally pragmatic culture to challenge the assumptions of Euro-American queer critics, rather than taking their arguments to be paradigmatic. Finding myself in the unique position of being a scholar trained in the methods of US-based queer theory hired to teach English literature in a postcolonial nation, I sought to transform this potentially fraught triangulation of cultures into a queerly transnational pedagogical practice. My courses operated under two guiding principles: first, we would take every opportunity to examine how Singapore’s colonial history allows one to see connections between Victorian British and modern Singaporean cultural attitudes; second, when discussing questions about sexuality, we would actively attempt to decenter the assumptions of a liberal, rights-based model of sexual politics.

Rather than presenting both queer theory and Victorian literature as sources of cultural authority, students sought to develop a Singaporean reading of Victorian writing, one that would not implicitly prioritize Western-style identity politics as the default mode for understanding the history of sexuality. Although we read “canonical” works of queer theory, students had opportunities to enter into dialogue with these thinkers in class discussions and assignments, to question whether their claims applied to the Singaporean cultural and political climate, and to consider how their own experiences of public debates about sexuality within a globalized, postcolonial nation could add a new perspective to how sexual selfhood gets constructed in Victorian

texts. Throughout the term, I reminded students that they were not simply attempting to understand the often complex arguments of Euro-American queer theory, or learning how to apply those claims to nineteenth-century literary texts, but that they were themselves doing a form of queer theorizing whenever they brought their own insights to bear on interpretations of the Victorians, regardless of whether or not they were doing so under the aegis of a major theorist.

I was aided in this goal by Aaron K. H. Ho's (2012) essay "How to Bring Singaporeans up Straight (1960s–1990s)" (a reference to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's essay "How to Bring Your Kids up Gay" [1991]), which we discussed early in the semester. Ho identifies structural and systemic similarities between government actions meant to police aberrant sexualities in Victorian England, such as the Contagious Diseases Act and the Wilde trials, and recent controversies in Singapore surrounding the public expression of women's and queer sexuality. As he states, "In both Victorian England and postcolonial Singapore, homosexuality was linked to sickness, perversity, degeneration, shame, immorality, and the 'Other,' all of which were/are seen as threats to the nation" (Ho 2012: 34). This article opened the door for students to make connections between the colonial past and the postcolonial present in class discussion, rather than feel like they were trying to decipher a body of writing that has been deemed culturally important, despite being in many ways strange and distant from their own lives. Assigning this article early on signaled to students that they were invited to discuss the sexual politics of Victorian literature and culture from their own modern Singaporean perspectives.

One of the strongest scholarly examples of the kind of intellectual insights that can be gained from such a cross-cultural approach is found in Jane Yean Chui Wong's (2016) discussion of the 2013 staging of an all-male production of Wilde's *Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) by Singapore's W!ld Rice theater company. She describes how the local context of intense public debates surrounding the potential repeal of 377A brought to light for the Singaporean audience aspects of the original work that have gone under-examined by Western readers. While the play's "homosexual undertones . . . have largely been discussed in terms of the inversion of gender identities and muted desires," an agenda set by important analyses by queer critics like Jonathan Dollimore (1987) and Christopher Craft (1990), "when the play is performed in Singapore, where local attitudes toward homosexuality have drawn comparisons to Victorian society, the perceptions of moral authority invite social and political reckoning" (Wong 2016: 510). According to Wong,

Lady Bracknell's comically supercilious assertion that Jack Worthing's having been "born, or at any rate bred, in a handbag" evidences "a contempt for the ordinary decencies of family life that reminds one of the worst excesses of the French Revolution" comes across in this performance environment "as a criticism of the nature of social policies in Singapore" and "perceptions of what families ought to look like" (512).

In this context, the play can be seen to be interrogating the relationship between formal and informal enforcements of normative moral precepts, and thus it serves as an indirect comment on the Singaporean public's ambivalence toward the notion that the government is obligated to use the law to enforce Confucian and Christian family values. This ambivalence arises from contradictions between the Singaporean state's ostensible liberal institutions of governance, which are supposed to guarantee universal equality and the right to privacy under the law, and the public's nonliberal attitudes regarding the state's obligation to bolster culturally normative codes of morality. According to Wong, it is no coincidence that this tension can be most clearly articulated in Singapore's arts scene, which is financially supported by the government as an engine of national economic growth and prestige, but is also a potentially dangerous venue for the public expression of socially subversive opinions (505). Wilde himself, of course, experienced this contradiction in Victorian England, where his plays were immense commercial successes, yet his writings were also used as evidence against him in court.

Although Wong's article came out too late during my time at NUS for me to assign it as a model for the kinds of conversations we could have in class, we took a similar methodological approach in our discussions and assignments, where local experiences and insights shed new light on historical materials. After engaging with Ho's chapter, we read Thomas Macaulay's (in)famous "Minute on Indian Education" ([1835] 2012) and an 1895 essay from a Singaporean newspaper published upon Wilde's conviction for acts of gross indecency. In Macaulay's colonial policy document, he argues for the creation of a privileged class educated exclusively in English language and literature, so that they would be "Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect" (1640). My students tended to react strongly to this piece because it forced them to confront the fact that their literary education from primary school through the NUS English major, which is primarily devoted to the study of canonical British texts, derived from an explicitly colonialist ideology based on the assumption that European languages and literatures are "intrinsically superior" to anything produced in Asia (1640). As part of our discussion, students inter-

rogated the relationship between English as a tool of colonial domination and its continuing role in their own postcolonial nation, leading them to engage in thoughtful, passionate debates about topics such as the afterlives of nineteenth-century imperialism in their own lives. Yet I also learned that students felt more ambivalent toward Macaulay's policy than I expected, evincing an attitude I identify as "illiberally pragmatic": although they readily acknowledged it to be grounded in unreflective assumptions of Western superiority, they also saw that from a practical standpoint Macaulay grasped the future implications of British colonialism. Students remarked that they felt their English-language education was ultimately beneficial in a world that continues to be dominated by anglophone powers, and it is likely one of the reasons Singapore has been able to hold its own economically and politically against Western nations during the era of decolonization.

After our engagement with "Minute," students read an article I discovered while doing archival research on Wilde's reception in nineteenth-century Singapore.<sup>1</sup> Throughout 1895, the *Straits Times*—then, as now, the island's major English-language daily newspaper—regularly published updates on the trials via the Reuter's *Telegrams* news wire service. When Wilde's conviction was reported in the 27 May 1895 edition, there appeared on the paper's second page an anonymously authored editorial titled "The Wilde Scandal" (see archived article at *Straits Times* 1895). While the article is similar to condemnations of Wilde that appeared all over the world at the time, students readily detected certain aspects of the author's discussion that respond to the colonial context of its publication. Primed by Macaulay to be attentive to how British imperial rule was supported by assumptions of cultural superiority, especially in literary matters, they quickly realized that the author's address to a local anglophone audience takes a defensive posture: the conviction of England's most famous author for indecent acts challenged the supposed cultural and moral authority that justified the English presence in places like Singapore.

The author of the article begins by addressing the charge, prevalent in the 1880s and 1890s, that England was in an era of decadence, its excessive wealth and material comfort eliciting a cultural decline that recapitulated the fall of earlier world empires, one of the symptoms of which was the increased prevalence of homosexual activity—a context my students understood through our supplemental readings on late Victorian sexuality and literary culture by Elaine Showalter (1990) and Stephen Arata (1996). In this context of imperial anxiety and self-doubt, the author writes that Wilde has been convicted of "a vice that has been more or less identified with the

epochs of luxury and opulence in the history of all the nations,” and that “in the palmy days of the Medes and Persians and of the Assyrians, in the zenith of the civilisations of Rome and Greece, their culture was perverted into the channel of that same vice which as Holy Scripture tells brought woe to the Cities of the Plain” (*Straits Times* 1895). Rather than being a symptom of decline, however, the author characterizes the appearance of this “vice” as a sign of cultural achievement and widespread creativity that, paradoxically, in England’s case at least, has no bearing on the value of artworks themselves:

Though not an outcome of intellectual development—although unfortunately associated with it—the vice is curiously identified with periods of great mental attainment, when the arts and sciences were made to speak through the brain of genius and the soul of the poet. . . . We, in our day, as a people of saner morals than the Greeks or the Romans, view the vice with repulsion and disgust, and we have taken good care that our laws bearing upon it shall be such as to reflect our view of what in olden times was thought a smaller matter. More than the actual punishment which the hand of justice metes out, however, is the public odium that never forgets the offender, that bans him as it would a leper, and that makes him for ever a stranger to the homes of pure men. (*Straits Times* 1895)

In light of this article, students realized that new aspects of Victorian decadence came to light within the Singaporean context that were not discussed in the readings from Showalter and Arata. They saw that the author’s seemingly paradoxical attempt to characterize homosexuality as a mark of British cultural achievement while also portraying it as a moral failing relied on the fact that both English laws and mainstream public opinion condemned same-sex activity. In contrast from earlier empires, which treated homosexuality with indifference, England’s law and mores protected their imperial culture from being corrupted by its queer creative class. If one imagines this essay’s appearance in an English-language newspaper in 1895 to suggest that the author is addressing primarily the island’s British business and administrative classes, the author can be understood to be implicitly defending the English presence in Singapore against the sense of lost moral authority and cultural prestige that characterized 1890s culture.

Weekly response papers asked students to connect these readings to contemporary culture, and it gradually became apparent to them that the issues and arguments at stake in these Victorian writings echoed current public debates in Singapore. Many student responses anticipated Yue’s argument by discussing the controversies surrounding the prominent presence of



a queer creative class associated with a burgeoning arts industry. They also discussed the widely held belief that public morality should be enforced by the nation's laws, anticipating Wong's discussion of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Overall, students realized that analyzing these nineteenth-century texts from a modern Singaporean perspective allowed them to see that conflicts between liberal and illiberal perspectives on queer sexualities consistently occurred in relation to public debates about the place of the arts and artists in society, and that such debates were not simply unique to their own time and place but were in many ways continuous with the contradiction of Victorian imperial culture. Perhaps the most important outcome of these discussions, though, was students' growing realization that Western queer critics did not necessarily have privileged insights into Victorian literature and culture, and that insights derived from their own experiences in an illiberal state could yield insights into literary history that were perhaps unattainable by theorists grounded in unexamined liberal norms.

The sense that students were doing queer theory in our classroom whenever we sought to displace Western perspectives on sexuality continued in conversations on Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray*. Along with the novel, I assigned selections from Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality, Volume One* (1976) and Ed Cohen's classic essay "Writing Gone Wilde" (1987), which uses Foucault's ideas to discuss the role *Dorian Gray* played in Wilde's trials, and as a response to the increased social policing of male sexuality at the fin de siècle. We first went over Foucault's arguments about the "repressive hypothesis" and the "reverse discourse" of homosexuality, which together suggest that arguments for LGBTQ civil rights that proceed from essentialist notions of identity actually consolidate structures of power that oppress queer subjects. Students then considered in their responses whether Foucault's insights applied to the debates surrounding the Singaporean Parliament's 2007 decision not to repeal 377A. In the course of our discussion, they determined that the government and local LGBTQ activists were often talking past each other because the latter relied on a Western "reverse discourse" of minority rights developed in the Anglo-American political context, while the former appealed to the importance of "social cohesion" and the statistical fact that the majority of Singaporeans did not approve of homosexuality. They determined that this was another instance of nineteenth-century tensions between liberal rights and illiberal social values reappearing in contemporary social discourse.

After this, we pivoted to a discussion of *Dorian Gray* in the context of Cohen's Foucauldian reading, which is when I mentioned to my students

the connection between Wilde's prosecution under the Labouchere amendment and Singapore's 377A. After a close reading of some of the novel's more obviously homoerotic moments in light of Cohen's argument, I asked them whether they believed the PAP's ambivalence toward non-normative sexuality might also serve as a form of cultural hegemony, as it did in late Victorian England. They responded enthusiastically to this line of questioning, especially when they were asked to apply these insights to the long-standing historical question about why Henry Labouchere's last-minute addition to the Criminal Law Amendment Bill of 1885 was rushed through and so readily approved by Parliament, when the stated intention of the amendment was to raise the age of consent for women. They concluded that the surprising success of Labouchere might ultimately be ascribed to the Victorian state's interest in policing the sexualities of subaltern populations that would eventually result in the importation of 377A to places like Singapore—an insight derived from our consideration of why Singapore's current government would want to maintain that same policy, despite the nation's ostensible rejection of “Western values” and the legacy of colonialism.

Throughout the semester, I reminded students that the unique insights they were deriving from Victorian literature and culture, especially when it came to untangling these texts' complex sexual, gender, and racial politics, did not arise merely from applying ideas from Western queer critics like Sedgwick, Cohen, Dollimore, Craft, Foucault, and others to English literature. They were building on but moving beyond these theoretical models by putting literary and theoretical writings into dialogue with their own experiences living in a postcolonial nation with contradictory attitudes toward liberalism that mirrored and historically derived from the ambivalences of the Victorian imperial state. By displacing the liberal assumptions that are often the unquestioned and unexamined horizon of queer theory in the West, my students were better able to grasp what Liu (2015: 7) calls the “impersonal, structural, and systemic workings of power” that not only characterize postcolonial Singapore but also are an aspect of Victorian literature and culture that has been underexplored by Western queer theorists. I suggest that engaging in queer critique in a manner that does not take liberalism as the horizon of its assumptions, as my students did, is key to decolonizing the British literary and Euro-American theoretical canons and creating what Pedro Paulo Gomes Pereira (2019: 422) has recently called a “decolonial queer theory” that is “always open to other-theories” such as (I argue) the illiberal pragmatics of postcolonial Singapore.

Although the remit of my teaching was solely Victorian literature,

I intended my approach to dovetail with that of my colleagues who taught modern Singaporean writing (including the renowned scholar Philip Holden) with a strong emphasis on recent queer writers on the island. Based on comments I received from students throughout the semester, the results of such an approach were twofold: first, that they were surprised to discover the many similarities between Victorian and Singaporean society; second, that their ability to generate new interpretations of these texts without deferring to the authority of Western critics allowed them to have a new relationship to the British literary canon, relieved as they were of the implicit obligation to imaginatively project themselves into the position of a US or UK literature student who would “naturally” assume these anglophone texts to form part of their cultural patrimony. Katherine Bergren (2018: 38) has recently termed this phenomenon “the daffodil gap” in postcolonial culture (a reference to the popularity of William Wordsworth’s 1807 poem “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud” in colonial education systems), a “productive provocation” elicited by the “gap between the colonizer’s culture and the lived experience of the colonized.” I want to suggest that non-Western students should be encouraged to develop a method of queer theorizing that draws on their experiences living in cultures characterized by tensions between liberal and nonliberal tendencies—a contradiction that has persisted in both the Western and non-Western world since the age of nineteenth-century imperialism, but which can be invisible to those who limit themselves solely to paradigms offered by the global West. In their introduction to a recent special issue of the journal *Victorian Studies* titled “Undisciplining Victorian Studies,” Ronjaunee Chatterjee, Alicia Mireles Christoff, and Amy R. Wong (2020: 373) have called on the field to stop perpetuating the same “whiteness, universalism, and liberalism” that characterized the Victorians themselves. I am suggesting that students like those in my Singaporean classroom are in a perfect position to accomplish this project.

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