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Abstract:

This article outlines the development of the Singapore Poetry Writing Month (SingPoWriMo) digital community, organised around an annual month-long poem-a-day, prompt-based writing challenge carried out on Facebook. As a highly active digital writing community, SingPoWriMo has generated more poetry in English in its six-year history than the Singapore literary community has since independence. The poems posted on SingPoWriMo are able to reach the group's population of more than 7,000 members without the traditional filters to publication such as editorial input, publisher selection, economic choice and transaction, and critical review. Conversely, social media provides selective replacements for some of these functions, via comment threads, 'likes' and other reactions, as well as Facebook's viral sharing function that allows poetry to reach an audience beyond the group. These factors of mass reach, rapidity, immediacy, and instant feedback have implications for the poetry generated, which goes on to integrate and remake traditional modes of publication and performance according to the qualities of a digital community. This article seeks to examine the historical antecedents and influences of high-volume, high-speed poetic output; the nature of the poetry being written in these digital writing communities; and the effects and implications of the SingPoWriMo phenomenon on the Singaporean and regional literary ecosystems. SingPoWriMo and its counterparts are new ways of writing that also create, and demand, new ways of understanding writing.

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Keywords: SingPoWriMo, Singapore, poetry, digital communities, form

Declaration of interest:

Joshua Ip is a director of Sing Lit Station, the charity that manages SingPoWriMo.

Introduction

The long tradition of web-based poetry can be traced to Theo Lutz's stochastic texts programmed on a Zuse Z22 computer in 1959; the experiments of Oulipo, an experimental poetry group founded in France in 1960 that sought to incorporate mathematical structures into their literature; and generative poetry created by computer programmes such as 'Auto-Beatnik' in the 1960s. Other forms include kinetic poetry, which utilises the computer's ability to animate; hypertext poetry that makes use of links to challenge the sequential flow of conventional poetry; and code poetry, which combines computer code and poetry. Since the popularisation of the Internet in the 1990s, these forms have found new iterations. In the early 21st century, the avant-garde movement Flarf harvested found language from web searches to construct poetry; in the same vein, contemporary poets like Steven Zultanski and Sam Riviere have used material from websites for their collections. The past two decades have also seen movement beyond the computer-based, programmatic nature of digital poetry. Genres and movements such as Alternative literature (Alt-lit), social media poetry, and micropoetry are all products of the internet, characterised by web slang and conventions (such as bad spelling and grammar) and a 'wide-eyed sincerity' that speaks to the principle of directness afforded by the Internet's reach (Goldsmith, 2014, para. 2). They are also often circulated on online platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube.

A key development for web-based poetry in the new millennium is the online collaborative writing community – the most significant arguably being the US-based National Poetry Writing Month (NaPoWriMo) movement, which began in 2003 with poet and publisher, Maureen Thorson. Thorson called for writers to 'write and post a poem a day for the entire duration of April' and included links to websites of participating writers on her blog (Thorson, 2003). This initiative modified the longer-running National Novel Writing Month (NaNoWriMo) challenge (est. 1999) to write a novel in a month¹. These online initiatives create spaces for virtual communities premised on collaboration, where writers can receive encouragement and feedback from one another, establish a sense of belonging, and share resources such as writing prompts. They are, as the editors of *Creating Communities* note, challenging the Romantic figure of the solitary writer through '[t]he rapid and dynamic integration of a diverse range of new media and technologies into [the creative writing] practice, the focus on trans- and interdisciplinary research in many academic institutions, and the increasing ways [the creative writing discipline] engages with wider communities' (Sarangi & Walker, 2020, p. 1).

This article provides a broad survey of Singapore Poetry Writing Month (SingPoWriMo), Singapore's iteration of NaPoWriMo, which has taken place on Facebook every April since

2014. It thereby makes a case for the impact of online communities of poetic practice and their effects on the literary scene. Working on the basis of a dynamic rubric aimed at fostering large volumes of poetry writing and critique at a rapid pace, SingPoWriMo has evolved into a testbed for experienced and emerging Singaporean poets alike. While poets foisted with the ‘social media poetry’ moniker, like Rupi Kaur and Lang Leav, have been scorned by the critical establishment despite their works being bestsellers, writers who have cut their teeth on SingPoWriMo have bucked this trend by moving on to critical acclaim and a substantial readership. However, this growth in size, structure, and function, as well as the considerable influence SingPoWriMo has had in shaping Singapore’s literary landscape, have not been matched by equivalent scholarly research. Gwee Li Sui (2019) notes that despite being an enclave of literary production in Singapore, SingPoWriMo is a part of our material culture that is not sufficiently known, chronicled or interpreted. Even as the editors of the first SingPoWriMo anthology assert that the movement was their way of ‘freeing poetry from its academic or highbrow association; [their] way of saying to [the reader] that it’s obvious from the sheer diversity of poems and poets in this collection that poetry is still relevant in our city’ (Ang et al., 2014, p. vii), it seems appropriate now for academic study to cast attention on this new centre of development. If the concurrent surge in the number of historically retrospective anthologies published in Singapore during this period is an indicator², there exists a strong urge towards curating a narrative of poetic development in Singapore. SingPoWriMo can be seen as an online corollary of these gestative conversations.

This study seeks to address the lack of scholarship on this online phenomenon. We are particularly interested in examining three notable developments in Singapore’s literary scene that can be attributed to SingPoWriMo. Firstly, SingPoWriMo has contributed to the growth of the local literary scene by setting up digital infrastructure that emphasises community building and connection, complementing existing infrastructure such as arts organisations. As a community of practice that creates opportunities for collaborative creative practice, SingPoWriMo has encouraged formal innovation on an unprecedented scale locally. Secondly, SingPoWriMo has resulted in a reconceptualisation of poetry as part of a larger conversation rather than as solitary self-expression. An example of this is the ‘daisy chain’ phenomenon that is directly influenced by the nature of online communities: participants responding not just to the daily writing prompts but also to each other. This, in turn, has led to new conversations about the politics of poetic form and the possibility of poetry as insurrection through formal innovation. Lastly, the affordances of online communities of practice, in terms of mass participation, high visibility, and rapidity of composition and publication, have fundamentally changed the means of poetic production. The digital infrastructure of SingPoWriMo challenges more conventional patterns of interaction in the literary community, which are generally vertical and limited in reach, and hence contributes to the democratisation of poetic creation and dissemination.

These developments constitute new frontiers in a cultural moment where poetry is seen as irrelevant to cultural and civic spaces while being the practice of an insular and institutionalised community. Unlike the novel, where reading publics are generated from a cultural economy centred on the literary prize (English, 2005, p. 256), the popularity of poetry, as with

SingPoWriMo, is often driven by producers doubling as consumers. Despite the umbrage attached to the assumed lack of introspection, ambition, and craft in what Donald Hall calls the mass produced McPoem (Hall, 1983, p. 95), SingPoWriMo resembles less a Fordian assembly line for cookie-cutter instant verse, and more the ceaseless, catalytic and recursive action of fractals as each poem responds formalistically and thematically to multiple forerunners. Though the focus of this article is not on theme or subject matter, the highly generative and automated writing processes supported by SingPoWriMo have enabled poetry that is current and responsive to contemporary sociopolitical issues. As a latter-day iteration of T. S. Eliot's famed pronouncements on the necessary depersonalisation of the poet and the importance of assessing poetic works as part of tradition, SingPoWriMo, as with other digital poetry communities around the world, reinvents Eliot's declaration that 'no poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone' (Eliot, 2001, p. 1093). Increasingly, 'tradition' resides not in Eliot's combinatory assessment of poetic value over the generations, but in a comparative and conversational mode of production that reflects how many societies are culturally diffusive, migrational, and discursively porous – Singapore being just one example.

SingPoWriMo as an online community of practice

Since its first iteration in 2014, SingPoWriMo has evolved to develop an infrastructure that emphasises its nature as an online community of creative practice. A community of practice (CoP), defined by Lave and Wenger as 'a system of relationships between people, activities, and the world' (1991, p. 98), is a frame for understanding creative interactions in collaboration. Within a CoP, common identities and agendas are self-decided upon, best practices are disseminated, and the conditions of collective learning are created. CoPs are particularly relevant in the context of creative practice. Webb and Carroll argue for the key role of community and networks in growing creative thought and capacity, a role they point out is not a recent phenomenon (2017, pp. 2-6). Philp, Doolan, and Wilson similarly note that this emphasis on collaboration has long been the bedrock of traditional writing groups, where trust and strong social relations are instrumental in the development of creative work (2020, pp. 3-5). Lori Howe, among others, has written about how the positive effects of collaboration can ramify beyond the confines of the workshop group (2016, p. 493). Their work reinforces that of Randall Collins, who identified communities as centres for the passing on of cultural capital, transfer of emotional energy, and creating competitive rivalry, thus ultimately driving intellectual change (1998, p. 71). That said, the collaborative workshop model has its share of detractors. Critics have argued that the atmosphere of workshops can be difficult to control, potentially leading to uncondusive, even violent atmospheres, which is particularly the case for minority voices (Kearns 2009, pp. 799-801). In addition, the instructor-student system has been accused of resulting in the homogenisation of voices (Kearns 2009; Shivani 2011).

While there is no comprehensive scholarship to date that surveys the efficacy of creative writing mentorships and workshops in Singapore, it is safe to assume that programmes like the Mentor Access Project (MAP) and Creative Arts Programme (CAP) have played a part in sustaining the number of writers in the scene³. In the new millennium, support from presses

such as Ethos Books and Math Paper Press has led to a growing number of single-author collections and anthologies being published. There were 245 new poetry publications in English from 2000-2017, averaging 9.7 per year in the 2000s and 18.5 per year in the 2010s⁴. In addition, new literary institutions have taken form, including Word Forward in 2003, which supports the growth of spoken word poetry; Poetry Festival Singapore in 2016, a charity running the eponymous annual poetry festival; and Sing Lit Station in 2016, an independent literary organisation and home for writerly efforts related to Singapore. Sing Lit Station also curates several workshop initiatives, such as the annual Manuscript Boot Camp for Poetry and Prose, and regular monthly workshop groups.

SingPoWriMo replicates these infrastructures online, the benefits of which have been significant in the past two years with the Covid-19 pandemic, and the consequential suspensions of physical gatherings⁵. As a CoP, the 7,000 members of the SingPoWriMo Facebook group (as of June 2021) respond to daily prompts set by a group of volunteer moderators who are often previous participants of SingPoWriMo, illustrating the enabling functions of the community. To facilitate the transmission of institutional memory, junior moderators are guided by senior moderators in the running of the annual event, particularly in the crafting of prompts for accessibility to diverse audiences, with an emphasis on current issues. While prompts are created ahead of the event, and coordinated by senior moderators, they often reflect the community's interests in form, translation, social justice, popular culture references, and digital modes of interaction. Prompts also reflect the personal poetic practice of these moderators: an informal means of transmitting one's aesthetic outlook. Prompts from 2020 include the 'Mother Tongue' prompt for a language from Southeast Asia, and the Forgotten City prompt encouraging a migrant perspective, with bonus references to 'Home-Based Learning' as part of the pandemic schooling experience. The bonuses, or sub-challenges to each prompt, function as scaffolding or extension tasks for individuated learning, while serving as foci for secondary conversations in the comments.

The regularity of the prompts, released daily at 10pm, affords participants a sense of structure and an opportunity to turn writing into a social experience as they log in at the same time to engage with the prompt. Beyond generating poetry, participants also interact with each other by commenting, 'liking', and sharing one another's works. Such interaction is encouraged in the 'About' section of the group, where participants are reminded that 'commenting on three other poems for each poem you post is a good rule of thumb' (SingPoWriMo). The ongoing and live comments on new poems encourage both first-time and experienced versifiers with near-instant feedback. Since 2015, senior moderators have also selected entries to receive prizes from donors, which include local presses, arts institutions, and corporate sponsors. In this way, SingPoWriMo brings together various stakeholders in the literary ecosystem. These official prizes are complemented by unofficial awards, the categories of which vary annually, with some rewarding community-building and others effort, continued participation, and formal innovation.

In contrast to the regulated educational structures of the traditional classroom, SingPoWriMo as a CoP provides something more akin to Giroux's concept of 'public pedagogy': a radical

form of learning that moves beyond conventional educational spaces and curriculums to germinate personal growth (2004, pp. 59-79). Participation in SingPoWriMo is self-paced and voluntary, even as it offers newer writers an opportunity to sustain and improve their craft, facilitated by access to experienced, practising poets. As will be discussed later, the online nature of the movement also helps to democratise the local literary scene, by improving accessibility to craft expertise and other forms of literary capital. Furthermore, guidelines for participation are minimal and broad. For instance, in response to the question concerning what constitutes a poem (i.e. a suitable entry for SingPoWriMo), the 'About' page on the Facebook group merely states, 'whatever you want it to be' (SingPoWriMo). There are also no deadlines for entries despite the daily prompts, one does not need to be a published writer to participate, and participants are allowed to post unfinished poems. As another example of the benefits of collaborative practice, there is a history of participants receiving suggestions on how to complete unfinished poems.

The few community rules that do appear on the 'About' page work towards mitigating some risks identified with the collaborative workshop model; these can be prevalent on online platforms, which are notorious for perpetuating cyberbullying given the veil of anonymity behind which users can hide. Clearly stated, these rules prevent 'Inflammatory hate speech', 'Deliberate plagiarism', and comments that perpetuate 'Racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia' (SingPoWriMo). There are also reminders to make only one post a day to prevent flooding the group, to 'keep criticism about the poem not the poet', to make use of content warnings, and a reminder not to contact poets directly. These rules are enforced by a network of junior moderators, a role introduced in 2016 in response to the increasing number of participants. Working on a shift system, junior moderators monitor the comments sections of every post, role-modelling constructive critical feedback; they are aided by a bot that gathers data onto a spreadsheet, directing attention to posts that have slipped through the net. Poems or comments that violate community rules are taken down. SingPoWriMo has also put in place hashtag conventions for signalling the poet's readiness for critique, with '#plsrit' and '#critifyouwant' indicating openness to any criticism, '#gentlecrit' if positive criticism is preferred, and '#nocrit' if none is desired.

These measures work towards creating a safe and conducive space for creative practice that reaps the benefits of a CoP while minimising attendant risks. While the emphasis is on fostering a sense of community, SingPoWriMo also allows opportunities for creative and critical development. As a self-curated Singapore-poetry-loving focus group that is mostly young, internet-savvy, and with progressive poetry leanings, SingPoWriMo is an ideal location for writers to debut new work that may not be ready for publication. It also allows their work to be read by a large audience that includes publishers in addition to peers and potential future readers. This rough-and-ready aspect of online CoPs may contribute to the view that poems generated in such spaces often lack critical value. In the case of SingPoWriMo, however, established writers have also benefited from the online community. Award-winning writers such as Alfian Sa'at and Desmond Kon have participated in SingPoWriMo, and material written during SingPoWriMo has been included in their print publications, thus challenging the preconception that social media poetry is for newcomers unfamiliar with the literary

establishment. Award-winning poet Alvin Pang has credited SingPoWriMo with prompting him to produce new work, extrapolate ideas from peer observation, and convey multiple perspectives through the use of form, particularly ‘in a literary context that has otherwise favoured singular perspectives and received notions about thinking, writing, and authorship’ (2020, p. 133).

Writers whose early works emerged from SingPoWriMo have, moreover, gone on to receive critical acclaim, both at national and international levels. The Golden Point Award, Singapore’s premier competition for unpublished writers, has been dominated by SingPoWriMo participants, who took four out of each year’s top honours in 2019 and 2017, and swept the first three prizes in 2015. The last two winners of the Singapore Literature Prize for English Poetry, Marylyn Tan in 2020 for *GAZE BACK*, and Samuel Lee in 2018 for *A Field Guide to Supermarkets in Singapore*, actively shared work in SingPoWriMo, workshopped their material in post-SingPoWriMo writing groups, and were published in SingPoWriMo print anthologies. Tan’s Singapore-Literature-Prize-winning collection was also shortlisted for the Lambda Literary Awards (Lesbian Poetry) in 2019. Meanwhile, Lee has since had his work published in *Yale Literary Magazine* and *Cordite Poetry Review*, and digitally adapted by the National Arts Council for the project *Little Red Comma*. Other notable poets include Amanda Chong, whose first poetry collection, *Professions* (2016), grew out of work in SingPoWriMo 2014 and was shortlisted for the 2018 Singapore Literature Prize. Daryl Lim Wei Jie, from the same SingPoWriMo 2014 cohort, published his debut collection *A Book of Changes* in 2016. Both Chong and Lim were part of the founding team of poetry.sg, the first database to publicly profile Singaporean poets with critical introductions. Reflecting the egalitarian nature of SingPoWriMo, they continue to be multi-mediators in the literary scene, with Chong co-founding ReadAble, a non-profit organisation that supports literacy in low-income neighbourhoods, and Lim co-editing *Food Republic* (2020), Singapore’s first anthology of literary food writing.

Formal innovation and the ‘daisy-chain’ phenomenon as critical interventions

The critical potential of poems generated through SingPoWriMo can perhaps be best defended by way of the formal innovations that have emerged from, or been popularised through, the movement’s prompts. Examples include the liwuli, kōel, peneira poroso, coronasonnet, the nucleus poem invented by Syedur Rahman Liton in 2015, and the twin cinema invented by Yeow Kai Chai in 2010⁶. These formal innovations often show the influence of digital culture: the asingbol, invented by Desmond Kon Zhicheng-Mingdé in 2010, is composed of 140 characters in the spirit of Twitter. Formal innovation has been enabled on an unprecedented scale by a ‘daisy-chain’ phenomenon observed in – and arguably unique to – SingPoWriMo.

SingPoWriMo functions as an online real-time writing workshop that possesses a rapid, organic self-reflexivity, which distinguishes it from the conventional writing workshop. In SingPoWriMo, the act of poetic creation is often closely linked with the act of poetic consumption: the daily prompt for writers shares the same space as posted responses, and

writers can view the work of others by scrolling down the page. It has been noted that poets adapt their responses to those already posted, whether towards the trajectory of seeking out difference and originality in one's approach, or, more interestingly, in the opposite direction – by responding not only to the prompt, but also to other poems already posted. The network of responses is enriched with each intersection of reactions, which tend towards the divergent and the excursive.

When the citation of works produced within the confines of SingPoWriMo occurs multiple times, and poets form a digital sequence of mutually-referencing pieces that link back in to a central prompt or idea, the phenomenon known as the 'daisy-chain' occurs. These include zodiac chains (Wang, 2016b, n.p.), mistletoe/religion chains (Ip, 2020c), and a single chain poem written on the number *pi*, with each line by a different poet, following the number of digits in each decimal place of *pi*. This last poem progressed to 116 digits before petering out (Ho, 2018, n.p.). In one notable instance, the theme in question was the seminal *Thought Catalog* article, 'Don't date a girl who writes' (Zabala, 2016, n.p.); this produced variations that included 'don't date a poet', 'date a poet', and 'don't post facebook poems about the girl you date' (Wang, 2016a, n.p.).

In *Thought Catalog*, the female poet is portrayed as a ruthless opportunist who repurposes the details of any romantic relationship as literary subject. But as the daisy-chain evolved over four days to include nineteen poems, individual pieces exercised a redemptive depiction of digital poetic creation, while continuing with the original article's satire of the poet. Wang's 'Don't date the girl who posts Facebook poetry' features a female bard who is an ardent fan of the cats at Singapore's pioneering independent bookstore BooksActually and who 'will only eat/organic greens and nut butter' (Wang, 2016c, n.p.). The poem immediately following, 'Don't date a guy who posts Facebook poems' by Crispin Rodrigues, presents the boy-poet as similarly afflicted by millennial sensitivities as a 'dirty treehugging hipster who spends / more attention on his coffee than himself' (Rodrigues, 2016, n.p.). Both poems adopt a similar mode of address to the ex of the Facebook poet, now doomed as an object of perpetual scrutiny. Of significance too is the humorous meta-commentary on the affordances and limitations of being a Facebook poet. In Rodrigues's piece, the poet's 'affection is edited constantly / and demands likes in return' while Wang's poem satirises the annual SingPoWriMo as where the heart-broken bard 'will immortalise you, / every April, with poetry of her own / and Facebook feeds will echo her words on'. Besides indicating the resonances in mode, theme, and subject matter that make the daisy-chain a key feature of this online community, Rodrigues's and Wang's poems provide a meta-language for the transmissibility and desired longevity of digital poetry.

Daisy-chains have also seen poets responding to and combining various poetic forms. In 'Marriage Vows' from SingPoWriMo 2017, Low Kian Seh marries the traditional Indian kural form, the invented anima methodi form, and the recently (re)coined twin cinema form, for a piece that contains the syllabic, meta-content, and cross-reading constraints of three forms of varying origins (Low, 2017, n.p.). Employing the independent two-line couplet of the kural, with the first line consisting of four words, and the second of three, Low attains a clausal concision in each stanza, even as this is exceeded by the twin cinema's requirement of bridging

across a central divide. The challenges of a marriage enduring ‘in sickness and health’ are set in relief against the enlarged time-scale of how ‘moments are infinite’. The final twin stanzas feature the volta rule of the *anima methodi*, with the touching conclusion that ‘two equal halves’ can be differently understood as ‘we are one’. Low’s medley of three forms popularised during SingPoWriMo may seem unnecessarily ambitious, but the resulting piece benefits from the brevity and graphometric qualities of enforced formal requirements.

Marriage	Vows
treasures within our chests	in richness or poverty
beat pulsing love	never in wanting
keep sight of moments	for better or worse
that matter most	with us together
though years are numbered	in sickness and health
moments are infinite	cherish all regardless
lives for life conjoined	till death parts us
two equal halves	we are one

Figure 1. ‘Marriage Vows’, Low Kian She, 2017, Facebook

Another notable example was observed in Joshua Ip’s presentation at the Writers Immersion and Cultural Exchange (WrICE) in Jogjakarta in 2018, during which he debuted the invented *kōel* form. Within half an hour, more than 100 ‘*kōels*’ had appeared in the comments thread, including *kōels* about *kōels*, haiku-*kōel* hybrids, and twin cinema-*kōels*, once again illustrating how the daisy-chain scaffolds poetry writing, with formal requirements as an engine of innovative replication.

At the core of the daisy-chain is the idea of response. This self-propagating bardic conga line, as it were, can happen spontaneously (as per the *Thought Catalog* chain above) or be constructed more deliberately by the prompts. For example, a prompt from 2016 reads: ‘Find a poem in this group written by anyone else. Rewrite it in half the length. Remember to tag them, and link the original piece’ (Ip, 2016a, n.p.). The intent of the prompt was to give participants experience in the too-little-practised art of poetic revision, with enforced concision as an external constraint to drive the discipline of selectivity. The underlying assumption was that poets would be more willing to ‘kill other people’s babies’ rather than their own. However, the unexpected outcome was an onrush of halving and re-halving of poems, where poets sought to outdo each other by repeatedly fraction-ing the same piece into increasingly shorter fragments. One notable sequence saw a long poem written in blank verse condensed into four couplets, then a quatrain, then a 14-syllable couplet (Heng, 2016).

These daisy-chains are not unique to the digital world; their ancestry can be traced to the literary tradition of call and response, including Japan’s intricate correspondence poems, known as the *renga* or *kusari no renga*, Somalia’s *silasilaad* chain poems, or even the writing workshop’s

overused ‘exquisite corpse’ exercise, where poets write a line and pass it to the next person to continue. However, there are two differences that SingPoWriMo daisy chains maintain from the courtly cho-renga of Basho and his colleagues: the speed at which the poetic stimulus propagates through the social media network, and the multiple simultaneous vectors of propagation rather than a single sequential dialogue. Interconnectivity and hyper-linkage are defining factors of the internet and social media – it is apt that they are definitive in the poetry of these media as well. This brings to mind Jonathan Swift’s automatic poetry engine in *Gulliver’s Travels*, or Hoffmann and Hofmann’s infinite monkey theorem: ways of producing writing within a set of rules that is replicable, yet demanding creative reinvention by each individual poet as part of an aggregated response. Via the daisy-chain, form becomes akin to an internet meme, rapidly propagating through the social media environs, responding organically to different iterations of itself. Poetry becomes no longer an individual form of expression, but an interactive entry in a larger conversation.

SingPoWriMo has always been self-aware of its fascination with poetic form. The superstructure of the annual SingPoWriMo print publication, which ran from 2014 to 2019, published the best poetry of each day in response to prompts, and identified formal trends that ran through each year. This emphasis, in turn, led to conversations about the politics of working with – and responding to – received forms. The editors of *Unfree Verse*, an anthology of Singaporean Anglophone poetry in form, note that Singaporean formal poetry ‘embodies the tension between repeating and repudiating colonial histories ... that Singapore politics and culture at large has also had to grapple with’ (Tse et al., 2017, p. xxiii); the forms of SingPoWriMo are similarly animated by this tension. The use of forms from non-regional cultures such as the Japanese haiku, Italian and English sonnets, and the French villanelle in SingPoWriMo is complemented by deliberate attempts to introduce and reinvent regional forms; these include the pantun, syair, empat perkataan, and udaiyaathathu. The revival of these forms, and the propagation of invented forms, extend beyond the movement as poets publish their work in international journals and collections. Local press, Squirrel Line Press, has published full anthologies dedicated to the invented forms of the found/fount sonnet, anima methodi, and asingbol; while the twin cinema form has been introduced to Hong Kong by way of *Twin Cities: An Anthology of Twin Cinema from Singapore and Hong Kong* (Ho & Ip, 2017). Many of these forms have entered the local poetic vocabulary, with poets often deploying them as part of their arsenal beyond the confines of SingPoWriMo altogether.

The daisy-chain phenomenon, and the formal innovation it drives, encourages and normalises a critical rebelliousness towards conventional registers of what is considered ‘literary’ in literary writing. Beyond invention and revival of poetic forms, SingPoWriMo has also facilitated writing in more than one language. In an article that notes the ‘linguistic and semiotic vibrancy witnessed in SingPoWriMo more generally’ and draws on the ideas of Pennycook and Otsuji to note a mundane metrolingualism that calls attention to the ‘ordinariness of diversity’ (2020, p. 51), Lee Tong King cites the example of various prompts in 2017, which requested the writing of poems in Singlish, the creation of verse via ‘faithless translation’, and the usage of non-poetic registers such as computer code or legal agreements (2021, p. 51). These transformative perspectives are not confined to the virtual space of SingPoWriMo. For

instance, Lee views poems that reference specific train stations in Singapore as an extension into daily realities that ‘integrate poetry with the city in an embodied manner’ (2021, p. 51). The reinvention of what is poetic, and of literary value is programmed into the creative methodology of SingPoWriMo, through the appropriation and re-constellation of existing semiotic networks into re-energised and eclectic signifiatory registers. As Lee aptly puts it, SingPoWriMo ‘proliferates quotidian creativities through the affordances of social media networking technologies’, which are quotidian for their operation outside ‘the purview of the literary establishment’ (2021, p. 50). Paradoxical as it might seem, the SingPoWriMo predilection for form actually conceals an insurrectionary spirit.

Notably, the predominance of prompt-following as opposed to #noprompt poems means the latter is often overlooked. The first three SingPoWriMo anthologies all featured segments dedicated to poems that deliberately chose not to engage with any prompt. In the introduction to the #noprompt section of the first anthology, Pooja Nansi writes: ‘there were also bad, mad bards who wouldn’t be told to colour within the lines. So many poems sprang up daily to disregard the prompt of the day (and rightly so) to say what they were bursting to say’ (Ang et al., 2014, p. 197). In the following year, editor Jennifer Anne Champion expressed hesitancy in relation to the prompt-constructed poem, which demonstrates ‘a well-intentioned but anxious attitude towards hitting all the classic ideas of what maketh a poem’; this, she argued, came at the expense of a poet’s voice, and the uncovering of subject matter in a way that is ‘new or authentic’ (2015, p. 237). Champion describes how she was grading twelve-year-olds writing about love by following the Oulipean rules of a prompt, and laments that such a ‘kamikaze dive’ into mature themes does not allow poets to inhabit their work with corresponding scrutiny of their own life experiences (2015, p. 237).

Echoing Champion’s concerns, editors of online journals or anthologies in recent years have complained in private about ‘the SingPoWriMo poem’, the poem self-evidently written to answer a restrictive prompt, then submitted to an open call without revisions. Poetry produced in response to prompts is not always valuable outside the context of the prompt and sometimes evinces an external orientation towards hollow performativity. While SingPoWriMo’s prompts are excellent at encouraging beginners to start writing consistently, the negative effects of overusing cookie-cutter stimuli on the wider literary scene are also important to note. Taken to an extreme, some of these poems resemble the ‘McPoem’, defined by Hall as poetry produced for rapid publication, with the Model T and fast food as analogies for a poetic process unrefined by a necessary duration for objective scrutiny (Hall, 1983, p. 95). Hall’s main criticism concerns lack of ambition craft-wise, stemming from how contemporary poets do not engage deeply with poetic tradition as a model for their writing (p. 93). In the absence of more specific commentary on record, the authors deduce that SingPoWriMo does sometimes give rise to formulaic poems produced by writers with a (Singaporean) tendency towards efficiency and cookie-cutter approaches instead of hard-won reflection on craft or subject matter. Yet it is also not entirely accurate to claim that prompt poems are devoid of writerly accomplishment or their creator’s own personal aesthetic, in part due to the dynamism of collective discussion and #plscrit feedback on the Facebook page.

Perhaps the final word on the value of prompts, or lack thereof, can be left to 2016 anthology editor Ruth Tang:

Because a prompt isn't a question in the way essays and exams and other educationally leading questions are. Even when you're chasing the #bonus or a whole pile of accruing #bonuses, poetry does this without being a clean line of argument. You don't have to show a working. But I'll be the first to admit that poetry with origins in a prompt, whatever the direction taken, is wholly different than poetry that isn't written towards or against something. (Ip et al., 2016, p. 279)

Democratisation of literary production

Power in literary spheres is heavily trammelled and protected by an interlocking network of institutions; a limited number of publishers and editors constrain the means of production while cultural institutions, academic institutions, prizes, and journals convey authority to a chosen few. The new writer subjugates themselves to the unspoken rules of the literary economy before receiving blessings from various community gatekeepers, and introductions into gated literary communities, where they are finally recognised as writers proper. Our survey of the first six years of SingPoWriMo indicates that the online community has, to some extent, been able to overturn this static system by placing the ability to write and be read in the hands of more.

The social media affordances of a public Facebook group both accelerate the speed of poetic production through mass publication, and the pace at which a poet develops their work. The average SingPoWriMo participant amasses considerably more real-time feedback and comparative assessments against other prompt poems, as compared to a one-on-one conversation with an editor or mentor. Emerging writers can, through the 'handling of materials in practice', access tacit knowledge that arises from the connections made in the process of creation (Bolt, 2007, p. 29). Shared poems become a pooled resource for writers, in a supportive environment not necessarily available outside the group (Pang, 2020, p. 132). Moreover, SingPoWriMo is a public platform where one's work may be profiled, leading to invitations to writing collaborations, workshops, and publication projects, with the group each year functioning as a catalyst for further literary self-organisation.

The relative immediacy of social media interactions lends greater momentum to the writing, editing, and publishing process: 'likes' and other reaction options offer near-instant approval, and sharing functions mean that the work is more likely to go 'viral', 'virality' itself being a social media phenomenon. An example would be Low Kian Seh's 'Singaporean Son': a poem posted on the SingPoWriMo group in response to the death of a military serviceman, which went viral with more than a thousand likes and shares, and subsequently garnered mainstream media attention, entering the national conversation on the value of National Service (Nazren, 2018, n.p.). More than ever, poetry today is of the people, at least of the people with internet access, a social media presence, and who are open to sharing their poetry online shortly after being written.

SingPoWriMo can also be seen as developing a new process of poetry publication in Singapore. Web-based Singapore poetry journals such as the *Quarterly Literary Journal Singapore (QLRS)* and *Softblow* follow the regular submissions or commissions-to-print workflow of most literary publications. In the case of SingPoWriMo, traditional filters to publication such as editorial review, publisher selection, and financial considerations are side-lined along with conventional hierarchies that may present obstacles to writers from certain demographics. These changes in the publishing process are, of course, not without issues. The removal of traditional filters and the substitution of a critical review process with the ‘mass review’ process of the social media publishing mode has received censure for not necessarily being grounded in craft. Poet Rebecca Watts, for instance, criticised the ‘artless poetry’ produced by amateurs on social media whose works are celebrated for their ‘honesty’ and ‘accessibility’ – which Watts dismisses as ‘buzzwords for the open denigration of intellectual engagement and rejection of craft’ (2018, p. 13). Similarly, UK Poet Laureate Simon Armitage described popular social media poetry as ‘facile [...] hollow, vacuous’ at the Singapore Writers Festival in 2018 and asked, ‘[W]hat good can that kind of poetry do?’ (as cited in Tan & Wee, 2019). In addition, the speed at which poetry is generated and propagated on online platforms and social media channels challenges the reflective and critical process occurring amongst the literary community’s gatekeepers and commentators that has conventionally legitimised new literature. Furthermore, while online writing communities can build strong bonds among writers, they also bring risks such as cyberbullying, trolling, and other forms of virtual harassment.

That said, as argued, SingPoWriMo has put in place specific measures to mitigate these risks. Furthermore, as Rachael Allen, poetry editor of *Granta* notes, ‘Poetic form has always been affected by the medium in which it’s presented’ (as cited in Hill & Yuan, 2018, n.p.). One might even argue, as Tan and Wee do, that social media poetry figures as the apex of the web literature form, given that the internet emphasises ‘networking and user-generated content’ (Tan & Wee, 2019, n.p.). Certainly, something similar is at work in SingPoWriMo. The instantaneity of social media publishing means that both the subject matter and craft of writing was highly visible, and exceeded the more typically constricted circles of the literati, an aspect enhanced by the presence of moderators who would comment and encourage revision. As the editors of the SingPoWriMo 2014 print anthology observe about the inaugural year, ‘despite the absolute freedom to not give a damn, 454 people from Singapore and beyond read, wrote, liked, and commented their way through the month’ (Ang et al., 2014, p. vii). As discussed, this free-wheeling nature of the online writing community provides fertile ground for poetic innovation.

Though he was writing about the newspaper as a democratising force in pre-WWII Europe, Walter Benjamin coined the term ‘literarisation’ to denote wrenching control from the grasp of an exclusively-trained elite, in order to empower a public with different but not less important training (Benjamin, 2008, p. 346). Readers, hitherto seen as passive receivers of information, are enabled by machines to be active participants in the process of mass production, creating a literature that is a space for productive confrontations with contemporary issues. While Benjamin’s hope was for the forum section of the newspaper to be where the control of writing

could be transferred from a trained elite to a broader public, he could not have anticipated the scale and speed of the internet in abetting the 7000 poets with little experience in writing poetry in writing a poem a day for 30 days on Facebook. These poets do not all possess specialised poetic training, organised along traditional lines of literary influence. But as a collective, they can speak for a ‘polytechnical education’ from a wide array of disciplines. Anyone with a Facebook account can actively participate in SingPoWriMo, and see their work instantly appear alongside published and prize-winning poets. Benjamin’s optimism is echoed by the Futurists: de Lautreamont (Isidore-Lucien Ducasse) once asserted that poetry should be written by the multitudes, not by a single person (Greene, 2014, p. 23), foreseeing SingPoWriMo’s collective effusions.

Conclusion

Though SingPoWriMo began as an adaptation of earlier collaborative writing movements, it has carved out a niche that reflects its unique attributes. The movement has arguably outstripped its origins, boasting nearly twice the membership of the NaPoWriMo Facebook group – in fact, SingPoWriMo is the largest month-long national poetry writing Facebook challenge in the world, or at least the largest PoWriMo-branded one. The sustainability of creative practice models that SingPoWriMo advocates for is evident in the ways it has successfully migrated offline. In addition to the anthologies discussed earlier, SingPoWriMo has resulted in the formation of workshop groups that meet to continue regular workshopping and development of CoPs, such as ATOM, Ministry of Noise, and s@ber. These groups have become entry-points for emergent poets into the community and occasions for further conversations and collaborations, with specific members going on to publish widely and win national awards as important voices in their own right.

Furthermore, SingPoWriMo became one of the foundational programmes of a new literary charity, Sing Lit Station, in 2016. Sing Lit Station was established with the wide-ranging vision of helping readers and writers meet. Besides administering SingPoWriMo, Sing Lit Station today commits itself to a variety of projects including an annual Manuscript Bootcamp, which recruits promising SingPoWriMo participants to develop their first publication. Other projects include the *poetry.sg* archive and the Book-A-Writer schools outreach programme. Many of these projects either surface in the immediate wake of SingPoWriMo every year to tap on the momentum generated, or use SingPoWriMo as a mechanism to disseminate information or create a common meeting space for discussion or poetry generation.

Events associated with SingPoWriMo such as parties and poetry readings have become a fixture in the annual Singaporean literary calendar. One notable event was SingPoOnTheMRT, a reading held in the public space of Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) trains inspired by a prompt in 2015 that invited participants to write about their favourite MRT station (Ip, 2016b, n.p.)⁷. 50 poets boarded a train at the eastmost MRT station and rode it to its western terminus, reading out poems corresponding to each station as they passed. Participants were equipped with a panoply of smartphones, DSLRs, and GoPros to ensure this experience returned to the internet

via poetry recordings, time-lapse videos, and a glossy promotional YouTube video. The audience included members of the public simply going about their day. This physical-digital performance and poetry-generating activity repeated itself thrice in the ensuing years – on a different train line, on a double-decker bus, and on a ferry navigating Singapore’s southern islands. Poetic connections made during SingPoWriMo have also led to collaborations such as Sing Lit Body Slam, the world’s first performance-poetry and professional-wrestling hybrid performance.

As a final testament to the generative and nurturing potential of online communities, SingPoWriMo has inspired branch-offs in different language groups, such as SingPoWriMo Tamil that caters to the Singaporean Tamil literary community; in different locations, such as KongPoWriMo, in Hong Kong⁸; or even spanning a region, e.g. the Southeast Asian Poetry Writing Month (SEAPoWriMo) group that includes moderators from every nation in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. Like SingPoWriMo, all are virtual communities hosted on Facebook. Beyond instrumental notions of learning and development, collaborative writing can above all be a place for solace and solidarity, bridging distances to bring people together, as Sarangi and Walker write in their introduction to a series of Indian-Australian poetic exchanges (2020, pp. 1-2).

Though much of this study is concerned with how the replicable structures of the SingPoWriMo online community have resulted in responsive encounters and the germination of new poems, our discussion also suggests how the dynamism of online discussion may be an important conduit for poetic practice in the post-millennium. Even if no single poet or poetry collective has been so bold as to issue anything resembling an artistic manifesto regarding online poetry communities, such groups are vitally connected to evergreen interests in criticism and canonicity, and intimate a certain desire for establishing the conventions of poetry writing. Amidst the transient nature of online writing and reading, it remains to be seen whether online communities will continue as digital nurseries for new poetic talent.

Notes

[1] Other early examples include the online web forums of the 1990s, including The Poetry Free-for-All (est. 2002, <http://www.everypoet.org/pffa/>) and the now-defunct Singapore Poetry Billboard (est. 1996, <http://www.poetrybillboard.com/index.html>); as well as Chinese poetry forums such as Chinapoet (<http://www.chinapoet.net/>) and the now-defunct Under The Banyan Tree (*Rongshu Xia*), which notably contributed to the boom of Chinese web literature in the early 2000s (Hockx, 2005, p. 674).

[2] These include *A Luxury We Cannot Afford* (2015), *A Luxury We Must Afford* (2016), and *Unfree Verse* (2017), a historical anthology of Singapore verse in form from 1937-2015. Notably, the editors of these anthologies are also active participants of SingPoWriMo.

[3] The Mentor Access Project (MAP) was started by the National Arts Council in 2000 to allow applicants to apply for a period of mentorship and learning with experienced poets, novelists, and

dramatists in the four official languages of English, Chinese, Malay, and Tamil. By 2014, more than seventy writers, including established fiction-writer O Thiam Chin, had participated in MAP with several subsequently winning literary awards at the national level (National Arts Council, 2008, p. 39). MAP has been on hiatus since 2015. An important equivalent for school-going youths is the Creative Arts Programme (CAP). Administered by the Ministry of Education since 1990, the annual week-long residential camp requires an application by portfolio and allows younger writers aged between 13 and 18 the opportunity to meet like-minded peers and to attend workshops by experienced writers. Camp attendees can subsequently apply for the Creative Arts Mentorship Programme, with selected pieces appearing in print in the annual *Eye on the World* anthology (Wang, 2001, p. xi).

[4] Data derived from annual bibliographies published in the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* and *Singapore Literature in English: An Annotated Bibliography*.

[5] Since 2020, BooksActually, which had up until then served as an important communal meeting space for literary events, has also transitioned into a webstore.

[6] Note: The liwuli consists of three stanzas: the first of these contains 31 syllables in the form of a prose poem and is phrased as imperatives or instructions; the second contains 14 syllables broken into three lines of any length and on any subject; the third stanza consists of questions and contains 10 syllables broken into two lines of any length. The kōel derives conceptually from Zen practice and is a musically-inspired form; it is made up of stanzas of three lines, the first and third of which should rhyme with an open vowel sound, and the second of which should be alliterative. In the peneira poroso, fragments of no longer than seven words are distributed across a page with uneven spacing, which are meant to indicate position and duration of ‘breaths’. Like the sonnet, the coronasonnet consists of 14 lines, two of which must be drawn verbatim from another poem(s). From line nine onwards, every word is written in caps; in lines 12-14, only the use of one-syllable words is permitted. The nucleus poem consists of four lines of a varying number of syllabi, corresponding to the number of electrons in each sublevel of the electron shell: the first line contains two syllables, the second eight, the third, 18, and the fourth anywhere from one to thirty-two. The original twin cinema form consists of two discrete columns of poetry; in its modern iteration, popularised by poet David Wong, the poem must be readable horizontally across both columns and vertically down each column. More information on these invented forms can be found on <http://formsofsea.blogspot.com/>; do note that the origins of some of these forms have been mythologised on this website, written by poets Joshua Ip, Ng Yi-Sheng, Desmond FX Kon Zhicheng-Mingdé, and Yeow Kai Chai.

[7] The poems can be viewed on an interactive map created by Jerome Lim, a SingPoWriMo participant, and managing editor of *poetry.sg*: <http://poemsonthemrt.weebly.com/>. This map proceeded to go viral on Singaporean social media, and was featured on several media sites, all within days of the announcement of the prompt (Chua, 2016; Thet, 2016). The site essentially had become a digital anthology, interrogating notions of space, locality, and the relation of Singaporeans to transport and urbanity. The poem-as-commuter became a self-embodied metaphor, taking on qualities of speed and movement, with the digital map of poetry replicating the nature of the physical train network.

[8] KongPoWriMo is a Hong Kong variant of the original instructions to ‘write 30 poems in 30 days’ formula. Rachel Ka Yin Leung and Silvia Tse were directly inspired by Singapore’s own version of the group, SingPoWriMo, first established in 2014 by the literary non-profit Sing Lit Station. Its founder, Joshua Ip, mentored Leung and Tse and encouraged them to brainstorm Hong Kong-specific prompts

as a supplement to those published daily by NaPoWriMo. In line with the argument made in the previous section, KongPoWriMo notably advertises itself as a ‘grassroots movement’ on its Facebook page.

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