TOWARDS A DIALOGIC ETHICAL CRITICISM:

Examining student responses in classroom debates of poems with ethical invitations

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Abstract

Since the late 20th century, Literature educators have adopted dialogic pedagogies that connect aesthetic appreciation and other-centred approaches to literary texts. However, classroom research on students' ethical meaning-making has rarely been connected with theoretical developments of ethical criticism or conducted in non-western contexts and classroom debate settings. To map how Literature classroom interactions open or close possibilities for ethical meaning-making, I propose a *dialogic ethical criticism* that synthesises an other-centred ethical criticism influenced by Emmanuel Levinas' ethical philosophy and Hans-Georg Gadamer's notion of hermeneutic conversation.

Using deductive and inductive analysis, I develop and apply a coding framework to examine classroom discourse in a high-ability Singapore Secondary Four (Grade 10) class in an Asian poetry unit. I focus on a series of classroom debates comparing poems with ethical invitations on the representations of asylum seekers, the process of embracing diversity, and reasserting identity amidst discrimination. While some students keenly consider others' perspectives and develop the strength of their interpretive possibilities with close textual evidence, other students simulate an ethical openness by selectively using textual evidence. Although antagonistic forms of literary debates can inhibit students' ethical meaning-making, student adjudicators providing constructive feedback with close textual support can facilitate responsible interpretive possibilities.

Keywords: Literature education, ethical criticism, classroom debates, Asian poetry, ethical invitations, classroom discourse, hermeneutic conversation

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1.   INTRODUCTION

1.1 Dialogic other-centric pedagogies and ethical invitations in literary texts

Since the late 20th century, Literature education has taken an ethical turn where pedagogy attends to both aesthetic appreciation and other-centred orientations toward literary texts. Not only have Literature educators broadened the diversity of literary texts taught in secondary level classrooms beyond western canonical texts, but their instructional strategies have increasingly positioned students as active and dialogic meaning-makers of literary texts, especially adopting critical and ethical stances. In short, these educators enact ethically oriented Literature pedagogies to cultivate what Suzanne Choo (2013) calls an "other-centric culture in the classroom" where teachers "encourage in students a commitment toward understanding others, particularly those who are in the minority and those who hold different beliefs from themselves" (p. 152). These pedagogies seek to cultivate in students an openness towards those who are often deemed to be different or marginalised in society and the world. Among others, these include teaching multicultural literature from writers of marginal and marginalised communities (Cai, 2002; Ginsberg & Glenn, 2019a; Gunn & Bennett, 2023; Landt, 2006; Loh, 2009; Margerison, 1995; Slaughter, 2021), the teaching of canonical texts with a focus on ethical concerns of discrimination (Del Nero, 2018; Dyches, 2018; Mohamud, 2020; Shah, 2013) and adopting critical approaches to literary representations of race and inequality (Borsheim-Black & Sarigianides, 2019; Dyches & Thomas, 2020; Thein et al., 2011, 2012).

When analysing literary texts, students attend to what Marshall Gregory (2010) calls a text's "ethical invitation" to a reader's "feeling, belief and judgment" through the construction of its "aesthetic tactics" (p. 291). These occur as students combine an emotional response, based on their personal convictions that judge the ethical values given in the text, whilst reasoning with literary evidence from the text. According to Gregory, rather than making didactic claims or conclusive moral takeaways for the reader, the acceptance of the text's ethical invitations can come together in the combined reflections of a reader's emotions, convictions and reasoning based on substantiated claims with literary evidence from the text. Thus, by way of one's transactional encounter with the text's aesthetically constructed ethical invitations (Flynn, 2007; Rosenblatt, 1994), a reader can construct hypothetical arguments and interpretive possibilities that allow the text to "exert an ethical influence" on themselves, and to be potentially transformed in their own ethos (Gregory, 2010, pp. 291-292). However, the Literature classroom is not merely a private site of encounter between text and reader, but a socially constructed public space where collaborative interpretations are made (Yandell, 2013), therefore responses to ethical invitations in literary texts need to be examined as interactive, rather than personal events.

1.2 Concerns of students' ethical engagement with literary texts: Self-centred responses and inconclusive influences

In this socialised pedagogical setting, two concerns pertaining to students' dialogic forms of ethical engagement remain. Firstly, eliciting personal responses to ethical invitations may draw uneven and self-centred student responses. Dialogic personal responses and student-centred Literature pedagogies have been critiqued for several limitations, especially when students tend to over-identify with characters and personas with whom they share little in common. Here, students may universalise complex and nuanced socio-cultural experiences depicted in texts (Appleman, 2015). Even students who are receptive toward literary representations of injustice may still reflect ethnocentric prejudices that reinforce their cultural superiority over the marginal groups (Ginsberg & Glenn, 2019b; Louie, 2005). Others may express concessions of their racially privileged perspectives (Borsheim-Black, 2015) or first-world background (Boyd, 2002; Habib, 2008; Louie, 2005). Collectively, these studies raise concerns of self-centred rather than other-centred takeaways in students' responses to literary texts with ethical invitations.

Secondly, students' subsequent ethical empowerment after encountering such literary texts remains uncertain and inconclusive. Gregory (2010) himself concedes that it remains unclear whether accepting ethical invitations necessarily leads to better or worse outcomes for a reader (p. 298). Ethical empowerment is thus left to chance, with little guidance or recourse on sustaining open-ended ethical engagements with texts. Empirical studies of student responses have been generally reserved in generalising long-term transformative impacts on students' orientation to the Other, be it from a single lesson (Xerri & Agius, 2015) or an entire unit (Ginsberg & Glenn, 2019b; Ware, 2015). Furthermore, students adopting perspective-taking approaches may merely go through the motions in class (Thein & Sloan, 2012), while others revert to pre-study prejudices of minimally considering others after the ethically oriented Literature unit ends (Dressel, 2005).

2.   RESEARCH GAPS

From these two concerns, three research gaps emerge across the theoretical, pedagogical and empirical levels concerning students' ethical meaning-making processes in Literature education.

2.1 Theoretical gap: Conceptualising students' ethically oriented responses

First, theoretical developments in the field of ethical criticism—where Marshall Gregory situates his notion of 'ethical invitations' in—often focus on the individual private sphere of reading rather than how "the literary text is mediated by a multiplicity of interpretive actors in the public sphere of education" (Choo, 2013, p. 10). Yet even among the few scholars of ethical criticism that do so, the emphasis

remains on curricular and pedagogical interventions teachers can make (Booth, 1998; Choo, 2021; Rabinowitz, 2010).

This study attempts to connect empirical studies of students' dialogic ethical meaning-making by building on the intersection between ethical criticism and Literature education to develop a theoretical framework that begins mapping how classroom interactions open or close ethical meaning-making.

2.2 Pedagogical gap: Ethically oriented debates in English (literature) classrooms

Secondly, at the pedagogical level, dialogic forms of instructional strategies in the ethically oriented Literature classroom through exploratory talk and inquiry-driven questions are prominent (Borsheim-Black & Sarigianides, 2019; Choo, 2021; Ginsberg & Glenn, 2019b; Juzwik et al., 2014; Thein & Sloan, 2012). Often, teachers enact dialogic forms of socially engaged talk, be it in small-group or whole-class levels of discussion, with some using instructional strategies such as Literature Circles (Chisholm & Cook, 2021; Thein et al., 2011, 2012) and Socratic Circles (Chappel, 2019; Moeller & Moeller, 2014).

Yet the affordances and challenges of classroom debates as a dialogic instructional strategy for ethical meaning-making in Literature classes remain under-explored. Classroom debates can circumvent concerns of self-oriented ethical responses and inconclusive ethical influences by first, providing students with abiding norms and structures to share in the responsibility of fostering dialogic classroom interaction, and secondly, to help direct substantive and complex instances of critical and ethical dialogue (Juzwik et al., 2014). Newman (2020) advocates for the rule-bound, oracy-based form of Parliamentary Debates or Mock Trials where students engage with others, ideas and the world outside themselves that includes "discussion, debate, advocacy, enquiry and role play" through the simultaneous use of speaking and thinking (p. 5). Debates can also provide a structured forum for constructive disagreement, especially where teachers seek to protect marginalised groups from being offended or deny discriminatory views a platform (p. 16).

This study builds on emerging research of using debates in Literature classrooms where students role-play fictional characters in political debates (Kersulov et al., 2021) and pays close attention to students' ethical meaning-making activity.

2.3 Empirical gap: Students' ethical oriented responses in non-Western contexts

Lastly, empirical classroom research on Literature students' ethical meaning-making has rarely been conducted in non-western contexts (Choo, 2021). I extend this body of research to Asian classrooms, drawing on data from Singapore's multicultural and Anglophone context.

2.4 Research questions

Henceforth, this paper addresses these two research questions:
1) How can we develop a theoretical framework of ethical criticism that helps map what opens and closes students' ethical meaning-making in their dialogic attempts to thematise the Other in Literature classroom settings?
2) How can classroom debates of poems open or close students' dialogic engagement with the texts' ethical invitations?

In what follows, I answer RQ1 by establishing a theoretical framework which I call *Dialogic Ethical Criticism* that synthesises aspects of Levinasian ethical criticism, Gadamerian hermeneutics, and existing empirical studies of students' dialogic ethical meaning-making. Next, I apply this theoretical framework as a deductive taxonomy to interpret a single case study of classroom debates to answer the second question. Finally, I discuss the affordances of classroom debates as an instructional strategy for ethical meaning-making in the Literature classroom.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: TOWARD A DIALOGIC ETHICAL CRITICISM

In the Literature classroom, one key ethical tension lies in dialogic attempts to understand what is foreign and different in the Other, or what Choo calls "a commitment toward understanding others" (2013, p. 152). Given concerns of students' self-oriented ethical responses that may limit their understanding of others, how can we account for the range of students' ethical meaning-making with them in the dialogic space of the Literature classroom, such that teachers can intervene to facilitate rather than inhibit ethical engagement?

Here, I propose to develop a theoretical framework which I presently call *Dialogic Ethical Criticism* to chart how real (student) readers' interpretive responses to the alterity of others involve dialogic acts that can facilitate and inhibit possibilities of ethical meaning-making in literary discussions. I first trace its antecedents in the field of ethical criticism, before synthesising Levinasian practices of ethical criticism and Hans-Georg Gadamer's notion of hermeneutic conversation. From there, I conceptualise a preliminary taxonomy and coding framework using a literature review of existing empirical studies of student responses to map two broad positions: facilitating and inhibiting ethical meaning-making.

3.1 Ethical criticism: From text-as-friend to text-as-stranger

As a field, Ethical Criticism emerged as an interpretive paradigm from the ethical turn in literary studies in the 1980s onwards, interested in studying how readers can interpret ethical meaning from literary texts (Eaglestone, 2011; Womack, 2006). Two major strands of ethical criticism positing different text-reader ethical relations were informed by different developments in moral and ethical philosophy that identified literature as a crucial resource for ethical deliberation (Eaglestone, 2011).

3.1.1   Text-as-friend: Readers' self-oriented projections of moral deliberations

The first strand—led by prominent theorists Martha Nussbaum and Wayne Booth—posits a text-as-friend relation between reader and text which facilitates a reader's moral deliberation. This strand focused on issues of judgement and morality via questions of narrative, responding against overly politicised forms of poststructuralist and postmodernist criticism (Eaglestone, 2011, p. 582). Here, readers can work through their own moral intuitions as they reflect on their responses to a text's implied author, which "will leave [them] clearer about [their] own moral aims" (Nussbaum, 1983, p. 44). Readers can also use Booth's framework to evaluate the "quality" of the implied author in literary texts in terms of responsibility, intimacy, intensity, coherence and distance of our engagement with the implied author (Booth, 1988, pp. 179-80). In Literature education, this text-as-friend relation can cultivate students' "sympathetic responsiveness to another's needs", especially those who are different and marginalised (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 90). Subsequently, Marshall Gregory's (2010) notion of ethical invitations builds on this text-as-friend relation wherein the reader's emotions, convictions and reasoning are substantiated with literary evidence from the text.

However, Eaglestone (1997) cautions that such an approach assumes that readers "[make] a straightforward imaginative identification with the characters", which may result in the projection of their own self-oriented moral dilemmas, rather than accounting for the worldview and otherness of the character depicted (p. 49). This dovetails with the concerns of self-centred student responses across empirical studies hitherto discussed.

3.1.2   Text-as-stranger: Readers'   other-oriented   projections   of   ethical deliberations

To account for the extent of students' responsible readings of the other in literary texts, I turn to the text-as-stranger stance posited by the Levinasian strand of ethical criticism, with prominent proponents such as Robert Eaglestone and Derek Attridge. In brief, Emmanuel Levinas' ethical philosophy that inspires this stance is fundamentally concerned with the reduction, simplifying and objectifying of the other by language that imposes the comprehension of others (Levinas, 2007, p. 43)— or what he calls "the imperialism of the same" (p. 87).

Transposing this to the ethical reception and meaning-making of literary texts, Derek Attridge turns away from the text-as-friend approach, and instead proposes that readers approach the text as a stranger with a responsibility for the other, with an attentiveness to the unfamiliar where one "assumes the other's needs, being willing to be called to account for the other, surrendering one's goals and desires in deference to the other's" (Attridge, 1999, p. 27). In Literature education, students would prioritise responsible readings of the other and practise ethical interruptions of their prejudices and singular perspectives "to find a means to destabilize or

deconstruct the set of norms and habits that give me the world" (Attridge, 2015, p. 71).

Even with this attentiveness to the other in ethical forms of literary interpretation, a question intersecting theoretical, pedagogical and empirical ends remains: when Literature students are confronted with textual representations of the other, how do they dialogically negotiate their limited awareness and expand their horizons of understanding about the other?

3.2 Dialogic ethical criticism: A framework for examining ethical meaning-making in the literature classroom

To conceptualise a Dialogic Ethical Criticism, I aim to chart a taxonomy of discursive conditions in classroom interactions that facilitate or inhibit the ethical meaning-making of texts. Here, I turn to Hans-Georg Gadamer's notion of hermeneutic conversation to delineate broad categories of discursive conditions within the Levinasian practices of responsible readings and ethical interruptions.

3.2.1 Gadamer's hermeneutic conversation: Interpretation as intersubjective activity

In brief, Gadamer's hermeneutics is concerned with how in interpreting texts we grapple with and overcome our individual prejudices—i.e., "judgement[s] that [are] rendered before all the elements that determine a situation have been finally examined" (Gadamer, 2013, p. 283). Here, his ethical concern with "breaches of intersubjectivity" (Linge, 2008, p. xii) lies in a triadic relation: between the text as it is, the reader (and extending to their real conversation partners), as well as the truth and otherness of the text (Wierciński, 2011, p. 38). Bruns (2003) observes that both Gadamerian hermeneutics and Levinasian ethics recognise how in one's attempts to understand the text and the other, the self is always placed in an "asymmetrical" and "accusative" relation to the other (p. 33). This is pertinent to Literature education, given how students are confronted with the 'accusation' of the otherness of a literary text, as it is introduced to them in the classroom for deliberation and interpretation.

Understanding otherness in literary texts, therefore, involves the testing of possibilities, in what Gadamer (2013) calls the "horizon of the question" (p. 378). A reader first comes to a text with their own "habitual framework" (Attridge, 2015) and "prejudices" (Gadamer, 2013), which constitutes the horizon of the reader. As they apprehend the text, they continually project and revise their projection of the text's horizon of meaning. In the process of understanding, the ideal is to arrive at a "fusion of horizons", where the projected historical horizon of the text is superseded and overtaken by a present horizon of understanding (p. 317). Consequently, we engage in hermeneutic conversation where we are both bound to the truth of the text's otherness and are transformed from our original horizon of understanding.

Transposing this to the Literature classroom, the reliance on verbal dialogue and written explication to interpret the otherness represented in literary texts necessarily binds students and teachers to the limits of language—one that risks fixing and flattening concepts of the other, while attempting to sustain a continued openness to meaning.

To understand the discursive conditions of classroom interactions that help facilitate or inhibit students' ethical possibilities of meaning-making to move towards a fusion of horizons with the otherness depicted in texts, I draw upon two sources. First, I begin with Gadamer's concept of hermeneutic conversation, using his discussion of the logic of question and answer, to create a set of valences (facilitating and inhibiting the fusion of horizons) with discrete categories as posited by Gadamer. I then present preliminary sub-categories using a literature review on existing practices of ethical meaning-making in classroom discourse from secondary level Literature classrooms. The preliminary taxonomy is as follows:

Table 1. Preliminary taxonomy for dialogic ethical criticism

Valence	Categories	Preliminary Sub-categories (Existing Practices)
Facilitating fusion of horizons between reader, text and other	Keenly considering weight of another's perspective	Affirming peers' empathetic responses
		Affirming students' culturally specific funds of knowledge
	Prevent questions or interpretive possibilities from being suppressed by dominant opinion	Questioning to manage dominant students' contributions
		Interrupting racial and/or linguistic privilege to account for minority perspectives
	Develop the strength of an interpretive possibility (supported by close textual reference)	Discerning how language reinforces dominant ideologies that disempower marginalised subjects
		Deliberating modal language that represents the other's attitude
	Object to the weakness of an interpretive possibility (supported by close textual reference)	Adopting non-judgemental stances to address confrontational and inappropriate responses
Inhibiting fusion of horizons between reader, text and other	Engage conversation partners without shared purpose, direction, or subject matter in interpretive conversation	Associative, reductive talk that can occur independently of the poem
		Expressing resigned confusion, boredom and disconnect with given text
	Argue down others by assertively foreclosing meanings, or discovering weaknesses of other interpretive possibilities	Controlling and resisting discussions of contentious topics

Simulating an openness: Selectively choosing evidence and ignoring other sections of the text	Constructing responses according to perceptions of acceptable and desired discourse in class
	Asserting literal over contextual interpretations
Asking open-ended or directionless questions (or making statements) with generalisations that vaguely suggest truth but lack specificity	Deflecting ethical dialogue by making appeals to moral relativism

<u>Conditions for Facilitating Fusion of Horizons.</u> Although Gadamer did not explicitly refer to didactics and classrooms when he conceptualised his hermeneutics, and that existing methods and practices have yet to rely on Gadamer's hermeneutics, several conditions that retain a state of openness are crucial for Gadamer to facilitate the fusion of horizons in Literature classrooms, and consequently, the possibilities of ethical meaning-making about the other in texts. Fundamentally, conversation partners cannot talk at cross purposes, and must ensure that they share the same subject matter and allow themselves to be conducted by it (Gadamer, 2013, p. 375).

Having established that common ground, four categories can be developed. Firstly, one must keenly consider the weight of another's perspective—and that of the text (ibid.). This includes discourse where students explicitly consider their peers' empathetic responses in whole-class and small-group discussions (Bedford, 2015; Brett, 2016; Del Nero, 2018; Louie, 2005). Teachers can also affirm students' culturally specific funds of knowledge in diverse classrooms which can give rise to insightful other-centred interpretations (Bedford, 2015; Habib, 2008; Shah, 2013).

Second, one can prevent questions—or interpretive possibilities—from being "suppressed by the dominant opinion" (Gadamer, 2013, p. 376) or prevailing majority perspective. Teachers can use questions to manage dominant students' contributions that would otherwise limit other students' ethical responses (Dressel, 2005; Glazier & Seo, 2005; Thein et al., 2012). Students can also interrupt their own racial and/or linguistic privilege to account for minority perspectives (Dyches & Thomas, 2020; Ginsberg & Glenn, 2019b; Nah & Choo, 2023).

Also, by referring closely to the subject matter of the text and explicitly establishing its presuppositions, one can develop the strength of an interpretive possibility. This includes discourse that discerns how language subtly reinforces dominant ideologies that disempower those who are marginalised (Dressel, 2005; Habib, 2008; Dyches & Thomas, 2020; Thein et. al., 2011, 2012).

Conversely, one can object to the weakness of that interpretive possibility, so that others can see what remains open (Gadamer, 2013, p. 372). Teachers can adopt non-judgemental stances to address confrontational and inappropriate student responses to provocative issues (Dyches & Thomas, 2020; Mohamud, 2020; Moore, 2022; Moore & Begoray, 2017).

<u>Conditions for Inhibiting Fusion of Horizons.</u> Conversely, there are conditions that inhibit the possibilities of ethical meaning-making. Firstly, one might engage other

partners without a shared purpose, direction, or subject matter in interpretive conversation. Students may engage in associative talk about the marginalised group depicted in the text in reductive ways that could have occurred independently of the text (Brett, 2016), express resigned confusion, boredom and disconnection with the text (Del Nero, 2018), or deflect direct engagement with the otherness of the text (Nah, 2023).

A second condition is when one tries to argue the other person down by assertively foreclosing meanings or by focusing on discovering the weakness of what has been put forth (Gadamer, 2013, pp. 375-76). This can include discourse driven by both teachers' and students' desire to control and resist discussions of contentious topics (Boyd, 2002; Dyches & Thomas, 2020; Mohamud, 2020).

Next, one can pose a question by "retaining false presuppositions" and "pretend to an openness", thus simulating an openness of ethical meaning in an interpretive possibility which is supported by selectively choosing evidence and ignoring other sections of the text (Gadamer, 2013, p. 372). Students may construct and present their responses according to what they presume to constitute acceptable discourse in class (Bedford, 2015; Shah, 2013; Thein et al., 2015; Thein & Sloan, 2012), or assert literal over contextual interpretations (Boyd, 2002; Nah, 2023).

Lastly, the asking of entirely open-ended or directionless questions (which can also be extended to making sweeping statements) cannot be productive, especially when using what Gadamer calls a "slanted question"—where the generalisations behind them may give rise to the sense of something true, while the lack of specificity cannot point towards a meaningful interpretation (p. 372). Here, students may deflect ethical dialogue by making appeals to moral relativism (Beach, 1997; Dyches & Thomas, 2020).

4.   THE STUDY: CONTEXT AND USE OF DEBATES

Having answered RQ1 by developing a theoretical framework of *Dialogic Ethical Criticism*, we turn to a single-case study to apply this taxonomy in Literature classrooms to answer RQ2—to map how classroom debates of poems open or close students' dialogic engagement with the texts' ethical invitations of the Other.

4.1 The Singaporean context of teaching literature

As a postcolonial and multicultural Asian society, Singapore's population comprises 74.1% Chinese, 13.6% Malay (the native population), 9.0% Indians and 3.3% 'Others' (a blanket term including Eurasians, Caucasians and any other ethnic groups) (Department of Statistics, 2022). English functions as an official first language for communication, administration and instruction in education, governance and public sector, as well as a bridging language for Singapore's multiracial population (Goh, 2017). In Singapore, the study of Literature is compulsory from Secondary One to Two (Grade 7 to 8), and optional onwards from Secondary Three (Grade 9). Since the

revised 2019 national Literature in English syllabus, there has been an explicit foregrounding of the subject's purpose to develop "empathetic and global thinkers" in students (Ministry of Education, Singapore, 2019) to be open to multiple perspectives, develop global awareness and reflect on their values and identities. This curricular objective sits alongside three others: to cultivate "critical readers" adept in close literary analysis, "creative meaning-makers" that can embrace ambiguity in the meaning-making process and creatively construct their own responses, and "convincing communicators" that can persuade others of their interpretations based on sound reasoning with evidence (pp. 8-9).

4.2 The Asian poetry unit

I draw on existing data from a broader two-year research study on cultivating cosmopolitan virtues through Literature education in Singapore. These lessons were part of a unit on Asian poetry developed as a pedagogical intervention in response to a nationwide survey of 232 secondary school Literature teacher's beliefs and practices of teaching Literature in Singapore (Choo et al., 2020). In particular, the survey found that Literature teachers in Singapore preferred choosing texts from Singapore (95%), North America (78%) and the United Kingdom (75%), over various Asian regions—Southeast Asia (37%), India (30%), Middle East (9%), China (7%), Japan and Korea (7%) (p. 6). The two participating teachers of the unit—Xing Le and Su Lin (pseudonyms)—are female Singaporean Chinese teachers upper secondary students (Grade 10 and Grade 9 equivalent respectively) from two different independent schools with high-ability and self-selecting students for Literature study.

The objectives of the unit were firstly, to introduce to students a variety of poetry in English from Asia and/or English translations of examples from different Asian poetic forms through dialogic points of convergence and conversation; secondly, to embrace the cultural heterogeneity of the writers and texts and make students aware of their culturally and historically located perspectives and responses to the poems; and thirdly, to encourage engagement with poetry from Asia and Asian writers within a larger global network of literature exchange (21CC Literature Research Interest Group, n.d.).

We drew on a range of online literary journals that published Asian and Asian diasporic voices such as *Asymptote Journal, Asia Literary Review, CHA: An Asian Literary Journal, The Electronic Intifada, Rambutan Literary* (website now offline as of 2023), *Quarterly Literary Review of Singapore, The Kindling Journal* among others. Students read existing and emerging forms of Asian poetry: from how Afghan women continue practicing the oral form of the Landay, to how contemporary Asian poets have engaged with the ancient form of the Ghazal, alongside poems by seminal and emerging Asian poets including diasporic voices—some in translation—depicting dialogic encounters of unevenness, prejudice and privilege between the persona and their interlocutors.

4.3 Intra-class poetry debate structure: Antagonistic comparisons of poems

Norlund (2016) highlights the two most common structures of classroom debates: *antagonistic debates* which favour bipolarity*,* where participants are framed as enemies and engage in rhetoric related to battlefields and legal trials; and *deliberative debates* which favour consensus, where participants are framed as friends and engage in low modality, democratic activity. Thirdly, she recognises *relativistic debates* where students' responses purportedly respect differences of opinion, albeit with an attitude of indifference; and finally, *agonistic debates* that favour recognition of multiple perspectives, where conflicts are not denied, but participants are deemed worthy opponents with a common political concern.

In Xing Le's class, the poetry debates closed out her eight-lesson run of the Asian Poetry unit. Xing Le adapted this format from Singapore's National School Literature Festival's annual Unseen Debate events (National Schools Literature Festival, n.d.) where students team up in groups of four and compare two poems. These are in turn, modelled after Parliamentary Debate formats of three-on-three speakers with three-minute speeches and summary speeches (Newman, 2020, p. 45), except that Xing Le excluded points of information and student debaters would speak uninterrupted. A standard motion consists of the proposition team arguing that 'Poem A is more effective than Poem B' in conveying a particular effect for readers, and the opposition team argues otherwise. Given the comparative analysis required in the motions and foregrounding of competitive stances, these debates often took on the style of a competitive, antagonistic debate (Norlund, 2016).

One additional role Xing Le included was that of student adjudicators (the top-performing students in the class for Literature) who served as chairpersons to judge and provide substantiated feedback for both teams. The motion for each pair of poems selected raised ethical concerns of identity formation, cultural stereotypes, and diasporic experiences, and the representations of asylum seekers:

<p style="text-align:center"><mark>Table 2:</mark> Poetry Debate Motions and Assigned Poems</p>

Motion	Poem 1	Poem 2
Motion 1: This house believes Jehan Bseiso crafts a more poignant portrayal of asylum seekers in poem 1 than in poem 2.	"Hashtag Gaza" by Jehan Bseiso (Palestine)	"No Search, No Rescue" by Jehan Bseiso (Palestine)
Motion 2: This house believes that embracing diversity is presented as a more challenging process in poem 1 than in poem 2.	*"In Which There Are Several Half-Asian Folks At A Faculty Meeting" by Kimberly Quiogue Andrews (USA)	*"OFW" by Troy Cabida (Philippines/UK)
Motion 3: This house believes that the persona was more successful in reasserting her	*"Dragon Girls" by Joyce Chng (Singapore)	*"Muslims Are Not Real People" by Madina Malahyati (Indonesia)

identity in poem 1 than in poem 2.

*Note: These poems were taken from the now defunct and offline literary magazine *Rambutan Literary*. Andrews's poem has since been published in her collection.

5.   METHODOLOGY

5.1 Single-case study

In this article, I use the single-case study of Xing Le's class as Su Lin did not enact the intra-class poetry debates in her classes. Xing Le's class consisted of 28 students from a Secondary Four (Grade 10) advanced humanities class in an independent all-boys' school. The class consisted of 27 Singaporean Chinese students and 1 Singaporean Indian student. The lessons were audio-recorded and transcribed by the researchers. I focus on the two lessons where the classroom debates were conducted.

5.2 Coding classroom discourse: Episodes and utterances

First, I examine the "episodes" and "utterances"—following Marshall et. al. (1995)—of both student debaters and adjudicators, as they engage in uptake, i.e. where there is a clear integration of interpretations and ideas over different turns (Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991) which respond to the same shared interpretation of the poem's representation of the other. Specifically, I attend to how the antagonistic format of the debate shapes the "participant structures", or "ways of arranging verbal interaction with students" (Philips, 1972, as cited in Rymes, 2016, p. 192), especially with the expectation for students to begin by rebutting the previous speaker. For each motion, I identify all the episodes of uptake within every student's uninterrupted speech episode, which centres on how the five students after the first proposition speaker (1st Opposition Speaker; 2nd Proposition Speaker; 2nd Opposition Speaker; 3rd Opposition Speaker; 3rd Proposition Speaker) explicitly integrate interpretations and ideas from previous speakers.

First, I code each episode of uptake by deductive analysis, using the preliminary taxonomy of Dialogic Ethical Criticism. I code for interpretive valences that facilitate or inhibit the fusion of horizons between student reader, text and other, depending on the extent they present "responsible readings" (Attridge, 2015) of the other. Where the preliminary taxonomy does not offer a relevant sub-code, I then practice inductive analysis using "process coding" to analyse observable and conceptual actions and interactions (Saldaña, 2016, p. 111) to produce new sub-codes, registering how students dialogically make meaning about the other in relation to their given motion.

5.3 Independent coder

To foster reflexivity in coding and to assess the rigour and validity (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020) of the preliminary taxonomy of Dialogic Ethical Criticism, an independent coder approved by the larger study's principal investigator coded the transcript of student responses in Motion 2, amounting to one-third of the given data. The independent coder was provided both the taxonomy, the original poems, and original transcripts of the debates without knowledge of the author's coding. To circumvent the issue of (in)consistent units of utterances within each speaker's three-minute speech, the independent coder was instructed to manually code segments of utterances as they see fit, to compare codes within a radius of five lines for contextualisation (Kurasaki, 2000), and to look out for uptake across the speakers and adjudicators. In lieu of practising "process coding" of sub-categories, each code was accompanied with a comment explaining the rationale for selecting the category based on interpreting the student's discourse. Of the intercoder's 21 codes, the author agreed with 14 of them, providing an acceptable rate of intercoder agreement of 66.6%.

5.4 On the selection of episodes

In selecting episodes to discuss in my findings, I aimed to portray a representative sample of the balance between facilitating and inhibiting moves student speakers made during each debate. From Motion 1, I elected to use an episode from the 3rd Proposition Speaker to represent the consistent attempts by student speakers that consider the weight of previous speakers' points in highlighting issues of representation in the suffering of the asylum seekers' journeys: from the portrayal of hopelessness (2nd Opposition Speaker), the false hope of resolution or improved livelihoods, and the reliance on western media representation (2nd Proposition Speaker; 3rd Opposition Speaker). Elsewhere, I excluded episodes of uptake where students argued down each other by assertively foreclosing meanings of the use of numbers and non-English words in the two poems. From Motion 2, there was a consistent antagonistic engagement across student speakers as they regularly cited the form, structure and decontextualised readings of individual words and phrases rather than a contextualised attention to the two poems as a whole. As such, my chosen episodes are meant to reflect students' fixation on rhetorical one-upmanship and the missed opportunities of considering the horizon of the poem's ethical invitations. From Motion 3, I chose to focus on the student adjudicator's commentary to represent the constructive critiques offered by student adjudicators' feedback in pointing out missed opportunities of ethical meaning-making. Several of Motion 3's student speakers often responded with brief statements of comparison, before discussing their assigned poem in relative isolation to the other poem (1st Opposition speaker; 2nd Proposition Speaker). Moreover, one significant limitation is that partly due to length, I have excluded episodes discussing the poem "Muslims

Are Not Real People", which collectively reflect a pattern of episodes where students focus on discovering the weakness of the opposing team's poem (or their interpretations) in fulfilling the motion, before turning to develop the strength of their own interpretive possibility with evidence.

6. FINDINGS

6.1 Motion 1: Facilitating fusion of horizons

Motion 1 featured two poems "Hashtag Gaza" (Poem 1) and "No Search, No Rescue" (Poem 2) both by Palestinian poet, researcher, and aid worker Jehan Bseiso that address the plight of asylum seekers. Poem 1 presents the voice of a Palestinian persona speaking back towards an implied addressee of foreign readers and media that report on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in Gaza and can be found online here: https://electronicintifada.net/content/poem-hashtag-gaza/14688 (Bseiso, 2015b). Similarly, Poem 2 presents the voice of a refugee fleeing war-torn countries towards Europe and can be found online here: https://electronicintifada.net/content/poem-no-search-no-rescue/14461 (Bseiso, 2015a).

Xing Le's motion foregrounds the poems' ethical invitation to a reader's feeling of poignancy, and to a reader's beliefs and judgements about how media representations tend to portray the collective and individual narratives of asylum seekers. I focus on how Proposition Speaker 3 built on the arguments previously made by Opposition Speaker 3.

6.1.1   Keenly considering the weight of another's perspective: Comparing affective depictions of autonomy

In this episode of uptake, Proposition Speaker 3 further opens ethical interpretive possibilities by considering the weight of Opposition Speaker 3's case about the "frustration" of asylum seekers in poem 1, by comparing the affective depictions of the asylum seekers' degree of autonomy and "helplessness" in navigating their dire plight.

Previously, Opposition Speaker 3 established that the stakes are higher for the asylum seekers in "No Search, No Rescue" given their exiled and castaway situation "in the middle of the ocean where they can only seek help from the Western people although the Western people may refuse to help them". He also highlighted their voicelessness — "suffering in silence" — without interpreters to help "show their story to the outside world". Thus, he presents a case for the dire and bereft status of the refugees in "No Search, No Rescue", compared to the Palestinian refugees in "Hashtag Gaza" who are more "frustrat[ed]" and have "a position of power to be able to command" with the accuracy of media representation by western individuals. He further points that out in "Hashtag Gaza", the refugees "do not lose everything. Because they still have a home and there are still people reporters caring for them

although it might be seen as superficial", thus providing close textual support from the setting and circumstance depicted in the poem to make his claim that "No Search, No Rescue" is more poignant than "Hashtag Gaza".

In response, Proposition Speaker 3 similarly establishes the extent of the asylum seekers' helplessness using close textual analysis, but disputes Opposition Speaker 3's interpretation on the grounds that the relative autonomy of the asylum seekers can be affectively observed:

> Proposition Speaker 3: So third speaker of opposition told us that there was break in the second stanza [in poem 1] showed a little bit of command and there are a little bit of authority. But rather I would argue that there is a person mentioning this out of frustration like they are alone they are going to do it any way. So let me just decide to do it any way. And I think that contrary to what he says, frustration does show a sense of helplessness because there is no other form of medium or media in which the person communicates their thoughts. And because poem 1's main idea is that these individuals have to fight against the media. They have to fight against everyone else that already thinks already has a conception of what's going on currently, while in poem 2 they can still have a chance of getting help.
>
> However, in poem 1 you have to convince everyone that the situation is a) still going on, and b) is serious. Because the media chooses to reduce the sufferings into mere words. You see in the few stanzas within page 1, they reduce things like bomb shelters, five people dead in two simple words "objective reality" and "neutrality". Because they want to reduce these amounts of narratives and these amounts of sufferings into simple words. It means that it creates a sense of unfeelingness, a sense of emotional disconnect, and means that the readers who read it don't feel an emotional attachment to the issue that is going on.

Here, Proposition Speaker 3's counterargument hinges on how "in poem 1, you have to convince everyone that the situation is a) still going on, and b) is serious". This creates a "frustration" which "shows a sense of helplessness because there is no other form of medium or media in which the person communicates their thoughts". He then explains how media representations of asylum seekers "reduce … these amounts of sufferings into simple words … that it creates a sense of unfeelingness, a sense of emotional disconnect" for the reader. Hence, he argues that the frustration in needing to resist the reductive representation and apathy that may arise from the celebratory and optimistic portrayal of refugee lives in the Gaza strip can qualify precisely as a more poignant portrayal. By keenly considering each other's interpretations of the affective portrayals of the other's relative autonomy, the students comparatively furthered the ethical possibilities of meaning-making about the asylum seekers' plights.

6.2 Motion 2: Inhibiting fusion of horizons

Motion 2 featured two poems "In Which There Are Several Half-Asian Folks At A Faculty Meeting" by Asian-American poet Kimberly Quiogue Andrews (Poem 1) and "OFW" (Poem 2) by Philippine-born, UK-based poet Troy Cabida. Poem 1 depicts a departmental meeting among university faculty members in the springtime and how

diverse perspectives are (not) listened to by dominant race individuals. Poem 2 depicts the cultural compromises that overseas Filipino workers make when attempting to assimilate and integrate into the society they migrate to, and the exoticisation of their own culture by dominant race individuals. I show how students tended to inadvertently inhibit ethical meaning-making by simulating an openness in selectively using evidence, along with arguing down others' interpretations by focusing on discovering weaknesses and exposing them in their extended discussion of Poem 1. Both poems are reproduced below with permission:

"In Which There Are Several Half-Asian Folks At A Faculty Meeting"

By Kimberly Quiogue Andrews

about increasing diversity   and someone says   well as you can see

we are all white here

perhaps we will never figure out the mechanism behind the yawn's contagion

perhaps the truth is

that we are sometimes reminded   that we have not actually been breathing

that our chests are screaming for air

which moves over the vocal chords with the pressure of a train on its tracks

well   but   I'm

the spring crocus   early and purple and cream   a joy and a silence

opening to let the air in

what and the answer is *nothing* and the answer is *everything* and the answer is

a series of silhouettes

against the sharp posterboard of one's presumptive motions in a room

perhaps the truth is

that the white   crocus or otherwise   blooms first from winter's fist

that it is not spring

that it is still winter   as we can see   as far as we know   we   we

the quiet of yes

now is not the time   you say yes   you allow the discussion to move on

this is good

see   you are hearing me right now

[Source: (Andrews, 2020, 2018)[1]]

<u>"OFW"</u>

<u>By Troy Cabida</u>

This was inspired by the fourteen-year-old boy in year ten

who spits out a six hundred year old word

he goddamn knows he shouldn't.

This was written for the haughty nanny of three

who refuses to buy cocoa butter for her winter-kissed cracked skin

because they're "not for Filipinos".

This was inspired by the hardworking NHS nurse slave

who's proud to be get down and dirty on her hands

but turns her nose up at her son who dreams of writing buildings in the sky.

This was written for the suburban girl

whose number one question after watching *Miss Saigon*

was what whitening soap that Kim girl actress uses.

This was inspired by that Ilokano family in Wimbledon

who forbids their children *bagoong* and *sukang maanghang*

because that's what the poor shanty town kids in Manila are left to feast on

---

[1] *From A Brief History of Fruit by Kimberly Quiogue Andrews. Copyright © 2018 The University of Akron Press. Reprinted by permission. Unauthorized duplication is not permitted.*

and having the salty smelling jar next to the merlot,

well, just doesn't look quite right.

This is for the Filipino

liking that video on Facebook entitled:

                    WHY AMERICANS LOVE FILIPINOS AND FILIPINO CULTURE

the thumbnail a still of a ginger American

with a smile half agape.

He later comments

Maraming salamat po!

Feeling good about himself for the rest of the workday.

[Source: (Cabida, 2017)]

6.2.1   *Simulating an openness: Asserting decontextualised ethical generalisations from Form, Structure and Punctuation*

There were multiple instances of students from both teams selectively using evidence from the poem's form, structure and punctuation to appear rhetorically convincing in relation to the ethical invitations of the motion. Here, the first proposition speaker constructs his claim based on Poem 1's structural features:

> Proposition Speaker 1: So the indentation will suggest there is a separation between diversity and someone which is the people. This proves that there's like no bond between people of different backgrounds in the society. And since they are separate hence forming a divided society. And as a result, everyone will live in their own bubble will not interact with each other. Thus resulting in them unable to bond with each other and thus we have already divided the society where diversity is not existent.
>
> …
>
> Throughout the poem, there's also a lack of full stops. Lack of full stops result in run on sentences, this reflective of the continuous problem of the difficulty in integrating people from other people of other background to society and there's no such end to this problem. Thus resulting in a continuous cycle of such inability to bring diversity in such a divided society.
>
> …
>
> And throughout the poem you can see a very strict structure of these two couplets per stanza. So this is reflective of the very strict societal norms that these people have to conform to.

Throughout his case, he builds his argument primarily based on the use of punctuation and poetic form without any direct reference to the context of language used in the poem. First, he identifies the poem's use of indentation, which he claims reflects the "separation between diversity and someone which is the people." Subsequently, he claims this "proves there's no bond between people of different backgrounds", which results in "divided society" where "everyone will live in their own bubble" and "resulting in them unable to bond with each other". He then repeats similar generalisations with reference to the poem's lack of full-stops and run-on sentences, and the "very strict structure" of couplets across the stanzas which is "reflective of the very strict societal norms" that need to be conformed to.

This practice of basing entire ethical claims on the structure and lineation of the poem with minimal reference to the poems' specific details was repeated by the second opposition speaker. In turn, he bases his claims on poem 2's repeated use of a three-line stanza and points primarily to the disruption of the stanza length pattern's regularity to prove that the overseas Filipino community "will still end up as like poor and shanty". However, a closer look at his claims suggests an over-reliance on repetition and stanza length, with little attention to specific uses of language in the poem's lines for context:

> Opposition Speaker 2: Whereas in our poem, there's literal conformity. Like you can see the first four stanzas, they all start with "this was" "this was"... and they are all triplets which shows that these people Filipinos living in America were all subjected to the same form of pains and struggles and discrimination by the Americans in the country.
>
> And you can see that in the fifth stanza, there was a disruption where there are five lines. But this disruption is trying to show that diversity is actually unable to be achieved and ultimately they still really do not have much. The fifth stanza is trying to show like the eventual outcome of the lack of diversity which means that the people will still end up as like poor and shanty.

This lack of substantial textual support for their ethical claims was noted by the student adjudicator presiding over this motion, where he expresses his perplexed response to his classmates' arguments, and how students from both teams favoured decontextualised micro-analysis of specific literary techniques rather than contextualising their claims within the broader perspective and content of both poems:

> Student Adjudicator 1: "So prop team, so basically both sides talk a lot about structure let they took an the [sic] entire speaker that talk about structure, but then the sun that they rose [sic] like for example [Proposition Speaker 1] said a lot about oh what separation, there is like this gap that gap. A lot of it were like not very contextualised using the content of the poem, and they were like lack of full stops and run on sentences means there is continuous problem then I am like what? So clearly we also see the same thing happening in opposition. They talked about how they broken into different stanzas stuff like that. But then when they started to engage in the text it was not very organised, it was all over the place."

Nonetheless, the students' tendency to select literary features with insufficient attention to the poem's language and context to support their claims can be

attributed to the predominant New Criticism form of disciplinarity that Literature students in Singapore are formally assessed on. Loh (2018) had identified how the "dominant skills-based framework guiding Singapore Literature education" from the 1999, 2007 and 2013 syllabi based on decontextualised close analysis and New Criticism principles "explains the resistance to the absorption of other emergent trends such as the inclusion of … world literature" (p. 93). Particularly, the introduction of the unseen poem component following the inaugural 1999 national syllabus emphasises close reading which "by its very nature … does not encourage students to look from the text to the world around them" (Loh, 2013, p. 24). Students then resort to what examination marker reports consistently observe as "technique-hunting" (Choo, 2021, p. 80), identifying and naming literary techniques but seemingly unable to explain their function or effect. Here, students appear to have formulated ethical conclusions that align with their given motion, almost force-fitting examples of literary devices and form to satisfy their assigned stand on the motion.

6.2.2 Argue down others: Selectively substantiating ethical claims to secure rhetorical points

In the debates' competitive spirit, some students tended to argue down others by focusing on highlighting weaknesses of other interpretive possibilities, with a similar form of simulating an ethical openness with selective uses of evidence to score a rhetorical point over their peers. For instance, when the third opposition speaker discusses the imagery of the crocus (a purple and white flower) in Poem 1, he accuses the proposition team of wilful negligence ("an idea they refused to engage with") before positing a correlation between the blend of purple and white colours as a "blend of two bilateral cultures":

> Opposition Speaker 3: So an idea they refused to engage with right now in the front imagery of crocus in their poem so if I direct to poem 1, you can actually see the spring crocus early in purple and cream, actually blossom in winter, the crocus is actually a plant a blended of two colours purple and white which the poems mentioned, thus suggesting how these individuals in themselves are a blend of two bilateral cultures, American and Asian. And they are still able to form something beautiful like a crocus something beautiful of its own.
>
> Oh furthermore, do take note that in half Asians are what the poem begins off with has a hyphen between an American-Asian, bam! that when you put together with a hyphen between them suggesting a bridge between these two bilaterally and worldly different ideas.

This antagonistic approach towards weaker or overlooked interpretive possibilities arguably misses an opportunity for constructive criticism. The student then appears to reach for evidence in terms of imagery and punctuation to support the claim of a "blend" and "bridge" between two "bilateral cultures, American and Asian". This is used to secure a rhetorical point ("bam!") by interpreting what the proposition team

had overlooked. Yet this rhetorical argument is itself premised on a decontextualised interpretation of colour symbolism of the crocus imagery from the rest of the poem.

6.3 Motion 3: Facilitating and inhibiting fusion of horizons

Motion 3 featured two poems "Dragon Girls" (Poem 1) by Singaporean science fiction, fantasy, and young adult writer Joyce Chng and "Muslims Are Not Real People" by Indonesian poet Madina Malahyati (Poem 2). Chng's poem invokes the mythical creatures of the carp and dragon in Chinese culture to explore the tensions of asserting gender equality, whereas Madina's poem responds to religious discrimination and stereotypes against Muslims invoked by the Twitter trend of #StopIslam. Xing Le's motion foregrounds the poems' ethical invitation to a reader's judgement about how successful each persona appears to be in reasserting their identity amidst forms of discrimination. I focus on how the student adjudicator responded to Proposition Speaker 1's anachronistic interpretation of cultural allusions in the poem "Dragon Girls".

"Dragon Girls" by Joyce Chng

in asia girls cannot be dragons,

instead we are asked to be

phoenixes,

flaming across the skies,

harbingers of good fortune,

but our feathers

are not carp scales,

are not dragon scales,

we do not ascend into heaven,

roaring with fury,

because society has thought so,

and yet we think

our feathers should be

dragon scales,

our claws, dragon claws

yet the irony is

that we can fly,

just not as dragons,

may your sons become dragons,

may your daughters become phoenixes,

and everyone nods,

smiling -

because it is the right thing to do,

after all, it is a good will wish,

a blessing

but for girls who want

to be dragons flaming

across the skies,

causing typhoons in the seas,

cracking the earth,

we sit in silence,

biting our tongues,

wringing our hands,

because they are not hands,

but dragon claws

and we wish to dominate

the heavens

we scream our triumph

to the skies

because we can also fly

like dragons

so, for many of us,

the dragon rests

insides hearts refusing to die,

refusing to give up

please do not tell us

that we cannot be dragons

that we have to remain

phoenixes

because girls are girls, boys are boys

this is society's lie:

a comfort tale we tell

ourselves

yang women generals are dragons

fa mulan is a dragon

all the warrior women are dragons

not phoenixes

never phoenixes

never tame

never

our feathers are dragon scales

we are carps ascended,

we are dragons

we do not announce good fortune

all the time

because girls are not pretty and nice

and all things spice all the time

we fight, we rage

we are dragons

and will remain dragons

we will chase our

dragon pearls

and we will sing

our victory like thunder

we are dragons

[Source: (Chng, 2017)]

6.3.1 Object to weakness of an interpretative possibility: Highlighting anachronistic misreadings to consider relevant cultural allusions

In one instance, the first proposition speaker deviates from the subject matter with irrelevant and anachronistic cultural allusions. When he posits the cultural significance of the carp in Chng's poem, he calls upon the popular culture reference of Pokémon to explain the insignificance of carps:

> Proposition Speaker 1: You can see from one of the later stanzas, it says "we are carps ascended / we are dragons" So what are carps? So for those who play Pokémon, you know that carp is also known as Magikarp. So when Magikarp evolves into Gyarados, and Gyarados is a flying type and dragon type Pokémon. So you can see that how it directly dates to the next line "we are dragons" so dragons is Gyarados. So this is a Pokémon Go. we know that Magikarp is normally seen as a Pokémon that is lesser and very like common.
>
> So as you can see, it connotes how women are lesser important than men and is not as highly valued as man which is symbolic of the Chinese "重男轻女" (zhòng nán qīng nǚ) ideal that has been perpetuated throughout history.

As he elaborates his analogy of the evolution of the Pokémon Magikarp to Gyarados, which presents a parallel to the evolution of carp to dragon in the poem, the class erupts into part groan and part laughter. He then equivocates Magikarp's status as a common Pokémon with the unequal status of women and men, by invoking the Chinese patriarchal cultural preference "重男轻女" (zhòng nán qīng nǚ) of having sons over daughters. It is likely that this deliberately anachronistic reference from popular culture was put forth to elicit a comedic effect—what Huuki et al. (2010) call "affiliative social play" (p. 378)—where the first proposition speaker humorously appropriates the serious space of the classroom debate, deviating from the shared purpose by invoking a less relevant set of prior knowledge to support his ethical interpretation of gender inequality in the motif of the carp.

In response to this earlier moment, the second student adjudicator's comments highlight the missed opportunities to consider the specificity of cultural allusions, rejecting the first proposition speaker's Magikarp reference and instead calling forth a more relevant reference. Not only does he recenter a well-known Chinese idiom as a relevant cultural reference to interpret the poem, but he also contextualises it

within the poem, showing how its allusive use in the poem implies the deeply inferior status of girls in society:

> Student Adjudicator 2: There wasn't sufficient like unpacking of the very rich cultural allusions that are being made in the poem. For example, for "Dragon Girls" right, the whole Magikarp thing was very bad.
>
> To be honest, the whole mention about carps and dragons is actually to show a point that women are even worse, they are not given as equal opportunities as compared to the common man because if you know a Chinese idiom called 鱼跃龙门 (yú yuè lóng mén), it's a story about how the carp manages to jump across this dragon head and after that it becomes a dragon. So it's showing like how a common man can become, so the carp is like representation of a common man. So when the girls don't even have the carp skills, it shows they are worse than common man. And it's not like how you guys interpret it as.

Here, the student adjudicator critiques the weakness of Proposition Speaker 1's anachronistic (and comedic) claims, but substantiates it with culturally relevant knowledge of animal symbolism of dragons and carps in Chinese culture which are reflected in the poem's extended metaphor of the dragon girl.

7.   DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study set out to achieve two main goals. Firstly, I outlined a theory-practice gap that examines the ways that real readers interpret ethical meaning about the other in literary texts. Here, I propose a framework of Dialogic Ethical Criticism that can help map the ways students facilitate or inhibit possibilities of ethical meaning-making when interpreting literary representations of the other in dialogic Literature classroom settings. Next, I then applied this framework in an Asian classroom setting, in debates of poems that presented ethical invitations to explore feelings, beliefs and judgements about how marginal and Asian identities are represented.

From existing empirical studies, other-centred Literature pedagogies require an adjustment period for students to recognise their limiting perceptions, and the inconclusive long-term influence on their orientations to the other suggest that cultivating the practice of continually interrupting their preconceptions and interpretations of otherness remains crucial. Student responses to ethically oriented pedagogies in Literature education have showed that text selection alone, even if they contain ethical invitations, is insufficient to foster critical engagement and increased understanding of others in students (Glazier & Seo, 2005; Thein et al., 2011, 2012, 2015). Without conscious teacher interventions and dialogic frames, students are not always ready, willing, or able to enter a stance from the other's perspective. Thus, extending a conceptually practical framework of *Dialogic Ethical Criticism* in Literature education can help teachers be more cognisant of the subtle differences of student responses when enacting such other-centred ethical pedagogies.

Classroom debates present a flexible and adaptable pedagogical tool that provides abiding norms and structures to helps students develop their critical thinking, communication and collaboration skills (Davis et al., 2016). Advocacy for the affordances of classroom debates in English education is not new, often centring on its generative and flexible affordances to cultivate critical thinking, communication and collaboration skills (Davis et al., 2016; Juzwik et al., 2014; Newman, 2020; Norlund, 2016). More recently, Kersulov et al. (2021) infused drama and role-playing exercises with real-world political issues as springboards for students to portray literary characters—ranging from canonical texts to East Asian films—in mock dramatised political debates campaigning for leadership. While connecting student selections of current, real-world political and ethical issues with literary characters and texts, students reflected that during the mock debates they found it "uncomfortable to act out a character's motivations and persona with which they personally disagreed" (p. 79). This contrasts with the students of this study, who often spoke of the marginalised other at a remove, likely as a result of their positioning in the classroom debate as competitive and interpretive commentators on the portrayals of the other. Furthermore, the tendency for students to score rhetorical points by citing technical details and popular culture references — as seen in Motion 2 and 3 — against each other appeared to be an equally prominent focus alongside the commentary about the representations of the other.

Nevertheless, whether the instructional strategy be immersion in role-play or objective debate, what remains necessary to continue opening ethical possibilities of meaning-making lies in practising self-reflexivity towards one's own preconceptions "so that the text can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one's own foremeanings" (p. 282). Classroom debates can still be productive as students use argumentative dialogue to highlight and confront each other's limitations of fully understanding and knowing the other that they encounter in texts and negotiate the multiplicity of ethical meanings between readers—as seen in Motion 1 where a keen consideration of the Opposition speakers' perspective was demonstrated by Proposition Speaker 3. Consensus-building exercises after the debates' conclusion can also be incorporated to provide revisions of interpretive closure, where teachers and students (much like Xing Le's student adjudicators) question the validity and consistency of the ethical claims made using consistent textual reference, offering constructive improvements and revisions, staying close to the poem's shared subject matter, akin to Gadamer's hermeneutic conversation.

In this single-case study, I show that "antagonistic" (Norlund, 2016) classroom debates of literary texts create discursive conditions for students to approach texts with a single-minded investment that can inhibit possibilities of ethical meaning-making. In Xing Le's class, the debate's antagonistic frame is foregrounded in the comparative stance assigned to students: where students are instructed to commit to an ethical judgement that *Poem A was more effective than Poem B (and vice versa)* in representing an ethical concern or evoking an ethical response. Ethical interruptions of students' prejudices and initial interpretations in the form of

rebuttals by their peers are then taken defensively as they are committed to these competitive stances. Self-reflexivity, in terms of revising their original stances in lieu of convincing evidence, is further disincentivised as students double down, committed to their singular perspectives that their assigned position has to defend. Thus, students—such as the speakers in Motion 2—defer to simulations of openness using ethical judgements derived from selective uses of evidence that often do not account for the poems' full contexts. Consequently, they favour persuading the audience with rhetorical force—sometimes even to comic effect as seen in Motion 3's anachronistic example of Magikarp—over what Attridge (2015) calls a "responsible reading" that attends to the fullness of the other's subjectivity. Moreover, these misinterpretations tend to rely on generalisations of the other—as seen in Motion 2 where students claim overseas Filipinos "people will still end up as like poor and shanty"—to establish claims that would satisfy the given motion.

In terms of pedagogically framing literary debates for students, teachers can emphasise accountability to others' interpretations among students—that effective debating involves consideration, concern, and respect for opposing views (Davis et al., 2016, p. 5). Also, while the students in this study were high-ability advanced humanities students, this is not to say that literary debating is better suited only among the most able students (p. 25). To help retain a balance of ethical and aesthetic responses that move towards more convincing and coherent logical developments, teachers can introduce scaffolding and sentence stems for struggling students to help formulate ethical claims, or even allow for verbal rehearsals of interpretive ideas for students of varying readiness levels. Instead, students can be assigned specific positions from different sides of a given issue in a text following a "deliberative" or an "agonistic" format (Norlund, 2016) to harness the dialogic affordances of revising their limited ethical interpretations, which can consequently foster empathetic thinking (Zorwick, 2016). Furthermore, the phrasing of the debate motions themselves may give rise to generalisations of the other and flatten out particularities. For instance, in Motion 1, the Palestinian refugee persona in Gaza (Poem 1) and the refugee persona making the illegal, dangerous crossing in the Mediterranean Sea (Poem 2) are both labelled as 'asylum seekers' by the Motion, which students can speak of as a single entity of marginalised others.

Building on this study's coding framework derived from Gadamer's hermeneutics, teachers can firstly encourage students to object to a weakness of another's interpretive claim by carefully referring to close textual evidence instead of arguing down others by focusing on discovering faults and weakness of their interpretive claims. Secondly, and relatedly, teachers can explicitly encourage students to keenly consider another's perspective and practice open-mindedness by being mentally prepared to be persuaded if another student's challenge turns out to be convincing (and to defend their position when they are not).

Nonetheless, two limitations of context affect this study's generalisability. First, the gender demographic of the all-boys' classroom which can encourage competitive and comedic stances may differ in other all-girls' and mixed-gender Asian

classrooms. Second, the students' high-ability levels may differ with students of varying ability in mainstream public schools in other Asian contexts.

Ultimately, these efforts serve to develop students' disposition of what Gadamer (2013) calls "tact" *(takt)*—a mode of knowing and being where one is sensitive to situations and how to behave in them, to "preserve distance" and avoid "the offensive, the intrusive, the violation of the intimate sphere of the person" (p. 15), facilitating a preservation and practice of an openness toward the ethical invitations of understanding the other in literary works of art, and in turn, of others in the real world.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

FUNDING

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