Singapore Writers Festival 2026: Writing The Lives at Home

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What is special about writing about home? Thank you to the SWF for inviting me and pairing me with Professor Liang Hong, together with Clarissa Oon, on this panel. I was at Professor Liang's keynote event yesterday and was really amazed to see the resonances in our work and to note that many of our motivations and values for writing are aligned. I think it's also really good that the SWF has designed this theme of "Writing the lives at home" for our conversation to reside in. It's a valuable opportunity for me to think about the question of home and what it means to write about it.

Writing about the place one resides in is what most sociologists everywhere do. As a sociologist living in Singapore, there is therefore something quite natural about my researching and writing on Singapore. But considering my work not in terms of the place where one resides, but of *home* evokes a different, slightly more intimate tone. It brings to the fore what scholars recognize only occasionally—when what we observe and record is something in which we ourselves are deeply embedded, our work holds emotional stakes, for ourselves, our respondents, and our readers. 'Home' signals that our scholarship is infused with attachment, belonging, and love. It indicates that even when we are writing of the now, in 'home' there is always also a complicated past, and an aspirational future. 'Home' is a place that is specific to the individual writer, but it is also, always and invariably, a place shared with many others.

Given these multilayered stakes, we ought to bring intentionality and reflexivity to our work. This evening, I want to reflect on how writing about Singapore, my home, as a Singaporean sociologist, has shaped my approach and outlook to my craft. Because such reflections can get unruly, I will anchor my remarks with a shorthand of the what, the how, and the why—insofar as my writing is about home, what does that mean about what I study, how I write, and why I do the work?

What: Seeing the familiar anew, going toward gaps, churning the waters

So first, if my writing is about home, what do I write about?

The biggest risk to scholars, thinkers, writers who are trying to understand their own homes is the risk of overlooking what needs scrutiny. Precisely because home is familiar, and because I too am a social actor embedded in its values, norms, and logics, there are things that I may unknowingly accept, am oblivious to. Part of my task when I approach

'home' must therefore be to deliberately de-familiarize it, to churn the waters of common sense, to ask and answer questions that are not asked often enough.

What are things about life at home that we take for granted? What are problems that people experience that we cannot see and fail to recognize? What are assumptions we make that are untrue or outdated? What are the missing stories we need to make better sense of who we are—where we have come from and where we are headed?

Over the past twenty years, I have tried to make it my habit to ask these types of questions. This is trickier than it sounds. The work requires embracing a beginner's mind and giving up the satisfaction of being an expert. It requires putting in place conditions to ensure that I am regularly exposed to people and ideas that make these questions salient—this means stepping outside my professional field to engage with artists and activists, engaging with writings and works that don't appear to be directly relevant to my scholarship, and also ensuring that even as I get more senior in my profession that I do not 'outsource' those aspects of research that bring me in contact with a wide range of ordinary people who make up my society.

Sometimes we miss out on the obvious not just because of cognitive blindspots but because of the context of the stories we already have. I am referring to the larger discursive environment in which we live. Within this, there are dominant narratives, hegemonic frames, and subtle no-go zones. The task of figuring out what to study must also involve paying special attention to what seems not ok to ask, what could get one into trouble. We often misunderstand the notion of 'risk assessment,' thinking it is about figuring out how to evaluate a field in order to stay within boundaries. I think, when we call a place home—with a past and a present to speak of, and a shared future to aspire to—our duty is to evaluate how we can push existing boundaries of thought and speech, to see what questions seem unaskable, figure out what risks to take to turn unaskable into askable questions precisely through asking them.

Summing up the 'what' question, to write about home is to see the familiar anew, to insist on churning the waters of common sense, and to gravitate toward gaps and supposed no-go zones.

How: rethinking the terms of academic work, writing for/with others who call this home

How do we do this? How have I done this?

Home is a place we share with others. That is, if there is a country or a society I call home, this is a meaningful idea only if I recognize that there are many and diverse others who call it home too. These people, my imagined community, are not primarily academics.

Most academic work is produced only for academic readers. Scholars do specialist work and engage with other specialists. There is value in this. But for me this insular circular economy has always been uncomfortable and in recent years become intolerable. Since Singapore is my home and other people living here also a part of it, the narrow academic rules of engagement, in which academics talk primarily to other academics is, in my view, not enough.

If I recognize that there are others who call my focus of study 'home,' who also have skin in the game, then how I write and for whom become important components of the writing process. Where academic writing requires theoretical sophistication legible to small groups of experts, writing for a public audience requires creating a tent big enough for people with diverse vantage points and limited shared vocabulary to come in. Where academic writing entails a static loop with little feedback—write, publish, add citation to CV—publicly oriented writing involves dynamic engagement and multiple opportunities to receive complex, sometimes messy, feedback. Most importantly, the recognition of shared skin in the game means that I am writing not just to convince, I am also writing to relate and connect, to spark and engage. I seek out an audience of readers not to show how much I know or how deserving I am of citations, but because I believe that collectively, by traveling through scholarship and stories, we can understand our home and our intersecting lives more clearly.

This type of writing means that both the process leading to a book, and what happens after a book is finished, involve cultivating spaces of solidarity. In the years before there is a book, there are encounters first and foremost with the ordinary people whose lives I am interested in learning about. I also interact with people in civil society. I pay attention to other people's work in multiple domains—read widely, watch performances, attend events. I give talks and take meetings with strangers so that there are conversations with a range of people whose interests and works intersect with mine. In the time after a book is born, I do public events and podcast interviews. The purpose is to meet readers, listen to what they are experiencing and how they are interpreting and making meanings of their own when they enter the pages of my books.

I started learning to write like this in the mid-2000s when I was in my thirties, and this must be said: in the many years before these encounters settled into feeling natural and part of my process, they were awkward, confusing and terrifying. I am glad my younger self found a way to keep going despite the terror and trepidation, because looking back now, what I gave up by way of academic authority and professional status, what I ceded in control and

predictability, I have more than made up for by the privilege of participating in a gradually but unmistakably widening circle of solidarity.

So, *how* do I write when I write about home? I write for and with a broad community. This is a readership with whom I share a past, present, and future; both them and me are here for the long haul. Amidst our differences, I write toward solidarity.

Why: justice, knowledge, playing my part

Why do I write?

I have thus far been hanging my remarks on the notion of how 'home' matters. You may presume that that too is the source of my why, that love for home and country is what motivates me. You would be wrong, or at least only partially right.

I think the 'why' question, for anyone who writes or makes any other kind of art, must come from a deeper well than crude national patriotism. It should stem from an ethic—some values regarding the purpose of our individual gifts; a commitment toward the beauty and urgency of truths; and an appreciation about life on earth and our brief time in it. For me, this ethic comes from Sociology, my vocation. I don't think Sociology is unique nor that professions are the only origin of ethics. I make this point as a reminder that 'home' is too often a romanticized place and that within the romanticization of home lives a dangerous and ugly ethno-nationalism. It means to draw borders—between those who belong and those who don't, to demarcate who's allowed to call a place home and who is not. If solidarity is important in human society, and I believe it is, then this notion of 'home' must be tempered. The 'why' question must be answered by cultivating an ethic that is more universal and expansive in outlook. It must be specific and focused in intention, but never exclusionary or parochial in spirit.

For me, Sociology provides answers to the why in three interlocking parts: I am grown from a discipline that has at its core an orientation toward justice and equality. It is my good luck that the Singapore pledge too holds these words—"to build a democratic society, based on justice and equality"—and so there is a way in which my particular disciplinary lens dovetails with the formal ideals of my home. This resonance, *as well as* the dissonance between ideal and reality, are good reasons to keep doing the work of studying, critiquing, imagining, writing writing writing.

Writing is of course not the only way to make a difference in the world, to work toward greater equality and justice. But it happens to be the path I have stumbled onto. And here, on this road that many others have travelled before and alongside me, I see that knowledge

about the world—stories of the past and present, as well as ideas about the future—can shape social action. Our interpretations of our lives matter—how humans see ourselves can bring us to fatalistic standstills just as they can drive us into passionate action. Knowledge is a necessary component of action.

And action, when taken, is most empowering when taken with others in society. I have experienced this first-hand, over and over through the years. It is true I have the kind of ego every writer needs to some degree—interested and willing to have my name alone on a book cover, to sit on stage to talk about 'my work,' to claim credit and demand attention—but this is not what has kept me going in the times when the work gets hard and its impact negligible. What keeps me going are all the times and opportunities when I experience myself as part of a larger community of knowledge generators and changemakers. This is when I can see I am just doing my part, no more and no less. When that individual ego is contained, I feel comfort. I can accept that my impact, each person's impact, on outcomes, will always be modest. 'Success' is hard to come by when you are working toward something as audacious as justice and equality. But playing a part, because I can and therefore I should, playing a part because there is meaning in contributing, in collaboration and solidarity—this is plenty and it is enough.

So, as a sociologist who writes about home, why do I write? I write because I believe there is value in aspiring toward greater justice and equality, because I think there is a role that knowledge through scholarship can play in bringing this about, and because I believe I have a part to play.

Writing about home, what do I study, how do I write, and why do I do the work? I try to see the familiar anew, go toward gaps, do my best to churn the waters through the questions I ask and the research projects I pursue. I approach writing as an act of continual engagement, of creating spaces for connection and solidarity with others who share this home. And I do the work because I think universal ideals around justice and equality are worth working toward, that knowledge production is part of the effort, and that I should do my part.

Let me wrap up my remarks in good teacherly fashion, by giving you all an assignment of your own.

This is called a writers' festival, but if you think about it, what really unites everyone in any of its rooms is that we are readers. So let me pose this for us to think together: in this world we occupy, in these times when we live and breathe, what is the place of reading?

I have been seeing on Instagram ads for t-shirts that say 'Reading is my favorite sport' and it reminds me of a film made about the French theorist Pierre Bourdieu titled 'Sociology is a martial art.' Reading looks quiet, it appears solitary, and it does not seem, on its own, to be a social or political act. "Reading is my favorite sport, sociology is a martial art." Are these taglines/titles onto something? So again, I ask you: in these troubled times, in our messy world, what is the place of reading? Can we approach it as an important, crucial component of seeing one another? Is it a vehicle for us to lean into knowledge, look discomfort and difference in the eye? Does reading have a place in acts of resistance against injustice? Can we bring into being an alternative, better world, through our insistence on reading?

In this place you may or may not call home, what do *you* read? How do *you* do it? And why?