

Article

Understanding “Love” in the English Lyrics of the Original Songs by the Multilingual New Creation Church Singapore

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Abstract: This article explores the way in which love is understood and expressed through the original English lyrics of songs by New Creation Church Singapore (NCC) in comparison to the original songs from Hillsong Church Australia (Hillsong) through the period of 2014–2020. While NCC has a multilingual congregation, reflective of the larger Singaporean society, it composes and releases original contemporary congregational songs (CCS) with English lyrics. English is the primary language in Singapore; however, it is shaped by the languages spoken in homes (e.g., Mandarin, Malay, Tamil). Combined with the theological emphases of NCC, its CCS provide a unique lens into English as a common language of worship. This article demonstrates that while the use of English lyrics is a unifying force for multilingual congregational worship, it is also not benign, but actively shaping Christian confession and associated theology and being shaped by wider multilingual contexts.

Keywords: theology; love; contemporary congregational songs; lyrics; Singapore



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1. Introduction

The theme of love has universal prominence within the lyrics of contemporary congregational songs (Thornton 2021, p. 154). While most articles in this special edition will likely focus on multilingual worship, we wanted to consider a slightly different perspective, that of multilingual worshipers and multilingual contemporary congregational song writers even when an ostensibly common language (English) is used for gathered musical worship. As such, this article undertakes a comparative analysis of the lyrical expressions of love in the original contemporary congregation songs (CCS) of two megachurches, one with a multilingual congregation in the multilingual context of Singapore, the other in the predominantly monolingual (English-speaking) culture of Australia.

The data consist of CCS produced by New Creation Church Singapore (NCC) and Hillsong Church Australia (Hillsong) during the period from 2014 to 2020. This analytical exploration hypothesises that although both NCC’s and Hillsong’s lyrical compositions are written in English, their expressions of divine love and divine–human love are nuanced. This divergence emerges as a consequence of both lingual and cultural differences and theological distinctions embedded in these megachurches. As such, this study endeavours to shed light on the multifaceted interplay between language, culture, and theology through a comparison of these producers’ CCS.

English, the shared language chosen for CCS by both NCC and Hillsong, serves as a unifying force during congregational worship, enabling worshipers from diverse linguistic backgrounds to engage in collective devotion. However, the utilisation of English in worship is not innocuous. Because NCC’s and Hillsong’s lyrical contents are moulded by their respective cultural and theological milieus, their songs contribute reciprocally to the shaping of beliefs and confessions within their respective congregations and beyond. “Love” may appear with the same spelling and syntax in the original song lyrics of these two churches, but as we will demonstrate, they are not identical.

Singapore, as a heterogeneous nation with a rich cultural and ethnic diversity, employs the English language as its principal mode of communication within crucial spheres of society, including the educational and economic domains. Within the context of NCC, the coexistence of English and Chinese in different church services reflects the divergent linguistic backgrounds of its congregants. Singapore's bilingual education system ensures that a substantial portion of the population is educated bilingually, with proficiency in both English and a mother tongue language, which includes Mandarin among the Chinese-speaking population (Chew 2017). While NCC caters to this linguistic diversity by offering services in both English and Chinese, the significant representation of English-speaking congregants within the church community underscores the strong influence of English in shared communication.

New Creation Church began in a Singapore flat in 1983 with twenty-five members (Chong 2015). Over four decades, it has grown into an independent megachurch, currently gathering more than 33,000 congregants, according to its website.¹ Central to its identity is a vibrant Pentecostal ethos led by its renowned senior pastor, Joseph Prince, since 1997. Prince's teaching on the 'gospel of grace' has propelled NCC to become one of Singapore's largest independent churches. It has also attracted considerable critique. Chong (2015), who studies the Singapore megachurch phenomenon, suggests that their rapid growth stems from their adeptness at embracing contemporary culture. He highlights societal and economic factors, noting their "appeal to upwardly mobile" individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds, effectively attracting emergent middle-class Singaporeans. Similarly, Goh argues that Prince's message is that "prosperity is not just a sign of God's grace, but is grace itself" (Goh 2018, p. 187). He goes on to argue that the church's five core values situate the church in a "client-centric mold", or in other words, are firmly aimed at satiating a popular culture and mass consumption market (Goh 2018, p. 193). Such an approach has direct implications for the original songs NCC produces and employs in congregational worship.

In a survey conducted by Chong and Hui, exploring the receptiveness of non-Christian Singaporeans to the topic of 'God's love', they found unanimously positive responses based on four different Christian groups (Chong and Hui 2013). Living in a multi-cultural society with government advocacy for religious harmony, Singaporeans are apparently receptive to the 'message of God's love'. Thus, songs expressing God's love for humanity, which are under examination in this paper, should not only be seen as relevant texts for worship, but also as evangelistic tools for the broader community.

The worship team of NCC, known as New Creation Worship (NCW), embraces English as the primary language for its CCS. This choice allows them to reach a wider audience and effectively convey their gospel messages through a common language. However, NCC's English lyrics are not entirely divorced from the linguistic backdrop of the songwriters, as they bear the influence of other languages (mother tongues) spoken in their households, such as Mandarin for the Chinese, and other vernacular languages according to ethnicity. As such, understanding the use of the English term "love", in NCC's original CCS, benefits from multilingual contextualization. Hillsong's songwriters, on the other hand, are primarily native English speakers and writers.

As mentioned earlier, language is not the only factor influencing the songwriters' lyrical creations. The songwriters' theological understanding and orientation also contribute to the way they write about Christian concepts such as love. For example, although NCC shares the core theological tenets of Christianity with Hillsong, it places a strong emphasis on divine love and grace, and the unmerited favour of God for the believers' spiritual transformation. This perspective of love is consistently interwoven into NCC's CCS lyrics. As we will demonstrate, love, as conveyed in NCC's lyrics, tends to revolve around the interpersonal relationship with the divine, accentuating God's transformative capacity in the realm of the believers' daily lives. Only in one instance does the use of "love" allude to the believers' love for God in NCC's CCS.

Hillsong, an internationally renowned entity in the realm of worship music, boasts a substantial repertoire of original songs that resonate with Christian audiences worldwide. Similar to NCC, Hillsong's CCS also feature the theme of love (Thornton 2021, p. 154). However, Hillsong's approach to love transcends the individual and extends to encompass a broader collective of not only the body of believers but also creation itself. As the analysis will bear out, God's love exemplified by Christ's redemptive sacrifice on the cross serves as a unifying force for the church, culminating in the collective act of worship.

In summary, the original lyrics of NCC and Hillsong reflect the distinctive cultural-lingual and theological foundations of each entity, influencing their portrayals of love. As English serves as a common language of worship, it unites worshipers from diverse linguistic backgrounds, fostering a sense of inclusivity and collective devotion. Nevertheless, language is not a neutral medium; rather, it actively shapes and is impacted by the broader contexts in which it operates. In certain contexts, English may be a constant reminder of historical colonialism, with all that it entails for individuals or communities. At the same time, for songwriters at NCC, the choice of writing English lyrics is an act of empowerment, uniting congregants with common language for the purpose of worshiping God, and potentially impacting other churches globally who also worship in English.

2. Literature

Contemporary congregational songs, whether by intention or not, are theological constructions, despite some scholars remaining unconvinced (Ruth 2021, p. 11). They reflect a writer's understanding of God, themselves, the church, the nature of worship, and other phenomena. Furthermore, writers "put words in the mouths of Christians who sing their songs" (Thornton 2021, p. 147). As such, the theology expressed through their lyrics has an impact on those that sing them and listen to them repeatedly. Despite the fact that "hundreds of millions of Christians sing CCS" (Thornton 2021, p. 2), studies examining the sung theology of the contemporary church are still lacking. The following section selectively traces the scholarship that informs the present study.

Examining the contemporary English CCS writing in North America, Ruth notes that there has been a shift towards a conversational style in the lyrics. This transformation involves the integration of "lexical and grammatical features associated with conversation, such as first-person pronouns and contractions" (Ruth 2015). This style identified as a "drift or colloquialisation of written English" brings the written language closer to a spoken form (Ruth 2015). How this conversational shift in CCS writing impacts theological transmission is incorporated into the analysis below. However, it is worth noting here that this deliberate effort by songwriters to create a sense of intimacy and relatability with their lyrics potentially enhances both the songs' accessibility and emotional impact on worshiping congregants. The embedded theology is then not objective or formal but personal and applied.

Studies of Hillsong's music by both Evans (2015, p. 183) and Cowan (2017, p. 93) suggest the presence of a generalised theology in their songs to cater for the global Christian market. However, this does not mean that a discernible theological orientation is absent. Riches' analysis of Hillsong's repertoire from the period 1996 to 2007 provides a comprehensive analysis of the theme of love (Riches 2010). The first aspect identified is "the immutable characteristic of God as Spirit", which Riches relates to the unchanging nature of God's love for humanity. This facet of love highlights God's central role in empowering believers. The second aspect Riches identifies is "love as human emotion", articulating this as a powerful and emotive experience within the human heart. The third aspect is a "response to the cross", which delves into how love is portrayed in relation to Christ's sacrificial death and resurrection. The fourth and final aspect focuses on "the believer's love for God" (Riches 2010). Riches' findings are informative to this study, although they are from a previous era of CCS production by Hillsong. The comparative element of this study brings Riches' work into dialogue with more recent releases from Hillsong and the theological similarities and differences between NCC and Hillsong.

3. Methods and Questions

The methodological design for this study employs both quantitative and qualitative elements. The quantitative approach involves a systematic count of the term “love” in the corpora of both megachurches. These numbers reflect the prominence of the theme within their songs, both individually and as a corpus. They also provide a clear comparison of the degree to which this theme is present in the respective producer’s songs. However, the quantitative analysis alone is insufficient to illuminate the theological nuances of the lyrical content. Therefore, a complementary qualitative analysis is also undertaken. It includes an exploration of employed metaphors and the use of direct or paraphrased scriptures. It includes a division of the overall theme into directional elements of the term:

- Divine love: songs emphasising the nature and unchanging characteristics of God’s love.
- Divine–human love: songs depicting God’s love for humanity, particularly in relation to Christ’s sacrifice on the cross, and sometimes implicating the reciprocal love between the believer and God.
- Human love: songs portraying love as a personal emotional experience within the human heart, and, in the context of worship, as a response to divine love.

Finally, the qualitative analysis explores the grammatical structures surrounding the term. For example, love is expressed as both a noun and a verb. Divine love, as a noun, is further classified by its accompanying adjectives, either descriptive (e.g., love unstoppable) or comparative (e.g., your love is better). Divine–human love is also explored in terms of its participial adjectives, and how love is presented and reciprocated—whether as a transformative force, empowering love, a symbol of grace and forgiveness, or a motivator for spiritual growth. Such analysis provides insight into the theological perspectives associated with the expression of love, as well as the way in which the English language is approached by writers in their respective settings.

The data collection process involved the selection of twenty-five songs from each of NCC’s and Hillsong’s corpora between 2014 and 2020. The compilation of their lyrics was obtained from official websites and through listening to the songs on Spotify to identify any discrepancies between published and performed lyrics. NCC’s corpus was taken from its three albums produced during that period. As an established global Christian music producer, Hillsong has released many more songs/albums than NCC. Therefore, Hillsong’s selection was drawn from Christian Copyright Licensing International’s “Top 2000 Australia Bi-yearly Payouts” report. The selection criteria involved identifying the twenty-five songs produced by Hillsong that were popularly utilised/reported between 2014 and 2020. The list of NCC’s corpus with its composers appears in Appendix A, and Hillsong’s corpus in Appendix B.

4. Findings

How do the original written song lyrics by New Creation Church Singapore (NCC) and Hillsong Church Australia (Hillsong) in the period of 2014–2020 differ in their expressions of love? Tables 1 and 2 provide a summary of the song titles with their respective lyrical expressions of love, the song location, and the frequency of the term. Twenty-one out of NCC’s twenty-five CCS (84%) contain the theme of love with a total of 122 instances. In comparison, 19 out of Hillsong’s 25 CCS (76%) contained the theme, with a more modest 76 instances in total. The term “love” is evidently more prominent within NCC’s lyrics than Hillsong’s.

The following discussion of the analysis is divided into subsections based on the term’s grammatical structure (verb and noun). The noun form of “love” also subdivides into the two adjectival categories outlined earlier.

Table 1. New Creation Church’s Expressions of Love.

NCC Song Titles	Location	Love Expression	Instances
1. Grace Revolution	Verse 1	Love unstoppable	1
	Chorus	Hearts arise to the name of love	4
	Chorus	Your love is a grace revolution	4
2. Hearts On Fire	Chorus	Your love’s changing my heart	4
3. Anthem Of Grace	Verse 1	In Your love there is no fear	1
4. Sweeter Than Wine	Verse 1	By Your unending love	1
	Chorus	Your love is better than life	4
	Chorus	Your love is all I need	4
5. Refuge	Verse 1	In the presence of Your love	1
	Verse 2	For Your faithful love endures	1
6. Forgiven Much	Chorus	By Your unending love	5
	Chorus	For Your love will never fail	5
	Verse 3	Dearly loved	1
7. Restore	Verse 1	Your love has won my salvation	1
	Verse 2	Embraced in love by the Father	1
8. Finished	Verse 1	Your love for me will never fade	1
	Verse 1	Relentless love pursued my soul	1
9. I Surrender	Verse 1	You love me as I am	1
	Chorus	To a love so strong	2
	Chorus	To the greatness of Your love	2
10. I Will Follow After You	Verse 2	I will love You all my life	2
	Verse 4	And I will love You	1
	Verse 4	For You love me all my life	1
11. Sons & Daughters	Verse 2	Your weight of love	2
	Chorus	Stand in the light of Your love	3
12. Love Burns Bright	Chorus	Love burns bright	18
	Verse 1	Your love the only light	3
13. Wonderful (Grace Made Real)	Verse 1	Whisper love that words can’t fathom	1
	Chorus	O how wonderful Your love for me	5
14. Shadow Of Grace	Verse 1	Eyes brimmed with love	1
15. All Of You	Verse 1	Stand upon Your love unshakeable	3
16. For You So Loved Me	Verse 1	For You so loved me/For You so loved	2
	Verse 2	For You so loved me/For You so loved	2
	Chorus	How Your love has seized my heart	6
	Chorus	Oh, Your love will not depart	6
	Verse 3	For You so loved me/For You so loved	2
	Bridge	Trusting in Your love	2
	Verse 4	For You so loved me/For You so loved	2
17 Letting Go	Verse 1	Perfect love has won my heart	1
	Verse 2	Resting in Your love	2
18. Give Me This Mountain	Verse 1	Your love is calling me onwards	1
19. As He Is, So Are We	Verse 1	His love has rescued me	1
20. Supply	Verse 2	I will drink of Your love	1
21. Your Lavish Love	Chorus 1	I am caught in Your lavish love	3
	Chorus 2	I’m immersed in torrential love	2
	Bridge	Love died for me	4
			Total 122

Table 2. Hillsong Church’s Expressions of Love.

Hillsong Song Titles	Location	Love Expression	Instances
1. Broken Vessels	Chorus	Oh I can see the love in Your eyes	5
2. No Other Name	Verse 2	As boundless as His love	1
3. This Is Living	Verse 2	Forever young in Your love	1
	Verse 3	In Your love I’m complete	1
	Chorus	It’s Your perfect love that sees me soar	2
4. In God We Trust	Bridge	Forever strong in Your love	2
5. What A Beautiful Name	Verse 2	My sin was great Your love was greater	1
6. I Will Boast In Christ	Verse 1	Love will never lose its power	1
7. Love So Great	Verse 1	Your love so great	1
	Chorus	Your love is like the wildest ocean	7
8. Look To The Son	Chorus	See the image of love	4
	Pre-Chorus	Love reaching out for us	4
	Verse 2	There’s no fear in love	1
9. Crowns	Chorus	Than just to know His love	4
10. Behold	Verse 1	What compares to His great love	1
	Verse 2	The righteous died for love	1
	Chorus	How great Your love is	10
11. Who You Say I Am	Verse 1	Oh His love for me	2
12. God So Loved	Chorus	For God so loved the world	4
	Verse 1	For His love has salvaged me	1
	Verse 1	For His love has set me free	1
13. So Will I	Chorus	Designed in a work of art called love	1
	Chorus	If You gave Your life to love them	1
14. You Are My Life	Pre-Chorus	In Your love You are life	2
	Post-Chorus	‘Cause Your love is all I want now	2
	Bridge	For all the world to find Your love	1
15. Good Grace	Chorus	God is madly in love with you	2
16. The Passion	Verse 1	Of the measure of His love	1
	Bridge	To honour this love	3
17. Touch Of Heaven	Chorus	All I want is to live within Your love	4
	Verse 2	In Your love and affection	1
18. King Of Kings	Verse 4	For the love of Jesus Christ	1
19. Awake My Soul	Verse 1	There is a sound I love to hear	2
			Total 76

4.1. Verb Form

Four songs in NCC’s corpus express love in the verb form:

- “Forgiven Much” emphasises “Dearly loved” as the acknowledgment of God’s love as a sacrificial offering on behalf of the human agent.
- “I Surrender”, in the verse, contains the simple but perennial divine truth, “You love me”.
- “I Will Follow After You” consists of three phrases: “I will love You”, “And I will love You”, and “For You love me all my life”, with two references to human love and an additional reference to the reciprocal nature of divine–human love. This is a fairly clear personal rendering of 1 John 4:19.
- “For You So Loved Me” uses the title phrase “For You so loved me” to reference John 3:16.

Hillsong’s three songs with the verb form of love are

- “God So Loved”, which uses “For God so loved the world”, divine love reflective again of John 3:16;

- “So Will I”, which contains “If You gave Your life to love them”, points to the sacrificial love of Jesus for human beings;
- “Awake My Soul”, which uses “There is a sound I love to hear” referring to human love which longs for a tangible encounter of God’s presence.

4.2. Noun Form

Most CCS use the noun “love” with possessive adjectives, such as “Your love” or “His love”, and are typically references to divine love. NCC’s CCS convey divine love using the second-person pronoun, “Your love”, a total of 71 times, and only one instance of a third-person pronoun, “His love”. However, Hillsong uses significantly fewer second-person pronouns, “Your love” (36 instances), and more instances (11) of the third-person pronoun, “His love”. Put another way, NCC has sixteen songs with “Your love” and only one song with “His love”. In comparison, Hillsong uses “Your love” in ten songs and “His love” in five songs. Here are just a few examples of possessive adjectives in both corpora:

- NCC’s “Hearts On Fire” conveys divine love as “Your love’s changing my world”, and “Anthem Of Grace” uses “In Your love there is no fear”, a clear reference to 1 Jn 4:18. To convey the sufficiency of divine love, NCC’s “Sweeter Than Wine” states, “Your love is all I need”.
- Hillsong uses “In Your love I’m complete” (in “This Is Living”) and “Cause Your love is all I want” (in “You Are My Life”) to focus on the sufficiency of divine love.

In previous research, the songs employing the second- and third-person pronouns were overwhelmingly “directed to Jesus” and not other members of the Godhead (Thornton 2021, p. 209). The findings of this analysis largely align with previous research, although Hillsong’s “Behold” is an interesting case, as it emphasises all three persons of the Godhead with possessive adjectives.

NCC’s and Hillsong’s corpora also contain numerous love lyrics in common noun form. Some examples include

- “Your weight of love” in “Sons And Daughters” (NCC);
- “Hearts arise to the name of love” in “Grace Revolution (NCC);
- “I can see the love in Your eyes” in “Broken Vessels” (Hillsong);
- “Love will never lose its power” in “I Will Boast In Christ” (Hillsong).

Some examples of poetic expressions of divine love in NCC’s CCS include

- “Whisper love that words can’t fathom” in “Wonderful” (NCC). The use of “whisper” and “words can’t fathom” creates a sense of mystery and evokes a visceral picture;
- “Eyes brimmed with love” in “Shadow Of Grace”;
- “Stand upon Your love unshakeable” in “All Of You”;
- Personifications of love in “For You So Loved Me”, including “How Your love has seized my heart” and “How Your love will not depart”.

Such poetic techniques invite worshipers to explore and contemplate the theological concept of love through symbolism and emotional resonance.

Hillsong’s examples of poetic expressions of love include

- “Forever young in Your love” in “This Is Living”;
- “Forever strong in Your love” in “In God We Trust”;
- “All I want is to live within Your love” in “Touch Of Heaven”;
- Adjacent contrasting language in the phrase “The righteous died for love” in the second verse of “Behold”;
- “designed in a work of art called love” in “So Will I”. This particular CCS is full of poetical lyric constructions.

4.3. Divine Love Adjectives

Both NCC and Hillsong employ descriptive adjectives. Here is a sample of divine love descriptive adjectives in both corpora:

- NCC's "Grace Revolution" describes divine love as "Love unstoppable" contrasting with Hillsong's more poetic rendering of the phrase, "Your love is like the wildest ocean" in the chorus of "Love So Great".
- The greatness of divine love is quite commonly expressed. NCC uses the phrase, "To the greatness of Your love" within the chorus of "I Surrender", while Hillsong uses, "Your love so great" in the verse of "Love So Great". Additionally, the phrases "His great love" and "How great Your love" are found in the verse and chorus of Hillsong's "Behold".
- This "Perfect love has won my heart" is found in NCC's "Letting Go" and the phrase can also be found in Hillsong's "This Is Living"—"Your perfect love". The contrast here, though not explicit in the lyrics, is with the imperfect love of humanity.
- The strength of God's love can be found in both corpora. NCC articulates "To a love so strong" in the song "I Surrender". Hillsong's "Forever strong in Your love", on the other hand, focuses on the human recipient of divine love in the song "In God We Trust".
- NCC's songs "Sweeter Than Wine" and "Forgiven Much" employ the phrase "Your unending love", while Hillsong's "No Other Name" uses the expression "boundless as His love". Both churches convey God's immeasurable love using such descriptive adjectives.
- God's "faithful love" in NCC's "Refuge", and "lavish love" and "torrential love" in "Your Lavish Love" also fit the qualitative category of descriptions for his love.

Comparative adjectives are less common, although employed more frequently by Hillsong than NCC. Some examples include

- Hillsong's "What A Beautiful Name", contrasting the enormity of sin with divine love by stating, "My sin was great, Your love was greater". Similarly, NCC employs comparative adjectives, proclaiming God's love as "better than life" and "sweeter than wine", emphasising its surpassing nature over life and earthly pleasures.
- Hillsong's "Behold" uses the phrase "What compares to his great love". While not a comparative adjective per se, the phrase essentially states, "Nothing compares to God's love, because it's greater/better than any other love".

4.4. Divine–Human Love Adjectives

Certain CCS lyrics incorporate participial adjectives reminding us that God's love is not an abstract concept, but an applied divine characteristic to humanity that invites or invokes a response.

- NCC has three songs that reference divine–human love and human participation in divine transformation. "Hearts On Fire" consists of two phrases, "hearts arise to the name of love" and "Your love's changing my heart". "For You So Loved Me" utilises the phrase, "trusting in Your love", and "Letting Go" uses "Resting in Your love".
- Hillsong's "Touch Of Heaven" utilises "Your love is calling me upward", which is not a common phrase, but a familiar sentiment for Christians, and probably a reference to Philippians 3:14. "This Is Living Now" contains "In Your love I'm complete" and focuses on the divine–human relationship that denotes the dependency of the human agent on divine love.

Divine love and divine–human love are the overwhelming categories of love expressed in the lyrics of CCS from both NCC and Hillsong. The only exceptions are NCC's "I Will Follow After You" and Hillsong's "Awake My Soul". That more expressions of human love are not present in the lyrics suggests that writers are conscious of the purpose and focus of worship: that it is predominantly for the One worshipped and not for the worshipper. In Hillsong's case, it may be that songs without human love lyrics are more palatable to churches at large and hence they appeared in the CCLI reports upon which their corpus was selected.

5. Conclusions

The term “love” is the most frequent keyword found in both NCC’s and Hillsong’s corpora. Their CCS use possessive adjectives (“Your” and “His”) to convey divine love for humanity. They also convey divine love using descriptive and comparative adjectives to feature the qualities or characteristics of love. When expressing divine–human love, participial adjectives are added to invite and implicate human participation in God’s transformation process. The usage of the second-person (Your) and third-person pronouns (His) is observed in both corpora, although Hillsong uses “His love” more (11 instances) compared to NCC (1 instance).

There is a difference in the poetic style of NCC’s and Hillsong’s CCS. NCC employs more adjectives than Hillsong (122 instances versus 76 instances). While there are some common adjectives describing the magnitude of God’s love such as “perfect”, “great”, and “strong”, NCC employs additional descriptive language such as “relentless”, “lavish”, and “torrential” for expressing divine love. Hillsong’s CCS, on the other hand, tend to use less flowery English. The reason could be, as Cowan argued, that Hillsong is more focused on its “complexly layered, sonically rich instrumentation” while maintaining a “simplistic” lyrical text (Cowan 2017, p. 97). Both Evans (2015, p. 183) and Cowan (2017, p. 78) observe that Hillsong has a “generalist” approach to theology in their lyrics, as also supported by this research. However, is there also something within the Asian culture of Singapore that leans more towards the embellishment of adjectives within lyrics?

Another observation by Cowan is that Hillsong’s “love” expression usage occurred in almost every song examined from 2007 to 2015 (Cowan 2017, p. 91). However, that is not reflected in Hillsong’s corpus during the study period of 2014–2020. Nevertheless, there is still a significant number of NCC’s 21 songs and Hillsong’s 19 songs out of each twenty-five-song corpus that place a strong emphasis on love.

Though the salvific language of Christ’s love through his atoning death is found in numerous songs in both NCC’s and Hillsong’s corpora, they portray divine love differently. NCC’s “Anthem Of Grace” and “Forgiven Much” show a greater emphasis on God’s grace and mercy, and the believer’s transformation found in Christ’s sacrifice; whereas Hillsong’s “Calvary”, “O Praise His Name”, and “I Will Boast In Christ” put a greater emphasis on Christ’s suffering, death, and resurrection, without necessarily directly linking those to the present life of the believer.

Cultural, theological, and lingual nuances can be observed in the original lyrics of worship songs from NCC and Hillsong. NCC’s love seems to have a greater emphasis on divine love, using possessive adjectives such as “Your love” to convey a believer’s personal and intimate relationship with God. While Singaporean culture is more communal than (Caucasian) Australian culture, there is a cultural emphasis on individual agency, and in this case on an individual’s direct and intimate connection with the divine. If Australian culture is arguably more individualistic, Hillsong’s songs use references to divine love to invoke more of a sense of community and shared faith. It is an interesting finding from this limited study that a more communal culture should seek to express a more individual faith, and a more individualistic culture should seek to express a more communal faith.

The choice of possessive adjectives also indicates a difference in the theological perspective between the two producers. NCC’s overwhelming use of “Your love” suggests a strong belief in a relationship with God that is personal and direct. Hillsong’s usage, however, reflects more of a balance between a personal connection with God and the acknowledgement of God’s transcendence.

The poetic expressions of divine love in the songs also reflect cultural differences. NCC’s love is more mystical, emotional, and intimate, employing phrases such as “Whisper love that words can’t fathom”, “Eyes brimmed with love”, and “Your weight of love”. Hillsong’s poetic expressions are just as emotive, but often less personal and more overarching, such as “forever young in Your love, and “designed in a work of art called love”.

Cultural, theological, and linguistic differences between the Singaporean and Australian megachurches evidently affect how they understand and articulate love in the

context of their original contemporary congregational songs. However, it should be reiterated that this study did not include all of Hillsong’s CCS output in the given period. It is possible that Hillsong songs, less popular with Christendom at large and therefore less reported to CCLI, contain more emotive and personal language relating to divine and human love. The parameters of this paper did not allow for an analysis of all Hillsong CCS from 2014 to 2020, although this would be a valuable and complementary scholarly endeavour. Additionally, there is no way to know if these songs were equally employed in worship setlists of these respective churches’ services. It may be that certain songs with particular ways of framing divine or human love resonate with the respective congregations much more than others. If so, then the presence of love lyrics may need to be further nuanced to reflect congregants’ resonance with those songs and, thus, their understanding of love.

Hypothetically, native English speakers might be more adept at using colloquial expressions, wordplay, and creative metaphors to convey their messages effectively. However, that conclusion is not evident from this research. Colloquialisms may be more evident in Hillsong’s corpus, but poetic mastery seems to be more evident in the lyrics of NCC.

In conclusion, we have argued that there is a discernible difference between Australian-English “love” and Singaporean-English “love” in CCS lyrics. In regards to “musical caring” through multilingual worship, several questions remain (Myrick 2021). Is “musical caring” something reflected in the nuanced English expressions of love for the respective congregations in Singapore and Australia? Does English as a common language for worship hamper or enhance a multilingual congregation’s worship experience? What impact does it have on the particular congregation of New Creation Church? More study is needed but, considering the size and influence of New Creation Church Singapore, their original English-lyric worship songs will continue to be written, released, and employed for congregational worship. Scholarly examination, as we have undertaken here, sheds light on the use of English language lyrics in multilingual worship contexts and on multilingual contemporary congregational songwriters.

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Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Appendix A

Table A1. New Creation Church Corpus.

Number	Anthem of Grace Album (2015)	Composers
1	Grace Revolution	Brendon Seeto, KC Gan
2	Hearts On Fire	Sean Goh
3	Anthem of Grace	Brendon Seeto, KC Gan
4	Sweeter than Wine	Elaine Fung, Sean Goh
5	Refuge	Karen Lim
6	Forgiven Much	Karen Lim

Table A1. Cont.

Number	Anthem of Grace Album (2015)	Composers
7	Restore	Brendon Seeto, KC Gan
8	Finished	Josiah Lim, Karen Lim
9	I Surrender	Karen Lim
10	I Will Follow After You	Benjamin Lim, KC Gan
Number	Encounter Album (2017)	Composers
11	Sons & Daughters	Jen Tan, Joseph Yong, KC Gan Daniel Chong, Edwin Wong, Eli Ordonez, Joseph Yong, Melissa Tal Jasuratna, Nicholas Zach Jasuratna
12	Love Burns Bright	Jen Tan, KC Gan
13	Wonderful (Grace Made Real)	Jen Tan, Jilian Har, KC Gan
14	Shadow Of Grace	Elijah Leong, Jen Tan, KC Gan, Melissa Tal Jasuratna, Nicholas Zach Jasuratna
15	All Of You	Caleb Lim, Karen Lim
16	For You So Loved Me	Edwin Wong, Eli Ordonez, Joseph Yong
17	Sky	Jen Tan, Karen Lim, KC Gan
18	Letting Go	
Number	As He Is So Are We Album (2020)	Composers
19	Give Me This Mountain	Elaine Fung, Eli Ordonez, KC Gan
20	As He Is, So Are We	Jen Tan, Karen Lim, KC Gan
21	Supply	Joseph Yong, Karen Lim
22	Your Lavish Love	Karen Lim
23	YHVH	Elaine Fung, Evangeline Ang, KC Gan, Silas Hwang
24	Trust In the Lord	Elaine Fung, Evangeline Ang, KC Gan, Silas Hwang
25	For My Good	Josiah Lim, Karen Lim, Sean Goh

Appendix B

Table A2. Hillsong Church Corpus.

Number	No Other Name Album (2014)	Composers
1	This I Believe	Matthew Crocker, Ben Fielding
2	Broken Vessels	Joel Houston, Jonas Myrin
3	No Other Name	Joel Houston, Jonas Myrin
4	This Is Living	Joel Davies, Aodhan King
5	Calvary	Reuben Morgan
Number	Open Heaven/River Wild Album (2015)	Composers
6	O Praise The Name (Anastasis)	Ben Hasting, Dean Ussher, Marty Sampson
7	In God We Trust	Ben Fielding, Reuben Morgan, Eric Liljero
Number	Let There Be Light Album (2016)	Composers
8	What A Beautiful Name	Ben Fielding, Brooke Ligertwood
9	I Will Boast In Christ	Scott Ligertwood, Reuben Morgan

Table A2. Cont.

Number	No Other Name Album (2014)	Composers
10	Love So Great	Reuben Morgan, Jamie Snell, Joshua Grimmatt
11	Look To The Son	Matthew Crocker, Joel Houston, Scott Ligertwood, Reuben Morgan, Marty Sampson
12	Crowns	Scott Groom, Ben Hastings, Michael Fatkin
13	Behold	Joel Houston
Number	There Is More Album (2017)	Composers
14	Who You Say I Am	Joel Houston
15	New Wine	Brooke Ligertwood
16	God So Loved	Matt Crocker, Marty Sampson
17	So Will I	Joel Houston, Ben Hastings, Michael Fatkin
18	You Are My Life	Michael Guy Chislett, Scott Ligertwood, Aodhan King, Ben Tan
19	Good Grace	Joel Houston
20	The Passion	Scott Ligertwood, Brooke Ligertwood, Chris Davenport
21	Touch Of Heaven	Aodan King, Michael Fatkin, Hannah Hobbs
Number	People Album 2018	Composers
22	Another In The Fire	Christ Devonport, Joel Houston
Number	Awake Album 2019	Composers
23	King Of Kings	Jason Ingram, Brooke Ligertwood, Scott Ligertwood
24	Awake My Soul	Brooke Ligertwood
25	See The Light	Ben Fielding, Reuben Morgan

Notes

¹ <https://www.newcreation.org.sg/about-us> (accessed on 6 May 2024).

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