

IMAGINED DIASPORAS:
NEOLIBERAL NATIONALISM IN CONTEMPORARY SINGAPOREAN
FICTION AND STATE CULTURE

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Abstract

In *Imagined Diasporas: Neoliberal Nationalism in Contemporary Singaporean Fiction and State Culture*, I compare the diasporic Singaporean figure as it is constructed in state narratives and contemporary fiction, making two central arguments: first, although the liberal humanist underpinnings of cosmopolitanism present attractive ideals for overcoming national difference, we must be cautious of the ways cosmopolitan thought can be retooled in the service of neoliberalism and at the expense of class consciousness; second, through my reading of a wide range of texts—including novels, performances, newspapers, and political speeches—I argue that an attention to genre and narrative can enrich an analysis of the cultural logics of neoliberalism.

The first half of the project shows how the Singaporean state's cultural production of diaspora serves to create and manage a population of cosmopolitan knowledge workers to maintain its position in a global economy through readings of the "Singaporean Abroad" series (2008-2012) from the *Straits Times*; a state-produced booklet, *Conversations on Coming Home* (2012); and a heritage festival known as Singapore Day. In contrast, the second half of the project examines how Singaporean authors Hwee Hwee Tan and Lydia Kwa use diasporic figures to perform critiques of neoliberal state policies that rely on the erasure of history, notions of human capital, and heteronormative family values.

As a whole, my study of Singapore complicates the tendency in postcolonial studies to privilege geo-political sites where independence has been predicated on anti- or decolonial struggle. When Singapore was expelled from Federation of Malaya, the newly independent state conceived itself as linked with its former British colonizer which has

resulted in a postcolonial nationalism that is consciously complicit in many neocolonial practices. In its attention to the emergence of the diasporic figure as it relates to this unusual postcolonial past, my project offers important historical considerations to theorizations of neoliberal culture in a non-western context.

Imagined Diasporas: an introduction

“The case of Singapore is particularly instructive. It has combined neoliberalism in the marketplace with draconian coercive and authoritarian state power, while invoking moral solidarities based on the nationalist ideals of a beleaguered island state (after its ejection from the Malaysian federation), Confucian values, and most recently, a distinctive form of the cosmopolitan ethic suited to its current position in the world of international trade.”

—David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*

“What is one to do with international fictions informed by an identity culture that involves extreme global mobility, but does not involve third world roots?”

—Antje M. Rauwerda, “Not Your Typical ‘Diaspora’ or ‘Third World Cosmopolitanism,’”

In Alfian Sa’at’s *Homesick*, a play about a family of Singaporeans who no longer live in Singapore, brothers-in law Manoj Abraham and Arthur Koh argue over how to define Singaporean identity. Explaining his own theories, Manoj, a Malay-Singaporean and now US citizen, tells his brother-in-law: “Hypothetically speaking, it’s possible to have a Singapore without Singaporeans. You see, historically, we’ve never cultivated a local entrepreneur class... you know, a national bourgeoisie...” (188). Manoj’s notion of “a Singapore without Singaporeans” comments on a seeming paradox: a country that is all state and no nation. For Manoj, such a contradiction is made possible through the state’s economic policies that have encouraged business from multinational corporations rather than local businesses that could have “provided some national rallying points” (188). Despite his personal reservations about Manoj, Arthur finds himself agreeing that Singapore increasingly does not need Singaporeans: “Look at all our unskilled workers. Bangladeshis, Thais, Burmese. And in the top level, foreign talent. We realized the economy could depend less and less on actual citizens” (189). For both characters, the

disenchantment Singaporeans feel about their country is largely due to the state's emphasis on economic profit.

Homesick, written by renowned Malay-Singaporean author, poet, playwright, and social media commentator Alfian Sa'at, is described on its cover as a story about a "diasporic Singaporean family." The play begins with the return of the five Koh family children to Singapore from various places in the world—the United Kingdom, Australia, the United States, Germany, China—to celebrate their father's birthday. As a result of their exposure to the unnamed Koh family father who is suspected to have SARS, the Koh children and mother are put under home quarantine for ten days. What was meant to be a celebratory homecoming quickly changes when, over the course of the enforced homestay, various family conflicts, grudges, and secrets come to the fore. It is from this family drama that characters make strong critiques of state governance—such as in the scene above.

Alfian's choice to explore issues of state governance and nationalism through a family drama suggests that the play be read allegorically which is appropriate given the tendency of national kinship to be predicated on familial relations. The cast of characters is also allegorical; those familiar with Singaporean local culture would recognize that Alfian's characters each function as an archetype of a Singaporean living abroad. There is Herbert, the "certified Anglophile" (157) and ideal postcolonial subject who lives and resides in the UK; Marianne and Manoj, the culturally progressive interracial married couple who migrated to the US; Daphne, the animal-rights activist based in Germany; Arthur, the "born-again" Chinese based in China; and finally Patrick, the youngest, who

lived in Australia to attend boarding school. Together, the Koh family represents a microcosm of diasporic Singaporeans, at least as they exist in the popular imagination.

Homesick met with mixed reviews. While many reviewers acknowledged Alfian's ability to "write beautifully" (Zhuang) and his aptitude for dramatizing pertinent questions of what it means to be Singaporean, many reviewers felt that the performance fell short of its ambitions. Certainly, Alfian had high expectations to meet as one of the most outspoken political critics on the Singaporean literary scene and as his play was the headline performance of the very first Singapore Theater Festival in 2006. The criticisms that emerged after the play's performance do not seem unfounded, however, and are born out by a reading of the play. According to Ng Yi-Sheng, for example, the play was filled with "circumlocutions that belonged in textbooks, not in popular theatre" and the characters "appeared as stereotypes or political mouthpieces" ("Full House"). Several other reviews repeat Ng's observations. Amos Toh describes the play as didactic, pointing to moments when "characters devolved into mouthpieces feeding us *Homesick*'s intended messages" ("All-Weather Quitters and Fair-Weather Stayers"). For Richard Lord, the characters and director were overly burdened by the "'talkiness' and frequent 'dueling speeches'" ("Tackling the Great Singapore Question") and unable to bring the script to life.

Besides the above exchange between Manoj and Arthur, several other moments make a case for Ng's argument. When discussing the scandal of their absent father's affair, for example, Marianne speculates that Cindy, the Koh father's mistress, is after the Koh family's money and Singaporean citizenship. Accusing her sister of being unfairly xenophobic, Daphne points out:

Marianne, we're living in an increasingly borderless world. It's so easy for capital to flow from one country to another. Investors can dump their money wherever they want. Capital accumulates in first world countries. But when it comes to the movement of people, we put up barriers. We stop them at customs, we interrogate them, we X-ray their bags and their lungs. But all they're doing is simply following the money. They just want a slice, no, a tiny crumb of the opportunities the rest of us have. (212)

Throughout the play, Daphne, a lawyer turned animal activist, provides several lines of political critique. Daphne's speech, while interesting for the ways it points to the power of capital and the contradictions in national attitudes toward capital versus human individuals, would likely come off as moralistic or preachy in the context of a play. Though befitting for Daphne's character, the speech seems to be a direct commentary on Singaporean political happenings at the time.

My point here is neither to defend nor challenge the reviews of Alfian's play, however. Though a point of critique for many of the reviewers, what interests me for the purposes of this dissertation project is Alfian's casting of "diasporic" characters (I will explain my use of scare quotes below), and the manner they are used to articulate certain perspectives. For Alfian, whose work is well known for its exploration of "national memory and cultural memory as sites for the exercise of state power" (Poon 122), diasporic characters facilitate a political and social critique of the Singaporean state and its continuous attempts to shape its nation according to economic need. What appears to be assumed in the writing of Alfian's play is that there is a recognizable diasporic ethos that can effectively convey critique. Manoj and Arthur's experiences outside of

Singapore, in the US and China respectively, appear to be connected to their assessments of the Singaporean state's economic policies. So too is the case with Daphne whose international involvement with environmental and social justice issues is the by-product of time outside of Singapore and influence her communication with her family. In *Homesick*, Alfian uses diasporic Singaporean figures in deliberate and strategic ways and imagines them to have voices distinct from other types of Singaporeans.

Besides its thematic focus on diasporic Singaporeans, *Homesick* provides a useful point of departure for many of the questions and concerns that animate this dissertation project. Alfian's *Homesick* is one text, among many, that features a diasporic Singaporean figure. As I discuss, that such representations have materialized from both Singaporean fiction writers and the Singaporean state indicates the political significance of diasporic Singaporeans. Moreover, the very different ends to which these representations are deployed further illustrates that diasporic Singaporean identity is fraught and mired in power relations between state and national subjects.

In this dissertation, *Imagined Diasporas: Neoliberal Nationalism in Contemporary Singaporean Fiction and State Culture*, I compare the diasporic Singaporean figure as it is constructed in state narratives and contemporary fiction, focusing on constructions of diasporic subjectivity and their functions within the texts I examine. From my readings of a wide range of texts—including novels, English language state newspapers, ephemera from “Singapore Day,” National Day Rally speeches, online media, and social development reports such as the Singapore 21 Report—I make two main arguments.

First, I claim that although the liberal humanist underpinnings of cosmopolitanism present attractive ideals for overcoming national difference, we must be cautious of the ways cosmopolitan thought can be retooled in the service of neoliberalism and at the expense of class consciousness. Although the basis of this argument might seem to emerge from my discussion of state cultural texts, my argument is built on my discussions of both state texts and fictional writings that are critical of state politics. I show that while fiction writers use diasporic figures to make subversive political critiques, they do not interrogate the class privilege from which their characters' mobility derives, they ultimately run the risk of reifying a cosmopolitanism that obfuscates and normalizes the ideological workings of neoliberalism.

Second, I argue that an attention to genre and the narrative features of texts can enrich an analysis of the cultural logics of neoliberalism. Tracking the emergence and adaptations of particular genres under conditions of neoliberalism allows us to see important continuities and discontinuities that neoliberalism has with previous historical moments. In the case of the texts I examine in this project, we observe how *bildungsroman*-type narratives are adapted both by the state in service of its neoliberal agenda and by fiction writers to perform critique. This attention I give to the textual forms through which economic culture and ideology is expressed centralizes questions of language, literature, and representation in the study of what is often considered to be one of the strongest economic influences in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century--neoliberalism. In their discussion of genre and neoliberalism, Jane Elliot and Gillian Harkins explain that genre criticism—and more largely, I would argue, questions that surround the study of literature and culture—can “offer a humanities-based meditation on

political economic periodizing tendencies and to consider the extent to which humanistic inquiry can participate in defining the meaning of the twenty-first century” (2). As such, my project builds on efforts in literary and cultural studies to develop critical language that accounts for border-crossing movements and processes of neoliberal globalization.

My study of Singapore is not only especially pertinent to issues of neoliberalism, but it is also a site which has been generally ignored by postcolonial studies, Asian American studies, and the humanities more generally. As various social scientists, area studies specialists, and economists have noted, Singapore is an especially rich site for studying the effects of global capital on national identity and culture because its unprecedented rate of economic development and modernization intensify issues of neoliberal globalization. Singapore, as put succinctly by Pheng Cheah: “embodies the values and imperatives at work in the operations of global capital artificially speeded up as in a computer animation model that simulates natural motion in exaggerated fashion” (183). The added combination of Singapore’s status as a former British colony, its histories of multi-ethnic immigration, and the state’s push to be seen as a “global city” makes it an ideal setting for staging questions of how processes of neoliberal globalization affect constructions of postcolonial cultural identity. Despite its unusual and complex history and its relevance for studying the effects of global capital flows, Singaporean literature and culture has been the subject of only four monographs, that by and large, are more focused on the Southeast Asian region.¹ My project offers an extended study of contemporary Singaporean literature and culture, taking it as a worthy site of concentrated attention.

¹ See Shirley Geok-lin Lim, Lily Roxas-Tope, C.J. W.-L. Wee, and Eddie Tay

For postcolonial studies, my study of Singapore complicates the tendency to privilege geo-political sites where independence has been predicated on anti- or decolonial struggle. When Singapore was expelled from the Federation of Malaya in 1965, the newly independent state conceived itself as linked with its former British colonizer, resulting in a postcolonial nationalism that has been from the beginning consciously complicit in many neocolonial practices. The project calls attention to an understudied geo-political site, which thus diversifies our understandings of what constitutes the postcolonial experience. As one of the four Asian Tigers—the others being Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Korea—Singapore differentiated itself from the rest of the postcolonial world because of its economic success. Although exceptional, as Jini Kim Watson points out drawing on Samir Amin, the so-called Asian Miracle nations “must be seen as the profound product of the age of three worlds” (253). What Singapore is today, in other words, is the result of its postcolonial history, not a conquering of it. Postcolonial studies “has been less interested in the developmental theory and policy that fundamentally shaped the third world in the years immediately after independence” (89) and as a result, the field has had less to say about sites that took up—and continue to take up—the imperative to modernize and develop. This project seeks to fill in that absence. In its attention to the emergence of the diasporic figure as it relates to this unusual postcolonial past, my project offers important historical and aesthetic considerations to theorizations of neoliberal culture in a non-western context and eschews depictions of neoliberal culture as western, singular, or unified.

This project also has a postcolonial agenda in that it is interested in studying Singapore as a way of understanding what Robert Young describes as the “power

structures of the world” (20). If, as David Harvey argues, neoliberalism is a class project—and not just one that takes place within national borders, but one that is enacted globally—it becomes increasingly urgent not only to recognize neoliberalism’s effects in exacerbating class difference, but to study its working and its implementation. As Robert Young puts it:

[Postcolonialism’s] objectives have always involved a wide-ranging political project—to reconstruct Western knowledge formations, reorient ethical norms, turn the power structures of the world upside down, refashion the world from below. The postcolonial has always been concerned with interrogating the interrelated histories of violence, domination, inequality, and injustice, with addressing the fact that, and the reason why, millions of people in this world still live without things that most of those in the West take for granted. (20)

Part of the work that must be done, not only requires an understanding of the effects of power structures, but also necessitates an analysis of how that power works.

The dissertation is split into two main parts. The first half of the project shows how the Singaporean state’s cultural production of diaspora serves to create and manage a population of cosmopolitan knowledge workers to maintain its position in a global economy. The primary texts I examine include English language state newspapers, ephemera from “Singapore Day,” National Day Rally speeches, online media, and social development reports such as the Singapore 21 Report. One of the key concepts I forward in this project is that of Overseas Singaporeans as an “imagined diaspora.” By attaching “imagined” to diaspora I am not only riffing off of Benedict Anderson’s “imagined

communities,” but also focusing on the ways diasporic subjects are culturally signified and the ends to which they are used. I offer a concept for thinking about geographic mobility as an identity marker that is—as with constructions of race, gender, class, and sexuality—shaped by everyday life, law, and cultural representation. In contrast, the second half of the project examines how Singaporean writers use diasporic figures to perform critiques of neoliberal state policies that rely on the erasure of history, notions of human capital, and heteronormative family values. I consider how novelists Hwee Hwee Tan and Lydia Kwa use diasporic perspectives to contest state power by questioning constructions of history, imagining ways of being Singaporean that are not motivated by neoliberal ideology, and revealing the effects of neoliberal globalization on national belonging. In the texts I examine, diasporic Singaporeans are variously positioned as the author, the audience, or the subject. For example, “Singaporean Abroad” is a newspaper series featuring diasporic Singaporeans; “Singapore Day” is a state-produced event targeting diasporic Singaporeans; *Pulse* is a novel written by a diasporic Singaporean. These positions that diasporic Singaporeans take with respect to the text provide different vantage points to study their function and interpellation into national discourse about Singapore’s economy as well as the ways Singaporeans living abroad identify as diasporic. As those in diaspora studies have pointed out, diasporic formations compel us to rethink nations, nationalism, and the relation between nation-states and citizens. It is the very manner in which diaspora is constructed and performed in the Singaporean context by both state and national subjects that makes it a particularly compelling object of study.

Through its focus on the function of diasporic Singaporeans in contemporary state-produced and fictional texts, my dissertation mobilizes important questions around neoliberal and transnational cultural formations, the role of literary and cultural studies in theorizations of neoliberalism, and the significance of Singapore for postcolonial studies. In what follows, I lay out the critical concepts—“imagined diasporas” and “neoliberalism nationalism”—that frame my textual analyses, as well as the history and context behind the emergence of the diasporic Singaporean figure as it has appeared in public discourse and literature.

Singapore: an overview

For first time visitors to Singapore, perhaps one of the most arresting experiences is the suffocating humidity as they step out of the heavily air-conditioned Changi Airport (which has been consistently rated as the world’s best airport). Though its hot and steamy weather is fitting for its location just off the equator, the miserably sweaty effects of tropical climes draw a sharp contrast to the sleek, modern, and high-tech civilization that the island-nation has built. Riding down one of the highways, or “expressways” as they are referred to, one is struck not only by the number of tall buildings that pepper the landscape, but also by the amount of greenery. Thanks to former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew’s vision for Singapore as a “garden city” in the 1960s, trees, bushes, creeping vines, and bougainvillea now fill every possible space in the city and line roads and pedestrian overpasses. Not that there is too much free space these days with a population of 5.3 million citizens and residents sharing 715.8 square kilometers. Much like its population, Singapore itself is also growing; its area is up about 1.5 square kilometers from the measured land area in the year before in 2011, due to land reclamation projects

(Department of Statistics Singapore 1).² Amongst the buildings and greenery, one would also likely notice the many red building cranes that line the city. It seems nearly impossible to get away from the hammering sounds of construction that echo throughout the country.

Walking around the city, one can both see and hear the vestiges of its time as a former trade outpost of the British Empire that attracted migrant labor from East and South Asia to supplement the labor provided by the indigenous Malay population through its multi-ethnic and multi-lingual population. Though signage, bureaucratic affairs, and everyday transactions are mostly in English, much to the chagrin of the state, Singapore's ethnic and linguistic diversity is reflected through its creole language, Singlish. Singapore has four languages: English, Tamil, and Mandarin are "official" languages, while Malay is its "national" language.³ Many Chinese families still speak dialects such as Hokkien, Cantonese, Teochew, and Hainanese at home or in casual everyday conversation.⁴ Singapore's Chinese, Indian, and Malay traditions are reflected in the calendar of public holidays, different public television channels, the many religious institutions throughout the city (Hindu temples, Muslim mosques, Buddhist temples, etc), and its cuisine. According to a 2012 report, Chinese make up 74.2% of Singapore's population while Indians and Malays make up 9.2% and 13.3% respectively (Department of Statistics 4).⁵

² Singapore's current size is about half the size of the island of O'ahu in Hawai'i which is 1545 sq km.

³ The state's differentiation between official and national language seems to be a geo-political issue. By recognizing Malay as its national language, the state acknowledges its indigenous population and their shared linguistic roots with others in the region.

⁴ See Tan Pin Pin's documentary *Singapore GaGa* for a wonderful representation of Singapore's diverse (and disappearing) language traditions.

⁵ Those who do not fit into the Chinese, Malay, or Indian category are put into the "Other" category. Such individuals comprise 3.3% of the population. The general racial structure used by the Singaporean government today is a hangover of the British who categorized (and hierarchized) the different groups according to this structure. Previously when registering births, Singaporean citizens were required to list "race" according to their father's ethnicity. Those in the "Other" category have typically included

Many depictions of Singapore celebrate it as a harmonious multi-racial and multi-religious society. Critics, however, see Singapore's celebrated multicultural society as an ideological instrument of the state to maintain social relations in the service of global capital.⁶

Perhaps, the best word that describes Singapore is "intense." At the beginning of its reluctant independence in 1965—a status that was achieved not because of a fight for national sovereignty, but because Singapore was expelled from the Federation of Malaya—Singapore's fate was uncertain, to say the least. Since then, under the leadership of former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew and the People's Action Party (PAP), the island-nation has become one of the wealthiest nations in Southeast Asia, exceeding their neighbors' per capita incomes by more than five times, with the exception of Brunei with its oil reserves (Chandler, Owen, Roff, et. al. 399). Moreover, Singapore in "the early 1990s . . . reached rough parity, in terms of per capita Gross Domestic Product, with the United Kingdom, its former colonial power" (Holden 345). While the point here is not to uphold economic progress as the primary measure of success, the upward trend in Singapore's significant economic wealth over a less than fifty-year period indicates the intensity of social, cultural, and political change.

individuals who are part white (i.e., Eurasians). In addition to being listed on ICs (Identity Cards), race categorization has implications for what education Singaporeans will receive. Singaporeans who attend local government schools must learn their mother tongue language (yes, ironically determined by their father's ethnicity) as well as English. There is more that can be said about class implications due to the state's language policies that prioritize English and Mandarin as modern lingua franca. Though the Singaporean government seems to be taking on a more liberal stance in terms of race categorization by now allowing for mixed-race individuals ("Greater Flexibility of Double-Barrelled Race Option from 1 January 2011), what race parents decide to list at the time of their child's birth still has consequences for education; for hyphenated individuals (i.e., Malay-Indian), the first of term of the appellation will determine the child's education.

⁶ See Chua Beng Huat's "Multiculturalism in Singapore: an instrument of social control" *Race & Class* 44(3): 58-77.

For many years, Singapore's success has been explained as a result of its authoritarian state and what was often construed as its punitive governance. The facts of its no spitting and no littering laws; that drug offences are punishable by death; restrictions of free speech and assembly; and that vandalism is punishable by caning as made famous by American Michael Fay are used as examples of a strong state that bordered on a dictatorship. Famously, American science-fiction writer William Gibson described Singapore as "Disneyland with a Death Penalty" (1993), depicting Singaporean governance as technocratic and overly focused on economic-profit, and lampooning the island-nation's "white-shirted constraint," "absolute humorlessness," and "conformity" (1). Such dreary representations suggest that Singapore was somehow predictable and that its economic success was more of a point of denigration than celebration.

More recently, however, depictions of Singapore—particularly from the west—are celebratory of its economic success. Though once represented as sterile, even boring and possibly dangerous given its strict laws, Singapore now appears as an exciting travel destination on American cable television with great shopping, exotic food, architectural wonders, and cultural diversity. In 2013, the International Finance Corporation and The World Bank ranked Singapore as the best place in the world for its "Ease of Doing Business" ("Economy Rankings"), and The Heritage Foundation ranked the city-state as second for "economic freedom" ("Singapore"). Although nothing like the US and its military or China and its economy, Singapore has become a global power, as indicated by the level of admiration its "success story" commands amongst economists, policy makers, and business people. So compelling is Singapore's success that Thomas

Friedman of *The New York Times* has commented that “[i]f Singapore has one thing to teach America, it is about taking governing seriously” (“Serious in Singapore”).

Despite evidence of all the public attention that Singapore has received in recent years, and even with its increasing significance in the global economy, Singapore—and indeed, Southeast Asia more largely—has been noticeably absent from discussions and theorizations of postcolonialism, particularly in the North American academy. A former British colony from 1819 to 1942 that was then taken over by the Japanese Imperial Army from 1942 to 1945, Singapore’s history of multiple colonizations would seem to offer a rich site from which to study the effects of colonial occupation. Moreover, its rather complicated road to full independence offers an interesting example of postcolonial nationalism. Following Japanese occupation, Singapore returned to British rule from 1945 to 1955, eventually gaining partial self-governance from 1955 to 1959, and full self-governance under the PAP in 1959 (Turnbull 251-287). Singaporean independence from Britain was only achieved, however, upon its merger with Malaysia in 1963. Following escalating tensions between the Chinese and Malays that erupted into violence in 1964, Singapore finally “gained” its independence after Tunku Abdul Rahman, the former Malaysian Head of State, announced Singapore’s separation from the Federation of Malaya (Chan 157). As Philip Holden describes it: “Unlike the formal ceremonies of flag-raising in postcolonies that preceded it in the 1950s and 1960s, Singapore’s independence was marked by a ‘moment of anguish,’ by then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew’s tears at a press conference announcing separation from Malaysia on August 9, 1965” (345). Such bleak circumstances that led to Singapore formation into an independent nation-state hardly seemed cause for celebration. Though its path to national

independence departs from the more typical victorious narrative of other postcolonial nations in Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean, this different historical trajectory does not seem reason enough to account for Singapore's absence in postcolonial studies.

The Singaporean state's politics, however, hardly fit into postcolonialism's critical agenda. Postcolonial studies has not only been interested in contexts that were once colonized, but in ways of critiquing social hierarchies, inequities, and oppression. Franz Fanon, whose writings have been foundation to postcolonialism's radical agenda, describes decolonization as a program which "sets out to change the order of the world" (36). Though a postcolonial national formation, the directions that the PAP has directed Singapore towards since 1959 have never been interested in a radical politics or changing the any order of the world. Instead, it has sought to capitalize on world order. The Singaporean state has always and unapologetically made economic progress (as read through the lens of capitalist profits) the bottom line rationale for its governance. In doing so, the Singaporean state could hardly be described as attempting to "turn the power structures of the world upside down." Global capitalist structures are not only accepted as matter of fact by the Singaporean state, but are reified through state governance. For example, official state histories attribute the beginning of Singapore's history to its "founding" by Sir Stamford Raffles as a British trading post in 1819. As C. J. W.-L. Wee puts it: "[According to the state] [t]he imperial past is not necessarily a debasing one, for it laid the foundation for present sociopolitical developments . . . Singapore is probably distinct among postcolonial societies in its *valorization* of the *imperial past*—a past of progress, it might be said" (719-720—emphasis in original). Quite unlike other postcolonial contexts that typically articulate a break from colonialism, state

representations of Singaporean history effectively narrate the nation's independence as continuous with colonial contact.

Though anomalous in the postcolonial context, Singapore's conscious complicity in neocolonial practices makes it worthy of an extended study. In addition to addressing a noticeable absence in the field, the Singaporean example asks us to rethink what the normative features of postcolonialism are. What does postcolonial experience and culture look like when histories of anti-colonial struggle—taken to be foundational to postcolonialism—do not exist? What does the state's implementation of successful socioeconomic policies and the ensuing responses through literary and cultural production tell us about the workings of global capitalism? How is national subjectivity constructed by the state to achieve its economic agenda and how does this compare to the ways Singaporeans imagine themselves? How do Singaporeans imagine their relationship to the state? Although the Singaporean government has arguably been successful—if we at least take the various economic measures, ranks, and indicators as evidence—the fact that the state constantly refashions the nation according to perceived shifts in the global economy and constantly seeks new cultural strategies to achieve its economic agenda means that the nation, always dynamic and shifting, is a contested space.

My project specifically focuses on Singaporean literary and cultural production from 1997 onwards, taking the Asian financial crisis as a formative moment in the history of contemporary diasporic Singaporeans. A report published in February 2003 by the Singapore Economic Review Committee (ERC), *New Challenges, Fresh Goals: Towards a Dynamic Global City*, gives a sense of how seriously the Singaporean state took the Asian financial crisis of 1997 despite the fact, as Aihwa Ong points out, that the effects of

the financial crisis were relatively minor in Singapore compared to the rest of the Southeast Asian region (178). In rather dramatic language, the report, which describes the crisis as a “turning point,” details the dire consequences the nation would face should the state not change its economic strategies:

-Our workers will experience painful displacement and structural unemployment, which were never serious problems before. This will especially affect older, less-skilled workers who missed their secondary education, but even white-collar workers and professionals will not be spared.

-Our fiscal position will become tighter. With a slower growing economy, revenue will be less buoyant. Against this, there will be pressure to increase government spending on social needs, such as healthcare. We are unlikely to accumulate budget surpluses as easily as we used to. (3)

Although Singapore’s economic model has “always emphasized free trade, an export-led economic development strategy, and a dependence on international capital, technology, and labour, all combined with an extensive role for the government,” the 1997 Asian financial crisis—and indeed Singapore’s economic recession in 1985 and the 2008 global financial crisis—marks a pronounced shift in the state’s economic structuring (Choy 123). To address the pressing concerns of slowed economic growth, the ERC report recommends the need to “embrace” globalization by “linking ourselves to the developed economies,” “strongly support[ing] the multilateral framework of the World Trade Organization,” by establishing “bilateral Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) with key trading partners,” and by creating a “knowledge economy powered by innovation, creativity and

entrepreneurship (9-10). Embracing globalization, in other words, entails the implementation of neoliberalism—an issue that I take up at greater length in the next section.

With Singapore's pronounced shift to more liberalized economic policies and the concomitant turn to a knowledge economy came an emphasis on building a cosmopolitan city and nurturing Singaporeans to become more cosmopolitan. *New Challenges, Fresh Goals* repeatedly declares its goals of making Singapore “the most open and cosmopolitan city in Asia” (5), one that “will also be a fun and fulfilling place—vibrant, cosmopolitan, unique and confident in our blend of cultures and the arts, where East meets West and diverse ethnic heritages co-exist with modernity” (63). We see similar sentiments echoed in another social development report, *Singapore 21: Together, We Make the Difference* that was released a few years earlier in 1999. The report, “a vision and an action plan to take Singapore in[to] the 21st century” (Ho), was the result of an initiative directed by former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong (the second Prime Minister of Singapore) who assembled the Singapore 21 committee. Although the taskforce was not explicitly formed in response to the 1997 Asian financial crisis, it was established in August of that year, a few months after the crisis began. Despite being written for different purposes—*New Challenges, Fresh Goals* as policy recommendations to the state and *Singapore 21* as a study/open response to the perceived societal stress Singaporeans were facing with its frenetic pace of development—both reports accept neoliberal globalization as a condition that the nation must face. Singaporeans can adapt to the demands of globalization, *Singapore 21* suggests, by creating infrastructure that encourages young Singaporeans to “grow up with an international perspective,” “go

global,” and “grow up feeling comfortable with peoples, cultures, food, religions and social norms from around the world” (45). Together, these two reports illustrate the ways that cosmopolitanism arose as an important national trait at the same time as the state deregulated the economy. It is this “cosmopolitan turn,” I argue, that gave rise to the prominence of diasporic Singaporeans in state discourse.

It would be misguided, however, to believe that we can entirely credit the cosmopolitan turn for Singapore’s economic success— Overseas Singaporeans are only a small part of a much larger and complex picture. As with many first-world economies, Singapore’s very image as a clean, modern, and bustling city with gleaming skyscrapers is made possible by migrant laborers who work in low-paying, service-sector and construction jobs: domestic workers from the Southeast Asian region who feed and manage Singaporean families, professional caretakers from the Philippines who look after the elderly, bus drivers from China who make possible Singapore’s efficient transportation system, and South Asian construction workers who build Singapore’s infrastructure. If all of the so-called “unskilled labor” were to go on strike for even a day, the city-state would not be able to function (and this is perhaps a point not lost on the Singaporean state, as strikes are illegal). Scholars, journalists, and human rights activists have variously commented on Singapore’s poor treatment of its migrant laborers. As a recent strike by bus drivers from China and a recent riot by mostly construction workers in Little India demonstrate—two events that occurred during the writing of this dissertation—the Singaporean state may not be able to sustain the legislation that devalues and dehumanizes its migrant laborers.⁷

⁷ See “Singapore Strike: The Full Story” by Chun Wan Wong of the *Wall Street Journal* and “Big Trouble in Little India: Riot in Singapore” by F. C. of *The Economist*.

Yet to be considered is the degree to which the Singaporean state relies on foreign professional workers to sustain its knowledge economy. Political controversy attends Singapore's reliance and valorization of "foreign talent." As I discuss in the chapters that follow, Singaporean state officials have justified their constant exhortation to increase the nation's population through relaxed immigration policies, making very clear the state's preferential treatment of certain types of immigrant labor. When a parliamentary white paper published in February 2013, *A Sustainable Population for a Dynamic Singapore*, revealed the state's plans to increase the population by 30 percent, Singaporean citizens and residents—already aggravated by the rapidly rising cost of living and the sense that "foreign talent" were treated better than its own citizenry—staged the largest political protest since the Singapore's independence. As the rising discontent among migrant labor and Singaporeans alike demonstrates, the state's love affair with neoliberalism will not be easily maintained.⁸

It is not yet clear how the construction of the Overseas Singaporean population articulates with these other migrant populations. My overview of the various migrant populations and their status in the national imagination is only but a brief sketch. Overseas Singaporeans occupy a small portion of the larger web of (migrant) labor in Singapore and has not garnered much critical scholarship. In her outline of Singaporean migration issues, cultural geographer Brenda Yeoh notes that Singaporean emigration is becoming an increasing state concern, particularly because there is "an average of about 1,200 highly educated Singaporeans (including 300 naturalized citizens) giving up their citizenship each year in favor of others." But in the face of some of the above mentioned

⁸ See "Singapore's Foreigner Problem" by Mark Fenn of *The Diplomat* for one account of the rising discontent surround Singapore's immigration policies.

immigration issues that have taken central stage in Singapore's political scene, Singaporean emigration has been overlooked or at least overshadowed. Issues of emigration and diaspora are also very new as a cultural phenomenon, and there is general absence of clear empirical information and discussion about those who leave Singapore.⁹ Although the scope of the project is limited insofar as it is focused on diasporic Singaporeans, this project offers a concentrated study of how emigration—as it is encapsulated by discourses of diaspora—is represented in Singapore. It will be important for scholars to further examine the relationships between outflows and inflows of migrants in Singapore, and it is my hope that this project sets up the foundation for future work in this area.

Neoliberalism, Nationalism, and Neoliberal Nationalism

In his *Brief History of Neoliberalism*, David Harvey poses an important question: “How was neoliberalization accomplished, and by whom?” (39). The point for Harvey is that neoliberalism is often narrated as inevitable or even natural, and its implementation is political and requires ideological consent, at least in the contexts of the US and UK with the election of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan respectively (39). Because my project is not focused on the beginnings of neoliberalism in Singapore (which, I would argue, would take us back to Singapore's independence), the question shifts a little to one of how neoliberalization is sustained? What literary and cultural forms is neoliberalism most attracted to, and why?

⁹ Yeoh writes: “Many Singaporeans migrate as highly skilled workers and are employed in specialist sectors such as banking, information technology, medicine, engineering, and science and technology. Additionally, a generous proportion of them are students pursuing their first and/or postgraduate degrees. Some Singaporean students abroad have been sponsored by government scholarships and are obligated to return upon finishing their studies.” She does not provide any sources for this information, however.

In one answer to such a question, I use the term “neoliberal nationalism” to describe the way that economic doctrines that promote free market policies, economic deregulation, and privatization are sustained and expressed through forms of national cultural expression. As Harvey points out, “the neoliberal state needs nationalism of a certain sort to survive” (85). Concerned with how we “think” and “feel” neoliberalism through national relations and national subjectivity, neoliberal nationalism enables us to 1) see neoliberalism as a cultural phenomenon 2) think about the affective dimensions of the economic 3) consider the ways in which the nation-form is changed and evolved in the late twentieth and twenty-first century. As I demonstrate, the valorization of Overseas Singaporeans that emerges post-1997 is a part of the state’s cultural work in its attempt to sustain and further encourage neoliberalism. For the rest of this section, I offer definitions of neoliberalism, nationalism, and neoliberal nationalism as they function in the Singaporean context.

On Neoliberalism

During a question and answer session at conference panel at the MLA Annual Convention in 2013, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak suggested that most people who use the word “neoliberalism” actually have no idea what the word refers to. Thus it seems important to take some time to explicate the term’s meaning and usage.

The origin of neoliberal theory is often credited to Austrian economist Freidrich Hayek, whose *The Constitution of Liberty* was influential to Margaret Thatcher, and Milton Friedman of the Chicago School of Economics who was an economic advisor to Ronald Reagan. According to most accounts, the widespread implementation of neoliberalism began in the 1970s to 1980s when the US, UK, Chile, and China shifted

away from “social collectivity and Keynesian government to radical individualism and macroeconomic strategies” (Elliott and Harkins 4). Neoliberalism can variously refer to an economic theory, economic policies, style of governance, or cultural processes.

As a theory, neoliberalism is based on the idea that capital accumulation is enabled by governmental deregulation of the market in favor of businesses and corporations, and embraces the understanding that free trade and privatization optimize human well-being. Neoliberalism is not the first or only economic theory supportive of free trade and capital mobility; similar logics appear in classical economic liberalism. The differences, however, are the motivations. In his useful review of the differences between liberal internationalism, neoliberal institutionalism, and classical economic liberalism, Adam Harmes points out that classical economic liberals such as John Stuart Mill and Richard Cobden believed that free trade and capital mobility would create “a more interdependent and peaceful world” (63). For economic liberals such as Adam Smith and David Ricardo, economic free trade offered “economic efficiency and mutual gains” (63). For neoliberals, who support free trade and capital mobility but oppose the expansion of international regimes and institutions, the main “normative priority . . . is individual freedom, freedom from ‘progressive’ forms of government intervention designed to redistribute wealth and correct market failures” (63). What Harmes describes as the desire to be free from government interventions often gets easily construed to mean that neoliberals and states are in adversarial relationship. As examples in both Southeast and East Asia demonstrate, however, this is not always the case. To be more precise, neoliberals are against a particular *type* of government intervention—in the Singaporean context, neoliberals are likely to be highly supportive of, for example, the state’s

prohibition of labor unions. Also notable here when considering neoliberalism from the vantage point of Southeast Asian and East Asian contexts is the notion of (individual) freedom that neoliberalism supposedly facilitates. Put bluntly, freedom is not a word or concept that has much currency in the Asian context and has been, at times, a term taken to represent the worst of western decadence and American imperialism—an issue I take up further in Chapter Three with my discussion of Asian Values discourse. This is not to say that Asians do not value agency, but that the notion of “freedom” as a central value of neoliberalism does not translate easily from the western context. In Singapore, values of individualism appear more in the form of meritocracy. Regardless of the different ways they understand “freedom,” what conjoins western and Asian notions of neoliberalism is a belief that what is beneficial for individual achievement is ultimately to the benefit of society as well.

Neoliberalism as it is put into policy and cultural practice, however, looks differently depending on geopolitical context; as Ong points out in her critique of David Harvey’s characterization of neoliberalism in China, the effects of neoliberalism are uneven and unpredictable: “David Harvey invokes the ‘the neoliberal state’ as an ideal-type and thereby unwittingly presents the state as an entity of singularity. This approach encounters conceptual problems when confronted with East Asia, the world’s most economically dynamic region” (12). What Harvey terms “neoliberalization,” or the reconstruction of “divisions of labor, social relations, welfare provisions, technological mixes, ways of life and thought, reproductive activities, attachments to the land and habits of the heart” according to neoliberal ideals (3), varies greatly. For example, in the US, according to Lisa Duggan, neoliberalism is “a wide-ranging political and cultural

project—the reconstruction of the everyday life of capitalism, in ways supportive of upward redistribution of a range of resources, and tolerant of widening inequalities of many kinds” (XI). In Singapore, however, there is still substantial public housing and public transportation, as well as subsidized education, health, and recreation services. Quite unlike the US, Singapore under neoliberalism has directed more money towards higher education—to nurture even better professional workers for corporations—and the arts, in its attempt to fashion itself as a cosmopolitan global city.

Also relevant to this dissertation are the ways that neoliberalism used to refer to issues of governance. In this sense of the term, according to Ong, neoliberalism refers to “calculative choices and techniques in the domain of citizenship and of governing . . . the infiltration of market-driven truths and calculations into the domain of politics” (4).¹⁰ Put crudely, neoliberal governance seeks to run government like a business. Such neoliberal governance, argues Foucault, gives rise to specific forms of biopower, under which “the basic biological features of the human species become the object of political strategy” (1). In the first half of the dissertation particularly, my readings are centered on this aspect of neoliberalism, and I ask after the ways that the constructions of the texts and of Overseas Singaporeans reflect this “infiltration of market-driven truths into the domain of politics.”

Finally, at play in the use of neoliberalism is the reference to a general contemporary condition or what James Ferguson describes as “a broad, global cultural formation characteristic of a new era of ‘millennial capitalism’—a kind of global meta-culture, characteristic of our newly de-regulated, insecure, and speculative times” (171).

¹⁰ Ong’s analysis draws from Michel Foucault’s work (see *Society Must be Defended, Security, Territory, Population* and *Birth of Biopolitics*), hence her focus on issues of governmentality.

In this usage, neoliberalism overlaps with other terms such as postmodernism and globalization. As Elliot and Harkins point out, neoliberalism can offer more precision when attempting to understand our contemporary condition because postmodernism is a term “derived from aesthetic, humanistic, and cultural methodological questions” while globalization is “derived from political economic, social, and cultural methodological questions” (2). Although neoliberalism is subject to definitional debates, it has a stronger periodizing element to it than postmodernism and globalization. As David Harvey argues in *The Condition of Postmodernity*, we can see postmodern tendencies are evident during what we often think of as the modern era. Scholars from various disciplinary, historical, geographical, and regional perspectives use the term “globalization” to describe social, economic, political, ecological, or cultural processes that facilitate the sense that our world is increasingly more connected. We can find scholarly accounts of both the “postmodern” and “globalization” that market it as relatively contemporary (or least taking place in the second half of the twentieth century) and accounts that date it quite a bit earlier. By comparison, there is less disagreement about what “neoliberal” means as a temporal marker.

In this project “neoliberalism” is deployed to refer to the economic doctrine and its implementation through governance and cultural processes. In the first half of the dissertation where I analyze Singaporean state-produced texts, issues of governance are much more strongly at play. By contrast, I focus on Singaporean responses to the state in the second half of the dissertation where, and in those later chapters neoliberal refers primarily to the cultural and social discourses that surround such economic doctrines.

On Literary/Cultural Study of Nationalism and the Nation-State

In his study of how print capitalism and secular languages contributed to the development of the nation and thus nationalism, Benedict Anderson famously theorized the “imagined community.” His point that national communities are imagined emphasizes the degree to which we cannot ever entirely know the nation: “members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (6). As the argument goes, print capitalism provided the technological means through which “a fundamental change was taking place in modes of apprehending the world, which, more than anything else, made it possible to ‘think’ the nation” (22). The novel and the newspaper facilitated the creation of print-languages (44) that laid the foundation of imagining simultaneous (25) and “interior” (27) time and thus staged the possibility of group formation in such a way that created fraternal links imbued with shared values across the nation (53). Rather than treating nations and nationalism as an inevitable evolutionary outcome, Anderson provides a theory through which we can understand how the nation is socially constructed.

Anderson’s theory of imagined communities, which is rooted in an attention to literature and narrative, is significant for literary and cultural studies for the way it brings theorizations of the nation into the realm of cultural signification through questions of social construction. As Homi K. Bhabha writes in the introduction to the edited collection *Nation and Narration*, a study of language can offer valuable insights into the workings of the nation and national discourse because it

investigates the nation-space in the *process* of the articulation of elements: where meanings may be partial because they are *in media res*; and history may be half-made because it is in the process of being made; and the image of cultural authority may be ambivalent because it is caught, uncertainly, in the act of ‘composing’ its powerful image. (4—emphasis in original)

In other words, language and narrative expose the ways that nations are incomplete and constantly in formation. In the face of scholarship that depicts nations as increasingly weak due to the rise of, for example, powerful transnational corporations, remembering that nations are always in formation is important.¹¹ Attention to the ways that a nation is always in the process of becoming reminds us that as a cultural institution, a nation is subject to change according to shifting social, political, and historical conditions.

As evidenced by the essays in *Nation and Narration*, Anderson’s work has laid the foundation for discussions of the nature of nationalist narratives. For Anderson, and others such as Etienne Balibar, the typical narrative and ideological form of the nation is singular, linear, and developmental. As I explicate further in Chapter One, both Anderson and Balibar’s theorizations of the nation are based in eighteenth century Europe. If we are to believe that nations can and do change according to context, then we must assume that under conditions of neoliberal globalization, the world and the nation looks quite differently. Thus not only is this project concerned with the ways neoliberalism relies on nationalism, but I also track the ways in which Singaporean nationalism takes on new ideological and narrative forms. Anderson’s theories of nation and nationalism continue

¹¹ See Masao Miyoshi’s “A Borderless World? From Colonialism to Transnationalism and the Decline of the Nation-State” or Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s *Empire*.

to be centrally relevant to this project because they provide a necessary methodology through which to read the construction and significance of the nation under conditions of neoliberalism. I am mindful, however, that Anderson's theorizations of the nation look to its origins in the eighteenth century and a different set of economic and political conditions. Our understandings of nation and nationalism under globalization and neoliberalism will necessarily have to track both the continuities with and breaks from that foundational moment. I retain Anderson's theories of nationalism as a way of thinking through such continuities, looking for the ways that the nation form has adapted to our present context.

Neoliberal Nationalism

As a term, "neoliberal nationalism" has appeared in a few essays, mostly from scholarship in political theory. The most explicit treatment of the term appears in Adam Harmes' "The Rise of Neoliberal Nationalism." His article, which primarily sets out to prove that contrary to the literature in international political economy, neoliberalism and nationalism are not antithetical to each other and that "certain nationalist policies can be genuinely compatible with, and even essential for, neoliberal values" (72). Some of the examples that Harmes gives of neoliberal nationalism include the US Tea Party movement, the British National Party, and Australian One Nation Party (73), as well as the Canadian conservative opposition to the Kyoto Protocol (81), all of which couch neoliberalism in patriotic rhetoric. In Harmes' essay, nationalism refers primarily to patriotism; many of his examples of neoliberal nationalism demonstrate the ways that neoliberalism is used to assert global political power—"[American neoconservatives] support free trade because, in the context of continued US hegemony and economic

dominance, free trade is seen as enhancing US power” (74)—or to defend national sovereignty. My project departs from Harms’ in its treatment of nationalism. Rather than treating nationalism as international relations discourse, I discuss it as a cultural force through which subjects comprehend the world and form social relations. In my argument, neoliberal nationalism is not a nationalism necessarily interested in reifying the power of the nation or the state (though it can have that effect) through kinship ties amongst its citizenry. Rather, it is a nationalism that reifies neoliberalism.

As I demonstrate through the dissertation, neoliberal nationalism in Singapore, or what Harvey describes as a “cosmopolitan ethic suited to its current position in the world of international trade” (86), takes on some very particular characteristics. First, neoliberal nationalism entails a different sort of relation to the world, one in which the nation and its citizens are imagined to exist within a transnational network rather than in a binary relation of self/other or national/non-national. As such, neoliberal nationalism provides its national subjects with a different orientation to the world. Rather than an emphasis on the fraternal relations that occur across what Anderson describes as “interior time,” neoliberal nationalism instead directs attention to the nation’s exterior. Second, neoliberal nationalism has a particular interest in age. As I show, neoliberalism’s ideological power relies on the social construction of youth, as a distinct stage of one’s life, in order to produce a developmental narrative and as a way of internalizing neoliberalism. Thirdly, neoliberal nationalism produces and relies on cosmopolitan subjects, which is the main subject of the next section.

Imagined Diasporas

At the launch of the Overseas Singaporean Portal—a website created by the Overseas Singaporean Unit in 2006, the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Home Affairs Wong Kan Seng claimed that one of the goals of the newly established office was “to create an interconnected Overseas Singaporean diaspora with Singapore at its core” (Home Team Speeches). Wong then went on to praise the diaspora as “rich in its diversity of experiences, knowledge and networks.” Not only does “diaspora” appear to be synonymous with “network,” but there also seems to be a very particular characterization of what the individuals in the diaspora as wordly, culturally savvy, and well-networked.

For those who take “diaspora” to suggest, as Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur put it, “a dislocation from the nation-state or geographical location of origin and a relocation in one or more nation-states, territories, or countries” (1), Wong’s usage of diaspora as synonymous with cosmopolitan might strike them as strange or problematic. There is a long history of critiques behind the ways the term diaspora has been deployed. Beginning with Rey Chow’s “Against the Lures of Diaspora,” which critiques third world intellectuals claiming diasporic identity and taking recourse to alterity as a way of creating space in the North American academy (116), scholars have variously cautioned against the use and claiming of diaspora for self-serving purposes or in ways that ultimately “risk losing specificity and critical merit if [diaspora] is deemed to speak for all movements and migrations between nations, within nations, between cities, within cities *ad infinitum* (Braziel and Mannur 7).¹² Other scholars have resisted taking too

¹² For further reading, please see Arif Dirlik’s “The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism” and Timothy Brennan’s *At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism Now*.

narrow a conception of diaspora. Though clearly in agreement with Braziel and Mannur when writing that “[t]here is serious danger of emptying out the diasporic baby with an increasing volume of bathwater” (9), Robin Cohen posits that there are different types of diaspora, ones that are not always determined by exilic status (18).¹³

Critics have observed that no matter how definitions and understandings of diaspora might circulate in academic circles, the importance of diaspora has taken on a life of its own outside of the academy. Ong comments that diaspora “is loose on the information highway and political byways, and elite diasporic subjects have picked up the term in order to mass customize global ethnic identities” (60). For example, Ien Ang discusses how the notion of a Chinese diaspora has been deployed online as a form of solidarity in the face of anti-Chinese sentiment in Indonesia (see Chapter Three of her *On Not Speaking Chinese: Living Between Asia and the West*). According to Khachig Tölölyan, different treatments of diaspora within and outside of the academy suggest the need to be less restrictive: “[Diaspora’s] limitations can be overcome by attending to the identity of the diasporic collective subject not simply as generated from literary and theoretical discourse but as both effect and cause of the social formation, as a figure that mobilizes dispersion into diaspora and is fleshed out in the course of that mobilization” (29). In other words, there is a need in diaspora studies to account for the ways that subjects self-identify—for better or worse—as diasporic and theorize the effects of this powerful form of identification.

My dissertation reads neoliberal nationalism in Singapore through the emergence of diasporic Singaporeans in political discourse or, as the state calls them, “Overseas

¹³ Similarly, in Khachig Tölölyan’s work, this editor of *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* pushes for a more expansive definition of diaspora (see “Rethinking Diaspora(s): Stateless Power in the Transnational Moment”).

Singaporeans.” I argue that the establishment of the Overseas Singaporean Unit, a “directorate under the National Population and Talent Division of the Prime Minister’s Office” (“About OS Portal”), to maintain friendly ties with Singaporeans living abroad and to encourage them to return home is indicative of the more positive and relatively new stance the Singaporean state takes toward these Singaporeans who have left. This willingness to valorize Overseas Singaporeans is a far cry from years before when the state framed Singaporeans who left as national traitors. It is no coincidence that the state’s valorization of Overseas Singaporeans as ideal, cosmopolitan, and economically successful begins with its turn to a neoliberalized knowledge economy after the 1997 financial crisis. As such, the state’s depictions of Singaporeans living abroad are highly suggestive in terms of what they can offer our understandings of neoliberal ideologies and their relationship to cultural representation.

As previously mentioned, very little empirical information about diasporic Singaporeans and the reasons for their departure exists. As of 2013, there were 207,000 Singaporeans—about 3.8 percent of the total population—who were overseas for a period of six months or more in the previous year (National Population and Talent Division).¹⁴ According to the 2012 “Population in Brief” publication, the majority of Overseas Singaporeans were between the ages of 20 and 54 (20), which would suggest that most Singaporeans leave for educational or professional reasons. Though these Singaporeans are not necessarily leaving Singapore permanently, the state has expressed some apprehension over the 1200 Singaporeans who have renounced their citizenship from

¹⁴ As a point of comparison: there are about 21.9 million Overseas Indians (The Ministry for Overseas Indian Affairs) which is about 2% of India’s total population of 1.22 billion Indians (CIA World Factbook). These numbers are meant to give a rough picture of how the Overseas Singaporean population compares in terms of its percentage of total population.

2007 to 2011, and efforts such as Singapore Day have been depicted as an attempt to prevent permanent emigration (Yeoh and Lin). State representations of Overseas Singaporeans as a highly mobile, cosmopolitan demographic are at once a part of the state's neoliberal agenda and a symptom of the state's anxiety over its loss of human capital.

Readers may notice that I refer to diasporic Singaporeans and not the Singaporean diaspora throughout the dissertation. This is deliberate and meant to, as Ong puts it, “differentiate between *diaspora* as a set of differentiated phenomena and *the diasporic* as political rhetoric” (60—emphasis in original). Throughout the project, I read the diasporic figures in state texts and fiction as part of political rhetoric rather than as a referent to an actual, empirically proven phenomenon. For example, in my readings, fiction writers Hwee Hwee Tan and Lydia Kwa employ diasporic figures—by which I mean they use characters with “an alternative political sensibility to nationalism in a transnational age” (58)—in their writings in order to challenge the Singaporean state and its tethering of the nation to the global economy. It remains to be seen whether there truly is a Singaporean diaspora at this point. As according to the statistics put out by the Singaporean state, Overseas Singaporeans are categorized as such based on their leave from the island-nation for a period of six months or more. It might be the case that such Singaporeans will return, in which case they would not constitute a diaspora. Notable, too, in this example is how the diasporic Singaporean phenomenon departs from say, the manner in which the Chinese diaspora has been mobilized for reasons of political solidarity as Ong and Ang discuss because Singaporean identity is a national identity and not an ethnicity. In the state production of Overseas Singaporeans we can observe a sort

of “ethnic logic” governing national identity despite various governmental claims to the contrary.

By posing the notion of “imagined diasporas,” I mean to call attention to the ways that diaspora can be constructed and forwarded for ideological purposes. In the case of the Singaporean state, the so-called diaspora is held up as an example of an ideal, cosmopolitan population. As my dissertation shows, diaspora is imagined by the state and by Singaporeans to very different political ends. As Braziel and Mannur write:

“[d]iaspora forces us to rethink the rubrics of nation and nationalism, while refiguring the relations of citizens and nation-states” (7). Although Braziel and Mannur here are referring to what diaspora studies can offer, their statement is particularly relevant to the Singaporean state. As I demonstrate, the state uses the diaspora to rethink the rubrics of nation and nationalism and refigures the relations of citizens and nation-states in the service of neoliberalism. Unfortunately, the manner in which the state essentializes diasporic Singaporeans as cosmopolitan, modern, highly-professionalized individuals and instrumentalizes them to forward its neoliberal nationalist agenda is unlikely to work against the cultural or critical critique to which Braziel and Mannur’s conception of diaspora aspires.

The cosmopolitan diasporic figures, within both texts produced by the state as well as the fiction writers whose work I examine, exemplifies how mobility can be framed as a cultural and national value. Mobility signifies a *possible* range of movements—migration, diasporic spread, travel and tourism, exploration and colonization, settlement, exile and expatriation, to name some of the conditions under which people move. Mobility is tied up with desires, hopes, dreams, imaginations,

politics, power relations, and cultures. As such, I show how the Singaporean state rearticulates mobility as a coveted identity feature for its citizens, one that signifies both the individual citizen's as well as the state's ability to navigate and enter in different markets. By comparison, in the works of Tan and Kwa, their protagonists' mobilities enable perspectives that ultimately allow for a critique of how the Singaporean state instrumentalizes national discourses to forward its neoliberal agenda. What becomes apparent through my study is not only how mobile identities are coveted under conditions of neoliberalism, but that there is a very particular type of mobility that is valued. It is one that appears to be by choice, motivated by career advancement, and performs a cosmopolitan ethos. Even though, as I argue, Tan and Kwa's writings facilitate nuanced critiques of the Singaporean state, it is at the expense of class consciousness; neither text adequately treats the underprivileged service labor that makes possible much of Singapore's economic success.¹⁵

Certainly, other geopolitical contexts will offer different examples of the ways diasporas are represented and their function within political and cultural discourse. The concept of "imagined diasporas" might be useful for discussions of India's "non-resident Indian" or the Philippines' "Overseas Filipino Investor," for example. While this project is meant to provide a specific analysis of Singaporean migration issues through a discussion of Overseas Singaporeans, it also aims to more largely enable a discussion of how diasporas are constructed and represented in and by the nation.

¹⁵ The film *Ilo Ilo* (2013) features the story of Chinese-Singaporean family who hires Filipina domestic worker. The film won the an award for best debut feature at the Cannes Film Festival and has received critical acclaim for the attention that has brought to issues of service labor in Singapore.

Overview of Chapters

Chapter 1 of *Imagined Diasporas*, “**Transnational Lives, Nationalism, and the Production of Diaspora in ‘Singaporean Abroad’ and ‘Conversations on Coming Home’**” posits an initial understanding of how mobility is framed as a cultural and national value through a comparative reading of the *Straits Times* newspaper series “Singaporean Abroad” (2008-2012) and a state-produced booklet *Conversations on Coming Home* (2012). I show that both texts present the “Overseas Singaporean” as a model of mobility in order to forward the state’s neoliberal agenda. I pay particular attention to the respective ways that Singapore and diasporic Singaporeans differ when presented to a local audience versus an audience outside of Singapore. I call attention to the use of series in both texts and how serial narratives implement neoliberal values through what I call “imagined populations.” Through the difference between an affective discourse of kinship (i.e., imagined communities) and a nationalized, biopolitical narrative that emphasizes utility for the nation rather than belonging, we are able to better recognize the ways in which nationalism changes under conditions of neoliberalism. Moreover, this chapter illustrates how forms of storytelling are used by the state to bring its neoliberal agenda into the national affective realm. Through my reading of *Conversations on Coming Home*, I show how adaptations of the *bildungsroman*, what I call the “coming-of-career” narrative, construct and value lives according to neoliberal ideals of individualism, human capital, and heteronormativity.

I continue to examine the way the state represents diasporic Singaporeans as ideal citizens in **Chapter 2: “Staging Singapore: Neoliberal Nationalism, Diaspora, and Singapore Day 2012.”** In this chapter, I distinguish types of nationalisms in Singapore

through a comparative reading of the National Day Parade 2012, a celebration of independence, and of Singapore Day 2012, a heritage event held for Singaporeans living outside of Singapore. I ask, what type of national sentiment is the state attempting to cultivate in light of its neoliberal orientation? Drawing on fieldwork and analysis of Singapore Day 2012 ephemera, I discuss how cultural memory produced for the diasporic Singaporean population diverges from the typical nationalist narrative that emphasizes postcolonial independence. I further argue that youth emerges as the privileged and defining characteristic of the nation that the state enlists to call back its citizens. I demonstrate how the state draws on global youth popular culture—namely that of the hipster subculture and its so-called “ironic aesthetic”—to enable a nationalist performance from a group that has a tenuous relationship with the state. The Singapore Day 2012 example demonstrates, I argue, that under conditions of neoliberal nationalism, the appearance of nationalist culture, or form, takes precedence over nationalist commitment, or content.

Moving into fictional texts, **Chapter Three: “Hwee Hwee Tan’s *Mammon Inc.* as *Bildungsroman*, or the Coming-of-Career Narrative”** provides a more concentrated examination of the relationship between genre and neoliberalism through a reading of a novel about a diasporic Singaporean trying to land a position with the “largest company in the world.” I claim that attention to genre provides a framework through which to understand how the internalizing of neoliberal values becomes a matter of personal fulfillment and self-improvement. As in the previous chapter, I discuss the significance of youth for neoliberal ideology. I consider how the novel buys into the notion that attaining a professional career is the apex of an individual’s development and marks the passage

from youth to maturity. I further argue that the novel complicates accounts of Singapore's nation-formation as state-driven by highlighting the influence of transnational corporations in Singapore's history. In contrast to coming-of-career narratives in *Conversations on Coming Home, Mammon Inc.* is an example of how the *bildungsroman* has been adapted for the purposes of cultural critique—in this case of the state and its attempts to make Singapore properly neoliberal. Although the coming-of-career narrative is limited to discussions of privileged and upwardly mobile subjects, I argue that there is potential to think about the genre more generally, and I propose that theorizing the neoliberal *bildungsroman* might present us with an opportunity to better historicize neoliberalism.

In the final chapter, “**Alternative Histories and Antidevelopmental Narratives in Lydia Kwa's *Pulse*,**” I examine how Singaporean experience and critique of Singaporean state politics transfer into the North American context. Though appropriate to the historical period my project focuses on, Kwa's novel is slightly out of place compared to earlier texts because it does not directly engage the diasporic discourse as it emerges from the post-1997 context in Singapore. I illustrate the ways that *Pulse* is an anti-developmental narrative, one that accentuates the intersections of sexuality and class through its emphasis on non-linear time, memory, bodily sensation, and queer bonds as ways of knowing, understanding, and relating to the past in the face of Singapore's emphasis on cosmopolitanism and progress.

Taken together, the four chapters of my dissertation provide a study of neoliberal ideology and its impact on Singaporean nationalism. It is also a set of pieces on various modes of life writing, the relation between constructions of the subject and state-

sponsored narratives, and a formal and ideological sketch of contemporary Singaporean culture. It is my hope that with a better understanding of neoliberal culture, the stories that it relies on, and the ways it is critiqued and resisted we will be better equipped to reorient ethical norms, as Young puts it, with our students, in our professions, and in our communities.

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Chapter One: “Transnational Lives, Nationalism, and the Production of Diaspora in ‘Singaporean Abroad’ and *Conversations on Coming Home*

During a 2002 Singapore National Day Rally speech, former Singaporean Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong famously questioned the loyalty of Singaporeans living abroad:

Fair-weather Singaporeans will run away whenever the country runs into stormy weather. I call them “quitters.” . . . I take issue with those fair-weather Singaporeans who, having benefited from Singapore, will pack their bags and take flight when our country runs into a little storm. . . Look yourself [sic] in the mirror and ask, am I a “stayer” or a “quitter?” Am I a fair-weather Singaporean or an all-weather Singaporean? (39-40)

Goh’s speech, much of which was responding to the nation’s economic uncertainty following the 1997 Asian financial crisis, framed Singaporeans living abroad as traitors who had deserted the nation in a time of need. Goh’s use of “stayers” and the “quitters” made clear that Singaporeans at home were somehow truer than their overseas compatriots and that the “quitters” were not seen by the state as important contributors to the nation’s welfare because such individuals were no longer connected to their national homeland.

Over a decade later in 2008, the Singaporean Prime Minister’s office launched the Overseas Singaporean Unit (OSU), a government agency created for the purpose of “engag[ing] Overseas Singaporeans, [and connecting] them back to Singapore and with each other” (“About OS Portal”). The establishment of the OSU made clear that the state was attempting to foster more positive relations with Overseas Singaporeans and was separating itself from alienating sentiments like those expressed by Goh’s speech in the years before. Since 2008, Overseas Singaporeans have been embraced by the state as

necessary for the nation. Through several cultural projects managed by the OSU—including heritage festivals, websites, advertising—those in what the government has named as the “Overseas Singaporean Diaspora” have been the target of state interest and are moreover, positively framed as Singaporeans of the future.

In this chapter, I argue that following the 1997 Asian financial crisis, the Singaporean government has been actively fostering a new national identity by articulating a narrative based on the image of a state-constructed Singaporean diaspora. Within the context of this new state-sanctioned Singaporean diaspora, I examine two texts. The first is the newspaper lifestyle series, “Singaporeans Abroad,” published in *The Straits Times*, the leading English-language newspaper in Singapore.¹⁶ The series began in June 2008 and concluded in May 2012. With over 200 articles to date, the series spotlights an overseas Singaporean and the city he or she resides in. The second, *Conversations on Coming Home: 20 Singaporeans Share their Stories*, is a state-produced booklet distributed to diasporic Singaporeans to persuade them to return back to Singapore. I came across the booklet in the context of Singapore Day 2012, the topic of the next chapter.

I analyze both texts against the state’s efforts to construct an official “Overseas Singaporean Diaspora” and show how that diaspora is used within state nationalist discourse to unify human capital with cultural capital. In other words, the diaspora is used to inculcate, normalize, and nationalize economic values for the national body. This timely construction of the so-called diaspora correlates with the nation’s transition to a

¹⁶ According to its website, *The Straits Times* was first published in 1845 and is one of the oldest and most widely read English-language papers in the region. (“About Us”). It has a circulation of 365,800 and a readership of 1.43 million (“About Us”). This is a sizeable difference compared to Singapore’s leading Chinese daily newspaper, *Lianhe Zaobao*, which has a circulation of 158,000 and a readership of 591,000 (“Lianhe Zaobao”).

globalized knowledge economy after the 1997 Asian financial crisis. Because the “Singaporean Abroad” series appears in what is often regarded as a state-controlled national newspaper, this series provides a way to understand how the state attempts to shape public and cultural discourses in response to the pressures of neoliberal globalization.¹⁷ I refer to “neoliberal” as economic policies that have promoted unregulated and free market capitalism, and to “neoliberalism” as attendant to cultural and political discourses that surround such economic policies—something that Aihwa Ong describes as “the infiltration of market-driven truths and calculations into the domain of politics” (4) and, I would add, culture. Thus, within the context of the production of the Singaporean Diaspora as manifest in “Singaporean Abroad” series and *Conversations on Coming Home*, cultural expression and culture should be understood as a site where the state articulates its power and promotes neoliberal ideologies and values; neoliberalism is a governing strategy. Nationalist culture here is a state-produced force for economic and political power and not a populist formation or movement.

I begin by giving some of the historical and political context necessary to understand how and why the positive representation of overseas Singaporeans in the “Singaporean Abroad” series constitutes part of the state’s neoliberal agenda and is a cultural expression of the state’s biopolitical governing strategies. I show how neoliberalism is endorsed by the content of the representations as well as through the formal narrative of the series. I examine how the narrative privileges transnational space through the overseas Singaporean, in the example of “Singaporean Abroad” in order to produce a nationalism reworked to accommodate global capitalism. In the move away

¹⁷ For more on media control in Singapore, see Tan Tarn How “Singapore’s Print Media Policy: A National Success?” *Management of Success: Singapore Revisited*. Terence Chong, ed. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2010.

from the construction of a singular, linear narrative—the typical ideological form of the nation as according to Benedict Anderson and Etienne Balibar—“Singaporean Abroad” exemplifies an ideological form of the nation that is multiple and webbed. Through a discussion of the series’ episodic narrative structure, I show how biopolitics is a useful—and necessary—theoretical lens to understand emergent and contemporary forms of Singaporean nationalism. Michel Foucault’s rendering of biopower as a “political strategy” suggests that biopolitical analyses often require an examination of policy and governmental structures. However, by focusing on cultural and textual forms through which biopower is expressed, I am arguing for an understanding of biopolitical aesthetics and form. I propose that the episodic narrative structure of “Singaporean Abroad,” as well as the way Overseas Singaporeans are used to convey tourist information, represents an example of what I want to call “imagined populations.” Such a term, I argue, is a way of marking the difference between an affective discourse of kinship (i.e., imagined communities) and a nationalized, biopolitical narrative that emphasizes utility for the nation rather than belonging. The Singaporean state produces a representation of a demographic and uses the visibility of this imagined population that it has created to promote and sustain its neoliberal agenda.

While the structure and genre-mixing of the *Conversations on Coming Home* as a whole is similar to “Singaporean Abroad” in the way it presents diasporic Singaporeans as an imagined population, there is less of an emphasis on an ideological form of the nation that is transnational. Instead the booklet *Conversations on Coming Home* exemplifies what I describe as the “coming-of-career” narrative, which I propose as a critical term for understanding the ways lives are constructed and valued according to

neoliberal ideals of individualism, human capital, and heteronormativity. As with “Singaporean Abroad,” the coming-of-career narrative of *Conversations on Coming Home* is a way for the state to normalize particular narratives and ideologies that ultimately enable the state’s neoliberal agenda. The booklet has the further effect of typifying diasporic Singaporeans as a young, highly professionalized, and pre-dominantly Chinese. *Conversations on Coming Home* effectively constructs diasporic Singaporeans as a privileged class. I consider coming-of-career narratives as a neoliberal adaptation of the coming-of-age story, and thus much of my thinking is influenced by criticism of the *bildungsroman*. In Chapter Three I also discuss the coming-of-career narrative in relation to the *bildungsroman* and the history of corporations in Singapore.

State planning may not be a typical area of study for literary and cultural critics. However, because the Singaporean state works with forms of storytelling and print culture to accommodate the knowledge economy, “Singaporean Abroad” and *Conversations on Coming Home* provide case studies to examine the nexus of culture, nationalism, biopolitics, and neoliberalism. Though biopolitics and neoliberalism are associated with economic and political structures, “Singaporean Abroad” offers an understanding of how these structures are at work within an affective realm. My analysis assumes that the form through which biopower and neoliberalism are asserted in this series is as important as the content of the articles themselves—that is, the language and the way stories that the state tells about the nation are important to understand how processes of global capitalism are at work within state produced cultural logics.

Diasporic Discourse: “Singaporeans Abroad” History and Context

In a 2008 speech during the launch of the Overseas Singaporean Unit, Wong Kan Seng, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Home Affairs stated: “I believe in and share the unit’s mission – to create an interconnected Overseas Singaporean diaspora with Singapore at its core. There are now more than 140,000 Singaporeans spread across the world.” For those working in diaspora studies, Wong’s speech might strike them as especially curious—particularly the use of “diaspora” which seems to be interchangeable with “network.” Moreover, the use of “create” is suggestive here, immediately connoting an idea of deliberate construction, which is made even more peculiar when taking into account that this speech was made by a government official.

I am dubious about whether we can accurately describe the growth of Singaporeans living and working abroad as a diaspora. What constitutes a diaspora is contested; Robin Cohen suggests that we might generally categorize five types of diaspora: victim (e.g., Jews, Africans, Armenians), labor (e.g., indentured Indians), imperial (i.e., British), trade (i.e., Chinese, Lebanese), and deterritorialized (i.e., Caribbean peoples) (18). Even though Cohen is credited with expanding the notion of diaspora to its more contemporary usage, he nonetheless warns against opening up our understandings too far: “There is a serious danger of emptying out the diasporic baby with an increasing volume of bathwater” (9). In other words, we should be cautious of evacuating the term of its critical purchase that names a particular form of movement rather using it interchangeably with “movement.”

Although Singaporeans who leave might share some features of the diasporas that Cohen describes, designating overseas Singaporeans as diasporic seems unusual for two

main reasons. Firstly, diaspora has not been used to describe the movement out of immigrant nations; for example, the idea of a diasporic American or diasporic Australian would seem quite unusual. Secondly, as a nation that is fairly young and has only gone through about two to three generations since its independence, it seems rather difficult to determine the permanence of the movement that has taken place. Cohen too points out the importance of time as an analytic: “We can add a time dimension looking at how a putative social formation . . . comes into being, how it develops in various countries of settlement and how it changes in response to subsequent events in hostlands and homelands” (5). Tamara Wagner examines the literary potential of reading Singaporean fiction as diasporic and has argued for a “double diaspora” which centers the Chinese diaspora in Singapore rather than China as the homeland. While this is a more useful method that gets away from center-periphery type models of Chinese diaspora, and more convincing than arguing wholesale for a Singaporean diaspora as Eddie Tay suggests through the title of his review “A Singaporean Diaspora?,” in Wagner’s work “Singaporean” and “Chinese” are conflated.

Maintaining the integrity of diaspora as a concept is not just a matter of academic fussiness. Scholars such as Rey Chow, Aihwa Ong, and Ien Ang have shown that the notion of a Chinese diaspora can be a hegemonic construct. Through her examination of online representations of the Chinese diaspora, Ong writes:

I maintain that diaspora as a permanent political exile is often conflated with contemporary forms of fairly unrestricted mobility. *Diaspora* however, is increasingly invoked by elite migrants in transnational contexts to articulate an

inclusive ethnicity that includes disparate populations across the world who may be able to claim a common racial or cultural ancestry. (emphasis in original 53)

Ong suggests that the free use of diaspora by Chinese migrants forecloses recognizing economic and social inequalities. Shu-mei Shih has further commented that “The framework of ‘Chinese diaspora’ also masks past conditions of something similar to settler colonialism in Southeast Asia” (713). Though Wagner does not necessarily want to remove diaspora from the discussion, Shih makes a similar argument to Wagner when she argues that the notion of a Chinese diaspora presumes a dependence and relationship with China. Heeding these warnings, we should therefore be further cautious when a state governing body is as invested in the term as we see in the case of Singapore, particularly when we consider the wider context.

Regardless of whether or not overseas Singaporeans constitute a diaspora, more notable are the ways in which such a term is being deployed by the state. As the aforementioned speech indicates, in the state’s usage, “diaspora” refers to “successful” Singaporeans living abroad. Successful in this context are individuals who are middle-class and upwardly mobile—there is no sense that the term refers to Singaporeans who move to take up service labor. There also seems to be the suggestion that the Singaporean diaspora is some sort of elite club. The OSU website offers, for example, the “OSU-PAssion Card” for Singaporeans living abroad. The discount card offers various discounts for merchants both in Singapore and outside of it (“OSU-PAssion Membership”). Moreover, for those familiar with the Singaporean context, perhaps most curious are the ways in which those who are seen to be within the diaspora are constructed and represented to the Singaporean public through productions such as

“Singaporean Abroad” when considering how overseas Singaporeans were vilified by the state in the past.

The “Singaporean Abroad” series presents short biographical sketches and interviews with overseas Singaporeans about the cities they now reside in. The cities range from well-known metropolitan centers such as New York, Seoul, London, Mumbai and Tokyo, to smaller and lesser recognized cities such as Neuchatel, Switzerland; Astana, Kazakhstan; and Lappeenranta, Finland. The series, which began in August 2009 and ended in May 2012, had over 200 articles written. The series as a whole has no obvious narrative arc, with each article featuring a new Overseas Singaporean in some far-flung, and sometime unexpected, corner of the world. Each article is a full-page story—and in some instances, even a double-page feature—complete with color-photography. Though eight different journalists have written articles for the series, the structure and format of the stories have been consistent. After each headline, the article places an inset with what looks to be a small self-selected headshot and listing of the interviewee’s name, age, occupation, and length of stay in the city where he or she now resides. Following a short blurb on the city and its history and how the featured Singaporean came to live there, each story moves into questions and answers—the Overseas Singaporean is asked about the types of activities in the city that local Singaporeans might enjoy, the nightlife, the food, and how the city compares to Singapore. As a reading experience, the “Singaporean Abroad” series draws on magazine and feature writing conventions—at times the series feels reminiscent of an alumni magazine and a “see where they are now” section. That the series appears to be like a magazine feature that provides readers with a “slice of life” of the Overseas Singaporean

is slightly misleading because, as I discuss below, the articles do not give a strong sense of the featured Singaporean's life or character.

The "Singaporean Abroad" series demonstrates the global reach of Singapore through its cosmopolitan citizenry. The activities and kinds of cities Singaporeans find themselves in suggest their part in a cosmopolitan and globalized world that life in Singapore has well prepared them for. Through the series, an Overseas Singaporean comes to represent a different place in the world each week. Week to week, the series further builds the nation's reputation as a global city by framing the Overseas Singaporean individual as a transnational connection to the world.

By spotlighting Overseas Singaporeans through this series, "Singaporean Abroad" clearly bestows on such individuals an elevated status. The elevation of the social and political status of the Overseas Singaporean is partially the effect of the interview format. Through this genre, the interviewees are positioned as cultural authorities on the city they live in and on Singaporeans themselves. Interview questions and answers are organized by subheadings which typically include "Getting Around," "Food," "Culture," and "Shopping." Use of first person voice in the answers focuses the attention on the Overseas Singaporean in a way that builds his or her ethos as knowledgeable and worldly. Many of the articles feature questions asking the interviewee to comment on what Singaporeans will like about the city or to remark on interesting differences between Singapore and the city the interviewee resides in.

Such questions that ask Overseas Singaporeans to comment on Singaporeans not only reassert the Overseas Singaporean as an authority to comment on the Singaporean national body, they also have the effect of interpellating Singaporeans in Singapore as a

distinct, recognizable, and coherent group of people. Thus the imagined community is formed through the Overseas Singaporean, which in turn, affirms his or her idealized status. The Singaporean nation is imagined and projected through the Overseas Singaporean.

The interview format of “Singaporean Abroad” also rewrites the nationalist narrative within a global context through the construction of time. By positioning interviewees as international ambassadors, the interviews create comparativists out of the interviewees in a way that requires them to think *back* in time to their experience of Singapore, thus positing Singapore as an origin and homeland. Through this imagining of Singapore, the interviewees create the effect that there is a national history from which their answers draw from while simultaneously maintaining their status as global, cosmopolitan citizens.

The positive and idealized representations of diasporic Singaporeans in this series are a far cry from the “traitors” they were represented as in the aforementioned 2002 National Day Rally Speech. Similar sentiments were expressed through the newspapers in the 1970s and 1980s, mainly through criticisms of wealthier Singaporean families who sent their children abroad for a western education (Lee; Phey, Kwang, and Bin Idris). Such censure was at its height in the newspapers in the late 1980s and 1990s when emigration and a so-called brain drain was put to Parliament as a national concern (“Question on brain drain for Parliament”). For example, in 1991, when Members of Parliament suggested initiatives to encourage Singaporeans abroad to come home, education officer K.S. Yuen famously retorted: “These people have betrayed their

country and are ungrateful. If they want to go, let them go. We shouldn't encourage them to come back" (qtd. in Fernandez).

So why this change of heart in state-sponsored cultural productions like "Singaporean Abroad"? Why are Overseas Singaporeans now featured in a national newspaper and no longer seen as national traitors? Why are Overseas Singaporeans represented as authorities—both of Singapore and another city in the world?

In my analysis, the cultural production of the Overseas Singaporeans is a result of the nation's shift to a globalized knowledge economy that has increased the need for human capital and changed the state's governing strategies. In my usage of the capitalized "Overseas Singaporean," I am referring to the official state construction of Singaporeans living abroad as cosmopolitan, modern, and mobile. This does not account for all Singaporeans who leave. The changes in the Singaporean economy come primarily after the 1997 Asian financial crisis when the state moved away from the Asian tiger economy to a knowledge economy. Prior to the financial crisis, Singapore enjoyed status as one of the four "Asian Tigers," a name used to describe the highly successful economies of Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Korea characterized by economic growth for a period of 30 years, rapid industrialization, high exports, and foreign investment (Sarel 1). Although the impact of the 1997 financial crisis and consequent economic recession was relatively minor in Singapore compared to the rest of the Southeast Asian region, the Singaporean state deemed the Asian tiger model inadequate to handle "[n]ew global pressures to deregulate markets" (Ong 178). Such changes have required a political, social, cultural, and spatial reconfiguration of the imaginings of the

nation and its inhabitants through new forms of power and governmentality in order to accommodate this change.

In August 1997, only a month after the Asian financial crisis began, then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong assembled a working group known as the Singaporean 21 Committee to “articulate a vision that Singaporeans can reach out for together to build the society we want for the year 2000 and beyond” as part of what was ostensibly an economic and social development initiative created in response to the financial crisis. As the 1999 release of the Singapore 21 Committee report stressed, a knowledge economy, in which “information and knowledge, rather than material resources, drive activities” (3) was the way of the future. The push towards a knowledge economy has made Singapore highly reliant on “human capital,” a term widely popularized by the Chicago School of Economics to describe knowledge and skills as economic assets. Such changes have required a political, social, and cultural reconfiguration of the imaginings of the nation and its inhabitants through new forms of power and governmentality in order to accommodate this change.

The shift to a knowledge economy created a nation now more dependent on accruing human capital, and thus questions of life and populations have been of crucial concern to the Singaporean state amidst worries about an aging population, declining birthrates, and emigration. The production of a Singaporean diaspora as a recuperation technique is one amongst many state efforts to resolve issues of a declining local population and to supply human capital. The state has also been encouraging human

capital accumulation through relaxed immigration laws for those who qualify as “foreign talent” and urging Singaporeans to have families through financial incentives.¹⁸

The underbelly of the state’s valorization of certain types of professionalized labor is the low-paying, service sector and construction jobs, known as “unskilled labor,” that make the state’s drive to accumulate human capital possible at all. Although the state heavily relies on such immigrant labor to build the city-state’s infrastructure, run the service industry, and maintain Singaporean households, such workers are hardly depicted as desirable citizens or residents. There are various laws designed to prevent “unskilled labor” from permanently settling in Singapore as well as measures that prevent their mixing with Singaporeans. For example, the work permit visas that so-called unskilled laborers enter in Singapore with only permit such individuals to work one occupation and with one employer (Yeoh and Lin). Moreover, this transient class of immigrants is not allowed to marry Singaporean citizens or permanent residents; female domestic workers found to be pregnant are immediately deported and their employers fined (Yeoh and Lin). The pathways to residency and citizenships for such workers are limited at best, further illustrating the state’s privileging of professional and white-collar labor as well as the efforts made to denigrate “lesser” forms of work such as service and manual labor.

The state has always pushed for population growth in Singapore through immigration, but the rate of increase in the past twenty years is especially noteworthy. In 1980, the population was about 2.4 million; in 1990, the population of Singapore was about 3.05 million; and in 2000, about 4.02 million (Department of Statistics). In other words, the population has increased about one million people per decade over the last

¹⁸For more on family planning initiatives in Singapore, see Yap Mui Teng, “Fertility and Population Policy: The Singaporean Experience” in *Journal of Population and Social Security: Population Study*, Supplement to Volume 1, June 2003.

twenty years. In 2001, the Urban Renewal Authority, a branch of the government that oversees land use and development stated plans to accommodate a population of 5.5 million¹⁹; in 2007, Minister for National Development, Tan Mah Bow argued that the figure should be increased to 6.5 million.²⁰ Recently, in June 2010, the Department of Statistics released census data reporting the Singapore population to be at 5.08 million.

The vast increases in population have not come without some justification. The rationale that, for example, former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong's National Day Rally speeches in 2001 and 2002 exemplify, begin to show some of the neoliberal logic that accompanies the knowledge economy at work. In 2002, Goh said:

Because of the quality of our people, and our economic success and social progress, we are taken seriously by other countries. We enjoy an influence disproportionate to our size. But if we now shut our doors to talent, we will soon become like any other Third World city of 3 million people. Then we will find life quite different. We will become a small fish - a guppy - in a small pond. To swim among the big fishes in the ocean, we have to top up our population with international talent.

However clichéd, Goh's biological metaphor to symbolize the global capitalist market situates Singapore within an ecology in order to underscore the problem of biological survival. The use of ocean as global capitalist market further signals a sense of the inevitability of death, of being swallowed up by the ocean, if not vigilant.

While equating economic survival with biological survival might seem like just a rhetorical flourish, it is in fact symptomatic of the biopolitical governing strategies that

¹⁹ See website for the URA's "Concept Plan 2001" at: <http://www.ura.gov.sg/conceptplan2001/index.html>

²⁰ See "Why we need 6.5 million people." *Petir Magazine* March/April 2007. Singapore: People's Action Party. Web. 25 Sept. 2011.

have accompanied the shift to a knowledge economy. As argued by scholars such as Aihwa Ong and Pheng Cheah, we can understand these Singaporean governing strategies as what Michel Foucault has described as biopolitical. In *Security, Territory, and Population*, Foucault describes biopower as “the set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy” (6). Foucault discusses how expressions of biopower are most interested in maximizing the potentiality of life and consequently, planning and development treat populations, rather than individuals, as its subject matter (34). Such logics, he points out, move mechanisms of power away from modes of social control or biological destiny (25). Biopolitical societal planning is instead “a matter of maximizing the positive elements, for which one provides the best possible circulation, and of minimizing what is risky and inconvenient, like theft and disease, while knowing that they will never be completely suppressed” (34).²¹ Biopower does not operate according to “a static perception” (35), as is the case with discipline, but instead is turned towards a more general outcome as the language of “maximizing” and “best possible” indicates.

There is some difficulty in theorizing Foucault’s notion of biopower from a position of cultural and literary criticism. To many political theorists, Singapore offers a straightforward example of biopolitics, especially when examining how state policies focus on population growth to resolve economic issues. Although Ong and Cheah’s work are cogent examples of biopolitical and cultural analysis, there is no attention given to cultural production. To truly understand the reach and the extent through which biopower

²¹ Biopower and biopolitics are not being used interchangeably here. The latter refers to the larger structures than enable expressions of biopower. Or, as Roberto Esposito cogently explains in *Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy*: “By the first [biopolitics] is meant a politics in the name of life and by the second [biopower] a life subjected to the command of politics” (15).

operates, I am suggesting that we must look at how cultural production works in the service of biopower. Considering the nationalist context in which cultural production, biopower, and neoliberalism converge, the Singaporean example is a complex one.

I provide this account of Singaporean economic and political policy not only to provide the context for the production of the Singaporean diaspora, but also to suggest that a reading and theorizing of the “Singaporean Abroad” as an extension of the diaspora must account for the state’s neoliberal logics and biopolitical governance. On one hand, the production of the Singaporean diaspora can be read as part of the state’s drive to accrue human capital; on the other, the production of the diaspora can also be read as part of the state’s push to change national ideologies. It is clear that the Singaporean state has realized that in order to successfully transition to a knowledge economy, its own citizens must have the same neoliberal values and biopolitical logics. In other words, neoliberalism and biopolitics must be nationalized and normalized.

While we can understand the positive representation of Overseas Singaporeans within a biopolitical framework, the representation of them as successful and worldly is also part of the way that the state attempts to influence its national body to assimilate the neoliberal values—namely, that of free market ideologies—of the globalized knowledge economy. The same “Singapore 21” committee report provides a sketch of the ideal Singaporean of the future: “The Singaporean of the 21st century is a cosmopolitan Singaporean, one who is familiar with global trends and lifestyles and feels comfortable working and living in Singapore as well as overseas” (45). Moreover, according to the report, Singaporeans must “be encouraged to explore foreign languages, literature, geography, history and cultures throughout their school years, so that they will grow up

‘world ready,’ able to plug-and-play with confidence in the global economy” (45). When considering how the Overseas Singaporean fits the vision of the state and when situating the Overseas Singaporean Diaspora at the nexus of this transition to a knowledge economy and national anxieties surrounding human capital, it becomes clearer that the diaspora has an ideological function and does work for the state.

Against this economic, political, and cultural background, “Singaporean Abroad” can be read as part of the state’s attempt to refashion national values to suit the neoliberal values of the global capitalist market. Besides the fact of its relative popularity as indicated by the circulation of the *Straits Times* and the manner in which it usefully highlights the cultural logics of neoliberal nationalism for the purposes of this project, that the representation of this cosmopolitan class comes in a newspaper seems rather anachronistic, particularly given the ways in which Singapore is often posed as modern and at times, futuristic. It is this innocuous appearance in a daily newspaper and seeming temporal dissonance between its content and medium that makes it deserving of further study. The publication of the “Singaporean Abroad” series in the daily newspaper suggests that the Overseas Singaporean is being inserted into the everydayness of Singaporean life. In other words, it is the very ordinariness of the “Singaporean Abroad” series—particularly in contrast to the sense of exceptionality that surrounds the Overseas Singaporean—that interests me. As I also discuss in my analysis of *Conversations on Coming Home* and at other points of this project, such a contrast is symbolic of the tension between individualism and community that the state is constantly mitigating in its cultivation of neoliberal culture. While the change in how Overseas Singaporeans are represented in both state and public discourse marks the most obvious shift towards

neoliberalism, in this next section I address how the particularities of the form in which the Overseas Singaporean is represented further accommodates and endorses the neoliberal values of a globalized knowledge economy.

Transnationalizing and Biopoliticizing the National Imagination

“Singaporean Abroad” is an example of state-sponsored cultural expression within a global context that attempts to restructure national time according to the needs of Singapore’s new neoliberal knowledge economy. My argument draws on the work of Benedict Anderson and Etienne Balibar who make a case for the relationship between narrative form and imaginings of the nation through constructions of time. In arguing that the narrative form of “Singapore Abroad” does the cultural work for neoliberal governing strategies, I compare how the Singaporean context provides a counterpoint to the ways that nation-formation has been typically theorized as a singular, linear narrative; in the series, we observe the construction of a webbed, networked nationalist narrative.

Since theorizing the notion of the nation as an “imagined community” in the 1980s, Anderson’s work has provided the means to comprehend how collective kinship comes to be understood as a nation. The notion of imagined communities relies on what Anderson calls the imagining of homogenous, simultaneous national time that, within the eighteenth-century context that he examines, hinges on an understanding of how print capitalism revolutionized the dissemination of vernacular languages. Anderson’s discussion of newspapers as the means for the national imagination stems from his understanding of the novel form. Before Anderson starts to discuss the newspaper, he considers how the novel form provides a complex gloss upon the word “meanwhile;”

how the novel is able to create different types of temporalities; and how the protagonist of the novel, or “the national hero,” as he calls it, navigates space in a way that provides the stuff of what we come to term imagined communities (25, 30).

Though “Singaporean Abroad” is not a novel, as I show, Anderson’s point that the hero figure within a nationalist narrative enables the construction of national time and space remains pertinent in “Singaporean Abroad.” Moreover, Anderson’s claim that a conception of the nation is made possible through the novel is important because it provides the groundwork for the relationship between narrative and the construction of national time: “The causal progression of the ‘interior’ time of the novel to the ‘exterior’ time of the reader’s everyday life gives a hypnotic confirmation of the solidity of a single community, embracing characters, author and readers, moving onward through calendrical time” (27).

Anderson’s understanding of how time is constructed through the novel is enabled by his analysis of the singular and solitary hero. Newspapers also enable simultaneous time through mass distribution and material culture: “The date at the top of the newspaper, the single most important emblem on it, provides the connection—the steady onward clocking of homogeneous, empty time” (33). Only after working through examples from four different novels does Anderson turn to the newspaper, which he describes as having a “novelistic format.” What is significant about this element of Anderson’s argument is his emphasis on language and narrative in relation to the material elements of print capitalism.

Anderson’s work reminds us that we should not take for granted an analysis of form when speaking about the political entity that we call the nation. Jonathan Culler

claims that Anderson's interest in and attention to form is often overlooked: "...despite the frequency with which Anderson's general claims are cited and deployed, there has been surprisingly little discussion about his claims about the novel and the possible ramifications of his claims about the novel" (22). Culler's assertion is somewhat surprising when considering that his essay came after the publication of *Nation and Narration*, edited by Homi K. Bhabha. In this collection, Bhabha not only states that Anderson's ideas are formative for the anthology as a whole, but in fact goes on to specifically discuss Anderson's claims about the novel:

The emergence of the political 'rationality' of the nation as form of narrative—textual strategies, metaphoric displacements, sub-texts and figurative strategems—has its own history. It is suggested in Benedict Anderson's view of the space and time of the modern nation as embodied in the narrative of the realist novel . . . (2)

Though Culler is not entirely accurate when saying that Anderson's work on the novel has been ignored, ultimately, Culler and Bhabha's comments indicate that those working in literary and cultural studies are particularly well positioned to discuss how globalization affects the imaginings of the nation. If the novel and print media have been one of the primary modes through which the nation has been theorized, they also have the potential to reveal the effects of the world becoming more interconnected.

Like Anderson, Balibar views the narrative construction of time as necessarily constitutive of the ways that the nation and nationalism are imagined. Although Balibar does not refer to a particular literary or aesthetic form like Anderson does in his examination of the novel, Balibar's notion of the national is predicated upon an

understanding of how time is sequenced to create the fiction of national unity. Continuity, according to Balibar's argument, is created by narratives which link myths of national origins (87) with the fulfillment of a "'project' stretching over centuries, in which there are different stages and moments of coming to self-awareness" (86). Balibar's formulation of this national project is not unlike that of Anderson, insofar as both discuss the implications of the national imaginings of a journal and ideas of destiny (12, 53).

Inherent in Balibar and Anderson's arguments is the notion of national time and history as necessarily singular, linear, and developmental. In Anderson's contributions this characteristic is, in part, a result of his reliance on the novel to forward his points, while in Balibar's it is a result of his consideration of the "one single founding revolutionary event" (87) of the nation. While Anderson and Balibar's works provide a useful understanding for the ways that the nation is constructed and how nationalism is expressed, both are working closely with eighteenth century Europe. Given the context of the late 20th and early 21st century, we should consider how the material developments that are associated with the era of globalization—increased economic flows and finance capital; and advancements in travel, communications, and media technology—have changed the experience of time and space and play into nationalist narrative.

Later work by scholars such as Joseph Slaughter build on and refine Anderson by using Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the chronotope, to explain how the novel form can unify nation-time and nation-space in a way that effects a normative plot (92). Though Slaughter's work is concerned with how the bildungsroman naturalizes ideas of human rights, the convergence of Anderson's and Bakhtin's work offer us a way to understand

how narrative emplotment coordinates time and space in the service of national ideals. Space, place, and territory are important analytics for understanding how the nation-state asserts its power, but as Bakhtin points out, time is constitutive of space: “Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history” (84). We must remember, however, the construction of time is subject to change according to political and cultural shifts.

To retain the significance of Anderson and Balibar’s analyses, we must consider how constructions of time have changed as well as how expressions of nationalism function in the contemporary context. In this regard, we might consider the work of geographer David Harvey who uses the term “time-space compression” to describe the contemporary “processes that so revolutionize the objective qualities of space and time that we are forced to alter, sometimes in quite radical ways, how we represent the world to ourselves” (240). Harvey’s work reminds us that alterations in our understandings of time and space have an effect on social and cultural processes.

Given the theoretical frame that Anderson, Balibar, and Harvey provide and the Singaporean state’s propensity to plan and orient the nation towards a global capitalist market, I ask how might we understand national time and space, as represented in “Singaporean Abroad,” in a globalizing context? What new insights can an analysis of literary form provide when examining globalization?

Unlike the representation of a singular national hero in the novel as Anderson discusses, or the myth of the singularity of national origins in Balibar’s argument, the narrative of “Singaporean Abroad” is dispersed across repeated articles and its narrative

is carried through multiple Overseas Singaporeans rather than a singular, ideal Singaporean. This shift from singularity to multiplicity suggests the ordinariness of the ideal citizen—no longer is the nationalist narrative filtered through the exceptional life achievements of a singular individual; now anyone has the potential to be a national hero, unlike previously when, through his various memoirs, former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew was held up as the singular and exceptional hero. Here I use the term national hero to refer to the interviewees of the series in part because I am taking from Anderson's vocabulary, but also because within the Singaporean state-sponsored political context and discourse, Overseas Singaporeans are framed as citizens who are saving the nation from its inevitable economic demise.

The ordinariness of the Overseas Singaporean is reinforced by the headshot that every story features—the pictures are candid and likely self-selected from personal albums by the interviewee. When juxtaposed with the larger and often higher resolution professional stock photography of the featured city, the headshots seem starkly commonplace. For example, a feature on Sydney, Australia, shows Overseas Singaporean Terrence Yiew casually posing in a green t-shirt with his arm perched upon a handrail with the Sydney Harbor Bridge in the background. The resolution of the shot is not particularly clear and the photo is neither glamorous nor remarkable—it memorializes Yiew's visit to a famous Australian landmark. Above the inset of Yiew's picture is a photo of the Sydney Opera House during an evening lightshow and an action shot of a Puccini opera. Below is a long shot of Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park and a close up of a wallaby and her joey. The photography is crisp and shows impressive detail such as the beading on the opera performers' extravagant costuming and the animated expressions on

their faces. The visual contrast in the photography constructs Yiew as a regular person, thus creating the impression that reaching such an elevated status is attainable.

The series' reliance on multiple heroes seems especially fitting for the nation's shift into the knowledge economy because within this economy, all citizens have the potential to be successful capitalists. Heroism is read through those who uphold capitalist economic success for the nation. The multiplicity of national heroes suggests that all Singaporeans have the potential to cultivate themselves as heroes of both their individual stories and the success of the Singaporean nation.

In addition to the change in how citizens come to be valued, the shift from singular to multiple heroes transforms an understanding of time as reflected through the series' structure. In "Singaporean Abroad," instead of a temporally organized progressive plot movement unfolding through the action or character development of a single hero, we have a *spatially* organized narrative that relies on repetition through multiple heroes outside of Singapore. Usually we understand plot to refer to the design and arrangement of events within a narrative that provides the framework for a theme. Plot movement, then, is a change within the plotline where readers are able to distinguish between different events and their interrelationship. The focus on the Overseas Singaporean's location in each article collapses the formal elements of character and event within its narrative because the Singaporean living abroad is at once the character and the event. Thus, the heroes of the "Singaporean Abroad" series are doubly structural because they are both character and event.

Because the narrative is shaped by imagined traversals of geographic space through multiple heroes, the Overseas Singaporean as national hero serves as a device to

map out Singaporean transnational connections. The spatial imagination that is created by the narrative of “Singaporean Abroad” traverses vast geographical distances—from Askersund, Sweden to Herrenburg, Germany to Busan, Korea—and the space of the nation is imagined to extend beyond the borders of the nation-state vis-à-vis the Overseas Singaporean. No longer is the nation imagined as limited within national territory. The “Singaporean Abroad” series thus provides an example of how the imaginings of the space external to the Singaporean nation is transformed by neoliberalism.

This move to articulate nationalism outside the bounds of the nation does not suggest an attempt to reterritorialize or dominate external spaces, but merely to mark a Singaporean presence in it. Much as Anderson argued that the technology of the novel was able to narratively construct the sense of “meanwhile” in the nation-world of the story, the series’ construction of simultaneous, fraternal time exemplifies a “meanwhile” taking place outside of the nation. “Meanwhile” in this instance is not just temporary synchronicity that citizens identify with each other through. “Meanwhile” orients the nation towards its outside, creating a global consciousness within nationalist discourse when thinking about the series as a whole and a transnational consciousness with each article. The Singaporean national imagination is at work through the movement of Overseas Singaporeans within a global landscape thus fusing the world outside the nation with the nation inside. Their perceived mobility and representation in “Singaporean Abroad” provides a means to globalize the national imagination because it structures national imaginations to move beyond territory and to make linkages with the world. Through their presence outside Singapore, the Overseas Singaporeans work as active signs of Singapore’s position within a global context.

While on one hand the narrative structure of the series is complementary to the neoliberal values of a knowledge economy through its emphasis on transnationalized space, its episodic structure also embodies the biopolitical logics of populations by focusing on what constitutes a useful life for the nation. The Overseas Singaporean's life abroad is framed as a major accomplishment for the person featured as well as for the nation of Singapore and, as I have discussed, the framing of the "overseasness" as a positive trait is significant in terms of how the state shapes national imaginings. Of equal importance is noting how the series structures the readers' focus on such lives. The plot structure of the series might be best described as episodic because each article can stand on its own without the others and has no bearing on the next. Each article is connected by the use of generic features that are repeated and its legibility as a series, much like that of a population, is made possible through its repetition. The language of the articles does not create any transitions (e.g. "to be continued" or "next week"). Although each article can stand on its own, the repetition, similarity, and regularity of these pieces unify readers' expectations.

Like a population, the people in the series are defined by a single shared feature, rather than a shared affinity as the case with an imagined community. Unlike the novel where plotline is built through action, causal relations, and thus follows a progressive structure that reaches a climax, the plotline of "Singaporean Abroad" might best be described as a series of climaxes because the focus of the article suggests that the very act of living abroad is a climactic point in each featured Singaporean's life. Though the state is invested in representing the Singaporean's overseas status as a major achievement, little attention is given to historicizing each accomplishment. Life and the way that it is

narrated are instead structured by the notion of accomplishment—that of being Singaporean and abroad. The lives that are featured in this series have little to do with each other and are never framed as a community. The lack of relationality between each story in the episodic structure of the series compels us to think of Overseas Singaporeans as a desirable population, rather than a desirable community to be a part of. Also implied in the construction of Overseas Singaporeans as an imagined population is that national community only exists inside the nation. By creating this community-population dichotomy, the state mitigates the problems of alienating Overseas Singaporeans while also maintaining Singapore as an “authentic” nation.

The form of “Singaporean Abroad” creates a sense of population through its repetition and also because it lacks a discernible beginning and end. Readers come into the narrative in media res; the middle of things in this case however, is not eventful, but in the middle of multiple lives—in the middle of a crowd, if you will. There is no recognizable beginning or end in “Singaporean Abroad;” the very first article of the series hardly called any attention to itself beyond a short line: “In our new column Singaporean Abroad, he [Huang Eu Chai, the interviewee] talks about the best ways to experience a place he calls his ‘second home’” (Shetty 56). Here, the use of the word “new” only points to the appearance of the article and not to the beginning of a narrative. Were the “Singaporean Abroad” series to stop being published, this would not suggest the end of Singaporeans living abroad. In fact, the last article of the series which features Daniel Wong living in Nottingham, England ends with very little explanation: “This is the last instalment of the Singaporean Abroad series.” Again the language points to the end of the series, not the end of Singaporeans living abroad, nor anything that suggests a

closing to the narrative. To use mathematical language, the use of “last” simply marks the last term of a finite sequence rather than providing a sense of denouement. That the series ran weekly for over two years suggests that the newspaper was constantly able to choose another person and city to feature from a very large pool. Thus, the series mimics a population in that when taken together, the individual stories represent a group of the same type. With the repetition of the feature’s layout, color scheme, and narrative, the visual similarity of each article reinforces the effect of viewing a population.

The utility of the Overseas Singaporean population is further highlighted when examining how they are used as vessels for consumer information in the series. Readers do not get any sense of the social or historical person. While the interview with the Overseas Singaporean might seem to bring the subject’s life into the text in a significant way, the answers are rendered generic because of the focus on information. For example, in an article about Copenhagen, Denmark, Ian Choo is asked “Which places in the city excite you?” (click) The answer reads: “Free concerts at the famous theme park Tivoli (Vesterbrogade 3, 1630 Copenhagen V, www.tivoli.dk) everyday Friday. . .” In the article “Tivoli” has been bolded for easier reference for the reader. Presumably, Choo was not able to rattle off the location’s address and website off the top of his head and this information was added in after the interview. Moreover, Choo’s answer does not indicate any particular insider knowledge and instead reproduces what is likely common knowledge for residents and tourists. Choo’s answer—and this is the case with most of the featured profiles—reads more advice from someone taking a temporary sojourn rather than a permanent move. While arguably the interview is written in such a way to appeal to a touristic reader, there is only a very shallow sense of the Overseas Singaporean’s

experience of the featured city. Readers are provided with no interpretation of the life presented in part because the mainstay of the article is the featured city. While these Overseas Singaporeans are certainly documented, they are not portrayed in a way that brings any individuating substance or history to the life being presented. Instead Overseas Singaporean lives are a means to a capitalist end and a conduit for state power.

In this representation of Overseas Singaporeans as an imagined population, we can observe a significant difference between an affective national discourse of kinship and belonging to a biopolitical narrative that emphasizes which lives are of greater utility to the nation. In the particular case of Overseas Singaporeans, lives are created as a population in order to cultivate neoliberal national culture. As such, we observe a reversal of Esposito's notion of biopolitics as "politics in the name of life" (15)—instead we have lives in the name of politics. Of course, these are not lives committed or sacrificed for political cause; these are lives used to create a political effect. The difference between imagined communities and imagined populations is not to argue that kinship and social relations are no longer of concern for conceptions of the nation. "Imagined populations" illustrates the ways that nationalism can take a very different form when the main motivation for group identity is economic success under conditions of neoliberalism. Imagined populations do not reflect a nationalism concerned with issues of sovereignty, territory, or distinctive identity as the case was in the eighteenth century and post-World War II era of decolonization and independence. The state's production of the Singaporean diaspora as an imagined population, in this example, is to normalize neoliberal ideologies through the representation and valorization of the diasporic Singaporean's mobility. Whereas nation in relation to territory is typically framed as a

discussion of what a state is able to rule over, we observe through the “Singaporean Abroad” series a repackaging of the ways territoriality is typically understood in frameworks of nationalism. The state’s emphasis on the value of the diasporic Singaporean’s ability to navigate and engage the world is highly suggestive in terms of the relationship between cosmopolitanism and neoliberalism. In this example, cosmopolitanism essentially performs the free market ideologies that neoliberalism espouses. In other words, the Singaporean state harnesses the liberal humanism that underwrites cosmopolitanism to inculcate neoliberal values amongst its citizenry.

Typifying Diasporic Singaporeans in *Conversations on Coming Home*

Similarly to “Singaporeans Abroad,” *Conversations on Coming Home* presents a series of diasporic Singaporeans. The purpose and audience of the latter text, however, diverges from the former. While “Singaporean Abroad” uses diasporic Singaporeans to promote ideas of worldliness and cosmopolitanism amongst its resident citizenry, *Conversations on Coming Home*, as the title suggests, does quite the opposite by encouraging those very worldly cosmopolitans to return back to Singapore.

I came across the booklet during a research trip to a state-sponsored heritage festival for Singaporeans living abroad known as Singapore Day, the topic of the next chapter. The Singapore Day I attended in 2012 in Brooklyn, New York, had an estimated crowd of 5000 people and a budget of S\$4 million (roughly US\$3.2 million). The event was a curious amalgamation of trade show—with various installations showcasing the latest infrastructural developments in Singapore—heritage fest, and career fair. I was given the booklet as I was surveying the scene at the career fair component of the event, which included booths that were offering lucrative positions at transnational corporations

and with the government. *Conversations on Coming Home* was put together by Contact Singapore, self-described as “[a]n alliance of the Singaporean Economic Development Board and Ministry of Manpower.” On its website, Contact Singapore further explains its function as “actively link[ing] Singapore-based employers with professionals to support the growth of our key industries. We work with investors to realize their business and investment interests in Singapore.” One might think of Contact Singapore, then, as a national public relations and advertising cum headhunting company.

Conversations on Coming Home is a striking publication introducing twenty Singaporeans and describing their decisions to return to Singapore. Its black cover with red and white (the colors of the Singapore flag) colored font combined with the booklet’s heavy-stock paper immediately connotes a tone of costliness and thus investment, especially when compared to the flimsier pamphlets and the various mementos such as pens, notebooks, keychains, etc., that were passed out during the event. It is clear from the quality of the publication that no expense was spared. At over fifty pages, the booklet’s importance is further underscored by its length, which again differentiates the publication from other ephemera at Singapore Day. The glossy nature of the publication, combined with the opening statement made by Ng Siew Kiang, the Executive Director of Contact Singapore, reads like a magazine yet functions more like a brochure for “Singapore Inc.”²² Besides observing that these booklets were placed on nearly every table at the career fair component of Singapore Day, there is no other circulation information. *Conversations on Coming Home* is also available in PDF form on the website of Contact Singapore. It appears with three other booklets which all promote

²² As I discuss at greater length in Chapter Three, there are many reasons for thinking about Singapore’s national form as a corporate form.

Singapore as a place to develop careers, but to different audiences: *Welcome to a New City of Opportunities* (2014) is aimed at a general audience; *Dreams Taking Shape* (nd), is geared toward Southeast Asian expatriates; and *Connecting in the Heart of Asia* (2012) is specifically for Indian (South Asian) professionals. It is likely that *Conversations* and Contact Singapore's other booklets are distributed at the various events they organize. A quick glance at their calendar shows that they will be participating at seven events—a mixture of university career fairs, job fairs, and self-organized events—which seem like likely venues for distribution. Compared to the aforementioned booklets which are all under twenty pages, *Conversations on Coming Home* is the longest which again underscores the importance of diasporic Singaporeans as an ideal workforce for the Singaporean state.

The kinds of diasporic Singaporeans that the state chooses to endorse through its various representations and the ways in which their lives are framed are highly suggestive in terms of the ways diasporic Singaporeans are instrumentalized in the production of neoliberal culture. If one were to construct a sense of the diasporic Singaporean demographic from *Conversations on Coming Home*, one would likely assume that “Overseas Singaporeans,” as they are named by the state, are predominantly Chinese and what Leslie Sklair has described as the “transnational capitalist class,” or a global elite class comprised of corporate managers and professionals. Functioning as a table of contents, the opening pages of the booklet feature a series of individual photos of the returning Singaporeans. As the case is with many multicultural and multilingual places, it is not possible to know what ethnicity each of the featured Singaporeans are beyond crude guesses based on names and phenotypes. While names do not reveal those with

mixed race backgrounds, it is notable too that none of the Singaporeans in the catalog have Malay or South Asian names—the other major ethnic groups in Singapore.²³ Underneath each photo we are able to find the person's name, the company they work for, and where they used to live prior to moving back to Singapore. As the names of the companies such as Goldman Sachs, Accenture, and Mitsubishi connote, these Singaporeans are highly-skilled professionals. Besides bankers, the booklet spotlights engineers, researchers, business managers, and legal interns. Though it is likely that many who have left Singapore are white-collar labor migrants, that the state only represents the highly-mobile and cosmopolitan variety of diasporic Singaporeans maintains the image of the city-state as a global city.

Although *Conversations on Coming Home* is not a periodical publication like the daily *Straits Times* newspaper, it similarly follows a serial logic in its overarching structure as indicated by the repeated format and layout of each profile. Every profile is a double-page feature with one full-page colored photo and a second page dedicated to the story of why he or she decided to return. Each of the photos feature a professionally-dressed individual looking away from the camera against either a background that showcases Singapore's modern architecture or "natural" landscape as denoted by trees. Not only does office clothing emphasize professional status, many of the pictured returning Singaporeans are holding an Apple iPad, a smartphone, tablet computer, or a book.

Given the rhetorical context, the photos of each of these Singaporeans create the sense that they are happily and securely looking into their futures as successful

²³ In Singapore, ethnic identity falls under what is known as the "CMIO" scheme. All Singaporean citizens and residents are either identified as Chinese, Malay, Indian, or Other on their identity cards (IC). Certain language and religious affiliations are assumed under this rubric (e.g., Indians speak Tamil and are Hindu).

professionals. The low-angle shot of the majority of the photos creates the further effect of amplifying the background as larger and the resulting effect positions the reader as looking up to the featured Singaporean. The framing of the shot creates a hierarchical relation between the reader and returning Singaporean, one in which the Singaporean who comes home is given an elevated status. Moreover, the photo angles give the impression that the returning Singaporean is situated in the wider world. On the photo's facing page, we are given a short biography that details the individual's career choices and trajectory followed by a Q & A. Although the Q & A section creates a more candid tone because the questions are not standardized across the profiles, the ultimate effect of the profile repetition creates the sense that there are many like-minded diasporic Singaporeans. Much like "Singaporean Abroad," the repetition creates a sense of likeness, but does not imply relations or connections across each profile, thus again constructing diasporic Singaporeans as an imagined population rather than an imagined community. In other words, there is no deep sense of fraternity—to invoke Anderson's language—being constructed in across these profiles.

Unlike "Singaporean Abroad" which has no discernible plot in the overarching structure of the series or in the individual features, *Conversations on Coming Home* offers a clear story-line, or what I call the "coming-of-career" narrative. Each of the Singaporeans in the booklet tells the story of leaving Singapore and then coming back for the purposes of their career. While on one hand such narratives cast diasporic Singaporeans as professional migrants, these adapted coming-of-age stories promote values of individualism, human capital, and heteronormativity, and perform important cultural work for the state's neoliberal agenda.

The coming-of-career narrative reflects the influence of the globalized economy in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Unlike the coming-of-age story which focuses on the maturation process through a young person's move from childhood to adulthood within the context of the nation-state, coming-of-career stories are about the processes of investing in and enhancing one's self for the purpose of economic benefit. Coming-of-career stories assume that one's life is "human capital," the term widely popularized by the Chicago School of Economics to describe knowledge and skills as economic assets. Implicit in coming-of-career stories is the idealist notion of *Bildung* (i.e., the novelistic form of the coming-of-age story, the *bildungsroman*) which emphasizes self-cultivation and self-making. Unlike the coming-of-age stories, however, it is the global, neoliberal economy that dictates the processes through which to form one's ideal self rather than the nation-as-society. Coming-of-career stories are not simply about getting a job and surviving the capitalist market. Instead they reveal the ways individual lives are given meaning through the process of becoming an economically valuable subject in an increasingly globalized world.

My use of "career" is meant to widen the context in which lives are given meaning beyond the nation-state. In its 1800s usage, "career" referred to "[a] person's course or progress through life (or distinct portion of life), esp. when conspicuous, or abounding in remarkable incidents: similarly with reference to a nation, a political party, etc." (*OED*). The modern usage of the word emerged in the late 1920s and is described "a course of professional life or employment, which affords opportunity for progress or advancement in the world" (*OED*). Notable about the modern usage of "career" are the changed emphasis on profession and the wider geographical scope ("the world") in which

progress is possible. “Career” at once constricts the scope of the narrative by limiting it to progress in the economic sphere while opening it up to a scope beyond that of the nation. “Career” also reflects the ways work and an individual’s economic viability have an extended narrative beyond the moment of “getting a job.” While the focus on career points us to issues of work and labor, a consistent theme in coming-of-age narratives, the term “coming-of-career” limits the discussion of the ways upwardly mobile and economically privileged subjects rationalize and internalize neoliberalism.

Coming-of-career stories can either perform the work of social commentary or the work of socializing their audience into ideological norms. In this example of *Conversations on Coming Home*, it is very much the latter—with Singapore’s turn to a neoliberalized knowledge economy following the 1997 Asian financial crisis, the state has done much to create a neoliberal national culture. The coming-of-career narrative’s focus on upwardly mobile professionals is especially fitting for the Singaporean state’s use of such narratives since they are mostly trying to galvanize such types for nationalist purposes, and as I discuss in Chapter Three, coming-of-career narratives are limited in the cultural critique that they can perform.

The representation of diasporic Singaporeans in *Conversations on Coming Home* seems to contradict “Singaporean Abroad” because it is the very state of living abroad that allows them to appear as a highly-mobile, modern, and cosmopolitan group. Of course, it is not impossible to be live in Singapore and be mobile, modern, or cosmopolitan, but clearly the diasporic Singaporean’s status as outside of Singapore cannot operate in the same manner in this context. Thus, the conceivable challenge for *Conversations on Coming Home* is to present the act of returning to Singapore as part of

the continuing developmental narrative, one in which “coming home” is not a neoliberal regression. We might read the two series as focused on different parts of the diasporic Singaporean’s life. While Overseas Singaporeans in “Singaporean Abroad” are captured at the moment in which they are still abroad, the diasporic Singaporean presented in *Conversations* is at a later stage of her life. It is through *Conversations* that we understand that the diasporic Singaporean’s status abroad meant to be temporary.

In order to create such a developmental narrative, the overseas status of diasporic Singaporeans is framed as an event in the individual’s youth rather than a defining feature of his or her character. For example, the biographical description of Debra Ma, a Corporate Planning Manager explains,

Debra Ma absolutely enjoyed her graduate school days at Boston University, where she received an MBA in Finance and Strategy. She was inspired by the exchange of ideas within the diverse global student population, and being able to hear speakers such as US President Obama and Facebook founder, Mark Zuckerberg live. Back in Singapore she is inspired in a different way—by exciting new architecture, fascinating heritage conservation and an equally international make up in her home city. (7)

As with several of the people featured in the booklet, Ma’s stint living overseas was a result of her education. Because schooling is, for most, terminal and associated with youth, Ma’s time outside of Singapore is circumscribed. Her overseas status is impermanent and thus appears as a discrete event. The added element of youth further

enables the developmental narrative because youth is so often presented as transitory and a stage in one's life during which one has not quite reached his or her potential.

Returning Singaporean Toong Yao Yang provides another example in which the developmental elements of the coming-of-career story rely on the construction of youth as a transitory period of life:

Toong Yao Yang, a 29-year-old banking professional, had studied abroad as a teenager and has lived and worked overseas. He says he thoroughly enjoys the experience and has never ruled out settling abroad, but also values Singapore as a financial hub that offers career growth and opportunity. After 18 months working in Shanghai followed by a short stint in Hong Kong, he was offered a job by a European Bank and so, he returned home. (31)

In this instance, living and working abroad is framed as part of an enjoyable period of youth, which again creates the sense of impermanence (i.e., all good things must come to an end). The use of “but” is significant because it suggests that the value of Singapore must be read in contrast to such a period of enjoyment. While it is clear that the booklet does not mean to construct Singapore as a place that is less than enjoyable, it suggests that the career-minded will not let the youthful notion of “enjoyment” determine their life decisions. Here too we see a how travel, or fleeting, momentary enjoyment abroad is fine, but settling in Singapore is more lasting because of what it can offer one's career.

In order to retain a developmental narrative in the coming-of-career story, setting is presented in a continuous state of newness, quite unlike a coming-of-age story, in which setting is often posed as an unforgiving and immovable structural force (hence the

“man versus society” formulation). At times this sense of newness is created by the perspective enabled by the experience of living abroad and at others, the sense of newness is posed as the result of Singapore’s modernity. There is a very clear emphasis across the different profiles that Singapore is not quite what the returning Singaporean knows or remembers. For some, Singapore is different as a result of living abroad. Meredith Chan, a Programs Manager who lived in San Francisco, explains that she “actually appreciate[s] the country so much more” (11) as a result of living abroad, which has allowed for new discoveries in her home country: “In terms of fun and adventure, I have had to look harder, simply because I love the great outdoors, but I have found pockets of Singapore that are beautiful and scenic” (11). The subtext of Chan’s statement suggests that despite Singapore’s size, there are still undiscovered aspects of the island-nation. That there are also even possibilities for fun and adventure in Singapore allows for some sense of continuity between the individual’s youth and movement towards maturity, which is important given the ways that the coming-of-career story relies on constructions of youth as a time of enjoyment. Chan Yan Neng, a Real Estate Associate who did her Master’s degree in the UK, echoes Chan’s revelation that there is more to Singapore than she realized:

It’s not just about political rallies and more open discussion, Singapore’s physical landscape has transformed and there are many new buildings and outdoor spaces. On weekends, I enjoy exploring the countless walking and cycling trails around the city and discovering new independent shops and cafes. I don’t remember there being so much to do before!

Though acknowledging that Singapore's political climate has become more liberal, more significant for Chan are the ways that Singapore has become a more dynamic city. Both of the different Chan women address the implicit critique of Singapore as subject to overdevelopment and having a sterile and lackluster culture. Through the lens of a successful career-minded individual, Singapore's new developments allow for work-life balance. In this example of *Conversations on Coming Home*, setting takes on a more complementary role to the individual's process of maturity because the setting is represented as a structure that enhances the career plot. The complementary role that setting takes in coming-of-career narratives is a notable departure from the ways setting is often depicted as a disciplinary or antagonistic force that compels the protagonist's journey of maturity in coming-of-age stories. Moreover, Chan language suggests that it is her status abroad that enabled her to be able to see and appreciate Singapore. As typical to colonial travel narratives, time away from one's homeland allows for a more enlightened perspective.

Values of individualism are inherent to coming-of-career stories and are reflected in the booklet's content and form. Professional and corporate careers themselves are structured to promote ideals of independence and self-reliance because they promise mobility up a company's hierarchy based on an individual's job performance. *Conversations on Coming Home* emphasizes individual needs in the way that it suggests that returning to Singapore is about personal satisfaction. Although there are clear benefits for the nation-state, the featured diasporic Singaporeans do not explicitly frame their return home as an act of nationalism; rather the decision to return, we are to believe, is entirely about self-improvement and job opportunity. Individualism is also reflected in

the framing of each diasporic Singaporean as a distinct personality worth dedicating an interview and a full-page photograph to. Although when taken together, their singularity becomes less significant, each portrait features a story of individual achievement. As David Harvey has pointed out, the notion of individual freedom has been a central feature of neoliberal thinking because it lends itself to an oppositional stance toward state intervention in the market (7). The state has had to walk a fine line in terms of individualism, at once harnessing from the individualism inherent to neoliberalism, but in a way that does not contract the ways that the state has denounced individualism as a Western and decadent value. The state's aversion to individualism is likely another reason that these feature stories have taken a serial form. Though there is some degree of emphasis on the singularity of each featured diasporic Singaporean, their grouping with several others—as a population—to represent some semblance of a collective presumably is a way of countering the individualism implicit in these coming-of-career narratives. The notion of “population” at once allows for individualism and collectivity in a way that community does not.

Related to issues of individualism, the biography of the returning Singaporeans also encourages the notion of human capital. Because coming-of-career stories are made up of different events that form a career plot, lives are narrated in a neoliberal logic, which is to say that biographies are written according to the things that explain the subject's economic viability or value. Put a little differently, lives are subject to neoliberal logics or, as David Harvey might say, “neoliberalized,” in coming-of-career stories. Returning to Debra Ma as an example:

In Boston I was part of an extremely diverse student population, which has sharpened my cross-cultural communication and decision-making skills . . . *I believe these skills have added value to my interaction* with global co-workers at CapitaLand, which operates in 110 cities across 20 countries and employs 11,000 people worldwide. (7, emphasis mine)

Though the nation that Singaporean state seems to imagine for its citizens could be called CapitaLand, it is the name of an Asian real estate company. Ma's logic of "adding value" to herself is indicative of the ways that notions of *bildung* and human capital intersect. Undergirding *bildung* and human capital is the notion that people can invest in and improve themselves to achieve an (economic) ideal. Thus, the experience of living abroad is less about Ma's personal enrichment, and more about the ways it enhances the experience of her labor. We see a similar logic of self-improvement, though in slightly different circumstances, in the example of Gwendelene Foo:

Gwendelene Foo knew that accepting a more senior position as Head of Human Resources at her previous company's joint venture factory in Vietnam in 2002 would be a test of her abilities. She faced a language barrier, different work attitudes and employee ethics as well as stringent labor laws and the challenges of living in a developing country. Yet, by the end of her first year, she hit her stride and thoroughly enjoyed her stint for the next two years, she however knew that it would soon be time to leave. (33)

While Foo was able to "add value" to her career by living and working away from Singapore, her experience is posed more as a challenge to overcome—unlike Ma who

was in the “inspirational” United States, Foo was working in a third world country. Thus value in the case of Foo is her willingness to face adversity in order to become a better Human Resources Director and, moreover, her inclination to maintain a developmental attitude toward her career: “I was concerned that I would lose my competitiveness if I stayed too long [in Vietnam]. I was determined to return to sharpen my skills and perhaps be considered for another posting subsequently” (33). As Ma’s language indicates, the notion of “competitiveness” upholds the developmentalism intrinsic to the coming-of-career narrative.

Despite the very clear nationalist agenda these stories are meant to serve, there is actually very little emphasis on nationalism. Gone are the typical emphases on home as a space of national community; instead, home is reconfigured as a space that is functional in one’s career (as CapitaLand!), which is to say that the nation must take on a particular spatial and temporal configuration in order to be considered ideal. Singapore’s functionality as an ideal place for careers is evident in the coming-of-career story of Toong Yao Yang:

While I am thankful for all that I have learnt from my valuable experience in Shanghai, I felt that, at some point, my professional development would be limited because the finance industry there is still highly regulated and restrictive, especially for foreign banks. Singapore’s finance and banking industry is mature and globally connected, and my current job allows me to gain experience with more sophisticated products. At this stage in my career, I feel that it’s important to learn as much as I can and Singapore provides the opportunity for me to do so.

True to neoliberal ideology, Singapore is constructed as a place of freedom and career advancement—at least for those working in the finance industry. We are able to see that Singapore is the optimal environment for Toong's career because of this freedom. Moreover, Toong's depiction of Singapore as place that is mature in terms of global capitalism parallels the coming-of-career narrative's emphasis on careers as the marker of maturity.

The booklet also endorses heteronormativity through its promotion of the nuclear family, ostensibly in the service of the state's pro-natalist policies and to uphold neoliberalism. This endorsement is most evident in the booklet's last profile of Gabriel Lim, an electric engineer who returned to Singapore from New Zealand. Unlike the rest of the photographs in *Conversations on Coming Home* which feature close ups of individuals, Lim's photograph is of himself, his wife, his son, and a white male who is, one has to assume, Lim's friend or colleague laughing together around a table. The photograph stands in stark contrast to the others in the booklet because it is the only domestic scene that shows an entire family and for the fact there is an anonymous non-Asian person. It is not clear who the white male is in relation to the Lim family, but puzzlement aside, the scene displays cosmopolitanism through inter-racial interaction and comfort with a westerner.

As the last profile, and perhaps the final word of the booklet, Lim's photograph and interview remind its audience of the importance of family values. In his interview, Lim discusses the benefits of bringing his family back to Singapore:

My job opportunity came at the perfect time. I had a good offer and Ying
Ying [Lim's wife] wants to develop her accounting career here. At this

young age, Caleb [Lim's son] can easily adapt to a new environment. We trust that he will receive a robust education and be exposed to a diversity of cultures and pick up Mandarin! (51)

As it has for Gabriel Lim, Singapore equally promises Lim's wife a successful career plot. Moreover, a return to Singapore will prepare young Caleb to become a cosmopolitan in the future. But perhaps most notably, the moral of Lim's profile is that the family, not just the individual, benefits from the pursuit of career opportunity in Singapore. Lisa Duggan points out that the state's promotion of family values and marriage is a way of creating a sense of personal responsibility, thus enabling increased privatization by shifting costs of social services to individuals and households (14). Though it would not be accurate to depict the Singaporean state as a strong proponent of privatization in terms of social services—there is substantial public housing and public transportation, as well as heavily subsidized education, health and recreational services—the state's targeting of the family does enable notions of personal responsibility as Duggan argues, thus articulating neoliberalism with personal relations.

The state's emphasis on family and heterosexual relations also links with neoliberalism and ideas of human capital. As Laurence Leong Wait Teng points out, in the state's logic, sex and procreation are necessary for a healthy economy:

Singapore's population policies underscore the productionist ethic of sex. Sex—particularly heteronormativity—is articulated not in the context of pleasure of expressivity (for consumption), but in the context of instrumentality: sex for the purpose of making babies. The obsession with babies (measured by the amount of resources to entice mothers to breed) is

underpinned by economic concerns . . . When officials see low fertility rates in Singapore, they anticipate negatives effects such a shrinking and ageing population would have on the economy . . . procreative sex is therefore necessary to sustain economic growth. (583-584)

In its neoliberal and biopolitical logic, babies are human capital. The “happy ending” of the booklet with its story of a content, career-minded family with an already cosmopolitan baby is perhaps, the state’s ideal narrative.

Ultimately, the coming-of career narrative focuses on Singaporean citizens who matured through their time abroad—often gaining education and career experience—and eventually returned and reintegrated into Singapore. It is only on the basis of their cosmopolitan experience and (cultural) capital accumulation that they are hailed by the government as an ideal citizen to return home. The diasporic Singaporean is thus the paradigmatic and ideal neoliberal subject who becomes conscripted by the state’s nationalist narrative in order to further integrate the island-nation into the global economy.

Conclusion

Through the example of “Singaporean Abroad,” and *Conversations on Coming Home* I have demonstrated how processes of globalization have both affected and demanded new forms of nationalism. By analyzing the content and form of both “Singaporean Abroad” and *Conversations on Coming Home* I have shown how imaginings of national time and space are reconfigured in a global capitalist context, the ways that diasporic Singaporeans are instrumentalized to normalize neoliberal thinking through individualism, notions of human capital, and heteronormativity. Singapore is an

especially apt case to study in analyzing neoliberal culture and the intersections of neoliberalism and nationalism because of the state's insistence on attaching the national to the global. Working with an example like Singapore shows both the staying power of Anderson's arguments about national imaginings and narrative form, and the necessity of reconsidering the primacy of the novel as sole literary vehicle through which such imaginings are achieved. In the Singaporean context, we observe the significance of serial narratives and the magazine feature genre. For those in literary and cultural studies, analyzing the forms through which nationalism is expressed is critical to understanding the connection between the political and the aesthetic. As I have argued for a different and better understanding of nationalism as it is tied to processes of globalization, I have also tried to show how the state's neoliberal logics and biopolitical impulses manifest as cultural and aesthetic expression in these two state-sponsored sets of texts. *Conversations on Coming Home* illustrates the ways in which lives are narrated according to neoliberal nationalist ideals. In Chapter Three, I further discuss the ways that coming-of-career narratives in Singapore call attention to the Singaporean state's dependence on transnational corporations for its economy.

"Singaporean Abroad" and *Conversations on Coming Home* represent a significant change in the content and form of traditional nationalist narrative. Interestingly, similar types of journalistic, episodic life writing features have emerged in other sites in Singapore. For example, the Overseas Singaporean Unit's webpage also runs an occasional feature article in "OS Snapshots & Hotshots," which focuses on the lives of overseas Singaporeans. The *Straits Times* also publishes a series known as the "Expatriate Files" which features expatriates living in Singapore. Taken together, there seems

to be a clear move towards employing journalistic, episodic forms to represent the shifting values in state nationalist discourse. Though it remains to be seen whether these series will have the same popular impact as something like former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's memoirs, there is something more subtle at work through the use of a more frequent, yet more fleeting narrative form. Ultimately, "Singaporean Abroad" shows us the need to be attentive to emergent and contemporary forms of nationalism and the cultural and textual genres through which they are deployed.

Although the state's attention to overseas Singaporeans suggests a more open attitude to experiences of its citizens abroad, the state's conflation of diasporic and cosmopolitan identity and its representation of Overseas Singaporeans as a privileged class essentializes a group whose identities are much more complex and further submerges the significance of migrant workers in Singapore who make its economy possible. The state's privileging of professionally skilled workers is already evident through the distinction between "low-skilled foreign workers" and "foreign talent" in its immigration policies. Singapore's neoliberalized policies that make immigration, residence, and citizenship in Singapore much easier for professional workers has resulted in a strongly xenophobic sentiment toward new immigrants in Singapore. In February 2013, after the release of the Population White Paper, *A Sustainable Population for a Dynamic Singapore*, an estimated three to four thousand people rallied in protest against the state's plan to increase the population by 30% over the next few decades (Hodal)—the largest show of public dissent since Singapore's independence in 1965. It remains to be seen whether the state will be able to continue to exalt diasporic Singaporeans given the current political mood towards professional immigrants to Singapore. No doubt such

comparative work between Singaporean immigration and emigration will be a valuable way of studying the contradictions that the state and Singaporeans face in its neoliberal nationalism.

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Chapter Two: Staging Singapore: Neoliberal Nationalism, Diaspora, and Singapore Day 2012

Although I was not quite sure what to expect at Brooklyn, New York's Singapore Day 2012, I expected it might be like Singapore's National Day Parade (NDP), filled with over-the-top national fervor. I had heard from a friend, who attended Singapore Day 2009 in London, that the event was a hectic and crowded affair because of the free food. As my companion and I approached the venue in Prospect Park for Singapore Day, it was clear that I had underestimated the event's size and scale. Speakers blasted Top 40 pop music so that we heard the event long before we saw it. Based on the scores of well-dressed, young twenty-somethings, the scene could just as easily have been a music festival rather than a government-sponsored heritage event.

Through this discussion of Singapore Day 2012, I continue the work of Chapter One, which examined the ways that representations of diasporic Singaporeans normalize a neoliberal culture, and produce the "diasporic Singaporean." This annual multi-million dollar heritage festival held outside of Singapore targets a similar "Overseas Singaporean" audience as does "Conversations on Coming Home." Organized by the Overseas Singaporean Unit, a branch of the Singaporean government that coordinates outreach efforts with Singaporeans living abroad, Singapore Day appears to be another effort by the Singaporean state to affirm the imagined population of the diasporic Singaporean. By bringing together Singaporeans living abroad in a social setting, the event also is ostensibly an effort to cultivate a particular imagined community. My main focus, however, is on how Singapore is represented to Singaporeans outside of the country and the ways that this event constructs diasporic Singaporean identity for neoliberal nationalist purposes.

Through this large-scale production of Singapore Day, the state attempts to woo the diasporic Singaporean back to Singapore. The diasporic Singaporean is someone, to invoke former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong's language again, who may potentially "quit" Singapore indicating that the relationship between Singapore and the diasporic Singaporean is a precarious one that may need remedying. Thus the orchestration of Singapore Day must not only be read as part of the state's attempt to attract Singaporeans back to Singapore, but also as part of the state's endeavor to "create" diasporic Singaporeans. It is in this process of calling forth diasporic Singaporeans that I read the logics of neoliberal nationalism.

To provide some historical context to my analysis, I begin by discussing some cultural initiatives that have emerged over the last few decades, framing the ways such initiatives seemingly cohere around a historical and postcolonial national narrative, "the Singapore Story," through an emphasis on cultural memories of historical sites and events. A form of what Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger refer to as the "invention of tradition," the national narratives that such cultural memory produces are familiar and cultivate a deep sense of shared community (i.e., Benedict Anderson), shared historical trauma (i.e., Lauren Berlant, Judith Butler), and shared destiny (i.e., Etienne Balibar).

In the next section, I make the argument that Singapore Day illustrates a form of "neoliberal nationalism," which is determined by an economic agenda and which, as I illustrate through my reading of ephemera from the event as well as my participant observation at Singapore Day, relies not only on constructing diasporic Singaporeans as ideal, cosmopolitan, and modern, but works to develop a generationally-based kinship amongst its participants. I argue that the articulation of youth culture is necessary in order

to give meaning to neoliberalism and, thus, the project for the state is to cultivate relations amongst diasporic Singaporean youth. Neoliberal nationalism, then, is not just “merely economic,” to rephrase Judith Butler’s title “Merely Cultural,” but an age-based cultural formation.

I discuss the various ways Singapore Day is constructed in order to appeal to youth as well as the ways the organizers of the event utilize particular aspects of youth culture—ironic humor and the “ironic aesthetic” prevalent with the hipster subculture—to compel an otherwise unenthusiastic audience to perform nationalist sentiment. In this form of nationalism, which differs from other theorizations of nationalism as based on a linguistically or ethnically-determined affinity, the state shifts the emphasis from cultural memory to a sense of a “shared interest”—in this case, of an interest in popular culture—in its production of a national narrative. The use of the word “interest” here is deliberate and is meant to play on both its associated meanings of hobbies, pastime, and leisurely activity and also the denotation of profit made off of an economic investment. In order to provide a point of comparison from which we are better able to recognize the distinctiveness of the nationalism performed at Singapore Day, I also discuss the National Day Parade 2012, noting how the use of youth and popular culture differs in a local context and for a local audience compared to Singapore Day which, by contrast, addresses a Singaporean audience living abroad.

My reading Singapore Day 2012 and its ephemera utilizes a cultural studies methodology that is informed by ethnography, performance studies, film studies, affect studies, and literary studies. A dynamic festival like Singapore Day 2012 with its many different components requires a varied and flexible approach. I rely on ethnographic

techniques and participant observation to form the text for this chapter and recognize that as someone who would likely be the target audience of Singapore Day 2012, my own subjectivity as a former resident of Singapore is necessarily reflected in my presentation of the event. Singapore Day is what Diana Taylor would describe as an instance of a repertoire, or a performance in which “people participate in the production and reproduction of knowledge by ‘being there,’ being a part of the transmission” (20). Thus my representation of Singapore Day 2012 and readings of its ephemera treat my participation as part of the object of study. Moreover, the ways in which my analysis of Singapore Day 2012 is shaped by what I experienced and felt draws from the work of affect studies scholars such as Ann Cvetkovich, Kathleen Stewart, and Lauren Berlant.

Performing Heritage and History

Even prior to its forced independence from Malaysia in 1965, the question of what constitutes Singaporean identity and culture was a state obsession. This obsession can be read in a number of ways, whether it is through the state’s concerted focus on managing culture through governmental bodies such as the Ministry of Culture, Community, and Youth (formerly the Ministry of Culture) or the National Heritage Board; newspaper headlines such as “National culture ‘will take 20 years’” (*Straits Times* May 12, 1962), “How to evolve a cultural S’pore” (May 17, 1973), “MP: Help evolve a national culture” (June 21, 1980); or the state’s attempt to legislate national culture and identity through the document Shared Values, which I discuss in Chapter Four.

The state’s obsession with establishing national identity—and by extension, national culture and national history—points us to the importance of culture for governance. It moreover suggests something manufactured about Singaporean culture. In

addition to the ideological function culture plays in state governance, the state's attempts to deliberately construct a national culture, identity, and history provide a way of understanding the relationship between nationalism and global capitalism because, as historians Hong Lysa and Huang Jianli write, Singaporean history has continuously evolved with changing global market conditions (3). In other words, constructions of Singapore's history are intimately linked to the economy. This on-going evolution as well as its hegemonic effectiveness make Singaporean history an important site for understanding the effects of neoliberal globalization on national culture. Hong and Huang further write: "those who are critical of the Singaporean's government's heavy hand in the scripting and imprinting of its version of history do not give sufficient credit to the thought and skill with which these have been done" (3). Nonetheless, the state's effectiveness as a hegemonic power does not mean that the culture it produces is always clear in terms of what it is attempting to achieve or that it entirely conforms to the state's intended outcomes. The very ways that the state repurposes history, culture, and identity in response to market conditions help us to better understand, in this case, the effects of neoliberal globalization on national culture in realms outside of the purely economic. The Singaporean state's activities are a reaction to certain non-state dynamics that are out of its control, and as a result, the state's effectiveness is shaped in part by what is outside of it. In focusing on state-power, my point is not to justify it but rather to show how state-power operates and demonstrate that it is never predictable, or fully effective. The point here is not to ignore the repressive and punitive dimensions of Singaporean governance, but to instead push for a fuller and more nuanced analysis of how Singaporean state power works.

It is perhaps no surprise that the Singaporean state has emphasized history when we consider the importance of a shared past in nation-formation. Hong and Huang put it best in their depiction of the state's instrumentalization of history when they write that Singapore's "yoking [of] history to the cause of nation-building [is] particularly insistent and didactic" (2). As modernist theorists and scholars of nationalism such as Balibar, Anderson, Hobsbawm, and Nicholas Dirks have variously pointed out, history plays a foundational role in the imaginings of the nation. In Balibar and Anderson's argument, history is the cultural and social foundation of the nation. For Anderson, "[t]he idea of a sociological organism moving calendrically through homogenous, empty time is a precise analogue of the idea of the nation, which also is conceived as a solid community moving steadily down (or up) history" (26). In other words, the nation's existence relies on imaginings of kinship across time and limited space. Balibar's discussion of the ideological form of the nation similarly follows Anderson's temporal logic when he points out that history bestows on the nation a sense of the "continuity of a subject" (86). Though not addressing nations and nationalisms specifically, Stuart Hall too stresses the importance of history for cultural identity: "our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as 'one people' with stable, unchanging, and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history" (223). As a multi-ethnic, -lingual and religious society, Singapore relies on the unifying function of history to provide its citizens with a sense of shared identity.

The ideological function of history in the context of a consolidated nation-state points us to a different set of considerations than were present during the period of

nation-formation. Though concurring with Anderson and Balibar's assessment of the significance of history for the nation, Hobsbawm and Dirks' works shift our attention to the ideological and hegemonic function of history. Undergirding Hobsbawm's argument that history and invented traditions are used to "inculcate certain norms and norms of behavior" (1) as "responses to novel situations" (2) is the notion that the construction of history is subject to relations of power. Dirks' point that history can be deployed in order to signify that "we have developed consciousness of our historical depths and trajectories" (25) illustrates but one way in which history is instrumentalized for the purposes of asserting power—in this case, through discourses of modernity. Appearing modern and highly developed, as C.J. W.-L. Wee argues in *The Asia Modern*, has consistently been a cornerstone of Singaporean nationalism. The PAP's push for first world modernity, often encoded in the rhetoric of "success," has been a constant refrain from its early days of independence and onwards.

The official history that has emerged over the past decade, referred to as the "Singapore Story" which is also the title of former the Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's memoirs, became prominent in 1997 with the introduction of the National Education initiative that required students learn a version of Singaporean history officially sanctioned by the state. As Loh Kan Seng points out in his analysis of the construction of Singapore's official history, the state's move to formalize a particular historical narrative marked a radical departure from the government's previous posture which had "rejected history as a threat to nation-building" (2). C.J. W.-L. Wee claims that in previous state logic, Singapore's history would destabilize the potential for a coherent imagined community because it would merely serve to emphasize racial difference—a legitimate

concern at the time of independence (716). That the People's Action Party—the ruling political party in Singapore since independence to the present—began the work of “constructing a politically expedient history” in the late 1970s (Loh 2) and later instituted it in school curricula suggests, however, that the state realized the valuable ideological work that an official history can do.

Through its emphasis on themes of survival, progress, and pragmatism, the Singapore Story affirms the state's power, its economic agendas, and the nation's modernity. The Story goes something like this: modern Singapore was founded by British statesmen Sir Stanford Raffles in 1819 after which Singapore became a flourishing trading port, thanks to Chinese, Malay, and Indian immigrants and British leadership. Following Japan's short but violent takeover of Singapore from the British from 1942 to 1945, the Singaporean nation began to develop a political consciousness when it was returned to British rule. When it merged with Malaysia in 1963, Singapore established independence from British rule. Following a spate of riots fuelled by racial tensions, Singapore was expelled from Malaysia in 1965 and thus “gained” full independence. By emphasizing the hard work and practical thinking of then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, the (still) ruling political party PAP, and the loyal citizens of the time, the Singapore Story portrays Singaporean's break with Malaysia as the impetus that fuelled its transformation from a third-world country into the flourishing, first-world cosmopolitan biotechnology and financial hub it is today.

Themes of survival—and by extension, crisis—in Singaporean national narratives owe their existence to the circumstances of Singapore's independence. Because of Singapore's unexpected rejection by the Federation of Malaya, independence is

understood as a challenging time of uncertainty, fear, and, as Philip Holden writes, a time “focused on Singapore’s lack versus other post-colonial nations” (345). Citizens are continually reminded of Singapore’s resilience in times of difficulty, but also of the state’s precarity. Take for example, the opening lyrics of the national song “We are Singapore”: “There was a time when people said/that Singapore won’t make it/But we did.” Variations of this mantra have been repeated by state officials in order to galvanize people towards a common cause, while also imbuing Singaporeans with a sense of victory over unlikely circumstance. As Loh writes, survival was often framed in terms of modernity (3) and, I would add, economics—that is, Singapore’s survival depended on its ability to modernize and become economically successful. Such logic is evident in former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong’s 2001 National Day Rally Speech:

In the next few months, as our economy slows down and unemployment increases, some Singaporeans may again question the need for more global talent. I urge you to understand that this *is a matter of life and death for us in the long term*. Our own talent is being creamed off. If we do not top up our talent pool from the outside, in ten years time, many of the high-valued jobs we do now will migrate to China and elsewhere, for lack of sufficient talent here. (emphasis added).

Although this particular speech is Goh’s attempt to persuade his audience to believe that relaxing immigration laws is necessary, he equates “survival” with economic success and development. Here, we observe what Naomi Klein has described as “shock doctrine” in the sense that Goh is exploiting an economic crisis to rationalize state action. In his claim that Singapore does not have the resources (“talent”) to survive the global economy, we

see a similar logic to that expressed in the national song “We are Singapore.” Much like in the song, Goh’s speech emphasizes crisis, in this case of economic slowdown. Where the two texts depart from each other is that the song celebrates the overcoming of crisis and the speech accentuates the potential for new crisis. When considering the larger Singapore Story, implied in Goh’s speech is that survival will be possible, so long as citizens cooperate with the government’s economic decisions.

The brief example above is meant to illustrate the ways that national themes of survival get refracted differently depending on the moment or text referred to. Aside from the National Education curriculum and Lee Kuan Yew’s nearly 700-page memoir, the Singapore Story is rarely represented in its entirety. Nonetheless, we can perceive the omnipresence of the Singapore Story’s master narrative as well as a different type of nationalist logic at work behind the various cultural initiatives launched by the state.

In order to make history a significant part of Singaporean identity, projects and cultural initiatives directed by the National Heritage Board—such as the National Museum, the Singapore Discovery Center, nature trails, monuments, archives—concretize those aspects of the Singapore Story that generate a sense of an imagined communities, shared history and trauma, and a shared destiny. Much has been written about the ways memorializing projects such as museums, collections, nature trails, monuments, heritage sites, and archives, enable imaginings of the nation as a coherent and unified entity and as having clear and locatable origins.²⁴ These earlier projects directed by the National Heritage Board tend to rely on what I would describe as more passive forms of memory-making and memorialization because they render the audience

²⁴ See Edward Said’s *Culture and Imperialism*, Gayatri Spivak’s *Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, Marita Sturken’s *Tangled Memories*, and Diana Taylor’s *The Archive and the Repertoire*

as receptacles of knowledge. National history, as it is represented in the context of museums or heritage sites for example, is narrated with authority because the communication is unidirectional. History is narrated to the audience.

More recently, in an apparent effort to counter critiques of the Singapore Story as hegemonic, the state has launched a number of “active” memory-making projects that encourage citizen participation in the creation of collective memory. These include the Singapore Memory Project (an oral history endeavor), the Singapore Heritage Festival, Yesterday.sg (an interactive online archive aimed at youth), Singapore Day, amongst many others. In such initiatives, citizens are given a sense of agency in the construction of Singapore’s national narrative because such projects rely on the telling of history by citizens. For example, developments such as the Singapore Memory Project ask citizens to contribute their memories by sending in voice recordings, taking pictures, or writing anecdotes through its website or smartphone app. The Singaporean state appears to have traded places with the citizen because it is now the state that is the receptacle of the citizen’s historical knowledge. The website of “I remember SG” goes so far as to state:

The Singapore Story is not simply the tale of one city’s rise from third-world to first, but it is also one enriched by each and every one of us and our unique experiences. irememberSG hopes to share these stories, relive these memories and retrace the steps trodden by people who’ve experienced Singapore.

It would appear that the state aspires to a more democratic telling of the past, one that is inclusive of all Singaporeans. This more inclusive history is meant to be understood as distinct from the state’s past tellings of its history; this is indicated by the website’s

mention that Singapore Story is not just a developmental story of its move from “third-world to first,” which is an allusion to former Lee Kuan Yew’s memoir *From Third World to First: the Singapore Story*. The state still maintains full control over which memories are actually curated and put forth to the public as worthy of reception, however.

While the state’s push for more active forms of memory-making might seem to be a way of preventing accusations that the state is only trying to indoctrinate its citizens with its own agenda, it also cultivates meritocracy—an ideology that serves neoliberalism well because of the ways it preserves, rather than challenges, the framework of free markets. David Harvey argues that concepts of dignity and individual freedom have been vital for the enabling of neoliberalism. While notions of “freedom” do not operate in Singapore in the same ways that Harvey describes, an emphasis on individualism is nonetheless palpably present. An initiative such as the Singapore Memory Project both distinguishes citizens as individuals and promotes the idea that only the “best” are worth celebrating. For example, the Singapore Memory Project recently presented an exhibit from the histories that it had collected entitled “Hands: Gift of a Generation.” As the media release puts it, the exhibition of the “life stories and hard work of 30 Singaporeans depicted through photographic portraits of their hands” were curated through “a selection of more than 400 memories” (“First Hand Account”). The language used to describe the making of the exhibit at once presents the Singapore Memory Project as an initiative that citizens are excited to be a part of, but also a project of high quality and with some conceptualizing of merit. Though all citizens can be a part of the Singapore Memory Project, not everyone will be significant enough to be featured in an exhibit.²⁵

²⁵ A highlights video of “Hands” is available on YouTube. The Singaporeans featured in the two and a half minute clip include a musician, a former charcoal seller, a boxer, and a flower seller. Much like with

Ultimately, the point here is to highlight the Singaporean state's role in the making of national history and culture and, moreover, to emphasize the different types of work performed across the multitude of initiatives that currently exist. There is, however, consistency across all of the initiatives in the way that they promote ideas of an imagined community through shared experience. As I argue in the next section, Singapore Day presents a different type of nationalism in its attempt to appeal to youth—one that emphasizes shared interest rather than shared experience.

Neoliberal Nationalism at Singapore Day 2012

As the largest project managed by the Overseas Singaporean Unit in terms of scale, organizational effort, and participation, Singapore Day is an important cultural text to analyze when examining the state's efforts to construct and recuperate Overseas Singaporeans. The inaugural Singapore Day was held in New York City in 2007, one year after the Overseas Singaporean Unit was established in 2006. Frequently described in PR releases by the OSU as their “signature event” (“Overseas Singaporeans Get to”), Singapore Day is ostensibly a heritage festival for Singaporeans living abroad, but might be better described as a combination of a heritage festival, career fair, and trade show. The event has been held in a different global city every year; starting in New York City, Singapore Day subsequently has been held in London, Melbourne, and Shanghai, returned to New York in 2012 where it was held in Brooklyn, Sydney in 2013, and will return back to London in 2014. The OSU has not made clear what their procedures are in

representations of diasporic Singaporeans, occupation is prominently featured. As the sepia tones and sentimental soundtrack suggest, these Singaporeans are not, however, seen as the future, but as figures of history and heritage. In the context of a highly modernized and technological society, the choice to thematize hands connotes authenticity. The years after Singapore's independence are often referred to by in state history as the “nation-building years” and the emphasis on the featured Singaporeans' hands emphasizes the notion of citizens making the nation.

picking cities, but the repetition suggests that there is a circuit through which the event travels. On one hand the chosen cities might simply be a reflection of high populations of Singaporeans in the area. On the other hand, the chosen cities might be suggestive of the specific kinds of Singaporeans the state is trying to attract back to Singapore—all the cities that Singapore Day is held in are major commerce centers. Certainly, the Singaporean Abroad series does not suggest that diasporic Singaporeans only live in major global cities.

The structure of Singapore Day has been fairly consistent over the past five years with four main aspects to the event: food, entertainment, career fair, and what the OSU has called the “experiential showcase.” Local Singaporean hawkers are flown to the designated location to prepare samples of their signature dishes while Singaporean stage and television actors provide the comedic and musical entertainment. A significant part of the event is dedicated to disseminating information about the latest industries and jobs available in Singapore. Finally, the “experiential showcase” is much like a tradeshow except with a nation on showcase rather than an industry. Large visual and interactive displays are staffed by representatives giving out mementos such as pens and answering questions about the “latest developments in the various aspects of life in Singapore” (“Singapore Day”) such as housing, education, or the newest projects that the state is leading.

Much effort is put into making the event attractive and accessible to as many people as possible. In this regard, Singapore Day organizers have been quite successful. News sources have estimated the turnout for Singapore Days to range from 5000 to

12,000 people.²⁶ The entire event is free, including the food. Entrance is supposedly limited to Singaporean citizens and permanent residents, though perhaps not strictly enforced. In order to get tickets to attend Singapore Day 2012, I had to register my partner and myself online and provide personal information such as my NRIC number²⁷, his passport information, and our education levels. There did not seem to be any suggestion that guests had to be related to the Singaporean. Although the event was initially touted as for “Singaporeans only,” it seems that Singapore Day 2012 was opened to the general public the day before the event.²⁸ Since the food and entertainment is free and the event has so far been held in central public spaces with high foot traffic, it seems likely that the number of attendees is inflated insofar as the official number who attended does not reflect “Singaporeans only.”

The state, however, has faced some criticism and controversy over the price of producing Singapore Day in order to create bonds with Overseas Singaporeans and put on display such cosmopolitanism. To some, the event’s high budget— S\$4m (roughly US\$3.2m) price tag in 2012—illustrates the elevated status overseas Singaporeans have over other citizens. For example, taking the high cost as representative of the state’s priorities, blogger Sophia Tsang commented:

I was trying to compare this spending with a \$3.8m pledge to boost the medical social work profession. Out of this amount, \$1.8m is set aside for scholarships. Both amounts, the one spent on Singapore Day, and the one

²⁶ See Barratt, Olly. “12,000 turn up to celebrate Singapore Day in London.” *Channel NewsAsia*. 26 April 2009. Web.; Lim, Kristine. “Overseas S’poreans celebrate Singapore Day in Shanghai.” *Channel NewsAsia*. 17 April 2011. Web.

²⁷ NRIC, or National Registration Identity Card, is somewhat like an ID card and Social Security card, but with fewer notions of privacy surrounding it.

²⁸ Singapore Day 2013 in Sydney faced some controversy after a white Australian claimed he was denied entrance into the event and accused the organizers of racial discrimination. See Xue, Jianyue. “Foreigners who pre-registered could attend S’pore Day in Sydney: OSU.” *Today*. 16 Oct. 2013. Web. 28 Oct. 2013.

set aside to boost a very necessary profession is roughly the same. The difference is one is spent on a one-day event, the other will be disbursed over years.

But the immensity of Singapore Day and the efforts required to orchestrate it were justifiable, according to the Minister of State for Health Amy Khor, who remarked: “There’s a value to helping our Singaporeans remember their roots so that if they ever go back, it’s easier for them to adjust. You can’t put a price on that” (qtd. in Tsang). Implicit in Khor’s language is the suggestion that the state has an important role to play in enabling cultural memory. Moreover, her clichéd language, reminiscent of a credit card commercial, is revealing of the state’s economic logic in its treatment of diasporic Singaporeans. The very act of proposing that Overseas Singaporeans need help remembering is very telling, however, because of the way it conveys that there is a particular way that Singapore should be remembered. Further responding to Khor’s comments above, Tsang goes on to sardonically refer to everyday problems within Singapore when she asks: “Did they [Singapore Day participants] get to experience many foreigners fighting over the food that they miss so much? Did you show them packed MRT trains?” Tsang’s criticisms of the event make clear her unhappiness that Overseas Singaporeans are of such important status to the state and, moreover, that the Singapore presented to overseas Singaporeans is not realistic. Of course, given that the event is largely meant to recruit overseas Singaporeans to return to Singapore, one would not expect the state to be upfront about the nation’s current social and political problems. Ultimately, Tsang’s critiques rightly call attention to the privileged and exceptional status overseas Singaporeans have in the eyes of the state.

Within the spread of memory and heritage-based projects orchestrated by the state above, Singapore Day is an “active” form of remembering Singapore and enacting nationalism. Unlike these other projects, however, Singapore Day is specifically meant for Overseas Singaporeans and is held outside of Singapore. That the setting of Singapore Day is always outside of Singapore adds a transnational dimension to the discussion that, in turn, affects the ways in which Singapore can be and is represented. Thematically speaking, Singapore Day 2012 is particularly unique for its emphasis on futurity. Unlike previous years in which the themes have overwhelmingly emphasized memory and appreciation of the past—for example, “Relook, Refresh & Reconnect” in 2009 and “Rekindle and Rediscover” in 2008, “Relive and Reconnect” in 2011—the event’s theme in 2012 was “My Home, My Future.” In light of the event’s emphasis on Singapore as a future for its diasporic citizens, three main questions drive my analysis. First, how are heritage, history, and cultural memory used to foster nationalist sentiment and the recruitment of Overseas Singaporeans? Second, where does Singapore Day fit within the state’s “historical turn” in its nationalist endeavors? Finally, what do the state’s efforts to appeal to the audience of Singapore Day 2012 indicate about the relationship between neoliberal globalization and nationalism?

The amount of time, money, and planning put into the event is evident the moment one steps onto the event grounds. From the elaborate displays to the glossy brochures, I was struck by how immense and well-orchestrated the whole event was during my visit to Brooklyn for Singapore Day 2012. For example, the entrance to the venue was a life-sized and very realistic reconstruction of the Singapore MRT (Mass Rapid Transit) station entry gates complete with turnstiles—this was no cardboard or

papier-mâché imitation, the turnstile had metal parts and turning mechanisms. On the signage that would have had the station's name, the sign read "Welcome Home" alongside the event's logo. Upon crossing the turnstiles, attendees were given a "goody bag": a large vinyl shoulder bag filled with various notebooks, pens, tissue paper, a rain poncho, and a mat to sit on. It was only upon crossing the turnstiles that I was able to comprehend the enormity of the space the event took up, as well as the degree of organization put into the staging of Singapore Day. From what was visible from the entrance—different activity areas with elaborate visual and interactive displays, a large stage, long lines, and uniformed volunteers milling about—I had a feeling not unlike entering an amusement park.

At first, Singapore Day appears to be an attempt to invoke nostalgia amongst Overseas Singaporeans in order to stir up nationalist sentiment like the many other state-led initiatives that emphasize Singapore's heritage. Like several of these other projects, Singapore Day attempts to construct experiences for Overseas Singaporeans that generate memories and nostalgia for a place and past that they are no longer a part of, no longer have access to, or perhaps, have not even really experienced. Catherine Gomes makes a similar point based on her account of Singapore Day 2008 in Melbourne, Australia: "SG [Singapore] Day actively uses official remembering as a means to generate and nurture nationhood among its transnational citizenry" (45). According to Gomes' observations, the notion of a shared past and heritage was a prevalent theme in the event through an emphasis on childhood. For example, children were encouraged to participate in storytelling sessions (45) and favors given out to participants "included a small eraser of the type popular with primary school children growing up in Singapore, [...] and a

chatek, a feather joined at the shaft to two pieces of rubber that is used in a local schoolyard game” (45). As Gomes points out, these aspects of the event not only serve to idealize childhood and posit Singapore as the source for such nostalgia, but they also create the sense of a shared memory.

Perhaps the most effective attempt to generate nostalgia amongst Overseas Singaporeans at Singapore Day 2012 was through food. One of the beloved features of Singapore Day has been the use of local Singaporean hawkers to cater the event with dishes that are common in Singapore, but difficult outside of the country. As illustrated by the long lines, event goers were excited by and attracted to the food. Despite the paltry portions, excusable because it was free, many lined up for hours and were visibly disappointed as vendors began to run out of food. For much of the event, attendees sat in small groups with their friends or family on the grass to eat together, presumably enjoying each other’s company and the communal experience of eating. One could imagine that at least some of the conversations involved discussions of local cuisines or memories of the actual vendors present at Singapore Day. Although it seemed that most of the people sitting together already knew each other, the food was at least a significant factor in the way that people were bonding with each other in that moment.

By providing “authentic” Singaporean food for Overseas Singaporeans to commune over, the Singaporean state creates a gustatory sensory experience that is powerful in terms of nationalism because it recreates something sentimentally unique, provides a way of affective bonding through a shared experience, and celebrates heritage through pleasurable consumption. Authenticity and nostalgia link the hawker food to culture and memory. Though, as I am arguing, diasporic Singaporeans are of great

interest to the state's economic agenda, by not requiring them to pay for their food—or indeed, admission into Singapore Day 2012, diasporic Singaporeans are not put into obvious economic relation with the state. It appears that the state does not profit. Without any marked economic value, the communal consumption's sentimentality rises. Although Singaporean food is available in the New York and East Coast area, flying in hawkers famous in Singapore—such food vendors typically only specialize in one dish—creates the effect amongst attendees that they are eating an authentic, original dish that would be otherwise inaccessible. Even prior to the event, the event's promotional materials prominently featured the names of the actual vendors and highlighted certain dishes. Through the state's emphasis on authenticity, the food takes on an exceptional status. As a result, the organizers use food to positively frame Singapore and locate it as the site of pleasure. Perhaps what is the most powerful about this “food nationalism” is the way it reifies state power. Of course, it is not likely that Singapore Day attendees were consciously thinking about the state as they consumed their food, and yet the entire experience would not have been possible without the state. It is the very fact that pleasurable consumption feels as if it is free of state intervention that makes the act ideologically powerful, however.

Besides the emphasis on food, there were several elements of the event that were promoting nostalgic memory as well as shared heritage and experience in the spirit of framing Singapore as home and cultivating nationalist sentiment. For example, there was a life-sized installation of a public bus stop in the middle of the event space as well as mascots from national campaigns (such as “Singa the Courtesy Lion” from a 1980s effort to encourage Singaporeans to be more polite). Though hardly symbols of heritage or of

the nation, the bus stop and mascots that were walking around served as reminders of the more mundane, everyday aspects of Singaporean life. For the event's entertainment, television actors and actresses from a local satirical show "The Noose" emceed the day's performances and spoke primarily in Singlish, or Singapore's creole English. Ironically, although the Singaporean state takes a negative position against Singlish and has made great efforts to discourage the use of it, no such stance was evident at Singapore Day 2012. The entertainment included a game show where audience members were invited to the stage to answer trivia questions on Singapore's history (i.e., "what was the name of our first president?") The live entertainment was interspersed with pre-recorded videos that featured an Overseas Singaporean being surprised with a video of their family in Singapore. More often than not, the video ended with the Overseas Singaporean crying and reminiscing about all the things they missed about Singapore and a vow to eventually return home or at least a remark that their lives in the United States would never amount to what they had in Singapore. Predictably, the kind of nationalist rhetoric behind many of the elements of Singapore Day was meant to generate nostalgia and create a sentimental mood around memories of Singapore.

Other aspects of Singapore Day 2012, however, went against my expectations. Despite all the elements of the event that emphasized sentimental memories of Singapore, and shared heritage—in other words, an affective relation based on a common past and history—Singapore Day 2012 left me with a strong sense that Singapore was a trendy, hip, and fun place to live and work. Put another way, rather than affirming what Stuart Hall has described as the sometimes "backward-looking conception of diaspora" (235),

the experience at Singapore Day cast Singapore into a different temporality, into the future of the Overseas Singaporean's life.

The temporal emphasis on a shared future rather than just a common past was evident in subtle ways at Singapore Day 2012. For example, as with previous Singapore Days, upon entrance one would encounter a large map of the event's layout and realize that the space was made to be a small-scale version of Singapore with various features named after Singaporean landmarks. The sitting area by the entertainment stage was called "Caldecott Hill"—in Singapore, this site is where one would find many of the TV office stations. Interestingly, many of the landmarks used to plot out Singapore Day 2012 were places that were either recently, or at the time, in development such as Marina Bay and Punggol. The use of more current landmarks was a departure from Singapore Day 2008 in which Gomes noted the use of older heritage sites that have existed since Singapore's colonial era such as Fort Canning Park and Clarke Quay for the event's map. In Gomes' reading, the use of such heritage sites on the Singapore Day 2008 map was a way of commemorating Singapore's early history (46). In the case of Singapore Day 2012, the use of newer landmarks for the event's map created a sense of newness and change.

The emphasis on Singapore as a shared future was clearly aimed at a younger twenty-something demographic. Such an intention can be partially gleaned from the organizer's choice to set Singapore Day in Brooklyn, New York. Compared to other places Singapore Day has been held, Brooklyn is a much smaller setting and is casually known as one of the primary sites of hipster subculture. If setting Singapore Day 2012 at Prospect Park in Brooklyn was meant to be a way to attract college-aged or young

professionals to come to the event, the organizers were successful. The event was dominated by young, fashionably dressed people in their early- to mid-twenties who seemed to have traveled either in from the city or from the New England area.

Several elements of the nationalism performed at Singapore Day were unique for the way that they used age and youth rather than race, ethnicity, or language as an organizing element of the nation. While this form of age-based nationalism apparent at Singapore Day 2012 is, in part, generated in response to the 2011 elections where the ruling party PAP lost a record six seats in Parliament, I would argue that the focus on youth is more generally symptomatic of the pressures of neoliberal globalization to create subjects who frame their youth as a time of economic inadequacy.²⁹ For if the state is successful in articulating a shared national kinship among a particular age group, national narrative may become more deeply and powerfully entrenched because it is articulated as a developmental life narrative. I flesh out this argument on the relationship between youth, neoliberalism, and developmental narratives more fully in the next chapter and focus here instead on the ways that the state cultivates a national community according to age through the use of pop culture as a guarantor of cultural memory.

One of the ways that this age-based nationalism was evident was through the use of “Mambo Jambo” as a key feature of Singapore Day 2012. Mambo Jambo, also known as Mambo Night, is a retro-themed clubbing night at popular Singaporean nightclub Zouk where 70s and 80s, top 40 pop hits are mixed with electronic house music. The remix of familiar pop hits with progressive electronic music is meant to be a way of introducing young adults to a new scene: “Commonly known as Mambo Night, this mid-week party

²⁹ As I discuss further below, the PAP’s by-election loss in East Punggol, a constituency made up of a younger demographic, has partially been attributed to a generational rift.

has changed Singapore's clubbing scene forever and remains the virgin clubbing experience for newly turned 18 year olds [the legal age to drink in Singapore]" ("Mambo Jambo"). Distinct to this weekly event is the synchronized hand gestures and dancing that accompanies the music—a characteristic of the event that has been described as unique to Singapore. Regular clubgoers would be familiar with the dance moves associated with remixed songs such as "Greased Lightning." It was not unusual to visit Zouk on Mambo Night to find hundreds of clubgoers dancing together in unison. Ironically, Zouk ended its famous Wednesday night ritual only a few months after Singapore Day 2012, citing its diminishing popularity amongst the new generation of clubbers as reason for the change (Mahtani).

The combination of a subcultural movement and a state nationalist recuperative effort might strike one as rather odd. While clubbing and nationalism both attempt to operate on notions of mass appeal and popular culture, the aims and discourses that surround club culture operate under a notion of fun while (state) nationalist discourse is meant to compel strong identification with the nation. The use of a subcultural movement to encode nationalist sentiment seems to be a very clear strategy to construct Singapore nationalist culture to be cool, stylish, and trendy for a younger generation of Singaporeans.

In anticipation of Singapore Day, the Overseas Singaporean Unit released commercials via YouTube to promote Mambo Jambo. One of the commercial features Hossan Leong, a local Singapore TV actor and stage performer who was also the main emcee for Singapore Day 2012's entertainment, leading viewers through typical Mambo dance moves. The commercial opens up with Leong standing in front of an MRT (Mass

Rapid Transit) station as if he is waiting to meet someone with the title “Mambo Jambo featuring Hossan Leong” overlaid on the screen while people entering in and out of the station’s entrance in the background have been sped up. The picture then cuts to a full frontal medium shot of Leong against a background of metal mailboxes typical to HDB (Housing and Development Board) buildings—government subsidized housing where 82% of Singaporeans live (“HDB History”). On the right of Leong is another title overlay that reads “SG Day is in New York with a huge Mambo Party!” The video continues as a how-to video for various classic Mambo dance moves. Different moves are shot against a changing background of mundane everyday scenes of HDB life. The commercial is meant to be comedic and its humor comes from the contrast between the silliness of the dance movements and Leong’s feigned enthusiasm—indicated by his exaggerated facial expressions—and the background of everyday life in Singapore.

Like the first commercial featuring Leong, the second commercial also features a montage of classic Mambo Night moves set against familiar Singaporean landmarks and scenery. This commercial, however, offers less context and begins with a shot of three young adults—one man and two women—dressed in loud retro style fashion, standing in front of bulletin boards and a soda machine at what might be the communal area of an HDB building or a community center. The three are wearing sunglasses, looking away from the camera, with body language suggesting a lack of enthusiasm: slumped shoulders, hands in pockets, expressionless faces. On the bottom of the screen, the viewers read a title, “#SGDAY2012,” providing one of the few clues of what is to come next. As the song “Love in the First Degree” by Bananarama begins to play, the three begin to bob their heads to the beat, still looking away from the camera. Though the

montage of backgrounds feature different key landmarks from Singapore, including Clarke Quay, Raffles City, Universal Studios, Marina Sands Bay, the three are shot in the same position to create the image of a long continuous shot. As the lyrics start, the three perform the synchronized hand-movements. Although every so often one will crack a smile, the three generally maintain a nonchalant composure throughout the performance. Despite the general disinterest that the three exude in their facial expressions and posture, the coordinated hand-movements with the lyrics belie their apathetic disposition.

Arguably what makes the use of Mambo Jambo quite clever is that it compels subjects to act and appear nationalistically, but not necessarily be nationalist. Put a little differently, participants enact the form of nationalism, but not necessarily the content. In fact, without knowing the context in which they were produced, it would be nearly impossible to guess that these commercials had anything to do with the Singaporean state or a nationalist project at all. At its most basic core, nationalism is the communal identification with a group of other individuals as part of a nation. The structural conditions that enable such kinship and identification can include genealogical ties, customs and tradition, print capitalism, language, a history of colonialism, war, and so on. Ultimately, all these conditions allow national kinship to be imagined because they create the experience of simultaneity and of shared feelings. Thus the use of Mambo Jambo to galvanize participants to act nationalistically is perhaps not so strange if we consider how it directs bodies to act in unison; subjects are grouped as a national (imagined) community. Benedict Anderson makes a similar point in his discussion of national anthems: “No matter how banal the words and mediocre the tunes, there is in this singing an *experience* of simultaneity. At precisely such moments, people wholly unknown to

each other utter the same verses to the same melody” (145—emphasis mine).

Theoretically, in the context of Singapore Day, Mambo Jambo enables the experience of simultaneity by situating the dancer within a mode of reception and performance as an individual who is part of the nation. Yet unlike singing a national anthem, there is no actual national content to dancing or singing “Love in the First Degree” together with other Singaporeans, and this is where the split between nationalism’s form and content are evident. That is, although in the act of simultaneously dancing Overseas Singaporeans appear as a coherent collective, there is no demand for political commitment, allegiance, or obligation. Uttering the lyrics of “Love in the First Degree” does not align one with any particular political ideologies in the ways that a national anthem or national pledge might.

The potential appeals of Mambo Jambo for a college-aged and young professional demographic work in slightly different ways. Although Mambo Jambo is of contemporary and popular culture, Mambo Jambo can operate as a cultural memory for a younger demographic within the Overseas Singaporean audience present at Singapore Day. Mambo Jambo only began in the 1990s suggesting that those familiar with it would likely be around their 30s now. For those Overseas Singaporeans at the Singapore Day 2012 familiar with Mambo Jambo, presumably modern and urbane types, Mambo Jambo lends a sort of historical depth and rootedness to their cosmopolitan lives because it stands as part of a ritualized culture they used to be a part of. The sort of historicity that Mambo Jambo invokes is further enabled by the fact that Mambo Jambo was closed shortly after Singapore Day 2012—it has, in effect, become a historical memory. In fact, Mambo Jambo became an official national historical memory when it was recorded as a

“Memento” on the Singapore Memory Project website which speaks to how quickly something can be cast as a historical memory within neoliberal nationalism’s accelerated pace.³⁰ The coincidence of the demise of Mambo Night shortly after its cameo role in Singapore Day 2012 indicates the difficulties the state can face when trying to enlist popular culture, which is notoriously subject to youthful vicissitudes, to hold on or call back its diaspora. The state runs the risk of looking perpetually a beat behind as one subculture or trend overtakes another.

For a younger demographic that was potentially not familiar with the clubbing ritual, the state’s use of Mambo Jambo at Singapore Day seemed to be an attempt to foster a national community around a shared interest rather than a shared memory. Based on the promotional videos as well as the decision to set Singapore Day 2012 in Brooklyn, it appears that organizers of the event used Mambo Jambo as a way of connecting with hipster youth and as a way of, again, compelling Overseas Singaporeans to appear nationalist. Though debates on how to define hipsters continue in mainstream media, they can be generally described as part of an urban subcultural movement that listen to indie music, wear alternative fashion and style, and tend towards progressive political views. Author Matt Granfield sums it up nicely:

While mainstream society of the 2000s (decade) had been busying itself with reality television, dance music, and locating the whereabouts of Britney Spears’s underpants, an uprising was quietly and conscientiously taking place behind the scenes. Long-forgotten styles of clothing, beer, and cigarettes and music were become popular again. Retro was cool, the

30 See: <http://www.iremember.sg/index.php/2012/07/20/together-in-electric-dreams/>

environment was precious and old was the new “new.” Kids wanted to wear Sylvia Path’s cardigans and Buddy Holly’s glasses—they reveled in the irony of making something so nerdy so cool. They wanted to live sustainably and eat organic gluten-free grains. Above all, they wanted to be recognized for being different—to diverge from the mainstream and carve a cultural niche all for themselves. For this generation, style wasn’t something you could buy in a department store, it became something you found in a thrift shop, or, ideally, made yourself. The way to be cool wasn’t to look like a television star: it was to look like as though you’d never seen television. (22)

For better or worse, despite hipsterism’s antiestablishment posture, the subcultural movement has been a part of the mainstream consumer culture. In North America, the ironic aesthetic associated with hipsters can be seen in mainstream fashion to television humor. That one can purchase hipster style would seem to render it inauthentic, however, the point here is that the hipster subculture is widespread and recognizable, to the point that one might describe it as a generational sensibility—it is not exclusive to the point that it is inaccessible.

Attempting to incite nationalism amongst young Overseas Singaporeans through the use of a subcultural movement takes on a neoliberal logic for the way it appears to privilege a particular consumerist and lifestyle choice. To put it more bluntly, it is a nationalism focused on a specific market. Nationalism tends to be theorized as a deep sentiment, one that makes citizens, as Anderson puts it, willing to die for each other (7) and thus organizing nationalism around a shared subcultural lifestyle would seem

inadequate for nurturing a strong identification with the nation. Ernest Renan, whose seminal work “What is a nation?” influences Benedict Anderson’s thinking, goes so far as to declare that nations cannot, in fact, be built on common interests:

A community of interest is assuredly a powerful bond between men. Do interests, however, suffice to make a nation? I do not think so. Community of interest brings about trade agreements, but nationality has a sentimental side to it; it is both soul and body at once, a *Zollverein* is not a *patrie*. (18)

Much like Anderson, Renan theorizes nationalism as a deep, affective attachment to a nation and its citizens. “Interests” in Renan’s usage, suggests a more superficial relation that does not enable sentimentality or “soul.” As I will later return to, notable is Renan’s emphasis on soul, or the intangible and spiritual interior to a body. What the Singaporean example provides, however, is an attempt to create a *Zollverein* into a *patrie*. Bruce Robbins, on the other hand, points out that capitalist collectivities, though seemingly shallow, might indeed create powerful attachments:

Anticosmopolitans frequently assume that capitalism is a destroyer of collectivities, yet nothing could be more counterintuitive. After all, why should the profit motive lead corporations to distinguish and nourish collective identities that they can then target and sell to, even identities that the buyers may go onto feel worthy of the ultimate sacrifice?” (8).

As I mention in Chapter One and Three, the Singaporean state has often been likened to a corporation and thus Robbins’s point is an apt one. Certainly, the Singaporean state appears to be targeting youth through their consumptive habits. Although the Singaporean state would likely prefer that Overseas Singaporeans take a more sentimental view

toward their homeland, it would seem that the state is willing to accept a more nominal relation, so long as it prevents the Overseas Singaporean from becoming, to invoke former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong's language, a "quitter." In other words, neoliberal nationalism is less about forming a deep commitment to the nation, but about keeping up nationalist appearances and emphasizing bodies rather than souls. Noteworthy about Renan's remark above is his point that interest can bring about trade agreements. In other words, interest can be enough to align parties according to economic need. In the case of Singapore, forming nationalist bonds according to interest may suffice.

That the state is specifically targeting Overseas Singaporean youth through the use of Mambo Jambo at Singapore Day seems to be, in part, a response to recent political controversies in Singapore. Following a contentious election in 2011 when the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) lost seats in Parliament for the first time since Singaporean independence, former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew commented that young Singaporeans were unable to fully appreciate the needs of the nation because they "[do] not understand from whence we came . . . That is to be expected. But I do and those amongst you who are older than 50 will remember" (Toh). Lee's divisive comments only underscored and exacerbated a rift between the PAP and a more liberal and progressive generation. The results of the election already sparked large public debate on youth and political engagement and the place of internet forums (which host Singaporean political dissent), prompting Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, Lee Kuan Yew's son, to promise that the government would take steps to engage and listen to youth.³¹ Such political events could have been the motivation behind Singapore Day 2012's theme "My Home,

³¹See "S'pore belongs to you, PM tells the young; Government making special effort to engage young citizens, he says" in *The Straits Times* (6 May 2011).

My Future” which was quite unlike the previous years that emphasized renewed appreciation for the past.

Young Overseas Singaporeans might identify, find humor, or simply be willing to act as consumers of the performed apathy in the Mambo Jambo commercials given the prevalence of the “ironic aesthetic” of the more global subculture of hipsters. Besides its distinctive fashion style, hipster culture has been noted for its ironic aesthetic: “Under the guise of ‘irony,’ hipsterism fetishizes the authentic and regurgitates it with a winking authenticity” (Lorentzen) and with the intent seeming subversive, I would add. There has been some debate about whether such proclaimed irony ultimately works to undermine mainstream culture and thinking. The point here, however, is to note the rather curious choice to employ a device such as irony, understood as when the implied meaning of an interpretive context is in opposition to its literal meaning, within state nationalism. As Linda Hutcheon and others have pointed out, irony is a risky business because there are no guarantees that the irony will be grasped:

With irony, there are, instead, dynamic and plural relations among the text or utterance (and its context), the so-called ironist, the interpreter, and the circumstances surrounding the discursive situation; it is these that mess up neat theories of irony that see the task of the interpreter simply as one of decoding or reconstructing some “real” meaning (usually named as the “ironic” one) [. . .] a meaning that is hidden, but deemed accessible, behind the stated one. (11)

Hutcheon is pointing to the unpredictability of irony and here we might note how different the ends of nationalism and irony seem to be. Yet there might be strong payoff

in endorsing an ironic text because irony has the ability to create and sustain community since it can invoke a strong affective response: “irony *explicitly* sets up (and exists within) a relationship between ironist and audiences (the one being intentionally addressed, the one that actually makes the irony happen, and the one being excluded) that is political in nature” (16). Hutcheon, drawing on Ross Chambers, explains that the relationship is political because irony sets up a hierarchy between those who grasp the irony and those who don’t.

The use of Mambo Jambo at Singapore 2012 works by playing on the hipster desire to “be ironic.” In this case, “being ironic” means to appear apathetic, but in actual fact be enthusiastic about performing the dance—in the act of learning and knowing the specific movements of the dance, one belies their apathy. Being ironic as the dancer is also a play on the temporal dissonance of performing the corny dance movements that literalize the song lyrics—reminiscent of the ways children often learn songs—as an adult. The temporal dissidence is further heightened by the age of the music. In this case, the sound of the synthesizer track that was popularized in the 1980s gives the music an “old” sound in today’s setting. Being ironic as hipster is the process of making the uncool, the silly, and contextually inappropriate something to take seriously as cool. In other words, the hipster aesthetic is about performing disharmony.

By exploiting this hipster desire to perform discord, the state can compel Overseas Singaporeans to act nationalistically while circumventing the young Overseas Singaporean’s tenuous relationship with the state. Oddly enough, it is the participant’s apathy that the state can take advantage of because it affectively appeals to a particular demographic and also foresees the participant’s attitude. Although apathy seems like an

antithetical affect on which to ground nationalism or to exalt the nation, in light of the 2011 election in which the PAP took its biggest loss of Parliamentary seats prior to Singapore Day, apathy via youth subculture potentially gives young Singaporeans a way into nationalist expression despite an ambivalent relationship with the state. Apathy makes sense in this context if the goals of the Singapore Day organizers were to at once to appeal to a young generation, to encourage nationalist appearances, and to mitigate existing political tensions between the youth demographic and the state. In other words, apathy is the most suitable sentiment for this group that is already unwilling to perform enthusiasm for the nation. It compels and allows young Overseas Singaporeans to participate nationalistically, but under the guise of hipster affect.

Ironically, in its sanction of apathy, the state enables participants to perform what the state wants: nationalist sentiment. There is situational irony at work between the participant's assumed oppositional stance to the state—or more generally speaking, an opposing stance towards authority—and that the performance, apathetic or not, is what the state wants. The irony of the Mambo Jambo commercials is that in the unified performance of apathy, they are actually performing an enthusiasm for the nation by virtue of dancing together in a nationalist context. Moreover, because the apathy itself is state-endorsed, the subversive edge of being ironic as a hipster is lost. In a sense, the state sanction of apathy potentially attracts a demographic to the scene, but also outmaneuvers those who truly are apathetic. Permitting apathy to be an acceptable form of nationalist participation further allows participants to retain their tenuous relationship with the state.

The apathy in the commercials almost seemed to foreshadow the apathetic audience at Singapore Day 2012. The event's program included local music performers (a

rapper, an acoustic duo, the winner of Singapore Idol, and an electric violinist), all of whom were quite talented, in my estimation. The various performances supported the city-state's image as a burgeoning global arts hub. The musical acts garnered little support or enthusiasm, however, with audience reactions flat at best, making the whole affair rather pitiful. Even in several instances when the performers attempted to get the audience involved ("Wave your hand in the air!" "Stand up!"), less than a handful even responded. The lackluster responses were apparently unsurprising to some of the performers, however, as evidenced when one of the performers of musical duo Jack and Rai mimicked the typical show of Singaporean support by crossing his arms and frowning his face.

When it came to the conclusion of Singapore Day 2012, all the performers joined together on stage to dance to "Love in the First Degree." Several organizers came out into the audience, cajoling people to stand up. As I was standing with the crowd, an organizer followed by a camera moved through the crowd. As she passed by me standing with my arms crossed, she instructed "Put your hands in the air! Look active!" I assumed that this was for the benefit of creating camera footage to use for later promotional or news material. It was almost as if the commercial was being replayed, but live. The younger, college-aged audience members looked suitably unimpressed, slowly and reluctantly standing up. The most enthusiastic of the audience seemed to be parents who used the event finale as an opportunity to play with their children. Eventually, after much coaxing and promises of free prizes for the best dancers, more of the audience joined in, performing the various Mambo Jambo moves sarcastically. Though it is doubtful that the audience members were simply trying to emulate the Singapore Day 2012 commercials,

it was not without some irony that I noted the resemblance. No matter the actual feelings participants had about Singapore or the state, they were still standing up and at least appearing—to each other and to the cameras—as interpellated national subjects.

Ultimately, perhaps what matters most about performing national form is less about being synchronized or doing specific motions, but about staying in the national scene that the state has orchestrated. Given the state's anxiety that Overseas Singaporeans are potential quitters, the challenge is to find ways of turning citizens into what former Prime Minister Goh called "stayers." Consequently, for diasporic Singaporeans, political commitment is less about engagement and more about sticking around. That the state is willing to accept such a nominal form of nationalism from Overseas Singaporean further differentiates them from Singaporeans in Singapore.

The distinction between different types of Singaporeans is further evident through a video released by the OSU post-Singapore Day 2012.³² Vernetta Lopez and Aleric Tay, two local Singaporean celebrities, narrate the event to its YouTube audience, thus suggesting that the video is meant for an audience who did not necessarily attend Singapore Day 2012. The video depicts Singapore Day as a family-oriented event, featuring several shots of young children with their parents as well as participants enthusiastically engaging with the event's many activities. Several clips of Singaporeans attest to the event's success in galvanizing nationalist sentiment. One woman claims: "It's like a mini-Singapore in Prospect Park and I love it." With a large smile, another man says "It makes you feel like you are part of the, part of the Singaporean community." Though Singapore Day 2012's theme was "Our Home, Our Future," the video mostly

³² See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ls1pOIIAV8U>

emphasized memory and pastness. Nostalgia is a prominent emotion in the video, particularly at the end, when—thanks to the organizers of the event—some chosen participants were given an iPad to watch a pre-recorded greeting from their family and friends in Singapore. Surprised and clearly touched, the YouTube video ends with the various participants crying. After watching her message, one woman—with her husband and son beside her—tells us, teary-eyed, “I miss my friends and family...and I miss my grandma. Thank you [the organizers] for doing this for me.” Another participant, this time younger and single, repeats: “I miss my family.” After being prompted by an off-screen interview to explain what New York does not have, the woman continues to say that she will never have family or home in New York. Rather than focusing on diasporic Singaporeans as the future of Singapore or attempting to compel diasporic Singaporean youth to act nationalistically, the video depicts Singapore Day 2012 as a time to remember past times, family, and shared culture. In other words, Singapore appears as an imagined community where citizens have a deep kinship with each other and an affinity for their homeland.

That Singapore Day is presented differently depending on the type of Singaporean audience illustrates the significance of diasporic Singaporean for neoliberal nationalism. It moreover demonstrates, perhaps unsurprisingly, neoliberalism’s reliance on transnational culture. Compared to the promotional videos of Singapore Day, which advertises the event as a big party, the post-event video of Singapore Day tells a very different story. The emphasis on family, deep attachments, and nationalist attachment (i.e., New York will never offer what Singapore can) is typical of the nationalism

discussed earlier in this chapter. For diasporic Singaporeans, we observe an emphasis on global popular culture and youth.

To give another brief example of the use of popular culture for neoliberal nationalism, I will briefly turn to the example of the National Day Parade 2012. Much like Singapore Day 2012, the National Day Parade is an annual celebration of Singapore's independence. The main difference between the two events, however, is that the National Day Parade is held in Singapore and has long established itself as a nationalist event. This is in part because of its origins, but also because it has been running for much longer and is more ritualized. Although Singapore Day is about the nation, it has not necessarily been ritualized into an event that is purely about celebrating and commemorating the nation. As I have pointed out, it functions as a way of maintaining relations with Singaporeans. By contrast, the celebrations of National Day already assume a strong tie between citizen and nation. Moreover, the National Day Parade is aimed toward Singapore's territorial citizens who are much more heterogeneous in class and age.

By and large, the National Day Parade reflects a familiar postcolonial nationalism, particularly through the spectacle of symbols such as the national flag, national colors, national song, and most importantly, the military.³³ The National Day Parade's performance of military skill fits in with ritualistic expectations and would also likely appeal to an older generation whose tastes are accustomed to post-World War II/Cold War nationalist expressions. In context of postcolonial independence, military performance also emphasizes Singapore's sovereignty and its ability to defend itself from threats to its

³³ Some of these more common symbols of the nation might also be described as what Michael Billig termed "banal nationalism" or forms of everyday, habitual reproductions of the nation which are both mundane, yet crucial in maintaining the nation as a commonsense, naturalized entity (6).

national integrity. Though military performance is a staple of all National Day Parades, the organizers of the Parade made a point to highlight that 2012 marked the 45th year of National Service, or Singapore's military conscription, and so the military was highlighted even more strongly.³⁴ Forty-five years is not a particularly remarkable number, but the parade's emphasis on the military seems to fit in with the Singaporean state's emphasis on security, especially since September 11th.³⁵ In sum, the use of the military is a way of asserting territorial sovereignty national capability.³⁶

Much like Singapore Day 2012, the organizers of the National Day Parade drew on pop culture trends, it would seem, to appeal to a younger demographic of citizens and give Singapore the appearance of being a trendy and hip place to live. For example, one of the opening performances included what the television commentator described as a "mix of our 'Count on me, Singapore' and Bruno Mars' 'Count on me.'" For the performance, groups of young people—school-aged to young adults—danced on stage to this rather odd mash-up. On one hand remixing a top 40 pop song might be a way of rousing young school children to be enthusiastic. One could read the remix as having the effect of emphasizing Singapore's modernity through the contrast of the "traditional" national song with a current hit. Singapore's lack of anti-colonial resistance and its lack of a "racial identity . . . upon which to safely to erect a national identity" (Wee 717) has

³⁴ Singapore's military, or the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) has historical ties with the Israeli Defense Force. Though often understood somewhat as a national open secret, former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew has written about his decision to contact the Israeli Defense Force in secret to train the SAF in his memoirs: "To disguise their presence [from Islamic nations Malaysia and Indonesia] we called them 'Mexicans.' They looked swarthy enough" (15).

³⁵ Observations of the state's emphasis on security post-9/11 (and its negative effects on Singapore's Malay-Muslim minority population) also comes up in Lydia Kwa's *Pulse* which I discuss in Chapter Four, as well as Alfian Sa'at's *Homesick* which I discuss in the Introduction.

³⁶ Although Singapore has a strong and technologically advanced army, it is not seen as a threat to neighboring countries. There is a military-industrial complex through Singapore's arms trade, however. See Hoe, Pei Shan. "S'pore No. 20 in weapons exports." *The Straits Times*. 21 Mar. 2013.

not easily produced a nationalism that “implies continuity with the past,” as Hobsbawm puts it—a problem for the state in terms of constructing a national narrative. What has resulted from this lack of postcolonial history from independence and onward, according to C.J. W.-L. Wee, is a greater emphasis on modernity and economic success:

Lee [Kuan Yew] and his colleagues aimed to make industrial modernity the metanarrative which would frame Singapore’s national identity, and to create a remarkable ‘Global City’ which, because of its trading links, would escape the restraints placed upon it by history and geography. (717)

Thus pop culture provides a way of emphasizing the nation’s progress and development by creating a “look how far we have come” narrative in the remixed song. At another point of the event, the members of the Precision Drill Performers of the Singapore Armed Forces Police Command and the Singapore Civil Defense provided a marching demonstration complete with guns to the song “Party Rock Anthem” by LMFAO. One assumes that part of the performance’s purpose is to demonstrate the superiority and skill of the Singaporean military—and perhaps even more so since the demonstration is in tune. It seems that the point is to establish Singapore as a fun and trendy city and perhaps to deter criticisms of Singaporean culture being sterile.

Though a performance like “Count on Me” might at first appear as a confused attempt to reach multiple audiences, it can also be read as a fusion of postcolonial and neoliberal nationalism, which is to say that there are nationalist projects with different ideological aims at work in one text. The differences in types of nationalism become much starker through the dissonance between the performance of military capability and the use of pop culture. What becomes evident in the National Parade example is the

different forms of neoliberal nationalism. Unlike the use of popular culture in Singapore Day, which is used to target a specific demographic, popular culture is used to perform cosmopolitanism to its territorial citizens in order to encourage neoliberal cultural logics.

If postcolonial nationalism is in part derived from threats to its territorial sovereignty, one might then analogously ask what the function of popular culture is in the context of neoliberal nationalism, which I am arguing is derived from threats to economic sovereignty. With a diasporic audience, popular culture is a way of attracting cosmopolitans to the national scene and compelling them to act nationalistically. For territorial citizens, however, a state-sponsored performance of popular culture is a show of the nation's ability to be cosmopolitan and therefore its ability to handle the threat—and promise—of neoliberal globalization. In illustrating its capability to perform and in fact adapt forms of global popular culture in a nationalist context, citizens are able to observe a sort of cultural prowess. As the amalgamation of the Singapore national song “Count on Me, Singapore” with Bruno Mars’ “Count on me” shows, this global cultural competency comes not in the form of mimicry. The state's readiness to use a pop song by an American artist demonstrates that it does not see global forms of pop culture as an incursion to its sovereignty. Much in the way that neoliberalism encourages free market ideologies, the performances at National Day encourages its citizens to base their nationalism with an eye to global culture with an emphasis on the West and United States.

Conclusion

What can Singapore Day 2012's use of Mambo Jambo teach us? What are its larger implications for a discussion of nationalism?

First and foremost, Singapore Day 2012 reminds us of the plurality of nationalisms as well as the ways in which the state might adapt and refashion forms of nationalism in order to respond to shifting economic conditions. Nationalist expectations and practices must necessarily change in the face of neoliberal globalization because such processes may turn citizens against the state. In this example, Singapore's most prized citizens—modern, mobile cosmopolitans—are potentially critical of the Singaporean nation-state and thus the norms of what nationalism can look like must change to maintain their allure.

Although the state's use of popular culture to recruit and retain diasporic Singaporeans is idiosyncratic and site specific, it marks a departure from other attempts by the state to instrumentalize and deploy cultural formations based on ethnic and linguistic identification (for example, the Asian Values discourse which I take up at greater length in the next chapter). Through the example of Singapore Day 2012, we are able to see the ways that the Singaporean state reorganizes nationalist sentiment around generational identification. As I argue, the national community built around a "shared interest" suggests an acceptance of a shallower form of nationalism, one that prioritizes nationalist form over content. This change reflects a shift in the state's expectations as well as the ways that neoliberalism affects nationalism. Rather than accusing young diasporic Singaporeans of being traitors to the nation, the state has instead attempted to rework a nationalism that agrees to the Overseas Singaporean's distancing from the state and the nation in the hopes that they will maintain national ties and shared economic interest.

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Chapter Three: Hwee Hwee Tan's *Mammon Inc.* as *Bildungsroman*, or the Coming-of-Career Narrative

In the opening scene of Hwee Hwee Tan's *Mammon Inc.* (2001), Chiah Deng laments to her university roommate Steve: "I feel like I don't fit in anywhere, like I can't connect. Like I'm a three-pin plug living in a two-pin world" (13). Chiah Deng's revision of the idiomatic expression "a square peg in a round hole," speaks to her sense of alienation and confusion about her place in society in the twenty-first century, an era marked by the influence of electronic technology. Chiah Deng's language also reveals her cosmopolitanism; "anywhere" for Chiah Deng is global in scope, as her knowledge of three-pin versus two-pin plugs indicates. Indeed, as a Singaporean who has just completed a degree at Oxford, Chiah Deng is a character keenly aware of the lack of proper connection and different cultural currents one can experience as they move through the world.

Mammon Inc., which won the Singapore Literature Prize in 2004, is often described as a light-hearted, humorous novel about the escapades of an upwardly mobile cosmopolitan woman. Newly graduated, unemployed, and about to be deported because of her expiring student visa, Chiah Deng begrudgingly agrees to interview with Mammon Inc., the largest corporation in the world. She applies for the coveted position of "Adapter," in which she would assist "the modern international professional elite: those executives who grew up in one country, were educated in another, and are now working in a third" (2) to gain social acceptance in the country where they are posted.

Tan's novel has all the typical hallmarks of the *bildungsroman*. Readers follow the developmental narrative arc of Chiah Deng's foray into the "real world" after university and her quest to pass the tests for the Adapter position despite her reservations

about pursuing a corporate career. Through the course of the tests and various conflicts with friends and family, Chiah Deng comes to understand that the position would afford her and her family great financial benefits and agrees to take the position at Mammon. The novel's themes of personal development, self-actualization, maturation, and identity formation are consistent with the genre conventions of "the coming-of-age" story.

For early German thinkers such as Schiller, Hegel, Goethe, and Humboldt, the links between the *bildungsroman* and the nation-state are explicit because they theorized *Bildung* as the social processes of "self-cultivation" necessary to become a good citizen. As Joseph R. Slaughter writes: "Humboldtian *Bildung* describes a civic course of acculturation by which the individual's impulses for self-expression and fulfillment are rationalized, modernized, conventionalized, and normalized within the social parameters, cultural patterns, and public institution of the modern nation-state" (113). Whether the nation is an oppressive force or the structure in which individuals can realize their "self-culture," the *bildungsroman* is a genre that provides insight into the workings of the modern nation-state. Notable too are the ways authors have used the genre to offer critiques of the nation-state. Although often about protagonists who must adapt to rather than change society, because the nation is implicitly assumed to be the protagonist's main contender, the *bildungsroman* has been used to challenge societal structures and norms, as well as the Euro-American canon and its attendant ideologies. As Marianne Hirsch points out, the genre has been particularly instrumental for "social outsiders, primarily women or minority groups" (Hirsch 300).

In its globalized setting, *Mammon Inc.* departs from the national norms of the *bildungsroman*. Chiah Deng's lament that the cosmopolitan nature of her life does not fit

in a “two-pin *world*” points readers to a scale larger than the nation-state. In fact, one of the major plot points of *Mammon Inc.* is that Chiah Deng’s ability to assimilate to more than one national context (Singapore, England, and eventually the US) makes her a desirable employee. The nation-state is not the structural force that propels the young protagonist’s maturation process as is often assumed in the *bildungsroman* genre.

The status of the nation has shifted since its emergence in the late eighteenth century when the genre emerged and can no longer be claimed to be the primary social and cultural influence of our time.³⁷ Increased human mobility, communication technology, and finance capital have facilitated processes of globalization and transnationalism, making the nation-state one amongst many factors in what the *bildungsroman* might construe as “society.” Writers and scholars alike have attempted to account for transnational changes, revealing the limitations of a nation-based framework in capturing the complexities of globalization.

Exemplifying the ways genre responds to socio-political changes and following this “transnational turn,” this chapter sets out to consider what I call the “coming-of-career” narrative. To demonstrate the significance of Singapore’s geopolitical context for the writing of the novel, in contrast to critics who have read *Mammon Inc.* as representing a cosmopolitanism unconscious of national context, I insist that *Mammon Inc.* is a critique of the Singaporean state’s attempt to neoliberalize and globalize its citizenry during its turn to a knowledge economy. Through its focus on the corporation, the novel also nudges us towards Singaporean history as a “host” for corporations since its

³⁷ While the modern European nation-state came to prominence in the nineteenth century, I follow Benedict Anderson’s claim that the early roots of nationalism (“the dawn of nationalism but the dusk of religious modes of thought”), or the thinking of nations, can be located in the eighteenth century (11). Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*, often regarded as the first *bildungsroman*, was published in 1795-96.

independence in 1965. Next, I develop the features of the coming-of-career narrative, or the story of becoming an economically viable subject in a globalized economy through the pursuit of a professional career, which I initially posit in Chapter One. Through the framework of the coming-of-career narrative, I explicate what *Mammon Inc.* tells us about neoliberalism in Singapore and about the role of the transnational corporation in neoliberalization, which David Harvey describes as the process and effects of promoting free trade, increased privatization, and economic deregulation (2-3).

Attention to genre helps to understand how the internalizing of neoliberal values becomes a matter of personal fulfillment and self-improvement. As Jane Elliott and Gillian Harkins in the recent special issue “Genres of Neoliberalism” write: “Genre thus offers a means of drawing form, formation, and reading protocols together in a fashion and allows for attention to emergent and unexpected practices” (12). Although the *bildungsroman* has, according to Joseph R. Slaughter, “lost much of its social and aesthetic appeal in the ages of modernist irony and postmodern suspicion” (27), the developmental, idealist, and individuating aspects of the *bildungsroman* make it an especially fitting genre for our neoliberal moment because proponents of the economic policy often make *bildungesque* arguments through the notion of human capital.³⁸ The continuities between the notion of human capital and *bildung* allow us to historicize neoliberal thought more deeply while the difference in the way maturity is assessed in the coming-of-career narrative elucidates the particularities of the present moment.

38 Human capital is a term that was widely popularized by the Chicago School of Economics to describe knowledge and skills as economic assets.

***Mammon Inc.* as social critique**

I read Tan's novel as criticizing the Singaporean state's attempt to inculcate cosmopolitan values amongst Singaporean citizens in the service of its neoliberal agenda. Besides departing from previous readings of the novel and calling our attention to the role of the corporation in Singapore's nation-formation, reading the novel's social critique is important for recognizing the ties between genre and geo-political context. Although Singaporean state planners have always been economically-minded, there was a pronounced "global turn" following the 1997 Asian financial crisis. At the time, then-Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong called for a reassessment of Singapore. He assembled what came to be known as the Singapore 21 committee, a group of 83 individuals from private and public business sectors and everyday citizens, and tasked it with brainstorming solutions to the perceived economic and social challenges of the time. In April 1999, two years before *Mammon Inc.*'s publication, the Singapore 21 committee released their recommendations for ways to develop and improve the economy in a report entitled "Singapore 21: Together, We Make a Difference." The committee detailed how to create a more transnational, geographically mobile, and worldly citizenry for Singapore.³⁹

Critics have tended to focus on Chiah Deng's cosmopolitan identity as the novel's primary engagement with issues of globalization and in doing so, have missed the novel's critique of the state and its critical illustration of neoliberal culture. Robbie B. H. Goh, for example, writes that Tan's work is demonstrative of "the anxieties and inducements of global mobility and cultural transformations [that] are a central concern in the works of

³⁹ While such efforts are characteristic of the state's governance, unique to this latest economic response is its construction and instrumentalization of diasporic Singaporeans.

Singapore Anglophone writers of the younger generation” and is less concerned with issues of postcolonial independence (239). Eddie Tay writes that the novel “makes the statement that global capitalism necessitates a negotiation of one’s identity as a result of the shifting relations between global capital and labour” (127). As Singaporean literature, *Mammon Inc.* reflects how globalization changes Singaporean identity for these critics and others. Although they accurately depict Tan’s novel as marking a shift in Singaporean identity, these readings tend to cast the “global” in opposition to the national and reflect what Saskia Sassen describes as the “ascendant rhetoric of dematerialization” (185) that has accompanied discussions of globalization. For example, informed by an overview of Tan’s biography, Goh discusses how Tan’s writings have less attachment to a Singaporean sense of place compared to other contemporary writers (240). Goh suggests, perhaps even excuses, this tendency in Tan’s writing as merely reflective of the author and her protagonists’ experiences of “navigating the waters of a globally-connected world” (243) as if nation and place are irrelevant in a globalized world.⁴⁰ Other critics have similarly depicted Tan’s work as lacking nuance because it does not appear to engage with the specificities of Singapore’s geopolitical context. Philip Holden, for example, describes Tan’s work as “enact[ing] a fantasy of global mobility, in which the only drama is between individual conscience and the material temptations of capital . . . both local and global are evacuated of history” (286). In their various ways, existing scholarship on *Mammon Inc.* mostly frames the novel as lacking depth.

Certainly, because of the constant pop culture references, the style of writing in *Mammon Inc.* can read shallowly, but we need to consider that the novel is working to

40 C. J. W.-L. Wee also critiques the novel for its apparent superficiality, concluding: “*Mammon Inc.* is so shallow that it becomes profound in its depiction of contemporary globo-culture as Social Darwinian market effect in which a vacuous identity politics is carried out in the name of a globalized elite” (203).

operate as a popular cultural text and not aspiring to “high” culture. In this regard, Patricia P. Chu’s work on the ways that Asian American authors have used the *bildungsroman* strategically is relevant here—Tan studied and lived in New York for a number of years and arguably, her work sits on the fringes of Asian American literature. Based on her examination of early Asian American novels, Chu argues that, although early writings have often been considered depoliticized and assimilationist in ways that support hegemonic American ideals, Asian American writers often used the *bildungsroman* as a way of making political critique. As I discuss, *Mammon Inc.* as a coming-of-career narrative provides critique of the ways that the Singaporean state has shaped the nation according to its economic agenda while also exposing the cultural logics of neoliberalism.

The novel’s awareness of the Singapore 21 Report is evident from the plug metaphor that I introduced earlier. Chiah Deng’s metaphor for understanding her place (or her lack of a place) in the world takes on a different meaning in an exchange with Draco Sidious, the head of Mammon Inc. Explaining the tests that prove an applicant’s aptitude as an Adapter, Draco Sidious hands Chiah Deng a plug:

“We like to think of ourselves as being like a universal travel adapter. We enable our clients to go anywhere in the world, and plug into the power supply there.”

“So you want me to become like a plug-and-play peripheral,” I said, “like one of those PCMCIA cards that you can just take out of the box and slot into any computer, anywhere?”

The CorpS nodded. (64)

Mammon wants Chiah Deng to function as a connection between two-pin plugs and three-pin plug sockets and vice versa. However, the plug adapter here also serves as a reference to the language of the Singapore 21 Committee report:

The Singaporean of the 21st century is a cosmopolitan Singaporean, one who is familiar with global trends and lifestyles and feels comfortable working and living in Singapore as well as overseas. . . They must be encouraged to explore foreign languages, literature, geography, history and cultures throughout their school years, so that they will grow up ‘*world ready*,’ able to *plug-and-play* with confidence in the global economy. (45—emphasis mine)

The report is meant to be read as ambitious and perhaps even inspirational, but Tan repurposes the report’s language. She ridicules the grand-sounding notion of “world ready” when Chiah Deng asks incredulously if her job is to be a computer peripheral piece.

Readers who are knowledgeable of the Singapore 21 report would recognize Tan’s ironic use of the plug metaphor and the notion of the Adapter. For readers who are unaware of the source material, the plug metaphor might appear to be a way of describing a globalized identity. For example, Tay takes the plug metaphor to be a comment on Chiah Deng’s “transnational subjectivity that is, at the same time, transcendental” (131) and finds that that the novel illustrates how it is difficult to “be a citizen of the world and at the same time remain loyal to local and specific national ties” (131). Such a reading depicts Chiah Deng’s cosmopolitanism as unrooted while problematically romanticizing it. The tensions between the local and the global are of relevance for critical

cosmopolitan studies, but Tan's novel is more interested in criticizing the Singaporean state and its espousal of cosmopolitanism for its economic agenda.

Tan further satirizes the Singapore 21 Report by making Chiah Deng a caricature of the state's ideal citizen as someone who demonstrates twenty-first century cosmopolitan sensibilities by exploring foreign languages, literature, geography, and so on. Chiah Deng's knowledge and curiosity about other cultures and literature is vast and impressive:

I became friends with Tock Seng because he was the only one in my school who had read Dante and Derrida. For our class project, we used Chinese opera conventions to perform scenes from the Greek tragedy *Oedipus Rex*. . . We would greet each other with – ‘You! *Hypocrite lecteur! – mon semblable – mon frère!*’, knowing that we might possibly be the only couple in Singapore who knew this was an allusion to Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* via T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. (42)

This scene reads sardonically due to the smug pride that Chiah Deng and Tock Seng take in their knowledge of the more obscure aspects of high culture. Moreover, through the constant popular culture references throughout the novel, Chiah Deng's narrative voice makes clear that she is indeed “familiar with global trends and lifestyles” in the way that the Singapore 21 report recommends. For example, the opening page makes clear Chiah Deng's familiarity with British popular culture through its mention of the British band Blur and the National Lottery logo. While C. J. W.-L. Wee describes Tan's writing as an example of “mass-mediatized language usage, one that reads easily, well and quickly, and is comfortable with the culture industry” (201), I would go further to suggest that the

language performs something beyond fluency and that the novel is in fact overwrought with allusions to pop culture. Chiah Deng's familiarity with global trends and lifestyles is an exaggerated one, explicitly satirizing the Singapore 21 report. Although Tan's writing has been described as humorous and satirical, critics tend to miss the novel's specific critiques. Tan's allusion to language from an official state document shows the novel's engagement with actual historical circumstances of the Singaporean state's attempts to neoliberalize the nation through cosmopolitan culture.

Given the critique I am claiming that *Mammon Inc.* performs of the Singaporean state, it is difficult to say why the novel won the Singapore Literature Prize in 2004. Certainly, people outside of Singapore would likely miss the Singapore 21 reference because the critique of the state is encoded in ways that require some special knowledge. It seems, however, that even the state (and literary critics) have missed out on the novel's critique. It is possible that the award is a sign of the state's more liberal stance towards literary and cultural production.⁴¹ My own sense is that the literary prize indicates the state's investment in cultivating a Singaporean cosmopolitan identity—the award comes around the same time as the state's "cosmopolitan turn." Although my reading proposes that the representation of Chiah Deng's cosmopolitan identity is ultimately a critique of it, it seems that readings of the novel have assumed the protagonist's identity as the author's espousal of cosmopolitanism. Perhaps the assumption is that Tan, who was educated both at Oxford and New York University, does not set out to present a critique of an identity that she herself appears to embody so fully. Ultimately, the combination of

⁴¹ As the editors of *Writing Singapore* point out, there was a significant loosening of censorship laws after 1992 (363). The effects have mostly affected theater, however, and there is less discussion of how the Singaporean state's censorship affects genres such as poetry and fiction.

the Singapore Literature Prize and existing criticism thus far suggests the subtlety of Tan's critique has been overlooked.

Reading *Mammon Inc.* as a coming-of-career narrative

Taking *Mammon Inc.* as emblematic of a *bildungsroman* subgenre, I define the coming-of-career narrative as a story that follows a protagonist as she comes to invest in and enhance herself due to the neoliberalization of her milieu. The story focuses on privileged and upwardly mobile subjects who uphold the corporation, its interests, and its values through the pursuit of a career. Coming-of-career narratives retain the *Bildung* ideal of self-cultivation, but as determined by the global economy. As the wording suggests, in the coming-of-career version of the neoliberal *bildungsroman*, the attainment of a professional or corporate career rather than age is the marker of maturity. In the coming-of-career narrative subgenre, the transnational corporation (TNC) is the primary structuring force in the protagonist's actions. "Coming-of-career" at once emphasizes the specific historical period of the subgenre as the TNC is a development out of the twentieth century and also comments on the ways that corporations have become increasingly powerful since the late twentieth century.⁴² In some arguments, the corporation is even threatening to displace the nation-state as a structural power. As beneficiaries of free market policies and increased privatization, corporations have stakes in the propagation of neoliberal policies and ideologies.⁴³

⁴² See Masao Miyoshi's "A Borderless World? From Colonialism to Transnationalism and the Decline of the Nation-State" or Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Empire*.

⁴³ David Harvey points out: "For any way of thought [such as neoliberalization] to become dominant, a conceptual apparatus has to be advanced that appeals to our intuitions and instincts, to our values and our desires, as well as to the possibilities inherent in the social world we inhabit"(5). Purnima Bose and Laura E. Lyons' edited volume *Cultural Critique and the Global Corporation* demonstrates the ways in which corporations advance this "conceptual apparatus" and how we might critically approach such structures through cultural analysis.

Although my use of “career” deliberately widens understandings of “society” beyond the nation-state, it retains the thematic emphasis on work in the *bildungsroman* tradition. Themes of work as one of the ways that social conventions are enforced upon naïve and unsuspecting protagonists is evident in early texts such as Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (1795), which is also referred to as the apprenticeship novel. “Career,” however, reflects the ways work and an individual’s economic viability have a narrative beyond the moment of “getting a job.” In its 1800s usage, “career” referred to “[a] person’s course or progress through life (or distinct portion of life), esp. when conspicuous, or abounding in remarkable incidents: similarly with reference to a nation, a political party, etc” (*OED*). The modern usage of the word, which emerged in the late 1920s, emphasizes more a profession and the wider scope in which progress is possible: “a course of professional life or employment, which affords opportunity for progress or advancement in the world” (*OED*). On the other hand, the thematic focus on career in this subgenre should indicate its narrower class parameters.

Although I am arguing that understandings of society in coming-of-career narratives move beyond the nation-state, this shift should not suggest that the nation-state is irrelevant or that it should be dropped out of consideration. My intention is not to set up a dichotomy between notions of the national and the global, but rather to suggest that we must consider the wider globalized context in which the nation-state is situated by examining the different scales and complexities of national power that exceed its territorial context.

The coming-of-career narrative draws on a thematic tradition in the *bildungsroman*—that of work. Such issues have been foregrounded more strongly in

Euro-American women's writing, particularly in the twentieth century as women increasingly were able to work outside of the domestic sphere. With its focus on a female protagonist's work life, *Mammon Inc.* has some similarities with older female *bildungsroman* such as *Jane Eyre*, which ties the protagonist's character development to her work life as a governess. Twentieth-century examples include what Juliette Rogers describes as the female *berufsroman*, or novel of women's professional development, which emerged in post-World War I France. Also notable are the career novels, which are serialized fiction novels that were primarily published in the US and UK from the 1930s to the 1960s. Seen as the precursor to the chick lit phenomenon, typical career novels followed the professional and romantic adventures of a young woman about to embark on her first job, often concluding with a marriage proposal and job promotion. In the examples of *berufroman* and career novel, the protagonist's formation as a total personality is the story of what it means to be a gendered body in the workforce. In the United States, series included Avalon's *Career Novels* and Dodd Mead's *Career Books*. In the United Kingdom, there were Bodley Head Career Books for Girls Series and Career Novels series published by Chatto & Windus. Some titles include: *Juliet in Publishing*; *Margaret Becomes a Doctor*; *Monica: The Story of a Young Magazine Apprentice*; and *Shirley Clayton, Secretary*. As the titles suggest, not all of the women in these novels were necessarily making a lot of money—their achievements are denoted by the fact that they are entering in the workforce.

Although rooted in women's writing, coming-of-career narratives do not necessarily foreground gender. This, of course, is not to suggest that gender is not an important consideration, but merely to emphasize the broader structures in which

coming-of-career narratives are situated. Certainly we can see in the example of *Mammon Inc.* the relevance of this Euro-American tradition of women's writing that explores gender and work. Tan's novel shares some of the classic hallmarks of the career novel, such as the young female protagonist who is about to begin her first job. *Mammon Inc.* sharply departs from career novels and even their contemporary cousin, chick lit, through its rejection of the marriage plot, however. Though her high-school sweetheart Tock Seng Edwards returns back to Chiah Deng's life in hopes of marrying her, Chiah Deng refuses his proposal. While mostly a side plot, as I take up below, gender comes up more strongly through Chiah Deng's physical transformation.

Like the *bildungsroman*, the coming-of-career narrative can provoke social critique or a socialization of its audience into neoliberal thought. This dual function has always been true of the *bildungsroman*. Patricia P. Chu's work, for example, demonstrates that Asian American authors who used the genre to subtly criticize the nation-state though their writings were often mistaken as assimilationist. Conversely, Bret Benjamin examines how the World Bank deploys the literary form of the *bildungsroman* narratives to promote the hegemony of neoliberalism (162). As I show in my reading, the relationship between notions of individual freedom and neoliberalism play out in the novel differently than has been typically argued from western contexts. Regardless of the ideological purpose or critical stance, the neoliberal *bildungsroman* provides insight into the relation between culture and economy through its focus on the internalization of neoliberalism as ideology and part of one's personality. As I discuss below, Chiah Deng's formation relies on a neoliberal construction of youth as a time of impractical idealism and economic impossibility while depicting a corporate career—and

all its attendant neoliberal values of individual freedom, human capital, and family structures—as a corrective.⁴⁴

In the coming-of-career narrative of *Mammon Inc.*, the corporation subsumes and embodies—incorporates—the social. In this genre, the corporation is a social setting and a structuring force. Tan sets the corporation rather than society more generally as the protagonist’s influence. After receiving a recruitment letter, Chiah Deng sees a Mammon Inc. commercial and muses over its influence: “There seemed to be nothing that they didn’t own or couldn’t buy. Whether you were in London, Singapore or New York, you would find people in mcJeans drinking mcLite beer while talking about the latest mcMovie. I looked at the headlines of the *mcTimes*, which announced that Mammon Inc. was taking over Apple computers to form a new company—mcMac” (4). The corporation’s presence becomes the setting where everything happens. It is also the institution that homogenizes all places. Regardless of where one goes in the world, one finds the same scenes and modes of socialization through ubiquitous mcProducts. The passage illustrates Mammon’s power as a corporate entity and how the brand operates as a norm that mediates everyday life and interaction. Although it has little relation to the name of Mammon, referencing McDonalds through the prefix of “mc” emphasizes Mammon’s palpable presence in the novel’s world while also commenting on the ties between corporations and processes of globalization. “Mc” in this passage could also be a reference to the title of George Ritzer book *The McDonaldization of Society* or Benjamin Barber’s *Jihad vs McWorld: How Globalism and Tribalism Are Reshaping the World*,

44 As I show in my reading, the relationship between notions of individual freedom and neoliberalism play out in the novel differently than has been typically theorized.

both of which take McDonald's to be the definitive example of economic globalization and the corporatization of culture.

The novel's focus on the transnational corporation is not only befitting because of the twenty-first setting in which the novel takes place, but also because of the Singaporean context from which it derives. Since its independence in 1965, Singapore's nation-formation and economic success has always been attributed to the Singaporean state, as it has been led by Lee Kuan Yew and the People's Action Party (PAP). While state power is undoubtedly a significant force in Singaporean history and culture, corporations have had a more material and substantive presence in the everyday life of Singapore than can be discerned from the logic of state governance. The statistics alone are telling: in 1959, there were 83 MNCs operating in Singapore, a figure that increased to 383 in 1973 (Yoshihara qtd. in Lee). In 2013, there are over 7000 MNCs (Ministry of Manpower), up from more than 5000 MNCs in 1999 (Ermisch and Huff 21).⁴⁵

In postcolonial Singapore, corporations have always been, perhaps surprisingly, welcomed. As a 1980 UNESCO report observes:⁴⁶

there appears to be an absence of acrimony and bitterness which characterize the relationship between Latin American countries and the multinational corporations. To put it rather crudely, while the multinational corporation is an ugly word in Latin American, it evokes a

⁴⁵ These numbers lack some consistency; Yoshihara refers to the number of MNCs in the manufacturing sector whereas the numbers taken from 1999 and 2013 include companies in both manufacturing and services sectors.

⁴⁶ While "multinational corporations" (MNCs) and "transnational corporations" (TNCs) are distinct—an MNC is "headquartered in a nation, operating in a number of countries" where a TNC "might no longer be tied to its nation of origin but is adrift and mobile, ready to settle anywhere and exploit any state including its own, as long as the affiliation serves its own interest" (Miyoshi 1993:736)—the two are often referred to interchangeably. Though some of the sources I employ, such as the UNESCO report, appear to be discussing TNCs, they refer to them as MNCs, which seems to be more reflective of popular usage of the time rather than a significant error on the part of the authors.

different response in South-East Asia . . . Singapore appears to stand out in South-East Asia as a shining example of how domestic policy may be formulated to accommodate the demands of the multinationals in their search for profits and market shares on a global scale . . . (52)

Over the years, Singapore's ability to house so many MNCs has been represented as a point of pride for the state. For example, in a 1982 *Straits Times* front page story on Singapore's high ranking in a business and investment poll, a large headline boasts "Singapore is Number One." Because of the protections afforded to investors, tax incentives, and a highly-skilled local workforce, Singapore continues to be seen as an ideal place for business and commerce. Moreover, MNCs have become normalized as part of the logic of the nation's history.

This normalization can be illustrated by former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong's 2001 National Day Rally speech in which he invoked the economic success the nation experiences as a result of bringing in MNCs in order to rationalize the need to attract new immigrants to Singapore:

That is why we have to bring in multinational talent, like the way we brought in MNCs. Like MNCs, multinational talent, or MNTs, will bring in expertise, fresh ideas and global connections and perspectives . . . Just as we use incentives to attract MNCs, we may need to consider special measures to attract MNTs. (45)

Goh's language suggests that the MNC presence in Singapore is entirely laudable and largely unproblematic.

One would expect the presence of MNCs since Singaporean independence and the state's willingness to shape policies according to the needs of MNCs to have a large and lasting impact on Singapore. This impact, however, has been mostly understood using econometric methods or through the lens of business management theory. For example, the UNESCO report examines technology transfer, the ways that education policy responds to the labor needs of MNCs, management issues, and the influence of mass media. "Culture" in UNESCO's report, "The Cultural Impact of Multinational Corporations in Singapore," is not as those in cultural studies might have it with a focus on the ways everyday life, ideology, or history is shaped by the presence of MNCs. Rather, the report reads cultural impact according to structural change and whether such changes make positive accommodations for MNCs.

Recognizing the relevance of the corporation to Singapore's nation-formation requires a different understanding of Singapore's economic development, one that is not so state-driven. Almost any treatise on how a newly independent, third world nation managed to generate such rapid economic growth in the period following its 1965 independence will explain that the combination of Singapore's geographical positioning and the state's decision to take advantage of globalizing trends and free market economies by "hosting" corporations as the primary reasons for its success. In such accounts, the state is held as the main determinant behind the nation's economic accomplishments. The geo-economic significance of Singapore, however, long precedes 1965. Singapore's location in the Straits of Malacca—a narrow water channel that links the Indian Ocean with the South China Sea—has long been strongly tied to its economic position in a global market. Prior to British colonization in 1819, the island was a key

port for traders and merchants (Joo-Jock 13). The British continued to take advantage of Singapore's location, using it as a "regional headquarters for international capital investing in primary production for export in neighboring countries, particularly Malaysia and Indonesia" (Lim and Fong 51). Moreover, for British imperial power, Singapore was a strategic military outpost and "bulwark of imperial defense in Asia" (Ken 17). After independence, the government continued to take advantage of Singapore's geographic location by promoting itself as a strategic location for MNCs to establish their headquarters as they entered into Asian markets. In the 1960s and 70s, Singapore became a major player in export manufacturing, oil servicing and refining, and an important financial services center (Lim and Fong 51). Singapore encouraged foreign investment and thus a free market economy by providing MNCs with incentives, which included tax breaks, capital assistance, and loose government regulations (53). In the 1980s, the state took measures to "ensure political stability, to promote peaceful labour-management relations, to produce the most efficient and up-to-date infrastructure, and to rapidly develop a pool of skilled manpower [for labor demands]" (54). In short, the state did all it could to play good host and ensure that MNCs would have a comfortable and profitable stay in Singapore. The parallel rise of the number of MNCs and the upward trends in GDP and GNP suggest that the state's economic strategies were successful, at least in terms of capitalist logic.

In almost all renderings of Singapore's history to the present, the state's involvement in the nation's rapid development and modernization is held as the key feature of Singapore—regardless of whether the narrative comes from within or outside of Singapore. For example, *The Singapore Story: Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew* makes clear

that Singapore's rapid economic development is tied to its national history and narrative while simultaneously emphasizing the significance of the state in such history. In Lee's rendering, the nation's economic success can be attributed to the state's (i.e., his own) ingenuity, as indicated by some of the remarks in the preface to his memoir: "They [Lee's children] have been a source of joy and satisfaction as Choo [Lee's wife] and I watched them grow up and, like their peers, build successful careers *in the Singapore my policies had transformed*" (9, emphasis mine). Lee's language also marks the importance of his children's careers as a measure of the Singapore's success.

In contrast, science fiction writer William Gibson wrote in a piece titled "Disneyland with a Death Penalty" (1993) for *Wired* magazine about the significance of the state—albeit in far less flattering terms:

Singapore is a relentlessly G-rated experience, micromanaged by a state that has the look and feel of a very large corporation. If IBM had ever bothered to actually possess a physical country, that country might have had a lot in common with Singapore. There's a certain white-shirted constraint, an absolute humorlessness in the way Singapore Ltd. operates; conformity here is the prime directive, and the fuzzier brands of creativity are in extremely short supply. (1)

Gibson's Disneyland reference renders Singapore's development and modernity as inauthentic and kitschy. Lee's and Gibson's titles exemplify both the (self-)congratulatory and critical ways that the Singaporean state is often, if not always, represented. While the state undeniably plays a strong role in Singapore's nation-formation, representations and interpretations of Singaporean development—in popular

culture, scholarly discourse, or otherwise—tend to focus solely on state governance which thus obscures the role and influence corporations have had in Singapore. As the Gibson quote illustrates, the state can be described as a corporation in a metaphorical sense, but rarely is the corporation itself actually discussed.

While on one hand, thinking of Singapore as a metaphorical corporation lends itself to understanding the economic logic that determines Singaporean governance, it is also appropriate to treat the Singaporean state as a literal corporation. Unlike Gibson, who sees Singapore's corporate structure as a point of denigration, Thomas Friedman commends the corporatization of the Singaporean government and marvels: "Top bureaucrats and cabinet ministers have their pay linked to top private sector wages, so most make well over \$1 million a year, and their bonuses are tied to the country's annual G.D.P. growth rate" ("Serious in Singapore"). What is striking is the degree to which economic indicators are used as official guiding principles for Singaporean governance and, moreover, the corporate form of compensation used—government figures are like the CEOs and upper management of what it sometimes referred to as "Singapore Inc."

In addition to the corporate structure and thinking of the Singaporean state, the state also owns a transnational corporation, Temasek Holdings. The Singapore Ministry of Finance owns Temasek, an investment company with offices in Asia and Latin American and a portfolio of S\$215 billion (roughly US\$173 billion) ("Corporate Profile").⁴⁷ When referring to state-owned corporations, one typically thinks of the nationalization of natural resources, banks, or infrastructure. Though Singapore also

⁴⁷ The official estimate of Temasek's GDP share is around 10% (see <http://www.temasek.com.sg/mediacentre/medialetters?detailid=8258>) . According to US diplomatic cable documents put up by WikiLeaks, however, Temasek's GDP share is closer to 50% (see <http://wikileaks.org/cable/2007/02/07SINGAPORE394.html>).

owns such industrialized corporations—Singapore Airlines, communications company SingTel, and Singapore Technologies Engineering, for example—what is unusual about Temasek Holdings is that it is an investment company operating in the finance industry. Officially “neither the President of the Republic of Singapore nor the Singapore Government, [Temasek’s] shareholder, is involved in our investment, divestment or other business decisions” (“Corporate Governance”). Nonetheless, given Singapore’s propensity towards accommodating corporate needs, the state would likely have indirect influence over the corporations it owns and vice versa.

The novel’s focus on corporations, then, simultaneously provides larger commentary on a generalizable condition of the twenty-first century as well as a particular socio-political development in Singapore. The novel’s critique of the way Asian Values were deployed to encourage neoliberalism and the dynamic between Chiah Deng and her family tells us more about the workings of neoliberalism in Singapore while Mammon’s influence in Chiah Deng’s formation as an economically viable subject indicates something broader about the cultural influence of corporations.

Examining how Chiah Deng moves from rejecting Mammon to accepting it—or in the formulation of the *bildungsroman*, examining how the plot moves to the “projected resolution. . . [of] an accommodation to the existing society” (Hirsch 298)—compels us to consider what the logic of the story indicates about how Mammon’s power operates. The story begins with Chiah Deng initially rejecting the opportunity to work at Mammon Inc., claiming “I didn’t want to be a cog in some capitalist machine” (3) and “Mammon Inc. might be able to buy everything . . . but they can’t buy me. It’s a matter of principle” (4). Notable is Chiah Deng’s resistance to being treated as a function (a mere plug) within

a larger system and her concerns of a lack of freedom. In her refusal to concede to capitalist pressures, we also see the political idealism that later becomes untenable. “Society” in this instance is not the nation-state, but the larger global market in which Mammon operates. By the end of the novel, Chiah Deng comes to believe the opposite—that Mammon does offer her freedom and that choosing a career with Mammon is the ethical choice. Such an ending, while indicative of a certain cynicism on the part of the author, allows her to illustrate the ways that economic doctrine becomes normalized. As discussed in the introduction, one of the defining features of neoliberalism is that it appears to be good for individuals and society. And thus, these plot details are central for understanding how Chiah Deng internalizes neoliberal ideology and moreover, provides an illustration of how neoliberalism comes to be accepted. As Peter Brooks writes: “We might think of plot as the logic or perhaps the syntax of a certain kind of discourse, one that develops its propositions only through temporal sequence and progression” (xi). Thus, issues of sequencing and causality that come out of a plot analysis help us examine the “common sense” of neoliberal narratives.

Tan’s use of the *bildungsroman* trope in which the young protagonist is spurred on her journey illustrates neoliberalism’s appearance as a practical choice and its use of the logic of freedom. Up until Steve points out to Chiah Deng that “You’ve only got two weeks before the Nazis from the Home Office kick you out of the country” (4), Chiah Deng turns down interviews, ostensibly because they do not adhere to her principles (4). Doing so also creates the illusion of choice. Though said in humor, Steve’s depiction of the Home Office as “Nazis” also emphasizes its power and Chiah Deng’s helplessness in the face of legal constraints. Steve further points out, “You can’t afford the luxury of

having principles” (4). Chiah Deng realizes: “Steve was right. Time was running out, and I had to choose” (7). The exchange between the two roommates creates a sense of practicality—Chiah Deng has to face the facts and act. Although Chiah Deng’s language suggests a belief in her unfettered agency, it is clear that she has no control over the finite time of student life or the timing of her life choices. What becomes clear through this unfolding of events is that the notion of choice is illusory.

In this moment of supposed choice, Mammon Inc. seems to offer Chiah Deng freedom despite the fact her actions are temporally situated and legally circumscribed. The notion of choice is possible only because the structuring of her actions is unquestioned and accepted. Moreover, when it becomes clear to Chiah Deng that she might have to return back to Singapore to live with her parents against her will (4), a job, whether it is with Mammon or not, becomes more appealing. Chiah Deng’s alarm at the prospect of having to live with her parents again illustrates how neoliberalism operates through the logic of freedom, as David Harvey and Lisa Duggan have argued. Unique to the novel and perhaps the Singaporean context is the way that Chiah Deng’s sense of freedom is derived from liberating oneself from familial structures. Critics such as Duggan have argued the opposite: that neoliberalism presents the family as a way to get free. While *Mammon Inc.* affirms the importance of the family structure for upholding neoliberalism, what differs is the way that family is not seen as a site of freedom.

Though the relationship between the individual and the family is not inherently antithetical, in the novel the family impinges on personal freedom. Throughout the novel Chiah Deng depicts her family and her obligations to it in ethno-cultural terms (“filial

piety”) which suggests a critique of the way the Singaporean state has used “Asian Values” to maintain its economic agenda.

The debates surrounding Asian Values began in the 1980s and 90s as observers and critics attempted to explain the economic success of East Asian and Southeast Asian nations. More often than not, such explanations—whether positive or critical—were strongly orientalist or what Mark Berger has described as “yellow mythologies.” The “Asian Miracle,” as it was sometimes described, was attributed to Confucian values, what Chua Beng Huat describes as “hard work, emphasis on education, pragmatism, self-discipline, familial orientation, and ‘collectivism’” (573). Chua further argues that the rise of the Asian Values discourse was an attempt by western academics and critics to “promote Confucian values as the moral equivalent to the Protestant spirit in the Weberian thesis of the rise of Capitalism in the West” (573). For critics, Asian-style capitalism, Confucian capitalism, or Asian Values, was instead more pejoratively known as “crony capitalism.”

The Singaporean state embraced the notion of Asian style capitalism and by instituting “Asian Values” vis-à-vis the “Shared Values,” the Singaporean state enabled yellow mythologies. Asian Values were embraced and espoused most vocally by former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew and eventually through a Parliamentary White Paper that came to be known as Singapore’s Shared Values. The White Paper describes the core tenets of Singapore’s national identity and ideology: nation before community and society above self; family as the basic unit of society; community support and respect for the individual; consensus, not conflict; racial and religious harmony. Though the Shared Values were supposedly derived from the belief systems of various ethnic communities,

its publication as a White Paper institutionalized “Asian Values.” As LHM Ling points out, by “trumpet[ing] an ‘Asian way’ with ‘Asian values’, embedded in ‘harmony’, ‘humanity’, ‘a long-term vision’, and a Confucian version of ‘folk democracy’ (*minben zhengzhi*)” yellow mythologies exacerbated east/west binarisms because they also “denigrated the West as ‘lazy’, ‘inefficient’, ‘racist’, and ‘decadent’” in order to say “no” to the West (124). Although such self-orientalism and Occidentalism were prevalent throughout East Asia, *Mammon Inc.* presents a critique of Asian Values discourse in Singapore, pointing to the ways it enables neoliberalism through structures of family and sinocentricism.

Chiah Deng’s resistance to family obligation criticizes how the Singaporean state has used Asian Values discourse to co-opt the family. In the novel, the job interview offer from Mammon comes at the same time as a job offer to work as a research assistant with her beloved Professor Ad-oy, her Christian mystic advisor from Oxford. The position is less lucrative but more fulfilling than what Mammon offers. The intellectual work of the Oxford position is alluring to Chiah Deng, in part due to her religious curiosities. But pursuing her strong desire to “experience the Christian God, to know the One who could melt the earth with His breath” (25)—an experience that Oxford would ostensibly enable—would mean that her “soul would have to fly without [her] family” (25). Despite Chiah Deng’s initial misgivings about working with a “capitalist machine” (3), Mammon appears as the more ethical choice in the sense that an Adapter’s salary would enable Chiah Deng to financially support her family. In another scene when Chiah Deng talks to her sister, Chiah Chen, about the possibility of becoming a research assistant instead of working for Mammon Inc, Chiah Chen scolds her: “You need to make a lot of money to

give us, so Buddha will see that you're very filial" (37). By mixing traditions—filial piety is a value more often associated with Confucianism and most schools of Buddhist thought renounce materialism rather than espouse it—Tan satirizes the ways in which ethical systems of belief are coopted by neoliberal culture. The guilt that Chiah Deng feels eventually propels her to pursue a job at Mammon, and her feelings illustrate the significance of the family and also highlight the affective power of neoliberalism.

Although the salary difference suggests that Chiah Deng might make an economic (and hence, under neoliberalism, ethical) decision based on her family, Professor Ad-oy poses the issue of working at Mammon versus Oxford as one of ideology. According to Professor Ad-Oy, Oxford would allow Chiah Deng to be “free” and pursue her individual desires, while Mammon would merely reinforce the Chinese/Confucian traditions Chiah Deng is obligated to and imprisoned by:

. . . Professor Ad-oy had looked at me and said these same words with that same sad face: “Remember the words of the Lord: ‘If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple. And whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after, cannot be my disciple.’”

“But if I hate my parents, I’ll go to Hell,” I said. That doctrine was something my parents had scared into me from childhood.” (25)

In most of the exchanges between the two characters, Professor Ad-oy tries to persuade Chiah Deng to work for him with the further implication that Chiah Deng will also

convert to Christianity.⁴⁸ Against conversion, Chiah Deng's use of the word "doctrine" points to the ideological and affective weight of tradition.

Thus *Mammon Inc.* complicates the significance of individualism, a mode of thought considered to be intrinsic to neoliberalism, suggesting that neoliberalism can be articulated through notions of family obligation. As Chiah Deng explains to Professor Ad-oy: "My parents expect me to support them now that I've graduated" (24). Professional and corporate careers themselves are structured to promote ideals of independence and self-reliance because they promise socioeconomic and professional upward mobility based on an individual's job performance; the pursuit of a career is an individualist endeavor. In the case of *Mammon Inc.*, however, the pursuit of a non-corporate, academic career promises individual freedom away from family and financial responsibilities.⁴⁹

The way Chiah Deng represents and conflates Singaporean/Chinese culture and values as fabricated, essentialist, and sinocentric enables a critique of Asian Values discourse. One might wonder whether Chiah Deng's disdain for the Chinese values she feels beholden to is a mere reflection of Tan's own feelings. In an interview, Tan comments:

I'm on some level very much like a banana – I've no interest in Chinese culture, I just get very bored. So the boredom might come from that as well. I do have a

48 Professor Ad-oy's character seems but a thin veil for Tan's attempts at proselytizing the reader. Save for one master's thesis, there are no published works that fully take up the significance of Christianity in *Mammon Inc.* Though no one has explicitly said so, I suspect that the author's forceful claim that *Mammon Inc.* is a "Christian novel," evidenced by the strong Biblical allusion in the novel's title, Chiah Deng's desire to convert to Christianity, and various passages that slip into Christian imagery and rhetoric, detract from the ways in which the novel critiques the Singaporean state.

⁴⁹ This idealizes academia as a non-ideological, non-neoliberal, non-corporate space.

strong fascination with western culture a lot more than some eastern culture. I can't stand Chinese music, I can't listen to any sort of Chinese music. (Toh)

Tan's use of "banana" suggests a problematic east versus west binary thinking in her conception of identity. In terms of the ways Tan's apparent disdain for Chinese culture plays out in the novel, we see that Chiah Deng's contempt for Chinese culture and values appears to be driven by her perception that such values are so obviously manufactured. For example, when Chiah Deng initially explains to Professor Ad-oy how she became indoctrinated to the notion of filial piety, the narrative moves into a flashback scene in which she recalls her childhood visits to Haw Par Villa, "an amusement park created by the two eccentric brothers who invented the Tiger Balm muscle rub, [and] the 'Ten Courts of Hell' exhibit [which] recreated the punishments for the perfidious" (25). Haw Par Villa is famous for its various dioramas based on Chinese folklore and mythology. Amongst the Ten Courts of Hell dioramas are graphic depictions of grotesque and violent punishments one might face if sent to hell for a sin. For example, one can have their heart cut out for disobeying elders or be ground by a large stone for disobeying their siblings. That Chiah Deng feels so affected by Haw Par Villa is not to suggest that what Haw Par Villa represents is somehow inaccurate—the exhibits are rooted in a folklore tradition. But Haw Par Villa is ultimately an amusement park that requires an admission fee and thus, for Chiah Deng to cite Haw Par Villa as her main cultural influence can be read as a critique of the constructedness of Chinese belief systems as they are presented in the context of Singapore. Though both Chiah Deng's and Tan's remarks on Chinese culture certainly can be construed as essentialist, the novel is actually focused on the construction of Chinese culture in Singapore. The constructedness and superficiality of Chinese

culture is underscored by Chiah Deng's dismissive remarks: "All my life, my parents had taught me to light joss sticks and ghost money, but whenever I knelt to my ancestors' idols, I felt nothing but emptiness and boredom" (25). Highlighting what she believes to be the falsity of such traditional practices through "idols," here Chiah Deng also emphasizes the lack of individual fulfillment that comes from upholding her family structure.

Despite Chiah Deng's resistance to the Chinese values represented at Haw Par Villa and her cognizance of the amusement park's function in upholding the institution of the family, her inability to get past her guilt illustrates the power of collective affective ties. Chiah Deng explains to Professor Ad-oy:

You know, after reading Foucault, I tried to dismiss the Ten Courts of Hell as a superstitious discourse invented to keep the dominant patriarchy in power. . . But it's difficult to de-programme myself from the code that my parents have pounded into my system since infancy. (26)

Although a position at Oxford and conversion to Christianity fulfill Chiah Deng's fantasies of her future, she ultimately cannot get away from the beliefs and principles she grew up with. The violent imagery invoked by "pounded into my system" makes clear that Chiah Deng does not feel agency in this context.

One could interpret Chiah Deng's eventual acceptance of Mammon's job offer to work as an Adapter as an indication that there is no outside of neoliberalism or a way to escape the power of the corporation. In Wee's reading, for example, Chiah Deng's decision is a "capitulat[ion] to capitalist commodification and reification" (203). When tracking Chiah Deng's initial ethical resistance to capitalist and neoliberal ideology to her

acceptance of a position with Mammon, it is easy to portray *Mammon Inc.*, to use Wee's language again, as a "depiction of contemporary globo-culture as Social Darwinian market effect in which a vacuous identity politics are carried out in the name of a globalized elite" (203). Mammon's influence and authority is so great that it is able to subvert Chiah Deng's initial declaration in the beginning of the novel that she would not work for Mammon Inc.: "'Mammon Inc. might be able to buy everything,' I said, 'but they can't buy me. It's a matter of principle'" (4). Chiah Deng believes, in other words, that the powers of capitalism will not sway her. Although the novel falls short of critiquing or imagining alternatives to neoliberalism, Tan's use of the *bildungsroman* form offers us an important way of tracking the process of neoliberalization.

Despite a disappointing ending, *Mammon Inc.* effectively highlights the significance of family obligation in the cultivation of neoliberal culture through its tracking of Chiah Deng's eventual formation as a Mammon Adapter. Chiah Deng's family's influence over the way events unfold in the novel also suggests neoliberalism in opposition to the pursuit of individual freedom. Chiah Deng, in other words, joins Mammon Inc. under the notion of caretaking rather than her fulfillment of her individual liberties. Scholars such as Chua have argued that the emphasis on the social and communitarianism within Asian Values discourse was "a barricade against the onslaught of unbridled global capitalism in its cultural form" (580). While the novel does not enable a reading that suggests Chiah Deng's decision is meant to act as a defense against global capitalism in quite the way Chua argues, part of what drives Chiah Deng's filial piety is a sense of protection. Her parents are aging and increasingly unable to generate enough income to take care of themselves. The shifting of responsibility to individuals to care for

their families is typical of a neoliberal economy, but what is particular to the Singaporean context is the ways in which traditional value systems—here, of Confucian filial piety—is retooled in the service of neoliberalism. *Mammon Inc.* supports arguments made by notable scholars such as Aihwa Ong that there are different forms and enactments of neoliberalism. When considering, for example, David Harvey's claims that neoliberalism relies on the notion of the liberal, free individual, *Mammon Inc.* illustrates what Aihwa Ong would describe as a neoliberal exception because it departs from the way neoliberalism has typically been theorized from western contexts.

The way that *Mammon Inc.* plays out issues of Asian Values discourse enables a critique of dominant theorizations of neoliberalism. Such a critique is not to suggest that the novel advocates for Asian Values or rabid consumerism because there are aspects of the novel that suggest otherwise. For example, much of Chiah Deng's depiction of Singaporean culture satirizes the self-orientalizing and occidentalist aspects of the Asian values discourse that assume a sinocentric Singapore. Throughout the novel, Chiah Deng refers to "Asian," "Singaporean," "Chinese," and "Confucian" culture interchangeably, something that is also evident in the Singaporean state's use of Asian Values discourse. Even as Chiah Deng satirizes the state's decree that future Singaporeans must be able to act as a plug adapter, she also performs Singaporean national ideology in the way that it is prescribed by the state. Read this way, Chiah Deng's contempt for Chinese culture—"I hate being Chinese," (37) she exclaims to her sister—is not a wholesale rejection of Chinese culture, but of how it manifests in the Singaporean context. The critique of Asian Values discourse thus emerges if we recognize that Chiah Deng embodies the state's vision of the ideal Singaporean.

The beliefs that Chiah Deng's parents have about Chiah Deng's roommate, Steve, satirize the inherent occidentalism in Asian Values to a much greater extent. Upon meeting Steve for the first time, Chiah Deng's parents ask Chiah Deng in Chinese how many women Steve has slept with and whether he has AIDS (219). In the ensuing scene, Chiah Deng finds herself in a position where she is making up answers to gratify her parents' persistent questioning while lying to Steve about what the conversation is actually about: "Oh, nothing, we're just arguing over what food to order . . . Perfect friendly bickering about the relative merits of laksa and stewed chicken feet" (222-223). Though meant to be comical, the scene indicates that Chiah Deng's ability to act as an Adapter means that she is able to connect people, but also able to keep them disconnected as well. But more significantly, the scene illustrates the sort of antagonistic relations Asian Values promotes with westerners that are reminiscent of some of the comments former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew made in interviews about the United States when asked to comment on the notion of Asian Values. For example, when queried on the state of American society, Lee remarked that the liberal, intellectual tradition that flourished after World War II was causing societal breakdown:

Westerners have abandoned an ethical basis for society, believing that all problems are solvable by a good government, which we in the East never believed possible . . . there's already a backlash in America against failed social policies that have resulted in people urinating in public, in aggressive begging in the streets, in social breakdown. (113-114)

For Lee, examples of uncivil society and "failure" are when private responsibilities (hygiene, income) enter in the public sphere. Whether or not Lee earnestly believed that

the West was the epitome of decadence and social ills, such depictions of the west were crucial to developing state nationalism and policy such as the Shared Values. For Lee to cite urination in public as a symptom of social breakdown in the west is an interesting role reversal of colonial depictions of the non-west which often relied on equally absurd examples to prove the “backwardness” of the non-west. Thus, rather than reading Chiah Deng’s parents as provincial or ignorant, we might read them as Tan’s way of bringing in some of the Singaporean state’s logic into the story, where individuals are at fault for their own and their family’s poverty.

Mammon Inc. also satirizes the neoliberal desire for freedom; the particular use of Singaporean humor again illustrates the way the novel is engaged with a specific cultural context. Early in the novel Chiah Deng tells her roommate, Steve, that she wants to be able to live in Singapore because she misses her sister, Chiah Chen, but has a difficult time explaining why her sister’s “kiasu-ness” (4) is an endearing trait. “Kiasu,” a Hokkien word literally meaning “fear of losing out” is something of a national joke. Though meant to describe one’s cutthroat behaviors generated by the consumer desire to find a good bargain, the word applies not only in consumerist situations, but to circumstances when one simply wants to “win” for the sake of winning—for example, cutting in line simply to be the first. In remembering her sister’s kiasu-ness, Chiah Deng recounts a memory of a visit to Singapore when shopping together:

While we were pondering the difficult question of what flavor Pot Noodles we should get, a voice boomed out from the PA system, “Dear customers, because today is our grand opening, the first twenty customers to spend over fifty dollars will get a free gift—collect at the lobby.” “Free” is one of the key words in the

Ten Commandments of *kiasuism*, namely, “Anything that’s free, you must get.” We looked around for the nearest and quickest thing we could buy . . . The Emporium was doing a “Golden Bamboo Special—100 plastic straws for only \$1.” We quickly bundled a lifetime’s worth of straws into our trolley and drove it with Schumacheresque speed towards the cashier . . . shoring two eight-year-olds and a pregnant woman with a pram out of the way. I would have been ashamed of my behavior, but I was too stressed trying to outrun the granny who was hot on my heels. (5)

Although clearly exaggerated for the sake of comedy, the way Chiah Deng depicts *kiasu* people seems fairly true to how *kiasu*-ness lives in the national imagination. At once a national joke, as exemplified by the popular comic book series *Mr. Kiasu*, *kiasuism* was also considered a serious social and national issue in the 1990s and the central topic of the 1993 National Courtesy Campaign (Ho, Ang, Loh, Ng 359). The tone in which the desire for free commodities appears can be construed as an ironic reversal of one of the supposed central tenets of neoliberalism. So strong is the Singaporean desire for neoliberal freedom, rather than desiring individual freedom, Chiah Deng and her sister desire commodity freedom, which is to say commodity enslavement.

The novel illustrates the ways that a developmental narrative in which a career can appear as the telos relies upon the parsing of one’s life into progressive stages; in *Mammon Inc.*, youth is depicted as a stage in life filled with pleasure and lack of (financial) responsibility. The notion of the “real” world under neoliberalism, where individuals must “grow up” and face the global market, relies on the belief that youth is temporary and transitory—something that is made even clearer by the novel’s narrative

structure. Youth and immaturity are made legible through the portrayal of Chiah Deng's and Steve's student life as fun and carefree or, as Chiah Deng puts it, "the perfect slacker lifestyle" (7). Chiah Deng muses over the things she would miss about her student life in England if she were to move back to Singapore for work:

If I left England, there would be no more sleeping in on Bank Holidays, waking up just in time for the mandatory mid-afternoon Bond movie on telly. No more Saturday afternoons at the launderette, listening to the cricket on Radio on our portable radio and fighting over who gets to read the TV Guide in the *Guardian* first. No more eating strawberries at Wimbledon, swept up in Henmania; no more intellectual slumming, nursing pints of Boddingtons while deconstructing Indiana Jones with reference to James Frazer's *Golden Bough*. (7)

The passage also makes clear that Chiah Deng's student life is filled with entertainment and instant gratification and, as the repetition of "no more" indicates, life in the impending "real" world under neoliberalism lacks pleasure. Also notable is how Chiah Deng says that she will no longer be able to sleep in on Bank Holidays, suggesting her understanding that she is entering a time in her life in which the global financial market will determine her actions. Ironically, even in her youth, Chiah Deng's sleep schedule still runs according to Bank Holidays. Life during one's youth is not determined by function—as the cog-within-a-system metaphor earlier invoked—but by the liberty to indulge in pleasures and act without the responsibility of family obligation.

Tan's use of the *bildungsroman* structure also reveals the ways neoliberalism relies on the depiction of youth as a transient time of economic impossibility and

impractical idealism; it is through this framing of youth as an inadequacy that it is possible for the career to loom large and appear as the inevitable solution and “coming.” Chiah Deng’s understanding of her student life as a phase and its relation to her future career illustrates how corporations rely on a particular construction of youth. Following Raymond Williams, we might think of neoliberalism’s depiction of youth as a “structure of feeling” in order to think about the affective and generational dimension of neoliberalism in the novel. Williams uses this concept to describe the “meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt” in the social present and that are often “not yet recognized as social but taken to be private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating” (132). The desire to transform oneself into a corporate subject is tied to social constructions of age and reveals how the significance of a career is built not only on anxieties of survival but, more positively, on ideas of progression. Thus, attachments to youth as one gets older become increasingly attended by feelings of inadequacy and transience in relation to developmental narratives that end in a career.

In the novel’s coming-of-career narrative, maturity and growth are read through Chiah Deng’s willingness and enthusiasm to remake herself according to the demands of Mammon Inc. Although there are ups and downs throughout the story, there is a general sense that with each test given by Mammon, she becomes increasingly more invested in passing them. For example, for Chiah Deng’s first test, she must gain entrance into Utopia, an exclusive nightclub in New York City to prove her ability to build her image and socialize—important skills for a corporate job. Here we see the significance of the social sphere in the coming-of-career narrative through issues of assimilation. To prepare, Chiah Deng gives herself a complete makeover, even going on an extreme diet and

exercise program in order to lose weight to fit into an appropriate dress, according to the demands set out by Mammon.⁵⁰ After the final stage of her physical transformation, a hair styling appointment, Chiah Deng looks in the mirror:

For the first time in my life, when I looked into the mirror, my instant reaction was, “oh my God, I look so cool.” I slid my hands down the sexy white-leather dress, skin-tight against my finely honed body, which, for the first time in my life, bulged in all the right places. I never thought I could ever feel that way about myself . . . to be able to see myself and think—“Hello, cover girl. *Gen Vex* this month, *Vogue* the next. (131)

The mirror, symbolic of the way society views her, allows Chiah Deng to see how she now embodies societal ideals of gendered beauty, underscored by the notion that there are “right” places to bulge. The repetition of “for the first time in my life” further emphasizes that the transformation is a significant change and that there still remains further potential to improve her appearance and grow up even more, as the *Gen Vex* to *Vogue* narrative suggests. Chiah Deng’s pleasure with her appearance, moreover, exemplifies how she accepts the values that come with her entrance into Mammon Inc. In the closing lines of the passage, Chiah Deng muses: “For the first time in my life, I had to admit that the bad guys were right all along. Mammon Inc. was right and I was wrong—money can make you into the person you’ve always dreamed of becoming” (131). This moment marks a change in Chiah Deng’s beliefs and points to a gendered aspect of the coming-of-career narrative. No longer is Mammon just a repressive capitalist machine; it is a pathway to an

50 An oft-cited feature of the bildungsroman is the protagonist’s physical transformation.

improved and better possible self as it is construed according to beauty standards for women. Unlike the earlier passage in which Chiah Deng's took pleasure in *not* being a part of larger system, we see now that Chiah Deng's pleasures derive from the work of becoming a better Mammon employee. In other words, she now takes pleasure in being the "cog" in the system that she once resisted. Chiah Deng's physical transformation reveals how neoliberalism is not really about individual freedom, but about providing the means for conformity.

The above scene highlights the overlap between the values of human capital and *bildung*. The concept of human capital treats one's capabilities, knowledge, social and personal skills as potential sources of economic labor. Under this thinking, individuals can potentially make smart investments and give themselves more value—and thus "improve"—by, for example, going to school. For the sake of passing Mammon's test, Chiah Deng went to great lengths to change her physical appearance and to learn about popular culture in order to fit in with the crowd at Utopia. Although these investments in herself were spurred on by the test itself, in her excitement with the results and the social world offered by such a transformation, her thinking shifts. The transformation is no longer just about adding economic value to herself or finding a husband; it becomes a manner of personal satisfaction. What is lost in this "personal satisfaction" perspective is the original critique Chiah Deng had of Mammon Inc.: that it would transform her into a cog within a system. In her rapture for her new appearance, the fact that her physical transformation is part and parcel of her labor as an Adapter also gets subsumed. Chiah Deng forgets that her role as an Adapter requires her to assimilate and network. Moreover, as discussed through the notion of imagined populations in Chapter One and

with performances of nationalist form in Chapter Two, appearances have great significance under conditions of neoliberalism. This significance is also apparent in *Mammon Inc.* as we witness Chiah Deng's transformation. Furthermore, in the move from improvement—where value is assessed, in this case, by economic measure—to self-improvement, we see the overlap between human capital and idealist philosophies of *bildung*. The values and thinking that uphold neoliberalism thus become internalized and a matter of personal satisfaction.

Neoliberal development can also be read through the setting of Chiah Deng's apartment, illustrating the ways that neoliberal ideology is attached both to temporal and spatial logics. Littered with dirty dishes that “[w]e never wash up, because we believe in the theory that if you let the germs develop on the dishes, sooner or later they’ll start a war and wipe each other out” (3), dirty laundry, and a welcome mat that resembles a “grey alien substance, like Jabba the Hutt had finished molting and left his skin behind” (9), it is clear that Chiah Deng and Steve have little interest in keeping their apartment clean and orderly. Recalling Chiah Deng's refusal to move back home, the roommates' refusal to maintain the apartment could be read as an expression of their independence and freedom from their parents' home. As the story progresses and as Chiah Deng begins to mature—in the sense that she becomes increasingly invested in the idea of joining Mammon—Chiah Deng's space begins to change because her sister, Chiah Chen, begins to clean it. “It was amazing,” Chiah Deng comments,

By the end of the week, our bathroom smelt of Zen sandalwood, our kitchen was filled with pots bubbling with gourmet delight, and I could actually walk around my bedroom without stubbing my toe on some junk

on the floor. For the first time, our chairs and table weren't buried under a pile of underwear and magazines circa 1999. (186)

Unlike earlier in the novel when Chiah Deng and Steve seem to take pride in the filth and clutter of their apartment, Chiah Deng appreciates the changes Chiah Chen makes. The scene is also reminiscent of the earlier quote from Lee Kuan Yew about filth and its relation to the west. In *The New Asian City*, Jini Kim Watson points out how for Lee the development and modernization of urban space was particularly significant in establishing itself as an independent nation (179-180). Just as Singapore's urban development was held up as proof of its modernity, Chiah Deng's clean apartment serves as evidence for her successful transformation into a neoliberal subject. Her newly cleaned apartment, which she can "actually walk around"," allows her greater freedom and mobility. Also notable is Chiah Deng's periodizing—the "before" is pre-twenty-first century, around the time when we begin to see the Singaporean state shift to a neoliberal economy. Although Chiah Deng accuses Chiah Chen of only cleaning because she is avoiding the studying she must do to pass the second test, the way the changes in the apartment correspond to the increasing energy and investment Chiah Deng puts into passing Mammon's tests provide another way of understanding neoliberal development and its relationship to space.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I examine issues of genre in Hwee Hwee Tan's *Mammon Inc* as a way of explaining the relationship between the economy and culture. I propose the coming-of-career narrative allows us to see how definitions of maturity have shifted under conditions of neoliberal globalization. More generally, Tan's novel illustrates the

ways that constructions of youth as a transient time of economic vulnerability and impractical idealism uphold corporate careers and by extension, corporations that endorse neoliberalism for their own survival and profit. Tan's novel moreover enables a critique of the ways that the Singaporean state has coopted cultural values such as Confucian filial piety. *Mammon Inc.* usefully maps out how neoliberal culture relies on complex relations between age, family, and corporation, and ultimately helps us to better understand the ways in which neoliberalism becomes obscured by what seems to be issues of personal relations and fulfillment.

There are clear limits to what the coming-of-career narrative can offer studies of neoliberalism, however. There are different pathways to becoming an economically viable subject and the particularity of each pathway depends on economic class—clearly, Chiah Deng's story is a privileged one. The story of what it means to become economically viable in Singapore looks quite differently when discussing transnational domestic laborers, for example, and the process of becoming an economically viable subject is not always a story of being upwardly mobile or of pursuing a corporate career.

Although the coming-of-career narrative is limited, that there are many types of experiences that are affected by class, gender, sexuality, ability, and race, narratives of becoming an economically viable subject in a global context might offer a larger possibility: the neoliberal *bildungsroman*. One here might ask why “neoliberal” as opposed to “postmodern” or “global.” As Elliot and Harkins point out, there are “diagnostic” issues with postmodernism and globalization because of its roots in questions of aesthetics and cultural methodological questions. The use of “neoliberal” does not completely elide these issues—after all, as Aihwa Ong points out, neoliberalism

exists in the plural and highly depends on geo-political context. Despite the seeming incoherence and theoretical contradictions across different sites, studies of neoliberalism consistently privilege discussions of free markets and deregulation of the private sector. A term like the “neoliberal *bildungsroman*” would focus on *bildungsroman* in the late twentieth century with specific attention to the ways the global emergence of national policies which promoted free trade in the 1970s and 1980s have affected the ways that lives are narrated and valued. Perhaps most importantly, such a term would demand attention to the ways that genres adapt, perpetuate, and resist processes of neoliberalization and globalization, allowing us to see the consistencies and discontinuities with previous historical moments in which *bildungsroman* narratives have flourished. A number of recently published novels such as Tash Aw’s *Five Star Billionaire* (2013), Mohsin Hamid’s *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2013), and Dave Egger’s *The Circle* (2013) suggest a growing interest in exploring what it means to survive under conditions of neoliberal globalization and thus the potential for further theorizing of the coming-of-career.

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Chapter Four: Alternative Histories and Antidevelopmental Narratives in Lydia Kwa's *Pulse*

Lydia Kwa's *Pulse* (2010) tells in the first person the story of Natalie Chia, a Singaporean-Canadian who lives and works in Chinatown, Toronto, while taking care of her aging parents. Although nothing seems particularly amiss about Natalie's life—she is passionate about her work, has a successful acupuncture practice, and is in a happy relationship with her girlfriend, Michelle—a sense of melancholy suffuses her narration. Spurred by the news that Selim, the son of Natalie's friend and ex-lover, Faridah, has committed suicide, Natalie returns to Singapore, and we slowly learn that her melancholia is likely caused by the trauma of sexual abuse at the hands of her father, separation from her family in Singapore as she migrated to Toronto, and a difficult break-up with Faridah.

Pulse might appear quite unlike the representations of diasporic Singaporeans that I have taken up in this project thus far. Unlike the other texts, *Pulse* is not engaged with the post-1997 state-produced Overseas Singaporean Diaspora phenomenon in any discernible way. The diasporic Singaporean, as represented by Natalie, is not a young, professional cosmopolitan as is the case with those featured in the "Singaporean Abroad" or Chiah Deng of *Mammon Inc.* Instead, Natalie is a 48-year-old woman, settled in Toronto with little aspiration to change much about her career—one might even describe *Pulse* as the anti-coming-of-career narrative. Like *Mammon Inc.*, however, *Pulse* presents a diasporic Singaporean protagonist who enables us to critique the state and its neoliberal national agenda. Kwa's novel affirms the diasporic figure as a significant trope through which to engage cultural politics of neoliberalism in Singapore.

At the time of this writing, only one master's thesis, which examines issues of sexual trauma in *Pulse* and in Kwa's other writing, exists. There have been published articles on Kwa's other work, most notably her novel *This Place Called Absence* (2000), which was shortlisted for the Amazon.com/Canada First Novel Award, by Asian Canadian and Singaporean literary critics. *Pulse* has much in common with *This Place Called Absence* in terms of the transnational connections each novel makes between Singapore and Canada. Just as *This Place Called Absence* is set in present-day Vancouver and early twentieth century Singapore and uses multiple narrative perspectives, so too *Pulse* moves through time and space between Singapore and Toronto, but through the use of a single narrator. Although Kwa has not been as celebrated with literary awards in the same way as Hwee Hwee Tan reviewers have mostly lauded *Pulse* for its compelling story, its attention to social and cultural context, and its use of poetic language.⁵¹

My reading examines the significance of Natalie's queer diasporic identity for our understandings of Singapore's neoliberal nationalism. While much of this dissertation is focused on transnationalism vis-à-vis representations of diasporic Singaporeans, the addition of "queer" to discussions of diasporic and cosmopolitan critique enables, as Gayatri Gopinath writes, an important "challenge [to] nationalist ideologies by restoring the impure, inauthentic, nonreproductive potential to the notion of diaspora" (11). The transnational and the queer are brought together through Natalie's narration. Throughout we observe an emphasis on non-linear time, memory, emotions, bodily sensation, and queer bonds. The novel thus calls attention to alternate possibilities of knowing,

⁵¹ Unfortunately, *Pulse* has now gone out of print due to the publisher's bankruptcy.

understanding, and relating to the past that are not determined by notions of developmentalism.

I begin with a discussion of Kwa's transnational aesthetic and examine the significance of the parallels that she draws between Singapore and Toronto. The way in which the narrative moves back and forth between Singapore and Toronto—both in Natalie's memories and in the actual plot of the novel—offers us a different understanding of the diasporic subject's relationship to postcolonial Singapore. Singapore is not the site of career development, nor is the lure to return back to Singapore economically determined. The transnationalism that the novel performs through its narrative is one that draws unlikely parallels between geopolitical sites rather than a transnationalism that depicts Singapore as a site of commerce. Moreover, while the state presents Singapore's postcolonial status as the rationale to continually develop its economy through open market policies, *Pulse* presents the postcolonial experience as a memory that lingers in Natalie as a corporeal sensation.

Next, I consider how Natalie and her "impure, inauthentic, nonreproductive" diasporic identity reveal neoliberal nationalism's reliance on heteronormativity. I claim that *Pulse* takes an anti-developmental stance against a neoliberal nationalist narrative that emphasizes modernity and progress through heteronormative values of procreation and family. Following an overview of the ways official histories, also known as the "Singapore Story," have been produced, I discuss how the novel interrupts representations of history as a continuous narrative of progress. I show how Selim's death inspires life for Natalie and Faridah, more largely commenting on the heteronormativity of Singapore's biopolitical agenda. I also examine moments in which Natalie engages

with the “official” history of the 1964 race riots, which are often cited as turning points in official histories. Natalie renders the race riots as inconsequential and without causal relation with other aspects of her life, thus challenging the ways the Singapore Story has been cast as a story of select events and great individuals. Finally, I show how Natalie’s emotions and bodily sensations offer a different mode of apprehending the past, one that does not emphasize sequencing and causality.

Through a method Elizabeth Freeman calls “erotohistoriography,” I track the ways that Natalie’s feelings and physical responses of shivering, shaking, and shuddering dramatize encounters with the past and illustrate the ways that, as Natalie puts it, “[t]he past is sometimes so present” (18). Thus *Pulse* provides us an alternative history of Singapore, narrating the past with a focus on the pre-colonial and economically inconsequential, challenging us to move away from understandings of histories that emphasize teleological arrangements of events.⁵² In its focus on bodily interiors and sensation, I see Kwa’s novel as a counterpoint to Singaporean state narratives that configure bodies to appear as a distinct populous or, as I discuss in Chapter One, imagined populations. Moreover, *Pulse* asks us to consider how queer subjects fit within the Singaporean national narrative and the significance of the ways they place themselves into dominant tellings of history.

Drawing from Roderick Ferguson’s important work on the intersections of class and sexuality, I conclude that although *Pulse* exposes the problematic heteronormative

⁵² Due to the novel’s themes on queer bodily affect, I rely on Elizabeth Freeman. Also valuable for thinking through histories that challenge developmental thinking is Reynaldo C. Ileto who advocates for a nonlinear emplotment of history that “give[s] equal status to interruptions, repetitions, and reversals, uncovering the subjugations, confrontations, power struggles, and resistances linear history tends to conceal. It should reveal history for what it has been: a weapon in the struggle for and against domination of all shades . . . the subversion of linear history also strikes at the ‘developmentalism’ that presently dominates the core of the state/center’s ideology” (126).

logics of Singaporean state nationalism and of Canadian multicultural policies, it does so by foregrounding class privilege. Thus *Pulse* highlights the limitations of cosmopolitan critique.

Within the scope of this project, *Pulse* offers a different perspective on the relationship between neoliberal nationalism and the production of diaspora by suggesting that the roots of neoliberal nationalism in Singapore take place much earlier than the 1997 Asian financial crisis. Although some of the dialogue throughout the novel creates the sense that Natalie's parents move to Canada to seek a better life, their move is never explicitly explained, but there do seem to be a few possible influential factors. One of the most directly stated possibilities is Natalie's father's tense relationship with his in-laws. In a scene in which Natalie asks her mother if she regretted leaving Singapore, her mother replies: "All for the better, Natalie. I don't like to think about the past. Papa not happy living near my family. You know that, right? You not happy. Life there not suit you. Right or not?" (157). In saying that life in Singapore does not suit Natalie, her mother's answer also suggests that the Chia family's move to Toronto has something to do with her father's discovery of Natalie and Faridah's romantic relationship. As we later learn, the revelation of this relationship is a major source of trauma for Natalie whose father beat her following his discovery. Although there is no obvious cause for Natalie's move, it is clear that—at least for Natalie and her mother—the Chia family's migration to Canada is understood as a displacement and somehow linked to Natalie's sexuality. The novel also hints at the economic motivations behind the Chia family's move, which is where we can locate the effects of neoliberal nationalism. In one of her childhood

flashback scenes, Natalie returns home from school to discover her father and his colleagues sitting around the house, home early from work suggesting that they might have been fired or that there has been some trouble with the company's management. We know from earlier scenes that Natalie's father works with a pharmaceutical company, which is likely a multinational company, and that Natalie's maternal grandfather, who works as a Chinese herbalist, disapproves of his job as a salesman for this company (75). At the time this scene takes place, the 1970s, Singapore was beginning to construct itself as a hub for multinational corporations—a history that I treat at greater length in Chapter Three. In order to attract and accommodate corporations to Singapore, the state established legislation that curbed Singapore's then reputation as a site of labor dispute and strikes ("The excesses of irresponsible trade unions...are luxuries which we can no longer afford," stated then President Yusof bin Ishak). I read this moment when Papa and his colleagues are at home and the consequent loss of his job as an allusion to this unrest. Natalie, eavesdropping on her father and his colleagues, overhears Papa's colleagues: "Can't be true. Just stupid rumor maybe spread by our competitor" (169) and later, "Company going to break our balls, I think" (170). Natalie is unable to make sense of the conversation, but we can infer from the context that Papa and his colleagues have been sent home from work due to the rumor of an impending strike. Thus we might read neoliberal nationalism, which in the 1960s and 70s took the form of the state's disbandment of labor unions in favor of corporations, as another possible influence for the Chia family's migration to Canada.

While the novel is ambiguous about the reasons for the Chia's family departure, all these possible reasons are significant in that they allow us to call into question the

state explanations of why Singaporeans leave. As I mention in the opening of Chapter One, Singaporeans who left were often cast as traitors, or to recall Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong's language from his 2002 National Day Rally Speech, "quitters." The idea that someone might "quit" being part of a nation suggests that there is some degree of agency in the matter. As Goh puts it: "I take issue with those fair-weather Singaporeans who, having benefited from Singapore, will pack their bags and take flight when our country runs into a little storm." By suggesting that Singaporeans leave on individual whims characterizes emigration as privileged movement. Singapore's image as a relatively wealthy, modern, developed, and perhaps even luxurious nation, further exacerbates such an impression. Besides the fact that there is little to no information gathered by the state about why Singaporeans leave, such an assumption elides recognition that there may be Singaporeans who left for serious political reasons, including being subjected to forms of structural violence that would make living in Singapore untenable. The Chia family story suggests that their decision to leave involves some notion of escape. Certainly, with a state that makes political dissent through labor organization and queer sexuality punishable, one can imagine that there are reasons to leave. In light of the state's current valorization of diasporic Singaporeans and counter to Tan's novel which seemingly affirms the state's vision of diasporic Singaporeans as professional, upwardly mobile corporate types, *Pulse* reminds us there are other less privileged motivations to leave Singapore.

Pulse also offers us a different periodization of neoliberalism. In his *Brief History of Neoliberalism*, David Harvey posits 1978-1980 as a watershed moment in world economic history (1). According to Harvey, the three epicenters of neoliberalism's

beginnings include China, the United States, and the United Kingdom thanks to the political leadership of Deng Xiaopeng, Paul Vlocker and Ronald Reagan, and Margaret Thatcher. Amongst the various transformations these leaders made to their respective national economies, Harvey names Thatcher's decision to "curb trade union power" (1) as one of the key moves that enabled neoliberalism to take a stronghold in the United Kingdom. Certainly, as a form of governmental intervention in favor of businesses and corporations, minimizing union power is a classic neoliberal move. If such state action is one of the early symptoms of a neoliberalizing economy, we see the early beginnings of neoliberalism in Singapore with the Industrial Relations Act that was revised in 1968 in the favor of multinational corporations. As a result of such legislation, trade disputes and collective bargaining are heavily regulated by the state and strikes are illegal unless approved by the state. As is often the case, such moves have been rationalized by the state as necessary for Singapore's economy and thus survival as a nation. In its depiction of the early and tumultuous years of Singapore as an independent nation, *Pulse* alludes to the beginnings of neoliberal nationalism. As a result, we see that neoliberalism and postcolonialism are closely linked in the context of Singapore.

***Pulse* and transnationalism**

Within the spread of Singaporean literature, the novel's focus on transnationalism is in line with tendencies in contemporary writings in English that explore the impact of globalization on Singaporean identity and culture. Often considered a more precise term than the global (Hannerz 6), "transnational" describes social, economic, and cultural subjects, events, actions or dynamics that cross national borders. The novel moves back and forth between Toronto and Singapore and creates affective and historical

relationships between the two places. That *Pulse* represents Singapore as transnational is not in itself unusual. Studies of Singapore have always tended towards transnational and globalized approaches due to its history as a site of trade and now as a financial hub. In fact, scholars have pointed out that what we now recognize as qualities of globalization and transnationalism have been present in the Southeast Asia context dating back to the spice trade in the 15th century.⁵³ Consequently, Singaporean literary studies has tended toward a transnational methodology in recognition of Singapore's historical roots and position in long-established trade and migrant routes.⁵⁴

The transnationalism we observe in *Pulse*, however, is unique. Quite unlike the transnational aesthetic presented by the "Singaporean Abroad" series, *Pulse* offers a transnational aesthetic that does not aim to glorify Singapore as an economic hub. In this respect, *Pulse* marks a refreshing change from that of the Singaporean state's transnationalism or even what is presented in *Mammon Inc.*, which presents transnationalism as cosmopolitanism. Instead, Kwa's novel makes subtle affective connections between Singapore and Canada.

Early on *Pulse* calls attention to the issues of time and space, establishing itself as a transnational novel concerned with one of the most cited effects of globalization—

⁵³ See Patke and Holden; Ng.

⁵⁴ Authors have argued that attention to Southeast Asia—which, much like with postcolonial studies, is a burgeoning subfield—has much to offer Asian American studies. Fiona I. B. Ngô, Mimi Thi Nguyen, and Mariam B. Lam write: "Given the rise of US power in Southeast Asia during but also after the Cold War, escalating both intellectual and imperial ambitions to contain or capture these countries, many emerging scholars are focusing on the traffic in bodies, images, and capital, coming to and from Cambodia, Laos, and Viet Nam (and the other nations included in Southeast Asia, if to a lesser extent) as scenes for a multiply postcolonial imaginary and neoimperial geography" (672). Without negating the importance of Southeast Asian American studies, notable here from my perspective is again the conspicuous absence of Singapore. As the authors' language suggests, what gets studied largely depends on the "traffic in bodies, images, and capital." This tendency to be "migrant-centric" misses out on US-Singapore economic ties that potentially will shape Asian American experience. Singapore thus becomes a blindspot for Southeast Asian American studies.

time/space compression. Rather than illustrating the speed of globalized time, however, the novel begins with an unexpected arrival of a letter that, by virtue of its medium, seems anachronistic in the twenty first century and thus creates a sense of mystery to the opening of the novel.⁵⁵ The effect of mysteriousness is only amplified when upon recognizing the handwriting on the envelope, Natalie describes that her “heart started to race” (9). As indicated by the airmail envelope, Singapore is a distant place from Natalie’s current location in Chinatown, Toronto. The distance is further emphasized by the July 17th date that marks when letter was processed in Singapore (10) which is, as we realize later in the chapter, eight days prior to Natalie’s receiving of the letter (25). In the twenty-first century context of instantaneous communication that the novel takes place in, the temporal lag between the writing of the letter and the moment that Natalie reads it (which, as it is happens, does not occur until many hours after she’s received it) both underscores the vast distance between the two cities and adds to the complication of comprehending the novel’s timeline. As I later discuss, the construction of time becomes an important issue for understanding the ways that the novel poses an alternative historical consciousness.

The symbolic imagery that accompanies the letter stages one of the more significant issues of the novel: how Natalie fits into and places herself within Singapore’s story of progress. Upon receiving the registered mail from Canada Post, Natalie carefully examines her letter:

The *par avion* envelope with its border of red and blue flags boasts three stamps, all bearing an insignia on the top right-hand corner: the dark

⁵⁵ The epistolary novel shares historical roots with the *bildungsroman*.

figure of a lion's head. Referring to the “Singa” in Singapore, city of lions. One stamp features a pair of blue turquoise fish. I've never seen such pretty fish. The other two stamps are a study in contrast: one a two-dollar stamp features a modern Singapore Bus Service double-decker bus with neither driver nor human passenger; the other, worth only thirty cents, of an electric tram with silhouettes of a driver and nine or ten passengers. I suppose that kind of tram would have been used in the early 1900s in Singapore, after a century of rickshaws and buffalo carts. (10)

The details that emerge from Natalie “focus on minutiae” (10), in her attempt to calm her nerves, provide a commentary on Singapore’s modernization. In the juxtaposition of the two stamps, a narrative of national progress between two eras becomes clear. Given Singapore's investments in modernity as progress, it seems only apt that the image portraying the more technologically advanced transportation would have higher value. The diction is also suggestive of the way we are meant to understand the relation between the two stamps. The cheaper stamp, devalued as “only worth thirty cents” and designated as “the other,” is peripheral to the more important image. Yet, despite the advancement that the double-decker bus represents, Natalie reads the stamp through its absence of passengers and its lack of humanity, which creates a sense of emptiness. In spite of its lesser value, Natalie's observations of the passengers and driver on the tram in the cheaper stamp stand as a contrast to the double-decker bus due to the sense of fullness and life created by the “nine or ten passengers.” This passage also comments on Natalie’s distant position in her relation to the story of Singapore that the two stamps create. Though Natalie’s speaks with some familiarity of the imagery (the national “Singa” lion

head symbol), her speculative language (“I suppose”) and the distance that the letter itself represents comment on Natalie’s detachment from Singapore’s national scene.

Similarly, a scene of Natalie’s Chinatown neighborhood that follows shortly after the arrival of Faridah’s letter suggests Natalie’s ambivalent engagement with Canada’s national story of multiculturalism. Attempting to calm down, Natalie takes a pause from her morning preparations for work and observes the neighborhood happenings:

Hiding behind partially drawn curtains in the living room, I watch a group of children playing outside: the two Vietnamese sisters with Hello Kitty barrettes in their hair; the lanky son of Iranian parents and the cute, wide-eyed Korean boy with the mini mohawk haircut; dressed in oversized jeans, a hand me down from his brother. Afternoon heat, shimmering along the edges, enters the pores of the children and suffuses them with glee. Sunlight animates the trio of plastic Canada Day flags, nestled among the cascades of blue lobelia in the planter box across the street.

(11)

Through its repeated imagery and framing, Natalie’s observation of her neighborhood connects back to the earlier mentioned passage. Like the rectangular shape of a postcard, Natalie’s view of the neighborhood children play is framed by the window curtain, accentuated by the sun “shimmering along the edges.” The turquoise fish stamps and the red and blue flags that border the envelope, connect to the neighborhood scene through its similar coloring created by the “blue lobelia.” National symbols--three stamps with the lion’s head and three Canada Day flags--mark each scene. Such similarity in imagery creates a transnational relation between the two scenes. While the letter symbolizes

Singapore's economic progress, the neighborhood scene is the model of multiculturalism, which was initiated as a part of Canada's national policy in the late 1960s. What Natalie sees outside her window is the quintessential multicultural ideal: children of all ethnic groups playing together in a Canadian setting. Natalie's use of definite articles to describe the children and her knowledge that the clothes of the "wide-eyed Korean boy" were once his brother's suggests a familiarity and intimacy with the neighborhood happenings. Rather befitting, perhaps, when describing an inanimate object, Natalie's language in the earlier passage does not have the same sort of warmth and familiarity and is even somewhat hesitant and detached, when she remarks "I suppose" and speculates on the significance of the tram image. The contrast in the language illustrates Natalie's relationship with her place of birth, Singapore, and her current home, Toronto. Similar to the image of the tram filled with passengers, the neighborhood is made lively through the presence of children. And as with the letter, Natalie is not a part of the national scene. In this case, she is slightly hidden behind a curtain in her own home, not participating in the cultivation of Canada's future, which perhaps comments on the absence of queer subjects in the project of multiculturalism.

Through the use of repetition and parallels, the novel makes clear that Natalie's experience of Toronto and Singapore must be considered together, making *Pulse* a decisively transnational novel.⁵⁶ The narrative moves both geographically and temporally—Natalie lives in Toronto and makes a trip to Singapore during the novel's present time of 2007— and illustrates the ways that Toronto and Singapore are put in

⁵⁶ Another parallel through repetition that calls attention to Singapore and Toronto's multilingual and multiethnic settings: walking to work, Natalie thinks of Chinatown as "noisy, thick with the sounds of Toishan, Cantonese, Mandarin, Tagalog and an occasional flurry of Vietnamese" (16), a depiction quite similar to her Singaporean childhood in which she experienced "the sounds of many Chinese dialects—Hokkien, Teochew and Cantonese, for example—as well as Malay and Tamil" (71).

relation. As an outsider to both scenes, we are instead encouraged to consider how Natalie, as a queer middle-aged woman, is positioned in relation to Singapore and Canada's national scenes and what one context might yield for our understandings of the other. Although the linkages and parallels forged between Natalie's life in Toronto and her past in Singapore invite a comparison, the novel does not create a story in which we learn that Natalie's life has somehow improved by virtue of living in Toronto: Natalie still feels structurally excluded from Canada's national scene and the story of multiculturalism.

Transnationalism has been liberating to those who have felt the confines of the nation-state as an organizing category for literary studies more generally. The way that transnationalism challenges the limiting, and at times exclusionary national frameworks aligns with the work of some Asian American and minority literature scholars. In *Global Matters: The Transnational Turn* (2010), Paul Jay credits the presence of scholarly focus on US multi-ethnic literatures, minority, and postcolonial literatures—as fundamental to what he terms the “transnational turn” in literary and cultural studies. Jay comments that English has been late to transnational literary study, especially compared to comparative literature and postcolonial studies (4-5), thus suggesting that minority literary studies have always been forerunners of the transnational turn in English. If what Jay writes is true, it might be worth proposing that the scholars of minority literatures will lead the way in developing the transnational turn within English departments. Accordingly, I would argue that part of this role is to continually theorize transnationalism so as not to let the transnational turn become contained by the notion of minority literature.

For as much engagement Singapore has had with North America, there seems to be very little criticism or literature exploring the contemporary relations between Singapore and Canada or Singapore and the United States. In this regard, *Pulse* is valuable in its exploration of Singaporean-North American ties through the representation of diasporic Singaporean experience. In terms of migration, there are over 5000 Singaporeans in the US and 1300 in Canada. In the US particularly, Singaporean presence is difficult to track due to the tendency to categorize identity by broad categories of race and ethnicity. It is possible, perhaps even likely, that Singaporeans will mark their Chinese, Malay, or Indian ethnic origins on census forms rather than nationality, this is even the case for Singaporean state bureaucratic procedures—Singaporean citizens are categorized according to what is sometimes known as the CMIO (Chinese, Malay, Indian, Other) rubric. Moreover, Singapore only became an independent nation in 1965--the same year that immigration laws in the US changed to allow Asian immigration and two years before similar laws changed in Canada. Singaporeans who left for North America during this period might very well have identified as Malaysian since Singapore and Malaysia were part of the same nation until then.

There are only a handful of published writers who take up Singaporean-North American relations. Besides Lydia Kwa who has written three novels and two books of poetry, there is Fiona Cheong, who has written two novels set in Singapore; Chay Yew, a Singaporean playwright and stage director now based in Chicago; Hwee Hwee Tan who was living in New York City for a number of years; Wena Poon, a lawyer based in the US, who has written about diasporic Singaporean Chinese; Vyvyane Loh, a Boston-based novelist who is also a medical doctor and choreographer; Shirley Geok-lin Lim, an

English professor in Santa Barbara who is Malaysian, but identifies a strong connection with Singapore in her writing. It seems likely that there will be stronger critical attention to Singapore-North American relations in the future. During the writing of this dissertation, two novels Singaporean-American novels have been published: Kevin Kwan's *Crazy Rich Asians* (2013), whose novel tells the story of a wealthy Chinese family in Singapore, and Kirsten Chen's *Soy Sauce for Beginners* (2014), whose novel is the story about a woman who returns to Singapore from San Francisco to take over her family business, have been met with positive and popular reception.⁵⁷

As a narrative that moves temporally through Natalie's associative memories of newly independent Singapore in the 1960s and 70s and Toronto in 2007, *Pulse* also calls for a postcolonial reading which is, in itself, a transnational one because Natalie's postcolonial past takes place in another national context altogether. The very name and legacy behind Natalie's internet username, "Cosmic Pulse," is one way that Kwa calls

⁵⁷ If we are to imagine other ways of talking about Singapore-American culture, one that is not primarily shaped by issues of immigration, it is worth pointing out that Singapore and the United States are particularly strong economic allies, especially as they have entered into trade agreements through the Trans-Pacific Partnership. As Candace Fujikane points out: "Colonial and imperial capital, as embodied by APEC and the TPP, seek to isolate geopolitical sites from each other through the fragmenting fictions they disseminate . . . Given the Obama administration's policy regarding economic and military advances in the Asian-Pacific region, it is important to enlarge the critical framework of Asian American critique to think of Asia and the Pacific as method, extending Asian American studies in Asia to Asian American studies in Asia and the Pacific" (207). Fujikane's argument extends Kuan-Hsing Chen's notion of "Asia as method," by advocating for the "Pacific as method." While Fujikane's work is particularly focused on significance of Asian American settler colonialism, her point that Asian American critique and struggle should not be isolated from discussions of neoliberal globalization is notable in the context of this project. In her essay, Fujikane demonstrates the importance for Asian American studies to widen their scope to consider state economic ties and their impact on Asian American and Pacific communities. As literary and cultural representations of Singapore-American culture grow, it will be important to consider the importance of Singapore-US state ties. Prior to the 1997 Asian financial crisis, Singaporean state rhetoric tends to take a stronger cultural stance against the United States, often subscribing to occidentalist notions of the West as overly decadent and undisciplined—a point I discuss in Chapter Three. In more recent times, however, Singapore has positioned itself as more culturally aligned with the US; this is evidenced in Chapter One with my discussion of *Conversations on Coming Home*. There is a similar pattern in the US. Quite unlike in previous years when popular representations of Singapore denigrated the city-state as authoritarian (i.e., William Gibson's essay "Disneyland with a Death Penalty"), American representations of Singapore have become increasingly laudatory of the island-nation's pro-business practices. This suggests that east/west binaries are shifting under conditions of neoliberalism and in the face of the stronger economic ties between Singapore and the US.

attention to the wider transnational and postcolonial context within which Natalie's life is situated. As the story unfolds, we learn that the rather unusual name, Cosmic Pulse, was also the name of Natalie's grandfather's herbal medicine shop. Though Natalie's grandmother insists that the store is actually named for her and her divination practices, Kong-Kong claims that the store's name has more to do with his inclination for adventure:

“This name Cosmic Pulse because as young man, I follow my adventurous spirit. Look to heaven because stars in sky pulse for those who want to see.” Once again, he reverted to Conrad in impeccable English: “*It was the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention.*”

(69 italics in original)

Natalie's grandfather feels an affinity with Joseph Conrad, believing that his independent streak and migratory adventures outside of his home country, China, are analogous to Conrad's love of seafaring and exploration. Moreover, Conrad, a Pole, was not a native speaker of English himself. Beyond its familial significance, the name also has colonial overtones because of the grandfather's penchant for Conrad. Despite his fondness for Conrad and speaking the King's English (68), Kong-Kong refuses to entirely capitulate to western hegemony. When describing her grandfather's speech patterns, Natalie notes: “Everyone was a *he* in Kong-Kong's speech, and English was not going to make him change that” (68). Kong-Kong's English is influenced by his first language, Mandarin, which has no gendered pronouns. Rather than depicting her grandfather's as flawed, however, Natalie represents Kong-Kong's speech as taking a stand against authority. Thus, in naming her practice the “Cosmic Pulse,” Natalie forges links between her life in

Toronto and a complex colonial history that precedes her arrival in Canada, which might not otherwise be captured if Natalie is only understood through a single nation- or race-based framework.

With its seamless moves between Singapore and Canada, treating both places as formative to Natalie's subjectivity, *Pulse* speaks to the problematics that attend border-crossing movement that transnational scholars are often engaged with. The back-and-forthness of the narrative structure—in both time and space—works against developmental narratives in which Canada, as emblematic of the west, is the telos. Moreover, the narrative structure of *Pulse* performs one of transnationalism's main interventions in migration studies by showing that migration is not an event confined to a particular moment in one's life. As Khagram and Levitt write:

Transnational dynamics cannot be studied in one point in time because they involve multiple, interacting processes . . . because transnational migrants' practices ebb and flow over long periods, a one-time snapshot misses how people periodically engage with their home countries during election cycles, family or ritual events, or climatic catastrophes—their attention and energies shifting in response to a particular goal or challenge. (7)

Pulse seems unwilling to attribute a singular reason to Natalie's continuing engagement with her former home. In this respect, we might read the novel's anti-developmental themes not just as a critique of the Singaporean state's emphasis on development, but as a way of working against depictions of migration as developmental narrative.

The anti-developmental aspects of *Pulse* are reflected at the level of language; there are several instances in which Natalie's narrative focus on her associative memories or on the details of setting disrupt the narrative flow. Such frequently occurring passages have been cause for comment amongst reviewers of the novel. In a less flattering depiction of the novel, Bev Sandell Greenberg claims *Pulse* "suffers from an overabundance of irrelevant information, such as pages and pages about films that Natalie and Faridah watched as teenagers. Other examples include needless references to Singaporean history, the Raffles Hotel and the smorgasbord of foods eaten by the characters" (1). In a more positive review, David Fedo writes: "Some readers of *Pulse*, perhaps dulled by a steady diet of airport fiction, will undoubtedly chafe over the lack of exterior 'action' in the book's plot; many of the key determinants occur 'offstage,' . . . by a ruminative Natalie" ("Buoyant Pulse"). By depicting Kwa's focus on setting and history as "irrelevant information," Greenberg's evaluation of Kwa's writing reflects her position of social privilege; she cannot recognize the significance of cultural and historical specifics or why Kwa, as a minority writer in Canada, would be compelled to include such details in her representations of a little known history and place. Together, we can read Greenberg's characterization of the novel as filled with "irrelevant" and "needless" passages and Fedo's point that the novel is not plot-determined as indicative of the novel's anti-developmental stance.

Natalie's stream of consciousness narrative, or what Greenberg might describe as "needless," exemplifies the novel's anti-developmental stance by refusing to conform to the continuous, causal logics of novelistic narration. To take one early passage that does not ultimately serve to advance the plot, Natalie narrates an associative memory that she

has with the present scene. The passage occurs shortly after Natalie receives Faridah's letter. Upon noticing a slight movement from her father sitting, Natalie's narration moves into a reflection on the effects that a stroke has had on her father's behavior at home, and she muses over the positive influence that music has on him at rehabilitation. Marked by a paragraph break, the narration suddenly moves into a memory of Natalie's student days at the University of Toronto:

When I was a student at U of T many years ago, I was taught to think of the brain as a conglomerate of site-specific functions. We read about Dr. Wilder Penfield's experiments at the Montreal Neurological Institute. Touch an electrode to a patient's raw, exposed brain and suddenly what seemed long lost is experienced freshly, as if it were happening in the present. Talk about magic. Talk about possession. All it took was a touch to the right spot. A simple and elegant concept. One spot for each memory, one spot for particular kind of movement. (13)

The passage continues, further explicating Natalie's fascination with Dr. Penfield. While the above passage certainly alludes to themes that are prevalent throughout the novel—that of experiencing the past in the present and alternative modes of knowledge, in this case, physical touch—Natalie's associative memories have little function in the larger scheme of the story. Such a memory has no bearing, no causal relation to other events in the novel. At best one might argue that the passage provides a fuller picture of Natalie's character, but again this passage does not add to Natalie's development as a character when she inwardly forgives her father for his incestuous sexual abuse. In the very attempt

of trying to situate the significance of the passage, we are able to see the ways that causal, developmental logic of novelistic writing can determine value.

***Pulse* and Singaporean literature**

A noticeable characteristic of *Pulse* when considered within a Singaporean literary context consists of its efforts to present a challenge to dominant conceptions of history. As the editors Angelia Poon, Philip Holden, and Shirley Lim of the first Singapore literature anthology, *Writing Singapore: An Historical Anthology of Singapore Literature*, point out, in the face of rapid modernization and development, many contemporary Singaporean writers are engaged with issues of history:

. . . the past exerts a strong pull in Singapore literature not just nostalgically but sometimes fatalistically in the way it thwarts and subverts the modern rationality of the present with its retributive logic.

Through their work, Singapore writers have actively resisted the tendency to amnesia as well as to caricatures of the past enshrined in official historiography for presentist political ends. (Poon, Holden, and Lim 371)

Such official historiography is often referred to as “The Singapore Story,” both as reference to *The Singapore Story: Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew* and as a sardonic comment on the immovability, manufactured aspects, and singularity of official Singaporean history. The Singapore Story, as I synthesized it earlier in Chapter 1, narrates history through some version of the following events: modern Singapore was discovered in 1819 by British statesman, Sir Stamford Raffles, who worked for the British East India Company. Under Raffles’ management, Singapore grew to be one of the most robust and important ports for British trade. In 1942, the British lost Singapore to the Japanese

Imperial Army, considered one of the greatest defeats in British history. Though Singapore returned to British colonial rule for a few years, the experience of Japanese imperialism led to a political awakening and Singapore eventually took a form of full self-government in 1959, led by the People's Action Party (PAP) and Lee Kuan Yew, who acted as the island-nation's first prime minister. The ending of British colonial rule was marked by Singapore's merger with Malaysia in 1963 to form the Federation of Malaya. As a result of ideological tensions between the governing parties of Singapore and Malaysia and the 1964 Race Riots, Singapore was expelled from the federation and was forced to become its own independent state. Since then, under the rule of the PAP and Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore has become an economic powerhouse, moving from Third World to First World status in a matter of forty years. The Singapore Story contains few characters. Of the few, Sir Stamford Raffles is often cited as the "Father of Singapore," a seemingly odd choice given Singapore's colonial history, and Lee Kuan Yew is often credited as the mastermind behind Singapore's economic success. As I've made mention of in previous chapters, Singapore's reluctant independence in 1965 enables a tone of victimization in its nationalist narrative, often taking the form of "no one believed we would make it" rhetoric. Besides the ways that the Singapore Story serve to represent the Third World to First World story of economic development, it has also presented the image of Singapore as a harmonious multicultural, multilingual society, with the 1964 Race Riots as a pivotal point in the greater narrative.

Pulse makes gestures at the Singapore Story, but situates it in its narrative in such a way where it does not have the significance of a turning point. This is most clear with Natalie's reference to the 1964 race riots. In official histories, the race riots are often

cited as cause for Singapore's splitting from Malaysia and rightfully depicted as one of the most perilous periods in Singaporean history. Within a larger developmental narrative of Singapore's multiculturalism, the race riots serve as evidence of progress of how far Singapore has come. In the novel, it seems at first that the race riots will play a major role in the rest of the story:

I thought of the time Papa and I narrowly escaped being harmed in July 1964. We were in Geylang Serai when his scooter stalled on a dirt road next to a field of lallang grass. We spotted a gang of Malay men with parangs approaching us from the far side of the field. We were saved when a lorry drove by and blocked the path between the men and us, allowing Papa to finally start up his Vespa and drive away. (37)

Though at this point Natalie does not directly state that she was caught up in the race riots, those familiar with the Singapore Story will find Natalie's account recognizable, particularly from the date. Notable here is how Natalie's language seems to mimic official historical narratives. Gone are the rich sensory details from Natalie's narration. Instead, the specifics are focused on time and location, resembling journalistic writing. Natalie's account is focused on causal actions. Memories of this scene resurface several times in the novel, suggesting its traumatic significance, but ultimately the memory only serves as a way for Natalie to question her father's Christian faith: "I thought of my father praying to God while he frantically tried to get his scooter started on that dirt road in Gelang Serai. Papa said out loud that he would dedicate my life to Him if we survived that encounter. It seemed to me that there was a vast, irreconcilable difference between Papa's 'dedication' and the kind of devotion Selim was talking about" (38-39). For

Natalie, the Race Riots are associated with her father's sacrifice of her life for the purposes of his own survival. Against Selim's more idealist and altruistic beliefs around sacrifice, Papa falls short and the Race Riots serve as another reminder of Natalie's father's shortcomings. This is not to suggest that the novel as a whole negates the historical significance of the 1964 Race Riots. *Pulse* instead situates the Race Riots in another narrative, one in which the event is not wholly framed by the master narrative of the Singapore Story.

Pulse refuses to uphold the Singapore Story narrative and instead, Natalie's memory of meeting Selim, encourages readers to challenge and explore history, which is a clear theme in the novel. After learning that Selim's suicide note alludes to Natalie and Faridah's relationship, we are presented with Natalie's flashback memories of her initial encounter with Selim and their consequent communication over email and text messaging. From Natalie's recounting of their first meeting, we learn the formative impact of Natalie's life on Selim because Faridah would regale her son with stories of her past (39). In hearing the stories about Natalie and Cosmic Pulse, Selim felt a shared connection with Natalie because of her queer identity and her abusive father. We, moreover, find out that Selim and Natalie's usernames in an online Kinbaku chat room allude to their personal histories. For Selim, "Benkulen Bound" refers to a twist in colonial history that led to the rise of British power in the Malacca Straits and the fall of the Dutch. Natalie's name, Cosmic Pulse, also traces a colonial legacy as discussed earlier. In both instances, historical referents are used to name virtual and queer identities. Natalie remembers Selim's injunctions to her that "[h]istory is important" (45) and to "investigate history" (61). Kwa sets up a parallel between Natalie and Selim's lives

which calls attention to the unexpected ways personal and family histories can shape other individuals while also exploring the effects of national history on queer identity.

One of the ways to read how *Pulse* posits an alternative Singaporean history is through how it appears to challenge Lee Kuan Yew's political career as the synecdoche of Singapore's national history. Various scholars have pointed to the ways that Lee's memoirs have come to represent official histories in Singapore (Hong and Huang; Holden). As Philip Holden points out, Lee's memoirs constitute a form of hegemonic popular historiography in Singapore, "reinforced by their strong sales . . . [and use in] schools as part of the national education initiative" (404). Natalie offers a subtle critique of this hegemony in the linking of her life, as a queer woman, to Singapore. The relevant passage comes in a scene after the arrival of Faridah's letter and as Natalie is preparing for work. After considering how she is often told that she does not look her age, the narration moves further into Natalie's reflection:

I turned forty-eight recently. June 6, to be exact. That makes me as old as modern Singapore when the People's Action Party government, under Lee Kuan Yew, began to run the country, independent of British Rule. Even though the country remained part of the Federation of Malaya until 1965, the PAP under Prime Minister Lee took over the running of the island six years earlier, on the very day I appeared out my mother's womb, two hours ahead of the government. To have one's existential debut coincide with the emergence of the country's self-government--I couldn't help but grow up believing that my fate could never be severed completely from Singapore's (15-16).

Notably this passage suggests a reading of Natalie's life as somehow allegorical because her birth coincides with the PAP's beginning as a political power.⁵⁸ Natalie's rehearsing of Singapore's history is atypical in that what is "momentous" is not the nation's independence, but PAP's establishment as the state. Much in the way that Lee's memoir "draws parallels between the making of a nation and the writing of a life" (Holden 402), Natalie's language performs a similar linking between her life and Singapore's. Such a comparison invites an alternative imagining of Singapore: what does the Singapore Story look like from the vantage point of a middle-aged, diasporic, lesbian woman? The comparison generated by the phrase "as old as modern Singapore" also creates ambiguous meaning. Does Natalie believe she is indeed old? Or does she mean to suggest that Singapore itself is quite young? The dark and somewhat ominous closing of the passage, that the fate of Singapore is tied to Natalie's life, seems to be a way of foreshadowing later events in the novel, or to read the unfolding plot allegorically.

Not only does the novel suggest that Natalie's life is linked to Singapore's national time, but also Natalie's narration shows a certain fixation with comprehending and documenting time in exacting ways, suggesting that Natalie is highly conscious of time, as if her temporal attentiveness is meant to convey a specific timeline to her readers. Although times and dates in *Pulse* are not quite as pronounced as they might be if it were an epistolary novel, it is possible to recreate a timeline of the novel's plot. Time and dates are referenced in passing throughout Natalie's narration. At the beginning of the novel, we know that it is 12:40 pm when Natalie leaves the house (16) and that it only takes fifteen minutes for Natalie to walk to work, as indicated by the "LED clock [which]

⁵⁸ Salman Rushdie also did this with Saleem in *Midnight's Children*.

shows 12:55” (18) at the office, and that Natalie finally leaves work “[j]ust past 8.30 pm” (24).

Such timestamps enable a certain tracking of the narrative’s speed.⁵⁹ For example, the first chapter is plotted according to Natalie’s workday. This duration of the chapter’s time is comparatively shorter than the second chapter, a flashback memory of Natalie’s first meeting with Selim, which occurs as she stands, “listening to the silence of the street” (29). When the narrative returns to the present time of the novel in the third chapter with Natalie commenting, “Either the temperature has dropped drastically in the thirty minutes I’ve been standing, or I’m feeling a chill from recalling my chat with Selim in February two and a half years ago” (49), we realize that Natalie’s recounting of her memory takes place in the novel’s present. Besides a temporal consciousness, Natalie’s narration also provides a historical consciousness of the novel’s happenings. For example, we know that Natalie and Faridah broke up in 1975 (29), that Natalie’s grandfather died in January 1978 (16), that the Chia family emigrated to Toronto in 1979 (16), that Selim was born in 1980 (29), and that Natalie’s father had a stroke in February 2005 (31). In contrast to master narratives of history like the Singapore Story, where linearity is the norm, *Pulse* puts the onus on the reader to (re)order the novel’s timeline and thus subtly calls our attention to the ways historical narratives are normed.

In contrast to the ways that Natalie’s narration uses times and dates to index significant historical events, the sensory details that she provides offer a different mode of knowing. I take up bodily sensation and emotions at greater length in the next section, but one could turn to a number of other instances in which the sensory provides a less

⁵⁹Relatedly, narrative theorist Gérard Genette terms the difference between discourse time and narrative time as “duration.”

temporally determined mode of comprehension. Natalie's attention to sound and her musical associations provide an alternative narrative from which to comprehend the past. For example, when describing a difficult period during her life as a college student, a time that eventually led to her becoming an acupuncturist, Natalie says:

Music became my refuge. During sleep-deprived days, hauling myself from class to class, my mind turned to scenes from *The Hunger*. I kept myself fuelled listening to "Bela Lugosi's Dead." All through the nights in the genetics lab at Ramsay Wright. . . I heard the refrain of "Undead, undead, undead" echo through my loneliness. Walking home at 2:00 a.m., I would sing David Bowie: "Hunt you to the ground they will, mannequins with kill appeal." (19)

Many of the songs referenced in the above passage are not only dark in terms of their lyrics, but also the instrumentation itself provides a sense of the emotions that Natalie felt at the time without her describing them. Arguably, songs provide a temporal narrative because we can track when they were released. Ultimately, the songs are able to give a sense of the mood of this episode in Natalie's life and strongly foreground the issue of time and history. While music provides the readers with insight into Natalie's feelings, sound also functions as a mode of comprehension for her. In a passage when she is getting ready for work:

The news in Cantonese drifts in from the kitchen. I can tell that Mum is paying close attention because of the way she crunches crisp shrimp crackers. The rhythm of her snacking seems to track the tempo of the Toronto Chinese Radio announcer's voice. My mother uses her front

incisors like percussions instruments. When the announcer mentions the recent killings by Chris Benoit . . . the crunching stops momentarily, evidence of Mum's fascination with the case. (14)

The metalanguage of the above scene—in which we read Natalie reading her mother reading, or listening to her mother listening, depending on how one wants to frame it—illustrates the ways in which sound operates as a form of knowledge and comprehension. Indeed, the novel deserves an essay solely focused on the ways that Kwa enlists sound as a form of alternative knowledge. My point here is to give but a brief example in which knowledge formation is not temporally but rather sensorially based. Throughout the novel, alternative forms of knowledge, such as sound, contrast with Natalie's fixation with precisely marking time.

Another example of how *Pulse* challenges dominant tellings of the nation and the narratives that it enables is the fact of Selim's suicide. In the face of the state's biopolitical agenda that emphasizes the need for larger populations—and thus, heteronormative cultural values and procreation—to increase Singapore's human capital, the point that Selim's death becomes the story's point of departure is significant. By beginning with death, the novel works against the emphasis on youth and procreative life in current state discourse. It is from Selim's death as a young, model citizen that enables Natalie's story. Selim's suicide might even be read as a form of antidevelopmental protest against the state, as a refusal to comply with the state's agenda or let his body be read as a positive example of the state's values, despite being a model policeman. Such a resistance to state politics is even more evident, as I discuss in the next section, through

Natalie's queer sexuality and the ways the novel presents bodily sensation as a form of historical knowledge.

***Pulse* and erotohistory**

Queer Singapore is a particularly interesting, if fraught, site for engaging the competing dynamics of self-expression, Singapore's colonial and postcolonial history, and its aspirations to become a global city. Section 377a of the Penal Code, the legislature that allows for the criminalization of sex between men, is a legacy of British colonialism. In 2007, Parliament deliberated over whether to repeal this part of the Penal Code, but the initiative failed to pass and state officials cited conservative Asian Values as a critical reason to retain the penal code. As Laurence Leong Wai Teng points out: "Although Singapore officials invoke Asian culture, constructed as sexually conservative, to justify the selective retention of sex laws, the fact remains that these legal codes had Western origins in Victorian England" (587). Despite the ways that such primitive laws continue to repress those with same-sex desires between men, former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong has openly acknowledged the importance of the foreign LGBT community for Singapore's development as a global city (588). Using similar reasoning as with the example of having a visible "Overseas Singaporean Diaspora," the state has realized that having a visible queer community is necessary for its global city aspirations. As a result, queer expression in Singapore risks losing its counter-hegemonic edge if appropriated by the state and folded into its neoliberal agenda.

Within the spread of Singaporean literature more generally, *Pulse* is part of a burgeoning group of contemporary Singaporean texts in English that explore issues of sexuality. Given that Singapore is one of the few Asian countries that has yet to

decriminalize homosexuality, it almost goes without saying that the novel's queer themes are a significant contribution to Singaporean literature and understandings of Singaporean culture. When we further consider that issues of LGBTQ identity have mostly been explored through theater and drama and poetry and that the two most well-known novels are gay coming-out stories, *Pulse* stands out as an even more radical text for its exploration of lesbian desire and queer expression.

The novel's focus on a middle-aged, queer, diasporic woman is significant for the ways it unsettles the heteronormative and reproductive logics that undergird Singapore's neoliberal nationalism. In a sense, we might think of Natalie as a foil to Chiah Deng from *Mammon Inc.* in Chapter Three, whose story of model mobility and youth more positively illustrate the ways neoliberal nationalism rely on genealogical ties and notions of economic success. To take a phrase from Gayatri Gopinath, it is the "impossibility" of subjects like Natalie, or the "illegibility and unrepresentability of a non-heteronormative female subject within patriarchal and heterosexual configurations of both nation and diaspora" (16) that enables a critique of dominant formations of nationalism. Even though Singaporean legislation takes a clearly homophobic stance, lesbians are ignored; Section 377A of the Penal Code criminalizes only sex between two men. As feminist scholars such as Anne McClintock point out, it is women's reproductive abilities that are of importance to the nation—women serve as reproducers, symbols, producers, transmitters, and participants in patriarchal nationalism (105-106). In the Singaporean context, this certainly rings true; for decades now, Singaporean women and their ability to reproduce has been a central economic concern for the state. In 1983, the state--stirred by former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's remarks that highly-educated women were

not married or producing enough babies for the economy--instituted tax-incentives and other monetary motivations for women with university education to have children and for low-income and under educated women to be sterilized before the age of thirty after one or two children (Teng 582). Though Lee's eugenics logic no longer dictates Singapore's demographic policies, the state continues to give monetary incentives to women to encourage procreation and by extension to promote heterosexual privilege. In other words, women's bodies are crucial for maintaining heteronormativity. Although Natalie, in the form of filial piety, seemingly subscribes to the Asian Values discourse that the Singaporean state so strongly promotes, as an unmarried woman who is past her reproductive years at forty-eight, she is of little use for the state's economic agenda. Natalie's ability to successfully make a living as someone who heals bodies through a decidedly ancient, non-western practice such as Chinese acupuncture further serves as an ironic comment on the Singaporean state's biopolitical logics and emphasis on producing human capital to maintain a competitive edge in a global market.

Natalie's diasporic identity allows for a critical distance from her former home and a consciousness of the state's neoliberal agenda, but in a way which only haunts the edges of the novel. For example, towards the end of the novel, when Natalie is in her hotel room in Singapore and flipping through the television, she comes across the airing of Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's annual National Day speech:

The prime minister's speech starts out with a list of all the excellent achievements Singapore and its citizens have accomplished. He reports on the economic growth and productivity of the country. How different his style is from his father's. In the early days, our first prime minister

emphasized Singapore's vulnerability at the hands of the Communists.

(249)

As he does every year, the Prime Minister's speech discusses the importance of economic progress and prosperity for the nation. This scene is the only explicit mention of state politics and one that does not obviate a connection between Natalie's queer identity and the state's conservative stance towards homosexuality—the speech is not about sexuality in any way. As indicated by the possessive shift from “Singapore and its citizens” to “our prime minister,” however, the passage illustrates something of Natalie's more distant and diasporic positioning in relation to the state. Although Natalie feels removed from current Singapore and does not include herself as part of it, the use of “our” indicates her identification with an older generation of Singaporean citizens who lived through the years of decolonization. Natalie's emotional distance from Singapore is further emphasized as the passage continues after the speech ends and Natalie marvels at the “[v]ery grandiose” (250) National Day festivities on the television. Natalie's amazement and puzzlement at the scale and nature of the patriotic celebrations underscores her lack of familiarity and remove from Singapore's national scene. As with the opening scene of the novel in which Natalie observes the neighborhood children playing in the street through the privacy of her home, Natalie watches the performance of Singaporean neoliberal culture through a television screen. While this scene likewise comments on the absence of queer subjects in the national scene, the fleetingness and inconsequentiality of the passage within the scheme of the novel also indicates the peripheral role of the Singaporean state in Natalie's life.

Queer critique is subtle in Kwa's novel and does not play out in confrontational ways. Perhaps surprisingly, despite the oppressive politics of the Singaporean state, very little of the novel specifically takes up the suppression of queer identity. The strongest antagonism Natalie faces in terms of her queerness comes not from the Singaporean state, but from Faridah's husband, Adam. In his depiction of same-sex desire as unnatural, Adam, who is also Singaporean, undoubtedly reflects some of the state's homophobic logic. In Natalie and Adam's first direct exchange during a dinner in Faridah's home, he makes clear his homophobia when, after he learned about Canada's laws that allow for gay marriage, he comments: "That's pushing it, don't you think? I mean, we need to be tolerant, but..." (202). In his specific attention to law and his depiction of Canada as the liberal west, Adam's homophobia is expressed through an occidentalist, national framework. In this sense, Adam echoes state discourse most rampant in the 1990s, which cast homosexuality as a threat to Asian Values. Although Adam does not refer directly to Asian Values, he does rely on the binary logics of east versus west, which are endemic to Asian Values discourse. In a later scene, Adam makes an unexpected and drunken visit to Natalie to tell her, "I don't mind if you still want to sleep with my wife. I mean, help her get it out of her system. I don't care" (207). Natalie challenges Adam's homophobia, and when the scene escalates and becomes physical, Natalie, not Adam, triumphs. Although it would be a stretch to read Adam as allegorical for the state, Natalie's two altercations with Adam represent the clearest and most oppositional moments in the novel in terms of queer politics. That Adam is a fairly minor character and that such scenes pass rather fleetingly suggest a greater interest on the part of the author in exploring Natalie's queer identity and queer politics through less confrontational ways.

The ways in which we understand Natalie's queer identity throughout the novel tend to take the form of indirect characterization. The lack of oppositional moments throughout the novel exemplifies what Joshua J. Weiner and Damon Young describe as "lateral homoknowledge," or the forms of knowledge that "operate to the side of the fascinated projections of a phobic heterosexist order" (228). As the authors ask in their special issue of *GLQ*, "is there a queerness today that is not *only* produced through an act of determinate negation and phobic interpellation, as the repudiated projection of heterosexuality *is not*?" (228, emphasis in original). The authors further argue that though oppositional politics have been central to queer critique, queerness is not "exclusively oppositional" (229). In a similar way, Kwa's exploration of queerness through Natalie rarely engages oppositional politics.

Pulse performs a queer critique of race through themes of visibility and invisibility. Early in the novel, after reading the shocking letter from Faridah, Natalie walks home, taking a brief break at a liquor store: "I pause in front of the LCBO before I turn onto Baldwin. Wish I could push away the feelings welling up inside me. I count thirteen whites and four people of color going in or out of the liquor store. Ridiculous habit, but at least it distracts" (28). Noting the tangible details of the scene in front of her, Natalie focuses on the racial makeup of those on the street as a way of comforting herself, in much the same way as she previously observed the details of the envelope. Natalie's observations confirm people of color as, to use Canadian parlance, "visible minorities." Her acknowledgement that her counting is a "ridiculous habit" indicates that this is not the first time Natalie has taken her own racial census of those around her, suggesting that she has a longstanding awareness of race. If this passage illustrates

Natalie's consciousness of race, it also has the subtle effect of illustrating the ways in which queerness and sexuality are not equally legible within the color-conscious policies of multiculturalism. That physical details such as color act as a counterpoint and way of containing Natalie's emotions also speaks to the difference in rational and emotional understandings of the world which becomes a significant theme in the novel.

Similarly, the novel also illustrates the ways that the politics of "visible minorities" obscure Natalie's Singaporean-Chinese identity in the context of Canada because such policies are unable to capture the nuances of national difference amongst ethnic groups. Although Singaporean, Natalie's identity is only made legible through the Cantonese immigrant communities from Hong Kong:

Thanks to coming to this church, I've improved my Cantonese. I might even pass as a Hong Konger. It doesn't matter to me that I don't have the same kind of faith as many others at this church. There's virtue in keeping certain secrets. What matters is that my parents have found a community of people to share life with. (89)

We see that Natalie does not just assimilate to a white Canadian majority, but rather to a particularly dominant ethnic community. Natalie's language makes clear that she sees the value of being part of a larger community and in fact treasures the "secrets" of her dissimilar faith. In many respects, Natalie's Singaporean identity is also largely a secret within this context because Singaporean identity and history cannot be expressed in the North American context. Unlike immigrants from Hong Kong, immigrants from Singapore, who are much more heterogeneous in terms of ethnicity, language, and religion, do not have the same avenues of legible expressive culture.

Another one of the novel's lines of queer critique is apparent through the way it resists national time, which is evident through the narrative provided by Natalie's emotions and physical sensation. I have already made similar claims earlier in this chapter in my discussion of the way *Pulse* destabilizes conventional novelistic narratives that emphasize causality and sequentiality. Although my reading of Natalie's physical sensation similarly emphasizes the ways such a narrative takes on an anti-developmental stance, here I am emphasizing the queerness of the perspective and critique that such a narrative offers through a method Elizabeth Freeman describes as "erotohistoriography."⁶⁰ Freeman writes:

Erotohistoriography is distinct from the desire for a fully present past, a restoration of bygone times. Erotohistoriography does not write the lost object into the present so much as encounter it as already in the present, by treating the present itself as hybrid. And it uses the body as a tool to effect, figure, or perform that encounter. Erotohistoriography admits that contact with historical materials can be precipitated by particular bodily dispositions, and that these connections may elicit bodily responses, even pleasurable ones, that are themselves a form of understanding. It sees the body as a method, and historical consciousness as something intimately involved with corporeal sensations. (95)

For Freeman, erotohistoriography works against the privileging of cognitive modes of understanding history rather than sensory ones (95). Moreover, erotohistoriography refuses the too easy separation often made between past and present. Through Natalie's

⁶⁰ Also relevant here is Judith Halberstam's notion of queer time as taken from *a Queer Time and Space*. Halberstam writes: "I try to use the concept of queer time to make clear how respectability, and notions on the normal on which it depends, may be upheld by a middle-class logic of reproductive temporality" (4).

constant shivers, quivers, and shudders throughout the novel, *Pulse* performs an erotohistoriography, one that refuses to situate the past as static and distinct from the present and one that, to quote Freeman, “intervene[s] into the material damage done in the name of development, civilization, and so on” (120). In the context of Singapore, where the past is framed as distant and mostly used to justify economic development, the stakes of such a queer mode of apprehending the past is significant because it reclaims history as something other than an instrument of power. Quite simply, Natalie’s encounters with the past challenge the norms of historical inquiry and representation.

Depending on the time in Natalie’s life from which the passage is narrated from, Natalie’s shivers and shudders represent fear, recognition, or sexual arousal. Before discussing the ways that these seemingly unrelated emotions connect in the novel, I will first go over them separately, beginning with fear.

In most of the passages that take place during Natalie’s childhood in Singapore, shivering emphasizes the anxiety and trauma that surround Natalie’s relationship with her father. One example comes early in the novel, during a scene that we realize later is significant for the way it stands out in Natalie’s memory. The Chias are celebrating Chinese New Year with a large family dinner, but Papa is absent and no one is sure where he is. After starting to eat, Natalie’s father shows up at the family doorstep, bloodied and injured from an altercation. Already feeling anxiety from the bickering at dinner, upon seeing her father, Natalie’s emotional distress takes on a full physical expression: “I shivered, the hairs on my neck standing on end. My whole body started to shake uncontrollably” (83). Though Natalie tries to keep away from the scene of commotion, Papa grabs Natalie and, in an apparent bad mood, scolds her for scratching

the rash on her hands and threatens to cut off her fingers. Later in the novel, whenever Natalie recalls the traumatic memory of this scene, it is accompanied with a physical response. For example, in another scene, this time as an older child: “They [the rash on her fingers] didn’t flare up as much these days compared to when I was six. Like that time when Papa came home on Chinese New Year’s Eve and threatened to snip my fingers off. I shuddered from the memory” (109). The very memory of her bodily reaction comes to represent the extent of the trauma that Natalie felt, as indicated in a scene narrated from Natalie’s point of view as an adult: “I think of that night in 1965 when Papa arrived late for Chinese New Year’s Eve at my grandparents’ house. How terrified I was when Papa threatened to cut off my fingers if I didn’t stop peeling. My body shook for a long time after” (88). As a physical sensation that cannot be consciously produced, Natalie’s shivers illustrate for readers the magnitude and depth of her fear. When considering that much of the novel is concerned with the process of healing from childhood trauma, Natalie’s shivers have implications for the way we should understand the degree of pain and difficulty Natalie’s relationship with her father causes her. Although Natalie’s shivering in the above examples is not necessarily unexpected or surprising—shivering is well-understood as a psychosomatic sensation related to a body’s fight or flight reaction—what becomes interesting is the way that fear later connects with other emotions in the novel.

Natalie’s shivering also marks moments in which she recognizes the ways history forges an unexpected connection between herself and Selim. Early in the novel when Natalie first learns of Selim’s suicide, Faridah tells Natalie that she used to tell Selim about the abuse that Natalie faced during her youth in Singapore. Although she learns

that for Selim, who was abused by his father Adam, these stories were comforting, Natalie is shocked to realize the ways the two are related: “A chilling shudder passes through me. I imagine a young boy of ten become aware of a bond between his mother’s friend and him, that he and I were joined together because we had both been marked by our father’s rage. I feel sick again” (55). Time and history here is queer, discontinuous, and complicated. It is only in Selim’s death that Natalie is aware of the role of her past in Selim’s life—Natalie’s past was Selim’s present. But at this moment, Selim’s life is now past history and playing a role in Natalie’s present as she works to reconcile her past. History, in this case, does not build continuously with a cumulative effect, but to draw from Walter Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” “flashes” up in unexpected ways and is registered in Natalie’s consciousness through bodily affect. We later learn that Natalie is already aware of her queer bond with Selim through their shared interest in kinbaku, a Japanese form of erotic bondage, but her realization that the two also share the experience of trauma and abuse at the hands of their respective fathers adds another layer of complexity to their unexpected relation.

Natalie’s shivers also mark moments of arousal. For example, in a scene that recalls the beginnings of Natalie and Faridah’s sexual relationship, shivers illustrate Natalie’s desire:

With her hands on my shoulders, Faridah pushed me gently back, until I was up against the frangipani tree with the deep pink flowers. I could feel the rough, coarse texture of the bark against my blouse and pinafore. It didn’t hurt. It was a pleasant sensation, as if the skin on my back was becoming awakened by that unusual, uneven pressure. . . She pinched

open my shirt collar with one hand and then dropped the figure right in.

Godzilla landed between my small breasts, nestled in my recently acquired white Maidenform bra. I felt his cold presence and shivered. (168)

With Natalie's burgeoning awareness of her lesbian desire comes an attentiveness to her corporeality as indicated by the feeling of her clothes—her blouse, pinafore, and bra—and of the tree trunk on her back and the Godzilla figurine, a memento of their relationship, on her chest. Also notable is the ambiguous symbolism of the frangipani tree that frames the scene. On one hand the vaginal imagery of the “deep pink flowers” seems to represent the blossoming of Natalie and Faridah's lesbian desire. Within the Southeast Asian context, however, the frangipani holds a more ominous association of death and cemeteries because it is a flower connected with the Pontianak, or vengeful vampiric ghosts in Malay and Indonesian folklore. According to such folklore, the Pontianak are the spirits of women who died while pregnant and prey on men. One of the indicators of a Pontianak is the scent of the frangipani flower. Outside of this particular scene, there is room to read Faridah as a Pontianak figure—we later learn that Faridah dies in a more figurative sense when she is pregnant with her first child, Gabriel, who was stillborn. The above scene suggests the more specific cultural and historical context that is at work in Natalie and Faridah's lesbian desires.

As indicated by parallel imagery and sensation, the memory of Faridah and the intersection of history and sexual desire also play a part in Natalie's sexual relations with her girlfriend, Michelle. Much like the scene with Faridah that is bordered by white and pink flowers, reddish colors tinge the scene with Natalie and Michelle as Natalie views the moon behind Toronto's CN Tower: “the voluptuous moon looks ready to mount the

phallus, shifting from the red in the midsection to purple, with the tip showing a hint of carmine” (122). Though the phallic image of the CN Tower in the scene might seem to be about masculinity, the moon’s mounting signifies feminine sexuality and power by signifying envelopment. After reading a tanka poem by Akiko Yosano and as she prepares for their kinbaku session, Natalie realizes the similarities between her relationship with Faridah and now with Michelle:

I close the book as a shiver of recognition runs down my back. I’m not sure of myself tonight. Not sure how steady my hands could be. Truth can be rather unpleasant. . . I return the book to the side table and reach under the bed, lift the coils of hemp rope to my face and inhale. Smells from that other time arrive unbidden. The grassy sweet smell of jute sacks, their tops rolled down to display the varieties of rice, pulses, and dried red chilies. Hemp, like jute, exudes a raw scent, reminds me of the urgency of my needs. (123)

Much like her learning of the synchronicity of her and Selim’s lives, Natalie’s shiver here also indicates the parallels between her relationships. As with Faridah, Natalie never fully opens up about her abusive past with Michelle and as a result, feels loneliness and isolation. Yet despite the trauma and sadness Natalie associates with her life in Singapore, the kinbaku rope invokes sensory memory and arouses her. It is in this scene we also learn that the significance of “pulse” extends beyond the allusion to Natalie’s acupuncture practice and her ability to diagnose bodies by reading their pulse. When described amongst other staple ingredients used in Singaporean cooking—rice and chilies—we realize that “pulse” can alternatively refer to the seeds of a legume plant.

Thus “pulse” refers not just to a biological sign of life, but also signifies a lesbian continuum and feminine aesthetic because of the clitoral imagery of “pulses.”

Because kinbaku has roots in Japanese torture practices for war prisoners, Natalie’s bondage practices also allude to Japanese colonialism in Singapore. Although a practice that began in Japan around the nineteenth century, in the context of the novel, kinbaku’s association of war and torture creates an association with the Japanese occupation of Singapore during World War II. The above moment of queer desire invokes history, or “that other time,” which is not a just a time relegated to the past, but central to the erotic encounter in the present. As the scene continues, we see the ways that Natalie attempts to recreate the same erotic sensations she first felt with Faridah:

Sitting cross-legged across from her, I caress her very slowly. Up and down the length of her spine . . . My slow deliberation is traced along her back where the yin channels run, hidden to the world, private and receptive. . . While kissing her, I gently nudge her face back until the rope makes contact with her nape. She shivers but says nothing. (123-124)

With the uneven and rough textures of the rope, Natalie recreates the sensation of the frangipani tree trunk on her back for Michelle. That Natalie tries to reconstruct some of her past in a scene of pleasure and transfer her sensations to her new lover’s, despite the aftermath of emotional pain that she associates with Faridah, calls attention to the ambiguous division between pleasure and pain.

Taken together, shivers connect pleasure and pain and the past and present. In presenting encounters with history as an erotic encounter or visceral reaction, the novel

refuses the pressures of a modernizing time that situates the past as only relevant if it has an economic bearing on the present.

Compared to the state-authored texts in Chapters One and Two, we see a very different use of how bodies are used to narrate national histories. In the examples of the state texts, diasporic bodies are configured to appear as an imagined population—the focus is on the exteriors of bodies. Such an arrangement is especially apparent in *Singaporean Abroad* which, as I point out, gives no sense of the interior lives of Singaporeans living abroad. *Pulse* is very much the opposite—it almost entirely focused on Natalie’s interior. For Natalie to feel history as bodily sensation rather than rationalize history is a feminist and queer intervention into dominant modes of telling history.⁶¹

Conclusion

Pulse is a complex novel, one that calls our attention to the place of queer diasporic bodies across transnational space and time. Though *Pulse*, like the other texts in this project engages Singapore and its diaspora, Kwa’s novel differs in its refusal to directly contest state power. The novel’s attention to the place of bodies, desire, and corporeal sensation as sites of comprehending history and its effects intervenes into dominant forms of nationalism in the context of Singapore where bodies are read through economic productivity and human capital.

Although the novel makes subtly incisive political critiques of the contexts it deals with, it is limited in terms of the class critique it can offer. Through his reading of

⁶¹ Because of my reliance on Freeman’s notion of erotohistoriography, my reading has mostly understood the significance of bodily sensation through a queer lens. It is worth noting, however, that the significance of bodies is not limited to issues of sexuality. For example, issues of the body and corporeality figure prominently in David Palumbo-Liu’s *Asian/American*: “The Body, as a somatic entity that exists within the contingencies of time and space, desire, need, gratification and denial, thus helps us maintain a sense of Asian America as imbricated in material history—specifically, immigration, economic, gender, and racial history” (6).

Karl Marx's *The German Ideology*, Roderick Ferguson reminds us of the ways that class critique has relied on a normalizing of heteropatriarchal order. The opposite seems to be true of *Pulse*. In its queer critique, class privilege goes unquestioned and is normalized within the novel—quite unlike in Kwa's earlier work *This Place Called Absence*. Though not radical in terms of its class politics, Natalie's class privilege enables a queer diasporic critique and opens up interesting questions about the contradictions of sexuality and class. Despite the novel's lack of attention to class, the queer diasporic aspects of *Pulse* make it a significantly transgressive novel. *Pulse* makes a valuable contribution to Singapore literature and literary studies because its transnational perspective challenges the workings of the Singaporean and Canadian nation-states and their accompanying ideologies of heteronormativity and multiculturalism.

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