AUDREY YUE

Paging “New Asia”:

Sambal Is a Feedback Loop,

Coconut Is a Code,

Rice Is a System

The recent emergence of Singapore as a regional New Asian center reflects how cultural policy functions as a technology of sexuality associated with institutions, practices, and discourses, as management, economics, and citizenship. “Singapore-as-New Asia” designs the nation as a cultural template for the region and directs a contradictory practice of consumption that is both Oriental and Occidental, global and particular, urban and exotic.¹ “Singapore 21” promotes the ideal Singapore society by emphasizing the preservation of family values and active participation as citizens.² “Dot.com the nation” restructures the media by adhering to the “nation-building role and fostering community values.”³ The congruence of government, economy, and population has produced culture as a field of “social management,” as a system of training competence in order to situate and alter the forms of conduct of a citizenry.⁴

At the heart of these postcolonial, postmodern, and developmental capitalist processes of modernization is the force of “New Asia” as a homogenizing strategy of regionality.⁵ The past few decades of globalization in late capitalism have witnessed the realignment of people, capital, and markets through different and disjunctive modes of deterritorialization and reterritorialization, from supra, transnational, national, intra, and virtual to the local and the everyday. Spivak’s provocative metaphor of “globe-girdling” suggestively points to the global effects of regionality as a hegemonic process of unequal development to create a global presence of the information-rich

at the expense of the technologically poor.⁶ By emphasizing economic success through the neo-Orientalizing ideology of shared Asian values, the discursive construct of New Asia highlights the rise of a new hegemonic Asian class that exposes the geographical materialist politics of representation.

Singapore's top-down policy codes engineer techniques and produce practices that interconnect with a regional New Asian sexuality. The regulation of the Internet and the endorsement of new media and their consumption reveal how Singapore's emergent queer culture has become an ambiguous site for the exercise of power.⁷ This culture problematizes the governmentality of the social by actively participating in the operative procedures of such technologies and turning them into different modalities of dissent. With modern images promoting positive role models, resistant politics highlighting an emergent minority movement, and transnationally queer identities mediating new forms of connectivity, this presence has made Singapore's subterranean gay and lesbian communities visible through and in spite of the ambiguous relationship surrounding globalization and the local policing of queer.

This essay argues that Singapore's transnational Queer'n'Asian modernity celebrates cultural citizenship through the consumption of shared Asian values and constitutes a politics that has witnessed the rise of a New Asian class. It demonstrates the formation of this culture by examining the different consumption practices of new media technologies by lesbian communities in Singapore, its diaspora, and its cyberspace. I show how the constitution of a regional sexuality, processed and navigated through cybernetic rice as a new system for representing New Asia, reveals the hegemony of New Asia as a class that is used to sustain a normalizing vision of modernity as a narrative of progress. "Paging 'New Asia'" highlights technology as a mark of the modern New Asian queer present, as a device that attends to the exigency of how a community makes itself present by calling out the stakes and challenges involved in the creation of new identities and belongings.

Introducing the Cybernetic Force of New Asia

The hegemony of New Asia is a force similar to Gibsonian cyberspace as a form of "consensual hallucination."⁸ Not coincidentally, Chua also states that the Gramscian form of consensus is the key marker of the success of the

Singapore–New Asian ideology.⁹ Others have accounted for Singapore-as-New Asia through its political economy and economic consumption;¹⁰ I argue here that another way to decode the impact of such a force is through cybernetics and its system of coding and reproducing information.

Information, as a form of Virilian speed-space, after all, underpins the rapid progress of Singapore's new global informational capitalist economy. The rise of new media has witnessed the revaluation of information as data to image, exchange, and capital.¹¹ The theory of cybernetics helps to explain how New Asian regional sexuality is characterized by a consumption of Asian values organized in a system that restructures information as New Asian capital. Norbert Wiener's idea of cybernetics as a technoscience that explains both organic and machinic processes as parts of information systems has resulted in many developments in Western culture that have contributed to our current cyborg age.¹² By emphasizing the theorization of cybernetics as a mechanism for the organization of information based on the structure and the representation of information,¹³ the trajectory I propose in this essay is to move away from the technologically deterministic or euphorically utopic tropes that have been deployed in the theorization of the cyborg.

The *cyber* of cybernetics is derived from the Greek word *kubernétés*, meaning "steersman," or *kubernan*, for "control" or "navigate." As a study of the systems for controlling the travel of information, the fundamental feature of cybernetics is its computational capacity for feedback or recursion. Feedback is the return of part of an output (receiver) to an input (sender). I examine feedback as a device that interrogates the regime of the input by its ability to alter the characteristics of an input.¹⁴ A linear or digital system organizes information hierarchically from the top down; a nonlinear or analog system self-organizes information chaotically from the bottom up.¹⁵ My objective is to show how "cybernetic rice" functions as both a linear and a nonlinear system that codes a New Asian regional sexuality. Exposing the structure of cybernetic rice will produce a critique of the modernization of Singapore–New Asian lesbian cultures, and allows for the emergence of a Queer ('n') Asian modernity that can account for class. The following case study attends to such a task in two stages. First, I demonstrate the rise of a transnational and diasporic Singapore–New Asian lesbian class using rice as a network for making intelligible the discourse of *SAMBAL*, an acronym for Singapore and Malaysian Bisexual and

Lesbian Network.¹⁶ I examine SAMBAL as a diasporic film, *Sambal Belacan in San Francisco* (Madeleine Lim, 1997) and as an electronic mailing list (e-SAMBAL) to reveal *sambal* as a feedback loop. My aim here is to show how information travels and which tactics of recursion relate to which specific classes of lesbian cultures. I contrast this by concluding with the use of paging technologies by lesbians in Singapore to argue that the consumption of different technologies produces different identities that expose the politics of class. This politics delineates a regional New Asian sexuality steered through the cybernetic emergence of “rice” and functions as a cultural formation of transnational Queer (’n’) Asian modernity. Such a formation expresses its progress by calling to task the effect of its own hegemonic force.

Sambal Is a Feedback Loop,
Coconut Is a Code, Rice Is a System

Sambal belacan is very hot, very aromatic and it’s shrimp paste and fresh pounded chili, red chili, and how we eat it is with squeezed lime, like you mix it with the rice and you eat it in the rice and in the food . . . *lemak* is a dish that you always eat with *sambal belacan*. . . . *Sambal belacan* is pounded chili that’s not completely smooth.

The above voice-over begins the documentary *Sambal Belacan in San Francisco* (SBSF), an award-winning short film by American-based Singaporean lesbian filmmaker Madeleine Lim.¹⁷ The film documents the lives of some members of SAMBAL, a support group for Singapore and Malaysian bisexuals and lesbians in San Francisco. Since 1995, SAMBAL has also been archived as a closed electronic mailing list. E-SAMBAL is the first electronic mailing list for lesbians from the Singapore-Malaysian region. At its peak, a two hundred-odd strong membership spanned Singapore and Malaysia, as well as the Singapore and Malaysian diaspora in Australia, the United States, Canada, and Japan. Like most electronic mailing lists organized around shared interests, e-SAMBAL recalls Rheingold’s conceptualization of a virtual community through its primary function as a forum for com-

munity announcements, communication among its members, and diasporic outreach.¹⁸

Sambal belacan is a signifier for the affirmative project of Singapore lesbians in San Francisco, expressing a particular Singaporean lesbian diasporic politics through a self-conscious practice of how food can be made to code and recode. As a playful reclamation of Asian sexual stereotyping, its material signification speaks through the gendered and sexualized discourses of the relationship between migrant Asian women and food. Enough has been written on this topic and there is no need to repeat it here. Suffice it to say that the stereotypes of migrant Asian women as sexualized exotic objects and piece workers expose consumption as a contradictory practice discordant with the politics of diasporic Asian lesbian sexuality.

The film uses food (and the practices of eating and cooking) as a site for (diasporic) cultural maintenance and negotiation. In addition to the visibility project of political organizing (e.g., Pride marches, conferences, workshops), one of *SAMBAL*'s most regular activities is the monthly potluck. *SBSF* chronicles the ritual of this practice through the labor of food preparation that culminates in a reenacted potluck sequence. Here, a voice-over reminds us of the limitations of Anderson's imagined community when food functions not just as a site of comfort, but also as a moment of contestation of disjunctive heritages, traditions, and sexual identities.¹⁹ As a source of "home" comfort, the potluck serves its imagined community function when *SAMBAL*, as a group and as an acronym, expresses a shared identity organized through food as a mobile (monthly) site of belonging. In this instance, sambal belacan materializes as a sexy project of collective Singapore-Malaysian-diasporic-lesbian identity: hot, aromatic, pounded, raw, mixed.

Such practices surrounding food and eating also expose the material force of its construction. As a form of food, sambal belacan is the type of side dish that, like pickles and condiments, on its own is pungently and tastefully inedible, or so my refined taste buds constantly remind me. Rather, consuming sambal belacan requires a form of cultural capital that is acquired through the privilege of shared knowledge, in this instance, a particular discourse about the history of its heritage, the function of its materiality, and the practice of its culture. Its (culinary) potency lies in its preparation, its mix, and its mode of presentation. The film's gastronomic

advice, and correctly so, is that in its orthodoxy, sambal belacan works only to the extent that it is mixed in with coconut (lemak) and served with rice.

Coconuts and rice are essentially Asian and diasporic Asian. The cultural history of coconuts exposes the quintessential forbidden delights of the stereotyped sexualized image of Asia consumed in the West, with idyllic beaches, tropical sun, and mail-order Asian brides. Coconuts, like bananas, are also codes for Westernized Asians, who are “brown on the outside and white on the inside.” Enough has also been written about such signifiers as the coconut as an ideological relay for the fetish and disavowal of Asian femininity, sexuality, and ethnicity through the technology of its image and its racial science. *SBSF* recuperates this image, not by inversion or turning it inside out, but by mediating it through the Asian diaspora. Where else but in a Westernized Asia can the coconut make sense, in what Butler has eloquently termed the historicity of its force of oppression, as the postcolonial genealogy of racism (and consequently self-internalized racism).²⁰ While *SBSF* narrativizes the racism experienced by its cast in San Francisco, from immigration policies to isolation in the mainstream gay and lesbian community, what the film recodes is an identity that can be expressed only through the historicity of the lemak. By making sambal belacan intelligible (or, indeed, edible), the coconut functions as a (renewed) code for a sexual politics of displacement mediated through the technology of food. The material force of the coconut produces *SAMBAL* as an emergent and diasporic possibility in its construction and representation by destroying its abject status through its constitution as a platform for engaging with the specificity of a diasporic New Asian lesbian politics.

Such a politics engages the West (in the film, San Francisco), the diaspora (in the film, overseas Singaporean lesbians), and the homeland (in the film, Singapore) in a feedback loop that produces and organizes information as New Asian capital. New Asian capital refers to the new economic wealth evident in the developmental rise of Asia in the past two decades. It is also characterized by cultural capital, whereby a taste around New Asia becomes a form of classification and a class emerges through the acquisition of such shared values.²¹ Let's take the central motif of the film, for example, to examine how diasporic New Asian lesbian identity is constituted through a discourse of value.²² The narrative reveals the homesickness experienced by the three lesbians through interviews and newsreel footage that recount the memories of and desires for their families in

Singapore. The foregrounding of the family discourse, made (more) “objective” by the documentary talking-head device, exposes how the discourse of shared (family) values underpinning the ideology of New Asia functions as a hegemonic force. For the three interlocutors, diasporic Singapore lesbian identity is narrated through the irreducibility of cultural difference; the values of a San Franciscan lesbian sexuality are at odds with the values of being a good Singaporean daughter. Shared Asian family values become the neo-Orientalist motif that makes explicit the film’s narrative of displacement: homesickness and daily reminders of outsidership are constructed through the yearning for family and their homes in Singapore.

Such an instance highlights the discourse of shared Asian values as an “exchange of sacrifice and gain”²³ to reconcile the values accorded a good Singaporean daughter and a diasporic Singaporean lesbian. As suggested earlier, at the core of cybernetics is the processing of information through the ability of the machine to use the results of its own performance as self-regulating information.²⁴ Information denotes whatever can be coded for transmission through a channel that connects a source (homeland) with a receiver (diaspora), regardless of semantic content. Here, information does not reveal a retrieval of data or facts; rather, information is transformed to an exchange value connoted by New Asian capital. As the “negative” (psychical) condition of homesickness and displacement can arguably be “lessened” or leveled out through a positive feedback, a positive feedback can be said to be represented by an exchange of New Asian consciousness, evident in the film’s thematic preoccupation with the familial discourse. This suggests that diasporic New Asian sexual identity requires the acquisition of cultural citizenship through the consumption of shared family values. Such a quest recalls the self-regulating technology of the Singapore 21 cultural policy, where citizenship is patterned out of an active process of consumption. Clearly, policy lends itself as an agent for sexuality in a cybernetic system that institutionalizes the force of New Asian consciousness in a hierarchy from top/homeland/source to bottom/diaspora/receiver. A diasporic New Asian regional sexuality is thus characterized by a belonging to Singapore-as-New Asia, and by extension, a form of New Asian cultural citizenship consisting of ascribing a value equivalence to New Asian consciousness compatible to the ideology of shared Asian (and family) values. I argue that cybernetic rice becomes the system by which the acquisition of citizenship is enabled.

Cybernetic Rice

Rice highlights a unique relationship among food, trade, and technology. A luxury crop that is preferred in Asia as superior to other grains, the technological innovations evident in the cultivation of rice have revolutionized and modernized the region.²⁵ Its status as a primary commodity has shaped links between countries and the development of the land, in particular within Asia and across the world.²⁶ Its cultivation as staple and surplus has produced rice cultures that are characterized by “sculpturation” networks and practices.²⁷ From the engineering of terraces, the conduits of irrigation canals, and the changes in social structures, rice has refashioned the landscape to engender an intricate connection among technological systems, everyday life, and global trade. This connectivity resonates with how, as a metaphor, rice can be made to speak to the current contradictory forces of informational capitalism, identity production, and cultural governance.

Cybernetic rice is both a linear and a nonlinear system of representing information organized around “rice” as a signifier for diasporic New Asian gay and lesbian sexuality. As a linear system of informational flows from top/homeland to bottom/diaspora, cybernetic rice reinforces the hegemony of New Asia by commodifying Asian values as New Asian capital. As a nonlinear system of informational flows from bottom/diaspora to top/homeland, cybernetic rice decenters the hegemony of New Asia by appropriating New Asian capital as New Asian body politic. This politic exposes a transnational New Asian sexuality as a diasporic class.

In the film, the serving of rice with sambal and coconut reveals the central function connoted by “rice” as a structure that makes sambal possible as a recursive or feedback device. Like the coconut, rice has functioned as a stereotype for Asians in the West. As a geographical material culture, it is both a staple food and a mode of production constituted in a regional network facilitating the exchange of ideas, food, and resources. Soja recently suggested that one way to map the governmentality of regionality is by understanding how urban agglomeration functions. He uses the ancient Greek word, *synekism*, to refer to regional settlements under a center, and to imply a form of “urban-based governmentality . . . as well as . . . an interconnected network of settlements . . . interacting within defined and defining *regional* boundaries.”²⁹ The film reveals such a system of governmentality when belonging as (Singapore) citizens requires the taking up of New

Asian values as a sexual identity organized around regionality. Recalling the Latin root of the term, *regere*, meaning “to rule,” the incorporation of shared Asian values in *SBSF* shows the centering of regionality by positioning a discursive New Asia as a regional center. As a signifier for an economy that organizes the defining social order of Asians, the hegemony of rice reveals cybernetic rice as a linear system of rendering meaning from top/homeland to bottom/diaspora.

However, in recent years, “rice” has also been reappropriated by Asians in the West and has become an affective force for new diasporic formations. Consider, for example, the recent phenomenon of the rice boy in the West. A rice boy, or a rice rocket, is an Asian identified by his car and what he does to it. The rice boy usually drives a Japanese car, but unlike a normal performance enthusiast, he is more concerned with the image of speed than performance.³⁰ The rise of the rice boy is connected to the rise of the New Rich in Asia, where sustained economic growth in the past two decades has translated into a rapid expansion of consumerism as part of daily life. Chua writes that the body has emerged as the site for consumerism with “adornment as its primary modality.”³¹ The image of speed becomes a form of New Asian capital that expresses a resistance to the body politic of (emasculated) Asian masculinity in the West. Here, the desire for Occidental muscularity is displaced by the display of materialism: Western consumption (purchase of cars)/Eastern practice (adornment of cars), globally familiar (branding)/regionally specific (customizing), modern (urban street savvyness, road-wise)/tradition (amateur “novice” car enthusiast).

This transformed body politic is also evident in the gay and lesbian communities. The past decade has witnessed a politics of (diasporic) visibility organized around “rice.” From rice pride marches and queer rice workshops to award-winning Asian gay and lesbian Web portals, “rice” has now come to connote what the online *Race Magazine* gay editors have promoted as “a total lifestyle . . . for gay Asian men by gay Asian men.”³² Its Web site address, www.riceasia.com, encapsulates the diasporic Asian queering of “rice” mediated by the displacement of people, technology, and markets. Factors such as the global consumption of difference, the role of new media in enabling new modes of Asian presence and connections, and the mainstreaming of Asian popular culture have led to the emergence of a New Asian sexual identity tied to New Asian capital. This is also evidenced by the shift from the postcolonial “rice/potato queen” sexual identity to a

“sticky rice” sexual model, or what I have written of elsewhere as a sexual identity represented by the desire for Asians by other Asians in the West.³³ Such an identity politic celebrates a regional sexuality made possible by the New Asian body politic: urban, cosmopolitan, fashionable, newly exotic, adorned with the correctly acceptable Western lingo, attire, and style. As a nonlinear system, cybernetic rice highlights the (sexual) appropriation of New Asian capital as New Asian body politic. Such a politic decenters the hegemony of New Asia by reordering it through its diasporic settlements and produces a regional sexuality characterized by the emergence of a class. The following discussion of e-SAMBAL demonstrates this.³⁴

E-SAMBAL: New Regionality, Sexuality, Class

E-SAMBAL’s construction of its membership and the rice-accumulation strategies practiced by its members problematize the forces of regionality and globalization and support the structure of cybernetic rice as a linear and nonlinear system. These two systems underpin the emergence of a New Asian sexuality through a New Asian body politic that produces class. This politics mediates and mediatizes a regional material culture and destroys the ontological claims of the West, the homeland, and its diaspora by exposing their hegemonic constitutions.

E-SAMBAL began in 1995 as a nonautomated and private list called *Singalaysian*. In May 1996, a survey on membership and subscription was posted to the list, intended as an appraisal to consider the possibility of automating it due to a rapidly growing membership.³⁵ This survey constructed membership regionally, with two initial assumed policies. First, it is a Malaysian/Singaporean-only space. Second, it is a women-only space. Regional specificity is maintained through a strict vetting system whereby, “other than [the] initial contact person, the list mistress or regional contact cross-examines, subtly or otherwise, on behalf of SAMBAL.”³⁶ Regionality is problematized in one post when an Australian lesbian who has lived in Malaysia for the past twenty years decided to subscribe to the list.³⁷ She was vetted out because she is Australian. Here, the status of being Australian highlights race as a form of classification according to not just one’s country of birth, but one’s line of descent. Rather than the transcendence of racial boundaries promulgated by new media enthusiasts, this instance highlights

the significance of race as a necessary determinant for the reinscription or reterritorialization of a New Asian regional difference. The cybernetic force of rice highlights the discourse of New Asian regionality as a discourse of race by structuring it as a form of self-regulating governance, where the right to belong requires a claim to an Asian genealogy. Australia is clearly not (in) Asia. It also supports Soja's synecism whereby sambal emerges as a transnational Asian lesbian formation through a series of hierarchical networks capable of generating growth and order from within Asia as a "defined territorial domain" (Asia, not Australia).³⁸ The rejection of the Australian lesbian living in Malaysia supports an essentialist, neo-Orientalist construction of a Malaysia/Singapore spatiality through the force of its diaspora. Such a spatiality organizes a practice that is ambivalent.

On the one hand, it produces a citizenship that extends Ong's concept of flexible citizenship³⁹ because cybernetic rice, as the hegemonic ideology of New Asia, governs in a linear system that produces feedback hierarchically. In other words, citizenship, or belonging, is not flexible; membership is fixed by race. Rather, citizenship is fixed through an active process of Asian-identified rice reclamation or accumulation, to use David Harvey's term.⁴⁰ This reclamation is evident in the list, for example, through the postcolonial use of the Singaporean/Malaysian hybrid creolized language, Singlish. New Asian capital as information value recodes the generic status of a newbie through differential Singlish proficiencies. Here, Singlish is not a performative effect of cultural hybridity; rather, Singlish has shifted from its "unofficial" status as a spoken vernacular to a formal genre of writing stylized as a self-conscious technique of pedagogical accumulation. Its literalization foregrounds English language as a necessary device for making intelligible the parodic play with other languages (Mandarin and Malay) and other dialects (Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese, Hakka).

Another example includes the neo-Confucian discourse of what has been termed "the responsible thing." In a series of introductory postings, members (who have recently returned from overseas) introduced themselves using the discourse of the "responsible thing" as a specific New Asian lesbian argot. "Coming back to do the responsible thing," for Evette, describes an accountability that "is to set priority of coming home first . . . think of myself later."⁴¹ Clearly, "being true to myself" is discordant with the "Confucian" value of "filial piety." Again, the reconciliation of sexuality to the communitarian discourse of "coming home" supports the

agenda of Singapore 21. These self-conscious and self-regulating practices highlight cybernetic rice as a linear structure for the accumulation and consequent acquisition of cultural citizenship in the diasporic Singapore lesbian cyberspace.

On the other hand, cybernetic rice, as a nonlinear system, also reorders informational flows from bottom/diaspora to top/homeland, producing feedback that renders meanings in a haphazard, chaotic, and subterranean manner. In such a system, the informational value of rice (New Asian capital), as the signifier for diasporic New Asian gay and lesbian sexuality, decenters the hegemonic positionality encoded by the regional center, Singapore-as-New Asia, and repositions, through feedback (New Asian body politic), the new sambal space of Singapore/Malaysia. Singaporean and Malaysian membership is reconstituted as newly Asian through the diaspora. As a loop, sambal emerges as a queer and Asian formation that is characterized by dispersion and exposes the ontologies of the homeland, the host land, and its diaspora.

Such a formation exposes the hegemony of the Occidental global queer-ing project as well as the production of a local resistance. Take the naming strategies used in the survey as a cultural template. In question 1, when asked what “type of people [members] want/don’t want on SAMBAL,” 75 percent of the respondents answered that they wanted “lesbian-identified women.” About 50 percent and 60 percent, respectively, responded by stating that they “don’t want but (can negotiate on case-by-case)” “bisexual-identified women, women involved in hetero relationship [and] gay-positive straight women.” And 80 percent stated that they did not want “people exploring” on the list, but “newborn” (“just realized she is lesbian/bisexual”) lesbians and bisexuals are welcomed.⁴² These naming devices (“lesbian,” “bisexual,” “gay positive,” “newborn,” etc.), as instances of the globalization of queer, are at the same time destabilized by a neo-Orientalizing strategy of retrieving the histories of Asian sexualities so that other identities such as *wasawa*, *hubungan sejenis*, or “slang” are equally valid.⁴³ The following post encapsulates the contradiction aptly:

Lesbian, Chinese, Slang
Sociology, Postmodernist, Foucault, Goffman
Customer Service, Insurance
Popular Culture, movies, books, music, food, Shopping malls.⁴⁴

It is interesting to note that “slang” is the only term that fits the status of an argot. Slang is the name of the women’s subgroup in People Like Us.⁴⁵ Its local specificity foregrounds its status as a New Asian lesbian identity constituted in its function as a suture that coheres the seemingly disparate identity claims connoted by the rest of the terms. The metaphorical, transitory, and unofficial status accorded to slang vocabularizes the ephemerality of a culture mediated by information and mediatized by the contradictory logics of Occidentalism, neo-Orientalism, global consumption, racial nativism, and developmental capitalism.

As both a linear and nonlinear system for organizing the specificity of a diasporic New Asian lesbian sexuality, cybernetic rice redefines the essential Asian discourse of *guanxi* (connections) by transforming its traditional familial and kinship discourse of connections to an artifice driven by a new informational structure of representing the regionality of Asia. Rather than a network enabled by families and friends, this structure is constructed by mobilizing diasporic displacement through the capital and body politic of a New Asian consciousness. Such a redefinition reconstructs New Asia as a self-conscious diasporic interface navigating the economic, social, and political specificities underpinning the material force of its capitalist development.⁴⁶ It calls to task the New Asian lesbian diaspora as a specific class.

In a recent survey on the status of privilege in Singapore, Chua and Tan note that the past three decades of economic growth have led to the emergence of a majority “new rich” middle-class culture.⁴⁷ Middle-class households enjoy monthly incomes between \$3,000 and \$10,000. Comfortable middle-class households have monthly incomes of \$4,000 or more; tertiary-educated professionals and entrepreneurs predominate in this group. Such a classification resonates with e-SAMBAL’s membership comprising mostly Western-educated, overseas-returned, tertiary-trained professionals. This is evident when e-SAMBAL was targeted in 1999 for market research by a global queer publishing house researching the possibility of providing an Asian queer Web portal based on lifestyle and a monthly income of more than \$5,000.⁴⁸ Characteristics listed under lifestyle included frequency and place of overseas vacations, hobbies and weekend pursuits such as water sports, bike rides, car rallies across Malaysia, and golf. Lifestyle is expressed in the terrain of everyday material consumption where vacations, ownership of vehicles, and “luxury sports” are “positional goods” that determine and

stratify class.⁴⁹ These practices reveal e-SAMBAL as a “new rich” transnational and cosmopolitan diasporic lesbian class.

This classification became evident when I began actively researching the use of paging technologies by lesbians in Singapore in September 2000. I used my *guanxi* connection to engage a childhood friend, who now owns and manages what is unofficially known as the lesbian alfresco pub in Singapore, as a local informant, and to help circulate in her pub an anonymous questionnaire about local lesbian beeper practices.⁵⁰ The questionnaire included personal data such as income, profession, language spoken, and educational level. The results revealed a monthly income of less than \$5,000 and a predominantly Mandarin- or dialect-speaking blue-collar 20–35 age-group class. According to the Singapore Department of Statistics’ table distribution of monthly household income in 1990, \$5,000 is the mark that demarcates working and lower middle class from the “new rich.”⁵¹ Chua and Eng rightly argue that the working-class culture in Singapore expresses itself differently from the working-class youth subcultures in Britain, where local resistance is expressed through a politics of fashion and dress.⁵² They state that a taste for designer fashion in Singapore is coded by the working class as a sign of upward mobility. My pager research reveals that working-class lesbians also aspire to such desires. All inscribe a “brand” consciousness. Those in the lower-range income group adorn themselves with Charles Jourdan, Adidas, and Dr Marten’s shoes and, “if they can afford it,” will wear “Gucci, Louis Vuitton and Valentino.”⁵³

Beeper culture in Singapore expresses the politics of class. As an accessory, they adorn the body and constitute the class of the user. The use of colors, for example, helps to single out the identity of the user in a sea of beeper ubiquity. Gold is the color of the new rich.⁵⁴

In mainstream culture, beepers, like telephones, are a form of communication. Beepers, unlike the globality of the Internet, are more localized, more personalized, and site-specific. By *literalizing* New Asian capital as New Asian body politic, working-class lesbian culture mobilizes beepers to mediate the production of a locality in their reconstitution of a neighborhood.⁵⁵ In my membership participation in e-SAMBAL since 1995, daily and weekly posts have ranged from activist announcements (e.g., workshops, meetings, socials, fundraisers) and conference discussions (e.g., pride, safe sex, health), to requests (e.g., market surveys, classifieds). Here, class expression is tied to a global queer politics of visibility. By *appropriating* New

Asian capital as New Asian body politic, e-SAMBAL's tactics support Ap-
padurai's disjunctive global "scapes" that are formed as a result of cul-
tural flows.⁵⁶ Mobile cultures are produced, one transnationally, the other
subculturally.

Feedback: Paging Sambal

Like many of my childhood dyke buddies who have left Singapore for the United States, I migrated to Australia in 1987, in the wake of a post-Independence generation of women who have grown up in a culture that has experienced the region's most rapid development as well as the impact of the country's infamous social engineering policies, ranging from the Great Marriage Debate to the state control of motherhood and reproduction. The policy emphasis on education and language, the state directive that required proficiency in both Mandarin and English in order to gain admission to the local university, marked the pivotal point in our young 20–30-something adult lives. Many of us failed miserably at our "Chinese as a Second Language" examinations. We were the products of a colonial government-aided school education system that valorized the English language. Mandarin, the Chinese language, and local dialects were the markers of "the others." In short, those who failed left, and those who passed stayed.

I returned routinely during my many summer breaks through the years, temporally and permanently out of sync with my friends in the United States. I cruised the streets with those who passed. One summer in the early 1990s I met L. She was carrying a pager. On the screen was a code. This was not just any ordinary pager, ordinary pagers being de rigeur accessories in a country that has the highest penetration rate of pagers (one in three owns a pager); this was a pager constantly beeping a nonsensical series of numeric mobile codes, 88 for a bar, 5281 for a restaurant, even 6634 for a hotel room. It took me a while to realize that these codes were charged in a chain of associations, not as revolutionary as December 2000 in the Philippines where anti-Joseph Estrada (SMS) messages were sent among some of the nation's 4.5 million mobile phone users, but equally as monumental. Every beep became a secret code for a place or an event: 10.2 On the way; 10.7. Arrived at destination; 533-0. Where are you?; 3347-0 Are you free tonight? Every beep was an introduction to a subterranean world where toms (butch) hung Motorolas and traded Prada and Gucci with

their GEs, femmes with colored beepers in handbags, on call. I learned to traffic in the lingo, like a recursive Morse code, as we shape-shifted from pubs to discos and cafés.

Meantime, I became a Sambalite and SAMBAL became my feedback loop, paging New Asia like a technology out of sync.

Notes

- 1 Singapore-as-New Asia is a cultural tourist state discourse that endorses the blending of heritage with modern cosmopolitanism. It constructs New Asia “at the crossroads of the East and the West,” with “a single national identity, so much so that you are likely to hear someone regard himself as a Singaporean first before a Chinese, Malay, Indian or Eurasian.” See Singapore Tourism Board, *Official Guide: Singapore New Asia* (May 2000), 2–16. Its Web site highlights its regional agenda with its non-Singapore registered domain. See Singapore Tourism Board, *New Asia—Singapore: The Official Website for Tourist Information on Singapore*, 1 July 1998, (<http://www.newasia-singapore.com>) (30 May 2001).
- 2 Singapore 21, *Singapore 21 Website*, 1 January 2000, (<http://www.singapore21.org.sg>) (30 May 2001).
- 3 Lee Hock Suan, “Digital Television: Managing the Transition,” keynote address presented at BroadcastAsia 2000, Singapore Expo, Singapore, 5 June 2000, in Singapore Government Media Release, *Singapore Government Website*, 28 April 2000, (<http://app.internet.gov.sg/data/sprinter/pr/archives/2000060503.htm>) (18 July 2002).
- 4 Tony Bennett, “Putting Policy into Cultural Studies,” in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula A. Treichler (London: Routledge, 1992), 27. On the governance of culture, see Michel Foucault, “Governmentality,” in *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, ed. Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller (Hemel Hempstead, U.K.: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), 87–104. Ian Hunter has also seminally written on education as a site for managing culture. See “Setting Limits to Culture,” in *Nation, Culture, Text: Australian Cultural and Media Studies*, ed. Graeme Turner (London: Routledge, 1993), 140–63. In a similar vein, Joseph Tanney suggests that education functions as a key site for the ideological shaping of Singapore’s culture. See *The Struggle over Singapore’s Soul: Western Modernization and Asian Culture* (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1996).
- 5 On “Asia” as a discourse of regionality, see, for example, Rob Wilson and Wimal Dissanayake, eds., *Asia/Pacific as Space of Cultural Production* (Dur-

- ham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995); Chen Kuan-Hsing, ed., *Trajectories: Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1998); Aihwa Ong and Donald Nonini, eds., *Ungrounded Empires: The Cultural Politics of Modern Chinese Transnationalism* (London: Routledge, 1997); Tu Wei-ming, ed., *Confucian Traditions in East Asian Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996); Arif Dirlik, ed., *What Is a Rim?* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993); Ron Martin, ed., *Money and the Space Economy* (Chichester, England: Wiley, 1999); Kris Olds et al., eds., *Globalisation and the Asia Pacific: Contested Territories* (London: Routledge, 1999); Myong-gon Chu, *The New Asia in Global Perspective* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000).
- 6 Gayatri Spivak. "Cultural Talks in the Hot Peace: Revisiting the 'Global Village,'" in *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling beyond the Nation*, ed. Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 342.
 - 7 The Singapore Broadcasting Authority's regulation on Internet content ensures that community values, national security, and religious and racial harmony are maintained. Section 6(d) of its guidelines, "Contents which depict or propagate sexual perversions such as homosexuality, lesbianism, and paedophilia," highlights the extent of its censorship codes by positioning sexual identities as issues concerning the governance of "public morals." See Singapore Government, "Chapter 297," *Singapore Broadcasting Authority Act*, 15 March 1994 (Singapore: Statutes of the Republic of Singapore, 1994). On the Internet as a site for policing, see Terence Lee and David Birch, "Internet Regulation in Singapore: A Policy/ing Discourse," *Media International Australia*, no. 95 (May 2000): 147–69. On the legal discourse of homosexuality, see Laurence Wai-Teng Leong, "Singapore," in *Sociolegal Control of Homosexuality: A Multi-Nation Comparison*, ed. Donald J. West and Richard Green (New York: Plenum Press, 1997), 127–44. Singapore's recent IT push toward global informational capitalism has not only enabled the emergence of the city-state as the world's first digital economy; the consumption of high-tech communications technology has also led an emerging queer presence to emanate from Singapore cyberspace. Ng King Kang argues that the Internet has enabled the globalization of post-Stonewall gay-related information in the West to be available to many gay men in Singapore. See *The Rainbow Connection: The Internet and the Singapore Gay Community* (Singapore: Kang-CuBine, 1999), 5. Baden Offord's essay in this volume further supports the role of the Internet in paradoxically enabling an "unruly sexuality."
 - 8 William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (London: Grafton, 1986), 56.
 - 9 Chua Beng Huat, *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore* (London: Routledge, 1997).
 - 10 The list is too long to cite here. Some examples include *ibid.*; Chu; Michael

- Leifer, *Singapore's Foreign Policy: Coping with Vulnerability* (London: Routledge, 2000); Shirley Geok-lin Lim, Larry E. Smith, and Wimal Dissanayake eds., *Transnational Asia Pacific: Gender, Culture, and the Public Sphere* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999); Michael Pinches, *Culture and Privilege in Capitalist Asia* (London: Routledge, 1999); Joel S. Kahn, ed., *Southeast Asian Identities: Culture and the Politics of Representation in Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998); Robert W. Hefner, ed., *Market Cultures: Society and Morality in New Asian Capitalisms* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998).
- 11 See Theodore Roszak, *The Cult of Information* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); McKenzie Wark, "Infohype," in *Transit Lounge: Wake Up Calls and Travellers' Tales from the Future*, ed. Ashley Crawford and Ray Edgar (Sydney: Craftman House, 1997), 144–47; Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto, "Real Virtuality," in *Global/Local: Cultural Production and the Transnational Imaginary*, ed. Rob Wilson and Wimal Dissanayake (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 107–118.
 - 12 David Jerison, L. M. Singer, and Daniel W. Stroock, eds., *The Legacy of Norbert Wiener: A Centennial Symposium in Honour of the 100th Anniversary of Norbert Wiener's Birth*, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA, 8–14 October 1994. For a history of the convergence between cybernetic science and post/modern cultural representation, see Donna Haraway, *Modest Witness@Second Millennium: Female Man Meets Onco Mouse* (New York: Routledge, 1997). For a brief but succinct development of the relationship between cybernetics and the cyborg, see Chris H. Gray, ed., *The Cyborg Handbook* (New York: Routledge, 1995).
 - 13 Charles Francois, ed., *International Encyclopedia of Systems and Cybernetics* (Munich, Germany: Saur, 1997). Lyotard's postmodern treatise on the death of metanarratives links the partiality of information to the crisis in science. He sees incomplete information as offering a chaotic and anarchic potential to disrupt the structure of knowledge. See Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984). Mark Poster suggests that cybernetics enables a new mode of communication, producing national identities that are multiple and fragmented. See *The Mode of Information* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1990).
 - 14 This emphasis differs from Margaret Morse's suggestion that feedback produces interactivity by constituting a feeling of liveness, and Sherry Turkle's emphasis on how it engages the user as a second self. See Margaret Morse, *Virtualities: Television, Media Art and Cyberculture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998); Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995).

- 15 Ron Eglash, "Cybernetics and American Youth Subculture," *Cultural Studies* 12, no. 3 (1998): 383–84.
- 16 For more information, contact SAMBAL at (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/sambal>).
- 17 Madeleine Lim, dir., *Sambal Belacan in San Francisco*, Madbull Productions, United States (1997). I thank Madeleine Lim and Soo-lin Quek for enabling my access to the film.
- 18 Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (London: Minerva, 1994), 3.
- 19 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), 15.
- 20 Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (London: Routledge, 1993), 227.
- 21 On cultural capital, see Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984). Bourdieu differentiates cultural capital (knowledge acquired through upbringing and education) from economic capital (wealth). According to Bourdieu, the group "nouveau riche" possesses no cultural capital despite having the means to purchase the high artifacts of "culture." I argue here that the consumption practices of the New Rich in Asia produce a taste that distinguishes itself as the new hegemonic modern middle class. See Pinches; see also Chua Beng Huat, ed., *Consumption in Asia: Lifestyles and Identities* (New York: Routledge, 2000).
- 22 John Frow proposes the concept "the regime of value" to describe how values are discursively constructed. A regime of value refers to "a semiotic institution generating evaluating regularities under certain conditions of use, and in which particular empirical audiences or communities may be more or less fully imbricated." "Economies of Value," in *Cultural Studies and Cultural Value* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 144.
- 23 Arjun Appadurai, "Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value," in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 4.
- 24 Roszak, 9. See also Max H. Boisot, *Information Space: A Framework for Learning in Organizations, Institutions and Culture* (London: Routledge, 1995).
- 25 Francesca Bray has suggested that "rice economies" in Asia emerged through an alternative model of progress. Compared to Western models of progress that are characterized by "labor-substituting" mechanical development, Asian rice economies are characterized by "land substitution" and an orientation toward skills. *The Rice Economies* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 5, 115.
- 26 For a history of the rice trade, see A. J. H. Latham, *Rice: The Primary Commodity* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

- 27 For a brief examination of rice cultures, see Jacqueline M. Piper, *Rice in South-East Asia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).
- 28 Although the metaphor of rice is not directly used in Singapore to describe the relationship between cyberculture and information technology, there has been a prominent increase in the circulation of rice metaphors in global queer cultures, on and off the Internet. This section shortly will show how the circulation has produced emergent "rice pride" queer movements in Asia and its diaspora.
- 29 Edward Soja, *Postmetropolis: Critical Studies of Cities and Regions* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 13.
- 30 Rice Boy, *Rice Boy Page*, 17 September 2000, <<http://www.riceboy.com>> (17 September 2000).
- 31 Chua, *Consumption*, 14.
- 32 Rice Magazine, *Rice Magazine Online*, 1 July 2000, <<http://www.riceasia.com>> (27 September 2000).
- 33 Audrey Yue, "Asian-Australian Cinema, Asian-Australian Modernity," in *Diaspora: Negotiating Asian-Australia*, ed. Tseen Khoo et al. (St. Lucia, Australia: University of Queensland Press, 2000), 190–99.
- 34 As e-SAMBAL is a closed and private list, my respondents have stated their desire to remain anonymous. In this section, the authors' names used in the citation of e-mails are fictional.
- 35 At the time of the survey, Singalaysian had twenty-seven members. Of the three from Singapore, two had just recently returned from overseas studies in the United States. The only two from Malaysia had also just recently returned from the United States. The rest were diasporic members from the United States and Canada. Four were regional contacts in Australia (two in Melbourne, one in Sydney, and one in Perth). In Kris, "The Replies," 15 May 1996, private Singalaysian email, 30 June 1997.
- 36 Ibid.
- 37 Veronica, "Re: Join and Membership," 9 September 1996, private SAMBAL email, 30 June 1997.
- 38 Soja, 13. On such a concept of regionality, see also Stefan Immerfall, ed., *Territoriality in the Globalizing Society: One Place or None?* (Berlin: Springer, 1998).
- 39 Aihwa Ong, "Flexible Citizenship among Chinese Cosmopolitans," in Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins (1998), 134–62.
- 40 David Harvey, *The Conditions of Postmodernity: An Inquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge, England: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 147.
- 41 Evette, "Re:Intro," 22 April 1996, private SAMBAL email, 30 June 1997.
- 42 Kris, "The Replies."
- 43 Faridah, "Some Names," 18 October 1995, private Singalaysian email, 30 June

1997. *Wasawa* and *hubungan sejenis* are Malay terms and, according to the author, have been used interchangeably with “gays and lesbians” to refer to “same-sex having sex” or “same-sex relationships.”

- 44 Selena, “Re:Intro,” 10 May 1995, private Singalaysian email, 30 June 1997.
- 45 People Like Us is a gay and lesbian activist group in Singapore. They can be contacted at (<http://www.geocities.com/WestHollywood/3878/>).
- 46 Myung-gon Chu recently suggested that the Asian diaspora is responsible for the regional rise of New Asia and is the result of capital returning to the homeland.
- 47 Chua Beng Huat and Tan Joo Ean, “Singapore and the New Middle Class,” in *Pinches*, 141.
- 48 Evette, “Focus Group Market Research,” 16 March 1999, private SAMBAL email, 30 January 2000.
- 49 Chua and Tan, 138.
- 50 This questionnaire was distributed on 23 September 2000. Twenty-three of eighty questionnaires were returned. The questionnaire consists of categories delineating age, education, income, language/dialects most frequently used, pager model (current and old), pager code (and where they came) (numeric/alpha-numeric), other hangout places, dress, handphones (if any), and sms (short messaging system) code. I thank Lim Li for her assistance.
- 51 Cited in Chua and Tan, 140.
- 52 *Ibid.*, 144.
- 53 Lim Li, “Re: more pager questions,” 10 October 2000, private email, 30 October 2000.
- 54 Chua Beng Huat, “Beep Beep: Look at Me, I’m Important and Needed Urgently,” *Straits Times*, 10 February 1996, 6.
- 55 Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).
- 56 *Ibid.*

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Author/s:

YUE, AUDREY

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