A Literature of Absence: Post-Independence Fictional Narratives of Singapore (1965-1990s)

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Master of Arts (English Language and Literature)

Submitted in total fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Arts

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December 2017

Abstract

This thesis traces configurations of textual absence (disavowal, repetition, silence) as the elaboration of a political unconscious in three iconic Singaporean prose fiction texts, *If We Dream Too Long* (1972) by Goh Poh Seng; *Little Ironies: Stories of Singapore* (1978) by Catherine Lim; and *Abraham's Promise* (1995) by Philip Jeyaretnam. With a particular focus on the tensions between politics and aesthetics in Singaporean literary history, my approach contextualises absence as an aesthetic category across the domains of public culture and literary production. Investigating the formation of literary and cultural identity within the period of the becoming of Singapore's social, cultural, economic and political systems, loosely periodised as 1965-1990s, I re-examine reading and writing models and practices associated with the formation of the canon and consolidation of national identity that occurs during this period of postcolonial becoming. Employing the close reading practices of ideology critique, this thesis re-emphasises the texts' own productively ambivalent sense of marginality, open-endedness and erasure, and engages the mobility of the texts by reading their circulation among the nation's diverse readership as cultural commodity alongside their study as literature. Through this focus, I argue for different critical connections and interventions to be made by challenging the texts' codified histories of literary value and cultural production.

Declaration

This thesis comprises only my original work except where indicated otherwise. Due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used. The thesis is fewer than the maximum word limit in length, inclusive of footnotes but exclusive of appendices and bibliography.

Acknowledgments

I would like to extend my deep gratitude to Clara Tuite, for her extraordinary generosity, expertise, support and patience throughout this project.

I would also like to especially thank Audrey Yue for her generous and indispensable expertise, guidance and encouragement.

My thanks and appreciation to Heather Love, Jini Kim Watson, Paul Rae and others at the Department for their penetrating insights and questions which helped to formulate and hone my ideas.

A special thanks to Kai Toong, for her care and support. Thank you also to Vicki Toong for her encouragement.

Finally, to George Mouratidis, my greatest debt is to you.

Contents

Introduction: Writing the Nation

Nation and Culture in Singapore

The contested terrain of cultural identity in modern Singapore is nicely captured in an oft-quoted pronouncement of S. Rajaratnam. In 1960, as Singapore's first minister of culture, he declared:

> We do not regard culture as the opium of the intellectuals or as something to tickle the fancies of gentlemen and gentlewomen. For us the creation of a Malayan culture is a matter of practical politics. It is as essential for us to lay the foundations for a Malayan culture, as it is for us to build hospitals, schools, factories, and provide jobs for our rapidly expanding population. Malayan culture is […] an essential part of nation-building […] an instrument for reshaping society along lines we think desirable.[1]

Alluding to Singapore's British colonial past as a culture of hedonism and privilege, Rajaratnam presents 'us' as a point of contrast, delineating culture as an issue of self-determination and national survival. Culture is, in a sense, a tabula rasa for the state's creation of a model society; just as hospitals and schools would reflect and guide the nation's physical and economic development, so too would culture secure and advance the nation's imaginary. The framework of national necessity implies its destabilising opposite: organic, unruly cultural production and practice. In 1973, at the closing ceremony of a literary gathering, the parliamentary secretary of culture, Sha'ari Tadin, said axiomatically, seeming to echo his predecessor's position, 'Literature in a developing country must, therefore, serve an end envisioned by the community, for it becomes risky if the ethic of literature as an end in itself is given too much emphasis.'[2] In the attempt to establish cultural and literary values as part of a nation-building project, these remarks foreground the ineluctable attachments of Singaporean literary history to its national(ist)

[1] S. Rajaratnam, 1960, cited in S. Rajaratnam, *The Prophetic and the Political: Selected Speeches and Writings of S. Rajaratnam* (Singapore: Graham Brash, 1987), p119.
[2] Speech by Sha'ari Tadin, Parliamentary Secretary (Culture) at the closing ceremony of the Literary Gathering Organised BY the ASAS50 at the Tanah Merah Besar Holiday Camp on Sunday, August 5, 1973, 8pm.

obligations, and, relatedly, convey a dialectical opposition between the 'nation' and an aestheticised understanding of the practice and function of literature.

Taking the familiar tensions between politics and aesthetics in Singaporean literary history as a starting point, this thesis is primarily a study of poetics and hermeneutics. Its broad historical context is the becoming of Singapore's social, cultural, economic and political systems, loosely periodised as 1965-1990s. The thesis re-examines reading and writing models and practices associated with the formation of the canon and consolidation of national identity that occurs during this period of postcolonial becoming.[3] I contend that in their interpretive delineation of the relationship between literature and the dominant culture, such pervasive reading models of this kind that posit an opposition between politics (the 'nation') and aesthetics overlook textual production as an autonomous site of meaning that contains, produces and enacts constitutive textual silences or absences whose greatest import lies in the ambivalent space between politics and aesthetics. This thesis deliberately probes the established dimensions of Singapore's literary history through three iconic prose fiction texts which respectively represent crucial junctures in national development and identity formation: *If We Dream Too Long* (1972) by Goh Poh Seng; *Little Ironies: Stories of Singapore* (1978) by Catherine Lim; and *Abraham's Promise* (1995) by Philip Jeyaretnam. Using the category of absence to inform an emphatically productive reading model (and one that speaks back, as it were, to this somewhat traditional, nation-building model that opposes politics and aesthetics), I problematise these texts' popular and critical significance by reading the textual practices and symbolic workings of erasure, deferral, equivocality and occlusion as equally integral to the hermeneutics and literary and cultural value of these texts.

[3] The period 1965-1990 has been widely acknowledged by literary and cultural critics as the consolidation of political, economic and cultural systems. Government discourse shifted from the aggressive will to modernise in the 1960s, to anxiety about the loss of history and culture in the 1980s, to the rise of a global city-state post-mid-1990s. James Francis Warren, *Rickshaw Coolie: A People's History of Singapore (1880-1940)*, (Singapore: Oxford University Press), p326; Albert Lau, 'The National Past and the Writing of the History of Singapore', *Imagining Singapore*, Ban Kah Choon, Anne Pakir and Tong Chee Kiong (eds.), (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 1992, 2004), 2nd edition, p39; Rajeev S. Patke and Philip Holden, *The Routledge Concise History of Southeast Asian Writing in English*, (New York: Routledge, 2010), p92; Angelia Poon, Philip Holden and Shirley Geok-lin Lim, (eds.) *Writing Singapore: An Historical Anthology of Singapore Literature* (Singapore: NUS Press and National Arts Council of Singapore, 2009).

Nation and Narration in the Singapore Story

Concomitantly, this thesis also contends that absence is equally foundational to the formation of the nation and cultural identity. The history of modern Singapore is a tumultuous one, marked by a series of abrupt shifts from dependence to self-reliance, and the promulgation of a governing ideology of crisis and survival. Following a brief period of provisional (1955) and full (1959) internal self-governance, in the wake of emancipation from 140 years of British rule, Singapore merged with Malaysia in 1963, only to be separated in 1965. Faced with the manifold challenges of sudden independence —a lack of natural resources, the loss of a potential shared market, perceived Communist threats, and presupposed isolation of a Chinese-majority country in a predominantly Muslim region—this moment galvanised a self-image of a 'fragile young nation' forced to 'stand alone'. One need only recall the ubiquitous image of then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's tearful reaction to separation in history textbooks and commemorative events, to be reminded of the affective invocation of a national trauma written on the body of the self-sacrificing paterfamilias. The failed merger, repeatedly framed in the dominant account of national history as a painful, familial separation,[4] forms one of the founding moments within a traumatic birth narrative of an emergent nation.

This traumatic birth narrative legitimates two interrelated concepts of 'crisis' and 'pragmatism' which drive the state. Cultural historian Chua Beng Huat argues that the former creates anxiety about conditions of the state and the latter ideologically calls upon pragmatic solutions to these threats to national survival.[5] Scholars have similarly described the approach and ideology of the People's Action Party government—the sole ruling party since independence—as 'political pragmatism', a style of governance which privileges the economic and capitalist interests of the state. This continued style of governance has evolved in its political sophistication and expanded to manage all aspects of society.[6] Pragmatism has been used to describe the various policies and approaches governing wide-ranging areas of society—for instance, the organisation of urban space, socio-economic and cultural policies, as well as history

[4] See for example, Lee Kuan Yew's description of Singapore-Malaysia relations during the post-merger years as an 'abang-adik (big brother-little brother) relationship' in 'A close but difficult relationship', *Today*, 23 March 2015, <http://www.todayonline.com/rememberinglky/close-difficult-relationship-0>, accessed on 30 March 2015.
[5] Chua Beng Huat, *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore*, (London: Routledge, 1995), pp40-78.
[6] Ibid.

and national education.[7] In relation to literature, the postcolonial literary scholar Philip Holden has critiqued the narrow interpretation and use of literature to 'cultivate national instincts among pupils', an idea that has been propounded by the Ministry of Education since the late 1990s.[8] The significance of pragmatism has been examined in relation to such factors as the cultural impact of national anxiety, social engineering through economic policies, and the construction of public memory.[9] The important work of cultural criticism has recognised the ways in which each manufactured crisis, while brought about by particular historical forces, is appropriated by the national ideology and collectively remembered through a set of representational practices—national idioms, tropes, metaphors, affect—to fit within a politically strategic, linear account of crisis and prevention. Pragmatism as a 'systematic conceptual framework' is not only based on these historical and material conditions, but itself produces, constructs and manages its own (ideological, imaginary) reality.[10] Pragmatism provides a historical and ideological context for narratives in the construction of national culture.

The strategically linear narrativisation of Singapore's history accounts for its privileged position within the PAP nation-building discourse.[11] This narrative is widely disseminated and reproduced at various levels of cultural life. Officialised as the Singapore Story in the late 1990s in the National Education project, it is the prevailing narrative of Singapore's history that has, since independence, aimed to forge a cohesive (emergent) national imaginary. Today, it features in the public record, national education curriculum and commemorative events such as National Day. As historians rightly argue, it is a nationalist myth-making project that focuses on

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[7] Ibid; Diane K. Mauzy and R. S. Milne, *Singapore Politics under the People's Action Party*, (London: Routledge, 2002); Aaron Koh, 'Imagining the Singapore "Nation" and "Identity": The role of the media and National Education', *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, 25:1, 2005, pp75-91; Can-Seng Ooi, 'Political pragmatism and the creative economy: Singapore as a City for the Arts', *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, Vol. 16, No. 4, November 2010, pp403–417; Audrey Yue, 'Introduction: Queer Singapore', in *Queer Singapore: Illiberal Citizenship and Mediated Cultures* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012), pp1-2; Yinghong Cheng, 'The Chinese Cultural Revolution and the Decline of the Left in Singapore', *Journal of Chinese Overseas* 7 (2011), p238.

[8] Philip Holden, 'On the Nation's Margins: The Social Place of Literature in Singapore', *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (April 2000), pp. 30-51.

[9] Chua (1995); Yao (2007); Quinton Clements, 'A Gracious Society: The Engineering of a New National Goal in Singapore', *History and Anthropology*, 1999, Vol. 11, No. 2-3, pp. 257-299; Lau, loc. cit.

[10] Chua (1995).

[11] Michael D. Barr and Zlatko Skrbis, 'The Singapore Story: Constructing a National Myth', *Constructing Singapore: elitism, ethnicity and the nation-building project*, (Copenhagen: NIAS, 2008), pp. 18-38. Barr and Skrbis argue that the Singapore Story is the conceptual product of political leaders S. Rajaratnam, C. V. Devan Nair, George Yeo and Lee Kuan Yew. See also Hong Lysa, 'Making the history of Singapore: S. Rajaratnam and C.V. Devan Nair', *Lee's Lieutenants: Singapore's Old Guard*, Lam Peng Er and Kevin Y.L. Tan (eds.), (St Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1999), pp96-115. Hong attributes the making of the Singapore Story to first-generation politicians S. Rajaratnam and C.V. Devan Nair.

'struggles' towards independence.[12] In this story, Singapore's linear history of progress is presented as a series of struggles from a 'sleepy fishing village' to a 'bustling metropolis'. Tellingly subtitled, 'Overcoming the Odds', the story's selective portrayal of key events within a narrative of 'repeated management of crises' articulates a survivalist ethos of a nation which has to be pragmatically defended because it is always under threat of annihilation.[13] This story occludes instability not only by writing it into a narrative of success, but by formulating and delineating the kinds of instability that such a narrative can accommodate. Hong Lysa and Huang Jianli's account of the Singapore Story, for instance, highlights its strategic erasure of history, in their analysis of a narrative 'narrowly focussed on leadership struggles played out as […] the battle between the righteous and the perfidious', arguing that political actors (such as Communists and opposition leaders) have been 'doubly defeated' in the political sphere and in these narratives.[14] Hong and Huang's account offers an exemplary analysis of the erasure and occlusion of alternate versions of cultural memory and identity, and provokes a more fundamental observation of narrative gaps and silences as a condition of the exclusionary, pragmatic framework of the Singapore Story. Equally important, the past is constantly reinvented to suit the needs of the present political agenda and 'maintain its ideology of control.'[15] This description is not at all intended to over-implicate the state as monolith, but rather to recognise the cultural systems within which and against which the nation comes into being.

As an element of the nation space in the process of articulation and construction, the Singapore Story powerfully demonstrates what Homi Bhabha, in his book, *Nation and Narration*, argues is the 'transitional history' and 'conceptual indeterminacy' of the nation.[16] Within the nation's continuous process of cultural signification, the crisis narrative's anxious pursuit of a 'recalcitrant Other' (to borrow cultural scholar Souchou Yao's evocative description) compounds a sense of perpetual renewal, elaborating the ways in which elements of the nation-

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[12] Barr and Skrbis, pp18-38. Strategic periodisation of the Singapore Story signposts 'key moments' titled 'Political Awakening' and 'From Survival to Independence', which establish the vocabulary, idioms, tropes and images of national history (p22).
[13] Philip Holden, 'A Man and an Island: Lee Kuan Yew's *The Singapore Story*', *Autobiography and Decolonization: Modernity, Masculinity, and the Nation-State*, (U.S.A.: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), p170.
[14] Hong Lysa and Huang Jianli, *The Scripting of a National History: Singapore and Its Pasts*, (Singapore: Hong Kong University Press, 2008), pp3, 50.
[15] D. Birch, 'Staging crises: media and citizenship', *Singapore Changes Guard: Social, Political and Economic Directions in the 1990s*, G. Rodan (ed.), (Melbourne: Longman Cheshire, 1993), p75.
[16] Homi K. Bhabha (ed.), *Nation and Narration* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p2.

space multiply, in Bhabha's words, the 'Janus-faced' discourse of the nation.[17] The Singapore Story is a prime example of the nation's becoming as an unstable cultural knowledge system.[18] The examination I present in this thesis draws on the salient question that Bhabha poses: 'If the ambivalent figure of the nation is a problem of [...] its conceptual indeterminacy [...] then what effect does this have on narratives and discourses that signify a sense of 'nationness'[?]'[19] We turn to the short story and novel as examples of the nation's process of its articulation.

Formation of 'National Literature'

From the 1940s and continuing into the formative decades of independence up to the 1980s, poetry was the dominant mode of literary output in Singapore. In the 1970s, largely emerging from the University of Singapore, a then recently decolonised and newly independent institute separated from the University of Malaya, local poetry, while searching for distinctly indigenous and national modes of expression, voice and subject matter, bore heavy resemblance to Anglo-European poetic forms valued within colonial pedagogical institutions. Institutional, academic, 'English' and elite, poetry sparked intense, even antagonistic debates over form and function and cultural and artistic legitimacy, questions which we see echoed later in critical considerations of the novel.[20] We can also witness literary criticism at the time as a site of corresponding upheaval and anxiety in the emergence of equally useful and problematic labels such as 'commonwealth literature', 'New literatures in English' and 'literatures of emerging nations', reflecting the self-defining tenor of postcolonial discourse.

A recent examination of the Singapore short story by Philip Holden provides an excellent account of its genealogy, tracing its 'narrative of development' in the 1970s and 1980s in which Singapore writers were interpellated as national subjects through their participation in such an

[17] Souchou Yao, *Singapore: The State and the culture of excess*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), p41. Bhabha, p2.
[18] Bhabha, pp1-2.
[19] Ibid, p2.
[20] T. Wignesan, 'Correspondence', *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 1990 25: 220, p221. See for instance, his dismissal of Arthur Yap's *Man Snake Apple & Other Poems* (1986) as poems that 'could have easily been written by an Englishman or an American who […] had never laid foot in Singapore.' See also Jan B. Gordon, 'The Crisis of Poetic Utterance: The Case of Singapore', *Pacific Quarterly* 1979 (Moana), 4 (1), p9; Ooi Boo Eng, 'Malaysia and Singapore', *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 15 (1980), p102.

'apprentice genre'.[21] National short story competitions significantly corroborated the formation of the genre as a, if not nationalist, certainly national, institution.[22] The tensions between the pragmatic goals of state-fostered culture and artistic autonomy, which Holden argues is witnessed, for example, in the lukewarm participation in one courtesy campaign contest, is a point which this thesis seeks to explore.[23] The consciously national 'apprenticeship' of the short story form constitutes a provocatively anticipatory canon-forming gesture, through which we can read an institutional corroboration of a literary economy of taste and value.

As Chapter Two will show, the novice genre of the short story, epitomised in Catherine Lim's pioneering representation of cultural authenticity, with a degree of ambivalence, shifts from a colonial genre to a postcolonial re-negotiation of identity. However, the tendency to read its authenticity and connections to national representation overlooks the text's troubling aesthetic equivocality that is difficult to account for and yet a key aspect of its meaning production. I contend that popular readings into the text's cultural and national representative-ness establish metatextual hermeneutics and identity practices and expand the textual terrain's interpellative function. *Little Ironies*' narratives sustain and instate the narrative of the 'Singaporean' experience of the nation, fitting within a narrative of development as a novice genre not only for writers, but writers and readers as national subjects,[24] demonstrating narratives' 'prodigious doubling' at the site of the nation's construction. It is therefore appropriate to describe such literary narratives inexorably signalling 'nation-ness' as an ambivalent site of the containment and production of cultural knowledge**.**

It is worth pointing out here that this thesis does not make a generic claim that the novel form, or prose fiction in general, compared to poetry, is more conducive to the exploration or expression of national identity. It also does not suggest that poetry and poetry collections, and drama for that matter, are non-narrative. Needless to say, poetry and drama also refer symbolically, emotionally and structurally to narratives of national development and—owing in no small part to their dominant outputs over the novel—these connections have been well examined in the field of literary and cultural studies. Rather than a study of genre, I am making

[21] Philip Holden, 'The Social Life of Genres: Short Stories as a Singapore Form', *Singapore Literature and Culture*, p102.
[22] The relationship between story-writing and the nation can also be seen today in 'Your Story' national writing forums on new media platforms.
[23] Holden (2017), p102.
[24] Ibid.

an historical claim about the significance of a certain kind of prose fiction that coincides with the writing of the nation and the consolidation of social, cultural and political systems. Deidre Lynch and William Warner's *Cultural Institutions of the Novel* provides an example from outside the field of Singapore studies that engages nation through narration and narrative fiction, by arguing for a shift in critical focus from generic considerations of what the novel is to 'new historicist' examinations of what and how it 'does'.[25] Particularly useful to our study, Lynch and Warner argue for the ways in which paradigmatic instances of the 'national' novel—which narrative counts as a novel—participates in producing social divisions and forms of power through the solidity and brokering of institutional practices.[26] This model provides a valuable framework for this thesis' consideration of the ways in which the formation of iconic prose fiction texts registers social struggles and divisions and shapes and contends with social, cultural and 'national' desires. I contend that the cultural and literary significance of these texts have been inscribed into the narration of the nation in ways which have yet to disrupt a hegemonic, 'national' system of literary evaluation.[27] Presenting a detailed analysis of these three chosen texts, I am attempting to provide a different type of sustained reading to frequently practised examinations of a cluster of texts of similar themes or genre.[28] Eddie Tay has similarly noted the trend of focused studies of theme and genre, for example, in poetry anthologies by Singaporean poet Alvin Pang and studies such as *Island Voices: A Collection of Short Stories from Singapore* (2007) edited by Angelia Poon.[29] A relatively recent historical anthology *Writing Singapore: An Historical Anthology of Singapore Literature* (2009) edited by Poon, Holden and Shirley Geok-Lin Lim represents a timely examination of literature alongside cultural, historical and political contexts.[30] My approach also emphasises an historical re-examination but differently focuses on providing a re-evaluative reading model of under-examined textual spaces and modes of signification. I employ the close and deep reading strategies of ideology critique, a model which, although in general decline, remains valuable, I argue, in the context of Singapore literary studies

[25] Deidre Lynch and William Warner (eds.), Cultural Institutions of the Novel, (Duke UP, 1996).
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid, p7.
[28] This trend is also noted in Poon, et. al. (2009), xxi-xxii.
[29] Eddie Tay, 'Angelia Poon, Philip Holden and Shirley Geok-lin Lim, eds. Writing Singapore: An Historical Anthology of Singapore Literature', *Asiatic*, Vol. 4, No. 1, (June 2010), p113. Alvin Pang's themed anthologies, among others, include *No Other City: The Ethos Anthology of Urban Poetry* (2000); *Love Gathers All: The Philippines-Singapore Anthology of Love Poetry* (2002); *Over There:Poems from Australia and Singapore* (2008).
[30] Poon, et. al. (2009).

in order to re-emphasise the texts' own productively ambivalent sense of marginality, open-endedness and erasure which do not necessarily conform to the hegemony of the national in such a literary history. In this sense, my study is not purely an exercise in ideology critique, but a form of discourse and textual analysis that attempts to resist 'norms' in formal and theoretical considerations of national literature, and engages the mobility of the texts by reading their circulation among the nation's diverse readership as cultural commodity alongside their study as literature. Through this focus, I am arguing for different critical connections and interventions to be made by challenging the texts' codified histories of literary value and cultural production.

Rise of the Novel

The novice quality of the short story genre that we earlier described cannot be used to easily explain the later rise of the Singapore novel in the 1980s, which saw the publication of writers' first novels, such as *The Serpent's Tooth* (1982) by Catherine Lim; *Rice Bowl* (1984) by Suchen Christine Lim; *Raffles Place Ragtime* (1988) by Philip Jeyaretnam; and *The Stolen Child* (1989) by Colin Cheong. As Holden notes, in the 1990s, the short story's centrality was not replaced by the novel, but by English-language theatre and poetry.[31] Indeed, as Shirley Geok-Lin Lim argues, the development of Singapore literature defies 'neat categories of periodization or theoretical progressive development,' and instead, displays a 'pattern of false starts and fallings away.'[32] The urge to periodise, coupled with the aspirations for a 'national literature', sparked a not uncommon impulse among critics to evaluate and even anticipate each generation of writers as heralding a new era or pattern in Singaporean writing.[33] Nevertheless, if not the novel's rise, certainly, its 'limitations', have been linked to the maturation of social and cultural systems in national life, highlighting the critical emphasis on the extra-textual, national dimensions that forge literary identity and practice. In 1984, Kirpal Singh observed that the conditions in Singapore were not conducive to novel-writing and reading: 'the whole manner of living and working is not calculated to leave enough room or energy for the production or consumption of

[31] Holden (2017), p103.
[32] Shirley Geok-Lin Lim, 'Finding a Native Voice- Singapore Literature in English', *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 24: 30, 1989, p33.
[33] Ibid, pp31-32. For examples, see Koh Tai Ann and Ismail Talib, 'Singapore 1994-1996)', *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 33:117 (1998), p119; Ong Teong Hean, 'A Story of Singapore Poetry', *Prospects*, Vol. 7:9, 1975, p. 33, on poets writing between 1950 and 1960; Kirpal Singh, *'An Approach to Singapore Writing in English', Ariel: - A Review of International English Literature*, 15(4), April 1984. pp8-9.

works needing long and sustained effort', while Singaporean novelist Suchen Christine Lim makes a similar point that '[c]reating a fictional world and peopling it with memorable characters in three hundred pages may seem like a foolhardy enterprise in a pragmatic society […].'[34]

At its formative stage, the Singapore novel was criticised as being 'second to the poetry', 'clumsy', with its 'achievement … in doubt'.[35] Responding to such criticism and the lack of critical attention given to the novel, some scholars argued for the infancy of the Singaporean novel to be taken into consideration, asserting that the question of literary or aesthetic value ought to be suspended in favour of assessing novels' ability to raise important social questions and illuminate national life.[36] Conversely, others have argued that such an approach could render texts as political and social documents,[37] and unduly emphasise moral, social and political messages instead of literary dynamics.[38] Certainly, this dichotomy in criticism has not simply been reproduced across scholarship; critical collections and anthologies have shown a wealth of nuanced examinations of textual poetics alongside cultural and political significance. The most recent example of a critical shift is the collection of essays in *Singapore Literature and Culture* (2017), which shows a move to emphasise the marginal, resistant and fragmentary by recognising new pathways for literary production and reception in the global age.[39] These nevertheless show that politics and aesthetics remain pertinent and tensional categories of analysis in any study of Singapore literature. The following chapters add to the critical field by attempting to sustain a productive tension between politics and aesthetics, in order to trace the ambivalent ground of the nation as an in-between space of contested meaning. I argue that such an approach to these tensions resist the normalising impulse of recuperative readings to restore an idealised self-marginalisation or national(ist) prerogative to the text. My insistence on the

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[34] Kirpal Singh, 'An Approach to Singapore Writing in English', *Ariel*, Vol. 15 No. 2 (1984), p9. Suchen Christine Lim, 'Singapore Fiction: The intelligent maid in the kitchen', Writing the City, <http://writingthecity.sg/singapore-fiction-the-intelligent-maid-in-the-kitchen-by-suchen-christine-lim/>

[35] Kirpal Singh, *Singapore Studies* 1986, p482; 'An approach to Singapore Writing in English', *Ariel* 15, 2 (April 1984):11, 12, cited in Koh, p273.

[36] Lloyd Fernando, 'The Social Imagination and the Functions of Criticism in Asia', *Culture in Conflict: Essays in Literature and the English Language* (Singapore: Graham Brash, 1986), pp. 113, 117; Koh Tai Ann, 'Self, Family and the State: Social Mythology in the Singapore Novel in English', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (Sep 1989), pp. 273-287.

[37] Kirpal Singh, *'An Approach to Singapore Writing in English', Ariel: A Review of International English Literature*, 15(4), April 1984, p5. He reviews Bruce King's *The New English Literatures* which argues for nationalism as an essential category for the analysis of new literatures in English.

[38] Ooi Boo Eng. 'Malaysia and Singapore', Journal of Commonwealth Literature 18 (1983): 11-21, p16.

[39] Angelia Poon, and Angus Whitehead, (eds.), *Singapore Literature and Culture: Current directions in local and global contexts*, (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017).

tensions between the social, political, literary and aesthetic dimensions of Singapore prose fiction draws from Bhabha's argument that the 'locality' of national culture is never simply a boundary of self/other, inside/outside, but essentially incomplete, and therefore hybrid and generative.[40] Such a view enables productive reading practices that affirm in-between spaces which challenge closure and thresholds of meaning.

Writing in 1989, Koh Tai Ann proposed that 'it might be more fruitful and helpful to novelist and reader to try to see what there is in the novels we do have than to complain of what is not there.'[41] Rather than lamenting 'what is not there', this thesis on the contrary welcomes this as a productive category for analysis. While acknowledging the sincerity and historical relevance of Koh's call to develop a reading framework that is more responsive to an emergent novel genre, I also take this cue to argue for a re-evaluative reading model that recognises 'what there is' as a containment of 'thresholds of meaning.'[42]

Reading Ideology and Narrative through Absence

To develop my strategy for reading in-between spaces, I turn to post-structuralist literary criticism to understand the ideological construction of narrative as constituted by its exclusions. I draw on such a methodological framework in order to understand textual productivity as a key site of ideological contestation and destabilise the manifest meanings of the texts. In doing so, I recognise that the somewhat unfashionable symptomatic reading practice in the Marxist tradition which seeks to unearth hidden meanings, has been accused of, among other things, imposing an assumed 'mastery' over the text, and, perhaps less conclusively, insisting on restoring the humanist agency of the text.[43] Taking these critical 'risks', I argue that such an approach is valuable in the context of Singapore literary studies precisely as it remains a relatively under-utilised and unexplored hermeneutic approach in the field. Restoring textual agency or excavating latent significance and hidden histories appears to be a naïve critical task, as Bruno

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[40] Bhabha, p4.
[41] Koh Tai Ann, 'Self, Family and the State: Social Mythology in the Singapore Novel in English', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (Sep 1989), p287.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, 'Surface Reading: An Introduction', *Representations*, Vol. 108, No. 1 (Fall 2009), pp1-21; Heather Love, 'Close but not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn', *NLH* 41 (2010), pp 371-91.

Latour wearily reflects, in an environment of postmodern, pre-empting suspicion of totalities and single 'Truths'.[44] Yet, in a field where criticism has always been chiefly and appropriately focused on what Singapore literature 'does' by way of its diverse but nevertheless unflinching associations with the nation, it is perhaps valuable for us to take an 'anachronistic detour' into symptomatic reading to emphasise and reveal more deeply how it does by examining the literary contestation at work in the formation of cultural institutions.

In his book, *A Theory of Literary Production* (1966), Pierre Macherey argues that historical conditions dictate the parameters of subjectivity and meaning and determine what is and can be said. [45] In the Althusserian tradition, Macherey asserts that ideology is omnipresent, constituted by its exclusions: 'Like a planet revolving around an absent sun, an ideology is made of what it does not mention; it exists because there are things which must not be spoken of.'[46] Arguing that tensions between the expressed and inexpressible reveal the 'truth' of history, Macherey offers a negative hermeneutic through which literary texts can be examined within ideology.[47] Through a conceptualisation of absence (silence, gaps, deferral, disavowal) as the necessary conditions for the text's existence or presence, he presents literary texts as having their own partial autonomy within the dialectic of History. Through silences, the text demonstrates what it does not and cannot say, revealing the limits of its expression and the text's real significance, crucially, 'without […] speaking in its place'.[48] In line with my intention to underscore the literary contestations in institutional practices as outlined above, I qualify my use of Macherey by emphasising that it is not the aim of my reading of absence to expose the fixity of ideology, but rather, to engage the instability and incompleteness of the nation as a cultural and narrative formation.

Appropriate to our formulation of incomplete and generative national/textual boundaries, Macherey argues that 'we can only describe, only remain within the work, if we also decide to go beyond it: to bring out […] it is not a question of redoubling the work with an unconscious, but a question of revealing in the very gestures of expression that which it is not. Then, the

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[44] Bruno Latour, 'Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern', *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (Winter 2004), pp225-248.
[45] Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, Geoffrey Wall (trans.), (London, Henley and Boston: Routledge & Keagan Paul, 1978), (French edition first published 1966), p94.
[46] Ibid, p132.
[47] Ibid, p94.
[48] Ibid, pp86-87.

reverse side of what is written will be history itself.'[49] Macherey reminds us, that it is the relation between the two, instead of an exclusive reading of absence, that reveals the limits of its expression and the hidden significance of the text. Macherey's reading of absence privileges textual (re)production at the site of the reader, an appropriate model for reading social realist fiction given frequent criticisms of its lack of agency.

Prose fiction's 'lack'

A common criticism of Singaporean prose fiction is that it too closely replicates real life, and in doing so precisely reproduces 'real life' limits on individual expression. In an article about the social world of Singaporean novels, Koh observes that the novels function too closely as reportage of the world in which they are written, thus failing to perform the imaginative role of literature.[50] In the novels' replicating of real life, Koh notes the 'absence of an alternative radical vision of life with concomitant technical innovation in their use of the novel form…even when there are indications within some of the novels (e.g., *If We Dream Too Long* and *Rice Bowl*) of protest against power of such values to repress and thwart individual lives … the opportunity is not seized or perhaps, not seen as such.'[51] Leong Liew Geok similarly notes a characteristic real-life 'mirroring' in the narrative engagement with history and politics in Simon Tay's short stories 'Stand Alone' and 'Exiles' (1991) and novels such as Suchen Christine Lim's *Fistful of Colours* (1993); Gopal Baratham's *A Candle or the Sun* (1991); and *Abraham's Promise*.[52] Like Koh, Leong argues that the abovementioned novels fail to offer 'amicable resolution to the tensions which characterise not only Singapore but also modern states and their governance: between the need for freedom and the need for order, between openness and intimidation, between idealism and pragmatism, even as these authors demonstrate that history and politics are integral to Singaporean narrative and text.'[53] Eddie Tay concurs that novels like *Abraham's Promise* and *A Candle or the Sun*, while offering indications of liberal democratic critique, ultimately

[49] Ibid, p94.
[50] Koh (1989), p287.
[51] Ibid, p286.
[52] Leong Liew Geok, 'Dissenting Voices: Political Engagements in the Singaporean Novel in English', *World Literature Today* Vol. 74 No. 2, English-Language Writing from Malaysia, Singapore, and the Philippines (Spring 2000), p285.
[53] Ibid, p290.

demonstrate the limits of such a possibility.[54] These critics argue that in the close mirroring of everyday reality, these novels reproduce the limits of discursively mediated processes of civic and political engagement. The unresolved constructed socio-political predicaments within the texts enact the texts' inability to overcome the real neo-liberal conditions within which they are produced. At the same time, one could argue that this conceptualisation of 'lack' as a reflection of social powerlessness reveals deeper questions about textual agency and aesthetic autonomy: Is such a literature in pragmatic society doomed to the conditions of its production? What about the role of the reader as actor, agent and subject of history? The common charge of lack prompts this thesis' consideration of the different registers of 'lack' as a formal, sociohistorical, ideological problem in Singaporean literature. My examination of absence intervenes in this mode of reading, by privileging textual production at the site of reading. Such a claim does not assume the 'death of the author', but rather, attempts to 'free' interpretation from any fixed position of socio-political, national determination.

At the same time, this thesis is careful to heed Bhabha's warning of the potential narrowness of reading the nation as purely an 'ideological apparatus of state power', or the opposite but equally restrictive recuperative reading of the nation as an 'emergent expression of the "national-popular" sentiment preserved in radical memory'.[55] This thesis employs a post-structuralist reading model to simultaneously emphasise and defamiliarise the ideological structure of narratives by reading the ideological import and literary significance of absence within such narratives. It also attempts to emphasise the 'Janus-faced' becoming of the nation and mobilise textual meaning through a sustained analysis of ambivalence as a defining feature of textual production.

In Chapter One, I argue that modes of writing over, deferral, incompleteness and disappearance in *If We Dream Too Long* textually enact an eschewal of the political through a move towards aesthetics. Written in 1968 at the dawn of national independence, this pioneering text's literary experimentation and difficult history of reception invite an examination of its history of cultural and literary valuation. I contend that types of misreading reproduce the novel's fictional outsiderness in relation to the dominant culture. Exploring the novel's use of the

[54] Eddie Tay, *Colony, Nation, and Globalisation: Not at Home in Singaporean and Malaysian Literature* (Hong Kong University Press, 2011), p106.
[55] Bhabha, p3.

existential tradition, postcolonial irony, ambivalence and illegibility, I argue that Goh deliberately stages a narrative mode of disappearance that highlights the textual significance and productivity of outsiderness.

The second chapter undertakes an historical examination of Catherine Lim's *Little Ironies* through her depiction of a Singaporean idiosyncratic everydayness that anticipates and witnesses the consolidation of pragmatism in emerging social, cultural and political systems. I explore Lim and her text's popular reception and iconic status by problematizing readings of her stories as benignly authentic representations of Singaporean life. I examine Lim's famous irony through various formal and theoretical considerations such as affect theory, sentimentality, aesthetic equivocality, flat or minor affect, making a case for affect as a pragmatic site of deferral and for Lim's brand of irony as producing an aesthetic equivocality of suspended agency.

The third chapter examines *Abraham's Promise* as a patriarchal allegory for the story of the nation, reading an absenting of trauma at the heart of its fantasy of the nation and the self. Reading the narrative mobility of the Singapore Story as a fetishistic narrative of trauma and deferral, I argue that Jeyaretnam's narrative of Abraham reproduces such narrative modes in order to rescue a sentimentalised masculinity in crisis. Departing from past readings of the novel as a critique of the nation, I attempt to show its narrative complicity in key images and structures of the gendered discourse of the nation, such as the disciplining of a feminised body politic and the privileged temporalisation of past and future.

Through these selected texts, I aim to provide a different account of absence in each chapter that highlights its hermeneutic possibilities for renewed understandings of cultural and literary contestation.

‘He only knew that he did not know’: Ambivalence and Disappearance in *If We Dream Too Long* (1972)

Widely known as the first Singaporean novel in English,[1] *If We Dream Too Long* (1972) by Goh Poh Seng opens with the following passage:

> Here in the tropics, the evening light goes away so abruptly, you notice it as you would a person who leaves your presence suddenly and without a word. Here, and then gone. But a slight trace, a small memory remains, for a while and then too is gone.[2]

The world of *Dream* is introduced by a proleptic relation with memory and time, foregrounding the dissolution of memory at the moment of recall. Anticipating its own demise, the novel opens with a melancholic envisioning of inevitable, imperceptible loss. Atmospheric tones of fading light visualise the elusiveness of memory and time—not simply tracing disappearance, but anticipating it such that the present becomes future demise. Present time is perpetually anticipatory; its presence is absent. This brief yet significant opening passage, disengaged from the narrative events—as though estranged from the world which it contemplates—enacts the very quality of the trace it describes, separate to yet continually structurally and thematically informing the proceeding narrative. Enacting its foregrounding theme of disappearance, the novel’s opening, as though beginning *in media res*, shifts abruptly in tone in the next paragraph: ‘It was a bright and hot afternoon only a few hours ago when Kwang Meng took the long bus ride up the East Coast Road to Tanah Merah beach at Changi.’[3] This passage reads like a second and separate opening to the novel, where, instead of the previously vague and nostalgic description of its locale, the ‘tropics’, it now announces immediately recognisable landmarks, East Coast, Tanah Merah and Changi, declaring its setting to be Singapore. The reader, as if

[1] In her study of novels by Singaporean women writers, Koh Tai Ann makes an important point about the gender bias in canon formation and the margins of critical discourse in that *If We Dream Too Long* is widely known as the first Singaporean novel in English, but *Sing To the Dawn* (1975) by Minfong Ho, lesser known and mentioned, is the first novel written by a Singaporean woman in English. Koh Tai Ann, ‘Sing to the Dawn: Novels in English by Singaporean Women’, Tahir, Ungku Maimunah, T. Kintara, Koh T.A. and T. Heraty (eds.) *Emergent Voices: Southeast Asian Women Novelists* (Manila, University of Philippines Press, 1994), pp67-68.
[2] Goh Poh Seng, *If We Dream Too Long*, (Singapore: Island Press, 1972), p1; hereafter *Dream.*
[3] Ibid.

thrust into the bright light of day, is presented with this second opening, seemingly written over the tropical evening which, indeed, remained for a while, and, before our eyes, disappeared without a trace.

What, if anything, should we make of this pioneering Singaporean literary text's founding act of disappearance, and writing over? As a nation's 'first', one which self-consciously captures history and nation in the making, or their disappearing, the novel's own popular and critical life has been similarly characterised by the ebbs and flows of Singapore's cultural history and literary development. Marked by a tenuous history of initial muted public reception, belated recognition and nostalgic revival decades later, *Dream*'s position in literary and cultural history as an outsider text highlights the evolving status of the institutional valuation of Singaporean literature and culture. Largely dismissed with a few exceptions by early critics, the novel was, according to Koh Tai Ann's excellent introduction to the 2010 edition of the book, a 'victim of its own pioneering status.'[4] With no blueprint for reading local fiction, raised on a diet of Anglophone pulp and canonical literature, local readers found the alienated, seemingly flippant protagonist Kwang Meng unconvincing and childish, and the local setting unappealing.[5] In his retrospective preface to *Dream*, Goh recalls feeling like an 'uneducated writer' when compared to the English Literature graduates of the then recently decolonised University of Malaya and National University of Singapore.[6] As a young doctor, educated in Dublin, Goh was deeply influenced by European existential philosophy and mid-century British literature and left-wing politics. His self-taught literary sensibilities differed greatly from the classical Anglophone literary traditions of academe. For these reasons, Koh speculates, his literary strategies were unfamiliar and incomprehensible to academic readers.[7] While *Dream* shared the national award for fiction in 1976, the award itself was an inaugural prize that had yet to establish its status.[8] Receiving little publicity, coupled with lukewarm reviews from the national press, the novel did not attract much local interest.[9] *Dream*'s tepid public and critical interest, on the one hand, and its national award, on the other, is perhaps indicative of, firstly, the text's ambivalent status in relation to the dominant culture, and, secondly, an institutional effort

[4] Koh, *Dream*, xvii.
[5] Ibid, xviii.
[6] Goh, cited in David Phair, 'Living in Exile, but the Dance Never Ends', *Straits Times*, 19 May 2001.
[7] Koh, *Dream*, xxviii.
[8] Ibid, xxii; Goh, *Dream*, xliv.
[9] Ibid.

to establish a national literature. Its subsequent inclusion in local university syllabi produced more sustained and nuanced literary criticism and paved the way for its wider recognition.

Past critical readings of *Dream* are themselves rich sites of critical discursivity. In an essay originally written in 1989, Shirley Geok-Lin Lim uses her reading of class struggle/striving in *Dream* to demonstrate Singaporean literature's dialogic of the individual against the global marketplace; and this reading was formulated to resist Jameson's 'hegemonic' model of Third-World nationalism against First-World imperialism.[10] Koh, in a deliberately postcolonial reading written in 1984, approaches Kwang Meng's fantasies as a symptom of a colonised imagination.[11] Recent critical analysis covers a range of readings—the nuanced role of English as a colonial language in the Singapore novel;[12] urban spatial representation in cultural and literary production;[13] strategic staging of 'failed masculinity';[14] fictional engagements with Singapore's discursive formation as strategic locale.[15]

Today, the novel's thematic ambivalence towards mainstream society is also uncannily repeated through its popular treatment. The novel's nostalgic revival shows that what is being 'rescued from oblivion' is not only literary history (the text or its author), but *Dream*'s social and cultural landscape, which is being transformed and reproduced as a cultural commodity. In 2016, *Dream* was adapted as a four-course dinner theatre event as part of the Singapore Writers' Festival. Under a colourful promotional photograph of an actress dressed in a polka-dot bikini and an actor with a wry smile wearing coke-bottle glasses, sprawled on a picnic mat, the *Straits Times* announces, 'Step back in time to late 1960s Singapore and interact at a dinner with Kwang Meng, the protagonist of Singapore's first novel'.[16] While one can read perhaps a tentative attempt to destabilise and diversify the text within contemporary public culture in new, creative

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[10] Shirley Geok-Lin Lim, 'Centers and the Fringe: Novels in English from Malaysia and Singapore', *Writing S.E./ Asia in English: Against the Grain, Focus on Asian English-Language Literature* (London, UK: Skoob Books, 1994), pp135-154.
[11] Koh Tai Ann, 'Intertextual Selves: Fiction-makers in Two 'Singapore' Novels', *Tropic Crucible: Self and Theory in Language and Literature* Ranjit Chatterjee, Colin Nicholson (eds.), (Singapore: Singapore University Press, National University of Singapore, 1984), p182.
[12] Philip Holden, 'Postcolonial Desire: Placing Singapore', *Postcolonial Studies* 11.3 (2008), pp345–361.
[13] Jini Kim Watson, *New Asian City: Three-Dimensional Fictions of Space and Urban Form* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).
[14] Angelia Poon, 'In Praise of Failed Men (and the Woman Writer)', Angelia Poon, and Angus Whitehead, (eds.), *Singapore Literature and Culture: Current directions in local and global contexts*, (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017), pp217-236.
[15] Cheryl Narumi Naruse, 'Singapore as Strategic Location', Poon, et al (2017), pp237-255.
[16] Gurveen Kaur, 'Goh Poh Seng's novel If We Dream Too Long adapted as dinner theatre for three weekends', *Straits Times*, 13 May 2016, < http://www.straitstimes.com/lifestyle/arts/goh-poh-sengs-novel-if-we-dream-too-long-adapted-as-dinner-theatre-for-three-weekends>, (accessed 22 June 2016).

ways, we also observe a stronger commercial interest in the text as a vehicle of pop culture nostalgia than artistic engagement, in harnessing the cache of the novel's reputation as 'Singapore's first'. The 1960s working-class clerk Kwang Meng and the bar-girl Lucy in *Dream* proliferate as aestheticised, superficial re-appropriations of historical images of the novel, in a postmodern pastiche of literary *mise en scene* and foodie culture. As one reviewer observed of the event, it was instantly 'Instagrammable', 'less like a semi-theatrical/literary event and more like a really elaborate theme dinner.'[17] We can read this tenuous revival of *Dream* in new, commodified forms of contemporary retromania as the novel's uncanny displacement into the social and economic margins of neo-liberal capitalist modernity. These examples demonstrate tenuous beginnings, vanishings, and a quality of outsiderness that expand outwards from the themes and subject matter of the novel to its own reception history.

'Conspicuously devoid of nationalist euphoria,' as Angelia Poon argues,[18] the novel presents an anti-heroic account of a young man struggling to find meaning in a rapidly changing Singapore of the 1960s, and, finally, becoming resigned to a life of quiet despair. The novel's plot is well-known today: the eighteen year-old clerk Kwang Meng wanders through his workaday life in newly-independent Singapore seemingly without aim or ambition. A perpetual outsider, alienated from his immediate surrounds, he constantly dreams of faraway places and lives. He encounters characters in his social milieu that embody other worldviews and ways of living. Kwang Meng tentatively attempts some of these, but suddenly inherits his ailing father's role as the sole provider for the family and is in the end relegated to the life of a clerk, and in the novel's final sentence, narratively vanishes from the text. This existential bildungsroman explores themes of personal displacement and alienation in an increasingly materialistic, institutionalised Singaporean society, demonstrating a personal crisis of modernity.

While past readings account in many ways for the novel's difficult early reception, they rarely consider that the novel is self-consciously an outsider narrative that works to generate textual modes of elusiveness and disappearance as enactments of a selfhood in crisis. I take my cue from the title of a sub-section in Koh's introduction to *Dream*, '(Mis)Reading or Not Reading Goh's First Novel', which provides an excellent detailed account of the context and

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[17] Jo Tan, 'Theatre review: If We Dream Too Long was more party than arty', *Today*, 16 May 2016, <http://www.todayonline.com/entertainment/arts/theatre-review-if-we-dream-too-long-was-more-party-arty> (accessed on 6 Oct 2016).
[18] Poon (2017), p217.

reasons for the novel's past reception (xvii-xxxvi), some of which I have introduced above. Although Koh's title suggests an attribution of critical blind-spots to past readings, it also provokes my consideration of the ways in which the text consciously resists meaning, the way it stages *in*significance. A textual poetics of nostalgia, romantic escapism and ambivalent longing illustrates Kwang Meng's existential crisis and establish his outsiderness in relation to the normative conditions of his historical time and place represented by his striving and well-adjusted friends. In past readings, the category of the 'existential' has been suggested as a belated way of cohering other more significant but unresolved themes, or used as a passing, descriptive term as though a given,[19] yet its poetics remain curiously and provocatively under-analysed. If disappearance is foregrounded at the start, what, if anything, is being written over? How can we recognise *Dream*'s elliptical protagonist? The narrative plots Kwang Meng's gradual disappearance and the demise of his dreams, where he progressively becomes the personification of the moment that is likened to 'a person who leaves your presence suddenly and without a word.' Not only is his disappearance foregrounded from the very beginning, but also, such a departure is enacted through a writing-over. The narrative announces his quality of disappearance through the elliptical nature of his presence, as are his inexpressible, private experiences thrown into sharp relief against his friends' articulated ideas of pragmatic striving. These effects highlight disappearance as a self-conscious mode of representation which invites a reading of the text and its expressions—*through* absence—as variants of absence. The text, interspersed with rhetorical questions, internal monologues, and framed by a third-person limited narration of Kwang Meng's elliptical thoughts, repeatedly signals displacement, deferral, incompleteness, elusiveness. This slippage of meaning engages a modernist conception of an essential selfhood that has been lost, one which mobilises the existential subject's search for authenticity.

In this chapter, I argue that the novel presents an outsider narrative through textual modes that destabilise meaning. By focusing on these features, I would point out that I am not denying that *Dream* is also a class, national, or postcolonial fiction, or suggesting that these emphases have been misplaced. These readings highlight the richness of the text as a literary, cultural and historical artefact that bears the multiple registers of Singaporean becoming. As Koh has

[19] Poon (2017), p224. Ban Kah Choon, 'What is Singapore/Malaysian Writing in English?' <http://postcolonialweb.org/singapore/literature/fiction/fiction6.html> (accessed 20 Mar 2015); Koh, *Dream*, xxxv.

suggested, Goh's sophisticated bildungsroman goes beyond the personal strife of the protagonist to display historical, intellectual and national morals and currents.[20] Yet these approaches also demonstrate a kind of common critical interest in social or structural interpretations which engage the category of the national in explicit ways. Can such a novel ever 'escape' the national? This question is neither intended to be flippant about the important and pioneering social representations and critique that critics have suggested *Dream* offers, nor to reductively claim that the political value and content of the work is separate to the realm of aesthetics. My intention is to widen the critical scope of enquiry by complicating existing readings of the novel's engagement with politics. I argue that part of *Dream*'s value is in Goh's textual attempts to circumvent the political through an escape, with varying degrees of success, into an aesthetics of disappearance. In my approach, I will not foreclose the contradictions inherent in Goh's project towards the apolitical by suggesting, in the end, that such a position is or should be inevitably safely co-opted into the political. Rather, I aim to show that Goh's eschewal of a direct confrontation with the political happens through the depiction of personal struggle. By engaging a poetics of ambivalence, he elaborates the problematic of a political superstructure.

Further, as Koh notes, *Dream* has often been dismissed as a 'young man's work'.[21] This intended gesture of critical disregard provides us with an interesting generic classification of the novel, which implicates the writer's gender, youth and inexperience. Does Goh's positionality as a 'young male writer', self-consciously or not, also work to produce the novel's enacted narrative of outsiderness? I engage this description to read Goh's personal and artistic engagements with existentialism in his early life as a way of illuminating processes of becoming and the search for authenticity in the novel. In the analysis that follows, I engage the existentialist preoccupations with the individual's experience of time, as well as processes of negation and becoming that inform the existentialist tradition of the search for authenticity, in order to illuminate *Dream*'s aesthetic of questing, ambivalence and elusiveness. This will be read against tensional forces of emergent, postcolonial, Singaporean modernity in this chapter's central examination of outsiderness, in order to complicate established readings of the text as a nationally engaged literature of post-independence.

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[20] Koh, *Dream*, xxxv.
[21] Ibid, xxxvi.; Ban, < http://www.postcolonialweb.org/singapore/literature/fiction/fiction6.html>.

The narratives of the novel and that of its creation are marked by an inter-implicated sense of beginning. Being a 'first' in several ways; Goh's first novel and the first Singaporean novel written in English, *Dream* is embedded with the significance of a formative moment. The time of personal discovery for Goh as a writer and as a national subject is born out of a broader moment of social, political and cultural becoming. Within this formative discovery, the figure of the outsider as exiled, marginalised, even oppositional, is an important critical model through which to examine Goh's early life, which reveals an identity in flux anchored by a cultural dualism. Born in Malaya, Goh left for studies in Dublin at the age of 16, experiencing there the cultural and political dislocations that would influence the writing of *Dream*. Goh recalls his early desire, as a young medical student in Dublin, to become a writer:

> I was living through tumultuous clashes between the cultures of the East and the West. For me, it was an unequal match. I was overwhelmed by the Western world, swamped by its newspapers, radio and theatre, the cinema and books, books, books. After a while I staggered about in a kind of shell-shock, dancing merrily down the road towards becoming deculturalized and a cultural pariah, profoundly affected by the words of Samuel Beckett, 'The sun shone, having no alternative, on the nothing new. Murphy sat out of it, as though he were free.'[22]

This passage draws attention to the ways in which Goh's positionality as a British-Malayan colonial subject and Western educated, middle-class Chinese, within a shifting local and international landscape of evolving political and cultural ideologies, was crucial to his experience of outsiderness. The reflexive use of Beckett rhetorically emphasises the ways in which Goh's identity as a 'pariah' was self-consciously conflicted, traumatic and liberating; and indeed, it reminds the reader of Beckett's aesthetics of negation that attempt to defy political forms of representation. While Goh's use of the term 'deculturalized' is perhaps naïve, as he clearly confesses falling prey to Western culture, it also speaks to an attempt to eschew the tumult of cultural politics. Under this idea of deculturalisation, all ideologies came under scrutiny. Goh's youthful questing for self-identity and knowledge through a rejection of systems, rebelling 'against colonialism, neo-colonialism, capitalism, communism, the Irish Press, and

[22] Goh, *Dream*, xxxviii-xxxix.

Hollywood',[23] as Goh tells us, is one that we see later depicted in Kwang Meng's own private politics of negation. For Goh, this experience of destabilisation paved the way for the appeal of the figure of the outsider in European literature and philosophy. He writes of being 'deeply influenced' by Colin Wilson's *The Outsider* (1956) and Dostoevsky, Beckett, Camus, Kafka and Kierkegaard and the 'angry young man' of Britain's stage and screen of the 1950s.[24] We can surmise that the outsider not only provided Goh with intellectual inspiration, but represented a source of personal identification for the young man lost in the historical cross currents of a global climate of post-war decolonisation.

Indeed, this period of self-development provided inspiration for Goh's participation in national culture upon his return to Singapore through the depiction of the outsider in Singaporean society, 'a worthy subject to explore'.[25] Goh's conflicting interest in the depersonalisation of the outsider, and, at the same time, enthusiasm about engaging in an emergent Asian society that held the promise of change, anticipates his poetics of ambivalence in *Dream*. Goh focuses this ambivalence through Kwang Meng, who is a site of conflict between social obligation and personal freedom. Kwang Meng, in his reluctance to return to the office, 'was aware of this strange ambivalence, this splitting into two parts. One said, "Remember you have to answer for it all when you return to the office," and the other, "How impossible it is now, after … What? What?"'[26] An indefinable sense of loss permeates Kwang Meng's everyday experience, shrouded in ellipses that highlight that which cannot be accounted for. Kwang Meng embodies ambivalence through classic existential conflicts between the social and the personal, public and private. Through his elliptical internal monologue, the text also displays a seeming obligation to representation that at the same time falls short into silence, capturing this simultaneous and contradictory struggle at the level of expression. Goh's urge to participate, along with a personal and artistic identification with the figure of the outsider, establish his positionality as a site of particular forms of cultural and literary production. While more can be written on these aspects of displacement in Goh's later life and work, some of which has been documented in articles and

[23] Ibid, xxxviii.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid, p71.

biographical entries on Goh, our discussion is focused on the period of his life pivotal to the writing of *Dream*.[27]

The notion of authenticity gave Goh a voice to negotiate and articulate this contradictory identification with the outsider and impulse to engage with Singaporean society. As Goh recalls of writing his first play, *The Moon is Less Bright* (1964), 'I realized that to have authenticity, the language must reflect the life around me.'[28] Like the 'Angry Young Man' novels which employed everyday symbols of English working-class life, idiomatic language and cultural idiosyncrasy to establish a visibility and legitimacy about working-class culture and identity in cultural production, Goh attempted to represent the local Singlish patois and a variety of local types in *Dream*. For example Lucy, the sexually experienced bar girl; Aziz, a Malay school friend from a working-class background; the Indian star athlete and future lawyer 'Portia'/Nadarajah; Kwang Meng's uncles, a businessman and a gambler. The authenticity of representation that Goh pursued was distinct from but interrelated to his interest in the condition of the outsider. Goh, witnessing the rapid changes in Singapore of the 1960s, 'wondered what would happen to those who could not embrace these changes. I wanted to capture the flavour and reality of Singapore in the sixties.'[29] The outsider which Goh recognised in a post-independent Singapore had to be culturally authentic, with its own language to express its unique conflicts and experiences. The novel, replete with instances of Kwang Meng's interior struggle with the meaning of his existence, repeatedly signals that 'He only knew that he did not know.'[30] The novel dramatises insignificance through such narrative declarations of passive inaptitude, signalling a crisis of self-knowledge. The crisis of self-knowledge, enacted in the figure of the young man--the site of productivity, strength and vitality resonantly symbolic of a young nation full of promise--marks this crisis as a moment of discursive conflict and emergent identity.

This crisis, often depicted in a highly personal way, momentarily suspends the exterior practical world that triggers Kwang Meng's struggle: '[It] was difficult for Kwang Meng to adjust to the dull workaday world. […] to keep on doing it is one thing, because there is no real

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[27] Clarissa Oon, 'Freedom and Fearlessness: The 1970s Novels of Goh Poh Seng', *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore* 12(4) Oct 2013, http://www.qlrs.com/essay.asp?id=1049, accessed 2 Nov 2016; 'Singapore Literary Pioneers: Goh Poh Seng', National Library Board, <https://web.archive.org/web/20080325175418/http://exhibitions.nlb.gov.sg/literarypioneers/writers/english/gohpohseng/index.php>, accessed 15 Jan 2017.
[28] Goh, *Dream*, xlii.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Ibid, p98.

choice; it is another thing to know one is following one's true path. If only he knew what that path was.'[31] The only way he can enact his disaffiliation with and rejection of his present is through an ambivalent passivity. Such passages of his increasing confusion and defeat reveal that the search for personal meaning is not an emancipatory choice, but rather an inevitability that ultimately dooms him to a life of bleak alienation. There is nothing in his present that he can recognise as 'true'; he only knows what is not the answer. One way of reading this unknown is through the conceptualisation of authenticity as a presence in absence. In *Being and Nothingness*, Jean-Paul Sartre explains that authenticity eludes objective criteria. He describes 'human reality' as 'being which is what it is not and which is not what it is.'[32] Authenticity is a negative concept, in that it is understood through its search, significantly through inauthenticity and acts of 'bad faith' (*mauvaise foi*).[33] It is this essential negation that makes authenticity's absence conspicuous, or in another way, its presence is known through its absence. Kwang Meng's search for meaning declares authenticity's quality of 'not here-ness', or absence. This negative concept of authenticity functions as a point of tension for the questing Kwang Meng, whose search reveals only the elusiveness and increasing impossibility of an authentic life.

Canonical existentialist literary texts such as Camus' *The Stranger* (1942) and Sartre's *No Exit* (1944) invoke authenticity through the juxtaposition of the subjective and objective, such as private impulse or sentiment versus public avowal and action. Similarly, in *Dream*, the site of tension, slippage, rupture or even ambiguity between these two categories of the presupposed authentic and defined inauthentic mobilises the process of negation in the outsider's questing. The elusiveness of the present for Kwang Meng, or the impossibility of an embodied presence, is manifested in his sense of physical dislocation. He possesses a desire to be anywhere else but 'here', implying an inability or refusal to inhabit the moment. Tellingly, Kwang Meng has a recurring impulse to flee to the sea when he feels alienated from his present, representing an escape from a prescribed world into a chaos of infinite possibility and potential. Alienated from 'the sound of his own footsteps', his spontaneous, if not unconscious, rejection of his surroundings, , in favour of the sea, rivers and 'really foreign cities', suggests a process of

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[31] Ibid, p97.
[32] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. H. E. Barnes (London: Methuen, 1957), p55.
[33] Sartre's *mauvais fois* include using objective criteria to understand authenticity which implies a misleading essentialism. See also Jacob Golomb, *In Search of Authenticity: from Kierkegaard to Camus* (New York: Routledge, 1995), p7.

negation in which the familiar is rejected for the not-here, not-this, not-I.[34] Authenticity for Kwang Meng is an elsewhere that can only be known by its absence.

While concepts of authenticity vary among European existentialists, the authentic is commonly anchored in ideas of temporality; specifically, the individual's awareness of his/her being in the moment.[35] Modernity's temporality is antithetical to this sense of continuum. Kwang Meng's ambiguous relation to the past, present and future represents the individual's struggles in inauthentic time. His unstable and nebulous relation to modernity's temporality is central to his outsiderness. Kwang Meng (光明), whose name in Chinese literally means 'bright and clear (light)' and metaphorically means 'promising', and who is at the threshold of adulthood, having just graduated from high school into working life, stands not only as a synecdochal figure for the youth of the post-independent generation, but as the promise of the emerging nation. He represents a kind of projective temporality associated with modernity's progress. However, his characterisation quickly becomes a searing indictment of the rapidly consolidating pragmatic social and cultural landscape which cannot accommodate the idealism and nebulous questing of youth. In his search for meaning and fulfilment which he 'hankered for, but knew not how to attain', Kwang Meng inevitably finds himself alienated from such a society and does not in fact represent clarity, optimism or a bright future as his name suggests.[36] He is introduced as a low-level clerk who takes the day off on the pretence of feeling unwell. The narrative voice tells us that Kwang Meng experiences 'poverty, loneliness, boredom, sexual frustration and periodic coughs and colds. Not to speak of his dreary job.'[37] Upon his graduation, Kwang Meng is already obsolete to the demands of a new and changing workforce. We learn that his father was too a clerk, but in the days of post-Independence there is little demand for white collar workers, the only occupation his education prepared him for.[38] This sense of obsolescence permeates the lives of his generation and characterises the evanescent historical moment of modernity.

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[34] Ibid.

[35] For Maurice Merleau-Ponty, time is a continuum; a fixation on the past or future is a betrayal of the 'plenitude of being in itself.' Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, (Routledge, 1965), p421. Martin Heidegger's notion of a heightened present is a 'moment of vision' (*Augenblick*) which requires Dasein (a being that is present through an awareness of mortality, or a being unto death) to draw on the past and its relation to the future. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarie and E. Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962).

[36] *Dream*, p98.

[37] Ibid, p1.

[38] Ibid, p7.

The novel's post-independence generation mourns the present as a new historicity continually forsaken them; history in the making as that which is always already over. Hock Lai and friends lament:

> 'Who wants us now? There's no trouble, no revolution, and I got no Law Degree or, the latest thing, an Economics Degree. Time's changed, and politics […]. We come too late on the scene, our generation, after the action is over. Now no one wants us.' 'We are only digits. How I wish I belonged to that period!' [39]

Goh gives voice to the casualties of such a historical moment, alluding to Lee Kuan Yew's famous description of Singaporeans as 'digits.'[40] The present, deflated of opportunities, is compounded by a sense of inevitability as these digits succumb to prescribed roles without protest or expression, announced by an omniscient narrator seemingly standing for the pre-determined, all-encompassing hand of fate:

> They knew what was to come. Those with secret or private dreams, saw their dreams crumble as they went in search of work. Most saw themselves become like their fathers, fated to their fathers' lives. In the space of a few weeks they assumed adulthood, they assumed an undespairing and undramatic resignation.[41]

As though outsiders to their own fate, they passively observe their participation in a depersonalised future. Goh evokes a heightened awareness of time through the proleptic anticipation of present time as future failure. In his influential narratological account of prolepsis, Gérard Genette defines it as 'any narrative maneuver that consists in narrating or evoking in advance an event that will take place.'[42] Proleptic intervention potently marks the

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[39] Ibid, p8.
[40] For examples, see Alex Josey, *Lee Kuan Yew: The Crucial Years*, (Singapore: Times Books International, 1980), pp316, 412, 458, 462, 578, 579.
[41] *Dream*, p7.
[42] Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane L. Lewin, foreword Jonathan Culler (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1980), p40.

absence of the present. More specifically, the anticipation of retrospection precludes any meaningful present, transforming it into 'the object of a future moment.'[43]

Proleptically set out in the novel, Kwang Meng, representative of the post-independence generation, progressively becomes a mocking and ironic inversion of his name and designation of a 'promising future'. His life is splintered by disjunctive temporalities of pre-determined futures and potently disappearing pasts. Seized by a moment of truth, Kwang Meng tells his uncle, 'What I face in front of me is what I face now: a clerk, always a clerk, leading a clerk's life, marrying a clerk's wife, rearing a clerk's family, dying a clerk's death, and if I should have a son, he would probably follow after me and be a clerk.'[44] Kwang Meng's projected future has no emancipatory potential or immanent meaning. It consists of repeated images of his present, which he cannot meaningfully occupy, belonging to a future that is already pre-determined. Present time is perpetually anticipatory; its *presence* is absent. As permanent futurity, the present for Goh represents not positive potentiality, but inevitability and loss.

This existential dialectic with authentic time is further complicated by Kwang Meng's anxiety with the past. The backdrop of national upheaval further presses on his memories when he becomes an impassive observer of his own history. His childhood in Chinatown 'was like a scene in a drama in which his present self was not an actor, but a spectator, and a somewhat disinterested spectator at that. […] [D]imly remembered figures of the past, separate from his present life. They were almost characters of another story, and not his own.'[45] This description captures a profound rupture in self-identity. Rapid urbanisation has dislocated time and memory from the individual; it has robbed Kwang Meng of his memories and hence self-recognition. The past is depersonalised and yet, the recollection of his childhood is also coloured by immigrant nostalgia: 'dried salted fish, strings of reddish-brown Chinese sausages hanging from wire hooks, sacks of rice, tins of coconut oil […] all those smells mingling with the smells of the often rubbish-choked monsoon gutters'.[46] Faces from his childhood 'came back to him, like stills from a film momentarily arrested on a screen'.[47] The dreamy, surreal quality of these sensorial descriptions conveys a romanticisation of the past, underscoring its crucial inaccessibility.

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[43] Peter Brooks describes narrative's key trope as the 'anticipation of retrospection.' Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), p23.
[44] *Dream*, p100.
[45] Ibid, p34.
[46] Ibid, pp34-35.
[47] Ibid, p35.

As postcolonial scholars have observed, colonial nostalgia has historically surfaced in various cultural contexts of dissatisfaction with independence.[48] Given that nostalgia is a memory discourse and a practice informed by dislocation and loss, colonial nostalgia is also driven by a loss of cohesion or continuity associated with the disruptive temporalities of high modernity.[49] Modernity's disjunctiveness and destruction are well understood by Kwang Meng when he laments 'out-pacing my own history,' feeling 'It's like throwing everything away, and when once thrown, so irretrievable. Something wrong, something sad about that.'[50] The erosion of Kwang Meng's memories communicate individual loss and personal upheaval during this period of national transformation, when slums such as Kwang Meng's family's Chinatown quarters were increasingly replaced by standardised urban housing. In such a changing social and physical landscape guided by national economic imperatives, Kwang Meng's proleptic visions of his self-identity are simultaneously over-determined and thus fixed, as well as threatened by pre-mature, permanent dissolution, underscoring a fundamental instability and ultimate impossibility of an embodied presence, in other words, an authentic existence.

Kwang Meng's description of outpacing his own history in the context of fading images of childhood and family speaks directly to personal memory disappearing under the weight of modernity. It is the urbanisation of new Singapore that has dislocated him from his childhood memories in Chinatown. In a postcolonial reading of *Dream*, Koh has extensively argued for Kwang Meng's loss of history as a condition of colonisation, stating that he 'falls thoroughly under the spell of the white man's fantasies'.[51] She argues that Kwang Meng's elliptical soliloquies are not emancipatory, empowering 'imagination', but 'fantasy', an inferior, degraded form of imagination.[52] To be sure, Kwang Meng is a colonial subject raised on Sir Walter Scott, Tarzan and dreams of a white Christmas,[53] but he also bears Goh's critique of British occupation when he notes the belligerence of colonial buildings in the local landscape, personifying the buildings with British arrogance: 'the Singapore Cricket Club stood patronizingly at the corner of the Padang. […] still the same syce-driven cars […] the same English masters […] the white uniformed Chinese 'boys'. […] They still cling on to their Cricket Club, Tanglin Club and Polo

[48] William Cunningham Bissell, 'Engaging Colonial Nostalgia', *Cultural Anthropology* Vol. 20, No. 2 (May, 2005), pp. 215-248; Kathleen Stewart, 'Nostalgia—A Polemic', *Cultural Anthropology 3*, No. 3 (1988), pp227-241.
[49] Andreas Huyssen, 'Present Pasts: Media, Politics, Amnesia', *Public Culture* 12(1): 2000, pp36-37.
[50] *Dream*, p107.
[51] Koh (1984), p182.
[52] Ibid, p184.
[53] *Dream*, p27.

Club.'[54] Kwang Meng also questions while 'unsentencing' himself from his work desk, 'Why did they teach him Treasure Island and Sir Walter Scott, etc., etc., at school, feeding him adventure?'[55] In this light, Goh's critique is not only of the British but of new Singapore, which Kwang Meng cannot meaningfully occupy in his prescribed role as a clerk. Kwang Meng notes the colonisation of the landscape as well as imagines himself as a sailor answering calls at 'the ports of the world, Aden, Amsterdam, Hamburg, Tokyo, New York, Hong Kong, Colombo, Vladivostok'.[56] As Koh points out, many of the places are former British colonial outposts, standing for Kwang Meng's colonised imagination whose coordinates are the British experience. However, such an observation overlooks a crucial convergence between the postcolonial subjectivity and global modernity. As postcolonial critics have long established, modernity is not an exclusively Western concept; with the international transfer of labour and capital is the emergence of new, competing modernities which proliferate new historicities.[57] But of course, as Peter Osborne reminds us, the meanings of modern in non-Western cultures are also shaped by their exposure to European ideas and social forms in the context of economic and military domination and colonial and post-colonial relations.[58] What Kwang Meng dreams of then, including luxury travel to faraway places, can be read as equally symptomatic of a post-independence Singaporean identity of burgeoning global connectivity. If Kwang Meng is the embodiment of the young nation, its growing pains and disjunctive ambiguities, ambivalences and temporalities (crisis of identity), what Koh refers to as the fantasies of a degraded imagination may in fact symbolise a young nation—in all its complexities, post-colonial, anti-colonial, nationalistic, capitalist, modern(ising)—wanting to connect with the rest of the world. But the crucial point is that these places are not purposefully defined, but rather, collectively represent an elsewhere that Kwang Meng seeks beyond his immediate knowledge or experience. These dreams of elsewhere thus set up a tensional relationship between Kwang Meng's present which he struggles to negotiate, and at times, attempts to escape, in search of the absent

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[54] Ibid, p4.
[55] Ibid, p27.
[56] Ibid, p26.
[57] Peter Osborne, *The Politics of Time: Modernity and the Avant-Garde* (London: Verso, 1995), p16. For example, Homi Bhabha's study of post-colonial contra-modernities in Homi Bhabha, '"Race", Time and the Revision of Modernity', *The Location of Culture*, (Routledge, London and New York, 1994), ch12; Paul Gilroy's examination of black counter-cultures of modernity in Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, (Verso, London, 1993), ch1.
[58] Osborne, p205, note24.

unknown. Goh's portrayal of Kwang Meng's flights of fancy invest his protagonist's dreamed of places with their literal and figurative meanings, mapping desire as a 'not-here' or 'elsewhere'. These places can be read as the virtual space of Kwang Meng's psyche, his topos of imagination and desire. These real places are imbued with fictitious meaning, giving them a mythic status, as though their inaccessibility is essentially what they represent—utopia, or 'no-place'.

For Goh, the context of beginning is central to the ambivalence of his Singaporean outsider; there existed an '"everything is possible" attitude' at the onset of independence luring the individual into 'commitment and involvement'.[59] At the same time, Singaporean modernity for Goh also necessarily heralds the disappearance and foreclosure of other lives or beginnings. As he writes, *Dream* 'is about a young man who did not quite fit into this new world. … Kwang Meng is a composite of a few people I knew. One was a clerk who showed me his poems and eventually ran away to sea… He confessed that he had always felt an outsider.'[60] Remarkably, a 1963 article in the *Straits Times* displays this very socio-cultural reality of changing times, rising pragmatism and the erosion of what was deemed 'old-fashioned' ambitions. In its advice column, titled: 'Old-fashioned idea from "Failure"', someone self-deprecatingly identifying as 'Failure' writes: 'Dear Know Alls: I have failed my School Certificate examination and wish to run away to sea. Where can I get a job as a sailor?' To which, the 'Know Alls' reply: 'Your idea is not very original and also old-fashioned. Nowadays, with modern technical advances, even a seaman will not get far without a basic education. So why not think it over and decide to sit for the examination again.'[61] As a public space for negotiating and producing social values, the advice column of the national newspaper attests to the production of pragmatism as a necessary value in this emergent national and personal life. 'Failure' could easily be Kwang Meng, who is displaced by the rapid modernisation of a society and its workforce. Under the pervasive force of pragmatic modernisation, the ideal of running away to sea is a romantic anachronism of an outsider. Like Failure, who is advised to be brought back into the fold by the Know Alls in the mainstream media, Kwang Meng is told to conform by his friends and family. Hock Lai lectures Kwang Meng thus: 'You must remember we didn't make the world, we must accept its terms, its conditions and conventions, or we opt out. It's as simple as that, old buddy. You gotta make up

[59] *Dream*, xlii.
[60] Ibid, xlii.
[61] 'Old-fashioned idea from "Failure"', *The Straits Times*, 24 March 1963, p17.

your mind, and fast! A lot of us in the race, and the stakes are each man for himself.'[62] Hock Lai's sermon outlines the bleak stakes of engagement with the new world, an alienating social Darwinism of dog-eat-dog, the only other alternative of which is to be left behind. Typically, Kwang Meng does not outwardly reply, but rather reflects, 'Thus spoke their schooldays' would-be maker of a new world,'[63] while 'clumsily trying to eat the *mee* [noodles] with fork and spoon. It's so much easier with an old pair of chopsticks, at which he considered himself an artiste.'[64] This reflection conveys a tone of resignation but also appears flippant in its attempt at a humorous deflection. One way of reading his 'artistry' with chopsticks is that it represents the minute material, everyday cultural practices that insinuate the tensions between the old and new in that new world order of modernity. Further, Goh presents Kwang Meng's unreadable silence as a response that verges on critique of Hock Lai's ultimatum, by sidestepping this constricting binary altogether. We can observe here a phenomenon of mutual erasure within a shared temporality between Goh/*Dream* and the socio-cultural landscape within and without the novel. 'Failure', the aspiring sailor of the boundless sea, overtaken by 'modern technical advances', so poignantly captures the erasure of an age, lifestyle and its related worldview and the coming of a new one, and another yet. Goh represents such erasure through Kwang Meng's physical and psychological retreat. *Dream* thus paradoxically captures this particular historical moment through Kwang Meng's failure to occupy it.

Yet, this space outside Hock Lai's proposed binary is not a liberating position for Kwang Meng, and highlights the ambivalence of Goh's outsider. Tellingly, in his school production of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, his friends played the major characters Portia and Shylock, while he was Balthazar, whom he describes to people as 'The one who had the one line, 'Madam, I go with all convenient speed,' And exits.'[65] Kwang Meng identifies with and continues to play a minor, walk-on role in his life, wondering, in the company of his friends Hock Lai and Portia, 'whether his being there mattered or not. […] not exactly a buffer even. His function was more ambiguous than that, having no specificity.'[66] The realisation that there is no place for him in this new Singapore is illustrated in his relationship with these Singaporean 'types', Hock Lai, the ambitious, materialistic social climber and would-be politician and Portia,

[62] *Dream*, p109.
[63] Ibid, p31.
[64] Ibid.
[65] Ibid, p8.
[66] Ibid, p109.

an aspiring lawyer, who are part of the new generation determined to 'make it in this rat race'.[67] The way in which Kwang Meng occupies his Balthazar-like role is one of extreme neutrality, neither rejecting nor embracing it. This ambiguous role suggests a melancholy stasis which highlights an ideological difference to the pragmatic busyness of the perpetual rat race, of the collective aspirations to cultural and economic mobility.

The novel also negotiates nation-building pragmatism through Kwang Meng's neighbour Boon Teik, who wholly embraces a sense of self-worth and potential predicated on its social usefulness. In a conversation with Kwang Meng, he attributes the problem of job dissatisfaction to people's lack of understanding 'that no matter how lowly or dreary their work is, it is meaningful and essential for the smooth functioning of society'.[68] Boon Teik, a teacher, whose name means 'culture' and 'refinement', is the well-adjusted, idealistic new Singaporean, who promotes 'positive', practical values, illustrative of the 1960s rising middle-class culture embodying a practical compromise between material and spiritual values. His pragmatic vision is foregrounded by the eye-catching *mise en scene* of his new flat that impresses Kwang Meng, 'prints of Van Gogh's and Cezanne's', 'a long bookshelf filled with books and a record player with a stack of long-playing records', 'batik cloth curtains, with matching cushion covers'.[69] The juxtaposition between Boon Teik's impressive eclectic cultural collection and their conversation conveys the sinister quality of his vision of man in society as 'individual pieces of an intricate machinery,' 'whatever the plane of work,'[70] an unequal sacrifice which precisely affords to the aspirational middle-class its existence. In contrast, Kwang Meng struggles with the problem—and its expression—of a lack of meaning for the individual within this formula of practical living. Finding arguments futile, he thinks, 'but did not actually voice to his friend', 'that it is very sad'.[71]

Boon Teik's characterisation and his influence on Kwang Meng is a major focus in critical readings of the novel. As much as Kwang Meng looks up to Boon Teik, the novel also reserves subtle judgment against him, who, earnestly believing in social betterment at the price of personal happiness, so fully imbibes nation-building ideology as to verge on the ridiculous. Similarly, Poon reads Boon Teik's characterisation as almost a caricature. 'On the other hand,

[67] Ibid, p8; p109.
[68] Ibid, p115.
[69] Ibid, p112.
[70] Ibid, p114.
[71] Ibid.

Boon Teik's influence, such as it is, is undermined by the portrayal of him as nothing more than a stereotype of the earnest and didactic civil servant. He is so unselfconsciously in the moment as to be faintly ridiculous and entirely lacking self-awareness.'[72] Poon reads Kwang Meng's initial aspiring to Boon Teik's lifestyle and the narrative's eventual foreclosure to that possibility for happiness as a way of shifting the novel's central problem from a political to an existential one.[73] On the other hand, Shirley Geok-Lin Lim's reading of Boon Teik as an earnest source of admiration and emulation for Kwang Meng positions her critique of the novel's 'valorizing middle-class mores and aspirations (in the pleasures in books and classical music of the paragon couple, Boon Teik and Mei-I) and presenting in Kwang Meng's entrapment in poverty the truly bourgeois nightmare.'[74] Reading that the narrative's momentum is based on Kwang Meng's struggle to escape his working-class origins, for example, through the text's idealisation of a middle-class lifestyle which Boon Teik and Mei-I represent, Lim argues that *Dream* is a 'middle-class fiction'.[75] Responding to Lim's analysis of Boon Teik and Mei-I's role in an aspirational narrative, I would argue instead that Goh embeds a commentary against middle-class cultural consumption through his reflexive use of intertextual references to complicate class power. Another way of reading Boon Teik's role in the narrative, I argue, is as one of the many 'hats' Kwang Meng tries on as he continues to negotiate and consolidate his own politics. Kwang Meng borrows Boon Teik's books, which tellingly are the moral allegories, Narayan's *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*, Hemingway's *To Have and Have Not* and Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. Goh signposts that for Boon Teik, a middle-class consumer of culture, culture is a safe appropriation rather than a lived experience of identity in crisis or flux as these texts negotiate. The pleasures that Boon Teik associates with reading, for example, describing Narayan as 'hilarious',[76] are later counterposed with the comparatively dogmatic exercise of reading for instruction. In an episode following Kwang Meng's returning of his books, Boon Teik asks 'Did you learn anything from them?' To which Kwang Meng replies, 'I learned something alright, but what it was I've learned I cannot say. Because I don't know.' With a peculiar sense of authority, Boon Teik says, 'It takes time […] for you to sort out what you've learned from reading; time, and perhaps effort, for you to analyse what you've learned.' '"I

[72] Poon (2017), p223.
[73] Ibid, p224.
[74] Shirley Lim (1994), p148.
[75] Ibid.
[76] *Dream*, p118.

somehow think I wouldn't want to sort it all out, to analyse. I would rather leave whatever it is a dark thing inside me," Kwang Meng said. "But that's just laziness," Boon Teik scolded. "Laziness," he repeated. "A very bad vice."'[77] Kwang Meng's 'dark thing' alludes to another Shakespearean text, *The Tempest*, where the coloniser Prospero says of the 'beast' Caliban, 'This thing of darkness I / Acknowledge mine.'[78] Goh appropriates Shakespeare's complication of the colonial duality of civilised culture versus magic savagery to highlight the role of inscrutability in the agency of his postcolonial subject. Through this intertextuality, Goh underscores the reflexive significance of the act of writing as a means of negotiating cultural power in a postcolonial context. He also reflexively gestures towards the act of reading, suggesting its possibilities of incipient meaning that may resist interpretive demand, as well as the moral grounds on which acts of reading are often contested. Kwang Meng's inexpressible 'dark thing' is too bleak to be entirely emancipatory, yet there is agency in his choice not to 'sort it all out'. Goh sets up a defence of reading and writing that expresses a kind of desire for the freedom of art and the imagination from the socio-political world, most of all it seems, from the bourgeois consumption habits of the middle-class. While the novel's denouement shows Kwang Meng's resignation to a fate determined by the constricting financial pressures of his class, the pursuit of freedom Goh evokes (the only form of freedom in the novel being the hypothetical kind) complicates the novel's class preoccupations, gesturing towards struggles other than class interest.

At the end of the novel, Kwang Meng looks at those evening ships he loved 'but they were no longer beckoning. No, he shall not go. […] He shall only go home.' Responding to an English tourist's request for directions to the British colonial icon the Raffles Hotel, Kwang Meng performs his character Balthazar's only line in the play, 'Yes, madam. I go with all convenient speed,' and walks away. The novel ends with the line: 'The old English lady tourist looked at the vanishing figure, and shook her head, puzzled.'[79] Goh presents Kwang Meng's moment of disappearance with the 'convenient speed' of postcolonial and post-independence modernity's disjunctures. This resignation of claiming his bit-part in life is tellingly ambivalent; on the one hand, it rhetorically announces a defiance against the old colonial order through an ironic subversion of canonical English literature to mark one's new home, and on the other,

[77] *Dream*, p122.
[78] William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, 5.1.289-290.
[79] *Dream*, p155.

demonstrates a symbolic suicide in his acknowledgment that ‘going home’ guarantees the fate of disappearance. The puzzlement inspired by the departing figure of Kwang Meng also compounds the ending’s sense of ambivalence and registers another layer of Goh’s postcolonial irony. ‘Puzzlement’ registers as a response to incoherence; it suggests at once Kwang Meng’s colonial defiance and symbolic suicide, and yet, it is also with another layer of postcolonial irony that this registration occurs through the complicitly colonial gaze directed towards the perceived incoherent, self-sabotaging resistance of the native. In the novel’s final frame, Goh reinforces the outsider narrative through the figure of the tourist who, through her puzzlement, is positioned as looking from the inside at this outsider.

The final scene of Kwang Meng’s departure marks a significant moment in the emergent Singaporean novel, representing a self-identity that is founded on powerfully private conflicts and disavowals. The ambivalence of such a process of negotiation illustrates the novel as a symbolically contested terrain of subjective identity formation occurring within the time of the nation. The outsider narrative is ironically one which authorises the shifting dynamics of a national life from which it is disappeared. Moving from this chapter’s investigation of disappearance, we will examine the pragmatic poetics and aesthetic equivocality in Lim’s attempts to represent and recognise emergent national life and cultural identity in the short story form.

Pragmatism's 'Coming of age': Catherine Lim's Iconic Representations, Irony and Affectlessness

> Listen to this! She was supposed to write a story with the title 'The Stranger' and all she did was write a great deal of trash about her father—*'He canned me everytime, even when I did not do wrong things still he canned me'*—she means 'caned' of course—*'and he beat my mother and even if she sick, he wallop her'.* This composition is not only grossly ungrammatical but out of point. I had no alternative but to give her an F9 straightaway. God, I wish I could help her!
>
> When the news reached the school, the teacher was very upset and said, 'Poor girl. What? She actually jumped down from the eleventh floor? Such a shy, timid girl. If only she had told me of her problems. But she was always too shy and timid to speak up.' [1]

This closing scene of 'The Teacher', an emblematic story in Catherine Lim's iconic first collection, *Little Ironies: Stories of Singapore*, conjures up familiar and troubling themes of Singaporean life: the pressure for and pursuit of material achievements at the expense of emotional or spiritual fulfilment, and the chasing of quantifiable markers of success with a blindness to things of intangible, qualitative value. In this story, these take the form of the pressure for academic excellence, the blindness, if not apathy, of the authority figure towards one under his charge, and pragmatic single-mindedness in pursuit of the 'best' (academic) results. Albert Camus' novel of alienation and defiance of the law, *The Stranger* (1942), is given ironic recontextualising in this scene of tragic misreading. The circumstantial shift we can identify from the figure of tourist in *Dream* to stranger in this scene registers an apparent development of a national subjectivity which authorises its own gaze; in this example, the student is asked to write her own story of outsiderness. The student's personal crisis remains unrecognised, and instead is read as a struggle with grammar. The dramatic irony is obvious and underwhelming: the teacher's oblivion and dismissiveness ('a great deal of trash') is a glaring contrast to the multiple authority positions he holds as a teacher, guardian and custodian of language. Language is the

[1] Catherine Lim, 'The Teacher', *Little Ironies: Stories of Singapore* (Singapore: Heinemann, 1978), p15; hereafter *Little Ironies*.

site of social and moral dysfunction; the student's writings situate the cry for help and the teacher's skewed (non-)reading of it as exercises in grammar. More ironic then, is that the narrative presentation of such dysfunction is itself dysfunctional, seeming to repeat such problematic emotional disengagement. The teacher's response is perfunctorily reported, 'the teacher was very upset'. Moreover, the response of being 'upset' suggests something performative which also circumvents emotional engagement, which is further endorsed by the teacher's direct speech, 'if only she had told me …' Finally, the story's resolution is unfulfilling. With ironic narrative distance in the teacher's conclusive lament that underscores his prevailing ignorance, the student 'was always too shy and timid to speak up.' In this flat narration of a tragedy, tragedy's affects are conspicuously absent, and yet, the ironic distance of the narrative voice generates other modes of troubling affect such as cruelty, condescension and mockery. These affects, deliberate or unintentional, are characteristically embedded in the collection's overall narrative tone of detachment. 'The Teacher', like most of its collection's other little ironies, displays simple language, moral or ethical stakes and a flaccid ending of suspended agency. Read one after another, these stories' narrator's stock mocking tone which deliver unfulfilling resolutions only succeeds in provoking irritation or indifference in the reader.[2]

As the final scene of 'The Teacher' exemplifies, reading *Little Ironies* produces modes of affect in the reader perhaps not intended by the author: indifference or irritation at underwhelming twists that don't twist and promised ironies that don't ironise. Is this deliberate, inadvertent or both? Rather than conveying the traditional politically and morally powerful categories of the beautiful and sublime, Lim's stories, to borrow aesthetic theorist Sianne Ngai's salient description of late capitalist cultural production, display minor, flat or no affect, suggesting an aesthetic equivocality that is challenging to read.[3] Indeed, the canonical work's title 'Little Ironies: Stories of Singapore' signposts an unremarkableness or 'mereness' to the kinds of ironies one might find in these local tales. That is to say, minor or low affect is produced by the perception of obvious ruptures, contradictions or dramatic irony in these stories of everyday struggles. Lim's promised ironies suggest a number of authorial strategies, an intention to present a critique of Singaporean society, and also suggests a number of ways to read her text as a complex engagement with precisely those conventional modes of reading that irony can

[2] This narration excludes 'Adeline Ng Ai Choo' and 'The Taximan's Story' which are written in the first person voices of the characters.
[3] Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard UP, 2005).

challenge. For example, irony can suggest a calculated representation/(re-)enactment of the slippage of affect in a pragmatic, modernising society, or offer a doubling of meaning that undermines the single vision of pragmatic ideology or authoritarian state discourse. Yet, what to make of Lim's particular brand of irony that does not illustrate the typical semantic richness or double bind that irony generates? Is this lack of irony itself ironic? Does the stories' undercutting of the reader's expectations of a tragic mode of representation work to draw us in another way? In particular, I am interested in the forms of affect that Lim's stories produce and the ways in which they designate the category of the aesthetic in Singaporean realist fiction.

The period 1965 to 1990 has been described by cultural and literary scholars as the 'coming of age' of Singapore's economic, social, cultural and political systems, specifically, a maturing pragmatism evolved to govern all aspects of everyday life. [4] Literature of this period also reflects this maturation by addressing themes of modernity and nation-building as well as gender, class and race.[5] In this context, *Little Ironies* may be easily read as an index of the sociohistorical conditions of an evolving pragmatism within its field of production. Lim articulates the permeating mood of the age; her stories can be read as stories of normativised pragmatic busyness as affectless defence against fundamental and potentially destabilising social problems. However, this chapter instead uses the term 'pragmatism' in a speculative rather than deterministic way to approach pragmatism in Lim's writing not only as a stylistic category pregnant with sociohistorical meaning, but one that informs the key term 'affect' as a functionalising aesthetic in her object lessons in modern Singaporean life. I argue that Lim's objective, impassive reportage and a marked perfunctoriness of detail and description exemplify a form of pragmatic, empiricist poetics and praxis.

Celebrated in the local press as 'our very first best-seller'[6] and 'a mirrored image of ourselves',[7] *Little Ironies*' initial enthusiastic reception (and recent re-canonisation) reveals the

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[4] The words 'coming of age' are from Eddie Tay's review of Angelia Poon, Philip Holden and Shirley Geok-lin Lim (eds.), *Writing Singapore: An Historical Anthology of Singapore Literature* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2009). Poon, Holden and Lim view the period 1965-1990 as the maturation of Singapore's systems of governance and national identity. See also Chua Beng Huat, *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore*, (London: Routledge, 1995).

[5] R Dass. 'English literatures in post-colonial Singapore' [online], Education Research and Perspectives, Vol. 42, 2015: pp136-137. For example, Stella Kon's pioneering play, *Emily of Emerald Hill* (1982) explores issues of gender, domesticity and Peranakan culture, while Kuo Pao Kun's *The Coffin is Too Big for the Hole* (1984) allegorises the health of the body politic and its homogenisation under a bureaucratic government authority.

[6] Chandran Nair, 'The "unknown" who gave us our very first bestseller', *The Straits Times*, 23 December 1979, p2.

[7] Gretchen Mahbubani, 'Cultural cringe...' *The Straits Times*, 6 September 1980, p29.

collective desire for visibility and representation of local subjectivity in literature. Read as a benignly authentic mode of cultural representation, it evokes the 'affectivity of being-in-common'.[8] This popular reception, dominated by cultural interpretations of her text, has delineated subsequent readings of the text and its author, whether valorising or critical. These readings, which view the text mainly as an encryption of the historical and social, tend to occlude an examination of *Little Ironies*' aesthetic equivocality. Approaching it as literary text, we encounter the opposite to its affective cultural meanings, a pervasive affectlessness in its representations of Singaporean subjectivities in crisis.

Little Ironies' flat descriptions and simple prose makes it a problematic text to analyse through traditional hermeneutics. If one applies a traditional deep reading to this text, assuming depth and richness in its aesthetic form and function, the reader discovers that its pervasive irony prevents meaning production. In the above passage, the mildly ironic, perfunctory conclusion both occludes interpretation and yet prompts a paranoid reader to read into its flat realism's conspicuous absence of affect. However, is this absence only recognisable through such a reading approach? Focussing on Lim's iconic irony and codified representations of affect(lessness)—this chapter draws on a number of aesthetic theories and reading approaches such as surface versus deep reading, affective irony versus sentimentality, minor affect, naturalism and flat affect to examine the difficulties of reading this canonical text. What I initially loosely describe as the absence of affect in Lim's stories will be further defined and debated in the chapter as flat affect, affective irony, ironic distance, all prompting a simultaneous consideration of the deliberate absenting of affect versus a symptomatic lack of affect. In other words, the absence of affect will be explored in two ways: as an aesthetic strategy in Lim's central realist mode of representation, using different models of literary aesthetics to consider ways of reading her affective markers; or alternatively, as an index of the discursive functioning of pragmatism in literature.

While *Little Ironies* made Lim an almost instant literary icon, her name has remained in the national imaginary for more than three decades through her prolific literary output and presence in the popular media. Her public profile has been a site of continuous political contestation, making Lim and her work important texts through which to examine the tensional

[8] Lauren Berlant and Jordan Greenwald, 'Affect in the End Times: A Conversation with Lauren Berlant', *Qui Parle*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (Spring/Summer 2012), pp77-78. Berlant and Greenwald use this to describe's Oprah's harnessing of an intimate public, the collective affect of 'Empty Oprah Syndrome'.

relationship between literature and society in Singapore. In 1980, a *Straits Times* article titled 'Cultural Cringe', reporting on the discussion on the television programme *The Craft of Writing*, noted that *Little Ironies* 'was mentioned several times, cited as the most successful locally written book. In Singapore terms it was a best seller when published in 1978, selling 3,000 copies in its first year.'[9] Descriptions of Lim and her work in public forums evidence an eagerness to claim and establish a literary first, one that Singaporeans could call 'our' own. A week before the article was published, Lim was named Singapore's best known writer on *The Craft of Writing*. Multiple endorsements in *The Straits Times*, the nation's main state-regulated broadsheet, and a leading voice shaping Singapore's social, cultural and political landscape, significantly corroborates and self-consciously authorises a collective identification and celebration of Lim as a local icon.[10] Further, its place in the national syllabus since 1986 codifies it as a national text, illustrating its perceived national relevance and authenticity. The terms for which Lim has been celebrated have also been the source of criticism by the media and literary critics alike. While local newspapers and some scholars have keenly endorsed her style and substance of representation as a paean to Singaporean life, others have also described these as lacking artistic ingenuity. Gretchen Mahbubani of the *Straits Times* noted in 1980 that *Little Ironies* is 'well-crafted, not too serious and simply written.'[11] At the same time, John Kwan-Terry, a literary critic from the University of Singapore, identifies a reductive quality of the stories which he describes as 'short and undemanding' as well as 'uncomplicated and familiar'. [12] Such a criticism highlights a perceived lack of imaginative weight and emotional complexity. For both her fiction and social commentary, Lim is at once popular and notorious in the eyes of the dominant culture. While she has been widely celebrated by the state-owned press, she was also derided by the government as a fringe writer in 1994 during a highly publicised confrontation with the government, commonly known as the Lim affair.[13] Her active, public engagement in literature and politics thus invites a reading of affect as a site of political contestation both in terms of her public profile as well as at the level of textual practice. While

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[9] Mahbubani, loc. cit.
[10] See Gretchen Mahbubani, 'Those little ideas that shot story writer Catherine Lim to top', *The Straits Times*, 13 September 1980, p7; Nair, loc. cit.
[11] 'Cultural cringe...', loc. cit.
[12] John Kwan-Terry, 'Little Ironies: Stories of Singapore by Catherine Lim', *World Literature Today*, Vol. 54, No. 1, (Winter, 1980), p173.
[13] Han Fook Kwang, 'Prime Minister's remarks show that on fundamental issues, nothing has changed', *The Straits Times Weekly Edition*, December 1994, p15.

this chapter's key focus is a textual analysis, we will also briefly examine the Lim affair as an example of public affect at play in readings of canonical Lim.

One key theme throughout Lim's body of work of novels and short stories, which span more than three decades, is the tension between tradition and modernity, which plays out through characters embodying East and West, age and youth, superstition and capitalism. In *Little Ironies,* Lim depicts these tensions as the divisions and contradictions of a society in rapid transition, marking the material gains and spiritual and emotional losses of a national agenda of progress and the resultant culture of upward mobility. The subject of gender politics has been frequently explored in Lim's body of work, which often depicts the female experience through women in crisis who are beleaguered by patriarchal forces. This theme of gender conflict is germinant in *Little Ironies* in 'The Taximan's Story'. Written entirely in Singlish, a pioneering literary innovation at the time, this famously ground-breaking short story is narrated by a taxi driver, a typically struggling working-class figure, vexed by what he views as the corrupting influence of American and European culture on local youth, particularly his daughter who 'make herself so cheap when her father drive taxi all day to save money for her University.'[14] Lim highlights the taxi driver's hypocrisy of making money by ferrying prostitutes to hotels while judging them, representing oppressed, castigated females through the male gaze in order to reveal the hypocrisies and contradictions of the archetypal dialectics that she establishes are central to Singaporean society and culture.

Since its initial publication in 1978, *Little Ironies* has been read by an enthusiastic Singaporean public as reflections of 'us'. Public reception embraces *Little Ironies* as the rallying point of a common cultural imaginary, missing or glossing over its depiction of a society in moral and psychological crisis. The early cultural and literary criticism of *Little Ironies* in the 1970s and 1980s reflect a significant moment in local literary development, a longing for a book about 'us', that is, the literary representation of the Singaporean subject, and through this articulation of subjectivity, the creation of a local literature—one that embodied local issues, patois, characterisation and narratives. They convey a common excitement with self-representation and visibility: 'Ideas for the stories, that friends tell her are uncannily so close to reality, come from childhood memories, newspaper reports and her own acute perceptions.' [15]

[14] *Little Ironies*, p79.
[15] 'Those little ideas …', loc. cit.

'Lim's stories and characters are so lifelike that many readers have claimed that they either know someone who resembles one of her characters or recognise the situations she writes about.'[16] Here we find responses to Lim's collection characterised by the affectivity of a shared imaginary, revealing an aesthetic value mainly tied to the reification of cultural identity in the turbulent times of rapid modernisation and nation-building. They also demonstrate the middlebrow reception of *Little Ironies*, which highlights popular readings into its sentimentality, accessibility and moral flavour.

Subtitled 'Stories of Singapore', Lim's image of the literary protagonist is one who is plain spoken, tied up to all kinds of identification with the spiritually modest and materialist achievements and expectations of the average Singaporean. Lim's depiction of an emergent Singaporean identity of middle-class striving and pragmatism, later consolidated in the 1990s public discourse of the 'heartlander' with the evolution and ubiquity of the HDB estate , similarly invokes and sentimentalises a Singaporean national imaginary. Such stories of 'Singaporean-ness' rhetorically inscribe the boundaries of cultural and social identity, making claims to its essentially unique and vulnerable quality, and allegorising a national soul and selfhood. This consolidation of an immediately identifiable and accessible cultural familiar resonates with modes of middlebrow practice and cultural consumption. Familiar cultural imagery, simple language and 'not too serious' stories make the text easy to consume, a key feature of middlebrow tastes and practices. Lim's own raison d'être reflects this category of the 'not too serious' when she says: 'The primary aim of a writer is to entertain, never mind the moral content or the social message. I don't want to claim to make a difference in people's lives.'[17] Further, her comments in 2013 on her political and fictional writing's separate 'target readers' [18] suggest an overarching commitment to the audience that is common to middlebrow practices of supporting its audience's 'needs and desires'.[19] As scholar of the middlebrow Beth Driscoll explains, middlebrow institutions are 'accessible, leisure-based cultural consumption'.[20] Popular readings of *Little Ironies* suggest such a leisure-based consumption in their emphasis on

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[16] 'Curtains up on life's Little Ironies', *The Straits Times*, 22 January 1988, p37.
[17] Lim, quoted in Helen Chia, 'Adding up bits of experience**',** *The Straits Times*, 7 June 1989, p20.
[18] Lim, 'Playing Three Different Roles: Telling The Same Story Of Human Drives And Conflict', 27 Aug 2013, < http://catherinelim.sg/2013/08/29/playing-three-different-roles-telling-the-same-story-of-human-drives-and-conflict/>, (accessed 30 Oct 2013).
[19] Beth Driscoll, 'The Middlebrow family resemblance: Features of the historical and contemporary middlebrow', Post45, 2016.
[20] Ibid.

the stories' imminent healing conclusion. As recently as 2008, a *Straits Times* literary critic observed, 'Not that this depressing book makes you give up hope entirely on humankind. Lim's humour and compassion shine through, especially in the stories which have an element of comeuppance or redemption.'[21] The stories' irony or twist is read as a comforting moral conclusion to its dilemma, the 'full repercussions of the character's decisions revealed in a surprising, but never outlandish, twist only at the end.'[22] Lim's stories are lauded for fulfilling their promise of a satisfactory, value-affirming conclusion, suggesting an earnestness with which the morality of Lim's stories is read. While readings of its accessibility, feel-good quality and moral flavor are all reasons for *Little Ironies*' popularity, they also limit the examination of its textual dynamics and aesthetics.

Departing from these cultural readings, we turn to affect theory to establish our examination of *Little Ironies*' literary aesthetics. For affect scholars, affect's significance (and the challenge of theorising affect) is its in-between-ness, independence of socially determined order and yet radical potential to transform and exceed such an order. Since the 1980s, for a range of affect scholars responding to New Criticism, affect is the excess left out by structuralism's analysis of social signification; a potentiality of being, a force, intensity or incipience which transcends or is independent of social production. Brian Massumi's account of affect underscores agency as a key feature of the affective experience which exceeds social subjection. Massumi's descriptions of affect as 'tendencies', 'virtual', 'potential', pertaining to 'futurity' ground his conception of affect as of a different order—potentiality, before its expression which bears the 'dint of inhibition' —although inseparable from the concrete expressions of the body. [23] These conceptions of affect highlight its potential, imaginative capacities and qualitative, unstable, autonomous yet transmissive nature which enable affect's socially transformative power. It is this transformative potential that we will be examining in relation to the textual agency in *Little Ironies*' central realist mode of representation. The role of affect in literary realism is a fundamental underpinning of realism's potential to mobilise human agency and engagement. Of particular relevance to this discussion is literary realism's use of affect as a form of embodied aesthetics which corporeally and emotionally transforms our relations with the real world through its creative representation. As Jane F. Thrailkill argues,

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[21] Stephanie Yap, 'Daily despair', *The Sunday Times*, 3 Aug 2008, 23.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Brian Massumi, 'The Autonomy of Affect', *Cultural Critique*, No. 31, Part II (Autumn, 1995), p91.

'Works of literary realism, despite the documentary promise of the term, are not photographic representations of a real world elsewhere; they are condensations and expansions of human thought, sentience, and experience.'[24] Thrailkill maintains that literary realism's affective engagement with the emotional intelligence of the body enables the complex interrelations, instead of simplified distinctions between the aesthetic encounter and practical life. She highlights the potential and centrality of affect in literary realism to prompt new meanings, stressing the reader's role in such an interaction. Termed 'emotive realism', her notion indicates an importance of affect's function in literature's portrayal of 'real' experiences in order to (re-)situate human engagement. Affect and its conceptual links to textual agency are key to our approach in differentiating *Little Ironies*' realism from the sociological emphasised by previous cultural readings. While these conceptions of affect are useful in highlighting its powerful and dynamic states of agency, *Little Ironies*' 'affectlessness' prompts a study of other kinds of affect known as minor or low affect. As explained in Ngai's authoritative work on the subject, minor affect signals situations of 'suspended agency', that is, those without release or action, which index their politically ambiguous states. Given that they are centred on trivial aesthetic categories and contradictory feelings, these aesthetically equivocal, potentially powerful states are especially relevant in debating the lack of mobility and dynamics of irony in Lim's representations.[25]

Linda Hutcheon's illuminating study of irony differentiates irony from other similar and related tropes such as ambiguity and sarcasm by conceptualising irony's constitutive 'edge'. This edge of irony provides our model in examining the dynamics of irony in *Little Ironies.* Irony's edge is always evaluative and affective. Irony conveys an evaluative attitude towards the said and the unsaid. This attitude's indirection and 'transideological' nature,[26] neither inherently radical nor conservative, yet employed by all camps, make for the unease that irony is known to provoke.[27] The intentions of the ironist, from derisive mockery to detachment, and the emotions that the attribution of irony can produce, ranging from irritation to embarrassment, highlight

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[24] Jane F. Thrailkill, *Affecting Fictions: Mind, Body, and Emotion in American Literary Realism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), p26.
[25] Ngai, pp1, 3, 6, 9.
[26] Hayden White, *Metahistory: The historical imagination in nineteenth-century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), p38.
[27] Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony*. (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), pp.35-37.

irony's affective charge.[28] Using this conception of irony, one way of reading the narrator's detachment in Lim's stories is as a general ironic tone of representation. For example, characters and their emotions are plainly presented through the use of repeated adjectives such as 'anger' or 'terror' or 'ugliness' without variation. From 'The Jade Pendant', 'The terror of her mother […] was itself terrifying to behold';[29] from 'Male Child', '[S]he and her aunt baited him and made him feel even more angry. His anger was great because he knew that he could not do without her' and 'He went on and on in his angry voice about the humiliation of not having a male child';[30] from 'The Ugly One', 'Wild were the rumours that circulated about the Ugly One, inspired probably by her indescribable ugliness.'[31]This conspicuous emotional distance could suggest the attribution of irony to such a narration and be read as Lim's general reflexive mode towards representation. The repetitious descriptions, compounded by the monotony of clichéd language, could be read as a sardonic stance towards the represented subjectivities, prompting an irritation towards the ambiguity and ambivalence of Lim's project. The minor affect of irritation generated by Lim's literary techniques is at the heart of the collection's aesthetic equivocality. This invites the question: is passive repetition enough to produce an ironic edge? Lim's bland language, as a weak literary device in and of itself, provides no possibility for juxtaposition or tension against textual complexity (as we will continue to show in subsequent examples). Hence, the question remains as to Lim's intentionality with regard to this possible irony that permeates the collection. While the protective shield of irony that the title 'Little Ironies' claims forces a paranoid reading into the kinds of irony that may exist in Lim's affectless, banal representations of everyday moral crises, can and should we read this as irony? As we will elaborate, a close reading of Lim's irony examines the politics of her genre of social realism and elaborates the ambivalent charge of her central aesthetic.

Little Ironies' flat tone of sociological documentation suggests Lim's naturalist, objective approach to her short stories. Indeed, the literary critic and author Austin Coates has compared Lim's stories to those of French naturalists Guy de Maupassant and Alphonse Daudet, for its 'same sureness of observation, clarity in presentation of character, and finely judged economy

[28] Ibid.
[29] *Little Ironies*, p82.
[30] Ibid, p35.
[31] Ibid, p89.

both of words and emotion.'[32] Moreover, the stories' endings bear a resemblance to the tragic conclusions of Emile Zola's novels or the twist endings of Maupassant's short stories in that they attempt to masquerade as objective depictions of the behaviour of social beings while often containing a cruel resolution. It is this particular treatment of character and the narrative trajectory towards ruination that prompt a comparison of Lim's stories to the French naturalists. However, unlike the intricate details of Zola's famously romantic, expressive and voyeuristic descriptions—which often exceed his treatises' aims to present scientific, psychological, social portraits—Lim's plain and unexpressive descriptions remain objective and detached. Applying the French physiologist Claude Bernard's experimental method in science to literary practice, Zola espoused a literary approach of exploring the 'how' of things and not the 'why'.[33] Resembling this idea, the problems experienced by the characters in *Little Ironies* that comprise the tension of the plot are dramatised as originating from and occurring on an individual level rather than connected to a broader political project, or as the product of social codes. Hence for Kwan-Terry, there is little in *Little Ironies* to enlighten the reader on 'the Singaporean "soul"—its physical locale, for instance, or the moral, social, intellectual and emotional complex that motivates it to action or inaction.' [34] Lim locates her social dramas as somehow rooted in culturally idiosyncratic behaviour—a representative, superficially local psyche which, lacking edification, is simply always already present. Lim's designation of idiosyncrasy negates and undermines any meaningful social or cultural critique as it passes societal symptoms off as droll incongruities—ironies of life. Commenting on Lim's early works, Kirpal Singh asks, 'So far Catherine has dealt with 'little' ironies ... But where are the "big" ironies?'[35] For Singh, it is difficult to connect her ironic representations of the everyday, however subtle a social commentary they may pose, to the broader structural causes and socio-political implications. Indeed, Lim's engagement with Singaporean society is one of surfaces, which are easily recognisable and consumable. She establishes narrative arcs of marriage, family, education and class, all representing social and cultural institutions as sites of personal crises for the characters. These highlight the 'coming of age' of Singapore in the consolidation of social and cultural

[32] Austin Coates, *Writing in Asia Series*.
[33] Emile Zola, (1893) 'The Experimental Novel', *The Experimental Novel and Other Essays*, II, (trans: Belle M. Sherman, Haskell House, New York, 1964), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/zola/1893/experimental-novel.htm> Accessed on 20 Dec 2015.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Kirpal Singh, 'Singapore Fiction in English: Some Reflections', *Singapore Book World* 1993/4, Vol. 23, pp21-23.

systems which find their fullest expression in the impersonalised everyday, where everyday 'crises', while inherently connected to a larger political and social project, for Lim, are no longer recognised as such and instead exclusively negotiated and articulated on a crucially faceless individual level.

For an examination of the collection's relationship between its affectless style and emotionally-charged subject matter of everyday tragedies, we turn to Paula Bennett's idea of 'affective irony' as a useful point of comparison. In Bennett's study of women writing in the nineteenth-century fin-de-siècle, she terms the women writers' self-conscious use of irony in a move away from sentimentality as 'affective irony', or 'the irony of "cool"'.[36] Affective irony was a mark of modernity, a move away from the previous century's Victorian excess and sentimentality, a way for the New Woman writer to shed stereotypes of overly-emotional, 'frivolous' writing associated with women writers and establish herself as a serious poet, as 'maker' and not 'feeler'.[37] Bennett argues that affective irony deftly played in the gap between a desentimentalised style and emotionally-charged subject matter.[38] Such a rupture opens up meanings in the texts as the writer and narrative persona do not pass judgment on their subject matter, but through such a gap leave the reader to evaluate it themselves. In a stripped-back style in contrast to sentimental moralising, the things left unsaid by the speaker give the poem its tension and affective charge. In *Little Ironies*, the lack of mobility between affectlessness and emotionally-charged subject matter must be linked as well to Lim's use of sentimentality. The ironic twist at the end is embedded with a moralising sentimentality which displaces emotional and character complexity. While the New Women writers' desentimentalising style favoured their poems' affective charge, Lim's sentimentalising augments the affectlessness in her stories.

Sentimentality in *Little Ironies* exists in three forms: parables about the price of modernity and human frailty; simple, accessible, unchallenging language especially through the use of cliché, making the emotional clichés of the characters easily identifiable and consumable; and cultural sentimentality in the use of local signifiers to localise universal themes of greed. In the throes of modernisation and rapid urban development's permanent transformations to Singapore's cultural landscape, Lim's sentimentality is one of a growing, anticipatory nostalgia

[36] Paula Bennett, *Poets in the Public Sphere: The Emancipatory Project of American Women's Poetry, 1800-1900* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), p193.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Ibid, p194.

for the eroding traditions and customs which she romanticises. In 'Monster', Lim places an elderly Chinese immigrant with her prized possession of a bed she had 'slept in for 60 years now' against her modern, materialistic daughter-in-law, with the English name of Karen, establishing a trite contrast between the embodiments of tradition and modernisation, innately good versus fundamentally bad. Karen wants to get rid of the bed she calls a 'hideous four-poster with its carvings and that filthy mat and the rusty tin she [the old woman] uses as a pillow', 'full of bugs and vermin'.[39] Karen is highly-strung, fussy and vain, and gossips about her mother-in-law and her bed to her colleagues at work.[40] In stock contrast, the sickly, suffering elderly woman, in the semi-conscious state of her final days, has flashbacks to her youth as 'a young woman of 24, frightened by the noise and the smells on board ship, feeling very sad and wondering how soon she would be in that new country', 'the birth of her first son, after the humiliation of three daughters… her husband's *pleasure*, and how he … gave her a gold chain, to show his *pleasure*' [italics mine].[41] Unsurprisingly, her flashbacks turn to more pressing fears, 'a dream in which she saw Karen coming in with an axe and chopping the bed into pieces.'[42] Through the figure of the helpless old woman, Lim designates the past, its attendant rituals, objects and behaviour as the victim of an unfeeling and threatening modernity. Yet, Lim's sentimentalising reinforces a narrative distance because its stereotypical representation reveals a formulaic, undiscerning view of migrant struggle and its related issues of cultural loss and nostalgia. Further, this sentimentality is projected onto and contained within material signifiers, whose endurance speaks in place of perishing characters and thereby highlights their lack of agency. The story ends with Karen's discovery that the bed is worth a fortune and her private thought of broaching the subject of its sale to her husband. The bed, with its perceived hideousness and therefore 'shockingly' high monetary value, functions as the old woman's vindication, if any, emphasising the narrative displacement of human affect and agency onto material objects. Lim stages her universalised themes of greed and superstition against a local backdrop abound with material signifiers such as 4D lottery, HDB flats and fried noodles which work to provide a feeling of cultural authenticity. Sentimentality in *Little Ironies* is presented as culturally ascribed, deliberately pointing to a constructed 'aura' of authenticity, that is, a feeling

[39] *Little Ironies*, pp72, 73.
[40] Ibid, p73.
[41] Ibid, p74.
[42] Ibid.

of localness generated by material signifiers. However, this aura is ultimately incidental to the narrative tension and meaning which are culturally and socially non-specific, universalised human weaknesses.

Perhaps the most significant moment of textual richness in Lim's collection occurs in the story, 'The Ugly One', which complicates our account of affectlessness and aesthetic equivocality so far. In the story, a jade seller, whose striking feature is her apparent physical unattractiveness, is introduced unimaginatively as 'The Ugly One'. Meng Choo, a girl from the rural outskirts, is taken under her inner-city friend Rosalind's wing. Meng Choo, stereotypically portrayed as naive and sensitive, protests feebly against the unsympathetic, amoral tactics of the more vocal Rosalind, who ultimately wins in misleading her into wrongdoing. The jade pedlar is deceived by Rosalind and Meng Choo into selling her jade for Meng Choo's counterfeit notes which they were looking to unburden on an unsuspecting victim.

Given that the Ugly One's death is portrayed chiefly through its effects on Meng Choo, it is significant that Lim bestows upon Meng Choo 'a more literary turn of mind' at the story's outset, a necessarily self-reflexive description which implicates the writer/narrator by drawing attention to the construction of literary identity.[43] One could read this bestowal of the literary turn—against Meng Choo's immediately proceeding clichéd description of 'the legendary monster guarding the jewels in the cave'—as a satire of faux-literariness against which Lim implicitly positions herself.[44] This moment captures the strategic significance of the cliché as Lim's ironic claim to authenticity, positioning a seemingly complex moment of textual richness in spite of such a claim. Yet, this suggestive textual richness also raises the central problem of reading Lim's authorial intention. Lim's 'turn' enables her to simultaneously authorise and repudiate the function of banality and cliché in her writing with seeming impunity. She sets up banal juxtapositions between the innocent country girl and the cunning city-slicker; the ugliness of the pedlar and the beauty of her wares; the hideousness of the poor and infirmed and the physical beauty of those revolted by them. In this moment of potential textual complexity contrasting with banality, we could turn to Rajeev S. Patke and Holden's recent reminder that 'At a time when Catherine Lim seems to represent all that is canonical in Singapore writing, it is instructive to remember that in an essay first published in 1990 Shirley Lim would explicitly

[43] Ibid, p87.
[44] Ibid.

include her as part of a "counter-tradition" of Singapore writers who were deeply concerned with the social place of their works, in contrast to a prevailing concern with aesthetics'.[45] To attempt a reading of counter-traditional Lim, we can observe in Lim's 'literary turn' her recognition of a literary aesthetic that she intends to subvert by adopting a faux-literariness in order to satirise it. Yet, the power and possibility of such a literary turn is difficult to distinguish from the story's banality. For instance, Meng Choo witnesses the jade seller's dead body being retrieved from the river. She cries at the death by drowning, but, convinced by Rosalind and another friend that the jade pedlar probably drowned by accident, not due to despair at her counterfeit notes, she grows thankful towards the persuasive Rosalind. The final paragraph, a single sentence, reads:

> Meng Choo could only murmur, 'Thanks, Rosy,' but her heart expanded in a glow of gratitude and love.[46]

The ironic, droll framing of the affects of gratitude and love in a 'glow' seems to caricaturise sentimental romantic writing. Yet, coupled with heavy-handed cues to ironic meaning (heartless Rosalind's home is a place called 'Golden Heart Mansions'), we are presented with yet another object lesson in greed and inner beauty—who is the *real* ugly one?[47] Here, the ambivalence of satire registers an equivocality not only in textual aesthetics, but in terms of Lim's intention. As Ngai insightfully argues, the equivocality with which we can read weak or characteristically unreliable intentionality does not solve its dilemma but diagnoses it and draws necessary critical attention to its ambivalent agency.[48] Lim's iconic representations which are seemingly benign, on the one hand, and seemingly counter-traditional, on the other, incite broader questions of what is at stake in reading her stories as unambiguously representational of a national 'essence'.

For further considerations of irony's edge, cliché and affectlessness, we turn to a reading of the story, 'Paper'. 'Paper' presents a consummate image of a rapidly developing Singapore, the stock-market dabbling, aspirational middle-class. A man named Tay Soon dreams of owning a big house with a swimming pool but a failed investment leads to bankruptcy, his ill health and

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[45] Rajeev S. Patke and Philip Holden, *The Routledge Concise History of Southeast Asian Writing in English*, (New York: Routledge, 2010), pp94-95. Shirley Geok-Lin Lim, 'Centers and the Fringe: Novels in English from Malaysia and Singapore', *Writing S.E./ Asia in English: Against the Grain, Focus on Asian English-Language Literature* (London, UK: Skoob Books, 1994), p119.
[46] *Little Ironies*, p97.
[47] Ibid, p95.
[48] Ngai, p353.

ultimate demise. The detached and clichéd descriptions of desire, joy and panic, making up an affectless exposition of a narrative of stock characters who are unimportant, hackneyed figures in their own story. The clichéd expressions of desire such as 'wanted', 'dreamed of' and 'hankered after' perfunctorily establish Tay Soon's obsessional pursuit of a big house, reminding us of Kwan-Terry's criticism of Lim's stories as 'clichés' and 'ready-made formulas of irony' that are 'contrived'.[49]

Let us pause here to explore Lim's brand of irony and use of cliché in 'Paper' more deeply by turning to Hutcheon's fine study of irony, where she examines repetition as one semantic model of irony, through simple logical contradiction and meaning substitution.[50] Using one of the most undisputed examples of irony, Mark Antony's 'Brutus is an honourable man' speech in William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, Hutcheon shows how Mark Antony's refrain becomes antiphrastic when through logical contradiction, it suggests 'all those who are *not* Brutus are not honourable men'. [51] Secondly, Brutus' double injunction to Mark Antony recontexualises his repetition with the opposite, unsaid meaning.[52] Cliché, which is a product of repetition, can then also be read as a vehicle for irony. For example, could Lim be deliberately using clichés to convey her characters' emotional states in order to suggest the opposite, that is, to ironise affect? Or are the clichés instead simply be the inadequacies of Lim's powers of description? In her 'ecstasy', Yee Lian exclaims about the joyous volume of her rapidly multiplying profits.[53] When stocks' value diminished, Tay Soon 'went on hoping against hope', and Yee Lian, in fear of Tay Soon's wild dreams, 'was afraid and ran sobbing'.[54] Such is the extent of the characters' motivations and emotional complexities—joyous cries, desperate hoping, or else, fearful fleeing. The lack of variation or contrast suggests that irony does not happen here, because repetition is not recontextualised or contradicted. Lim's matter-of-fact, clichéd exposition of Tay Soon's downfall is not framed by variation or contradiction to signpost ironic meaning. Lim's detached, predictable style establishes a collusive vocabulary of indifference, as though the narrator (writer), uninvested in the particularities of the individual, is in fact reciting yet another well-worn parable of greed. Instead of ironising affect, this generates

[49] *Little Ironies*, p6. Kwan-Terry, loc. cit.
[50] Hutcheon, pp59-61.
[51] Ibid, p60. William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar* 3.2.92-93.
[52] Hutcheon, pp140-141.
[53] *Little Ironies*, p8.
[54] Ibid, p10.

other modes of affective engagement—cruelty and condescension by the depersonalised narration.

The ending of 'Paper' provides more detail to our account of the story's irony and affect so far. After Tay Soon's death, his mother buys and burns a beautiful paper representation of his dream house and pool as an offering to the departed. After the human sorrow and death, the paper house looms large at the end as an object of irony, an uncanny blend of capitalist greed and superstition. The paper house's belligerent materiality—unreactive 'object-ness'—exceeds the human tragedy or characterisation. Tay Soon in all his frailty has disappeared from the pages while the paper house has survived. Isolated typographically, the house gains dominance over human action and emotion, appearing independently in a two-sentence closing paragraph:

> At the appointed time, the paper house was brought to Tay Soon's grave and set on fire there. It burned brilliantly, and in three minutes was a heap of ashes on the grave.[55]

The narration assumes the position of an omniscient Fate that reports the fact of tragedy, continuing its matter-of-fact tone in descriptions such as 'at the appointed time' and 'in three minutes' that are conspicuously affectless. The absenting of affect is underscored by the narrative action that turns away from Tay Soon, focusing on material desire and its objects that are linked to the world of the dead, performing a kind of ironic, divine authorial punishment. This ironic detachment is paradoxically judgmental, or to use cultural theorist Brenda Austin-Smith's apposite phrase, irony's 'cutting edge of not caring'.[56] The judgmental edge of this ending's irony is mocking, almost cruel towards its flawed subjects in the detachment of the final image of the indiscriminate ash heap that alludes to Tay Soon's own fate.

[55] Ibid, pp11-12.
[56] Brenda Austin-Smith, 1990. 'Into the Heart of Irony', *Canadian Dimension* 27: 51-52.

One might argue that instead of insisting on restoring richness to the text, we could suspend such a compulsion of interpretation for instead, a reading of this one-dimensional reportage as just that, in order to occupy it. Heather Love, an affect scholar who is a proponent of surface reading, suggests that surface reading can be as or even more productive a form of close reading, owning a refusal to excavate from the text more meanings, ethics or emotions than the text suggests or intends. Love's position is compelling, because while her approach boldly rejects the long and established history of close reading, the traditional hermeneutics of assumed textual richness and humanism, it also resists, in the act of surface reading, the likely risk of turning texts into objects or commodities.[57] She does this by relying on 'description rather than interpretation', a kind of 'flat reading' borrowed from the social sciences, to mount an alternative reading model based on description and documentation, than 'empathy and witness'.[58] Love uses Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, a historically and politically charged text, an account of African American slavery, to mount her case for a viable ethical model of surface reading. She rejects depth hermeneutics' account of Morrison's narrator's detached description of cruelty against an African American subject as cue for the reader to repudiate a racist viewpoint, suggesting instead that the narrative voice disallows critical distance for the reader to reject it. Instead of restoring agency to a dehumanised history, which she suggests is an all-too tempting approach for traditional literary interpretation with its powerful humanism, she is suggesting that Morrison is documenting its reality by forcing the reader to occupy it.

If we apply this model of reading to 'Paper', considering for a moment what may be gained while also abandoned and lost through surface reading, the apathetic narration would be a deliberate documentation of a dehumanizing reality with real, affectless processes which captures the reader within it. The lack of distance—the indifference and, crucially, irony—of the framing narrative voice disallows any repudiation of this problematic modernity, but instead invites the reader to also adopt the coy impartiality of the ironist. In this flat reading, we occupy the depersonalising effects of the story's object lesson in materialism and greed precisely through the aforementioned use of cliché and the final affects of mockery and cruelty of the narrative voice which distances us. Thus we observe the obstructed agency of the characters while resisting deep reading's assumptions of humanism—there is no need to restore agency to

[57] Heather Love, 'Close but not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn.' *NLH* 41 (2010), p375.
[58] Ibid.

Tay Soon through affective representation.[59] However, 'Paper' lacks the dynamic tension between flat and rich, empathy and indifference, interior and exterior to crucially distinguish a flat reading of the sociological from the literary. Love differentiates Morrison's account of dehumanisation from a mere decentering of the human, maintaining the important distinction between literature and sociology, where Morrison's flat description is meaningful in contrast to other richer moments in *Beloved* that allows the reader to recognise and occupy the site where the novel's ethical and political commitments play out. These complex dynamics between flat and rich descriptions can be easily contrasted with our earlier discussion of Lim's use of flat repetition without variation or recontextualising, the lack of contrasting descriptions, between the interiority of the pained characters and the exteriority of the observing narrator, and between the 'richness' of the former and the 'flatness' of the latter, which thus fail to enunciate her collection's ethical or political dimensions as a work of literature. While it attempts to engage social critique through its choice of local signifiers, social situations and characters that are inevitably politically and ethically charged, its lack of contrast, a lack of affective descriptions to generate contrast with a deliberately affectless, ironised reality (which is her critique of Singaporean modernity and pragmatism), denies the reader the agency to engage with such a problematic but unproblematised reality.

We now move from an examination of the dynamics of affect in Lim's textual practice to a discussion of her use of affect in the public sphere. In 2013, Lim chose to read 'The Teacher' at The 2nd Summit of the Book, an international literary event held in Singapore.[60] This choice reinforces her perception of her story's continued relevance today. She prefaced her reading with an explanation that the story, based on her experiences as a secondary school English teacher, was written 'out of a sense of guilt' for the times she and her fellow teachers, in their pursuit of academic excellence, overlooked their students' other concerns.[61] This remark of 'guilt' positions Lim's affective relation to the story's genesis, also suggesting her signal to the emotional currency of the story. Using her public profile, Lim actively re-authorises her story with affective personal meaning and social relevance. In this public forum, Lim's description of

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[59] See a nuanced discussion of the complexities and tensions between new 'humanism' in academic discourse and 'humanism' of common sense values in Terry Flew, 'Creativity, the "new humanism" and cultural studies' *Continuum* 18, no. 2 (2004):161–178.
[60] Catherine Lim, speech at The 2nd Summit of the Book, Singapore, 16 August 2013, http://catherinelim.sg/2013/08/17/a-reading-event-the-teacher/, (accessed online 1 June 2014).
[61] Ibid.

her story's personal significance and real-life origin bring together her textual practice and public persona through an appeal to affect. This appeal to affect through Lim's public profile also famously played out in a highly publicised series of heated exchanges between Lim and the government.

In 1994, Lim published two articles in the *Straits Times* titled 'The PAP and the people – A Great Affective Divide' and 'One government, two styles'. Lim's essays self-consciously elaborate affect as a value in national life, as a bridge between the government and its people. In the first article, she criticises the PAP for being 'deficient in human sensitivity and feeling', levelling what she alleges are common charges against them of being 'dictatorial', 'arrogant', 'impatient', 'unforgiving', 'vindictive'.[62] She argues for a 'factor of feeling' between government and people.[63] In what became known as the Lim affair, the PAP responded in an exaggerated, hyper-masculine script of affect in a series of public exchanges in the *Straits Times*. In parliament, the then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong described Lim's political commentaries and criticism from other Singaporeans as an ''attack'' that the government would have to reciprocate: 'If you land a blow on our jaw, you must expect a counter-blow on your solar plexus'.[64] The affectation of macho posturing establishes the rules of engagement when questioning state authority. Lim displayed this understanding when, shortly after the affair, she described the issue of openness as 'a three-steps forward, two-steps back dance with the Government'.[65] Her final apology enacted the inevitable conclusion to her deliberate provocation of the ire of the state in order to demonstrate—for as long as she could make it 'dance'—the violence of the state apparatus. On 5 December 1994, Lim apologised to PM Goh in a handwritten note which was later quoted in the *Straits Times*: 'I am sorry if I have caused you distress as a result of my articles. I have the greatest respect and regard for your Government, and wrote both articles in that spirit.'[66] Kenneth Tan compellingly argues that Lim's deliberate enactment of the prescribed feminine role in a patriarchal society was an effective strategy in

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[62] Id., 'The PAP and the people – A Great Affective Divide', *The Straits Times*, 3 September 1994.
[63] Id. (1994), loc. cit.
[64] Goh Chok Tong, quoted in 'Those with agenda have entered political arena', *The Straits Times*, 24 January 1995, cited in Kenneth Paul Tan, 'Who's Afraid of Catherine Lim? The State in Patriarchal Singapore', *Asian Studies Review*, Vol. 33, March 2009, p57.
[65] Cherian George, 'Openness in Singapore is "3 steps forward, 2 steps back," says writer,' *The Straits Times*, 26 October 1995.
[66] Catherine Lim, cited in 'PM tells Dr Lim why he responded to the commentary', *The Straits Times*, 17 December 1994.

forcing the state to clarify the true limits it placed on the possibilities of liberalisation promised by the new administration under PM Goh. Lim's strategy also exposed the excessive violence of state authoritarianism and subverted the PAP's hyper-masculine, rational self-image by provoking it—through mimesis of the feminine role—into a melodramatic response akin to hysteria, a form that 'would have readily been associated with a debased femininity.'[67]

The Lim affair highlights a performance which approaches affect as symbolic and virtual, a political tool in order to simulate—the gestures and signs of—(the foreclosure of) political debate. Masculine and feminine affects are performed as an elaboration of the symbolic roles within a patriarchal political power structure. Canonical Lim of *Little Ironies* and of public life presents a mode of national self-constructing and self-understanding that instantiates the history and cultural significance of affect in Singapore as highly unstable, oxymoronic, strategic and equivocal. The ambivalence of affect in textual production indexes the pragmatic principles of an emergent national identity played out in everyday and individual contexts. In the next chapter, we move from affective equivocality in Lim's representation of the consolidation of Singaporean social and cultural systems to modes of deferral and occlusion in Jeyaretnam's reappraisal of these systems at the turn of the millennium and the construction of national identity through patrilineal narratives.

[67] Tan (2009), p60.

The Fantasy and the Void: Nation and Trauma in *Abraham's Promise* (1995)

In 1997, Asad Latif, a reviewer from the *Straits Times*, in praise of Philip Jeyaretnam's novel, *Abraham's Promise* (1995), remarked that 'Like the prodigal son, history is returning to Singapore.' [1] At a time when a linear history of national struggle against historicised trauma was becoming codified by government initiatives as the Singapore Story, Latif identified Jeyaretnam's novel as a site of writing history, observing in fact a key feature of the Singapore novel at the turn of the century. Amidst a climate of public debate over national memory, novels frequently re-examined and re-appraised national history by alluding to or depicting 'real' historical events in their portrayals of the struggle of the individual against the state. For example, the government's detention without trial of alleged Marxist conspirators in 1987 (Operation Spectrum) is the subject of Gopal Baratham's *A Candle or the Sun* (1991) and Lau Siew Mei's *Playing Madame Mao* (2000), while Suchen Christine Lim's *A Fistful of Colours* (1993) explores the lives of immigrants over three decades of Singaporean history, and, through personal memory, presents an affective portrait of intergenerational struggles. The Singapore novel of the loosely periodised fin-de-siècle of the 1980s and 1990s to the early 2000s, in re-presenting the sanctioned account of national history, responds to the period's national identity crisis by (re-)writing histories into existence. Such a novel participates in the genre of writing the nation, presenting a space where fiction-writing and the writing of the nation are interimplicated.

In *Abraham's Promise*, Jeyaretnam re-writes, re-appraises and re-occupies the nation's history through elderly Abraham Isaac's retrospective of his personal and political struggles during the formative stages of modern Singapore. The forces which directly shape Abraham's personal narrative are 'real', 'traumatic' events in Singaporean national history (such as the Japanese sinking of the British ships the *Prince of Wales* and the *Repulse*), as well as fictional events that allude to real events (the dismissal of union activists; Krishna's arrest and police coercion, reminiscent of the 1963 Operation Cold Storage and Operation Spectrum). The failed promise of progress and participatory democracy directly relates to Abraham's personal failures—his loss of job, the collapse of his marriage, his role in his sister Mercy's suicide—

[1] Asad Latif, 'What Future for the Past?' *Sunday Times*, 13 July 1997.

thereby inviting a reading of the personal and political as coterminous and interlinked. Framed by the elliptical recounting of these traumatic events, Abraham's narrative gradually reveals his failures as father, husband, brother and citizen, prompting a consideration of what these narrative constructions of masculinity mean in relation to the gendered discourse of nationhood.

Widely acclaimed and the author's most recent novel, *Abraham's Promise* is frequently positioned by critics and scholars alike within the canon of historically and politically engaged novels of the 1990s for its critique of state hegemonies, 'of official nationalism in Singapore' (Eddie Tay) and 'of the patriarchal state, its values' (Angelia Poon, Philip Holden and Shirley Geok Lin-Lim).[2] More recently, Poon has argued that Jeyaretnam's representation of Abraham's 'failed masculinity' disrupts the dominant narrative of state fatherhood.[3] Jeyaretnam's characterisation of his protagonist references the biblical character Abraham who is fraught with ambivalence towards patriarchal duty and sacrifice and eponymously suggests his character's embodiment of both betrayer and betrayed. Adding to this ambivalence, Abraham occupies multiple minority positions within the national narrative as a Ceylonese Tamil Anglican, a disgraced schoolteacher, a former union activist, a Latin tutor, a divorced widower and the father of a gay son. Critics have argued that these multiple positions of contradiction and marginalisation within the national Confucian narrative of unity and progress strategically broaden a homogenous account of Singaporean history.[4] Yet, they have overlooked the consideration that these minority subject positions of 'failed masculinity' are framed by a patrilineal narrative of traumatic deferral that enables Abraham to uphold his stake in the nation. Abraham's idealised vision of himself in the traditional roles of father, husband, brother and citizen is a manifestly patriarchal one which is violently asserted on the female body, namely, through his rape of his wife Rani and his role in Mercy's suicide. This patriarchal vision is further projected onto the non-generative, queer subject of his gay son Victor through his

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[2] Eddie Tay, 'Irresponsibility and Commitment: Philip Jeyaretnam's *Abraham's Promise* and Gopal Baratham's *A Candle or the Sun*', *Colony, Nation, and Globalisation: Not at Home in Singaporean and Malaysian Literature* (Hong Kong University Press, 2011), p98; Shirley Geok-lin Lim, Philip Holden, Angelia Poon (eds.) *Writing Singapore: An Historical Anthology of Singapore Literature*, (Singapore: NUS Press Singapore & National Arts Council Singapore, 2009), p365.

[3] Angelia Poon, 'In Praise of Failed Men (and the Woman Writer): Gender Politics in the Singapore Novel', *Singapore Literature and Culture: Current directions in local and global contexts*, Angelia Poon and Angus Whitehead (eds.), (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017), pp224-228.

[4] Ibid. See also Philip Holden, 'The Significance of Uselessness: Resisting Colonial Masculinity in Philip Jeyaretnam's *Abraham's Promise*', *Jouvert: A Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, Vol. 2 (1998), <http://english.chass.ncsu.edu/jouvert/v2i1/HOLDEN.HTM>, accessed online 24 May 2015.

narrative quest for legacy. Geared towards legacy-building, the narrative is structured by three temporalities: Abraham's traumatic past, his static present, and his uncertain but redemptive future. These narrative shifts mobilise a deferral of the traumatic past through Abraham's attempts to build a patrilineal legacy in order to carry his name forward into the infinite future: 'longevity alone is not enough. He who captures the minds of the young is in truth the victor.'[5] The sense of patrilineality that governs the narrative privileges a key trope of the father which is innately connected in complex ways to the national narrative of state fatherhood.

Suitably, Latif's grandiose description of the return of the 'prodigal son' implies national history as a patriarchy in crisis and designates Jeyaretnam's text as its redeemer, perhaps accidently but appropriately hinting at a fundamentally androcentric framework of imagining the nation. Indeed, a strategically affective trope of paternal sacrifice is central to the conservative figuration of the nation. As social historians Geraldine Heng and Janadas Devan have forcefully argued, the Singapore Story's narrative of crisis and trauma fantasmatically restores the privileged image of the founding fathers in perpetuity, consolidating the ideology of state fatherhood as central to the imagining of the nation. '[T]he saving visions of a reactionary past, selectively idealized, stages that past as the exclusive theatre of omnipotent fathers.'[6] Literary critics Shirley Geok Lin-Lim and others have similarly noted that in public discourse and PAP rhetoric, the government is 'the paterfamilias with "natural" moral authority over the citizen-children',[7] indicating a patriarchal framework governing the body-politic. Linking fiction-writing with writing the nation, then, the father, as head of the Confucian family, driving at the heart of Singaporean self-identity, is a key trope in Singaporean narratives that embeds an always already prior staging and negotiation within the metatext of the nation.

Seemingly doubly implicated in the metatext of the nation, *Abraham's Promise* bears a biographical parallel to the author's father in the writing of modern Singapore. The son of Joshua Benjamin (J.B.) Jeyaretnam, the nation's first political opposition member in Parliament, and a figure whose very public political demise at the hands of the political establishment is well-known, J.B. Jeyaretnam's position as an historical subject adds even more metatextual

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[5] Philip Jeyaretnam, *Abraham's Promise* (Singapore: Times Editions Pte Ltd, 1995; 2010), p7. Hereafter cited as *AP*.
[6] Geraldine Heng and Janadas Devan, 'State Fatherhood: The Politics of Nationalism, Sexuality and Race in Singapore', Aihwa Ong and Michael G. Peletz (eds.) *Bewitching Women, Pious Men: Gender and Body Politics in Southeast Asia* (California: University of California Press, 1995), p202.
[7] Lim, et al, op. cit., pp368-9.

complexity to the novel's exploration of patrilineality. This autobiographical detail is often under-analysed as an inherited, passive feature in Jeyaretnam's writing. However, this detail's inexorable haunting of the text as well as its self-conscious re-creation and re-working are important ways in which the text participates in the paternal metaphor of nation-building. Jeyaretnam's novel of an ageing protagonist, living out the consequences of his younger days of activism and idealism, recasts an image of his father in the key role of both writing and embodying the nation whose history he was written out of. Jeyaretnam's character profiles are enriched with the biographical details of this lived history at once public and private, doubling the novel's perspective of a larger narrative of the nation at work. The trope of the father operates on these multiple levels of the textual and metafictional, focusing allegory as both reflexive and inadvertent in a reading of the text.

These critical formulations prompt this chapter's central investigation of the narrative of Abraham Isaac, which, eponymously announcing its key binary of father and son, reconfigures the key trope of the father in the national narrative. Sentimentalised through the father-son bond (its rupture and restoration), Abraham's narrative upholds those very exclusive binaries central to the gendered space of the nation. Through the three aforementioned modes of Abraham's search for identity, past trauma is evoked and repudiated within the same continuous gesture of sustaining a patriarchal fantasy of the self and nation by upholding a narrative of paternal sacrifice and redemption. In order to maintain his self-identity as a good man in his personal and national life, envisioned through his legacy, Abraham absolves himself of his past transgressions and trauma where he violently re-asserts his thwarted masculinity, narratively absenting trauma that is inherently feminine and feminised in this patriarchal fantasy of duty and sacrifice. Such a narrative of failed masculinity structurally embeds the conservative impulse of state fatherhood, geared towards the fantasmatic restoration of the masculine national self. We are therefore led to ask: Is Abraham's 'failed masculinity' a radical critique of the state, or, in fact, a traumatic, affective reversion to the 'exclusive theatre of omnipotent fathers'?[8]

It is this chapter's contention that the novel's representation of trauma stages a fetishistic narrative of male sacrifice, loss and redemption, one whose coordinates also lie outside the text at the site of the Singapore Story as a nationalist fantasy of patrilineality. Departing from past readings that focus on this canonical text as a critique of the nation's history, my approach will

[8] Heng and Devan, p202.

emphasise *Abraham's Promise* as an allegory of such a history, calling attention to the novel's structure and constitutive mode of deferral that propels a gendered, heteronormative fantasy of the nation. A reading of the novel as an allegory for the gendered writing of the nation historicises *Abraham's Promise* within the process of the codification of state hegemonies in the 1990s and the ensuing public debate over the ethics and objectives of the writing of public memory. Allegoresis appropriately examines the cultural politics that define narrative and the dynamics of textuality and intertextuality in the self-conscious narrativisation of history in both literary and public narratives. This approach covers a broad range of textual features – figures, language, themes, structures—operating at different levels of literary discourse, highlighting the tensions and ambivalence between authorial and textual agency within the 'always already symbolically mediated' textual universe of the historical narrative.[9] While recognising the complex ambivalence of Jeyaretnam's novel's opposition to state hegemonies, I emphasise in my reading the ways in which the text narratively reproduces the gendered space and temporality of writing the nation.

Drawing on Heng and Devan's influential account of the formation of Singapore,[10] I will use their analysis of the gendered discourse of Singaporean nationhood and the feminisation of national trauma to argue that *Abraham's Promise* operates as an allegory for a state fatherhood disciplining a feminised social body, in ways that perhaps exceed Jeyaretnam's intended interrogation of gendered national discourse. Borrowing historian Eric Santner's term 'narrative fetishism' and drawing upon Lacanian theory in the field of ideology and politics, I examine how the text produces, through masculinity in crisis, a sentimental reinforcement of a nationalist fantasy of a self-generating patrilineality and of the heteronormative family unit, at the heart of which is an absented trauma that is occluded in order to sustain the myth of the nation and the good self. Taking my cue from literary and cultural critic Lee Edelman's critique of the conservative ideology of reproductivity as the safeguard of collective futures and national imaginaries, and thereby imprimatur of social meaning,[11] I read the narrative movement of Jeyaretnam's novel as displaying the conservative logic of heteronormative meaning production. I contend that the narrative structure moves between the privileged temporalisation of past and

[9] Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative, Volume 1* (University Of Chicago Press, 1990), p57.
[10] Heng and Devan, pp195-215.
[11] Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, (U.S.: Duke University Press, 2004).

future which displaces and occludes other temporalities, such as non-patriarchal, non-masculine and queer temporalities.

This particular novel of Jeyaretnam's, through the narrative of Abraham's political activism, coupled with biographical parallels, is highly suggestive of the author's family context and elaborates the reflexive role of autobiographical detail in fictionalising an affective account of personal memory. In particular, through the major narrative thread of government crackdown and retribution, which cause Abraham's personal and professional undoing, the novel alludes to the author's own family context in relation to the making of modern Singapore. Abraham's dissenting attitude towards power recalls Jeyaretnam's father's synonymy with the watershed history of political opposition in Singapore, bolstering the novel's counter-narrative to the national vision of progress. As the nation's first opposition leader to win a seat in Parliament in 1981, as well as his systematic discrediting and ousting from political office and public life, J.B. Jeyaretnam can be read as one of the 'founding fathers' of a parallel national narrative that has been marginalised.[12] Further, J.B. Jeyaretnam's eldest son Kenneth has inherited his father's legacy of political opposition, heading his father's Reform Party after the latter's death. The Jeyaretnam name then provides a loaded context to a reader's approach to the novel. The significance of patrilineality to the Jeyaretnam family story, and at the same time, marginalisation from the sanctioned narrative of national history provide a metafictional context to the novel, enabling us to witness the novel's reflexive autonomy in the author's act of writing. The act of writing thus establishes fiction and allegory as the privileged modes through which to re-appraise history and re-instate subjective identity within it. The novel then, at both a fictional and metafictional level, operates as a minor narrative. Yet Abraham's minority status is never binaried or definitive, and his counter-narrative encompasses a broad range of sociohistorical ambivalences, at once resistant and complicit. However, while parallels can be drawn between Jeyaretnam's family's and Abraham's experience of Singapore life, a biographical reading is neither sufficiently expansive nor the focus of our analysis of patrilineality. Nevertheless, Jeyaretnam's family and particularly, his father's public and political life, will provide some context for our later reading of the novel's paternal trope.

[12] Others include for example, David Marshall, founder of the Workers' Party.

We learn by this early point in the novel that Abraham has lived through the key moments of development in the history of modern Singapore. The scope of Abraham's life is the scope of the nation's history. The nation can be read as a fantasy space upon which Abraham projects his self as the 'good' Singaporean. Early in the novel, he reflects:

> Surely my life can withstand any scrutiny: it has always been an examined life, at every step I directed my energies towards becoming a good son, good brother, good husband, good teacher and good citizen. … But then why am I not rewarded with the grace of sleep, calm repose after a lifetime's toil?[13]

This self-reflexive passage establishes the analogous and allegorical relationship between individual and national legacies, capturing the various roles Abraham plays throughout his life and through which he claims his symbolic identity as the 'good' subject. This passage sets up the key dialectical tension in Abraham's account of history and self-identity. The elusive sense of regret introduced in a preceding passage, 'troubled and sleepless' nights associated with Rani and Mercy, is at odds with Abraham's vision of his good self, establishing the rupture at the heart of his fantasy of the good. Throughout the novel, Abraham's present is destabilised by these memories which he attempts to suppress: 'Memories seem to be overwhelming me, they seize me and will not let go. I must stop them. Choke them off.'[14] The recounting of Abraham's private and national life—crucially, in the past tense—highlights the act of writing as one founded on loss and establishes the novel's reflexive and melancholic re-writing of history through psychodrama (trauma, memory) as an allegorical, unstable mode of self and national *re*membering.

Given the novel's multiple allusions to the national trauma narrative, let us examine the Singapore Story as one key contextual frame for our reading. While we are not conflating the workings of this narrative with that of the Singapore Story, which of course bears its own particular functionings of a nationalist fantasy, we will briefly elucidate the rhetorical function of trauma in the Singapore Story which corresponds with the narrative logic of deferral and recall in *Abraham's Promise*. The use of the word 'trauma' in the context of the Singapore Story refers to

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[13] *AP*, p30.
[14] Ibid, p107.

the rhetorical trope as it functions in these hegemonic representational practices of cultural memory. As we have outlined in the introductory chapter, the Singapore Story is a strategic account of national history that paints a vulnerable nation perpetually threatened by dangers overcome by the pragmatic and self-sacrificing decisions of its leaders.[15] In the Singapore Story, the past is continually reworked to suit the needs of the present. In particular, trauma is continually re-staged in order to emphasise the threats to national survival, while at the same time repudiated in the narrative of overcoming the odds. Historian Eric Santner's term 'narrative fetishism', which refers to 'the construction and deployment of a narrative consciously or unconsciously designed to expunge the traces of the trauma or loss that called that narrative into being in the first place', is apposite in our formulation of the structure of the nationalist fantasy.[16] Narrative fetishism operates through fantasy and negates the need for mourning (traumatic events) by simulating an appearance of 'intactness' by repeatedly locating the source of loss elsewhere.[17] In the Singapore Story, trauma is at once real and out of reach, indefinitely postponed as its cause is perpetually deferred. Enacting the national self-identification in the Singapore Story, Abraham's account of 'the Good'—good son, good brother, good husband, good teacher and good citizen—simulates an appearance of intact masculinity by deferring trauma. Figurations of trauma, feminised, embodied by Rani and Mercy, haunt Abraham's present, both triggering and threatening his self-identity as a 'good' national subject. This disavowed history is one he cannot fully possess, but through which he enacts his traumatised subjectivity, which propels a fantasy of self and nation.

This trauma narrative logic is evidenced through Mercy's suicide—an event which simultaneously upholds and threatens Abraham's fantasy of a 'good' self:

> Surely to have survived this far, to have managed as well as I have done, surely that is achievement enough? Why then the prick of these recurring memories, why this

[15] Hong Lysa and Huang Jianli, *The Scripting of a National History: Singapore and Its Pasts*, (Singapore: Hong Kong University Press, 2008); Souchou Yao, *Singapore: The State and the culture of excess*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), pp1-6; Michael D. Barr and Zlatko Skrbis, 'The Singapore Story: Constructing a National Myth', *Constructing Singapore: elitism, ethnicity and the nation-building project*, (Copenhagen: NIAS, 2008), pp. 18-38.
[16] Eric Santner, 'History Beyond the Pleasure Principle: Some Thoughts on the Representation of Trauma', S. Friedländer (ed.) *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the 'Final Solution'* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1992), p144.
[17] Ibid.

> disturbance of what should be a tranquil old age? Don't I deserve a rest, Mercy, won't I join you soon enough? I am not at fault, for you to haunt me so.[18]

The above passage is a key example of the novel's fetishistic trauma narrative. Abraham's rhetorical questions to the haunting figure of Mercy in his memory highlight both his guilt and his denial of guilt in her suicide. Trauma continually eludes Abraham in his silencing of it and yet he is possessed by such a trauma that renders him unable to fully inhabit his image of the good national self that enjoys a 'tranquil old age'. On the one hand, one could argue that Jeyaretnam here questions the national narrative of survival as success by using the return of trauma to highlight the price of this 'success'. This popular view of the novel as a critical account of self and national appraisal is one shared no less by its author. In the preface to the 2017 re-publication of his best-known works, reflecting on the writing of his three novels including *Abraham's Promise*, Jeyaretnam recalls 'the urgency that he felt to stop people, if only for a moment, and make them reflect upon the place of dreams and ideals among the speeding gleaming cars [...].'[19] We observe here the pedagogical imperative of Jeyaretnam's novel-writing to question materialism and the price of progress, implying an intended authorial critique of the state's vision. His critique of national success 'through a personal lens'[20] privileges Abraham's oppositional youthful idealism. In Jeyaretnam's words, 'Here is a man with a good heart, yet indecisive, thinking too much and in his inaction often failing those around him.'[21] For him, Abraham is a cautionary example of one who in remaining 'pure' in his vision, failed to be 'effective' in 'making a difference'.[22] However, this authorial characterisation of a tragic hero fetishises the trauma that underlies an uncritical representation of patriarchy in the novel and bolsters its problematic fantasy of the nation. Abraham's pain in remembering is rhetorically bordered by his constructed idea of his 'good' life.[23] In her magisterial study of affect in post-war neoliberal politics and society, Lauren Berlant formulates the 'good life' fantasy as a 'moral-

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[18] *AP*, p36.
[19] Jeyaretnam, 'Preface', *The Philip Jeyaretnam Collection* (Marshall Cavendish International, 2017).
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid.
[23] I also draw on Jennifer Rutherford, *The Gauche Intruder: Freud, Lacan and the White Australian Fantasy* (Melbourne University Publishing, 2000), where she analyses the fantasy of an 'Australian Good' as a moral category (for example, neighbourliness and fraternity) with violent exclusions. This idea of aggression underlying the good will be taken up later in our reading of the narrative's futurity and the feminine body politic.

intimate- economic thing', highlighting its affective attachments that continue to drive fantasy's persistence in precarious contexts.[24] Taking my cue from Berlant, Abraham's good life forms an affective language about trauma and survival, crisis and pragmatism, and delineates the 'good' as a redemptive ideal, and in so doing, in fact stages modes of anxiety and deferral around this fantasy of the good. His fantasy of the good self structurally and rhetorically encircles a core of trauma. In this internal dialogue, Abraham's perception of himself as a righteous survivor of history is simultaneously destabilised by the haunting memory of Mercy's suicide and upheld by such a trauma through his measures taken to survive it.

Let us now pause to examine the concepts of the nation, allegory and fantasy that we will be using throughout our analysis of the novel. Similar to Benedict Anderson's idea of the nation as an imagined community,[25] the Singapore Story is a narrative that privileges particular ways of being (i.e. founding father narrative of sacrifice, toil and pragmatism) which establishes an imagined community connected by these common, idealised traits reified by a traumatic past that is beyond grasp, yet pressingly real in its continuous invocation.[26] In order to apply this idea of the nation to textual dynamics, Paul de Man's temporal structure of allegory describes a similar dialectical model of displacement to this idea of imagined communities. De Man states, 'allegory exists within an ideal time that is never here and now, but always a past or an endless future.'[27] Its reference to its subject is founded on a void, as he explains: 'allegory designates primarily a distance in relation to its own origin, and, renouncing the nostalgia and the desire to coincide, it establishes its language in the void of this temporal difference.'[28] If we think of the conceptualisation of allegory in a similar way to Anderson's imagined communities, the story of the nation, always already allegorical, is a value-affirming fantasy of an 'imagined community' in an imagined time. In his analysis of *Abraham's Promise*, literary scholar Eddie Tay observes that the novel's historical markers show that 'Abraham's personal time is aligned with the homogenous empty time of the nation.'[29] Elaborating Tay's argument through Anderson, *Abraham's Promise* cannot escape the national. The form of the Novel shares the paradigmatic

[24] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Duke University Press, 2011), p2.
[25] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Revised and extended. ed.) (London: Verso, 1983; 1991).
[26] Yao, pp28-49.
[27] Paul de Man, 'The Rhetoric of Temporality', *Blindness and Insight* (2d ed. rev.) (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1983), p226.
[28] Ibid, p207.
[29] Tay (2011), p97.

features of modern nationhood--its narrative representation/occupation of modern temporality, homogenous empty time--and in doing so, is active in the processes of nation formation—writing the nation—by synchronically representing 'this bound, intrahistorical society-with-a-future'.[30] The allegorical nature of Abraham's narrative positions narrative as a site where multiple imagined times and histories coincide and negate each other, compelling a fluid reading across this temporal void that, consciously or unconsciously, produces and foregrounds a language of absence. We are reading the allegory of Abraham's narrative, then, as the mode in which the void proper to the fantasy of the nation is narratively structured and temporalised.

For example, Abraham's voice—in grandiloquent, rhetorical style—self-mythologises his life, enacting its fantasmatic space of projection:

> Temperance, not desire, was in my nature. If I am to find meaning, it must lie in that, that careful planning of a life's work. That I may have fallen short is still no reason to lament a life undiverted by hedonistic pursuits. Perhaps the true value of a good life lies in its aim, not its trajectory. And after all I have Victor, have brought Victor into the world.[31]

His extended monologue of hindsight conveys a tone of appraisal and accountability, hinting at the allegorical scope of his life as the voice of broader (national) history itself, standing for both its 'victors' and 'losers', having simultaneously 'fallen short' and yet becoming 'victorious' in patrilineal legacy, seeking temporal stability in an imagined past anchoring a secure future. Yet, this imagined 'good life' is necessarily founded on the absenting of trauma and loss, establishing the dialectic of displacement in the language of fantasy. Desire is a key category of disavowal, not only in Abraham's self-aggrandising image of ascetic discipline, but in the elliptical and intertwined narratives of Victor's conception and homosexuality seen through Abraham's eyes. While Abraham claims to be disciplined by temperance and 'careful planning', Victor, we later discover, is the result of the buried trauma of marital rape, suggesting an intergenerational, ambivalent link between history's victors and losers, fantasy and trauma.

Nation exceeds representation or definition; it is fundamentally unattainable in the sense that it is a collectively upheld fantasy, yet it drives one's desire to attain it by 'having a stake in

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[30] Benedict Anderson, *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia, and the World* (London: Verso, 1998), p334.
[31] *AP*, p133.

the nation' by ascribing to particular 'national' ideals, principles, characteristics, practices, in other words, participating in ideas of the nation. On this issue, Lacanian scholars in the field of ideology and politics have formulated the self-fulfilling, yet fantastical nature of the imaginary of the nation as the Thing.[32] Slavoj Žižek explains the impossible structure of the nation-Thing, which exceeds the sum of the features composing a way of life, 'The tautological character of the Thing—its semantic void, the fact that all we can say about it is that it is "the real Thing"—is founded precisely in this paradoxical reflexive structure.'[33] This 'semantic void' proper to the structure of the Thing is the unattainable excess which initiates our desire.[34] It is in this paradoxical, fantasmatic space constitutive of the Thing that fantasy is staged, as according to Lacanian theory, fantasy provides the subject with the coordinates to stage his/her 'impossible' relations to the object-cause of desire.[35] As Lacan puts it, 'it is in relation to the real that the level of phantasy functions. The real supports the phantasy, the phantasy protects the real.'[36] Abraham's fantasy of his self and nation encircles the kernel of trauma at its heart. Fantasy both creates and conceals the trauma which occasions it.[37]

Abraham's Promise abounds with literal and latent figurations of the father, emphasising the centrality of paternal authority in the text's treatment of national and self-identity. Recalling our earlier discussion, Jeyaretnam's positionality as the author of the text converges the public and private experience of nation-building centred on the figure of the father. The novel's haunting by the writer's father, particularly, J.B. Jeyaretnam's well-known political and public demise at the hands of the state apparatus, lends itself to an uncanny literalisation of the novel's paternal trope. J.B. Jeyaretnam, the literal father, overlaps with J.B. Jeyaretnam, the forefather of the nation's political opposition, a synecdochal representation of an individual subject to the overwhelming power of the state apparatus. In the Singapore Story, Lee Kuan Yew, the self-proclaimed and widely perceived father of the nation, whose own life is portrayed as a metonymic representation of the Singapore Story in his seminal two-volume autobiography

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[32] Slavoj Žižek, 'Enjoy Your Nation as Yourself!' *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Duke University Press, 1993), pp200-237; Rutherford, loc. cit.; Ghassan Hage, *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society* (Annandale, NSW: Pluto Press, 1998).
[33] Žižek, 'Eastern Europe's Republics of Gilead', *New Left Review* 183 (Sept-Oct 1990), p53.
[34] Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991), p134.
[35] Ibid, p6. See also Hage, p72.
[36] Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (Vol. Book XI), Jacques-Alain Miller (ed.), Alan Sheridan (trans.), (New York: W. W. Norton, 1981; 1998), p41.
[37] Žižek, 'The Seven Veils of Fantasy', *The Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso, 1997), p7.

tellingly titled *The Singapore Story* (1998) and *From Third World to First: The Singapore Story* (2000), exemplifies the centrality of the paternal metaphor in the mythmaking of state fatherhood and nation. This personal mythmaking of the father looms large as a key trope for the novel's expression of the nation and the self. While state fatherhood is the paternal trope for the hegemonic account of history, it is also a father figure (the literal and figural father J. B. Jeyaretnam) that authorises an alternate account of the nation's history. Similarly in the novel, this father figure is importantly a symbolically castrated one, emphasising the power of state fatherhood as the transcendental master signifier, that which authorises the phallic order. Further, the national crisis in the 1980s and 1990s of the ageing population/low birth rates threat highlights state fatherhood under threat and in the process of evolution/deterioration, a crisis of patrilineal regeneration also captured in Abraham's characterisation as a castrated father.

Relatedly, the narration of history in *Abraham's Promise* always already occurs at the site of male identity, privileging an androcentric worldview, where male experience is the 'neutral standard' and is seen to provide the universal norm through which other experiences (such as women's) are 'organised and evaluated'.[38] Right from the novel's opening, we are immediately given indications of an androcentric, patrilineal view of history: 'He who captures the minds of the young is in truth the victor.'[39] Introducing Abraham, Victor, Richard and Krishna, the novel presents history from the outset as a space of masculine survival and legacy. Abraham, the sole narrator, tells us, 'History is written by its survivors, survival elevated into triumph.'[40] He goes on to address his nemesis Krishna in his 'victorious' soliloquy, 'you at least I have outlasted.'[41] Further, Abraham Isaac's name and identity represent archetypal binaries that maintain an exclusive male identity at the centre of these dualities. Abraham, whose name derives from the Old Testament story of Abraham and his son Isaac, and who makes multiple references to the bible, in particular to qualities of sacrifice and faith, prompts a reading of the bible's story of Abraham alongside Abraham Isaac's narrative. The relationship between God and Abraham tells the story of the promise of a nation set up as a future reward for unquestioning faith, obedience and sacrifice. 'The Lord said to Abram, "Leave your native land, your relatives, and your father's home, and go to a country that I am going to show you. I will give you many descendants, and

[38] Jane Pilcher and Imelda Whelehan, 'Androcentricism', *Key Concepts in Gender Studies* (SAGE Publications Ltd, 2015), p5.
[39] *AP*, p7.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Ibid, p8.

they will become a great nation."'[42] As though in response to this omniscient divine request, Abraham Isaac soliloquises: 'after all I have Victor, have brought Victor into the world. To have a son, a fine, upstanding boy, is that not legacy enough? It is vanity for a father to consider himself unfulfilled, vanity that is tantamount to blasphemy.' [43] Abraham's promise can thus be interpreted as the promise of the nation whose coordinates of fulfilment are staged and realised through a simultaneously national and biological duty to patrilineal procreativity.

This ideal of a reproductive future is one that Abraham seeks to affirm by absenting Victor's queer narrative. The dialectic of national desire as patrilineal, generative and heteronormative is established in the novel through Abraham's constant deliberations of the extent of Victor's likeness to him. For example, 'But what has Victor inherited? What can I point to in myself that endures in him? Is there anything?'[44] 'What fruits then has my life borne in Victor?'[45] Victor, at once the embodiment of the nation's material success and the threat to regeneration through his homosexuality, hinders Abraham's self-mythology, one that is geared towards the generative futurity of legacy. As Edelman explains, the Child, as the key image of reproductive futurism, simultaneously regulates political discourse by figuratively advancing a vision of a collective future.[46] Therefore as an organising social principle, reproductive futurism privileges heteronormativity through the occlusion and negation of what is seen to undermine its absolute value: the threatening other of queerness as non-productive and therefore socially non-viable and resistant.[47] The ideology of procreativity informing reproductive futurism thus secures the privileged relation between heteronormative sexual practice and meaning.[48] At the textual level, this structural pre-conditioning recalls Macherey's reading of literary absence: 'There is not even the slightest hint of the absence of what it does not, perhaps cannot, say: the disavowal extends even to the act that banished the forbidden term; its absence is unacknowledged.'[49] Queer temporality, the inconceivable obverse, cannot articulate its own absence, as its disavowal is pre-conditional to the novel's narrative logic. The fantasy of a seamless futurity structurally

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[42] Genesis 12: 1-2, *Good News Bible*, (Minto, N.S.W.: Bible Society in Australia Inc., 2006).
[43] *AP*, p133.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Ibid, p136.
[46] Edelman, p3
[47] Ibid, pp2-3.
[48] Ibid, p13.
[49] Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, Geoffrey Wall (trans.), (London, Henley and Boston: Routledge & Keagan Paul, 1978), (French edition first published 1966), p85.

embeds optimism in the perpetuity of state fatherhood and is reinforced by a fetishistic narrative as the mode in which this temporality is suitably realised. Thus, as an allegory for national development, Abraham's ideology of heteronormative, patrilineal procreativity in the novel's central theme of legacy therefore determines its corresponding narrative sequence, operating as an organising narrative principle in which this ideology reproduces and regulates meaning. The structure of the novel, which moves between the past and the future, reinforcing patriarchal origins in order to secure the privileged future engendered by patrilineal legacy, emphasises the metaphoric investment of reproductive futurism to the fantasmatic space of the nation and the good self and its discursive authorisation of a masculinised social identity.

While the novel espouses the patriarchal fantasy of the nation through Abraham's androcentric narrative and patrilineal desire, his place in the Confucian narrative is marginalised in other regards. Sparring over politics with a Chinese Member of Parliament at a party thrown by Richard's Chinese family, Abraham objects to the MP's defence of Asian Values and is publicly humiliated by him. Abraham's otherness is multiple and interlinked; his manner of speech that differentiates him is related to his Tamil identity, social status and intellectual refinement.[50] His racialised otherness is conflated with values and practices that are antithetical to the national project. Yet, while Jeyaretnam positions Abraham's marginalisation within a public discussion of national direction (highlighting public discourse of the day such as the Asian Values debate and the threat of Communism of the 1980s), this conversation is depicted as crucially forged among men and boys, inscribing a space of male dominance in writing the nation. Women are at best relegated; Abraham notes that Richard's mother 'looks like Imelda Marcos, and I tell her so.'[51] Even as Abraham is presented as an ambivalent figure in the hegemonic account of the nation, he reinforces the values of patriarchy by upholding the importance of patrilineality in his own vision. While Jeyaretnam shows Abraham's counter-project to pragmatism by tutoring Richard in Latin, 'something that is wholly useless, utterly irrelevant,' through which 'we glimpse true beauty, the beauty of the divine', this is a handing down of knowledge between men; 'It was Mr Clarke who first made me understand that …'[52] Abraham symbolically seeks salvation in moulding the future of men according to his own

[50] *AP*, p66.
[51] Ibid, p63.
[52] Ibid, p16.

vision: 'the future, that is still in my hands.'[53] While Abraham's profession, anachronism and ideological difference demonstrate the variations or exclusions of the national story of pragmatic, material success, he similarly symbolises the gendered, patrilineal space of the writing of the nation.

While scholars have argued that *Abraham's Promise* does not provide 'amicable resolution' to the socio-political problems depicted, few readings have recognised the problematic absenting of women as a key way in which Abraham participates in ideas of the nation.[54] Rosaly Puthucheary, for instance, describes Abraham as a 'male chauvinist',[55] but does not sustain an analysis of the novel's gender politics. On the other hand, Holden insightfully draws on the state's fantasy of a self-generating fatherhood in a detailed discussion of the construction of masculinity in the novel. Having said that, he reads the ambiguities and silences in Abraham's narrative—his prevarications, inaction and rationalisations—as a disruption to the state's patriarchal vision by embodying 'multiplicity'.[56] I argue instead that Abraham's narrative of masculine binaries does not displace the patriarchal fantasy of the nation, but upholds such a fantasy precisely through the silencing of trauma that is gendered as female. Rani's rape and Mercy's suicide are figural representations of trauma that highlight the ways in which the feminine is always already designated as anti-national. The literal and figural absence of the feminine body in *Abraham's Promise* has yet to be addressed in any scholarly discussion of the novel, but is a significant way in which the novel's structural and temporal logic coheres the gendered fantasy of the nation.

Let us now introduce the related concept of state fatherhood to provide a mutual context for our reading of the feminine body. In their compelling account of Singapore's 'state fatherhood', Heng and Devan argue that official discourses of nationhood in Singapore are essentially gendered, privileging an image of a masculinised state, 'state fatherhood', imposing discipline on a feminised social body (be it women or 'othered' races and cultures positioned as feminine) harbouring the threat of economic or social disintegration, undoing the possibility of

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[53] Ibid, p107.
[54] Tay (2011), pp97-8; Leong Liew Geok, 'Dissenting Voices: Political Engagements in the Singaporean Novel in English', *World Literature Today* Vol. 74 No. 2, English-Language Writing from Malaysia, Singapore, and the Philippines (Spring 2000), p290; See also Leong, 'Fiction Can't Escape Politics', *The Straits Times* 15 Oct 2000, p8.
[55] Rosaly Puthucheary, *Different Voices: The Singaporean/Malaysian Novel* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2009), p213.
[56] Holden, n32.

its future.[57] Such a narrative effectively enforces as its key image the founding fathers as the vindicated owners of power, protectors of the new nation facing ever-new vulnerabilities.[58]

In the novel's representation of the nation as patriarchal, the inverse of such privileged modes of being are figured as undesirable excesses and gendered as female. Two major female characters in the story, Mercy and Rani, are characterised as volatile, hysterical, suicidal and unfaithful, and suffer a terrible fate as a direct result of these 'flaws'. Mercy enters the narrative as what Holden describes as 'a disruptive force', upsetting the balance of the respectable Ceylon Tamil family unit.[59] At a meeting of the family of an arranged suitor, Mercy accidentally spills tea on his lap. Her response—the sign of her untameable, unpredictable nature—is so terrifying to Abraham that it is described as almost a foreign element of which she is a mere vessel: '[…] I heard the sound, a gurgle that started in Mercy's throat, growing into something else as her mouth opened, growing into a roar that seemed to shake the windows.'[60] She is the 'personification of Sodom and Gomorrah', from whom the arranged suitor's family flee without looking back, lest they suffer 'the fate of Lot's wife.'[61] Jeyaretnam's use of hyperbole in this scene is surely to comedic effect, but symbolically invokes the fate of the two cities smited for their disobedience to the Law of God the father, thus implying more seriously a phallic order in which woman, personified by Mercy, is characterised as a threat to that order. The reference to the two cities which are recognised as symbols of vice and homosexuality also rehearses the text's criteria of regenerative heteronormativity. This is a complex moment in the text between the author and character, where Jeyaretnam seems to critique Abraham and his family's phallocentricism through Mercy's response. She is such an affront to convention that Abraham remembers her as rattling 'in fierce bursts', 'the machine gun of her laughter'.[62] Mercy's laughter is powerfully emancipatory in this sombre scene of patriarchal ritual, undermining and flouting the code of female modesty and subservience. However, as we will see, as the narrative progresses, the tensions introduced by his female characters remain unresolved in the end, where Mercy and Rani are, in effect, in Holden's words, sacrificed to the androcentric narrative: '*Abraham's Promise* clearly does not represent the only way in which a writer might intervene in

[57] Heng and Devan, p204.
[58] Ibid, pp107-108.
[59] Holden, n24.
[60] Ibid, p55.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Ibid.

masculinist discourse of nationhood. The unresolved juxtaposition of scenes of domestic violence and political betrayal in the novel, however, does encourage a questioning, a peeling back of the surface of Gramscian "common sense" which genders nationalist discourse in Singapore.'[63] To be sure, Jeyaretnam's descriptions of Abraham's chauvinism allow us to acknowledge the violent treatment of women, but the narrative space of the novel absents the female body and trauma from its resolution, geared towards, instead, Abraham's restoration of his identity. While this absenting of women may raise questions about the patriarchal nature of the nation, the narrative structure and movement also provides a model of omnipotent fathers which, to a greater extent than Holden concedes, reinforces the structure proper to the Gramscian common sense of gendered nationalist discourse.

Mercy as a threat to the family is also a threat to the stability of a fledgling nation, when Abraham's narrative of democratic self-government overlaps with that of Mercy's marital troubles. The dynamics of Abraham's family life is a metaphorical representation of the dysfunction of the modern state founded upon the ideals of pragmatism. Mercy's call disturbs Abraham's reverie of himself as the Apollonian man within an exclusive space of male privilege and civic duty, 'dreaming of a new nation, the possibility of rational men in power, disinterestedly taking those decisions that tended to the public good, seeing myself among them, Abraham Isaac, ushering in a new age of enlightenment'. [64] The overlapping narratives of Abraham's ideals regarding democratic self-governance and his interaction with Mercy invoke the symbolic value of her namesake within the national narrative of progress. By positioning her as the sacrificial lamb in national progress, Jeyaretnam positions his gendered critique of Singapore's development. Mercy is characterised as chaos that an emergent utilitarian society cannot accommodate. The idea of mercy or compassion in this new society is feminised, condemned by Abraham as weak, irrational and impractical. When Mercy cries over the pressure from David's mother to have a baby, Abraham thinks: 'The woman was hysterical. If only she were present in front of me I could slap her face and snap her out of this nonsense.'[65] Like his curt behaviour towards his sister, there is no quarter given to mercy in this march towards progress. Allegorically, her suicide demonstrates that there is ultimately no place for mercy in this new world. The death of mercy, one could hypothesise, is an aspect of the founding trauma

[63] Ibid.
[64] Ibid, p76.
[65] Ibid.

of the national fantasy, a silenced kinship between Mercy and Abraham, mercy and the modern state.

Like Mercy, the tragedy of Rani's fate is similarly overtaken by Abraham's self-serving narrative of rationalisation or lamentation of his own suffering. Such a narrative contains a double gesture of simultaneously locating past trauma (violence, excess, rape) at the site of the feminine body while at the same time disavowing its existence through a repudiation of its traumatic significance in Abraham's grandiloquent attempts to maintain the seamless rationality of his male identity; 'moderation my touchstone',[66] 'asceticism on which I prided myself'.[67] Krishna, Abraham's political rival, functions as the correspondence between domestic politics and the politics of the nation. When Rani confesses her affair with Krishna, Abraham's political betrayal is reinforced on a personal level. For Abraham, woman is essentially anti-national; she poses a threat to patriarchal duty. According to him, while Aeneas, in leaving Dido, had 'chosen to do his duty, by his men, his nation and his destiny',[68] Dido's curse of eternal conflict between the Tyrians and Dardanians demonstrates 'Another woman putting her narrow, selfish, sinful desires above the dictates of duty and honour.'[69] Comparing Dido with Rani, Jeyaretnam strategically conflates family with nation, a familiar conflation recognisable in Singaporean Confucianism which ideologically stipulates a homology between family and nation under the paradigm of state fatherhood.[70]

As Heng and Devan observe, under Singapore's state fatherhood, moulded by strategic appropriations of Confucianism, the transfer of the paternal signifier from the traditional family to the modern state secures the metaphor of the state as family and thus its 'natural' and 'omnipotent' status.[71] The naturalness of the Law, that of the patriarchal structure of the nation, is asserted by Abraham's conflation of woman as a threat to family unity with woman as a destabilising force to the nation. Jeyaretnam's trope of woman-as-absence depicts women as not absent but absented, emptied of autonomous significance, marking a space or subjectivity

[66] *AP*, p134.
[67] Ibid.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Ibid.
[70] Heng and Devan, p208.
[71] Ibid.

divested of meaning, primed for masculine intrusion to make male presence meaningful,[72] problematically naturalising this function in the narrative. Following Abraham's refusal to renounce his piece in the *Straits Times* critical of the government, his consequent loss of job and status as provider of the family represents a symbolic castration, a sense of emasculation highlighted in Abraham's observation that 'instead of cherishing [Rani's] her independence, I was irked by it, for I found myself sliding into dependence.'[73] Rani's body is the site at which Abraham attempts to recuperate his thwarted masculinity. 'It was not just desire, but also dominion, the need to prove myself still master of her body.'[74] While in the earlier discussion of desire, Jeyaretnam positions Abraham's temperance as dominion over his desire, here, desire is related to his dominion over others, specifically the female body, demonstrating Jeyaretnam's latent critique of Abraham's self-identification based on disavowal. When he discovers Rani's infidelity, it is her body by which he asserts power and control, even as, or more accurately, precisely because she, like Dido, augurs the collapse of family and nation, demonstrating the Law in which the woman is necessarily absented in order to authorise the Symbolic authority of a patriarchal order. Abraham joyfully uses her body to restore his thwarted masculinity. 'For the first time in many, many months, happiness surged through me, I wanted to shout, to scream, "Look at me, I'm not a failure, I have a son, I mean a child, there, growing in his mother's womb!"'[75] Abraham asserts his success through the figure of the Child as the 'fantasmatic beneficiary', safeguard and authentication of social order.[76] Yet, Jeyaretnam's critique of Abraham's self-image based on disavowal does not extend to a problematising of the narrative's disavowal of feminine trauma and a narrative logic that is geared towards the restoration of Abraham's flawed masculinity. His joyful self-perpetuation and the 'mastering' of one's legacy through the son produced through silenced, violent 'dominion' instantiates the compulsory narrative of reproductive futurity violently inscribed on the female body.

In the novel's central conflict between father and son, Jeyaretnam, repeatedly alluding to then current debates about national direction and identity, presents Victor as the allegorical figure for modern Singapore. The successful consolidation of PAP pragmatism of the 1990s is

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[72] Amy K. Kaminsky, 'The Presence in Absence of Exile', *Reading the Body Politic: Feminist Criticism and Latin American Women Writers* (University of Minnesota Press, 1992), pp27-28. I draw on Kaminsky's description of woman-as-absence to approach Jeyaretnam's similar trope.
[73] *AP*, p115.
[74] Ibid, p127.
[75] Ibid, p138.
[76] Edelman, p3

reflected in Victor's expression of pragmatism as a living ethos. Victor's wealth and status as a successful lawyer is achieved by being 'perfectly comfortable keeping within the bounds set by our rulers,'[77] highlighting the ironic significance of Victor's name as the triumph of new Singapore, of pragmatic, material development and economic growth over political and civic liberties.

While Jeyaretnam uses Victor's values to level a critique against pragmatic, materialistic new Singapore, his use of homosexuality as a metaphor for the fin-de-siècle nation's impasse is inherently problematic, functioning as a complicit reminder of the persistence of a conservative, anti-queer, gendered nationalist ideology at play in the novel. Abraham deems Victor's successes as 'Nothing of any true worth',[78] lamenting of his son, 'You work too hard… I cannot be happy until you have found a wife.'[79] Victor's professional and economic productivity is made possible by a personal non-reproductivity, metaphorically representing his homosexuality as the price of the nation's relentless economic pursuit. Compounding the novel's problematic designation of social negativity to the queer in its thematic and structural allegiance to the absolute value of reproductive futurism,[80] Victor's homosexuality is presented as the retribution for Abraham's personal and political infidelity. The strength of the state is all-encompassing; Abraham's loss of job and status, a symbolic castration, leads to the dysfunction of the family. The breakdown of his marriage, his rape of Rani and Victor's homosexuality are directly linked:

> Thoughts of Victor, of sickening, vile lusts, still plague me. The fruit of my wicked union cursed, and I with him! Far from triumphing over the circumstances of his conception. Victor has been moulded by them. If a woman will lead a man to such wickedness, then far better to be with men.[81]

The fall of the heteronormative family unit caused by the proverbial Eve, leads to Victor's homosexuality, a defeated masculinity, the perversion of a natural order. It represents the literal and figural impasse of national reproductivity and progress, preventing Abraham's only chance at constructing a legacy which he outlines at the beginning, is the true victory. Jeyaretnam uses the family drama of Victor's wicked genesis to represent the pre-determining birth narrative of the nation. Victor, the allegorical figure of modern Singapore, born out of a violent and unstable

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[77] Ibid, p46.
[78] *AP*, p7.
[79] Ibid, p150.
[80] Edelman, p4.
[81] *AP*, pp158-9.

history, a shameful secret, as it were, 'the unclean fruit of an unholy union',[82] is corrupted by the conditions of his conception. Given that Abraham and Victor represent different visions of the nation, Victor's homosexuality is problematically deployed as a broad metaphor for a failed masculinity that undermines the heteronormative patriarchal authority which underpins Abraham's vision of the nation and the good Singaporean. Victor is the fruit of a buried, silenced trauma of marital rape, whose homosexuality, born out of that violence, stands for the traumatic kernel at the heart of the fantasy of the nation and self.

The novel underscores a conservative fantasy of patrilineal regeneration, in a sentimental, moralising ending of family harmony as the only thing that keeps trauma at bay. Towards the end of the novel, haunted by his past, Abraham, in a state of panic over Victor, whose absence recalls Mercy's before her suicide, makes a compulsive admission of his complicity in past traumas:

> Oh God, oh God […] Let it not be him. Take me instead. […] I place myself upon the altar, turn my neck towards the knife. Me, Lord. And Mercy, that ignored, forgotten phone call, my indifference, my washing of my hands, far worse than Krishna ever had. […][83]

While it may be argued that Abraham is attempting to acknowledge his role in the violence against the women in his life, or, in line with Holden's reading, that Abraham's ambiguous position, 'alternately likeable and infuriating', shows a narrator 'openly engaged in the process of its own interpretation',[84] I would argue instead that Abraham's recognition is realised through the privileging of a sentimentalised, threatened paternity which solidifies rather than breaks his original position of traditional patriarchal authority. Here, the novel revisits and inverts the Christian binary of Abraham and Isaac, where Abraham this time offers himself, rejecting his duty to the Father and relinquishing his promise of the nation, by putting his love of his son ahead of his legacy. This reinforces the ambivalence in the novel's ending that seems to undermine Abraham's vision for the nation. At the same time, the father-son relation that Jeyaretnam uses to position his critique of the nation insinuates a paternal love that pre-determines, masks and enforces an always already naturalised trope of male survival. The only way to come to terms with his role in past trauma is to reaffirm the male bond, in the form of his

[82] Ibid, p154.
[83] *AP*, p159.
[84] Holden, n13.

reconnection with his son: 'Standing here, arms around my son… [I] am at peace.'[85] Abraham accepts Victor's 'failings' with the same resignation with which Abraham accepts his own life and deeds: 'What more could be asked of me? And what more could I ask of my son?'[86] The father-son bond is used as a sudden, unexplained resolution to his troubled conscience. The patriarchal Law that subsumes Mercy and Rani and to which Abraham subscribes is not meaningfully scrutinised, and, in fact, is ultimately upheld by the fantasy of patrilineality founded upon the repudiation of the feminine/mother. Those final lines bear a tone of resignation, but also rhetorically, pre-emptively foreclose further scrutiny. They highlight the ambivalence of at once defying yet embracing an imagined national duty, further emphasising the trope of sacrifice.

The novel closes with a troubling image of father and son physically embracing 'as if the age of miracles were not yet past,' while Abraham celebrates that 'I have done my best'.[87] In this moment of coming to terms, Abraham's father's words ring in his ear, 'Don't cry', and he in turn secures the intergenerational male bond with Victor: the father-son embrace becomes the privileged and final image of 'Imaginary totalisation' that dispels the trauma.[88] The image of patrilineality compels the narrative, inscribing a sequence of androcentric futurity as the privileged guarantor of meaning and continuity within this fantasy of the good self and the nation. The description of 'miracles' preserves optimism, registering a redemptive hope that indicates continuity instead of death. Abraham nods towards the future, by simultaneously acknowledging Victor's generation's stasis, 'He may never change the world, hardly wants to, but still, head down, he will hold his ground.'[89] Abraham praises Victor as a 'beetle,' grounded in his pragmatism, unlike his own fickle idealism and weakness of a 'butterfly, soaring upon the puffs of my youthful fancies, too easily beaten'.[90] While this difference set up the novel's early tension, that 'His [Victor's] success will be my [Abraham's] final failure',[91] here, Abraham concedes to the strength of Victor's version of national participation. At the same time, however, Victor's queer temporality remains, for Abraham, finite and immediate, while Abraham's temporal ideal of futurity and possibility is boundless. The stasis that Victor is charged with by

[85] *AP*, p162.
[86] Ibid.
[87] Ibid.
[88] Edelman, p93.
[89] *AP*, p162.
[90] Ibid.
[91] Ibid, p7.

Abraham compounds the ending's sense of ambivalent resignation, embedding a critique of queer temporality vis-à-vis the idea of national progress. In not wanting to change the world, but still holding his ground, the figure of Victor the beetle is made to represent both the rupture and security in the nation's fantasmatic continuity, underscoring the ultimate ambivalence of Abraham's vision in Jeyaretnam's treatment of national legacy.

Conclusion: Creatures of the National Imagination

Throughout the chapters, my examination of *If We Dream Too Long*, *Little Ironies* and *Abraham's Promise* engaged the question: how do iconic, post-independence narratives mean? I have attempted to answer this question in order to displace the privileged and established positions that these texts occupy in popular and critical accounts of the development of a national literature. The reading of absence suitably provides us with little stability or closure, revealing multiplying equivocalities, ambivalence, antimonies and ambiguities which characterise the nation's endless, unstable process of becoming. I have attempted to refocus an aesthetic consideration of the form and function of literature that elaborates the ways in which configurations of absence in the texts and their evolving histories, when examined alongside their canonical meanings and significance, help to render a fuller picture of literature as a site of cultural identity formation at its most contested and paradigmatic. By tracing modes of disappearance, deferral, erasure and equivocality in the three texts, I have tried to present divergent accounts of absence which complicate and problematise canonical readings of icons of national becoming.

The impact of the products and practices of national and cultural becoming which I have examined in this thesis continues to shape new Singapore literature in the global age (diasporic production, new media and independent publishing), which produces and displays new, myriad connections that complicate the traditional dialogical model of state and cultural production. While these changing forms of national becoming continue to proliferate and demand new models of reading and response, I hope that the reading model elaborated in this study has contributed a framework that is both flexible and responsive enough to be able to continue to speak to these changing forms of global production and practice.

Ban Kah Choon remarked sometime ago that the whole history of Singapore's imagination, of the internal sensibility of what makes Singapore, is ripe for theorisation, a comment which seems to invoke a certain elusive character of this history and its own agonistic marginalities.[1] In this sense, the latent nature of the nation's cultural signification continues to invite further probing. To end, let us consider, by comparison, the nation's manifest meaning in

[1]Ban Kah Choon, "Narrating Imagination", *Imagining Singapore*, Ban Kah Choon, Anne Pakir, Chee Kiong Tong (eds.), (Times Academic Press, 1992), p14.

state discourse that recalls our study's beginning. We invoke once more the process of cultural signification of the nation: this time, through the state's participating fictions about a unified/unifying national body. We move from Rajaratnam's will to construct culture like hospitals and schools to the nation's leaders' impulse for the construction of similes for the purpose of national identification. In its aspirations, the nation has transformed from the early days of a 'Malaysian Malaysia' to a 'Swiss style of living'. Similarly, the history of national defence has been a breeding ground of transmogrifying national creatures—the 'poisonous shrimp', 'porcupine' and 'dolphin'. The continuously morphing national body remains alive and well, animated and sustained by the intrafictive impulse of regenerative and exclusionary narratives, metaphors and similes of self-imagination, an impulse which continues to shape and proliferate a literature of absence.

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