Notes on an Anxious State

Overthinking Singapore's Historical Narratives

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1. *Prologue: (a/A)nxious (s/S)tate(s)*

1.1. I have spent most of my life in an anxious state.

Almost as far back as I can remember, I have never been truly carefree. This probably isn't entirely true – I must have, at times, enjoyed my childhood – but from a young age, I had developed an overwhelming sense of self-consciousness that, on the one hand, slowly suffocated my self-esteem, and on the other, surfaced a constant anxiety that persisted at the level of a low hum, at best. Among other reasons, I think it must have been rooted in the fact that since I was around four or five years old, I was physically much larger than other children my age – a condition that left me vulnerable to the casual cruelty of both family and peers who, perhaps because of my size, thought me not-so-vulnerable. I was far too aware, far too early in life, that my existence would be determined by how people looked at me. I was often reminded that I was the object of someone's critical gaze, the target of their hurtful words. It became crucial, then, that I cast myself with a critical eye first, that I said unkind things to myself before someone else could, in order to change the things that I could change, or to prepare myself for the inevitable judgment I would receive for the things I could not. My anxiety was a logical extension of a life lived in a body in which I've never felt fully at home, and could of course never escape. Of my own accord, and likely as early as age seven, I developed two tendencies that compounded this anxiety. First, an obsession with proving my worth beyond my physical size, mostly through academic achievement, which then manifested as an intense competitiveness and perfectionism in almost all areas of my life. Second, a largely involuntary compulsion to relive, and over-analyse, incidents that might seem otherwise trivial, but to me revealed what I perceived to be my own failings – either in being unable to anticipate or prevent the situation, or in failing to respond in a way that would reflect well on me, or that would leave me in a position of relative power and stability, so to speak. Any situation that resulted in having to confront some form of inadequacy in myself – even if both situation and inadequacy were more or less inconsequential – became framed in my mind as a rejection or denial of my entire being, the cause of some crippling destabilisation of the self. As if – they know now, I am a fraud. They know I'm nothing special. Or, worse – this is what they've always known me to be. They've always known. *I'm not* [insert adjective here] *enough.* I suspect that this is what people might think of me, even people who have known me, respected me, perhaps even loved me for many years. A strange thought, for someone who always felt like they were taking up too much space in the world, that they are *not enough*. In the face of a world that I have always considered replete with threats to my sense of self, I developed another compulsion: an intrinsic need to worry, as a means to anticipate, protect, *control*. And so it was that from a tender age I learned how to punish myself with thoughts of *if-only* ("if only I had/hadn't…", "if only I were more/less…"), using all the possible paths I *could have taken* as ammunition against myself, which is then complemented, quite naturally, with torturous thoughts of *what-if*: all the possible paths I *could still take*, and all the possible ways in which others might respond to these possible paths, and all the possible ways in which situations might unfold – that is, all the possible things that could happen to me, that I would somehow still construe as my fault. There is always something I could have changed, could have done better, could change, could do better. All these spectres of past and future in the present mind. Sometimes, it becomes much safer for me to be smothered in the paralysing embrace of anxiety, than to take an action that might risk reminding me of the certainty of my own worthlessness. I think of how every moment I am stepping into an abyss of possibility, which sounds as if it could be the source of hope, but often feels like an immense —

1.2. I have spent most of my life in an Anxious State.

I was born and raised in Singapore, an island city-state in Southeast Asia, at the southern tip of the Malay Peninsula. A British colony from 1819 to 1963, Singapore has been an independent country since 1965, when it separated from Malaysia after a short-lived merger. Five-and-a-half decades later, Singapore has grown to become one of the centres of the global economy. It is one of the wealthiest, and most expensive, countries in the world, with high standards of living, education, and safety, run by a relatively efficient and uncorrupt government – though it is a de facto one-party-state, governed by the People's Action Party since independence, even with regular elections. Yet, despite its successes, the anxious rhetoric used by the State to frame the country's history, and to justify its policies even today, often depends on the same few concepts to emphasise Singapore's vulnerability: that the country is a small, land-scarce one, surrounded by many larger neighbours; that we have next to no natural resources, and are dependent on the generosity of said neighbours for basic needs such as water; that as a nation comprising people of many races and religions, we must put societal harmony above all; that growth, in both economy and population, is the only way forward, and we will be required to make sacrifices with this in mind.[1] And so on.

As part of the first generation of students exposed to the National Education (NE) programme, launched in 1997 to "foster national cohesion and instil a sense of national identity", I was taught the officially-sanctioned history of Singapore (the 'Singapore Story') as part of a subject called Social Studies.[2] Thus, I was acutely familiar with the rhetoric mentioned above from the age of ten. When then-Deputy Prime Minister (DPM) and current Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong first announced the NE initiative, he described the "Singapore Story" using vocabulary that specifically established it as a pedagogical tool that warns of the threats that face the country: "It shows what **external dangers** to watch out for, and where our domestic **faultlines** lie. [. . .] [O]ur young must understand Singapore's unique **challenges, constraints and vulnerabilities**" *[emphasis mine]*.[3] NE further introduced four annual events that are still commemorated in schools today, including one called Total Defence Day. This falls on 15 February, the day the British surrendered Singapore to the Japanese in 1942, marking the start of three years and eight months of the Japanese

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[1] Donald Low and Sudhir Vadaketh, "Introduction: Reframing Policy and Political Debates in Singapore," in *Hard Choices: Challenging the Singapore Consensus*, eds. Donald Low and Sudhir Vadaketh (Singapore: NUS Press, 2014), 4.

[2] "Launch of National Education," HistorySG, National Library Board, accessed July 30, 2019, http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/history/events/44fa0306-ddfe-41bc-8bde-8778ff198640.

[3] Loh Kah Seng, "Within the Singapore Story: The Use and Narrative of History in Singapore," *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 12, no. 2 (1998): 2, https://www.jstor.org/stable/40860676.

Occupation. It is, therefore, tied directly to the fall of Singapore during World War II, during which the defence of Singapore was in fact the responsibility of the British Empire, who ceded the territory to what was effectively our second colonial master, the Japanese Imperial Army. Yet, the Total Defence policy, which dates back to 1984, is centred not just on Military Defence, but also four other pillars including Civil Defence, Economic Defence, Social Defence, and Psychological Defence (a sixth pillar, Digital Defence, was added in 2018). Even as children, we were positioned quite literally *on the defensive* as the foundation of our responsible citizenry, permeating all areas of life, with the catastrophising implication that if we do not exercise vigilance, our country would cease to exist. As the Total Defence website states, "every Singaporean has a part to play to help strengthen our defences against these threats and challenges".[4]

Speaking of being *on the defensive*, this tends to be the Singapore government's default position in the face of external criticism. At bare minimum, the State regularly asserts that Singapore should not be judged by those who do not understand its context, and it has gone so far as to ban international publications such as *Wired* for William Gibson's infamous 1993 essay about the country, 'Disneyland with the Death Penalty'. In the face of criticism from its own citizens, the government has in the past imprisoned political dissidents for many years without trial under the Internal Security Act, and more recently resorted to strategies such as defamation lawsuits, or preventing academics and journalists from being employed in the country. There is only one place in Singapore – the Speaker's Corner at Hong Lim Park – where a Singaporean can speak to a public gathering without first obtaining a public entertainment license. Anyone who makes comments that can be interpreted as a threat to racial and religious harmony can be reported to the police, and even prosecuted under the Sedition Act. These are just some of the strategies that the State has used over the years to restrict freedom of the press and civil society activism, creating a largely depoliticised society in which political discourse, not to mention organisation, is seen by the average Singaporean to be futile, undesirable, or even unpatriotic – an unnecessary 'rocking of the boat' – particularly when most of the population enjoys a comfortable life.

But perhaps one of the most intriguing, if bizarre, political concepts to emerge in Singapore is the OB marker. The term was adopted from golf, in which an out of bounds marker denotes the area beyond which playing is not allowed, and was first used in a 1991 speech by then-Minister for Information and the Arts George Yeo in reference to "the boundaries of acceptable political discourse, delimiting permissible topics for public

[4] "Total Defence," MINDEF Singapore, accessed July 30, 2019, https://www.mindef.gov.sg/web/portal/mindef/defence-matters/defence-topic/defence-topic-detail/total-defence.

discussion".[5] Anything that falls outside of those markers might find itself on the receiving end of an official government response, and even retribution. Crucially, OB markers are invisible and constantly shifting – in a speech from 2000, again by then-DPM Lee, he states: "As our society matures and grows more stable, and the population becomes better educated and more discerning, the limits for debate – the 'OB markers' – will widen."[6] (This statement reveals the paternalistic government's condescending perception of the people as 'immature' and 'undiscerning', requiring the government's guidance.) Yet, despite their impreciseness, OB markers are enforced by the government in various ways till this day, most prevalently through its control of the daily English language newspaper *The Straits Times* (ST). In fact, former ST editor Cheong Yip Seng titled his 2012 memoir *OB Markers: My Straits Times Story*, in which he recounts how individual politicians, including former Prime Ministers Lee Kuan Yew and Goh Chok Tong, made personal requests and even threats regarding potential news stories. Besides direct State interference, ST journalists and editors also regularly practice self-censorship, particularly regarding topics such as politicians' salaries and race relations.

Many have declared the Singapore government authoritarian and its policies draconian, and much has already been said about the State as a 'benevolent dictatorship' or 'flawed democracy'. What is more fascinating, and in part disturbing to me is that the government's narratives of the country's past, present, and future – and the way it chooses to address, control, and suppress any effort to destabilise these narratives – are often driven by certain fundamental anxieties, with an underlying insecurity engendered by a fear of threats within and without. Oddly enough, OB markers remind me of the strategy of setting boundaries within oneself and with others in order not to trigger one's anxious thoughts. They are, in a sense, a State-imposed national perversion of this common practice of managing anxiety. I am not suggesting that the Singapore government should be inscribed as a victim of these anxieties, especially since it exercises a great deal of power, and will continue to do so for years to come. Instead, this is the starting point for my consideration of how these narratives might be scrutinised not just through the lens of specific anxieties, but rather an abstract interpretation of anxiety as a narrative space. I am wondering whether, even with State narratives that might appear benign or largely truthful, we could look more closely at the ways in which those narratives have been constructed, in order to see the ghosts of what cannot or will not be said – not just to question whether Singapore is truly as vulnerable as it reiterates, which other academics have already sought to do, but also to use that assumption of

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[5] Wernmei Yong Ade and Lim Lee Ching, *Contemporary Arts as Political Practice in Singapore* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 4-5.

[6] George, 47.

vulnerability as a gateway to generate more thoughtful, nuanced discussions that go beyond examinations of validity and veracity. By extension, if anxiety can function as an entry point for discussing the rigidities of State-sanctioned historical narratives, how might it then be applied to alternative explorations of Singapore's history?

2. The Anxious Author

2.1. Defining anxiety

Anxiety is familiar to most, if not all of us, as a feeling of unease or nervousness, particularly about something that is uncertain and/or perceived to be threatening; also familiar is the incessant worrying (and even physical discomfort) that accompanies it. Experiences of anxiety can range from the normative – as a reaction to stressful situations at work or school – to the pathological – as a crippling symptom of medical conditions such as generalised anxiety disorder or post-traumatic stress disorder. Beyond the context of the everyday and the clinical, the concept has also been the focus of a number of major works of Western theoretical writing in the past two centuries: it has been explored theologically in Søren Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Anxiety* (1844), philosophically in Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1927), and psychoanalytically by Sigmund Freud ('Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety', 1926) and later Melanie Klein ('On the Theory of Anxiety and Guilt', 1942), to name a few. To attempt to summarise these here would be to skim over an epistemology comprising incredibly dense texts that, as Sianne Ngai observes in her own affective analysis of anxiety, uses the concept as "an all-purpose term stretching across knowledge formations and disciplinary vocabularies".[7]

However, a brief examination of their definitions of anxiety reveals obvious overlaps *[all emphasis mine]*. Freud, for example, defines anxiety as "a reaction to a situation of **danger**",[8] and in particular neurotic anxiety as "anxiety about an **unknown** danger".[9] Heidegger states that "when something **threatening** brings itself close, anxiety does not 'see' any definite 'here' or 'yonder' from which it comes. That in the face of which one has anxiety is characterized by

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[7] Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 213.

[8] Sigmund Freud, "Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety", in *On Psychopathology: Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety and other works*, trans. James Strachey, ed. Angela Richards (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1979), 284.

[9] Freud, 325.

the fact that what threatens is **nowhere**."[10] Kierkegaard offers perhaps the most optimistic definition of all, comparing anxiety to a man who looks down into a "yawning **abyss**", and subsequently experiences a "dizziness of **freedom**" – freedom being that which exists in an open space with no restrictions – "which emerges when the spirit wants to posit the synthesis, and freedom looks down into its own **possibility**, laying hold of finiteness to support itself."[11] Each of these three definitions are variations on the theme of a response to a 'danger' or 'threat' that cannot be fully known, and therefore results in a destabilised, dislocated self (for better or for worse).

Most recently, the word 'anxiety' has been used in Leftist discourse to describe the "dominant reactive affect" of a contemporary capitalist society in which it is the "linchpin of subordination".[12] Anxiety is the consequence of a population subjected to pressures to produce and consume in ways that are unsustainable, both for human beings and for the environment. It is also the consequence of the omnipresent surveillance that makes us conscious of being watched and assessed at every moment. Anxiety is further positioned as analogous to the state of precarity, which Judith Butler defines as "the politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence and death".[13] While anxiety and precarity in these contexts are framed as conditions that imprison, rather than, as in Kierkegaard, free us, they are again connected to uncertainty and insecurity, in relation to an unstable, unknowable future, whose very instability and unknowability is experienced in the present. This temporal element is key – returning to Ngai, anxiety is "intimately aligned with the concept of futurity, and the temporal dynamics of deferral and anticipation": the space between oneself and the threat, and the waiting and worry that occurs within that space.[14]

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[10] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), 231.

[11] Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin*, trans. Reidar Thomte and Albert B. Anderson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 61.

[12] "We Are All Very Anxious," Plan C, accessed July 31, 2019, https://www.weareplanc.org/blog/we-are-all-very-anxious/.

[13] Judith Butler, "Introduction: Precarious Life, Grievable Life," in *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009), 25.

[14] Ngai's analysis focuses on anxiety's "spatial dimension" – the affect of being 'thrown' or 'projected'. Ngai, 210.

2.2. Anxiety as ambivalent narrative space

While my approach takes into account the aforementioned ideas, I am most interested in conceptualising anxiety as an ambivalent narrative space, rooted in what can be called its lived mechanics. This ambivalence is perhaps best encapsulated by an excerpt from Roland Barthes' *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*. In a chapter on the anxiety of waiting for the loved being, he writes, on the one hand, of the paralysis: "Waiting is an enchantment: I have received *orders not to move*. [...] For the anxiety of waiting, in its pure state, requires that I be sitting in a chair within reach of the telephone, without doing anything."[15] On the other hand, he refers to anxiety as if it was a generative, creative act: "There is a scenography of waiting: I organize it, I manipulate it, cut out a portion of time in which I shall mime the loss of the loved object and provoke all the effects of a minor mourning. This is then acted out as a play."[16] Anxiety is characterised as a space in which the paralytic (the state of "without doing anything") and the generative (the organisation, manipulation, acting) co-exist as a complex, ambivalent binary. The narrative is frozen and perceived to be dependent on other unknown factors, yet exploding with possibilities that can fill that abyss, perhaps finding kinship, at least affectively, with Kierkegaard's "dizziness of freedom".

In Sara Ahmed's analysis of the difference between fear and anxiety, she identifies a kinetics of anxiety that can also be read as both paralytic and generative:

> In anxiety, one's thoughts often move quickly between different objects, a movement which works to intensify the sense of anxiety. One thinks of more and more 'things' to be anxious about; the detachment from a given object allows anxiety to accumulate through gathering more and more objects, until it overwhelms other possible affective relations to the world. One becomes anxious as a mode of attachment to objects. In other words, anxiety tends to stick to objects, even when the objects pass by. Anxiety becomes *an approach to objects* rather than, as with fear, *being produced by an object's approach*.[17]

In addition to referencing the speed at which anxiety operates, Ahmed's emphasis on the "more and more" of anxiety possesses both a spontaneous accrual of thought as well as a sense of immobilisation that monopolises ("overwhelms") one's mental space. She further frames anxiety as passive in its "attachment to objects", suggesting that the subject is subservient to

[15] Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* (London: Vintage, 2002), 38-39.

[16] Barthes, 37.

[17] Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 66.

them, and yet also active in its "approach to objects", in which the subject possesses some degree of agency that might otherwise not be observed in a state of fear.

The inherent duality – or perhaps collapsed duality – of anxiety can further be seen in its temporality. It is not just bound up in Ngai's "futurity", but also, as Freud wrote, in the past:

> 'The present situation reminds me of one of the traumatic experiences I have had before. Therefore I will anticipate trauma and behave as though it has already come, while there is yet time to turn it aside.' Anxiety is therefore on the one hand an expectation of trauma, and on the other a repetition of it in a mitigated form.[18]

Thus, in addition to the kinetics outlined by Ahmed, anxiety possesses a looking-forward that is built on a simultaneous looking-back. Anxiety is driven by the experiences of what came before, including the choices we have made in the past to determine those experiences; it is also motivated by the possibilities of what is to come, and what we can do to create a path to, or protect ourselves from, those possibilities. Here, Freud does not explain what "repetition" entails, but I would propose that repetition is not so simple as 'doing the same thing over and over again', but rather functions as a motif that is constantly revisited in different settings and situations. It is, as Ahmed wrote, "more and more objects", not just 'more and more of the same object'. Anxiety, a space of intense and potentially debilitating uncertainty, can also be reconfigured as a space of multiplicity and simultaneity.

Barthes' acting out of a play, Ahmed's accumulation of thought, and Freud's repetition are all versions of one of the core mechanisms of anxiety, which is rumination. More so than just a state of worry, rumination is the repetitive going-over of a thought or a problem without completion. Rumination is often framed in recent psychotherapeutic contexts as the driver of the negative affects of anxiety and depression; psychologists Gerald Matthews and Adrian Wells have written that long-term rumination may eventually "block adaptive restructuring of self-knowledge, initiate potentially damaging thought-control strategies, and facilitate the development of harmful metacognitive beliefs about rumination itself".[19] This implies that rumination can result in a shutting down, rather than an opening up of thought. However, in the context of my own conceptualisation of anxiety, I would propose using rumination, at least theoretically in its most basic state as a continuous and repetitive overthinking, as a model for examining both a narrative *immobilisation* and a narrative *creation* on the part of the author.

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[18] Freud, 326.

[19] Gerald Matthews and Adrian Wells, "Rumination, Depression, and Metacognition: the S-REF Model," in *Depressive Rumination: Nature, Theory and Treatment*, eds. Costas Papageorgiou and Adrian Wells (Chichester: Wiley, 2004), 146.

That is, to acknowledge rumination as a negative entrapment, while also reframing it as a potentially positive and productive method. Can rumination be accepted as an end in itself – not seen in terms of its failure to achieve completion, which is to falsely suggest a single solution or resolution is available, but rather in terms of how the constant revisiting of a thought can generate multiple interpretations and multiple pathways?

As such, in contemplating an 'Anxious State', it is not just the word 'state' that can have a double meaning – referring on the surface to the state, as in condition, of anxiety, but with a secondary reference to the State, as in the Singapore government within the context of this paper, as well as the underlying anxieties that motivate it and its construction of historical narratives. It is also anxiety itself that can be read as ambivalent, being on the one hand paralysing, and on the other hand generative, in its exploration of multiple threads within the same narrative space.[20]

3. The Anxious Reader

3.1. Rumination as close reading

If rumination can be considered the main driving force of anxiety's narrative space, then one must consider that it is important not only in the generation of narratives, but also in the analysis of them. After all, the anxious author is necessarily an anxious *reader* of past events or pathways-not-taken, in order to assess perceived threats and/or uncertain futures. To ruminate, is to overthink, which is to think too much, which is also to read too much into something. It is akin to a form of close reading – a sustained interpretation of a brief passage of text (or a thought, or past or future incidents). Elaine Showalter calls close reading a "slow reading", since it extends the period of time that one spends on a given text, by reading deeper into the language, or even possibly reading between the lines to determine what has been omitted. Showalter further describes it as "a form of defamiliarization we use in order to break through our habitual and casual reading practices. It forces us to be active rather than passive consumers of text."[21] While rumination might potentially congeal into something "habitual",

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[20] Anxiety's potential to be generative, in the abstract sense of my definition, should not be contorted to defend the state of precarity (as in Judith Butler) as one that is desirable.

[21] Elaine Showalter, *Teaching Literature* (Malden: Blackwell, 2003), 98.

it is insistently *not* "casual" – it is a constant and "active" questioning, a not-accepting of something as it is presented. It is crucial to note that 'close reading' is not a 'closed reading'; the former, which is taken from the adjective form of 'close' (/kləʊs/), implies the decreasing of proximity to the object, whereas the latter, taken from the verb form of 'close' (/kləʊz/), implies a shutting, covering, blocking, concluding. Ironically, though the antonym of the verb 'to close' is 'to open', it is 'close reading' that encourages the opening up of a text.

As touched on in the previous section, excessive anxious rumination might also lead to a paralytic response – a shutting down or repression of the anxiety, and of the trauma that is at the root of it. This 'shutting down' or 'making it go away' is not the same as a resolution of anxiety. It may in fact result in the creation of a narrative on the part of the author that unconsciously or deliberately excludes information that might otherwise be traumatic, triggering, or beyond the boundaries that have been set by one's mind. However, even if the anxiety is not superficially apparent, it does not mean that it is not present or that it will not surface in indirect ways. As Ahmed wrote, anxiety "[sticks] to objects"; perhaps it also leaks even where one has attempted to obstruct or impede it.

Thus, the onus is on the reader – whether the reader is one and the same as the author, or an entirely separate being – to perform a *secondary rumination-as-close-reading* on the *primary rumination-as-narrative-construction*, to "defamiliarize" themselves, in Showalter's definition, from a blindly accepting absorption of a text, in order to determine if a narrative is the manifestation of repressed or revealed anxiety. That is, the reader is in a position to *deny closure* – 'closure' here being the psychological desire for an unambiguous answer. This is the power of interpretation that the reader possesses, even and especially if the author insists upon artificially providing the certainty of an answer where there might not be one, as in the construction of a historical narrative.

3.2. Overthinking the dominant narrative

In a historiographical context, the dominant narrative refers to the version of history that is seen through the lens of a dominant culture. In Singapore, the dominant narrative is not so much a result of the ground-up beliefs of a dominant culture – although a dominant culture does exist in the form of the ethnically Chinese people that make up 76% of the country's population, or in how almost its entire population is comprised not of indigenous people, but of immigrants or descendants of immigrants that arrived on the island since the British established the trading port in 1819. Instead, because of the limits on political and

therefore historical discourse in Singapore, the State has established itself as the top-down writer of the country's dominant historical narrative, as enacted through, for example, the 'Singapore Story'. This narrative has – in ways that are beyond the scope of this essay – catered mostly to the needs of the dominant culture(s) of Singapore, but it has nonetheless been constructed and disseminated by the government first and foremost, before later being internalised and re-articulated by its citizens.

As an extension of the use of anxiety as a theoretical framework with which to examine historical narratives, I would also like to draw a parallel between the historiographical concept of the dominant narrative and the psychotherapeutic concept of the 'core belief', used in Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) to describe the beliefs we might hold about ourselves, others, and the world. Judith S. Beck describes 'core beliefs' as "enduring understandings so fundamental and deep that [subjects] often do not articulate them, even to themselves".[22] Core beliefs guide and possibly even distort our perspectives and interpretations of what happens to and around us. For example, if one believes in one's own inadequacy, one then reads the world as a succession of evidence that proves that to be true. Incidentally, one of my therapists has used the term 'dominant narrative' in reference to my 'core beliefs' about myself – one constructs a narrative that, while not always falsifying, nonetheless performs an interpretation of one's life according to those beliefs. Building an awareness of these core beliefs is crucial to examining if this interpretation is fallacious. While the psyche of a State cannot be equated to the psyche of an individual, the State's narrative constructions are nevertheless similarly driven by certain underlying beliefs or agendas – such as the myth of Singapore's vulnerability – resulting in potentially flawed interpretations or framings of history. Yet, the State either remains unaware of the fallacies that arise as a result, or consciously chooses to ignore them to preserve their own power. It is up to the 'reader' of these narratives, then, to identify these fallacies.

Interrogations of the Singapore government's dominant narrative tend to rely on a true-false binary. They compare the historical mythos of Singapore, as put forward by the State, with contemporaneous evidence to reveal what has been obscured or reframed. This is, of course, necessary and important work. However, I am interested in assessing the dominant narrative with another lens, by looking more closely at the way the State uses language – the way certain stories are written, as opposed to the veracity of their content. I am not interested in unveiling outright falsehoods, but in examining how the choice of language reveals anxieties about certain less desirable or palatable aspects of history. Such narratives might not present

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[22] Judith S. Beck, "Cognitive Conceptualization," in *Cognitive Behavior Therapy: Basics and Beyond* (New York: The Guildford Press, 2011), 32.

un-truths, but nonetheless close off further discussion about Singapore's histories, or at least create very clear (OB) markers for where such discussions can begin and end. An approach that looks more closely at the choice of language is one that aims to *overthink* rather than *dismantle*, and still in the process investigate how the State attempts to enact its power. Can one thus find a new way of reading and questioning the dominant narrative that accommodates the nuance, uncertainty, and ambiguity embedded in the telling of the story, even if the story insists on being otherwise?

In the following two sections, I will look at four case studies of historical narratives of Singapore from the past five years, close reading them as a form of secondary rumination. The first section will focus on two narratives written and/or approved by the State, which I will analyse as examples of paralytic narratives that repress certain aspects of the country's history. Such narratives are built on the assumption that the reader will accept a stable and immutable history; any rumination that occurs on the part of the Anxious-State-as-author has been, at least on the surface, repressed, in order not to be subject to questioning. Therefore, the discerning reader must be equipped to interrogate (close read) these texts so as to better understand the agendas, and failings, of the State narrative. The second section will focus on two artworks that immerse the audience/reader in layered and open-ended historical imaginaries, in which the artists themselves openly perform their own processes of overthinking that encourages a wider scope of engagement from the audience/reader, thereby generating stimulating alternative interpretations that run counter to the State-written dominant historical narratives.

4. The State as Paralytic Author

Anxious Note 1

With every thought that comes into my head, every decision I make,
I worry what it says about me, and how I must protect myself.

4.1. Reframing history in the Singapore Bicentennial

In April 2018, the Singapore government officially announced the Singapore Bicentennial, a year-long series of events in 2019 to commemorate the 200th anniversary of Sir Stamford Raffles' arrival in Singapore. Raffles is often acknowledged as the 'founder of modern Singapore' – he secured the transfer of control of the island to the East India Company in 1819, for the establishment of a trading port. From that year until 1963, Singapore remained a British colony. In its media release, the Singapore Bicentennial Office insisted that despite its name, the Bicentennial is not just "an opportunity to reflect on 200 years of history from 1819", but "will also examine the 500 years prior to 1819, as these formative years lend context to our evolution."[23] The emphasis on a seven-hundred-year history seems to be a revision of the Singapore Story, which gave only cursory attention to the years prior to British colonisation. While the Singapore Story largely paints Singapore as a blank slate before the British came along, barring some stories from the Malay Annals, recent research has shown that it was a key part of the Srivijayan kingdom, and later the Majapahit empire and Ayutthaya Kingdom. The Bicentennial's emphasis on this longer span of history aligns with a shift in history education in Singapore, beginning in 2014 with the publication of a school textbook titled *Singapore: The Making of a Nation-State, 1300-1975*.[24]

1819 has thus been reconfigured not as the beginning of history for 'modern Singapore', but, according to the Bicentennial, as "a turning point in that journey that set us on a new trajectory". This strange conflict between the name 'Bicentennial', and this longer seven-hundred-year history, has resulted in an almost-comical extended reiteration of the fact

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[23] Singapore Bicentennial Office, "A Wide Range of Events for Singapore's Bicentennial Commemoration in 2019," National Archives of Singapore, last modified April 6, 2018, http://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/speeches/record-details/6eb44e30-4492-11e8-b81e-001a4a5ba61b.

[24] Jane A. Peterson, "In New Textbook, the Story of Singapore Begins 500 Years Earlier," *The New York Times*, last modified May 11, 2014, https://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/12/world/asia/in-new-textbook-the-story-of-singapore-begins-500-years-earlier.html.

that "our story actually began in 1299" – not just on the Bicentennial website, but by multiple politicians.[25] Furthermore, in his speech at the launch of the Bicentennial in January 2019, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong was careful to say that "Stamford Raffles did not 'discover' Singapore, any more than Christopher Columbus 'discovered' America". Nonetheless, later in the speech, he accedes that "we also recognise the decisive and indelible imprint that the British left on Singapore – the rule of law, our parliamentary system of government, even the language I am speaking today."[26] In other words, the State's power continues to be dependent on the remnant structures of colonialism, even as it attempts to reframe it, not as the genesis of Singapore, but as just one of the island's many historical milestones.

The Bicentennial itself has been quick to embrace Singapore's former colonial master. An official event organised by the Singapore Tourism Board, bafflingly titled "Singapore: Where Explorers Meet" (as if colonial expansion was mere exploration), was held in London, and leaned heavily on the aesthetic trope of tropicality in its displays. One of the official Bicentennial partner events happening in August 2019 is organised by a non-profit called the Adam Smith Centre (in association with the British Chamber of Commerce), and purports to "explore the importance of British-Singapore friendship".[27] This implies that the State will continue to frame Singapore's former colonial masters as benevolent, and the colonial period as largely benign, in order to benefit from friendly diplomatic relations in the present.

Thus, while the extended historical narrative presented by the State-led Bicentennial seems to suggest a revisionary history, it is merely additive, and refrains from truly scrutinising the British colonial period. The Bicentennial has thus far failed to constitute any meaningful interrogation into Singapore's history, and in particular the most recent two hundred years that gave the Bicentennial its name. It has tended to focus more on spectacle and storytelling rather than the promotion of discourse. The Bicentennial was launched with a publicity stunt that camouflaged the iconic statue of Sir Stamford Raffles for a day, before later adding statues of other important figures in Singapore's history, created in the same style. It is also currently running the fifty-minute-long multimedia Bicentennial Experience (subtitled 'From Singapore to Singaporean', though it covers the pre-1819 period when Singapore was referred to as 'Singapura' or 'Temasek'). The Experience is complete with live actors, 360° video projections, and a room that simulates rainfall indoors. The level of participation expected

[25] "About the Singapore Bicentennial," Singapore Bicentennial, accessed June 9, 2019, https://www.bicentennial.sg/about/.

[26] Lee Hsien Loong, "Speech by PM Lee Hsien Loong at the launch of the Singapore Bicentennial on 28 January 2019," Prime Minister's Office Singapore, accessed August 15, 2019, https://www.pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/PM-Lee-Hsien-Loong-at-the-launch-of-the-Singapore-Bicentennial-Jan-2019.

[27] "Why Commemorate 1819? Reflections on Singapore Bicentennial," Singapore Bicentennial, accessed August 15, 2019, https://www.bicentennial.sg/event/why-commemorate-1819-reflections-on-singapore-bicentennial/.

from the audience is merely to answer the following question at the end – "Which DNA trait do you think is most important to Singapore?" One is given a choice between three options: Openness, Multiculturalism, and Self-Determination.

While the Bicentennial Experience, which is free of charge, has been booked up weeks in advance, general response to the Bicentennial as a whole has been muted at best, as evidenced by the title of an article in SG Magazine: "It's only February, and we've already got Bicentennial fatigue". The questioning of the State or state-sanctioned narrative has fallen on the shoulders of people acting on the fringes of the Bicentennial, such as local writers Faris Joraimi, Ng Yi-Sheng, and Alfian Sa'at. The former two wrote critical reviews of the 'Raffles in Southeast Asia' exhibition at the Asian Civilisations Museum, while Alfian's Facebook post about a panel held in conjunction with the exhibition was shared almost nine hundred times. In this post, Alfian,[28] who is of Malay and Javanese descent, detailed problematic curatorial decisions and subsequent frustrating responses from the curator, particularly regarding the exhibition's failure to properly address Raffles' role in orchestrating the violent British Invasion of Java. Nonetheless, outside of the exhibition and the challenges to it, Raffles' legacy in Singapore remains enduring, admired, and largely unchallenged – many institutions are named after him even today.

Articles have already been written on the illusion of an inclusive history perpetuated by the Singapore Bicentennial. Rather than attempt to deconstruct this aspect, I will instead focus my attention on a microcosm of this new iteration of State rhetoric: the 'About' page of the Bicentennial's official website, which defines the objectives and scope of the commemoration. Also included on this page is a Frequently Asked Questions section (figure 1), which attempt to anticipate queries about the Bicentennial.

The first thing that is striking about the language used on this page is its tone, which manages to be both sterile and anxious. It traffics in sweeping general statements, such as the following: "For over 700 years, we have been open to a diverse flow of people and ideas, and connected to wider geopolitical currents, all of which shaped our evolution." The statement emphasises Singapore's need to stay relevant in a globalised economy, as if it has continually and consistently done so for seven centuries, with no consideration for its fractured history. The copy also repeatedly emphasises the use of history as a pedagogical tool or warning for present and future challenges, just as with National Education and the Singapore Story. In response to the question, "Why do we need to commemorate the Singapore Bicentennial?", the answer begins, "We live in a rapidly changing and troubled world", and positions the Bicentennial's narrative as "key to facing our challenges today, and charting our future

[28] Malay naming conventions use patronymics rather than surnames; Alfian is referred to by his personal name.

tomorrow". In response to the question "Why are we looking at the 500-year period before 1819, it states that "If Singapore is to face the challenges of today and continue to prevail in future, we must look to our past for lessons." The introduction to the Bicentennial further states that "2019 **could be** the time for us to explore how our past has formed us, discover what this means for our future, and find our way for the future to come" *[emphasis mine]*. The use of "could be", rather than "must be", is curious; it is as if the State is unable to decide if it wants to assert its control or merely provide a gentle suggestion.

Fig. 1 List of Frequently Asked Questions on the Singapore Bicentennial website. Screenshot by author.

The FAQs themselves can be read as a kind of defensive manoeuvre; anticipation itself is one component of anxiety, and these were formulated as a prediction of potential questions from the public. Upon closer inspection, some of the questions do read as almost paranoid – "Why are we commemorating the Singapore Bicentennial when we celebrated SG50 not too long ago?" and "What is the difference between them?" stand out in particular. SG50 refers to the nationwide effort to celebrate Singapore's 50th year of independence in 2015, one that was overwhelming in scale and budget, and intensified by the passing of Singapore's founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew in March of the same year. The questions seem overly conscious of the proximity of the Bicentennial to SG50, perhaps because of the fatigue that

was experienced during the latter, particularly since every other event or product was branded part of the celebrations, logically or otherwise. The answers are painstaking in their attempts to differentiate between the two, noting that they differ in "time periods", "focus", "scale", and "tone". Yet, even these answers betray an inability or hesitance to clearly define these differences. In explaining how they differ in focus, for example, the answer states that "SG50 focused on Singapore as an independent republic", while "The Bicentennial will look at Singapore's connections with the region and the world over time and how that contributed to our unique DNA". When these vague statements are probed, one realises quickly that they are not in fact mutually exclusive.

There is also a tendency to latch onto specific key words and concepts and repeat them ad nauseam, even in response to different questions. Singapore's '700 years of history' is mentioned six times, directly and indirectly, on the entire page, while 1819 as milestone or turning point is also mentioned six times. The concept of the Singapore DNA, defined using the three characteristics mentioned earlier – Openness, Multiculturalism, and Self-Determination – is referenced four times. Conversely, there is not a single reference to the "colonial" in any form, not even to describe Singapore, factually, as a British colony. The compulsion to repeat marquee phrases and yet avoid framing the 144 years of colonialism as exactly what it is reads as farcical, especially considering that the Bicentennial is intentionally positioned as a "reflection" on a more inclusive history. This continues to perpetuate an attitude of denial, one that refuses to fully examine Singapore's colonial past with a critical eye.

A recent controversy reveals that the Bicentennial's construction of the Singapore DNA is merely paying lip service to the concepts of 'Openness' and 'Multiculturalism'. In July 2019, a local e-payment service released an advertisement featuring a popular ethnically Chinese actor who darkened his skin to portray characters of different races. This advertisement was eventually withdrawn after criticism of its use of 'brownface', but it was what happened after that really highlighted the challenges of discourse surrounding race in Singapore. Local YouTuber Preetipls (Preeti Nair) and her rapper brother Subhas, who are of Indian descent, recorded a humorous video that pointedly lambasted racism in the Chinese community. Later, the police announced that they had opened an investigation in response to reports, allegedly from civilians, about the video "inciting racial tension" (the investigation was later closed after the video was removed). Even government ministers and Members of Parliament – both Chinese and non-Chinese – condemned the video, made by two people of an ethnic minority criticising the behaviour of the ethnic majority, for threatening racial harmony. K. Shanmugam, Minister for Law and Home Affairs, commented mutedly on the original advertisement: "You need that cultural sensitivity. You have a Chinese brown out the

face and pass off as Indian or Malay, there's going to be a lot of distaste." His reaction to the video was far more vehement, saying that if more videos like it were allowed: "What do you think will happen to our racial harmony? Social fabric? How will people look at each other?"[29]

Singapore's netizens, on their part, were divided. There were those attempting to open up a conversation, not for the first time, about Singapore's deeply complicated race relations (which have often been over-simplified). Others criticised this first group for not being able to take a joke in relation to the original advertisement, while simultaneously framing the subsequent video as a vulgar and unnecessary overreaction (which is the joke and which is the insult?). As Ruby Thiagarajan wrote in one of a number of think pieces written in response, "The backlash against calling out racism turned out to be worse than the backlash against racism."[30] The entire saga reflects a failure of the citizenry and State to engage in an 'Open' discussion of 'Multiculturalism', a case in which Ahmed's "more and more objects", in the form of the maelstrom of Singapore's race relations, 'overwhelmed' the abilities for frank and compassionate discussion. In fact, it revealed the very present and unresolved anxieties that the Bicentennial fails to address, or maybe hoped to suppress, in its packaging of history-as-pedagogical-tool.

The reframing of the Singaporean national identity as DNA is a Bicentennial construction, but the anxiety surrounding national identity is a long-standing one. This stems from a complicated set of historical factors, including Singapore being largely an immigrant society, in addition to being a relatively young country that once saw itself as part of a larger Malaya. Regardless of *why* Singapore possesses such a distinct doubt about how to define its own culture, the fact is that idea of the Singapore DNA is simply the latest in a series of attempts to constitute a national identity, one that continues to ring empty. This belies a deep-seated existential uncertainty about what it means to be Singaporean. Beyond this, the defensive and repressive anxiety ever-present in State rhetoric continues to manifest itself through the Bicentennial, while competing with an additional anxiety to project the veneer of openness and accommodation. Once subjected to a close reading or rumination on the part of the 'reader', the Bicentennial is quickly revealed to be a muddled State creation that, perhaps intentionally, fails to generate any kind of debate about history except on its dissenting periphery, and which feels dislocated from the discourse, or lack thereof, that *is* being generated in response to incidents occurring in the present.

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[29] Adrian Lim, "Rap video by local YouTube star Preetipls on 'brownface' ad crosses the line, not acceptable: Shanmugam," *The Straits Times*, last modified July 30, 2019, https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/rap-video-by-local-youtube-star-preetipls-on-brownface-ad-crosses-the-line-not-acceptable.

[30] Ruby Thiagarajan, "Brownface and Racism in Singapore," *New Naratif*, last modified August 1, 2019, https://newnaratif.com/journalism/brownface-and-racism-in-singapore/.

Anxious Note 2

I avoid thinking about that which hurts me; I refuse to even give it a name.
My avoidance charts its outline, until one day I am numbed by this forgetting,
and in the process I reenact my pain.

4.2. The colonial as heritage: the Singapore Botanic Gardens

The Singapore Botanic Gardens was founded by the British in 1859 as an 'English Pleasure Garden'; by the 1870s, it had evolved into a key colonial outpost of the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew in London. Now, it is one of the country's most popular national parks. In 2015, it was awarded the status of UNESCO World Heritage Site, the first and only tropical botanic garden to receive this honour, and the third botanic garden in the world to be inscribed (after the Orto botanico di Padova in Padua, Italy, and Kew). UNESCO's rationale for the Gardens' "Outstanding Universal Value" includes the following statement:

> Through its well-preserved landscape design and continuity of purpose, the Singapore Botanic Gardens is an outstanding example of a British tropical botanic garden which has also played a key role in advances in scientific knowledge, particularly in the fields of tropical botany and horticulture, including the development of plantation rubber.[31]

The *Singapore* Botanic Gardens, then, is recognised for its historical value as a *British* tropical botanic garden, complete with English style landscaping and colonial era architecture. Given that almost all of Singapore, as it exists today, was developed after 1819, it is unsurprising, even if disconcerting, that the country's first UNESCO World Heritage Site would date to the colonial period. However, also concerning is how part of its importance as a Heritage Site stems from its role in "the development of plantation rubber", suggesting colonial expansion and exploitation of the land should be recognised positively, or at least neutrally, as a form of 'heritage'. These frameworks do not come from UNESCO itself (though it accepted and reproduced them), but rather from the 850-page nomination dossier prepared by jointly by the Singapore Botanic Gardens, and by extension the National Parks Board (NParks), as well as the National Heritage Board (NHB). NParks and NHB are both statutory boards of the Singapore government, which report back to specific government ministries. Hence, the narratives presented in the nomination dossier can be considered State-sanctioned.

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[31] "Singapore Botanic Gardens," UNESCO, accessed August 19, 2019, https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1483/.

Among the dossier's 850 pages, the crux of the narrative of the Singapore Botanic Gardens lies in the section entitled 'Justification for Inscription'. This is its second paragraph:

> Singapore Botanic Gardens is an **exceptional** example of a 'British tropical colonial botanic garden', which emerged during the 19th century period of global expansion, exploration and colonisation. As one of the British Empire's **key** colonial botanic stations, within the global network that radiated out from Kew, the Singapore Botanic Gardens formed a **vital** capital asset, transforming knowledge into profit and power for Great Britain. The Botanic Gardens, which originated as 'pleasure gardens' (1860-1874), assumed a **pre-eminent** role in the promotion of economic botany in the Malay Peninsula and Straits Settlements administration during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The Gardens bears **exceptional** testimony to the history of British colonial botanic gardens and to the 19th century colonial legacy of economic botany. This is evidenced in its cultural landscape that has high levels of authenticity and integrity, its **crucial** role as a **key** node within the Empire's global network of botanical gardens and its role as a **significant** centre for the exchange of plant research and specimens.[32] *[emphasis mine]*

As Timothy P. Barnard writes in his book on the Gardens: "An understanding of plants was the basis for power, and the transformation of this knowledge into a control over land and economies in distant colonies occurred in botanic gardens."[33] The Gardens' heritage value is thus predicated upon the preservation of structures that enabled the 'economic botany' that occurred during the British colonial period, as an extension of the British Empire. While the field of economic botany itself refers generally to the study of the relationship between people and plants, from the 1870s onwards the Gardens was directly involved in the the process of researching the conditions necessary for the growth of cash crops, such as rubber and oil palm, in the Southeast Asian region (figure 2). In fact, the twenty-two rubber seedlings sent to Singapore by Kew in 1877 were the origins of almost the entire rubber industry in Southeast Asia. Through the rest of the 19th century, experiments in growing and tapping *Hevea brasiliensis* rubber plants, spearheaded by Henry Nicholas Ridley, the Director of the Gardens, continued. As the importance of rubber as a raw material grew globally, so did interest in rubber cultivation in the region, and with that the role of the Gardens. In 1905, the

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[32] Singapore Botanic Gardens, *Singapore Botanic Gardens: Candidate World Heritage Site Nomination Dossier* (Singapore: Singapore Botanic Gardens, 2014), 85.

[33] Timothy P. Barnard, *Nature's Colony: Empire, Nation and Environment in the Singapore Botanic Gardens* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2016), 19, eBook.

Fig. 2 This illustration from page 86 of the dossier shows the origins of the cash crops introduced to the Southeast Asian region via the Gardens. Screenshot by author.

Gardens supplied over 390,000 seeds to the British colonies, and by 1911 it was shipping 837,500 seeds all over the world, many destinations being colonial territories.[34] Rubber production was once monopolised by South America, but it was Southeast Asia that came to dominate the global rubber industry in the early 20th century. This boom came to irreversibly change, not just the economies, but also the natural environment of the Southeast Asian colonial territories. Between 1897 and 1922 alone, the amount of land under rubber cultivation in Malaya expanded from just 345 acres to 2,304,231 acres.[35]

On the topic of the Gardens' role in the rubber trade, the dossier draws a direct link between the "pioneering work carried out there" and how the "rubber trade drew enormous revenues which underpinned the region's early economic prosperity and gave it a significant place in the world commodity trading markets".[36] Yet, the impact of the rubber boom goes

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[34] Barnard, 211.

[35] Barnard, 222.

[36] Singapore Botanic Gardens, 85-86.

beyond the economic. In a recent book on the environmental history of imperialism, Corey Ross writes that the expansion of rubber plantations in Southeast Asia destroyed "enormous swathes of lowland forest", "brought hundreds of thousands of labourers into previously remote jungles, many of whom died from disease and maltreatment", and before cultivation practices had stabilised, it irreversibly "eroded soils, damaged rivers, destroyed the habitat of countless species, and radically diminished local biodiversity".[37] What is, on the one hand, an institution that transformed the global economy and changed the course of history, can also be reframed as one that facilitated the destruction of natural environments of colonial territories through the clearing of forests for plantations, as well as the exploitation of British colonial subjects as labour. And, like the Bicentennial's failure to use the word 'colonial' and any of its derivatives, the dossier studiously avoids mentioning the word 'exploitation', instead euphemistically hiding it in phrases such as "transforming knowledge into profit and power".

Returning for a closer interpretation of the excerpt: on first reading, it seems to uncomfortably nullify, if not revere, the legacy of colonialism. The adjectives that I have bolded all have a positive connotation – "exceptional", "key", "vital", "pre-eminent", "crucial", and "significant". Yet, if one looks at what exactly they describe, they are not sanctioning the exploitative practices of the British Empire. Rather, their positivity is directed towards the Gardens as a well-preserved colonial relic, one that has "authenticity and integrity". This subtle distinction reveals that the adjectives emphasise "importance", which is not a *moral* judgment of the practices of the British Empire (though important to which party and interests would become the central question). This language does not obscure the truth; none of it technically praises colonialism. In fact, all this can logically coexist with uglier, crueler, more difficult parts of colonial history. Yet, the Gardens does not acknowledge its entanglement in this dark past of environmental devastation, even as it prizes itself on conservation research. The dossier only briefly mentions the Gardens' significance in preserving heritage from *before* the colonial period, in the form of "a tract of primary lowland equatorial rainforest [...] thus preserving in some small part the ecological heritage of Singapore" that was mostly destroyed post-1819.[38] Yet, the same forces that allowed the Gardens to come to be in the first place were also responsible for the clearing of almost all primary forest in Singapore by the late 19th century, for the purpose of accommodating plantations, farms, and the migrant population.[39]

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[37] Corey Ross, "Colonialism, Rubber, and the Rainforest," in *Ecology and Power in the Age of Empire: Europe and the Transformation of the Tropical World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 135.

[38] Singapore Botanic Gardens, 87.

[39] Goh Lee Kim, "When Tigers Used to Roam: Nature & Environment in Singapore," *BiblioAsia*, last modified January 10, 2018, http://www.nlb.gov.sg/biblioasia/2018/01/10/when-tigers-used-to-roam-nature-environment-in-singapore/.

Of course, the Gardens' objective is to secure the status of World Heritage Site, and to fulfil this agenda they had to frame certain aspects of history as positive or dislocated from negative narratives of destruction. However, this linguistic sidestepping, this careful tiptoeing around facts, implies that the framing of this narrative is in some sense haunted on its periphery by this invisible ghost of *known but dislocated* history. The text itself, when observed closely, becomes the outline or trace of this negative space. But in order for this outline to be visible to the reader, the reader must be aware that the ghost exists. The Gardens' framing of its own history can be observed as a symptom of a larger amnesia, continued ignorance, or deliberate repression, regarding Singapore's colonial period. It can be seen as one of many attempts to exorcise this ghost of colonialism from Singapore's past, an attempt that has now been validated by an international, independent body. It is part of a cumulative ignorance of the ways in which the country, and/or State, and its various communities, were complicit in or victims of imperialism, and how this is perpetuated today. In the State's anxiety to exorcise, the ghost only continues to haunt the country, albeit in increasingly insidious ways.

A more pronounced example of this amnesia, also manifesting in the form of word choice, comes in the form of a 2016 debacle involving the National Gallery Singapore, an art museum that oversees the world's largest collection of Singapore and Southeast Asian art. In conjunction with the exhibition 'Artist and Empire: (En)countering Colonial Legacies', which was organised in association with London's Tate Britain, the Gallery announced a fundraising gala event called the Empire Ball, complete with the dress code "Black Tie and Empire". (The museum also happens to be sited in the former City Hall and Supreme Court buildings, originally constructed by the British in the 1920s and 30s.) Controversy quickly erupted and the gala was subsequently renamed, plainly, the National Gallery Singapore Gala, with a brief statement from the Gallery's director stating that the original intention of the name 'Empire Ball' was not to "glorify colonialism".[40] Nonetheless, it remains to be seen how the Gallery itself managed to lack enough reflexivity to make this decision in the first place, especially considering the 'Artist and Empire' exhibition intended to explore "the different ways in which the British Empire has been represented and **contested** through art".[41] *[emphasis mine]* An editorial published by Southeast Asian art guide website ArtHop addressed the controversy in a thoughtful manner that the Gallery seemed ill-equipped to practice, and describes a set of circumstances analogous to this selective repressive amnesia:

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40 Reena Devi Shanmuga Retnam, "Reflecting on National Gallery Singapore's 'Empire Ball' outcry," last modified September 23, 2016, https://www.todayonline.com/entertainment/arts/reflecting-national-gallery-singapores-empire-ball-name-change.

41 "Artist and Empire: (En)countering Colonial Legacies," National Gallery Singapore, accessed August 20, 2019, https://www.nationalgallery.sg/see-do/highlights/artist-and-empire.

> As a nation, we have managed to cover up our scars of colonialism very well, refusing to recognise, or even explore, in mainstream discourse the kinds of problematics that our own colonial experience has brought to us. This insulation, *insularity*, may have somewhat made Singapore less sensitive to the critical dialogues surrounding colonialism on a broader scale.[42]

The *avoidant* anxiety that underlies the Empire Ball incident, as well as the omission of history in the Gardens' nomination dossier, is something buried far deeper than the more palpable, insecure anxiety that is so visible in the text accompanying the Singapore Bicentennial. The former is one that, in this particular instance, reveals itself as a refusal to deeply engage with Singapore's colonial history, a process that may disturbingly reveal exactly how much the country and the State is still dependent on colonial structures. This anxiety leads exactly to the paralysis of the narrative, one that in Singapore's context can also paralyse the ability of its readers (i.e. its own citizens) to interrogate history. While the Gardens was designated a World Heritage Site only a year before the Empire Ball, public reaction to this, which could also be framed as a glorification of colonialism, was, at most, confusion rather than outrage. Perhaps it is because the recognition of something as heritage makes it feel like part of the past, something that can be put behind us, as opposed to a bald-faced reminder that not only was Singapore once part of an 'Empire', but that it continues to use the language of colonialism carelessly. With the Gardens' designation, one wonders if this version of its past – one that amputates Singapore from the devastating consequences of imperialism – will become gospel. This external validation of its narrative might well be the foundation to passively simplify and neutralise its history, to persist in framing the colonial as benign heritage without proper scrutiny, and thus, close off a nuanced approach to the past.

[42] "What's wrong with an 'empire' ball?" *ArtHop*, last modified September 22, 2016, https://arthop.co/editorials/whats-wrong-empire-ball-national-gallery-singapore-gala-2016.

5. *The Artist as Generative Author*

Anxious Note 3
I steep myself within a single event, replay it over and over again in my head;
I think of all the other ways I could have acted;
how all these possible pasts might influence my hypothetical futures.

5.1. Reworking the (Pre-)Colonial: Ho Tzu Nyen, *One or Several Tigers*

The name 'Singapore' is an Anglicised version of 'Singapura', a Malay word derived from Sanskrit meaning 'Lion City'. According to the Malay Annals, a Sumatran prince named Sang Nila Utama (also known as Sri Tri Buana) arrived on the island of Temasek sometime in the 13th or 14th Century after a treacherous sea journey. Upon spotting an animal with a red body, a black head and a white breast, identified by one of his advisors as a lion, he gave the island its new name: Singapura. However, lions are not in fact native to the island. It is believed that what Sang Nila Utama saw was a Malayan tiger. This animal played a central role in indigenous myths and pre-Islamic animistic beliefs in Southeast Asia, including by way of the *Harimau jadian*, a form of weretiger who "possessed a shamanic power, and interacted with humans by way of riddles and trickster-like encounters".[43] The tiger was eventually erased from Singapore in two ways: in the wiping out of these beliefs during the colonial period, and in their actual extinction as a species by the 1930s, fuelled by an aggressive response to numerous fatal tiger attacks on plantations that encroached on the tiger's jungle territories. And so, the entanglement of the country's history with the tiger grew more and more invisible. It is the symbol of the lion, a misnomer, that continues to be appropriated by the State till this day for a variety of national symbols.

In January 2018, I wandered into a video installation called *One or Several Tigers*, by Ho Tzu Nyen, in the National Gallery Singapore. Inside this black box contained within an entirely mirrored exterior, I sat on one of a number of small pedestals, the space itself flanked by two video screens facing each other. What unfolded on those screens was a duet, hypnotic in its protractedness, between two computer-generated figures, a tiger frozen mid-pounce, and

[43] Kevin Chua, "The Tiger and the Theodolite: George Coleman's Dream of Extinction," *Forum on Contemporary Art and Society* 6 (2007): 136.

a Caucasian man dressed in colonial garb falling backwards, his left arm permanently held up in front of his face. The man would later be identified as George Drumgoole Coleman, the first Government Superintendent of Public Works in the early years of the colonial period in Singapore, who oversaw much of the early decades of urban planning and building. The two figures spoke in long-drawn, fragmented utterances reminiscent of the oral qualities of various Asian vocal traditions, a spectral poetry accompanied by an electronic soundtrack that is both monotonous and cacophonous. Coleman and the tiger simultaneously converse and talk over each other, narrating first a history of the tiger in the Southeast Asian region and how it is embedded in the history of colonial Singapore, then the description of a confrontation between themselves. A third 'character' appears in the form of Coleman's theodolite, an optical instrument used in land surveying (figure 3). About ten minutes into the thirty-three-minute-long work, a flash of light reveals that one of the screens has in fact been obscuring an elaborate, layered version of this clash between Coleman and the tiger, and the theodolite suspended between them. The scene was created in buffalo skin in the style of *wayang kulit*, an Indonesian tradition of shadow puppetry (figure 4).

Fig. 3 Still from the video documentation of *One or Several Tigers* at Haus der Kulturen der Welt (Berlin, 2017), double-channel video projection (two screens facing each other), ten channel sound, shadow puppets, automated screen, lights, show control system, 33:33. © Ho Tzu Nyen. Screenshot by author.

This entire tableau is based on Heinrich Leutemann's 1865 wood engraving *Unterbrochene Straßenmessung auf Singapore (Interrupted Road Surveying in Singapore)*, a dramatisation of an actual 1835 tiger attack involving Coleman (figure 5). As the video itself reveals, this illustration hung – and still hangs today – not too far away from the installation, at the very beginning of the Gallery's permanent collection exhibition '*Siapa Nama Kamu?* Art in Singapore Since the 19th Century' (*Siapa Nama Kamu?* meaning 'What is your name?' in

Fig. 4 The initial reveal of the *wayang kulit* tableaux, still from video documentation (see caption for figure 3). © Ho Tzu Nyen. Screenshot by author.

Fig. 5 Heinrich Leutemann, *Unterbrochene Straßenmessung auf Singapore (Interrupted Road Surveying in Singapore)*, c. 1865, wood engraving, 20.8 x 29.4 cm. Singapore, National Museum of Singapore (on view at National Gallery Singapore).

Malay). The image also features eight other dark-skinned men, likely Indian convict labourers who served as an indentured, low-cost labour force in British colonial states. As *One or Several Tigers* narrates, Coleman served concurrently as Superintendent of Convicts in addition to Government Superintendent of Public Works, and was able to exploit this workforce to construct the roads and buildings that he planned and designed. The Indian convict labourers eventually emerge in the video, similarly computer generated, except at this point the viewer

also sees sequences in which their real life human models are being photographed and scanned in the same poses, as part of the process of generating their digital counterparts. The viewer is thus made aware that the digital figures are based on a group of South Asian migrant workers (or at least a group of men whom a viewer familiar with Singapore would be able to identify as such from their clothing). These workers still constitute a large part of Singapore's low-cost labour force today, largely in the country's booming construction industry. Many continue to be employed in exploitative working conditions, despite efforts by both the government and non-profit organisations to curtail this. Towards the end of the video, this group of men stands in the Gallery, in front of the framed engraving on which the installation is based, a potent reminder that the practices of the 19th Century continue to haunt, and be perpetuated by, this former colonial territory.

Ho Tzu Nyen is an artist who works primarily in film, video, and performance, and who has in recent years developed environmental multimedia installations that incorporate all three of those mediums in collaboration with practitioners from multiple disciplines. *One or Several Tigers* (2017) is the last in a series of works that have at their core the motif of the tiger; the others are *Song of the Brokenhearted Tiger* (2012), *Ten Thousand Tigers* (2014) , and *2 or 3 Tigers* (2015). These projects come under the umbrella of *The Critical Dictionary of Southeast Asia* (CDOSEA), initiated in 2012, which Ho describes as "a platform facilitating ongoing research, a matrix for generating future projects and an oracular montage machine". CDOSEA takes twenty-six terms, one for each letter of the English/Latin alphabet, as ideas that constitute "threads weaving together a torn and tattered tapestry of Southeast Asia".[44] Upon selecting a letter on the CDOSEA website – for example, T for 'tiger' and 'theodolite' – the viewer is told a narrative accompanied by a pastiche of found images and videos. When one refreshes the page, the algorithm generates a different combination of text, images, and videos, reflecting how each term holds within it a repository of histories. This system can be repeatedly revisited to engender new connections between these audio-visual fragments; Ho uses it as a basis to develop projects such as *One or Several Tigers*.

The act of revisiting, of *ruminating*, of coming back to something over and over again with no attempt to reach a resolution, but simply to find new arrangements and new perspectives: this mechanic appears on multiple levels in *One or Several Tigers* and the larger network of projects within which it is situated, in both the inter- and intra-narrative approaches of Ho's practice. As mentioned, *One or Several Tigers* is part of a series of works developed around the motif of the tiger; Ho was exploring this at least as early as 2007, when he wrote an essay entitled 'Every Cat in History is I', which already mentions many of the

[44] Ho Tzu Nyen, "The Critical Dictionary of Southeast Asia," accessed August 24, 2019, https://cdosea.org/.

ideas and historical anecdotes that appear in *One or Several Tigers* and its counterparts. Ho's use of repetition says, one can never achieve a fixed version of Singapore's colonial past, or a fixed definition of what Southeast Asia is; one can only place material in different constellations with the hope of generating new meaning. This can manifest as simply as in the repetition of phrases within a work, such as the phrase "We're tigers / Weretigers", which appears nineteen times in *One or Several Tigers*, and which within itself contains two homonyms that suggest the overlapping of human and tiger. The ritualistic chanting of this phrase is not the empty repetition identified in the copy of the Singapore Bicentennial; instead, it reinforces the many guises and scenarios in which the tiger appears within this work: from 15th Century Ming Dynasty account of weretigers in the region to a 19th Century British colonial account, and even in the form of General Tomoyuki Yamashita of the Japanese 25th Army, known as the Tiger of Malaya, who led forces to conquer Malaya and Singapore in 1942 during the Second World War. The work further implies that the Japanese soldiers themselves were tiger-like: "Moving swiftly / through the forest / savage / amphibious / and full of guile in battle / the Japanese forces / seem to embody the very qualities / that had made the tiger / such a feared adversary / of the early British settlers."[45]

In addition, *One or Several Tigers* bridges its historical narrative space with that of the viewer's physical present, identifying Leutemann's image within the Gallery, and the convict labourers' bodies with the men who continue to travel from India and Bangladesh to work in Singapore's construction industry, who are themselves trapped in modern systems of indentured labour ("In colonial Singapore / Prisoners resembled workers / and the prison / a worker's dormitory"[46]). They repeat the lives of their historical counterparts; the independent State sustains the colonial structures that sustain these repetitions. Freud, once again: "The present situation reminds me of one of the traumatic experiences I have had before." In Ho's work, there is a commitment to continuity and entanglement, one that deliberately illuminates the difficult, cruel, and ambiguous, even if it cannot provide any form of stable conclusion – the kinds of histories that the narrative spaces of the Singapore Bicentennial and the Singapore Botanic Gardens fail to accommodate, or actively avoid.

Despite the wide scope of the content of its script, the entire visual premise of *One or Several Tigers* is essentially one image, a slow and obsessive meditation on its various parts, seen first in isolation floating within a void before eventually coalescing into Leutemann's composition. Even then, like the tiger, the image itself appears repeatedly in different modes – as computer-generated, three-dimensional figures; as the enlarged projected version of

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[45] Ho Tzu Nyen, "One or Several Tigers," 2017, unpublished script, 9.

[46] Ho, "One or Several Tigers," 16.

Leutemann's engraving; as the elaborate *wayang kulit* set, both as physical object and shadow; as the original engraving framed in the Gallery. It is one image containing multiplicities, as if a memory or fantasy in the mind of an anxious person to which one's thoughts continually return, which one might deconstruct, stretch, connect to other memories and fantasies. Or perhaps it is a dream – the title *One or Several Tigers* recalls '1914: One of Several Wolves?', the first chapter or 'plateau' in Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus.* This plateau is perhaps best known for their intense criticism of Freud's analysis of the Wolf-Man Sergei Pankejeff, who dreamt of six or seven white wolves sitting on a tree outside his bedroom, staring at him. The Wolf-Man was not, obviously, a werewolf, but became synonymous with the animals in his dream. Both the Wolf-Man and the figure of the weretiger represent the hybridities or fluidities of man and animal within one body.

Deleuze and Guattari meander through a number of dense terms in this essay that they later revisit within the text and in other books, including the concept of multiplicities:

> The jaw is not a wolf jaw, it's not that simple; jaw and wolf form a multiplicity that is transformed into eye and wolf, anus and wolf, as a function of other distances, at other speeds, with other multiplicities, between thresholds. Lines of flight or of deterritorialization, becoming-wolf, becoming-inhuman, deterritorialized intensities: that is what multiplicity is.[47]

Becoming-wolf can be replaced here with becoming-*tiger*, and all the tiger's multiplicities, deterritorialised and reterritorialised not just in the context of Leutemann's engraving, but within all its possible associations and histories. (I think back both to Ahmed's "more and more objects", and Barthes's organisation and manipulation.) Another related concept introduced in this plateau is the "body without organs": "not a dead body but a living body all the more alive and teeming once it is blown apart by the organism and its organization."[48] I imagine Leutemann's engraving as a body, its constituent parts as it organs, or not-organs – Coleman is not just Coleman, but both Government Superintendent of Public Works and Superintendent of Convicts and a symbol of British colonialism; the convict labourers are not just their 19th Century selves but their 21st century selves; the tiger is not just the tiger that attacked Coleman but all the tigers that attacked people in Singapore and were later killed for it; it is the figure of the weretiger, of the white coloniser, of General Yamashita and his soldiers… Six times in *One or Several Tigers*, this verse is heard: "In this season-less tropical

[47] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, "1914: One or Several Wolves?" in *A Thousand Plateaus* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 36.

[48] Deleuze and Guattari, 34.

hell / time / stands / still / In the flash of this encounter / between man and tiger / time is folded / one moment slips into another / one tiger resembles another / becomes every tiger in history."[49]

In May 2019, during a trip back to Singapore, I watched Ho's newest multimedia work, *The Mysterious Lai Teck*. It takes as its subject the Secretary General of the Malayan Communist Party from 1939 to 1947, who was later revealed to be a triple agent for the British, the French, and the Japanese, and in the course of his life could have had up to fifty pseudonyms. According to the script, provided to me later by Ho, at one point the figure of Lai Teck says in Mandarin (with English surtitles): "Speech is spell, it warps the very weave of the world."[50] In August 2019, as part of my research, I read Ho's essay entitled 'We're Tigers', published in a 2015 book called *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies.* A similar line starts this essay: "Speech is a spell, and words, once ejected into the air, warp the weave of worlds."[51] What does it mean for language, for narrative, to warp the weave of the world, to bend it to the speaker's will? On the one hand, it is as the State would have it, which is the power to control and regulate history – to warp something otherwise complex into something orderly, constant, uniform, unchangeable. On the other hand, it is as the artist would have it, which is to re-warp that seemingly fixed narrative, to rejoin connections that have been broken, to forge new, always unstable, always ambiguous networks of knowledge.

[49] Ho, "One or Several Tigers," 5.

[50] Ho Tzu Nyen, "The Mysterious Lai Teck," 2018, unpublished theatrical script, 20.

[51] Ho Tzu Nyen, "We're Tigers," in *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies*, eds. Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin (London: Open Humanities Press, 2015), 191.

<u>Anxious Note 4</u>
My anxieties remind me of what remains unstable and uncertain within me;
perhaps they are not warnings of unknown dangers,
but lodestones of truths I must learn to face.

5.2. Redrawing Decolonisation: Sonny Liew, *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye*

Like many Singaporeans, my first encounter with Sonny Liew's graphic novel *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* was not through a book review, a bookstore, or a recommendation from a friend. Rather, I first heard of it through news reports in mid-2015, when it was revealed that the National Arts Council (NAC) – a government statutory board that oversees the development of the arts in Singapore – withdrew an S$8,000 publishing grant after the book had already been printed, citing vaguely that its "sensitive content, depicted in visuals and text, did not meet our funding conditions".[52] A further S$6,400 that had already been disbursed was also to be returned, and stickers had to be pasted over the NAC logo on the first 1,000 copies that had already been printed. A few days later, Mr Khor Kok Wah, then the senior director of the NAC's literary arts sector, released a statement elaborating on the decision: "The retelling of Singapore's history in the graphic novel potentially undermines the authority or legitimacy of the Government and its public institutions and thus breaches our funding guidelines."[53]

What the NAC, a proxy of the State, found so objectionable about *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* was simply that it presented an alternative, or perhaps more accurately a broader historical narrative of Singapore. The graphic novel chronicles the life and work of the eponymous character, a comics artist, from his childhood in post-World War II Singapore till today. Though Chan is fictional, the historical events to which he responds are not. The novel is structured around the interweaving of Chan's published and unpublished comics in diverse styles (figure 6), many of which are thinly veiled satirical commentaries or barely-fictionalised allegories regarding the socio-political environment of Singapore through the decades. Perhaps the biggest 'sin' committed by Liew is the novel's complication of the narrative of Lim

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[52] "NAC withdraws grant for graphic novel publisher due to 'sensitive content'," *TODAY*, *l*ast modified May 29, 2015, https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/national-arts-council-revokes-grant-for-graphic-novel-Sonny-Liew.

[53] Charissa Yong, "NAC pulled grant from comic as it 'potentially undermines the authority of the Government'," *The Straits Times*, last modified June 3, 2015, https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/nac-pulled-grant-from-comic-as-it-potentially-undermines-the-authority-of-the-government.

Fig. 6 Excerpts of various fictional comic strips featured in *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* (2015). 'Ah Huat's Giant Robot' dramatised clashes between British authorities and Chinese student activists in the 1950s; 'Force 136' retold the World War II years through anthropomorphised animals; 'Invasion' cast the campaign for independence as a dystopian future that pits humans against alien overlords; 'Sinkapor Inks: Stationery & Supplies' portrayed post-independence Singapore as a stationery supply company run by a tyrant boss resembling Lee Kuan Yew. © Sonny Liew and Epigram Books.

Chin Siong, a leftwing politician, trade union leader, and talented orator in the 1950s and 1960s, whom the main character deeply admires. Lim co-founded the People's Action Party in 1954, which remains the only ruling party that independent Singapore has ever known. In the State's version of history, Lim is branded a Communist – he was too radical, they say, to be trusted in the campaign for Singapore's independence from the British, especially given the political climate of the Cold War. Instead, it was fellow PAP leader Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore's Prime Minister from 1959-1990, who negotiated a peaceful transfer of power. Lim was expelled from the PAP in 1961 and started a new party called Barisan Sosialis ("Socialist Front" in Malay), but was later among 113 alleged Communists arrested in February 1963 during Operation Coldstore. He was detained without trial for six years (after having been detained by the previous government from 1956-59). Lim later lived in exile in England, before returning to Singapore in 1984 for the last twelve years of his life. Liew attempts to rescue Lim from the peripheries of the Singapore Story – which positions Lee Kuan Yew at its centre as the country's founding father – and bring to light Lim's crucial role in Singapore's decolonisation process. It is a brief comparison of Lim and Lee that begins the book, even before the introduction of Chan; later, the breakdown of Lim and Lee's political partnership mirrors that of Chan's creative partnership with his collaborator Bertrand Wong.

While the graphic novel was not censored, the NAC decided it could not be seen to have sanctioned a historical narrative that counters the one prescribed by the State. Interestingly, the explanation given was carefully crafted to avoid framing the graphic novel as an incorrect version of history. (This would have been foolish given that Liew conscientiously includes exhaustive, well-researched footnotes, and later described his approach as "trying to make history more inclusive rather than championing a competing version".[54]) Instead, the statement emphasised that the book could in some way erode the State's "authority" and "legitimacy" – inadvertently admitting that the State's power is constructed upon *one version* of a historical narrative that conflicts with the one presented by Liew. Khor also tried to push the blame to Liew and his publisher, Epigram Books, for breaching the "funding guidelines" – which presumably refers to the book "adversely [affecting] the reputation of the National Arts Council, any government bodies, public institutions, national leaders or (the applicant's) organisation".[55] Such guidelines are, like OB markers, difficult to objectively define. The incident reflects something the Singapore arts community knows far too well. Even though censorship is no longer always the go-to strategy of the State, the State funding on which

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[54] Ian Johnson, "An Alternative History of Singapore, Through a Comic Book," *The New York Times*, last modified July 14, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/14/world/asia/sonny-liew-singapore-charlie-chan-hock-chye.html.

[55] "NAC withdraws grant."

many arts practitioners in Singapore are dependent remains contingent upon the artistic creation falling within the parameters outlined – and shifted – by the State, concerning what can and cannot be verbalised and/or visualised, regardless of artistic merit.

Nonetheless, the publicity generated by this withdrawal of State support aroused outrage, sympathy, and curiosity amongst the general public, thus increasing sales of the book. After news broke, its first print run of 1,000 copies sold out within a week, in comparison to an average of two years for other graphic novels published by Epigram. Its second print run of 1,500 copies also sold out within a week, resulting in a third print run of 3,000 copies.[56] By mid-2017, over 15,000 copies had been printed in Singapore alone.[57] Ironically, the revoking of the grant encouraged more widespread dissemination of Liew's alternative or expanded history of Singapore (and if the NAC was aware that this would be a possible consequence, then it seems it was more important for the State to *perform* this act of disapproval rather than restrict it outright). On its own merit, *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* was awarded the Singapore Literature Prize in 2016, and won three Eisner Awards in 2017, further contributing to its local and international success.

While wholly unlike *One or Several Tigers* in medium and storytelling style, and focusing on an entirely different time period, *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* similarly presents layered, fragmented, and overlapping historical narratives reimagined through semi-fictionalisation, reliant upon the mediating voice and perspectives of its central character, here Chan rather than Coleman and the tiger. The rumination – the constant revisiting of the motif of the tiger in Ho's larger menagerie of works – materialises in Liew's graphic novel as the retelling and reframing, not just of Singapore's history, but also the life of Chan himself. Liew deftly pivots between a wide variety of drawing techniques and styles to create a mesmerising plethora of the unsettled creative mind desperate to make sense of the world around him (perhaps Kierkegaard's man standing on the edge of the abyss). Each of the comics purportedly drawn by Chan allows the reader to follow numerous tracks of his imagination – his own close readings of history that never fully resolve. The comics range from poignant one-off meditations on his childhood, to an autobiographical recollection of the trials and tribulations of his early career, to intimate sketches, and finally to the cornerstone of Liew's novel: Chan's serialised political comic strips, as seen in figure 6. Many of these series remained open-ended – because they were envisioned only as proposals that never came to fruition, or because Chan no longer had the financial support to continue the project, or

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[56] Akshita Nanda, "Second sell-out success, third print run for controversial Sonny Liew graphic novel," *The Straits Times*, last modified June 25, 2015, https://www.straitstimes.com/lifestyle/arts/second-sell-out-success-third-print-run-for-controversial-sonny-liew-graphic-novel.

[57] Johnson, "An Alternative History."

perhaps they were 'unpublished' because of the acknowledged danger in how they challenge the powers that be (as Liew himself encountered in reality).

Even the two series for which Chan did write proper endings are suffused with an ambiguous "what if?", underpinned by a sense of futility. 'Invasion', a sci-fi dystopian take on the campaign for independence, ends with the death of the main character, an everyman named Tommy Tan, who wonders if the progress achieved in Singapore ('Lunar City') was worth the sacrifice of Lim Chin Siong (here labelled a 'Martian sympathiser' rather than a communist). 'Days of August', inspired by Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle*, imagines an alternate universe in which Lim became Prime Minister of Singapore, but which is also plagued by a mysterious figure called the 'Man in White', a representation of Lee Kuan Yew from a "reality trying to reassert itself, to force history back onto the path it was always supposed to have taken".[58] The conclusion to this story, which Chan only finished a few years later, sees Lim thrown back to pre-independence Singapore, alongside Chan, who appears as a comics artist that depicts the version of the future based on Lee's reality. This Chan never tells Lim of his real path, maybe "because I knew that he would have followed his chosen path no matter what I said. Or maybe… I was afraid that he wouldn't. Perhaps I wanted a world where he still made a mark, however briefly. Fought the good fight."[59]

Thus, in reading the graphic novel, one is plunged into the unceasing mental workings, hopes, regrets, and *ruminations* of a man who, though claiming at the beginning to be "Singapore's greatest comics artist", is revealed to have seen barely any professional success, possibly because of his frank interpretations of local politics, or simply because he chose to walk a path that was not 'practical'. The precariousness of his life and stories is reinforced by the intrusion of other characters and perspectives, such as a caricature of Liew himself, who intermittently acts as a narrator for Chan's life and work; through 'interviews' with Chan's collaborator Bertrand Wong, who chose a pragmatic life over the idealism of his youth; and the occasional appearance of a boy meant to represent the average apathetic Singaporean.

Eleonora Fabião, in writing about the potential for a performative historiography, describes the fragment of an archive in a way that deeply resonates with Liew's approach:

> Different from a detail, a fragment does not evoke a supposed whole of which it is originally a part, but rather, it generates in and by itself successive provisory wholes. The fragment ontologically threatens not only the notion of completeness but also, and meaningfully, the temporal linearity related to it. […] There is no possible unity to be

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[58] Sonny Liew, *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* (Singapore: Epigram Books, 2015), 283.

[59] Liew, 288.

> achieved out of fragments; a fragment will never become a totality; the final puzzle is necessarily incomplete.[60]

Again, I am reminded of Ahmed's description of anxiety as an accumulation of objects, or rather an "approach to objects", that refuses to stabilise. Liew's fictional archive of Chan's life is an anxious collection of fragments that, in widening Singapore's history in a deliberately destabilising manner, reveals history to be something that is "necessarily incomplete", rather than one that is made more complete by the existence of the graphic novel. There is yet another layer of unease: even upon repeat readings, I felt an instinctive discomfort at Liew's counterpositions to State-sanctioned history, and realised that I was not immune to an internalised anxiety regarding whether to challenge Singapore's dominant historical narratives. *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* might be most powerful in the friction that it creates between itself and a reader who has, consciously or unconsciously, subscribed to the State-constructed worldview, shifting that reader not to a position that is definitively anti-establishment, but rather to the uneasy liminalities or interstices between different versions of history ("successive provisory wholes"). In addition, the visual medium brings to life a period of uncertainty in Singapore's past that feels distant and almost unfathomable in today's relatively calm political climate, achieved not merely by illustrating the past, but by personalising it through Chan's own interpretations. This creates a collapse of temporality that I earlier described as symptomatic of an anxious mind or approach, but is perhaps more important here as a proposition that an inclusive history can never be stable ("no possible unity"), and in fact *should be subjected to our anxieties*, and the act of questioning that accompanies those uncertain thoughts.

On the surface, given the excellence of Liew's book, it might seem unfortunate that discussions of it cannot escape the controversy in which it was embroiled in the early days of its publication. However, this arguably became an additional meta-narrative interwoven with the multiple threads of history already present in *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye*. The paralytic and avoidant anxiety of the State – in its assertion of its authoritative version of Singapore's history – directly collided with the generative anxiety within the narrative(s) constructed by the artist. In his seminal text *The Location of Culture*, Homi K. Bhabha writes:

> Counter-narratives of the nation that continually evoke and erase its totalizing boundaries – both actual and conceptual – disturb those ideological manoeuvres through which 'imagined communities' are given essentialist identities. For the

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[60] Eleonora Fabião, "History and Precariousness: In Search of a Performative Historiography," in *Perform, Repeat, Record: Live Art in History*, eds. Amelia Jones and Adrian Heathfield (Bristol: intellect, 2012), 131.

> political unity of the nation consists in a continual displacement of the **anxiety** of its irredeemably plural modern space."[61] *[emphasis mine]*

One can consider here the Singapore Story, or equivalents such as the Bicentennial's Singapore DNA, to be "ideological manoeuvres" that give Singapore an "essentialist identity", attempting to create a version of history that is devoid of any doubt, which has already proved inadequate in addressing the 'pluralities' of the country. In Singapore, the anxiety of the State, which exists in the form of constructs such as the myth of vulnerability, and in its negative responses to alternative historical narratives, feeds into the generative anxiety of Liew's (or Chan's) uncertain, incomplete version of Singapore's history, which "continually evoke and erase [the State's] totalizing boundaries". These two forms of anxiety are thus *one and the same* – the generative potential of anxiety is that which the State seeks to paralyse. Both approaches lie within the same narrative space – an ambivalence and not a binary.

There is a small and unexpected intersection between Liew's graphic novel and Ho's practice. The brief comparison between Lee Kuan Yew and Lim Chin Siong that serves as prologue to the book is presented as a comic titled with the Chinese proverb, "一山不容二虎", which Liew translates as "One mountain cannot abide two tigers". Within one playing field, there cannot be two leaders, two strong personalities – implying then that one of them must win in the end. In Ho's essay 'Every Cat in History is I', he refers to the same proverb in a different translation to describe the tension between the wild tiger population in Singapore and the ultimately victorious white coloniser: "if colonialism had laid the foundations for the capitalist exploitation of the land that in turn contributed to the thriving of tigers, it was also at the 'invisible hand' of capitalism that tigers would later perish. As the Chinese proverb goes, 'A single hill cannot support two tigers.'"[62] The proverb might prove true in practice, in order for the world to continually return to a state of stability as power struggles resolve (and later begin again). However, in the context of a story, of a multiplicity of historical narratives, of an anxious narrative space, one can surely allow for two, or several, or infinite tigers, and the conflicts between them, to coexist without rest within a simultaneous entanglement.

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[61] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge Classics, 2004), 213.

[62] Ho Tzu Nyen, "Every Cat in History is I," *Forum on Contemporary Art and Society* 6 (2007): 155.

6. *Repress / Process: On Anxiety and Trauma*

'Notes on an Anxious State' originally grew out of the shifting of my understanding of the term 'trauma'. The word comes from the Greek for 'wound', which is typically understood within a framework of violence, and as an isolated, destabilising event. In my personal experience in therapy, I was taught to expand my definition of trauma in order to critically examine the emotional damage I had suffered since childhood, and subsequent coping mechanisms that I had developed in response. This was encapsulated by a fairly recent psychological concept called 'small-t' traumas, first outlined by psychologist Dr Francine Shapiro in her 1995 book, *Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing (EMDR): Basic Principles, Protocols and Procedures*, a manual for the psychotherapy technique she pioneered, which is now commonly used to treat post-traumatic stress disorder. Shapiro refers to 'small-t' traumas in the context of negative or humiliating childhood experiences; they have also come to relate more broadly to cumulative non-violent everyday occurrences that leave us in a state of helplessness. The characterisation of this helplessness as an overreaction to a series of events that we do not recognise by definition as trauma results in the development of repressive or avoidant behaviours.

Given, firstly, the privileged position that Singapore occupied within the British Empire; secondly, how its population descended from immigrants that benefited economically from colonial structures over generations; and thirdly, its largely peaceful decolonisation process – one might find 'trauma' too *violent* a term to be used to describe the repercussions of the country's colonial period.[63] Yet, the State clearly operates within a framework of anxiety, and if we are to believe Freud, anxiety manifests in an expectation of the return of some past trauma. In considering how the concept of small-t traumas could be applied to understanding the world outside of myself, I began to wonder if this framework could have any relevance to Singapore's relationship to its colonial past. Is the expansion of the definition of trauma, of colonial trauma, a possible means of reframing and interrogating Singapore's history, of lifting it out of that strict immutability that underlies State narratives? Can the State narrative that excludes the more uncomfortable aspects of history be understood, not just as a form of outwardly-directed *oppression* of other aspects of history, but rather an inwardly-directed *repression*, which is defined in psychoanalytic contexts as a defence mechanism that ensures

[63] This is not to say that the British were uniformly merciful in their treatment of people in Singapore (or the region), or that colonialism did not result in exploitation and disenfranchisement of both indigenous and immigrant communities, even if these experiences might be comparatively less 'cruel' than in other colonies.

that what is unacceptable to the conscious mind (and would, if recalled, arouse anxiety) is prevented from entering into it?[64]

Postcolonial theorists such as Homi K. Bhabha, Ashis Nandy, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, all of whom speak from a position largely influenced by the colonial experience in South Asia, have all brilliantly incorporated psychoanalytic concepts into their work. However, I am conscious of Griselda Pollock's thoughts on narratives of trauma, in which she points out that "the mechanisms of an individual psyche are not present in a 'culture'; there is no collective psyche or unconscious to account for what we can theorize as the traumatic wounding at the level of the individual […]".[65] In meditating on the (a/A)nxious (s/S)tate(s), my intention is not to align my personal traumas with Singapore's historical traumas. Furthermore, I am conscious that the term 'trauma', in spite of any kind of conceptual reframing, inherently implies a victim-perpetrator relationship. Attempting to prove the legitimacy of the traumas of the colonial period, even as small-t traumas, would run the risk of framing the State as a victim when it remains in a position of power, dependent on remnant colonial structures. Instead, the objective was to use concepts with which I have grappled in my personal experience with anxiety and trauma as a lens through which to view and discuss recent narrative constructions of Singapore's history – to *overthink* rather than *dismantle*, as mentioned – based on my own theorisation of the anxious narrative space.

Nonetheless, Pollock does go on to write that:

> If trauma refers to events that cannot be processed by existing mechanisms for making sense of them, we can extrapolate metaphorically that extreme historical events can shatter prevailing schemes of representation – cultural digestion so to speak – so that some dimension of real events remains unknowable for lack of cultural metabolization, and as such persists, shadows and engenders certain reactions or affects, even tendencies to repeat because they have not been processed into self-reflective knowledge.[66]

In conceptualising anxiety as both the passive-paralytic (or repressive-paralytic) and the active-generative, I am suggesting that the latter, as it manifests in artworks such as Ho's and Liew's, can become a means of that which "[processes] into self-reflective knowledge", one

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[64] Richard L. Gregory, *The Oxford Companion to the Mind (2nd edition)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 803.

[65] Griselda Pollock, "Introduction: trauma and artworking," in *After-affects | After-images: Trauma and aesthetic transformation in the virtual feminist museum* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 10.

[66] Pollock, 10.

that is able to represent not just the nuance of history but *that which cannot be resolved* in history. Furthermore, by shifting the discussion from trauma itself to trauma response in the form of anxiety, this steps away from the victim-perpetrator, or indeed the true-false binaries that can lock historical narratives in unproductive antagonism, resulting in readers taking sides with the various authors of history. The idea, instead, is to place these various interpretations of history within the same ambivalent narrative plane – as Liew said, to present "inclusive" rather than "competing" histories – to understand that they must exist in conversation with each other, and that there is potential in a productive rumination that should not be *repressed*, but rather be allowed to persist as a means of *processing* the past. Ho, again: "Speech is spell, it warps the very weave of the world." It is this "cultural digestion" or "metabolization" that must be allowed to progress in order to erode, to *warp,* the power of the Anxious State's amnesiac version of history, which continues to lie in the grip of whatever original trauma that resulted in its germination, and the subsequent trauma that the State continues to perpetuate and inflict even in its avoidance.

The Anxious Person (the Anxious State, the Anxious Artist) knows that they are trapped, haunted by pasts they cannot put behind them, unsettled by futures they continually anticipate. The Anxious Person knows that history is never truly stable, can still be repeated even in the present, is always open to new interpretations. The Anxious Person knows they can try to mute their own anxiety, but that it is only quiet and not gone, never gone, and if this muting never makes it go away, then perhaps the truth lies in listening differently. The Anxious Person knows that a story is never a conclusion in itself, but one among many propositions, to be articulated and re-articulated, entangled already or ripe to be entangled with other stories. And, at their core, even if they try to deny it, the Anxious Person always knows that the most important question to ask is –

what if…?

7. Epilogue: Finding the Right Words

Once,

I had a therapist who asked me to write a letter to someone.
For much longer than I should have, I had been avoiding a conversation with this person,
though I knew rationally that this conversation would, painfully or otherwise,
end an extended period of mental and emotional agony.

1.1: "Sometimes, it becomes much safer for me to be smothered in the paralysing embrace of anxiety, than to take an action that might risk reminding me of the certainty of my own worthlessness."

With this letter, I could imagine words with no consequences.
No control. No filter. No reason to be afraid.

The letter ended up being three thousand words long.
In the next session, my therapist made me read out every single word.
After, she asked me how I felt while reading the letter.
The answer was – nothing. I didn't feel *anything*.

It was as if, by putting it in words, I had excised this tumour from myself.
I could read all my pain as the words of someone other than me.
I thought, perhaps, I might have detached from this burden,
by giving it form through language, through story.

I was wrong, of course.

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