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book review

Queer(y)ing Illiberal Pragmatism in Singapore

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Audrey Yue and Jun Zubillaga-Pow (eds)
Queer Singapore: Illiberal Citizenship and Mediated Cultures
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Hong Kong University Press began publishing the groundbreaking Queer Asia series in 2008. An outcome of the innovative AsiaPacifiQueer Network, Queer Asia was a response to intense academic interest by Asian scholars in contextualising queer studies in Asia. The series has established itself as a cutting edge inter- and multi-disciplinary space for queer Asian investigations where queer is understood as both 'an umbrella term for the diverse LGBT community, and a critical tool to unsettle heteronormativity'. (4)

On the whole, the latest volume in the series, *Queer Singapore: Illiberal Citizenship and Mediated Cultures*, is an impressive collection of essays that explore the emergence of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender subjectivities and cultural, social and political forms against the backdrop of Singapore's state-sponsored repression of non-normative sexualities. Given the concerns of cultural studies scholarship to analyse, investigate and critique power relations, everyday life and

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cultural representation, this book provides an excellent entry into one of the most fascinating polities in the world. Singapore is a postcolonial, multicultural and multireligious city-state that is uniquely placed at a crossroads between the local, global and transnational. Singapore highlights superbly what Zygmunt Baumann has described as the paradox of culture; indeed, it is a paradoxical cosmopolitan culture.

From a small British colonial trading port in the nineteenth century, Singapore has become a global trading hub par excellence. In many ways Singapore demonstrates the convergence of modernity and post-modernity: an authoritarian city-state constructed out of concentrated capitalism and a highly sophisticated, centralised (matrix-like) governance of power; a global city with national territorial boundaries that are characterised by fluidity but simultaneously engineered through cultural, social and historical processes of self-definition. Selvaraj Velayutham has argued that 'the fact that Singapore is at once a city-state and a nation presents unique global/local problems and paradoxes'.[1] These problems and paradoxes are brought into sharp focus in *Queer Singapore*.

As a part of its active and ongoing self-definition, Singapore's approach to sexuality has been powerfully marked by surveillance, repression, regulation, strategic tolerance and control. The production of a heterosexual, family-oriented state has been purposefully engineered. Sexuality in Singapore is micromanaged through various state apparatuses and agencies. Homosexuality remains illegal in Singapore under Section 377A of the Penal Code, a legacy of British colonisation. The history of queer Singapore is one of expanding homosexual visibility and socio-cultural recognition. While in many ways achieving greater normalisation of homosexuality in everyday life, this queer history has been in tandem with the Singapore's instrumental approach to managing sexual citizenship in the legal and public spheres.

The key theoretical innovation of this book comes from what Audrey Yue refers to as Singapore's illiberal pragmatism in relation to homosexuality, a conceptual framework that she has developed over the last few years. Yue writes: 'Illiberal pragmatism is characterised by the ambivalence between non-liberalism and neoliberalism, rationalism and irrationalism that governs the illegality of homosexuality in Singapore.' (2) This logic of illiberal pragmatism 'is evident in the contemporary (il)legal discourses of homosexuality in the country'. (17) Yue argues

that the emergent LGBT social movement in Singapore is activated .through this logic which is alive and flourishing in the context of Singapore's investment in the cultural and creative industries. She makes the point that the queer culture of Singapore 'has been constituted, not as a result of the recognition of rights and liberation, but through the disjunctive acceleration caused by economic and cultural reforms'. (18) LGBT activism, when understood through this framework, is asymmetrical and unpredictable in origin and effect.

While I largely agree with Yue that queer culture in Singapore has developed without the attendant overt activist struggles for equality and civil rights that pertain in many other (usually democratic, mainly western) polities, I would argue that it has nonetheless developed in resonance with and in response to rights and liberation discourses in localised and transnational ways.

In terms of human rights activism, for example, LGBT rights claims are reconceptualised within the Singaporean context and translated by the queer social movement in ways that are inventive and novel but nonetheless conscious of the problematic legal situation. Human rights discourse does not always follow a 'normalising and assimilationist' trajectory in terms of claims for legal reform. (7) If thought of as more of a language, human rights discourse offers creative opportunities for claiming social recognition. The annual Pink Dot celebration, for example, which has occurred over the last few years, and which is explicitly a localised Singaporean LGBT event, has gained greater and greater levels of participation. The Pink Dot is a strategic and pragmatic adaptation by the LGBT community to the socio-political and legal conditions of Singapore. It is not a demonstration against the state, nor does it promote or incite any sense of confrontation. Yet, as a communal event involving thousands, it is a means of mobilisation and commitment towards the social recognition of LGBT people. This is an example of Singaporean-style (human rights) activism. What is not clear yet is whether cultural expressions, such as Pink Dot, will ultimately affect any social change. Legal scholar Lynnette Chua has cautiously suggested: 'In the end, pragmatic resistance preserves and repeatedly validates the boundaries of cultural norms.'[2]

Queer Singapore offers a range of multidisciplinary encounters with Singapore's queer culture that illuminate the possibilities and challenges of social recognition within an illiberal pragmatic context. The diverse methodologies,

contexts, sites and cases that are explored through the chapters reveal how, despite the flagrant contradictions and paradoxes found in illiberal pragmatism, queer communities have found ways to thrive in Singapore, which has been referred to as the gay capital of Asia. The collection showcases how the framework of queer activism is re-cast in a Singaporean context. Yue argues that resistance and complicity are inherent to the ways LGBT communities have pragmatically and creatively 'worked within and twisted the illiberal logic of State control'. (25)

Organised under the rubrics of Cultural Citizenship and Queer Politics, the first part of the collection provides critical explorations of how LGBT Singaporeans have negotiated a range of complex issues, events and discourses characterised by their sexuality and ability to participate as full citizens. Aaron K. H. Ho examines the construction of a neo-Victorian Singapore where conservative sexual morality has been institutionalised by the state alongside the simultaneous erasure of queer presence and history. Ho's thesis is that while Singapore's institutions have made heterosexuality mandatory, Singaporeans have opted for Victorian-like sensibilities when it comes to sexuality. Through the perspective of legal scholarship, Michael Hor's chapter provides insights into the architecture of the law that makes homosexuality illegal. Hor makes a powerful argument about the ambiguity and 'messiness' of the 377A Penal Code, which criminalises homosexuality, as a tool to govern national sexual borders. While sociologist Lawrence Wai-Teng Leong focuses on how 'moral entrepreneurs' have influenced the way sexuality is managed in Singapore, anthropologist Chris K.K. Tan gives a gripping account of the everyday gay negotiation of compulsory military service. Tan observes that the military is a primary site where the heterosexual template of the state is critical to the experience of gay men.

Another highly interesting chapter is Shawna Tang's ethnographic study of female same-sex relations in Singapore. This chapter breaks new ground in understanding the links between the transnational and material conditions of Singaporean lesbians. Tang frames her analysis around the question of whether 'the "modern" Singaporean lesbian and her immaculate mimicry of Westernised ways' might be evidence of 'global gay colonisation?'. (84) She asserts: 'Singaporean lesbians embody a more complicated model of transnational sexuality that neither assumes a position of local resistance nor global gay embodiment, but a

contradictory, complicit and contingent negotiation of the local and global.' (84) This observation is relevant to much of the work in the volume including the final contribution by Simon Obendorf who situates queer politics in the complicated context of Singapore as a contiguous urban cosmopolitan city and nation state. As Obendorf demonstrates, queer lives are lived in the shadows cast by the absurdities of government policies that promote social and cultural spaces for LGBT citizens in the city while simultaneously regulating, censoring and managing their socio-cultural viability in the nation.

The second part of the volume is organised around the theme of Queer Media Cultures. While the writing is uneven at times and a couple of chapters are overly descriptive, the sites and contexts explored reveal queer culture at work within this important domain. 'Mediated cultures', according to Yue, 'are critical intersections that express the politics of people, resources and power.' (22) Despite the fact that in Singapore the media is highly regulated and mostly state-run, LGBT communities have 'seized the media to challenge stereotypes, self-narrate identities and organise collectively'. (22) Roy Tan's photo essay tracing the history of gay venues in Singapore is descriptively rich and invites further reflection on the impact that gay venues have had on queer Singaporean subjectivity. Jun Zubillaga-Pow's ambitious analysis of homonationalism and print media in Singapore shows how adverse representations of homosexuality have been used by the state in its nation-building enterprise.

The recurrent thematic of the book emerges with great clarity in Kenneth Chan's discussion of the queer cultural implications of the film *Solos* (2007). Chan argues that it is the intersection between the national and transnational that makes queer cinema possible in Singapore, where censorship of LGBT representations in the media is still common. In Loretta Chen's chapter she explores how lesbian representations in film, theatre, television and other media, are heavily but erratically censored by the Media Development Authority of Singapore.

Taking up the issue of race and sexuality, Robert Phillips explores how queer Indian men in Singapore have to negotiate a sense of belonging to the nation at the same time that they seek social space for their sexual desire. In the final contribution, Audrey Yue presents an in-depth examination of Asia's most successful queer website, Fridae. A perfect demonstration of Yue's governing thesis, Fridae

exemplifies how 'homosexuality is illegal but tolerated, and on the other hand, promoted through the cultural liberalisation of the creative economy'. (199)

Overall, the diverse range of approaches taken in this collection make a valuable 'platform for understanding the shaping of queer Asian futures'. (25) *Queer Singapore* provides an excellent portal into the contradictory, illiberal and pragmatic discourses that shape the city-state of Singapore.

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[1] Selvaraj Velayutham, *Responding to Globalization: Nation, Culture and Identity in Singapore*, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, 2007, p. 203.

[2] Lynnette Chua, 'Pragmatic Resistance, Law, and Social Movements in Authoritarian States: The Case of Gay Collective Action in Singapore', *Law & Society Review*, vol. 46, no. 4, 2012, pp. 713–48, 743.