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Southeast Asian Island City-State, Singapore: Multi-Scalar Spatial Fictions and the Hinterland within

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We need a different idea of space, a better theory of how it is integrated with nonspatial aspects of context, and a more thorough treatment of the social embedding of the deictic field. —Hanks, 2005. "Explorations in the Deictic Field," 198

If space and place appear to be safely secure and unwavering, then what space and place make possible, outside and beyond tangible stabilities, and from the perspective of struggle, can potentially fade away. Geography is not, however, secure and unwavering; we produce space, we produce its meanings, and we work very hard to make geography what it is…Concealment, marginalization, boundaries are important social processes. We make concealment happen; it is not natural but rather names and organizes where racial-sexual differentiation occurs. —McKittrick, 2006. *Demonic Grounds*, xi–xii

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> I contend that the very distinction between material and literary, or physical and representational space, must be done away with. —Watson, 2011. *The New Asian City*, 13

“Singapore has no hinterland.” Sitting with an urban planner in the atrium of Singapore’s Urban Redevelopment Authority, with a three-dimensional scale model of Singapore visible in my peripheral vision like a heavy-handed literary device, my interviewee delivered this pronouncement with an air of finality: “You cannot understand what has happened since 1965 if you do not understand this. Other cities, other countries have their hinterlands to source raw materials, their talents and labor force, everything they need, they have right there. We did not. We **do** not. You must understand this.” For a Singaporean (or someone familiar with Singapore’s history), the planner’s reference to 1965 invoked the Southeast Asian island city-state’s tumultuous events, from internal self-rule under the British to the fraught Merger with Malaysia to the catastrophic advent of full independence, which pulled the rug out from under Singaporean hopes of a unified Malaysian market and left the place without access to key natural resources like fresh water (Rahim, 2010). More than just a tale of environmental determinism, the planner’s statement told another story, narrating a world of boundaries and asymmetries, of abundance outside and lack within.

Approximately a month later, I sat in a cab waiting at a traffic light. Up to this point, the ride had proceeded in silence, but at this moment the driver craned his neck, peering at the scaffolding and sound barriers installed around the high-rise buildings that were being constructed on both sides of the road. Gesturing upward with a raised palm, the driver exclaimed: “Always building! Everything in Singapore, always changing. Government says must upgrade, must tear down. Singapore is very small, no hinterland—so, always building.” At the time, my exploratory fieldwork was focused on urban planning and nation branding in Singapore. I was relatively familiar with the concept of “hinterland” from the scholarly and practitioner literatures I was exploring and talk of “hinterlands” recurred among planners, marketers, and civil servants in the ministries and statutory boards whose work focused on making, managing, and marketing place in Singapore. However, the taxi driver’s pronouncement

was the first time I had encountered talk of "hinterland" outside expert-technical domains, used to voice a latent critique of an abstract institutional entity rather than to ideologically assert a mere physical-geographical fact.

Within imaginaries such as these, what kind of entity has a hinterland, what do anxieties or assertions over the hinterland tell us, and what kind of entity is Singapore such that it does not have a hinterland? Who does the imagining? Who or what gets displaced or erased by this imaginative storytelling about Singapore? As the epigraphs indicate, this chapter approaches these questions by exploring resonances across three fields concerned with the geographic and socio-historical study of space: linguistic anthropology, Black feminist geography, and postcolonial comparative literature. Building on the work of scholars across these three areas, I begin from the perspective that space is not a neutral, inert backdrop for social life, nor is it separate from the stories that take place in, through, and about it. Rather, space and place are co-participants in the making of social positions, boundaries, and personae, together with the systems and structures into which social actors are slotted or against which they struggle.

Despite the relative hegemony of perspectives that variously assert Singapore does not have a hinterland, the social actors that voice these perspectives work to erase other ways that Singapore's hinterlands *do* get materialized. As a Global City that is also a strategically positioned island at the nexus of global shipping lanes, political and economic commentators in Singapore and beyond have long asserted that the world is Singapore's hinterland: Singapore sources its raw materials, its talent, and its labor force (to re-voice the urban planner's perspective) from the world. This rescales the hinterland beyond Singapore's geopolitical borders, which also rescales the influx of materials, talent, labor, and other resources as always foreign. To better understand where and how the disavowed hinterland gets materialized, I thus turn beyond hegemonic, state-backed, and expert discourses to consider other genres in and through which other constructions of space and place appear—constructions of space and place that are shaped by, but extend beyond a manifest concern for "hinterlands" as such. Though a named concern for "hinterlands" is rarely voiced by individuals aside from planners, marketers, state

officials, or individuals who lived through Singapore's fraught independence, I argue that the hinterland motivates latent forms of boundary-making across other domains, too.

This chapter's intended contribution is both conceptual and empirical. Conceptually, I draw together linguistic-anthropological work on the embedding of deictic fields in social fields—an approach that theorizes how discourse is tied to the social and spatial worlds in which it occurs (Hanks, 2005)—with theorizations of pragmatic paradigms: sets of indexical, or context-indicating and implicating, signs taken by users as "appropriate to distinct contextual conditions" (Silverstein, 2014, p. 152). I further connect these to theorizations of "geographic stories" (2006, p. 34) by geographer Katherine McKittrick, linking this, finally, to the production and circulation of multi-scalar spatial fictions, a term I extend from comparative literature scholar Jini Kim Watson to describe mutually constitutive, contested entanglements of built environments with creative texts and other communicative genres (Watson, 2011). I mobilize this conceptual framework to undertake an ethnographic exploration of the contrasts and contradictions that animate the multi-genre production of geographic stories in and about Singapore, stories through which concerns over "hinterland" locate racial-gendered difference in place and space. Singapore has the distinction of being the world's only sovereign island city-state, yet the terms available for its categorization—as island, city, state, or belonging to a region—each entail mutually destabilizing pragmatic paradigms (Silverstein, 2014) of spatial organization. Singapore is variously described as an outlier in—but not of—a Southeast Asian region (Goh & Yeoh, 2003); a Chinese island in a Malay-Muslim region (Rahim, 2010); an island without a mainland (Holden, 2001); a city without a hinterland (Tan, 2007); a state without a (single) nation (Wee, 1993). Though not overtly contradictory, each paradigm selectively focuses attention on the kind of space and place Singapore is taken to be while provisionally silencing alternatives.

I focus on the ways that multi-scalar spatial fictions materialize, and are materialized by, axes of differentiation that are brought to bear in constructing trans-modal figures of landscape for understanding Singapore as island, city, nation/state, and regional entity. I show how individuals' selection of one over another pragmatic paradigm—focusing

on island over city, city over nation/state, etc.—drives semiotic processes of differentiation (Gal & Irvine, 2019) that produce what I call a *hinterland within*: an iterative, spatialized introflection of each paradigm's social, linguistic, racialized, and cultural outsides. I track these processes across the contributions to the six-volume *Balik Kampung* series of short stories (edited between 2012 and 2016 by Singaporean storyteller and author Verena Tay), together with material drawn from Singaporean political talk and written reflections by policymakers/politicians and scholarship by Singaporean and Singapore-based academics. I examine how these texts narrate actors' experiences of discovering the outside, inside; when the mainland comes to the island; when the hinterland appears in the city; and when the region makes itself at home in (or as) the nation.

Geographic Storytelling, Embedded Deictic/ Social Fields, Spatial Fictions

Building on work by a broad, inter- and multidisciplinary cast of characters, McKittrick's work offers a methodological and conceptual toolkit for tracing interconnections across "material referents, external, three-dimensional spaces, and the actions taking place in space, as they overlap with subjectivities, imaginations, and stories" (2006 xiii). In elaborating a theorization of geographic stories, McKittrick begins from a familiar analytic insight: that all geography, like all social practice, involves storytelling. While not dismissing the importance of this insight, however, McKittrick goes on to invert the formula: not only is all geography storytelling, but all storytelling is geography. In elaborating this perspective, McKittrick peels back the layers of emplacement and displacement of racial-sexual differentiation through which Black women's geographies—ways of knowing, negotiating, and experiencing space and place *as Black women* (McKittrick, 2006, p. x)—get situated in space. Her work elaborates how Black women's geographies are constitutive of space in and as stories; further, she does this "without situating these geographies firmly inside an official story or history" (ibid, p. xxiv).

Like McKittrick, scholars in social, cultural, linguistic, and archaeological anthropology have long been interested in the interconnections among language, place, and space. Both classic and recent works have employed a range of perspectives and methodologies to analyze space and placemaking as socio-cultural practices. I mention this work only in passing here.[1] Instead, I here engage most closely with Hanks' (2005) elaboration of the embedding of deictic fields in social fields, linking this to Michael Silverstein's conceptualization of the pragmatic paradigm. Drawing on a broadly linguistic anthropological approach to language, Hanks offers an important (re)conceptualization of deixis—context-indicating linguistic resources like "this," "that," "here," "there," "I," and "you" through which speakers of any language work to link "elementary social relations of speaker, addressee, and object to the phenomenal context of utterance" or speech setting (2005, p. 191). Deictic expressions are united by the fact that they all derive their meaning and force from context. In this view, context does not precede interaction, it is *projected from* interaction. Importantly, context is not just the immediate or even distal spatial surround to a speech situation, but also encompasses social fields: the "space of positions and position takings in which agents (individual or collective) and through which various forms of value…circulate (ibid, p. 192). Moreover, "in any social field there are boundary processes that constrain who can engage in different positions and which moves can be made and which not" (ibid). Deictics articulate with social fields, but because of their status as *grammaticalized*, context-indicating or-implicating resources, they are distinct from other linguistic resources in their relative autonomy and semiotic specificity.

Though beginning from deixis, the perspective on which I draw (following Hanks and others) is more broadly indexical, affording a method for tracking the stratification of interacting participants' orientations to the context-appropriateness of signs at varying degrees of explicitness. As Michael Silverstein has argued, users' conceptualizations are key to

[1] An in-depth review of the centrality of space in the history of social and cultural anthropology is beyond the scope of this chapter. For a review of anthropological approaches to language and space, see Levinson, 1996; Hanks, 2005 also provides an excellent, more recent (though technical) overview.

understanding how language-internal contextual variation is made and made meaningful:

> [L]anguage users conceptualize contextual variability as "different [context-indexing] ways of [denotationally] saying 'the same' thing," at whatever plane and level of analysis, the isolable formal differences constituting, as was noted above, a (sometimes gradient) paradigm of indexical signs appropriate to distinct contextual conditions, in short a PRAGMATIC PARADIGM. Speakers have intuitions—sometimes even explicit normative stipulations—of how one or more elements of such paradigmatically differentiated indexes can appropriately—congruently—co-occur across textual stretches. Such principles define a DENOTATIONAL-TEXTUAL REGISTER for the users of language, an intuition (or stipulation) of which textual elements go together with which others, and which ought to be excluded from textual co-occurrence—save for producing (entailing) special effects by violation (Silverstein, 2014, pp. 152–53).

For Silverstein, like Hanks, social fields importantly include not only implicit normative orientations, but also explicit stipulations on linguistic and paralinguistic forms' uses. This means that difference is a constitutive feature of all language- and sign-use, both grammatically and through the encoding of socio-cultural distinctions. Difference, in other words, is not manifest through abstract, macro-sociological structures that hover over social or three-dimensional worlds; it is a discursive, interactional achievement that shifts from moment to moment within and across events.

Like McKittrick, Hanks, and Silverstein, comparative literature scholar Jini Kim Watson examines how "three-dimensional fictions" get made in and as built environments. Watson explores the postcolonial intertwinement of sociopolitical, cultural, economic, and spatial shifts in Singapore, Seoul, and Taipei, tracing the ways that political-economic arrangements impact, and were impacted by, storytelling practices. By examining Singaporean political memoir, post-independence national(ist) poetry, and rehabilitative anti-nationalist poetry produced between the 1960s and early 2000s, she works to trouble the category of the postcolonial and decenter "Western theorizations on modernity and urbanization" (ibid, p. 9), particularly as such theorizations relegate fictional texts either

to a realm of epiphenomenal cultural production, or as fodder for Orientalizing debates over texts' cultural authenticity as resistance or identity (see Said, 1978/1994).

Focusing on Singapore's post-independence, industrialization, and post-industrialization periods, Watson's text elaborates how the Singapore state's expropriation of land and "urban renewal" programs—which gave rise to the proliferation of towering public housing and other high-rise architecture—also drove new narratives about Singaporean modernity, citizenship, identity, and subjectivity. The analysis traces this across autobiographical texts by Singapore's founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, whose tour of seventeen postcolonial African states in the 1960s afforded a series of negative images against which his own desired image of Singapore was constructed (Watson, 2011, pp. 181–83). Watson juxtaposes Lee's storytelling against works by Singaporean poet laureate Edwin Thumboo, who in the 1960s and 1970s used reflexively public, nationalist poetry to celebrate Singapore's built-environmental transformation as iconic to the new Singaporean national identity. Finally, Watson turns to 1970s poetry by Singaporean poet Arthur Yap, whose poetry excavates the Singaporean experiences that came to be located outside the new modern/urban/national subjectivities (ibid, p. 195).

While Watson's analysis serves as a source of methodological and empirical inspiration for me, I nevertheless seek to expand her analysis beyond the city as a category. As much as Singapore's status as a sovereign city-state has been incessantly focalized in national(ist) narratives and scholarly accounts, what Watson calls the "New Asian City" is just one among many pragmatic paradigm of spatial denotation for telling geographic stories about the place—not only about what kind(s) of place(s) Singapore is, but also about the kinds of people who are, or should be, there. The next two sections elaborate this by explicating, first, Singapore's raciolinguistic situation, and second, by tracing out various "geographic solutions to difference and political crisis" (McKittrick, 2006, 34) through which race and language get co-naturalized and spatially located in Singapore.

Singapore's Raciolinguistic Situation

As myriad critical scholars have demonstrated, encounters with difference in Singapore are racialized by default (PuruShotam, 1998; Goh, 2010; Chan & Siddique, 2019). As my own ethnographic research has also shown, this observation should not be understood as a statement of analytic necessity; rather, it describes an empirical-ethnographic reality. To emphasize the raciolinguistic construction of difference in Singapore is not to ignore or deny other intersectional axes of differentiation. Instead, it is to point out the ways that individuals navigate encounters with difference by attempting to fix interactants to locations in a racial ordering project. This work happens from within asymmetric positions intersectionally structured by historical, institutional, and interactional defaults (Rosa & Flores, 2017, p. 623; p. 637).

As reflexively modernist, co-naturalized constructs, language and race have been deeply intertwined in Singapore from the British colonial period onward. Further, the intersections of language and race have been variously institutionalized across state bureaucracies and other sites. Singapore's population is officially categorized according to a standardized model known as CMIO, an acronym referring to Singapore's four official "races," each with an official "Mother Tongue" language: Chinese-Singaporeans comprise 76% of the population and speak Mandarin; Malay-Singaporeans make up 14% of the population and speak Malay; Indian-Singaporeans comprise 7% of the population and have Tamil as an official "Mother Tongue," though Tamil speakers comprise a slim majority of all officially Indian people in Singapore; finally, Other is simultaneously an administratively capacious and ideologically narrow category.[2] Because of bilingual education policy from the 1970s onward (Tan, 2017), Singapore also comprises a society of what sociolinguist Anne Pakir has called "English-knowing bilinguals" (Pakir, 1991):

[2] For an in-depth historical overview, see PuruShotam, 1998. Further complicating any simple raciolinguistic picture of Singaporean-Indian as a category is the fact that five "non-Tamil Indian Languages" (Hindi, Bengali, Gujarati, Punjabi, and Urdu) are also available for "Mother Tongue" instruction today due to early-2000s advocacy efforts (Cavallaro & Ng, 2014, pp. 40–41). "Others" historically referred only to mixed-race descendants of European and East-Asian intermarriages, but today also includes anyone who does not fall into the CMI categories.

English use is widespread in public and private settings. However, this has occasioned deep anxieties over the quality of Singaporean Englishes, to the extent that a public language-planning campaign was launched by the state in 1999 to ensure that Singaporeans speak "Good English" (Tan, 2017).

As a raciolinguistic system, CMIO is a pervasive presence in Singaporean public and private life. Official CMIO categories are listed on Singaporeans' and residents' identification cards, and determine where one can buy a home (Haila, 2015),[3] how one can access social security benefits (Yeoh, 2004, 2437–8; Lim, 1989), and the "Mother Tongues" subject one studies in school. Public signage and other state-produced textual materials are often (but not always) printed in four languages. Race is also explicitly inquired after in interaction: "What is your race?"—along with variations like, "What are you?" and "Where are you (*really*) from?"—are common getting-to-know-you questions (PuruShotam, 1998, pp. 53–55). In my experience, these questions are common today across a variety of interactions, not just those involving foreigners. Despite the apparently egalitarian flattening of the groups classified by CMIO, various sociohistorical processes continue to produce group-based hierarchies between and among the classified groups, hierarchies that also link spatialized and emplaced axes of differentiation to places cast as "outside." Via these processes, signs interpreted as cultural, ethnic, national/citizenship, gendered, classed, etc. are subsumed under or projected into/as a raciolinguistic order. In other words, a Singapore-internal racial order (with language as its supporting evidence) sets up racialization as a default interpretive frame for subsuming encounters with other kinds of difference. I elaborate this in the next two sections.

[3] This aims at integration rather than segregation. Public housing policy has been used since Singapore's independence to ensure that public housing estates match the demographics of the city-state. Roughly 80% of Singaporeans live in public housing today.

Southeast Asian Island City-State, Singapore

This section traces how raciolinguistic differentiation in and beyond Singapore gets located spatially. I focus on the differential construction of four pragmatic paradigms of spatial denotation: region, island, city, and nation/state. I elaborate each paradigm in turn by drawing from political oratory/memoir and scholarly accounts. My purpose across each of the subsections is to deconstruct and move beyond the labels as such. While the region, island, city, and nation/state often stand as lexical labels for indexing a pragmatic paradigm, the terms alone are not these paradigms' salient features, nor are the labels' presence necessary or sufficient for recognizing when a given paradigm is being presupposed and entailed in an event of storytelling. In other words, the labels themselves are not my focus. Additionally, I do not treat hinterland as a separate paradigm, but rather track the contrastive figuration of spatialized distinctions within and across each of the paradigms as a manifestation of that paradigm's hinterland: its constitutive outsides and conditions of possibility, which are at once material and ideological. As I hope is clear, these outsides are never simply outside but are materialized fractally inside, too.

Region

For centuries, Singapore has been part of fluid, shifting entanglements across the areas known as Nanyang (南洋) 'the South Seas' and Nusantara 'the Malay Archipelago/Malay World' through trade; migration; feudal and tributary obligations; intermarriage; cultural and intellectual exchange; etc. (Rahim, 2010; Bernards, 2015). In the wake of colonial encounters—most centrally British colonization—local feudal, tributary, and cultural relations in British Malaya and beyond were slowly yet unevenly reconfigured as racialized nation and state formations (Hirschman, 1986; López, 2001). As post-WWII decolonization and nationalist movements were increasingly tied to Cold War geopolitics, the Southeast Asian region was recast as a relatively coherent geographic, environmental, and cultural zone by Euro-American strategists (Jones, 2002; Goh & Yeoh, 2003).

Yet this regional paradigm was not simply a projection from Euro-American military, political, and cultural hegemony: it was also taken up locally as an axis through which to understand racialized, inter-state relations. From Singapore's independence onward, the group categorized as Chinese has maintained a demographic majority. This majority status has been variously mobilized to construct Singapore as geopolitically and raciolinguistically embattled. That is, Chinese majority status has driven racialized narratives of the city-state's perpetual state of threat from its Malay-Muslim neighbors (Rahim, 2010, pp. 60–62).

Since independence, Singapore has gone on to be mythologized as a "Third World miracle," a "tiger economy" (Watson, 2011, p. 18), and an "unlikely" success (Perry, 2017; see Holden, 2017 for a critique). Referred to locally as the "Singapore Story," these success stories aim to instill in Singaporeans a sense of pride in the meteoric rise from "Third World to First" (Lee, 2012). By framing Singapore as exceptional in this way, these stories invoke a regional contrast: unlike the rest of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Singapore is wealthy, powerful, and successful—a "First World nation" in a "Third World region."

Island

Particularly in Western imaginaries, islands have a long genealogy as a figure of desire, and island status carries a range of assumptions and defaults that continue into the present.[4] This was the case in Singapore under British colonial rule: its status as an island was crucial to the strategies for governing British Malaya, since, as an island, Singapore had "economic and social interests distinct from those of the mainland" (*Malayan Union and Singapore, Statement of Policy on Future Constitution*,

[4] Political theorists from Thomas More (*Utopia*, 1516) to Francis Bacon (*New Atlantis*, 1626) and beyond have long utilized the figure of the island as a setting for imagining utopian societal visions (Dodds & Royle, 2003). During WWI, the figure of the Sprachinsel 'language island' was a powerful rhetorical and political device for mobilizing German imperial designs aimed at "saving" the isolated, fragmented German völker (Braun, 2016). In a less obviously insidious genealogy, the sociolinguist William Labov proclaimed islands the perfect setting in which to conduct sociolinguistic studies because their physical isolation made them "self-contained units," hence "natural laboratories" for variation (Labov, 1972, p. 4).

Cmd. 6724, London: HMSO, 1946, para. 5, cited in Chan, 1971, p. 3). In the lead-up to Singapore's independence, the terms island and mainland were used by public commentators and politicians to indirectly index the racialized divide between Chinese (island) and Malay (regional) interests (ibid, pp. 3–4).

Talk about Singapore's island-ness continued beyond independence, needless to say. In a 2015 speech given on the occasion of Singapore's Golden Jubilee, ambassador Bilahari Kausikan cited a statement by Lee Kuan Yew: "island nations are a political joke" (Kausikan, 2015). Bilahari's speech circulated widely in mediatized reports and online. He noted at the time that this quote was largely apocryphal, and provided the full citation to Lee's original 1957 speech in a later 2020 publication. The full quote read: "In the context of the second half of the 20th century Southeast Asia, island nations are a political joke" (Kausikan, 2020). However, by way of an ethnographic observation, I will note that the earlier, truncated, and largely apocryphal version of the quote circulates in Singapore with far greater cultural cache, even beyond Bilahari's speech as such. That is, Prime Minister Lee's assertions about Singapore's island-ness is today presented as a testament to the "unlikeliness" of its political survival—and thriving.

City

Singapore's status as a city is often narrated along the lines of classic sociological definitions: a densely built-up physical conurbation occupied by a congeries of demographically heterogeneous persons living in close physical proximity, and who relate to one another only via their ephemeral, shifting social roles or statuses. City-ness is also attributed via labeling practices: Singapore is constantly referred to via terms like city-state, the Lion City, and the world's first "Global City"—a term coined by the Singaporean minister Sinnathamby Rajaratnam decades before it became a social-scientific buzzword (Rajaratnam, 1972). As Rajaratnam articulated it, Singapore's status as a Global City was not just meant as a description: it outlined a policy stance, too. Of course, Singapore was long tied to global imaginaries of imperial conquest and competition; my point

here is that the term "Global City" was first applied during a particular post-independence moment. With its new status as a sovereign island city-state, Singapore was faced with new challenges that were solved, in part, by reimagining it as a Global City among Global Cities—in competition with a world of sovereign states, even as it sought to attract and accommodate the world to accrue financial and cultural capital. Global City status today is increasingly tied to tourism and "skilled" labor markets, and Singapore's citizen population of approximately 3.5 million and 1.6 million non-citizens was overshadowed by 19.1 million tourist arrivals in 2019 (Singapore Tourism Board, 2020). To denote Singapore's status as city is thus to invoke not only its intensively built-up environment but also its heterogenous and mobile population and embroilment in global competition.

Nation/State

The sociolinguist Lionel Wee has written about the post-independence contradiction that Singapore faced as a "state that is not a nation" (Gupta, 1992, p. 73). While many postcolonial states historically took recourse to discourses of "primordialism" to construct a teleology from a shared national past to a future destiny in self-determining statehood, this was seen as impossible in Singapore. Responding to the fact that Singapore had inherited a plural society from their colonizers, members of the People's Action Party (PAP), Singapore's dominant political party since 1959, sought to ensure that:

> [t]he modern European model of the nation-state…[could] be *indigenized* for the PAP's own purposes. Since there was no one racial identity—and thus no Single "nation"—upon which to safely erect a national identity, [Prime Minister] Lee and his colleagues aimed to make industrial modernity the metanarrative which would frame Singapore's national identity, and to create a remarkable "Global City" which, because of its trading links, would escape the restraints placed upon it by history and geography. The "national" as a category was not to be jettisoned but to be renovated so that Singapore's racial and cultural difference could be contained and to

some extent homogenized for the leap into modernity (Wee, 1993, pp. 716–717).

In these (and other) ways, constructing geographic stories that attribute Singapore's status as a nation/state thus presuppose and creatively entail a Singaporean public that is at once inchoate, incomplete, and internally fractured, hence one that requires the "visible hand" of the state to manage its internal fractionation (Kathiravelu, 2017, pp. 160–61). The next section expands outward from official stories and histories (McKittrick, 2006, p. xxiv) to track how differentiation gets worked out in and through Singaporean literary texts.

Balik Kampung and Geographic Stories of the Hinterland within

In this section, I analyze the *Balik Kampung* series of short stories as geographic stories. The series is titled with a Malay expression meaning (literally) 'go back to the village,' but also (metaphorically) 'go back home' and (generally pejoratively) 'go back where [one] comes from'. The series is edited by storyteller, author, and educator Verena Tay, and is published by Math Paper Press, a small, independent Singaporean publishing house. The series comprises six volumes: *Balik Kampung: Stories of Connection and Disconnection with Different Parts of Singapore* (2012/2015a); *Balik Kampung 2A: People and Places* (2013/2015b); *Balik Kampung 2B: Contemplations* (2013/2016a); *Balik Kampung 3A: Northern Shores* (2016b); *Balik Kampung 3B: Some East, More West* (2016c); and *Balik Kampung 3C: Central Corridor* (2016d). The volumes include 56 stories by 55 contributors, all of whom have lived in their Singapore neighborhoods for at least 10 years. Though many of the stories are autobiographical or semi-autobiographical, boundaries between (auto)biography, fiction, and nonfiction are not rigidly maintained. These works were also incredibly popular in Singapore, topping best-seller lists in their respective publication years and reprinted/reissued in the years following.

Before I continue, two brief notes. First, my approach here resonates with other scholars in anthropology, comparative literature, and geography who have argued that ethnography ought to be analyzed as fiction-writing (Strathern, 1987; Firth, 1989; Visweswaran, 1994), and that works of fiction—and literature more generally—be analyzed as ethnographic (Schwab, 2012). Second, I acknowledge that the authors in the *Balik Kampung* series are anglophone elites with access to linguistic, cultural, social, and (to varying degrees) economic capital, all of which afford degrees of privilege in articulating and working out the felt tensions of dwelling in Singapore—and doing so in ways that align with state and public concerns over "Good English" (Tan, 2017). I do not dismiss this, but rather insist also on the realities of the tensions, ambivalences, and violences borne out of the multiple, contested erasures of spaces, places, and differences in Singapore (Lim, 1989), which these authors also experience and navigate in various ways. I seek to keep open rather than resolve these tensions as I continue.

Region

Across *Balik Kampung*, the Southeast Asian region appears primarily through characters—often minor characters, but occasionally a narrator or protagonist. A total of 16 stories feature non-Singaporean characters that range from male Bangladeshi migrant workers; Thai sex workers; and Filipina or Indonesian domestic workers to Indian, Malaysian, and British expats who have made Singapore their home. Of note are the stories "Enough" (Bryant, 2013/2015a, pp. 63–76,), "Gedong Gold" (Ang, 2013/2016a, pp. 19–32), and "Beginnings" (Wong, 2012/2015b, pp. 83–104). In stories like these, migrant workers appear as objects of xenophobic derision, often voiced through raciolinguistic evaluations; even where they appear as protagonists and quasi-kin, their distance from their Singaporean counterparts is still marked.

"Enough" narrates a story of multiple axes of exploitation and otherness, as Kali, an Indian-Singaporean woman police officer—the only Indian woman in her brigade—is micromanaged and disciplined by her male Chinese-Singaporean superior; because of her intersectional

identities, she is assigned to any case or incident involving a Tamil speaker or a woman, which requires her to submit more reports than the men in her unit. The story follows Kali as she counsels her sister, who is in a physically abusive relationship, but also as she dehumanizes the manual laborers whose informal settlements she raids with her police colleagues and expresses her derision for a group of arrested Thai sex workers whom she and an interpreter are assigned to interrogate:

> She entered Room C and greeted the interpreter.
>
> "I'm Officer Kali."
>
> "You can call me Jitra," the other woman replied, returning Kali's curt nod with one of her own.
>
> "Sorry to have kept you waiting," Kali said. "I was sent out to deal with a call from the neighborhood while my desk sergeant located a Thai translator."
>
> "It's fine," Jitra replied. "I'm ready when you are."
>
> "Then let's get started."
>
> Over the next three hours, Kali witnessed five versions of the same event. A girl entered the room, escorted by one of the male officers. As soon as she was seated, the man left, closing the door behind him. The girl turned toward Jitra, a stream of pleading Thai bursting from her mouth the moment the door clicked shut. Kali was already sick of the nasal quality of the language, and she was no more than half done. She never understood why others called the Thai language lilting or musical. To Kali, it was peevish and whiny, making all these women sound weak (Bryant 2012/2016, p. 67).

In scenes like this one, characters comment on—thereby forming gendered and linguistic characterizations of—others' language use to construct raciolinguistic person-types linked to other regional locales.

In "Gedong Gold," an older Chinese-Singaporean man, Seng, is informally contracted by an acquaintance to illegally gather and sell a kind of wild durian (the Gedong Gold of the title). As Seng stumbles through the jungle at night searching for the fruit, he encounters a pair of Burmese manual laborers who have set up an encampment. After stealing a sack of the durians from the two men, Seng is pursued through the jungle, eventually losing them after falling down an embankment. There, he fumes: "Stupid people, he juddered from rage, taking our land and living for free. He held both knees and curled up, biting back curses. As if the money we pay them didn't magically make them rich men when they went home" (Ang, 2013/2016a, p. 28).

In "Beginnings" (Wong, 2012/2016b, pp. 83–104), meanwhile, the story's protagonist is a Filipina maid, Lualhati. Lualhati's position is ambivalent: both deeply intimate, occupying a well-off Chinese-Singaporean family's domestic space, and multiply other to them. The story is also marked by Lualhati's desire to return to the Philippines; she ultimately succeeds, but is brought back by the family's daughter, Amelia, whom Lualhati raised from a young age. After she marries, Amelia asks Lualhati to come to work for her and her new husband, an offer that Lualhati eventually declines. Across these stories, the region is both a place from which characters come and to which they go (or return), but the region also signals its appearance through a embodied encounters with "foreign" raciolinguistic others. These others' raciolinguistic markedness is cast as external to the nation, even though it is first encountered locally—a kind of "matter out of place" (Douglas, 2001) whose presence is offered as a transparently interpretable, multiply marked, and often stigmatizing encounter with difference.

Island

Singapore's status as an island is indexed across the series through stories that narrate separation and disconnection between and among both people and places: in short, through forms of isolation that go beyond a semantic-etymological link between "island" and "isolation," appearing as aesthetic and narrative devices in the stories. This is most explicit in

eight of the series' stories, where characters find themselves cut off from others following another character's return to a place beyond the island. In "The Great Dying" (Yong, 2012/2015b, pp. 39–49), a young woman's ghost pieces together her final days alive. As she gradually realizes that she was the victim of a hit-and-run accident, the ghost learns how to use train tracks as a conduit to move through space:

> There is a suggestion that I take the railway—it is deserted and quiet, since the train service to Malaysia has stopped running from Tanjong Pagar, after the relocation of the railway station to Woodlands…So I take the easy way out, since the railway iron serves as a superconductor for spiritual beings like me. It can help to transport me swiftly from here to another location along the track…In a matter of weeks, the stretch of railway from Tanjong Pagar to Woodlands will be dismantled. With the track gone, I don't know if I'll still be able to find my way back home. But this is a moot point, since I'm pretty sure I'll have no desire to return (ibid, pp. 48–48).

Across scenes like these, characters narrate their intertwined geographic and social isolation, albeit ambivalently. In this story, isolation from the Malay Archipelago—which is also isolation from Singapore—is not narrated as a loss. Similarly, in other stories, isolation from past lifeways and-worlds is often narrated as a catalyst for greater affective, interpersonal, and spatial closeness among characters.

City

References to Singapore's status as a city are often materialized through narrations of the density and intensiveness of interpersonal encounters among characters. City status is further indexed through narrative descriptions of Singapore's high-rise urban architecture. The former can be seen in "Peace is a Foot Reflexology Parlour" (Ip, 2013/2015a, pp. 5–20): an upper-middle-aged man, Kok Seong—an avid reader who reads while walking—encounters a cavalcade of minor characters, strangers and acquaintances alike, who together index the character's antisocial personality. After an unwelcome encounter with a garrulous primary

school classmate, Kok Seong dwells on this aspect of Singaporean urban sociality

> The trouble with Ang Mo Kio and Toa Payoh, Tampines and Jurong—the HDB heartlands were too full of people who actually lived there. Who went to market. Who popped downstairs for a haircut or a bottle of soy sauce, a used video game or a chat with a schoolmate. There were too many malls with too many things that were actually useful, too many shops that people actually went to, too many pathways actually convenient enough to bring you from point A to B. A read-walker in search of peace, Kok Seong mused, would never find it in the heartlands. There was always a risk that he would be recognized and stopped for a conversation, or that the sheer density of human traffic would override his collision avoidance mechanisms—he would actually have to look where he was going, rather than enjoying his read (ibid, 8).

Kok Seong's reference to the Singapore "heartlands" is a local indexing for an "average" or "everyday" Singaporean persona and the urban spaces in which they dwell (E. Lim, 2018, p. 24), a predication that emphasizes the inescapable, all-pervasive social relations that are thrust upon those who dwell in Singapore-as-city. Crucially, the "heartlands" are a part of the city, a site of the "sheer density of human traffic" that gets felt as acutely unavoidably by this story's protagonist.

The darker side of Singapore's status as a city, meanwhile, gets narrated through stories about the entanglements of architecture and death. In "Certainty" (De Rozario, 2013/2016a, pp. 87–97) and "Everest" (Jaswal, 2016b, pp. 25–40), the narrators—also characters—describe the new kinds of death made possible by Singapore's skyward expansion. In "Certainty," a young mother recounts one of her early memories as a child encountering a dead body, the remains of a person who jumped to their deaths from a public housing block. The character goes on to kill her son by dropping him from the roof of her block; the woman had planned to jump as well, but was stopped. "Everest" is decidedly less dark. The narrator, Meena, is the elder of two children in an Indian expat family. Meena's younger brother, Mahesh, resolves one day to climb Mount Everest, and begins a training regimen that consists of climbing

the 25 flights of stairs in their building every day. Meena befriends a local girl and learns from her that their block—the tallest in the estate—is where people go when they want to jump to their deaths. Beyond these stories, 19 other stories feature vertical-architectural tropes (through recurrent tropes of gazing up or down; climbing long flights of stairs or taking lifts to high floors; etc.), but it should be noted that they do so without also narrating death. However, city-ness and vertical urbanism are most foregrounded in stories of death.

Nation/State

Stories that typify Singapore as a nation/state do so most explicitly in cases where the protagonists are not Singaporeans, curiously enough. Across six stories of this kind, characters articulate, locate, and navigate the tensions that emerge from living as long-term outsiders in Singapore. For instance, in "Mrs Gupta and the Squeaky Trolly" (Nansi, 2016c, pp. 1–18), the eponymous character, Mrs. Gupta, follows a pair of Indian expat women around the supermarket. Though an expat herself, Mrs. Gupta finds herself increasingly enraged by the duo's dismissive attitude toward Singapore and Singaporeans:

> Mrs Gupta felt an irrational irritation at these women who were making uneducated and, in her opinion, insensitive comments about the cuisine and culture of a place she called home…A part of her wanted to tell these women off and she found herself trundling after them with the wheel of her trolley squeaking angrily along with her…Livid, Mrs Gupta thought of her best friend Mrs Irani who was also a Permanent Resident. She had insisted her son complete his responsibility to his adopted nation. He had served as an officer and they had all been so proud the day he had his commissioning parade. National Service was a wonderful social equaliser, Mrs. Gupta thought. It turned our boys into men. It meant we were always ready in times of trouble (Nansi, 2016; pp. 15–16).

Notably, Mrs. Gupta narrates the Singapore military as a source of belonging, a positive force that incorporates and fashions the nation's men as men—as defenders of the nation. The encounter with outsiders is

framed as a moment of anger for Mrs. Gupta, who locates the "we" of the nation via a contrast with a "them" who hail from a nation-state elsewhere—ironically, the nation-state in which Mrs. Gupta was herself born. This is further indexed via the deictic shifts across the passage, from "these," "they," "her," and "she" (the latter two a reported-speech construction to narrate her best friend's relationship to Singapore) to "our" and "we." Mrs. Gupta's character—and her inner monologue—materializes the shifting conditions of possibility for gradiently belonging to and identifying with Singapore as nation (and/or state), even while remaining in various ways at its margins and outsides as an ideological hinterland within.

Conclusion

This chapter has tracked the production and circulation of multi-scalar spatial fictions in a series of geographic stories in and about Singapore. By elaborating historical, ethnographic, and literary-textual sources, I have tracked the constitutive, contested entanglements of Singaporean environments with creative texts and other communicative genres, from political oratory and -memoirs to collected short stories. In doing so, my primary aim has been to track the stakes and forms of a concern with Singapore's imputed lack of a hinterland. I have looked beyond hegemonic, state-backed sources and mobilized an interdisciplinary scholarly apparatus to elaborate the ways that these multi-scalar spatial fictions materialize, and are materialized by, axes of differentiation that get used to variously figure Singapore as island, city, nation/state, and regional entity. These semiotic processes of differentiation (Gal & Irvine, 2019), I have argued, work to produce what I call a *hinterland within*: an iterative, spatialized introflection of each of the pragmatic paradigms' social, linguistic, racialized, and cultural outsides. My use of outsides/insides do not describe ontological necessities, of course, but ideological orientations. Crucially, this takes place in and through stories: following McKittrick and Watson, I have sought to keep in view the art and pleasurableness (whether reactionary, liberatory, or otherwise) of stories through which place and space get materially co-constructed.

Of course, the *Balik Kampung* stories are not the only stories where these implicit-to-explicit sets of contextually appropriate representations materialize. I have chosen these stories because of their public popularity in Singapore and because of their overt focus on places, but the pragmatic paradigms I have tracked also materialize elsewhere, across other genres and instances of geographic storytelling. Similarly, spatial fictions and the pragmatic paradigms they anchor should not be understood as discrete. Though I have analyzed and exemplified each of the four categories in turn, these paradigms appear together and trouble one another across each of the 56 stories in the *Balik Kampung* series as well as in other works beyond my own selection for this chapter. I hope to model an interdisciplinary vantage point from which scholars interested in the co-construction of language in, about, and through space can work to track the multifunctional production, location, contestation, and concealment of racialized-gendered difference beyond my own argument about spatial denotation in and about Singapore. Following McKittrick, this vantage is not simply intended to "reveal" or "discover" what has been erased (2006, p. xxiv), but to open up possibilities for constructing new, and different, worlds by learning to identify stories differently—and to tell different stories.

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