

## The Road People: Poetry and Urban (Im)Mobility in Singapore

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### Abstract

The extent to which dromological desires, the desires of the roads, have become intertwined with the Singaporean condition may not be underestimated. Life in the island city develops through a unique range of circumstances from limited land resources, economic aspirations, and political harmonisation to the constant evanescent of its ground for national identity. The mix of modernisation, claustrophobia, result-oriented policy-making, and endless cultural renewal creates an explosive context for the resident to embrace speed. This essay aims to study the impact of Singapore's excessive but necessary reliance on its roads and will explore both the observations of its poets and how they compare with regular political answers. Some of the most representative poems from the last four decades will be examined in order to outline the human experience of urban speed as a catastrophe.

### Keywords

Poetry, Singapore, city, urbanity, roads, transport

What should constitute the transgressive excess that was enjoyed locally during the Singapore Grand Prix held on 28 September 2008 but this: the *complete* imposition of a grassroots fantasy onto the topography of an otherwise exclusive motorsport event? In the sixty-one rounds of this much-hyped first Formula One night race set in Singapore's Central Area and watched by over a fifth of its residents on-site and via telecast, the repetitions seemed to reline the contours of a wholly accessible popular imagination ("Stunning Start").<sup>2</sup> Here were awe and applause for practically

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<sup>2</sup> This sold-out event was not so much the country's first Grand Prix as a revival of what was held formerly on Thomson Road from 1961 to 1973. Its live telecast became the national channel's most watched programme of the year, beating even the spectacular opening of the Beijing Olympics (Huang, "Grand Prix").

everything criminal in the pure rush of high speed: the flouting of normal traffic rules and road direction, the anticipation of some spectacular crashes, and utter disregard for air and noise pollution – all pressed against the backdrop of landmarks that stood for legal and economic prowess. That the track was, in fact, safely contained and well-monitored is beside the point: what made this an actual national affair was not just the anxiously achieved logistical excellence but also its Dionysiac release of closed subterranean energies. A reader intrigued by this claim needs only to remember that, prior to the event, a key topic dominating public debate for months had been about the same roads with a twist in perspective and outward sentiment. Its issue had involved a state of traffic congestion so bad that the government’s advisors warned of its economic harm, the fear of a so-called “gridlocked nation” leading to further hikes in the already high cost of road use in Singapore (Raymond Lim, “Speech”). From this angle, the race that followed was a curious reverse celebration of life in a conundrum, its frustration transformed into raw enjoyment through a clearly Burkean experience of the sublime. The terrible became both a conduit and a command for the paralysed human subject to recover all it ever desires in the road through an encounter with a free, continuous, and legitimate form of its violence.

This essay aims to study the poetic intuitions of such a complex perverse relationship between humans and roads in modern Singapore and will enable a level of dialogue among a few poets based on them. I will trace the life of the artistic consciousness out of a work notoriously banned from the airwaves in the 1970s, Lee Tzu Pheng’s “My Country and My People,” and read its early suppression in terms of an institutional horror at a future that could not be *admitted*. To get to this point though, I need to establish first an island city’s uniqueness by highlighting a mistake some critics and strategists still make in seeing it as a miniaturised or laboratory version of the standard city. The image leads them to evaluate and offer solutions in happily experimental terms and to assume that the effects of their proposed scenarios are largely reversible, the human cost either too small or too irrelevant to cause any real trauma. Yet, unlike obvious metropolises such as London and New York, both being the country’s current cultural models, an island city has its own explosive space-time continuum that tends to defy the fundamentals of conventional governance. What it combines is a relative speed of urbanisation – relative because it relies on, and is always competing with, the speeds of other economic centres – with the absolute limits for such volatility to take place. The fact makes it strongly naïve to believe that, when the aggression of urban time clashes with real cosmopolitan space, that is, when physical change cannot catch up adequately or uniformly with the rate of economic change, the discordant forces simply dissipate and do not ricochet back in some other ways. Indeed, Singapore’s constant need to reclaim land along its coastlines may not be as capricious as some sceptics assert but exactly illustrates these repercussions of progress at the island’s stress-points, its own terranean limits.

In the light of such devastating urban kinetics, we state the understanding here that there is truly no ontological difference between the city and the road and that the road – more than the skyscraper or the economy – is the quintessential image of urban processes. The road is not just the city’s life-giver and shaper, its circulatory system, but also a paradoxically *unlivable* space, a desert stretch: this is effectively what the Minister for Transport Raymond Lim implied too when he demonstrated roads to be in dangerous competition with residents for living space. Considering that Singapore’s population now stands at 4.84 million and is projected to reach 6.5 million by mid-century, what is staggering in Lim’s proving figures is the roads’ occupancy of almost one-eighth of national land and expansion at an annual rate of one percent (Lydia Lim, “You Ain’t”; Raymond Lim, “Speech”). The fact that roads do not actually enhance but militarise social relationships, marking out and ranking their spaces and essentialising the speed of mobilising resources, labour, and information, is long related by the urban theorist Paul Virilio. This knowledge can help us to differentiate between the motif of motor travel in Singaporean literature and in standard Anglo-American writing, whose current postmodern preoccupation generally shifts its old meaning of rootless adventure to a vision of infinite possibilities in the hyper-real. I am certainly reminded here of Thomas Pynchon’s own critique of the Californian road in *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) as a “hypodermic needle, inserted somewhere ahead into the vein of the freeway” to keep the city “happy, coherent, protected from pain” (15). In Singapore however, the thinking writer does not have this luxury of glorifying apparent indefinite space and spectral horizon but is forced habitually to set the road against real limits in the coexistence of the urban and the human. Ironically, the string of economic woes in 2008 – soaring fuel prices and costs of living and then the world financial meltdown – is inviting ordinary Singaporeans to realise the same by bracketing out markers of prosperity as fundamentally metaphysical.

### **The Road Giveth, The Road Taketh Away**

This twist involving what is now self-evident has even Lim affirm the belligerence of mere urbanisation and describe new car-curbing measures as necessary for citizens to “continue to enjoy living in a city, in a garden, and not a city in a carpark” (qtd. in Saad). The remarkable outburst tellingly kept up a doubling of dream and reality, the hope of some pastoral ideal – common at the birth of modern *planned* cities, as poems like John Gay’s *Trivia* (1716) on Augustan London show – and an admission of stark urban certainties. In this sense, Lee’s “My Country and My People,” finally published in *Prospect of a Drowning* (1980), was the first poem to dismiss the duality and name the eventual defeat of nature in Singapore:

Then I learnt to drive instead  
and praise the highways till  
I saw them chop the great trees down,  
and plant the little ones;

impound the hungry buffalo  
 (the big and the little ones)  
 because the cars could not be curbed.  
 Nor could the population.  
 They build milli-mini-flats  
 for a multi-mini-society.  
 The chiselled profile of the sky  
 took on a lofty attitude,  
 but modestly, at any rate,  
 it made the tourist feel 'at home.' (51-52)

We can see here the coming of Lim's city held hostage in the carpark, of the fully optimised road where car becomes home, which underscores Virilio's point that the "*non-place of speed has definitely supplanted that of place*" (133). The point should also be noted that this complete mobilisation of living conditions enables not just nomadic culture but, given how the single constant in motion is speed, a form of stagnancy too. Its scenario affords the comfort of human control only via a juxtaposition of urban and civil powers where, as if in an imperial partitioning of conquered lands, what is horizontal is surrendered to roads while the vertical belongs to humans. Yet, we may already sense real menace in the former's underestimated amorality: if the substitution of "great trees" with "little ones" appears reasonable and vaguely reassuring, the seizure of both big and little buffaloes removes any doubt that its choice is purely arbitrary. It is this subjection of all life to the roads' efficient reshaping of reality around them, with animal lineage destroyed and trees moving like those of Macbeth's Birnam Wood, that allows the city to bring forth and maintain its distinct life.

I am indeed challenging traditional readings of Lee's poem as a record of what critic Kirpal Singh calls an "historical problem," its datedness clear once "Singapore matures and develops a strong sense of identity." This view has led Singh to warn against overstating its significance or attempting "any philosophical speculation" since it is "enough" that the poet "should have been able to discern so aptly and state so poignantly the social-political milieu relevant to Singaporeans possessing insight" (43). While Lee's merciless highways continue to be of use to discussions on early modernisation and citizenry, it is wholly possible to invert the relationship and see urban growth and identity themselves as grounded on viatical disinterest in particular fates. The uncontrollability of cars becomes the expanding roads' own *raison d'être*, their violence synonymous with that of reckless and faceless drivers tied as such to the "them" who wield vast self-deluding powers to "chop," "plant," and "impound." A recognition that roads form a closed economy of desires where builders and users are ultimately interchangeable amplifies this crucial sense of false empowerment, the city being the only pure force behind its lived reality of Virilio's "dromocrats." Singh may note too how Lee's "ever so short-lived" celebration of highways terminates upon her realisation that not she but "automobiles are accorded priority"

in their future, but he posits her change of mind as merely “sardonic” (41). The double cross is, in fact, fundamental to how roads both close distance and, by diminishing our sense of arrival, expand it; it explains Lee’s most baffling images of what she owned in her parents’ home, “a duck that would not lay” and “a runt of a papaya tree/ which also turned out to be male.” The two actually signal the same thing: their mistaken sexuality does not just anticipate the breakdown of false expectations of productiveness but also highlights, from what hoping itself suggests, wrongheaded efforts at same-sex bleeding, a catastrophe of trying to mate two masculine powers.

This accelerated infusion of a whole people with urban principles climaxes in the utter subversion of home, recast by the cosmopolitan desire for tourist dollars into the image of a hotel or a resort.<sup>3</sup> The motif of citizens being, therefore, never “home enough” was extended later by Boey Kim Cheng, whose poetry from 1989 to the mid-1990s was fixated on human exile in a city “gridded” for “permutations of possibilities”:

The buildings are in alignment with the roads  
which meets at desired points  
linked by bridges all hang  
in the grace of mathematics.  
They build and will not stop.  
Even the sea draws back  
and the skies surrender. (63)

These lines from “The Planners” appear in a section of *Another Place* (1992) entitled “Here, Now” that both complements another on Boey’s travels named “There, Then” and recalls Lee’s famous opening: “My country and my people/ are neither here nor there.” While Lee’s topographical poles serve to mark the same clarity lost to her sense of belonging, Boey’s displaced Singapore lies firmly in a “Here” and “Now” determined by well-educated elites who can command even sea and sky like biblical messengers of God.<sup>4</sup> Their differences in judgement are significant because the pair effectively frame over two decades of an orchestration of collective will, the surrender to which names what Lee feels for assuming the city to be “a distant way” and contributing to the rise of its roads as guilt. Indeed, her eventual resignation to a belief that self-cultivation can, in Maoist-speak, “make a hundred flowers bloom” betrays not just her lingering sway under “China’s mighty shadow” but also her disenchantment and guardedness towards what she once welcomed as a path of

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<sup>3</sup> For an extended discussion of the poetic motif of the citizen as tourist, see Gwee Li Sui’s “Poetry Between the Experience of Nation and City in Singapore Today.”

<sup>4</sup> I have argued elsewhere that the figure of the magical tyrant, against whom Boey’s artist must struggle, recurs in his early poetry and is visible in, for example, “The Poet,” “The Sculptor (Rodin),” and “Prospero” (Gwee, “Boey” 22-24).

liberalisation.<sup>5</sup> Lee's series of systematic loss may resemble the style of rhetorical writings such as Martin Niemöller's "First They Came," a postwar poem that describes the apathy of ordinary Germans during the Nazis' rise to power and its consequent human cost (qtd. in Mayer 168).<sup>6</sup> Yet, her own trail of destruction, in listing the plight of ducks, trees, buffaloes, and so on, comes out evoking so much comic wit that any inherent appeal to ethical consideration is at once diminished.

### **My Country Is a Car**

Conventional wisdom has explained the suppression of Lee's poem soon after state independence by stressing "a few harsh things" it says against "the kind of direct onslaught the passage of history has had upon an individual" (Singh 39). Clarinda Choh's revisit in 1999 even seems to excuse its initial censoring through a view that "care and control" with regard to potentially subversive elements had been necessary when "a young country faced the volatile years of its foundations" (175). However, to site a poet's complicity in a national course of action demands that we also recognise a wider awareness of the ethical cost in options and, by extension, the country's implication in the poet's own conscience. In this sense, should we not read rather for a face of urbanity the establishment sought to avert for the same reason we may avoid promulgating new subjects of fear – lest their presence to mind causes their actualisation? This understanding leads me to suspend the familiar "us-them" divide of political thought here and see as hardly coincidental the tendency of art's muting to be accompanied by policies seeking as if to thwart the fulfilment of its insight. The obverse of any political decision is the *secret* that renders the functioning of power both seamless and meaningful, and such a relationship is what puts the artist at the heart of his or her society even if the truths at stake may not be tolerated, let alone understood, publicly. An institutional awareness of the roads' potential energies certainly exists, seeing how, from 1975, the authorities have been proactive with traffic issues by creating new roads and altering existing ones, setting annual quotas for new cars and auctioning their rights of ownership, regulating vehicle and road taxes, and developing the public transport system. The often short-lived or erratic successes of creative policies – from the launch of "weekend cars" to the use of Electronic Road Pricing (ERP) gantries – point less to a lack of effort on the government's part than to an overestimation of its ability to solve a problem inextricable from its express desires (Toh 72-74).

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<sup>5</sup> This phrase from a classical Chinese poem was made famous by Mao Tse-Tung in a 1957 speech and became part of the slogan of his Hundred Flowers Campaign, aimed at encouraging diverse views on state policies. The purge that came after has led to the popular belief today that the movement was meant, in fact, to both weaken the power of Mao's party enemies and identify dissident voices. It must also be noted that Lee's original title was parenthesised and should thus allude to the name of Lin Yutang's famous 1935 survey of Chinese culture and identity.

<sup>6</sup> This poem narrates an individual's silence and inaction while the Nazis were calmly eliminating one social group after another; its various known versions differently include Communists, Social Democrats, trade unionists, Jews, and Catholics.

What then is the horrific core of Boey's subsequent rebuke of Singapore's continued intense flirtation with urban forces, which also coincidentally supports the trivialisation of literature in "real life"?<sup>7</sup> His poem "Change Alley," found in *Days of No Name* (1996) under the section "Home, Elsewhere," surely a sublation of his previous volume's two sections, highlights the paradox of the citizen's *disappearance*:

It seemed he had come through the changes  
 unchanged, searching still the place  
 for signs leading home, or out of the streets  
 emptying into loss, whichever turn he took.  
 And while he waited the country flipped  
 the book of changes; streets lost their names,  
 the river forgot its source, soaring towers  
 policed the skies and before the answer  
 could come like the laugh heard changes ago

the alley packed its stalls and followed  
 the route to exile, its nomadic spirit  
 inhabiting now the country of the mind.  
 All is utterly changed, the map useless  
 for navigation in the lost city. (56-58)

Set in the heart of Singapore's financial district, Change Alley is a small shopping lane that has survived its practical use to those disembarking at the island's waterfront during its colonial times. Its grounding by Boey on the Chinese divinatory *Book of Change* firstly mocks the country's regular exoticisation by foreigners, seen again in how Vladimir Martynov's recent symphony *Singapore: A Geopolitical Utopia* (2005) praises the national application of what the *Tao Te Ching* teaches.<sup>8</sup> Secondly, this sublimation of the streets' disconcerting diversion, renaming, and loss emphasises the isolation felt by Singaporeans themselves in an assessment of the hailed mysticism's real-world impact. Boey's insomniac Singapore resides so completely in the space and time of speed that it tears the ground from under its sentimental residents and forces them to recreate a Singapore without a corresponding presence, a "country of the mind" and "Home, Elsewhere." I recall here the phrase "country of the spirit" which Lee herself uses to describe in an early foreword for Boey the realm he wanders with a fascination for "the vastnesses

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<sup>7</sup> For more discussion on this systematic disparaging of literature, see Gwee Li Sui's "Poetry and the Renaissance Machine in Singapore" (36-37).

<sup>8</sup> Martynov's composition happily sets to music the text of Lao Tzu's penultimate chapter, which offers a series of advice on state governance and leadership (228-30). A helpful angle on the problematic politics here may be found in Chang Tao Liang's "Some Thoughts about Vladimir Martynov's *Singapore: A Geopolitical Utopia*."

behind every human decision and alongside every action or path taken” (7). Her more important insight of his interest in modes of travel reaching always “beyond themselves and their immediate horizon” is right in what she does not ultimately say: in straining beyond moving itself, the poet aims for an essence *external* to the effectively circular motion of a country, its self-forgetting through speed feeding this impulse to keep on moving.

In fact, if poetry as a craft operates at one remove from ordinary perception expressed in language, Singaporean poetry exists with at least two levels of mystification, the other being its reflective speed set against the reality it arrives from. To put this another way, a citizen-poet choosing to observe the gestalt of Singapore at once falls out of line from a want of perspective even as he or she can then understand the true violent ruptures of modernity and the total disempowerment that viatical economics enables. The horror of real physical loss *outside* of roads – what not only occupies spaces but also makes them disappear by passing through, over, and around them – haunts Boey and all subsequent poets seeking merely to pin down their sense of place. The use of textual signs to suggest what can be written, written over, and written off and what may *not* be written is seen too in Paul Tan Kim Liang’s “Changing Bus Routes,” from his tactfully titled *Curious Roads* (1994), which describes why buses no longer “ply” some old housing estate:

Someone pulled out  
demographic charts  
as they struck out their routes.

Out, out –

There are no buses here,  
only feasting spirits  
on these unswept avenues.

The old women in purple  
*samfoos* look like  
ghastly orchids –

They queue at a deserted interchange. (53)

This confluence of obsolete routes and names and expended spaces reveals its human agency and expected victims: again the nameless “they” and “Someone” who can transform geographies and the dispossessed longtime dwellers, represented by old women who wait Didi- and Gogo-like at “a deserted interchange” for “no buses.” All city-dwellers’ essential reliance on an access to roads helps to highlight here the roads’ central power over social visibility and reality, their mere denial effecting a discriminatory erasure of those who have lived past their economic lifespan. This

intrinsic operation exposes the real challenge to Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's memorable promise of 2005 that the nation under his leadership "will progress together" and "not leave anybody behind" – a conundrum since progress itself is defined by an efficient art of disposing. The bewildering "Out, out," in invoking both Macbeth's famous reflection on life's absurdity and his wife's ablutomaniac attempt to scrub off her "damned spot," correctly locates the urbanising act as an ethical decision first with consequences of great guilt (Shakespeare 132, 125).

### **The Road Never Sleeps**

Tan is a curious poet writing between Lee's complicity and Boey's abjuration in beating a middleway that shows how one can still exercise power over a refusal to sound melancholic. His old women number with Boey's displaced citizen as creatures of place who have weathered broad changes unchanged but are, like the spaces they live and dream in, passed over, rendered ghostly through the city's endlessly rebooting reality. Tan's use of a classical Chinese text likewise affirms the notion of mysticism sublimating a political condition: in "Dream," the *Tao Te Ching* flung "at freckled children" by an imaginary Oriental invasion of "uncivilisation" allows him to mock in reverse the failure to see the ideological violence of Western influences (*Curious Roads* 3). Yet, his nightmare from "Island in the Sun" offers a different landscape, a Singapore overrun not by foreign cultures but by its own urban appetite for space, creating as such the fantastical panic of people "falling off its edges." This acute claustrophobia is set crucially at a level just under the skin of normal life on an island that triumphantly "tyres over what had been water" and "sand bars over coral" as "unleaded cars now course the roads," "its passengers neatly strapped" (52). The metaphysical ability to make cars walk on water doubles as a power that further straps human down for both their own safety and their subjection, an ambiguity highlighting another wakeful disconnect between an eerie campaign-induced optimism, where "the people are smiling and smiling," and actual trauma.<sup>9</sup> An underlying tiredness – from not just ceaseless smiling but, in view of this excess being compensatory, the dehumanising that compels it – is admitted in "train ride," a poem about a northward journey "out of a country/ drugged with its modernity and its self-image." Unable to appreciate rural Malaysia, Tan wonders whether "perhaps we have been too long in/ pigeon holes, our claustrophobic comforts," and states:

how were we to  
know that our  
smiles could wear thin,  
our eyes tire of green,  
our minds hunger

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<sup>9</sup> For a clarification of the National Courtesy Campaign within the scope of the government's public policy-making, see Jon S. T. Quah's "The Public Policy-Making Process in Singapore."

for throbbing crowds,  
concrete dreams? (65)

These lines strike hard at the unnaturalness of the urbanites' ability to enjoy: their oblivious pleasures consist less of focus, simplicity, solitude, and reality than of novelty, dazzle, intrusiveness, and immateriality. Tiredness, to be sure, is a central trope of recent Singaporean verse and appears too in Alvin Pang's "Work," from *Testing the Silence* (1997), which describes an evening homeward drive through traffic that "threatens to eat you/ up, to pull you into itself, and never let go." This irrational awareness that urban life is a gothic mode with ultimately false escape routes adds to the human's blurred vision imaged in the synonymous "smudged glass" and "tired / eyes" that worry that "Somehow, somewhere,/ someone is always alive, and working" because "It never sleeps" (61-65). Pang's unidentified "It" is the monstrous vampiric city that may reward its diligent dwellers with material comfort and a measure of economic wealth but demands from them in turn the constant feeding of its speed-based virtuality. Real loss in such transactions may be implied by Pang but is named directly by Koh Jee Leong, whose "Going Home from Church on Bus 197" uses his dimming senses to discover why Thai workers "living between narrow days" can "Catch the sun of a passing moment and/ make me feel the alien in my own land" (72). Visual exhaustion points not just to the inhabitants' fatigue and insomnia but also to the drained national spirit within, a fact we see in his subtle reference "Across the ridges of their faces," linking inner fortitude to identifiable real terrains. Koh's yearning, in other words, already answers his own query: since the Thais' sense of identity needs no grounding frame in Singapore, a bus ride for them is only a bus ride and not a ready contemplative image of their country. Koh's poem itself appears in an outstanding anthology of Singaporean verse on urban life entitled *No Other City* (2000), with Pang and Aaron Lee as editors, its unsolicited dominant feeling being noted frequently as one of discontent (Huppertz, "D. J. Huppertz Reviews"; Patke 106-7).

Such a state of affairs after over four decades of modernisation is not puzzling, seeing that we can posit at least three stages of urban acceleration by now: an initial establishment of the roads' omnipresence, the promotion of restlessness and homelessness, and the elimination of *rest* itself. We may alternatively speak of the parallel perverse enjoyment of speed, stress, and exhaustion where, in contrast to the postmodern celebration of anti-essentialist flux, an urbanite is never left with an indefinite scope for self-renewal at all. Given the stark limitations of an island city, constant urban activity grinds down both its material and human resources, this mastication seen in Felix Cheong's "Work in Progress," from *I Watch the Stars Go Out* (1999), which equates the resulting dust of damaged space – from "coastlines/ eaten by tides" and "streets and lands" that are "chewed and spat" into order – to the sands of lost time. When Cheong then calls Singapore "a country of dust/ where nothing is saved/ but face," he is referring not just to a familiar Asian insistence on

keeping up appearances but also to a pathological reliance on cosmetics when one has lost one's coordinates for natural processes (48). In Aaron Lee's *A Visitation of Sunlight* (1997), the notion of this fragile but all-important urban layer, a mask under which there may well be nothing more, is elaborated in a poem with a hauntingly composed voice, "Road-Works." Seeing roads being torn up "like paper," peeled like "the rind of earth/ so carelessly as eating an orange" in a scene of "blasted sand, harsh talk/ and machinery," Lee reflects:

When they pack up and leave  
two months or a year from now,  
they will leave behind a criss-cross  
of surgical scars and giant patchwork  
squares of grey and darker grey.  
Almost no other sign where they had touched the earth;  
no sign that is, except for that great ribboned chunk  
of congealed stone and bitumen, gift-wrapped  
and given back to itself.  
The ground may breathe again,  
though the soft-talking trees deny it everyday. (52-53)

The violence Cheong sees as cosmetic procedures is treated by Lee in terms of professional surgery; while despair in what "We are" leads the former to join the older Lee in self-flagellating, the latter sides with Boey in refusing identification with such impersonal "they." Yet, unlike Boey, Aaron Lee's workers are entirely impartial to place, and his social self lying below the operated body is at best ambiguously alive: urban life may return when traffic is restored, but the rejection of "soft-talking" nature already hints at deep-set rot.

### **Conclusion: End of the Road**

To stress this disturbing point from "Road Works" though, I need now to mention a curious recent turn of events where the government itself is waxing poetic in its own thoughts on roads. Faced with a worrying 25% rise in congestion levels since 1999, Transport Minister Lim declared mobility as not simply the problem: the solution too lies in how Singaporeans "must move" by wanting "a viable alternative to the car" and embracing ways to "curb excessive car travel demand" (Raymond Lim, "Speech"). Two visibly different meanings for transport were affirmed again when Lim related elsewhere how the government had been steering away from the proverbial "populist road," this defined as also about roads, an alleged option many cities took in choosing to "postpone the necessary" and so "store up the trouble and suffer future gridlock" (qtd. in Saad). Such topographical dualism is remarkable since the use of one image to signify two separate fields is a quintessentially literary tactic; it invites the reader or listener to double the immediate practical form as more significantly a *metaphor* for an otherworldly vision. The call to leave behind cars

was even reiterated in the National Day Rally Speech of 2008 when Prime Minister Lee acknowledged the realistic impossibility for every Singaporean household to own a car “like in America” and the necessity for citizens to focus on their country’s long-term utopian goals. (Lee Hsien Loong, “Transcript”). This message may have come too late for a population accustomed to treating cars as more than mere means of transport as also markers of social standing, what follows a longstanding institutional failure to generate private aspirations distinct from economic ones tied to the ownership of housing properties and cars. Indeed, if urban aesthetics may be gauged according to the speed at which an appreciation of the cityscape is possible, we find Singapore – with its often small, unlevelled, and crowded pavements for walkers and little consideration for cyclists – built mostly for admiration through car-windows.<sup>10</sup> A whole social imagination from the vantage point of roads makes the sacrifice of an individual’s wish to drive all the more complex and explains why Lim spoke in terms of real pain and posited as a “critical decision” whether “a people” could make “sometimes difficult decisions, painful decisions,” to benefit “Singaporeans as a whole” (qtd. in Saad).

Two points emerge: firstly, the way in which roads now seem capable of hurting residents underscores a confluence with a history of poetic insights and illustrates what Theodor W. Adorno has meant more as a description of psychoanalysis, a kind of knowledge where “nothing is true except the exaggerations” (49). Insofar as poetry can supply its own truths by reacting to repressed evidences of social being, its indulgences locate the domain of its ultimate relevance as both the horrific secret voice in choices and a far-seeing one about consequences. Secondly, a strange thing is clearly happening to the island city on its road of progress: the current repeated appeal to a sense of belonging to solve traffic problems effectively inverts a principle in national policies that has allowed the reality of speed to ravage the same sense in the first place. Indeed, the call to devolve from a popular overreliance on cars invites not just a change in travel habits but a fundamental shift in the prosthetic life of Singaporeans, one that further tends, in its urgent focus on public transport, towards a more communal experience of mobility. Whether residents can be convinced to give up personalised speed in the name of national well-being – when, for so long, the two notions were all but synonymous – is an issue tied to another one: whether the state itself is able to create a discourse independent of that on material pursuits linked to the enjoyment of roads through cars. To be sure, with regard to insights, we are still not too far from Lee Tzu Pheng’s premonition of the roads’ misanthropic self-interest when we find Aaron Lee observing a road repairing itself as a reward “gift-wrapped/ and given back to itself” (53). That this mending is shown emphatically to leave almost “no other sign” allows us to see the missing signifier of traumatic change within the language of urban renewal, its silence amplified by the disempowered fearful whispers of trees.

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<sup>10</sup> See Melissa Sim’s “How Bad Are Roads for Cyclists?” for an idea of how hazardous cycling can be on Singaporean roads.

What Lee's trees are whispering though I may only venture to guess: if true ground is allowed to "breathe again," then an anthropocentric national culture must be raised up in a way that can parallel in force, if not overcome, pure urban logic.

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