Sex and the City-State: Cultural Politics and Sexual Cultures in *Love and Lust in Singapore*

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Abstract
In this article, we explore how the erotic short story collection *Love and Lust in Singapore* (2010) emblematises the cultural and sexual politics of the nation-state. We argue that the anthology presents a conflicted and contradictory view of Singapore, demonstrating a movement between conservative affirmation and liberal critique of the state's political, cultural and sexual practices. While the nation-state is presented as a participant in a global capitalist culture, the majority of the stories contained in *Love and Lust* challenge, in one way or another, Singapore's alleged privileging of materialism and consumerism over the domestic, cultural and spiritual needs of citizen, resident and visitor. Acutely aware of the collection's problematic status as predominantly populated by expatriates, we will argue that all of the stories in *Love and Lust* serve to either affirm or disavow both national state rhetoric and popular ideologies of nationhood.

Abstract in Malay
Makalah ini mengkaji bagaimana kumpulan cerpen erotika *Love and Lust in Singapore* (2010) berfungsi sebagai simbol budaya dan politik seksual sebuah negara-bangsa. Kami bahaskan bahawa antologi ini memberi pengertian bercanggah mengenai Singapura, menonjolkan satu pergerakan yang bersifat konservatif pada satu ketika dan bersifat kritikan liberal terhadap kedudukan politik, budaya dan amalan seksual negara-bangsa ini, pada ketika yang lain.Walaupun negara-bangsa ini dipaparkan sebagai pemain budaya kapitalis global, kebanyakan cerita-cerita di dalam antologi ini mencabar kedudukan Singapura yang mementingkan materialism dan konsumerisme berbanding keperluan domestik, budaya dan spiritual/ kerohanian rakyat, permastautin dan pelawat negara ini. Walaupun kami sedar bahawa status antologi ini membawa sedikit masalah kerana kebanyakan penulis adalah dari kalangan ekspatriat, kami akan usulkan bahawa semua cerita di dalam antologi *Love and Lust* ini bertindak mengiyakan atau menolak retorik dan idelogi popular tentang kenegaraan sebuah negara-bangsa.

Keywords
Singapore, national, materialism, conservatism, postfeminism, sexuality

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Keywords in Malay
Singapura, nasional, materialisme, konservatisme, pasca-feminisme, seksualiti

The majority of the stories collected in *Love and Lust in Singapore* (2010) are written by present or former expatriates, yet the meaning of the term "expatriate author" in the postcolonial city-state is fraught with ambiguity. Koh Tai Ann's recent *Singapore Literature in English: An Annotated Bibliography* (2008) includes authors "who are Singaporean by birth and citizenship *or permanent residence*" [our italics] (7). According to Koh's criteria, a significant proportion of the writers in *Love and Lust* could potentially be categorised as Singaporean writers. Yet, despite the inclusion of a review of expatriate writers in Malaya up to 1965, Rajeev Patke and Philip Holden's recent *Concise History of South-East Asian Writing* does not discuss the existence of expatriate writing in Singapore beyond 1963 (138-39). An exploration of the ambiguities surrounding recent expatriate writing in Singapore seems long overdue, and raises important questions: Is the expatriate or visitor to Singapore (as opposed to the Singaporean citizen) to be regarded as a local writer, without citizenship or allegiance? If so, can the expatriate writer be seen as capable of capturing a more, or indeed less, reliable representation of the personal and political terrain of Singapore? The heavy expatriate presence – sixteen out of a total nineteen authors – and Singaporean absence in *Love and Lust*, also poses questions concerning the construction of this collection, and what can be read and termed as its Singaporean "silence."[2]

Yet, whether Singaporean or expatriate, it is clear that all the stories in the collection serve to either affirm or disavow both national state rhetoric and popular ideologies of nationhood. In the Introduction to the collection, expatriates Caz Goodwin, Femke Tewari and Joseph Hoye demonstrate the former, commenting that, "[Singapore] is not a place where cultures clash, but rather melt and mingle, which makes it a fascinating setting for the stories in this book" (10).[3] The collection seems, therefore, framed by its editors as presenting a series of stories sympathetically espousing Singapore's national narrative of the importance of multicultural tolerance in state progress. Whilst the nation-state is presented as a participant in a global capitalist culture, the majority of the stories contained in *Love and Lust* critique, in one way or

[2] Two out of the three Singaporean authors included in *Love and Lust*, Michele Koh and Felix Cheong, are based abroad.

[3] Here the editors of *Love and Lust* appear to echo the easy and positive homogenisation of Singapore and Singaporean literature found in Peter Nazareth's "Introduction" and Alvin Pang's "Preface" to Pang's recent anthology of Singapore literature (see Pang ed. *Tumasik* 11-21). In both collections a significant number of the writers are amateur in the sense that they have a "proper job."

another, Singapore's privileging of materialism and consumerism over the domestic, cultural, and spiritual needs of ordinary citizen, resident and visitor. It is in this manner that the narratives in the collection corroborate Angelia Poon's assertion that literature and the arts in Singapore are "inevitably affected by [state policy] while… modulating and critiquing the dictates of the state" (359). In the first section of this essay, we identify and explore a comparable dynamic in *Love and Lust* between, on the one hand, the editorial (and occasionally authorial) affirmation of a conservative state friendly rhetoric and, on the other, critiques of Singapore's present socio-cultural condition. In the second section of this essay, we will argue how political conservatism manifests itself in the narratives' hostility towards female characters who serve to reassert and destabilise traditional configurations of female sexuality.

Cultural Politics

In Femke Tewari's "Truth or Dare," three young women at a party on a "magnificent junk boat" off Sentosa's Katong Beach encounter, according to the US expatriate narrator, "a bizarre miniature Singapore in itself," populated by the presence of "Taoist priests performing ghost marriages, old Chinese men burning paper money, snake tamers with painted foreheads and fire eaters" (64). This pantomimic-parody of a near vanished and orientalised historic Singapore – off the city-state's contemporary shores – offers a confected, presumably tourist targeted misrepresentation. In doing so, the junk party parallels the nation's past cleansing and redevelopment of a "tourist friendly" (but culturally inauthentic) Chinatown[4] in a nation-state that appears to privilege the culturally elided national over the peculiar particulars of locality. Both recreations of Singapore suggest "crass opportunism aimed at the tourist dollar" (Poon 368). Brooke's description of the junk masquerade and the food on offer prominently represents Singapore's major exogamous Chinese and Indian cultures; Singapore's comparatively more indigenous Malay culture is only marginally represented by a racially unspecific *rojak* hawker stall. However, later after sexual betrayal by her seaman lover, Brooke retreats back through a "miniature city-state" that is transformed (perhaps owing to the substances she appears to have unknowingly ingested) into a series of figures from her immediate Singaporean past: a university professor, a toilet inspector, a taxi driver and even prostitutes once ridiculed by Brooke and her friends. These "secondary" Singaporean figures – perhaps representing the quotidian local and therefore marginalised in the city state – offer the distressed Brooke their blessings, foreshadowing her imminent epiphany. The story ends with Brooke abandoning the Chinese style junk to swim back to the regulated safety of Sentosa (meaning

[4] And foreshadows similar plans for "Indian" Little India and, one imagines, "Malay" Geylang Serai, arguably Singapore's last locally sited vestiges of authentic, traditional cultural difference.

"peace and tranquillity" in Malay). In doing so, the "free" Western spirit escapes an offshore Singapore "through the looking glass," unregulated and therefore dangerous, excessive and deceptive. Ironically, contrary to encouraged national assumptions about Westerners, Brooke ultimately chooses Singaporean national regulation over the illicit attractions primarily offered to tourists. In contrast, her Chinese Singaporean and Indian schoolmates, Ling and Jasmeet willingly succumb to this Singaporean take on "Western" pleasures enacted within a fabricated version of itself.

The title of Jacyntha England's "Swimming Out of Bounds" puns on the numerous "out of bounds" activities and topics for discussion in an authoritarian and highly regulated Singapore. The story's setting, again "Sentosa island," provides a critical sense of disjunction between the nation-state's global presentation of itself as "first world" and a culturally immature reality:

> "Sentosa Island," the Singapore Tourism website had claimed, "is the jewel in the crown of Singapore's natural delights, where visitors can savour all the service and style of our city in a lush tropical setting." Maura wondered now if the person who wrote those words had ever actually been to this so-called island, where all she could hear during the day was whirring and hammering from the construction site next to the hotel, and all she could do at night was sit in her cramped, stuffy room and watch reruns of American sitcoms left over from the 1980s. (72)

Brooke and Maura, expatriate and tourist rather than Singaporean, represent comparatively more transient, less nationally invested lenses.[5] Left cold by Singapore's less than self-reflexive aping of the West in its "Resorts World" at Sentosa, Maura's encounter with an alternative Singaporean narrative occurs through risk, danger, and – in contrast to the previous story – swimming away *from* rather than *to* Singapore. Attempting desperately to escape the "manicured fantasy" of Sentosa by swimming to a nearby uninhabited island, Maura gets into difficulties but is rescued by a local Malay fisherman, recalling Sentosa's pre-redevelopment existence as the Malay fishing village of Pulau Blakang Mati:[6]

> "Shhh, Ibu [Mother or madam], is OK. Don't worry, is OK. You safe now. We go back soon, OK Ibu? You just rest now."
>
> Wrinkled callous fingers carefully stroking her hair and the back of her neck, gently cradling her head on a bony shoulder. The slap of water against the rim of the boat. The lilting tones of a lullaby murmured in her

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[5] See also Jenny, the protagonist in England's other story in this collection, "Room 2109."

[6] The only other sustained allusion to a Malay character in this volume of 24 stories is to be found in Marc Checkley's story "Nasri."

ear in a language she had never heard. (*Love and Lust* 79)

England's peculiar privileging of the marginal figure of the Malay fisherman, his voice and his traditional occupation (almost unique in *Love and Lust*) enhances her critique of Sentosa and Singapore.

While also exploring the presence and role of (in this case "high") culture in the nation-state, and in the lives of its inhabitants, Chris Mooney-Singh's "Rain Ponies" introduces a main character, Phillip Choo, who might be said to represent a culturally mature, cosmopolitan as well as competitive, Singaporean citizen. Choo is a literature lover, an awkward rarity in Singapore, where the majority of bookshops are "packed with 30% off paperback browsers, searchers for top shelf romance and How-To-Win action heroes" (82). Isolated in this environment, the narrator: "thumb[s] a new format Penguin Classic – *Selected Works of Cicero*. I flick through the pages, close my eyes, place my finger and read: 'A room without books is like a body without a soul'" (83). In what might be construed as elitism, if he were not so brow beaten by his fiercely philistine surroundings, Choo distinguishes himself from his fellow citizens, "I exist on thoughts, while they feed on instinct," surviving on "Fast Food Lit" (86). Echoing Singapore's attempts under the comparatively liberal premierships of Goh Chok Tong and Lee Hsien Loong (1990-Present) to utilise the arts and culture as marketable commodities ("creative and entrepreneurial citizen-subjects" [Poon 361]), Choo attempts to marry his "unSingaporean" love of literature with Singaporean economic savvy: "Normally, I lurk between Literature, History and Philosophy looking for a sign: a phrase in a text, a lifeline from a poem, some philosopher's stone of wisdom to throw down at the next motivational boardmeet" (83). Choo's attempt to utilise literature as a means to excel in business sounds suspiciously similar to his description of the popular motivation manuals he disavows: "I want to tell [the bookseller] that most of the principles and points of insight written into motivational tomes that sell millions of copies are just cups of water dipped from deeper wells of the Great Works" (83).

Despite similarities between Choo and Singapore's recent arts policies, it is unclear whether Choo is really a new Singaporean civic-minded man or an unpatriotic colonial throwback. His musing "Was I born fifty years beyond my era?" (86) tellingly suggests that Choo, trapped in a developed uncultured present, yearns nostalgically for "undeveloped" but culturally richer pre-1965 Singapore.[7] Choo senses he is born out of time and place in modern Singapore,

[7] Mooney-Singh's story is therefore reminiscent of Arthur Yap's privileging of pre-1965 Singapore as a lost golden age in several of his short stories – "The Effect of a Good Dinner" and "The Story of a Mask." See Angus Whitehead and Joel Gwynne, "'To See If It's Wise or Otherwise': Folkways and Social Commentary in Arthur Yap's Short Stories," Weihsin Gui and

repeatedly representing himself as a Don Quixote figure, needing literature "to read and anaesthetize the pain of [his] real and bookless existence" (93). Ultimately, despite his apparently unpractical bookishness, shy Phillip is chosen by his American boss over his brassy Singaporean colleague Candy for promotion: "I feel stupid that I cannot explain myself at all. Yet, I am to be the New York, Southeast Asian Division Head" (100). That Phillip's "quiet perseverance and dignified approach to [his] work" (100) – denoting nationally encouraged, traditional Asian qualities complementing his literary cosmopolitanism, creativity and originality – is rewarded by promotion beyond Singapore, perhaps gestures toward national anxieties concerning a Singaporean brain drain of "home grown" talent. More controversially, Singh's story seems undermined by its witty, bookish, self-deprecating narratorial pyrotechnics, suggesting the expatriate writer's slightly too heavy hand upon his Singaporean creation.

In Zafar Anjum's "A Fraction of a Whore," a story set in the "dense built environment" (Goh, *Contours of Culture* 155) of Singapore's Ang Mo Kio "Heartland,"[8] Amar, an Indian expatriate copywriter, sleeps with a Filipina bargirl-cum-prostitute, Amelia. Amar is feeling suicidal, over his failure, like numerous other migrant workers, to "succeed" in Singapore:

> dreams in their eyes, failed Indian immigrant workers returned to India to a life of shame, and within weeks, when the ignominy became unbearable or when they could no longer try to fit themselves into a system that they had left behind, they found escape in hanging themselves from ceiling fans in their parents' flats – flats that had been bought with their dollar remittances. (130)

At first glance, Anjum's story appears to offer a harsh critique of Singapore's pragmatic and impersonal privileging of national progress over individual welfare:

> As a foreign worker in Singapore, Amar now had less than a month to find another job; otherwise he would be forced to leave the country or even get deported with a tarnished record. He might even be jailed. Who knows how the state machinery would react? And the banks? Would they chase him even in India if he returned there? They had his permanent home address, his passport details. (133)

Shirley Geok-lin Lim, eds. *Common Lines and City Spaces: A Critical Anthology on the Work of Arthur Yap*. Singapore: ISEAS (forthcoming).

[8] Ang Mo Kio is consistently (one might almost say exclusively) deployed by different writers in *Love and Lust* to denote Singapore's plebeian margins, in a politically motivated "spatial paradox" (Patke and Holden 159) renamed its "Heartland." See also O Thiam Chin's "Housewife" and Mary Byrns' "For a View of Green."

Amar's perception of his helplessness in Singapore recalls other figures of literature at the mercy of impersonal, tyrannical and malevolent forces of government and law: William Godwin's Caleb Williams, and George Orwell's Winston Smith. But Amar's paranoia, and Zafar's ironic framing of his musings, may give us pause. Singapore, albeit authoritarian, is not a police state. Indeed, Singapore offers its professional expatriates (if not its citizens) material and sexual opportunities and liberties not necessarily so freely available back home. Amar's behaviour in Singapore, which has led to his current unemployment and debt, is the result of such selective permissiveness. Previously in India, Amar has worked responsibly in several jobs. However, in Singapore he has been unable to handle the unprecedented (at least for an arrival from Bangalore) and seductive freedoms on offer. When Amar and his friend Raghu visit Singapore's extensive red-light district of Geylang, Raghu "looking at the pick of the girls in the market, as if they were not there to sell their bodies but participating in an international beauty pageant," cries "You live in heaven, man!" (137). Singapore's seemingly unlimited commercial and pleasure opportunities offered primarily to expatriates rather than locals generate, in Amar, selfishness and egotism:

> Partying, whoring, alcoholism…an unchecked life and bouts of unemployment led him down a path that left him in neck-deep debt. He thought he was a genius, and geniuses don't need to play by society's moral code. (136)

Neglecting his family in India and spending the money he came to earn for them, in bars, on prostitutes, and on electronic gadgets, he is in inescapable debt:

> One by one, most of his belongings that he had bought in good times had ended up in pawn shops or been sold through eBay. His iPod, the Nokia Communicator, the Canon digital SLR, even the expensive European tripod that he had bought from Sim Lim Square were all gone. (135)

Amar's Singaporean trajectory may be said to critique the materialism of a society which encourages the constant consuming of material goods and determines: "failure and success… not in terms of anything but accumulation of wealth and assets"(135). The fact that Amar has "less than a month to find another job" indicates that he, like the bargirl-prostitute Amelia, is not a Permanent Resident in Singapore, but merely holds a work permit. Amar, in spite of his initial illusions and office job, is also a transient, vulnerable and expendable element of nation building whose value and even presence is predicated upon employment.

Yet, Amar's depression and anger is arrested by Amelia's selfless,

generous actions toward him. Through her simple unpaid actions of cleaning and ironing within the self-oriented, materialistic society they find themselves in – a moment of peace and stability is created:

> "Shhh, she interrupted, stepping forward, leaving behind the iron tilted up on its base. 'I feel like a housewife,' she said, holding him by his waist and promptly planting a kiss on his lips. 'Can I become your wife for a day?' (139)

Ironically, the "normality" Amelia aspires to, if only momentarily as both she and Amar have spouses "back home," is a Singaporean domestic ideal "the healthy norm of the nation" (Poon 369): the foundation of family and nation building. Yet while it is an ideal targeted at citizens, or Permanent Residents, such emotional-sexual stability is denied to transient and therefore expendable migrant workers like Amelia. The "normality" of monogamous married life provides the émigré couple temporary escape and peace, even if Amelia's sense of what a "wife" is defined by (cleaning and ironing) remains traditional, and suspiciously resembles the role unequivocally assigned to Filipina and Indonesian domestic workers in Singapore since the 1980s.[9]

The final two stories explored in this section eloquently exhibit what Poon has described in the context of recent Singaporean literature as "nuanced political commentary [mediated] through the prism of the personal" (365). Such a strategy enables Linda Collins' "Dad Jeans," (and Anjum's story just discussed), to explore within the genre of Singaporean popular fiction the controversial topic of Singapore's reliance upon immigration and highly paid "foreign talent." Narrated in the first person, Collins' narrative operates in ways reminiscent of a nineteenth century "dramatic monologue," simultaneously critiquing its expatriate narrator while training an often doubly mediated lens on contemporary Singapore. At the beginning of the story, Bill, an aging Caucasian expatriate on his way to an informal chat about a job, appears a privileged and confident character, assuming he can get by on race and charm alone:

> I must have looked like a lost tourist. But the marketing muppet would still be impressed. I am a cool Caucasian guy, after all. I'd flirt a little bit, and she would be sweet, and then we'd agree on a fee for the story, and that would be it. I hadn't even bothered to bring a résumé or samples of my writing. (178)

Yet Bill's easy, laissez faire attitude is belied by current circumstances:

[9] Singapore's large migrant-transient population of Filipina and Indonesian "maids" and construction workers from India and elsewhere are curiously absent from the pages of *Love and Lust*.

> I'm broke. And lonely. Having a wife persuade you and the kid to move to Singapore for the sake of her banking career, only to have her dump you both for a Texan oil engineer, screws up your life. Having the wife, Claire, then decamp with the guy for the riches of Dubai, leaving you with the kid makes it even worse. (180)

Like Amar, Bill is a troubled expatriate failing in Singapore. Now a divorced single parent, deprived of both his banker wife's large income and a job in the city, relying on a salary from English teaching, Bill has involuntarily retreated to Singapore's relatively cheaper western margins – "the boondocks of Jurong" (178). Despite the chastening experience of his downsizing he retains a patronising, old world, if affectionate preconception of what the young woman he is about to meet will be like:

> She was probably a demure Singaporean lass who lived at home with her parents in a Housing Board flat, with a diploma from a polytechnic and dating a bespectacled youth named Mervyn who did not know about Derrick and the rides in his Mercedes. She would keep a collection of soft toys on her bed, and avert their bead-eyed faces when she and Mervyn got cosy. (177)

In a Starbucks in Shenton Way, Bill is disabused when he actually meets a woman he terms "Miss Hong Kong," "a ruthless Cantonese bitch." The stylishly dressed, Ivy League educated "Hong Konger" considers herself the cultural-intellectual superior of the population of Singapore, commenting "The people are like robots. They cannot think for themselves. And their English skills! Hopeless. It's this mangled market Malay on Chinese grammar" (181).[10] Patke and Holden, in alluding to spoken English in Southeast Asia as having outgrown its colonial origins, describe the language as potential "cultural capital": "the use of it may at times indicate privilege" (1). Miss Hong Kong is from a country that shares with Singapore a cultural and colonial past, notably the strong historical links between Chinese communities in Hong Kong and Singapore. But Miss Hong Kong's negative remarks about Singaporean proficiency in English are made more telling by the fact that in contrast to the supposedly "prominent" functional role it plays in Singapore, English as a language plays only a "muted" role in Hong Kong (see Patke and Holden 5). The perceived dearth of creative and competent writers of English in Singapore is why Miss Hong Kong is meeting Bill: "I'm desperate for someone to write a

[10] Miss Hong Kong deems the feeling mutual, ironically, in less than flawless English: "Of course the Singaporeans hate Hong Kongers. We are so much more smart" (181). As in Zafar Anjum's earlier story, "Dad Jeans" reveals an expatriate writer presenting an image of Singapore as a small city-state prone to generating "needed" Asian and Caucasian expatriates with over-inflated senses of themselves.

few magazine articles for us" (181). But despite his efforts to impress "Miss Hong Kong," the meeting is "all about her" (181) and Bill is informed that he has also been rejected as "not… intense enough" (184). It dawns on Bill that – at least in the Central Business District if not the boondocks of Jurong[11] – youth, beauty and style, regardless of gender or race, are now privileged over his Caucasian male middle-aged presence. The point is underlined by story's title. The provocative advertisement "Guy Style Warning: Are You Wearing Dad Jeans?," commercially and professionally privileges stylish youth, or the appearance of youth. In contrast, Bill's Singaporean business friend, Derrick, like many middle-aged Singaporeans active in business and politics, dyes his hair and seemingly deceives Miss Hong Kong.[12]

In her juxtaposition of two expatriate perceptions of Singapore(ans), it could be argued that Collins charts Singapore's postcolonial shifts in cultural allegiance, now privileging those who are US (especially Ivy League) educated, regardless of race or gender (though Miss Hong Kong's Cantonese origins may be significant), over predominantly male Caucasians from the former "mother country" and her colonies.[13] While Bill's assumptions of Singaporean women may seem unbearably chauvinistic, they at least reveal nuance, humour and perhaps even affection. His out of date gender-racial complacency is clearly a target of satire, yet that satire is problematised by the fact that Miss Hong Kong, his disabuser and replacement, is so unlikeable, aggressive and even more offensive. Bill and Miss Hong Kong's jarring portraits of Singaporeans are juxtaposed without comment. As Collins is employed as a senior writer by Singapore's most widely read broadsheet *The Straits Times*, "Dad Jeans" might be read as satirising erroneous over-simplifications of Singaporeans, thereby suggesting that Singapore and Singaporeans add up to significantly more than either expatriate portrait would have us believe. Yet, Collins might be also accused of hitting a national nerve. Bill's portrait of a Singaporean office girl alludes to filial piety, demureness, ordinary accomplishments and appetites offset by an illicit hint of excitement with her boss Derrick Ho (a successful Singaporean) and a slight squeamishness about sex. That Bill imagines her as a "muppet" and "sweet" suggests homely attractiveness as well as a willingness to be managed. Conversely, Miss Hong Kong's assessment, while extrapolating aspects of Bill's assumptions about Singaporeans, is nationally all-encompassing and therefore both orientalising and starkly devastating. She ascribes to *all*

[11] Another example of a *Love and Lust* story indentifying and underlining tensions between Singapore's geographical and social "center"' and its margins on the other.

[12] Nevertheless, Miss Hong Kong despises even a relatively successful model Singaporean like Derrick ("oh him").

[13] Bill's lexicon suggests that, like his creator, he may hail from New Zealand.

Singaporeans a dearth of creative originality, and a lack of competence in English. Her attack plays on contemporary national apprehensions about those very issues almost fifty years after the introduction of English as Singapore's language of commerce and twenty years after government initiatives to generate "creative and entrepreneurial citizen-subjects" (Poon 361).

Sexual Cultures: The Global and the Local

If *Love and Lust in Singapore* displays a tension between affirming a reactionary, conservative state rhetoric and critiquing this cultural condition, then this tension is similarly reflected in the collection's construction of sexuality. Indeed, the introductory comments are especially revealing, with the editors Goodwin, Tewari and Hoye declaring what can easily be read as a sexual disclaimer, perhaps predicated by their awareness of local sexual conservatism: "There are erotic moments in these tales. Lusting after people and objects are all part of the human experience collected here" (10). The editors are eager to provide a justification for the collection's sexual content, and proceed to situate the collection as "not a book of erotica," but rather "collected tales of family and friendship and desire" (10). This degree of caution regarding the presentation of sexual material is, perhaps, to be expected in a state where even soft-core visual pornography is illegal.[14] Nevertheless, in Jenifer Raver's "Café B," the author implies that local sexual conservatism extends beyond judicial and legislative prohibitions: "That was Singapore; the women I knew had no qualms telling you what they spent on a couch or car but their mouths would settle into thin, grim lines at the mention of sex" (156). The commercialist excess of the Singaporean is not, according to Raver, paralleled by a discernible sexual voracity, an appraisal affirmed by O Thiam Chin's "Housewife," where oral sex is not – initially at least – a practice enjoyed by the housewife of the title, but rather something that "Danny enjoyed and wanted her to do sometimes" (34). In the context of this sexual conservatism, it is perhaps not surprising that demonstrations of overt female sexuality are subjected to critique when enacted by both foreigners and Singaporeans alike. In Dawn Farnham's "Filial Piety," Victor Chen is reunited with Lyn, his half-British lovechild, after many years of absence. Lyn is constructed in counterpoint to Victor's niece, Mei, and the former quickly wins over her father, who "liked nothing more than watching his daughter dance in her tight cheongsam" (18). The story's upholding of sexual conservatism and traditional family values is made apparent at the close of the story, when the quiet and sexually silent Mei begins a chaste love affair with Joseph, a family friend, and Lyn is disinherited. What is perhaps most interesting about *Love and Lust* is, however, not merely its sexual

[14] Literary pornography is, however, sold in major high street stores such as Borders and Kinokuniya.

conservatism, but how reactionary sexual mores are positioned as conflicting with global narratives of sexuality, especially when read in the context of postfeminism.

Stephanie Genz and Benjamin Brabon situate the term as indicative of a "post-traditional" era characterised by "dramatic changes in basic social relationships, role stereotyping and conceptions of agency" (1), a rhetoric of "power feminism" that accentuates women's "shared pleasures and strengths" in a manner that is unapologetically sexual, premised on the understanding that "good pleasures make good politics" (69). Postfeminism as a rhetoric does not, of course, have its roots in any aspect of South-East Asian cultures and societies, and is "white and middle class by default" (67). Yet, in her analysis of advertisements for beauty products in *The Straits Times*, Michelle Lazar has observed that Singaporean ads demonstrate postfeminist sensibilities predicated on the notion of choice as a form of empowerment, and "predominantly enunciate a Western-style discourse of emancipation based on individual rights," despite the fact that "the concept of individual rights is antithetical to the Asian-Confucian national and cultural ethos of Singapore" (Lazar 38). In the context of globalisation, and especially Singapore's aggressive, if selective embracement of Western popular culture, it is hardly surprising that postfeminist sensibilities have emerged in local popular fiction, especially when authored by expatriates. In *Love and Lust*, the local presence of postfeminist rhetoric is clear in Femke Tewari's "Truth or Dare," particularly in the portrayal of Ling. Ling's anti-traditionalism is evident in her ridiculing of Jaz, a friend from India, who is engaged and will soon, in Ling's words, "marry a guy she's met for, like, two seconds" as cultural traditions are "weird over there" (60) in India. Ling does not merely reject cultural tradition, but also romantic love and sexual fidelity, and is indicative of the postfeminist woman who "expresses her individual agency not by politicising her relationships with men and her status as a sexual object, but primarily through the re-articulation of her sexual identity" (Genz and Brabon 92). She is the catalyst of sexual decision making in the story, encouraging her expatriate friend Brooke to French kiss a stranger and encouraging Jaz to act on her fantasy of having sex with a black man. When Michael, a seaman who the girls meet at the bar, comments "Come on girl, it's just a kiss," Ling "parrot[s]" the words "Yes, Brooke, it's just a kiss" (63). As the story progresses, Brooke watches from a distance as Ling "wrapped herself around a Eurasian underwear model, giving the term dirty dancing a whole new meaning" while Jasmeet dances "hesitantly with her dark man" (64).

Brooke, the story's protagonist, becomes the reactionary signifier of sexual conservatism in counterpoint to Ling's postfeminist sexuality, and is appalled when the girls end their evening at a party on a boat that turns into an orgy. In attempting to save Jaz from her newfound sexual exhibitionism and foray with the black man of her sexual fantasies, Brooke comments that Jaz's

conduct "will taint [her] marriage forever" (64). Jaz's response, "It's too late for that, girlfriend" (68), marks her transformation – under the guidance of Ling and the influence of recreational drugs[15] – from a sexually conservative woman soon to be married in a manner appropriate to her cultural tradition, to a sexual libertine embracing global postfeminism and detraditionalism. In uttering "girlfriend," Jaz demonstrates her adoption of the vernacular and maxims of "Girl Power," a signifier of a variant of postfeminism that began in the early and mid-1990s and "found currency in almost every realm of children's popular culture," evident in the production and popularity of T-shirts bearing slogans declaring "Girl's Kick Ass!" and "Girl's Rule!"[16] Despite this transformation, the narrative closes with Brooke's abandonment of her friends (and therefore rebuking the postfeminist sensibilities they demonstrate) by swimming to the shore alone, her train of thought reaffirming a return to the passive and gendered conventions of love and romance: "And whatever I would do this year, I would not go looking for love. I just had to wait for it to come to me" (69).

Femke Tewari's "Truth or Dare" is not the only story in the collection that ultimately rebukes postfeminism's configuration of female empowerment as dependant on sexual assertion, and Dawn Farnham's "I Got You, Babe" offers a narrative account of the undoing of the sexually assertive postfeminist woman. The narrative's protagonist, Miss Tan, is a private detective, representing a female colonisation of a conventionally masculine occupation, and she demonstrates a sexual agency that accords with historical literary and cinematic constructions of the promiscuous, alpha-male private detective. The narrative is flippantly ironic, a postmodern recuperation of the sexually assertive language of masculine "noir," with Miss Tan commenting on her attire, "It's Singapore, it's hot, I like bare legs, sue me" (115). The story simultaneously invokes and inverts second-wave feminist contestation to female objectification by shifting the focus to male anatomical objectification, as Miss Tan objectifies a client who has "hips you wanted to mount" and "equipment ready for an assault" (114). After being betrayed by his lover, Sher, the client is "as sad as a puppy without a toy," and his fragile masculinity is placed as a weak counterpoint to Miss Tan's sexual advances, and for whom "seduction had never felt so good" (115). As Miss Tan's client places his hand "deep inside the pocket of his shorts," the narrative appears to be on course to validate Miss Tan as a postfeminist woman who is a "knowing, active and heterosexually desiring subject" (Genz and Brabon 91) who has succeeded in seducing her prey. It transpires, however, that "Sher," the client's partner, is indeed Sherman, the

[15] Although the consumption of recreational drugs is only implied.

[16] See Projansky, 1997.

male client's gay lover, positioning female sexual assertion, and by extension postfeminist agency, as a failure.

If, in this instance, the failure of female sexual assertion rests on the sexual orientation of Miss Tan's object of desire, many stories in *Love and Lust* rebuke postfeminism in their conservative imitation of heterosexual romance narratives. Returning to Chris Mooney-Singh's "Rain Ponies," in this narrative the reader witnesses the demise of the postfeminist woman, while reactionary femininity is celebrated; the latter constructed as a figure who fortifies masculinity and the former constructed as a threat. The narrative charts Phillip Choo's uncomfortable professional relationship with Candy, his "arch rival" (88). The relationship clearly represents not merely a competitive business relationship, but also contesting sexual ideologies, yet before evaluating this particular dynamic it is essential to briefly trace and contextualise the contemporary global crises of masculinity.

Indeed, since the ascent of second-wave feminism, the interrogation of men and masculinities has been placed in the spotlight in both popular and elite culture, and Stephen Whitehead and Frank Barrett have observed that "in terms of sustaining unequal material advantage, opportunity, status and privilege, men have much to lose with the rise of feminist thinking" (3). Yet, it is not simply the rise of second-wave feminism that resulted in the seismic shift in gender relations between the sexes, but also globalisation and worldwide economic transformations. The rapid descent of male-dominated industrialization and ascent of female-dominated service industries, has acted as a catalyst to the decline of the patriarchal nuclear family, and the domestic model of the male-as-breadwinner has virtually disintegrated in most, if not all, economically developed societies. Similarly, gay sexuality, the historical "other" that served to define and consolidate hegemonic masculinity, is no longer confined to the margins in most developed societies.[17] It has, arguably, never been more difficult to locate a fixed and normative masculinity in the morass of contemporary sexual and gender pluralism, evident in postfeminist conceptualisations of the "new man" in the 1980s and the "new lad" in the 1990s.

The growing media presence of female sexuality has also served to disrupt and problematise hegemonic masculinity, and not only in Western contexts. The current proliferation of postfeminist sensibilities in Asia and the prevailing climate of Asian women's sexual expression in the media has been noted by Louise Schein, who comments that while the white woman remains an object of desire, "she has shed some of her political charge as her otherness has been eroded" becoming less a sign of the inaccessible or the forbidden, and

[17] While sex between men remains illegal in Singapore, homosexuality is not socially taboo outside of religious contexts, and sustained explorations of homosexuality exist in Marc Checkley's "Nasri" and Brandy Russell's "The Birthday Treat."

concludes that the "eroticized domain that she once monopolized is increasingly populated by Asian women" (481). It is in this complex terrain that Chris Mooney-Singh's "Rain Ponies" documents Phillip's crisis of masculinity and undoing of postfeminist sexual assertion. Candy is positioned as "Plastic-pretty," a woman who "began her career as a receptionist, yet has advanced to middle management through clever moves on the corporate chessboard" (88). The narrator constructs Candy as vapid and consumerist, commenting that "every month her hair changes colour – from blonde to pink, to burgundy, to plum like a Barbie doll" (88), and describes her as a "lady praying mantis" (91). For Phillip, "destiny is brutal in a post-feminist world" (91) where the modern workplace is depicted as a "she-wolf's den, with the wolf-pack nearby" (95). Candy's power, in accordance with postfeminism's "merging notions of personal empowerment with the visual display of sexuality" (Genz and Brabon 92), manifests itself through aiming a "poisoned dart of a kiss" (92) at male colleagues and "hitching up her short skirt and swishing her pony tail" (96) before entering the manager's office. Candy is constructed as a figure who threatens Phillip's masculinity, and the story locates her reconfiguration of femininity as the obstacle in his search for love: "abhorrence of Candy had made me wary of getting close to any one of them". At the close of the story, the rebuke of postfeminism comes in two forms; first in the failure of Candy to secure promotion over Phillip – thus highlighting postfeminist sexual empowerment as both limited and illusory – and secondly in Phillip's realization of his love for the gender normative Fay. In counterpoint to Candy, Fay is described as "child-like," a woman who works "diligently at her computer," and is "not the sort of girl to get in your face" (101). The narrative closes with not only a rejection of postfeminist sexuality and celebration of the traditional woman, but also an affirmation of Phillip's previously contested masculinity in his promotion and relocation to New York.

In this essay, we have positioned *Love and Lust in Singapore* as a fictional landscape that, despite its lightweight status as a work of popular fiction, partially reflects the cultural and sexual landscape of contemporary Singapore. Even though many of the stories under discussion occupy a highly problematic textual space – written by expats yet from the perspective of Singaporeans – the narratives nevertheless attest to "a nation state that since the 1990s has embarked on the expressed goal of reinventing itself as a global city, embracing even more determinedly the tenets of late capitalism including its favouring of a mobile, marketable elite, technological innovations, specialized services, and increasingly deterritorialized transnational business networks" (Poon 359). Poon reads Singapore's "desire to be a global city" as "the next logical step in the process of postcolonial nation building," yet also notes that the "process toward the desired incarnation would probably result in the conceptual alteration of the nation as hitherto traditionally conceived" (359). It is in this way that the stories

under discussion have demonstrated their postmodern, postfeminist and globalised status as fragmentary artefacts of complicity and critique; willing to contest the conservatism of the conventional Singaporean yet highly suspicious of the more liberal reconfigurations of sexual, social and political identities rapidly emerging in local culture.

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