

Un/productive Raciality and Transnational Affiliations in Lydia Kwa's *Pulse*

Michelle O'Brien¹
University of British Columbia, Canada

Article Received: 30 July 2016; Article Accepted: 30 November 2016

Abstract

This paper explores the intersections that develop as Canada and Singapore redefine the terms of their productive raciality through their respective multicultural/multiracial forms in order to remain globally competitive. It draws out these intersections as they appear in Lydia Kwa's *Pulse* (2010) through its engagement with the limits of "productive" raciality and the desires of the sexual racial body. Set both in Singapore and Canada, *Pulse* explores the everyday experiences of the particular figurations that are bracketed out through the rhetoric of productive raciality in both nations – including the Asianification of Canada's identity and Singapore's use of "Asianism" as part of their global multicultural identities. As *Pulse* considers the effects of these states' failure to facilitate frameworks that would make ostensibly "unproductive" transnational figurations legible to others, it also draws out new affiliations between these bodies subjected to these effects across these distinct contexts.

Keywords

Transnational, Canada, Singapore, race, multiculturalism, identity

Introduction

This paper examines Lydia Kwa's *Pulse* (2010) and its engagement with the limits of un/productive raciality. Set both in Singapore and Canada, *Pulse* focuses on Natalie Chia, a queer Singaporean Chinese woman who lives in Toronto, and works as a successful acupuncturist. Her former lover, Faridah, calls her from Singapore to inform Natalie that Faridah's son, Selim, has killed himself. Despite their age difference, Natalie and Selim are connected through Faridah, as well as through their explorations of what it means to be queer in the repressive space of Singapore. They also share the use of *Kinbaku* (Japanese rope bondage) as a means of bonding with others and expressing their sexual identities, while revisiting unspoken elements of their backgrounds. The narrative shifts between

¹ Michelle O'Brien received her PhD from the Department of English at the University of British Columbia and is currently a Sessional Lecturer in the Social Justice Institute. She is currently completing her first manuscript which examines how social organisation across Canada, Singapore and Malaysia was transformed by the same racial logic that circulated throughout the colonial world and is reiterated in their multicultural structures. Email: mics.siobhan@gmail.com.

Natalie's life in Canada, her childhood in Singapore during the tumultuous period of the 1960s and 1970s, and her return to Singapore to try and uncover the motivation behind Selim's suicide.

Through this narrative focus, *Pulse* exposes some of the intersections in the social structuring of these locales. For instance, while Natalie leaves Singapore's particular climate of homophobia, she is then divorced from her Singaporean roots as she is subordinated to the limits of Canada's failure to make space for complex racial figurations like hers, which results in individuals misreading her as Chinese rather than Chinese Singaporean. This limited inclusivity has pernicious results, when those racial bodies that are treated as though their experiences are extraneous to the nation must make themselves legible by forging relationships with other communities, or risk being subjected to variegated forms of misrecognition and exclusion.

This paper homes in on the effects of these states' failure to facilitate frameworks that would make ostensibly "unproductive" transnational histories intelligible to others. Diverging from critiques that focus on the distinctions between Canada's "liberal" approach to racial organisation and Singapore's "managed" hierarchical approach, Wendy Bokhorst-Heng asserts that these nations both use certain cultural forms to place an "instrumental value" on particular forms of diversity to strengthen global relationships (650). C.J. Wan-Ling Wee proposes that in Singapore, culture "was (and is) conceived of as a residual category to be revamped instrumentally as part of the radical reconstruction of subjectivity itself" (9) while, in the Canadian context, Smaro Kamboureli and Fred Wah describe that Canada "translat[es]" particular forms of "racialized cultural productions into its political and cultural capital both internally and internationally" (Kamboureli and Wah 133). To extend this, the recasting of Canada's and Singapore's racial diversity to bolster their global pursuits results in their emphases on specific socio-cultural forms, like "ideal" Asian immigrant populations in the Canadian context, or certain ideal Chinese cosmopolitans in Singapore. Yet for those "unproductive" bodies – which I define as those that fail to provide a cultural bridge to particularly advantageous populations that assist these nations' respective global programmes – their experiences within Canada and Singapore are devalued. As Raka Shome describes, the selective co-optation and value assigned to ethno-racial bodies – particularly as it affects those whose experiences are defined by immigration and migration – also produces a nation-bound framing of individuals' experiences, which "disallow[s]" the emergence of the "interruptive political possibilities" found within their complex and intersecting transnational histories (157, 152). The narrow scope of discourses of productivity thus devalues certain ethno-racial histories, and, as I will discuss, certain sexual identities. It also overlooks the transnational trajectories of individuals' experiences that do not benefit particular global relationships.

Through its particular transnational focus, *Pulse* draws out that, despite their distinctions, these nations' varied approaches to national development belong to a broader logic of raciality across the postcolonial world. It specifically suggests that their intersecting forms of racial governmentality render the experiences of "unproductive" individuals – within each of these nations, and those who live between them both – illegible when their raciality and sexuality fails to contribute to the developmental aims of these nations. Underpinning this engagement is the emergence of state discourses and policies that, as they emphasise particular social and cultural forms, overlook the experiences of those individuals whose distinction is inadmissible under the narrow terms of productive raciality. This article first briefly outlines the ways in which the state's ideological emphasis on particularly productive ethno-racial forms in these nations erases particular distinct figurations, before turning to how Kwa's texts homes in on these thematics, and examines how sexuality and sexual desire figure in this process. I then examine how, as *Pulse* explores these limits, it also envisions new cross-racial/national forms of relationality, particularly through how these individuals counter the effects of the state's demand for productivity through the sexual autonomy of the racial body.

Productive Racial Identities in Canada and Singapore

As Canada recasts its multicultural ideologies to develop new transnational relationships, the shifts in policies and accompanying discourses to fulfil its global goals have asymmetric effects on different Asian migrant populations. Although, as Philip Kelly suggests, Canada's relationship to Southeast Asian nations has been reconfigured through "the insertion of Asia into Canada and the complicity of Canada in events in Asia," this intensified connection is still dictated by the nation's participation in a global neoliberal market where individual value is stratified within racial categories (215). If, as Kelly proposes, specific "homeland cultural ties" that help produce an institutionalised "collective identity" are "courted politically" to strengthen Canada's global relationships, the ties that are especially sought after are those that belong to the more expansive and established Asian migrant communities in Canada, such as certain East and South Asian communities (212, Zhang 8). These communities are still subjected to discrimination, but are also legible and valued – albeit in limited ways – as part of Canada's multicultural makeup. Hijin Park similarly notes that Canada's "Asia rising" discourse still eclipses the experiences of those individuals whose social capital does not act as a "bridge" to the Asia Pacific, such as economically-disadvantaged women from Asia, those who are not part of (heteronormative) family units, or those who do not originate from one of Canada's favoured partner nations (21-22).

This rendering of only certain transnational histories as productive and valuable to Canada's development is cathected by the state's merging of its immigration policies with new strategies that emphasise economic *and* cultural productivity, such as the emphasis placed on "active citizens."² The rhetoric of "active citizens" is now used by organisations like Citizenship and Immigration Canada, but originated as part of the updated multicultural policy spearheaded by the Department of Canadian Heritage in 1995. In its analysis of Canada's need to extend its cultural forms in order to develop its global identity, this update stressed the importance of "civic participation," defined as the need to develop "among Canada's diverse people, active citizens with both the opportunity and the capacity to participate in shaping the future of their communities and their country" (Bullard). As the term foregrounds citizenship and civic participation while de-emphasising race, it suggests a diverging approach from Canada's emphasis on "visible minorities" in its multicultural programmes, which refers specifically to those persons "other than aboriginal peoples who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour" (qtd. in Ty 4). But as Abu Laban and Gabriel propose, the rhetoric of "active citizens" remains a racially-defined way of transmitting which specific immigrant groups possess these valuable traits, which aligns with Canada's selective approach toward admitting Asian populations (Abu Laban and Gabriel 114). The term is not only coded to demand the social and cultural participation of particular racialised immigrant communities; it also suggests that those who cannot (or do not) contribute aspects of their ethno-racial heritage to shape Canada's identity are unproductive citizens who are not engaged with the racial relationships that benefit the nation. It thus allows for certain valued racial groups to be admitted into mainstream cultural visibility, but for those whose migrant backgrounds fall outside of its scope, the term reiterates the effects of the "visible minority" rhetoric, where, as Eleanor Ty describes, "the effects of being legally, socially, and culturally marked as 'visible'" paradoxically renders individuals as "invisible in dominant culture and history" when elements of their backgrounds are illegible to the "gaze" of Canada's (white, European) "dominant order" (12). In the case of Singapore and Canada, these nations may enjoy trade and economic relationships, but Singaporeans in Canada are currently not mobilised under the state's goals to cultivate its global development, which effectively renders the few Singaporeans in Canada as culturally "unproductive" and thus illegible as part of Canada's diverse cultural makeup.

In Singapore, the terms of what I identify as "productive" raciality are also grounded in the nation's distinct multiracial makeup as the state emphasises particular Asian cultural histories that strengthen its regional and international

² This term does not solely refer to Asian communities in Canada, but reflects the tension between inclusion and exclusion that characterises many Asian Canadian populations.

relationships, and bolsters its development into an internationally-competitive hub.³ For instance, Wee notes that the government focuses on “Sinic’ qualities” like communitarian collectivism as it forms its “capitalist identity” which helps strengthen relationships with China (10). Wee also proposes that the emphasis of a particularly productive Asian identity may have been defined by the “hegemonic Euro-American West” but is “reterritorialized into a varied yet consistent vision” by Asian states as a way of developing a national identity that supports these international relationships and flows of global capital (30).

This ideological shaping of Singapore’s cultural identity would be impossible without the instrumentalisation of its citizens to support these efforts. Pheng Cheah proposes that “The cultivation of human capital has always been crucial to Singapore’s hyper development” and its desire to become the primary Asian hub of transnational capital (196). Crucially, this focus on instrumentalising citizens and developing “human capital” by rapidly improving its citizens’ skills and professional expertise also merges the language of capital with Singapore’s cultural concerns. Especially useful to my reading of *Pulse* is how this focus on cultural forms includes the incorporation of new liberalised cultural forms, including what Audrey Yue refers to as the “illiberal pragmatism” that characterises modern Singapore’s treatment of queer communities; the state may rely upon the growth of a queer Singaporean culture to convey that the nation is open-minded and able to attract global talent, but must not alienate its social conservative base that emphasises heterosexual reproduction (“We’re the Gay Company” 199, 200).⁴

Cheah maintains that this development and mobilisation of Singapore’s people in service of its “hyperdevelopment” also subjects individuals to state discourses and programmes that, much like Canada’s emphasis on active citizens, “induce a sense of belonging through social recognition and the emotional reward of striving toward a higher goal that transcends mere economic self-interest” (203).⁵ This focus on improving the particular skills of citizens to grow the nation’s cultural base produces an implicit value-based system: cultural contributions might be recognised alongside individual’s economic utility, but not

³ Given the focus of *Pulse* and this article, I do not examine here the complex role of Western migrants in Singapore. For more on this see Meier (2006) or Yeoh and Huang (2010).

⁴ Yue describes the ways in which Singapore’s recent focus on “technologically-enhanced knowledge-based creative economies” results in some degree of “cultural liberalisation and queer inclusion” in Singapore, but coexists with Singapore’s “anachronistic British Penal Code” that allows homosexuality to be prosecuted (153, 149).

⁵ In Cheah’s analysis, the state’s emphasis on “heartware” is exemplary of this mobilisation of Singapore’s ethno-cultural difference. “Heartware” was first used by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in 1997 as part of the government’s focus on social development for the 21st Century (Singapore 21). Heartware refers to the need to state’s gradual acknowledgement of factors outside its “economic and material needs,” and its desire to “develop and mobilize” certain communities to cultivate its cultural and “social infrastructure” and hone its global “edge” (qtd. in Cheah 255).

all contributions are equally valuable. Further, the value placed on these contributions is always defined by Singapore's hierarchical CMIO (Chinese, Malay, Indian, Other) grid, which, as Goh describes, is still "activated to meet the challenges of globalization" (214). Race thus remains the "symbolic vehicle for embodying the specific cultural skills that are deemed as crucial to the seizing of capitalist opportunities" in Asia, where the contributions of elite and cosmopolitan Chinese Singaporeans are especially valued for their ability to help "raise the country's international profile... to drive the economy into more advanced stages," including by forging new economic connections with the People's Republic of China (Goh 214, Tan 67). Despite the need for socio-economic contributions from other racial groups, the contributions from Indian, and especially working-class Malay and "Other" communities, are de-emphasised and rendered comparatively unproductive (214).⁶

Productive Citizenry and the Transnational Context of *Pulse*

In combination, the emphasis on specific forms of productive raciality, and the devaluation of certain migrant histories that are rendered unproductive through these same discourses, provide the critical context for literary interventions like *Pulse*. *Pulse* specifically focuses on everyday experiences of those whose transnational histories, which span the contexts of Canada and Singapore, are bracketed out through the rhetoric of productive raciality in both nations. It also crucially extends a reading of productive raciality to include how sexuality – and both Natalie's and Selim's queer desires – are entwined with these processes, and also help give form to vital transnational linkages that are otherwise foreclosed.

Pulse begins in 2007 in an established multi-racial community in Toronto. Natalie describes a daily scene of her life in Canada as she looks out her window, where "two Vietnamese sisters with Hello Kitty barrettes in their hair, the lanky son of Iranian parents and the cute, wide-eyed Korean boy with the mini mohawk haircut, dressed in oversized jeans, a hand-me-down from his brother" are juxtaposed against "plastic Canada Day flags" (11). This opening evokes a type of modern urban pastoral characterised by multicultural details, including the constant sounds of "Toishan, Cantonese, Mandarin, Tagalog... [and] Cantopop spill[ing] from the store selling pirated DVDs" (17).

But Natalie's descriptions of these details that suffuse cultural lines becomes more ambivalent when juxtaposed against a following scene where her observations of racial distinction are associated with attempts to stabilise her emotions. After learning of Selim's death, Natalie counts the "thirteen whites and

⁶ This racialised socio-economic hierarchy is a remnant of British policies developed under colonial conditions, and the divide-and-rule approach in particular which was used to undermine cross-racial alliances and segregate populations. As Jim Baker describes, under these policies, the Chinese "were to work for other Chinese as laborers or retail traders," the Indians "were to remain clerks, plantation workers, and laborers," and Malays were considered "fisherman and farmers" (Baker 181).

four people of color going in or out of the liquor store” – an act that she describes as a calming “habit” (28). Cheryl Naruse proposes that Natalie’s “racial census” suggests a “longstanding awareness of race,” and that it has the “subtle effect of illustrating the ways in which queerness and sexuality are not equally legible within the color-conscious policies of multiculturalism” in Canada (225). These scenes therefore contrast a particular multicultural ideal against this limited legibility within Canada’s multicultural imaginary, and signpost the narrative’s concern with the nation’s failure to admit particular sexual identities and racial formulations.

While Natalie seems to enjoy her life in Toronto with her partner and parents, as Naruse notes, a “sense of melancholia suffuses her narration” (191). A significant contributing element to this melancholia is likely that her own Singaporean Chinese background is obscured in Canada, which limits individuals’ ability to understand and engage with her history. She instead depends on her family’s ability to pass as part of the Chinese communities from Hong Kong and Mainland China in order to create new relationships with these immigrant communities around her. For instance, she describes going to church with her family despite her diverging beliefs, and the congregants “chatting in Cantonese. Many of them left Hong Kong in the late ‘80s or ‘90s, long before the handover of Hong Kong to the mainland in July 1997. Thanks to coming to this church, I’ve improved my Cantonese. I might even pass as a Hong Konger” (88-89). Through this effort to integrate, however, Natalie also loses the nuances of her background. Her family also has Nonya (half Malay, half Chinese) heritage, and this association with one particular community helps them to ignore the “uncomfortable reality” of their Nonya background (64).

To frame this differently, Natalie and her family must rely on an essentialised version of their ethno-racial distinction in order to find social recognition in Canada, which means that their background is subsumed under the recognisable immigrant communities that facilitate their integration. Kelly notes that this form of cross-racial “immigrant integration” is necessary for many Asian migrants in Canada, particularly when multiple national allegiances are occluded under the state’s attempts to circumscribe their position (212). But Canada’s foreclosure of the experiences of foreign others that do not contribute to its idealised multicultural landscape belies how migrant movements might be perpetual and do not end upon arrival. Lily Cho proposes that these processes that overlook alternate racial identities and individuals’ “multigenerational detours” through other national spaces also “naturalizes” the uniformity of Asian nations (190). For instance, Cho notes that Canada’s narratives of Asian immigration assume that all Chinese diasporic communities originate from China (190). For Natalie and her family, this assumption erases their Singaporean Chineseness, and further obscures their Nonya heritage. This erasure is also amplified by the relatively little

that is known about distinct Singaporean culture(s) and racial groups in Canada, which makes it easier for their distinction to be subsumed under their relationship with the larger and more-established Hong Kong and Mainland Chinese communities.⁷

Kwa's characterisation of Natalie therefore homes in on the day-to-day experiences of a body that lacks the qualities associated with an emerging productive global subject. As Naruse proposes, "the novel does not create a story in which we learn that Natalie's life has somehow improved by virtue of living in Toronto: Natalie still feels structurally excluded from Canada's national scene and the story of multiculturalism" (204). Since Natalie's integration is less crucial to Canada's global goals, she faces the state's failure to develop frameworks or vocabularies that would make "unproductive" transnational histories and experiences like hers legible to others. Further, as Natalie's background is rendered unproductive to Canada's current developmental aims she struggles to recover her complex relationship with Singapore and her identity as a Chinese Singaporean.

Pulse does not initially draw a connection between the two locales' contemporary structures. Rather, until she returns to Singapore, Natalie is more overtly critical of Singapore's past limitations than Canada's current failure to make space for her complex background. But her inability to give voice to the conditions of both nations equally appears to be influenced by the particular period of change that marked her immigration, which occurred after the race riot in Singapore during July 1964, and amidst Canada's turn to emphasising certain forms of diversity as part of its national multicultural identity.

It is Natalie's connection to Selim that helps her contextualise these issues in relation to modern Singapore, while exposing her to the forms of racial governmentality that transect both locales as they emphasise certain ideal figurations, and foreclose others. In another flashback, Natalie recalls describing these memories to Selim: "your mom and I grew up during a time when Singapore was going through a lot of political change. There was all that tension between the Chinese and Malays. And the race riots..." (37). This conversation is framed by Selim's desire to help "catch up" with Natalie, but also fill in the "lost years" during her time in Canada; to this end, Selim initially treats Natalie as an unformed outsider whose home and ideals are now rooted in Canada (35). Selim responds to Natalie's story by quoting from Singapore's National Pledge, and connects it to an event that changed race relations in both nations:

One united people, regardless of race, language or religion.... Sounds wonderful, but.... There's an underlying tension that wasn't there before

⁷ As Philip Holden contends, Singaporean cultural identity is largely "invisible" in other countries after individuals leave Singapore; a Singaporean Chinese migrant will be read by individuals in Canada as East Asian, and a Singaporean Indian as South Asian (278).

9/11, with the exception of those race riots in '64, of course.... That's why the government has been encouraging Muslims to devote themselves to what is positive and non-violent in their religion. (37)

By using 9/11 to bridge his understanding of modern Singapore, and Natalie's understanding as someone who identifies as Singaporean and Canadian, his comments recall the discourses of raciality that continue to have global influence, and resulted in certain forms of ethno-racial distinction being devalued in both locales. Selim thus extends Natalie's comparative reading of the two nations, and her recollection of his comments after his death signposts a narrative concern with refiguring, through their relationship, Natalie's feelings of aspects of her "spirit" being lost in Canada (22). For Selim, who stresses that "[h]istory is important" and must be "investigated," these conversations help him engage with a transnational history of violence that shapes his present, but is obscured under the nation's developmental processes – a point that I will return to later (45, 61).

Natalie's and Selim's Resignified Desires

While these scenes provide necessary historical and social context for the marginality that subtends their connection, it is the interconnection between Natalie's and Selim's sexual identities alongside their raciality that marks the limits of their productivity and value, and, subsequently, their social legibility. In his critique of Kwa's previous novel, Weihsin Gui proposes that Kwa's writing envisions an "alternate, queer genealogy," which produces a "non-instrumentalized intimacy" with another person (308). Gui states that this process is contrary to the state's "harnessing [of] queer subjectivity as a neoliberal technology for the creative industries" (309). I would suggest that *Pulse* expresses a similar preoccupation with developing a queer genealogy through Selim's and Natalie's connection. However, it weaves together this concern with the transnational effects of racial un/productivity in both nations, and draws out how their experiences – and Natalie's migrant trajectory – are obscured under the failure of these states to make room for their particular racial-sexual figurations.

Although Natalie's racial identity is occluded under Canada's limited focus on Asian distinction, she is part of the dominant Chinese racial group in Singapore. Yet the combination of her raciality and sexuality means that her identity is still occluded under the nation's developmental mandate, which, to return to Yue's theorisation of illiberal pragmatism, suggests that she falls outside the state's very narrow admittance of only certain queer identities. This cleaving of her subjectivity results in this amplification of her marginality in both locales, as the transnational detours that shape her life are effectively erased.

I consider this emphasis on Natalie's illegibility in relation to Denise Ferreira da Silva's discussion of the sexual female body. Da Silva proposes that while the female body is always already defined in an "economic and symbolic...

productive regime: as object, other, or commodity,” the sexual desire of this body presents an alternate figuration that is not integrated in economic orders and the state’s emphasis on – and commodification of – particular bodies (56). The sexual female body therefore “unsettles easy appropriations of the figure of the Woman” since it “*threatens the accomplishment of colonial and national juridicoeconomic goals* and has no place in the ontoepistemological grammar that governs post-Enlightenment accounts of existence” (56; emphasis mine). It is also in excess of the patriarchal “legalmoral” and economic order. As a result, the unrepresentable and unmanaged desires of this body can “never fuel the machineries of global capitalism and the existing critiques of it because the political text both draw from does not contemplate her” (56).

Da Silva’s analysis deals explicitly with the subjection of the sexual black female body, but also considers how we might read the female body in general as more than an object of desire or a subject of violence across postcolonial contexts (49).⁸ Da Silva’s analysis therefore thinks beyond the tension of the instrumentalisation of forms of racial and sexual distinction alongside the marginalisation of those that do not further the state’s economic goals; it helpfully directs attention towards a third figuration, where particular forms of sexual desire provide an “untraced guide for radical praxis” as they exceed the state’s signification of racial bodies, which complicates readings of these bodies purely in relation to their value or subjection (56). Da Silva intentionally does not elaborate on what new lines of knowledge may be opened up by this examination of the body and desire, but this critique informs my analysis of the ways that Natalie’s and Selim’s sexual bodies are bound together through their excess, which countermands both Singapore’s and Canada’s particular “national juridicoeconomic goals.” Their sexual desires and relationships, while rendered unproductive in most national spaces, thus become vital ways for them to merge the complexities of their backgrounds with new modes of relationality with others.

During her youth in Singapore, Natalie’s sexual desires intersect with a primary moment where she connects with another while transgressing the rigid racial categories that value particular forms of distinction over others. Her family’s anti-Malay prejudice is complicated when, at age thirteen, Natalie meets Faridah, who is Malay. Faridah’s family is as proud of their racial heritage as Natalie’s is of being recognised as part of the valued and dominant Chinese racial community. Faridah immediately admonishes Natalie for not knowing “Malay history,” and informs her that her father was part of the *Utusan Melayu* – an important Malay-language publication (163). Despite their racial and cultural

⁸ Da Silva acknowledges that what she is arguing “is not new because it has already been signaled in Sylvia Wynter’s reading of the modern episteme, in Gayatri Spivak’s analysis of modern representation, and in [Luce] Irigaray’s writings of the woman” (56-57).

distinctions, and taboos surrounding homosexuality, Natalie and Faridah soon start a relationship, which undermines emergent forms of cultural management that produce a core Chinese base and discrete peripheral cultural groups. Exemplary of this is how their developing bond is associated with the progressive thematics of the countercultural prose poem "Desiderata," which connects the two girls to other cultures and ideologies, and, as their teacher describes, is associated with resisting state suppression (102-3). Natalie eventually enjoys the experience of reading the poem aloud with Faridah and her classmates, and memory of *Desiderata* therefore becomes a node in her narrative that entwines the potential of the girls' cross-racial, queer relationship with other struggles to forge relationships that might not fall within the state's notions of pragmatism and productivity.

However, their relationship is ended by an extreme act of violence. From the time that Natalie is old enough to attend school, her father sexually abuses her. When the girls are roughly sixteen, Natalie's father arrives home after a particularly stressful day at work and walks in on the girls together on Natalie's bed. He violently attacks Natalie, strips off her clothes, binds her with rope, and nearly drowns her in front of her mother and Faridah. Her father is not only infuriated that Natalie and Faridah's queer relationship has disrupted his sexual and patriarchal dominance over her; he also tells Natalie that God "saved" her life in 1964 during the riots, and then blames Faridah for "corrupt[ing]" Natalie (226).

Natalie's relationship with Faridah therefore shifts from an instance where she experiences a new cross-racial form of relationality; it becomes the focus of numerous anxieties, including the family's anti-Malay sentiments, her father's homophobia, his frustration over Singapore's rapid development, and his perceived loss of control over a young woman's body. But Natalie's assault should not be construed as originating either from her father's inability to adapt to shifting social mores. Rather, the narrative merges Natalie's recollection of these painful memories with national issues that deepen her family's instability, including (anti-Malay) racial discrimination, patriarchal dominance and the suppression of particular queer identities – all of which coalesce to shape her relationship to Singapore. The public act of violence seems to have prompted the family's move to Canada, and her father's abuse and appeal to these restrictive state discourses lapses in Canada, which suggest one reason why Natalie is initially less critical of its restrictions.

This imbrication of sexual and racial restrictions that shapes Natalie's history is mirrored in modern Singapore through Selim's experiences. Gabriel Tat Meng Selim Khoo is half Malay, and half Chinese. Natalie notes that even though he is listed as Chinese on his identity card in accordance with his father's identity, this reveals an "inconsistency," as his father is "really a Baba, a male of mixed Malay

and Chinese heritage. But neither Babas nor Nonyas would be acknowledged on their identity cards” (30). Though the historical contexts for these nations’ inability to accept certain minoritised racial configurations, much like Natalie in Canada, Selim’s unproductive racial identity is obscured in Singapore and is indecipherable to others in his daily life. Selim is aware of these limitations, and uses his Malay name as an attempt to resist both the state’s desire to dictate his racial identity and mark him as Chinese, and the colonial implications of his Christian English name.

Selim’s relationship is also a form of implicit resistance that traverses racial lines, as his partner, Philip, is Indian. Selim is able to have a somewhat more open relationship with Philip in modern Singapore than Natalie and Faridah. However, as Gui discusses: “gay and lesbian culture in Singapore has flourished to a certain extent with the promotion of the creative industries and the attraction of creative foreign talent as a national priority... [b]ut the latitude given to queer communities and the recognition of sexuality as a cultural policy cannot be equated with a social and political acceptance of alternate sexualities” (303-4). For Selim, this lack of acceptance inheres in patriarchal homophobia. When Natalie returns to Singapore, Selim’s father, Adam, asks her what it is like living in Canada; he focuses on how the nation is “liberal” and allows “marriage for homosexuals,” which he feels exceeds the need to be “tolerant” (202-3). Adam’s comments are reflective of Singapore’s homophobic climate, but also draw on Canada’s global exportation of its rhetoric of liberal tolerance and diversity to create a contrast between the two nations, where Singapore is associated with the management of sexual and racial distinction, while Canada ostensibly tolerates difference. Further, as Naruse notes, “Adam echoes state discourse most rampant in the 1990s, which cast homosexuality as a threat to Asian values” (224). His homophobic sentiments are therefore entwined with conservative national ideals, and parallel the limits of the state’s failure to make space for diverse racial and sexual identities that are not vital to its development.

Like Natalie’s father, Adam’s dissatisfaction with modern Singapore – including the nation’s gradual acceptance of some queer identities and multi-racial forms – is also associated with the sexual abuse that he inflicts on his son. His animosity toward Selim is also intensified by the fact that, prior to Selim’s birth, Faridah miscarried a son who Selim was named after; the loss of a son who might have carried on Adam’s paternal line and Selim’s refusal to uphold the nation’s demand for heteropatriarchal reproduction influences Adam’s need to “discipline” Selim (209). Philip gives Natalie a note that Selim left before he killed himself, which reveals that Adam sexually assaulted Selim from age nine to sixteen. Selim asks Philip to share the note with Natalie because she is also familiar with “*That father from whom we can never receive unconditional love*” (244-45; emphasis mine). Further, Faridah reveals that she shared the details of her relationship with Natalie – and Natalie’s abuse – with Selim, which returns to the

emphasis Selim places on helping Natalie uncover her transnational history; doing so helps him mitigate the unreadability of his distinctiveness at home and, at times, within the nation, as it connects him to another whose life was also shaped by the occlusion of their racial and sexual histories. These comments also yoke their lives together once again through the oppression and violence they experienced, and through their fathers who express the extremes of Singapore's conservative base that refuses to admit certain identities.

This generalised description of a patriarchal entity that refuses to acknowledge its children, and subjects Natalie and Selim to unthinkable acts of violence, also invokes the state rhetoric that produces their complex distinctiveness as extraneous to these states' interests. Beyond their shared familial alienation, Selim's message to Natalie is a stark reminder of the fact that there is no retreat for them outside of their homes when they face rejection or misrecognition throughout these nations. This approach does not deny the distinctions between Selim's and Natalie's sexual desires. Rather, the narrative continues to connect them through their familial histories, their racial-sexual figurations and how the unrepresentability of their desires mark them as in excess of productive raciality. However, this also means that the nuances of their particular desires remain unmanaged, as they are not vital to the "machineries of global capitalism" that da Silva identifies.

This association between Natalie's and Selim's inadmissible bodies and their desires cohere in their use of Kinbaku, which also deepens their connection. During a brief trip to Singapore, Selim identifies Natalie as a fellow Kinbaku practitioner through her online anonym "Cosmic Pulse" – the same name as her grandparents' Chinese medicine shop in Singapore, which is a self-defined method of bridging her practices in Canada with her history in Singapore. While Natalie uses Kinbaku to "transform... fear and develop trust," Selim uses it to "experience surrender. Relinquish control" (40-41, 44). However, Selim proposes that they both use Kinbaku to express their desires while developing trust and intimacy.

Like Natalie, Selim connects his Kinbaku practices to his "ancestral heritage" through his nickname, Benkulen Bound (59). Benkulen refers to a port in Sumatra that was under the control of the British, until Stamford Raffles suggested that the East India Company cede power of Benkulen to the Dutch in exchange for Malacca (59). Natalie is adamant that Raffles' influence was "instrumental in developing the myth of Malay backwardness, so much so that for most of the nineteenth century, his arguments about the so-called delay of Malay society were implicitly accepted by Europeans" (41-42). Selim informs Natalie that he is maternally related to Munshi Abdullah, who was Raffles' tutor and interpreter, though, importantly, Abdullah disagreed with Raffles' treatment of the Malays (40, 230). Natalie eventually realises that Selim's choice to bring

together this aspect of his history with a practice that was significant to him was his way of “liv[ing] true to the complex, hybrid self that he was” (60). This choice is also a way for him to contest these historical events by “binding” his transgressive acts – as well as the power he associates with Kinbaku – to his Malay racial heritage that is both denied and devalued in modern Singapore.

Even as Natalie and Selim take “two different approaches to the rope,” through Kinbaku, they reclaim a form of authority over their bodies as they transfigure their past experiences (40). Kinbaku becomes emblematic of Natalie’s and Selim’s need to have the entirety of their complex figurations made legible to others. Given her traumatic history, Natalie is not comfortable with the “incalculable risk” of being bound *by* her partner, but the practice of binding another person fulfils Natalie’s need to be bound *to* another (131). She takes pleasure in the extension of this relationship beyond the immediate moment of the binding, as she and her partner can touch and view the “temporary markings” left behind on the body (40, 41). She is able to develop this lingering bond while performing an act of “servic[e]” that makes her feel vital to her partner, even as her identity is devalued elsewhere. Natalie’s desire to leave these marks on another may parallel how her initial understanding of sexual power was shaped by the psychological marks her father left on her, but Kinbaku is also the ideal vessel through which she is able to undo her father’s grotesque acts, including his violent binding of her body. Kinbaku also allows her to experience a connection reminiscent of the one she shared with Faridah, which unified the two women across social and racial categories of difference.

Selim’s suicide is, in some ways, a radical extension of this desire. In his final letter to Philip, Selim writes that his desire to end his life is provoked both by his father’s simultaneous rejection of and need to control the “son who survived,” as well as his feeling that “Every time I managed to escape, to survive, I felt a growing restlessness after the initial high... my feelings fascinate me. Why are human beings never satiated?” (244, 243). His comments are not reflective of a lack of fulfilment in his work or social life; he is an accomplished police officer, and Philip informs Natalie that Selim’s sexual identity is overlooked by his colleagues. Rather, Selim’s comments are directly associated with the release afforded by his use of Kinbaku, including the release from the state’s emphasis on heteropatriarchal reproduction that coheres in his father’s anxieties. The transgressive potential of Kinbaku, and its association with its practitioners’ particular desires, also foregrounds how the queer desire of racial bodies like Selim’s becomes part of the aforementioned excess that cannot be captured by the nation’s productive regime. Selim pushes his desire to its ultimate conclusion,

and his death ends the tension between his momentary “survival” through Kinbaku, and the consistent rejection of his identity.⁹

Kinbaku also foregrounds the ineffability of both of their desires. For Natalie, the transgression at the core of Kinbaku helps her counter her misrecognition in both locales. As she masters this practice, she is able to reshape her identity and harness her ability to define her relationships to others through this intimate form. The practice is methodological and historical, but also deeply personal. It does not deny the complex relationships of power between bodies, but quite literally reconfigures them through the act of binding another and being bound to others. Further, each shape of Kinbaku that is woven across the body is distinct and its significance is defined by its practitioners as they work together to form the designs. The lasting psychological and physical marks help Natalie and Selim to resist the restrictions that they feel defines their lives. In this sense, as it defies the patriarchal authority of Natalie's and Selim's fathers, it provides a medium that lets them use their desires to deepen their connection with others, while countering the state's patriarchal values – and its “patriarchal legalmoral” apparatus – that defines racial bodies by their socio-cultural (un)productivity.

By way of conclusion, I consider how Kinbaku's significance to Natalie's and Selim's figuration is reminiscent of Viet Thanh Nguyen's description of the “bad subject” that opposes the model minority stereotype and the “problem of commodification” by resisting “dominant society's interpellation into a race- and class- stratified society” (24, 150). In his reading of Kwa's writing, Bennett Yu-Hsiang Fu invokes the problematic of the bad subject to suggest that Kwa produces subjects whose bodies are re-signified and become a “site of transformative cultural practice,” as their transgressions take place “within the hegemonic system” that defines their bodies (4, 102). Natalie and Selim are not inherently “bad subjects”: they both lead comfortable middle-class lives, and have long-term relationships and occupations that they both excel at and enjoy. To most individuals they are still easily classifiable as Chinese and Malay, respectively, which provides them with the option to “pass” as one of these racial groups as needed. Yet this does not undo how the complexity of their racial identities remain external to these states' developmental aims and emphasis on racial productivity, which results in the everyday misrecognition of their identities. Selim's racial background remains obscured in Singapore, and the state's selective admittance of particular queer identities does not extend far enough to have bearing on the marginalisation he experiences from its (patriarchal) conservative base, as expressed through his father's sentiments. The unintelligibility of Natalie's racial identity results in her feelings of dislocation, and although her sexuality might be more accepted in Canada, she still associates it with her father's

⁹ Naruse refers to Selim's suicide as a potential site of “antidevelopmental protest” against the state (219).

rage until she reconnects with Selim and realises the powerful effects that her relationship with Faridah had on his life. Kinbaku is not a curative for the erasure of their experiences, but exemplifies how their unbounded desire can contest the cultivation or erasure of particular forms of raciality under these nations' developmental goals. Through Kinbaku, they can figure themselves as bodies that exceed particular racial-sexual configurations, and create a connection between themselves and a community –albeit largely an online one – of other “bad subjects” who produce new relationships of power through their insignificant desires.

In her analysis of the limits of multiculturalism and diversity, Shome describes that the “transnational limits of current frameworks of cultural inclusion” must be reconfigured so individuals can “connect to the existence, as well as imagination” of others (152). This paper has considered how these limits, and the devaluation of particular racial identities and transnational connections as part of these nations' global identities, diffuse throughout Natalie's and Selim's lives, and render their histories illegible to other individuals they attempt to connect with. But as *Pulse* engages with some of the processes that obstruct these possibilities, it draws out vital trans-national, -racial, and -historical connections between these bodies subjected to the effects of dislocation and the limits of un/productive raciality in both Canada and Singapore.

Works Cited

- Abu-Laban, Yasmeen and Christina Gabriel. *Selling Diversity: Immigration, Multiculturalism, Employment Equity, and Globalization*. Orchard Park: Broadview, 2002.
- Baker, Jim. *Crossroads: A Popular History of Malaysia & Singapore*. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Editions, 2008.
- Bullard, Jeff. “Second National Metropolis Conference: Introduction.” *Metropolis*. Department of Canadian Heritage, Nov. 1997. Web. http://canada.metropolis.net/events/civic/intro_e.html. 2 January 2016.
- Cheah, Pheng. *Inhuman Conditions: On Cosmopolitanism and Human Rights*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2009.
- Cho, Lily. “Asian Canadian Futures: Diasporic Passages and the Routes of Indenture.” *Canadian Literature* 199 (2008): 181-201.
- Da Silva, Denise Ferreira. “To Be Announced: Radical Praxis or Knowing (at) the Limits of Justice.” *Social Text* 31.1 (2013): 43-62.
- Fu, Bennett Yu-Hsiang. *Transgressive Transcripts: Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Chinese Canadian Women's Writing*. New York: Rodopi, 2012.
- Goh, Daniel. “Conclusion: Toward a Critical Multiculturalism.” *Race and Multiculturalism in Malaysia and Singapore*. Eds. Daniel P. S. Goh, Matilda

- Gabrielpillai, Philip Holden and Gaik Cheng Khoo. London: Routledge, 2009. 213-18.
- Gui, Weihsin. "Tactical Objectivism: Recognizing the Object within the Subjective Logic of Neoliberalism in the Fiction of Tash Aw and Lydia Kwa." *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory* 25.4 (2014): 291-311.
- Holden, Philip. "Interrogating Multiculturalism and Cosmopolitanism in the City-State: Some Recent Singapore Fiction in English." *Mobilities* 5.2 (2010): 277-90.
- Kamboureli, Smaro, and Fred Wah. "Shrink Wrapped: The National Packaging of Race Writing." *The Atlantic Literary Review* 2.4 (2001): 132-40.
- Kelly, Philip. "Canadian-Asian Transnationalism." *The Canadian Geographer* 47.3 (2003): 209-18.
- Kwa, Lydia. *Pulse: A Novel*. Toronto: Key Porter Books, 2010.
- Naruse, Cheryl Narumi. *Imagined Diasporas: Neoliberal Nationalism in Contemporary Singaporean Fiction and State Culture*. Thesis. University of Hawai'i, 2014. Ann Arbor: ProQuest, 2014.
- Nguyen, Viet Thanh. *Race & Resistance: Literature & Politics in Asian America*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002.
- Park, Hijin. "Migrants, Minorities and Economies: Transnational Feminism and the Asian/Canadian Woman Subject." *Asian Journal of Women's Studies* 17.4 (2011): 7-38. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/12259276.2011.11666115>. 1 April 2016.
- Shome, Raka. "Mapping the Limits of Multiculturalism in the Context of Globalization." *International Journal of Communication (Online)* (2012): 144-65. . <http://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/1184>. 1 April 2016.
- Tan, Kenneth Paul. *Cinema and Television in Singapore: Resistance in One Dimension*. Boston: Brill, 2008.
- Ty, Eleanor. *The Politics of the Visible in Asian North American Narratives*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004.
- Wee, C.J.W-ling. *The Asian Modern: Culture, Capitalist Development, Singapore*. Aberdeen: Hong Kong UP, 2010.
- Yue, Audrey. "Creative Queer Singapore: The Illiberal Pragmatics of Cultural Production." *Gay and Lesbian Issues and Psychology Review* 3.3 (2007): 149-160. Print.
- . "We're the Gay Company, as Gay as It Gets." *Queer Singapore: Illiberal Citizenship and Mediated Cultures*. Aberdeen: Hong Kong UP, 2012. 197-212.
- Zhang, Kenny. "Flows of People and the Canada-China Relationship." China Papers: Canadian International Council. *Asian Pacific Foundation of Canada*. no. 10. (2010). Web. <http://www.asiapacific.ca/research-report/flows-people-and-canada-china-relationship>