Representations of Precarity in Singaporean Historical Novels

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The candidate confirms that the work submitted is his own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

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This thesis is dedicated to the memory of Anthony Carrigan, who co-supervised this project for almost two years. His insight, energy, and generosity are sorely missed.

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Abstract

This thesis analyses Singaporean historical novels for their capacity to engage the 'Singapore Story' in dialogue, and for their representation of precarity as part of the narrative of national economic development. By exploring the motifs of the 'Garden City', the 'Island Nation' and the 'global city', I examine the interrelation of the individual, family, community, national, regional, and global frames of reference in these texts. Precarity is analysed as a phenomenon with a long history and a wide geographical spread, and as a consequence, the 'uniqueness' of Singapore as an economic model is shown to be challenged by historical fiction's tendency towards historical nuance and complexity. Questions of genre, form, and perspective are considered, and the redemptive possibilities raised by works of historical fiction are contextualised and appraised.

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Introduction

Fig. 1. This photograph of Lee Kuan Yew at the 2012 National Day Parade was the final image of Lee in *The Straits Times*' special edition, 23rd March 2015. Source: The Straits Times © Singapore Press Holdings Limited. Reprinted with permission.

In the early hours of Monday, the 23rd of March 2015, Lee Kuan Yew, the first Prime Minister of independent Singapore, died in hospital of natural causes. Within hours, the government-run *The Straits Times* had issued a special pull-out commemorating him. The above photograph (Fig. 1) dominated the twenty-fourth and final page of the special edition. It was captioned: 'Aug 9 2012: Mr Lee arriving for the National Day Parade at The Float@Marina Bay to a standing ovation, as Singaporeans cheered for the man who

overcame the odds to take Singapore from Third World to First'.[1] In this reporting of his death, the key component of the national narrative, that the triumphant character of Lee Kuan Yew had brought Singapore to its current socioeconomic position, was repeated. It is a narrative that Lee is widely credited with authoring, not least through his memoirs, *The Singapore Story: Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew* and *From Third World to First: The Singapore Story, 1965-2000*. The conflation of Lee's life story with the national narrative of independent Singapore is entrenched. It is a narrative that unashamedly celebrates the breaking of union power in early independent Singapore, whilst emphasising Singapore's geopolitical vulnerability. It chiefly celebrates the country's rapid economic development, and champions the ruling People's Action Party [PAP] 'pragmatism' in driving this development forwards. According to sociologist Chua Beng Huat in his foreword to *The Scripting of a National History* (2008), this official narrative 'has been taught at every level of education, repeated by PAP politicians at every commemorative occasion and built into mass entertainment at every opportunity'.[2] Lee's death provided another such opportunity. A week of national mourning was officially declared, and a 'legitimising hysteria' surrounding Lee's personal mythology ensued.[3] The print media ran dozens of articles over the following week, recounting citizens' personal stories of meeting (and being thoroughly impressed by) Lee. All of the state-owned Mediacorp television channels ran deferential biopics of Lee for the next few days. Primary schools, meanwhile, dropped some lessons to teach two specially-prepared packages that lionised Lee, and attributed the fruits of Singapore's development drive directly to him. The tendency to credit Lee as the main, or sometimes the *sole* architect of Singapore's economic development is prevalent, and has been sharply satirised by Morgan Chua (Fig. 2), a cartoonist who offers alternative perspectives on state myths, and who mainly publishes his cartoons in Hong Kong.[4] Lee's place in the national narrative has also been explored in poetry, in the collection *A Luxury We Cannot Afford* (the title of which is a quotation of Lee's opinion on poetry), for example. Prose fiction, however, has been less direct in its examination of Lee's place in shaping the country. Fiction lends itself more to sustained dialogue with broader historical

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[1] 'Lee Kuan Yew, Sept 16, 1923 – March 23, 2015,' *The Straits Times Special Edition*, 23 March 2015, p. 24.
[2] Chua Beng Huat, 'Foreword' in *The Scripting of a National History: Singapore and Its Pasts*, ed. by Hong Lysa and Huang Jianli (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008), pp. ix-xi (p. x).
[3] Simon Vincent, 'Lee Kuan Yew, Hysteria and the Degradation of Public Discourse', *The Online Citizen*, 2 April 2015, http://www.theonlinecitizen.com/2015/04/lee-kuan-yew-hysteria-and-the-degradation-of-public-discourse/ Accessed 4 June 2015.
[4] Lim Cheng Tju, 'Return of the Native Wit', review of *My Singapore,* by Morgan Chua, *The Straits Times*, 30 July 2000, p. 49; Morgan Chua, *LKY: Political Cartoons* (Singapore: Epigram Books, 2014).

ideas, and the broader ‘Singapore Story’ has been engaged with by many novelists. This thesis will examine some of these texts for their engagement with the national narrative, to uncover the complicated relationship between the ‘Singapore Story’ and the fictionalised narratives of life and development that emerge in these novels.

This image has been removed by the author of this thesis for copyright reasons

Fig. 2. Morgan Chua’s cartoon of Lee Kuan Yew, presiding over Tanjong Pagar (the constituency he won repeatedly) depicts him greeting Chua’s cartoon mascot.

Before exploring these texts, the key ideas of ‘Singapore Story’ require elaboration. The ‘Singapore Story’ concerns itself with the narrative of Singapore’s development. There are various iterations of this story, which can begin in 1819 with British colonisation or in 1965 with independence from Malaysia – the latter most famously articulated in S. Rajaratnam’s declaration in 1965 that ‘[o]ur history starts now. Clean slate. We start from here’.[5] What these divergent versions share is a focus on development, and a projection into the future of further prosperity and security. In all articulations of the narrative, progress is the operating principle. Singapore’s development has been framed as a

[5] Ping Tjin Thum, ‘Interview with Thum Ping Tjin about Lee Kuan Yew’s Singapore – Part 3’, *The Online Citizen*, 3 April 2015, https://www.theonlinecitizen.com/2015/04/03/interview-with-thum-ping-tjin-about-lee-kuan-yews-singapore-part-3/ Accessed 19 September 2017.

progression from a swamp or fishing village to a metropolis.[6] Other features of the narrative include the defeat of political Islamism and communism by PAP 'pragmatism', the implementation of a robust and society-wide system of meritocracy, and the creation of improved racial harmony (in contrast to the turmoil of early independence).[7] Japanese Occupation (1942-1945) is often described as a moment of national awakening.[8] Development is always central to the narrative, but I will argue in this thesis that processes of development can create as much precarity as prosperity. Precarity is never mentioned in the 'Singapore Story', whilst precarious conditions for individuals are always framed as being necessary sacrifices in the national interest. Many historical sources do not corroborate the version of events depicted in Lee's memoirs, which show Lee as the 'founding father' or overarching decision-making figure, to whom the credit for Singapore's rapid economic development must be given. On the day of Lee's death, Ping Tjin Thum, a Singaporean historian at the University of Oxford, took to the Malaysian airwaves to discuss Lee and his legacy. In so doing, he disputed the claim that Lee was solely responsible for the economic development of the country in the aftermath of British rule – thus complicating the 'Singapore Story'.[9] Thum is one of the academics who have been disparagingly labelled 'revisionists' by the Prime Minister for their failure to adhere to the PAP narrative of events.[10] As Thum points out, however, the government is equally revisionist, portraying the past in a manner that flatters PAP ministers.[11] Another such 'revisionist', Loh Kah Seng, has lamented the imposition of barriers to writing histories of Singapore, and the difficulty in bringing a more complete version of events from coming to light.[12] Indeed, Loh's ground-breaking 2013 social history *Squatters Into Citizens: The 1961 Bukit Ho Swee Fire and the Making of Modern Singapore* makes great use of oral history, since archival access is more difficult to obtain. With these examples in mind, 'revisionism' becomes a byword for academic work that challenges the tenets of the 'Singapore Story'.

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[6] Lily Zubaidah Rahim, *Singapore in the Malay World: Building and Breaching Regional Bridges* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 13, 24.
[7] Rahim, pp. 13-14.
[8] Lee Kuan Yew, *The Singapore Story: Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew* (Singapore: Straits Times, 1998), p. 74.
[9] Thum, 'Interview with Thum Ping Tjin about Lee Kuan Yew's Singapore – Part 1', *The Online Citizen*, 26 March 2015, http://www.theonlinecitizen.com/2015/03/interview-with-thum-ping-tjin-on-his-view-of-lee-kuan-yews-singapore/ Accessed 19 September 2017.
[10] Lee Hsien Loong, Facebook status update, 20 December 2014, https://www.facebook.com/leehsienloong/photos/a.344710778924968.83425.125845680811480/823863401009701/?type=1&theater Accessed 19 September 2017.
[11] Thum, 'Interview Part 1'.
[12] Loh Kah Seng and Liew Kai Khiun (eds), *The Makers and Keepers of Singapore History* (Singapore: Ethos Books and Singapore Heritage Society, 2010).

The policing of such ‘revisionism’ in the public sphere constitutes a curating of the national narrative – an attempt to control Singaporeans’ (and non-Singaporeans’) understanding of the country’s history and, by extension, its present and future.

It must be acknowledged that a handful of academics do not pose a threat to the PAP government in Singapore. Why, then, is the government so keen to publicly and forcefully dispute counter-claims about Singapore’s history? One answer to this would concern the sacred place that history has in Singapore, and in maintaining Singapore’s place in the world. Singapore is a place – arguably the place – where national economic development policies have been most successful according to their own criteria. Safeguarding this reputation as a stable and successful location is key to continuing to attract global capital. Another facet to the government’s anxiety to police the national narrative involves control of the social imaginary (as described above by Chua, implicating the education system and mass media). By narrating a linear history in which progress and development inexorably unfold, the historical, political alternatives to PAP ‘pragmatism’ are elided. There are many examples of the government’s controlling of the narrative by rendering the alternatives invisible. For instance, Tan Pin Pin’s documentary film *To Singapore With Love* (2013), which interviews former political detainees and exiles, was banned from cinemas in Singapore.[13] Sonny Liew’s graphic novel *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* (2015), which features an alternate universe in which leftist Lim Chin Siong rose to power and Singapore nevertheless became a prosperous city, had its National Arts Council funding withdrawn.[14] These examples illustrate that the government is capable of various degrees of censorship to preserve the dominant version of Singapore’s history. None of these texts are likely to bring the government down, but taken together, they represent a threat to government control of the national narrative.

The latter example of Liew’s graphic novel suggests that fiction, as well as documentary film, is considered dangerously subversive by some. After all, fictional accounts that cover historical events in a realist manner have the capacity to undermine the ‘Singapore Story’, and represent a more nuanced and complex history than the dominant national narrative allows. It can show the political alternatives that were gestating at various moments in Singapore’s history, whilst also offering non-state

[13] Tessa Wong, ‘Could Singapore Have Become Communist?’, *BBC News*, 5 August 2015, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-33621862 Accessed 10 August 2015.
[14] ‘NAC Withdraws Grant for Graphic Novel Publisher Due to ‘Sensitive Content’’, *Channel NewsAsia*, 30 May 2015, http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/nac-withdraws-grant-for/1881738.html Accessed 30 May 2015.

perspectives on the state-ordained narrative. The interjection of fictional individual narratives into the national narrative illuminates both, and constitutes an engagement with history that may well, on close inspection, count as ‘revisionist’. The power of any national narrative stems from its being held in common, as a shared understanding of the nation’s history and the terms of the individual’s inclusion within it. To complicate this understanding, or to offer alterative (if not always incompatible) ways of understanding the nation’s history, involves an engagement with dominant historical narratives and thus the potential to undercut or replicate the dominant narrative tropes. In Singaporean fiction that engages with history, the tropes of ‘fishing village to metropolis’-style progress, the defeat of a dangerous communist or Islamist threat, the establishment of meritocracy and the creation of racial harmony may all be contested or confirmed. By examining historical fiction’s engagement with the national narrative, including the replication of, as well as departure from, its narrative tropes, this thesis will explore selected texts’ ambivalent relation to the dominant ‘Singapore Story’. In this thesis, I shall examine Suchen Christine Lim’s *The River’s Song* (2013), Simon Tay’s *City of Small Blessings* (2009), Isa Kamari’s *Rawa* (2009|2013), Suratman Markasan’s *Penghulu* (1998|2012), and Yeng Pway Ngon’s *Unrest* (2002|2012) and *Art Studio* (2011|2014). These recent historical novels have been chosen for scrutiny because they feature representations of economic development, and are to some extent in dialogue with the ‘Singapore Story’, albeit from a critical point of view.

Development and Precarity

The idea of ‘development’ recurs in all iterations of the ‘Singapore Story’, and it needs to be critically analysed. Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin have shown that ‘development’ is a ‘strategically ambiguous term’ that is deployed and critiqued from an array of ideological positions, at a global level.[15] At its best, it can be ‘capitalism with a conscience’ – increasing economic output at the national level in order to alleviate poverty in individuals and families.[16] In *Development as Freedom* (1999), Amartya Sen has put forward the more nuanced idea of development facilitating various freedoms, rather than simply increasing national domestic product.[17] Development discourse, however, accompanies and justifies developmental strategies, and tends to treat all

[15] Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 27.
[16] Ibid, p. 29.
[17] Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 3-4.

'underdeveloped' areas in the same way, often presuming uniform development strategies can resolve economic and social problems.[18] Arturo Escobar has attacked the ascent of post-war development discourse and the ensuing neoliberal development economics. He outlines 'the "discovery" of mass poverty in Asia, Africa, and Latin America' at the moment of formal decolonization, and, drawing on the theory of Homi Bhabha, demonstrates how colonial discourses and development discourses are 'governed by the same principles'.[19] William Adams and Martin Mulligan argue further that 'dominant global development strategies are still rooted in European or Western values'.[20] They imply a colonial or neocolonial dimension to 'development', but other theorists situate developmental logic as more precisely capitalist than colonial. Examining the case of the Amazon rainforest, Susanna Hecht and Alexander Cockburn posit contemporary ideas of development as a more sophisticated, rationalised articulation of earlier pioneers' lust for the region's riches, positioning the idea of development as a late capitalist strategy that departs from the colonial capitalist strategy of unabashed plunder.[21] The late sociologist Zygmunt Bauman foregrounds the social cost of development, arguing that 'wasted humans' are a direct product of economic development which 'cannot proceed without degrading and devaluing the previously effective modes of 'making a living' and therefore cannot but deprive their practitioners of their livelihood'.[22] Pablo Mukherjee similarly observes capitalism's tendency towards economic and ecological unevenness, which can be ascribed to a 'rhythm of overaccumulation and underdevelopment' at global and national levels.[23] This suggests that there is a marginalisation or peripheralisation of human beings which is endemic to capitalist processes that have been labelled 'developmental'. The critics quoted here work in diverse disciplinary fields, from literary criticism to cultural geography, but they are united in their critique of global capitalism's excesses. Since this thesis draws overwhelmingly on Marxist critics for its definition of development, it takes a broadly Marxist stance towards this global phenomenon. More specifically, it defines development in the neoliberal mode as a strategy for resource and surplus labour value extraction, which

[18] Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. 5-14.
[19] Ibid, pp. 21-2, 9.
[20] William M. Adams and Martin Mulligan, 'Introduction' in *Decolonizing Nature: Strategies for Conservation in a Post-colonial Era*, ed. by William M. Adams and Martin Mulligan (Sterling, VA and London: Earthscan, 2003), 1-15 (p. 6).
[21] Susanna Hecht and Alexander Cockburn, *The Fate of the Forest: Developers, Destroyers and Defenders of the Amazon* (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 8.
[22] Zygmunt Bauman, *Wasted Lives: Modernity and its Outcasts* (Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity, 2004), p. 5.
[23] Pablo Upamanyu Mukherjee, *Postcolonial Environments: Nature, Culture, and the Contemporary Indian Novel in English* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 13.

has an attendant discourse that draws attention only to supposed universal benefits rather than socialised and localised costs.

Rob Nixon's critique of anthropologist Thayer Scudder's idea of the 'developmental refugee' overlaps with both Mukherjee's conception of ecological unevenness and Bauman's notion of the 'wasted human'. For Nixon, the 'developmental refugee', a synecdoche for people who have been relocated from their homes so that a developmental project can reshape the land, 'holds in tension an official, centripetal logic of national development on the one hand and on the other, a terrifying, centrifugal narrative of displacement, dispossession, and exodus'.[24] Nixon describes this process as one of making the original inhabitants invisible, and furthermore, that this process is performed in the service of capitalism. This idea will be dwelt upon later in reference to Singapore's resettlement programmes in Chapters One and Two, which critique novels' depictions of developmental refugees in an abstract 'national interest'. Elsewhere, Nixon critiques 'capitalism's innate tendency to abstract in order to extract', cataloguing 'distancing mechanisms' that include 'the rhetorical gulf between development as a grand planetary dream premised on growth-driven consumption and its socioenvironmental fallout'.[25] The global scale of the developmental project is foregrounded, whilst the local outcomes of the process are elided from national narratives. To combat the mechanisms he describes, Nixon engages literary works that render the subjects of development visible again. The 'Singapore Story' is also exemplary in omitting the struggles of developmental subjects. This thesis will follow Nixon's approach to 'developmental refugees' by attending to literary works that re-situate the neglected subjects of development within the national narrative. In the 'Singapore Story', the plight of the individual is absent, and this must be remedied by reference to alternative Singaporean historical narratives.

To return to Bauman's *Wasted Lives*, the victims of developmental processes are described as being thrown into 'market-promoted précarité' – a phrase that seems to overlap with the condition of the developmental refugee, but which Bauman does not explain.[26] Critiques of neoliberalism, however, have evaluated the idea of precarity in great depth. Precarity is theorised by Guy Standing, for example, as a routinised experience of financial uncertainty. The 'precariat' suffer multiple forms of insecurity, including the lack of availability of jobs in the job market, no guarantee of employment for any duration of

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[24] Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 152.
[25] Ibid, p. 41.
[26] Bauman, p. 5.

time, poor health and safety legislation and limited voice in the labour market.[27] Migrant workers have been shown to be amongst the most susceptible to precarity because of their inability to access social and economic safety nets.[28] The widest definition of precarity accounts for socio-economic dimensions to vulnerability, although the critics who take this position insist on the temporal and geographic specificity of the condition; precarity was first theorised in relation to employment practices in 1980s' Italy.[29] Standing also emphasises the temporal and spatial limits of the concept's applicability.[30] However, Brett Neilson and Ned Rossiter argue that precarity is the norm under capitalism, and is intensified under neoliberalism, making it a concept with much greater analytical applicability.[31] The concept of precarity might be said to overlap with risk theory's concept of vulnerability, and there is widespread acknowledgement that risks and vulnerabilities are unevenly distributed, and that wealthy individuals have greater capacity to alleviate any risks society produces.[32] Arthur P.J. Mol specifically targets globalisation as the root cause of increased inequality in exposure to risk.[33] It is pertinent, then, that Singapore is the most, or at worst, second most globalised country in the world in terms of multinational penetration, and the level of inequality within the country is stark, scoring a Gini coefficient 0.414, as compared to an OECD average of 0.314.[34] Precarity is an

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[27] Guy Standing, *The Precariat: A New Dangerous Class* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011), p. 10.

[28] Thomas Barnes, 'Marxism and Informal Labour', *Journal of Australian Political Economy* 70 (Summer 2012/2013), 144-166, p. 154; Laura Fantone, 'Precarious Changes: Gender and Generational Politics in Contemporary Italy,' *Feminist Review* 87 (2007), 5–20, p. 9; Rosalind Gill and Andy Pratt, 'In the Social Factory?: Immaterial Labour, Precariousness and Cultural Work', *Theory, Culture and Society* 25.7-8 (2008), 1-30, p. 11.

[29] Gill and Pratt, 'In the Social Factory?', p. 10.

[30] Standing, *The Precariat*, p. 9.

[31] Brett Neilson and Ned Rossiter, 'Precarity as a Political Concept, Or, Fordism as Exception', *Theory, Culture and Society* 25.7-8 (2008), 51–72, p. 54.

[32] Jakob Arnoldi, *Risk: An Introduction* (Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2009), p. 50; Ulrich Beck, *World at Risk*, trans. by Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2009), p. 178; Roger E. Kasperson, 'Acceptability of Human Risk', in *The Social Contours of Risk, vol. 2: Risk Analysis, Corporations and the Globalization of Risk*, ed. by Jeanne X. Kasperson and Roger E. Kasperson (Sterling, VA and London: Earthscan, 2005), 19-28, p. 26; Nicklas Luhmann, *Risk: A Sociological Theory*, trans. by Rhodes Barrett (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1993), p. 3; Arthur P.J. Mol, *Globalization and Environmental Reform: The Ecological Modernization of the Global Economy* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2003), pp. 82-3; Jens Zinn, 'Recent Developments in Sociological Risk Theory', *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research*7.1 (2006), n. pag., http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/68 Accessed 1 September 2016.

[33] Arthur P.J. Mol, *Globalization and Environmental Reform: The Ecological Modernization of the Global Economy* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2003), pp. 82-3.

[34] Tommy Koh, quoted in Philip Holden, 'Histories of the Present: Reading Contemporary Singapore Novels between the Local and the Global', *Postcolonial Text* 2.2 (2006); Roy Ngerng, 'Singapore Has The Highest Income Inequality Compared to the OECD Countries', *The Heart Truths*, 21 February

observable phenomenon in late capitalist Singapore. Most people have little to no safety net, which renders them vulnerable to risk but above all, renders them economically precarious. There is also no minimum wage.[35] In such a situation, the Singaporean precariat is forced to accept poor pay and working conditions to survive. Lee Kuan Yew may be correct when celebrating 'stability, growth and prosperity' in Singapore, but he is wrong to claim that 'everyone has a share in the fruits of our progress'.[36] Since independence, development and precarity have gone hand in hand in Singapore. To elaborate this link between the country's developmental drive and its precaritisation of its citizens, I will now turn briefly to an analysis of its political economic model.

Chua's 1997 monograph, *Political Legitimacy and Housing*, claims that 'the developmentalist-capitalist path was the only one open' to Singapore, due to its geopolitical situation as a Chinese-majority city in an anti-communist region:

> The result was [at the moment of independence], and continues to be, an ideology that embodies a vigorous economic development orientation which emphasizes science, technology, and a centralized, rational public administration as the fundamental basis for an export-oriented industrialization programme, financed largely by multinational capital. […] Consequently, from the very outset of state formation, capitalist development strategies have always been identified as the "natural", the "necessary" and the "realistic" solution to the problems of nation-building. It is through their "naturalness", "necessity" and "realism" that the PAP's economic and social policies have come to acquire a sense of being "pragmatic" and have crystallized into a loosely coherent system.[37]

Singapore's approach to development has been to differentiate itself from Chinese Communist-inspired state activity, according to Chua, resulting in a 'developmentalist-capitalist' ideology that is presented as pragmatism. Clearly, the entrenchment of neoliberal developmentalism as an ideological position is overdetermined, but critics' emphasis on 'pragmatism' allows the ideology to appear 'natural' in Singapore's historical and geopolitical context. Eugene Liow departs from Chua's characterisation of Singapore's

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2014, http://thehearttruths.com/2013/02/21/singapore-has-the-highest-income-inequality-compared-to-the-oecd-countries/ Accessed 5 September 2017.

[35] Ngerng.

[36] Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First: The Singapore Story 1965-2000* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000), pp. 11, 115.

[37] Chua Beng Huat, *Political Legitimacy and Housing: Stakeholding in Singapore* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 130-31.

political economy, categorising it more bluntly as a 'neoliberal-developmentalist state'. The PAP's 'ideology of pragmatism' has led to the 'simultaneous retreat and expansion of the state', comprising phases of state-led industrialisation, 'the use of draconian laws to keep labour servile and politically inactive', and financialisation.[38] If neoliberalism is seen as the latest phase in the evolution of capitalism (as it is by economists Gérard Duménil and Dominique Lévy) in which the state's primary role is to provide a 'good business climate', then PAP 'pragmatism' is at least a partial embrace of neoliberalism.[39] The Singaporean government's efforts to discipline the workforce are certainly a facet of neoliberal practice. 'Flexible' employment law allows retrenchment with limited benefits to the worker, and a tripartite system keeps unions within government.[40] In effect, the National Trades Union Congress, the only legalised union, is a government department in itself.[41] The government discourse on 'upgrading' or 'value adding' demonstrates that it is incumbent upon the worker to make themselves attractive to employers.[42] Giok Ling Ooi summarises PAP labour policy as 'emphasiz[ing] the importance of economic development which has to take precedence over [civic] rights and that discipline and conformity to group values are more desirable social goals than freedom and individualism'.[43] In order to promote economic development, labour rights are suppressed. The effort to underpin flexibility in the labour market is indicative of precarious conditions for workers: what is fêted as flexibility at the macroeconomic level is experienced as precarity by the individual.[44]

To deal more fully with the issues of development, precarity, and nationalism, I will need to establish a methodology with which to scrutinise these ideas from historical, geographical, and literary perspectives. The Marxist critique of development is foundational to this project, and it also inspires the fields of urban and global political ecology, which offer fruitful methodologies for critiques of global capitalism's

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[38] Eugene Dili Liow, 'The Neoliberal-Developmental State: Singapore as Case Study', *Critical Sociology* 38.2 (2011), 241-264 (pp. 242, 248, 243).
[39] Gérard Duménil and Dominique Lévy, *The Crisis of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 5; David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 70.
[40] Lee, *From Third World to First,* p. 108.
[41] 'Tripartism in Singapore', *Ministry of Manpower*, 7 November 2014, http://www.mom.gov.sg/employment-practices/tripartism-in-singapore/Pages/default.aspx Accessed 1 December 2014.
[42] Liow, 'The Neoliberal-Developmental State', p. 255.
[43] Ooi Giok Ling, 'State-Society Relations, the City and Civic Space', in *Globalization, the City and Civil Society in Pacific Asia: The Social Production of Civic Spaces*, ed. by Mike Douglass, K.C. Ho and Giok Ling Ooi (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), pp. 66-78 (p. 70).
[44] Jodi Dean, *The Communist Horizon* (London and New York: Verso, 2012), p. 62.

environmental destruction and societal impoverishment. Paul Robbins has defined political ecology in a recent edition of his critical introduction to the field, writing that

> political ecology is an urgent kind of argument or text […] that examines winners and losers, is narrated using dialectics, begins and/or ends in a contradiction, and surveys both the status of nature and stories about the status of nature.[45]

As such, the field is well-suited for a staging of debates regarding economic development at the expense of the ecological and the social, particularly when these debates are already framed as part of a national narrative. Contributions to political ecology are unified by a desire to 'unravel the political forces at work in environmental access, management and transformation', according to Robbins, although he argues that these contributions are methodologically diverse: 'there are very few techniques, technologies or analytics not used in political ecology', he claims.[46] This thesis will embrace the interdisciplinarity of political ecology, acknowledging its underpinnings in cultural materialism, analytics of accumulation through dispossession, and studies of extraction of land and labour surpluses.[47] For Robbins, Richard Peet and Michael Watts, '[u]nderstanding and resisting the way critical environmental problems are produced and promulgated in global capitalism depends on knowing and grappling with how people internalize, narrate, and explain the world around them'.[48] In particular, I seek to understand how people narrate the world around them through literature, as a multidimensional mode of explanation that resonates at individual, community, national and global levels. As a result, this exploration of literature can share alternative perspectives on the political forces that organise Singaporeans' daily lives and expose people to precarity. Political ecology's commitments to studying the impacts of capitalist development on the environment and the social consequences of environmental management and transformation mean that it is well placed to examine the phenomenon of precarity, as it intensifies and is reconfigured under neoliberal developmentalism.[49]

To date, literary engagement with these issues has been refracted through postcolonial ecocriticism and postcolonial and global ecologies, all of which coalesce in

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[45] Paul Robbins, *Political Ecology: A Critical Introduction*, 2nd edn. (Malden, MA, Oxford and Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), p. viii.
[46] Ibid, pp. 3, 85.
[47] Ibid, p. 54.
[48] Richard Peet, Paul Robbins, and Michael Watts, 'Global Nature', in *Global Political Ecology*, ed. by Richard Peet, Paul Robbins and Michael Watts (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 1-47, p. 41.
[49] Ibid, p. 24.

engaging with capitalist degradation of ecologies through narrative. The expansive postcolonial project of championing decolonisation and liberation from imperial structures demands engagement with former colonial sites like Singapore – not least because some versions of the national narrative fix the country's moment of birth at the date of colonisation by the British, in 1819 (eliding the history of Malay-dominated Singapura). Postcolonial interventions on Singaporean literature and history have commonly engaged with race, diaspora, cultural heritage, and nationalism.[50] Poverty, precarity, and, by extension, class have largely been background issues in these analyses, but my methodology will retain focus on race and nationalism whilst bringing the analytical category of class to the fore. By exploring the dynamics of precarity in Singapore, as they emerge and are reconfigured under neoliberal developmentalism, I will seek to fuse the anti-neocolonial aspects of postcolonialism with environmental and class analysis. Postcolonial studies have been put in dialogue with global ecologies by Elizabeth DeLoughrey, Jill Didur, and Anthony Carrigan in order to mount a 'critical study of narrative' that foregrounds the 'critical demand that the concept of ecology engage the vectors of social history'.[51] Narrative is thus a method of understanding shifting ecological relationships, through a cognitive process that is bounded by culturally specific limits. This process can be productively compared to Arun Agrawal's concept of 'environmentality'. However, where Agrawal posits a Foucauldian framework for addressing the question of people's understanding of themselves as ecological subjects,[52] I will take a more system-conscious approach to situate a reading of Singaporean texts, building on Marxist and systems-analysing theorists, whose recent updating of world-systems theory to account for ecological relations and cultural production I adapt here. This will illuminate the precarity-

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[50] See, for example, Angelia Poon, 'Performing National Service in Singapore: (Re)imagining Nation in the Poetry and Short Stories of Alfian Sa'at', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 40.3 (September 2005), pp. 118-138; Philip Holden, 'Rajaratnam's Tiger: Race, Gender and the Beginnings of Singapore Nationalism', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 41.1 (March 2006), pp. 127-140; Robbie B. H. Goh, 'Imagining the Nation: The Role of Singapore Poetry in English in "Emergent Nationalism"', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 41.2 (June 2006), pp. 21-41; Tamara S. Wagner, 'Boutique Multiculturalism and the Consumption of Repulsion: Re-Disseminating Food Fictions in Malaysian and Singaporean Diasporic Novels', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 42.1 (March 2007), pp. 31-46.

[51] Neil Lazarus, *The Postcolonial Unconscious* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 9; John McLeod, 'Introduction' in *The Routledge Companion to Postcolonial Studies*, ed. by John McLeod (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 1-18, pp. 6-7; Anthony Carrigan, Elizabeth DeLoughrey and Jill Didur, 'Introduction' in *Global Ecologies and the Environmental Humanities: Postcolonial Approaches*, ed. by Anthony Carrigan, Elizabeth DeLoughrey and Jill Didur (New York and London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 1-54 (p. 39).

[52] Arun Agrawal, *Environmentality: Technologies of Government and the Making of Subjects* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005), p. 8.

inducing underside to neoliberal developmentalism in Singapore, and allow comparative exploration of my primary texts' negotiation of this issue.

The *longue durée* of capitalist expansion has been conceived by David Harvey (and political ecologists) through a 'spatial fix' that attempts to postpone the resolutions of the internal contradictions of capitalism by expanding the system across more space.[53] This expansion has been theorised by Immanuel Wallerstein as the growth of the world-economy, which he defines as 'a large geographic zone within which there is a division of labor and hence significant internal exchange of basic or essential goods as well as flows of capital and labor'.[54] Wallerstein argues that world-systems analysis, a body of critical literature that fuses sociology, history, politics, and economics, provides the analytical tools to think through the system of relations that constitutes capitalism.[55] He adopts Fernand Braudel's idea of the *longue durée* as the duration of a world-system, which, in the case of capitalism, has been continuous from the sixteenth century.[56] I agree that capitalism can be conceived as a world-system in an analytically useful manner, so as to reveal the structural pressures that are brought to bear on individuals and institutions within a nation and across nations. Political ecologists like Robbins also find Braudel's idea of the *longue durée* useful for analysis of the history of environmental transformation, and risk theorists like Mol consider systems analysis helpful in evaluating the historical inequalities in the distribution of vulnerability.[57] Consequently, my concern with ecological dimensions of precarity will be greatly aided by systemic contextualisation.

In a departure from Peet, Robbins and Watts' conception of a combination of ecological and economic crises in the late capitalist world-economy, this thesis follows Jason W. Moore's argument that these phenomena are aspects of the same crisis.[58] Moore theorises a capitalist world-ecology, whose expansion involves the incorporation of untapped commodity frontiers into the capitalist system.[59] He repeats the political ecological argument that 'nature' and 'culture' ought not to be considered discrete actors or units of analysis. However, he casts the argument in a new light by claiming that capital

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[53] David Harvey, *Spaces of Capital: Towards a Critical Geography* (New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 284-311; Peet et al., p. 18.
[54] Immanuel Wallerstein, *World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004), p. 23.
[55] Ibid, p. x-xi.
[56] Ibid, p. 18.
[57] Robbins, p. 66; Mol, p. 83.
[58] Peet et al., p. 12; Jason W. Moore, 'Transcending the Metabolic Rift: A Theory of Crises in the Capitalist World-Ecology,' *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 38.1 (January 2011), 1-46, p. 2.
[59] Ibid, p. 33-8.

harnesses ideas about what is 'nature' to minimise costs from the capitalist's point of view, because 'nature' need not be paid monetary recompense for its services.[60] Such an observation has ramifications for questions of agency that will not be addressed here. However, the idea that 'nature' has been conceived of as a resource by capitalist actors is surely no accident, and it is notable that the Singaporean state, for example, evicted people from their settlement at the moment when that settlement's environment was newly commodified (as we shall see in Chapter One). Moore's world-ecological framework provides a structure for analysing Singapore's development and environmental transformation as a colonial and formally independent site, but this schema has tended to prioritise analysis of ecological frontiers and resource extraction. This thesis addresses the PAP manoeuvring of Singapore into an attractive position for multinational investors, which involves the intensification of precarity for many people, and marginalised groups in particular. In Singapore, there are few resources to extract, but there is surplus labour value to extract, and there are 'squatters' to turn into wage labourers. The experiences of these labourers need to be recovered, because they are not present in the 'Singapore Story' – a situation paralleled in other, global instances of displacement at the behest of development initiatives.[61] The dynamics of the states-system in the capitalist world-ecology put Singapore's marginalised people at the mercy of multinational capital, and this means that there are state-sponsored attempts to discursively and physically render these groups invisible. The national narrative, a 'universal narrative of progress',[62] elides mention of such groups, and so alternative realist literary narratives must be recognised for their contributions in sharing victims' experiences. At the same time, many of the people who are analogous to the fictionalised subjects of my primary texts have been physically displaced from Singapore, keeping them out of sight and out of mind in the late capitalist Singaporean 'environmentality'.

The 'universal' national narrative deploys homogenising developmentalist discourse (as critiqued by Escobar), in which, to quote Lee Kuan Yew, 'everyone has a share in the fruits of our progress'.[63] Of course, not everyone has shared equally in the fruits of economic development. One of the most pressing contradictions of the development drive in postcolonial Singapore has been the double role of women. The neoliberal

[60] Ibid, p. 2-4.
[61] Nixon, p. 153. Nixon cites instances of developmental refugees in Nevada, Kazakhstan, and Guatemala, among others.
[62] C.J.W.-L. Wee, *The Asian Modern: Culture, Capitalist Development, Singapore* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2007), p. 53.
[63] Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First,* p. 115.

developmentalist model that Liow describes pushes the majority of people into wage labour, and such a model perhaps ought to render the patriarchal division of domestic labour obsolete. However, the government gives mixed messages regarding domestic labour: in 1980, Minister Goh Chok Tong stated that 'women play a more beneficial role at home', and other internal observers see the government as 'trying to encourage both family values and women as income earners'.[64] Indeed, the national narrative is strategically conflated with Lee Kuan Yew's life story, in which a form of purposefully 'oriental[ised] masculinity' is meticulously constructed.[65] Where are women in the 'Singapore Story'? Women are not made invisible by the 'Singapore Story's' development discourse, but they are represented as partaking of the nation's progress as both wage labourers and domestic labourers. Literary responses to the national narrative complicate the 'universal' elements of the representation of shared progress by sharing the experiences of women who felt society's pressure from multiple directions.

Issues of race are similarly obfuscated in the national narrative. The national pledge, recited in schools every weekday morning, is rendered in English as 'We, the citizens of Singapore, pledge ourselves as one united people, regardless of race, language or religion, to build a democratic society, based on justice and equality, so as to achieve happiness, prosperity and progress for our nation'.[66] Such a commitment is undercut by many ministerial pronouncements. Lee Kuan Yew questioned the security of allowing Muslim Malays to be officers in the armed forces, and claimed that only a Chinese-majority multiracial nation could achieve the economic success enjoyed by Singapore.[67] These comments, in combination with the ongoing Speak Mandarin Campaign (launched in 1979), and his advancement of Confucianism within PAP ideology, have led to him being described

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[64] Goh Chok Tong, quoted in Janet W. Salaff, 'Women, the Family, and the State: Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore – Newly Industrialised Countries in Asia', in *Women, Employment and the Family in the International Division of Labour*, ed. by Sharon Stichter and Jane L. Parpart (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan 1990), 98-136, p. 111; Ann Brooks, *Gendered Work in Asian Cities: The New and Changing Labour Markets* (Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006), p.107.

[65] Philip Holden, 'A Man and an Island: Gender and Nation in Lee Kuan Yew's *The Singapore Story*', *Biography* 24.2 (Spring 2001), 401-424, p. 416.

[66] Zhi Wei and Kartini Saparudin, 'The National Pledge', *Singapore Infopedia*, 1 August 2014, http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_84_2004-12-13.html?utm_expid=85360850-6.qNOOYF40RhKK6gXsQEaAJA.0&utm_referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.co.uk%2F Accessed 30 June 2015.

[67] 'SM's Remarks Must Be Seen in Right Light', *The Straits Times*, 30 September 1999, p. 28; 'President's Address, 1 March 1985', *Singapore Parliament Reports*, column 70, http://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/topic.jsp?currentTopicID=00062986-ZZ¤tPubID=00069476-ZZ&topicKey=00069476-ZZ.00062986-ZZ_1%2Bid005_19850301_S0005_T00051-president-address%2B Accessed 30 June 2015.

as a ‘champion of a form of Sinocentric multiracialism’.[68] This skewed version of multiracialism makes the ‘endless touting of meritocracy’ disingenuous; there are privileges and obstacles accorded to different races that a ‘meritocratic’ system fails to address.[69] The national narrative implicitly deepens this phenomenon by celebrating the industry of the immigrant communities that now make up the majority of the Singaporean population – eliding the history and contemporary contributions of Malay people.[70] Historian Michael Barr goes so far as to label meritocracy and multiracialism the ‘two foundational mythologies of the regime’, which are visibly contradictory yet widely accepted.[71] Literary intersections with a national narrative that feature a longer and more complex history than that authorised in the ‘Singapore Story’ can therefore bring a great deal to conversations regarding race in the current meritocratic system. As the neoliberal-developmental model requires the opening up of environmental and human ‘resources’ to multinational capital, many people experience the adverse effects of development without tasting its ‘fruits’. This experience is suppressed at the national level, whilst a more celebratory narrative of the nation’s development is disseminated. By accounting for both the familial and national perspectives on the development process, Singaporean historical fiction can complicate the ‘Singapore Story’. Fictionalising development processes can bring to light fresh and plural perspectives on the mythologies of Singapore’s history – exploding some mythologies, and reframing others.

If, as Chua argues, Singaporean economic policy serves to distinguish the city-state from Chinese communism, then historical fiction can also complicate the role of communism in the ‘Singapore Story’. In this version of the national narrative, communism is a spectre that haunts Southeast Asia after the Second World War, and which is duly halted by the rapid and noble actions of ‘pragmatic’ leaders, in Singapore, Malaysia, and the British Empire. Communism is understood as a threat to many freedoms, and possibly also freedom from Chinese rule. Communism is usually figured as an outside force, bidding to take over the local political sphere. In *The River’s Song*, *Unrest,* and *Art Studio*, Singaporeans are labelled communists for their advocacy for the poor. In *Unrest* and *Art Studio*, some Singaporeans are communist, in that they fight for a communist cause, but

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[68] Michael D. Barr, *Lee Kuan Yew: The Beliefs Behind the Man* (Richmond: Curzon, 2000), pp. 157-8.
[69] Seker S.B., ‘Advantage of Growing Up a Minority in Singapore Is That You Adapt’, *The Online Citizen*, 28 March 2012, http://www.theonlinecitizen.com/2012/03/advantage-of-growing-up-a-minority-in-singapore-is-that-you-adapt/ Accessed 4 July 2015.
[70] Nurhidayahti Binte Mohammad Miharja, ‘Textbook Prescriptions: Malays in Singapore Historiography’ (MA thesis, National University of Singapore, 2011), p. 59.
[71] Michael D. Barr, *The Ruling Elite of Singapore: Networks of Power and Influence* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2014), p. 142.

their adherence to communist (or more specifically, Maoist) doctrine is inconsistent. Certainly, in these novels, communism does not present a great civilizational threat to Singapore and its 'pragmatic' leadership. Rather, it represents a facet of the most dispossessed groups voicing their opinions, and being repressed. Singapore's ideological location in the world, as well as its geographical place in the world, is one of the subjects of these novels. Singapore marks out its own neoliberal trajectory, even before neoliberalism takes hold in the US and Europe, but it retains central planning aspects from the colonial administration. It thus provides different ideological terrain for its subjects, who nonetheless move between Singapore, Malaysia, China, and North America throughout these novels. Whilst there is a dialogue with the national narrative, overarching system-wide narratives of Cold War development and decolonisation are also implicated. These literary representations show Singapore in a global network of relations, and thus as part of the world-ecology. Any analysis of Singaporean literature that adopts a world-ecological framework will need to address the place of the literature in world-systemic terms, which is what I shall attempt to do below.

Singapore in World-Literature

Political ecology's exercise in 'grappling with how people internalize, narrate, and explain the world around them'[72] demands the study of imaginative literature that explores ecologies at a global level. In her introduction to the 'Global and Postcolonial Ecologies' special edition of *Green Letters*, Sharae Deckard cautions that the institutionalisation of this field comes with risks. There is the danger of 'consecrating' novelists whose work fits with prevailing patterns of thought in the academy. There is also the danger of delimiting postcolonial or global ecological studies to certain literary forms. To avoid these pitfalls, Deckard calls for 'a more wide-ranging and properly comparative tradition of criticism'.[73] This project examines a body of literature that has been relatively understudied by ecocritics and postcolonialists alike, and thus responds to this call for a broadened vision of what might be the literature of 'global ecology'. Singaporean literature has been neglected in postcolonial and environmental critiques, but where it has featured, there has been scant attention to precarity, and no framing of socio-economic and environmental issues in a world-ecological framework, to date.

[72] Peet et al., p. 41.
[73] Sharae Deckard, 'Editorial', *Green Letters* 16.1 (2012), 5-14, p. 7.

Circumscribing the body of Singaporean literature is a challenge. Singapore is a city-state that has existed as an independent nation since 1965, having been integrated with Malaysia for two years since 1963, and having been administered as a British colony, alongside Malaya, previously. The contradictions in this 'national' literature are apparent from Wang Gungwu, Ee Tiang Hong, and Lim Thean Soo's attempts to linguistically unify the races of Peninsular Malaysia and Singapore in early poetry from self-governing Singapore. In his 2009 anthology, *Writing Singapore*, Philip Holden argues that describing this early work as 'Singaporean' is problematic, because in the 1950s, there was no Singaporean national identity with which to identify, but rather, a Malayan one. The poetry of Wang, Ee and Lim could therefore be classified in retrospect as 'Malayan Literature in English', because it comprised poems 'in different registers that attempted to explore both descriptively and linguistically through the incorporation of words from other languages, a hybrid Malayan environment.[74] Holden's stance is clarified further in the subtitle to the anthology, *An Historical Anthology of Singapore Literature*, which eliminates the potentially exclusive connotations of Singapore*an* literature as a body of literature written by people who would accept the identity of Singaporean. This thesis looks at contemporary writing, which comes bundled with its own issues of limits and margins: some writers were not born in Singapore, whilst some have taken other national identities. In all cases, however, the texts chosen for this thesis illuminate versions of Singapore in which development and precarity occur. They are written in an historical moment which can bear witness to at least thirty years of neoliberal developmentalism in independent Singapore, and thus historicise contemporary development patterns. They complicate the terms of development, and show precarity to be neoliberal developmentalism's underside. As a result, these narratives prompt a rethinking of the underpinnings of the 'Singapore Story'.

The novels selected for this thesis deal with Singapore and its history, but the novelists are not straightforwardly Singaporean. Suchen Christine Lim's *The River's Song* was published in 2013 in the UK, and printed in Singapore. Lim was born in Malaysia, but writes chiefly about Singapore, and currently works as a transnational academic. In 2009, Simon Tay published *City of Small Blessings*. Tay has headed multiple national agencies and thinktanks in Singapore, and also works as a transnational academic. As will become apparent in readings of this selection of texts, this transnational mobility can be a marker of class, differentiating the scholar from working-class and home-educated Singaporeans.

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[74] Philip Holden, 'Introduction: Literature in English in Singapore before 1965' in *Writing Singapore: An Historical Anthology of Singapore Literature*, ed. by Angelia Poon, Philip Holden and Shirley Geok-Lin Lim (Singapore: NUS Press, 2009), 5-14, p. 5, 10, 12, 13.

Isa Kamari's *Rawa* was first published in Malay in Kuala Lumpur in 2009, and was translated into English by another Kuala Lumpur-based publishing house in 2013, with funding from the Singapore National Arts Council. Kamari was born, raised, and works in Singapore as an architect. Three of the novels being examined in this thesis were first published in 2013. Suratman Markasan's *Penghulu* was published in 1998 in Malay, in Shah Alam, and was translated with funds from Singapore's National Arts Council and published in Singapore in 2012. Markasan is a Singaporean teacher and prizewinning novelist. Yeng Pway Ngon is a Singaporean columnist, literary critic, novelist and poet, and he published *Unrest* and *Art Studio* in Chinese, in Taiwan, in 2002 and 2011 respectively. These were translated into English and published in Singapore in 2012 and 2014 respectively. This panoply of diverse writers have all written about Singapore in ways that engage discourses of national identity and development, but as with the Malayan writers that Holden described, it is troublesome to ascribe a Singaporean national identity to all of these writers. The 'Singapore Story' is therefore critiqued from multiple temporal and geographical standpoints. Alternative 'Singapore Stories' can take into account the perspectives of writers who do not live and publish in Singapore. Whilst the 'Singapore Story' is a construction of the PAP, alternative 'Singapore Stories' are transnational constructions, benefitting from contributions from people across the world who are invested in remoulding local and global audiences' views on Singapore's development narrative.

In selecting texts that range in publication dates from 1998 to 2014, I am stretching the definition of the 'contemporary' to accommodate works that were first published almost twenty years ago. However, since there have been recent reissues of the oldest novels selected, all of these novels remain critically relevant in the Singaporean public sphere. This collection of writers have also all had transnational experience to some degree, which is perhaps to be expected when the home country is a single city. This transnationalism may also be due to the world-ecological role of Singapore as a financial and shipping hub, stationed on the routes between some of the largest producing and consuming nations in the world. People often travel to other 'core' sites to find employment and conduct business. In the case of these writers, however, transnational experience is often garnered by studying abroad, rather than working, which is a function of the state's role in granting scholarships and educating and orienting its 'gifted' pupils towards higher education at internationally prestigious universities. Consideration of the conditions of production of contemporary Singaporean literature must begin by

contextualising this literature in terms of government-led cultural drives and government-imposed limits on cultural production.

In a bid 'to attract tourists and foreign talents', and to pursue a nation-building agenda, the Singapore government announced in 1992 that it intended Singapore to be a 'global city for the arts'. The state-led cultural policy 'focuses on the commercial aspects of the arts and how they may be harnessed for global ends such as attracting tourists, establishing new cultural industries and luring foreign talent and expatriates to the country,' according to Tou Chuang Chang.[75] His phrase 'global ends' masks the economic motivation behind these objectives, but serves to emphasise the Singapore government's consciousness of the visibility of its arts scene in the world. Coinciding with this self-awareness, the Singapore Literature Prize was instituted in 1992, enhancing the arts' visibility within and outside Singapore. Suchen Christine Lim's *Fistful of Colours* was its first winner. The novel may have been recognised for its adherence to a national self-image, described by Cheryl Narumi Naruse as 'discourse that promotes Singapore as a global, modern, and cosmopolitan business hub'.[76] *Fistful of Colours* is structured around one woman's imaginings of her ancestors' lives in gritty detail, contextualising their lives across an historical trajectory that includes Singapore's colonial era, Occupation, and decolonisation. As such, it intersects with the 'disciplinary project of nationalism' that was fostered by the PAP elite, who 'demanded that the developmental work of nation-building be expressed also through the reconstruction of individual life-narratives'.[77] This might lead to the suggestion that the ruling party has used prize culture as a means to elevate and render visible certain novels which express a favourable national allegory. This hypothesis cannot be proven or disproved by close readings of the texts. However, it will be useful to examine the intersections between national and personal narratives in each text, to see how the idea of development, defined at its broadest, might be complicated at a range of levels.

Whilst state intervention can make some literary expressions more visible, it can render others invisible. Singapore's regime of censorship is highly sophisticated: it operates

[75] Chang Tou Chuang, 'Renaissance Revisited: Singapore as a 'Global City for the Arts'', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 24.4 (December 2000), 818-831, pp. 819, 821.
[76] Cheryl Narumi Naruse, 'Singapore, State Nationalism, and the Production of Diaspora', *Comparative Literature and Culture* 15.2 (2013), 1-9, p. 3.
[77] Philip Holden, 'Reading for Genre: The Short Story and (Post)colonial Governmentality', *Interventions* 12.3 (2010), 442-458, p. 455; Sinnathamby Rajaratnam, *S. Rajaratnam: The Prophetic and the Political*, ed. by Chan Heng Chee and Obaid Ul Haq (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2007), pp. 248-9.

on the principle that censorship is unnecessary where classification can be effective. This can limit the potential audience of work that displays 'undesirable content'.[78] In addition to this stringent regulation, there is the arguably more pernicious phenomenon of 'OB [out of bounds] markers' in the Singaporean public sphere. Singaporeans are urged to avoid saying insensitive things, even as the boundaries for public expression remain unclear.[79] Failure to self-censor may result in fines or lawsuits, but the 'OB markers' are not set in any firm legislation. As a result, the censorship 'climate' is subject to constant change, and can only be deduced from the most recent court case or ministerial proclamation. Whilst this form of censorship is most commonly critiqued in relation to pronouncements at public gatherings, speeches and activism, such a system has ramifications for cultural output. Besides selecting which literary products are given a national platform, through literary prizes, the state's deployment of censorship laws might also be said to suppress unflattering material – or to prevent such material even reaching the stage of literary expression, by encouraging self-censorship. Although there is no way of knowing how this has affected the Singapore-published texts that are examined in this thesis, an awareness of the self-regulating environment of Singapore should condition any reading of these texts. Whilst the overseas-based writers of these texts will have relocated from Singapore for an array of reasons, it is pertinent that there would be more freedom to critique sensitive issues in publishing environments outside Singapore. However, oppositional representation of political events, for example, is notably absent from most of these texts, and this must be addressed with 'OB markers' in mind.

This selection of Anglophone novels (and novels translated into English) that depict versions of Singapore's national narrative features texts which are orientated towards both local and international readers. The texts are replete with suggestions that the writers and publishers want a local readership, whilst keeping the possibility of a global readership open. In *The River's Song*, for example, Lim writes of the 'karang guni rag-and-bone man',[80] which is tautological because a Singaporean would know that karang guni means rag-and-bone man. *Rawa* and *Penghulu* are translated from Bahasa Malaysia into English, with funding from the Singaporean government. This may be an effort on the part of the

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[78] 'Content Standards and Classification', *Media Development Authority Singapore,* http://www.mda.gov.sg/RegulationsAndLicensing/ContentStandardsAndClassification/Pages/Overview.aspx Accessed 19 March 2015.
[79] Yuen Chung Kwong, 'Political Singlish – OB Markers and Civic Society', *The Online Citizen*, 6 September 2012, http://www.theonlinecitizen.com/2012/09/political-singlish-ob-markers-and-civic-society/ Accessed 19 March 2015.
[80] Suchen Christine Lim, *The River's Song* (London: Aurora Metro Books, 2013), p. 54.

Singapore government to bring Singaporean Malay experiences of the national narrative to other Singaporean racial groups, potentially co-opting the novels as nation-building cultural products. Regardless of the intentions behind the translation, this serves to make the novels accessible to a wider English-speaking readership, and thus brings them to more markets. Taken as a whole, the features of the novels outlined above combine nation-building with commercial motives, and this draws attention to their status as commodities. How does this commodified status affect textual analysis of development and precarity in the national narrative? To move towards an answer to this question, I turn to theorisations of the world-literary system that these novels enter at the moment of their publication.

The conceptualisation of world-literature deployed here borrows from many critics. In the preceding section, I outlined the understanding of the capitalist world-ecology that will be used here to analyse the systemic political-economic situation of Singapore, drawing particularly on the work of Moore. World-literature can be understood as the literature of this world-ecology.[81] I opt for this definition, rather than, for instance, world-literature as 'those works in which the world-system is not a distant horizon only unconsciously registered in immanent form, but rather consciously or critically mapped', following James Graham, Michael Niblett and Sharae Deckard;[82] world literature as 'literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin', following David Damrosch;[83] or world literature as 'that part of the world's literature that is both "the best" of what literature has to offer and possesses universal appeal', as described by Theo D'haen, César Domínguez and Mads Rosendahl Thomsen.[84] This is because my priority in studying Singaporean historical fiction for its representations of precarity is to situate Singaporean historical novels in world-literary terms, rather than to make claims in relation to world-literature as a political avant-garde or as a vehicle for humanist ideological influence. In so doing, I mean to contribute to ongoing debates in world-literary studies, which to date have not explored Singaporean literary output.

To claim a link between the literary works produced in the capitalist mode of production and the mode of production itself need not be deterministic. Rather, it is an

[81] Michael Niblett, 'Specters in the Forest: Gothic Form and World-Ecology in Edgar Mittelholzer's *My Bones and My Flute*', *Small Axe* 44 (July 2014), 53-68, p. 55.
[82] James Graham, Michael Niblett and Sharae Deckard, 'Postcolonial Studies and World Literature', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 48.5 (2012), 465-471, p. 468.
[83] David Damrosch, *What is World Literature*? (Princeton and Woodstock: Princeton University Press, 2003), p.4.
[84] Theo D'hean, César Domínguez and Mads Rosendahl Thomsen, 'Introduction' in *World Literature: A Reader* ed. by Theo D'hean, César Domínguez and Mads Rosendahl Thomsen (London and New York: Routledge 2013), pp. x-xii (p. xi).

acknowledgement of the conditions of production for literary works, a dense form of contextualisation that accounts for systemic patterns and flows of capital, people, and cultural influences. The literary system reflects the capitalist world-ecology in some respects, and demonstrates autonomy from it in others. This artistic autonomy can be thought of as having 'radius of creativity' from which 'exemplary agents' can produce art, but art which never passes beyond the constraints of the given resources of a particular person in a particular society.[85] World-literature as a system is 'one, and unequal', in Franco Moretti's words, insofar as all literature produced can be perused or purchased on capitalist markets, retaining a geo-political core and periphery in cultural terms that sometimes mirrors economic dynamics. There is a colonial legacy in the form of 'large stocks of inherited literary capital,' in core zones, with 'substantial publishing industries and command of commercial trade routes [...] not easily replicated in the colonies'.[86] This is not to suggest that colonial influences remain the determining factor in shaping these trade routes and publishing patterns, but rather to show that the legacy of colonialism is reconfigured in some places and petrified elsewhere into a system of literary core and peripheral zones – a system that can be said to be 'of' late capitalism, rather than colonial capitalism. For Fredric Jameson, this system is predicated on 'the export and import of culture'.[87] The economic unevenness in this networked exchange means that the literary flows between nations are also uneven and, as a result, models of world literature that fail to account for economic unevenness inevitably fail to account for the global distribution of cultural production and consumption.[88]

What does this model, which links the capitalist world-ecology to world-literature, achieve for literary analysis? Michael Niblett has shown how such a conception of world-literature permits new and productive possibilities for comparative literary analysis. This mode of comparison 'enables comparison of not only one subunit of the system to another at the same point in chronological time, but also one subunit to another at the same

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[85] Jason Toynbee, 'How Special?: Cultural Work, Copyright, Politics' in *Theorizing Cultural Work: Labour, Continuity and Change in the Cultural and Creative Industries*, ed. by Mark Banks, Rosalind Gill and Stephanie Taylor (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 85-98 (p. 86).

[86] Franco Moretti, 'Conjectures on World Literature,' *New Left Review* 1 (January 2000), 54-68 (pp. 55-6); Joe Cleary, *Outrageous Fortune: Capital and Culture in Modern Ireland* (Dublin: Field Day Publications, 2007), p. 57.

[87] Fredric Jameson, 'Notes on Globalization as a Philosophical Issue' in *The Cultures of Globalization*, ed. by Fredric Jameson and Masao Miyoshi (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998), pp. 54-77 (p. 58).

[88] Sarah Brouillette, 'UNESCO and the Book in the Developing World', *Representations* 127.1 (Summer 2014), 33-54, pp. 34, 35-6.

location within the recurring rhythmic cycle' of economic expansion and contraction.[89] This is allowed because the capitalist world-ecology is 'a common reference point for all societies' and 'a singular and simultaneous phenomenon […] [which] is everywhere heterogeneous and specific'.[90] Capitalism can be thought of as a singular phenomenon with a multitude of manifestations when we consider that capitalism does not universalise many of its features (such as class structure) from core to peripheral zones.[91] Rather, the only feature which is always universalised is dependence on the market.[92] This form of comparative literary study can assess the literary forms and phenomena that occur with varying degrees of integration into the world market. This proves useful when analysing zones and moments when the ecological revolutions and regimes – and economic phases – are clear. Singapore has historically had a different relationship with its colonial metropole than any resource frontier: it was founded as a regional hub with a free trade ethos that pre-dates the rise and hegemony of neoliberalism.[93] As such, it could be classified as somewhere between a semiperipheral site (with some profits repatriated to Britain) or a core site in its own right, as the regional trade hub. The transformation that it underwent in the twentieth century was not one of a pre-colonial to a colonial regime, but rather one of a colonial capitalist core site becoming a late capitalist core site. Singapore thus complicates the world-literary mode of comparison in productive ways: its ecological transition does not fit neatly into the classifications that tend to arise in world-literary studies. A world-literary intervention brings its own tools to begin addressing such a problem, however: it can examine local specificities within a larger system.

By exploring literary alternatives to the 'Singapore Story', then, this thesis will be intervening in world-literary debates. It will reconsider the world-literary model proposed by Niblett, alongside other models of world literature. Such alternatives include David Damrosch's schema of analysing transnationally circulating cultural artefacts which must be

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[89] Michael Niblett, 'World-Economy, World-Ecology, World Literature', *Green Letters* 16.1 (2012), 15-30, p. 19.
[90] Ibid, p. 19.
[91] The understanding of core-periphery dynamics of the economic world-system in this thesis draws on the work of Christopher Chase-Dunn and Thomas Hall, whose monograph *Rise and Demise: Comparing World Systems* (1997) elaborates differentiation and hierarchy between core and periphery. These can involve societies in interaction with each other, with potential for 'political, economic, or ideological domination' between them. This can involve 'domination' between societies of similar 'complexity', and can involve processes of deliberate underdevelopment (pp. 36-37). This adds nuance to Wallerstein's conception of core-periphery relations.
[92] Vivek Chibber, *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* (London and New York: Verso, 2013), p. 100.
[93] R.M.J. Stewart, 'Raffles of Singapore: The Man and the Legacy', *Asian Affairs* 13 (1982), 16-27, p. 23.

analysed from the perspective of one nation at a time (but which in theory, ought to be performed in every nation).[94] Although this thesis's attempt to track literary representations of precarity and development push it towards the more materialist outlook of Niblett, the limits of this approach will be navigated. Because I explore texts that are written in or translated into English, my use of the world-literary framework is necessarily limited to a form of 'Anglo-globalism' suggested by Jonathan Arac.[95] I acknowledge this limitation, but agree with Moretti that 'the rapid wide public exchanges [this model] makes possible far exceed its potential dangers'.[96] In the context of this study's consideration of literature's dialogue with a particular national narrative, it is worth noting that the 'Singapore Story' is most prominently promulgated via Lee's English-language memoirs. Anglophone cultural products' dialogue with this narrative therefore takes place in an Anglophone public sphere that does not include all of Singapore, even as it extends beyond Singapore.

This intervention into postcolonial, world-literary, and Singaporean studies will sit within a political ecological methodological framework that permits a range of analytical techniques. Postcolonialism's commitment to social justice on a global scale will be coupled with systemic analysis to address precarity – including its ecological dimensions – in the Singaporean context. This will give fresh perspective to questions of nationalism and national narratology, the emplotment and configuration of which will be key to addressing questions of the aesthetics of form beyond a literary codification of economics. Embracing political ecology's commitments to Marxian economics, grassroots movements and solidarities and its problematisation of development, this thesis will navigate some historical novels' representations of Singaporean development and precarity, as they both depart from and cleave to the dominant national narrative. The imaginaries that are created in this selection of texts are constructed through the historical novel genre. What can historical novels lend to contestations of national narratives?

The Singaporean Historical Novel in World-Literature

An intuitive definition of the historical novel genre might start with its depiction of events that are recognisably real, if fictionalised, and which are often refracted through

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[94] Damrosch, *What is World Literature*?, pp. 26-8.
[95] Jonathan Arac, 'Anglo-Globalism?', *New Left Review* 16 (July-August 2002), 35-45.
[96] Franco Moretti, 'More Conjectures', *New Left Review* 20 (March-April 2003), 43-81, p. 76.

individual characters' perspectives.[97] The novels selected for exploration in this thesis fulfil this criterion, although they serve as unconventional examples of historical fiction. They are set within living memory, depicting Singapore's development drive that has taken place from the 1960s to the present. They engage with history insofar as they present alternative perspectives of this development drive, often juxtaposing official explanations of events with individuals' experiences of those events. Singapore's national narrative locates the 'sacrifices' of ordinary people in the name of the country's development firmly in the past, whilst these novels complicate this closure. They thus engage with the narrative's constructedness and its pastness, in order to nuance the 'Singapore Story' and present the so-called development drive afresh. By presenting narratives that intersect with the dominant historical narrative, these texts constitute historical novels, albeit of an unconventional kind. Here, I stretch the definition of the historical novel to encompass texts which actively engage with historical narratives – beyond the historical novel's more common definition as a text which is set in the past, and which attends to the social manners and conditions of the age. Richard Maxwell has commented on historical fiction's durability, by citing Moretti's *Graphs, Maps, Trees* to show how uncommon it is for a form like the historical novel to survive. He claims that this must mean that the genre serves a certain purpose, answering a vital need.[98] This need, however, surely differs from context to context. Maxwell analyses the European historical novel, whereas this thesis looks at fiction that is in critical dialogue with the dominant historical narrative of one city-state, Singapore. What need might be fulfilled by these novels in contemporary Singapore, and what can Singaporean historical novels achieve? To answer this question, the genre's representation of historical events must be elaborated.

Roland Barthes and Hayden White have been pivotal in establishing the role of narrative in the construction of historical events. For both critics, placing events in an order provides coherence and imparts meaning to the events themselves, which would otherwise have no meaning. As a result, narration has ideological implications.[99] Within the discipline of history, White argues that real events never offer themselves in narrative form, unlike imaginative sequences of events, which 'naturally' take a narrative form. It is this

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[97] Hamish Dalley, *The Postcolonial Historical Novel: Realism, Allegory, and the Representation of Contested Pasts* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 5-8; Richard Maxwell, *The Historical Novel in Europe, 1650-1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 1-2.
[98] Maxwell, p. 3.
[99] Roland Barthes, 'Historical Discourse', trans. by Peter Wexler, in *Structuralism: A Reader*, ed. by Michael Lane (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970), pp. 145-155 (p. 153); Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), p. 1.

structuring of events that provides the coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure of a plot.[100] However, a plot need not cohere perfectly to act as an 'organizing principle', in Peter Brooks' words. Narrative offers 'patterns of sequence and consequence', and thus remains useful for certain 'kinds of understanding and explanation'.[101] Like all national narratives, Singapore's hegemonic national narrative selects certain events for one-sided representation. For example, the imprisonment of left-wing politicians and activists in 1963 is narrated and given meaning as 'necessary'.[102] With attention suitably drawn to the constructedness of historical narratives – particularly the narrative of progress or development – it is clear that historical novels have the potential to contest or replicate these narratives. Historical fiction typically features historical events in narrative form, which can give it the same coherence and meaning as the national narrative. The chief difference between the 'Singapore Story' and the fragmented collection of literary alternatives is the power with which they are broadcast. No matter how powerful the potential for contestation of the national narrative, such novels' readership is limited, and their capacity to actively transform national politics and society (or, considered more broadly, world politics) must also be considered limited. Prizewinning novels gain more traction in the public sphere, but for the most part, literature is subordinate to state-owned media, national education, national service, and other state apparatuses, in broadcasting the PAP version of the 'Singapore Story'.

To have relevance in the public sphere, and compete with the 'Singapore Story', historical fiction needs to make truth-claims of its own. How, then, can historical fiction make truth-claims? In his recent monograph, *The Postcolonial Historical Novel* (2014), Hamish Dalley has mounted a defence of the genre, showing that it has the capacity to make assertions that must be read in dialogue with other, non-literary forms' historical claims. Dalley begins by arguing that realism remains the dominant literary mode of literary representation globally.[103] He then traces his formulation of 'allegorical realism' from a reading of Ian Baucom's 2005 *Specters of the Atlantic*. Baucom's work is reminiscent of Ian Watt's claims regarding the origin of the novel (that is, that the novel was first written in

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[100] Hayden White, 'The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality', *Critical Inquiry* 7.1 (Autumn 1980), 5-27, pp. 8, 27.
[101] Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 7, 314.
[102] Geoff Wade, 'Operation Coldstore: A Key Event in the Creation of Modern Singapore', in *The 1963 Operation Coldstore in Singapore: Commemorating 50 Years*, ed. by Poh Soo Kai, Tan Kok Fang and Hong Lysa (Petaling Jaya and Kuala Lumpur: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre and Pusat Sejarah Rakyat, 2013), pp. 15-72.
[103] Lazarus, pp. 124-5.

the free time afforded by capitalist specialisation). He claims that the literary phenomenon of typification – that is, a character standing for a group or class of people – was made possible by the presence of abstract exchange-value in the public imagination with the onset of early modernity's financed expeditions. The mapping of exchange-value logic on to literature allows the authorial technique of typification, in Baucom's argument.[104] Dalley departs from Baucom's theorisation of historical fiction as prioritising either radically singular characters, or a cast of typified characters, to suggest that the genre depends on 'a dialectic of typification and singularity', in which the defining features of the genre are spun out of the contradiction between these two poles.[105] He explains this phenomenon in the following terms:

> if we treat allegory not as a unidirectional act of *substitution* in which the concrete object is negated by conceptual exchange value, but rather as a multidirectional process in which interpretation oscillates between the sign and its allegorical referent, we can understand the typical and the singular as different moments *within a unified allegorical realism*. [original emphasis][106]

By representing a recognisable yet fictionalised world, with radically singular characters that resist abstraction to a larger group, the historical novel can make allegorical truth-claims, rather than literal truth-claims.

The defence of the realistic literary allegory incorporates a partial recovery of Fredric Jameson's conception of the 'third-world allegory' in fiction. The main strength of Jameson's argument, for Dalley, is in recognising the realistic allegory's ability to 'connect […] the individual to sociopolitical structures that seem abstract, but which shape collective experiences'.[107] Imre Szeman has mounted a similar defence of Jameson in this regard, showing that Jameson's use of the word 'nation' was a clumsy way of referring to 'the political', and that therefore, a reading of realist allegory as a combination of personal and more abstract, political machinations could be recuperated.[108] The historical novel, then, can be said to make allegorical truth-claims by building on the tension of the typified and the singular, and by situating the individual in a larger historical context. As Neil McEwan

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[104] Dalley, pp. 24-30.
[105] Ibid, p. 31.
[106] Ibid, p. 37.
[107] Ibid, p. 34.
[108] Imre Szeman, 'Who's Afraid of National Allegory? Jameson, Literary Criticism, Globalization', *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 100.3 (2001), 803-27, p. 814.

has also noted, the imaginative truth is the strength of this genre.[109] Fictionalising historical events, and representing the social (and environmental) dynamics to historical processes, allows contemporary readers of historical fiction to reimagine historical events from fresh perspectives. Dalley's focus on the aesthetic and structural techniques within the historical novel genre is useful, but it does not fully account for the potential that the genre has in national public spheres and beyond.

To add to the picture of historical fiction's role and function in world-literature, we should turn to the earliest theorist of the genre, Georg Lukács. Lukács is optimistic about the capacity of historical fiction to mobilise readers:

> in this mass experience of history the national element is linked on the one hand with problems of social transformation; and on the other, more and more people become aware of the connection between national and world history. This increasing consciousness of the historical character of development begins to influence judgements on economic conditions and class struggle.[110]

Lukács' claim that historical fiction can situate historical moments by reference to *world* history and social transformation means that these plots are recontextualised in a longer history of development (in the anachronistic Marxian, sociological sense of progression from one stage of society to another), and potentially, revolution. He hints, through these claims, that there is a radical social imaginary being shared through literature. Lukács' revolutionary enthusiasm has been dampened by late twentieth century revisions in Marxist thought. During a close reading of Conrad and Lukács, Jameson argues that the 'ambivalent value' and 'ambiguity' of literature 'makes it a complex and interesting historical act', and insists that Marxist readings should 'lead to an ever greater sense of the complexity and dialectical ambivalence of history, rather than to its dogmatic simplification'.[111] I contend that a systemic approach to literary criticism, that is attentive to local specificities, can lead to an even greater sense of complexity and historical ambivalence than a reading in the style of Jameson. However, I also argue that historical fiction has some limited transformative potential, insofar as it can prompt the reimagination of society's practices.

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[109] Neil McEwan, *Perspective in British Historical Fiction Today* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1987), p. 13.
[110] Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. by Hannah Mitchell and Stanley Mitchell (London: Merlin Press, 1962), p. 20.
[111] Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act (*London: Routledge, 1981), pp. 237, 227.

In the Singaporean context, this might involve consideration of alternative, more inclusive modes of development, or modes of resistance to neoliberal developmental logic that implicitly or explicitly challenge the 'Singapore Story'. M.M. Bakhtin has argued that the novel's capacity to hold together a multiplicity of voices means that it can 'show the object of representation in a new light'.[112] The plurality of perspectives that appear though the narrator's and the characters' voices are 'drawn into the battle between points of view [and] value judgements'.[113] As a consequence, any historical novel can stage the clash of perspectives that exhibit and examine complicity and resistance, and can therefore be transformative without necessarily being radical in outlook. Singaporean literary critic Angelia Poon shares Lukács' cautious optimism for literature's power to transform the way the nation is imagined:

> While literature may not present sustained and coherent visions or fully articulated alternatives, they remain no less powerfully suggestive for being passing, sidelong glances and beginning utterances, a necessary step towards disrupting the state-established racial, spatial and historical paradigms for imagining the nation.[114]

Poon wrote this in 2005, before the publication of some of the texts in the selection used for this thesis, but her statement remains true of these texts. The 'Singapore Story' is complicated through historical fiction, and textual analysis can reveal the dimensions to this critique.

Perhaps undercutting this possibility of new ideas being formed and shared through literature, the texts explored here often drift into a nostalgic tone. The fictionalised world that is evoked is not just recognisable, it is the lost domain of many Singaporean readers' childhoods. Nostalgia has been theorised by Svetlana Boym as 'a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed', evoking 'a sentiment of loss and displacement […][and] a romance with one's own fantasy'.[115] It can express 'rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress', and can function to make truth-claims, or cast doubt over such claims.[116] Whilst this suggests that there is a capacity to undermine dominant historical narratives, in nostalgic fiction this is coupled

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[112] M.M. Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the Novel', in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. by Michael Holquist, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), pp. 259-422 (p. 262).
[113] Ibid, pp. 312, 315.
[114] Angelia Poon, 'Performing National Service in Singapore', p. 121.
[115] Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), p. xiii.
[116] Ibid, pp. xv, xviii.

with the potential to cling to mythical pasts. Fresh and alternative conceptions of Singaporean history might be limited by their refraction through the depiction of an older society. Practical conceptions of an ideal future cannot spring from a romanticised past. John Su has voiced a similar caution within the discipline of literature, saying that nostalgia's idealism is illusory because it fails to provide 'knowledge of legitimate alternatives to present circumstances'.[117] However, nostalgia's predilection for 'rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress', in Boym's words, leaves more space for optimism.[118] Indeed, Su argues that '[n]ostalgic longings enable characters to articulate in clear and powerful terms the disappointment that the narratives containing them cannot resolve'.[119] This remark chimes with the radical social imaginary found in Lukács: the dissatisfaction with the narratives that pervade someone's life can be disputed in historical fiction, thereby prompting the possibility of imagining alternatives. Singaporean historical fiction can immerse readers in a past Singapore, with historical and fictionalised individuals, families, and communities brought together to drive the plot of the novel.

The novels selected for analysis in this thesis all have a geographical scope that exceeds Singapore, and thus exceeds the frames of reference of the 'Singapore Story'. By factoring in regional and transnational historical developments as part of Singaporeans' narratives in these novels, the texts perform a historicisation of Singapore at different moments, and in this sense, there is a continuation of the performance of the nation. In his influential essay 'DissemiNation', Homi Bhabha argues that a key element to the narration of national culture (and the national narrative) is the 'repetitious, recursive nature of the performative'.[120] In critiquing the formation and re-formation of national identity, Bhabha writes that '[t]o be obliged to forget – in the construction of the national present – is not a question of historical memory; it is the construction of a discourse on society that *performs* the problematic totalization of the national will'.[121] If the 'Singapore Story' ties together remembrances of national history and obligatory forgetting of parts of national history, the historical novel can perform (in the recursive sense, following Bhabha) anew this remembering and forgetting, but with departures from the monolithic national narrative

[117] John J. Su, *Ethics and Nostalgia in the Contemporary Novel* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 8.
[118] Boym, p. xv.
[119] Su, p. 179.
[120] Homi K. Bhabha, 'DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation', in *Nation and Narration*, ed. by Homi K. Bhabha (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 291-323 (p. 297).
[121] Ibid, p. 311.

that subvert any possibility that the 'Singapore Story' could represent the totality of Singapore's history. Historical fiction can perform nostalgia and international linkage, and as a result it can undercut the linearity of the national narrative. Time is spatialised across the historical novel, insofar as characters move between places and understand historical processes as unfolding across space. At the same time, sites are embedded in longer histories, as a product of these historical processes that unfold across time. Time and space are negotiated in tandem in historical fiction, to narrate individuals' lives within large-scale narratives. In these examples, the celebration of neoliberal-developmentalism that emerges in the 'Singapore Story' is complicated by literary representation of a dynamics of space and time beyond Singapore's neoliberal-developmental phase. As a result, the historical novel may invoke the politics of nostalgia while also reframing the narrative of progress and development in terms that emphasise precarity and enclosure. Historical fiction can suggest alternative narratives or frames of reference, and thus critique the hegemonic narrative.

A more pessimistic interpretation of nostalgia has been expressed by Jameson. He briefly analyses the structure and content of five historical novels, as well as nostalgia films, to critique the cultural logic of late capitalism, which for him, has commodified the past. His analysis seeks to bring out the symptoms of this commodification. He claims that nostalgia films function by 'conveying "pastness" by the glossy qualities of the image', although he concedes that 'nostalgia' is not quite the right word for the phenomenon he describes: it is a fascination with a lost era of stability and prosperity, coupled with the early phases of counterculture.[122] This reading of film translates (albeit crudely) to Singaporean historical novels. Historical novels are invested in conveying 'pastness', but this need not detract from the political undercurrents of narrative in the Singaporean context, which contest hegemonic narrative patterns that legitimise developmental-neoliberal modes of governance.

One aspect of Jameson's argument withstands translation from recent American historical fiction to recent Singaporean historical fiction, and that is the proposition that fictionalised worlds must be recognisable. For this to be achieved, the readers must already have a sense of the history that is being corroborated or contested. To put it another way, it would be impossible to understand an historical novel without some prior knowledge of the national- or world-scale events that occur during the narrative. Intriguingly, Jameson

[122] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London and New York: Verso, 1991), p. 19.

suggests that this leads to a readerly sensation of ‘peculiar familiarity’ that renders the plot uncanny, ‘rather than […] any solid historiographic formation on the reader’s part’.[123] I would argue the opposite: that in reading an historical novel, the reader fully expects to be confronted with a version of the past that is recognisable and yet departs from other, more official representations of the same history, not least because it is a fictionalised multi-perspectival representation. This is one of the generic expectations of the historical novel, so there can be nothing ‘peculiar’ about the familiarity of the frame of reference. Jameson’s claim that the reader must already have some knowledge with which to approach the details of the plot, however, rings true. Mediating a Singaporean novel that struggles against the ‘Singapore Story’ requires in-depth contextualisation for it to be accessible to a non-Singaporean readership. This renders some novels’ orientation towards the world-literary market all the more contradictory. Access to interpretation of the novel is governed by prior historical knowledge, but the novel is sold internationally, regardless. This might have a number of effects, which we can speculate upon briefly. For example, it might cause a reader to abandon the book, or it might cause a reader to presume that they have just received an authentic and official Singapore Story. Most optimistically, it might cause a reader to delve further into Singaporean history and culture. Even in this last scenario, however, the reader’s access to the historical novel is mediated by the world-literary market – not necessarily prior knowledge of the prevailing national narrative. This is not merely a contradiction of the Singaporean historical novel, it is a contradiction of world-literature: since world-literary market is both local and global, anyone who can afford the price can buy a Singaporean historical novel, but it would require a great deal more of an investment of time and energy to understand the context it addresses, and the radical social imaginary that it conjures. There is a risk of the novel being circulated internationally and consumed for ‘universal’ features and values, in a manner that smooths over the particularities of Singaporean historical experience. This would exclude readings of the text that fully interrogate the ‘Singapore Story’, leading to an incomplete understanding of the logic of capital and development that has led to precarity, and led to the respective places in the world-system of the reader and the writer. I would suggest that Singaporean literature that is written in English and published in the global city of Singapore (or in other metropoles like London and Kuala Lumpur), is particularly vulnerable to this inherently limited mode of consumption.

[123] Ibid, p. 24.

Even if there is no in-depth prior understanding of the 'Singapore Story' on the part of the reader, however, there remains potential for Singaporean historical fiction to grapple with larger questions of development and progress – questions which resonate across the world. The 'Singapore Story' is a single, national-level instantiation of the capitalist meta-narrative of development, a meta-narrative in which countries that embrace capitalism thrive and prosper (at the national and individual levels), whilst socialist countries (with Venezuela, Cuba, and Cold War-era Russia often cited), by contrast, are consigned to poverty. Such a narrative does not take into account socialist modes of development (a question which will be addressed in Chapter Three), and it does not fully account for the precarity produced by certain development initiatives. The meta-narrative of development has currency across the world, and non-Singaporean readers are likely to be acquainted with this quasi-historical narrative, even if they are not familiar with the 'Singapore Story'. Published books might be conceived as a measure of a country's development, as noted by Sarah Brouillette. From the late 1950s to the early 1980s, UNESCO promoted the publication of books in less economically developed countries as a way of countering the publishing hegemony of former colonial powers, and this approach rendered books 'agents of cultural and economic development'. This support, intended to offset global inequality in publishing, gave way to more market-driven research in the 1980s, thus reframing the book 'as an ostensibly politically neutral and expedient resource that, properly husbanded and promoted, will result in job creation and economic development via growing visitor and creative economies'.[124] Books are not politically neutral, of course, and the novels explored in this these are mostly published in Singapore, and occasionally grasp for an international audience (perhaps attesting to a high level of 'cultural development' in obsolescent UNESCO terms). Even so, they engage with the global meta-narrative of development as well as the Singaporean national narrative of development. They both contest and corroborate the national narrative, and by extension, the global capitalist meta-narrative of development, but they have the potential to show the intertwining of development and precarity. They may foster a worldly understanding of precarity as 'also occurring here', contributing to a global body of texts which attests to development's adverse effects, and the combined and uneven production of precarity on a global scale. Historical fiction that focuses on development, as a body of literature, provides a potential platform for showcasing the system-wide logic of capitalism, whilst individual historical novels can illuminate the local, specific dynamics of ecological,

[124] Brouillette, 'UNESCO and the Book in the Developing World,' pp. 33-35, 50.

economic, and social relations. As development unfolds on a global scale, accompanied by a legitimising development discourse which heralds newfound prosperity and freedom (in the Sen interpretation), historical fiction can offer counter-narratives, or narratives that complicate the idea of development.

To pick up a Singaporean historical novel is to expect to engage with received narratives of Singapore's history, however incomplete these received narratives may be. The genre demands an engagement with history. Lukács notes how some characters in historical fiction represent polar extremes of background or opinion, and the chief protagonist drifts inevitably towards the middle ground.[125] For Dalley, this 'makes the direction of history appear neutral. The violence of the conflict between different modes of social organisation is legitimated as the inevitable side of progress'.[126] Such a schema is conservative: it permits incorporation into society, without reorganisation of that society to fulfil everybody's needs. These novels do not only fulfil the generic expectations of the historical novel genre, though; some also function as family sagas. *Rawa*, *Penghulu, City of Small Blessings,* and *The River's Song* are family sagas as well as historical novels. The ideological implications of this require elaboration.

The family saga genre can draw attention to the wider relations of capitalism that can affect an individual. This is most true of transnational family sagas, in which family members opt to migrate to get a better-paying job, or open a business in another national market to exploit the labour pool or resources there. In such instances, the novel form can illuminate a global system of relations in action, tracking the movement of people and capital across national borders. One pre-eminent postcolonial novelist who has achieved literary celebrity by penning family sagas is Amitav Ghosh, who argues that because '[f]amilies can actually span nations,' the family should be centralised, rather than the nation, in readings of his fiction. Anshuman Mondal has stated that 'the use of the family as a trope in most of Ghosh's fiction' is deployed as a corrective to national-oriented readings.[127] I would argue that the transnational family saga does not act so much as a corrective as a supplement to the nation, as the nation and family feature as scales in multi-scalar historical fiction. The nation is not privileged above the family or the world-system, necessarily, but its institutions and language nevertheless must be dealt with by the novel's characters. Ghosh's own literary transnationalism is not confined to families. He

[125] Lukács, p. 53.
[126] Dalley, p. 23.
[127] Anshuman Mondal, *Amitav Ghosh* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), p. 15.

often shows international capital *prompting* family members' migration. The family saga, then, does not naturalise or justify the prevailing system of relations that affect an individual, but it does broaden the context in which they are represented, by showing the family, nation, and world-system as phenomena with which to grapple or compromise. It has the capacity to depict the 'social factory' theorised by Antonio Negri, in which 'the whole society is placed at the disposal of profit', at the family, national and global levels.[128] There is greater potential, in a family saga, for sharing in a Lukácsian radical social imaginary that highlights the role of global capitalism in the reshaping of contemporary Singapore. The family saga genre represents the interactions between family members and their social circles, embedded within larger economic and social systems, and as a consequence, it is through the family that the contradictions and tensions of development (as required by global capital and stimulated by national government) are made visible. This thesis makes the claim that the family is the primary site at which development and precarity are brought to light in the historical novel form, as part of the wider project of interrogating the relationship between development and precarity in 'Singapore Stories'.

Historical fiction, then, can accommodate aspects of the family saga, in such a way as to illuminate social, economic, and ecological dynamics as they are reconfigured across time and space. Readers of historical fiction expect to engage with historical narratives (at some remove), and thus these novels direct any subversive message that they may have to a self-selecting audience. However, readers may not expect substantial departures from the dominant historical narrative, so there is transformative potential in the representation of development and precarity as part of the 'Singapore Story'. At the same time, these novels can widen, as well as challenge the national narrative. They can be more inclusive than Lee's memoirs or subsequent classroom or televised iterations of the 'Singapore Story', and incorporate regions and demographics who previously figured little in official narratives. Historical and sociological studies have documented how the Singaporean identity that was constructed and promoted in the early independence period focused almost exclusively on Chinese experiences, relaying information about the Sook Ching massacre of young Chinese males under Japanese Occupation, in particular. More recently, a more complete, multiracial version of events has been promulgated in school curricula, but historical fiction can reinforce this more nuanced version of events.[129] The novels

[128] Antonio Negri, *The Politics of Subversion: A Manifesto for the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), p. 79.
[129] Khatera Khamsi and Paul Morris, 'Constructing the Nation: Portrayals of National Identity in Singapore's School Textbook Narratives of the Japanese Occupation' in *Controversial History*

selected here do not focus upon Japanese Occupation, but they do show how individual experiences are refracted as familial and racial, as well as national (as in the national narrative).

These frames of reference demand attention. They overlap, to some extent, with the national narrative's framing of Singapore's success. Singapore has been articulated as a 'garden city', an 'island nation' and a 'global city' by government sources over the past fifty years, as I will show below, and these scaled frames of reference relate to historical fiction's perspectives in intriguing ways. By figuring Singapore as a 'garden city' since 1967, the government has meant to draw in multinational capital whilst legitimising its resettlement programme, which in turn seizes commercially valuable land from kampung dwellers. The reconfiguration of ecological relations across Singapore, which involves the disappearance of near self-sufficient communities and the creation of a new precariat, is framed as a sign of development and progress in the official narrative. Historical fiction, however, complicates this, and shows who and what is sacrificed in the national, neoliberal-developmentalist interest. Chapter One of this thesis focuses on this claim to 'garden city' status, in part by reinterpreting the idea of gardening. If a garden is an ordered and enclosed space, the verb 'to garden' involves the creation and maintenance of ordered sites. Thus, both mainland Singapore and the 'Singapore Story' are shown to be pruned and cultivated. By moving between Suchen Christine Lim's *The River's Song* and Simon Tay's *City of Small Blessings*, Chapter One will explore the reconfigured ecological dynamics to precarity, under neoliberal-developmentalist policies, and how these alternative narratives are in dialogue with the 'Singapore Story'. This focus on the local scale will allow for scrutiny of particular historical public and private sites – specific gardens – as well as processes of gardening, in terms of national narrative and in terms of the regulation and containment of space. The representation of logics behind these modes of gardening will be dwelt upon, to illuminate the place of Singaporean developmentalism in a wider context.

Expanding the frame of reference, Chapter Two will engage with another trope regarding Singapore's ecologically-inflected social imaginary (or 'environmentality', following Agrawal) as an 'island nation' or a 'nation of islands'. By considering the city and nation-state as archipelagic, and partaking dynamically in an archipelago, this chapter will explore the interrelations and moments of isolation that islands undergo. Just as there are

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Education in Asian Contexts, ed. by Mark Baildon and Kah Seng Loh (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 92-108.

processes of gardening which mediate the production and reception of gardens on Pulau Ujong (the Singaporean mainland), there are processes of 'islanding' which govern the production and reception of islands. Islands have been figured alternately as isolated, economically backwards, self-sufficient, and networked, and these ideas permeate unevenly into the 'Singapore Story'. Historical fiction both relies upon and contends with these tropes, to complicate the national narrative's form and content. Isa Kamari's *Rawa* and Suratman Markasan's *Penghulu* show the archipelago, of which Singapore is a part, as being subjected to cycles of isolation and transformation, to the detriment of the islanders and islands themselves. Islanding (as a verb) can be both active, in the kampung dwellers' reclamation of the island space, or it can be passive, in the islanding or isolation of the island space from the mainland by the government, for the purposes of coercing the islanders away. The representation of a more nebulous national interest – which is shown to be the interest of a Pulau Ujong-based elite in these novels – refracts the national narrative in a new light. The novels both expand the frame of reference of the 'Singapore Story' by representing development across the archipelago, but they also show how the 'Singapore Story' might more accurately be called the 'Pulau Ujong Story', insofar as the celebratory tone of the national narrative does not translate across archipelagic space. Examining novels through this frame of reference permits a re-interrogation of the logic by which development and precarity occur and the ways in which they are experienced and narrated.

Chapter Three explores similar questions, but at the largest frame of reference permitted by contemporary realist fiction, that of the world. Singapore was declared a 'global city' by S. Rajaratnam in 1972, a city which is 'linked intimately' with other global cities through 'the tentacles of technology', and a city for which 'the world is its hinterland'.[130] Exploration of the transnational links, multinational commitments, and exposure to global capital that influence the representation of Singapore as an actor on the world stage can offer further grounds for dialogue with the dominant national narrative. As development and its concomitant precarity continue and are reconfigured across time and space, the modes of narrating individuals' involvement in national and transnational development can be explored. Historical fiction can reframe development and precarity as transnational and systemic, rather than isolated in the Singaporean instance. The novels explored here are Yeng Pway Ngon's *Unrest* and *Art Studio,* which represent Singapore's neoliberal-developmentalism within the context of global capitalism, to resituate the

[130] Sinnathamby Rajaratnam, *S. Rajaratnam,* pp. 216-7.

'Singapore Story' in much larger and longer historical narratives. The modes of expansion and connection will also be examined in this chapter. Some characters in these novels are 'worlded,' in that they are put at the disposal of the capitalist world-system by their government or by other forces. But these novels also contribute to a positive worlding, and a sense of connection and shared capitalist subjecthood across economic and historical formations – and even into a shared sense of being precarious, and outside an obviously neoliberal economic formation.

In these pairings of novels, the logic and large-scale processes driving development are the same. The same processes of enclosure, isolation of communities from sustaining networks (be they human or ecological), erasure of historical detail, and transformation in the interests of multinational capital are pushed through, whilst individuals, families, and communities are dispossessed as a result. These processes are negotiated in fiction as they occur at different scales. The novels studied in this thesis represent and recuperate histories that are not visible in Singaporean space, and are often excised from the Singaporean social imaginary. At garden, island, and world scales, there are different modes of resistance and different sets of relations being erased. Counteracting these erasures through fiction constitutes a contribution to a potentially transformational social imaginary. Despite their complicity in capitalist patterns of circulation, and despite occasionally reproducing tropes from the 'Singapore Story', these novels can complicate the national narrative by instantiating the 'development drive' at individual, community, and family levels.

Chapter One: The Garden City and Its Discontents

Fig. 3. A photograph of Lee Kuan Yew planting a tree on 16 June 1963. Source: The Straits Times © Singapore Press Holdings Limited. Reprinted with permission.

In 1967, the Singaporean government launched the 'Garden City' programme to beautify the city-state, putting tree-planting and rubbish-clearing at the top of the country's agenda. This campaign had roots in colonial town planning policy, as well as the government's own limited tree-planting campaign four years previously, but the 1967 campaign benefitted from renewed publicity from state-owned media. This media coverage depicted Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew as central to the new programme, often printing dramatic images of his personal involvement in implementing as well as formulating this policy (as in Fig. 3). Through this coverage, Lee cultivated an image of himself as Singapore's 'chief gardener' – imagery that was recapitulated in obituaries in 2015. The National Parks agency, for instance, credited him as 'The Man Behind the Greening of Singapore'.[131] Environmental historians Timothy Barnard and Corinne Heng argue that this campaign has so successfully infiltrated public consciousness that it has become 'part of the national narrative'.[132] They

[131] Timothy Barnard and Corinne Heng, 'A City in a Garden' in *Nature Contained: Environmental Histories of Singapore*, ed. by Timothy Barnard (Singapore: NUS Press, 2014), pp. 281-306 (pp. 290, 287-9, 295); 'A Special Tribute to Mr. Lee Kuan Yew', *National Parks,* https://www.nparks.gov.sg/about-us/special-tribute-to-mr-lee Accessed 5 September 2015.
[132] Barnard and Heng, p. 295.

also report that '[t]hese coordinated efforts to beautify the developing nation-state extended to cleanliness campaigns, which included the removal of illegal dwellings', but they do not examine the purposes or history of such campaigns. It is this history of resettlement in the name of progress which will form the focus of this chapter. The creation of developmental refugees and a localised precariat is achieved as part of the development drive, as will be elaborated below.

The 'Garden City' programme's stated aim of 'beautify[ing] the Republic' was fulfilled by planting trees, as Lee is depicted doing above, and resettling people away from commercially valuable land, and into Housing Development Board [HDB] apartments.[133] Historically, the programme functioned to render Singapore a more attractive place for investors. A combination of legislation and grassroots drives was implemented throughout the 1950s, '60s and '70s, 'not only to beautify the landscape but […] also […] to [promote] economic progress and social engineering during Singapore's early years of independence'. Emphasis lay with displaying an 'orderly Singapore' that was 'a stable location for investors'.[134] As Belinda Yuen notes, the Singaporean 'Garden City' programme had little to do with Ebenezer Howard's conception of a communal, near-anarchist settlement that brought 'the keen and pure delights of the country' to the city.[135] Rather, the PAP vision of a 'Garden City' emphasised orderliness, rather than wellbeing, and advanced the government's agenda of disciplining citizens into labourers. It constituted a continuation of the British plan of resettling vulnerable communities that were in danger of siding with communists during the Malayan Emergency – so-called 'New Villages' – and therefore entailed mechanisms of control rather than those of communalism.[136] As a consequence, Singaporean town planning drew more from the colonial disciplinary traditions than from the metropole's utopian thinkers. 'The removal of illegal dwellings' was a key element to the development drive (in that valuable land was confiscated from residents and given to commercial developers) but also to the greening programme, because it contributed to the image of Singapore as a stable and ordered environment in which to do business.[137] The primacy of investor interests was always paramount in historical accounts of the PAP's

[133] Ibid, p. 290.
[134] Ibid, p. 282, 297.
[135] Belinda Yuen, 'Creating the Garden City: The Singapore Experience', *Urban Studies* 33.6 (1996), 955-970, p. 696 (endnote one); Stephen V. Ward, 'The Garden City Introduced' in *The Garden City: Past, Present, and Future*, ed. by Stephen Ward (London: E & F Spon, 1992), pp. 1-27 (pp. 2-4); Ebenezer Howard, *Garden Cities of To-morrow* (1902) (Eastbourne : Attic Books, 1985), p. 8.
[136] Loh Kah Seng, *Squatters into Citizens: The 1961 Bukit Ho Swee Fire and the Making of Modern Singapore* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2013), pp. 73-97.
[137] Barnard and Heng, p. 293.

greening programme; Lee Kuan Yew described these efforts as the 'most cost effective project' of his tenure, because competing developing nations showed little interest in beautifying their urban areas and this gave Singapore a unique selling point.[138]

Policy emphasis on orderliness was complemented by the public discourse of cleanliness, which was aided by the continuation of the British designation of slum-dwellers as 'squatters'. This disparaging term 'alleged an illegal encroachment on property and social inertia hindering the march of progress,' according to Loh, who shows that both charges were untrue.[139] Depictions of 'squatters' were often delivered in the 'language of contagion,' justifying state action against squatters as a threat to sanitation, but also, indirectly, investment.[140] As Mary Douglas emphasises in the 2002 preface to her influential work of anthropology *Purity and Danger*, 'there is no such thing as dirt; no single item is dirty apart from a particular system of classification in which it does not fit'.[141] The government's re-classification of slum-dwellers from citizens to 'squatters' permitted the government to move them back to being citizenry by physical means. 'Squatters', with questionable legality and cleanliness, were resettled from the 'unique form of modernity that was at variance with the officially sanctioned idea of a planned city' to the disciplined spaces of HDB apartments.[142] The re-classifying was one act of violence performed by the state upon its citizens that facilitated another, much greater act of violence, which in turn expedited multinational investment into commercially viable and newly-vacant spaces. The 'Garden City' programme in Singapore prioritised tree-planting and waste removal, and made cleanliness and orderliness nation-building virtues, which carried over into the national narrative, justifying the state's beautification scheme.

What kind of a garden, then, was produced by the 'Garden City' programme? One definition of the garden, which retains currency, was given by Romantic-era English landscape gardener Humphry Repton, who in 1816 described the garden as 'a piece of ground fenced off from cattle, and appropriated to the use and pleasure of man: it is, or ought to be, cultivated'.[143] A few features can be discerned from this definition: the garden is an enclosed space, which can be functional or decorative (or both), which has potential

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[138] Lee, quoted in Barnard and Heng, p. 297.
[139] Loh, p. 74.
[140] Ibid, p. 76.
[141] Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concept of Pollution and Taboo* (London and New York: Routledge 2002), p. xvii.
[142] Loh, p. 10.
[143] Humphry Repton, quoted in Tom Turner*, Garden History: Philosophy and Design, 2000 BC-2000 AD* (Abingdon and New York: Spon Press, 2005), p. 1.

to be ‘improving’, and which implies a hierarchy based on land ownership. The garden city, as conceived by Ebenezer Howard, involved a democratic ownership of this functional and decorative space between the city’s residents. As implemented in Singapore, the creation of the garden city constitutes a process of ‘disciplining nature, disciplining society’ in Barnard and Heng’s words.[144] The ‘Garden City’ programme involved a kind of cultivation that was amenable to the government’s drive to create a proletariat and open up commercial land for development. At the same time, the ‘Garden City’ was legible in such a way as to promote and celebrate Singaporean development, and erase past uses of the land. There are both literal and metaphorical dimensions to the disciplining function of gardens, as space is physically opened up to development and inscribed with the triumphalism of the national narrative. In this sense, my interpretation of the garden city space overlaps with the more ‘cynical view of urban history’ described by Tom Turner, in which ‘public gardens were provided by manipulative governments to control the rebellious tendencies of the working class’.[145] Controlling Singaporean citizens’ way of understanding city-space, as part of the national narrative, was clearly a key aspect to the ‘Garden City’ programme. The garden of the ‘Garden City’ was not for individuals’ leisure, but rather, an instrument of state control. Private, enclosed gardens continue to exist in wealthier neighbourhoods in Singapore, as we shall see in the novels explored in this chapter, but the ‘Garden City’ programme chiefly regulates public space whilst also subjecting private space to the possibility of confiscation and redevelopment in the neoliberal-developmentalist national interest at the government’s whim.

The ‘Garden City’ programme’s effect of ‘disciplining nature, disciplining society’ renders it a useful prism through which to interrogate Singaporean development and precarity. The programme transformed ecological relations to create a demographic of developmental refugees – a new precariat – who were put at the disposal of multinational capital. If this process of transformation involved the pruning and cultivating of both Singaporean space and Singaporean history, then historical fiction can nuance the dominant national narrative, whilst grounding an understanding of the past in redeveloped spaces. The various kinds of garden that comprised the ‘Garden City’, and the various modes of ‘gardening’ in which Lee was the ‘chief gardener’, will be explored for their role in these novels’ reimagining of Singapore’s past and present. The historical novels examined in this chapter are Simon Tay’s *City of Small Blessings* (2009) and Suchen Christine Lim’s *The*

[144] Barnard and Heng, p. 295.
[145] Tom Turner, *Landscape Planning and Environmental Impact Design*, 2nd edn (London: UCL Press, 1998), p. 114.

River's Song (2013). Both of these narrate acts of resettlement (with varying levels of cooperation on the part of the resettled) and rapid landscape transformation as part of the 'Garden City' drive. In *City of Small Blessings*, Bryan, a retired history teacher and civil servant is forced to relocate after the government decides to repurpose the land his house is built upon. He protests, using as many of his government contacts as possible, but does not succeed in halting the development – only postponing it for a few months when he suffers a heart attack. His wife, Anna, has an attachment to their private garden which is revealed in piecemeal fashion over the course of the novel. *City of Small Blessings*' narration moves between Bryan in the contemporary, Peter, the couple's son, and Peter's reimagining of Bryan's past, collected from photographs. At various moments, they both try to recuperate their experiences of the past. In *The River's Song*, two Singaporeans from working-class backgrounds experience vastly different financial trajectories as they deal with the redevelopment of their neighbourhoods. Ping, the daughter of a singer and prostitute, is moved into high society when her mother begins a relationship with a property magnate, whilst Weng militates against the government as his riverfront kampung is redeveloped in the national interest. The novel ends with their respective successes and prosperity as they enter middle-age, and they rekindle their adolescent romance. Importantly, these novels were both written and published after the 'Garden City' programme evolved into the 'City in a Garden' vision in 1998. The 'City in a Garden' emphasises beautification and orderliness, just the 'Garden City' did, but there is no emphasis on resettlement in this new policy.[146] This may be because there are so few kampungs remaining, and none on commercially viable land. The emphasis of the new policy is also to make it incumbent on members of the public to take an interest in maintaining the city's public spaces, even though the government remains the primary actor in ordering the landscape. This means that the historical novels are writing about a period of Singaporean history that has officially been concluded, or at least departed from substantially in official policy. *City of Small Blessings* and *The River's Song* thus grapple with an historical narrative that has a degree of closure. These novels share an important structural feature, as well as subject matter and markers of genre: they include a belated revelation that one character has been instrumental in, or stands to gain from, the transformations that are affecting the character's family and wider community. As a

[146] '"Garden City"' Vision is Introduced', *HistorySG,* http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/history/events/a7fac49f-9c96-4030-8709-ce160c58d15c#15 Accessed 30 July 2015; 'City in a Garden', *NParks*, 24 November 2016, https://www.nparks.gov.sg/about-us/city-in-a-garden Accessed 30 July 2015.

consequence, comparing these novels, and moving between them, will help to negotiate divergent perspectives and thus complicate a narrative that has been expounded as a national story. These novels inflect the 'Singapore Story' in such a way as to draw attention to the precarity experienced by Singaporeans situated within a mode of development that champions a 'Garden City'.

Unravelling 'Garden City' Precarity

The relation between development and precarity has already been elaborated in the Introduction to this thesis, but the 'Garden City' programme reframes and reconfigures the dynamics of precarity in specific ways, which deserve further scrutiny. As established above, the programme involved a 'beautify[ing] [of] the Republic' through the resettlement of citizens and tree-planting.[147] As far as Lee was concerned, this programme was the 'most cost effective project' of his tenure, drawing in multinational capital and opening up commercial land for development.[148] The key institution that brought these phenomena together was the Housing Development Board, which provided social housing for Singaporeans. During the many (and ongoing) resettlements in Singapore's history since independence, HDB offered housing to those affected. HDB took over the remit of the Singapore Improvement Trust, which had been providing social housing during the colonial administration, in 1960.[149] The 'Singapore Story' celebrates the role of increased national economic output, and how this objective is facilitated by governmental social housing initiatives. Chua Beng Huat's contribution to conceptualising this process, in his 1997 work of sociology, *Political Legitimacy and Social Housing*, merits quoting at length for its elucidation of economic development as experienced by the nation and the individual:

> A population that was used to such a lifestyle [featuring irregular income and rent payments] had to be disciplined and transformed into the regular workforce needed for industrialization. Promoting public-housing home ownership was an important process that helped to speed up this transformation. […] Both the cost increases [the cost of living] and the regular payments [of mortgages] can be met only by regular monthly income earned from the formal sector of the economy,

[147] Barnard and Heng, p. 290.
[148] Lee, quoted in Barnard and Heng, p. 297.
[149] Valerie Chew, 'Public Housing in Singapore', *Singapore Infopedia,* http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_1585_2009-10-26.html Accessed 19 October 2015.

> often by pooling the wages of several, including the female, members of the family. Home ownership was therefore an important step in the active proletarianisation of the Singapore population.[150]

For Marx, proletarianisation was the general process by which capitalism created new wage labourers, a phenomenon achieved 'either by extending its rule to sections of the population not previously subject to itself' or by 'subjugat[ing] a section of the labouring masses that has accrued through the natural growth of the population'. Marx saw these methods as being regulated by capital.[151] However, in his account of proletarianisation in England, E.P. Thompson claimed that this process took 'distinct forms in different historical contexts, forms which related to corresponding forms of ownership and state power'.[152] Barry Munslow and Helen Finch have discussed how 'non-free market mechanisms' can drive proletarianisation –and how some newly independent countries accelerated this process through state intervention.[153] The Singaporean state's mode of proletarianisation, as illustrated by Chua, did not simply force people from a subsistence existence to wage labour, but compelled them to abandon irregular wage labour in favour of regular wage labour. In this sense, the 1960s' proletarianisation drive in Singapore was an act of disciplining and regularising the workforce. Loh concurs that '[t]he triumph of public housing over the wooden dwelling as the dominant housing form helped bring squatters into the social regime of regular employment in the industrial economy'.[154] Loh critiques the cleanliness campaigns and their operation as part of the mass resettlement programme. Without linking resettlement directly to the 'Garden City' programme, Loh shows that British post-war period concern for the sanitation of slums masked anxiety about slums' impenetrability to surveillance, and argues that the PAP government continued the resettlement policy for the same reasons.[155] The cleanliness campaign criminalised slum-dwellers, whose resettlement threw them into a precarious existence paying for rent and utilities. From the national perspective, the resettlement programme successfully regularised the workforce into one conducive to economic development. After

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[150] Chua Beng Huat, *Political Legitimacy and Housing*, p. 135.
[151] Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, v. 1, trans. by Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Classics, 1976), p. 1061.
[152] E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Vintage, 1966), p. 203.
[153] Barry Munslow and Helen Finch, 'Introduction' in *Proletarianisation in the Third World: Studies in the Creation of a Labour Force Under Dependent Capitalism*, ed. by Barry Munslow and Helen Finch (London, Sydney, and Dover, New Hampshire: Croom Helm, 1984), pp. 1-18 (pp. 2, 12)
[154] Loh, p. 4.
[155] Loh Kah Seng, *Squatters into Citizens*, pp. 74-5.

1967, this was achieved under the auspices of creating a 'Garden City', as well as improving housing for Singaporean citizens.

From the individual, family, and community perspectives, the 'Garden City' programme's resettlement drive represented a discomfiting transformation in lifestyle and networks of relations. Rearing poultry and growing vegetables was no longer possible for most residents, which meant that meals could no longer be supplemented by home-grown food. All food now had to be purchased.[156] Previously, the vegetable patch functioned as a sort of safety net: when wages were at their most irregular, there was a stock of food in the ground, available for consumption (although this stock was beset with its own insecurities). The removal of this stock constituted a loss of a safety net and increased families' vulnerability and dependence upon wages. This problem was exaggerated by the reconfiguration of family units: the architecture of the HDB buildings prevented routine social interaction and therefore eliminated the extended kampung community, concentrating people into smaller groups.[157] The nuclear family prevailed, with working-age adults providing for their parents, children, and possibly other dependents. The political economy of the HDB estate differed enormously from that of the kampung, because these dependents could no longer contribute to the family budget without performing wage labour. Previously, the eldest and youngest generations had been able to nurture crops, collect water from the well, gather firewood, or go fishing. The division of the extended kampung community into smaller units also meant that smaller units had to be self-reliant in terms of income. They could no longer depend upon distant aunts and uncles or local residents to help to alleviate their problems. This communal self-reliance was called 'kampung spirit'. The removal of routinised mutual aid from the communities, in the transition to HDB flats, constituted another removal of a social safety net. Resettlement therefore involved the tearing away of many forms of social safety net, to be replaced with social housing. These evictions created developmental refugees – the processes of development overrode the wishes of people who already lived on the land. This was a different kind of violence to that perpetrated by developers cited by Rob Nixon (as mentioned in the Introduction). It involved a series of coercive measures, which only used violence as a last resort, but which did not stop until all evictions were complete. This may be the mode of developmental resettlement more appropriate to the core site in the world-system: the delegitimising discourse around 'squatters' combined with the public

[156] Chua, *Political Legitimacy and Housing*, p. 58.
[157] Ibid, p. 58-9.

provision of alternative housing elsewhere meant that people appeared to be invited to 'share in the fruits of our progress', to quote Lee.[158] Uprooted from the land that helped to sustain them, kampung dwellers were thrown into a new kind of precarity, and a new kind of regularised wage labour. Compounding this, the public housing provided did not alleviate the set of problems that it created. Economist Donald Low has cautioned against replacing safety nets with home ownership, since home ownership is no 'substitute for social insurance against the risks of unemployment, ill health, or retirement', because it cannot be easily monetised.[159]

The removal of safety nets, and their replacement with housing as a commodity, meant that people who were resettled were not merely proletarianised, they were precaritised. When Chua asserts that '[h]ome ownership was […] an important step in the active proletarianisation of the Singapore population', his argument hinges on people's dependence on regular wages paid in the industrialising society.[160] This dependence, in tandem with the union-breaking celebrated by Lee Kuan Yew (and analysed in the Introduction to this thesis), highlights that proletarianisation was achieved through precaritisation in Singapore. Forcing people into precarious circumstances, with no stock of vegetables, livestock, or an extended family upon which to rely in times of hardship, meant that they were compelled to take wage labour at whatever wage was offered. Loh points out that housing was integral to the campaign of economic development in the early independence era:

> To the state, [HDB housing] was an instrument of nation building and development. […] Economically, public housing bolstered Singapore's industrial development by lowering labour costs, attracting foreign investors and encouraging local consumption. In the 1970s PAP policy integrated Singapore into the new international division of labour, by offering attractive tax holidays and cheap labour and factory sites to attract foreign investors.[161]

Key to this neoliberal-developmental policy of attracting international capital was keeping labour costs down, and this was achieved through disciplining mechanisms such as the tripartite union arrangement, as well as public housing provision. The formation of the

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[158] Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First*, pp. 11, 115.
[159] Donald Low, 'Rethinking Singapore's Housing Policies' in *Hard Choices: Challenging the Singapore Consensus*, ed. by Donald Low and Sudhir Thomas Vadaketh (Singapore: NUS Press, 2014), pp. 104-112 (pp. 108-9).
[160] Ibid, p. 135.
[161] Loh, p. 4.

Singaporean precariat was key to economic development, and therefore key to the unfolding of the 'Singapore Story'. Sasha Lilley has argued that such pools of labourers have been cultivated near many sites of production around the world, writing that '[t]he expansion of the global pool of labor has eroded labor's bargaining power, making it much harder for workers to demand higher wages without capital going elsewhere'.[162] It is testament to the success of Singapore's early and thorough adoption of neoliberal economics (as evinced by the creation of a precarious workforce and incentives to multinational corporations) that the 'elsewhere' of Lilley's formulation is often Singapore: its characteristics render it an attractive retreat for multinational capital. The fostering of a new type of wage labour, inducing precarity among the slum-dwellers – an obligatory step, in the 'pragmatic' view of the PAP – has allowed for the mode of economic development that is celebrated in the 'Singapore Story'.

Is it the case, then, that precarity is fundamental to the 'Singapore Story', as articulated by PAP luminaries? The national narrative is, in large part, a celebration of an economic model, and this model has depended on the precarity of the Singaporean workforce. Unsurprisingly, the word 'precarity' does not feature in publications and exhibitions that adhere to the national narrative, but the often deleterious living and working conditions experienced by Singaporeans *do* feature – and prominently. For example, Lee Kuan Yew describes the transition from kampung to HDB in a humorous tone:

> Difficult adjustments were inevitable and there were comic, even absurd, results. Several pig farmers could not bear to part with their pigs and reared them in their high-rise flats. Some were seen coaxing their pigs up the stairs! One family, a couple with 12 children, moving from a hut to a new HDB flat at Old Airport Road brought a dozen chickens and ducks to rear in the kitchen. The mother built a wooden gate at the kitchen entrance to stop them from entering the living-room. In the evening the children would look for earthworms and insects at the grass patches outdoor for feed. […] The Malays preferred to be closer to the ground. They planted vegetables around the high-rise as they used to do in their kampongs.[163]

The humour that Lee finds in this collection of anecdotes serves to defuse the outrage that might be provoked by human stories of neoliberal development policies. The 'Singapore

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[162] Sasha Lilley, 'Introduction' in *Capital and Its Discontents: Conversations with Radical Thinkers in a Time of Tumult*, ed. by Sasha Lilley (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2011), pp. 1-23 (pp. 6-7).
[163] Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to* First, p. 120.

Story' cannot help but represent this transition: it was key to economic development and was also experienced by almost every Singaporean of the early independence era. Potential indignation might also be neutralised by situating these experiences in a narrative of national development, and by articulating them as part of a larger process of 'beautification'. By framing these experiences as necessary sacrifices, made for the good of the nation (and ultimately rewarding, many of these slum-dwellers' descendants might say) they do not sit outside the 'Singapore Story', but are assimilated into 'pragmatic' PAP ideology, which requires that individual, family and community sacrifices be made to offset Singapore's rhetorically-constructed vulnerability. Resettlement is not framed as traumatic or lethal, but rather, a moment of sacrifice on the part of the slum-dwellers for the good of the nation.

The resettlement campaign created a pool of developmental refugees who served as labourers for multinational capital, but this alone does not explain why Singapore is an attractive retreat for multinational capital as stated above. This has been achieved through holistic policymaking: giving tax breaks to large companies, providing reliable infrastructure, as well as providing the conditions that led to the formation of a precariat in Singapore. The beautification and precaritisation endemic to the 'Garden City' programme added another layer of appeal to investors. The beautification was, of course, subjective. To be caught up in the transformations, be resettled, or watch the setting of one's upbringing being redeveloped beyond recognition would be alienating and discomfiting. As Lee boasts, the greening drive was pitched at tourists and multinational investors, rather than residents. The orderliness that was generated by redevelopment was designed to appeal to investors and tourists, and thus the levels of visibility of different groups were recalibrated. The 'squatters' were rehoused away from the central commercial district, for example, whilst high-class restaurants were invited in. Poverty is no longer visible in the riverfront area as a consequence, since it has been relocated to other parts of the island, rather than eradicated. The regulation of space and the regulation of people across space require continual management, into the present day. Development comes unevenly and accedes to a logic of continued redevelopment, as the landscape continues to be reshaped to suit the PAP's neoliberal-developmentalist goals. As a consequence, the boundaries set by the 'Garden City' programme are often in flux, and space is held in tension as new initiatives threaten further evictions and redevelopments. Just as a garden requires commitment and cultivation, the regulation of space under the auspices of the 'Garden City' requires constant management and discipline.

Narrating 'Garden City' Precarity

As shown by Barnard and Heng, 'Garden City' spaces can be read as part of the national narrative. Whilst gardens are not as explicit as Lee's memoirs or annual parades in communicating their message, they testify to historical transformation in their own way. These sites may contain traces of past uses of the land, past settlement, and past interactions. Where they do not bear such traces, a narrative is being imposed and alternatives are erased. The orderliness of the Singaporean 'Garden City' landscape involves erasures, rather than layers, but there may be layers of meaning attached to a space in the memories of Singaporeans. These layered meanings, which emerge from 'Garden City' spaces and individuals' memories, and do not necessarily adhere to the national narrative that these spaces implicitly promulgate, can also be found in historical fiction. Historical novels narrate events across space and time, and in the Singaporean context can thus complicate the single-layered history of the artificial spaces that were created in the drive for national economic development. Historical fiction attests to a more complicated narrative, with multiple perspectives on unfolding developments. The singular national narrative excludes alternative interpretations of events, but historical fiction can show this exclusion to be a process, whilst showing divergent individual, family, and community perspectives. As we have seen, the Singaporean 'Garden City' programme was a process of eviction and redevelopment of commercially-viable land, meaning that land value, according to the market, is a key determinant of whether a space is at risk of confiscation. Eviction is a spectre that haunts all commercially under-productive land. This programme has been justified through the public discourses of cleanliness, orderliness, and the ideal of the 'Garden City', and it is thus, to borrow Barnard and Heng's phrase, 'part of the national narrative'. To combat the neoliberal-developmentalist 'environmentality' – people's understanding of the world around them – I will argue in what follows that *The River's Song* and *City of Small Blessings* partake in the 'struggle […] against the concepts and stories that have enabled environmental degradation in the past' that environmental humanities scholars Ursula K. Heise and Allison Carruth champion.[164] With attention to 'the strategic use of *fiction* as a mobilizing idiom',[165] this chapter will explore the relationship between precarity and the 'Garden City' programme in Singapore. What kinds of precarity did the 'Garden City' programme produce? What relation did this historical process have to

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[164] Ursula K. Heise and Allison Carruth, 'Introduction to Focus: Environmental Humanities', *American Book Review* 32.1 (2010), 3, p. 3.
[165] DeLoughrey, Didur and Carrigan, 'Introduction' in *Global Ecologies and the Environmental Humanities*, p. 14.

the history of Singapore? The official history of Singapore – the 'Singapore Story' – co-opts the resettlement and greening drives as part of national development, meaning that 'bottom-up' accounts of these processes are scarce.

Historical fiction opens up space to explore the processes and logic behind the 'Garden City' drive. Whilst historical fiction has the capacity to corroborate or oppose the dominant national narrative, novels tend to complicate or depart from the national narrative in subtle ways, rather than directly confirming or opposing the entire trajectory of the 'Singapore Story'. Historical fiction can show a variety of perspectives, representing individual, family, community, and national prerogatives in tension with each other, or bundled together. As a result, it can explore the shifting dynamics of precarity – which are otherwise challenging to quantify – as political and economic forces act upon individual characters and their families. Whilst PAP articulations of the development drive tend to narrate events in the mode of 'sacrifice' for the national good, the novels I want to examine focalise individuals and small groups, and therefore lend themselves to sympathetic depictions of precarious groups – although *The River's Song* is ambivalent about the costs and benefits of the 'Garden City' drive as a whole. Both novels examine the 'sacrifices' made by resettled people, and the benefits of industrialisation that accrue to various parties, in all their unevenness across 'Garden City' space. Alternative histories can emerge in historical fiction, or at least, alternative perspectives on the dominant history of Singapore. By exploring the connotative force of spaces that have been transformed to tell a single story, fiction adds depth to our understanding of Singapore's redevelopment.

The spaces that feature in *City of Small Blessings* and *The River's Song* are diverse, and attest to various colonial and neoliberal-developmentalist patterns of urban regeneration and town planning. *The River's Song* juxtaposes representations of spaces with great wealth and those of the resettled, highlighting the inequality that has been produced by the 'Garden City' drive. Importantly, only the HDB of the resettled Weng and Chong Suk has been subjected to the programme, whilst the opulent Juniper Gardens estate that Ping now lives in has not been earmarked for redevelopment, and so remains unscathed. It is Juniper Gardens, though, which has the features of a garden, in the conventional sense. Weng is a slum-dweller and a central character in the novel, and his attempts to mobilise the disenfranchised 'squatters' at a rally lead to his arrest. At the same time, his lover, Ping (who experiences a similar poverty growing up in the riverfront shophouses), benefits from her mother's new relationship with a wealthy Hong Kong businessman, 'Uncle Chang'. *The River's Song* juxtaposes Weng's struggle to articulate the

voices of the evicted slum-dwellers with the comfortable environment enjoyed by Ping, in her new uncle's large house in 'Juniper Gardens':

> A secluded, tree-lined Eden of sun-drenched, two-storey bungalows with large gardens and green lawns hedged and fenced in, protected by burglar alarms and gates with signs that warned "Beware of Dog". Majestic raintrees shaded the lanes which had few passers-by except the maids walking their dogs in the evening. The estate had attracted those riding the crest of Singapore's newfound prosperity. Businessmen, lawyers and doctors had bought houses here, stocking them with the emblems of their new wealth.[166]

This passage adheres to the framework of the 'Singapore Story' as promulgated by the PAP, insofar as it describes the wealth of businessmen, lawyers and doctors as 'new'. There is also an obscuring of the relations of domestic labourers to their employers; maids overwhelmingly live with their employers, and would not be walking 'their dogs', but rather their employers' dogs. The passage does, however, serve to visualise the Singaporean 'Garden City' ideal. The narration does not comment on the origins of this estate, but it may have been built on valuable land confiscated by the government, since it symbolises 'newfound' wealth. Alternatively, it could be an estate built in the colonial era, and which has not yet been earmarked for redevelopment. Even in this case, however, the land remains susceptible to confiscation and redevelopment at any time, to be repurposed and turned to more profitable uses. The absence of direct commentary about the history of the estate means that the narrative replicates the erasures of the 'Garden City' drive by obscuring possible previous land uses of the site. In the passage, beautification and opulence go hand in hand in this image, echoing Lee Kuan Yew's vision in which '"the garden would be bearing gold and silver underneath"'.[167] Space is also disciplined in the image presented by Lim: the hedges and fences regulate the limits of public space, and the signs carry threats to intruders. The hedges are arranged in such a way as to perform the same function as fences and concrete, and are cultivated to serve a particular purpose. This is a more conventional garden, in that it is enclosed and marked heavily by property relations. This is not a symbol of shared national wealth, but rather, wealth accumulated in the hands of the elite. By writing that the lawns are 'fenced in', Lim suggests that the 'Garden City' is as much a disciplinary idea as a beautifying one. The poor are to be made less visible, with their roots torn up from areas of high commercial value. The artificiality of

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[166] Ibid, p. 102.
[167] Lee, quoted in Barnard and Heng, p. 297.

the government programme is disguised by the supposed 'naturalness' of the disciplinary gardens that regulate space, class, and visibility, and which throw slum-dwellers into a new kind of precarity. All of these developments, represented by Lim, are part of the historical 'Garden City' programme. Whilst Juniper Gardens is celebrated as 'Edenic', however, the set of policies that creates such spaces also involves the eviction of Ping's friend and lover, Weng, plus his community, as part of the holistic programme. There is certainly a process of beautification underway in the more opulent districts of Singapore, but the visibility of these green, regulated and regulating spaces is coupled with the making-invisible of the precarious slum-dwellers.

Garden imagery is mockingly present at the scene of Chong Suk's death, an event which Weng also ascribes to the government's plan for redeveloping the riverfront. Chong Suk crouches next to his 'wilted' chillies, next to the metal bars of the HDB block.[168] Having spent his life tending plants in the riverside slum, he struggles to nurture the spices that he has transported to the apartment block. In this image, the chillies reflect Chong Suk, whose crouching diminishes his frame as vitality leaves him. The new environment is inhospitable to the man and to the plants that have sustained him. The greening policies that were enacted as part of the 'Garden City' drive aimed to offset the loss of 'kampung spirit', by encouraging people to buy potted plants for their HDB residences, in order to retain some familiarity during a period of drastic environmental change.[169] Obviously, the community spirit of a group of people in similarly precarious circumstances cannot be transplanted along with the dispersed slum-dwellers, because the spirit resided in the people, not the plants. Some small-scale dietary supplement is permitted in HDB estates, such as spices and herbs tended to in flowerpots. The small plants provide only a superficial beauty, however, and fail to survive in the HDB environment. The family are still thrown into precarity, and any beautification that their apartment block undergoes as a result of their dedication to horticulture is simply consolatory. The orderliness of the beauty is not conducive to sustaining life, but rather, to disciplining it.

Both of these scenes feature gardens, and have been subjected to the 'Garden City' programme in some sense, even if Juniper Gardens has not been dramatically altered by the set of policies. Places that already feature sufficient profit-making (be it in terms of rent or housing the wealthy) are less likely to be redeveloped in the near future, even if they may someday be subject to redevelopment. The flipside of the preservation of sites of

[168] Lim, *The River's Song*, p. 177.
[169] Ibid, p. 297.

Juniper Gardens is the redevelopment of sites like the riverfront, and the construction of the HDBs to which the kampung dwellers are dispersed. The programme as a whole, which affects the whole nation, has localised effects in terms of slum clearance, redevelopment, and the safeguarding (up to a point) of wealthier districts. In both cases, though, there is a process of neoliberal-developmental 'gardening', in which a particular idea of orderliness is maintained. It is the orderliness that might appeal to the multinational investor, who needs both a comfortable residence and a source of revenue. The gardening of the riverfront and Juniper Gardens involves drastically different processes, but nevertheless ends up with the nationwide application of an idea of 'beauty' which is designed to attract global capital. The process of weeding out traces of past land use is implied, too, through *The River's Song*'s replication of the erasure of possible pasts in Juniper Gardens, even as the novel attests to development's ugly flipside on the riverfront. By showing an example in which the past is obscured (in the case of Juniper Gardens), and as one example where it is recuperated (in the form of the novel), *The River's Song* illustrates the process of gardening the national narrative – the regulating of history to accompany the disciplining of space that might bear witness to these various aspects of the 'Garden City'.

The River's Song represents the historical processes that accompany redevelopment, even as the novel corroborates some of the tropes of the 'Singapore Story'. The precaritisation of Singaporeans through the 'Garden City' drive was particularly visible to urbanised Singaporeans (and residents of Singapore) during the redevelopment of the riverfront, which began in 1965, but the novel does not straightforwardly counter the dominant historical account. This case of redevelopment is the central theme of *The River's Song*, though, and it is referred to tangentially in *City of Small Blessings* (which I shall come to in greater depth later). In both texts, this redevelopment offers a glimpse into the social and environmental changes that are wrought across Singapore, as the city was re-ordered to facilitate greater profit-making and control. In *The River's Song*, the 1960s river is represented the only way it can be in 2013: as a memory for some characters, and not others. Towards the end of the novel, Ping returns to the city in which she grew up in order to attend her mother's funeral. She does not recognise her surroundings:

> The moon is trapped in the gap of sky between the towering office blocks. Should I walk farther up the river to look for the spot where the creek used to be? The young taxi driver who brought me here had not heard of the creek where Weng and I used to fish. "Didn't know, leh, Madam. Got such creek, meh?" The young man has smiled into his rear view mirror. Ah well, I heave a sigh, the erasure of

> place and memory is the hallmark of the city. The river's tributaries have been hacked off and paved over with concrete. Swanky new hotels and condos with shiny glass and aluminium frontage have replaced the messy boatyards and majestic raintrees.[170]

Differing in age, the taxi driver and Ping have different memories of the Singaporean landscape, but this difference between memories plays out as a collision between Ping's personal history (connected with this specific location) and the taxi driver's deference to the nationally-framed act of remembrance (in the absence of a personal connection of his own). Individual and national perspectives are in conflict for Ping, yet in the imagination of the taxi driver, they are reconciled.

The 'Garden City' programme of tree-planting and spatial reorganisation is not mentioned by name in the novel, but the transformations that take place in Ping's absence can be attributed to this particular set of policies. The language of 'beautification' is also absent from the novel. The transformation from a slum-like settlement to a commercial district is figured in the language of aggression and containment: tributaries are 'hacked off' like limbs, whilst the moon is obscured between the high-rise buildings. The combination of messiness with majesty in the form of the kampung gives way to the 'shiny' and 'swanky' commercial buildings, suggesting a new architectural pattern of postmodern homogeneity in the newly gardened space. Ping's nostalgia for the pre-transformation river landscape emerges through a desire for a personal connection to the place she grew up, but she tempers this with recognition of the improved sanitary conditions for the people who lived there:

> All that is gone now. Even the teahouses [where Ping grew up] have disappeared without a trace. The taxi driver was surprised that there had been teahouses behind the river.
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> "I never heard of them, madam. Last time, this river very dirty. Now, it's very clean. Our gah'ment did good job. And we got win international award." The taxi driver told her proudly.

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[170]Ibid, p. 282.

> I think of Weng's father, Uncle Chong Suk, digging in his vegetable plot, his stepmothers and sisters in their hut with no running water or electricity. Yes, the taxi driver has every reason to be proud.[171]

The novel situates Singaporean economic development internationally, by relating the taxi driver's pride at the transformation of the river landscape, which fits neatly into the 'Singapore Story' of a shared development experience. This scene is delivered with irony, however, because it is coloured by previous plot points. Chong Suk has died as a direct consequence of the resettlement, so to cite his example to argue for development's ameliorating effects subverts the Singaporean offshoot of global development discourse, which would justify the transition. Whilst the taxi driver, whose working-class authenticity can be inferred from his heavy use of Singlish, feels proud of the development, a previous generation of working-class people has suffered throughout the redevelopment process. The collision of Ping's personal history (in relation to the riverfront) with the taxi driver's absence of a personal connection to the space and deferral to the national narrative also highlights that Ping's perspective is not grounded in the nation. Hers is a personal and transnational perspective on Singapore's development, because she is an academic, based at a US institution, who is returning for family reasons. The relative class positions of the two people in the taxi are not articulated as antagonistic; rather, they are bound together by their sharing of a national identity and overall approval of the changes that swept Singapore as part of the 'Garden City' drive.

The River's Song offers further examples of the mobilisation of cleanliness discourse to advance the 'Garden City' programme by narrating the state's use of its apparatuses for the purpose of projecting its rationalisation of the process. In one scene, the slum-dwellers' struggle to read the newspaper headline 'Immediate Removal of Illegal Structures At the Riverfront. Polluters to be Severely Punished'.[172] Weng initially addresses the eviction notices with written replies 'in the jargon of civil servants' before opting for a louder mode of dissent – giving speeches to the furious slum-dweller community:

> "The government people say we have turned this river into a rubbish dump. It's an open sewer. A national disgrace. They want to clean it up. Clear us out as if we're

[171] Ibid, p. 282-3.
[172] Ibid, p. 194.

> part of the rubbish. The riffraff who pollute this river. Squatters! Polluters! They shout at us from their newspapers, their radios and television."[173]

There is a power imbalance between the parties: Weng and the slum-dwellers have the power of their voices to broadcast to each other, whilst the government can disseminate its message through various mouthpieces. At this stage, the government is clear as to who is to blame for the pollution. They blame the slum-dwellers (who recycle their own refuse). Earlier in the novel, government media organs are more precise, and no less hysterical, in assigning blame. The government claimed that it had to evict 'the farmyards, charcoal yards, backyard factories, boatyards, bumboat operators, boat coolies, and their families – the culprits who dumped tons of filth into the river every year, the newspaper reported. "A National Disgrace", a newspaper headline screamed'.[174] In these quotations, blame is assigned to the smallest of businesses and the family units that depend on these businesses' job openings for casual wage labour. Some of this cleanliness discourse is subverted in the novel, as the food inspector is revealed to be corrupt, and happy to eat the food that he labels unsafe.[175] However, the novel never seriously disputes the claims that the slum-dwellers are responsible for the uncleanliness. Regarding the issue of food hygiene, Lim represents a stallowner cheating his customers by diluting coffee before serving it, and allowing flies to gather on roasted duck.[176] Looking back nostalgically on the kampung community, an older Weng still recalls the settlement as 'a cesspool in the heart of the city', as though this were justification for resettling the poorest and most vulnerable in society away from the valuable land.[177] Even the most victimised surviving character seems to appreciate the transformation that occurred in the early independence period.

The fictionalised kampung is not described in idyllic terms. The presence of refuse and foul stenches permeate descriptions of the settlement.[178] Lim uses the word 'squatter' to refer to the occupants of this settlement, embracing the national narrative's delegitimising language. In fact, slum-dwellers paid rent to landlords, who opted to redevelop the land with government approval. Whilst the novel uncritically mimics this use of cleanliness discourse, it also narrates the redemptive aspects of a self-reliant lifestyle that involves the use and re-use of discarded items from the town. It is Ping's delving into

[173] Ibid, p. 196.
[174] Ibid, p. 144.
[175] Ibid, pp. 28, 197.
[176] Ibid, p. 55.
[177] Ibid, pp. 59-60.
[178] Ibid, pp. 50, 54, 55, 60.

the ‘squatter’ settlement that sparks her relationship with Weng, whose resourcefulness typifies the more admirable aspects of ‘squatter’ life. Vegetables are scavenged from the charitable donations that are ‘flung on to the road’ by those passing through the village.[179] Ping and Weng then sell these vegetables door to door, supplementing their families’ incomes, before eating the remaining vegetables themselves.[180] Their efficiency at this task is improved by Weng’s repurposing of a disposed pram into a trolley to ease the travel between sales pitches.[181] Tins and bottles are collected for sale to the karang guni (rag-and-bone) merchant, and firewood is salvaged from wooden crates. The word ‘recycling’ is never used, although the practice is key to maintaining ‘squatter’ way of life.

The kampung’s farming practices follow a similar ethic. Weng gives Ping a tour of his family’s patch of the village, pointing out ‘the red chillies, spring onions, Chinese mint, lemon grass, pandan and roses that his sisters and stepmother had planted in rusty tins, earthen pots and discarded plastic pails that he had salvaged from the backlanes’ as well as Chong Suk’s vegetable patch, complete with ‘cucumbers […], lady’s fingers, Chinese spinach and long beans’. Weng proudly states that ‘“we’re lucky. We’ve water from the river to water the plants, chickens behind our hut so we get fresh eggs every day. Our drinking water is from the public taps you saw.”’[182] Ping and Weng fish for crabs and guppies in the river, retaining some for food and selling the rest to pet shops, for more affluent citizens to purchase.[183] Their income is supplemented further by Chong Suk’s music lessons and Weng’s busking.[184] The unsanitary conditions of the settlement are always foregrounded in these accounts, and the slum-dwellers live precariously. They rely on the dubious cleanliness of the well water and the weather’s kindness to their crops to continue this way of life. Casual wage labour is performed, but there is no need for regular wage labour because these other subsistence tasks require attention, whilst also sustaining the kampung community.[185]

It is not the case, then, that the ‘Garden City’ drive simply throws people out of a comfortable and happy lifestyle, and into precarity. Rather, they are shifted from one kind of precarity to another. The kampung lifestyle already abounds with risks to health and sanitation, and relies on the structure of patriarchal family units to keep the elderly fed and

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[179] Ibid, p, 50.
[180] Ibid, p. 54.
[181] Ibid, p. 74.
[182] Ibid, p. 61.
[183] Ibid, pp. 58, 75.
[184] Ibid, p. 73.
[185] Ibid, p. 118.

the young educated. HDB living alleviates these risks, but builds new dimensions to a precarious wage labouring lifestyle. Since they now need to regularly pay rent and utility bills, inhabitants depend upon regular wage labour. Here, the reconfiguration of precarity which ensues as part of the 'Garden City' drive has, in fact, obliterated a garden. The functional garden space of the kampung, which helped to sustain the kampung dwellers offset the precarity that they experienced. Once they lose the functional garden and the extended community ethic of the kampung, the riverfront 'squatters' experience precarity in new ways, and are compelled to seek wage labour.

The cleanliness discourse that legitimised the 'Garden City' drive is critiqued subtly by Lim, and does not involve romanticising the kampung. Weng recounts the changes that have been wrought on the area where he grew up:

> Office blocks tower above the river mouth, shrunken by landfills. The city's hunger for land has eaten up parts of the river. The placid ribbon rippling darkly between the grey concrete embankments is much narrower now than the broad, meandering, congested, teeming, busy waterway of my childhood when the expanse of blue sky arcing over the river mouth was wide and high. Instead of bumboats and twakows crowding its banks, now it's the pubs and restaurants that pack the riverfront.[186]

A binary opposition is set up, in this passage, between the 'teeming' and energetic pre-transformation river and the dull scene in the aftermath of the transformation. The river has become orderly and functional (ideal, when seen from a national perspective), and no longer useful to the individuals, families and communities that have been displaced – paralleling the functional gardens of the kampung, which are replaced by sterile 'Garden City' postmodern architecture. Both the river and the riverfront, then, undergo neoliberal-developmental 'gardening'. Food consumption remains the primary socio-economic process that occurs in this passage, but now the food is monetised and brought in from elsewhere. The land's functional use has been altered, from sustaining the community, to enhancing the image of the nation, and bringing in greater domestic product. The river is no longer the source of food, and indeed the river appears sapped of strength. This quotation also gives the reader insight into the comparative uses of refuse. Where 'squatters' were criminalised and evicted for their proximity to waste, and their dumping of waste into the river, the state is now dumping waste into the river on a much greater scale

[186] Ibid, p. 279.

and with greater coordination. To sate a ‘hunger for land’ in a prime commercial district, landfill is used to narrow the river. This creation of commercial land, ripe for development, fits governmental criteria of development and national prosperity, but it comes at the expense of the individuals, families, and communities who could also be sustaining themselves from this refuse. State imperatives override the needs of those that the state claims to represent, in order to aid the national appeal to multinational capital. *The River’s Song* therefore complicates the ‘Singapore Story’ by juxtaposing these different modes of waste disposal and waste recycling. It is this redevelopment that earns Singapore praise from international bodies, to the taxi driver’s delight, and which furthers processes of capital accumulation. The ‘Singapore Story’ aims to instil nationalist pride in the nation’s role in expanding these global processes, but this novel’s alternative perspective on redevelopment constitutes a small departure from this. Eschewing the idiom of working-class ‘self-sacrifice’ for the national good, the novel represents working-class suffering at the hands of the state apparatuses that impose a form of orderliness – a mode of ‘gardening’ – that facilitates multinationals’ profit-making.

The novel exposes the ‘Garden City’ drive as a means to modify the precarity of Singapore’s working-class, and the modes of resistance that the novel represents fall short of effecting change in the precariat’s favour. Rather, the novel shows how the dominant historical narrative contains elisions and processes of re-framing which re-cast victimisation as sacrifice and refashions the developmental refugee experience as that of the modern, safe, and well-cared-for worker. *The River’s Song* departs from the ‘Singapore Story’, but it also effects a partial corroboration of it, shedding greater light on the suffering of the Singaporean precariat. Framed as noble sacrifice in the interests of the nation, this does not greatly detract from the national narrative. The novel focuses on a single instance of redevelopment – implying other processes of redevelopment, whilst remaining within the ambit of government-ordained representations. We can speculate that Lim may be hedging her bets here, as a national prize-winning author whose novels are frequently taught in Singaporean classrooms, but more clearly there is a degree of ambivalence, in this novel, regarding the ‘Garden City’ drive.

In the novel, evictions are threatened soon after Ping is introduced to the less-than-idyllic but functional riverside community. Government officers carry out surprise checks on slum-dwellers to push them into taking the HDB flats on offer, prompting anger among the residents, whose four-generation long claim on the land is being superseded by

a shadowy owner's legal might.[187] At first, there is a belief that '"There must be a law to protect poor people like us"', until it becomes apparent that the slum-dwellers are targeted precisely because of their poverty: the state's national imperatives and neoliberal ideology demand that the slum-dwellers are transplanted to a more economically productive way of life.[188] The key arguments against resettlement, which are expressed within the kampung echo-chamber at length, are summarised by Chong Suk:

> "We're comfortable here. All our friends are here. The air is better here. There's more space here. More trees. We grow our own vegetables here. Have you seen those flats? Like boxes on top of other boxes. Can't grow a thing in a two-room box. There'll be no more free vegetables once we move. We'll have to spend more money. On food, on lights, on water, on transport. Everything will cost more. I will have to take a bus every day to come back here to work."[189]

He misunderstands an important tenet of the resettlement programme: there will no longer be work on offer at the river – at least, not the sort of work to which he is accustomed. Shophouses are to be converted into restaurants, whilst ferrying and repairing are to be scaled down enormously. His prediction as to the lived experience through this transformation rings true, however, and the ballooning costs for utilities will have to be paid for somehow. At the same time, the community will be torn apart and rehoused in different parts of the island, and the architecture of the new HDB estates is not so conducive to fomenting 'kampung spirit'. They are also being rehoused away from the river, meaning that they will no longer have the bounty of fish, crabs, and guppies to supplement their diets and incomes. As a result, the community, vegetable patch, and river, which have all operated as sorts of safety nets within the kampung network of relations, no longer prop up the slum-dwellers. The unpaid-for ecological resources that the community previously depended upon for survival are removed. By representing this reconfiguration of the metabolism of the slum, Lim critiques the proletarianisation of Singaporeans. The slum-dwellers are not simply transformed into a proletariat, but rather into a precariat, which is divorced from its semi-subsistence lifestyle and pushed into wage labour. By taking away the prospects of self-sufficiency, an ecological form of precarity is engendered. Whilst *The River's Song* does not represent the push into regularised wage labour for Chong Suk, it shows how various safety nets are taken away from him. This mode

[187] Ibid, pp. 118, 123.
[188] Ibid, p. 125.
[189] Ibid, p. 125.

of representation is purposefully sympathetic, and readers bear witness to a history in a less varnished fashion than is presented in the 'Singapore Story'. The details of the eviction process are not disputed, but they are reframed in such a way as to highlight the social and environmental costs of the 'Garden City' drive, and its 'gardening' of the riverfront community.

Chong Suk's death reinforces this point. He collapses 'near his chilli plants' in the corridor, near the last vestiges of the kampung that were transported to the HDB environment in their salvaged pots. Weng believes that '[h]is Pa would've been alive today if they were still living by the river'.[190] Through this historical narrative, a chain of causality is offered, whereby the national-level event of the resettlement programme is instantiated for Weng's family through the death of his father. Clearly, it is Chong Suk who makes the ultimate sacrifice in the service of national economic development, despite his utter unwillingness to be resettled – but his death is not described in terms of sacrifice. It is figured as a crime against the poorest in society, whose suffering is elaborated by Weng, as he silently watches tourists at the riverfront:

> Two thousand nine hundred and fifty-nine squatters and their families.
>
> Five thousand hawkers and their families.
>
> Several thousand boat builders and boatmen working on the bumboats and tuakows and their families.
>
> Several hundred backyard family operators, workers, coolies, and their families.
>
> Vegetable gardeners, chicken farmers, duck farmers and their families.
>
> And eight thousand pig farms, pig farmers and their families.
>
> A memory recalled is a memory snatched from the jaws of defeat.
>
> He will not forget the misery of his father crouched among the pots of withered chillies in the corridor of their new Housing Board flat. Nor the duck farmer who couldn't find another job after the family's eviction from the river. Nor the vegetable gardener, a father of six, who got drunk every night on the compensation the government paid him. Evicted from his land, the man lost his bearings. Grew violent and beat his wife and children every night. […] How many former river men

[190] Ibid, p. 177.

> have drowned themselves in drink and depression? There are no national statistics. Just a few bloated bodies caught under the barges dredging the riverbed.[191]

This passage lists the victims of the kampung to HDB transition to show national economic development's human cost. Weng links a plethora of personal histories to the national history, illustrating that national development comes at the expense of individuals' survival. The precarity in this process is narrated by Weng, who emphasises the individuals and family units that no longer have the resources to survive. This passage frames domestic violence, alcoholism, unemployment and suicide – all issues, one would think, that are derived from multiple deprivations – as caused by resettlement. By situating the effects of the 'Garden City' programme alongside the rhetoric of national economic development, *The River's Song* nuances the supposed inclusivity of the 'Singapore Story'. The dredging of the riverbed, a cause for celebration for the taxi driver later in the novel, brings up resettlement's bloated casualties, and by extension, *The River's Song* dredges up the alternative perspectives that were drowned out by the PAP's narrative of the resettlement drive. However, the statistics quoted by Weng here are derived from Lee Kuan Yew's memoirs,[192] indicating a dependence on the seemingly-authoritative sources of the PAP even as an alternative perspective on events is presented. The novel's relationship to the national narrative, then, is an uncomfortable dependence rather than outright subversion. The experiences of those resettled under the auspices of beautification are narrated and situated in such a way as to combat the singular elite voice that delivers the 'Singapore Story'.

In Lim's account of events, cleanliness discourse is partially legitimate, but is deployed unfairly to condemn slum-dwellers to resettlement and regularised wage labour. The discourse of cleanliness is not contested for its premises, but rather its application, meaning that the counter-discursive impetus of the novel is only partially developed. The kampung remains characterised as a slum, and the slum-dwellers remain labelled as 'squatters', following official discourse. In the novel, a wealthy businessman redevelops the land that he now unambiguously controls, meaning that the process of precaritisation (which includes union-breaking as well as resettlement in *The River's Song*) is coupled to the process of 'beautification'. The push for profit is soon revealed as the motive behind the evictions: tourists' desires supersede those of the slum-dwellers, and Weng looks

[191] Ibid, pp. 156-7.
[192] Suchen Christine Lim, personal interview, 29 July 2015.

mournfully across the river that has been superficially 'prettified for tourists'.[193] This piece of historical fiction offers a glimpse into the cost of such a hierarchy of governmental priorities, as a previous inhabitant of the land feels alienated by the re-ordered riverfront scene. The 'Garden City' drive's priorities are thus revealed. The riverfront precariat is displaced, to be dispersed across the island and be rendered less visible to the tourists and multinational financiers in the central zone. The central zones become an exclusive area, which does not welcome the families that have resided on the land for generations, but rather welcomes those who can afford to pay the high commercial rates for the land. Beautification is undoubtedly a part of the 'Garden City' scheme, but it does not benefit the residents of the land; rather it appeals to multinational investors and tourists, whose enjoy a beauty designed for its orderliness, and departs from the self-sustenance of the slum-dwelling community. This neoliberal-developmental 'gardening' of Singaporean space is firmly part of the national narrative, and is nuanced by *The River's Song'*s re-telling of events from the perspective of the developmental refugees.

The River's Song figures the kampung-dwellers as both militant and unified in their resistance to the government, and yet utterly powerless to stop the encroachment of the 'Garden City' drive on to their land. The figuration of the kampung-dwellers in one of Weng's internal monologues is particularly powerful, and subversive in relation to the beautification programme. He memorialises those who have fallen victim to the re-organisation of space under the auspices of the 'Garden City' drive by playing his flute on the bridge near his former kampung:

> What can he do for them other than to play his flute? He is, after all, a flautist. He will play for these former squatters, the nameless grass growing by the roadside that was pulled up and removed. He has to commemorate their protest. Here's to the grass we step on![194]

'[T]he grass we step on' is literally silent and possesses minimal agency, offering a parallel with the evicted slum-dwellers who do not have the language with which to enter the Singaporean public sphere in this era of dialect suppression. Neither the grass nor the flautist can mount an effective critique of government policy. If the resettled are 'the grass we step on', how might this change the way we think about the 'Garden City'? The phrase forces a recognition of the 'sacrifices' made by the resettled, against their will, in order to

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[193] Lim, *The River's Song*, p. 263.
[194] Ibid, p. 156.

further the neoliberal-developmentalist agenda of the PAP, and indeed at the behest of multinational capital. 'The grass we step on' finds a new centrality in the 'Singapore Story', as it narrates the 'Garden City' drive to beautify and discipline the island. To foreground grass is to foreground that which is ordinary and necessary to any garden environment, and yet it is the kampung-dwellers, figured as 'grass', that are removed in the name of the 'Garden City' drive. Both the functional, physical gardens that sustain Chong Suk's family, and the metaphorical 'grass' of the kampung-dwellers themselves, are removed in order to accommodate a new 'Garden City' space. The 'Garden City' drive thus eliminates inconvenient gardens in order to create a space which is garden-like only in its orderliness and maintenance. The space does not provide sustenance for people, but it provides a kind of sustenance at the national level, by attracting multinational capital. The substitution of kampung priorities for the imperatives of the nation, by the neoliberal-developmentalist policymakers, is instantiated in this act of resettlement. The novel depicts this, even as it shows Weng's music falling short of instilling in his audience a sense of grievance against the government, or even engendering sympathy and understanding for the history of the site. Weng plays his flute to commemorate the trauma endured by the resettled people, but his performance is received as art without meaning by young passers-by.[195] Music is consolatory, and might allow articulation of dissent, but has no prospect of effecting change here. This historical novel may have the potential to do more, by showcasing alternative perspectives of the national narrative, and drawing attention to the past land use of the riverfront site – uses which are obscured by the new architecture that impresses the taxi driver who talks to Ping.

As previously mentioned, Lim does not depart substantially from the national narrative, however, and corroborates some of its key points. When Weng performs music commemorating the lives lost during the redevelopment of the riverfront, Lim writes that '[t]he good life on this sunny isle has added flab to his waistline'.[196] In addition, when Weng proudly introduces the squatter settlement to Ping, the novel says that '[i]t was only much later […] that he came to see the river as others saw it – a cesspool in the heart of the city'.[197] Towards the end of the novel, Ping, too, becomes accepting of the drastic changes in the environment in which she grew up.[198] As a consequence of these details that are woven into the narrative, the novel seems to encourage provisional consideration of

[195] Ibid, p. 86.
[196] Ibid, p. 157.
[197] Ibid, pp. 59-60.
[198] Ibid, p. 306.

alternative perspectives rather than an outright rejection of the government interpretation of events. The novel corroborates the dominant national narrative in its agreement that the transformations were necessary, by having Weng agree that the settlement was a ‘cesspool’. It supports the myth that Singaporeans all live in comfort, by pointing to Weng’s apparent prosperity-induced flab. It also corroborates the myth, central to the ‘Singapore Story’, that social mobility allows anyone to rise to the top of society, regardless of social, economic, or racial background.[199] Weng profits from his musical abilities because he is an internationally-renowned flute ‘maestro’ with his own ensemble by the end of the novel.[200] Having earnt an income piecemeal from impromptu performances in the slum-dwellers’ village, he now has a regular income from his concerts that take place across the globe. Singapore’s model of social mobility is therefore celebrated, albeit indirectly, because even the most impoverished and disenfranchised character succeeds in forging a lucrative musical career. As a result, there are no poor people by the end of the novel, despite the novel’s interest in representing the most vulnerable in society during the resettlements of the early independence era. Poverty is consigned safely to history, through the narrating of events in this historical novel. There is no hint of further transformations to come, as the ‘Garden City’ programme would demand. The novel replicates the linear understanding of development as fostering social and economic progress, following economists such as Sen (who theorises at the global level) and following the government-sponsored outline of Singaporean economic development. Poverty becomes a historical curiosity, in this novel, and thus a subject of historical fiction, to be sought and represented for contemporary readers.

The novel contains a revelatory moment, however, which highlights the global dynamics of the national ‘Garden City’ drive. Uncle Chang is the Hong Kong-based new husband of Ping’s mother, and he is a wealthy businessman. His investments span various countries, and his portfolio in Singapore includes a number of cinemas in HDB estates, a shipping company, a water transport company, warehouses and a great deal of land around the river. He is revealed to be the landlord responsible for the eviction of the slum-dwellers from their riverside kampung.[201] His business operations do not always go smoothly: two workers die in the construction of one cinema, and government help is

[199] Teo You Yenn, ‘Poor People Don't Like Oats Either: Imagining Poverty, Constructing Need and Deservedness’, *Living with Myths: Cultural Medallions, Poverty, Histories*, TheatreWorks 72-13, Singapore, 20 July 2015. Conference presentation.
[200] Lim, *The River’s Song*, pp. 270, 275.
[201] Ibid, pp. 131, 124.

enlisted.[202] To improve the company's image, Chang holds a charity gala, believing that '"[c]harity makes money look less crass"', but the gala is also an excuse to invite a minister and discuss the government's role in facilitating his business. '"[I]n business, you've got to grease the wheels of power; must have this to and fro between business and politics."'[203] At the same time, many of Chang's employees, including Chong Suk, are fired. The unions go on strike, but are wary of the government's desire to break these strikes and are aware of attempts by the Internal Security Department to infiltrate unions.[204] Chang uses the charity gala as an opportunity to demand the relevant minister help break these strikes.[205] When Ping returns to Singapore decades later, as an academic at an American university, a great deal has changed: Chang has committed suicide, and the riverfront is unrecognisable. The narration thus shows the transnational links that are made in the course of the 'Garden City' drive. The novel also indicates the gulf between the 'gardeners' and those who undergo 'gardening', in terms of agency. The surviving developmental refugees, as exemplified by Weng, can only play music which is impenetrable to its audience, by way of commemoration of the past, whilst Chang lives in opulence in Juniper Gardens. It is only when his businesses falter that he loses his position as a 'gardener' of Singaporean space, and this coincides with his suicide on the bridge near the riverfront development. Global capital is shown to be the driver of these transformations, and the 'Garden City' programme more widely. This programme, then, is shown to be for the benefit of global capital rather than for Singaporean citizens – indeed, it operates at the expense of Singaporeans.

Despite this subversive representation of the winners and losers of the 'Garden City' drive, the novel nevertheless represents the act of resettlement as an isolated, and implicitly, an unrepeatable incident. The great changes that have been organised in Singapore's ecology are represented as being consigned safely to the past. Such a representation is fallacious in the case of the 'Garden City' drive because the programme continues, albeit in a modified form, to this day. The historical detail offered by this historical novel helps to cast light on the specifics of the events, but they also suggest that these events are unique and unrepeatable. *The River's Song* represents the transformation as traumatic but ultimately productive for the resettled people, as well as the nation more widely, and thus hews closely to the 'Singapore Story'. If the newly 'gardened' space at the

[202] Ibid, pp. 176, 164.
[203] Ibid, p. 164.
[204] Ibid, p. 161.
[205] Ibid, pp. 163-4.

riverfront tells a story of development – a story which appeals to those who do not have ties to the land, as in the case of the taxi driver – *The River's Song* nuances this story, without altering its broad contours. The novel depicts developmental refugees' transition from one kind of precarity to another, the latter of which renders them more amenable to exploitation by multinational capital. As capital requires spaces to be 'gardened' in its interests, functional, community-sustaining gardens are replaced with the 'Garden City' space that attracts investment. The government's mode of 'gardening' is revealed to be a euphemistic way of rationalising eviction and resettlement, as well as justifying the large-scale transformations of the landscape in the interests of multinational capital. The national narrative is 'gardened' in tandem with the 'gardening' of space, insofar as it is maintained and regulated, and geared towards celebrating Singapore's national economic development. *The River's Song* adds further dimensions to this story, and is complicit in a kind of 'gardening' of its own, in this sense. The novel constitutes a rearrangement of a flowerbed, rather than a transformation of the principles by which the garden is ordered, however. The 'Singapore Story' is complicated by representation of transnational linkages alongside the dispossession and re-precaritisation of the kampung community, in the neoliberal-developmental 'national interest'. This 'national interest' takes precedence over the interests of riverside kampung-dwellers, and *The River's Song* tells the story of this substitution as a mode of 'gardening', undercutting the euphemistic language used to justify eviction and resettlement, whilst hewing closely to the national narrative nonetheless.

<u>'Gardening' symbolism</u>

The River's Song narrates precarious conditions for the riverside kampung, in such a way as to engender sympathy, if not to prompt a complete rethinking of the dominant national narrative. Another historical novel which deals with the issue of resettlement is *City of Small Blessings*. The novel tracks Bryan's various attempts to halt the redevelopment of the land upon which his house is situated. Since he has occupied privileged positions in Singapore's civil service and the headteacher role at a large school, his methods include petitioning his former students in the civil service, meetings with MPs, and direct correspondence with the Prime Minister. None of these avenues bring him any rewards, and as a consequence he begins to doubt that his service to the nation is being requited. His house is a colonial-era bungalow in Seletar, and it must make way for a

development which is said to be both an American military outpost and a high-tech hub for multinational corporations. When at the novel's close development begins, the bungalow is surrounded by high-rise condominiums. *City of Small Blessings* features the family garden very prominently, as a site invested with emotional baggage and family ancestry, and garden imagery appears frequently in Bryan's dreams. As in *The River's Song*, the 'Garden City' drive is not mentioned by name, but the processes of resettlement and redevelopment are undoubtedly part of this national drive to appeal to multinational capital. Precarity is represented in this novel through these upper middle-class characters' observations of people they see, their precarious neighbours, and the elitist and racialised mode of governance with which Bryan comes in contact. *City of Small Blessings* also focuses upon the construction and reconstruction of history through both narratives and spaces, which renders it a fruitful historical novel to compare to *The River's Song*.

The garden is a marshalling image in *City of Small Blessings*, an image around which other ideas are organised. The novel opens by introducing Bryan Lim, the former headteacher and history teacher, emigrant and returnee, and his dreams in which he visualises a dying tree. Soon after having these dreams, he learns that the tree in the garden of his colonial house is Seletar is dying.[206] This causes great anxiety in his wife, Anna, whose relationship with gardening becomes central to the family dynamic between Anna and Bryan as parents, and their son Peter, who migrated to Canada for study and work. Whilst the couple employ a gardener at their house in Seletar, Anna is described as bringing 'order and beauty' to the garden – suggesting that the order is brought through planning, whilst the implementation of ideas, carried out by the gardener, is of secondary importance.[207] The role of gardener is reduced to a manual labourer, whilst the credit for the design of the space goes to the master-gardener figure, who is infrequently involved in the physical acts of gardening herself. This parallels the 'Singapore Story', and parallels Anna and Lee Kuan Yew as garden designers. This metaphor falls short, however, in the scaling of the two images in relation to one another, since the 'Garden City' drive prioritises national-level imperatives at the expense of families and communities like Anna's. The novel's representation of Anna's work is in an admiring tone, however, and this parallel with the 'Singapore Story' may constitute a partial endorsement of the role of Lee Kuan Yew in the planning of the 'Garden City': it requires vision and a method, and contributes positively to individual, family, community, and national wellbeing, according to the

[206] Simon Tay, *City of Small Blessings* (Singapore: Landmark Books, 2009), pp. 8-9.
[207] Ibid, p. 19.

national narrative. The phrasing of 'order and beauty' does, however, draw attention to the fact that the two ideas are distinct, and whilst this beautiful garden is orderly, it does not necessarily follow that ordered gardens are beautiful. Singaporean 'Garden City' spaces are 'disciplined', according to Barnard and Heng, and beauty can be built upon orderliness as a secondary consideration. The control that Anna exerts over the garden is apparent throughout the novel, and is underpinned, in Bryan's narration, by rational principles.

The rationale behind the accumulation of paving stones, in this house in Seletar, is outlined by Bryan. He connects this newly-inhabited space with other spaces, allowing memorialisation on a small scale:

> Some were stones specially bought from a garden shop. But many other paths were made from discoveries, leftovers that Anna salvaged. Some were from the sidewalk on the main road nearby, left when they upgraded it. Some were bricks left over from the houses that were torn down in the neighbourhood. There were even stones from the foundation of Anna's old house next door, rescued after the demolition.[208]

This passage hints at the drastic changes that have taken place nearby, and in the family's own history. Local history and family history are intertwined with the patterns of national history, where the state's influence over families and communities has led to sweeping transformations. These entangled histories, which include an ongoing process of redevelopment as well as the detritus of this process, are given form by the collection of stones. *The River's Song*, too, shows a recycling ethic in play, but rather than using leftovers in a functional manner, as do Weng and Ping in the riverfront slum, these leftovers from state processes are deployed in an ornamental fashion. The class difference between Bryan and Anna in Seletar and Weng and Ping in Chinatown explains this to a great extent: their respective uses of space fulfil needs first, before decorating a homely environment. The process of gardening, at this family level and in this middle-class setting, involves the decorating of a private garden space to infuse it with meaning for the Lim family.

The homeliness is given faintly nationalist overtones when the rationale behind the choice of plants is provided. Peter reminisces about his mother outlining the logic behind her garden in Seletar:

[208] Ibid, p. 20.

> All of them, my mother explained, were native to Singapore or long established, traditional plants. Not for her the temperate roses that struggled in our heat, nor the lush Bali-style gardens. No cacti and no strange hybrid orchids either. My mother's was a garden of home-grown things, a home in itself.[209]

As a Peranakan woman married to a Eurasian man, the emphasis on being 'long established' is understandable. The garden mirrors the legitimacy and authority that comes with having roots in Singapore.[210] Rootedness is a shared concern of both gardeners and governments, but in *City of Small Blessings*, as in *The River's Song*, it is the process of being transplanted that drives the narrative. Anna's dismissal of 'strange hybrid orchids' is powerful, too, because of the resonances it creates with Singapore's national flower, the *Vanda* Miss Joaquim.[211] As a hybrid orchid, it supposedly stands for something particularly Singaporean, whilst also exhibiting 'vibrant colours, hardiness and resilience'. For Anna, the intermingling of different groups is irrelevant (even though her family stands as an ideal of such productive hybridity); it is how long one is established on the land that is important. This renders the process of transplantation all the more traumatic. The critique of the hybrid orchid is echoed in a criticism of the Merlion statue that Bryan mounts, earlier in the novel: he condemns the half-lion, half-mermaid statue that spouts water from its mouth as 'an image made up for tourists'.[212] This hybridity is imagined, and is not performed routinely in daily life. The private garden, too, is founded on the idea of homeliness, and is valorised for being 'long established'.

In a departure from the rationalist identity constructions that are embroiled in national 'Garden City'-style planning, multiple emotionally-laden perspectives are

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[209] Ibid, p. 104.

[210] Peranakans occupy a position of symbolic authority as a consequence of government mobilisation of romanticised imagery that revolves around Peranakan cultural customs – a mobilisation for nationalist effect. See Patricia Ann Hardwick, '"Neither Fish nor Fowl": Constructing Peranakan Identity in Colonial and Post-Colonial Singapore', *Folkpub*, 22 February 2008, https://folkloreforum.net/2008/02/22/22%E2%80%9Cneither-fish-nor-fowl%E2%80%9D-constructing-peranakan-identity-in-colonial-and-post-colonial-singapore/ Accessed 1 November 2015; Daniel P.S. Goh, 'Unofficial Contentions: The Postcoloniality of Straits Chinese Political Discourse in the Straits Settlements Legislative Council', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 41.3 (2010), 483–507.

[211] Sitragandi Arunasalam, Ong Eng Chuan and Fiona Lim, 'Vanda Miss Joaquim', *Singapore Infopedia,* http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_752_2005-01-10.html?s=vanda Accessed 1 November 2015.

[212] Tay, p. 98. This condemnation comes amidst a tirade against over-planning in Singapore, and indicates his disillusionment with the government. Later, Bryan is revealed to own a Merlion-themed envelope opener (p. 144), perhaps suggesting that he is conflicted over this recently-constructed symbol of Singapore.

represented of Anna at work in her private garden in their house in Katong. Peter recalls watching his mother strain whilst working, and ponders his interpretation of events:

> I watch […] the way the perspiration gathers on her fine brow and begins to roll down her elegant, sharp nose. I can see her flinch as it rolls down into the deep wells of her eyes. She does not pause to wipe them with the back of her gloved hand, or against her sleeve. She just carries on, the liquid rolling down her face and off her cheeks and chin unrestrained. So much of it, like a flood of tears.
>
> And now, thinking this, I wonder if they were in fact tears. […] There are stories we know, that matter so greatly, and yet these are the very ones that we do not know fully.[213]

Complete interpretation of events is impossible in this scene, because there is insufficient information from which to draw conclusions. Peter has doubts and suspicions, but cannot confirm anything to his satisfaction, only spin a narrative that highlights the difficulty of finding meaning. This neatly allegorises the history of Singapore's independence from Malaysia – the most infamous instance of weeping in public, when Lee Kuan Yew announced separation in an emotional press conference – by showing the limits that historians must explore in the absence of access to national archives.[214] Peter feels that his personal history would be expanded by greater knowledge of this scene from his family's history, which in turn allegorises the difficulties in writing a national history in any other manner than as the strictly-delineated 'Singapore Story'.

Bryan's withheld, clarifying perspective on this scene is revealed at the end of the novel. Anna has suffered a miscarriage, and must gently reintroduce herself to familiar (one might say 'homely') routines:

> I see her outside in the garden, as always. She sits at the flower beds, crouched on a low, wooden stool. She wears a big straw hat, with her old pair of white gloves. She is spading the earth, over and over with a trowel, working without a pause. I think it is alright, that she is doing what she normally does, that which she loves to do: this is what I think at first.

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[213] Ibid, p. 105.
[214] 'Singapore Separates from Malaysia and Becomes Independent, 9th Aug. 1965,' *Singapore Infopedia,* http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/history/events/dc1efe7a-8159-40b2-9244-cdb078755013 Accessed 1 November 2015; Loh Kah Seng and Liew Kai Khium, *The Makers and Keepers and Singapore History*.

> Then I notice the urn. It is a squat metal canister on the green grass next to her stool. It is open; the lid also on the grass. Anna is spreading the ash into the soil, into her garden. I realize this, and something inside me gasps, clenches. At first I think that this is a kind of madness. Then it seems natural enough, like those people who spread ash on those special memorial lawns or into the sea. […]
>
> And then I see that Anna is crying. Silently, the tears stream down her cheeks and drop into the soil that she is tilling, mixing with the ashes.
>
> I want to go out to Anna. […] But then I see little Peter standing at the glass doors, watching her quietly, and I go over to him and pulled our boy away, back to his bed.[215]

Peter's childhood memory is newly inflected, upon rereading, by this passage. Where Peter had interpreted a nationalist pride in the garden environment, Anna was in fact instilling personal and familial meaning into the soil. Their private garden symbolises home, by being infused with items that carry meanings, be they the ashes of hopes and dreams sifted into the soil, or the fragments of pre-PAP Singapore. The personal and familial histories that are buried in this private garden are not a topic for discussion elsewhere in the novel; Bryan realises too late that he 'ignored' and 'refused to discuss' the connection to their garden in order to justify selling the house.[216] The topic becomes taboo, and the emotional weight of the place is severed in favour of a rationalist discussion about where they can afford to live. Even in this passage, Bryan rationalises the emotion that Anna is clearly displaying, as a ritual that 'seems natural enough'. The realisation comes too late that 'this used to be a home, our home. Now it is just real estate'.[217] The connotations of the private garden as a refuge are undone in this realisation of the commercial value of the land, and the site that is rich in family history and memories – both joyous and sombre – is turned over to developers. The space will now be 'gardened' in the national interest, and thus in the interests of multinational capital, which will bring its own profit-maximising mode of orderliness to Seletar.

Besides illustrating the layers of personal and familial histories that are built into the private garden environment, *City of Small Blessings* highlights the process of garden management as an ongoing affair. Bryan narrates how the garden 'grew more beautiful

[215] Tay, pp. 194-5.
[216] Ibid, p. 21.
[217] Ibid, p. 205.

each year', and 'was not a finished project but something that Anna was always adding to in her spare time', adding plants, features and fish for the pond occasionally.[218] The garden is not built to order in one swift moment, but rather is cultivated, and added to, piecemeal. This means that the 'disciplining' of space in family homes is a lengthy process requiring commitment and expertise, in a further parallel to the management regime of the 'Garden City' programme. Even if there is an ideal to work towards, however, it is implied that cultivation and refurbishment will continue to suit the needs of future generations, as one might expect. The garden requires a process of management, rather than a moment of creation, and so the meaning of the site will be in flux. The history of the place can be memorialised, however, and the novel is, to some extent, a record of a family's acts of remembrance in the face of the forces of development – which, in the example of the Katong house, 'have that garden torn up by the contractor to make a bitumen driveway for the condo'.[219] The 'Garden City' removes gardens that stand in the way of the plan for national economic development, and this garden only has great meaning for one family. The 'Garden City' programme will give the land greater value to the nation, at the expense of the family.

It is made abundantly clear, at the end of the novel, that the government's drive to resettle the family will result in the destruction of the private garden space. Peter has a vision after Bryan has been struck by a car and is in a coma, in which he imagines the garden in the Seletar house, after they are evicted:

> Everything lacks real order and care, is barely worthy of being called a garden. My mother's efforts have been real, monumental, but a garden requires a lifetime, and she has already given a life to another garden, in a time already gone.[220]

By describing his mother's laudable efforts as 'monumental', Peter aggrandises the role of gardener (or garden planner). However great his mother's efforts to include tokens of the past in her garden, the entire garden is 'barely worthy of being called a garden' once detailed attention ceased to be given to it, and it is now at the mercy of the American military. The emphasis on 'real order' in this description draws attention to the type of order required. We can assume that a military approach to space will be no less ordered, but it will demand a different sort of order that prizes functionality over decoration and memorialisation. The different types of order that can be manifested in disciplined space

[218] Ibid, p. 20.
[219] Ibid, p. 20.
[220] Ibid, p. 211.

are thus subtly suggested. The type of order required by the 'Garden City' demands that this private garden, which boasts a rich history, must be destroyed. The gardens of *City of Small Blessings*, then, have no single symbolic function. Rather, they accumulate meaning and are contested sites at risk of having different types of order imposed upon them. They are at once homely and vulnerable, and host personal, familial, and national histories, whilst simultaneously being subject to multinational capital (in the form of the new Seletar development's business park that supplants the family's garden).

City of Small Blessings situates contemporary developments and acts of 'gardening' in a longer history than the 'Singapore Story' might conventionally permit. He observes that 'a statute [sic] marks Raffles' probable landing spot',[221] but he also notes the people omitted from the official, national narrative of the river's development:

> The original government plans were to tear down the old shop houses of the merchants and replace them with more skyscrapers. One citizen – a writer and a doctor Bryan knew and encouraged in his cause – proposed that they be conserved to make a historic district, with entertainment and restaurants like the Fisherman's Wharf in San Francisco. For these ideas, the doctor had been denounced for pandering to old exoticism and inappropriate Western models. Then, there was the slow U-turn on that decision, with the government finally clearing out all the merchants and old owners, not to tear down the buildings but to conserve them.
>
> Now Bryan sees the bars and restaurants that re-use this space, and that irritatingly and illegally tout their overpriced food and drink to the busy workers from the tall towers. Now he notes there are even statues along the river that commemorate the old stevedores and boatmen. But there is nothing, no mention of that one man who fought to preserve that place.[222]

This short narrative presents Bryan's memory – his idea of the history of the site – both as adhering to and departing from the national narrative. He adds another important figure (not important enough, however, to be named) to the history of the river, and shows how the national narrative is selective. This complicates the history presented earlier in the passage, where Raffles' 'probable' landing site is memorialised: the question is raised as to what is left out of the narrative of national foundation. History is presented as problematic, and interweaving only partially with people's memory of the place being narrated. By

[221] Ibid, p.51.
[222] Ibid, p. 51.

highlighting the role of statues along the river, Bryan shows how certain events and ways of life are memorialised and consigned to the past, whilst others are excised completely. The redevelopment of the riverfront site as part of the 'Garden City' programme (which was explored at greater length in *The River's Song*) has created a space that tells the story of its own creation, but which features the developmental refugees' commemoration, without their voice or presence. The 'old stevedores and boatmen', of course, would not be commemorated with consolatory statues if the government had thought that their industry was conducive to the planned mode of development. Instead, the riverside is re-ordered to accommodate tourists and 'busy workers from the tall towers', by which Tay might mean the ex-patriate Americans, Australians, and Europeans who are over-represented in finance.[223] History becomes circular, in this interpretation, as the self-important white man makes his presence felt on the shores of the Singapore River. Alongside the circular, colonial, and neo-colonial interpretation is an interpretation of the space, as narrated by Tay, as featuring embedded sites of particular significance. The selective memorialisation of certain livelihoods is complemented by the preservation of the shop houses – cleared of small retailers 'to conserve them', and, clearly, to allow space to more expensive and profitable businesses. The new businesses are breaking the law, touting their wares illegally, but are not prosecuted. This puts the criminalisation of the previous inhabitants in a new light, as the emphasis on cleanliness and orderliness over 'squatting' is revealed as an expedient method of delegitimising the presence of the working class. The gentrification of the river takes place to rid the historic site of such workers, and appeal to tourists and multinational capital instead. Alternative interpretations of the 'Garden City' programme are interwoven with each other in this fragmentary narrative, complicating the 'Singapore Story'. In particular, the national narrative's framing of the resettlement of the riverfront communities as nobly self-sacrificial and in the national interest is undermined, as Bryan sees the same developmental logic extend across even his peripheral land, which also has claims to national heritage. By juxtaposing the commemoration of the boatmen alongside the resettlement of the Lim family (among others) from Seletar, Tay draws attention to the hollowness of the commemoration, and the bankruptcy of the narrative that the redeveloped riverside space tells. The 'gardening' of the riverside space, the Seletar airbase space, and the national narrative are shown together, as part of the same process. *City of Small Blessings* reveals this holistic policy to be the profit-oriented approach that it is,

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[223] 'Skilled Cosmopolitan Workforce', *Monetary Authority of Singapore*, http://www.mas.gov.sg/Singapore-Financial-Centre/Value-Propositions/Skilled-Workforce.aspx#fsplink. Accessed 25 October 2015.

rather than the noble, self-sacrificial, or pragmatic idea that is presented in the 'Singapore Story'.

Bryan is even more scathing in his critique towards the end of the novel, where he observes that neoliberal development strategies lead to the constant redevelopment of the island beyond recognition (implying a continual process of neoliberal-developmental 'gardening'). He cycles around the city core in the early morning, and catalogues the dozens of shops with which he felt a personal connection, and which have since been demolished:

> So much has changed since I last visited, that I feel like an old man who has outlived his time. Still more is being constructed; there is a constant piling and construction cranes everywhere.
>
> The city has changed. […] This city is not so young any more. We have a history to write. A history of many people, many stories. There are many of us who worked to build this city, to change it for the better. […] And the future that is being written is a dictated record.[224]

The novel clamours for recognition of stories like that of the writer-doctor-conservationist. The disruptive changes of tense in the second quoted paragraph serve to surprise the reader, noting how it is the future that is being written by an elite, rather than the past. This implies that Bryan thinks that a multiplicity of narratives *can* be recovered from past developments, which is an optimistic stance, given the environment. He is less optimistic about the future, which is being 'dictated' – a suggestive word, which testifies to Bryan's feeling of powerlessness in the face of dramatic transformations. His thoughts here accept some of the premises of the national narrative already: by conceding that the 'city is not so young any more', he implies that it was 'young' earlier in his life. Presumably, he accepts that the city came into being in 1965, the year of independence from Malaysia, but, as we can see from quotations above, he also accepts a history of the city that stretches back to Raffles. He juggles competing narratives of the city and nation, without fully endorsing either.

His musings on the nature of history are particularly evocative when we consider the mode of transport that he uses to explore his memories of the city: the bicycle. As he reports on the circular histories of the place, he literally cycles past the ongoing redevelopments. The cyclical motif is spun through the novel, as Bryan's son Peter dwells

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[224] Tay, pp. 207-8.

on photographs of his father during Occupation, where he stands astride his bicycle. This is the cue for a reimagining of Bryan's past, including how he received the scar on his finger and how he met Anna, Peter's mother.[225] History is cyclical in *City of Small Blessings*. When Bryan complains that '[s]till more is being constructed; there is a constant piling', he is acknowledging the cyclical nature of a mode of development that does not prize heritage. Everything that is being developed will be redeveloped at some later stage, in a continuous process of 'gardening' in the national interest. This sense is reinforced by the changing connotations of names during Bryan's life. In his youth, 'Changi' is a beach, then the name becomes attached to a prison under Occupation, before being associated with an airport which is so grandiose it is a source of national pride.[226] Bryan ponders the nature of historical development in Singapore, and notes that these cycles do not operate as 'layers', but rather as 'erasures'. He cites the example of Troy, where 'there is some thing to excavate, and there was some continuity in being a city […]. It was not so with Changi: the airport erased the beach, which erased the prisoners' hell'.[227] These erasures are tantamount to the 'gardening' of Singaporean space, rendering it more open to global capital and more readable as a manifestation of the development celebrated in the 'Singapore Story'. The city's redevelopment is full of erasures and fractures, to such an extent that he feels Singapore lacks continuity. The novel, however, performs the excavation of the layers of Singapore's history, and narrates these layers, even as their traces are removed from the physical landscape of the city. The erasures of the 'Garden City' spaces, which are made to be amenable to the 'Singapore Story', are undone in this work of fiction, which complicates the narrative of beautification and redevelopment. Tay's historical novel acts as a corrective to national history, but also creates layers through protagonists' memories, and thus invites readers to imagine their own historical connections to erased places. In a similar vein, Bryan remembers Katong as the beach where his house once stood. At the time of the novel's recounting, Katong is two miles inland due to land reclamation.[228] By narrating the changing of the landscape, and the shifting connotations of place-names, Tay offers an anticipatory gesture. By showing the changes that have happened, as well as the logic by which the changes take place, we can see how the fictionalised Singapore will expand and develop in the future. It is the future which is 'being written' like 'a dictated record': the same neoliberal developmental logic is

[225] Ibid, pp. 199-200.
[226] Ibid, pp. 28-9.
[227] Ibid, p. 30.
[228] Ibid, p. 133.

applied across more space. An ever-expanding purview of land will be 'gardened' so as to be open to capital, and to tell the 'Singapore Story'; the novel anticipates this.

Bryan's observations contrast with the role played by the statues placed along the riverfront. The statues anchor the traumatic transformations firmly in the past, whilst the narrative of *City of Small Blessings* offers a more nuanced view of the 'Garden City' drive. This work of historical fiction consciously imagines how events unfolded and how they connect to the present, undercutting official efforts to situate such changes as completely past and irrecoverable. This in turn implies a future where similar events could be imagined. Peter's envisioning of his father's life under Japanese Occupation, for example, coupled with the representation of history as cyclical, suggest that there may be future instances where Singapore is under different neocolonial pressures. As in *The River's Song*, there is a revelation that one character has been instrumental in, or stands to gain from, the transformations that are affecting the other characters in the novel. In Lim's novel, it is Ping's new father-in-law's business decisions that cause Weng and his family to become developmental refugees. In *City of Small Blessings*, it is revealed that Peter, who has become a manager in a multinational technology corporation after working in Canada for many years, is precisely the target market for the government in their latest batch of transformations. It is this wave of redevelopments that forces his father's eviction from their colonial house near Seletar Airport. Intriguingly, this chain of causation is only implied in the novel. Politicians argue that the redevelopment is required to house an American military force, and therefore that Bryan's resettlement is for the security of the nation.[229] However, alongside the facilities built for the US military, the government 'will build up an aviation hub in the old airbase, inviting companies to expand to fully utilize the airport, which is to be extensively renovated and enlarged for this purpose'.[230] This is the only direct reference to the appeal to multinational capital in this particular transformation. As the redevelopment gets underway, Peter reports 'on the possibility raised by an old friend of a job in my company opening up in this very city, a regional hub, with prospective increases in responsibility and pay'.[231] The new job in a regional hub and the development of the aviation hub are never causally linked by characters in the novel, but the text can suggest a connection, and both situate and systematise it. The link is specific to the time and place of the events of the novel, but there is potential for similar links across the world-economy in phases and cycles. Global connections are implied through family

[229] Ibid, pp. 42, 62, 145, 153,
[230] Ibid, p. 42.
[231] Ibid, p. 216.

relations in this moment, even if the text only gives a snapshot into the globalised process of a construction company's profit-making ventures in a single moment. Ecological transformation is fictionalised in such a way as to draw attention to the global processes of capital accumulation that are facilitated by the government's programmes, whilst narrating one family's attempts to grapple with their evolving environment. Family members' involvement, as horrified and precarious onlookers to the transformations, or managerial instigators and beneficiaries of the transformations, are re-situated in a 'Singapore Story' that is connected to a longer and more global story of colonial and capitalist development.

Once again in *City of Small Blessings*, the cyclical nature of the unfolding of history is implied in the presence of US forces. The novel's ending involves a patching together of narrative snippets, which flow from Peter's discovery of Occupation-era photographs of his father, and his subsequent imaginings of his father's life. Recollections of the Japanese Occupation of Singapore foreground Bryan's cooperation with a Japanese soldier called Yamashita, who, at the end of the war, returned to Japan to find it under US occupation.[232] The impending arrival of the US military in Singapore (and, quite possibly, in Bryan's house) reflects the repetitive pattern of historical progression, in a circular rather than linear manner. This pattern in the novel heaps scorn on the historical commemoration of those evicted from the riverfront, in the form of statues. Traumatic transformation is not embedded in the past, with only sculpted bronze carrying on into the present – it is ongoing. The continuing role of US capital, as well as US geo-political influence, in reshaping the Singaporean landscape into a neoliberal 'Garden City' can be detected in *City of Small Blessings*. Tay implies that multinational capital is a homogenising force. When Peter commutes to work, he is 'driving on a foggy morning on the highway that by-passes Vancouver, leading from my suburb to a sparkling new business park near the airport'.[233] This is precisely the layout at Changi airport, and the layout expected at the new development at Seletar.[234] Capital demands the same patterns of infrastructure and space in all the 'global cities' in the world-economy (as we shall see in Chapter Three), and the 'Garden City' drive remakes Singapore in the image of global capital. This, in turn, makes the PAP's distaste for the Fisherman's Wharf, San Francisco model of heritage preservation all the more absurd, and perhaps offers some explanation of why they relented: preservation *can* be profitable. The transformations in *City of Small Blessings* are

[232] Ibid, pp. 172-5, 200.
[233] Ibid, p. 85.
[234] Ibid, pp. 29-30.

multifarious, global, and ongoing, and the largely critical tone of their representation constitutes a departure from the dominant national narrative.

Individual Agency in the 'Garden City'

The Singaporean national narrative of growing prosperity amid dramatic redevelopment depends upon the 'contributions' (or sacrifices) of individuals and communities. Questions of agency immediately arise in an environment where the landscape's future is decided by a select group of officials in tandem with the mores of multinational capital. *The River's Song* suggests a lack of agency, coupled with a continued, hardy presence on the part of the oppressed in the form of 'the grass we step on'. Working among this grass, however, are the ants that Bryan scrutinises in *City of Small Blessings*. The power of the individual in a rapidly changing 'Garden City' landscape is problematised through the imagery and symbolism of ants, as Bryan ponders their presence in large-scale narratives at multiple points in the novel, and incorporates them into the telling of his own life story. Bryan repeatedly refers to people commuting to work as 'ants', and eventually discovers ants gnawing away at the wooden stilts that support his colonial-era house.[235] On a plot level, this instils an uneasy sense of comfort in Bryan:

> This is a house that has withstood the ravages of the war and the bombs that fell in this area so near the British base. It has survived even the development that comes with years of peace and the frantic pace of building and construction. It can even outlast me and my eviction, with suitable updates and adjustments, to become a home for the Americans – unless they insist on pulling it down to build some American ranch style monstrosity.
>
> Imagine if therefore, after all those large events of history, the house will fall victim to the minute bites and digging of these ants, so small a force of time and nature. Imagine that the plans of the state agencies to give these buildings over to the Americans can be upended by such a force. Imagine. And then I feel a kind of peace.[236]

Whilst he is being evicted, another unexpected and previously unknown force is working to combat government plans in a way that he would find impossible. This offers nothing to

[235] Ibid, pp. 33, 61-5, 138, 155.
[236] Ibid, pp. 62-3.

Bryan, except relief at the realisation that the government's powers are not all-encompassing. He situates the ants in history, as a paradoxically ahistorical yet contextually-bound force, which has the capacity to destroy the house at any time, even as the house survives the touchstone events that make up the national narrative. The ants ignore the selectively constructed history, with its trajectory of progress and development, and act in a manner that potentially destroys this artefact of great historical value.

Ants become more symbolic once the first neighbourhood anti-eviction meeting is held between the stilts holding up the house, in the shade. He ponders how the ants would respond to such a dilemma as the impending eviction:

> What can ants do in the larger frame of things? I realize that from an ant's view of history, this is not a relevant question. An ant does not know how things add up what results. The ant only asks what he is supposed to do. And then the ant works.[237]

By introducing the ant perspective on history, and on the particular events unfolding around him, Bryan moves from considering ants as a force of nature to considering them as slavish individuals with devotion to a cause higher than that of the individual. When the anti-eviction meetings begin to peter out, Bryan reintroduces the idea of ants within history:

> We are not ants. We are not so faithful, nor so disciplined. We cannot continue with our work without some assurance of how it fit with other, larger things. Humans need a resonance. This can be an affirmation, or it can be a reasoned debate. But silence, the stonewall of stock replies in smug tones of "we know best", kills the human will to action. I realize this. Yet I am powerless to defy its gravity.[238]

By imagining the actual experiences of ants, Bryan reconfirms the validity of his own position in demanding more of a discussion take place before the evictions occur. Such a democratic forum is unforthcoming, of course, and when the group meet with an MP, they receive the same answers as before in a one-way discussion. 'After an hour and a half, what had been called a dialogue ends', Bryan narrates.[239] The individual is in a system that cannot be comprehended and which does not give immediate rewards – if any – to those

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[237] Ibid, p. 65.
[238] Ibid, p. 155.
[239] Ibid, p. 64.

that do its bidding. Ants may be capable of such action, but Bryan sees his distance from, rather than parallel with, this insect.

Ants in *City of Small Blessings* offer another perspective on questions of agency in the context of a national narrative that renders some people's existence invisible at the national level. The ants have no place in the national narrative, but they have survived the same events and continue to have a real impact on the landscape of contemporary Singapore. Their performance in a symbolic and functional role offers new perspectives on the 'Garden City' drive and its attendant transformations of space – from their powerfully paradoxical perspective, they care not a whit for the 'Singapore Story' and they will not be evicted. They remain physically part of Singapore's ecology, and defy neoliberal-developmental 'gardening'. They stand as a metaphor for persistence in the face of such dramatic 'gardening', but they also illustrate a kind of hopelessness for ordinary Singaporeans, if it is only ants that can persist in the reconfigured 'Garden City' space. At the same time, their minimal agency can be contrasted with that of the 'gardeners', and those upon whose behalf the 'gardening' is undertaken – the multinational corporations that will redevelop the land. *City of Small Blessings* dramatises the gulf in agency between the Singaporean inhabitants of land earmarked for development and the faceless companies that will redevelop the land in their interests. That the Singaporeans in question here should be someone so privileged, nationalist and dutiful as Bryan and his family only makes the disparity more striking; no matter how affluent he is, or how effective his connections are, he resides on land that must be ceded to multinational capital in the neoliberal-developmental national interest. Ants are the only survivors on the 'gardened' Seletar site, and their agency in gnawing at the foundations of a colonial bungalow, persisting through various chapters of human history, contrasts with that of the Lim family who must vacate the space that has great symbolic meaning to them.

If the ants' continuity renders the achievements of the 'Singapore Story' somewhat incongruent, even absurd, what can be made of the seemingly heroic interventions of powerful individuals within that story? Obviously, Lee Kuan Yew stands at the centre of the 'Singapore Story' as its primary author as well as its chief protagonist. Tay offers a more circumspect version of history in the first few pages of his novel: '[t]here are always many perspectives, many futures and many past histories. Some are remembered, like the lives of great men. […] But I am still enough of a historian to know that many more lives are

forgotten'.[240] Historical fiction therefore acts as an antidote to the overblown representations that depict Lee as chief gardener or architect by narrating other lives in the midst of the developments that are lauded as part of the 'Singapore Story'. In *City of Small Blessings* and *The River's Song*, individuals' efforts at resisting the 'Garden City' programme are fruitless: Weng's music earns him a following of fans who do not understand the message, whilst the artists on Bryan's threatened estate hold an exhibition of the area's historic value, at the culmination of which 'the exhibition closes, and the newspaper articles are cut out and filed away. But no government agency makes any response. Nothing changes'.[241] These small acts of resistance are captured by the national regime and by the wider economic system. In *City of Small Blessings*' Seletar, '[t]he artists can apply for a Ministry grant to set up a joint studio, with subsidies, so long as they provide weekly lessons for children as part of a public service'.[242] In *The River's Song*, Weng is hired by the Singapore Chinese Orchestra, becoming 'the orchestra's principal flautist and dizi player'.[243] Dissent is stifled and harnessed and redirected towards Singaporean nation-building in both instances. The novels offer commentary on this process, and illuminate the process of the construction of history. By showing the capturing of dissent, and the re-direction of dissenters' creativity towards nation-building, the 'gardening' of the public sphere gains a new dimension. Opposition is weeded out, and more decoration is planted in the 'Garden City' narrative.

City of Small Blessings dramatises the problem of agency, and the state's and system's method of combined restraint and exploitation, across a historical duration by juxtaposing Bryan's conflicts with the Singaporean regime alongside his memories of British and Japanese rule. Bryan, now principal of his school, becomes disillusioned with the PAP's ideology after two encounters with the administration, as well as his two evictions, which were supposedly in the national interest. The first encounter involves him being requested by a minister to stand as a candidate for the ruling party, when they lose their first seat since independence. He is briefed by the minister's aides, but is still surprised by the way the question is framed:

> They were seeking rejuvenation to win back all the seats and wanted to recruit a good non-Chinese candidate.

[240] Ibid p. 11.
[241] Ibid, p. 144.
[242] Ibid, p. 162.
[243] Lim, *The River's Song*, p. 229.

> Had I, the minister asked, considered serving?
>
> […] [T]he given reason made me think, made me frown. Should a candidate by picked by race? Was I Eurasian, as my father was, or could I just be Singaporean?
>
> […] I wanted to question the minister. I wanted to ask him why the government had fomented an association for the Malays and then for the Indians, with similar arrangements expected soon for Eurasians and Chinese; why these things were necessary in a Singapore that was independent and pledged to be united, regardless of race.[244]

In a system of governance that claims to be meritocratic, such regulation of race ought to be irrelevant, at least in Bryan's mind. He regrets that the questions that arise are taboo and that he cannot ask them, and he also regrets that the teachers under his purview at his school are in the same bind and cannot discuss race with their students. Between them, he and his teachers make up the entire hierarchy in his school, but they remain subject to the framework that is institutionalised by their predecessors and other government agencies. This scene in the minister's office has resonances from only a dozen pages earlier in the novel, and once again points to the circularity, rather than progressive linearity, of Singapore's history. During a flashback section, the young Bryan befriends a Japanese soldier during the Occupation. This soldier asks him to transcribe an interrogation, in which a Mongolian torturer, in the employment of the *Kempeitai*, skins a captive. '"The skin comes off beautifully, whole, almost without a single scratch"', boasts the Japanese interrogator, who then lists the crimes of the captive:

> "You have been spreading questions, propaganda, organizing people against us, against the way that we deal with the different races and peoples of this city. You ask: Why do we have the Overseas Chinese Association? Why is there a Malay Welfare Association? Why is there an All Malayan Association for the Eurasians and another one for the Indians?
>
> "So, this special talent of the Mongolian to de-skin people is perhaps appropriate."[245]

Throughout the interrogation, no information is given for Bryan to transcribe, but the soldier 'press[es] down on his shoulders' and 'presses him back into his seat' to prevent

[244] Tay, pp. 190-1.
[245] Ibid, p. 179.

Bryan from leaving.[246] The very same problem is posed: why are you governing through race? This is a colonial strategy, and it disciplines society to facilitate non-democratic rule whilst also creating racial boundaries and hostilities – deepening precarity for people who are pariahs from their own community and do not have the protection of the state. That the colonial strategy should continue through the Japanese Occupation is perhaps to be expected, because Occupation was nothing if not a colonial relationship, but it is more problematic that the PAP should be seen to continue to rule through this strategy (the particulars of this racialised mode of governance will be dwelt upon further in Chapter Two). In this system, which is promulgated throughout modern Singaporean history, the individual has less agency and dissent is dangerous. For Bryan, troubling historical parallels are easy to find but taboo to discuss.

Both PAP elitism and the circularity of Singaporean history are problematised during Bryan's second encounter with high officialdom. He is made Director of the Ministry (of Education) and holds the post for a period of three years before resigning under circumstances that resonate with the Occupation period once again:

> I began with hope, with plans. And I suppose for those years I did think I was making a contribution to my country. Then, as I started my third years as Director, I realized I might be mistaken. A policy was made to give mothers who were graduates the right to choose the best schools for their children, in priority over other mothers. Those with advantages would be given more advantages. I shook my head. The policy had not originated from the Ministry and certainly not from my desk. It was sent from above, I found out when I asked. Taken and pushed through as part of an effort to create incentives for graduate women to marry and procreate.
>
> To me, this was wrong, elitist in the worst sense of that word. Even more, I knew that it would not work; that the conditions that disfavoured educated women from having more children could not be reversed by this single policy. I argued against it to the highest level, wrote memos, spoke up at meetings. But I was told to just write up the policy paper like they wanted and then to implement it, fast. I felt a weight on my shoulders, like a force holding me down in a chair. […] I resigned.[247]

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[246] Ibid, pp. 179, 180-1.
[247] Ibid, pp. 192-3.

This passage comes in the aftermath of the description of the torture scene, and the repetition of the imagery of Bryan being pressed into his chair suggests that the power relations between the governing elite and the rest of society remain much the same. He had earlier admonished an unhelpful former student of his by pointing out that the laws and policies of Singapore can ‘often be traced to one man, or a very small circle of them’, and argues that ‘the country, the city, must belong to more people than this’.[248] *City of Small Blessings* once again highlights the circularity of the dominant version of Singaporean history, but does not show this to be inevitable; it is the result of the PAP clinging to colonial technologies of government. The passage shows the diktat in action, as it passes from one leader through the whole civil service, seemingly without resistance until it meets Bryan. The only form of resistance left to him is to resign, and this means that the proposal goes through. Even as the most powerful person in the education sector, he is overruled by eugenicist and elitist leaders, who impose their will quietly but surely. The fear that people have for their jobs is almost certainly the reason that Bryan is alone in facing down this policy, suggesting that this is another aspect of colonial ruling strategy that has been retained. The policy is eventually reversed, but Bryan is not exonerated and is ‘never again invited to serve on any significant position for the Ministry’.[249] The treatment of the man who championed the riverside heritage, and was eventually proved correct even as he was vilified, is recalled here too. As a consequence, the repetition of Singaporean history is ascribed quite directly to the PAP. The ruling party is at fault for retaining colonial approaches to dissent, justice, and democracy.

One further example of the circular course of history is worthy of scrutiny in *City of Small Blessings*. In the aftermath of the torture scene, Bryan sees the ‘lumps of blood-red meat’ and ‘limbs and parts of limbs that have been discarded in a corner’, but ‘nothing that looks much like a person’ and concludes that the skin has been taken ‘as a trophy’.[250] In a vision of the decimation of Seletar, as the airbase is redeveloped into a small military installation and a business hub, Bryan sees his neighbour’s house, which points to the fate that will befall his own: ‘[t]he house is not even a skeleton with the white bone elegance that time leaves. It is a new corpse of a home, with exposed bloody flesh and severed limbs, organs out of place, skinned and peeled’.[251] The themes of race, discipline, and home are gruesomely tied in a manner that reveals Bryan’s horror at events unfolding in the

[248] Ibid, p. 142.
[249] Ibid, p. 193.
[250] Ibid, p. 182.
[251] Ibid, p. 212.

name of national progress, and in the name of creating a 'Garden City'. It is the body under the flesh that Bryan wants to be able to take pride in, in independent Singapore, but the imagery of the de-skinned dissenter haunts his visions of the future as well as the past. The resonance of the imagery highlights the brutality of 'gardening' as a way of ordering space and the nation – by race, in both instances, but also a way of weeding out criticism. This condemnation of PAP race policies connects colonial-style governance of race to the dissolution of 'homely' sites. Bryan links the ravages of the 'Garden City' drive to their race regulation, as the same set of policies implemented in a colonialist manner. He feels powerless to fight the skinning, as he is powerless to fight the eviction and resettlement, despite his decades of service to his country as a teacher, principal, and Director of the Ministry of Education.

Conclusion: Narrating Precarity and Power Relations in the Neoliberal 'Garden City'

The 'Garden City' drive is heralded by many pro-government publications and mouthpieces as one of the greatest successes of the PAP, and of Lee in particular. It is a cornerstone of the 'Singapore Story', and almost all Singaporeans would have experienced the effects of the redevelopment that constituted the 'Garden City' programme at some point. The spaces reconfigured by the 'Garden City' programme, too, tell this story. They tell the story of their own creation, celebrating the neoliberal economic policies that the spaces further. The national narrative, constructed and retold frequently (performed in the repetitive sense theorised by Bhabha), complements the narrative unfolding across 'disciplined' space. These redeveloped spaces that were created through the 'Garden City' programme are open to readings that are narrow in scope. Because redeveloped spaces, in Bryan's words, constitute erasures of meaning and memory rather than layers, the simplistic fishing village-to-metropolis narrative is promulgated. Traces of historical activity on these sites are either removed, or mediated through a selectively constructed national narrative. The historic uses of the land that was transformed as part of the 'Garden City' drive can only be accessed through memory and imagination, and historical fiction weaves both together in order to multiply the connotative force of 'gardened' spaces. Individual, family, and community histories are re-embedded in the spaces that were transformed by the nation at the behest of the primary actors in the world-economy through these fictionalisations. By adding more depth to the 'Singapore Story', the national narrative

becomes harder to micro-manage, and the historical erasures and acts of orderly 'gardening' that are integral to it are undone.

Historical fiction that represents the transformations that comprise this programme complicate the national narrative, as told through garden spaces. Precarity is reframed, and is no longer narrated in the idiom of self-sacrifice for the national good. Instead, by instantiating the national Garden City drive, the precaritisation of individuals, families, and communities is shown to be in the interests of the state and the world-system – and fundamentally at the expense of families and communities. These historical novels depict a wide array of environments that are reshaped in the 'Garden City' drive, besides private gardens. Precarity is latent in these 'gardened' spaces. The 'skinned and peeled' homes of Seletar evoke the torturous instability of Occupation. The business hub that is to come on this same space will be an environment that will attest to the national narrative's trajectory of development, even as it erases the homes that stood on the same ground. Anna's well-tended private gardens in Katong and Seletar, one of which is represented as containing tears and ashes, carry great connotative weight in their emotional components, which can be contrasted with the high hedges and triumphalist opulence of Juniper Garden – a 'disciplined' private garden space that symbolises the prosperity that is celebrated in the 'Singapore Story'. The functional community-sustaining vegetable gardens of the riverfront are destroyed as the space is 'gardened' in favour of global capital, meaning that functional and symbolic, and public and private gardens alike are exposed to the risk of redevelopment in the neoliberal-developmentalist 'national interest'. The 'Garden City' drive represents the imposition of this logic upon all spaces, and involves the sacrifice of garden spaces to accommodate 'gardened' spaces – that is, spaces that have been regulated to be more amenable to global capital and to the PAP narrative that celebrates the regulation itself. Space is reconfigured, through this programme, to replace community and family imperatives with the imperatives of the state, and the state's neoliberal-developmental (or 'pragmatic') logic takes precedence across the nation. The managed, clean, orderly, and artificial landscapes erase their own place in the history of eviction and precaritisation. The statues along the riverfront put the trauma of transformation firmly in the past, whilst commemorating a way of life that has been rendered obsolete by the same mechanism that led to the creation of the statues. By complicating this national narrative, historical fiction also complicates our understanding of the disciplined space that was created through the 'Garden City' drive. These historical novels' realist mode of narration depicts the living conditions of people who are resettled or who object to the

transformation of their home, whist using allegory to extend meaning at individual, family, community, as well as national levels. The family becomes the site at which the national can be read, and such a reading complicates the tone of the national narrative. The novels also suggest, on occasion, that the developments that transfigure the relationship between agents on these varying levels are directly influenced by global capital.

As a result, the continuity of disciplinary strategies in regulating space, the practice of ruling through race-based institutions, and the selective commemoration of specific, flattering moments in a national narrative are all shown to continue through the British colonial era, the Japanese Occupation, and through independence under the PAP into the present. The embracing of the economics of the entrepôt is the common factor under these regimes; neoliberalism demands a certain kind of discipline and openness to the profit-making desires of multinational capital, just as the city-state was expected to be open to investment from afar under colonial regimes. The circularity of history that is portrayed in *City of Small Blessings* and the ongoing hunger for land in *The River's Song* mean that the logic of these economics continues unabated. *The River's Song* situates the transformation in the past, in a manner that mirrors the riverfront statues of *City of Small Blessings*, but Lim also shows the contingency of narrative by complicating and departing from the 'Singapore Story' at key moments, by rendering the death of Chong Suk and the incarceration of Weng so emotively. Even as these events are figured as sacrificial in the national narrative, *The River's Song*'s elaboration of the family's and the community's conditions as they are under threat, and then under orders to leave, serves to humanise the transformation. *City of Small Blessings* also shows the individuals as small nodes in a network, primed for sacrifice. It is when the chief protagonist is threatened with eviction that he takes issue with his impending sacrifice, and warns against 'see[ing] as a state sees' because 'the lens of memory is individual'.[252] These examples of historical fiction broadcast and add to individuals' memories of national projects, in a manner that allows space for critique of the 'gardening' that is carried out in the disciplined spaces of Singapore.

The disciplinary bent of the 'Garden City' is revealed at length throughout these examples of historical fiction, by instantiating the national narrative at individual, family and community levels, and showing how these processes, suited to the interests of multinational capital, throw individuals into precarity. These novels show the process of 'gardening', as it applies to Singaporean ecology (including the destruction of functional

[252] Tay, p. 101.

and symbolic, and private and communal garden spaces, in favour of national 'Garden City' spaces), but they also show the 'gardening' of the dominant national narrative, which is pruned for disruptive outgrowths. These novels constitute further outgrowths, however, and add depth to the 'Singapore Story' by highlighting the global linkages and local dynamics that are in play in the 'Garden City' drive. Fiction, then, can make the national narrative harder to manage, and it can undo the erasures and other brutal acts of 'gardening'. *City of Small Blessings* and *The River's Song* defy the logic of 'gardening' to draw attention to a chaotic profusion of perspectives. Private and public gardens are depicted as sites for hierarchies to become manifested. The multiplicity of meanings attached to the idea of the garden in these narratives that track the social and environmental impacts of the 'Garden City' drive show how the historical novel can accommodate a wide variety of interpretations. By fictionalising these government policies' effects at personal, family, community, and national levels, whilst at the same time retaining the idea of a wider systemic subjectivity, a network of relations can be represented and a series of connections between various characters can be suggested. Global capital is not faceless in these novels: it has its protagonists, in the form of Uncle Chang in *The River's Song* and Peter in *City of Small Blessings*, but their triumphs come at the expense of their friends, acquaintances, and families. These protagonists reshape Singapore into the homogeneous image of capital with varying degrees of agency. To represent these 'gardening' processes, and to incorporate an abundance of historically-silenced perspectives on these processes, is to open up space to critique 'gardening' and its celebratory role in the 'Singapore Story'.

Chapter Two: Precarious Islands and Islanders

The 'Singapore Story' complements the regulated space of Singapore's main island, the fêted 'garden city', by rendering the authorised history of Singapore more legible, whilst suppressing alternative conceptions of the past, which might depart from the dominant version in perspective, details, or overall framing. Chapter One examined how the process of 'gardening' can involve the projection of state power or the individual investment of meaning into spaces. This chapter explores similar dynamics of state activity and individual, familial and community activity, on Singapore's many islands. 'Singapore is known as an "island nation"', according to an information board at the 'Island Nation' exhibition in Singapore's National Library in June 2015:

> But it may be more accurate to call it a "nation of islands", one that is comprised of more than 60 islands at one moment in history. As Singapore progressed economically, many of the off-shore islands were re-zoned for specific purposes – industrial, leisure, landfill, and military. The island residents were relocated to the mainland Singapore, leaving behind a way of life we no longer know.[253]

This documentary project, which operated concurrently with the SG50 celebrations that commemorated 50 years of Singapore's independence from Malaysia, juxtaposes photographs and transcribed oral accounts from former islanders. In so doing, it aims to tell 'the stories of Singaporeans who once lived on the islands south of Singapore as we weave them into the broader narrative of nationhood'.[254] The project functions to incorporate the personal narratives of these displaced people into the 'Singapore Story', and it does so in a mode that suggests nationalist self-sacrifice on the part of the islanders (whose displacement allows economic progression, in the language of the exhibit) and also suggests a curious absence on the part of the state. A passive voice reports that 'islands were re-zoned' and 'residents were relocated'. Clearly, the role of the state in the resettlement process – a process which is palpably in the service of national and multinational industry – is obfuscated in this government-funded project. This history of the islands does not illustrate the power dynamics that were in play during this process, and a more complete story of the islands' redevelopment remains to be told – just as a more complete version of the 'garden city', including resettlement, remained to be told through fiction. Unlike gardens, which tell stories of their own creation in tandem with the

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[253] Edwin Koo and Zakaria Zainal, 'Island Nation' (Singapore: Capture Pte. Ltd., 2015), Exhibition.
[254] Edwin Koo and Zakaria Zainal, 'Island Nation' (Singapore: Capture Pte. Ltd., 2015), Exhibition catalogue.

'Singapore Story' (as discussed in Chapter One), islands are not present on Pulau Ujong (Singapore's largest island) to tell stories. They cannot operate as storytellers in physical space because they lack an audience: the islands are peripheral, whilst the population of Singapore has been centralised on Pulau Ujong through decades of resettlement. Gardens are ubiquitous on Pulau Ujong, whilst redeveloped islands are not, and the islands receive minimal exposure through national media – to such an extent that 'we no longer know', according to the exhibit, the islanders' way of life. How, then, might a narrative of these islands' redevelopment be recovered?

In order to develop a greater understanding of the dynamics of resettlement and precaritisation across the islands that fall into Singapore's jurisdiction, we must turn to forms which weave personal and national narratives alongside familial and community narratives, without losing sight of the system-wide economic and ecological reconfigurations to which Singapore is subjected. As Anthony Carrigan writes, 'historicization is vital in combatting the colonially conditioned discursive erasures that underwrite appropriations of land'.[255] In addition to the government's land seizures, there were processes of redevelopment that were enabled by erasures and acts of renaming. The most famous example is the island of Sentosa ('Tranquillity'), which was formerly named Pulau Blakang Mati ('The Island of Those Who Die Behind', referring to the island's status in legend as the paradise for warriors buried on the adjacent Pulau Brani). As Pulau Blakang Mati, the island was invested with local mythology, whilst also hosting a military installation. It was also a site of genocide during the Japanese Occupation.[256] After a public competition in 1969, the island was renamed Sentosa and rebranded as a tourist destination by the government. Whilst this example is widely known in Singapore, historicising the more peripheral islands remains a challenge. Historical fiction is one example of a literary genre that is particularly adept at historicising national events. Historical novels have been written about Singaporean islanders, and two such novels, *Rawa* (2009|2013) by Isa Kamari and *Penghulu* (1998|2012) by Suratman Markasan, form the basis of this chapter. These novels are attentive to the wider dynamics of resettlement across Singapore's islands, and reformulate Singapore's 'islandness' in such a way as to complicate the 'Singapore Story', rather than simply supplement it. The resettlement that took place across Singapore's territory displaced people from the most economically

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[255] Anthony Carrigan, *Postcolonial Tourism: Literature, Culture, and Environment* (New York and London: Routledge, 2011), p. 10.
[256] Aloysius Ho and Alvin Chua, 'Sentosa', *Singapore Infopedia,* http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_247_2005-01-20.html Accessed 20 April 2016.

valuable land to less valuable, purpose-built residential districts, and in this regard, islanders experienced the 'Singapore Story' in a similar trajectory to the people in Pulau Ujong. By hosting key economic developments, however, the islands themselves were vital to the 'Singapore Story'. The developmental language of the 'Island Nation' exhibit (such as 'progressed' and 're-zoned') attests to the role played by these islands in facilitating the development of Pulau Ujong and to Singapore as a national entity, but it also raises questions about Singapore's 'islandness'. They are figured as 'off-shore islands' – an economistic phrase that obscures Pulau Ujong's physical status as an island. Might the 'Singapore Story', as it is promulgated through state apparatuses, be more accurately called the 'Pulau Ujong Story'? Would a recognition of the 'islandness' of Singapore fundamentally alter the national narrative? By exploring historical novels that are in conversation with the 'Singapore Story', whilst foregrounding islander experiences, I shall move towards answering these questions.

A Question of Islands?

Whilst the southern islands are peripheral to the everyday lives of Singaporeans resident on Pulau Ujong, this is not a 'natural' state of affairs. People have been parted from their islands forcefully, in many cases, and the separation between Pulau Ujong and its nearby islands is discursive, rather than economic. In fact, the economic activity housed on these islands is integral to Ujong's development and centrality. The government-sponsored discursive rendering of the southern islands as *remote* continues a developmental tradition which has a history in colonialism. Indeed, remoteness is one of the myths regarding islands that have facilitated combined and uneven development across the globe. Elizabeth DeLoughrey has shown how scientific discourse –and island biogeography in particular – has been complicit in facilitating colonial landgrabbing.[257] By formulating islands as at once remote, 'allowing us to isolate particular factors and processes and to explore their effects',[258] and yet accessible to biogeographers and developers, a contradiction emerges. Once a place's remoteness is emphasised, DeLoughrey shows, it is discursively rendered strategically important.[259] The discursive

[257] Elizabeth M. DeLoughrey, 'Island Ecologies and Caribbean Literatures', *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie* 95.3 (2004), 289-310, pp. 300-304.
[258] Robert J. Whittaker and José María Fernández-Palacios, *Island Biogeography: Ecology, Evolution, and Conservation* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. v.
[259] Elizabeth M. DeLoughrey, *Routes and Roots: Navigating Caribbean and Pacific Island Literatures* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Pres, 2007), p. 8.

process of island*ing* involved a repetition of persistent colonial-era tropes regarding islands: they are at once remote and accessible, and thus provide a blank canvas upon which to experiment, or alternatively, an empty territory upon which to impose the ruler's will.[260] The role of scientific rationalisation in landgrabbing (or in this Singaporean example, islandgrabbing) is clear throughout the colonial phase of capitalism, as DeLoughrey observes, but also into the present, as evinced by Singapore's development of its islands in the neoliberal mode. The figure of the island is caught in a dialectic of remoteness and accessibility, and it is with this in mind that I wish to situate southern Singaporean islands in a history of longue-durée colonial and capitalist expansion. This expansion is facilitated by islands' discursive construction (in European cultural production) as both remote and accessible, as DeLoughrey shows, but islands can also be imagined as places of paradise. Islands can be discursively produced as paradisiacal locations, subject to mythology that fluctuates between 'the promise of labor-free delight – *paradise*, garden, gold-land – and the "infernal" shadow of its repressed realities – *anti-paradise*, wasteland, depraved Eden', in Sharae Deckard's words.[261] Islandness, then carries contradictory discursive burdens from the colonial era. They are sites for imagining ideals, nightmares, and experiments, and they hold together some of the connotations of the garden, as seen in Chapter One. Both gardens and islands can be enclosed spaces, subject to power at different levels, and permeated with meaning by different groups. In an era of formal decolonisation, islands remain subject to world-economic agents, and can be 'islanded' – a process that Anthony Soares describes occurring in Timor-Leste at the hands of the Dutch and Indonesian administrations.[262] Whilst Soares does not offer a full definition for this phrase, being islanded clearly involves economic, social and cultural isolation from a pre-existing network, in a form of enclosure that reinforces the control of the enclosing actor, in his analysis. In the example of the southern Singaporean islands, there is evidently a core place of rule, from which the southern islands are peripheralised and, to some extent, isolated.

Islandness can connote isolation, in the disabling sense of being subject to larger geopolitical powers. In another sense, isolation can appear to have positive aspects, chief of which is a sense of self-sufficiency. In many novels regarding Singaporean islands, self-sufficiency is romanticised, and a similar pattern emerges from historical fiction that deals

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[260] Ibid, p. 13.
[261] Sharae Deckard, *Paradise Discourse, Imperialism, and Globalization* (New York: Routledge, 2010), p.3.
[262] Anthony Soares, 'Western Blood in an Eastern Island: Affective Identities in Timor-Leste', in *Islanded Identities: Constructions of Postcolonial Cultural Insularity*, ed. by Maeve McCusker and Anthony Soares (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2011), pp. 169-188 (pp. 170-71).

with ecological dynamics of precarity. As I discussed in Chapter One, using the example of *The River's Song*, pre-HDB lifestyles can slip into idealisation, as the daily struggle for survival is refigured as an admirable prerequisite of 'kampung spirit'. Island kampungs experience similar patterns of representation. Concepts of self-sufficiency rely upon a place having definable limits, and island boundedness is a closely-associated myth that springs from colonial tropology. Islands tend to form part of archipelagic networks, and this is certainly the case with Singaporean islands. To deny the existence of inter-island flows of people, commodities, and other natural phenomena allows nostalgic representations of island kampung self-sufficiency to gain traction, but this is self-defeating. The ideas of boundedness that are a prerequisite to self-sufficiency can be adopted to neoliberal, developmental ends, and used to justify processes of resettlement and various processes of development that prize profit-making over the needs of islanders. Islands, like gardens, can be instrumentalised as part of development projects that are put in motion by the neoliberal state.

Resettlement programmes are key to the 'Singapore Story', and in many ways, they create the conditions for the prosperity that is celebrated in the national narrative. Through the resettlement programme, Singaporean islanders were physically brought from the periphery of the nation to the centre. The *mode* of island depopulation employed by the government deserves further scrutiny. Islanders were denied many of 'the fruits of our progress' in which, according to Lee, 'everyone has a share'.[263] These might include government assistance in improving housing, communication and infrastructure, and ready access to medical facilities. The islanders were offered subsidised housing, the rent and mortgage payments, which remained more expensive than kampung housing. This combination of push and pull factors engaged by the government overlaps considerably with the mode of depopulation examined elsewhere by Carrigan in a discussion of the repurposing of Montserrat. Carrigan borrows the term 'assisted migration' from biology, a term that 'refers primarily to transplantation of plant species in response to climate change', and is deployed in Carrigan's analysis to describe the deliberate depopulation of Montserrat from the island in the wake of Soufrière Hills' volcanic eruption in 1995.[264] Resettlement was cheaper than reconstruction for the British governors, and this mode of depopulation also resulted in a depopulated island on which British scientists could experiment. Whilst the southern Singaporean islands were not exclusively depopulated in

[263] Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First*, p. 115.
[264] Anthony Carrigan, '(Eco)Catastrophe, Reconstruction, and Representation: Montserrat and the Limits of Sustainability', *New Literatures Review* 47-48 (2011), 111-128, p. 119.

order to facilitate the scientific machinations of their metropole, they were depopulated in a very similar manner, and the phrase 'assisted migration' has further resonances in a Singaporean context. The connotations of uprootedness and transplantation in 'assisted migration' are suggestive of the manner in which islanders were divorced from their proximate ecological resources and required to sustain themselves on new ground, which in the context of island-to-HDB resettlement meant that new mode of sustenance was required as well. The part-subsistence lifestyle that was possible on the southern islands was replaced with a wage labour relation on Pulau Ujong. In the biogeographical sense and the geopolitical sense described by Carrigan, 'assisted migration' involves one actor forcefully moving another, with the justification that it is in the best interests of all parties.[265] The implied equivalence of islanders with plants exaggerates the helplessness of the islanders, but it usefully evokes the gulf between the levels of agency between the islanders and the state, whilst also suggesting an ecological rootedness which undergoes radical alteration. In this chapter, I examine fictionalised examples of 'assisted migration' (or, to use a less euphemistic term, eviction) in order to explore representations of this precaritising process at different scales and from a variety of perspectives.

The process of assisted migration can create a further kind of island. Ralph Crane has shown that an 'island' in the anthropological sense can be 'an enclosed habitat that isolates and sustains its inhabitants',[266] and he evaluates the Anglo-Indian community in colonial India through this framework. Enclosure is key to this sense of islandness, as is self-containment within geographical bounds. In the context of Singapore, the new HDB estates might be considered islands, replete with amenities and services where the HDB resident can spend their wages to satisfy daily needs. These estates are also structured to house people as vertically as possible so as to minimise the use of valuable commercial land, rendering them densely-populated, yet islanded spaces, which can be contrasted with the depopulated islanded spaces south of Pulau Ujong. Singaporean islandness is discursively produced as isolated from modernity and at the disposal of neoliberal development initiatives, and this categorisation applies chiefly to the southern islands, but to some extent, to the HDB estates, too. There are different types of development that service the broadly defined national interests of Singapore, and the labour pool that is housed in HDB

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[265] Michael Allaby, 'assisted migration', *A Dictionary of Ecology,* http://0-www.oxfordreference.com.wam.leeds.ac.uk/view/10.1093/acref/9780191793158.001.0001/acref-9780191793158-e-6058 Accessed 7 July 2017.

[266] Ralph Crane, '"Amid the Alien Corn": British India as Human Island,' in *Islanded Identities: Constructions of Postcolonial Cultural Insularity*, pp. 127-144 (p. 127).

estates is available to many types of economic activity on Pulau Ujong. The depopulated islands in the south, however, house a variety of activities that do not depend on a local labour force. A sample of the islands indicates the wide array of purposes to which the southern islands have been put: Pulau Bukom, a reclaimed amalgamation of smaller islands, has an oil refinery and petroleum tank depot; Pulau Semakau has been expanded to accommodate landfill; Jurong Island, also a product of island consolidation and land reclamation, houses chemical industry; Pulau Brani has a container terminal; Pulau Senang, Pulau Pawai and Pulau Sudong are used for military training (Senang having hosted a failed penal reform experiment); and Pulau Biola and Sisters' Islands are primarily touristic, hosting diving and other sea-based leisure activities.[267] These islands have been subjected to different kinds of development, as well as varying levels of land reclamation, resulting in an utterly reshaped landscape in the southern archipelago, to suit the interests of multinational capital and national defence.

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[267] 'Trouble on the Isle of Ease', *Island Nation,* http://islandnation.sg/story/trouble-on-the-isle-of-ease/ Accessed 19 September 2017; Janice Loo, 'Pulau Bukom', *Singapore Infopedia,* *http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_922_2005-01-19.html?s=pulau%20bukom* Accessed 13 February 2016; Joshua Chia Yeong Jia & Noorainn Aziz, 'Pulau Semakau', *Singapore Infopedia,* http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_1008_2010-03-22.html?s=Islands--Singapore Accessed 13 February 2016; Irene Lim, 'Jurong Island', *Singapore Infopedia,* http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_505_2004-12-17.html Accessed 13 February 2016; Vernon Cornelius-Takahama, 'Pulau Brani', *Singapore Infopedia,* http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_221_2005-01-18.html Accessed 13 February 2016; Vernon Cornelius-Takahama, 'Pulau Pawai', *Singapore Infopedia,* http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_729_2005-01-19.html?s=Islands--Singapore Accessed 13 February 2016; Vernon Cornelius-Takahama, 'Pulau Sudong', *Singapore Infopedia,* http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_240_2005-01-19.html?s=Islands--Singapore Accessed 13 February 2016; Khor Kok Kheng, 'Pulau Biola', *Singapore Infopedia*, http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_1439_2009-02-06.html?s=Islands--Singapore Accessed 13 February 2016; Vernon Cornelius, 'Sisters' Islands', *Singapore Infopedia,* http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_185_2005-01-20.html?s=Islands--Singapore Accessed 13 February 2016.

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Fig. 4. A map of Singapore's islands, including a zoomed-in view of the development of the southern islands over time. From *Singapore: An Atlas of Perpetual Territorial Transformation,* p. 47.

The depopulation of the islands since Singapore's formal independence has meant that they resemble the emptied, isolated laboratories of colonial capitalist and neoliberal fantasy. Elaborating the British governmental strategy of assisted migration, Carrigan points out that the term 'assisted migration' could apply to similar resettlements carried out in other British Dependent Territories.[268] Expanding on this idea, I propose that assisted migration is a capitalist strategy to vacate valuable land and create a proletariat – or more preferably, to neoliberal states, a precariat – across the phases and spaces subject to capitalist relations. The southern islands are new frontiers for exploitation when Singapore gains independence and becomes a military and economic 'core' by itself, and the state facilitates the expansion of these frontiers with many strategies. The 'Garden City' programme, analysed in Chapter One, was one such strategy for disciplining space, vacating it of residents whilst opening it up for multinational capital. Assisted migration from southern island spaces is the archipelagic form of the 'Garden City' programme, because it has the same objectives and the same strategies, differing only in the biogeographical dynamics. The creation of the island of the developer's dreams can be seen as a microcosm of the incorporation-and-peripheralisation process that Immanuel Wallerstein shows to be fundamental to the expansion of the world-economy.[269] Resettlement programmes that can be categorised as part of this neoliberal strategy of assisted migration occur across the globe, but this thesis focuses on the example of Singapore's biogeographical and geopolitical transformation since independence. Key to fostering a 'good business climate', in David Harvey's words, is state activity,[270] and the Singaporean state is very keen to launch the process of assisted migration, whilst also facilitating the endeavours of multinational corporations in other ways. The state takes a leading role in expanding the frontiers of the neoliberal world-ecology across the southern island spaces, and recreates the colonial fantasy of the deserted isle. The geopolitical dynamics to the assisted migration process, as it displaces people from the southern islands, differ from the 'Garden City' programme only in biogeography. The geopolitical contours of the precaritising process mirror the terrestrial acts of resettlement.

If the classic biogeographical question – why do organisms live where they do? – is posed in relation to the ecologies of Singaporean islands (including humans and non-

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[268] Carrigan, '(Eco)Catastrophe, Reconstruction, and Representation', p. 126n.
[269] Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System III: The Second Era of Great Expansion of the Capitalist World-Economy, 1730s-1840s* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2011), p. 130.
[270] David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, p. 48.

humans), a great deal can be explained by state action, as it operates in service of multinational capital. Whilst these islands' biogeographies have been marked by human activity for centuries or millennia (before this abrupt redevelopment after decolonisation), the nationally-facilitated and system-ordained dispersal of capital to islands marks a new phase of economic, social, and ecological transformation. Thinking of these islands' transformation in this way harnesses and complicates the language of biogeography: the dispersal of organisms can be linked through a network of relations to the dispersal of capital. Outlining the dispersal of English and British subjects to colonial outposts across the globe, DeLoughrey shows that 'the *limitations* of [British] island space were not the problem so much as the inequitable distribution of territory, the result of an emergent capitalism that turned the terrestrial commons into private property'.[271] In the example of Britain, it is enclosure – antithetical to dispersal – that propels the energies of British subjects into overseas empire-building. Robert Marzec has scrutinised the discourses that accompany acts of enclosure in literature, and points out that their logic presumes that 'enclosures are a more "efficient" and "rational" relation to the land. They bring land into the domain of the scientifically objective'.[272] In Britain, the eradication of ways of life that were founded on free access to land proceeded synchronously with the saturation of enclosure discourse in scientific, political, aesthetic and mental fields, he convincingly shows.[273] He traces the enclosure movement's 'colonial-capitalist' phase,[274] before urging us to consider the relevance of enclosure in the twenty-first century:

> Consider the passage of first world transnational corporations into third world "Common" lands, where the politicoeconomic organizations of the IMF and the World Bank set the terms of "development" and "structural adjustment": code words from a discourse that centralizes the production of high yields, an economy of "surplus extraction" that ultimately has the opposite effect of leaving the land barren […]. The connection being suggested here between transnational corporations and the old empires is by no means tenuous. This logic of the "high yield" has its origins precisely in the enclosure movement: enclosures were justified […] on the grounds that they tripled and quadrupled its yields.[275]

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[271] DeLoughrey, *Routes and Roots*, p. 7.
[272] Robert P. Marzec, *An Ecological and Postcolonial Study of Literature: From Daniel Defoe to Salman Rushdie* (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. 2007), p. 31.
[273] Ibid, pp. 10-11.
[274] Ibid, p. 11.
[275] Ibid, p. 24.

Singaporean islands, with the large exception of Pulau Ujong (and, to some extent, Pulau Blakang Mati) escaped enclosure during the colonial phase of capitalism in Southeast Asia. With the independent government's embrace of neoliberal development strategies, the islands were newly subject to a mode of production that eliminated self-sufficient and nomadic ways of life. Marzec reads 'development' as a 'code word' from a discourse of enclosure. I propose to read enclosure as a phenomenon that facilitates and accelerates processes of development, particularly in the neoliberal mode. The logic and language of 're-zoning' that is found in cultural products like the 'Island Nation' exhibit suggest that enclosure is key to the processes of development that occurred on Singaporean islands, and a developmentalist discourse obscures the dispossessions that underpin enclosure. 'Re-zoning' could be described as a 'code word' that obscures the subjecting of people and space to state and market forces that previously had little to no access. To put it another way, 're-zoned' space is newly hierarchised space. This phenomenon is observable in late town planning in Singapore, and has persisted into the neoliberal-developmentalist present in both island and 'garden' environments (as was discussed in Chapter One).[276] Marzec's monograph tracks the connection between the novel form and capitalism, empire, and the enclosure movement in particular, in order to show how the novel form naturalised the 'real brutalities' of dispossessing people of shared land.[277] He argues that 'the transformation of human subjects into "bare life" and unenclosed land into a "state of exception" has been occurring long before Giorgio Agamben suggests'.[278] As the citation of Agamben implies, processes that lead to dispossessions of land and way of life can be theorised as processes of precaritisation. To be brought to Pulau Ujong, and physically 'centralised' as a labourer, is to be thrown into precarity.

The 'Island Nation' exhibit re-centres islanders once more, by representing them in the Singapore's core, discursively and physically. The exhibit took place in the National Library building, which was opened in 2005 in the central business district – the centre for state-sponsored cultural and intellectual activity, as well as finance.[279] The exhibit chiefly represented the islanders, offering only a glimpse at the places that have been redeveloped. It can be surmised, however, that the islands' biogeography has been affected by human activity for centuries, if not millennia. 'Island Nation' foregrounds the

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[276] Teo Siew Eng, 'Planning Principles in Pre- and Post-Independence Singapore', *The Town Planning Review* 63.2 (1992), 163–185.
[277] Marzec, pp. 1-2, 169.
[278] Ibid, p. 169.
[279] 'National Library Building', *National Library Board, Singapore*, https://www.nlb.gov.sg/VisitUs/NationalLibraryBuilding.aspx. Accessed 4 January 2016.

practice of fishing, and outlines local fishing techniques – which cannot, of course, be easily replicated in the site to which the islanders were relocated, in Choa Chu Kang. 'Island Nation' uses multiple names for places, suggesting the plurality of cultural readings of places across Singaporean waters, and beyond. Some islanders' reference to Pulau Ujong as 'Tanah Besar' or 'mainland' suggest that they do conceive of Pulau Ujong as the core to their peripheral islands, but it also contains a recognition of Singapore's 'islandness' – that is, the fact of it being constituted by islands. This implies that the islanders conceive of themselves as constitutive of Singapore, rather than in its margins or apart from it, as the dominant version of the 'Singapore Story' implies by its understating of islands' role. The islands are not remote, as the national narrative suggests. Rather, the islands' rendering as 'apart' from mainland Singapore facilitates their development in the interests of the mainland. The 'Island Nation' exhibit, then, complicates the national narrative only slightly, because it replicates the discursive peripheralisation of the islands, if not the islanders. The process of assisted migration, as represented in the exhibit, reproduces the narrative's arc and its tendency to make Pulau Ujong the main protagonist of the 'Singapore Story', to which the other islands play secondary roles. To interrogate representations of these historical processes in greater depth, forms that give greater attention to history must be considered. Historical fiction has the capacity to interrogate historical processes, by representing a sequence of historical events from an array of perspectives. Individual, community, and family viewpoints can overlap and move beyond national, system-wide, or pan-regional structures of feeling. Historical fiction can rehistoricise these dehistoricised islands, or resituate them in an alternative of sequence of events to that narrated in the 'Singapore Story'. Historical novels are particularly well-suited to the task of subverting the national narrative, even if they can also be complicit in reproducing that narrative's terms or presuppositions. Analysis of precarity through literary study can reveal the ways in which precarity (as a function of enclosure, legitimated by discourses that construct island boundedness) is naturalised or questioned. For this reason, this chapter will analyse two historical novels and explore their relation to processes of enclosure of islands, dispersal of capital, precaritisation, and the discourses that surround and justify state action in these representations of Singaporean society. What kinds of precarity are produced by the development of Singapore's islands? And how does an awareness of the 'islandness' of national economic development affect the 'Singapore Story'?

The texts that form the basis of this chapter are *Rawa* (2009|2013) by Isa Kamari and *Penghulu* (1998|2012) by Suratman Markasan. These texts have been selected for their

similarities in form and subject matter, combined with their different approaches to narrating and situating the process of 'assisted migration' historically. Both texts can be read as historical novels, since they grapple with the dominant narrative's elision of islands. They ponder the construction of historical narratives, and resituate Singapore in archipelagic biogeography and geopolitics. Both novels feature Singapore's 'offshore' islands prominently. The novels are fictionalised accounts of historical acts of eviction – that of the Orang Seletar from Seletar and the disputes over Pedra Branca in *Rawa*, and the resettlement of communities from southern islands to the mainland, Pulau Ujong, in *Penghulu*. The historical accuracy of the broad sweep of events is important to both novels. There are further commonalities between the novels, in terms of plot points: both represent elderly, dispossessed characters who struggle to adjust, even as their children manage the change that they experience. Both narratives contain a redemptive aspect for the younger characters. As such, *Rawa* and *Penghulu* could be described as family sagas: they relate plot development through the prism of the family, over time and across space, alongside the national economic development of Singapore. Both novels narrate the process of resettlement, which is described as occurring in the national interest, and both dramatise ecological relationships that are under threat. These stories are delivered in a tone which is often religious or spiritual. Both writers are prolific, and they are prizewinners: Isa Kamari won the S.E.A. Write Award in 2006, the Cultural Medallion in 2007, and the Anugerah Tun Seri Lanang in 2009 (the year *Rawa* was published in Malay). Suratman Markasan won the S.E.A. Write Award in 1989, the Mont Blanc-NUS Centre for the Arts Award in 1997, and the Tun Seri Lanang Award and the Nusantara Literary Award in 1999 (the year after *Penghulu* was published in Malay). In 2011, he was awarded the Cultural Medallion. Both *Rawa* and *Penghulu* are translations from Malay, and both were translated 'with the support of National Arts Council Singapore'.[280] *Penghulu* is marketed as a prizewinning text: the front cover is emblazoned 'Winner of the Cultural Medallion', and its publication is part of Epigram Books' Cultural Medallion series. *Penghulu* and *Rawa* are texts that share space on the literary market as well as sharing thematic interests, and this will render an analysis of their representations of island precarity all the more pertinent to an extended critical engagement with the 'Singapore Story'.

Penghulu begins with a former village chief (or penghulu), Pak Suleh, nostalgically recalling his life on the island he once ruled. The novel tracks his mobilising of his family to

[280] Isa Kamari, *Rawa*, trans. by R. Krishnan (Kuala Lumpur: Silverfish Books, 2013), p. 2; Suratman Markasan, *Penghulu*, trans. by Solehah Ishak (Singapore: Epigram Books, 2012), p. iv.

move back to the island, which has not yet been turned into an oil refinery, as promised, and this trajectory is interspersed with flashbacks and arguments that detail the lifestyle in their former place of residence, the fictional Pulau Sebidang. Suleh eventually opts to move back to the island, and his wife and daughter accompany him. At this stage, his sons-in-law intervene and try to persuade him to return to the Singapore mainland – first through intermediaries in the family, and then in person. Both sons-in-law have something to lose from this public embarrassment of a law-breaking father-in-law; Maiden runs to be a PAP candidate, and eventually wins, whilst Syed Farid is an Islamic scholar and preacher who is running to become a member of the highest committee of the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore. Both of these characters are represented in an unfavourable light, as hypocrites who contribute to Singapore's wastefulness (in comparison with the islander lifestyle). By contrast, Suleh's son and son-in-law Lamit and Samad are poor but hardworking men who attempt to find a peaceful solution to the family crisis that becomes a national crisis. Lamit has faith that God will find a solution, and considers his own intervention useless, although he is unswervingly loyal to Suleh. The sub-plots to the novel are also microcosms of national crises at a family level. At the beginning of the novel, Suleh's daughter Sohrah disappears with a boy, and the family suspect that there is a romantic entanglement that will embarrass the family – risking such embarrassment, in fact, that the family opt not to tell the police that she is missing until a few days after her disappearance. She is recovered in a trancelike state and a preacher is called in to exorcise evil spirits. At this stage in the novel, it is revealed that Sohrah has literally been possessed by Satan, and the preacher's ceremony eventually banishes him from her body. Later in the novel, Suleh's youngest son Juasa is suspected of dabbling in substance abuse (which is presented as the natural progression from his taste in Western-style fashionable clothing), and this too poses a danger to the careers of Maiden and Syed Farid. To try to solve this problem, Samad and Piyah take responsibility for Juasa, as he leaves Suleh's and Timun's care. Both of these scenarios move towards a resolution, with some uncertainty hanging over them, by the end of the novel, and both of these subplots also fictionalise the 'Malay Problem', as it is articulated in the Singaporean public sphere. This 'problem' is characterised by 'economic backwardness and social problems', including 'issues such as drug abuse'.[281] *Penghulu* situates the 'Malay Problem' in the historical moment of assisted migration, and as such it transplants responsibility for the 'problem' from Malays (as is generally perceived to be the case in the Singaporean public sphere) out to society more widely, and the government's

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[281] Kamaludeen Bin Mohamed Nasir, 'Rethinking the "Malay Problem" in Singapore: Image, Rhetoric and Social Realities', *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 27.2 (2007), 309-318, p. 309.

actions in particular. The novel ends with Maiden travelling to the island with a police escort in order to evict his father-in-law, but finds that he has disappeared, as have Timun and Sohrah.

Rawa, on the other hand, opens and closes with a reflection on the status of Pedra Branca, an island east of Singapore, historically part of the Sultanate of Johor, and which is presently disputed territory, claimed by both Singapore and Malaysia. This island plays a key role in the narrative, but the process of assisted migration that is represented in *Rawa* does not feature southern islanders. Rather, it shows the multiple dislocations that are experienced by one Orang Seletar family, as they are resettled from the Seletar River, then Johor, finally into the confines of the HDB and wage labour lifestyle. The elderly character who is the focus of the novel, Rawa, is saddened by the transformations that have gripped Singapore, but his family is more ambivalent. His daughter Kuntum and son-in-law Lamit enjoy modern technology, even as they submit to the ravages of a brutal labour market to bring in wages. Rawa's grandson Hassan is keen to take up his grandfather's heritage by learning canoeing and working on ship design (rather than ships' construction, the menial job undertaken by his father). The novel is interspersed with flashbacks from Rawa's life, as he struggles to reconcile the spirituality of his Orang Seletar worldview with the Islamic worldview to which he has submitted in order to marry his wife, Timun. His heritage, which he feels is being lost, takes the symbolic form of a ring which was passed to his father as a reward from the Sultan of Johor, and which disappears at the time of the death of Ayong, his friend, at the beginning of the novel. The novel ends with Rawa seeking the ring upon Pedra Branca, as his dreams instructed. However, he dies of a heart attack, and Hassan brings his body back to Singapore aboard a canoe. When Hassan arrives, a mysterious man (Ayong, it is implied) gives him the ring, and the novel ends. Rawa's keen sense of being an Orang Seletar, and being incorporated into the Malay category, permeates the novel, and his Orang Seletar spiritual beliefs shape his understanding of ecological interactions and transformations. *Rawa* historicises Malayness, unlike *Penghulu*, and it situates the experiences of indigenous groups at the hands of British colonists as well as the Chinese-dominated Singaporean government. The ecological transformations, which are enforced by a ruling elite upon indigenous and immigrant groups, are shown to shape younger people's worldview in such a way that gives rise to rationalism over spiritualism – a phenomenon that Rawa laments.

These novels both complicate the 'Singapore Story', whilst exhibiting a degree of complicity in reproducing the national narrative's terms and premises. In the rest of this

chapter, the complicity and complications will be understood and underscored through close reading and comparative analysis, in order to ascertain the types of precarity caused by the development of Singapore's islands. The sense of 'islandness' that is central to these novels is brought to bear on the 'Singapore Story', and this offers another kind of exploration into the national narrative, which will build on the analysis of gardens in the previous chapter. The family saga dimensions to these two novels further complicate the narrative of linear progress, both spatially and over time, and highlight the spatial and temporal dynamics to precaritisation. In these novels, precarity is primarily evident through the processes of resettlement, as was the case in the examples shown in Chapter One. The ecological dimensions to this form of precaritisation are similar, but in the case of resettled islanders, there is a much wider ecology and 'self-sufficient' lifestyle that is 'sacrificed' in the national interest. Whilst the islanders are compelled to perform wage labour in order to survive, their assisted migration does not take place chiefly to proletarianise them, but rather, to 're-zone' the islands upon which they dwell. As the islands undergo the process of enclosure, capital is dispersed to the island spaces, whilst the islanders themselves are brought to the 'centre' of Singapore, Pulau Ujong. Processes of enclosure, dispersal, and centralisation are interrelated and mutually complementary, but these literary representations of the islander perspective suggests that there is tension between these mobilisations. Historical fiction that narrates these processes has the capacity to complicate the national narrative by instantiating the narrative of development in human and spatial form. By exploring the transforming biogeography of Singaporean islands, paying attention to the islands' shifting levels of visibility, and reading for the geopolitical interventions of the state on behalf of the global market in these novels, an interrogation of the national narrative can be staged.

Island Precarity and Assisted Migration

Both *Rawa* and *Penghulu* narrate processes of assisted migration, but the process elucidated in *Penghulu* speaks more directly to ideas of 'islandness' in the national schema of development. One of the flashbacks near the beginning of the novel recalls the tactics deployed by the government to push the islanders off Sebidang. '"[A]s of today,"' Pak Suleh declares to his villagers, '"the two telephones that we have on this island, one in the hall and one in the police station, can no longer be used. It seems that those people cut the

telephone wires last night."'[282] The myth that islands had been apart from Singaporean development, which might also be formulated as the myth of these islands' remoteness, is dispelled immediately. They had functional telephone lines until intruders (in the pay of the government, it is suggested) take steps to excommunicate Sebidang. The network that existed between the islands is disrupted. This act of disconnection between islands is meant to push the villagers off Sebidang, and over a period of time (and in combination with other strategies on the part of the government), it succeeds. The government promises to transform the area into 'a resort, into a petroleum area'. The ambiguity here as to whether the island is re-zoned for tourism purposes or to house another oil refinery illustrates the government's disposition towards the islands: they are stripped of inhabitants to act as a stock that can be tapped into for either tourist or fuelling purposes. In fact, this is Pak Suleh's main grievance with the process of resettlement:

> "Five years ago, that was what the member of parliament told us when he wanted to chase us out of that island, where our ancestors were born and died. For our nation! For development! But now, what has happened? Nothing has been done and our island has been neglected. Quiet and still without any development, without any inhabitants either!"[283]

As the government expands its stock of islands that can be put to multifarious development purposes, Suleh's family are repurposed into wage labourers, whilst Suleh himself remains in their HDB flat. The logic of re-zoning leaves the space subject to a new hierarchy, and subject to the state, as the state looks to promote multinational capital's interests in the more 'remote' areas under Singapore's jurisdiction. At the same time, it brings people towards the 'centre' – an action which renders Pulau Ujong the centre – and facilitates the process of proletarianisation.

The proletarianisation of Pak Suleh is presented as particularly grievous, because he has fallen from being the penghulu of Sebidang to being a dependent in an HDB flat. Concomitantly, Suleh's reminiscences about life on the island differ from those of his former villagers. Whilst he has moved from the top of a clear hierarchy to an indeterminate position (that is subject to the state, perceived to be a 'foreign' actor[284]), the villagers have remained subjects as a new hierarchy is imposed. Suleh's experience is not representative of the experiences of many resettled islanders, then, but even when he was 'king of that

[282] Suratman, p. 20.
[283] Ibid, p. 17.
[284] Ibid, p. 16.

island',[285] in his words, he contributed to his community in a way that is impossible on Pulau Ujong as a decision-maker and mediator.[286] Whilst his nostalgia stems chiefly from his former place at the top of Pulau Sebidang's hierarchy, it is also due to the active role that he was able to play in his community. By introducing Suleh 'sat in the lazy chair', observing the islands from his apartment window in Clementi West, Suratman emphasises the former penghulu's immobility, as compared to his image of himself 'fishing, his shirt wet with sweat'.[287] Suleh cherishes the idea of self-sufficiency, and throughout the novel, he raises the idea of returning to the island. His wife Timun tempers his romanticisation of island life with her own memories of an arduous lifestyle:

> "We have to pay for everything, Mun. We have to pay for fresh fish. We have to pay for vegetables. If we were living on the island, we could get fish by fishing. And we could get vegetables by growing them ourselves. […] Here we're just like lodgers, Min, do you realise that?" Pak Suleh asked his wife. "The loan for this house is being paid for by Maiden. Water and electricity are being paid for by Syed Farid. They are even paying for our food!" […]
>
> "Even if we were to live on the island, who would give us food? Surely it would still be the children!"[288]

Even as Suleh outlines the ideal of island self-sufficiency, he acknowledges that they would need to return to Pulau Ujong for '"rice, salt and tamarind"'.[289] Whilst this might undercut the prospect of complete self-sufficiency, this recognition demonstrates that the island can function as a place of residence for people, when the island is serviced as part of a network. Suleh articulates his objection in the same terms as were expressed by the riverside kampung-dwellers of *The River's Song*: the new need to pay for items that used to be free compels people into wage labour. This, I argued in the previous chapter, illuminates the ecological dynamics of precarity. For Suleh and his family in *Penghulu*, a similar process can be observed, with different geographical ramifications: both groups are removed from an area where they can supplement their cultivation of crops and fishing with casual wage labour into HDB flats. For Suleh, specifically, however, the dynamics of the resettlement process have been different again. He is not compelled into wage labour, but his family are, and this is to support him. Having contributed to his family and community, he is now

[285] Ibid, p. 1.
[286] Ibid, p.2.
[287] Ibid, pp. 1, 99, 1.
[288] Ibid, pp. 71-2.
[289] Ibid, p. 72.

made dependent upon the family unit. This is compounded by the absence of the larger community unit that sustained itself on Sebidang. 'They did all their work together, helping one another in a communal spirit', Pak Suleh recalls.[290] The transition to the new government-built housing is articulated through the same imagery as in *The River's Song* (even across languages, since *Penghulu* is a translation from Malay): both use the word 'birdcage' to describe the prison-like confines of the claustrophobic HDB apartment.[291] The process of resettlement produces similar experiences across disparate groups, at individual, family and community levels, in this comparison.

Whilst there was a great level of coercion involved in the resettlement of the islanders to Pulau Ujong – evident in the officials' cutting of telephone lines, for example – there were also reasons that some of the islanders might have wanted to move to the mainland. Suleh says that he has been suffering from poor health, brought about by poor air quality, since the resettlement in 1990. Timun, however, argues that they moved to the mainland partially to be closer to a doctor, implying that Suleh's breathing condition had existed prior to resettlement.[292] If proximity to medical facilities is a consideration for other islanders, readers can infer that other islanders might wish to move to Pulau Ujong, too. Suleh's family also work to undermine his romanticisation of the island at various moments in the novel. Upon learning that Suleh's youngest son Juasa is accused of taking drugs, Suleh's daughter-in-law disputes the assertion that '"none of this would have happened"' had they stayed on Sebidang, saying that there may well have been a drug problem, and if there was not, this was due more to the lack of a dealer than an innate island-based resistance to drugs.[293] Suleh's claim that Sebidang was crime- and slander-free is open to question.[294] The novel does bear out his proclamations regarding his health, however. On Pulau Ujong, '"there are just too many factories which spew out dirt, and that dirt has now mixed with the air which you and I are breathing in"', he argues.[295] Once they move back to Sebidang near the end of the novel, Suleh's health has improved, and, to further corroborate his point, his daughter-in-law Sumirah is too ill to visit them on the island.[296] Competing interpretations of discourses of health and cleanliness are in play in this debate, which emerges at a few moments during the novel as a way of justifying different courses

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[290] Ibid, p. 70.
[291] Ibid, p. 2.
[292] Ibid, pp. 17, 15.
[293] Ibid, p. 117.
[294] Ibid, p. 70.
[295] Ibid, p. 15.
[296] Ibid, p. 221.

of action (as in *The River's Song* in Chapter One). On the one hand, the medically-illiterate Suleh and his devoted son Lamit believe that the air on Sebidang is healthier. Indeed, Lamit trusts god, rather than doctors, to ameliorate his father's health.[297] On the other hand, Timun wants Suleh to be close to medical help for his own good, despite the greater industrial pollution on Pulau Ujong. Whilst Suleh is eventually vindicated, the novel shows drawbacks to residing on either Ujong or Sebidang.

The Singaporean government is not shown to be forcefully evicting the islanders, even if they do decree that they must leave and cut their telephone lines. The family's desire to have better access to healthcare suggests that the move could be convenient for them, too. It is to the advantage of the Singaporean government, however, that the islanders are resettled. The act of re-zoning means that the island can now be earmarked for future development, and the possibilities are greater if residents need not be taken into consideration. In this regard, the state is servicing capital (both domestic and multinational) by 'opening up' the area to development. Suleh muses on the fate of the various islands from his lazy chair. 'He could see Pulau Bukum clearly, an island with its shining oil tanks, signifying prosperity'.[298] The outcome championed by proponents of national economic development (as imposed in Singapore) is precisely this sort of prosperity: enclosed island space is transformed to facilitate and fuel international trade, rather than local human and ecological interests. Another version of prosperity is visible from Suleh's lazy chair: 'He could see people waterskiing. The people looked as big as matchsticks and the boats pulling them as big as matchboxes'.[299] This image shows the new use of space, as leisure and commerce intrude upon an area that might have hosted small-scale fishing for islanders, but it also conveys the fragility of the scene. Humans are matchsticks, here. They are individually weak, tightly packed, and homogeneous in their leisure pursuits. Juxtaposing the imagery of oil tanks and matches suggests that the whole landscape is dangerous and combustible, or perhaps its various aspects are mutually incompatible. Suleh clearly regrets the change in use of the island space, and figures the scene in front of him as an aberration that both tantalises and excludes him. In this regard, this scene alone adds a layer of complexity to the 'Singapore Story', in which Singapore is dependent upon multinational capital to develop apace. These island spaces are made dependent upon the government housed on Pulau Ujong, which peripheralises them and creates a network of fuelling stations and tourist sites that render the space more amenable to multinational capital. As

[297] Ibid, p. 194.
[298] Ibid, p. 2.
[299] Ibid, p. 1.

these spaces are also brought into capital's domain, Suleh becomes newly dependent upon his family, and this is the individual instantiation of the national 'Singapore Story' in *Penghulu*. The forcefulness of Suleh's description of landscape transformation is heightened by his personal nostalgia for a questionably paradisical island lifestyle (which is described as free of gossip, crime, and pollution).

The role of nostalgia in *Penghulu*, and in historical fiction more generally, requires further consideration. In the Introduction to this thesis, the theories of Boym, Su, and Jameson were briefly elaborated. Nostalgia was discussed as an ambivalent phenomenon which can express a rebellion against the passing of linear time, or a commodifiable conveyance of 'pastness' in artistic form. My expanded definition of the historical novel depends upon nostalgia to a certain extent; nostalgia feeds into 'bottom-up' understandings of recognisable historical narratives, which can in turn be complicated by historical fiction's narration of historical events from a fresh, fictionalised set of perspectives. Like historical narratives and fictional narratives, nostalgia is selective in its choice and sequencing of events, and may present events in a different tone in hindsight. Dennis Walder's monograph *Postcolonial Nostalgias* (2011) usefully theorises nostalgia as an ambivalent phenomenon or genre that can contain potential for prompting understanding and creativity, whilst also holding potential for narcissism.[300] For Walder, nostalgic modes of narration negotiate 'present and past, private and public'.[301] He builds on the work of Avishai Margalit, who postulates the idea of 'communities of memory', to show how nostalgia often 'goes beyond 'natural' communities of memory such as families, clans, tribes, religious communities, and nations, […] [and] also responds to the moral claims of the past'.[302] It is pertinent that Walder also claims that nostalgia is particularly strong 'among those who have literally been displaced'.[303] The many developmental refugees created by Singapore's neoliberal mode of development have every reason to feel nostalgic for the places and ways of life that have been lost, and nostalgia is clearly observable in the fictionalisations of eviction explored so far in this thesis. In Lim's *The River's Song*, Weng's father (among other developmental refugees) is nostalgic for the kampung; in Tay's *City of Small Blessings*, the warm depiction of pre-Occupation Singapore conjured by Peter as he looks at his father's photographs contains hints of nostalgia, and

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[300] Dennis Walder, *Postcolonial Nostalgias: Writing, Representation, and Memory* (New York and London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 16, 14, 3.
[301] Ibid, pp. 19-20.
[302] Ibid, p. 18.
[303] Ibid, p. 9.

the family is evidently nostalgic about each house they vacate, and in Suratman's *Penghulu*, as we have seen above, the titular penghulu pines for the days he governed his own island. These representations of milestone events in the national narrative of economic development (the redevelopment of the riverfront, the clearing of Seletar, and the depopulation of the southern islands) are re-framed as events that transformed the landscape in an alienating manner, and in a way that emphasises the human cost of eviction and development.

In a sense, then, these nostalgic representations are instances of rebellion against a sense of linear time and 'progress', but there are further complications to consider because there is a clear target of resistance in these representations. The Singapore government and its strategy of neoliberal-developmentalism was the facilitator of these transformations, and the evictions occurred to enhance multinational companies' profit-making. Even if they are not named directly, the government and the multinational companies it assists feature strongly in the chain of causation that leads to the nostalgic depictions in these novels, and this means that the nostalgia has political ramifications. These nostalgic longings for pre-transformation spaces also demonstrate the existence of nostalgic communities (as described by Walder). The preponderance of nostalgic ruminations by characters in these novels, and perhaps nostalgic representations by the novels themselves, suggest that the historical novels in question rely upon nostalgia to a large extent. Historical fiction relies upon familiarity with a recognisable historical narrative, and in these novels that depict eviction, familiarity with nostalgia for pre-eviction ways of living is also a pre-requisite. Readers may not necessarily share in this nostalgia before reading the historical novel, but they are offered a glimpse into nostalgic modes of representation through reading the novel.

If nostalgia in historical fiction is political, the ramifications of their politics can be analysed. The historical novel's politics emerge from the fictionalised narrative's relation to the state-sponsored national narrative. The Singapore government has actively sought to shape the nostalgia that its citizens feel for the past, in such a way as to consolidate these longings as particularly Singaporean. By commissioning films and other creative works that feature nostalgia for past Singapores, the government attempts to harness nostalgia to complement the Singaporean national narrative and to continue to build a Singaporean

national identity.[304] Nostalgia for the kampung, for instance, becomes an identifier of Singaporeanness, through this policy, rather than an identifier of displaced kampung communities. The various communities of memory in Singapore are brought together at the national level, rather than the community or family level. Political scientist Kenneth Paul Tan has shown how the government sought citizens' contributions to databases such as SingaporeMemory.org to commemorate SG50 (50 years since Singapore's independence from Malaysia) and to neutralise any anti-PAP political impetus that may stem from peoples' nostalgia – or as Tan puts it, to 'depoliticise the past'.[305] He writes:

> these efforts have the effect of re-packaging The Singapore Story in a more emotive, participatory and bottom-up way that will appeal to a more sophisticated and globalised citizenry, but they are mostly based on the consumerist logic of a more self-indulgent middle class.[306]

Nostalgic consumerism is an intriguing phenomenon, and one that suggests an ephemeral engagement with the past, in line with Jameson's critique of nostalgia's potential to be commodified. It is important, however, that the government's efforts in this regard serve to reshape the national narrative in a 'bottom-up' way. The 'Singapore Story' is in flux, and it is flexible enough to accommodate longing for the kampung, among other historical homely environments. One example of a piece sponsored by the government would be the 'Island Nation' exhibit explored at the beginning of this chapter. This perhaps indicates that whilst the works are sponsored with a view to establishing nostalgia at a national level, the works remain open to interpretation, and can be read as subverting the 'Singapore Story' even as the works positively reshape the national narrative in a more inclusive manner.

No novels were sponsored as part of this drive to incorporate community nostalgias into the monolithic national nostalgia. Where, then, do historical novels feature in this governmental harnessing and depoliticising of nostalgia? To consider this problem, it is worth returning to the idea of space, and how these nostalgias re-inscribe the Singaporean space that has played host to processes of redevelopment and eviction, whilst narrating the story of Singaporean development (as shown in Chapter One). 'Garden City' spaces tend to obscure interpretations that highlight the evictions and the human costs of economic development, but the 'bottom-up' campaigns during the SG50 celebrations

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[304] Kenneth Paul Tan, 'Choosing What to Remember in Neoliberal Singapore: The Singapore Story, State Censorship and State-Sponsored Nostalgia', *Asian Studies Review* 40.2 (2016), 231-249, pp. 244-6.
[305] Ibid, p. 243.
[306] Ibid, p. 244.

suggest that a more inclusive history of 'Garden City' space is already being included in the 're-packaged' national narrative, in a depoliticising mode that frames the evictions as worthwhile and in the national interest. The government's policies towards heritage and preservation also show the ideological inflections of the historical narrative, as this narrative is reproduced in state-sponsored artworks and activities (as well as the more established vehicles for dissemination of the 'Singapore Story' such as education and popular culture). Brenda Yeoh and Lily Kong have argued that nostalgia and heritage are in a complex relationship which is modulated by the intervention of the Singapore government. Nostalgia, for Yeoh and Kong, emerges through citizens' piecemeal collections of tokens of the past, whilst heritage is a state-driven phenomenon that serves government purposes.[307] 'While individuals collect the past in the form of family memorabilia, photographs and increasingly video-recordings,' they write, in 1996, 'the nation-state also retains and occasionally manufactures clues to its past'.[308] These clues include 'heritagised' spaces,[309] such as conservation districts like Clarke Quay, which Bryan critiques in *City of Small Blessings* as we saw in Chapter One. Yeoh and Kong argue that heritage is useful to the government in retaining the ephemeral details of past land use – 'the visual qualities, the facades and concrete forms which constitute place' such as riverfront shophouse architecture, which is repurposed as restaurants and bars – whilst removing the 'lifeworlds' that these spaces hosted:[310]

> The re-creation of the past in a place gives the state the opportunity to filter out what it deems undesirable and to retain what it considers beneficial to cultivating a sense of cohesion and national identity. History is thus recycled as nostalgia. Thus, while nostalgia is in one sense a critique of the present as argued earlier, it may also be reshaped to serve the present needs of nation-building and national cohesion. […] In Singapore, from the state's perspective, heritage has important social, economic and political purposes. Not only does it represent the city's cultural wealth and diversity, it serves to bind Singaporeans in a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural state together and also to "sell" Singappore [sic] abroad as an exotic tourist destination.[311]

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[307] Brenda Yeoh and Lily Kong, 'The Notion of Place in the Construction of History, Nostalgia and Heritage in Singapore', *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 17.1 (1996), 52-65.
[308] Ibid, p. 58.
[309] Ibid, p. 54.
[310] Ibid, p. 59.
[311] Ibid, p. 60.

'Garden City' space and 'heritagised' space contribute to both the building of a national identity on the part of the government, whilst also facilitating profit-making and redevelopment to suit contemporary market or state requirements. State-sponsored heritage commemorations like the 'Island Nation' exhibit or the Singapore Memory database mirror these processes, so that the government's functional nostalgia is embedded in creative works and exhibits as well as the city's physical space.

The historical novels examined in this thesis contain many nostalgic representations, and so they are in dialogue with these processes of harnessing nostalgia as well as processes of history production (which are tightly interrelated in any case). As Yeoh and Kong elaborate, 'bottom-up' nostalgia can operate as a countervailing force to government-sponsored heritage, as it is manifested in partial preservation of historic districts, for example, but in Singapore, the government intervenes to repurpose nostalgia, too. No novels were endorsed, sponsored, or commissioned as part of the SG50 commemoration, and the novels examined here are thus autonomous from such state management. More importantly, they engage with nostalgia in more ambivalent ways to those encouraged by the government. There can be a similar consecration of heritage and nostalgia, as understood by the government, but there can also be nostalgia for communities that do not fit neatly with the national framework. As we will see in *Penghulu*, for example, Pak Suleh, the displaced penghulu, feels divorced from the National Day celebrations on television, favouring a more communal, island-based, and devoutly religious understanding of community. The nation is kept at some distance. This suggests a refusal, at some level, to participate in the 'Singapore Story', even as the islander community is brought into the Pulau Ujong-centric national framework. In this sense, historical fiction is ambivalent in its engagement with nostalgia and heritage, but these engagements exist in a physical space which is closely regulated to 'heritagise' certain spaces, and in a public sphere in which the government manages nostalgia to incorporate it more neatly in to the 'Singapore Story'. Historical novels offer further ways of holding on to something that has been lost, in an alternative mode of representation to government methods – that is, through fictional narrative. Novels can circulate among and beyond nostalgic communities to inform or depart from the 'Singapore Story', even as the national narrative expands to become more inclusive of displaced people.

Penghulu offers an example of a nostalgic community that fragments in the face of state power, in a fictionalisation of the redevelopment of the southern islands. As island space is drawn into the sphere of Singapore's developmental neoliberalism and

simultaneously peripheralised, another process unfolds in relation to the islander inhabitants. The proletarianisation of the islanders is facilitated by their resettlement, as with the resettlements that took place across Singapore's territory since independence. As in previous acts of resettlement, the resettled were divorced from the ecological resources that sustained them (and which they sustained, in many cases), resulting in precarity. Proletarianisation, then, is also a process of precaritisation, as was outlined in Chapter One: people are compelled to perform wage labour because they are poor and have no alternative but to offset the abruptly-introduced costs of living with their wages. In *Penghulu*, the narrative is driven by islander characters' new needs in Clementi West, and other characters' more nationalist outlook. As a consequence, *Penghulu* frames resettlement as a conflict between those with familial and community priorities and those with national priorities (and, the novel implies, personal stakes in national priorities being fulfilled). Both sides of the argument mobilise religious language and justifications for their actions, and the varying levels of access to religious knowledge, and authoritative interpretation, are portrayed. Pak Suleh and Timun eventually plot their way back to Sebidang, with the help of some of the community that used to live there, despite opposition from Suleh's son-in-law Maiden, who runs to become an MP for the PAP. Another of Suleh's sons-in-law, Syed Farid, is a respected Islamic scholar who is running to become a member of the highest committee of the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore.[312] *Penghulu* presents this as a dangerously self-interested move, and suggests that this level of power is corrupting for the individual and the family (although no parallel critique is evident from the portrayal of penghulus) because of Farid's alignment with Farid and against Suleh. There are class divisions within the family. Those most embedded in island life, such as Suleh and Lamit, struggle enormously on the mainland, whilst those with no acquaintance with island living, such as Maiden and Farid, experience great material comfort. For the former islanders, the adjustment is represented as a struggle for survival.

In *Rawa*, the process of assisted migration is narrated in a similar fashion, through flashbacks related from an elderly family member to a grandchild. In a conversation with Hassan, Rawa describes how he used to live on a houseboat, as is Orang Seletar custom, on the Seletar River through mainland Singapore:

> He recalls how Temah and he were driven away by environmental officials when the dam at Seletar was built. They were asked to leave because they didn't have

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[312] Suratman, p. 83.

> identity cards. They had never required an identity card for as long as they had lived on the banks of the river, nor did his parents need one to live and procreate there. They told him that he and his wife needed to have such a card before they'd be allowed to live in one of those rented houses allocated to those displaced by the Seletar dam project. In any case, he didn't want to live in a rented house on land.[313]

The reshaping of the land is in the national interest, which trumps the interest of the indigenous Orang Seletar. The family dodges the proletarianisation drive, however, by opting to move to Johor, rather than stay in Singapore. The same strategies as can be seen in *Penghulu* are in operation here: official coercion combines with the offer of HDB housing to empty the land of human residents. In a later recollection of the visits by governmental officials, Rawa recalls how police visited them on Seletar Island (at the mouth of the Seletar River), demanding to see identity cards, prompting many Orang Seletar to flee to Malaysia.[314] Official cards and certificates have no importance to a group of people who have no fixed place of residence, or even nation of residence, until they become the indicators of citizenship that grant people the right to their homes. These papers operate as markers of modernity and continue the colonial administrative regulation of subjects of the state. When the family do make a final decision to leave the Seletar River, it is for a number of reasons, including those outlined above, but also for the sake of the marriage of Rawa and Temah's daughter Kuntum to Lamit, a mainland Singaporean Malay. Kuntum and Lamit move to the Sembawang barracks, which houses labourers, whilst Rawa and Temah move to Johor.

The final decision to leave the river, which has underwritten Orang Seletar culture for centuries, is presented as a grave but inevitable decision. Rawa discusses the government's plans for resettlement with Temah:

> "I heard they will be building a dam here, and clean up the surroundings. This river will become a lake, and a source of drinking water for Singapore. […] Anyway, I noticed that they have brought bull dozers to the island… and I've seen lorries laden with rock and sand on the other side. We don't have much time left… we are refugees now," Rawa said in a sad voice.

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[313] Isa, p. 33.
[314] Ibid, p. 87.

> They looked at the river bank. The berembang trees that they loved so much looked listless in the hot sun, and even their reflections in the water looked dead. The flow of the Seletar, too, seemed lifeless.[315]

A combination of national and family prerogatives are shown to be the factors driving the family from the Seletar River to Johor, but it is clear that the family do not have a great deal of choice in the matter: work has already begun on the dam. Cleanliness discourse (explored in greater depth in Chapter One) recurs in this passage. The government's intention to 'clean up' an area that is in no way polluted is ironised by the description of the river as lifeless, as though it is being strangled by the dams that are being constructed. This dam expanded the third reservoir constructed in Singapore since 1819, and catered for 'the needs of industry' as well as 'the new housing estates', according to historian C.M. Turnbull.[316] The demand for piped water was increasing dramatically, doubling between 1966 and 1971. 'By the early 1970s,' Turnbull writes, 'nearly 95 per cent of the population had a piped water supply'.[317] This was not achieved by adding taps to Orang Seletar communities, but by resettling the Orang Seletar, among others, to HDB housing. The increased demand for piped water, too, stems from nationwide assisted migration schemes. As the resettled complain about having to pay for these amenities (a feature of most of the novels explored in this thesis), there are new demands placed on the water network, instigating the government to expand reservoirs and continue resettlement, in the plan for the creation of a modern neoliberal-developmentalist state.

The novel shows that Rawa's cultural and ecological connection to the river has not simply been severed; he is now excluded from the area by his socio-economic class:

> He directs his gaze beyond the dam, a distance of some 400 feet, at an undulating, turfed area, with scattered short poles flying little flags here and there, with signs to indicate different species of grass. The area is landscaped with ornamental *gading* coconut palm and tembusu trees, and he sees several low-rise buildings with tiled roofs and glass windows at the fringes. He sees a few well-dressed men and women stroll about and chat on the field, all wearing hats, and two of them in dark glasses. The sun is still high in the late afternoon sky.

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[315] Ibid, pp. 103-4.
[316] Peter Pak and Goh Lee Kim, 'Seletar Reservoir', *Singapore Infopedia*, http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_562_2005-01-19.html Accessed 27 February 2016; C.M. Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore, 1819-2005* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2009), p. 318.
[317] Turnbull, p. 318.

> "This is now a playground for the rich," he thinks.[318]

Class difference has been landscaped into the terrain of the Seletar basin, which now hosts golf and other leisure activities. From his high-rise residential building, he sees low-rise buildings which signify wealth in transformed Singapore. Where there were plants that thrived in the ecology of the river, there are now ornamental trees, and the grass is labelled (thus becoming a curiosity for tourists and Singapore golfers alike). The space has been 'gardened' in a manner that mirrors the disciplining of space in *City of Small Blessings* and *The River's Song* in Chapter One. Here, the labelling of grass renders the area of only superficial interest; that is to say, it is a place with which the golfers will develop an acquaintance rather than an entangling. By contrast, Rawa still feels an embedded knowledge of the area. His glimpse of a berembang tree sparks reminiscences about his childhood spent playing on such tress, as well as an understanding of the trees' role in Seletar history and ecology, since the Orang Seletar hid in these trees during the Japanese invasion, and the trees are 'able to withstand swampy conditions when water spilled over the banks during the rains' – a phenomenon that does not happen since the construction of the dam.[319] Echoing the dynamics of the 'Garden City', the history of the area is being replaced with scenery more conducive to capital accumulation. The golf course is inscribed with wealth, and the history of the co-dependent Seletar culture and ecology is erased, or at least, diminished and less legible.

The relationship with the land has changed utterly, to Rawa's great distaste, but it is the transformed relationship with the water that saddens him most:

> He sees three small rowboats racing towards the river mouth. The boats are swift; he notices they're not made of wood. […] The rowers, who wear short-sleeved shirts and safety jackets with orange markings, are singing and joking loudly as they paddle.
>
> Then he hears the roar of an engine that gets louder and louder until eventually it drowns out the voices. Before long, he realises the sound is that of a motorboat towing a woman on a water ski, splashing water indiscriminately […].

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[318] Isa, p. 10.
[319] Ibid, pp. 15, 12.

> "Playground for the rich," he thinks again, looking at the bizarre happenings in front of his eyes. "What's happened to my river?"[320]

The noise is a kind of pollution that was not present before the transformation, but which now disrupts the soundscape of Seletar, for Rawa. There are a few things that compound Rawa's irritation with the scene: the singing and laughing implicitly reveals ignorance of the history of the place that has been drowned in this reservoir. The boat is not made of wood, and therefore feels like a disjuncture with the environment to Rawa. The people who now use this area are playful and inconsiderate (as evinced by the noise and indiscriminate splashing, which would pose a problem for a houseboat), and Seletar is in every way a playground, not a home. Seletar becomes a playground attuned to the whimsical desires of the rich, rather than remaining a homely space. The area is newly geared towards profit extraction, rather than the subsistence living that comprised Rawa's experience of Seletar.

Whilst the rich can afford to enjoy their leisure time in this setting, Rawa cannot. He watches on from his HDB apartment in neighbouring Yishun – a less homely space than pre-transformation Seletar. His new place of residence carries its own history of transformation and erasure:

> [H]e wondered when the Chinese village of Nee Soon became Yishun. Perhaps it was only a change of name, he thought. But when he got there, he realised that nothing was the same. He no longer recognised the Chinese village.
>
> Where there used to be rubber plantations, and farms with vegetables, chickens, ducks, geese and pigs, there were now many blocks of high-rise apartments. There were also shopping malls and a stadium, apart from a bus interchange, and railway tracks elevated on concrete pillars. And the streets were congested.
>
> He felt confused and afraid, like a deer lost in a village. What had happened to his kampong?[321]

This description of the transition that has been affected in Nee Soon could be applied to many other kampungs that were turned into new towns, save some specific details. Agriculture was moved outwards and peripheralised from residential areas, and residential areas were being developed along a radiant route across the island (preserving a central forest reserve). Nee Soon, on the north of Pulau Ujong, was selected for development as a

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[320] Ibid, pp. 10-11.
[321] Ibid, p. 31.

new town in the 1970s,[322] and Rawa's encounters with the town fall either side of the redevelopment: he stays in Seletar, near Nee Soon, until 1969, and relocates to Yishun at some point in the 1980s, after the construction of the MRT train network. Yishun is not simply defamiliarised in this description, it is figured as a completely new place, even though Rawa knows that he has been here before. He tries to put his sensation of shock into perspective:

> The Chinese from Nee Soon would visit his old village often, coming to trade vegetables and pork for the river folk's catch. He did not eat pork now, after he had converted to Islam to marry Temah. He had changed, too. So, he couldn't understand why he found it so difficult to accept the changes in Nee Soon. He had to stop being nostalgic. He had to adjust. He was determined to adjust.
>
> But after a week in the apartment, he feels like he's living in a bird cage. He feels like a pigeon. Furthermore, those scenes at the dam the other day bother him greatly. What has happened to his river? He feels like a stranger in his own land.[323]

The imagery of the birdcage resurfaces again here, as it does in *The River's Song* and *Penghulu*. Constriction and discomfort characterise Rawa's experience of HDB life, after houseboat living. Even as he tries to take into account the changes that would be expected with time and his own shift in outlook, he is baffled by Yishun. Rawa is now more dependent upon his daughter and son-in-law, and has no functional reason to leave the apartment. This representation constitutes a great departure from the inclusive mode of nostalgia favoured by the government, which is amenable to incorporation into the national narrative. This representation of Nee Soon is characterised by confusion and discomfort in the present, even as it is tempered by a pragmatic realisation that there is no going back. It is the family dynamic that compounds the problem for Rawa. On the river, he would have been able to fish at his own pace as he moves into old age. In Yishun, however, he is an economic burden on his family.

The family is a key institution in both novels in explored in this chapter. In both *Penghulu* and *Rawa*, the changes wrought on Singapore's environment and society are reflected in family relations. Narratives concerning the nation and the family intertwine, and these novels share family saga characteristics. The mode of narration is not linear,

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[322] Naidu Ratnala Thulaja and Noorainn Aziz, 'Yishun New Town,' *Singapore Infopedia*, http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_363_2005-01-18.html Accessed 17 September 2017.

[323] Isa, pp. 31-2.

though, as the historical moments of social and environmental reconfiguration are accessed as reminiscences. Often conditioned by nostalgia, these narrations offer glimpses at the characters' and the nation's past. Because change is not represented linearly, as unfolding evenly across time and space, it demands more effort and attention from the reader to piece together the historical fragments. In the case of *Rawa*, the reflection that comprises the prologue can only be understood in light of the plot developments on the final pages of the novel. Both novels represent the processes of national economic development across time and space, but they do so in a manner that is uneven and conditioned by nostalgia. This undercuts the linearity (and relative simplicity) of the national narrative by representing Singapore's development alongside the family unit, showing that there are multiple perspectives on the same, or similar, events. The family saga form lends itself to representations of transformations over time within the family and without, and thus might be predisposed to emphasise generational difference as a primary factor in mediating experiences of Singapore before and during processes of neoliberal developmentalism. *Penghulu* and *Rawa*, however, emphasise that the difference between these perspectives can be read as following axes of class and race, as well as generation.

The degree of importance assigned to generational difference in relation to these other factors can be assessed through a comparison of the two novels. *Rawa* historicises in greater depth, by situating Rawa's conversion to Islam and his family's growth alongside the development of Singapore. *Penghulu* does not utilise such a strictly historical timeframe, as will be explored below, because it frames Islam as a universal and transcendent reference point for Malays (which is acknowledged to be relatively recent for some Malays, as seen in *Rawa*). *Rawa* draws attention to generational difference through the processes of development by emphasising Rawa's emotions, and sensation of dislocation from his family, at moments when they appear to behave as overly-rational subjects, in accordance with developed Singapore's abandonment of Orang Seletar values. Rawa cries when his daughter tells him not to eat food that has been on the floor, because he takes this as a sign of the influence of pernicious rationalisation, and that 'she has forgotten her life on the river'.[324] He also laments the proletarianisation drive, which has caused a shift in outlook in his daughter and son-in-law.[325] Whilst these are important changes that occur, leading to drastically different perspectives and experiences between members of each generation, the novel shows that great changes occur between every

[324] Ibid, p. 129.
[325] Ibid, p. 93.

generation (and, indeed, that not everything has changed, and might not have changed for the worse – thus tempering the novel's nostalgia). Rawa recalls talking to his father-in-law, a Cham Malay whose ancestors were from modern-day Cambodia, who advises that he 'acquire knowledge and experience' lest he lose his place among Singaporean society to 'recent immigrants', because 'success belongs to those who are clever and quick'.[326] This call for receptiveness to change has an impact on Rawa, who attempts to quash his misgivings about the transformed Nee Soon area. The novel also emphasises continuities with the past, rather than breaks from it, and juxtaposes the courtships of Rawa and Temah with Kuntum and Lamit, which are presented as parallel examples of a community expanding to accommodate, and centralise, a marginal figure.[327] For the older couple, Rawa was deemed 'no outsider' despite not being a Muslim at the time,[328] whilst for the younger couple, Lamit is drawn to the houseboat out of curiosity, because it is not floating with the other Orang Seletar (because, at this stage, the family is Muslim).[329] There is a cyclical phenomenon here, in which the community expands to welcome marginal figures into the group through family ties. Whilst there are dramatic changes shown in *Rawa*, there are valuable continuities and repetitions that sustain the family through large-scale historical processes.

Penghulu, on the other hand, offers a bleaker view of the drivers behind plot development in the family saga. Suleh and Timun object to their youngest son's '"womanly fashion"' that features 'tight bell-bottom trousers'.[330] Juasa does not alter his fashion sense after hearing this from his parents, and argues that it is 'the fashion of the nineties'.[331] This does not necessarily represent a sharper difference between generations than that shown in *Rawa*; it contrasts the tastes of older characters with those of younger (and in these cases, more Westernised) characters. Of greater importance to *Penghulu*'s tension and plot development is the class difference between family members that emerges and unfolds across the family saga. Maiden and Syed Farid are high earners, and this contrasts with the relative poverty of Suleh and Timun, as well as their children and in-laws, Sohrah, Samad, Piyah, Sumirah and Lamit. The former group consists of an MP and a religious elder, and the latter consists of security guards, delivery drivers, and domestic labourers. Across the generations, there are varying levels of economic mobility, as well as varying levels of

[326] Ibid, pp. 64-5.
[327] Ibid, pp. 36-7, 40-43.
[328] Ibid, p. 42.
[329] Ibid, p. 36.
[330] Suratman, pp. 9, 7.
[331] Ibid, p. 7.

religious devotion, and it is the interstices of these variables that drive the novel's plot. The poorer characters are the most humble and the most devout, whilst the richer characters are dismissive of religion, or try to manipulate interpretations of Islam to justify their wealth. *Penghulu*, then, conflates devotion and poverty in such a way as to valorise meekness. Whilst the younger generation has access to 'Westernised' lifestyles and cultural tastes, the option remains to live simply and religiously, and the novel celebrates adherence to this way of life. However, it acknowledges the growing impossibility of continued islander life (by having Suleh admit that he would only occupy the island so long as he lives, and that it would be turned over to the government again subsequently). Implicit in this acknowledgement, though, is the belief that Singaporeans can continue to live religiously and righteously on Pulau Ujong, as do Lamit, Piyah, Samad and Sumirah. The notion that island life is somehow 'purer', and uncontaminated by the malign influences of the mainland, is shown to be at least partly illusory. As family sagas, these novels narrate the temporal dynamics to the historical processes of national economic development, as these processes reconfigure the role of the family unit. As members of families adjust to transformed Singapore with varying levels of commitment, the family becomes the staging ground for the tensions that arise from development in the neoliberal mode.

Penghulu generally fulfils the conventions of a realist historical novel, since it engages with the recognisable historical narrative of displacement and development, but its realism can be stretched to uncomfortable limits, as can be seen in the scene in which Sohrah is possessed, and the family's eventual disappearance from Pulau Sebidang. The exorcism scene is intriguing for its realistic narration of a phenomenon that would appear to break realist convention. The logic leading up the exorcism is presented in a matter-of-fact manner: because of Sohrah's disappearance with the boy, she almost certainly forgot to pray. The Ustaz (or Islamic scholar) reminds the family why this is so dangerous:

> "Each Muslim, man or woman, cannot miss their prayers, except women who are having their periods. Even when we are sick, we have to do our prayers, in whatever way we can. For during those times when we are supposed to pray but don't, at those moments there will be disturbances from Satan. […] During these times it is very easy for these other beings to disturb us and get into our bodies."[332]

The Ustaz's account is utterly borne out, in the novel, as Satan speaks through Sohrah, and it is only through the Ustaz's hard work and the family's recitation of key suras of the

[332] Ibid, pp. 56-7.

Qur'an that Sohrah is eventually relinquished.[333] In the aftermath of this, the Ustaz advises that '"we should not miss and neglect our prayers. We should not listen to songs or music or watch television."'[334] *Penghulu* appears to endorse this message, showing that the scholar has performed good work in rescuing Sohrah from her own poor judgement and insufficient devotion. The advice to avoid modern technology would also appear to overlap with Pak Suleh's disdain for the modernity of mainland Singapore, as he favours the simpler life of the island. The allure of the island is, however, romanticised. As is made clear elsewhere in the novel, the island is not apart from modern technology (and indeed, historically, the islands never were), because Sebidang was linked by telephone lines before their disruption. The recommendation for a technologically austere life is anachronistic, and this contradiction highlights the tension within *Penghulu* as to what sort of a life the islanders lived and left behind during the process of assisted migration – as well as the contradiction between living a faithful Islamic life, as defined by this Ustaz, and living in 1990s Singapore. I will return to the conflation of Islamic devotion and Malay experience later in this chapter, but I will now continue examining the ruptures in *Penghulu*'s realist form.

The second moment in which the realism of the text is brought into question is the disappearance of the family at the novel's end, when Maiden attempts to evict them from Pulau Sebidang once more. The scene might confuse readers attuned to realist conventions, because rational explanation of the family's disappearance is purposefully occluded:

> The two policemen and the three officers from the Department of Building Rules and Regulations stepped on the flat ground which was the former site of Pak Suleh's house. It was as if a house had never stood there before.[335]

At this stage in the novel, the narrating voice is distanced from events. The narrator loses their omniscience and reports the theories and speculation that abound in coffeeshops and in printed media. The final chapter of the novel, which is three pages long, raises and counters the theories that the '"coffee shop parliaments"' compose. Some people suggest that the family may have died, but 'there were no traces whatsoever [of the family] on the entire island'.[336] Another theory held that the family had 'received the help of Allah' and

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[333] Ibid, pp. 54-62.
[334] Ibid, p. 62.
[335] Ibid, p. 236.
[336] Ibid, p. 241.

'had all been transported to a place which was quiet, safe and undisturbed', but this is countered by the fact that Maiden was not proportionately punished as Suleh, Timun and Sohrah were rewarded.[337] Another story told that a fisherman had seen Suleh, and spoken with him since Maiden's visit. In this story, it is suggested that 'Maiden and his entourage had been blinded by Allah'.[338] Whilst these theories jostle for space in the 'coffee shop parliament', further declarations do not seem so unrealistic: Maiden is ostracised by his family for driving Suleh, Timun and Sohrah from the island; he is said to be in danger of losing his seat in parliament; and reportedly, his business is going to suffer. In addition to this, the speculation says, 'people like Maiden – and there were plenty of them around – would certainly only receive worldly goods and wealth, but in the next world, they would get nothing'.[339] There is no conventional realist closure to this historical novel and family saga. Indeed, the island and islanders temporarily resist enclosure, as the islanders become invisible and the island becomes unwieldy, and presumably less amenable to exploitation. As enclosure is resisted in the content of the novel, the novel's form performs another kind of resistance to enclosure, by obstructing formal closure in the realist sense.

By relating people's expectations of Maiden's punishment in the afterlife, *Penghulu* creates an anticipatory and religious form of closure at the end of the novel. Rather than saying for certain how Suleh, Timun, and Sohrah spent the rest of their time on the island, or explaining their disappearance, the novel reports mainland Singapore gossip whilst creating an expectation that Maiden will be punished in the afterlife for his self-interest. Realist closure may be denied, but many possibilities are opened up, and the rupturing of the historical fiction genre allows for interpretations beyond the conventional focus on individual, family, community, and national developments, by maintaining a more cosmic, religious perspective. The disappearance of Sohrah at the beginning of the novel is mirrored in her disappearance, along with Suleh and Timun, at the end. This might predispose readers to accepting a religious interpretation a second time, without the narratorial omniscience forcing this interpretation. As a consequence, *Penghulu* situates the process of assisted migration (with its local and national dynamics) in a religious perspective, and thus places the developmentalist 'Singapore Story' in an even longer extra-history of sin and devotion.

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[337] Ibid, pp. 241-2.
[338] Ibid, p. 242.
[339] Ibid, p. 242.

The rupture of the historical novel genre might, then, constitute a rupture of history. The moments of possession and disappearance are placed beyond the realm of historical knowledge, and yet are narrated in a form that is, in every other respect, an historical novel. It is broadly historically accurate, insofar as the process of assisted migration, which has been ongoing since the colonial era, is accurately portrayed. The government's coercive strategies and selective offer of subsidies public housing are represented in this novel. Sebidang is a fictional island that is subject to the same networks of relations that the other southern islands have experienced, playing host to either tourism, oil storage, industry, or simply being held in reserve as a future asset to exploit. Islanders' resistance is also represented accurately. The 'Island Nation' exhibit testifies to the endurance and disobedience of the islanders in the face of government pressure, because it documents the travails of people who opted to stay on the islands as the islands are made inhospitable. *Penghulu* is very specific with dates: Suleh is 75, he is evicted from the island in 1990, and the novel is set in 1995. As a result, *Penghulu* neatly historicises island life, and shows its modernity in many ways. This creates expectations of social realism from the novel, on the part of readers, and this renders the punctures to the realism all the more arresting. By situating social realist modes of representation in an historical mode, and by dramatising the various institutional pressures on characters, *Penghulu* sets up expectations of it being an historical novel. Its subordination of individual, community, and national perspectives to a religious perspective culminates in reconciliation between community ideas of justice and an Islamic conception of justice, in an extra-historical timeframe.

Rawa and *Penghulu* both dramatise the processes of enclosure and assisted migration, and they situate a family in the nexus of national economic development in the neoliberal mode. With formal elements of the family saga genre, these historical novels show the tensions that emerge between members of different classes and different generations, within the family unit, in parallel with the developments that occur on a national scale. National tensions are staged in family settings, as these settings are relocated from river and island communities to HDB complexes. In addition, *Penghulu* disrupts the expectations of the genre, by formulating the ending as a set of expectations, rather than allowing conventional closure. As enclosure is briefly resisted in the novel, closure is postponed in the novel, and a new, cosmic scale of reference supplants the family and nation. Singapore's transformation is experienced differently according to generation and class – and both novels temper one with the other – but the transformation

does not create a catalogue of ruptures with the past. *Rawa* and *Penghulu* represent some continuities within the family unit. Indeed, these cultural products move beyond representing these persisting phenomena, and act as memorialisations of redundant practices too. The novels stake claims to show some social continuities, and the mode of preservation that they attempt is the subject of the next section.

<u>'Backwardness' and the 'Malay Problem'</u>

The trope of island isolation is not completely undercut in these two novels. There is a degree of complicity in replicating the tropes of the 'Singapore Story'. *Penghulu* does show that Suleh and Timun remain dependent upon ingredients staple to their diet from the mainland, which hints at recuperating a kind of archipelagic understanding of island life from the mainland-offshore binary propagated in government discourse. Suratman also narrates the government's disconnection of Sebidang from the telecommunications network. Besides this recognition of the island's place in a connected and productive archipelago, the novel also seems to celebrate a kind of isolation that is amenable to a simple way of life, which, in turn, becomes a pious way of life. In *Rawa*, Isa emphasises that Rawa's family now endures a 'life [of] daily struggle'.[340] There is difference between generations and classes within the family unit, but there is also a sense that the struggle experienced by characters in both novels is something distinct to Malays. The 'Malayness' of the struggle is compounded by the discursively-generated 'backwardness' of the islands, and thus racial and spatial categories are deployed to render the island Malay lifestyle 'of the past' and in need of modernising transformation.

The idea of 'Malayness' is a challenging one to define and delineate. 'Malay' is a racial category assigned at birth, in Singapore, according to the father's registered race, but it is also 'a contested and wandering identity'.[341] Whilst some critics argue that the category of 'Malay' was an expedient construction by British colonial governors, for the purpose of divide-and-rule strategies, others point out that Malay identity is self-fashioned to a certain degree, constructed 'by colonial and subsequently modern nationalist

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[340] Isa, p. 93.

[341] Timothy P. Barnard and Hendrik M.J. Maier, 'Melayu, Malay, Maleis: Journeys through the Identity of a Collection' in *Contesting Malayness: Malay Identity Across Boundaries*, ed. by Timothy Barnard (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2004), pp. ix-xiii (p. xi).

discourse'.[342] This discourse was promulgated through the canonisation and instruction of Malay history and literature by colonial powers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, by drawing on texts from across Southeast Asia.[343] At the same time, Malay writers and thinkers such as Mohammed Eunos worked to discursively construct and cultivate Malayness for the purposes of 'uplifting' Malays in a colonial context.[344] Anthropologist Joel S. Kahn writes that, after 1901, 'Malay-ness […] came to signify a subsistence-oriented rural life lived in distinctive residential units called kampungs. […] [A]lthough there were certainly wealthy Malays, both aristocrats and merchants, Malay-ness came to be associated with marginalisation, disadvantage and poverty'.[345] Malayness, then, could be mapped spatially and discursively, occupying ground that was convenient to both colonial and independent nationalist ruling elites. A perception of marginalisation was complemented by physical marginalisation. Kahn shows that in the first decade of the twentieth century, both space and discourse were reconfigured to construct Malayness, in close approximation to Malayness of the twenty-first century:

> [T]ransformations were starting that would serve to re-embed the diverse inhabitants of the Malay Peninsula within a new socio-spatial order constructed by colonial capitalism and a modern state. […] [T]his re-embedding entailed new representational practices through which new elites competed to speak for and on behalf of subaltern Malays.[346]

Kahn moves swiftly between the discursive shift that he observes at the beginning of the twentieth century, and another shift in the 1970s, which entails a new valorisation and centralisation of Islam in constituting Malayness.[347] Whilst nationalist discourse originated in Malaysia, it penetrated into Singapore, 'capturing the imagination of a broader Malay public'.[348] The 'new representational practices' that Kahn describes were part of the 'new culture industries' based in Singapore, and they included the films of P. Ramlee, which Kahn analyses at length. Whilst it is not my objective to recover a sense of 'Malayness' or 'Muslimness' from *Penghulu*, it is important to note that the novel's conception of

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[342] Shamsul A.B., 'A History of an Identity, an Identity of a History: The Idea and Practice of 'Malayness' in Malaysia Reconsidered' in *Contesting Malayness: Malay Identity Across Boundaries*, p.p. 135-148 (pp. 144-5); Joel S. Kahn, *Other Malays: Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism in the Modern World* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2006), pp. 1, 3, 15.
[343] Shamsul, p. 145.
[344] Kahn, pp. 10-11.
[345] Ibid, pp. 47-8.
[346] Ibid, p. 137.
[347] Ibid, pp. 84-9.
[348] Ibid, p. 116.

Malayness overlaps a great deal with the 1970s 'new definition of Malay identity which conflated it with Islam and being Muslim'.[349]

Pak Suleh's complaint about the act of resettlement that has robbed him of his title as well as his way of life becomes a more wide-ranging critique of society, as he sees it, and a perceived crisis of Malayness is abundantly in evidence:

> "Here people have gone to English schools, they are no longer like the island Malays, Mun. They're now city folks, mainland people, Singaporeans, so they've forgotten their origins. The cultural traditions and customs of the Malays have been abandoned, for they've seen how their friends behave. […] We're buried, submerged in the customs and behaviours of city folks, Mun. If we were drowning in the sea, we could still swim, or there would be others who could help pull us to shore, but if we are drowning in a sea of people, it's like we're being buried deep in a muddy swamp, Mun."[350]

The islandness of Malays, Suleh implies, is more authentic, honest, or perhaps more secure than the landedness of mainlanders, who are on no firmer ground. He feels like an outsider in cultural terms as well as economic terms. In this quotation, Suleh conflates Malayness with Islam to build a contrast between those who are spiritually-oriented and those with more material priorities. In essence, it distinguishes Maiden and Farid, who seek money and status, from Suleh and Lamit. Farid's role as a scholar is undercut throughout the novel, when preachers' wastefulness and elitist interpretations of the Qur'an are questioned.[351] Farid repeatedly argues that those who disagree with him do not understand and should be quiet, and Lamit declares that religion is for everyone, '"not only for the ustazes or religious people"'.[352] Farid sells cassette recordings of his lectures for profit, and Lamit accuses him: '"you tell your students to accumulate wealth, so long as they do not forget their responsibilities to God"' – an accusation Farid does not dispute.[353] Rather, he argues that he needs to earn money 'for his family, for the future of his children, who would be studying and needing lots of money'.[354] This corroborates the critique put forward by Suleh: that materialism is being reconciled with religion in a manner that renders island living redundant and outdated. Island living is thus displaced temporally as well as spatially,

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[349] Farish A. Noor, quoted in Kahn, p. 84.
[350] Suratman, p. 22.
[351] Ibid, pp. 152-8, 164-71, 212-5.
[352] Ibid, pp. 166-70, 154.
[353] Ibid, pp. 169, 213.
[354] Ibid, p. 214.

in a destructive and involuntary islanding. When Sumirah gives Suleh a 'book of [Qur'anic] interpretations' for his seventy-fifth birthday, he gains a foothold against the elitist and imposed religious logic of Farid.[355] By returning to the island, even after its disconnection from the technological infrastructure of the mainland, Suleh renounces the bind that constricts even religious preachers into a life of self-interest.

Suleh and Timun are in a more difficult position, as parents, than Farid and Bedah. Lamit sacrificed his chances of getting an education so that the family's money could be spent on Juasa's school fees[356] – a decision that makes Juasa's turn to drug use all the more devastating to the family. In this example, the family is a minor buttress against the ravages of state-sponsored precarity, in that it allows the family's meagre resources to be allocated in the optimum way for the family, even if this means great sacrifice on the part of one individual for the others. This ossifies the class divisions that already existed in the family, as Lamit becomes a driver for a small businessman, whilst his brother-in-law Samad works as a security guard.[357] In Samad's apartment, there are no chairs, tables, televisions, or even telephones.[358] Taking this into consideration, we can conclude that Samad's apartment is more remote from the fruits of development than was Sebidang, which at least had a telephone line before it was sabotaged. This throws into relief the idea of Sebidang's remoteness, but it also shows how the proletarianisation of the islanders has led to them being precaritised, even as they are moved into a physically central space within Singapore's economy and ecology, in Clementi West. *Penghulu* goes to great lengths to emphasise Maiden's life of comfort as a politician, describing his Rolex watch, perfumes, and BMW.[359] Maiden, unlike Lamit, has not had to make sacrifices. Indeed, the language of sacrifice is critiqued by Pak Suleh, as he questions the foundations of the 'Singapore Story': 'Talking about sacrifice is always easy! Pak Suleh muttered in his heart. But to sacrifice for whom? For the nation? Who is the nation? And who are we?'[360] This direct challenge to the premises of the national narrative highlights how islanders must sacrifice their way of life in order to further the development of the nation of which they are a part, whilst receiving none of the benefits of development. Maiden looks to further his career when demanding that his family members leave the island again, once they resettle upon Sebidang again, but he argues that he thinks about the 'whole of mankind'. Lamit laments that they were never

[355] Ibid, p. 78.
[356] Ibid, p. 106.
[357] Ibid, p. 118.
[358] Ibid, p. 93.
[359] Ibid, pp. 173, 201, 160, 180.
[360] Ibid, p. 35.

consulted in this process that has led to the destruction of their way of life, and points out that they have not been given the knowledge to understand their own sacrifices.[361] This echoes the critique made in *City of Small Blessings* (see Chapter One): unlike ants, humans cannot happily work towards an abstract 'greater good' without some understanding of the wider project. As the land is enclosed and re-zoned for the benefit of the nation and multinational investors, the island residents are expunged from sites of development. *Penghulu* offers a critique of the framing of the national narrative, however, and re-inserts islanders into the history of Singapore.

Penghulu is an example of a novel in which economic and cultural considerations are shown to mask each other. Government-promulgated discourse surrounding Malayness suggests that there is a 'Malay Problem', as outlined earlier, characterised by economic backwardness. This mirrors the ideas of remoteness and economic backwardness that afflict islands, in government development discourse. Pak Suleh's language when he recalls the island way of life accepts the premises of both of these ideas, however. By romanticising island self-sufficiency to some degree, he accepts the ideas of boundedness and isolation that the government uses to justify development of the islands. In this regard, the language of self-sufficiency is self-defeating. An island problem compounds the 'Malay Problem', which Suleh exacerbates by embracing a way of life that does not partake of the national economic development programme. Indeed, this exacerbation is the crux of the 'Malay Problem' as it is articulated in the Singaporean public sphere: supposedly, Malays are not sufficiently engaged with the new mode of economic development that is being imposed – or if they are, they are engaging with the wrong parts (as in Juasa's case). To Suleh, these aspects to development go hand in hand; the development drive that pushes him from the top of his island hierarchy is the same disruptive influence that leads his son to dress as a Westerner and take drugs. In Suleh's opinion, we can surmise, the 'Malay Problem' is not a problem. The more pressing issue, for him, is the emergent and now dominant culture of materialism that grips Farid and Maiden, among others. Suleh willingly removes himself from this culture, but finds that he is compelled to partake of it to some extent, even once he has returned to Sebidang. In this sense, Suleh feels that traditional Malay culture (as he understands it) is being marginalised by new economic imperatives.

There is a similar sensation of being marginalised from the national agenda through the national agenda when he sits in front of the television at the beginning of the novel.

[361] Ibid, p. 152.

Symbolising progress and development, the television allows all Singaporeans to watch the same spectacles and form a national character. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the National Day Parade, which is shown on television, to Suleh's great distaste. In this passage, the crisis of Malayness that Suleh laments is compressed into a few pages:

> The television announcers related how the people in the parade were forming perfectly straight lines. "How mighty our Air Force looks flying in the sky! Although a young Air Force, it is ready to face all challenges. Our Air Force is perfect, on par with that of other new, emerging nations!"
>
> Tired and breathless, Pak Suleh continued to rub his chest. A short while later, Juasa returned to his father's side.
>
> "Did you watch TV last night, Bak? Our new President spoke in Malay. He really sounded like a Malay!" Juasa said as he rubbed his father's chest with oil.
>
> "That's it, see how even non-Malays can really speak like Malays. And you Malays can't even pass our Malay language exams. Serves you all right."
>
> "Look! How fearless they look, our combat group with the striped uniforms!" The announcer's voice could still be heard.
>
> "There are no Malays there," observed Pak Suleh weakly. […]
>
> "Go and switch off the TV, Juasa. Don't waste electricity!" ordered Pak Suleh weakly and helplessly.[362]

This passage is permeated by a sense of helplessness. Suleh's instruction to Juasa demonstrates the limitations of the shared experience of being Singaporean as a resettled islander. The suggestion of the family's economic precarity, in the need to lower energy payments, is overridden by the other forms of marginalisation that sting Suleh. The media event that is designed to build a shared national character is insulting and marginalising, but Suleh's own limited agency is highlighted once more, because he cannot turn off the TV by himself. As a former penghulu, the only power he has now is to demand that his youngest son carry out this simple operation. He retains a small level of power in family politics, if not in community politics, as his community is split up and dispersed across Pulau Ujong. Whilst he has been disempowered by being brought to a more 'central'

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[362] Ibid, pp. 4-6.

location, in geopolitical terms, he also bears witness to the disempowering of fellow Malays through national media.

The backdrop to this conversation is the visible absence of Malays from the national event. *Penghulu*'s representation of the marginalisation of Malays from the military ceremony is based in fact, because Malays were not generally trusted to be loyal to Singapore above Malaysia (as evinced by Lee Kuan Yew's declaration that putting Malays in positions of military responsibility was 'a very tricky business'[363]). Suleh's complaints echo both the official idea of a 'Malay Problem', characterised by a perception of economic backwardness, as well as the more traditionalist complaints that the young are not sufficiently engaged with their heritage. This thread of argument goes beyond the officially articulated 'Malay Problem', which denotes government failure to bring the 'fruits of our progress' (in Lee's words) to Malays, and constitutes a wider crisis of Malayness, in the eyes of Suleh. The older generation, in *Penghulu*, have fixed ideas as to what it means to be Malay, and this seems to involve self-sufficiency in a kampung or island setting, coupled with belief in Islam. At the beginning of the novel, Juasa and Sohrah are less rigorous in their devotion, but as the plot progresses, they encounter misfortune and consequently change their ways. By the end of the novel, Juasa is moved to the care of Samad and Piyah and Sohrah joins her parents on the island. Farid and Maiden, however, try to justify their own actions within Islam, and reconcile the materialist society with their religion. They do not prosper, and suffer economic and social consequences for their pro-resettlement stance. *Penghulu* frames this difference as both racial and cultural, as can be seen in the narrator's observation that 'Maiden was of Indian Muslim descent, whereas Samad was a pure bred, true son of Sebidang'.[364] Thus, the novel validates the essentialist, conservative position that connects Malays, Islam and islandness in a straightforward manner.

Pak Suleh extrapolates from Juasa's poor Malay ability and the absence of Malays from the National Day Parade that there is a crisis of Malayness. A sense of displacement is evident from Suleh's mournful watching over the islands from his Clementi apartment, and from his dismissal of the exclusive National Day parade. Malayness and Singaporean developmental nationalism are not compatible in his eyes. The version of Malayness connoting 'subsistence-oriented rural life' (that Kahn describes) would seem to be very welcome, to Suleh. The 'marginalisation, disadvantage and poverty' that spring from the attempt to hold to this lifestyle in the context of a rapidly-developing country constitutes

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[363] 'Reality is race bonds exist – SM', *The Straits Times,* 19 Sept 1999, p. 26.
[364] Suratman, p. 68.

the ‘Malay Problem’, as it is officially articulated, and *Penghulu*’s narrative trajectory implies that it is the insistence on national development that forbids Malays from being true to their identity. This political position becomes easier to understand with the acceptance of the conflation of Islam and Malayness as fixed and dehistoricised ideas. Paradoxically, the historical novel makes no attempt to historicise Malayness; instead it focuses on historicising assisted migration for island Malays. Kahn’s description of the power structure of the kampung in regulating this Malay-Muslim identity offers another window on to Suleh’s nostalgia for the island. Kahn reports that ‘the ideal Malay world of much nationalist discourse was one in which Islamic law was strictly applied by a national authority represented, at the level of the kampung, by the penghulu’.[365] It is unsurprising that the penghulu of the novel is so keen to frame his actions as strictly Muslim (and is so delighted by receiving the gift of Qur’anic interpretations), considering his previous role as the local bastion of Islam. This compounds Suleh’s sensation of being marginalised: besides being underrepresented in National Day proceedings, he has been relieved of his duties as a spiritual authority, and must now follow the advice of his greedy son-in-law Syed Farid. This means that there has been a multidimensional reversal of positions, and that Suleh has suffered in all cases: the family has been uprooted and a new dynamic of religious authority is in place, whilst his son has taken to wearing Western clothes and taking drugs. A claustrophobic sense of isolation closes in on Suleh, and this might productively be figured as his being ‘islanded’. The discourse that conceptualises islands as remote and bounded (that is to say, not dependent upon connections with other nodes in a system) would figure Singaporean Malays, and former island inhabitants in particular, as newly islanded upon Pulau Sebidang. Pak Suleh is emblematic of this discursive and physical islanding: he is both centralised on Pulau Ujong and peripheralised in terms of the power structures that now govern his daily life. He depends utterly on his immediate family members, but has little access to the wider community that he used to rule and mobilise. The crisis of Malayness in *Penghulu* can be reimagined as a process of islanding, which occurs as part of the government’s adherence to and promotion of lifestyles that are neatly accommodated to the process of national economic development. The novel situates the transformation of family dynamics in the processes of assisted migration and national development, and thus mediates the marginalisation and recentralisation of Malay-Muslims through the cultural politics of the family.

[365] Kahn, p. 85.

The novel ends with a description of Maiden's collapsing family life, as his punishment for prioritising national objectives over the wellbeing of his relatives. The very last paragraph, however, transitions into a critique of the government's dissemination of sensitive information:

> [N]ews about the failure of YB Maiden and his group, which had been reported in the *Harian Pagi* newspaper for one whole week, suddenly stopped. And so everyone made the assumption that the news had been barred from publication, because it was feared that such news would have a negative impact on the development of the minds of the younger generation. So there was yet another assumption that the reporting of such news had been prevented because it would have a negative impact on the development of the nation and its people, or more specifically, on the formation of mainstream thoughts and minds.[366]

The second assumption is that people need to be greedy and materialistic in order for the nation to prosper, and this prosperity is endangered by news depicting adherence to a way of life which is not based on wage or salaried labour. The novel thus counters the 'formation of mainstream thoughts and minds', as a text that represents the islander way of life in great detail. Acts of censorship may succeed in erasing wider memories of islander existence, on the part of inhabitants of Pulau Ujong, and thus cultivate a more official version of the 'Singapore Story'. However, *Penghulu* situates the struggle of islanders in the longer history of national economic development, as well as the extra-historical context of spiritual justice. The novel moves between history, memory, and myth in such a way as to confound the national narrative, whilst also denying straightforward nostalgia for the island way of life.

This stance is of particular interest in a novel that has been awarded multiple prizes by Singaporean institutions. Suratman won the Tun Seri Lanang Award in 1999 (one year after *Penghulu* was published in Malay). In 2011, he was awarded the Cultural Medallion. The English translation of *Penghulu* was published in Singapore, with financial assistance from the National Arts Council of Singapore, in 2012, and this edition is emblazoned with the banner 'Winner of the Cultural Medallion'. Clearly, *Penghulu* has been given a national platform by government institutions in Singapore – as well as in Malaysia, where the novel won the Nusantara Literary Award in 1999. The politics of prizewinning are fraught, and there may be multiple political, cultural, and aesthetic factors determining the winner of

[366] Suratman, pp. 242-3.

these prizes. Nevertheless, it is pertinent to ask: is *Penghulu* consecrating a politically useful version of history, or of Malayness? The conflation of Islam with Malayness certainly intersects with nationalist narratives in Malaysia, and also fits the racial classification systemisation in Singapore – but I do not mean to address the impossible question of whether the novel's approach to race is representative of a particular elite or subaltern group. Rather, I argue that the platform offered to the prizewinning text gives it a level of canonicity that, in turn, gives it a wide readership with which to share its imaginary, as well as a degree of prestige in consecrating this version of the 'Singapore Story'. *Penghulu* is dependent upon the dominant narrative of economic development, even as it departs from that narrative. The combination of the discourse of islandness and the representation of the process of islanding the islanders shows the contradiction here: embedded in the critique of the developmentalist narrative is an acceptance of many of its premises regarding the nature of islands and their secondment to national objectives. Suleh, for example, is insistent that he, Timun and Sohrah will only occupy the island for so long as they live, which he argues is not very long.[367] There is an acceptance that island living is consigned to the past, obsolete in the modern era, and yet there is a longing, on the part of the older (and more devoutly Muslim) characters, for this lifestyle. Whilst the assisted migration of islanders to Pulau Ujong is reluctant and sporadically resisted (chiefly by Sebidang's penghulu, who has the most to lose), it is accepted by many islanders. This is suggestive of a wilful nostalgia, in that islanders have changed their way of life, and promptly romanticise islander experience. At the same time, the prizewinning status of the novel canonises a version of Malayness as inherently embittered through the acts of marginalisation that are part of the development process. *Penghulu* historicises the development process, and in so doing, it historicises the 'Malay Problem' alongside Suleh's perceived crisis of Malayness.

In order to explore the representation of these crises, it is important to return to the mode of historicisation in this historical novel. As discussed above, the largely realist genre of the novel is inflected with non-realism in places, creating ruptures in the reading experience and in the shared imaginary. *Penghulu* moves beyond the realist mode of representation. The final scene of the family's disappearance, which denies realist closure, places historical events in a deeper sense of spiritual time and its accompanying justice. The departures from a plainly realist mode of representation mean that the processes of development and assisted migration are both historicised and dehistoricised in the same

[367] Ibid, p. 189.

text. The processes are shown in detail, with multiple actors and perspectives depicted, and yet they are placed in a cosmic order of time that justifies inaction in the short term (and on Earth), in anticipation of the meting out of divine justice. Nostalgia is not mobilised in the political idiom of resistance, since the novel puts faith in divine justice's overlap with social justice. This constitutes an undercutting of the 'Singapore Story' because it is only a partial embrace of the ideology of development. *Penghulu*'s historicisation of islander experience shows how the southern islands were seconded to Pulau Ujong in a manner that did not prioritise the needs of islanders themselves, who are repeatedly islanded. The various prizes help to sanctify a conception of the 'Singapore Story' that is rendered more of a Pulau Ujong Story, whilst suggesting that there will be justice in deeper time if people remain religious through their most precarious circumstances.

Heritage, Inclusion and Incorporation

Rawa's historicisation of the development drive, as pertains to Singapore's islands, combines a deeper historicisation of racial categorisation with a fragmentary narrative of assisted migration. In *Rawa*, there is less generational difference in evidence, and more emphasis on the circularity of historical processes and the parallels between generations. Where *Penghulu* emphasises characters' religious consciousness, and presents these as unified and transcendent, *Rawa* is more attentive to characters' sense of race in the pre-colonial, colonial, and post-independence history of the archipelago. Isa distinguishes between Malayness and Islam, and sees a longer arc of history in the category of Malay. Isa shows heritage as a method of being included in the national narrative, in the public eye (echoing Yeoh and Kong's understanding of heritage as public mode of legitimising government activity by reference to the past), whilst also representing the problems that this poses in terms of undercutting the national narrative as a whole. The tropology of islands is undercut, although the novel uses some of the discursive formulations that hold together the 'Singapore Story', including the conflation of Malayness and islandness. By engaging with the 'Malay Problem', *Rawa* succeeds in situating the government media's version of the narrative dynamics of the 'Problem' alongside a version borne of experience, in which the 'Problem' is the product of government action. The family experiences precarity as part of the government's development drive, and the family members have differing reactions to this. Lamit and Kuntum maintain that there is material progress that is a cause for celebration. Rawa laments the passing of his previous way of life, and tries in

vain to find modern Singapore's redeeming features. Hassan is keenly attuned to the opinions of each generation, and the novel's bittersweet ending narrates Hassan's incorporation into Singaporean modernity, on the government's terms, with the partial and tokenistic preservation of his grandfather's heritage.

The heritage that Rawa bequeaths to Hassan takes the form of a way of life, which, Rawa laments, is being destroyed.[368] The Orang Seletar nomadic and partially self-sufficient lifestyle is rendered redundant in the government's formation of a precariat. Scorn for wage labour is represented as part of the cultural makeup of the Orang Seletar and the Orang Kallang (another group that has been categorised as Malay). Rawa's Orang Kallang friend, Ayong, discusses how the waterways of the straits and swamps provide access to him, whereas they provide barriers to land-dwellers. He incorporates this into his derision of proletarianised Malays, when petitioned by Rawa to consider their point of view:

> "Are you not concerned that urban Malays say we're uncivilised?"
>
> "Urban Malays can say whatever they want. They're only wage earners. Slaves. But, I am free. I am able to go anywhere in my houseboat. No one bothers me."[369]

Ayong dies before he can witness the transformations that grip the areas he moves through on his houseboat, but his point remains valid: residing on land compares poorly to houseboat living in an archipelagic setting. The Orang Seletar, who Ayong recognises as fellow 'straits nomads',[370] share a relation to the sea that belies the enclosure-based mode of expansion of Singaporean development (and indeed capitalist expansion more widely). Their mode of self-sufficiency is nomadic, involving taking only what is needed from the environment for sustenance.[371] Rawa insists that the Orang Asli, who, 'have the same roots' as the Orang Seletar, in his words, 'take good care of the environment'.[372] The belief system underpinning the Orang Seletar ecological relationship involves 'liv[ing] harmoniously with trees, animals, rivers, wind, sea and land'.[373] This faith structures everyday encounters with the Seletar environment.

> This universe did not belong to humans. Nothing could be taken from nature without the permission of the guardians in charge. […] Rawa was comfortable with

[368] Isa, p. 71.
[369] Ibid, p. 18.
[370] Ibid, p. 17.
[371] Ibid, pp. 18, 24, 43, 81, 128.
[372] Ibid, p. 88.
[373] Ibid, p. 26.

> his way of life. Nature provided sustenance and protection from calamities. Now, however, his way of life was being disrupted.[374]

There is an awareness of the interconnectedness of ecological phenomena inherent in the Orang Seletar belief system, which is not compatible with drastic environmental change, and certainly not with the Singaporean materialism that is critiqued in *Rawa* and *Penghulu*. By seconding his gratification to spiritual imperatives, Rawa keeps any environmental change gradual, and allows for the possibility that the Seletar environment will regenerate. When Rawa converts to Islam in order to marry Temah, he finds that Islam, too, 'taught respect of nature', and only differed in 'details of worship'.[375] Whilst this description understates the difference between the ecological spirits worshipped by the Orang Seletar and the monotheism of Islam, it suggests that Rawa has not had to adjust greatly in order to become Muslim – and indeed he heralds the birth of his daughter in a syncretic ritual.[376] He remains in 'harmony with nature' after his conversion.[377]

This way of life might be said to follow biogeographical patterns: where food is available becomes home for the 'straits nomads'. This becomes incompatible as geopolitical priorities are exercised more rigorously, and Rawa laments that passports and marine police make the Orang Seletar way of life much more difficult.[378] Encroaching pollution from industry and nearby residential units poses a problem too, as the Orang Asli have to navigate waste in their rivers, dwindling fish stocks, and dying mangroves.[379] *Rawa* depicts the northern Seletar ecology at its most romanticised alongside a representation of the environmental degradation brought about by development:

> Temah looked out at the brightening sky and saw several seagulls diving into the water to catch their first meal of the day. At the shore, they saw fishermen casting nets. They looked happy, for the day promised to be good for fishing. […] Rawa turned left in search of tributaries amid the mangroves that linked the two sides under the landfill, which was passable only when the tide was high.[380]

In these examples of environmental degradation and effective criminalisation of nomadic self-sufficiency, it is clear that the Orang Seletar way of life is becoming untenable.

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[374] Ibid, pp. 26-7.
[375] Ibid, p. 57.
[376] Ibid, p. 56.
[377] Ibid, p. 58.
[378] Ibid, p. 87.
[379] Ibid, p. 88.
[380] Ibid, p. 77.

Incompatibility with the developmental logic of the Singaporean state has led to the state reducing Orang Seletar mobility and thus coercing them into taking up the offer of HDB apartments, and thus divorcing them from the ecological resources upon which they depend. By couching this critique in a partially harmonious image of Seletar ecology, Isa shows the scale of what is being lost, and how it is being lost through processes that prize national economic development over the prerogatives of the Orang Seletar community. It is with this in mind that Rawa laments that heritage and preservation are options only for buildings and monuments, rather than values and ways of life – or 'lifeworlds' as described by Yeoh and Kong.[381] The erasure of the Orang Seletar way of life entails further erasures: that of the possibility of the Orang Seletar way of life, and that of the history of the Orang Seletar. Because the 'straits nomads' do not build monuments, there is no physical structure recognised by the state, and the novel therefore turns to the practice of canoeing and the symbolic ring– which is as much family heirloom as cultural heritage – to play this role (as we shall see below).

The history of the 'straits nomads' is elaborated through conversations in *Rawa*, however, and the novel thus combats some of the erasures that are endemic to the 'Singapore Story'. The racial classifications that the PAP inherit from colonial rule are complicated by *Rawa*'s recollection of character's ethnic backgrounds, as divergent, regional histories of race intertwine with Rawa's own family history. Ayong recalls that his '"grandfather on my mother's side was Daik. He converted to Islam while living in Kallang, influenced by the many Indian and Arab merchants who traded there."'[382] The Malay-Muslim identity is not entirely confounded by this description, but Ayong's lineage complicates the racial classification somewhat – as does his admission that he has never entered a mosque.[383] Taking into account this difference, however, Ayong accepts the category of Malay:

> We're all of the same species; the people of Kallang, Seletar, the Riau islands, the straits Malays. We're all brown skinned. We speak more or less the same language. Only our beliefs and habits are a little different.[384]

The differences in belief and habit are being erased, however, by the government's processes of assisted migration requiring that the 'straits nomads' root themselves on land

[381] Ibid, p. 71.
[382] Ibid, p. 16.
[383] Ibid, p. 16.
[384] Ibid, p. 19.

– in combination with the dominant faith in Islam amongst the land-dwelling Malays. Malays become more homogeneous in belief and practices, as they are resettled into HDB units, proletarianised, and strongly encouraged, through social pressures, to convert to Islam. To Rawa's surprise, his father-in-law – the man who required Rawa convert to Islam to marry Temah – has a Cham Malay background, meaning his ancestors travelled to the straits from Vietnam. In *Rawa*, race is represented as a regional phenomenon, crossing geopolitical borders, even as it is subjected to national objectives and influenced by the ethno-nationalist rhetoric of Malaysia's ruling party. Temah fears that she has '"heard too many cries of 'Hidup Melayu' [in the kampung]. And, from what I've heard, the Chinese in Nee Soon are living in fear because they are surrounded by Malay villages."'[385] This is presented as a cause for concern because '"[t]he Orang Seletar are close to the Chinese, and I wonder how the Malays feel about that."'[386] The ethno-nationalist cry of 'Hidup Melayu', 'Long Live the Malays',[387] threatens to destabilise the network of trade and communications enjoyed by the Orang Seletar. This is not a result of processes of Singaporean development, but rather an influence from Malaysian politics. It compounds the precaritising and islanding processes that isolate the Orang Seletar and other 'straits nomads' from each other and from the network upon which they depend. If there is a 'Malay Problem' apparent in *Rawa*, it emerges chiefly from the problems caused to the 'straits nomads' by the Singaporean state in its development drive.

Rawa historicises race, then, in a manner that complicates the straightforward racial classifications that permeate the official discourse of the 'Singapore Story'. The novel also reintegrates the Seletar ecology with the longer versions of Singapore's history, which do not hinge on the development drive undertaken by the PAP. Parameswara, one of the kings reported in the *Malay Annals* as foundational to the settlement on Pulau Ujong (as the last ruler of Temasek, the settlement on Pulau Ujong, and the first to call the city Singapura),[388] is said to have hidden in the swamps of Seletar after murdering his host.[389] Further touchstones of the elongated 'Singapore Story' are woven into the history of Seletar. During the Japanese Occupation, many Chinese hid in the swamps, among the Orang Seletar, to avoid detection and imprisonment or death at the hands of the

[385] Ibid, pp. 58-9.
[386] Ibid, p. 58.
[387] Anthony Reid, 'Understanding Melayu (Malay) as a Source of Diverse Modern Identities', in *Contesting Malayness: Malay Identity Across Boundaries*, pp. 1-24 (p. 17).
[388] Turnbull, pp. 21-2.
[389] Isa, p. 16.

invaders.[390] '"This is a historic place […]. The Seletar swamp has many stories like this,"' says Ayong to Rawa.[391] By imbricating the swamp with the longer histories of settlement on Pulau Ujong, *Rawa* renders Seletar a place of historic importance. It is the specific ecology of Seletar which is amenable to these stories, too: neither Parameswara nor the Chinese could have hid in the concretised landscape of a dam and reservoir. The developmental logic that is celebrated in the narrower versions of the 'Singapore Story' actively erases the possibilities that the longer histories permitted, and further erases the traces of the past on the landscape. The novel therefore combats the erasure by narrating the process of erasure. Through snippets of conversation, Isa builds an archipelagic understanding of his existence, which precedes neoliberal-developmental programmes and which remains residual in the nostalgic community of resettled Orang Seletar and islanders.

If we consider Singapore as a cluster of islands, rather than a single island, how does the 'Singapore Story' change? There are clearly more island histories to recuperate and incorporate, but there is also a fresh awareness of the networked nature of the islands. There are routes across and between the islands that exceed the neoliberal conception of Pulau Ujong as the regional free trade hub, as prefigured by colonial forces in 1819. The presence of trade and cultural linkages between islands means the islander 'self-sufficiency' is debunked in favour of a conception that takes into account the co-dependence of islands within Singapore and beyond Singapore, in archipelagic dynamics that move beyond the 'Singapore Story' frame of reference. *Penghulu* and *Rawa* might be said to exhibit an archipelagic structure of feeling, to borrow a phrase developed by Raymond Williams. In *Marxism and Literature* (1977), Williams outlines his concept of a structure of feeling, claiming it to be 'a social experience which is still in process', offering 'meaning and values as they are actively lived and felt'.[392] It includes a set of psychological phenomena or collective imaginaries which have 'specific internal relations, at once interlocking and in tension'.[393] An archipelagic structure of feeling would entail an awareness of the networked nature of islands, or to put it another way, it would flip the colonial and neocolonial isolation and exploitation of islands (in processes I describe as 'being islanded') to emphasise connectedness, dynamism and mutual support between islands (what I will call a positive form of 'islanding'). Geographer Jonathan Pugh has argued that 'the notion of the archipelago unsettles static tropes of singularity, isolation,

[390] Ibid, pp. 15-16.
[391] Ibid, p. 16.
[392] Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 132.
[393] Ibid, p. 132.

dependency and peripherality', on account of its emphasis on connections over borders.[394] Literary critic Brian Bernards has also commented on 'the centrality of the [Southeast Asian] seas in connecting cultures across the region'.[395] In this rearticulation of islandness, the archipelagic space is reframed as productively connected, defying colonial logic in which the island is a 'fixed space that is easily accessed and assessed', in the words of cultural critics Brian Russell Roberts and Michelle Ann Stephens.[396] In *Rawa*, positive islanding is evident from Rawa's insistence on the mutually supportive relations between his community and their environment. In *Penghulu*, islands are shown to be interconnected but also self-sufficient to a degree, and not totally dependent upon Pulau Ujong. The mainland-offshore binary is exploded in both of these instances, as an archipelagic structure of feeling takes precedence over government-sponsored development discourse. These novels both exhibit an archipelagic structure of feeling, and contribute to its dissemination in novel form. The engagement with history, which re-historicises islandness in the context of neoliberal development, prompts these articulations of islands as co-dependent and networked. These expressions are not abstracted and 'purely' ideological, but rather embedded in conversation and practices, as described in the fictional works. They indicate the lasting presence of longer and more disparate histories than are accommodated into the 'Singapore Story', even as it expands to incorporate islander experiences. The national narrative's neoliberal-developmental trajectory cannot account for the plurality of regional, archipelagic histories that can be salvaged and circulated in historical fiction.

Rawa regionalises the problems of a constrictive society, and extends the vision of suffering to non-human animals to offer readers a glimpse of the nomadic, archipelagic structure of feeling that subverts government-promulgated tropes of 'backwardness' and isolation. Rawa orients the history of Singapore's succession of Prime Ministers (as told to Hassan) according to what he read in the news, and Goh Chok Tong's ascension to Premiership is associated, to Rawa, with elephants:

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[394] Jonathan Pugh, 'Island Movements: Thinking with the Archipelago', *Island Studies* 8.1 (2013), 9-24, pp. 10-11.

[395] Brian Bernards, 'Introduction' in *Writing the South Seas: Imagining the Nanyang in Chinese and Southeast Asian Postcolonial Literature* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2015), pp. 3-28 (p. 15).

[396] Brian Russell Roberts and Michelle Ann Stephens, 'Introduction' in *Archipelagic American Studies*, ed.by Brian Russell Roberts and Michelle Ann Stephens (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017), pp. 1-54 (p. 28).

> "I still remember the kerfuffle when three elephants swam from Johor to Singapore across the straits. […] Some environmentalists from Malaysia managed to trap and tranquilise them, and, with the help of two tame animals, coax them onto lorries to take them back. […] But what's more interesting is that another elephant, this time a bull, managed to swim the straits to Ubin Island the following year. […] Two tame females, Cik Mek and Mek Bunga, were brought in to persuade the bull to climb a lorry to return to Malaysia. I believe that the bull was released in the jungles of Endau-Rompin. Unfortunately, it's also one of the areas being heavily logged; elephants are rapidly losing living space."
>
> "People are the predators now."[397]

The elephants experience habitat loss as a consequence of the geopolitical developments of the era. Malaysia is industrialising in a similar manner to Singapore, and fells forests to expand its industry. The elephants are pushed out of their diminishing space, looking for better opportunities for survival elsewhere. The parallel with the humans is palpable. Malaysia and Singapore are cooperative in the endeavour to capture the elephants, but the animals are offered no long-term solution. Hassan figures humans as the problem, but it is a very specific version of human activity which is causing the elephants to lose their living space – it is developmentalist capitalism's expansion of its frontiers into the jungle at fault here. That Rawa should structure his memory of a geopolitical event in accordance with the migration of animals (a biogeographical event) is indicative of his worldview spent on the island and swampland margins, with great respect for the environment around him.

Rawa continues to juxtapose the condition of the displaced elephants and the developmental refugees from Seletar, to highlight the precarity endured by his family. He insists upon framing the family's struggle as stemming from government policy, comparable with that of caged animals, even as the government frames the struggle as a 'Malay Problem':

> Rawa rocks his head back and forth, visualising Lamit and Kuntum's lives, trapped in the corner of bustle and neglect, like the elephants, tranquilized to be rendered tame enough to be coaxed into an orderly life-cage, their lives forever in want.

[397] Isa, pp. 90-91.

> He finds it strange. They are not mired in poverty, yet live in want. They have a house and a car, a big television and a fridge, air-conditioning in every room, and expensive furniture. Yet, life is a daily struggle.[398]

The emphasis on orderliness troubles Rawa, and this interlinks with the government's drive for cleanliness, explored in Chapter One of this thesis, and which chiefly served to re-order people's lives to render them conducive to profit extraction. The precarity of the situation is evident from Rawa's description of the household possessions. They have the items that allow them to function as workers in reasonable health, yet they struggle to make ends meet. The biogeographical comparison illuminates the desperation that the family feel, but also highlights the imbalance in agency between the state and the precarious – and indeed, the state's role in the creation of precarity. After drawing this comparison, Rawa diagnoses the problem as a fundamental lack of spirituality on the part of the Malays, in the face of developmentalist discourse:

> The newscast confirms his worst fears. Divorce is highest amongst Malays. The number of Malay addicts in rehab centres is not decreasing. There is a rise in gangsterism, and births out of wedlock. And there is no shortage of 'forums' to address these issues.
>
> It is clear; the Malays are not coping well.[399]

By arguing that there is a crisis in Malayness, Rawa slips into adopting official discourses on race and poverty. By imagining the problems facing the Malays to be uniquely Malay problems, he compounds the process of islanding that the government encourages. Rawa identifies issues that he considers social problems for Malays, and suggests that this constitutes a crisis of Malayness. The novel, however adds considerably more nuance to this presentation of society, by showing the fluidity of Malay identity. Malays were not always islanded, *Rawa* suggests, or at least, not islanded through the dynamics of neoliberal-developmentalist capitalism.

We have already seen how Rawa cherishes memories of visiting Nee Soon village. It is this networked integration into the community of islands and islanded communities that is celebrated by *Rawa*. Rawa describes the history of the Orang Seletar to highlight the disjuncture between the colonially administered core of southeast Pulau Ujong and the more marginal areas that came under British rule without coming to British attention. He

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[398] Ibid, p. 93.
[399] Ibid, p. 93.

outlines how Orang Seletar were apart from, and barely affected by colonial transformations.[400] They, too, are islanded in idealised isolation:

> "This entire region, was where we lived and played. We owned nothing; we only borrowed it from time to time for temporary usage. We only took what we needed from wherever we stopped to rest, never more. So we didn't have struggles over property or power." Rawa sounded sad, lost in nostalgia.
>
> "But our life is different now. We have to grab every opportunity that comes our way, or we'll be left behind," Lamit adds. He worries about the negative impact of his father-in-law on his son's ambitions.[401]

Rawa's description draws on the narrative of development and progress, but it recasts this development as a problem rather than a panacea. The mode of development that is expanding across the areas favoured by the Orang Seletar interferes with the networked, islanded nature of their community – in opposition to the bounded islanded representation of the Malays in Singapore more widely. The tension in the mode of islanding – as either networked or bounded – means that the trajectory of the 'Singapore Story' is not utterly undercut, but it is complicated. Isa repurposes the national narrative to add a subplot of spiritual devaluation, whilst also mapping the narrative across Singapore's jurisdiction. The 'Singapore Story', here, is the story of the metropolis of southeast Pulau Ujong expanding unevenly across the waterways to the nation's contemporary outer limits. Generational difference is apparent in this conversation, informed by the cultural milieu of each family member. Hassan is presented with two divergent options – an emergent and a residual culture, represented by his father and his grandfather, and, it is implied, he must choose one. Hassan is therefore called upon to validate one mode of existence or the other, or he will, to use Lamit's phrase, be 'left behind'.

The idea of being 'left behind' by the neoliberal-developmental mode that expands across Singapore's jurisdiction reverberates through the novel:

> "People are too busy with their own lives… but… what else do we need in life? You only have to look at the past to see how far Singapore has come. We are now considered as a developed country."
>
> "But I see many who are left behind," Rawa provokes his son-in-law.

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[400] Ibid, p. 127.
[401] Ibid, pp. 127-8.

> Lamit remains calm.
>
> "Yes, I do understand why you say that. You grew up in an old world. I was born after independence, and I have seen only progress and development."[402]

The exchange suggests that Rawa is not enjoying the progress and development that Lamit celebrates – although it is clear from the plot of the novel that there is little to celebrate for Lamit, either. Rawa's claim to have seen people who are 'left behind' refers to an earlier episode in the novel, in which it is made explicit that those 'left behind' are the elderly – those who cannot be proletarianised. When walking through Ang Mo Kio with Hassan, to visit the library, Rawa 'notices many seniors in the crowd, in the food courts, or idling on park benches'. When he asks Hassan why this is, Hassan explains that the district has 'an old-folks home' – a concept that has to be explained to Rawa:[403]

> "People unable or unwilling to look after their old folk send them there."
>
> "Oh my God! Do people do that?!" Rawa whispers to himself. He now understands. This is the downside of development. Those unable to cope are left behind. He is glad and feels lucky that Kuntum and Lamit have taken him in.[404]

Rawa observes that development produces family dynamics that do not favour living together. The man is 'left behind', islanded in much the same way as *Penghulu*'s Pulau Sebidang; the man is marooned in time as well as space, to be incorporated back into the neoliberal-developmentalist, Pulau Ujong-centric system – in this case, as a paying customer at the nursing home. The new housing regime means that the elderly become an economic burden, rather than simply a family member. When Hassan waves at the elderly stranger, the man 'turns around and goes inside. He continues to watch them through a window, though'.[405] The elderly are figured as observers, rather than partakers of modern Singapore. By showing the home's residents jealously watching an elderly man being doted upon, Isa shows that Rawa is an unusual case in preserving an extended family dynamic into the new housing regime. By having Hassan notice this, Isa sets up the concept of being 'left behind' for future conversations and future scenarios, creating tension between family members and generations in the abstract, as well as the cultural impetus behind each position.

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[402] Ibid, p. 92.
[403] Ibid, pp. 46-7.
[404] Ibid, p. 47.
[405] Ibid, p. 48.

The novel recognises that Lamit enjoys material comfort as a consequence of his hard work, and avoids being fully ‘left behind’. Alongside this recognition, however, is a sense of encroaching precaritisation in his work, and in the work of Kuntum. For Kuntum and Lamit, moving from the Seletar River was not such a traumatic experience. Whilst they could not afford to move straight into a conventional HDB flat, they live in the Sembawang barracks of the old British naval base for five years before saving up enough money to put a deposit on the apartment in Yishun. There were welcome surprises in the amenities for the couple in Sembawang, rather than upsetting shocks: lights were operated with a switch, not a lamp; they cooked with gas, not firewood; and there were flush toilets rather than nearby bushes.[406] The eventual move into HDB housing involved similar surprises: they had a TV and fridge, and buses connected them to everything they could want to visit.[407] Soon, the stability and comfort of their new home unravels. Kuntum works as a shift worker on a production line in a TV factory[408] – precisely the sort of job that is celebrated as blossoming in Singapore in the ‘Singapore Story’, because it emblematises swift and shared development. For Lamit, too, the job fits the narrative of progress:

> “Work is manageable and the pay is good. I used to be a manual worker before, but now I’m a welder. The company sponsored my training. […] [W]e have strict safety regulations. The shipyard has grown very big now and we repair ships from all over the world.”[409]

Lamit feels a sense of belonging at the shipyard, as a valued employee. Before long, this situation changes and both Lamit and Kuntum feel their grasp on their jobs to be precarious:

> “They say that the company is not getting job orders like is used to. Fewer ships are coming in for repairs. There are too many workers with nothing to do who sit around idling, me included.”
>
> “What are we to do then? Similar rumours are going around in my factory too, and there is also talk or retrenchment. My supervisor says that the cost of labour in

[406] Ibid, pp. 106-7.
[407] Ibid, p. 108.
[408] Ibid, p. 37.
[409] Ibid, p. 37.

> Singapore is too high, as a result of which many companies are relocating to neighbouring countries," she said.[410]

Productivity and labour costs are the reasons behind the sudden realisation that they are precarious, but this does not constitute the sudden onset of precarity. Because laws and union representation favours companies – and this was part of Lee Kuan Yew's mission in making Singapore an industrial hub[411] – workers in the sort of jobs undertaken by Lamit and Kuntum are vulnerable to the predations of market patterns. Their exposure to global labour market forces means that they are at risk of losing their jobs completely if a better offer (of both low wages and good infrastructure) appears nearby. It is no coincidence that both Kuntum and Lamit experience this vulnerability at the same time, because it is the same global market forces that cause their employers to consider their positions.

The workers are compelled to increase their productivity in order to remain in a job. When Kuntum misses a family day out, Hassan asks why this is the case. Lamit does not answer the question, but knows that 'Kuntum has to work overtime because she needs to keep her job. Many employees in her factory have been let go for being ill too often, or not working hard enough'.[412] The seemingly arbitrary nature of the sackings keeps everyone else anxiously working longer hours, effectively in competition with labourers in neighbouring countries. In order to offset the risks of losing their jobs, employees were encouraged by the government to build up their own skillset and therefore remain attractive to other employers even if they lost their jobs in the short-term. This 'upgrading discourse', as Eugene Liow calls it, makes it incumbent upon the worker to train themselves in their spare time, theoretically boosting their productivity and taking the burden of training from the employer.[413] In *Rawa*, Lamit hears about the drive for workers to upgrade their skillset from TV:

> [Lamit] selects a channel on the television. It's *Selamat Pagi Singapura (Good Morning Singapore)*, a news magazine targeted at Malays. A human resource "expert" is talking about training programmes and skill upgrading for the job market. Lamit wonders how that would apply to him. How could he afford courses

[410] Ibid, p. 66.
[411] Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First*, p. 108.
[412] Isa, p. 70.
[413] Eugene Dili Liow, 'The Neoliberal-Developmental State', p. 255.

> and programmes that cost so much, when he has hardly enough for his family? Blue collar workers like him are the most vulnerable, he thinks.[414]

Isa ironises the policy in such a way as to show workers like Lamit in a cruel position: where he used to get training from his former employer, who has since made him redundant, it is now up to Lamit to keep himself employable. He receives the government's message from TV, and this is an instance in which the government uses products that symbolise rapid economic development (and which Kuntum used to manufacture) to deepen Lamit's precarity. Since the 'Malay Problem' as articulated by the government is characterised by 'economic backwardness and social problems', this targeting of Malay speakers is ironised further.[415] Official discourse creates and defines the problem of precarity to a great extent, and entangles it with Malayness (even though precarity is demonstrably an observable phenomenon for all races in Singapore), without recognition of the government's role in exacerbating precarity.

Precarity envelops the life of the other central working-age Malay character of *Rawa*, Kuntum. She returns home with her redundancy letter as Lamit watches *Selamat Pagi Singapura*.[416] The technical skillset that she has built up whilst working at the factory is proven redundant, too, as she is forced into casualised labour to supplement the family income however she can. She attends the *pasar* (market) to sell nasi lemak and 'traditional sweetmeats' – echoing Rawa's memory of when '"she used to sell white-cempaka flowers at the *pasar* in Kampung Lorong Mayang with Temah when she was little. She was free and happy then. Now, I only see her consumed with worry about money."'[417] Such casualised work is a hallmark of precarity.[418] Kuntum slips into depression for three months, and visualises the river of her childhood as a means of coping with the harsh obligations of the present.[419] Once more, the novel appears to accept the premise that the deleterious experiences of its protagonists are due to a wider 'Malay Problem'.

Throughout the novel, Hassan is presented as occupying the middle ground between his parents' generation and his grandparents' generation, in terms of cultural and economic prerogatives. Where Rawa lived on a houseboat the he maintained himself, and Lamit worked in a shipyard, in repairs, Hassan trains to be a naval architect. He therefore

[414] Isa, p. 85.
[415] Kamaludeen, p. 309.
[416] Isa, p. 85.
[417] Ibid, p. 92.
[418] Standing, p. 34.
[419] Isa, p. 109.

works with the same style of ship as his father, but has better prospects. He also continues a lineage of working with boats, and satisfies his grandfather with this compromise between cultural preservation and economic necessity. Hassan trains in canoeing, too, and Rawa joins him.[420] When they are proficient, they are invited to take part in a canoeing expedition by their canoeing club. The trip will take them 'around the entire island of Singapore', and this will include Pedra Branca or Batu Puteh Island, the island disputed by Singapore and Malaysia,[421] and which is the subject of *Rawa*'s prologue. The prologue foreshadows this finale by reporting that the International Court of Justice had given the islands to Singapore, but also pointing out that '[p]olitical wrangling between the two countries does not affect him. […] In his heart, the island is not Batu Puteh or Pedra Branca, but Rawa'.[422] By the time of the expedition, Rawa has had dreams about the ring, which was his inheritance from his father, and which was awarded to his father by the Sultan of Johor for killing a tiger.[423] He has been dreaming that the ring is connected to an episode in his life where he was struck by a container ship, whilst out in his wooden canoe, and eventually returned home to discover his wife missing. When he eventually found his wife, she would not speak. The novel hints at what has happened in an obscure manner: his friend Ayong, who seemed to die at the beginning of the novel, is revealed to be a smuggler and may have trafficked Temah.[424] Through these dreams, Rawa becomes convinced that Ayong has his ring, and placed it on Pedra Branca, before challenging Rawa to canoe there.[425] With his grandson's help, and in the spotlight of the national media, Rawa reaches Pedra Branca, but he does not find the ring there. He suffers a heart attack and dies in Hassan's presence.[426]

It is at this juncture that Hassan opts to not leave his grandfather behind, or allow anyone else to take his body back to Pulau Ujong:

> Everyone looks out to the sea, waiting for the first sight of the canoe. When they see it, they see two forms in it and a police patrol boat following at a distance. They see the oarsman rowing back strongly. […] The oarsman has stubbornly insisted on rowing back to Changi by himself, rejecting the offer of a ride from the marine police. […] So he hadn't stopped at all for five whole hours, despite his muscles

[420] Ibid, pp. 73-4.
[421] Ibid, p. 149.
[422] Ibid, p. 7.
[423] Ibid, pp. 100-1, 121-2.
[424] Ibid, pp. 162-3.
[425] Ibid, pp. 121-2.
[426] Ibid, pp. 164-5, 169.

> screaming for rest, the canoe seemingly getting heavier and heavier as time passed, and his difficultly in navigating all by himself. It was fortuitous that the sea was calm though, and it was heart-warming to watch the small waves lapping his canoe gently as if they too were paying their last respects to his grandfather.[427]

In this affirmative ending to the novel, it is clear that Hassan has been attentive to the problems posed by his grandfather's assisted migration and his parents' retrenchment, and refuses to allow his grandfather to be 'left behind'. As such, he takes on the burden of his grandfather in literal and physical terms, not simply economic ones, and he does so proudly in front of a national audience. The novel takes the audience's perspective for a brief interlude, in which Hassan becomes 'the oarsman', making him an abstracted, heroic figure who conveys a message of familial resilience to the media arranged on Changi beach. By performing a pastiche of the role of a 'straits nomad' as a leisure activity, in front of the same government media which promulgates a 'Malay Problem', Hassan overturns the tropes that constrain Malay, and Orang Seletar, representations. Hassan seems to have the sea's aid as he traverses the route between islands, and the novel suggests that this is a manifestation of respect on the part of the environment which sustained Rawa for a large portion of his life. When he reaches the beach, an unnamed man (presumably Ayong) gives Hassan the symbolic ring.[428] This ring can thus be read as binding in multiple ways. It binds the past to the present (and through the figure of Hassan, to the future); it binds the islands to each other through the route travelled by the characters over the course of this section of the novel; and it binds the Orang Seletar to the archipelago. It consecrates an archipelagic structure of feeling, highlighting emotional and cultural linkage beyond the purely economic demands of neoliberal-developmental Singapore. The character of Hassan therefore demonstrates that there is reason for optimism for the preservation of Orang Seletar heritage in Singapore: he manoeuvres between the spheres of 'developed' modernity and a culture which is being displaced. The movement between islands that closes the novel is fulfilling in this sense, but in a way that cannot stand for the preservation of all Orang Seletar culture, and which came with sacrifices and struggle.

The symbolic place of Rawa's death, the disputed Pedra Branca Island, was of course a provocative place to feature in an expedition which claims to circle Singapore. An otherwise benign leisure activity (and possibly one of the ones to which Rawa objected when he saw them on the Seletar reservoir) serves the national objective of staking a claim

[427] Ibid, pp. 168-9.
[428] Ibid, p. 172.

to the island and incorporating it as a Singaporean island into a shared imaginary. Predictably, there are administrative problems that arise from Rawa's death, chiefly arising from his Malaysian citizenship, and the event organiser faces questions as to 'why the deceased, who was not a Singapore national, was allowed to participate in the expedition'.[429] Clearly, there is governmental anxiety over the national claim to the island, as the decision regarding sovereignty was impending[430] – and this expedition was fulfilling national objectives, however indirectly. The Singaporean insistence that he acquire an ID card to be eligible for an HDB apartment led to his migration to Johor, under the protection of the Sultan of Johor in Malaysia, which meant that he was granted Malaysian citizenship.[431] Isa is at pains to point out that Pedra Branca was, historically, in the Sultanate of Johor, and indeed this was the basis for Malaysia's claim.[432] The novel therefore ironises the anxiety over Rawa's nationality, since he lived in Singaporean territory until he was evicted by government agents, and who then became a subject of the historic ruler of Pedra Branca. The irony of the official response is deepened by the affable relations between Singaporeans and Malaysians throughout this dispute. Hassan observes 'the Singapore Marine Police waving to their Malaysian counterparts, who reciprocated likewise as they left the island, and the tension dissipated'.[433] This bears out Rawa's earlier description of Singapore-Malaysia tensions as '"only political"'. Despite the geopolitical machinations that rumble between governments, the people caught in the middle retain affection for each other, and this is manifested through small gestures which emphasise the commonalities between Malaysian and Singaporean citizens, rather than their differences. Family and community bonds can and do cross the straits, and this constitutes a minor departure from the national, Pulau Ujong-centric emphasis of the 'Singapore Story'. That these transnational bonds should preserve the heritage of the Orang Seletar, who are indigenous to Singapore, is a more radical subversion, and it complicates the islandness of the 'Singapore Story'. The government's national objectives in the construction of the reservoir overrode those of affected Singaporeans, yet in staking a claim to Pedra Branca and encouraging Singaporeans to see these islands as Singaporean, the government facilitates an exercise in heritage preservation. Rawa's participation as a Malaysian citizen is another small gesture that combats the celebration of the

[429] Ibid, pp. 170-1.
[430] Ibid, p. 171.
[431] Ibid, p. 99.
[432] Ibid, pp. 120-1.
[433] Ibid, p. 170.

developmentalist, heritage-sacrificing logic inherent to the 'Singapore Story', which disdains non-wage earning communities such as the Orang Seletar.

Rawa, then, functions to include the Orang Seletar in the 'Singapore Story'. The narration shows the centrality of these Orang Seletar characters to Singapore's claim to Pedra Branca. It is also important to note the limits to this mode of inclusion. Ironically, Hassan and Rawa's excursion constitutes a furthering of national goals, when Rawa has previously been demonstrating subscription to an archipelagic structure of feeling, coupled with a celebration of transnational commonalities. In addition, Hassan's Orang Seletar inheritance is literally tokenistic. Whilst the nomadic, houseboat-based way of life is made obsolete, Hassan preserves his fascination with watercraft and a family heirloom, which is a token of the way of life that is demolished as developmental ideology is implemented across Seletar. Orang Seletar culture is no longer even residual – it is a memory, to be prompted by this ring. Hassan remains, in Rawa's words, 'an exemplary citizen of the rational society'.[434] Hassan's performance of the Orang Seletar culture remains a pastiche, because it is a leisure activity rather than a networked 'straits nomad' journey that upholds the Orang Seletar way of life. In this sense, the practice is commodified and re-purposed for profit-making purposes. By situating Hassan's heroic efforts in this context, Isa demonstrates that small acts of resistance against neoliberal-developmental ideology are possible, even if these actions are captured into the service of the ideology of the state. Hassan's actions reinsert the Orang Seletar into the national narrative, and in a considerably more positive light than the 'Singapore Story', as delineated earlier in the novel, could accommodate.

As Hassan inherits an item of historical importance to the Orang Seletar, the novel demonstrates the dominant national narrative's inheritance of – and indeed reliance upon – the tropes of the colonial history of Singapore, which has enough currency in the Singaporean public sphere as to require rebuttal:

> "Tok, is it true that the Orang Seletar living in the Tebrau Straits were pirates?"
>
> "Hey! Where did you hear that?"
>
> "In a history book about Raffles coming in Singapore in 1819. According to records, he found about 500 Orang Seletar in Singapore. And most were pirates."

[434] Ibid, p. 150.

> "That's nonsense, San. […] You have to question everything you hear, San. Don't believe everything blindly."[435]

In this conversation between Hassan and Rawa, the colonial legacy of definitions and criminalisation is discussed. This is all the more pertinent because it reflects uncannily on the discursive facilitation of processes of assisted migration undertaken by Singapore's independent government. The label of piracy was a delegitimising one, and applied to traders who operated without British approval, or privateers who operated without the support of Britain or a rival European power.[436] Syed Hussein Alatas also points out that piracy was 'exaggerated in order to justify colonial rule', even though in practice, 'piracy, murder and looting were present in the colonial ruling class as they were among the native ruling class'.[437] There is a degree of continuity from the colonial regime into the present, in that discursive delegitimation of people allows the government to justify its exercise of power against those that it views as obstructing its objectives. The Singaporean government does not murder or loot, by any means, but it does confiscate land, block marine routes, and circumscribe ecological resources within an area. The persistence of colonial-era structures of power leads to Rawa's warning to Hassan to engage in critical thinking when presented with sources such as a history book that celebrates Raffles' 'founding' moment. As we have seen above, Rawa favours a version of history that extends beyond 1819 in such a manner as to undermine the 'Singapore Story' and its perpetuation of stereotypes regarding Malays. Once again, he evinces an archipelagic structure of feeling, actively islanding in a manner that reaches out in temporal as well as spatial terms, to confirm transnational bonds.

The subversion of the national narrative, then, emerges through an altered perspective to that of the dominant 'Singapore Story'. When Lamit describes the treaties that led to the formation of Singapore and the Straits Settlements, Rawa interrupts:

> "History always sides with those with the power and knowledge, San. The weak, the simple and the selfish will be exploited and pushed aside," Rawa who has been

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[435] Ibid, p. 34.

[436] Carl A. Trocki, *Prince of Pirates: The Temenggongs and the Development of Johor and Singapore, 1784-1885* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1979), p. 56; James Warren, *Pirates, Prostitutes and Pullers: Explorations in the Ethno- and Social History of Southeast Asia* (Crawley: University of Western Australia Press, 2008), pp. 134-5, 145.

[437] Syed Hussein Alatas, *The Myth of the Lazy Native: A study of the image of the Malays, Filipinos and Javanese from the 16th to the 20th century and its function in the ideology of colonial capitalism* (London: Frank Cass and Co., 1977), pp. 130, 134.

> listening to their exchange in the living room interjects, while watching *The Singapore Story* on television.[438]

The detail of Rawa's viewing matter steeps the conversation in irony; he could be referring to either the colonial or independent Singaporean government's justifications of their actions. The textbook that Lamit imitates would certainly have been written by those with power and knowledge, and who wish to promote a version of history that is conducive to present-day objectives. Since the curriculum is shaped at a national level, Hassan can expect to be confronted with a version of history that promotes national objectives, which include economic development in the neoliberal mode. Contemporary historians are of course chipping away at the monumental version of Singaporean history, but they face repercussions for doing so, as well as the limitations of a national archive that has not been declassified.[439] *Rawa* offers a counterpoint to the 'Singapore Story' can be cultivated and shared, as space for consideration of alternative modes of development is opened up.

This space is created most explicitly during a conversation between Hassan and Kuntum, in which Hassan asks a pointed question of his mother:

> "Where were you happier: at Seletar River, or in Yishun?" […]
>
> "It's not easy to compare the two, San. We were very poor in those days. Everything has changed now and has progressed. It's difficult to compare."
>
> "I'm only asking a question: were you happier then, compared with now?"
>
> "I was happier when I was a child. I had no responsibilities. […] The question of whether I was happier on the Seletar River or in this flat does not arise, because the Orang Seletar were forced to leave their homes. We were given no choice."[440]

Whilst Hassan is openly considering the alternatives, Kuntum refuses to accept that the Orang Seletar way of life was an alternative, because it has now been prevented. It is made clear that this is not the result of an active choice on Kuntum's part, and indeed it is apparent from her fond memories of childhood that she did prefer life on the river. She ascribes this preference to the simple fact of it being her childhood, rather than the particularities of the Seletar setting. Just as Rawa is 'determined to adjust' and 'stop being

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[438] Ibid, p. 126.
[439] Loh Kah Seng, 'An Annotated Bibliography of Operation Coldstore', *New Mandala*, 15 January 2015, http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/newmandala/2015/01/15/the-history-writes-itself-an-annotated-bibliography-of-operation-coldstore/ Accessed 4 March 2016.
[440] Isa, pp. 124-5.

nostalgic',[441] Kuntum reframes her positive memories of the Orang Seletar way of life as nostalgia, and thus unworthy of serious consideration alongside the mode of development that has brought change and progress (however nebulously this progress is defined). The nostalgic community that is foregrounded in *Rawa* is that of the southern islanders, though, not Singaporeans more broadly. The narrative offered here, in which the past is presented in a partially nostalgic but ambivalent manner, is not amenable to incorporation into a more inclusive 'Singapore Story' because it does not present itself as a Singaporean narrative. Rather, it is an Orang Seletar narrative, a Malay narrative, and an islander narrative, in which an archipelagic structure of feeling is foregrounded. A nascent curiosity about alternative models to the dominant developmental mode is instilled in Hassan. Some form of cultural preservation is shown to be possible amid the onslaught of development and redevelopment, even if an alternative is not fully presented.

Conclusion: Precarity in the 'Island Nation'

Rawa shows how the Orang Seletar are islanded (in a passive sense) by the government, and it also shows a more active and productive island-based set of relations. The novel's representation of processes of active islanding, emphasising the inclusive network between sites such as Johor and Nee Soon, is suggestive of an archipelagic structure of feeling, in which cultural and social linkages between islands destabilise the neoliberal promotion of Pulau Ujong. Community and family bonds cross the straits, and this re-centres the Orang Seletar in the historical narrative. Once Seletar is earmarked for development, however, a new conception of islanding takes priority. The Orang Seletar are figured as isolated and in need of some form of economic uplifting or assisted migration in order to participate in neoliberal developmentalism more fully. This form of islanding is precaritising, and yet it is precisely this dispossessing trajectory and logic of development that is celebrated in the 'Singapore Story' – as was shown to be the case with the 'gardening' of Pulau Ujong in Chapter One. Literary historicisation of the process of assisted migration from island locations, be they the figurative islands like the Seletar community, or physical island spaces like the fictionalised Pulau Sebidang in *Penghulu*, undercuts the national narrative. *Rawa* unravels the narrow 'Singapore Story' into a longer history, which includes Occupation, British colonisation, and the political manoeuvres of the Malay king Parameswara, and this longer history inevitably involves pre-Islamic Malayness – thus

[441] Ibid, p. 32.

subverting the racial classifications that underpin official discourses on the 'Malay Problem'. The telescoping of national history into a mere half a century, in the 'Singapore Story', is undone in this novel. Rather than projecting into the future, this historical novel incorporates more from the past, and refashions the Orang Seletar 'lifeworld' into an uncomfortable, if insistent presence on Pulau Ujong. *Rawa* represents the government-sponsored processes that dispossess people who fall into the category of Malay, whilst weaving a more complex narrative that places families and communities in the margins of the nation. In so doing, the novel explodes the officially-sanctioned equivalence between economic backwardness, islandness, and Malayness. *Penghulu* reframes individual, family, community, and national perspectives in an extra-historical timeline, in which justice is meted out. The novel's mode of historicisation involves a deferral to the divine to right the wrongs of development. *Rawa*, by contrast, focuses chiefly on the themes of heritage and history, and attests to the minor triumphs of heritage preservation in the form of Hassan's inspiration by the Orang Seletar 'lifeworld'. The novel also contributes to this preservation by documenting and sharing the Orang Seletar mode of existence from the platform of a prizewinning novel. Both *Rawa* and *Penghulu* subvert the 'Singapore Story' to open up space for alternative ideas and alternative perspectives to the dominant neoliberal mode of development that demands assisted migration and proletarianisation of Malays – whilst attributing the ensuing 'problem' to the Malays themselves. The linkage, co-production, support and symbiosis implied in the archipelagic structure of feeling suggests that there are countervailing cultural pressures to the neocolonial processes of islanding, which maximises islands' productivity at the national frame of reference. *Rawa* and *Penghulu* undercut this frame of reference, which is shown to be of less relevance to the nostalgic community of the displaced islanders over the course of these historical novels.

Chapter Three: Singapore and the World

In the preceding two chapters, I have argued that the historical novel represents historical change in a manner which complicates the 'Singapore Story'. Historical fiction adds an array of perspectives (some opposed to that of the neoliberal-developmentalist state, the chief protagonist of the national narrative), reframes the scope within which narrative linkage can be made (to include small urban communities and larger, regional island networks which transcend the borders of the 'Singapore Story'), and punctures the illusion of linearity of experience in Singapore's historical economic development. This chapter takes as its focus the same logics and processes as were analysed in Chapters One and Two, but broadens them and so they take on a larger geographical scope. In this chapter, I explore the idea of the world in historical-fictional representations of Singapore's development. By extending the frame of reference from the garden, to the region, to the world (or from the 'Garden City', to the 'island nation', to the global city), this chapter will argue that the historical novel genre has the capacity to undercut celebrations of neoliberalism and global capitalism. By exposing the logic at work in processes of enclosure, rationalisation and redevelopment, whilst also offering forms of 'affective solidarity' – a term borrowed from Lauren Berlant, and which will be explored in greater depth below – historical novels can illuminate the global and local dynamics of precarity.

The texts examined in this chapter are both written by Singaporean novelist Yeng Pway Ngon. Yeng writes in Chinese and often publishes initially in Taiwan, and is then translated into English by a small Singaporean publisher, Math Paper Press. His novels *Unrest* (2012|2002) and *Art Studio* (2014|2011) both narrate a cast of characters with a series of political and personal connections, as they disperse across the world following socio-economic upheavals in their places of origin. The novels feature Singapore, Malaysia, China, Canada, and Hong Kong across a period spanning the 1950s to the 1990s – a period which saw the emergence and redevelopment of neoliberal Singapore as part of Cold War-era world-economic expansion and intensification. The texts are historical novels insofar as they contest a dominant historical narrative, and tie individuals, families and other collectives to broader historical developments both within and beyond Singapore. They are in dialogue with received history, and interweave personal stories with wider histories. Their historical scope covers much of the Cold War, situating Singapore's contemporary society and relations as products of past relations and processes. The novels' geographical scope allows for personal stories that cross (or even confound) preponderant political divisions. Throughout both *Unrest* and *Art Studio*, individual life narratives exceed the

bounds of the ‘Singapore Story’, whilst dramatising the lived relations that the Singaporean state has to its subjects. In different senses, each of these novels might be considered ‘experimental’: *Unrest*’s modernist sequence of fragments requires readers to deduce who is in the scene, whilst *Art Studio* features deliberations on the creative artistic process, which implicitly commentates on the text’s own production. Both prove fruitful for analysis of representations of precarity (across spaces and times – that is, across history), and in relation to the ‘Singapore Story’.

There are four aspects to my argument in this chapter. The first concerns these novels’ spatial dynamics. By featuring Singapore so prominently and as a point of origin or primary identification for most characters, both novels are in some sense about Singapore. However, both novels explore global and regional dynamics, exceeding the national frame of reference. By expanding the sphere in which narrative action can take place, whilst remaining anchored in Singapore, these novels complicate the ‘Singapore Story’; the discursive construction of Singapore as ‘unique’ (due to its ‘pragmatic’ mode of capitalism and specific place in the world) is undercut.[442] In narrative terms, Singapore becomes one of many settings for action, and one of many places where there are precarious conditions. The novels re-situate Singapore in global socio-economic terms, too, by describing developments in other sites across the world-ecology. Singapore becomes one of many sites of enclosure, isolation, redevelopment, and erasure.

Secondly, besides this spatial mode of undercutting the ‘Singapore Story’, there are temporal aspects to historical-fictional narrative that confound the national narrative. The linear and narrow frame of reference of the ‘Singapore Story’ is confounded further by the novels’ re-historicisation of capitalist and nominally communist development across the period of the Cold War, which is interwoven with characters’ life stories. As a consequence, these characters’ life stories are not Singapore stories – they go beyond these bounds. The sense of the present as a product of past events also serves to lend a sense of futurity to the novels. By representing the logic and processes key to redevelopment and world-systemic expansion, *Unrest* and *Art Studio* anticipate further development and redevelopment. These are processes that necessitate further capitalist expansion and intensification, and which, readers can deduce, will continue to reshape the cultural and political geography of Singapore (and other sites across the world-ecology) in the future.

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[442] Cliff Kupchan, ‘Keeping the S'pore 'Unicorn' Alive for Future Generations’, *The Straits Times*, 5 September 2015, http://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/keeping-the-spore-unicorn-alive-for-future-generations Accessed 30 December 2016.

Precarity is shown as a phenomenon that emerges and persists at various historical moments, as well as in various geographical settings. Analysis of these two novels follows the analysis of the previous chapters, in which *The River's Song*, *City of Small Blessings*, *Rawa,* and *Penghulu* showed development occurring across time and space, with a sense of inevitability about these transformations. The same logic is apparent across the novels analysed in this thesis: sites are enclosed, isolated from their sustaining, communal networks, and developed or redeveloped in the most profitable manner possible, or in accordance with 'the national agenda' (which can involve securitising other profitable sites, as in the US base coming to Seletar in *City of Small Blessings*). *The River's Song* and *City of Small Blessings* showed how the national and kampung-level instantiation of these processes was the 'Garden City' programme, which isolated communal groups from each other and threw them into deeper precarity. *Rawa* and *Penghulu* showed how the development of Singapore's islands followed the interests of the 'mainland', whilst also representing an archipelagic space which was kept in reserve for future expansion. Representation of both the spatial expansion of Singapore's developmental processes and their temporal extension allows for an undercutting of the 'Singapore Story' with greater complexity and nuance that it can accommodate. In *Unrest* and *Art Studio*, these processes occur on the largest scale yet possible, the global scale. Transformation still occurs at a local level, but is linked to capital at a global level, and in tandem –in a combined and uneven manner – with other developments across the world-ecology.

Thirdly, I argue that the texts create 'affective solidarity' (to borrow Berlant's term): they offer readers modes of political solidarity based on empathy, which have radical potential to counter capitalist narratives of individualism and development on family, community, national and transnational scales. The novels both show capitalist subjects, some of whom leave capitalist countries for a time, but who speak from a position within capitalism. Whilst precarity is evident across political formations in these novels, the shared sense of capitalist subjecthood cuts across classes, times, and geographical locations, and this provides a platform for interrogation of the combined and uneven relations intrinsic to global capitalism. Narrative's capacity to go through and beyond such boundaries, and link different sites and times within a series of interweaving plots, is subversive in a context in which there is one dominant national narrative, figuring Singaporeans as subjects of the Singaporean state first and foremost. The potential and limits of this shared sense of capitalist subjecthood will be dwelt upon later.

Finally, the artistic self-consciousness exhibited in these novels suggests that there is a recognition of the complicity of the text as a commodity form, as partaking in the same networks of capitalist development that allow (or perhaps demand) the transformation of Singapore along neoliberal-developmentalist lines. This recognition of the impossibility of non-capitalist circulation (impossible, at least, on a global scale) constitutes a reaffirmation of radical possibilities in the cultural imaginaries with which the texts engage. By acknowledging the co-option entailed in capitalist commodity circulation, the texts problematise their own status as commodities, whilst complicating the 'Singapore Story' and its celebration of neoliberal developmental intensification.

These four arguments, regarding these texts' use of space, history, their creation of a shared sense of capitalist subjecthood, and their self-consciousness, are mounted specifically in regards to *Unrest* and *Art Studio* in particular. However, these arguments also apply to historical fiction more broadly. I do not mean to claim that these two texts are representative of historical fiction on a global or universal scale, but the analysis that proceeds here demonstrates that historical novels have the potential to resist narratives that are amenable to capitalist expansion and intensification, even as the texts themselves are commodified. By rehistoricising capitalist narratives of development, and showing alternative, 'bottom-up' perspectives on development, historical fiction can open up space for critique of global capitalism more widely. These two examples are historical novels that undermine neoliberal narratives of development – narratives that contribute to the long-term reproduction of social relations. Precarity, which exists across political formations, is neutralised as part of the celebration of Singapore's neoliberal mode of development – but Singapore also stands more widely on the global stage, in capitalist imaginaries, as a 'model' or 'economic success story'.[443] By complicating this narrative in particular, *Unrest* and *Art Studio* undermine global capitalism's poster child. Even in this exemplary site, there are social and environmental costs to neoliberal-developmental processes, and the development is shown to be non-linear, uneven, and elitist. Global capitalism is a singular and unequal system, within which there can be very few Singapores: the prosperity of Singapore depends upon multinational companies settling headquarters there rather than anywhere else – a decision that is made on the basis of factors such as tax expectations and

[443] Zhang Dan, 'How Could "Singapore Model" Achieve Success?', *CCTV*, 5 September 2012, http://english.cntv.cn/program/newshour/20120509/118665.shtml Accessed 1 September 2017; Kishore Mahbubani, 'Why Singapore is the World's Most Successful Society', *The World Post*, 8 April 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/kishore-mahbubani/singapore-world-successful-society_b_7934988.html Accessed 1 September 2017.

quality of infrastructure. Singapore's status as a core site fundamentally depends upon the peripherality of other sites. For historical fiction to represent social and environmental costs in even this privileged site is deeply subversive – it complicates the teleology of neoliberal triumph that underpins the 'Singapore Story'. *Unrest* and *Art Studio* depict a world in which processes of development are global, combined, and uneven. It is the dialogue with history across space, the demonstration of a shared capitalist subjecthood and precarity across formations, and novelistic self-consciousness, which provide the platform for literary engagement with the capitalist world-system.

Whilst this chapter and this thesis proceed on the basis of an understanding of capitalism as a singular and uneven world-system, it is worthwhile engaging with Lee Kuan Yew's own conceptualisation of Singapore's place in the world, in cultural and economic terms. 'In material terms,' he writes, 'we have left behind our Third World problems of poverty. However, it will take another generation before our arts, culture, and social standards can match the First World infrastructure we have installed'.[444] This prediction regarding the future of Singapore's cultural output is made in the year 2000, and is delivered in the outdated language of three worlds theory. Lee takes credit for Singapore's exit from the Third World, in economic terms, but he believes that in cultural terms, Singapore remains a Third World country. He does not specify what First World culture might look like, but believes that a standard of First World cultural output is attainable – and linked, in a phrase redolent of colonial thinking, to First World 'social standards'. Framed in this manner, First World status is something open to every nation, in economic or cultural terms, and attaining this status is only a question of policy-making. Lee's statement also suggests that there may be a First World of cultural production which does not align with a First World of economic production. This thesis agrees with Lee that cultural output and cultural capital do not correspond neatly to economic conditions, but it also holds that attempts to measure and categorise tiers of cultural production by nation are problematic. The model that Lee uses, involving a First, Second and Third World, is obsolete in the wake of twenty-first century globalisation, because cultural flows and economic 'dependency' have altered dramatically since the collapse of the USSR and the 'opening up' of China.

Lee's model, and the language in which it is couched, recalls Cold War-era oppositions which are no longer reflective of global economic or power dynamics. There is

[444] Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First*, p. xv.

no USSR any more, and Chinese communism's qualifying 'Chinese characteristics' mean that its mode of production 'looks uncomfortably like the reconstitution of capitalist class power,' in David Harvey's words.[445] The conception of the world used in this thesis is systemic, and is thus radically different to that described by Lee. In an unevenly developing world-economy, the development of certain sites comes at the expense of the exploitation others, and indeed, processes of development can entail dynamics 'of underdevelopment, of maldevelopment and dependent development,' in the words of the Warwick Research Collective.[446] World-culture is structured systemically, too, but does not necessarily follow economic prerogatives. It, too, is fundamentally uneven, because one site's cultural prestige comes parcelled with other sites' cultural obscurity across the world-system. The First World 'arts, culture, and social standards' that Lee seeks, then, are not derivative of Singapore's First World infrastructure (by which, we have established in the preceding chapters, Lee means a neoliberal-developmental infrastructure), but rather, Singapore's cultural position within the world-system. The First, Second and Third Worlds are undoubtedly part of the same world-system, and the 'world' of this world-system consists of the territories and temporalities that are dominated by capitalism. The expansion of this system to incorporate more space and more time would therefore constitute a process of 'worlding'. This chapter builds on the analysis of Chapters One and Two, in which space is 'gardened' across Pulau Ujong, and 'islanded' across the Singaporean archipelago, to explore how this expansion and extension of precaritising processes can be re-historicised and narrated from 'bottom-up' perspectives on the global scale.

Conceptions of the world, and of associated processes of worlding, have been debated recently by a number of theorists. Pheng Cheah outlines a definition of the world and the world literature that accompanies it:

> I suggest that we should conceive of the world not only as a spatio-geographical entity but also as an ongoing dynamic process of becoming, something that possesses a historical-temporal dimension and hence is continually being made and remade. […] We should thus understand world literature as literature that is *of* the

[445] David Harvey*, A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, p. 122.
[446] Warwick Research Collective, *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), p. 21.

> world, something that can play a fundamental role and be a force in the ongoing cartography and creation of the world […].[447]

In Cheah's definition, the world is not only inseparable from processes of worlding, it *is* this process. He describes 'worlding' as 'a process of temporalization' and 'how a world is held together and given unity by the force of time'.[448] In addition, a sense of being worlded, he writes, involves a sense of 'belonging, relating, being-with', even as he acknowledges that

> the spatial diffusion and extensiveness achieved through global media and markets give rise to a sense of belonging to a shared world, when one might argue that such developments leads instead to greater polarization and division of nations and regions.[449]

It is from this platform that Cheah elaborates a conceptualisation in which there are multiple worlds, divided into national and regional blocs. He wishes to depart from theorisations in which 'globalization creates a world', and instead focus on 'what ought to be' – that is, '[literature's] power or efficacy to change the world according to a normative ethicopolitical horizon'.[450] His definition of normativity is somewhat circular, but he holds to the belief that a shared world, 'a world being destroyed by capitalist globalization', can be recuperated through the dissemination of what he calls world literature (that is to say, literature with 'normative force'):[451]

> Through the powers of figuration, it enables us to imagine a world. But more important, through the pleasure it arouses in us and our desire to share this pleasure through universal communication, literature and its criticism enhance our sense of (being a part of) humanity. Indeed, literature performatively brings humanity into being by integrating individuals into a universal whole by means of the sociability it occasions.[452]

In this liberal conceptualisation of world literature, the acts of reading and writing, or any modes of cultural production and consumption – 'the powers of figuration' – permit a horizon-broadening appreciation of a broadly-conceived 'humanity' in both its diversity and universality. There is some intersection, in this conception, with a Saidian understanding of

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[447] Pheng Cheah, *What is a World?: On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 42.
[448] Ibid, p. 8.
[449] Ibid, p. 42.
[450] Ibid, pp. 5, 6.
[451] Ibid, p. 16.
[452] Ibid, pp. 44-5.

worldliness. Graham Huggan explains that in this conception, worldly writing maintains 'a commitment to the horizon-broadening capacity of literary and other cultural texts'.[453] This near-Arnoldian conceptualisation of 'improvement' through literature is shared by both Said and Cheah, although Cheah's (presumably) progressive 'ethicopolitical horizon' remains tantalisingly under-elaborated. For Said, though, 'texts have ways of existing that even in their most rarefied form are always enmeshed in circumstance, time, place, and society,' and worldly texts are attentive to the power relations that underpin contemporary social realities.[454] Cheah aims to look at power dynamics on a global level, but his 'world literature' is not the same as the 'worldly' texts identified by Said: Cheah's conception does not sufficiently engage with cultural capital, taste, and literary reception. In the above quotation, he postulates that world literature stimulates 'desire to share […][literary-consumptive] pleasure through universal communication'. The limits of this universality must be probed, however. Cheah is at pains to emphasise that the 'power of aesthetic pleasure is not derived from pre-existing social forces',[455] but does not convincingly assuage doubts as to the type of world being created through literary expression and reception. If world literature is 'universal', it is also tempered by uneven degrees of access and penetration, as Sarah Brouillette and Pascale Casanova have shown.[456] Reading and criticising fiction is not always pleasurable, but can still arouse sensations of respect, anger, or solidarity. Plenty of other activities might elicit the same reaction, without being literary. The selection of texts that constitutes Cheah's world literature also contains pitfalls. As in the framework proposed by David Damrosch (another major protagonist in world literary debates), the criteria for entry into this body of literature are deeply contested. Damrosch's conceptualisation of world literature implicates any 'literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin',[457] and this means that texts in major languages, and texts that fit the tastes of a wide audience, are favoured. As Jonathan Arac points out, 'English in culture, like the dollar in economics, serves as the medium through which knowledge may be translated from the local to the global'. This is true of culture, as well as academic discourse, and draws attention to the flaws in both Damrosch's conception of a boundary-crossing cosmopolitan world literature and Cheah's 'improving', and similarly

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[453] Graham Huggan, 'The Trouble with World Literature' in *A Companion to Comparative Literature*, ed. by Ali Behdad and Dominic Thomas (Chichester: Blackwell, 2011), pp. 490-506 (p. 493).
[454] Edward Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (London: Faber, 1984), p. 35.
[455] Ibid, p. 45.
[456] Sarah Brouillette, 'UNESCO and the Book in the Developing World'; Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. by M.B. DeBevoise (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2004).
[457] David Damrosch, *What is World Literature?*, p. 4.

cosmopolitan, selection of texts for his body of world literature. Translation of texts is mediated by publishing houses' presumption as to what will gain traction in the market, besides other subjective considerations. The commensurability of non-Anglophone texts to their translated counterparts remains an issue in all of these conceptions of world literature.

The idea that readers might recognise themselves, however, as integrated into a universal whole, is extremely valuable, and I shall borrow this idea from Cheah's theorisation of world literature. As I have argued in the Introduction to this thesis, historical novels are particularly amenable to representing a world in which we partake, even if we do not necessarily 'share' it evenly. Their mode of representation embeds individuals' places in the community, nation, or region, across history. They show how narratives that aim to represent the nation are instantiated or subverted from the perspective of smaller or larger units than that of the nation-state, with its formidable technologies for storytelling. Novels that situate events in space and time, and by extension, in history, but which do so beyond the domain of the strictly regional, must grant their readers the capacity to imagine themselves as part of the world.

The Warwick Research Collective (hereafter WReC) formulate an alternative framework for interpreting globalisation and cultural production. Grounded in world-systems analysis and postcolonial theory, WReC postulate a world-economy which is linked systemically. Their ideological differences from Cheah are evident from the aims of their project; they analyse capitalism as an historical totality, through its cultural and social (re)production. Cheah, on the other hand, advocates a liberal, quasi-Arnoldian mode of cosmopolitan reading practice. For Cheah, world literature is a select body of literature that is amenable to such readings. To WReC, world-literature (hyphenated to emphasise the constitutiveness of cultural production to worlding processes) is a problem requiring a materialist methodology. These two perspectives share an interest in cultural production as it manifests across the world, but further very different political aims. Cheah explores a body of world literature that is improving in a moral and communal sense, whilst WReC critique globalisation. Despite these ideological differences, WReC and Cheah are similarly enthusiastic about the role of the novel in world-culture. WReC note that the

> plasticity and hybridity of the novel form enables it to incorporate not only multiple literary levels, genres and modes, but also other non-literary and archaic cultural

> forms […] in order to register a bifurcated or ruptured sensorium of the space-time of the (semi-) periphery.[458]

I do not wish to suggest that these features are unique to the novel, but it is important to note the novel form's capacity to represent change over time. These listed features render the novel a unit of analysis that is particularly amenable to WReC's stated mission of attending to capitalism's

> modes of spatio-temporal compression, its juxtaposition of asynchronous orders and levels of historical experience, its barometric indications of invisible forces acting from a distance on the local and familiar – as these manifest themselves in literary forms, genres and aesthetic strategies.[459]

Novels, then, can represent a world under a series of pressures, and can track these pressures as they unfold. Whilst the projects conceived by Cheah and the WReC differ in approach, they share an alertness to representation of time in literary texts.

Consideration of time is key to both Cheah's and WReC's conceptualisations of processes of worlding. Literature can be a worlding force, for Cheah, because it 'open[s] different temporalities and worlds', whilst for WReC, the expansion of the capitalist world-system constitutes 'the *capitalisation* of the world and of the full *worlding* of capital' – which, we can infer, unfolds unevenly over time, and which realises 'the production of *untimely* space'.[460] The spatial and temporal dynamics of capital's worlding processes can be read through any cultural texts, for WReC, because 'the literary "registration" of the world-system does not (necessarily) involve criticality or dissent'.[461] The texts selected for exploration in this chapter are largely critical of processes that divide and rationalise people and places, and which manage time in such a way as to render them amenable to exploitation by global capital. Cheah's insistence that processes of worlding involve 'belonging, relating, being-with' bears returning to at this stage,[462] because the characters of the novels examined here are explicitly capitalist subjects, and when they undergo changes in this status (by venturing to Maoist China), attention is drawn to this fact. The characters thus relate to capitalism, as its subjects, and there are therefore grounds for arguing that *Unrest* and *Art Studio* dramatise the possibility of solidarity between subjects

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[458] Warwick Research Collective, p. 25.
[459] Ibid, p. 27.
[460] Cheah, p. 17, Warwick Research Collective, pp. 24, 28.
[461] Warwick Research Collective, p. 31.
[462] Cheah, p. 42.

of different nations. When precarity is shown to emerge across these historical and political formations, this possibility of transnational solidarity might offer a kind of Saidian 'worldliness', in which power dynamics are illuminated through fiction.

In a separate conceptualisation of the world, Slavoj Žižek draws on the work on Alain Badiou to argue that global capitalism 'sustains a "worldless" ideological constellation in which people are deprived of their ways of locating meaning'.[463] To say that an ideology is 'worldless' depends upon a conceptualisation of the world that privileges 'meaning', which in turn is replete with ambiguities and analytical pitfalls. This conceptualisation of the world is not compatible with the ideas laid out above, in which the worlding of the world involves the expansion of the capitalist world-system across new space and time. However, in another rumination on the idea of the 'world', Žižek argues that the present-day task, in the face of global capitalism, is to provide 'cognitive mapping' for a new world.[464] Sharae Deckard and Wendy Knepper argue that literature offers the possibility of newly anti-capitalist cognitive mapping, particularly when the literature is experimental in nature:

> Aesthetic experiments not only lend visibility to struggles against the injustices of capitalist development in a globalizing world but also disclose new cognitive maps and more ethical reckonings with the totality of global transformation. […] In a globalizing world, literary experimentation mediates the particularities of heterogeneous perspectives, cultural traditions, and political possibilities unevenly situated throughout the world-system. Because of its capacity to exceed the limits of a dominant global imaginary, it can also initiate change in the world. In our view contemporary experimentation distinguishes itself through its efforts to rethink art's participatory role in world transformation.[465]

Emphasising literature's participation in world transformation, Deckard and Knepper show that processes of worlding are not always at the behest of capital, even as capital disperses unevenly across the world-system. Pushing beyond a 'dominant global imaginary' may involve the creation of a new global imaginary (or at least, offer space for the generation of

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[463] Žižek, Slavoj, 'Shoplifters of the World Unite!', *London Review of Books*, 19 August 2011, http://www.lrb.co.uk/2011/08/19/slavoj-zizek/shoplifters-of-the-world-unite Accessed 30 May 2016.
[464] Žižek, 'On Alain Badiou and *Logiques des mondes*', http://www.lacan.com/zizbadman.htm#_ftnref9 Accessed 1 May 2016.
[465] Sharae Deckard and Wendy Knepper, 'Towards a Radical World Literature: Experimental Writing in a Globalizing World', *Ariel* 47.1-2 (January-April 2016), 1-25, p. 3.

such a phenomenon), and as a consequence, cultural production involves a kind of world-making that proceeds beyond (or apart from) economic linkage. This is not to dissociate economic linkage from cultural production; cultural production always occurs under particular economic conditions and must compete in its contemporary global literary marketplace. However, I want to emphasise that cultural texts do not always make themselves amenable to global capitalism. They can gesture towards new forms of solidarity, based on cultural linkage and partnership. They can represent or foster connections at local and regional levels, besides that of the globe (as seen in Chapters One and Two). They can be disruptive to capitalism, by casting light on uneven and deleterious processes of development and globalisation. This mode of disruption is fundamental to the experimental nature of the texts analysed by Deckard and Knepper, but disruptive potential exists in texts that are not necessarily trying to cognitively map capitalism or dissent against precaritising processes. More ambivalent texts, such as those explored already in this thesis, need not be experimental to participate in worlding.

The question of visibility, which is key to Deckard and Knepper's formulation of experimental world literature, becomes even more crucial when we consider the possibilities for a global imaginary rooted in global cities. Jini Kim Watson, writing about her conceptualisation of global 'New Asian Cities', notes that

> urban transformations are the primary mediator of struggles over modernity and industrialization in […] postcolonial contexts. In the [New Asian Cities], processes of construction and demolition, urban renewal, and export-oriented development are among the most formidable forces shaping social reality as well as literary forms; such aesthetic forms, however, are what give these forces visibility. Thus, where the state-or corporate-directed forces that connect the nation's economy to the world market are largely indiscernible to the individual, the built forms arising from these linkages become tangible evidence of them, operating as textual actors.[466]

Globalisation marks city spaces with evidence of its processes. Texts that are concerned with both local built forms and the economic and cultural linkage that is so intensified by late capitalist globalisation, as exemplified by historical novels such as *Unrest* and *Art Studio*, further undermine the dominant global imaginary of late capitalism. If global capitalism is present in global cities, then we must also account for capitalism's 'dynamic of

[466] Jini Kim Watson, 'Seoul and Singapore as "New Asian Cities": Literature, Urban Transformation, and the Concentricity of Power', *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 19.1 (Spring 2011), 195-215, p. 212.

dispersal and of centralization'.[467] The centralisation is visible in the form of concrete and chrome structures in global cities, but the dispersal must be made visible, and the novel form has the capacity to represent the flows and linkages that sustain uneven development. From as early as 1972, Singapore was labelled a 'global city' by its leadership, because it was 'linked intimately' with other global cities. In addition, as a global city Singapore had 'the world [as] its hinterland'.[468] The ecology of the global city thus differs from that of other kinds of city; its economic and social linkages cross borders to other global cities, and there is an implied ecology of rural-urban dynamics which is displaced from the city's immediate environment, out to the world. Global cities' metabolism operates on a global scale, and this poses challenges to literary representation and literary criticism. Fiction that largely narrates events in and between global cities (as do the novels explored in this chapter) has an implied ecology on a global scale, in which resources are brought in from other sites across the globe. Of course, there is no need for texts to track movements of resources and labour between kinds of sites, but global-scale ecological dynamics of urban in-flows and out-flows underpin the action of the novels. Novels are not sociological studies, but the fictionalised world conjured by these realist texts correlates to the world as experienced by readers. As such, ecological links between fictionalised global cities and their hinterlands remain implicit and ripe for analysis. Saskia Sassen postulates a difference between global cities and world cities,[469] the latter of which are centres of 'dominance and power', often springing from a strategic geopolitical location.[470] Global cities can be world cities, but are not always. Is it possible, then, to have corresponding world texts or global texts? A world text with a strategic location is clearly impossible, because texts are not geographically fixed. The idea of a global text, however, bears further exploration. If a global city hosts processes that link areas from across the globe, and bears physical traces of these processes, might a text do something similar? The trouble with a definition of a text that partakes in global processes is that all texts have the capacity to circulate globally on the market, but no text has circulated so widely or completely. It would also be true to say that all texts, due to their hypothetical capacity to circulate globally, bear the marks of capitalist globalisation; all texts are world*ed* in that they are commodities, and they can be world*ing* in that they move towards building cultural linkage

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[467] Saskia Sassen, *The Global City* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 32.
[468] Sinnathamby Rajaratnam, *S. Rajaratnam*, pp. 216-7.
[469] Sassen, p. 28.
[470] Ben Derudder, Anneleen De Vos and Frank Witlox, 'Global City/World City,' in *International Handbook of Globalization and World Cities,* ed. by Ben Derudder, Michael Hoyler, Peter J. Taylor, Frank Witlox (Cheltenham and Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar, 2012), pp. 124-142 (p. 129).

alongside economic linkage. If all texts can be 'global' texts, but none are, then the category of global text becomes redundant. Rather than label *Unrest* and *Art Studio* 'global' or 'world' texts, I claim they are late capitalist historical novels which represent precarity and unevenness across sites which are systemically linked. These novels narrate individuals' political activity, career advancement, and love lives in the face of political transformations in Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong, and China from the Second World War to the present. The texts are symptomatic of capitalism's dominant global imaginary, but also represent linkage in such a way as to invite critique of the histories and temporalities of these linkages. In this sense, *Art Studio* and *Unrest* are also 'experimental', as per the definition laid out by Deckard and Knepper: they 'participate […] critically and creatively in the ongoing struggle for affirmative social transformation', and 'interrogate […] [their] participation in the long history of globalization'.[471] Both novels feature conversations about the role of art and creative practice, and their self-consciousness regarding texts' commodity status enhances their radical potential. Acknowledging their place in capitalist patterns of circulation draws attention to those patterns, and gestures towards their unevenness. An emergent 'global imaginary' or 'cognitive mapping' can spring from such texts, and can account for this dynamic of centralisation and dispersal across geographic space, even as these process are also grounded in a global city.

Following Žižek, Deckard and Knepper, I aim to explore whether the novels examined here offer a potential cognitive mapping that resists global capitalism, or tries to formulate an alternative to it. Any acts of resistance remain embedded in a commoditised cultural form. I do not mean to suggest that the possibility of developing alternative cognitions is precluded as a consequence, but that the text as a commodity is not detached from the world-economy. This means that acts of resistance that take commodity forms are already incorporated into the world-system. This limits, but does not annihilate, their transformational power. By coupling the prospect of an alternative cognitive mapping with Cheah's important observations regarding the temporal aspects to globalisation, I shall also pursue forms of cognitive temporalisation in Yeng's novels. Historicising geo-spatial linkages will allow for an understanding of the world-system grounded in history, providing ground for a more realisable solidarity between sites, and thus offering space for more robust resistance to capitalism's ravages. WReC attack developments in literary and cultural studies which allow for readings of 'civilisational' or *apolitical* 'community-building'

[471] Deckard and Knepper, pp. 1, 2.

capabilities in literature,[472] and this thesis takes the view that literature can open up precaritising processes for *political* critique by situating them in narratives that encompass individuals' lives as well as regional and global linkage. Precarity is shown to be a phenomenon that occurs in a combined and uneven system, where one place's wealth comes at the cost of another's impoverishment. By exploring these two novels' capabilities (and limits) for generating sentiments of solidarity, this chapter will argue that cultural products represent a shared capitalist subjecthood across national boundaries, within the world-system. In particular, historical novels like those of Yeng can re-historicise an avowedly neoliberal national narrative, and foreground how precarity persists across formations, across time and space, in accordance with the logic and processes narrated in the 'Singapore Story'. The 'Singapore Story' is a narration of the process of worlding in one nation, and frames Singapore's process of worlding as a 'First World-ing'. The uneven capitalist processes that render Singapore a First World site (at least in terms of infrastructure and economy, according to Lee Kuan Yew) unfold elsewhere as Second and Third World formations. The logic of worlding, which involves enclosure and incorporation into the capitalist world-ecology, is thus a continuation of the logics of gardening and islanding. It is a logic of enclosure and isolation from other components of the world-ecology that may buttress against precarity, and which may offer a network of solidarity. This logic, and this process, are instantiated at a number of scales in literary works, and through close reading, my previous chapters have shown the dynamics of this expansion and incorporation at local and regional scales. This chapter explores this same logic as it appears in texts that navigate global patterns of linkage. It looks at interconnectivity that implies a larger system of relations – a system whose logic governs the interconnectivity itself. If being worlded involves being precaritised, are there seeds for solidarity and resistance embedded in the precaritisation? Can a text historicise capitalist subjecthood?

Spatial and Historical Dynamics of Precarity

Unrest represents precarity's persistence across economic formations. Whether in neoliberal-developmentalist Singapore, colonial capitalist Hong Kong, or Maoist China, the characters of the novel experience precarity. Multinational capital has been at home in each of these locations, historically, before *Unrest*'s narrative, but the plot follows characters' vulnerability to this capital and the state. In the cases of Singapore and Hong

[472] Warwick Research Collective, p. 59.

Kong, the state drives people into precarious wage labour, whilst in China, the state itself underpays, overworks, and divides the families of its workers. Whilst the characters disperse across the globe, they all have roots or shared experiences in Singapore. Weikang is the son of a construction worker and rubber tapper; Daming is a student activist leader turned entrepreneur and son of a hawker; Ziqin is a bookseller who takes on many part-time jobs and struggles against the patriarchal family unit; and Guoliang is a part-time worker who founds a small business. They coalesce in the student-led anti-colonial demonstrations of the 1950s (without all meeting each other) before heading separate ways – Guoliang hiding in Singapore, Weikang moving to Malaya, Singapore, then on to China, whilst Daming and Ziqin move to Hong Kong, before Daming moves on to Canada. The connections between characters are often incidental, such as the accidental meeting of Guoliang and Daming in Hong Kong, which in turn leads to the rekindling of romance between Guoliang and Daming's wife, Ziqin. The narrative arc of the novel moves backwards through fragments of varying length. It begins with Weikang's memories of his childhood under British colonialism alongside Ziqin's 1980s fling with Guoliang, then develops Weikang's account of moving through leftist circles before moving to China, whilst also narrating the abrupt ending to the affair. The novel then describes Ziqin's unhappy marital situation, and how this unfolds. The novel ends with Guoliang and Ziqin's meeting in the 1980s, which is their first meeting in two decades, and which culminates in Ziqin's rejection of Guoliang. Ziqin and Guoliang's encounter is not the only abortive love story in *Unrest*: Weikang pines for a woman he knew (and whose family despise him) before he is arrested by British forces, and Weikang and Guoliang have an ambiguous affair which neither seems to understand. These characters all enter into marriages with varying degrees of enthusiasm, too: Guoliang passively marries an unnamed Singaporean woman, Weikang marries a Chinese woman after he travels to China, and Ziqin and Daming sustain an unhappy marriage for most of the duration of the novel. These relationships are all related through non-sequential fragments that are set in various places, and occasionally, the characters are not named in these fragments.[473]

Geopolitical developments underpin the possibilities for these relationships, and the novel represents hardship for various characters, at various times and at various places. This, in itself, might not be taken to undercut the 'Singapore Story', but it marks a departure from the depiction of Singapore in the novels scrutinised in previous chapters of this thesis, because Singapore, in *Unrest*, is a point at which people meet (befitting the

[473] Yeng Pway Ngon, *Unrest*, trans. by Jeremy Tiang (Singapore: Math Paper Press, 2012).

entrepôt state) but then depart. The novel does not metaphorically depict a single national narrative, but a series of stories across a region. The geographical scope of *Unrest* is greater than that of any of the novels examined in Chapters One and Two: *Unrest* tracks characters' movements through East Asia and Southeast Asia, as well as one character's migration to Canada. Singapore's depiction in these overlapping narratives counteracts the preponderant representation of the city-state, in which Singapore is unique. People's life narratives exceed Singapore as a staging ground, and experiences of development and its associated proletarianisation and precaritisation are spread across wider geographical and temporal latitudes. This constitutes a greater departure from the national narrative than that seen in the previous two chapters of this thesis: Chapter One analysed life narratives that revolved around Singapore, and returned to it, whilst Chapter Two scrutinised novels that put Singapore in a regional perspective. *Unrest* and *Art Studio* exceed these frames of reference to show narratives unfolding in places across the world-system, with Singapore as a site of confluence at one specific moment.

Colonial capitalism, neoliberal developmentalism, and Maoist socialism are present in *Unrest* (even if they are not named as such) and they all engender precarity. Precarity in each situation is, of course, overlaid with the cultural specificities of the people and places involved. In colonial Malaya and Singapore, there is a catalogue of precarious characters. Ah Huat, a minor character who is a childhood friend of Weikang, 'left school at a young age to work alongside his father, a rubber tapper', before moving to Singapore aged fourteen. He becomes a construction worker, then a taxi driver, and dies of a heart attack in early middle age.[474] He is memorialised as the courier of pornography from Hong Kong to Cha'ah New Village, and raconteur of encounters with prostitutes – the 'oral history of fucking' that 'made [Weikang] go home and hand himself over to pleasure'.[475] Weikang works on a construction site in Singapore, then in a coffee shop, residing 'in a company room above the shop, along with several old Hainanese men' before opting to migrate to China.[476] Guoliang works as an assistant at a fruit stall, then at a book stall, where he is allowed to sleep in the warehouse – 'a dilapidated, murky room full of stale air,' infested with 'mice and cockroaches'. He uses his wages of thirty dollars a month to buy a luxurious meal once a month, before returning to a diet of 'five cent Indian flatbread, or occasionally ten cent clam char kway teow or fishball noodles'.[477] Their precarity is apparent in the risk

[474] Ibid, pp. 163, 164, 169, 306.
[475] Ibid, p. 165.
[476] Ibid, p. 76.
[477] Ibid, pp. 223-5.

to their health that these living conditions represent, and in their employment in unstable industries with no legal safeguards. These are the only conditions offered in *Unrest*'s Singapore, as either a colonial capitalist or subsequently an independent state capitalist regime.

Through piecemeal fragments of narrative in *Unrest*, readers are presented with the various places Weikang has tried to call home. The novel dramatises the precarious circumstances that Weikang negotiates in various places, and both British Malaya and Maoist China enforce structures of power that precaritised him. During a flashback sequence, when he remembers the Cultural Revolution (from a moment in the 1980s), Weikang remembers the cold, which numbed the feet so that 'you wouldn't notice even when sharp stones cut your feet to ribbons. It only hurt when you stopped to rest'.[478] He remembers the meals, which 'consisted of rice and a few shreds of vegetables, hardly any meat,' and the 'coughing, diarrhoea', and 'rapid loss of weight' that were endured on the farm.[479] He remembers mounds of rubbish by the sides of poorly-lit roads, and 'dilapidated houses'.[480] These memories highlight precariousness outside the colonial and formally independent neoliberal modes of capitalism, where society is disposed not towards profit for private companies but towards the imaginary fulfilment of Maoist ideology. Precarity in communist China revolves around the instability of health and nutrition, and the work is dehumanising: Weikang's 'flesh body became a machine'.[481] Besides these aspects of precarity under Maoist ideology, there is also a need to appear to adhere to the regime's way of seeing and behaving, and a need to renounce any tie to capitalist family members. If families are a potential buttress against precarity in some settings – as we have seen in Chapters One and Two – they can also be a source of precarity in the Cultural Revolution. Historian Jonathan Spence reports the Red Guards' 'concentration on family history,' which endangered individuals through the family unit.[482] Zang Xiaowei's oral history stresses that the Red Guards 'would organize an investigation team going all the way back to the person's hometown to retrieve information about the "class" background of his or her parents'.[483] In *Unrest*, Weikang games this system, building on his lack of nearby family to evade Red Guard censure. Although Spence reports that '"[c]onfession" to some sort of

[478] Ibid, p.50.
[479] Ibid, pp. 47, 299.
[480] Ibid, pp. 271, 270.
[481] Ibid, p. 295.
[482] Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China* (London, Sydney, Auckland, Johannesburg: Hutchinson, 1990), p. 613.
[483] Zang Xiaowei, *Children of the Cultural Revolution: Family Life and Political Behavior in Mao's China* (Boulder and Oxford: Westview Press, 2000), p. 91.

failing was seen as essential to personal redemption; stubborn silence or righteous insistence on innocence could lead to vicious punishment,' Weikang realises that 'he must not tell the whole truth, but a version of the truth that would benefit him':[484]

> As an immigrant, it wouldn't be easy for them to verify his account, and so he turned his contractor father into a construction worker, his grandfather into a rubber tapper, and the whole family into supporters of the Malayan Communist Party. According to the bloodline theory, his birth was acceptable [...]. In truth, the parts Weikang felt were false, wouldn't be considered false under normal circumstances. His father was basically a construction worker, but had taken on the status of contractor for ease of organising work; when on a job, he laboured alongside his builder friends.[485]

Weikang benefits by not having family to incriminate him. Whilst he lacks social support, the same absence leaves him the security of tailoring his story to suit current conditions. Red Guard investigations could happen at any time, without warning, and he remains precarious despite his efforts to diminish the hostility towards him.

In Hong Kong and Singapore, the family unit can ameliorate the precarity required by global capital, but family can have other precaritising effects. Ziqin does not benefit from a protective family, buttressing her against precarious circumstances. Instead, she grows up in a family unit that actively operates to her detriment, promoting her brother's interests over her own. Ziqin leaves Singapore 'not just to be with Daming, but also to get away from them,' and 'was even prepared to be disowned if it came to that'.[486] Her parents prefer to fund their son's education, despite his academic limitations:

> He was lazy and playful, and hated to study. [...] Because I was a girl, even though I was more academically-inclined, I wouldn't be allowed to continue my education. I'd have to work, to help support my brother through his degree. [...] I argued strenuously with my parents, and their answer was always: we only allowed you to continue to the sixth form because your results were good, otherwise you'd already be in a job. Girls will get married sooner or later – what's the use of studying so much?[487]

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[484] Spence, p. 613; Yeng, *Unrest*, p. 287.
[485] Yeng, *Unrest*, pp. 287-8.
[486] Ibid, pp. 88-9.
[487] Ibid, pp. 89-90.

Depriving Ziqin of education forces her into either menial wage labour or marriage (and its attendant reproduction of social relations and unpaid 'replenishing' labour), precaritising her in the long-term. More immediately, she is recruited into wage labour to help fund her brother's education. For Ziqin's brother, this process stabilises his future, but it comes at the cost of Ziqin's future. Once she reaches Hong Kong, she exchanges this patriarchal unit for another, as her husband gets a better-paid job as a manager of a printing press whilst she works as a waitress, supplementing her income by assembling plastic flowers.[488] The necessity of this casual, freelance homeworking shows the precarity of her situation.

In Hong Kong, there is an alternative bastion against precarity available. Ziqin and Daming's landlords become familial support. The landlords are referred to as Auntie and Uncle Quan, despite having no family ties, and Ziqin and Daming 'began to call [Auntie Quan] Godmother, and taught [their son] Yingjie to call her Grandma'.[489] The elderly couple support the Daming and Ziqin during their early hardship:

> They showed us how to get around by bus, which markets had the best vegetables, even how to cook. And from time to time, they made us some soup or food, and boiled herbal medicine when I was ill.[490]

This aid is returned when Uncle Quan dies suddenly and Auntie Quan is weakened by kidney failure. Ziqin 'visited her every day after work, feeding her lotus root soup,' but she dies within a month.[491] Ziqin is overcome with filial grief:

> I couldn't stop myself from sobbing, calling out Ma, Ma. Yes, she was my Ma, and I'll never see her again. [...] When I most needed protection, she cared for me, loved me, did more for me than my real mother.[492]

Beyond Ziqin's biological family unit, she finds a stable family unit willing to offer her some protection against both the ravages of Hong Kong capitalism and the unfamiliarity of Hong Kong's cultural geography. Across Singapore, Hong Kong, and Maoist China, then, there are varied precarious circumstances, and top-down processes of precaritisation. The novel highlights the significant regional variation in the precise dynamics of precarity, even as it shows how authorities engender the precarity of their own subjects.

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[488] Ibid, p. 118.
[489] Ibid, p. 117.
[490] Ibid, p. 116.
[491] Ibid, p. 117.
[492] Ibid, p. 118.

In *Unrest*, Singapore's development is not set in isolation. Readers encounter national economic development agendas being implemented in other places at the same time, the 1950s. As a result, both Hong Kong and China might be said to present alternative modes of development for Singapore, but these are not enticing alternatives. The novel's depiction of China does not move beyond the representation of primary industry (and China is pursuing a national development agenda at this time[493]). Singapore most certainly traffics commodities mined or grown in exploitative conditions too, and this trade underpins the city's entrepôt status in the world-ecology – the metabolism of the global city depends upon it. Resource extraction under capitalism is only implied in *Unrest*. Chains of production are made apparent, though, and *Unrest*'s characters' trajectories are also bound up with each other. All of the places and people in the novel are shown to be implicated in the same economic system that means they co-produce each other's wealth, poverty, and precarity. In this sense, the text is suggestive of combined and uneven relations across the world-ecology. Systemic linkage is intrinsic to the novel's representation of these characters' lives in the context of the Cold War and decolonisation.

Art Studio represents very different geographical dynamics of economic and cultural linkage. In *Art Studio*, characters are all primarily based in Singapore, before dispersing to rural Malaya, urban Taiwan, Hong Kong, Madras, then Paris, Lyon and Barcelona in the final chapters. Mainland China is only visited once, by Su Lan, who goes there for a brief retreat. Apart from this trip, which is described over three pages, China only appears as a place of business investment for Singaporean characters.[494] This is possible because of China 'open[ing] its doors' (presumably under the reforms implemented by Deng Xiaoping), to create a situation in which 'money became king again'.[495] As a result of this transformation, China is no longer seen as a potential alternative to the way of life experienced in Singapore and Hong Kong, as it is by *Unrest*'s characters. This correlates with the different historical settings of the books. *Unrest* is predominantly set in a period of colonial reassertion and Cold War binary: Britain is battling insurgents in Malaya in the first phase of the Emergency (1948-60) in flashback sequences, and China appears to present an opportunity for individuals to partake in a seemingly communist revolution. It is a time of unrest, in terms of colonial reassertion of authority and anti-colonial blowback, Cold War divisions, and local manifestations of these large-

[493] Spence, p. 541.
[494] Yeng, *Art Studio*, trans. by Goh Beng Choo and Loh Guan Liang (Singapore: Math Paper Press, 2014), pp. 374, 376-9.
[495] Ibid, p. 197.

scale processes (such as the anti-colonial demonstrations and race riots that occurred in Singapore in 1950, 1954, 1955, 1956, 1964 and 1969). The novel's eponymous unrest is foregrounded: the characters participate in the Chinese middle school riots of 1956. Besides this political fervour, there is also sexual unrest in the novel – a point I shall return to later. For the first half of the novel, political unrest is central to the plot. The Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) and its propaganda attracts Weikang, who hopes for an escape from the meaningless drudgery of Singaporean colonial capitalism and the subsequent neoliberal-developmentalism. The economic position of Singaporeans in the wake of independence is not dramatically altered: independence from Malaysia comes in 1965, following independence from Britain in 1963, but the PAP came to power in Singapore's second general election in 1959. The transition from colonial capitalism to neoliberal-developmentalism is relatively seamless. The British social housing programme is expanded after decolonisation, and a new flag is chosen, but Singapore remains an entrepôt state. For Weikang, at least, China appears to be an alternative. Immanuel Wallerstein has argued that the communist praxis of Marxist thought in the capitalist world-system 'functioned in reality more as an ideology of national development than as an ideology of socialist construction'.[496] Certainly, Weikang is engaged in activity every bit as menial and meaningless as in Singapore. He does not see the fruit of his labour as an agricultural worker in China either.

Weikang experiences precarity under communism as a direct resonance from the colonial era. Through echoes in the narrative, the novel parallels a raid on Weikang as a child in British Malaya and as an adult in China to demonstrate that the colonial structure of power is replicated elsewhere – and may not be a chiefly colonial structure, but more to do with authoritarianism and elitism:

> Bang bang bang! The kind of pounding that arouses fear, panic, uncertainty, always in the middle of the night. Bang bang! Each blow fiercer than the one before, more insistent, making you feel you've committed some crime, even if you have no idea what you might have done to cause such guilt. […]
>
> The same event, over and over, but always another door, another pounding fist, another uneasy night. Even after leaving the Malay peninsula and returning to the socialist republic, Weikang still heard that knocking.

[496] Wallerstein, 'Marx, Marxism-Leninism, and Socialist Experiences in the Modern World-System', *Thesis Eleven* 27.1 (1990), 40-53, p. 52.

> Bang bang bang! Bang bang! The next time it was the Cultural Revolution, the Red Guards, like the British Security Forces, hammering energetically at his door, like Sisyphus' rock crashing downhill once again, as it has done through all of history at different times, in different places, taking different forms, and like its other victims, Weikang had no choice but to grapple with it, trying not to be crushed, pushing it back up the hill. Of course, it would roll down again.
>
> In Malaya, the colonial forces knocked at his door, and in the socialist republic, the Red Guards did. The colonials were rooting out communists, and the Red Guards were searching for anti-revolutionary elements. But they were the same except for the uniforms they wore and the language they spoke. They sounded exactly the same from the other side of the door: bang bang bang! A sudden, terrifying accusation.[497]

The arbitrary and destructive nature of these accusations adds another dimension to the precarity endured in the Cha'ah village in Malaya and in Guangzhou, where 'the Red Guards did pour into his house and turn everything upside down'.[498] Alongside poor nutrition and health, the Cultural Revolution engenders a culture of fear that mercilessly precaritises everyone, because anyone could be targeted next, 'whether they were your parent or child, student or teacher, husband or wife, superior or subordinate'.[499] In this passage, the knock at the door is a recurring trope that suggests rupture: the knock ruptures Weikang's understanding of his existence as a subject of the Cultural Revolution, but it also ruptures the narrative by connecting different places and times with the same irruption of a structure of power. History, in this passage, works in cycles and exhibits recurrent features or patterns that defy the linearity of narratives such as the 'Singapore Story'. By beginning Weikang's story in Malaya, and tracking it through Singapore, Yeng showcases an alternative narrative trajectory to the 'Singapore Story'. At the same time, there is a wider spatial frame of reference: Malaya and China host this resonant moment of institutionalised fear, and Weikang only escapes a similar scenario in Singapore by fleeing before the ISD can detain him. In this sense, fear of authority is instilled in various sites, and various political formations, across the world-system.

In all cases, Weikang is targeted for failing to be amenable to strategies of development that are imposed by the elites of these various countries. In Malaya, these

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[497] Yeng, *Art Studio*, pp. 58-59.
[498] Ibid, p. 286.
[499] Ibid, pp. 281-2.

strategies are designed to make the New Towns more amenable to colonial exploitation of labour. In Singapore, they are to reduce anti-capitalist threats and render the country more pliable by multinational capital. In China, the development strategies demand adherence to the national ideology in subjects' being, and Weikang comes to represent a suspiciously 'Westernised' fringe of society. Weikang's story is at once more spatially and politically complex and more temporally loose than the 'Singapore Story', and yet the Singapore that features in this story is just one site of many where history's circularity and power's abuse are foregrounded. Singapore becomes part of a larger, global pattern where elites wield power in ways that disrupt the lives of their subjects – and in each location, Weikang is a precarious subject. This does not serve to undermine the national narrative, however. *Unrest* shows how precarity emerges and is perpetuated across different formations, but the 'Singapore Story' gives meaning to this precarity by framing it as a national prerogative in a teleology of progress and development. The 'Singapore Story' concedes that there were sacrifices (as we saw in Chapter One's analysis of *The River's Song*) but situates these in a narrative of national development, with a suggestion that today's prosperity is a result of yesterday's sacrifices. *Unrest* reinforces this. Precarity is meaningless in other contexts, but meaningful in tandem with the 'Singapore Story'.

In *Unrest*, then, China features as an alternative to capitalism which, from the individual perspective, is not palatable. The limited role of China in *Art Studio* is, at one level, a function of China's shifting role in the world-system at this time; in the 1980s, China adopts reforms that render its mode of production more akin to that espoused by Singapore (with Singapore acting as a model for China, by some accounts).[500] *Art Studio* is set in the 1980s, with the last stages of the Malayan Emergency still dragging on, and the novel continues into its contemporary, with references to the 2008 financial crisis and Tiger Woods' affairs in 2009. China is not even a nominally socialist alternative for these characters. At another level, however, China's place in the background of the novel is a consequence of the cross-section of society that is focalised in *Art Studio*. Whereas *Unrest* narrates the lives of a precarious proletariat, who splinter off in various directions to become manual labourers or entrepreneurs, *Art Studio* focalises a precarious middle class, with access to university education and realistic prospects of self-employment. They, too, disperse in various directions, to be guerrilla fighters, professional artists, and homemakers. Some also die during the narrative, and their class status is shown to be no buffer against precarity. There are also working-class characters, such as Ah Gui, who joins

[500] David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, p. 120.

a gang to gain a new safety net, and who dies relatively young of liver failure. For the middle class who further the bulk of the novel's plot, thought, China is only relevant as a place to make money. It is not an escape route from the precarity which consumes their lives. *Art Studio*'s cartography also includes significant flashback sequences in which Ning Fang is in India. Ning Fang witnesses Madras' 'poverty, chaos, [and] filth', and she abstracts this to stand for all of India.[501] A gendered form of precarity takes hold of her in Madras, where she is expected to stay at a friend's home awaiting music lessons, and where she inadvertently contributes to a toxic family situation.[502] She escapes this situation by agreeing to marry Ganesan, a middle class, French-born Indian who offers to take her to France.[503] Neither China nor India represent an escape from precarity, and neither, really, does France; rather, the opportunity of marriage to a middle-class French citizen alleviates precarity for Ning Fang.

Malaya looms large in the plotlines of both *Unrest* and *Art Studio*. In both cases, sites in Malaya are shorn of major place names. In *Unrest*, Weikang, Guoliang, and Ah Huat grow up in Cha'ah Village, a colonial 'New Village' in which rural labourers are imprisoned outside of working hours.[504] In *Art Studio*, Malaya is the area to which Jian Xiong is conveyed as a communist militant. In both cases, readers cannot be sure of the exact location of the characters, other than to imagine them located somewhere in Malaya. In this way, Malaya stands abstractly in relation to the characters' life narratives, as it does in the 'Singapore Story'. In Singapore's national narrative, Malaya is a hinterland with a similar history of colonisation, anti-colonial resistance, and anti-communist military activity leading up to independence. At the same time, it stands as an opponent, as the figure that expelled Singapore from Malaysia, and as the figure by which Singapore's government can measure its economic superiority. Historian Hong Lysa shows that '[i]n the post-1965 national imaginary […], Malaya/Malaysia was everything that Singapore was not, and did not want to be'.[505] Malaya is fundamental to Singapore's modern constitution despite being rhetorically sidelined, Hong convincingly argues. *Unrest* and *Art Studio* go some way towards redressing this, by showing characters who are Malaya-born (and thus Malaysian in contemporary terms), who identify strongly with Singapore as a homeland. The texts also partially re-historicise the peninsula: they show colonial dynamics of control as well as anti-

[501] Yeng, *Art Studio*, p. 542.
[502] Ibid, p. 550.
[503] Ibid, pp. 551, 556.
[504] Loh Kah Seng, *Squatters into Citizens*, pp. 73-97.
[505] Hong Lysa, 'Revisiting Malaya: Malayan dream or Singapore nightmare', *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 16.1 (2015), 24–34, p. 24.

colonial and anti-communist violence. This historicising process is only partial, though, because the geographical specifics are so sparse. Once again, Malaya is made to stand figuratively in relation to Singapore and Singaporeans, as a point of origin, a neighbour with a shared history, and a wilderness of negative connotation – an ahistorical site, in the case of Jian Xiong's struggle. Malaya is a liminal site or a background setting for character development, whilst Singapore is deeply historicised by reference to political intrigue and economic development. As an ahistorical site, the jungle is part of the same reserve of developmental potential as Singapore's southern islands or northern swamps examined in Chapter Two, when seen through neoliberal-developmental lenses, but in *Art Studio*, Malaya remains a hinterland for small-scale agriculture in economic terms and character development in novelistic terms. Jian Xiong and Big Beard are passive in relation to history, having partaken of a struggle which, they anticipated, would be pivotal in reconstituting Singapore and Malaysia. The surrender of the communists renders their activity fruitless, and the history of the winners unfolds elsewhere, with other actors. Nevertheless, *Art Studio* shows how the pair are part of the story of Singapore: Jian Xiong has grown up in Singapore and has family in Singapore. His story is part of Singapore's story, but his death is not framed as a sacrifice in the national narrative. Rather, the deaths of communists in the Malayan jungle are part of the narrative of the triumph of neoliberal-developmental Singapore. By fictionalising one such Singaporean fighter – and having him build a mutual dependence with a Malaysian fighter for the same cause – Yeng subtly undermines the triumphalism of the 'Singapore Story'. *Art Studio* draws attention to the marginalia of the national narrative, to show alternative 'loser's histories'. The characters in these novels may be seen as Malaysian or Singaporean, and thus their life stories exceed the spatial and historical frames of reference of the 'Singapore Story'. At the same time, Malaya is brought into the story of Singapore. Processes of development, in narrative or economic terms, hinge upon Singapore's relation to its neighbour.

This inclusion of marginal voices has counter-hegemonic discursive effects, too. As M.M. Bakhtin showed when writing about heteroglossia, novels are composed of a multitude of voices, which, through their utterances and mutual interaction, constantly transform linguistic relations. Novels can represent people from a variety of backgrounds and in various subject positions, and their interrelation shifts through the articulations of the novel.[506] Bakhtin argues that

[506] Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the Novel', pp. 272-5.

> [t]hese distinctive links and interrelationships between utterances and languages, this movement of the theme through different languages and speech types, its dispersion into the rivulets and droplets of social heteroglossia, its dialogization-this is the basic distinguishing feature of the stylistics of the novel.[507]

Such speech types can include the official discourses which delegitimise slum dwellers, for instance, by calling them 'squatters'. The slum dwellers' fictionalised counter-articulations allow for a more nuanced understanding of their relation to the government and its development drive. In *Art Studio* and *Unrest*, a plethora of characters from the margins of society are described or focalised, and the novels thus counter the government's boundaries for inclusion into the national narrative. Heteroglossia may be a prominent feature of the novel form, but in these historical novels, it is repurposed towards counter-hegemonic historical narrative. The individuals and families who make up large-scale historical narratives are given voices, and these voices differ from the narrating voice of the hegemonic narrative. These alternative perspectives illuminate the social and environmental costs to the celebratory thrust of the 'Singapore Story'. The counter-hegemonic force of fictionalised utterances from society's peripheries emerges from both the content of the utterance (that is, the contestation or nuancing of the developmental narrative) and in the form of the utterance (as fundamentally different from the national narrative's narrating voice, and repositioning itself in relation to that voice). Novelistic utterances take an active part in reshaping the connotative force of language through the speech act. Historical novelistic utterances can do the same, but they can also reshape the national imaginary – or in the case of novels that dramatise global connections, the capitalist global imaginary – by contesting the teleology of dominant historical narratives. Heteroglossia and historicisation are historical fiction's tools for contesting and disrupting hegemonic narratives, and by extension, these tools can be put to work refashioning the national and global capitalist imaginaries.

Art Studio and *Unrest* bring in voices from Singapore's margins, but they also situate Singapore regionally and globally. Characters' life stories exceed the 'Singapore Story' in terms of the spatial and historical frames of reference. National borders, and the divisions between core, semi-peripheral and peripheral site are crossed in these examples of historical fiction. Rather than showing a First, a Second and a Third World, these novels show processes of capital's worlding together, in a combined and uneven manner.

[507] Ibid, p. 273.

Singapore's national narrative is complicated through these narratives, as the spatial and historical limits to the narrative are pushed. Besides the functions of heteroglossia and historicisation in combatting the erasures of the national narrative (of a politicised Malaya, for instance), historical novels can also have a profoundly anticipatory effect. By showing the logic of precaritisation, the spatial and temporal persistence of precarity, and space and time that has yet to be subject to precaritising logic, historical fiction can have a sense of futurity. It can heavily imply that the processes that are represented will continue to encroach into the as-yet unenclosed or insufficiently productive space. This was evident in Chapters One and Two, in which we saw slum and rural spaces being developed and redeveloped (with the threat of more to come), and the islands that make up Singapore (a reserve to which Singapore is attempting to add, as in the case of Pedra Branca) being repurposed in the national interest. In this chapter, the logic is shown to be in operation beyond these city-wide and regional perspectives, in genuinely global dynamics of accumulation, dispossession, and precaritisation. The worlding of capital is shown to proceed into new areas and with a new intensity, and historical fiction anticipates these processes, providing a sense of futurity under global capitalism. This is achieved in tandem with the genre's pushing at the limits of the national narrative. The people at the margins of the story are brought back to the narrative centre, to articulate their perspective, and the future of Singapore is resituated as part of the imagined global capitalist future: combined and uneven expansion and intensification will continue in Singapore and across the world, and it will bring precarity in its wake.

Affective Solidarity

Historical novels may also contain more optimistic aspects. In this section, I will argue that a kind of 'affective solidarity' materialises in these historical novels, and can thus emerge in historical novels more widely. Before embarking on an explanation of the theoretical platform for this analysis, though, I will explore the idea of linkage across the world-system, as represented in *Unrest* and *Art Studio*. In the above section, Singaporeans were shown to be in times and places that do not fit the national narrative. This dispersal follows global flows of people, culture, and capital, and these are all interlinked. *Art Studio* and *Unrest* represent a system of linkage that comprises people, culture and capital, operating together, and these connections filter into the narrative sequence of events.

Yeng introduces subtle possibilities of linkage that suggest systemic connection between sites.

In *Unrest*, the characters who take collective action as students disperse across the archipelago, but remain connected through commodity circulation. Daming, a student leader who moves to Hong Kong with Ziqin, becomes an entrepreneur with his own printing press. He prints pornographic magazines, and thus takes part in the circulation of magazines through places like the Cha'ah New Village. This connection is never made directly; it remains up to readers to infer that the linkage is implied in Daming's and Ah Huat's respective producer and consumer positions. The fact that the characters are linked by their commodity does not necessarily imply any sense of solidarity, but readers' access to both characters' relationship to the commodity and to each other illustrates the systemic link. Indeed, these characters never meet, and are distantly connected in the narrative only by their shared acquaintances. The novel links them through narrative and through a represented commodity chain, allowing readers to see the relations with greater clarity than either of these characters can see. These sites and people are brought into the same world-system, and are thus worlded in their dependence to the same market. By representing and historicising the linkages that were in operation at this stage of the Cold War and at a moment of intensifying colonisation (especially in Malaya), Yeng shows how worlding processes are entrenched in Singapore, whilst also depicting these processes' unfolding beyond Singapore. In *Unrest*, this technique is strengthened by the fragmentary nature of the diegesis. The novel consists of a series of fragments, in which characters are not always named, and this leaves readers attempting to make connections between fragments. Readers attempt to rationally link the fragments as they engage with them, and thus situate the characters in relation to each other in economic and geographic terms, as well as in terms of plot linkage.

Art Studio, Yeng's later novel, has structural similarities with *Unrest*. Characters' life stories intersect and split in various directions. The main cast of characters are members of Yan Pei's art studio at the beginning of the novel, with another two characters joining the cohort as nude models for sketching purposes. These two, Ah Gui and Ji Zong, are schoolfriends who go their separate ways after modelling in the studio. Ah Gui joins a gang to try to pay for his grandmother's medication, since she has no other family members to provide for her. Ji Zong studies in a Christian mission school in Singapore, then moves to Hong Kong to further his studies. His literary and artistic tastes develop away from the action films and sketches over which he bonded with Ah Gui. On a return to Singapore, he

has a brief sexual encounter with a mysterious Malaysian woman, and then he performs his national service and returns to Hong Kong to lecture. He survives Ah Gui, and returns for his friends' funeral. The reader can deduce that the mysterious woman is Mei Feng, the partner of an artist at the art studio, Jian Xiong. Jian Xiong is implicated in a communist plot and flees to the Malaysian jungle at the beginning of the novel, leaving Mei Feng alone. With her family dependent upon the income she receives in Singapore, she struggles with the news that she has a brain tumour. The teacher at the studio, Yan Pei, is revealed to have allowed his marriage to break down by failing to acknowledge the entreaties of his wife Wan Zhen to earn some money for the household. She eventually leaves him and moves to Hong Kong, but does not find love elsewhere. Yan Pei is diagnosed with prostate cancer and cannot afford treatment. Wan Zhen learns of Yan Pei's condition from another studio-based artist, Si Xian, in a chance meeting in Hong Kong, and flies to Singapore in time to watch Yan Pei's final days – without being certain that Yan Pei acknowledges her presence in the ward. Two students at the studio, Si Xian and Ning Fang, grow up together and have a platonic relationship that does not blossom until they are both older, both resident in Paris, and after Ning Fang has been widowed. Ning Fang migrates from Singapore to India to follow her singing instructor, but is disappointed by his manipulative behaviour and is rescued by the man who she eventually marries. Si Xian, meanwhile, moves to Taiwan to establish a reputation away from the shallow Singaporean press and public sphere. He anguishes over his loss of Ning Fang and creates poignant sketches that incorporate her body into features of the Taiwanese landscape. The novel ends with Ji Zong, who now works at university in Singapore, encountering the sketch of himself which is drawn at the beginning of the novel, decades later. He discovers this on the wall of his colleague's mother's house; his colleague is Indranee, the daughter of Ning Fang and her first husband Ganesan. The narrative appears to be more linear and chronological, although there are fragments that are explicitly memories of previous events. The episodes in the Malaysian jungle also disrupt the chronology, because neither the characters nor readers know how long Jian Xiong and his comrade Zhang Bao Jin struggle to survive in the wilderness. There is a constellation of chance meetings and economic and cultural linkages across the time and space of *Art Studio*, in a similar dynamic to that of *Unrest*. *Art Studio* is more chronological, however, and names characters earlier and with greater clarity.

Economic linkage extends to the least visible and most peripheral places. Rural Malaya is most certainly in the capitalist sphere, in that it is under the control of British colonial forces. Its peripheral status, however, means that the precarity of the jungle is

nearly invisible to other precaritised subjects (in Singapore or Hong Kong, for example). Jian Xiong is escorted by 'the organisation' to various outposts before being plucked from a farm to move into the jungle. During the handover, communist agents are attacked by government forces, and Jian Xiong is the only survivor. With his contact dead, and his presence confirmed in the jungle, he cannot go forward to the organisation or back to Singaporean society.[508] Shorn of his support network, he is faced with immediate starvation or death at the hands of the military. There are echoes of Yan Pei's accidental implication in a communist plot (which stems from his singing of catchy communist songs[509]) when Jian Xiong realises that he only ran away to make himself believe he had a choice, which he gravely regrets.[510] It is in this boundary space that Jian Xiong encounters Big Beard, a man of unknown age who rifles through the remains of the soldiers and communist agents. Big Beard eventually agrees to let Jian Xiong join him, and takes him to his camp in the side of a mountain. They scavenge and cultivate crops to survive. The novel returns to these characters periodically without specifying how much time has passed, and they become suspended in time – as discussed above, they are almost dehistoricised. They detach from the firm dates and times of the narrative's action in Singapore to partake in a nebulous version of history, in which their activity is emptied of meaning at the national level. They do not experience Singapore's (or Malaysia's) economic development, and do not take part in the events chronicled in the 'Singapore Story', but they are undoubtedly products of the historical circumstances that comprise the national narrative. For this period, they are literally and figuratively in the wilderness. Their conversations about art, survival, and memories of home mean that they locate meaning in their lives in various places. The novel shows their relation to Singapore's history, as this history's products and its discarded paraphernalia. They are reintegrated into the national narrative insofar as they are linked up to it through *Art Studio*'s narrative, but they do not fit neatly into the trajectory of progress at the cost of precarity. Their precarity is only tangentially related to the ascendency of multinational capital in Singapore, since their protracted absence is part of a wider policy to rid the country of leftist organisers and militants. Their precarity has not contributed to Singapore's vaunted history of progress, although their circumstances may relate to the securitisation of this neoliberal development.

They experience a form of precarity that is not a direct outcome of only capitalist processes, since the communist militants also modulate the pair's exile. Big Beard recounts

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[508] Yeng, *Art Studio*, pp. 90-2.
[509] Ibid, pp. 47-8.
[510] Ibid, p. 93.

the times before his desertion from 'the organisation' in a partially fond tone, although he regrets their turn towards internal conflict and recrimination that left their members precarious. '"It's bullshit. We joined the party to liberate this unreasonable society so the disenfranchised can live a freer, better life. To think our freedom was taken by the ones we swore to fight alongside with."'[511] With this strong proviso foregrounded, he frequently credits the movement with teaching him the skills to survive in the wilderness, and it is in this sense that movement acts as a substitute for a family unit in its infrastructure and system of mutual provision. In the organisation, only the sick could eat fruits due to their scarcity.[512] He enjoyed the fact that 'we shared a common goal and supported one another'.[513] Now that he is outside the movement, he grows his own vegetables. His survival skills include scavenging, hunting, foraging, and knowledge of which plants are edible.[514] He collects rainwater in mugs left outside his cave, and washes by standing out in the rain.[515] He creates a fire in the cave to ward off insects and snakes, as well as the cold.[516] Valuables salvaged from soldiers' corpses, which have no use-value to him, are traded with the Orang Asal villagers nearby.[517] Big Beard, then, survives the wilderness through training and ingenuity. Precarity is evident, because there are no specialised services that they can access, in terms of healthcare, food provision, or accommodation. They learn to buttress themselves against the worst ravages of the jungle, however, by working together and teaching each other survival techniques.

The pair are isolated in the jungle. Their isolation is partly self-inflicted, but it is maintained and policed by the government and the hostile communists, which means that they are reluctant to travel far beyond their small realm for fear of being discovered. Their two-man society on the mountainside contains the classic ingredients to a conventional literary self-sufficient domain: they rely upon the forest for foraging, they fish in the river, and they plant, nurture, and harvest crops in an enclosure on the side of the hill. Over time, they expand this enclosure.[518] Their self-sufficiency, however, is a myth they create. They remain dependent upon the two sides' war dead to provide them with tins, food, and tradeable resources like wristwatches, and they are also dependent upon trade with the Orang Asal. As a result, they are not de-linked from the world-economy. Rather, they are

[511] Ibid, p. 116.
[512] Ibid, p. 110.
[513] Ibid, p. 115.
[514] Ibid, p. 106.
[515] Ibid, p. 112.
[516] Ibid, p. 115.
[517] Ibid, p. 102.
[518] Ibid, p. 222.

barred from partaking fully of the benefits of society's networked relations. As in the example of the islands examined in Chapter Two, this self-sufficiency is a myth, because to be truly self-sufficient and isolated would be impossible. Greater economic linkage might be beneficial to the pair, and it is only the military forces on each side that prevent them from expanding their domain further. In addition to being part of a network of trading groups in the jungle, Big Beard is similarly implicated in the cycles and patterns of history to Jian Xiong and Yan Pei. He, too, joined the movement out of a combination of social and economic pressures, rather than a deep-rooted ideological commitment to communism. His parents were farmers and he was a primary school teacher when his kampung was 'swept in a leftist frenzy' and he felt obliged to join up, with his parents' blessing.[519] In the cases of Big Beard, Jian Xiong, and Yan Pei, then, their presence in leftist groups is not entirely accidental, but it is the product of specific local social forces. None are committed to governmental overthrow before they join up. *Art Studio* illustrates this historical pattern, as its most openly communist characters are either reluctant, confused or naïve in their commitment to the organisation – and they come to realise this. The novel makes these characters and their circumstances visible and understandable in context, when these experiences would be distant and invisible from Singaporean society (even as they are integral to the 'Singapore Story'). This complicates the national narrative profoundly: it shows the exclusion of Singaporeans from Singapore, which is foundational to the 'Singapore Story' in a new light to problematise the narrative's tone of celebration. The isolated situation of Big Beard and Jian Xiong is the outcome of grand global forces of capitalism and communism, but also minute local forces. The local forces are no less global for their local-ness, in that such pressures occur globally, but they operate at different scales. By making visible the invisible and isolated deserters, *Art Studio* complicates the national narrative, and shows the extent of global linkage.

There are further examples of invisible subjects of a linked-up global capitalism being made visible and understandable through Yeng's fiction. In both *Art Studio* and *Unrest*, 'vagabonds' and 'vagrants' populate the streets of the novels, whilst the plight of prisoners is also narrated. In *Art Studio*, detentions are both political (in that they deal with overtly political prisoners) and criminal. Yan Pei is detained without trial for months, and has no information to offer his captors.[520] The instance of imprisonment of the criminal is the case of Ah Gui, who joined a gang in order to pay for his grandmother's medical care

[519] Ibid, p. 114.
[520] Ibid, p. 126.

and funeral.[521] In this instance, Ah Gui's bleak situation compels him to commit crimes and eventually leads to his detention. *Art Studio* represents imprisonment by referring to it on multiple occasions as an event in the past, but it also irrupts into the present in the form of the police search for Jian Xiong.[522] Whilst the detentions are a part of the history conveyed in the 'Singapore Story', they are also a presence in the novel's contemporary, and history is presented as becoming circular as the detentions continue. The novel also brings in the incarceration that accompanies the lawbreaking that becomes necessary for the most precarious urbanised character, Ah Gui. This is an untold 'Singapore Story', in that this detention is just as key to the maintenance of the neoliberal mode of governance in Singapore as the overtly political detentions. By referring to these past moments of imprisonment, whilst narrating an ongoing police hunt for Jian Xiong, *Art Studio* complicates the national narrative's framing of detention as a necessary evil that is consigned to the past. The conditions that make detention necessary for the authorities are deliberately reproduced as part of an ongoing process. Imprisonment also acts as a caution to other precarious characters to accept their conditions with greater obedience. In *Unrest*, the detentions are exclusively 'political' in essence. Weikang describes how '[t]ime stopped' once he was in prison, and he finds himself taking a long time over simple acts like peeling a banana (which he likens to undressing a woman).[523] He eventually learns that his former partner's new husband has also been detained, but this is not narrated.[524] By juxtaposing these two similar situations, and narrating one of them whilst referring to the other in passing, the novel draws attention to the levels of visibility and narratability in these instances. Weikang spends months in prison, and this is condensed to five pages of the novel, whilst the other detainee's experience is limited to a paragraph. Yeng draws attention to the difficulty of narrating the detentions, even though they are key to the trope of the communist threat that allowed Lee to crush unions, which is integral to the 'Singapore Story'. Weikang is freed without having to confess, but all of his friends presume that he must have confessed and implicated some of his friends in order to gain his freedom, and he is thus newly isolated even after his release. The ensuing social pressures lead him to move to Maoist China, and attempt to reorient himself in relation to another mode of production.[525]

[521] Ibid, p. 360.
[522] Ibid, pp. 27-9.
[523] Yeng, *Unrest*, pp. 101-6.
[524] Ibid, p. 306.
[525] Ibid, p. 110.

In China, however, Weikang is not free from seeing another kind of social isolation: the isolation of the 'vagrant'. The unemployed and homeless in Yeng's novels feature as presences in almost all urban areas, be they capitalist or nominally socialist. The unemployed are, of course, as much a product of socio-economic relations as the employees of any industry. Walter Benn Michaels analyses unemployment as a function of capital to illustrate this point:

> [I]t's only because of the unemployed – the "relative surplus population" who function, in Marx's words, as "the pivot upon which the law of supply and demand in labor works" that the wages of less-skilled labor can so easily decline. For capital, in other words, unemployment is as much a solution as a problem, since the unemployed are a crucial mechanism for the exploitation of their more fortunate colleagues, the ones with jobs. Thus unemployment is structurally necessary to capitalism […].[526]

This might help to explain the preponderance of unemployed people in Yeng's novels. The unemployed are a 'mechanism', acting to warn the employed that their job might be lost at any moment. This dynamic echoes the function of the detained in Yeng's novels, as a presence that works as a series of cautionary tales to the precariat: do not cause instability or steal private property, or else incarceration awaits you. In this sense, the unemployed and the detained are made visible in the texts, and they are made legible as warnings in human form. The unemployed are reduced to being a mechanism in the service of capital, even as their surplus labour value is not extracted. As a mechanism, they are particularly effective on the precariat – those in greatest danger of losing their jobs unless they exceed their employers' expectations on a regular basis. The spectre of unemployment is given corporeal forms in these novels. In *Unrest*, there are 'drifters', 'homeless' , travellers 'like refugees', and 'vagrants', whilst in *Art Studio* there are 'beggars', 'vagrants' and 'vagabonds'.[527] The language is oddly antiquated in some cases, when the unemployed or homeless are referred to as 'vagabonds' or 'vagrants'. By describing the unemployed in this archaic idiom, Yeng shows the persistence of impoverishment into the present as an historical problem.

Situated within both underdeveloped and highly economically developed settings, these people testify to the fact that capitalist and communist development strategies, in

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[526] Walter Benn Matthews, 'The Beauty of a Social Problem (e.g. unemployment),' *Twentieth-Century Literature* 57.3-4 (2011), 309-327, p. 319.

[527] Yeng, *Unrest*, pp. 14, 38, 303; *Art Studio*, pp. 565-6, 516, 453, 463.

any of the forms encountered by Yeng's characters, produce unemployment as a structural necessity. The precariat's geographical distribution in the novel is interesting: these 'vagrants' are present in Chennai, Swatow, 'a Minnan farming village',[528] the Cha'ah New Village, Singapore, and in the streets, parks, and McDonalds restaurants of Paris – wherever, in fact, the narrator takes us. Capitalism thus produces impoverishment and precarity across its many forms, and communism is presented as no escape from the experience of precarity. 'Vagrants' in China are angrily dismissed as 'human trash' by Weikang's new acquaintances.[529] Zygmunt Bauman has observed that processes of development lead to some people constituting 'wasted humans'. For Bauman, 'wasted humans' are

> an inevitable outcome of modernization, and an inescapable side-effect of *order-building* (each order casts some parts of the extant population as "out of place", "unfit" or "undesirable") and of *economic progress* (that cannot proceed without degrading and devaluing the previously effective modes of "making a living" and therefore cannot but deprive their practitioners of their livelihood).[530]

The language of progress and development is endemic to both capitalist and Maoist socialist discourses of self-legitimation. The order-building and the making redundant of particular modes of making a living, in combination, mean that the tarnishing of people as 'vagrants' is not specific to a mode of production: it is a phenomenon that justifies the present state of affairs in multiple situations. By fictionalising homelessness in such a way, Yeng might be said to replicate the capitalist logic (outlined above by Michaels) that renders them cautionary tales. However, by situating the precarious in narratives, across which wealth accrues and diminishes across time and space, his novels also illustrate the relations which produce and reproduce this precarity. In so doing, Yeng complicates the 'Singapore Story', which presents Singapore's case of development as unique. Yeng shows that it is specific, rather than unique, and the relations that produce precarity are in evidence across the world-system.

In the above paragraphs, I have shown that there is a series of economic and social links between sites in the world-system, in which people are worlded by global capitalism – they are brought into the world-economy and they serve it, whilst they also try to make it serve them. *Unrest* and *Art Studio* highlight a series of links through their narratives, and

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[528] Yeng, *Unrest*, p. 300.
[529] Ibid, p. 271.
[530] Bauman, *Wasted Lives*, p. 5.

these links include the links of commodity circulation (as in Daming's pornography production), links of structures of fear (in colonial Malaya and Maoist China), and links in terms of the visibility of the unemployed or homeless. I argue in this section that historical fiction has the capacity to make readers understand their shared capitalist subjecthood with fictionalised characters, and by extension, with other subjects of capitalism globally. This is achieved through a juxtaposition of various characters and various labour regimes in texts, and through the texts' ways of making meaning from linkages. Novels do not narrate economic or cultural links, necessarily, but they do narrate people's stories, which imply economic and cultural links between sites. Moreover, in both *Unrest* and *Art Studio*, the stories that connect people are often love stories, and here there is a generic intersection between the historical novel and the love story. The generic expectations of the love story would involve romantic conflict and resolution, but *Unrest* offers a resolution which is not strictly happy: Daming moves to Vancouver and is apoplectic that Ziqin does not wish to follow him, Guoliang is newly infatuated with Ziqin, and Ziqin embraces a new relationship with Guoliang with minimal enthusiasm. *Art Studio*, on the other hand, weaves a far more optimistic tale, in which one subplot tracks a romance between Si Xian and Ning Fang which is rekindled at the novel's end as they meet again in Paris, as an established artist and a widowed art enthusiast respectively.

What might love stories achieve in an historical novel? Philosopher Alain Badiou has written that 'love is what the imagination employs to fill the emptiness created by sex'.[531] Moving beyond the imaginary, Badiou goes on to provisionally theorise love:

> Provided it isn't conceived only as an exchange of mutual favours, or isn't calculated way in advance as a profitable investment, love really is a unique trust placed in chance. It takes us into key areas of the experience of what is difference and, essentially, leads to the idea that you can experience the world from the perspective of difference.[532]

He elaborates that '[l]ove isn't simply about two people meeting and their inward-looking relationship: it is a construction, a life that is being made, no longer from the perspective of One but from the perspective of Two'.[533] With this definition of love foregrounded, Badiou adds another definition, when discussing the 'communism' of the theatre:

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[531] Alain Badiou, *In Praise of Love* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2012), p. 20.
[532] Ibid, p. 17.
[533] Ibid, p. 29.

> By “communist” I understand that which makes the held-in-common prevail over selfishness, the collective achievement over private self-interest. While we’re about it, we can also say that love is communist in that sense, if one accepts, as I do, that the real subject of a love is the becoming of the couple and not the mere satisfaction of the individuals that are its component parts. Yet another definition of love: minimal communism![534]

Whilst Badiou may be being facetious in this definition, he is also advancing the idea that collective achievement is akin to the process of a couple getting together. Courtship, too, is a collective achievement in this sense. If the family unit can be a buffer against precarity, but also a potential source of precarity, might a genuinely loving relationship represent the best possible unit, in which each individual attempts to make their partner’s life easier? By representing courtship and successful relationships in fiction, might historical fiction be dramatising a successful collective as it extends through the past, and hinting at the possibilities of greater future political transformation by extension?

The presence of love stories in historical fiction means that the humanity of the specific historical circumstances is stressed further. These stories tend to emphasise resilience and optimism in their protagonists, which can further illuminate the historical details of the setting. Love stories can annihilate the importance of grand historical narratives, or they can render the particular historical, political conditions all the more moving when they do intrude upon or condition a love story. Love stories in historical fiction can frame history emotively. The passage of time in historical fiction and in fictionalised relationships can be shown in parallel, illuminating both and emphasising the ‘bottom-up’ perspective on historical narratives. In tandem with historical narratives, love stories can thus offer an alternative method of chronicling events sequentially, as part of a relationship’s development. Love stories have their own trajectories which can have little or no relation to the sweep of ‘historical’ events, and this can aid a representation of political histories as tangential to people’s experience of the passage of time, or alternatively as all-consuming for those who are forced into lovelorn situations for political and historical reasons. When precarity becomes an obstacle to a love story, this has implications for the larger historical narrative. In texts which illuminate love stories and mutual support, and which circulate in the world-literary market, linkages can be shown which defy or bypass the market. Understandings of the world are remade, and not in

[534] Ibid, p. 90.

capital's image; rather they illustrate cultural and social flows through narrative. These novels can offer representations of active worlding, in contrast to the processes seen in previous chapters in which characters are being worlded, as well as islanded and gardened.

The optimism of this position requires severe tempering. In *Art Studio*, the novel sets up expectations of Mei Feng and Jian Xiong being reunited, after her diagnosis with a brain tumour and flight to Kuala Lumpur, and his isolation in the Malayan wilderness. The romance of Mei Feng meeting with Jian Xiong would create the perfect happy ending, in which all threads to the narrative tie together, but Jian Xiong dies in his attempt to leave his jungle hideout. *Art Studio* shows instances of unsuccessful and successful relationships. However, if we take Badiou's definition of love to mean the process of couples getting together – the 'life that is being made', rather than the endpoint celebrated in the films that mislead Si Xian into thinking he is in a relationship at the beginning of the novel – then *Art Studio* is a love story and historical novel that dramatises 'minimal communism'. It shows the devotion of love as a collective, and as a phenomenon in which many people are engaged independently. In a similar vein to that mined by Badiou, Lauren Berlant has begun a theorisation of love which puts faith in 'the world-building drives of love':[535]

> [L]ove is one of the few situations where we desire to have patience for what isn't working, and affective binding that allows us to iron things out, or to be elastic, or to try a new incoherence. This is the main upside of making love a properly political concept, it seems to me. A form of affective solidarity that admits the irrationality of the principled attachment.[536]

Love can take the form of 'affective solidarity' where patience and elasticity are prioritised, Berlant claims. To see this as 'world-building' suggests that positive cultural and social worlding can be developed through love, or representations of love. Whilst *Art Studio* remains a commodity, and is complicit in the patriarchy and heteronormativity that the market favours, it also suggests directions for solidarity as steps towards this 'minimal communism' of love. In the novel, Jian Xiong and Mei Feng have a relationship, Wan Zhen and Yan Pei have a relationship, and Ning Fang and Si Xian have a relationship. Must these all resolve in a Hollywood ending for the reader to feel solidarity with these characters, who are based in diverse (if linked-up) global cities and their hinterlands? We might invert this question, and reflect upon how readers might be more inclined to feel part of this

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[535] Lauren Berlant, *Desire/Love* (Brooklyn, New York: Punctum Books, 2012), p. 111.
[536] Berlant, 'A Properly Political Concept of Love: Three Approaches in Ten Pages,' *Cultural Anthropology* 26.4 (2011), 683–691, pp. 685-6.

collective, who struggle against the barriers put up by the capitalist world-ecology (including its similarly precarity-inducing communist sphere in *Unrest*), if there is an array of situations and outcomes by the end of the novel. If we accept Badiou's definition of experiencing the world 'from the perspective of Two', then in both of Yeng's novels, development strategies act as a barrier to love, and an inducement to (possibly loveless) sex in some cases. Characters' attempts to work within these constraints, or struggle beyond them, drive the novels onwards. The globe-trotting sexual escapades of Daming can be counterpoised neatly to the isolation and frustration of Jian Xiong. In this sense, the coupling of the historical novel and love story genres creates radical novels that amplify, rather than neutralise, the subversion of the celebratory, nationalist, neoliberal aspects of the 'Singapore Story'. *Unrest* and *Art Studio* develop a sense of their characters as being tied together by plot linkage over time and space, as well as economic linkage. This provides a platform for a reading of 'minimal communism' in the text, as shared capitalist subjecthood is made visible through fiction.

The novels suggest that affective solidarity exceeds the traditional romantic pairing. If we widen our interpretation of Berlant's idea of 'world-building drives' and 'affective binding' based on patience for others, then many more textual examples of affective solidarity become available. Towards the end of *Art Studio*, Si Xian and Ning Fang visit multiple European cities as tourists. In Barcelona, Si Xian observes a great many homeless people, and is prompted into a city-by-city comparison:

> The streets of Barcelona were broader and cleaner than those in Paris, and he started talking about his impression of Paris. He said that while Paris was known as a city of art, it was not as romantic and beautiful as he had earlier imagined. For instance, there were vagrants and beggars all over the place […].
>
> "Yes," she replied. "The Paris that visitors know is the Paris of travel guides. For them, Paris is a splendid metropolis teeming with breathtaking monuments, where fashionable people walk the street, where people luxuriate at alfresco cafés. It's as though life in Paris is nothing but bliss. In reality, for the average Parisian, especially migrants who struggle to make ends meet, the hardship they go through is something visitors cannot even begin to fathom."[537]

Ning Fang describes the gulf between the experiences of tourists, who savour only the most favourable aspects of the city, and the migrants and precariat who experience

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[537] Yeng, *Art Studio*, p. 516.

hardship there on a daily basis. She is keenly aware of the class difference represented by their different types of mobility. Ning Fang's mobility flows from her disposable income and income security, in a mode of travel that is 'powerfully associated with the articulation of privilege', in the words of Raminder Kaur and John Hutnyk.[538] The migrant workers' presence in Paris almost certainly springs from compelling economic and social forces which are opaque to the tourist. The tourist experience is oriented according to tourist guides and monuments. The vagrants are rendered invisible in this version of Paris, to be contrasted with the hyper-visible marvels of architecture. The tourist experience, then, precludes an understanding of Parisians as sharing in capitalist subjecthood, and thus impedes solidarity. Ning Fang critiques the experiences of tourists in comparison with those of the Parisian precariat, and suggests that this is due to both the layout of the city itself and the guidebooks which beckon tourists away from spectacles of hardship. In Barcelona, which is compared favourably to Paris, there are pickpockets in abundance. Ning Fang leaps to their defence: '"really, who chooses to be a beggar or pickpocket? These things happen as a matter of circumstance."'[539] The cities of *Art Studio* are juxtaposed against one another for comparison on these grounds. No-one chooses to be a vagrant, vagabond, or beggar, and yet there are people who are described in such terms in sites across China, India, Singapore, France, and Spain. The circumstances that produce precarity (and vagrancy, vagabondage, and so on) persist across space, whilst they also persist across time (as evinced by the archaic language). The example of Ah Gui shows us how precarious people can be represented in the novel. By narrating the life of just one such person, Yeng shows how each of these life-narratives is narratable, and can be made visible and understandable in relation to global capitalism. Ning Fang sees herself as a fellow capitalist subject to the 'young female Nigerian beggars' that she describes in Paris,[540] and this acts as a further critique of the conventional tourist experience. She is a tourist in Barcelona, and has a heightened understanding of the precariat's circumstances by comparing them to people in a similar position elsewhere. The novel shows both the similar structures that produce and reproduce petty criminality in the cases of Ah Gui in Singapore, the Nigerian women in Paris, and the pickpockets in Barcelona, and the novel highlights the possibility of feeling shared subjecthood with them, or an affective solidarity, on the basis of their difficult circumstances.

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[538] Raminder Kaur and John Hutnyk, eds. *Travel Worlds: Journeys in Contemporary Cultural Politics* (London and New York: Zed Books, 1999), p. 1.
[539] Yeng, *Art Studio*, p. 517.
[540] Ibid, p. 517.

This possibility is suggested again when Si Xian feels prompted (as he often does) to talk about where he lives in Taiwan. In response to Ning Fang's tour guide-like description of Lyon, he begins to describe Jiufen, a town near his in Taiwan:

> She explained that the magnificent buildings were erected by wealthy merchants who settled in Lyon. He told her of Jiufen in Taiwan, which had buildings that were also built atop a hill, although these residences were occupied by common folk.
>
> "Is it an old town?" she asked.
>
> His mind drew a blank. […] He began haltingly. "It used to be a mining town with only nine families. The households took turns to go downhill to stock up on supplies. Each time they did so, they would buy nine families' worth of goods; thus the name Jiufen, which means 'nine portions'. Today, the site is a bustling tourist destination."
>
> He recalled why he mentioned Jiufen: the old streets! Jiufen's old streets! Jiufen's old streets resembled those in Vieux Lyon, though the former were smaller in scale.[541]

Ning Fang and Si Xian take turns to play tour guide, and it is through their template-style descriptions of the places that the novel suggests homogeneity in settlement organisation. Whilst there is specificity – as Si Xian considers the size of the streets to be different – there are points of comparison which prompt him to suddenly start talking about Jiufen when in Lyon. The original layout of the two towns is similar, and both towns are now tourist destinations, amenable to a certain kind of heritage consumption. The comparison also suggests, implicitly, that there are many other towns around the world which might fit this category of being an old town, a tourist destination, with a collection of houses set upon a hill. There are some points of material convergence, where the towns physically have similar layouts, but it is pertinent that *Art Studio* shows how the language used to describe these towns is essentially the same. This language could, in turn, be used to describe almost any heritage tourist town. Once more the comparison with Singapore is subtly invited. The reorientation and repackaging of Paris, Barcelona, and Lyon for tourist consumption could also be done for Singapore, in such a way as to manage visibility. Ah Gui and his gang could be made less visible, whilst, for example, the Merlion (a nationalist monument), the Fullerton Hotel (a former colonial post office), and St. Andrew's Cathedral

[541] Ibid, pp. 530-1.

(the last Singaporean building constructed with convict labour, completed in 1861) are made hyper-visible. Singapore follows this template, by which the tourist experience is managed by monument construction, selective heritage preservation, and guidebook suggestions, but *Art Studio* does not narrate this. Instead, it draws parallels between town layouts on the one hand, and people in precarious circumstances on the other, exemplified by cities and towns from around the world. Both the tourist industry and the precariat it obscures are products of the same capitalist logic, and the novel shows how the management of visibility and the extractive processes of capitalism are bundled together. The 'wasted humans' who have been worlded are brought to light, after they were obscured by tourist industry processes of spatial management. This mode of representation suggests not only that people are shared capitalist subjects, being managed for the purposes of profit, but that an understanding of this shared subjecthood is possible through literary exploration and connection of similar situations globally. The 'drifters', 'vagrants' and 'beggars' are represented in such a way as to make them signify more than a mere reserve labour pool for capital's convenience. Their circumstances are produced and reproduced globally, and *Art Studio* connects these circumstances to a wider picture – that of the capitalist world-system.

Affective solidarity, as a phenomenon in which capitalist subjects understand themselves as subject to the same logic, is in evidence in these two novels. There is an active worlding, an effort to reshape understandings of the world produced by capital. Ning Fang's empathy and understanding of her own situation in relation to those of the migrant workers and beggars is one example of this phenomenon, whilst the love stories represent another. The intersection of the love story and the historical novel genre serves to resituate people in the longer and larger historical processes of development, and provides plot links that go beyond capitalist linkage. There are limits, however, to this conception of affective solidarity. Ning Fang's understanding of herself as complicit in the same system of relations as the beggars does not alleviate anyone's precarity, and the fictionalised perspective replicates the elitism of capitalist developers (insofar as the tourist sees the beggars, rather than the other way around). This need not destroy the radical potential of affective solidarity, because solidarity is a starting point for much more substantial mobilisation and transformation. That a text has the capacity to open up space for such transformative thinking is laudable. However, there are limits to the kind of cross-class affective solidarity displayed by Ning Fang. In *Unrest*, for example, Daming must be keenly aware of the precarious conditions for his workers, as a former leftist student leader, but his workers are

never mentioned. There are also problems posed by Daming's philandering, which is a subplot of the novel, and which darkly mirrors the romances elsewhere in the text. His love story contains little love, and demonstrates Daming's self-indulgence and predatory behaviour. The power relations that comprise his series of relationships are clear: Daming's intimacy with global capital takes him to various global cities in which he has mistresses. 'When it comes to women, Daming is both a hunter and a gatherer,' the narrator says.[542] Ziqin's conjecture about men's motivation for money encapsulates this depiction: they earn money 'the better to control people (especially their wives), to enjoy the high life, to possess more women'.[543] The accumulation of wealth and the accumulation of women are placed in parallel. If this is a love story, it has little capacity for a wider, progressive transformation of relations. Eleanor Wilkinson's modifications to political conceptions of love emphasise that love is not simply a positive force to transform the world for the better:

> Political love is not just about collective joy, but also love as fear, love as disappointment, love as rage, love as domination. […] Love is not just a generative power for good; love can also close down dialogue, narrow our worlds and limit our imaginaries. As feminist critiques of romantic love have long argued, love can often be as much about violence and domination than it is about care and support.[544]

Rather than leading to greater care and support, this example of a love story focuses on domination. The love described by Wilkinson, and evinced by Daming (if indeed it is love) is not affective solidarity. The marriage of Ziqin and Daming only constrains Ziqin, and her decision to cut ties with him renders the final section of *Unrest* more encouraging.

My theorisation of affective solidarity has grown out of various theorisations of love, and has a sense of love – of Badiou's 'minimal communism' and Berlant's 'world-building drives' – at its core. It is not intrinsically linked to the love story genre, however. The historical novel itself has the capacity to foster affective solidarity, and create a shared sense, among its characters and readers, of a linked-up capitalist subjecthood across space and time. This constitutes an expansion from such productive phenomena as the archipelagic structure of feeling examined in Chapter Two, but it differs further in its systemicity. Affective solidarity overlaps with the more anodyne idea of empathy, but

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[542] Ibid, pp. 145.
[543] Ibid, pp. 123.
[544] Eleanor Wilkinson, 'On Love as an (Im)properly Political Concept', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 35.1 (2017), 57-71, p. 67.

extends the idea to show commonality of subjecthood through a system of relations of which the characters and readers are a part. Showing how precarious situations can be economically linked to other instances of profit-making or redevelopment suggests that the variants of development discourse deployed in the Singaporean context (of delegitimising less commercial land use, of economic necessity, of the national interest, and so on) can be re-situated globally. This in turn contests the capitalist imaginaries in which neoliberal development processes are the only option available to a nation. By representing networked precarity and an alternative dynamic of productive social and cultural linkage, historical fiction can show and begin to delegitimise the combined and uneven development that underpins large-scale historical processes of capitalism.

As suggested above, this has implications for the conceptions of world literature that were outlined at the beginning of this chapter. If texts can represent a system of precaritising relations alongside moments of affective solidarity, then world-literature as a singular and unequal system of market- and prestige-based relations can be problematised from within. Fictionalised realisations of solidarity with fellow capitalist subjects across a world-ecological totality can generate affective solidarity, and these texts can be disseminated on the world-literary market for consumption, potentially spreading awareness of rapacious economic systemic linkages alongside the more mutually productive cultural and social connections that tend to structure narratives. A body of literature that generates affective solidarity could hypothetically be identified, and this body of literature would inevitably draw comparisons with Cheah's idea of world literature with 'normative' force, or even Arnoldian or Nussbaumian conceptions of 'improving' literature. It is not my intention to elaborate on such a potential body of literature or to offer a reading method for transposition to other national literatures, but I do contend that the examples of Singaporean historical fiction explored in this thesis feature moments where affective solidarity can be glimpsed. By offering a plethora or personal and romance narratives alongside or within recognisable grand narratives, longer and more nuanced histories of the present become possible. Whilst they offer potential for affective solidarity in gestures of active worlding, they also show us where moments of possible solidarity were missed, and allow us to feel solidarity with fictionalised and past figures. As a result, where historical novels narrate the past and anticipate the future, they heighten the urgency of the present.

Cultural Agency and Cultural Production in Historical Fiction

The historical novels explored in this thesis share an interest in recovering other forms of art, to greater or lesser extents. *Penghulu* opened with the family's captivation in front of a television in their new, carceral HDB, and showed Pak Suleh's delight at the gift of a book of Qur'anic interpretations. *The River's Song* represented Weng's failure to disseminate his political views through his flute-playing, followed by his commercial success internationally as a musician. The short-lived art studio in Seletar in *City of Small Blessings* testified to the precarity of artists' conditions in Singapore, and their control by the state. *Unrest* and *Art Studio*, too, depict characters reading novels, playing music, singing, dancing, and painting in various genres. All of these forms and genres have different ways of moving their reader or audience, and have different modes of being marketed and circulated. These two novels show how different cultural forms are mediated under global capitalism, since they fictionalise economic linkages alongside the plot linkages that drive the narrative forward. Connections between places are often 'purely' economic, but connections can also be cultural, and these cultural linkages have the capacity to foster affective solidarity and thus undercut the economic logic of linkage. In *Art Studio*, especially, the linkages that are presented to readers are cultural as well as economic. The titular art studio is the narrative anchor that gives most of the characters a shared experience in Singapore (even if little of the novel's action takes place there) but the studio itself is already transnational in provenance: it is made available to the artists when the owner, a doctor, retires to Malaysia.[545] The international cultural industry is alluded to frequently, and the novel comments on the capacity of art to engage with the world. Besides representing cultural and social flows between locations, Yeng shows the limits to the influence that various kinds of art have. Connections are evident through such moments when Si Xian remarks that he has previously seen some of the pieces in Paris' Musée d'Orsay when they were on loan to a Taiwanese gallery,[546] whilst the pragmatic reality of the Singaporean arts scene is satirised by Yeng's representation of the little-known master-in-waiting Yan Pei in contrast with the self-aggrandising fraud Ye Chao Qun. Ye accumulates social capital and invests in relationships with key journalists and art personalities, and even seduces and marries a construction magnate's daughter in a bid to acquire her father's network of connections. This magnate would almost certainly own sites frequented by Wei Hua, the communist recruiter, who in turn recruits Jian Xiong

[545] Yeng, *Art Studio*, p. 1.
[546] Ibid, p. 479.

among others. In *Art Studio,* economic and cultural prerogatives are linked. As in *Unrest*, there are coincidences that drive the plot forward and lead to characters reconnecting. Besides Wan Zhen's chance meeting with Si Xian in Hong Kong, from which she learns of Yan Pei's illness, the young Ji Zong meets Mei Feng when she is depressed about her illness. Their sexual encounter does not lead to a relationship: he is about to be called into national service whilst she plans to move to Kuala Lumpur. The coincidences keep coming as she moves, meets an art connoisseur on the bus, who tells her about a Japanese film about a man in her situation, and how he dealt with it. She resolves to do something positive with her time: she sets up a restaurant in Kuala Lumpur, calls it the Jian Xiong Vegetarian Restaurant, and works in outreach as a health ambassador.[547] The man on the bus is revealed to be Zhai Fei, a friend of Ji Zong's who is in love with Mei Feng, even though Mei Feng remains committed to finding Jian Xiong. This is why she names the restaurant after him. She hopes that Jian Xiong will one day emerge from the jungle, see her stall and the couple can restart the relationship that has driven them both to survive. This is a coincidence which the novel sets up and then derails, as Jian Xiong is killed in a confused attempt to communicate with villagers.[548]

Many of these links are not primarily economic. The cultural linkages between sites and people show that there is more to world-economic expansion than enclosing valuable sites and redeveloping them. *Art Studio* dramatises cultural agency, and is concerned with art's place in the world. Cultural agency is shown to be actively worlding, on the part of the creative writer or artist. It is Si Xian's creative work that prompts his travelling, and thus prompts his meeting with Ning Fang. His creative work is thus a plot driver, as well as being financially successful and spiritually fulfilling. He visits Paris to look into the possibility of holding an exhibition in memory of Yan Pei. He has a chance meeting with Ning Fang and learns that she has been married and recently widowed. Over the course of his stay, which lasts a few weeks, they fall back in love. Ning Fang's daughter Indranee is particularly encouraging of the relationship, hoping that her mother would find happiness again.[549] It was Ning Fang, and the paradoxical proximity and distance that Si Xian felt with her when they were children, which inspired Si Xian's career in Taiwan. He paints portraits for businessmen to make ends meet, but also 'enhances' the imagined nude sketches that he made of Ning Fang when they were close friends in the art studio in Singapore.[550] His later

[547] Ibid, pp. 394, 397.
[548] Ibid, p. 398.
[549] Ibid, p. 493.
[550] Ibid, p. 208.

sketches of the rocks at Kenting are visually reminiscent of the nude sketches. He draws 'coral rocks that bore the softness and sinuosity of the female body', and this wins him praise. 'It was a Kenting at once familiar and unfamiliar'.[551] By returning to his original inspiration, Si Xian succeeds in creating a work of art that is appreciated by his peers and the market, and it drives the novel forward.

The landscape represents an insight into Si Xian's vision, which he shares through this creative work. John Berger has argued that paintings offer us a unique glimpse into the artist's vision:

> No other kind of relic or text from the past can offer such a direct testimony about the world which surrounded other people at different times. In this respect images are more precise and richer than literature. To say this is not to deny the expressive or imaginary quality of art, treating it as mere documentary evidence; the more imaginative the work, the more profoundly it allows us to share the artist's experience of the visible.[552]

Whilst the painting may constitute a shared experience to the fictionalised characters that see it, readers of a novel have a different kind of access to this landscape. Readers cannot see the landscape and share in Si Xian's vision directly, but they do receive the landscape through Si Xian's mediation of his own work. Si Xian's intentions in composing the artwork are prioritised in descriptions of the piece. The historical novel's inclusion of the work of art merits further scrutiny. In arguing for his particular selection of texts for analysis in *Postcolonial Environments*, Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee writes that

> one of the features of literary fiction is its performance of its own fictionality […]. Time after time we will encounter our novels thus performing (or exhibiting) their own novelistic or literary nature for us. This ensures that the story we are reading […] is experienced as a performance of the story; a disturbing experience that prevents any easy consumption of the story as merely another simple pleasure. […] I have chosen to focus on the quite remarkable emphasis that these novels place on other art forms, such as dance, theatre, music and photography […]. Why is this? I think it is no accident that each of the novels in question exaggeratedly performs its own fictionality by borrowing idioms, rhythms and cadences from allied art forms that constitute the cultural matrix of contemporary India at the

[551] Ibid, p. 236.
[552] John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: BBC and Penguin Books, 2008), p.3.

> same time as they assign these forms strategic thematic positions in their stories […].[553]

For Mukherjee, the inclusion of non-novelistic artworks in the novel is, in part, a function of the novel's self-consciousness, but the other cultural forms also take up 'strategic thematic positions' in the narrative. I will dwell on novelistic self-consciousness below. *Art Studio*'s amalgamation of artistic forms, though, modifies the heteroglossia which Mukherjee notes in Indian Anglophone novels. Besides including a range of voices, which add to the 'bottom-up' perspective on the Singaporean state's narrative of neoliberal development, the inclusion of non-novelistic artistic forms adds further modes of self-representation which surpass the vocal or written. Artistic representations allow for more diverse interpretations of 'the artist's experience of the visible', in Berger's words, but they also allow for more personal experiences on the part of the beholder: these works of art may resonate with viewers on different levels. *Art Studio* does not exploit this, though. At no stage are other viewers' interpretations of the pieces described. This personal form of resonance is not granted to readers, who see the work only through the prism of Si Xian's intentions (and artists' intentions are deeply problematised by this novel, as is explored below). Nevertheless, the modes of representation and the range of voiced subject positions in the historical novel allow for a deeper historicisation of the works of art that are represented. Si Xian's artwork is presented to readers alongside its gloss, and this narrows potential interpretations whilst also situating the creative process historically, as the outcome of Si Xian's personal endeavour within his socio-economic context. Readers experience the lessons which Si Xian receives from Yan Pei, and so they read how Yan Pei historicises artistic production and describes pieces of art as 'outcome[s]' of the artist's emotions.[554] The novel thus situates creative processes in a history of artistic production that goes beyond the bounds of Singapore, and incorporates any number of inspirations. Si Xian's landscape, for instance, is an 'outcome' of his unrequited attachment to Ning Fang, and his projection of his emotion into the rugged and sublime cliffs of Kenting. Readers share in his experience through the narration rather than the landscape painting. Creative processes are shown to be conducive to self-representation and the sharing of an experience of the world with others.

The cultural form that has led to the impasse between Si Xian and Ning Fang, however, is the film. In the early stages of the novel, Si Xian presumes that he and Ning

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[553] Mukherjee, pp. 11-12.
[554] Yeng, *Art Studio*, pp. 66, 123-6.

Fang are a couple, without any sort of intimacy, whilst Ning Fang has developed feelings for her singing instructor. '[F]or Si Xian, their love was tacit, unspoken', Yeng writes. Ning Fang sees him merely as a listening ear. He thinks the relationship is 'like in the movies: a couple get caught in a downpour, they flee into a deserted house or an empty kiosk, and amid the falling rain their lips will eventually seek shelter in a long-overdue silver screen kiss'.[555] Si Xian's expectations of romance have been conditioned by cinema. It is the clash of his filmically-modulated expectations with the reality of their platonic relationship that causes his torment. This puts Si Xian's landscape painting in a new light. Through his creative expression, he intervenes in the cultural sphere to share his romantic longing. Whilst his piece in particular does not combat the 'silver screen kiss' which has inflected his attitudes, it puts forward his perspective. In terms of the novel's heteroglossia, Yeng positions Si Xian's landscape in relation to other voices and other modes of representation: by their juxtaposition in the same novel, the romance film and the landscape of longing are put in dialogue, and are shown to have different modes of circulation and reception. The film is unspecified, but clearly circulates in Singaporean cinemas. The landscape, on the other hand, is seen in exhibitions. Regardless of how much respect Si Xian earns for his creative labour, he cannot compete with the hegemony of romance genre film. Instead, he expresses his obsession and captivation with Ning Fang, in tandem with the sublime landscape of Kenting. In plot terms, the landscape painting does help to push him into a position where he can meet Ning Fang again.[556] In this sense, *Art Studio* shows art's power to shape attitudes and preconceptions, but also to insert the artist into global flows of culture. The landscape piece itself, however, does not have the power to change the world in its painter's image. However much the piece attests to Si Xian's longing for Ning Fang, it does not catch her attention, and it does not rekindle the romance subplot in the novel. In an indirect sense, it propels Si Xian to fame and permits his wanderings in Paris, which in turn lead to the recovery of the romance narrative, but the piece of art itself changes little. Here, Yeng highlights the limits of landscape painting in inspiring love or sympathy, let alone forging the systemic kind of empathy suggested in representations of affective solidarity.

Where is the novel in this artistic heteroglossia? The novel form is discussed by Jian Xiong and Big Beard, at the moment of being cut off from their social, cultural, and economic networks. They retain the culture of their upbringing and discuss questions

[555] Ibid, p. 18.
[556] Ibid, pp. 255, 418-9.

regarding art and literature at length. *Art Studio* invites comparison between their isolation in the jungle and island isolation by repeatedly and explicitly referring to *Robinson Crusoe*.[557] As soon as Jian Xiong meets Big Beard, Jian Xiong offers to do anything to tag along, to Big Beard's disgust. '"Who do you think you are? Man Friday? My slave? Or servant?"[558] Big Beard eventually recruits Jian Xiong and teaches him the ways of the forest – which is not an exact parallel of the hierarchical relations in *Robinson Crusoe*, but which situates the pair in the jungle in relation to the pair on the island. The colonial or neocolonial logic of the island is thus played out again: they are isolated, they feel that they must depend upon themselves, and they insert themselves into a mythology of self-sustaining heroes. Literature, as well as film, is shown to shape worldviews in *Art Studio*. Whilst this is unsurprising, it is notable that the example of the English colonialist novel acts as a kind of blueprint for the deserter-militants' small settlement in the Malayan jungle. The literary references serve to situate the pair in relation to their distinct cultural spheres. Jian Xiong has not read *Robinson Crusoe*, but he is aware of the American legend of Rip Van Winkle, whilst Big Beard refers to Chinese folklore (which includes reference points which Jian Xiong understands) and the novels of Dostoyevsky.[559] Big Beard reveals that he read *Robinson Crusoe* as a child, but found it unrealistic because 'between literary imagination and reality was a gap, a very big gap indeed'.[560] This notion does not prevent his self-fashioning in the image of Crusoe, underlining how the imaginary of the novel permeates his thinking nevertheless.[561] He later quotes 'the ancients' on the importance of reading, and the ancients in question could be from a 'Western' or Chinese literary tradition.[562] Big Beard asserts a firm opinion on the function of books when the pair are hunting snakes:

> "How nice it would be if I had a book that taught me how to survive in the wild. Between a classic – say, *Dream of the Red Chamber* – and a book on jungle survival, I'll choose the latter without a doubt. Between literature and survival, the choice is clear."[563]

Nothing more is said about literature here, and the material realities of jungle survival immediately displace this conversation. It is clear, however, that literature has shaped Big Beard's understanding of himself in the jungle, as an analogue of the 'unrealistic' Crusoe.

[557] Ibid, pp. 111, 101.
[558] Ibid, p. 101.
[559] Ibid, pp. 94, 109.
[560] Ibid, p. 119.
[561] Ibid, p. 119.
[562] Ibid, p. 148.
[563] Ibid, p. 135.

The pair have uneven access (between them) to a global literary imaginary, in which Crusoe, Dostoyevsky, and the canonical *Dream of the Red Chamber* loom large. Even in the Malayan wilderness, though, there is no escaping the pervasiveness of the literary canon.

Over the course of *Art Studio*, and the opaque passing time, Big Beard's views evolve. Realising that '"we got on fine without a manual on jungle survival, didn't we?"', Big Beard says he feels a need for literature now, even as Jian Xiong maintains that a book on jungle survival would have been preferable:

> "So what if we survived? Yes, physically we get to stay alive, but spiritually, our minds starve. In that case, what's the difference between us and primitive men, or even birds and beasts? Do we turn into savages then? […] Actually, I wish I could have a book now or two," Big Beard sighed wistfully.[564]

His position here points to an Arnoldian view of literature as 'improving', as having utility for its cultivating effects. This suggests a preference for 'great' literature, which has already been established by the pair's preference for 'classics'. This is interesting to hear from avowedly communist characters, although the communism of the MCP drew on Chinese cultural nationalism and therefore might be expected to valorise 'great' writers from the canonical Chinese tradition. However, Big Beard does not state a preference for a great Chinese writer. He says that he would choose a novel by Dostoyevsky:

> "if I was ever given the opportunity to write, I'd want to be like Dostoyevsky, a writer who cared for the fate of mankind. When Dostoyevsky was exiled to Siberia, he had the opportunity to meet people and experience the plight and humiliation of those occupying the lowest rungs of society. But I'm trapped in the bloody jungle, so what the hell can I do?"[565]

Whilst Dostoyevsky is another canonical name for Big Beard to choose, and thus hints at Arnoldian elitism, Big Beard's penchant for social realism at the margins of society suggests a kind of empathy through creative and cultural production. The idea of literature springing from, and possibly speaking to, the most oppressed people in society suggests that he sees literature as a platform for affective solidarity of the kind outlined above. Even in this most peripheral zone, *Art Studio*'s characters feel cultural connections that would be enhanced by a book that would expand their horizons beyond those of the jungle, and promote feelings of solidarity between them and similarly isolated groups. Yeng suggests that novels

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[564] Ibid, p. 149.
[565] Ibid, p. 150.

– particularly socialist realist ‘classics’ – have the capacity to move readers, beyond the capabilities of the landscape painting which expresses Si Xian’s longing.

If *The Brothers Karamazov* could fundamentally alter the pair’s sense of themselves in the world, this might be undercut by the preponderance of *Robinson Crusoe*, and its celebratory imperialism, in these episodes of the novel. Big Beard is aware of the ideology behind the novel, claims it is unrealistic and even critiques its ‘colonialis[m]’.[566] This does not prevent him from replicating Crusoe’s relation to the land and the nearby communities. By juxtaposing allusions to these two novels in the text, Yeng shows both the possibilities in literature for fostering affective solidarity, and its ideological constraints; in this sense, reading literature for its ‘improving’ effects, even in a decidedly leftist manner, is a double-edged sword. Imaginative conceptions of empathy and possibly even solidarity differ greatly from their implementation in the world, if Big Beard can be so critical of *Robinson Crusoe* and yet imitate its protagonist’s relation to the land. Yeng thus illustrates fiction’s limitations, even for those it influences. Jian Xiong directly contributes to this sense of shortcoming by reporting how he was inspired by a particular work of art by Korzhev:

> “The title of the painting is Raising the Banner. It depicts a man bending down to take a red flag from his fallen comrade’s hand. The man looks straight ahead, showing steadfastness and firmness. This painting moves me greatly. If I ever become an artist, I want to be just like him, fighting alongside my revolutionary compatriots, capturing and expressing their fearless revolutionary spirit. But… […] [t]he first day I stepped into this forest, my comrade and I were attacked by enemies. At that time, I realised I’ve been living in a false fantasy. Revolution is not as romantic as I imagined it to be, neither is death. In the face of death I am spineless, fearful and confused. I can never become an artist this way.”[567]

Jian Xiong recognises the falseness of the glamorisation of war and struggle, expressed artistically. This is not offered as a direct counterpoint to Dostoyevsky’s sympathetic depiction of the marginalised in Siberia, but it shows that representation of struggle must be negotiated carefully, and with greater nuance than is possible in a propagandistic painting. Representations of struggle that stray into romance are a component of the social forces that drew Yan Pei, Jian Xiong, and Big Beard into the movement, and Jian Xiong is now suspicious of such representations. Cultural texts can be horizon-broadening and

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[566] Ibid, p. 120.
[567] Ibid, pp. 150-1.

contribute to an active worlding on the part of the cultural agent, but in this case of the painting, they can also be misleading and dangerous. Active worlding, and the building of cultural links, is by no means guaranteed to be a progressive, transformative phenomenon. With newfound mistrust of overtly political paintings, Jian Xiong decides that he cannot be an artist 'this way'. If he is to be a painter, he must represent struggle carefully – if, indeed, he still intends to represent struggle at all.

Even with this new suspicion of texts' representations of reality, Jian Xiong ponders committing once more to artistic production from his location in the jungle. Big Beard sees Jian Xiong's sketching during an early part of their stay in the jungle (while they still have a pencil and paper), and says that 'a man like him should be an artist; hiding in the forest like this was a waste of talent'.[568] As for Big Beard, Jian Xiong urges him to record his struggles so that they can be disseminated:

> [I]f an outstanding writer like him left the jungle and wrote a book about his fight with Mother Nature, it would make a fascinating read. But Big Beard was not interested. He shook his head, saying, *They won't believe it. Besides, I've not picked up a pen for so long that writing itself is a problem. How do you expect me to write a masterpiece in my current state?*[569]

The pair in the jungle consider making art: it is not only a therapeutic 'outlet' for the feelings of being exiled from society, but it could also contribute to people's understanding of the struggle, even in abstracting this struggle to a 'fight with Mother Nature'. For Big Beard, being believed is integral to the documenting process, despite the dehistoricising implications of a narrative that focuses on a battle with 'nature'. They realise that they would have to rejoin society in order to compose these works of art and writing, however, because they lack the physical tools to create them in the jungle. They are divorced from the possibility of artistic production. They are being worlded, in that their exile is a product of the expansion and neoliberal intensification of the capitalist world-ecology (even if these processes are facilitated by their absence, rather than their precarity and submission to multinational capital), but they also want to participate in processes of worlding. They want to be cultural agents that produce worldly texts – texts that communicate the nuances of struggle in a complex manner, and which encourage sympathy without being propagandistic. However, they are in the tragic position of being so worlded and so

[568] Ibid, p. 147.
[569] Ibid, p. 187.

divorced from their society that they do not have the means to create such artistic expressions. Eventually, both perish before they can leave the jungle and rejoin society, meaning that *Art Studio* represents the impossibility of such representation based on personal experience; the closest we can manage, the novel suggests, is *Art Studio* itself. In the novel's artistic heteroglossia, paintings, films, and novels are situated in relation to one another, and all have the capacity to inspire, express, and mislead. It is in the form of *Art Studio* itself, however, that creative processes and processes of reception are historicised, and cultural texts' transformative limits are navigated. The novel shows how recognition and engagement with the world cannot proceed without certain prerequisites, such as an art studio or gallery. In the Malayan jungle, their artistic output cannot inflect worldviews in the same manner as 'classic' novels or popular films. However adept their engagement with the world, there can be no dissemination or discussion of their pieces for greater nuance or complexity.

Art Studio complicates the idea that artistic engagement with the world can lead to affective solidarity, and thus lay the groundwork for global transformation. This is achieved through the accounts of propagandistic or overly-romantic works of art and literature, and also through the figure of Ye Chao Qun, *Art Studio*'s most cynical character. Ye is a limited poet who chances his hand at the art studio as a newcomer in the first few pages of the novel. He reveals himself to be uninterested in learning techniques or mastering the basics of composition, rebuffs all polite and friendly advice, and leaves in a huff.[570] Once he ascertains that painting realism is not his strength, he opts to move into modern art, for the most superbly cynical of reasons:

> This was modern art – nobody cared whether it was going to be an apple or a pear, all you needed were some coloured lines and shapes, the ability to interpret your own mess, the graciousness of critics who would read too much into your work and expound on its depth and implicit aesthetics, and your art piece instantly shed its messy coloured skin to become a masterpiece.[571]

He ploughs this furrow for decades, expertly. He attempts to convince people that he is a member of an exclusive literary circle by peppering his speech with stock phrases in French, he uses artistic terms picked up from Westerners and English-educated locals, and he uses

[570] Ibid, pp. 9-10.
[571] Ibid, pp. 73-4.

his father's savings from his antiques firm to wine and dine critics and journalists.[572] When he eventually holds an exhibition, he architects his media success. He has the event officiated by an MP, he lunches with newspaper editors, and gives some paintings as a gesture of goodwill. He seduces the construction magnate's daughter to gain access to his wealth and connections, but treats her appallingly and does not stop womanising.[573] He abandons the job secured for him (unbeknownst to him) by his father in the advertising business, and becomes a full-time celebrity artist.[574] His mode of artistic production is that of the production line, and has none of the political and emotional weight of the pieces conceived by the pair in the jungle: '[i]nspiration came easily to him: all he had to do was consult the works of famous artists, assemble a bricolage, sign his name at the bottom of the work, and he was done'.[575] Yeng compares this pace unfavourably with Ye's constipation, a symptom of his obesity: '[i]t took him twenty minutes to finish an art piece but more than an hour to clear his bowels'.[576] When the 2008 financial crisis arrives, it takes Ye's savings, and he is left without fame or fortune.[577] Yeng's cutting depiction of this profiteer artist shows the problem with searching for seeds of affective solidarity within global cultural flows. Ye has no vision to share with those who view his paintings; he expects people to project brilliance into his work, guided by paid, expert reviewers. Ye's cultural agency might be seen as a mode of worlding, because it leads to people viewing his art at his exhibitions on a global scale. It does not, however, offer viewers a shared imaginative experience of the world. Indeed, of the artists of *Art Studio*, Ye garners the most commercial success. Yeng situates Ye's artistic production historically, by showing the 2008 financial crisis as part of Ye's series of misfortunes. To him, cultural production is just another part of his financial portfolio. This example, contrasted with *Art Studio*'s plurality of contemplative artists who prize and puzzle over art's improving or linking effects, demonstrates that any interpretation of *Art Studio*'s planting of seeds of affective solidarity must be tempered by a recognition of potential cynical commercialism in cultural production. The form of the painting, which is not amenable to circulation, does not positively engage with the world, here. For Ye, it is purely a source of income; for Yan Pei, a vessel for sorrow and profound thought; and for Jian Xiong (initially at least), a source of uncritical political fervour.

[572] Ibid, pp. 72-5.
[573] Ibid, pp. 436-7.
[574] Ibid, p. 75.
[575] Ibid, p. 435.
[576] Ibid, p. 388.
[577] Ibid, p. 438.

Art Studio shows how dangerous or unhelpful perceptions of artists can obscure or glamorise precarious circumstances. Si Xian is anxious that he is not a real artist because he has not experienced the suffering that the 'masters' did. *Art Studio* largely glamorises artists' poverty, conforming to bourgeois celebrations of the masterful individual. The novel thus portrays poverty as productive. In the first session in the art studio that is shown in the novel, Yan Pei points out that Van Gogh 'painted with his life', and that suffering and poverty were integral to his formation as an artist.[578] He claims that Van Gogh's 'hard life gave his works added bitterness and pain', as though this were something to aspire to as an artist in the largely middle-class setting of the art studio.[579] He later argues that 'passion for life' is the most important thing in an artist, and this can involve a productive kind of suffering alongside workers[580] – foreshadowing Jian Xiong's avowedly flawed conception of himself in the thick of action, painting valiant freedom fighters in the heat of battle. This conception of the brilliant, put-upon artist correlates with Big Beard's celebration of Dostoyevsky, whose exile in Siberia granted him the opportunity to see the margins of society and their relation to society's centre. Yan Pei's principles of art are derived chiefly from his art teacher, Li. Li's philosophy of art claims that technique is important, but thought and emotion are what persists in good art:

> "Thought and emotion originate from an artist's life experience and what he reads. Reading is crucial, not just to a writer, but also to an artist." […] For [Li], geography and lived experience shaped an artist's ideas and feelings. Likewise, the style of a particular region, its history and people enriched the artist's personal style. […] Work unsupported by experience would lack style. Without a distinctive style to call his own, an artist would never transcend the shadows of his predecessors. His work would be just a trickery of colour and lines – embellishments pandering to hackneyed tastes.[581]

This last sentence is a neat description of the output of Ye, the commercially-successful counterpoint to Li and Yan Pei. Li's philosophy also adds nuance to the idea of the artist, who must have their own personal style, founded in both material suffering and distinction from artistic predecessors. This is a phenomenon analysed by Berger, who argues that the

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[578] Ibid, p. 66.
[579] Ibid, p. 416.
[580] Ibid, p. 125.
[581] Ibid, p. 52.

> great artist is a man whose life-time is consumed by struggle: partly against material circumstances, partly against incomprehension, partly against himself. […] [T]he struggle was not only to live. Each time a painter realized that he was dissatisfied with the limited role of painting as a celebration of material property and of the status that accompanied it, he invariably found himself struggling with the very language of his own art as understood by the tradition of his calling. […] Single-handed he had to contest the norms of the art that had formed him.[582]

This departure from previous ideas is central to the constitution of a 'great' artist: they must be in dialogue with previous art, and they must break with artistic convention in some way. In one capacity, to earn a living in Taiwan, Si Xian paints portraits of businessmen, performing a role that celebrates 'material property and of the status that accompanied it'. He finds an alternative to this mode of painting, however, with his nude-imbued Kenting cliff landscape paintings. In this sense, Si Xian's art is not 'great', necessarily, but it is a product of his romantic suffering, and it is in dialogue with the other artistic forms in the novel. Within the form of the landscape painting, there remain possibilities for expression that are emotive, if not illustrative of the painter's or subject's precarity or place in society in a systemic sense.

Despite the hardship he endures, Yan Pei does not consider his own life to contain fruitful material to exploit artistically. 'Except for his broken marriage that tormented him for a while,' he thinks, 'his life had largely been without incident. How could a man with an uneventful life create moving works of lasting significance?'[583] In this comment he elides the utter poverty that he has grown used to, his incarceration without trial for months, and his diagnosis with prostate cancer. He is only appreciated in the newspapers after his death. He briefly works as a secretary in a Chinese clan association, where he is poorly paid and undertakes long commute, so he quits and works as an art teacher and Chinese teacher, before focusing entirely on being an art teacher. 'Rifts in his marriage surfaced in the third year', and predictably, these rifts emerged along the faultlines of income.[584] Ironically, it is his austere interpretation of the role of the artist that leads to Yan Pei being thrown into the most difficult period of his life (by his own admission), and that is his marriage breakdown and divorce. His glamorisation of poverty results in the breakdown of his marriage. Yan Pei's narrative trajectory features impoverishment, illness, real love

[582] Berger, p. 104.
[583] Yeng, *Art Studio*, p. 127.
[584] Ibid, p. 58.

between Wan Zen and himself, death, and then critical acclaim. The romanticisation of the marginal, precarious artist leads quite directly to his tragic death of a disease which he believes to be curable when discovered early and approached properly (and with enough money). Yan Pei finds Si Xian to be a productive source of inspiration. In the studio, Yan Pei repeatedly compliments Si Xian on his pieces, even though Si Xian doubts them. It is only after Yan Pei dies that Si Xian finds a painting amongst Yan Pei's possessions, which he describes:

> A youth seated in front of an easel. The youth was fixated with the scenery in front of him, but his eyes were full of longing and loss. Si Xian recognised the youth straightaway. It was so long ago when he looked at Ning Fang from afar in the studio. The other students were busily drawing the model in front of them, except for him, who was sketching Ning Fang.[585]

Clearly, Yan Pei has found other people's suffering productive, and has painted Si Xian's image. It is not his own suffering that has formed the basis of the work, as in the model described by Berger. It is empathy for another who is suffering that forms this basis. The middle-class group that assembles in the art studio creates sketches and paintings that demonstrate their empathy for people in different circumstances to their own. As precarious as their own circumstances may be, they prefer to empathise with people in different situations, and represent their plight instead. The creative process is thus founded upon empathy and plants the seeds of affective solidarity. That said, it is notable that Yan Pei's sketch of Si Xian highlights his angst and longing, but cannot illustrate his precarity or place in the world-system. Affective solidarity cannot emerge from a simple sketch of a young artist. The sketch cannot represent precarity or the hierarchies of prestige in artistic institutions, but the novelisation of artistic production can do so by narrating a series of overlapping and interrelated life-narratives. Besides the understanding of a shared capitalist subjecthood in the consumption of texts, this understanding can emerge from the fictionalisation of the creative process. In the novel, people in various circumstances are represented, and are put in relation to each other in plot terms (and occasionally in economic terms). The novel's heteroglossia allows for various modes of representation and expression to emerge, and artistic representation becomes a key way to express other people's precarity. Even though Li's and Yan Pei's teaching shows a longue-durée of artistic precarity, the artists in the novel's contemporary prefer to focus on the plights of others.

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[585] Ibid, p. 418.

This historicisation – a feature of the historical novel – situates artistic precarity alongside other kinds of precarity (which are less frequently glamorised), and shows the interrelation of the represented subject positions. Artists' precarity, like the precarity of those with whom they empathise, is shown to be related to capitalist processes of accumulation, be they instigated at the behest of multinational capital or securitisation (including expulsion of dangerous individuals) in 'the national interest'. The novel accommodates a range of modes of expression, and shows their dialogue across the course of the narrative, in relation to larger historical processes and in relation to each other. The historicisation of the interrelation of cultural forms, as they emerge in the fictionalised group of artists, shows the transformative potential that is contained in the artists' intentions, and in the artists' practice.

Art Studio shows how the consecration of particular artworks serves to dehistoricise these modes of expression, removing any radical potential in artists' intentions. The novel thus demonstrates the need for works' rehistoricisation and attempts to buffer against the removal of artistic intention through self-consciousness. When Si Xian sits outside the Louvre, and watches the line of tourists queuing up to gain entry, he ponders the origins of

> the royal collection of the French conquerors. The artefacts acquired were used to adorn their palaces and boost their magnificence. Did the artists create in order to satisfy the vainglorious appetites of those in power? How many of them ever imagined their creations would persist for all to see?[586]

Whatever the motives of the artists – and however poor or oppressed they were – the Louvre acts to consolidate them into a nebulous projection of power on the part of the ruler. No matter how subversive these pieces are, or how attuned they are to the suffering of particular groups, the works are used to project imperial power, across the historical period of French colonialism and into the present. By representing the tourists outside the museum, Yeng shows the persistence of this neo-imperial projection into the present day. Art is not about sympathy for the precarious, in the Louvre; it is about bringing in tourists' money whilst disseminating French cultural 'soft' power and prestige. Si Xian wonders aloud '"[h]ow many artists whose works are in the Louvre lived obscure lives in abject poverty?"'[587] Evidently, it is the cultural agent who puts in the work and their patron, or

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[586] Ibid, p. 460.
[587] Ibid, p. 460.

inheritor, or conqueror who earns the cultural prestige in the present day, underpinning the dominant ideology of the present. According to Berger, 'a work of art also suggests a cultural authority, a form of dignity, even of wisdom, which is superior to any vulgar material interest; an oil painting belongs to the cultural heritage',[588] and the museum is the site upon which this heritage is instantiated and this authority, dignity and wisdom repurposed towards national goals. This is not to say that all of the works in the Louvre serve to promote French interests; it is to say that they are being instrumentalised for this purpose, and any political subversion is neutralised by the pieces' context in the grand imperial museum. *Art Studio* is ambivalent about the possibilities afforded by art in the present day: it can mobilise people to dangerous action or it can be assimilated to ideologies which it may originally have contested. By representing the artists' intentions in the creative process, and their disparity from the present instrumentalisation of artworks (and, in the Louvre, paintings in particular) Yeng shows how artists might intend to engender affective solidarity among a global precariat, and among capitalist subjects who view the piece of art. He also represents the problem of contextualisation. Through *Art Studio*'s fictionalisation of artistic production, the repurposing of paintings in the museum setting is undercut, and this repurposing, in turn, is shown to exist in a context of neo-colonial 'soft power'. However the pieces of art engage with the world, and whether their painters intended to 'improve' the world through this engagement, the pieces serve to solidify the status quo of institutional power and artistic precarity. *Art Studio* dramatises the difficulties of the artist, and suggests that the novel has greater capacity to represent precarity in a systemic manner, as part of larger processes of capital accumulation and power consolidation over time as well as space, beyond the capturing of one moment that can be achieved in a social realist sketch or painting.

Through this artistic heteroglossia and historicisation, *Art Studio* exhibits self-consciousness. Yeng recognises that his novel is as much a commodity as are the lazy amalgamations created by Ye Chao Qun. The text is a commodity form, and is subject to the same logic that requires and propels Singapore's (and China's, and Malaya's) development. The novel highlights the intention behind processes of artistic creation (of empathetic pieces of art, at least) to foster affective solidarity, and thus creates a shared sense of capitalist subjecthood among the work of art's viewers in gestures of positive worlding that might be said to have 'normative force', following Cheah. However, the novel also highlights how the intentions behind the work can be obscured or corrupted, whilst

[588] Berger, p. 129.

also showing how all forms are prone to co-optation. It thus problematises its own commodity status, and situates the glamour of the artist's precarity in a longer history of cultural production and co-optation under capitalism. In so doing, *Art Studio* reframes precarity as a longstanding problem, rather than a source of prestige or glamour. *Art Studio* warns of the risks of co-optation, whilst affirming that empathetic representation is worthwhile, because it can foster affective solidarity – but also because it brings the novel's love story to a positive resolution. The novel registers its own status as a commodity in circulation, but nonetheless works to reshape the cultural imaginary, and its political nuance and historical complexity counter the propagandistic or misleading representations that hinder its protagonists. This undermines the 'Singapore Story', insofar as it implicitly encourages a critical approach to Singapore's own national museum, and it shows how precarity is not noble, but rather lethal.

Conclusion: Representing Singapore in the World

The subversion of the 'Singapore Story' is valuable because of Singapore's vaunted place in the world – it is an economic example, held up for imitation. *Unrest* and *Art Studio* show that Singapore is not unique. It is specific. It is one place where the interests of people and capital have shaped the landscape, but it is one of many, as these novels illustrate by focalising characters that cross borders into China, Malaya, Canada, and Taiwan. The strategic undermining of the 'Singapore Story' has wider consequences for global capital: the capitalist imaginaries in which every country can aspire to be Singapore undergo critique, and the celebratory tone of the national narrative (and by extension, capitalist-developmentalist imaginaries) is shown to be founded upon a selective version of history. *Unrest* and *Art Studio* work to undo the erasures in space and historical narrative that are apparent in the 'Singapore Story'. The novels add nuance to the state's narrative, by showing the celebrated processes of eviction, expulsion, and redevelopment from non-state perspectives, with a plethora of voices and modes of representation in dialogue. The novels factor Malaya into the national narrative, as a productive and constitutive element, whereas the 'Singapore Story' would feature Malaya only as a cautionary tale. By representing the logic behind developmental processes, alongside space for expansion, the novels have an anticipatory dynamic: they show how and where the expansion and intensification of the world-economy might proceed. They also show how development and redevelopment of the same site can lead to cycles of erasure and dispossession, in the

interests of capital. These historical novels are reconstructive: they contest the dominant national narrative in order to narrate new stories that undo the exclusions of the 'Singapore Story'. By representing Singapore's present as the product of a more complex and nuanced past, Singapore's place in the world is reformulated. This theorisation comes as the continuation and culmination of the analysis undertaken in the previous chapters. The same logic is represented in all of the novels analysed in this thesis. Sites are enclosed, isolated from their communal networks, and undergo development or redevelopment to serve multinational capital, or in accordance with 'the national agenda' (which can involve securitising other profitable sites). In Chapter One, the novels analysed narrated processes of ecological transformation, which occurred under the aegis of the 'Garden City' programme, but which appeared more plainly as slum clearance and eviction. Without their sustaining networks, these communities dispersed and joined the wage labouring precariat. In Chapter Two, the novels narrated the development of Singapore's islands, and contested the idea of the national interest based upon a 'mainland', whilst also representing a reserve of archipelagic space, ominously primed for future development. In this chapter, *Unrest* and *Art Studio* represent these processes at the largest scale, that of the world. Ecological transformation still occurs at a local level, but is linked to the combined and uneven development projects set in motion by capital across the world-ecology. The inchoate alternative of Maoist China is shown to be just as firmly in the grip of developmental (and thus precaritising) logic, before turning to free market strategies. Singapore is just one of many sites where the neoliberal triumphalism of the 'Singapore Story' is in evidence.

In *Unrest* and *Art Studio*, Singapore is also shown to be just one of many sites of artistic production and co-optation. Cultural production has the capacity to foster links which belie the economic, and which can generate affective solidarity between capitalist subjects, to create a shared sense of capitalist subjecthood. This affective solidarity can be 'world-building', in Berlant's phrase, and can involve an 'experience [of] the world from the perspective of difference', to Badiou. Historical novels' heteroglossia, modulated by a range of cultural forms of expression as well as a range of voiced subject positions, can offer this affective solidarity. Whilst there are processes in which protagonists are worlded, *Art Studio* demonstrates that a far more optimistic mode of worlding is possible, based on cultural links, rather than primarily economic connections. The novel retains a healthy suspicion of the radical potential of texts as they are commodified. However, the novel situates the creative process historically, and in relation to the already-existing body of

cultural products, whilst also showing processes of co-optation. By representing and historicising these processes in the narrative, *Art Studio* demonstrates awareness of its own commodity status, combining this self-awareness with a contestation of the capitalist imaginaries to which co-opted artworks are repurposed. As a result, the novel retains its transformative potential by representing the lives of people in the direst circumstances and linking them globally. The active worlding of the novel's cultural agents constitutes affective solidarity between the characters, and by extension, between the readers and the characters. This solidarity has limits, as the novel shows. There is a difference between fostering affective solidarity and affecting material transformation, as the isolated pair in the wilderness testify. They are mobilised into action, prompted by capitalism's injustices and a moving, propagandistic painting, and yet they realise they have been fighting for a dream that cannot be brought into material existence from their isolated position. Cultural works are put to ideological use in various ways, and a critical reading of these works is shown to be advisable.

Despite these limitations, the novels re-problematise the precarity which is neutralised in the 'Singapore Story'. This precarity is historicised and shown to be systematic across the globe, in a combined and uneven network. Artists' precarity is implicated in the same system as that of the manual workers which are represented. The 'Singapore Story', which stands as an exemplary narrative of neoliberal development, and which contributes to the long-term reproduction of social relations, is undercut by this novel's re-historicisation. By engaging with history, the literary representation of a shared capitalist subjecthood and precarity across formations provides a potential platform for transformative cultural engagement with the capitalist world-system. With affective solidarity fostered, a renewed understanding of Singapore in global capitalist imaginaries becomes possible. The texts that seek to nurture this solidarity (such as *Art Studio*) are represented in the novel itself, in such a way as to frame them as resistant to global capitalism in the conception, if rarely in their reception. By grappling with the co-optation of art which is intended to be radical, and the romanticisation of the precarious artist, the novel exemplifies transformative, worlding historical fiction. The genre's capacity to situate and historicise the artistic heteroglossia is purposed towards an undercutting of the 'Singapore Story', and by extension towards a contestation of the celebratory capitalist narratives that justify precarity globally.

Conclusion: Precarity in Singaporean Historical Fiction

This thesis has intervened into studies of Singaporean literature, world literature, and the historical novel, to argue that Singaporean historical fiction can disrupt the linearity and the celebratory tone of the 'Singapore Story' whilst also highlighting the dynamics of precarity as part of this narrative. In the texts analysed here, precarity is represented as being reconfigured or intensified by neoliberal development strategies, across the various enclosed spaces under Singapore's jurisdiction, and this undercuts the triumphalism of the 'Garden City', 'Island Nation', and 'global city' strands to the national narrative. By analysing narrative, using a methodology which draws upon political ecology and literary criticism, this thesis has contributed to scholarship on Singaporean literature – a marginalised body of work in postcolonial and world literary studies. It has highlighted Singaporean literature's autonomy from government control, as well as its capacity to reframe dominant narratives from fresh perspectives. The acts of active gardening explored in Chapter One and the nascent archipelagic structure of feeling examined in Chapter Two are examples of suggestive literary responses to historical narratives. The potential of the historical novel in world literature to engender affective solidarity has also been appraised in this thesis. These historical novels' capacity to represent relations beyond the nation-state, and beyond the geopolitical fractures produced under capitalism, has been shown to complicate Singapore's place in the world-system as a beacon of neoliberal accomplishment – and possibly to foster solidarity across political formations.

In a public sphere saturated with versions of the government-ordained national narrative, however, historical fiction is fighting an uphill battle to reshape readers' understandings of Singapore's history. In almost every major bookshop, one can find special displays featuring Lee Kuan Yew's memoirs, biographies of Lee and works of history that rubber-stamp the official narrative such as *"Original Sin"?: Revising the Revisionist Critique of the 1963 Operation Coldstore in Singapore* (2015) by Kumar Ramakrishna and the recently re-published *The Battle for Merger* (1961|2014), a collection of Lee's radio talks about how he would create a prosperous country by enacting repressive and neoliberal-developmental policies.[589] The biographies of Lee include a trilogy of children's books by Patrick Yee, *A Boy Named Harry* (2014), *Harry Grows Up* (2015), and *Harry Builds*

[589] Kumar Ramakrishna, *"Original Sin"?: Revising the Revisionist Critique of the 1963 Operation Coldstore in Singapore* (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2015); Lee Kuan Yew, *The Battle for Merger* (Singapore: Strait Times Press, 2014).

a Nation (2015).[590] Framed against this backdrop, any gains made by historical novels in departing from, or adding nuance to the dominant narrative must be considered localised and provisional.

Fig. 5. A display at a bookshop in a shopping mall in Singapore, 2015.

The transformative power of historical fiction, however, lies in its engagement with history and the processes through which historical narratives are constructed. The image of Singapore that emerges from the 'Singapore Story' is one in which development has occurred and is ongoing, the government is stable and meritocratic, and Singaporeans share in the country's economic prosperity. This thesis has shown that historical fiction can begin to complicate these ideas by nuancing the logic of the national narrative; that is, it can show the historical complexities that are glossed over in the 'Singapore Story'. Alternative accounts of Singapore's history may not focus upon development, or may not herald economic development as the primary criterion by which to measure a country's success (or by which to structure a narrative). The selection of historical novels in this thesis shows how precarity is endemic to neoliberal modes of development. Precarity is shown to have a long colonial history and a modification after formal independence.

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[590] Patrick Yee, *A Boy Named Harry* (Singapore: Epigram Books, 2014); Yee, *Harry Builds a Nation* (Singapore: Epigram Books, 2015); Yee, *Harry Grows Up* (Singapore: Epigram Books, 2015).

Neoliberal-developmentalism reconfigures already existing precarity in its interests, in various sites across the globe, and precarity is shown to persist across economic formations in the context of the capitalist world-ecology. Development and precarity are made to sit uncomfortably within the 'Singapore Story', as the social and environmental ramifications of precarity are shown from the perspective of those precaritised, in contrast to the national narrative's arc of national progression and improvement. Individuals', families', and communities' suffering is brought to the fore, as the national narrative is complicated or bypassed in favour of alternative narratives that feature Singapore's economic development drive.

Engagement with recognisable historical narratives allows these works of alternative historical fiction to reframe the terms and trajectories of the dominant national narrative, across both time and space. The unfolding of events in the 'Singapore Story' is shown to be uneven, encompassing multiple processes of enclosure, eviction, and precaritisation which are obscured or sanitised in official versions of the narrative. The expansion of neoliberal-developmental processes in spatial terms is also complicated, as eviction is shown to proceed to create a reserve of potential land for investors. This land is repurposed in vague 'national interests' which can involve the construction of oil refineries, bases for foreign military forces, or tourist destinations. The possibilities afforded by the form of the historical novel mean that there is a sense of anticipation endemic to these recovered and repurposed fragments of historical narrative; as developmental processes are shown to have unfolded over time and space, these processes' future expansion over time is suggested. Historical novels can thus hint at future modes of development and redevelopment in space that has already been exposed to state and multinational exploitation, as well as space that stands to be developed in the future. This spatial critique can be transformative in the context of a public environment, as Kenneth Paul Tan notes:

> [T]he right to narrate The Singapore Story remains jealously guarded by the state. Films, theatrical performances and literary works that too strenuously interrogate official national history, or that question the PAP government's political authority, tend to quickly encounter various forms of state censorship.[591]

Historical novels that are published and circulated, whilst retaining moments of dissent or frames of reference that complicate the 'Singapore Story', have the capacity to reimagine both the past and the future. The future would otherwise be written like 'a dictated

[591] Kenneth Paul Tan, 'Choosing What to Remember in Neoliberal Singapore', p. 246.

record', according to Bryan in *City of Small Blessings*.[592] Alerting readers to the elitist production of self-legitimising history, whilst interrogating the futurity of Singapore's neoliberal-developmentalism, is a bold act in this context.

This sense of anticipation does not depend on outright contestation of the 'Singapore Story'. Rather, it emerges from representations of the national narrative's pivotal events (often replicating the terms of official versions of the narrative) from perspectives which are not granted prominence in the public sphere. The simple act of narration in engagement with history can prove subversive. Film studies researcher Sophia Siddique Harvey argues that the Singapore government works to make its own narrative of the past the dominant one, in order to reinforce its political legitimacy.[593] Harvey borrows political theorist Davide Panagia's term 'narratocracy' to mean 'the governance of narrative as a standard for the expression of ideas and for the rules that parse the perceptual field according to what is and what is not valuable action, speech, or thought'. As she argues:

> In this narratocratic mode, the state produces and regulates citizen-subjects scripted according to its narratorial narratives of progress, competitiveness, pragmatism and survival. […] It is the state, in the context of Singaporean political and public life, that positions itself as the dominant force imagining and outlining what is sensible, what makes sense and therefore what is readable.[594]

If the 'Singapore Story' remains 'jealously guarded', in Kenneth Paul Tan's words, then any narrative that departs from the official version of events in terms of sequence, structure, perspective or emphasis can be read as radical. Simply being readable, and not being the government-ordained history, constitutes a contestation of government legitimacy. Fictionalisation of historical events in a different sequence, or from a 'bottom-up' perspective, can allow space for further imaginings and prompt a re-reading of Singaporean space. Indeed, it is the inscription of space with meaning, and the legibility of meaning, which is at stake in these historical and fictional narratives. The government's 'narratocratic imperative' is 'a grand vision of forward propulsion', according to Harvey,[595] meaning that space that is re-read for its meaning at family and community levels, rather than at the level of the nation, represents a departure from the government's logic and self-

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[592] Tay, p. 208.
[593] Sophia Siddique Harvey, 'Sensuous Citizenship in Contemporary Singapore Cinema: A Case Study of *Singapore GaGa* (Tan Pin Pin, 2005)' in *Singapore Cinema: New Perspectives*, ed. by Liew Kai Khiun and Stephen Teo (Abingdon and New York: Routledge 2017), pp. 84-93 (p. 85).
[594] Ibid, p. 85.
[595] Ibid, p. 92.

legitimising narrative. The state has reshaped much of Singapore, repurposing multiple islands in the national interest, and leaving just one kampung in existence at the time of writing.[596] This sole remaining kampung functions as a curiosity for Singaporeans and tourists, whilst representing a useful barometer of progress, for visitors, in terms of Singaporean housing. The rest of the islands that comprise Singapore have been changed utterly throughout the last fifty years of neoliberal-developmentalism. The multiple ways of narrating action across space and time in Singapore spring from and point to multiple 'ways of seeing' (following Berger), meaning that the creation of meaning at state level can be bypassed or complicated in historical novels. The 'narratocratic imperative' of the Singapore government can be disrupted, and the precaritisation of Singaporean citizens foregrounded.

The novels examined in this thesis achieve this in multiple ways. The allegorical realist mode of narration posited by Hamish Dalley (of postcolonial historical novels more generally) allows space for political allegory in a Jamesonian sense to be read, whilst the characters in historical fiction retain their individuality. Even as they are made to stand for larger community, racial, or national groups, they remain individuals with their own drives and interests. As a consequence, meaning can be inscribed and read at a number of levels, even as the 'Singapore Story' is kept within reach as a reference point. The structure of this thesis reflects the reading strategies deployed: Chapter One explored *The River's Song* and *City of Small Blessings* for their focus on meaning at the local level, in dialogue with the 'Garden City' drive; Chapter Two examined *Rawa* and *Penghulu* for their emphasis on archipelagic and pan-regional understandings of belonging, in contrast with the notion of 'Island Nation' Singapore; and Chapter Three analysed *Unrest* and *Art Studio* for their global linkages that transcend national boundaries by great distance, and resituated Singapore in the world as a 'global city'. Any of these novels could have been read for their dialogue with the national narrative's representation of space on Pulau Ujong, the relation of the 'mainland' to its subsidiary islands, or Singapore's place in the world-system. Indeed, all of the novels are suggestive in many directions. My reading strategies in this thesis have opted to develop lines of inquiry comparatively across pairs of historical novels, in order to explore their engagements with recognisable historical narratives in greater depth.

Chapter One critiqued the 'Garden City' drive and two fictionalisations of its imposition and after-effects. The greening programme entailed displacements of a great

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[596] 'Kampong Lorong Buangkok', *Remember Singapore*, 22 October 2010, https://remembersingapore.org/kampong-lorong-buangkok/ Accessed 1 September 2017.

many people in the name of neoliberal-developmentalism, and to suit contemporary national interests. Even as the programme is replaced by the ‘City in a Garden’ set of policies, anxieties regarding cycles of displacement of the populace by the government remain in these novels. *The River’s Song* focalises Ping and Weng as they experience diverging trajectories as their home is redeveloped, in a policy which, Ping discovers, is heralded by other Singaporeans as an example of the government cleaning up the city and winning international awards.[597] People with no personal connection to the redeveloped riverfront space defer to the reading promoted by the government, and the riverfront space itself becomes amenable to the government version of events, shorn of its history of use as a functional garden which warded off the worst of precarity in the colonial period. The longer history of colonial-imposed precarity is not dealt with here, but the novel illustrates the reconfiguration of precarity for some Singaporeans for contemporary purposes. The riverfront space, and the people who inhabited it, are passively ‘gardened’ as the government evicts them and redevelops the riverfront in the interests of multinational capital as part of the ‘Garden City’ drive. The new mode of precarity for the developmental refugees of the riverfront demands that the new HDB dwellers pay rent or mortgages, pay for utilities, and thus find regular wage labour rather than partially living off the land. *The River’s Song* emphasises the human cost of this transition for middle-aged and elderly characters, even as it shows the younger generation eventually embracing the change and being successful on their own terms. This tends towards the official narrative, which acknowledges the ‘sacrifices’ made by the ‘pioneer generation’, as they underwent these processes of gardening which disciplined and maintained various spaces to suit the government. *The River’s Song* is dependent upon the national narrative, and repeats some of its terms and premises, but nevertheless fictionalises the process of being ‘gardened’ from the perspectives of those who are transplanted.

City of Small Blessings, however, counters the image of Lee Kuan Yew as Singapore’s ‘chief gardener’ to show multiple acts of gardening in Seletar, which impart family-level meaning onto private garden spaces. The Lim family are gardeners of their own private space, as the parents add layers of meaning to the space through their experiences and management of their garden, and their son Peter comes to learn of these additional layers to the space’s history. Their family-level encoding of meaning is overridden by the state, which repurposes the land into a technology hub, in a fictionalisation analogous to

[597] Lim, *The River’s Song* pp. 282-3.

real events.[598] Even as they are 'gardened', however, Peter and Bryan remain able to read the space in dialogue with photographs and their memories, respectively. This partial reclaiming of agency over space may be tokenistic, but it serves to contest the government's monopoly of the production of history. *City of Small Blessings* also reflects upon the heritage space of the riverfront, in which the veneer of colonial architecture is preserved without the energetic 'lifeworlds' (to borrow Yeoh and Kong's word) of the casual labourers who lived there. The lifeless reproduction of the boatmen into statues helps to commemorate their existence, but fails to represent the processes by which this commemoration is carried out. The novel itself functions to narrate these processes, and does so in a cynical tone that attests to historical cycles of development, redevelopment, and elite governance. Indeed, the brutality of government-led gardening, in the interests of maintaining order, is highlighted through the continuity of the promotion of racial division through colonial, Occupation, and independence periods. The 'new corpse of a home' that Bryan sees in the processes of being redeveloped in Seletar mirrors these gardening and management processes.[599] Both *The River's Song* and *City of Small Blessings* illustrate the suffering and precarity engendered by the 'Garden City' drive, but Tay's novel also complicates the production of history in Singapore, showing multiple gardeners at work on many types of garden. It contests the government 'narratocracy' in which the 'Garden City' is an overwhelmingly benevolent programme.

In Chapter Two, *Rawa* and *Penghulu* were examined for their representations of 'being islanded' and more positive 'islanding' on the part of the islanders, in the formation and exemplification of an archipelagic 'structure of feeling' (Williams). When fictionalised islands are 'islanded' by the government, they are isolated and enclosed, and their inhabitants are precaritised. Since the islands are not present on Pulau Ujong, island space cannot attest to past land use as can the riverfront or Seletar environments. Rather, narration can situate Pulau Ujong amongst its 'subsidiary' islands, which are repurposed to enhance and entrench the neoliberal-developmental policies of the Singapore government, and by extension to enrich the multinational corporations that the government services. As in Chapter One, people are not shown to be living in a stable idyll, but rather in a kind of precarity which is modified by neoliberal-developmental policies to accommodate contemporary world-systemic conditions for Singapore. Consequently, both novels complicate their own partly nostalgic mode of narration. They also exhibit varying degrees

[598] 'Seletar Aerospace Park', *JTC Corporation*, 17 August 2017, http://www.jtc.gov.sg/industrial-land-and-space/Pages/seletar-aerospace-park.aspx?ref=search Accessed 1 September 2017.
[599] Tay, p. 212.

of acceptance of the premises of the ‘Malay Problem’, and the government’s conflation of this socio-economic, discursive ‘phenomenon’ with economic ‘backwardness’ as well as physical island space, following colonial and neocolonial logic. The novels’ historicisation of islanders and the categorisation of Malays is also achieved with varying levels of depth: *Rawa* is invested in narrating processes of inclusion into the Malay community, as the Orang Seletar protagonist converts to Islam and embraces terrestrial Malay culture, whilst *Penghulu* situates its characters in an extra-historical timeline of truth and justice in which characters’ adherence to their religion is of primary importance.

Both novels confound the ‘Singapore Story’ and its obfuscation of precarity, but in different ways. In *Rawa*, the longer history of the Malay racial category is hinted at, as Rawa moves between racial categorisations. Further, involuntary dislocations then take place as the family is transplanted from the Seletar Reservoir into HDB housing. The struggle to adapt to Singaporean modernity, as it is represented in the novel, is dramatised at length, as Rawa is effectively ‘islanded’ by government policies. Rawa’s grandson Hassan, meanwhile, becomes the beacon for a kind of middle-ground between heritage conservation (in a more genuine, ‘lifeworld’-affirming manner than takes place at the riverfront) as a ship designer and canoeist. His inheritance of his great-grandfather’s ring confirms his place in Singapore and in the novel, as a representative and inheritor of multiple ‘lifeworlds’ and ‘ways of seeing’ – some of which run counter to the ‘Singapore Story’, but others of which (as exemplified by Hassan’s embrace of salaried labour and government-build housing) accommodate its premises. Nevertheless, an archipelagic structure of feeling persists, as productive links beyond the Singaporean national entity are manifested. *Penghulu*, on the other hand, offers a more thorough displacement of the ‘Singapore Story’: the novel’s closure invokes divine intervention, and anticipates that the characters will meet with fitting rewards or punishments, according to their behaviour over the course of the novel. In *Penghulu*, the identity of Malay is much more static and tied to devout religion, although association with Singapore’s southern islands is also rendered important. The islands are shown to be ‘islanded’ by the government, as they are isolated and exploited in line with colonial interpretations of ‘islandness’ – or rather, they are procured by the government as a reserve for development purposes. Pak Suleh’s resolve to move back to Pulau Sebidang, with some of his family in tow, is presented as an admirable and humble course of action, in contrast to that of his grasping politician son-in-law. Maiden, in association with Syed Farid, another disloyal son-in-law, attempts to prevent his father-in-law from returning, for fear of embarrassment to him and hindrance to his career

on the mainland. Suleh's daughters and son Lamit are presented in a far more favourable light, as is the youngest, Juasa, to a lesser extent. Juasa's provisional reformation from drug abuse is one example of the novel's acceptance of the discourse of the 'Malay Problem', and it is through righteous living that he eventually remedies the problem at the family level. In *Penghulu*, greater humility, devout religiosity, and a penchant for romanticised island living are presented as realistic and worthwhile. Both novels succeed in fictionalising and validating a nostalgic community (to borrow Walder's term) of displaced islanders. *Penghulu* slips into dehistoricised idealisation of island life, even as it presents a cosmic confounding of the 'Singapore Story', whilst *Rawa* warns against nostalgia for the island and the Seletar swamp, even as Rawa clearly pines for the way of life that has been sacrificed in the name of development. The 'Singapore Story' is complicated by the regionalisation of identity and socio- environmental bonds in both novels.

Chapter Three analysed Yeng Pway Ngon's novels *Unrest* and *Art Studio* for their depiction of transnational linkage and affective solidarity, as well as their capacity to complicate their own commodity status in the world-system. The scale of the frame of reference analysed is increased once more in this chapter, from regional to global dynamics. By showing linkage across sites in a system which is combined and uneven – that is, one site's prosperity comes at the cost of another's impoverishment – the novels suggest a world-ecology of urban-rural and core-periphery dynamics, often articulated in the example of Singapore as a quintessential 'global city', formidably linked with a vast hinterland. In the literary works explored in this thesis, various social, economic, and environmental transnational linkages feature which push the novels' plot onwards. By highlighting the social and cultural links that drive narrative, in amongst the economic linkages that become of secondary importance, Yeng's novels hint at the possibility of active 'worlding', in the refashioning of connections beyond functional enterprise. Whilst people and place are 'worlded' in a passive sense in many of the novels explored here, Yeng explores the idea of 'worlding' through artistic production, and dwells on the creative capacities of various forms and genres of art. *Unrest* does not reflect upon this idea at great length, other than to mention the singing of leftist students and their mobilisation by Chinese cultural influences. *Art Studio*, however, problematises political mobilisation through art, and encourages scepticism towards artistic pieces (particularly paintings) that capture snapshots and glimpses of injustice and potential revolution. Equally, Yeng shows how the art market can favour shameless self-promoters, at the expense of 'masters' like Yan Pei. Implicitly, the novel that engages with history emerges as a more nuanced and

complex form, well suited to situating individuals as well as nations in larger historical contexts. The novel (and more precisely, in my loose definition of the historical novel, the novel that engages with recognisable historical narratives) can situate artists and writers in longer histories and wider social and ecological contexts. *Art Studio* reflects upon the romanticisation of artists' precarity over the course of capitalist history, and dramatises the gulf between artists' intentions and the reception of their works. This is no outright celebration of the novel form, but rather a nuanced representation of the limits of art's (including fiction's) capacity to transform the world.

Both *Art Studio* and *Unrest* represent precarity as endemic to global capitalism, but they also show precarity's persistence across other economic formations within the capitalist world-ecology. The sites of extraction in Maoist China in *Unrest* prove more gruelling than Singapore's construction industry for Weikang, although the novel does not represent avowedly capitalist sites of extraction. Yeng's novels, then, are in dialogue with the 'Singapore Story', particularly on the narrative's emphasis on the unique economic phenomenon that Singapore symbolises. The novel shows that this is not factually incorrect, rather that it is misleading since development and precarity exist in many places across the world-ecology. Under multiple economic formations, precarity is the flipside of development, particularly in the neoliberal mode. *Art Studio* also shows middle-class Singaporeans' mobility as tourists across the world, and hints at their potential to develop affective solidarity. Tourism, too, is shown in many locations, and Singapore's riverfront scene becomes one of many sites that is modelled in such a way as to maximise footfall and profit. The novel is thus in critical dialogue with the 'Singapore Story', showing Singapore as one of many linked sites that unevenly displaces people and develops sites, whilst also showing Singaporeans' mobility between these sites at particular historical moments. Singapore's place in the world is therefore complicated. Rather than being represented as an economic model for others to follow, it is clear that there cannot be many Singapores in the combined and uneven world-ecology.

This is all the more pertinent considering the potential readership of the novels explored throughout this thesis. The Singaporean readership would almost certainly be familiar with the trajectory of development and working-class 'sacrifice' in the national interest, but this is not necessarily the case for an international readership. *The River's Song* and *City of Small Blessings* were published in English, whilst *Rawa*, *Penghulu*, *Unrest,* and *Art Studio* have all been translated into English. All of the novels thus have a potential Anglophone readership, whilst *Rawa* and *Penghulu* also have a Malayophone audience and

Unrest and *Art Studio* a Sinophone one. Some of these novels thus have the potential to circulate and be understood throughout Southeast Asia and East Asia, as well as the Anglophone 'West'. This presents problems for the definition of the historical novel that I am adopting here. If historical fiction engages with recognisable historical narratives, how well known must the narrative be? The degree to which the minutiae of the 'Singapore Story' are recognisable is variable, but the reference point of Singapore as a wealthy entrepôt city-state – and thus potentially an economic model – has greater purchase. Whilst *Art Studio* is keen to highlight the limits of art's capacity to transform the world, there remains hope that properly nuanced and complex engagements with history, and the production of history, can influence worldviews in a gradual, possibly infinitesimal manner. By complicating Singapore's place in the global capitalist imaginary, this influence can be spread on a global scale, as well as regionally and locally.

Through the varied techniques and strategies used by the writers examined in this thesis, departures from the national narrative and the capitalist global imaginary can be made, to varying extents and in various directions. World-ecological linkage between sites of extraction, production, circulation, and consumption is either represented or implied in these historical novels, to illustrate that precarity is the flipside of development. Whilst this is inadvertently celebrated in the 'Singapore Story', it is obfuscated and reframed as 'sacrifice' on the part of the new (or newly dislocated) precariat. These fictionalisations of processes of development bring precarity to light and show its long-lasting consequences for families and other social groups that morph into disparate, displaced nostalgic communities. The national narrative is a partial narrative, constructed to entrench power in the neoliberal and often neocolonial elite, and engagement with this history can give voice to alternative perspectives, disrupt the government's monopoly on storytelling, and even bypass this narrative entirely to tell alternative versions of events during Singapore's development drive. However limited their capacity to change the world, these works of fiction can illuminate precarity and history in new ways, and draw attention to narratives grounded in completely different sets of values and premises. This thesis has shown that Singapore's status as a 'Garden City', 'Island Nation', and 'global city' is not demolished, but is rendered more complex through these fictionalisations, which offer alternative, often peripheralised perspectives on Singaporean history and contemporary social life.

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