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Etiolated Conduct: More-than-human Performativity with/in Singapore

by

Zihan Loo

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Performance Studies

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Shannon Jackson, Chair

Professor SanSan Kwan

Professor Colleen Lye

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Abstract

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A Malayan banyan sapling, cut from the parent tree at The Substation, an independent arts center in Singapore, and confined to a public housing flat, persists in an attenuated state. *Etiolated conduct* names this persistence as resistance that emerges under constraint. The term bridges J.L. Austin's description of "etiolated" performatives – utterances rendered hollow or void – with the horticultural practice of etiolation, where plants deprived of light are deliberately distended, suspended in calibrated conditions of making-live and not quite letting-die. This pairing engages with both a more-than-human performativity and a performativity of the more-than-human. I read Austin alongside Michel Foucault's counter-conduct, drawing both through a critique of liberal personhood (Saba Mahmood, Chen Kuan-Hsing, Pheng Cheah) and the more-than-human turn (Anna Tsing, Rebecca Schneider, Karen Barad). I begin by extending speech-act theory toward the ecological and infrastructural forces conditioning political life, moving from figure to ground, and conclude with withdrawal and worlding beyond human live-ness.

Three vectors of restriction propagate across the dissertation: sexuality, social reproduction, and political dissent. The first chapter establishes the limits of pragmatic resistance rooted in a politics of recognition through the 2022 repeal of Section 377A, the law criminalizing consensual sex between men, alongside the constitutional reinforcement of a heteronormative order. Subsequent chapters develop close readings of Jason Wee's camouflaged choreographies, Otto Fong's *Cetacea* (1993/1994) and Boo Junfeng's *Tanjong Rhu* (2009) on cruising along reclaimed shorelines, Seelan Palay's *32 Years: The Interrogation of a Mirror* (2017–2018) on solitary-solidarity in political detention, and Charles Lim's *All Lines Flow Out* (2011) on waterways and fugitivity, alongside archival documents, testimonials, and field research.

I argue that under etiolated conditions, art's indirection performs a politicization of aesthetics rather than an aestheticization of politics, gathering force through durational deprivation rather than spectacular confrontation, generating lateral intimacies with pioneer vegetation, carceral architecture, and drainage infrastructure – a sensuous underside that escapes accounting. Singapore's post-natural environment offers a glimpse of governance to come; resistance under these conditions carries anticipatory potential for a world where liberal frameworks organized around visibility, rights, and recognition are being eroded.

To my parents, for a lifetime of teaching.

书籍是储藏智慧的不灭明灯*

**These vessels of knowledge are eternal beacons,
keeping wisdom's flame alight.*

Table of Contents

	List of Figures and Tables	<u>iii</u>
	Acknowledgements	<u>v</u>
Introduction	Etiolated Conduct More-than-human Performativity with/in Singapore	<u>1</u>
Chapter 1	Beyond Pragmatic Resistance: The “Violent Gifts” of Repeal	<u>33</u>
Chapter 2	Camouflage Choreographies: The Public Secrets of Jason Wee’s Practice	<u>64</u>
Chapter 3	Reclaiming Reclamation: Ecological Intimacy at Tanjong Rhu	<u>95</u>
Chapter 4	Solitary-Solidarity: More-than-human <i>Parrhesia</i> and Trans-generational Conduct	<u>127</u>
Chapter 5	Containment and Contingency: Sensing Infrastructure in Charles Lim’s <i>All Lines Flow Out</i>	<u>155</u>
Epilogue	Temporary Measures Conduct in a Broken Circuit	<u>184</u>
	Works Cited	<u>198</u>

List of Figures and Tables

Figure 0.1	<i>How To Make A Tree Disappear As Nature Intended II</i> (2015).	32
Figure 0.2	The Substation Banyan, at Neo Tiew in 2015.	32
Figure 1.1	The field of resistance in Singapore (1990s–present).	42
Figure 1.2	Still from <i>Someday</i> (2012).	62
Figure 1.3	30 Nov. 2022 front page headline of <i>The Straits Times</i> .	62
Figure 1.4	17 May 2021 Instagram post by Pink Dot SG in response to the mention of Pink Dot at the UPR.	63
Figure 2.1	<i>Lord Mountbatten Thinks of Pink</i> (2010) with the reflected silhouette of the author.	92
Figure 2.2	<i>Lord Mountbatten Thinks of Pink</i> (2010), 1st panel.	92
Figure 2.3	<i>Lord Mountbatten Thinks of Pink</i> (2010), 2nd panel.	92
Figure 2.4	<i>Lord Mountbatten Thinks of Pink</i> (2010) at Mountbatten train station.	93
Figure 2.5	Metal plaque with artwork description and artist biography for <i>Lord Mountbatten Thinks of Pink</i> (2010).	93
Figure 2.6	Detail of <i>Uncommon Choreographies</i> (2020–present).	94
Figure 2.7	Detail of <i>Uncommon Choreographies</i> (2020–present)	94
Figure 2.8	<i>Uncommon Choreographies</i> (2020–present).	94
Figure 3.1	Production documentation from <i>Cetacea</i> (1993).	123
Figure 3.2	Production documentation from <i>Cetacea</i> /鯨 (1994).	123
Figure 3.3	<i>Tanjong Rhu</i> (2009). Jason in a baseball cap leaning in for a kiss with Kelvin.	124
Figure 3.4	<i>Tanjong Rhu</i> (2009). Kelvin kissing David.	124
Figure 3.5	<i>Tanjong Rhu</i> (2009). Casuarina leaves in focus, with a silhouette in the background.	124
Figure 3.6	<i>Tanjong Rhu</i> (2009). Kelvin teases the feather-like flower of the lallang plant.	124
Figure 3.7	<i>Tanjong Rhu</i> (2009). Kelvin and Jason/David sit by the beach with the casuarina branch in the foreground.	124
Figure 3.8	View of the rocky revetment at Tanjong Rhu on 23 Apr. 2021.	125
Figure 3.9	Makeshift shelters amidst the dense undergrowth at Tanjong Rhu that has replaced the pioneer species on 8 June 2020.	125

Figure 4.1	Seelan Palay's <i>32 Years: The Interrogation of a Mirror</i> (2017–18).	154
Figure 4.2	Seelan Palay's <i>32 Years + 14 Days</i> (2017–19).	154
Figure 5.1	<i>All Lines Flow Out</i> (2011). Installation view with a close up of one of two drainage socks, the video in the background.	181
Figure 5.2	<i>All Lines Flow Out</i> (2011). Installation view with drainage sock.	181
Figure 5.3	Still from <i>All Lines Flow Out</i> (2011). Figure wading through the canal.	182
Figure 5.4	Still from <i>All Lines Flow Out</i> (2011). Search party in the <i>longkang</i> .	182
Figure 5.5	Still from <i>All Lines Flow Out</i> (2011). White opaque stain in the <i>longkang</i> .	182
Figure 5.6	Still from <i>All Lines Flow Out</i> (2011). Cashin House.	183
Figure 5.7	Still from <i>All Lines Flow Out</i> (2011). Figure floating in the open sea.	183
Figure 5.8	Still from <i>All Lines Flow Out</i> (2011). Drainage socks in the waterway.	183
Figure 6.1	<i>Temporary Measures: A Procession of Physical Proximity</i> (2020).	197
Table 1.1	Typology of resistance in Singapore.	42
Table 3.1	A timeline of events in Singapore around the staging of <i>Cetacea</i> (1993) and <i>Cetacea/鯨</i> (1994).	126

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Introduction

Etiolated Conduct:

More-than-human Performativity with/in Singapore

If society is a tree, and its fringes are the leaves at the tree's outermost reaches, then trimming the fringe, where the youngest, tenderest leaves grow nearest to the light, can only stunt the growth of the center. [...] what appears at first to be a fringe issue will slowly strike you as being at the root of the very kind of people that we are.

— Tan Tarn How, “Far-reaching Stricture on the Arts”

Might we ask with the gesture perceived as ongoing how to handle our planetary relationships differently? How can we approach the matter of intrainanimacy with respect for all lifeways that circulate among us all, across vast stretches of time, vast stretches of space, as well as at the tiniest increment of a single quivering leaf or bit of detritus of bone?

— Rebecca Schneider, “Slough Media”

In the mindset of [Singapore's] “soft” illiberalism, the languid unfolding of each flower is a burst of policy, each tree an explosion of ideological material. Every absent weed represents, by the same logic, the seeds of disorder averted.

— Joshua Comaroff and Ong Ker-Shing, “Paramilitary Gardening”

0.1 The Substation Banyan¹

A Malayan banyan (*Ficus microcarpa*) stood in the garden of The Substation, an alternative arts center founded by theater director Kuo Pao Kun in 1990, housed in a former electrical substation in downtown Singapore. A substation is an invisible yet key node in the city's infrastructure, modulating the flow of power while isolating anomalies, a role that the arts center echoes along different cultural circuits.² Over three decades, the banyan tree grew along the garden's concrete walls and into the cracks. Audrey Wong, a former artistic director of The Substation, described the magisterial banyan as possessing “a ‘primordial’ energy” and “a living spirit.”³ In 2015, development from neighboring properties forced a

¹ This section is based on my contribution to the commemorative book *25 Years of The Substation* titled “Within Ourselves: Starting Over.”

² The Substation arts center was a formative space in my early artistic practice: a site for chance encounters, drop-in performances, and exhibitions. I held my first exhibition and solo performance there, participated in their associate artist research program (2013), and was their artist in residence (2016).

³ This was documented as part of Robert Zhao's *Singapore, very old tree* (2015; reprinted 2020), co-authored with Adeline Chia, which gathered stories of significant trees in Singapore. The statement appears on the project's Facebook page and in an accompanying publication.

relocation of the tree. Prior to its uprooting, The Substation launched a crowdfunding campaign for maintenance costs of its gallery and offered cuttings from the tree as an incentive. I bid for and received one of these saplings.

I brought the banyan sapling home to my parents' public housing flat on the twelfth floor, planting it in a ceramic pot with a dragon motif. My mother resisted the domestication of what she regarded as an unruly tree. She believed the species possessed a heavy "yin" energy (阴气很重) and fretted that its roots would burrow through pipes and cracks in the concrete floor. The *Ficus microcarpa* is a strangling fig, parasitical by nature, a species that "initially encircle[s] other plants, crowding out other organisms, eventually suffocating their hosts" (Yee). My mother wanted to replant the sapling on the ground floor, where it might grow without restriction. We decided against it, concerned that the town council, which manages all public green spaces within our estate, would identify it as illegitimate and clear it. The certainty of removal outweighed any possibility of its thriving. More than a decade later, the sapling remains in its stunted state, a hybrid between a bonsai and its parent tree. Its roots circle the small pot to form a tight woven structure like a bird's nest, deprived of the soil depth its root system requires. The labor of tending to it is durational and mundane: pruning leaves colonized by mealybugs, watering every other day, cutting off hanging aerial roots before they reach the soil. It persists in what this dissertation will elaborate as an etiolated condition.

In 1994, journalist and playwright Tan Tarn How wrote a commentary in response to the proscription of performance art, describing society as a tree. To trim the fringe stunts the growth of the center, he states: "That is how you get the little bonsai plants, pretty but poor imitations of the real thing." As a fringe arts space that sustained experimental performances, cinema, and music, The Substation was pruned in 2021 when the National Arts Council reclaimed its premises for renovation, continuing as an arts company without a permanent home.⁴ The banyan sapling is, in this sense, both metaphor and metonym for the role of aesthetics and forms of life that this dissertation examines. In our theorizing of a more-than-human performativity with/in Singapore, what forms of political life persist when deprived of the sustenance that enables flourishing? How does life adapt to inhabit this deprivation, and conduct across space and time? These are questions about people, places, and plants, but they are also questions about infrastructure and practices under Singapore's governance. I argue that their connections are often deeper than we consider within Singapore's post-natural environment and "paramilitary gardening" regime (Comaroff and Ong). To answer these questions requires a framework that holds together the human and more-than-human, the political and the ecological, the spectacular protest and the mundane act of nurturing a sapling that carries the memory of an arts center.

⁴ For further details, see The Substation's press release of 23 July 2021. ("Substation 2.0")

0.2 To Command, To Conduct

Hannah Arendt foregrounds the importance of speech and action in *The Human Condition*, stating that they tether us to the condition of human plurality. Speech and action, and the vessels of transmission in the form of theater and performance, are reminders that we are political creatures in co-presence with others, in solidarity and never solitary. This is Arendt's basis for an active human life – *vita activa*. She claims that “a life without speech and without action [...] is literally dead to the world; it has ceased to be a human life because it is no longer lived among men” (176). It is through this emphasis on action and speech that she arrives at the act of storytelling as the central mode of sociality, concluding with a grand claim in support of the dramatic form: “this is also why the theater is the political art par excellence; only [in theater] is the political sphere of human life transposed into art. By the same token it is the only art whose sole subject is man *in his relationship to others*” (188; emphasis added).

This dissertation de-exceptionalizes Arendt's figure of the human and considers the politics of what Anna Tsing refers to as a “More-than-Human” form of sociality around speech and action. What alternatives are possible when political conditions prevent a human-to-human connection? How can the transmission of action and speech through the act of storytelling still happen when transmuted through surrogates and across time and space? What can we consider as registers of “speech” and “action” of these non-human, inhuman, or more-than-human life forms, registers that might challenge what we recognize as “liveness”? When a human-to-human transmission is corrupted because of restrictions on personhood, and the figure of the human displaced, the etiolated condition requires us to attend differently to what we conventionally classify as “inhuman” entities: the archive, inanimate objects, the ground instead of the figure, and other variegated understandings of animacies.

I arrive at these questions through the specific political context of Singapore, where protests and freedom of expression are restricted by the State. The Public Order Act defines a public assembly to include a demonstration by a single individual, meaning that a lone person holding a sign in support of or in opposition to a cause can constitute an assembly and require a police permit. Public space, both physical and virtual, is regulated through overlapping legal instruments that enable the swift penalization of unsanctioned expression. That Singapore's legal architecture insists on counting the individual as a collective body is structurally analogous to eco-critical debates that call for us to engage with the body as always-already in relation. Engaging with this capacious understanding of agency within the Singaporean context is an ironic alignment with the State's own insistence on the singular as plural or as a potential threat to the plural. It is also a necessary tactic to consider

how relationality is possible under differently liberal⁵ conditions that restrict solidarity, necessitating an orientation toward circuits that include other forms of life.

I examine artistic practices that navigate these constrained conditions through *etiolated conduct*: a specific modality of counter-conduct available to figures who exist in varying degrees of subalternity, who cannot risk full transparency (like the queer community), or who have been rendered invisible by the State (like migrant workers⁶ and political detainees). In botanical usage, to etiolate is to deprive a plant of light, starving it of its ability to photosynthesize while it continues to adapt and survive, its growth fundamentally altered by enforced and durational deprivation. This is often a horticultural technique, a form of controlled stunting imposed by cultivation to achieve intended deformities conducive to extraction and consumption.⁷ Under etiolated conditions, organisms are maintained in a state of weakness or passivity, benevolently kept alive but constrained through the calibrated regulation of what sustains them. This resonates with Achille Mbembe's necropolitics, which inverts Foucault's biopolitical "making live and letting die" to theorize sovereignty as the determination of who is made to die, as well as Jasbir Puar's formulation of debility, where populations are sustained in calibrated states of capacity and incapacity. I develop etiolated conduct through the lens of Singaporean governmentality where it operates in the interval these theorists describe, the zone between making-live and letting-die, but under conditions where life is maintained through environmental and infrastructural conditioning rather than through deliberate debilitation. Etiolated conduct names the forms of resistance, solidarity, and creative praxis that emerge within and through such conditional living as distended forms, taking shape through lateral alliances with the more-than-human infrastructure that supports forms of life and live-liness. As I will elaborate in the following section, "etiolated" possesses a foundational, and also anti-foundational, role in the history of performance theory, notably within J.L. Austin's disquisition on the difference between the theatrical and the performative.

Sexuality, political dissent, and social reproduction are the three vectors of etiolated conduct under Singapore's governance that this dissertation traces, each operating through shared infrastructural logics of surveillance, containment, and calibrated livability. Queerness runs through the dissertation as a method rather than mere object of study. This is an analytical orientation toward what persists in the conditions of enforced opacity, leaning

⁵ In this dissertation, I use "differently liberal" as a descriptor for Singapore's governance. Defaulting to "illiberal" flattens the complexities of Singapore's political context while leaving unexamined the assumptions that undergird humanist liberalism. See page 10.

⁶ For consistency, I use the term "migrant workers" throughout the dissertation to refer to foreign laborers recruited to work in Singapore on temporary permits. While the Singapore government uses "foreign workers" in official policy and legislation, "migrant workers" is the more widely adopted term in scholarship and advocacy, and I follow that usage here.

⁷ A crop that is cultivated under such etiolated conditions is rhubarb. Etiolation results in longer stems, which increases crop yield.

toward the etiolated and penumbral rather than the transparent and what is assumed to be knowable. This follows from what David Eng and Jasbir Puar have called a “left of queer” critique, one that builds on ongoing conversations around queer of color critique within queer theory that attends to the “sublated, repressed, or otherwise disappeared material conditions and terms” (16) undergirding subjectivation. Petrus Liu extends this materialist orientation through his insistence on social structuration over possessive individualism in the theorizing of sexual politics, grounding queerness in the material conditions that produce subjects rather than in the agential subjects themselves. In this dissertation, queerness names a mode of reading that refuses to settle on proper subjects or proper objects of study, attending instead to what operates at the threshold between legibility and opacity – for now, let us refer to it as the infrapolitical, the sensuous, and the ecological.

The term “conduct” carries specific weight. Derived from the Latin *condūcere*, meaning to command or lead together, and the French *conduit*, linking pastoral guidance with conductivity, conduct refers to personal behavior (“Conduct”). Conduct is the direction of others, and the capacity to be a channel through which currents pass, recalling the conductor in an orchestra who directs through gesture. The gesture, understood as a unit of conduct, functions as a performative “strip of behavior” (Schechner) containing the potential for iterability (Butler; Derrida), the capacity for repetition with a difference. In this sense, conduct connects to Hannah Arendt’s concept of action, an activity defined by plurality, performed always in co-presence with others, never in isolation, and carried across time. The sections that follow develop the two halves of the dissertation’s central term. I turn first to J.L. Austin’s “etiolations of language” and the critical genealogy that term opens, before examining Michel Foucault’s “counter-conduct” as a mode of strategic resistance within pastoral power. Their convergence produces what I call etiolated conduct: a practice of resistance through deformation, persistence, and more-than-human solitary-solidarity under differently liberal conditions.

0.3 On Etiolations

J.L. Austin’s *How to Do Things with Words*, in which the term “etiolations” appears, is a foundational text for performance studies and ordinary language philosophy. Austin invokes “etiolations of language” twice in his lectures. First, he describes a performative utterance that is “hollow or void” (22), comparing it to theatrical artifice and infelicitous performatives: utterances that are “unhappy” or have no perlocutionary effect because of the artifice of context, or because the speaker does not have the vested authority to make them. Second, in a footnote, he refers to the “possibility of etiolation” as a scenario where sincere performatives are interpreted as false (92). Austin’s choice of this botanical metaphor is striking in a lecture that emphasizes the power of language. Why describe linguistic failures through the language of stunted vegetal life? And how many of his readers are aware that this word has its origins in botanical discourse? What assumptions are being made about the anthropocentric force of language? The metaphor (and its use) suggests that language, like

vegetation, can be deprived of its sustenance, drained of vitality, all while retaining the outward appearance of live-likeness. Performance remains, differently distended.

Janelle Reinelt notes how Eve Sedgwick and Andrew Parker drew queer scholarly attention to Austin's use of "etiolate," highlighting how the word carries connotations of "the perverted, the artificial, the unnatural, the abnormal, the decadent, the effete, the diseased" (Reinelt 204; Parker and Sedgwick 5). This queer and "parasitic" reading of the verb, emphasizing failed communication and deviant forms, offers a framework for understanding conduct in Singapore as it operates under etiolated conditions, constrained by legal suffocation and Kafkaesque negotiations with bureaucracy. The forms of resistance I examine are rendered as etiolated "void" performatives by the State and public discourse in the media, dislocated from their original intent and drained of their illocutionary vitality. A common strategy the State adopts in response to protest is to reproduce the most sensational fragments divorced from context: the performance stripped of its inciting intent through its citational reproduction, the gesture reduced to its most spectacular remainder.⁸ Part of this project's intention is to revisit and reinstate the conditions that scaffolded some of these gestures without a desire for recovery, attending to what art historian and curator June Yap refers to as a "historiographical aesthetic" in Singapore, "where the aesthetic expression may be conjectured as examining the nature and production of history" (6).

This botanical metaphor is also a response to Singapore's self-fashioning first as a "garden city," now as a "city in a garden" (Barnard and Heng). This self-fashioning aligned with the State's management of its horticultural appearance, what Eng-Beng Lim has referred to as an "island botany complex" (444), and Joanne Leow's "new Asian tropicalities" (874). The parallels between the management of plant and human life have generated a proliferation of verdant critical approaches to Singapore (Kong and Yeoh; Barnard and Heng; Comaroff and Ong; Schneider-Mayerson), and the botanical extends into the rhetoric politicians and commentators use to describe the arts ecology. In the epigraph to this introduction, journalist Tan Tarn How describes Singaporean society as a tree, its fringes as the leaves nearest to the light, and the artist as one of these tender outermost growths. The metaphor doubles back on itself: if etiolation describes the deliberate stunting of plant life through controlled deprivation of light, then Singapore's manicured landscapes and engineered ecologies represent a hyper-cultivation that is an exercise in biopolitical management. Both practices determine which forms of life flourish and which are

⁸ For example, in 2020, activist Jolovan Wham took a photo of himself holding up a cardboard sign with a smiley face in front of a police station. He disseminated it on social media, and was charged for taking part in a public assembly without permit. Wham's gesture was a response to the police investigation of university student Nguyen Nhat Minh, who had carried out a similar protest with a placard stating "SG is better than oil" as part of the global Fridays For Future climate movement. The climate content of the original protest was eclipsed entirely by the spectacle of prosecution over a sign without content. Josef Ng's *Brother Cane*, elaborated in this introduction and in Chapter 3, and Seelan Palay's *32 Years*, examined in Chapter 4, follow similar patterns of state decontextualization.

systematically weakened. The etiolated conduct I examine exists within this broader regime of horticultural, biopolitical, and technocratic governance. These are leaks, cracks, and stains in the veneer of horticultural governance (Leow; Myers), where human and more-than-human life forms are manipulated to thrive in states of partial transparency and restricted growth. Such an orientation moves beyond sovereign power determining necropolitical conditions of life and death, or disciplinary conditions often associated with Singaporean models of governance (Langenbach), or the engineering of debility that Jasbir Puar theorizes. It describes the deliberate design of more-than-human infrastructures, akin to the edenic domes of Jewel at Changi Airport, cloud forests and supertrees of Gardens by the Bay (Chan), and air-conditioned environments (George) that brand the nation in popular imagination. These infrastructures cultivate conditions of calibrated livability, a technocratic mode of infrastructural governance that operates at the level of conditioning, sensing, architecture, and environmental engineering, producing compliance through both comfort and discipline.

This etiolated state of being starved of light also evokes the concept of penumbra (眾罔兩), or the shadow of a shadow, that Taiwanese feminist theorist Liu Jen-peng proposes when theorizing an abject sexual subject position. Drawing from the Taoist philosopher Zhuang Zi's parable of the shadow questioning its own shadow (罔兩問景), Liu articulates a subject position that haunts both the dominant subject (形) and its residual shadow (陰). Chen Kuan-Hsing extends Liu's formulation in his epilogue to *Asia as Method*, deploying the penumbra to examine Han-Chinese racism in societies where ethnic Chinese populations dominate. For Chen, the relationship between subject (形), shadow (陰), and penumbra (眾罔兩) models the "discursive and psychic strategies" deployed when encountering the figure of the Other. Chen extends this to consider the "hierarchical distinction between human and nonhuman, or, more specifically, an assertion of the power to judge the degree of humanness of others" (261). To attend to the etiolated penumbra as an agential position is therefore to interrogate the category of the human itself, suspending fictions about bodily integrity to consider the demonized, feral, inhuman, and dehumanized populations not legible as "proper" objects of study.

Etiolation and penumbra work in tandem across both ecological and queer registers – they describe states of durational and enforced deprivation and of being suppressed within a liminal penumbral space through active management rather than mere neglect. Etiolated conduct is therefore neither fully transparent nor entirely erased, suspended in a condition of opacity that denies it recognition as a form of legitimate life. To extend this to the "objectless" critique that Puar and Eng propose, studying this etiolated penumbra also requires a method that leaks beyond the spatial and temporal borders of the sovereign nation-state and what it can contain. This requires us to position these practices within an assemblage of transnational interests that shape regulation and restriction, and examine them over longer arcs of time to understand how they are grounded in materiality. To theorize

human gestures and their sociality on an island-nation whose very construction of national identity is contingent on ecological and biopolitical management steeped in extractive colonial history, we must attend to “human histories within a multispecies field of histories” (Tsing 33).

0.4 On Counter-Conduct

As part of this mode of attending, let us first recall another genealogy in the theorizing of conduct. On 1 March 1978, Michel Foucault delivered a lecture at the Collège de France, later published as the series *Security, Territory, Population*, in which he grappled with a fundamental question in his theorizing of power and governance: how to name a form of resistance within the framework of pastoral power, a power that operates not through sovereignty or exploitation, but through the biopolitical “conduct of souls” (193). This question emerged from Foucault’s extension of Georges Canguilhem’s concept of the milieu, which Foucault reimagines as a conductive fluid that permeates the self and society, acting upon the corpus both internally and externally. Within this framework, the self becomes a relational conduit through which power flows, a conductive material connected with the world. Resistance cannot simply mean cutting off this flow, as this is a link to power that also sustains life.

To clarify this relationship between power and resistance, Foucault employs an electrical metaphor. Consider the filament in a lightbulb. The filament does not stop electricity from flowing through the circuit, but conducts it while simultaneously producing heat and light through its material resistance. The filament’s resistance is what makes it productive. Similarly, Foucault argues that “refusal, revolts, and forms of resistance of conduct” (195) must take the form not of blocking power but of modulating it, of conducting it differently. This is resistance through transformation rather than pure negation. He asks: “How can we designate the type of revolts, or rather the sort of specific webs of resistance to forms of power that do not exercise sovereignty and do not exploit, but ‘conduct?’” (200) The challenge Foucault identifies is that traditional understandings of resistance, those based on refusal or withdrawal, prove inadequate for pastoral power precisely because power emanates from multiple sources in governmentality rather than from a single sovereign authority. There is no clear target to refuse or specific current to cut off when one is mired in the milieu. Severing the flow of power completely would also isolate the individual from the relational network, highlighting both the fiction of autonomy and the circuits of social reproduction that support social beings. The context of Singapore, with the scale and reach of its technocratic governance and surveillance, with no geographical hinterland that might permit one to live off the grid, is an instance of how this mode of refusal as resistance is untenable. What we need are not strategies of refusal, but tactics of redirection. This redirection seeks a different kind of connection, one that senses what performance theorist Rebecca Schneider calls the intra-in-animation of more-than-human networks.

After cycling through and rejecting various terms, including “dissidence,” a word he claims he would rather “cut out [his] tongue” (200) than use, Foucault settles on the portmanteau “counter-conduct” to name this strategic mode of resistance. The term is deliberately volatile, its meaning shifting depending on where emphasis falls. When emphasis falls on “counter,” the term signifies refusal. This includes the rejection of one’s body as conductive material, the refusal to be governed, and the counter-cartographies Joanne Leow theorizes that allow us to imagine Singapore otherwise. When emphasis falls on “conduct,” it signifies redirection, the permitting of one’s body to serve as a vessel for a different kind of current, along with the demand to be governed differently. “Conduct” itself carries the multiple meanings unpacked earlier in this introduction. It signals personal behavior shaped by governance, the guidance or direction of others, and conductivity as conveyance. This duplicity is its strength. “Counter-conduct” resists stable definition because it is a practice of constant inversion, one that demands a transformation of one’s relationship to power through the heightened awareness of one’s own interiority and exteriority, both solitary and in solidarity.

Foucault offers three clarifying remarks on counter-conduct that connect to this dissertation’s framework. First, he emphasizes its specificity “in form and objective,” insisting that counter-conduct is “never autonomous” (197). It always operates in tandem with systems of power and governance, and always in concert with other entities within relational circuits. Second, he locates counter-conduct spatially, arguing that such practices emerge at the edges of political institutions. He identifies several margins, including the deserter who refuses the political system of the nation, secret societies that operate outside official channels, and medical dissenters who insist on their right to live and die differently. These figures provide a potential range of what performing counter-conduct might look like, connecting with his later work on *parrhesia*, the individual who speaks truth to power at great personal risk. Finally, Foucault introduces the possibility of exhaustion as a strategy, the wearing down of oppressive systems through “the exhaustion of the evil [they] contain” (195). Counter-conduct, in this framing, works by stressing systems through persistent use and presence. It is a conduct that crosses generations, space, and time, through what Foucault provocatively frames as a willingness to “sin to infinity” (195). These three strategies of counter-conduct describe the logic of resistance this dissertation traces: remaining in relation, operating at the margins, and exhausting systems through persistence. It is also important to note that Foucault’s genealogy derives from the European pastorate and its secular democratic afterlives. When transposed to Singapore – where the grammar of governance follows trajectories shaped by colonialism, Cold War anticommunism, and what Chua Beng Huat, C.J. Wee W.-L., and others have identified as a contradiction of neoliberal economics with “Asian communitarian” ideology – counter-conduct requires further critical examination.

Saba Mahmood's *Politics of Piety* provides a path that opens up possibilities for this critical transposition. Through her study of the piety movement among Muslim women in Egypt, Mahmood challenges the assumption shared across liberal feminism and its poststructuralist critiques that agency is legible primarily through resistance to domination. She argues that this framework renders illegible "dimensions of human action whose ethical and political status does not map onto the logic of repression and resistance" (14). Mahmood highlights the difference between *negative freedom*, freedom from external restriction, and *positive freedom*, the capacity for self-mastery, offering a way of thinking about agency that moves beyond the "binary model of subordination and subversion" (14). Responding directly to Foucault and Judith Butler, Mahmood persuades us to shift our attention to "the multiple ways in which one inhabits norms" (15; emphasis in original) and examine what she refers to as the "topography of the self" (24), "the work bodily practices perform in crafting a subject" (122; emphasis in original). Her reconfiguration of agency resonates with Chen Kuan-Hsing's call in *Asia as Method* to de-imperialize the categories through which knowledge about non-Western subjects is produced.

The study of aesthetics under differently liberal governance sharpens this intervention specifically. In *Minor China*, Hentyle Yapp identifies how scholarship on non-Western art defaults to "major narratives around resistance and romanticized notions of liberal free speech, while setting aside both seemingly minor details about aesthetics as well as complex action by the state" (2). The aesthetic, particularly within the international art market and how it circulates and commodifies art practice, is often heralded as a "liberal antidote," while the Asian State is cast as "inherently illiberal, behind, and needing to catch up to the West" (2). This becomes a Manichean binary that reinforces the very framework it claims to critique. Like Mahmood, Yapp reminds us of the importance of inhabiting these norms, proposing the "minor as method," an analytical orientation that "highlights the epistemological assumptions and ontological conditions that uphold the order of things, the major" (5), persuading us to "pause and hesitate" in our inhabitation of this gap. Grounded in what he calls, after Petrus Liu, a "Marxist notion of social structuration" (5), Yapp's hesitant method attends to how rather than who or what we value, renegotiating "the terms that shape existence, like the human subject, rather than including more individuals into the category" (15).

If Foucault's counter-conduct names resistance that modulates power from within, Mahmood, Chen, Yapp, and Liu together insist that this "within" is historically constituted and cannot be universalized from a Eurocentric critical genealogy. They provide a counter-narrative to the outsider accounts that have diagnosed Singapore as a "cultural desert" (Sesser), a "relentless G-rated experience" (Gibson), or a "Barthian slate" of "pure intention" (Koolhaas), critiques of Singaporean governmentality that are endlessly echoed in

scholarship.⁹ Their search for familiar, legible, and liberal expressions of art and culture prevented them from recognizing what James C. Scott refers to as the “infrapolitical” registers of resistance that “subordinate groups” (19) produce under conditions of domination. This dissertation questions this default assumption of Singapore as a *terra nullius* (Charmaine Chua) and highlights what we missed, hesitating on the infrapolitical registers of cultural production that thrive below the threshold of legibility.

0.5 Etiolated Conduct

Read through a performance studies lens, the architecture of public transcripts (what is uttered in power’s presence) and hidden transcripts (what is said out of view) that James C. Scott develops in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* resonates with Erving Goffman’s dramaturgy of everyday life, where frontstage and backstage designate not merely spatial zones but performative registers through which social actors manage impressions under conditions of unequal power. Scott’s insistence that “the masks may get thicker or thinner, they may be crude or subtle, depending on the nature of the audience and the interests involved, but they are nevertheless performances, as are all social actions” (28) transposes Goffman’s theatrical metaphor into the domain of political resistance, where the management of legibility carries material consequences. His formulation that the hidden transcript functions as “a condition of practical resistance rather than a substitute for it” (190) reminds us that etiolated conduct does not replace pragmatic advocacy but works in tandem to expand the field of resistance within our collective imagination.

Yet Scott’s framework still presupposes a spatial arrangement and communicative intent that the Singaporean context complicates. His infrapolitics, which “lies strategically between” public and hidden transcripts in the form of “rumor, gossip, folktales, jokes, songs, rituals, codes, and euphemisms” (19), still relies on immediate transmission between human-to-human interlocutors. The etiolated conduct I theorize persists in forms that may

⁹ Stan Sesser’s 1992 *New Yorker* article “A Nation of Contradictions,” William Gibson’s 1993 *Wired* piece “Disneyland with the Death Penalty,” and Rem Koolhaas’s 1995 essay “Singapore Songlines: Portrait of a Potemkin Metropolis ... or Thirty Years of Tabula Rasa” each attempted sweeping portraits of the island from the outside during a volatile period of Singapore’s post-independence modernization. All three writers approached Singapore as temporary guests with privileged access to spaces, key civil service figures, and native informants, and all characterized its arts and culture through a lens of deficiency. Sesser called it “a cultural desert” where residents “pursue but one activity with passion ... This is the making of money” (37). Koolhaas described a “semiotic state” (1039) whose modernism had been “lobotomized,” stripped of “modernism’s artistic, irrational, uncontrollable, subversive ambitions” (1041). Gibson proclaimed “conformity here is the prime directive, and the fuzzier brands of creativity are in extremely short supply.” C.J. Wee W.-L. has critiqued Koolhaas’s piece as a “sprawling, subtle, yet oddly blunt and essentializing essay” (79), and their partial observations collectively reveal what Wee identifies as “the global West’s transculturated presence in Southeast Asia” (88). These writers were discovering precisely what they sought, parachuting in without recalibrating their analytical frameworks to sense what was occurring on the ground beyond the spectrum of convenient visibility.

not register as communicative at all, involving more-than-human transgenerational transmission that occurs on different spatial and temporal scales. This includes secret messages scribbled on prison walls in solitary confinement that might not be read; this also expands to a more-than-human ecology that provides cover for intimacy, a call that does not, and cannot, anticipate an immediate response. Where Austin's "etiolations of language" describe void or hollow utterances that retain the outward form of speech while stripped of authority, this dissertation reclaims that distention as generative and inhabits these "errors." Where Foucault's counter-conduct describes the modulation of power's flow from within the relations of pastoral governance, etiolated conduct specifies the constraints under which such modulation happens. These are conditions of enforced deprivation where the sustenance that enables political expression, assembly, visibility, and legal personhood has been systematically curtailed.

Under these repressive conditions, conduct finds alternative routes. Aesthetic objects register what structural analysis alone cannot sufficiently account for: the excess of affect and sensorial embodiment. Transport and drainage infrastructure camouflage queer choreography and provide conduits for escape. These lateral alliances with more-than-human infrastructure generate distorted forms of solidarity through durational deprivation rather than spectacular confrontation, forged in crucibles of conduct that include solitary confinement and the criminalization of sexual behavior. This framework refuses to romanticize either resistance or constraint. Etiolated conduct reads the material consequences of deprivation while attending to the specific potential and consequence of agential capacity available within Singapore's technocratic governance, a regime that determines which lives flourish and are nourished and which lives are pruned, stunted, and weeded out. Because of its strategic illegibility, etiolated conduct requires a recalibration of our critical attention and patience, an attunement to a different frequency, a methodology that aligns with its dynamic. The rest of this introduction maps out this relationship to existing scholarship in performance studies and its more-than-human turn, before situating the dissertation's methodology, my positionality, and the specific conditions of Singapore that necessitate this framework. I conclude with an overview of the chapters.

0.6 On the More-than-human in Performativity

I approach performance studies as a field that congeals around the question of what sustains, animates, and reproduces embodiment, live-ness, and co-presence. The field traces performativity through Austin, Derrida, and Butler, with disciplinary origins in anthropology, ethnography, theater, and dance that center the human condition.¹⁰ Austin's ordinary language philosophy establishes the speech act as a unit of analysis. Derrida's critique in "Signature Event Context" demonstrates that iterability, the structural capacity

¹⁰ Refer to Shannon Jackson's scholarship tracing the genealogy of the field in *Professing Performance* for further elaboration.

for repetition in the absence of any originary context, is the general condition of language rather than a parasitic exception to it. Butler extends this iterability to the constitution of gender, theorizing performativity as the regulated repetition of norms through which bodies materialize. Each move expands what counts as performative while retaining language, discourse, and the discursively constituted subject as the primary site of analysis. Performativity assumes an agential being, a speaker who pronounces an utterance, whether vested with proper authority or not. By this measure, a “more-than-human performativity” names an inherent contradiction that we must invest time in unpacking before we proceed further.

Butler has more recently shifted critical attention to “forms of life,” engaging with the philosophical lineage of Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and Arendt to consider the social and ethical conditions that make life possible or precarious. This attention to infrastructural and material conditions provides a space for us to theorize performativity beyond the liberal human subject. Black feminists and decolonial scholars such as Saidiya Hartman, Hortense Spillers, Sylvia Wynter, and Denise Ferreira da Silva remind us to be critical of how our scholarship remains oriented toward the default formulation of Man – a patriarchal liberal figure situated within the West and Global North. Even in critiques that seek to displace Man, this human figure remains at the heart of our calculus. The challenge is to theorize performativity across these scales without merely defaulting to the extension of an anthropomorphic framework.

Reading foundational performance studies texts against the grain reveals slivers of more-than-human potential already latent within. Joseph Roach’s theory of surrogation in *Cities of the Dead* permits us to think about performance over a long duration, as gestures that shape-shift from body to body across the circum-Atlantic. While Roach’s framework remains faithful to human-to-human transmission, his concepts of kinesthetic imagination, vortices of behavior, and displaced transmission open toward consideration of the conditions that scaffold memory’s reproduction, the more-than-human factors that push at fidelity and displacement. Roach’s engagement with James C. Scott is particularly generative for my scholarship. Citing Scott’s observation that “if domination is particularly severe, it is likely to produce a hidden transcript of corresponding richness” (Scott 27; qtd. in Roach 56), Roach attends to “restored behaviors that flourish in the penumbra of the law” (56). This penumbral flourishing, where the severity of restriction produces cultural richness, anticipates the etiolated conduct this dissertation traces. What remains underexplored in Roach’s framework is the hidden transcript of a more-than-human sociality, the infrastructural, ecological, and material dimensions of how memory is carried, grafted, and displaced beyond human-to-human surrogation. This dissertation extends that inquiry, attending to how land, drainage, vegetation, and carceral architecture participate in the transmission and obstruction of political memory.

Peggy Phelan's *Unmarked* interrogates the ontology of human subjectivity through a feminist psychoanalytic lens, but a close reading reveals a materialist undercurrent that the field's reduction of her work to a fetish of ephemerality has obscured. Phelan writes that "performance clogs the smooth machinery of reproductive representation necessary to the circulation of capital," and it is this "potential revaluation" that "gives performance art its distinctive oppositional edge" (148), anticipating a similar argument for the role of aesthetics in the critique of capital through value-form Marxist feminist theory in my third chapter. Her distinction between metaphor, which "works to secure a vertical hierarchy of value and is reproductive" (150), and metonymy, which "works to secure a horizontal axis of contiguity and displacement" (150), provides a formal vocabulary for the modes of transmission this dissertation examines. Metaphoric transmission reproduces through equivalence, erasing difference in the service of legibility, while metonymic transmission moves laterally, preserving contiguity and displacement, with fidelity that is always partial. The pragmatic resistance examined in my first chapter operates through metaphoric logics of recognition; the etiolated conduct I trace across subsequent chapters operates metonymically, through contiguity, displacement, and the refusal of transparent substitution. Phelan's formulation of the "unmarked," that which "shows itself through the negative and through disappearance" (9), prepares us for attending to what persists in the penumbral registers of opacity rather than in the spectacular registers of transparency.

The question of what persists when the human figure withdraws has a longer history within performance studies than the posthumanist turn sometimes acknowledges. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's "Objects of Ethnography" questions the status of objects within ethnographic display, refusing what she calls "artifactual autonomy" and insisting that objects are inherently social, "created by ethnographers" (17). Her analysis hinges on the problem of detachment. The ethnographic object is always an excerpt, severed from its environment, and the question of "how and why certain cuts are made in deciding where an object ends" is for Kirshenblatt-Gimblett a "surgical issue" (18) of selection and pragmatics. This surgical cut anticipates what Barad will later theorize as the agential cut: the splice of ontological indeterminacy that produces the boundary between object and subject, figure and ground. Yet Kirshenblatt-Gimblett still defaults to crediting a human entity for bestowing meaning and intent, even as her analysis strains against it. Her examination of the "limits of detachment" (30), where the ephemeral and intangible resist capture, sets up the perennial anxiety in performance studies between the archive and the living, between bone and flesh.

Rebecca Schneider muddies this distinction in *Performing Remains*, arguing that if we accept that the archive is never purely bone and the performance never purely flesh, that "there is flesh in bone and bone in flesh," then the question shifts from whether performance disappears to how it "remains, but remains differently" (98). Schneider's provocation, directed partly at Diana Taylor's influential separation of archive and repertoire, insists that

both categories are more porous than we acknowledge.¹¹ Materials housed in the archive are given “for the *future* of their (re)enactment” (108; emphasis in original). This reframing of the archive as “live,” and a theater for repertoires of preservation, and of performance as a means of re-appearance rather than vanishing, lays the groundwork for Schneider’s subsequent engagement with new materialisms that complicate this subject/object relation in ways that matter for a more-than-human theorizing of performativity. In her introduction to the special issue of *TDR* on “New Materialisms and Performance Studies,” Schneider identifies the productive friction between the field’s commitment to embodiment, live-ness, and co-presence, and the new materialist insistence on attending to forces that exceed the human sensorium. She asks: “If ‘living beings’ might include stone, and if time might be as vast as geologic time, what are the limits of copresence or of contemporaneity?” (11) Schneider cautions against collapsing the distinction between animate and inanimate too quickly, noting that “theatricality, unlike performativity, makes sure we remember that not everything in the world is real,” and that the matter of mimesis might be posited as “agential theatricality: becoming unreal” (14). In “Slough Media,” Schneider elaborates on this, asking how we might approach “the matter of intrainanimacy with respect for all lifeways that circulate among us all, across vast stretches of time, vast stretches of space, as well as at the tiniest increment of a single quivering leaf or bit of detritus of bone” (98). This question, which serves as an epigraph to this introduction, identifies the scalar challenge of this dissertation, moving between the planetary forces that reclaim land from the sea in Chapter 3 to the incremental gesture of an orange consumed sac by sac in a prison cell in Chapter 4.¹²

Karen Barad’s scholarship marks a decisive break in the lineage of performativity that centers the human, one that engages performance theorists like Rebecca Schneider at the same time as ethnographers like Anna Tsing who theorize a “More-than-Human Sociality.” Barad provides the ontological framework for why the extension of live-ness to stone and duration to geologic time is warranted. She cautions that “performativity is precisely a contestation of the excessive power granted to language to determine what is real” (802), arguing that the linguistic turn, for all its productive destabilizations, has installed a new form of representationalism in which discourse mediates access to matter rather than being entangled with it. Her agential realist framework, drawing on Niels Bohr’s quantum physics, proposes that the primary ontological units are not things but phenomena, and that agency is “not aligned with human intentionality or subjectivity” but is “a matter of intra-acting,” an “enactment” (826) distributed across entities produced through the encounter. Butler theorizes the materialization of bodies through the regulated repetition of discursive norms, while Barad insists that “matter is a substance in its intra-active becoming,” “a stabilizing and destabilizing process of iterative intra-activity” (822). The

¹¹ Refer to pp. 106–8 of *Performing Remains* for debate between Schneider and Taylor.

¹² There is further elaboration and engagement with Schneider’s scholarship in Chapter 4.

agential cut does not carve a pre-existing world into subject and object. It enacts a “local resolution” of “ontological indeterminacy” (815), producing the very distinction between observer and observed, figure and ground, human and environment through the act of measurement itself. This has consequences for how we understand the artworks, ecologies, and infrastructures this dissertation examines. If boundaries between human and nonhuman are enacted rather than given, then the material-discursive apparatuses through which artworks are produced, sited, and encountered are themselves boundary-making practices, enacting cuts that include some entities while excluding others. The transportation network, the reclaimed geology, the pioneer vegetation, the carceral wall, and the drainage network are co-constitutive of the phenomena this dissertation reads.

0.7 On Performativity in the More-than-human

Infrastructure provides a methodological anchor for how this more-than-human performativity translates analytically. In the prologue to *Social Works*, Shannon Jackson reads Petra Kuppens on the turtle-paced *flâneur* in Benjamin’s arcades to argue that what is needed are “frames that show the social stakes of that perceptual shift” (5). Jackson’s interest in what lies backstage, in the “wider apparatuses of labor and infrastructure” that “support our self-figuration” (4), connects performance to social theory beyond the proscenium. Her insistence on “emphasizing sustenance, coordination, and re-materialization” alongside performance’s “routinized discourse of disruption and de-materialization” (13) provides a counterweight to the discipline’s tendency to privilege the spectacular and the disruptive event over the reproductive and the durational practice. This infrastructural attention, what Jackson describes as tracking “systems that keep us alive” (*Back Stages* 351), shapes my reading practice across every chapter of this dissertation. In recent scholarship, Jackson has extended this infrastructural thinking to the planetary scale, observing that “the heteronomy of planetary catastrophe undoes forms on which a theory of autonomy does not always know it depends” while “an aesthetic theory of autonomy questions received patterns for understanding the world that climate science does not always know it needs” (*Back Stages* 359). This formulation names a crucial tension this dissertation navigates between the affective human political urgencies of restricted expression and the more-than-human forces that condition and exceed those restrictions. Jackson’s autonomy-heteronomy dialectic also provides a frame for holding together (and apart) the ethical commitments that pull in different directions across these chapters: the insistence on extending agential capacity to the more-than-human (in the undoing of a theory of autonomy), and the accountability to ongoing struggles over who counts as human in the first place (and what an aesthetic theory of autonomy reminds us of).

Jackson’s scholarship pivots the inquiry from the latent frequencies of the more-than-human within performance studies to the performative force of infrastructure within the more-than-human. Beyond performance studies, conversations around the more-than-human have been flourishing across the humanities and social sciences over the

past few decades: object-oriented ontology (Harman), actor-network theory (Latour), new materialisms (Bennett; Coole and Frost), the post-natural (Morton), the climate of history (Chakrabarty), eco-Marxism (Foster; Moore; Malm; Battistoni), ecology and ethnography (Tsing; Kohn; Haraway), arts and the Anthropocene (Davis and Turpin; Myers; Demos), eco-dramaturgy (May; Chaudhuri; Woynarski; Kupperts), and decolonial ecologies (Sharpe; King; Gómez-Barris; Jue). This scholarship in turn draws upon a longer philosophical tradition concerned with the figure's relationship to the ground, which includes Baruch Spinoza (monism, *conatus*), Karl Marx (commodity fetish and living labor), Martin Heidegger (Being, worlding, *physis*), Georges Canguilhem (*milieu*), Maurice Merleau-Ponty (the flesh), Jacques Derrida (parergon), Gilles Deleuze (assemblage, rhizome), among others. My dissertation builds on the ongoing critique of the vibrancy of matter, a project that attends to who counts as human and to inhuman conditions (Cheah) in our turn toward the more-than-human (Schneider; Chen). At the same time, I attend to the opacity of more-than-human forces, drawing on what object-oriented ontology offered in theorizing the withdrawal and unknowability of objects, while reading that withdrawal through Moten as a fugitive resistance of the object rather than a flat ontology.

Arjun Appadurai, whose volume *The Social Life of Things* (1986) was an early precursor to the analysis of object-relations and political economy, returned to this intervention in "Mediants, Materiality, Normativity" (2015), narrowing the focus from "actants" to what he names "mediants," a subset of the more-than-human that is entangled with both inhuman processes and humans. For Appadurai, mediation is what makes materiality interface with the human, how matter comes to matter. At the same time, his scholarship reminds us of the financialization of modern life that produces ever-thickening layers of abstraction. Mediation identifies these layers, and Appadurai argues mediants have the capacity to "support a more secure set of normative or critical interventions without reverting to a classic humanist view of the convergence of actor, self, person, subject, and agent, which the new materialisms have rightly done much to dethrone" (222). The attention new materialism brings to the embodied experience of mediation, how we sense and are sensed by the world, helps us approach materiality with a heightened awareness of the more-than-human while retaining accountability to forces of normativity that shape the human alongside the more-than-human. Appadurai states: "Materiality is the site of what mediation—as an *embodied practice*—reveals" (224; emphasis added). This formulation, centering sensed embodiment as practice and a method of cutting through layers of inhuman abstraction, holds real stakes read through a performance studies lens, opening up an aporia for us to consider what can count as "performativity" in the more-than-human infrastructures that conduct life.

This call to sense infrastructure critically connects to an emerging conversation across disciplines that attends to the material and aesthetic dimensions of political economy: within performance studies (Ridout; Lubin-Levy and Shvarts; Boyle), the infrastructural turn in

anthropology (Larkin; Anand, Gupta, and Appel), and critical logistics studies (Cowen; Chua). What these scholars share is an insistence that infrastructure is legible as form, and that form carries political force. They build on the Marxist base (infrastructure) vs. superstructure relations as elaborated by Louis Althusser and others. Brian Larkin's project holds particular affinity with this dissertation. Drawing on Jakobson's parsing of the poetic function and Rancière's distribution of the sensible, Larkin argues that infrastructures address people as aesthetic subjects, evoking affects of "hope, pessimism, nostalgia, desire, frustration, anger" (176). Form is where the technical and the symbolic become inseparable: infrastructures impose "sensory conditions of experience" (185) that constitute political life. The "promise" that Larkin identifies is a promise of accountability: when infrastructures work or fail, they "bring into visibility the operation of governmental rationality and offer that rationality up for political debate" (183). Alongside Jackson's heteronomy-autonomy dyad, Larkin grounds what Jackson identifies as the "received patterns of understanding the world" available through "aesthetic theory" (359) in the built, sensed, and lived environment of daily life. Within the Singaporean context, both success and failure become visible through infrastructure as containments and contingencies. What Larkin's framework does not fully account for, and what this dissertation pursues, is what happens when infrastructure withdraws and resists the sensory conditions through which political life is constituted. This withdrawal is at once strategic and tactical. Strategic, as the State conceals what must remain out of view for the city to function: land reclaimed from the sea and left to settle (Chapter 3), carceral facilities built to contain political detainees (Chapter 4), drainage systems designed to expel water efficiently (Chapter 5), and dormitories housing migrant workers during the height of the pandemic (Epilogue). Tactical, as these infrastructures become sites for etiolated conduct: gay cruising on reclaimed shorelines, transgenerational communication and survival within carceral space, and emergent contingency via drainage infrastructure.

It is also important to emphasize how this dissertation's approach to a more-than-human performativity differs from adjacent projects in the environmental humanities and eco-dramaturgies. I theorize with and in the political infrastructure and material conditions of restricted expression in Singapore, arguing that this set of conditions necessitates and produces a more-than-human analytical framework, an approach distinct from an ecological sensibility that arrives at political implications belatedly. The more-than-human is the condition under which politics persists. As Schneider cautions, "granting inanimate objects agency might let human exploiters, who are responsible for the excesses of the Anthropocene, off the hook" (*New Materialisms* 10), a risk Elizabeth Povinelli's scholarship on "geontopower" sharpens by attending to populations whose claim to the category of the human is unresolved. This dissertation neither abandons the human nor settles within it, sensing instead through the more-than-human networks that sustain political life when conventional circuits of solidarity have been severed. Nested within the

“more-than-human” are the inhuman (infrastructure), the non-human (animality, vegetal life, matter), and the less-than-human (the subaltern), each requiring differentiated analytical vocabularies that this dissertation develops across its chapters.

0.8 With/In – On Methodology

“With/In” names a methodological orientation that extends the queerness-as-method I develop. “Within” carries the valence of the “infra,” Latin for below or underneath, a prefix that grounds both an infrastructural perspective and Scott’s “infrapolitical” mentioned earlier. Infrapolitics not only names forms of surreptitious resistance but also requires an embedded methodology to approach “hidden transcripts” with attunement. The slash in “within” holds together two positions that cannot be separated: to theorize *with* Singapore’s conditions of restricted expression, in solidarity and in dialogue with artists and communities, and to theorize from *inside* these conditions, as someone whose practice and personhood have been shaped by the apparatus I am critiquing. I was born, raised, and educated in Singapore before relocating to the United States to pursue graduate education in 2009. As an artist and scholar whose practice spans performance and the moving image, I approach the objects in this dissertation from my experience as a participant who has been nurtured by, and contributed to, the arts ecology in Singapore. I count many of the artists I am reading as friends and respected colleagues with whom I have been in conversation for decades. My positionality as a Chinese cisgender gay male within Singapore’s ethnic majority shapes both the scope and limitations of this dissertation. The objects of my analysis emerge from my embeddedness in the networks of circulation, censorship, state funding, and comradeship that determine what is made and shown. My demographic biases and patterns within that ecology reflect the circuits of power and infrastructure that this dissertation interrogates. Even though I do not engage with my own practice directly, my theorizing is deeply informed by my experience navigating the field of resistance in Singapore, where one oscillates between the pragmatic and the unpragmatic, the transparent and the opaque, working with what is informally referred to as the mercurial “OB” (out-of-bounds) markers.¹³

The methods this section names emerge from a logical paradox at the heart of etiolated conduct: how does one theorize and read an object that refuses transparency, that survives within the archive precisely because of its opacity? Mel Y. Chen’s “feral archive” refers to objects tugged out of disciplinary homes, incomplete, filtered through embodiment

¹³ This is a term borrowed from golf to describe the invisible boundaries of permissible public discourse in Singapore. The phrase was first used in 1991 by then-Minister for Information and the Arts George Yeo to demarcate areas of political and social life that should remain off-limits to media and civil society. Unlike their golfing equivalents, these markers are never formally defined, and shift according to the political climate. Tan Tarn How, Cherian George, and other political commentators have theorized versions of this informal system of self-censorship. See also Cheong Yip Seng’s memoir *OB Markers: My Straits Times Story* for an account from the perspective of a former Straits Times editor-in-chief.

and affect, with gaps that reflect both willful refusal to be documented and the impossibility of archiving more-than-human entanglement. Chen observes that “archives themselves feralize” (18), pulling categories of race and sexuality into the wild. This dissertation’s archive is similarly undomesticated. Even though each chapter engages with specific aesthetic objects, I read them as apertures that also withhold as a tactic of concealment. My reading method for each chapter reaches past the object toward what Derrida names the *parergon*, translated from Greek as “beside” and “work,” the frame or infrastructure that supports the work, and what makes the object both possible and partial. I will elaborate on the *parergon* in Chapter 5 through Fred Moten’s reconfiguration of the milieu.

This paradox also opens an ethical question this dissertation holds throughout rather than resolves: what does it mean to decode objects of opacity? My engagement with the ethics of reenactment and archival research is influenced by scholars who foreground the archivist as an embodied figure with a tactile relationship to the archive as material, and by those who have engaged critically with the project of recovery and restitution in relation to archival absences. This reflexive tactility emerges as sticky fingers or erotohistoriography (Freeman), as remaining differently in intra(in)animation (Schneider after Moten; Barad), and as the structural secret that resists the guarantee of recovery (Arondekar). Anjali Arondekar’s methods of reading sexuality within the British colonial archive in India, where colonial legal instruments continue to structure the regulation of sexuality and shape the archive’s absences, carry particular resonances with etiolated conduct. Her insistence that one must “grasp, precisely not to fix” (4), reading without the guarantee of recovery yet without abandoning the promise of a future, describes the orientation this dissertation takes toward its own feral archive.¹⁴

Reading such an archive requires methods responsive to each object’s specific conditions of opacity. Chapter 1 reads the parliamentary records of the Section 377A debates along with other archival documents for what escapes the transcript – affect, tone, emotion, but also historical context. Chapter 2 develops camouflage as a reading strategy, approaching an artistic body of work as fragments of a jigsaw puzzle, lingering in their gaps rather than seeking completion. Chapter 3 reads ecology and reclaimed land as the material ground that holds two different aesthetic objects together, a ground that continues to settle and unsettle over time. Chapter 4 develops a cellular reading method that responds to the distention of space and time under solitary confinement. Chapter 5 reads the dialectic of containment and withdrawal through a fugitive archive of speculation and ghosts. The methods I have outlined emerge from proximity to the etiolated conditions they approach. They are calibrated to an archive shaped by the specific political formation of Singapore as a site.

¹⁴ Arondekar’s methodological influence recurs throughout this dissertation. This focus on the intimacies of suppressed and opaque narratives within the archive is also informed by Gayatri Spivak, Jane Blocker, Sara Ahmed, Ann Stoler, and Vivian Huang among others.

These methods and genealogies clarify why Singapore is a critical site for these questions of contemporary political and aesthetic theory.

0.9 On Singapore

The nation, as Benedict Anderson reminds us, is an “imagined political community” (6) whose material production depends on the technologies of classification inherited from the colonial state. In the final chapters of *Imagined Communities*, Anderson traces how the census, the map, and the museum operated as what he calls a “totalizing classificatory grid, which could be applied with endless flexibility to anything under the state’s real or contemplated control: peoples, regions, religions, languages, products, monuments” (184). Singapore inherited this grid from the British with particular intensity and compression, condensing the classificatory imperatives of colonial governance into an approximately 280-square-mile island that is constantly expanding through processes of land reclamation.¹⁵ This is a site where the census, the map, and the management of population via the infrastructural have operated with a density and thoroughness beyond what Anderson’s framework might anticipate.

As Chua Beng Huat observes, “Singapore is easy to denigrate from a distance” (1). The aggregated effects of single-party rule since 1959 and coerced independence since 1965,¹⁶ variously characterized as draconian, authoritarian, or a “benevolent dictatorship,” have circulated widely in international media and scholarship on the Singaporean State.¹⁷ These include detention without trial of political dissidents, repressive legislation on labor relations and media (Rajah; George; Low), and aggressive gerrymandering to preserve the political status quo (Tan and Grofman). Through the lens of liberal ideology, these have been framed as evidence of political and cultural suffocation, the etiolation of life examined earlier. Yet as Chua argues, “the continuing simplistic and reductionist characterization of

¹⁵ The processes of land reclamation have been theorized in detail by Charmaine Chua, Joshua Comaroff, Lim Tin Seng, and others, and will be further elaborated in Chapter 3.

¹⁶ The Singaporean government in recent times has refuted this narrative of being coerced to leave Malaya, releasing classified information that claims that it was part of the plan all along. See Susan Sim’s *The Albatross File* for further elaboration.

¹⁷ “Benevolent dictator” refers to Singapore’s first Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, resurfacing widely around his death in 2015. William Branigin describes Lee’s rule as “efficient but often heavy-handed” (*The Washington Post*, 22 Mar. 2015); Carlton Tan calls him “the benevolent dictator” who left a “legacy of authoritarian pragmatism” (*The Guardian*, 23 Mar. 2015). The term sits alongside a broader lexicon of qualifiers: Cherian George’s “calibrated coercion,” Gordon Means’s “soft authoritarianism” (which George Baylon Radics also adopts, and whose scholarship will be discussed in further detail in Chapter 1), and William Gibson’s enduring epithet “Disneyland with the Death Penalty” (*Wired*, 1993), for which the Singaporean government banned the magazine. “Draconian” recurs in coverage of Singapore’s criminal code, particularly its drug laws: Phil Robertson of Human Rights Watch describes the penalties as “grave” and “draconian” in an interview with *Time* (4 Aug. 2023) by Max Walden, while BBC *HARDtalk* interviewer Stephen Sackur posed the term directly to Minister K. Shanmugam (29 June 2022), who will also be discussed in Chapter 1.

the Singaporean as ‘docile,’ culturally race-bound and living in fear of political authoritarianism is descriptively inadequate” (4). What such characterizations miss is the specific and material formation of the Singaporean State. The island possesses no natural resources and no geographical hinterland; this scarcity has produced what Chua identifies as a “generalized anxiety about the long-term viability of the social, economic and political foundation of the island-nation” (2), a siege mentality translated into ideological justification for tight social and political control through the maintenance of social cohesion and the administrative efficiency of one-party governance. The complex subjectivities produced under these conditions resist binaristic classification into docility or delinquency. The politics and practices of the Singapore system have been characterized, in the government’s own term, as “pragmatic” (Chua 8) solutions to changing circumstances, a rhetoric of pragmatism and its consequences that this dissertation’s first chapter examines at length, and that the remaining chapters seek to imagine beyond.

The cultural contradictions this pragmatism produces in Singapore have been mapped by C.J. Wee W.-L., who argues that Singapore represents a postcolonial State that combines Western modernization with an “Asian values” discourse to manage its population through biopolitical and technocratic means, framing the island as “a national project taking place in an offshore economy, and a particular formation integral to the free-trade regime” (6). Wee traces how the post-independence suppression of local ethnic cultures in the 1960s and 1970s, oriented around economic modernization, produced what he identifies as “an exuberant socio-economic modernisation with a deficient cultural modernism” (7), where “‘culture’ [...] was (and is) conceived of as a residual category to be revamped instrumentally as part of the radical reconstruction of subjectivity itself for the economy” (9). The reterritorialization of the 1980s and 1990s, through the Shared Values White Paper and “Asian communitarian” discourse, introduced what Wee identifies as a fundamental contradiction: “how can a state have an idea of collectivism, given the neo-liberal emphasis on the free market?” (11) This was a period when the government was rebranding Singapore as a creative city to court multinational investment, in the wake of Richard Florida’s “rise of the creative class.” This contradiction generated an unexpected “authorisation of the arts” that cultural producers then used to “resist the government’s heavy-handed cultural planning” (10), prompting what Wee terms an “artistic counter-reterritorialising of the country within the larger idea of East Asia” (11). Wee examines plays by theater directors Kuo Pao Kun and Ong Keng Sen as examples of this “counter-reterritorialising,” which sought to address a central question: “how does one find one’s ‘self’ or ‘home’ in a terrain that is physically and culturally changing?” (130). The artworks this dissertation examines build upon Wee’s idea of art as a

“counter-reterritorialising” force, forged within this volatile crucible, where aesthetic expression is encouraged on one hand, and curtailed on the other.¹⁸

This dissertation steers away from reproducing the State’s narrative of geopolitical exceptionalism. Critical scholarship on Singapore engages with its mega-projects and horticultural veneer as synecdoche for the capabilities (or failures) of governance (Myers; Lim; Comaroff and Ong), highlighting the “graduated sovereignties” (Ong) through which Singapore distributes differential rights, protections, and precarity across its inhabitants according to class, citizenship, and economic utility. I extend their scholarship by attending to how these policies have impacted the population that includes migrant workers, the ecologies displaced and produced by land reclamation, and the forms of intimacy and solidarity that persist in the cracks and stains of technocratic management as “a form of revolt” (Leow 899). The conditions this dissertation traces, which include the surveillance of assembly, the biopolitical management of populations, the instrumentalization of ecology, and the calibration of livability, are not unique to Singapore. If Matthew Schneider-Mayerson is accurate in his observation that Singapore’s “artificial technonature might provide a glimpse of the future” (166), then the etiolated forms of resistance that emerge under these conditions carry anticipatory weight for the rest of the world. The liberal frameworks that dominate North American scholarship on resistance, organized around visibility, rights, and recognition, are, as Chua Beng Huat identifies, inadequate to the Singaporean condition. As liberal democratic institutions encounter erosion across the globe, and as authoritarian right-wing populist regimes return to power, the question of how solidarity persists under conditions where assembly is proscribed and expression is curtailed becomes urgent beyond the boundaries of any single nation-state. Art’s indirection, under these increasingly illiberal conditions across the world, represents a politicization of aesthetics rather than an aestheticization of politics. When direct political speech is foreclosed, aesthetic opacity becomes the form through which political utterance persists, accumulating force over time through the ambiguity that protects it from capture.¹⁹ The artworks I examine in my dissertation conduct with/in this etiolated condition.

0.10 With/In Singapore – Perform: State: Interrogate

In 2004, Performance Studies international (PSi) held its tenth annual conference in Singapore, titled *Perform: State: Interrogate*, a play on the acronym PSi. It was the first time the organization convened in Southeast Asia. On the title, performance studies scholar, artist, and co-organizer Ray Langenbach comments on the “productive pleasures” of “complicity, resistance and the ‘guilty pleasures’ of textuality and dissemination” in

¹⁸ Chapter 3 traces this contradiction in detail through the 1990s, a decade that bookends the two stagings of the first artwork I examine in that chapter with the political conditions that necessitated its aesthetic camouflage.

¹⁹ I am indebted to Colleen Lye for providing critical feedback that shaped this formulation.

“bringing state power into being through the power of discourse and representation” (25). His comments encapsulate the perverse and promiscuous pleasure of thinking and writing about performance and proscription in Singapore, a site where he has spent extensive time researching and documenting performance art as an American expatriate. The timing of the conference, and the implicit reference of his statement, carried a significance that is acknowledged in an auto-interview by Singaporean performance artist Lee Wen, included in the program, where Lee highlighted the restriction of licensing and funding for performance art and forum theater. Lee lamented the inherent contradictions of working under restrictive conditions, stating:

It's the way that art reconciles contradictions in its manifestation that is also liberating [...] it is one of things, which a capitalistic, consumer-based, materialistic society fears most [sic] about performance art. More than its other inherent dangers. (39)

In a classic example of how etiolated conduct manifests through obfuscation, Lee concludes the interview by refusing to answer his own question to elaborate on what these “other dangers” are. Lee responds instead with: “Good question” (39).

A decade earlier, on 1 January 1994, artist Josef Ng staged *Brother Cane*, a performance protest in response to the police entrapment of gay men at Tanjong Rhu, the site of critical focus in Chapter 3.²⁰ A photograph from the performance was sensationalized by state-managed media, leading to Ng being charged for committing “an obscene act, to wit, by ~~trimming~~ cutting²¹ [his] pubic hair and exposing [his] buttocks to the annoyance of the public.” The fallout prompted a joint statement from the Ministry of Home Affairs and the Ministry of Information and the Arts restricting licensing and funding of performance art for a decade. In 1993, theater practitioners Alvin Tan and Haresh Sharma from The Necessary Stage traveled to New York to attend an Augusto Boal “Theater of the Oppressed” workshop. When they returned to Singapore, they created forum theater performances, and were accused by the press of being Marxist. When the restriction of funding and licensing of performance art was imposed after the Josef Ng incident in 1994, a similar proscription was placed on forum theater as a form. PSi's arrival in 2004 coincided with the unofficial lifting of this proscription, made possible by the conditions of calibrated liberalization that had produced the ban in the first place, the contradiction Wee identifies at the heart of Singapore's cultural policy examined in the preceding section.

²⁰ I reenacted *Brother Cane* in 2012. For further details on the performance and my reenactment, refer to *Archiving Cane*.

²¹ This is quoted from Ng's charge sheet issued by the police. The redaction and replacement of “trimming” with a handwritten “cutting” was also part of the trace left on the charge sheet. The event was a private ticketed event and occurred at the post-midnight hours of the new year as part of a marathon performance event titled *Artists' General Assembly* organized by 5th Passage and The Artist's Village at Parkway Parade Shopping Centre. The “annoyance of the public” was a construct since it happened in a semi-private space where there were no casual observers.

The question of whether performance studies and its analytical frameworks carry an imperialist charge when transposed transnationally has been posed reflexively and repeatedly from within the discipline, most extensively in a three-part exchange in *TDR* between 2006 and 2007. Jon McKenzie, who collaboratively edited the anthology *Contesting Performance* with C.J. Wee W.-L. and Heike Roms, mapped what he called a “nested structure” of perceived imperialism radiating outward from NYU, to United States performance studies, to the Anglophone sphere, noting that “the dominance of English informs and deforms the very concept of ‘performance’ and, by extension, the very objects studied ‘as’ performance” (7). Janelle Reinelt sharpened this by observing that major journals “internationalized their *objects of study*” without widening the “global scope of the *production of knowledge*” (“Is Performance Studies Imperialist?” 8; emphasis in original), and called for the cultivation of “international performance literacies” that attend to how scholars “occupy particular niches in an unequal world” (Wallerstein; qtd. in Reinelt, “Is Performance Studies Imperialist?” 7). Diana Taylor, in her response, distinguished the charge of imperialism from what she considered “a far more serious threat: self-referential academic practice” (Raznovich et al. 20), arguing that performance studies methodology, by recognizing embodied practice as a form of knowledge transmission, carries an anti-imperialist potential that challenges writing as the predominant “handmaiden of empire” (Raznovich et al. 21).

Singapore served as a critical site in this debate. McKenzie notes that PSi’s 2004 conference was one of only three held outside the United States/United Kingdom axis, and that “at PSi Singapore, there was a discussion at one plenary of the complicity of U.S. imperialism and U.S. performance studies” (8). Paul Rae, who lived and worked in Singapore as artist, scholar, and educator, characterized the conference as a site where “postcolonial pressures meet Western cosmopolitanism” (qtd. in Reinelt, “Is Performance Studies Imperialist?” 10). As Reinelt astutely observes, “it is not surprising that in Singapore, third world [sic] and postcolonial sentiments about keeping American imperialism at bay could become entwined with a desire to keep performance studies also at arm’s length” (“Is Performance Studies Imperialist?” 11). In their co-written contribution to *Contesting Performance*, a volume designed to contest the discipline’s assumptions from a transnational perspective, Rae and Ray Langenbach highlight how performance studies discourse allows us to interrogate how “‘Singapore’ is performatively produced” (139). Later in that essay, they question why a Singaporean scholar like C.J. Wee W.-L. reads performances in Singapore with a “dispassionate professionalism,” writing his “embodied presence out of his analyses” (143), while they, as Briton and American respectively, seem unable to write their own embodied complicity out of theirs.

Performance studies as a disciplinary formation carries a persistent orientation toward professing embodied subjectivity, a set of expectations that produces a specific productive friction when it encounters the dispassionate, withdrawn, and pragmatic disposition that Singapore’s conditions of restricted expression have cultivated. In their critique, Langenbach

and Rae are unable to identify that Wee's dispassion is exactly what Singapore has "performatively produced." In this, we sense a structural parallel with the outsider accounts examined earlier in this introduction. Where Sesser, Koolhaas, and Gibson searched for legible liberal expression and diagnosed cultural deficiency when they could not locate it, Langenbach and Rae searched for legible embodied confession and diagnosed scholarly deficiency when Wee did not perform it. My dissertation offers a different approach. Rather than treating Wee's dispassionate professionalism as a deficit to be corrected, I seek to understand what produced that disposition and to track the infrastructural pressures that forged his etiolated conduct as a mode of scholarly survival under a differently liberal governance.

This is one response to the question that Reinelt and Taylor pose: attending to the forms of critical literacies that differently liberal conditions produce rather than imposing frameworks calibrated to liberal democratic contexts. Reinelt's distinction between internationalizing the *objects* of study and widening the *production* of knowledge is demonstrated here. The discipline has been more willing to turn its analytical gaze toward non-Western sites than to reckon with the epistemological assumptions it brings to them, assumptions about what embodied scholarship looks like and what critical engagement sounds like.²² Where Reinelt calls for "international performance literacies" cultivated through scholarly practice, and Taylor insists on the anti-imperialist potential of recognizing embodied knowledge transmission, this dissertation locates both impulses in the etiolated conduct that Singapore's conditions of restricted expression have induced. The scholars examined in the preceding section of this introduction, Mahmood, Chen, Yapp, and Liu, have already extended this self-interrogation by insisting that the categories through which we theorize agency, resistance, and embodiment are historically constituted and cannot be transposed. The forms of scholarly attention that constraint produces have something to contribute to a discipline whose analytical habits were calibrated under conditions of expressive freedom it can no longer take for granted.

Another critical blind spot within both Singaporean scholarship and performance studies, one that the preceding critique of its imperialist assumptions implicitly calls for, is an engagement between aesthetic analysis and political economy.²³ Joshua Lubin-Levy and Aliza Shvarts posed this provocation at a 2014 conference on Marxism and performance:

²² I am also implicated in this critique, as a scholar trained in the U.S. engaging with Singapore from a position shaped by the same disciplinary habits as Langenbach and Rae. I count Langenbach as a close collaborator and mentor, and I am also deeply influenced by Rae's scholarship and practice in Singapore.

²³ Some performance studies and performance studies-adjacent scholars like Sianne Ngai, Fred Moten, Joshua Chambers-Letson, José Esteban Muñoz, and Michael Shane Boyle have engaged directly with Marx or theorists that are associated with Marxist thought. However, there has yet to be a thorough engagement in performance theory with recent uptakes in Marxism that have developed post-2008. This includes a Marxist-humanist strand that Hentyle Yapp picks up on, building on the work of Raya Dunayevskaya, and a value-theoretical approach to the logic of gender.

“how does performance analysis bring together the living body and the working body?” (115) The question carries particular weight in Singapore, where the living body does not necessarily profess its presence, and where Marxism remains a discontinuous gap in the collective consciousness. The brutal arrest and exile of political opponents before independence under accusations of communist affiliation, culminating in Operation Coldstore in 1963, eliminated organized political opposition and enabled the People’s Action Party to consolidate single-party rule. In 1987, twenty-two social activists were detained without trial under Operation Spectrum for alleged involvement in a “Marxist conspiracy.”²⁴ The proscription on forum theater following the Boal workshop accusations in 1993, imposed alongside the performance art ban after Ng’s *Brother Cane*, extended this stigma into artistic practice. I highlight these examples to underscore the specter of Marxism that haunts the nation. I was educated in a high school that was established by the diasporic Chinese community, and anxieties over communism meant that there was no mention of alternative political models or critique of capitalism in the syllabus. In fact, there is a residual stigma of anything associated with Karl Marx, communism, and socialism in knowledge production or artistic representation. Marxism seems buried along with other injustices in the penumbra in order for the city to thrive, an etiolated philosophy in itself. It was only during my graduate education that I encountered the resources for sustained engagement with Marxist thought. Chen Kuan-Hsing’s *Asia as Method*, whose theorization of the penumbra I examined earlier, returns to provide the methodological framework for this engagement around de-imperialization. His “geocolonial historical materialism” demands a method concretized in “dynamic local histories” shaped by “dialectical interaction with colonial and other historical forces” (66) and the pressures of global capitalism, one where theory itself is subject to the same de-imperializing critique it applies to its objects. This dissertation’s turn to value-form Marxist feminism in the third chapter responds to this potential, providing a framework for attending to what falls outside capital’s accounting: the sensuous, reproductive, and intimate activities that the value-form depends on yet refuses to register. It gestures toward what current Marxist scholarship, in dialogue with other fields, might offer to our understanding of the forces that shape us.

0.11 Chapter Outline – Toward Etiolated Conduct

My dissertation chapters follow an arc that maps onto the range of conduct with/in the field of more-than-human performativity in Singapore, moving from the most transparent and pragmatic forms of resistance in the first chapter, through camouflaged choreographies in the second chapter, to the etiolated modes in the third, fourth, and fifth chapters. The first chapter, “Beyond Pragmatic Resistance,” establishes the concept and

²⁴ Both Operation Coldstore and Operation Spectrum will be covered in further detail in Chapter 4. Arrests as part of Operation Spectrum include members of *Third Stage*, a group that uses theater as a pedagogical tool for building awareness about socio-political issues.

examines the impact of pragmatic resistance in Singapore by tracing the 2023 repeal of Section 377A alongside the constitutional amendment reinforcing heterosexual marriage. Rather than celebrating the repeal as a victory, the chapter draws on Pheng Cheah's critique of rights-based recognition to read decriminalization as a "violent gift" that stabilizes power while producing the identities of its claimants. Through a review of illiberal pragmatism (Audrey Yue) and pragmatic resistance (Lynette Chua), I propose a diagram ([fig. 1.1](#)) mapping resistance along two axes, pragmatic to unpragmatic, transparent to opaque, locating etiolated conduct in the unpragmatic-opaque quadrant. Examining joint stakeholder submissions across Singapore's three UN Universal Periodic Review cycles alongside the parliamentary debates of 2007 and 2022, I read the State's shifting rhetoric through Georges Canguilhem's theorization of life and "error" and Foucault's late distinction between practices of freedom and processes of liberation. The chapter tracks a migration from moral prohibition to normative calibration in the installation of "order before law," a phrase MP Christopher de Souza recovered from a 1962 speech by Lee Kuan Yew. I highlight how the repeal corrects one "error" while reinstalling the parameters that produce queerness as "error" at a higher level of constitutional authority through the attached constitutional amendment.

The second chapter moves from pragmatic resistance toward etiolated conduct by examining what I refer to as "camouflaged choreographies," the interstitial space between pragmatism and the unpragmatic, transparent and opaque, in which artists thrive, echoing the complicity and pleasures of restrictions that Lee Wen highlights. I read Singaporean visual artist Jason Wee's practice from 2010 to the present, tracking his engagement with the politics of queer visibility across three works: the public art commission *Lord Mountbatten Thinks of Pink* (2010), the ongoing series *Uncommon Choreographies* (2020–present), and his poem "Walk Walk Only: A Choreography" (2026). Wee's practice operates through a methodology of cruising, encoding queer desire within state-commissioned infrastructure while remaining camouflaged to those who do not sense queerly, marking the queer community as "public secrets." This camouflage responds to a Singaporean double bind in which the state simultaneously represses queer sexuality and instrumentalizes queer visibility when useful for branding the city-state as cosmopolitan. Drawing on Samuel Delany, Deborah Cowen, and Sianne Ngai, I theorize camouflage across three registers: temporal, after Benjamin's mimetic faculty; spatial, after Laura Levin's performing ground; and agential, after Neil Leach's Deleuzian fold. Grounding this theorization in the affinities between military and civilian life in Singapore, where underground train stations double as civil defense shelters and expressways as emergency airstrips, the chapter proposes camouflaged choreographies as the surrogates through which etiolated conduct circulates while retaining protective opacity. Reading cruising as subject and method across public art, gallery, and printed page, the chapter tracks how Wee sustains alternative futurities through

acts of provisioning and care across Singapore's shifting visibility conditions, from 1990s entrapment through 2000s homonationalism to present-day ambivalence.

The third chapter, "Reclaiming Reclamation," acts as the dissertation's critical hinge, shifting from representation toward the sensed materiality of reclaimed ground. I analyze Tanjong Rhu, a fifty-four-acre expanse of reclaimed land at the southern tip of Singapore, as an unauthorized cruising ground where queer subjects and pioneer vegetation co-inhabited the fallow decade between reclamation and development. The chapter argues that Singapore's reclamation literalizes what value-form theorists describe as the dissociated sphere, and that the cruising ecology occupies a doubly-dissociated position, expelled even from the reproductive labor that value-form feminists typically theorize. Drawing on Roswitha Scholz's account of value-dissociation as a "pervasive social formal principle" (131) and Amy De'Ath's argument that aesthetic objects "sense" value-form determinations where social analysis reaches its limit, the chapter develops ecological intimacy as a reading method attentive to the more-than-human substrate of cruising. Close readings of Otto Fong's play *Cetacea/鲸* (1993/94), which stages interspecies kinship between a boy and a beached whale at the height of the 1993 police entrapment crisis, and Boo Junfeng's short film *Tanjong Rhu* (2009), which foregrounds casuarina and lallang as co-constituents of intimacy on reclaimed ground, sit alongside field notes that ground the analysis. Anjali Arondekar's method of reading "without a trace" shapes my approach; I refuse to coerce the site's amalgamated oral histories into transparency, attending instead to the casuarina cover, tidal rhythms, and silt that registered what reclamation could not absorb.

The fourth chapter, "Solitary-Solidarity," examines etiolated conduct under one of its most repressive conditions: solitary confinement, as a result of political detention without trial. Reading performance artist Seelan Palay's durational work *32 Years: The Interrogation of a Mirror* (2017–18) alongside testimonials from political detainees held under Singapore's Internal Security Act (ISA), the chapter extends Foucault's theorization of *parrhesia* beyond speech acts to encompass embodied practices of truth-telling. The chapter traces parrhesiatic practice across three registers: endurance through more-than-human attentiveness in solitary confinement, exemplified by Teo Soh Lung's relations with insects, toads, and papaya plants; the delayed perlocutionary force of testimonials published decades after detention, read alongside the Berkeley audio recordings of Foucault's 1983 seminar for what their silences and student provocations register; and aesthetic responses across generations, from Kuo Pao Kun's post-detention dramaturgy to Palay's installations. A cellular reading method, modeled on Palay's meditative consumption of an orange in solitary confinement, attends to micro-gestures and infrastructural traces such as coconut husk mattresses, prison attire, and bloodstained walls that exceed conventional speech-act analysis, registering void performatives whose hollowness is the very source of their accumulated trans-generational force.

The fifth chapter reads Charles Lim's mixed-media film installation *All Lines Flow Out* (2011) as a more-than-human staging of Singapore's drainage infrastructure, taking up the public memory of Mas Selamat Kastari's 2008 escape from ISA detention and the year-long manhunt that followed. The chapter claims that Lim's film inhabits the affective conditions of infrastructure that made escape imaginable, holding open a fugitivity the State's security apparatus could neither apprehend nor resolve. Drawing on Fred Moten's "re/con/figuring of the milieu," Pheng Cheah's reading of Derridean temporalization, Rebecca Schneider's "agential theatricality," and a critical engagement with Arjun Appadurai's mediants and Brian Larkin's poetics of infrastructure, the chapter develops a recursive method oscillating between containment and contingency. Four moments from the film anchor the analysis: a human figure mistaken for floating debris, an opaque white substance contaminating the canal, the testimonial layers over a house built on a pier, and the looped temporality of the installation itself. These moments register withdrawal as a mode of presencing, dwelling at the threshold where the conducting subject dissipates into the milieu. As the dissertation's final chapter, it shifts the question from how etiolated conduct persists under constraint to what the poetics of infrastructure teach us about the limits of how we sense our worlds.

I conclude the dissertation with an epilogue, "Temporary Measures," which moves between personal history, field notes, and an account of a performance I conducted during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. I open with a poem my mother wrote in 1971 as a "hidden transcript" of etiolated conduct. From there, the epilogue traces how Singapore's lockdown, termed "circuit breaker" by the State, differentially distributed the conditions of restricted assembly and enforced isolation that the preceding chapters examine. Through the figure of the migrant worker grasscutter and the State's classification of landscape maintenance and aesthetic labor as "non-essential," the epilogue reflects on what the pandemic made visible about the entangled forms of more-than-human performativity.

0.12 From Dust to Dust

In 2015, artist Robert Zhao staged a solo exhibition *The Tree That Fell* in The Substation gallery. Zhao, who also goes by the Institute of Critical Zoologists, had salvaged a section of hanging root from The Substation banyan when the tree was transplanted. After keeping the root for a year, he found that powderpost beetles (*Bostrichidae*) had reduced part of it to dust, while insects and plants continued to thrive in the salvaged sections: life persisting despite and because of etiolated conditions. In the gallery, the first of two vitrines contained this root fragment. The second vitrine held Zhao's response to the discovery, an undulating landscape formed from wood dust sanded down from the remaining salvaged trunks, a landscape that reminds us of the many stockpiles of sand along the periphery of Singapore for land reclamation and construction, a desert amidst the tropics. (fig. 0.1) Zhao states: "I started thinking about the idea of disappearance in nature, and how long, without intervention, a tree takes to disappear. As an experiment, I started sanding all the wood

down manually to see how long I can reduce it to dust. It took me nine months.” He titled the works *How To Make A Tree Disappear As Nature Intended I and II*. Zhao’s nine months of human labor accomplished what the beetles had begun, a durational practice that mirrors the patience Comaroff and Ong attribute to Singapore’s administrators, who wage “some national struggles at an almost glacial pace, and with enormous gentility” (75).

The exhibition also included a photograph of The Substation banyan in a holding pen at Neo Tiew, far northwest of Singapore ([fig. 0.2](#)), its limbs and roots sawed down to a stump, held together with chicken wire on concrete ground, awaiting transplanting to a new site. This is the banyan on life support, caged and artificially resuscitated. Comaroff and Ong observe that “the environmental method of Singapore’s administrators is to put all agents, vegetal and human, into orders that establish apposite place” (15). Zhao himself notes the temporal distortion this ordering produces compared to the durational practice highlighted earlier: “It takes forever for a tree to disappear in the forest, but in Singapore, we can grow a 30-metre tree in just a few days.” This contradiction of compression and suspension, and of the horticultural as infrastructural, encapsulates the tension of thinking about a more-than-human performativity with/in Singapore.

This photograph returns us to questions that have buttressed this introduction. What makes a tree? The long hanging roots that once reached the garden floor? The wall of The Substation that both supports and is structurally affected by it? The stump that survives, wired together on concrete? Or the sapling on the twelfth floor, its roots circling a pot with a dragon motif? Perhaps, as Zhao reminds us, a merciful response to entropy is non-resistance, allowing nature to take its course as an act of resistance against the State that views “the tropical climate as a state of siege” (Comaroff and Ong 15). A return to dust. The chapters that follow trace how this ordering of all agents, vegetal and human, extends to the political, the sexual, and the infrastructural, as we attempt to discern what persists in the cracks of that arrangement.



Figure 0.1 *How To Make A Tree Disappear As Nature Intended II* (2015). Part of *The Tree That Fell* exhibition at The Substation gallery from 28 Aug. to 27 Sep. 2015. Installation documentation courtesy of Robert Zhao.



Figure 0.2 *The Substation Banyan*, at Neo Tiew in 2015. Photo by Robert Zhao.

Chapter 1

Beyond Pragmatic Resistance: The “Violent Gifts” of Repeal

1.1 Someday

A man looks at you and utters: “Someday...” What follows is a series of brief vignettes: a gay man picking up his partner at a public school, a kiss shared in the car; a trans woman washing her hands in a women’s bathroom; a lesbian couple at dinner with their parents; a heterosexual couple watching two men embrace on a screen. The video moves between two opposite worlds, rich and vibrant in one, desaturated and drained in another, the same scenes playing out differently depending on which side of “someday” you find yourself. Familiar scenarios are staged in the desaturated world: derogatory names hurled in passing, a tearful coming-out to parents, a photograph of a gay couple cropped for ambiguity. In the saturated world: acceptance, joy, and the freedom to love. In each vignette, a person addresses us directly. Each person, strategically cast to represent the diverse multicultural society of Singapore, utters a different line:

Someday, it won’t matter to the world if I am gay or straight.

Someday, nobody will stare or point fingers or call names.

Someday, our partners will be part of our families.

Someday, gay people will be able to express themselves without censorship.

Someday, a new chapter will be written for the gay people of Singapore.

In that final vignette, the camera cuts to a headline on the front page of the national broadsheet: “377A Repealed.” ([fig. 1.2](#)) The video closes on the man browsing through his closet, selecting a pink shirt, as he and his partner dress up for Pink Dot.¹ A date, a time, and a place: “30 June 2012, 6 p.m., Hong Lim Park.” A voiceover proclaims: “Let us make ‘someday’ happen.”

This two-and-a-half-minute campaign video was posted online before the fourth Pink Dot rally in Singapore in 2012 to publicize the event, an annual gathering of the queer community at the only site in the country that permits licensed protests and public assembly.

¹ Pink Dot is an annual gathering and rally in Singapore that began in 2009 for the queer community and their allies to gather at a state-sanctioned space for protest, Hong Lim Park. Participants gather, often dressed in pink, to form a “pink dot” in a public space as a visible sign of solidarity. Pink Dot adheres to the rules around public assembly and the Public Order Act. The organization accommodates shifting requests from the State while marketing itself as a celebration of love, family, and community. An example of shifting requests includes the 2017 restriction barring non-citizens and non-permanent residents from participation in the rally and the prohibition of sponsorship from foreign entities.

Since its inception in 2009, the volunteer-run Pink Dot SG has developed increasingly sophisticated and consistent branding and campaign materials.²

On 30 November 2022, a decade after the *Someday* campaign video, one of those imagined “somedays” finally arrived. The national broadsheet carried the headline “Parliament repeals S377A, decriminalising gay sex,” with a subheadline in smaller font: “Laws amended to protect definition of marriage.” (fig. 1.3) Is this the “new chapter” the queer community has dreamed of? When we made that hopeful declaration about writing a “new chapter,” did we consider who would be the author?

This chapter traces the structural limits of recognition-based approaches to queer politics under Singapore’s governance, limits that are clarified by the repeal and the constitutional amendment that accompanied it. Drawing on Pheng Cheah’s critique of how sexuality and gender identity rights function as “violent gifts” that stabilize power while “producing the identities of their claimants” (172), I examine the rhetoric of pragmatism that has shaped both queer advocacy and its instrumentalization by the State, from stakeholder submissions at the UN Universal Periodic Review to the parliamentary debates that staged the repeal. I read the State’s rhetorical maneuvers as performative utterances through which the State’s otherwise opaque governing logics are compelled into public speech-acts. Through Georges Canguilhem’s theorization of life and “error,” I read the government’s shift from moral prohibition to decriminalization as the correction of a normative calculus, one that extends rather than resolves the biopolitical management of queer life. The chapter concludes by proposing etiolated conduct as an alternative register of queer presence, one that refuses the legibility that the State demands.

The Prime Minister announced at the National Day Rally in August 2022 the government’s plan to repeal Section 377A of the Penal Code that criminalized private acts of consensual sex between men. The move took most Singaporeans by surprise. Later that year, after two days of debate on 28 and 29 November, Parliament moved to repeal the law with a caveat, a constitutional amendment to articulate the “definition of marriage as a union between a man and a woman” (Article 156(4), Constitution of Singapore). On 3 January 2023, after certification from the president and with the amendment bill gazetted, Section 377A was officially repealed. On paper, the connection between the imagined headline of 2012 and the reality of 2022 seems to be proof of the cliché that the arc of history bends toward justice. José Esteban Muñoz cautions that a horizon’s arrival is also an inevitable neutering of its potentiality (11). Concrete, educated hope functions as the practice of

² This video was directed by independent filmmaker Boo Junfeng. If the video reads as propaganda in tone and style, it is because Boo, like most Singaporean creatives, performs double duty: he has also worked on government campaign videos and served as video director for the military-organized National Day Parade. His feature films are recognized for their socially conscious representation and methodical, detailed portraits of lives that pack an emotional punch, qualities evident in this campaign video that foreshadows an imagined future.

desiring. With the repeal of Section 377A in Singapore, we witnessed what happens when utopic hope is captured in stark reality. This repeal appeared to affirm years of relentless campaigning by civil society, queer activists, and transnational human rights non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Their advocacy included international platforms like the UN Universal Periodic Review as well as private negotiations with cabinet ministers and politicians. Upon closer scrutiny, the conditions of this “freedom” through decriminalization clarify as one that reinstates a heteronormative order.

In the days leading up to the National Day Rally in August 2022, activist friends were messaging me speculating about the impending announcement. Some were invited to attend the annual address by the Prime Minister in person. I watched the livestream remotely as he proclaimed: “The government will repeal Section 377A and decriminalise sex between men. I believe this is the right thing to do, and something that most Singaporeans will now accept.” (Lee, “National Day Rally 2022”) In that moment, there was a fleeting sensation of relief and tears of joy – a day we did not imagine would happen in our lifetime had arrived, especially after the failed constitutional challenges and petitions that came before. That sensation was quickly followed by hesitation, as the Prime Minister continued in the same speech:

Hence even as we repeal Section 377A, we will uphold and safeguard the institution of marriage. Under the law, only marriages between one man and one woman are recognised in Singapore. Many national policies rely upon this definition of marriage – including public housing, education, adoption rules, advertising standards, film classification. The government has no intention of changing the definition of marriage, nor these policies. (Lee, “National Day Rally 2022”)

The government’s position was clarified through subsequent parliamentary debates, which introduced a constitutional amendment bill reinforcing marriage as a union only available to heterosexual partners. For gay men, the repeal of 377A might have been a weight off our shoulders, but the reification of heterosexual marriage felt like a double betrayal: the government betraying its queer citizens, and gay men, inadvertently betraying the rest of the queer community. Lesbian couples, who had never been criminalized under Section 377A and had thrived within a zone of ambiguity, now found their hopes for “reproductive futures” (Oswin, *Global*) permanently foreclosed by an amendment they did not ask for.

The contradictions increase upon closer scrutiny of how this repeal was orchestrated. For years leading up to the repeal, the government’s position was that the rest of the population was not ready to accept the decriminalization of consensual sex between men, maintaining that 377A would not be enforced. This position was reiterated as recently as 2021 at the third cycle of Singapore’s UN Universal Periodic Review. In response to NGOs

and other nations calling for the recognition of sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) rights,³ delegation leader and Ambassador-at-Large Chan Heng Chee parroted the position first established by the Prime Minister at the close of the previous cycle of repeal efforts in October 2007. She cautioned:

It is better to accept the legal untidiness and ambiguity of leaving 377A as it is [...] it would not be wise to push the issue, to settle the matter one way or the other. Our view is that our society should evolve gradually, our population has to decide collectively, rather than the government [deciding] one way or another.⁴

In hindsight, her words read as a warning we refused to heed. Singapore's Westminster-derived political system distributes power across three distinct branches of government: the Executive (the Cabinet), Legislative (Parliament), and Judiciary (the courts).⁵ Over the two days of parliamentary debate in November 2022, the government's primary justification for repealing 377A was preemptive: the Executive and Legislative branches feared that the Judiciary would strike down the law in response to future constitutional challenges.⁶ In the Parliamentary debates, Minister of Law and Home Affairs K. Shanmugam, speaking under his party's whip, said:

The position with section 377A is like a train approaching. The question is whether we have the courage to act or rather dive for cover to protect yourselves and leave society to face the train wreck.

Voting for the repeal was framed through his rhetoric as an act of duty and responsibility, "courage," and conviction. Opposition party members who voiced hesitation

³ SOGI (Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity) rights, commonly known as LGBT rights, derives from the language of The Yogyakarta Principles (2006). For more on the drafting of this terminology, see David Brown's article. Advocates prefer SOGI over LGBT because it describes a general condition rather than identity categories that are constantly evolving and unevenly adopted across the world. Some Southeast Asian nations use the acronym SOGIE to include "expression," reflecting regional variations in how these frameworks are adapted.

⁴ Chan Heng Chee's statement arrives at the three-hour mark as one of the closing comments of the Singapore UN UPR on 12 May 2021. Refer to Works Cited "Singapore Review - 38th Session of Universal Periodic Review" for a link to the archived video.

⁵ Singapore adopted the Westminster system in the wake of British colonial rule, with three branches of government. The first is the Executive, consisting of the Prime Minister and his cabinet, appointed by the Prime Minister from elected Members of Parliament. The second is the Legislature, consisting of elected Members of Parliament, Non-Constituency and Nominated Members of Parliament led by the President of Singapore. The President, modeled after the British monarch, serves as a ceremonial head of State, though the role has been expanded since 1991 to include custodial powers over national reserves and key public service appointments. The third is the Judiciary, which consists of the Supreme Court and State Courts.

⁶ There were several ongoing constitutional challenges at the time of the repeal of Section 377A. The concern was that a court-led repeal would set a precedent, opening the floodgates for future litigation around civil rights and liberties.

or dissent were cast as abdicating their responsibilities. The repeal was initiated by the Executive branch even though it was the Legislature that formally voted on it. Key Executive branch members shaped the process: Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong announced the government's intention at the National Day Rally, and Minister for Law and Home Affairs K. Shanmugam led the parliamentary debate, setting the terms of engagement with an hour-long speech that provided the historical context and background for Section 377A and the constitutional amendment. The Legislature then voted on both bills. The repeal reinforced the fact that the Executive and Legislative branches of the Singaporean government are structurally porous: Members of Parliament also serve as appointed cabinet ministers, and because the ruling party holds a supermajority, government-initiated bills pass with near certainty – a pattern critics describe as characteristic of Singapore's "illiberal democracy" (Hussin Mutalib). This orchestration directly contradicted Ambassador Chan's 2021 promise that the government would not "[decide] one way or another."

The repeal of Section 377A is an occasion to recall both Muñoz's caution and Lauren Berlant's "cruel optimism": the paradox where "something [we] desire is actually an obstacle to [our] flourishing" (1). We remained attached to the possibility of decriminalization because the legible identity of queerness in Singapore and modes of resistance have been interpellated through Section 377A. From the ruling party's perspective, the repeal and constitutional amendment represented a series of pragmatic wins: eliminating an inherited colonial law that stained Singapore's international record, disarming a galvanizing issue for the queer community, and appeasing conservative constituents by protecting the institution of marriage. The broader implications of this proceduralism are more consequential. By repealing Section 377A through legislative action while simultaneously amending the Constitution to enshrine the definition of marriage, the government has effectively foreclosed the pathway for future constitutional challenges for other constituencies championing human rights-based causes like contesting the death penalty or abolishing the Internal Security Act that allows indefinite detention without trial.⁷

I begin with a review of scholarship on illiberal pragmatism (Audrey Yue) and pragmatic resistance (Lynette Chua), proposing a diagram that maps forms of resistance along two axes in order to locate the undertheorized domain of etiolated conduct.

1.2 Illiberal Pragmatism and Pragmatic Resistance

In the early 2010s, two books emerged detailing strategies of survival and resistance practiced by the queer community in Singapore. In her introduction to *Queer Singapore*:

⁷ Opposition MP Sylvia Lim hints at this obliquely in her contribution to the Parliamentary debates in 2022, dedicating her entire speech to critiquing the constitutional amendment for its redundancy and the precedent it sets for the future. She and fellow opposition MP He Ting Ru were the only two MPs who voted in abstention on the constitutional amendment.

Illiberal Citizenship and Mediated Cultures (2012), Audrey Yue introduces the notion of illiberal pragmatism, “characterised by the ambivalence between non-liberalism and neoliberalism, rationalism and irrationalism that governs the illegality of homosexuality in Singapore” (2). Yue develops this concept from sociologist Chua Beng Huat’s framing of pragmatism in Singapore governance, a centralized rational public administration acquiescing to global capitalism, to track how queer subjectivities are shaped toward a “neoliberal push towards entrepreneurship and digital literacy on the one hand, and non-liberal media surveillance and social control on the other” (8), producing a queer subject that is pragmatically complicit while performing conformity. This results in “a logic of queer complicity that complicates the flow of oppositional resistance and grassroots appropriation” (2), a position of deliberate precarity and ambivalence.

The second book, Lynette Chua’s monograph *Mobilizing Gay Singapore: Rights and Resistance in an Authoritarian State* (2014) focuses on resistance under differently liberal pragmatic conditions through her formulation of “pragmatic resistance,” which she describes as “[shifting] along a spectrum of covert-overt forms of action” and “shows how activists innovate strategy and tactics to achieve social change under authoritarian conditions” (5). Where Yue adopts a media and cultural studies approach, Chua’s social scientific methodology, derived from fieldwork with queer activists in Singapore, maps out tactical moves and works with a legal framework of rights-based recognition. Her scholarship operates squarely within this framework, focusing on what Foucault refers to as the “revolutionary approach” (“structured around traditional positions of public law”) over the “radical approach” (“independence of the governed with regard to government”) in the conception of freedom (*Birth of Biopolitics* 41–42). Unlike Yue, Chua does not contend with the more philosophical decolonial critiques of SOGI rights. She acknowledges that “rights alone may not be able to achieve social change” (13; emphasis in original) but claims that they are “the first step toward the fight for social change” (14). Following James C. Scott’s formulation of resistance from below, she claims that “hidden transcripts of pragmatic resistance, manifest in pushing boundaries and toeing lines to exercise rights and achieve recognition without getting into trouble with the state” (158), achieve a cumulative effect over time.

The scope of Chua’s fieldwork was restricted to a hundred interviewees comfortable with being identified as queer activists,⁸ shifting the dataset to a certain social class (ninety-three had received university-level education). The sample was further bracketed within a two-decade span from the 1990s to the late 2000s. Critically, the social scientific method of data collection leaves little room for alternative approaches or contrarian voices to

⁸ Chua offered anonymization and pseudonyms to interviewees and organizations. In a country as small as Singapore, these protections are limited. Willingness to participate, even anonymously, already self-selects subjects with a particular relationship to visibility and risk.

emerge. The queer resistance she maps remains the most visible and dominant strand, foreclosing possibilities that might adopt a Foucauldian “radical approach,” an approach that resists being identified as queer mobilization. This includes performance art, aesthetics, or quieter modes of presence that might not be immediately legible as resistance, that refuse to be defined by these terms.

This chapter attends to what Foucault names as “connections between the heterogeneous” (*Birth of Biopolitics* 42), practices that operate outside the shared field of recognition where queer activism and State power remain dialectically bound, connecting otherwise disparate tactics, temporalities, and modes of opacity. Recent queer scholarship about Singapore has begun to identify the forces that produce this field. Natalie Oswin’s genealogical account of “straight space” traced how colonial legacies and reproductive futurism structured desire and sexuality within Singapore’s developmental trajectory. Pavan Mano’s critique of “straight time” identified pragmatic resistance within queer scholarship about Singapore as a “theoretical *deus ex machina*” that resolves “contradictions, ambivalence and untidiness” rather than “compelling us to grapple with their complexities” (15; emphasis in original). Pragmatism, in Mano’s account, absorbs the tensions of Singapore’s governance into a narrative of rational administration rather than interrogating the structural forces that produce those tensions. Both scholars direct us toward the biopolitical forces, which include the colonial, reproductive, and economic, that produce what we understand as pragmatism.

A counter to this critical pragmatism may be immanent within existing scholarship. Yue makes a brief reference to the philosophical tradition of American pragmatism, highlighting Cornel West’s “prophetic” pragmatism as a form of “democratic faith that is action oriented, concerned with consequences and possessing a dynamic position of social and cultural critique” (15).⁹ West’s “future-oriented instrumentalism” (14) resonates with the Blochian educated hope that José Esteban Muñoz takes up in his insistence on queerness as horizon, a potentiality that is not yet here but whose critical gaps orient political desire beyond the present. My project shares Muñoz’s frustration with the anti-relational turn in queer studies, while maintaining a critical wariness of homonationalism in the approach toward that horizon. Yet a temporal reorientation toward futurity is insufficient on its own without a structural account of what forecloses it. Petrus Liu provides this structural account by calling out queer theory’s formation as a “U.S. area studies” (58) and demonstrating how “the perceived impasse between queer theory and Marxism is actually a consequence of a particular logic of American liberal pluralism, which has limited their dialogue to an identity-based mode of analysis” (27). Reconceived as a “subjectless critique grounded in the

⁹ Yue cites Cornelis De Waal’s *On Pragmatism* which provides a brief precis of the pragmatist movement in American philosophy. My takeaway from Yue’s reading of the tradition of American pragmatism (Emerson, Peirce, James, Dewey, etc.) is a desire to reground philosophy in everyday life and social action, and to produce knowledge in response to creative action (experimentalism and experience).

problem of social structuration” (28), queerness becomes an analytical orientation attuned to the material conditions that recognition-based frameworks structurally cannot account for. Etiolated conduct takes up this reorientation under Singapore’s benevolent authoritarian governance, approaching queerness as an analytical method rather than a category of objects.

1.3 The Field of Resistance: Between Pragmatism and Transparency

I approach the expansion of pragmatic resistance along two vectors. First, I recalibrate this formulation beyond queer subjectivities in Singapore to encompass other rights-based forms of recognition contaminated by power dynamics between NGOs and the postcolonial nation-State. Second, I ask what possibilities emerge from resisting commonplace pragmatism in our gestures of resistance, speculating on unpragmatic forms that focus on what Foucault terms “practices of freedom” rather than “processes of liberation” (*The Ethics* 283). This distinction is consequential. Foucault voices his suspicion toward the notion of liberation, cautioning that liberation “runs the risk of falling back on the idea that there exists a human nature or base that, as consequence of certain historical, economic and social processes, has been concealed, alienated, or imprisoned in and by mechanisms of repression” (*The Ethics* 282). With attention trained on removing the obstacle that enforces repression, one often neglects the less spectacular “practices of freedom” through which subjects recalibrate their relationship to themselves and others. Jasbir Puar expands on this by situating biopolitics along the “metrics of debility and capacity” (xviii), where processes of liberation – liberal rights granted or progressive regressions – ultimately suspend sections of the population within states of debilitating livability. I am interested in the “practices of freedom” as counter-conduct against the deployment of sexuality, inhabiting the “bodies and their materiality, their forces, energies, sensations, [and] pleasures” (*History of Sexuality* 155).¹⁰

To map the field of resistance in Singapore, I propose a diagram ([fig. 1.1](#)) organized along two axes, and a corresponding table ([Table 1.1](#)). The horizontal axis distinguishes pragmatic from unpragmatic tactics, drawing on J.L. Austin’s felicitous conditions for performative utterances. Pragmatic (felicitous) resistance achieves effects within State-recognized procedures. Unpragmatic (infelicitous) resistance misfires, refuses, or operates outside such recognition. The vertical axis differentiates transparent (spectacular, visible) from opaque (unspectacular, illegible) modes. My use of “transparent” indexes more than mere visibility. Transparency can paradoxically produce invisibility through clarity and overexposure, where pragmatic gestures of resistance repeated over time generate a certain

¹⁰ I cite Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*, vol. 1 cautiously, aware of its overuse in queer theory and of criticisms levelled against it by theorists such as Petrus Liu, who refers to it as “allochronic queer criticism” (25) that sets up the binary between *ars erotica* and *scientia sexualis*. More on page 53.

banality that renders them imperceptible. This sensitivity to legibility and opacity draws from Édouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relation*, where he theorizes opacity as resistance to demands for transparency – demands to possess, objectify, and therefore control. These vertical and horizontal axes produce four interconnected quadrants, each representing tactical orientations with particular relationships to documentation, archival strategies, and scholarly attention. Within this diagram, existing scholarship around queer resistance has leaned toward the pragmatic.

The pragmatic-transparent quadrant, dominated by Pink Dot, has received extensive scholarly and media attention because it operates through visibility. These are recognition-seeking, rights-based practices that adhere to the restrictions of the State, often co-opted and instrumentalized in the process. This quadrant also includes parliamentary speeches as sanctioned dissent, and the constitutional challenges filed against Section 377A – pragmatic in method even as they edge toward confrontation.

The unpragmatic-transparent quadrant emerges fleetingly as cautionary tales. These are protests in public spaces that face swift reprisals under the strict restrictions around public assembly and protest outlined in the Public Order Act. This includes performance art protests like Josef Ng's *Brother Cane*, which led to a ten-year restriction on the licensing and funding of performance art from 1994 to 2003. This also includes the 2021 #FixSchoolsNotStudents protest outside the Ministry of Education (Choo), where activists were arrested for assembling without a permit. These event-based moments flare and recede, preemptively neutered before they can develop into sustained movements.

Part of the second half of this chapter examines pragmatic-opaque resistance. This quadrant includes the sustaining of infrastructure: bars, saunas, gathering spaces, and queer-affirming religious institutions. It also includes service and care provided by queer counseling organizations and HIV/AIDS advocacy and testing centers like Action for AIDS, as well as civil society groups serving specific constituencies.¹¹ Pink Dot SG's participation in the UN Universal Periodic Review stakeholder submissions also falls in this quadrant: as a disciplined durational practice that exceeds any single spectacular event, leaving archival traces in stakeholder submissions, court filings, and policy negotiations.

Finally, the unpragmatic-opaque quadrant is the focus of this dissertation, an area that remains theoretically and empirically underexplored. The reasons are practical: how does one theorize something that resists visibility, that survives because of its opacity? How do we assess the efficacy of resistance that refuses pragmatism? This is the domain of etiolated conduct – practices that operate through strategic illegibility, refusing both State recognition and the spectacular visibility that would render them vulnerable to capture.

¹¹ Some of these groups include Sayoni (lesbian and queer women), Young Out Here (queer youth), Project X (people in the sex industry), and the T Project (transgender community).

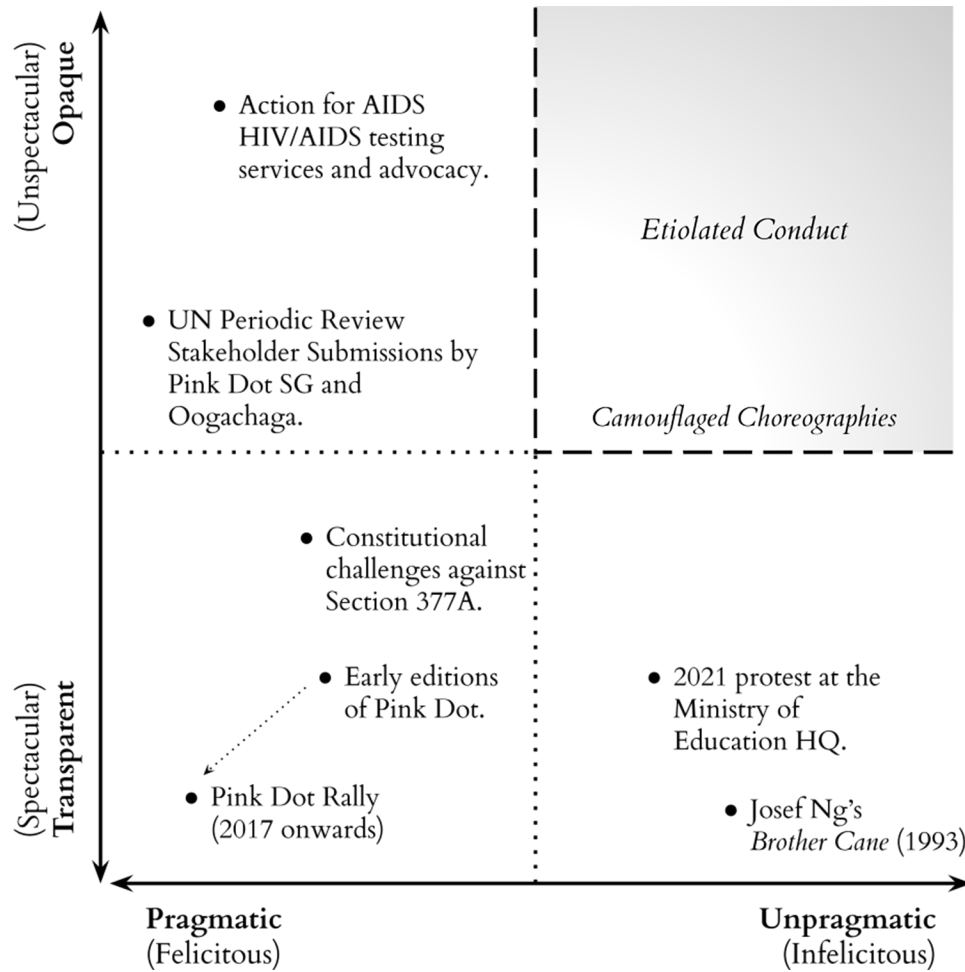


Figure 1.1 The field of resistance in Singapore (1990s–present).¹²

	Pragmatic (Felicitous)	Unpragmatic (Infelicitous)
Transparent (Spectacular)	Recognition-seeking visibility that adheres to restrictions of the State.	Confrontational visibility that refuses restrictions of the State.
Opaque (Unspectacular)	Less visible institutional negotiation and compromise, disciplined and sustained over time.	Etiolated conduct that emerges as camouflaged choreographies. Practices that might not be immediately legible as resistance.

Table 1.1 Typology of resistance in Singapore.

¹² This Punnett square schematic draws on a tradition of two-axis mapping, most notably Richard Schechner's "Restoration of Behavior" essay, which maps relationships between subjunctive, indicative, past, and future, and the Greimas's semiotic square as adapted by Fredric Jameson in *The Political Unconscious* for ideological analysis. Like Jameson, I acknowledge the square's static limitations but appreciate its pedagogical utility. For Jameson, the square's closure allows it to gesture toward empty or unthinkable ideological positions. I draw on this insight in noting that the unpragmatic-opaque quadrant remains underexplored because conditions of scholarly visibility structurally exclude it.

Drawing on Georges Canguilhem's vitalist understanding of life as a norm-generating activity, where "error" is not failure but an inherent and productive discontinuity, etiolated conduct inhabits the position of "error" within the State's normative calculus. Life, for Canguilhem, "resists solely by deforming itself so as to outlive itself" (103), and the milieu in which it operates is a thick atmospheric substance that proposes, without ever imposing, its solutions. Etiolated conduct moves beyond pragmatic resistance, resisting easy affiliation with distinct identity markers of sexuality, class, or race. In the diagram, camouflaged choreographies occupy the threshold between the transparent and the opaque, where aesthetic representations function as abstracted surrogates for etiolated conduct – hinting at presence while preserving opacity.

Three caveats are necessary in reading this diagram. First, the diagram does not imply a hierarchy of value: there is a role and a place for pragmatic and transparent forms of resistance, even as this dissertation focuses on the unpragmatic and opaque. Second, acts migrate between quadrants – Pink Dot began in 2009 as less visible and less pragmatic, shifting over the years toward pragmatism and transparency through compliance with restrictions on foreign participation, dramatic light-ups, and increased media attention. Third, the diagram is reflexive: research designs that foreground the visible, archival practices that preserve the legible, ethics review protocols that require identifiable subjects – these conventions shape what can be known as resistance, reinforcing an epistemological bias toward legibility. The challenge this dissertation takes up is how to sense etiolated conduct without making it transparent and vulnerable to the capture that recognition brings.

1.4 The UN Universal Periodic Review

1.4.1 Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Rights as "Violent Gifts"

The UN Universal Periodic Review (UPR) is a peer review mechanism established by the United Nations Human Rights Council in 2006, through which every UN member State's human rights record undergoes systematic examination every four to five years. States submit national reports; UN agencies, transnational institutions, and civil society organizations submit stakeholder reports highlighting gaps in the official narrative. The review unfolds through a procedural dialogue in Geneva, where member States pose questions and make recommendations, and the State under review responds by accepting, noting, or rejecting them, creating a public, archived record. While the UPR creates opportunities for civil society to leverage international scrutiny, significant limitations constrain its efficacy. The lack of enforcement mechanisms means it often functions symbolically, and the restriction of speaking rights to member States creates conditions for

strategic reciprocity – States with poor records ask softball questions to avoid inviting scrutiny of their own practices.¹³

To understand how SOGI rights operate as “violent gifts” within this mechanism, we must trace their consolidation within UN human rights discourse. SOGI rights were first codified through the 2007 Yogyakarta Principles, gaining institutional prominence with the Human Rights Council’s 2011 report on discriminatory practices based on SOGI. That December, Hillary Clinton proclaimed “gay rights are human rights” at the UN in Geneva, echoing her 1995 declaration that “women’s rights are human rights.” Both speeches operated as strategic realpolitik, imposing what Momin Rahman terms a “homocolonialist” rubric that “invokes a sense of Western exceptionalism” (274). Clinton’s declaration worked to fix SOGI rights within parameters legible to liberal governance, fossilizing their understanding into what Anthony Langlois describes as a “relatively essentialist and restrictive matrix of possibilities” (80) determined by the Global North.¹⁴

The scholarship around the critique of rights-based mechanisms of recognition in this chapter is indebted to Pheng Cheah’s study of cosmopolitanism and human rights discourse in *Inhuman Conditions*. Cheah critiques how the discourse fails to address the uneven structural inequalities of capitalist globalization, arguing that capitalism is contingent on the division of the “human” from the “inhuman” to distribute harms from Global North onto the global majority. A central paradox he engages with is how this dream of a human rights framework to “unify us into a common humanity” can also be “used to justify economic globalization as a form of postcolonial civilizing mission” (145). Cheah also highlights that human rights is not a “monolithic” concept, differentiating between first generation rights (negative freedom), second generation rights (positive freedom), and also third generation rights (collective rights like the right to self-determination, or the right to determine what can be considered as rights). He uses the case study of foreign domestic workers in Singapore as an example of how such rights-based recognition under inhuman global capitalism implicates NGOs, governments, and what he names as a “contaminated normativity” (266). Cheah writes:

Rights are not, in the original instance, entitlements of intersubjectively constituted rational social agents, but violent gifts, the necessary nexuses within immanent global

¹³ Human rights and international relations scholars have engaged with how the UN UPR can be wielded as a vehicle for advancing geopolitical interests. Gareth Sweeney and Yuri Saito, Rochelle Terman and Erik Voeten write about “the relational politics of shame” in the review process, and Haeun Jang and Byungwon Woo engage with the politics of North Korea’s review.

¹⁴ For further analysis of Hillary Clinton’s speech and situating it within existing literature on SOGI Rights critique, refer to Cynthia Weber’s *Queer International Relations: Sovereignty, Sexuality and the Will to Knowledge*, pp. 104–142.

force relations that produce the identities of their claimants. Yet they are the only way for the disenfranchised to mobilize. (172)

Cheah's formulation captures the paradox that structures the remainder of this chapter: rights as simultaneously indispensable and violent, enabling mobilization while fixing identities within matrices of power. Building on Cheah, I draw on critiques (Bosia, Rahman) that frame universal rights-based approaches to queer recognition in postcolonial Southeast Asian countries as biopolitical technologies of power that function as normalizing instruments. Langlois cautions that such mechanisms, beyond "effect[ing] change," possess the capacity to be deployed "for other ends" (83). He elaborates how sexuality and gender may be politicized in culture wars, obscuring other more pressing or egregious human rights violations. His critique echoes critical legal studies scholarship by Wendy Brown and Duncan Kennedy. Kennedy identifies the tendency for rights to function as a "universalization project" of "ideological intelligentsia" (188), while Brown describes a paradox whereby rights "differentially empower different social groups, depending on their ability to enact the power that a right potentially entails" (423). Jena McGill raises the concern that a "discourse based on SOGI may force people to assume or declare identities that do not naturally apply or exist within their contexts just so they can access human rights" (30).¹⁵ This resonates with Petrus Liu's observation that liberal pluralism has "limited [queer theory's] dialogue to an identity-based mode of analysis" (27), while the material conditions of subjection remain unexamined.

At the time of writing, Singapore is scheduled for its fourth UPR on 12 May 2026, having participated in three prior cycles (2011, 2016, 2021). Given the scarcity of platforms where SOGI rights can be publicly debated, NGOs have strategically tapped into the UPR to challenge the government on a supranational world stage. The contaminated normativity that Cheah and Langlois critique is undeniable, yet dismissing participation overlooks the severe constraints of Singapore's differently liberal context, where domestic dissent is restricted under the Public Order Act and the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act. The question shifts from whether to participate in contaminated systems to how participation functions strategically when alternatives have been systematically foreclosed.

Pheng Cheah identifies three voices in human rights practical discourse, registers clearly articulated in the UPR process. The first is "the position of governments in constitutional democracies in the economically hegemonic North" (152). In the UPR, this takes the form of recommendations posed by member States. In Singapore's third UPR in

¹⁵ Other scholars like Joseph Massad, Rajesh Dhir, Peter Drucker, and Rosalind Morris have also argued similar positions around SOGI rights.

2021, sixteen¹⁶ countries recommended repealing laws criminalizing same-sex relations, an increase from eleven in 2016.¹⁷

The second voice, which includes Singapore's, represents the "community of nations that respects cultural differences and the right to development" (159). Singapore's voice is heard via representatives from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, led by Ambassador Chan Heng Chee, whose remarks were cited earlier. As Cheah points out, this voice is linked to "the need to subordinate political and civil rights to the right to development" (147). Singapore's approach has remained remarkably consistent across decades. In *Inhuman Conditions*, Cheah refers to a 1993 speech by Minister of Foreign Affairs Wong Kan Seng at the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna, where Wong stated that "moralizing in the abstract is seldom productive" and "a more pragmatic approach is in order, if we want to be effective rather than just feel virtuous" (3). In Wong's speech, he emphasized the need to "strike a realistic balance between the ideal of universality and the reality of diversity" (4). Significantly, Wong mentioned sexuality:

Singaporeans, and people in many other parts of the world do not agree, for instance, that pornography is an acceptable manifestation of free expression or that homosexual relationships [are] just a matter of lifestyle choice. Most of us will also maintain that the right to marry is confined to those of the opposite gender. (4)

Wong's turn to sexuality when articulating cultural differences demonstrated how sexuality functioned as a tool to incite moral panic. His rhetoric revealed a convenient slippage conflating sexual identity with pornography and marriage equality, one that eerily preempted the compounding of the constitutional amendment to the repeal of Section 377A, invoking the slippery slope logic that Gayle Rubin identifies in *Thinking Sex*. Ambassador Chan's remarks at the 2016 and 2021 UPRs echoed Wong's appeals to pragmatism. She stated in 2016:

I hope we will be able to provide a better appreciation of the circumstances and factors that shape Singapore's pragmatic and outcomes-based approach towards the promoting and protecting of [the] human rights of our citizens.¹⁸

Crucially, Cheah shows how this voice becomes contaminated by the State's economic interests, observing that "it is the disenfranchised who are caught in the aporetic embrace between a predatory international capitalism and an indigenous capitalism seeking

¹⁶ The countries in 2021 are Canada, France, Israel, Luxembourg, Australia, Austria, Spain, Sweden, United States, Uruguay, Chile, Czechia, Iceland, Italy, Netherlands, and New Zealand.

¹⁷ The countries in 2016 are Norway, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom, United States, Austria, Brazil, Czechia, France, and Greece.

¹⁸ Chan Heng Chee's statement at Singapore UN UPR on 27 Jan. 2016. Refer to Works Cited "Singapore Review – 24th Session of Universal Periodic Review" for a link to the archived video.

to internationalize” (164). His analysis suggests that the 2023 repeal may stem from opaque calculations motivated by transnational capitalism, despite the government’s insistence that sexuality should remain a domestic affair.¹⁹

The third voice is that of human rights NGOs in the South, “a polymorphous global community within an equitable international economic order that is genuinely sensitive to sexual difference and cultural diversity” (159). For Singapore’s UPR, this subdivides into transnational civil society groups²⁰ and Singaporean queer NGOs that submitted stakeholder submissions.²¹ These submissions have been refined over successive cycles to document SOGI-rights-related issues and educate both international and Singaporean publics.

1.4.2 Stakeholder Submissions from Pink Dot SG and Oogachaga from 2011 to 2026

Between 2011 and 2021, the number of SOGI-specific submissions grew from two to four coordinated joint submissions, while the coalitions behind them expanded from a single Singaporean queer NGO (People Like Us) to ten different groups in different combinations. To track these shifts closely, it helps to compare the three joint submission reports by Pink Dot SG and Oogachaga, a non-profit counseling and support group for queer individuals. The most significant shift between the three reports is that the repeal of Section 377A in 2023 paradoxically restructured the landscape of SOGI rights advocacy. Where the 2016 and 2021 submissions centered on repealing Section 377A, the 2026 submission immediately pivoted to the constitutional amendment and its “chilling effect [that] lingers on in policies around education, healthcare, social services, marriage and family formation” (14), affecting essential rights of social provision and family recognition.

This constitutional amendment prompted increased sophistication in advocacy strategy. Where the 2016 submission relied on anecdotal evidence, the 2026 report cited

¹⁹ This was part of the rationale behind the banning of foreign sponsorship for Pink Dot, or Ministry for Home Affairs’s admonition of the U.S. Embassy and Senator Nancy Pelosi for campaigning for American businesses to support the local queer community when they visited Singapore in August 2022. (Goh, “MHA Reminds”)

²⁰ These transnational civil society groups include International Lesbian and Gay Association and ARC International. Notably, over successive UPR cycles, the championing of SOGI rights has shifted from these transnational organizations to local Singaporean NGOs.

²¹ These submissions were summarized and grouped under various headings corresponding to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948. The contributions from these three joint submissions fall under the “Right to privacy, marriage and family life” (The repeal of Section 377A), “Freedom of religion or belief, expression, association and peaceful assembly, and the right to participate in public and political life” (Censorship of queer representation in the media, and ability for queer groups to register as a society), “Right to work” (Workplace discrimination, bullying, harassment, blackmail and intimidation because of SOGI), “Right to health” (sexuality conversion therapy, ability to get government subsidy for sexual reassignment surgery) and the “Right to education” (sexuality and sexual health programmes that are inclusive of queer issues).

community-generated quantitative data – the “2024 Pink Dot SG community survey,” “2025 transgender community survey,” and statistics such as “47% of LGBTQ+ students have experienced some form of discrimination in Singapore schools” (2). The recommendations evolved from broad principles to granular legislative demands: the 2016 call to “remove all discriminatory guidelines” (16) became, by 2026, “deleting references to ‘homosexuality, lesbianism, bisexuality, transsexualism, transvestism’ where it appeared alongside criminal behaviours like ‘incest, paedophilia, bestiality or necrophilia’” (14). This calibration reflects advocacy that is adapted to Singapore’s mode of governance, one that Pheng Cheah critiques as “contaminated” by the “performative positing of a subject of rights within and by a given conjuncture although this performative is then necessarily taken to be a constative declaration about and by a preexisting subject” (168). Cheah’s use of the performative/constative distinction reminds us that the stakeholder submissions enact a specific contradiction: the act of claiming SOGI rights conjures a collective queer subject into bureaucratic existence, a subjectivity then presented as if it were a pre-existing constituency seeking recognition.

Perhaps most striking is how the submissions collectively mapped a progressive regression, where apparent legal advances generated new forms of codified exclusion. The 2025 Workplace Fairness Act explicitly excluded SOGI from protected “sex” characteristics, even as it enumerated protections based on age, race, religion, and disability, with the government stating protections should only cover “the more common and familiar forms of discrimination” (Pink Dot SG, Oogachaga, and Project X 4). The 2022 Adoption of Children Act amendments closed a legal opening that a gay man had successfully used in the 2018 *UKM v. Attorney General* case to adopt his son conceived through overseas surrogacy, restricting joint adoption to couples “whose marriages are recognised” (8) under Singapore law. In both cases, the State absorbed pressure for formal equality while legislating new exclusions through specification.²²

The submissions also demonstrate an evolving archival sensibility, chronologically cataloging specific incidents of censorship between UPR cycles, compiling a shadow archive that builds evidentiary infrastructure for future struggles.²³ The submissions function not just

²² The reports also document shifts in coalition structure that respond to this changing landscape. Project X, a non-profit organization which advocates for people in the sex industry, joined Pink Dot SG and Oogachaga as a first-time stakeholder organization in the 2026 submission, expanding the coalition from two to three named groups. This addition brought into view the compounded vulnerabilities facing transgender sex workers, who experience intersecting marginalization through criminalization of sex work, social stigma, and lack of formal employment documentation that would enable access to labor protections. Transgender rights shifted from a subsection embedded within healthcare concerns in 2016 to a dedicated section in 2026, supported by survey data with the community (9).

²³ Pink Dot SG and Oogachaga have also made concerted effort to translate the bureaucratic documents into accessible language and visuals for public access. They include a UPR explainer on their site to

in service of the UPR mechanism, but as cumulative documentation of the evolving field of contestation – demonstrating how pragmatic resistance adapts to differently liberal governance by becoming more legible to it.

1.4.3 The Government Responds – Pragmatic Rhetoric from 2011 to 2021

The government's response across the three UPR cycles revealed a supranational consolidation and clarification of its position toward SOGI rights, one that does not commonly emerge in parliamentary debates or statements. By tracking the shifts in the concluding statements delivered by representatives, we can map the rhetorical strategy adopted through a “pragmatic approach” that negotiated with the “reality of diversity” (4) seeded in 1993 by Wong Kan Seng. As the stakeholder submissions evolved to become more sophisticated, so did the government's response. It crystallized between the first and second cycles of the UPR, then calcified for the second and third cycles – demonstrating how the language of pragmatism functioned as diplomatic positioning but also as a technology of governance that absorbed and neutralized the very resistance it acknowledges. The three statements that engage explicitly with member states' recommendations around SOGI rights delivered by delegate representatives Sng Siew Ping (2011) and Chan Heng Chee (2016 and 2021)²⁴ traced an arc from defensive deflection to a confident instrumentalization of pragmatic resistance.

In the first cycle, Sng's response was notable for what it performed as a compelled utterance: a parsing of criminalization that separated identity from act. She stated: “Let me assure the U.K. and clarify in particular that what is being criminalized is not gay Singaporeans but homosexual acts between men.” This distinction – between being and doing, public identity and conduct that must remain etiolated – anticipated the biopolitical logic of the eventual repeal. Sng established the foundational grammar that subsequent responses elaborated: Singapore was framed as a society where queer people “do not have to hide their sexual orientation for fear of losing their jobs or for fear of prosecution by the State.”²⁵ The phrase “do not have to hide” positioned non-enforcement as equivalent to freedom, a negative liberty that demands no affirmative recognition – tolerance presented as the State's restraint from exercising the violence it retained the authority to enact.

break down how the UPR process works, and why it is important to engage in the review process. They commissioned local comic artists to draft short cartoon artworks to highlight recommendations from the stakeholder reports.

²⁴ These statements were delivered during the livestreams of Singapore's UPR in 2011, 2016 and 2021 that are archived on UN Web TV. See Works Cited “Singapore Review” 11th, 24th, and 38th session.

²⁵ This position was mentioned by the second Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong in a 2003 interview with *Time* magazine. Goh stated: “So let it evolve, and in time the population will understand that some people are born that way.” (Elegant 36)

By the second cycle in 2016, Chan's remarks marked a significant rhetorical escalation, likely prompted by the first joint stakeholder submission from Pink Dot SG, and the increase in the SOGI rights recommendations from member states. Where Sng responded defensively to a handful of nations in 2011, Chan addressed a larger coalition with a pre-calibrated confidence. Two shifts were apparent. First, the framing moved from negative liberty to a positive assertion that "the LGBT community are valuable members of our society." This language of value, not rights, was consistent with what Cheah identifies as the contamination of rights discourse by capitalist logic: queer citizens recognized insofar as they are productive. Second, Chan introduced Pink Dot into the diplomatic record: "An annual Pink Dot event in Singapore has been organized by the LGBT community for the past twelve years."

The citation of Pink Dot at the UPR was a remarkable instance of what I have been describing as the tension and irony of pragmatic-transparent resistance. Pink Dot, which exists as a protest against discrimination, was cited by the government – which maintained the very law being protested – as evidence that queer life is not constrained. The transparency cultivated through years of pragmatic compliance – adhering to Hong Lim Park's boundaries, accepting restrictions on foreign participation, operating within the licensing framework – became the material through which the State projected tolerance internationally. Pink Dot's willingness to work within the architecture of State power is what renders it available for this instrumentalization. The event's spectacular transparency – with its tens of thousands of attendees, its media coverage, its branding – provided the State with a visible, quantifiable metric of tolerance that required no legislative change to claim.

Chan's 2021 statement at the third cycle doubled down on this instrumentalization with striking specificity. The 2021 review was conducted virtually due to the global pandemic. Chan delivered her statement from Singapore, framed in the intimate visual grammar of a televised State address, speaking directly into the camera as her colleague nodded beside her. She not only mentioned Pink Dot again, but provided attendance figures: "They hold an annual LGBTI rights rally called Pink Dot which was attended by more than 28,000 people last year as reported by our national media."²⁶ The attendance figure transformed Pink Dot into a statistic legible to the UPR's bureaucratic logic – the same logic the stakeholder submissions have adopted. The reference to the national media coverage refuted claims that the queer community was not represented in media, domesticating the event as a permitted spectacle that the State monitors, reports on, and now cites as evidence of its own benevolence.

The third cycle response also expanded the catalogue of permitted and visible queer life: "They are free to write and stage plays about LGBTI issues, and there are bars that are

²⁶ Pavan Mano similarly engages with this moment at the UPR as an example of how the State "[co-opts] resistance to fortify itself" (24). See the epilogue of *Straight Nation* for his extended analysis.

frequented by LGBTI persons.” This enumeration of conditional freedoms – to gather (under permission), to stage plays (only if they are vetted by the Infocomm Media Development Authority), to patronize bars (that are only accessible to a certain class) – constituted a mode of tolerance through inventory of what was transparent. The “freedoms” catalogued were notably freedoms of consumption and expression within carefully demarcated spaces, rather than freedoms of kinship, family formation, or equal citizenship. Chan’s rhetoric reflected what Natalie Oswin identified as the State’s capacity to incorporate queer life at the level of livability – permitting mere existence while foreclosing futurity. It also revealed that livability is mitigated through conspicuous consumption and participation, differentiating those who can afford to be queer from those who cannot. Chan’s reiteration that “our society should evolve gradually, our population has to decide collectively, rather than the government [deciding] one way or another” was a strategic misdirection in light of the repeal initiated a year later. This illuminated how the UPR mechanism functions for the Singaporean State as a stage for the performance of diplomatic and deliberative governance rather than as a site of accountability, where the same script was recycled until the State unilaterally decided to change it. I write in anticipation of the fourth UPR in May 2026, where the repeal of Section 377A will undoubtedly feature as added ammunition to the State’s insistence that queer lives are valued – the violent gift of recognition deployed as diplomatic currency, where the complicated cost of such “freedoms” is conveniently obscured.

In response to Chan’s instrumentalization of the rally in the 2021 UPR, Pink Dot SG shared a post on 17 May 2021 with the aerial photograph of the 2019 event with lights spelling out “REPEAL 377A.” ([fig. 1.4](#)) The text superimposed on the image reads:

Pink Dot exists as a protest AGAINST discrimination towards the LGBTQ Community. We are not a convenient excuse for the government to claim that discrimination does not exist. The government should also not be taking credit for Pink Dot’s existence. Especially when our events are organized in spite of the obstacles placed in our way.

This strident response is significant for the mode through which it intervenes in the conversation. Shared on social media, it operates in the register of pragmatic-transparent resistance, visible, public, and beyond the procedural architecture of the UPR mechanism. This incident highlights how Pink Dot’s hypervisibility may obscure the structural discrimination that occasioned and continues to restrict its existence. This dynamic illustrates the chapter’s broader argument: advocacy that operates within the State’s procedures is vulnerable to capture by the governmentality it contests, even as it remains one of the few ways the queer community can be heard.

1.5 Parliamentary Debates over Section 377A

1.5.1 Return to Repeal – Correcting the “Error”

The UPR analysis revealed how pragmatic resistance was captured at the level of discourse. But the repeal of Section 377A and the constitutional amendment operate at a different register. To understand what transpired, we shift from how the State talks about queer life to how it acts upon it – from the rhetoric of pragmatism to the biopolitical management of life and livability.

My orientation to Foucault moves past the *History of Sexuality*’s identity-based framework that Petrus Liu critiques, toward the late Foucault who turns to the ethical formation of the self in relation to power. The Foucault I cite operates at the level of the milieu – the atmospheric conditions through which subjects form themselves. I trace this dimension through his mentor Georges Canguilhem, for whom norms emerge from living systems rather than arriving as external impositions, and “error” is an inherent, productive aspect of life rather than a mere deviation (115). The milieu is where technologies of governance operate, adjusting the conditions through which subjects form themselves, coercing the population toward certain tendencies while discouraging others. Within such a regime, sexuality functions as a lever of power through which to manage populations.

Under the reproductive futurist logic that Natalie Oswin identifies as the main drive of Singapore’s technocratic administration of life or “straight space,” and what Pavan Mano names as “straight time,” queer presence registers as an “error”²⁷ within the State’s demographic calculus – it is managed as a deviation from the normative trajectory of heterosexual reproduction that the State’s mechanism is designed to produce and sustain. This drive is the inhuman logic that undergirds the governmentality of the Singaporean State, with its persistent insecurities about scale and population viability. We see this form of management emerge in the often-cited coercive eugenics policies to encourage or discourage certain types of reproduction: the Graduate Mothers’ Scheme of 1983 granting tax breaks to educated women, the Stop-At-Two campaign incentivizing sterilization among the less educated. This is what Chua Beng Huat describes as a coerced communitarianism driven by “a generalized anxiety about the long-term viability of the social, economic, and political foundation of the island-nation” (2). Within a milieu of administrative pragmatism, sexuality is almost always tied to social reproduction and placed in service of economic growth. As a result, the default response to queer presence – even amid supranational coercion toward tolerance or domestic moral and liberal arguments – is to treat it as an “error” that must be managed.

²⁷ On the productive dimension of error in Canguilhem, see Samuel Talcott: “the possibility of error reveals that knowledge is an operation engaged in becoming,” (92) Foucault, reading Canguilhem, refers to this as a “permanent contingency” (*Life: Experience and Science*, 477).

The steps taken to contain this “error” within the milieu, along with the possibilities it produces, function as a method of guarding against its potential recurrence and reproduction. For decades, the State adjusted the milieu without resolving the discontinuity. The “legal untidiness and ambiguity” that Chan faithfully reiterated at the 2016 UPR was a strategy of containment – permitting queer life to circulate at the level of livability without futurity. But as the UPR analysis demonstrated, the cost of the error was becoming clear – diplomatically through mounting international pressure across UPR cycles, juridically through constitutional challenges that threatened to shift power to the courts, economically through the need to project tolerance consistent with Singapore’s positioning within global capitalism and its recruitment of talent from multinational corporations. The preemptive and sudden repeal of Section 377A was the State’s attempt to correct the error before the error corrected the system. *Someday* has arrived – not as the liberation we imagined, but as a violent gift that extends governmental reach and reiterates the sustained “[regulation] of intimate life” (Oswin, *Global* 19).

Minister for Law and Home Affairs K. Shanmugam set out the terms of the debate in his opening hour-long speech in Parliament on 28 November 2022. He traced the persecution of male homosexual conduct through the Buggery Act of 1533, the Vagrancy Act of 1898, and the Offences Against the Person Act of 1861. The argument he constructed was detailed and meticulous, with supplementary annexes supporting his citations. He laid out evidence demonstrating how outmoded the laws were and how far removed they were from contemporary Singaporean society, echoing the rhetoric of multiple constitutional challenges against Section 377A. What he did not mention, however, was equally revealing. This gap concerned the “A” clause of Section 377 – the extension of gross indecency laws into the private sphere of consensual acts between adult men. The delineation between public and private constituted much of the 2007 debate; this angle was significantly absent in 2022.

Historian J.Y. Chua’s archival reconstruction shows that the “A” clause was introduced in 1938 as a response to specific configurations of race, class, and sexuality under British colonial rule rather than as the expression of moral consensus. The amendment emerged amid a crackdown on female prostitution that exposed the extent of male prostitution, the circulation of sexological discourse that rendered homosexuality “as a distinct conceptual category” (700), and a series of sex scandals involving European colonial officials and Asian men that threatened British institutional legitimacy and prewar military security. Chua’s research also reveals the racialized architecture of the law’s application. Of the thirty-four men prosecuted under Section 377A between 1938 and 1942, at least twenty were caught in interracial configurations. Colonial courts frequently acquitted or demonstrated leniency toward European defendants while convicting their Asian counterparts. In doing so, they reproduced the trope of the predatory Asian “catamite” who

corrupted unwitting European men.²⁸ The provision that the postcolonial State described as an inherited “error” began as a technology for managing the colonial color line and anxieties over espionage. The State’s invocation of “Asian values” and community consensus in forums such as the UPR, as well as during the 2007 and 2022 debates surrounding the repeal of Section 377A, obscures this specific history of governing sexuality through containment.

J.Y. Chua’s account of colonial “strategies of containment” (702), one that reinforces Lynette Chua and Jack Jin Gary Lee’s research of governance through a logic of “contagion,” revealed decades of managing same-sex activity through spatial control, vagrancy laws, immigration apparatus, and administrative discipline rather than direct prosecution. What Ambassador Chan named as “legal untidiness and ambiguity” in the non-enforcement of Section 377A was continuous with this strategic containment. Shanmugam’s citation of legal history was intended to draw a clear line separating past from present, suggesting that the law was an outdated relic – but the elision revealed that strategies of containment remained in place. Omitting the 1938 introduction of clause “A” of Section 377 obscured the fact that the law was a targeted colonial intervention into private male sexuality motivated by anxieties around national security. It avoided scrutiny of how this architecture of regulating intimacy persists through the constitutional reinforcement of heterosexual marriage.

Scholarship on the 2023 repeal has approached it from several disciplinary vantage points that illuminate its political logic without fully accounting for these biopolitical operations. Gao Ding, writing from the intersection of queer theory and Marxist political economy, reads the repeal through Marx’s concept of concrete labor to argue that the discourse surrounding decriminalization effectively subsumes gay men into the “sexual division of labor” (419), rendering their inclusion contingent upon productive, non-disruptive participation in capitalist accumulation. The observation that “private” appears sixty-five times across two days of parliamentary debate sharpens Ding’s claim about how the public/private dichotomy operates as an ideological mechanism of value extraction. Yet a labor framework cannot fully account for the simultaneity of the repeal and the constitutional enshrinement of heterosexual marriage as a single legislative act. If the logic of concrete labor demands the extraction of use value from queer bodies, why would the State foreclose the kinship structures through which those bodies might be most fully integrated into the reproductive economy?²⁹ A Canguilhem-Foucauldian approach allows us to

²⁸ This complements the work of other legal scholars and historians on the institution of Section 377A, including George Baylon Radics and Jack Jin Gary Lee. I focus on J.Y. Chua’s research because it engages directly with declassified materials since the 2010s from the British colonial records.

²⁹ Chapter 3 takes up the question of subsumption more fully through a value-form critique of gender and sexuality, where a materialist account of how desire and land are reconfigured by the same regime of accumulation is positioned alongside the dissociation of the value-form. Structural critiques cannot fully account for the sensuous, embodied, affective remainder that persists.

understand this paradoxical simultaneity as structurally necessary. The State corrects one “error” (the diplomatic and juridical liability of criminalization) while reinstalling parameters that identify queerness as “error” at a higher level of legal authority.

Walid Jumblatt Abdullah, working within political science, offers an account through the concept of “calibrated social liberalization,” arguing that the repeal demonstrates the “possibilities and limits of advocacy coalition-building in Singapore” (107). His finding that queer issues are not critical to the ruling party’s legitimacy, and that the party therefore permitted contestation in this sphere, confirms the logic of preemptive correction: the State repealed Section 377A because the cost of maintaining the “error” exceeded the cost of correcting it. Repeal in this case functions as risk management without substantially reconfiguring the conditions of queer life. The choice of the word “calibration” complements ideas of precise adjustments to a biopolitical milieu that this chapter emphasizes.

1.5.2 Small Measures of Political Theater

When commenting on the debates in Parliament around the petition to repeal Section 377A in 2007, Chua Beng Huat stated: “Alas, in a country in which parliamentary proceedings are monologues by the single-party government, citizens must be grateful for small measures of political theater” (60). I am interested in taking his comment seriously, and engaging with the potential of this “political theater” from a performance studies lens. What can a performative reading of these debates disclose? The speeches delivered in Singapore’s Parliament over 28 and 29 November 2022 around the repeal of Section 377A and the constitutional amendment to fortify the heterosexual definition of marriage were theatrical in the fullest sense, staging the appearance of democratic deliberation before an audience who knew the outcome had already been determined.³⁰ Reading the 2022 debates for their performativity, alongside the 2007 debates in which the same provision was retained, reveals a rhetorical migration that tracks the biopolitical shift from moral prohibition to normative calibration. This chapter traces that shift through the UPR process and Georges Canguilhem’s theorization of “error.”

In this last section, I focus on backbenchers and opposition MPs rather than the ministerial speeches that have received the most attention because the backbenchers’ speeches revealed something the ministers often avoid – a more candid grappling with what opposition MP Jamus Lim named in his speech as the “three distinct identities” that are entangled in the parliamentarian: representatives for their personal ethics and morals, their constituents’ interests, and their political party. This triangulation is where the theatrical

³⁰ I state this without irony, since the imposition of the party whip and the dominant single-party composition of the parliament meant that the repeal and the constitutional amendment would pass with or without the debates.

dimensions of the debate become the most productive: counter-conduct embedded within the pragmatic-transparent quadrant in the field of resistance ([fig. 1.1](#)), pressing against its boundaries from within.

Across both days of debate, forty MPs stood up to express their views. A pattern emerged in the way queer subjectivity entered the Parliament. It appeared as reported speech – as empathy, as apology, as the moral struggles of straight MPs who recounted conversations with “gay brothers,” friends and colleagues. Queer voices surfaced through heterosexual ventriloquism, mediated through the personal anecdotes of parliamentarians who spoke on behalf of perspectives that could not speak for themselves within this architecture. The structural barriers to queer entry into Parliament are well documented: queer opposition candidates have had their sexuality wielded against them during the election campaign cycles.³¹ There is a heteronormative emphasis on “family” credentials for promotion within the civil service and credible political candidacy. The queer voice remains in an etiolated state within this most visible theater of governance, present only through a differently liberal pragmatism. The speeches that follow demonstrate how this ventriloquism operates alongside a rhetorical migration from moral prohibition to normative calibration.

Among the MPs who spoke on Section 377A in both 2007 and 2022 was Christopher de Souza, a member of the ruling People’s Action Party. He was first elected in 2006 and rose steadily through the party ranks, becoming Deputy Speaker of Parliament in 2022. In 2007, de Souza argued for the retention of Section 377A on explicitly moral grounds. He warned that “what is in private will not remain private.” Decriminalizing private homosexual acts, he argued, would lead to public claims for legitimacy, including marriage and adoption, and would undermine sexuality education. Fifteen years later, he returned to the podium to support repeal. At first glance, the argument appeared different, even though its underlying structure remained intact. He reaffirmed the sanctity of heterosexual marriage and called for unity on what he described as a divisive issue. He called for “decorum, tone, and respect,” perhaps in anticipation of the graphic descriptions raised during the 2007 debates by others.³² What interests me is how he began his speech. Christopher de Souza opened by reminding his fellow parliamentarians to “discharge a duty.” He cited a 1962 speech by founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, delivered at the University of Singapore Law Society annual dinner:

³¹ During the 2011 General Election, the People’s Action Party team drew attention to a video of Singapore Democratic Party candidate Dr. Vincent Wijesingha speaking at a forum on Section 377A, framing it as evidence of a hidden agenda and requesting clarification on whether the “gay cause [would be pursued] in a political arena.” The move effectively outed Wijesingha during the campaign. Wijesingha’s team lost the election with 39.92% of the vote.

³² Nominated Member of Parliament Thio Li Ann employed shock tactics of fearmongering in her 2007 speech, she described anal penetrative sex in detail and compared it to “shoving a straw up your nose to drink.”

Those of you who are just embarking on the study of the law will learn the phrase “law and order.” In a settled and established society, law appears to be a precursor of order. Good laws lead to good order, that is the form that you will learn. But the hard realities of keeping the peace between man and man and between authority and the individual can be more accurately described if the phrase were inverted to “order and law,” for without order the operation of law is impossible.

Invoking Lee Kuan Yew is a familiar rhetorical move in Parliament, borrowing the authority of a formative political figure. De Souza implicitly linked the present constitutional moment to 1962, a period preceding independence and marked by political turbulence. In that same speech, Lee went on to justify the Protection of Public Security Ordinance, the precursor to the Internal Security Act, which enabled the detention of political opponents and dissidents without trial.³³ Lee addressed a gathering of legal professionals to explain why executive action could supersede juridical process in the name of maintaining order.

After quoting Lee, de Souza stated: “By inverting the phrase, [Lee Kuan Yew] showed how one must establish order first before laws can work.” He then declared: “what we are debating today is the order of things,” repeating the phrase six more times. This emphasis on “the order of things” was not incidental: it signaled a reframing of Parliament’s task, beyond repealing an unenforced law, into one of enforcing a hierarchy of power and the correction of an “error.” The constitutional amendment reclaimed authority around moral issues from the Judiciary and consolidated it within the Legislature, albeit under the influence of the Executive. The register may have shifted between 2007 and 2022, but de Souza’s underlying concern in both debates was with the preservation of a heterosexual definition of marriage while regulating its public consequences. When de Souza spoke of “the order of things” – echoing Foucault’s 1966 book of the same title, though without its critical reflexivity – he was naturalizing a particular arrangement, presenting the heteronormative family structure as a foundation that governance must protect, rather than a construct that biopolitical governance produces. Many speakers across the two days echoed this rhetoric, asserting the heteronormative order as conditional on their support for the repeal.³⁴

³³ I cover the history of the Internal Security Act and the impact of political detention in the fourth chapter of this dissertation.

³⁴ Fellow People’s Action Party MP Xie Yao Quan, speaking in Mandarin, reinforced this logic through a different linguistic register. He cited the *Huainanzi* (淮南子·汜論訓): “治国有常，而利民为本；政教有经，而令行为上” (“Governing a State has its norms, and benefiting the people is the foundation. Governance has its principles, and ensuring that orders are carried out is paramount”). The *Huainanzi* passage in context argues that governance need not follow ancient precedent if it benefits the people, a reformist spirit that Xie’s citation glosses over to naturalize the consolidation of power within the Legislative and Executive branches. Xie’s vernacular speech, calibrated to address differently conservative Mandarin-educated constituents,

Scholars have referred to Singapore's political system as an "authoritarian rule of law" (Rajah).³⁵ I suggest that after Lee Kuan Yew's passing in 2015, this configuration has shifted toward a rule of order, specifically in this case, a biopolitical order of heteronormativity which has been adopted as the explicit organizing principle. Legal change is justified through the need to secure unity and stability. Law (and its disciplinary approaches) no longer serves as the primary site of correction; order (and its biopolitical drive) has emerged as the organizing grammar of governance.

Another significant shift between 2007 and 2022 was the increase in opposition representation in Parliament, from two out of eighty-four seats to ten out of ninety-three seats. Even though this shift still left the ruling party with a supermajority, it resulted in more robust parliamentary debates. I highlight two examples: Jamus Lim, whose speech I cited earlier outlining the three positions that an MP represents, and He Ting Ru, who abstained on the constitutional amendment alongside fellow Workers' Party member Sylvia Lim – the only two MPs to do so.

Jamus Lim, an economist and professor who spoke on the second day of debates, also cited this "order of things" in his speech. He performed some of the riskiest rhetorical moves of the debate, turning several of the debate's tropes reflexively against themselves. He began by reversing the slippery slope argument of moral decline often used to justify the retention of Section 377A in 2007 and the reinforcement of the definition of heterosexual marriage in 2022. He pointed out that retaining a law the government claimed not to actively enforce was a "far slipperier" slope toward invalidating the juridical institution. He then moved into a hypothetical thought experiment grounded in his own interracial heterosexual marriage, citing recent historical precedents where miscegenation was outlawed, including Nazi Germany and apartheid South Africa. Lim recounted a conversation with a close friend who is gay:

Just imagine, he said, if the way you feel about women – the strong, unrelenting attraction when you first meet, the wish to share one's most innermost thoughts and feelings with them, the deep desire to be with that person for the rest of your life – imagine if all that was not the natural order of things.

This reflexive inversion stands in stark contrast to de Souza's unquestioning adoption of this "order." As Lim read the passage ventriloquizing his friend's thoughts in Parliament, he looked directly into the camera and his voice began to waver, apparently overwhelmed

deployed a familiar rhetorical move in Parliament, reaching even further back in time than de Souza citing Lee Kuan Yew, referring to classical Chinese text to impress and legitimize this order of things.

³⁵ Jothie Rajah's scholarship builds a case around authoritarian legalism, the use of legal apparatus and the judiciary to suppress dissent. The "rule of order" extends this analysis by foregrounding how such juridical mechanisms serve to consolidate power within the legislature (and in turn the executive) by borrowing Lee Kuan Yew's legacy to claim a naturalized order of things.

by the recollection of the moment he described. He paused, furrowed his brow, then picked up where he had left off. Non-Constituency MP Leong Mun Wai from the Progress Singapore Party, seated in the background, looked up in bewilderment. Our view of Leong was partially blocked by Lim's shoulder, but we saw Leong glancing around at his colleagues, as if trying to ascertain whether Lim had indeed been overwhelmed. Both the affective force and the content of Lim's speech disrupted the existing order of things.

He Ting Ru, a lawyer, followed Lim's speech by challenging this settled "order" further. She supported the repeal but abstained on the constitutional amendment, calling it a "carve-out" that shields legislative policy from judicial oversight. Her Cambridge law education lent her Singaporean-British accent the clipped authority that Singapore's Westminster-derived system still rewards. She named the amendment as "taking fright at the 'phantom menace' of judicial activism," and stated that the constitutional amendment to reinforce the heterosexual definition of marriage "may continue to advance the divisiveness" that the very repeal of Section 377A was trying to combat. This abstention was a sophisticated parliamentary maneuver that refused the binary choice that was constructed by the ruling party, where repeal and amendment were presented as a single package, a false equivalence presented as a trade-off of one for another. The triangulation of the three identities and the friction it produced were clearly articulated in both He Ting Ru's and Lim's speeches. Shanmugam has framed the Workers' Party's lifting of the party whip as an abdication of responsibility, employing catastrophic metaphors of sinking ships and crashing trains. However, the opposition party MPs' speeches demonstrated the layered consideration of the triad of responsibilities, arguably enacting a more rigorous discharge of parliamentary duty than the imposed whip permitted.³⁶ In the second half of He Ting Ru's speech, she returned to her personal voice, sharing another compelling anecdote about the "anguish and pain" of a gay friend, a move that mirrors several other speakers over the two days of debate.³⁷ Her anecdote was emotionally compelling and she used it as a reminder to Parliament that "the topics we discuss today are [...] academic to our personal situation" but to some, these topics affect "every moment of their lives."

Minister for Social and Family Development Masagos Zulkifli's closing speech on the last day of the debate constituted the most explicit articulation of milieu management. Speaking in response to the debates, he systematically enumerated the domains the government would continue to regulate after the repeal and with the constitutional

³⁶ Fellow Workers' Party MP Gerald Giam, who voted against repeal of Section 377A with two other colleagues, narrated his moral struggle, reported his constituents' divided views, and stated that his conscience would not permit him to vote in favor, knowing this would cost him politically. He said: "I have been told in my face by a constituent that he will not vote for me in the future because of my stand."

³⁷ Louis Chua named Theresa Goh, an openly lesbian Paralympian; Baey Yam Keng referred to gay artists and celebrities. Dr. Vivian Balakrishnan apologized to his gay friends. Shanmugam stated that queer Singaporeans are "our family, our friends, our colleagues."

amendment: education curriculum, media content standards, adoption policy, housing allocation, social service provision, religious freedom, and workplace norms. Each domain was individually calibrated to ensure that the repeal of Section 377A produced “no change in social norms.” This illustrated Canguilhem’s point about “error” correction articulated in form: the milieu absorbing the anomaly by recalibrating around it, adjusting one variable while holding constant every other parameter of the normative infrastructure. The repeal corrected the “error” of criminalization while the constitutional amendment reinstalled the parameters that produced queerness as “error” at a higher level of legal authority.

1.6 The Margin of Refusal

I think back to the *Someday* video that the Pink Dot team imagined for the 2012 campaign, its saturated futures filled with hopes of inclusion, and find myself reading it in a different light. A teacher who shares a kiss with his male partner, one who can afford a car under Singapore’s exorbitant Certificate of Entitlement³⁸ system, both white-collar professionals, dual income, no kids, their bodies gym-toned to homonormative expectations. A trans woman who can afford the right makeup, the right clothes, the right medical care, and whose appearance reads as sufficiently cis-conforming to use a pristinely clean gender-segregated public bathroom, welcomed into an air-conditioned boutique without discrimination because of her purchasing power. A lesbian daughter who brings her partner home for Lunar New Year reunion dinner, both dressed in red, an auspicious act of filial piety. Her mother receives her partner as a daughter-in-law, ladling her favorite food from a hot pot into her bowl alongside their extended family. A middle-class heterosexual couple who watch queer intimacy flicker across their television, their wedding-banded hands clasped in solidarity. Model families (two children, one of each gender) pile into their SUVs, decide what shade of pink to wear before they join their friends at Hong Lim Park with their well-groomed pet dog in a pink harness. Each of these moments is carefully lit and beautifully conditional. Some queer desires that were mapped onto heteronormative coordinates in each vignette are now formally foreclosed by the constitutional amendment. The “someday” that arrived was not the one that had been imagined. More unsettling, however, is the recognition that the imagined “someday” had already reproduced the heteronormative script of the “order” it sought to overcome.

How would “someday” look different? One that refuses the “order” of normativity? These are questions the remaining chapters pursue through practices that inhabit rather than correct the “error” of the milieu. If *Someday* imagines queer life arriving on heteronormative terms, an impossible logical paradox, etiolated conduct proposes forms of presence that

³⁸ The Certificate of Entitlement is a quota license required to register a vehicle in Singapore. It is designed to restrict vehicular ownership in land-scarce Singapore. The cost is determined by a bidding system and can exceed USD 75,000, making car ownership in Singapore among the most expensive in the world.

refuse the transparency and recognition that the State demands. After Muñoz, these forms of presence move beyond imagining a “someday,” insisting instead on inhabiting ongoing life with concrete, educated hope.³⁹

Among scholars of queer Singapore, Kamalini Ramdas comes closest to these concerns, arguing for the “margin as a place of radical openness” (1450) and attending to how Singapore’s queer communities contest hegemonic narratives of family and nation. Yet her theorizing of the margin as a “place of refusal” (1448) still operates through spatial and geographic registers, with refusal remaining legible as community-based activism, more opaque but ultimately still restrained by pragmatism even in its contestation against a default heteronormative order. The practices I examine in subsequent chapters move through the other quadrants in the field of resistance ([fig. 1.1](#)). These are the quadrants of potential resistance that Ramdas gestures toward but has yet to fully inhabit, where resistance operates through temporal and biopolitical registers alongside spatial ones, and where illegibility functions as a tactic of survival rather than a deficit to be made transparent. The UPR submissions, the campaigning for repeal, the stakeholder advocacy traced throughout this chapter, all remain within the realm of processes of liberation designed to correct “error.” Etiolated conduct pursues another path, meandering through practices of freedom that attend to “bodies and their materiality, their forces, energies, sensations, [and] pleasures” (*History of Sexuality* 155), recalibrating the self over a sustained *durée* rather than petitioning the State for recognition. As Foucault reminds us, “at the very heart of the power relationship, and constantly provoking it, are the recalcitrance of the will and the intransigence of freedom” (*The Subject and Power* 342).

³⁹ While pointing out what the constitutional amendment exposes, I need to emphasize that this does not translate into a call for marriage equality, which will once again herald other consequences with its legal visibility. I align with Petrus Liu’s call to look at queer emancipation in Asia beyond marriage equality and toward “an analysis of the differential allocation of grievability across racialized populations” (Liu, “Homonormativity’s Racial Capitalism” 56).



Figure 1.2 Still from *Someday* (2012). Pink Dot SG campaign video directed by Boo Junfeng.



THE STRAITS TIMES

Parliament repeals S377A, decriminalising gay sex

PM Lee calls it a major milestone; laws amended to protect definition of marriage

Goh Yan Han
Political Correspondent

Parliament on Tuesday voted to repeal a decades-old law criminalising gay sex, while endorsing changes to the Constitution to protect the current definition of marriage from legal challenge.

The repeal of Section 377A of the Penal Code, following a 10-hour debate over two days, saw 93 MPs voting in favour of the move.

Workers' Party MPs Gerald Giam (Aljunied GRC) and Dennis Tan (Hougang), and Nominated MP Hoon Hian Teck were the only three to vote against the repeal.

The constitutional amendment to introduce Article 156 saw 85 MPs vote in favour, while both Progress Singapore Party Non-Constituency MPs (NCMPs) voted against the move, and WP MPs Sylvia Lim (Al-

junied GRC) and He Ting Ru (Sengkang GRC) abstained. Nominated MPs are not allowed to vote on constitutional amendments.

Law and Home Affairs Minister K. Shanmugam said Parliament's overall choice showed that the House is the one to decide on issues of marriage rather than leaving the matter to the courts and living with the potential threat of the current definition being ruled unconstitutional.

During the debate, several MPs had raised concerns about the repeal leading to cancel culture – the practice of shutting down those with differing views.

Mr Shanmugam said the Law Ministry is looking at measures to deal with the harm caused by cancel campaigns online. "People really ought to be free to stand by their beliefs, express their views with due respect for the feelings of others, without fearing being 'cancelled'," he said.

Responding to Mr Louis Ng (Nee Soon GRC) on individuals with existing records of convictions under S377A, Mr Shanmugam said: "There is a small number of individuals who were convicted between 1988 and 2007 for consensual, private, homosexual acts, between adults. I have instructed my ministry to consider how the records of these persons can be rendered spent proactively."

He also questioned the WP's decision to lift the Whip on its Members, saying this meant that as a party, it had no official position on the repeal and did not support the constitutional amendments to protect marriage.

The Whip requires party members to vote as a bloc, and WP chief and Leader of the Opposition Pritam Singh had said on Monday that his decision was due to the risk of diluting the democratic value of Parliament as the varied views of Singaporeans on the topic would not be adequately ventilated in the House.

Mr Shanmugam said this explanation was "factually untrue". "The Whip does not, and has not, prevented MPs from speaking their minds. MPs have always been free to express what they, their constituents think. The Whip is relevant for voting, not speaking, and the Whip sets out the party's position," he said.

Choosing not to vote for the repeal meant passing the buck to the courts, given the legal risks of the law being struck down by the courts, he said. "That's an abdication of responsibility as parliamentarians."

Mr Singh replied that with the WP MPs indicating their positions – six for repeal and three against due to reasons of religion and conscience – the party position has now been established by way of a majority in Parliament.

Rounding up the debate, Minister for Social and Family Development Masagos Zulkifli addressed concerns MPs had on religious freedom, sex education in schools

and support for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender students.

He said it is the intention of the Government that there should not be a change in social norms following the repeal.

He reiterated that education policies and curricula remain anchored in Singapore's prevailing family values and social norms, which most Singaporeans want to uphold. These include the family as the cornerstone of society's social fabric, and marriage as between a man and a woman.

On religious freedom, he said: "Every person has the right to profess, propagate and practise his or her own religion, subject to public order, health and morality. Every religious group has the right to manage its own religious affairs."

On NCMP Hazel Poa's call for the definition of marriage to be decided by a national referendum, Mr Masagos said the Constitution sets a very high bar for one.

In a Facebook post on Tuesday, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said the amendment and repeal were a major milestone for Singapore. "Taken together, these are balanced, wise steps forward. Even more important, we have got here together – calmly, with all sides showing restraint, listening to one another, and accepting compromises to achieve a good result," he wrote.

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SEE THE BIG STORY • A4&5

GPs to be trained to better care for patients' well-being

Ang Qing

As Singapore's population ages and chronic diseases become more common, general practitioners will get training from 2023 to improve care for patients' social, mental and physical well-being outside the hospital setting.

SingHealth Community Hospitals is discussing with professional bodies – the College of Family Physicians Singapore and the Academy of Medicine, Singapore – to introduce this into their overall programmes, said Associate Professor Lee Kheng Hock, deputy chief executive of education and the Academy of Medicine, Singapore – to introduce this into their overall programmes, said Associate Professor Lee Kheng Hock, deputy chief executive of education and community partnerships at SingHealth Community Hospitals, on Tuesday.

He was speaking on the sidelines of the inaugural First Asia Pacific Social Prescribing Conference. This push for a social and physical environment that supports health, also known as social prescription, follows the nation's

Figure 1.3 30 Nov. 2022 front page headline of *The Straits Times*.

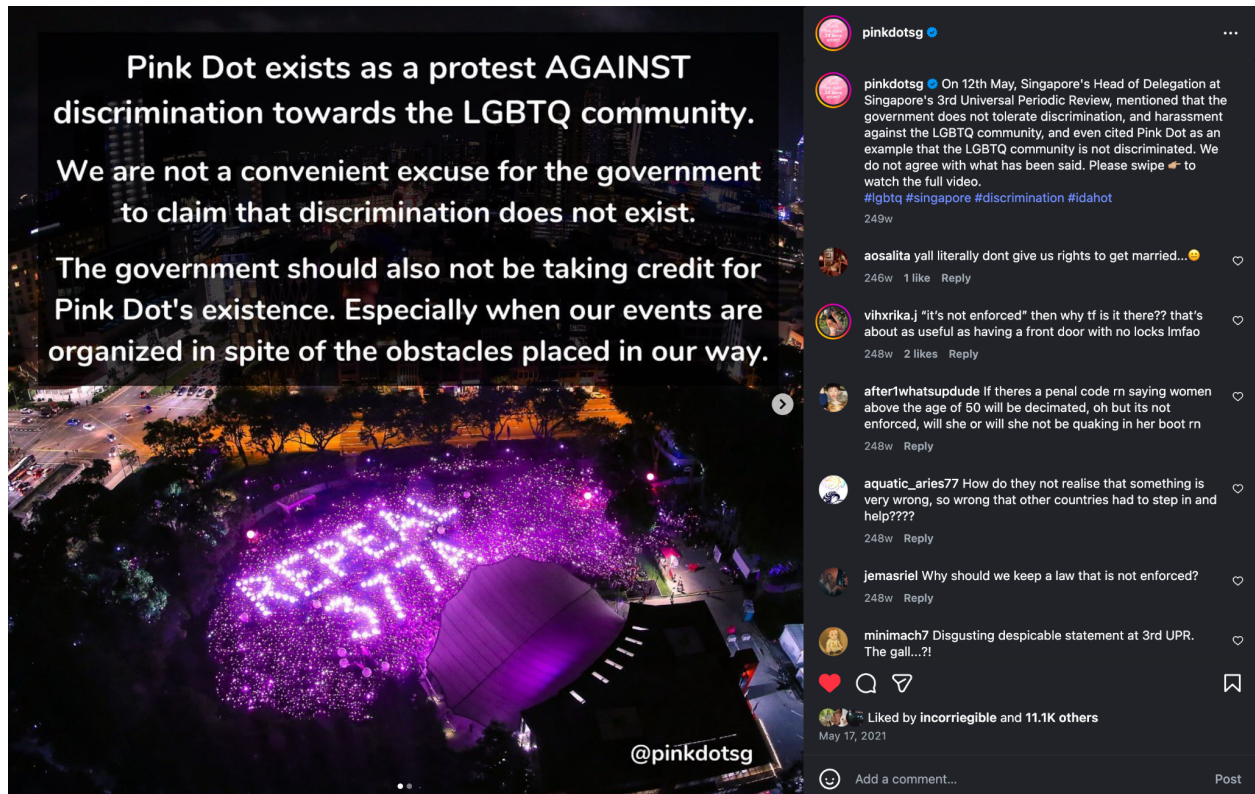


Figure 1.4 17 May 2021 Instagram post by Pink Dot SG in response to the mention of Pink Dot at the UPR.

Chapter 2

Camouflaged Choreographies:

The Public Secrets of Jason Wee's Practice

We are public secrets,
we stand in public spaces and without beginning to,
without deliberately covering or passing or hiding,
are already hidden and passed over and overlooked.

— Jason Wee

2.1 A Palimpsest of Reflections

You are standing in a passageway at Mountbatten station, an underground Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) train station in Singapore. Installed beside the fare control area is a public artwork, *Lord Mountbatten Thinks of Pink*, by Singaporean visual artist and writer Jason Wee. Two monumental, pink-tinged seascapes flank the corridor as you walk toward the escalators leading to ground level. Measuring approximately six by thirty feet each, it takes about twelve to fifteen steps to traverse the length of the work. For most commuters, these are brisk paces as they hurry to their destinations. Framed in chrome and encased in reflective glass, the seascapes may register as decorative wallpaper or advertising, a response conditioned by the invisible, perennial presence of public artworks in transit hubs in Singapore and around the world.

The artwork's mirrored placement choreographs your body. Orienting yourself toward one panel means turning your back to the other. It appears impossible to hold these two opposing images within your field of vision simultaneously. Yet when you stand still, slow down, and sense closely, the glossy glass surface returns your own silhouette as a reflection suspended in the seascape. The second panel emerges behind you in this reflection, as waves of commuters passing through interrupt this effect. You witness your image as a floating apparition, caught between these seascapes – one calm and the other turbulent – in an endless hall of funhouse mirrors. ([fig. 2.1](#)) *Lord Mountbatten Thinks of Pink* invites you to adopt a duplicitous mode of seeing.

This chapter examines Jason Wee's visual art practice from 2010 to the present, tracking his engagement with the politics of queer visibility across two works: the public art commission *Lord Mountbatten Thinks of Pink* (2010) and the ongoing series *Uncommon Choreographies* (2020–present). My analysis draws from ideas established in the introduction around etiolated conduct, and the previous chapter's theorizing of the limits of pragmatic and transparent forms of resistance. I examine the infrastructure that both restricts and supports Wee's practice as a mode of more-than-human performativity. This chapter asks:

How do artists with/in differently liberal contexts develop aesthetic strategies without defaulting to politics of representation that foreground recognition and transparency? My argument hinges on Wee's practice of camouflaged choreographies as "public secrets" – queer presence that exists openly yet remains systematically overlooked by the state apparatus designed to perceive a reproductive heteronormative order.

I build on curator and writer Louis Ho's theorization of Jason Wee's anti-representational tactics: what Ho terms an "anti-ocular drive" that traces a "historical unconsciousness" (101) through refusing the "scopophilic instinct" (88) and its demand for visual legibility. Wee's work operates through a methodology of cruising, camouflaged choreographies that signals desire and sexuality while carefully navigating capture by the state and the market. His works extend an invitation to engage in choreographies across time with those who sense queerly while remaining camouflaged to those who do not.

Wee's practice coincides with a transitional history, a shifting political landscape of the policing of sexuality in Singapore: from the entrapment of men who were cruising at Tanjong Rhu in 1993, to 377A activism that surfaced most prominently from 2007 onwards, through the religious backlash exposed by the 2009 AWARE saga, to the resurgence of public cruising during the 2020 pandemic. Through this reading, the chapter invites us to imagine possibilities beyond pragmatic resistance theorized under differently liberal governance. The works I examine in this chapter do not represent a linear evolution within Wee's multifaceted practice, which spans community organizing, curation, poetry, and visual art.¹ I selected them for their sustained engagement with the practice and sites of cruising, and because they reveal how camouflaged choreographies respond to restrictions.

This chapter proposes an unpragmatic² reorientation, one that moves through hesitation and close sensing beyond seeking queer representation in aesthetics toward an attunement to the politics of queer sensibility and its rhythms. This method of minor sensing and hesitation aligns with Hentyle Yapp's project in *Minor China*, where narratives of aesthetics as resistance are complicated "to help us imagine other analytic modes for materialist concerns." (6) This attunement attends to how our engagement with aesthetics is in itself a choreography of cruising, a social practice of seduction and desire embedded within a network of histories and infrastructures. Wee's artworks mask complex negotiations with the artist's own identity, colonial history, and the embodied experience of

¹ Wee runs an artist space with a gallery, public programs, and artist residency called *Grey Projects*. He is also involved with queer community space *Proud Spaces*. He runs the Singapore Queer Memory Project, "a multi-year initiative [...] to collect and collate a history of queer lives in Singapore."

² My use of "pragmatic" and "unpragmatic" forms of resistance is elaborated in my first chapter, building on the scholarship of Lynette Chua and Audrey Yue specific to the language of queer resistance in Singapore. I refer to this as an "unpragmatic reorientation" as it does not translate to direct, effective, and concrete social change.

cruising. Drawing on both queer critical logistics studies (Deborah Cowen) and Samuel Delany's tertiary thesis in *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* on the potential for superstructure to "impinge" (112) on infrastructure, I read cruising and the camouflaged choreographies Wee's works induce as a durational creative practice that sustains alternative futurities through acts of care under Singapore's restrictive conditions. This chapter concludes by considering how Sianne Ngai's concept of visceral abstraction helps us understand Wee's practice as social knowledge.

2.2 Cruising as Camouflaged Choreographies

My theorization of cruising as a method is indebted to Samuel Delany's *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*, an auto-ethnographic account of his experiences at adult cinemas in Times Square during the 1970s and 1980s. Delany argues that cruising produces what he calls "interclass contact," aleatory encounters that move beyond sex toward care, sustenance, and the building of interpersonal relationships across social divides. He contrasts this "contact" with "networking," activities that tend to occur in private, indoor spaces and seldom cross class lines. His primary thesis states that "given the mode of capitalism under which we live," both contact and networking are essential to maintaining a "rewarding, productive and pleasant" life (111). For Delany, the urban spaces that enable cruising, the theaters, parks, and public infrastructures where strangers encounter one another, constitute a form of social provisioning (Cowen, "Reading" 269) that cannot be replicated through private networks alone.

Delany's framework can be extended to consider how cruising operates as embodied practice and interpretive methodology.³ To "cruise" Wee's artwork is to adopt a particular rhythm through space: the slowed pace, the lingering glance, the return over time. It is also to read for what is not immediately legible, to sense the hidden transcripts that public secrets contain. It is in this spirit of cruising for the illegible that I turn to the "tertiary thesis" he elaborates toward the end of his book. Here, Delany moves toward a philosophical discussion of discourse, interpellation, and the production of identity. He claims that "the superstructure (and the superstructure at its most oppositional) can impinge on infrastructure" (112), meaning that oppositional practices, cruising among them, have the potential to reshape the material conditions of infrastructure. Crucially, however, Delany insists that this relationship exceeds simple causality. Infrastructure and superstructure influence, support, and shape one another, but certain connections remain indirect, illegible, and camouflaged.

Translated to cruising spaces, Delany's tertiary thesis poses a question of interpellation: did gay men appropriate public spaces for sexual encounter, or did the

³ Other theorists who have written about cruising as method include José Esteban Muñoz in *Cruising Utopia* and Sean Metzger in *The Chinese Atlantic*.

availability of those spaces interpellate the practice we have come to name as “cruising”? The answer, Delany implies, is both. Habits, identities, and practices emerge through recursive encounters between bodies and the environments they move through. To study cruising as a social practice while remaining attentive to this tertiary thesis is to understand that cruising moves beyond a behavior imposed upon neutral space or an identity expressed through space, toward a co-constitution in which space and practice produce each other over time.

To linger on this third thesis while considering the policing of sexuality in Singapore is also to escape a quagmire that has long entrapped queer theory transposed onto the Asias: the tendency to read “sexual identity” or “sexual liberation” as concepts exported from the Global North to the global majority. Delany’s method offers another approach, one that attends to how sexuality has been produced, deployed, and managed by the technocratic postcolonial state of Singapore, and to the forms of both pragmatic and unpragmatic resistance that emerge along a longer historical arc. Tracking queer presence beyond liberal frameworks of autonomy and personhood is central to camouflaged choreographies. I approach Jason Wee’s practice through this sensing as entangled infrastructure that participates in producing the modes of attention and movement it appears to depict, rather than as a container for queer content or a mere expression of sexuality.

2.3 On Camouflage and Choreography

Camouflage allows for cruising without the need to adopt a fixed or prescriptive identity. In Singapore, camouflage as disguise and survival is interpellated through citizenship and adulthood, most significantly via compulsory military conscription. I understand this duplicitous relationship with military and civilian life intimately. One lingering memory from my basic military training: crouching in the jungle with my fellow platoon mates, learning to disappear into our environment.⁴ We were decked out in camouflage green uniforms, back then still in a splotchy pattern of greens and browns, before the pixelated designs that were introduced later during reservist training. Each recruit received two standard-issue camouflage paint sticks, one dark brown, one light green. We applied shapes to our sweaty faces, hoping that the thick oily paint would adhere in the tropical humidity. “Do not forget the backs of your hands, your necks, and your ears!” my platoon commander barked intermittently to ensure we were thorough. We were trained in the art of quick drag, long before we knew the name for it.

We learned not to mix the two colors, which turned into muddy black paste. Instead, we traced distinct shapes of each shade, breaking up the human outlines of nose, eyes, mouth, dissolving our sense of self into the collective, the jungle, and the ground. Then came the vegetation: leaves and twigs carefully selected and inserted into helmet webbing to

⁴ The length of military conscription service ranges from 18 to 24 months of full-time duty, followed by ten or more years in the part-time reservist force.

complete the illusion. We were then told to hide our bodies in the jungle terrain as a test of the effectiveness of the camouflage exercise. Days, sometimes even months after the camouflage exercise ended, traces of paint would surface in unexpected places. Green and brown residue lurking in crevices behind ears, the depths of nostrils, underneath fingernails, obdurate reminders of lessons in folding the self into the environment.

Military service is a shared formative moment among male citizens and extends its influence into co-ed civilian sociality. It shapes communication, cultivates tactics of hiding in plain sight and instills, by design, habits of concealment and masking, while also teaching us to subsume the individual into the collective – whether community, society, or the natural world. Chris K.K. Tan has discussed this briefly in his essay on homosexuality and cultural citizenship in the Singaporean military, what he refers to as “extra-legal emotional ties that bind one to [their] country” (73). In that essay, Tan examines the repercussions of declaring your sexuality to the Singaporean government and the potential consequences it may have on one’s career after full-time military conscription. For this reason, most of us decided to remain silent about our sexuality during active military service. This is a tactical (il)legibility that is part volition, part coercion, where one’s relationship to the proverbial closet is interpellated beyond the binary of in and out, becoming a situational response contingent on social pragmatism and survival.

This chapter’s reading of Wee’s work as camouflaged choreographies extends these embodied lessons into dialogue with critical theory on camouflage across three interconnected registers: temporal, spatial, and agential. Temporal camouflage, drawing on Walter Benjamin’s concept of mimesis as “reading what was never written” (722), considers how reproduction and reenactment fold different temporalities together. Spatial camouflage, after Laura Levin’s concept of performing ground, attends to how figure-ground distinctions dissolve as “performance strategy” (5). Agential camouflage, extending Neil Leach’s Deleuzian concept of the “fold,” considers how camouflage dissolves the fiction of individual agential capacity into more-than-human assemblages, “a process of becoming – of becoming one with the world, and of becoming distinct from that world” (245).

The perceptual stakes of camouflage exceed an easy binary of visibility and opacity as simple inversions. Wee’s practice reveals that opacity can produce high visibility, as when an opaque surface announces its own withholding, drawing attention precisely because it highlights something concealed behind it. Conversely, transparency can generate a form of imperceptibility, as elements so fully present to sight pass through perception unregistered, akin to light passing through clear glass. The “public secret” that Wee describes operates through both registers simultaneously, both transparent and opaque. Fully available to perception in public space, yet withheld from easy recognition. The camouflaged choreographies I trace across Wee’s practice thrive in this instability, where what is most visible remains imperceptible to those not attuned to sense it.

I consider these three registers of temporal, spatial, and agential camouflage in conversation with the term choreography. Building on Susan Leigh Foster's definition of choreography as "a plan or score according to which movement unfolds," I understand choreography as a latent language that moves and orients bodies in space, a plan for the unfolding of movement across time and space. Choreographies are a call that invites a response where there is the potential of deviation, misprision, and repetition with a difference. In other words, I read choreography, after Randy Martin, as a "social kinesthetic," always already in relation as a social form. This sociality of choreography is a productive gap that welcomes and endures a range of etiolated conduct. In this spirit, this chapter differentiates choreographies-in-relation from choreography as sole authorship. As part of sociality, "choreographies" indicate a distribution of agency, a call-and-response social dance that Wee both responds to and contributes to over time. Camouflaged choreographies are the forms through which etiolated conduct reaches toward representation and circulation, even in abstraction. Where etiolated conduct remains illegible and unpragmatic, shaped by the deprivation that produces it, camouflaged choreographies are the surrogates that carry this conduct toward visibility while retaining protective opacity. They operate at the threshold between illegibility and legibility, between the unpragmatic and the pragmatic, mediating what cannot yet be spoken publicly into forms that might be sensed by those attuned to its frequencies. This is a more-than-human network of bodies responding to environment and infrastructure, even if the score is written into the archive by a human artist.

Camouflaged choreographies challenge what André Lepecki terms "choreopoliced movement," the imposed circulation of consensual subjectivity where "to be is to fit a prechoreographed pattern of circulation, corporeality, and belonging" (20). Yet within the restrictive political context of Singapore, this challenge is necessarily scaled differently. The "camouflage" that precedes the quality of movement indicates that the choreography of resistance is both produced and received in ways that might not appear immediately legible or transgressive, distended instead across a longer temporal arc, spatial orientation, and agential capacity. These choreographies extend an invitation to vary one's rhythm, to hesitate and sense closely, attending to slight movements in both self and others. Through Foster and Lepecki, and in conversation with Benjamin, Levin, and Leach, I consider how Jason Wee's works both document and induce camouflaged choreographies in reciprocity. Beyond a refusal of the liberal demand for transparency and recognition, camouflaged choreographies produce modes of durational attention that constitute a form of queer sociality and care, sustaining presence across spatial, temporal, and more-than-human registers through what Deborah Cowen calls acts of provisioning.

2.4 Between Dawn and Dusk

We cruise Jason Wee's work by sensing the details of *Lord Mountbatten Thinks of Pink*. Each panel renders a seascape in varying hues of pink. Wee refers to them as "Dawn" and "Dusk," though he provides no labels indicating which is which, leaving us to assign temporal identity through our own bodily knowledge of crepuscular light. This opacity, this denial of interpretive closure, compounds the spatial disorientation established by the panels' oppositional placement. Unable to hold both images within a single field of vision, you find yourself turning from one panel to the other, then back again, trying to match each image to your accumulated sensory experience of sunrise and sunset. Which pink corresponds to the light you associate with waking? Which evokes the slow dimming that signals day's end? Your bodily memory of dawn and dusk becomes the medium through which the work transmits, a primordial attunement to correspondences that exceed language. Benjamin names this the mimetic faculty: the capacity "to read what was never written," transmitted through "entrails, the stars, or dances" (722). The work encourages a turning and returning that continues across repeated visits as your associations shift, a durational choreography that extends well beyond any single encounter.

One panel is composed of richer, darker tonalities. ([fig. 2.2](#)) The horizon line sits high, allowing the sea to dominate roughly two-thirds of the image. The waves appear tumultuous and choppy, arrested mid-motion, undulating like an alien landscape that might read as foreboding. A lone container ship cruises above the horizon on the left. This is the only figurative element across both panels, offering a visual anchor, a sense of scale, and confirmation that this abstraction depicts the sea. Both the ship and waves remain slightly out of focus, producing a blurred quality that could suggest rapid motion. Standing before this panel, you wait for your eyes to adjust, for the image to resolve into clarity. This withholding also prompts movement – you approach, then retreat, testing if distance might bring the blurred image into focus. The protective glass over the panel magnifies this interference, as you witness your ghosted reflection mirroring your approach and retreat, growing and diminishing in size. Along the horizon, a subtle orange glow complements the tangerine color of the corridor's wall paneling. Each station is coded with a different accent color for easy identification.

The other panel appears lighter, suffused with white undertones and pale pink hues. ([fig. 2.3](#)) Where the darker panel offers the container ship as an anchor, this one provides no such mooring. Even the horizon line dissolves, leaving no clear demarcation between sea and sky. The water is calm, with barely discernible ripples, while a strip of diffused white bisects the midsection, dividing the composition evenly. In its abstraction, this panel evokes the luminous color fields of Mark Rothko, or the perceptual atmospheres of a James Turrell light installation. Unlike Turrell or Rothko, however, the work remains suspended between reference and abstraction – the seascape never fully dissolves into a color field. This

incompleteness sustains the camouflaged choreographies, which require traces of what they conceal. Absolute abstraction would forfeit the duplicity on which Wee's practice is contingent. The lighter shades also produce clearer reflections: the darker panel opposite, your own presence, and the station's infrastructural details – signage, utilitarian light fixtures, orange design accents – all appear within its surface. This is the camouflage as “performance strategy” (5) that Laura Levin refers to, one where spatial displacement unsettles the privilege of the figure, dissolving the distinction between figure and ground.

Moving between these two panels enacts a rhythm of cruising itself: attentive hesitation, the sideways glance, the return over time. The crepuscular indeterminacy between dawn and dusk suspends the viewer in a temporal anticipation that mirrors the waiting endemic to cruising in practice. Wee's panels demand that we draw on embodied memories of crepuscular light, yet the underground station's fluorescent lighting is designed to flatten precisely this sense of time, stripping the environmental cues that would orient us above ground, suspending the commuter in a temporal purgatory. Against this infrastructure of transit, Wee's invitation to hesitate, to vary one's pace, registers as silently defiant. (fig. 2.4) To stand still in a passageway designed for movement is already to adopt an uncommon choreography, one that may attract notice or may pass undetected by station security and the surveillance cameras mounted on the ceiling, a choreopolitics that resists the choreopolice that Lepecki speaks of, camouflaged as aesthetic absorption in the public secrets of *Lord Mountbatten Thinks of Pink*.

2.5 Mountbatten Pink

Further contextual layers of these “secrets” emerge not from a sensing of the panels alone, but via the discreet circular metal plaque installed beside them. (fig. 2.5) Etched with the artwork description and a brief biography of the artist, the plaque conforms to the standard quantity and format of information provided alongside public artworks within Singapore's transportation infrastructure. Given Wee's parallel practice as writer, poet, and curator, I read this short passage, along with its biographical framing, as calibrated information designed to support the layers of opacity central to his form of camouflaged choreographies. This is information that resists the expectation to decipher or decode. I reproduce the cryptic artwork description in its entirety:

Lord Louis ‘Dickie’ Mountbatten, friend to Noel Coward, Jawaharlal Nehru and Lee Kuan Yew, once thought it a good idea to paint a fleet of ships pink in wartime. In 1940, he invented Mountbatten Pink as a naval camouflage colour for the Fifth Flotilla. The naval commander reasoned that pink pigments will match the colour of the sky at dawn and dusk, making the ships harder to see by the enemy. Using these unusual connections as inspiration, the artwork depicts a modern container ship at those ‘pink’ hours, a vessel typical of those moored off the Fort Road shoreline close

to the station. This station, and Mountbatten Road beside it, is eponymously named after him, the colourful last Viceroy of India.

By opening with Lord Mountbatten's pet name "Dickie," the artwork description performs a cheeky intimacy with British monarchy that postcolonial convention would not typically permit. This gesture signals that Wee is working beyond the indicative register of public art signage, playing with layers of meaning that exceed the descriptive. The description repeats "pink" four times. The common anecdote is that Mountbatten spotted a mauve ship of lavender-gray hue disappear into the horizon at twilight and commanded that his flotilla be painted "medium gray with a dash of Venetian red" (St. Clair 57). In this account, the seemingly ostentatious pink camouflage operates through chromatic attunement to specific environmental conditions, rendering the vessel illegible to hostile detection only at twilight while making it more visible at all other times.

This paradoxical "thinking" of pink as camouflage, and the fine line between legibility and illegibility according to one's space and time, requires further elaboration in the context of Singapore's political semiotics. Beyond the global queer movement's reclaiming of the pink triangle as a symbol of resistance, since 2009, pink has functioned in Singapore as the organizing color of Pink Dot.⁵ This chromatic tactic of Pink Dot employs what Michelle M. Lazar calls a "homonational discourse" (420) of pragmatic resistance. Pink combines Singapore's national colors of red and white, rendering queerness palatable and legible through patriotic assimilation. For an informed public, the seascapes' pink hues may be read as a coded reference to the queer community, while the historical naval camouflage narrative maintains plausible deniability.

Wee's calibrated opacity also camouflages other layers of queerness latent in the artwork's naming of Lord Mountbatten. The artwork description name-drops a strange triad of friendships: flamboyant British thespian and playwright Noël Coward, along with the inaugural prime ministers of both India and Singapore after British decolonization. This peculiar constellation of names performs its own queer choreography, recalling Foucault's engagement with gay relations as friendship ("Friendship as a Way of Life"). Coward's inclusion signals toward a particular milieu of queer sociality among the British elites in the arts, while Jawaharlal Nehru and Lee Kuan Yew anchor the reference within the official histories of postcolonial nation-building. The juxtaposition refuses hierarchy or elaboration, leaving the viewer to sense the "unusual connections" the description names as the artwork's inspiration.

Most tellingly, the descriptor that Wee uses for Lord Mountbatten is the ambiguous but coded term "colourful," a phrase that can be queer-coded to indicate someone in the

⁵ For further details around Pink Dot, and the organization that runs the event Pink Dot SG, along with their activism, refer to Chapter 1.

circle, or perhaps a wink at the controversy surrounding Lord Mountbatten's reputation. Posthumous speculation around Lord Mountbatten's sexuality and alleged abuse exists in whispered knowledge rather than official history. I cite this cautiously, refusing conflation between homosexuality and pedophilia, and avoiding both hagiographic celebration and slander of British monarchy. The point here is to indicate that Wee's citation performs something that exceeds naive or transparent anti-colonial critique, revealing the complications of furtive and taboo desires that operate through camouflaged choreographies beneath these mercurial seascapes.

Indeed, recalling James C. Scott's analysis of "gossip" as an infrapolitical tactic within what Scott calls "hidden transcripts," we can read Wee's references to Lord Mountbatten's sexual proclivities as aligned with these infrapolitics. The wall plaque camouflages itself through a mimicry of historical wall plaques and site markers to perform borrowed pedagogical legitimacy. It locates the depicted container ship as "typical of those moored off the Fort Road shoreline close to the station." This final geographic specificity performs its own disclosure for those who recognize it. The Fort Road shoreline, also known as Tanjong Rhu, has historically functioned as a cruising ground for men who have sex with men. This was the same site where a series of police entrapment operations in 1993 resulted in multiple arrests and contributed to the climate of fear that shaped queer life in Singapore. The work appears to monumentalize the station's namesake, Lord Mountbatten, while also evoking the practice of cruising and the moment when private, furtive acts were exposed to public scrutiny along reclaimed shorelines, where men gathered under the cover of crepuscular light.

2.6 Doubled Conveyances

The choreography of *Lord Mountbatten Thinks of Pink* operates on different levels. The commuter who hesitates to consider the panels may sense only dueling pink seascapes and a historical anecdote about naval camouflage. The viewer attuned to Singapore's queer histories may recognize the sly Fort Road reference, the resonances with Pink Dot, the "colorful" coding. A reader who lingers over the artwork description, moving between text and panels, may begin to see that camouflage functions not only as concealment, but also as a mode of address – speaking to multiple publics across time while remaining illegible to others. When I corresponded with Wee about the duplicity and obfuscation in his work and the experience of being queer in Singapore, he responded with the observation on this tension of hiding in plain sight:

The doubledness you and I were talking about – some folks getting one conveyance, other folks understanding the other conveyances – works more than disguise or deflection. I think it can manifest, by placing in public contexts, the secrecies that are demanded by democratic authorities of their constituencies, a kind of anonymity that

allows the authority to be both blind to us and simultaneously – because of that selective blindness – perceive us as the citizens they know.

We are public secrets, we stand in public spaces and without beginning to, without deliberately covering or passing or hiding, are already hidden and passed over and overlooked.⁶

Wee's quote clarifies his practice of concealment and highlights paradoxes around the governance of sexuality in Singapore. A key idea is that camouflaged choreographies work beyond "disguise or deflection," toward the productive and layered. Importantly, Wee foregrounds the tension between public and private life for the queer community. Before its repeal in 2023,⁷ Section 377A criminalized acts of "gross indecency" between men in both public and private spaces. Although derived from the British Penal Code, the "A" clause was a colonial addendum introduced in 1938 amid anxieties over national security and the potential blackmail of British military officers. This distinguished it from Section 377, which targeted "carnal intercourse against the order of nature" but was limited to acts in public. By extending sodomy law into the private sphere, Section 377A rendered male homosexual conduct – including non-penetrative intimacies – prosecutable regardless of where it occurred (J.Y. Chua; Radics). Even after its repeal, this legal intrusion into private life continues to cast a long shadow, shaping a generation of gay men and the broader queer community.

This legal erosion of the private sphere,⁸ what Foucault refers to as a "deployment of sexuality" (76), operates within Singapore's particular spatial limitations. In a land-scarce city-state, the boundaries between private and public space have always been porous and contested. Privacy and safety can be purchased by those who can afford it, but remain often out of reach for those who cannot.⁹ Privacy in Singapore is a constant negotiation, subject to common corridors, thin walls, and proximity to one's neighbors. Geographer Natalie Oswin elaborates this fraught relationship between urban spaces and queer subjects in Singapore, calling it an "exclusionary politics of reproductive futurism" (17). For queer subjects, this

⁶ Personal communication with Jason Wee, 21 April 2021.

⁷ The repeal of Section 377A and the debates around it are examined in detail in Chapter 1.

⁸ The debate and demarcation of the public from the private is beyond the scope of this chapter. It includes Herbert Marcuse's definition of the productivity of eros, Hannah Arendt's degradation of the social, Jürgen Habermas's structural transformation of the public sphere and Nancy Fraser's subsequent critique through subaltern counterpublics, and Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner's elaboration on the concept around intimacy, sexuality, and queerness.

⁹ Chua Beng Huat has written extensively about the relationship between public housing, citizenship and the state. For a compilation of his writings around this topic, refer to *Public Subsidy, Private Accumulation: The Political Economy of Singapore's Public Housing*. The conversation around queerness and urban infrastructure and the boundaries between public and private has also been explored in further depth by other scholars, including Shawna Tang, Gao Ding, and Jason Luger.

spatial condition compounds the legal framework. When the private sphere is always already semi-public – along with the proscription of all gay sexual behavior even within the private sphere – the demand that queerness remain invisible becomes nearly impossible to fulfill unless it is a complete abstention from gay intimacy or sex, or a proliferation of sex in public spaces. These are the “secrecies that are demanded” of the State “of their constituencies” that Wee refers to, along with the “selective blindness” – choosing to ignore what cannot be hidden, and what has always been considered public. In this sense, when intimate acts between men were criminalized regardless of whether they happened in the public or private sphere, cruising for pleasure in public spaces became less a transgression of spatial norms than a practical acknowledgment that gay sex, wherever it occurred, was always already categorized as a “public” offense under Section 377A.¹⁰ Wee explicitly names the ontological paradox and queer sensibility his artwork both depicts and enacts. The phrase challenges a politics of recognition and representation that liberal frameworks of queer politics champion. Queer sexuality and presence are the necessary secrets that need to be ignored for the integrity of the population to cohere.

This condition of invisibility operates within infrastructure that is itself structured by a logic of doubleness. The concept of military camouflage – painting a container ship pink, making it more visible against its ground – becomes a condensed symbol of Singapore’s postcolonial condition, in which the military forms the infrastructural foundation of what appears to be civilian space. As Deborah Cowen observes in *The Deadly Life of Logistics*, the boundaries between what we conventionally identify as “civilian” and “military” have become increasingly porous. She connects Foucauldian biopolitics to logistics, recognizing that “military history reminds us that logistics is not only about circulating stuff but about sustaining life” (3). These underground MRT stations were designed as civil defense shelters, but this dual and hidden purpose extends far beyond transport networks. As much as the scarcity of land determines where and how queer subjects are intimate, it also shapes engagement with public space. Almost every part of public infrastructure carries an architectural duplicity: expressways engineered to function as emergency airstrips, reservoirs that serve as both recreational spaces and strategic water security functions,¹¹ nature reserves that conceal a sprawling underground military armory. This pervasive condition of strategic ambiguity means that no space exists merely for its stated civilian purpose; these environments operate under multiple, often conflicting logics simultaneously.

¹⁰ Ahmad Salehin and Laura Vitis’ article on gay cruising in Singapore explores the third space that online spaces provide, and how the gay community utilize it as a space to reinforce internalized self-surveillance, but to collate and share information on cruising sites and safety. My project is aligned with their project to move beyond a binaristic thinking of resistance – to examine the layers and textures of what resistance might appear like.

¹¹ I discuss the history of water resource securitization as a national anxiety at length in Chapter 5.

Beyond the secret duplicity of military and civilian infrastructure lies a third latent layer, that of public desire and reclamation. Just as Fort Road and Tanjong Rhu were reclaimed as land, we have reclaimed and appropriated these part-military, part-civilian infrastructures as spaces of bodies and pleasures. Underground civil defense structures are transformed into skate parks and group dance practice sites. Nature reserves and reservoirs become areas of public cruising. Even transitional spaces such as the underground passageways of MRT stations, because of their proximity to common and public toilets, are reappropriated despite heavy surveillance cameras into spaces for pick-up sex among gay men. These duplicitous logics of infrastructure echo the multiple registers of camouflage I outlined: temporal, spatial, and agential. Wee highlights that queer subjects in Singapore do not necessarily perform choreographies of camouflage out of volition, but “are already hidden and passed over and overlooked” by the selective perceptual apparatus of state and society that prioritizes the rights of a heteronormative, reproductive citizen. This formulation of queer sensibility resonates as a particular type of etiolated conduct: a mode of being that is shaped by deprivation rather than active resistance, produced by the conditions that constrain it. To stand in public space as a public secret is to move through infrastructures¹² designed for other purposes while remaining camouflaged to those who do not sense queerly. *Lord Mountbatten Thinks of Pink* operates, like cruising practices and the management of sexuality in Singapore, as a secret that the State demands of its constituents. As camouflaged choreographies, the artwork gives this etiolated conduct of cruising a representational surrogate, one that reaches toward public circulation while remaining partially opaque as political address. As Louis Ho has observed of Wee’s practice, this is a quality of “anti-ocularity: namely, the correlation of sight and knowledge” (96). His practice reminds us to linger longer, move closer, and cultivate sensitivity to infrapolitics that lie beyond the spectrum of visibility.

So let us take up Wee’s invitation to hesitate and shift our habits of perception. To cruise is to move without a fixed destination, but it also names the movement of container ships that carry vast more-than-human assemblages across global networks, provisioning the desires of everyday life. *Lord Mountbatten Thinks of Pink* holds these meanings in suspension. Situated within an infrastructure of circulation, Wee’s work depicts the container ships off Singapore’s shoreline that sustain its consumer economy. Their blurred forms, hazy and unsettled, suggest perpetual movement. Here, Lord Mountbatten’s naval camouflage is transposed onto a civilian freighter: a cruising ship that becomes an anachronistic surrogate for the warships this technique once concealed. In this gesture, military history, colonial legacy, logistical infrastructure, and queer desire converge. By rendering the container ship

¹² This includes both social infrastructure, like marriage, application for public housing, but also physical infrastructure, like bathrooms and social spaces that are gendered.

in camouflage pink, Wee gathers these threads into alignment, inviting us to consider how colonial histories, economic flows, and queer desire intersect.

2.7 Camouflage in Transit

Beyond an analysis of *Lord Mountbatten Thinks of Pink* as camouflaged choreographies, an attunement to the method of cruising and infrastructural support will also need to examine the commissioning process that shaped the work, and the political circumstances around it. The Land Transport Authority initiated the *Art in Transit* scheme for underground MRT stations in 1997.¹³ The program's title, *Art in Transit*, reveals a contradiction at its core. The name suggests movement and temporality, evoking associations with choreography and transience, yet these artworks are resolutely and stoically stationary and permanent. This irony extends beyond the name: while "transit" implies quick passage, an *Art in Transit* commission typically represents the most high-profile and logistically complex project an artist might undertake, demanding years of negotiation and preparation involving consultations with project managers, curators, station architects, and construction engineers. The Circle Line artworks, which include Wee's *Lord Mountbatten Thinks of Pink*, demonstrate these timelines. Construction on the line began in 2002. Wee received the commission in 2008, yet Mountbatten station did not open until 2010, creating a two-year gap between initiation and realization. This commission timeline reflects the deliberation that goes into realizing the work; the queer frequencies of Wee's practice are unlikely to have gone unnoticed by the commissioning body.

Each station is typically allocated to a single contemporary artist, with the resulting artwork contributing to the station's distinct identity. The project's brief encourages artists to create works celebrating the site's "history, identity and community bond[s]" (Land Transport Authority) while carrying an implicit expectation that the work will democratize contemporary art by making it accessible to mass audiences. Yet these artworks possess another paradoxical quality – their very permanence creates a hypervisibility that can render them almost invisible, as they risk receding into decorative background elements when positioned in awkward spaces, under nondescript halogen lights, or when competing visually with corporate advertisements. Their very public display also means the accessibility of the work has to orient itself to the broadest possible audience in form and content. Other *Art in Transit* pieces involve the community as socially engaged relational artworks, or

¹³ From the Art in Transit website by the Land Transport Authority.

function as direct representations of the site of the station.¹⁴ Despite the potential of being overlooked by the public, for visual artists in Singapore, this commission represents state legitimization of their artistic practice. Having an artwork displayed in an MRT station serves as an official national recognition and creates a lasting legacy, as the work endures beyond the artist's career and lifespan.

Wee's practice within the *Art in Transit* scheme enacts what Neil Leach, drawing on Deleuze, calls the "fold": the artist becomes—with the state infrastructure that commissions, funds, and constrains the work, while the artwork becomes—with the station that houses it, "both states locked into a mechanism of reciprocal preposition" (245). Yet an application of Leach's "reciprocal preposition" to understand the strategies of camouflage assumes a symmetry that Singapore's specific conditions complicate. The fold between artist and State is not one between equal partners. The State can choose to unfold, to recognize what it has been selectively blind to, and the artist and the community that the work addresses must bear the consequences of that recognition. Engaging with *Lord Mountbatten Thinks of Pink* requires examining how Wee's artistic vision emerged through, rather than despite, these layered negotiations with State infrastructure alongside the broader assemblage of camouflaged choreographies that enabled this work's realization.

That institutional actors vetted, approved, and conversed with Wee throughout this process while remaining oblivious to (or choosing not to sense) the work's queer coding does not mean an artist outwitting the State. The State's blindness is itself a strategic choice: a selective ignorance that allows it to absolve itself of culpability when queer content is exposed, while claiming liberal tolerance when it proves useful. Artist and State are mutually implicated. Wee remains contingent on the funding structures and constraints that shape his practice, while the State's apparatus for managing public art produces the very conditions under which camouflaged choreographies become both necessary and possible. The *Art in Transit* commission's demand for an accessible, public art that responds to the site provides the formal alibi within which Wee's queer coding can operate, while the same State's proscription of queer sexuality ensures that such coding must remain camouflaged to circulate at all. This is a co-constitution in reciprocity, where queer presence in Singapore emerges through entanglement with the infrastructure that constrains it.¹⁵

¹⁴ Examples of socially engaged works commissioned by the *Art in Transit* scheme include performance artist Lee Wen's *When the Ship Comes In* at Bayfront MRT station, which is a mural composed of drawings of ships by young Singaporeans aged seven to twelve and Boo Junfeng's *I Am Anonymous* at Upper Changi MRT station, which collects and displays fingerprints from students at the Singapore University of Technology and Design. Examples of artworks that are direct representations of the site of the station includes Mintio's long-exposure photographs of the night sky along Orchard Road at Orchard MRT Station, and Darren Soh's photographs of the Malayan-Singaporean railway line at Hillview MRT Station.

¹⁵ For a more complete and comprehensive picture, this claim has to be considered in relation to Chapter 1, where I examine the pragmatic negotiations queer communities navigate in relation to the State,

2.8 Sustenance of Alternative Futurities

These acts of appropriation constitute camouflaged choreographies of “provisioning” and “sustenance” that operate through what Deborah Cowen calls “creative forms of resistance, contestation and alternative futurity” (“Reading” 269). The infrastructure designed for control, efficiency, and national defense inadvertently creates gaps and penumbras where other forms of life can flourish, precisely the kind of resistant occupation that might generate “alternative futurities” in these cracks. In both her introduction to *The Deadly Life of Logistics* and her concluding chapter titled “Rough Trade: Sex, Death, and the Queer Nature of Circulation,” Cowen promises a line of flight beyond the totalizing power of logistics. Drawing on feminist readings of Darwin, specifically Elizabeth Grosz’s work, she states that “the recovery of sexual selection is a claim on *the place of artistic practice* in organizing future politics” (*Deadly Life* 226; emphasis added). This approach extends queer analysis beyond human subjects to encompass broader ecological and infrastructural relations, challenging how circulation and mobility become naturalized under biological survival logic.¹⁶ Cowen turns to queer theorists Jasbir Puar and Anne McClintock, arguing that queer theory offers critical methods for imagining alternatives by holding desire “as simultaneously intimate and infrastructural, crossing public/private divides and collapsing spatial scale” (*Deadly Life* 223). Through McClintock’s concept of “rough trade” – both a sexual euphemism for cross-class male prostitution and literal commodity exchange – Cowen suggests possibilities to “produce creative solidarities” and “connective tissues of alternative futurities if they are occupied differently” (*Deadly Life* 227). This extends Samuel Delany’s ideas around interclass contact made possible through activities like cruising.

In a subsequent article examining Fisher River Cree Nation artist Kent Monkman’s performance installation work, Cowen elaborates on this turn toward aesthetics as a mode of denaturalizing logistics by arguing that queer logistics allow us to rethink social reproduction and concepts of “provisioning” and the “sustaining of capacities to live intergenerationally” (“Reading” 269). She states:

Logistics has historically been responsible for provisioning human life and the non-human animals, machines and infrastructures that constitute battlefields and now consumer societies. It is an art and science that has crafted empires, enabling them to

and the calibration of the milieu to maintain a heteronormative order. Chapter 3 provides an elaboration on this argument in relation to the practice of cruising itself, beyond the representation of it.

¹⁶ Cowen demonstrates this naturalization through her analysis of UPS’ corporate sponsorship of National Geographic’s *Great Migrations* documentary, arguing that the company inserts “social Darwinist politics of species survivalism deep into the ‘heart’ of the human life of logistics” (*Deadly Life* 199). This critique leads to her central question: “If this ‘natural’ vision of sex and death is deployed to naturalize the violence of supply chain capitalism, how might different engagements with nature’s reproduction help cultivate alternative futurities, including alternative forms of economic organization?” (*Deadly Life* 222)

function practically and materially. And yet, *provisioning and sustaining are the highly gendered and racialized labors of social reproduction*, not a terrain that could ever be fully ceded to the corporate and military worlds where it is practiced so violently and professionally today (“Reading” 269; emphasis added).

I approach Wee’s practice as a form of durational resistance that sustains queer presence through acts of “provisioning,” rather than solely in forms of pragmatic political resistance.¹⁷ Cowen’s project clarifies what art can do – and within performance praxis, what a body can do – which is to expose the body’s embeddedness within larger networks of circulation. This approach performs a Marxist feminist critique of the under-recognized labor of social reproduction through “provision” and “sustenance” – in areas that escape corporate or military structures. This includes care work, maintenance work, sexual desire, and artistic practice. What Cowen names “the queer nature of circulation” exposes how the unwaged labor of social reproduction, of care, desire, and sustenance, forms the under-recognized foundation of logistical movement, rendered invisible by the heteronormative frameworks that naturalize whose labor counts as productive. An encounter with *Lord Mountbatten Thinks of Pink* is an exercise in delinquency, where the slowing of your pace to attend to the work attracts others to do the same. The logic of efficient circulation and movement is suspended, and for a brief moment we forget our destination and cruise as we attend to a materiality of queerness and desire.¹⁸

2.9 Periodizing Camouflage

Read together, Cowen and Delany remind us to look beyond identity, immediacy, and legibility when tracking queer presence. Both direct our attention materially toward longer temporal frames – acts of sustenance and provisioning, what Cowen theorizes as the unwaged labor of social reproduction, that enable queer presence to circulate and persist. Their critical frameworks prove essential for understanding Jason Wee’s artistic practice and the politics of queer presence amid Singapore’s shifting terrain of liberalization and modernization. To read Wee’s practice infrastructurally requires situating it within the political conditions that shape both the necessity and the form of camouflage. This brief periodization tracks some of the most visible episodes of public exposure and policing of sexuality in Singapore, providing essential historical context for understanding the shifts in Wee’s practice across three loosely delineated periods.

¹⁷ Wee’s other community organizational efforts for both the queer and arts community – some of which constitute more legible and overt forms of pragmatic resistance – are beyond the scope of this chapter.

¹⁸ The next chapter takes up this critique in further detail, examining how the unwaged labor of cruising and the ecology of reclaimed land constitute forms of social reproduction that fall outside capital’s accounting of value. I develop a framework I call “ecological intimacy” to examine how cruising practices and land reclamation intersect at the shoreline Wee’s work discreetly depicts.

Wee's "public secret" formed against a backdrop of overexposure: the Singaporean media's treatment of gay sexuality in the early 1990s, a period marked by fear and ignorance as knowledge about AIDS and HIV was still emerging, coinciding with police entrapment of men who had sex with men in public cruising areas at shopping malls, swimming pools, and public parks. This culminated in a significant case in September 1993 in which twelve men were arrested at Fort Road. Six who pleaded guilty were given jail sentences and three strokes of the cane each.¹⁹ Toward the end of the 1990s and early 2000s, queer presence was again publicly instrumentalized, this time through pedagogical spectacle, most notably when Paddy Chew, the first Singaporean to publicly disclose living with HIV, staged a one-person monologue in 1999.²⁰ The State instrumentalized Chew's presence for international media as evidence of modernization and tolerance.²¹ For queer people who lived through the 1990s, including Jason Wee, this oscillation between criminalization and instrumentalization laid the groundwork for seeking alternative strategies of signifying queer presence. What emerged were approaches attuned to the trappings of visibility and exposure, forged in the wake of sexuality's pathologization and policing.

Queer visibility seemingly flourished in the post-2000s in Singapore, albeit with strongly homonationalist undertones. During the premiership of Goh Chok Tong, there was a period of rapid liberalization marked by pragmatic tolerance of queer citizens in the civil service²² alongside a surge of gay, lesbian, and trans representation in Singaporean theater and the annual gay circuit party *Nation*. Yet this liberalization proved mercurial: the government restricted queer visibility by shutting down *Nation* in 2005, exemplifying what Singaporeans refer to as the invisible and constantly shifting "out-of-bound" markers of the

¹⁹ This specific history is elaborated in further detail in the next chapter that engages with the more-than-human ecology of Fort Road. The view of the "Fort Road shoreline" at "those 'pink' hours" described by Jason Wee in the plaque that memorializes this incident and the location as a cruising ground.

²⁰ The media represented Chew's performance as a cautionary tale, framing it as Catholic confession and absolution before his passing in August 1999. The performance obtained a public entertainment license, meaning the script was submitted for approval to the State-run licensing authority. For further context on the production *Completely With/Out Character*, directed by Alvin Tan at The Necessary Stage, see C.J. Wee W.-L.'s article "Performing Performance: Paddy Chew, Sincerity and (Re-)Staging AIDS." In full disclosure, I restaged Paddy Chew's performance twice as part of a practice based research in 2015 and 2017.

²¹ This is in the Asian edition of *Time Magazine* on 19 July 1999, with the cover title "Singapore Swings: Can Asia's nanny state give up its authoritarian ways?" The article was written by Terry McCarthy and Eric Ellis, titled "Singapore Lightens Up."

²² The second Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong said in a *Time* magazine article by Simon Elegant "The Lion in Winter", 7 July 2003: "We are born this way and [queer people] are born that way, but they are like you and me." (36) In this same article, which talks about the impact of the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis on Singapore, he also mentioned being open to hiring queer foreign talent and allowing gay employees into sensitive government positions.

State and its tolerance of difference.²³ It was in this shadow that Jason Wee began making and exhibiting his mixed-media work from 2004 onwards.

Queer social activism, less militant in the long shadow of political detention of dissidents from the 1960s onwards,²⁴ became more prominent during this time. The parliamentary debates in October 2007 over the petition filed to repeal Section 377A (which I analyze as a primary object in my first chapter) marked peak exposure of gay sexuality in the highest public forum of the State.²⁵ The repeal was rejected, and the government adopted a compromise position of keeping the law while not actively enforcing it, a decision that sowed the seeds of the queer community's disillusionment with pragmatic rights-based legal proceduralism.

In early 2009, an aggressive takeover of AWARE – a non-governmental organization dedicated to women's rights and gender equality – exposed the force of religious conservatism and the extent to which it would mobilize to resist queerness, galvanizing a coalition across feminist and queer constituencies that generated activist momentum.²⁶ On 16 May 2009, weeks later, the first Pink Dot was held. As elaborated earlier in this chapter, it is in the wake of these events that Jason Wee's *Lord Mountbatten*

²³ *Nation* was timed to coincide with Singapore's National Day, and features military themed "dog-tag" parties and overt and camp displays of patriotism. For scholarship on the *Nation* circuit parties, see Eng-Beng Lim, "Glocalqueering in New Asia: The Politics of Performing Gay in Singapore." The work of Audrey Yue and Lynette Chua, cited earlier in this dissertation, also addresses the parties' significance and their 2005 ban. The denial of the Public Entertainment License cited the event as "contrary to public interest," with Minister of State for Health Dr. Balaji Sadasivan linking the parties to rising HIV infections by claiming they "allowed gays from high-prevalence societies to fraternise with local gay men, seeding the infection in the local community." Ex-journalists Cherian George and Tan Tarn How have written about the subject of "OB" or out of bounds markers in Singapore in relation to the government's control over print media.

²⁴ The history of political detention is something I cover in Chapter 4.

²⁵ I cover these 2007 debates, along with the 2022 debates that led to the eventual repeal of Section 377A in my first chapter. For further reading refer to legal sociologist George Baylon Radics' scholarship.

²⁶ At an Annual General Meeting on 28 March 2009, a group of new members were elected to the executive committee of AWARE. It was subsequently revealed that many of the new executive committee were members of the same church, and that they had taken over AWARE largely due to their objections to the organization's sexuality education program, one that they view as too tolerant of alternative sexualities. This incident, known as the AWARE saga, gave rise to an immense amount of indignation amongst queer, human rights, and feminist communities in Singapore. On 2 May 2009, around three thousand people attended an Extraordinary General Meeting, during which a vote of no confidence was held and the new executive committee was made to step down. For a more comprehensive overview, refer to Terence Chong's monograph on the incident *The AWARE Saga: Civil Society and Public Morality in Singapore* and Shawna Tang's article *Chinese Racialization and Technologies of Mothering: Continuities in Straight and Queer Reproduction in Singapore*. Tang's research triangulates the AWARE incident, 1980s graduate mothers' scheme, and contemporary queer family units and adopts an intersectional approach. AWARE has also produced a twelve episode podcast on the incident produced by Jasmine Ng and Kelly Leow that provides essential chronological and political context to the incident.

Thinks of Pink was conceived and installed in 2010. Notably, Jason Wee received the 2008 Young Artist Award in Singapore, the nation's highest honor for early-career artists, just two years before his public art commission was unveiled. That Wee received both an artistic award from the State and a high-profile commission while his work consistently negotiated queer representation illustrates the tension and irony of this period, of simultaneous celebration and obfuscation.

The third period, from the mid-2010s to the present, features greater awareness and sensitivity toward a wider range of sexualities in tandem with global conversations around sexuality and its intersections with race, gender, and class-based discrimination. It was during this period that Jason Wee developed *Commonplace*, a photographic series consisting of blurred photographs of people cruising in unnamed public sites around Singapore, as part of an artist residency with Exactly Foundation. Wee started explicitly associating the language of movement and choreography with cruising activities, writing in an accompanying artist statement: "This may be a choreography, but it is less a dance than an embodied diagram/legend that unlocks the map of possibilities in both our public spaces and their sexual selves" (10).

The residency required Wee to participate in work-in-progress showings and discussions. Foundation director Li Li Chung intentionally gathered people from both sides of the 377A debates and AWARE saga, including religious conservatives and queer performers, creating what drag artist Becca D'Bus described as conditions that felt "reckless, and irresponsible" (38). This well-intentioned but poorly conceived exposure impacted Wee's continued development of his work. In his epilogue to the *Commonplace* catalog, he explicitly reflects on the dangers of instrumentalizing his work for pedagogical purposes, naming the "mix of hesitation and suspicion" people carry while navigating cruising spaces "as a psychic defense for living queer in Singapore" (10). Cruising spaces, for Wee, are "endangered and threatened" spaces "where we queers can look into and find each other" (66). The *Commonplace* residency demonstrates what can happen when transparency is imposed on work that thrives on opacity, along with the consequences of lowering "psychic defenses."

In the lead-up to the first public presentation of *Uncommon Choreographies* in 2020, the global pandemic resulted in a national lockdown of several months. Compounded by enforced social isolation and home quarantine, the lack of private spaces in a land-scarce State drove queer individuals to outdoor and public spaces. There was a resurgence of cruising practices: part defiance of social isolation, part manifestation of repressed sexual desire, part resistance to the choreographies demanded by the State of its citizens. It is against this backdrop that *Uncommon Choreographies* emerged, a work that camouflages the traces of these encounters within its fragments. *Uncommon Choreographies* is an ongoing series, an indication that Wee intends the work to be seen as part of a longer temporal

continuum. What we witness across this trajectory is a sustained practice of navigating queer presence under shifting conditions of visibility and constraint.

2.10 Assigning “Assignations”

Ten panels, each measuring thirty-two and a half inches by twenty inches, are arranged in two neat rows. There are two gaps: one in the second position of the top row, another in the fifth position of the bottom row. This creates a symmetrical tilde-shaped (~) constellation. Each panel holds a completed jigsaw puzzle contained in a white frame. The puzzles are assembled using pieces from different panels, creating an abstract interchange. The camouflaged photographs feature close-ups, color fields, landscapes, and portraits with horizon lines in unpredictable orientations. While the grainy outlines of silhouettes, vegetation, and infrastructure remain visible, compositions are interrupted by displaced flashes of blue, red, green, and black superimposed from other panels. Like *Lord Mountbatten Thinks of Pink*, these images never surrender entirely to abstraction. The referent haunts the image, revealing itself to the curious while receding into noise for others. The work invites multiple viewing experiences, including two particularly contrasting approaches. Close examination uncovers intricate details: a sign that reads as either “danger” or possibly “dancer” in one panel and a figure’s shadow lingering under a bridge-like structure in another. (fig. 2.6 & 2.7) Stepping back to view the entire constellation enables tracking the dispersal of fragments across the wave-like arrangement.

This constellation of fragmented images and absent panels characterizes *Uncommon Choreographies*, a series of photography-based installations by Jason Wee that has traveled across multiple contexts. A ten-panel version was exhibited at the Asia Society Triennial in New York City. (fig. 2.8) The series exists in various dimensions and configurations that began as experiments with smaller panels and culminated in a solo exhibition titled *Cruising* held at Yavuz Gallery in Singapore. The work camouflages its context as it travels across cities transnationally. When first shown in Malaysia under the title of *Dances On Their Own* in 2019, the work was described as depicting “queer bodies” in an “unspecified location in Singapore,” as they “cross and recross the area looking for each other” (*Jason Wee: Dances On Their Own* 6). Another sentence abruptly declares “sex” as “the driving compulsion and ambition of the evening” (*Jason Wee: Dances On Their Own* 6), yet this frank admission exists in isolation, offering no bridge between explicit naming and ambiguous activities. In New York City, the website described the “unspecified location” as “frequented by the queer community in Singapore for *assignations*” (“Jason Wee” *Asia Society Triennial*; emphasis added). “Assignations” refers to the attribution of something to someone – often in pedagogical contexts (as in assignments or gender assignment) – but also, less commonly, to

a secret rendezvous between lovers.²⁷ In 2021, even though the solo exhibition in Singapore was titled *Cruising*, Wee played into the multiple valences of the word, and there was an absence of explanation about the sexual practice in the press release or website. The activity was euphemistically coded as “secret choreographies” and a representation of “disobedient desires inscribed onto our coastal parks” (Yavuz). What was consistent across all three presentations was Wee’s intention to obscure image, meaning, and intent by blending figures into ground and using precise and coded language. The work was described as “shifting between the expansive and the secretive” (Yavuz). Critical attention focused on the “immediacy and distancing possibilities [...] of movements” (“Jason Wee” *Asia Society Triennial*). It was also framed as a continuation of Wee’s “interest in landscapes and assemblages” (Yavuz). Unlike *Lord Mountbatten Thinks of Pink*, *Uncommon Choreographies* exists as an untethered art object that can be transported in the very container ships that the public artwork depicts. The work’s circulation across transnational exhibition contexts reveals how contextual ambiguity acquires different currencies in different markets. Abroad, the work may circulate precisely because it appears to have eluded State censorship, satisfying a liberal appetite for queer representation from contexts where queerness is proscribed. The opacity that functions as protective camouflage in Singapore becomes, in New York or Kuala Lumpur, a sign of transgression, consumed as evidence of artistic tenacity. This transnational reception risks reproducing the demand for transparency that Wee’s practice resists.

While Wee’s tactical reframing demonstrates the power of linguistic camouflage, *Uncommon Choreographies* operates intrinsically as visual camouflage as well. The work recalls military camouflage patterns and incorporates images that Wee photographed at various cruising sites in Singapore, which became the source material for the puzzle collages. The fabrication technique is elegant in its simplicity. Wee prints these images – often captured in low-light conditions that further degrade image quality – onto individual Forex boards, creating what amounts to a first layer of camouflage. Each board is then cut using the same jigsaw puzzle die, producing interlocking pieces that can be transposed across different puzzles, which adds a second layer of camouflage. The photograph is fragmented, temporally layered with others, while spatial perspective is consistently reconfigured in the collage, as landscapes and portraits are interlocked with each other. This creates an impressionistic and affective simulation of the furtive experience of cruising – the wandering and searching, the disorientation of bodies, the excitement of catching a glimpse of the surreptitious, and the pleasures of withholding a secret in public. Wee’s cheeky intervention also functions infrastructurally as institutional critique, superimposing clandestine cruising

²⁷ The audio guide and artist interview for the Asia Society Triennial were more direct about naming the site as a “cruising location.” The transcript of the audio guide and artist interview are accessible on Asia Society’s website (“Jason Wee” *Asia Society Triennial*).

activities onto the pristine and sanitized white cube gallery walls. Gallery visitors might find themselves staring directly at the obscene (the profane, the unseen, the off-stage), with only a select group recognizing what they are looking at.

Wee describes the exercise of collective assemblage that the creation of *Uncommon Choreographies* entails. He prints and works on ten panels simultaneously, as gaps in one fill in for the other (“Ian’s Research Club”). He responds to each image while holding others in mind, selecting and editing what he chooses to reveal and conceal. Effectively, a pragmatic way to decode the abstraction is possible if one disassembles and reassembles the pieces of all the puzzles, but this remains a fantasy of complete legibility. Wee’s camouflage succeeds because reassembling the image demands more labor and capital than the art collector is willing to invest. Most importantly, one also destroys the artistic value of the work in its decoding. This creates a clever double-bind between the desire to know and the value of unknowing. In this specific case, the infrastructure of the art market is what protects the secret that is latent within the work; the work circulates socially in its redaction, because full legibility would eliminate its potential exchange value. The artistic labor and signature of the artist reside in the method and form of abstraction.

Uncommon Choreographies exemplifies Wee’s signature “anti-ocular drive,” identified by Louis Ho in the artist’s work, building on the earlier analysis of *Lord Mountbatten Thinks of Pink*. The installation also echoes Wee’s sentiments of Singapore’s queer community existing as “public secrets,” operating within what he describes as layers of “conveyances.” Wee reinforced this in an interview about his 2021 solo exhibition, stating that he strives for his work to have the quality of being “invisible but tangible, present but illegible, opaque yet legible” (“Ian’s Research Club”). As we follow Wee’s work from 2010 to 2020, what we have witnessed over the last decade is an increased sensitivity and sophistication in his linguistic and visual choreographies of camouflage, triangulating infrastructure, form, and content. The title itself registers the shift: from “commonplace,” an assumption of coming together at a location in solidarity or affinity, to “uncommon,” with shades of Fred Moten and Stefano Harney’s formulation of “the undercommons” as fugitivity. The prefix insists on an undoing of the common that nevertheless remains tethered to it.

2.11 Social Visceral Abstraction

Wee’s calibrated opacity connects to a broader tradition of queer artists using abstraction as relational concealment, yet demands careful differentiation. Some examples of this broader tradition among queer artists include Félix González-Torres and his installation portraits of his partner Ross, materialized in abstraction as a pile of sweets that invite public consumption. We are also reminded of Scott Burton, embedding his cruising experiences in what art historian David J. Getsy calls “obdurately resilient public sculptures of furniture that offered care and contact to passersby” (39–40). Unlike the works of González-Torres and

Burton, which circulate socially through disarming generosity, relationality, and conviviality, the works of queer artists in Singapore respond to a differently situated politics of queerness. Where these artists' abstraction operates within liberal democratic contexts where queer visibility, however contested, remains available as political tactic, this chapter has traced the costs of visibility in Singapore: entrapment at Fort Road, instrumentalization through Paddy Chew's public disclosure, co-optation through Pink Dot's homonationalism. Under such conditions, Wee and queer artists in Singapore adopt a more severely opaque, anti-relational disposition. This disposition manifests as a withholding of information, as opacity instead of transparency, as a resistance of the object.²⁸ Within a space of "heteronormative governance" (Oswin 107), this dense opacity becomes a tactic for survival. The camouflage thickens; the time capsule is sealed for a longer durée; legibility is coded for, by, and with more-than-human registers. Every moment of easy legibility and exposure remains a risk of entrapment, not merely implicating the artist and their practice, but also the community they represent.

Having traced Wee's practice across these works, let us return to three assumptions that underlie the discussion: my practice of reading Wee through his self-theorization while extending it into frameworks he does not necessarily invoke, the limits of the collective "we" his formulation of "public secrets" claims, and the ethical quandary of rendering transparent aesthetic objects that thrive in abstraction. As an artist-scholar, I understand the significance of remaining faithful through a close reading of the artwork and the artist's intentions. Wee is a self-aware conceptual artist, one who lends his work to rich critique. Much of my analysis in this chapter is grounded in conversation with him and structured around his own words: "public secret," "conveyances," "doubleness." I would go further to claim that being a contemporary artist in Singapore – where the artist has been historically framed as a "security threat"²⁹ to the stability of the country – produces an artistic practice that is necessarily cerebral, reflexive, and obtuse. Wee and I both belong to a cohort of artists who have been trained to articulate our ideas with a veneer of transparency for grant proposals and bureaucratic management. What I add to his adept self-theorizing, beyond a representation and consolidation of his ideas, is the infrastructural and historical reading that situates his formal strategies within conditions he navigates. I read his choreographies beyond what they mean, attending to what they do and how they move.

²⁸ Chapter 5 engages with the withdrawal and resistance of the object in conversation with Fred Moten's *In the Break*.

²⁹ This was language around the proscription of performance art and forum theater in Singapore in 1994. See Russell Heng's "Arts, security and Singapore's liberal fringe," *The Business Times*. In response to the statement to proscribe performance art and forum theater, Heng wrote: "It is about the artist as possible subversive and how the realm of art must be regulated with security uppermost in mind."

This brings us to the second assumption: Wee's formulation of "we" in his "public secrets" statement. In our email correspondence, Wee's "we" was a royal one, taken in context to mean us, both cisgender Chinese gay men, well educated, and well positioned. Sitting with his words in light of the infrastructural reading of his practice, I question: what are the blind spots that this "we" assumes in its solidarity? The density of our camouflage can afford to be much thinner, as "we" enjoy a wider and safer margin of privilege within Singaporean society. This is a reminder that camouflaged choreographies are not equally accessible to bodies that appear differently in race, gender, sexuality, class, and nationality. Camouflaged choreographies traffic in legibility that etiolated conduct may not.

The third assumption concerns the ethical quagmire of interpreting aesthetic objects that thrive on opacity. This quagmire recalls academia's colonial impulse to render the unknown knowable as a way to extract, control, and dominate. As Pheng Cheah, Cherian George, Ho Rui An, and others I have referred to in the chapters across this dissertation have theorized, this interplay of power, visibility, and control traces the shift from disciplinary surveillance in the 1980s to a more sophisticated biopolitical system of technocratic management by the 2010s. Under such circumstances, what forms might critique take if we are to approach aesthetic works while also attending to their more-than-human capacities? How do we perform this without betraying or instrumentalizing their "public secrets" through academic translation? How might scholarship itself register as an etiolated gesture, or as a practice of keeping a secret we have been assigned? How do we engage with abstraction without defaulting to deciphering it concretely?

These questions emerge from the specific conditions under which Wee's practice operates. Singapore's technocratic governance operates through a pervasive sanitization: of public space, of discourse, of the body and its desires. The city-state's well-documented obsession with cleanliness extends beyond the literal examples that have circulated internationally (fines for littering, the ban on chewing gum) into a biopolitical management that renders desire abstract and disembodied. Under such conditions, a theoretical framework that insists on reinstating the visceral into abstraction becomes an essential mode of critique. Sianne Ngai's "visceral abstraction" names how aesthetic opacity achieves social and political effects without demanding legibility. In *Theory of the Gimmick*, Ngai regrounds the concept of abstraction through a translation nuance in Marx's *Capital*, vol. 1: Marx originally used *gallerte* to describe how living labor-power becomes captured within commodity objects. Typically translated as "congealment," *gallerte* also refers to a gelatinous meat-based condiment made from bone and connective tissue, a visceral, material association lost in translation. Ngai argues that this affective gap reveals the "socially binding or plasticizing action of capitalist abstractions" (191)³⁰, and positions aesthetic judgment and

³⁰ This visceral, material association, familiar to a German reader of Marx's time, is essential to understanding abstraction and the alchemical transmutation of value in *Capital*, vol. 1 as it shapeshifts between

sensing as forms of social knowledge that encode implicit critiques of capitalist relations without requiring us to uncover, reveal, or decipher abstraction itself.³¹ Like the camouflage paint that surfaces in crevices behind ears months after the military exercise has ended, abstraction always carries bodily residue that the sanitizing apparatus cannot fully eliminate.

In an artist statement that accompanies *Uncommon Choreographies*, Jason Wee states explicitly: “I want them to think about abstraction as a social form, and as representative of movement, secrecy, and desire.”³² Within the context of cruising, this abstraction as sociality de-centers the human individual. Wee’s practice navigates and cruises along this threshold: neither the full transparency that might render queer presence vulnerable to capture, nor the total abstraction of absence and erasure. These puzzle pieces and the composition retain sufficient referential residue to orient the attuned viewer, yet remain insufficient to constitute legible evidence. These camouflaged choreographies are “visceral” precisely because they retain enough bodily, spatial trace to produce affective familiarity, enough referential clues to circulate as social knowledge rather than mere aesthetic abstraction.

In *Uncommon Choreographies*, this social choreography includes the process and infrastructure that support the work. This ranges from Wee’s visits to cruising sites to collect these images while engaging with the sociality of the environment and cruising, to the work’s exchange value through transnational exhibitions, to the visceral pleasures withheld from those who yearn to consume and decode. Camouflaged choreographies succeed precisely through challenging legibility and persisting in abstraction. Rather than extracting hidden meanings from Wee’s works, we can use Ngai’s framework of “visceral abstraction” to attend to how aesthetic abstractions function as furtive social knowledge, encoding critiques of state surveillance while maintaining protective opacity.

forms. This gap operates across multiple registers: between use-value and exchange-value, between abstract and concrete labor, between the social relations among things and the material relations among persons. Engaging this sensuous viscosity becomes crucial for understanding both labor’s value and the connection between affective reactions to economic abstraction and their material consequences.

³¹ Politically, this visceral abstraction shares the intent of Brechtian alienation effect, but aesthetically, it draws from literary tactics like Harold Bloom’s misprision, where meaning emerges through creative misreading rather than correct interpretation. There is a recognition of the dialectic between the abstract and the concrete, an understanding of the material viscosity that undergirds abstraction, but without pressure to demystify or decode it. The viscosity of real abstractions is precisely how abstractions achieve material effects.

³² This is a quote from Asia Society Triennial Artist Q&A posted on their website titled “Dreaming With: Jason Wee.”

2.12 Walk Walk Only

Stand at the entrance to the trail
at the forest line
at the shore
the tankers blink their
answers to an unheard
question³³

Jason Wee published a poem titled “Walk Walk Only: A Choreography” in 2026, gathering texts originally hidden within *Commonplace* (2019).³⁴ The poem reads as part instructional score, part notational system for the choreographies of cruising. It tells the reader where to walk, what to touch, what to wear, what to say and ask, and as above – where to stand. Isolated from the images that once accompanied them, these words are formatted as concrete poetry, deliberately scattered across the page. If Ngai’s framework allows us to understand aesthetic abstraction as a form of social knowledge that need not be decoded to achieve material effects, the poem returns to the visceral quality of language itself.³⁵ Wee’s concrete poem operates as its own abstraction: its visual dispersal on the page withholds meaning through formal arrangement, while its visceral details – spit, cum, lube, poppers, veins, skin, skulls, muscles – insist on the body’s material presence. The affective experience of yearning, desire, searching, hesitating, and sensing remains. The “tankers blink their / answers to an unheard / question” recalls the lone container ship in *Lord Mountbatten Thinks of Pink*, a relation between human and infrastructure that persists in Morse-coded abstraction.

The poem is another piece of the puzzle that Jason Wee continues assembling in his body of work engaging cruising and opacity. It further obscures while opening a more capacious reading of his practice, drawing out both the viscosity of his text and the literary dimensions of his visual art practice – from the calibrated signage for *Lord Mountbatten Thinks of Pink*, to the careful statements and responses he provides for *Uncommon Choreographies* across transnational exhibition contexts. Poetry, like cruising, operates through compression, withholding, and the invitation to sense differently. The concrete poem’s spatial disorientation on the page echoes the MRT panels’ mirrored placement, but also the puzzle pieces’ interlocking displacement, and the choreography of turning and returning over time.

³³ Excerpt from *Walk Walk Only: A Choreography*, pg. 65. This formatting replicates the visual format of the poetry as published.

³⁴ In an addendum, he mentioned that the poem “started as hidden text in [his] serial photowork *Commonplace*.” (83) He did not elaborate on how and where the text is hidden.

³⁵ Ngai’s *Visceral Abstraction* engaged with Rob Halpern’s poetry in *Music for Porn*.

Throughout this chapter, I traced Jason Wee's practice across different modes and media, from public art to gallery to printed page, reading cruising as subject and method. I examined camouflage as a temporal, spatial, and agential practice that responds to Singapore's shifting political terrain: from 1990s entrapment through 2000s homonationalism to present-day ambivalence. Across this journey, Wee's practice reveals sustained camouflaged choreographies that vary their layers of opacity in cadence with these shifts while sustaining what Cowen names "alternative futurities" through acts of provisioning and care. He challenges the demand for transparency while continuing to signal across time to those who sense queerly. These camouflaged choreographies persist as public secrets: "invisible but tangible, present but illegible, opaque yet legible" ("Ian's Research Club"). They are the surrogates through which etiolated conduct circulates, shaped by constraint yet sustaining the conditions for queer life to emerge in forms that we may not yet recognize. Wee has guided us to the edge of this shoreline, gesturing out to sea at the lone tanker in dusty pink, adrift in turbulent waters. The next chapter takes us off this desire path, into the casuarina forest, sinking into the mud of unsettled reclaimed ground where we seek ecological intimacy in forms of sociality that escape accounting. If anyone asks: walk walk only.

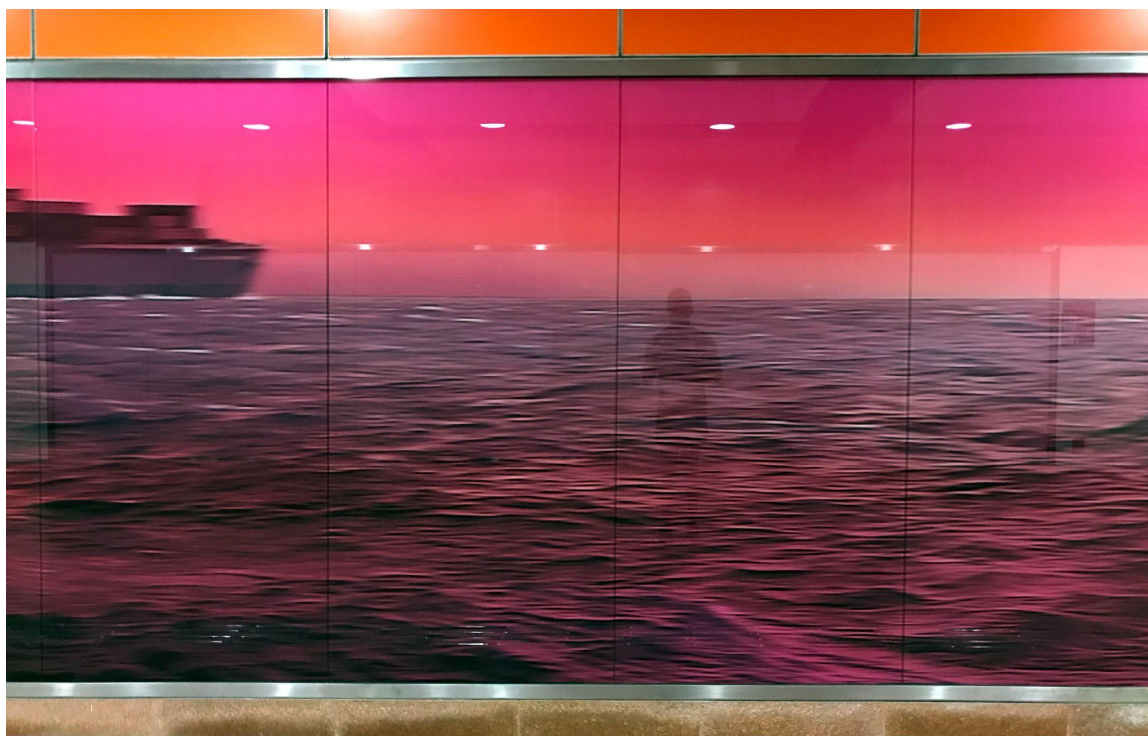


Figure 2.1 *Lord Mountbatten Thinks of Pink* (2010) with the reflected silhouette of the author. Photo by author.

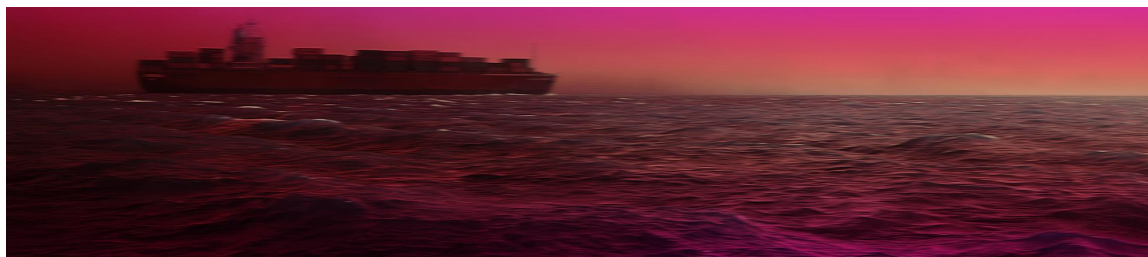


Figure 2.2 *Lord Mountbatten Thinks of Pink* (2010), 1st panel. Courtesy of Jason Wee.

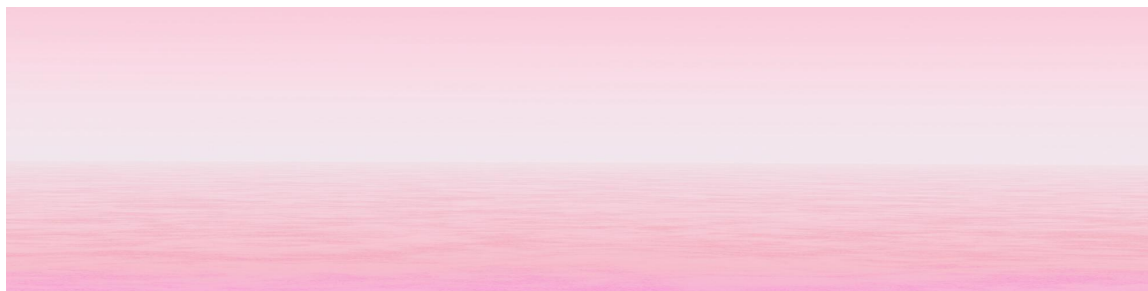


Figure 2.3 *Lord Mountbatten Thinks of Pink* (2010), 2nd panel. Courtesy of Jason Wee.

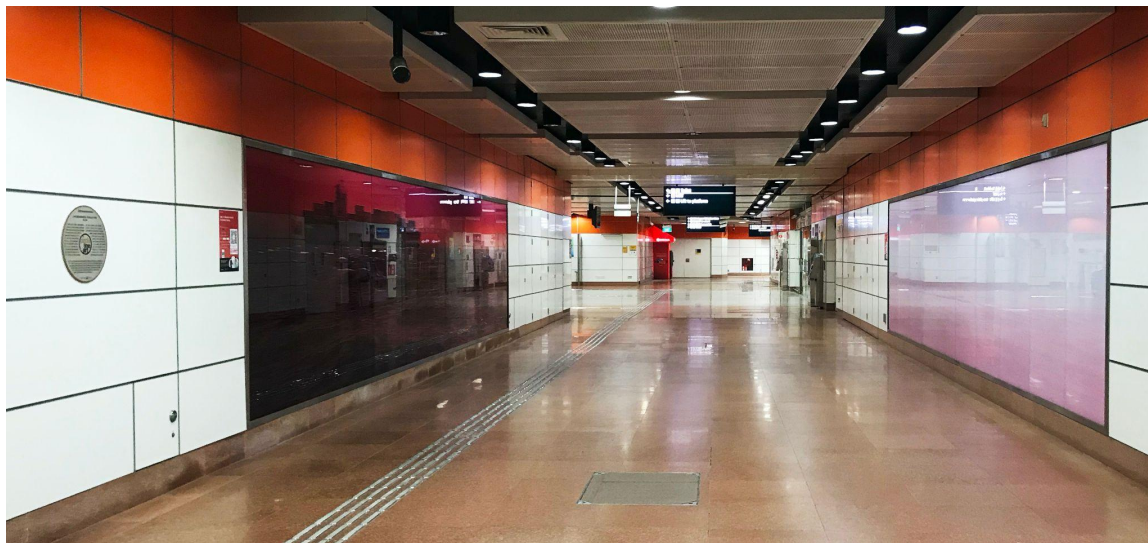


Figure 2.4 *Lord Mountbatten Thinks of Pink* (2010) at Mountbatten train station. Photo by author.



Figure 2.5 Metal plaque with artwork description and artist biography for *Lord Mountbatten Thinks of Pink* (2010). This commemorative format is standard for *Art in Transit* installations. Photo by author.



Figure 2.6 (Left) & 2.7 (Right) Detail of *Uncommon Choreographies* (2020–present). Courtesy of Jason Wee.



Figure 2.8 *Uncommon Choreographies* (2020–present). Ten laminated chromogenic prints on Forex boards. Image from Asia Society Museum. Photo by Bruce M. White.

Chapter 3

Reclaiming Reclamation:

Ecological Intimacy at Tanjong Rhu

Men arising by evening
shape silhouettes
bowered by spidery trees,
slaloming between puddles
of the moon's orgasm.

— Cyril Wong, *Beachlight*

3.1 Sinking into the Land

It was the first time they were cruising at Tanjong Rhu. They attended a school nearby. They read about it online in gay forums. They did not quite understand this word, “cruising,” except that it named a place where men gathered in search of pleasures with other men. They were in search of love. They were in search of sex. They were fifteen. They were in their forties. They had been coming for years. They followed the detailed instructions from online forums, from their friends. Walk toward the open-air parking area at the roundabout at the end of Fort Road. Jump across the canal and the green barricades where a desire path has been worn through. Follow the smaller canals all the way until you reach the sea. They were walking on land that used to be sea. After reclamation, the State had to wait at least a decade for the ground to settle. During those years, it became ripe for other uses. The gay beach was once closer to the road, but the State kept building and they kept retreating further in. First, parking for fishing boats displaced them, then cycling paths and other public facilities. Each development pushed them deeper into what remained unsettled and unclaimed. They passed the public toilet where an attendant everyone called Mama witnessed everything: the cars circling again and again, the men washing up on their way home, the hive of activity around his small booth.

Beyond the rows of casuarina trees, they found the rocky coastline. A few people were tanning. Some naked, others in the skimpiest of swimwear. All of them carried a large plastic water bottle, careful to keep a safe distance from each other. In a clearing among the lallang grass, they saw two men having sex; one looked up and smiled. They had a dream that night that they were one of the two men, and the police came to arrest them. The sun was setting and the mosquitoes were out in full force. There were no streetlights this deep in the “enchanted forest.”¹ They were lost. A person appeared holding a lit newspaper as a torch, dressed in nothing but a haversack and boots, and offered to guide them out. They

¹ The informal name that some community members use to refer to Tanjong Rhu.

followed. The path kept drifting further from the road, toward a clearing where a mosquito coil was already burning. Their guide knelt beside it and looked up at them.

They said yes. They said no.

They saw a road in the distance and decided to find their own way out. They jumped across a ditch that looked shallow. What had seemed like shallow water was a deep pit of silt. They began to sink. They thought to themselves: “I am only so young, and I am going to die here in my school uniform.” When the mud reached their neck, they stopped sinking. They pulled themselves out and walked to the nearest public toilet. Mama gave them a “Good Morning” towel to clean up. On the way home, in their soiled uniform, shivering on the air-conditioned public bus, they wondered if two men could truly be in love.

This account is an amalgamation of conversations with friends and people who cruised at Tanjong Rhu across different decades. Some details were drawn from online forums and blogs. I use “they” to anonymize these memories and emphasize that this is a composition. Fragments of stories told and retold, gossip and rumor, memories shaped by the conditions of their transmission. They belong to the act of storytelling that Hannah Arendt identifies as constitutive of the human condition, and to the infrapolitical registers of resistance that James C. Scott attends to. They are records that persist as etiolated conduct thriving in the penumbra of legibility. Their memories were shaped by what Anjali Arondekar calls reading “without a trace,” utterances shared without a “guarantee of recovery” (4). To study Tanjong Rhu through official archives alone would be to reproduce the State’s own methods of coerced legibility. The site demands alternative methods that do not coerce its knowledge into transparency. We sink along with the young man in the school uniform, down into unsettled ground.

The previous chapter traced how queer presence circulates through representational surrogates, artworks that carry etiolated conduct toward transparency while performing and inducing a choreography of camouflage. This chapter shifts from representation to the sensed materiality of the ground. Tanjong Rhu, which translates as “cape of casuarinas” in Malay, is a fifty-four-acre expanse of reclaimed land along the southern coast of Singapore.² Since the 1970s, sand imported from across Southeast Asia has been compacted into what was once sea, producing ground that required a decade or more of settling before it could bear the weight of development. During those fallow years, the unsettled terrain was taken

² The site is produced through the “Great Reclamation” project that has expanded Singapore’s total land area by more than twenty-four percent since independence in 1965, with plans to reach thirty percent by 2033. There are multiple scholars who cite this statistic, including Joanne Leow, Joshua Comaroff, Charmaine Chua etc. I have found librarian and academic Lim Tin Seng’s “Land from Sand: Singapore’s Reclamation Story” to be one of the more comprehensive accounts of the history of land reclamation.

over by pioneer vegetation and by queer subjects³ that thrive under inhospitable and etiolated conditions. Both forms of inhabitation were unauthorized and shaped by the incomplete transformation of seabed into territory. The casuarina and lallang grass roots that stabilize reclaimed silt provided the cover under which men cruised.

This chapter argues that Singapore's land reclamation literalizes what value-form theorists describe as the dissociated sphere, the constitutively feminized underside of value that Roswitha Scholz theorizes as a "pervasive social formal principle" (131). I transpose Scholz's gendered framework to the ecological and sexual registers of Tanjong Rhu, arguing that the cruising ecology occupies a doubly-dissociated position, a claim I develop in this chapter's theoretical section. Drawing on a growing body of critical scholarship on Singapore's land reclamation and its extractive ecological impact (Comaroff, Chua, Leow, Fok), I read the cruising ecology at Tanjong Rhu as a form of social reproduction that falls beyond the threshold of value's accounting.

I develop this argument in tandem with fragments of ecological intimacy in these accounts, alongside close readings of two artworks that function as what Amy De'Ath refers to as aesthetic objects that "sense" value-form determinations where social analysis reaches its limit. The two artworks are Otto Fong's *Cetacea* (1993/1994), a play about interspecies kinship between man and whale, staged in the months surrounding a police entrapment operation that arrested twelve men at the site, and Boo Junfeng's short film *Tanjong Rhu* (2009), a fictionalized retelling of the entrapment incident which composes the site's geological memory through non-linear structure and the foregrounding of vegetation. This sensuous substrate of mud, silt, casuarina, and lallang undergirds the abstractions of value, property, and sovereign territory that the State engineers into existence. It corresponds to what Sianne Ngai calls visceral abstraction, which concluded the previous chapter's account of how aesthetic opacity circulates socially. This more-than-human sociality on reclaimed ground is a mode of ecological intimacy, etiolated conduct shaped by the material conditions of the site, sustained through whispered knowledge of the wispy casuarinas. These aesthetic representations in theater and film are core samples drawn from different depths of Tanjong Rhu's layered, unsettled stratigraphy.

3.2 On Reclamation

The term "land reclamation" suggests that this was a process of recovering something that was once ours. To "reclaim" implies prior possession, a return to rightful ownership. Charmaine Chua calls reclamation a "fiction on two registers" (242). First, that the sea is

³ While many who cruised at Tanjong Rhu in the 1990s identified as gay cisgender men, others who did not identify as gay or male also frequented the site. The term "queer" is used here to signal the category's capaciousness, though it was not commonly adopted as a self-identification by individuals for gender or sexuality in Singapore during the 1990s. For consistency, "queer" in this chapter refers to the community, except in cases where specific sexual and gender identities are clearly stated.

“aqua nullius,” and second, that the term centers the site where land is created rather than the sites from which material is extracted. Reclamation carries additional contradictory meanings that complicate the fiction. It is an act of redefining and remaking. The term’s historical usage reveals dimensions of violent cultural erasure, of the colonizing project to tame both land and the people. At the same time, it also refers to acts of “revoking” and “renouncing,” acts that include “the action of protesting” and “making a formal objection.”⁴ Beverly Fok names how reclamation is “enacted in the idiom of a ‘re’: a return, a retrieval, a recuperation” (10). The word holds recovery, transformation, and erasure in suspension. This chapter contends with these various permutations, reading reclamation as material process, ecological possession, and queer reappropriation through aesthetics. This logic of repossession was naturalized and perpetuated in national discourse, where the expansion of Singapore through land reclamation was framed as both an ambitious necessity to remain globally competitive, and a tactic of survival.⁵ The city-state’s logic is thus: Why should we not claim land from the sea if we need it? I echo Chua’s and Fok’s scholarship and counter by hesitating: But what if this claim was never ours to begin with? What does it mean to shift beyond the logic of expansion and extraction? To linger with the other possible definitions of reclamation and to allow ourselves to be possessed by land?

The sand used for the initial stages of the project was extracted from inland hills and dredged from surrounding seabeds, a process that transformed not just the coastal landscape but the island’s entire terrain. It was compacted into coastline to convert what was designated as “unproductive” sea into future real estate. When local resources were exhausted in the mid-1980s, Singapore began importing sand from neighboring Southeast Asian countries, driving costs up tenfold and prompting Malaysia and Indonesia to ban exports in 1997 and 2007, respectively. A black market for sand from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Myanmar followed. The ecological costs of extraction and reclamation include the disappearance of islands in the region, the destruction of coastal mangrove habitats, and the decimation of aquatic life through sedimentation.⁶

⁴ Other notes on the definition: Reclamation refers to “the conversion of wasteland, especially land previously under water, into land fit for use” (“Reclamation”, def. 6a) and “the action or process of recovering waste products.” (“Reclamation”, def. 6b) It also encompasses “a reassertion of a relationship or connecting with something” and “a reevaluation of a concept.” (“Reclamation”, def. 3b) Legal dimensions further complicate the term, as reclamation involves asserting “the legal right to make such an action.” (“Reclamation”, def. 3a) This definition implies possession of legal personhood and an authority to bestow.

⁵ Within the national propaganda machine, this was framed as a form of “resilience” and part of the “Total Defence” strategy introduced in 1984. It is the promotion of the idea that resilience and defense extend beyond the military to include civil, economic, social and psychological defense. Land reclamation projects will fall under both a psychological defense (overcoming geographical and spatial limitations) and economic defense.

⁶ For further detail on the transnational sand trade, see Chris Milton’s “The Sand Smugglers” and Jonas Fryer’s “Environmental Impacts of Land Reclamation in Singapore.”

A growing body of critical scholarship has examined this process across multiple scales and geographies. Joshua Comaroff argues that territory acquires unprecedented liquidity through the malleability of sand, whose softness and scalability make it a uniquely volatile substance for territorial expansion. Sand's fungibility means disappearances become difficult to map and nearly impossible to quantify. He calls this Singapore's "original debt," arguing that "for the territorial state to survive, land must be continually introduced." Joanne Leow observes that Singapore functions as a "modern-day imperial power" and a "recalibration of the British maritime empire" ("this land was the sea" 184) based on this extraction of natural resources, creating what she terms transnational ruins. Her attention to counter-cartographic resistance through art provides a precedent for this chapter's argument about the body's intimacy with reclaimed ground. Beverly Fok traces continuities between colonial convict labor and contemporary migrant construction work, theorizing reclaimed land as chattel, a commodity form that depends on rendering human labor as expendable. Her contribution connects the ground at Tanjong Rhu to the bodies that built it. William Jamieson points out that reclamation "inverts the grammar of colonization: territory is extracted as a resource in one place to expand an internal frontier in another" (278). As Michaela Büsse notes, this process has exhausted the sea's extractive possibilities, forcing a shift from extensive (claiming new land mass) to intensive (maximizing control over existing territory) modes of spatial accumulation, now cloaked in the rhetoric of "renaturation and sustainability" (135).

Tanjong Rhu is what Timothy Morton's ecological thought renders legible: a post-natural environment, a hybrid construction of natural processes, human intervention, and capital that appears on its surface to be wild or "natural" in its unkempt state. These extreme manipulations of the environment are made possible by Singapore's "eco-authoritarianism" (Schneider-Mayerson 173), a single-party state with the political continuity and deep national reserves to implement decades-long infrastructural projects.⁷

⁷ The verdant and fertile scholarship around this topic is beyond the scope of this chapter. Scholars have traced how Singapore's environmental manipulation serves governmentality. Timothy Barnard and Corrine Heng document the island's long history of reshaping nature for "economic and social goals" (281), noting how environmental beautification disciplines both nature and society, making Singapore "an island in which humans have contained nature to suit their purposes" (306). Marcus Yee similarly highlights the colonial roots of landscape management, observing that in the 1990s, "the state figures as the judicious gardener, hothousing freedoms and retaining the power to uproot them at their discretion" (255). Other critics emphasize how this environmental governance is entangled with aesthetics and affect. Eng-Beng Lim identifies an "island-botany complex" that "internalizes that imperial display for an electric tropicality powered by biodiversity, sustainable energy and a global ambition for the postcolony" (444). Joanne Leow critiques the adversarial "manufactured tropicality" (871) of the island, where "plant life, climate, and human endeavor are locked in a seemingly constant struggle for dominance" (878). Joshua Comaroff and Ong Ker-Shing extend this analysis through the notion of "paramilitary gardening," where "the environmental method of Singapore's administrators is to put all agents, vegetal and human, into orders that establish apposite place" (174). Beyond the scholars who are discussed above, refer to Chua Beng Huat's "Singapore as Model" chapter in *Worlding*

These scholars establish what reclamation does at macro scale, reading objects of study that are qualitatively and quantitatively stable. This chapter builds on their scholarship and remains obdurately on the intimate scale of the ground. Aihwa Ong's concept of "pluripotent governmentality" (12), borrowed from bioscience to describe latent developmental potential, extends to Singapore's land reclamation, where the State manages both biological and environmental forms of life as malleable and fungible. Ong's access to scientists and civil servants in Biopolis for *Fungible Life* is itself a product of the State's self-presentation apparatus. A few kilometers away, on reclaimed ground that the same regime produced, forms of sociality persist that are constitutively un-fungible, circulating through whispered knowledge and obliquely represented in aesthetic objects. I depart from Ong's formulation of "fungible life" to consider forms of etiolated conduct beyond valuation – non-fungible encounters, pleasures, and ecological intimacy exchanged on reclaimed ground.

Hatib A. Kadir and Anna Tsing provide additional critical vocabulary for this chapter. Their concept of *timbun*, a word borrowed from Old Javanese meaning "to pile," is the iterative compacting of wetland into property, identifying reclamation as a process that is never finished. The ground shifts, the *timbun* repeats, but the mud always comes back. Transposed to Singapore, with the caveat that the parallel is structural rather than analogical,⁸ reclaimed ground at Tanjong Rhu never fully became the stable property it was engineered to be. The fallow period between reclamation and development produced conditions for unauthorized inhabitation, both ecological and intimate, shaped by the incomplete transformation of seabed into sovereign territory. If reclamation is the subsumption of nature into the value-form, land rendered as property and as real estate, then the mud that resists settling is what the value-form cannot absorb, and what unauthorized forms of etiolated human and more-than-human life take root in.

3.3 What Value Dissociates

Why turn to value-form Marxism? Value-theoretical feminist readings of Marx emerged in the years following the 2008 financial crisis, building upon but also departing from the social reproduction feminism of Silvia Federici, Nancy Fraser, Tithi Bhattacharya, and others. Value-form feminist readings provide a critical scaffold to read capitalism as constituted through social forms, with value as the central mediating abstraction. As Marina Vishmidt frames it, value-form theory allows us to question "what it means to inscribe social practices which do not produce market commodities into the wage-form, more narrowly, and into the value-form more broadly" ("Counter(Re-)Productive Labour" 10). Training

Cities and Cherian George's seminal essay on Lee Kuan Yew's sensitivity to urban planning in *The Air Conditioned Nation* for further foundational context.

⁸ Kadir and Tsing's study focuses on reclaimed land on West Papuan coasts, with the displacement of indigenous population. This specificity is different from the land reclamation in Singapore, with its own indigeneity (the Orang Laut), distinct speed of reclamation, and so on.

our critical attention on value, and the alchemic process of real abstraction that renders incommensurable things equivalent, reminds us of what is always in excess of capital's accounting, hidden in the process that sustains the M-C-M' circuit but that the circuit itself is unable or refuses to register.

Value-form feminists begin theorizing from what falls outside value's accounting, bringing into the foreground what capitalism is contingent upon and refuses to acknowledge as value. In value-dissociation approaches that depart from classic value-form theory, they shift attention away from circulation and on reproductive activity that falls outside production, away from reification and toward the value-relation itself. Value-form feminists share a recognition of activities that are unwaged, unmeasured, and undertheorized. They move from the critique of how gender appears (as natural, as ideological, as performative) and toward the question of how value, "as conceptually distinct from both use-value and exchange-value, dominates the process of social reproduction" (De'Ath "Gender and Social Reproduction" 1541). The value-form, as De'Ath goes on to elaborate in later scholarship, "is not any particular thing but an expression of a relation between things: an objectively existing but abstract process that shapes our social world in ways that are impossible to out-think [...] it is action rather than thought that produces capitalist abstraction" (8). De'Ath's approach is neither reliant on orthodox economic readings of Marx, nor does it default to a merely linguistic or discourse-based mode of analysis. It allows us to consider the materiality of the object and to theorize both human and more-than-human presence that might not be immediately legible. Crucially, it reminds us of what undergirds the vibrancy of materiality and our capacity to sense it: labor, economics, and infrastructure. At Tanjong Rhu the ecology of what we come to refer to as "cruising" is practiced through repeated embodied and material actions within our social world, through crossing canals, reading tides, and navigating by casuarina, rather than through bounded ideology or transparent identity. De'Ath's method links two Marxian concepts: the "hidden abode" of surplus value production, concealed from the noisy sphere of exchange, and the "inner bond" connecting value to its forms of appearance. Tanjong Rhu parses out a further distinction within the hidden abode concerning the queered reproduction and sustenance of life that does not directly reproduce labor-power for capital's circuits of valorization. What occupies this space within the hidden abode is what Liu Jen-peng and Ding Naifei, along with Chen Kuan-Hsing, identify as the penumbra, neither the subject nor its shadow. To name the structural form of this displacement, De'Ath draws on a constellation of value-form theorists whose categories I transpose onto the site and its ecology.

Roswitha Scholz gives us the macro-theoretical framework within which these value-form categories operate. She argues that capitalism requires a dissociated sphere of sensuous, reproductive activity consigned to its underside: "value dissociation means that capitalism contains a core of female-determined reproductive activities and the affects,

characteristics, and attitudes (emotionality, sensuality, and female or motherly caring) that are dissociated from value and abstract labor” (127). As mentioned earlier in this chapter, value-dissociation is a “pervasive social formal principle” (131), one that “perpetuates classificatory thought that is unable to register and maintain particular qualities, inherent differences, ruptures, ambivalences, and asynchronies” (132). Scholz names value-dissociation as a dynamic process that shifts through historical phases as capital reconfigures what it banishes. At Tanjong Rhu, the ecology of desire that cruising sustains – its sensuality, intimacy, and pleasure – constitutes the process of one such dissociated sphere. What Scholz describes as the dissociated sphere has its own internal hierarchy, and cruising at Tanjong Rhu occupies its lowest stratum, dissociated even from the forms of reproductive labor (childcare, eldercare) that value-form feminists typically theorize. This doubly-dissociated sphere is produced and abjected by the same apparatus that engineers land into sovereign territory and property.

Maya Gonzalez and Jeanne Neton, writing in *Endnotes*, provide a clear breakdown of the underside of value in “The Logic of Gender,” and give us a model that differentiates between directly market-mediated and indirectly market-mediated spheres. Marina Vishmidt and Zoe Sutherland summarize this value-form approach concisely: gender is “the anchoring of a certain group of individuals in a specific sphere of social activities,” a formulation that avoids “the reduction of gender to a simple association with specific tasks, locations (the home), or bodies (feminized)” (“Social Reproduction” 11). Vishmidt and Sutherland’s critique also expands Sue Ferguson’s critique of intersectionality, one that is predicated on a legal form of recognition and visibility. They remind us that a value-theoretical approach to thinking about alliances across gender, sexuality, and class attends to an “integrative ontology of labor” (“(Un)making Value” 75) that links totality to lived experience. “Gender appears and is felt as an external constraint precisely at the point at which capital expels some tasks that had become interiorised to its ‘exterior,’ and drags us along with it in that abjection” (Vishmidt and Sutherland “Social Reproduction” 11). These trimmings have been naturalized as “gendered” tasks, consigned to the indirectly market-mediated sphere and left unwaged. The erotics and pleasures of cruising fall further outside, beyond the reproductive labor that value-form feminists theorize, into what this chapter reads as ecological intimacy sustained on reclaimed ground.

Beverley Best sharpens these stakes for Singapore. She challenges the assumption shared by *Endnotes* and Nancy Fraser that capital structurally requires a dissociated sphere of unwaged social reproduction, arguing instead that capital’s tendency is toward the full subsumption of all reproductive activity into the value-form. Singapore has pursued this heteronormative order⁹ more aggressively than most: Housing Development Board policies contingent on marriage, Central Provident Fund as compulsory savings for retirement, the

⁹ See Chapter 1 for further elaboration on this order.

commodification of eldercare and childcare, the foreign domestic worker system. Best points out that “The problem with limiting the struggle to these terms [of the dissociated sphere] is that it locks us into the capitalist present, arrests the wage-relation as dominant, and keeps the value-form in place” (915). To return to Natalie Oswin’s critique of Singapore’s politics of reproductive futurism, Best’s insistence on thinking outside the terms of recognition can also be read as resistance to the regulation of families and heteronormative kinship by the Singaporean State. Best asks provocatively: “What would social reproduction look like if it were everyone’s work, and no one’s work in particular?” (917) At Tanjong Rhu, the informal social infrastructure of cruising, however transactional or impersonal, alongside the whispered knowledge of tides and terrain, and Mama holding court at the public toilet, can be considered as intimacy and care exchanged between strangers, one of many provisional answers to Best’s provocations that redistributes social reproduction.

De’Ath pushes past *Endnotes*’ formulation of the abject to suggest that we could “expand the category [...] to account for an even less discernible [...] dimension of capitalist abjection beyond the set of abject feminized reproductive activities that *Endnotes* retheorize as an economic category” (*Behind Our Backs* 37). The cruising ecology at Tanjong Rhu is an expansion in De’Ath’s direction – a form of abjection that was never inside the wage relation, that reproduces life without directly reproducing labor-power. Life in this case includes material needs as well as immaterial needs of bodies and pleasures, sensations and affect. The method of the ground calls for what Alyssa Battistoni refers to as a “rematerialization” (7). Battistoni’s scholarship encourages us to consider the more-than-human valences of ecological intimacy, attending “to the physical reality of the world while critically assessing the social relations in which it is situated” (7). Battistoni’s framework unsettles what she calls “the anthropocentrism of the wage” and underscores “the material content that always attends social forms” (10), bridging the connection between reproductive labor in the household and natural capital in the biosphere. Her concept of the “free gift,” which the next section returns to, articulates what capital depends on but does not, and often cannot commodify. De’Ath’s method and Battistoni’s rematerialization converge at Tanjong Rhu, where the ecology of cruising persists as unwaged activity on reclaimed ground that capital produced but is unable (or unwilling) to price.

Rosemary Hennessy gives this “free-ness” a name. Her concept of “outlawed needs” identifies activities necessary to the reproduction of life that remain unwaged, grounded in “the human capacity and need for sensation and affect” (35). Christopher Chitty historicizes this insight, exposing the economic rationale beneath sexual intolerance and how “criminal intimacies and cross-class encounters” (186) shape subject formation from below. Tanjong Rhu is an example of how intimacy has been made criminal, and testimonials from the site consistently reflect how cruising constitutes cross-class and cross-species encounters. Kay Gabriel extends this further, foregrounding “the aesthetic and sensuous qualities of gender as a dimension of bodily autonomy” (136) and insisting that the body remains “an

indispensable site of struggle over the creation of a disalienated life-world” (148). Collectively, Hennessy, Chitty, and Gabriel provide ways of engaging with the pleasures of sexuality and cruising that value-form feminists do not adequately address.

In Chapter 1, I argued that measuring resistance according to transparency creates a silo where only pragmatic forms are registered. This chapter extends that framework to the materiality of land and the practice of cruising, attending to sensations, affects, and desires that have remained in the penumbra on the underside of value. De’Ath asks: “Which kinds of time refuse productivity increases and thus remain fixed units of time? Which kinds of time cannot be measured in units of socially necessary labour time at all?” (“Gender and Social Reproduction” 1546) The cruising ecology at Tanjong Rhu operates at its own temporalities and rhythms – of the ebb and flow of tides, the growth of vegetation, the stabilization of the reclaimed land, the durational practice of waiting to cruise and be cruised. Kevin Floyd’s critique of Autonomist Marxism reminds us that what is expanding is capital relative to labor, and that attributing autonomous value-producing capacity to biological life mistakes the “mediated capacities of capital” for the “immediate capacities of labour” (61). Floyd directs this critique at Cooper and Waldby’s depiction of “living labour as capacities of capital” (73) within biotechnology, where surrogacy and tissue donation are reframed as value-producing. Aihwa Ong’s *Fungible Life* operates within a parallel logic, studying biological life in Singapore’s Biopolis as rendered calculable and exchangeable by the State. Floyd clears the critical ground that this chapter occupies – the cruising ecology at Tanjong Rhu persists as what capital’s expansion produces but cannot absorb. This framework gives us a way to sense what Chitty calls “queer realism” without pragmatism.¹⁰ De’Ath argues that aesthetic objects “sense” value-form determinations “where they are otherwise at their most illegible” (8). *Cetacea* the play and *Tanjong Rhu* the film are two such objects, registering what the dissociated sphere feels like sensuously. The analysis of aesthetic objects that engage with Tanjong Rhu attends to how the structural framework is sensed on the ground.

3.4 Sensing the Ground – Ecological Intimacy as Method

In Boo Junfeng’s *Tanjong Rhu*, casuarina trees and lallang grass dominate the foreground while human figures recede as silhouettes into the background. In Otto Fong’s *Cetacea*, we hear a human who ventriloquizes for a whale insist on how he is “not a fish” but a mammalian creature. The cruisers in the opening vignette, like the young man in his school uniform, describe not just an encounter with other men in their search for pleasure, but also intimate encounters with the ecology of the cruising ground. These encounters

¹⁰ I use pragmatism here in reference to queer pragmatism established by Lynette Chua and Audrey Yue specific to the condition of Singapore. They are theorizing in response to Chua Beng Huat and other theorists responding to the rhetoric of pragmatism wielded by the Singaporean government to justify draconian and unpopular social policies. For further elaboration, see Chapter 1.

occasionally carry danger or risk, from contracting dengue fever from mosquitoes, to losing one's orientation on unmarked reclaimed land, to sinking into mud and suffocating. To elaborate on Samuel Delany, cruising at Tanjong Rhu's reclaimed coastal environment enables a form of interclass contact that Singapore's urban spaces foreclose. Online blogs reminiscing about the site describe regular patrons ranging from television celebrities to hawker stall owners. The entrapment arrests included men across various social classes. The intentional wildness of the site as it is left to settle also encourages us to extend Delany's notion of contact to consider an interspecies intimacy. Sarah Ensor reads Delany as a way to consider how contact itself "is a kind of ecological web, and that contact is inherently promiscuous" (159–160). Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Gordon Brent Ingram sharpen this by demonstrating that public parks have historically been programmed for heterosexual contact, and that sex in public constitutes a "democratization of natural space" (Mortimer-Sandilands, "Unnatural Passions?" 11). The scholarship of Ensor, Mortimer-Sandilands, and Ingram permits us to question the categories and behaviors conventionally known as "unnatural," and discover the deviance that is present in what we assume to be "natural" all along.

Alyssa Battistoni's scholarship sharpens the stakes of this ecological encounter. She observes that what we have considered to be "free gifts of nature" have always had an implicit cost that we humans choose to willfully ignore. In her critique of Anna Tsing's research that romanticizes matsutake mushroom pickers as having the "freedom" to forage for subsistence, Battistoni reminds us that "Capital's authority is ubiquitous in their lives—it simply operates at a distance" (87). Read through a value-form lens, the ecological intimacy of cruising at Tanjong Rhu is a form of social reproduction materially produced by the State's alchemy of sea transmuted into land under the imperatives of capital, temporally located in the gaps of developmental time, one that appears suspended from Singaporean heteronormative logics while remaining, on closer inspection, conditioned by them. While cruising operates within the dissociated sphere Scholz describes, its relationship to the value-form exceeds the terms of that debate. It is sensorially shaped by the ecology of reclaimed ground, and remains conditionally "free," oblique to the categories that structure the debate between value-form feminists over whether the dissociated sphere is internal or external to capital. At Tanjong Rhu, this conditional "free-ness" is stacked. The ecology of cruising persists as an unwaged mode of social reproduction, one that appears to refuse a reproduction of labor-power for capital's circuits of valorization.¹¹ Men who cruise at Tanjong Rhu enjoy the pleasurable activities of individual consumption, but also the "free" gifts of the reclaimed environment itself: the casuarina cover, the tidal rhythms, the desolate reclaimed shorelines. The realization of value is deferred while the land settles, and this

¹¹ I acknowledge the social reproduction feminists' observations that individual consumption (eating, resting, pleasure) that Marx refers to is always already productive consumption, and that the "unwaged" character of cruising does not in itself place it outside the circuits of valorization.

deferral opens the ground to unintended uses. The police entrapment of men cruising at the site in 1993 is one example of the illusory conditional nature of this “free-ness.”

Within the highly manicured horticultural management of land-scarce Singapore, the unkempt wildness of Tanjong Rhu exists as an anomaly. Many cruisers described it as a space of respite from the relentless rhythms of 1990s Singapore, a place to explore both sexual desire and solitude with the more-than-human environment. The entrapment incident in September 1993 received the most media coverage and produced the harshest sentences. Twelve individuals were arrested in the entrapment by plainclothes policemen. Rather than being charged under Section 377A of the Penal Code, which criminalized consensual sexual acts between men, they were prosecuted under the provision for “outrage of modesty.” Their names, ages, occupations, photographs, and other identifying details were published in national newspapers as a form of public shaming. Of the twelve, six pleaded guilty and received corporal punishment in the form of three strokes of the cane, along with jail sentences ranging from two to six months.¹² The consequences extended beyond formal legal punishment. Public exposure led to reputational damage and social ostracization, cultivating an atmosphere of fear that haunted the cruising and queer community. Although this was the last widely reported entrapment case at Tanjong Rhu, it marked the beginning of the site’s gradual decline as a cruising ground. This decline was fueled by sensationalist media coverage, increased public scrutiny, and ongoing redevelopment of the area. The timing of the 1993 entrapment has been attributed to the rise of HIV, to the volume of public complaints, and to the land’s readiness for development after decades of settling. Clearly, the hidden cost of this unwaged “free” activity had been deemed too high. The entrapment incident, read through the lens of value-form Marxism, can be understood as a shattering of this illusion of “free-ness” that Battistoni points out, demonstrating the hidden “costs” latent within these unwaged activities of pleasure under a heteronormative order. These “costs,” in connection with the hidden abode that De’Ath theorizes, include the materiality of the reclaimed ground manufactured by the State and the act of cruising itself, where rest, pleasure, and intimacy sustain and provision (Cowen, “Reading” 269) our capacity to labor.¹³

The 1993 incident, along with earlier entrapment operations, prompted numerous artistic responses, across visual art (as covered in the previous chapter in the practice of Jason Wee), poetry (Alfian Sa’at, Cyril Wong), performance protests (Josef Ng), plays (Alfian Sa’at,

¹² See [Table 3.1](#) for further details about this incident and a timeline of events in 1993 and 1994. This was one of the last reported cases of police entrapment of people cruising in public areas under “outrage of modesty” charges, in part due to legal precedent set by one of the arrested men who appealed his sentence after pleading guilty. The Chief Justice allowed the appeal, reduced his sentence, and stated: “It was disquieting that an accused arrested as a result of a police operation should subsequently be charged with having outraged the modesty of the police officer he came into contact with” (Tan B.H. v. Public Prosecutor).

¹³ This heteronormative order is elaborated in Chapter 1, in dialogue with the repeal of Section 377A in 2023. For further elaboration of Deborah Cowen’s “sustaining and provisioning” as care, refer to page 79.

Ng Yi-sheng, Otto Fong), and film (Boo Junfeng). Some of these works have faced state surveillance and censorship in their circulation and exhibition, partly because they highlight public cruising practices and revisit the trauma of police entrapment. This chapter focuses on two works within this chorus of responses. These two works, *Cetacea* and *Tanjong Rhu*, are objects that register the site's accumulated history of intimate encounter with land and the environment, each drawing from a different stratum of the ground's unsettled memory. My method of analysis leans toward ecological intimacy, reading both works through their relationship to the reclaimed land and the political context in Singapore, attending to how each registers the material and social conditions of reclaimed ground and the forms of life that persist on it. This approach attends to landscapes, textures, and infrastructures that frame and exceed human action, where the ground performs by shaping the conditions of encounter rather than functioning as mere backdrop.

Building on the analysis from the previous chapter, this approach moves beyond an attempt to coerce intimacy into transparency. Anjali Arondekar's method of engaging with sexuality within the colonial archive of British India is critical here. The paradox she locates is relevant to this chapter's objects – a known prevalence of sodomy alongside an equally known rarity of its documentation. Sodomy appears everywhere and nowhere as the colonial archive refuses to capture its presence. Arondekar refuses recovery and the coercion of the subaltern into speaking; her method instead traces how homosexuality emerges as “the structural secret of the archive, without whose concealment the archive ceases to exist” (7). Her method of reading “without a trace,” one that “articulates against the guarantee of recovery” (4), is essential for approaching *Cetacea* and *Tanjong Rhu*. I tie this archival structural secret to its economic correlation. Just as the colonial archive requires the concealment of sodomy to maintain its coherence, the value-form structurally depends on “free gifts” that it cannot account for as value. Read alongside each other, Battistoni's analysis traces capital's structural relationship to what it accounts for as “free” while De'Ath provides the method for registering how that relationship is sensed from the underside of abstraction.

3.5 Otto Fong's *Cetacea* (1993/1994)

3.5.1 Of Cetaceans and Homo Sapiens

*Cetacea*¹⁴ was written by Otto Fong, who was then working as an engineer and later became an educator and gay activist.¹⁵ Bilingual in both English and Mandarin, Fong developed the work through TheatreWorks' Writer's Lab, an incubator for emerging

¹⁴ The spelling of the title survives in various versions. For consistency, this chapter adheres to *Cetacea* when I refer to it in this chapter. It was initially named *Cetecea* (with an e) in the 1993 production, then titled *CETACEA (A Play of A Whale)* in the archived July 1993 version of the script.

¹⁵ Fong made headlines in 2007 when he came out in a blog post while serving as a teacher. The Ministry of Education requested he remove the post; he continued teaching for a couple more years before leaving the civil service.

playwrights. The play was first staged by TheatreWorks¹⁶ in July 1993; a Mandarin-language adaptation by Drama Box followed in May 1994. Between these two stagings, in September 1993, the police entrapment at Tanjong Rhu took place, leading to performance artist Josef Ng staging a performance protest in the early hours of 1 January 1994 which resulted in a decade-long proscription on funding for performance art and forum theater. In January 1994, in an incident of fiction as an imitation of life, a thirteen-foot false killer whale was stranded along Singapore's eastern reclaimed industrial coastline and died within a week. The play, the entrapment, the proscription, the beaching – these events arrived in rapid succession during a volatile period, as if the reclaimed site of Tanjong Rhu and its surroundings were refusing to be settled, returning repeatedly to haunt the national imagination of Singapore. [Table 3.1](#) documents the constellation of pressures contemporaneous to the staging of *Cetacea* and registers the stakes and risk of the play. The timeline documents a seventeen-month period when the dissociated sphere surfaced into transparency, when activities and ecologies that had been operating below the threshold of value's accounting were coerced into public scrutiny.

The play tells the story of Gerald, a boy who encounters Jonah, a beached whale, at an unnamed beach in Singapore. The same actor plays both Jonah and Gerald's deceased brother Derek, who has died from what the play's textual clues suggest to be AIDS-related complications. Structured across a prologue and seven scenes, the play unfolds as an existentialist two-hander in liminal space, reminiscent of Samuel Beckett's absurdist plays. Gerald and Jonah/Derek converse through the hours before dawn as the scenes are presented in a non-chronological order. Flashbacks intersperse the scenes between Gerald and Jonah the whale with scenes between Gerald and Derek at various stages of their brotherly relationship. Jonah dies at the conclusion of the play as the sun rises. The dramatic tension is located in the interstitial intertidal zone, a ground belonging to neither land nor sea, shifting between the two according to tidal rhythms that cannot be accelerated. At one point, Gerald calculates the time to the next high tide, hoping he might push Jonah back into the sea when the water rises. He realizes it will be too late. If land reclamation is one of the forms that directly subsume the intertidal zone into the value-form, rendering it property,¹⁷ then *Cetacea* stages what that process of subsumption expels as the waiting for land to settle is paralleled with the wait toward Jonah's (and symbolically the natural world's) inevitable and eventual death. These two mammalian figures, human and the more-than-human, are waiting for a tide that will not rise in time for survival.

The 1993 staging took place at the Drama Centre on Fort Canning Hill for an audience of approximately three hundred. The set was sparse: a gray cloth hung in the

¹⁶ TheatreWorks rebranded as T:>Works in 2020. Since this chapter engages with a 1993 production, the company is referred to by its earlier name throughout.

¹⁷ One could also argue that less aggressive forms of subsumption, still in service of capital, include the conversion of swamp or intertidal coastlines into fish farms or tourist attractions.

background, doubling as a screen for shadow sequences performed by two movement artists whose silhouettes morphed between human, cetacean, and non-human forms ([fig. 3.1](#)). The cloth's seams, when backlit for the shadow play sequences, created a grid-like pattern resembling a net. It pooled around a large artificial boulder downstage center that suggested the bodily presence of a beached whale. Long, slender structures emerged from the floor, arranged to resemble skeletal ribs, evoking the vastness of a whale in contrast to the human body. The design and direction leaned into a conventional spatial metaphor: the proscenium stage as shoreline, with the audience positioned as the sea or as the horizon toward which the performers gaze.

The 1994 Mandarin staging at The Substation's intimate black box venue of a hundred and twenty seats was further pared down. A cube of neatly layered and stacked prop rocks doubled as a hospital bed for the scenes with Derek, the brother at his deathbed with a terminal illness ([fig. 3.2](#)). This bed of rocks also reminds us of the revetments constructed along Singapore's reclaimed coastlines to act as a perimeter boundary before sand and landfill were added as part of the reclamation process. Audiences familiar with these straight and even coastlines at Tanjong Rhu would recognize these structures as the very revetments where cruisers were known to sun themselves ([fig. 3.8](#)). The staging transposes the site's material infrastructure into the dramatic scenography, where a structure of reclamation becomes the surface on which dying human and cetacean bodies rest.

The prologue opens with Fong's retelling of the biblical story of Cain and Abel. In his version, Abel escapes death by fleeing to the sea, becoming the ancestor of cetaceans. Cain's descendants, humans, continue to hunt them. This reimagined myth establishes a primordial sibling rivalry between oceanic and terrestrial life that maps onto the logic of reclamation this chapter has traced. Pre-existing oceanic ecology is absorbed by a terrestrial, land-making regime, transformed and settled into property. The fiction of *aqua nullius* that Chua identifies finds its mythological expression. Just as reclamation treats sea as raw material available for conversion into sovereign territory, Cain's terrestrial descendants treat Abel's oceanic descendants as huntable and expendable. Fong's prologue stages the relationship between these two forms of life as one of structural co-dependence and violence, a dynamic that corresponds to what Scholz describes as value-dissociation, where capital simultaneously requires and banishes the sensuous, reproductive activity consigned to its underside. The hunt is the condition that sustains terrestrial dominance; to acknowledge this co-dependence would expose the fiction on which the claim to the ground rests.

A recurring line in the play is Jonah/Derek's insistent declaration: "I am not a fish."¹⁸ Within the world of the play, the line reminds Gerald that whales are mammals, warm-blooded and air-breathing, more closely affiliated with humans than the category "fish" suggests. On a metatheatrical level, the line calls attention to the actor performing both Derek and Jonah, signaling the deliberate ambiguity of the act of doubling. Read through the value-form framework, the cetacean Jonah's insistence on kinship and sensuous intimacy with the human registers alongside the queer human Derek's refusal of non-human status, a reminder that Singaporean society views him as less-than-fully-human for his sexuality and as a patient with his implied AIDS-related complications. In *Cetacea*, a stranded body refuses the classification of queer non-human imposed upon it, insisting on a correction of how it is recognized, one that perhaps can be read as a Muñozian disidentificatory tactic. At the end of the play, as Jonah takes his final breaths as the sun rises, Gerald responds to this repeated declaration emphatically, affirming Jonah's plea with: "No, you're not." In a blackout, we hear the narrator proclaim:

In the world of mammals there are two mountain peaks.
Mount Homosapia and Mount Cetacea, that of whales and dolphins.
If we can humble ourselves enough to accept this possibility, we may find that we
have reached the dawn of an era of understanding what life is all about. (27)

This plea for a cross-species kinship and interspecies intimacy is simultaneously a veiled call for compassion across sexualities and for acknowledging forms of sentience and suffering that trouble the distinctions on which the State's apparatus manages its population. *Cetacea* proposes forms of affiliation, care, and recognition that operate outside the categories through which the State distributes reproductive futurities.

3.5.2 The Value of Ambiguity

The play thrives in the ambiguity of the intimate relationship between the two main characters that exists as brotherly kinship, as interspecies human-whale care, but also as homoerotic companionship. This ambiguity was legible to contemporaneous critics, though they evaluated it differently. A journalist from *The Straits Times* previewing the 1993 Young Playwrights Series proclaimed: "In: Relationships between men and women, with the media and with a whale. Out: Homosexuality, transvestites and incest" ("Young Writers"). The article compared the crop of new plays to the previous year's, framing the shift away from

¹⁸ The classification of the whale as fish or mammal within literary canon is beyond the scope of this chapter, but the most well-known example is the "Cetology" chapter of *Moby-Dick*, where Ishmael insists on classifying the whale as a fish despite knowledge of Linnaean taxonomy. Fong has not raised this reference in conversation, but for a reader familiar with the novel, the play is a reminder of both Ishmael's refusal of scientific classification and a taxonomic correction from the perspective of Jonah the whale.

explicitly sexual themes as evidence of tasteful artistic maturation.¹⁹ Janice Koh, who performed in the 1993 staging in a non-speaking movement role, wrote about the “limits of ambiguity” (iii) in her thesis on the representation of alternative sexualities in Singaporean plays, critiquing what she called a “puny form of radicalism” (47) in *Cetacea*, while acknowledging that “Fong effectively appropriates the problem of conservation and the irrational hunting of whales to disguise the more urgent but underlying theme of gay discrimination” (30). Critic Ng Sek Chow called Fong’s treatment of homosexuality and AIDS “watered down,” lamenting the playwright’s “avoidance of a most pressing issue [...] a shame.” For both Koh and Ng, efficacy and clarity were the measure of success. This is a refrain of rights-based approaches that privilege confrontation and legibility. Given the political context of 1993 ([Table 3.1](#)), Fong’s surrogation of queer relations through interspecies kinship opened capacious space for interpretation and deniability by director, actors, and audience alike.

The play’s codedness warrants a more generous reading than the one Koh and Ng offer. Their critique assumes that ambiguity is a strategic concession, a dilution of what would otherwise be stated directly. De’Ath’s framework argues that feminized poets write “about capitalist abstraction itself as something sensed but not articulated, and from the position of the underside of abstraction” (21). The “formless” and “obscured histories” (21) that Marxist feminism takes as its starting point are precisely those that “real abstraction” produces and that resist the legibility social analysis demands. The play cannot name cruising, AIDS, or homosexuality explicitly because these activities occupy a similar structural position to the “free gifts” the value-form must conceal in order to function. The play’s ambiguity registers this condition from within by sensing what it cannot articulate.

In fact, the play names cruising directly only once, even though the homoerotic tension between the actors, the coastal setting, and the act of loitering would have been legible to anyone familiar with gay cruising. In a flashback between the brothers, Gerald recalls seeing two men walking out of the area. Derek speculates that they might have been fishing. Gerald replies that they had no fishing rods. Derek hesitates, then offers: “I think they are cruising.” When Gerald presses him for further information on what they were seeking, Derek stammers: “Se...seashells” (Fong, *Cetacea* 17). The stage direction notes that Derek “decides against telling.” This scene performs the circulation of information through hesitation and partial disclosure, shaped by the conditions of its transmission. Derek withholds what he thinks Gerald is too young to receive, and in doing so demonstrates how sexual and ecological knowledge circulate in tandem at sites like Tanjong Rhu, transmitted through the same gestures of caution and substitution – the utterance of sex mutates into seashells, the euphemism of fishing in lieu of cruising. Later in the same scene, Gerald

¹⁹ The previous year’s plays included Ovidia Yu’s *Three Fat Virgins Unassembled*. TheatreWorks also staged Michael Chiang’s *Private Parts* as part of its main season, a comedy about sexual reassignment surgery featuring transgender characters.

catches a fish and shouts “My fish!” before Derek releases it out of compassion. This small assertion of possessive claim and its gentle reversal in Derek’s release of the fish echo the chapter’s broader questions around what resists possession on reclaimed ground.

As the play builds toward its eventual Aristotelian climax – the death of Jonah at sunrise – Jonah delivers a stentorian declaration of why cetaceans beach themselves:²⁰

They grew wary of having to dive and hide every time they sense a whaling ship’s relentless hum. They got tired of dodging fishnets that so often snarl and drown their friends. They looked into the eyes of the dead and saw themselves in it, and they had nightmares of being rounded up and slaughtered haunts [sic] their sleep. When they can no longer stand the screams and cries in their own head, they went crazy. (15)

This passage reminds us of De’Ath’s method – to register the sensuous content that structural analysis alone cannot retrieve. Jonah the whale’s testimony traces what humans might initially dismiss as self-destruction back to the accumulated trauma of persecution across generations, a logic that reflects the forms of apparent risk that gay men navigated in 1990s Singapore while patronizing cruising sites with the knowledge of police entrapment. In fact, as an anecdote that constitutes the opening amalgamated account shows, the guilt and shame of being caught haunts gay consciousness – after witnessing men having sex at Tanjong Rhu, a person dreams of being arrested by the police. While the passage might appear, to licensing officers vetting the script, as a straightforward commentary on whaling, it takes on multiple valences when staged on a set evoking Tanjong Rhu’s shoreline, and performed by an actor who also portrays a brother who died from unspoken AIDS-related complications. Fong, in the program notes for the 1993 staging, wrote that the play was conceived when he “saw a photograph of a school of whales beached on a shore,” wondering what would drive whales to desire land and death. In the next sentence, he states that the play is about “coming to terms with someone close to you, and yet seems to live worlds apart.” The play builds empathy across species and sexualities, allowing audiences to transpose feelings of queer isolation and desire for kinship to an ecological more-than-human register.

The false killer whale that stranded on Singapore’s eastern reclaimed industrial coastline in January 1994, between the English and Mandarin stagings, produced a metatheatrical correspondence to what the play staged. Incidents of beached cetaceans in

²⁰ In Fong’s stage directions, he specifies that the actor’s voice should gradually increase in volume until it reaches a deafening level. In the video documentation of the 1993 production, actor Lim How Ngean delivers this passage passionately.

Singapore are not a common occurrence,²¹ and Fong wrote *Cetacea* at a time when there was little precedent of whale sightings along Singapore's high-traffic coastal waters, peppered with container ships and other vessels. Newspaper tabloid reports describe crowds gathering around the distressed creature, swimming or sailing up to it and prodding it for reaction. The crowds christened the creature "Willy" after the orca in *Free Willy* (1993). This is the same State-managed tabloid that exposed gay cruising at Tanjong Rhu a couple of months earlier and also sensationalized Josef Ng's performance protest against the entrapment exercises.²² This public harassment of a trapped cetacean paralleled the dynamics Fong had scripted. In both cases, bodies that had been operating below the threshold of public scrutiny were forced into spectacular transparency by the media and subjected to the violence of that exposure, echoing how the names, ages, and occupations of the entrapped men had been published in the national broadsheet. Fong, who was preparing for the Mandarin staging during this period, later recalled the stranding as uncanny,²³ as if something the play had written into fiction was being belatedly reclaimed by reality.

The 1994 Mandarin staging shows a shift. Fong reworked the script in translation, expanding the familial and kinship narratives between Gerald and his parents, while significantly reducing the play's environmental content. Mention of the extinction of cetacean species was removed, along with other details around the physiology of cetacean communication. The play concluded with Gerald's reconciliation with his mother rather than Jonah's death at sunrise. William Peterson, in his overview of queer theater in Singapore, notes that Mandarin-language plays historically faced less censorship due to their perceived limited audience, and that "throughout the 1990s, the authorities have consistently demonstrated greater latitude with respect to depictions of gay men in Mandarin-language drama than in English language works" (147). This latitude may have contributed to the Mandarin version's greater directorial confidence with the latent sexuality of the play. Yet these changes also expose a tension within aesthetic practice that uses ecological surrogacy to address queer content. Once the whale metaphor accomplished its work of navigating the heightened political conditions of 1993, the ecological concerns that gave the play its

²¹ The most recent sighting occurred in 2015, when a whale carcass washed ashore off the coast of Jurong Island, one of several industrial islands south of Singapore. The whale carcass was named "Jubi Lee" in conjunction with the nation's fiftieth anniversary celebrations, and its skeleton is preserved and displayed at the Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum. Newspaper reports from 2015 also mention a whale found floating in the open sea around 2007 or 2008, which was not retrieved due to advanced decomposition. The 1994 case remains the only recorded instance of a large cetacean beaching in Singapore since independence in 1965. There were records of multiple strandings of smaller cetaceans like dolphins in the 2000s.

²² *The New Paper* ran the cover story "Ambush on Gay Beach" on 9 Mar. 1992 on the entrapment exercises that were being conducted at Tanjong Rhu. The coverage by journalist Yaw Yan Chong described Tanjong Rhu as a "homosexual haunt" (6). Josef Ng and Shannon Tham's performances were reported on 3 Jan. 1994.

²³ Otto Fong in conversation with the author, 27 June 2025.

more-than-human complexity were deprioritized in 1994. The ecological life that the play had mobilized as kin and as cover became secondary to human intimacy. Even within resistant artistic practice, the ecology risks being regarded as a “free gift” in Battistoni’s reading, indispensable to the work’s survival through the developmental process, yet dissipating in its final version. The 1994 program notes in Mandarin demonstrate an awareness of this reduction, while also pushing back against this dissipation. Translated from Mandarin, it reads: “All beings and things in the universe possess inherent value and power.”²⁴ This insistence on “inherent value (价值)” corresponds with this chapter’s attempt to trace what falls outside capital’s accounting of value. Where the Mandarin staging’s compressed dramaturgy shifted attention away from the play’s ecological substance, the notes remind us that the more-than-human bears intrinsic value and is not a mere fungible “free gift.”

From *Cetacea* at the water’s edge, dramatizing the intertidal zone of Tanjong Rhu as a space of categorical refusal and interspecies kinship, we move further inland to the flora of the reclaimed ground. This spatial progression tracks the geological layering of the site itself. *Cetacea* occupies the boundary between sea and land, the zone that reclamation first subsumes. The next artwork moves into the interior, where pioneer vegetation has colonized the settled silt during the fallow years between reclamation and development.

3.6 Boo Junfeng’s *Tanjong Rhu* (2009)

3.6.1 The Casuarina Cove

In 2009, filmmaker Boo Junfeng directed *Tanjong Rhu*, a nineteen-minute narrative short film that revisits the 1993 entrapment through the moving image, centering the site’s ecological intimacy through sustained attention to its pioneer vegetation. The structural conditions of the film’s production mirror those of *Cetacea*. Both works emerged through arts institutions’ developmental programs for emerging practitioners, and both materialized through combinations of unwaged labor, institutional resources, and informal networks operating outside the State’s official circuits of cultural production. Fong’s play was developed as part of the Young Playwrights Series sponsored by the state-affiliated Singapore Press Holdings, while Boo’s film was produced as part of his graduation thesis film at LASALLE College of the Arts, where he was part of the pioneer graduating cohort of the Puttnam School of Film. The Singapore Film Commission rejected Boo’s funding application despite his track record as an award-winning short filmmaker (Boo, “Tanjong

²⁴The original Mandarin text in the program in a subsection as “Cetacean speech” reads: “宇宙间的人与物都有它们存在的价值和权力。在我们寻找人与物与物之间的交流，了解和包容时，也许早已潜埋着一份难以诠释的爱。只要是爱，都是没有理由和目的的，都是没有绝对的对或错。” My translation of this passage: “All beings and things in the universe possess inherent value and power. As we seek connection and exchange between human and non-human entities, fostering understanding and acceptance, there may already be a buried form of love that resists interpretation. Such love transcends reason and purpose, recognizing no absolute distinctions between right and wrong.”

Rhu Afterthoughts”). He relied on private sponsorship, institutional equipment, queer community infrastructure, and fellow students as crew, lowering production costs through what amounted to unwaged student labor.²⁵

The film centers on a documentary interview between Janice and Kelvin, a man who was arrested during the 1993 police entrapment exercise. Janice’s brother Jason operates the camera and sound equipment. Through fragmented flashbacks, the audience reconstructs Kelvin’s relationship with his boyfriend David, whom he met while cruising at Tanjong Rhu; his grandmother’s tacit acceptance of their relationship; and the devastating fallout of his arrest, public shaming, imprisonment, and caning. The film’s temporal complexity deepens through the gradual revelation that Jason, initially positioned as a silent documentarian, is the secondary protagonist whose own connection to the entrapment remains concealed. Flashbacks reveal that Jason was also present at Tanjong Rhu the night of the arrests, sharing conversation and physical intimacy with Kelvin before Kelvin withdrew. Jason witnessed the police arresting Kelvin and other men, and escaped in the dim light of dawn.

The film encodes class differences through its linguistic and spatial registers. Boo describes this as a deliberate directorial decision: he “wanted to explore something different from local representations of queer experience (which tended to be middle-class and English-speaking)” (“Tanjong Rhu Afterthoughts”). Kelvin speaks in Singlish and Mandarin, lives in an older-generation public flat, and receives Janice and Jason in his modest domestic space. Jason, in contrast, is an English-speaking military officer whose education and bearing mark him as a beneficiary of the meritocratic apparatus the State promotes. Their encounter at Tanjong Rhu materializes the interclass contact Delany theorizes as latent in cruising, a form of sociality across class lines. This promiscuous sociality is what Singapore’s regimented urban planning is designed to foreclose, through ethnically zoned public housing and a school system historically segregated by language of instruction. In a moment of formal doubling that recalls the Jonah/Derek surrogacy in *Cetacea*, when Kelvin leans in for a kiss with Jason, the film cuts to reveal David’s face in Jason’s place ([figs. 3.3 and 3.4](#)), collapsing the two encounters so that interclass intimacy and prior romance become indistinguishable within the same frame, one body substituting for another across time and social position. Kelvin’s fateful return to Tanjong Rhu on the night of the entrapment is simultaneously a return to where he first met David, chasing the anonymous intimacy the site promises and that once blossomed into his first serious relationship. The site accumulates these intimate histories, layering encounters on the ground as Kadir and Tsing’s *timbun* layers silt into property. The film’s recursive and fragmented temporal structure is a formal translation of this accumulation. The reclaimed ground creates space for cross-class and

²⁵ State funding dominates the arts and cultural landscape in Singapore. See *Reimagining Singapore: Self and Society in Contemporary Art*, which features interviews and further research about the conditions of artistic production (Lum).

cross-temporal promiscuity because it has not yet been formally absorbed into the urban infrastructure.

Jason's guilt culminates in an emotional breakdown as they leave Kelvin's apartment. Janice places a hand on his shoulder in a gesture of silent understanding. We do not know if she comprehends her brother's closeted sexuality or hidden past, but the moment echoes the familial acceptance shared between Kelvin and his grandmother. A key moment, repeated twice across different sequences of the film, is when Janice asks Kelvin if he blames anyone for what happened to him. Kelvin stoically and calmly replies in Mandarin: "No, I don't blame anyone. Who do you expect me to blame? This society? Those policemen? Or the homophobes? Who am I supposed to blame?"²⁶ (10:18 and 14:00) The answer shows a level of critical self-awareness of the heteronormative order that is structural and is beyond a figure of blame. The violence that Kelvin experienced is dispersed across the apparatus that reclaims land and manages the population, distributed across what produced both the conditions for cruising and its criminalization. This reminds us of what De'Ath, after Best, describes as value's "perceptual delinking," one that makes it "impossible to know how a historical moment, experienced or imagined, is constituted within a social totality" (4). Kelvin's series of rhetorical questions reflects this delinking process – he can name individual agents but is unable to see the structure that connects them. The film renders this formally through its own fragmentary and distributed narration, offering Kelvin initially as protagonist, then shifting focus to Jason's hidden past, all while mediated by Janice's line of questioning. None of them possesses a complete account, yet their fragmented perspectives accumulate into the narrative.

3.6.2 Foregrounding Ecological Intimacy

Boo's directorial choices formally enact what this chapter has theorized as ecological intimacy. Ecological intimacy is related to the more-than-human entanglement that Tsing and others have theorized, but it operates at a sensuous and embodied register that entanglement as a concept does not always reach. Where entanglement describes a condition of relational sociality, ecological intimacy focuses on the physical interaction with the ground that carries risk to forms of life: the sinking into mud that the opening vignette highlights, the penetration and being penetrated by an ecology that shapes desire. This is intimacy as material sensing, distinct from the metaphorical registers of intimacies that Lisa Lowe and others have traced. The film's compositional logic demonstrates how this intimacy is sensed by consistently foregrounding the vegetation of Tanjong Rhu while human figures recede as shadows in the background. In his artist statement, Boo articulated this priority: "It was essential for me to portray on screen the casuarina trees, the silhouettes and the forlorn seascape where gay men sought furtive encounters" ("Tanjong Rhu Afterthoughts"). Where *Cetacea* registered the structural concealment that the value-form

²⁶ This translation is from the film's English subtitles.

requires, sensing through interspecies surrogacy what could not be named, Boo's film registers what the theatrical performance could not capture: the sensory and ecological substrate of the cruising ground itself. The cinema's capacity for indexical representation and environmental documentation, what Boo calls its ability to "reproduce a setting with greater fidelity" ("Tanjong Rhu Afterthoughts"), allows the film to attend to the material conditions of ecological intimacy on reclaimed ground through sustained sensorial attention to what usually appears as mere backdrop.

The film opens *in medias res* on the evening of the entrapment exercise, establishing the environment with plant life as a co-constituent of concealment: cover for the men cruising, but also a screen for the plainclothes policemen setting the trap. A series of tight close-ups establishes the tone: a flickering flame, brief contact between two lit cigarettes, a blurred figure in the background while blades of grass and tangled vegetation remain in sharp focus in the foreground ([fig. 3.5](#)). These give way to shots of the moon, waves crashing against the shore, the light rendered with the uncanny blue tonalities of day-for-night shooting that collapses our sense of time. Water droplets cling to the slender, needle-like leaves of the casuarina as they sway, a visual motif that recurs throughout the film. The casuarina plant's needle-like leaves create a wispy silhouette and susurrations in the wind.²⁷ Figure-ground relations dissolve to approximate the sensory experience of being in the environment by night: wayfinding and cruising, a chance encounter with flora, fauna, and other bodies. The montage layers botanical and bodily intimacy. A boot splashes into a muddy puddle, scattering the reflection of surrounding foliage. The frame lingers on the feathered tip of the lallang,²⁸ its teasing silvery plumes catching the moonlight ([fig. 3.6](#)). Linked hands move through tall grass. The atmospheric sequence culminates in a cut to the title card set against a blurred bokeh of flashing red and blue lights, foreshadowing the

²⁷ The casuarina tree (*Casuarina equisetifolia*) is a distinctive feature that marks parcels of reclaimed land in Singapore. This fast-growing pioneer species reaches heights of up to 130 feet and tolerates the saline and barren sandy soils that characterize coastal reclamation projects. Horticulturalists selected casuarinas for propagation because their deep roots bind and stabilize loose fill during the settlement process. The trees' leaves are tiny scales held in whorls, surrounding gray-green needle-like twigs ([fig. 3.5](#)), giving the tree its distinctive feathery crown and making it effective as a coastal windbreak. The casuarina spreads through wind-dispersed seeds contained in cone-like clusters which split open when ripe. This aggressive seed dispersal, while useful for rapid coastal stabilization, has led to the casuarina being considered invasive in some environments because of its ability to form dense monocultures that crowd out other vegetation.

²⁸ The lallang (*Imperata cylindrica*), which grows up to six feet in height, is perceived as a weed in Singapore's manicured landscape. The feathered tips that crown each stem release fertilized seeds that travel across vast distances on hair-like awns carried by wind. This capacity for aerial dispersal allows lallang to transgress borders, fences, roads, and other infrastructural barriers designed to regulate movement and contain growth, especially on flat reclaimed parcels of land. Like most grasses, lallang also relies on the invisible work of rhizomatic root networks that spread laterally beneath the soil surface. On nutrient-poor reclaimed coastal land, these underground runners establish new shoots across open areas while helping to prevent erosion. Even when visible portions of the plant are cut down, the subterranean network persists and reemerges.

entrapment. Online forums and informal accounts from cruisers document how lallang growth cycles, tide timings, and wind conditions co-constitute what visitors describe as ideal conditions for crossing into the cruising area and seeking intimate encounters.

The film explores the texture of pioneer vegetation that grows on reclaimed ground during the fallow years of settling. The casuarina and lallang were selected by horticulturalists for their capacity to bind and stabilize loose sand. After the human labor of extraction and filling of sand, the plants continue the process of making the reclaimed land developable. Once the soil settles and development proceeds, they are cleared, their infrastructural purpose fulfilled. Boo's insistence on foregrounding these species marks their presence as co-constituents of cruising intimacy. They are active participants in the ecology of desire, providing cover, windbreak, and spatial differentiation on an otherwise flat, landmarkless terrain. The parallel between queer and ecological existence on the cruising site, where the freedom for growth within a contained area is probationary and subject to eventual displacement and prohibition, is also a material entanglement. The humans that patronize the site feed the mosquitoes that thrive within the stagnant pools of collected rainwater trapped in the potholes of the muddy ground. This ecological entanglement shapes the most intimate human encounters in the film.

In a scene by the beach that echoes the brothers in *Cetacea*, Kelvin explains that he chose to sit by the shore because the interior forest was too warm. Jason approaches and they sit side by side on the stone revetments looking out toward the horizon, avoiding a potentially awkward face-to-face encounter ([fig. 3.7](#)). This positioning enacts the spatial negotiations crucial to the encounter in cruising, where orientation enables withdrawal through ambiguity, without requiring explicit refusal. After their brief conversation, Jason notices Kelvin holding his elbows closer and reads this as a sign that the coastal breeze, buffered by the casuarina trees further inland, might be too cold. He asks if Kelvin is feeling chilly, then reaches out and places his arm over Kelvin, pulling him closer for warmth, producing the conditions for their eventual kiss. The granularity of this encounter speaks to the sensitivity of Boo's direction, but also reenacts the spatial intimacy that a reclaimed environment like Tanjong Rhu affords its patrons, mediated by and through its ecology. The revetment that supports their bodies was constructed to contain the sand and mark the boundary of reclamation. The casuarina and lallang shroud their encounter and buffer the sea breeze. Beyond facilitating the encounter, the ecological infrastructure co-produces this moment of intimacy. The casuarina's growth cycle determines the density of the windbreak. The rising tide determines the width of the rocky revetment they are seated on. The interaction of sea temperature and reclaimed topography generates the breeze that initiates physical contact between two strangers. More-than-human temporalities converge in this moment of intimacy: seasonal growth, tidal rhythm, the geological time of land settling and the waiting it induces. The topography of reclamation produces the conditions for what this

chapter has theorized as ecological intimacy, a form of sociality constituted through, and inseparable from, the more-than-human ecology of reclaimed ground.

3.6.3 Re-cognition of a Structural Secret

Tanjong Rhu premiered at the Berlin Film Festival in February 2009, was nominated for a Teddy award,²⁹ and won the audience award at the Torino Gay and Lesbian Film Festival. Despite international recognition, the film was abruptly withdrawn from programming at the National Museum Cinémathèque of Singapore in August 2009, after initially being included in a double-bill of queer short films, and after the film had already received an R(21) rating³⁰ and a prior public screening at the Singapore International Film Festival. No official reason was provided. The screening proceeded on the scheduled day, unlisted and unpublicized, playing to a packed auditorium, yet the event was subsequently removed from the Cinémathèque's official programming archives.³¹ This proscription of gay content is an echo of what the State had performed on the cruising ground – a dance with tolerance: a refusal to record, a marking-through-restriction that acknowledged the presence of queerness. Where Arondekar identifies the paradox of sodomy's simultaneous presence and absence within the British colonial archives, the Cinémathèque's erasure of the screening from its records is a minor but precise extension of this logic operating at the level of cultural institutions that are themselves extensions of the State's heteronormative order.

Boo has described his approach to filmmaking as revisiting history to “generate discourse so that people can talk about issues that have been swept under the carpet” (qtd. in Lim and Hong). Chew Yi Wei identifies this method as producing “re-cognition” (77), a deliberate review of assumptions that compels viewers to re-examine what they think they know. Fiction functions as a sensuous counter-archive that opens up criticality rather than filling in gaps, dissipating the top-down official narrative of the entrapment and offering up what Chew refers to as the “duplicity of memory” (77) in its place. A comment left on Boo's blog by a viewer who attended one of the early screenings of *Tanjong Rhu* offers a closing resonance with the many furtive accounts of cruising at Tanjong Rhu, and demonstrates this “re-cognition” viscerally. The viewer describes his experience: “The casuarina branches were all too familiar; the soft soil that squelched under my shoes, the mosquitoes and I can even

²⁹ The film premiered in the Panorama section of the festival. The Teddy award, established in 1987, recognizes outstanding queer cinema. For a Singaporean short film, this nomination represented international validation of the artistic merit of *Tanjong Rhu*.

³⁰ R(21) is Singapore's most restrictive film classification, limiting exhibition to audiences aged twenty-one and above. This rating is typically applied to films containing mature themes around sexuality, politics, or other content deemed sensitive by the Infocomm Media Development Authority. The rating means the venue and organizers of the event have to enforce identification checking to ensure no one below the age of twenty-one is in attendance.

³¹ My short film was part of this double-bill of short films screening. See Sylvia Tan's report on Fridae.com, the online portal that provided private sponsorship of Boo's film for further details on this incident.

smell the odd mixture of cigarette smoke, mud and the briny breeze.” He goes on to write that the film “has unlocked the doors to dark chambers that I have consciously tried to hide for many years,” describing these memories as residing “in the darkest corner” of his consciousness (“Tanjong Rhu Afterthoughts”). This unsolicited testimony resonates with the amalgamated oral accounts at the beginning of this chapter. His testimony reveals that ecology, more readily than narrative or character, unlocks the memory of cruising at Tanjong Rhu. He describes the familiar casuarina, the soil that gives way, and the smell of salty smoke. These sensory details persist in embodied memory after the cruising has been displaced and the vegetation replaced. The film opens up the opportunity for this and other unrecorded testimonies to resurface through the textures of ecological intimacy.

3.7 What Remains – Field Notes from 2020 and 2021

Over the decades, I have returned to Tanjong Rhu repeatedly. My initial encounter was in the early 2000s, when my then-boyfriend introduced me to the practice of public cruising. We drove there under the cover of the night, our headlights cutting across shadows that scattered into the dark. I was seeking some form of imagined community, but remained in our vehicle, gripped by the paranoia shaped by then-recent cases of police entrapment. It was not until the 2010s that I explored the other layers to the site, including the forest and the beach. I returned as a curious observer and occasional participant. These visits were marked by caution and the fear of recognition. I never lingered long, nor ventured deep enough to reach the tip of the reclaimed coastline with a helicopter landing pad. By this time, the State had also erected signs and reinforced holes in fences to prevent trespassing. The ecological intimacy this chapter has traced – through the amalgamated oral accounts, the navigation by casuarina and tides, the whispered knowledge of where and when, the play and the film – was also part of my own experience.

In 2020 and 2021, during brief windows when Singapore’s pandemic restrictions permitted outdoor movement within limited parameters, I returned with a critical lens. International borders were sealed, and the claustrophobia of urban life on the island had intensified. The pandemic produced a resurgence of outdoor cruising in public parks, driven by a desire for intimacy and communion with what was perceived as “natural” during lockdown.³² Tanjong Rhu had become redeveloped by then; the topographical changes also meant that it was no longer a popular cruising area. I conducted fieldwork for this chapter while also seeking relief in the strange, wild terrain I remembered from those earlier visits, terrain represented in *Tanjong Rhu*, *Cetacea*, and online accounts. The vegetation had matured and diversified beyond the pioneer species that had defined the site for decades. The

³² This trend extended beyond Singapore (where I was located during lockdown) to other parts of the world: a resurgence of interest in returning to “nature,” whether through physical relocation to the hinterlands or through outdoor activities undertaken to avoid the risk of contagion in enclosed indoor environments. The Epilogue elaborates further on the etiolated conditions of living in Singapore during the pandemic.

casuarina and lallang that once provided cover had been overtaken by denser tropical undergrowth and thicker canopy. Secondary growth signaled the soil's gradual stabilization. The fallow period that had enabled cruising was drawing to a close, even as the stabilized ground opened up new possibilities for unauthorized occupation.

Part of the area in 2020 and 2021 serviced the logistics of construction, acting as the holding area for further extraction inland. A long pier extended from the reclaimed shoreline into the water, and an incessant procession of trucks loaded with sand, concrete, and other building materials moved along it throughout the day. The pier functioned as an entry point for materials to be offloaded from barges and to supply the construction projects continually reshaping Singapore. Piles of stockpiled sand and other construction materials sat on parcels of the reclaimed ground, waiting for redistribution. These materials, extracted through the same transnational supply chains as the sand that decades earlier had filled the sea, arrived on the ground that sand had helped to produce, confirming what Büsse and others have identified as the shift to increasingly intensive modes of spatial accumulation. Nested within the vegetation alongside these sandpiles, makeshift shelters housed migrant workers from neighboring Southeast Asian countries ([fig. 3.9](#)). As some theorists and artists have observed, these workers are living on land extracted from their homelands (Leow, “this land was the sea” 179). These temporary structures, assembled from corrugated metal and salvaged materials, were positioned deep enough in the undergrowth to be invisible from the public roads. Their presence on reclaimed ground is an extension of the labor histories Fok traces from colonial convicts to contemporary migrant construction work, and adds to the site's history of illegitimate appropriation.

At strategic locations along the shoreline, tall poles with clusters of surveillance cameras had been erected, their lenses trained on the revetments and the remaining stretches of barren coastline. These cameras continue the work of deterrence that the entrapment exercise of the 1990s had initiated, now automated and continuous. On those same rocky revetments, mineral water bottles remained strewn across the rocks, sun-bleached and misshapen by the heat and weathering. These bottles, once code for announcing one's intention to cruise, persisted as a material residue of the site's history. Nearby, a parcel of land once used as an unofficial dumping ground has been rehabilitated as Bay East Garden, an extension of Gardens by the Bay. In the middle is a large construction project, named the Founders' Memorial, a museum and commemorative site dedicated to the first generation of politicians who led Singapore after independence in 1965.³³ The website invites visitors to identify with the values it determines as foundational to national identity. This includes “multiculturalism, resilience, openness, boldness, integrity and service to others before self”

³³ Boo Junfeng served on the Founders' Memorial Committee during its third term (2021 to 2023). That the filmmaker whose work was withdrawn from the National Museum Cinémathèque now advises on the memorial being constructed on the ground his film documents is a correspondence this chapter notes but does not presume to adjudicate.

(“Find My Value”). This invitation operates as an ironic contrast on ground this chapter has read through the value-form. The memorial mobilizes “value” in the moral register, echoing the 1991 Shared Values White Paper,³⁴ which promoted what Chua Beng Huat terms “Asian Communitarianism.” The paradox that cultural critic C.J. W.-L. Wee identifies with this process of self-fashioning and reinvention around “values” remains. Wee asks: “How can a state have an idea of collectivism, given the neo-liberal emphasis on the free market?” (11) The memorial exercise replaces the question of what value dissociates (the sensuous, the reproductive, the intimate) with a catalog of values the nation wants its citizens to embody and identify with. “Value” is laundered of its critical content and historical material grounding, and returned in the form of civic vocabulary and aspiration.

This chapter is one attempt to counter this laundering of value’s critical force. I argued that Singapore’s land reclamation literalizes what value-form theorists describe as dissociation, and that the cruising ecology at Tanjong Rhu constitutes what this chapter has called ecological intimacy. This is a form of etiolated conduct shaped by the material conditions of reclaimed ground, and registered by artworks like *Cetacea* and *Tanjong Rhu*. Ecological intimacy names a form of social reproduction that is materially produced by capital’s transformation of land, temporally located in the gaps of development, and sensorially shaped by the ecology of reclaimed ground. Both artworks analyzed in this chapter engage with different aspects of the sensuous content of what the value-form dissociates. The cruising ecology at Tanjong Rhu is shaped by capital’s reconfiguration of land and intimacy, yet it persists as a sensuous remainder the value-form cannot absorb. Where previous chapters traced etiolated conduct through the structures of legal recognition and the camouflage of aesthetic representation, this chapter grounds it in the material conditions of land itself, reclaiming reclamation. The next chapter moves from the reclaimed ground to another site of confinement, tracing how political detainees under Singapore’s Internal Security Act cultivated practices of more-than-human attentiveness in solitary confinement, extending etiolated conduct from ecological intimacy to the carceral environment.

³⁴ The five Shared Values were: 1. Nation before community and society above self. 2. Family as the basic unit of society. 3. Regard and community support for the individual. 4. Consensus instead of contention. 5. Racial and religious harmony. These values were printed on pedagogical materials (on the back cover of exercise books and textbooks) and laminated in posters. I recall encountering them at every turn on campus as part of my primary and secondary school education (*White Paper on Shared Values*).



Figure 3.1 Production documentation from *Cetacea* (1993). Image courtesy of T:>Works.



Figure 3.2 Production documentation from *Cetacea/鯨* (1994). Image courtesy of Drama Box.



Figure 3.3 *Tanjong Rhu* (2009). Jason in a baseball cap leaning in for a kiss with Kelvin (10:13). (Left)
 Figure 3.4 *Tanjong Rhu* (2009). Kelvin kissing David (07:52). The identical framing and lighting create temporal ambiguity, suggesting either a flashback or Kelvin's fantasy as he kisses Jason in the present. (Right)



Figure 3.5 *Tanjong Rhu* (2009). Casuarina leaves in focus, with a silhouette in the background (04:25). (Left)
 Figure 3.6 *Tanjong Rhu* (2009). Kelvin teases the feather-like flower of the lallang plant (01:37). (Right)



Figure 3.7 *Tanjong Rhu* (2009). Kelvin and Jason/David sit by the beach with the casuarina branch in the foreground (03:14). Figures 3.3 through 3.7 are film stills courtesy of Boo Junfeng.



Figure 3.8 View of the rocky revetment at Tanjong Rhu on 23 Apr. 2021. Photo by author.



Figure 3.9 Makeshift shelters amidst the dense undergrowth at Tanjong Rhu that has replaced the pioneer species. 8 June 2020. The figure in the photograph is the author. Photo by Looi Wan Ping.

5 Dec. 1992	TheatreWorks presents Otto Fong's <i>Cetacea</i> in its inaugural public reading, directed by Ong Keng Sen.
15–19 July 1993	TheatreWorks stages <i>Cetacea</i> as part of its Young Playwrights Series, developed through a workshop mentored by David J. Britton and directed by Lim Yu Beng.
19–20 Sep. 1993	Police conduct three entrapment operations over two days, arresting twelve men at the Tanjong Rhu cruising area. This operation forms part of ongoing police entrapment exercises targeting gay men in public spaces including shopping malls, swimming pools, and parks.
22 Nov. 1993	Six of the twelve men plead guilty and receive sentences ranging from two to six months' imprisonment plus three strokes of the cane. The remaining six claim trial.
23 Nov. 1993	<i>The Straits Times</i> publishes "12 men nabbed in anti-gay operation at Tanjong Rhu," listing the names, ages, and occupations of all arrested men.
1 Jan. 1994	Artist Josef Ng stages a protest performance against the police entrapment, culminating in cutting his pubic hair. State-managed tabloid newspapers sensationalize the act as obscene.
22 Jan. 1994	The Ministry of Home Affairs and Ministry of Information and the Arts issue a joint statement banning state funding for performance art and forum theater. New licensing requirements mandate that unscripted performances provide synopses and security deposits when applying for Public Entertainment Licensing Unit permits. The proscription on licensing and funding of performance art and forum theater will continue for the next ten years.
25 Jan. 1994	A thirteen-foot false killer whale is stranded on Singapore's eastern reclaimed industrial land. Crowds gather to observe the rare occurrence, with reports of spectators prodding the animal and making loud noises in an attempt to move it. The cetacean dies within a week.
5 Feb. 1994	<i>The Straits Times</i> publishes an article stating that playwright Haresh Sharma and director Alvin Tan of The Necessary Stage received training on forum theater techniques at "Marxist workshops" in New York City. The journalist Felix Soh accuses the company of "using theatre for a political end."
3 Mar. 1994	American teenager Michael Fay is sentenced to four months in jail, a SGD3,500 fine, and six strokes of the cane for vandalizing eighteen cars. The case attracts international attention and diplomatic intervention from President Bill Clinton.
5 May 1994	Despite international protests, Singapore carries out the reduced sentence of four strokes of the cane on Fay. The punishment generates worldwide media coverage and diplomatic tensions between Singapore and the U.S.
13–15 May 1994	Drama Box stages the Mandarin version of <i>Cetacea</i> /鲸 as part of The Substation's Raw Theatre series, directed by Jackie Liu and Tan Pei Hwee.
17 May 1994	Josef Ng pleads guilty to committing an obscene act in public and is fined SGD1,000 for his 1 Jan. performance.

Table 3.1 A timeline of events in Singapore around the staging of *Cetacea* (1993) and *Cetacea*/鲸 (1994).

Chapter 4

Solitary-Solidarity:

More-than-human *Parrhesia* and Trans-generational Conduct

Can a liberated human mind be constrained by a state sanctioned space? [...]

Can a liberated work of art be contained within a state sanctioned space?

Do you know the answers to both of these questions? I will show you.

— Seelan Palay, *32 Years: The Interrogation of a Mirror*¹

4.1 No. 5153

8 October 2018. Performance artist Seelan Palay is serving a prison sentence for conducting “a public procession without a permit.” He chose to serve a two-week sentence in lieu of a fine of \$2,500 in Singapore dollars.² His protest commemorated Dr. Chia Thye Poh, Singapore’s longest-serving political detainee, whose movement the State restricted for thirty-two years without trial. Palay is referred to as prisoner number 5153. It is the sixth day of his solitary confinement; he has been isolated from the rest of the prisoners because he refused a blood test during his intake process. The reading materials he requested have yet to be cleared by guards, and there is little to do but endure the solitude. 5153 considers the political detainees before him who survived similar conditions, and the many more in the future who might face the same for speaking up in public, for standing up for their beliefs, for holding up a sign in defiance. To cope with the unbearable isolation of solitary confinement, the artist devises a meditation practice. He meticulously peels the orange that is served with his prison meal and starts consuming it, sac by sac. He feels sticky juice on his fingertips, breathes in the sharp citrus scent, tastes dirt under his fingernails mingled with faint sour sweetness. As time trickles away, 5153 wonders where he stops and where the orange begins.

This etiolated conduct was part of Palay’s durational performance *32 Years: The Interrogation of a Mirror*. Palay initiated this performance on 1 October 2017, at Hong Lim Park, a state-sanctioned space modeled after London’s Hyde Park that permits licensed protest. During this performance, Palay left the protest area, conducted “a public procession”³ by walking to Parliament House while trailed by the media and supporters, and

¹ Seelan Palay addressed his artwork and the crowd during his performance *32 Years: The Interrogation of a Mirror* at Hong Lim Park in Singapore before walking to the Parliament House on 1 October 2017.

² This is approximately \$1,800 US dollars.

³ The charge sheet reads: “You, [Seelan Palay] are charged that you, on 1 October 2017, at about 2.23 p.m. to about 3.07 p.m., from Hong Lim Park to the National Gallery, and then subsequently to the Parliament House, Singapore, did take part in a public procession with the following three purposes: (1) To commemorate the detention of Dr Chia Thye Poh for 32 years; (2) To demonstrate opposition to the actions of the Singapore government in relation to that detention; and (3) To demonstrate opposition to the Singapore

standing outside Parliament House while holding up a mirror (fig. 4.1). The performance culminated in his arrest and concluded on 15 October 2018 when Palay was released from prison after completing his sentence. In an interview, Palay stated that he regarded “the whole process [as] part of this performance” and his artwork, “including being arrested, facing charges, going to trial, being detained, and then being released” (Varagur). The duration of this process was slightly more than a year, stretching our perception of the event-time of a performance, extending the proscenium of the stage to include the park, the public road, the Parliament House, the courtroom, and the prison. Through his practice that stretches the spatial and temporal limits of performance, Palay’s extended artwork corresponds to Ray Langenbach’s account of the performance of the Singaporean State, revealing the proceduralism and bureaucracy of Singapore’s technocratic governance designed to discourage dissent. Palay’s performance raised awareness of the Public Order Act introduced in 2009 to restrict assemblies and protests, while recalling the ongoing force of the Internal Security Act, which allows the government to detain individuals without trial on grounds of national security, political subversion, or terrorism.⁴ This chapter examines etiolated conduct that is hidden or withdrawn from public view as a mode of unpragmatic and obdurate resistance in the face of legal restrictions.

4.2 Etiolated Conduct and More-than-human *Parrhesia*

The ancient Greek concept of *parrhesia*⁵ (παρρησία), often translated as “speaking truth to power” or “speaking freely,” became a central focus of Michel Foucault’s scholarship in his final years. He elaborated on *parrhesia* across multiple lecture series at the Collège de France and the University of California, Berkeley between 1982 and 1984.⁶ In these lectures, Foucault identifies five defining characteristics of *parrhesia*. First, it involves “saying

government’s actions of designating the Speakers’ Corner at Hong Lim Park as an area for public entertainment in the form of performances; In respect of which no permit had been granted under Section 7 of the Public Order Act, Chapter 257A (2012 Rev Ed), and you have thereby committed an offence punishable under Section 16(2)(a) of the said Act.” This charge sheet was shared publicly on social media by Teo Soh Lung, who attended and commented on Palay’s two-day trial on 26 and 27 Sept. 2018.

⁴ Legal scholar Jothie Rajah’s *Authoritarian Rule of Law* traces the history of these restrictions on expressive freedom to British colonial laws, and provides a comprehensive background behind the use of the legal apparatus to manage dissent on the island-state.

⁵ There are multiple spellings of *parrhesia* in writings by and about Foucault. Since his lectures on *parrhesia* survive mainly in lectures, this has also been translated in various forms. For consistency, I have adopted the spelling: *parrhesia*, *parrhesiatic*, *parrhesiaist*. The emphasis on the oratory and performative aspects of *parrhesia* gains particular significance and irony given that these ideas survive primarily in speeches, interviews, and lectures rather than in written works published during Foucault’s lifetime. Consequently, these lectures vary across translations and contexts, and Foucault’s elaborations of *parrhesia* evolve throughout this period.

⁶ I abbreviate my citations of these two lectures as “GSO” for *The Government of Self and Others* (his Collège de France lectures) and “D&T” for *Discourse and Truth* (his UC Berkeley lectures) for the rest of this chapter.

everything” (*D&T* 40) without concealment. Second, he distinguishes “good” from “bad” *parrhesia* (*D&T* 41), truth-telling from sincere belief versus flattery or narcissism. Third, parrhesiatic utterance necessarily involves risk and danger. Fourth, *parrhesia* is speech delivered by someone of inferior social standing to greater authority. Fifth, it represents an ethical duty to speak truth regardless of consequence. *Parrhesia* is, in Foucault’s terms, “a courageous act” (*GSO* 66) that produces a contingent “open situation” whose effects “are, precisely, not known” (*GSO* 62). Together, these features define *parrhesia* as a courageous ethical practice in which a speaker truthfully and openly addresses a more powerful authority at great personal risk, compelled by duty rather than self-interest.

In one of his few engagements with ordinary language philosophy, Foucault positions *parrhesia* in contrast to J.L. Austin’s performative utterance, which requires “a particular, more or less strictly institutionalized context” and “an individual who has the requisite status” (*GSO* 61). *Parrhesia* is an infelicitous and etiolated speech act, delivered by someone without the requisite institutional power, speaking to authority. As mentioned in the Introduction, J.L. Austin uses the term “etiolations” to refer to language he describes as “hollow” and “void” (22) in *How to Do Things With Words*. These infelicitous performatives lack the authority to produce perlocutionary effects, functioning like theatrical utterances without institutional force. Yet it is this voiding, this stripping of institutional authority, that opens *parrhesia* up to possibilities. When human speech becomes hollow under detention, when expressive freedom is curtailed by laws like Singapore’s Internal Security Act and Public Order Act, gestures toward oranges, insects, and coconut husk mattresses become the medium through which etiolated conduct persists. These “void” performatives, seemingly stripped of perlocutionary force, accumulate what Lorenzini terms a “possibilizing” power that subverts established norms and transforms reality in unforeseeable ways (10).

This chapter extends Foucault’s incomplete critical project on *parrhesia* to encompass embodied practices of truth-telling under political detention. Drawing on Lisa Guenther’s philosophical phenomenology of solitary confinement, the analysis reframes the dominant rhetoric of “dehumanization” toward what Guenther refers to as “de-animalization” (157). Within conditions of solitary confinement designed to sever all connection to the world, political detainees in Singapore developed practices of endurance through more-than-human attentiveness, cultivating relations with insects, toads, plants, and the very infrastructure of their confinement. These practices are what Rebecca Schneider theorizes as “response-ability” (“That the Past”), an ethical capacity for bodies to relate and respond across vast expanses of time and space through material remains and gestural resonance.

Parrhesiatic practice operates across three registers that structure this chapter’s analysis. The first register encompasses endurance through more-than-human attentiveness during solitary confinement, where the daily habits and relations cultivated by political detainees represent an embodied refusal of de-animalization. The second register examines testimonials that transmit the experience of detention across generations, tracing how

published accounts by figures such as Said Zahari and Teo Soh Lung function as delayed parrhesiastic utterances with accumulating force over time. The third register attends to aesthetic responses that interpret detention with varying degrees of legibility, from Kuo Pao Kun's post-detention dramaturgy to Seelan Palay's decade-long artistic engagement with political detention culminating in *32 Years*. These registers compose what this chapter calls "solitary-solidarity": how the infrastructure designed to isolate political detainees simultaneously enables forms of more-than-human and trans-generational intimacies.

A cellular methodology of reading calibrates the critical attention that these three registers demand. Palay's deliberate, patient separation of each orange vesicle, a gesture of slow consumption that blurs the boundaries between the subject consuming and the object being consumed, offers a model for how to attend to the testimonials of survival. This cellular reading methodology mirrors the temporal distension and micro-attentiveness required for enduring solitary confinement, applying that same attentiveness to the practice of critical engagement beyond what is visible. This chapter brings the same micro-attentiveness Palay has for the orange both to the testimonials and to the theoretical archive itself, where Foucault's 1983 lectures on *parrhesia* at the University of California, Berkeley are read not only for what is uttered, but for the power dynamics of the seminar space, the silences and provocations in dialogue with students that his developing framework cannot accommodate.

Along the way, I seek to expose, gently and sometimes covertly, the infrastructure that props up both the inhumanity of political detention and the conditions of power. By juxtaposing audio recordings from Foucault's Berkeley lectures with testimonials by political detainees, this cellular reading method extends the temporal, spatial, and agential frame of truth-telling by attending to specific gestures, infrastructural details, and temporal layering that often elude analysis. Critical and media responses to Palay's *32 Years* have largely focused on the spectacular and dramatic public-facing gestures, which include the initial event of his performance on 1 October 2017, the "public procession," his arrest, and the legal trial documented by both local and international media.⁷ Instead of merely highlighting these well-documented moments, this chapter shifts our critical attention to parrhesiastic practices beyond the frame of the spectacular and transparent. In so doing, this analysis tacitly connects to testimonials of survival from other political detainees about how they coped with living in the penumbra of legibility, withdrawn from public view.

I am guided by a series of questions: How can one persuade oneself to be governed differently through practices of solidarity in solitude? How might such ethical parrhesiastic practices generate a trans-generational form of agency under captivity? By attending to the

⁷ Examples of this include Daphne Lei's article "Solitude to Solidarity: Imagined Transnational Alliance of Humanity against Bestial Hegemony" and Sharmila Wood's indexing of artistic interventions in public spaces, along with the various news reports and interviews with Palay by NGOs like Amnesty International, but also media outlets like the Los Angeles Review of Books and Al Jazeera.

infrastructure that supports life under inhuman conditions, we can trace counter-conduct enacted through the self's relation to the world. These include opaque gestures performed in solitude both as tactics of survival and as acts that build trans-generational solidarity with political detainees across time. In alignment with the final phase of Foucault's thought before his death in 1984 – particularly his study of the Cynic practice of *askesis* (ἄσκησις) – such practices of the self are a form of solitary-solidarity.

4.3 The Internal Security Act and Political Detention

The Internal Security Act (ISA) of Singapore has complex origins.⁸ Under the ISA, the Internal Security Department is able to detain anyone suspected of threatening national security or public order for up to two years without trial. These detention periods can be renewed indefinitely. Since these detention powers took effect in the 1950s, the government has used them to arrest over a thousand individuals.⁹

The 1960s saw initial arrests of opposition party leaders, most prominently through Operation Coldstore in 1963, on allegations of communist subversion. Mandarin theater doyen Kuo Pao Kun and his wife, choreographer and dancer Goh Lay Kuan, were detained in 1976. In May 1987, twenty-two social activists, including several theater practitioners, were arrested under allegations of plotting a “Marxist conspiracy.” From the 2000s onward, individuals detained under the ISA were accused of planning terrorism-related activities. Across different decades, some detainees were coerced into signing confessions and making public statements before their conditional release into political exile overseas. Others were relocated from detention facilities to offshore islands or to their own residences, where their movement continued to be restricted and monitored. Some who publicly refuted their confessions and statements were subsequently rearrested.

Most detainees underwent interrogations and solitary confinement in various carceral facilities at different stages of their detention. Solitary confinement cells measured approximately six feet wide by ten feet long and eight feet in height, though dimensions varied by facility. Detainees under solitary confinement were allowed outside their cells for an average of twenty minutes daily. Dr. Chia Thye Poh, a physics lecturer, former Member of Parliament, and leader of the opposition Barisan Sosialis party, was the longest-serving

⁸ The British colonial government introduced the Emergency Regulations Ordinance in Malaya in 1948, which laid the foundation for Singapore's internal security detention policies. This became the Preservation of Public Security Ordinance in 1955. Malaysia enacted the Internal Security Act in 1960 to replace its emergency regulations. When Singapore joined the Malaysian Federation in 1963, the Malaysian ISA was extended to Singapore. Singapore retained the ISA after independence in 1965.

⁹ In a written parliamentary reply, Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean reported that from 1959 to 1990, a total of 2,460 people were arrested, of which 1,045 were detained under the Preservation of Public Security Ordinance (1955–1963) and the Internal Security Act (1963–1990). In the absence of an official list, former political detainee Loh Miaw Gong compiled an independent list of 1,190 detainees from 1950 to 2013, published in *The 1963 Operation Coldstore in Singapore*.

political detainee, held under various forms of restriction for thirty-two years.¹⁰ On 8 October 1966, Dr. Chia led a protest march to the Parliament House, demanding the release of political detainees arrested in preceding years and the repeal of the ISA. A few weeks later, on 29 October 1966, he was accused of inciting subversive violent acts and being a member of the Malayan Communist Party; he was arrested alongside twenty-two other colleagues. Palay's performance, initiated almost to the day of Dr. Chia's protest march fifty-one years later, is a direct echo and reenactment, down to the consequence of *parrhesia*: solitary confinement that they both had to bear. I am not suggesting Palay's two-week jail sentence is commensurate with Dr. Chia's twenty-three years in detention facilities. Palay's solitary confinement during his two-week jail sentence was a deliberate choice, brought about by his refusal to submit to a blood test during the prison intake process. This indicates that even under conditions of confinement there still remains a degree of agential capacity. Palay's calibrated decisions over the duration of the performance of *32 Years*, which led to his solitary confinement, are evidence of this deliberate negotiation with Singapore's legal and carceral apparatus.

When Dr. Chia was asked what the most difficult parts of his incarceration were, he stated that they were the moments he was placed under solitary confinement in a sensory deprivation "dark cell." According to Dr. Chia, the Internal Security Department told him that "prisoners held in such cells go totally insane in just a few days" (Moreau). In accounts by political detainees that have surfaced in recent years, solitary confinement, especially in the immediate aftermath of their initial arrest, was similarly recalled as the most traumatic memory of detention. Solitary confinement was described as "one of the worst forms of mental torture" (Poh 1963 229)¹¹ and "an experience I had previously never dreamed of" (Poh 256). Some described the cells as having bloodstains on the walls made by prisoners "who could not take the confinement and were prepared to end their life" (Poh 291). Others recounted how the Internal Security Department used solitary confinement as a strategy for the political prisoner to "develop a high degree of dependency" on the officer, and ultimately break the detainee's spirit, producing dependency and forced trust. Dr. Chia recalls:

When you are in solitary, there is nothing in the cell. But you can explore, and see faint scribblings from previous prisoners. I still remember one of them. It was a poem in Chinese: "Ten years behind bars / Never too late / Thousands of ordeals / My

¹⁰ Dr. Chia spent twenty-three years in detention facilities from 1966 to 1989, was then confined to Sentosa Island from 1989 to 1992, and subsequently had his movement restricted within Singapore until all restrictions were lifted on 27 November 1998.

¹¹ Some testimonials throughout this chapter are drawn from *The 1963 Operation Coldstore in Singapore*, edited by Dr. Poh Soo Kai, which collates accounts from former detainees including Tan Jing Quee, T.H. Haw, and others; references cite Poh's volume by page rather than individual contributors.

spirit steeled.” When you were alone and helpless, and you saw things like that, you were encouraged. (Chee 246)

4.4 Endurance Through More-than-human Attentiveness

Dr. Chia’s account of the traces on the walls of prison cells reminds us of the potential for trans-generational solitary-solidarity under inhuman conditions. Kenyan writer and political detainee Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o compares his experience in detention to being suspended in a state of animality. He explains how his senses became heightened under carceral conditions and how the inhumanity of detention verged on the experience of being treated as livestock. Thiong’o describes the rhythm of prison life as one “of animals waiting for slaughter or escape from slaughter at a date not of their own fixing” (116). The comparison to animality is a rhetorical trope that is often associated with carceral conditions: of being treated less-than-human, or like animals in captivity.

Critical prison studies scholar and philosopher Lisa Guenther’s 2013 monograph *Solitary Confinement: Social Death and Its Afterlives* is one of the few studies that adopts a philosophical phenomenological approach to the study of solitary confinement, or what she refers to as “intensive confinement,” a broader term covering other practices within the U.S. prison system. She draws on Husserl, Levinas, and Fanon to examine how prolonged periods of isolation undermine the sense of self in relation to others. Guenther intervenes critically in the rhetoric on solitary confinement, which typically frames it as dehumanizing treatment akin to chattel slavery. Adopting a posthumanist critique, she argues that “the hierarchical opposition of humans to animals that humanist discourse presupposes ultimately works against prisoners, who share vital interests in common with nonhuman animals held in prolonged, intensive confinement in factory farms, laboratories, zoos, and other sites” (126). Referencing Merleau-Ponty’s animal ontology, Guenther contends that even animals can be de-animalized under conditions of extreme confinement. Her scholarship provides a useful approach for us to reframe our critique of carceral conditions away from anthropocentric dehumanization toward de-animalization: “the reduction of a living, relational animal to a nonrelational thing to be stored, exchanged, or even destroyed without regard for its particular ways of being in the world” (157). For Guenther, this disconnection from relation and world – leaving beings “unhinged” from reality – constitutes the most insidious cruelty of solitary and intensive confinement. She highlights how there is an invagination of the self that happens in the process of this confinement, stating that:

Solitary confinement works by turning prisoners’ constitutive relationality against themselves, turning their own capacities to feel, perceive, and relate to others in a meaningful world into instruments of their own undoing. (xiii)

What are the consequences of this “self-betrayal” (xiii) and self-veridiction, this turning into and against the self as an embodied experience? What forms of resistance against this turning against the self are possible in the vicissitudes of human isolation? These

“void” performatives – utterances performed without the institutional force to produce effects – become the primary modes of existence under solitary confinement. Modes of survival that thrive on connections with the infrastructure of confinement and the creatures that share detainees’ space, building relations with their environment in isolation.

Guenther’s critique connects to ongoing conversations in performance studies around posthumanist performativity referred to in the introductory chapter, initiated by Karen Barad in response to Donna Haraway and Judith Butler, and extended by Rebecca Schneider. Like Guenther’s challenge to the “dehumanization” discourse, Barad, in their 2003 article, cautions that language has become too substantializing, producing an ontological relation with the world, and persuades us to return our critical attention to ontic facticity, reminding us that “performativity is precisely a contestation of the excessive power granted to language to determine what is real” (802).¹² A Baradian agential realist account that focuses on intra-action between “words” and “things” permits us to reimagine agency, autonomy, and agential separability, to see “agency” not as “an attribute, but the ongoing reconfiguring of the world” (818).

Adopting an agential realist ontology highlights a paradox: the very infrastructure designed to isolate political detainees also enables forms of posthuman and trans-generational connection. When the act of *parrhesia* results in persecution and isolation – the dissolution of a bounded contract with the self – it reconfigures how power operates on confined bodies by opening it up to a more-than-human relationality. This is what I refer to as “solitary-solidarity,” a condition where individual practices of embodied truth-telling generate resonances with a collective resistance across time through shared material conditions. The infrastructure that enables this solidarity includes both the mechanisms of confinement (detention cells, legal apparatus) and the specific material objects that persist across generations of detainees described in the testimonials – the coconut husk mattress filled with bedbugs, worn and misshapen hand-me-down prisoner clothing, the three-legged interrogation chair that destabilizes and disorients the detainee. These infrastructural objects that support the body become mediators that connect detainees in isolation with a common network of resistant gestures.

This reshaped sensitivity of one’s relation to the world recurs across testimonies and experiences in political detention, with the most comprehensive account provided by lawyer and activist Teo Soh Lung.¹³ In *Beyond the Blue Gate*, a memoir which provides a detailed

¹² Barad reminds us of the materiality of these bodies and how this visceral materiality performs an active role in the workings of power through a reading of the concluding section of Foucault’s *History of Sexuality, Vol. 1* where Foucault turns to the possibilities of bodies and pleasures as a counter to the deployment of sexuality. Within the context of political detention and solitary confinement, the “unhinging” of this material body from the world is designed to turn one’s mind (logos) against the self (bios).

¹³ This chapter focuses specifically on practices of endurance during solitary confinement through relation with the environment. Many other aspects of political detention remain beyond its scope, including

account of Teo's experience of detention as part of the 1987 arrests codenamed Operation Spectrum, Teo speaks repeatedly about the affinity she shared with the creatures in her carceral space during solitary confinement. The blue gate in her title refers to the entrance of Whitley Detention Center, where political detainees were held, located in the heart of Singapore's water catchment area. The detention center was surrounded by secondary jungle, which explains the profusion of encounters with flora and fauna.

In contrast to the earlier 1963 cohort of detainees, Teo had access to books, drawing materials, and even a transistor radio toward the end of her two-year captivity. She was also moved during her detention from a smaller cell to the "Shangri-La" suite, a confined space with a semi-outdoor area where she had access to natural elements like sunlight and rain. These shifting conditions gave her and her fellow detainees the possibility of seeking companionship with more-than-human forms of life in solitary confinement. She describes her experience of listening to raindrops falling on the zinc roof, observing birds fly across the patch of sky in her yard, watching a chameleon that entered her open area change color, and finding brief comfort in the presence of a toad she named Toddy. She transforms her harsh conditions of confinement (the fluorescent-lit space, the unbearable heat, the dust, the cobwebs) into occasions to notice small details and more-than-human entities. As she states: "conscious of the fact that deprivation of reading materials was deliberate, I tried to keep myself busy by observing insects in my cell" (40). She documents their appearance dutifully: wasps, birds, lizards, spiders, toads, chameleons, crickets, ants.

As her detention wore on, she reflects: "It was during detention that I became acutely aware of the lives of little insects and living things. Each little life was important to me" (282). She shed tears when a cricket she attempted to save passed away and wrote a poem to commemorate it. She fed her ants a Christmas meal and attempted to assert the little power she had over them by shifting their food around, an ironic parallel to how she was being controlled by forces beyond her control. In such moments, she writes: "I would observe how long it took for the ants to discover that they were trapped and how they would react to such a situation" (295). When she first saw a toad in her cell, she records that it struck her as unusual to witness a creature with four legs, since she was used to observing insects with six legs. On the toad, she comments: "I was the biggest life in the cell and it was not afraid of me. I often marveled at its courage. Why did it decide to live with a human being, a million times its size? What made it decide to trust me?" (291) In her confined yard, she secretly scattered papaya seeds from the fruit given to her with her meals, and over the period of detention witnessed them grow into plants. Teo's attention to insects, her emotional

interrogation tactics involving physical violence, force-feeding to break hunger strikes, and psychological torture techniques such as coerced confession-writing designed to break detainees' spirits and willpower. While these abuses are important and well-documented in existing testimonials, this chapter attends to the less-examined practices of survival that emerge through more-than-human relationality under conditions of extreme isolation.

investment in a toad's courage, her secret cultivation of papaya plants – all are forms of self-veridiction through care, a *parrhesia* operating beyond speech as the embodied persistence of subjectivity under conditions designed to undermine it. Where Foucault describes *parrhesia* as a process of self-critique that creates “an open situation,” Teo's encounters with more-than-human life produce a contingency within confinement, a shared vulnerability.

Teo's openness was not universal among detainees. Chng Suan Tze, president of the theater group Third Stage, was detained for fourteen months. She describes drawing chalk circles on the floor around her food to keep insects from consuming it. She admits that unlike her colleague Teo, she was less tolerant and compassionate toward the creatures she shared her space with. Yet Chng's relationship to the more-than-human still operated as a survival practice: birds became a motif of hope. She tore out a full-page Singapore Airlines advertisement depicting birds in flight and stared at it in her cell, longing for her freedom. Where Teo cultivated intimacy with the creatures physically present in her cell, Chng sustained herself through the image of flight and of departure. She imagined a freedom mediated through the visual language of the state-aligned corporation whose advertisement she surreptitiously repurposed. Both responses are practices of endurance through more-than-human attentiveness, even as they register the different temperaments and coping strategies that detention produced. Chng's resourcefulness extended to the infrastructure of confinement itself. She discreetly flipped the light switch outside her cell at night without the guard noticing, creating a tomb-like dark space for rest against the permanent fluorescent illumination designed to disorient the detainee. This small act of reclamation echoes across the testimonials of detainees from earlier decades who similarly imposed their own embodied order onto the infrastructure and experience of detention whenever possible.

Said Zahari, detained for seventeen years and placed in solitary confinement four times for up to four months each time, described the experience as “designed to put fear, terror, and guilt in their hearts and minds, causing them psychological trauma that lasted for years after their release” (*The Long Nightmare* 53). He witnessed detainees who returned from solitary confinement unable to respond when greeted, unable to eat, unable to sleep for days. Some had “conversations” with walls, “at times laughing, at times angry and at times, not unexpectedly, crying” (53). Suicide attempts and the burning of clothes marked the most extreme responses. Dr. Poh Soo Kai, held for seventeen years and subjected to four months of solitary confinement, stated that “the artistic types, the ones who work with words have a harder time” (*Living* 340) with solitary confinement.

Yet within these conditions designed to sever all relations, detainees developed practices of endurance. Unable to communicate freely during solitary confinement, Said Zahari once discovered he could tap on cell walls with a toothbrush to reach a fellow detainee – a labor-intensive method requiring utmost concentration. As he stated with bitter

irony: “Imagine knocking 279 times just to say ‘I am happy to know you’” (*Dark Clouds at Dawn* 208). Many sang to themselves, hoping others might hear. Teo Soh Lung recited poems to the lizards in her cell. KC Chew, Said Zahari, Teo Soh Lung, and others wrote notes, drawings, and poems that some subsequently published after their release.¹⁴ These are examples of void performatives: communications that lack the requisite conditions for felicitous transmission yet continue to persist. Stripped of institutional authority, perlocutionary force, or even guaranteed reception, this hollow conduct performs solitary-solidarity through its seeming infelicity.

These practices of self-discipline extended to spatial and temporal measurement. Tan Jing Quee, detained for three years, gives an account of his first day in isolation that echoes the experience of other detainees yearning to establish a routine. He recalls:

I tried to work out a plan to pass the time for the day. The first thing I did was to pace the room – 11 steps up and down, after which I tried some stretching exercises. [...] A good number of thoughts flashed through my mind, but I told myself I had to reduce my thinking to manageable issues, otherwise I might fall into depression. So I developed further exercises like running and jumping up and down to sweat a little bit. (*The 1963 Operation Coldstore* 290)

The precision of his description – eleven steps exactly – speaks to the way detainees measured their confinement spatially and temporally, imposing their own embodied sense of order onto the infrastructure of detention, with its permanent fluorescent lights and confined space designed to erase any orientation to the outside world. Even seemingly minor acts took on significance: KC Chew used his prison tunic to clean dirt from his cell, asserting ownership of his space and refusing the neglect that coconut husk mattresses and sparse amenities were meant to induce.

Detainees also developed heightened awareness toward the material conditions of their confinement. Where the Internal Security Department intended the cell to function as an instrument of control, detainees learned to read the materiality of their environment as an archive – a repository of endurance and medium for trans-generational connection. The coconut husk mattress that many early detainees shared became both a device of discomfort and a sensory archive. T.H. Haw and Said Zahari described the infested mattress as a source of constant torment, its bedbugs attacking nightly. Yet Said Zahari also reveals how he used

¹⁴ KC Chew’s post-detention poetry describes himself as “partly metamorphosed into a stone” (“Just Ears” 262). This half-metamorphosis is important: a state between stone and human, suspended in the liminality of detention. This phenomenological description of what solitary confinement does to embodied existence – transforming the human from mobile subject to object of stasis – is itself an act of parrhesiastic refusal, as the poem’s published transmission is evidence of his persisting personhood.

the mattress as a hiding place, writing poems on toilet paper and concealing them within its stuffing, transforming the instrument of discomfort into a repository for creative resistance.¹⁵

Other infrastructural elements bore witness to past desperation, acting as physical traces of previous detainees and their presence. Tan Jing Quee describes bloodstains on the cell walls from detainees who attempted suicide in their cells (Poh 1963 291). These stains functioned as a haunting archive and evidence of suffering. That the institution left these bloodstains visible, when repainting would have been simple, suggests calculated intent: they functioned as a warning to future detainees of what desperation in isolation could produce. Said Zahari similarly describes finding charcoal messages left by previous detainees in shared spaces like restrooms, including a Chinese greeting, “Welcome, Comrade” (*Dark Clouds* 206), at an interrogation facility – an assertion of political solidarity inscribed directly onto the infrastructure.

The infrastructural solidarity connecting detainees across decades extended beyond cell architecture to the intimate scale of daily objects: three-legged interrogation chairs, prison clothes, blankets, towels, floor brushes. When Teo Soh Lung first arrived at her detention cell in 1987, she received some of these items alongside the metal bedframe and coconut husk-filled mattress. She noted they appeared to be the same objects used by detainees from the 1960s and 1970s – worn, dusty, showing signs of age and neglect, carrying the physical traces of previous bodies (Teo 38). The Internal Security Department’s provision of these items was deliberately inadequate: Teo received no underwear or shoes, and the standard-issue clothing came in male sizes that fit poorly, choices designed to compound humiliation with physical discomfort. Yet precisely because these objects had passed through so many hands, had covered generations of detainees, they accumulated a significance beyond the State’s degrading intent. These worn objects bore the material memory of endurance, tactile evidence that others had survived similar conditions. Teo, a lawyer who had met Said Zahari and other political detainees, was aware of how these objects had been handed down across time. The Internal Security Department’s punitive and humiliating intent became a possible medium for trans-generational connection. These aged objects constituted an intimate material counter-archive.

Through these varied accounts from Said Zahari, Tan Jing Quee, Dr. Poh Soo Kai, T.H. Haw, Teo Soh Lung, KC Chew, and Chng Suan Tze, methods of endurance and embodied absence emerge across generations of detention. These practices of self-discipline, attention to infrastructure, and more-than-human relationality are a mode of parrhesiatic etiolated conduct, an embodied solitary-solidarity that emerges in the space where the State treated detainees like “caged deadly animals” (Teo 78). In spite of this, detainees managed to

¹⁵ T.H. Haw reflects: “As it was probably intended to be part of the strategy for mental torture, no fumigation was ever undertaken to exterminate the pests. The hard cement floor thus served as my bed, table and chair on which I slept and sat throughout the solitary confinement period of three months” (*The 1963 Operation Coldstore* 321).

find a way to maintain connection: with their own bodies through disciplined practice, with past and future detainees through shared infrastructure, and with more-than-human life through calibrated shifts in attention and habit.

4.5 Testimonials and the Force of Truth

Beyond the few brave testimonials, memoirs, and poems that were published by political detainees as veridiction of their truths in the wake of detention, there were also many others who maintained their silence after release, conditioned by their time in political detention and solitary confinement. The climate of anxiety had clear cause, for many experienced continued social isolation and surveillance after release, or were psychologically haunted by their time in confinement. Those who spoke up too soon – like the 1987 detainees who released a collective statement refuting their coerced confessions months after their initial release – were rearrested and subjected to further solitary confinement and detention. Many waited for decades before releasing their accounts publicly. Some, like Dr. Poh Soo Kai, were waiting for the declassification of documents from British and Australian government archives, which included top-secret diplomatic telegrams with Singapore and Malaya, to corroborate their accounts. Political detention and waiting in solitary confinement for release shifts the detainee’s relationship to time, teaching patience, extending physical isolation into psychological confinement beyond release. This spatial and temporal expansion of detention echoes what Kenyan artist and ex-political detainee Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o describes as a “performance of punishment,” where the entire island is seen as a “performance area” and “enclosure” (21) – a condition in which detainees are freed but not yet free.

Some artists who emerged from political detention attempted to continue their work in this enclosed “performance area” with varying success.¹⁶ Wong Souk Yee, a founding member of the socially engaged theater company Third Stage, left Singapore after her detention but returned in 2008 to resume her activism. She ran as an opposition party candidate and joined Function 8, the social enterprise that published and consolidated post-detention accounts, ensuring their trans-generational “response-ability” and transmission. These published testimonials, arriving decades after the events they describe, are a second register of parrhesiatic practice, one where the force of truth-telling accumulates across time precisely through its delay.

Daniele Lorenzini’s scholarship on Foucault’s concept of *parrhesia* helps clarify what is at stake in this delayed transmission. Lorenzini identifies *parrhesia* as producing “perlocutionary effects” that can “subvert established norms, thus transforming reality in unforeseen and unforeseeable ways” (10). This perlocutionary analysis bears witness to the capacity of words and gestures to act beyond the moment of their utterance, what Lorenzini

¹⁶ Four members from the theater company Third Stage were arrested in the 1987 Operation Spectrum and accused of being Marxists.

terms a “possibilizing genealogy” (115). Within this framework, the testimonials published by former detainees decades after their release are not belated or diminished versions of the original parrhesiatic act. They carry a different kind of force, one that accumulates through patience rather than spectacle.

Lorenzini’s 2023 monograph *The Force of Truth* clarifies *parrhesia*’s connection to Foucault’s broader concept of alethurgy (truth-work) and “self-veridiction” (*The Force of Truth* 10), where the speaker is transformed in the very act of truth-telling. This practice of critique calls for us to be governed differently, including governance of the self. My understanding of Foucauldian *parrhesia* is shaped by Lorenzini’s monograph and the audio recordings of Foucault’s 1983 English-language lectures delivered at the University of California, Berkeley, as part of a graduate seminar titled *Discourse and Truth*.¹⁷ Reading Foucault’s lecture transcripts alongside the trace of “live-ness” captured in the audio recordings reveals not only what is said, but what is left unanswered, and the static silences documented in the recordings.

The editors of *Discourse and Truth* (which include Lorenzini) draw on J.L. Austin’s scholarship to elaborate Foucault’s distinction between *parrhesia* and rhetoric, identifying it as the difference between illocutionary intention and perlocutionary effects of speech acts. They observe that with *parrhesia*, Foucault moves away from rhetorical technique toward the “dramatics of discourse” and how the event of speaking “binds [the subject] to the statement and enunciation of the truth” (GSO 66, *D&T* 236). This shift toward the “dramatics of discourse” opens productive dialogue with performance studies scholarship that has expanded Austinian performative utterances beyond speech acts to encompass embodied and performed knowledge (Derrida, Butler, Parker and Sedgwick, Phelan, Schneider, Taylor).¹⁸ This expanded framework follows Foucault’s own acknowledgment of *parrhesia*’s theatrical and embodied dimensions. While other theorists remain faithful to speech-centered interpretations of Foucault’s *parrhesia* (Di Gesu), this chapter extends *parrhesia* beyond the initial parrhesiatic speech-act to encompass the embodied gestures and

¹⁷ These lectures, edited and published in 2019 by Henri-Paul Fruchaud and Daniele Lorenzini, were transcribed and supplemented with notes from Foucault’s manuscripts. The Berkeley lectures, though less comprehensive than his Collège de France elaborations, are methodologically faithful to the concept of *parrhesia* as an utterance that counters power. Foucault had repeatedly expressed dissatisfaction with the large public lecture format at the Collège de France, describing it as isolating and constituting a unidirectional delivery of information. Frédéric Gros describes the scene in his “Course Context” as: “a huge, silent, captivated public ready to receive a magisterial discourse with unwavering reverence and admiration. No exchanges, no discussion” (GSO 384). It was because of this that Foucault stipulated to his hosts at Berkeley his desire for a small graduate seminar format during his visit (Sluga). Kéline Gotman provides a comprehensive review of Foucault’s *parrhesia* and its relationship to theater and performance studies in “The ‘Scene of Discourse’: Foucault and the Theater of Truth (on *Parrhēsia*).”

¹⁸ See my introduction for further elaboration on these citations.

responses that follow from such speech and can be transmitted and translated across generations.

When asked by a student about *parrhesia*'s movement away from speech into "gesture and a full mise-en-scène," a "theater of provocation," Foucault explicitly affirmed: "Yes, you're quite right" (*D&T* 181).¹⁹ Within this expanded framework, the gestures, responses, and ongoing performances that follow from the parrhesiatic moment carry great personal risk as they extend resistance beyond the moment of utterance, creating sustained resistance that can be transmitted across generations. The political detainees in Singapore understood the risk of releasing their testimonials even decades after their release, haunted by the history of rearrests in both Operation Coldstore and Spectrum. Only a small fraction of the 1,190 political detainees in Singapore documented their testimonials. The overwhelming majority did not publish their accounts, yet neither did they disavow their experience. This sustained reticence, a withholding that persists without recanting, leads us to consider what parrhesiatic force gathers in the space between silence and speech.

"Does *parrhesia* ever make a statement by refusing to speak?" (*D&T* 48) A woman, as heard on the recording, asks Foucault from the back of the classroom,²⁰ her voice faint over the static of the audio recording on 24 October 1983. The student goes on to question whether gestures of refusal and moments of silence can be regarded as forms of parrhesia. In his reply, Foucault offers a hint of what he terms a Cynic form of "parrhesiastic attitude" (48), a line of inquiry that he will subsequently elaborate in his final lecture series in 1984 as the *bios* of Cynic philosophy and parrhesiatic practices. In fact, throughout the course, there were several moments when students attempted to stretch and question the limits of the course's focus on the ancient Greek practice of *parrhesia* from a presentist lens, which was limited to an act that only citizens of the polis could perform. The requirement of citizen status seems inherently contradictory to the act of *parrhesia* – an act of taking a risk and summoning courage to speak truth to power. We are reminded of those excluded from

¹⁹ Foucault's use of playtexts as evidentiary objects establishes another connection with performance studies methodology. Throughout the Berkeley lectures, he analyzes excerpts from multiple Euripides plays, including *Phoenician Women*, *Hippolytus*, *The Bacchae*, *Electra*, and *Orestes*, with sustained focus on *Ion*, which he terms a "parrhesiastic play" (*D&T* 77). When questioned about his text selection, Foucault states: "nobody speaks to say nothing," and to speak is to "play a certain game in this context" (*D&T* 116). These plays are sites where parrhesiatic utterances were staged and enacted for Athenian audiences, with dramatic staging itself constituting evidence of speaking truth to power. See the *Foucault's Theatres* anthology edited by Gotman and Fisher for a comprehensive collection of literature on theater's influence on Foucault's work.

²⁰ The audio recordings reveal the seminar's spatial dynamics: male students with American accents, seated near the recording device, were the most active participants, while women and speakers with foreign accents, seated further back, participated less frequently and often asked questions about legitimacy and subalternity. Stuart Elden's research on the seminars notes that the graduate working group consisted almost exclusively of white male students, with only two female students identifiable by name among the hundred attendees. While such demographics were typical for Berkeley in 1983, they remain largely undocumented in the lecture transcripts and subsequent literature around these lectures.

political participation: women, slaves, and foreigners – figures of subaltern life not recognized as political participants. The student goes on to elaborate on her question by saying “I think I’m using the word more strongly than that, like when you’re being pressured to make a political statement and you refuse [...] you’re being *burned at the stake* but you refuse...” (*D&T* 48; emphasis added) We see echoes of these parrhesiastic refusals across generations of political detainees arrested under the ISA, from the refusal to sign written confessions in the 1950s to the refusal to participate in televised confessions in 1987, each bearing the consequences of declining to sustain the State’s version of truth.

This question about the refusal of speech in the seminar lectures brings to mind a contemporaneous text presented a few months earlier, in the summer of 1983, at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. There, Gayatri Spivak posed the now-canonical question: “Can the subaltern speak?” Drawing on Derridean thought, Spivak critiques Foucault for valorizing the oppressed as subject, what she calls the “object being” (27). She asks us to recognize the “complicity of *vertreten* and *darstellen*” (31), the entanglement between representation as speaking for (*vertreten*) and representation as portrayal (*darstellen*). Spivak’s analysis of *sati* (widow sacrifice), set against the tragic and powerful female figures in Euripides’ tragedies that Foucault engages, reveals how subaltern figures remain unheard within the supposedly liberal and liberalizing impulses of power structures even when permitted to speak. As exemplified in the Berkeley seminar dynamics, Creusa – whom Foucault highlights as an example of a parrhesiaist – is ventriloquized through multiple layers: first through Euripides’ text, then through Philip Vellacott’s ironic translation, and finally through a male student’s recitation of her lament in class. Through Spivak’s critical lens, there exists a fundamental impossibility in translating subaltern speech into either mode of representation, and “knowledge of the other subject is theoretically impossible” (48).

Foucault addresses this provocation obliquely three weeks later, on 7 November 1983, distinguishing between “the history of ideas and the history of thought”:

Most of the time, historians of ideas try to determine when an idea appears, and they often identify this moment through the new appearance of a word. But what I am trying to do with the history of thought is something different. It is to analyze the way things, practices, habits, behaviors, become a problem for people who behave precisely this way [...] I think that when the word parrēsia appears at the end of the fifth century [...] It is a sign of a new form of problematization of this freedom of speech in Athens, it is a new way for taking care and asking questions about the relations between truth, freedom, political power, and verbal activity. (*D&T* 114–15)

Here Foucault justifies his genealogical method: examining not what *parrhesia* is, but what social conditions produced its problematization in relation to power and politics. The question, then, is whether we can carefully apply Foucauldian methods to examine figures

beyond the Greek polis and transpose these methods to non-Western contexts without being constrained by the limits of Foucault's specific archive. Keeping in mind Spivak's skepticism about whether Foucauldian analysis can adequately address subaltern epistemology, I cautiously extend Foucauldian methods to the study of testimonials from political detainees in Singapore. Parrhesiatic practices emerged as etiolated conduct during political detention in response to expressive restrictions imposed by the State. If we follow Foucault's call to not merely listen to what is being uttered and analyze its content, but move beyond to consider the conditions of power that induced these parrhesiatic practices and "problematize" speech acts, what "new way of taking care and asking questions" will emerge? The ISA and its apparatus of indefinite detention, coerced confession, and post-release surveillance constitute this kind of problematization, producing specific forms of parrhesiatic practice conditioned by Singapore's particular configurations of truth, freedom, and political power.

This expanded reading of *parrhesia* responds directly to the female student's provocation about silence and refusal, and to Spivak's skepticism about subaltern speech. In the case of political detainees who have been subjected to detention without trial, rendering them external to the judiciary system and stripping them of legal rights as subjects, it is necessary to attend not only to the acts of *parrhesia* that resulted in them being seen as political adversaries, but also to what escapes the archive of spoken and performed utterances after they have been detained and silenced. This "problematization" encompasses the "things, practices, habits, behaviors" (*D&T* 114) conditioned and produced during detention and in the wake of the detainee's release. Attending to it means listening for silences and reading the embodied gestures that persist across generations of political detention in Singapore. Such observation engages with forms of parrhesiatic performativity that fall outside the boundaries of conventional speech act analysis focused on the illocutionary force of rhetoric and language. These "dramatics of discourse" (*GSO* 66), or what Diana Taylor has named "repertoire" – embodied forms of "ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge" (20) – studied through cellular reading and micro-attentiveness to the mundane, permit us to view solitary confinement in relation to more-than-human environment, infrastructural support, and temporal palimpsests layered within testimonials. This methodological approach treats post-detention testimonials as necessarily opaque gestures of survival, rather than transparent windows into subaltern experience, gestures that resist easy legibility yet accumulate force across time.

Classicist James I. Porter, who was in attendance as a graduate student during Foucault's time in Berkeley, and who was invited to present a lecture on *Ion* as part of the seminar lecture series, provides one of the most succinct responses to Foucault's late scholarship and his citing of antiquity:

Ironically, in looking for auspicious predecessors Foucault discovered unwanted precursors: his ancient Greeks and Romans are proto-Christians and proto-moderns in more ways than not, given that they are rational, moral, autonomous, truthful, and aesthetically/ascetically fashioned subjects. It is hard not to see in Foucault's final turn to antiquity a romantic and even naive attachment to things past and something of a regression with respect to his earlier stances. (135–36)

Porter's rhetoric is persuasive; the rest of his article cites Hegel and Arendt's reminder that "care for the self bespeaks a loss of world [...] a withdrawal from reality" (134), stating that Foucault's project of articulating a "history of the present" in 1983 is no longer relevant for our present dominated by neoliberal subjectivation, one that he traces via Foucault's citation of Kant's critical lineage and *Sapere aude!* in "What is Enlightenment?" Instead, Porter reminds us that what we need is a theory of "not subjects or selves but beings – ontological, ecological, elemental, collective, racialized, (de)colonialized, and differently abled yet always vulnerable beings" (136).

Some of Porter's critiques are evident through a reading of the questions from the students, a form of parrhesiatic inquisition that Foucault did not encounter when he first delivered the same lectures in France. Recurring questions probed Foucault's apparent lack of a transcendental or normative ground for truth.²¹ This echoes Habermas' ongoing critique of Foucault's account of the totalizing nature of power, alongside Nancy Fraser's and Charles Taylor's critiques of epistemic relativism. At best, the logical reasoning of these critiques is that Foucault's relativism demonstrates naïveté; at worst, they point out how deconstructive relativism has been willfully misappropriated by fascists as "alternative facts," and the versioning of truths in the post-truth era. Lorenzini defends Foucault's lectures on *parrhesia* and their "ethico-political relevance" (9) by disaggregating the "truths" from "facts" in Foucault's critical project, outlining these lectures on *parrhesia* as Foucault's attempt to map out the "force of truth" (10) – a critical examination of the relationship between truth and power, and the effects of truth-telling on "regimes of truth." According to Lorenzini:

What Foucault puts at the core of his critical project, more precisely, is the "therefore" of truth, that is, the often imperceptible procedures that lead us not only to accept certain truth claims, but to submit to them and give them the power to govern our conduct. This is what I have called the problem of the force of truth. [...] The multiple ways in which we give "truth" the right to tell us what to do and how to live. (120–21)

Granted, this still does not provide an answer to the question of the normative grounding of truths, but it does shift critical attention toward what Johanna Oksala refers to

²¹ Students ask the difference between belief and truth (*D&T* 52), and moral and immoral truth (*D&T* 50); they also recur elsewhere in different sections of the seminar lecture series. These questions are posed from a foundationalist understanding of truth as intrinsic.

as the “normative force” of these parrhesiastic utterances. Lorenzini’s scholarship connects Foucault’s work on *parrhesia* to performance analysis, examining how the force of “truth-telling” reconfigures not only the subject and their relationship to their world, but also affects the listener(s), shifting collective relationships to prevailing “regimes of truth.” In the schema of a Greek tragedy staged in Athenian antiquity, this is manifested infrastructurally as the theatrical frame of the proscenium. Beyond the lament of the parrhesiaist (Creusa) and the person in power who is the listener (Apollo), there is an audience who gasps at the scandal of speech made public (Can she say that about a god?), an infelicitous utterance, an unspeakable truth spoken aloud, a gesture of resistance in willful defiance to power. Within the schema of the graduate seminar in Berkeley, there is the inquisitive student who asks the parrhesiastic question, Foucault the professor in power, but also the rest of the class, including the student across time who is listening to the exchange via the mediated archive. (Did they really just ask Foucault that question?) This unforeseeable transformation of reality is what Lorenzini’s “possibilizing genealogy” (115) describes. This is a force of truth with the ability to act across time, expanding the concern around solipsistic relativism of the parrhesiaist into a relational and collective practice with ethico-political conscience.

Parrhesia as a critical practice, then, is about “creating and experimenting with new ‘therefores’ of truth – and instead of concealing them, making them (and their consequences) as explicit as possible in our words, in our actions, and in our lives” (Lorenzini 123). It is up to the reader and the listener accessing the archive over time to practice a different quality of attention in order to hold these possibilities open. This reframing also reveals how seemingly void performatives – the refusal of a blood test, the methodical consumption of an orange, the befriending of a toad – accumulate force precisely through their apparent hollowness. What appears infelicitous within carceral logic becomes felicitous in building trans-generational affinities.

Notably, Lorenzini and Porter, despite their differing critical perspectives, arrive at similar conclusions regarding responses to Foucault’s turn toward the self. Porter calls for a relation to other beings, while Lorenzini concludes his discussion of the force of truth by turning to an “ethico-political ‘we’ encompassing the individuals who endured and fought against [...] apparatuses and regimes in the past” (113). He identifies *parrhesia* as belonging to a larger family of embodied forms of resistance to power, what Foucault refers to as “counter-conducts,” which I have elaborated in detail in the Introduction. Foucault employs the metaphor of an electrical circuit, describing it as allowing power to pass through oneself, to be conductive, while simultaneously resisting this flow of power to produce light or heat (*Security* 200). This concept shares affinities with James C. Scott’s “weapons of the weak,” Anna Tsing’s “friction,” and other ethnographical frameworks for mapping resistant gestures from below. This “multiplicity of non-totalizing, structurally open, and potentially overlapping ‘we’s” (115) that Lorenzini identifies on the far future horizon is indeed

necessary and relevant for expanding Foucault's project around critique and *parrhesia*. I posit that this "possibilizing" dimension of collective identity through parrhesiatic gestures, this solitary-solidarity, is already latent within the graduate seminar classroom in Berkeley, with the carillons resonating in the background. As we have learned from political detainees, the task is to listen to the silences in between parrhesiatic utterances and the possibilizing dimension of these gestures across time. Reading the Berkeley lectures this way, for their static and silences as much as what was being said, is itself a practice of cellular attention applied to the theoretical archive. What remains is to ask how such attention operates when parrhesiatic practice adopts aesthetic forms.

4.6 Aesthetic Responses Across Generations

Artistic practice is how some artists have sustained their etiolated conduct beyond the time of political detention, thriving on the possibilizing dimension of abstraction, which prevents the legibility that could lead to capture and surveillance. Besides Seelan Palay, who regards his time in solitary confinement as part of his performance, other artists likewise had their experience of detention shape their practice in subtle ways. Theater director Kuo Pao Kun was detained for four years and seven months under the ISA beginning in 1976. He was later awarded the Cultural Medallion in 1990, Singapore's highest arts award. Kuo remained largely reticent about his time in detention, often choosing to err on the side of caution in response to the State,²² though he did selectively share the psychological impact of the experience. In an interview with Janadas Devan in 2000, Kuo states: "When solitude became so extreme that the appearance of an ant could cause great joy and comfort, my perception of life underwent a paradigmatic change" (Devan 4).

Devan, a former journalist who has served since 2017 as Chief of Government Communications at Singapore's Ministry of Communications and Information, wrote about Kuo's experience in a state-managed national broadsheet. According to Devan's account, Kuo described having "an almost grateful feeling" for being able to "see my truer self" during his detention (4). Regardless of how Kuo's sentiments may have been distorted to align with a state-sanctioned narrative, the detention clearly transformed his artistic practice.²³ It provided him with space to reflect on what he called a "more naked, bare and modest self" (Devan 4).²⁴ Cultural critic C.J. W.-L. Wee refers to this post-detention, mid-1990s phase as Kuo Pao Kun's "extraterritorial theatre practice" ("Beyond" 251). This transnational practice moves beyond Benedict Anderson's concept of the nation as

²² See C.J. W.-L. Wee's "Culture and the Arts 'After' Kuo Pao Kun" for an account of Kuo's reaction to the arts community's proposal of putting out a collective statement in the form of a full-page newspaper spread in response to the arrest of performance artist Josef Ng in 1993.

²³ See Quah Sy Ren, Ng How Wee, and others in the special issue edited by C.J. W.-L. Wee of *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, vol. 21, no. 2, 2020 on Kuo Pao Kun.

²⁴ Upon Kuo Pao Kun's passing in 2002, Devan went on to state that the detention process "broke" Kuo, an observation that has been disputed by C.J. W.-L. Wee, among others.

“imagined community” to examine the subtle and overt registers of violence that nationalism produces. Building on this framework, Gan Chong Jing explores the linguistic violence produced by post-independence language policy to comment on the liminal gaps produced by acts of mistranslation and misdirection in Kuo’s post-detention plays (Gan “Marginal”).²⁵ This post-detention shift toward transnational and multilingual theater carries a more-than-human infrastructural sensitivity that may have emerged from his time in solitary confinement.

This heightened sensitivity to more-than-human entities is a recurring feature of Kuo’s post-detention works. In *The Spirits Play* (1998), spectral apparitions haunt the stage; in *The Silly Little Girl and the Funny Old Tree* (1987), a strange and peculiar tree has a conversation with a human; and in *Mama Looking for Her Cat* (1988), as Gan observes, human-to-human communication breaks down only to be substituted by a process of becoming-cat. These examples from Kuo’s oeuvre suggest that his detention experience may have fundamentally altered his dramaturgical imagination, opening it up to forms of agency and presence that exceed humanism. This post-detention shift is reinforced in Kuo’s own testimonial published in *TDR* in 1994. Kuo explains that his practice became more internalized post-detention, with the performer serving as “the sole instrument of expression” (60). After re-reading Brecht and Grotowski, he began to view theater not merely as “a medium of criticism and education,” but as an “aesthetic/philosophical/ceremonial/religious communion” (60). This renewed approach led him to incorporate meditation and explore nonverbal communication in the rehearsal process. He encouraged his performers to release their inhibitions and develop a deeper awareness of the body’s relationship to the world. Kuo cited his 1991 experimental theater piece *0Zero01* as an example of how this approach was manifested in practice. Kuo writes about staying overnight with his cast at various outdoor spaces including beaches, stone quarries, and forests to “receive the elements with their sensual organs” (61) as part of the devising process. They also drew inspiration from geologic temporal scales “beyond humans, beyond animals” (61). The final presentation was conceptually structured around the salmon’s reproductive cycle, inspired by the determined upstream migration undertaken after maturity to breed and to sacrifice the self for the next generation.

Kuo’s immediate post-detention dramaturgy incorporated not only a sense of reflexive interiority on the human condition, but also extended toward multiple temporalities, biological processes, and generational transference. His continued cautious practice after release is a form of etiolated conduct – to persist in *parrhesia* and truth-telling, but in a less confrontational manner. Through detention, Kuo had been taught the parrhesiatic game Foucault describes between the truth-teller and those in power. Kuo’s relationship with the ant, like Teo’s toad and Palay’s orange, marks a threshold where the

²⁵ The Epilogue covers a personal account of how this shift in language policy affected my family.

more-than-human becomes the medium through which detainees sustain themselves in relation to the world. These gestures of attentiveness, differentiated by decades, form a trans-generational pattern of solidarity. Each person arrived independently at a practice of care that the infrastructure of confinement inadvertently enabled.

Rebecca Schneider provides a framework for understanding how such gestures transmit across time and space. In “That the Past May Yet Have Another Future,” Schneider writes about gesture across vast temporal distances, stretching the interpellative hail of one gesture in response to another by connecting her own hand with a forty-thousand-year-old negative hand stencil from a Pech Merle cave in France and the Black Lives Matter movement’s “hands up” gesture of protest. In both this article and “Slough Media,” Schneider extends her critical focus on the inter-in-animation of bone and flesh to consider how performance is conducted across vast expanses of time and space. Schneider responds to Karen Barad’s notion of posthuman performativity to consider the ethical limits of “response-ability,” this ability for bodies to relate and respond over time, an intra-in-animacy. Intra-in-animacy names the interstitial relations across human, more-than-human, animate, and inanimate beings engaging in call and response, emphasizing how the dead and what we consider “alive” are always already in entanglement through material remains. Palay’s etiolated conduct, read alongside Schneider’s framework of ethical “response-ability” and intra-in-animacy, reveals the solitary-solidarity connecting Palay, Dr. Chia, and other political detainees through the material infrastructure of confinement.

This turn toward Schneider for a trans-generational connection is grounded in the artist’s biography and oeuvre. Palay draws this ethical relation from science fiction, finding in Isaac Asimov’s *Foundation* a model for imagining trans-generational connection and surrogation across time. This book – one of three he requested during his jail sentence and a performance object he carried during the procession – clearly holds significant influence on his worldview and practice. In interviews, Palay states:

One of the things that struck me in *Foundation* was how the story jumped in time. It’d jump a hundred years, five hundred years, or a millennium. All the characters would change, yet the setting remained the same. [...] It amazed me to think of how Asimov conceived this world and these concepts. (“Seelan Palay on Performing”)²⁶

Beyond science fiction, other influences for *32 Years* that Palay mentions include Taiwanese-American performance artist Tehching Hsieh’s one-year performances, and

²⁶ Alongside the worldbuilding capacities of *Foundation*, Palay emphasized how the concept of psychohistory inspired him – describing it as “the ability for scientists to predict the future” that led to the scientists being exiled, as “they were deemed too dangerous” because “they had too much knowledge” (“Seelan Palay on Performing”). While Palay’s characterization simplifies Asimov’s more complex plot, it captures how he understood the parallel between persecuted scientists and political dissidents who are viewed as a threat to power because of the knowledge they were in danger of transferring.

Taoist philosophy of Wu Wei (无为) – a concept that refers to action through non-action, often glossed as an effortless way of doing. These references reveal that Palay understands time and the body as malleable media in his performance practice. This temporal attunement manifests in *32 Years* through persistent gestures that accumulate meaning over duration and the trans-generational solidarity his performance is designed to invoke.

Palay's engagement with political detention in his art practice can be traced back to 2009 with *Walking the Streets, Haunting Ghosts*, an installation first presented at Your Mother Gallery²⁷ in Singapore. The work established motifs that would define his later practice: processional walks through the city, the posting of signs to disseminate suppressed political knowledge in public space, and books as vessels for transmitting dissent. Though this early installation focused on J.B. Jeyaretnam, the first opposition Member of Parliament in post-independence Singapore elected in 1981 ("J.B. Jeyaretnam"), it presented a video showing a walk through spaces Jeyaretnam would frequent to campaign for political support, alongside photocopied booklets featuring a chapter from Dr. Chee Soon Juan's *To Be Free: Stories from Asia's Struggle against Oppression*, which recounted an encounter between Dr. Chee, an opposition politician, and Dr. Chia Thye Poh. Art historian June Yap characterized this installation as "Palay's uncompromising refusal to let these individuals be forgotten" (148).

Missing You (2013) consolidated Palay's investigation before *32 Years* (2017–18). Where the 2009 installation addressed multiple opposition figures rendered as social pariahs, this work focused solely on Dr. Chia through a facsimile of a missing person's poster. Palay produced two hundred monochrome A4 copies bearing Dr. Chia's photograph and the text "MISSING YOU." The simplicity of the form evokes loss and absence, resembling a mourning photograph despite Dr. Chia being alive at the time. By refusing to name its subject directly, the poster cultivates deliberate ambiguity. The phrase "MISSING YOU" reads as an intimate address, almost romantic, establishing a trans-generational longing between artist and disappeared figure. For those familiar with Singapore's political history, Dr. Chia's bespectacled visage requires no caption; his image has circulated widely enough to be instantly recognizable. Yet for viewers unfamiliar with this history, the poster poses an unsettling question: who is being mourned, and why do I not know who this is? The work thus operates on two registers simultaneously. It memorializes a living ghost for those who remember while marking, for those who do not, the success of state-engineered amnesia, educating them on Dr. Chia and the legacy of the ISA. The simplicity of the form reminds us of the figures we choose to ignore, those who live in an etiolated state in order for the rest of the population to thrive.

²⁷ Your Mother Gallery (2004–2025) was an independent arts space run by artists Jeremy Hiah and Lina Adam. The name "Your Mother" references a colloquial expression often used as an insult. Its adoption as the name of an arts space invokes this double meaning while signaling an intentionally irreverent and anti-institutional stance.

These two installations reveal that Palay had been fomenting ideas that led to *32 Years: The Interrogation of a Mirror* for nearly a decade. In interviews, he stated that he began preparations two years before the performance, knowing the precise year he would execute it. He would perform *32 Years* when he turned thirty-two, matching the number of years Dr. Chia's freedom had been curtailed. Palay admitted he could not fathom having his liberty restricted for his entire life. He also understood the risk and stakes of this parrhesiatic durational practice, stating: "I went through an emotional breakdown every time I thought about what I had to do" ("Seelan Palay on Performing"). He timed the date of the performance to echo Dr. Chia's own procession on 8 October 1966 to the Parliament House demanding the release of his colleagues who were arrested and detained under the ISA. These choices reveal a "response-ability" across time between Dr. Chia and Palay's performance. A deliberate reenactment, trans-generational conduct.

On 1 October 2017, Palay initiated what would eventually become a year-long performance. He exited Hong Lim Park and conducted a one-person procession, following a similar route that Dr. Chia took on 8 October 1966. He set off a chain of events that approximated a reenactment of Dr. Chia's experience of detention, from arrest to interrogation to solitary confinement. The performance and subsequent arrest of Palay were publicly disseminated via independent news outlets and on social media after the event, with the video documentation made available for public access. It was subsequently picked up by international media outlets, and the trial and sentence continued to draw media attention since it complements the international image of differently liberal authoritarian Singapore.

The mediated exposure of *32 Years* generated two opposing narratives that unwittingly reenacted the historical vilification of ISA detainees. International and online alternative media celebrated Palay as a parrhesiatic artist confronting a differently liberal state; state-managed Singaporean outlets painted him as troublemaker and delinquent,²⁸ their coverage inflected with discriminatory rhetoric coded through his working-class background and status as a racial minority. This bifurcated reception mirrored the treatment Dr. Chia and earlier detainees endured, extending the performance's trans-generational "response-ability" beyond Palay's deliberate temporal and spatial echoing of Dr. Chia's 1966 procession to encompass the infrastructural mechanisms of state propaganda itself. The splitting of Palay's image across international and domestic audiences performed a fragmentation similar to what solitary confinement enacts on selfhood, revealing how the apparatus for managing dissent operates not only through detention and legal prosecution

²⁸ International coverage includes *Al Jazeera's* "Singaporean artist jailed after peaceful protest" and similar reports in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*. State-managed Singaporean coverage includes *The Straits Times*, "Illegal procession: Activist refuses to pay fine, gets jail," which quotes the District Judge stating "he had deliberately set out to break the law" (Koh), and *Channel NewsAsia*, "Activist charged for unlawful 'public procession' from Hong Lim Park to Parliament House." Both outlets label Palay an activist and frame his performance-art defense as an excuse.

but through the curation of public perception. The impact of detention extends beyond the prison cell into the circulation of representation itself.

4.7 Solitary-Solidarity in Practice

Finally, we return to where we began, with Palay and the orange. Palay brought three books to read during his two-week jail sentence. The first two books were John Dewey's *Art as Experience* and Isaac Asimov's *Foundation*. The third book was a hardcover version of Lin Yutang's translated and edited volume – *The Wisdom of Laotse*. The prison authorities gave him his first two books approximately a week into his sentence after vetting. The third book was withheld because hardcover books were not permitted in jail. Of his experience for the first week without reading materials, Palay said:

When you're stuck in a small room and can't speak to anyone, you talk to yourself, and very often you find yourself walking around in circles. I could hear other prisoners talking to each other and singing — because the walls were thin — and I couldn't participate in it. (Varagur)

Given that one's relation to time is lost during solitary confinement with no clear measurement of passing days, Palay mentions turning to the orange meditation practice during the fifth or sixth day of his sentence. Palay shared this anecdote in conversation; Ray Langenbach also documents it in a video interview.²⁹ Even within the span of a two-week sentence, Palay was starting to hone his approach to endurance and survival that echoes the practices of other political detainees – this awareness of the infrastructure, discipline of the mind and the body, and attentiveness toward the more-than-human creatures with whom they shared space. The orange practice also exemplifies the cellular reading method. Palay slowed time to pass time, bringing his micro-attentiveness to the fruit's materiality, connecting his gesture trans-generationally with other detainees. Teo's patience with Toddy, Kuo's recognition of the ant, Said Zahari's poems hidden in his mattress. Where the carceral system provided this infrastructure as sustenance for mere survival, Palay and others transformed these materials into opportunities for relation, blurring the boundaries between subject and object, human and the more-than-human. This parrhesiatic practice beyond speech, this self-veridiction maintains a self-in-relation under conditions designed to dissolve it.

Upon his release on 15 October 2018, supporters and media awaited him outside the prison gate. Palay emerged holding up John Dewey's *Art as Experience* and declared the performance of *32 Years: The Interrogation of a Mirror* concluded. Yet as the chapter has demonstrated, parrhesiatic practice persists beyond the initial utterance and its immediate consequences. A year later, Palay mounted another solo exhibition at Your Mother Gallery, *The Adventures of a 22nd Century Neo-Taoist*, extending his etiolated conduct into aesthetic

²⁹ The video was screened as part of Langenbach's solo exhibition *Gulag Archipelago Zig-Zag*. The exhibition ran from 3 Apr.–30 May 2019 at Piyadasa Gallery, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur.

production. The centerpiece assemblage incorporated materials that bore witness to his confinement: acrylic paint, saliva, sixteen sheets of legal documents, and a ziploc bag containing two books (fig. 4.2). The saliva – his own bodily trace – mixed with blue acrylic paint that obscured the documents and sealed the books, creating a thick redaction that mimicked state censorship while transmuting the instruments of his persecution into art objects. Only select words remained legible through the paint: “accused,” “declined.” The faint impression of one book’s title could still be discerned under paint and plastic – *The Wisdom of Lao-tse*, the hardcover volume prison authorities had withheld throughout his sentence, now permanently entombed as an art object, withdrawn from public access. Accompanying canvases depicted the same figure, fragmented into three, in prison attire pacing a confined room, with words inscribed and scratched into walls in multiple languages, echoing the testimonials of earlier detainees who measured their cells in steps and left charcoal messages for those who would follow. On 29 October 2019, Palay shared a photograph on social media that closed the trans-generational circle: Tehching Hsieh, whose one-year performances had inspired *32 Years*, in conversation with him before the installation, contemplating these material traces of solitary-solidarity. The artwork’s title? *32 Years + 14 Days*.

This chapter has traced parrhesiatic practice across three registers of political detention in Singapore. The first register examined endurance through more-than-human attentiveness during solitary confinement, where detainees formed relations with insects, toads, plants, and infrastructure of their cells as a refusal of de-animalization. The second register traced the delayed force of testimonials through an analysis of Foucault’s lectures, examining how published accounts arriving decades after detention function as possibilizing utterances whose perlocutionary effects accumulate through time. This delay also demands a different quality of attention from the receiver, asking us to attend to these testimonials differently – listening beyond what can be heard, attending to what has been silenced. The third register attended to aesthetic response across generations, from Kuo Pao Kun’s post-detention dramaturgy to Seelan Palay’s decade-long artistic engagement with political detention. Artistic practice becomes a medium for trans-generational transmission. Together these registers reveal solitary-solidarity: how seemingly void performatives, stripped of institutional force, yet persistent across time, generate trans-generational connections that exceed the State’s capacity to isolate and silence. Under conditions of restricted expression, the indirection of aesthetic forms – through abstraction and temporal delay – becomes one of the limited modes of parrhesiatic utterance that can survive.

Where liberal frameworks privilege individual rights, visibility, and spectacular protest, solitary-solidarity names a resistance that persists in opacity, patience, and relation with inhuman infrastructure. To return to Porter’s critique of Foucault’s late turn toward the practices of the self as solipsism: a more-than-human parrhesiatic framework allows us to attend to “ontological, ecological, elemental, collective, racialized, (de)colonialized, and

differently abled yet always vulnerable beings” (136) while remaining grounded in the material conditions of confinement. The orange consumed sac by sac, the recognition of a toad in a cell, the poems scrawled on toilet paper stuffed into the mattress: these gestures of counter-conduct persist where speech cannot, building response-ability across generations of captivity. This chapter engages with a more-than-human performativity within etiolated conditions of solitary confinement. In the next chapter, we shift from within to without, examining a film that recalibrates our sensing of inhuman infrastructure through withdrawal, escape, and fugitivity.

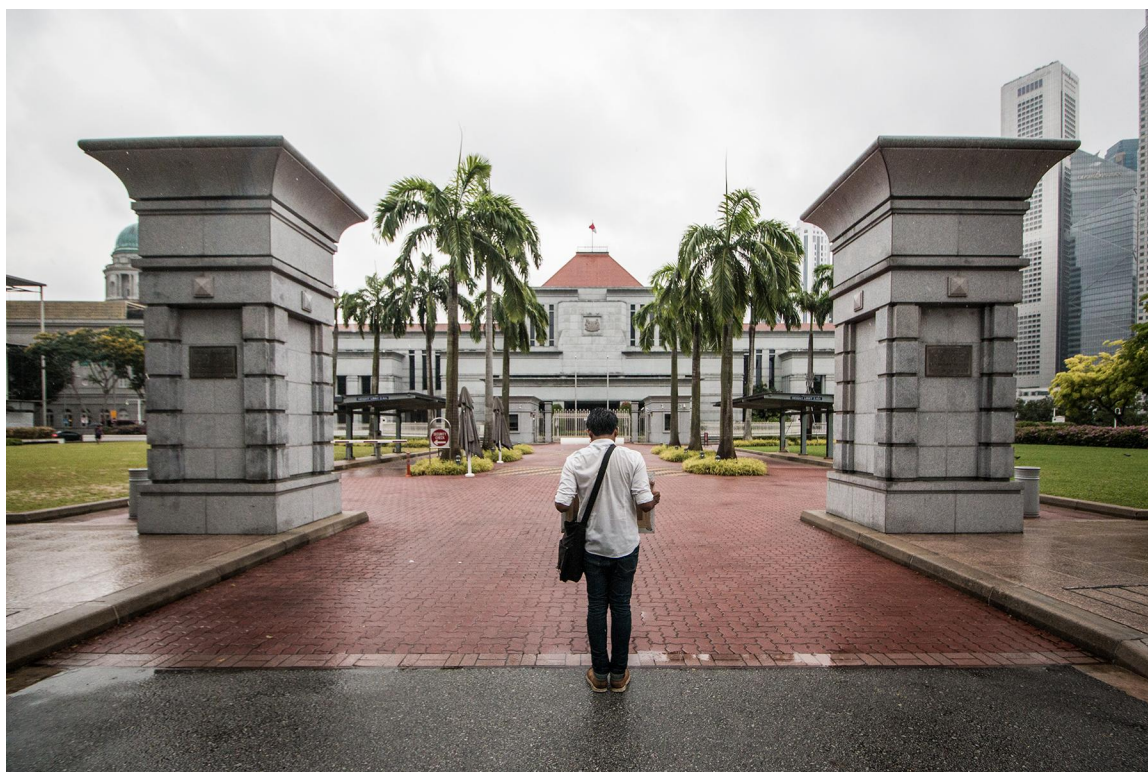


Figure 4.1 Seelan Palay's *32 Years: The Interrogation of a Mirror* (2017–18). Photo by Foo Chuan Wei.

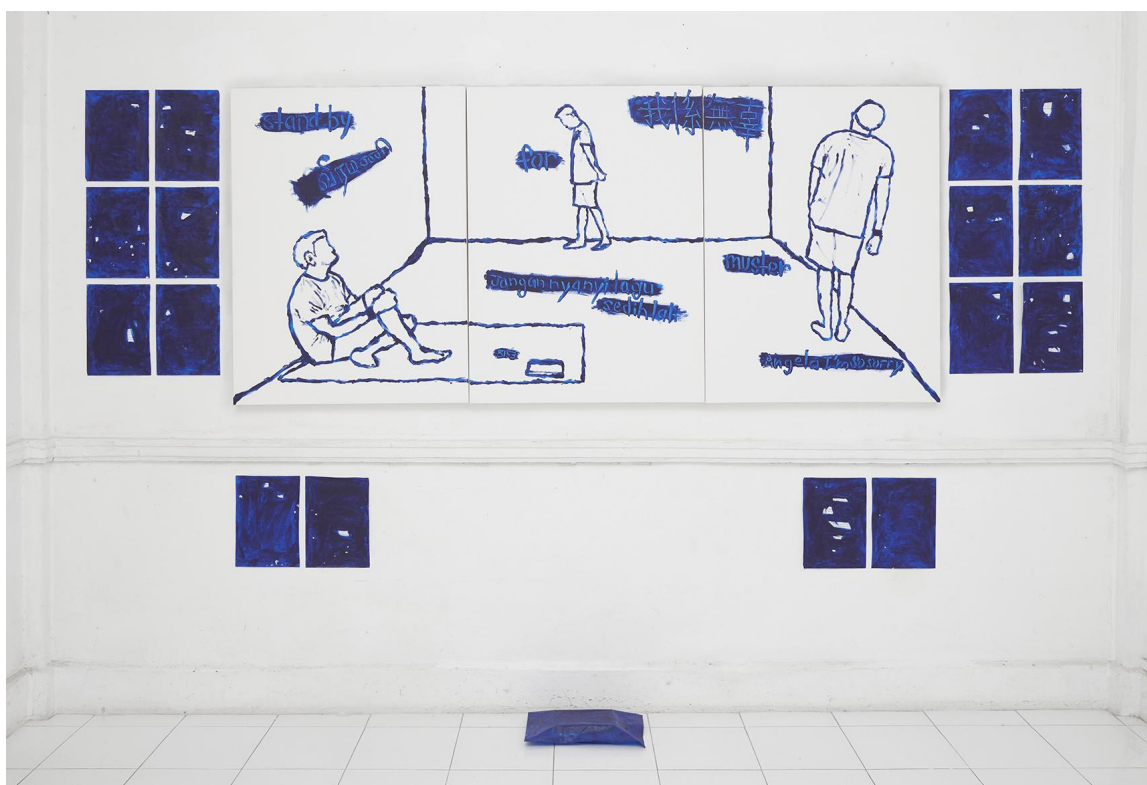


Figure 4.2 Seelan Palay's *32 Years + 14 Days* (2017–19). Acrylic on three canvases, sixteen sheets of documents, and a ziploc bag with two books. Photo by Teck Lim, courtesy of Seelan Palay.

Chapter 5

Containment and Contingency:

Sensing Infrastructure in Charles Lim's *All Lines Flow Out*

This drive towards sterilisation breeds “ghosts” – everything suggestive of other histories. A formidable presence rears up here, it rushes out of control, and it dissipates. It cannot be forgotten but must not be mentioned.

— Charles Lim

5.1 Rupture and Continuity

On 27 February 2008, Mas Selamat Kastari escaped from Whitley Road Detention Centre, where he had been held for two years under the Internal Security Act (ISA), the same law used to detain political dissidents without trial.¹ He is the only ISA detainee on record to have successfully escaped. He climbed through a bathroom window, scaled the perimeter fence, and vanished. How he evaded capture in Singapore's dense, heavily surveilled landscape remains a mystery. The most popular theory traces his route through the largely invisible drainage infrastructure network,² a system of canals colloquially referred to as *longkangs*,³ that channels surface runoff of rainwater from the interior central catchment area to the edges of the reclaimed shorelines. Mas Selamat's escape led to a year-long islandwide manhunt. The nation was placed on high alert; posters with the fugitive's image were disseminated; resources were mobilized to secure our borders and infrastructure. Investigators later confirmed he crossed the Straits of Johor on an improvised flotation device. Recaptured in a Malaysian village on 1 April 2009, he has remained in indefinite detention after his repatriation to Singapore.

In 2011, Charles Lim premiered *All Lines Flow Out*, a mixed-media video installation commissioned as part of the Singapore Biennale. The installation, set within a disused airport terminal, features a twenty-one-minute video on loop alongside two bulbous drainage socks, suspended from the ceiling and packed with dried leaves and debris. The density of accumulated debris registers the scale of the infrastructure and brings us into close proximity with the residue of what courses through these waterways. At that time, Mas

¹ See Chapter 4 for further elaboration on the legal instrument of ISA, its context within Singaporean politics and further analysis of political detention and parrhesiastic conduct. Mas Selamat Kastari was held under suspected terrorism charges that targeted public transport infrastructure.

² Parliamentary records and the Committee of Inquiry report refuted this claim, finding that Mas Selamat received support and shelter from family members and associates after his escape and before eventually leaving Singapore. Nevertheless, this speculative theory persisted in public imagination.

³ *Longkang* is derived from the Hokkien term 垄沟 (*lónggōu*). It is a loanword in Malay referring to surface drains and waterways, reflecting the linguistic and cultural blending characteristic of vernacular Singapore.

Selamat's escape and manhunt were still fresh in public consciousness. Lim has not publicly confirmed or denied that the film⁴ references Mas Selamat's escape, but several writers have drawn connections between the incident and details in the film. Beyond its focus on drainage infrastructure, the film's enigmatic subject, whom the camera never shows directly, matches the fugitive in ethnicity and follows the speculated escape route. On these uncanny parallels, Kevin Chua observes:

[...] more intriguing than the stories of how [Mas Selamat] escaped using storm drains was the myth that he simply drew a doorway in order to escape (which taps into a long history of Malay magic). Lim's aesthetic has a topological continuity between inside and outside, containment and release. One cannot be reduced to the other. [...] Rupture and continuity circle around each other. (60)

Chua reminds us that approaching the film installation as a mere public representation of Mas Selamat's escape would be too reductive. The curatorial wall text identifies the figure as "a migrant worker navigating the hidden waterways of Singapore's underground drainage system,"⁵ though this framing may be to deflect readings of the figure as a surrogate for Mas Selamat and avoid direct State censorship. Paul Rae also identifies this figure as a laborer of "indeterminate South or Southeast Asian ethnicity," observing that, based on the way the figure interacts with the drainage infrastructure, "it is often the migrant labourers who treat as a resource features of the landscape that locals are more likely to overlook or view as ornamental" (49).

Whether as a tacit representation of Mas Selamat's escape or as a migrant worker seeking survival within the drainage infrastructure, both interpretations engage with subaltern fugitivity. The complexity of *All Lines Flow Out* lies in the multiplication of interpretations without granting confirmation, a tactic of opacity and withholding. Chua's analysis also comments on Lim's representation as one that bridges the dialectic of interiority and exteriority, containment and contingency, an etiolated conduct of escape that appears to be "magic." It is this oscillating tension that this chapter mimics as a method of reading the film, its more-than-human performativity, and its "magical" manifestation of fugitivity and infrastructure. *All Lines Flow Out* recalibrated the viewer's sensing of drainage infrastructure, as *longkangs* became perceptible as infrastructural when they failed to contain. The film installation reminded us of a perceptual atmosphere that was palpable during a moment in Singaporean history, when the nation was momentarily thrown askew, with the potential of a fugitive at large, everywhere and nowhere.

⁴ I refer to *All Lines Flow Out* as a film throughout this chapter, even though it was shot digitally on video, and has been referred to as a video installation. The work exists in multiple edits, one of which has screened at film festivals, the "video" is also rendered with a filmic quality with its anamorphic aspect ratio and lush cinematography.

⁵ Wall text with the artwork description was retrieved from photo documentation of the exhibition archived online.

5.2 Re/con/figuring the Milieu

This chapter reads *All Lines Flow Out* as dwelling in the affective conditions of drainage infrastructure that made escape imaginable, and in doing so, holds open the opaque fugitivity that the State's security apparatus could neither apprehend nor resolve. The first half expands on theory introduced in the Introduction: I return to recent literature in infrastructure studies on Singapore, then extend this engagement to materiality through Jane Bennett, Arjun Appadurai, and Rebecca Schneider. The second half performs a close reading of four moments from the film: debris, stain, house, and loop. By reading these moments in oscillation between containment and contingency, I attend to inhuman forces of temporalization and withdrawal. I approach temporalization as a coming-into-presence that also withdraws from recognition, an out-of-jointness, an inhuman force of etiolated conduct. At the threshold of concluding this dissertation, in place of a neat resolution, I open this critical doorway, inspired by Charles Lim's installation, Mas Selamat's escape, and Fred Moten's theorizing of how an object/subject resists in persistence.

Fred Moten writes about the "resistance of the object" in his concluding chapter of *In the Break*. He reads Adrian Piper's 1970 performance of walking through Max's Kansas City blindfolded as a gesture of refusal. Moten grapples with the tension between Piper's "indexical present" and her resistance to being rendered an object (Blackness) while performing as an object (blindfolded). Through a critique of Michael Fried's *Art and Objecthood*, Moten persuades us to reevaluate the liberal category of the human and the latent inhumanisms that undergird it, recuperating the "theatricality" of the encounter with the minimalist art object that the Kant-Greenberg-Fried modality too readily dismisses. Important for this chapter, Moten claims that what is at stake in Piper's work is "not an eclipse of the visual but its rematerialization [...] of visual pleasure and visual desire" (250). He returns to a Derridean *parergon* (what Derrida posits as the frame or margin of a work) to consider a liminal space both within and without the work, an invagination that is "neither simply outside nor simply inside" (247). The *parergon*, for Moten, "[reproduces] the milieu as figure," bringing environment and infrastructure into the foreground. He goes on to reiterate: "The material figures, re/con/figures, the milieu" (249). He states:

This is what object is, what performance is, an internal complication of the object that is, at the same time, her withdrawal into the external world. Such withdrawal makes possible communication between seemingly unbridgeable spaces, times, and persons. (253)

It is this "re/con/figuring of the milieu"⁶ and the potential of withdrawal as bridging "spaces, times, and persons" that I find productive in thinking through what Lim is doing in *All Lines Flow Out*. Departing from Moten's theorizing of the resistance of the racialized

⁶ The milieu as the circuit for etiolated conduct recalls the Foucauldian biopolitical, alongside his mentor Canguilhem's theorization of life and "error" explicated in Chapter 1.

human object, I extend his framework cautiously to an inhuman withdrawal staged by Lim's film. The fugitive subject that withdraws from representation in *All Lines Flow Out* references a figure detained under the same ISA that held the political detainees of the preceding chapter. The ISA was redirected after 2001 toward those the State frames as terrorism suspects. This abject subaltern position, further racialized through Singapore's post-9/11 security apparatus, shares affinities with the objectification of racialized personhood that Moten theorizes.⁷ The historical fugitive, the migrant worker, and the surrogate figure that appears and disappears in Lim's film are material figures that reconfigure the milieu; they both "[stand] out like figure[s] from the ground" and "[stand] out from the figure as a ground" (Moten 249).

5.3 Infrastructural Horror

The film exists in two slightly different versions. This chapter focuses on the 2011 Singapore Biennale installation, *All Lines Flow Out*. A film festival edit with extended opening and closing sequences, *all the lines flow out*, premiered at the 68th Venice International Film Festival and received a special mention by the festival jury.⁸ The installation version refuses a clear setup or resolution: encountered mid-sequence on loop, the viewer is cast into the deep end to make sense of what they are witnessing. The film sits between genres as both experimental and documentary. Actors perform specific gestures, yet the film remains ambiguous about who these figures are and what motivates them, while also documenting the drainage infrastructure across Singapore. Midway through, a disembodied voice describes a memory of a family house built on a pier over the sea. (fig. 5.6) This is the only human speech in the film. Beyond this brief sequence, the film features sound design by Zai Tang that amplifies environmental sounds. Within the installation, the film appears on luminous frameless flat-panel screens that float at the far end of a room under a low false ceiling, lit to expose its construction and highlight the compression of space. (fig. 5.1) This mode of display accentuates the anamorphic ratio, landscape, and horizon of the film. The installation includes two drainage socks approximately eight feet tall, filled with organic matter and detritus, suspended from the ceiling like giant pitcher plants or cocoons. The synthetic fibers and loosely woven dark green netting contrast with the matter they hold, desiccated but slowly decomposing over the duration of the

⁷ Since 2001, the ISA has been used primarily against persons accused of Islamist terrorism, but not exclusively. An overwhelming majority of the post-2001 detainees have been Malay-Muslim or Indian-Muslim Singaporeans. It is important to emphasize that pre-2001 detainees were also racialized, detainees in the 1960s were predominantly Chinese-educated leftists, while Operation Spectrum of 1987 targeted English-educated Catholic social workers and activists across ethnicities.

⁸ The version at the Venice International Film Festival runs 23:18 and includes extended opening and closing shots with titles. The installation version, first exhibited at the 2011 Singapore Biennale, is edited to run as a loop and has a duration of 21:42. This chapter uses *all the lines flow out* in lowercase to indicate the film version and *All Lines Flow Out* to indicate the installation version.

exhibition. ([fig. 5.2](#)) The socks underscore the entrapment and containment that the film foregrounds, anchoring the installation in a decommissioned airport terminal along one of the waterways featured in the film: a commentary on drainage infrastructure nested within transport infrastructure.

The pacing of the film parallels the movement of water. We begin with still, long shots that mirror the calm creep of the island's manicured landscape. We conclude with a volatile and choppy visual montage, evoking the experience of swimming out in the open sea. In *All Lines Flow Out*, this point of extreme disorientation is where the film loops, performing a jump cut in endless recursion. Shot from the perspective of these waterways, the camera remains close to the water surface. We glide quietly beneath street level, looking up at the world passing us by. We move through recreational parks and public housing estates, under bridges, past construction sites, before landing in a deep storm drain with steep concrete banks. The depth of water increases as we move through these channels, replicating the infrastructural accumulation the system must manage as it edges closer toward the sea. The film traces the complex network of *longkangs*: storm drains, canals, and tunnels through which the island's volatile hydrology is conveyed, contained, and sometimes exceeded during tropical monsoons. This is a strange portrait of the city. The buildings and roadways may appear familiar, but we have never encountered them from this angle. Kevin Chua writes: "though these storm drains remove water, waste and effluvia from the island interior, we don't think about them, they've become naturalized in the city's imagination. The film is at one level, then, an allegory of forgetting" (59). The film denaturalizes our relationship to what we have taken for granted, reminding us of what hides in plain sight.

The Venice Film Festival jury describes the film as a journey "creating an abstract mystery appropriate to an era of hyper-mobility, virtual networks and ecological crisis" (Napolitano). The phrase "abstract mystery" is key. It echoes curator Kenneth Tay's description of the film as "infrastructural horror," a quality that accumulates alongside the gradual build of hydraulic pressure on our senses beyond what is seen. A persistent affect of uncertainty and violence we cannot quite name is induced by the slippage between the film's sound and image, reinforced by the peculiar perspective that keeps us questioning what we see, as visual, aural, and semantic registers remain off-kilter from each other. Moments of quiet are loudly interrupted by edits that imitate filmic jump scares, except what is monstrous is a torrent of water, or deafening construction at night. In a roundtable on the film, Tay and his interlocutors compare this pacing to Rob Nixon's "slow violence." The film is attuned to inhuman geological scales of land and water, and to temporal rhythms that lie beyond a human ability to narrativize and perceive. Beyond the horror film language that the film cites, a key part of Tay's insight is how *All Lines Flow Out* depicts a sublime "horror" of infrastructure. The description on Charles Lim's website provides a gloss on this "abstract mystery" that the festival jury mentions. It states:

We know that Singapore is in a climatic state of constant change, even if we would rather not acknowledge it, this is the tropical condition. Many have cited it, decried it as a state of lethargy, leisure, tranquillity, surrealism, decadence. But there is a flipside: the tropical is a state of flux and extremes. It demands renewal and replacement, erasure as a simultaneous resistance to and acceptance of the forces that create it. This drive towards sterilisation breeds “ghosts” – everything suggestive of other histories. A formidable presence rears up here, it rushes out of control, and it dissipates. It cannot be forgotten but must not be mentioned.

Lim challenges the appearance of tropical tranquility that Singapore offers, foregrounding inhuman (and inhumane) registers latent in a “formidable presence” that “cannot be forgotten but must not be mentioned.” In a related statement for *Manifesta 7*, Lim names the hubris of human endeavor more directly, comparing human construction to “parasitic growth” with “the power, for short periods, to conquer the environment entirely” (qtd. in Mustafa 22). A commentary on infrastructure opens up a space of speaking about politics nested within what appears to be an ecological critique, akin to the strategies of etiolated conduct covered earlier in this dissertation. The “ghosts” Lim invokes as alternative versions of history, as presence that cannot speak or be spoken of, are the material figures that “re/con/figure” (Moten 249) in order for the nation-state to thrive, fugitive presence that is palpable but unknowable, and therefore ungovernable.

In an essay contextualizing the 2025 Singapore Biennale, curator Hsu Fang-Tze distinguishes “infrastructure” from “infra-structure” in terms that complement this chapter’s conversation around infrastructure, ghosts, and withdrawn presence in Singapore. Hsu defines “infrastructure” as “the bedrock that supports a higher order system or hierarchy,” and “infra-structure” as that which “reveals an alternate existence of the city, one that eludes common visibility or recognition” (153). Just as the introduction elaborates “infra” as what exists below visible frequencies, Hsu also turns to James C. Scott’s infrapolitics, writing:

“Infra-structure” refers to how a city functions through subtle acts, gestures and thoughts. It is a network of unseen social actions that holds the city together [...] “infra-structure” conveys how certain actions exist in domains that appear politically irrelevant or remain discrete yet embody the predominant mode of daily engagement for people navigating systems of control. (153)

Hsu’s formulation resonates with the case this dissertation has been building: sensing the infrastructural, or the “infra-structural,” allows etiolated and ignored durational practices to be approached as “fluid, socio-material arrangements” (168) that enable a form of resistance and agential capacity from below. This chapter elaborates on Hsu’s project by attending to the more-than-human post-natural environment specific to the etiolated conditions of the “natural” in Singapore. I complicate the demarcation Hsu sets up between infrastructure and “infra-structure,” arguing that the boundaries between the two are more

diffused than her framing suggests. Kevin Chua also draws this connection between infrastructure and infrapolitics in his reading of *All Lines Flow Out*, claiming that “if infrastructure allows for the creation of new politics, so too can a disruption of infrastructural flows interfere with it” (63).

Besides Tay, Hsu, and Chua, other Singapore studies scholars read this uncontainable excess as a reflection of technocratic hubris. Joanne Leow focuses on ruins and ruination in “new Asian tropicalities,” concluding her monograph by reading the “moss, mildew and rust” at the Gardens by the Bay greenhouse domes as testimonial to “the silent and ongoing failure of mapping, of complete control, and of the production of flawless tropical spectacle” (*Counter-Cartographies* 159). Natasha Myers, in an essay on the same domes she names a “simulated eden,” lingers on a grungy smear on the glass that obscures her view of Singapore’s port lands, reading it as evidence that this garden of spectacle is also “a living memorial to an already vanishing world, and a thriving fantasy of the earth’s immanent undoing” (135). Both Leow and Myers conclude their observations with the contingencies of maintenance made visible by the laborers attending to the facade, an etiolated presence made momentarily legible. Joshua Comaroff takes this spectral presence to a non-human realm in *Spectropolis*, engaging with Chinese Buddhist-Taoist rites to exorcise spirits in real estate development in Singapore as a commentary on the correlations between capitalism and this ghostly, formidable presence. Together, these theorists read aesthetics with an ethical imperative to sense the poetics of infrastructure and, as Leow argues, a counter-narrative that refuses homogeneity “in favor of the depictions of excess, of the unsettling and unsettled, and of the deep fissures of race, desire, ecological harm, and violence inherent in Singapore’s (post)colonial spaces” (*Counter-Cartographies* 31). This chapter builds upon the foundation laid by these writers, reading *All Lines Flow Out* as indicative of these ghostly excesses and a more-than-human presence latent in this “horror” of infrastructure.

5.4 Returning to Mediation as Embodied Practice

This final chapter of the dissertation returns to the introduction’s question of what counts as “performativity” in the more-than-human infrastructures that conduct forms of life. Tay, Hsu, Chua, Leow, Myers, and Comaroff – alongside Charles Lim’s statement – all gesture to the connection between aesthetic theory and the ecology of infrastructure, the figure and the ground. The introduction laid out Shannon Jackson’s formulation of aesthetic theory in the context of planetary catastrophe; I return to it as a formulation to consider the relation between containment and contingency:

The heteronomy of planetary catastrophe undoes forms on which a theory of autonomy does not always know it depends. At the same time, an aesthetic theory of autonomy questions received patterns for understanding the world that climate science does not always know it needs. (359)

Jackson's formulation names a tension between the political urgencies of restricted expression and the forces that condition and exceed those restrictions within the context of Singapore. Her heteronomy-autonomy dialectic provides a frame for holding together and apart the ethical commitments to the figure of the "human" in our inquiry into the exigencies of the "more-than-human." This chapter responds to the call in my introduction to theorize the withdrawal and unknowability of the more-than-human, reading etiolated conduct at its boundaries. The question shifts in this chapter from how etiolated conduct persists under constraint, to what aesthetic sensing is contingent upon, and what the poetics of infrastructure show us about the limits of how we sense our worlds. I read this withdrawal through ideas of temporalization as inhuman worlding (Cheah; Derrida) and a fugitive resistance of the object (Moten), attending to the aesthetic representation of Singapore's drainage infrastructure in *All Lines Flow Out*.

This chapter also elaborates on a conversation in critical infrastructure studies about how to theorize agency beyond the human without flattening ontological complexity. Appadurai's concept of mediants responds to new materialist and object-oriented approaches. Instead of "actants" (after Latour and Bennett), he proposes a subset of "mediants" that "could support a more secure set of normative or critical interventions without reverting to a classic humanist view of the convergence of actor, self, person, subject, and agent" (222). This is Appadurai's counter to Bennett's "vibrant materiality," which extends agency to "thing-power" and treats objects such as the gunpowder residue sampler as composite "actants" (Bennett 8). Appadurai traces this extension to its logical extreme:

If agency in all its forms is democratically distributed to all sorts of individuals, some of which may temporarily be assembled as humans and others as machines, animals, or other quasi agents, then do we need to permanently bracket all forms of intrahuman judgment, accountability, and ethical discourse? Will future courts only be judges of assemblages of hands-guns-bodies-bullets and blood or of syringes-heroin-junkies-dealers or of ricin-envelopes-mailboxes-couriers and the like? And, worse, who will be the judges, witnesses, juries, prosecutors, and defenders? Will our very ideas of crime and punishment disappear into a bewildering landscape of actants, assemblages, and machines? If the only sociology left is the sociology of association, then will the only guilt left be guilt by association? (234)

Appadurai calls for a "deeper sociology," one he names a "sociology of mediation" (234), reserving a "special responsibility" for "human mediants" (235). His critique is grounded in an anxiety about what the democratization of agency costs for a sociology that needs to keep human accountability thinkable. I share his anxiety about the ethical consequences of this extension. However, Appadurai's reinforcement of the human as adjudicator does not fully resolve it. My introduction highlighted Appadurai's claim that materiality "is the site of what mediation—as an *embodied practice*—reveals" (224; emphasis

added). This chapter returns to the potential of what Appadurai brackets as “embodied practice” in relation to a more-than-human performativity of infrastructure. Who counts in this embodied mediation? How does it manifest beyond the figure of the human?

Brian Larkin’s “poetics,” and Anand, Gupta, and Appel’s “promise” of infrastructure, extend Appadurai’s engagement. They read the materials of infrastructure as “historical forms that emerge through and with social systems of ideology, meaning, and imagination” (Anand, Gupta, and Appel 25), calling for attention to infrastructure’s sensory, somatic, and affective registers. My introduction tracked how Larkin’s poetics draws on Jakobson’s literary theory and Rancière’s “distribution of the sensible,” holding *poiesis* alongside *aisthesis*. For Larkin, form is where the technical and the symbolic become inseparable, where infrastructures address people as aesthetic subjects, imposing “sensory conditions of experience” (185) that constitute political life. The “promise” Larkin names, and its failure, brings governmental rationality into visibility. Larkin resists ontological flattening, drawing on Barad to argue that “material and figural” are “reciprocal and entangled rather than causal and successive” (198). Political life is constituted in this embodied sensing without recentring the human as mediator. However, Larkin’s “promise” remains future-oriented, and his “poetics” insistently legible. Both operate within a commitment to visibility as the register through which infrastructure registers politically.

Larkin’s turn toward Rancière picks up a line of thinking Jane Bennett develops in the final section of *Vibrant Matter*, where she asks: “What if we loosened the tie between participation and human language use, encountering the world as a swarm of vibrant materials entering and leaving agentic assemblages?” (107). Bennett, like Larkin, operates within a Rancièrian framework to loosen the connection between the human subject and the sensible it is presumed to adjudicate, careful to resist flattening ontology. What Bennett opens, and what this chapter pursues further, is a line of thinking about how political sensing is conditioned by materials that exceed the human. She hints at this condition of withdrawal through Adorno’s negative dialectics and the “remainder” that objects leave behind (14),⁹ but pivots quickly to resolve it through “utopian imagination” (15) and a “capacity for naiveté” (18) that supports enchanted human participation in vital materiality. This chapter lingers where Bennett does not, asking what aesthetic sensing is contingent upon when infrastructure withdraws as the condition of its operation.

Rebecca Schneider’s theorization of “agential theatricality” offers one way to hold this question open. Her engagement, via Barad and Haraway, with an “intra(in)animacy” (“Slough Media” 72) that acknowledges the entanglement of a more-than-human sociality

⁹ The oscillation between containment and contingency may appear similar to Adorno’s holding open of the non-identical, but this dissertation is an attempt to ground its non-resolution at a different methodological register, at the level of the contradiction internal to capital’s value-form rather than at the level of identity-thinking, as in the sensuous excess theorized in Chapter 3 and Battistoni’s concept of *suprasumption* mentioned in the Epilogue.

(Tsing) remains with the hesitation that Larkin's poetics and Bennett's naiveté move past. As she asks: "if 'living beings' might include stone, and if time might be as vast as geologic time, what are the limits of copresence or of contemporaneity?" ("New Materialisms" 11). This chapter pursues that question at the scale of drainage infrastructure. Schneider goes on to engage with Bennett by reperforming the key *mise-en-scène* from the introduction to *Vibrant Matter*: an assemblage of "glove-pollen-rat-cap-stick" (Bennett 5) in the storm drain to the Chesapeake Bay in Baltimore (Bennett 4). Schneider's attention to the animacy of debris floating along drainage infrastructure holds particular affinities with this chapter's reading of *All Lines Flow Out*. Schneider transposes the storm drain from Baltimore to Providence, a site absent of trash, where she asks a chain of rhetorical questions:

When does a trajectory of human or nonhuman agency begin and end, and whom does it sweep along with it, where? [...] Does the Baltimore trash carried by the storm, then further carried by Bennett's book, wash into my hands in book form where it can ask of me the same questions it asked Bennett? [...] What kind of shape-shifting, rat and glove to book and hand, is this? And where does the agency lie if it is now, somehow, in my hands (or, more truthfully, yours)? ("New Materialisms" 13)

Schneider continues by countering Bennett's enchantment and invoking Lauren Berlant's "slow death" with Mel Y. Chen's "queer animacies," reminding us that "some people's and some things' lives *count* more than others, and whose lives count as *live* matters" ("New Materialisms" 13; emphasis original). She returns us to the question of how to account for the less-than-human, for "fragility" and "environmental precarity" in our felicitous embrace of "vibrant animacy" (13). Schneider offers "theatricality" as performance studies' contribution to these conversations, with the "unreality" and mimetic quality of performativity as a critical gap: "Theatricality has long rummaged at the habitual borders erected between subject and object, and troubled any hard line on what constitutes the animate and what the inanimate" ("New Materialisms" 14). The not-not, or the same-but-different remains of liminality and paradox, what some might refer to as "magic," is what this frame holds open. Schneider's "agential theatricality: becoming unreal" ("New Materialisms" 14) names what Appadurai's "mediants" and Larkin's "poetics" do not quite reach. I read *All Lines Flow Out* as an aestheticization of drainage infrastructure that conjures the invisible into sensuous visibility and containment, and at the same time performs an escape from knowability, highlighting infrastructure's contingencies through formal operations that refuse resolution and transparency. The chapter acknowledges Appadurai's concern, reading inhuman worlding against the grain of the extensional more-than-human. The ethical stakes are contingent on keeping this theatrical penumbra active.

5.5 Four Moments from *All Lines Flow Out*

The drainage infrastructure of *All Lines Flow Out* operates in opacity, ignored by the city and functioning out of sight. It withdraws by default as a mode of presencing. The sensing of withdrawal and opacity requires a critical framework attuned to these etiolated conditions. For the second half of this chapter, I examine four specific moments from the film: the human figure appearing as debris in the canal ([fig. 5.3](#)), the opaque staining of the waterway ([fig. 5.5](#)), the durability of the Cashin House ([fig. 5.6](#)), and the looping temporality of the film as installation ([figs. 5.7](#) and [5.8](#)). Each of these moments highlights a different mode of worlding as temporalization: a re/con/figuring of the milieu, the opacity of contamination, durability under ruin, and non-resolution as looped recursion.

5.5.1 Human Debris and a More-than-human Condition

We begin *in medias res* as the infrastructure of the *longkang* takes center stage. Having left the dense vegetation of the central catchment area, we drift along widening canals as signs of the city accumulate: pedestrian bridges, construction pilings, expressways. Water laps gently as the current guides us onwards. We witness the State's attempts to domesticate these functional waterways into park connectors and recreational amenities, as the film cycles through different times of day. The condition of the canals varies, mostly pristine, occasionally littered with debris. After about five minutes, a black dot bobs into view on the horizon. We assume it to be another piece of trash, part of the assemblage filtered by the drainage socks on display alongside the video, suggesting the live-likeness of matter to which both Bennett and Schneider refer. As we approach, what we initially perceived as debris resolves into a human head, submerged from the shoulders down, wading slowly forward and away from us. ([fig. 5.3](#)) That this figure moves unnoticed by anyone along the shore, or even by us, who have been attending to these very waterways for the past few minutes, momentarily unmoors us. When I first encountered this moment, I caught myself second-guessing whether I had missed other figures hidden in plain sight in earlier scenes. The film altered the way I encountered *longkangs* in Singapore, scanning them habitually for the possibility of apparitions. The filmmaker's sleight of hand in concealing a figure in broad daylight, compounded with the context of Mas Selamat and fugitivity, unsettles our habituated gaze that regards the environment as mere ground. The bobbing head shares the water's surface with floating plastic and organic matter, an assemblage where the distinction between living and nonliving is suspended.

This reminds us of Anna Tsing's more-than-human sociality and her call to situate "human histories within a multispecies field of histories" ("More-than-Human Sociality" 32). In *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*, Tsing and her co-writers extend this multispecies entanglement to include a consideration of ghosts, one that echoes Lim's artist statement about the "ghosts" of other histories. They write that monsters and ghosts "help us notice landscapes of entanglement, bodies with other bodies, time with other times. They aid us in

our call for a particular approach to noticing” (M7). For them, monsters and ghosts “unsettle the *anthropos* [...] by highlighting the webs of histories and bodies from which all life [...] emerges” (M3). At the same time, this pivotal moment, in which the figure shapeshifts from object to subject, also exposes the limits of the “More-than-Human Sociality” and framework of entanglement. This search for a “who,” however widely cast, still extends from a human subjective sensing of the world. Grasping what is at stake, and why the film’s refusal to satisfy our desire for clarity exceeds mere ambiguity, requires engaging with how the relationship between “nature” and “world” has been theorized.

I opened this dissertation’s introduction with Hannah Arendt’s *The Human Condition*, so I return to Arendt in this final chapter for a closer read of how she articulates “nature” and “world,” and the point at which their relation fractures. I read Arendt through this fracture, tracking how her theorization of nature both forecloses and, in one etymological aside, inadvertently reopens the very ground this film crosses. This opens a reparative reading of her work toward a more-than-human condition. For Arendt, the “world” mediates between the “subjective” *vita activa* of men and the passivity of “objective” nature. As she writes: “Without a world between men and nature, there is eternal movement, but no objectivity” (137). Her approach inherits a high Romantic philosophical understanding of nature as degraded, unrepresentable, and defined in opposition to man. The man-made world is constructed within and from the natural environment as a *habitus* from which man can appreciate “objective” nature from afar. This “world” is one of labor, which fulfills biological necessities; of work, which ensures durability; and of speech and action, through which man manifests political potential and practices intersubjective plurality. “Natural processes,” for Arendt, proceed along an “automatic necessity” (246) that needs to be disrupted by action and speech. She concludes that “the miracle that saves the world, the realm of human affairs from its normal, ‘natural’ ruin is ultimately the fact of natality, in which the faculty of action is ontologically rooted” (247). Notably, Arendt places “natural” in scare quotes, marking a distance from the very term she employs. If we read “natural” as a state of entropy, and accept both human and more-than-human emergence as ontological roots for the faculty of action, a more capacious interpretation of Arendtian action begins to surface within her own text.

In a chapter on instrumentality and the introduction of machines into the process of work in *The Human Condition*, Arendt addresses “nature” and its etymology in a passage that may provide an aperture for reevaluating her approach. She proclaims that “the channeling of the natural forces into the human world has shattered the very purposefulness of the world” (150), and terms the disrupted natural processes as having the “character of automatism” (151), figuring the seed-into-tree analogy as a “[coming] into being” (150). The seed already is the tree until “wilful and purposeful interference” (151) interrupts this automatic process. Foreshadowing her later observations on world alienation, she warns that the “channeling of nature’s never-ending process pursuant to the world [...] may very well

destroy the world *qua* world as human artifice” (152). Most importantly, Arendt offers an etymological breakdown of “nature” in this chapter:

This is also the authentic meaning of our word “nature,” whether we derive it from its latin root *nasci*, to be born, or trace it back to its Greek origin, *physis*, which comes from *phyein*, to grow out of, to appear by itself. (150)

This etymological aside opens an Arendtian natality beyond the human, latent in the Latin and Greek roots that suggest initiation, birth, growth, and appearance. The botanical metaphor that runs through Arendt’s etymology, the seed becoming tree, the *physis* that grows out of and appears by itself, may appear to rhyme with the etiolated conditions that this dissertation proposes. However, Arendt’s natality gestures toward the emergence of action, whereas etiolated conduct names an appearance that withholds under conditions of deprivation. To reach for a more-than-human conduct, we may have to trace the genealogical influences of Arendtian natality. Arendt’s passage also reveals her intellectual influence from Heidegger, who unpacks *physis/phusis* at various points in his career. In “Why Poets?” writing on poet Rainer Maria Rilke, he states:

What Rilke calls Nature is not set off against history. Above all it is not understood as the objective domain of the natural sciences. Nor is Nature opposed to art. It is the ground for history and art and for nature in the narrower sense. In the word Nature as it is used here, the echo still lingers of the earlier word φύσις (*physis*), which is equated with Ζωή (*zoe*), translated by us as life. In early thought, the essence of life is not represented biologically but rather as φύσις (*physis*), *the emergent, that which arises*. (208; emphasis added)

Heidegger names the emergent, initiatory potential of nature as central to his fundamental ontology, not set against “history” or “art” or any other modality of human fabrication. What possibilities open when we extend Arendt’s human condition beyond natality and plurality, human action and speech? Do we merely re-center the human subject and stretch its sociality to a more-than-human world? What might it mean to fundamentally reorient our ontological relation to the world by considering the potential of etiolated inhuman forces that withhold and refuse?

These questions bear on how the “More-than-Human Sociality” framework engages with the philosophical tradition it claims to surpass. In “More-than-Human Sociality,” Tsing notes that Heidegger fails to consider plant life in his formulation of worlding, citing his 1929–30 lectures in *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, where he pronounces the animal “poor in the world” and the stone “without world.” Tsing’s observation about plant life is well taken, but her deduction that for Heidegger plants “have no ability to make worlds at all” (31) invites further examination, since Tsing’s own proposal of a “More-than-Human Sociality” sits in proximity to Heidegger’s *Mitsein*, ontologically prior to sociality and community, and precedes objective presence.

What Heidegger means by “poor” is worth unpacking, since Tsing takes it in its evaluative rather than ontological sense. For Heidegger, being poor is “being deprived [Entbehren]”; “a kind of *being in a mood* [Zumuteseins]” and “poverty is not merely a characteristic property, but the very way in which man comports and bears himself” (195; emphasis in original). Animals, minerals, and vegetables lack world-formation capacity because they are “limited in [their] range” (193). He insists this is not “a hierarchical evaluation” (194), and pronounces uncertainty on whether the essence of man stands higher than that of an animal. Yet the convergence between Tsing and Heidegger operates within a shared assumption: beings, whether human or more-than-human, are given as present before the question of their relation arises. The sociality they describe, however capaciously extended, still presupposes the objective presence of the entities it brings into relation. What remains in question is what gives these beings their being, and whether that giving can be accounted for within the frameworks of Arendtian sociality and plurality. Is it possible to consider this “poverty” as a mode of opacity, as an etiolated condition that does not merely extend from the human?

Pheng Cheah offers a critique of Arendt’s anthropologizing force of worlding. For Cheah, Arendt’s devotion to the “ontic dimension of worldly existence” (135) reduces the world to interactions among human subjects. Her version of natality encrypts a “human relation to our divine creator” (143), substituting a quasi-theistic metaphysics of creation for Heidegger’s ontology of radical finitude (142). Arendt’s anthropologizing transmutes the openness of Heidegger’s fundamental ontology into one limited to factual human action and speech, where time becomes “an endless cycle of meaningless, purposeless destruction” (144) that only natality can counter. Cheah then turns to Derrida to reconfigure a fundamental ontology beyond a human understanding of natality.

In *Politics of Friendship*, citing Heidegger’s 1943–44 course on Heraclitus, Derrida writes: “In *physis* reigns the benevolence of what accords or is accorded, as the favorable of the favor” (242). This expands *physis* beyond emergence to consider what gives and what is given between beings. The accordance is not an act of will performed by a subject. It names a giving that precedes any agent who might claim to give, a presencing that withdraws from the one who presences. Cheah reads this Derridean move:

By arguing that temporalization entails the constitutive contamination of presence by alterity, Derrida retains Heidegger’s insight that temporalization is transcendence. But, unlike Arendt, Derrida solves the problem of the transposition of the force of temporalization into factual action without privileging the human subject’s rational will as the mediating bridge. (169)

What Cheah identifies here is the crux of what Arendt’s etymological aside opens but her broader framework forecloses. The force of worlding does not default to the rational will of a human subject. It arrives as an accordance that also withholds, an etiolated conduct

carrying within it the potential of refusal and withdrawal into opacity. Temporalization, as Cheah reads it via Derrida, names this coming-into-presence constitutively contaminated by its own withdrawal, the force by which a world opens and, in the same movement, shows itself as contingent. To return to *All Lines Flow Out*, it is this perceptual delay, these seconds between seeing the human as debris and realizing the debris as human, that is the force of temporalization. This suspension in time, between personhood and objecthood, in a state of what Moten refers to as thingliness, is the temporal lag that forms the structure of perception itself. This pivots the conversation away from a subject/object framing and retains the sensing at the level of the figure, a “re/con/figuring of the milieu” that Moten theorizes. In this temporalization, we are held inside the constitutive contamination of presence by alterity itself, by the penumbra of ghosts, of monsters, of the subaltern.

This hesitation is more than an interval between presencing and recognition for the viewer. It is a formal property of the film, induced by its durational and languid pace, the sparseness of its edits, and the way each shot is held just long enough to condition us to read the drainage infrastructure and water surface as ground rather than as a site of possible concealment, but not so long that opacity dissolves into transparency. In this shot, we move from a wide angle into a mid-close-up without any temporal cuts – the edits that would conventionally clarify figure-ground distinction. The film also cuts away preemptively so that we see only the back of the figure’s head while their face remains withheld. This deliberate withholding of cuts and faces is a formal technique of opacity, a temporalizing presence that responds to etiolated conditions.

5.5.2 The White Substance

The “promise” of infrastructure (Anand, Gupta, and Appel) highlights how the non-human unsettles the political realm of the human. This second moment from the film stages the systems of surveillance and securitization the fugitive figure is escaping, and connects them to water as a national resource within the milieu of Singapore. At almost a quarter of the running time, a six-minute wide shot of a canal in a tropical rainstorm with no cuts is the longest shot in *All Lines Flow Out*, and sets the pace for our encounter with the rest of the film. We hear torrential rain before we see it onscreen. At the far end of the horizon, two tiny silhouetted figures approach slowly. More figures enter from various directions, descending from above, emerging from the banks, or stepping in from behind us. All wear translucent raincoats, appearing as ghostly apparitions in broad daylight. The seven tread slowly without visible communication, before gathering around a pile of branches to clear it from blocking the flow of water. (fig. 5.4) One figure drifts away and walks toward us, dragging his feet in the calf-deep water. He spots something underwater and bends over to take a closer look.

The film cuts to a close-up of his face: this is the first cut after the relentless durational shot, a reprieve from the shot that preceded it, and the only moment when we encounter a

complete and clear visage. The face is fair, with thick brows, youthful and Chinese, in distinct contrast to the age, race, and class of the fugitive figure we encounter elsewhere in the film. Silvery light ripples off the water's surface, bathing the image in an almost romantic sheen. The next shot shows what he is looking at: a transparent trap fashioned from a plastic water bottle, set against a bed of mossy green vegetation in the clear canal water. Its outline is barely visible, marked by the brightly colored silver and orange bodies of the guppies contained within. The string holding the bottle against the current is taut. We return to a wide shot. The youth stands slightly apart from his cohort, his back to us. A milky, opaque white substance emanates from his body, contaminating the pristine clear water. It spreads, sending tentacles toward the rest of the search party, who register it and turn toward him (fig. 5.5). The shot begins in silence, before a gradual buildup of the shrill sounds of crickets and the soundscape of the tropical climate. These seven figures vanish from the film as abruptly as they appear.

The white substance remains a mystery, as does the search party's purpose in this enigmatic sequence. Their presence within the drainage infrastructure recalls both maintenance workers and security personnel combing the island during the manhunt for Mas Selamat after his escape. One possible and direct interpretation reads this white substance as a metaphor for the impact of human presence on the environment. This strange and inhuman substance, leaking from a human corpus, makes visible what was invisible – the pace of the current, the direction it runs, the shapes it takes as it spreads. A bodily event and its environmental consequences become legible: a lone figure altering the conditions of an entire waterway, the team downstream negotiating with the chain of events set off by an individual. Beyond this direct interpretation, there lies a symbolic resonance that recalls the “poetic” potential of infrastructure as a portrait of governance, particularly when layered over the memory of the search for a fugitive. White, the color of both the translucent raincoats the search party wears and the opaque substance that leaks, is associated with the ruling party, whose members are colloquially known as the “men in white.”¹⁰ This is a color that suggests purity instead of the contamination the sequence evokes. The visage we glimpsed briefly reinforces this reading: male, clean-cut, and of the ethnic majority that dominates Singapore's political class and civil service. For the body to pollute the natural environment with a disconcerting opaque whiteness returns us to conversations around leakage and excess that governance cannot account for.

Water has always been an issue of national concern in Singapore: its supply, its consumption, and its securitization. As Olivier Lefebvre notes in 2018, “With total renewable freshwater resources of 0.6 km³ and a population of 5.6 million, corresponding to

¹⁰ This colloquialism is formalized by the book *Men in White: The Untold Story of Singapore's Ruling Political Party*, published in 2009 by Sonny Yap, Richard Lim, and Leong Weng Kam, three journalists from the national broadsheet.

less than 110m³ per capita,¹¹ [Singapore is] by far the most water scarce country in South East Asia” (26). The Water Agreements of 1961 and 1962 between Singapore and Malaysia secured a steady supply of imported water through 2061. Bilateral relations shifted in 1999 after the Asian Financial Crisis, and in the early 2000s Malaysia experienced a water shortage that prompted diplomatic negotiations to adjust the terms of the agreements. These negotiations proved volatile, culminating in the 2003 release of correspondence exchanged between the two countries, an act then-Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad likened to circulating a private letter from one’s girlfriend “to all her boyfriends” (*Water Talks* 4). The Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts of Singapore titled the eighty-five-page dossier *Water Talks? If Only It Could*.

The conduct of water, in determining its value, quantity, potability, and direction of flow, is a diplomatic event for Singapore. It is in light of these anxious negotiations, in which a Ministry professes a desire to coerce speech acts from a more-than-human agent, that Minister for the Environment Lim Swee Say announced the Four National Taps strategy in 2004. The four taps he named are respectively: imported water from Malaysia; water from local catchment areas collected from stormwater runoff in drainage infrastructure that *All Lines Flow Out* focuses on; desalinated water from the sea; and recycled water. I remember, as a young infantry officer working with the National Day Parade show committee in the early 2000s as part of my military conscription, going through copious amounts of the tiny water bottles the logistics department provided in endless supply. These bottles made their way into the goodie bag of every parade attendee, who quenched their thirst on the humid day from a bottle branded NEWater. This was a new source of sustenance: recycled drinking water made from our wastewater supply, a recent addition to our four national taps, a closed water circuit that included the human population as a conduit. We raised our bottles and toasted the nation’s birthday with our recycled pee,¹² celebrating being one step closer to water sovereignty.¹³ Drinking one’s processed urine is normalized, a biopolitical adjustment of the milieu beyond any individual’s agential capacity, introduced at the level of the national water supply. This

¹¹ 0.6 km³ is 486,428 acre-feet. The population is approximately 6.1 million as of mid-2025, including non-residents, which means the updated statistic is 3,460 cubic feet of water per capita with the assumption that the freshwater resource remains the same, which is the volume of a small residential swimming pool.

¹² This is from the NEWater website: “On 9 August 2002, we launched NEWater to the Singaporean public when 60,000 people toasted the nation’s birthday at the National Day Parade with bottles of NEWater.”

¹³ John Groenewegen, Claude Ménard, and Rolf Künneke use Singapore’s treatment of wastewater as a model of governance, noting that “as of 2017, five NEWater plants provided 40% of water demand, and the target is to reach 55% of total demand in 2060” (154). Of this amount, only 5% of recycled wastewater was channeled into water reservoirs and bottled as of 2020; the remainder went to industrial use. Some journal articles cite this capacity to “eliminate yuck” (Leong) as emblematic of a whole-of-government technocratic approach, one made possible only within a State under one-party rule, where the same government controls the media outlets that shape the narrative around NEWater as both a matter of national security and a show of communitarian resilience.

inverts the sensuous visceral abstractions (Ngai, De'Ath) of the earlier chapters, the affective surplus by which the body is made available to abstraction while remaining obdurately corporeal. It operates as an abstraction of viscosity: the contingent blood and dirt microfiltered, reverse-osmosed, and ultraviolet-disinfected before containment to be consumed.

Returning to the white substance in the film requires attending to the historical and material stakes of water as a national resource in Singapore. Like many other natural resources in Singapore, water carries a cost made clear to its citizens repeatedly through the language of scarcity and survival, against any framing of it as a “free gift” of nature (Battistoni). The canal water polluted by the figure in this sequence, and the horror it may evoke in a citizen conditioned by this rhetoric – who understands both the cost of clean water and the lengths the government will go to in order to secure water sovereignty – sits at the center of this sequence as unspoken knowledge. Water collected from precipitation and funneled through the drainage infrastructure, either expelled into the sea or channeled into the catchment reservoirs to be filtered and recycled alongside NEWater, accounts for three of the “Four National Taps” that secure independence from reliance on Malaysia. It holds particular irony then that the fugitive who escaped and could not be contained was found to be hiding in Malaysia, and the Malaysian government conducted the arrest and repatriation of Mas Selamat. The motif of water, the infrastructure that manages its flow, and the return of the fugitive who leaked from the cracks of technocratic governance form a palimpsest that the white substance sequence refers to obliquely.

This staining sequence, beyond being the most politically overt in its representation of containment and contamination of the human figure entangled with a more-than-human environment, is also the most deliberately staged moment in the entire film. This dramatic sequence references not only horror as a genre, but also science fiction, with the strange emanating substance and the fear of contagion. The figures attired in uniformed raincoats resemble personal protection attire. ([fig. 5.4](#)) It is striking precisely because it departs sharply from the documentary realism of the rest of the film. While commentators have compared it to Soviet director Andrei Tarkovsky's enigmatic films,¹⁴ I find closer affinities to Thai director Apichatpong Weerasethakul's magic realist style of disrupting the mundane with the mystical that foregrounds the unknowability of the tropical environment. This moment recalls Kevin Chua's mention of magic in the fugitivity of Mas Selamat, and also Rebecca Schneider's “becoming-unreal” and “agential theatricality” mentioned earlier in this chapter. The theatrical quality of this staged moment amid the mundane creates an uncanny gap, troubling what she identifies as “the habitual borders erected between subject and object” and any “hard line on what constitutes the animate and what the inanimate” (14). This

¹⁴ The roundtable with Kenneth Tay, Phoebe Pua and Elizabeth Wijaya about *All Lines Flow Out* elaborates on this.

intra(in)animacy of the human as it leaks into the environment conjures what was previously invisible into a sensuous presence.

A Derridean reading of presence through withdrawal and Moten's "re/con/figuring" of themilieu both apply here: a moment where presence is undone. The figure in the canal brings pollution into visibility, contaminating these waterways with an inhuman, opaque, and alien substance. This presence is tied to the undoing it induces. The trap laid for the more-than-human guppies doubles as bait for a trapping of the human figure. The stain gives visibility to the water, the political significance of it, the infrastructural management of flow, and the figure that stands in it while withdrawing this group from the rest of the film. The substance appears by making what surrounds it disappear. Derrida's elaboration on Heideggerian *physis* – the accordance that gives without willing – names what this sequence performs. Derrida points out that what Heidegger calls the "voice of a friend" is an accordance with a companion who could be both friend and enemy, one which allows for a "dissimulation of self" (242). At this point, human speech-acts have yet to surface in *All Lines Flow Out*. In the next section, it does so through a disembodied possession, naming the oscillation and tension that add to these formal operations.

5.5.3 The Cashin House

As we near the end of the film, the apparition we have been shadowing, the figure that stood under a torrent of runoff rainwater and waded through neck-deep water, finally makes it to the deep concrete embankments that line the canals at the edge of the sea. A tight webbed grill covering a row of tunnels separates us from the sea. We lean into the grills, their surfaces covered with barnacles, and see the circle of waves in the light at the end of the tunnel. At the edge of the barren reclaimed shoreline, as the line of drainage infrastructure we have been following flows out to the sea, the film takes a slight detour, shapeshifting into an essayistic documentary mode. This sequence lasts for about a minute and this shift in tone is announced by the deep reverberation of a foghorn. We hear a female voice with a clipped Singaporean English accent, recalling the memory of living in a house built on a pier. She speaks with a measured, unhurried tone, but with occasional hesitation and repetition, as if recounting a memory during an interview:

It's really like being out in the sea during a heavy storm. During the monsoon we have a constant rain, it is like being enveloped in water. Sometimes we had the most horrific storms, and everyone will always say, weren't you scared? I said, well, my husband always assured me that the piling of the pillars went so far deep that people said that the house would stand for many many many years.

She repeats "many" several times, signaling her confidence in the durability of human fabrication. The house sits at the threshold between land and sea, a world erected between humans and nature. "Enveloped" is another word emphasized. She enunciates each syllable, drawing out the word so that it performs the very sensation it describes. We hear her recall

dwelling¹⁵ within the elemental, inhabiting an intimacy with the milieu. Her first line is juxtaposed with the image of a flat, sandy landscape with a well-fortified double concertina wire fence running across its length. A closed gate prevents access, and we are uncertain if it is keeping us out, or keeping us in from this empty land. The visual representation of the derelict house is withheld from us until after she has uttered her first line of “being out in the sea during a heavy storm.” Its concrete corridors are lined with green-yellow algae, its roof tiles missing.

The shots are symmetrical, lending a sense of proportion and order that parallels the lines and shape of the *longkangs*. There is a temporal disjointedness: what we see is an abandoned house in ruin; the voice insists that the house will exist forever. As we view this ruin, we imagine what it would have looked like inhabited. The camera slowly but steadily zooms in, pulling us toward the house. The house is simple in design, with minimal ornamentation beyond a decorative metal gate bearing a floral motif. Five evenly paced shots accompany Cashin’s voiceover. The first two frame the sheltered corridor of the long gangway leading to the pier on which the house stands. (fig. 5.6) The third and fourth are filmed in the empty house, where we see the opposite coast through gridded windows. This composition echoes a barnacled storm drain grill encountered earlier, with open sea visible at the end of a long tunnel. The fifth shot cuts abruptly to an unobstructed view of the far shore; the grills that previously contained us disappear. The vegetation, distant hills, and fish farms floating between the two coastlines place us on the northwest of the island, looking toward Johor, Malaysia. This stretch of the Straits of Johor is the narrowest body of water separating the island from the mainland. It was where Mas Selamat was reported to have escaped on an improvised flotation device.

The voice is attributed to Lily Cashin in the end credits of the film festival edit, but remains enigmatic in the installation version. The house is a colonial-era residence known as the Cashin House at Lim Chu Kang, an area defined by its muddy mangrove swamps and sedimented histories. The house may initially appear out of place against the rest of the film’s focus on drainage infrastructure, but it is a significant if lesser-known structure in Singaporean history, the brief passage condensing a density that informs how the film may be read. The house began as a pier built in 1906 by Henry Cashin, an Irish merchant, to service the transport of rubber from his plantation estate. His grandson Joseph Cashin erected the house on the pier in the early 1920s. During the Japanese invasion of British

¹⁵ I invoke “dwelling” here in resonance with Heidegger’s formulation of *Wohnen* in “Building Dwelling Thinking,” where dwelling names a fundamental mode of being-in-the-world, a “remain[ing] at peace within the free,” an act of “sparing” and “preserving” (149) rather than mere residential habitat. I cite Heidegger with care: Singapore’s reclaimed ground, dredged from the sea and continuously reconstructed, sits in productive friction with the *Bodenständigkeit* (rootedness in soil and homeland) that organizes his later thought that is beyond the scope of the chapter, and is briefly elaborated on in Chapter 3. I read dwelling here through Pheng Cheah, Hannah Arendt, and Jacques Derrida, who respond and rework Heideggerian thought through *différance*.

colonial Singapore on the night of 8 February 1942, the Imperial Japanese Army entered the island from the northwest, exploiting the narrow strait and surprising the British who had fortified the south. The house was seized, a war shrine erected on its grounds, and the site used as a comfort station, a euphemism for military sexual slavery. Howard Cashin, the third generation, and his wife Lily used the house as a weekend retreat from the 1960s to the late 2000s. The house was vacated and its compound acquired by the Singapore Land Authority. By the time the film was made in 2011, it had fallen into disrepair. It was subsequently determined to be structurally unsound, demolished, and carefully rebuilt. The house reopened to the public in November 2023 as a heritage site managed by the National Parks Board alongside the nearby Sungei Buloh wetlands nature reserve. Colonial extraction, wartime invasion, familial kinship, and preservation of nature and heritage layered on a site that bore witness to Singaporean history.

As with the opaque white stain, a direct political reading would take the Cashin House sequence as a metaphor for the confidence of human governance set against the reality of the more-than-human ground. Linger with Lily Cashin's testimony and the dense historical context of this house reveals a deeper tension between dwelling in conditions of both containment and contingency. In each of the historical layers, attempts to contain the contingent ultimately prove futile. The pier itself was built to manage the transport of rubber as a cash crop, the outflow of colonial extraction that eventually ran dry. The Cashins then converted it into real estate as a way of containing their wealth, transforming the site into a place of leisure and recreation. This strategic location was breached during the British colonial defense of Singapore and reappropriated during the Japanese occupation, when the leisure compound was repurposed as a military installation in the form of a war shrine and a comfort station. These uncontainable exigencies continue to haunt the house in its brief and stoic appearance in the film.

In 2026, after the rebuilding and reopening, I visited the house with my mother while researching this chapter. The walk was a guided biodiversity tour – access to the house is only possible through reservation, with multiple gates preventing entry. The shoreline was fortified and securitized, with fleets of boats from the coast guard anchored nearby, guarding this thin band of water that has been identified, especially after the Mas Selamat incident, as a site of strategic vulnerability. My mother, who as a teenager assisted my grandmother as a rubber plantation tapper, identified the rubber trees (*Hevea brasiliensis*) still standing on the compound and commented on how houses like Cashin House were built through her labor, my grandmother's labor, and the labor of generations of itinerant and precarious plantation workers. The guide mentioned that after the war the Cashins destroyed the stone pillars of the Japanese war shrine, breaking them down and repurposing them as gravel for the driveway. As an infrastructural manifestation of the tension between containment and contingency in governance, the guide pointed to the balustrades lining the house and the boundary of the plot, noting that they had to make the gaps between them

smaller to prevent children from slipping through into the water. The justification for tearing down and rebuilding the entire structure was making the house safer for public visits, ensuring there would be no unexpected contingencies. From this expanded context of the site in the past and present, we return to the testimony in the film.

Lily Cashin's account is but one of many stories of the site, told from an inhabitant's perspective. For Cashin, containment is evident through her faith in fabrication. This is her husband's assurance that the pilings on the Cashin House go deep enough into the mud and silt that the house will remain standing in perpetuity. Contingency is the immersive envelopment she describes, and the visual representation of the house in a state of dilapidation. This is dwelling in the elements, the sublime sensation of being surrounded by water during a heavy monsoon storm, feeling vulnerable yet safe. The concrete pilings she has deep faith in are the world erected between humans and nature. Cashin's faith in the pilings recapitulates what Cheah identifies as the Arendtian faith in *homo faber*, where "our ability to make a world enables us to transcend our mortal worldly existence." (Cheah 142). However, the pilings endure through being held in place by the ground on which the pier stands: layers of rock, soil, and mud beneath the water that the pier is built upon provide the infrastructural support that holds up the house. This man-made structure is held in place by the very elements it is designed to withstand. These are the inhuman forces of contingency that no human can completely contain or prevent. In *All Lines Flow Out*, this testimonial to durability is juxtaposed against a weathered and uninhabitable structure. Her testimony does not resolve the contradictions between the human volition we hear and the more-than-human phenomena we witness.

5.5.4 The Loop as Temporalization

After Cashin finishes her testimonial, an abrupt jump cut pushes us off the pier and plunges us into the turbulent sea. This disorientation, arriving immediately after her proclamation of faith in the stability of the pilings and the durability of infrastructure, speaks to the precise editing strategies of the film. We turn our attention to the space between images, the soundscape, the gap of *différance*, and temporalization. These are the contingencies that escape our field of vision, beyond direct interpretation. They flood our senses affectively, associatively, leaking beyond the frame or withdrawing in opacity. Our destabilizing perspective is carried by the undulating waves as we oscillate between the sky and the murky underwater seascape. A bright red object catches our eye at the corner of the screen. A man in a life jacket is thrown into the water with us. A visceral sensation of swimming in the open sea, and with it the possibility of drowning, courses through us; our pulse races. (fig. 5.7) This is where the film loops, returning to the static and calm shots of interior infrastructure from the start. The very first shot we encounter is a line of drainage socks and the calm, undulating canal water at twilight. (fig. 5.8) This absence of a definitive beginning and end removes the formal establishment of a protagonist or subject – we do not know who constructed and laid the fish trap, only the person who found it. We do not

know if the figure survived or found land. We only know he is still swimming in the open sea.

What the loop performs is the structure of temporalization that Cheah reads through Derrida. In *What Is a World?*, Cheah writes:

Deconstruction reaffirms the world's grounding in temporalization in a way that directly addresses the problem of how worlding is related to world-making activity. Time can never be completely appropriated by and made proper to human existence because it is given by an inappropriately other whose coming tears and suspends temporalization. Consequently, the world is always to come. It can never be destroyed or completely unworlded by human design. Indeed, the world's disappearance is the abyssal background for the emergence of an-other world. (186)

Cheah reminds us of the inhuman forces of temporalization that can never be contained by humanity or subjecthood. The world that the logic of the drainage system produces, symptomatic of Singapore's containment and management of nature¹⁶ within a legible, managed, sterilized infrastructure, disappears at the moment the figure plunges into the open sea. The loop returns us to containment, which will again leak. The figure, like us, is trapped in an endless cycle of time, oscillating between chaos and calm, between the phenomenal turbulence of the open sea, and the still, measured interiority of the canal system. The loop is an inhuman presence constitutively contaminated by withdrawal. "An-other" world is always to come, its disappearance the "abyssal background" for emergence.

The fracturing effect of the loop cutting from the chaos of the open sea to the safe calm of the internal waters extends to the film's editing strategies. Jump cuts propel us further down the stages of hydraulic infrastructure, making apparitions in space appear and vanish intermittently. Contrasting shots edit between agitating construction by night and the tranquil waterway by day. We see the same pedestrian bridge along Kallang River at different times, with its distinctive W-shaped bracing and semicircular arch recognizable under different light. Yet the shift in atmosphere makes it feel like a different place on each return. The stability of the Cashin House and Lily Cashin's proclamation of faith in the pilings gives way to the ground disappearing beneath us, and an unstable body struggling for air in the sea. These oscillations between containment and contingency constitute the formal rhythm of the film, and they enact what Moten, reading Adrian Piper's practice, describes as a "withdrawal into the external world" (249). The clear distinctions between figure and ground, body and environment becomes muddled in these cuts.

In tandem with the editing strategies that shape our temporal experience of the film, Zai Tang's subtle yet deliberate sound design performs a parallel reconfiguration of the

¹⁶ I reference Timothy Barnard's *Nature Contained: Environmental Histories of Singapore* when thinking about the logic of containment.

milieu, one with both syncopation and cadence between sound and image. The opaque white stain sequence is accompanied by the drone of crickets in the background, growing louder as the stain creeps toward us. A construction scene features a deafening screech of machinery that cuts to calm silence. The augmented sound of waves accompanies our view through the barnacle-covered grill, looking down a tunnel that leads to the open sea, closing the distance between what we see and what we hear. Cashin's voice announces itself after a foghorn, a disruption that signals a shift in tone; we hear her speaking before we see the image of the house she describes. The disorientation of being plunged underwater is complemented by the auditory experience of being underwater. As we drift beneath a bridge, the rhythmic thud of vehicles passing overhead reaches us without a visible source, the sound design here relies on the viewer's embodied sense memory. These frequencies reorganize the viewer's sensory orientation toward the milieu. Sound is the medium through which contingency leaks beyond the frame, reaching the viewer before the image represents what is happening, and persisting long after the image has cut away. The viewer may avert their gaze to avoid witnessing the "horror" of infrastructure, but sound is something one can never completely escape when experiencing the film installation. Within the installation space, it bleeds into adjacent spaces and scores the viewer's experience of the drainage socks and beyond.

Sound design, the recursive looping, and editing interruptions act as what Cheah identifies as temporalizations. A temporalizing event is a rupture that exposes the contingency of what had appeared permanent and secure. The film's reference to fugitivity and leaks throws into question the stability of a reality that, until moments of rupture, had presented itself as secured, whether that rupture surfaces as the escape of a fugitive, the impasse of diplomatic water talks, or pillars no longer able to hold up a man-made structure. The reconfiguration of the milieu is the suspension of a singular official State narrative, permitting a multiplicity of competing narratives – magic, counterfactual history, infrapolitical gossip – to surface. Beyond the temporal frame of the world in the film, reading the film through Cheah's framework of temporalization reminds us that there is also the temporal frame of us encountering the film. This encounter can happen in an archive, in the installation space, in the cinema, or online. Time is always-already out of joint: between the here and now, and the then and there. The film's effectiveness lies in its ability to open a space to sense moments of national trauma we have collectively experienced and to approach this trauma through an affective experience that reconfigures in withdrawal and opacity rather than through literal reenactment or reconstruction.

The alertness we bring to the waterway carries the affective residue of a paranoia, the year-long search where every canal, storm drain, body of water in the country became a potential site of concealment. Horizon scanning, a term employed by the Singaporean

government to indicate predictive and preemptive governance,¹⁷ replicates both the State's surveillance and, simultaneously, the fugitive's vigilance. This perceptual possession works in both directions. The figure that appears and reappears in the film, through the magic of montage, through a directorial sleight of hand, reconfigures the attention we give to the film. We scan the horizon diligently, noticing the various traces and clues that might help us understand this unsolved mystery. We notice: An upturned table that could double as a raft, a red tanker emanating thick black smoke that drifts past the horizon and could be a vehicle of escape, a man on a bicycle at the far end of the grassy, sandy land – is that a bystander? Or the apparition in question? At times, it seems our perception has been possessed by the figure; we hear the lapping of water against our feet as we are propelled forward. The question of who moves through the film has quietly become a question of what moves through us. The film distributes the possibility of the subject across the more-than-human landscape, scattering it among objects, figures, and the environment without resolving any of them into a legible agent. Heidegger's formulation in *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* offers a final clarification of the withdrawal this chapter has been engaging with:

Awakening is a matter for each individual human being, not a matter of his or her good will or even skillfulness, but of his or her destiny, whatever falls or does not fall to him or her. Everything that contingently falls upon us, however, only falls and falls due to us if we have waited for it and are able to wait. Only whoever honours a mystery gains the strength to wait. Honouring in this metaphysical sense means action that engages in the whole that in each case prevails through us. (351)

The contingent is what leaks, but contingency is also the element of chance that emerges. The film's temporalization in its looping, recursion, and long, slow shots is a form of this ability of waiting that honors the mystery of the milieu by allowing "the whole" to prevail through us. This is etiolated conduct, one that emerges at the threshold where the milieu withdraws and that reconfigures recognition.

5.6 The Milieu as Fugitive

How does one conclude a chapter that escapes closure? Throughout this chapter, I have traced a sensing of drainage infrastructure along containment and contingency, the frame and the *parergon*, the visible and the penumbral. The four moments I have isolated from the film – the human debris, the white substance, dwelling at Cashin House, and the temporal structure of the loop – offer ways to imagine an inhuman temporalization, a giving that simultaneously withdraws, and the drainage infrastructure as an etiolated worlding apparatus. Our attunement to infrastructure exposes the limits of how we sense our worlds and orients us toward other worlds that do not extend from the human. It is through this

¹⁷ Ho Rui An discusses this in *Crisis and Contingency at the Dashboard*. Risk Assessment and Horizon Scanning is a government-initiated technology enabled program that analyzes data sets for patterns or threats that enable proactive mitigation.

limiting appearance, in the form of aesthetics, that political life is recognized. This chapter is an obdurate reminder of what remains: a dwelling that delays, contaminates, oscillates, and unsettles our senses. To return to Appadurai's concerns about "a bewildering landscape of actants, assemblages, and machines" (234) in our embrace of a more-than-human sensitivity, this chapter attends to a discourse grounded in materiality – the value of water, the layers of history, the migrant worker and subaltern fugitive who refuse transparency – while re/con/figuring our relationship to inhuman infrastructure. Sensing the "poetics" of infrastructure operates in a register that Appadurai's theorization does not quite reach, and demands capacious and abstract approaches that linger in a theatrical penumbra. It is, as Charles Lim reminds us in both his film installation and artist statement, "what cannot be forgotten but must not be mentioned."

How does one end a dissertation that theorizes cracks, leaks, and stains? Throughout the arc of this dissertation, we have moved from establishing the cost of a transparent, pragmatic mode of resistance in the first chapter, alongside the State's migration from moral prohibition to normative calibration. Subsequent chapters cycle through different modes of tactical opacity, asking how etiolated conduct persists under constraints. This began with the camouflaged choreographies of Chapter 2, tracing queer visibility as a public secret hidden in plain sight; continued with the reclaiming of reclamation in Chapter 3, finding the sensuous more-than-human ecological intimacy that escapes the value-form; and arrived at the practice of solitary-solidarity in Chapter 4, articulating transgenerational survival within carceral confinement. Opacity in this chapter operates as the inhabitation of an etiolated condition of deprivation, one that questions the conditions of limitation and dependence within aesthetic sensing. The drainage as milieu is at once a conduit for safe passage and a temporalization that resists legibility. It is a form of inhuman worlding under conditions when we attend to what exceeds a human calculus, a more-than-human performativity – containment and contingency held perpetually in their gerundive suspension. The world is always coming, and the world is always to come.



Figure 5.1 *All Lines Flow Out* (2011). Installation view with a close-up of one of two drainage socks, and the video in the background. Image courtesy of Singapore Art Museum.



Figure 5.2 *All Lines Flow Out* (2011). Installation view with drainage sock. Photo by boonscape.



Figure 5.3 Still from *All Lines Flow Out* (2011). Figure wading through the canal in shoulder-height water. Image courtesy of Charles Lim.



Figure 5.4 Still from *All Lines Flow Out* (2011). Search party in the *longkang* in the rain. Image courtesy of Charles Lim.



Figure 5.5 Still from *All Lines Flow Out* (2011). White opaque stain that leaks out into the *longkang*. Image courtesy of Charles Lim.



Figure 5.6 Still from *All Lines Flow Out* (2011). Cashin House at the end of a pier in Lim Chu Kang, fish farms in the background and Johor, Malaysia on the far horizon. Image courtesy of Charles Lim.



Figure 5.7 Still from *All Lines Flow Out* (2011). Figure floating with a life vest in the open sea, with ships on the horizon. Image courtesy of Charles Lim.



Figure 5.8 Still from *All Lines Flow Out* (2011). Drainage socks installed along the waterways to collect debris and trash from runoff water. Image courtesy of Charles Lim.

Epilogue

Temporary Measures:

Conduct in a Broken Circuit

石头下的小草
为了见阳光
只得把腰弯一弯
被压迫的人们
是该挺起腰板
还是学小草永远弯腰
风雨中的树
西风来，东边倒
东风来，西边歪
被压迫的人们
是该抬头抵抗
还是如风中树
永远点头
样样称是

— 晶莹, “该如何”

The grass beneath the stone
adapts by bending its back
to get a glimpse of the sun.
Should the oppressed stand tall?
Or should we learn from the grass
and bow down forever?
Trees in a storm:
When the west wind blows, it falls east.
When the east wind blows, it leans west.
Should the oppressed
lift our crowns to resist?
Or sway like trees in the wind,
forever nodding along,
agreeing to everything?

— Jing Ying, “What to Do”¹

6.1 Like Grass and Trees

This is a poem written by my mother in 1971 while she attended Teachers' Training College in Singapore. It was there she met my father and they married soon after. My father had dreams of becoming a writer and published several poems under his pen name 田浪 (waves in a field). He encouraged my mother to write, and she adopted the pseudonym 晶莹 (shimmering stars). This was her only published poem. While organizing the flat I had returned to during the pandemic, I discovered newspaper cuttings of her poem, along with several of my father's, carefully preserved in a notebook.

This was in the wake of the student political movements of the 1950s and 1960s, a period when *parrhesia* – speaking truth to power² – carried real risk. The poem's metaphors compare the condition of oppression to grass growing under a stone, deprived of light, and trees bending in compliance with the capricious winds. Granted, the use of botanical metaphor is common among poets, and the metaphor itself remains in service of human

¹ This is my translation of her poem from Mandarin.

² I covered some of the history of political detention and suppression of political dissent in Chapter 4. After my mother graduated from Teachers' Training College, her peers all received job postings, but she did not. She eventually sought out her own teaching position at a primary school, a role she was overqualified for, at a reduced salary. She harbors a suspicion that the poem may have something to do with this.

agential capacity. Her language rhymes with my dissertation's focus on etiolated conduct and more-than-human performativity fifty years later. Her poem teaches me how forces of nature shape forms of life, and the limits of agential capacity under conditions of deprivation.

My mother and father left their passion for creative writing behind in pursuit of pragmatism, giving up their idealism to join the Ministry of Education. My mother taught math and science, and my father taught technical woodwork and vocational training in a subject known as "Design and Technology." With the shift in language policy in the late 1970s, English became the mandated language of instruction. Some teachers, like my parents, were suddenly required to speak and teach in a language they acquired much later in life. My mother recalled having to relearn the periodic table in English overnight, something she had memorized by heart in Mandarin. She also remembered years of night school after work to acquire the necessary language skills, and being mocked by students for her mispronunciations. After years of obdurate persistence, she eventually shifted to teaching math, finding its universal language easier to navigate. Singapore society was modernizing rapidly, and my parents needed, like grass and trees, to bend and sway accordingly.

A decade after writing the poem, I entered their lives. The version of them I know is that of rule-abiding civil servants, model citizens who fret about getting caught for replanting a banyan sapling without permission, often deferring to colleagues who were native English speakers. They were perceived as, and made to feel like, second-class citizens in quiet compliance. Throughout my artistic practice, which was occasionally confrontational with the State,³ my parents worried about my future prospects, urging me to step off the soapbox, to be pragmatic and cautious about what I said and how I said it. Did they "bow down"? Or have their revolutionary energies been transformed and channeled into other forms of life – including mine? Are they part of the stone and wind that are shaping how I move through this world? What does it mean, now, to "lift our crowns"? This poem, buried in the time capsule of our home, asks all these questions. It is a "hidden transcript" of my parents' etiolated conduct. A reminder of what they withheld for me to write the words you read now.

6.2 Breaking the Circuit

The discovery of my parents' etiolated performatives was only possible because of the pandemic that brought me back to my childhood home. I was a year into my coursework when I got on a plane to return to Singapore in March 2020. When I touched down from the United States, arriving at an empty airport, I was placed on a fourteen-day mandatory quarantine in a hotel, followed by a brief stay-home notice to ensure I was not a vector of transmission. Everything was paid for by the government, including lodging and meals, a

³ I spoke up against censorship in my university valedictorian speech with the President of Singapore as the guest of honor in attendance. In 2012, I reenacted Josef Ng's *Brother Cane*, a 1994 performance that had led to a ten-year restriction on the licensing and funding of performance art.

calibrated livability that sustained the body while restricting its movement. When I re-entered society and moved back in with my parents in the twelfth-floor flat with the banyan sapling, the State implemented a nationwide “circuit breaker,” the term used to refer to the lockdown from 7 April to 1 June 2020.⁴ The metaphor implies that the energy flowing through this electric city is centralized, and could be interrupted with a flip of a switch. The circuit thrives on a sustained and modulated current, and circuit breakers are a safety catch to prevent a blown fuse. The language informed the introductory chapter’s formulation of “conduct” in dialogue with Canguilhem’s milieu and Foucault’s pastoral conduct. “Circuit breaker” literalized it at the scale of an entire population, interrupting the conduits through which political, sexual, and reproductive life flowed.

On the same day the lockdown began, Parliament passed the COVID-19 (Temporary Measures) Act, an online legal document that read like a choreographic score. The Act dictated what behaviors were legal, what types of movement were possible, from the definition of proper mask wearing to what constituted a specified symptom of COVID-19. Under a heightened state of exception, we understood what needed to be done. It was a living document, constantly amended in response to new outbreaks and daily infection rates. Every refreshed page potentially brought a new or amended clause, with detailed specifications.⁵ We witnessed the law being written and revised in real time while it was being enforced, exposing the contingency of laws otherwise framed as carefully deliberated. Tracking the multiple versions over time, one could reconstruct the rationale for each shift in policy, and with it the model figures that this score was written for. The heteronormative order that undergirds all policymaking was among the clearest things to emerge. Permission for grandchildren to visit grandparents living in separate homes was one of the first forms of social contact permitted after “circuit breaker” restrictions were lifted. None of the initial provisions acknowledged non-normative kinships and intimacies. As Pavan Mano observes under these “temporary measures”:

The act of turning toward was guided by a heteronormative logic where one had to turn toward the heterosexual nuclear family unit for relief from solitude; and, at the same time, one had to continue turning away from all other relations that could not be inscribed within the existing matrix of heteronormative kinship structures. (“Rethinking” 145)

⁴ It was such an effective metaphor that the United Kingdom adopted it for its lockdown measures in Wales and Northern Ireland in autumn 2020, an ironic instance of the heart of empire loaning policy language from a former colony (Gallagher).

⁵ An example of this granularity would be the restrictions around “live” stage performances as infection rates started to decrease. These stipulations included details such as the mandatory masking of all performers and crew on and offstage, and the audience having to be at least ten feet away from the edge of the “stage area.” There should be no audience participation or interaction, and minimal “physical interaction between any crew or performer.”

It was in this recursive orientation to my legally recognized kin that I found relief from solitude during the pandemic, and it was this enforced return to my parents' flat that led to the discovery of the poem. As grateful as I am for that additional time with my parents, the compulsory reorientation toward heteronormative kinship was, for a queer person, an etiolated condition.

These “temporary measures” also need to be read along a longer arc of history. In Singapore, the roots of laws demarcating civil liberties historically stem from “temporary measures” in response to crises. Pre-war anxieties led to the introduction of Section 377A by the British (J.Y. Chua), and post-independence insecurities took the form of the Internal Security Act, the Vandalism Act, the Public Order Act (Rajah), and most recently the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act. Giorgio Agamben warned in February 2020 that COVID-19 would produce a “state of exception,” allowing the state of exception to become a “normal governing paradigm.”⁶ With the virus raging through his home country of Italy, his opinion drew pushback from Jean-Luc Nancy, among others. Yet the pattern scholars have identified in Singapore’s legal history suggests that Agamben’s concern, however poorly timed, was warranted. The COVID-19 (Temporary Measures) Act raised questions whose answers are still unclear: How did we adhere to this legal document as a performance score, and in what ways did it script and police our failures? What populations were these measures designed to securitize and what infrastructural logics determined the terms of their containment? What living labor was deemed to be non-essential and how were these perceptions folded into the ongoing “crisis ordinary” (Berlant)?

6.3 Letting Grass Grow

On 21 April 2020, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong delivered his fifth address to the nation on the pandemic. We were on the fourteenth day of the “circuit breaker.” The number of daily new infections had peaked at 1,426 the day before, catching the government off guard.⁷ Ninety-eight percent of infections were from the migrant worker community. The living conditions of the 323,000 migrant workers in the construction sector whose living labor fuels the economy were suddenly under scrutiny. There were an estimated 200,000 workers living in forty-three purpose-built for-profit dormitories, each room housing up to twenty men in an area of approximately 960 square feet.⁸ The virus

⁶ This was first published in an Italian newspaper *il manifesto* on 26 Feb. 2020. The translation I refer to is archived on *praxis*, the online version of the *positions* journal. Jean-Luc Nancy published his response to Agamben on 27 Feb. 2020 in *Antinomie*.

⁷ This was the highest daily case count during the initial phase of the pandemic. The number was exceeded in subsequent waves, including the Omicron variant in 2022. However, the later spikes occurred when vaccines were readily available and medical knowledge of the virus was significantly more advanced.

⁸ This is about eighty-eight square meters. The statistics in this paragraph are from Namita Bhandare’s article in *Foreign Policy* and Hilary Leung’s article in *Time* magazine.

found its way into these cramped quarters and spread rapidly. In his address, the Prime Minister announced the need to tighten “circuit breaker” measures and extend the lockdown until 1 June 2020:

We will also close more workplaces, so that only *the most essential services* will remain open. This will reduce further the number of workers keeping essential services going, and minimise the risks of transmission among the workers. It will mean some degradation of services – for example, *less frequent grass cutting* in our HDB [Housing Development Board] estates. But I hope we all understand why this has to be done. (Lee Hsien Loong; emphasis added)

A day after the Prime Minister’s speech, approximately ten thousand laborers in essential services were moved out of their dormitories into special accommodation that included military barracks, floating hotels, and vacant public housing units. The dormitories were gradually gazetted over time as isolation areas with restricted entry and exit as infection rates rose. Workers deemed as providing “non-essential services” remained within their overcrowded quarters, vulnerable to the virus, kept out of sight. The daily COVID-19 case reports from April 2020 onward began splitting the number of infections within the community from those in the worker dormitories. What appeared to be pragmatic data management also reinforced a social divide that had always been there, a partitioning that revealed a section of the population as the penumbral other (Liu Jen-peng) that needed to be securitized.

The Prime Minister’s speech also mentioned a “degradation of services,” manifesting visibly through lapses in horticultural maintenance, specifically “less frequent grass cutting.” When the migrant workers who maintain Singapore’s landscapes were confined to their dormitories, the physical environment registered their absence. Vegetation grows rapidly in the tropical climate, and the landscape has been rigorously manicured by what Comaroff and Ong have called the State’s “paramilitary gardening” forces. In early reports, this rewilding was romanticized as a return to nature that “[evoked] a sense of freedom and creativity” (Hicks). Nature enthusiasts started pointing out the reappearance of birds and insects that this rewilding attracted, leading to a “more active eco-system and greater biodiversity in the urban parts of Singapore” (Asher). A few months in, this romanticization wore off when these unkempt landscapes became breeding grounds for mosquitoes, leading to a spike in dengue fever cases alongside COVID infections (Teoh).

The temptation to read this as straightforward capitalist critique is strong, but as the journal *Chuang* cautions, the pandemic cannot be reduced to a naive unmasking of late capitalism as the root of all ills. What the pandemic can offer is an opportunity to trace how “the ‘natural world,’ including its microbiological substrata, cannot be understood without reference to how society organizes production” (Chuang). The labor of maintenance outsourced to itinerant migrant workers takes on material representation when it is withdrawn, and the hidden cost becomes transparent in overgrown grass and rising

infection rates.⁹ Tracing the viral etiologies of both COVID and dengue leads back to the figure of the migrant worker grasscutter. Grasscutting is a non-essential service revealed to be essential because of the entangled relations of places, people, and plants within the hyper-cultivated environment of Singapore. The labor of these stagehands that prop up this botanical performance is exposed to both public attention and the virus. The cost of the manicured state of our environment's appearance is clarified. A question that lingers after the pandemic has waned: How does this degradation in the maintenance of our landscape compare to the degradation of lives that our reliance on migrant labor-power creates? How do conditions of calibrated livability decide what forms of life to make-live, and not quite let-die?

6.4 The Grasscutter

In eco-critical analyses of Singapore, the figure of the gardener as landscape architect recurs, often attached to the politician. Lee Kuan Yew, the “Chief Gardener” (George), presided over a landscape that “could not, by definition, survive without a constant gardener” (Comaroff and Ong 14). During the pandemic, political attention shifted from the gardener-architect toward the grasscutter, whose absence during the “circuit breaker” made their labor visible. On 19 July 2020, Sim Ann, a Member of Parliament and Senior Minister of State for Communications and Information, was photographed alongside migrant workers trimming and clearing grass. She wore a bucket hat, a mask, and long sleeves, attired like the workers. These essential workers from the construction industry had been moved out of dormitories and rehoused in a vacant building. They were described as “giving back” to the community by maintaining the overgrown landscape. Mr. Natesan, a migrant worker from India, stated: “It is a Sunday, but we are very happy to volunteer to do this” (Zhuo). Mr. Natesan and his colleagues from the “essential” construction sector were “volunteering” their time to trim grass on their day off. In contrast, their colleagues from the landscape maintenance sector who were deemed “non-essential” remained confined to their dormitories under mandatory quarantine orders, performing a different type of “labor” in suspension and containment.

The National Parks Board oversees public landscape maintenance through a network of private contractors staffed by platoons of migrant workers. Given the pervasive greenery on this island, and the recommendation to trim grass to an optimum height of one to one and a half inches every six to nine days (*Guidelines* 43), this is a “Sisyphean object” (Comaroff and Ong 168) that demands incessant living labor to maintain. The most common method is the portable backpack mower fueled by gasoline. The laborer, clad in a high-visibility vest, balaclava mask, protective gloves, and earmuffs, lugs a motor fitted with a long pole. Nylon ties attached to its end spin at a rate fast enough to tear the blades of

⁹ Chapter 3 adopted a value-form analysis of the sensuous underside of the reproduction of living labor in the form of individual consumption (cruising) that escapes value's accounting, and that analysis of ecological intimacy finds a parallel here in the unmanicured landscape.

grass. The public maintains a distant proximity by default, repelled by the deafening roar of the motors and the threat of the spinning filament. They are a regular feature of your daily commute: they register your presence, pause their task long enough for you to pass, and resume when they assume you are at a safe distance. They move in a pack, spreading over a designated area and combing it methodically until the grass is even; then they migrate to the next location, ferried precariously on the back of lorries.

The most prevalent turf species in Singapore is cow grass (*Axonopus compressus*), imported by the British from South America around 1900. It is valued for its ability to thrive in harsh environments and its quick regeneration after damage. This hardy plant, like many of the workers who tend it and the generations of Singaporeans who arrived from distant shores, is a migrant transplant that has persisted through regeneration. Research by the Centre for Urban Greenery and Ecology indicates that backpack mowing does the most damage to turf compared to other methods, producing an “uneven, low quality cut” that results in scalping and increased susceptibility to disease (*Guidelines* 46). The method is explicitly not recommended, yet it remains the standard because the labor model makes it affordable.¹⁰ Migrant workers often pay “staggering recruitment costs” to secure jobs, effectively placing them in debt and indentured servitude before they arrive, leaving them in an etiolated condition of coerced compliance.¹¹

Matthew Schneider-Mayerson identifies the symbiotic relationship between the management of labor and the maintenance of landscape on this island, observing:

In Singapore [...] “nature” generally exists as the final product in a deliberate (but rarely deliberative) process: first as an economic strategy → a national priority → a set of policies → architectural plans → installation via heavy machinery → and finally as an entry in a database for maintenance, tended by migrant laborers on temporary work visas. (171)

Schneider-Mayerson’s chain places the migrant worker at the terminal point of a “deliberate” logic of governance, with the politician-architect-gardener at its apex. The grasscutter and the landscape they maintain were both classified as non-essential services during the pandemic. They were not alone in this classification.

¹⁰ A comparative study of landscape maintenance in Singapore and Australia commissioned by the National Parks Board found that Singapore’s landscape workers are lower paid, non-unionized, and trained in fewer skills than their Australian counterparts (Vial et al. 19). The study observed that the assignment of “monotonous, highly manual and low skilled activities, for significant periods of time” decreased hourly productivity rates (Vial et al. 21). There is no incentive to increase relative surplus value when there are few restrictions limiting the extraction of absolute surplus value.

¹¹ NGOs such as Transient Workers Count Too and policy revisions by the Ministry of Manpower have addressed specific abuses, but the recruitment debt and other issues are sedimented in a longer history of migrant labor management in Singapore. See Beverly Fok’s dissertation and Kellynn Wee, Theodora Lam, and Brenda Yeoh’s book.

6.5 Aesthetics and Essential Services

The pandemic raised the question of what types of labor counted as “essential.” Social reproductive labor conventionally taken for granted was recognized as essential to maintaining life and part of the infrastructure that provisions and sustains (Cowen). With migrant workers quarantined in their dormitories, it became clear that the value of one’s living labor was pegged to one’s vocation and the perceived significance of the service one provided. Whether one’s vocation was classified as essential or non-essential could mean the difference between being moved out of dormitories to off-site facilities and reducing one’s exposure to the virus or staying in dormitories and potentially getting infected.¹² A few weeks after the “circuit breaker” ended, *The Straits Times* published a survey on 14 June 2020 that asked the public what they considered essential and non-essential jobs (Tai). Essential jobs: doctor, nurse, cleaner, garbage collector, hawker, deliveryman. Non-essential jobs: telemarketer, social media manager, business consultant. The top non-essential job ranked by a thousand survey participants was the artist.

The arts community responded on social media to the survey results, and the conversation briefly echoed the Wages for Housework debates that Marxist feminists staged in the 1970s and 1980s. Some insisted on being valued as essential, while others argued that art’s value lies precisely in its resistance to instrumentalization. Playwright Faith Ng wrote in a Facebook post on 17 June: “the fear is very real, that this will be used against us, in homes, in classrooms, in fundraising, in policy making.”¹³ Writer Alfian Sa’at responded in a public Facebook post, questioning the survey’s methodology and timing on 18 June: “who are the ones profiting from our outrage and our pain?” The classification of both landscape maintenance and art as non-essential places aesthetics and the environment in the same category, both devalued in the order of things. The question of aesthetics’ value to the State was captured decades earlier when Lee Kuan Yew, in response to a question from an audience at the University of Singapore in 1968, stated: “Poetry is a luxury we cannot afford” (Koh Tai Ann 303). Three years after the Prime Minister’s proclamation, a young writer will get her first poem published in the newspapers; her soon-to-be husband will clip the newsprint and carefully stow it away for the next five decades. Heeding the Prime Minister’s call, society funneled her down the pragmatic path, and she left this indulgent “luxury” behind.

The declaration and its quotability have persisted over the years, deployed in precisely the ways Faith Ng feared the classification of the artist as non-essential would do. Perhaps because of its association with unaffordable luxury, poetry has become one of the

¹² Despite the scale of infection, with 54,505 migrant workers in dormitories testing positive out of 58,320 confirmed cases nationally, there were only two recorded deaths from COVID-19 among migrant workers living in dormitories, with twenty-five COVID-19-related ICU admissions (Singapore, Ministry of Health).

¹³ This post is from a private Facebook post by Faith Ng, quoted with permission.

most vital literary forms in Singapore, practiced by writers like Alfian Sa'at, Jason Wee, and Cyril Wong, whom I cite across this dissertation. Poetry's formal persistence in Singapore is itself an etiolated conduct: since art has no value to extract, it cannot be subsumed, and its contingency is the very condition of its endurance, growing because of and despite the State's deprivation. In her 1980 article on literature, one of the first pieces that archived the 1968 quote, Koh Tai Ann surfaces another statement Lee made a decade later. In 1978, in a nationally televised session responding to a Malay teacher's question about literature, the mother tongue, and cultural heritage, the Prime Minister stated:

What is important for pupils is not literature, but a philosophy of life [...] *a value system for life* [...] This is an important matter which is concerned not with poetry or literature, but with relationships [...] This has to do with *how humans differ from animals*. This is the meaning of culture. (304; emphasis added)

Koh counters by making a case for literature's importance, arguing that the qualities Lee was seeking, value, philosophy of life, sociality-in-relation, are fundamentally embedded in what literature and poetry offer. Lee's statement, however, also proclaims something else: he defines the "meaning of culture" by its distance from the animal, the vegetal, the non-human, even as he emphasizes a "value system for life." This dissertation opened with Arendt's claim that speech and action tether us to human plurality, and that theater is "the political art par excellence" because its sole subject is "man in his relationship to others" (188). Lee shares Arendt's anthropocentrism, but where Arendt locates theater and storytelling at the center of political life, Lee excludes literature and poetry from his "value system," reaching for a politicized version of "culture" as means to an end. The logic of Lee's governance, one that created the heteronormative order that survives him and casts a long shadow on every aspect of Singaporean political life, assigns aesthetics to the paradox of the non-essential yet instrumental. It is this assignment that the preceding chapters have traced as the condition of etiolated conduct. It is in this gap that aesthetics' indirection operates, its diminished status and perception as "error" becoming the condition of possibility. This is how one can walk in a canal under broad daylight and remain a "public secret."

6.6 A Measure of Time

On 19 June 2020, the first day of Phase Two of the lifting of "circuit breaker" restrictions, I met a companion for a "procession" from the Former Ford Factory to a canal that runs alongside Kranji Lodge migrant worker dormitory. We walked five and a half miles along the old Malayan railway route, which was being developed into a green corridor.¹⁴ I had discovered this trail during the "circuit breaker," when long solitary walks

¹⁴ This artery running through the island was part of a decades-long territorial dispute between Singapore and Malaysia. It surfaced as part of the bilateral water discussions mentioned in Chapter 5. Its status as Malaysian-held railway land in land-scarce Singapore was a consequence of colonial-era ordinances that persisted after separation in 1965.

outdoors were one of the few permitted activities. In Phase Two, social gatherings gradually expanded beyond the restriction to blood relations. The end point of the walk was outside Kranji Lodge, a dormitory with a capacity for up to twelve thousand workers. It was one of twenty-four migrant worker dormitories that had been declared isolation areas (David Koh 635).¹⁵ The workers were two months into their quarantine on the day of the walk, even as restrictions were being lifted for the rest of the population.

I titled the performance *Temporary Measures: A Procession of Physical Proximity*. “Temporary measures,” after the COVID-19 (Temporary Measures) Act. The migrant workers were sixty days into their quarantine. The “circuit breaker” lasted fifty-five days. I had spent fourteen days in hotel confinement. The “procession” in the subtitle was in response to Seelan Palay’s charge in court for conducting a “public procession without a permit” for *32 Years: The Interrogation of a Mirror* (2017–18), a charge for which he served a prison sentence in solitary confinement for two weeks.¹⁶ He was in solitary-solidarity in relation to generations of political detainees arrested under the Internal Security Act. Palay’s performance was at the forefront of my mind during my hotel quarantine and the “circuit breaker” that followed. The Public Order Act of 2009 defines “assembly” as a gathering whose purpose includes demonstrating support or opposition, publicizing a cause, or commemorating an event, specifying that a single person constitutes an assembly. It defines a “procession” to include “a march by a person alone for any such purpose” (*Public Order Act*). I made clear to my walking companion the potential legal risks of this “procession” we were embarking on under the Public Order Act, alongside the health risks of doing so during the pandemic. This was an intimate encounter in a public space, and a “public secret” shared between me and my companion.

My “procession” companion purchased the experience of this one-on-one intimate performance from an art sale titled *Moving In Place* organized by Seelan Palay. The sale was intended to raise funds for Transient Workers Count Too, a non-governmental migrant worker advocacy organization. Each artwork in the fundraising sale was priced at 750 Singapore dollars,¹⁷ a symbolic equivalent to the average monthly salary of a migrant worker in the construction sector. The performance, the art sale, and the fundraising initiative were responses by the arts community to the treatment of migrant workers during the pandemic, and their continued separation from the rest of society. I prepared for the “procession” by walking the route several times in solitude. There was a heightened paranoia to being outdoors during “circuit breaker,” a palpable sense of being observed while observing others. In the twelve days leading up to the performance, I sent daily emails to my walking companion, parts of which were developed into this epilogue. These emails included

¹⁵ The Infectious Diseases Act declared Kranji dormitory as an isolation area on 17 Apr. 2020.

¹⁶ This performance is examined in detail in Chapter 4.

¹⁷ This was approximately USD 550 in 2020.

logistical details for the “procession,” along with personal anecdotes and reflections on the pandemic.

6.7 From the Factory

We started the “procession” at the Former Ford Factory, the site where the British Army unconditionally surrendered to the Japanese Army on 15 February 1942. It was the first motorcar assembly plant in Southeast Asia for the Malayan division of the Ford Motor Company, opened only a few months before the Fall of Singapore (“Former”). Its location along the railway reflected a strategic infrastructural decision to aid the flow of raw materials and products, which overlapped with the decision to convert the site into the Japanese military headquarters and to manufacture military vehicles and trucks during the war. It has since been converted to a heritage site that marks this history.

My mother worked briefly as a factory worker in an aluminum manufacturing plant before enrolling in Teachers’ Training College. When she was younger, she assisted my grandmother as a rubber plantation tapper (mentioned in Chapter 5). She remembers both experiences as tedious, back-breaking work. Both experiences strengthened her resolve to pursue a teaching position that was less labor-intensive, and one she considers a more meaningful contribution to society. Marx writes in *Capital*, vol. 1: “Factory work exhausts the nervous system to the uttermost; at the same time, it does away with the many-sided play of the muscles, and confiscates every atom of freedom, both in bodily and in intellectual activity” (548). In the chapter on “Machinery and Large-Scale Industry,” he describes the machine as “an instrument of torture” that entraps and transforms the human body rather than reducing one’s labor (548). My mother never read Marx, but her early life experiences shaped her poem about the oppressed. The bending and distortion of the body she describes move beyond compliance with political shifts to address the condition of the laborer. This exhaustion and confiscation of freedom, from the rubber tapper, to the factory worker, to the grasscutter, to the quarantined worker, is part of the etiolated condition that her poem names. I initially read the question in her title as purely rhetorical: what should we do in the face of oppression? But returning to the poem in light of the factory, the rubber tree, the unruly landscape, and the dormitory as a carceral isolation facility, her question thickens. “该如何” also asks: How can we proceed? Where do we go from here? With the knowledge of the heteronormative order of things, what choices (or illusions of choice) are available (and unavailable) for our relations to forms of life? Her poem asks these questions at the crossroads of her life as she moved from the plantation and the factory floor to the classroom.

In her analysis of Marx and machines, Alyssa Battistoni coined a term, *suprasumption*, that moves beyond the real and formal subsumption of labor:

Suprasumption describes the fact that both physical and social processes always exist in excess of that remaking. Where real subsumption denotes precise control over time, suprasumption is characterized by asynchronies and interruptions. [...]

suprasumption describes the friction inevitably generated by speedup, the unintended byproducts that attend commodity production, the stubborn intrusion of the concrete into the smooth circulation of abstract value, the places where the material labor process spills beyond its containment by capitalist social forms. (98)

This method of looking at the more-than-human remainder aslant is something I have been doing across this dissertation. Thinking about the pandemic as *suprasumption* is a way to acknowledge the vitality of forces of nature that reshape the human while attending to their contingent materiality. This is a method where trees and grass move beyond metaphor, and inhabit the space of contiguity with the human. The amount of rubber sap a tree produces determines how deep a cut my mother would make on its trunk, and the frequency of her return visits to collect it. The rate of growth and strength of the grass affects how far a grasscutter's body bends with his machine, and how often he is required to trim it. The transmissibility of the virus and the time it takes for a group to develop immunity determine how long the workers remain isolated in their dormitories. These more-than-human forces determine the rhythms of bodies and movements that resist instrumentalization. How do we, in Battistoni's words, "attend to the physical reality of the world while critically assessing the social relations in which it is situated" (7)? What does etiolated conduct make possible or impossible?

6.8 To the End

The walk took us around three hours, from three in the afternoon to six in the evening. Along the way I pointed out a secondary school where my mother was a teacher. It was situated by a wide canal that doubled as a recreational exercise area. We stopped occasionally for rest; we peeled and ate an orange I brought. I shared with my companion an exercise Seelan Palay developed in solitary confinement: a meditation practice with an orange.¹⁸ As we headed north, away from the city and toward the periphery of the island, paved paths gave way to gravel and dirt. The number of people thinned, and eventually we were the only two left on the trail as the sun dipped in the sky.

You could hear them before you could see them, a distant murmur of restless commotion against desolate land and dense vegetation. Eventually, the top of the first building emerged into view through the canopy of trees, then several more in succession. The buildings were factory-like, long rectangular metal cubes four to five floors high that appeared efficiently constructed. Each floor was marked with a brightly painted railing that ran along its side. Many of the workers were standing along this corridor, some bare-chested, some wearing *sarongs*, perhaps to alleviate the heat and humidity of their claustrophobic rooms. The trail ran along the perimeter fence, fortified with concertina wire. Some of them saw us, and started to smile and wave. We were worried about getting

¹⁸ Palay's performance and this practice are covered in detail in Chapter 4.

into trouble for being in such close proximity to a government-gazetted isolation area, but we returned their waves and smiled back at them.

We followed a thin path covered with dense undergrowth that separated a canal from the compound. We started seeing flashes of color along this path, and realized they were bicycles chained to a fence that ran along the canal, overgrown with vegetation after not being utilized for two months ([fig. 6.1](#)). They were a convenient, low-cost mode of transportation that made the dormitory's remote location accessible for the workers. The number of bicycles kept increasing as we got closer, some chained together with long grass and creeping vines tangled up between the links of the chains and the spokes of the wheels, others rusted from being exposed to the elements. Hordes of mosquitoes were out in full force, thriving in this untamed landscape, feeding on our blood relentlessly. They, too, must have been starving for their regular supply of sustenance. We kept walking until we could not proceed any further. The path ahead was blocked by a barricade of bicycles. These bicycles were placed on their sides and stacked six or seven high, three or four layers deep, keeping us out and the workers in. We began retracing our steps, turning our backs on the deafening sound of a contained and restless crowd. The sound continued to reverberate long after we left the worker dormitory behind. A circuit broken for others, but not for some.

She hesitates and asks: 该如何?



Figure 6.1 *Temporary Measures: A Procession of Physical Proximity* (2020). Bicycles at the end of the “procession” at the perimeter of Kranji Lodge migrant worker dormitory. Photo by author.

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