



Straight nation: heteronormativity and other exigencies of postcolonial nationalism

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BOOK REVIEW

Straight nation: heteronormativity and other exigencies of postcolonial nationalism, by Pavan Mano, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2025, 216 pp., £85.00 (hbk), ISBN 9781526176783

Queer politics in Singapore is at an impasse. Section 377A of the penal code that criminalized private acts of consensual sex between adult men was repealed on 3 January 2023, while a constitutional amendment reinforcing the heterosexual definition of marriage was introduced to forestall further legal recognition of queer kinship. Together, these moves caught the queer community by surprise and took the wind out of the sails of queer activism, producing an appearance of liberalization at one level and a reinstantiation of normativity at another. Pavan Mano's *Straight Nation: Heteronormativity and Other Exigencies of Postcolonial Nationalism* offers us a way to read this impasse, naming the heteronormative foundation of this correction, and extending scholarship that has been written on the governance of sexuality in Singapore. Mano frames this post-repeal condition, after Jasbir Puar, as 'what happens when "we" get what "we" want' (20), highlighting the blind spots of a liberal-rights approach to recognition. As his book title promises, Mano historicizes the repeal as the friction between heteronormativity and the 'exigencies of postcolonial nationalism', the contrast between what Mano calls the 'straight nation' and the 'counter-nation'.

Mano sets up this manoeuvre by drawing on scholarship that imagines the postcolonial nation (Benedict Anderson, Paul Gilroy, Syed Hussein Alatas). He reads political speeches, media reports, policy and legal texts, or what he names 'formal state discourse in its scattered and disparate elements' that produces a 'discursive formation of the nation' (188) post-independence. His claim that Singaporean nationhood was built on logics of heteronormativity extends Natalie Oswin's account, in *Global City Futures: Desire and Development in Singapore* (2019), of alternative kinship structures the state refuses to recognize. Mano joins Oswin in examining the homonationalist (Lazar 2017) and homocapitalist (Rao 2020) valences of queer resistance and presence in Singapore. Like other recent queer scholarship about Singapore (Ramdas 2021), these scholars foreground a non-identitarian critique that questions proper objects and subjects of study (Eng and Puar 2020). Collectively, they bridge conversations between the political context of Singapore and recent developments in North American queer theory, understood as queer of colour critique, that examines the intersections of race, class and sexuality.

This body of recent scholarship elaborates on an earlier generation of queer Singaporean work marked by the anthology edited by Audrey Yue and Jun Zubillaga-Pow titled *Queer Singapore: Illiberal Citizenship and Mediated Cultures* (2012), which outlines an illiberal pragmatism of queer cultural presence, and Lynette Chua's *Mobilizing Gay Singapore: Rights and Resistance in an Authoritarian State* (2014), which introduces the concept of 'pragmatic resistance'. In *Straight Nation*, Mano asks what this pragmatic form of resistance costs, what heteronormative foundation its 'pragmatism' rests on, and what contradictions it produces when it interfaces with a distended form of nationalism and xenophobia. As Mano frames it succinctly, 'pragmatism can function as a kind of theoretical *deus ex machina*

that resolves these differences instead of compelling us to grapple with their complexities seriously' (15). I read Mano's project as one that attempts to navigate these complex 'differences', highlighting what queer movements obscure or foreclose in order to align themselves with the state, visibility and legitimacy.

Like Oswin and Zubillaga-Pow, along with scholars who theorize sexuality in Singapore and beyond, Mano relies on a Foucauldian approach to critique, adopting it in both theory and genealogical method. The throughline Mano claims via Foucault is that there is no constitutive outside to power, and one is always already imbricated within networks of subjectification (16). This biopolitical claim extends from the *History of Sexuality Vol. 1*, which Mano cites, and it underwrites his formulation of a key concept, the 'counter-nation', referencing a Foucauldian notion of counter-conduct as a modulation of power from within its circuits. Mano's 'counter-nation' is developed in Chapter 1 and defined as the 'spectral antithesis' (36) to nationhood, a 'heterogeneous entity, a collection of disparate groups, a set of multitudinous manifestations that conjoins the various imagined communities that the nation xenologizes' (51–52). This effort to theorize what Mano, after Sivamohan Valluvan, calls 'the container for the remaining entity of belonging' (52) resonates with recent scholarship in Singapore studies, including Joanne Leow's 'counter-cartography' of aesthetics and infrastructure (2024), and Joshua Comaroff's *Spectropolis* (2025), which examines the built environment, spectrality and political economy. Similar to these projects, Mano attends to a critical gap sharpened in the wake of the pandemic: namely the treatment of migrant workers, grounded in the nation's reliance on low-cost labour to sustain social reproduction and economic production within the city-state. In Chapter 4 of *Straight Nation*, in what is perhaps the book's most compelling contribution, Mano walks us through the post-independence political developments, examining policies, ministry reports and the management of urban space that imbricates both xenophobia and queerness, or what he identifies as the 'queer-foreign communion' (124). He expands the framework of xenology beyond citizenship into a 'sense of subjectivity and (in)compatibility with the straight nation' (125), allowing us to imagine solidarity across national, racial and sexual margins. This theorizing beyond the container of the nation opens up possibilities for further elaboration within South East Asian studies of transnational alliances that complicate rather than iron out contextual differences.

The post-pandemic condition that reveals the latent 'counter-nation' that Singaporean governance is both blind to and reliant on is an undercurrent that courses through the monograph. The introduction begins with the pandemic, elaborating on Mano's 2021 article 'Rethinking the heteronormative foundations of kinship: the reification of the heterosexual nuclear family unit in Singapore's COVID-19 circuit-breaker restrictions'. When lockdown restrictions, known as the 'circuit-breaker' period in Singapore, were relaxed, the first social visits permitted were those of children to their parents and grandparents. Mano elaborates on this anecdote in *Straight Nation* to conclude that in Singapore, 'the nuclear family has the capacity to suffuse all other possibilities of social relation in the Singaporean political imagination' (2). From this, he theorizes public housing policies shaped by kinship, and a patriotic masculinity forged through military conscription (Chapter 2), reads alternative kinship models through a 2018 legal case of a gay parent adopting his surrogate child (Chapter 3), and connects the affinities between xenophobia and sexuality (Chapter 4).

He concludes *Straight Nation* in both Chapter 5 and the Epilogue with an extended critique of Pink Dot, the annual Singapore queer gathering that has inspired similar events regionally, one that Lynette Chua has theorized as a clear articulation of pragmatic resistance. Mano historicizes the conditions that 'restricted [Pink Dot's] shape – both literally and figuratively' (164). It is a licensed event, held in a park with the requisite permits, rather than a processional parade like pride events elsewhere. Mano traces the chain of events: the early-2000s influence of Richard Florida's 'creative class' fostered a tolerance of difference, leading to the

designation of a public protest area in 2001, the site of Pink Dot's 2009 conception. Unlike other critiques that tend to treat Pink Dot as a consistent and monolithic entity, Mano reads the event as it tactically shifts position over various editions, tracing its movement from overt demonstrations of patriotism and an insistent self-description as 'NOT a protest' (167) in the early years, to reclaiming its status 'as a protest' (190) to counter the state's instrumentalization of it as evidence of liberalization at the UN Universal Periodic Review of 2021. Mano's reading is a reminder that Pink Dot is a product of evolving contingencies that is constantly reshaped by the volunteer organizing committee in response to shifts in governmentality of the 'straight nation'.

Mano writes with intimate knowledge of volatile political events that result from the compressed modernization of post-independence Singapore. By his own account, the book grew out of conversations with colleagues and friends. The conversational tone, which he refers to as an 'essayistic fashion' (25), makes for an approachable yet critical read, accessible to non-specialists and students alike. *Straight Nation* shines in its grasp of the nuances of Singaporean governance and the moulding of its citizenry, which it often traces back to Lee Kuan Yew. This includes the founding Prime Minister's affect, his pragmatic worldview and a legacy that outlives him both patrilineally, in the son who succeeded him, and symbolically, in the recurring citation of his speeches and his persistence in public memory. It weaves together a web of seemingly discrete events and statements, finding the connecting threads that make visible the heteronormative infrastructure we may have taken for granted. This strength is also an aporia for critique, since the archive of objects it draws upon to theorize the 'counter-nation' still relies heavily on what is articulated within the 'straight nation', dominated by the ruling political party and the personalities who shape it.

In the introduction, Mano cites Anjali Arondekar's scholarship and cautions us against approaching the archive with the desire for, or guarantee of, recovery (18). Perhaps this hesitation against overreaching justifies Mano's restriction of his archive to political statements, national policies, and the most visible and legible records of queer presence. Beyond the density of this archive, I wonder if it is possible to theorize the 'counter-nation' without defaulting to normative public transcripts. Some possibilities have already been modelled by other Singapore studies scholars, many of whom have been cited in *Straight Nation*, who have sensed otherwise in the formal abstraction and ambiguities of aesthetic production (Leow 2024), read colonial archives along and against their grain (Chua 2020), and conducted embedded ethnographic research from below (Teo 2018). As Arondekar reminds us, it is important to recognize that this work highlights the structural contradictions produced by what is absent from the archive while also exploring alternative methods of critique, in the spirit of Foucault's subjugated knowledges.

Writing about contemporary Singapore also means building on rapidly shifting and unsettled sand. Mano briefly acknowledges the 2023 repeal of Section 377A, in both the introduction and the epilogue, yet how the repeal works in tandem with the constitutional amendment to reinforce a heterosexual definition of marriage remains underarticulated (192). *Straight Nation*'s recency is both its strength and its point of exposure, and the theorizing of the heteronormative logics of governance would have been reinforced by dissecting the Parliamentary debates of 28 and 29 November 2022 that preceded the repeal. Similarly, the gay adoption case (*UKM v. Attorney General*) that serves as the central object of analysis in Chapter 3 has since seen a significant development that the book does not address. Amendments to the Adoption of Children Act, passed on 9 May 2022, made it illegal for same-sex couples to adopt children or employ surrogates, closing the loophole, briefly opened by *UKM v. Attorney General*, that allowed queer individuals to adopt as single parents. This development directly manifests the position that the Minister for Social and Family Development

stated in Parliament in response to the *UKM* case, which Mano documents (106). Read alongside the constitutional amendment, the inclusion of these developments would have scaffolded Mano's argument.

Beyond brief critiques, *Straight Nation* remains an important and necessary contribution to scholarship about sexuality in Singapore. It is a relevant addition to syllabi for Singapore and South East Asia Studies and postcolonial queer theory. It offers a persuasive historicization of Singaporean governance via heteronormative logics shaped by political anxieties of a postcolonial island-nation state in South East Asia. Given the ruling party's intolerance of critique and history of imposing the authoritarian rule of law to suppress dissent (Rajah 2012), scholarship such as Mano's is not only urgent, but is also what Foucault names in his late work, a courageous act of *parrhesia* and the speaking of truth to power. We can only hope that the body of critical and necessary scholarship to which Mano's monograph belongs continues to address this gap. In solidarity with other writers, and over time, such work might form a collective counter-archive that records the complexities of this 'straight nation' omitted from official records.

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