Beyond Singapore Girl
Discourses of Gender and Nation in Singapore

Exploring the gendering of national subjects in Singapore
The branding of Singapore International Airlines with the image of a beautiful, petite and servile 'Oriental' woman dressed in figure-hugging *sarong-kebaya* is one of the world's longest running and most successful advertising campaigns. But this image does not simply advertise a service; it is part of a global and national regime of symbolic constructions of gender that today is seen as outdated and sexist, and bearing little relation to modern Singapore where women have good access to education and increased life choices resulting from engagement in the wage economy. The nation's economic success has been a force for their liberation. One catastrophic consequence of women's changed lives has been the plunge in fertility rates. Singapore has one of the world's lowest despite energetic government campaigns encouraging women to have more babies — and men to be more 'masculine.' The failure of these campaigns and rethinking of the Singapore Girl highlight a key premise of this book: there are limits to the power of discursive constructions of gender in the national interest.

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BEYOND THE SINGAPORE GIRL
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BEYOND the SINGAPORE GIRL
Discourses of Gender and Nation in Singapore

Chris Hudson
For Fergus, Rory and Ciarán Hudson
and for Philip Mears
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Rethinking the Singapore Girl

Is there a feminised symbol of a nation more globally recognisable than the Singapore Girl? The branding of Singapore International Airlines with the image of an Asian woman is one of the world’s longest running and most successful advertising campaigns. The Singapore Girl does not simply advertise a service; she has a particular significance in a global and national system of symbolic constructions. She is the boundary marker for Singapore, an element in a global scopophilic gaze through which Asian women are sexualised for commercial purposes (Mackie, 2000). It has also been argued that she can be seen as the Other of a global modernity through which Asian women are imagined as service providers for a global hypermasculinity (Ling, 1999). The petite and beautiful Singapore women dressed in figure-hugging sarong-kebaya has not failed to incite the erotic imagination of the male consumer. A Qantas chairman once referred to the campaign as ‘massage parlour in the sky ads’ (Dahinten, 2007).

While this well-known image, and the uses to which it is put in strategies of symbolising the nation and advertising the airline, have been highly successful, its image has recently lost some of its glamour. The international advertising agency Batey Ads managed the advertising campaign for some 35 years. In the wake of the decision in early 2007 to change agencies, a debate emerged in the public arena about the appropriateness in the twenty-first century of advertisements depicting female flight attendants as the quintessential object of male fantasies – the subservient Oriental woman. Despite this, the August 2012 edition of Silverkris, the in-flight magazine of Singapore Airlines, featured a story about three generations of Singapore Girls. According to Desiree Koh, the author of the story, the Singapore Girl is still ‘for many, the
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epitome of Asian grace and hospitality’ (Koh, 2012: 44). In the same article, Karen Teo, currently a Singapore Girl herself, was quoted as saying: ‘People look at us differently when we wear our sarong kebayas ... It’s almost like it gives us super powers ...’ (Koh, 2012: 46).

Notwithstanding the perpetuation of the myth of the magic of the feminine mystique and the eternal grace of Asia, the Singapore Girl has appeared to some people as less an Oriental woman ready to serve, and more an imperious shrew. One observer reiterated a continuing desire for a sexualised and servile Oriental female, while censuring the Singapore Girl for her inappropriate gender performance. In the ‘Letters to the Editor’ section of the Straits Times, Singapore’s national English-language daily, Goh Jong Hou writes:

ANA (All Nippon Airways) is definitely a match for SIA, at least from the cabin-crew perspective. It also has young pretty stewardesses with immaculate make-up and poise. However, the similarity stops there once the flight begins.

Where ANA stewardesses answer and communicate with every customer with unpretentious smiles and polite language, SIA stewardesses smile selectively and the choice of language is often inapt, if not utterly impolite. Where ANA stewardesses treat customers as king, SIA stewardesses, for some reason, run the cabin like a school hall in a typical Singapore primary school. You do not instruct customers to raise the window shades, you request. You do not instruct them to raise their foot-rest, you request. You do not instruct them to put the earphones into plastic bags, you request ... In fact, if you discount the SIA stewardesses’ make-up and uniform, they are merely providing the usual Singaporean-style service, albeit with a bit more polish (Goh, 2003).

This rethinking of the Singapore Girl and the possibility of multiple interpretations of the image in global and national discourses of gender highlights a key premise of this book: there are limits to the power of discursive constructions of gender in the national interest. In Singapore, as elsewhere, the meanings attached to gendered imagery are constantly shifting and, in the long term, may become unstable and unsustainable. Competing discourses emerge from this instability – or cause it.

Singapore women have long been constructed as the feminine ‘Other’ of a masculinised nation. John Drysdale’s (1984) book, Singapore.
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*Struggle for Success*, is a standard history of Singapore which documents events in the post-war period. It begins with the following quotation:

To the women of Singapore who bear the heat of the day – and the night; on whom their menfolk wisely lean as a buttress of fortitude and resolution when spirits falter (Drysdale, 1984).

Drysdale's book is almost exclusively devoted to detailing the history of masculine agency in the establishment of the nation. Its description of the struggle for nationhood is consistent with the discursive field established by Lee Kuan Yew (Singapore's first Prime Minister – 1959–1990) in which nationhood is inscribed as the triumphing over inimical forces and the struggling into fragile existence of a people facing a range of adversities. This dedication at the beginning of the book, however, also says much about the discursive construction of gender, and the masculinisation of nationhood as the central ontological frame for national identity. Through this dedication women are read as the long-suffering silent bearers of hardship, located in a feminised world of emotional strength on which masculine action relies. The statement speaks of separate spheres in the making of the nation, the boundaries of which can be imagined through a polarised relationship in which men perform and act, while women wait to support and nurture. Drysdale promotes an essentialised view of women as the Other of the nation, the archetypal helpmate of man who will endure any suffering for their 'menfolk'.

Feminist literature has adequately demonstrated that all nations are gendered (McClintock, 1993, 1995; Sen and Stivens, 1998; Yuval-Davis and Anthias 1989; Yuval-Davis, 1997, 1998). The creation of a field of essentialised gender difference is a part of the ontology of nationhood. It relies on cultural and historically specific textual strategies to create a discourse which can produce appropriately oriented national subjects. The discourse of gender difference in Singapore, however, encounters limits in its attempts to define nationhood and citizenship. While it may be possible to construct women as Other in the narration of the nation, as Drysdale has done, this has not ensured their acquiescence to the standard image of helper in the creation of nation; nor does it indicate that they are powerless to challenge or unsettle this image. In Singapore, a strategy relying on the inscription of gender as an organising principle
for hegemonising masculine power at every level of society has been challenged and contested for decades.

The education of women and the utilisation of their labour resources have resulted in increased life choices for women. The success of Singapore’s development strategies has liberated many women. This has resulted in forms of refusal, particularly of attempts to control fertility and to over-determine the role of women in the family. The realities of women’s increasing independence have given rise to instabilities and discontinuities in the dominant discourse about the place of women in the nation. This has meant that competing discourses of gender, and of gender relations, have emerged, resulting ultimately in a crisis of representation.

The exercise of national power, and the production of national subjects, demands an articulation of forms of racial and sexual difference. The rhetoric of nationhood depends on the establishment of difference, but difference is always unstable. Gender difference is produced through multiple textual strategies, but people can also produce themselves and in turn disrupt the standard imagery. Interventions by women into the textual practices of the state has meant that representations of both masculinity and femininity have been challenged and transfigured. Ultimately, the patriarchal order itself is confronted. This book explores the limits of the discursive construction of gender difference in the maintenance of the modern nation. It also examines forms of counter-practice. I argue that contradiction and ambivalence, rather than fixity, are defining features of gender representations in Singapore. I also explore the ways in which Singapore women have, firstly, contested the gendered narrative of nation and negotiated their way through the demands of the nation and the family on their own terms; and secondly, how, through textual interventions into the dominant discourse they have escaped the gendered narrative and reclaimed the image of the modern Singapore woman.

**Imagining the Nation**

My primary interest in this book is on the discourses of nationhood in which gendered representations appear. The multiplicity of discursive elements operating in various strategic moves does not overlap to form a unified ideological structure; rather, they interlock as a set of varying,
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sometimes competing and contradictory narratives. An integral part of this narrative has been to inscribe the female body as a site of cultural and economic crisis.

It is now axiomatic to say that cultural and national identities are invented, and constructed through discursive means. Benedict Anderson (1991) has also enabled us to think of the nation as an imagined political community. However illusory this might appear to be, it is nonetheless real to the members of the community. It is made real by the discursive strategies used in the production and dissemination of nationalist ideology.

Concerted attempts to invent a national identity and construct a mode of thinking through which the collective could be imagined have been well recognised in Singapore (for example, Chew and Kramer-Dahl, 1999; Ban, Pakir and Tong, 2004), a state whose formative characteristics include 135 years as a British colony, a relatively short history as a collective with an identity, and a manageable-sized multi-ethnic population of around 5.1 million (as of 2012). Of those people 76.8 per cent are ethnic Chinese, 13.9 per cent are Malays, 7.9 per cent are Indian, and the rest fall into the category of Other. A salient feature of the demographic profile of Singapore is the low birth rate. The Total Fertility Rate (TFR) is still amongst the four or five lowest in the world. It was noted in 2011 that the general marriage rate had also declined.

Nations should be distinguished by the style in which they imagine themselves (Anderson, 1991: 6). Singapore can be distinguished from other post-colonial nations not only by its mode of representation of unity, its shared understanding of its national culture and the ways in which it imagines itself, but also by the methods its government employs for representing and manipulating difference. The potential disunity which the Singapore government considers a problem, and which calls for the disciplining of difference, is as much an imaginary construct as its unity.

Eminent Singapore academic Chua Beng Huat has argued that the one overriding feature of Singapore national identity is the characteristic prevalence of discontinuities which reflect changing conditions: ‘nation’ and ‘people’ are relatively shallow and fluid constructs (Chua, 1995: 103–104). There is no constant and consistent unfolding of identity (Chua, 1995: 103). Even if ‘imagined communities’ are given essential-
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ist qualities through ideological manoeuvres, they can be disturbed by the ‘counter-narratives of the nation that continually evoke and erase its totalising boundaries’ (Bhabha, 1994: 149). This book, while using Anderson’s imagined communities as a point of departure, follows the informing premise of Homi Bhabha’s work on the nation, that is, that the nation is an irredeemably plural modern space, in which national unity consists in the continual displacement of the anxiety engendered by this plurality (Bhabha, 1994: 149). Representations of national unity are attempts to overcome the anxiety of confronting uncontrolled difference. The rationality of difference – as a constitutive element in the imagining of national unity – has the power to disrupt the unified field and challenge its boundaries. This process is ineluctable and relentless; a unified field of exchange is a myth. Foucault also made this point, arguing that the social body constituted by the universality of wills is a fantasy and is better understood through the materiality of power over bodies (Foucault, 1980). In Singapore, neither of these can be total.

Bhabha’s work on nationalism has demonstrated that, despite the intention of nationalist discourse to produce the idea of the nation as a continuous narrative of national progress in which everybody participates equally, national unity is inherently impossible (Bhabha, 1990: 1). He and others (Chakrabarty, 1997; Prakash, 1995) have shown that the locality of national culture is neither an uncompromised and cohesive unit within its own boundaries, nor can it maintain a bounded integrity in the face of what is beyond it. Bhabha (1990: 5) remarks that the nation is ‘one of the major structures of ideological ambivalence within the cultural representations of “modernity”’. The nation is characterised by an intransigent pluralism, and its putative unity is forged in the spaces of difference.

Women’s resistance to the power structures of the state and the family in Singapore have generally been non-political and supportive of the state (Lyons, 2000), and Chinese women, in particular, are compliant with state demands in order to secure a middle class life for their families (PuruShotam, 1998). Constance Singam, formerly Vice-President and President of the Singapore Council of Women’s Organizations and President of AWARE (Association of Women for Action and Research), has been a key figure in the Singapore women’s movement for decades. She has urged women to break the silence that surrounds domestic violence, but counsels that an expansion of civil society will only come
about if a middle ground of mutual trust and mutual respect between the
government and the people is achieved (Singam, 2000: 37). AWARE
was formed in 1985 in response to widespread dismay about the ‘The
Great Marriage Debate’ (to be discussed in chapter 3), but has always
adopted a non-confrontational stance in relation to the state and an
explicitly non-political profile (Lyons, 2004: 41-42).

Despite class and political restraints, there are important sites of
refusal that do not rely on the establishment of a middle ground. As
Singapore scholars Brenda Yeoh, Peggy Teo and Shirlena Huang have
suggested: ‘These fragmentary, less-than-completely articulated, and
possibly unintended, struggles written into the interstitial spaces of
everyday life should not be dismissed’ (2002: 3).

Struggles, however, are not written only into the interstitial spaces. A
key location for resistance in Singapore is the public culture, manifested
in the press and other mass media. Such a visible confrontation leaves the
national ideology all the more exposed and vulnerable. What is important
to understand in the case of Singapore is that the limits which may be set
to the discursive representations of subject/citizens do not only come, as
might be expected, from ‘the liminality of the nation, the margins of mo-
dernity’ (Bhabha, 1994: 147), but also from the very centre of Singapore
modernity: the modern, educated, salaried Chinese woman.

Yeoh et al. (2002: 3) argue that disclosure of women’s resistance outside
the macropolitical allows us to appreciate the unstable and shifting nature
of power. Women’s access to the public spaces of discourse in Singapore
has given them an audible, even persistent, voice, and the press has en-
larged the space for the diverse strategies and multiple identifications on
which an emancipatory politics must draw, as Yeoh et al. (2002: 3) have
suggested. While many aspects of private life in Singapore have been
politicised (Clammer, 1998: 175) and the citizenry largely depoliticised
(Chan, 1989), that does not preclude the micropolitical, or the personal,
from invading the macropolitical. In Singapore, the public space of the
state colonises citizens’ lives to an extreme degree, but the private has also
insinuated itself into the public and interrupted its power.

Public Spaces of Discourse
The press is a preeminent site for the production of national subjects,
and it can be both populist and instrumental as Anderson (1991) has ar-
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gued. Since Singapore is a highly regulated society it is difficult to imagine a site for alternative discourse in which the state does not have some authority. Marginal and emergent voices which might appear in obscure interstices out of the range of surveillance, and which might generate real political opposition, find survival difficult. There are a number of cases in which dissidence has been silenced and perpetrators banished. One of the best known examples is the government’s treatment of the late J. B. Jeyaretnam, formerly opposition leader and Secretary General of the Singapore Workers’ Party (see Lydgate, 2003). Chee Soon Juan, secretary general of the Singapore Democratic Party is another cause célèbre where there has been an attempt to silence a dissenting voice. Typical punishments are incarceration, financial ruin and ostracism, often ending in self-imposed exile.

The English language press, of which the Straits Times has the greatest circulation, is a prime site for the emergence of challenges to patriarchal power and the masculinised narrative of nation. The press is tightly controlled and owned by the government in Singapore, adversarial comment or criticism of the government and its policies is not permitted, and dissent is generally dealt with summarily (Lingle, 1996; Lydgate, 2003; Seow, 1998). That does not mean, however, that a diversity of voices is not heard through the mass media and other sites for public discourse such as the universities, seminars, conferences, text books, web sites, blogs, internet chat rooms, and even women’s and men’s magazines. Velayutham’s (2004) study has shown that during the last few years many Singaporeans, particularly the young, have begun to participate in news polls and internet bulletin boards to express their opinions about national identity. There is a plurality of spaces for the negotiation of alternative meanings, and even contestation. While print capitalism might provide the vehicle for imagining a community in Anderson’s terms, there are now far more diverse outlets than one national newspaper and it is possible for any or all of these to offer opportunities for alternative imaginings. At the 2011 general elections there was a 6.46 per cent swing against the ruling People’s Action Party (PAP). With the opposition winning 7 per cent of the seats, this was the PAP’s worst electoral performance since independence. This change in voting patterns has been partly attributed to the emergence of alternative media, particularly political websites such as The Online Citizen and
other internet tools such as Facebook, Twitter and blogs. It is often said of Singapore that it is one of the world's most wired societies. Wendy Bokhorst-Heng (2002) describes newspapers in Singapore as a mass ceremony in the imagining of the nation. What should also be considered is the potential of the mass media to become a site for popular and semi-articulated forms of contestation which do not all appear as political confrontation. While the mass media in Singapore, in particular the press, are invested with the task of maintaining national unity and the production of national subjects through language, and by providing ways to imagine the community, they can be, despite restrictions on what may be said, the sites for these refusals. The media must produce and police national subjectivities but the English language press has also provided sites for the perception of difference and forms of resistance. The imagining of the nation might not, therefore, fulfil the expectations of the state, and the nation may be imagined in unexpected ways. Important sites for articulating not just the struggle for power, but also ultimately the struggle for meaning, are not only in the interstitial spaces of everyday life, but in the wider arena of the national press.

The emergence in these discourses of the paradoxical, the incongruous, the ambivalent and the blatantly contradictory should not be unexpected. It merely demonstrates the fragile nature of representations in Bhabha's irredeemably plural modern space and gives clues to the ways in which they can be contested and to the sites at which the struggle for meaning might take place. As Jolly (1998) has pointed out, blaming mothers for social ills may coexist with conferring on them the power to build race or nation through happy families. Such sites of contradiction can serve as the mobilising points for the assertion of individual, gender and race identity. This book will consider a number of these sites in the discourses of nationhood in Singapore.

A Word on Critical Strategies

Foucault’s (1998: 103) account of sexuality as one of the most instrumental of all discursive formations for the production and reproduction of the conditions of the modern world is an extraordinarily seductive point of departure for an understanding of Singapore. If for no other reason, there is a compelling parallel to be drawn between his repudiation of the conventional view that the increasing repression of sexuality
is a feature of industrial societies (Foucault, 1998: 49), and the apparently almost universal perception of Singapore as 'straight-laced', a place where sex is in hiding and passion is subsumed by economic rationality. In the gendering of the nation for ideological ends, a sexualised narrative has been activated and has been a feature of public life in Singapore since the 1970s. It is through an examination of the uses of a sexualised narrative in the public discourse in Singapore that modes of gender differentiation are brought into sharp focus.

The state in Singapore is fixated on the sexuality of the population, or, to paraphrase Foucault, since independence: [Since the eighteenth century] ‘sex has not ceased to provoke a kind of generalised discursive erethism’ (Foucault, 1998: 32). According to Foucault (1998: 32), these discourses on sex did not multiply in opposition to power, but in the very space and the means of its exercise. Sex was, therefore, an integral aspect of the exercise of power, and the reason ‘our civilization’ has required an ‘immense verbosity’ about sexuality. This sexual imperialism required by civilisation meant that every individual was equipped with the discursive means by which to transform his or her sexuality into a perpetual discourse (Foucault, 1998: 33). In Singapore, nation building since independence has been distinguished by several perpetual discourses, ultimately linked by some means to an overarching discourse of gender and sexuality.

Since sexuality is not the most intractable element, but rather the one endowed with the greatest instrumentality (Foucault, 1998: 103), it can be a useful critical exercise to ask under what specific circumstances and for what discursive purposes it is instrumental and how this would be exercised in a specific nation. Sexuality is not ‘a natural given which power tries to hold in check, or an obscure domain, which knowledge tries gradually to uncover. It is the name that can be given to an historical construct ...’ (Foucault, 1998: 105). It seems, therefore, to be a useful critical move to consider how and for what purpose it is constructed in a given ideological climate.

Foucault (1998: 105) also drew attention to the socialisation of procreative behaviour through the politicisation of fertility, and the medicalisation of reproduction and birth control. While this is the case in Singapore, the socialisation of procreative behaviour might also be conceptualised in terms of the commodification of procreative behaviour.
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Bodies and fertility patterns might have been nationalised, but it is difficult in a sophisticated, well educated and outward-looking consumer society to pathologise the refusal to marry or have children. Consumer choice, as a predominant feature of a mature, globalised economy has confounded couples’ responsibility to procreate for the state. Far more effective as a means of harnessing fertility for a national agenda based on economic rationalisation is to politicise the family and commodify procreative behaviour and link it to other forms of economic behaviour. Romance and sexuality have been commodified at the same time as being politicised.

I draw on readings of Foucault for an insight into the specificities of the mechanisms of power in Singapore, but I also follow a trajectory of selected ideas from Homi Bhabha. In exploring the processes of nation building and the gendered and hierarchised modes of differentiating national subjects, analytic priority should also be given to an understanding of the inherent instability of these modes, and the ways in which representations can be subverted and undermined. In Bhabha's terms, the nation is a space of incomplete signification; narrative authority and therefore regimes of power can never be immune from disruption. Bhabha's analysis of the nation exposes the weaknesses, the cracks in a discursive formation where power can be interrupted and challenged. If we understand the failure of signifiers to adequately secure or guarantee shared and fixed meanings, we can begin to understand the discontinuities in power and the levels of delegitimisation of national authority. Bhabha's (1994) formulation of the conceptual binary ‘the pedagogy and the performative’ is a central critical tool for understanding, on the one hand the ‘historical “objects” of a nationalist pedagogy’, and on the other their ability to perform themselves as ‘subjects of a process of signification that must erase any prior or originary [national] presence’. Put more simply, the modernity of the nation is dependent on these two concepts, but there is a tension between the imposition of historical narrative on people, and what people actually do in their daily lives. Part of the task of understanding the nation is to draw out the ambivalence inherent in the juxtaposition of the epochal against the everyday.

Althusser's 1971 essay on ideology and ideological state apparatuses considers the ways the state interpellates subjects. He uses the now famous example of the police hailing a citizen in the street (‘Hey, you!’)
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to try to explain how a subject comes into being. At the moment of rec-
ognition that the interjection is directed at her or him, the individual is
interpellated as a subject. In Singapore, national subjects are interpellated
through the ritual enunciations which appear in the discourses. 'Better
educated women should have more children,' or 'Men are the main
providers in Asian societies,' are pertinent examples from Singapore
of such discursive interventions in which individuals are produced as
subjects with an ideological history articulating their relationship to the
conditions of existence. But, as Bhabha has argued, one can’t be sure
that the capture of the subject in ideology is total. Both the subject and
the authoritative figure – who appears to control discursive production
and the possible forms of interpellation – are evolving cultural agents;
neither is a fixed entity (Bhabha, 1989: 67). Since the subject is in a
responsive position, the master does not always set the terms. The mo-
ment of resistance or cultural or political survival occurs at the moment
of engagement, produced out of antagonism or struggle. (Bhabha, 1989:
67). There will be no moment of political resolution or comforting nar-
rative, but people will find the means for cultural survival at the level
of the quotidian through the disrupting of the fixity of authority or the
subject. Subjectification, therefore, can never be complete and interpel-
lation, in the way it is intended, can never be assured.

The moment of interpellation, understood as a ritualised form of
utterance in a serial discourse of connected moments, is crucial for an
understanding of the historical development of interpellated and em-
bodied subjects in the narrative of post-colonial Singapore. For Judith
Butler it is by being interpellated within the terms of language that a
certain social existence of the body first becomes possible (Butler, 1997:
5). Interpellation can be creative and positive – it gives the subject life.
The discourse can produce submissive subjects, but it can also call into
being Bhabha’s evolving cultural agents. Butler (1993) also notes that
although Althusser refers to the possibility of ‘bad subjects’ he does not
consider the range of disobedience that such an interpellating law might
produce (Butler, 1993: 127). This book is the story of some evolving
cultural agents which have been called into being by language, and
which some people in Singapore might wish had never been mentioned.
It is also about some aspects of the range of disobediences that such an
interpellation can invoke.
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The representation of difference, a linguistic strategy enabled by the use of certain literary devices, is inscribed in the everyday performance of both the empowered and the less powerful. An important corollary to this proposition – and one which will animate much of the discussion – is Bhabha’s examination of the fragmented, unstable and in particular, ambivalent nature of representations of identity. Reading national subjectivities through his use of the notion of the ambivalence of the Other, we confront the impossibility of establishing a truly unified Other. By extension, therefore, the project to realise a unified, gendered individual or national self is also fraught. The rationality of the Same can be seriously disturbed if the Other, represented in a differentiating order of ‘Otherness’ (Bhabha, 1994: 45), can never be completely excluded or extruded, never completely bounded. Furthermore, there can exist a liminal space in which the authority of the empowered is compromised, and in which escape from the hegemony of difference is possible. I am interested not so much in the liminal spaces of resistance which can be found in Singapore, but in the very public displays of challenge to national and patriarchal power in the national space of the mass media where ‘unified fields of exchange and communication’ (Anderson, 1991: 44) should be possible.

Out of this space can emerge disturbing counter-narratives. As Bhabha, puts it:

Counter-narratives that continually evoke and erase its totalizing boundaries … disturb those ideological manoeuvres through which “imagined communities” are given essentialist identities. For the political unity of the nation consists in the continual displacement of the anxiety of its irredeemably plural modern space … (Bhabha, 1994: 149).

Attempts to mitigate this plurality by excluding the putatively subversive, the extreme, the merely outré, may actually conjure them into existence as dangerous characters in the way that Butler suggests. Ritual enunciation of the threat to the integrity of the nation, especially in Singapore from recalcitrant women, may create a ‘condensed historicity’ which exceeds itself in past and future directions. Women end up being invested with more power due to the ‘effect of prior and future invocations that constitute and escape the instance of utterance’ (Butler, 1997: 3). Chapters 6 and 7 will show the extent to which the ritualised
enunciation of male anxieties has created new categories of women and new ways of imagining the threat they pose to the nation.

In the end a national crisis emerges that is derived from the continuing tension between the pedagogical and the performative, between, on the one hand, the linear, chronological and encompassing narrative of the historical time of the nation which allegedly constitutes national identity, and, on the other, individual interpretations and inferences. People not only act individually, but their affective attachment to the nation and the personal meanings they conjure, while unpredictable, are also features of the whole. The pedagogical is the set of rules governing the representations of nation at a specific historical juncture. It is juxtaposed against the individual, creative utterance of the performative through which people can be, in de Certeau’s terms, the ‘unrecognized producers, poets of their own acts, silent discoverers of their own paths in the jungle of functionalist rationality’ (1984: xviii).

The content of discourses that structure the representations of nation, however, is not as important as its assumed pedagogical power. Where the content changes with each era, in response to the demands of political economy, its pedagogical imperative remains. The mode of representation of the nation and of the ungovernable performance is the product of specific historical conditions of culture and political economy. I am interested in the ways in which individual performative acts or utterances disrupt the narrative and advance ahead of the pedagogy. Far from being retrograde or backward, they can be radical and have the potential to generate change at the level of the pedagogical. As individual acts, they can be disparate signifiers, detached from the meaning of the meta-narrative. Any number of practices, or performances, are possible, and the space of cultural signification that is permitted by these variations ensures that ‘no political ideologies could claim transcendent or metaphysical authority for themselves’ (Bhabha, 1994: 148). The performative is the discursive space of refusal and the nation encompasses an almost insurmountable contrariety at its centre. It must somehow reconcile the appeal to tradition and history to authenticate its own existence, with the need to instil a progress which is in many ways antithetical to tradition as its driving force. Contradictions are difficult to erase, and occur at multiple sites.
Introduction

Rosi Braidotti also asserts the efficacy of counter-narrative or counter-memory for the subversion or evasion of hegemonic and restrictive gender constructions. If feminist writings once focused on motherhood as an oppressive institution conflicting with women’s interests and locking them into a hegemonic social destiny, motherhood can now be understood as a double bind, ‘as one of the pillars of patriarchal domination of women and one of the strongholds of female identity’ (Braidotti, 1994a: 181). This is particularly the case in many Asian societies (Quah, 1997; Ram and Jolly, 1998). While this is a complicating factor and forestalls a categorical condemnation of marriage and motherhood as oppressive institutions, it is, nevertheless, important to consider ways in which women might escape the phallogocentric mode (Braidotti, 1994b). Phallogocentric is a term used to describe the position of the phallus at the centre of the symbolic world. It produces a binary order constituted by a centre in opposition to an arrangement of pejorative Others, defined by their negative difference. It denotes the masculine as a subject position within the symbolic to whom the power of the speaking position is allocated. My concern is with the ways in which the peripheral position finds a voice in the symbolic order.

The Limits of Narrative Control

In the face of a declining population, the state in Singapore becomes increasingly fixated on the management of fertility. Women who insist on controlling their own fertility to the point of rejecting motherhood altogether actually arrogate to themselves some power in defiance of this national obsession. They find themselves not in a field of unidirectional surveillance as described by Foucault, but in a field of mutual recognition (Dews, 1987). The seer and the seen are not so clearly separated. Women refusing motherhood are so powerful in Singapore in the face of a state that is powerless to coerce them that the government has had to bribe them to have children.

It appears that the state becomes less able to maintain its own narrative control as time passes. Representations of both masculinity and femininity are challenged and transfigured. Ultimately, the patriarchal order itself is confronted. The forms of counter-discourses that I explore demonstrate that contradiction and ambivalence are defining features of these representations.
Finally, the purpose of this book is to understand the ways in which gender representations are constructed and deployed in the service of reproducing the nation, and the power relations that underlie them. Representations change over time, depending on a variety of factors, including the changing nature of perceived threats to national unity. However powerful these might be, they are increasingly difficult to sustain in a world in which the labour of women is crucial to the national economy, and in which women make independent decisions. This book is, therefore, a study of modes of gender differentiation, of the political ends for which they might be used, and of the proliferation of the means of contesting and compromising gender representations.

The national narrative is suffused with ‘transgressive boundaries and interruptive interiority’ (Bhabha, 1990: 5). This book will study the nation through its narrative address, as Bhabha suggests it should be if we are to understand not just the ideological apparatus of state power, but also ‘the easily obscured but highly significant recesses of the national culture from which alternative constituencies of people and oppositional analytical capacities may emerge’ (Bhabha, 1990: 3).

From the innumerable discursive moments which have occurred in Singapore’s history, I have selected three interrelated episodes that demonstrate my point about gendered discourses, and disclose the failure of attempts to establish a hegemonic gendered ontology of nation. These are: reproduction and the production of the nation state (chapters 1 and 2); the link between intimacy and consumption in the local and global economy (chapters 3 and 4); and the interruption of traditional gender roles and nostalgia for the traditional Asian woman (chapters 5 and 6). Chapter 7 concludes this book by discussing the loss of narrative authority and the unsettling of masculinity. An examination of these discursive events reveals an increasing sexualisation of the narrative of nation, and a multiplying of anxious male responses to women’s refusal of gender expectations. These overlapping events, while not strictly speaking chronological, nevertheless suggest the coincidence in historical development of an increasingly sophisticated globalised economy with the proliferation of women’s modes of refusal and the limits of a gendered discourse of nation.
CHAPTER ONE

Narrating the Nation

Masculine Nation

In this chapter I want to explore representations of the nation which have emerged in public discourses in Singapore since independence. Two prominent and enduring discursive objects have helped establish the pedagogy of nation. They are: the primacy of a hyper-rationalised industrial modernity on the one hand; and on the other the family, deployed in the ‘nation-as-family’ trope. This discursive milieu incorporates race and gender as inflections of the national ‘essence’, so that the nation is imagined as both masculinised and sini-cised. A number of perpetual discourses circulate with high frequency to make such an imaginary possible. These include discourses of fear, the family as the only viable social arrangement within the nation state, and the importance of conformity. It is in this context that sexualised gender difference as a primary feature of the narrative of Singapore can be understood.

From the outset, the national narrative of Singapore was a discourse gendered as masculine. On 13 July 1966, not long after the final dissolution of the union of Singapore and Malaysia, Lee Kuan Yew1 delivered a speech at the Political Study Centre in Singapore. It was reported in the weekly current affairs journal, The Mirror, that Mr. Lee believed that Singapore’s best chance of survival as an independent nation lay in producing a tightly-organised society. The magazine quoted him as saying:

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1 Lee Kuan Yew was the founding Prime Minister of Singapore. He served from 3 June 1959 until 28 November 1990 as Prime Minister; from 28 November 1990 until 12 August 2004 as Senior Minister; and from 12 August 2004 until 21 May 2011 as Minister Mentor. He announced his retirement when the results of the 7 May 2011 General Election became known. He was, he said, stepping down to make way for the younger generation. His son, Lee Hsien Loong, has been Prime Minister since 2004. It would be difficult to overestimate the influence Lee Kuan Yew has had on Singapore.
Many other small societies like ours have survived, because they are better organised ... Societies like ours have no fat to spare. They are either lean and healthy, or they die ... our best chances lie in a very tightly-organised society. There is no other way ... If you do not have an army, you will always be exposed to perils one of these days when bases are run down and many problems arise ...

... those found in our situation, with higher standards of life in a tightly-organised economic community like Singapore who do not at the same time acquire the capacity to stand up for themselves soon, on their own if needs be, must perish ... it is as simple as that ... if we cannot, if we develop a 'soft society', then we cannot survive ... What is required is a rugged, resolute, highly trained, highly-disciplined community. This is the lesson which other nations have learnt, and which I hope we will learn in time (Lee, 1966).

Lee's modernising narrative celebrates the nation state even though he has referred to a 'society' a 'community', and 'societies like ours', by which he means a nation constructed from a former European colony, made up almost entirely of diasporic peoples. The masculine qualities of ruggedness, discipline, the ability to stand up for oneself, and the commitment to a society not considered 'soft', which Lee Kuan Yew wants to cultivate, are resonant of the nineteenth century masculinities promoted by Britain as constitutive of the greatness of the British Empire (Beynon, 2002; Cooper and Stoler, 1997).

Lee has always made it known that he subscribes to the distinction between 'hard' cultures and 'soft' cultures, that 'culture is destiny' (Zakaria, 1994) and that 'genes are destiny' (Barr, 1999). He subscribes to a Lamarckian view of evolution, and an understanding of eugenics and dysgenics (Barr, 1999) reminiscent of nineteenth-century thinking. He has maintained his belief in the 'X factor' (Barr, 2000: 185; Han et al. 1998: 171–191), an inexpressible essence to be found in East Asian cultures which makes them tough, resilient and economically successful. He has never hidden his admiration for the Japanese, despite their record of war-time atrocities in Singapore, nor his contempt for the 'soft' cultures of both Europe and Asia. While travelling around Europe in his days as a student at Cambridge, he noted the difference even in European cultures. As he listened to the loudspeakers at the airports in Germany announcing 'Achtung! Achtung!', he compared the Germans with the British: 'These were people who were defeated and completely
destroyed and they were rebuilding. I could sense the goal, the dynamism. Then Britain – well, they were languid, gentlemanly. With welfare, the British workers were no longer striving … So one was looking for a soft life, the other was rebuilding and pushing’ (Han, Fernandez and Tan, 1998: 173).

Lee provided what has become a famous illustration of this X factor. In a speech at the University of Singapore on 27 December 1967, he is reported to have regaled his audience with this parable:

Three women were brought to the Singapore general hospital, each in the same condition and each needing a blood transfusion. The first, a Southeast Asian was given the transfusion but died a few hours later. The second, a South Asian was also given a transfusion, but died a few days later. The third, an East Asian, was given a transfusion and survived. That is the X factor in development (cited in Barr, 2000: 185).

Lee was confident that Singapore was a ‘hard’ society. Noting the prevalence of intelligence and the X factor among the Chinese dialect groups in Singapore, he was quoted as saying:

Look at the number of smart Teochews there are [in cabinet] … just count them … how do you explain that? For that matter, the Hakkas consider themselves very special too. They are tough, resourceful … You also have more Hakkas in the cabinet than represented in the population. They are supposed to be harder working, tougher and therefore higher-achievers. So there are differences even within races (cited in Han et al. 1998: 173).

It is apparent from his many speeches and public statements that Lee believes the Malays to be one of those groups afflicted with a ‘soft’ culture. Barr reports that people who were present when Lee used the example of the women who survived the blood transfusion, cited above, were in little doubt that the Southeast Asian was a Malay, or another of the indigenous groups of the archipelago, the South Asian was an Indian and the East Asian was Chinese (Barr, 1999). It was Chinese society, then, in which Lee expressed his confidence when he described Singapore as ‘hardy’:

This is what is required of this community: all the time, that push, that thrust to counter the natural sluggishness which this climate tends to build into our physical system … We can build industries. We have what sociologists call a highly ‘achievement-oriented’ type of society … Not
all societies have this. In many societies they are quite happy just to sit down under the banyan tree and contemplate their navel. So when there is a famine they just die quietly. Here they will not die quietly … there is nothing we cannot solve, given a little time … A good, striving, hardy people cannot be kept down (Lee Kuan Yew, speech at joint Alexandra and Queenstown community centres’ National Day celebrations, 15 August 1967, cited in Han et al. 1998: 176).

The rulers of Singapore have always associated masculinity with the historical and political, the rational, and the progressive time of national history. Lee’s view of history and culture has consistently been imbued with a commitment to instrumental rationality, and a belief that culture could be manipulated, and citizens constructed as modern subjects, or as Clammer has put it, ‘to create identity by fiat’ (1998: 259). Lee was unequivocal about the rationale for its existence, its invention as a political entity, and the need for narrative control to secure the fragile state:

If [Singapore] breaks up, it will never come back. It’s man-made, it’s very contrived to fit the needs of the modern world and it has to be amended all the time as the needs change. The moment it no longer fulfils that role, it will begin to decline. I would put it at one chance in five (Lee, cited in Barr 2000).

Chua’s analysis has shown the extent to which the management of Singapore has been guided by a political philosophy of pragmatism (1995). It has also been guided by a sense of masculine dynamism. One of the most telling comments in this regard came from Goh Keng Swee, appointed Minister of Finance by Lee Kuan Yew in 1959, and well known as ‘the architect of Singapore’s economic success’. In a forum on ‘Qualities Required for the 1970s’ he described the subject-citizen of Singapore:

The Singaporean … is a busy and active person. He is happiest when he is engaged in doing something. Not being of a philosophical bent, he seldom pauses for a moment to reflect whether there is any point in doing it. Instead, he applies himself with zest and energy, hoping to improve his skill or knowledge or to make money or whatever may be the purpose.

It is this trait that makes the Singaporean a highly competitive and individualistic person. This is at once a source of strength and weakness. On the one hand, he is a sturdy, resourceful and self-reliant person, excellent material for promoting economic growth. It is only necessary to
give him opportunities to find employment or do business, and he can look after himself ... In inculcating group loyalties or group consciousness, we have avoided trying to stifle or inhibit the sturdy individualism which is so strong a part of the Singaporean’s character (Goh, 1972).

The Singaporean’s masculine agency extends to a role in the determination of history. Lee saw himself as an agent in the unfolding of the historical: ‘We must not go against what is historically inevitable. This does not mean that we passively wait for history to unfold itself. We must actively strive to accelerate the process of history’ (Lee, 1960, cited in Barr, 2000: 49).

At the Malaysian Solidarity Convention, held on 6 June 1965 to debate the eventual collapse of the union with Malaya, Lee Kuan Yew articulated his contempt for the Other of historical process. In a statement reminiscent of Cynthia Enloe’s (1989: 44) understanding of nationalism as springing from ‘masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation and masculinized hope’ Lee said:

They want us out, you know. You see the way they phrase it. ['Kalau anak jantan, chakap sekarang mahu keluar Malaysia', chakap Dato Albar. ‘Apa sebab? Takut saya anak perempuan-kah’?] [If you are a man, say now that you want to get out of Malaysia, said Dato Albar. Why? Are you afraid that I am a woman?] (cited in Rodriguez, 2003: 107)

In 1966, one year after Singapore was expelled from the union with Malaysia, and Singapore was compelled to establish itself as a sovereign nation with its own narrative, Lee Kuan Yew was asked about his opinion on education in Singapore. He was unambiguous about the role he saw for the educated, male elite to engage with history and determine the constitution of nation. He imagines the history of nations as masculine, and something that can be produced at will. On 29 August 1966 he told a meeting of school principals:

I would like first, at the very top of society, to rear a generation that has all the qualities needed to lead and give the inspiration, the drive to make it succeed. This would be your elite ...

What is the ideal product? The ideal product is the student, the university graduate who is strong, robust, rugged, and with tremendous qualities of stamina, endurance and, at the same time, with great intellectual discipline and, most important of all, humility and love for his...
community; a readiness to serve whether God or king or country or, if you like, just his community.

Every society produces this type or they try to. The British have special schools for them. They send them to Eton or Harrow and a few very exclusive private schools which they call ‘public schools’, then they send them to Oxford or Cambridge. They have legends that the Battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton.

The Australians are trying to do it. Recently, Prince Charles went to this school at Geelong. This is their equivalent where they try to build the complete Australian with great vitality, outdoor life, resourcefulness. Even caught in the bush he will learn how to survive, and he will have the qualities of discipline and heart. That is your ideal …

We should try to do that. Not every boy is equal in his endowments in either physical stamina or mental capacity or character. But you want to try and get all those with the potential to blossom forth. That is your spearhead in your society. On them depends the pace of progress (cited in Han et al. 1998: 393–394).

Holden’s (2001: 405) examination of Lee Kuan Yew’s autobiography, *The Singapore Story*, points out that its salient feature is the covert logic of Singapore nationhood and citizenship, depicted through a representative life. Lee draws parallels between the governing of the city-state and the governing of the male body through a certain style of masculinity (Holden, 2001: 402). The production of the ‘Enlightenment self’ (Holden, 2001: 407) and the nation are carried out simultaneously through a disciplined, gendered modernity. Lee’s book offers an exemplary of the ideal citizen: an autonomous, self-directed, masculine, individual citizen through which body, text and nation can be connected. For Holden, Lee’s autobiography ‘serves as a portable machine for the production of [such] national subjects’ (2001: 402).

Women are also expected to cultivate themselves, as national and family subjects. In an interview with journalist Fareed Zakaria, Lee made it clear that women should cultivate themselves within the family:

We are also caught in the same social problems of change when we educate our women and they become independent financially and no longer need to put up with unhappy marriages. But there is grave disquiet when we break away from tested norms, and the tested norm is the family unit. It is the building brick of society.
Narrating the Nation

There is a little Chinese aphorism which encapsulates this idea: *Xiushen qijia zhiguo pingtianxia*. *Xiushen* means look after yourself, cultivate yourself, do everything to make yourself useful; *Qijia*, look after the family; *Zhiguo*, look after your country; *Pingtianxia*, all is peaceful under heaven. We have a whole people immersed in these beliefs. My granddaughter has the name Xiu-qi. My son picked out the first two words, instructing his daughter to cultivate herself and look after her family. It is the basic concept of our civilization. Governments will come, governments will go, but this endures. We start with self-reliance … (Zakaria, 1994).

Lee has acknowledged changes in the social conditions of women, but nevertheless wants to sustain the belief that the public world of the nation relies on the compliance of women in the domestic sphere. The maintenance of Confucian patriarchal power is crucial for the family and the nation. Lee’s statement brings into sharp focus Anne McClintock’s argument that nationalism must manage its anomalous relation to time as a natural relation to gender, in which women are represented as atavistic while men represent the progressive agent of national modernity (1995: 359). While this is now largely unsustainable, I suggest that attempts to control the sexual and procreative behaviour of women spring from the perceived importance of recreating ‘the continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical’ (Bhabha, 1994: 145–146) through the Chinese family. The expectations that women will continue the reproduction of the culture, while at the same time participate in the national economy, inevitably activates ‘the repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative’ (Bhabha, 1994: 145–146). It is this point in the ‘conceptual ambivalence of modern society’ that becomes the site of *writing the nation* (Bhabha, 1994: 145–146).

Creating Modern Subjects

Since 1965 Singapore has transformed itself from a remnant of nineteenth-century European colonialist policies and practices to a sovereign independent state with a national identity and a recognisable and identifiable set of national values. Much of the critical literature on the economic, cultural and political development of Singapore identifies three salient features of which it is constituted: it is a product of the globalising and integrating economic and cultural forces which had begun in Europe centuries before; since independence, it has demon-
strated spectacular and enviable economic success; and it functions within the framework of an instrumental rationality, a system which is remorselessly driven and has, some people have argued, ‘treated people like units of production rather than as human beings’ (Carey, cited in Tremewan, 1994: ix). Lee Kuan Yew famously once referred to the people of Singapore as ‘digits’ and their inherited attributes as ‘hardware’ to be ‘programmed’ with software in the form of ideology, education and culture (Heng and Devan, 1995).

Phases in the development of Singapore can be understood firstly in light of the demands of nineteenth-century European industrial expansion, and, in the mid-to-late twentieth century, with reference to the exigencies of internationalising capitalist forces and the position of the nation state within that system. Singapore has been driven by the logic of developmentalism. Developmental capitalism in Singapore has meant assuring foreign investors of a docile and de-politicised workforce and control of the population in order to fulfil the development agenda, set by Western imperatives and the need for foreign capital. One observer has referred to this form of polity as ‘authoritarian capitalism’ (Lingle, 1996). Cherian George (2000: 17) prefers to think of it as the ‘Air-conditioned Nation – a society with a unique blend of comfort and central control’. Others see it as a mode of pragmatism, in which all aspects of social life are viewed as possible resources that can be instrumentally harvested (Lazar, 2001: 61); a ‘space where accumulation becomes the very stuff of life, through persuading the population to become its own prime asset – a kind of people mine … of reflexive knowledgeability (Thrift and Olds, 2005: 94).

The decline of the Fordist production model and the emergence of global financial, media, entertainment, information and communication technology industries (amongst others) has resulted in the development of an economy now more accurately characterised as post-industrial. These global economic forces have reconfigured and restructured the local and precipitated Singapore’s agenda to become a ‘Global City’. Since the 1990s a crucial part of the strategy to intensify global links and secure its status as a global city has had several strands relating to the development of cultural capital. Firstly, in order to attract global elites and creative classes to the city-state it has attempted to dispel the nation’s enduring reputation for being a boring, straight-laced nation of
overly disciplined workaholics, which has meant reinscribing Singapore as exciting, innovative and creative – a space of global cosmopolitanism. Secondly, it has intensified the development of a sophisticated symbolic economy in which culture is commodified and cultural capital is accumulated. Thirdly, it has helped to fulfil the need to remake Singapore as an exciting place where citizens would want to stay in order to counter the substantial emigration problem and brain drain that it has experienced. These agendas converge in the reinvention of Singapore as a ‘Global City for the Arts’. By the turn of the twenty-first century it had moved further towards becoming an e-commerce hub, an educational centre for international institutions, a regional medical centre, a science and innovation hub, a centre for research and development, and a tourism capital. ‘Global City for the Arts’ is one strategy for intensifying global connections and creating a symbolic economy.

Singapore’s economic growth since independence, regularly pointed out by observers, has been spectacular. It was known as one of the ‘Four Little Dragons’ of the East Asian economic boom until that epithet fell into disuse after the Asian financial crisis of 1997. Its rapid rise to success is usually attributed, in part, to a hard-working pragmatic populace which has been encouraged to think of Singapore as a bastion of Confucian values in Southeast Asia (Wong, 1996). This transformation was founded on the discursive construction of a sense of national purpose, a group identity in which the needs of the individual and the ethnic group are subsumed and erased for the sake of the ideals of the nation. Singapore had to invent a national identity, one which could be relied upon to be flexible enough to respond quickly and decisively to the constraints imposed by the international capitalist economy, and to the opportunities provided by it. This meant, for Lee Kuan Yew and the PAP, modifying cultural practices which might hinder development. Modern subjectivities had to be created; Singapore needed citizens with appropriate attitudes to labour and consumption, both essential requirements of a successful industrial capitalist economy. Barr (2000) describes the changes wrought by Lee and the PAP, which came to power in June 1959, as nothing short of a cultural revolution – the ‘creation of a new man’, as one observer, Chan Heng Chee, called it (cited in Barr, 2000: 78). In a speech to the Principals of Schools in 1966, Lee outlined his beliefs in compelling change – and his methods:
Singapore responds to two things ... it is a new society, it does not respond as much to sentiments. It can respond to reason, but only very few people can reason things out. But they respond to immediate incentives and deterrents, the carrot and the stick. Many understand that very well ... weed out those who are really misfits (non-performers) ... out they go. It is cruel. A society has the right to protect itself against this sort of situation, and give rewards to people who really make the grade (cited in Rajakru, 1996: 6).

In 1994, even after he had relinquished his position as Prime Minister to become Senior Minister, Lee was still arguing that coercion was a valid and necessary means of social control. He linked this to the fact that Singapore is a ‘Chinese society’:

Nobody doubts that if you take me on, I will put on my knuckle-dusters and catch you in a cul-de-sac ... Anybody who decides to take me on needs to put on knuckle-dusters. If you think you can hurt me more than I can hurt you, try. There is no other way you can govern a Chinese society (cited in Han et al. 1998: 126).

Not long after he became the first Prime Minister of Singapore, Lee summed up the central dynamic of the recently decolonised state and his expectations that the inhabitants would be transformed into modern citizens, and would demonstrate their relationship to modernity through modifying their daily practices. They would develop appropriate tastes and consumption patterns for the modern world, and their labour practices would be accordingly modified to fulfil the promise of accumulation held out by modernity. In a speech at the Foreign Correspondents Association Dinner in Tokyo on 21 March 1967, he said:

I think you must have something in you to be a ‘have’ nation. You must want. That is the crucial thing. Before you have, you must want to have. And to want to have means to be able first, to perceive what it is you want; secondly, to discipline and organise yourself in order to possess the things you want – the industrial sinews of our modern economic base; and thirdly, the grit and the stamina, which means cultural mutations in the way of life of large parts of the tropical areas of the world where the human being has never found it necessary to work in the summer, harvest before the autumn, and save it up for the winter (cited in Han et al. 1998: 396).

Expectations of citizens as national subjects were centred on the development of a sense of the future, a transformation of traditionalism,
a developmentalist ideology and a desire for development so great that citizens would be prepared to pay the cost, however high. A goal-oriented meritocratic society was the framework within which a disciplined workforce would acquiesce to the economic imperatives of Singapore’s agenda to become a ‘Global City’.

The narrative of Singapore’s development throughout the 1960s, 1970s and into the 1980s was to promote the primacy of industrial modernity. Wee (1993: 717–718) has argued that Singapore functioned as a sort of transnational formation using the organisational form of the nation state, in which the modern European model of the nation state was indigenised to fit the PAP’s own purposes. From independence on, a nation was created in which an internal colonisation created subjectivities which are consistent with the paradigms of industrial modernity and state corporatism. In his study of Singapore in the period 1965–1967 Chan Heng Chee notes:

The most striking thing about PAP thinking ... is the party’s unshaken belief that the survival of Singapore will depend on the willingness and ability of the Singapore citizen to adopt a new set of attitudes, a new set of values, and a new set of perspectives; in short, on the creation of a new man (cited in Barr, 2000: 78).

These attitudes were not attributed equally to all citizens; not all could meet the requirements of Lee Kuan Yew’s ‘Chinese society’. The Malays, who make up only around 14 per cent of the population, are created as a problematic minority. They are, as Clammer (1998: 220) says, the Other within. Representations used by the British to legitimise a colonial division of labour in which the Malays were promoted as lazy, incapable of change and their culture seen as an impediment to modernisation and progress were available to the PAP and others from independence. These representations could easily be inserted into the discourse generated by a developmentalist ideology which fetishised capital accumulation in a meritocracy. Not everybody could have the same access to success when merit was determined by narrow criteria related almost exclusively to status and money. Difference emerged as ‘the Malay problem.’ The interpretation of cultural practices which reinvented Malays as not only lazy and profligate but also as having a culturally determined inability to compete in business, as lacking in ambition, and as still dreaming of the kampong and having no interest in money
became ideological orthodoxy. One feature article in the *Straits Times* describes a visit to a predominantly Malay neighbourhood, where, the writer reports, they found that the Malays ‘lazed like lizards in the sun’ (cited in Li, 1989: 173). Orthodoxy would have it that the Malays suffer from ‘cultural weakness’, born of centuries of unchanging cultural and religious practices.

Entrepreneurship as a form of economic activity has become an important ethnic marker distinguishing Malays from Chinese (Li, 1989: 137). Chinese business practices become privileged above all other forms of economic activity and the social arrangements associated with them are deemed to be superior (Li, 1989: 166). The image of the Malays as lazy is reinforced by narrowly defining diligence, progress and productivity as determined only by entrepreneurship, leaving the impression that while the Southeast Asian Chinese is ‘economic man’ the Malay is not (Li, 1989: 166). Goh Keng Swee, former deputy Prime Minister, made this statement in which both the Malays and the Chinese are constructed as stereotypes and cultural differences are racialised:

In the ethos of Malay society, the unrelenting pursuit of an objective, like the accumulation of wealth, is not held in high esteem. In fact it is condemned ... And yet without this passion for wealth generating a fanatical determination to accumulate, is it possible for the Malays to achieve the economic success of the Chinese? (cited in Li, 1989: 180).

Asked if he thought there was a possibility for change, Ong Teng Cheong, a pre-eminent representative of the PAP, essentialised ethnic difference and relegated the Malays to a problematised position in the nation. He was quoted as saying:

Undoubtedly Singapore Malays have changed to a degree. They are able to acquire certain skills, become technicians. In the universities however, the Malays who have been doing well and then going on to professional or higher levels of public service have tended to be only part Malay. Many of them are part-Indian or part-Arab (cited in Vasil, 1995:89).

Since the Malays are allegedly incapable of normative national behaviour, by dint of their cultural weakness and tendency to turn to proletarian labour to make a living, they are excluded from the inner domain of the national culture. In Bhabha’s terms, the cultural and political effects of the liminality of the nation finds them on the margins
of modernity (Bhabha, 1994: 147). This has important implications for modes of representation of sexuality and gender differences as part of the national agenda.

The national ideology, first articulated in the ‘White Paper’ or ‘Shared Values’ document which appeared in 1991, embodies a basically Chinese cultural bias (Clammer 1993). This signified a shift in emphasis in the management of race. Emboldened by the ‘Confucian Capitalism’ thesis which had appeared in Western business and economic literature to explain the rise of the East Asian economies (Berger and Hsiao, 1988), the government moved to resinicise Singapore by promoting Confucian morality in schools and enlisting foreign experts on Confucianism to act as advisers. Confucianism was never associated with rural China, only with the dynamic economies of East Asia. Goh Chok Tong (then Prime Minister-in-waiting) observed in one speech to the nation in 1988: ‘Like Japan and Korea, Singapore is a high-performance country because we share the same cultural base as the other successful East Asians, that is, Confucian ethics’ (cited in Chua, 1995: 31–32).

The Chinese, it appears, identify more closely with other neo-Confucian capitalist nations than they do with the Islamic minority in Singapore. The language of Confucianism, with its emphasis on self-discipline, hard work, filial responsibility and unquestioning respect for authority, was mobilised to articulate the cultural dimension of the nation. Lee was seen as the epitome of the Confucian Gentleman. Goh Chok Tong hailed him as ‘a modern Confucius’ and he has been called ‘part Confucius, part Calvin’ (Plott, 2000). Many Singaporeans would argue that he is still the spiritual leader of the nation. The effect was to centralise Chinese culture as the practical and ideological basis of Singapore’s success, and to locate its spiritual centre in national cultures external to Singapore. Vasil writes of the allegedly intrinsic attributes of the Chinese as if they were an uncontested given, resulting from their racial heritage – as if their ascendancy was ‘natural’:

Much of the economic expansion and growth in the country since ... 1965 has resulted from the special entrepreneurship, business acumen, management skills and the ability to absorb new ideas of the Chinese. It is only natural for the Chinese then to view Singapore more and more as being their [author’s emphasis] country and to want to assert themselves as the dominant majority. Inevitably, in the long run,
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Singapore’s Chineseness is bound to show itself more and more (Vasil, 1995:4).

That the PAP, Lee and his successors – Goh Chok Tong, followed by the current Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew’s son, Lee Hsien Loong – have created a citizenry equipped for success in industrial modernity, and more recently, a form of global consumer modernity is beyond dispute. Kenneth Paul Tan has no doubt that it was precisely the focus on economics that turned Singaporeans into *kiasu* workaholics who have no time for relationships and family (Tan, 2003: 417). *Kiasu* is a Hokkien term commonly used to describe Singaporeans’ fear of losing out to others, or fear of not being the best. Tan points out that *kiasu* also connotes ‘self-centredness, money-mindedness, greed, inconsideration and crass behaviour’ (2003: 408). One of the most common perceptions of Singaporeans is that they are driven only by the desire for accumulation, known colloquially as the ‘5 Cs’. Frommer’s ‘cultural guide’ to Singapore claims:

Older folks are becoming frustrated by younger generations who discard traditions in their pursuit of ‘The 5 Cs’ – career, condo, car, credit card, and cash ... Although many lament the loss of the good old days, most are willing to sacrifice a little tradition to be Southeast Asia’s most stable and wealthy country (*Frommer’s Southeast Asia, 2003*).

Goh Chok Tong acknowledged that the construction of the ‘New Singaporean’ as a pragmatic, ambitious, driven subject had perhaps gone too far and created a less than attractive national identity. In his 2001 National Day Rally speech, entitled ‘New Singapore’ he said:

We can also be more gracious and considerate, at home and in other countries. For example, some Johoreans have described Chinese Singaporeans as ‘hao lian’ or ‘show-offs’. They claim that Singaporeans love to speed and beat traffic lights when in Malaysia; behave as if they are ‘ABC’ or ‘American-born Chinese’; and love to shout ‘very cheap, very cheap!’ while shopping. I would add that we are too ‘kiasu’. For example, at buffets, we pile oysters on our plates as high as Mount Everest. I think our less than gracious behaviour is because we have become affluent too quickly. Our social graces have not kept pace with our material progress. Let us be humble, courteous, and gracious in our behaviour and attitude. Let us make friends with our neighbours, especially Johoreans (*Singapore Government, 2001*).
Narrating the Nation

Despite this critical view, however, the absence of attitudes required for unfaltering economic development and accumulation is considered aberrant. The *Washington Post* reported the comments of one of Singapore's most eminent sociologists which confirm this:

... noted Chua Beng Huat, a sociology professor at the National University of Singapore. 'One of the most radical things you can do in Singapore is be contented with your life,' he said. 'That means you won't compete like hell for the next dollar. The ability of the government to maintain its competitive edge economically will collapse.'

So, he said, people have been conditioned to excel. In a state known for banning chewing gum (recently relaxed to exclude medicinal gum) and spitting in public, people have bought into the work ethic almost as a national duty (Nakashima, 2004).

Constance Singam cites the 1997 MasterCard International Survey which found that 71 per cent of Singaporeans desire to make as much money as they can during their lifetime (Singam, 2000: 33). And it is not only individuals who are *kiasu*; the nation itself is driven by the same ethos. Using the metaphor of the race, in both the title and the content, *The Next Lap* – a social and political manifesto for the Goh Chok Tong regime and the economic agenda for the decade of the 1990s – reiterated the urgency and the need to beat others: 'We live in a world that is ever-changing. External events can shake us as they have in the past. Nothing is certain. We have to keep trying to stay ahead in the race of nations' (Singapore Government, 1991a).

The multicultural, multiracial *mélange* of races that made up the population of Singapore precluded a national identity predicated on a single ethnic or racial identity. Lee and his colleagues in the PAP, according to Wee (1993: 717), resolved to make industrial modernity the meta-narrative which would frame Singapore's national identity. Transforming it from a colony to a 'Global City' would mean renovating the category of 'national' so that difference could be 'contained and to some extent homogenised for the leap into modernity' (Wee, 1993: 717). Every citizen over 16 years in Singapore is daily reminded of the logic of difference contained within the binary same/different since all state identity cards declare the ethnicity of every person. While nobody in Singapore is allowed to forget why he or she is *essentially* different from others, citizens are also asked to subsume difference under the
nation and commit in a concerted effort to national economic progress. According to Chua, industrialisation has meant not just a technological and economic phenomenon, but also a demand for something else: ‘... that is, the emergence of a new social order characterised by instrumental rationality and a population with strong achievement motivation. Cultural development, in other words, had to abide by the dictates of the logic of the economy’ (1995: 105).

Selvaraj Velayutham has argued that this has been so successful that many Singaporeans’ sense of national identity is imagined through the materiality and the realities of social modernity (Velayutham, 2004: 3). His study indicates that there is a profound absence of affect in feelings about the nation, and a pronounced sense of pragmatism. What he found was ‘a materialist form of national expression ... very different from traditional modes of nationalism ...’ (Velayutham, 2004: 6). The material and structural aspects of Singapore life, such as the use of English, the education system, the shopping and eating, and so on, are what being Singaporean means and what distinguishes Singapore from other nations (Velayutham, 2004: 3). His survey also indicates a prevalent sense of confusion about what citizens should feel about the nation. One of his respondents has this to say:

I am in PARADISE [original emphasis] when our leaders work hard to turn around the economy, put food on every family’s table, provide better jobs for the young graduates, better and cheaper HDB2 housing, cleaner environment for all to live in and all Singaporeans having a bright positive future (Velayutham, 2004: 9).

Singapore writer Catherine Lim also identified the lack of affect in the nationalism of Singapore and its consequences:

It is no secret that while the PAP Government has inspired in the people much respect for its efficiency and much gratitude for the good life as a result of this efficiency, there is very little in the way of affectionate regard. It is also no secret that the Government is not much bothered by this attitude ... The Great Affective Divide has created a model of government-people relationship that must be unique in the world: solid, unbreakable unity of purpose and commitment on the economic plane, but a serious bifurcation at the emotive level, resulting in all kinds of anomalies and incongruities (Lim, 1995a).

2 Housing Development Board, the government organisation which provides housing for the majority of Singapore's population.
Some citizens have expressed deep ambivalence. Velayutham comments on a report that appeared in the *Straits Times* on 21 February 2001 about Singaporeans’ incoherent sense of identity in a globalising world. The report quotes Frederick Wong – ‘a net surfing youth plugged into global culture’ – as saying: ‘I can’t identify something that is unique about Singapore … I can’t tell a friend that I’m proud of Singapore just for our 10 per cent growth’ (cited in Velayutham, 2003: 6). In the same report, 23-year-old Noel Tan could not adequately describe the essence of Singapore. He said: ‘… we want to be proud of being Singapore, but we’re not sure what to be proud about’ (cited in Velayutham, 2003: 6). Aaron Koh (2005) has pointed out that conceptually it is a challenge to pin down what Singapore’s national identity is.

There is little doubt that the greatest internal influences on Singapore have been Lee Kuan Yew and the PAP. Lee dominated politics from before independence and still played an important role until his retirement in 2011. The PAP instigated state building, the discourses of national identity, myth creation, mass mobilisation, wealth redistribution and a full-scale socio-economic transformation (Chan, 1989: 70). This was carried out by means of an ‘administrative state’, a political system which according to Chan has two key characteristics: depoliticisation of the citizenry; and an increase in the power and role of bureaucrats, accompanied by the expansion and development of the bureaucratic and administrative sector (Chan, 1989: 78). Ezra Vogel has called it a ‘macho-meritocracy’ which creates an ‘aura of awe’ around the top leaders and provides a basis for discrediting less meritocratic opposition (Vogel, 1989: 1053). In a speech at a dinner at the Raffles Ballroom, Westin Hotel, on 29 August, 1990, Lee Kuan Yew reiterated his commitment to macho-meritocracy:

Twenty-five years ago, Singapore’s national unity was uncertain … Our experience of crises in the 1950s and 1960s made Singaporeans acutely aware of the vulnerability and fragility of our society. Fortunately we are a pragmatic people and so we set out to build on our common interests and to mute our differences. The government has broadened the bases of the institutions of government as widely as practicable … We have ensured a continuing flow of trained and able men into the machinery of state: the civil service, the SAF [Singapore Armed Forces], the police and the professions … Camaraderie, esprit de corps, a sense of honour and shared values in the top echelons of any society,
are crucial for the survival of the group … Our right to govern is based on merit … Our open system of selecting men for office or jobs based on their ability and performance is the basis for legitimacy (Lee, 1990).

Change in Singapore since independence has been carefully managed through this administrative state where politics has been subsumed under the imperatives of good bureaucratic management. The extension of instrumental bureaucratic reason has meant government intervention in almost every aspect of social life. Paradoxically, while politics has been defused and depoliticised, people’s intimate lives have been politicised. This is especially so in the case of sexuality and procreative behaviour. Christopher Lingle has argued that the Singapore government’s less than subtle social engineering methods have crippled civil society (Lingle, 1996: 101) and in the process created a ‘Republic of Fear’ (Lingle, 1996, see also Chee, 1995). If Lingle’s description is perhaps a little extreme, citizens’ everyday anxiety might be expressed more realistically in what Singaporeans call OB markers or Out of Bounds markers. These are the parameters of political debate, the limits of what may be said at any given time. Every Singaporean understands what they are, and the consequences of transgression, even if the boundaries are less than explicit. Bokhurst-Heng, in her study of government control of the press, says that the genius of this mechanism of control lies in its very vagueness; OB markers are not clearly defined until you cross them (Bokhorst-Heng, 2002: 563). It is, however, becoming increasingly difficult for the OB markers to be maintained in the conventional way. The consequences of infringement of the rules governing publication have historically been met with harsh penalties. In recent years, a large number of blogs and websites that provide textual interventions into the discursive public space have emerged to present challenges to the dominant narrative and to unsettle the boundaries. At the same time official responses have become less strident and coercive. Although the Singapore government may still determine what can be said in the public sphere via the Internet, it seems that the forms of that control have become more subtle as the media of expression have become more sophisticated and the on-line world can constitute a space of resistance (Hudson and Johal, 2011).

Housing, education, culture, language, reproduction and family life, religion, car ownership, the keeping of pets, the chewing of gum,
and so on, have all, at one time or another, been politicised (Clammer, 1998: 175), and subject to forms of social engineering. Chewing gum was banned in 1992. It is now on sale again but only on a doctor’s prescription. The state continues to be the main institution through which social relations are expressed and regulated institutionally (Tremewan, 1994: 2). The reach of the state into the daily, even intimate, lives of citizens is extensive. It is widely known, and regularly reported by bemused observers, that the government can even impose fines on those people caught leaving a public toilet without flushing, and those found urinating in lifts. The state is so intrusive in the people’s everyday lives that, as Chua (2003: 177) comments, the interventions create a sense of the state being literally everywhere and it invariably creeps into any serious conversation about anything Singaporean. Christopher Tremewan (1994: 5) has argued that the extensive social control the Singapore government imposes is a function of the central political alliance and its imperative to maintain its economic agenda. This alliance is constituted by the relationship between the Singapore capitalist class – represented by the PAP – and foreign capital. Tremewan’s argument is that social institutions, rather than civil society, dominate Singapore politics. In his account, the four major institutions which not only organise commodities and resources, but also people, are: public housing, state education, parliament and the law (Tremewan, 1994). Singapore is still understood to be a culture of control, even if the means of that control have been modified (Trocki, 2006).

Social practices, both personal and public, have been ‘managed’ by the government in a mode of political supervision which at once standardises social practices and politicises individual, including sexual, behaviour. One of the effects of power is that whole populations can be controlled over space and time, while at the same time the state can extend its control over individuals in the same mode of operation; or,

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3 This may be the result of the US–Singapore free trade agreement. The Swiss drug company Pfizer launched its gum at the Ritz-Carlton Singapore on 18 March 2004. It may not be irrelevant to note that Pfizer is also the manufacturer of Viagra. For reasons that will become obvious in the course of the book, it would seem to be very much in the government’s interest to encourage the sale of Pfizer’s products in Singapore, particularly Pfizer’s most celebrated product. Halim Mohamad, the sales and marketing director of Pfizer Singapore, announced that while Viagra is Pfizer’s No. 5 product worldwide, it is No. 3 in Singapore. He attributes this to the fact that Singapore men are more sexually active than men in other countries (Teo, 2001).
even more significantly, create individuals as citizens of a state. Foucault (1977) points out that the state uses both individualisation techniques and totalisation procedures. Its mode of modernity is contingent on both a totalising form of state power and the politicising of individual choice and behaviour. In Singapore, while individual choice has been politicised – especially choice connected with fertility, sexuality, marriage and divorce – state power has not been totalised.

With two or two and a half years of military service compulsory for all young men, it should be noted that Singapore is also a militarised society. Kenneth Paul Tan (2001) believes that the effect of industrialisation and militarisation has not only been the political emasculation of the populace, but the ‘feminisation’ of civil society into a ‘domesticated space’ of docile, compliant citizens. This view conflates the feminine with the docile and subservient. It is precisely these glibly gendered representations that I want to interrogate. The notion that Asian societies that are managed by authoritarian, ‘hypermasculinised’ power structures have been ‘feminised’ has already been noted. Ling argues that:

> Economic development, in particular, is the site of this enactment of hypermasculinity. By inflating the mantle of classical Confucian paternalism, the state locks society into a hyperfeminized position of classical Confucian womanhood, that is, into a role involving subordination, self-sacrifice, discipline, and deference (Ling, 1999).

I am particularly keen to decouple the concepts of feminisation and ‘domesticated space’, and also to contest the idea that subordination, self-sacrifice and deference are the necessary corollaries of economic development for Asian women. Women in Singapore cannot be represented adequately as subordinate or self-sacrificing, nor ‘feminised’ in the way that Tan and Ling mean. There are limits to the discursive existence of the ‘classical Confucian paternalism’ to which Ling refers.

**Vulnerable Nation**

A perpetual discourse of threat to a vulnerable nation has been a feature of the writing of the nation since independence. It is not necessary to rehearse a detailed history of Singapore here. A few key dates of direct relevance to this book will suffice. Singapore was a British colony from 1819, and part of the Straits Settlements – that is, Penang, Malacca and Singapore – from 1826. At the end of the Japanese occupation
of Singapore – for three and a half years from 15 February 1942 – a climate of nationalist fervour and anti-colonial sentiment had arisen. Singapore was granted self-government from the British in 1959, and Lee Kuan Yew became the country’s first Prime Minister. In August 1963, Singapore declared independence, and in September of that year Malaysia was formed, comprising the old federated states of Malaya, along with Singapore, Sarawak and Sabah. In July 1963, Tunku Abdul Rahman decided that Singapore should leave Malaysia, and on 9 August 1965, Singapore was expelled. The merger had lasted a mere 23 months.

Lee’s deep anguish at the failure of the merger is on the public record, as is his belief that it was his greatest political regret (Han et al. 1998: 67). Lee’s (1998) autobiography notes that he was sceptical that Singapore could survive as a nation separated from Malaysia, and he had previously said, ‘island nations are a political joke’ (cited in Leifer, 1998: 20). Leifer (1998: 19) has described Singapore’s situation at that time as ‘living in the shadow of vulnerability’. According to Barr, after the separation, Lee went into retreat for six weeks and reread Toynbee’s ‘A Study of History’, from which he understood that only adversity and challenge would make people strive for a higher civilisation (2000: 78). It is this episode, in Barr’s account, that precipitated Lee’s commitment to the building of a ‘rugged’ and ‘tightly knit’ civilisation capable of ensuring the country’s survival. One of the earliest uses of this metaphor of ‘rugged’, which became a leitmotif of the nation’s character, according to Barr (2000: 94), was in his speech at the Tanjong Pagar Community Centre on 30 October 1965.

The requirement that the citizens of Singapore be ‘disciplined’, ‘goal-oriented’ and ready to rid themselves of dangerously anachronistic forms of political spirit in order to ensure the success of the tiny, vulnerable city-state, emerged in national narrative as the trope: ‘Singapore’s only resource is its people’. This is an endlessly reiterated discursive object, deployed in multiple contexts. It is implicated in the discourses with configurations of race and class, but especially with gender, through which fertility, the national identity and continuing economic success are linked.

A series of government publications has appeared since the 1990s which outline the economic and social agenda for the coming years. One such publication, ‘The Next Lap’, appeared in the year following
Lee Kuan Yew’s relinquishing of his post as Prime Minister in favour of Goh Chok Tong on 28 November 1990. The Next Lap states:

People are, and always will be, our most precious resource. More than anything else, it is the effort of Singaporeans, with their drive and talent, that has made the country what it is today. Overcoming great odds as a newly-independent nation without natural resources, we have turned our city state into a thriving modern economy (Singapore Government, 1991a: 19).

It reiterated the trope of vulnerable nation, using new imagery:

Small states are like small fish. A small fish lives in an uncertain environment, where danger from bigger fish is a constant factor in its existence. Undercurrents can suddenly suck a small fish into more dangerous waters. To survive, a small fish requires vigilance and ingenuity … A small fish is not defenceless. It can seek security in numbers; it can develop its own defences against predators. This in essence is Singapore’s national security strategy to safeguard our inheritance and our future (Singapore Government, 1991a: 139).

The trauma of the failure of the union with Malaysia, the inherent vulnerability of the tiny nation state, and the focus on Singapore’s citizens as its only resource have all been conflated to form a consistent and frequently deployed leitmotif in the narrative of the ‘imagined community’ of Singapore. Barr notes that the ‘survival’ motif became all-pervasive in Lee’s early rhetoric (2000: 78). Birch (1993a: 3), in his study of the uses of the media in Singapore has called it the ‘official crisis-discourse line’.

Ban Kah Choon believes that much of what he calls the ‘psychological hinterland’ of Singapore comes from and remains that of crisis resulting from the trauma of the expulsion from Malaysia and the sense that Singapore is eternally vulnerable to outside threats to the integrity of the nation (2004: 5). Ban describes the use of a range of figurative language deployed in the construction of the narrative of nation, such as Singapore as the ‘poisoned shrimp’ – small and tasty, but lethal to predators – in the early years after independence, but the narrative of the crisis of a nation dependent on its people behaving appropriately and adapting to change has emerged more regularly in the discourses, it seems, than any other imagery. The discourse of crisis has been perpetually and consistently maintained throughout Singapore’s post-
independence history, and Birch has argued that this is one of the main strategies adopted by the government to maintain ideological control. Endless crises, ‘staged’ in the state-controlled media (Birch, 1993b) allow the creation of the threatening Other external to the nation, and create a climate of domestic uncertainty to be strategically deployed. Heng and Devan (1995: 196) have argued that while the metaphors for representing the crises have mutated since the PAP came to power, they have in recent years been directed internally against those segments of society that refuse to reflect the image of the state’s founding fathers to themselves. When that image – overwhelmingly male, Chinese, and socioeconomically and educationally privileged – is distorted or not adequately returned, crises are ‘fearfully imagined’. National survival is at stake unless the regeneration of the nation’s population produces the same ratios of race and class as at the nation’s founding moment. For this reason, the nation’s mothers represent an internal threat, the internal Other (Heng and Devan, 1995: 197).

John Clammer (1998) has corroborated other observers (Chee, 1995; Lingle, 1996) when he calls Singapore a ‘society of fear’ in which internal factors are as much a source of anxiety as the external Other. The rhetoric of threat to a vulnerable nation with its people constituting its only resource is a frequently conjured trope of nationhood and a fetishistic mode of representation. In a nation imagined as inherently fragile, fear itself becomes a resource to be used in nation-building and social control. In the decades since independence, anxieties have emerged in the discourse concerning the fear of communism, of a slow economy, of too high a population increase, of racial violence, of an environment dominated by hostile Muslims, of Westernisation, of liberal values, of too low a population, of foreign workers, of drug abuse, of a lack of commitment to competitiveness, of creeping welfarism, of financial meltdown. Anxieties have also centred on the body and the uses of sexuality, so that crises arise out of the threat of miscegenation, of exogamy, of graduate women remaining unmarried, and in the last decade, of the global spread of disease. The repeatability of such varied but consistent menace affords narrative authority and makes available for the national imaginary an unbounded discursive space of fear of the threatening external Other.

The multi-ethnic composition of Singapore also activates an internal enemy: the Other of the Chinese patriarchal self. Recognisable and puta-
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It is generally impenetrable class, race and gender boundaries must be preserved symbolically as well as in reality. The boundaries of the nation and the internal divisions between groups categorised as Other are maintained by recourse to these discourses of uncertainty and crisis. While the prototypical crisis was the expulsion of Singapore from Malaysia, the template of crisis and menace has been available to accommodate other events that can be inscribed as a threat to the national security.

Global Citizens

While the power of this enduring discourse cannot be underestimated, Clammer (1997: 46) has pointed out that the use of endless crises as a method of control no longer works, since people are sceptical and more discerning. Singaporeans do not live in insularity, but in a global space which offers forms of cosmopolitan belonging which unsettle the myth of the organic nation and offer a larger range of connections to local groups and the international community. This is especially the case for a ‘Global City’. Singapore has a well-educated and sophisticated population and a twenty-first century post-industrial nation demands a different inscription. Singapore now focuses less on the discipline required for self-directed production and robust masculinity forged on the playing fields of Eton, and more on the construction of the subjectivities required for a cosmopolitanism that befits a global cultural economy. Indeed, Singapore has undergone a renaissance. This is perhaps most definitively articulated in a government-authored document of 2002 called Renaissance Singapore. Culture and the Arts in Renaissance Singapore. The report puts forward a vision for a new Singapore for the twenty-first century in which aesthetics is seen as a tool for creating a competitive economy:

Renaissance Singapore will be creative, vibrant and imbued with a keen sense of aesthetics. Our industries are supported with a creative culture that keeps them competitive in the global economy. The Renaissance Singaporean has an adventurous spirit, an inquiring and creative mind and a strong passion for life. Culture and arts animate our city and our society consists of active citizens who build on our Asian heritage to strengthen the Singapore Heartbeat through expressing their Singapore stories in culture and the arts (Singapore Government, 2002: 5).

The mission for culture and the arts is to globalise Singapore’s economy while reviving its Asian heritage. It is prescriptive in its invention.
of a new kind of person who could challenge the stereotype of the staid Singaporean workaholic. It offers no less than a minor social revolution in its aim to reinvent its citizenry as passionate and creative. The fantasy of the rugged Eton-trained pragmatic individual, and the instrumentalised ‘digits’ have given way to a newly reborn Singapore citizen, whose contribution to continuing economic development now includes developing a passion for life and an appreciation for the arts.

Many blogs, chat-sites and websites that now act as an element of the public sphere demonstrate levels of scepticism, even cynicism, about government rhetoric and forms of governmentality. Important websites include Singaporeans for Democracy (a pro-democracy website), TalkingCock.com (a satirical website, replete with political comment) and The Online Citizen (political comment), amongst others. The results of the 2011 general election indicate a weakening of the near-hegemonic grip of the PAP. While the PAP won 81 out of a possible 87 seats to retain government, this represents a swing of 6.4 per cent away from the ruling party. The holding of six seats in parliament by the Workers’ Party of Singapore has led to some speculation that a two-party political system may emerge in the future.

There is, however, still uncertainty and anxiety generated by the state about the threat to the nation. While the bodies of women, in particular the uses of fertility, and in more recent years the life choices of women in general are still central to this process, there are not only limits to the effectiveness of this discourse, but also alternative and contending discourses in circulation.
**Creating the Capitalist Family**

The family has been politicised and deployed as a discursive object in Singapore since independence. Despite a variety of family forms that existed in the colonial era the nuclear family and the bourgeois marriage were represented as the foundation of the nation. Singapore’s early labour-intensive import-substitution economy made the transition in the mid-1970s to more export-oriented capital-intensive industries, which demanded a labour force with advanced technological skills. That the cheap labour of docile female workers was a prerequisite for the successful development of the East Asian ‘tiger economies’ has been well documented (Applebaum and Henderson, 1992). Janet Salaff (1992) has confirmed this in the case of Singapore. Female workers were paid less than men, and were more easily deployed so long as they were not encumbered with young children and extended family responsibilities.

Profound social and economic reforms helped to achieve the mobilisation of women’s labour and to institute a full-scale development programme. Salaff (1988: 261) believes that the transformation of the family by the Singapore government, as part of its development programme, is the best known example in a market economy of a state restructuring society. Prior to independence, family structures amongst the population of Singapore were varied. There had been a practice amongst wealthy Straits Chinese of one-patriarch-two-household arrangements in which some Chinese men maintained two wives and families. While residential polygamy was rare, polygamous arrangements in multiple households were sufficiently common to be the catalyst for the passing of the Women’s Charter (Hill and Lian, 1995: 143). Stella Quah (1993: 59) reports that in 1957 only 64 per cent of the total households
were ‘one-family nucleus’. Malay Muslim men were entitled to practise polygamy on condition, among others, that they were capable of the financial support of all wives and children. Concubinage was not uncommon. Nirmala PuruShotam has pointed out that some family forms which existed before 1960 transgressed the norms of the family constructed around a male/female relationship. She refers specifically to the practice of male/male marriages, a Fukien-inspired practice, and lesbian marriages, a practice known in Cantonese society (1998: 135). Indeed, it has been pointed out that while the family is now promoted as the ‘basic building block of society’, family life got off to a slow start in Singapore (AWARE, 1996: 11). While the diversity of familial arrangements has been curtailed, the family can be configured in various ways and deployed in multiple strategic moves as an instrument of the national agenda.

In 1959, the PAP campaigned using the slogan ‘one man, one wife’ (Wee, 1987). Rights for women were legislated in 1961. Known as the Women’s Charter,¹ this bill outlawed polygamous marriage, except among Muslims. This ensured that at least in non-Muslim society the nuclear family would constitute the normative social arrangement, and replace all traditional family arrangements with the Anglo-Christian family structure enshrined in British law. In Singapore before the Women’s Charter was passed as a bill of parliament there existed as many different forms of marriage as there were ethnic groups. The new bill brought order and uniformity (Kuo and Wong, 1997: 234). It also enshrined in policy the concept of the nuclear family – as subsumed by the nation – as the appropriate social collective for Singapore’s development strategy.

The bill had other effects which highlight the link between the promotion of the nuclear family form and the development of industrial capitalism in Singapore. Policy documents, such as The Tasks Ahead: PAP’s Five Year Plan, 1959–1964, called for the emancipation of working-class women from domestic drudgery and household slavery by increasing education (Hill and Lian, 1995: 144), thereby making them available as a labour resource for the industrialising economy. Quah has

¹ The Singapore Council of Women, established in 1952, partly in the hope of eradicating polygamy, pledged to support the PAP in the 1959 election. In return for ‘the women’s vote’ the PAP promised a society that would not exploit women (Edwards and Roces, 2000: 44). The Women’s Charter was the result of pressure from the Council for a more equitable society.
argued that an important effect of the Women’s Charter was to remove the legal barriers to women entering the workforce. Indeed, it has been argued that the Women’s Charter did little for women’s rights and legitimacy other than to codify marriage laws as part of the government’s strategy of using the family as an instrument of social change (Quah, 1997). Salaff shows that in Singapore (and in Hong Kong and Taiwan) the state required families to earn money in certain industries. In the process of accommodating themselves to new demands on the family, the state actually strengthened household authority over its members (Salaff, 1992: 267).

The capitalist mode of production relies not only on healthy workers with adequate housing, but to a large extent on the consumption patterns of the bourgeois family, as well as the discretionary spending power of individuals. Goh Keng Swee (then Minister for Finance) stated in 1965 his view of the traditional extended family as an impediment to progress:

... the most important single economic variable determining the scope and effectiveness of a development plan is the amount of domestic savings that can be made available from the economy ... In many poor countries, kinship ties impose certain economic obligations that are absent in Western countries where welfare and social security schemes assist those whose sources of incomes have been disrupted by old age, illness or unemployment. The extended or joint family system, by placing these functions on the income earners of the extended family, diminishes their capacity to save and may even reduce incentives to earn more income (Goh, 1972: 63).

Extended family arrangements also had, in terms of capitalist development, the disadvantage of allowing for the sharing of resources, rather than individual family consumption. Early in its developmental phase the government established the Housing Development Board which rationalised the use of space on a small island by demolishing kamponds and other forms of domestic arrangement. By 1976, 63,347 kampong and squatter households had been resettled, 65 per cent in high-rise buildings (Salaff, 1988:30). This relocation of bodies transformed the space for familial arrangements from the sprawling compound of many families, to the four or five-roomed apartment of the nuclear or two-generational family form. This had a transformative effect on personal
relationships, consumption patterns and the labour force participation of women. Salaff (1988) describes the effects:

The state housing project thus propels HDB (Housing Development Board) residents into the labour force and consumer economy, with wider impacts on social bonds. In the shift from kampong housing and small farms to HDB quarters, families lost their home garden plots and their food bills increased, as did their outlays on utilities. Many farm bungalows and kampong houses that were torn down housed several married couples, both related and unrelated, while few of the HDB flats do. Before resettlement, these family units often shared appliances; now they must buy their own appliances, furnishings and other consumer durables. When they have no need to borrow these things from other people, their exchanges with kin and neighbours decrease. Deployment of women into the wage labour force, overtime work, and moonlighting help pay for the most costly and elaborate HDB lifestyle, with implications for women’s position in society (Salaff, 1988: 30).

As women entered the money economy in ever larger numbers, the family, as Salaff puts it, became proletarianised. Educational costs, long term goals for children (now the priority of a small family), retirement benefits and mortgage payments for the HDB flat for the nuclear family were all indications of a reshaping of family goals (Salaff, 1988: 246–254), and of the privatisation of consumption required for capitalist development.

The importance of marriage for Singapore society has been well documented (Lyons, 2004; PuruShotam, 1998; Quah, 1997). Whether to marry or whom to marry have historically not always been a matter of personal choice. Monogamous marriage involving romance and courtship rather than arranged marriages is recognised as one of the improvements in women’s lives since independence (PuruShotam, 1998: 137). In his study of the relationship between marriage and passion in Western societies, Niklas Luhmann (1986: 129–130) points out that choice of marriage partner in the eighteenth century was not so much driven by passion as dictated by the need to voluntarily develop solidarity with a given order (that is, not necessarily by arranged marriages). While his study relates to the early modern period, it has a strange resonance in modern Singapore, particularly if considered within the framework of our understanding of the deployment of the family as an instrument of social change (Kuo and Wong, 1997; Quah, 1997). The ‘given order’
of a nation demands that marriage and the family be seen as matters of the state. In Singapore any failure of social commitment to the mythological status of the family as ‘the basic unit of society’ is construed as a failure of solidarity with the given order. Good citizens get married and have children. It is a formative constituent of the national ethos, and personal life choices about whom to marry, or whether to marry, are politicised. Luhmann makes the following statement about the social role of marriage in the early modern period: ‘... marriage did not signify the freedom to found a new family, but rather had to be controlled as the means of reproducing one and the same family’ (Luhmann, 1986: 129).

The patterns of social relationships this paradigm of marriage creates are similar to those of traditional Chinese lineage systems imported from South and Southeast China which created a ‘corporate kin group’ (Kuo and Wong, 1997: 233) or generational layers of family, and horizontal kin connections, as one and the same family. Such lineages could not be transferred intact to Singapore and were unravelled by the demands of Singapore’s post-independence economic strategies. Disparate family forms were able to be transformed in the 1960s and 1970s, partly because the Confucian family form is highly adaptable (King, 1996) and functional for business (Redding, 1996). Speaking of the transformation of the Chinese family in Hong Kong under capitalism, Ambrose King (1996: 270) says of the Chinese that: ‘They have adopted a rationalistic, instrumental attitude toward familistic values, thus turning them into a cultural resource to achieve other purposes’. In what he calls ‘rationalistic traditionalism’, familial traditions ‘are selectively preserved, mainly, though not exclusively, for their extrinsic usefulness in pursuing economic goals’ (King, 1996: 270).

The Chinese family form, the basic unit of society, and the nation, appear in the same discursive space in government publications. In this mode of representation the ‘corporate kin group’ of the Confucian family – which can be adapted and variously deployed through a form of ‘rationalistic traditionalism’ – and the state can be imagined as indivisible; they unite to form the ‘given order’. If the state represents itself as the Confucian family, decisions to marry and have children, particularly amongst the Chinese, can, therefore, be seen as maintaining solidarity with the given order. Behaviour not complicit with the given order of heterosexual sociality can therefore be construed in some way as politi-
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cally oppositional, as acting against the normative social order. Marriage, within this framework, can be controlled in the exercise of producing ‘one and the same family’, represented as the trope of ‘nation-as-family’. The romance of the family is enshrined in the ideology of nationhood. The technologies of order which provide the framework for the narrative of the nation overlap with the life choices which form the personal narratives of ordinary people.

The Nation and Family as Discursive Objects

At the end of the 1980s Singapore began to develop a National Ideology, in order to, as then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong put it, ‘preserve the cultural heritage of each of our communities, and uphold certain common values which capture the essence of being Singaporean’ (Quah, 2000: 107). This National Ideology, encapsulated in a document entitled Shared Values (Singapore Government, 1991b) and commonly known as the ‘White Paper’, was tabled in parliament on 2 January 1991. The five core values which would capture the essence of being Singaporean are:

- Nation before community and society above self
- Family as the basic unit of society
- Regard and community support for the individual
- Consensus instead of contention

The diversity of traditional family forms which existed in pre-independence Singapore has been erased in discursive constructions of the nation. Variations in family formations have been largely superseded by nuclear arrangements, albeit retaining responsibility for the elderly. The family is imagined to be the central social formation that provides for the cohesion of the nation. Indeed, it has been argued that the family would not exist without the nation. In the parliamentary debates which followed the tabling of the ‘White Paper’ and the motion that the parliament adopt it as the national ideology, Peh Chin Hua (the member for the electorate of Jalan Besar) seconded the motion and praised the wording which ‘emphasizes that the existence of the family is possible only when the nation exists’ (Singapore Government, 1991b). The concept of the family as the basic unit of society, he continued, would ‘strengthen unity among family members, thereby resulting in the social cohesiveness of the nation’ (Singapore Government, 1991b). The impli-
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cation that the nation is *sine qua non* for the existence of the family recalls Bhabha’s (1994) point about the disturbing of the symmetry of public and private. It is through this unsettling that a domestic space can be redrawn as the space of the normalising, pastoralising and individuating techniques of modern power and police: the personal-*is*-the-political; the world-*in*-the-home (Bhabha, 1994: 11).

*Singapore 21* – another government publication which appeared at the end of the last century – was designed to fortify national and societal cohesion. It uses the metaphor of the ‘base camp’ as a place to begin the life struggle:

Strong families are the foundation for healthy lives and wholesome communities. They give security and meaning to life, and are the ‘base camp’ from which our young venture forth to reach for high aspirations. They are also the conduit through which our elderly pass on the values and lessons they have learnt in life. Strong families ensure that our children grow up happy and well, and that our elders enjoy respect and dignity. They are an irreplaceable source of care and support. We are fortunate that our families remain strong. But we cannot take them for granted. We must ensure they strengthen further because the 21st century will bring greater pressures on them (Singapore Government, n.d. [a]).

As sociologists have observed, the family is used as a mediating structure and a source of moral values (Hill and Lian, 1995: 141). But the family is also a source of economic values and a key structural factor in the political economy of modern capitalism. Rajakru (1996) is unequivocal in his assessment of the reasons for the fetishisation of the family in Singapore: ‘The whole frenzy over the question of family formation is basically driven by rational/technocratic considerations ... The people on their part have much earlier shifted their family behaviour to be in tandem with economic tendencies’ (Rajakru, 1996: 25). Lee Kuan Yew disclosed his profoundly gendered understanding of the link between economy and family when he acknowledged the role of the male-headed family in the development process: ‘We used the family to push economic growth, factoring the ambitions of a person and his family into our planning’ (cited in Zakaria, 1994).

National welfare is often configured through the image of the family. Where the state is considered masculine, the nation is configured
as feminine and women as national subjects are represented through their traditional role in the family. McClintock has examined the family trope as a constitutive element in the imagining of the nation. One important role for the family in the textual strategies of the state is that it could offer an image through which social hierarchy within a putatively organic unity of interests could be sanctioned (McClintock, 1993: 64). She argues that:

The family as a metaphor offered a single genesis narrative for national history while, at the same time, the family as an institution became void of history and excluded from national power. The family became, at one and the same time, both the organizing figure and its antithesis (McClintock, 1995: 357).

The family was a ready-made structure, through which gender differentiation could be both historicised and hierarchised, and forms of exclusion naturalised. This has been noted in the case of Singapore. For Heng and Devan (1995) the Singapore polity is characterised by a ‘state fatherhood’ in which femaleness is subordinate and citizens’ relationship to the state is analogous to a father/daughter relationship (Heng and Devan, 1995: 196–197). The nation then appears as one family, and in Singapore marriage and children is a national goal (Singapore Government, 1991b).

With the family trope at the centre, nations can be symbolically figured as domestic genealogies (McClintock, 1993: 63). In Singapore this distinction is confounded by differing representations of the family. The family is far from being a unified category. Hing (2004) acknowledges the diversity of family styles in Singapore and the differing demands on women. Within Indian families alone she notes a spectrum of expectations and behaviours from the Hindu daughter who must squeeze the toothpaste onto her father’s toothbrush and offer domestic services to her brother, to the Christian Indian daughter who ‘loves flaunting her body and behaves just as confidently and freely as Chinese daughters when reacting to the reproduction of family traditions’ (Hing, 2004: 380).

In this climate of diversity and polysemous representations of the family, all lives must follow a ‘normal’ life trajectory. The central tasks which provide the dynamic are to create oneself as a woman who will grow up, have children and raise them; or to produce yourself as a man who will be responsible for supporting the family financially. In this
scenario, men are the natural heads of the family (PuruShotam, 1998: 135). Commonly understood ideological constructions of the normal family naturalise the roles of men and women. Women's acquiescence to these roles, and the reproduction of the ideology of the family means the reproduction of their own subordination, as PuruShotam (1998: 135) argues.

If women produce the family, it may also mean, however, that they can reproduce the inherent ambiguities in the Singapore family, and find spaces of liberation within it. The education of women, and the expectation of labour force participation as part of their commitment to the nation and the family has delivered to the younger generation of Singapore women a measure of economic freedom. Not marrying at all has become a real possibility. This has caused a significant unsettling of the family trope as the underpinning of a gendered nation. An important consequence is substantial discretionary income that young people can devote to hedonistic pursuits and largely unrestrained consumption of luxury goods. This has meant that women have confounded their role as cultural and biological producers of society, and the ones who can always be relied upon to sacrifice their own desires for family and nation, and has transformed them into individualistic consumers. These points will be further examined in the following chapters.

If we are to understand the contradictions of ideational and discursive structures, it is important to note that PuruShotam identifies an aspect of the family that she perceives to be not so much Chinese, as Singaporean. It is ‘importantly Singaporean’ (PuruShotam 1998: 135) in the sense that while women are expected to be freed sufficiently from tradition to engage in paid labour and contribute to both the national agenda outside the family and the financial welfare of the family itself, they are also expected to understand and acquiesce to the demands of patriarchy. The two dimensions of family she discusses may be seen as corresponding roughly to the traditional family and the modern family.

The imperative for a nation with a small population to educate its women, and employ them as a national and economic resource, has meant an expansion of the discursive space for women, rather than a diminution of it. And this has generated contradictions that McClintock (1995) may not have considered in her studies. PuruShotam (1998) has recognised the inescapable discrepancy in the case of Singapore:
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Women are subordinated but liberated; their bound feet have been freed for a wider range of spaces that they can enter into both literally and figuratively; but they must also be cognisant of their status as women in a patriarchy (PuruShotam, 1998: 135).

There is, then, a tension between the forms of liberation that Singapore women have attained and the imperatives of a patriarchal society.

It is also useful to consider more carefully PuruShotam’s distinction between the Singapore family and the Chinese family in a wider context. Just as ‘woman’ is a situated category, in Singapore the ‘family’ is also a situated and contested category. A significant multiplier of the meaning of the family in Singapore is the discursive existence of three predominant categories of family: the Asian family, the Chinese family and the Singaporean family. PuruShotam (1998) notes three main concerns of the government in terms of threats to the welfare and continued economic success of the nation. They are: Westernisation, Welfarism and Political Liberalism (PuruShotam, 1998: 132–123). Brown has noted that the Asian family has been deployed as a means of defusing potential ethnic divisions which could ultimately threaten the integrity of the state, by promoting the idea that all the ethnic groups which make up the population of Singapore are united in their shared commitment to family (Brown, 1998: 43). It is tempting to imagine the parallel between these concerns and the various constructions of family: the Asian family as a safeguard against Westernisation; the Chinese family, with its traditional support systems and Confucian hierarchy, will obviate demands for welfare; and the Singapore family will guard against political liberalism because of its central role as producer of appropriate national identity. The family, then, as traditionally the location of women and children can be transfigured in diverse ways, for various discursive strategies in the imagining of the nation. This requires women to adopt multiple subject positions around issues of sexuality, motherhood, aged care, family income, and the need to contribute to the continuing economic success of the nation through paid employment. These subject positions also intersect with subject positions of their own making. It is the subject positions of women’s own invention which ultimately problematise all these categories of the family.

An important point is that while the construction of a national identity based on the family has multiplied images of the family, to be deployed
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in various strategies for disciplining gender and ethnicity, in reality, the diversity of family forms found in pre-independence Singapore has been all but eliminated. They have been distilled into the standard nuclear family represented by the three primary discursive constructions of family.

According to Clammer, it is the government’s belief that changing values will bring about a corresponding change in social practices that precipitated the publication of the ‘White Paper’. For him it is merely another manifestation of the PAP’s constant recourse to propaganda as a means of changing behaviour patterns (Clammer, 1993: 37). The 1968 ‘Bus Safety and Courtesy Campaign’ was followed but the ‘National Safety First Council Road Safety Campaign’ and the ‘Safety and Courtesy Campaign Week’ (both in 1972). The ‘National Courtesy Campaign’ was launched in 1979, and was subsumed in 2001 by the ‘Singapore Kindness Campaign’. In addition to these, the ‘Productivity Campaign’, (1983) the ‘Speak Mandarin Campaign’ and ‘Smile Singapore Campaign,’ (1996) even the ‘Total Defence Campaign’, which exhorts every Singaporean to be vigilant about national security, are all attempts at social engineering, with more or less successful outcomes. Some campaigns contradict previous ones. Campaigns designed to encourage people to reduce family size, followed by campaigns to increase family size, will be discussed in subsequent chapters.

If the meta-narrative of the nation was, in the first decades after independence, industrial modernity, the dominant economic paradigm is now consumerism (Chua, 2003). Singapore’s political culture, encapsulated in the ‘White Paper’, is described by Clammer:

It is statist; it lacks (unlike, say, Indonesia) a national myth – the story of a struggle, preferably a war of independence – to sustain it (somehow economic figures do not have the same qualities!); it is, despite its multiracialism, run on fundamentally Chinese principles, and so dislikes ‘confrontation’ and debate; it is intolerant of alternative ideas and attempts to co-opt or suppress them, depending on their utility to the state; it is paternalistic; it is fundamentally violent, not at the physical level, but in psychic and spiritual terms; and it is very materialistic and this-wordly and has great problems with the idea that people might be motivated by other things than money (Clammer, 1993: 37–38).

For Clammer, the ‘White Paper’ is the articulation of a political culture which valorises Chinese culture over others and deauthorises any but government-sanctioned methods of managing one’s life.
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Lee Kuan Yew and other Singapore politicians have argued that the restrictions on democratic freedoms are necessary to protect Singapore’s communitarian traditions from adulteration by Western-style individualism. In the pragmatic style of the PAP government, the ‘White Paper’ acknowledges that ‘Westernisation has helped us to run a more rational government, and build a more efficient economy’ (Singapore Government, 1991a: 6). The threat to an Asian society such as Singapore, however, is not merely from the cultural changes that would ensue from increasing individualism. The ‘White Paper’ makes it clear that the danger is that Singapore might lose its economic competitiveness:

> Singaporeans are not Americans or Anglo-Saxons, though we may speak English and wear Western dress. If over the long term Singaporeans become indistinguishable from Americans, British, or Australians, or worse, become a poor imitation of them, we will lose our edge over these Western societies which enables us to hold our own internationally. We need to ensure that Singaporeans do not, while short-sightedly pursuing individual interests, all end up worse off (Singapore Government, 1991a: 6).

There is, therefore, a tension between the need to maintain the institutional structure of pragmatic Western rationality, while at the same time continually reproducing the inner spiritual core of a culture which did not exist previously.

Daniel Bell has noted that Singapore politicians have explained restrictions on democratic freedoms in order to maintain Singapore's communitarian traditions. As Bell puts it, Americans may prefer more democracy and less community; Singaporeans are said to prefer less democracy and more community (Bell, 1997: 7). For Chua (1995: 28), however, a key characteristic of the ‘communitarian democracy’ operating in Singapore is not so much a democracy in which citizens have a greater commitment to community, but one in which the state represents itself as acting on behalf of the community. Velayutham (2004) comments that the state acts as if social life is a ‘gift’ for which citizens must reciprocate. This is an important aspect of this relationship. Chua discusses the strategies the government has developed for what he describes as ‘its proactive interventionist tendencies’. A well educated population can think as well as consume, and might become ‘individualist’ and ‘liberal’. These dangers are denounced as the ‘corrupting influence’ of the West (Chua, 1995: 210). The communi-
tarian values of Asia, inscribed in the ‘White Paper’, are set in opposition to the individualism of the West. As Chua explains it, the state constitutes itself as representing the collective and its interests, and interventions are justified as the ‘pre-emptive measures which will safeguard the collective well-being’ (Chua, 1995: 210).

Warwick Mules defines communitarian democracy as a political system in which there is a need for the government to seek legitimacy by means other than adversarial party politics, or by defeating legitimate opposition. Its method is to directly assert authority within the national public sphere (Mules, 1999: 74). A relationship with the citizenry, perhaps more direct and intrusive than that found in the Western democracies, is carried out through the media. Mules observes that the directness of the address takes the form of a ‘presumed familiarity between the state and the people, imagined as a single collective with common interests’ (1999: 74). A communitarian philosophy presupposes that the individual’s interest will be subsumed by the interest of the community. State opinion is then conflated with public opinion. As Mules (1999) puts it:

This is because a communitarian democracy has no need to identify separate forms of subjectivity within the national domain, since they are already anticipated in the idea of community embodied in the relationship between the state and the people in the first place (Mules, 1999: 75).

In addition to *The White Paper*, *The Next Lap*, the ‘Singapore 21 Campaign’, and the *Renaissance City Report* there are many other discursive constructions of the national agenda in which the interests of the family and the state are conflated. Heng and Devan (1995) have encapsulated this succinctly when they say that ‘few nations can boast the degree of thoroughness to which the founders of Singapore have carried the paternal logic of the modern state’. The intersection of the public and private provides the discursive field in which Bhabha’s normalising, pastoralising and individuating techniques of modern power can operate (1994: 11).

If the citizens of Singapore feel that the state is everywhere, then they must always be aware that the intervention, ritualised through the media and other spectacles such as the Prime Minister’s annual National Day Rally, is directed at them. At the moment of recognition, which is unavoidable in a communitarian democracy described by Chua (1995)
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and Mules (1999), the individual is interpellated as a subject (Althusser, 1971: 169). The difficulty for the state is, however, that it cannot always be sure people are called into being and created as subjects in the way it intended. They can find the means for subverting the address of the nation, for resisting attempts to ensure state-sanctioned subjectivities, and for recalling and inventing their own narrative. People can, and do, create their own subject positions, even in Singapore. Chua, in explaining that Singaporean culture and identity are discursive objects, argues that:

These terms, Singapore and Singaporean, refer not to the ontological geographical feature of the island nor to the biological being-as-such. They are unavoidably the results of discursive practices that formulate them as objects with specific but temporally changing characters, which are ‘called into existence’ by statements that circulate in different discourses, in different spheres of social practices. Each of the given ontological elements, singularly or interactively, can be discursively thematised to produce specific social, cultural and political effects in the discursive formation of the new nation and its people (Chua, 1995: 102–103).

Elements can be transformed into discursive objects, and ‘the given elements strategically deployed for specific moves in the discursive formation of “Singapore” and “Singaporeans”’ (Chua, 1995: 103).

Chua’s ontological elements can interact to create yet more means for reinscribing the nation as vulnerable, creative, passionate, and so on. They cannot, however, create a bounded and immutable ‘Singaporean’ subject position; identities are multiple, layered and organic (Ling, 1999: 297). As Chua has pointed out, the continual reinvention and strategic redeployment of these elements has meant that the history of Singaporean culture and identity is characterised by fluidity (1995: 103). The ‘continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical’ (Bhabha, 1994: 145–146) is therefore, problematic for Singapore, and is constantly invaded by the performative.

The Female Body and the Unsettling of Nation

The ruling elite of Singapore has witnessed a failure of their population policy and other strategies for creating subject positions and influencing, if not controlling, behaviour. It has encountered an abiding recalcitrance
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amongst women, a point to be elaborated in the following chapter. While women responded positively to the exhortations of the government to have fewer children in the first two decades after independence, since then women have exhibited a marked reluctance to have large families, and even indifference to marriage in some cases. This has entered the discourse as another threat to the always-vulnerable nation, and has produced anxieties about masculinity in a masculinist state structure and about the stability of Chinese masculinity itself. Over a sustained period, birth rates in Singapore have fallen and are currently below replacement levels. This reflects a resistance to the symbolic construction of the *nation-as-family* trope in which the responsibility for the stability of the family, and therefore the nation, is considered to be women’s. Women are interpellated as the mother of the nation – as both the cause and the solution to the problems of the nation – but they are also Bhabha’s evolving cultural agents (Bhabha, 1989: 67) with their own agendas. As Butler has argued, certain social existences of the body first become constituted through interpellation, and come to exist by dint of the authoritative address (Butler, 1997: 5). Two contradictory forms of address have dominated the discourses of nation in the post-war period. The first is the demand that women have fewer children; the second is the exhortation to have more children (to be discussed in more detail in the following chapter). Only one of these strategies was successful; both, it seems, were instrumental in the constitution of a subject. The latter has produced Althusser’s ‘bad subject’ and a range of disobediences (Butler, 1993: 127). It is this evolving agent with an agenda of her own which can unsettle and disconcert the national narrative.

Recognition of this failure of ideology, and concern over a diminishing population on an island in an archipelago which is characterised by nations with immense populations of non-Chinese, predominantly Muslim peoples, has generated a form of state panic, articulated discursively, even in the parliament. Concerns for the long-term economic stability of Singapore, coupled with the putative problems of a mixed-race population domestically and the threat of fundamentalist Islam, have intensified the racialised assumptions underlying the ethos of Chinese economic and cultural superiority on which the nation is based. Cultural anxiety has been generated in which the falling population is understood as a threat to Chinese cultural and economic hegemony. Singapore has
a history of the careful management of female fertility in the service of the nation. Apparently, it is no longer possible to manage it effectively. Singapore’s devotion to capitalist ideology, and its consumer-oriented development strategies, have both exploited and liberated women.

This has given rise to discontinuities and disruptions in endeavours to totalise control of women’s bodies, and therefore has lead to instabilities in the dominant discourse surrounding the place of women in the nation. Tactical social engineering in Singapore has been able to accommodate glaring contradictions in its promotion of women’s roles, but this has left it all the more vulnerable to resistance. Far from affording control to the state, discursive strategies have highlighted the paradoxes and provided space for the emergence of disturbing counter-narratives.

Bryan Turner has referred to the rise of the somatic society, ‘a society in which our major political and moral problems are expressed through the conduit of the human body’ (1996: 6) and reformulates the Hobbesian problem of social order as a problem of the body (Turner, 1996: 107). This is especially important for understanding the link between control of population, female fertility and the national narrative in Singapore. Lee Kuan Yew has never made any secret of the fact that he believes that the problem of social order is the problem of control of the body. Threats to progress, as defined, can be located in people’s use of their bodies, their modes of thinking and expression, and the spatial arrangements in which they find their bodies. He said:

I am often accused of interfering in the private lives of citizens. Yet, if I had not done that, we wouldn’t be here today. I say without the slightest remorse that we wouldn’t be here, would not have made economic progress, if we had not intervened on very personal matters – who your neighbour is, how you live, the noise you make, how you spit (or where you spit) or what language you use … It was fundamental social and cultural changes that brought us here (Lee, 1987).

Braidotti has argued that: ‘The body, or the embodiment of the subject … is to be understood as neither a biological nor a sociological category, but rather as a point of overlap between the physical, the symbolic, and the material social conditions’ (Braidotti, 1994b: 161). If national history is imagined as naturally teleological, as an organic process of upward growth (McClintock, 1995: 359), any bodies whose behaviour is not consistent with this mode of thought are construed not only as discon-
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tinuous, but also as disruptive. In Singapore, women who are agents of this discontinuity, who find themselves crossing the porous boundaries between the commonly received imaginings of tradition (embodied in motherhood and a submissive female role in the family) and images of the modern (embodied in young single women motivated by the dream of consumption, working mothers and educated women), are a source of political and cultural crisis. The body is constituted through the discourses of nationalism and national survival. In Singapore, this has been dubbed ‘uterine nationalism’ (Heng and Devan, 1995: 201).
Chapter Three

The Politics of Fertility

Decreasing Reproduction to Increase Production: the ‘Stop at Two’ Campaign

It has been noted that in times of transition or crisis the female body becomes a symbol of cultural crisis (Buci-Glucksmann, 1994). The crises of modernity such as ageing populations, under and overpopulation, miscegenation and so on have been articulated as threats to the welfare of the nation and have been inscribed in the discourses of Asian modernities, as they have been in the West. It would be difficult to find a more obvious example than in the population policies and anxiety over marriage and fertility patterns in Singapore. These aspects of the female body have played one of the lead roles in the spectacle of crisis, and its ongoing articulation in public discourse. The female body becomes apocalyptic – it threatens to destroy the family as an institution, and ultimately jeopardises the welfare of the nation.

State fixation on female bodies and fertility emerged in the public discourses when the White Paper on Family Planning was tabled in parliament in 1965. The paper’s recommendation was for the government to provide a family planning service (Saw, 1999) through the now defunct Family Planning and Population Board (FPPB). Its public face was the ‘Stop at Two’ campaign, intended to reduce family size. It appeared in the discursive domain as a crisis of overpopulation, which would jeopardise the development programme of Singapore and constitute a direct threat to families themselves. Mass media representations located the problem in people’s intimate choices by exhorting married couples to ‘Stop at Two’ or to think: ‘Girl or Boy, Two is Enough.’ Size of family was paramount; gender composition less so. This factor both affected, and was affected by, the need for the labour of women as part of the development process, a point to be further elaborated below.
Foucault (1998) identifies two main characteristics of the politics of health in eighteenth-century Europe: the medicalisation of the family, and the function of medicine as an instance of social control. His model of society is also useful for an understanding of the flourishing in Singapore of state-run maternal and health services, and an increase in the number of registered births taking place in hospitals rather than through traditional birthing and peri-natal care practices. In order to continue to reduce population figures, the state side-stepped religious and medical opposition and liberalised abortion and sterilisation laws. Family planning and contraception services became readily available. The average number of births per family fell from over five to fewer than two, while the labour force participation rate of all women rose, with that of married women increasing substantially after 1970 (Pyle, 1997).

Although these measures were designed to give the government more control over fertility and birth practices, Kanwaljit Soin (1996) has identified anti-natal policies as a node for the diffusion of power. As she puts it, while abortion was meant to be a family planning measure, an unintended consequence was the control it gave women over their bodies and sexuality (Soin, 1996: 195). Soin also contends that another unintended consequence was the raising of the status of girls (1996). Families who preferred sons had to be content with girls and began to educate them as much as boys (Soin, 1996: 195), thereby creating the next generation of well-educated women who could contest government policy from a position of greater personal power than their mothers. These women, in turn, confounded and diffused the power of government by refusing to acquiesce to the government’s later contradictory demands to increase the number of children per family. Indeed, the very site of government control became the source of recalcitrance and resistance in the decades to come, and a catalyst for the shift of power from men to women. Policies designed to control women’s sexuality eventually became a liberating force and have provided a framework for refusal of government control over bodies, long after the policies had

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1 Dr. Kanwaljit Soin is one of Singapore’s most respected orthopaedic surgeons. She was a founding member of the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE), and is a well-known champion of the rights of women. She was elected to the presidency of AWARE in 1991 and also served two terms as Nominated Member of Singapore Parliament. She was Singapore’s Woman of the Year in 1992, for her work for the alleviation of poverty and the promotion of education in Southeast Asia. She has since been awarded a number of national and international awards for the significance of her contribution to society.
been reversed. The anti-natal policies of the 1970s, the proletarianisation of the family and education policies designed to develop exploitable skills across a population have all provided new frameworks for the development of women's project of the self.

The root of the crisis, which undermined the smooth management of the developing economy, was understood as located in the family. It was not government policy but irresponsible and anti-social uses of fertility in women which could undermine the quality of the populace and interfere with Singapore's commitment to an ideology of developmentalism and economic progress. Chua Sian Chin, then Minister for Health, in a parliamentary debate in 1972 drew on patronising and stereotypical images of the poor and forms of classist essentialism as part of the discourse:

> No amount of subsidies by the Government can remedy the lack of adequate care at home ... In fact, the greater the feather-bedding of large anti-social families ... the greater will be the numbers of large families ... Moreover, social friction and tensions will increase because [children in large families] will do poorly because they are deprived of adequate food and care. It is a vicious circle which we must break. It is kinder in the long run to put disincentives on large families. Certainly, it will carry less danger of social tensions, overcrowding, and generally lower standards in the very limited space of Singapore ... (cited in Salaff, 1988: 37–38).

The anti-natalist fertility policies of the 1960s and 1970s were carefully manipulated to facilitate economic development through the mobilisation of the labour of women into key areas such as the electronics industry. Frank Tipton gives a number of examples of the use of what he calls ‘the domestication of women by nation states’ (Tipton, 1998: 375). He describes the use of women’s labour both domestically (through the institution of marriage and the promotion of the nuclear family over traditional forms) and in the market as part of the nationalist and developmentalist agendas of the Soviet Union, China and Vietnam, but particularly in the Newly Industrialising Economies of capitalist Asia. In the 1960s an adequate supply of female labour was critical for restructuring the recently decolonised economy and its transition to an export-oriented economy, and for boosting the discretionary spending power of families. The government’s economic planning created a de-
mand for semi-skilled female labour, and the increase in the availability in contraceptive technologies, coupled with the public denunciation of people with big families, in turn influenced women’s availability for the economy. Policies that have affected fertility patterns in Singapore, and control of female bodies, have not only been central to Singapore’s economic growth, but also to the PAP’s carefully managed nation-building strategies.

Fertility policies were designed to increase the supply of available labour. Those who contravened the policies appeared in the public discourse as irresponsible and anti-social. Admonishments were intended to inculcate ideological constraints; material constraints were also used. Families with more than the targeted number of children lost income tax deductions, priority in education, and faced loss of maternity leave and higher delivery fees. This is consistent with what Quah (1997) describes as the Singapore-style five-step policy implementation process, that is: distributing objective information, suggesting appropriate behaviour, introducing incentives, introducing disincentives, and instituting sanctions. Catherine Lim imagines the dilemma through Mrs. Wong, a character in one of her short stories, and describes its effects on her and its force of presence in the community. Mrs. Wong has two daughters and wants a son to satisfy tradition but she is living in the period of the ‘Stop at Two’ campaign. Lim writes Mrs. Wong as the perfect product of the economic rationalism and pragmatism of Singapore:

Tradition has been routed by Economics. If tradition is in the bloodstream of the Wongs, Economics has entered the very marrow of their bones. For Mrs. Wong’s calculator tells her that if she dares oppose the new policy to ‘Stop at Two’, she stands to lose thousands and thousands of dollars: she will have to pay higher accouchement fees in the hospital for the Third Child, she can claim no income tax relief, she is not entitled to paid maternity leave. Mrs. Wong’s fingers work furiously at the calculator. ‘So much money lost!’ she gasps. The Third Child is the national arch-villain: in all the posters sprouting everywhere in the shopping centers, in government buildings, at bus-stops, at the hawker centers – the Third Child is depicted as the subverter of national progress and prosperity. He/she is sternly excluded from the happy family pictures which show two children laughing on the swing in the garden or paddling in the baby pool, watched by contented parents. If the Third Child is included, it is only in the capacity of trouble maker and cause
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of all the parental anxiety and domestic chaos. The Third Child is the ultimate outcast ([from *The Concatenation*] in Lim, 1998: 111-112).

Lim describes a context in which both nation and family are confronted with a dilemma: children or economic growth? It is a manifestation of a deeper conflict between tradition and economic imperatives, in which tradition demands more rather than fewer children, but economic and therefore national growth demands access to the labour of women. This is played out in the bodies of the Wong family members: in their bloodstream, and in the very marrow of their bones. Lim’s image of the body invaded by competing ideologies is particularly apt, since labour in the sense of both childbirth and paid work, temporarily relinquishes control over the body. This control over the bodies of workers has always been of paramount importance in the post-independence period.

The importance of the labour of women to the developmentalist agenda of the PAP was noted by Lee Kuan Yew. In an address to the National Trades Union Congress he acknowledges how crucial the labour of women is to development, while still placing the burden of maintaining the basic unit of society on the shoulders of women. Women are simultaneously located in this discursive space as units of production and as producers of the family. Their educational possibilities hinge on their ability to reproduce the family and therefore the nation. The independence of women is constituted through traditional family structures:

It is only a matter of time before women nearly equal men in employment ... The key is education ... On the whole we have been fortunate in educating our women, opening up jobs for them, and having them more independent without too great an upset in traditional family relationships (Lee, cited in Wee, 1987: 8).

And, while noting the ‘problem’ of women having to disrupt their careers to bring up children, his solution is to credentialise the role of the care-giver, and to relocate the environment for mothering closer to the locations of capitalist production. He continued:

This break in their careers can be minimized if we can organize new social institutions and organizations to help married women look after their children, whilst they are at work. Well run crèches and kindergartens, near factories or homes, staffed by well-trained workers, should be part of our new social institutions. (Lee, cited in Wee, 1987: 8)
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A woman’s success in the productive workforce is contingent not only on her role as reproducer of the family, but also on her responsibility to ensure the continuing stability of society. Lee also said:

There has been no vociferous women’s liberation movement in Singapore. It has been government policy to encourage the education of women to their fullest ability and their employment commensurate with their abilities. … Societies which do not educate and use half their potential because they are women, are those which are worse off … We cannot NOT educate and use the ability of our women (Lee, cited in Wee, 1987: 9).

The gains accrued by women have been inscribed in the public discourse as ‘gifts’ from a benevolent government to women (PuruShotam, 1992). Michelle Lazar has argued that the early granting of ostensible equality to women should be seen as an example of strategic egalitarianism, where the equality women were granted was contingent upon meeting specific political and economic gains (2001: 59). In the 1983-84 parliamentary debates about appropriate social roles for women, the then Minister for Trade and Industry, Tony Tan, acknowledged the contradictions inherent in the expectations of women’s dual role for women, in both the domestic and public sphere:

We will have to be more imaginative and more determined in our efforts at retaining a large number of our womenfolk in the labour force without however endangering the upbringing of our children. The family unit is the most fundamental building block in our society, and it is an institution which we must cherish and preserve even at the cost of sacrificing some economic growth (cited in Goldberg, 1987: 29).

Singapore’s economic agenda for the 1980s, as stated in the Economic Development Plan for the Eighties (see Goldberg, 1987), included the objective to ‘optimize the scarce manpower by encouraging more women … to work’ (Goldberg, 1987: 28). The debates revealed that part-time work was popular, since it enabled women to fulfil their primary responsibility as producers of the next generation, and, what was presumably their secondary responsibility, wealth producers in the economy. Tony Tan was explicit about the government’s disconcerting problem of dual roles, and the ideological dissonance it confronted:

Some members feel that the government is a little bit confused and does not know what it wants: whether educated women should stay at home,
have children, bring up their families, or go to work and contribute to the economy. The answer is, of course, we want both (cited in Goldberg, 1987: 29).

The government’s ‘Stop at Two Campaign’ had been so successful in reducing fertility rates and redeploying women’s labour into the public sphere that the declining birth rates eventually began to be perceived not just as a new problem for the nation but as a dilemma incorporating disruptions to the image of Singapore woman as mother of the nation. In a development unsettling for a state which announced, with regularity, that its only resource was its people, birth-rates had dropped below replacement level. This, coupled with the continuing discourse of the beleaguered nation in a sea of hostility, occasioned a transformation of the population policy – a reversal. It was accompanied by a shift in the discourse. Lee Kuan Yew’s 1983 National Day Rally speech was the earliest notable public attempt to insert into the discourse the reformulation of the problem, now re-scripted as the danger inherent in women’s restriction of their fertility. The first public announcement of the New Population Policy was on 1 March 1987, by Goh Chok Tong, then Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Defence. The 1985 population statistics had shown that the Total Fertility Rate (TFR) was 1.62, below the replacement level of 2.10, and by 1986 it had fallen to 1.44 (Ho, 2000: 53).

Suzanne Goldberg analyses the policy debates in parliament from February 1981 until August 1985. She has divided them into a number of categories which concern women, reporting that labour and childcare were the most frequently debated topics, with abortion, family planning, immigration, taxation and marriage laws also coming up for discussion (Goldberg, 1987: 26). She also provides statistics which demonstrate the success of the campaign to deploy women into the paid labour force: 1957 saw a female labour force participation rate of 17.5 per cent, while by 1986 it had risen to 45.6 per cent (Goldberg, 1987: 27). It is important to note that much of that participation was in unskilled and semi-skilled, low-remuneration jobs (particularly in the garment and electronics industries). According to Goldberg (1987), in the 1980s Singapore labour policies were sending mixed messages to women in an attempt simultaneously to encourage economic participation, and to remind them that their primary role was motherhood. The mixed,
and often contradictory, messages continued into expanded discourses. Indeed, the transformation of the extended family into the bourgeois nuclear family suggested by Goh Keng Swee in 1972 was reversed by Lee Kuan Yew in 1982. He made it explicit that the extended family is instrumental to national development when he said that:

... there is one aspect of this process of change that we must avoid at all costs – that is, the break up of the three generation family ... However different or modern our way of life becomes as a result of high rise living we must arrange for one married son or married daughter to live with their parent or have their parents live with them (Lee, cited in AWARE, 1996: 57).

In an indirect way the problem of defending the nation, a normatively masculine role, also fell to women when then Brigadier General Lee Hsien Loong called the low birth rate a ‘danger trend’ and announced, in a scenario calculated to be alarming for any mother, that ‘the fewer people you have, the longer all the boys will have to serve national service because it is the only way to keep the force level up’ (Lee Hsien Loong, 1987, cited in Ho, 2000: 54).

It appeared that at least one aspect of a woman’s national duty was to restock the armed forces. Women would deliver economic advantage with their cheap labour, and deliver a male population on demand. The notion that women have a subsidiary role in National Service (NS) has moved into the quotidian imaginary of Singapore. It is now articulated in fiction, as is demonstrated by the introduction to Koh Buck Song and Umej Bhatia’s (2002) anthology of short stories of national service: ‘Conscription in Singapore has never included women, but women have not been entirely exempt. They have also experienced NS – as mothers, sisters, girlfriends, wives, friends, colleagues, bosses and observers of society’ (Koh and Bhatia, 2002:18).

Chia Yueh Chin’s story, in this same volume, about her brother entering National Service, imagines maternity as women’s national service during Singapore’s anti-natalist period. In her piece titled Women Do National Service Too, she says:

My mother always said that she did her national service — after all, didn’t she get pregnant twice and give birth to both of us? If that was not a service to the nation, what is? Didn’t she follow orders and ‘stop at two’? And don’t tell her that it’s not the same, as men ran the risk of
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dying for their nation. ‘You think childbirth is so easy, I would like to see the men do it. It’s bloody painful, and I think I was in labour for six hours, and finally went under the knife.’

At this point my mother would flash her ‘national service’ scar, and we would gawk at it, and at the stretch marks on her tummy as well. And to clinch the argument, my mother would say: ‘And don’t tell me that I’m not prepared to kill for the nation – I stopped at two – it might have been four, you know. I’m even prepared to kill my own flesh and blood. How many men can say that?’ … ‘I finally had enough and tied up my tubes. So, son, don’t let anyone tell you that women don’t do national service. We do it, and far longer than you men … so don’t let me catch you saying that we don’t do national service…’ (Koh and Bhatia 2002: 156).

Chia notes, however, that her brother’s girlfriend was not so keen to embrace the self-sacrifice that was expected of her and thought only of how she would miss her boyfriend. Chia’s mother disparaged the attitude of the younger woman, while presupposing that women must ‘serve’ the nation: ‘Young girls nowadays suffer a little bit also cannot. How to serve the nation, tell me?’ (Koh and Bhatia, 2002: 157).

Quality vs Quantity

By the early 1980s it had became apparent that the reduction was not evenly distributed across the population, that it differed by ethnic group, educational level and income (Pyle, 1997). The problem, for the PAP, became one of ‘quality as well as quantity’. The government was concerned not only with the fall in population but also with certain demographic patterns lurking behind the raw figures. Goh Chok Tong identified some ‘worrying trends’ (Goh, 1987). The most worrying was, firstly, the growing numbers of better educated people choosing smaller families and delaying marriage. This phenomenon was a particular feature of Chinese families, and would eventually leave the Chinese population exposed to the possibility of being outnumbered. Since it was generally believed that the economic success of Singapore was the result of Chinese entrepreneurship, this created considerable anxiety, and concern for the future of the nation. The second worrying trend was the increasing number of women remaining single.

2 The syntax in this sentence marks it as Singlish, rather than English. Singlish is a creole with its roots in English, but with a vocabulary comprising Hokkien, Malay and Mandarin words as well as English.
In the 1980s the dramatic reversal of the fertility policies was precipitated, according to Pyle (1997), by perceived constraints on competitiveness in the international economic arena. While still focusing on the disorder created by female fertility, the gender problem coalesced with race, class and Lee Kuan Yew’s understanding of eugenics to generate further constraints on the female body. In his 1983 National Day Rally speech he reaffirmed his adherence to eugenics, by citing an American study that argued that 80 per cent of a person’s abilities are conferred by nature and only 20 per cent through nurturing. While the 1980 census showed that the birth-rate had been reduced, in accordance with policy, Lee said he worried that:

... we have reduced it most unequally. The better educated the woman is, the less children she has. Ironically, she has the greater resources to provide her children with a better environment, nurturing and care. A woman below age 40 with no educational qualifications, on average produces about three children although she has limited income and few resources to give her children the extra attention, help and stimulation required (Lee, 1983a: 3).

His conclusion was that fertility policies must be amended to encourage better-educated women to have more children. In a statement in which women are imagined as resources, he proclaimed:

It is too late for us to reverse our policies and have our women go back to their primary role as mothers, the creators of the next generation. Our women will not stand for it. And anyway they have already become too important a factor in the economy (Lee, 1983b: 5).

Lee’s speech was met with shock, dismay and anger (PuruShotam, 1998: 144). This response, as PuruShotam (1998) points out, was found largely amongst middle class women who objected to its patriarchal tone, and to the suggestion that they could be reduced to mere functionaries in the economy. Its direct result was the establishment of the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE) in 1985,3 which was, ac-

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3 AWARE (Association of Women for Action and Research) was registered in Singapore in November 1985 as a voluntary organisation of women with three main areas of focus: support, research and advocacy. Its mission is to pave the way for gender equity by:
- raising awareness of women’s and men’s rights and responsibilities
- developing women’s full potential by encouraging full participation in public and private life
- enhancing women’s knowledge and skills and empowering them to make informed decisions.
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cording to PuruShotam the first feminist organisation to arise since ‘the virtual disappearance of women activists from the political scene in the early 1960s’ (1998: 144). Lee Kuan Yew acknowledged his debt to his wife, Kwa Geok Choo, who took on the roles of sole breadwinner, wife and mother, in terms redolent of an indemnity against business failure:

My great advantage was I have a wife who could be a sole breadwinner and bring the children up. That was my insurance policy. Without such a wife, I would have been hard-pressed. To be fair, I was able to make these decisions because I had this fall-back position, I was insured (cited in Han et al. 1998: 235).

Describing the education of women as a ‘Pandora’s Box’, a metaphor for the release into society of uncontrollable ills, Lee remarked: ‘To this generation, their contribution is purely an economic one. Without their representation in the next we are in very deep trouble’ (1983a: 5). Lee’s statement reflects a belief not only in the duty of women as producers of the family, but also the expectation that women will conserve tradition. His statement recalls McClintock’s (1995: 359) understanding of women as the authentic body of national tradition, embodying nationalism’s conservative principle of continuity.

In his 1983 National Day Rally Speech, Lee also introduced the metaphor of ‘lop-sided development’, which was to become a common theme in public discussions of the problems surrounding reproductive patterns. It referred to two worrying phenomena: the lower fertility rate among Chinese women; and the increasing numbers of tertiary educated women remaining unmarried (Quah, 1997: 266). The cause of the anxiety was the fact that on the whole, it was Chinese professional women who had the lowest fertility figures, while the ethnic minorities (Malays and Indians) were producing children at higher rates (Heng and Devan, 1995). The locating of differences in reproductive habits in

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4 Kwa Geok Choo (1920–2010) was a high-earning lawyer, and like Lee Kuan Yew, was educated at Cambridge. The family law firm Lee and Lee is one of the most successful law firms in Singapore. It is ironic then, not to say elitist, that she gave a radio broadcast in support of the PAP at the 1959 election. She said:

Our society is built on the assumption that women are the social, political, and economic inferiors of men. This myth has been made the excuse for the exploitation of female labour. Many women do the same kind of work as men but do not get the same pay. The PAP supports the principle of equal pay for equal work. But we also face facts. We realize it can only be achieved gradually (Straits Times, 9 May 1959, cited in Drysdale, 1984: 217).

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the discursive space reserved for the configuring of hierarchised racial superiority issues allowed the issue to be seen in terms of the ‘quality’ of the population, as well as ‘quantity’.

The problem of women’s fertility and its deployment as a national asset coalesced with race and class to create anxiety about a national future jeopardised by women refusing to fulfil their responsibilities for the quality and sustainability of the nation. Women would be held accountable for the discontinuities in national time:

*If we continue to reproduce ourselves in a lopsided way, we will be unable to maintain our present standards. Levels of competence will decline. Our economy will falter, the administration will suffer, and the society will decline. The impact of the phenomenon is being felt in just one generation or 25 years (Lee, 1983b).*

He also noted in his the speech that only about one in four Singaporean men with tertiary education was marrying his intellectual equal (Han et al. 1998: 169). This would be a dangerous dilution of the nation’s gene pool, particularly when women with lower educations were having larger families. Lee Kuan Yew made it clear that he saw women’s fertility as a resource, as a national asset to be deployed at will. He also promoted the idea of categories of women from which the most powerful men could choose. Calling on sixteenth and seventeenth century practices of trafficking in women as an ideal practice, he excited alpha-male fantasies of domination and possession of the most beautiful women. He never regretted the 1983 speech (Han et al. 1998: 169) in which he reiterated the notion of women as commodities and the selection of the correct type of wife as functional to capitalism:

*If you don’t include your women graduates in your breeding pool and leave them on the shelf, you would end up a more stupid society. The men don’t believe me. Every year, I produce them the results. You marry that kind of wife, you get this kind of result. They close their minds. I think we are not going to become as good a society as we were with each generation ... This is the basic stock of human success. If you don’t have this, you can have the best human resources program, but your human resource is poor ... In the older generations ... [T]he pattern of procreation was settled by economics and culture. The richer you are, the more successful you are, the more wives you have, the more children you have ... You read Hong Lou Meng, ‘A Dream of the Red Chamber’,*
or you read Jin Ping Mei, and you’ll find society in the sixteenth, seventeenth century described. So the successful merchant or the mandarin, he gets the pick of all the rich men’s daughters and the prettiest village girls and has probably five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten different wives and concubines and many children … So in that way, a smarter population emerges … Now we go into a stage of disgenics – not eugenics – where the smarter you are, the more successful you are, the more you calculate … so one [child] is enough, or at the most two. The people at the lower end … some of them have 10, 12 to 14 children … So what happens? There will be less bright people to support more dumb people in the next generation. That's a problem … That's the way procreation has been structured by nature (cited in Han et al. 1998: 169).

Lee had already publicly expressed his view of woman as a commodity which could be used to construct a better future for Singapore. In a speech to Malayan students in London on 14 September 1962, he warned:

When I was a student here you could tell a Malayan from a West Indian student or an Indian student by the amount of money he has got to spend … We have got to make sure that the capital we have accumulated is put to good use … and if these two emerge [China and India], well, then I say Malayan students who come to London will find that the Indian boys and girls are better clothed and shod and probably have better girlfriends to take places. And that is the meaning of planning for progress (cited in Barr 2000: 50).

Lee reiterated his continuing commitment to eugenicist theories of human behaviour. Expressing alarm that the birth rates had been reduced unequally because the better educated a woman was the fewer children she had, he said:

... we discover that women marry their educational equals or educational superiors. In other words, the Singaporean male marries his educational equal or his inferior. Seldom does he marry his educational superior … The Singapore male is a chauvinist enough to not like marrying women better educated than himself (Lee, 1983a: 4).

This statement exposes anxieties engendered by the fragile and vulnerable nature of masculinity and the unease surrounding the difficulty of maintaining the traditional status and superiority of a man in a family. It also speaks of a gendered hierarchy as a constitutive element of the
nation’s culture and the creation of difference based on economic potential. For Lee Kuan Yew, as we have seen, superiority as an individual is determined by wealth, power and intelligence, as it was in imperial China. The result is: ‘A considerable loss in well-educated women remaining unmarried at 40 and not represented in the next generation’ (Lee, 1983a: 4). It seems that women are ‘lost’ if they do not enter into a bourgeois marriage, thereby repudiating at once their race, class and gender roles.

The causes of the problems were the very same ‘gifts’ the government had given women. The education of women had created the contradictions inherent in demanding, on one hand, women’s contribution to the economy in the present, and, on the other, charging them with the responsibility for social and cultural capital in the future. Lee crystallised the dilemma for Singapore:

> With the advantage of blinding hindsight, educating everybody, yes, absolutely right. Equal opportunity, yes, but we shouldn’t get our women into jobs where they cannot, at the same time, be mothers ... You just can’t be doing a full-time heavy job like that of a doctor or engineer and run a home and bring up children. It is tough (Lee, 1983a: 5).

Lazar (1993) has identified ‘double-talk’ by the Singapore government as ‘inherently prevalent throughout the society’ (Lazar, 1993: 447). She gives the example of a pair of complementary ‘Family Life’ advertisements, one directed at women, one at men, published in the 1980s and designed to help counter the ‘female graduate problem’. Where the two advertisements, which she calls the ‘Male Ad’ and the ‘Female Ad’, intend the same outcome (that is, to encourage graduates to marry in the hope that they will fulfil Lee Kuan Yew’s eugenicist dream of intelligent parents producing intelligent offspring to ensure Singapore’s competitiveness), the messages are not only contradictory, they also emphasise the importance of women reinforcing men’s sense of masculine self by performing female inferiority. Both advertisements feature what appear to be educated professionals; both appear to be Chinese. Where the ‘Male Ad’ encourages men to engage with women of their social and intellectual equal, the ‘Female Ad’ warns women against giving men ‘the wrong idea’ and reminding them that their real goal in life is ‘a home of your own and a family’ (Lazar, 1993: 452–453). The message is clear: women should deny their ‘self-sufficiency’ to ap-
pear attractive. As Lazar (1993) points out, these advertisements use a strategy of ‘resolution-by-contradiction’ to forestall any genuine move towards women being accepted as equals in a partnership (Lazar, 1993: 451). While men are exhorted to ‘keep up with the times’, women are asked to acquiesce in order to remedy the situation.

**Have Three or More if You Can Afford it**

In 1987 the ‘New Population Policy’ was introduced, and the ‘Stop at Two’ slogan was revised to: ‘Have three or more if you can afford it’. The 1985 statistics had confirmed that the total fertility rate had dropped below replacement level (Ho, 2000: 53). The new policy was aimed at ‘under-achievers’ (Yap, 1995), women who were ‘under-performing’ in their patriotic duty to reproduce (Ho, 2000: 54). Two factors were reiterated as the cause of the graduate woman phenomenon: educated women restricting their fertility, and people delaying marriage in favour of a career. Educated women were accused of being ‘too independent’, ‘career minded’ and ‘choosy’ (Lyons-Lee, 1998: 315), and were asked to lower their expectations for a husband.

In addition, a number of material incentives were introduced in an effort to induce women to marry, to marry earlier and to marry someone of the appropriate social class. In 1983 Tony Tan had announced a scheme to encourage ‘more highly qualified’ (that is, tertiary educated) women to re-enter the workforce. Under the ‘Graduate Mother Scheme’ graduate women could now claim tax relief comprising ‘the normal child relief plus five per cent of the woman’s annual income’ (Goldberg, 1987: 31). J. B. Jeyaretnam and others denounced this policy as elitist, arguing that it showed disregard for children of the illiterate and poor (Lydgate, 2003: 125). In response to this, in 1984 the government extended the enhanced child relief to its maximum of $10,000 per child for the first three children to women with O levels. A $300 ‘baby bonus’ was offered. Around June 1984, the government also announced a sterilisation scheme for poorly educated and low-income mothers, under which they would be given $10,000 if they were sterilised after their first or second child (Lyons-Lee, 1998: 314; Ho, 2000: 47).

The ‘Graduate Mother Scheme’ also gave priority in school admission to children of better-educated women and enhanced child relief for ‘specially qualified’ mothers, in addition to other preferential treatment
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in school admissions for children of tertiary educated women. The election of opposition leader J. B. Jeyaretnam to the seat of Anson, formerly one of the PAP’s safest seats, and Mr. Chiam of the Singapore Democratic Party to the seat of Potong Pasir in the 1984 elections was seen to be an expression of retribution for the elitism of Lee Kuan Yew’s policies (Lyndgate, 2003: 125). Khai Leong Ho believes that the thirteen per cent swing against the PAP in the 1984 elections was a clear indication of widespread dissatisfaction with this (Ho, 2000: 48), and a willingness to contest the racist and classist connotations of the bill.

Re-scripted discursive strategies were employed in public texts. Advertisements for the joys of family life appeared, with slogans such as ‘Life will be lonely without a family. Don’t leave it too late’ and ‘Why not reality? You could wait a lifetime for a dream’ (Lyons-Lee, 1998: 313). The public agenda began to intervene more intensely in the private lives of its citizens. The government published the names of Lover’s Lane-type locations, where dating couples could park their cars and find intimacy away from domestic arrangements that stifle ardour. Lengthy articles appeared in the Straits Times on ‘how to make babies’. In an expression of the extreme pragmatism for which he is known, Lee Kuan Yew even mooted the reintroduction of polygamy and applauded former Japanese Prime Minister Tanaka – who had children by both his wife and mistress – for his biological contribution to Japanese dynamism (Lazar, 2001:68). Goh Chok Tong put it bluntly: ‘... we need 50,000 babies a year’ (Singapore Government, 1991a: 25).

This shift in the discourse and the public interest surrounding it came to be known as The Great Marriage Debate, or the ‘Graduate Woman’ phenomenon, in which the education and granting of equality to women was restated as a problem of success (Goh cited in Singapore Government, 1989). Goh (then Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Defence) said in a speech titled The Challenge and Reward of Managing Success in 1989:

I want to underline this with the population problem, which is itself a consequence of success. This is a sensitive subject because it is not just about getting the birth rate up. It is about improving the quality of our population. A full discussion must inevitably touch on the problem of unmarried graduates and better educated-women, late marriages and incentives through tax rebates to encourage and compensate those who
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can afford to have three, four or more children. It is particularly sensi-
tive to discuss the subject openly, because Singapore is a multi-racial
society; and there will inevitably be misunderstanding that government
policies are designed to keep the birth-rate of one community down
or the population of another community up (Singapore Government,
1989).

Where once progress was threatened by the constraints embedded in
tradition, it was paradoxically now threatened by the dynamism and
perpetual change characteristic of modernity.

Reinstating his belief that an essentialised, immutable and inherited
‘culture’ is the determining factor, in a speech at the National University
of Singapore on 29 July 1994, Lee Kuan Yew attributed the problems to
patriarchal attitudes for which women themselves were partly to blame.
Educational success for women had come far too quickly for men ‘and
their mothers’ to cope with. Stating that he would have done things dif-
derently had he known graduate women would ‘have problems getting
married’, he would have opted for a gradual opening up of the system
and re-educated men and their mothers:

But we forgot that culture does not change rapidly. Culture goes with
your mother’s milk. Your mother implants ideas in you. So you want to
be the boss in your family. You don’t want a wife who is smarter than
you and earning more than you (cited in George and Ibrahim, 1994).

Invoking again the imagery of mother’s milk to reiterate the crisis of
cultural values and lack of control over children, he moved the image
from the realm of the imaginary to a more literal understanding of the
危机 as inscribed on the surface of the bodies of women. He was also
able to rearticulate the relationship between cultural development and
the body, when he said: ‘The inculcation of cultural values does not
come from casual interaction. It comes from parent to child and it goes
with mother’s milk. But our problem is that the mothers go to work and
children are not being breastfed’ (cited in Ibrahim, 1996). In this sce-
nario, the transmission of cultural values faces a contradiction. Mothers
are expected to create the values that sustain Singapore’s culture of
capitalist modernity, and yet it is this very culture which prevents them
from successfully carrying out their maternal role.

Recalling East Asian cultures, he recommended the Japanese
method for protecting the sensibilities of men while not affecting the
Japanese economy, that is, to retard the progress of women. Educated Japanese women ‘did not threaten the Japanese male’, he said, because women studied in finishing colleges rather than universities. Unlike the Japanese who restricted the number of women who could attend university, the Taiwanese had the same ‘problem’ of too many unmarried educated women (George and Ibrahim, 1994). The Indian community in Singapore had the right methods for maintaining the stability of the Indian community, he argued, since they still believed in not allowing women to choose their own marriage partners. ‘And I am all in favour of it’, he said (cited in Ibrahim, 1996). He let it be known that for him the ultimate value of marriage is in its potential to further the cause of capitalist development. He had already made it clear that marriage and the correct type of wife are functional to capitalism. Acknowledging that there would be protests from women, he urged pragmatism:

The Chinese girls think I am an old-fashioned despot. But I am the product of an arranged marriage. One successful businessman decided to marry his son to the daughter of another successful businessman. As I was born from such a marriage, I thought: ‘It’s not such a bad idea’ (cited in Ibrahim, 1996).

And, as if to pre-empt any further objections from young people who may be labouring under the illusions created by the influence of a foreign culture not imbibed through their mother’s milk, he added: ‘Falling in love is a Western fantasy. You fall out of love long before the first child is born’ (cited in Ibrahim, 1996).

Lee suggested other methods for enticing Singaporeans to marry and have children. He argued that giving an extra vote to those who had children would, within the ‘logic of the system’, give every human being one vote, including the child. This would have a dual effect, he argued. It would prevent senior citizens from voting in a bloc and demanding their CPF\(^5\) early, and would ensure that parents voted responsibly: ‘It’s completely fair … The day that you bring a child into the world, I give you two votes. And the chances are you will not do foolish things’ (George and Ibrahim, 1994).

An enhanced baby bonus programme was instigated in 2001. Nevertheless, the Straits Times reported that the thirty-eight million dollars

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5 Central Provident Fund (CPF) is a government-managed comprehensive social security savings system designed to support people in retirement, rather like a superannuation scheme.
worth of baby bonuses distributed in 2002 had not stopped the number of births falling to a fourteen year low of 40,800 (W. Tan, 2003). From the 'mixed messages' circulating in the discourse, women had apparently chosen the wrong one. Ambivalence, indeed ambiguity, has left attempts at hegemonising the idea of having babies as a national good, negotiable, and its power impaired. The fertility rate for Singapore peaked in 1988 at 1.98 and it has fallen since. Singapore's total fertility rate (TFR) is still one of the lowest in the world (Mauzy and Milne, 2002: 187). Current estimates vary from 1.15 children per woman in 2011 (Index Mundi) to 0.78 in 2012 (CIA Factbook). Peggy Teo and Brenda Yeoh (1998), in a study of women's responses to changing population policies in Singapore have examined this in the light of the conventional understandings of the public–private/productive–reproductive dichotomies. Their study shows that the Singapore women they interviewed distanced themselves as individuals and households from complicity when it came to the effects of government policies on the private sphere. Private choices demonstrate the clear discrepancy between what might be thought of as 'the public good' and what might be 'a private good' (Teo and Yeoh, 1998: 93).

Fertility rates consistently below replacement levels for nearly three decades demonstrate that Singapore families have largely ignored the blandishments and public interventions. One Singapore citizen, taxi driver Steven Leong, was prepared to admit publicly that he regretted having six children. The government's financial incentives and the fact that he is almost a model citizen in the eyes of the Singapore government (Jayasakaran, 2000) did not alleviate his problems: 'I work like a dog, at least 14 hours a day ... Everything here costs money, and my wife doesn't work' (Jayasakaran, 2000). He told the reporter, 'only half jokingly' that if he had to start all over again, he would be a bachelor and there would be no children (Jayasakaran, 2000). Some have blamed not only the rising costs of lifestyle in an affluent society but also progress for the failure to convince people that they should have more children. Posting to the Singapore Review electronic message board, Christopher Low Kin Siong writes:

The birthrate problem is a common global trend that can be seen in more affluent societies, it is in part due to the pursuit of a comfortable standard of living versus the actual cost of living ... In Singapore, we have all sorts of costs that are imposed upon us, and in these difficult
years, we have had transport fee hikes, educational fee hikes, wage cuts, an uncertain salary as we move to flexi-wage, decreased domestic consumer spending and the GST rate increase. The declining birthrate is also highly noticeable in countries with increasing population density, the trend is that as population density increases, birth rates decline. It may not be apparent, but in noticeably congested Singapore, the last thing most people want to do when they go home after being stuck in public transport is proximity to another human being. Scientific research on the general adaptive syndrome in humans also indicates that hormonal and biological changes occur in humans under social and environmental stress as a result of overcrowding. Biological responses include inhibited sexual maturation, glandular malfunction, homosexuality, diminished ovulation, inadequate lactation, increased susceptibility to disease, and rise in infant mortality. Social responses include increased abortion rates, increased aggression, infanticide, curtailed reproduction and child abandonment (Low, 2004).

People have not only made private decisions about childbirth patterns, disdaining the government’s exhortations and financial inducements, but they have also negotiated and used them for their own advantage:

Where a policy conforms to their plans and decisions, it will be taken advantage of and the rhetoric of ‘public good’ drawn upon; where it runs counter to other personal circumstances, it is ignored, along with the apparent contradiction between public and private discourse … the insistence on personal degrees of freedom suggests that ideological concurrence at the public level masks some degree of ideological resistance at the personal level (Teo and Yeoh, 1998: 93).

Agence France Presse, reporting on a poll of 300 people conducted by the Straits Times, revealed not so much ideological compliance or resistance as a high level of extreme pragmatism and the recognition of an opportunity for personal gain. They report that the common message from Singapore couples in response to inducements to have more children is: ‘Show us the money!’ (Agence France Presse, 2000). In a society in which cars are one of the most important indicators of success (Chua, 2003: 32), it is interesting to note that one of the suggestions sent to the Straits Times was for the government to give financial grants for young couples to buy cars (Agence France Presse, 2000).

Dana Lam-Teo, former president of AWARE, commented on the 8,000 babies aborted each year by married women, and the 6000 by single
women, despite the S$260 million worth of financial incentives to encourage women to have more children announced by the government in 2000. In a question which speaks more of an individual citizen’s demand on the state, rather than any recognition of a woman’s ‘national duty’, she asks: ‘If their decision to terminate is solely monetary, how much is the state prepared to pay?’ (Agence France Presse, 2001). Exhortations for women to have more children, a form of interpellation, has called into being, not the subject constituted by language of Althusser’s (1971) understanding, but Bhabha’s (1989: 67) ‘evolving cultural agent’. Butler’s (1993: 122) critique of Althusser’s analysis becomes all the more important in this context. As I have suggested in my introduction, although Althusser recognises the possibility of the creation of ‘bad subjects’, he does not consider the range of disobedience (Butler, 1993: 122, Butler’s emphasis). Where the behavioural conformity of the subject is expected, the law – juridical and social (Butler, 1993: 121) – might not only be refused, but also ruptured, forced into rearticulation, and have its legitimacy challenged. In this way, an unwanted and unexpected subject might be called into existence. Dana Lam-Teo’s intervention in the discourses, speaking for the premier women’s group in Singapore, has called into existence not merely a ‘bad subject’ but a subject with the power to renegotiate the reciprocal relationship of ‘presumed familiarity between the state and the people’ (Mules, 1999: 74). The communitarian philosophy, which Mules (1999) describes, presupposes that the individual’s interest will be subsumed by the interest of the community. The command: ‘Show us the money’, an instance of what Butler (1993: 122) describes as the ‘parodic inhabiting of conformity’ or ‘the rearticulation of the law against the authority’, shifts primacy to the interests of the individual in the relationship between state and people. This rupturing of the law, embedded in this presupposed reciprocity, points to the limits of discursive power in Singapore. Butler’s (1993) analysis seems to be uncannily apt for an understanding of Singapore:

Here the performative, the call by law which seeks to produce a lawful subject, produces a set of consequences that exceed and confound what appears to be the disciplining intention motivating the law. Interpellation thus loses its status as a simple performative, an act of discourse with the power to create that to which it refers, and creates more than it ever meant to, signifying in excess of any intended referent (Butler, 1993: 122).
This not only constitutes a failure of the pedagogical, but the difference between the command and the effect provides ‘the linguistic occasion for consequential disobedience’ (Butler, 1993: 122).

In Singapore, inscribing women as a national resource has produced a subject in excess of what has been intended. Subsequent chapters will elaborate this. While a Chinese woman cannot be seen to be an unlawful subject in this context, she is nevertheless empowered, through discourses emanating from the state, to invent herself as an evolving cultural actor with agency.

*Asiaweek* reports on the case of one of the highly educated Chinese couples the government wishes would have more children. Helen Chai and her husband Kenneth Mak both have PhDs, high-powered, high-income careers, a car, a ‘condo’, a club membership, and they want more success. The offspring of two such members of the superior class and racial group would certainly help to fulfil Lee Kuan Yew’s dream of improving the ‘quality’ of the population. Although Chai and Mak have a three year old son, Chai has admitted they did not welcome her pregnancy, but because they are Catholic, they decided she should not have an abortion. She is adamant they will not have another child, and says:

> Sometimes I wish I didn’t have a child, especially when you have to work overtime or miss out on something … But a child can also be adorable. It’s a conflict. I enjoyed myself too much and became more materialistic … That’s when we realized we didn’t want children. When I got pregnant, we were shocked … We were really into golf and adventure tours (Mitton, 2000).

*Asiaweek* also reported the disdain with which many young Singaporeans treat the government’s attempts to increase the birth rate. Even the reported tax breaks and a bonus of up to S$5100 for a second child – and twice that for a third – are met with derision. Another citizen, Simon Tay, who has one son, was scornful of the government’s strategies: ‘What do they think we are? Pavlov’s dogs?’ (Mitton, 2000).

The low birth rate has been a 30-year concern for Lee Kuan Yew. He continued articulating the threat to the nation in 2012, couching the problem in terms of the invasion of alien values. His annual National Day dinner speech on 11 August 2012 was reported in *The Sunday Times*:

> Singaporeans need to marry and have children if they do not want the country to fold up, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew warned last night … the trend
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of declining birth rates needs to be reversed ... ‘If we go on like that, this place will fold up because there will be no original citizens left to form the majority’ he said. ‘And we cannot have new citizens, new PRs unsettle our social ethos, our social spirit, our social norms’ ... ‘So our choice is simple. Either accept migrants at a rate which we can assimilate them, and make them conform to our values, and have the others on temporary work permits to help build up Singapore’ ... Mr Lee ended by asking: ‘Do we want to replace ourselves? Or do we want to shrink and get older, and be replaced by migrants and work permit holders? That is the simple question’ (Lim, 2012: 1).

The ‘mixed messages’ and contradictions circulating in the public sphere disrupt the public/private continuum in Singapore and leave a space for the diffusion of power through which citizens can negotiate multiple and competing ontologies. In this ‘sphere of force relations’ (Foucault, 1998: 97), where the body is the site for the exercise of power, it can also define the limits of hegemony.
Marriage has been in crisis for some time in Singapore. A government publication, *Family First. State of the Family Report 2009*, reports that despite aspirations to be married, more Singaporeans are remaining single. The number of unmarried people in the 20 to 44 years age group has been increasing steadily over the years, with a 3 per cent increase in singlehood rates from 2000 to 2007. The report found that the top two reasons singles cited for not marrying continue to be: not having met a suitable partner, and choosing to concentrate on their studies or career. In addition to the female general marriage rate decreasing, the total number of divorces rose by nearly 50 per cent in the period 1997 to 2007 (Singapore Government, 2009). It was reported in *The Sunday Times* in August 2012 that around 44 per cent of Singaporean men and 31 per cent of women aged 30 to 34 are single. This was attributed to ‘lifestyle’, that is, ‘Singaporeans want to have more leisure time and not be burdened by children’ (Lim, 2012: 1). Attempts are being made to remedy this situation through the reinvention of the romance of the family for the twenty-first century.

In a prevailing climate of anxiety about women marrying ‘down’, and men being forced to marry ‘superior’ women, thereby threatening the patriarchal structure of the family, and ultimately the nation, the government intervened as marriage broker. The Social Development Unit (SDU) had been established in January of 1984 within the Ministry of Finance, with the express aim of ‘matchmaking’ male and female graduates with a view to marriage. This form of social engineering was designed to ensure the reproduction of the next generation of Singapore elite. Other marriage brokering units, such as the Social Promotion Section (for ‘O’ level holders) and the Social Development Section (for ‘A’ level
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holders) which dealt with people of inferior educational background were later established. This was an attempt to ensure a form of class endogamy. The sections were merged in 2009 and the new unit, which now accommodates all heterosexual singles, was renamed the Social Development Network (SDN). The government had assumed the role of village matchmaker in the hope of ‘marrying off’ educated women who were charged with the responsibility of safeguarding the racial and class future of Singapore. In the 1980s Lee Kuan Yew had expressed the problem in terms of eugenics:

We have altered our pattern of procreation producing the next generation, first by educating everyone, second by giving women equal employment opportunities, and third by establishing monogamy since 1960 ... For how can we avoid lowering performance when for every two graduates (with some exaggeration to make the point), in 25 years’ time, there will be one graduate, and for every two uneducated workers, there will be three? (Lee, 1983a: 4)

A fundamental transformation in the focus of the government’s population strategy was paralleled by an enhanced campaign to modify behaviour. Where once the crisis engendered by the uses of women’s fertility was associated with the imperatives of economic production – with the productive body – discursive tactics shifted to a concentration on the consuming body. The perpetual discourses of sexuality came to be integrated with consumerism as a national and personal goal. In this context the heterosexual couple and the bourgeois marriage are fetishised, intimacy is commodified, and romance becomes a spectacle. While the modes of representation of these discursive objects are potent, there are limits to their narrative power.

It was during the 1996 National Day Speech that then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong articulated what he saw as the existential dynamic of Singapore. In a statement which has since become famous, he declared that: ‘Life for Singaporeans is not complete without shopping!’ It is an irony not lost on many Singaporeans that one of the reasons people want to restrict their fertility is because children interfere with their desire to maximise material acquisition and consumption, as the previous chapter has shown. High levels of conspicuous consumption, however, do not preclude sexual desire; indeed, sexual desire becomes a form of consumption. Commodifed sexual desires appear in an on-
going spectacle – which was increased in intensity after February 2003 – manifested in news or propaganda, advertising or the consumption of entertainment. The spectacle of commodified sexuality in Singapore, in Debord’s terms, epitomises the prevailing model of social life (1995: 13) and serves to produce ‘heterosexual sociality’ as specifically normative and enforced (Smith, 1990: 191). The spectacle of publicising people’s intimate choices has also further disturbed the symmetry of public and private and redrawn the private as a space for the exercise of the individuating techniques of modern power (Bhabha, 1994: 11). Private choice and public good overlap. These tactics, however, have not met with the success the government had hoped for; indeed, they have met with disagreement and in some cases outright hostility, even derision. While private conduct and sexual practices continue to be matters for public scrutiny and the body again becomes a site for both the exercise of bio-power (Foucault, 1998) and state surveillance, the public sphere continues to be compromised by the private.

Chua argues that the intervention of global consumption practices, and the appearance of commodities which have been distributed on a global scale, point to ‘the emergence of consumer culture or of consumerism as a culture among Singaporeans’ (2003: 4). Almost everything Singapore consumes is imported, and consumption practices are inexorably linked to global tastes and trends. This does not mean that consumption of the same consumer goods internationally will produce identical selves, or homogenised cultures. Poststructuralist theories, and understandings of the reception of consumer commodities globally, have paved the way for new analyses of the indigenisation of cultural forms. The patterns of certain cultural forms which have their most noticeable social manifestation in consumption patterns imported from elsewhere are not only absorbed into the local idiom, but are absorbed into the local narrative of nation and politicised as part of the government’s agenda to govern and manage personal relationships and procreation patterns. The national narrative which privileges the Chinese heterosexual couple with children is constructed in accordance with the logic of capitalism, however, the logic cannot escape contradiction, even though, as Chua’s account shows, capitalist modernity is inscribed on each individual Singaporean (2003: 29). An evolving cultural agent has the power not only to avoid this inscription but also to deploy it for his or her own ends.
Displays of public manifestations of romantic love, and the fetishistic mode of representation of marriage we see as an aspect of the theatre of nation in Singapore, are part of the many ‘campaigns’ which have the effect of appearing to constitute national culture. Campaigns are protracted public moments in which some private aspect of people’s lives is emphasised and drawn into the public sphere for public scrutiny as a problematised practice. One such campaign is the ‘Romancing Singapore’ Campaign. Since independence a range of government and non-government bodies and programmes have been devoted to promoting planned parenthood, marriage and the family, firstly espousing anti-natalist, and later the pronatalist policies of the 1980s onward. These have included the Singapore Family Planning and Population Board (established 1965), the Singapore Planned Parenthood Association which celebrated its sixtieth anniversary in 2009, Family Life Education, Family Life Ambassadors, ‘Family Matters! Singapore’ and the School Family Education Programme. The leading agency for family issues is currently the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports.

In February 2003 ‘Family Matters! Singapore’ launched its inaugural Romancing Singapore campaign in time for St. Valentine’s Day. A month-long festival of events, it:

... aims to convey the message that ‘Love is the little things’ and seeks to encourage everyone to be more expressive with their partners at all times, not just on special occasions. It serves as a gentle reminder to all of us in a relationship to appreciate that the little things we do together or do for each other count for a lot. The spirit of the festival is to also help everyone discover and enjoy living in Singapore (Singapore Government, 2003).

This statement is consistent with strategies through which the boundaries of romance, marriage and procreation are set within the discursive space of nationhood. The space expands to encompass the role of private capital in the reinvigoration of love in the national interest, promoting a discourse of nation in which business is imagined as acting in the national interest:

Romancing Singapore has received encouraging support from all sectors of the community – media, grassroots organizations, all the CDCs

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1 Community Development Councils.
in particular, the F & B, entertainment, hospitality and spa-sectors. This is an all-encompassing initiative with both the private and public sectors coming together to make it happen (Singapore Government, 2003).

The Romancing Singapore Festival initially ran for the month of February 2003. By 2004 it had expanded to become a year-long ‘campaign’, the effect of which is to ensure that sexuality is maintained as a political category, instrumental to the nation’s continued success. It is regularly reiterated as a matter of national importance. The Romancing Singapore campaign provided the discursive space for production of the immense verbosity about sexuality to which Foucault refers (1998: 3). It is this ‘sexual imperialism’ which is equipped with the discursive means to transform individuals’ sexuality into a perpetual discourse (Foucault, 1998: 33). The festival, which now involves not just the government, but also private enterprise, is an example of state attempts at the management of biological processes and the conditions leading up to them: that is, meeting and forming relationships with marriageable partners. This is effected through what Foucault identified as ‘an entire series of interventions and regulatory controls: a biopolitics of the population’ (1998: 139).

The task force managing the campaign on behalf of ‘Family Matters! Singapore’ was co-chaired by sociologist and entrepreneur, Claire Chiang, and venture capitalist Dr. Finian Tan. He was reported as saying:

It’s a festival, a celebration. And if we can get everybody participating and thinking a bit about their loved ones, and whether or not they are spending enough time, whether they are nice enough, not taking them for granted, it will be a great success (Channel News Asia, 2003).

Chiang added: ‘We want to create the idea of love not just for Valentine’s Day, it’s not just about roses and wine and champagne. It’s the little things, the everyday expression’ (Channel News Asia, 2003).

In the first Romancing Singapore month, February 2003, the campaign began to appear in the media in earnest. ‘Wheel of Fortune’ and ‘The Weakest Link’, two popular game shows shown via Singapore’s Mediacorp Channel 5, were absorbed into the campaign. Both game shows were devoted to creating and satisfying consumer cravings by

2 Food and Beverage.
giving away prizes and money and featured dating couples and couples soon to be married. In a very public display of commitment to the idea of romance, one male contestant, ‘got down on one knee and proposed to fiancée Theresa who immediately said “Yes!”’ (A. Wong, 2003). In the same month the Straits Times exhorted people to:

Start your Valentine’s Day celebrations with a breezy trishaw ride from Raffles City to Merlion Park and dwell in the mood of dusk as you enjoy a romantic comedy under that stars. As the moon rises, a ‘love-rover’ cruise will take you along the Singapore River. Upon arriving at Clarke Quay, you fill your stomachs with romantic set dinners from your preferred choice of restaurant, after which you will proceed to Read Bridge for a night of games and a chance to win prizes (Yee, 2003).

Music producers capitalised on Valentine’s Day to put out new and re-released CD titles which appeared in the music stores in time for the celebrations. One of these was ‘Love is … the Little Things’, the official jingle of the Romancing Singapore festival which was released on 13 February 2003.

In the same month, National Family Week (NFW) also launched a number of programmes for married couples. These included: Relighting the Fire in Your Marriage; Romancing Your Spouse; Staying Married After You Say ‘I Do’. The Straits Times helped to publicise activities:

Stroll along the Singapore River tomorrow and on Saturday and be serenaded by musicians … This attempt to get couples into the mood for romance is part of the month-long Romancing Singapore campaign. The musical event by the river will be staged from 7 to 11 each night. The groups will take turns doing 45-minute medleys of love in genres ranging from pop ballads to jazz. ‘We hope couples will eat al fresco by the river, then while away their time listening to the music, holding hands and staring into each other’s eyes’, says Derrick Duncombe, director of DMC Marketing, which is managing the event … The event is organized by the Singapore Tourism Board and Family Matters! Singapore Task Force for Romancing Singapore. (Teo, 2003) … At Boat Quay, three pavilions have been set up for performances by two a capella groups between 7 and 11 pm tonight. Three groups of musicians will also serenade passers-by with a variety of popular tunes, including well-known love songs. Free roses will be distributed to the first 500 ladies at Boat Quay this evening. To add to the mood, the works of 10 poets will be displayed on banners. Those who spot these banners and send in the
name of the poet to poems@romancingsingapore.com.sg stand to win one of eight $100 NTUC Fair Price vouchers (Lee, 2003).

Under the title, ‘Love ... Actually: Romancing Singapore 2004’, Radio Singapore International (a subsidiary of Mediacorp, the government controlled network) in a programme called ‘Singapore Scene’ announced that this year’s festival would be called ‘Love is the Little Things’. The two theme songs for 2004 were ‘Little Things’ and ‘Thank You for Being You’, composed by Finian Tan. Tan and Chiang were interviewed on the programme. Tan explained that it was a carefully selected Public Relations company that had come up with the theme (Singapore Government, 2003; Tan, 2004).

The official Romancing Singapore website advertised a number of products and events which implicated private business interests with the national good, including: the Romancing Singapore aphrodisiac cake, the Chocolate Truffle cake, available at the Big O Café at Wheelock Place, Orchard Road; ‘Gifts of Love’ from Spa Lavande including two free treatments each worth $90 when you buy seven different or similar treatments; the delivery of the Talking Rose from the Katong Flower Shop; Enchanted Romance Set Dinner; O’Brien’s Romantic Meal Deal; Partner Yoga; Wedding Limousine service; ‘Sweet Romance’ getaway packages and so on (Singapore Government, 2003).

Two particular event promotions on the website encapsulated the importance of the technologies of leisure for the campaign, and the link to the consumption practices of the middle class. One was the ‘Bed and Bubbles’ Room Package at the Ritz–Carlton. For $450 plus per night, consumers could have a:

One night stay in a deluxe room at the Ritz-Carlton, Millenia Singapore with magnificent views of the Singapore city skyline or the bay. Soothing butler-drawn Honeymoon bath, enhanced with Tuxedo strawberries, roses and therapeutic oils. Breakfast buffet for two persons at The Greenhouse with Complimentary use of the Fitness Centre (Singapore Government, 2003).

Other options included the ‘Chocoholic Anonymous Promotion Just for Romancing Singapore’ where couples could avail themselves of:

‘A sumptuous combination ritual starting with a luxurious Hot Chocolate Milk Bath to soften the skin … Mocha-Mania Massage … This is followed
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by the Cocoa Cocoon – another exclusive Chocolate Treat. This body masque promises to even out skin tone, feed it anti-oxidants and hydrate it to the max’ (Singapore Government, 2003).

In modern consumer culture, especially in Singapore, as Chua Beng Huat argues, the body has become the locus of consumption: ‘Twenty-something Singaporeans are on the make, impatient for success. Deprivation from car-ownership, contextually the ultimate success symbol, has made their bodies the locus of consumption’ (2003: 32).

One link from the Romancing Website was to a ‘speed dating’ site. Acknowledging the problems Singaporeans reputedly have in trying to find the time for relationships in a fast-paced and competitive environment, O’Brien’s Sandwich Bar and Big O Café, amongst others, hosted the SDU’s speed dating game:

The latest move to fire up the dating scene … cafés, coffee joints and hip restaurants across the island could be joining in its mission to help singles find love … All singles have to do is sign up and show up … In speed dating, singles are paired up and get eight minutes to chat. Then, the man moves to meet the woman at the next table. At the end of the session organizers pass on the contact details of the people who indicated they’d like to see each other again (Singapore Government, 2003).

Both companies are quoted on the website as saying that they hope the dating programme will boost business and said they were glad to play a part in bringing singles together.

The website also offered links to The Dating Guide 2004, published on-line by Female, one of the highest circulation women’s magazines in Singapore. The Dating Guide 2004 offered expert advice on top places to dine, the best dating experiences, where to scout for men, types of men (such as The Corporate Man, The Sporty Man, The Intellectual Artsy Man and The Gay Straight Man), what men and women want, love horoscopes, dealing with couple envy and a dating survey (Singapore Government, 2004a). One piece of advice for women who want to make themselves more attractive to men was: ‘Learn to modulate your voice and vary the tone, speed and pitch while speaking. Cultivate a sexy laugh, but make sure it doesn’t sound false: just something you feel comfortable with’ (Singapore Government, 2004a).

The romance of capitalism and middle class affluence is expressed in the advice given to people who happen to be overseas at the time of dat-
Romancing Singapore

ing: ‘Hire a boat for an entire day and explore the Greek Isles together. Dance the tango in the middle of the ocean’, or: ‘The next time you’re in Brisbane, go for a gondola seafood dinner along the Brisbane River. You could almost imagine you’re transported to Venice. The setting is terribly romantic and you’ll feel inclined to feed each other the whole time’ (Singapore Government, 2004a)

‘When Boy Meets Girl. The Chemistry Guide’, the government’s official guide to successful dating, gives the following tips:

**first impression counts!**

Yes, they do! (sic) Unfortunately, many books are judged by their cover at first glance, so if you want to secure that second date, spruce yourself up a bit before you meet! Whether you are a natural beauty or cosmetically-challenged, you are what you make yourself out to be.

flash your pearly whites

Smiling is a great way to break the ice but don’t grin like a Cheshire cat the whole time ...

The adage you are what you eat cannot be more true – diet, exercise and skin care products are must-have investments for your personal portfolio (pun intended!). Apply toners moisturizers, scrubs and whatever traditional or artificial remedies, and don’t forget the rest of the body. Every nook and cranny of your visage must be primed and pampered before the big date ...

Personal hygiene doesn’t end with a shower and clean clothes. For close encounters between the sexes, oral hygiene cannot be ignored because there is no bigger turn-off than a foul mouth, reeking with leftovers from lunch! Extreme halitosis may require medical attention, so set up a dental appointment and fix that dragon-breath.

Horizontal stripes accentuate your wide girth, bright colours make you appear even bigger and black is in … (Singapore Government, 2004b).

The campaign also helped imbricate business with romance by employing the lexicon of commerce and by urging the use of business strategies to find a partner. The SDU’s official guide to finding a partner advised: ‘A date is very similar to a job interview. You have to sell yourself’ (Singapore Government, 2004b).

The SDU’s website was a site for the reproduction of gendered knowledge, which linked the focus on remaking the body to the capitalist marketplace of consumption. Its role was to prepare consumers for the marketplace of romantic relationships, by teaching them the correct
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way to perform marriagability. The way to ‘sell’ yourself is to change your behaviour and your body by using the products available.

The SDU also revamped another website at www.LoveByte.org.sg which issues ‘Dating Tips’ couched in terms of a commercial venture or military tactic:

Whether it’s a work project, or going on a vacation, or even going to war, smart people start by making plans. You figure out what you want to achieve, where you want to be, and how you’re going to get there. Then you take it step by step. So put your talent for organizing into your love life. Set realistic goals for the week – email or talk to that person you always wanted to, go to one party or group outing, meet one new person, arrange for or go on a date. Then decide what you need to have, who you need to network with, and where you need to be in order to achieve your goal (Singapore Government, 2004c).

And, as if to reassure what are commonly perceived to be risk-averse citizens that some risk is acceptable, another of Lovebyte’s ‘ Dating Tips’ drew parallels between the risk of falling in love and the risk associated with investing money:

As we get older, we either stop falling in love, or take longer to fall in love, or we’ve simply forgotten what it means to fall in love … the fall requires one to let go, and as we get older, we learn to avoid risk. As any investment advisor (i.e. someone who wants your money) will tell you, risk isn’t always bad – it’s just a matter of balancing risk (Singapore Government, 2004c).

In 2003, the government enlisted the help of Dr. Wei Siang Yu, a ‘self-styled sex guru’, also commonly known as Dr. Love. Wei himself became a minor global celebrity with his radical plans to televise couples’ attempts to create romance leading to procreation. Hoping to get couples to appear in bathtubs, Wei was reported as saying:

We will have people come and talk about their love lives and private lives. We will also talk about their strategies on love … We will not reveal the breast or the groin. Viewers will see only the back. This is not pornography, this is edu-tainment [education and entertainment] (Aljazeera, 2004).

He also had plans for a show called ‘Dr. Love’s Super Baby-Making Show’ in which couples from all over the world would compete in an
international baby-making contest. CNN reported that the competition was to see which couple from the nine foreign couples taking part would procreate first. The prize was to be US $100,000 – and a baby (Choi, 2004). Wei summed it up: ‘It’s like a baby race’ (Aljazeera, 2004).

In 2003, in conjunction with the Singaporean government, he launched a Baby Planning Camp, and ‘love boat’ cruises to an Indonesian resort while gaining a following for a weekly radio programme called ‘Sex in the Air’, where experts answered young people’s questions about sexual and reproductive health.

These days, Dr. Love operates an interactive sex education website (http://www.sexxie.tv/) for the dispensing of advice on sexuality, sexual health and so on, incorporating Twitter, Facebook, SMS and celebrity interviews. The explicit questions and descriptions from Singaporeans available to the global public on this website must surely help dispel the myth that Singaporeans are sexless workaholics.

The Straits Times reported on February 7, 2004, a series of government initiatives to encourage couples to get together. It was announced that:

This year it will be a $400,000 affair that will go on until December. There will be a dinner with eligible strangers this month, a mass wedding in May and to follow, tango parties and much more … But even while the authorities worry about ways to boost the country’s birth rate, which has hit a new low, the wooing of the Republic’s many singles to marry and have children by the Family Matters! Task Force will be leisurely and gentle … So on the agenda is a five course dinner for 30 unmarried men and women … The food will be provided by Halia Restaurant, which will have so-called aphrodisiacs – oysters, chocolate torte and a ginger and pumpkin broth are all on the menu … The restaurant is one of Romancing Singapore’s 80 ‘partners’, which include schools and grassroots organisations. One of them, SingPost, which runs the 62 post offices here, has come up with a set of four postcards to encourage people to do that old fashioned thing; put their feelings down in writing. As encouragement, there is a chance to win a holiday in Bintan … The cards are all in bright pink, each bearing a single word – I, Miss, U – or an image of a heart. They are free and can be picked up at any post office (Sim, 2004).

Since Romancing Singapore became a year-long festival, or ‘campaign’, private dating agencies have become a substantial commercial prospect in Singapore, as they are elsewhere in the world. Replacing the
old village matchmaker, they are now privatised, professionalised and credentialised. One such agency is a company called ‘Lunch Actually’, which was launched at the beginning of April 2004 from its offices in Raffles Place, the heart of Singapore’s Central Business District. ‘Lunch Actually’ locates itself directly in a particular sector of the class structure and in the economy of romance, when it advertises itself as:

Singapore’s premier first date specialist who arranges fun and quality dates for busy pro-active professionals in a discreet, fun and no pressure environment … Our clients are single and successful professionals who are seriously looking for that special someone but due to their hectic lives are unable to find them. Our database is full of managers, executives, directors, therapists, administrators, lawyers, accountants, doctors and entrepreneurs who are now looking to get more from life than just work … We believe that every individual deserves love, respect and companionship. Thus we strive to create supreme value and provide immaculate service to address the needs of our customers … We embody the entrepreneurial spirit, daring to dream and making our dream a reality. (Lunch Actually, 2004)

‘Lunch Actually’ has expanded from its beginnings in Singapore to become ‘Asia’s premier lunch dating company’, with branches in Kuala Lumpur and Hong Kong as well as Singapore. The patterns of association of unmarried people, and their sexual lives, are problematised, and put under the public gaze. Unmarried people, or ‘singles’, are interpellated as consumers who will be able solve their problems by lifestyle and leisure choices. The tension between production and consumption also involves the requirement for reproduction of the next generation.

The forms of social relations engendered by this prominent public display of devotion to the idea of romance are inextricably connected to strategies to reinforce not only gender relations, but also class distinctions, reflected in their reliance on the promotion and consumption of luxury goods and the configuring of romance through the technologies of leisure. It all came at a price. A programme called ‘Eating to a Beautiful Body’ was one of the many courses offered by the government agency to assist singles to promote themselves and perform marriageability. It was run at a cost of $120 for SDU members, and $150 for non-members (Singapore Government, 2004c). A course on how to flirt, advertised on the LoveByte.com website cost $85 (Singapore Government, 2004c). By
2006, the government had launched a million dollar partner connect fund to support commercial dating agencies to come up with new opportunities for singles to meet and the SDU had begun to reduce its involvement in the matchmaking business. In 2007 the government introduced an accreditation scheme to weed out disreputable operators, and training in how to run a dating agency began to be provided by the Workforce Development Agency. People searching for a life partner can now call on a large number of agencies including: One Plus One; A Dance Date; Love Express; Drinks at Eight; Clique Wise; It’s Just Lunch, Lovestruck, Exclusive Match; Champagne JSG; and Eteract. In the 2008 National Day Rally Speech, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong made a particular point of encouraging singles to resort to dating agencies to find a marriage partner as a matter of national importance. It was at that point that he suggested that the SDU (for graduates) and the SDS (non-graduates) should be merged and the class separations made less rigid, adding: ‘Once couples are married, we like them to have children’ (Lee Hsien Loong, 2008).

The government sponsored Romancing Singapore campaign was disbanded in 2009. A new pro-marriage campaign called ‘Beautifully Imperfect’ was launched in the same year. The Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports launched a competition on Facebook to find Singapore’s top 10 ‘beautifully imperfect’ people. Using the expertise of global advertising company Leo Burnett, the campaign’s mission was to inspire singles not to give up searching when they can’t find Mr. Right and to accept potential marriage partners ‘warts and all’. It encouraged singles to appreciate the beauty of each individual’s imperfections, an attempt perhaps to obviate the problems of women being too ‘choosy’, identified in the 1990s (Lyons-Lee, 1998: 315).

The Romance of Nation – Family and Capital

Anthony Giddens distinguishes passionate love, which has the quality of enchantment and the ability to free the individual from the mundane and generate radical behaviour, from romantic love. Passionate love is a more or less universal phenomenon, but romantic love is much more culturally specific (Giddens, 1992: 38). It is the culturally specific nature of the expressions of romantic love in the public arena in Singapore, along with its contradictions, which can be used to understand the creation of the gendered, consuming citizen in Singapore.
Romance and falling in love are learned cultural expectations (Illouz, 1999: 162). ‘Romance’ is the telling of a story, and, as Giddens (1992) reminds us, in the Western tradition, romance provided a narrative frame for an individual’s life. The story became individualised, providing a narrative thread for the self, (Giddens, 1992: 39–40) a personal rehearsal of one’s *curriculum vitae*, which had no particular reference to wider social processes. The rise of the narrative form of the novel in Europe and the personal narrative of romantic love occurred at around the same historical period (Giddens, 1992: 39–40), providing people with a cultural expectation of romance. In Singapore, the focus on romance which began in earnest as a public spectacle in 2003 is a government response to what it sees as a threat to the economic well-being of Singapore. It appears in one of the many ‘campaigns’ which circulate in the discursive realm and which attempt to constitute historically and economically specific forms of culture in Singapore.

Obviously, marriages based on mutual love existed in Singapore in the pre-independence period. Romantic love, however, is linked not so much with the rise of the novel, but with the rise of the nation. Romantic love in European history should be understood with reference to changes in relations between parents, the creation of the social space of the home, and the invention of motherhood (Giddens (1992: 41–42). Romance, and the choice of a life partner based on an individual’s irrational personal attraction to another, rose with the institution of the nuclear family as the only viable form of family arrangement for a modernising nation. In Singapore, an individual’s personal narrative is bound up with the narrative of the nation. The narrative frame is that of the political economy of Singapore. Private concerns such as the choice of life partner come to circulate in the public domain as political issues.

Chua (1995: 79) argues that in Singapore the public and private spheres are conceptualised as interactive. Rather than generating resistance to extraordinary events – where extraordinary events might include governmentental decisions such as sudden and monumental reversals of fertility policy – in Singapore a series of administrative changes could transform the mundane into a new configuration. A greater sense of continuity is then possible over a historical period. Chua explains the two elements of this continuity:

First, at the individual level, the memories of individual Singaporeans, who participated in and bear witness to the continuing changes, serve to
frame the changes as a sequence of continuous adjustments to the opportunities and pitfalls thrown up by the societal environment. Second, in line with the postulated conceptual relations between history and everyday life, and between political activities and the mundane sphere, at the societal level the two configurations may be rendered continuous by the public policies that were aimed directly at transforming the first everyday life into the second (Chua, 1995: 80).

People’s personal narratives overlap with the narrative of nation as a series of physical and attitudinal adjustments to shifts in policies, and the romance of the nation in Singapore overlaps with the romance of capital. One of the respondents to Velayutham’s (2004) survey of national sentiment was explicit about his/her relationship to the nation:

Our existence as Singaporeans is merely an economic one – from decisions to marry or not to marry, to have kids or not, and when we have them, on how they should be raised; to staying in HDB [public housing] or condominiums; to slogging on a job you don’t enjoy; to working freelance which better suits your temperament; to conforming to the social norms of the workplace and society; to risking losing your possessions and wealth to be really you; to those you befriend and those you shun; and your choice of country … these are all merely economic decisions (cited in Velayutham, 2004: 13).

Citizens can engage with the text of nation through the rhetoric of economic stability and their need for security, and according to Velayutham, the ‘constant focus on survival and development has reduced the state–citizen relationship to a transaction of social goods such that a broader emphasis on sociality has not developed’ (2004: 20). The state’s relationship to its citizens can come to be seen more as a commodity exchange than a genuine creation of community spirit and affection for nation. It might, therefore, empower evolving cultural agents, and put them in the position of demanding something in return for loyalty.

It is not difficult to see how the romance of nation and the romance of capital come to be understood as inseparable. The Romancing Singapore campaign provides a point of engagement with the text of nation which exploits citizens’ desire for status and a sense of personal worth, for material rewards for hard work, and for the comfort of knowing that the government is doing something to secure their futures.

Aihwa Ong (1999) uses the concept of the ‘family romance’ to examine the way in which the conjunction of illiberal political orders and
liberal economic systems – that is, the combining of capitalist strategies and state control – is represented in the public culture of the Chinese communities of Southeast Asia. She is referring to the ‘collective and unconscious images of family order that underlie public politics’ (Ong, 1999: 143). In Ong’s account, the family romance informs the way people imagine the operations of power between individuals and the state, between different ethnic groups, and between men and women (1999: 143). The ‘family romance’ is articulated in public displays, images and narratives which encode certain political messages. One such narrative configures images about the moral economy of the state. This is bound up with what she calls, after Lynn Hunt (1992) ‘the family model of politics’, a concept especially relevant for Singapore. It encompasses not only gender hierarchy and a commitment to a particular state vision of communitarian capitalism (Chua, 1995; Ong, 1999: 142), but also informs notions of authority and legitimacy of subaltern subjects in Asian modernity (Ong, 1999: 143).

The family romance as the capitalist adventure of the impoverished but diligent coolie who rises to community prominence, or the overseas Chinese entrepreneur who builds a transnational financial empire through discipline, pragmatism and hard work, belongs to the meta-narratives of contemporary Chinese family business amongst the Chinese diaspora, as Ong (1999) points out. It is also one of the founding narratives of colonial Singapore. The history of peranakan leaders, such as Song Ong Siang and Lim Boon Keng as early indigenous elites, celebrates their business acumen and ability to build networks with the colonising forces, as well as their kinship ties (Song, 1984). Chua Mui Hoong, a columnist for the Straits Times, reiterated the leitmotif of the immigrant family gaining status and wealth in the new land, as part of her personal narrative, while eulogising the nation itself:

Sometimes, I consider how my life might have turned out if my immigrant parents had taken a longer journey on the boat from China and disembarked not at Nanyang, but at Jinshan (San Francisco) ... But being Singaporean wasn’t too bad, I reckoned. ‘What other society would

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3 Peranakan: ‘Straits-born Chinese’; a culture arising from the marriage of immigrant Chinese men with local Malay women.

4 Nanyang: literally South Sea or South Ocean, a Chinese term referring to the geographical region south of China.
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have given me the opportunities that I’ve had here? Daughter of illiterate peasants, going on to Cambridge and Harvard?’ (Chua, 2004a).

The family model of politics produces a form of governmentality in which there is a clear attempt to coordinate ‘the moral economy of the family’ with the moral economy of the state (Ong, 1999: 152). The family romance ensures that marriage and the family maintain ‘solidarity with the given order’. The corporate structure of the Chinese ‘big business’ families is reflected in the corporatism of governmentality; capital, the family and the state form a tripartite sphere of force relations. The discourses of ‘the family romance of the state’ that Ong has described ‘allow the state to produce disciplinary knowledges and ideologically align family and state interests along a single moral continuum’ (1999: 151). Embedded in the structures of the family are contesting arenas of, on the one hand, financial and emotional security, liberation from loneliness, comfort, sexual fulfilment, commitment to others, and love; and, on the other, hidden violence, abuse and oppression. In Singapore the family is an amorphous notion. It encompasses ideas not only of the public narrative of the power of wealth and influence of the Chinese family, but also the private narratives of individual power to create subversive subject positions within and without it, and to resist its forms of oppression. The Romancing Singapore campaign deployed a romantic idealisation of the family. It was designed to reinforce heterosexuality, privileged above other forms of sexuality, and to hegemonise the social implications of hetero-normativity.

The political economy of the nation is supported by a moral economy which promotes marriage and the family as a state agenda. In 2004, then Member of Parliament, Dr. Ong Seh Hong, a father of three, delineated the boundaries of moral commitment to the nation in gendered terms. He politicised personal choice and pinpointed the problem for the future of the economy in the recalcitrance of the childless. Suggested penalties for ‘unlawful’ behaviour and failure to fulfil one’s national duty point to the nexus between self-discipline and the economy:

Procreation is not only the duty of everyone, but also the responsibility of every citizen towards his family, parents, society and country. Those ‘irresponsible’ people who shun the stork, he said, should realise they would become a liability to the society in future. To prevent this, he suggested making this group bear the costs of their old age by having them
contribute to an account called the ‘Preventive Eldercare Account’. The money in this account would then provide for their needs when they are old (Tee, 2004).

As if to reinvigorate the romance of the Confucian family, and calling on both the traditional and the modern to help sustain the family, it was reported that:

... [Ong Seh Hong] believed that Chinese philosopher Mencius’ words on filial piety – *bu xiao you san, wu hou wei da* – still have relevance today. Translated it means that of the three instances of unfilial behaviour, not having descendents is the worst ... Such messages ... could be transmitted through TV dramas ‘highlighting the sorry plight of a childless old couple and the great problems faced by an ageing society’ (Tee, 2004).

Romantic love is not about intimacy, rather it is a symbolic code (Luhmann, 1986). The narrative of self can be created through this symbolic exchange, located in popular culture and underpinned by market values.

**No Sex, Please – We’re Singaporean**

The focus on sexual activity and the need for young people as reproducers of the next generation to accommodate their sexual behaviour to political and economic forces have created sexualised narratives about Singapore society that circulate in extended discourses. In this linked series of utterances the distinction between the public and the private spheres is again blurred, and the spheres overlap and interconnect. These discourses are fed by what seems to be a plethora of street surveys and popular polls appearing in newspapers and journals around the world. The origin and authority of the surveys are rarely established. Even while appearing under the guise of statistics and facts, they are fraught with contradictions and are susceptible to manipulation for multiple political and commercial ends. They frequently take a prurient and sensational approach, endlessly reiterating the popular opinion that Singaporeans rarely have sex, at the same time conflating sexual activity with a falling population, as if contraception and personal choice played no part in the falling birth-rates. One example appeared in the *South China Morning Post*:

No sex please, we’re Singaporean. That is the impression given by a survey of 2369 Singaporean youths that found that only 85 of them, or 3.4 per cent, have had sex. This was despite the fact that 40 per cent
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were dating. The Singapore Planned Parenthood Association’s revealing survey has shown Singaporean youths aged 12 to 21 to be even better behaved than previously thought. ‘The findings surprised us too’, said John Vijayan, the association’s president. Admittedly, the majority of those surveyed were under 16. Even so, their lack of sexual promiscuity has again raised concerns over Singapore’s potentially shrinking population. A separate global survey by the maker of Durex condoms last year found Singaporean youths to be the least sexually active in the world. Young adults in Britain aged 16 to 21 had sex the most frequently, at 133 times a year, closely followed by the Americans, at 128 times a year. Singaporeans had the least sex, at 63 times a year. While not condoning underage sex, the straight-laced Singaporean government has been actively encouraging Singaporeans to have more babies … (Porter, 2000).

Textual mediations of reality such as this relocate sexuality and the body in the realm of the economy, and recreate them as objects of politics. In his desire to sensationalise sexual behaviour in Singapore (demonstrated by his by-line ‘No sex please, we’re Singaporean’) and, presumably to help sell newspapers, Barry Porter (2000) has erased certain contradictions and possible alternative interpretations of objective realities. He has exposed the ineluctable paradox contained in the notion that not having sex is deemed to be ‘good behaviour’, yet simultaneously raises concerns about not enough sexual activity. That Singaporeans are ‘better behaved’ because they have less sex than was supposed is a statement which speaks of prudery and repression, and lends itself to be read in the context of Foucault’s thesis that sexuality is a transfer point for power relations (Foucault, 1998: 103).

Control of sexuality is social control. Admitting that the survey respondents were almost all under 16 years old, Porter chooses not to problematise or question the provenance of a survey in which the social circumstances of an Asian society might inhibit truthful responses to a survey requesting information of an intimate nature. By linking sexual activity inexorably with childbearing, he has also ignored the most important transformation in sexual life of the last century. The ability to effectively prevent pregnancy through artificial means has created modern sexuality through its separation of sex from the exigencies of production (Giddens, 1992: 27). What Giddens has called ‘plastic sexuality’, that is, ‘sex severed from its age-old integration with reproduction, kinship and the generations’ (1992: 27) has been overlooked by Porter.
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Singaporeans are aware that the universally received wisdom about their putatively low-energy sex lives is titillating and amusing, especially for those outside Singapore. S. M. Ong’s report in *The New Paper*, a tabloid daily owned by Singapore Press Holdings, demonstrates the willingness of people to accept stereotypes, despite evidence to the contrary. Headlined ‘More sex please, we’re Singaporean’ he said:

I was watching The Tonight Show with Jay Leno on CNBC a couple of weeks ago and the guest was Dennis Miller. He made a joke about Singapore banning sex on buses. ‘What?’ I exclaimed Was this true? How did our government keep this horrific news from us, but a glib American comedian managed to hear about it? … After some checking, I found that it was actually in Bangkok, Thailand, where officials were urging students to refrain from coitus while commuting. But Bangkok somehow became Singapore as the story circulated and the uncorrected error soon became perceived fact. And thus another unflattering myth about our much maligned ‘fine’ city is born. After all, it made irresistible sense. We are the country that banned chewing gum, Cosmopolitan and Sex and the City. We might as well prohibit procreation on public transport, too. It would be just like us. Unlike Bangkok, a city whose name speaks for itself, the Republic of Singapore is synonymous with buzzkill (Ong, 2004).

In fact, the latest survey by Durex (2011), which claims to have 26,000 on-line respondents worldwide in 26 countries, compares countries across the ‘respondents having sex weekly’ category. It reports that 62 per cent of Singaporeans say they have sex weekly. This compares with 60 per cent in Australia, 55 per cent in the UK and 53 per cent in the US. The country recording the lowest number of people having sex weekly in this survey was Japan, with only 34 per cent. In addition, the Japanese reported a mere 15 per cent satisfaction rate. While I cannot vouch for the credibility of the survey, on the basis of its findings, it might be time to revise the slogan to: No Sex, please – We’re Japanese!

Munir Majid, writing in the Malaysian daily, *New Straits Times*, a Malaysian English-language daily, reiterated a commonly held perception that Singaporeans have empty lives and neuroses as a consequence of their acquisitive lifestyle and *kiasu* ethos:

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Apparently many among the 550,000 Singaporeans in their 20s and above who remain single have never held hands with, hugged or kissed a member of the opposite sex. This state of affairs is further supported by the report of the Singapore matchmaking agencies that three out of every 10 persons who approach them are of this ilk. We conclude, therefore, that they have never known a romantic relationship, have not known love, which is deprivation, like poverty. So there is this huge emptiness in this highly advanced and materially successful city-state of 4.2 million. Psychologist Daniel Koh of Mount Elizabeth-Charter Behavioural Health Services sees an average of one or two patients a month who have never dated. They suffer from anxiety or depression problems, an avoidant personality, and disclose they have never had a relationship ... Perhaps Singaporeans would understand romance and love a bit more if they were less single-mindedly material and economic in their approach to the good life (Majid, 2004).

Stories refuting previously held ‘truths’ about Singaporeans and their sex lives abound to such an extent that it is tempting to think it is not truth in which writers are interested, so much as continuing to fuel the already pervasive sexualised discourses. If young Singaporeans are ‘better behaved than previously thought’, it is then rather strange to find another survey of the same population only a couple of years after Porter’s reported this way:

Singapore teens are to be bombarded with horror pictures showing body parts disfigured by sexually-transmitted diseases in a government attempt to quell a growing cavalier attitude to casual sex. A 10-page magazine called Teenagers Ask, depicting the horrors of sex diseases, will be distributed to secondary three pupils ... the 15-year-olds will be shown colour pictures of people suffering from diseases such as gonorrhoea, chlamydia and syphilis, to illustrate the horrors of casual and premarital sex ... Singapore authorities have repeatedly expressed concern about rising teen promiscuity, with a recent survey finding that nearly one in five Singaporeans aged 13–18 have engaged in sexual intercourse ... Teenage abortions are also on the rise, with 1698 abortions, or 13 percent of last year’s total being performed on women aged 20 and younger ... A recent survey found one-third of some 870 Singaporeans aged 16 to 13 surveyed practise unsafe sex. Nearly half said they would have sex with a new partner without a condom (Singapore Window, 2002).

Sex is to be encouraged for reasons of reproduction of citizens, but not the ‘plastic sexuality’ described by Giddens which is dislodged from
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the realm of the family and its reproduction. Where moral constraints appear to be failing, disease is deployed as a discursive strategy to maintain the boundaries between plastic sexuality and the controlled sexuality found within marriage. Fifteen-year-old Singapore teenager Ben Tay, said: ‘The pictures are gross, but the scarier the better because it’s the fear factor that will stop people from taking sex casually’ (Singapore Window, 2002).

Seah Chiang Nee writing for Star (Malaysia) imagines an Asia in which sex is located in marriage for the purposes of procreation, and which has now been corrupted by Western influence and technological development:

Almost half the singles here admitted in a recent survey to having had sex, 50% with multiple partners – a sign that Singapore is no longer the puritan society it once was. … ‘To many youths, sex is no big deal. It’s for the thrill. There are no strings attached,’ marketing executive Adrian Lee, who lives with his girlfriend told the paper. For previous generations, sex was for procreation; today it is for recreation, said sociologist Alfred Choi. ‘It has been de-linked from marriage in places like Singapore, Hong Kong and Japan …’ Another revelation: six in 10 Singaporean men had multiple partners, compared to four in 10 women. About a quarter of both sexes said they had cohabited. Another survey found that teenagers were also experimenting with sex at a younger age … What is happening is a trend, or rather a Pandora’s Box opened up by Web pornography and imported lifestyles that are accessible to most teenagers … Liberal youths who believe in a permissive lifestyle are undergoing changes, never mind the consequences … The large conservative part of society, however, sees the changing values as having left behind a trail of broken marriages, AIDS, unwanted babies and even a few murders … The ‘smart’ island is linked by an underground fast-speed cable system to promote the use of the Internet for business and education. The computer has long been a common sight in the classroom. Many teens are savvy enough to put up a simple website. But the flip side is their exposure to a dark new world of pornography, sadism and perversion (Seah, 2003).

In a narrative which sexualises the problems facing Singapore society, it is the modern which is to blame: technological advances, global culture, cross-border epidemics, increased life choices for women, and the disengagement of sex from procreation. It is the modern which defiles
and adulterates an essentialised Asian-ness, giving rise to a dangerous sexual pluralism. To suggest that extramarital sex is only now occurring in ‘places like Singapore, Hong Kong and Japan’ (by which the author presumably refers to the industrialised neo-Confucian capitalist societies of East Asia) is to be disingenuous and sanctimonious at the very least, and to ignore history. One only needs consider the widespread and historically enduring existence of prostitution in Asian societies to refute such a specious claim (Brown, 2001; Lim, 2004).

Such erasure of knowledge can be as important as exposure and sensationalisation. The American television series ‘Sex and the City’ was banned from being aired on television in Singapore from its first appearance in the US in 1998 until July 2004. This once-popular series is the urban narrative of four middle class New York women. They appear to be obsessed with finding the elusive man who could become a life partner, or provide them with the ultimate sexual experience. Their daily search is fuelled by a middle class consumer hedonism made possible by well-paid jobs and high levels of disposable income. The compulsive acquisition of expensive clothes and designer-name shoes is one of the hallmarks of the show, and a defining feature of the characters. Why, in a state apparently so obsessed with conspicuous consumption, and where a sense of self is so intimately tied to appearance and gender performance (exemplified most notably in the Romancing Singapore campaign), would ‘Sex and the City’ be banned? One contributor to website islandSingapore.com wondered what the controversy was all about, saying: ‘Considering the hubbub surrounding the award-winning HBO dramedy arrival on Singapore airways … you’d think the foul-mouthed foursome had invented sex or something’ (islandSingapore.com, 2004, original emphasis).

I suggest the answer lies in Giddens’ concept of plastic sexuality (1992: 20). As ‘decentred sexuality’ plastic sexuality can ultimately liberate women from the constraints of the patriarchal family and the compulsion to produce and sustain the next generation. It provides the power for women to reclaim sexual pleasure for themselves. That is not simply liberating; it is subversive. Giddens sums up his argument about the subversive possibilities of intimacy in a modern society:

Plastic sexuality can be moulded as a trait of personality and thus is intrinsically bound up with the self. At the same time – in principle – it frees sexuality from the rule of the phallus, from the overwhelming importance of male sexual experience. (Giddens, 1992: 2)
Heng and Devan (1995) have taken this concept further in the case of Singapore. Referring to the state’s fantasies of control over the ‘body-machine’, they put it this way:

The pleasurable and the economic are not only read as separate in Singapore today, but inimical (the trope of the machine allowing no role for pleasure, which by its very concession of unusefulness, non-necessity, and excess disables the fantasies of order and regularity on which a local notion of the economic must depend): indeed, pleasure is tacitly suspected of subverting what would otherwise have been an economic reproductive sexuality, distorting this instead into its opposite, a self-indulgent noneconomy (Heng and Devan, 1995: 211).

Giddens argues that the changes now affecting sexuality in modern society are profoundly revolutionary and relationships are transformed by modernity into ‘a transactional negotiation of personal ties by equals’ (Giddens, 1992: 3). The possibility for women to attain sexual pleasure in a relationship which has been freely entered into can be understood in terms of Braidotti’s (1994a) discursive ethics, which magnifies, rather than elides, sexual difference. It is revolutionary in that it can allow women to reclaim sexual fulfilment; it can generate a sort of sexual counter-memory located at the very site of sexual difference. Plastic sexuality can be a point of exit from the phallogocentric mode, an angle ‘through which women can gain access to a nonlogocentric mode of representation of the female feminist subject’ (Braidotti, 1994b: 160).

Giddens’ argument is all the more illuminating for a study of gender and sexuality in a masculinised corporate state which fetishises population growth and the maintenance of the nuclear family as the bedrock of capitalist production and consumption:

Intimacy implies a wholesale democratising of the interpersonal domain, in a manner fully compatible with democracy in the public sphere. There are further implications as well. The transformation of intimacy might be a subversive influence upon modern institutions as a whole. For a social world in which emotional fulfillment replaced the maximizing of economic growth would be very different from that which we know at present (Giddens, 1992: 3).

That social world would be very different from the Singapore we see in the twenty-first century. The six-year ban on ‘Sex and the City’ was apparently an attempt to control culture and manipulate the production
of discursive objects appropriate for a Singapore which emphasises the maximisation of economic growth as a personal and national goal. Bans on sexually explicit material are, however, not consistent. Dr. Wei’s ‘Sex in the Air’ and advertisements for the avowedly erotic love boat cruises co-existed with bans on ‘Sex and the City’, *Cosmopolitan* magazine (re-launched in 2011 after a 28-year ban), and soft-porn magazines *Playboy* and *Penthouse*. Janet Jackson was once deemed ‘too sexy for Singapore’ and TV series ‘Six Feet Under’ and ‘Ally McBeal’ were censored at various times.

In Singapore, instrumental rationality suffuses social life, and intimacy cannot escape marketisation. The intimate lives of Singaporeans have global exposure. John Aglionby reported in the *Guardian* newspaper some of the ways in which the search for intimacy in Singapore can be relocated into the public sphere, transformed into a product and valorised as a luxury consumer good:

Crouching like Sumo wrestlers but with their hands level with their navels and palms facing down, Rebecca and Henry Hsu gaze into each others’ eyes. The two 36-year-olds’ love for each other is plain to see, or at least their trust in Tim Hamons, their visual therapist. ‘This is all about awareness, just being aware of what’s happening in your body’, Tim soothingly intones against a background of African music playing in a luxury villa on the Indonesian island of Bintan. ‘We’re going to do movement and sound together, pushing our energy’. He then performs a very credible imitation of a monkey, bouncing on his knee, pushing down on his hands and expelling the words ‘Hooh! Hooh! Hooh!’ Without a trace of embarrassment, the general manager of a Singaporean mobile phone company and his accountant wife follow suit three times. Highly-educated professionals paying hundreds of pounds to travel overseas to behave like monkeys in a bid to conceive might seem, at best, bizarre; at worst, cultish. But for Wei Siang Yu, an unconventional Singaporean doctor, it is part of his approach – which he calls biopsychosocialanalysis, aka lifestyle assessment – to solving one of the country’s increasingly alarming social crises, the collapsing birthrate. ... More and more doctors and researchers believe the problem is not so much about infertility … but what Dr. Victor Goh, at the National University of Singapore’s department of obstetrics and gynaecology, calls ‘lifestyle impotency’. ‘A lot of people are so stressed out they don’t even see sex as an important area of their activity’, he says. ...The Hsus are a classic example of Singapore’s low libido. Both
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work long hours in demanding jobs and admit they have few moments together ... Hence two weeks ago they were one of the first couples to sign up on Dr. Wei's course ... The Bintan experience begins with the movement, meditation, visual therapy – ‘Give a gift from your heart using only your eyes’, is one of Tim’s favourite exercises ... then goes on to massaging techniques, and further counseling on diet, fantasies, sex toys and lifestyle (Agionby, 2003).

Immense verbosity about sexuality is a feature of Singapore society, as it is elsewhere in the modern world. The fact that the London Guardian, the Melbourne Age, The Washington Post, Agence France Presse, and other print and electronic news sources around the world publish news about the sex life of Singaporeans confirms the global reach of this verbosity.

In his discussion of the explosion of the discourses of sex in the modern period, Foucault (1998: 18) points to the simultaneous existence of a restrictive economy within which tact and discretion and ‘a tightening up of the rules of decorum’ about sex was at work, with a simultaneous multiplication of discourses concerning sex in the field of exercise of power itself. In Singapore, what Foucault (1998: 18) calls ‘the policing of statements’ – most obviously found in the attempts to censor the Internet, the censoring of foreign films, and the celebrated case of the banning of ’Sex and the City’ – co-exists with ‘an institutional incitement to speak about it’. While the Singapore government might be known as ‘straight-laced’, and the creator of a ’buttoned-down society’, boring and obsessed with rules (Reyes, 2000), sex is in the public arena.

One important mechanism for the deployment of sexuality as a means of concentrating power is consumer culture. In modern consumer culture, especially in Singapore, as Chua (2003) has pointed out, and I have reiterated, the body is the locus for consumption. Aglionby’s interview with Rebecca and Henry Hsu is an example of the reach of individualising processes and citizens’ acceptance of the government’s gaze as a normal aspect of life. Having subjected themselves to Dr. Wei’s ‘biopsychoanalysis, aka lifestyle assessment’ through an organisation connected to the Ministry of Community Development and Sport, they further expose their private lives to the public gaze with the following answer to the interviewer’s questions:

We are together, yet there’s no time to say, ‘I love you’, Henry says. ‘In the night, sometimes if I touch her – not [during] those four or five
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[fertile] days – she will say, Oh no, don’t touch me, please. I have to wake up tomorrow at 7!’ So OK, good night’ (Aglionby, 2003).

Foucault has argued that institutions of power speak more and more about sex, even in so-called puritanical societies (as Singapore is often called) and that ‘there is a determination on the part of the agencies of power to hear it spoken about, and to cause it to speak through explicit articulation and endlessly accumulated detail’ (1998: 18). Institutions can provide explicit detail which might be considered pornographic in other contexts. The following is an excerpt from a Ministry of Community Development and Sport publication called ‘Planning for Babies: how babies make your life complete’, from the section entitled, ‘Making Babies’:

Position can be a factor in getting pregnant, though if you have a major reproductive problem, then position may not be relevant any more. But assuming that you are both ‘averagely’ fertile, but you just want to give conception a little boost – which way to have sex? Your aim is to deposit sperm as close to the cervix as possible … (cited in AWARE, 2004: 47).

This advice constitutes what Braidotti calls ‘new medical pornography’ – a form of representation that stops short of titillating but nevertheless allows manipulation and appropriation of the body by the state (1994a: 69). The image above allows the appropriation of the bodies of both men and women by the state. And it appears pornographic because, in Braidotti’s terms: ‘The secret is to titillate the audience without fulfilling it, arouse it so as to manipulate it. This is true pornography: that of the language of power and manipulation; it is a structure of representation, not just a matter of content’ (Braidotti, 1994a: 70).
CHAPTER FIVE

Resisting the Hardsell

Pragmatism vs Love

Despite the mission of the Social Development Network and its predecessors, ‘Family Matters! Singapore’ and the ‘Romancing Singapore’ campaign to hegemonise marriage and procreation, alternative texts have been generated in both alternative and mainstream spaces. As mobile and transitory points of resistance, they are sites where evolving cultural agents can write their own scripts and where their own counter-narratives emerge as the performative that may unsettle the pedagogy.

On the issue of the government promoting sex, filmmaker and satirist Colin Goh lamented:

Firstly, even if we wanted to, there aren’t many places to have sex in Singapore. Living with your parents? You must time trysts to avoid being summoned to come and eat dinner or whatever. Living by yourself? You’re probably working most days to pay the mortgage, so by the time you’re done, you’re not in the mood. Going overseas is expensive (assuming you have leave), doing it in cars and parks means risking being caught, and when even popular lovers’ haunts like Changi Village Road are shut down for national security reasons, what are we supposed to do? Start an account with Hotel 81? ¹ … We’re unromantic because we have little space to be ourselves. It doesn’t help that we must now add romance to the many spheres in which we’re already judged … Having more get-to-know-you events is great, but our hyper-competitive work ethic, high property prices, intrusive policies and even our erstwhile family values probably have more to do with why we’re not procreating (Goh, 2004).

¹ Hotel 81: a budget backpackers’ hotel and brothel in Geylang, a ‘Red Light’ district known for its high levels of sex trade activity.
According to AWARE, the kiasu society the state has created in Singapore has had a transformative effect on people’s values. This confounds not only the rhetoric that the ‘family is the mainstay of society’, but the ‘Asian values’ which are allegedly the ontological foundation of the nation. AWARE’s report acknowledges that modernity has privileged ‘lifestyle’ above traditional desire for a family, and that Singapore’s competitiveness might help deliver material wealth, but it also has negative consequences:

In contrast with earlier generations that seemed to equate a large family with a higher quality of life, the reverse seems to be true in present day Singapore. Many are weighing the time, energy and effort to bring up a child against other factors (e.g. how conducive they think Singapore is for a growing family) and coming to the conclusion that parenthood is either inconvenient or undesirable in current-day Singapore, and at this time in their personal lives when they are enjoying a lifestyle that does not include children (AWARE, 2004: 79).

Journalist Seah Chiang Nee reported on a television show which exposed what is increasingly coming to be seen as the negative side of Singaporeans’ pragmatic approach to life:

The moderator of a TV forum, Dr. Joseph Ozawa, addressed a young, single Singaporean woman: ‘I’m going to put it to you straight, lady. What do you say is more important in marriage – love or money?’ Gina Lim, 22, hesitated: ‘Umm, love or money? That’s a tough one.’ An 18-year-old British student interjected: ‘I can’t believe this! The very fact that you have to ask this is a bad indictment of society here’. Gina finally chose a non-controversial answer: ‘I think both are equally important’. She was one of three men and four women taking part in Face 2 Face, a new forum show on national television. That week the subject was: ‘Is money vital for a good marriage’? … Surprisingly, the women named ‘money’ as the most crucial factor in a successful marriage. Their views reflected them as a ‘practical’ lot. Their rationale: you can’t live on just love and fresh air … Sam Jones, whose father works here, [was] asked what he thought. The teenager said he was sure his answer would provoke derision, but he would say it anyway. ‘It’s something called love. That’s the most important thing in a marriage.’ The camera swung to another participant, Ivy Singh-Lim … who played an imaginary violin and everyone laughed. The forum drew a line between the men and the women, who put more emphasis on money, or, as they put it, security.
... The woman’s opinion reflects a widespread view here. It is now so established that ‘pragmatic’ Singaporean youths are finding it hard to say the words ‘I love you’ … Singapore women are increasingly being stereotyped as money-minded and demanding … The Singapore girl is being stereotyped, one columnist put it, as someone who ‘has a calculator for a brain and sizes up potential mates with the eye of a scrupulous quality controller’ (Seah, 2003).

Well-known Singapore writer Catherine Lim has lampooned this attitude in a short story called ‘A Singapore Fairy Tale’. In response to a question in the story, ‘What do Singaporean men and women want of each other as marriage partners?’ the correct answer is: ‘Singapore men like their women to be all dollar ed up and the women like all the men to be Cashanovas, for the sake of marital har-money!’ (Lim, 1998: 102).

Women’s pragmatism in choosing life partners in the economic and social climate of modern Singapore has led to a lamentable decline in old-fashioned values and the waning of passion. If, as Lee Kuan Yew believes, ‘Falling in love is a Western fantasy’ (Ibrahim, 1996) then the fantasy has been reprised and repackaged as part of the ‘Romancing Singapore’ campaign. It has met with limited success, however, since the pragmatic, rather than romantic, choice of a life partner is now the prerogative of women as well as men, and women do not always make themselves available as national resources. One Singapore woman is certainly ambivalent about her national duty to have more children.

The real enemy is time, or rather, lack of it – especially given Singapore’s economic and social climate. Kids suck up your time faster than you can say Pokemon … If you take a few years off work to start a family, you have to accept being put on a slower career track while your peers surge ahead of you … Having a third child may just mean kissing the dream condo goodbye (cited in Mauzy and Milne, 2002: 188).

Government attempts at matchmaking appear in a context of a social structure and certain spatial arrangements that are in some ways inimical to forming intimate relationships. It is publicly acknowledged that the near impossibility for young people to escape the social gaze because of regulations governing the availability of HDB flats for unmarried people, and the moral constraints of the family, are counterproductive. It is not easy to find private space and intimacy in Singapore. Not long after the Prime Minister’s National Day Rally Speech in 2001, the Straits
Times published a twelve page special section on tips for ‘making babies’. The Atlantic Monthly reports that:

The section was titled ‘Yes, Prime Minister! An All-Out Make-Out Guide’. On one page was an article headlined ‘Get Lucky Spots’, which included tips on the best places in Singapore to have sex in a car ... a columnist exhorted Singaporean men to ‘rise to the occasion and do your country proud’, and gave instructions on how to use newspaper and tape to cover car windows during automobile trysts. Another piece itemized the essential components of a ‘Make-out Kit’: among other things, K-Y Jelly; Wet Ones, to ‘clean up, freshen up and mop up’; favourite romantic/sexy CDs; and ‘cushions, for extra padding, comfort and lift’ (Kurlantzik, 2001).

The BBC news reported on a study carried out by Professor Victor Goh from the department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology at the National University of Singapore. His study found that Singaporeans have sex just six times a month, compared with three times a week in many other countries. He said: ‘At the end of the day, when all their other responsibilities have been fulfilled, Singaporeans just feel too tired to perform ... ‘To improve your sex life, you just have to make time for it ... It’s just like exercise’ (BBC News Online, 2002). For Professor Goh, sex is a skill to be mastered if one is to ‘perform’ properly.

Surveys indicating how infrequently Singaporeans have sex as a result of their stressful lifestyles seem to be a popular topic of prurient interest. Whether these surveys are legitimate or accurate is less a point of interest here than the fact that they appear in the press, and circulate as truths in the public domain. Singapore is represented as a country of passionless workaholics. Singapore social activist Constance Singam, however, has tried to expose the alternative view of sex and success in Singapore:

We are too busy making money. Buying that condo, that car, which doesn’t give us the time nor the inclination to be reflective ... The media’s role in influencing opinions, attitudes and perceptions cannot be underestimated. An awful lot is being published about sex and women. Take, for example, the recent report of ‘Zoe’, the 14-year-old who slept with 25 men. I often think of young women such as her who are hopelessly lost and lonely, longing for love and appreciation. Where would she learn about love, about healthy and wholesome sex? Not from her
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parents who are, themselves, dysfunctional – with no time for her. Not from women’s magazines which are more interested in sensational and sleazy stories than in being responsible for the harmful messages that their stories convey to the young (Singam, 2004: 3).

Since it is difficult to get an HDB flat if you are unmarried, Singaporeans need ‘practical romance’. A musical review staged in time for St Valentine’s Day 2011 was entitled ‘Broadway 4 Suakus: You, Me, HDB’ (Hearts Don’t Break). The Straits Times reported:

It promises to be a humorous introduction to Broadway music and, above all, a romantic evening. As for the acronym HDB, which resonates with Singaporeans as standing for the Housing Development Board, actor-director Jonathan Lim, 36, explains with a chuckle: ‘Singaporeans need romance with a practical edge. Nothing stirs the Singaporean heart more than an HDB flat waiting to be applied for’ … On the theme of HDB flats, Lim says: ‘We’ve been spoofing things like the Romancing Singapore campaign for a long time. But if we’re going to get Singaporeans tumbling into bed as soon as possible, you can’t just talk about it. You have to talk rebates. So if I tell you that you’re going to get $11,000 off an HDB flat, of course, you will hook up. It’s very straightforward. And so as all things in Singapore, you go straight for the jugular. HDB flats’ (Tan, 2011).

In Singapore, the culture that is created by the interface of the public and the private, and the perception that the state is literally everywhere (Chua, 2003: 177) does not go uncontested. AWARE’s position paper (Beyond Babies, 2004) reports that people feel that the government intervenes too much in people’s lives:

While it may be the state’s prerogative to be concerned about declining national TFR figures, fertility decisions remain the domain of the individual. The government should be less invasive in its approach to population and fertility issues. The state must still lay down ground rules and provide a coherent and comprehensive enabling environment for Singaporeans to make informed decisions about fertility. Its regulatory role is therefore more behind-the-scenes work as the ‘meta-regulator’ like a gatekeeper, rather than as an enforcer on the ground like a normal regulator … The State cannot do it all’ (AWARE, 2004: 47).

Catherine Lim satirizes the government’s management of society via endless civic campaigns through her character, the troubled civil serv-
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ant Sai Koh Phan. In Lim’s short story, ‘The Malady and the Cure’, Sai Koh Phan is suffering a psychological disorder because of the extreme anxiety caused by his attempts to win the ‘Ideal Civil Servant of the Year Award’:

Mr. Sai Koh Phan leaves the doctor’s clinic in a daze. He walks into the bright sunshine outside, and he looks at the many campaign posters around, and the pride and gratitude once more surge into his heart, in recollection of the years of total fidelity to their admonitions:

Don’t litter
Don’t spit
Don’t stop at two
Don’t dirty public toilets
Don’t sniff glue
Don’t waste water
Be courteous …
Don’t be ‘kia su’ …
Don’t grow long hair
Don’t grow
Don’t (Lim, 1989: 20–21)

Satirical websites devoted to the lampooning of Singapore society have used humour as part of a trenchant critique of the government’s apparent obsession with the sex lives of Singaporeans, amongst other issues. One such popular website is to be found at www.talkingcock.com, which uses and promotes ‘Singlish’. Under the heading: ‘Gahmen’ Committee Prepares Shagging Package’, Soi Kok Chiow wrote:

The committee set up to look into ways to tackle the baby dearth, Copulation Officials to Inform & Teach Us to Screw (or C.O.I.T.U.S.) will put up a ‘practical and sensible package that will address the heart-felt needs of young families in Singapore’ … The suggestions include ways to rejuvenate Singaporean men’s flagging desire, as well as increase fornication frequency. Some ideas are encouraging married couples to watch porn together, to incorporating soundproof walls in the design of HDB flats. Recently married Mr Lam Boey Kee said, ‘Singapore is so sterile, my mojo all habis. At least the Gahmen can let my wife and me

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2 Talking Cock: A local Singaporean term meaning either to talk nonsense or to engage in idle banter.
3 Gahmen: Singapore slang for ‘government’.
4 Habis (Malay): finished, over.
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watch a bit of ... you know, action, lah\textsuperscript{5} ... must put soundproof wall in the HDB flat lah, if not my mudder can hear all the ooh and ahh. Si beh pai she \textsuperscript{6} Another idea, described as ‘sensible’ by Mr Boh, was to give tax rebates for KY jelly, and implementing COEs\textsuperscript{7} for the purchase of condoms (Soi, 2004).

Kway Png (a pseudonym referring to a Hainanese dish popular amongst Singaporeans), another contributor to the website, listed ‘The Top 20 Reasons Why Singaporeans Aren’t Having Sex or Children.’ Under the guise of a survey, Singaporeans were quizzed about why they are not having sex or children. Some of the answers were:

Gahmen told me last time to stop at 2, so I thought better be kiasu and stop at zero ... Sex is cheaper overseas, like in Batam or Hat Yai, so I thought I’d have sex there instead ... I’m too scared that I’ll accidentally call out my maid’s name during sex ... Romancing Singapore campaign is too subtle. We need a Let’s Shag, Singapore! Campaign ... If I have kids, that means I’ll have to start watching weird shit on TV like Teletubbies or Barney, and I’d rather die ... I do’wan to mess up my hair. Do you know how much hairdressing costs nowadays? ... If I have chewren,\textsuperscript{8} wait till they take all my Hello Kitty dolls, then how? ... Are you kidding? I do’wan to have the same kind of fucked-up children like my parents did ... Too scared. During horror movies, the ones who always kena\textsuperscript{9} killed first by the psycho serial killer are the ones having sex ... I’m just too shacked out from masturbating to Internet porn ... Every time I have sex, I recall that the Gahmen wants me to have sex, and frankly, thinking of the Gahmen when having sex totally kills my mood (Kway Png, 2004).

The TalkingCock website’s lampooning of the government’s focus on the sex lives of citizens opens up sites for the contestation of other aspects of Singapore society. TalkingCock’s ‘20 reasons’ can be seen as a discursive reversal: a diffusion, even disempowerment, of the authorized text of nation, by ridicule. The internet and other spaces for textual

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\textsuperscript{5} lah: Hokkien particle used to signify strong assertion; used like a full stop at the end of a sentence.

\textsuperscript{6} Si beh pai she (from Hokkien): That would be extremely embarrassing.

\textsuperscript{7} COE: Certificate of Entitlement; a certificate that must be purchased when buying a car in Singapore. The government limits the number of COEs that can be issued.

\textsuperscript{8} Chewren: children.

\textsuperscript{9} Kena: A Malay term denoting that something has happened – ‘always kena killed first’: ‘always get killed first’.
representation constitute not so much points of transfer of power, but nodes of disjuncture of power where multiple aspects of Singapore society can be satirized: *kiasu* society, the commodification of sex, a patronizing and infantilizing government, status driven citizens, the negative and constraining features of family life, the demand for obedience and conformity, and the government’s obsessive attempts to restrict the wrong kind of sex. Too much emphasis on sex has generated newly created spaces of contestation. TalkingCock’s ‘Ode to Romancing Singapore’ blames the government for destroying romance through economic rationalism and by creating citizens who are driven only by the desire for acquisition:

‘True Love: an ode to the Romancing Singapore Campaign’
I love you,
You love me
And the Gahmen wants
Us to make three
They don’t care
About romance
They just want us
In each other’s pants
But they should not forget
Why we get wed
We do it for
The HDB flat
Our true love is
Not for our mate
Alas, you see,
It’s for the real estate

And as for why
We procreate
We’re aiming for
The tax rebate
No romance
In Singapore?
Just blame it on
The Gahmen, lor (TalkingCock, 2004).

On 28 January, 2003, the month before the first ‘Romancing Singapore’ Festival began in earnest, the *Straits Times* reported that many people lacked...
interest in the idea. Steven Chia, an executive producer who is unmarried, said he would join in the festivities only if he came across them by accident. His intention was to resist the government’s attempts to organize a context for falling in love. Lamenting the rationalisation of romance he was quoted as saying:

> Romance is a state of mind rather than a concept. It’s got to be a spur of the moment thing, impulsive, impractical and fun. I don’t believe it can be achieved through programmes, campaigns, talks, and so on. If you are not the romantic type it won’t happen (cited in Tee, 2003).

Businesswoman Neo Chia Reei was also unable to accept that the government’s attempts at manipulation of space and atmosphere:

> I’ve attended many mass activities organized by grassroots organizations. I can’t imagine how we can feel romantic when the atmosphere is not right. It is impossible to express our love in such an [hot, humid, and noisy] environment (Tee, 2003).

Other statements of both indifference and outright objection to commercialisation and the government’s promotion of the fantasy of romance have appeared in the letters pages of the *Straits Times*. Zheng Huifen said: ‘It seems to me that the idea of love has been overrated … the concept of romantic love is so terribly unreliable and overused …’ (Zheng, 2003). And Benjamin Seet added: ‘I feel that the Romancing Singapore is putting love in a box. There are countless ways to express love other than chocolates and roses’ (Seet, 2003). Journalist Karl Ho, writing in the *Straits Times* reacted even more strongly:

> Love is in the little things. That was the premise behind the month-long Romancing Singapore campaign, which ended last Friday. It maintained that tiny gestures reign supreme in the bumpy course of love. Well, let me tell you this: it was also the little things about Romancing Singapore that annoyed the hell out of me. Sure, given the ample warning, I was able to sidestep festival events like the Romancing Couple Karaoke Competition 2003. But no matter where I turned, whiffs of the lovefest assaulted me like the cheap perfume of a stalker who refuses to go away. In the office, I saw stacks of ‘Love Is … The Little Things’ CDs on a common table, up for grabs. … There was no escaping the romance overkill, and I’m glad the festival is finally over. Instead of making me lovesick, Romancing Singapore has made me sick of love … the festival made quite a few of my peers see red too: We know what love means, thank
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you very much. There was no need to rub it in our faces. As a teacher friend of mine exclaimed in frustration: ‘Are we so sad and pathetic that we have to be taught by the Government how to love?’ Are we really indeed? … The festival reinforced Singapore’s reputation as a nanny state … [it was] a mere extension of the commercial monstrosity that is Valentine’s Day. Mass-marketing love to the public trivialises it … I find a marketing campaign that sells a saccharin-sweet image of love a bitter pill to swallow … So, no more Romancing Festivals, please. If you want people like me to get hitched and contribute to the birth rate, don’t throw love at our faces. Leave us to experience love ourselves. And leave Hallmark sentimentality to cardmakers (Ho, 2003).

Ho used his views on Romancing Singapore to open up spaces for a more extensive critique of Singapore society, focusing on the government’s infantilisation of citizens, their high-stress lifestyles, the commercialisation of human relationships and the barely concealed hypocrisies of everyday life.

At least some Singaporeans were also discomfited by the Dr. Wei’s use of media to promote sex, and the international media coverage it attracted. A series of letters contesting this apparent attempt at hegemonising the sexualised narrative of nation appeared in the Straits Times in February 2004, at the appearance of the second ‘Romancing Singapore’ Campaign. Of particular concern was the focus on people as reproductive resources. A reader of the Straits Times, Sara Yin Pai-sze, was concerned that a sophisticated society such as Singapore could support ‘such ridiculous ideas’, and was ‘appalled and embarrassed’ by Dr. Wei’s description of a typical format for the late night chat show (such as filming couples in bathtubs) and by ‘The Dr. Love Super Baby Making Show’ (Yin, 2004). Many young people scoffed at the old SDU and its attempts to match people with life partners:

Over at Liquid, a neon-lit bar not far from the business district, the young singles seem less concerned about allegations of eugenics than exasperated by government paternalism. Derisive laughter arises from the young hipsters reclining on a red velvet sofa when the unit is mentioned. ‘SDU – Single, Desperate and Ugly,’ says a thirty-something woman in a miniskirt

10 Reports about the ‘Romancing Singapore Campaign’ and Dr. Wei have appeared in The Weekend Australian, 24–25 April 2004, BBC World Service Today, 16 February, 2004 and other newspapers and on-line news sites internationally such as Aljazeera News Global on 26 January 2004 and 15 February 2004.
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and open-backed shirt. ‘Those guys are geeks – the government doesn’t think we can do better on our own,’ says another young woman. ‘You kind of get fed up sometimes with all the hand-holding. We’re grown-ups. And the government is not our parent’ (Murphy, 2004).

Kenneth Paul Tan has pointed to the PAP’s loss of two seats in the 1984 election as a rejection of Lee Kuan Yew’s eugenicist policies. The ridiculing of the SDU as ‘Single, Desperate and Ugly’, he argues, is a continuing expression of Singaporeans’ moral repugnance at the rationalisation of sexual behaviour (K. P. Tan, 2003: 415).

The Paradox of Romance

The paradox facing Singapore is to be found in the very material success for which Singapore is now celebrated. It finds its most, in government terms, ominous manifestation in the apparent unwillingness of young Singaporeans to relinquish the pleasures of hedonism for the potential drudgery of family life. The ‘Romancing Singapore’ campaign promotes ‘dating’ as a privileged site for the fetishisation of market oriented leisure activities presented as romance and intimacy (Hudson, 2004). Romance is commodified and commodities are romanticised. Conceptions of intimacy and sexuality come to be defined and understood through the consumption of self-enhancement products.

Daniel Bell recognised the cultural contradictions of capitalism when he argued that there was an inherent disjuncture between the social structure and the culture. The social structure that the PAP has developed privileges capitalism as the only legitimate political and economic arrangement for Singapore; individual security and happiness depend on the nation’s economic success (Chua, 2003). Shopping is regarded as the prime leisure activity and consumption the prime site for expression of self. Bell has argued that there is a:

... disjunction between the norms of the culture and the norms of the social structure, but also an extraordinary contradiction within the social structure itself. On the one hand, the business corporation wants the individual to work hard, pursue a career, accept delayed gratification – to be, in the crude sense, an organization man. And yet, in its products and its advertisements, the corporation promotes pleasure, instant joy, ‘relaxing and letting go. One is to be ‘straight’ by day and a ‘swinger’ by night (Bell, 1979: 71–72).
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An irony of the post-industrial world is that the production principle must now be subjugated to the pleasure principle when one is not engaged in production. Dick Hebdige has described this phenomenon as part of his premise that postmodern society means, if nothing else, a loss of wholeness and the disintegration of the unitary subject. The rigid postures of the past have been unfrozen (Hebdige, 1993: 81) and ‘Capitalism these days has absolutely no stake whatsoever in the idea of individuals being tied to fixed and stable identities’ (Hebdige, 1993: 82). Citizens are required to order themselves through certain technologies of self-discipline to fulfil the demands of capitalist productivity. In Singapore the desire for economic success and status is underpinned by a commitment to hard work, competitiveness and the ethos of kiasu-ism. Citizens are, at the same time, required to abandon themselves to an alternative range of technologies dictated by irrational desires, whims, or needs created by global and local markets. Hebdige argues that:

The ideal consumer is not the ideal productive worker of an earlier epoch – a sexually repressed nobody alienated from sensual pleasure, subjected to the turgid, life-denying principles of the working week and the nuclear family. Instead, the ideal consumer … is a complete social and psychological mess … rather, it is … the absolute decentred subject, the irresponsible, unanchored subject: the psychotic consumer, the schizophrenic consumer (Hebdige, 1993: 82–83).

Chua has contextualised this idea for Singapore: ‘Such is the inherent logic of capitalism: high savings and asceticism are necessary in the period of economic “take-off,” while hedonism is the necessary ethos of a mature economy’ (Chua, 2003: 37). This, of course, confounds the state’s attempts at control of the body-machine, to which Heng and Devan allude. It disturbs the illusion of control created by the use of this trope and the belief that if the body is a machine, ‘what eludes, limits, or obstructs absolute knowability, management and control, can be routinely evacuated’ (Heng and Devan, 1995: 199). A mature economy such as Singapore’s is dependent for the maintenance of the required levels of consumption on fashion, on caprice, on the unknowable and unpredictable.

The ‘Romancing Singapore’ campaign incorporated multiple ideological fields which depend on a set of interrelated representations: the irrationality of falling in love, in Singapore, becomes an instrumentally rational cultural practice linked to the commodification of romance as
a consumer goal. It recalls Bauman’s notion that modernity is a mode of being suffused with ambivalence in which order and chaos are modern twins (Bauman, 1991: 4). It appeared in government websites, articles in tabloids and broadsheets, letters to the editor of the Straits Times, and magazines, amongst other media. As a generalised discursive erethism about sexuality it has invaded TV shows, talkback radio programmes, documentaries, billboards, bus advertising, shopping mall events, public parks, holiday destinations, and an extensive range of opportunities to sell products and services; it colonised even the geography and history of Singapore. Love has become a consumer festival, and sexuality a public spectacle.

As Debord has argued, the political economy of modern societies represents itself in an immense accumulation of spectacles (1995). The spectacle as a unifying force, a sector where all attention, all consciousness converges (Debord, 1995: 12) is of particular importance for an understanding of the fetishisation of sexuality, and the bourgeois marriage. For Debord, the spectacle is the locus of illusion. It is not a collection of images but the social relationship between people mediated by images (Debord, 1995: 12). It is not simply an event, like a baby making competition or a love boat cruise, but a terrain of relationships mediated by the spectacular whose ‘fetishistic appearance of pure objectivity conceals their true character as relationships between human beings and between classes’ (Debord, 1995: 19). ‘Romancing Singapore’ mediated relationships between people and classes. Class relationships and the material arrangements on which they are predicated are a ‘weltanschauung that has been actualized, translated into the material realm – a world view transformed into an objective force’ (Debord, 1995: 13). At its base, spectacle contains ‘the oldest of all social divisions of labour, the specialization of power’ [original emphasis] (Debord, 1995: 18). This seems to be especially the case in Singapore where the government had such an obvious and heavy hand in the creation of the illusion. Indeed, in Singapore it is important that the specialisation of power is transparent in the process. The state gives it its legitimacy and ties individual agency to the national good; it is the ideological space in which the nexus between the market and the state, inscribed on the bodies of citizens, can take place. It is, paradoxically, also the node of its failure: ‘Every time I have sex, I recall that the Gahmen wants me to have sex, and frankly,
thinking of the Gahmen when having sex totally kills my mood’ (Kway Png, 2004).

The spectacle of heterosexual hegemony constituted by the ‘Romancing Singapore’ campaign and the fetishisation of sexuality and the family is clearly not always successful in its reach and ontological authority. It is treated with derision and ridicule by many; people are still delaying marriage and the birth rate remains low. The campaign, now largely in the province of the private sector, emphasises a commodified sexuality, and articulates love in the lexicon of consumerism. While it manifests itself in the clichéd accoutrements of commercialised romance such as roses, champagne, bubble baths, love songs, candlelit dinners, aphrodisiac foods, luxurious pampering of the body, diet and fashion advice, it obscures the realities of consumer choices limited by money, the underlying class and race infused terrain of Singapore society, and the apparent cynicism about the idyll of marriage. Baudrillard explains that simulation is not always a question of imitating the real; simulation can mask the absence of a profound reality (Baudrillard, 1994: 6). In his account, where there is an absence of a profound reality, the image ‘plays at being an appearance – it is of the order of sorcery’ (Baudillard, 1994: 60). The happy, bourgeois, Chinese heterosexual couple is not non-existent; but as a putative universal it is an ephemeron of the real, a phantasm, something conjured by the state and the market. Given the destabilising contestations of the image, the unsettling of it by ridicule and refusal, divorce rates, domestic violence, prostitution, teenage abortions, stress created by an over-competitive society, and the reliance for the maintenance of the family on the cheap and often exploited labour of immigrant women working as maids, it must be seen as masking the absence of a reality. The fetishistic mode of representation of sexuality, controlled and harnessed for the market, the patriarchal family and the nation, relocates it into the realm of Baudrillard’s hyperreal. It becomes: ‘more real than the real, and in doing so abolishes the real’ (1994: 81). What is simulated in Singapore, as elsewhere, is the asymmetry of the sexes, intransigent gender distinctions, the naturalness of falling in love and getting married and the naturalisation of market forces in these processes. The heterosocial text obscures the limits of gendered categories, in particular alternative sexualities and subordinate categories of gendered embodiment. It stages a simulacrum of the unity of the nation/family. If the spectacle epitomises the prevailing model of
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social life, as Debord argues, it can also, in the material effects brought about by its language and imagery, generate an excess of meaning. The prevalence of spectacle in Singapore has made a space for the production of a public counter-narrative and for the emergence of subjects who, even while participating in the spectacle, have created a spectacle of their own which has been instrumental in providing the discursive limits of gender.

Beyond Babies

PuruShotam has explored the possibility for women’s resistance in Singapore in a climate in which ‘fear of falling’ is a deeply held anxiety. She describes ‘fear of falling’ as a set of shared, non gender-specific knowledges about the limits within which one is constrained to make choices (PuruShotam, 1998: 131), in order to maintain national and personal security. This anxiety, predominantly focused on potential loss of the material wealth on which the authorised ethos of Singapore nationhood is based, creates a tension between middle class aspirations and the state sanctioned frame within which they must be worked out. The climate of anxiety in Singapore constrains and shapes the possibilities for the contestation of a masculinist narrative and forecloses radical feminism. A central tension for women demanding change is created at the point where contestations of the meta-narrative of the Asian family, in which their gendered embodiment is embedded, collide with the need to maintain ‘Asian-ness’ in a world which is allegedly becoming increasingly globalised. The material conditions for women’s advancement, and that of their children, are predicated on the stability of the Asian nation and the Asian family, underpinned by capitalist class ideology. Circulating in the discourses is the knowledge that too strident a brand of feminism, will, allegedly, upset the balance, as we have seen. What might be considered moderate and entirely reasonable gains, even rights, in many Western and Asian societies, can generate a backlash and a call for moderation. Contesting the family can be seen as analogous to contesting the nation. As PuruShotam puts it:

Asian-ness is importantly located in the normal family, the core of which is patriarchal. Patriarchal families, in which men are heads of household, refer, implicitly at least, to a patriarchal society in which the members of the male ruling elite are heads of state in a like manner (PuruShotam, 1998: 145).
Demands for change, she points out, are largely from the educated and articulate middle class. She speaks of a ‘moderate feminism’, a feminism which relies on feminist texts for its vocabulary, but which nevertheless recognises, and even respects ‘Asian’ concerns which moderate the limits of what is possible for a woman in Singapore (PuruShotam, 1998:145, see also Lyons, 2000). Women, it is argued, have negotiated a form of selective feminism in which ‘middle-class women’s politics arises and takes shape within a constantly shifting continuum of compliance with and resistance to patriarchal ideologies and practices’ (PuruShotam, 1998:145). Women who have refused to have large families, or who have become ‘aggressive’ in the workplace, or who refuse to marry, or who are better educated than their prospective husbands, fail to fulfil their tacit agreement with the collective to perform like ‘traditional Asian women’. This failure has been punished in a number of ways, the most obvious of which are exclusion from marriage, unreasonably high demands on time, and the onerous duties associated with the task of being the primary caregiver while at the same time performing wage labour.

Hing has explored the erosion of traditional authority relations between people and the state, concluding that the ‘male state apparatus’ is ‘even now struggling to grapple with a new world inhabited by a female body which is no longer satisfied with serving as the passive ground on which the body politic inscribes its authority’ (Hing, 2000: 66).

Public disapprobation of the recalcitrance of women, it should now be clear, has long been a discursive feature of public life in Singapore. This has, in recent years, appeared in rancorous comments about the putative advantages extended to women, purportedly at the expense of men. Wong Hoong Hooi’s frequent letters to the Straits Times express a certain amount of resentment towards the gains women have made through legislation which ensures continuing financial support of a woman after divorce. He contends that:

... what women contribute to a marriage is factored into the division of assets in a divorce. To use these same contributions to justify maintenance is to overcompensate them. Husbands are the main providers and secondary care-givers, holding up half the sky. What compensation do they get? … Policy makers caved in. So Singaporean women retained the right to receive maintenance from Singaporean husbands … A ‘discriminatory’ policy was reversed, creating double standards against Singapore men. It
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was a slap on the face, make no mistake about it ... Yet the number of women affected pales in comparison to the number of men discriminated against by conscription and maintenance laws here ... Don’t expect our legions of female chauvinists to even acknowledge this. Theirs has always been a sly grab-the-rights-and-duck-the-responsibilities campaign. It is up to Singaporean men to tell policy-makers that they too are entitled to equal treatment (Wong, 2002a).

A follow up statement by Wong Hoong Hooi appeared in the Straits Times again on 4 May, 2002, this time directly implicating AWARE as a source of conflict in the family and the nation:

In the letter ‘Social conditions affect the birth rate’ (ST, April 27), the Association of Women for Action and Research (Aware) lays a large part of the blame for falling birth rates on the fact that women bear most of the childcare responsibilities ... Yet, the expectation that women should be the primary caregivers is linked inextricably to women's expectations that men should be the main providers. The latter expectation is too well documented to deny, what with men who earn less than their prospective wives being branded ‘losers’ ... Instead of giving yet another spin of its old line of ‘indolent men and long-suffering women’, albeit in less shrill terms, Aware should focus on changing the Singapore woman’s mindset of ‘you are a man so you should pay’. But in the vocabulary of the women’s movement, the word ‘reciprocate’ does not exist. And only heretics talk about being fair to men as well (Wong, 2002b).

Conflicting issues appear in several related discursive fields within which the struggle for gendered power and over the body can be played out. One is the issue of financial support for women after divorce. This is linked, in various ways, and with various degrees of coherency, to the problematic of multiple identities for women who are expected to be primary caregivers and financial contributors to the household, to be financially independent and – in order to maintain the Asian family – dependent on men. The general tenor of the debate, exemplified above, is that women are asking for too much and can’t have everything. It is articulated now in terms, not only of a diminution of patriarchal power, but also as a threat to the financial welfare of men.

Acrimony against women among some Singapore men is a complicated terrain in which bitterness at the loss of patriarchal power collides with the knowledge that men rely on women’s paid labour and success
outside the home for the material conditions of the middle class family. It has unsettled the symmetry of public and private, as Bhabha would have it (1994: 11). Men cannot rely on women’s total acquiescence to familial ideology, nor their full complicity in the reproduction of gender relations. The Chinese family constitutes both a space of patriarchal oppression and the limits of it. A fuller discussion of public animosity towards women will be provided in Chapter Six.

An even more significant contestation of the issue of women’s rights, and women’s gains at the expense of men, centres on National Service and the sacrifices men make in the service of the nation. NS is compulsory only for men, and it has become a site for the struggle over citizenship, and legitimacy as a national subject. It is also the site of struggle over political and cultural meanings inscribed on the surface of the body. Koh and Bhatia’s anthology of stories and poems about national service highlights the transformation of the ordinary into the ideal national subject, and the ways in which the Others of masculine duty are excluded:

But above all, NSmen have gained a deeper appreciation of the meaning of duty and service to the nation. At times, these qualities have been under-estimated by those who do not serve. Others, affected by counter-culture posturing, libertarianism or unreflective animus towards authority, proclaim that concepts of duty and honour are totalitarian or just plain ‘uncool’ (Koh and Bhatia, 2002: 13).

While this quotation is obvious in its intention to valorise military service as the most significant form of service to the nation, its tone also has the effect of ensuring that ‘service’ to the nation is normalised and exalted. It describes any alternatives to service in pejorative terms only. Those who do not serve merely ‘posture’ from the position of an unauthorised culture and have little substance; any critique of authority is seen as unthinking. The use of the term ‘uncool’ juxtaposes duty and honour against the libertarian attitudes engendered by youth culture, since it is likely that only young Singaporeans would use the term ‘uncool’ or think of national service in terms of trends or fashions. If libertarianism is a threat to the ethos of devotion to the nation, national service momentarily erases individual identity and ruptures bonds to the family as the individual is subsumed by the nation. Gilbert Koh’s poem encapsulates this:
I had a small part in a
Big show of a great nation ...
Later at home, my mother replayed
The video tape five times
But couldn’t tell her tiny toy-
Soldier son from any of the rest
‘that one is me,’ I said,
Pointing to the screen.
I couldn’t be sure ...

National service is inscribed on the masculine body, and the power of the patriarchal state is incorporated as body and nation become one:

my country and my body
merge into blood and dust ...
my life and days are national knowledge:
whether and when i ate,
slept, shitted, read, ran ...

It produces the masculine subject:

It is of course a ride of passage:
the purposeful stride out to the waiting trucks,
to be transported into manhood.

And, it creates a lifelong embodied masculine subjectivity:

That early morning Tekong\textsuperscript{11} smell has remained with me for life. The metallic smell of urine, sweat and gun oil. You smelt it in yourself, within your hot, sweaty green PT shirts. You smelt it in others. You smelt it as you rested with your nightsnack and you chomped your kueh\textsuperscript{12} and washed it down with dehydrating hot tea (from the short story ‘The Beach’, by Shashi Jayekumar, cited in Koh and Bhatia, 2002: 58).

The debate about whether women should be conscripted to NS began to circulate with some vigour in the public discourses around 2000. While

\textsuperscript{11} Pulau Tekong (Tekong Island); an island off the north east coast of the main island of Singapore used for basic military training.

\textsuperscript{12} Kueh (Malay): cake.
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the Ministry of Defence had stated that there are no strong imperatives for conscripting women, some public opinion was in favour of it, and noted a range of social benefits, including being called on to prove their loyalty to the nation, and the possibility of finding a life partner in NS:

One argument is that NS will help socialise women, as it does men today, and make them fuller participants in nation building. The shared experience of NS will bond women from a variety of ethnic and economic backgrounds, creating a more tightly-knit Singapore society. In fact a dose of regimented training might be the right medicine for the unruly and wild girls who seem to be increasingly visible these days. Ms Leigh Pasqual, who chairs PAX, a voluntary and non-profit network for professional women, places great premium on citizenship. ‘If citizenship is based on loyalty to the nation, and national service is the teaching, inculcating and exercising of that loyalty so that the nation’s people are prepared for crisis, then it is not really understandable why half of the citizenry is not involved in national service,’ she says. The 28-year-old business-development manager of bowtieAsia.com, which match-makes start-ups and investors, also thinks that NS as a social leveller would benefit women immensely … Another argument is based on equality. Women, the logic goes, will gain equality with men only when they fulfil the responsibilities of equality and not merely enjoy its rights. The comments of nominated MP Gerard Ee, who suggested introducing NS for women in Parliament last year were reported in the Straits Times Insight: ‘I feel that when both men and women are conscripted, it will provide a strong common ground for the sharing of experiences. Men will begin to see women as equals and partners. It may be more successful than any SDU programme.’ He is referring to the Social Development Unit, a matchmaking agency for Singaporeans … Ms. Pasqual too thinks that NS for women would augment gender equality in Singapore. ‘I do not believe in total equality between men and women, as this is obviously impossible and undesirable,’ she says. ‘I do believe, however, in equal opportunity. The opportunity, in this case, would be for women to participate in the nation’s defence in times of crisis, to be called on just as men are, to act as loyal citizens.’ Indeed, in an extension of the egalitarian argument, some complain that men have to do national service twice, first as the main providers in the family and then as conscripts (Latif, 2000).

Ms Dana Lam-Teo, president of the AWARE, put an alternative argument:

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'The question to be asked is not whether girls should be in national service to make it equitable for boys. The question is whether our society, on the whole, is an equitable place for women and men. Women are already under pressure from multiple roles. Until this is addressed, by women, and family-friendly work place and society, recruitment into NS would be an additional burden,’ comments the mother of a 17-year-old son and a 15-year-old daughter (Latif, 2000).

And in another opinion which serves to reinforce a state masculinism, a feminized ‘uterine nationalism’ (Heng and Devan, 1995: 201) and reduces citizens’ contribution to crude biological determinism, the Straits Times report continued:

During an Internet debate on the same issue several years ago, a male participant argued that sexual equality is hard to define because natural differences give men and women complementary roles in society without making them comparable. Since men cannot become mothers, he said, they do the next best thing which is to protect those who can be mothers. He pointed out the stark biological facts which keep women out of warfare. A man can produce four million sperm in half an hour, whereas a woman is born with a ‘lifetime supply’ of only about 500 eggs. Hence, even if 999 men out of 1,000 die in battle, but women are safe, the remaining men can repopulate the country. But if 999 women in 1,000 die, the remaining women ‘can only get pregnant so many times’ (Latif, 2000).

The boundaries of gendered citizenship are made clear in such a statement. The image of the nation as mother who must be protected reconfigures the power structures of the nuclear family as part of the debate on citizenship and the legitimacy of a national subject’s agency. One frame through which this imaginary could be extended was the discursive field opened up by the campaign for Total Defence. The government website promoting the concept says:

Total Defence is about the different things that we can do every day in every sector of our society to strengthen our resilience as a nation. When we take National Service seriously, participate in civil emergency exercises, upgrade ourselves and learn new skills, build strong bonds with different races and religions, and feel the pride of being Singaporean, we contribute to Total Defence (Singapore Government, n.d. [b]).

In order to interpellate every Singaporean adult as a responsible citizen with a commitment to the national good, the concept of Total Defence
was created and disseminated in the discourses. It involves more than just military defence: the five key areas of Total Defence are military defence, economic defence, civil defence, social defence and psychological defence. This idea expands the possibilities for participation to encompass other than a military contribution, thereby allowing an ideological space for women’s contribution and for everybody to make sacrifices for the nation. In this way it also forecloses on any demands women might have to be allowed to undertake NS. Mathialagan M., a reader of the Straits Times, writes:

There has been much talk about the declining numbers of national-service enlistees because of declining birth rates, which are expected to fall further ... We should also discard the narrow-mindedness of looking at national service only as service in the armed forces, police and civil-defence force. Instead it is time to embrace the concept of Total Defence in the true sense of the word ... This is not a new concept. It was practised in Spain and Switzerland in the early 1990s. Young men and women served their country together, and not only in the armed forces. They were in hospitals and schools — fitting, given that nurses and teachers are always in short supply; they were in charitable organizations, helping out in old folks’ homes and children’s homes; they were in the beach services, contributing to cleanliness, safety and security of the beaches; and they were helping out in poor neighbourhoods and with youth services. Women here could be enlisted into the forces for service, support and some combat appointments. This would free more men for service in the combat appointments and other services. Adopting these ideas here would not only be a great help to the organizations concerned, reducing worries and their costs, but it would also provide a golden opportunity for our young women to play a more active role in nation-building (Mathialagan M., 2000).

A common theme of the debates was that women should do national service and contribute to nation building, but that it should be limited to the roles traditionally assigned to women, such as nursing, care-giving, child-minding and cleaning. If women performed more of these roles, it would free up more men to be produced as legitimate defenders of the patria, as the masculine subjects of nation. Yeh Siang Hui writes:

I refer to Mr. Mathialagan M.’s letter ... I agree with him that the time has come for Singaporean women to be involved in national service ... National service does not equate to service only in the armed forces,
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civil defence or police force; the term is broad and connotes any form of service to the country ... Thus there is no reason why women should feel inhibited about contributing to the overall security and good of the country in the fields of nursing, teaching, social work, and even in the less rigorous activities of the armed forces ... Let us not forget that ‘equality’ is an all-embracing term that includes not only equality of rights, but also equality of responsibilities (Yeh, 2000).

National service for women can be located within the discursive domain created by the concept of Total Defence and the government-designated arenas of nation-building which have expanded outside the military to encompass even the economic. This overlaps another prominent discourse which demands that women ‘pay’ for their equality by a more responsible contribution, and by allowing men to perform their traditional role as ‘providers’. For men, ‘the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions’ (Butler, 1999: 178) in order to appear as ‘natural’ men, is not possible without the complicity of women, without women carrying out their own circumscribed gender performance. This would not include military training. Xie Yanming in a letter to the *Straits Times* writes:

I read with interest the call by some readers to involve women in national service (*ST*, July 17 ... *ST*, July 20) ... Although most of the points raised are valid, we have not reached the stage where we need to resort to recruiting the fairer sex. As one reader noted, the term ‘national service’ is ‘broad and connotes any form of service to the country’. Many of us fail to realise that women have been performing their share of ‘national service’ all along, when they undergo the laborious and painstaking process of child-bearing and child-rearing. In other words, they are carrying out the ‘national’ duty of maintaining our population (Xie, 2000).

As if to reclaim some of the gender power men feel they have lost, some writers to the *Straits Times* demand that women be made to see that it is a travesty to valorise women’s contribution (Wong, 2000).

The discursive struggle over legitimacy of contribution to the nation rehearses the politicisation of women’s bodies and reinforces what Braidotti has called the ‘myth of the complementarity of the sexes’ (1994a: 182). Angie Wee in a letter to the *Straits Times* argues that women’s bodies have always been available for the national good:
Men and women have different roles to play in life. Men are generally the protectors and women, the nurturers. In a significant way, women in Singapore have always gone through national service, even before the government introduced it for men. They have carried their babies in their wombs, given birth to them, breastfed them and brought them up, sometimes jointly with their husbands, sometimes not. And for every baby born, this ‘national service’ amounts to many more days, weeks, months, and years than any man put in for compulsory NS. (Wee, 2002)

Braidotti emphasises the embodied, and therefore sexually differentiated, structure of the speaking subject. It is precisely the voice of the embodied that offers points of exit from the phallogocentric mode (Braidotti, 1994b: 180). If women have located in the celebration of the female body an exit point from the meta-narrative of the patriarchal state, they may have foreclosed on the possibility for men to locate their own. Men are conscripted and their bodies temporarily subsumed by state processes. Foucault discusses the methods of domination and discipline used for turning men into soldiers and the double value of docile bodies. The body disciplined by military training has had its energy harnessed and enhanced for two purposes: it is more obedient, and it is more amenable to exploitation in the service of the state (Foucault in Rabinow, 1991: 182). This presents a subtle problematic for Singapore: women have not been subjected to this discipline and have not had their energies harnessed in the same way. Although it could be argued that commitment to the maintenance of the family and to a cycle of production and consumption in the market are effective ways of harnessing energies, for the majority of women it has not ensured docility or afforded the state control over their bodies. Women have developed strategies of resistance to state discourses over several decades (Phua and Yeoh, 2002). If ‘for citizens, this land is their home, and defending it a duty, part of the social contract of Singapore’ (Koh and Bhatia, 2002: 15) then those who are excluded from this part of the social contract, that is from the experience of military training, are less malleable, less disciplined and their bodies less utilisable.

The body in Singapore is constituted through the discourses of the state at their intersection with the nation, the family and individual desire. The body becomes a principle of socio-political organisation. In the instrumental rationality of modernity, the body itself is instrumental.
However, while the body is a site for discipline, it is also a site for resistance. If the Singapore government has failed to cajole women into accepting that their national obligation is to deploy their own sexuality for the benefit of the nation, then power has at some level been transferred out of the field of state power to the individual. Foucault also argues that relations of power are:

... distributed in irregular fashion: the points, knots, or focuses of resistance are spread over time and space at varying densities, at times mobilizing groups or individuals in a definitive way, inflaming certain points of the body, certain moments in life, certain types of behavior. Are there no great radical ruptures, massive binary divisions, then? Occasionally, yes. But more often one is dealing with mobile and transitory points of resistance, producing cleavages in society that drift about, fracturing unities and effecting groupings, furrowing across individuals themselves, cutting them up and remolding them, marking off irreducible regions in their minds and bodies. (Foucault, 1998: 96)

It is in these mobile and transitory points that the logic of resistance may be played out. The nodes of textual mediation of social relations are the points where power is diffused most definitively, because these nodes, while focusing on intended power relations, also expose the discordances and disruptions to the given order. It is at these points that, as Foucault asserts, certain actions may structure the field of other possible actions. The points of the transfer of power can become the most effective points for contestation and refusal. At the site where the failures become obvious, alternative texts, and therefore, differently mediated social relations, can emerge.
Bad Subjects

Chan Choy Siong made a speech in parliament on the first reading of the Bill for the Women’s Charter, 6 April 1960, in which she said: ‘The problems of women are the result of an unreasonable society. Men take women as pieces of merchandise ... Women in our society are like pieces of meat put on the table for men to slice’ (Singapore Government, 1960). In the context of Singapore’s engagement with global economic and cultural forms and a sophisticated late capitalist local political economy a New Singapore Woman emerges. No longer treated as a piece of merchandise, she has caused a crisis of representation and placed limits on the discursive construction of gender in the following ways: she has profoundly disturbed the state’s attempts to achieve the nationalisation of fertility and she has resisted what Foucault describes as the placing of the feminine body in organic communion with the social body (1998: 104). She has apparently also treated marriage with the same pragmatism Lee Kuan Yew once advocated, with unanticipated outcomes. Indeed, the New Singapore Woman emerges in the twenty-first century as a ‘bad subject’, one who provokes the intervention of repressive apparatuses (Althusser, 1971: 181). She performs a range of disobediences and modes of refusal of the conventional pedagogy that a masculinised narrative of nation – Butler’s interpellating law (1993: 127) – might otherwise produce.

Lee Kuan Yew’s conviction that Singapore men do not want to marry women who are better educated than they, and his belief that the better shod and better clothed will get the ‘best girlfriends’ for the breeding

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1 Chan Choy Siong (1934–1981) was the first woman to be elected to the Legislative Assembly of Singapore. She was an activist for women’s concerns and one of the key figures in the establishment of the Women’s Charter.
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pool (cited in Barr 2000: 50; see Chapter Three), should not be disregarded as the outmoded musings of a previous, more conservative, generation. A more recent view was expressed by Jason Leow in the letters section of the *Straits Times*. In accordance with national desire, he wants women who are both modern and inexorably tied to the mode of reproduction of the family:

Men want ‘babes’. That’s a code word for ‘gorgeous bodies without brains’. Well, no, actually, it’s more true to say that Singapore men want babes … I’ll provide an anecdote to show that I’m not alone in thinking that men here dig babes. Make that babes with boobs. No, make that babes with boobs, without brains. Last week, at a café sipping smoothies to wind down from work, I eavesdropped on four men who looked to be in their 30s … all of them had victory tales to tell. Women seem to fall into their laps. Not just any women, but pretty ones who are below 30. And ‘cannot be graduate’, one of them declared. ‘Woah, these university women. Buay tahan!’ … Pity the graduate women. It’s no wonder they form the crux of Singapore’s Great Marriage Problem. But it’s not any graduate women. It’s those who show their intellectual mettle – unabashedly and with delight – whom the men shun. A university degree is a symbol of a woman’s braininess. It is also a warning for men to not let their egos be walked over by her. So if she’s really smart, she’ll know how to keep her brains under lock and key. As one very accomplished colleague, single and graduate put it: ‘The trick is to be so bimbo you don’t even know how to operate the washing machine or turn on the oven. I’ve been laughing at those columns recently by my female colleagues, lambasting the stupidity of the finalists in the Miss Singapore/Universe pageant. Why mock their poor English and shallow answers, their dumb silence in response to difficult social questions, their ah lian² manners?’ What if, just what if, they are showing off what Singapore men like? Quite likely these bimbos ah huays³ – if that’s how you want to view them – won’t have problems getting hitched and settling into a warm family life with three healthy kids and a loving husband. They will bask in the glow of the Great Singapore Family. Not the mocking graduate women, though, I bet. So guess who’s laughing her way to the church altar? (Leow 2001)

2  Buay Tahan: a hybrid Hokkien-Malay term meaning: ‘I can’t stand it’; ‘I can’t take it’.
3  Ah lian: unsophisticated Chinese girl; usually denotes a ‘lower class’ girl.
4  Ah huay: interchangeable with ah lian.
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Such a statement reflects not only wishful thinking, but also resentment, and not a little anxiety. Jason Leow’s desire for a wife who is brainy ‘but keeps her brains under lock and key’, and who has the right anatomy for childrearing, is also the desire of the nation. It points to what Braidotti calls the ‘underlying theme in the textual and historical continuity of masculine self-legitimation and ideal self-projection’ (1994a: 139) which has the effect not only of positioning the woman as the silent ground work of male subjectivity, but is also ‘the condition of possibility for his story’. One is reminded, too, of Alice Jardine’s proposition that a man’s response, in both private and public, ‘to a woman who knows [original emphasis] (anything) has most consistently been one of paranoia’ (1985: 98).

The collapse of national certainty, however, might be the catalyst for a relocation of individual power and certainty to women and one of the mobile and transitory points of resistance (Foucault, 1998: 6). Where they might confound the history of the nation, they may also rewrite their own history. Monica Gwee’s letter appeared in the Straits Times:

Today’s career women who choose to remain single, seek a quality of life they know they can achieve on their own, over marriage’s uncertainties … The idea of being so busy building a career that you might actually ‘miss the boat’ docking at the port of Marriage may have been a little more true a decade ago. Radical and life transforming social changes in Singapore now offer individuals, especially women, options that were once elusive or limited to a privileged group. We live in a place and time of profound change, contradictions and dichotomies. The recent Social Development Unit survey focused on young singles who pronounced in measured and considered tones, that thriving careers take priority over marriage and children. Single women very likely formed the bulk of the finding. Today’s women who choose to remain single seek a quality of life they know they can achieve on their own, over the uncertain quality promises of married life in Singapore.

Of course, many women, surveyed or not, have been living their beliefs for some time and pointing out to the various government agencies who monitor their child-bearing potential that the terms of the social contract the government wishes to conduct between Singapore women and their duty to the nation, need to be reviewed. I suggest that in this Millennium, there may be more Singapore men than women who wish to get married. This introduces the grey area of family units not under
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the marriage umbrella, a concept that sits uncomfortably with a large majority of society (Gwee, 2001).

Gwee claims narrative power and agency for women. The conditions of the possibility for her story reside not in legitimation of her position by men, but in liberation from it. She locates the struggle for meaning in the space where the pedagogical jostles with the performative. If national subjects are doubly-inscribed as pedagogical objects and performative subjects (Bhabha, 1994: 151), Gwee gives voice to an inversion of the standard representation of this doubling. Women are more pedagogically bound to reproduce the nation. In Gwee’s counter-narrative however, the weight of the pedagogical shifts to men. She continues:

It is not always a case of women not [being] interested in children, but they do question if marriage must mean children, or that children must mean marriage ... Children are a huge and costly responsibility in Singapore, but not as much as some husbands. Put the two together and layer on the modern Singapore women’s determination to have her own career, and you have a lifestyle so demanding that any stress the career alone may throw up seems like the clear choice. No contest. Many Singapore men now form their own set of statistics. ‘I don’t seem to be able to get married,’ said one Singapore male ruefully. ‘I keep trying, but it doesn’t happen.’ After what seems like a cultural lifetime of language that placed women in the role of ‘hooking’, ‘trapping’, ‘tricking’, ‘tying down’ and ‘forcing’ men into marriage, the worm has seemingly turned. Now, increasingly, men want to get married and women don’t. Or they want to postpone it indefinitely. After witnessing other marriages, and after some imaginary life journeys with the men surrounding them, these women have decided – er ... maybe not. They’d rather be alone in their own home with a pirated DVD for company. In that scenario, a career helps support the lifestyle choice. Husbands may come and go as they always have, but in this age, that doesn’t have to destroy a woman’s life investment, which was so often her marriage ... so this attitude is worrying the Government. The SDU is also concerned about simply getting singles to just consider having a serious relationship ... This used to be linked to the notion of fussy Singapore women, notably the graduate kind. This is curious, because for the longest time, it was the unreasonable fussiness of Singapore men that was affecting the marriage statistics among graduate women. The list of things they didn’t want in a mate was longer than their mother’s. Now the men complain women
just demand too much in a mate. They want money, they want smarts, they want humour. Most of all, they seem to want to wait (Gwee, 2001).

Elspeth Graham, Peggy Teo, Brenda Yeoh and Susan Levy’s (2002) study of the reproduction of the gender expectations implicit in the reproduction of the Singapore family across generations has shown that while women recognise their role as ‘bearers of tradition’ (Graham et al. 2002: 76) they are not without agency in disrupting the alleged immutability of traditions of filial piety and the role of women. ‘Asian values’ can be maintained, as expected, but the cyclical nature of oppressive relationships of power and the devaluing of female children can be resisted. Graham et al.’s (2002) study has pointed out a fundamental change in both the corporeal and the emotional for Singapore women. The transformed relationship between the generations in a Singapore family can be observed not only in changing fertility patterns (that is, women do not have children because their mothers and mothers-in-law put pressure on them), but also in the signifying space where a woman is located. In the interviews they carried out with married women with children, Graham et al. (2002) found that younger women did not see themselves as belonging to their husband’s family. The traditional narrative of ‘marrying out’ in which a woman left her own family to relocate into her husband’s family at marriage has been all but erased. Evelyn Koh and Jooean Tan’s (2000) study found a fundamental change in attitudes towards the equal treatment of girls and boys, rather than a privileging of male children. They report that up until the mid-1970s ‘traditional’ Chinese family patterns persisted and that a strong component of this was a preference for sons over daughters. With the overwhelming majority of the population now living in public housing and most people relying on the Central Provident Fund to support them in their old age, families rely less on their children for physical survival, and more for emotional support. The important point from Koh and Tan’s study is that in one generation, companionships and emotional ties have come to be seen as more important than instrumental relationships and the maintenance of structures of dominance known to be characteristic of Chinese families.

On 21 April 2004, in the speech to the Third Session of the China Scientists’ Forum on the Humanities, Beijing, Lee Kuan Yew lamented

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5 Graham et al. studied only Chinese families.
the disruption to the family and the nation caused by the development of modern female subjectivities. ‘Three generation households are going out of fashion because of high rise living in apartments in Singapore,’ he was quoted as saying, and this was ‘partly because Singaporeans speak English, but also because Singapore women have been given equal rights.’ It is these equal rights, a consequence of being ‘more Westernised in their social habits than the Chinese in Taiwan or Hong Kong’ (Siow, 2004) that has led to the very serious social disruptions facing Singapore today. He specified the causes:

Singapore women are now as well-educated and earning as much as men. This has altered the husband-wife relationship and affected the nature of our society. The result has been higher divorce rates, more single-generation families, less grandchildren in each family and fewer three-generation households (Siow, 2004).

These social problems are a lamentable but inexorable consequence of the modernising process, and apparently could not, even in the future, be perceived as anything other. The ‘Graduate Woman’, invented as a category of Otherness, is inscribed as a recalcitrant being who defies the normative and the pedagogical.

Graham et al. (2002) point out that in the attempted ‘Asianisation’ of Singapore through the ‘Asian Values’ debate, the ideological contradictions are all the more stark because what is meant by the ‘traditional values’ the government wants women to maintain has not been clearly articulated (Graham et al. 2002: 65). This leaves them all the more vulnerable to individual interpretation. Xie Wen could say in his regular column in the Straits Times: ‘We will continue to … lament the passing of the Asian and feminine in our women’ (2001a).

It has been noted by one Singapore teacher that historical narratives that embed women in the past of nation, in the cyclical time of the family, are now being erased. For her, the loss of something ‘Asian’ is a liberating force for women:

I feel that there aren’t many differences between our boys and our girls these days. I mean if you look at junior college students, there’s quite a lot of equality. Our girls are asserting themselves. I think the concept that women do not have brains and are not interested in politics will die out. It’s the older people who will have this kind of thinking; the younger ones are different. I also notice the subtle change in attitude...
towards daughters at home. The population policy was so successful that we end up just having two kids. I think that has changed our attitude quite a bit, because when you have two, whether you have girls or one girl and one boy, they are precious to you. So we lose a little bit of the Asian kind of mentality that discriminates against daughters (cited in Low, 1993: 85).

The reversal of historical constraints on women has resulted in the failure of women to provide the discursive conditions for the masculinised national story; they have failed to perform appropriately in the ‘theatre of omnipotent fathers’ (Heng and Devan, 1995). This generated a protracted debate about ‘hard’, ‘aggressive’ and ‘unfeminine’ Singapore women that appeared in the pages of the Straits Times. Journalist Sumiko Tan (2001) said:

But gender equality has come at a price for Xena-type females. When I look at successful (okay, aggressive) women around, almost all are either still single or have tattered love lives. Can it be that while men are comfortable around confident, articulate female colleagues, they would rather not share their beds with these forceful, argumentative types? (Tan, 2001)

In addition, a significant problem facing women in the corporate world is the discordant expectations of gender performance. A woman manager must:

... possess both the ‘masculine’ traits to be an effective manager and ‘feminine’ traits to live up to the image of womanhood. If she does not act like a woman, she may be criticized for being unfeminine, aggressive, tough, unkind and mannish. If she is feminine in attire, emotional and nurturing to her employees, she may be judged unfit to be a woman manager. The successful woman must walk a fine line between always being a woman, but not behaving ‘like a woman’. Besides possessing masculine managerial attributes, woman managers must also remind others of her femininity (Lee, Campbell and Chia, 1999: 205).

It seems that the ‘aggressive’, ‘masculine’ qualities and enhanced gender performance that women must cultivate are both a necessity for success and the root of failure, particularly in public life. Women find themselves in the position of having to adopt not just multiple gender and class per-

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6 Xena is a character from a television show called ‘Xena, The Warrior Princess’. She is known for her combative skills and Amazon-like behaviour.
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formances, but multiple performances which may compete against each other. It is perhaps too obvious to point out that one glaring disjunction in the power structures created by gendered Otherness is the fact that what is admired in a man will not be tolerated in a women. One observer noted that authorities may be less willing to put up with (emphasis added) female community leaders they consider to be aggressive (Wang, 1993). It is unacceptable for women to develop what are conventionally considered ‘male’ characteristics. Women must cultivate contiguous subject positions, those which are reinforced by their own gender performance, and through which, by dichotomous juxtaposition, the superiority of the male can be articulated. At the same time, however, women are condemned for not exhibiting male qualities, a position which renders them inherently in need of the management strategies of men. Goh Chok Tong has asked the question: ‘Can you find a woman who has the same kind of quality as a man, who is as good as a man, and whose husband or potential husband and boyfriend would allow that woman to carry on a hazardous and time-consuming profession?’ (Goh Chok Tong, cited in Chew, 2004: 7).

I have previously drawn attention to Debord’s work on the representation of the political economy of modernity as an immense accumulation of spectacles (1995). For Debord, the spectacle is a unifying force, a sector where all attention, all consciousness converges, the locus of illusion (1995: 12). If it represents the social relationship between people mediated by images (1995: 12), then, if these relationships are in contestation, the spectacle may also represent disunity. If the spectacle contains ‘the oldest of all social divisions of labour, the specialisation of power’ [original emphasis] (Debord, 1995: 18), and that power is challenged, the spectacle may be the site for disruption of power, the place where voices, otherwise unheard, can emerge. In Singapore the spectacle of masculine anxiety, played out in the pages of the Straits Times, has also been the site for the emergence of the New Singapore Woman.

Public discussion about the ‘new woman’ reached a pitch bordering on male hysteria in 2001 when banker Xie Wen began writing his fortnightly weekly column in the Straits Times called He*mail. His first posting included the following:

I am tired of our women always putting us down. Somebody has to stand up for our rights, so it may as well be me. Guys, do you hear that awful whining noise in the background? No, it’s not from our fighter
jets rehearsing National Day routines. That dreadful din is the collective whining of our ungrateful, unappreciative women folk … This is about the New Women who may have local boyfriends/husbands, but who hassle these poor guys constantly with plain silly demands based on some misguided notion of what a modern, Westernised man is supposed to be like. Women who pressure their husbands on the basis of some media-distorted notion of what their lives are supposed to be like as fulfilled women … Just a week ago, I overheard in a wine bar this bunch of SYGs (silly young girls) going on ad nauseam about how unfair life was towards women. Huh? Which time warp were these girls caught in? Where did these girls come from? Could they possibly be Singaporean? Unfortunately, they were. Let me tell you about unfair, little girly. That’s when girls were beaten for going to school. That’s when women were forced to marry against their wishes. That’s when widows were burnt on funeral pyres along with their deceased husbands. What exactly do Singapore women have to complain about? I would like to hear them translate their whining over the abstract into concrete grievances … the next time one of these silly girlies mouths off about how Western men respect women more, somebody please check if she sees any correlation between this respect and the much, much higher rates of sexual assault against women in many Western countries compared to Singapore. You could even compare domestic violence directed against women, if she wishes. Or can their grievance be over the dozens, no hundreds, of men whose cars hog vast areas of no standing zones at peak hours … to await the arrival of their little Empresses? Do you see that in New York? In Sydney? In London? Guys, the awful truth is that Singapore men have become a race of unappreciated and exploited good providers and unpaid chauffeurs. But we wouldn’t mind that if they didn’t bitch so much. It’s time we spoke up. We are becoming disenfranchised, meek supplicants in their world … Man, I am angry (Xie Wen, 2001b).

Such invective recalls PuruShotam’s (1992) assertion that the gains accrued by women have been inscribed in the public discourse as ‘gifts’ from a benevolent government to women, or gifts from the father to the daughter, since recalcitrance is infantilised and feminised. Here women are accused of being ungrateful for these gains. It appears to confirm Lazar’s (2001: 59) view that the early granting of ostensible equality to women should be seen as an example of strategic egalitarianism, where the equality women were granted was contingent upon meeting specific political and economic gains. That equality is strategically distributed
seems to be affirmed by Soin’s comment that one of the ‘unwritten penalties’ for highly educated women is that they are seen to be unsuitable as political candidates (1996: 197). Women may have met the economic gains expected of them, but they have not performed their role expectations to legitimate and reproduce the conditions for the masculine Confucian narrative of nation. The perceived threat to the masculine self, articulated by Xie Wen (2001a), is a threat to the national self. References to Western men as one of the sources of women’s recalcitrance speak of anxiety about the invasion of difference, not just gender difference, but racial difference. Xie Wen, emboldened by letters of encouragement, continued:

Guys, hands up, please – how many of you have heard these New Singapore Women complain that local men are uncommunicative? Yet, when we try to tell them how we feel, the more aggressive of them jump down our throats. Indeed, the Storm Troopers of the Feminist Brigade (STFBs) would clearly like to shut this column down – and run me out of town for good measure. You would probably say these women are insecure about the tremendous gains they and their sisters have made in just 30-plus years. But I suspect that this is a bit nastier than that. This is about continued dominance – by this wall of feminist noise – over the conversation on gender issues. This is about their sense of entitlement to say pretty much whatever they like about men, and their right to, figuratively speaking, scratch your eyes out if you so much as utter one ‘politically incorrect’ word in public … we have noticed how Singapore women are demanding – and generally getting – the best of both worlds. That is, they demand and get gender equality … But there is no way I am going to put up with this new, and rapidly growing ‘in-your-face’ pop feminism that comes from reading too many articles about men’s sexual performances; whether ‘size matters’ and whether we can deliver a quality orgasm … it’s not as if we have never heard women talking crudely and publicly about men’s bodies and their performances (or lack thereof) … They can through the sheer force of this wall of feminist noise define it ‘ungentlemanly’, ‘politically incorrect’, or just plain ‘rude’ for one man to write publicly and say what many say privately. Big deal: we will continue to e-mail one another, talk in pubs, and lament the passing of the Asian and the feminine in our women (Xie Wen 2001a).

The He*Mail column continued to disclose the high level of anxiety associated with discourses generated by women:
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Guys, one of the biggest ‘cons’ pulled on the Singapore Man is the myth of male superiority and privilege – a hoax that now disadvantages a gender that has already been brought down several pegs over the past few decades ... And their recently-acquired assertiveness turns into something quite aggressive – the trendy ‘in-your-face’ and totally graceless pop feminism of their TV heroines from shows such as Ally McBeal, sans the humour ... They are quite oblivious to the fact that growing numbers of Singapore men now feel cornered, threatened and short-changed ... Singapore men are not unique in having been brought down a peg or three – this is a global trend among developed countries ... (Xie Wen, 2002a).

The New Singapore Woman to whom Xie Wen (2001a) refers apparently confounds the history of the gains women have achieved through Singapore’s economic development. His desire is to maintain the sanctity of that national history and prevent discursive intrusion which might disturb the meaning that has previously been allocated to those events. For this reason he must repossess an essentialised Asian-ness and the feminine of past ages of national time when the boundaries between Singapore and the outside world and between men and women were clear. He must also lay some blame on Western culture, and globalised feminism, which allows him to ally himself with a globalised offended masculinity. Xie Wen’s columns confirm Bhabha’s assertion that maintenance of the illusion of the political unity of the nation requires continual displacement of anxiety about its irredeemably plural modern space (1994: 149). If women are indeed talking about the sexual performance of men, it should not come as a surprise, given the emphasis on sex, sexiness and sexuality promoted so intensely by the ‘Romancing Singapore’ campaign. It should not be unexpected if we accept Giddens’ (1992) hypothesis regarding the power of plastic sexuality to allow women to recover sexual pleasure for themselves. If Singapore men are focusing on the sexual embodiment of women when they express their desire for ‘babes with boobs without brains’, it would be hardly surprising to find that the ‘New Singapore Woman’ might also focus on the sexualised body.

Taming the New Singapore Woman

The ‘Romancing Singapore’ campaign encompassed multiple meanings and functions. One possible interpretation is that it is an attempt to refeminise women in the traditional mode, or in the mode functional
to the advancement of capitalist consumption, that I have already described. Roses, champagne, aphrodisiac food, ‘wining and dining’ might be thought to be enough to stop the whining of the most aggressive New Singapore Woman. Kenneth Paul Tan (2003) points to several other purposes of ‘Romancing Singapore’. With demographic concerns converging with the economic, he argues that the ‘sexiness’ of ‘Romancing Singapore’ was as much about raising spending levels in the recession-hit retail and tourism sectors, as increasing the population (K.P. Tan, 2003: 405–406). In addition, the ‘Romancing Singapore’ agenda had more subtle links to the global economy, for as he argues, Singapore was being ‘sexed up’ (Tan’s term) ‘to produce a fertile, stimulating, innovative, risk-taking climate conducive to success in the new global, knowledge-driven and entrepreneurial economy vital for staying competitive in a region that is catching up fast’ (K.P. Tan, 2003: 406).

The ‘Romancing Singapore’ campaign, however, might also have had a more subversive and unintended consequence. By bringing sexuality out in the open, by the immense verbosity which characterised it, by focusing so intensely on the sexual conduct of citizens, it might have disturbed what Bhabha (1994) refers to as the symmetry of the private and the public, to which I have already referred. Gender differences which are not neatly accommodated in the conventional private/public split can unsettle domestic space so that ‘the personal-is-the political; the world-in-the-home’ [original emphasis] (Bhabha, 1994: 11). This inversion then provides space for the subversive. Where the personal sex lives of Singaporeans have been politicised the ‘home is in the world’, but it is then all the more exposed to the critiques of women who are claiming a liberating sexual agenda for themselves. The New Singapore Woman has the power to confound even the old public–masculine/private–feminine dichotomies.

Challenges to the gendered narrative are disconcerting, to say the least, to a number of Singaporean men such as Xie Wen, since they have brought about, not simply a modification, but a reversal of attitudes. Far from promoting the idea of the better clothed getting access to the ‘better girlfriends’ of Lee Kuan Yew’s undergraduate days, the counter-narratives of women continually evoke and erase attempts to totalise the boundaries of gender difference, and of the nation, in the way that Bhabha (1994) suggests. For Xie Wen and others, the performative

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emerges as manifestly hostile to the pedagogical, creating neuroses and panic.

While the economic power and labour of women is essential to the continued development of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew’s ‘Pandora’s Box’ (1983: 50), that is, the education of women, has created ills which cannot now be controlled. Chew Shing Chai writes in the Straits Times:

With the passage of time ... the [female] graduate would have undergone a permanent metamorphosis into a hard-driving, arrogant, self-opinionated, whatever-preneur ... nowhere is there mention of affection, family life or companionship ... Singapore men, astute by nature, are overwhelmed by this female attitude and so prefer to marry ‘downwards’ or to look to the less demanding and more feminine women from China ... (Chew, 1999).

Statements such as these, circulating in the public sphere, are articulations of deep unease, if not distress, over a failure of normative performativity. In Butler’s terms gender performance ‘is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalisation in the context of the body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration’ (1999: xv). If gender is a ‘stylised repetition of acts’ it is not, as Butler (1999: 179) has made clear, a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow. It must be understood, instead, as the daily performance of self, a performance unable to be tied to some sort of model, but constituted as ‘social temporality’ (Butler, 1999: 179). Gender is governed by a social and temporal reality and is subject to dramatic and contingent construction of meaning.

The correct gender performance is a precondition of successful management of the self and of successful functioning in the field of organised heterosexuality. As Smith has argued: ‘Being desirable, being attractive, arises as the textual norms of the discourse of femininity provide standardised ideals of what is desirable and hence evaluate a woman’s success in achieving desirability on her own body’ (Smith, 1990: 194). Indeed, if women fail to perform the feminine appropriately, the field of organised heterosexuality is doubly disrupted: its legitimacy is challenged; and it may have adverse effects on masculine existential security, for as Smith has asserted, ‘a woman’s desirability may also serve to define a man’s masculine status with other men’ (1990: 194). Although, as Butler argues, ‘gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences’
(1999: 178), the lack of an objective ideal to which it aspires, the lack of ‘essence’ it expresses, affords the performer a useful set of strategies to subvert a putatively hegemonic gender order if she chooses not to act as expected or demanded. While women may be ‘punished’ for failure to adhere to the expectations of a market-driven gender performance, by, for example, becoming the subject of the sort of public disapprobation cited above, this may have positive consequences for the challenge to the restrictive and circumscribed roles of women.

As Xie Wen and others show, the anxieties of men are articulated in scurrilous and hurtful (hard driving, aggressive, arrogant) or demeaning (little girly) utterances. Butler, however, offers one possible unintended consequence of the control of the master narrative of self-legitimating masculinity which uses insults as weapons. Her thesis has important consequences for the possibilities for empowerment through the performative, and for the creative production of self within the context of the national pedagogy. How can insulting and demeaning names be positive?

To be called a name is one of the first forms of linguistic injury that one learns. But not all name-calling is injurious. Being called a name is also one of the conditions by which a subject is constituted in language. By constituting woman as a subject in language it at least acknowledges a subject that has an autonomous existence:

One is not simply fixed by the name one is called. In being called an injurious name, one is derogated and demeaned. But the name holds out another possibility as well: by being called a name, one is also paradoxically given a certain possibility for social existence, initiated into a temporal life of language that exceeds the prior purposes that animate that call. Thus the injurious address may appear to fix or paralyze the one it hails, but it may also produce an unexpected and enabling response. If to be addressed is to be interpellated, then the offensive call runs the risk of inaugurating a subject who comes to use language to counter the offensive call (Butler, 1997: 2).

The discourse of injurious speech around the aggressive behaviour of women in Singapore can both empower the interpellated to counter the offensive call and highlight the anxieties of the caller. Butler advises that one cannot with any certainty expect the contemptuous or offensive speech act to have the injurious effect the speaker intends. As she
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puts it: ‘The interval between instances of utterance not only makes the repetition and resignification of utterance possible, but shows how words might, through time, become disjoined from the power to injure and recontextualised in more affirmative modes’ (Butler, 1997: 15).

Where men in Singapore are authorised to perform such injurious speech acts, women have authorised themselves to detach the speech acts from the power to injure. Sumiko Tan reversed the insults. She titled her piece in the Straits Times, ‘Singapore women fierce? So what?’ She wrote:

Singapore women are too argumentative say some Singapore men. So would there be fewer single women if we were more gentle and accommodating? ‘I’m so tired of Singapore women’, a friend lamented the other day. ‘Why can’t they stop arguing? And must they always ask so many questions?’ The way he sees it, Singapore women – especially those who are well educated – have become ‘hard’. They should be more feminine, more accommodating and, yes, less career-driven … But, yes, the Singapore woman – especially if she is better educated – is a confident and assertive creature. She is pragmatic, and hence, materialistic. (Money talks, right? Both Singapore women and men know that.) She is articulate (well, more so than the Singapore man) and will fight to defend herself and her loved ones. She goes out to work and tries to excel in her career because (a) it is expected of her; and (b) the money she brings home makes life easier, for herself and those she loves. She is frank and has no time for mind games, making her, in fact, naïve at times. There is little pretence and guile. What you see is what you get. She is also a product shaped by her society. Singapore is small, cosmopolitan and competitive. There are no fields or farms where uneducated women are relegated to toil in. Instead, much stress is placed on education – for both sexes – because every pair of hands counts in the urban workplace. … When they go out to work, women are judged by the same standards as men. In fact, one of Singapore’s earliest female role models is Mrs. Lee Kuan Yew, the wife of the Senior Minister who has proven to be a successful lawyer. And because homes and cars are so expensive, women have to work – and work hard – if they (and their husbands and families when they get married) want to enjoy the finer things in life. Can you blame us, then, if we tend to be businesslike and are uncomfortable with displaying more feminine traits like flirting, or feminine skills like prawn peeling? (Tan, 2002).

Sumiko Tan illuminates the contradictory expectations of a woman to be both a financial contributor to the household by her participation
in the paid workforce where she is judged by the same standards as men, and to be ‘more feminine’. She points out the discursive tension inherent in the respect for the late Kwa Geok Choo as a successful lawyer and role model, and the desire to locate women in the idealised past of an Asian society.

Women who ‘are judged by the same standards as men’, as Sumiko Tan has asserted, must adopt the values and behaviours associated with the masculine to be successful in the workplace. The feminine attributes of servitude and obedience are incompatible with the skills required to be a successful lawyer, businesswoman or doctor, to name only a few occupations in which women excel in Singapore. Kenneth Paul Tan has noted the stereotype of masculinity in Singapore:

... the universal stereotype of masculinity persists and hinges upon the image of the male as provider and protector of the family. He is primordially aggressive, and in modern life, motivated, competitive, daring, and achievement oriented. He is analytical, avoids sentimentality, and approaches situations as problems requiring solutions derived from rationality and industry. He is also individualist and independent (K. P. Tan, 2001: 96).

Since most of these qualities are now attributed to the New Singapore Woman, it is not difficult to understand why she causes such consternation. Nicholas Fang, writing in the Straits Times noted the similarities between men and women: ‘... after all, the new woman is closer to the stereotypical male in many ways. She’s financially independent, socially aware, well-educated, and thanks to female contraception, sexually liberated as well’ (Fang 2003).

If women are pragmatic, aggressive, businesslike, materialistic, demanding, and so on, they are, in effect, eschewing the behaviour traditionally expected of women – the maternal, the gentle, the acquiescent – in favour of performing like men. This mimicking of the conduct of men renders women like Bhabha’s colonial Other, a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite (1994: 86, original emphasis). Mimicry, he argues, relies on ambivalence for its discursive power. In continually producing slippage, excess, difference, it is stricken by indeterminacy, and ‘emerges as a representation of difference that is itself a process of disavowal’ (Bhabha, 1994: 86). Mimicry is a ‘double articulation’, which, on the one hand regulates and disciplines the Other while visualising power for itself; and
on the other, poses a threat to ‘normalised knowledges and disciplinary powers’ (Bhabha, 1994: 86). The ambivalence of mimicry (almost the same as a man, but not quite), both fractures the discourse, and transforms the subject into an uncertainty (Bhabha, 1994: 88). It poses a significant threat to the social order because: ‘The question of the representation of difference is therefore always the problem of authority’. (Bhabha, 1994: 89). It is this which crystallises the central problematic: in a discursive terrain characterised by the fetishisation of masculinist culture, variable but unrelenting enunciation of gender difference discloses the anxiety of destabilised authority; and it is an articulation of the depth of panic about the menace posed by failure to maintain unassailable boundaries of difference.

Peeling Prawns – Recovering the Asian Woman

If the ‘Romancing Singapore’ campaign can be interpreted as one discursive strategy to refeminise women, it is interesting to observe other discursive events with similar impulse. In a public discourse in which successful and assertive women are often constructed as less than feminine, and inscribed as the culprits in a crisis of masculinity, women can be re-feminised and rehabilitated as more acceptable to potential husbands. One attempt to recover an idealised Asian feminine past can be found in the public articulation of imagined, idealised female subject positions associated with the issue of ‘peeling prawns’ to which Sumiko Tan referred. It apparently began its discursive life when Straits Times writer Xie Wen claimed that Singapore men have become ‘yuppie puppies’, and find themselves in the grip of loud, graceless, overly materialistic women ‘complete with their pashmina shawls and Prada/Gucci/Armani ensembles’ (2001c). Comparing these putatively opinionated, grasping and emasculating Singaporean women with other Asian women he wrote:

But that is not how women relate to men elsewhere – not even in Malaysia … ‘Malacca, brother, Malacca’, that’s my buddy Evil Eddie’s recommendation. ‘You take them out for a RM1007 seafood dinner with a few bottles of beer thrown in, and they’re happy’ … I have observed the way so many of these very attractive Malaysian girls would

7 RM100 (Malaysian Ringgits) was, at the time of writing, worth approximately US$32 or €24. The point being made is that it is a cheap meal.
hold their partners arms over dinner and feed them. And look so totally contented! (Compare that with the sullen faces over S$300 ... meals in Singapore!) Never mind that the ride home is a Proton, not a Mercedes. And a well-travelled friend of mine, Parry, says this of Singapore and Chinese women: ‘I say Singapore women are no match for their Chinese counterparts because the latter know how to be feminine without being fawningly subservient, do take care of their male friends’ feelings and are not out to put them down as if they need to prove something. A Chinese girlfriend will, without asking, peel prawns for you at dinner, without even being self-conscious about it. She will not regard it as lowering herself, or pandering to the male chauvinist ego’. Well, Parry, I have to tell you though – there are still Singapore women out there who will peel prawns for their men, and who do know when not to interrupt conversations they know nothing about. But buddy, they have unfortunately become somewhat unfashionable within our elite ‘grrrrl’ circles ... Well, I know attractive, financially independent, professional Malaysian, Filipino and Japanese women in Singapore who still know how to flirt with men, be every bit the coquette, or pamper their men when they sense that it ‘works’. And at the end of the day, who’s complaining when it works? (Xie Wen, 2001c).

Sumiko Tan (2002) reported in her column on a male friend’s view of Singaporean women:

My friend is a Singaporean in his early 50s. Although he has had his fair share of girlfriends – mostly Singaporean – he has never married. Recently, he began dating women from China. Clearly, they have made a big, and positive impression on him. One, in particular, is not only young, but also ‘stunning’ and plays a mean guzheng. She can not only read the Chinese calligraphy scrolls in his apartment, but also provide the context and stories behind the poems, whereas we Singapore girls burst into giggles trying to decipher the scrawls. And she’s not a university graduate. Women from Malaysia, especially those from Sabah and Sarawak, my friend observed, also out-score Singapore women in the family/gentleness stakes. They are also content to be housewives, tending to kids, while their Singaporean husbands work. And when the men come home, these women will not bombard them with 101 questions about their day (Tan 2002).

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8 Guzheng: Chinese string instrument, similar to a harp.
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Tan also reported on one man’s response to Xie Wen’s columns: ‘Local women don’t cut it …’ He even gave his rating of women elsewhere in Asia:

Malaysian gals are friendly and down-to-earth. Thai gals have grace and are charming and caring. Filipino gals have talent and are devoted. Indonesian gals are also charming and musically talented. Japanese gals have grace and spunk. Vietnamese gals are also graceful and devoted (Tan 2002).

This statement reads like an inventory of available women and their commendable qualities. It essentialises Asian women and demands that they lay ‘the silent groundwork for male subjectivity’ (Braidotti, 1994a: 139). Women must reproduce the conditions for the possibility of the story of masculinised rationality and agency, the ‘textual and historical continuity of masculine self-legitimation’ (Braidotti, 1994a). Attempts to recover a submissive Asian female past demand that a woman have knowledges to support an essentialised past (reading Chinese poems, playing guzheng), but will not exercise a voice which intervenes in the discourses of men. The listing of Asian women and their characteristics as if they were consumer choices commodifies women and inscribes them as resources to be deployed in the text of self-legitimation of masculinity. In addition, the correct subject position for women is the role of mother. While both parents will earn money to provide food, it is the mother on whom you rely to prepare your food for you and do the messy jobs without question. Everybody except the mother herself wants someone else to peel their prawns.

When Xie Wen recommended to women ‘a bit of prawn-peeling to improve relations with men’ (2002b), he ignited the imagination of both men and women in Singapore. It apparently provided a place of narrative authority for men to express resentment and anger, and to identify the idealised Asian woman. The saviour of the wounded masculine ego would be charming, submissive, graceful and caring, in short, the Singapore Girl of masculine fantasy.

‘Family Matters! Singapore’ noticed the public attention to the issue of peeling prawns and deployed it as part of the ‘Romancing Singapore’ campaign. A play entitled ‘Confessions of Three Unmarried Women’, written by Eng Win Lee, had been staged in Singapore in 1987 and 1997. A revised version, with a new scene devoted to the psychology
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of peeling prawns, was commissioned by ‘Family Matters! Singapore’, and restaged as part of the campaign. Richard Lord’s (2003) review of the play identified it as merely a paean to marriage, with ‘standard issue’ stamped on key parts. The last scene, according to him, ‘presented a rather unconvincing, much too easy happy ending which came off as saccharine in every sense – especially the fact that saccharine is a kind of artificial sweetener’ (Lord, 2003).

The issue also generated a counter-narrative of the sort that, to paraphrase Bhabha, evokes and erases the totalising boundaries, both actual and conceptual, of gender difference, and which disturbs those ideological manoeuvres through which ‘imagined communities’ are given essentialist identities (1994: 149). In an articulation of the sense of alienation of the national feminine subject, Ong Soh Chin wrote: ‘Let’s declare a truce’ (2002). She contests these resentful inscriptions of Singapore women, and the essentialising female stereotypes which have been invented in an attempt to secure the boundaries of male identity:

Okay, so the whole world seems to be at war. And Singapore – benign, complacent and smugly docile – has not been spared. At home, in this newspaper, the past few weeks have also seen some pretty intense debate about mundane things like prawn peeling and Singaporean feminists ... What appalls me are the easy and irresponsible generalizations that inform a column like He*Mail ... I find the underlying assumptions in Xie Wen’s columns – that certain liberated Singaporean women are unfeminine, whiny bitches; that feminism is a western concept that no longer has a place in Singapore; and that women can be discussed like cattle, differentiated by their manner and country of origin – highly offensive. In support of Singapore men who prefer the charms of less demanding, non-Singaporean women, he offers the sterling example of his friend ‘Evil Eddie’, who recommends: ‘Malacca, brother, Malacca. You take them out for a RM100 (S$48) seafood dinner with a few bottles of beer thrown in, and they’re happy’. Of course, he has also given us the now-classic stereotype of Chinese women as a nation of prawn peelers. I find these categories demeaning (Ong 2002).

Ong continues, calling for a new ethics of difference and an enhanced female agency and responsibility:

The public airing of mistaken assumptions and vicious stereotypes must stop. PM Goh may have been talking about Muslims and non-Muslims on Monday night, but surely, his words can be taken to refer
to men and women as well. ‘We should speak in one voice as citizens of Singapore, rather than from a coloured perspective of the different ethnic and religious communities’, he said. In other words, emphasise the similarities and the solidarity, not the differences. Mingle, understand and empathise. Men and women can be as different as Israelis and Palestinians. But this is the bottom line: They need to get along. The exchange of heated rhetoric and the sowing of deep-rooted suspicions and resentment will only lead to war. Women must stop being treated like heads of cattle, but perhaps more importantly, they must stop allowing themselves to be treated in such a manner (Ong 2002).

Drawing on the model of racial difference as her mode of representation of difference, Ong has presented us with a narrative inversion which spells a loss of narrative control for men such as Xie Wen. His response, the final column in the He*mail series, narrates his own disquiet, in particular his anxieties about women disturbing the boundaries of gender representation:

Yes, I am the Osama bin Laden of the gender ‘war’, or so some women would have you think. Ms. Ong Soh Chin’s column last week alleged that I was driving wedges between Singaporeans at a time when the Government was trying to build racial harmony … Although it was way over the top, the aggressiveness of the column did not surprise me. Indeed, various female and feminist writers have been stepping up pressure on any man bold enough to disagree with their ideals on gender relations … Effectively, these women have taken it upon themselves to set the out-of-bounds markers for gender discussion in Singapore. And, in doing so, they intimidate politically those who beg to differ … they will fight with breathtaking viciousness to deny anything that mirrors the reality of how large numbers of men think and speak in private. Meanwhile, in women’s magazines and on TV, there has been a growing trend towards the trivialization of men. It is supposedly harmless, fun stuff. But with every article and sitcom, there is the reinforcement of the right of women to mock men – it’s fun, duh! The reverse is, of course, sexist. Out of the mainstream media, it gets worse – it’s patriarchy this and that; it’s oppression of women; it’s how disadvantaged women are in Singapore … He*Mail started in the middle of last year as a result of a lunchtime challenge from a senior journalist friend – a dare to give a voice to what we knew were common Singapore male concerns hitherto confined to private conversations. And these concerns revolve around the loss of femininity that has accompanied the attainment of equality.
But equality does not necessarily require the blurring of gender differences, the surrender of what I described in an early column as the power of yin and yang. What many local men are increasingly disgruntled about is the bloody-minded refusal of a growing number of Singaporean women to indulge men in the smallest of feminine gestures. Note how a few lines in one of my columns about the peeling of prawns – which was intended as a metaphor for a *quid pro quo* in gender relations – had kicked up such a storm … the way some women continue to lash out at men, long after the battle for equality has been won, is simply alienating Singapore men … Masculine thinking is to be mocked as ‘oafish’, to be exorcised at the earliest opportunity … Singapore men have shown amazing equanimity in the face of tremendous change over a very short period of time. Appreciate that. This is the last column of Xie Wen (Xie Wen, 2002c).

Xie Wen’s appeal to women to indulge men in ‘the smallest of feminine gestures’ is an indication of desperation in the attempt to recover the stereotype of the submissive, feminine Asian woman; his reference to yin and yang appears to be an indication of his desire to sustain the fantasy of gender asymmetry, and clearly bounded, gendered worlds. His use of the term *quid pro quo* recalls PuruShotam’s (1992) description of the gains accrued by women as having been inscribed in the public discourse as ‘gifts’ from a benevolent government to women, and Lazar’s (2001: 59) ‘strategic egalitarianism’, where the equality women were granted was contingent upon meeting specific political and economic gains. Having met those political and economic gains, women have apparently also gone so far as to authorise an alternative discourse.

Xie Wen claims that his use of the ‘peeling prawns’ imagery was merely a metaphor. Metaphor, as a device for transferring meaning from one site to another, allows a process of ‘stretching’ of language (Hawkes, 1972: 63) whereby new fields of meaning are made available within the linguistic figuration. Since the boundaries of meaning have been expanded through metaphor, ambiguities are also made available, and meanings rendered more fluid. It allows for expanded meanings, imagined associations, textual transformations and imaginative possibilities which provide the means for multiple interventions at specific points in time, and for various poetic or political ends. Metaphor makes available the means by which the signifying space of the male desire to tie women to the reproduction of the family and the reproduction of gender rela-
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tions intersects with the signifying space of a counter-narrative of femininity, outside the conventional pedagogy, and constructed by women. ‘Peeling prawns’ may be a symbol of the ‘feminine Asian woman’ for some Singaporean men, but also invites a discursive intervention because its very ambiguity allows for multiple interpretations. It shifts narrative authority from men who want to restrict women to traditional roles, and into the imagined community of women who contest these stereotypes. The ‘peeling prawns’ debate is one of a series of discursive moments in Singapore which articulate masculine anxieties about the collapse of certainty, centred on the unsettling of male hegemony and the myth of immutable gender difference. For Bhabha (1994: 145), this could ‘demonstrate that forces of social authority and subversion or subalternity may emerge in displaced, even decentred strategies of signification’. The ‘peeling prawns’ debate, far from recovering the Asian Feminine, created a new space for the intervention of the performative in the pedagogical. The interpellation of Singapore women as less than Asian, less than feminine, has created ‘more than it ever meant to, signifying in excess of any intended referent’ (Butler, 1993: 122).
Chapter Seven

The Crisis of Representation

Loss of Narrative Authority

It seems that Singapore reached a crisis in the representation of gender and nation. The uses of sexual difference in the production of the masculinised national narrative is contingent upon the production of the feminine Other in pejorative mode (Braidotti, 1994a), but women have created counter-narratives that have disturbed the certainty of gender difference. The pedagogy of nation has been ruptured by the performativity of women, whose increased economic power invests them with greater personal autonomy and the means of refusal. The perfect product of Singapore culture – the productive, well-educated, smart, consumer-oriented, Chinese woman with discretionary spending power, the ideal consuming citizen – has emerged to challenge narrative authority. The result has been that cultural agents have evolved into ’bad subjects’ which have created profound anxiety, even anger, inscribed as a threat to nation, family and even to masculinity itself, and indeed, the reinscription of men.

Challenges to the given order and the dream of a masculinised state generated a crisis of masculinity, which sometimes appeared as a backlash against women. While the state is immensely powerful, the government in Singapore has to some extent lost narrative control. Lee Kuan Yew has always understood the importance of narrative control. In a speech to the Singapore Press Club on 15 November 1972, he revealed not only his understanding of the power of the text, but the importance of the state’s role in controlling cultural discourse:

Every morning, my task begins with reading four or five newspapers. It can be tiresome. I note the scurrilous, the scandalous. I can live with that. But when any newspaper pours a daily dose of language, cultural or religious poison, I put my knuckledusters on. Do not believe you can beat the state (cited in Han, et al, 1998: 212).
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When vacillating and ambivalent representations emerge, where the narrative offers nodes of escape from the power of the discourse, where the discourse is enfeebled or diluted, where there are openings for expanded contestations, the claim to a unified nation and the stability of the ‘given order’ of gender are compromised. You may not be able to beat the state, but you can sometimes cause it to fray at the edges, and it may have to adopt more subtle methods (see Hudson and Johal, 2011).

A climate of anxiety about loss of narrative control in which the power of the centre has been disturbed by emergent subjectivities has, in Singapore, given rise to an attempt to recover this power by extending the phallogocentric master narrative to encompass other Asian groups, in particular the Japanese. Even the Japanese, with whom the leaders of Singapore feel as if they share ‘the same cultural base’ (Chua, 1995: 31–32) of Confucian ethics, seem to be unable to contain the problem of women’s refusal. The structural position of women, their relationship to reproduction, and the crisis of marriage, are compared, weighed up, and solutions considered, in terms of parallels in the global environment. Despite the fact that low fertility levels are a common feature of most developed nations, Taiwan and Japan are most often cited in Singapore as two countries with the same problems, created by the personal choices of women. Women’s autonomy in the workplace, the decreasing popularity of marriage (especially in Japan), and the exercise of economic and personal power outside the confines of the family, are inscribed as unfortunate and negative consequences of modernisation, increased gender equality and exposure to Western culture. On 21 April 2004, in a speech at the Third Session of the China Scientists’ Forum on the Humanities in Beijing, Lee lamented this trend, even admitting to having once blamed himself. His statement implies that women have no true autonomous agency, but their situation is simply the result of the inexorable forces of modernisation:

The Japanese tried to block this trend to equality of the sexes. They kept their women as defenders and nurturers of the next generation, to be good wives, mothers and daughters-in-laws. They did not allow the birth control pill to be sold without a doctor’s prescription ... But by the 1990s, they faced similar problems. Japanese women are getting married much later; many choose to remain single, there are more divorces, fewer children, low Total Fertility Rates (TFR), many marry foreigners.
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Japan had only postponed these changes by two generations. I used to hold myself responsible for having caused this phenomenon of many unmarried women graduates by opening up equal education and top job opportunities to all women from the 1960s. I now believe that I only hastened it by some 20 years (Chongqing Globe, 2004).

Alleged gender equality has provided an expanded space for the production of Otherness. Having absolved himself from any blame, in a discursive move which writes out women’s personal autonomy, Lee implies that modernity has created the Other which has become a problem of nation. The ‘gifts’ from a benevolent government to women (PuruShotam, 1992), discussed previously, might have been a mistake, but were nevertheless an unavoidable consequence of the modern.

If Otherness can shift and reappear for a specific discursive agenda, the centre can also dissolve and reform. The centre becomes then, not simply the beleaguered Singapore male, but Asian masculinity itself. Lee’s reference to Japan having similar ‘problems’, however, erases differences between Japanese and Singaporean women, and alludes to a powerful and unsettling Asian female agency. The phenomenon of young Asian women refusing or postponing marriage has created a new category of woman, known in Japan as the Parasaito Shinguru, or Parasite Single. She is typically painted as a young career woman who lives rent-free with her parents, wears designer labels and travels internationally with girlfriends. The many references to ‘Parasite Singles’ in what is becoming a rash of anxious comments in newspapers and websites never fails to mention that these young women are parasitic (not contributing to the reproduction of the next generation), and that their consumption of global products and services demonstrates greed and selfishness. The BBC reported:

Professor Masahiro Yamada – who coined the phrase Parasite Single – says their numbers are set to grow. They suffer a dramatic fall in their standard of living if they get married. On average they lose two thirds of their spending money. And they also have to do housework. The gap between the two lifestyles is growing. Single women remain in the workforce for much longer than their married counterparts. Surveys show they are the most contented demographic group in Japan. It is not going to get any easier for Japanese men to persuade them to give it all up (Scanlon, 2001).
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It is, however, clear from an article published in Japan Times that the real problem is not unmarried women, but unmarried men, whose expectation of women is that they will minister to their daily needs and acquiesce to traditional male domination in the family setting: ‘When I come home from work in the evening, my room is dark, and in winter it’s cold. At these times I always wish I had a wife waiting for me, with a hot meal,’ says Yoshiharu Mitamura (not his real name), a 36-year-old photographer (Naito, 2000). The New York Times also reports a similar phenomenon in Thailand, which is apparently causing consternation among Thai men. It was reported that Saovapna Devahastin, who works in the media and is studying for a Masters degree, won the title of Miss Spinster in 2003, a beauty contest for women who are single by choice. Devahastin said that the response to her win was unexpected:

Right at the start, some of them got my phone number and called me … but they weren’t asking for a date. They wanted me to be their secret mistress and let them take care of me. They said, ‘You don’t need to stand up and say you’re a spinster. I’ll provide for your comfort.’ It was crazy. They thought we were showing off our looks because we were desperate to find a man (Mydans 2004).

Lily Kong and Jasmine Chan (2000) have underlined the contradictions inherent in a state which is at the same time a perpetuator of patriarchal power, and a source of social reform. Considering government action in the areas of housing, education and health, they argue that in balancing patriarchy and pragmatism, seemingly in ideological contradiction, the state faces no conflict as it serves the two ideologies simultaneously. Indeed, they demonstrate that the solutions to any apparent conflict are easily overcome since pragmatism maintains primacy over patriarchal ideals (Kong and Chan, 2000: 507). It is the logic of capitalism, according to them, which determines primacy and finds ways to allow patriarchy and pragmatism to be mutually reinforcing. Novelist and academic Catherine Lim, when asked how far Singapore has come in ‘liberating women’ answered:

The Singapore government is extremely pragmatic and would liberate women in the sense of economic liberation or liberating them to the extent that they would contribute to the economy. They will do that. Not for moral or ideological reasons. They will give us crèches; they will educate us. They will do anything. As we are fifty percent of the popula-
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tion and the country needs us, we ought to contribute to the economy. The other aspect, you know, women’s ideology is a much more touchy subject compared to the first. If we feel that we have a right to abortion, a right to be lesbians, that’s when they’re on uncomfortable, not very familiar ground. When we say we have the right to be promiscuous or we have the right to have affairs, I think it’s a totally different area, very alien to them and they would rather not deal with it. They still want the Asian woman to be traditional. Women are still expected to be virtuous according to Confucianist ideals, modest and always deferring to men – that would be the ideal Asian woman here. But the government is prepared to give us good pay – that’s for certain – and prepared to help us upgrade ourselves in our work. They are willing to help us with our children, if necessary by building crèches, by making conditions in schools good for our children so that WE CAN REST EASY [original emphasis] knowing that they are getting a good education. We can then concentrate on our work (cited in Lim Yi-En, 1999: 71–72).

The contradictions, contestations, and the alternative voices that I have outlined can offer points of escape from the phallogocentric mode of discourse and provide for Braidotti’s discursive ethics (1994b: 160–161). A discursive ethics is not prescriptive and does not demand a particular content for women’s discourse, rather it is women’s entitlement to speak which is empowering, and can offer the escape from the dominant mode. Soin offers a moment of dislocation of the dominant mode when she argues for a redefinition of power, and acknowledges the consternation it will cause:

Apart from control over resources, power comprises control over ideology. Unfortunately, Singapore leaders believe in a patriarchal society, one in which men have all or most of the power and importance. This further disadvantages women. The process of empowerment of women should generate new notions of power and the purpose for which it is wielded. Present-day notions of power encourage aggression, competition and corruption. There is need for a new understanding of power – not one of control and exploitation for personal gain, but of sharing and giving, and of creating and developing the potential for every human being ... The outcome of empowerment is a redistribution of power between men and women. This brings us to the widespread fear that women’s empowerment is against men and against the family. Yes, empowerment does mean the loss of men’s traditional power and control over the women of the households – wives, daughters, sisters, mothers (Soin, 1998: 18–19).
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Singapore academic Phyllis Chew has also argued for a discursive ethics which erases gendered power differentials, and valorises the feminine:

Men and women would become androgynous in the sense of balancing their male and female qualities, still providing for individual and gender differences but not those based on inequality of power and privilege. However, men would need to make greater changes in themselves than women would. The reason is that both the existing male-dominated social structure and the traditional behaviour and attitudes that have characterized male roles would need to be feminized (Chew, 1998: 25).

Women’s demands, not just for an end to violence and more control over their own lives, but for a feminisation of relationships, precipitate the collapse of the certainty of masculine hegemony. These are the counter-narratives which disturb the ‘imagined community’ of the nation and ceaselessly recall its intransigent pluralism. The essentialism of masculinity is challenged and, therefore, also the essentialism of the nation of which the father is the head.

The Great Marriage Debate exposed this pluralism and disturbed the certainty of the acquiescence of women to their prescribed roles. According to Heng and Devan (1995: 202) the debate and the negative responses to Lee’s eugenicist agenda was a threat to the patriarchal authority vested in the traditional Asian family. They report on a counter-narrative which appeared in the Sunday Times in 1986 at the peak of publicity about people’s consternation regarding Lee’s public expression of panic about falling birth and marriage rates. Under the pseudonyms, ‘Veronica’ and ‘Mrs. Chan’ the following articulation of the potential of women to unsettle patriarchy appeared:

*Veronica:* ‘But there are women like me who would love to have children, even though we’re unmarried.’

*Mrs. Chan:* ‘Yes, a lot of women would like that. Our laws should not penalize such women. Those who are professional and financially self-supporting are quite capable of bringing up their children alone. We should encourage single motherhood, allow such interested women to have artificial insemination.’

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Alternatives to the conventional family such as single parenthood were anxiously rejected since they struck at the core of state fatherhood itself, the institutional basis on which government patriarchy was posited (Heng and Devan, 1995). Heng and Devan argue that ‘behind the ostensible crisis of maternity and production – too much or too little, never exactly enough – was a crisis of paternity [original emphasis] and reproduction’ (Heng and Devan, 1995: 202). This is the ‘pathology of nation’ for Singapore. Braidotti’s argument is that it is on ‘the women’s body – on her absence, her silence, her disqualification – that phallocentric discourse rests’. This sort of ‘metaphysical cannibalism’, as she calls it, sometimes understood as uterus envy, to reiterate, ‘positions the woman as the silent groundwork of male subjectivity’ (Braidotti, 1994a: 139). It is clear that not every woman in Singapore is silent, not every woman allows herself to be disqualified.

Heng and Devan point to Singapore’s ‘obsession with ideal replication in the register of the imaginary’ (1995: 196), a pathological preoccupation with reproduction of the unified nation predicated on Chinese male supremacy. Positing alternatives to the male-headed family, and diminishing the reproductive necessity for men, unsettles the nation itself. They put it succinctly:

His [Lee Kuan Yew’s] sentimental indulgence in the saving visions of a reactionary past, selectively idealized, stages that past as the exclusive theatre of omnipotent fathers: state fathers whose creative powers incorporate and subsume the maternal function, as attested by their autonomous birthing of the nation. The subsequent show of protective solitude over the national offspring then aggressively, if fantastically, replays the cherished moment of paternal delivery; by arresting change and difference in the national body, and wishfully transfixing the population in its original composition at birth, a living testimony to the founding moment is made perpetually available, a constantly present reminder; and the fearful threat of material transmogrification – growth, alteration, difference, the transformations wrought by an undisclosed, never-certain future (imagined, conveniently, as issuing from mothers, that displaced, but ever looming, ever returning source of threat and competition) – is simultaneously warded off and disengaged (Heng and Devan, 1995: 203).

A reactionary past appears as the imagined community, and recalcitrant women confound even the history of the nation.
Reinscribing Men – The New Singapore Man

Representations of the masculine have been compromised by the feminine Other, and women have exhibited characteristics contrary to the image of the traditional Asian woman; the boundaries of gender difference, highlighted by patterns of circumscribed behaviour, have been transgressed by women. One consequence of women’s appropriation of the right to demand a discursive space for alternative voices has been the unsettling of images of masculinity. Women have claimed a level of narrative authority in the struggle over gender representations by generating uncertainty about masculine gender expectations, if not a change in behaviour. A corollary of this has been the reinscription, or ‘regendering’ of men, a discursive intervention in gender relations which has been observed in other cultural locations. In Western societies such as Britain for example, as Gill notes, ‘where men once represented the invisible, unmarked norm of human existence and experience, today they are hyper-visible as a gendered group’ (2003: 34).

Long before the peeling prawns spectacle articulated male anxiety about the loss of narrative control and the performative recalcitrance of women, the contesting, even lampooning, of men’s expectations of women had already emerged in the discourse. The collapse of gender certainty not only allowed for a performative dissonance but changing representations of women have brought about a shift in representations of men; ambiguity and ambivalence now adulterate images of masculinity and problematise the norm.

In 1994, journalist Geraldine Kan noted certain characteristics of Singapore men that were unattractive to women, educated women in particular:

Right. The secret is out. A mysterious species of Singapore male called the Homo Dufferulus Foolus has just been identified on the island … a definition of its characteristics has been attempted. A very senior minister said last weekend that this creature, who can also be called a ‘duffer and a fool’ is the product of an outmoded set of values and can be identified by his choice of mate – women who ‘are seen to be his

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1 This is a reference to the then Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew’s comments that the Singapore male was ‘a duffer and a fool’ with ‘an outmoded set of values which makes him want to marry a wife who is seen to be his subordinate, or at least does not challenge him’ (Straits Times Weekly, September 24, 1994), cited in Kuah (1997: 45). It will be obvious to the reader that this contradicts previous statements by Lee.
subordinates, or at least do not challenge him’ ... A sub-species was also discovered last Thursday. A Straits Times straw poll found that some young men want wives who earn as much as they do or more – but will stay obedient. In other words, someone who not only brings home the bacon, but cooks it for him too, after asking how he wants his fried and getting his permission to turn on the stove. The HDF is actually a very smart creature. He knows which side his bank account, and ego, are buttered. My friend Nick, who is otherwise one of the sweetest men I know, goes into severe regression when this subject comes up. ‘I believe that women should be educated’, he says. ‘I just don’t see myself marrying someone who outperforms me. That’s intimidating. That’s opening yourself to getting laughed at’. Another friend, Andrew, is willing to make some allowances. Brilliant, even wildly successful young women are acceptable – as long as they do not outshine him in public. ‘It can get embarrassing – not that I want her to look like a dumb blonde, but she should know when to take a back seat – like at company functions. I don’t want to look henpecked …’ (Kan, 1994).

Some years later, in the middle of the peeling prawns spectacle, another series of descriptions of Singapore men began circulating in the discourses. Sumiko Tan writes that the Singapore Male is perceived as being too goal-oriented:

At lunch with colleagues the other day, the conversation drifted to The Singapore Male ... The Singapore Male clearly has drive and is goal-oriented. He lives in a tiny, urban, fast-paced society, and he measures his life – as his unforgiving society measures him – by material possessions. He wants the 5 Cs of cash, credit card, car, condo and club, and sets out to attain them, one by one, as quickly as possible. He is pragmatic to a fault, putting career before love. Even marriage and children are regarded as goals. As a Singaporean woman told me: He is very deadline conscious. He has a mental idea of the right age to get married, before which he is commitment-phobic. And when he’s in danger of passing the deadline with no bride in sight, he panics and starts hunting. The Singapore Male appears to respect the concept of gender equality ... I could be wrong, but I sense that more have adopted the Sensitive New Age Man (Snag) persona, though this could be a matter of convenience than conviction (Sumiko Tan, 2001).

And inarticulate:

The Singapore male is uncomfortable with strangers. He doesn’t speak well and may even lack what is considered good manners in Western-
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civilised societies. He is genuinely confronted by the sight of a Singapore woman dating a Caucasian man, but sees no problems with Singapore men going out with non-Singaporean, Asian (or dare I say, China?) women … A colleague told me how, because she is forward and opinionated, most Singapore men are wary of her. ‘My ang moh’ friends handle that much better than my local male friends. This explains why I have more of the former – and it’s no Sarong Party Girl thing’, she said. I yearn to debate, to be challenged, so I want someone who doesn’t get intimidated. It’s not about skin colour (Sumiko Tan, 2001).

Nicholas Fang, writing in the Straits Times acknowledged that Singapore men have an ‘image problem’:

We’ve flossed, we’ve worked hard, carried the groceries and even displayed our emotions. Yet, Singapore women say we are not up to the mark. What more can we do? … judging by the number of dissatisfied women in Singapore, Singaporean men definitely still don’t get it. A recent feature in the The New Paper highlighted the ‘bodoh-sexual’ nature of Singapore men, quoting women who claimed that their men were insensitive, childish, chauvinistic and molly-coddled. Men’s magazine FHM also recently published its annual global sex survey where Singapore men were given a paltry 5.1 points out of 10 by their female partners in terms of their sexual performance. This was two points below the international average … Data from the Department of Statistics’ 2002 report on marriages and divorces also showed that more than 60 per cent of divorces in Singapore were initiated by wives … And anecdotal evidence from my friends doesn’t help the cause of Singapore men either. Most female friends I know have at one point or other bemoaned the lack of good Singaporean men. The bulk of the complaints have centred around us being too materialistic, too macho, not having a sense of humour … The list goes on (Fang, 2003).

As I have noted, the ‘Romancing Singapore’ campaign can encompass multiple meanings and functions. These include the potential to rehabilitate and refeminise the Singapore woman and increase

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2 Ang moh: a Hokkien term meaning Caucasian (literally ‘red-headed’), a common epithet for Western people in Singapore.

3 Sarong Party Girl: a term used in Singapore to describe women who date and often marry Caucasian men – so called because they often wear a sarong with a glamorous top. It has generally been a derogatory term for women who are assumed to be sexually promiscuous, and who appear to have more interest in foreign men than Singapore men. (see C. Lim, 1995b)

4 Bodoh: (Malay) stupid.
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consumer spending to benefit the economy; another might also be its potential to reinvent Singapore masculinity and transform it from ‘bodoh-sexual’ and pragmatic to more ‘romantic’ and sensitive. It is perhaps the Singapore man described by Kenneth Paul Tan (2001: 96) who is inscribed as protector of the family and the nation that is the problem. In a discursive terrain in which successful and assertive women are often constructed as less than feminine, and inscribed as the culprits in a crisis of masculinity, women can be re-feminised and rehabilitated as more acceptable to potential husbands; men, in the same frame, can reclaim a sensitive New Age masculinity.

The importance of the labour of women in the development of Singapore, a globalised feminism which demands a new ethics of gender difference (Braidotti, 1994a), and a cultural climate in which ‘Barbie has largely been replaced by Xena as a role model for girls’ (Fang, 2003), has meant that representations of masculinity become precarious. Some people have even claimed that masculinity is actually in crisis. Xie Wen’s representation of masculinity describes an uncompromising stereotype linking power, technology and the masculine, while at the same time lamenting the crisis:

Cruising down the North-South Expressway – 235 brake horse-power under the pedal and 1,000 watts of Joe Satriani blasting around me – it was an ironic moment to contemplate the powerlessness of the New Man ... At a kopitiam along the way, I went through the recent article in The Economist magazine headlined: The Downsized Male. It put the challenge to Singapore men in a global context. It reaffirmed what I had long believed – that masculinity is in crisis in almost all industrialized societies ... as economies advance up the technological ladder, male attributes have become liabilities. Being brawny – now celebrated in female magazines the way Playboy celebrated women with big breasts – is a disadvantage these days. In skills-hungry, knowledge economies, macho management styles are frowned upon. Men must curb their combat instincts to negotiate the more emotionally-complex terrain that women are thought to be more competent in. Meanwhile, socially, men must also find themselves disadvantaged by women who want it all – women who make a fuss about peeling a lousy prawn while expecting their partners to pay for dinner ... they find themselves up against women who still expect men to be men – do all the masculine things –

5 Kopitiam: traditional coffee shop.
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but who reckon it’s demeaning for women to do feminine things ... All we have now are feeble symbols of male power. In the African-American ghettos, disenfranchised black guys grab their crotches and strut their misogyny in angry rap. That’s all they have. Me – I have my 1,000 watts of Joe Satriani around me and 235 bhp underfoot (Xie Wen, 2002c).

Xie Wen’s description of a beleaguered masculinity, his referencing of black American rappers as part of a global enfeeblement of the masculine, along with his conflation of the power of technology with masculinity, reinvents a hypermasculine world. Ling (1999) takes up Nandy’s (1983) description of a global hypermasculinity, with its origins in the spread of British imperialism. For Ling (1999: 278), hypermasculinity implicates local gender authority with the global, to create a form of hegemony which appears as a naturalised form of dominance. The site of the enactment of this hegemony is the economy. The patriarchal state is the most dominant of the institutions which integrate local traditions with global manifestations of power. Ling’s point is that contemporary global capitalist relations of production and consumption rely on hypermasculine structures and ideologies. In both global and Asian contexts, one salient and common manifestation of this is the Asian woman as the embodiment of ‘service’ (Ling, 1999: 285), epitomised by the stereotypical Thai sex worker, the Filippina maid, the Japanese geisha, amongst others, and of course, the Singapore Girl. In Xie Wen’s world, peeling prawns is a ‘feminine thing’, while driving fast cars is masculine. His appeal is to the global hypermasculine, as he articulates his own masculinity through the consumption of global popular culture, technology, and global discourses of the aggrieved male. He colludes with a global hypermasculinity, and the ‘combat instincts’ of men everywhere, to produce an Asian hypermasculinity which draws on local and traditional forms of gender domination and patriarchal expectations of women.

It is clear, however, that in Singapore, as Ling has argued, following Bhabha (1990: 4) in a wider context, that ‘the Other under global hypermasculinity is not outside, alien or policeable but inside, familiar, and all too unmanageable’ with ‘debilitating internal contradictions’ (Ling, 1999: 285).

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6 Joe Satriani’s album ‘Is there Love in Space?’ in described on his website in decidedly masculine terms: ‘[The album] ... catches Satriani in rip-snorting improvisational rides, laying searing, stinging leads over thick, grinding rhythm parts’ (Is there love in space? 2004).
1999: 299). When it becomes unmanageable, and the recalcitrance too great, an appeal to the global is made. If it is difficult for Singapore men to find women who won’t ‘make a fuss about peeling a lousy prawn’, they merely look to an international context in which other Asian women (‘Malacca, brother, Malacca …’, as Evil Eddie recommends) will embody and perform service.

Bourdieu (2001) has noted that symbolic construction is not just a performative operation which structures representations, especially the body; it is also a process through which differentiated differences must be constructed, by excluding from ‘the universe of the feasible and unthinkable, everything that marks the membership of the other gender’ (Bourdieu, 2001: 23). For domination to be effective, it must foreclose on all the potentialities of what Freud has called polymorphous perversity (Bourdieu, 2001: 23). It is clear that neither gender domination, nor the exclusion of the unthinkable is possible in modern Singapore. The very global culture to which Xie Wen appeals, provides the conditions under which gender boundaries can shift. Xie Wen’s reference to a hypermasculinity is perhaps an attempt to re-establish the boundaries of gender identity which have so obviously been ruptured. While Xie Wen’s anger about Xena replacing Barbie can intersect in the imagination with the gender dynamics of urban black America, and help confirm a masculinity in opposition, not all Singapore men are quite so sure of their gender identity. Nicholas Fang writes:

My former English tutor Mr. Purvis used to hark back wistfully to the days when ‘men were men and women were happy about it’, and it’s true that notions of what it means to be a man are becoming less clear. In recent years we have had to make do with the rather watered-down Snag tag, which is wimpy at best, and confusing at worst. We’re expected to be sensitive, emotionally vulnerable, and still be ‘guys’, which presumably means exhibiting masculine traits such as strength, dependability and gentlemanliness. The latest trend towards metrosexuality seems to promise even more confusion for a generation of men who have had to stand in the shadows as their female counterparts storm past in a whirlwind of sexual revolution (Fang, 2003).

Kam Louie’s study of Chinese masculinity describes a paradigm of masculinity characterised by the idealised dyad wen-wu. Wen can be understood as cultured behaviour, refinement, scholarly mastery of the lit-
erary canon and other important works; *wu* is martial prowess, strength, mastery of the physical (Louie, 2002), perhaps the ‘combat instincts’ to which Xie Wen (2002a) refers. Traditional cultural constructs of gender such as these are compromised and confounded in the modern world. The demands of a modern capitalist economy in a globalised system leave little room to develop *wen* as a literary scholar, even though academic success is highly valued in Singapore. Now, the constitution of Chinese masculine identity probably lies somewhere along the continuum of economic success as a modern form of *wen* at one pole, and the *wu* of compulsory military training in National Service at the other. Kenneth Paul Tan has pointed out that NS is not merely about the defence of the nation, but is ‘the antidote to the effete-ness and complacency that are commonly thought to accompany affluence, better education, and modern lifestyles’ (K. P. Tan, 2001: 98). NS is not only a masculinising exercise, but also a means of regulating male aggressiveness and channeling political energies into the nation’s security, rather than political dissent (K. P. Tan, 2001: 98). Amongst the top ranks of the Singapore Armed Forces, however, the expectation is broader. According to K. P. Tan (2001), the upper echelons are occupied by ‘soldier-scholars’, a combination of *wen* and *wu*, who have been selected on academic merit and leadership as well as on their demonstration of physical strength and discipline. But even the masculine paradigm made available by NS cannot be an uncompromised representation of adult masculinity. For Sumiko Tan it somehow infantilises them: ‘… there’s something pitiful yet sexy about a grown man suddenly looking as woebegone as a boy as he sets off in his uniform for reservist training’ (2001).

NS, according to K. P. Tan, is not only regarded as a male activity because it involves men undergoing tough discipline and training, and encourages aggressiveness and martial virtues; it is also a ‘masculine’ exercise because it is seen as the rite of passage into male adulthood (through the exclusion of women), the essential feature of which is the requirement to act as protector of both the family and the nation (K. P. Tan, 2001: 98). This paradigm has, however, been discredited by the New Singapore Woman who apparently does not need protecting. The time when ‘men were men’ and defined in unambiguous ways has disappeared.

Re-feminisation of women through the ‘Romancing Singapore’ campaign has been accompanied by a reinscription of Singapore men as
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caring, sensitive and considerate life partners and less patriarchal in their attitude to family relationships than in previous eras. This may be seen as a strategic move to induce Chinese women to marry local men, rather than continue the trend of exogamy. As if to rewrite him as a combination of gentleness and uncompromising militarised masculinity, Sumiko Tan (2001) articulates a ‘new masculinity’:

Despite his rough edges, The Singapore Man – in my book at least is a sweetie at heart. Yes, he’s unromantic, brusque and materialistic (but who isn’t in hard driving Singapore?). But he’s gone through National Service and – he might not want to believe this – women are grateful for that (Sumiko Tan, 2001).

Xie Wen’s lament that the ‘new man’ is powerless is recognition that representations of masculinity in Singapore have been confounded by the changing demands of women. Where Xie Wen’s masculinity connects discursively with a global hypermasculinity, in reality it is no longer possible to maintain an uncompromised hegemonic masculinity, where modern life demands more *wen* than *wu*.

Hing’s examination of the role of family relationships and expectations in Singapore shows that one important corollary of ‘the bold emergence of the ecstatic ungovernable’, as she calls the independent woman, is the appearance of the ‘new man’ (2000: 66). She points to two small-scale studies, S. T. Lim’s (1990–91) and R. Lim’s (1992–93), which show that young fathers with children growing up today spend more time caring for their children than their own fathers did. This new man, a predominantly middle class phenomenon and not a universal, actively seeks a relationship with his children. A father, an army officer, in S.T. Lim’s study stated: ‘Since last May, I have made it a point to spend one afternoon a week with my children just one-to-one ... I want [to be] not just a father to them but also confidant and friend’ (cited in Hing, 2000: 68). Some will also prioritise family above work. An airline pilot in R. Lim’s study made the statement: ‘Although money is needed which I get from my work, my company can always find another manager, but

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my kids need me more and I'm a family man first, and a company man second’ (cited in Hing, 2000: 68).

The phenomenon of reconstructed masculinity is not exclusive to Singapore. Rosalind Gill (2003) points to the emergence of the ‘new father’ in Britain as a way of producing knowledge about masculinity that could render knowable the conflicting and contradictory domestic and emotional landscapes of heterosexual couples with children (Gill, 2003:35). In February 2005 The Sunday Times published a feature in its Lifestyle section about ‘Heavenly Fathers’ and ‘Dishy Dads’, as part of its Valentine's Day special:

There’s nothing fuddy-duddy about these Daddies. Check out these hot new Dads, who are as adorable as the cute babes in their arms. You’ve seen them in ads before: hot men with abs of steel cradling delicate babies in their bronzed arms. These poster boys and poster babies may not even be related, but who cares? Girls just go wild over Dishy Dads. Take freelance writer Jane Lee 34, who goes weak in the knees looking at bare-bodied pictures of actor Allan Wu, who is married to actress Wong Li-Lin, and their four-month-old girl Sage. ‘People always expect mothers to be close to their babies. But when a man showers love on his little child, it shows off his softer side and reinforces his masculinity as well,’ she says. ‘Of course, it helps if the Dad’s a hunk’, she adds (Seah, 2005).

The feature helped promote the PAP’s family policy by rewriting the father as more mother than mother:

With his handsome matinee idol looks and muscular 1.78m-tall frame, Aaron Aziz is, without a doubt, a Dishy Dad. But ask the 29-year-old Fly Entertainment artiste if his four-month-old son is his new weapon of mass seduction when it comes to women, and he demurs ... The actor takes to his paternal role with impressive ease. Oblivious to those present at the Singapore Press Holdings studio where the interview and photo session took place, he playfully coos, kisses and rocks the precious bundle in his toned arms. Each time the baby cries, he either promises him a new toy from Mothercare or apologises for making him sit through the ordeal. Short of breast-feeding, you get the feeling that there is nothing Aaron wouldn’t do to please the little one. It is a sight that would probably make most women want to put all their eggs into his basket. He beams with pride when he tells you that he was at Thomson Medical Centre to witness the baby’s delivery, and even washed the
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placenta off his newborn. And in what must be music to most women’s ears, he claims he helps his wife change diapers and wash the baby in their four-room HDB flat in Pasir Ris. He also earns brownie points for taking his son for daily morning walks before he goes to work: ‘This is about the only quality time I have with him on weekdays because of my working hours, which end around eight’ (Seah, 2005).

This protective Dad, who wants two more children, admits that he sometimes chastises his wife for not giving in to the baby’s demands: ‘I get irritated when she doesn’t do things the way I want them done, like how to treat the baby when he cries’. But his wife defends him: ‘He’s a very meticulous father. He’ll make doubly sure that things like the teat and milk bottles are all properly sterilized’ (Seah 2005).

Feminised Nation

Underlying the modernist meta-narratives, which rely on disciplined and obedient Asian subjects driven by a seemingly universal compliance with the imperatives of an instrumental rationality and a desire for accumulation presented as the logical outcome, has been an informing narrative of internal threat to the stability of the nation. This has been articulated as both racialised and feminised. The discursive practices of patriarchal state corporatism have created a national narrative which is profoundly gendered. While women can be configured as nature, to be controlled by the culture of the state, ethnic Others, such as the Malays, can be inscribed as atavistic, backward and needing to be controlled, rather like children. In a gendered discourse, masculine instrumental rationality is juxtaposed against an irrational female sexuality to create crises in which the ungovernable female body is inscribed as a threat to national stability; the masculinised corporate institutions of the state (the rational) are threatened by the corporeality of the female population (the irrational). Discursive spectacles of Mother, Dutiful Wife and Good Citizen give enunciative power to the belief that control of women’s sexuality is the key to continued national success. While the masculinity of the state is an excessive fetishistic mode of representation, it is by no means hegemonic. The feminine may escape the paternal logic of the state and disrupt the masculine, thereby bringing into existence a new and more subtle crisis, the crisis of representation of the gendered nation.
All nations depend on powerful constructions of institutionalised gender differences that confound the idea of unity; they are contested systems of cultural representation (McClintock, 1993: 61). While all are contested, modes of contestation of the master-text of nation are contingent upon historically specific conditions such as economic development, cultural background, modes of belonging and exclusion, globalisation and the intersection of modernity and tradition. There are discursive limits to the gendering of nationhood, but these limits will take specific forms at specific sites. ‘The great uninterrupted text’ (Foucault 1972: 37) of social cohesion is illusive.

I have engaged with a range of theoretical approaches to try to better understand the social and textual phenomena of Singapore. Foucault’s (1998) account of sexuality as the most instrumental of all discursive formations has illuminated the central role of sexuality and fertility in the public discourses in a modern society. His work has also pointed to the possibility of a discursive contradiction: Singapore society is putatively straight-laced, prudish and puritanical, but in reality, sex is everywhere and constantly under the public gaze: on television; in letters to the editor, both feminist and misogynistic, in the national daily broadsheet; in frequent press reports on the threat to the nation from low fertility levels due to the diminishing libido of exhausted Singapore workers; the oft-cited international Durex report; in National Day Rally Speeches; in politicians’ statements; in policy documents; in radio shows; in advertising campaigns; in tabloid media such as Streets and Today; even in museums such as the Singapore Heritage Museum in Chinatown where a major exhibition is a sound and light show featuring scenes of sex workers and brothel life in early Singapore. Along with fashion, hair and make-up, sex is the staple fare of women’s and men’s magazines. Indeed, women’s and men’s magazines fetishise the sexualised body and sexualised self.

Foucault’s analysis of Victorian England also allows us to see that the power of enunciative modalities can produce domains of validity within which what can be said and what can be done are circumscribed. A reading of his work through the prism of Singapore shows that while domains of validity can be established, they can also be undermined or ignored. Where the ‘Stop at Two’ campaign of the 1970s was highly effective in reducing family size and controlling the growth of population, the ‘Have Three or More If You Can Afford It’ campaign has had little
effect on reversing the trend. The obsessive fixation on fertility in the post-independence period has created the body as an object of political knowledge. But it is also an object of self-knowledge, the focus of the self-obsessed, individualistic consumer, and the locus of individual desires in constant tension with the desires of the State.

The founding fathers of independent Singapore inscribed the state as masculine. Our understanding of the limits to this masculinising discourse and its patriarchal underpinnings can be deepened with reference to Bhabha’s theories of the nation (1990). I have proceeded from his notion that the nation should be studied through its narrative address. For him, the nation is a space of incomplete signification in which narrative authority can always be challenged. His argument has been that marginal voices have always contested this authority, and that the narrative address is vulnerable to disruption from the alternative constituencies located in the interstices. I have taken this notion further, to argue that it is not only from the margins that the alternative voices which will contest and ultimately unsettle the narrative will emerge: in Singapore these voices are central to the construction of the nation. This brings about masculine anxiety, even panic.

As part of the government’s obsession with fertility, the female body has been brought into sharp focus and politicised. The male body has also been politicised (Hudson, 2009). Braidotti’s theories have shown that while the Other of the phallogocentric order must be created in pejorative mode, the highlighting of sexual difference as part of this process can also leave space for renewed recognition of the value of sexual differences by women themselves. By reinscribing sexual difference as positive, women can find ways of escaping phallogocentric authority.

As Braidotti has suggested, the affirmation and valorisation of sexual difference can be the beginning of a new feminism. While the masculine self is produced simultaneously with and as a corollary of the pejorative Other, this can also mean that women can deploy pejorative representations for their own political and personal ends. Norms, expectations and standards can also invite transgression, as it appears to have done in Singapore where transgressive actions and refusal are creative ways of establishing the authority of their own voices. The women in Singapore on whom my book focuses have already been empowered by education, professional competence and recognition, independent incomes, and
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(in most cases) by their position in the Chinese majority. The reclaiming of sexual difference as a positive mode, which can demand recognition and even material rewards has the potential to be even more empowering. Women have found in the phallogocentric narrative of Singapore a space for the celebration of sexual difference and the recovery of its power. The possibilities of escape from the dominant narrative and ultimately the constraints of the patriarchal order itself exist.

In Singapore, discourses which have attempted to inscribe the nation as an uninterrupted masculine text, have, it seems, never really enjoyed the authority they needed to promote the idea of the unity of the nation, manifested in collective national goals. Women have been contesting the gendered text of nation for some forty years. The ‘New Singapore Woman’ has emerged as a late capitalist evolving cultural agent with increasing power to confront and disturb the masculine pedagogy of nation. There are specific historical and cultural conditions which provide for the production of the modes of contestation of gender hegemony in Singapore. The expectation that women will engage in paid labour in a modern economy embedded in a global political economy is a feature of global modernity generally. More specifically, Singaporean factors which provide the conditions for local modes of contestation include the existence of a communitarian democracy in which there is a ‘presumed familiarity between the state and the people, imagined as a single collective with common interests’ (Mules, 1999: 74). This can provide the conditions for the mutual recognition of state and subject, as Dews (1987: 198) has asserted in his critique of Foucault’s account of the formation of subjects. In Singapore, where the state intervenes in citizens’ intimate lives and appears to be literally everywhere (Chua, 2003: 177), the separation of seer and seen (Dews 1987: 198) is not strictly demarcated. The disturbing of the symmetry of public and private has also redrawn the domestic space as the space of the normalising, pastoralising and individuating techniques of modern power and police (Bhabha, 1994: 11), however, in Singapore, it is possible for the private to interfere with the public and sometimes frustrate its agenda. All these specifically Singaporean factors produce evolving cultural agents who unsettle the pedagogy of nation with their own performative power.

The focus on the bodies of women as the site of a looming social disaster, the management of fertility as a prerequisite for continuing na-
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tional progress and welfare, and the immense verbosity about sexuality, seem to confirm Butler’s proposition that the body becomes accessible ‘on the occasion of an address, a call, an interpellation that does not “discover” this body, but constitutes it fundamentally’ (Butler, 1997: 5). Women have been constituted through the address of the nation. But this has served also to produce, in Butler’s terms, a subject in excess of any referent (1993: 122). The discourses, far from creating the conditions in which fertility could be managed for the national agenda, have relocated women as centre-stage and invested them with a voice which sometimes demands: ‘Show us the money!’ (Agence France Presse, April 30, 2000). The high levels of pragmatism expected of Singapore citizens has meant that for women ‘where a policy conforms to their plans and decisions, it will be taken advantage of and the rhetoric of “public good” drawn upon; where it runs counter to other personal circumstances, it is ignored …’ (Teo and Yeoh, 1998: 93). As a pragmatic, rational subject, apparently not too encumbered by sentiment, and hardly more ‘romantic’ than the average Singapore man, the well-educated, hard working, status-driven woman is the perfect product of Singapore. She would be the ideal citizen, but for the fact that all these characteristics apparently deter her from producing children in the numbers the government would like. She could be the perfect citizen, but often appears as Althusser’s ‘bad subject’ (1971) with an extensive repertoire of disobediences.

The masculine pedagogy of nation has been established through a number of discursive strategies such as the narrative of continual crisis, the campaigns to change behaviour, the sexualised narrative of gender difference, and the deployment of the family for the national good. Women have been interpellated as subjects in all these forms of narrative address. The social existence of the subject becomes possible through interpellation (Butler, 1993: 127), but subjects are not always interpellated in the way it was intended. There has not merely been a failure of the interpellating law; the site of failure is also the site of emergence of a new subjectivity. The existence of the New Singapore Woman becomes possible at the site of greatest masculine anxiety about the loss of narrative control. The ‘peeling prawns’ image is not merely a metaphor for the loss of the feminine and the Asian in Singapore women; it is a metonym, the part (loss of control in the private sphere) standing for the whole (loss of control of the narrative address of nation, and ultimately masculine power).
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The performative not only unsettles the pedagogy but has brought changes to it. The response to the New Singapore Woman is not uniform. A corollary of her appearance is not only anxiety in some men, but a ‘feminising’ of others, and a re-evaluation of modes of masculinity. Braidotti (2003: 1) has discussed the location of Sameness in relation to the inflation and reification of the notion of difference. Braidotti posits that while the centre, articulated through the White, Male Master Narrative, is powerful, it does not exhaust the specificity and the positions of the Others. In Singapore the centre is articulated through the Chinese, Male Master Narrative, but its existence generates a proliferation of Others of that position. The destabilisation of the centre accelerates the production of pejorative Others, at the same time multiplying sites of resistance. The proliferation of sites of resistance in Singapore parallels the nation’s steady economic development through cycles of industrial production in the first decades after independence, to a vibrant and sophisticated globally oriented consumer economy in the twenty-first century. For as Braidotti has pointed out:

The historical era of globalization is the shifting meeting grounds on which sameness and otherness or centre and periphery confront each other and redefine their inter-relation. The changing roles of the former ‘others’ of modernity, namely women, natives and natural or earth others, turn them into powerful sites of social and discursive transformation (Braidotti, 2003: 2).

There are myriad examples of sites of discursive transformation which empower alternative voices and from which women speak in Singapore. These voices constitute Braidotti’s (1994a) counter-memory, or in Bhabha’s terms, the ‘counter-narratives of the nation that continually evoke and erase its totalizing boundaries’ (1994: 149). They provide the points of exit from the phallogocentric mode, ‘the angles through which women can gain access to a nonlogocentric mode of representation of the female feminist subject’ (Braidotti, 1994a: 160). The focus on the embodied Other in Singapore has helped create the conditions for a discursive ethics, which amplifies, rather than eclipses, sexual difference. It has created ‘the space for women to posit themselves as corporeal and sexed beings’ (Braidotti, 1994b: 160–161).

The writing of any nation is ambivalent, and no political ideologies can claim transcendent or metaphysical authority for themselves.
The Crisis of Representation

(Bhabha, 1994: 148). It is not possible for narrative authority to remain uninterrupted. It is in the nature of the nation that there is a disjuncture between the pedagogical and the performative. It is in the space of this disjuncture that people write their own nation. In Singapore the crisis of representation that has come about from the performative intervening in the pedagogy, from refusal, and from the writing of a ‘women’s nation’ has demonstrated the creative possibilities for transcending gendered modes of dominance. Disunity, then, is as important a mode of articulating the nation as unity. Neither is monocular nor monologic. If every nation’s narrative is full of ambivalences, of inconsistencies, of conflicts, of paradoxes, of disagreements, of discontinuities, then each nation should also be known as much for its specific modes of disunity as its unity.

Despite the attempts to establish a pedagogy of nation through a masculinist text of nation, Singapore appears as a feminised society. Women are highly visible in the public sphere; they have a powerful voice. Women are also agents of social and discursive transformations. The Singapore woman is no ‘Singapore Girl’. Far from being the Other of modernity she is at the very centre of the dreams and aspirations of the nation.
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