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ARTICLES

There's Sand in My Infinity Pool: Land Reclamation and the Rewriting of Singapore

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“There's Sand in My Infinity Pool” explores land reclamation in Singapore as a speculative material and cultural practice. Typically presented as either a practical engineering feat or an ecologically disastrous approach to coastal development, the significance of land reclamation in the cultural formation of identity and landscape has yet to be addressed. Given the ongoing and speculative nature of land reclamation, this practice-led research seeks to position land reclamation as a form of writing to identify the rewritten boundaries of memory and identity, unearthing the unacknowledged implications of land reclamation as a material and cultural practice in the formation of national identity. Sourced from interviews, ethnographic accounts, and autoethnography, the narratives examine what it means to live with and through land reclamation. The “breakwater” widens the field of conceptual enquiry, juxtaposing ideas from human geography, literary criticism, and critical theory to widen the framework for interrogating this practice of nation building. **Key Words:** fiction, land reclamation, landscape, national identity, Singapore.

A THIRST FOR SAND

1997 | 2006 | 2015

MARINA BAY

It is a weekend, and I am in my father's office. I look out of the window and see bulldozers moving across the edge of a plain of sand etched against the sea. We are removing boxes of documents, navigating around precarious stacks of paper that tower over his desk. Outside I see ridges containing acres of shallow water foaming around streams of sand as it is pumped in. Inside I hear paper being shuffled, sheets slipping away from each other as one pile tips over and slides to the floor. I ask my father what is happening; he says it has been going on for so long he almost forgot it was there. On a bleached rectangle of sand further away there are people flying kites.

Another weekend, nine years later. Instead of revising for my GSCE exams I am walking down a wide empty road toward Marina South, and walk into a cul-de-sac of abandoned restaurants and bars formerly that boasted stunning seafront views (see [Figure 1](#)). There are high corrugated fences over which I can see mounds of sand. There are glossy hoardings that line the high fences; a hotel, a casino, what looks like a boat held aloft by three skyscrapers. Machinery noise dimples the air, itches the inside of my ears.



FIGURE 1 Marina Bay reclamation, 1997 (Koon Holdings 2011). © Koon Holdings. Reproduced by permission of Koon Holdings. Permission to reuse must be obtained from the rightsholder. (Color figure available online.)

Another nine years later I am lying on a deck chair by a pool on top of a 340-meter sky-park spanning the three towers of Marina Bay Sands. The engineers worked for months to devise a structure that would cope with the torque of the sky-park in a high wind. Sheldon Adelson believed he could bring the spirit of luck to the luckiest country on earth: peace, prosperity, a surplus in the treasury. Below is the only casino in Singapore; when asked about it by joshing reporters, the prime minister smiles tightly and politely before correcting: “Integrated resort, not casino.” The edge of the water cleanly cuts into the postcard-crisp view of the central business district as if clumsily Photoshopped. I am high above the land I saw constructed, and have a 360° view of smoothly curved reserve hectares, which, I am assured, will provide enough development potential to last fifty years.

Every time I saw a photo of the Marina Bay Sands I refused to believe it existed, refused to believe that the sand I saw pumped into a muddy waterlogged plain jutting out against the water has become the defining image of the city I grew up in (see [Figure 2](#)).

I try to make sense of what I remember and what I see, suspicious of the view and its attempt to absorb me, disbelieving of its existence while I am inside it, and waiting for the moment, perhaps in fifty years, when management will capitalize on this spectacular view and begin pumping sand into the Infinity Pool, so it can finally be reclaimed as world-first premium real estate.

Growth without End

9 August 2015 marked the fiftieth year of Singapore’s independence, its fiftieth year under People’s Action Party (PAP) rule, and its fiftieth year of continuous growth. It was also its first anniversary



FIGURE 2 View from the Marina Bay Sands Infinity Pool (Reuters 2014). © CHIA Ming Chien. Reproduced by permission of CHIA Ming Chien. Permission to reuse must be obtained from the rightsholder. (Color figure available online.)

without Lee Kuan Yew, who led the country as prime minister from independence until 1990, afterward serving as senior minister and then minister mentor for the PAP until his death. He has been seen, in the eyes of many (and his own), as instrumental in the transitions that have defined Singapore: from colony to city-state; from “Third world to First” (Lee 2000); from 585 km² in 1965 to 718 km² in 2014 (Data.gov.sg 2017).

Land reclamation projects in Singapore, as with all other government initiatives, are presented in terms of their pragmatic necessity, a legacy of Lee Kuan Yew, who saved the nation from poverty and obscurity by doing what was absolutely necessary (Yao 2007; Trocki 2008): Pragmatism has come to serve as the abiding motive and justification of the state’s actions. Pragmatism in contemporary Singapore manifests in the egregious excesses of the Marina Bay Sands: The casino and tourist attraction built on reclaimed land was precisely the “infrastructure” required to solidify Singapore’s status as a global city par excellence (Bullock 2014).

It could be argued that the pragmatism by which the state defines its concept of success is tinged by an element of paranoia. According to Chua (2011), success “has become part of the technologies of the Singaporean self and a constitutive element of the Singaporean identity” (32).

It is a pragmatism deeply embedded in the exigent conditions of the country’s independence, from the political and sectarian turmoil that divided the country, to the *Konfrontasi* between Malaysia and Indonesia from 1963 and 1966, to the eventual ejection from Malaysia in 1965. This is the context in which the state of Singapore undertook its first land reclamation scheme along the East Coast (Latif 2009).

Commentators have noted that Singapore is an island trying to deny its own “islandness” (Hassler and Topalovic 2014, 12), with less than 7.5 percent of its coastline being accessible to the public (Topalovic 2014). The state downplays its embeddedness within the region, presenting itself as a “Global City” (Lim 2003), and dismissing its effect on the region, both economically and environmentally (Lin 2003). Uncomfortable political, ecological, and cultural relationships become entangled in and articulated through land reclamation. It is little wonder that land reclamation is almost exclusively addressed within engineering and ecology (Pui 1986; S. Lai et al. 2015), with the most notable criticisms delivered by environmental scientists examining land reclamation’s disastrous effects on coastal habitats (Chia and Chou 1991; Eisma 2006). The recent recognition of land reclamation as a regionally contentious practice of Singaporean state sovereignty by Bunnell, Muzaini and Sidaway (2006) has shifted the discourse toward the realm of the political, but a theoretical framework for understanding the function of Singapore’s land reclamation project in consolidating its citizenry has yet to be formulated. Accounts of living through and living with land reclamation have been conspicuously absent from social science discourses.

Initially devised as a strategy of the Housing and Development Board (HDB), which directed the reclamation projects I am examining, the significance and scope of Singapore’s land reclamation has yet to be acknowledged and examined in the same depth as its housing program. Only recently has it been recognized as “the central paradigm of Singapore’s urban development today” (Hassler and Topalovic 2014, 11).

Aside from my suspicion of official and academic silence about the topic, though, a simple fact could be that this kind of environmental and cultural change is difficult to trace. What sort of framework can articulate the experience of watching the sea become land, the archetypal “smooth” and “intensive . . . space of distances” replaced by the “striated” space “of measure and properties” (Deleuze and Guattari 2009, 479)?

Many official accounts of land reclamation admit a basic sense of loss. Writing of the East Coast reclamation scheme, Leong and Lim (2006) noted that “little eyes watched with dismay as the coastline ebbed further and further away” (11), the dismay mediated through a photograph of an empty and pristine Katong beach (see Figure 3). The sea is typically described as being “pushed away” (Latif 2009, 95). The displacement of the sea is only one result of this process, however; if a boundary “is not that at which something stops but . . . that from which something *begins its presencing*” (Heidegger 1977, 356), then what has been made room for through reclamation is as important as what has been erased.

In 2013 the Ministry of National Development (2013, 4) forecasted an additional 5,600 hectares of space needed to support the population by 2030. This land would be obtained through reclamation and the intensification of existing land. Amidst this air of inevitability around Singapore’s past and future reclamation projects, it seems appropriate to ask these questions:

- How does land reclamation alter the relation between individual and landscape?
- How could the impact of land reclamation be traced in the individuals who have lived with it and lived through it?
- When does a tool of nation building become a condition of national identity?

Perimeter Bund (setting out the work to be done)

This article seeks to delineate the material and cultural entanglements of land reclamation in Singapore through the fictionalized narrative of a reclaimed site: Marine Parade. It is in response



FIGURE 3 Katong Beach 1960, East Coast (Leong and Lim 2006, 6). © People's Association. Reproduced by permission of People's Association. Permission to reuse must be obtained from the rightsholder. (Color figure available online.)

to calls within human geography to move “beyond the critical examination of ‘the work that stories do’ to become involved as ‘active participants’” (DeSilvey 2012, 34). Land reclamation exemplifies the basic premise of landscape in human geography, outlined by Cosgrove (1990) as place engineered and designed with an ideological and visual unity, but interpreted through political, ecological, and personal spaces of contestation. The title of the story, “Vanishing Point,” juxtaposes the Renaissance innovation of linear perspective, crucial to the architectural history and visual culture of landscape, to the vicissitudes of modernity as experienced by relocated kampong (village) dwellers; specifically, how modernity was experienced through a fundamental transformation of landscape, and became the frame within which expectations between the state, its citizens, and the tissue of the nation itself had been set.

Land reclamation mobilizes the literary aspects of geography through the supervening relation between author (the state), the text (the reclaimed land), and the reader (the citizen). It is a form of geographic expansion and coastal development that offers a clear expression of authorial intent, especially considering the shadow cast by founding father Lee Kuan Yew, the author of the nation’s success, even as interpretation remains turbid. The reclaimed landscapes of Singapore constitute a blatant imposition of national and ideological unity, especially when

considering how subtle but ever-present the assertion of the state's pragmatism and efficiency in most matters was expressed by my interviewees. Sometimes they would interrupt their recollections, criticisms of the state, or sometimes my own questions to remind me that the state always operates shrewdly and efficiently, interjecting so abruptly and automatically it felt like a mental extrapolation of Bourdieu's (1977, 93) notion of "bodily *hexis*." Singapore's land reclamation is so strongly defined by the state's ideology of pragmatism that it emerged in interviews like a reflex. I hope to coordinate the contradictory and conflictual perspectives on land reclamation through narrative to interrogate one form of representation through the performance of another, using narrative's potential for "connecting ... or re-connecting conceptual polarities" (Daniels and Lorimer 2012, 3), which in this case, goes beyond the tension between "idiographic and nomothetic" (3) species of analysis. The fickle objects of my inquiry that emerge through their numerous "intra-actions" (Barad 2007, 33) force me to question "disciplinary boundaries and recognise the contradictoriness of human encounters with time and landscape" (Bender 2002, 106). On the most basic level, the subject of my practice is what happens when boundaries lose their fixity.

My decision to use fiction as the fulcrum for the material of research to reconstitute land reclamation as a speculative material and cultural practice stemmed from the productive openings in the possibility of new encounters between geography and writing, as explored by geographers like John Wylie, Mitch Rose, and Hayden Lorimer, but a problem arose: How do you write a landscape so materially and culturally modern? A discursive phenomenology of the self through a day's hiking, the route preferred by Wylie (2005), didn't seem appropriate for a landscape defined by displacement, emergency, and fragmentation. Land reclamation was a difficult topic to discuss with respondents; outside the realm of the technical, the conversation kept being shifted to displacement and relocation, to the leap forward into modernization, to the depletion of fishing stock, to the long-standing tension with Malaysia, to the question of "who" the frantic urban development in Singapore was meant for, to my respondents' doubt of future administrators guaranteeing Singapore's success after the death of Lee Kuan Yew. The connection to land reclamation in each instance appeared tangential.

After a review of my sources, land reclamation persistently figured as a tangent, and began to coalesce as the perimeter of these experiences, a horizon that framed and oriented these fragmented knowledges. By reordering and remapping these disparate facts into narrative, I could trace more directly the political and social impingements on the field created through land reclamation. At a more granular level, using fiction became necessary as a way of recuperating the tension between my own position as a researcher and a writer, as an *author*; I felt implicated in the same dynamic as I premised the scope of my research on: that of the state as an author and the reclaimed land as text.

Through fiction, I could re-present research material to cognitively map the mechanisms through which the site had been designed and narrativized by the state, and through which the state had inscribed itself into my respondents' experiences (Jameson 1990). Instead of "decoding" the symbols of the landscape in the fleeting glimpses of their potency through my respondents' utterances, I recoded and re-presented those utterances to delineate the mechanisms through which the landscape had written its symbols into the experience of those who had to adapt to a new way of living, and a new relationship between nation and landscape. Although fictionalized, I relied on the evidence I gathered through interviews, archival research, and field work to furnish the narrative with its basic elements of location, setting, character, and history.

Aligning these multiple sources in a single narrative, and magnifying and shrinking elements of research through hyperbole and bathos, fabrication, and distortion granted a freedom to use evidence without situating it in a representational framework of attribution, and allowing the research to be solely focused on those fields impinged on by land reclamation and those experiences and expectations land reclamation formed the horizon of. The narrative functions as a critical fiction “interven[ing] and challeng[ing] dominant/hegemonic narratives” (hooks 1998, 57), using breaches or gaps in the material not only as “bridge[s] for the critical imagination to embark on work elsewhere” (Grillner 2007, 139), but to use a critical imagination to reconnect those polarities created by the state through land reclamation.

One polarity engendered by land reclamation finds its expression in the contested nature of individual identification, which Fuss (1995) theorized as the “boundary between inside and outside [which], while sustained through the activity of introjection (the assimilation of an object), is *initially* formed through the mechanism of projection (the externalization of the object)” (94). Silverman (1996) distinguished this split as idiopathic identification, a cannibalistic and “annihilatory relation to the other” (23), and heteropathic identification, which occurs at a distance. Through land reclamation, these two conceptions of identification are configured across time and within fundamental transformations of space, and negotiated between national ideology and personal experience. To examine the intra-action of these processes, I seek to open the space of narrative as a “Third Space of enunciation” (Bhabha 1994, 37), eschewing the representation of cultural knowledge as “an integrated, open, expanding code” (37).

I have conceived of this practice-led research homologically with current land reclamation practices in Singapore, and consider the following narrative as *reclaimed*. Fill material for reclamation projects in Singapore is sourced from wherever it can be obtained: soft clay dug out from infrastructure projects; shipped from Myanmar or the Philippines; or barged surreptitiously from Malaysia, Indonesia, or Cambodia, which have all banned the export of sand to Singapore (Global Witness 2010).

This research is structured homologically to reveal the cultural and material practices entangled in land reclamation through reproducing its process as an “architectonics of criticism” (Rendell 2007, 90). By shifting the relation to my object of inquiry from one of distance to one of *homology*, my aim in “writing *as* the object” (Rendell 2010, 21) is to present land reclamation as a form of writing as well as showing how this subtle process of displacement might be traced. By forging a homological link between land reclamation and writing, and rearranging the materials of research into an aesthetic of cognitive mapping, the series of histories, transformations, and experiences coalesce into a counterformation, a countersite. The “breakwater,” where I map the materials of the narrative and open “entry points” (Lorimer 2003, 214) to conceptual enquiry, demarcates the narrative. Within the breakwater are extracts of interview material, samples of the fill material with which I have constructed my narrative. Contained within text boxes, they are glimpses of the original topographies of speech I reconfigured into the first-person fiction.

In this movement between inside and outside, between fictional narrative and critical analysis, I hope to trace a “series of interlocking sites” (Lorimer 2003, 214) that unfix boundaries between writer and researcher. By weaving the two together, shuttling between stasis and flow over the border of fiction and fact (Bloomer 1993), I hope to articulate the “the dynamic doubleness” (Friedman 1998, 178) of land reclamation by exploring how the sites have been written through rewriting them.

VANISHING POINT
1961 | 1975 | 2008
MARINE PARADE

I am walking toward him and he is looking through me, at some vanishing point pinching my belly button. There is a plate of pale mush on the table in front of him that he is sculpting with the edge of his fork. I ask my sister how he is and without looking away from her arms in the sink sleeved in suds she informs me that the nurse said that he either can't chew or forgets to, so no solids for him.

"He doesn't eat a lot anymore anyway, plays with his food like that. He's OK lah."

I ask her how she is and she says she's OK, wheels around in her blue sari and, wiping the soap on a dishtowel, immediately picks up the phone keys in a number.

He is still looking away into the distance while deftly landscaping the food with his fork when I pull up a chair at his side and make my introduction.

"Hello Father, it's Jonathan."

Three seconds later his eyes rotate toward me while his head remains still.

"Your son."

His eyes hold me in some shadow or turbidity of suspicion for a moment then slacken to the same fixed point in front of him. Dhal trails out of the corner of his mouth so slowly I wonder if he is retrieving or syphoning other time-zones through his southward stare.

I rip off some paper towel and reach for his mouth to wipe it. The instant the paper towel touches my father's mouth a hard, translucent hand whips it away, and he wipes his mouth by himself, turning his head in my direction and fixing me with the pearly coordinates of his pupils.

"Can you take him out? It would be nice for him to go outside, I have to sort this house out."

The floor wobbles as if it swallowed too hard.

"What about the maid?"

"Back in Indonesia. Her two-week holiday. You can take him down to East Coast Park, I haven't taken him in a while. Show him round the old neighbourhood."

"He barely knows where he is, let alone sees, does it matter where I take him?"

"You can talk to him and jog his memory a bit. That's what the nurse says."

"Say he does remember, what do I remind him about, how it's all expensive condos now?"

"Just tell him about the old days."

"Alright, I'll take him for a spin," I said, pushing the wheelchair along. Showing him the old neighbourhood. In the lift my father's head looks as smooth as the skin of a pomegranate. The good old kampong¹ days. The doors open and I push him out: he weighs almost nothing. We turn off to go down Siglap canal. So I start with the good old days I have not thought about in years.

"Of course, this was never as busy as it is now. You'd leave in the morning then spend all day in a kelong² as the fish practically jumped into your net, then come here to sell your fish, and comb your oily hair and smoke and drink and do those things you couldn't do at home, while the Malay auntie next door kept an eye on us without even asking."

I push the wheelchair into Lorong Telok Kurau, where his old haunts have been quartered and gridded into parallel streets of quiet houses slipping off his misted eyes.

"Unless you were dragging your younger brother away from another one of his 'political' arguments, as you called them whenever Alan got branded a communist; this being '61 when

you kept your head down while your brother got a few drinks in him and mouthed off about how gahmen³ thugs tossed flaming torches into Bukit Ho Swee⁴ just so they could stop the community sharing their lives and views on labour, tear them apart and parcel the families into giant HDB filing cabinets. You would be so angry at him you wouldn't say anything, because it was like saying anything in reply would make his stupid words come true, even saying the exact opposite; so you would mutter 'goondu'⁵ under your breath and drag him away."

My father sits straight and parallel to the back of the wheelchair; his head is too large for his frame, its sheen suggesting some power of levitation. The chair jams on a crack in the pavement and his head rattles on its stem; I rush around to the side to make sure he is OK and I can see his jaw go rigid, his horizon-fixing squint deepen even further before he spits the word "goondu" out through clenched teeth.

"Yes, that's what you called him. Later in '62, when Alan's fiery talk was catching up to him, I would come in late at night to you and him arguing so quietly and calmly the tide gnawed at the edges of your talk, Alan saying 'A better standard of living living someone else's life, paying for water we can pump out of the ground.' 'I'm not political like you,' you would tell him, 'I don't have the same appetite for talking cock. Where were those people meant to live?' Alan would smile and you would both look up at me, four eyes loosened and lacquered by the consumed samshu,⁶ the fumes of which I could smell wafting from the empty canteen on the table between you both, and you asked how my scholarship tutoring went, and I said it went fine, then Alan said there was no need to act blur, it was too late to be swotting up, had I squeezed in some skinny dipping and then he winked."

But I cannot recall the darkness of that beach, because when I move my mind back to it the lights of the hundreds of ships now crowding the Strait turn on as if motion-sensitive, the entire horizon slicked in neon.

"One morning you told me that you woke from a strange dream where you said you were an old man trying to sleep but unable to hear the tide seventeen floors below or the night eight floors above you, only the silence of other people's houses you did not know. Then you thought for some reason you didn't even like money, so everything you owned in your four-room flat seemed to precede you. It was so high up and without the sound of the tide it was as if the HDB was keeping a watchful ear on you and your neighbours; the soles of their feet, their coughing and murmurs clearly audible as if recorded by the scalp-thin walls. Then it ended with you casting your net out to sea but there was only sand and sand and sand stretching out in front of you."

The East Coast Road opens out either side of us, a roar of traffic panning right and left as we cross. I think I can see the seventeenth storey of Marine Terrace where my HDB is. I can picture my children inside, their faces suspended in the pale light of their screens, and for some reason I wonder: Would they realize how high up they are, or who is on the other side of those walls? What look of incomprehension and horror would dawn on their faces if I told them they had to shit in a hole in the ground they dug themselves?

"When we first moved in all you could talk about was falling back into the sea. Mother said that she saw some cracks in the ground on her way to the hawker centre, but she wasn't worried. You'd look out the window, saying, any day now, we're going to sink right down into the ground, and then back into the sea, then turn to me and chuckle. And every time I would try to explain what I knew about soil mechanics or shear stress calculations, and how a few cracks in

the road was as bad as it would ever get. You made sure that we were high up enough for you to still see the sea, and so when you went out fishing in the waters getting busier day by day you would look over in the direction of our HDB, as if it was pulling those tankers closer and closer. Hiding from Indonesia behind a wall of cargo ships, you said.”

I still saw Poh Leng and Derek after we moved in, they never cared that I spoke this way and no one else in my family did; they still snigger whenever an acquaintance of theirs asks me “You ever live in England? Why you speak like ang moh for?” But when I’m with them I can hear the hours of elocution lessons at St. Patrick’s with Brother McNally, within earshot of the sand and soil pounded into land in my voice. As they worry about making rent or working into their seventies my accent sticks in my throat like some success they were never taught to assemble.

“After I came back from National Service⁷ the dust blowing over from Bedok was everywhere, a new weather or future filming the grass and trees and eyes and lips. You couldn’t see it happen but you could hear it, those whirring conveyor belts carrying the soil to where we would live our lives in a few years’ time. You couldn’t hold on to the land for much longer, not least because everyone in the kampong knew what happened to Alan. Mother would ask you with patient force how it was going while she was gutting your dwindling catches. You weren’t just a cheapo holding out for better compensation, but the pulse in your ears when I asked you to post a letter to your brother proved his maddening words right. Mother was telling you we would get priority on allocation, and you imagined Alan replying “Don’t worry Rohan, you get to choose your own box, but no balik kampung, no more home to go back to, or even a beach to remember.”

My father is singing tunelessly, groping with his voice through the dishwater-coloured land of his eyes. I wheel us onto the jetty, which is all the more exciting for him because he won’t know where he is and never will. He leans forward in his chair as if he can see the not-too-far out ships crowding the Strait, and he is talking quietly and clearly, so I lower my ear to his face:

It was last morning I hear the zinc roof crackling, there is falling rain before we go.

There are so many boxes all fill with useless crap I don’t want to throw out, boxes stacked high, water coming in and I think about the boxes and where they go.

You know, actually better now. Very hygienic, no outhouses no hole in the ground.

I look into the water wishing that our barang-barang was bobbing in the water to be taken away with the tide that no longer return. Was better before, you see now all condo.

My wife at the door say we won’t worry about flooding, and I shake my head; now we don’t worry, we just pay. First time in the flat, I turn on the tap and just watched a stem of water reach into the sinkhole. You pay and pay, you think you know where the money goes.

When we moved into the flat things disappear like they never exist: the early morning, nothing between you and the sea; the others who relocate in Bedok or Ang Mo Kio; or my idiot brother taken away for talking cock about merger with Malaysia, leaving copies of *Plebeian* and whatever BS Chia wrote on the frontpage lying around the kopitiam without reading it first.⁸ First time on the new beach, there are no creature, no life, so I collect worms in a condensed milk can from St John’s Island, and plant worms in the new sand, so in a few weeks I would get fresh bait like before,⁹ but the fish didn’t come back so I go farther and farther out in my boat for fish that you can’t even sell as ikan bilis.¹⁰

And when we move into our flat and I see that I pay and at first it’s OK but then they make it so so so

fucking expensive, first ten years to pay then twenty years to pay and thirty years.



FIGURE 4 East Coast reclamation, 1966 (C. Lai and Lee 2015, 21). From the Lee Kip Lin Collection. All Rights Reserved. Lee Kip Lin and National Library Board Singapore 2017. (Color figure available online.)

So OK you no longer just survive but your brother gets release and you cannot tell him he's wrong or tell him that what you remember will pass down to younger generation or even your own grandchildren when they pretend to listen but you see them on MRT with headphone in their ear so they can get enough personal space¹¹ from each other, but you still say to Zubir the kampong spirit can transplant to air-conditioned shopping mall? OK OK can but how much longer can he work paying his HDB? You see crack in the pavement and tell your son, and he looks at you smiling, like you are bodoh already losing your marbles, but you aren't worried that your HDB will fall into the sea but it will slot into the ground, and you will be filed away.

It is better before. It was better now.

Breakwater

The first phase of the Marine Parade housing estate was completed in 1973, as part of the larger East Coast reclamation scheme (see [Figure 4](#)), which began in 1965 (Latif 2009). The instigation of the scheme was redolent of the state's behavior at the time: quick, decisive, and unsentimental. The problems of private property ownership and compensation for seafront property impeded the urgent project of land reclamation to such a degree that in 1966 the Land Acquisition Act was passed, which allowed the compulsory purchase of land, without requiring

additional compensation for seafront property (Han 2005). Lee Kuan Yew elegantly phrased the rationale in terms of the uncertainty of the market and the future of Singapore:

Property prices were right down because people had no confidence in the future of Singapore. External investors had no confidence, and even our domestic investors were not certain of the future. So I could pass a law allowing all sea frontages to be reclaimed without compensation. . . . At that time, there was no confidence that anything was going to last for ever. So we said: "Okay, let's make the country more secure." (Latif 2009, 96)

The presentation of shrewd, market-oriented, and crisis-motivated pragmatism belies the ideological motive behind the unilateral move. Singapore's modernization program, exemplified by its HDB, was a vast effort to gain a hold on the material and social fabric of the racially and politically divided society (Chua 2011). Three years prior to the Land Acquisition Act, Operation Cold Store was launched, in which more than 100 members of left-wing parties like the Barisan Sosialis and Partai Rakyat were imprisoned without trial, accused of being agents of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP), despite the fact the MCP denied involvement or affiliation with either party (Yao 2007). In "Vanishing Point," Jonathan's uncle is imprisoned as a result, and is not released until 1975, by which time his brother Rohan has settled in an HDB flat.

The resettlement of kampong dwellers into high-rise government housing could be construed as a subtler consolidation of PAP state power. Real and urgent concern for the hygiene and safety of kampong dwellers concealed a suspicion that the close-knit communities harbored communists and criminals (Trocki 2008), and through resettlement in high-rise HDB blocks, these problematic communities could be separated and more easily regulated. Dirt, feces, flood, and other emergencies became defined by the state's intervention so much so that they became inconceivable. Jason Geoffery, a former resident of Kampong Siglap, relocated to a flat in Marine Parade, touched on the edge of this vanishing point of conceivability:

Yeah, but it was very good actually that we were rehoused. Because before the conditions were absolutely terrible. We had to go shit in an outhouse, and because there wasn't any plumbing we had the night soil collector come round every week. And you wouldn't want to shit in it after a whole week of the stuff collecting, so what I would do is wait until the night soil collector came and I could actually bear it. (Laughs) The conditions were appalling, though, it was much better to be somewhere with plumbing and with electricity. (Interview with Jason Geoffery 2015)

Loh (2013) asserted that the nostalgia of the past simultaneously allows the older generation to reassert their place in society and for the PAP to "maintain its political hegemony" (255), when it was the process of resettlement that revised their horizons of memory: the state inscribing itself in a standard of living. Past recollections come to be judged and defined by a present expectation that in turn was dictated by the state's ideology; what was made space for through land reclamation was a sleight of hand where the landscape of pre-independence turmoil was revised into the tabula rasa of a united nation (see Figure 5). Jonathan's ventriloquism of his father tries to explore this kind of utterance "that takes place on the border of the unsayable [and] promises to expose the vacillating boundaries of legitimacy in speech" (Butler 1997, 41).

In "Vanishing Point," by regurgitating his father's memories back to him, Jonathan performs an act of "psychical memorialization in which the subject must repeatedly kill and ingest what it wishes to preserve a remainder of inside" (Fuss 1995, 34). This cannibalistic act of identification



FIGURE 5 Construction of Marine Parade, 1972 (Leong and Lim 2006, 23). © People's Association. Reproduced by permission of People's Association. Permission to reuse must be obtained from the rightsholder. (Color figure available online.)

is accompanied an inverse interior motion, however. In addressing his father verbally, with the accusatory “You” (Barthes 1985, 216), and by internally addressing him with the “mortification” (216) of “He,” Jonathan completes a circuit of idiopathic and heteropathic identification (Silverman 1996). By moving in both trajectories, he is able to temporarily evade the “borderlander” (Fuss 1995, 48) of the ego and access the contradictory feelings around resettlement from kampong to high-rise flat, which would otherwise be inaccessible in the rewritten boundaries of his standard of living. Although not truly “reclaiming” the thoughts and feelings of his father throughout the process of resettlement and reclamation, Jonathan attempts to articulate the precise boundaries of his inaccessible experiences.

It is the same double movement that leads him to recognize that stylistic features of his education, such as his English accent, gave him an advantage over his father and his kampong friends in the PAP-defined vision of success. It is the colonial weight of this material and cultural transformation that makes his voice feel like a separate “mechanism” rather than a part of his identity: Both Lee Kuan Yew and Sir Stamford Raffles, the British Governor-General who founded Singapore, saw the country as a “tabula rasa” (Trocki 2008, 137), and decided that the past only impeded their vision of progress. In the canon of Singaporean independence, the multicultural politics of the emerging

nation-state, structured through the formal articulation of ethnic categories of CIMO (Chinese, Indian, Malay, Others) premised on a commitment to equal rights and treatment, had been a factor in Singapore's ejection from Malaysia (Noor and Leong 2013). This framework is undermined, however, by other forms of difference it attempts to elide or erase; multiple ethnic minorities are aggregated together with a majority in the same category, and other forms of religious, economic, and cultural difference carry less weight (Clammer 1988). Indeed, this kind of essentialized difference structured, guaranteed, and reproduced by the state ensures that the state plays an active role in the modulation and constitution of a passive identity (Noor and Leong 2013).

Through the practice of land reclamation, the state ensures its centrality by forming a polity's horizon of experience and expectation; but, as with its policies of multiculturalism, difference and inequality that cannot be "read" by the state's categories form pressure points in the body politic, and transitional spaces in the consciousness of the nation. Kampong Siglap was notable for its heterogeneous ethnic composition, including a significant Eurasian, Indian, and Malay population. The omission of specific ethnic markers for the principal characters in "Vanishing Point" was an attempt to reflect the experiences of the people who lived in Kampong Siglap, and two people in particular whose accounts I structured my narrative on, who were Eurasian and Malay Indian, and thus did not sit comfortably in the CIMO matrix. The strategic smattering of Singlish words and turns of phrase throughout, which find some of their roots in Malay, Tamil, and Hokkien (or indeed simply Singaporean), was used not only as a veneer of authenticity, but as a texture, a relation to language warped between father and son by land reclamation, and the political moment it framed. Moreover, by maintaining relative ethnic ambiguity in characterization, and risking a less-than-satisfying realism, the horizontal *universalizing* capacity of land reclamation in engendering a citizenry becomes established; it was by no means a process that transcended categories of race or class, but oriented them around the will of a state, and circumscribed those categories (and many others) to the boundaries of the state's pragmatism.

The disjunctive utterances of the father at the very end of the narrative enact a subaltern agency through the "relocation and reinscription" (Bhabha 1994, 193) of the story of his memory that his son has been telling him, and mirror the way that hills in Tampines and Bedok were cut down to be used as fill material in the East Coast reclamation (see Figure 6). The father, neither a victim of modernization nor benefactor, is host to a discordance of gratitude, anger, and melancholy, and situated at the boundary of the kampong past and pragmatic present. Although silent, he had been using his son's words to reconstitute his landscape dialogically (Folch-Serra 1990), attending to the relocation of his own identity through this twinned process of land reclamation and modernization. These entanglements are knotted with the success of the HDB program: Those who were provided with state-of-the-art dwellings had to pay their debt and their bills by working without complaint. HDB flats can be bought using a Singaporean's Central Provident Fund, the government's mandatory savings program, which helped put 90 percent of Singaporeans in HDB flats by the 1980s (Chua 2011). Marine Parade is now a highly desirable residential neighborhood (see Figure 7), and three-bed flats can regularly fetch upward of S\$500,000. Chew Beng See, a resident of Marine Parade, articulated the frustration of such an entangled position:

It was better before, better before. So it is good that the government can give you opportunity to own home, and now more opportunity for people to own home, so it's better now. But so expensive, so expensive. Before, buy a flat, pay ten year, fifteen year, with CPF. It's long time. But OK lah, OK. Now pay twenty year, thirty year, it's so fucking fucking fucking fucking expensive! So maybe better before, better before. (Interview with Chew Beng See 2015)



FIGURE 6 Conveyor belt carrying fill material, East Coast, 1968 (Leong and Lim 2006, 16). © People's Association. Reproduced by permission of People's Association. Permission to reuse must be obtained from the rightsholder. (Color figure available online.)



FIGURE 7 Marine Parade today. Photo by author. (Color figure available online.)

NOTES

1. This is a Malay word meaning a small village or community of houses.
2. This is a Malay word for any offshore structure used by fishermen.
3. This is Singlish slang for “government,” often used pejoratively or ironically to denote opposition.
4. The Bukit Ho Swee Fire in 1961 destroyed around 2,800 houses in a squatter settlement, prompting the HDB’s first resettlement and public housing project. Subsequent resettlements would be modeled on the emergency of Bukit Ho Swee. In the politically febrile state of pre-independence, a few Singaporeans thought the fire was a government conspiracy to break up and properly police subversive political groups. For a full discussion of various conspiracy theories around the Bukit Ho Swee Fire, see “Fires and the Social Politics of National-Building in Singapore” (Loh 2009).
5. This is a Singlish word meaning dense or idiotic, derived from Malay or Tamil.
6. This is a Chinese liqueur distilled from rice, popular in the 1960s and 1970s. Illicitly produced samshu was more popular, as it had a higher alcohol content.
7. This is the compulsory conscription of men into uniformed services that came into practice in 1967.
8. Chia Thye Poh, a Barisan Sosialis politician, was convicted of publishing a seditious article in July 1966, and subsequently imprisoned without trial as part of Operation Cold Store on 29 October 1966 (Seow 1998). Detained for twenty-three years, he is Singapore’s longest serving political prisoner. The *Plebeian* was the newspaper of the Barisan Sosialis (Mutalib 2004).
9. Apparently, a condensed milk can’s worth of worms harvested from nearby St. John’s island was enough to repopulate the new East Coast Beach with bait, according to Lee Chong Keng (Leong and Lim 2006, 26).
10. This is salt-cured anchovy used in Malay cuisine, literally “little fish.”
11. Walking along the Bedok Jetty toward the end of my field work, I stopped to talk to one of the few people still out fishing. He hadn’t remembered the reclamation, or the beach that preceded this one. Instead he told me about the typical woes Singapore faced: things always busier than they used to be, more people on the bus, on the MRT. Then he paused, and a lightbulb turned on: “If you want more personal space, you put in your headphones.”

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