No longer Singaporean

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From communal politics and internet governance to language policies, the tiny speck that is Singapore is known for doing things its own way, with an innovative if patriarchal government kneading a hungry, migrant mass into one of the most well-disciplined, efficient, and diligent working populations in Southeast Asia. Much has also been made of its success at multiculturalism though some, like sociologist Chua Beng Huat, argue it to be multiracialism. Using Chua's argument as a platform for departure, and taking a cue from Stratton's notion of 'everyday multiculturalism' I argue through a reflexive exploration of Singapore as a lived experience, that rather than conflict, the two theories complement each other with the former paving the way for the latter.

Introduction

In early 1998, when my family migrated to Australia from Singapore, an Anglo-Australian related through marriage pointedly asked us: 'are you going to assimilate?' With the earnestness of new migrants somewhat cowed by the Hansonite rhetoric of that period, the answer then was an enthusiastic 'yes'. Our experiences since have proven that reply premature, not least because the reality of migrant resettlement is much more complex than the question allowed. This paper, then, is a belated attempt to respond to that query more fully, as informed and evoked by a 2009 trip to Singapore to visit family.

According to Chua (2005, 4), race is explicitly addressed in Singapore through the instrument of its Constitution, which recognizes and defines the nation as multiracial and comprised of three main racial categories: Chinese, Malay, and Indian. He argues that though couched predominantly as cultural policy, 'official multiracialism' also disempowers the concept of race in order to utilize its categorizations and assumed norms as 'policies of social control' (Chua 2005, 1; 1998, 34). I will not repeat Chua's arguments here as for the most part I concur that race has been appropriated with great expertise by the government of Singapore during the course of its uninterrupted rule since independence (see Chua 1998, 1995). The logic of multiracialism is deeply ingrained in Singapore and often enacted as well as co-opted into the hegemonic discourse of economic progress via discriminatory policies.

Race looms large in the Singaporean imaginary as racial categories play the crucial role of structuring much of national policy as well as everyday life. An instance of this can be seen in the quota system designed to balance the racial composition of residents of every HDB (Housing Development Board) estate so as, ostensibly, to reflect the racial demographics of the nation and prevent the formation of ethnic enclaves (Chua 2005, 7). The same categorical understanding of race is evinced in the education system where

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school children selecting a 'mother tongue' as part of the language curriculum are confined to a specific range based on the origins associated with their race (PuruShotam 1998, 89–91).[1] Similarly, within meritocratic Singapore, those who fail to make the cut or fall by the wayside of socioeconomic progress must look primarily to their racial/cultural associations and self-help bodies for assistance, not the state. Unsurprisingly, everyday existence in Singapore is sharply delineated along racial lines, marked by a high level of anxiety over financial and educational goals, and preoccupied by individual material consumption power and success (Chua 1998, 33).

Yet, in Race Daze (1998, 15), Stratton makes positive comparisons between the 'everyday multiculturalism' of Singapore and the 'official multiculturalism' of Australia. The latter, he argues, 'suppresses the continued hegemony of Anglo-Celtic Australian culture by making it invisible' (Stratton and Ang 1994). Conversely, 'everyday multiculturalism', as enacted in Singapore, is a process whereby 'cultures, creolise and transform as people live their lives, adapting to and resisting situations, and (mis)understanding, loving, hating and taking pleasure in other people with whom they come into contact'. For Stratton, it is precisely because Singapore has no 'perceived core culture' (1998, 34–40; 202) but a 'tripartite racial/cultural structure' that a 'syncretic, composite culture' has developed (1998, 202–3).

On the surface the two theories on race and culture in Singapore – official multiracialism and everyday multiculturalism as conceived by Chua and Stratton respectively – seem to contradict each other. However, I argue that not to be the case and suggest some value is to be gained from a study of the Singaporean ethos through both lenses. Hence, while I agree with what Chua writes of official multiracialism in Singapore, I also want here to flesh out some of what Stratton alludes to, through a reflexive exploration of Singapore as a lived experience. In so doing, I contend that it is precisely because official multiracialism governs the structure of Singaporean society both naturalizing and compelling its people into state-determined racial categories that it paves the way for everyday multiculturalism. To be clear, however, this is not to imply that the existence of everyday multiculturalism justifies Singapore's inequitable, race-based public housing and language education policies.

Singapore: As lived experience

A few years into life in Australia, I was present when a keynote speaker at a conference declared himself not Chinese but specifically and unequivocally Singaporean. I was struck by his adamant assertion, but not being game to quiz him further, had to contend to live with it then. However, during the recent aforementioned trip to Singapore, that unanswered query returned to pique me again. This was especially acute after the occasion where, exasperated with my flinches and back-seat driving, my eldest sister silenced me with: 'you're no longer Singaporean'! Perhaps this is what Croucher (2004, 40) means when she argues that identities are as much assigned as they are asserted. In any case, it is only since having been summarily stripped of my Singaporean-ness by my sibling that I have had opportunity to realize some measure of what that keynote speaker from years ago meant.

To explain the Singaporean ethos is to describe the experience of growing up with friends, working with colleagues, and living with neighbours of different ethnicities, creeds, and origins. The everyday experience of life in Singapore is essential to and formative of the Singaporean ethos. Siti, James, Chandra, and Wai Ling – Malay boss, Eurasian co-worker, Indian corner store owner, and Chinese classmate – their names,

faces, voices, gestures, and presence at various stages of life, are an intrinsic part of life in Singapore. The ability to make sense of each other despite the intersecting differences of age, gender, class, language, religion, and culture is a large part of that mutual knowing, of recognition. Although it is rare for one individual to be fluent in all the four official languages of Singapore – English, Chinese, Malay, and Tamil – most Singaporeans can converse in Singlish,[2] if not English, and are able to utter or at least recognize a smattering of each others' languages and dialects.

Singlish has developed in a hostile environment engendered and grounded in the rationale of economic progress that Singaporeans have all but internalized. The state consistently discourages the everyday use of Singlish as it is not easily penetrated by outsiders and thus, considered bad for business.[3] Its stubborn longevity owes something to the genuine need for daily socialization amongst a population of migrants. But it also attests to the existence of resistance, resilience, and adaptation to situations a là Stratton within the mild-mannered populace. To be certain, there are some Singaporeans who have little recourse but to try and pass off Singlish as English. Unlike the English-educated middle class, adept at both grammatically proper English and Singlish, they have no 'proper English' to switch to whenever needs must (Chua 2005, 14). Nonetheless, the linguistic dexterity of the middle classes does not detract from the fact that Singlish is a practical synthesis of the variety of cultures and languages in Singapore. It adapts and adopts not just words from Malay, Tamil, Hindi, and Chinese dialects like Hokkien and Cantonese, but also their intonations, humour, and connotations. Hence, Singlish is very much the result of striving to listen to, understand, and live with each other's differences. Out of a mix of languages, accents, and sounds, Singaporeans have cobbled together a working lingua franca of praxis – Singlish. It both identifies and distinguishes Singaporeans, even from their closest neighbours, the Malaysians.

Attendance to listening is as important as attendance to speaking and voice in the cultivation of receptive and open attitudes to difference (Dreher 2009). The frequent, habitual listening to cadences strange and unfamiliar accustoms one to difference. The importance of such relaxed familiarity with heterogeneity is not to be underestimated as it underlines the immediacy and reciprocity responsible for the air of anonymous amity surrounding relations between the people of Singapore. This is not, however, to imply that all is tame and sanguine. Few, for example, can remain unmoved by the racket and aromas of obligatory over-night cooking and hand-drums (kompang) thumped by well-wishers at Malay (Muslim) weddings commonly held at the void decks of housing estates in space-scarce Singapore.[4] Nor will many admit that a weekend suffused in the incessant Buddhist chants typical of Chinese funerals held at similar spaces is appealing. But, with well over 80% of the population living in tightly-spaced, government-subsidised HDB flats (Housing and Development Board, Singapore 2008), the sounds of one's neighbours gargling in the morning, warbling karaoke in the evening, and 'washing' mahjong tiles through the night do intrude at will. There is and always has been, as Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong puts it, a need to maintain a 'common space' (H.L. Lee 2009).

The point is that the unwanted, often unmediated knowledge of and co-presence of one's neighbours is par for the course in the city-state. As with many big cities, privacy is a precious luxury afforded by the affluent few. Whilst not literally living in each other's pockets, in tiny 693 square kilometre Singapore, all have had to adapt to being repeatedly confronted by the crude intimacies of their fellow residents' lives. Along with the inconveniences, one is left with unrelenting knowledge of the nuances that differentiate as well as the steady regard that is the foundation of peaceful coexistence.

This sense of conciliation, the making of space for others, extends beyond the physical into the social. A brief study of street and place names in Singapore, for example, reveals references drawn from a multitude of languages and cultures, from Devonshire and Veerasamy Road to Kandang Kerbau Hospital and the town of Ang Mo Kio. This is obviously a consequence of official multiracialism. Yet, to compare how far the simple act of reading the Singaporean street directory takes one's imaginary – from the English and Tamil to Malay and Hokkien cultures – to the relatively few indigenous names and places, let alone other cultures, that feature in the Australian equivalent is telling of how effectively official multiracialism paves the way for everyday multiculturalism.

The multiplicity of cultures and customs adhered to and present in the common, daily life of Singaporeans are an integral part of what Taylor (2004) calls their social imaginary. Unquestioned and often taken for granted, these elements of knowledge and their layers constitute the tissue of Singaporean society. It is this seldom articulated yet shared store of mundane, inside comprehension that allows Singaporeans to interact and coexist peacefully from day to day. Generally speaking, Singaporeans have encountered and resolved the major frictions present between them with goodwill, with few racially motivated incidents occurring in the years since independence in 1965.[5] These traits – the making of space, in both the imaginary and physical sense – are crucial to Singaporean-ness. Coexistence on such intimate terms is embedded in the motley and the banal. Though it arises from conditions fostered by official multiracialism, its nature is more ad hoc, unruly, and subject to unscripted, tacit rules.

Bell hooks writes in belonging (2009, 9) of a 'sense and sensibility' that is 'deeply informed by the geography of place', which for her happens to be Kentucky, USA. On one level, geography is also paramount in Singapore. As any school-age child will inform you, the city-state's strategic location on the equator, halfway between the trade routes running from the West to the East, is instrumental to its status as one of the world's busiest ports. From the period when the monsoons ruled sea travel to the present where the limits of fuel-tank capacity and the attraction of efficient infrastructural support encourage and entice transporters carrying travellers of all kinds to stopover, stay, and settle, geography has been intrinsic to Singapore's destiny and economic success.

However, geography is not all, and on another level, place in the form of nature is secondary in Singapore. On a day-to-day basis, despite its claim to the title of the garden city, the vast majority of Singaporeans conduct their lives in artificial, man-made environments. Moving from and between air-conditioned buildings, vehicles, and green areas like pint-sized playgrounds and neat garden strips, nature, soil, weather, flora, and fauna feature less so in the social imaginary than they would, for example, in the expansive landscapes of hooks' native Kentucky. This is not, of course, to aver that one can escape entirely from the vagaries of nature only that in congested, densely-populated and intense, efficient Singapore, 'sense and sensibility' are primarily mapped onto and result from immersion in the terrain of social relations.

Sampling Singapore

To return to the 2009 trip that triggered this paper, some of the greatest pleasures enjoyed then were the sampling of affordable street food and the plentiful bargains to be had in the home-ground of Goh Chok Tong's 'heartlanders'.[6] The housing estates of Ang Mo Kio, Toa Payoh, and Hougang, were repeatedly visited en masse by the entire family. Hawker centres were destinations of choice for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, followed by the obligatory, postprandial stroll amongst the straggle of neighbourhood shops (see Figure 1).

Figure 1.   Night shopping at the Toa Payoh housing estate, Singapore ɋ Susan Leong 2009

After multiple outings, what struck me was the realization that Singapore had grown markedly more Chinese in character. That is to say, whereas the Chinese have always formed the dominant proportion of the local population,[7] and Chinese cultural symbols lined the streets, the Malay and Indian cultures were also present, albeit in different proportions. Also, together with the earlier references to Singlish, street and place names, cuisine and attire, one could add the common observance of cultural and religious occasions by all. Finally, there was always an understanding that in multicultural and meritocratic Singapore, English, or more accurately Singlish, is the working language for most people. Yet, during that recent trip I observed that most sales assistants would try and communicate with customers in Mandarin Chinese (henceforth Mandarin) before attempting any other language. There is, as Ang (2001) relates, almost always an unspoken expectation that if you look even halfway Chinese, you can and should speak Mandarin. In part, this can be explained by the high number of Mandarin-speaking migrants from mainland and Greater China Singapore has attracted in the past ten years through its explicit 'strategic focus' on trade with China through the creation of a 'China-ready' population (People's Daily Online 2009; Wong-Anan 2009). This has seen the local Chinese population rise from 2.47 million in 2000 (Saw 2007, 29) to 2.79 million in 2010 (Census of Population 2010). Given it is the only Southeast Asian nation with a majority Chinese population, new arrivals from mainland and Greater China quite naturally expect to utilize their native language skills and encounter familiar customs as well as traditions in Singapore. In itself, this is not an unexpected or remarkable consequence. However, in multiracial Singapore, this has certain implications.

Like many middle-class Chinese Singaporeans, I am fluent in English and fairly competent in a second language (Mandarin) as well as a Chinese dialect (Cantonese), which my parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents who emigrated from China used at home. However, in comparison to the Mainland Chinese that have arrived since the 1980s, post-colonial, second-generation Chinese Singaporeans are, as Sun (2005, 80) points out, only somewhat literate in Mandarin. Hence, Mandarin as spoken and used in

Singapore is not Mandarin as it is in Mainland China.[8] This is largely because while Mandarin constitutes a single subject (Mother Tongue) taught at school and used by the younger population in social situations outside the home, dialects like Hokkien and Cantonese have long been the main languages of communication in the private sphere (Xu, cited in Dixon 2005, 32). This is likely to remain the case with diminishing proportions in coming years as many of the older generation are not as fluent in Mandarin. In the meantime, whilst Mandarin is a learnt or academic language, it is hardly utilized to the same depth or extent as it is in China. Instead, the communication gaps within the diverse local populations have habitually been breached with the aid of Singlish. So it was to my consternation I found myself not only struggling to communicate in what used to be home but also, in one instance, chided for having tried to do so in Singlish rather than Mandarin. It is hard to imagine how the non-Chinese speaking in Singapore would react, but a growing sense of unease in the general population is finding voice (see also Mak 2009; Loh 2009):

> Why is it increasingly difficult to order in English in some Chinese restaurants and shops? Why is it that in some, perhaps many offices, staff seem to speak more Mandarin than English among themselves? Why is it that a new 'language' is emerging in Singapore, Mandarin-English or perhaps we can call it Manglish, which is really spoken Mandarin interspersed with English every now and then? (Owen 2009)

It says much of the depth of habits of thought ingrained through indoctrination that despite the years of enforced independence in Australia, my own immediate response was to turn to the paternalistic authority of the state for an explanation. It seemed then as it still does now that the famed social engineers of the nation, the government of Singapore must be aware of what they are doing in encouraging the encroaching Sinicization of Singapore. After all, the spectre of Chinese chauvinism was one reason forwarded, in the early days of the city-state's independence, for shutting down the vocal Chinese language media and bringing the clans and communities that had established themselves under the aegis of the British administration into the fold of the then newly-formed state (Chua 2005, 9–10).

There now seems to be an about-face in train. From the Minister Mentor, Lee Kuan Yew,[9] onwards, everyone is expounding on how being Chinese has its usefulness (People's Daily Online 2007). Many intersecting conditions play a role in the preponderance of Chinese culture in Singapore: the large volume of migrants from China, the existent cultural similarities derived of the local Chinese population, and the rise of China as an economic power in the world as well as the region. It would be disingenuous to think Singapore is the only nation trying to establish some kind of grasp on the runaway bandwagon of Chinese economic expansion. And even more foolish to consider that Singapore can afford to refrain from taking advantage of the benefits 'cultural proximity' (Iwabuchi 2002, 130) appears to hand its predominantly Chinese population. Just as the former Australian Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, attempted to parlay his Mandarin-speaking skills to some political benefit, Singapore's government has been urging its citizens to 'speak good Mandarin and take advantage of the opportunities China presents' (Kor 2009). Such instrumentalism is evidenced in the long-running Speak Mandarin Campaign (SMC), which has, since 1990, emphasized Mandarin language skills as an important economic asset in relation to trade with China (Teo 2005, 125), so much so that between 1998 and 2000, the slogan for the SMC was 'Speak Mandarin, It's an Asset' (Teo 2005, 129).

Discussions on online forums (http://www.asiaone.com) provide some inkling of the wider Singaporean public's responses. Unsurprisingly, since Singaporeans have a well-publicized liking for acronyms, a new one, FT (foreign talent), had been coined by the

government to denote the migrants who originate from Mainland China and elsewhere (Low 2002). What the discussion threads reveal is a considerable level of resentment among 'born-and-bred Singaporeans' at the FTs snatching jobs and benefits from the hands of Singaporeans without committing to local citizenship; this antipathy stretches all the way back to 2000 and earlier (Chng 2000).[10]

A comparison of population statistics from 1998 and 2008 lends some credence to their concerns: the proportion of citizens is diminishing even as the population of residents is growing (figures derived from those available on Population in Brief 2008, 15). In the current context of economic recession, there is also substantial cynicism as to the necessity for and level of talent that is being recruited into the country. According to Low (2003, 420), these sentiments are most prevalent among the older, less mobile, and local 'fallen talents' of the post-war baby boomers who perceive themselves to have been nudged out of employment by the presence of these non-citizens. Correspondingly, there is much anxiety, even amongst those who have taken up Singaporean citizenship, about the wisdom of their decisions (Li 2009). The state, however, remains adamant that global foreign talents are vital to Singapore's vision of becoming a 'global city' (Chong 2003).

None of this is especially novel and one can discern within the rhetoric the outlines of a familiar pattern – one most recently evidenced during the 1980s when the Singaporean state was constantly encouraging its citizens to adopt the Japanese style of management (Chong and Jain 1987, 76, 83) and learn Japanese,[11] even as neighbouring Malaysia was rolling out its 'Look East' policy (Furuoka 2007). The formula that propelled Singapore from third- to first-world status is simply being reapplied. According to its succession of able administrators, the 'Singapore [success] Story' is that of a vulnerable, tiny nation with a lamentable lack of natural resources that cannot survive without the sustained efforts of its population (Tan 2007, 296ff). At every opportunity, this is the perennial theme the state and its ministers reiterate: the only resource Singapore can lay claim to is human; hence Singaporeans must strive to build up, improve, and adapt to whatever (economic) winds prevail in order to survive (see H. L. Lee 2008). For this reason, the government argues, the continued inward flow of migrants is essential. In his 1997, 1998 and 2001 National Day rally speeches, then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong even took pains to emphasize that the Foreign Talent Policy was not limited to top-rung positions (Low 2002, 415) but 'a matter of life and death', vital to the nation's continued survival (Fernandez 2001; Latif 2001).

Chinese by fractions

In more recent times, reassurances to placate those disgruntled by FTs include promises to make a '"sharper" differentiation' in the treatment of permanent residents and citizens (Chia 2009). Yet the impulse to cleave to what is thriving seems irresistible, especially when seemingly primordial notions such as that of Greater China fuel it further. Though historically a term coined based on the binary notions of China Proper and Outer China, as a concept Greater China has in recent times grown to incorporate a sense of 'economic integration, cultural interaction and political reunification' in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macau, and Singapore (Harding 1993, 661–2). The resurgence of pride in all things Chinese also has some of its roots in the Middle Kingdom's mixed fortunes. Once deferred to by vassals, China was courted by other nations keen to trade, before communism took over, then stagnated economically and culturally while the rest of the world passed it by (Spence 1999). In the time since Deng Xiaoping declared China open for business again in 1978 (Yeh 1997), the nation has taken great strides, powering into capitalism at full tilt and

taking many other more established, first-world economies by storm by virtue of its massive population and its seemingly insatiable hunger for economic progress. So impressive is the steep rise of China's economy, the rest of the world is understandably gripped with an urgent need to be part of its latest revolution. With Lee Kuan Yew boldly declaring to Singaporean Chinese that 'in two generations, Mandarin will become our mother tongue' (People's Daily Online 2009), Singapore seems perfectly poised to plunge into the warm embrace of Greater China.

Who belongs to this pan-Chinese diaspora, Greater China? How many generations removed can one be before losing membership? A snatch of conversation with my 21-year-old niece in Singapore about her boyfriend goes as follows:

> Me: So, is he Chinese or what?
> My niece: Yah, pure Chinese.

In Australia, the expression 'pure Chinese' is less common than 'full Chinese'. One is left inevitably with the notion of a half, quarter, one-eighth and so forth Chinese, a concept not that distant from the racist terms of mulatto, quadroon, and octoroon, complete with implied assumption of a purity of blood that has been tainted and diluted through miscegenation. China-born Australian poet Ouyang Yu reflects a similar attitude in his poem, The Least Chinese (2010). For Ouyang, though their (the Australian-born Chinese) 'skin [is] forever Chinese' their hearts and minds are always 'twice removed' because they were 'born and bred in oz' and cannot speak Chinese. Full or pure Chinese, the notion that there are degrees of Chinese-ness is persistent.

Zeleza (cited in Makalani 2009, 2) writes of the plasticity and vagueness of the term 'African' and the uncertainty as to whether it is a racial and spatial referent. The same can be said of the term 'Chinese'. There are two imbricated assumptions at work in insistence on racial purity. The first is that all those of Chinese descent are somehow Chinese by default. A large part of this assumption is owed to the long-running principle of jus sanguinis adopted by China that was repealed only as recently as 1955 (Mansingh 1991, 317–18). This is the underlying notion buried within the seemingly innocuous phrase 'full Chinese'; the belief in an uninterrupted racial continuity is complicated by its intersections with an unbroken spatial connection and encapsulated in the concept of diaspora – that is, a people displaced from their homeland, their place of origin. The two intermingled ideas are problematic but both are frequently conflated in popular imaginaries and discussions of the overseas Chinese.

To continue with Ouyang's terminology, who is most Chinese? Would a person who speaks Mandarin be considered more Chinese than the one who speaks only Chinese dialects? Is a person of Chinese descent brought up and educated in the West less Chinese than one born, raised, and living in China? Is one more Chinese if residing geographically closer to mainland China, say, in Malaysia rather than Australia? What tacit list of qualities defines a pure Chinese? Who, ultimately, is the arbiter of that list?

The overall tenor of everyday life in contemporary Singapore is changing, becoming increasingly Chinese in tone and character. As mainland and Greater Chinese migrants come to comprise even more of Singapore society, new social practices like the previously mentioned acceptance of Mandarin as the lingua franca are also being introduced. At the same time, by sheer weight of their presence these migrants also readjust customs that have acquired a more local, hybrid flavour in equatorial Singapore. One example is the highly elaborate celebration of Chinese New Year as the Spring Festival, which nowadays sees great volumes of festive products, content, and trends imported from China. As these goods are manufactured for a Mandarin-literate market, much of the symbolism is lost on

those who do not read the language. The risk, then, is that non-Chinese Singaporeans would be cut off and distanced from an event of which they have gradually become a part. Whilst it is unlikely that Malays and Indians will entirely adopt the festival as their own, many do celebrate alongside the Chinese, partaking in the congeniality of customs like visiting each other's homes during the happy season.

The prospect of Singapore losing its multiethnic, multicultural character must be squarely faced. Yet the solution lies not in the demand that those originating from Mainland China or elsewhere for that matter should drop all their cultural traits at the border, learn to speak Singlish, and assimilate into Singapore. Such demands are futile, for the cultural transitions that presage naturalization cannot be demanded or commanded. It is my argument that official multiracialism in Singapore has allowed its people to enjoy a level of familiarity and ease with difference, which Stratton (1998) dubs everyday multiculturalism. However, in a reality organized around nation-states, the continuance of everyday multiculturalism cannot be left to happenstance. The issue at stake for Singapore is one of bringing about an appreciation and awareness of the inclusive, multiethnic tone and character of Singaporean culture even as shifts continue to occur within the terrain of social relations. More broadly, it is a question of ensuring the continuity of that sensibility towards multiplicity that might be irretrievably lost if Singapore rushes towards being part of Greater China.

As the Singapore government makes obvious, there are economic benefits that can accrue from a mainland-centred and directed sense of Chinese-ness. Even as the authorities argue for the necessity of this market-driven logic, the local population's growing resentment at the inflow of migrants speaks of the risk such policies pose for the island-state (AFP 2011). In the past couple of years, the Singaporean government has responded to complaints through a fine-tuning of immigration policies to limit the number of Singapore Permanent Residents and Citizens. It has also promised to preserve 'distinct and unique aspects of Singapore', giving cause to believe that the changes described above have not gone unnoticed by either the State or its inhabitants (Chee 2011). There is reason to believe, then, that within Singapore, the pluralist sense of Chinese-ness that strives to include will be preserved over a narrow, purist one, however defined by whatever tacit list.

Impoverished of natural resources and geographically miniscule, it seems apparent Singapore is constantly under threat and thus in need of bigger, stronger allies for survival. The same discourse was emphasized by Lee Kuan Yew as recently as 2009 through a highly public exchange of words sparked by Nominated Member of Parliament (NMP) Viswa Sadasivan's maiden speech in Parliament.[12] In his controversial exhortation to Parliament, Sadasivan (2009) called on the government of Singapore to abide by the egalitarian 'nation building tenets enshrined in the Nation Pledge'. Written in 1966 by then Deputy Prime Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sinnathamby Rajaratnam, and recited daily by thousands of students at the start of every school day, the Singapore National Pledge reads:

> We, the citizens of Singapore
> pledge ourselves as one united people,
> regardless of race, language or religion,
> to build a democratic society
> based on justice and equality,
> so as to achieve
> happiness, prosperity and progress for our nation.

This ritual of mass affirmation is usually accompanied by the national anthem, Majulah Singapura (Onward Singapore), composed and still sung in Malay, the language indigenous to the region. The will towards nation-building is blatantly clear as is the

intention to instil values in young Singaporeans through the daily, ceremonial repetition of what is largely a creed. Yet, Sadasivan's advocacy of justice and equality was met with a response that swiftly demolished any immediate hope of such a levelling taking place.

Delivered with great authority by the Minister Mentor, the rebuttal consisted of two parts (K.Y. Lee 2009). The first is the crushing assertion that the government has 'a duty not to treat everybody as equal' because Malay paramountcy is written into Singapore's Constitution.[13] The rationale is deeply flawed because it mistakes attempts to recognize and redress the 'structural disadvantages' that minorities are subject to with unequal treatment (Sa'at 2009) but that is perhaps an issue best left for another day. The second explanation rationalizes that as a nation still 'in transition', it will be some time before Singapore is ready to live up to the aspirations of its national pledge and 'high-falutin ideas' like egalitarianism (K.Y. Lee 2009). Ideals, it seems, are only for those who can afford them.

Are the entrenched anxieties surrounding survival embedded in the Singaporean psyche sufficient reason to ignore the needs of the disadvantaged? Like all modern nations, Singapore is a construction in progress; however, deprived of an awe-inspiring landscape, ancient history, or any of the usual symbols of a shared common language, religion, and ancestry that nations mythologize and cohere around, the prosaic activities of everyday life is the arena where the sense and sensibilities of Singaporean-ness are tested, formed, and recast. The processes of accommodation and resistance, and their novel solutions, comprise the lived experience of being Singaporean. To underestimate and undermine the importance of this ethos and the ideals intrinsic to them is to court disaster.

Conclusion

The longing for rootedness, as Weil (1952) puts it, is as essential to humans as food, shelter, and clothing, but it cannot spring from the pointless search for what is already past. In this final answer to the initial query posed more than a dozen years ago: no, I have not assimilated but Australia is home. Nonetheless, when questioned about Australia, I am deeply aware that large sections of Australian society persist with the '"White" nation fantasy' where the Nation is understood as 'a space structured around a White culture' (Hage 1998, 18). On these terms, the dominance of white culture is non-negotiable and all those of other cultures who wish to be part of Australia must recognize and assimilate into the core culture (Stratton 1998). It is this insistence that drives the actions and insistence of individuals like Matthew Wayne Tweedy of the anti-immigration Australian Protectionist Party (Adshead 2009), white supremacist groups like the Southern Cross Hammerskins (Glennie 2010), and the immigration policies of ex-Prime Minister John Howard (Stratton 1998).

The fact that of the top ten countries of birth of those who settled in Australia between 2007 and 2008, eight are Asian (Australian Human Rights Commission 2008) serves both to exacerbate the strident demands of the above parties and argue for the futility of their task. What may result is by no means a foregone conclusion but I contend that the experience of inhabiting a space amongst others of a different ilk, with the attendant need to be understood, make a living, and coexist, in and of itself sets into motion a process that creates and embodies its own set of cultural dynamics.

I am convinced that we are as much where as how we live. That is to say, as human beings we absorb and draw on the social imaginaries in which we have been immersed and of which we are a part (Taylor 2004). Ang (2001, 30), citing Gilroy contends that 'for the migrant it is no longer "where you're from", but "where you're at" which forms the point

of anchorage'. I would add that who I am is not only a function of where I live but also where I will live for emigration is nothing if not the embodiment of aspiration, whether that is the prospect of safety from persecution, improved economic prospects and broader educational opportunities or a better lifestyle. Migrants are almost always deeply motivated and hence, anchored by what they hope for the future.

In the awareness that the world consists of many cultures, each distinct from but capable of coexistence, I am more Singaporean than I was ever Chinese. This condition of awareness was bred into me through the circumstance of growing up in Singapore. The lived reality of multiethnic coexistence is innate to the formation of my sense and sensibilities. Structured and shaped by policy and adapted to, lived, and experienced, multiculturalism is what has defined Singapore so far. Whether this continues to be the case is not a matter that can be settled here. However, without wanting to paint the issue in the hues of nostalgia, I am no longer of Singapore, for the time and space that gave rise to that sense and sensibility no longer fully exists in its present incarnation. In light of contemporary Singapore, the nation that appears to be losing sight of its pluralist ethos, I am, as my sibling charged, no longer Singaporean.

Is it possible, then, to lay claim to the hyphenated, hybrid category of Chinese-Australian; a Chinese, as Beth Yahp puts it, 'with tags'? (Yahp, cited in Shen 2001, 125). The notion that there are degrees of Chinese-ness is stubborn. Would it better to frame one's identity as evolving around a core? The notion titillates and the awkward Singaporean-Australian, Asian-Australian, Australian-Chinese tags loom as possibilities. However, I doubt one could maintain a stable, unchanging core any more than one could remain impervious to external influences. The layers of one's self accumulate but they also seep into each other and work their way into one's core to anchor the self in a seething, heaving mass that is somehow, paradoxically, cohesive and whole. No hyphens or double-barrelled qualified labels can begin to explain the multiplicity of contemporary identities.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. This policy has been relaxed and gradually broadened in recent years to allow for greater diversity (Dixon 2009, 120).
2. Singlish is English as spoken by many Singaporeans. It incorporates words and idioms from Malay, Chinese, dialects and to a lesser extent, languages like Sikh and Tamil.
3. See, for example, the 'Speak Good English' Movement (http://www.goodenglish.org.sg/2009/#top), which has been running since 2000.
4. The term 'void deck' describes the empty space at the ground floor of housing development flats in Singapore. Considered a communal space, its usage is administered centrally by the town council, which often hires it out for events as varied as weddings and funerals.
5. Prior to 1965, when Singapore was still part of Malaya, there was a period known as The Emergency (1948–1960) where mostly Chinese pro-communists led an insurgency against the then British administration. Two race riots also occurred in 1964. Memories of these events and threat of racial disharmony are still used today to justify the laws enacted in response, such as the Internal Security Act (ISA).
6. Singapore's Prime Minister from 1990 to 2004, Goh Chok Tong, used the term 'heartlanders' to denote the majority of Singapore's population who are less affluent, educated, and who live mostly in government-subsidised housing estates.
7. The Chinese comprise 2.7 million of Singapore's 4.8 million population (Population in Brief 2008).

8. The Speak Mandarin Campaign (SMC) was implemented alongside the bilingual educational policy in 1979 and has been running continuously since then (Teo 2005). The SMC's primary aim has always been to utilize Mandarin as a uniting (as well as homogenizing) factor across the disparate dialect-speaking Chinese communities in Singapore, which have a historical tendency to self-organize along ethno-linguistic lines (Kuhn 2008, 347).

9. The former Prime Minister of Singapore now sits in government as the Minister Mentor, (MM). His son, Lee Hsien Loong, is the current Prime Minister.

10. See for example, It's Singapore, serve us in English first, please at http://forums.asiaone.com/s howthread.php?t¼10827&page ¼ 40#396.

11. Japanese remains one of seven 'third languages' that can be taken up by the top 10% of every graduating primary school cohort as a subject. The others are Malay, Chinese, Bahasa Indonesia, Arabic, French, and German (Language Programmes 2011).

12. NMPs are a unique paradox of the Singapore Parliament and style of democracy. Introduced in 1990 to 'provide for alternative views and constructive dissent in the House' and raise 'the quality of debate in Parliament', NMPs are not elected but nominated representatives of specific interest groups that are themselves designated by the government in power (Hussain 2009).

13. For details, see Article 152, Minorities and Special Position of the Malays, on http://statutes.agc. gov.sg/non_version/cgi-bin/cgi_retrieve.pl?actno¼ REVED-CONST&doctitle ¼ CONSTI TUTION%20OF%20THE%20REPUBLIC%20OF%20SINGAPORE%0A&date ¼ latest&m ethod ¼ part.

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