Colonialism with benefits? Singaporean peoplehood and colonial contradiction

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Most of the research presented in this special issue questions the notion of a singular Singaporean story, and yet this narrative persists as a form of Gramscian common sense for most Singaporeans, whether young or old, and also for recent immigrants and international commentators. To understand the reasons for this persistence, I turn to American political scientist Rogers M. Smith's concept of narratives of people-hood, and in particular his notion of ethically constitutive stories that are central to individual subject formation. The role of the colonial past in such stories of Singapore is contradictory, in that the relationship between colonialism and the nation-state is seen simultaneously in terms of rupture and continuity, and this conceals a further contradiction in terms of the relationship between individual and the collective. In exploring these contradictions, and in tracing reparative possibilities for new stories of peoplehood, I will, in conclusion, turn to recent literary narratives, and in particular recent historical speculative fiction that revisions the colonial past.

In January 2019, Singaporeans were surprised to confront four new statues near that of colonial 'founder' Stamford Raffles on the Singapore River. The statues, of Sang Nila Utama, Tan Tock Seng, Munshi Abdullah and Naraina Pillai, might seem at first sight to revise the place of 1819 in history. Three of Raffles' non-European migrant contemporaries were memorialised, as was an alternative act of foundation and naming over four hundred years before the English colonial adventurer's arrival. Yet the display concealed paradoxes: in its racialised divisions, it still followed the contours of colonial governance of subject peoples the British introduced, and it erased colonial violence. This essay considers the persistent ways in which 1819, and by extension a colonial past that is still longer than Singapore's existence as an independent nation, have become seamlessly folded into a moralised developmental narrative. Concomitantly, it argues that fictional retellings of such a past that highlight its contradictions offer us potential for critical reflection.

Commemoration of 1819, indeed, has come at a time of renewed transnational debate about the memorialisation of colonialism. The end of 2017 was marked by two popular controversies regarding scholarship in colonial history. In September,

Bruce Gilley's 'The Case for Colonialism' was published in *Third World Quarterly*. After massive online protest — Gilley's vision of colonialism as 'reaffirming the primacy of human lives, universal values, and shared responsibilities' could surely have not passed responsible peer review — approximately half of the editorial board of the journal resigned.[1] Gilley's article was withdrawn because of 'serious and credible threats of personal violence' to the journal editor; similar threats were also made online to those who opposed its publication.[2] Some observers questioned whether the article was simply the academic equivalent of social media clickbait, designed to amplify its author's citation count. As the controversy came to a close, a new one emerged. Scholars of colonialism in Oxford and from around the world protested against the McDonald Centre's Ethics and Empire Project, helmed by theologian Nigel Biggar and historian John Darwin. The home page of the project references both the Gilley article and Biggar's role defending Cecil Rhodes in the 'Rhodes Must Fall' protests at Oriel College; concerns about Biggar's lack of objectivity were exacerbated by his publication of an article defending Gilley's 'courageous call' in the *Times*, entitled 'Don't Feel Guilty About Our Colonial History'.[3] Singapore became an exhibit in these discussions. For Gilley, the nation-state was — along with Belize and Botswana — a successful example of a postcolonial developmental strategy in which 'governments and peoples in developing countries' might 'replicate as far as possible the colonial governance of their pasts'.[4] In an article in the *Guardian* in January 2018, *Financial Times* Singapore and Malaysia correspondent Jeevan Vasagar, a Singapore resident, again asked whether colonialism might have benefits, and asked readers to look at Singapore. While more critically nuanced than Gilley, whose article he referenced, Vasagar again repeated Gilley's central point. Celebrating 'a mix of Victorian neoclassical pomp, neon-lit office towers, and Taoist temples with bearded gods and sinuous porcelain dragons on their roofs' in the city-state in which he then resided, Vasagar argued that Singapore's post-independence leadership had 'seized the advantages left them by the British empire and used them for the benefit of wider society', although he also noted that Singapore's adaptive use of 'illiberal colonial tradition' had also created a 'paternalist' security state.[5]

The above discussion, I hope, may serve as a heuristic for our thinking through three issues. The first, most apparent, is the contradictory place of colonial history in the popular stories of Singapore that circulate both within and outside the nation-state, in which implicitly anti-colonial narratives of the self-determination of a people intersect ambivalently with those that celebrate modernist (and thus colonial) development. This contradiction can, of course, be squared at a popular level of narrative in several ways. Looking back on the period of decolonisation in the 1980s People's

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1 Bruce Gilley, 'The case for colonialism', *Third World Quarterly* 38 (2017): 1; http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2017.1369037.
2 *Taylor & Francis Online*, 'Withdrawal notice', https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01436597.2017.1369037.
3 Nigel Biggar, 'Don't feel guilty about our colonial history', *Times*, 30 Nov. 2007, p. 36.
4 Gilley, 'The case for colonialism', p. 1.
5 Jeevan Vasagar, 'Can colonialism have benefits? Look at Singapore', *Guardian*, 4 Jan. 2018; https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jan/04/colonialism-work-singapore-postcolonial-british-empire.

Action Party (PAP) luminary S. Rajaratnam saw post-independence Singapore's acknowledgement of its colonial past, and of Raffles as founder, as 'unprecedented in the history of anti-imperialist nationalism', representing popular acceptance 'of a fact of history'.[6] Yet Rajaratnam's history, based on the supposition that everything that 'happened before 1819 — if anything worthwhile happened at all — has been irretrievably lost in the mists of time' is not a vision that contemporary historians would accept.[7] A decade after Rajaratnam's speech one of the most thoughtful of a new generation of PAP leaders, George Yeo, retold an experience in the United Kingdom years earlier when he and other Singapore Armed Forces scholars were dining at an officers' mess. 'One evening at dinner,' Yeo recalled, 'a British Army major sitting opposite us, noticing that we were talking among ourselves in English, remarked that we were a well-colonized people. I do not think I will ever forget what he said for the rest of my life, not because it was an insult, but because it came so close to a very painful truth.'[8] Yeo was not paralysed by this recollection, and indeed used it as a touchstone to argue for a 'new Asian' identity in Singapore. But the uneasiness he identified does, I think, persist at the heart of Singapore's relation with its colonial past.

The second issue is very much related to the first. It is a concern to understand why many of the insights of scholars of Singapore history, even when efforts have been made to popularise them through syllabus revision in schools, through public fora and publications that aim to reach a wider audience, have not been able to substantially transform the way the colonial past is understood by most Singaporeans. What I want to argue is that the capsule three-point narrative of Singapore history that Singaporeans know — Raffles' arrival at a fishing village, British surrender to the Japanese, and Lee Kuan Yew's tears of anguish — is, in a deep way, a moralised part of Singaporean self-making: it has an ethical dimension for individuals that allows for some assimilation of new perspectives, even small accommodations, but no substantial revising of such a history, nor a revisioning that may be necessary in a contemporary world very different from that in which what we now call the Singapore Story was first told.

My third interest is, as a scholar of literature, the ways in which literary texts written in and of Singapore, especially those that have historical themes, approach the question of the colonial past. Such texts' simultaneous strengths and weaknesses are that they are not restricted by the regime of truth-telling that binds historians; unlike history, they are not, in Alun Munslow's words, a form of 'narrative representation that pays its dues to the agreed facts of the past'.[9] The most interesting literary texts that explore the traces of the colonial past in the present are not those we might think of at first: not realist narratives, as persuasive as their visions might be, nor metafictional texts that use modernist or postmodernist techniques to question

6   S. Rajaratnam, 'Adaptive reuse of history', in *S. Rajaratnam on Singapore: From ideas to reality*, ed. Kwa Chong Guan (Singapore: World Scientific, 2006), pp. 252–3.
7   Ibid., p. 251.
8   George Yeo Yong-Boon, 'Speech by BG (Res) George Yeo, Minister for Information and the Arts, and Second Minister for Foreign Affairs, at the official opening of St Gabriel's Secondary School', Press Release no. 47/Aug 03B-1/93/08/21 (Ministry of Information and the Arts, Singapore, Aug. 3, 1993), p. 1.
9   Alun Munslow, *Narrative and history* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 6.

historiography. Rather, they are a number of contemporary novels and short stories that we might gather under the classification of speculative fiction, which engage in the building of new worlds from the scraps of colonial history and everyday life, and address the place of the self within larger collective structures of consciousness.

In order to approach the first issue raised above by way of the second, this essay will draw on American political scientist Rogers M. Smith's concept of 'stories of peoplehood'.[10] Smith has already been used with reference to Singapore: educationalist Ho Li-Ching has examined the ways in which the narrative we often call the 'Singapore Story' becomes part of students' sense of self. Adapting Smith's notion of 'ethically constitutive stories', Ho focuses mostly on the presentation of the period of decolonisation as a time of crisis and the lessons of the need for social harmony that such storytelling aims to foster.[11] However, a closer examination of Smith's ideas, and indeed a reading of them against the grain to displace them from their consciously American context, begins to unravel some of the contradictions in our doxological relationship to the colonial past in Singapore.

In his monograph *Stories of Peoplehood: The Politics and Morals of Political Membership*, Smith shifts focus from nationalism's nation-building projects to consider the perspective of 'people-making', the stories that are told to create what he calls a 'political people or community' as 'a potential adversary of other forms of human association, because its proponents are generally understood to assert that its obligations legitimately trump many of the demands made on its members in the name of other associations'.[12] Such stories, Smith argues, often build on pre-existing ones, and are the subject of negotiation between elites and a larger populace: if people-making is sometimes produced through coercive measures, it also relies heavily on 'persuasive stories'.[13] Political leaders have two goals in facilitating the telling of such stories: first, to encourage a commitment of individuals to make a primary identification with the people or community, and second, to get them to accept the leadership's legitimacy in the quest for the further development or at least maintenance of the community. We see such dual goals embodied in the Singapore National Pledge, in which the affirmation by each citizen of membership of 'one united people' is followed by goals to which any political leadership must aspire, 'to build a democratic society based on justice and equality, so as to achieve happiness, prosperity, and progress for our nation'.

Smith divides stories of peoplehood into three categories. First, there are economic stories which 'promote trust' by arguing that leaders can deliver economic benefits.[14] Second, political stories stress 'personal and collective political power', which may be defined in terms of rights and freedoms but which also incorporate the ability of elites to provide safety and security.[15] Smith's final category is what he calls

10 Rogers M. Smith, *Stories of peoplehood: The politics and morals of political membership* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 45.
11 Ho Li-Ching, '"Freedom can only exist in an ordered state": Harmony and civic education in Singapore', *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 49, 4 (2017): 478.
12 Smith, *Stories of peoplehood*, p. 20.
13 Ibid., p. 43.
14 Ibid., p. 60.
15 Ibid., p. 62.

'ethically constitutive stories', focusing on religious, ethnic, and linguistic myths that might unite a people.[16] Smith, from a United States-centred perspective, is sceptical of the exclusionary nature of this category of stories, seeking to 'check their dangers' and to argue instead for 'a politics of contestation among multiple constitutive stories of peoplehood'.[17]

What makes Singapore unusual in its relationship to a colonial past is the way a Singaporean polity is made through such stories. In the period of decolonisation, most nation-states stressed the kind of ethically constitutive stories of which Smith writes. Kwame Nkrumah, who would lead Ghana to independence, spoke in 1953 of decolonisation as an opportunity for a 'people to decide their own destiny, to make their way in freedom'.[18] For Nkrumah, the existence of the story of a distinctly Ghanaian people was self-evident, and drew upon the historical reality of a precolonial past. 'We take pride in the name of Ghana,' he emphasised, 'not out of romanticism, but as an inspiration for the future. It is right and proper that we should know about our past. For just as the future moves from the present so the present has emerged from the past.'[19] Jawaharlal Nehru, in a similar vein, talked of Indian identity in almost mystical terms, of the 'special heritage for those of us of India … something that is in our flesh and blood and bones, that has gone to make us what we are and what we are likely to be.'[20] While stories of rights, of security, and of economic development had value, they were ultimately trumped, at the discursive level at least, by these ethically constitutive stories of a national community emerging from a common or shared precolonial past. One example of this is Philippine President Manuel Quezon's frequently repeated assertion that he would rather live under 'a government run like hell by Filipinos than a government run like heaven by Americans'.[21] In a world in which many of the political leaders of nation-states which gained independence in the 1950s and 1960s have failed to deliver development or democratically responsive polities, this story of the nation still retains its power. If the state has failed, the nation remains a reservoir of hope, and offers the continual possibility of renewed political change.

Singapore, as we know, does not fit the decolonising template in two ways. First — and this is perhaps, to echo Rajaratnam's words, unique in the history of anti-colonial nationalism — there was, in 1965, no useable vision of a precolonial past. This was not, as Rajaratnam thought, because there was no precolonial past, but because there had been no time to think through this past with reference to Singapore, and to construct narratives about it. From the 1920s onwards, protonationalist and then nationalist visions had been directed towards the founding of a Malayan nation, and these visions, often contesting with each other, were readily mapped onto the new Malaysian nation that came into being on 16 September

16 Ibid., p. 64.
17 Ibid., p. 15.
18 Kwame Nkrumah, *Ghana: The autobiography of Kwame Nkrumah* (London: Nelson, 1957), p. 192.
19 Ibid., p. 198.
20 Jawaharlal Nehru, *The discovery of India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 36–7.
21 Manuel L. Quezon, 'Speech of President Quezon on civil liberties, December 9, 1939', *Official Gazette*, https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/1939/12/09/speech-of-president-quezon-on-civil-liberties-december-9-1939/.

1963. In 1965, then, there was no publicly articulated vision of the past that Singapore could claim that was neither colonial nor Malaysian. Second, Singapore since 1965 has been a highly successful developmental state in terms of economic growth. Parties that gained moral authority in the process of decolonisation throughout the world have lost legitimacy after independence and the arrival of majority rule. Nkrumah's Convention People's Party lasted less than a decade after Ghana's independence in 1957; Nehru's Indian National Congress retained legitimacy longer than this, and power for even a greater length of time, but now occupies a reduced part of Indian national and state political landscapes; South Africa's African National Congress retains power, but has lost much popular legitimacy. Singapore's PAP, in contrast, has retained power and, for the majority of the population, legitimacy, in regular elections since independence.

Many historians and political scientists might point to various causes of the PAP's electoral dominance: the elimination of an effective democratic opposition by coercive measures in the 1960s, gerrymandering or at least a political system that does not give proportional representation to the opposition's share of the popular vote, and draconian curbs on constitutionally guaranteed freedoms of expression and the right to assemble. Critiques of the PAP's electoral dominance, indeed, have often focused on ideological or hegemonic control. Yet there is perhaps another way of looking at this question, via Smith, that moves the question of one-party dominance to the side. In Singapore, in the absence of historically based ethically constitutive stories, stories of economic growth and of security have become moralised, and have themselves become ethically constitutive stories on both a national and an individual level. If we follow Smith's emphasis on people-making rather than nation-building, we might consider how these stories serve as schemata, visions of the world that are not simply abstract mental representations, but which guide individual behaviour and cognition.[22] In this respect, it is germane to note that the psychologist who first used the word schema in its contemporary sense, Frederic Bartlett, was particularly concerned with the manner in which 'social remembering' of narratives 'was apt', under the influence of schemata, to 'take on a constructive … character'.[23]

An example of this would be how public stories of nationhood address recent scholarship and literary and artistic texts regarding the precolonial past, or dealing with pasts relatively unmarked by colonial presence. Derek Heng, Kwa Chong Guan, Tan Tai Yong, John Miksic and Peter Borschberg have all demonstrated that Singapore's history might be usefully seen as a series of cycles of trade and cultural flows extending back 700 years or more, rather than in terms of a linear story of development, and that the island's place within a larger region is of crucial importance.[24] Such material has, indeed, been incorporated into school syllabi so that the 2014 lower

22 See Katja Michalak, 'Schema', in *The international encyclopedia of political science*, ed. Bertrand Badie, Dirk Berg-Schlosser and Leonardo Morlino (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2011), p. 2363.

23 Frederic C. Bartlett, *Remembering: A study in experimental and social psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932), p. 267.

24 See, for example, Peter Borschberg, 'Singapore in the cycles of the longue durée', *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 90, 1 (2017): 29–60; John Miksic, *Singapore and the Silk Road of the Sea* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2013); Derek Heng, Kwa Chong Guan and Tan Tai Yong, *Singapore, A 700-year history from early emporium to world city* (Singapore: National Archives of Singapore, 2009).

secondary school history syllabus now covers 'The Singapore Story from 1300 to 1975'.[25] But some of the larger possibilities of reimagining the past that this material suggests, with Singapore as a place in a fluid network, in which histories of what happens outside the island are as important as what happens on the island itself, seem to be lost. These possibilities are picked up in creative work by Singaporeans in many languages: Kuo Pao Kun's vision in *Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral* of the nation-state as a ship, moving through space and time, or Isa Kamari's imaginative entry into the lives of the Orang Seletar before the rigid enforcement of national boundaries in *Rawa*.

At the level of ethically constituted narratives, however, these alternatives remain stubbornly unassimilated. While the history syllabus usefully illuminates many different historiographic questions for teachers to analyse, the history it covers is described as 'Singapore, The Making of a Nation-State, 1300–1975'.[26] This concern with the integrity of the nation-state is in turn driven by an emphasis on security as a moralised category. Such an emphasis is shown more starkly in the current 'Character and Citizenship Education Primary School Syllabus', in which the five pillars of 'Total Defence' are taught in the first two years of primary school, while questions surrounding 'Being an Active Citizen in a Globalised World' only appear in the fifth and sixth years of study.[27] The PAP's legitimacy, it has been argued, comes from its identification of and its ability to superintend crises,[28] but this response is not simply appreciated at an intellectual level: it is embedded in the schemata and life scripts of individuals, which are in turn founded partly on historical narratives of peoplehood.

To have a measure of this, we only have to look at the way in which citizens have been encouraged to play their part in keeping Singapore 'safe and secure' as part of the SGSecure campaign to prepare for possible terrorist attacks. Threats of terrorism are, of course, very real in the contemporary world, and many governments and institutions worldwide conduct awareness campaigns. However, SGSecure is perhaps unusual in the way that it moralises an awareness of security as an essential part not just of citizenship but of peoplehood, as a facet of character. The central element in such a story of peoplehood through security is Singapore's departure from Malaysia on 9 August 1965, dramatised by Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's emotional press conference at this 'moment of anguish'.

How, then, does the story of the colonial past become part of an ethically constitutive story that comes to be part of Singaporean schemata? The simple answer is through one of Smith's other narratives, that of economic prosperity. Yet this story is more contradictory than the story of security, which is buttressed by events drawn both from the colonial era (the Fall of Singapore, and the Japanese Occupation) and the post-independence period. The Singapore Story as Rajaratnam

25 Ministry of Education, Singapore, *History syllabus, lower secondary: Express course, Normal (Academic) course* (Singapore: Curriculum Planning and Development Division, 2016), p. 11.
26 Ibid., p. 11.
27 Ministry of Education, Singapore, *Character and citizenship education syllabus, primary* (Singapore: Curriculum Planning and Development Division, 2012), pp. 26, 12.
28 Geraldine Heng and Janadas Devan, 'State fatherhood: The politics of nationalism, sexuality and race in Singapore', in *Nationalisms and sexualities*, ed. Andrew Parker, Mary Russo, Doris Sommer and Patricia Yaeger (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 343–4.

conceived it, we have seen, makes no appeal to an imagined precolonial history, but it does stress rights and freedoms within the context of decolonisation. In the 1950s, we are told, as colonialism retreated, the franchise gradually widened, and the voice of a population recognised as citizens increasingly began to be heard. In this story the formal commencement of self-government on 3 June 1959 represents the choice of a people, after the first fully democratic general election, for a new vision of a post-colonial nation-state. Yet if the Singapore Story on one level follows the standard narrative of decolonisation and sees independence as a rupture with the past, it also, far more than most equivalent narratives, stresses continuities. The Pledge's projected achievement of 'happiness, prosperity and progress' hints at a continuity with the colonial past. Thus when Raffles' arrival is portrayed in popular Singapore history, it is seen not simply as a colonial occupation, but an imposition of certain forms of necessary modern rationality — town planning, good governance, a commitment to free trade — that the postcolonial nation-state would realise in the fullness of time. As Kwa Chong Guan has noted, in allowing Stamford Raffles' statue to continue to stand in Empress Place, 'Mr Rajaratnam and his colleagues were … extending the mode of their PAP story about "heroic" (or anti-heroic) men driven by a sense of mission and against the odds …. to include Raffles as the first of a series of great men in Singapore's history.'[29] The tensions between a narrative of post-colonial rupture and developmental continuity are perhaps best seen in popular capsule summaries of Singapore history by individual citizens, who, if caught off guard, will often casually telescope Singapore's development from Raffles' 'fishing village' to modern metropolis into a single postcolonial lifetime, that of Lee Kuan Yew.

This essay has drawn extensively on the experience of S. Rajaratnam, perhaps because of his closeness to its topic: stories of peoplehood, and the effects of such stories on the self. As a creative writer and a journalist, Rajaratnam was a consummate storyteller. Yet Rajaratnam's experience also shows the ultimate contradictions of the story of economic success, and the story of rights and freedoms, of the good postcolonial society. In the 1960s, both Rajaratnam and Goh Keng Swee emphasised that the purpose of economic development was for social good; it was not an end in itself. In the early 1980s, while still serving as Second Deputy Prime Minister, Rajaratnam began to raise the issue of the 'religion of moneytheism' and the attendant 'vices, … injustices, and inhumanities' that economic prosperity might bring.[30] Economic development and the virtuous society, which were easily reconciled in the PAP's manifesto, *The Tasks Ahead*, in 1959, now seemed less compatible.[31] A new language that justified ongoing inequalities began to appear in parliamentary debates and in government documents. The word 'meritocracy' was first articulated in Parliament in 1971 by Augustine Tan, and then only to argue for 'a meritocracy-plus society', 'a comprehensive review of our system of taxation to achieve more socialism without

29 Kwa Chong Guan, 'Writing Singapore's history: From city-state to global city', in *S. Rajaratnam on Singapore*, pp. 176–7.
30 S. Rajaratnam, 'Speech by Mr S. Rajaratnam, Second Deputy Prime Minister (Foreign Affairs), at the official opening of the regional workshop on the roles and functions of the senior citizens' clubs of the community centres', Press Release no. 41/July 09-1/84/07/22 (Ministry of Culture, Singapore, 22 July 1984), p. 7.
31 People's Action Party, *The tasks ahead: P.A.P.'s five-year plan, 1959–64* (Singapore: Petir, 1959).

hurting efficiency': the term did not enjoy frequent usage until the 1980s.[32] When Yeo talked of his conflicted response to being called a member of a 'well colonized people', he was thinking largely of his own cultural heritage, and a problem that he was confident policies such as bilingual education and larger projections such as 'Asian values' might address.

Yet there was another possibility: that the model of development Singapore had chosen still contained within it a debilitating legacy of the colonial past, that colonial and postcolonial modernity could not be as readily separated as imagined in 1959. In a society marked, like most other societies in the last two decades, by growing social inequality, one of the most powerful modes of critique of institutions of governance in Singapore — of the racial categories of state multiculturalism, for instance, or the continuing proscription in 377A of the Penal Code of Singapore of consensual sex between adult men — has been their colonial origins. And yet, perhaps, the moralised story of security trumps all these contradictions: even if they embody a contradictory relationship to the colonial past, economically based morally constitutive stories persist.

How have novels and short stories in or of Singapore examined these intersecting stories? Broadly, in two ways. The first of these approaches is realist historical fiction. These may accept the broad contours of the developmental narrative unquestioningly — Meira Chand's *A Different Sky*, for example — or simply argue for the inclusion of a neglected group within the existing framework of history — one thinks here of the novels of Rex Shelley, which place the Eurasian community within a story of national resistance to and emergence from colonialism. Yet realist texts may also question established stories of peoplehood in their focus on forgotten or marginalised histories. Isa Kamari's novel *Rawa* (2009, 2013) for instance, tells stories of the everyday life of the Orang Seletar that are undocumented in historical records, while his *1819* (*Duka Tuan Bertakhta*, 2011, 2013) re-imagines the 'founding of Singapore' from a Malay perspective, substituting for Raffles a variety of figures, including the Sufi saint Habib Nuh. In each of these novels, periods of colonial and then national development are seen from the perspective of those who are dispossessed by it, and find it difficult to distinguish between the two. Suchen Lim's *The River's Song* (2013) explores the lifeworld of the communities displaced by the 'cleaning' of the Singapore River from 1977 to 1986, focusing on cultural loss and hinting at the affinity between colonial development and the actions of the postcolonial developmental state.

A second tendency is represented by consciously self-referential texts, such as Sonny Liew's *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* (2015) or Taiwan-based Malaysian writer Ng Kim Chew's *Slow Boats to China* (2016), elaborately metafictional narratives that consciously fragment and distort received histories. Liew's graphic novel famously tells the fake biography of 'Singapore's greatest comics artist' against the background of decolonisation and the city-state's post-independence history.[33] The use of various comic styles to depict historical events draws our attention to the act of narrativisation, at times explicitly and more frequently implicitly. Charlie

32   Augustine H.H. Tan, 'Reply to the President's address', *Parliamentary Debates (Hansard), Singapore*, 2nd Parl., 2nd sess., vol. 31, sitting 2, 30 July 1971; https://www.parliament.gov.sg/parliamentary-business/official-reports-(parl-debates), col. 85.
33   Sonny Liew, *The art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* (Singapore: Epigram, 2015), p. 3.

Chan's own unreliability as a narrator, and the text's various narrative layers, each told by an interested party, contribute to an overall scepticism about the veracity of any single story regarding the past. One continuity from colonialism to post-independence Singapore, in Liew's text, however, is the use of sanctioned state violence against political opponents. Ng, in contrast, uses a more austere modernism in which the plots of short stories mysteriously rub up against a history we think we know. The story 'Monkey Butts, Fire and Dangerous Things', for instance, commences with the author's arriving on an island which is clearly Singapore, and being summoned to a meeting with a mysterious Elder, whose recently published memoirs are 'as hot as a bun just out of the oven on a summer afternoon'.[34] The encounter leads to an aeroplane flight and a dizzying plunge into the past on another, deserted island that begins with a meeting with the wartime Malayan Community Party leader and triple agent Lai Teck. Ng's continual narrative sleights of hand do not cause us to question received histories as directly as Liew's novel does, but they abrade such narratives, pulling their threads apart in awkward ways. Unresolved legacies of the violence of the Japanese Occupation trouble the present; narratives of peoplehood that stress a sunny familism are undone by a subtext of male rape.

Both these examples of historical fiction-making, whether realist or metafictional, however, might be argued to appeal to the head and not the heart, to contest patterns of storytelling while leaving submerged questions of peoplehood and personhood — the individual schemata of Singaporeans — uncontested. What new narratives might work on these stories through the affective responses of their readers, bringing the contradictions between colonial and national pasts to the surface? One important genre that has exploded in popularity in the last few years in Singapore is science fiction and fantasy. Historically, science fiction and fantasy has transgressed the division between the popular and the literary, often being defined less by taxonomic generic features than through the 'communities of practice' that produce and consume it: those associated with gaming, comics, online transnational popular magazines, as well as more conventionally literary texts.[35]

Science fiction and fantasy might at first sight seem to have less to say about history than the realist novel, which is more tightly bound to Munslow's 'agreed facts of the past'.[36] Matt Hills, however, has argued that the way in which science fiction plays with time and creates new worlds represents a profound engagement with the process of telling history.[37] Commentators from Darko Suvin onwards have seen science fiction as inducing a Brechtian questioning of the reader's own world through a process of 'cognitive estrangement' from the everyday.[38] This feature of science fiction narratives, Hills notes, moves beyond space into time, in a process of 'ontological

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34 Ng Kim Chew, *Slow boats to China and other stories*, ed. and trans. Carlos Rojas (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), p. 151.
35 John Rieder, 'On defining SF, or not: Genre theory, SF, and history', *Science Fiction Studies* 37, 2 (2010): 203.
36 Munslow, *Narrative and history*, p. 6.
37 Matt Hills, 'Time, possible worlds and counterfactuals', in *The Routledge companion to science fiction*, ed. Mark Bould, Andrew M. Butler, Adam Roberts and Sherryl Vint (New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 433–41.
38 Darko Suvin, 'On the poetics of the science fiction genre', *College English* 34, 3 (1972): 372.

disruption and decentering' of history.[39] Such an effect is most clearly seen in works of alternative history such as Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle*, in which the introduction of a single changed historical detail — here the victory of the Axis powers in the Second World War — results in an entirely different history that is still bound by the historical operation of cause and effect. Yet decentring also occurs in fictions of alternative worlds that are similar to but have no obvious point of historical divergence from our own, and yet are internally consistent, fictional universes that Gary K. Wolfe has characterised as 'alternate cosmologies'.[40] Such worlds, especially those constructed in lengthy fictional narratives such as novels, have histories that are elaborately planned out by authors and then slowly revealed to readers: these other histories are new, but as readers engaged in narrative discovery we inevitably compare them to histories we think we know.

Two recently published novels illustrate the possibilities that science fiction and fantasy open up in revisioning history in Singapore. Kevin Martens Wong's *Altered Straits* (2017) features male protagonists who are part of a history, or rather two historical narratives, of war and conflict. The later of these narratives is perhaps the easiest to understand conceptually: it occurs in a future Singapore in 2047, in which the city-state is one of the last human holdouts in a worldwide struggle against the Concordance, an entity that attacks and assimilates individual human beings into a collective consciousness. The second occurs in 1947, not in the historical Singapore we know, but in the Kingdom of Singapura, now the centre of a maritime empire that is in conflict with two other empires centred on Sulu and Aceh. This second narrative strand has split from the Singapore history we know in 1803, when various bioengineered creatures, including merlions, sent via time travel from the future timeline have arrived in Singapore, and decisively modified history. 'Instead of changing our own timeline,' one of the characters in Wong's future Singapore narrative remarks, 'we appear to have created a … parallel universe.'[41] In this universe the merlions have given leaders in the Malay world a decisive military advantage: the British have been expelled in the years 1823 and 1824, Raffles is forgotten, and Farquhar is thought of as a more significant historical figure. Technological development has continued, and by 1947 in this parallel historical reality Singapura has trams and airships, and continues to be defended by merlions, who engage in a process of mind-merging (termed pair-bonding) with specially selected young recruits in the Royal Singapuran Army.

Wong's manipulation of time and technology is both inventive and historically well informed, and yet, intriguingly, sidesteps the contradictions of the Singapore Story. The colonial past is eliminated in one timeline, and irrelevant in the other, and history thus proceeds without rupture. The individual's relationship to the collective remains ambiguous. Wong's protagonists resist assimilation by the Concordance through stubbornly clinging to their individuality. Resistance comes through the sharing of consciousnesses in intimate personal relationships, whether

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39 Hills, 'Time, possible worlds and counterfactuals', p. 435.
40 Gary K. Wolfe, 'Babylon revisited: Alternate cosmologies from Farmer to Chiang', in *Parabolas of science fiction*, ed. Brian Attebery and Veronica Hollinger (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2013), p. 230.
41 Kevin Martens Wong, *Altered Straits* (Singapore: Epigram, 2017), p. 96.

in the process of pair-bonding, in moments of shared memory that occur as characters travel from one time level to the next, and more prosaically, in SAF Officer Titus Ang's gay relationship with his partner Akash, or his care for younger sister Priscilla. If the narrative of development seems to have gone awry, with the Concordance's technological abilities advancing through its assimilation of the knowledge of individual human beings, the narrative of security and survival persists, and is indeed strengthened. Both of the narratives in *Altered Straits* feature military personnel resisting external threats to Singapore, and indeed sacrificing themselves in order to enable others to survive. The novel, indeed, concludes in a third historical timeline, with the two surviving characters stranded alone on an island with few resources: 1965, or indeed 1819, begins again, with new hopes for peoplehood but without real prospects for its realisation. Rather than offering a critique of Singapore's narrative of peoplehood, then, *Altered Straits* emerges as something of a mash-up of historical elements, or an example of augmented reality, with a speculative overlay placed over a pre-existing ethically constitutive narrative.

Nuraliah Norasid's novel *The Gatekeeper* (2017) offers a more focused and intimate critique. It is set in the fictional country of Manticura, an island nation that has adopted a 'poisonous flying Human-headed lion' as its national symbol.[42] Manticura has had a long and complex history of migration by various species (or 'races') of sentient animals, most recently a wave of Human arrivals in what seems close to an invasion. It is only after these latter migrants have become established, 'raising buildings, laying down pipes, making laws and governments' that they seek to 'declare its birth as if it had never been there before'.[43] Nuraliah's novel follows the path of two protagonists — Ria, a Scerean from the lowest species on the social hierarchy, who lives a fleeting and underground life in the hidden community of Nelroote, and Eedric, a privileged Human who lives an individualised upper-middle class lifestyle in a landed property which is enabled by Manticura's rapid development. Yet neither of these characters is as genotypically, or indeed as phenotypically, simple as he or she seems, and Nuraliah's deft manipulation of transgressions across the species barrier provides a subtle defamiliarisation of the social economy of race in Singapore.

In terms of the contradictions of the Singapore Story, however, the most interesting element of the novel is the substitution of a human for a colonial past in a narrative that has many similarities to Singapore history — a four-year military occupation by an invading force, for instance, is followed by a restoration and then systematisation of an existing political order. The domestic Human world of Manticura is sterile, and consists largely of transactional relationships drained of real affective content: that between Eedric, for instance, and his 'perfect, airbrushed' girlfriend Adrienne.[44] Juxtaposed to this is the hidden organic community of Nelroote, its houses built without 'any design or … planning in mind', possessing 'no discernible beginning or end, no distinguishable boundaries',[45] but serving as a site for relationships of trust that have no economically instrumental basis. The

42 Nuraliah Norasid, *The gatekeeper* (Singapore: Epigram, 2017), p. 4.
43 Ibid., p. 4.
44 Ibid., p. 68.
45 Ibid., pp. 54–5.

ethically constitutive story of economic growth personalised in individual schemata as meritocracy is here overturned: the work one must undertake is in building reciprocal relationships of trust with others. And if the narrative of development blurs the colonial and the postcolonial, coloniser and colonised — all of us, after all, are Human — the novel seems to suggest that an ethically constitutive narrative of peoplehood may be found in traces of a precolonial, pre-developmental past that persist in the present. High above the settlement are three ancient statues of goddesses; Ria spends most of her time in Nelroote living in old catacombs excavated long ago to bury the dead. Much of Ria's wisdom comes from her knowledge of the ancient Tuyunri language, 'deeply matriarchal, rather than patriarchal', intricately interwoven with the natural landscape, and lacking the capacity for abstraction.[46] The link between this historical narrative and our own is, I think, illustrated by the presence of Malay words in the text of the novel. In terms of the world of the novel they are inexplicable, the intrusion of a real language that cannot logically exist in the fictional world Nuraliah has created. And yet they are always words to do with community and affective relationships, hinting at the possibilities of traces of the past in the Malay language as a reservoir of affect in contemporary Singapore.

What, then, is the potential place of colonialism in a useful historical narrative of Singaporean peoplehood? As the Singapore Story is currently formulated, it is viewed pragmatically, its costs and benefits weighed, and separated out. In a bleaker view — perhaps taking the framework of a scholar of nationalism like Partha Chatterjee at his most pessimistic — Singaporeans are indeed a well-colonised people, unable to escape colonial legacies that constrain political thought, and even, more deeply, senses of self. But I think Nuraliah's text suggests a third possibility — colonialism as a kind of scar tissue, partly healed, partly covered up, a site of generative contradiction that might be reflected on if we are to explore how to realise, in a new way and a very different world, some of those features of that new society that Rajaratnam and others envisioned in 1959.

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46 Ibid., pp. 294.