A 'Great Affective Divide': How Gay Singaporeans Overcome Their Double Alienation

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Abstract

Since its independence in 1965, Singapore has been trying to unify its diverse ethnic, linguistic, and religious communities under one coherent national identity. Queer Singaporeans, however, suffer from a double alienation from the nation. While socially ostracized by the existing anti-sodomy Section 377A and the queer-unfriendly state policies that it justifies, they also suffer from that inability to identify with the nation called the 'Great Affective Divide'. In this essay, I aim to achieve two goals. Firstly, I invoke the idea of cultural citizenship (Ong 1996; Rosaldo 1994) as I ethnographically investigate the efforts that queer Singaporeans make to overcome their national estrangement, particularly an event called 'Pink Dot'. While such efforts do not receive universal support from queers, they are essential in the development of a better understanding of it means to be citizens of Singapore. Secondly, rather than wanting to remain socially marginal and critical of the norm, queers

actually express their desire for national inclusion through Pink Dot. Yet, I argue that it would be erroneous to read this desire as 'homonationalism' (Puar 2007). As such, Pink Dot provides a fertile example that counters the conventional view within Queer Studies that queers always resist the hetero-patriarchal norm.

Keywords: Cultural citizenship; Sexual citizenship; Singapore; Great Affect Divide; Pink Dot

Introduction

Since its independence in 1965, Singapore has been trying to unify its disparate ethnic, linguistic, and religious communities under one coherent national identity.[1] Since the state regards the hetero-patriarchal family as the bedrock of society and economy (Heng and Devan 1992), queers are regularly excluded from such nation-building efforts (Hor 2010; Obendorf 2012; Tan 2012). Over dinner one evening in 2009, I discussed with my friend Thomas his feelings as a Chinese gay man towards our country Singapore. Relating how he would soon be eligible to purchase his own apartment from the state's Housing Development Board (HDB) the following year when he turned 35 years old, he revealed emphatically how shocked he was at the many privileges and grants the state denied him just because he was not married:

> There are so many privileges and grants that are given to married couples that I'm not allowed to have. Wow! I didn't know that. I was really an idiot when it comes to money and stuff like that. So only when I started doing [research on HDB flats], I started to find out. I was so surprised. And there're so many limitations and stuff like that. I almost wished that, you know, it made me feel that ... you're just a troublesome family member, that they had no choice but to give you a room. Given a choice, they wouldn't. So they would, like, you know, don't give you the best and stuff like that. It hit me personally for this, as a single. *And I think that being gay is one or two levels even below [being] single* (my emphasis).

The privileges that Thomas mentioned are indeed many. Beyond the usual tax relief and maternity leave, married couples also enjoy priority and a bigger subsidy when buying public apartments. In line with this pro-family stance, the state has since the 1980s implemented policies that established national matchmaking agencies, promoted eugenics (Heng and Devan 1992), and reward childbirth monetarily (Teo 2011), all in the name of encouraging early marriage and childbirth. These policies persist despite the lack of success after three decades of relentless effort – the total birth rate slid to 1.2 in 2011 – and their existence continues to alienate queer Singaporeans like Thomas and me.

Over the course of my doctoral dissertation research on gay Singaporean men's national belonging from 2007 to 2009, I realized that the estrangement had deeper roots than mere bias against the unmarried. When I asked whether they felt at home in Singapore, my gay fieldwork informants highlighted (not surprisingly) the anti-sodomy Section 377A and the gay-unfriendly policies and social attitudes it justifies, as major inhibitors on their national pride. All the informants, including the non-gay ones, repeatedly expressed dissatisfaction with the governing People's Action Party (PAP). Whether it was the party's gerrymandering tendencies, media censorship (George 2012), or the Cabinet ministers' astronomical salaries,[2] these issues reflect a national inability to identify with the country that local writer Catherine Lim (1994a) calls 'the Great Affective Divide'. As Singaporeans, my gay consultants are therefore doubly alienated. Yet, this does not mean that they are satisfied with their marginal status. Since the early 2000s, gay rights activists have been making numerous attempts at inculcating national belonging, the most popular of which is 'Pink Dot'. This event invites gay men, lesbians, transgendered people, other queers, and their straight allies to form the titular dot to celebrate everybody's right to love. This essay, then, documents how queer Singaporeans construct their national belonging through Pink Dot. After briefly reviewing Singapore's nation-building history, I move to discuss the concepts of sexual and cultural citizenship, and the Great Affective Divide. Lastly, as I ethnographically account for the nation-building process among queer Singaporeans, I maintain that it would be erroneous to read the event as evidence of their 'homonationalism' (Puar 2007). Instead, by allowing them to express their desires for national inclusion, Pink Dot challenges the conventional view within Queer Studies that queers must always resist the hetero-patriarchal norm.

Building the Singaporean Nation: A Brief History

Singapore has been engaging in active nation-building since its independence in 1965. After the British claimed it as a factory in 1819, disparate ethnic, linguistic, and religious groups populated the colony. To facilitate profit-extraction, the British built ports, railroads, hospitals, and other infrastructure. Otherwise, they implemented a divide-and-rule policy of administration, and a laissez-faire approach applied to education and social interaction that limited social, cultural, and linguistic integration between the disparate groups (Loos 2008). Indeed, when Singapore obtained domestic autonomy in 1959, a national identity did not yet exist. Everybody, including founding father Lee Kuan Yew, either oriented himself culturally towards Malaya, or to the cultural homeland of his ethnic group. The island's small geographical and market size further compounded anxieties of survivability, so instead of seeking full independence, Singapore merged with Malaysia in 1963.

The union collapsed a mere two years later from violently incommensurable ethnic tensions between the two partners. Still bruised from the racial riots and having had autonomy handed to them without revolution, Singapore's political leaders made economic development the basis of national identity. Public housing here became a key site through which the leaders disciplined the population to accept the rapid industrialization program they had planned. After passing a law that enabled the state to buy private land for redevelopment for under-market prices, politicians forced farmers and urban squatters to relocate into public housing, hence producing a working class dependent on the state for shelter and on wage labor to pay for it (Chua 1997). These early flats resembled prison barracks in both structure and appearance (Tremewan 1994), with many limiting rules on how residents could use their apartments' space (Jacob and Cairns 2008). The new tenants balked at the transition, and their resistance became enmeshed in the violent political activism of that era. In a series of complicated maneuvers, the PAP decimated the contentious Left (Barr 2000). While Loh (2013), and other historians now contest the state's portrayal of these demonstrators as communist agitators, the crackdown nonetheless convinced ordinary citizens of the dangers of pursuing politics outside of the PAP mandate.

Concurrently, public housing estates provided radical improvements in living standards through their easy access to public facilities and private employment. These material benefits further entrenched the PAP's legitimacy. By leasing the flats to residents at market prices, the state channels the profits back to the maintenance and construction of more flats. Indeed, the

program now houses more than 85% of all Singaporeans. More importantly, the high price of public housing transforms leasers into stakeholders of not just their properties (Singaporeans imagine themselves as owners of the flats that they 'buy' and 'sell'), but also of the larger nation-state (Chua 1997). Home-ownership thus becomes a key characteristic of the social norm, and a major component of cultural citizenship.

Not surprisingly, the state uses public housing to promote its vision of the 'proper' heteronormative family. It always promotes access to public housing as a benefit, never a right, of citizenship (Chua 1997). A family chooses the size of its flat according to its financial capabilities, and it usually takes the combined incomes of all the working adults in a family to pay off the housing loan over a significant period of time. To purchase a flat directly from the state, the applicant must be 21 years of age, and form a state-defined proper family nucleus consisting of the applicant, and fiancé(e); the applicant, spouse, and children (if any); the applicant, parents, and siblings (if any); if widowed or divorced, the applicant, and children under her legal custody; and, if orphaned, the applicant, and unmarried siblings. Those who cannot form such family units (including gay men, lesbians, and other never-married individuals) can still buy flats, but only after age 35, and from the more expensive resale market. They also receive a much smaller subsidy than that of family applicants. Since home-ownership marks one as 'normal', the public housing program not only further marginalizes Singaporean queers (Oswin 2010), but also severely diminishes their cultural citizenship.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Singapore ascended the world stage as an 'Asian Tiger'. The state promoted Confucianism both to enable further growth (Wong 1996), and to counter the perceived ills of rapid industrialization and Westernization (Tan 1997). Chinese women saw the move as a thinly veiled attempt to subjugate them to an archaic and patriarchal code of conduct, and English-speaking Chinese noticed its authoritarian political implications (Englehart 2000). In contrast, the non-Chinese viewed it as yet another state project to expand Chinese dominance (Barr and Skrbiš 2008). By the mid-1990s, Confucianism again gained public prominence, this time as the philosophical foundation of the 'Asian Values' discourse that Lee Kuan Yew promoted as an alternative to Western modernity. As a re-staging of the age-old ideological struggle between liberalism and communitarianism, it manifested locally as a fight between US-style individualism and state-promoted Confucianism (Chua 1999). While the ethnic Chinese largely accepted it uncritically, it alienated the Malays, for whom

Islamic religious piety and social relationships matter more than material success (Chong 2002).

With the dawn of the new millennium, growing the economy gathered urgency as the 1997 Asian economic crisis, the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and the 2002 bursting of the dot.com bubble greatly destabilized the global economy. Given its deeply embedded position in the global networks of capital flows, the Singaporean state increasingly attempts to shed its authoritarian reputation to attract more global capital and professional labor. It encourages citizens to regionalize to develop Singapore's 'second wing', builds casinos, courts famous universities to set up branch campuses, and constructed the Esplanade theatres to host visiting performance arts groups. More importantly, it enlisted queers (at least discursively) into this make-over campaign by employing openly queer civil servants (Chris Tan 2009), and making gay-themed movies (Yue 2007). At the macro level, I locate these strategies in the 'me-too-ist' chase for global capital (Bell and Binnie 2004, 1814): cities that consider themselves players must provide such attractions as ethnic enclaves, hi-tech corridors, and gay villages. Cities ironically become more alike in this quest to become unique, but not providing the attractions means falling out of the race altogether. At the micro level, Pink Dot, the legal challenge of S377A (Hor 2010), and other major events in Singapore's brief gay history all happened in the 2000s, suggesting strongly that local activists took their cues from the state's liberalizing attitudes towards homosexuality to push their own agenda.

Nevertheless, the economic model of nationhood remains deeply flawed. Nationhood encompasses far more than mere national wealth. Both ethnicity and religion can contribute significantly to one's national identity, but when they remain taboo topics in Singaporean public discourses, they limit the growth of a genuine sense of national belonging. Even as the state encouraged citizens to go abroad, anxieties developed that Singaporeans might become too cosmopolitan and migrate elsewhere. Indeed, in 1999, the then-Prime Minister divided Singaporeans broadly into 'cosmopolitans' and 'heartlanders', but he valorized the working-class latter as representatives of 'authentic' Singaporean culture while casting doubt on the former's national allegiance (Chong 2011). Furthermore, Singaporean nationalism does not hark to the past as nationalism usually does. National histories may gain a primordial timelessness through political machinations (Duara 1998; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983), but Singapore does not even have any such primordial histories to speak of. It looks instead towards the future, specifically one where the country has secured its economic prosperity (Goh 2005). Instability will always trouble this sort of vision. Despite its modernity,

Singapore still retains its geographical vulnerabilities. Decades of economic development neither made it significantly bigger in land area nor granted it any more natural resources to develop. Unable to exorcise the specter of national extinction, it remains a nation in perpetual crisis.

Beyond economic productivity, biological fecundity also characterizes good citizenship. Beginning in the early 1980s, the state installed pro-marriage and pro-fecundity policies that ranged from a state-operated matchmaking organization and easier access to choice schools, to cash rewards for childbirth and priority in public housing application (Teo 2011). It is vital to stress here that while the state could have accused queers for lowering the birthrates, it has never done so. The lack of blame, however, does not mean that the state welcomes queers. It retains the anti-sodomy S377A, despite the lack of justifiable legal reasons to do so (Hor 2010). This law, in turn, justifies such queer-unfriendly state policies and social attitudes as police raids and sting operations in the 1990s, the lack of legal protection for queers against hate speech and wrongful dismissal from employment, and a ban on positive portrayals of queer characters in mainstream media. This illegality exposes the Janus-faced state's hypocrisy: queers are welcomed for their economic productivity, but their refusal to partake in *re*productive marital life renders them partial cultural citizens.

Cultural and Sexual Citizenship

In the above light, queer Singaporeans attempt to claim national belonging by asserting their cultural and sexual citizenship through Pink Dot. By cultural citizenship, I refer to the extra-legal emotional ties that bind one to her country. This concept informs studies of queer belonging in China (Rofel 2007; Engebretsen 2013), Indonesia (Boellstorff 2005), Panama (Siu 2005), and New York City (Decena 2008; Manalansan 2003). Within anthropology, two scholars wield particularly strong influences in the development of cultural citizenship studies. Working among US Latinos, Rosaldo envisions citizenship as a people-driven and continually expanding process of inclusion and enfranchisement. To him,

> cultural citizenship refers to the right to be different (in terms of race, ethnicity, or native language) with respect to the norms of the dominant

national community, without compromising one's right to belong, in the sense

of participating in the nation-state's democratic processes. (Rosaldo 1994, 57)

In contrast, Ong (1999) argues that voluntary grassroots associations may hinder the development of inclusive and participatory social relations just as well as fostering them (Hefner 2001). She treats cultural citizenship not as a unilateral demand for rights by subalterns, as if the socially marginalized can evade state power and other forms of regulation. Rather, she sees it as a process of subject formation where civil institutions socialize newcomers and integrate them into the nation-state (Ong 1996). In her study of flexible citizenship (Ong 1999), she argues that political rights within a nation-state no longer provide the primary motivation for how Hong Kong business elites choose their citizenships. Rather, economic factors under global capitalism, and the regimes of governmentality that enable these opportunities, do. In a later development of the concept, she considers institutional webs of power in her study of how Cambodian refugees are made into citizens (Ong 2003). Here, while state and church institutions define the refugees as both helpless victims and potentially malevolent agents of Cambodia's communist regime, the refugees themselves learn to navigate these institutions to obtain both material and emotional necessities of life that they cannot access otherwise.

However one becomes a cultural citizen, the process can never be passive. Pateman (1970) theorizes three levels of political participation: 'pseudo', 'partial', and 'full'. She restricts *pseudo* participation to such processes as informing about and endorsing a pre-determined decision. No participation in the decision-making process actually occurs, but a feeling of participation is nevertheless created through such 'technique[s] of persuasion' as public relations practices (Pateman 1970, 69). Even when one does not vocalize her thoughts, she still participates actively by acquiescing in a less confrontational manner (Lee 2002). In *partial* participation, the individual exercises influence by voicing her opinions, but the political elites still reserve the final power and authority to make the decisions. Lastly, in *full* participation, each member in a decision-making body is invested with equal power to determine the outcome of decisions.

In contrast, sexual citizenship poses 'a deliberate challenge that any notion of the political being must recognize, and attend to, the simple yet often-ignored fact that humans are undeniably sexual'. (Brown 2006, 874-5) It emerged as 'a cluster of rights and responsibilities ... in the twentieth century around issues of sexual partner choices, control over the body, reproductive rights, intimate bonds and sexual identities'. (Farrer 2006, 102-103) In many democratic countries, sexuality informs judgments on whether groups or individuals can participate in public life in a responsible and desirable manner. Those people, whose sexual proclivities that society deems suspect, dangerous, or otherwise undesirable, may find policy-makers curtailing their civil rights to define the nation's moral geographies (Evans 1993). As such, figures as diverse as the single mother, the prostitute, the errant father, gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, the pervert, and the pornographer have all been demonized as 'bad citizens' in different time periods and in different ways to delimit normal and desirable behavior (Knopp 1995). The state's punishment of perceived sexual deviance highlights the liminal status of gay men and lesbians as 'partial citizens' (Richardson 1998, 88) who cannot marry, foster children, serve in the military in the same capacity as straight soldiers do, nor receive legal protection from harassment and discrimination.

In this light, the debate among intellectuals and activists over sexual citizenship revolves around the balancing of state-granted rights as pay-off for one's responsibilities to the state (Bell and Binnie 2000; Evans 1993). To some critics, sexual citizenship as a campaigning platform has been overshadowed by the need to secure rights (especially to consumption) in exchange for duties as a 'good citizen' who relegates her sexuality to the private sphere. Calling this exchange 'the new homonormativity', Duggan (2003) highlights the dangers of pitching rights claims around the right of access to the trappings of heteronormative privilege. 'Good' queer behavior can even take on a nationalistic bent called 'homonationalism' (Puar 2007), where homosexual acts, identities, and relationships are understood and enacted in racialised ways that make them compatible with, even exemplary of, the nation's ideals. By assimilating, however, one forgoes the right to critique the possibility and desirability of the types of sexual citizens one can become.

Others, especially geographers, consider it essential to examine issues of citizenship in terms of space, because citizenship concerns the appropriateness of one's behaviors in particular spheres of civil life (Smith 1989). The ways Euro-American societies organize space help to naturalize heterosexuality (Binnie and Valentine 1999). These societies do so by simultaneously saturating spaces of work, leisure and consumption with images and

behaviors that encourage people to adopt 'benign' and 'normal' heterosexual identities and performances (Nast 1998). Indeed, everyday spaces are more heteronormative than heterosexual, in that only certain heterosexualities are publicly acceptable (typically the racialised and middle-classed ones of conjugally united reproductive couples). These heterosexualities form the norm against which all other sexualities (hetero or otherwise) are queered (Oswin 2010). Transgressors of the sexual and spatial order are disciplined with social and legal codes of conduct. Such policing ranges from the formal sex zones that policy-makers set up to contain the sexed, unruly bodies of prostitutes, to the informal (but potentially deadly) homophobic abuse that gay men and lesbians risk attracting if they display public homosexual affection, friendship or desire. Similar behavior by heterosexual couples goes often unremarked and unpunished, so this policing reveals the aggressive hetero-patriarchy supporting civil society that poses a high barrier to entry to those whom society judged as 'immoral' (Namaste 1996; Valentine 1993).

Lastly, academics and activists most commonly associate sexual citizenship with non-normative practices and identities, most notably those of LGBT communities. Consequently, some confuse sexual citizenship with LGBT or even queer citizenship. Such thinking perpetuates the sexualisation of non-normative groups while de-sexualizing the normative ones. This thinking also obscures the fact that the contours of sexual citizenship have already been heavily heteronormalised. Those who campaign for same-sex marriage, for example, model their claims upon the idea of the romantically bonded opposite-sex couple not only as the legitimate form of adult intimate relationship, but also as the basis of society. As such, any further theorizing of sexual citizenship must include both normative and non-normative heterosexualities in the intellectual conversation (Bell and Binnie 2006).

The 'Great Affect Divide'

Since the 2000s in Singapore, issues of cultural and sexual citizenship rest at the core of such major queer rights activist events as the *Nation* circuit parties (Lim 2004), and the attempt to repeal Singapore's anti-sodomy statute S377A in 2007. This statute punishes male homosexual behavior with up to two years of imprisonment, although the Prime Minister himself promised in a parliamentary hearing of the repeal attempt that the state would not actually use the law; it was retained only for its 'symbolic value'. Yet, the very existence of S377A justifies such queer-unfriendly policies and social attitudes as police raids in cruising

grounds in the 1990s, the legal denial that lesbians even exist (Leong 1995), discrimination in the civil service and the military (Chris Tan 2009, 2012), and the censoring of homosexuality in schools' sex education syllabus (Leong 2012). Furthermore, the promise remains just that, a verbal agreement with no legal weight: S377A still hangs over the necks of all queer Singaporeans as a sword of Damocles that can easily fall in the future.

As much as S377A alienates queer Singaporeans from the nation, I argue that they are doubly estranged *as citizens* by that national malaise that local novelist Catherine Lim (1994a) calls the 'Great Affective Divide'. The People's Action Party takes credit for transforming the country from a backwater port into the socially stable and economically wealthy powerhouse that it is today. The draconian measures it implemented to achieve this current state (as outlined in the short history of nation-building above) so entrenched the PAP into the socio-political landscape that few Singaporeans can imagine a Singapore without the party. Singaporeans appreciate the immense national wealth that the PAP created, but deplore that party's impersonal and bureaucratic style of governance, as well as the heavy-handed manner in which it handles alternative political discourses. In a letter to the main English-language newspaper *The Straits Times*, Catherine Lim (1994a) writes that 'while the PAP Government has inspired in the people much respect for its efficiency and much gratitude for the good life as a result of this efficiency, there is very little in the way of affectionate regard'. Insofar as PAP's dominance results in citizens equating the party with the country itself (even though they ought to distinguish the party from Singapore the country and Singapore the nation), the Great Affective Divide effectively inhibits any real expression of patriotism.

As evidence, Lim points to the hanging of national flags outside one's flat in the months before National Day on August 9. The state encourages the practice as a sign of one's nationalistic pride, but few people do it on their own accord. Most Singaporeans do not identify with the PAP/Singapore, as Lim explains, so they are embarrassed to appear patriotic. When flats appear fully decked with national flags (Fig. 1), it is because the neighborhood residential committees installed them. The committees only have limited manpower and flags, so only those flats that face main roads are decorated. The inauthenticity of this 'patriotic' display becomes immediately apparent when one moves to the private apartments, where the residential committees cannot access (Fig. 2).

Fig. 1: Everton Park Flat with Flags (Source: Author).

Fig. 2: Flagless People's Park Complex Apartments (Source: Author).

PAP leaders did not react to Lim's critique initially. Kenneth Tan (2009) credits this tolerance to Lim's deft positioning of herself as a meek and obedient daughter vis-à-vis the overbearingly strict father-state. Lim (1994b) penned a second political commentary in the same newspaper shortly after her first. This time, she argued that former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong could not leave the domineering shadow of Lee Kuan Yew, his predecessor. As such, Goh failed to execute the gentler, more consultative style of governance that he promised. This second article attracted Goh's ire. In a reply by his press secretary, Goh stated that he could not allow non-politicians to set the political agenda, and challenged Lim to enter the political arena so that she could take responsibility for her views. Castigated, Lim not only apologized to Goh privately, but also stated publicly that she merely wanted to share her views on what she perceived as a grave problem. She neither wanted to enter politics nor 'belittle or upset anyone' (Lim 1994c).

Lim attracted the state's displeasure, as she violated discursive boundaries known locally as 'OB markers'. First used by a parliamentary minister as an adoption from the golf term 'out-of-bounds markers', OB markers demarcate state limits of topics deemed safe for public discussions. Unlike actual golf markers, the discursive ones are purposely left undefined. Social climates change constantly, so state officials cannot determine in advance the permissibility of any given topic (*The Straits Times* 1999). However, the Lim incident demonstrates that critical discussions of politics remain taboo. OB markers clearly stifle the growth of a Singaporean national identity, and Gomez (2000) decries their use as state censorship. Not knowing where exactly the markers lie, citizens would often rather err on the side of caution and self-censor, than to risk getting into trouble with the state.

By policing alternative (but not necessarily dissenting) political talk using heavy-handed methods,[3] the state severely limits the drivers of Singaporean nationalism. The state's economic developmentalism turned Gellner (1983) on his head: nationalism produced industrialization in Singapore, not the other way round as it is normally conceived of. However, economic accomplishments cannot form a national identity by themselves for the simple and obvious reason that nationhood encompasses far more than mere national wealth. To be fair, economic progress did provide *some* basis for such an identity. Singapore overcame severe physical limitations to become a developed country, and this achievement imbues citizens with a sense of nationalistic pride that emerges during international disputes. When former Indonesian president Habibie dismissed Singapore disparagingly as a 'little red dot' on the map in 1998, for example, Singaporeans rallied against this national insult. Yet, as

Furnivall (1944 [1939]) pointed out, market interests can only provide fickle guarantees of civil peace in Singapore and other plural societies organized for economic production rather than social life. He predicted that because economics ignores the cultural embeddedness of market operations, such societies would eventually crumble under the pressure of inter-ethnic competition. In fact, as a symptom of Lim's great affective divide, citizens already see themselves more as members of their own respective ethnic group rather than as Singaporeans (Chua 1996).

Pink Dot

Despite the double alienation that gay and lesbian Singaporeans face, queer rights activists have been increasingly asserting their cultural and sexual citizenship in the past decade. In terms of the number of attendees, Pink Dot is, by far, the most popular of all these efforts. The idea behind it – to gather pinkly attired people to form a giant pink dot to celebrate the notion that love transcends all, with the implicit goal of repealing S377A one day – is elegantly simple yet effective. The inaugural event, held in 2009 at Hong Lim Park in Chinatown, attracted 2,500 supporters from across the sexuality spectrum. By 2014, an unprecedented 26,000 participants showed up for the night-time Pink Dot that year (Fig. 3).

Fig. 3: Pink Dot, 2009 – 2013 (Source: *Pink Dot* website).

Strong nationalistic symbolism saturates Pink Dot. Historically, Hitler's purging of German queers already associated the color pink with homosexuality. More importantly in this case, the color also results from the combination of the red and the white of Singapore's national flag. Indeed, it is the color of a citizen's identity card (permanent residents have blue ones).

As such, pink symbolically re-inserts gay men back into the centre of the Singaporean nation when the Penal Code banishes them to the margins. The name 'Pink Dot' further strengthens this nationalizing sentiment, as it reminds participants of how they transmuted the Indonesian 'little red dot' insult into a badge of honor. The site of the event, Hong Lim Park, also poses some significance. Located in Chinatown, the park is one of Singapore's earliest gay cruising grounds. According to my field consultants, gay men began cruising there as late as the 1980s. Even after younger cruising gay men gradually moved southwest to an area of derelict shophouses nicknamed Jurassic Park (now demolished and occupied by China Square), to Ann Siang Hill further west, and eventually online onto the Internet, older gay men in their fifties and above still use the park as such. Politically, the park used to host speeches and rallies in the 1950s and 1960s. Now, the state-sanctioned Speakers' Corner is located there. Modeled after the more famous Speakers' Corner in London's Hyde Park, the Hong Lim Park version opened in 2000. It provides a rare public space for free speech and demonstrations in a country where the government usually treats such behavior with great scrutiny and distrust.

As an indication of the PAP's distrust of active citizenship, the state originally made the Speakers' Corner highly unsuitable for its intended purpose. For instance, speakers must first register their intention (although not their topics) with officers at a nearby police post. They could also only make speeches, without using sound-amplifiers, between 7 am and 7 pm. Trees only shaded the park along its edges, so the timing deterred would-be speakers from using the unshaded Corner, or going there to listen to others. Even at 7 pm, the park would still be uncomfortably warm from the day's residual heat. Over the years, the rules that govern the Speakers' Corner were relaxed such that would-be speakers can now register their intent online. They can also hold events at any hour of the day, and use loudhailers and other sound-amplification devices from 9 am to 10.30 pm. The list of permitted activities has also been expanded to include exhibitions, performances, and even demonstrations (provided that the demonstrators are all citizens and permanent residents). Clearly, were these rules not loosened, Pink Dot would not have been possible at all.

By making the legalization of homosexuality its goal, Pink Dot counts as 'ethical practice' according to Dave's (2011) definition: it problematises the established social norm of marginalised homosexuality, it invents alternatives to these norms by making homosexuality socially visible, and it creatively works with the state's very rigid rules governing large-scale

gatherings of any kind to practise these newly invented relational possibilities. Despite its goal, however, Pink Dot does not receive support from all queers. The rules governing the Speaker's Corner limit participation only to citizens and permanent residents. While foreigners can partake in the event, they cannot formally join to form the pink dot. Nothing stops them from doing so in reality though, as the police do not check for citizenship documents. More seriously, some accuse Pink Dot of lacking bite. Over dinner, a White British colleague highlighted how assimilative the event has become. Instead of defying the laws, the organizers keep having it at Hong Lim Park. 'Why can't they have it in nearby Johor Bahru (Malaysia) or Batam (Indonesia)?' he asked, because foreigners then could have joined in. Instead of demanding the decriminalization of homosexuality, Pink Dot caters to middle-class sensitivities by deliberately not mentioning orgies, drug use, BDSM, and other controversial aspects of gay social life. Instead, it couches its message in the warm and fuzzy terms of the freedom to love. Rather than turning participants into agents of social justice, it renders them compatible to, even exemplary of, Singapore's neoliberal ethics. Just buy the plushies on sale to support Pink Dot, and homosexuality will be legalized one day, my colleague remarked sarcastically. In short, it reeks of homonationalism to him.

By inviting its supporters to locate themselves as equal members in the larger Singaporean nation's 'imagined community' (Anderson 1991), Pink Dot strategically omits the real inequalities that exist within and between genders, classes, and ethnicities (Barr and Skrbiš 2008). Yet, I argue that Pink Dot is not homonationalistic. Despite its popularity of late among theoretically sophisticated academics, homonationalism remains at its core an idea rooted in contemporary western racial politics (Ritchie 2015). Specifically, it is an argument about how neoliberal governments in post-9/11 North America and Europe partially incorporate White queer citizens with the illusion of equality to the detriment of queers of colour (Puar 2007). Racial injustice critically undergirds the concept, but Pink Dot's organizers preach a color-blind freedom to love. They feature plenty of non-Chinese in their promotional materials. On the rare occasion when the state acknowledges queer claims on national belonging (for example, Chris Tan 2009), it also does so regardless of ethnicity. Applying homonationalism uncritically then to Pink Dot threatens to turn the idea into a monolithic, all-encompassing explanation of queer social life under capitalism everywhere, even though its spread both within and without the US and Europe has been incomplete, uneven, and sometimes self-contradictory (cf. Brown 2012). It ignores non-capitalist economic practices that co-exist with neoliberal relationships of profit and debt (Gibson-

Graham 2006). Pink Dot, for instance, runs on volunteer labor, and its activists channel the proceeds of selling plushies back into the organization of future events. Indeed, any accusation that Pink Dot lacks radicalness provokes the question: what then is queer enough? Will the answer be some form of loud public protest patterned after the western gay pride parade that vindicates Altman's (1996) 'global gay' thesis? Is it also not an exercise of White privilege to insist that Pink Dot be held beyond Singapore so that a small handful of foreigners could join in, even when this move would inconvenience more than 20,000 Singaporeans in the process? Accusing Pink Dot of homonationalism hence 'remove[s] the theory from the concrete socio-historical context it so lucidly describe[s] and release[s] it into the ether of empty signifiers that can take on ideological value for any purpose'. (Ritchie 2015, 620)

More broadly speaking, is going mainstream always necessarily bad? Within Queer Studies, the hegemonic view holds that 'good' queers always resist the heteronorm; it is the 'bad' ones who acquiesce and sell out. Indeed, Eng *et al.* (2005) reprise Warner's (1993, xxvi) call to reject a 'minoritizing logic of toleration or simple political interest-representation in favor of a more thorough resistance to regimes of the normal'. They demand further scrutiny, not celebration, as queer social life becomes increasingly normalized in the current moment. They envision an invigorated and expanded queer criticism of how state and society separates the 'normal' and the 'natural' from the 'perverse' and 'pathological' using sexualized, raced, gendered, classed and nationalized sieves (Eng *et al.* 2005, 3). Such a view validates and celebrates confrontational and public visibility, and a liberatory ethos that challenges categorical gender and sexuality as the unchanging essential basis of individual identities (Decena 2008; Manalansan 2003). This critique of such identity categories as 'gay' and 'lesbian' illuminates their limits, including those that structure mainstream gender and queer studies (Engebretsen 2013).

The insistence of remaining marginalized to interrogate the mainstream, however, remains an academic ideal that over-simplifies the complex social processes and experiences of everyday life outside the ivory tower (Valentine 2003). Even within the West, neither French queers nor their Filipino counterparts in New York City consider coming out as a central part of their identities. To them, such quotidian issues as making enough money and maintaining familial ties matter far more (Manalansan 2003, 2013; Provencher 2007). Indeed, gay Dominicans in New York City actively refuse to come out to shield their families from the corrosive effects of gossip (Decena 2008), even though 'negotiations of the closet that refuse speech, visibility,

and pride have been generally viewed as suspect, as evidence of denial and internalized homophobia, or as outright pathology'. (Decena 2008, 339) In East Asia, an emerging body of literature further highlights how gay visibility, while having definitional power both within and without academia (Gray 2009), is ultimately just one of many ways to negotiate queer identities. East Asian queer films depict queerness as problematic only when it develops into a social and sexual identity that interferes with one's appropriate role in the family (Berry 2001). Ethnographic research conducted in Beijing (Engebretsen 2013) and Singapore (Tan 2011) support this view that many East Asian queers, while aware of Euro-American discourses of the closet, would much rather be 'as normal as possible' (Yau 2010) than proudly declaring their homosexuality.

As an event borne of the concern for sociality in heavily Confucianzed Singapore, Pink Dot reflects the above view. Those queers who attend Pink Dot love Singapore, but this nationalism warrants a more nuanced explanation. In a gesture that illustrated how queer national affect could align with the PAP-state-nation complex of the 'Great Affective Divide' discourse, Pink Dot's organizers mourned the death of Singapore's founding father and senior PAP politician Lee Kuan Yew when he passed away in March 2015 (Pink Dot 2015). Yet, the queer desires for national inclusion do not map isometrically onto nationalism. Nationalism, as most Singaporeans understand it, is that particular form propagated by the PAP through, among other policies, the National Education program in all levels of education from kindergarten to high school (Mauzy and Milne 2002). This vision of the nation, as Obendorf (2012) crucially points out, accepts queers only insofar as they enable economic production by making Singapore appear liberal (Chris Tan 2009); queers still remain socially marginalized, because they threaten the hetero-patriarchal family by refusing to biologically reproduce. In seeking to normalize homosexuality, Pink Dot rejects this PAP-articulated nationalism, but it casts no doubts on queer Singaporeans as citizens. In this sense, while Pink Dot attendees are nationalistic, it is more accurate to say that they want full citizenship even more.

Pink Dot does not seek to disrupt civic society, even as it attempts to gain full citizenship for queers. When I brought up my dinner conversation with my British colleague on *Facebook*, a friend Nicholas reminded me that Pink Dot does not seek to directly legalize homosexuality:

I think PD has never set itself out to be a rally of any sort. Its main goal is to condition. And that's probably what it really is doing. It's helping to ease the gay agenda into the mainstream and out to various groups in a loudly subtle way. What it does is condition Singaporeans, and prepare them for a time for a proper stand, rally, or movement to happen.

Pink Dot succeeds in getting people to join precisely, because its promotional website avoids utilizing the language of rights to assure participants of their legal safety (Phillips 2013). Instead, online videos used in the 2010 event (some of which were in Mandarin) emphasized the familiarity of gay men and lesbians as kin, as somebody's sons and daughters. This way, they better reached out to queers in the Mandarin-speaking working-class 'heartlands', for whom open declarations of queerness are disconcerting and alien.

An organizer, Lip Sin, revealed to me that his team could have radicalized Pink Dot from the very beginning, but declined from doing so. At the very first planning meeting, someone 'wanted to march around Hong Lim Park, waving pink flags. Cannot *lah*. We told him no', Lip Sin said. Influenced by the state's predilection for controlled socio-political changes, Singaporeans typically avoid making assertive public statements of individualism, preferring instead to act in groups (Chua 2004). To get participants to even go to the first Pink Dot in 2009, the organizers had to engage both state and social forms of regulation by tailoring the event to this communitarian mindset, and show that queer cultural and sexual citizenships are commensurate with national belonging. Queer activists focus on 'convincing our fellow Singaporeans that though we are queer, we aren't really that different'. (Phillips 2013, 124)

Indeed, fearing that any open support for queer rights will cause the state to retaliate, some gay men and lesbians reject all queer activism. Heng (2004, 73-74) writes:

Criticism against Singapore's gay activists does not only come from conservative forces outside the gay community. There are gay Singaporeans who are also against political activism ... Those rejecting activism argue that being confrontational (read Western) rather than consensual (read Asian) will only bring down the wrath of the state on the gay community and lead to the reimposition of restrictions on gay social and commercial activities. For these people, it is enough

that the Singaporean gay community can enjoy a vibrant gay scene where many forms of recreation, which used to be only available in the West, are allowed, for example, gay saunas, films and plays with gay themes, *et cetera*. They hold the view that these facilities are what count rather than abstract Western notions of gay rights. They are concerned that gay activists risk jeopardizing all these precious new gains by being political.

Hailing from the upper-middle classes, one of my consultants sees gay activism as too socially disruptive:

I'm a very practical person. I think all these movements, it will come as society evolves. Don't push it too hard, because if you push it, you may get a negative effect ... you may get the reverse effect. So just let it be. I think the best movement is to do it subtly, through education, through the arts, through soft-sell. Ten years later, you can be sure that the attitude will change. Rather than all these waving pink banners and marching down the street. It just irritates people, and has a negative effect.

Earlier, as the public debate raged on over the possible repeal of the anti-sodomy law, the main English newspaper *The Straits Times* (2007) published the following letter from a gay man:

I live my life *discreetly* and I am happy to have been able to do so without any legal interference pertaining to my homosexuality for the past 30 years. Singapore is a good place for a gay man to live in, as long as one understands the social contract involved and respects the mainstream's wish to have the traditional family unit as the social norm (my emphasis).

By seeking to retain the social status quo, the above conservatives obscure the violent processes of queer exclusion through which the Singaporean state emerged. After all, they passively wait for the PAP to initiate changes to better queers' lives. Such changes are unlikely, since the party faces no pressure to make them. As such, one can cast serious doubts about Pink Dot's success. Is the event's popularity, however impressive, sufficient to get S377A repealed?

Here, I agree with Oswin's (2014) assessment that as a single-issue movement, Pink Dot will unlikely dent Singapore's deeply entrenched heteronormative logics. A multi-issue movement, however, presents its own problems. It risks diluting its campaign message, and it invites internal dissent if the different goals contradict each other. Lastly, activists also face the problem of finding compatible new issues to augment the original one. Oswin (ibid.) suggests migrant worker rights, arguing that queers can ally with foreign laborers as neither has a place in the state's vision of reproductive future. Even if Pink Dot's activists seriously consider the arcane concept of queer futures, they must still convince the supporters to step beyond their comfort zone to help the ethnic, class, and national Others in migrant laborers. When even getting Singaporeans to support co-ethnic and co-national queers already requires such effort, championing the rights of both queers *and* migrant workers on a single platform would be an immensely Herculean task indeed. Remaining a single-issue movement seems best for Pink Dot for the moment.

Nevertheless, we also should not dismiss outright civic activist efforts to assert cultural and sexual citizenship rights. Any real progress thus far towards the normalization of homosexuality were made by activists, whether it be petitioning the courts to stop anti-gay sting operations in the early 1990s, getting the elderly statesman Lee Kuan Yew to promise in 1997 that the police would not publicly harass queers (Birch 2003), or making the Prime Minister in 2007 declare he would not enforce S377A. For Singapore to grow its sense of nationhood, civil society movements such as Pink Dot provide critical sites where Singaporeans decide for themselves what citizenship means to them.

Closure

Singapore has come a long way since Leong (1997) observed that the country appeared least likely in Asia to achieve positive gay and lesbian developments. While queers remain

alienated from the nation because of both the punitive anti-sodomy law and a nation-wide malaise called the 'Great Affective Divide', the last decade witnessed events such as Pink Dot that demonstrate Singaporeans' attempts to bridge that emotional gap. I cannot predict whether Pink Dot will succeed in convincing the government to decriminalize homosexuality one day, or whether such a legal reform will bring about social acceptance of queers. In the US where same-sex marriage was legalized nation-wide in 2015, growing public pressure forced politicians (and arguably the Supreme Court) to re-evaluate their stance on the issue. Singapore, however, is not progressive when it comes to these kinds of laws. Despite repeated calls to repeal S377A, and the challenges launched against its constitutionality, PAP politicians have adamantly kept the statute by claiming that Singaporeans remain a conservative people who cannot accept queers (Chua 2014). Just like the US, Singapore might well legally normalize homosexuality *after*, not before, Singaporeans have socially accepted it.

Before this essay closes, one may ask why the notoriously illiberal Singaporean state tolerates Pink Dot and other pro-queer events at all. While I will leave a fuller discussion of this topic for another day, Obendorf (2012) maintains that Singapore sees homosexuality as 'both contagion and cure': a blight on the 'traditional' hetero-patriarchal family (if not the very biological survival of the nation itself), but also a cosmetic accessory that makes Singapore appear liberal and attractive to foreign investments and professional labor. This Janus-faced hypocrisy highlights the artificiality of the state's nation-building efforts, and confuses queer Singaporeans about their national desirability. Yet, its ideological interstices provide fertile grounds for Singaporeans to explore the meanings of their citizenship, so Pink Dot is unlikely the last of these citizen-affirming events that Singapore will witness.

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[1] This essay would not have been possible without the help I received in the course of research. Here, I give my heartfelt thanks to my friends and fieldwork informants who gave me their insightful views on queer national belonging in Singapore, as well as the editors and my anonymous reviewers of *Anthropological Forum*.

[2] In 2012, Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong earned an annual income of S$2.2 million (US$1.7 million), and that was after a 36 percent pay cut. Lower-ranking cabinet ministers earned S$1.1 million (US$850,000).

[3] The trial and subsequent conviction of the blogger Amos Yee in 2015 again reminded Singaporeans of the dangers of angering the state. Shortly after the death of highly respected statesman Lee Kuan Yew in March that year, Yee uploaded an expletive-laden *Youtube* video that mocked Lee and Christianity, and showed Lee having anal sex with Margaret Thatcher. Found guilty, Yee was incarcerated in a psychiatric hospital.