



Book Review Symposium

Natalie Oswin, *Global City Futures: Desire and Development in Singapore*, Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2019. ISBN: 9-780-8203-5502-3 (paper); ISBN: 9-780-8203-5501-6 (cloth); ISBN: 9-780-8203-5500-9 (ebook)

Commentary 1

Natalie Oswin opens *Global City Futures* with a humble caveat: conceding how long it took to complete the manuscript because of the demands of childcare labor, she begins by recognizing and acknowledging mothers and other caregivers involved in creating “familial lifeworlds”, for whom the realm of social reproduction is often cast as a distraction from productivity. If “the family” is often seen as injurious to the machine of academic knowledge production, Oswin’s willingness to acknowledge the struggles of balancing parenthood and academic work provides a rare opening for scholars to ask how we might trouble this binary between production and reproduction. *Global City Futures* thus charts a queer feminist politics from its very beginning, allowing us to see that the heteronormative reproductive future that the book critiques is also entrenched in lived experience in ways that must be politically refused.

Global City Futures is not a book about LGBT politics alone, but rather about the production of a compulsory heteronormativity that strangles a range of subjectivities in Singapore. For Oswin, interrogating LGBT life in Singapore cannot center only on the negative or repressive effects of the state’s anti-LGBT policing and laws. Instead, Oswin zooms out, illustrating how prescriptions of the nuclear family norm form the foundation on which Singapore’s urban and national development projects are built, and how these constrain the socio-political imaginaries that follow. Examining Singapore as both a heterosexual and a heteronormative city exposes how “intimate, familial, and domestic norms underlie the

colonizing, elitist, nationalist and patriarchal tendencies” of the city-state (p.16). The book maps out an intricate web of political-economic, civil, legal, infrastructural, gendered and racialized geographies that hegemonically structure Singapore’s civil society, and explores the underexamined dimensions in which these structures coalesce in a heteronormative politics of reproductive futurism.

This was not only an academic book for me. I am a Singaporean citizen whose life has been thoroughly defined by the reproductive futures and extensive social engineering efforts Oswin discusses: I entered the top-ranked primary school in the nation because my mother’s university degree gave me preferential school placement under the pronatalist Graduate Mothers’ Scheme of the 1980s (p.29); the *kampung* (village) in which I spent the first year of my life was razed, atomizing multiracial and multi-family communities into public housing programs that prioritized nuclear family units (p.26); and severe restrictions on free speech continue to constrain the scholarship and activism I engage in (p.51). Reading *Global City Futures* gave me a language to articulate the entrapment of these Singaporean visions – which, as Jane Jacobs writes, can “literally suck the air out of things ... and leave no oxygen or room for alternative dreams” (quoted on p.37). Oswin’s book has helped me unpack what Ann Stoler (2010: 38-39) terms the “common-sense making” practices of colonial conventions that create “grids of intelligibility” in the postcolonial state. The Singaporean national project thrives on this appeal to common sense, which upholds a pragmatic mindset as a prerequisite for the state’s survival. In denaturalizing state-imposed boundaries between the pragmatic and unnecessary, and in revealing their political and cultural violence, Oswin’s book helped to render strange the heteronormative norms Singaporeans have long taken for granted. The experience of reading it was, in short, liberating.

The major contribution of *Global City Futures* is its effort to pull postcolonial and queer critique together, showing how the policing of heterosexuality has “broadly socially polarizing” effects that regulate a whole range of subjects “queered” as improper when they exceed the

logical bounds of the anti-welfarist, heteronormative developmental state (p.17). Crucially, the state defines proper subjects on the basis of the nuclear family norm. Oswin quotes Singapore's founding father Lee Kuan Yew, who said in 1969 that reforming the population would ensure "... that the irresponsible, the social delinquents do not believe that all they have to do is to produce their children and the government then owes them and their children sufficient food, medicine, housing, education, and jobs" (quoted on p.86). With this, the family became the key domain through which the postcolonial People's Action Party sought to discipline the population. Extending literatures on neoliberalism that focus on the individual as the subject of meritocratic myth-making, Oswin argues that the family is the primary social unit held responsible for the production of "good" citizens. Individuals do not only need to "pull themselves up by the bootstraps"; nuclear families must "take care" of each other. According to this logic, queer intimacies are regulated because "the family" must be protected, and the cis-hetero conjugal family must be protected not only so it can socially reproduce future workers, but also because it reduces the state's responsibility as a social service provider.

This idea that the regulation of family norms helps to restrict the possible slew of democratic demands placed on the state binds all four of Oswin's chapters, but I would like to draw out some of the theoretical implications of centering the role of the family in the developmental regime of the state (p.85). Oswin's work argues that the Singaporean state configures the conjugal family as the site of both repressive and productive dimensions of power: it polices "deviant" sexual subjects through the punitive enforcement of compulsory categories of "proper" sexuality; and it proliferates institutions that generate legitimizing grounds for heteronormative and hierarchical subject positions. Yet in addition to illuminating the repressive and productive dimensions of the Singaporean family norm, Oswin's work also reveals what queer political theorist Elena Gambino (2019:6) calls the *recursive* dimension of power: where "hierarchies generate ... [new] relations of ruling" that work to "co-constitute normative and institutional exercises of power", "which in turn become new units of political control" in a self-

referential loop. In Gambino's conception of recursivity, power circulates through modes of repression and the production of disciplinary subjects and institutions, but it crucially gains force through the cyclical reinvigoration of hierarchies that "generate the very marginal subjects that it disciplines" (ibid.).

I read *Global City Futures* as a text that illuminates this recursive dimension of power, allowing us to understand why a liberal multicultural politics invested in widening circles of exclusion is insufficient for queer liberation. If power is recursive, its foundational relations of ruling generate the very conditions of marginality that produce hierarchical subjects, limiting the common appeal in Singapore – that gays and lesbians "can and ought to be integrated" – by its refusal to call Singapore's foundational heteronormative, capitalist, and developmental logics into question. Oswin shows that heteronormativity is not, as many scholars in Singapore studies suggest, just another dimension of marginalized identity that should be included in the polity through a broadening of existing norms. Rather, heteronormative logics control, surveil, and restrict access from a range of "improper" subjects, from single mothers and persons without university educations to "foreign workers". In this way, expanding on the repressive and productive functions of heteronormative reproductive futurism, *Global City Futures* shows that the constituent, recursive power of the Singaporean state lies in generating the heteronormative conjugal family as the *paradigmatic* site from which relations of ruling are generated. If Singapore's *raison d'être* is a modernity achieved through productive economic development, then sexual regulation underwrites its entire symbolic order, since the ideal replication of the productive citizen can only proceed through the definition of properly reproductive (i.e. heterosexual straight cisgender) subjects. For Oswin, though, the centrality of heteronormativity to a range of other constraints on political imaginations means that queer theory has to stretch its anti-normative politics outside of LGBT subjects and towards a critique that "accounts for and is responsible to a wide range of 'queered' others" (p.96). In the context of the postcolonial city

state, these “queered” others thus illuminate the need for political visions that combine a horizon of queer anti-normativity with a project of decolonization.

I would be curious to hear Oswin expand on the implications of her powerful argument for future directions in queer scholarship on urbanism. If the Singaporean rationality indeed suppresses alternative notions of kinship, intimacy, nation, community, and citizenship, and if indeed Oswin’s project has been to illustrate how these suppressions are politically produced, then Oswin’s final call to “build on connections across axes of difference” and therefore open up other world-building energies must reckon with the recursive dimensions of power (p.111). After all, the challenge of intersectionality is that people do not *see* common experiences of domination across the lines of race, class, gender, sexuality, and so forth. As Barbara Smith (1993) has noted, “[b]eing in structural opposition to the status quo because of one’s identity, however, is quite different from being consciously and actively opposed to the status quo”. In other words, a shared experience of marginality is only a condition for coalition, from which a democratic struggle for a more liberatory politics must be organized and built. This task is further challenged since, to draw from Gambino’s (2019) insights, marginalized subjectivities are recursively produced so that those made marginal often remain invested in the very structural relations that produce their marginality in the first place. This is certainly the case in the Singaporean state where the benefits accorded to upwardly mobile middle-class citizens consolidate justifications for the state’s policing of intimacy, since it produces a successful and efficient development model of nationhood and economic growth. The hierarchical foundations of these relations of rule thus reproduce the legitimation of heteronormative order, making it difficult for Singaporeans who benefit from these structures to disinvest from them.

Three questions follow. First, if, according to Oswin, we need to move from a critique of queer marginality to the recognition of other irreducibly multiple marginalities – such as the “foreign worker” – how might we move from the recognition of collective marginal subjects towards building concrete democratic struggles around these coalitional politics? Second, if it is

not only the *conditions* of identity-based exclusion that should be subject to question, but also the composition of the nuclear family norm itself, are there other norms foundational to heteronormative reproduction yet bracketed in the course of the book? For example, Oswin argues that in the literature, “patriarchy, racial bias, and capitalism are given explanatory power while heteronormativity is explicitly overlooked” (p.96). Oswin shows that heteronormativity is a fourth composite norm, yet while patriarchy and racial bias are intersectionally incorporated throughout the book, capitalism somewhat slips out of focus after Chapter One. Oswin is clear that heteronormative, racialized, and patriarchal policies are mobilized because of Singapore’s perpetual drive to be economically competitive. Yet the force fields that position Singapore within a global capitalism are not directly interrogated, even as capitalist competition forms the *raison d’être* for all the heteronormative, racist, and patriarchal norms that follow. If the Epilogue calls for a move from “queer to decolonized” (p.105), why doesn’t Oswin call for an anti-capitalist politics as well, especially if we take seriously the entire economic project on which Singapore’s heteronormative investment is hinged? I wonder if extending this question of queer critique to calls for both decolonization *and* anti-capitalism helps to push on the political question ultimately at the heart of the book: what kind of queer futures can one imagine when it is not only the population’s intimacies that are policed and repressed, but also their very commitment to a productively capitalist future? A more intersectional analysis of heteronormative reproduction with the expanded reproduction of capital may have helped to draw the ethico-political horizons of queer anti-normativity, decolonization, and anti-capitalism into clearer relief.

Third, I am curious whether Singapore’s heteronormative reproductive futurism might be transported to other contexts where the state is held up as a model of successful postcolonial development. Singapore’s various urban planning initiatives, particularly its public housing program, are increasingly being transported to other contexts such as Hyderabad and the Tianjin eco-city in China. If, as Oswin has been at pains to show, public housing polices intimacy

through the definition of a “proper family nucleus”, what are the implications for the importation of the “Singapore model” if the logic of these projects is not only infrastructural but also premised on a production of particular reproductive subjects? How do we interrogate model cities in their extension to other contexts if they are not simply economically successful projects but reproduce particularly conceptions of kinship and social cohesion? In other words, how does *Global City Futures* give us the tools to analyze urban infrastructure projects as not just housing families, but shaping their socially reproductive contours as well across other global contexts?

Finally, I wish to recognize Oswin’s commitment to jargon-free, widely accessible writing, and her clear investment in writing to and for a Singaporean audience. Readers from other countries will no doubt wonder why Oswin does not extend her analysis to other cases, so as to tell a more transnational story of heteronormative reproductive futurism. While some may identify this as a missed opportunity, I read it as an act of solidarity with and responsibility to Singaporean people, and as an effort to attend to the specificities and particularities that so define our existence in the city-state. Rather than approach Singapore as a staging ground for theorizing up toward broader global implications, Oswin has clearly made a choice to let her thinking tarry with this small nation, and to remain faithful to the Singaporeans for whom her book is clearly written. There is a responsibility to coalition in this task that I deeply admire. *Global City Futures* should be a book widely read. I certainly hope every Singaporean – and many others beyond the city-state – will pick it up.

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Commentary 2

I've known Natalie Oswin for some time, and have always valued not only her agenda setting scholarship, but also her leadership, mentorship and friendship. Through her scholarly, editorial and public facing work, Natalie has courageously and collaboratively pushed the discipline of Geography to rethink its onto-epistemological and political foundations through sustained engagement with critical theories that have historically been sidelined in the field. Her 2019 book, *Global City Futures* (GCF), is an important part of this broader effort. I am thankful to Natalie for offering her book as a resource for thinking “geography” and “urban studies” alongside “queer”; for pushing geographies of sexualities beyond and alongside LGBT; and for taking seriously lessons offered by intersectionality theorists for Geography and beyond. GCF is a must-read for those of us who are trying to grasp what it means to do “queer geography” in a way that takes the socio-spatial production, regulation and materialization of sexuality as deeply entangled in and constitutive of racial, class, gender, familial and national processes. Moreover, the richness of the archival analysis that anchors the book's empirical content is something to behold; this methodological effort is both ambitious and worth celebrating. I especially found the book to be such a page-turner. Natalie writes in an engaging way without sacrificing political and analytical nuance, a difficult task that she nimbly accomplishes.

Natalie's book is admirable at least in part because it does a fantastic job of documenting, with superb texture supported by archival, empirical and media analytical depth, the ways that the Singaporean city-state relegates certain subjects into non-normative forms of intimacy by making no room for them in the city-state's formal definition of the national family. She powerfully describes and takes apart official pronouncements and policy decisions that render certain subjects as surplus but useful to the nation. In one memorable moment in the book, Natalie describes this process as the consignment of non-normative subjects to the realm of productivity, as opposed to reproductivity. They are meant for labour, not love, at least in official

city-state terms. I say “at least” in part because, as we know, even while states do not officially recognize certain forms of love and intimacy, they nevertheless exist, even in the margins. So, what might we make of configurations and practices of love that escape, perhaps by design or necessity, the capacity of the state to recognize them? My question concerns, really, how we might hold together the idea that intimacy is simultaneously a target of governance, a practice of resistance and a quotidian practice of being in the world.

One example, dear to my heart, might be illustrative of this question. It involves my mom’s oldest living brother, Uncle Bobby, who lives in the Philippines on his own while his wife and their two children live and work abroad. My cousin Sean migrated to Vancouver through Canada’s infamous caregiver program, and he now works two jobs, both manual labour intensive. My other cousin, Charisse, works as a nurse in Singapore, having moved there for work in 2018. Their mom, Aunt Salva, works in Connecticut as a nurse. Prior to moving to the US, Aunt Salva also worked in Singapore as a nurse for some 15 years.

A family of four, split between four countries, three of whom find themselves elsewhere as workers abroad... The only time I’ve seen them “together” in the last 25 years has been on a cellphone, when I occasionally peep my cousin Sean on a WhatsApp group call, which splits his screen into four even smaller windows. Such a splitting of the screen four ways visualizes a transnational geography of love and family that subjects designated by the Singaporean state as incommensurate to its definition of proper intimacy continue to engage in. I was thinking of such practices of intimacy as I was reading Natalie’s book, but didn’t find them on the pages necessarily in part due to GCF’s focus on the city-state and its official practices of governance. They were there, however, between the lines.

In this example, Singapore constitutes one important node in my relatives’ global familial geography. Not insignificantly, the two women, both nurses, are the ones who’ve found themselves in Singapore, brought there as a result not only of the city-state demand for their care labour, but also of the Philippines’ well-documented hyper-aggressive labour export policy. As I

was reading Natalie's book, I kept thinking about my uncle, aunt and cousins, in part because their lived and embodied histories demand that we read Natalie's focused analysis of the Singaporean city-state's production of non-normative sexualities within a larger global context. In other words, I wanted more on Singapore's entanglements with other nation-state projects of governing intimacy and mobility. My relatives' story evinces the globality of this process, involving in their case at least: the Philippines' labour export policy; the US' ongoing imperial relationship to the Philippines; and the US', Canada's and Singapore's demands for care labour. In Natalie's book, we do get a textured analysis of Singapore's embeddedness in colonial histories, tracing the genealogies of Singaporean controls on intimacy, including same-sex desires, to British colonialism. What might we make of Singapore's involvement in the making of globally dispersed familial configurations? How, through what methods, might we study such a process? To be clear, I ask these questions not as an indictment of Oswin's work. She already does so much in GCF, so successfully. Instead, I see this as her book prompting other kinds of research questions, inviting us to think about possibilities for locating Singapore within a more global frame.

Fortuitously, I read Oswin's book on Singapore around the same time that the *Crazy Rich Asians* (CRA) phenomenon and #AsianAugust was sweeping mass and social media discussions about race, visibility and representation in the North American context. As I engaged both CRA and GCF, I noticed the remarkable similarities in the Singapores that each portrayed. For both, in their different ways, love, intimacy and family – and, most importantly, their reproduction – were key to the making of Singapore as a city-state of multiple and overlapping inequalities. Reading Natalie's book as I engaged both CRA and the attendant public discourse gave me important analytical tools to make sense of the CRA phenomenon. For example, I was asked by a media outlet why anyone should take CRA seriously given that it's just a romantic comedy. Thinking with Oswin, I pushed back against the gendered foundation of the question, given its framing of the rom-com or "chick flick" as a genre of frivolity and fluff. Oswin makes very clear precisely

why we need to take the “romance” in romantic comedy seriously: because the desire to define and govern intimacies is crucial to the production of a whole other host of social and political geographies – of belonging, of transnationalism, of citizenship. We need to take CRA seriously because, as Natalie also shows in her book, it powerfully shows how certain forms of heterosexual love are rendered outside “proper” heteronormativity. In CRA, one central conflict involving the two main characters, Nick and Rachel, and Nick’s mom, Eleanor, concerns the fact that Eleanor considers Rachel to be an unideal and unfit girlfriend for several reasons: she is not properly Asian (as she is American); she comes from an improper (single-mother) family; and she lacks the kind of filial piety expected of proper wives and girlfriends, due partly to her ambition and independence. In other words, on why take CRA seriously, one way to cut into the question is to point to the significance of film’s capacity to make Asians visible in popular culture through its use of a heterosexual romantic plot arc, but one whose complex non-normativity might be gleaned if we move as Natalie does beyond the straight pair of leads and focus a bit more on how racial, diaspora, class and family configurations also matter for defining who is rendered ideal and unideal for family and intimacy. This is a key lesson from Natalie’s book, and I thank her for such an insight.

One additional link I made between CRA and GCF concerns the material landscapes discussed in each. In CRA, we see landscapes and geographies of crazy richness – a container ship floating in the ocean doubling as the venue of a bachelor party, a private island location for a bachelorette party, the rooftop pool of the Marina Bay Sands, etc. In Natalie’s book, we see how foreign talent come to be invited into the national family in part through their eligibility for state provisioned dwellings. I was curious to learn more about the kinds of lives, families and communities that are being made in Singapore by the “foreign talent” that are being invited into the fold of the national family. Do they just get swallowed into an already existing set of official Singapore geographies, or do they also engage in making spaces that thus remake Singapore anew? I am thinking here especially of the production of expatriate spaces in Singapore, as in

elsewhere, and particularly the kinds of gendered, sexual, racial and class dynamics that characterize expat spaces. How might a consideration of expat spaces push our theorization of the making and remaking of the Singaporean national family (and thus geography) that Natalie already nicely examines in her book?

I want to end with another reiteration of appreciation to Natalie Oswin for her book and everything else that she offers to Geography. Her *Global City Futures* is an important, engaging and very teachable example of the possibility of a queer geography that, in not being single-mindedly about sexuality, actually pries open a lot of space for thinking geographies of sexuality more intersectionally and much more politically. I look forward to continuing to engage her and her work, and in being part of the collective project of insisting on a more politically and epistemologically capacious Geography.

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Commentary 3 – And the future now? A comment on Natalie Oswin’s *Global City Futures*

Natalie Oswin’s *Global City Futures* is a provocative, engaging, and hugely important book, which deserves to be taken seriously not just in the Singaporean context it so rigorously engages, but also for its critical interventions in urban studies more generally. The book offers a reading of Singaporean society through the lens of queer theory, and in so doing it makes a strong and persuasive argument about the heteronormativity of Singapore as a city-state. Through four chapters that are as empirically rich as they are theoretically nuanced, the book critically engages a recent history of Singaporean nation building that Oswin shows to be inseparable from the normalization of the nuclear and heterosexual family. What the book then argues is that a queer “identity politics” in Singapore – a city-state that still criminalizes same-sex relations via a colonial-era statute, Section 377A – is simply not enough to disrupt the stultifying heteronormativity of a state that squeezes into its margins not just LGBTQ subjects, but also the multitude of low income, predominantly South Asian migrant workers on which Singaporean economic development depends, yet simultaneously disavows.

The book does this in four chapters that are readable and compelling. They take us through a history of the city-state’s social and economic models of development and growth (Chapter One); a history of debates about the regulation of intimacy in Singapore and the place of homosexuality in those debates (Chapter Two); a historical excavation of Section 377A and its colonial legacy (Chapter Three); and a critical engagement with the heteronormative family norm that has emerged since independence and been promoted by the People’s Action Party (PAP) as integral to the developmental ambitions of the state (Chapter Four). At 111 pages, *Global City Futures* is slender and concise, yet intellectually it is provocative, creative, rigorous and fizzes with political energy. Oswin draws on queer theory from the likes of José Esteban Muñoz, Michael Warner, Lee Edelman, and a range of others, to suggest through these chapters that the city-state’s heteronormativity queers not only its LGBTQ populations, but also its migrant

foreign workers (not to be confused with “expat” foreign talent). What this means of course is that the struggle for LGBTQ groups to be accepted as normal is a diversion from what the book persuasively argues is a far more urgent and necessary task of interrogating what conservative and stultifying work “the normal” does to configurations of the human in Singapore. In other words, I take Oswin’s book to push us to ask how an avowedly liberal Singaporean society might move beyond a deeply conservative language of “tolerance” that is buttressed by a depressingly stultified imagined futurity in which the heteronormative, ethnically Chinese, male subject is sovereign.

To this extent, one of the book’s clear strengths is the way that it is anchored in its political and geographical context; that is to say, in the ways that it draws on and speaks to the debates on sexuality, immigration, and developmental urban/national politics *in* Singapore. It is, in this respect, a lesson on the postcolonial methodological imperative that genuinely innovative theoretical work should never lose sight of its social and political problem space. Nonetheless, in this brief commentary it is on the politics of location that I want to push Oswin and the book’s implications just a little. And I want to do this in two ways.

First, on reading *Global City Futures* I wondered to what extent this *is* a book about Singapore? As I have stressed, this is a book that is deeply immersed in the Singaporean context, and the first implication of this is to ponder over how the book’s intervention has been and will be received in that context? This is an important question not least because the book’s argument is a difficult one to make in that political context. It is a difficult argument to make simply because a large part of the book’s radical critique is to suggest that LGBTQ activism in Singapore is not in fact that radical as long as it remains tethered to the domain of “identity politics” and the straightforward task of repealing Section 377A. In other words, Natalie’s book suggests that unless LGBTQ activism pushes for the rights of the human, which would have to include the reform of the state’s repressive immigration laws, it does little to intervene in the

pervasive logic and spatialization of heteronormativity. This is a point to which I will return in closing.

However, to ask to what extent this is a book about Singapore is also to stress that when I read *Global City Futures* I began to see its relevance for diagnosing our present in many other elsewhere (urban or otherwise). Though the book makes no such grand claims, it is a book that makes visible heteronormativity in the ways that Natalie describes it as that which surrounds most of us, most of the time. That notion of the stable nuclear family, the properly raced, classed and sexed subject, is far more abundant geographically than perhaps the book implies, at least at a first reading. We know this from Black Studies after Fanon, from Feminist and Postcolonial scholarship as well, and from Critical Migration Studies. Arguably, we see it in the UK every time we hear talk of the “immigration problem” – a figure of speech whose normalization has come to queer, or demonize, immigrant bodies across much of Western Europe. So, by asking to what extent is this a book about Singapore, I mean simply to push Oswin to elaborate a little more on what implications she thinks her book has for bringing a queer reading to urban and social conjunctures beyond the undoubtedly rather exceptional circumstance of the case which the book does engage. This is something the book is a little shy about doing. To be clear, part of the book’s strength is its rigorous and sustained focus on and commitment to the specificity of the Singaporean context. Nonetheless, I also wonder whether the implication that the Singaporean case study is exceptional in some way undermines the undoubted theoretical import of the book for critically diagnosing the much more widespread and global problem of heteronormativity?

The second point I want to make comes from a set of questions I have long harboured about the geography of radical queer critique (see Jazeel 2016: 655). Reading *Global City Futures* has given me the opportunity to ground some of these concerns in a set of questions about solidarities and politics, and for that I am profoundly grateful to Oswin’s book. Let me elaborate.

I have been interested for some time in some of the issues that Oswin's book tackles for the simple reason that I have conducted previous research in Sri Lanka, another post-colony that has not yet repealed its own colonial statute criminalizing homosexuality, Section 365A which dates back to 1883. As such, reading Lee Edelman, reading José Esteban Muñoz, reading Michael Warner, I have been left feeling at equal turns inspired by the radical imperative to intervene in the fabric of the (hetero)normal, yet also a little bereft by the EuroAmerican preoccupations of Queer Theory as it comes out of metropolitan, predominantly North American, locations. Queer Theory's critiques and refusals of heteronormalizing institutions like marriage are written from places – locations – where gay people have the option of being normal precisely because of their legal right *to* marry. The gay community does not have that right in Singapore, nor in Sri Lanka. This simple fact has, for me, always necessitated a kind of geographical contextualization of radical queer critique. That is to say, the uneven geography of gay rights necessitates an important question about what exactly it is that queer interventions aim to make strange? The answer to this question will of course vary from place to place.

Oswin's book, however, makes a clear and instructive case for sticking with radical queer critique. It is precisely in doing so that she is able to develop a compelling argument regarding the heteronormativity of society; that sense that LGBTQ inclusion, or toleration, does little or nothing to queer the state's deeply conservative institutional infrastructure, which has political effects well beyond the LGBTQ community, and I am politically and intellectually excited by this. Nonetheless, what I want to push Oswin on are the political implications of that argument in the material here and now, in Singapore's everyday. Because that dream of queering the state's heteronormative social, spatial, and institutional building blocks depends, in this social and political configuration, not on "identity politics" as Oswin makes very clear, but instead (and I think the book is less clear on this) on *identifications* between and amongst marginalized groups. That is to say, it depends on solidarities and identifications between LGBTQ activists and migration activists; between the proliferating subjects positions of what Gayatri Spivak might

call the utterly subaltern. In other words, it depends on intersectional solidarities in the space of the margin, which Oswin shows to be much bigger than just LGBTQ groups in Singapore. And as I read *Global City Futures*, I wondered how and whether those kinds of solidarities are being forged in Singapore, where and how they might take place, and what the kind of politics the book gestures to means practically, on the ground so to speak? By this I mean that the book's logic would seem to lead politically to the staging of conversations between South Asian migrant foreign workers and LGBTQ rights activists in Singapore. What do these conversations look like? What social and political potential do they harbour for splitting asunder the straightjacket of heteronormativity? Perhaps it is unfair of me, but to this extent I would have liked the book to come back to some of the lovely ethnographic vignettes with which it started, which include a narrative of Oswin's participation in a Pink Dot demonstration in Hong Lim Park in 2009. After these first few pages, *Global City Futures* moves to the archives and critical theoretical literature to develop its compelling argument. As necessary as this *move* to the archive is, it is also in some sense a retreat. What I am asking here is how the book's argument lives and takes shape in the world once it is made public; or in other words, how its intervention might intervene? That this question can perhaps not yet be answered is, in fact, not a critique, but instead a sign of the book's originality and import.

Global City Futures is an important and stimulating book that sets an agenda for looking again at both state and urban politics through the lens of heteronormativity. It is a sign of a good book that by its end, I wanted to read more; more in this case on how one lives, feels and goes about enacting the kinds of politics that the book ushers us into the imagination of.



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Author's Response

The generous and insightful reviews of *Global City Futures: Desire and Development in Singapore* by Charmaine Chua, John Paul Catungal, and Tariq Jazeel are a gift for which I am deeply grateful. I also thank: Mat Coleman, who shepherded the book to publication in his capacity as editor of the University of Georgia Press' Geographies of Justice and Social Transformation series and convened the author-meets-critics session out of which this forum emerged; Ayona Datta, who participated in the in-person session though could not be present here in written form; Andy Kent, who patiently and supportively pulled this collection together; and *Antipode* for carving out such a vital space for critical thinking and making content available for free on this platform. It is a privilege and pleasure to be in conversation and collaboration with people I greatly admire and appreciate as scholars, friends and colleagues/comrades.

HQ 76.3 S55 OSW. That is where *Global City Futures* can be found in the National University of Singapore library. It is of course in other libraries in Singapore, and elsewhere too. But it matters especially to me that it is on the shelves in that library. As queer scholars have long argued, and is still relevant in the internet/social media age, the "common mode of 'discovering' the gay imaginary depends upon access to print, television, and other media. Getting beyond the family dictionary or the television set that projects directly into the privatized realm of the home requires access to facilities such as libraries, bookstores and movie theatres that disseminate gay-related materials" (Weston 1995: 259). Crucial to me as a young queer student in Canada were the LGBTQ/sexuality studies literatures kept in the HQ section.¹ These literatures brought me into new worlds, personally and intellectually, and set me on a path to studying queer geographies that was previously unimaginable. So when I visited the NUS library shortly after moving to the city-state in 2002, I headed into the stacks. The little knowledge I possessed about Singapore included awareness of its government's poor record on civil rights and free speech,

¹ On library classification and queer theory, see Drabinski (2013).

and its then determinedly LGBT-unfriendly political and social climate; indeed, I had already heard from friends about instances of LGBT-themed books and DVDs ordered from overseas being opened and turned back by customs agents, and I had experienced censorship in action in Singapore's movie theatres and broadcast television. I thus expected the HQ section in the NUS library stacks to contain an awkward jump cut like those I'd seen in HBO's *Six Feet Under* for instance (I had no idea the main character David was gay until I found some unedited DVDs!). But it didn't. The collection was rich, containing tons of queer studies work from and about other places, and a very little bit from and on Singapore itself.

Censorship in Singapore, I learned then, worked differently for "heartlanders" and "cosmopolitans". The former, as described by then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong in his 1999 National Day Rally speech titled "First-World Economy, World-Class Home", are those whose, "orientation and interests are local rather than international. Their skills are not marketable beyond Singapore. They speak Singlish. They include taxi-drivers, stallholders, provision shop owners, production workers and contractors ... If they emigrate to America, they will probably settle in Chinatown, open a Chinese restaurant and call it an 'eating house'". The latter, "speak English but are bilingual. They have skills that command good incomes – banking, IT, engineering, science and technology. They produce goods and services for the global market" (quoted in Poon 2013). The paternalistic Singapore state deemed educated, elite citizens like those who studied at NUS capable of handling "sensitive" material, of consuming it without getting politicized and undermining their own futures. As eventual white collar workers and decision makers, they are trusted to conduct themselves appropriately, and set the tone for the conduct of conduct among the masses.

In 2003, the space of exception for LGBT content grew when the Censorship Review Committee recommended taking a "more flexible and contextual approach when dealing with homosexual themes and scenes in content". It did this to support the governmental Economic Review Committee's assertion that to attract the talent needed to drive Singapore's new, creative,

knowledge-based economy, Singapore needed to be an “environment with less restrictive censorship guidelines and more diverse choices” (quoted in Lim 2005). The NUS library’s LGBT/queer studies then continued to grow throughout the 2000s. In addition, I observed a handful of faculty including scholarship on LGBT lives and communities in their syllabi across some departments, and many students I taught there showed great interest in learning about the geographies of sexuality and queer theory. These were extraordinary changes, all of which coincided with the developments outside the university that I write about in *Global City Futures* whereby the new, creative economy push led to a turn toward official tolerance for LGBT people by the Singapore government. This turn allowed LGBT subcultures and organizations to flourish in unprecedented and important ways.² But as with the NUS queer studies library collection, not all have access to this movement and community, and the Singapore state expects those who do to consume these resources responsibly and stay in their proper political place. As PM Lee Hsien Loong stated when he rejected an activist effort to repeal Singapore’s colonial-era sodomy law in 2007: “They are free to lead their lives, free to pursue their social activities. But there are restraints and we do not approve of them actively promoting their lifestyles to others, or setting the tone for mainstream society. They live their lives. That is their personal life, it is their space. But the tone of the overall society, I think remains conventional, it remains straight, and we want it to remain so” (quoted in *Global City Futures* p.46).

The Singapore LGBT movement rolls on, though, committed to changing the “tone” and improving material realities for LGBT Singaporeans in the face of considerable obstacles. For instance: Pink Dot, an event that first occurred in 2009 to celebrate the “freedom to love”, has grown exponentially and deals with government-imposed hurdles like banning foreign participants and funders with determination and creativity;³ and activist organization Sayoni released a major 2019 report on Singaporean LBTQ women’s experiences of violence and

² On the repression of LGBT communities, artists and activists in Singapore through the 1990s, see Heng (2001).

³ See <https://www.theleftberlin.com/post/what-does-the-covid-19-pandemic-mean-forpinkdot-singapore>

discrimination.⁴ I have watched such developments mostly from afar as I moved back to Canada in 2008 and am no longer able to spend as much time in Singapore as I would like. But with friends, acquaintances, people I have never met (for example, school teachers censured for publicly coming out), and especially so many former students who conveyed struggles with embracing their non-normative desires and worries over pursuing their intellectual interests in queer studies in mind, *Global City Futures* is my modest contribution to the struggle. To that end, it is not, as Chua, Catungal, and Jazeel all note, a book about LGBT politics and lives alone. Those topics are crucial, and there is fortunately now much more Singapore content in the HQ section that covers those realms very well and opens the way for further explorations (see, for instance, Bong 2020; Chua 2015; Phillips 2020; Tang 2016; and Yue and Zubillaga-Pow 2012). *Global City Futures*, though, is instead preoccupied with why we are still relegated to – and speaking mostly to each other within – the HQ section, and what possibilities for politics and scholarship emerge when we break out.

Singapore has a global reputation as a postcolonial socioeconomic success story. It also has a global reputation for undertaking massive postcolonial social and spatial engineering projects. There is a huge and long standing body of scholarship that examines these two facts in concert. This work, informed by feminist, postcolonial, critical race, and critical political economic thought, shows that Singapore's global city ascendance is patriarchal, racist, colonialist, and capitalist. *Global City Futures* makes the simple but generally overlooked point that it is also, and inextricably, heteronormative. Drawing especially on “queer of colour” and “postcolonial queer” theories and extensive Singapore studies literatures, it situates the “gay debates” in Singapore within a field of power relations that is raced, classed, gendered, and sexualized all at once. It takes the Singapore government's explicit assertion that it maintains policies and legislation that discriminate against LGBT persons for the sake of the family

⁴ See <https://www.sayoni.com/community/blog/202-latest-news/advocacy/2306-sayoni-releases-first-groundbreaking-report-into-violence-and-discrimination-facing-lbtq-persons-in-singapore>

seriously, and looks into Singapore's colonial and postcolonial archives to trace the emergence of that family as a sociopolitical force. It shows via discussions of family planning, housing, and immigration policies in particular, that norms of proper/respectable domesticity have for a very long time run through Singapore's polity and that these norms "queer" not just LGBT Singaporeans, but foreign workers, single-parents, the divorced, "minority" Malay families, and more. It thus makes a plea to Singapore studies and urban studies scholars to examine heteronormativity as an always consequential socio-political force rather than a fringe, minority issue (as both fields overwhelmingly tend to do). And it encourages LGBT and other activists to get out of their state- and academy-created silos and work in coalition to counter not just hegemonic heterosexuality but heteronormativity; whereby tackling the latter requires tackling patriarchy, racism, xenophobia, and capitalism too.

Turning to the reviews, Chua and Jazeel both raise pertinent questions about the book's political project "in Singapore's everyday". In response, I first want to clarify that I did not, as Jazeel reads, mean to convey that LGBT activism in Singapore is, "not that radical", or that the "struggle for LGBTQ groups to be accepted as normal is a diversion". There are certainly limits to LGBT identity politics that scholars and activists have long pointed out and which I articulate and build on in the book. But the brief account of the historical and contemporary restrictions on LGBT lives and organizing above attests to the material necessities and profound rupturing effects of efforts to organize for the validation and protection of LGBT lives in Singapore (and so many other places). The challenge and urgent need, as I see it, is to understand and push through the "recursive power" that Chua (following Elena Gambino [2020]) names. That is one of the reasons why *Global City Futures* makes a "retreat" to the archives. Norms of family, race, class, gender, and sexuality are written onto landscapes and bodies through constant narrative inscription and re-inscription. This is especially true in Singapore where state-controlled media and education systems enable the maintenance of strikingly consistent and hegemonic messaging. Thus the book dwells in the realm of the textual as an attempt to help disrupt the

stories Singapore tells Singaporeans about themselves. And thus I am glad the book is in the NUS library, as one of many key sites where dominant narratives get both formed and challenged in the city-state. Whereby the state's politics of "tolerance for the sake of talent" offers only the possibility of inclusion for some in an inequitable system for many, a radical reading of sexual identity politics as a product of colonialism, patriarchy, racism, and xenophobia might just shake the ground.

Of course, the goal is for the book's ideas to make it outside the university. But I have no blueprint to answer Chua's question about how "we move from the recognition of collective marginal subjects towards building concrete democratic struggles around these coalitional politics". Building such a struggle is especially difficult in Singapore given its government's firm grip on the registration of civil society organizations and oversight of their actions. Their approved mandates are narrow, which is a significant structural impediment. Scholarship and cultural production in Singapore are more porous though, and ideally the book's arguments will somehow resonate and circulate locally. Like Jazeel, I too want "to read more ... on how one lives, feels and goes about enacting the kinds of politics that the book ushers us into the imagination of" in Singapore. As the Singapore queer studies canon expands, I hope *Global City Futures* is in the reading list mix and am heartened that Catungal sees the book as, "prompting other kinds of research questions", and particularly the question he poses on how we might, "hold together the idea that intimacy is simultaneously a target of governance, a practice of resistance and a quotidian practice of being in the world". Practices like his extended family's transnational geographies of love and family, and like the reproduction of conceptions of kinship and social cohesion through urban infrastructure projects (that Chua raises) are ripe for study as expressions of global heteronormativity.

Which brings me, finally, to Catungal's urging to think about Singapore in a more transnational frame, Jazeel's point about the book's "relevance for diagnosing our present in many other elsewhere", and Chua's reading of the book "as an act of solidarity with and

responsibility to Singaporean people” rather than a missed opportunity to tell a transnational story. As Jazeel states elsewhere, “a methodological disposition toward singularity, toward the particular”, moves “the geographical imagination toward alterity” (Jazeel 2019: 6). *Global City Futures* is a short book that sticks with the city-state of Singapore. But heteronormativity, like capitalism, patriarchy, colonialism, and racism, is a transhistorical, planetary force that *takes place* everywhere. Beyond the “gay village” and the lives of “queers”, norms of proper intimacy and domesticity infiltrate all manner of urban and national design, planning, and policy, and all social, political and economic experiences. In other words, while I have intellectual, political and personal reasons for limiting its geographical frame, Singapore is by no means exceptional, and any project seeking to pry open more just urban and other futures can hopefully learn from this queer example at the forefront of the global city pack.

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