Performing Human Rights in Neoliberal Asia: Artistic and Activist Engagements in Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Singapore

Melissa Wansin Wong
The Graduate Center, City University of New York

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PERFORMING HUMAN RIGHTS IN NEOLIBERAL ASIA: ARTISTIC AND ACTIVIST ENGAGEMENTS IN HONG KONG, MALAYSIA, AND SINGAPORE

by

Melissa Wansin Wong

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Theatre in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Theatre to satisfy the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Date

Peter Eckersall
Chair of Examining Committee

Date

Peter Eckersall
Executive Officer

Jean Graham-Jones

David Savran

Domna Stanton

Supervisory Committee

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
Abstract

PERFORMING HUMAN RIGHTS IN NEOLIBERAL ASIA: ARTISTIC AND ACTIVIST ENGAGEMENTS IN HONG KONG, MALAYSIA, AND SINGAPORE

By

Melissa Wansin Wong

Advisor: Peter Eckersall

This dissertation examines artistic and activist performances that address issues of rights abuses in Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Singapore. I demonstrate how the centralized ruling parties encourage the neoliberalization of their economies while maintaining autocratic rule, thus intensifying structural inequalities while also clamping down on dissent. This condition then exacerbates the lack of labor, sexuality, and democratic rights. Concurrently, the states’ aspirations to be part of the global capitalist market have paradoxically provided conditional spaces of political and artistic expression. I contend that existing critiques of human rights from sociological and legalistic perspectives are inadequate for contemplating this state of affairs. My intervention thus lays in examining how the lens of performance studies reveals the fraught significance of rights claims in the region.

My case studies show how authoritarian neoliberalism has created peculiar scenarios where queer subjects are legally criminalized yet desired as economic generators, resulting in the proliferation of queer theatre and businesses; where low-waged migrant workers are exploited even while the state and the market fund theatre initiatives addressing the issue; and where aspirational practices of democracy are seen in the structures of artistic rather than electoral processes. By deciphering the dramaturgical strategies of works of theatre, installation art, photography as well as participatory street protests and demonstrations, I argue how by means of their embodiment, artistic and activist practices not only viscerally confront the urgency of addressing injustice, they also manifest the particularities of the contexts in which they occur.

In conclusion, I posit that a performative framework of human rights moves the judgment of its efficacy past that of legislative possibilities to how it enables nuanced agential shifts in the participants’ political subjectivities. As such, I see how the artists and activists in the quest for rights claims are constantly trying to strike a balance between resisting and being co-opted by authoritarian states in neoliberal Asia.
Acknowledgements

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INTRODUCTION: FRAMING THE PERFORMATIVE DIMENSIONS OF HUMAN RIGHTS

Each State Party to the present Covenant undertakes to respect and to ensure to all individuals within its territory and subject to its jurisdiction the rights recognized in the present Covenant, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.

—Article 2(1), International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

Reaffirming the principles of respect for national sovereignty, territorial integrity and non-interference in the internal affairs of States.

—Bangkok Declaration on Human Rights

Given the contentiousness of the debate over the nature, function and place of human rights, it is not enough for us to know how theatre promotes or exercises those rights. Rather, we must use our knowledge of theatre to understand what human rights mean and what holding them entails.

—Paul Rae, Theatre and Human Rights

This dissertation investigates the performance of human rights in three sites of engagement in Asia by extending the paradigm of performance studies to artistic and activist modes of resistance. It argues for a critical understanding of human rights in the region that as preaced in the following anecdote, has to move beyond a normative framework determined by socio-political and legislative discourses to one of localized embodied representation.

In September of 2010, Yale University President Richard Levin and Provost Peter Salovey announced that Yale was partnering with the National University of Singapore (NUS) to establish Yale-NUS College, the first liberal arts college in Singapore, to be jointly run by both universities. Scheduled to open in 2013, the project created a furor of debate. Objecting faculty members questioned the decision of the Yale Corporation, Yale’s “governing board and policy-making body,”¹ to expand the institution in a country in which they judged the government to be authoritarian. For instance, political science lecturer Seyla Benhabib expressed her discomfort

with the administration’s decision to collaborate “with a government that severely constricts human rights, civil liberties and academic freedom” without consulting the faculty. This culminated in a passed resolution led by political science lecturer Jim Sleeper, the final version of which is produced below:

We, the Yale College Faculty, express our concern regarding the history of lack of respect for civil and political rights in the state of Singapore, host of Yale-National University of Singapore College.

We urge Yale-NUS to respect, protect and further principles of non-discrimination for all, including sexual minorities and migrant workers; and to uphold civil liberty and political freedom on campus and in the broader society.

These ideals lie at the heart of liberal arts education as well as of our civil sense as citizens, and they ought not to be compromised.2

Faculty members who voted for this resolution were not just concerned with the ethical implications of Yale’s partnership with NUS surrounding issues of human rights. Jim Sleeper in particular suggested that the Yale Corporation was willing to overlook Singapore’s less-than-reputable human rights record for economic gains by “trying to weave something very like Singapore's golden web themselves, right at home in America, by transforming their old college from the civic-republican crucible of citizen-leaders it was for three centuries into a career-networking center and cultural galleria for a global elite that will answer to no particular polity or moral code.”3 I propose that Sleeper’s criticism is incomplete by adding that it was actually the NUS, a public and state-owned university, that approached Yale with the project and that fully funded the initiative.4 Thus, what is not openly acknowledged in this line of criticism is that

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while the Yale Corporation will gain financially in this expansion, Singapore will also accrue significant economic and cultural capital through a local and international student enrollment process and its association with the Yale brand.

On the other side of the debate, incumbent Yale President Richard Levin opposed the resolution, telling the *Yale Daily News* that its tone “carried a sense of moral superiority that [he] found unbecoming.” Similar sentiments were voiced by netizens in Singapore who expressed their unhappiness over what they saw as an imperialistic application of human rights, maintaining that the Yale faculty possessed limited “on-the-ground” knowledge of the country. For example, Koh Choon Hwee, an NUS student, admonished the Yale faculty’s essentialist view of the political apathy of Singaporeans by pointing out that the country’s youths are engaging through their online critiques of the ruling party. In another instance, an activist on Facebook challenged the Yale faculty’s criticism of the Singapore state discrimination against sexual minorities by writing that civil liberties have in fact increased for the LGBTQ community in recent years. Responding to the discussion thread, artistic director Alvin Tan of the Singapore theatre company, The Necessary Stage urged for more “respect” from the faculty in considering the complexities of Singapore society.

When this controversy first erupted, I was a recently minted doctoral candidate thinking about my project on the intersections of performance and human rights in neoliberal Asia. The Yale-NUS case reminded me of why I was drawn to the topic, as the debates that resulted reflect

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5 As quoted in Aw.
6 The traditional Chinese naming convention places the surname before the given name; however, not all people with Chinese surnames use this order. All Chinese names in this dissertation are styled according to the preference of the person referenced.
8 The information was culled from an informal discussion on Facebook in reaction to the text of the Yale-NUS Resolution.
my topic’s multifaceted nature. First, Singapore’s reputation as a wealthy nation ruled by an authoritarian government is considered a political abnormality when viewed through the lens of Western political theory that believes democracy to be predicated on economic development.9 Second, a state-operated university would be eager to broker a deal to open a liberal arts college, which by inference would promote unfettered civil liberties and politically progressive ideas, appears in antipathy to the state’s ideologies. Third, it might also seem puzzling that a country that aspires to include itself in the league of cosmopolitan and economically advanced nations would legally criminalize LGBTQ citizens and exploit low-waged migrant laborers. I am, therefore, interested in this paradoxical performance of the state particularized by its site-specific practice of neoliberalism with its attempt at controlling its citizens through draconian policies. Most importantly, as rights abuses are most felt and suffered by those affected, I want to analyze how their responses expose the complex nature of rights claims in my sites of study.

The responses of the NUS student Koh Choon Hwee and theatre artistic director Alvin Tan to the Yale-NUS case, for example, are indicative of how on-the-ground knowledge needs to be taken into consideration when deciphering the process of human rights abuses and the subsequent claims for social, political, and economic justice. I thus propose that this sort of contextual knowledge is best represented through the embodied and lived experiences that are highlighted by a performance methodology. For this reason, I analyze in this dissertation pertinent examples of artistic representations and performative activism like public protests in order to understand the practice of human rights in the region. A performance framework, which I define later in this chapter, is important because normative critiques of human rights with a socio-political approach cannot fully explain how human right claims are understood or practiced

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in Asia. The two foremost critiques are, first, the spouting of “Asian values” by Asian authoritarian states as a rhetoric to defend themselves against criticism of not following international human rights norms;\(^\text{10}\) and, second, the criticism of human rights by liberal humanist scholars who write that the discourse is being co-opted by strong states that utilize it for the neocolonial expansion of their cultural ideas, markets, or political power in the neoliberal milieu.\(^\text{11}\) While both stem from different historical genealogies, what they share is the dismissal of human rights as a tool of cultural imperialism used by liberal Western states. As evident from the Yale-NUS example, however, the Asian values argument is undercut by the mentions of on-the-ground queer activism and civil debate, while the critique of human rights used as moral shield for neoimperialism is not suitable for analyzing a situation in which the lack of rights, like the prohibition of the freedom of assembly, is imposed from within the state rather than from without and in which the Singapore state as the initiator of the project was just as complicit as the Yale Corporation in their shared corporate ambitions.

With a performance methodology, I can challenge and supplement these criticisms of human rights through analyzing located and material practices. These form the case studies of the dissertation, which include staged theatre performances, installation art, and photography as well as participatory street protests and demonstrations. I use them as evidence that while human rights as a discourse is rejected by some Asian governments, the quest for human dignity in the form of fair labor conditions as pursued by low-waged migrant workers, the political right for just governmental representation among the electorate, and the right to be free from persecution


\(^{11}\) Scholars who have written about how human rights have been corrupted by neoliberal politics include Costas Douzinas and Randall Williams. Detailed references will be given later in this chapter.
regardless of one’s sexuality as fought for by queer activists and subjects is very much alive in spaces like Singapore and the surrounding region.

While challenging these normative critiques, I also take into consideration their arguments. For instance, while I disagree with the essentialist connotation at the heart of the Asian values rhetoric, I agree with the critics of the Yale-NUS resolution that there needs to be an awareness of cultural relativism. And while I am not ready to dismiss human rights like the liberal humanist scholars, I concur that the efficacy of its practices is limited in the face of neoliberal ideologies. In the case of the Yale-NUS example, for instance, Yale’s successful expansion into Singapore in spite of the objections raised on ethical grounds points to how considerations of human rights were secondary to the institution when stacked against the monetary profits that came with corporatization. Expanding upon this observation, my case studies will also demonstrate how neoliberalism has not only affected the states’ policies on marginalized communities and their citizens but has also co-opted human rights work, including those of artists’ and activists’. I remain optimistic that although implicated into the power structures in which they are produced, these case studies are imperfect but important rights claims efforts that advance the mission of making better people’s lives—a conclusion I come to because the reading practice of performance allows me to decipher their complexities.

Another aim of my project is to address the neocolonial application of human rights by presenting alternative discourses that originate in the Asian region. As a United States-based scholar from Singapore, it is not surprising that I have chosen Singapore as one of my key sites of study given my in-depth knowledge of the country and impassioned opinions about circumstances of injustice there. I do not think, however, that a dissertation on Singapore artistic and activist practices alone is sufficient to map Asian-based versions of rights claims. Rather
than let one country stand in for Asia, I also include case studies from Malaysia and Hong Kong, two sites in the region that share political, social, and economic characteristics with Singapore.

My intervention is inspired by the field of Inter-Asia cultural studies, which aims to “contribute to the integration of an imagined Asia at the level of knowledge production”\(^\text{12}\) and to recognize the “urgent demand to move beyond nation-state boundaries to intersect the regional and sub-regional.”\(^\text{13}\) Kuan-Hsing Chen, a founder of the field, wants scholars to decolonize tropes in Western epistemology as he observes that “territorial colonialism” has transformed into “neocolonialism” in the age of globalization and transnational capital.\(^\text{14}\) In other words, despite being geographically decolonized, “ex-colonies,” including those in Asia, are still epistemologically embedded in colonial discourses.

By situating my analysis in the region of Inter-Asia, I move away from the dismissal of human rights as inapplicable due to its neocolonial implications to look at how claims have been made against rights abuses within these places themselves. Therefore, while my work draws on seminal texts that speak broadly to the fields of performance studies and international human rights, it is also much indebted to scholars who have formulated theoretical arguments based on their research within Asia. This includes scholars from both the humanities and social sciences who address labor, sexual, and civil rights issues. While some use the specific terminology of

\(^{12}\) Kuan-Hsing Chen and Chua Beng Huat, “The Inter-Asia Cultural Studies: Movement Project,” in *The Inter-Asia Cultural Studies Reader*, eds. Kuan-Hsing Chen and Chua Beng Huat (New York and London: Routledge, 2007), 1. The movement grew out of conversations at two conferences held in Taipei in 1992 and 1995 respectively. Scholars, including the editors Chen and Chua, discussed the possibility of establishing an “Asia/Third World as Method” in which “multiple frames of reference and sites of identification” would be available to counter the singularity of Western-oriented discourses. Routledge then approached Chua and Chen in 1997 to start a journal. The first Inter-Asia Cultural Studies Conference was held in 1998 in Taipei, and the inaugural issue of the *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* was published in 2000.

\(^{13}\) Ibid., 2.

human rights to contemplate its applicability, others offer alternative readings of what rights claims could mean or entail in these sites.\textsuperscript{15} Thus, by putting case studies from Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Singapore together and drawing on regional scholarship to make my arguments, I am not only adding to the literature on the performance of social justice and human rights, I am also attempting an Inter-Asian way of reading my case studies that will demonstrate the particularities of site-specific activist performance and rights claims.

My activist and artistic case studies are made more pertinent as by the standards of both international organizations\textsuperscript{16} and those of local civil society’s,\textsuperscript{17} the human rights records of these places are dismal not only because their governments have refused to judicially recognize them as such but also because they have infringed upon the principles of human rights. Notably, the Singapore and Malaysia governments have yet to ratify the majority of the International Human Rights treaties\textsuperscript{18} as part of the United Nation’s nine core human rights instruments.\textsuperscript{19} In

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{15} For example, cultural studies theorist Baden Offord contemplates the specificities of queer rights claims in Malaysia and critical theorist Pheng Cheah speaks of the particularities of defining labor rights for low-waged female domestic workers in Hong Kong and Singapore. There are also a myriad of scholars theorizing on the Asian values argument and its relation to international human rights discourses. I give details and references of these scholarship later in the relevant sections of this dissertation.
  \item \textsuperscript{16} For instance, all three sites, Singapore and Malaysia especially, are heavily critiqued in the yearly reports of Human Rights Watch.
  \item \textsuperscript{17} I expand on this point shortly after.
  \item \textsuperscript{18} The Covenants relevant to this dissertation that both countries have failed to sign include the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights; the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights; the Slavery Convention; the Convention on the Protection of the Rights of Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families; and the Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organize Convention. Of interest to the argument of Chapter 1, one of the few covenants that Singapore and Malaysia have acceded to is the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. However, they have also denounced the Abolition of Forced Labour Convention. This speaks to the double standards of the governments in the case of low-waged female domestic workers. As women, their gender does not protect them because they are labeled as foreign labor to be used. See “Ratification of International Human Rights Treaties – Malaysia,” \textit{University of Minnesota Human Rights Library}, accessed March 21, 2017, http://hrlibrary.umn.edu/research/ratification-malaysia.html; “Ratification of International Human Rights Treaties – Singapore,” \textit{University of Minnesota Human Rights Library}, accessed March 21, 2017, http://hrlibrary.umn.edu/research/ratification-singapore.html
\end{itemize}
Hong Kong, while Chapter 383 in The Hong Kong Bill of Rights Ordinance\textsuperscript{20} and Article 39 in Hong Kong’s Basic Law\textsuperscript{21} enshrine human rights protections,\textsuperscript{22} the central Chinese government’s increasing dominance over the territory have threatened this order. In the matter of sexual rights, neither Hong Kong, Malaysia, or Singapore are signatories to the Yogyakarta Principles, the global charter for LGBTQ rights launched at the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva in 2007.\textsuperscript{23} More recently in 2012, the ASEAN countries,\textsuperscript{24} including Singapore and Malaysia, adopted the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration.\textsuperscript{25} It reproduces much of the language of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights,\textsuperscript{26} but with the caveats that “regional and national context”\textsuperscript{27} and “public morality”\textsuperscript{28} should be taken into consideration. Critics responses include Phil Robertson, the deputy director of the Asia division of Human Rights Watch, who stated that his organization’s “worst fears in this process have come to pass” because “rather than meeting international standards, this declaration lowers them
by creating loopholes and justifications that ASEAN member states can use to justify abusing the rights of their people.” In short, the ASEAN Declarations is but another thinly veiled version of the earlier Asian values debate that argues for the right to national sovereignty in instances when governments are accused of abusing the rights of their citizens.

In these situations, civil society groups have emerged to counteract the false veneer or absence of legal protections. For example, SUARAM, an abbreviation for Suara Rakyat Malaysia (Voices of the Malaysian People) in Malaysia, MARUAH (Dignity) in Singapore, and the Hong Kong Human Rights Commission in Hong Kong are three organizations whose constitutions and goals are inspired by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. By using its language and principles as a guideline, these organizations create public awareness and encourage activism in cases of rights abuses.

Concurrently, individual artists and activists have also taken up the mantle of fighting against injustice. As I demonstrate in the following chapters—in some cases, these individuals utilize the term human rights to mobilize their actions. In others, when they do not address the term directly, I use human rights as a concept to mobilize my analysis. Either way, all my case studies are situated in larger political and social milieus where debates on sexual, economic, labor, and democratic rights are burgeoning. I argue that it is precisely the lack of judicial recourse in both international and local legislation that makes the framing of activist and artistic

33 The dissertation’s case studies will reveal that artists and activists have a communicative relationship with civil society groups in Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Singapore. Often, they work in an interrelated fashion on rights issues. Some of the artists are also the activists in question and vice versa.
performances as rights work important. Conversely, these localized particularities of human rights are best observed in the embodied nature of performative practices. By materializing the absence of legislative rights, these artists and activists are simultaneously defining what human rights work means to people living under authoritarian rule and creating spaces where artists, audiences, activists, and participants interact intersubjectively to envision and create better futures.

_Towards an Embodied Performance Methodology_

My use of the performance lens stems from the field of performance studies, in which performance scholar Richard Schechner defines “performance as an inclusive term” that could refer to artistic work such as theatre as well as reference how people act in different social settings, which he terms the “performances in everyday life.”

Schechner’s expansion of his work in theatre studies to include social performances is influenced by sociologist Erving Goffman’s use of the theatre as a metaphor to think of the “everyday life as framed and performed.” Theatre scholar Marvin Carlson also cites Goffman’s work as enabling the analysis of people’s conscious or unconscious behavior as role-play. In an interview, Carlson expresses “the grid of performance studies [to be] out on any behavior, either by the being that is doing the behavior or by an analyst who is looking at the behavior.”

Schechner and Carlson’s theorization resonate with philosopher Michel de Certeau’s thesis in _The Practices of Everyday_...
Life, in which he champions the study of individual human gestures that have the ability to subvert and appropriate the disciplinary structures of government or corporate institutions.37

The combined works of these theorists have enabled me to form a critical reading practice. By using performance to decipher the dramaturgical processes of my case studies, I am able to decipher how artists and activists are attempting to subvert and resist human rights abuses with their work. My understanding of term “dramaturgy” stems in part from Goffman’s usage of it in the social sense, in which people present themselves to the world through their actions and structures of behavior. I also read dramaturgy in the arts through the work of dramaturg Marianne Van Kerkhovan, in which dramaturgy is the procedural practice that considers the artistic works’ relationships with their various stakeholders and contexts of production, including the audience, the artists, and their economic and sociological influences.38 With Van Kerkhovan’s classification in mind, understanding the dramaturgical processes of the artistic works I analyze and how they are created structurally allows me to reflect on the complex ways in which they both embody and influence the political subjectivities of the artists, the audiences, and other participants. Together, these theoretical tools present a way of reading between and across the political processes of artistic and social performances.

In addition, the field of performance studies emphasizes the importance of reading embodied practices. In Notes Towards a Performance Theory of Assembly, gender theorist and political philosopher Judith Butler furthers her previous theorization on the performativity of speech acts as inspired by J.L. Austin to include the physicality of public protests.39 She argues

for the importance of “assemblies”—public gatherings bringing people together that disrupt their sense of “precarity” caused by the neoliberal milieu. For Butler, these assemblies “provide a chance to reflect upon the embodied character of social action and expression, what we might understand as embodied and plural performativity.”

I extend Butler’s idea of embodied assemblies to contend that the claims for human rights in my case studies are inherently performative and thus this dissertation’s engagement with performance studies is crucial. Aside from the obvious relevance of performance to the artistic case studies, the acts of political protests I discuss are also empowered by the fact of their performative nature. I agree with Butler’s argument against the criticisms of these “assemblies”—the Occupy Movement is one example she cites—as politically ineffective because they are deemed to have no clear or consistent ideology and have not affected legislation. I propose instead that these performances cover ground not adequately explained by discourses in the social sciences or legal studies with a traditional outlook on efficacy. Borrowing from performance scholar Shannon Jackson, who traces performance studies’ social turn in which civic events are analyzed performatively, I concur that the occurrence of bodies congregating in public spaces to make a stand against injustice, like the gathering of bodies brought together by artistic performances to bear witness to representations of rights concerns, bear analogous theatrical characteristics. People protesting on the streets as well as artistic mediations are symbolic gestures connoting either collective resistance or efforts to open up spaces for debate.

41 The Occupy Movement is a 2011 ground-up protest movement with participants from different factions of American civil society that began after the economic crisis, which was in part instigated by the burst of the country’s housing bubble resulting from the irresponsible and greedy acts of Wall Street financiers. Protestors “occupied” Zuccotti Park in Wall Street to speak up against the economic and social inequality in the country.
The case studies in this dissertation are thus performative embodiments of people advancing rights claims. They make visible otherwise marginalized or invisible communities or concerns, but it is also this very visibility that makes them threatening to the state. These are performances that manifest the ambiguous relationship between artists, activists, and the respective governments in power, revealing the delicate balance of allowance and restriction faced by those who are imbricated in the authoritarian and neoliberal milieus of Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Singapore.

**Neoliberal Asia**

These three sites share historical trajectories as postcolonial spaces. Singapore and Malaysia’s governmental structures follow the Westminster system. Hong Kong, a territory of the British Empire from 1842, was “returned” to China in 1997 and has since been governed by the tenet of “one country, two systems” as stated in the Hong Kong Basic Law. Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Singapore are overall prosperous countries with some of the highest gross domestic product per capita within Asia. All three are attempting to establish their national identity and economic prowess since their independence from British colonial rule. However, while these states claim to practice a democratic system of governance, they have had less than

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43 Post-independence, Singapore and Malaysia have modeled their governments after the United Kingdom’s democratic parliamentary system of governance.

44 As part of the “one country, two systems” legislation, the mainland government must abide by the stricture that “the socialist system and policies [of China] shall not be practiced in the Hong Kong Special Administrative region, and the previous capitalist system and way of life shall remain unchanged for 50 years.” See The Basic Law of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People’s Republic of China, Chapter 1 Article 5.

45 Malaya declared its independence from Britain in 1957, while Singapore became independent from Britain in 1963. In the same year, Malaya and Singapore, together with the states of Sarawak and Sabah, formed the Federation of Malaysia. Political disagreements based on religious and linguistic differences resulted in Singapore being ousted from of the Federation and it formed an independent country, the Republic of Singapore, in 1965. Hong Kong was part of the British Colony from 1942 to 1997.
stellar human rights records. Complaints pertain especially to civil and political rights, including accusations of autocratic rule and corrupt electoral practices, discrimination due to one’s ethnicity or sexuality as well as the fear of political persecution for holding dissenting views. In addition, in spite of their relative monetary wealth, these states have registered an increase in the social, economic, and political dissatisfaction among their people. This is in part due to the neoliberalization of their economies and public policies. It has resulted in rising inequality seen in the unequal distribution of wealth and power in these sites, exacerbating problems of human rights as well as complicating the efforts that seek to address them.

Human geographer Simon Springer details how neoliberalism favors the growth of the global free market necessitated by the lack of government intervention. Proponents advocate for a “neoliberal democracy” that allows for “freedom” in all aspects of social and economic life that would supposedly redistribute opportunity and power to benefit different segments of the population. Neoliberalism can thus be read as a type of management regime that is ordered by the market instead of the state. Springer reveals that far from a fair distribution of resources, however, the privatization and the reduction of welfare provisions have only served to intensify economic inequality and social segregation both between and within states. This outcome has also been observed by Marxist cultural geographer David Harvey, who declares how “neoliberal concern for the individual trumps any social democratic concern for equality, democracy, and

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47 The Universal Declaration of Human Rights expands its definitions of civil and political rights in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights Articles 2–21. These include freedom of discrimination due to one’s ethnicity, gender or sexuality; freedom from torture and slavery; the right to habeas corpus; the freedom from arbitrary arrest and detention; and the right to freedom of expression.
49 Ibid., 271–3.
social solidarities.” In addition, Judith Butler makes a similar observation as she scrutinizes the breakdown of social solidarity caused by the induction of “political and economic individualism:”

Neoliberal rationality demands self-sufficiency as a moral idea at the same time that neoliberal forms of power work to destroy that very possibility at an economic level, establishing every member of the population as potentially or actually precarious, even using the ever-present threat of precarity to justify its heightened regulation of public space and its deregulation of market expansion.

The capitalistic systems of Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Singapore bear similar traits to the descriptions above, with the marginalized groups I study equal to Butler’s notion of a precarious existence. What has not been examined in these recognizable articulations, however, is the particular type of the neoliberalism that exists in these sites that is complicated by strong histories of state intervention. Anthropologist Aihwa Ong describes this as a state of “neoliberalism as exception,” her term for the particularities of how the workings of governance and capitalistic processes are intertwined in advanced Asian economies. Unlike Western-style neoliberalism, in which the market dominates, Ong shows how Asian neoliberalism is predicated on the state dictating the workings of the market. For example, she draws out the ways in which the Singapore government creates different categories of citizenship, or lack thereof, in order to maximize the productivity of its large migrant labor force. With “the market determin[ing] the economic value” of the immigrant worker, highly skilled labor termed “expatriates” and low-skilled labor termed “workers” then have very different access to legal rights. The former are the

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first in line to be offered the privileges of citizenship while the latter are denied a path to permanent residency and a minimum wage.53

The authoritarian contexts of Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Singapore, which render a particular experience of neoliberalism, in turn, induce complicated scenarios for human rights that stem from both globally influenced neoliberal as well as internally influenced governmental policies. In addition to the diminished welfare for low-waged migrant workers, another scenario is how the states’ desire to participate in the global economy is tempered by their authoritarian control of the citizens, thus resulting in complex negotiations of civil, political, and queer rights claims. The countries’ capitalistic goals have created conditions for activists and artists in which they are allowed semblances of democratic debate as necessary conduits for economic growth. Ironically, however, it is also neoliberalism that has caused the precarious conditions that incite these cases of performative activism in the first place.

I elaborate in the dissertation how people can deliberate contentious issues like low-waged migrant rights, or engage in democratic elections, or be queer so long as they stay within fixed parameters and as long as their acts are beneficial to the workings or the international reputation of the countries. But once they cross the line to threaten the official rhetoric of the state, permission is rapidly curtailed by the revision of policies, and the activists and artists are reprimanded by the law. In Singapore, this mechanism is exemplified by the Yale-NUS project, in which part of the agreement was that any sort of public demonstrations would not be allowed on campus. The state is thus saying, in not so many words, yes, we want to have a “liberal” arts college where students can learn to be critical and participate in open debate. We want to train the next generation of leaders to be able to speak the language of the internationally mobile class.

53 Ibid., 186.
But with the caveat that they cannot use their education to engage in criticism of the Singapore government.

*Neoliberalism and the Arts in Asia*

In relation to the arts, the governments of these sites strike a similar balance of allowance and curtailment as influenced by neoliberal sensibilities. In the case of Singapore and Hong Kong, this condition has created access for artists by means of deliberate arts and cultural policies. The Malaysian art scene, in contrast, has benefited less. This is because the Malaysian state’s response to the arts has been less determined by economic considerations than by the vacillations around Islamic politics. In the 1990s to the mid-2000s, English-language theatre touching on social justice and human rights related issues was produced by independent theatre companies like Instant Café and Five Arts Centre. They are based in the country’s capital of Kuala Lumpur and supported by private funders and corporations. While facing considerable censorship, their productions were thought to appeal only to the English-speaking “elite.” They were thus tolerated because of their seeming inaccessibility to the majority of the Malay-speaking Muslim “masses” and deemed as not a threat to the mainstream state narrative. The turn to a more conservative form of Islam in recent years, however, has not only increased the impediments to independent theatre, but the Malaysian state also started sponsoring Malay-language theatre productions that adhere to their version of Islamic values as propaganda against their perceived spread of Western liberal ideas. For example, an anti-LGBTQ musical in 2013 toured Malaysian schools and universities. The production depicted the LGBTQ characters as
base and corrupt antagonists who deserved their harsh punishment dispensed by both the state and by divine intervention.\textsuperscript{54}

Singaporean artists have more leeway in comparison. This is due to a series of cultural reforms initiated in the 1980s, which culminated in a national cultural policy issued in 2000 entitled The Renaissance City Project. According to the report from the Ministry of Culture and the Arts (MICA), the government wanted to bolster the arts in Singapore, stating that the “short term aim is to develop the local arts scene to match regional hubs like Melbourne, Hong Kong, Glasgow, with the eventual goal of achieving a status comparable to cultural capitals like London and New York.”\textsuperscript{55} The project was established to attract global investors wanting to capitalize on East and Southeast Asia and to cement Singapore’s competitive position as the region’s “global city”—not just for the arts but in all aspects of the economy and trade.\textsuperscript{56} As a result, while arts productions still have to be approved through a censorship review, the policy increased arts funding as well as enabled productions dealing with contentious subjects to be staged. This resulted in some peculiar scenarios, including the proliferation of LGBTQ-themed plays in the early 2000s while the state’s sodomy law was not, and still is not, abolished.\textsuperscript{57}

Hong Kong’s cultural policy bears similar characteristics to Singapore’s in that investment in the arts is seen as a conduit for economic growth. In 2006, the state started to plan for the West Kowloon Cultural district in hopes that Hong Kong would serve as an arts and cultural hub for Asia. Funding for the arts, however, is relegated to mainstream and established


\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{57} I elaborate on this development in Chapter 2.
companies vetted by government agencies. In order to secure financial support, artists have had to find ingenious ways of speaking to contentious subject matters without provoking the ire of the state. Zuni Icosahedron, which is supported by the Home Affair’s Bureau of the Hong Kong government, is a theatre company that has deftly walked this fine line. Its founder and artistic director Danny Yung creates work that might seem politically sensitive to the Chinese government, including experimental productions debating issues of democratic freedoms and participation. At the same time, he is an influential cultural figure in Hong Kong and greater China, sitting on the boards of several national cultural organizations including that of the West Kowloon Cultural district.58

Based on the above scenarios, a key issue I examine in this dissertation is how the region’s specific form of neoliberalism has influenced the kinds of artistic work produced. Performance theorist Jen Harvie’s analysis, that “socially democratic art practices and neoliberal capitalist ideologies produce, inform, challenge and/or undermine each other,”59 has been helpful. Harvie acknowledges the possibility that artistic work dealing with issues of social justice can potentially be “passed off as critical social interventions when they are actually nourishing to neoliberalism’s inequalities.”60 However, the underlying optimism of her work is encouraging as she seeks the “democratic potential” of arts practices that can work towards “preserving fairness, constructive social relations and individual agency while diminishing inequality and selfish individualism, despite the massive power and insidious spread of global neoliberal capital.”61 Harvie’s theorization thus inspires me to ponder the effects of neoliberalism on arts production, both in terms of how neoliberalism could be reified in artistic

58 I elaborate on this example in Chapter 3.
60 Ibid., 3.
61 Ibid., 10.
processes as well as the potential of the arts to counter its ill effects. While her analysis focuses on the arts scene in the United Kingdom during the administration of the conservative Prime Minister David Cameron, I think about how socially motivated arts practices in the Asian region might counter the rights claims that are denied on the pretext of essentialist notions of cultural specificity.

Asian Values: Nativist Politics Disguised as Second-Generation Rights

The specter of state-led neoliberal sensibilities is seen in the selected Asian governments’ resistance to international human rights norms. They do so by asserting their right to national sovereignty, arguing for cultural relativism, and emphasizing “second-generation” rights to economic development over “first-generation” emphasis on civil and political rights.62 This defense reached a climax at the 1993 Bangkok Declaration Meetings 63 when incumbent Prime Minister of Singapore Lee Kuan Yew and incumbent Prime Minister of Malaysia Mahathir Mohammad led the argument for the inapplicability of universal human rights to Asia on the grounds of “Asian values.” The creation of the term is derived from the leaders’ appropriation of Confucian ethics under which they claim that Asian societies work better if they are governed on the basis of communitarianism instead of individualism. Asian political theorists Leena Avonius and Damien Kingsbury have in turn refuted this, observing that while the specificities of local

62 As elaborated by human rights scholar Micheline Ishay, first-generation rights are primarily civil and political rights. These rights protect individuals from arbitrary state persecution and are associated with Western liberal democracies. They have their roots in the French and American revolutions and are articulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Second-generation rights are social, economic, and cultural rights and are said to have their roots in the socialist revolutions of the early twentieth century. They are specified in the International Covenant on Social, Economic, and Cultural Rights. See Micheline Ishay, A History of Human Rights: From Ancient Times to the Globalization Era (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 173–244.

63 The meeting resulted in a declaration collaboratively written by the attending Asian states. Named the Bangkok Declaration, this was an exercise in partial adherence to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the United Nations Charter. While agreeing to a general humanistic idea of rights claims, governments argued that the rights to development for Asian nations should precede civil and political rights due to the unique social, political, and economic characteristics of the region.
cultures must be taken into account, the proposition of human rights as a neocolonial construct from the West was being used as an excuse to dismiss external criticism and to justify the authoritarian rule of Asian governments. Leena Avonius and Damien Kingsbury, “Introduction,” in Human Rights in Asia: A Reassessment of the Asian Values Debate, eds. Leena Avonius and Damien Kingsbury (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

I read the posturing of Asian values by these leaders as performative maneuvers to assert their ideologies over their citizenries, by which nativist politics are fashioned in order to uphold existing power hierarchies and to justify the structural inequalities that are in place.

The Asian values defense was used when human rights records of these countries were questioned. For example, when the governments of Malaysia and Singapore were accused of discriminating against and criminalizing LGBTQ communities by retaining their anti-sodomy laws, they either, in the case of Singapore, interpreted Asian values as privileging the heteronormative family or, in the case of Malaysia, conflated Asian values with the country’s Islamic faith. To elaborate, in the late 1990s, Singapore’s Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong professed that the normalization of homosexuality would lead to the decline of the extended family unit and the subsequent erosion of Singapore’s conservative society. Goh’s viewpoint was an extension of that of incumbent Foreign Minister Wong Kan Seng, who at the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993 declared “homosexual rights [to be] a Western issue.” inapplicable to Singapore. Similarly, the Malaysian state saw the practice of homosexuality as a corrupting and neocolonial influence from the West, with Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad stating in 2003 that the advocacy for LGBTQ rights was part of a conspiracy to colonize the mindset of Malaysians. He dismissed these rights claims as a Western

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construct, stating that “for them [the Westerners], the freedom of the individual cannot be questioned. They have rejected the institutions of marriage and family. Instead, they accept the practice of free sex, including sodomy as a right.”67 In addition, the Malaysia and Singapore governments, according to human rights scholars like Baden Offord and Carol Johnson, have conflated the normalization of homosexuality with the gradual acceptance of Western liberal democracy.68 Offord and Johnson state that the governments’ anti-LGBTQ stance was a way to assert their political sovereignty and that the reasoning of Asian Values was brought up not just to counter LGBTQ rights claims but also to justify the restrictiveness of the sites’ electoral practices or the impediment to free speech.

These Asian governments’ definitions of democracy thus veer away from Western liberal models. Their styles of governance have been critiqued as autocratic or authoritarian, which they have justified or defended on the grounds of cultural specificity. There are scholars who have tried to define the peculiarities of each site’s system of governance. Sociologist Chua Beng Huat describes the Singapore state as practicing “an anti-liberal democracy where collective well-being is safeguarded by good government and honorable leaders.”69 Chua further states that the ruling party’s interventions in the lives of its citizens and the harsh sidelining of political opposition members through its public and electoral policies support its ideology of a “communitarian-based democracy”70 where decisions are made for the collective good of the nation. Malaysia too sees governance as something to be determined and meted out by the party

70 Ibid.
in power. Political scientist Koo Boo Teik recounts that since the beginning of the country’s independence, Mahathir Mohammad criticized democracy as a “‘Western’ form of government,”71 as well as the West’s “‘self-righteous interpretation of human rights.’”72 Mahathir believed that Malaysia needed to find its own form of democracy that would take into account the wellbeing of society as a whole and did not “fetishize” individual and personal freedoms.73 Hong Kong, in turn, is described by political theorists Wai-man Lam and Hsin-chi Kuan as a “partial democracy.” With its status as an ex-British colony, before its reunification with China, Hong Kong is termed a special administrative region, and its residents enjoy comparatively greater social and economic freedoms than those in the mainland, but they still lack the right to universal suffrage.74

A key argument in the Asian values theory is that Western-style democracy, which would have to take into account free and fair elections and the possibility of oppositional parties coming into power, would disrupt stability in the region and in turn impede economic growth. In other words, to justify their continuance of power, the ruling parties insist that the second-generation right to development should trump the first-generation right to civil and political freedoms in order to meet the country or territory’s specific economic needs. This mix of a state-led narrative of Asian values together with the pursuit of global competitiveness is thus a prime example of the particular ways in which neoliberal ideologies are manifested and performed in these sites. The suppression of democratic rights is seen not as an impediment but a necessity to economic development.

72 Ibid., 66.
73 Ibid., 60.
The deep indoctrination of this ideology is evidenced in political scientist Bob Beatty’s observation that the Asian values argument had been fetishized by the region’s leaders. He gives the example of Lee Kuan Yew’s visits to Hong Kong in the 1990s, during which Lee repeatedly warned that Hong Kong “would do well to copy Singapore” and to stop its “flirtations with democracy.”75 Beatty then recounts how Tung Chee Hwa who, as Hong Kong’s first chief executive post-1997, declared that his “political heroes” were “Deng Xiaoping, Lee Kuan Yew, and Margaret Thatcher.” Tung expressed his admiration for Lee and the “Singapore Model” of governance—believing its core characteristic of Asian values to be rooted in Confucianism, he thus found it compatible with the “Chineseness” of Hong Kong.76

These governments’ narrow and partial application of Confucian ethics in their Asian values argument, however, fails to take into account the philosophy’s emphasis on benevolence, humaneness, and justice when it comes to their treatment of their low-waged migrant worker population.77 In fact, their justification for the right to development under second-generation rights claims has inadvertently resulted in the oppression of these marginalized individuals. Critical theorist Pheng Cheah, writing about the “contamination” of human rights by global capitalism,78 traces how the economic growth in Asia in the latter half of the twentieth century has been unevenly distributed.79 This results in the wealth in sites like Singapore and Hong Kong being largely dependent on the exchange of transnational capital, including that of human capital

75 Bob Beatty, *Democracy, Asian Values, and Hong Kong: Evaluating Political Elite Beliefs* (Westport CT: Praeger, 2003), 44.
76 Ibid., 42–45.
77 The core precepts in Confucianism are governed by the ethical practices of benevolence or humaneness, justice or righteousness, filial piety, proper rites, knowledge, and integrity, among others. See David K. Gardner, *Confucianism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
79 Ibid., 184.
from the neighboring countries of the Philippines, Bangladesh, and Indonesia.\textsuperscript{80} Even if the economy of these poorer countries does benefit from the remittance pay of their citizens who labor abroad, I ponder the double-standard of Asian values in this case as the economic prosperity of the wealthier sites is predicated on the exploited bodies of low-waged migrants.

\textit{Embodying Alternative Articulations of Rights Claims through Performance}

I thus examine in this dissertation the work of artists and activists who reveal Asian values as an ideology construct performed by governments to direct the behavior of their citizens. These artists and activists counter such attempts by materializing rights claims with the artistic performances and performative demonstrations manifesting the participants’ desire to be seen and heard, be it when they are lobbying for a more democratic political system, pushing for societal and legal acceptance of their sexuality, or demanding for more equitable labor conditions. In doing so, they also show how normative critiques of human rights, including those that admonish human rights as a tool of cultural imperialism and an excuse for humanitarian intervention, cannot adequately explain what is happening on the ground in these Asia countries. Critics like literary scholar Randall Williams, for instance, have claimed that there is no recuperative aspect to human rights, as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) was born out of the impetus of strong states, namely the United States and Western Europe, to consolidate their power after World War II. Believing that “human rights have increasingly come to define ‘the political’ in an age of advanced capitalist globalization,”\textsuperscript{81} Williams disagrees with how human rights have been used to justify imperialist economic expansion. Similarly, law professor Costas Douzinas bemoans how a system of “global neoliberal capitalism” has created a

\textsuperscript{80} Ibid., 188–90.
\textsuperscript{81} Randall Williams, \textit{The Divided World: Human Rights and Its Violence} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), xv.
“human-rights-for-export” model, in which the United States as the new empire is engaged in self-interested humanitarian wars in countries like Iraq.

While these arguments add to the larger discussions in the field, they emphasize how human rights rhetoric is abused by strong states to the detriment of people in weaker states. Therefore, they are not as helpful when it comes to examining what happens when human rights abuses are committed within states to people by their own governments, which is the primary context in this dissertation. In addition, the articles of the UDHR are considered recommendations that are not legally binding because of the United Nation’s policy of adhering to individual state sovereignty. Given that these Western-oriented critiques are not entirely applicable to my sites of study, and because of lack of legal efficacy of human rights instruments, I need to find alternative frameworks in which I can examine how the application of human rights in Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Singapore can reflect the politics in the region.

As such, I propose that the methodology of performance can reveal the efficaciousness of the participants’ agential political subjectivities as they learn to negotiate the potentialities and limitations of their struggle for culturally specific queer, democratic, and labor rights. By analyzing human rights as embodied activism, my case studies then recoup the term from its detractors who have voiced its irrelevance for reasons of Asian values or for its neocolonial perspectives.

82 Costas Douzinas, Human Rights and Empire: The Political Philosophy of Cosmopolitanism (Oxford: Routledge Cavendish, 2007), 293.
83 Ibid., 51–89.
84 The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is not a treaty and, therefore, countries do not have a legal obligation uphold the standards it puts forth.
Contextual Inspirations

The interdisciplinary nature of this dissertation requires that I draw from various fields. Readers should note that this section is not an all-encompassing literature review but examples of salient works that have informed my arguments and which I build upon. The first field focuses on works from performance studies that deal with human rights topics. The second focuses on human rights scholarship that moves away from legalistic analysis to emphasize the culturally specific, the affective, and the embodied. Most of the texts from these two fields are written from a Euro-American perspective. The final field of work written from and about Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Singapore, which examines the relationship between performance and the political, is, therefore, necessary to address this gap. Overall, while my methodology as informed by these fields will reflect how the dissertation benefits from the work of scholars from the social sciences and cultural studies, my deep reading into the dramaturgical and aesthetic aspects of my case studies ultimately emphasizes the importance of seeing rights claims as embodied intersubjective processes.

Performance Studies

In performance scholar Paul Rae’s book Theatre and Human Rights, he theorizes theatre’s relationality to human rights by stating:

Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, the tenor and focus of international human rights discourses were overwhelmingly legalistic. Insofar as legislation is a key to the means of securing human rights, this is understandable, but it should not blind us to the personal and political dimensions of human rights and of the law.  

Rae conveys that as the “different theatrical approaches” are concerned with human rights as a “subject” matter, the “performances that speak both for and to a wider public underscore the

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85 Paul Rae, Theatre and Human Rights (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 42.
word’s philosophical connotations, as in ‘subjectivity,’ and reminds us that, whatever it is, the subject of human rights is also the human being.”86

The field of performance studies has from its inception been concerned with issues relating to human rights. Pioneers in the field have foregrounded how performance can ignite the agential subjectivity of its participants. For instance, Richard Schechner frames the seminal protests for democracy around the world as performances of resistance, with examples like the Beijing Tiananmen Square movement, the breaching of the Berlin War, and the anti-Vietnam war demonstration.87 Diana Taylor looks at the “repertoire” of bodily acts, which she sees as the embodied re-writing of official national narratives in dictatorial Latin America.88 Dwight Conquergood’s work includes a stinging critique on America’s death penalty and his performance ethnography of the marginalized communities of the Hmong refugees in Thailand and the street gangs and Chicago.89 Peter Eckersall analyzes avant-garde performance practices in Japan post-1960s, tracing how the revolutionary potential of radical aesthetics was tamed by late twentieth-century capitalism.90 Jill Dolan provides an analysis of the works of feminist and queer artists whose performances she argues are ephemeral processes with the power to imagine a better world.91 Their scholarship highlighting the liminality between performance and politics is useful for my thinking on how this dissertation’s case studies, which include various forms of

86 Ibid., 17.
artistic representations and protest performances on the streets, can be read against one another. For example, I observe how street protests are inherently performative as they use gestures and tactics that are theatrical and, vice versa, how the dramaturgy of staged theatre works uses the aesthetics of street protests.

More recent analyses that engage with Rae’s emphasis of reclaiming the “human” in the discourses of human rights include Catherine Cole’s work on the South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission;\(^\text{92}\) Patrick Anderson’s on the Turkish Hunger Strike;\(^\text{93}\) Maurya Wickstrom’s on the theatre groups in Palestine and the Irish Traveller Theatre;\(^\text{94}\) and Soyini D. Madison’s on the artistic performances and activist engagements in Ghana.\(^\text{95}\) In spite of their different geographical sites, these scholars share in common the argument for the need to find a different way to look at what efficacy means in human rights claims regardless of immediate legislative outcomes and how theatre and performance can contribute to this alternative view. First, Catherine Cole aims to read beyond the judicial consequences of the South African Truth and Reconciliation commission by analyzing how “the notions of performance, embodiment, and public enactment . . . used in the larger areas of transitional justice and human rights law”\(^\text{96}\) helped present the victims’ unscripted testimonials in the courtroom. This resulted in the international media witnessing families of victims losing emotional control, thus thwarting the state’s intention for a neat narrative of national reconciliation, and called into question the ability of the commission to provide true closure. Second, Patrick Anderson’s work on the 2003 Turkish

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hunger strike, during which prisoners protested the authority’s implementation of solitary confinement, frames the starving bodies of the protesters as a concrete exposure of state violence. Significantly, Anderson observes that the hunger strike was not staged with the confidence of reforming Turkey’s penal system. It was in fact performed “against all hope of traditional success.”97 For Anderson, there is something else at work besides a change in legislature—the transformation of the prisoners’ subject position in relation to the state, in which starvation becomes an extreme but effective way to regain agency over their own bodies. Third, Maurya Wickstrom argues that political theatre that aims for direct legislative changes, for example, to confer statehood to those who are stateless, can be problematic due to these efforts being situated in and reaffirming neoliberal structures and frameworks. She, therefore, proposes that because of their statelessness, the Irish Traveller Theatre and the theatre groups in Palestine can be examples of the possibility of “new modalities of the political in performance, or the relationship between politics and performance.”98 Wickstrom’s appeal for new and radical forms speaks to the ability of theatre and performance scholarship to rethink human rights outside the parameters of conventional nationality and the rights and structures that come with it. Last, Soyini Madison proposes in her work on Ghanaian theatre and performance that it is possible to counter the ravages of global neoliberal policies with a localized and reflexive appropriation of rights practices. She envisions how theatre and performance can turn human rights from a “legislative disappointment” to an “ontological possibility,”99 because these forms give the people who perform them dignity.

97 Anderson, *So Much Wasted*, 137.
The works from these scholars reaffirm my stance that the study of human rights need not be understood just in terms of whether there are any measurable or quantifiable changes in the status quo. Instead, I think about how performance can enable a renewed understanding of the term “human rights” and how the political subjectivities of the participants can become more agential in the process of engagement. In addition, their work also enables me to see how a performative discourse of human rights could be widened and appropriated to fit the specific circumstances of the participants.

That said, while these works give me a framework to understand how performative discourses engage with the politics of participation, their analyses inflect differently when I consider the specificity of my dissertation’s geographical and political contexts. In fact, they precisely demonstrate how an understanding of locality is crucial, a point also made by Florian N. Becker, Paola S. Hernández, and Brenda Werth, the editors of the recent anthology *Imagining Human Rights in Twenty-First-Century Theater*.\(^{100}\) The editors’ primary contribution is their theoretical leap in comparing the public nature of the theatre with that of human rights by citing Jürgen Habermas’s theory of the “critical public sphere”— a vision where members have the ability to critique and be involved in the institutional structures that govern their lives.\(^{101}\) They argue that because Habermas’s work served as the foundation for the precursor documents of the UDHR, in the forms of the American Declaration of Independence in 1776 and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen in 1789, theatre is therefore an apt medium to convey the public nature of rights claims. I share the same view as the editors, who see theatre as


\(^{101}\) Ibid., 5. For more on Habermas’s work see Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence, 6th ed. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991).
an embodied practice of representation, a kind of “public imagining” laying bare the violence, pain, and suffering that demands to be addressed in a community of artists and audiences.\textsuperscript{102} In addition, I agree with their acknowledgment that the concept of Habermas’s public sphere is limited as it only references the eighteenth-century European white male-dominated bourgeois order. As the anthology seeks to include more heterogeneous voices, I too want to fill this gap by considering the particular relationship of theater, performance, and human rights in specific sites in Asia.

**Human Rights**

There is a vast body of literature on human rights from the various disciplines of the humanities, as well as in the legal and social sciences, primarily concerned with the gross violations that occurred in the twentieth century after the founding of the UDHR in 1948. While this literature, including seminal texts from philosophers like Hannah Arendt, Giorgio Agamben, Slavoj Žižek, and Jacques Rancière, among others, are important,\textsuperscript{103} they read differently when applied to a contemporary Asian context.\textsuperscript{104} In addition, as this is not a dissertation on human

\textsuperscript{102} Ibid., 3–4.

\textsuperscript{103} Hannah Arendt’s criticism in her seminal work *The Origins of Totalitarianism* has spurred the responses of the other theorists mentioned. Arendt disagrees with the claim in the 1948 Declaration that human rights are available to all who are human as it seems that only citizens are entitled to these rights. Subsequent arguments—Rancière’s that human rights are in fact “humanitarian rights;” Agamben’s that humanitarian work victimizes the marginalized by seeing them as nothing more than “bare life;” and Žižek’s that the practices of human rights have been mired by partisan political interests—all in their varying ways expand upon Arendt’s critique of the Declaration’s inadequacies. See Hannah Arendt, “The Decline of the Nation-State and the Ends of the Rights of Man,” in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (San Diego: Harcourt Books, 1973), 267–302; Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998); Jacques Rancière, “Who is the Subject of the Rights of Man?,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 103, no. 2 & 3 (2004): 297–310; and Slavoj Žižek, “Against Human Rights,” *New Left Review* 34 (2005): 115–31.

\textsuperscript{104} As Mary Luckhurst and Emilie Morin note, the above texts have infused the scholarship of theatre and performance scholars who write about human rights issues. Likewise, in my work, these philosophers have impressed upon me the need to look beyond existing discourses to address the most vulnerable of people. However, I have also had to look to other resources in order to speak to the particularities of the contexts and the communities to which I refer. See “Introduction: Theatre and the Rise of Human Rights,” in *Theatre and Human Rights after 1945: Things Unspeakable*, eds. Mary Luckhurst and Emilie Morin (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 4–5.
rights per se but about its performative dimensions, I focus on scholarship that aids my reading of how human rights discourses are inflected through critical artistic works and performances of protest. A performative methodology emphasizes the embodied and emphatic nature of claims and this, in turn, sheds light on the specificity of their local dimensions. The scholars Domna Stanton, Baden Offord, James D. Ingram, Carol C. Gould, Aihwa Ong, and Pheng Cheah have informed my overarching approach in giving voice to culturally specific, lesser-known cases of rights claims. While my case studies might not have the global impact of atrocities committed in times of grievous wars, such as during the Holocaust or the Chinese Cultural Revolution in the mid-twentieth century or more recently during the Syrian Civil War, my dissertation seeks to add to the diversity of scholarship by examining what human rights mean for those living in wealthy neoliberal Asian cities that are not in dire states of warfare or poverty. Therefore, the scholars who inform my work approach human rights with perspectives that are relevant to this dissertation’s concerns—from recouping human rights from criticisms of its Eurocentrism to theorizing its relation to queer, democratic, and labor rights practices. Ultimately, they help me to map a performance studies–based analysis of human rights that focuses on lesser-known acts of resistance that are nevertheless agential and important for those who live it.

With Costas Douzinas and Randall Williams, among others, criticizing the “universal” in the UDHR as a neoimperial or neocolonial concept, literature has arisen to challenge this view by those who seek to re-envision the term’s Germaneness. French studies scholar Domna Stanton, for one, proposes a “critical universalism” which would “abandon a totalizing representation of the universal in the human rights regime and recognize its dynamic, plural,
historically more expansive and inclusive structure.”  

Her intervention comes in her creation of “the generalizable,” which is an alteration of Clifford Geertz’s theorization of the “general.” For Stanton, “the generalizable” utilizes the “bottom up approach” present in Geertz’s theorization of “generalizations,” with her term suggesting “an attempt to delineate a process without end—generalizabilization—forging commonalities through a contest of meanings, rather than achieving a product, a generalization.” Importantly, Stanton’s “bottom up” approach of the generalizable seeks to go beyond what she sees as the false binaries of the “local and the global,” or the “universal or the particular.” I read Stanton’s generalizabilization of human rights as an approach that does not throw the baby out of the bathwater by respecting local articulations without “romancing the local,” thus enabling the consideration of the “universal” aspects of rights claims that could be agreed upon regardless of cultural difference. This allows me to view my case studies through a perspective of human rights that contextualizes its usage while still incorporating the universal pursuit of human dignity. As a result, this lens can then challenge the essentialism of the Asian values argument.

As I try to work between the “local and the global” without simplifying either, the work of scholars theorizing across the fields of cultural studies and human rights have been useful to how I frame activist and artistic performances as embodied cultural work. Like Stanton, they

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106 Ibid., 76. Geertz argues that while “general propositions” can be drawn out of “particular phenomenon,” and that an investigation through the general can eventually lead to the “particular, circumstantial and concrete,” he nevertheless disagrees with a consensual approach in verifying what is common in mankind through generalizations about cultural universals. See Clifford Geertz, “The Impact of the Concept of Culture and the Concept of Man,” Bulletin of the Atomic Sciences: A Journal of Science of Public Affair 22, no. 4 (1996): 2–8.
107 Ibid., 76.
108 Ibid., 78.
109 Ibid., 78. I understand “romancing the local” as an outlook that is dismissive of human rights because of the emphasis on local cultural particularities. An example relevant to my analysis is the Asian values argument.
view human rights as an imperfect but useful entity that needs to be reassessed. One such scholar is cultural studies theorist Baden Offord, who works at the intersections of human rights, cultural studies, and queer activism. His scholarship informs my analysis of the performance of queer rights in Singapore and Malaysia as well as the general methodology of this dissertation. Offord’s interdisciplinary approach to understanding queer subjectivity in Southeast Asia sets out to counter the Western hegemonic discourses of queer activism as he traces the genealogy of queer Asia that does not dismiss, yet has to depart from, using the Stonewall riots as a historical touchstone. His mapping of the conditions of both global influences and state control on queer subjectivity in the region directs my thinking on how these conditions are reflected in the dramaturgy of my case studies. In addition, his cultural studies approach to human rights informs my view of the usefulness of performance as a lens to read rights claims as performances are by nature always already culturally inflected.

In my attempts at articulating the intersection between democracy, human rights, and performance, the work of political philosophers James D. Ingram and Carol C. Gould have been particularly helpful. Although differing in their respective methodologies, both theorize democracy’s intrinsic link to situated human rights claims. To elaborate, Ingram criticizes how Western liberal democracy is compromised by neoliberal global interests that influence top-down government mandates and election outcomes. He then proposes a democratic model that is

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110 Cultural Studies John Nguyet Erni, for example, recognizes that while the legal study of human rights is important because it enables the institutional knowledge and political capital for legal intervention, cultural studies can complement legality by advancing “new conceptions of law.” By looking at the cultural aspects of human rights, Erni argues that the struggle for rights does not just happen in the legal field but in aspects of daily life. See John Nguyet Erni, “Reclaiming Cultural Studies: Human Rights as a Site of Legal-cultural Struggles,” in Cultural Studies of Rights: Critical Articulations, ed. John Nguyet Erni (New York: Routledge, 2011), 2.


112 The Stonewall riots refer to the pivotal historical moment when the LGBTQ community retaliated in protest against a police raid at the Stonewall Inn in New York City on June 28, 1969. The riots are seen to mark the beginnings of the gay liberation movement in the United States.
predicated on human rights claims from the ground up. For this to happen, Ingram states there needs to be a “radical shift of perspective: from seeing democracy as an ideal regime or system of government to seeing it as a practice and an ideal, a logic of transformative action through which people act on the institutions that ordinarily act on them.” Ingram argues that by “understanding democracy as a form of political action rather than a regime,” this would enable “practices of claiming rights as themselves democratic, and democracy as arising wherever and to the extent that such practices come into being.”

Like Ingram, Gould encourages her readers to rethink democracy by looking at its dialectical relation to human rights, as “democratic participation provides one of the main ways in which people can protect their human rights, while conversely, the protection of such rights is itself a condition for widespread democratic participation.” While Ingram theorizes this is happening through a broad-based ground up practice, Gould specifies her vision through the language of intersubjectivity. Specifically, she proposes a model of democracy based on a “conception of embodied politics” that emphasizes reciprocity and empathy. By doing so, Gould’s model goes beyond the liberal democratic model of “democracy as simply a matter of political representation and equal voting rights” to a model based on “communal embodiment,” which scrapes the surface address of cultural difference to try understand the “rituals and practices that express people’s social relations.”

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114 Ibid., 190.
115 Ibid., 258.
117 Ibid., 94.
118 Ibid., 34–46.
119 Ibid., 45.
120 Ibid., 100.
Significantly, Gould cites the arts as a concrete manifestation of this “communal embodiment.” Her theory speaks to a key concept in performance studies that performance can create spaces for the transformation and deliberation of politics among a communal body. Read together, Ingram and Gould’s works inspire me to look at my case studies in Singapore and Hong Kong as agential and ground-up practices of citizens who are resisting the top-down governance of authoritarian states. These citizens’ debates on what democratic rights mean to them are not just relegated to a theoretical matter, but their embodied performance is imbued with emotional and personal resonance, a factor that Gould emphasizes as an important consideration in understanding the nature of political subjectivity.

Lastly, Aihwa Ong and Pheng Cheah’s work has aided my analysis of performance’s relation to low-waged migrant rights. I model their methodologies, which examine the causes of rights abuses and also critique their counter-efforts. For Ong, her analysis stems from her rejection of Western-oriented human rights discourses, stating that they are “simple abstractions with little relationship to actual ethicopolitical negotiations on the ground.”\(^{121}\) While for Cheah, his approach to human rights as “institutional practices” enables him to expose how its processes are corrupted by neoliberal economics.\(^{122}\) In addition, both take into account the effects of the global economy as well as the relational dynamics between the stakeholders in these Asian sites, which include the governments, NGOs, employers, activists, and the laborers themselves, to decipher how this marginalized labor force is structurally oppressed. Overall, their work has not only given me the contextual framework through which I can analyze my labor rights case

\(^{121}\) Aihwa Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception*, 197. For instance, Ong explains why Giorgio Agamben’s view of the human as predicated on the notion of sovereignty, in which “bare life” can only exist external of citizenship and the law, cannot speak for Asian contexts in which low-waged workers, both valued for their labor yet reviled for their racial foreignness, have to find alternative ways to guarantee their welfare and dignity beyond the quest for citizenship.

\(^{122}\) As mentioned, one example Cheah gives is how Asian governments use second-generation rights claims to development to justify their use of low-waged migrant labor.
studies, but their emphasis on the need to understand institutional dynamics has also informed the methodology of this dissertation as a whole.

Literature of and from Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Singapore

In the literature written on issues relating to performance and human rights in Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Singapore, most scholars approach their subject matters with a postcolonial perspective, with the trope of the state’s influence on the citizens’ political subjectivities at the forefront of the discussion. While Hong Kong’s arts scene is by no means lacking, its academic output is considerably less prolific.\(^\text{123}\) There is a significant number of academic works on Hong Kong cinema, but I have been hard pressed to find comprehensive monographs on Hong Kong theatre and performance, much less ones that approach the subject from a political perspective. The closest is Rozanna Lilley’s *Staging Hong Kong: Gender and Performance in Transition*,\(^\text{124}\) which observes Hong Kong’s period of transition from British colonial rule back to Chinese governance through the work of theatre company, Zuni Icosahedron. Linda Lau’s unpublished dissertation, “Performing the City: Finding a Place Called Home in Contemporary Hong Kong Activist Theatre,”\(^\text{125}\) on how activist performance and activist theatre artists have responded to the postcolonial identity crisis of Hong Kongers has also been informative. There are also scholars who have written on Hong Kong as part of their larger projects. For example, dance scholar SanSan Kwan has a chapter on how dance and protest performances in Hong Kong

\(^{123}\) The scarcity of academic scholarship in contemporary theatre and performance does not just extend to publications in the English language but also in Cantonese, Hong Kong’s lingua franca. My observation is confirmed by Damien Cheng and Bernice Chan, who are a board member and the manager of the Hong Kong chapter of The International Association of Theatre Critics respectively. While the association is responsible for the comprehensive coverage of Hong Kong’s theatre scene, with the publications mostly edited or written by Cheng, they nevertheless do not focus on academic analysis. Damien Cheng and Bernice Chan. Interview by author, Hong Kong, June 12, 2011.


\(^{125}\) Linda Lau, “Performing the City: Finding a Place Called Home in Contemporary Hong Kong Activist Theatre” (PhD diss, Tufts University, 2013), 225.
reflect the anxieties of the residents during the transition period from British colonial back to Chinese rule.126 Theatre scholar Daphne Lei, in her chapter on contemporary Hong Kong Chinese Opera, also touches on the same issue.127 In addition, there are a few relevant journal articles that focus on how Hong Kong theatre practitioners are making work that reflect the city’s global cultural influences as they face increasing civic repression from the central Chinese government.128

In Malaysia’s case, literature about the arts in both English and Bahasa Malay is sparse due to the lack of a considered cultural policy. My arguments are therefore mostly informed by articles in Singapore-based journals that analyze the state of artistic production in the Southeast Asian region. Many of these journals have since ceased publication because of the lack of funding and state censorship, further limiting spaces for the documentation and analysis of Singaporean and Malaysian theatre and performance.129 In spite of this setback, subsequent scholarly output on the Singapore arts scene has been fairly robust. The state’s acknowledgment of a flourishing cultural sector being integral to general economic growth and its resultant

129 One such journal was the FOCAS: Forum on Contemporary Art & Society, which was published from 2000 to 2007. It featured critical analysis of the arts and cultural scene in Asia, focusing on Southeast Asian case studies. It was eventually discontinued due to the inability of the board to secure funding from government statutory boards, the latter perceiving the journal’s content as contentiousness. Another journal, Commentary (The NUS Society Journal), was published by the National University of Singapore. It analyzed social, cultural, and political issues in Singapore. The journal had periodic analysis of arts events until 1994, when an issue dedicated to a controversial case of arts censorship in Singapore was suppressed. Three editors of the journal, Sharaad Kuttan, Sanjay Krishnan, and Lee Weng Choy, withdrew from their positions and published the articles independently in 1996 as a book entitled Looking at Culture. The journal subsequently had limited coverage of the arts. No new issues of the journal have been published since 2003.
comprehensive cultural policies have proliferated analyses of the situation. There are therefore numerous articles published about the prickly relationship between the artists and the state as well as the resultant dramaturgies of works produced in such a milieu. Notably, Paul Rae’s scholarship on Singapore concerns itself with how the performative efforts from and about the state are constantly fissuring, with the artistic representations and everyday performances revealing the ambivalence between the state’s neoliberal agenda versus its desire to maintain authoritarian control of its national narrative.130 Other sources dealing with similar themes include articles available in anthologies as well as monographs published by local theatre companies The Necessary Stage and Drama Box (written in Mandarin) for archival, contextualization, and historization purposes.131

While there are only three academic monographs published about Singapore theatre and performance to date, one of which is a comparative study of case studies from Singapore and Malaysia, I have found their theses valuable to my dissertation. All three texts focus on the relation of the arts and artists to the state and share a common observation that Singaporean and Malaysian artists making politically charged work have to make compromises dramaturgically in order for the work to be granted a staging license.

Importantly, the methodologies of all three scholars acknowledge, but also veer away from or build on, postcolonial perspectives in order to address the conditions of contemporary Southeast Asia. For instance, cultural theorist Jacqueline Lo, in Staging Nation, Theatre in

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131 Ng How Wee, Drama Box and the Social Theatre of Singapore: Cultural Intervention and Artistic Autonomy (Singapore: Global Publishing, 2011).
Malaysia and Singapore, warn against a simplistic application of a postcolonial nationalist discourse to analyze the region’s theatre productions. Peterson invokes Edward Said’s theory in Culture and Imperialism in which oppressive structures from past colonizers are replicated by the local elites or ethnic majorities to suppress the minorities in newly independent nations. Similarly, Lo argues this is the same sort of rhetoric used by authoritarian Asian governments as an excuse for valorizing Asian values as a nationalist project. This enables the ruling elites to reproduce colonial power structures and systems of repression against communities marginalized by their politics, race, religion, or class within the country itself. In lieu of this, Lo proposes a Foucauldian lens to examine how nationalistic subjectivities are produced. She argues that this will better serve the analysis of the theatre productions in these sites because:

[it] move[s] beyond the identification of Singaporean and Malaysian theatre and the socio-political contexts which produce the texts as either positive and negative, towards an understanding of the processes of subjectification made possible by particular political conditions. Hence, the underlying impulse of [her] study is not to merely elucidate the specific ways in which power is articulated in and by representation but also to interrogate the construction of the subject to, and of power.

For Peterson, the solution is to modify a normative postcolonial reading centered on “national consciousness” to one of “political and social consciousness.” He looks at the uneasy

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132 Jacqueline Lo, Staging Nation: English Language Theatre in Malaysia and Singapore (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004).
136 Peterson, Theater and the Politics of Culture in Contemporary Singapore, 10.
arbitration of this consciousness by theatre-makers who are forced to become complicit by self-censoring in order to continue working, thus re-affirming the rhetoric of the state.

With Lo and Peterson examining how the power dynamics between the state and the individual artists affect the theatre produced, sociologist Terence Chong’s *The Theatre and the State in Singapore* adds to this discussion with an approach built on Pierre Bourdieu’s theories of symbolic power. He suggests that a conventional reading of pitting the oppressive states against marginalized or radical artists is too binary. Chong states that this approach, in which the artists’ compromised positions appear to depoliticize their work, can overlook the arts’ hidden radical potential. He thus uses Bourdieu’s theory of symbolic power to propose that Singaporean artists produce subversive modes of theatre that are made possible by, and that also reflect, their particular class position—middle-class, English-educated intellectuals whose works appeal to a like-minded and relatively small sector of the population. Although complicit in the system, these artists paradoxically have a certain amount of leeway to make work that subtly challenges it at the same time. They are, therefore “utiliz[ing] their cultural capital to resist censorship injunctions without directly challenging the state’s legitimacy or authority.” Importantly, Chong reminds readers not to judge “the Asian experience” of resistance from a Western perspective. For instance, the success of a work should not be measured on whether “the Singaporean middle class is a champion of liberal democracy” or not. He suggests that while Singaporean artists do not stage overt modes of resistance due to the possibility of significant

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137 Terence Chong, ed., *The Theatre and the State in Singapore: Orthodoxy and Resistance*, Contemporary Southeast Asian Series (London and New York: Routledge, 2010). See Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, ed. John B. Thompson, trans. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003). Bourdieu’s theory of symbolic power relates to his formulation of class and capital. The term capital is defined as an active agent that works in a specific social field. Its different forms include “economic capital,” “cultural capital,” “social capital,” and “symbolic capital.” These are used or exchanged by individuals in social situations in order to legitimize or to advance their class positions (230).


139 Ibid., 153.
repercussions from the state, there is nevertheless value in their less-confrontational methods that mold to the particular circumstances of the sites in which they work.

Overall, the scholarship in this field reminds me to take into account the particularities of my sites of study when considering the artists’ and activists’ specific modes of resistance. With the people I examine working in compromised conditions, I am reminded by Chong’s work, as I am by the scholars in performance studies, to look beyond traditional rubrics of political efficacy. In addition, I address the gaps of the above scholars in three ways. In examining the case studies from Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Singapore concurrently, I am writing the first comprehensive study of a regional take on the performative dimensions of human rights. I also move away from the postcolonial framework of these scholars who are analyzing works from the earlier post-independence years, to consider the effects of “neoliberalism as exception” on more recent permutations of political subjectivity.140 I have thus chosen case studies from the last decade that best reflect this shift. Lastly, while the analyses of these scholars are relegated to the theatre, I am cross-examining different genres of artistic works with activist performances of protest. This strengthens my claim of how the framework of performance is crucial to understanding the practices of resistance.

Chapter Summaries

In all three chapters, I interrogate how artistic practices and civil protests intervene in and complicate the reading of human rights. My analysis moves between artistic and activist events and helps construct the social, cultural, and political sphere of human rights efforts in the region. From another perspective, the activist examples enable the reader to get a clear sense of the

140 Ong, Neoliberalism as Exception, 3.
concerns and impassioned motivations occurring on the ground that inspire and inform the artistic works.

The ways in which the sites are chosen for each chapter are based on their suitability to the chapter’s topic. For example, I omit Hong Kong in the chapter on LGBTQ rights claims because consensual relationships between same-sex individuals were legalized in 1990. In contrast, Singapore and Malaysia still have an “anti-sodomy” law in place. For my chapter on the quest for democratic freedoms, while all three sites have had eventful election cycles recently, the artistic performances that resulted in Singapore and Hong Kong are more salient. Lastly, for the chapter on low-waged migrant rights, I omit Malaysia because it does not offer an artistic example that could be substantially analyzed and also because Singapore and Hong Kong have more similar economic situations that are largely dependent on low-waged migrant labor. As wealthy Asian sites with a visible disparity between the rich and the poor, instances of labor exploitation are thus made even more apparent.

The artistic and activist case studies, in turn, are picked as much for their relevance to the particular human rights issue that they represent as for the ways in which they rupture the states’ authoritarian and neoliberal narratives. They are not meant to give a comprehensive overview of the region but are notable because they make evident the paradoxical workings of rights claims in these sites. They show the potential of performance to resist human rights abuses, but their dramaturgies also reveal how they inadvertently reproduce the ideologies of the milieus in which they work, leading me to ponder both the potentialities and limitations of arts and activism to address rights issues.

In “Chapter 1: The Dramaturgy of Low-Waged Migrant Labor Rights in Singapore and Hong Kong,” I examine activist events and artistic productions that focus on one of the most
economically, socially, and politically marginalized communities in these sites—the migrant male laborers and the migrant female domestic workers. I begin with two events—one a street march in early 2014 by Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong to protest the abuse and ill-treatment of a fellow domestic worker and the other an anti-riot drill in late 2014 directed by the state with the participation of Bangladeshi laborers in Singapore. I highlight how these cases, while appearing to give voice to these marginalized communities, are ultimately either allowed or instigated by the states for the purpose of controlling civil disobedience. I then proceed to examine the ways in which artistic works with activist messaging can be similarly co-opted with Soil, a 2006 forum theatre play in Singapore produced by Chinese theatre company Drama Box and the arts organization Migrant Voices, to highlight the challenges faced by Bangladeshi laborers, and Ambedkar, a 2013 performative installation in Hong Kong by artist and scholar Bo Zheng that juxtaposes the issue of domestic labor rights in Hong Kong with the problem of economic inequality in India. By scrutinizing these case studies’ dramaturgies, social contexts, and funding sources, I set the stage for one of the main objectives in this dissertation—to apply the discipline of performance studies to address the blind spots as well as to complement the sociological and normative discourses of human rights. For instance, a key argument in this chapter is that the case studies reveal the need to forgo the simplistic narrative of the employer as victimizer, the worker as victim, and the activists and artists as saviors in order to look at the larger problem of structural inequality caused by the neoliberalization of the region’s economy.

My case studies in “Chapter 2: The Economics of LGBTQ Rights Claims in the Queer Performances of Singapore and Malaysia” are the 2012 performance piece Cane, conceptualized and performed by Singaporean multidisciplinary artist Loo Zihan, the 2013 installment of the LGBTQ grassroots campaign Pink Dot organized annually in Singapore, and the 2010
photography series *Repent or Die!* by Malaysian activist Pang Khee Teik. I demonstrate how the case studies in Singapore reveal the “queer” state of affairs in a country where LGBTQ individuals are legally criminalized and yet tolerated, even pandered to, as they are considered prized economic and cultural generators in the country’s quest to become a global hub. I then read how Pang’s photography utilizes camp aesthetics to recuperate a sense of agency for LGBTQ individuals in Malaysia, where the state can legally prosecute them in the name of conservative Islam. I argue that the senses of pleasure produced in these photographs are meant to resist the shame that these communities are encouraged to feel because of their “deviant” sexualities. An intervention that the chapter makes is to give embodied examples of how LGBTQ activism, and in a broader sense human rights claims, reads and acts differently in these Asian sites. Inspired by global queer discourses, these artists and activists then appropriate them to address their sites’ more conservative contexts, with their works manifesting both the successes and failings of these attempts.

In contrast to Chapters 1 and 2’s concentration on specific marginalized communities, “Chapter 3: Redefining Democracy from the Ground-Up in Singapore and Hong Kong,” looks at how artists and activists represent the overall desire for greater civil and political rights of the people in these two sites. Importantly, the rights abuses, including those described in Chapters 1 and 2, are a result of authoritarian governance in neoliberal milieus, of which there has been increasing signs of resistance to. This chapter’s case studies—the 2011 verbatim play *Cooling-Off Day* by playwright Alfian Sa’at produced by W!LD Rice theatre company and the 2011 experimental theatre piece *One Hundred Years of Solitude 10.0 – Cultural Revolution*, conceived and directed by artistic director Danny Yung, whose company Zuni Icosahedron co-produced the work with Singapore theatre company Drama Box—then capture the ways in which people are
negotiating what democracy means to them in sites where the electoral politics and governance defer from those of Western liberal democracies. I posit that Sa’at, by including heterogeneous and often contentious voices in his play, and Yung, by embodying a sense of political mobilization in his work, are challenging Singapore and Hong Kong’s autocratic governance by reflecting ground-up possibilities of democratic rights claims.

Chapter Conclusion

In the course of my research, during which I conducted multiple interviews, went through archival printed and video material as well as attended protests and artistic performances, I amassed information that could not all be included in the space of this dissertation. Overall, these sources have impressed upon me that, regardless of the governments’ dismissal of the rhetoric of human rights or their repression of civil and political freedoms, there is a strong impetus to address issues of social justice among these artists and activists. Analyzing these materials has also strengthened my belief that arts and activism are crucial to the advancement of rights discourses in the region. At the same time, the dramaturgies of these case studies reveal their limits by becoming conscripted into the neoliberal narratives of the states. In parsing out this dichotomy, I document the “generalizabilizations” of rights claims in the region.141

141 Stanton, “Top Down, Bottom Up, Horizontally,” 76.
CHAPTER 1: THE REPRESENTATION OF LOW-WAGED MIGRANT LABOR RIGHTS IN SINGAPORE AND HONG KONG

No migrant worker or member of his or her family shall be held in slavery or servitude.
—Article 11(1), International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families

The generalizing impetus in any staging of suffering entails an ethical responsibility to those individuals, communities or cultures being represented. . . . Using theatre to protect and promote human rights in often difficult circumstances invariably involves sensitive and sustained engagement with specific communities and contexts.
—Paul Rae, Theatre and Human Rights

On a chilly Wednesday in January 2014, I joined thousands of protestors in the streets of Hong Kong as they rallied to demand justice for Indonesian domestic worker Erwiana Sulistyaningsih. Later, at a court hearing against her employer Law Wan Tung, Sulistyaningsih revealed how she was locked up, deprived of food, and constantly beaten by household objects resulting in multiple injuries requiring hospitalization.¹ The protesters included domestic workers from Indonesia and the Philippines, human rights activists, NGO workers, and concerned Hong Kong citizens. As they headed towards the government’s headquarters, they held up posters featuring gory pictures of Sulistyaningsih lying in the hospital bed and chanted in unison, “We are workers. We are not slaves.” The protestors were guided by police officers as they marched in an orderly manner across town and then gradually dispersed after getting sufficient media attention in the early afternoon [see figure 1.1].

In an altogether different example of the tension between foreign workers and their host countries, photographs of migrant laborers of South Asian origin appeared on Singapore’s National Development Minister Khaw Boon Wan’s Facebook page. They show an anti-riot drill conducted on October 26, 2014, with the laborers posing as rioters who are subsequently subdued by the police. One photograph shows the workers hurling plastic bottles at policemen in anti-riot gear. In another, workers kneel on the ground surrounded by police officers in a gesture of surrender. The exercise was criticized by members of the public as “racially insensitive and in poor taste.” Civil society groups also condemned it as “dehumanizing” in its reinforcement of the stereotype of migrant laborers as unruly and prone to violence. The peculiar nature of this exercise, in which the laborers appear to be complicit in the performance of their own subjugation, had an instigating event—an actual riot that occurred on December 8, 2013 in Little

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India, an ethnic enclave in Singapore. This riot was fueled by the death of a construction worker from India who was killed in a road accident involving a Singaporean bus driver. The sequence of events is unclear, but news reports claimed that four hundred people were involved, 39 police and civil defense officers were injured, and twenty-five vehicles were torched or damaged, 16 of which were police cars. The subsequent “mock riot” was one of several measures implemented by the government to restore order and control dissent among the laborers.

The protest march for Erwiana Sulistyaningsih, the Little India riot, and the subsequent mock riot are the consequences of Singapore and Hong Kong’s treatment of low-waged migrant workers. In this chapter, a brief analysis of these labor relations will set the stage for my in-depth work on the two artistic case studies— theatre company Drama Box’s forum theatre production of *Soil* in Singapore and artist/scholar Zheng Bo’s performative installation of *Ambedkar* in Hong Kong. By reading these case studies as performance, I decipher how their dramaturgical processes address the inadequacies of, as well as complement, the socio-political human rights frameworks that seek to understand the lack of low-waged labor rights in these sites. In the quest for labor rights claims in neoliberal Asia, these participants embody their imbrication in the narratives of the states even as they purport to resist them.

*Precarious Conditions: The Low-Waged Migrant Worker in Neoliberal Asia*

To contextualize, the media coverage of the Little India riot and the abuse of domestic worker Erwiana Sulistyaningsih are examples that bring the precarious circumstances of

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6 One blind spot of a normative understanding of low-waged labor rights claims by its participants (NGOs, civil society, etc.) is the relegation of the workers to the role of victims who need to be “rescued” by well-intentioned NGOs or members of civil society. This victim and victimizer dichotomy then restricts the agential possibilities of the subjects in question. This approach also fails to take into account the structural inequalities propagated by the neoliberalism, resulting in the co-option of their efforts. I am summarizing the theories of Aihwa Ong and Pheng Cheah here. These arguments will be expanded in an upcoming section of this chapter.
Singapore and Hong Kong’s underclass into focus. The economic and infrastructural development of these wealthy sites is dependent on imported labor from their poorer neighbors. Migrant workers come from countries including Bangladesh, Indonesia, and the Philippines to work in so-called “3-D” (dirty, dangerous, and demeaning) jobs. They face dire conditions including poor pay, exploitation from corrupt employment agencies, poor living environments, serious injuries from unsafe work situations, and the lack of legal accountability and protection.

In the case of the 2014 riot in Singapore, while most agreed that it was the most serious case of public disturbance in the past forty years, the causes of the riot and how the authorities should respond were viewed differently. Civil society commentators argued that the riot was the result of underlying racial tensions and poor working conditions of the laborers, but the government denied these connections and blamed it on the laborers’ bad behavior. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong stated that “the riot was an isolated incident arising from the unlawful actions of an unruly mob,” and Minister of Interior S. Isawaran blamed alcohol as a contributing factor. In addition, Acting Manpower Minister Tan Chuan-Jin defended Singapore’s treatment of the workers on his Facebook page, writing, “There is nothing thus far to suggest that the rioters have existing employment and workplace issues.” He cited a 2011 government survey that reported 90 percent of these workers as being “relatively happy” to repudiate speculations that the riot was due to unsatisfactory working and living conditions. The government had repeatedly insisted that they were improving the welfare of these workers. When he was National

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7 The term 3-D originated from the Japanese expression “3K,” which stands for “kitanai, kiken, kitsui.” This translates to “dirty, dangerous, and demeaning” in English.
Development Minister, Khaw had proposed situating the workers on offshore islands, claiming that the government wanted to “help house foreign workers properly without causing too much inconvenience to them or to Singaporeans.” After the riot, the government reduced bus services that shuttled workers from their dormitories to Little India on their Sundays off and proposed to improve the workers’ living spaces so they would not have to venture outside.10

The government’s attempts at segregating them from the public with the housing proposals and the enactment of a Public Order Bill exposes the marginal status of these workers.11 A curbing of conversations on interethnic relations is also evident in the cancellation of a forum entitled “Foreign Workers, Justice and Fairness” organized by human rights organization MARUAH.12 The event lost its space when the restaurant that had initially agreed to host backed out after a visit from the police. MARUAH responded with the following statement:

MARUAH registers our protest over this blatant harassment by the government against lawful and legitimate civil society activities. Through this forum, we are seeking to build bridges in the community, to ask for equal access to justice for all and to deepen our understanding of the issues faced by foreign workers. . . .Civil society has a right, even a moral duty to organize such events, and the government has to respect and protect this right, not take steps to undermine our legitimate exercise of our lawful rights. . . .The approach adopted through the police was unnecessarily restrictive and oppressive, and has only served to reduce the common space for Singaporeans to speak up and play an active role in society.13

In response to the restrictive measures, political scientist Charan Bal, quoted in the Wall Street Journal, criticized the state as being “too narrowly focused on security” and proposed that “the

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10 Chen and Ng, “Singapore Will Stick to Foreign-Labor Policies After Riot.”
11 The government installed more surveillance cameras and curbed alcohol sales in Little India. The police were also dispatched to patrol the area in the name of security without judicial oversight. See Workfairsg, “Public Order Bill Disproportionate and Ill-timed,” Workfair Singapore (blog), January 23, 2014, accessed June 14, 2016, https://workfairsingapore.wordpress.com/2014/01/23/public-order-bill-disproportionate-and-ill-timed/.
12 Maruah means “dignity” in Malay.
riots needed to be framed within broader context of rising migrant-labor unrest in the country. “14

Activist Alex Au was also quoted in his observation that Singapore is “moving toward a segregationist arrangement whereby some people have their freedoms restricted in significant ways.”15

Similar to the male laborers who toil in construction, the female domestic workers in the households of these cities are equally marginalized. Compared to Singapore, Hong Kong is more progressive in terms of legal rights for the domestic workers. For example, Singapore refused to adopt the International Labour Organization’s (ILO) Convention 189 for Domestic Workers,16 which “established global standards for the estimated 50 to 100 million domestic workers worldwide who clean, cook, and care for children, families, and the elderly in private households,”17 whereas Hong Kong ratified the convention. A mandatory day off per week for the domestic workers has also long been in place in Hong Kong. While this right was eventually granted in Singapore in 2012, its domestic workers are still not covered by “key labor protections in Singapore’s Employment Act.”18 Therefore, Human Rights Watch deems that the legal protection for Singapore’s foreign domestic workers “still falls short of international standards.”19

15 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid.
As indicated in the case of Erwiana Sulistyaningsih, however, Hong Kong’s greater structural protection for domestic workers has not prevented instances of rights violations. Furthermore, as temporary “contract workers,”\textsuperscript{20} domestic workers cannot apply for permanent residency. In a well-documented case, two domestic helpers who had worked in Hong Kong for twenty years had their application for residency denied. Their lawyer Mark Daly lamented the case’s racial dimensions and how the decision “entrenches [the workers’] being second-class citizens.”\textsuperscript{21} Daly’s choice of words is, in fact, inaccurate, as these workers do not have any claims to citizenship at all. Their marginal status thus leaves them “vulnerable to widespread abuse and exploitation, including restrictions on freedom of movement, physical and sexual violence, lack of food and long working hours.”\textsuperscript{22}

\textit{Performances of Protest Contained}

Because migrants live and work in such sub-standard conditions, the protest march for Erwiana Sulistyaningsih in Hong Kong and the Little India riot in Singapore are understandable. The reactions to these cases by the authorities then reflect their varied attitudes towards labor rights claims in both sites. In Hong Kong, the protest march joins an ongoing battle to make the plight of these underrepresented women more visible. Its overt campaigning showed that peaceful protests are the norm in the city, with the police officers understanding the protocol as they monitored and directed the marchers on the streets. The march was organized not just by local NGOs and activist groups led by the Hong Kongers but also included leadership from domestic workers like Indonesian Eni Lestari, who heads the worker organization International


\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.

Migrants’ Alliance. Wearing bandanas and carrying signs printed with slogans like “End Modern Day Slavery” and “Justice,” the workers took to the streets in droves and spoke out to local and international media organizations.

Unlike Hong Kong, Singapore bans all forms of street protests. Also, while there are organizations that focus on the welfare of low-waged workers, none are led by migrant leadership. In contrast to the Erwiana Sulistyaningsih protest, the riot in Singapore was swiftly nipped in the bud by the police. The twenty-four workers who participated in the riot were prosecuted and faced up to ten years of jail time plus caning. The efficient control of any nascent insurgency reflects the Singapore state’s draconian methods of controlling the low-waged migrant population. This milieu of repression is also exemplified in the later mock riot. The photo documentation, which shows the workers in acts of simulated insubordination and containment, was a strange exercise indeed.

In what appears to be a case of bad theatre, the images show the laborers as amateur actors making half-hearted attempts at demonstrating disobedience. In one photograph, instead of the expected stances of anger and agitation, the actors’ body language is relaxed. One or two of them can even be seen half smiling and looking to each other for the next cue. More disconcertingly, the surrounding audience, which appears to consist of locals and other migrant laborers, is seen with their phone cameras capturing visual mementos of the event [see figure 1.2].
In another photograph, the police surround a group of workers crouched on the ground in gestures of surrender and defeat. The image is made more disturbing by the nonchalant faces of the audience, including a fellow worker to the right of the photograph holding up his phone camera as if he is visiting an attraction [see figure 1.3].

These migrant laborers, who according to Khaw “volunteered” for the exercise, appear to be complicit in their own subjugation. By participating in the mock riot, their bodies, on display to the audience at the site and then disseminated through images on social media, indicate that the threat posed by the instigating event has been contained. The act of photograph taking by both the local and migrant laborer audiences also connotes a lack of reflexivity on their parts.

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23 Khaw, “Khaw Boon Wan Clarifies Facebook Post Showing Mock Riot.”
24 Ibid.
The repression of agency and the potentiality of resistance is not only seen in the disciplining of these bodies perceived to be abject but also in the administering of the event itself. By staging this mock riot, the authorities are taming an originally subversive form in the service of state objectives. While the instigating riot had been violent, unpredictable, and threatening to Singapore’s image as a country inhabited by a placid citizenry, the mock riot then restores this order. By seeming to unquestioningly play out their assigned roles, the participants—including the police officers, the migrant laborer volunteers, and the audience—show that their political subjectivity has been subdued to embody the paternalistically authoritarian nature of the Singapore state.

On the surface, then, the Erwiana Sulistyaningsih protestors seem to assert a sense of agency absent from the “volunteers” of the mock riot. I suggest, however, that the efficacy of the act might not have gone beyond the symbolic. The march was restricted within the perimeters of a route designated and approved by the police, and no officials came out to engage the protesters at the Tamar district government headquarters when they arrived [see figure 1.4]. The protestors disseminated soon after, the domestic workers returning to the homes of their employers to prepare for a new day of work.

Figure 1.4. Erwiana Sulistyaningsih protesters outside the government headquarters. Photo by author.
Therefore, the performative elements of both the protest march and the mock riot reveal their states’ control of these low-waged workers. While the mock riot in Singapore was contingent on the overt co-option of the migrant laborers’ compliant bodies, the peaceful protest was authorized by the Hong Kong government so as to dispel the insurgent energies of this community. Contained or appeased, these workers could then be reintegrated back into the labor force to ensure the smooth running of another working day.

The Co-option of Human Rights Work

The abuses that sparked both of the above incidents have been framed as human rights issues by labor rights advocates and the workers themselves. For example, Sulistyaningsih, presumably having adopted the languages of the NGOs that work with domestics, wrote a statement addressing her ordeal by expressing her wish for employers to stop mistreating domestic workers, stating “because as human beings, we all have equal rights.”25 The term “modern-day slavery” is also adopted frequently by news publications to describe the life of servitude that these women lead.26 While the exposure of such abuse is important, I ponder the efficacy of such discourses given how easily activist protests or reactions like the above appear to be subdued.

Taking a cue from the works of Aihwa Ong and Pheng Cheah,27 I argue that such an approach is limited because it does not address larger issues of structural inequality. Human rights claims predicated mainly on the rhetoric of “equal rights” or “modern-day slavery” dichotomizes the workers and employers as abusers and victims. As a result, the plight of the

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27 Ong, Neoliberalism as Exception; Cheah, Inhuman Conditions.
workers is blamed, and the responsibility for their reparation falls, solely on the employers or citizens of the labor-receiving countries. By focusing mainly on the restoration of the worker’s dignity, together with the improvement of worker’s immediate working conditions, people then fail to see how it is also the particularities of the economic and labor structures in Asia that perpetuate instances of inequality.28

Both Cheah and Ong elaborate on this line of argument with the domestic worker phenomenon in Asia. Cheah explains how a “relentlessly uneven and brutally competitive character of capitalist development [has] created a regional divide within Southeast Asia.”29 For example, the Philippines due to the “neoliberal policies of the World Bank and IMF [, is] economically crippled by low commodity prices, high balance-of-payment deficits, large foreign debt, and massive unemployment.”30 It thus has to send domestic workers to toil cheaply in the richer countries of Singapore and Hong Kong. These sites, in turn, take advantage of the supply of low-cost labor to keep their economies growing. Cheah then emphasizes that the NGOs that spring up to seek rights claims for the underpaid and often abused workers can never be divorced from the interests of the capitalist milieu. This is because the NGOs’ very reason for being stems from the inequalities perpetuated by the system they are trying to fight.31 Ong makes a similar argument that NGOs do not work independently but manage global labor flows in service of the labor-receiving countries. She claims that state legislations, which are in part supported by NGOs to ensure the welfare of domestic workers, do not come from a place of pure altruism. Rather, it is to enable women in places like Hong Kong and Singapore to join the workforce so

28 I am paraphrasing the underlying arguments of both Ong and Pheng.
29 Cheah, Inhuman Conditions, 184.
30 Ibid., 185.
31 Ibid., 201.
as to fulfill the “new entitlements of the growing middle class.”32 This is one scenario of Ong’s “neoliberalism as exception,”33 which creates the precarious condition for low-waged labor, in turn necessitating the respondent narrative of human rights by NGOs and advocates.

The ways in which these incidents in Hong Kong and Singapore responded to labor unrest are synonymous with Ong’s and Cheah’s critiques. By blaming the abuse largely on the employer in the case of Erwiana Sulistyaningsih and by attempting to “improve” the living conditions of the Indian workers while also subjugating them with the policy changes and mock riot exercise, these efforts become consciously or unconsciously complicit in the states’ neoliberal agendas. Ultimately, the larger issue of how the economy of these sites is predicated on the workers’ cheap labor and their propensity for exploitation is not addressed. Similarly, the following two artistic case studies, while demonstrating the value of the arts to lend a voice to these marginalized communities, also expose how easily labor rights work can be co-opted, thus embodying the challenges faced by the artists, workers, and audiences as they confront the issue of “modern-day slavery.”

*Reading Beyond the Sociological in Drama Box’s Soil*

Shah, a laborer from Tamil Nadu, and his colleague Prem are eating lunch at a construction site when their supervisor, a foreman, hurries them back to work. Shah expresses to Prem that he misses his mother’s cooking and bemoans the poor quality of the food they are given before reminding the foreman that their lunch hour is not up. The foreman is irked by Shah’s seeming defiance and reminds him of the deadlines the workers need to fulfill. Due to the long working hours, homesickness, and poor living conditions, Shah’s health deteriorates, and he injures himself at work. When he asks to see a doctor, the foreman accuses Shah of being a

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32 Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception*, 201.
33 Ibid., 3.
troublemaker. Later in the dormitory, Shah conveys to Prem that he cannot sleep in the small
apartment they share with fifty others. Exiting the apartment, he plays the bansuri, a flute-like
instrument from South Asia, and reminisces about home. Prem and Shah then go to a coffee shop
at a Housing Development Board (HDB) estate for a beer. A Mandarin-speaking woman walks
by the two workers and looks at them suspiciously. Speaking on her cellphone, she derogatorily
calls them “banglas,” covers her nose, denoting she thinks they smell, and expresses her fear of
being assaulted by them, angering Prem. When a second woman walks by, a drunk Prem
accidentally shoves Shah into her. She shouts at the two workers for what she sees as their
disorderly behavior. Perceiving that he is at the receiving end of another ethnic slur, Prem lunges
at the woman with a beer bottle. The police arrive, and while Prem escapes the scene, Shah is
arrested. The foreman goes to the police station to bail out Shah. He angrily rails at Shah,
threatening him with repatriation by canceling his work permit. Shah begs the foreman to
reconsider, explaining that he has incurred a large debt to an employment agency in order to
work in Singapore and that his family in Tamil Nadu is dependent on his remittance pay. The
foreman is unmoved. Shah is then seen carrying a packed bag as he leaves the stage.

The scenario above is the premise enacted in “The Story of Shah,” part of a forum theatre
double bill entitled Soil. It was produced by Singapore bilingual Chinese and English language

34 Housing Development Boards refer to affordable housing developed by the government that houses the majority
(about 80 percent) of the population of Singapore. They are often referred to as the “heartlands,” with the inhabitants
assumed to be middle- or working-class Singaporeans with a relatively more conservative political outlook.

35 Bangla is a derogatory term that refers to South Indian workers.

36 Soil’s double bill includes “The Story of Shah,” which I analyze in detail, and “The Story of Atin,” about a female
domestic worker and her relationship with her employer. I only discuss “The Story of Shah” for reasons of access. I
base my analysis on archival video footage of one out of the four staged performances as well as from interviews
and written documentation of the work. There is no archival footage available for “The Story of Atin.” For the sake
of expediency, I use Soil to refer to the performance I am describing. See Soil, directed by Kok Heng Luan and Li
Xie, performed April 11, 2006, performer’s recording viewed at Drama Box’s office.
theatre company Drama Box in collaboration with the arts society Migrant Voices in 2006. [see figure 1.5].  

Sha Najak, the president of Migrant Voices at that time, states that:

Soil was staged in the heartlands—specifically, Ang Mo Kio Central, Bedok Central, Chinatown and Tiong Bahru Plaza—to reach out to an audience living in proximity with migrant workers but who might not be cognizant of issues confronting them. It aimed to offer an alternative perspective to the often negative and one-dimensional portrayal of migrant workers in the public realm.

Migrant Voices was formed as an arts society in 2006 following the success of their first project—a CD of original and adapted music created or sung by foreign domestic helpers and laborers that was launched during a fringe arts festival organized by theatre company The Necessary Stage (TNS). It subsequently used the form of forum theatre as part of their mission to raise awareness about these marginalized communities. The migrant participants were sourced from drama workshops and previous art-related projects Migrant Voices had conducted. They also approached advocacy organizations Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2) and

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37 Migrant Voices is a registered arts society founded in 2006. Its key objectives are to use the arts to “provide a platform of expression for the migrant worker community, facilitate the exchange of cultural information between the various migrant communities and the Singaporean society, and to develop a sense of community between Singaporeans, migrant professionals and migrant workers.” See “Migrant Voices Annual Report 2006,” Migrant Voices, last accessed May 16, 2012, http://www.migrantvoices.org.
Humanitarian Organization for Migration Economics (HOME) in their recruitment efforts for volunteers.\textsuperscript{40}

While Migrant Voices had worked previously with TNS to produce the CD project, it now approached Drama Box to produce their forum theatre piece. Specifically, Kok Heng Luan,\textsuperscript{41} the artistic director of Drama Box, was asked to work with migrant workers to create the scenarios for the double bill based on their experiences of working in Singapore. Najak explains Migrant Voices' decision of working with Drama Box and Kok as follows:

[Drama Box] has gained a reputation for the sensitive way in which it raises issues of social awareness and civic responsibility—particularly through interactive community theatre in the 'heartlands'. Through the medium of community theatre and relevant content, they have been particularly successful in reaching out to and engaging audiences that are otherwise not exposed to the arts.\textsuperscript{42}

In addition, Kok had been mentored by TNS for years before starting his own theatre company, and TNS and Drama Box, among their other endeavors, are known for their local appropriations of the forum theatre form. As artistic director of a bilingual company with Mandarin as a primary language of communication, Kok was the ideal choice for directing a multilingual production addressing a multicultural audience based on the assumption that a large number of the audience in the heartlands would be Mandarin speakers. The production featured the actors, many of whom were migrant workers, speaking in their mother tongues, which include Bahasa Indonesia,

\textsuperscript{40}TWC2 is a society that works with migrant workers through outreach and educational programs. HOME is a shelter for domestic workers and foreign laborers who are seeking redress for abuse from their employers. Migrant Voices, TWC2, and HOME often collaborate on projects. While the three organizations perform NGO-like functions and are often referred to by the term, they are not recognized as such by the government. They are officially registered as societies as there are no official channels for a group to be registered as a NGO in Singapore. These organizations cannot be fully considered NGOs as they are not independent of state jurisdiction and/or funding.

\textsuperscript{41}Kok Heng Luan started Dramabox in 1990, and the company is now considered the premier Chinese language theatre company in Singapore. Kok is also a playwright, dramaturg, and educator in the Singapore arts scene. The work of his company mirrors Kok's belief in the ability of the theatre to engage diverse spectrums of Singapore society and as a tool for community engagement.

\textsuperscript{42}Najak and Somosundram, “A Personal Reflection on SOIL.”
Tamil, and Mandarin. In addition, Kok, his fellow director Li Xie, and the translators spoke in English and Mandarin to facilitate the discussion.

I extrapolate how Soil performs the precarious existence of low-waged migrant laborers. By tracing how the form of forum theatre in Singapore has been adapted to be more palatable to the state as well as closely reading the production’s dramaturgical elements, I will argue against a sociological analysis that the work had resisted co-option.\(^4^3\) While creating a space that gives voice to the marginalized workers, Soil is also an example of how the arts can inadvertently aid the state in managing nascent dissent.

**Augusto Boal’s Forum Theatre**

To understand why Migrant Voices used the forum theatre genre to convey its mission of speaking to the plight of migrant workers, I present here a brief overview of its background and purposes. Forum theatre, as created by Brazilian activist and theatre director Augusto Boal, is part of Boal’s artistic practice called Theatre of the Oppressed, which uses the theatre as a tool for empowerment for marginalized communities in Latin America. It was created in the 1960s to counter to what Boal saw as the passivity of Aristotelian theatre, which he believed reinstates the status quo when the audience finds “cathartic” release, the purging of emotions, by watching a play. Forum theatre, on the other hand, requires active audience participation. By intervening in the action of the plot, the passive spectators then become “spec-actors.” Boal, in short, wanted to “transform the spectator into the protagonist of the theatrical action and, by this transformation, to try to change society rather than contenting ourselves with interpreting it.”\(^4^4\) The form

\(^4^3\) In sociologist Kenneth Paul Tan’s study on the history of forum theatre in Singapore, he states that Drama Box’s practice is decidedly more radical than that of TNS’s. I elaborate on his thesis and my counterargument later in the section. See Kenneth Paul Tan, “Forum Theater in Singapore: Resistance, Containment, and Commodification in an Advanced Industrial Society,” *Positions* 21, no.1 (Winter 2013).

requires a period of collaboration during which the director and facilitators get to know the community whose stories are being told. Through research and workshops, the community comes up with a focused storyline called the “antimodel,” which is based on an incident of oppression where the protagonist(s) and antagonist(s) are at odds. Then in a staging, the antimodel is first performed, followed by a re-performance where the audience as spec-actors can stop the play at any time and volunteer to replace the protagonist. Now part of the action, the spec-actor performs an alternative action that presents a more positive outcome to the original situation. A facilitator, called the “joker,” encourages debate by posing questions and recapitulating plot changes. He or she guards the rules of engagement and makes sure that the participants do not resort to unrealistic scenarios or easy solutions. Ultimately, forum theatre is meant to empower participants to take an active stance against social injustice or political oppression they might find themselves subjected to.45 Noting the thematic concerns of Soil, it makes sense that Drama Box and Migrant Voices used the form to highlight the plight faced by the low-waged migrant workers in Singapore. Forum theatre not only provided the structure to facilitate debates and discussions, but also gave voice to the individuals at the heart of the conversation by canvassing for their opinions, experiences, and participation.

Forum Theatre in Singapore: A Controversial History

The history of forum theatre in Singapore went through a turbulent evolution prior to the staging of Soil in 2006. It was first introduced in Singapore by Alvin Tan and Haresh Sharma, TNS’s artistic director and resident playwright respectively, upon their return from a 1993 workshop conducted by Boal in New York City. TNS’s first productions of forum theatre dealt

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with issues of ethnic discrimination, male chauvinism, and societally estranged teenagers in Singapore. Sociologist Kenneth Paul Tan encapsulates the controversy of TNS’s early history with forum theatre by stating “Ironically, TNS had to deal with both a state that regarded its practice as dangerously Marxist and a local intelligentsia that thought it was not Marxist enough.”

Tan is referring to the different reactions of the government and cultural critics regarding TNS’s forum theatre works. The National Arts Council (NAC), a statutory board of Singapore, discontinued funding for the form upon publication of an article in the local newspaper The Straits Times entitled “Two Pioneers of Forum Theatre Trained at Marxist Workshop.” Tan writes that the journalist Felix Soh “described forum theatre as a provocative and agitational form and suggested that TNS was using it to achieve a political end,” an observation that did not sit well with the government. To add fuel to the fire, another article had been published a two weeks prior commenting on the controversial performance by artist Joseph Ng. Seeing these particular forms of art as going against official state rhetoric, the government subsequently decided to ban performance art as well as withdrew state funding from both performance art and forum theatre. The official reason given was that these forms lacked a script, making them difficult to rate and license and that “spontaneous audience participation” in the productions could pose “dangers to public order, security and decency.” This reaction is not surprising

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46 The titles of these productions are Mixed Blessings, MCP, and Let Me Go and were all produced in 1993.
50 In his article, Tan details how the Singapore state understood “Marxism” to be linked to Chinese-speaking theatre groups from the 1950s to the 1970s that sympathized with the central Chinese Communist Party. Artists associated with these movements were seen as threats to national security, arrested, and questioned. As such, the government was especially weary of the controversy generated by Soh’s article.
51 I expand on the Joseph Ng case in the dissertation’s chapter on queer rights and performance.
given the authoritarian stance of the Singapore state in which its citizens are largely discouraged from questioning the policies made by the political elite. The structure of forum theatre, which encourages challenges to the status quo, was thus seen as a threat. On the other hand, Tan also notes how liberal critics like performance scholar Ray Langenbach have criticized TNS’s efforts as toothless. Langenbach as quoted in Tan’s article argues that in transposing a form initially meant to empower working class communities against the oligarchy in Latin America to middle-class situations in Singapore, TNS essentially depoliticizes forum theatre by using “radical techniques to address conventional bourgeois settings.”

By 2003, however, funding for forum theatre was reinstated, and the state’s Censorship Review Committee lifted the ban on performance art. This was seen as a pragmatic and calculated decision as the arts by then were regarded as an important element in developing the economy of Singapore. In order to improve the image of the country as a great place to do business and to attract foreign investments, the Singapore government initiated the Renaissance City Project in 1999, of which part of the plan was to transform Singapore into a “Distinctive Global City for the Arts.” After the loosening of state control, in 2004, TNS restaged its past forum theatre pieces and produced new ones. These included a work that addressed the threat of and public reactions to HIV/AIDS. However, Tan notes that these works felt stilted due to the fear of state interference. Quoting various academics, he recounts how TNS’s forum theatre productions became relegated to indoor proscenium stages in Singapore. This is contradictory to Boal’s revolutionary aesthetics in which productions are staged outdoors to ensure accessibility.

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54 I write about the evolution of the Renaissance project in detail in the introduction of the dissertation and in the chapter on queer rights and performance.
55 National Arts Council, Renaissance City Plan III.
56 Academics who have commented on this issue include performance scholar Paul Rae and sociologists Terence Chong and Chua Beng Huat.
to a wide demographic of audiences. As opposed to its idealistic beginnings, TNS’s forum theatre practice became co-opted by the government and used as a teaching tool to propagate state agendas—for example, to caution the public against casual or unprotected sex so as not to contract HIV/AIDS. In short, Tan notes how:

Forum theater’s emancipatory categories of critical reflexivity, alternative imagination, free play, creative solutions, and enthusiastic participation—once feared by an authoritarian government unwilling to let its citizens think for themselves and act without its script—have become desired as factors of production in the higher stages of capitalist development. Qualities that were once subversive are being domesticated, absorbed, and integrated into a one-dimensional society that closes off the universe of meaning, turning “alternative” and the “oppositional” into creative resources and exciting products that, ironically, provide support for an authoritarian capitalist system that must survive its contradictions and crisis tendencies. By harnessing the critical energies of the arts—and, in this case, forum theater—renaissance Singapore can manufacture evidence of “vibrancy” that it expects will appeal to an internationally mobile creative class.57

By the mid-2000s, both TNS and Drama Box were producing works that spoke to the low-waged migrant labor issue with little interference from the state.58 This stood in contrast with the backlash experienced by the now-disbanded theatre group The Third Stage that in 1986 produced a play entitled Esperanza about the plight of a female domestic worker in Singapore. They were arrested as part of the group of twenty-two social activists and artists accused of the “Marxist Conspiracy.”59 In the 1980s, speaking out for the welfare of low-waged migrant workers was considered aligned with Marxist causes.60 By the beginning of the twenty-first century, the fear of a communist infiltration had been replaced by the pragmatic approach of getting artists to aid in the management of labor relations in the country.

57 Tan, “Forum Theater in Singapore,” 211.
58 TNS’s productions that highlight the story of these workers include Mobile (2006) and Model Citizens (2011).
59 The “Marxist conspiracy,” also called “Operation Spectrum,” was a 1987 covert operation by the Singapore government who utilized the Internal Security Act to arrest social activists. The activists were imprisoned and tortured under the premise that they were trying to usurp the government by aiding “communists.” It has now been established that these accusations were without just cause and that the prisoners were detained merely because their socialist political beliefs were perceived as a threat to PAP.
While Tan critiques TNS’s overall artistic stance as having been compromised by its adherence to the “authoritarian capitalist state,” he draws a more sanguine picture of Drama Box’s practice. He states that the latter “continues to be strongly connected to a more radical Chinese theatre tradition, which—despite having to be cloaked in the rhetoric of renaissance Singapore—articulates well with the more ‘revolutionary’ origins of forum theater.” On the one hand, Tan observes how, like TNS, Drama Box also “ensure[s] that forum theater’s radical origins are masked by rhetoric that is more palatable—in fact desirable—to a state looking to industrialize the arts for its creative economy.” On the other, Tan also notes the company’s subtle acts of resistance. For example, he writes how artistic director Kok Heng Luan would stage the works in public spaces and, despite being repeatedly rejected, continued to openly declare in his grant applications to the NAC that he was seeking sponsorship for forum theatre works. Kok also declined a commission from the Ministry of Defense to conduct a forum theatre workshop for military officers, cognizant that forum theatre could be used as an instrument for government propaganda in such cases. Thus, Tan describes Kok as being “very conscious, in all the work that he does, of not allowing himself to be co-opted by the system.” In particular, Tan uses Soil to support his observation. He argues that the production, which touches on a potentially controversial issue and is staged in the open areas of the heartlands with the participation of multiple stakeholders, including a multilingual and multinational cast, is evident of Drama Box’s intent of preserving the revolutionary spirit of forum theatre.

I argue that Drama Box’s approach to forum theatre is actually more vexed than Tan reveals. Specifically, his analysis of Soil, while sociologically salient, lacks a close reading of the

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61 Ibid., 218.
62 Ibid., 217.
63 Ibid., 214.
64 Ibid., 216.
embodied aspects of the work, making his deductions incomplete. I ponder instead how *Soil*, if only approached as a project to better the welfare of migrant workers, could become complicit with the agendas of the Singapore state. I thus further Tan’s observations by suggesting that while *Soil* encompasses elements of the “revolutionary origins of forum theater,” its performative slippages also expose the complications of advancing labor rights in Singapore. On the surface, “advocating for migrant workers” through forum theatre might seem to no longer “incur the state’s wrath.” I claim instead that *Soil*’s dramaturgy reveals how the arts have become a tool to help manage the country’s low-waged migrant force. Overall, the production is an example that demonstrates the complicated fight for migrant labor rights in the country, where the perilous possibilities of constant co-option are interrupted by moments of participatory elation and intersubjective experiences between its participants.

The Inadequacy of Sympathy

In the performance of *Soil* staged on April 11, 2006, Kok Heng Luan and Li Xie as the “joker” figures facilitate the interaction between the audience and performers after the staging of the antimodel. To instigate responses and debates, Kok brings up the latest media headlines about the heartland residents’ discomfort with the presence of migrant workers in their midst. Kok then encourages audience participation by asking them for their “help” in thinking of “what [they] could do for Shah,” so as to make migrant workers feel “at home.”

Responding to Kok’s invitation, a female audience member, announcing her name as Jiahui, comes on stage to take over the role of the first female passerby (the character who

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65 Ibid., 217.
66 Ibid., 218.
67 Due to the aspect of “spec-actor” participation in forum theatre pieces, each staging of *Soil* resulted in different proposed scenarios after the initial performance of the antimodel. In addition to the performance video, I have based my analysis on feedback on the other performances of the production that were not recorded from written articles and personal interviews with the artists involved.
68 *Soil*. 
telephones her friend conveying her fear of the workers). Jiahui proceeds to perform a
convoluted storyline about how the female passerby is actually an undercover journalist trying to
entrap the workers into exposing their drunkenness and lewdness. She then jumps out of
character, stating that she is enacting an example of how these workers are villainized by the
public. She declares that the media should dispel these stereotypes by portraying the workers in a
more positive light. In a following intervention, an audience member replaces the role of the
second passerby (the character who reports Shah to the police). This audience member alters the
scenario by choosing to see the incident of the scuffle as a misunderstanding. She states that
while there might be genuine cases of harassment of locals by migrant workers, she believes that
most cases are the results of miscommunication.

Kok’s facilitation emphasizes Soil’s message, which is to humanize the migrant workers
to the general public by depicting the daily prejudices and difficulties that the migrants face.
However, while the audience interventions are supposed to facilitate better relations between the
migrant workers and Singaporeans, the ways in which the reenactments unfold highlight the
passive roles inhabited by the workers, even when they are meant to be the main subjects of the
production. I see Kok’s emphasis on getting the mostly local audience to “understand” the
position of the workers, as well as the lack of volunteers to replace the role of Shah, who is the
primary protagonist, as signs that Drama Box’s adaptation of forum theatre has veered away
from Boal’s original structure.

A key component of Boal’s forum theatre is spec-actors taking over the roles of the
marginalized protagonists. By altering the protagonists’ original actions in an agential way, the
spec-actors are then able to learn through this embodied experience how to empower themselves.
In Kok’s seeking the audience’s “help” to come up with a better situation for the character of
Shah, combined with the absence of audience members volunteering to take over Shah’s role, *Soil* ends up altering Boal’s impetus. It has inadvertently set up a process in which the audience members are placed in the role of the privileged locals, with the workers as the less privileged whose situation can only be improved with the assistance of the former. First, the audience, while implored to understand Shah, cannot fully empathize with his plight as the gap in the subjectivities of the locals and foreign workers are too wide to bridge. Second, the notion and vocabulary of “empowerment” is foreign in a country like Singapore where the development of political consciousness has not been encouraged in its citizens. As a result, the audience is unable to see that the problem lies not just in the absence of mutual tolerance and understanding between the parties but in a deeper-set issue of structural inequality.

A Social Dramaturgy of “Moral Economy”

The reason for this state of affairs can be illuminated with Ong’s analysis of the treatment of migrant workers in places like Singapore. She uses the term “exceptions to neoliberalism” to describe the workers’ conditions in contrast to her idea of “neoliberalism as exception,” the particular practice of neoliberalism in Asian capitalistic cities. Unlike neoliberalism in Western nations, in which the governmental policies are assumed to be overridden in favor of the free market, neoliberalism in Singapore is enabled by the government to maximize market opportunities. A specific example that speaks to this chapter’s discussion is how the state’s manipulation of factors like citizenship and labor laws causes economic and social stratification in its populace. Allowed in the country with restrictive employment passes, these low-waged migrant workers become “exceptions” to any social and economic benefits, even as they are key contributors to the country’s economic growth. As detailed in geographer’s Brenda S.A. Yeoh’s

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69 Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception*, 3.
report, female domestic helpers and male laborers earn well below the median salary of Singaporeans because the country does not have a minimum wage. In addition to policies that place the workers in callous working and living conditions, the government also controls their biological and reproductive functions. Employers of female domestic workers are financially penalized if the workers get pregnant, with the workers themselves facing the risk of deportation, while male laborers are not allowed to bring a spouse into the country. In the “absence of legal rights,” or processes in place that enable rights claims to be made, Ong then suggests that the workers’ welfare would be more attainable if the plea were made in the name of a “moral economy.” Because of the Singapore state’s emphasis on Asian values, a call for “Asian hospitality” towards foreigners would appeal to its ethical obligation as a host country.71

I read “moral economy” as a social dramaturgy that can be co-opted by the state, highlighting precisely the lack of agency on the part of the workers. Acting as a palliative to the exploitation of low-waged labor and the co-option of civil society in the name of economic growth, this social narrative of the need to be “morally” responsible for the less fortunate is reproduced in cultural productions like Soil. To elaborate, Kok’s appeal to the audience to “help” Shah and the spec-actors’ voicing the need to be compassionate towards the workers imply that the well-being of migrant laborers like Shah is dependent on the magnanimity of individuals in “higher” social positions in his host country. As opposed to a more empowered scenario where the worker is able to speak up for his rights for fair treatment and working conditions, Shah is

71 Ong, Neoliberalism as Exception, 213.
72 Ong’s case studies are largely centered on the experiences of female domestic helpers and the practices of and discourses used by Asian-based NGOs. I suggest that her analysis is applicable to other marginalized low-waged labor groups including the male laborers featured in Soil.
relegated to the role of the victim. As a result, these reenactments in *Soil* fail to meet the criteria of Boal’s forum theatre.

That said, Ong’s proposal of the “moral economy” is predicated on her awareness of how labor flows in Asia is imbricated in the unrelenting process of capital accumulation. She observes that NGOs can only help the marginalized workers by “foregrounding their capacity to serve the insatiable demand of the neoliberal sector”73 and that “NGOs have not so much converted the globally excluded into humanity with legal rights as redefined and reordered different categories of the human in connection with various moral systems, markets, and the state.”74 Ong gives the example of how the economy of Singapore, largely dependent on the labor of middle-class Singaporean women, is feasible only because of the availability of lowly paid hired help at home. I extend Ong’s observation to the Singapore economy’s dependence on the low-waged male laborers represented in *Soil* who built the country’s modern cityscape. In the absence of legal rights and where these subjects cannot escape their role as resources to be mined, the “moral economy” then becomes the only viable option to protect these workers. After all, the state and the market recognize that they have to address at least a minimum of the workers’ needs in order for them to remain productive.

I see the performance of *Soil*, then, as a microcosm of this sort of social dramaturgy. Interestingly, the production was supported by the NGOs HOME and TWC2. 75 Like how these government-approved NGOs are tolerated, theatre productions that deal with sensitive issues like

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73 Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception*, 215.
74 Ibid.
75 HOME runs programs and shelters for abused male and female migrant workers. While HOME and TWC2 are referred to as NGOs for purposes of expediency by various stakeholders and in the media, they are not officially recognized as such, as the government does not allow the legal registration of NGOs in Singapore. Rather, these organizations are registered as “societies” and have to remain consensual to governmental policies in order to do their work. They downplay the language of human rights and empowerment and emphasize the development of personal well-being and skills development instead. I observe that NGOs in Singapore and the practice of forum theatre in Singapore share this common trait, in which they are not autonomous from government interference.
migrant rights are permitted by the state because they benefit the country’s economic agenda. The ways in which the reenactments unfolded expose how much the narrative of “moral economy,” in lieu of rights claims, has become ingrained in the psyche of the participants. I hypothesize that an ideal scenario in the eyes of the state would have the characters of the foreman and the passersby extending their magnanimity towards Shah, thus enabling him to remain happily productive in his job.

By “outsourcing” the work of promoting the welfare of migrant workers to theatre groups and NGOs while keeping an eye out for any potentially dissenting messaging, the government simultaneously diminishes its responsibilities for creating legal mechanisms to protect these workers while suggesting through these discourses and cultural productions that the primary responsibility for ensuring the welfare of these workers lies with the employers and general public. Consequently, any occurrences of abuse and rights violation are blamed on the faulty relationship of the employers or uncaring citizenry with the migrant workers instead of on the state's implementation of the “neoliberalism as exception” that causes inequalities and dehumanization on a structural level.

Acts of Resistance, Acts of Co-option

While the actions of the facilitators and spec-actors in Soil demonstrate the limitations of staging forum theatre works in Singapore, a fruitful outcome in using the lens of performance to analyze the work is that it allows for multiple and often contradictory meanings to emerge, some more agential than others. The production may not be able to divorce itself completely from the milieu from which it springs, but there are also moments of reflexive insights. In confronting the issue of labor rights in an authoritarian city dependent on the exploitation of low-waged workers
to flourish, participants are constantly vacillating between resisting and being co-opted by the objectives of the state.

One positive example is how the participants were able to look beyond the common two-dimensional narrative of labor abuse in which the employers are portrayed as antagonists. For instance, the foreman, played by Jolovan Wham, was well received by the audience. I agree with Sha Najak’s critique that Wham played his character sympathetically. He avoided the simplistic caricature of the cruel antagonist suppressing the rights of the migrant laborers. Wham brought to his role his insight as a social worker who had dealt with stakeholders involved in labor conflicts. Reflecting on his character’s motivations, Wham states in Najak’s article:

> It is easy and often tempting to fall into didactic representations. The big bad ugly foreman has feelings too! Production deadlines, the frustration of having to handle so many human beings of disparate cultures and languages can be a trying experience. Of course, this does not excuse the systemic exploitation, racism, class bias and bigotry that exist, and the fact that the foreman’s frustrations are also colored by such prejudices; but it does give a more nuanced, and in my opinion, accurate, portrayal of the role of the traditional oppressor.

In the same article, an audience member is also quoted, saying, “Foremen are not always the real bad guys, [because] they only take orders from a higher authority who will, in turn, scold them if they don’t finish on time.” Najak proceeds to comment on how this remark “highlight[s] a chain of exploitation, where another antagonist binds the antagonist.” Overall, these reflections trouble the binary representation of cruel employers versus victimized migrant laborers, referencing the awareness of a larger scale of exploitation in an advanced capitalist economy.

Yet another example in which I see the participants veering away from the expectations of their “assigned” social roles is how the migrant laborers in the audience answered the call for

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76 Wham is a social activist and social worker. He is now the executive director of HOME.
77 Najak and Somosundram, “A Personal Reflection on SOIL.”
78 Ibid.
participation. In the performance of *Soil* staged in Little India, Kok recalls how a Bangladeshi worker volunteered as a spec-actor to share his woes as a migrant worker through the character of Shah. Najak writes about this incident, noting how this spec-actor broke down in tears as he spoke of his experience with ignored workplace injuries and the escalation of unreimbursed medical fees. Wham also notes his reaction in Najak’s article:

> I was struck and touched by how, during the last performance, the Bangladeshi workers took the stage and offered to be a part of the performance. We often see but don’t hear the migrant workers in our midst. The closest many of us get to construction workers is when we are stuck in a jam on the highway and there is a lorry-load of them peering at us through our windscreen. When he broke down and cried as he related the frustrations many migrant workers in Singapore face, his was a voice which for too long has remained in the margins.

At the end of the performance, Kok speaks of how the Bangladeshi audience and spec-actors spontaneously burst into their national anthem, *Amar Sonar Bangla* (My Golden Bengal). Kok’s “hairs stood up” during the song as he recognized the workers’ deep hunger to be heard and recognized. These recollections could signal the potential for agential forms of participation from the migrant worker community. It seems that forum theatre has provided a space for the workers to assert themselves beyond their role as cheap labor scorned outside their immediate work environment. The workers in *Soil* appear to be demanding for labor justice and challenging societal stereotypes by conveying their backstories and aspirations.

However, by keeping in mind Ong’s observations of how efforts to ensure the well-being of the marginalized are not done so much for their own sake but either to exploit their labor for capitalist development or to reduce their dependency on state services respectively, I suggest that

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79 I did not see this particular performance, nor is there a video recording of it. My analysis here is based on my interview with Kok and the article by Najak.
80 Kok Heng Luan, interview by author, Singapore, January 2014.
81 Quoted in Najak and Somosundram, “A Personal Reflection on SOIL.”
82 Kok, interview.
the above scenario in *Soil* can also be seen a form of spectacle staged to contain potential rebellion from the workers as well as to appease labor rights advocates. Cheah, who makes a similar argument to Ong’s, describes the “humanizing endeavors” of NGOs and civil society as “part of a biopolitical complex” that paradoxically “dehumanize OCWs by regarding them *as means* [emphasis added] to development.”83 He sees human rights work as part of “the human force field sustaining global capital” and thus inherently “contaminated.”84 I apply his proposal of the ways in which these “human” works stem from “inhuman” forces to argue how forum theatre in Singapore, now endorsed and funded by the state, can inadvertently be used as a tool to manage dissent.85 For example, I am torn between whether to read the migrant laborer spec-actor’s (who took over the role of Shah) action as an expression of emancipation or a reiteration of a narrative of victimhood. Like the Erwiana Sulistyaningsih protest that dissipated the marchers’ anger, the migrant laborers’ singing of the Bengali national anthem and the tears it incited could also be a cathartic palliative, placating emotions that could have otherwise led to concrete acts of resistance. Thus, unlike Boal’s original vision for forum theatre that advocates the subversion of the status quo in favor of the marginalized, *Soil*’s version of the practice diverts from the larger structural problems of its theme, compromising the efforts of its participants.

The difficulty of getting the audience to see through this particular aspect of Singapore’s social dramaturgy is evident in the ways in which the reenactments of *Soil* play out.86 While the participants display flashes of insight in analyzing the character of the foreman, the steering of the debate among the audience at large proves challenging and the results inconclusive. In the

83 OCW is an acronym for overseas contract workers used by Cheah. I use the term migrant workers in this chapter instead. Cheah, *Inhuman Conditions*, 229.
84 Ibid., 232.
85 Ibid., 231.
86 I refer to Erving Goffman’s use of the term social dramaturgy in his work *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*.
April 11 performance, co-directors Li and Kok, who function as the jokers, are seen encouraging the audience to speak out about the differences in power experienced by the migrant laborers and the local population, but this effort is met with limited success. For example, an audience member named Iris comes on stage as a spec-actor to take over the role of Shah’s friend, Prem. Iris as Prem tries to defend Shah from the foreman with a confident attitude. Kok observes that Iris’s characterization is closer to that of a local worker than a migrant laborer. He reminds the audience that a migrant laborer would have acted differently because of the vulnerability of his position. He then asks Thangamani Jeganath, the laborer who plays Shah, if Iris’s portrayal is realistic. Jeganath answers that he would not have dared speak up for fear of being fired. Both Li and Kok also question the audience about the stakes that these laborers face and keep repeating terms like “differences in power” to urge them to start a debate regarding labor relations in the country. However, these attempts become circuitous; I assume either because the audience is unable to understand the reference or unwilling to engage as the topic makes them uncomfortable. Ultimately, the jokers have to circumvent the awkwardness by wrapping up the performance, urging the audience to try “understand” the challenges faced by laborers like Shah.

In the jokers’ appeal to audience empathy, they enact a self-reflexive yet problematic situation where the subject of the performance, who is also played by a “real” migrant worker, is turned into an “object” to be scrutinized. In fact, Kok refers to this explicitly. He points to the actor/worker Jeganath and reminds the audience that while “we bring him up here so that we can look at him, [we should also] understand that [the workers] are part of us.”87 While there is a clear attempt at fostering an intersubjective understanding between the locals and workers, the

87 Soil.
ways in which the performance unfolds reveal that its objectives are ultimately caught up in an unbridgeable social hierarchy and the restrictions of neoliberal governmentality.

As much as the jokers try to empower the protagonist, Jeganath’s body language appears stilted and uncomfortable throughout the performance. Never facing the audience directly, he turns his body sideways as if hiding from their gaze. I might assume that this is due to a shyness that comes naturally from being an amateur performer, but given the circumstances, it is hard not to read into the scenario the process of objectification with the dark-skinned migrant worker as a novelty on display for a curious audience who does not seem to fully understand the play’s intent. Recalling the migrant spec-actor in the Little India performance who had broken down in tears, I also wonder if that had been a performance of agency on his part or yet another spectacle for a curious audience who can then feel good about having fulfilled their civic duty by attending the play before letting things revert to the status quo.

How Radical Can Forum Theatre in Singapore Be?

By looking closely at the dramaturgical outcomes of Soil, I am thus doubtful of Kenneth Paul Tan’s confidence in Drama Box’s recuperation of a more radical version of forum theatre. I propose instead that the production vacillates between the promises of empowerment and the dangers of co-option, embodying the vexing process of theatre’s attempt to address migrant labor rights claims in Singapore. At the time of writing, Drama Box is thriving as the premiere Chinese-language theatre company in the country. Kok has also been elected as the Nominated Member of Parliament for the arts.88 The company continues to stage forum theatre plays, and in 2015, they produced an international forum theatre festival. The festival’s works, like Soil before

88 Nominated Members of Parliament are official appointments to the Singapore government. They are meant to be non-partisan positions unaffiliated with political parties with candidates elected based on their expertise in a chosen field as advisors to the government.
them, were largely funded by the NAC. Migrant Voices, however, disbanded in 2012. Its ex-

president Shaun Teo explains that the organization became unsustainable after six years of
volunteer labor. Teo now works at the NAC.

With the arts in Singapore largely dependent on state support and artists entangled in its
mechanisms, it is not surprising that Boal’s radical vision of forum theatre cannot be fully
achieved in such a context. To truly confront the exploitation of migrant labor requires dissenting
acts that strive to overturn the very ways in which the economy of the country functions—a near
impossibility as the dramaturgy of neoliberal co-option is so naturalized that it is ingrained and
embodied even in the performances that purport to resist it.

_The Oxymoronic Dramaturgy of Zheng Bo’s Ambedkar_

Entering the Hanart TZ Square Gallery in Kowloon, the spectator is confronted with an
installation made out of three connected pieces by Zheng Bo (born 1974). As she walks on the
smooth surface of the gray concrete floor, her attention is captured by an enormous cone-shaped
megaphone of rusting metal suspended from the ceiling, occupying the center of the room.
Resting atop the middle of the megaphone is a video screen featuring the instructions “to start the
system, SHOUT” in white letters on a black background. A spectator standing at the end of the
megaphone sees the video screen in front of her, with the front end of the megaphone opening up
to windows of the gallery [see figure 1.6].

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89 Shaun Teo, interview with author, January 2014.
90 Hanart Square Gallery’s primary space is in the Central district on Hong Kong’s main island. The space in which
this installation was staged is Hanart Square’s secondary space in Kowloon, a smaller adjacent island. Central is the
financial and governmental center of the city.
91 Zheng Bo is a Beijing born artist, writer, and educator living and working in Hong Kong. His work spans large
scale installations to video and photography. A self-described “socially engaged artist,” Zheng’s work is concerned
primarily with marginalized subjects, including those from human communities and ecological ones like plants and
To the left, the spectator sees a series of nine postcards placed on three shallow wall-mounted shelves. The postcards feature agitprop drawings and anti-capitalist catch phrases. The instructions “Please take the ones you like and give them to children to color” are printed on the wall between the shelves and the postcards [see figure 1.7].

To the back of the megaphone are eighteen fluorescent light tubes. They are arranged six by three into the shape of a 500 × 230 cm rectangle with a tube in the middle role deliberately slanted as if it is about to be detached from the wall [see figure 1.8].
Together these pieces, entitled “Sing for Her,” “My Very First Political Coloring Book,” and “Please Imagine an Ad, Outside the State, Outside the Market (Race Course Station 5774),” make up the experiential installation *Ambedkar*, staged in the last quarter of 2013 by Zheng Bo, a Hong Kong–based visual artist and scholar of mainland Chinese origin. The work derives its name from Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891–1956), a jurist who was a principal architect of the Constitution of India, a tireless advocate for the abolishment of the caste system, and a labor and gender rights activist. In 2011, Zheng visited Delhi, India for a research project on its education system. He learned about Ambedkar through his exposure to the activist work of students and teachers who were working to improve the democratic practices in Delhi. The experience inspired him to draw linkages between the political, class, and economic systems of India, Hong Kong, and greater China.

*Ambedkar*, which is the outcome of Zheng’s inquiry, is described by the exhibition curator Amy Cheng as a piece of art that contemplates “the living conditions and activist gatherings of migrant Filipino laborers in Hong Kong, and their relationship with globalization” with Ambedkar’s work and ideals. Zheng elaborates on his methodology as follows:

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In this project I paid particular attention to form, to the effect of space, scale and shape in sustaining engagement. Nothing is formless in this world. Art as a catalyst for social change is not separate from art as thought and experimentation on form. I agree with Grant Kester’s argument that aesthetics must be understood not only formally but also socially. In other words, we can situate the aesthetics in the social.93

Zheng sees his work as “socially engaged art,”94 miring him in a line of academic debate on the form, of which a key dispute is represented by the diverging viewpoints of art critic Nicolas Bourriaud95 and art historian Claire Bishop.96 Bishop critiques Bourriaud’s “relational aesthetics,” which emphasizes that a work of art should be primarily viewed in terms of its relevance to its social contexts. She contends instead that artworks merited on a didactic rubric of social efficacy—for example, whether they address, help, or advance a social or political cause—can inadvertently reiterate the dominant narratives of the state.97 She thus proposes a less doctrinal approach by championing philosopher Jacques Rancière’s idea of “aesthesis: an autonomous regime of experience that is not reducible to logic, reason or morality,”98 arguing that the aesthetic experience that spectators have with art should move away from a singular didactic meaning to offer multiple and sometimes radical possibilities.99 This sort of active engagement will then result in agential political subjectivities on the part of the participants.

93 “Conversation between Amy Cheng and Zheng Bo,” in Shamans and Dissent, ed. Chen Yun (Hong Kong: Hanart TZ Gallery, 2014), 88. Exhibition Catalog.
94 “Conversation between Amy Cheng and Zheng Bo,” 85.
97 Bishop argues that some socially engaged art can end up promoting a “neoliberal idea of community [that] doesn’t seek to build social relations, but rather to explode them” in which “participation in society is merely participation in the task of being individually responsible for what, in the past, was the collective concern of the state” (Bishop, Artificial Hells, 14). Bishop’s reference is the United Kingdom’s incumbent New Labor party’s policy for supporting the arts in the name of social inclusivity, which was in fact a guise to mold politically submissive citizens and to push them into self-sufficiency as the party reduced welfare benefits. The rhetoric of economic independence and lack of state-provided safety nets is also prevalent in both Hong Kong and Singapore’s political milieu.
99 Ibid., 29–36.
Significantly, Bishop has also criticized art historian Grant Kester, whom Zheng references, for thinking that “a socially collaborative art project could be deemed a success if it works on the level of social intervention even though it founders on the level of art.”\footnote{Bishop argues that Kester’s privileging of art that emphasizes the dialogic and communicative while dismissing art that foregrounds the “visual and sensorial” associated with the individual experience is flawed. Claire Bishop, “The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontent,” \textit{Artforum}, February 2006, 181.} She postulates that this position results in substandard work that is thwarted by political correctness and identity politics. While Zheng cites Kester as an influence, I see Zheng’s statement emphasizing both the “form” and the “social” in artworks as similar to Bishop’s championing of works that “attempt to think the aesthetic and the social/political together, rather than subsuming both within the ethical.”\footnote{Bishop, “The Social Turn,” 182.}

I propose that Bishop’s stance for a deep analysis of the aesthetic components of an artwork is akin to the reading practice in performance studies. I thus interpret Zheng’s aesthetic choices as a manifestation of the works’ dramaturgy, which enables me to see Ambedkar’s multifold strategy for contemplating the rights of female domestic workers in Hong Kong. First, the “form” of the installation itself embodies the “social” debate on domestic labor rights by contextualizing it in wider transnational and transhistorical contexts. It juxtaposes the Filipina domestic workers’ empowerment in a neoliberal Hong Kong with that of the class struggle in postcolonial India; links Philippine’s colonial history under Spanish and American rule to its present day subjugation as a poorer country in the Asian region; and questions the hierarchies of cultural and knowledge production. In doing so, the work alludes to structural inequality as a factor for these workers’ marginalization, thus sidestepping the simplistic narrative of victimhood as could happen under Ong’s model of the “moral economy.”\footnote{Ong, \textit{Neoliberalism as Exception}, 199.} In addition, Zheng...
includes the workers as contributors rather than as a mere source of passive inspiration in his dramaturgical process. This effort then counters the narrative of victimization critiqued in human rights work.

As I do in my analysis of Soil, however, I raise the caveat that any art originating from a highly capitalistic milieu, even if its aim is to critique the system, cannot be completely detached from its context of production. By deciphering the multiple ways in which Ambedkar reads, as well as investigating the work’s source of funding, I contend that the installation has been unwittingly implicated in a system where the global circulation of labor and monetary capital is less than ideal or transparent. As such, I contemplate the irony of Ambedkar’s process of production as it performs the unavoidable imbrication of human rights practices in the neoliberal logic of capital accumulation.

Transnational and Transhistorical Contextualizations

The deliberate inclusion of the three pieces of work that make up Ambedkar is meant to encourage the spectator to contemplate Zheng’s key concern of structural inequality by making transnational and transhistorical connections between them. I start by analyzing “Sing for Her,” which is the central piece of Ambedkar and directly addresses the domestic worker experience in Hong Kong. To interact with this section of the installation, the spectator has to approach the rear end of the megaphone and activate the screen atop the megaphone by shouting as instructed.103 She will see a video of a group of Filipina domestic workers standing in an open area of Central. With their backs to the blocks of office towers, the workers sway as they sing acapella a Tagalong song [see figure 1.9].

The lyrics of the song, translated from Tagalong to English, are as follows:

Oh Light  
In the cold night  
You’re like a star  
In the sky  
Oh light  
In the quiet night  
Your picture, little girl  
Makes one hurt

Ay  

Awake and arise  
From slumber  
From your sleep  
So deep

Open your window  
And look out to me  
So that you may understand  
My true sorrow^104

In order for the video to keep playing, the spectator has to continuously sound into the megaphone. The lyrics appearing on the screen karaoke-style encourage her to sing along. The spectator sings a phrase of the song with the performers in the recording, and the performers then

^104 As quoted in Chen Yun, “Ambedkar,” in Shamans and Dissent, ed. Chen Yun (Hong Kong: Hanart TZ Gallery, 2014), 73. Exhibition Catalog.
repeat the same phrase back to the spectator, thus creating a call and response effect that signifies an intersubjective exchange between the live spectator and recorded performers.105

In the midst of singing, the spectator might question what the deceptively simple lyrics of the song, which on the surface connotes a love story, have to do with the issue of migrant labor rights. One could interpret it as a conveyance of loneliness or solitude in a foreign country, but if the spectator delves deeper into the origins of the song, she will find that “O Ilaw,” Tagalong for “Oh Light” is actually a patriotic anthem disguised as a love song. Popularized during the 1930s and 1940s in the Philippines, the lyrics allegorize the American occupation,106 urging Filipinos to resist this “true sorrow” and to “awake and arise from slumber.”107 As mentioned, the video will only play as long as the spectator is singing. If she stops, or if the volume of the voice dips too low, the video shows a warning for the spectator to sing louder before discontinuing altogether. These dramaturgical decisions invite the spectator to participate in deciphering the subtexts of the installation. This appeal to action is further enhanced by how the voices of the spectator and the recorded domestic helpers spill into the streets through the open window facing the front of the megaphone. I interpret this as socially engaged art moving outside the gallery space to impact the larger society. Specifically, Zheng states that he sees the “huge window facing out into the street” as a threshold that “create[s] an excellent opportunity in which social intervention [can] be combined with institutional critique,” strengthening his previous claim that both the aesthetic and the social has to be considered in an artwork.108

106 The American occupation of the Philippines lasted from 1898 to 1946. The country was ceded to America by Spain after Spain’s 1898 defeat in the Spanish-American War. Filipino nationalists then proceeded to fight for independence, leading to the 1899 Philippine-American War, which lasted for three years and which the Filipinos lost. The country then remained an American colony until 1946.
107 Yun, “Ambedkar,” 73.
108 Zheng criticizes artists who emphasize the social intervention aspect of their work to the point that they end up abandoning its aesthetic aspects. Conversely, he also disapproves of artists who are inspired by the social but revert during “the exhibition stage” to a “very conservative mode of presentation.” He feels that this neutralizes the politics.
Given the varied ways in which the spectator can approach the installation, I see “Sing for Her” working on several levels of meaning-making in relation to how it speaks to labor rights issues. First, the spectator, by singing to a song that references a dark period in Filipino history, can infer the transhistorical connection between contemporary migrant labor rights issues with the previous conquest of the Philippines. The spectator can juxtapose Philippine’s loss of sovereignty in the first half of the twentieth century against the more recent trend of large swathes of Filipinas migrating to affluent countries as low-waged help. The suppression of agency and rights has evolved from a “traditional” version of colonial control in which a concrete entity of a dominant nation represses a weaker one to a neoliberal system of subjugation predicated on the transnational flow of labor and capital.

In addition, a critique on the unequal economies between the rich labor-receiving countries and the poor labor-sending countries is embodied in the rusted material of the megaphone. Fine arts scholar Frank Vigneron observes how the deliberately chosen material replicates “the surface texture of the damaged infrastructures of the poorest areas of these ‘developing/developed’ economies.”109 The spectator will have no difficulty detecting the significance of the juxtaposition of the decrepit-looking megaphone meant to allude to a country like the Philippines with the shiny skyscrapers that she sees on the video screen characteristic of the affluent city of Hong Kong.

Zheng furthers his commentary in “My Very First Political Coloring Book.” The postcards in the piece are miniaturized replicas of wall posters Zheng saw at Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi designed by students of political organizations. These organizations, of production in institutions like galleries and presentation spaces, thus causing the political critique of the work to be neutered. See “Conversation between Amy Cheng and Zheng Bo,” 92.

which include the United Students Democratic Front (USDF), the Students’ Federation of India (SFI), and the All India’s Student Association (AISA), are ideologically Marxist or Socialist. They share the goal of a more equitable society for India economically, politically, and socially. One postcard by AISA features the likeness of and a quote from Ambedkar coupled with the slogan “Defend the struggle for social dignity, social equality, social justice!” Another has stylized drawings of women with arms raised, coupled with the English translation of the Urdu poem “We Sinful Women” by Pakistani feminist poet Kishwae Naheed. There is also a postcard with the headline “Socialism is the future” written above a drawing of a flag featuring the faces of Karl Marx, Vladimir Lenin, and Joseph Stalin. Yet another by SFI contains the mantras “Unite against neoliberal policies” and “Our democratic struggle long live.”

While the messages in these postcards appear simplistic in their doctrinal rhetoric and uncritical veneration of controversial figures in the history of communism, the aspiration of the organizations for a more just India is clear. According to Cheng, Zheng is using “his experience in Delhi to compare notions of equality he had experienced living in communist China to contemporary calls for equality in many of the world’s constitutional democracies.” In our interview, Zheng mentions how he noticed the distinct class differences perpetuated by the caste system in India when visiting the homes of his hosts with domestic servants. He recalls how the servants would “retreat from the room in a very humble and obedient fashion” after serving food to their employers. He then compares this with a similar experience in Hong Kong when, as a guest at a dinner party, he observed the shock of the host’s mother when he asked if the domestic worker would be joining them at the table. He concluded from this encounter that “in Hong

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Kong people think class society is normal.” By transforming the posters into postcards that the audience can color in, “My Very First Political Coloring Book” becomes an invitation to the spectator to partake in a learning process about the student movements in India that have a vastly different ideology from that of capitalistic Hong Kong.

Zheng’s attempt to contextualize in structural terms labor rights and its related issues of class and economic inequality is not just restricted to contexts of a historical or political nature but also to the establishment of contemporary art. This is seen in his inclusion of the light installation “Please Imagine an Ad, Outside the State, Outside the Market (Race Course Station 5774).” A spectator familiar with contemporary art might associate “Please Imagine an Ad” with the work of minimalist artist Dan Flavin, known for his installations made out of commercial fluorescent lights. By alluding to Flavin’s work, Zheng is commenting on the hierarchy of references in the institutional art world and that of knowledge production in general.

Significantly, curator Amy Cheng notes how “audience members [who are] familiar with modern art immediately associate this work with the fluorescent tube installations by famous Western artists, but not things related to India.”

Zheng then reveals that the initial impetus for “Please Imagine an Ad” is not Flavin but the florescent tubes he saw illuminating the empty light boxes meant to frame advertisements on the streets of Race Course Station in Delhi. I see the title of the piece together with its aesthetics as inviting the audience to imagine the possibility of advertisement, which could symbolically reference a commercial product or state-funded propaganda, existing independently from the “state” or “market.” This reads both as a challenge to the spectator to question the hierarchies of power cemented in the fields of market capital and politics as well as an ironic commentary.

112 Zheng Bo, interview with author, January 2014.
about this seeming impossibility. Considering both interpretations, Zheng has thus created a scenario in which the thematic struggle of domestic helpers in Hong Kong is situated within wider debates about institutional power transnationally on the commercial streets of India and topically in the hierarchy of recognition within the art world.

As the spectator moves through the installation, she is directed to step out of her comfort zone by confronting ideologies that may be at odds with the ways in which she lives and experiences Hong Kong. Together, her embodied interactions with “My Very First Political Coloring Book,” “Sing for Her” and “Please Imagine an Ad” culminates in her deciphering the varied subtexts within Ambedkar, enabling her to contextualize the issue of low-waged labor rights in Hong Kong within a wider frame of references.

Exchanging Expertise

Zheng’s attempt at shedding light on the structural marginalization of the domestic workers through the dramaturgy of Ambedkar’s aesthetics is also reflected in the work’s development process. Through Sol Pillas, an activist leader and domestic worker, Zheng was introduced to two Filipina domestic helper cultural groups—LIKHA Filipino Migrants Cultural Organization and the Philippines Independent Church Choir.114 By participating in their cultural and activist events, he learned about “their political struggles, [as well as] Filipino history and domestic politics.”115 Conversely, he also organized talkbacks and workshops where the domestic helpers became audiences and participants of contemporary art. This renders them not just as objects of the work to be consumed by an “elite” audience but as active subjects and collaborators to the work of which their experiences and labor were a part. Zheng states that his

114 “Conversation between Amy Cheng and Zheng Bo,” 89.
115 Ibid., 89.
approach was to overturn the power imbalance between artists or audiences and the marginalized
subjects of socially engaged art in which:

    [P]edagogical opportunism for disadvantaged groups are ignored, or there is an
unwillingness to acknowledge that they also can benefit from learning. As if to
compensate them for the oppression they suffer in life, artists and critics enshrine them
and worship them—so a good opportunity to help them understand and enjoy art is
missed out.116

By administering a system in which the workers and himself exchange knowledge and expertise
rather than him overtly validating them, Zheng sought to avoid the unconscious condescension or
patronization of his “less advantaged” subjects. By getting the workers to become agential
contributors to Ambedkar, both parties are then able to challenge, in the space of the gallery, the
naturalized social dramaturgy of the class hierarchy in neoliberal Hong Kong.

Structural Imbrications

Based on my study of Ambedkar thus far, from one perspective the work does situate the
issue of low-waged labor rights of domestic helpers within a larger milieu of structural
inequality. However, by further analyzing the work through the lens of Bishop’s argument, in
which she posits the need to look at the aesthetic complexities of an artwork beyond the rubrics
of social efficacy, I discover that Ambedkar has more facades than first appears, making me
fathom if any work of art could be completely divorced, consciously or unconsciously, from its
context of production. I thus return to Cheah’s argument that the logic of neoliberal capital is so
entrenched in a site’s social, political, and economic systems that any legal human rights
mechanisms and NGOs trying to work against it will be ultimately “contaminated.”117 I propose
that Cheah’s theory can be applied to the imbrication of artworks as well.

116 Ibid., 86.
117 Cheah, Inhuman Conditions, 232.
I had analyzed earlier how in “Sing for Her” the domestic workers used the song “O Ilaw” as an indirect way to critique their marginalization in Hong Kong. The singing of an anti-colonial song disguised as a love song to refer to the workers’ current circumstance is by most accounts a subversive act of resistance that imbues them with agency. Nevertheless, I cannot help but notice how the patriotism that reads so positively in the work is also what fuels the flow of low-waged workers from a labor-sending country like the Philippines to a labor-receiving country like Hong Kong. The image of the female domestic worker as a hero/martyr in the Philippines was created during the second half of the twentieth century as a justification for sending large numbers of Filipinas abroad. Dependent on the remittance they brought into the country, the state created the rhetoric pronouncing them “national heroes for their contribution to the development of the Philippine economy.”118 Ironically, the patriotism that fuels the workers’ resistance as evident in the video is also the same effect that contributes to their exposure to potential abuse by incentivizing them to come to Hong Kong in the first place.

As such, their substandard treatment is often blamed on the employers or the governments of the labor-receiving countries. But even when the anger is directed at the labor-sending country like the Philippines for failing to protect their “national heroines,”119 people “do not reject the fundamental axiom that development is the best way to actualize the humanity of the Filipino people.”120 In other words, while the ill treatment of these workers is denounced, the

119 One infamous example is that of Flor Contemplacion, who was executed in Singapore for allegedly killing a fellow domestic worker and her charge, a three-year-old boy. Filipinos staged large protests in the Philippines denouncing the inhumane sentencing of the Singapore court as well as accusing the Philippines government of not doing more to object to what they thought was an unproven verdict.
120 Cheah, Inhuman Conditions, 237.
dehumanizing effects of the global flows of labor caused by neoliberal logic remains unexamined.

In addition, I also contemplate how Ambedkar as an artistic production came to be entangled in the murky flows of neoliberal financial capital. The work was part of a year-long exhibition featuring artists from India and China. Entitled Shamans and Dissent, the exhibit was inspired by Indian intellectual and social theorist Ashis Nandy, who questioned the hierarchy of knowledge by eschewing Eurocentric frames of references. In turn, the Shamans and Dissent exhibition was sponsored by West Heavens, a “cross-cultural exchange program” founded in 2010 by cultural studies scholar Kuan-Hsing Chen to “promote interaction and cross-references between [India and China] through social thoughts and contemporary art.” West Heavens is a project articulating Chen’s theory of “Asia as Method,” in which he argues that an understanding of Asian cultures and knowledge production should stem from perspectives within the region instead of looking to “the West” as the primary frame of reference. Ambedkar, which juxtaposes the social and economic circumstances of India and Hong Kong as a way to explore domestic workers’ access to autonomy and welfare in Hong Kong, fits right into its sponsors’ mission.

A closer inspection of the funding source of the Shamans and Dissent project, however, reveals that while Ambedkar has addressed one form of global hegemony, it has been inadvertently imbricated in the hegemony of another sort, that of the unsavory side of neoliberal economics. The exhibition catalog of Shamans and Dissent lists the only funding source for the West Heavens project as a nonprofit called Moonchu Foundation. The catalog also reveals that

123 Please refer to the Introduction for the etymology of this term.
the foundation is the primary funder of the Inter-Asia School (IAS), co-founded by Kuan-Hsing Chen. While West Heavens is the artistic branch of Chen’s mission, the IAS is its scholarly trajectory.124

I was interested in finding out more about the Moonchu foundation, but an internet search did not bring up any official website. Instead, it led me to a series of news articles and financial sites written in Cantonese that link the foundation to shell companies registered in the Cayman Islands and the British Virgin Islands. For instance, the news article “證監會票控旭光前非執董” (Securities and Futures Commission of Hong Kong Sues China Lumena New Materials Former Executive Director Zhang Song-Yi) reveals that the Moonchu Foundation is the primary shareholder of Mandra Mirabilite Ltd., a trading company that was investigated for failing to declare its profits for tax purposes. Zhang defended himself and the company by arguing that the profits were all being channeled to his nonprofit entity the Moonchu Foundation, which funds arts and cultural projects.125 Analyzing the headline, I speculate that its choice of associating Zhang with the company China Lumena New Materials is a deliberate one. This company is ill reputed for fraudulently inflating its profits and making false claims about its productivity,126 and the article is thus hinting at the crooked nature of Zhang’s business dealings.

I decided to delve deeper by searching for Zhang Song-Yi and the Moonchu Foundation on the website Offshore Leaks Data Base, published by the International Consortium of

124 The Inter-Asia School aims to “create new modes of knowledge production for the staging and formation of an Asian circle of thought,” and to “overcome the long-lasting barriers of interactions and predicaments of thought engendered by colonialism, wars and the Cold War.” See Chen, “Ambedkar.”
Investigative Journalists (ICIJ), which leaked the Panama Papers.\footnote{The Panama Papers" refer to a leak of eleven and a half million files from offshore law firm Mossack Fonseca. The information was handed to ICIJ by German newspaper Süddeutsche Zeitung, which in turn had obtained them from an anonymous source. As described by the Guardian, "the documents show the myriad ways in which the rich can exploit secretive offshore tax regimes." See Luke Harding, "What Are the Panama Papers? A Guide to History's Biggest Data Leak," The Guardian, April 5, 2016, accessed June 16, 2016, http://www.theguardian.com/news/2016/apr/03/what-you-need-to-know-about-the-panama-papers.} This revealed a complicated web of companies either owned by Zhang or of which he is a director. For example, the site exposes that while Moonchu Foundation for Cultural and Education Limited is registered in Hong Kong, it is the primary shareholder of Woo Foong Hong Limited, which is in turn registered in the British Virgin Islands, a tax haven.\footnote{Moonchu Foundation for Culture & Education Limited," ICIJ Offshore Leaks Database, accessed June, 17 2016, https://offshoreleaks.icij.org/nodes/57330.} Tellingly, Woo Foong Hong Limited does not have an official web presence where I could garner concrete information on the nature of its business. A search for Zhang Song-Yi in the database also links his name to twenty-two entities, all registered in the British Virgin Islands. Zhang is acknowledged as a director for all but one of them, Woo Foong Hong, where he is named a shareholder.\footnote{Zhang Song-Yi," ICIJ Offshore Leaks Database, accessed June, 17 2016, https://offshoreleaks.icij.org/nodes/71440.} While it would be hasty to make any specific accusations about Zhang or his foundation, the fact that they are linked to a complex web of companies registered in tax havens is ground for suspicion. Upon further inquiry, I also uncovered that Zhang Song-Yi is the brother of Chang Tsong-zung, better known as Johnson Chang, the founder and director of Hanart Square Gallery, where Ambedkar was staged.\footnote{Chang Tsong-zung is one of the most influential curators and powerbrokers of Chinese contemporary art and is credited for shaping the trends in and developing the lucrativeness of the Chinese art market.}

Like Cheah’s criticism of the work of human rights NGOs, then, the way in which the related projects of Zheng’s Ambedkar and Chen’s West Heavens series are financially supported imbricates them in the “contaminated”\footnote{Cheah, Inhuman Conditions, 232.} structures in which they are produced. I doubt that Zheng nor Chen know in-depth the nature of their projects’ funding source. Similarly, the
domestic helpers in “Sing for Her” are unlikely to have pondered the irony of their performed patriotism, in which they were asserting their agency while also reinforcing the very structures that had exposed them to exploitation and oppression. The oxymoron in Ambedkar then lies in how a work meant to counter rights violations and structural inequality suffered by the marginalized classes is discovered to be financed by a foundation that is enabled by and might be enabling similar economic and power stratifications that cause them in the first place.

The Inexorable Process of Neoliberalization

Overall, Ambedkar’s dramaturgy makes visible both the agential and complicit qualities of the installation. Zheng speaks of how “engagement” in socially engaged art should not be focused on “results” but on the “changes the participants experience.”132 His rejection of the established criterion of socially engaged art being dependent on social efficacy is a position that Bishop would have approved. Ambedkar does not aim to directly seek a concrete legislative change in the labor rights situation of domestic workers in Hong Kong nor does it have an agitprop approach to its theme. Rather, it offers its participants the opportunity to alter their political subjectivities by becoming more aware of how labor rights are imbricated in the wider issues of structural inequality. Conversely, in making an artwork that allows for multiple ways of experiencing and reading, Zheng has also created a work that, consciously or unconsciously, encapsulates the inexorable formation of the neoliberal subject.

Chapter Conclusion

The social and artistic case studies in this chapter address the issue of low-waged migrant rights claims and their imbrication in the neoliberal flows of bodies and capital. While the state’s willingness to engage with the protesting workers stems from the country’s need to extract their

labor, the artistic productions reveal their inability to fully dislodge from their political and economic contexts of production.

In *Soil*, the theatre-makers, while cognizant of the compromised position of forum theatre in Singapore, continue to use the form to advocate for labor rights. *Soil* presents an altered form of forum theatre’s original dramaturgy, elucidating the insidious ability of authoritarian and neoliberal narratives to co-opt even forms and movements that are meant to be emancipatory. Recalling the mock riot meant to dispel the Bangladeshi migrant laborers’ sense of insurgency, I interpret the exercise as a forum theatre of everyday life. Similar to *Soil*, by using dramatic tropes to serve its ideologies, the state is depoliticizing potentially radical practices for its own ends.

While *Ambedkar* more overtly addresses how structural inequality contributes to workers’ exploitation, its processes reveal how even a work of art critical of its milieu can be inadvertently compromised. Similarly, the efficacy of the protest for Erwiana Sulistyaningsih can be questioned as the marchers eventually returned to their social and economic stations. As such, the reliance of art and cultural projects on dubious sources of funding, echoing the dependence on the labor of low-waged domestic workers, are indicative of how a capitalistic city like Hong Kong functions.

More positively, reading these case studies as performance also illuminates moments of rupture in these practices, in which sparks of agential subjectivity are detected interrupting the otherwise relentless flow of the neoliberal apparatus. The Bangladeshi workers who did not perform to script and unabashedly erupted into their national anthem in *Soil* and the spec-actors in *Ambedkar* being encouraged to oppose structural inequality by having to decipher the
interlinked references in the work are instances showing how the balance of subjugation and
resistance in human rights work is always in flux.
CHAPTER 2: THE ECONOMICS OF LGBTQ RIGHTS CLAIMS IN THE QUEER PERFORMANCES OF SINGAPORE AND MALAYSIA

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. Human beings of all sexual orientations and gender identities are entitled to the full enjoyment of all human rights.

— The Yogyakarta Principles

By taking a stand when rights are threatened, artists may act not solely or even primarily in the name of any supervening concept of “universal values,” but to reassert some of the internal differences that characterise all cultures and nations, however apparently homogeneous. . . . [T]his dual approach to recognising what is distinctive while affirming what is common about cultural identities can make an important contribution to the as-yet (and perhaps perpetually) unfinished process of universalising human rights.

— Paul Rae, Theatre and Human Rights

In 2003, Malaysian theatre company Instant Café produced Paula Vogel’s *Baltimore Waltz*.1 Centered on the relationship between a brother and sister, the play explores the themes of queer subjectivity, living with and dying of AIDS, and grief. The dramaturgy of the play is peculiar in its omission of dialogue and scenes that have direct references to LGBTQ issues. During those moments, the audience sees the actors taking frozen poses in front of projected captions on stage that read “Unacceptable Dialogue Removed,” or “Unacceptable Removal of Clothing Removed.”

The play’s director, Reynold Buono, recalled the sequence of events that led to his directorial decision. The production was originally banned by the censorship committee at Dewan Bandaraya Kuala Lumpur (DBKL), Kuala Lumpur’s city hall. The officers had deemed

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1 Instant Café is a theatre company originally formed in 1989 by Andrew Leci, Jit Murad, Zahim Albakri, and artistic director Jo Kukathas to speak to the political corruption and human rights abuses by an authoritarian state. Famous for their satirical skits lampooning Malaysian politics and politicians, they also produce plays by local and regional playwrights and adapt plays from the Western “canon.” In our interview, Kukathas recounts how the company was formed in a period of political upheaval in Malaysia. These events included the Bumiputra Malaysia Finance (BMF) financial scandal of the 1980s, when the Bumiputra National Bank reportedly lost one billion Malaysian ringgit in national assets that went unaccounted for, and Operation Lalang in 1987, when the country’s ruling party, Barisan Nasional (BN), imprisoned 106 members of the opposition parties and social activists without trial under the Internal Security Act. The government justified its decision by citing the prevention of a possible racial riot that could be instigated by an upcoming mass rally planned to protest the appointments of non-Chinese leaders as principals and top administrators in Chinese schools.
the play’s contents to be indecent and immoral. Instant Café filed an urgent appeal to DBKL for the ban to be lifted. During the follow-up visit by the censorship officers, Malaysian stage and screen star Joanna Bessey, who played the sister Anna, convinced the officers that *Baltimore Waltz* did not condone but was, in fact, a cautionary tale against LGBTQ “lifestyles.” She reasoned with the officers that since the brother character Carl eventually dies from AIDS, the message was that this gay character was being punished for his sin of sexual deviance.\(^2\) Bessey’s celebrity in Malaysia, combined with her dexterous appeal to the religious and moral beliefs of the Muslim officers through a deliberate misinterpretation of the play, succeeded in preventing an outright ban of the production, and it was eventually staged with extensive cuts.

At first look, this outcome seemed to have compromised the integrity of the original play. An understanding of Malaysia’s repressive stance against LGBTQ lives, however, allows me to read Buono’s intervention as a subversive one. The artistic director of the company, Jo Kukathas, recalled how the audience’s initial amusement regarding the censored scenes eventually turned into irritation and anger during the course of the performance.\(^3\) Thus, while the production appeared to be working within Malaysia’s censorship mechanisms, it was at the same time performing its own resistance, highlighting to the audience the state’s restrictions on both artistic expression and the persecution of queer subjects.

This chapter explores how artistic representation and performance activism address the discriminatory practices against the LGBTQ communities in two selected sites in Asia. I am interested in unpacking the paradox represented in the above example, in which artists and activists could find spaces for queer voices but only with caveats suited to state narratives. This is apparent in the cases of Malaysia and Singapore—two countries where non-heterosexual sex

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\(^2\) Reynold Buono, interview by author, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, December 19, 2011.

\(^3\) Jo Kukathas, interview by author, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, January 15, 2011.
practices can be prosecuted by law but where LGBTQ subjectivities have also been given considerable spaces of expression in the arts and in activist civic events.

In Singapore, I examine the performance piece *Cane* by self-identified queer artist Loo Zihan alongside the LGBTQ rights campaign Pink Dot. I acknowledge their efficacy in exposing the continued criminalization of queer subje in a country that prides itself on being economically advanced and culturally cosmopolitan. At the same time, I observe how they also hint at the depoliticization of their efforts due to their imbrication in the state’s capitalist and nationalist objectives, which led to the subsequent sanitization of their messaging. In Malaysia, I analyze the performative photography work *Repent or Die!* by queer activist Pang Khee Teik, which I contextualize with my observations on *Seksualiti Merdeka* (sexual independence), the LGBTQ rights campaign co-founded by Pang, as well as *Dalam Botol* (In a bottle), the first mainstream Malaysian film featuring queer characters. I examine how the camp performances in Pang’s set of photographs are defiant acts against a profoundly homophobic Islamic government and attempts to provide a representation of queer subjectivities unavailable or misrepresented in Malaysia’s mainstream media. However, I also question if the relevance of Pang’s work is representative only of LGBTQ individuals with considerable economic and cultural capital and consider what this might indicate about the limits of LGBTQ activism in the country.

Overall, I demonstrate how the chapter’s main case studies are hybrid performances that merge global LGBTQ rights discourses with Asian-based rhetoric, manifesting the evolving political subjectivities of selected Asian queer subjects who are at once enabled yet co-opted by the states’ particular systems of neoliberalism.4

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4 The words “homosexual,” “gay,” and “queer” are not used interchangeably. “Homosexual” and “gay” are used when these are the terms employed by the particular person or reading quoted. I use the term “LGBTQ” as an identity category that signifies a community designation. Following the work of queer theorist David Halperin, I understand queer to refer to a mode of subjectivity, where the individuals in question see themselves deviating from
An Asian-Specific Reading of Queer

The dramaturgies of these case studies reveal that the efficacy of LGBTQ rights claims in these Asian sites cannot be understood by reading them solely within frameworks of queer and human rights theory originating from Western perspectives. Rather, they have to be read and judged on their own terms. My analytical framework is thus inspired by scholars who take both global and local perspectives into account. Besides the work of Baden Offord, as mentioned in the dissertation’s Introduction, I also find cultural anthropologist Ara Wilson’s call for an understanding of queer subjectivities located in the specificity of political dynamics of Asia helpful. Influenced by the field of inter-Asia cultural studies, Wilson wants her readers to consider frameworks that “involve, but do not rotate on the Western world.” Wilson’s approach to queer subjectivity is compatible with human rights scholar Glenn Mitoma’s approach to general rights claims, in which the latter utilizes Homi K. Bhabha's idea of hybridity to think of human rights discourses as being formed through cross-cultural negotiations. Together, Offord’s interdisciplinary approach, which combines site-specific human rights and queer discourses, Wilson’s “queer regionalism,” and Mitoma’s “hybrid articulation of rights,” inform my analysis of queer rights claims in Asia that moves away from neocolonial discourses of human

the normative, “legitimate,” or dominant gender or sexual identifications. In turn, gender theorist Audrey Yue argues that queer subjectivity in Asia is inherently tied up to the region’s political and institutional structures, where “oppositional resistance” is impeded by the “queer complicity” with “governmental policy.” As such, I use queer in this chapter to refer to a particular mode of being inhabited by the LGBTQ individuals who are imbricated in neoliberal logics of the Malaysia and Singapore states. See David Halperin, Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiotherapy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 62. See Audrey Yue, “Introduction: Queer Singapore: A Critical Introduction,” in Audrey Yue and Zubillaga-Pow, Queer Singapore: Illiberal Citizenship and Mediated Cultures, 2.

5 Offord, “Queer Activist Intersections in Southeast Asia: Human Rights and Cultural Studies.”
8 Wilson, “Queering Asia,” sec. 4.
rights originating from Western historical circumstances. I am then able to situate my case studies in an “in-between space” where “the meaning of culture is negotiated and enunciated” in their particular contexts.  

Enabled by neoliberal economics, yet restricted by conservative social mores, I consider how *Cane*, *Pink Dot*, and *Repent or Die!* reveal the ways in which queer resistances are enacted and perceived in reaction to the Singapore and Malaysian states’ shifting positions regarding the presence of queer subjectivities and LGBTQ rights.

*Penal Code 377*

At present, queer subjects in Malaysia and Singapore are still discriminated against under the anti-sodomy laws of Penal Code 377, which was established in 1936 in Malaysia and 1938 in Singapore respectively. Both Malaysia and Singapore’s Penal Codes 377 are interpretations of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code under former British administration. While the code officially only criminalizes the sexual act of “sodomy” between males, by inference the law generally speaks to the abject status of all LGBTQ lives in these countries. In present day Singapore, under Section 377A of the Penal Code, “any male person who, in public or private” commits “any act of gross indecency with another male person” can be prosecuted and punished “with imprisonment for a term which may extend to 2 years.”  

In Malaysia, an individual who violates Penal Code 377A by “committing carnal intercourse against the order of nature” can be punished under Penal Code 377B with “imprisonment for a term which may extend to twenty years, and shall also be liable to whipping.” The continued existence of the penal code has been justified by the conservatism underlying the Asian values argument. While the strict enforcement

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10 Ibid.
of the penal code in both countries has not been widespread in recent years, its existence serves
as a device to keep queer subjectivities and LGBTQ activism in check.

**Queer Performances of Dissent, Queer Performances of Consent**

In past instances in which the code has been enforced, artists and activists have reacted
swiftly. Loo Zihan’s *Cane*, the main case study in this chapter, is a reenactment of a performance
intervention by performance artist Josef Ng. Ng’s original piece was a reaction to an infamous
entrapment case in Singapore, which had resulted in the arrest of a group of gay men in 1994.\(^{13}\)
In Malaysia, where conservative Islamic values are ingrained, the government used the code as a
political tool against opposition party members. Instant Café’s work closely commented on what
is now termed the Anwar Ibrahim sodomy trials, which started in 1998. Anwar Ibrahim was the
Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia under the ruling party Barisan Nasional’s (National Front)
coalition of the United Malays National Organization (UMNO).\(^{14}\) A vocal critic of incumbent
Prime Minister Mahathir bin Mohamad, Anwar was eventually seen as a political threat. Anwar
was then charged with practicing “unnatural sex” with both his speechwriter and his adopted
brother and subsequently fired from the cabinet and imprisoned on sodomy and corruption
charges. After a series of arrests and acquittals, Anwar, who by 2008 had become a leading
figure in the opposition party Parti Keadilan Rakyat (People’s Justice Party), was again found
 guilty in 2015 and is now serving a prison sentence. It is the general consensus of the public that
Anwar is not guilty of sodomy. Rather, the accusations are widely believed to have been made in
order to discredit Anwar as a politician.\(^{15}\) While the trial is most often spoken of in relation to

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\(^{13}\) Details of this event will be given in the chapter on the case study *Cane*.

\(^{14}\) UMNO is the leading political party in Malaysia and made up of different coalitions defined by the country’s
three major ethnic groups—Malay, Chinese, and Indian. The politicians of Barisan Nasional, the Malay ethnic
coalition, are the default leaders of the party.

government corruption, the very vehemence of the accusations highlights the deep discrimination against LGBTQ lives in Malaysia as well as the danger of legal reprimand that exists under the state’s sodomy law.

In reaction, Jo Kukathas adapted playwright Dario Fo’s *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* into a bilingual Malay and English language production in 1999. Kukathas used Fo’s play to reflect how the Anwar trial was widely viewed as an absurd performance in government corruption, police brutality, and unjust convictions. At a later date, a critic described Reynold Buono’s direction of Moises Kaufman’s *Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde* in 2001 as creating a sense of “déjà vu [in] anyone who has been following the farcical trials of Anwar Ibrahim.”¹⁶ These subversive plays escaped the Malaysian censors’ notice in the late 1990s and early 2000s due to Instant Café and the theatre scene’s relatively small audience base in the capital city of Kuala Lumpur. However, artistic productions of any genre, including the theatre featuring queer subject matters, have since been few and far between. I speculate that this is partly due to politicians advocating for more conservative versions of Islam,¹⁷ which by implication decreases the availability of state and corporate funding for the liberal arts.

One consequence of the Barisan Nasional–led embrace of hardline interpretations of Islam was the appearance of state-sponsored anti-LGBTQ education and arts programs. For example, the “anti-gay” musical *Asmara Songsang* (Abnormal desire) directed by Rahman Adam was staged in 2013 in Malaysia’s national theatre in Kuala Lumpur and then scheduled to tour primary and secondary schools, teacher-training colleges, and universities throughout the

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country. The didactic musical depicts the LGBTQ characters as social deviants who engage in a promiscuous and idle lifestyle of drug-addled casual sex and raucous parties. The characters who convert to Islam are spared from a violent death while those who do not are “killed in a lightning storm” sent by Allah.  

_Asmara Songsang_ was part of a comprehensive government initiative to stamp out pro-LGBTQ sentiments in civil society that have been growing since the turn of the twenty-first century. Another program set up correctional camps by The Education Ministry for male students showing signs of “effeminate behavior.” In addition, Deputy Education Minister Dr. Mohd Puad Zarkashi planned to introduce a “Social and Reproductive Health Education” program in schools to warn students of the “threats and dangers” of LGBTQ lives.  

To that end, a “how-to guide for recognizing gay and lesbian ‘symptoms’ in youths” was endorsed and anti-LTBTQ parenting seminars were launched in 2012. Defending his stance against the outcry from segments of civil society demanding recognition of LGBTQ rights, Zarkashi stated, “they are talking about human rights but the problem with human rights, is that it does not take into consideration religious sensitivities and prohibitions.”

While state-led Islamic conservatism dictated the usage of penal code 377 in Malaysia, the lobbying efforts from the minority Christian religious right played a role in the continued criminalization of LGBTQ communities in Singapore. Queer and performance theorist Eng-Beng Lim traces the National Council of Churches of Singapore’s (NCCS) campaign against what its

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18 Hordal, “Anti-Gay Musical Tours Malaysian Schools and Universities.”
members saw as a “gay rights agenda” of pro-LGBTQ activists who advocated the repeal of the penal code in 2003. Christian-right representative and Nominated Member of Parliament Thio Li-Ann saw a justification for the repeal of Code 377, which criminalized anal and oral sex between heterosexual partners since these acts could presumably lead to intercourse with the chance of procreation. However, as recounted by Lim, she argued vehemently against the repeal of Code 377A, which criminalizes anal and oral sex between same-sex couples, judging these acts as “unsafe, promiscuous, non-reproductive” and potentially resulting in the “rise of the militant gay.” She concluded that “gay activists and their perverse agendas must be tightly policed or they will grow into a U.S.-style lobbying for rights and marriage, and lead to the crumbling of society.”

Politicians like Thio and Zarkashi have engaged in scare-mongering tactics by associating LGBTQ activism with the “decadent” West. While this has not stopped artists, activists, and LGBTQ communities in both countries from speaking up against these politicians’ skewed representation of queer subjectivities, the situation in Singapore is considerably more contradictory as cultural policies and queer subjects themselves are heavily imbricated in the state’s neoliberal objectives. The conditional acceptance of LGBTQ communities is reflected in journalist Chua Mui Hoong’s article “It’s Not About Gay Rights, It’s Survival,” published in 2003 in the country’s highest circulating English language national newspaper, *The Straits Times*. Chua refers to urban studies theorist Richard Florida’s *The Rise of the Creative Class*, the latter writing that an educated, skilled creative workforce is attracted to vibrant cities tolerant of diversity, including those open to gay populations. Chua posits that Singapore must do the

same to achieve its desired economic goals, stressing, “Remember, this is not about gay rights. This is about economic competitiveness.” The word “tolerance” is used in the article several times to describe the attitude that Singaporeans should have towards the LGBTQ community. By using a word that does not connote unconditional acceptance, Chua’s article exposes how the social allowances given to Singapore’s queer subjects are based on capitalist imperatives and not on a sense of innate human right.

Singapore politicians are also constantly performing a complicated dance between the embrace of queer subjects as strong economic contributors and the rejection of their sexuality on the basis of Asian values in order to appease the conservative electorate, which includes fundamentalist religious groups. For instance, a significant milestone was established in 2003 when Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong announced that LGBTQ individuals “are like you and me,” thus enabling them to hold high positions in civil service. However, this was offset in 2007 by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong’s parliamentary speech, when he praised LGBTQ individuals as talented economic generators while still hinting at their sexual deviancy supposedly caused by the polluting values of Western societies.

Queer subjects in Singapore, therefore, occupy an ambiguous space between social acceptance and legal criminalization, grudgingly acknowledged as viable citizens enjoying considerable visibility due to their cultural and economic capital yet perceived as morally abject. This tension is often reflected in the production processes of LGBTQ-themed theatre. In the analysis of their proliferation, Lim explores why overtly queer performances in Singapore are

staged with few objections from the state. He observes that the government’s permissive stance is indicative of its “neoliberal and nationalistic agenda,” in which the “embrace of queer capital” and “pink dollar commerce,” coincides with the state’s desire to market itself as a global and cosmopolitan nation. Lim traces the downturn of Singapore’s global economic standing in 2003, which necessitated the state’s attempt to attract foreign talent into the country. At the same time, the state was planning initiatives to stop the brain drain of local skilled workers leaving the country partly because of its authoritarian reputation. Therefore, it is not a coincidence that the pragmatic acceptance of the LGBTQ community was reflected in the public remarks of politicians during this period. It was also during the first decade of the twenty-first century that LGBTQ-oriented businesses, festivals, and arts productions started to flourish as part of Singapore’s attempt to rebrand itself, its “queering as a global arts city [becoming] the country’s link to creativity and a sexy new image.”

The “Illiberal Pragmatics” of “Glocalqueering”

I have found the work of Lim and queer cultural theorist Audrey Yue, who both analyze the reasons for the boom in queer representation in arts and cultural spaces at the turn of the

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27 Some of the most prominent Singapore productions featuring gay protagonists include an adaptation of playwright Martin Sherman’s *Bent*, staged in 2003 by local bilingual theatre company Toy Factory, playwright Haresh Sharma’s *Mardi Gras* staged in 2004 by The Necessary Stage, and *The Asian Boys Trilogy* by playwright Alfian Sa’at, produced by The Necessary Stage and W!LD RICE theatre companies, staged between 2000 and 2013. A trilogy of plays, *Invitation to Treat* by playwright Eleanor Wong, which depicted the life of a successful lesbian Singaporean lawyer, written in the 1990s and early 2000s, was staged in 2003 by W!LD RICE.


29 Lim, *Brown Boys and Rice Queens*, 125.

30 In addition to the comments by Goh Chok Tong and Lee Hsien Loong, founding Prime Minister of Singapore Lee Kuan Yew said, “They tell me that homosexuals are creative writers, dancers. If we want creative people, then we have to put up with their idiosyncrasies.” See Geert De Clearq, “Singapore Considers Legalizing Homosexuality: Lee,” *Reuters*, April 24, 2007, accessed October 28, 2013, http://www.reuters.com/article/2007/04/24/us-singapore-lee-idUSSP5349120070424.

31 Lim, *Brown Boys and Rice Queens*, 128. Lim traces the proliferation of “pink dollar” business establishments in Singapore, including the opening of gay bars, saunas, and massage centers. He also mentions the short-lived Nation Party (conceived as an Asian Mardi Gras) celebrating the idea of alternative citizenship in Singapore on the same day as Singapore’s national day. The event was eventually banned due to protest from conservative and religious communities, 123–24.
twenty-first century in Singapore, seminal to the way I read my performative case studies. Yue observes how the proliferation of queer-friendly arts festivals and theatre as well as pro-LGBTQ civil-society groups illustrates “how a local Singaporean queer culture has been constituted, not as a result of the recognition of rights and liberation, but through the disjuncture acceleration caused by economic and cultural reforms.”\(^\text{32}\) Therefore, “the foundation for the emergence of a creative queer Singapore, [is] not one based on the Western post-Stonewall emancipation discourse of rights, but through the illiberal pragmatics of survival.”\(^\text{33}\) In other words, “illiberal pragmatics” is an Asian-centered queer discourse not predicated on Western-oriented rights claims but enabled through the neoliberal economics of an authoritarian region.

Lim makes a similar claim through his analysis of playwright Alfian Sa’at’s series of plays, *The Asian Boys Trilogy*.\(^\text{34}\) He observes how the legally marginalized yet culturally accepted subjectivities of the “Asian boy” characters in Sa’at’s plays are based on the historical and political context of Singapore and the region,\(^\text{35}\) therefore troubling the theory of “global queering” proposed by sociologist Dennis Altman, who posits that Asian queer subjects are influenced by Western liberal LGBTQ discourses.\(^\text{36}\) Lim critiques Altman’s global queering as a

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\(^\text{33}\) Yue, “Creative Queer Singapore,” 158.  
\(^\text{34}\) The plays in the trilogy are *Dreamplay: Asian Boys Volume 1*, *Landmarks: Asian Boys Volume 2*, and *Happy Endings: Asian Boys Volume 3* and were staged in 2000, 2005, and 2007 respectively by the theatre company W!LD RICE.  
\(^\text{35}\) Lim presents a detailed analysis of the first play in the trilogy, *Dreamplay: Volume 1*, which is an adaptation of August Strindberg’s *A Dream Play*. In Sa’at’s version, Indra’s daughter is transformed into Agnes, described as a “faghag” traveling with her chaperone, Boy, through various time periods in Singapore’s history. Agnes and Boy encounter “a myriad of gay lives,” and Lim reads Sa’at as “locating these Asian boys and their varied manifestations within the city-state’s national history, ambiguous cultural policies, and postcolonial social mores.” See Lim, *Brown Boys and Rice Queens*, 103.  
\(^\text{36}\) Ibid., 204. For more information on Dennis Altman’s position, see “On Global Queering,” *Australian Humanities Review*, July 1996, accessed October 26, 2013, http://www.australianhumanitiesreview.org/archive/Issue-July-1996/altman.html. Altman has since modified his position by lessening the eurocentrism of his earlier argument. He more recently argued that while LGBTQ civil society groups in Asia are influenced by Western human rights discourses, cultural specificity is important. Altman’s position is nevertheless still predicated on using Western discourses as anchoring frameworks to understand Asian queer subjects, which Lim is trying to move away from.
“neoliberal model of free market transmission, by which an emancipatory and often glamorized Western gay culture is transforming the rest of the world, [and which] presumes a primarily North American and secondarily European standard constituting what we think of as ‘modern homosexuality.’”

Stressing that queer subjectivities of Singaporeans cannot be solely understood by the narrative of the spread of globalized queer politics emancipating queer subjects in more culturally conservative milieus, Lim coins the term “glocalqueering” to describe the heterogeneous influences on, as well as the artistic processes and subject formation of, queer subjectivities in Singapore. For Lim, “‘acting gay’ in this global city has many inter-Asian dimensions that are not accommodated by Euro-American models.”

I apply Yue’s “illiberal pragmatics” and Lim’s “glocalqueering” as frameworks to read the following case studies. While these scholars are speaking primarily to the Singapore context, I extrapolate their theorization to understand the situation in Malaysia, where queer individuals share similar, if not identical, circumstances of prejudice and persecution. Yue suggests that the LGBTQ communities in Singapore adapted to the neoliberal milieu of the country and pragmatically “reclaimed the shame of their deviant homosexualities with localized new embodiments of doing queer.”

By unpacking the dramaturgy of Cane, Pink Dot, and Repent or Die!, I assess how these “glocally queered” performances advance queer rights claims in their


37 Lim, Brown Boys and Rice Queens, 97.
38 Ibid., 96–104.
39 Lim originally coined the term “glocalqueering” in his article “Glocalqueering in New Asia: The Politics of Performing Gay in Singapore.” In the subsequent expansion of the term in his book, he stresses that he is not dismissing individuals who posit the influence of certain “universal” characteristics of global gay culture nor is he positioning Singapore as an example of an “auto-orientalist anthropological account of queer heterogeneity.” Rather, he wants to “fundamentally displace how we look at emergent global queer cultures and performance.” Lim, Brown Boys and Rice Queens, 135.
40 Ibid., 158.
Asian sites. At the same time, I also consider if their “pragmatism” might be critiqued as a form of compromise that depoliticizes their work.

Performing Singapore’s Queer Quandary in Loo Zihan’s Cane

In 2012, Singaporean multidisciplinary artist Loo Zihan (born 1983) reenacted multiple times a 1994 piece by performance artist Josef Ng that had originally sparked controversy both in the artistic circles and mainstream media in Singapore. Loo’s pieces revisits Ng’s Brother Cane, which protested the imprisonment, corporal punishment, and public shaming of twelve gay men who were caught up in a sexual entrapment sting devised by the police as well as the legal and censorship mechanisms taken up against Ng and the arts community by the state. When he first performed the piece, Ng was charged with “committing an obscene act in public,” and performance art was indirectly censored by being denied public funding for the next ten years.

I analyze the third installment of the reenactments, performed on February 19, 2012. This particular reenactment, titled Cane, differs from Loo’s previous two attempts as well as Ng’s original in three aspects. First, the Media Development Authority (MDA) of Singapore required Loo and his production sponsor, The Necessary Stage theatre company, to apply for a license of approval by submitting a detailed script, which Loo was legally not allowed to depart from during the actual performance. Second, the reenactment of Ng’s original piece forms only

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42 The original performance, titled Brother Cane, took place at the Parkway Parade Shopping Center in Singapore. It was presented as part of The Artists’ General Assembly (AGM), an interdisciplinary arts festival and forum on alternative art organized by Singapore arts collectives 5th Passage Artists Ltd. and The Artist Village. The 5th Passage was subsequently prevented from obtaining a public entertainment license for future unscripted performances after Brother Cane. See Lee, “Chronology of a Controversy.”
43 Loo first reenacted Ng’s Brother Cane in a performance class at the Nanyang Technological University in 2007; the second reenactment took place in a showcase of his graduate work at the University of Chicago in 2011.
44 The MDA is involved in approving media content available for public consumption, including live public performances. Cane was presented as part of the Singapore Fringe Festival produced and curated by The Necessary Stage in 2012 and sponsored largely by mobile company M1. Loo expressed in our interview that the decision to self-censor his performance was partly due to not wanting to cause any tension between The Necessary Stage and their main corporate sponsor.
part of Loo’s performance, as Cane was divided—in Loo’s terminology—into six “Accounts.” The actions in these Accounts include Loo’s recitation of news reportage of Ng’s performance and the resulting legal actions against the artist [see figure 2.1];

![Figure 2.1. Photo of Cane, Loo Zihan reciting news reportage. Photo courtesy of Samantha Tio.](image)

readings of the trial affidavit by artist and scholar Ray Langenbach in which the state charged Ng with committing “an obscene act” [see figure 2.2];

![Figure 2.2. Photo of Cane, Ray Langenbach reading trial affidavit. Photo courtesy of Samantha Tio.](image)

video footage of the Chicago performance of Cane and of Ng’s original performance; [see figure 2.3];

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a post-show dialogue [see figure 2.4];

and, of course, Loo’s live reenactment of Ng’s original action [see figure 2.5].
Third, Loo alters an action in Ng’s original performance, the details and significance of which I shall elaborate upon later in this section. Loo declares during his performance that his “main interest in the re-performance of this piece lies in using [his] performing body to recuperate the public memory of Brother Cane.” But as Loo observes, try as he might to expose the meaning and effects of Ng’s original piece, he finds it to be an impossible task, as the “centre” of the performance that was Ng’s work could not be replaced. I ponder what exactly Loo might want to recuperate in Ng’s work. I also analyze how the impossibility of Loo’s attempt is paradoxically productive to dialogues surrounding the subject matter of queer rights to which the performance refers.

Back to the Original

In order to do so, I needed to understand the details of Josef Ng’s Brother Cane. Theatre scholar William Peterson provides a description of the case—in November 1993, the “pretty police” so termed by the general public, posed as gay men to entice males searching for sexual partners. Once sexual intent was established, the men were arrested and subsequently incarcerated, caned, and denounced in the news media. One of those men eventually committed suicide in response to the state’s public shaming. Details of Ng’s performance were recorded in the affidavit read by Langenbach during Loo’s 2012 reenactment. In the original performance, Ng had placed twelve tiles on the ground in a semicircle, then on top of each, placed copies of the news article entitled “12 Men Nabbed in Anti-Gay Operation at Tanjong Rhu,” a block of tofu, and a plastic bag of red paint. Ng proceeded to dance with a rotan (rattan) cane while

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47 Loo Zihan, interview by author, Singapore, January 14, 2013.
muttering, “Three strokes of cane; I will give them three strokes of cane.” He eventually splattered the tofu and red paint by hitting the blocks with the cane. Ng uttered, “I have heard that clipping hair could be a form of silent protest” before walking to the rear of the performance space, pulling down his briefs, and performing an action invisible to the audience. He then walked to the center tile and placed a small amount of pubic hair on it. Ng proceeded to declare, while smoking a cigarette obtained from an audience member, “Sometimes silent protest is not enough.” The performance ended with him stubbing out the cigarette on his arm.

Most mainstream media were quick to condemn Ng’s performance. Relevant news articles from 1994 were excavated by Loo in 2012, with the artist reciting selected passages from them in Cane. They included the following statements:

The performance may be exploited to agitate the audience on volatile social issues, or to propagate the beliefs and messages of deviant social or religious groups, or as a means of subversion.

Obscenity is shocking because it violates our sense of shame . . . some artists are so isolated from the rest of the world that their ideas never undergo a reality check.

Notwithstanding the artistic reasons offered in defense, what Ng did was clearly disgusting.

Addressing the “Missing ‘Centre’”

The terms used to describe Ng’s performance—“deviant,” “obscene,” and “disgusting”—I argue, were, in fact, implicit references to queer sexuality. Paradoxically, the press’s focus on the work’s supposed vulgarity, with the emphasis placed on the level of artistic freedom artists should be allowed, glossed over the impetus behind this “protest

49 The rotan (rattan) cane is symbolic of legalized corporal punishment in Malaysia and Singapore.
50 These performance details can be obtained both from the online video of Cane and the performance score in the booklet Archiving Cane that accompanies Loo’s installation of the same title exhibited at The Substation, Singapore, in December 2012. See Loo Zihan, “Performance Score for Cane (2012),” in Archiving Cane, eds. Loo Zihan and Louis Ho (Singapore: Loo Zihan, 2012), 43–44.
51 Loo, “Performance Score for Cane (2012),” 33–44.
performance,” which highlighted the entrapment and punishment of the twelve men, and the larger context of gay sexuality and LGBTQ rights in Singapore.

Loo’s embodied revisiting of the piece in 2012 is a testament to the loosening of discriminatory practices in line with the state’s neoliberal agenda, while also a visceral reminder of the continued legislative criminalization of queer subjects. *Cane*’s performative slippages and the subsequent critical feedback generated reveal its missing “centre” as the absenting of queer subjectivities and the arguable lack of “liveness” in Loo’s version of Ng’s original piece. First, the scripted nature of the performance and its dependence on governmental licensing signals the increasing sophistication of Singapore’s censorship mechanism and the continued policing of the artist’s voice. Direct censorship is no longer implemented, but the artist is obliged to self-regulate in order to obtain a performance license. Loo reflects that “It would be simplistic in judging that the fact that I can stage *Cane* means that the country has liberalized. My intention in presenting this work is to make transparent that it does not equate. The fact that I can stage *Cane* just means that I am *allowed* to speak about it” (italics added).  

Second, the liveness of Ng’s performance art piece, first staged in the public space of a shopping mall, is in Loo’s performance relegated to an enclosed theatre space and sanctioned by a state license. The video of Ng’s piece recorded the startled gasps from the original audience when Ng broke the tofu blocks and red paint with sharp slaps of the cane. Ng’s performance—part choreographed and part improvised—ignited a genuine sense of shock. There was something at stake in Ng’s performance that Loo’s reenactment could not reproduce. In comparison, *Cane* is criticized by Ho Rui An for its lack of liveness and its supposed

52 Loo, interview.
53 I viewed a recording of *Brother Cane* at the Asian Art Archive in Hong Kong, June 2013: Josef Ng, *Brother Cane*, recorded by Ray Langenbach, December 31, 1993 (Singapore, 1993), Asian Art Archive.
narcissism—a form of “therapeutics of the self”—to cathartically purge Loo’s personal demons in his negotiation of his identity as a gay Singaporean man.⁵⁴ This criticism refers to a particular action departing from Ng’s original performance. While Ng had snipped his pubic hair in private, Loo pulls down his pants and confronts the audience with full frontal nudity [see figure 2.6].

Figur 2.6. Photo of *Cane*, Loo Zihan pulling down pants. Photo courtesy of Samantha Tio.

Loo reveals that the media authorities had expressed discomfort with the original act during the licensing approval process; therefore, he altered the act in part to appease them. At a more agential level, Loo also justifies his modification, stating that “by not replicating Joseph’s Josef’s [Ng’s] piece exactly, I guess it is also a form of protest, a refusal to allow authorities to co-opt Josef’s original action. . . . If cutting hair is a form of silent protest—and there is no hair left to cut—how can the protest still happen?”⁵⁵ Disagreeing with Ho Rui An’s criticism, I argue that Loo’s act of substitution has to be read within its historical and political context, with his questioning the act of protest’s political efficacy manifesting the complexity of the state’s current control mechanism towards LGBTQ rights and media censorship. While the permitted staging of *Cane* creates the appearance of a loosening of censorship laws and the state’s openness to

⁵⁴ Ho Rui An, “Making Life Again, Between Josef Ng’s *Brother Cane* (1994) and Loo Zihan’s *Cane,*” in Loo and Ho, *Archiving Cane*, 78.
⁵⁵ Loo, interview.
negotiating the criminalization of queer subjects; Loo’s performance, as analyzed below, also embodies how these conditional allowances could depoliticize the potential radicalism present in the original.

Loo observes that there was a palpable wariness of his intent from the audience during his performance; some even sniggered at his act of genital exposure. The audience’s passivity at Loo’s performance contrasts with the original piece’s reception. In addition, both the post-show dialogue session and published essays focus either on issues of art censorship or the state’s prosecution of Josef Ng and performance art. The essays focus on an aesthetic deconstruction of Loo’s performance, but the basic premise of the work, as in 1994, has again been submerged. The omission of the critical link between Loo’s overtly visceral performance with its political and social context reads oddly to me, as I view Loo’s confrontational stance through his nude body as a merging of Ng’s act of protest with Loo’s own position as a queer Singaporean artist engaging with the present state of queer subjectivity and rights claims in Singapore. The artistic license taken in appropriating Ng’s original gesture is in some way a form of self-censorship. In appropriating Ng’s original act with his full-frontal nudity, Loo is also, in Louis Ho’s words, “recuperat[ing] Ng’s protest against the victimization of gay men, a detail generally lost to popular view by the moralistic cacophony eclipsing the afterlife of the original work.”

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56 Ibid.
57 Besides Ho Rui An’s essay, which critiques the lack of liveness in Loo’s reenactment, Ng Yi-Sheng’s “Becoming Josef” focuses on the state of arts censorship in Singapore, and Bruce Quek’s “Real Meat” and Guo Jie Si’s “Number 12” looks at Cane through the lenses of embodiment, aesthetics, and ontology. These essays are collected in the Archiving Cane booklet.
58 Of the essays collected in the Archiving Cane booklet, Louis Ho was the only author who highlighted the original impetus of Brother Cane and the political implications of Loo’s reenactment. Ho noted that the intertextuality of the reenactment is not only a resistance towards state co-option and censorship in response to the original incident, but also a confrontation with the state’s expectation of heterosexual normativity in its citizens. See Louis Ho, “Loo Zihan and the Body Confessional,” in Loo and Ho, Archiving Cane, 108.
himself states that he wanted to make visible “something that wasn’t addressed . . . or justice that wasn’t delivered.”

Vacillating between Limits and Progress

Returning to my earlier inquiry of whether the “centre” that Loo was trying to grasp is recovered in his performance or again submerged, a positive take would read the obtaining of permission for the work to be performed, combined with the lack of debate on the performance’s original impetus, as evidence of “progress” on LGBTQ rights claims, when it was no longer necessary to belabor the state of legislative discrimination towards gay men. I suggest instead that the very circumstances in which Cane was staged, which resulted in a version that was paradoxically more bodily explicit yet more ideologically sanitized than the original, and the subsequent responses of the audience and critics, absenting or making circuitous references to those twelve men, exposes the ways in which dialogues on the rights to freedom of expression had bled into, and at times substituted or obscured, debates about LGBTQ rights. The alteration of the dramaturgy of the original, performed under Loo’s own admitted self-censorship, also complicates any easy assumption of progress. The artist’s omission of Ng’s snipping of pubic hair, on the one hand, signals a bowing down to state mechanisms and the continued repression of marginalized artistic and sexual subjectivities. On the other, the transmutation of the original gesture to one of the nude performer’s direct gaze at the audience concurrently challenges the onlookers to confront the “justice that wasn’t delivered,” with Loo’s performance, exposing the complicity of both the artist and audience in reinforcing the status quo.

A performance like Cane reveals the quandary of queer rights claims in contemporary Singapore, where the neoliberal economic ambitions of the country had in part enabled Loo to

59 Loo, interview.
60 Ibid.
confront the marginalization and legal discrimination of queer subjects in a public performance. Yet the elements of its production also betray its limits, within which queer sexuality is obliquely acknowledged alongside the conditionality of necessary containment by the Singapore state. This, in turn, is manifested by the continued existence of Penal Code 377A and a vetted performance in a black-box theatre.

_The Sanitization of Queer Rhetoric in Pink Dot_

The dialectical politics of the simultaneous allowance for and containment of queer subjectivities can also be read in the phenomenon of Pink Dot, an LGBTQ grassroots campaign. Its media campaign exemplified Ara Wilson’s idea of a critical “queer regionalism,”61 in which, like Eng-Beng Lim and Audrey Yue, Wilson sees the importance of looking beyond Western hegemonic lenses by factoring the specificities of local political dynamics to understand what constitutes queer in Asia. I demonstrate in this section how the campaign’s lobbying for the acceptance of LGBTQ individuals in Singapore society was done through a downplaying of overt political demands. I thus ponder if this specific strategy of queer subject and rights formation in the region was a pragmatic way of opening up more spaces for queer voices or a defanged and sanitized version of queer rights claims.

_A Family Friendly Queer Campaign_

Each year Pink Dot has gathered people dressed in pink in an open field to form a big dot promoting queer solidarity. After starting in 2009 with about a thousand people in attendance, the event had grown in size to 21,000 attendees by 2013 [see figure 2.7].62

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61 Wilson, “Queering Asia.”
Pink Dot takes place annually in Hong Lim Park, the government’s designated public Speaker’s Corner, where Singaporeans and permanent residents can gather to voice political opinions peacefully without the threat of arrest. Thus, the spatial designation of Pink Dot manifests Singapore’s conditional freedom of speech, where only in a designated area of 2.3 acres can citizens speak in an official capacity in the open about contentious issues without fear of political prosecution.

Tellingly, Pink Dot’s 2013 slogan of “supporting the freedom to love” was indicative of the carefully chosen and non-antagonistic stance of the organizers to appeal to the general public and prevent a crackdown by state forces. For example, Pink Dot spokesperson Paerin Choa’s

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63 Singapore’s penal code contains the unlawful assembly statute, which states that “an assembly of five or more persons” is designated an “unlawful assembly and . . . whoever is guilty of rioting shall be punished with imprisonment for a term which may extend to 7 years and shall also be liable to caning.” A significant portion of Singapore’s statutes were imported from the Indian penal code when Singapore was under British rule. The present government continues to utilize selected colonial penal codes in the country as disciplinary measures against possible dissent. Singapore: Penal Code, Chapter 224, 1872.
description of the campaign as “non-confrontational and aimed at changing the hearts and minds of Singaporeans who are primarily conservative” is mingled with the campaign’s cautious use of global queer discourses. Pink Dot’s website’s preamble states, “Most LGBT Singaporeans are afraid to come out of the closet. This stems from a fear that the simple act of telling the truth can potentially pull them apart from the people that they love.” The Western-centric term “coming out of the closet” is immediately tempered by references to love and family, appealing to the perceived emphasis among Singaporeans on Asian-orientated familial and communitarian values.

Another example of this localized form of hybrid queer discourse is a promotional video portraying “wholesome” Singaporean LGBTQ individuals striving to gain acceptance. Three narratives are pieced together in the 2013 Pink Dot campaign video titled “Home,” directed by filmmaker Boo Junfeng. A young transgender woman of Malay descent faces prejudice from the public; one half of a middle-aged gay couple of Chinese descent is denied visiting rights when his partner is dying in the hospital; and a young woman of Indian descent faces disapproval when her family finds out about her lesbian relationship. The video was set to the song also titled “Home” by musician Dick Lee, first composed in 1998 to commemorate Singapore’s 33rd National Day. The final scene shows the three protagonists gathering at Pink Dot with their family members, all dressed in pink, with the parents connoting their acceptance of their LGBTQ children with smiles and hugs [see figure 2.8].

64 Paerin Choa, interview by author, Singapore, January 14, 2013.
65 Pink Dot SG.
The sentimental and nonthreatening aesthetics of the video uses tropes endorsed by the state—one being the emphasis on respecting Singapore’s racially diverse population and the other a reference to national patriotism as signaled by the musical underscoring of “Home.” Thus, Pink Dot performed its appeal for queer subjects’ recognition through muted rights discourses carefully couched within the state’s dominant rhetoric of a conservative Asian society predicated on a cohesive family structure, which supposedly ensures social cohesion and national solidarity.

Legal and Corporate Entanglements

In foregrounding the campaign with sanguine appeals to desexualized love, familial relations, and social acceptance, Pink Dot might appear to be skirting claims to legislative rights in the name of Asian values. However, the history of Pink Dot demonstrates crucial links between this campaign and Penal Code 377A. The formation of the campaign was instigated partly because a faction from Singapore’s Christian right objected to the abolition of the code. These right-wing Christians began to campaign in 2009 against the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE), an organization committed, as stated on their website, to “gender equality” and sexual “diversity.”^68 In conversation, Choa stated that Pink Dot was not

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^68 In 2009, a faction from the Christian right staged a procedural takeover of AWARE’s executive committee during the organization’s annual general meeting. This was seen as the Christian right’s attempt to use the organization as a
actively promoting legal change, but he concurred that “legal change is a by-product of what we are trying to achieve.” While the legislative recognition of queer subjectivities might be hinted at, it is never openly demanded. When prodded on the paradoxes and discrepancies of his repeated insistence that Pink Dot was apolitical, Choa’s concession reinforced and repeated the campaign line by saying “we hope to bring about political change by first changing hearts and minds of Singaporeans.”

The nature of Pink Dot’s queer politics, similar to those of Loo’s Cane, is an example of Audrey Yue’s “illiberal pragmatics,” where compromises were made to carve out spaces for LGBTQ subjectivities in Singapore. The contradictions of declaring Pink Dot an apolitical political campaign were further evidenced by the potential depoliticization of its radicality through its imbrication in neoliberal corporatization. Choa described how “Pink Dot suddenly became legitimate” after a slew of corporate sponsorship followed a publicity partnership with Google in 2011 initiated by Singapore-based Gayglers. Pink Dot subsequently received national and international news coverage. This corporate legitimation again points to the state’s conditional acceptance of queer subjects with a view to honing its cosmopolitan image to increase its international economic competitiveness.

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platform to influence society’s viewpoints on LGBTQ communities. One of the ways was by attempting to change AWARE’s sex education syllabus. While AWARE has stated that their viewpoint of “homosexuality” is “neutral,” the Christian right wanted to make the stance a negative one. While this “coup” was eventually reversed through a no-confidence motion and a second election, supporters and members of the LGBTQ communities in Singapore were shaken enough by this attempt to narrow spaces for LGBGQ subjectivities to take action, and Pink Dot was one of the results. For more information, see “Singapore’s NGO Furore: Taken Unawares,” The Economist, May 7, 2009, accessed March 10, 2017, http://www.economist.com/node/13611576. For more about AWARE, see “Overview,” Association of Women for Action and Research, accessed March 10, 2017, http://www.aware.org.sg/about/overview/.

69 Choa, interview.
70 Ibid.
71 Yue, “Introduction: Queer Singapore.”
72 Choa, interview.
73 Gayglers are self-termed LGBTQ Google employees.
74 Pink Dot has been featured in local newspapers as well as in the international press including CNN, Reuters and BBC.
The support of well-heeled Gayglers that sparked the mutually beneficial partnerships between Pink Dot and its various sponsoring corporations; the relegation of “appropriate” LGBTQ identities to the realm of normative Asian family values; and the subtle control of the campaign through the restrictions of its potential for growth by designating the event to the finite space of Hong Lim Park all point to a sanitization and shrewd regulation of LGBTQ lives and subjectivities in a way deemed acceptable by the Singapore state. It raises the question of what kinds of rights claims are left out in queer subjectivities enabled by economic mobility and consumption as well as normative familial and nation-building rhetoric.

*The Limitations and Potentialities of Queer Pleasures in Pang Khee Teik’s Repent or Die!*

A stylishly dressed “Asian bear” named Gayverine, “held captive in a dark and ugly room” attempts to “gayverize” the space by projecting his super powers through his wide-stretched arms. A man in a white shirt and tie appears in the next frame brandishing a pair of pink scissors, aiming for Gayverine and his blue designer jacket. Shouting “Not the Gaultier,” Gayverine directs his super powers, represented by a pink light source, towards his attacker. The attacker screams in disgust as his conservative outfit is transformed into an unbuttoned white shirt exposing a neon pink T-shirt, a printed neck scarf draped around his neck [see figure 2.9].

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75 Pink Dot’s corporate sponsors in 2014 include banking conglomerate J. P. Morgan, audio branding agency The Gunnery, the hotel group PARKROYAL, and contact lens specialist Cooper Vision.

76 Pang Khee Teik describes this character and the actor playing him as an Asian version of a “bear,” a term used to affectionately describe overweight gay men who are seen as “bear like” and “huggable.” Gayverine is a character of Pang’s invention based on Wolverine, a superhero character from the Marvel Comics *X-Men* franchise.

77 This caption is superimposed onto one of the photographs in the series.

78 This is a reference to clothing designed by upscale fashion designer Jean Paul Gaultier.
Figure 2.9. “Gayverine” from Repent or Die! Photo courtesy of Pang Khee Teik.

A drag queen is putting on her accessories in her dressing room. The man with the pink scissors steps into the next frame and stabs her in the neck. She dies. In the final frame, the drag queen is resurrected in the mirror in full drag queen regalia, her hair and makeup complete. The image in the mirror looks to the place where her attacker stood, her corpse slumped at the dressing table [see figure 2.10].

Figure 2.10. “The Return of Shelah” from Repent or Die! Photo courtesy of Pang Khee Teik.

Four men, dressed as a construction worker, a policeman, a cowboy, and a sailor respectively, gyrate campily to the song “Y.M.C.A.” The man with the pink scissors jumps into the frame and attempts to stab them. The men panic, their screams juxtaposed with the lyrics of the song [see figure 2.11].

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79 “Y.M.C.A.” is a song composed in 1978 by the American music group The Village People. The LGBTQ communities in selected urban metropolises have since appropriated it as a gay anthem.
A director is filming a scene with an interethnic same-sex couple sitting in a garden in the midst of a courtship. The man with the pink scissors steps into the frame and stabs the director dead. In the final frame, the couple holds the corpse of the director, realizing that the assailant had targeted the wrong man [see figure 2.12].

These four scenarios, titled “Gayverine,” “The Return of Shelah,” “Village People,” and “The Last Communist” respectively, make up the photography series Repent or Die! directed by Malaysian LGBTQ rights activist, art curator, and photographer Pang Khee Teik (born 1974). In 2010, the series was shown in the Lights Editions Gallery in Singapore and as part of an

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80 Pang Khee Teik is Malaysia’s foremost LGBTQ activist. He founded the grassroots festival Seksualiti Merdeka: Queer Without Fear in 2008. The festival featured live performing arts, film screenings, forums, and workshops advocating for LGBTQ rights. It was ultimately banned in 2011 by the authorities. Pang was a former program director of The Annexe Gallery, a contemporary art venue in Kuala Lumpur. He is also the founder of Arts for Grabs, an affordable art fair based in Kuala Lumpur.
exhibition titled *TOP/BOTTOM* at the Galeri Cipta III in Jakarta. In 2011, it was included by Paris-based *Photoquai* in their third biennale featuring international photography work. While *Repent or Die!* did not have an official showing in Malaysia, the full series is posted on Pang’s Facebook page, where he has a sizable Malaysian and regional following as one of Malaysia’s foremost LGBTQ rights activist and public intellectuals.81

The title of the work references a ruling by the Malaysian censorship board in 2010 in which gay characters in the media must either repent—by disavowing their sexuality by turning “straight” or—or come to a bad end.82 This legislation was thus the impetus for *Repent or Die!*, with Pang responding with his subversive and tongue-in-cheek photographs to draw attention to the repression and misrepresentation of marginalized sexualities. In this section, I consider both the political potential and the limitations of *Repent or Die!* in speaking to and reflecting the experiences of LGBTQ communities in Malaysia. I read the work to embody Glenn Mitoma’s “hybrid articulation of [queer] rights” claims,83 as its dramaturgy, which uses camp aesthetics,84 alludes to both globally recognizable queer tropes as well as localized Malaysian cultural references. The photographs and the sense of pleasure they evoke exemplify how the spread of global LGBTQ rights and identity discourses has enabled the burgeoning of queer activism and performances in the country. On the other hand, I also contend the shortcomings of the photographs in the following related ways. They reflect primarily the queer experiences focused on or acted out by individuals based in metropolitan centers with economic and cultural access,

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82 This is also reflected in *Asmara Songsang*, the musical I mentioned earlier in this chapter in which the unrepentant LGBTQ characters are killed in a lighting storm.
84 While realizing that the word “aesthetics” has a complex genealogy as a philosophical term, my use of the word in this dissertation simply refers to the way an artistic work or performance looks and, by inference, feels to an audience member or spectator. I am also following the lead of the queer theorists quoted in this chapter who describe their use of camp aesthetics.
thus limiting their representational scope. By implication, queer expression predicated on consumption in the absence of legal rights then signifies its precarity, as it could be revoked by the Malaysian state at any time. Ultimately, I ponder whether the sense of pleasure ignited by the dramaturgy of *Repent or Die!* was agential enough to outweigh its possible weaknesses.

**Performing Camp Pleasures**

I read the stylized poses and exaggerated gestures performed by the participants in the *Repent or Die!* series as characteristic of the aesthetics of camp, which Pang employs dramaturgically in response to the case of media censorship, and as an overall resistance effort against the criminalization of queer subjects. Part of the appeal of the series is due to the mix and match of recognizable queer tropes with popular cultural influences that draw laughter and a sense of pleasure. The photographs demonstrate this strategy through the portrayal of the Asian bear character whose nontraditional sex appeal is attributed to his “cuddly” nature and his passion for high fashion displayed through his attempt at protecting his outfit by “gayverizing” his attacker with his superpowers as well as various stereotypical professional identities fantasized as queer sexualized figures enacting over-the-top dance moves to the song Y.M.C.A.

One shot highlights the proud display of the men’s derrieres, the hyperbolic poses balancing the sexual overtones with comic silliness. Another is an enactment of a stereotypical courtship scene recognizable in romance movies, with the two characters sweetly holding hands, one party with his eyes shyly downcast, the other staring at his partner devotedly. Queered by the casting of a same-sex male couple, the scene is also purposefully marred by the incongruity of the filmmaker character functioning as the “third-wheel,” seemingly spoiling the romance as he records what should have been a private moment; The transsexual drag queen character’s larger-than-life screech of protest in the midst of her murder is followed by her miraculous rise from the dead.
Seeming to triumph against the odds, her fully–made-up image denotes that she is even more “fabulous” post-trauma.

The term “camp,” which aesthetics these photographs expresses, has a long theoretical genealogy. For the purpose of this section, I concentrate on literature that sees camp as indivisible from queer politics and as inherently performative. A seminal moment was cited by public intellectual Susan Sontag’s 1964 essay “Notes on ‘Camp,’” which in turn prompted a series of scholarly work and criticism. Moe Meyer is one queer theorist critical of Sontag’s definition, arguing that Sontag reduces camp to a “bourgeois” pop aesthetic, “its homosexual connotations downplayed, sanitized, and made safe for public consumption.” Meyer’s goal in response is to repoliticize the aesthetics of camp, defining it in dramaturgical language as “the total body of performative practices and strategies used to enact a queer identity, with the enactment defined as the production of social visibility.” For Meyer, whose case studies focus on drag and dance performances, the “cultural phenomenon of camp as a social agency [is] based on remembering and citing the bodies of gay forebears, with those practices “embedded in material histories.”

While Meyer’s definition is useful for me in terms of framing Pang’s work as an example of a camp performance that embodies localized referents lobbying for queer rights in Malaysia, I also recognize that his argument, written about three decades after Sontag’s essay, is by no

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85 The essay was first published in 1964 in the journal Partisan Review. It was then republished in a collection of essays by the author in 1966. For the current edition, see Susan Sontag, “Notes on Camp,” in Against Interpretation (New York: Picador, 2001), 275–292.
87 Ibid., 4.
89 Ibid., 154.
90 I will be elaborating on this point later in this section.
means unique or unproblematic. In particular, queer theorist Fabio Cleto views Meyer’s discrediting of Sontag’s views as overtly binary. In his introductory essay “Introduction, Queering the Camp” to Campus: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader, Cleto points out how Meyer’s relatively essentialist position of seeing camp as a purely gay phenomenon not only sidelines other subject positions, including those of non-male queers, it also prematurely dismisses camp expression that on the surface might appear divorced from strictly gay issues but, beneath its surface frivolity, could in fact reference a general subversive queer sensibility.91

Other queer theorists who have theorized about camp in relation to queerness and performance include Esther Newton, who claims drag culture is predicated on the “incongruity, theatricality, and humor” of the gender impersonator’s performance,92 and Jack Babuscio, who states that camp requires the intermixing of the elements of irony, aestheticism, theatricality, and humor. In particular, Babuscio sees theatricality as inextricable from camp’s engagement with gender role play while humor is read as a defense mechanism against the pain of social rejection and the marginalization of queer sexuality.93 A similar idea is echoed by Richard Dyer, who describes camp as a kind of “self-defense” and “coping mechanism” when writing on how and why gay men idealize selected women in pop culture by framing their performances as camp.94

In summary, Cleto provides a good overview of these overlapping positions by acknowledging

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91 While the term queer is essential to the subjecthood of gay persons, Cleto echoes the take of other queer theorists in seeing the term as encompassing other forms of marginalized sexual identities. More significantly, he describes how queer has been appropriated to signify acts of resistances and the empowerment of non-normative subjectivities in general. See Fabio Cleto, “Introduction, Queering the Camp,” in Campus: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader, ed. Fabio Cleto (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1999), 16–21.
92 Esther Newton, “Role Models,” in Cleto, Campus: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject, 103.
camp’s inherently queer and performative nature. By using various forms of stylized acts, masquerade, or parody, camp performances throw into question heteronormative understandings of gender and sexuality while attempting to reclaim queer agency under the guises of a seemingly frivolous aesthetic.95

What struck me about the campy photographs in Repent or Die! is the sense of joyful pleasure they invoked in their theatrical engagement with parody, satire, and humor. Recent scholarly work has helped my theorization of how camp as a pleasurable form of queer performance could open up spaces for queer subjectivity and, in turn, LGBTQ rights claims. Most prominently, feminist scholar Sarah Ahmed writes about how queer feelings and desires are often relegated to an “embodiment of the failure of the ideal” in a predominantly heteronormative social world because these desires cannot reproduce life in the biological sense.96 One of her responses to counter perceptions of queer failure is to explore how “the pleasures of queer intimacies challenge the designation of queer as abject.”97 Ahmed is speaking in particular of the pleasures elicited by queer feelings, which include queer emotions and sexual desire.

These queer feelings are present in Pang’s photography series. The images capture both society’s non-acceptance of queer subjects, as seen in the murder attempts on the characters as well as in the community’s persistent fight against such rejection in their camp performances. One specific example is Pang casting himself, a well-known LGBTQ rights activist and self-identified gay man, as a caricature of a government officer bent on eradicating queer subjects. The sardonic irony of Pang acting as a homophobic officer in a buttoned-up white shirt armed

95 Cleto, “Introduction, Queering the Camp.”
97 Ibid., 162.
with a pair of pink scissors was palpable. The sense of pleasure I gained came both from that recognition as well as reading how the series successfully lampooned and made ridiculous the efforts of state censorship and the repression of marginalized sexualities. As a whole, the strategy of resistance displayed in the photographs is not only seen in the purposeful parody of stereotypical queer characters and the application of queer tropes, but also in the doggedness of the actors in reveling in their roles. Their exaggerated performances blithely reject the Asian values defense against LGBTQ rights claims predicated on the need to uphold the “traditional” family unit and Islamic religious mores.

Repent or Die! as the Anti-Dalam Botol

To better contextualize the importance and efficacy of queer pleasures in Pang’s dramaturgical use of camp aesthetics, there needs to be an elaboration on what Repent or Die! was reacting against. The legislation regulating the depiction of LGBTQ characters in film, in which queer characters either have to repent or die, was instigated by Dalam Botol, a popular 2010 Malaysian film produced and written by director Raja Azmi. Azmi describes the film as “‘a tragic love story’ involving two men,”98 one of whom undergoes a “sex-change operation” in order to please his lover [see figure 2.13].99

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99 This is a term used by director Raja Azmi to describe the scenario in the film. Along with other critics, Pang has criticized Azmi’s misconception of transsexuality by her use of the term “sex change.” In an online article critiquing the film, Pang writes that the acceptable term (at time of writing) is “sex reassignment surgery” as gender identity is not predicated on one’s sexual organs. Rather, the sexual organs are altered to reflect one’s gender identity. See Pang Khee Teik, “Manu Anu: No Regrets,” March 31, 2011, accessed December 20, 2013, http://www.loyarburok.com/2011/03/31/mana-anu/.
His lover eventually deserts him, and the main character returns to his village as a “straight” man where he meets a “nice” Muslim girl. Unable to tell her his “shameful” secret, he leaves her on the day of their wedding. The Malaysian film censorship board gave the film its approval, and the negotiation between the filmmakers and the board effected the subsequent loosening of the censorship guidelines for films dealing with LGBTQ subject matters. In the case of *Dalam Botol*, the final frames of the film show the main character’s repentance as he is being driven in a taxi looking forlorn. Raja Azmi reveals that the film was inspired by the experiences of a friend who regretted his “sex-change” operation, saying that the film “is my way of preaching to remind society not to be influenced by gay culture that is taboo in this country.”

*Dalam Botol* did very well in the domestic market, in part due to the audience’s fascination with a “risqué” topic rarely portrayed in the Malaysian mainstream cinema and

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However, LGBTQ activists and academics simultaneously criticized the film for conflating gender identity with sexual orientation. Gender scholar Alicia Azharuddin states that the film is “misleading,” as:

…its narrative is not easily separated from how alternative sexualities and genders are perceived in Malaysia where gay men are sometimes confused for trans women who need to undergo sex reassignment surgery to become female while both transgender women and gay men are sometimes subsumed under the category “effeminate” men. Furthermore, Raja Azmi’s insistence that the film’s moral subtext should function as a deterrent against sex reassignment surgery serves only to reinforce the assumption that transgender and homosexual identities are not only temporary but a deplorable state of affairs to be rejected.

Critics like Azharuddin argue that the appearance of LGBTQ rights claims progression due to the easing of censorship laws that now allow for representations of marginal sexualities is a misconception. A film like Dalam Botol was, in fact, spreading inaccurate information on gender and sexual identities in addition to portraying LGBTQ characters negatively. Ultimately, it did a disservice to Malaysia’s LGBTQ communities.

In contrast, Pang Khee Teik reads the film more positively. In his online review, Pang suggests that “interestingly, the regret expressed by the main character at the end of the film does not really amount to repentance. The character never really repented, he just got even more ‘emo’ than he already was. The slippage between regret and repentance makes this film quite subversive. Really.” In my later interview with him, Pang followed up the above statement by explaining that it was never clear to him whether the protagonist repents for being gay/transgender/transexual—again, sexual and gender identities were conflated in the film—or if

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104 Pang, “Manu Anu: No Regrets.”
he regrets his decision to undergo gender reassignment due to the constraints of the conservative Malaysian society and for lack of information. Ultimately, Pang chooses to queer the mainstream analysis of the film by suggesting that the forlorn expression on the protagonist’s face at the film’s ending could be an expression of his regret in forgoing his queer identity in order to become “straight” again.105

If anything, this film shows why so much more education and empowerment is needed so that people who are going through such issues don’t make hasty choices. . . . With proper counseling, it is possible that the protagonist may understand he is just a gay man—a gay man is a man, no need to reassign his sex. Or if she does identify as a woman, perhaps she could understand the consequences so she doesn’t regret it later.”106

What is interesting in the critiques of Azharuddin and Pang, is that they expose the confusion about the gender identity and sexual practice of the film’s main character. Is he gay, a term used by them both; transgender, as indicated by Azharuddin; or transsexual, as insinuated by Pang? Given that the film itself does not have a clear sense of the differences between these categories, it is not surprising that the analyses of the character’s orientation would be equally murky. Nevertheless, Pang seeks to appropriate Dalam Botol’s stance as a cautionary tale of queer identity as a negative life choice that can be reversed, to a different kind of cautionary tale against the misrepresentation of queer subjectivities in his reading of the film.

Pang extends his subversive reading of Dalam Botol in his creation of the Repent or Die! series. The presentation of the photographs is in itself a resistance to the new censorship code that materialized as a result of the film. In addition, the performances in the photographs, with the portrayal of diverse queer characters—a gay “bear,” a transgender drag queen, an interethnic same-sex couple, and a group of club-hopping gay men masquerading in costume—set out to compensate for the narrow and misleading depiction of the gay character in the film. In short,

106 Pang, “Manu Anu: No Regrets.”
Repent or Die! attempts to reverse Dalam Botol’s articulation of gender and sexual confusion mired in shame, with camp performances of pleasure that embraced and celebrated queer subjectivity instead.

The Limitations of Camp Pleasures

One of the reasons Repent or Die! can rouse senses of pleasure is its citation of, in Moe Meyer’s words, the “bodies of gay forebears,”107 with practices “embedded in material histories.”108 These citations in the photographs reflect Dennis Altman’s idea of a “global queering” aesthetic,109 in which Pang uses normative queer tropes originating from the West to produce a sense of familiarity in the spectators. For example, Asian bear Bruno protects his designer Gaultier garb with his “gayverizing” powers inspired by the Hollywood movie franchise X-Men,110 and the dancers in the “Village People” referenced the partying and club scene prevalent in cosmopolitan urban centers. I do not want to critique the use of these “global” queer cultural tropes for their own sake, for they serve a positive purpose in their ability to elicit a sense of pleasure stemming from the images’ recognizable sanguine campiness. However, they could also be read through Meyer’s critique of Sontag’s version of Camp,111 in which he accuses Sontag of depoliticizing the term by relegating it to “bourgeois” consumerist practices. By using the lens of Meyer’s theory to read the work, I see how, due to Malaysia’s limited recorded queer history, queer subjects then look in part to Western cultural influences in forging their identity. As a result, while recognizing the potential of citing these global “forebears” of queer agency, I

108 Ibid., 154.
110 The X-Men comic series and movie franchise depicting the persecution of mutant characters by “normal” human beings, have been read as a metaphor for the discrimination of marginalized communities predicated on their ethnicity, religion, or sexuality. The X-Men series has thus become a touch-stone and cultural reference for selected LGBTQ communities.
111 I follow Sontag’s capitalization of the word “Camp” here.
also question the political efficaciousness of this practice. These images, which are tied to the
global commodification of queer pleasures could be limiting in their cultural and economic
representational scope, accessible only to queer subjects in Malaysia’s urban centers.

Sarah Ahmed’s nuanced theorization about the imbrication of queer pleasures in practices
of consumption supports the above argument. While she champions the processes of queer
pleasures that legitimize queer desire, she is also mindful of the limitations of “speak[ing] of
queer pleasure as potentially a site for political transformation.” Specifically, she
acknowledges gender theorist Rosemary Hennessy’s proposal that queer visibility and agency
cannot be divorced from global capitalism, in which “money and not liberation is crucial to
recent gay visibility,” and in which “the leisure industries that support queer leisure styles, as
with other industries, depend upon class and racial hierarchies.” An online exchange between
a Malaysian blogger and Pang, in which they argue over the state of LGBTQ rights and activism
in Malaysia, demonstrates this stance. The conversation begins with the blogger with the pen
name TykeOnABike criticizing the pro-LGBTQ movement Seksualti Merdeka (sexuality
independence), co-founded by Pang Khee Teik, for its overt campaigning for LGBTQ rights.
TykeOnABike complains that the campaign draws unwanted attention from the conservative
public and the government, deeming its rhetoric unnecessary and irrelevant to Malaysian queer

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112 Ahmed, 162.
113 Global capitalism has been theorized as a form of late stage capitalism occurring in the late twentieth and turn of
the twenty-first century that is characterized by the transnational flow of capital and labor headed by a globally
mobile class of corporate and economic elites. This system has vast reaching implications that I cannot get into here.
But its primary relevance for my argument is how global capitalism has the ability to cause increasingly larger
economic and social divides between the “haves” and “have-nots.” See William I. Robinson, A Theory of Global
114 Ibid.,163. For more on Ahmed’s reference to Hennessey, see Rosemary Hennessy, Profit and Pleasure: Sexual
Identities in Late Capitalism (New York: Routledge, 2000).
subjects. He feels that “the gay agenda is best served quietly,” and “the fight for acceptance and
tolerance is not won by emphasizing our differences.”\(^{115}\)

TykeOnABike backs his argument by stating that Seksualti Merdeka’s portrayal of queer
subjects having to live in fear under the oppressive laws of the Malaysian state and its
subsequent campaign for sexuality rights are overblown and not reflective of his experiences and
beliefs as a gay man in the country. He cites the example of gay men being able to socialize
freely in Bukit Bintang,\(^{116}\) as evidence of the social freedom gay men enjoy. He goes on to
describe the quintessential queer subject in Malaysia as a man with “perfectly styled hair” and an
“unusually fashionable take on casual wear, draped over his gym-toned body.” He carries “an
iPhone4, suitably blinged up with a snazzy cover case . . . , a leather folio bound iPad” and drives
a “valet parked” stylish Mini Cooper.\(^{117}\) TykeOnABike also points out his perceived similarities
between gay men and heteronormative citizens by emphasizing how they too have “jobs,”
“families,” and “responsibilities.”\(^{118}\)

Not only does this opinion disregard the experiences of LGBTQ community members
who are not gay men, but it is also clear how TykeOnABike seeks for and perceives the
acceptance of the LGBTQ individuals as tied to economic affluence, material consumption, and
the ability to partake in global queer cultural forms. Similar to the rhetoric underlying Pink Dot,
TykeOnABike’s argument for accepting gay men in society based on their ability to participate
in conventional economic and social practices depoliticizes the more radical missions of queer
by accepting its co-option into conventional narratives of rights claims dependent on neoliberal

\(^{115}\) TykeOnABike, “Does Your Sexuality Need Merdeka-ing?” \textit{The Malaysian Insider}, November 20, 2011,
merdeka-ing-tykeonabike/ (site discontinued).
\(^{116}\) An affluent neighborhood in the capital city of Kuala Lumpur.
\(^{117}\) TykeOnABike, “Does Your Sexuality Need Merdeka-ing?”
\(^{118}\) Ibid.
capitalistic ideologies. The problem with a pseudo-rights model that depends largely on economic ability is the most vulnerable and in need are not in the position to claim these rights. Pang, in his retort to the blog post, observes that “financially secure gays like TykeOnABike have an interest in sustaining the political culture that has guaranteed their survival, and furthermore, in which they are complicit in sustaining. . . . A dialogue with them then needs to highlight the economic inequalities that prevent poorer queer subjects from achieving the social insurance presently enjoyed by affluent gays.”

I add that allowances for LGBTQ communities that are predicated mainly on consumption are also under the threat of being revoked at any time. A key example is the event that inspired TykeOnABike’s blog post—the banning of the LGBTQ rights festival Seksualiti Merdeka in 2011. Since its inception in 2008, the annual festival had produced arts events and forums in Kuala Lumpur, managing to fly under the radar of state forces until 2011. That year, representatives from the extreme-right ethnic Malay organization Pertubuhan Pribumi Perkasa (mighty native organization) “described Seksualiti Merdeka as a threat to national security” and provocatively stated that “supporting gays and lesbians will destroy” Malaysia. Importantly, it was widely speculated that the main reason Seksualiti Merdeka was thrust into the spotlight in 2011 was due to the nefarious strategizing of conservative politicians rather than the fear of the campaign’s “gay agenda” itself. Observers like global studies scholar Julian C.H. Lee argue that the attack on the campaign and festival was used as a reason to delegitimize Ambiga Sreenavasan, a prominent lawyer, civil society member, and vocal critique of the ruling party, UMNO. Sreenavasan is a leader of the civil society–led Bersih (clean) movement, which

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campaigns for “free and fair elections” in Malaysia and seeks to end the corrupt electoral practices that have maintained the dominance of the UMNO party. UMNO viewed her growing influence with the Malaysian public as a threat. As Sreenavasan was a vocal supporter of Seksualiti Merdeka, the banning of the 2011 festival was thus a political maneuver by conservative politicians and media forces to indirectly delegitimize her and the Bersih campaign by painting her as an anti-Islamic supporter of “immoral sodomites.”

This political fiasco that inadvertently resulted in the demise of Seksualiti Merdeka points to the precariousness of queer rights forged by activists and artists in the country. LGBTQ communities are tolerated as long as individuals limit their sphere of influence to spaces of consumption, but once they cross the line by engaging in national political discourses or associating with political persons, these allowances are immediately curtailed. In addition, bearing in mind that Seksualiti Merdeka, the most prominent LGBTQ campaign in Malaysia to date, was held in the capital city of Kuala Lumpur, it seems that those who can access these already limited spaces are the well-educated, socially liberal, and relatively affluent. In such a system, individuals like TykeOnABike can find a way to live their lives as queer subjects through their economic participation and stay under the radar by not vocally demanding for political rights while the “poorer queer subjects” brought up by Pang are further marginalized.

It is telling though that while Pang criticizes the elitism in TykeOnABike’s commentary, the friends and colleagues photographed for *Repent or Die!* and the characters that they embody are nevertheless limited to a demographic who have access to global queer cultural practices as well as cultural and economic capital. Pang does not claim his work to be representative of all queer subjects, but the overall dramaturgical process and aesthetic sense of the photographs

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121 Ibid., 180–81.
again point to the larger question of who has access to and how can one access queer pleasures, and by implication, queer rights.

The Agential Pleasure of Recognition in Localized Camp Performances

In spite of these reservations, *Repent or Die!* does succeed in some ways in opening up agential spaces to further queer rights claims. Besides the unashamed claiming of queer subjectivity and desire through their camp performances elaborated on earlier in the section, another way in which the series does so was through Pang’s invocation of localized queer tropes, thus enabling a sense of recognition to create a space for community.

One way in which Pang contextualizes his work locally is through the casting of recognizable LGBTQ figures in the arts and civil society. The performers of the series are Pang’s friends or colleagues in the arts, most who identify as queer. In “Gayverine,” Pang casts “well-known tour leader and popular Asian bear Bruno Heong [in the title role who wore] his own collection of designer clothes.”

In the “Return of Shelah,” Malaysia’s foremost drag queen Shelah (Edwin Sumun) plays herself. The cast of “Village People” is made up of colleagues and friends from Pang’s close-knit LGBTQ circle. In “The Last Communist,” the series of photographs referencing a banned Malaysian film features Mark Teh, Fahmi Fadzil, and Amir Mohammad, who are prominent civil society members and film and theatre artists as well as vocal supporters of LGBTQ rights in Malaysia. And, of course, Pang himself plays the man with the pink scissors, a character featured throughout the series.

The photographs thus are “created by” while also “creating” the community Pang sets out to represent. They become a testament to the important role that artists and activists can play in advancing LGBTQ rights in repressive spaces. This community collaboratively participates in

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forging spaces for queer representation and dialogue about queer rights (and the lack thereof) in Malaysia. They embody the resistance against negative portrayals of queer subjecthood with their celebratory representations of alternative familial bonds that depart from the Asian values–based heteronormative family structure endorsed by the predominantly Muslim Malaysian state.

In addition to his casting choices, Pang cites cultural and political issues specific to Malaysia. “The Last Communist” is the section of the series with the most complex narrative, requiring the spectator to decipher its multilayered meanings. It alludes to the interconnected issues of media censorship, the state of queer marginalization and ethnic relations, and the role of artists as activists in Malaysia. The title is taken from a 2006 film directed by Amir Muhammad that traces the life of exiled Malaysian communist leader Chin Peng. Muhammad states that his film was meant to counter the “demonization of Communism in history textbooks and government statements,”123 and the film was immediately banned upon release. In his version of “The Last Communist,” Pang asks Muhammad to portray the murdered filmmaker in the photographs. This directorial decision explicitly highlights Muhammad’s experience with the state censors and serves as a general statement by Pang on media and art censorship in Malaysia.

The narrative of “The Last Communist” also references a second local film. By directing Mark Teh and Fahmi Fadzil to portray the same sex couple, Pang pays homage to one of Malaysia’s most prominent filmmakers, Yasmin Ahmed, whose film Sepet (Slit eyes) is what inspired the narrative of the section. The 2004 film depicts the trials and tribulations of an interethnic Malay and Chinese couple and caused considerable controversy for its positive

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treatment of the taboo love story. By referencing Ahmed’s film, Pang’s queering of the original love story brings into conversation the various contexts where discriminatory practices occur in Malaysia, and in this case, they were in the realms of ethnic relations and alternative sexualities. Pang’s tribute to the legacy of the late Yasmin Ahmed, a respected artist who voiced her objections to conservative Islamic mores in her films, is further layered with the objective of having his version of “The Last Communist” be a subtle acknowledgement of Ahmed’s identity as a transsexual woman, a fact seldom publicly acknowledged in Malaysia.

Viewing the series as a whole, it becomes apparent that Repent or Die!’s celebration of queer subjectivity is not just influenced by tropes of the “gay forebears” of Western-influenced queer culture. It is also indicative of Moe Meyer’s insistence that the work of camp should embody “field research, ethnographic practice, the integration of non-Western forms of knowledge into our academic studies, and the realignment (or even collapse) of traditional disciplinary boundaries resulting from experiential research.” For an audience in the know, the series is a joyful tribute to the efforts of the LGBTQ community members in Malaysia who are active in the spheres of the arts and civil society. Pang acknowledges their efforts in expanding spaces for queer rights in a country governed by an intolerant state by either featuring them in the photographs or by referencing their work. The camp performances in Repent or Die! thus incorporates both globally influenced as well as ethnographically and culturally specific tropes in order to enact its vision of a transcultural queer resistance.

124 Officially, it is against Islamic law in Malaysia for Malay Muslims to marry non-Muslims. Interethnic and interfaith relationships are therefore discouraged and intermarriages illegal and unrecognized.  
Is Pleasure Enough?

*Repent or Die!* embodies a vision of how Malaysian queer subjects are influenced by but not wholly accounted for by global queer culture, with its dramaturgy of camp aesthetics reflecting how Western-oriented queer tropes are appropriated and altered to speak to the experiences in Malaysia. The series speaks to Meyer’s strategy of recuperating agential notions of queer by engaging in culturally and politically specific camp practices. However, given that it also exposes how queer subjectivity in the country is in part enabled by neoliberal economics, it would perhaps be unrealistic to expect the work to also answer to Meyer’s vision of disentangling camp practices from capitalistic consumerism. Recalling blogger TykeOnABike’s conflation of economic access with queer expression, it seems that the allowance to camp performances in Malaysia and the indicative rights that come with them is restricted to Meyer’s critique of Sontag’s “bourgeois” subject.

Returning to my earlier question of whether this then devalues *Repent or Die!*’s political impact—on the positive side, I see an important difference in the embrace of “bourgeois” queer culture predicated on access to capital by someone like TykeOnBike as compared to what Pang’s work indicates as it appropriates and hybridizes elements of the “bourgeois” aesthetic with politicized camp performances. The series reflects a variety of “camp practices” that increase the “social visibility” of queer subjects in Malaysia, appealing in a tongue-in-cheek fashion for the recognition of the political and sexual rights of queer subjects *beyond* conditional acceptance predicated on their role as consumers. Ahmed’s theorization is especially useful here:

Despite the way in which queer pleasures can circulate as commodities within global capitalism, I want to suggest that they can also work to challenge social norms, as forms of investment. To make this argument, we need to reconsider how bodies are shaped by pleasure and take the shape of pleasures.\(^{126}\)

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\(^{126}\) Ibid., 163.
Thus, while Ahmed acknowledges the imbrication of queer pleasures in the economic realm, she also emphasizes their political potential in nurturing queer desire. The deliberate camp performances of Pang’s characters in the photographs—whether in the form of gay men gyrating unselfconsciously to the music; the Asian bear protecting his designer garb with his superpowers; the drag queen proudly revived from her assassination attempt; or the gay interethnic couple enacting a clichéd narrative of a burgeoning romance—all exude a bold resistance shaped by queer pleasures. Importantly, the photographs also invite spectators outside the immediate community of LGBTQ activists and artists to partake in the pleasurable experience created by these performances. This is the sort of process that, according to Ahmed, allows participants “not only the capacity to enter into, or inhabit with ease, social space but also functions as a form of entitlement and belonging. Spaces are claimed through enjoyment, an enjoyment that is returned by being witnessed by others.”

In short, Repent or Die!’s political efficacy is in how it applies a deceptively surface humor to a critical human rights issue; its pleasurable effects opening up spaces for spectators, performers, and the wider community to enter into intersubjective exchanges that supported the recognition and the acceptance of alternative sexualities. With the Malaysian state inciting hatred and fear of queer sexuality in its educational and cultural policies in the form of anti-gay musicals, films, and “sexual reprogramming” workshops for youths, these photographs’ positive embrace of queer subjectivities flies in the face of the state’s repressive tactics. As opposed to the primary emotion of shame depicted in the film Dalam Botol for example, Repent or Die! exudes a joyful sense of unapologetic celebration that indirectly challenges the criminalization of and discrimination against queer subjects.

127 Ibid., 164–5.
Chapter Conclusion

*Cane, Pink Dot, and Repent or Die!* are performative examples of Eng-Beng Lim’s “glocal-queering.” Engaging in their countries’ versions of Audrey Yue’s “illiberal pragmatism,” these are hybrid and transcultural case studies that expose both the agential and complicit nature of rights and cultural work. In the continued existence of Penal Code 377 in Singapore and Malaysia, they demonstrate both the human rights and queer theorists’ appeal for claims made through the specificity of the local, making evident that their dramaturgies are influenced by, but cannot be fully understood through, Western-orientated global queer or human rights discourses.

Saliently, what they have in common is how their manifestations of queer subjectivities are enabled and also problematized by their milieus’ versions of neoliberal economics. Loo Zihan’s summoning of the ghosts of twelve criminalized men in *Cane* and Pink Dot’s circuitous campaign for legal rights embedded within a call for social acceptance are embodied examples of the complex processes of queer rights claims in Singapore. In both cases, I ponder the political costs of relegating queer subjects to “acceptable” and limited spaces of consumption, normative social structures, and regulated artistic representation. The camp performances in Pang Khee Teik’s *Repent or Die!* are situated in global queer references and the specificities of Malaysia’s queer politics. This enables it to circulate queer pleasures that offer the possibility of destabilizing the heterosexual normative expectations of the country’s conservative social and religious norms. Yet, it is unable to fully address questions of access caused by divisions of class and economic hierarchies or the precarity of this access that could be unceremoniously revoked by repressive state forces. Ultimately, all three perform the necessary successes and failings of their attempts at advancing queer rights claims in their respective countries, opening up spaces of discussion that reemphasize the work that still needs to be done.
CHAPTER 3: EMBODYING DEMOCRACY FROM THE GROUND UP IN SINGAPORE AND HONG KONG

The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures.
—Article 21(3), Universal Declaration of Human Rights

[T]he history of the theatre in many parts of the world is closely aligned with civic participation. In a globalizing world where human communication is increasingly mediated at a distance, this basis of co-presence (to say nothing of collective processes of imagining and interpretation) continues to grant theatre much of its force – and in the eyes of certain regimes, its threat.
—Paul Rae, Theatre and Human Rights

In the past decade, the people of Hong Kong and Singapore have been embroiled in a series of protests and civil movements that advocate greater democratic and political participation. In Hong Kong, a flowering of civil disobedience occurred from late September to mid-December 2015, with an estimated two hundred thousand people taking to the streets and protesting in front of governmental buildings.¹ This is known as the “Umbrella Revolution,” so called because the only defense the protesters used against the police’s tear gas canisters were opened umbrellas. Images of Hong Kongers—many of them young people and students camping out for days in the streets, holding impromptu democratic debates, and creating make-shift art exhibitions—filled blogs as well as news websites and printed newspapers (see figure 3.1).

The protest movement was incited by the China's Standing Committee of the National People's Congress's (NPCSC) rejection of the proposed electoral reform in the “Chief Executive Election Plan” on August 31, 2014, which was written by the Alliance for True Democracy (ATD) and supported by twenty-seven pro-democratic Legislative Council members. The NPCSC forbade the ATD’s demands for universal suffrage, which would have allowed Hong Kong residents to choose the next chief executive officer in the 2017 elections. As evidenced by the number of bodies that took to the streets, the impending scenario of a twelve hundred-member nominating committee, dominated by the pro-Beijing business factions pre-selecting candidates for the chief executive position, was an affront to the people of Hong Kong.

The Umbrella Revolution is preceded by a long line of protest demonstrations that had increased in intensity in Hong Kong over the past decade. Just prior to its formation, hundreds of thousands of residents participated in a peaceful protest in the streets of Hong Kong on July 1, 2014, demanding universal suffrage from the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region.

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and the central Chinese government. This annual march, called 七一遊行, was inaugurated in 1997, the year of Hong Kong’s handover from the British back to mainland China, and continued to gain momentum, with an estimated five hundred thousand people marching in the streets in 2003 to oppose Hong Kong’s Basic Law Article 23—an anti-subversion legislation that would have quelled opposition to the policies of the central Chinese government.\textsuperscript{4} As a result of the massive protest, the proposed legislation was not passed. This march has continued yearly, with the one in 2014 having the largest turnout in the history of the marches—one million out of Hong Kong’s seven million population.\textsuperscript{5} The marchers were propelled by the central government’s rejection of an unofficial referendum, in which eight hundred thousand people demanded more autonomy in choosing Hong Kong’s chief executive. In addition, they were voicing their disapproval of a white paper issued in Beijing in June,\textsuperscript{6} which stated, “the city only has ‘the power to run local affairs as authorized by the central leadership.’”\textsuperscript{7}

In Singapore, the call for greater democratic rights, which has been nascent in the country for many years, culminated in 2011 when the People’s Action Party (PAP), the political party that has ruled the country for the past fifty-nine years, faced an unprecedented challenge to its

\textsuperscript{4} Hong Kong Basic Law 23 states, “The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region shall enact laws on its own to prohibit any act of treason, secession, sedition, subversion against the Central People's Government, or theft of state secrets, to prohibit foreign political organizations or bodies from conducting political activities in the Region, and to prohibit political organizations or bodies of the Region from establishing ties with foreign political organizations or bodies.”


monopoly of power. For the first time since the founding of the country, a majority of eighty-two out of the eighty-seven seats in parliament were contested. As opposition parties strengthened their resolve to offer alternative systems of governance, a sense of expectation was generated among the electorate as many citizens were eligible to vote for the first time in their lives. In the time leading up to, during, and after the “Watershed Election,” as it is now termed, citizens voiced their demands for better democratic processes in the forms of artistic representation, scholarly discussion, and online forums not covered by the mainstream media and participated in opposition party rallies in record numbers. Through personal observation on the ground and from dissident publications, I note that some of the political rallies held by the opposition had more attendance than those held by PAP (see Figure 3.2).

Figure 3.2. Rally of an opposition party, the Worker’s Party, in Yishun, Singapore. Photo courtesy of Cavin Teo.

People saw the opposition rallies as a platform that had not been available to them before; they cheered and shouted the names of the opposition politicians in support while booing when PAP party members were mentioned. Many took the opportunity for a public outpouring of their long-withheld grievances.

The intensity of the cathartic outbursts during the Watershed Election rallies in Singapore and the pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong were palpable. Their performative civic participation defied their respective cities’ images as politically apathetic postcolonial spaces now governed by authoritarian regimes whose people were supposedly keener to pursue capitalistic imperatives than to be concerned about civil and political rights. The dramatic nature of these demonstrations brought a new dialectic to civic life and broached the border between political and artistic practice in ways not formerly seen in these sites.

In this chapter, I analyze two artistic case studies produced during or near the time of the “democratic turn” in these cities. I show how these works reflect the negotiation of the artists, audience, and the communities they represent with the democratic processes specific to their contexts. They are artistic calls to participation from the ground up, as opposed to top-down definitions of democracy legitimated by the states. In bringing people together, these performances are continuing what Paul Rae calls the “intertwined history of Western theatre and democracy.” Rae echoes the opinion of philosophers like Hannah Arendt, whom Rae describes as praising theatre as an ideal medium to ruminate the politics of human relations. Rae goes on to argue that the embodied and contained nature of the theatre experience is where the promises of democracy can again be renewed “against the widespread disillusion with our elected representatives.” To this end, my case studies carry on the global tradition of theatre and

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9 Comparative literature scholar Ackbar Abbas claims that, at the time of his writing, Hong Kong had redirected its energy towards the realms of consumerist culture due to its political powerlessness as it was caught between its British colonial master and its incumbent Chinese ruler. See Ackbar Abbas, Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997). In Singapore, sociologist Chua Beng Huat comments on the country’s “anti-democratic” system of governance, in which citizens will compromise on civil and political rights as long as the government provides a good standard of living. See Chua, Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore.


performance as a form of democratic practice. They expose the narrowing of democratic spaces
due to the neoliberal imperatives of these Asian governments as well as trouble the hegemonic
view that democracy is incompatible with the workings of Asian societies on the basis of the
Asian values argument. In turn, this suggests the indivisibility of first-generation civil and
political rights to second-generation economic and social rights as conveyed in the UDHR.

The first case study is *Cooling-Off Day*, written by playwright Alfian Sa’at in Singapore.
The play uses the form of verbatim theatre, which in itself exemplifies a democratic process as it
seeks to represent voices from varied sectors of Singapore society to speak about the 2011
General Election. The second case study is the movement-based *One Hundred Years of Solitude
10.0 – Cultural Revolution*, conceived and directed by theatre director Danny Yung in Hong
Kong. I demonstrate how the work’s dramaturgy is a reflection on political mobilization and
unpack how Yung’s position as a civic leader in Hong Kong society reveals compromises an
artist has to make in order to engage in the political issues of the city. As in previous chapters, I
continue to be attentive to the limitations of both activist and artistic practices in the face of
neoliberal capitalist forces and autocratic governments and explore how these factors impede the
efforts of my subjects of study. Ultimately, I maintain that the political efficacy in these
performances lies not so much in their ability to change legislative or institutional procedures but
in how they have represented or altered the subjectivities of their participants in thinking, or to
think of themselves, as agential political subjects.

*Neoliberal Governance-Enabled Inequalities: A Backlash*

Before the detailed analysis of the case studies, it is necessary to outline the context of their
activist sensibilities. In particular, an understanding of how neoliberalism has developed in these
sites as centralized government practice is helpful in understanding aspects of the artworks that
may otherwise be missed. Neoliberal Asian cities practice forms of governance differing from that of Western liberal democracies. Hong Kong’s system of “partial democracy,” as described by Lam Wai-man and Kua Hsin-chi, and Singapore’s system of “anti-liberal democracy,” as described by Chua Beng Huat, have resulted in societies where a single party dominates, producing authoritarian leaders who effectively restrict civil and political freedoms while legislating policies that situate the cities in the global capitalist economy.

Like in Western liberal democracies, Singaporean citizens and Hong Kong residents technically have the right to vote during elections. However, the ruling parties of both cities have been accused of dismissing the mandate of people as well as rigging the electoral process by gerrymandering to maintain their positions of power. In Singapore’s 2011 general elections, PAP kept eighty-one out of eighty-seven parliamentary seats by obtaining 60 percent of the popular vote, a result that critics have noted to be representationally disproportionate. In Hong Kong, candidates for the chief executive of the region are pre-selected by the political and economic elite in order to ensure that the elected official will be loyal to the Beijing-based central government. Journalist Nisid Hajari reports how law professor Wang Zhenmin, who was a “committee member overseeing Hong Kong’s constitution,” explained the decision to reject voting reforms as necessary to safeguard “the interests of the city’s powerful tycoons” who “account for 60 percent of the city’s wealth . . . from unchecked democracy” because, according

14 Chua, Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore, 185.
15 Please refer back to the introduction for details.
to Wang, “if we just ignore their interests, Hong Kong capitalism will stop.”\(^{18}\) Separately, journalist Ken Brown reported incumbent Chief Executive Leung Chun-Ying’s justified opposing free elections because it would result in votes dominated by “half of the people in Hong Kong who earn less than US$1,800 a month.”\(^{19}\) This dismissal of the will of the people in favor of the affluent and elite ignited a fury that drove Hong Kongers into the streets during election season.

The discrepancy in wealth and power among the different factions of Singapore and Hong Kong society, which manifests itself in the election process, has roots in the neoliberal workings of these sites. Paradoxically, the suppression of civil and political rights also plays in stark contrast to the freedoms enjoyed by the capitalist markets. In Hong Kong, anthropologist Hai Ren examines how the “reincorporation of capitalist Hong Kong into socialist China” has “shaped the transformation of China into a neoliberal state.”\(^{20}\) Incumbent chairman Deng Xiaoping’s declaration of the Cultural Revolution as a failure and his rejection of socialist– and working class–centered Maoist ideologies of the 1970s set the path for China’s neoliberal turn with Hong Kong as its epicenter. With Hong Kong officially made a special administrative region after 1997, the central government was able to operate its state-owned businesses and firms in the global free “market system.” The push for the people of China and Hong Kong to see themselves as “entrepreneurial subject[s],”\(^{21}\) however, has not kept pace with the Hong Kong people’s desire for an improved process for representative democracy.\(^{22}\)

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\(^{21}\) Ibid., 19.

\(^{22}\) Ibid., 20.
In Singapore, blogger “Charles” argues that “free market ideology and neoliberalism is a significant factor in the suppression of the promotion of democracy and human rights in Singapore.” He traces PAP’s crushing of the political opposition, which included trade unionists, intellectuals, socialists, and student activists, from its support of the outgoing British administration in the 1960s,23 followed by its embrace of a free market system combined with state regulation post-independence,24 as the precedent for the government’s continued prioritization of economic growth over civil rights. Since then, state-controlled public goods and services in Singapore have been administered with market openness, enabling foreign multinational companies to thrive. This has resulted in a wealthy country that nevertheless has great income inequality and a lack of political freedoms. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, citizens have also perceived the situation being exacerbated by the government’s immigration policy, which liberally welcomes an influx of well-heeled expatriates and low-wage workers whom they see as a threat to their livelihood and sense of national identity.25

The negative consequences of authoritarian governments that embrace neoliberal policies offering the most benefits to the economic and political elites are evident in the following statistical research. Hong Kong has consistently topped right-wing think tank The Heritage Foundation’s Index of Economic Freedom. In 2014, Hong Kong was again ranked first and

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23 A covert security operation was carried out in 1963 when PAP rounded up so-called communist sympathizers deemed a threat to the newly established party. The manner of arrest and the practice of detention without trial have been criticized as human rights abuses by historians.


Singapore in second place. This indicates that both cities are attractive sites for business and monetary investments, and, by inference, economically prosperous. However, both inversely took the top spots in the United Nations Development Programme’s charts for income inequality. In 2009, Hong Kong’s Gini coefficient score was 43.4, and Singapore’s was 42.5. As of 2013, Singapore’s score has continued to rise, with Hong Kong maintaining its ranking as the site where the monetary divide between the rich and the poor is the widest in the world. This unequal distribution of wealth does not come as a surprise if we look at The Economist’s crony-capitalism index that measures corruption interweaving political and business practices. Singapore and Hong Kong are ranked fifth and first respectively.

While these two cities have common characteristics, there is a key difference between Hong Kong’s Umbrella movement and Singapore’s Watershed Election. The former stems from an established tradition of political protests now reacting to the threat of diminishing spaces for civil and political rights, while the latter marks the nascent political awakening for many of its participants. What they share in common, though, is how they are the results of the mix of economic, social, and political marginalization with the draconian approach of their governments. In turn, the call for economic and social rights is then coupled with the demands for civil and political rights as the electorate realizes that their problems cannot be divorced from their lack of democratic autonomy under authoritarian governments. As such, I read the

government’s justification for the suppression of civil and political rights with the argument of Asian values, under which the sacrifice is meant to further economic rights, as increasingly under duress. Instead, the practice of Asian values can now be seen as a probable cause of unequal economic distribution rather than a path to prosperity as it exposes itself as a form of social control.

*Embodied Democracy from the Ground Up*

The congregation of diverse groups of people in public squares and on the streets is a materialization of shared solidarity. They come together to demand their human rights through the democratic practice of civil, non-violent protest and, in the process, create communities predicated on a shared desire for a better future. In Singapore, the heated debates at the political rallies and in online forums challenge the image of Singaporeans as politically apathetic citizens resigned to or nonchalant of being guided by a paternalistic state. In Hong Kong, the protestors defiantly march to resist an electoral system imposed by the draconian superpower of the central Chinese government. I read these actions as performances from the ground up that are confronting state imperatives, demonstrating James D. Ingram’s idea of “understanding democracy as a form of political action rather than a regime.”

The urgent gathering of bodies also manifests Carol C. Gould’s model of democracy based on a “conception of embodied politics.”

I assert that the spirit of the above social performances is reflected in the following artistic case studies. These theatre pieces, produced around the time of the activist events and protests, are a direct reaction to or inspired by the seminal political moments of their times. *Cooling-Off Day* and *One Hundred Years of Solitude 10.0* are relevant not only because they

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29 Ingram, *Radical Cosmopolitics*, 190.
thematically deal with the issue of democratic rights claims but because their dramaturgies also demonstrate Gould’s proposal of an inter-subjective practice of democracy in which participants start conversations while aware of the cultural and political differences between and within communities.\textsuperscript{31} As such, these performances offer alternative definitions and practices of democracy that challenge the inadequacies of current institutional mandates. By providing a space for embodied debates and actions, they enable the political subjectivities of those involved to evolve, be they the artists, the audiences, or the people marching on the streets.

\textit{Alfian Sa’at’s Cooling-Off Day: Verbatim Theatre as Democratic Practice}

Just the fact of being able to decide
The government of the day
After Polling Day,
And a cross does that
Without any violence, any bloodshed . . .
This is going to sound very cheesy
But it was a very moving experience.
To think that people have died to secure that right.\textsuperscript{32}

These are lines from a monologue given by forty-one-year-old Indian social worker Vincent, a character in playwright Alfian Sa’at’s (born 1977) verbatim documentary theatre piece \textit{Cooling-Off Day}.\textsuperscript{33} While Vincent is referring to electoral processes in general, his sentiments are meant to capture the fervor that gripped the psyche of Singaporeans in 2011 as they pondered the implications of having, for the first time, a choice in electing their political leaders. Written in response to the 2011 general election, the play was co-directed by Ivan Heng

\textsuperscript{31} I elaborate on Ingram’s and Gould’s theses in the Introduction.
\textsuperscript{32} Alfian Sa’at, \textit{Cooling-Off Day} (Singapore: Ethos Books, 2012), 34.
\textsuperscript{33} Alfian Sa’at is a prolific award-winning Singaporean writer who has worked extensively with the theatre companies The Necessary Stage, which produced his \textit{Asian Boys} plays mentioned in Chapter 2, as well as with W!LD RICE, where he is currently the resident playwright. His work often touches on the salient contemporary socio-political issues of Singapore.
and Jo Kukathas\textsuperscript{34} and presented by theatre company W!LD Rice as part of its 2011 Man Singapore Theatre Festival.\textsuperscript{35} The play is structured as a series of monologues featuring a cross section of Singaporeans expressing their trepidations and hopes alongside their views of the country’s political system and its social and economic conditions. The characters are given voice by a cast of six actors—Janice Koh, Jo Kukathas, Neo Swee Lin, Rodney Oliveiro, Peter Sau, and Najib Soiman—who tackle close to forty ethnically diverse characters of Chinese, Indian, Malay, and mixed-ethnic descent ranging from the ages of seventeen to seventy. Inhabiting a mostly bare stage, they are aided by costume changes and personal props denoting a change in the characters they are personifying; a projector screen that shows the character’s name, profession or social role, and age at each scene change alongside additional images that establish the scenes’ contexts; and white chairs. Most scenes have only the primary character speaking; some have actors sharing the stage with the primary actor to heighten the message of the monologue through mimed movements. While mostly performed in English,\textsuperscript{36} which is the lingua franca of Singapore, there are also scenes performed in Mandarin, other Chinese dialects, and Malay.

W!LD RICE declares the aim of the play is to “form a portrait of Singaporeans confronting the real meaning of democracy and rediscovering their role in shaping the country’s future.”\textsuperscript{37} It explains how the play’s dialogue is culled from interviews that cover “a wide social

\textsuperscript{34} Ivan Heng is the artistic director of W!LD RICE. Jo Kukathas, as mentioned in Chapter 2, is the artistic director of Malaysian theatre company Instant Café. Kukathas is also active in the Singapore theatre scene as a director and actor.

\textsuperscript{35} The festival was so-named as it was sponsored by the British investment management company, Man Investments.

\textsuperscript{36} The grammar and syntax of some of the English dialogue diverts from standard English because, as verbatim theatre, the actors are vocalizing the colloquial speech patterns of the characters, which in this case is Colloquial Singaporean English, or Singlish.

and political spectrum” in order to “capture the . . . [general election] experience through the voices of individual Singaporeans—from election candidates to pro-establishment civil servants; from taxi-drivers to teachers; from die-hard opposition supporters to young people casting their virgin votes.”38 The play was quickly developed and produced as it rode the wave of the 2011 election fever, the first election since Singapore’s independence in which citizens had the option of voting for a considerable number of opposition party members. First staged in August 2011 just three months after the elections, the play was back by popular demand in February and March 2012, with both runs selling out.

The title of the play refers to the day before the elections when the ballots are cast. After nominations for candidates were announced in April, there was a three-week period when rallies were held in different constituencies around the country for the party candidates trying to shore up votes. With the affective intensity of the country rising during the election period, “Cooling-Off Day” was the official term of a policy introduced by PAP that forbade any public rallies and media debates the day before the elections. Therefore, May 6, 2011 was defined as a day of contemplation after the intense month of the electoral campaign so that, in PAP’s reasoning, Singaporeans could make an informed choice at the ballot box based on logical deduction rather than emotions. In bringing together heterogeneous voices and opinions, the play’s dramaturgy reflects the citizen’s contemplative deliberation that the stipulated Cooling-Off Day was meant to achieve. By capturing the emotionally laden dialogue, however, Sa’at captures the irony of the policy and the impossibility of absolute objectivity in the face of this historical event. The positive attendance and reception to both runs indicate how Cooling-Off Day became a conduit for the audience to process their thoughts and feelings about the significance of the elections in

38 Ibid.
the space of the theatre. The play’s success is thus not only due to it dealing with a “hot” political issue, but also because its genre enables the audience to see themselves represented on stage.

I argue that *Cooling-Off Day* as verbatim theatre is a manifestation of an embodied, ground-up process of democracy that brings together the diverse viewpoints of a wide demographic of Singaporeans representing both pro- and anti-establishment positions. Its inclusion of characters recounting salient political events with perspectives unfavorable to PAP, on the one hand, subverts the party’s top-down rhetoric by giving voice to political opinions not commonly heard in the mainstream media.39 On the other, the inclusion of characters supportive of PAP as well as those who are ambivalent is an attempt to limit bias by letting the audience decipher their political allegiances for themselves.

In addition, I assert that the materiality of theatre itself enables a different perspective of political efficacy that could not be glimpsed from the election results or statistical surveys alone. I demonstrate this by analyzing both the text of the play, which relates the complexity of characters’ inner lives as well as the actors’ process in portraying those characters. While pondering the representational limits of verbatim theatre, I ultimately argue that *Cooling-Off Day*, which features intersubjective “dialogues” taking place between and within the characters as well as between the actors and the characters, is a microcosm reflecting the burgeoning subjectivity of Singaporeans who are beginning to see themselves as agential beings in the country’s political processes.

Staging Verbatim Theatre

The term “verbatim theatre” was originally coined by theatre scholar Derek Paget in 1987. Paget traces how the practice flourished in the United Kingdom in the 1970s, with

39 All local mainstream media channels in Singapore, including television news broadcasts and newspapers, are owned and controlled by the government.
pioneers of the genre including Peter Cheeseman, David Thacker, and Ron Rose.\(^{40}\) Describing
the work of playwright Rony Robinson, Paget recounts how Robinson had taped and transcribed
“interviews with ‘ordinary’ people . . . [researching] into a particular region, subject area, issue, event, or combination of these things.”\(^{41}\) He notes how these practitioners were inspired by the
British documentary film movement of the 1930s and 1940s as well as the politically conscious
theatre of Bertolt Brecht and Erwin Piscator to feature the voices of individuals and communities
not “privileged by the journalistic or the entertainment media” nor found in the middle-class
theatres in metropolitan London.\(^{42}\) In a later study, Will Hammond and Dan Steward define the
process of verbatim as “the words of real people [that] are recorded or transcribed by a dramatist
during an interview or research process,” then “edited, arranged or recontextualised to form a
dramatic presentation, in which actors take on the characters of the real individuals whose words
are being used.”\(^{43}\) Importantly, they emphasize that what attracts audiences to this genre is that
“anyone can be the star of a verbatim play,” therefore, making it “a remarkably democratic
medium.”\(^{44}\)

The verbatim theatre’s penchant for democratic representation is also noted by
researchers of documentary theatre,\(^{45}\) of which verbatim is a branch. According to theatre
scholars Alison Forsyth and Chris Megson, documentary theatre has audiences “actively engaged

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\(^{41}\) Ibid., 317.

\(^{42}\) Ibid., 322.


\(^{44}\) Ibid., 12.

\(^{45}\) Derek Paget describes documentary theatre as based on factual accounts. The script might draw its material from source documents of the events it seeks to represent, including news or film footage, photographs, and interviews. See Derek Paget, “Documentary Theatre,” in *The Continuum Companion to Twentieth Century Theatre*, ed. Colin Chambers (London: Continuum, 2002), 214.
in dialogue as citizens and putative participations in the public sphere.”46 In another study, theatre scholar Carol Martin invokes performance studies scholar Diana Taylor by writing that documentary theatre “takes the archive and turns it into repertoire.”47 Through Martin, I see how verbatim theatre can transform the pages of recorded interviews into embodied experiences where artists and audiences come together as a community to debate the issues presented.

Cooling-Off Day’s dramaturgy displays many aspects of verbatim theatre, the most salient for my argument being the democratic inclusion of multiple opinions. To stage this particular play in the genre is of extra significance because the structure becomes a physical expression of its theme and the play itself a theatrical mediation of electoral freedoms and civil participation in Singapore. With protests and demonstrations on the streets forbidden by law, segments of the population saw rallies during this period as a chance to voice their deep-seated dissatisfaction with the ruling party and the state of affairs in the country. The play thus represents what was happening on the ground, and the monologues in it are the distilled reflections of these affective outcries, bursts of opinions, and debates.

Putting Diverse Voices into Play

The importance of the theatre in providing a space where the diversity of sentiments is encouraged, especially in a state where civil freedoms are constrained, is emphasized by co-directors Jo Kukathas and Ivan Heng, who state:

In Singapore, theatre dealing with politics is always viewed with suspicion, but in rehearsing and presenting this play, we are more convinced now than ever of theatre’s role in serving the community it represents. Our task in presenting Cooling-Off Day was to find empathy with voices and views not our own, and not merely to mimic those who were interviewed. We read, researched, listened, interpreted and rehearsed the transcripts

47 Carol Martin, “Bodies of Evidence,” TDR: The Drama Review 5, no. 3 (Fall 2016): 10. Diana Taylor refers to the archive as artifacts documenting “official” versions of recorded history, while the repertoire is the embodiment of history presented in live and oral performances. See Diana Taylor, The Archive and the Repertoire.
of the interviews, trying to find ways of expressing these voices with clarity and honesty. We have come to understand them through their wisdom, their humor, their grievances, their hopes, their worries and their contradictions.\(^48\)

Based on my knowledge of the artistic and activist work of Sa’at, Heng, and Kukathas, which reveals their public political positions, I deduce that they would be critical of the anti-liberal policies in Singapore and Malaysia authorized by PAP.\(^49\) The above statement then reads as a declaration by the artists that they are not just interested in representing the opinions of characters and citizens from the intellectual and artistic communities whose politics are similar to their own but in also giving space for a wider breadth of responses. For example, the play includes monologues by characters like Donald, an ex-civil servant who analyzes how the structural problems of economic inequality and the unbending bureaucracy of the government have resulted in the citizens’ discontent:

Inequality is shooting off the charts  
Wage Stagnation is a big problem.  
But having been successful  
With that old mental model for so long,  
And it doesn’t help that these have been now  
Elevated to the level of “hard truths,”  
It becomes ideology, it becomes dogma.\(^50\)

It also features the voices of those like Khatijah, a Malay housewife who justifies her vote for PAP because she feels that her family’s material needs have been fulfilled:

I vote because the PAP government  
Take care of us.  
My family got flat, and last year.  
My son got bursary from the CDC.

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\(^49\) Kukathas’s politics can be deduced from her role as the artistic director of the Instant Café in Malaysia, a theatre company initially founded to speak against the rampant political corruption in her country. Sa’at and Heng are openly queer artists whose works have not only addressed the social stigmatization of the sexually marginalized in Singapore but also other social and political issues, including those of ethnic relations, cultural identity, and so on. Their work adds to the constructive criticism of a country where such discussions are often sanitized or censored by the government.

\(^50\) Sa’at, *Cooling-off Day.*
Our life is peaceful.51

In presenting contrasting opinions, the play’s development process is reminiscent of Martin’s explanation of how documentary theatre should shift “away from single perspective notions of truth towards ambiguity and multiple viewpoints.”52 Martin is speaking of the misconceptions and misinterpretations of some audiences and practitioners who see documentary theatre as a form of singular or biased truth telling. Her analysis is similar to other scholars of verbatim and documentary theatre—that while the material should be sourced from historical events, the work should not veer into propaganda but present positions towards issues as unstable and dependent on the interpretations of those who are presented on stage, those who are presenting as well as those who are watching.53

By representing the characters’ multiple political perspectives, Cooling-Off Day enables the audience to identify with a diversity of opinions. In addition, this aspect of the play’s structural dramaturgy also presents an alternative vision to the political order of the Singapore state, which insists on a homogeneous discourse about nation building predicated on unwavering loyalty to PAP. By including “conservative” viewpoints that reveal that not everyone desires “liberal democracy,” Cooling-Off Day appears not to be pushing a specific political ideology or agenda. Instead, this tactic of inclusion subtly critiques PAP’s draconian control of the mainstream media as well as its ruthless prosecution of individuals deemed to be political threats.54

51 Ibid., 50. CDC is the acronym for Community Development Council. One of the initiatives of this government-led program is to provide educational funding for the underserved and economically-challenged communities in Singapore.
53 One other scholar who speaks to this point is dramaturg David Lane. He writes about how verbatim theatre often presents a topic or event as the “unmediated truth” when it most likely is a version of what the artists and producers “want us to hear.” See David Lane, Contemporary British Theatre (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 66.
54 I will elaborate this point further in the section.
At the same time, *Cooling-Off Day* advances the quest for democratic human rights by giving space to voices and opinions not featured in the political discourse of PAP or government-controlled media. As opposed to the state’s portrayal of the “left-leaning” activists as dangerous radicals, the play gives a rich contextualization of the social and political circumstances that had shaped the political subjectivities of these people by providing the opportunity for them to speak for themselves. Characters who serve as proponents for the reform of civil and political rights include ex-lawyer Soh Lung, who recalls the illegitimate imprisonment suffered by herself and other political prisoners under the Internal Security Act (ISA) during the 1980s when they were accused of aiding communists. The character of social worker Vincent mentions the same historical event, crediting the injustice he feels on behalf of the victims as one reason for his political awakening. He declares that “the so-called Marxist Conspiracy in 1987 was a pack of lies,” expressing his objection to the continued existence of the ISA by which the government could arrest, imprison, and torture political dissidents, without trial, on the pretext of threats to national security. The viewpoints of Vincent and Soh Lung on human rights, while incommensurable with the rhetoric of the ruling party, are close to those of international human rights organizations. The 2011 annual report by the Human Rights Watch states that Singapore refused to change “abusive laws” as recommended by the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) process at the United Nations Human Rights Council. For example, PAP failed to repeal ISA and continued the practice of caning in correctional facilities and its enforcement of capital punishment. These inhumane treatments documented in the report allude to the extremity of

55 Sa’at, *Cooling-Off Day*, 34. I explain the history of the Marxist Conspiracy in Chapter 1.
PAP’s laws, which suggests a general milieu of subtle repression and the censorship of contentious opinions in the country.

This situation produces an underlying politics of fear in the everyday lives of people, which deters them from speaking up in unjust situations or proposing alternative opinions and political processes for fear of governmental retaliation. As such, the knowledge that the dialogue in verbatim theatre is based on interview transcripts makes the pathos and courage expressed by these characters even more significant to the audience. Both Soh Lung and Vincent are thinly veiled representations of significant participants in Singapore’s political scene. Respectively, they are Teo Soh Lung,57 who is a political prisoner turned vocal opponent of PAP, and incumbent opposition party member Vincent Wijesingha58 of the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP), who had campaigned on his ideological differences from PAP’s.59 Neo Swee Lin playing Soh Lung uses her vocalization and body language to display her character’s mixed feelings of resignation, bitterness, and bewilderment at the recollection of her ordeal. Co-director Jo Kukathas doubles up as an actor to play Vincent. Mimicking the politician’s vocal pattern and physical stance, she conveys his sense of urgency and desire to alter the political landscape of the country.

In the actors’ deliberate highlighting of the characters’ bodily gestures and vocalization patterns, I read them as not attempting to identify with their characters’ emotions completely.

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57 Teo wrote a memoir about her experience. See Teo Soh Lung, *Beyond the Blue Gate: Recollections of a Political Prisoner* (Singapore: Ethos Books, 2010).
58 As of 2013, Wijesingha has stepped down from political office and is now a civil rights activist. He also returned to his previous profession as a professor of social work.
59 In interviews, Wijesingha highlights the economic and social conditions of the most vulnerable. He exposes matters downplayed by PAP. These include how the 20% of the nation live in poverty, the deplorable conditions of low-waged migrant workers, and the lack of affordable health care or a social safety net for the elderly, poor, and sick. For Wijesingha, these are unjustifiable policies in a country with a large sovereign fund governed by the highest paid politicians in the world. See Joshua Chiang, “I’ve never left Singapore—SDP’s Dr. Vincent Wijesingha,” *The Online Citizen*, March 30, 2011, accessed July 7, 2015, http://www.theonlinecitizen.com/2011/03/ive-never-left-singapore-sdps-vincent-wijesingha/.
They are trying to present the viewpoints of their “charges” as is, to allow the words of the people represented by the characters to come through, so as to ignite the necessary empathy and indignation in the audience in order to propel them to aspire towards a more democratic system of governance.

Political Awakenings

While the play gives voice to individuals who see civil and political freedom as essential to a thriving democracy, critics have argued that the majority of Singaporeans are more focused on practical “bread and butter” concerns. Votes for opposition party members or outcries during rallies are more calls for reforms that would improve the voters’ economic situation rather than demands for a “liberal” process of governance linked to civil and political rights issues. For example, Asian politics specialist Derek da Cunha argues that while the elections “dissipated the aura of invincibility and virtue surrounding the PAP, . . . the evidence remains inconclusive that there is a clamor by most Singaporeans for greater democracy and freedoms.”60 He further claims that in spite of the heated demands for greater civil freedoms in on-line discussions, these circulated among a self-selecting group and might not result in voting patterns that would topple PAP. In another study by political science scholar Bridget Welsh, a survey on voting behavior reveals that 42.9 percent of the people cited inflation and the cost of living as their first priority, affordable health care as their second with 12.3 percent, and political freedoms is at the near bottom with 2.3 percent.61

I argue however that this statistical data, while useful in understanding the general concerns and priorities of a population, nevertheless cannot reveal the complex psychological and emotional experiences of individuals relating to the political process. Sociologist Chua Beng Huat, in analyzing electoral behavior in Asia, uses philosopher Walter Benjamin’s theory of the “crowd” in sharing a similar sentiment, stating:

Survey and polling results can stand as proxy for materiality of the “crowd,” making “visible” the “invisible” popular sentiments. However, polls remain poor substitutes for generating “visibility” of popular support because individual members of the electorate remain abstract and invisible as “respondents” to the polls. Furthermore, the poll results can never be sufficiently disaggregated to get at the agency of the individual voter.62

Chua emphasizes the “individualized agency” of every “crowd” member, each with his or her “own reason and desire.” He states that this is “conceptually very important as it foregrounds the multiplicity of purposes of individuals.”63 By tearing away “the veiled illusion of mass popular support at the event,”64 one can then focus an “analytic attention on the complexities and instabilities of political support.”65 I agree with Chua that polls cannot capture the nuanced and complex thought processes of individual citizens negotiating their relationship with government power. The emotional resonances felt at the rallies cannot be simplified by assuming that all those who participated have the same perspectives towards what democracy is or does. Chua’s call to go beyond poll numbers to look at the individual’s psychology in understanding the “instabilities of political support” is then an important consideration in the case of the 2011 elections. Given that PAP returned to power, the significance of the elections

63 Ibid., 9.
64 Chua’s “event” refers to elections.
lies not in the hope for a change of political guard but rather in how it exposes the fissures
occurring in the seemingly impervious ideology of PAP.

I thus propose that the medium of the theatre addresses this blind spot of statistical
studies and polls in understanding electoral behavior. The genre of verbatim theatre, especially
with its inclusion of characters from different socio-economic backgrounds and political
affiliation as they discuss how the elections relate to them, becomes a embodied manifestation of
James Ingram’s heterogeneous ground-up practice of democracy that subverts the top-down
homogeneous political discourse institutionalized by the government in power. Cooling-Off
Day, then, is a play that captures this shift in the political subjectivity of its characters and, in
turn, the citizens whom they represent.

One such scene features the character Rebecca, a forty-two-year-old teacher who
recounts her dilemma at the ballot box. She tells the audience how she had wanted to support
Sylvia Lim, a member of the opposition Worker’s Party:

Anyway, I remember one of the things
Sylvia Lim said
Was that election time was the only time
When the government was afraid
Of the people.
It was the only time
When the balance of power
Was shifted to the citizens.
And it didn’t come very often.
You had that chance only twice
In every decade of your life.

Rebecca, however, ultimately votes for the ruling party. She expresses her paranoia that
her vote might be traceable and the danger of being penalized in her civil service job should PAP

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66 Ingram, Radical Cosmopolitics.
67 Sa’at, Cooling-Off Day, 45. Additional information about the monologues and characters can be read from the
script.
discover her disloyalty. This scene conveys both the strong ideological control that PAP has over its citizens partly predicated on fear as well as the nascent sense of agency experienced by this character that indicates potential disruption (see figure 3.3).

![Figure 3.3. Neo Swee Lin as Rebecca.](image)

The strong psychological hold that the ruling party has over Rebecca can be understood through the work of Chua and public intellectual Sudhir Thomas Vadaketh. Chua adapts Antonio Gramsci’s “ideological hegemony” to explain Singapore’s systems of control, calling it a process of “hegemony/consensus.” It attributes citizens’ approval of PAP’s draconian style of ruling with how they are inculcated to believe that it is necessary for their economic and social protection. More recently, Vadaketh argues that PAP’s authority over its citizens has reached beyond the realm of ideology to influence their affective lives:

> The PAP’s dominance is so complete that it has transcended mere legislative and political control, forging strong emotional and psychological bonds with the polity. Singaporeans have long equated the ruling party with the country. In other words, if you are loyal to the PAP, you are loyal to Singapore. On the other hand, if you are not loyal to the PAP, you are not loyal to Singapore.

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Following Vadaketh’s argument, it makes sense that a character like Rebecca would be hesitant to act against her institutionally ingrained ideologies and anxieties, but her excitement in casting her virgin vote also conveys Vadaketh’s observation of “a growing broad-based grassroots desire for liberalization” in recent years. Neo Swee Lin’s performance as Rebecca reflects this seminal period in the political history of Singapore as having a clear impact. Delivering her monologue in a soft spotlight on an empty stage, she is accompanied by several dimly lit actors simulating the motion of casting ballots backstage. The mechanical movements of the supporting actors contrast with Neo’s tremulous performance as she expresses her character’s barely containable excitement.

Rebecca’s choice reveals a co-option back into the systems of power, but the scene nevertheless conveys her nascent political awakening, indicating to the audience the possibility of change in the wider social landscape. Another such example is when the character of Chinese writer Ken bemoans what he sees as the misguided vigilance of his wife, who is working to ensure the nomination of an opposition party member despite her lack of knowledge of the candidate’s merit or experience. By the end of the scene, however, Ken has gained some insight into her sentiments:

And then I think she couldn’t take it anymore.
She said, I don’t know if I’ve done the right thing
But I was acting from my guts.
We don’t have much time because they have
To raise money by tomorrow.
So I just felt deep in my guts
That I had to do this, not just for myself
But for the people here
The people of Tanjong Pagar
Who’s never had the chance to vote
For god knows how many years.

71 Ibid., 202–3.
72 Tanjong Pagar is the name of a neighborhood in Singapore that has been zoned as a voting bloc.
And that was what I realized
It was a kind of hunger, you know?
Maybe because she said something
About guts but I realized
That she did what she did
Because there’s this deep hunger
To be part of the political process
To register your voice
To speak up and be counted.

And it’s a hunger that
Bread and butter
Will not satisfy. 73

Co-directors Heng and Kukathas chose to split the lines between two actors. The stage is set up such that Tan Kheng Hua, who plays Ken’s wife, sits opposite Rodney Olivero as Ken. The characters are bathed in a soft spotlight on an otherwise darkened stage, emphasizing the intensity of their dialogue. Tan speaks the lines “I don’t know if I’d done the right thing” to “For god knows how many years,” with Olivero taking over from the lines, “And that was when I realized” to the end of the script. The significance of their exchange is twofold. First, the revelation of the wife’s “deep hunger to be part of the political process” that “bread and butter could not satisfy” indicates the break in PAP’s Asian values argument that second-generation economic rights have to precede first-generation civil and political rights. The wife’s desire echoes Chua and Vadaketh’s claims that the political consensus between the ruling party and the citizens predicated on the exchange of economic stability for authoritarian rule is eroding. Second, Ken’s breakthrough in his ability to empathize with his wife’s seemingly illogical position dramaturgically extends the diverse opinions that break down the ruling party’s political consensus that had taken place between scenes. In this case, Ken and his wife’s contentious conversation, then, registers to the audience that an exchange has taken place within a scene 73 Sa’at, Cooling-Off Day, 30.
leading to the transformation and epiphany of both characters regarding how they relate to the country’s democratic process.

Intersubjective Dialogues

Invoking Carol C. Gould’s proposal of redefining a practice of democracy based on “embodied politics,” I read the example above as representative of her vision in which “a community of differentiated whole persons” characterized by their “embodied and diverse complexity” can come together to negotiate how the workings of democracy affect issues of human rights.74 In addition, these intersubjective occurrences are not only reflected in the play’s structural logic or its characters’ development but also in the course of the rehearsal and performance process.

Recalling the co-directors’ declaration that they want to find “empathy with voices and views not our own, and not merely to mimic those who were interviewed,”75 I see the artists’ intention as trying to stay true to the spirit of the verbatim tradition, in which they understand in Paget’s words—the “responsibilities towards the real people whose thoughts and feelings have been sought for the show’s material.”76 As mentioned, the inclusion of multiple viewpoints serves as a positive strategy that contrasts with the hegemonic policies of an authoritarian government. However, I am also aware of the politics of representation and how the wording of the directors could sound unintentionally condescending—that of the liberal, intellectual class trying to understand their conservative or less-educated counterparts.

Paget proposes that actors can avoid this pitfall by citing the opinion of fellow verbatim practitioner, Rony Robinson, reminding actors to keep their personal viewpoints about characters

74 Gould, Globalization Democracy and Human Rights, 100.
76 Paget, “‘Verbatim Theatre’: Oral History and Documentary Techniques,” 329.
in check in order to prevent a patronizing performance of “middle-class actors taking the mickey out of working-class people.” 77 In an audience talkback session after a performance of the play, 78 actor Tan Kheng Hua speaks about her frustration with her inability to portray an eighteen-year-old character named Daphne who claims not to understand the enthusiasm of her peers regarding the elections. Under the direction of Jo Kukathas, she came to realize that she was being impeded by her suppressed anger towards the character whose politics conflicted with her own. Tan then describes how, by considering the character’s age, social background, and experiences, she was finally able to portray Daphne as “objectively” as she could while withholding her own biases (see figure 3.4).

The skill of the actors as well as the performance style are keys to the success of a verbatim theatre production, in which the actors have to strive for representing the motivations of the characters respectfully without the assumption that they could fully inhabit their inner lives. Technically, Paget writes, this can be achieved through the actors’ delivery of the “rich textures

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77 Ibid., 329.
78 I viewed this conversation through a video recording.
79 “Cooling-Off Day,” W!LD RICE.
of ordinary speech.” Interestingly, however, Paget is not prescribing a naturalistic approach. Rather he claims that “the acting style of Verbatim Theatre [is] a Brechtian one.” I read Paget’s theorization of verbatim acting as commentary on how the actor should situate his performance in the in-between space of the construction of a character and making it the actor’s own. Thus, by having a critical distance from the character, the actor does not fall into the conceit that he or she can completely understand the subjectivity of the person on whom the character is based but offers himself or herself as a conduit instead. The monologues in *Cooling-Off Day* are delivered in the accents and syntax of the characters’ social and ethnic contexts, but, as briefly mentioned in the case of Kukathas’s performance of Vincent and Neo’s performance of Soh Lung, the actors are not striving for psychological realism as defined by method acting. They heighten particular physical and vocal characteristics of the characters to denote social types recognizable to the Singaporean audience, a strategy that works to invite both laughter and empathy during the performance. Additional examples include Peter Sau speaking with a convincing mainland Chinese accent to depict a female immigrant masseuse as she declares her admiration for incumbent prime minister Lee Hsien Loong; Neo, who dons a blond wig to play a famous blogger who lambasts opposition supporters online; and Kukathas as a transgender sex worker speaking of her support for PAP in spite of the government’s policy of banning gender reassignment surgery.

The actors’ portrayals, which straddle a Brechtian-style detachment and amity for their characters, together with the gender-, ethnic-, and age-blind casting, ignite in the audience a sense of identification mixed with defamiliarization. They are thus able to not just relate to the

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80 Ibid., 330.  
81 Ibid., 332.
characters with whom they agree or to reject those with whom they do not. The performances are effective because they elicit empathy while at the same time creating a critical distance from which viewers can debate the differences in opinions being put forth. The verbatim performance of *Cooling-Off Day*, by enabling intersubjective dialogues about the country’s state of civil and political rights between the actors, the people they represent, and the audience to take place, is thus a fully embodied manifestation of a ground-up process of democracy.

**Questioning Efficacy**

The play ends with a mise-en-scène of two rows of eighty-seven chairs placed in opposition to replicate the seating arrangements of the Singapore parliament. The eighty-one white chairs and six red chairs represent the number of PAP versus the number of opposition members elected into office respectively. The actors silently enter and arrange the chairs on stage before leaving, giving the audience a moment to contemplate the outcome of the elections, with the red chairs representing the greatest number of opposition members in parliament since the founding of the country. On an institutional level, this change seems minute given that the electoral system of Singapore still ensures that the ruling party holds a majority of seats in parliament in spite of it garnering only 60 percent of the total votes. I propose, however, that the significance of this image, which the audience is left to ponder, lies in its subtle suggestion of a subversive kind of efficacy. In capturing the shifts in the political subjectivity of the citizenry, *Cooling-Off Day* indicates a break in the hegemony of PAP’s political consensus, sparking varied definitions and more agential practices of democratic participation.
On a stark, bare stage of black wooden flooring, bare-footed performers move singularly or in groups from stage left to stage right in a processional manner, pointing their index fingers, sometimes wagging them frantically, or staring at a point intensely to indicate the act of observing. Oftentimes performers hold one arm up in a salute or crawl across the stage in a crouched position. Some spin in the style of whirling dervishes, some cradle a bundle in a way that suggests a baby or baggage, while others open their mouths in silent screams. There are moments when the performers walk languidly and purposefully; at other times, they run across the stage or frantically jog in place. They look intensely at the palm of their hands or use them to cover their faces. These gestures and actions, among others, are repeated over the duration of the performance, the reiteration of motions with slight variations across the stage casting a mesmerizing spell on the audience. White gauze is draped over bodies; some performers hold bamboo sticks; and the color scheme of white, black, and gray in the set and costumes is broken up by red cloth strewed across the stage by multiple performers in a long piece or held individually in smaller pieces (see figures 3.5 and 3.6).

Figure 3.5. Scene from One Hundred Years of Solitude 10.0.82

This is Hong Kong theatre company Zuni Icosahedron’s performance of *One Hundred Years of Solitude 10.0 – Cultural Revolution*. Created and directed by artistic director Danny Yung (born 1943), it was co-produced with Singapore theatre company Drama Box. This production was the tenth version of the performance series *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. First staged at the Grand Theatre in the Hong Kong Cultural Center in July 2011, it was then re-staged with slight modifications in February 2012 at the Esplanade Theatre in Singapore.

The *One Hundred Years* series has been in the Zuni repertoire from the inception of the company. The first was staged in 1982, subtitled *Magic Caravan*, and it was also the company’s inaugural production. Yung was initially inspired by Gabriel García Márquez’s 1967 novel, from which the title of the series is derived, and its treatment of “colonialism, dictatorship and bloodshed” interspersed with the themes of “forgetfulness and solitude” in the literary mode of magical realism. Cultural theorist Rozanna Lilley observes that Yung was expressing his

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83 Ibid.
84 Besides being the artistic director of Zuni Icosahedron, which he founded in 1982, Yung is also an experimental filmmaker, cartoonist as well as installation and conceptual artist. The productions of Zuni have been staged worldwide, and as I elaborate later in this chapter, Yung is also a prominent figure in the field of Hong Kong’s arts and cultural policy.
affinity with the Chinese *xungen* (searching for roots), a literary movement of the 1980s. Influenced by magical realism, Chinese authors were moving away from socialist realist writing and in turn rebelling against its affiliation with the “hegemonic status” of “Confucian and Communist ideologies.”86 Critics soon saw the series as a representation of the Hong Kong people’s negotiation of their political and cultural identity with China as well as their anxieties with the coming political changes of the 1997 handover, when Hong Kong was to be “returned” to Chinese sovereignty from British colonial rule. For performance scholar Jessica Yeung, the movement of the performers across the stage marks “the journey of the Chinese people from the Left to the Right in the last hundred years.”87 In the ninth edition of the series, sub-titled *Solitude*, the juxtaposition of the *xiqu* (Chinese opera) movements with poses reminiscent of the “Soviet-influenced heroic sculptures” seen in Chinese landmarks highlights for Yeung the introduction of “revolutionary ideology” into China during the communist period.88 Lilley, in turn, sees the “ceaseless flow of performers across the stage” and the mannerism of “bowing and kowtowing” as a reference to the power dynamics between “leaders and followers” and “groups and individuals.”89 In Lilley’s reading, Yung’s use of black, white, and gray as the primary colors of the production is symbolic of the position of Hong Kong “occupying the gray space between the black and white of China and Britain” and emblematic of the territory’s powerlessness to decide its own political fate democratically.90 The tenth edition of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* repeats motifs from earlier iterations with performers citing specific

86 Lilley, *Staging Hong Kong*, 102. Chinese authors influenced by magical realism include Mo Yan, Feng Jicai, and Han Shaogong, among others.
88 Ibid.
89 Lilley, *Staging Hong Kong*, 103.
90 Ibid., 106.
movements now embedded in the series’ gestural vocabulary and by using similar props and colors on stage.

I contemplate how an artistic production examining issues of democratic rights and revolutions, which are highly sensitive topics for the central government, could have been staged without disruption from the state. By analyzing the elements of the production, including its thematic concerns, casting and production processes as well as its aesthetic and directorial outcomes, together with Yung’s prominent role in Hong Kong’s civil society, I propose that the dramaturgy of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* 10.0 is also indicative of its director’s political stance. Both reflect political theorist Chantal Mouffe’s “agonistic” politics, in which one must stay within the existing structures of power in order to enable changes from within.91

“Agonistic” Politics

Mouffe coins the term “agonistics” to describe a political approach that differs from an antagonistic stance, the latter referring to an uncompromising opposition towards established institutions or ideologies that one does not agree with. Her proposal stems in part from a critique of political philosophers’ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s “Multitude,” what they see as the revolution from the masses needed to resist “empire.”92 Mouffe argues that Hardt and Negri’s “strategy of exodus” or “withdrawal,” in which “one should desert the state and existing institutions and construct a completely different society outside them,” is naïve because it leads to “impotence.”93 In contrast, Mouffe thinks that an engagement with representative politics

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92 Hardt and Negri define the “multitude” as the mass proletariat and social movements, while “empire” refers to their theorization of a global imperial order. See Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).
should be at the heart of any political struggle aiming to counter repressive acts, because only in this way can one incite changes within the institutions and society at large that are currently dominated by exploitative capitalism.95

Saliently, Mouffe insists that engagement does not have to mean a consensus towards established institutions or a form of co-option. She states that because political struggle is perpetual, with new forms of hegemonies forming to replace those that had been defeated, the practice of agonistic politics, therefore, has to be akin to a Gramscian “war of positions.”96 One needs to be aware of the shifts in social movements and institutions and how to constantly strategize for a space of influence in order to implement changes. In other words, the “agonistic struggle,” which is “the very condition of a vibrant democracy,”97 is an artful negotiation of power relations. It shifts the paradigm of seeing the democratic process as one of “antagonism” between “enemies” to one of “agonism” between “adversaries.”98

Important to my argument, Mouffe writes about the role of artists in agonistic politics. She believes that “artistic and cultural practices” have the potential to challenge the depoliticization, states of repression, and narrowing of democratic spaces caused by neoliberal governments. For her, “artistic resistances” can be “agonistic interventions within the contexts of counter-hegemonic struggles.”99 They “subvert the existing configurations of power” by

94 Mouffe, Agonistics, 66.
95 Ibid., 71.
97 Mouffe, Agonistics, 8.
98 Ibid., 7. Mouffe is referencing politician and historian Michael Ignetieff’s definition of these terms. While one is opposed to and would like to defeat both the enemy and the adversary, one seeks to destroy the enemy, but the adversary could be an ally under different circumstances or become one in a future scenario.
99 Ibid., 88.
“constructing new practices and new subjectivities.” However, Mouffe is also quick to express her doubt towards idealistic or utopian notions on the revolutionary impact of the arts:

Artistic activism is important, but it is not enough. It can play a role in creating new forms of subjectivity and designing new forms of social relations but those practices cannot be a substitute for more traditional forms of political involvement, trying to gain power, occupy the state and attempt to transform society from there.

Danny Yung is the epitome of Mouffe’s agonistic artist. He parleys his position as a respected leader in the Hong Kong arts community to advocate for democratic progress and civil participation in society. Together with his dramaturgical strategy, as demonstrated in works like *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Yung expresses how a practice of agonism has enabled him to work within the dominant political order of Hong Kong while remaining critical of its flaws.

Deciphering “Cultural Revolution”

In the space of nine years between the 2002 ninth edition of the *Hundred Years of Solitude* series, sub-titled *Solitude*, and the 2011 tenth edition, subtitled *Cultural Revolution*, the mass citizen-led democratization movements in Hong Kong intensified. For example, the annual 1 July democracy rallies that began in 2003 and the June Fourth commemoration rallies for the Tiananmen Square Massacre have both seen an increase in the number of protestors. The Economist approximates that there were about five hundred thousand people on the streets on July 1, 2011, and The Wall Street Journal quotes the organizers who estimated that one hundred fifty thousand people were at the rally on June 4, 2011. Given the intensity of the political

100 Ibid., 104–5.
101 Tan and Malzacher, “Art Can’t Change the World on its Own,” 38.
102 I will elaborate on this point later in the chapter.
103 Please refer to the beginning of the chapter for details.
climate that year, it would be difficult not to analyze the 2011 performance of *Hundred Years of Solitude 10.0* in these contexts, in which marchers protested the human rights abuses in greater China,\(^{105}\) as well as the threat to civil liberties within Hong Kong.

In light of the timing of *Hundred Years of Solitude 10.0*’s staging, I speculate as to why Yung might have sub-titled it *Cultural Revolution* and what the term could refer. Given that the performance was produced by a Hong Kong company in the recently “returned” territory of China,\(^{106}\) I see the closest reference being the Cultural Revolution of 1966 to 1976.\(^ {107}\) By referencing this violent episode in the country’s history, the performance invites the audience to debate the historical and contemporary connotations of the term in present-day Hong Kong.

Despite the Cultural Revolution’s initial impetus to achieve class and economic equality among the masses, it resulted instead in the persecution of the bourgeoisies, artists, intellectuals and those critical of governmental policies like the *Great Leap Forward*.\(^ {108}\) From the reference to this controversial movement, the audience might deduce the irony of how Mao Zedong’s ideologies in the present day have been rejected in favor of the neoliberal forms of capitalism even while China remains, in name, a socialist government. More disturbingly, though, the

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\(^{105}\) As written in “Thousands Rally in Hong Kong for Human Rights,” protestors did not just use the rally to commemorate the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre but also to highlight contemporary human rights abuses. Issues that circulated in discussion include protesting the arrest and imprisonment of artist activist Ai Wei Wei in China and the need to stand in solidarity with the participants of the Tunisian “Jasmine” Revolution.

\(^{106}\) Hong Kong has often been celebrated by the People’s Republic of China’s administration as having “returned” to the motherland.

\(^{107}\) The Cultural Revolution was a movement launched by Chinese communist leader Mao Zedong in order to consolidate his position of power in government. He mobilized Chinese youths into paramilitary groups called the Red Guards to attack those he claimed were corrupting influences on society, including the bourgeoisies, intellectuals, and former party members who opposed Mao’s ideologies. Unjust imprisonment, torture, public humiliation, and property seizure were the norm. Over a million people perished from the time the movement was instigated in 1966 until Mao’s death ten years later.

\(^{108}\) The Great Leap Forward was a program implemented by the Chinese Communist Party from 1958 to 1962 to rapidly industrialize China’s largely agrarian society, in which Mao implemented the new farming method “natural collectivization.” People were moved into communes, often forcefully. New but ineffective farming methods ultimately resulted in a famine that took the lives of an estimated forty-five million people. See Frank Dikötter, *Mao’s Great Famine: The History of China’s Most Devastating Catastrophe, 1958-62* (London: Bloombury Publishing, 2010).
term’s historical implication could be read as a warning of how China’s draconian governance could affect Hong Kong, including the possible persecution of dissenting voices in the people’s ongoing quest for democratic rights.

In addition, the production also references other world revolutions in its program booklet. It mentions early twentieth-century examples like the 1911 Revolution in China, when the aristocracy-based dynastic system was overthrown, the French Revolution, and the Industrial Revolution. More historically recent examples are also cited, with the booklet stating that:

Danny Yung is using culture and revolution as a starting point to take a look at all the big and small revolutions which took place in North Africa, the Middle East, China, and Singapore recently . . . [to] examine the interactive relationship among individuals, the public and leaders; organizations, the government and the country; people, cultures and revolutions.109

Yung’s use of “cultural revolution” is decidedly strategic. He is referencing specific historical revolutions as well as exploring the meanings of the term in general. The audience can then think about how revolutions can possibly be corrupted by authoritarian mandates while also being reminded of revolutions’ utopian promises. In addition, its production locale alludes to a contemplation of the Hong Kong people’s contemporary political evolution while situating it in larger transhistorical and transnational contexts. Last, but not least, by subtitling the production “cultural revolution” instead of just “revolution(s),” I also read this decision as a subtle call-to-arms for the revolutionary potential of arts and cultural activism.

Embodied Processes

Yung’s reference to building solidarity outside of national borders in the performance’s title is reflected in its creative process. First, the performance was jointly produced by two premier Chinese-language theatre companies in Hong Kong and Singapore. With the production

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109 “One Hundred Years of Solitude 10.0 – Cultural Revolution Pre-Show Educational Kit.”
staged in both countries, the audiences from each could read into the stagings their relationships with their respective authoritarian governments and the general struggle for rights claims within neoliberal Asia. In the program booklet, Singaporean Kok Heng Luan, in his position as dramaturg, describes how this could happen. He writes of the need to address “the rich-poor” divide in the “global economy” of “consumer culture.” Referring to his dissatisfaction with the Singapore state’s primary emphasis on the arts as an economic driver, he argues instead that the arts possess “spiritual impetus.” For Kok, this production is an example of how art can invite audiences to become more politically conscious, a process that can “only come about through a revolution in culture.”

Second, democratic principles are also embedded in the production’s casting choices and rehearsal process. Among the cast are professional actors from Singapore, a kunqu master from Suzhou China, and high-school students from the Lee Shau Kee School of Creativity in Hong Kong and the School of the Arts in Singapore. Yung’s engagement with student performers shows his commitment to empowering the young, while the inclusion of professional artists of different nationalities and backgrounds broadens the democratic coalition. Singaporean actor Zelda Tatiana Ng talks about how the cast would watch videos of the Tiananmen Square protest before launching into related discussions of civil and political rights as well as strategies of resistance. She recalls how Yung would encourage all cast members to debate the interrelatedness of notions of “culture,” “theatre,” “revolution,” and “democracy,” as informed

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110 Ibid.
111 Kunqu is a form of Chinese opera from the Suzhou region established in the sixteenth century. Present-day Kunqu performers go through years of intensive training to perfect the singing voice and dance technique of the genre.
112 Danny Yung sits on the board of the Lee Shau Kee School of Creativity, a school devoted to arts and creative education. It offers large subsidies for economically challenged students, many of whom are featured in One Hundred Years of Solitude 10.0.
by their countries’ histories. A promotional YouTube video featuring the Singaporean actors reveals some outcomes of these debates. The statements cover a range of topics, including the importance of the theatre as a space for reflection, how culture is developed through dissent, and why revolution can be both a powerful ideal and an illusion with the potential for violence. Judy Ngo’s opinion stood out for me—she conveys her belief that the theatre is revolution in Singapore since its processes often go against the results-oriented ideology of the highly capitalistic country.

Ultimately, the diversity of the performers on stage come to stand in for an array of human kind. By including bodies of different skill levels and types of training, Yung emphasizes the production’s democratic stance. While the kunqu dancer’s choreography requires a great degree of virtuosity, most of the physical actions asked of the cast, as described earlier in the section, are easily rendered by them. The end effect then creates a sense of agency. The audience can read the stylized movements on stage as a microcosm of what is happening at the protests on the ground—that people from various walks of life and abilities can come together to move, march, and incite change.

Staging Ambiguity

Importantly, while critics see the One Hundred Years of Solitude series as a commentary on Hong Kong’s quest for democracy in relations to China, Yung does not make this explicit in his work. For example, discussions about the Tiananmen protest may have taken place behind closed doors during the rehearsals for the tenth edition, but the resulting staging does not make a direct mention of this historical event. Rather than positing a singular message, the production

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113 Zelda Tatiana Ng, discussion with author, May 2014.
114 “One Hundred Years of Solitude 10.0 – Cultural Revolution, Actor Interview 3,” YouTube video, 4:04, posted by “Zuni Icosehadron,” September 7, 2011, accessed July 8, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=niumFTr9AmE. The interview was conducted in Mandarin and translations are my own.
engages the audience’s imagination and thoughts through a carefully presented combination of bodily movements, music, and projected texts. From the combination of Yung’s dramaturgical strategies, I read that the performance is subtly encouraging its audience to think about the need for mobilization in order to achieve political agency and democratic rights as well as the role of art or culture in this continuous struggle.

First, Yung sets up framing devices in the form of written statements to prepare the audience’s experience, since the performance was movement-based and free of on-stage dialogue or a linear narrative. For example, questions prompting their opinions of the connections between the key terms of education, culture, the arts, the economy, and revolution are projected in traditional Chinese characters intermittently at the back of the stage to accompany the performer’s movements and also printed in the program booklet (see figures 3.7 and 3.8).

Figure 3.7. Scene from One Hundred Years of Solitude 10.0.115

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These questions include: “Can theatre change society?” or “Can revolution change culture?”

Other ambiguous and open-ended statements referencing the performance’s key ideas are projected in scroll form. They include the lines:

- Of such culture one deserves such a revolution
- Of such revolution deserves such a public
- Of such a public one deserves such art
- Of such art one deserves such a nation
- Of such a nation one deserves such leadership
- Of such leadership one deserves such a system
- Of such a system one deserves such an era
- Of such an era one deserves such a culture.
- Revolution is not a dinner party
- Culture is not singing and dancing
- Revolution is not putting on airs
- Culture is not politics or economy
- Revolution is not an opera
- Culture is not thee or thou.\textsuperscript{117}

Some of the scrolled text is directly quoted or has derived its inspiration from the founder of the People’s Republic of China Mao Zedong’s writings. For example, “revolution is not a dinner party” is a quote from Mao’s “Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in

\textsuperscript{116}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{117}This translation is derived from subtitles in the program booklet and promotional videos for the performance.
Hunan.” Mao argues in this essay that revolution is not built on the artistic endeavors of writing or painting but through class insurrection grounded in violence. I read the inclusion of Mao’s statements in Yung’s work as a warning of the state’s persecution of artists and intellectuals in periods of class struggle. I also recognize how the irony of the statement’s inclusion in a performance with an “experimental” and non-didactic aesthetic, now used to incite the audience to seek alternative and critical understandings of cultural and political revolutions, could subvert Mao’s original intent of seeing art as a tool for instruction or propaganda. Generally, the statements, which complement the performers moving from the left to the right side of the stage, seem to urge the audience to contemplate fighting for the leadership and political or cultural systems they “deserve.” Still, the performance does not answer any of the projected questions directly nor does it straightforwardly explain to the audience what they mean.

Second, Yung chooses music that enhances the revolutionary theme in his production. For example, Floria Tosca’s aria “Vissi d’arte” from Giacomo Puccini’s Tosca accompanies a languidly paced segment of the performance. Tosca depicts political revolutionaries prosecuted by the state police in Rome in 1800, and the character Tosca’s aria about her sacrifice for love and art complements Yung’s meditation of art as revolutionary practice. Moving to the soaring music, kunqu performer Xiao Xiangping enacts his operatic actions; a male performer squats with his head bowed; a female performer moves tentatively backward and forward as she inches slowly from stage left to stage right; a cluster of actors sit downstage, their backs to the audience as they look at the action on stage; and yet another male performer sits on a chair backstage.

looking attentively to the right of the stage. I draw connections between the aria’s theme to how
kunqu was suppressed as an art form during the Cultural Revolution in China. The enacted
gestures, when read against the music, can allude to systems of repression, acts of witnessing, or
the struggle for mobilization against the odds.

Third, different versions of the Marxist Internationale are repeated throughout the
performance. A Mandarin version is broadcast during a fast-paced sequence in which some
performers frantically twirl large swaths of white cloth with their hands. They are joined by a
female performer on stage left who aggressively throws a cloth bundle repeatedly onto the floor.
The student performers, in turn, crawl on their stomachs determinedly from the left to the right of
the stage, while a male performer sits in stillness on a chair downstage right observing the action.
In another quieter and slower-paced scene, a female performer sings the Internationale in
Hebrew as performers carrying a lengthened stretch of white cloth above their shoulders walk
purposefully across the stage. The Marxist anthem is reiterated in different languages, reminding
the audience of the transnational nature of socialist and Marxist revolutions and of the quest for
greater economic and social equality in different political systems across space and time. This
anthem of solidarity also highlights the international and transcultural nature of this production
with the artists working together to reference themes of historical and political repression and the
regenerative role of culture.

Yet again, this is but one interpretation of the performance. One Hundred Years of
Solitude 10.0 presents a general idea of how cultural revolutions have both utopian and
destructive potential and seems to suggest how political revolution could be enabled by cultural
practices. However, it does not state a definitive political position. Instead these underlying
themes are conferred through the performance’s aesthetically beautiful and palatable images—
the billowing pieces of cloth, the stoic movements of the silent actors, the simple but effective set
design and costumes, and the minimalist projections of running words and phrases are elements
that help shroud its contentious subject matters by elevating the performance to experimental
“high art.” It shows Yung’s shrewd understanding of the kind of artistic work that can garner the
requisite cultural capital to be staged in neoliberal Hong Kong and mainland China’s most
prestigious state-sponsored theatres. Yung’s non-didactic direction, on the one hand, encourages
the audience to relate the production’s themes for themselves; on the other, its deliberate
vagueness also means that it can bypass state censorship.

An “Agonistic” Dramaturgy

Yung’s on-stage directions, thematic exploration, and rehearsal process work together to
form the agonistic dramaturgy for One Hundred Years of Solitude 10.0. Directorially, the
amorphous images on stage abstain from an authoritative address to draw the audience to work
harder in thinking about the nature of revolutionary struggles. Having to “read between the lines”
of the moving bodies, they become agential beings in the meaning-making process. I read the
repeated journeys of the performers across the stage as a statement of how revolutions for
democratic freedoms and rights are ongoing and continuous. In the context of Hong Kong, the
choreography reflects the mobilization of marchers on the streets, who, in performance studies
scholar SanSan Kwan’s words, resist the “continual disappearance” of the Hong Kong people’s
agency from the forces of global capitalism, its colonial past, and Chinese sovereign present.119
Like Mouffe’s argument that power hegemonies are constantly shifting or re-emerging, the
performers’ movements can indicate the tireless struggle of the Hong Kong people against the

119 Kwan uses her case studies of contemporary dance performances and civil protests to argue that their kinesthetic
movements interrupt the flow of neoliberal and capitalist habits in Hong Kong. See SanSan Kwan, Kinesthetic City,
historical cycles of state repression and democratic victory. However, it must be noted again that
Yung does not explicitly reference Hong Kong’s political situation. Instead, by thematically
alluding to multiple revolutions, the performance not only encourages the audience to situate the
performance transhistorically and transnationally but also prevents a clear denunciation or
critique of specific parties and revolutionary movements, thus succeeding in not inciting the ire
of the central Chinese government. Last but not least, while the inclusive and discursive nature
of the rehearsal and casting process are imbued with the principles of democracy, the aesthetic
outcome of the work enables it also to be consumed by the cultural or economic elites in
neoliberal Hong Kong.

Working from Within: Danny Yung’s Cultural Politics

Yung’s agonistic strategy in his artistic work is also reflected in his role as a prominent
“political” figure in his own right. As a leader in Hong Kong’s arts community and civil society,
Yung has moved Zuni in the period of three decades from its marginal position as a small
experimental outfit with little government or corporate support to a premiere theatre company in
Hong Kong. Zuni now receives considerable funding from the Home Affairs Bureau, a SAR
government statuary board.120 Yung also sits on the board of various national and international
arts and cultural policy organizations.121 According to cultural studies scholar Vivienne Chow’s
essay on Chinese elitism and the neoliberalism of Hong Kong’s cultural policy, Yung advised
Hong Kong Chief Executive Leung Chun-Ying on his election manifesto, which stressed the
importance of “cultural industries” for the “spiritual well-being” and the economic prosperity of

120 Vivienne Chow, “Chinese Elitism and Neoliberalism: Post-Colonial Hong Kong Cultural Policy Development: A
Case Study” (master’s thesis, University of Hong Kong, 2012), 54.
121 Among other positions, Danny Yung is the Chairman of Asian Arts Net, Chairman of City-to-City Cultural
Exchange Net, Director of Center of Contemporary Art Hong Kong, Director of the Hong Kong Joint Conference of
Cultural Sector, and a part-time member of the Central Policy Unit of Hong Kong.
Hong Kong.\textsuperscript{122} In addition, Yung is a board member of the West Kowloon Cultural District currently under development, which has been criticized as a neoliberal project that, while making the city more attractive for global investment and tourism and boosting surrounding real estate prices,\textsuperscript{123} will sideline small local arts companies in its concentration on showcasing commercially popular events.\textsuperscript{124}

But it would be simplistic to read Yung’s position and his work with elite cultural institutions as a straightforward case of co-option. In his leadership roles and board appointments in various governmental and non-governmental institutions, he parleys his position to advocate “cultural democracy,” the belief that cultural productions can advance civil and political rights claims, by campaigning for more artists’ involvement in Hong Kong’s cultural policies, which are usually dominated by government officials. In addition, Zuni has staged productions that directly criticize or lampoon the policies of both pre- and post-handover governments. These include the \textit{East Wing West Wing} series, directed by Zuni’s co-artistic director Matthias Woo,\textsuperscript{125} and Yung’s 1994 production of \textit{The Trial},\textsuperscript{126} in which he invited incumbent politicians to the stage to answer audience questions. This is symptomatic of the company’s dedication to addressing the controversial sides of Hong Kong identity and politics through aesthetically varied and innovative performances.

\textsuperscript{122} Chow, “Chinese Elitism and Neoliberalism,” 1–2.
\textsuperscript{124} Chow, “Chinese Elitism and Neoliberalism,” 50.
\textsuperscript{125} Since 2003, Woo has picked contemporary social and political events of interest to the Hong Kong public. He then writes and devises productions that satirize or comment critically on these events. \textit{East Wing West Wing}, a long running series of the company, is one such example. “East Wing” refers to Hong Kong, while “West Wing” refers to Beijing. The series interprets the power struggles between the governments in both spaces.
\textsuperscript{126} This production of \textit{The Trial} is inspired by Franz Kafka’s novel of the same name.
By criticizing the power structures that the company relies on while remaining in conversation with them, Yung is performing the politics of agonism. His position is made clear in a 2015 interview, when he declares his wish to explore “how to institutionalize what we believe in.” He argues for the importance of establishing cultural institutions that challenge capitalist ideologies or authoritarian states but also firmly clarifies, “We are not anarchists.” In analyzing Yung’s approach in Mouffe’s words, I read Yung recognizing that the “exodus approach denies the possibility of a counter-hegemonic struggle within institutions that disarticulates the constitutive elements of neo-liberal hegemony.” By positioning himself as a spokesperson for the arts community, Yung is then able to work with established systems of governance in an “‘agonistic’ model of democracy.”

Chapter Conclusion

At the time of writing, the Umbrella protestors’ demand for universal suffrage has not been met. In fact, a decision by the central government to bar two young elected Hong Kong legislators from taking office when they refused to pledge their allegiance to China during the swearing-in ceremony spurred a protest in November of 2016. It seems that the state remains unmoved by the people’s grassroots activism and continues to limit their agency in deciding how they are governed. In addition to China’s draconian policies, Hong Kong is also inextricably entangled in intensive flows of neoliberal capital, both factors in the gradually decreasing

127 Ibid., 20–21.
128 Ibid., 22.
129 Mouffe, Agonistics, 99–100. The exodus approach is a concept by Hardt and Negri advocating a total disengagement with repressive institutions.
momentum of the Umbrella Revolution. *TIME’s* “A Tourist Guide to the Hong Kong Protest” describes how in October 2014 “families, tourists and workers in their spare time are flocking to the protest site to soak up the creative atmosphere.”¹³² This description shows how easily transgressive movements can be neutered by consumption practices. Eventually, support for the revolution started to erode as small businesses and shops felt the pinch of the loss of revenue resulting from blocked streets in busy shopping areas. People began to complain about the disruption to their everyday lives as the protestors held up traffic. This impatience with the interruption of Hong Kong’s capitalistic habits, coupled with the government’s refusal to compromise or to engage with the protesters in any meaningful way, resulted in the dispersion of the protestors in mid-December 2014.

Visiting the last standing campsite in the area of Admiralty during that time, I saw a hundred or so makeshift tents occupied by the die-hard protesters who remained. These tents were dwarfed by the surrounding office towers and shopping malls decorated with tacky Christmas lights. The atmosphere was subdued. Amateur posters and artwork demanding “genuine democracy” with slogans that read “We Will Be Back” and “Never Give Up” fluttered in the winter breeze. Two weeks earlier, the same highway had been filled with camping student protestors, makeshift artwork, and the call for a more equitable society and universal suffrage. Looking out at the roaring, unencumbered traffic, I felt as if the protest had never happened—the physical traces of those demands had been disappeared. In the underground metro, where I glimpsed large advertisement posters promoting merchandise for the holiday season, a quote

from Ackbar Abbas came to mind: “If you cannot choose your political leaders, you can at least choose your clothes.”

In contrast to the Umbrella protestors’ antagonistic and uncompromising position, Yung works not in opposition to but *within* neoliberal structures. There are those who might think that the message in his artistic work is too reticent and his political engagement a form of co-option. More positively, I read Yung’s agonistic stance as a conscious and tactical repositioning of the processes of protest and negotiations of democratic freedoms in the cultural and political sectors of present-day Hong Kong. In a capitalistic and authoritarian milieu where confrontational practices of revolution seem unsustainable, Yung is perhaps strategically setting his sights on the longer game.

Similar to Hong Kong, Singaporeans’ heightened political consciousness during the 2011 watershed elections appears to have been subdued. In the 2015 general election, PAP’s share of the popular vote rose from 60.1 percent to 69.9 percent; it also won back several constituent seats from members of the opposition. This result has been attributed to two main reasons—the first is PAP’s response to the voter’s demand for better living conditions and economic equality by working on its welfare and immigration policies, and the second is the patriotic fervor ignited after the death of Singapore’s “founding father” and founder of PAP, Lee Kuan Yew. For weeks, the state-owned media channels flooded its papers, television programs, and websites with news that lauded and commemorated Lee. With the majority party’s ability to determine the timing of elections within five years from the last, PAP’s strategic call for a “snap general election” near

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133 Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*, 5. Although Abbas is writing about Hong Kong under the colonial administration pre-1997, I argue that the state of political autonomy for Hong Kong residents has not improved under the new administration presently run by the Chinese government.

the time of Lee’s death then garnered the necessary votes that strengthened the party’s grip on power.\textsuperscript{135}

In the meantime, the party has not loosened its undemocratic policies. In the aftermath of the 2011 election results, the party initiated new laws regulating Singapore-registered, non-state-owned websites where robust critique about the party had taken place. The move is widely analyzed as a strategy to censor dissenting information.\textsuperscript{136} The police also arrested and imprisoned a sixteen-year-old YouTuber for posting a video criticizing Lee Kuan Yew in the wake of his death. International human rights organizations have criticized this incident as a suppression of free speech and an implementation of a harsh punishment that does not fit the offense.\textsuperscript{137} The results of the 2015 elections then seem to suggest that most Singaporeans generally have no problem with a government that resorts to gerrymandering and authoritarian laws as long as their material demands are met.

Looking at Alfian Sa’at’s \textit{Cooling-Off Day} in recent context, I think about how the form of verbatim theatre, with its ability to capture the political climate as is, is nevertheless limited because it cannot definitively project into or envision a more positive future. The shifts in political subjectivity represented by the play’s characters, indicating the possibility of a political “renaissance,” seem to have receded under the pressure of the daily demands of living in a neoliberal city governed by an autocratic state.

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\textsuperscript{136} Ibid.  \\
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I remain hopeful and propose that it is precisely in a milieu where these forces seem insurmountable that the importance of theatre and performance comes to play. The protestors on the ground, as well as the works of Yung and Sa’at, exemplify the ground-up, embodied, and intersubjective performances of democracy theorized by James Ingram and Carol C. Gould. They open up spaces for citizens to be included in the conversation about their own political and civil rights. Theatre remains marginal and the protestors marginalized, but it is the spark ignited in these visceral experiences that reminds its participants that they are agential subjects who can, and have to, continue fighting for a more equitable future in spite of the odds.
[D]e-linking theatre from the assumption that it must either promote or reactively “problematicise” human rights frees it up to pursue a parallel enquiry whose outcomes may be productively at odds with some of the basic assumptions behind the modern idea of human rights. The status of the body; the nature of subjectivity and intersubjectivity; the relationship between the individual and the state; the psychologically complex and sometimes self-destructive dynamics of suffering, oppression, need and desire; human relationships, especially as they emerge through dialogue and social participation; our continuing dependency on the non-human world; that crazy little thing called love – these are some of the central problems of the human condition that theatrical processes and performances of all kinds tussle with. “Human Rights” offers one noble and rather ingenious response: the strength of the theatre lies in the opportunities it affords to interrogate the basic condition within which these rights must be anchored, where they do not, to envision alternatives.

—Paul Rae, Theatre and Human Rights

In the epigraph above, Rae highlights theatre and human rights’ shared attention to deciphering the human condition. I agree with him that theatre and its affiliated field of performance practice possess the ability to “envision alternatives” to occurrences of injustice. Theatre has the capacity to think in ways that exceed the normative frameworks of human rights because of its ability to see the political condition as a profoundly human one. The different states of emotions and the desire for intersubjective connection between people, for example, are part of the quest for a meaningful existence that underpins the sociological and legalistic notions of human rights but cannot be fully categorized by them. Theatre and performance, with their penchant to manifest these complexities, are therefore critical vehicles for rights claims. Through the lens of performance studies, my dissertation has thus argued that the embodied nature of activist performances and artistic representations both challenges and adds to existing discourses of human rights. I show how Asian governments disavow the relevance of human rights to the political contexts of their countries in order to prop up their authoritarian regimes. I also critically examine the limitations of arguments made by scholars who critique human rights discourses as neoimperial and neocolonial. My work veers away from these perspectives by
looking at how rights claims are still salient in the “neoliberalism as exception” milieu of Asia. I contend that while this context exacerbates the lack of labor, sexuality, and democratic rights, these governments’ aspirations to be part of the global capitalist market has also paradoxically provided conditional spaces of political and artistic expression. By analyzing the dramaturgies of my case studies, I demonstrate how they reveal a complex situation where artists and activists are trying to strike a balance between resisting and being co-opted by the neoliberal state.

In Chapter 1, I contextualized Singapore and Hong Kong’s dependency on low-waged migrant labor and the resulting violence brought upon these workers. My case studies of the Hong Kong protest march for an abused Filipino domestic worker, the mock riot exercise in Singapore, Drama Box’s *Soil*, and Zheng Bo’s *Ambedkar* reveal how acts of resistance can easily be reinscribed into the economic agendas of power elites and the nation state. The protesters marching along routes designated by the police and the Bangladeshi workers passively acting out their own subjugation epitomize bodies disciplined by the authorities. In turn, the ways in which the performances of *Soil* and *Ambedkar* unfold show how the artists’ activism has been compromised as they are inadvertently “recruited” by the state or the market to manage these low-waged labor forces. While the artworks provide an avenue for the marginalized workers’ voices to be heard, their presence also allows for the illusion that the problem of the labor abuse is being addressed. To this end, my analysis shows that all of the examples fail in some way to address the root of the issue, which is how the perilous conditions of these workers are caused by the inequality perpetuated by neoliberalism. Given that the economic prosperity of Singapore and Hong Kong, and consequentially the privileges of their people, are predicated on the

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1 Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception*, 3.
exploitation of the very bodies that the artists and activists purport to defend, it is then impossible for them to represent the rights claims of these workers without being compromised.

In Chapter 2, I explored the fraught relationship between the queer communities in Singapore and Malaysia and the states. While legally rendered abject by their countries’ anti-sodomy laws, they are tolerated because of their position as “pink dollar” generators. Queer artists and activists have taken advantage of this conditional allowance to express their subjectivities while engaging in calculated arts of resistance. Loo Zihan’s *Cane* is a performative embodiment of this paradox. As a work perceived to enhance the cultural capital of the country, it is able to confront the controversial issues of Penal Code 377 as well as arts censorship with the approval of governmental agencies but not before having to go through a thorough vetting process. Similarly, the grassroots campaign Pink Dot is at once a celebration of queer subjectivities in Singapore and a reflection of their containment. I argue that the event reveals how the radical and sexualized aspects of queer culture have been erased and replaced by a sanitized narrative that adheres to the paternalistic ideology of the Singapore state. In contrast to Pink Dot’s promotional video that conscripts queer subjects into state-approved notions of traditional family values, the aesthetic of Pang Khee Teik’s photographs in his *Repent or Die!* series embraces characteristics of queer camp that the religious state deems abject. While he is the most prominent queer activist in Malaysia, Pang does not purport to represent all factions in this diverse community. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to note that his photographs only reflect a select group of economically and socially privileged queer men in the country. The examples in this chapter show how the conditions of acceptance and representation for queer subjects are predicated on their access or ability to generate economic capital. For instance, those who are “out” and participating in the arts and cultural events are from an elevated social class with
access to cosmopolitan lifestyles. Ultimately, LGBTQ communities in these countries live precariously because their legitimacy is dependent on the authorities’ benevolence.

I examined in Chapter 3 how the people of Singapore and Hong Kong are fighting for fairer electoral processes in milieus where authoritarian neoliberalism is exacerbating structural inequalities. Through the verbatim theatre form, Alfian Sa’at’s *Cooling-Off Day* counters the top-down and singular rhetoric of Singapore’s autocratic government. The play does this by presenting the heterogeneous viewpoints of diverse citizens regarding issues of civil and political rights. Danny Yung’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude 10.0 – Cultural Revolution* is a beautifully opaque piece of theatre that provokes the audience to think about the issue of political revolution while evading the ire of the central Chinese government with its experimental dramaturgy. Since the time that these productions were staged, the ruling parties of Hong Kong and Singapore have tightened control over their electoral processes, further consolidating their power. Concurrently, a large number of constituents appear content to exchange democratic rights for access to economic capital. I thus ponder the efficacy of the arts in effecting positive changes on the ground while also noting how these theatre works embody the ground-up demand for a more equitable political system through their differing dramaturgical strategies.

Overall, my analysis has shown the impossibility for artists and activists to disentangle themselves from the contexts in which they work. On the part of the artists, their relationship to the state is invariably complex. Their work is celebrated for its capacity to enact cultural improvement and bring a sense of agency and imagination to citizens. Therefore, artworks and, more generally, activist protests that address topics sensitive to the state are tolerated, sometimes even encouraged, as long as they toe the line of the states’ capitalist agendas. However, the tendency to define culture in economic terms also undermines the capacity of the arts to make
such interventions. Furthermore, state patronage of the arts comes with an implicit sense of guidance and paternalism that quickly becomes visible when the artistic community is deemed to transgress. Once the allowance of increased rights claims is deemed threatening to the ruling parties’ hegemony, these governments swiftly return to the logics of authoritarian state power in which freedoms are rapidly curtailed and the instigators in danger of prosecution. The line of transgression is often neither visible nor acknowledged. I have thus argued that it is precisely the performative dimensions of my case studies that help expose this insidious element of neoliberal authoritarianism. In this context, my interest in the efficaciousness of the interrelation between human rights and performance then shifts from a straightforward inquiry of how performance can improve conditions of human rights abuses to a more nuanced one of how performance could rupture the hegemonic narratives of the autocratic states either by agentially shifting the political subjectivities of their participants or by materially embodying this very contradiction.

While this dissertation’s methodology refrains from an overtly sanguine outlook of how the arts and activism can incite positive changes on the ground, I emphasize that I view these works as unequivocally necessary and important. As I have shown, Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Singapore have a nascent but burgeoning civil society where capital accumulation and economic development override other rights concerns. What has been interesting in such an environment is that it is the artists who are often at the forefront of the fight for civil, economic, and political rights. Most of the artists highlighted in this dissertation are leading this conversation—not just with their artistic work but also with their activism by writing open letters to the press and state officials as well as organizing forums, workshops, and peaceful protests. While some like Danny Yung, who advises the government on cultural policy in Hong Kong, and Kok Heng Luan, who is at present a nominated member of parliament in Singapore, have chosen to engage
agonistically² with state powers, others have directly defied the state’s official positions. Pang Khee Teik in Malaysia, for example, has embraced his queer identity with unabashed pride in a conservative Islamic country where being queer is grounds for prosecution.

In other words, theatre and the arts may remain marginal, but they serve an important function in places where the press and news media are heavily government controlled or influenced.³ As such, it is often the artists and activists filling the role of the missing “fourth estate” in these sites. I, therefore, see them mapping a regional discourse and practice of human rights. It is useful to note that many of these artists are professionally connected—The Necessary Stage that produced Loo Zihan’s work also nurtured Kok Heng Luan’s career before Kok started his own company, Drama Box. Danny Yung and Kok Heng Luan’s companies co-produced 100 Years of Solitude – 10.0 and have had artistic exchanges in the forms of workshops and tours. In recent years, Alfian Sa’at has developed a close working relationship with Malaysian theatre company Instance Café, whose artistic director Jo Kukathas acted in and was also the co-director of Cooling- Off Day. At the beginning of his career, Sa’at’s plays were produced by The Necessary Stage before he became the resident playwright of W!LD RICE. W!LD RICE’s artistic director Ivan Heng. Heng, in turn, was an ambassador and spokesperson for Pink Dot, the key organizer and founding member of which, Paerin Choa, was an actor with ties to many of the companies mentioned.

The process of writing has consequently alerted me to additional paths of inquiry for the next iteration of this project. As indicated above, I would like to further parse out the

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² Mouffe, Agonistics.
implications of what it means to frame these connected artists as a network and how that could speak to a transnational articulation of human rights in which a regional community of artists and activists are committed to a similar goal of social justice.\(^4\) Another topic I would like to explore deeper is that of censorship. As mentioned briefly in the dissertation, both Singapore and Malaysia have statutory boards that oversee the content of cultural and media productions. Although Hong Kong does not officially have a censorship department in place, the central Chinese government’s autocratic stance on the flow of information has caused the press and artists to practice greater degrees of self-censorship in recent years. I could foreground how self-censorship as a strategy enacted by artists and activists to enable their work to be seen is concurrently an act of resistance and a sign of co-option before pondering its effect on the resulting performances.

In addition, the factors of race, gender, and class together with their relation to prejudice and privilege could be further addressed. For instance, the marginalization of the migrant domestic workers and laborers in Hong Kong and Singapore has an uncomfortable racial dimension in which these communities are perceived to be inferior to the ethnic Chinese.

\(^4\) There are many other artists and activists whom I interviewed and whose work I was privy to in the course of my research that could not be included in this dissertation but that would work well in an expanded project. These include, in Malaysia, The Instant Café theatre company, famous for its satirical revues that shed light on government corruption, and Five Arts Centre, a company founded by the late Krishen Jit and Marion D’Cruz that is interested in exploring the multifarious dimensions of the country’s history; in Singapore, playwright Tan Tarn How’s succinct political allegories critiquing the draconian nature of the country’s ruling party and the plays of Theatre Ekamatra, a company that produces Malay-language plays that often touch on the racial dimensions of being Malay, a minority ethnic group in the country marginalized both politically and economically; and in Hong Kong, the activist and artistic work of theatre director and performance artist Mok Chiu Yu, which spans three decades. Mok is one of the most well known and connected practitioners in the region. A self-proclaimed anarchist, his work ranges from the social justice–focused plays he directs, to performance art pieces touching on civil and political rights issues in Hong Kong, to devised theatre collaborations with migrant domestic workers. Hong Kong’s performance art scene, of which Mok is part, has also spawned many activist performance artists of which I cannot possibly name all. One of the most prolific is scholar/artist/activist Wen Yau, whose recent work focuses on the debates of Hong Kong sovereignty from China.
residents. This reflects a wider-spread problem in the region,\(^5\) which Alfian Sa’at has tried to address. He has written works examining both the marginalization of the ethnic minorities in Singapore as well as the racial tensions and xenophobia caused by a new wave of immigration into the country.\(^6\) Regarding the issue of gender, except for Jo Kukathas and Li Xie’s co-directing efforts in *Cooling-Off Day* and *Soil* respectively, the works of all the case studies in this dissertation have been primarily created and produced by men. The next phase of this project could ponder the reasons for this skewed representation and examine the unique insights that feminist perspectives contribute to gender and human rights. One example would be to explore the reasons for the lack of queer female voices in the theatre scene in all three sites. While gay-themed plays have proliferated in Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Singapore in varying degrees, the distinctiveness of the lesbian voice is sorely missing. Last but not least, factoring in the issue of class, which I alluded to in the chapter on migrant rights and in the verbatim theatre case study in the chapter on democratic rights, would enrich any analysis on rights claims. Given that most of the artists featured in this dissertation have privileged social statuses by means of their education, if not also their economic class, further exploration of the issue of representation is vital.

The question of who could, or should, speak for whom and the necessity of speaking up in general is perhaps made even more salient in the current global political climate. In the wake of Brexit\(^7\) and the Trump presidency, so-called intellectual and liberal “elites” have been accused

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\(^5\) In contrast to Singapore and Hong Kong, Malaysians of Chinese and Indian descent are marginalized in that they do not share the same access to political rights and social privileges as compared to the Malay Muslim majority. For instance, there is a quota system in public schools and universities that prioritizes Malay Muslims regardless of academic merit.

\(^6\) The influx of immigrants, predominantly from China as well as neighboring countries in Southeast Asia and India, has resulted in increased social tensions as some Singaporeans view the immigrants as a threat to their livelihood and cultural identity.

\(^7\) Brexit, the abbreviation for Britain Exit, refers to the historical referendum in 2016 when a majority vote by British citizens instigated the country’s withdrawal from the European Union. The results have been analyzed by pundits, journalists, and scholars to indicate the rise of nationalist thinking, xenophobia, and economic protectionism on the parts of conservative citizens and politicians. Similar to debates surrounding the election of Donald J. Trump to the
of being out of touch with the needs of the more conservative “common” people even as both “sides” are advocating in differing ways for economic equality, better notions of democratic representation, migrant or citizenship rights, and the rights to information. It is at the onset of political uncertainty and turmoil that artists and activists must remain vigilant in highlighting any instances of injustice that arise. Already, there have been mass mobilization efforts against the discriminatory language and executive orders of the Trump presidency that speak to Judith Butler’s notion of how assemblies could viscerally bear witness and embody collective resistance.8 These upheavals in the global political sphere have also drawn responses from Asian governments. In Singapore, for instance, at a conference held in the January of 2017, Education Minister Ong Ye Kung re-emphasized PAP’s position on the benefits of a one-party state, warning that a multi-party system would “ruin” the country as the diverse views represented by warring parties could “take a nasty twist, sowing discord and dividing societies.”9 Ong did not overtly mention the recent political upheavals in the Western hemisphere, but given the timing of his comments, it is not far-fetched to deduce that Ong was interpreting what he sees as the instability caused by liberal Western democracies and strategically using this to justify PAP’s authoritarian stance by means of inciting fear. Artists and activists in the region then need to continue providing alternative viewpoints on the merits of electoral democracy and the dangers of autocratic rule on civil and political rights.

8 Butler, Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly.
In surveying the current state of world affairs and in reviewing my case studies’ arguments, it would seem that human rights work is losing ground against neoliberal and autocratic forces. However, like Rae, I argue that the strength of performance practice and human rights lies in their stoic confrontation of the flawed present.\(^{10}\) Cheah, while acknowledging that the practices and discourses of human rights are inherently “contaminated”\(^{11}\) by neoliberal structures, nevertheless proposes that it is an imperfect but necessary instrument “for the disenfranchised to mobilize.”\(^{12}\) Utilizing Jacques Derrida’s theorization of how “justice remains, is yet, to come,”\(^{13}\) he proposes that the quest for a better future requires working both within and against the flawed structures in the moment. The artists and activists in this dissertation are doing precisely that—by performing the imperfect efforts of human rights work with the presence of bodies, they are manifesting the possibilities for a more equitable world.

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\(^{10}\) Rae, *Theatre and Human Rights*, 41.

\(^{11}\) Cheah, *Inhuman Conditions*, 172.

\(^{12}\) Ibid. 172.

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