Conversations in Singapore History 2018
Histories of Marginality

PROGRAMME BOOKLET

10 & 11 March 2018
Kings College London
Nash Lecture Theatre K2.31 King’s Building Strand Campus
## PROGRAMME OUTLINE

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Prof. Malcolm Murfett  
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Keynote Speakers

10 & 11 March 2018
Kings College London
Nash Lecture Theatre K2.31 King's Building Strand Campus
“Marginal Faiths, Marginal People, Marginal Spaces”

KEYNOTE SPEAKER

Terence Heng is a Lecturer in Sociology at the Department of Sociology, Social Policy and Criminology and Associate at the Centre for Architecture and the Visual Arts, University of Liverpool. His work is based at the intersections of Visual Sociology, Cultural Geography and creative practice. Terence’s research interests include sacred space, ethnic identity formation in urban environments, visual methods and technology as a tool for mediating religious experiences. He is the author of Visual Methods in the Field: Photography for the Social Sciences (Routledge), and has published in journals such as Geographical Review, The Sociological Review, Cultural Geographies and Visual Communication.

Terence is the inaugural winner of the International Visual Sociology Association’s Prosse Award for Visual Methodologies, and received the 2015 Sociological Review Prize for Outstanding Scholarship for his work on resistance to ethnic homogenisation through transient sacred space-making.

Dr. Terence Heng
Lecturer in Sociology
Department of Sociology, Social Policy and Criminology
University of Liverpool

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Conversations in Singapore History 2018
Histories of Marginality

10 & 11 March 2018
Kings College London
Nash Lecture Theatre K2.31
King’s Building Strand Campus
The emotive topic of education in Singapore

KEYNOTE SPEAKER

Professor Malcolm Murfett has taught in Australia, Canada, Singapore, and the UK and came out to Singapore after completing his doctorate at New College, Oxford on Anglo-American relations. He has been a member of the Department of War Studies at King’s College London for the past four years, where he teaches undergraduate modules on the European Cold War and Leadership in a Time of War & Revolution.

A consultant to the MOE for many years, Professor Murfett was also an advisor on the Humanities for The Chinese High School and Hwa Chong Junior College. He is an assistant editor of the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography and the editor of a new Routledge series on the Cold War in Asia. Widely published, Professor Murfett is a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society and the author of a number of books and scholarly articles on naval history and international affairs. His books include Hostage on the Yangtze (1991), Imponderable but Not Inevitable: Warfare in the Twentieth Century (2010), Between Two Oceans: A Military History of Singapore from 1275 to 1971 (2011), Cold War Southeast Asia (2012), Naval Warfare (2013), and European Navies and the Conduct of War (2018).

Professor Malcolm Murfett
Lecturer in War Studies
Department of War Studies
King's College London

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Race and Identity

Herman Lim Bin Adam Lim | Yale-NUS College

Often marginalised within Singapore's national narrative is the role the island played as the centre of the Malay-speaking world, prior to its separation from Malaysia. Singapore was not only a physical microcosm of this wider Malay archipelago, but a playground where Malay activists debated ideas surrounding nationalism and politics, through the medium of print journalism. This paper proposes an in-depth study of one such print publication from this past period: the Malay periodical titled "Fajar Asia" or "Dawn of Asia", the handiwork of Malay activists in Singapore. Sanctioned by the Japanese during the war period, the periodical advocates a specific notion of indigenous identity for the modern period, and discusses the relationship between Malay identity, Islam and Japanese identity at length - both of which are worthy of deeper analysis. In line with the symposium's theme, this study not only sheds light upon a highly forgotten aspect of Singapore's Malay-centric past, but also studies a moment of hopeful collaboration between the Malay activists and the Japanese officials, during a time period that has become ubiquitous with the Sook Ching, complete calamity, and suffering in our collective national memory.

Dancing into the Heart of a Nation
Elizabethe Er | SOAS

Why did Bharatanatyam, a marginalised art form in the late 19th century, become a cultural symbol for the Indian community in Singapore today? Bharatanatyam is today hailed as one the “8 Classical Dances of India”. Historically, it was exclusively performed by a community who were outlawed throughout India during the British colonial period. It was later re-invented, institutionalised and grew to gain immense acceptance in South India and its diaspora, especially in Singapore. I propose that institutionalisation of the dance and the bolstering of an ‘Indian identity’ in Singapore contribute to Bharatanatyam’s rise in status from marginalisation to a desirable symbol of femininity. The paper involves examining Bharatanatyam in media, interviews with purveyors of Bharatanatyam in Singapore as well as policies on race and education in creating a cohesive ‘Indian’ community. Notable dance scholars like Meduri and Srinivasan have studied Bharatanatyam in the context of the United Kingdom and the United States. Thus, this paper situates Singapore as part of the growing global scholarship on Bharatanatyam in diaspora, culture and gender studies. It will be the first to lay the groundwork and critically study one of the cultural power-houses that make up the social fabric of Singapore.

Anglophone Chinese Identity in Post-Colonial Maritime Southeast Asia
Leong Yee Ting | University of Oxford

This thesis compares the development of Anglophone Chinese identity across Singapore, Malaysia and the Philippines from 1965 to 1998 through literary sources, but I think it might be interesting to extend the discussion (for this symposium) to the present day, so this becomes a topic that our Anglophone Chinese participants can actually relate to and reflect on. My argument is that although there exists broad commonalities in the Anglophone Chinese experience across Singapore, Malaysia and the Philippines, their experiences diverged more than they converged, especially towards the end of this period. They are similar in the issues they dealt with - their alienation from China, their integration into the newly independent nation-states, postcolonial anxiety and the upward social mobility associated with the English language. However, each nation-state had a unique interplay of population demographics and government policies, which in turn provoked different responses from the writers. Anglophone Chinese identity was most developed in Singapore, owing largely to favourable government policies. The large Chinese majority tended to stratify along the lines of English- or Chinese-educated, whereas the smaller Chinese populations in Malaysia and the Philippines tended to unify and identify themselves against the non-Chinese majority. In the Philippines and Malaysia, English remained a minority language in which the Anglophone Chinese expressed hybrid identities and experiences of marginalisation. However, this expression was stronger in the Philippines than Malaysia.
Marginalised Labour and Material Nationalism

Adjusting to the Second Home: The Transnational Migration of Filipino Women to Singapore
Julie Foong | Goldsmiths, University of London

Women’s roles in Singapore are changing, with more women joining the paid labor force. Filipino women now fill many of the roles in the family that have been left vacant as more Singaporean women enter the paid labor force (Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2004). To examine issues that arise from this transnational migration of women into the domestic work field, I conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with eight Filipino women who were granted visas to temporarily migrate and work in Singapore. Drawing on these interviews, I argue that the individual-level social costs of domestic work far outweigh the economical benefits for many Filipino women. Developed and developing countries exploit domestic workers for regional gains and, in some cases, individual losses. In addition to the losses, these domestic workers gained cross-cultural sensitivity and adapted to their situations, where they expressed gratitude and happiness for the opportunity to work abroad and earn a greater income to help their families. Their limits were tested in various situations but they have managed to find compromises between themselves and their employers to enable successful assimilation into their household workplaces. At the end of the day, they can only hope to pave better life outcomes for their parents, partners, siblings, and children as they contribute to family income and point to education as the key to future successes for their families.

Borders and Ideology in Singapore
Helios Bajwa | New School of Social Research

Inclusion is widely regarded as an unalloyed social good in philosophical and political discourse alike. This paper contends that the schemes by which the other is included into a socio-economic space can be no less violent than those deployed for explicitly exclusionary purposes. Taking south Asian construction workers in Singapore as a paradigmatic case, we will examine how relations between capital, transnational labor flows, regulatory institutions, political power and socio-economic norms structure the integration of migrant laborers into a social topology, and the pathological consequences of this violent appropriation. In the first section, we draw on Balibar (2002) and Mezzadra and Nielson’s (2013) works on the border as regime of differential inclusion to problematize received treatments of inclusion. We animate this theoretical discussion by drawing on empirical studies, news reports and policy analyses that bring to light the latent tensions between the social and political exclusions of south Asian migrant laborers on one hand, and their effective inclusion into everyday socio-economic life in Singapore on the other. In the second section, we will draw on Zizek’s (1989) work on social ontology and the critique of ideology and fetishism to elucidate the socio-symbolic implications of the differential inclusion of migrant workers. We shall see how the regulatory functions and symbolic power of border regimes warp the Singaporean socio-symbolic field, and condition the emergence and development of subjectivities and social relations within it. In so doing, we gesture towards the sense in which concerns of political economy and ideology ought bear on the subject of inclusions and exclusions.

Materialising the nation - Nationalism and the Singapore Success Story
Joel Chong | SOAS

This paper will investigate how nationalism in Singapore invokes not the cultural – be it ethnicity, religion, or language – but rather the material. Specifically, it argues that the Singapore nation is materialised through the Singapore success story – the journey of the nation from ‘third world to first’, coupled with its staggering economic development and material infrastructure. This, what I argue is called ‘material nationalism’, occurs when the nation is envisioned and built on its material and economic achievements, an economic community ‘imagined’ through its shared journey to economic and material development. It is produced and reproduced materially through sustained economic performance of the nation-state, and represents a post-modern response to the traditional question of nationhood. Singapore’s material nationalism thus blurs the line between state building and nation building – shared historical memories feature exclusively material, infrastructural, and economic successes, and solidarity being the shared wealth reaped from this developmental journey. National identity becomes twinned with material growth and development, and becomes a reflection of the state’s desire to find its place – and survival – within the global economic system. This evocation of the material nation appears consistently in key national events, often supported by well-worn facts and figures – including but not limited to GDP growth, per capita income – and also visually through its infrastructural fruits.
Education

Within but without: Teaching national identity in part-time madrasahs
Mohammad Syafiq bin Mohammad Suhaini | University of Oxford

This paper I would be presenting is a mash-up between my undergrad thesis and independent research I did back in Singapore. I study how full-time madrasah graduates, who grow up and are educated in a school culture and identity that is different from the rest of the other Singaporeans, teach national identity to national school students in part-time (weekend) madrasahs. Having been on the edges of the National Education project, how do these teachers negotiate and teach national identity? I also look at how national identity is constructed in the part-time madrasah syllabus.

"Auspiciium Melioris Aevi" and "化为礼仪之帮": Origins of Educational Polices in the Straits Settlements, 1870 to 1895
Edward Tan Yu Fan | National Institute of Education

At the supposed height of Victorian self-confidence, education in the colonies only revealed a British world that was searching for answers to her social problems. The Education Departments in Britain and Singapore were founded in the same year. Contrary to popular imagination, administrative records, and existing historical literature, education was not a European import. It could not have been – Britain was searching for answers to social welfare in parallel to her colonies. Rather, it was the outcome of a series of complex interactions born out of the global movement of people and ideas during the period. Educational policy in the late-19th century Straits Settlements was a patchwork of indigenous pondok schools, Chinese si-shu, and British-style public schools. This messy collection was the norm between 1872 and 1892. This paper explores the various voices from within and without the Straits Settlements that fundamentally affected education – from the self-strengthening movement in China, to Victorian 'betterment', to the Islamic reformist movements in the Middle East – and produce a more holistic picture of colonial administration in the global late-19th century.

"Stories we Sing": Curating a Sense of Singapore through Music
Almira Farid | SOAS

This research project (through the medium of a radio podcast) critically explores the role that music education plays in constructing certain narratives about Singapore. My research focuses specifically on a recent project that I was personally involved in - 'Stories We Sing' (2017), a pedagogical music resource produced as a collaboration between the Singapore Teachers’ Academy for the aRts (STAR) under the Ministry of Education (MOE), and the National Arts Council (NAC). 'Stories We Sing' is the first time that educators and artists have come together in the creation of 12 commissioned songs (in English, Malay, Mandarin and Tamil), with the aim of enhancing quality music education in the classroom, through promoting local artists and Singapore's 'multicultural' soundscape. This meticulously researched song compilation is not just a creation, but a careful curation of what the resource identifies as "authentic" aural stories about Singapore. But what does 'authentic' even mean, and who decides which stories about Singapore to include or exclude? My research thus looks at music education as a form of curation, weaving together a particular narrative of the Singapore story.
Multiculturalism

*Imagined Multiculturalism \ Gaps in Singapore’s Art History*

Grace Lai SOAS

In May last year, Lee Hsien Loong gave a speech addressing Singaporean identity. He asserted that each race in Singapore is encouraged to preserve their own unique culture and traditions, thus, Being Singaporean, is about becoming more, of openness and expansion. However, this attitude is not embraced within the arts, or rather the History of Art in Singapore. Despite the onslaught of varied answers when the question of “What is Singaporean Art” is posed, the discourse lacks a national criticality witnessed in similar discussions in the context of postcolonial studies. The question thus becomes not ’who is represented’ but ’who are not represented’ within the narratives of art in the nation, and there are many. Through the use of interpretive strategies of temporisation and spatialisation, this paper investigates the limitations of Singapore’s Art History that prevents it from narrating a more multifaceted narrative and moves to suggests frameworks to encourage a discourse with much more agency.

*Interactive Public Installation: 洗手 (Washing Hands) 2017*

Quek Jia Qi Goldsmiths, University of London

洗手 (Washing Hands) (2017) is a reconstruction of Singapore's Chinese-Malay-Indian-Others racial classification model into hand-built soap dispensers installed in a public toilet. Displacing the boundary between the manufactured and handmade, the participatory art installation challenges how we visually register our mundane encounters in everyday life. By making tangible the ethical effects of our everyday actions produced by socio-categorical constructs and codes, the piece acts as a social interstice to raise a few key questions: How much do we submit ourselves passively, out of habit, or complicity in our everyday encounters. How do they influence our behaviour and internal conservative bias? In this age of increasing diversity, how can we remove ourselves from the danger of perpetuating stereotypes, and modify our structure of assumptions in order to strengthen our cohesive diversity? The public intervention seeks to empower everyday spaces by opening a discursive space for viewers to cultivate reflection, perspectives and inspire meaningful exchange. Prompted to participate in the act of cleansing with “dead skin” (made from soap), the pedagogical intervention seeks participants to reconsider our own notions of dirt, as a by-product of systematic classification. By questioning the threshold between individual liberty and social cohesion, the piece aims to activate dialogues in social responsibility as well as nuanced complexities of socio-ethnic identities and privilege.

*Lecture Recital: Composing Identity*

Ng Wei Jie Benedict, Elaine Ng, Joseph Lim Soon Keong, Lim Kang Ning

King’s College London

Jazz pianist Jeremy Monteiro once remarked that compared to the possibility of discovering a unique Singaporean musical identity, it was deemed ’easier looking for the Dodo bird. At least it existed’. Yet this task of seeming impossibility has not deterred scores of Western trained Singaporean composers from Leong Yoon Pin, Kelly Tang to young composers straight out of leading universities and conservatoires. This lecture recital discusses one such attempt with a world premiere of Joseph Lim’s Gelang Sipaku Gelang- A Fantasy on a Malay Folk Song. Recognizing that music could reflect broader social-political realities, this work will be used as point of entry to briefly explore the implications of ethnicity management in multicultural Singapore and the inherent dangers of essentialization. It will then be shown that superficial multicultural incorporation in the compositional paradigm therefore enacts what Kuo Pao Kun calls the identity of ‘orphans.. alienated from any real links to their cultural tradition’. In view of such compositional pitfalls, possible suggestions and areas of concern for composers will be raised to hopefully serve as handles in the long trek towards a unique Singaporean musical identity.
Performances and Activisms

Scripting Sovereignty: The State/Self as Em/Bodied in Josef Ng’s Brother Cane (1994)
Clara Lee Wenrong | University College London

Scripting Sovereignty plots the politics of performance and the performance of politics along a horizontal plane. It considers how each scripts sovereignty — both the Sovereign State as well as the Sovereign Self. Adopting a Foucauldian analysis of the forces at play, the examination favours an economy of power relations where resistance precedes authority. The paper opens with a scene of protest: in response to the police entrapment of homosexuals and the sentencing of 12 men for deviant sexual behaviour, Singaporean artist Josef Ng staged Brother Cane (1994). Acting out corporal punishment on blocks of tofu, Ng embodied the hyper-masculine figure of the State in a performance that became pronounced by the government and media as perversion. The discussion builds upon of the ontolog(ies) of performance outlined by Schneider, Taylor, Jones and Moten, which are centred on the lived body. It asks what it means to inscribe the flesh.

Annabel’s Big Bang: Pornography, Asian Values and Feminist Liberation
Ng Qi Siang | Yale-NUS College

Singaporean pornographic actress Annabel Chong (née Grace Quek) is a complex and divisive figure in Singapore’s cultural consciousness. Little scholarly attention, however, has been given to her status as a cultural phenomenon and her impact on gender discourses. Famous for performing a record-breaking 251 sex acts on screen in ten hours in a film entitled "The World's Biggest Gang Bang", “Annabel Chong” was widely vilified by Singapore’s conservative establishment, who saw her as a rebellious youth led astray by Western moral degeneracy. Taking a micro-historical approach, I investigate the intersectionality of Grace Quek as an elite, Chinese-Singaporean woman in the United States, her upbringing under the Asian Values gender regime and her motivations for entering pornography. I argue that more than youthful rebellion, performing pornography as Annabel Chong gave Quek a vehicle through which to challenge and liberate herself from the patriarchal “Asian Values” gender regime she grew up under, though problematic discourses regarding gender and ethnicity in the pornographic industry ultimately rendered her efforts self-defeating. This study allows us to better understand how Asian Values influenced the construction of elite Singaporean femininity in the 1980s-1990s while questioning the usefulness of pornography as a form of feminist liberation and resistance.

The Samsui woman and the Activist—Women in Singapore’s history
Yasmine Wong | London School of Economics and Political Science

This research is inspired by conversations with a few Singaporeans of different generations and their contact with Singapore’s history in education. There commonality in the accounts reflect a lack of female figures in Singapore’s history. One female collective, however, that was credited for contributing to Singapore’s progress was the Samsui women, a group directly involved in Singapore’s construction efforts. History, which gives precedence to individuals who are influential in the public sphere often neglects women, whose traditional roles were relegated to the private sphere of the family unit. However, this highlights a flawed assumption that women of the past were not active participants in the public sphere. The activities of the Singapore Council of Women and its pivotal role in the passing of the Women's Charter in 1961 reveals the contributions of women, who organised themselves effectively in the public sphere, in politics and the development of Singapore. This research aims at a social constructivist critique of how the image of the pioneer woman was constructed in Singapore’s history, leading to the active inclusion and exclusion of different women in history. How the image of the Samsui woman contrasts with that of the women activists and how, perhaps, women activists do not fit the dominant cultural discourse of Singapore’s development.
Much scholarship to date on student politics and student political organisations in the National University of Singapore* has focused on the most prolific and well-known time period for activism, the post-war years around the time of the Rendel Constitution up to the 1963 detentions in Operation Coldstore; including works by Loh Kah Seng, Dr. Poh Soo Kai, and others. However, many student organisations at NUS remained openly political throughout the late 1960s and 1970s, including at various times the student union itself (USSU and later NUSSU). The Democratic Socialist Club, too, plays a complex role, at once serving to endorse government policies but providing a platform for opposition speakers and critics. Were student societies, as Chan Heng Chee would suggest, truly ‘depoliticised’? This paper uses student publications, yearbooks, and magazines to trace a history of post-Independence student activism from the perspective of students in NUS at the time, how the Union and political societies succeeded or failed to engage students in political movements. Using a broad concept of ‘student politics’, I look at how students engaged in the political process and how the organisations functioned as communities, visible in publications like The Horse’s Mouth, Demos, The People, and Singapore Undergrad.
Participatory Workshop & Screenings

Selected Script Read from Boom (2008)
Amelia Yeo, Matthew Choo, Jamie Foo

This script read of Boom by local playwright Jean Tay explores the relationship of a mother’s determined spirit of holding on to physical remnants of the past as she struggles to reason with change and transition. Marked by the potential en bloc sale of their home, the audience witnesses the quieter struggles within manifested spaces of important memories against the inexorable march of progress.

Old of Things (2016)
Heather Teo and Victor Gan

In 2016, the residents of the Dakota Crescent estate received notice of eviction in lieu of redevelopment. The film grants exclusive access into the life of Yee Geok Eng, a resident in her late 60s, as she navigates the different phases of redefining everything she understands as home; the search for security, comfort, and family amidst an upheaval of life as she knows it. This film is a personal memento, but also a monument to all the spaces of memory that have quietly become forgotten histories.

Selected Readings from Migrant Tales
Filmed by Jay Ong

Reading from Migrant Tales, a bilingual anthology of poems by migrant Bengali workers in Singapore, translated by Debabrota Basu and edited by Zakir Hossain Khokan & Monir Ahmed.

Without Reason (2017)
Discussion with Playwright, Sim Yan Ying

A classic boy-meets-girl story in modern day Singapore. Or is it? Without Reason explores the challenges of an inter-racial relationship where a Chinese girl and a Malay boy struggle to overcome cultural differences, reconcile religious beliefs, and manage the expectations of friends and family. This coming-of-age story will take you on an unforgettable quest for love and the search for identity.

Without Reason was a Festival Commission of the M1 Peer Pleasure Youth Theatre Festival 2017, presented by ArtsWok Collaborative, in collaboration with Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay. It was originally written and devised under the mentorship of Buds Youth Theatre programme 2014, and received further development support from Centre 42.

Invisible City (2007)
Tan Pin Pin

Invisible City (2007) chronicles the ways people attempt to leave a mark before they and their histories disappear. From an avid amateur film director trying to preserve his decaying trove of Singapore footage to an intrepid Japanese journalist hunting down Singaporean war veterans, Tan Pin Pin draws out doubts, hopes and the ordinary moments of these protagonists who attempt immortality. Through their footage and photos rarely seen until now, we begin to perceive faint silhouettes of a City that could have been. Invisible City had a four week sold out run at The Arts House in July 2007. It now tours Singapore and film festivals abroad.
ORGANISERS

Rocky Howe investigates the intersection of space, marginality and politics. His present projects address heritage politics in Singapore; aesthetics and models in the national imagination; and ‘Vulnerability’ as a concept in political theory. He reads Politics, Philosophy & Law at King’s College London, and is editor of the programme’s journal. His latest writing, ‘Defamiliarising the Architectural Object’, is available in STAPLE Vol. 2.

Quek Jia Qi is a multi-disciplinary artist who harnesses art’s capacity for connection, integration and social good. She has exhibited internationally, led and worked with communities on public art projects to activate civic spaces. She believes conversations are enduring in unravelling the complex socio-economic, political constructs at play, and uses social art as a catalyst for these necessary dialogues. Currently, she pursues Fine Art and History of Art at Goldsmiths', University of London. [www.quekjiaqi.com](http://www.quekjiaqi.com)

Leong Yee Ting is a final year undergraduate in History at the University of Oxford. She thinks that the history of our nation-state is incredibly rich and wants to explore new angles to it. She is particularly interested in the history of colonialism and migration in Southeast Asia, and gender and fiction as approaches to history.

Afiq Fitri is a penultimate year undergraduate at the War Studies department in King’s College London. He is interested in historical discourse beyond the canon.

MORE INFORMATION:

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