

Singapore, Variability,
and the Exhaustion
of the Local

Alex Ferentzy

Singapore is a useful site for studying the capacity of a present-day state to extinguish the local and make it subservient to the state's exigencies. What makes Singapore unique, and in some sense representative of the leading edge of contemporary techno-capital, is that it is a fractured state that, although straddling the fine line between authoritarianism and totalitarianism, has constructed itself into a flexible conduit for the international economy and has demanded a similar practical, conforming malleability from its citizenry.

The idea that Singapore presents to us is of a permanent adaptive transformation. A historically and geographically predetermined *entrepôt*, Singapore has shaped itself into a transmission centre forever changing global flows of information, technology, and financial capital. In doing so, the demands on local culture are intended to be overwhelming. The local is overcome not by a simple exhortation, but through a complex process of adjustment and refinement that demands a state of permanent cultural, subjective, and institutional transformation. Linked to exhaustive surveillance measures the local exudes a sense of anxiety, which is covered over by a cult of positive expression.

Singapore is a processual city, its process is one of continuing functional adjustments. If in the local we tend to celebrate a certain indeterminacy and a safe and free space, we will have to appeal to roughly the same terms to describe the dystopian aspects of controlling variability. If we wish to celebrate something of the indiscernibility of the local without celebrating the variable control of international capital, we need to find some means of distinguishing between haptic and controlling variability. The controlling variability of contemporary Singapore brings us close to the language of an indeterminate encounter, yet with a decidedly dystopian tendency.

Although the local is often celebrated for its capacity to engender liminal and hybrid becomings, roughly the same set of terms can be appealed to in order to describe the assault on the local by global and state coercion. Where the local and global meet there is, among other things, a competition between definitions of variability which require us to negotiate between virtually antithetical tendencies that are expressed with the same set of terms. While it is unreasonable to think that the local can be made wholly subservient to outside pressures, Singapore's ever-ruling People's Action Party's ceaseless

attempts to control the minutiae of local culture and individual expression suggest this very tendency. In Singapore, the question of the local takes on an urgency, which I can address, ironically enough, only from afar. For what can survive, or what does the “local” mean at all when it is thoroughly permeated by the striations of a variable disciplinary regime?

Two Betweens

First, Singapore is “inter.” Immediately, we are close to the language of utopia. For the inter is one of our usual terms of hope. Neither here nor there, indeterminate, hopefully devoid of sedimented beginning and end. Yet the inter of Singapore is the squeezed between, the inter of the functional throughput most commonly referred to as an *entrepôt*. Singapore certainly was that. A free port between Malaysia and Indonesia and on the Ocean route between Japan and India. Its rapid rise to regional pre-eminence, itself a repetition of well worn regional developmental paths of earlier port cities such as Srivijaya and Malacca, is due, first of all, to its interstitial geographic position.

Perhaps this is the first distinction. There is a between that is neither here or there (the place to start thinking, assures Deleuze), and there is this other between that is precisely and specifically between. This is the border of the expressible, caught between the language of an encounter and that of specification. Trying to use the latter so that it is not confused with the former.

Yet, at the same time, the distinction in question is quite secure. We know well enough that the myriad subjective roles that are commonplace in cyberspace are the stuff of a playful celebration of multiplicity as much as they are the means by which to make contact, seduce, and rape children. To derive this distinction from the outcome is decidedly unsatisfying. That is a posterior judgement and it would be far better to distinguish these ideas intrinsically. If the idea is pursued until its tendency is revealed, perhaps we will find the means to distinguish between these two betweens and the two expressions of variability that they relate to. The explicit question then becomes how to explore the site and the idea simultaneously, without conceptually prefiguring the site nor losing sight of the theoretical problematic.

The first clue is this inter and the ways in which the “inter” of hybridity is distinct from the “inter” of functional accommodation. Both of these “inters” can be represented as nominally, or rather superficially, as hybrid. The overt hybridity of Singapore is incontestable. Multicultural (as every port of international trade has ever been) and overtly tolerant of religious diversity, Singapore resists hybridity through its cult of positive expression, a demand for clear and unencumbered religious expression and a discrete limit on the rights of religious expression, and lest we forget, the threat of severe punishment.

All manner of public religious ritual, which does not endorse ecstatic religious communion, is publicly supported. Every kind of organized religion is once again overtly supported. The government asks first that the religious expression be clear. Traditional ceremonies, such as processions to Buddhist temples for the celebration of the Buddha's birthday, are encouraged. Second, religious commentary must not cross the boundary of church and state. However, in Singapore this means that religious leaders must not comment on government policy and especially that they should not criticize government programmes. Christian ministers can criticize neither the government's anti-homosexual stance nor its liberal abortion policy. The point of religion is to give solace to the people and not to engage in politics from the pulpit. The cult of positive expression is generated through these complex combinations of allowances and strictures. It is possible to defend the principle of the freedom of religion and administer the content of public speeches. By encouraging the diversity of religious expression and then controlling the content, the government actually achieves a more thorough control over the minutiae of expression.

The hybridity of the squeezed between is clear. It is multiple, but multiple as in the several not as in the formless and messy interrelation of the indistinguishable mass where the lines of distinction are blurred. In Singapore it is rule by paranoia, or rather the rule of paranoia. The assault on the formless is total. There is, every so often, some evidence that the government is lightening up. Just recently the government rescinded its anti-chewing gum law and now allows people to buy chewing gum for medicinal purposes, with a prescription.¹ Besides assisting in quitting smoking, chewing gum may not be imported into Singapore except in small quantities for personal use with penalties ranging from fines of over \$5,000 to up to a year in jail. The chewing gum injunction is just one example from hundreds of little programmes and laws that deal with the minutiae of social and inter-personal life. The rule of paranoia problematizes myriad ordinary activities and instills unease into the citizenry. Complicating this are the numerous rewards offered for turning in your fellow citizen, which breeds mutual distrust. An ex-pat Canadian told me that joints are smoked almost exclusively in public as it is too big a risk to smoke one in your government-subsidized flat because of the risk that a neighbour will turn you in. You walk and smoke and get rid of the roach as quickly as possible. Joints even circulate one at a time so that the charge cannot be for dealing but only for possession.

The city-state of Singapore is set up as a throughput, an *entrepôt* for the relay of goods, which in the nineteenth century consisted primarily of raw materials such as rubber, foodstuff, and opium. The English bought what was, at the time, a virtually deserted island from one of the competing Malay

rulers. And then, they began to do what they, at that time, did best; they began to attract scores of merchants, traders, peasants, and above all ships. Their free port was much more attractive to local merchants than were the nearby Dutch ports in Indonesia, which were run under mercantilist policies. Now the fact that the bulk of those who came to Singapore were Chinese laid the groundwork for some unusual colonial politics. First, to speak of colonial politics in Singapore at all, it is necessary to appreciate that the colonized majority arrived after the colonizing minority. At least we might see it this way if we choose to see the Chinese as colonized, which of course they were not, or at the very least we need a new set of terms for this unusual set of circumstances. Certainly Chinese merchants and tradespeople had a long presence in the region, but they hardly considered this "their" region. Arriving in a port, it mattered little if the rulers were Malay, Dutch, or English. What mattered were the terms of rule and the opportunities for commerce. The Chinese population was eventually split into two factions, one of which could be characterized by its English education and the other by its Chinese education. The English-educated faction was considerably smaller; and yet ultimately this faction became more influential because they were the driving force behind changes to racial segregation laws in Singapore, and they fought for access for the Chinese and other ethnic groups into the growing bureaucracy and municipal administration. Closer to the machinations of power, the English-educated Chinese minority would ultimately come to power after the English abdication.

But, it is the Malays who are the colonized in Singapore. Twice colonized and always as a minority. First by the English and then by the Chinese. Except that, by all accounts, the island was deserted when the English arrived. So today, ethnic Malays know that they are structurally wronged in Singapore, but they also know that they cannot be treated too badly because Singapore remains a Chinese island in a Malay Sea.

One of the most advantageous harbours in the world, the English chose Singapore because of its great location and deep port. All ship traffic between Japan and India must come practically within sight of Singapore's harbour and pass through the narrow straits of Malacca. So Singapore was between such places and, moreover, was in one of the natural places to stop and transfer goods. Given the meeting point of the Monsoon winds there are a few hundred kilometres of logical places in which to transfer goods and to begin the return route homeward with new cargo. The wealth of distant port cities was intimately tied to the straits of Malacca.

Whoever is Lord in Malacca has his hands on the throat of Venice.²

This is very much the story of a functional between and how the logic of this type of being inter can be generalized to an entire city-state. This transmission point is similar to Baudrillard's discussion of the semiotic chain in which the receiver is always, at least theoretically, a new sender. Once the illusion of an unsent sender is dispelled, the term "transmission," understood as a functional "sender" and "receiver," will describe every moment in the sequence. Baudrillard slips from semiotics to cybernetics and begins to circumambulate what remains one of the best descriptions of the dystopian implications of cyber-capitalist society. Once every link in the chain has become functionally interchangeable, and the entire sequence is related to the exigencies of a closed system, it is a useful approximation of the idea of contemporary Singapore. In the closed system that Baudrillard described, the mechanism is constantly shifting in a never-ending process of feedback and adjustment. Yet the remainder, by definition, is excluded. The answers are preformed by the questions. The answers are performed by the questions. The shifting details in such repetitions are often imperceptible. Yet the ceaseless undulation of approximate adjustments offers a clear indicator of open-ended enquiry. Real questions, bold answers and yet more questions. But in actual fact it is a string wound on a pin, ever tighter or simply around and around.³

But the term transmission does not offer a distinguishing characterization either. Régis Debray uses "transmission" in the older, in fact, opposite sense. For Debray, transmission is the process of gradual historical and cultural diffusion of ideas via mediating institutions. It is a gradual and nuanced process of negotiating cultural change. Yet again, we see the same word used in opposing senses. The example of Debray's work is especially confusing and enlightening because his field of mediology covers much of the same territory as our discussion of the "inter," but he emphasizes the negotiation and mediation of transmitting media instead of the pressures on such mediating sites to become smooth conduits that cannot negotiate the transmission process.⁴

Located between larger powers, Singapore was from its inception an in-between. And while it rose in a manner that mimics its regional predecessors, it has become possible for Singapore to achieve something its predecessors could not. Singapore can change. In the region's history there have been many, perhaps countless, such ports of varying size, utility, and geo-political importance.⁵ Some were attached to strong empires in the hinterland, others were not. But as ports, they were all vulnerable to the vagaries of international politics. Tributes to the Chinese emperor were, for a time, the most important means of securing the stability and free passage along these oceanic trade

routes. Yet, in the fourteenth century, when the Chinese lost interest in Maritime expansion, any such allegiance with the Chinese became irrelevant. The shift in Chinese regional interest allowed the Portuguese to enter the region largely uncontested. Such geo-political shifts can cause ripples throughout the region and have been, in all likelihood, the norm rather than the exception in the long history of South-East Asia. There are myriad possible stopping points around the straits of Malacca and no necessarily optimal choice among them.

In this ecological setting, a stable urban hierarchy is unlikely. There is neither a large agrarian hinterland for which a city might serve central place functions nor a markedly differentiated terrain that might give comparative advantage to some special point - for example, at the confluence of roads or rivers. Herein lies the paradox of the Strait. On the great path of world trade, the coasts of Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula form a natural and unavoidable destination; but within that area no particular stopping point is uniquely compelling.⁶

As one port fell, others would rise. Singapore has attempted to achieve something that we might call functional instability; the logic of the inter becomes integrated into a capacity for continuing adjustment. Singapore's vulnerability to any particular series of adaptations is continually re-examined and adjusted to suit changing international circumstances.

From Inter To Process

Being in-between has been one of the main means of economic development for Singapore as it has expanded and generalized the logic of the *entrepôt*. First, the lessons of the port can be transferred to other areas of transportation and communication. An efficient railway route to the mainland was already constructed by the English in order to facilitate the flow of rubber and opium. Changi International Airport was constructed after independence and became a regional air traffic hub. The entire island begins to position itself (to use the marketing/technocratic vernacular that is popular among Singaporean bureaucrats) as a regional communications hub by investing in and developing its information and communications technology infrastructure.

But to generalize the logic of this in-between is another matter. This involves shifting the emphasis from where Singapore is geographically to where it is in relation to shifting flows of telecommunications, information, goods, finance, and the like. Most important, it is necessary to develop a responsive and flexible technocracy and the everyday culture to go with it. The system must be able to anticipate political-economic shifts and new

developments in technology and be capable of changing its milieu so that it maintains its position as an effective conduit.

This is, in short, how the in-between leads to a processual logic of control. While Singapore more or less stays where it is, the factors that surround it are mobile and shifting, and any reliance on sedimented strategies geared solely to maximizing the advantages of place would surely doom Singapore to the fate of its regional predecessors. Truth be told, Singapore is not exactly staying put, for it is regularly importing earth from Indonesia and undertaking land expansion programmes. The highway leading from the airport was once coastal, but it is no longer as the island has quite literally expanded. Myriad factors change externally as well as internally. There is also an ongoing process of adjusting policies in relation to their unexpected consequences. And, if Singapore is such a useful template it is not merely because the government is authoritarian and technocratic, but also because there is only one level of government and therefore little capacity for organized mediation between national decisions and local issues. Policy changes are stark as the government tries to live up to the name of “People's Action Party.” There is no time lag between conception and implementation as different levels of government disagree or negotiate major issues. There is simply a smooth implementation of whatever decision is reached.

This also allows the government to be run much like a business. The government can move quickly to attract corporations in various sunrise high-tech sectors, offer them incentives such as tax breaks, but above all, follow through on an action-oriented bureaucracy, which acts fast and decisively. In the words of one business executive, who was interested in moving his company from the U.S. to Singapore's Science Park:

Within an hour of stepping off the plane I was meeting with top people at the Economic Development Board. That afternoon the phone rang in my hotel room. It was a messenger from the board. He had a complete contract for me to examine, spelling out in precise detail the tax breaks and other incentives we would be offered at Science Park. Anywhere else the tax terms alone would have taken months, if not years to work out.⁷

The speed of bureaucratic rule and implementation is breathtaking. Under-productive land is dezoned, demolished, rezoned, and reconstructed. Swamps are drained and filled with imported earth then, they are landscaped and developed into housing estates or into industrial zones. All of this is accomplished by government-led initiative. Where simple tax breaks and other incentives do not work, the government actually takes the lead in developing the necessary infrastructure to attract their preferred corporation.

This is the usual process of capitalist creative destruction, with at least two notable exceptions. The government not only takes the leading role in the process of spatial destruction and creation, but also tries to stay ahead of market forces. It examines every trend, even if it is a mere ripple of under-productivity, and treats every sign of stagnation as a possible indication that action is required. The planners are always at the ready. The space of the city changes so rapidly that Rodolphe de Koninck refers to Singapore's continuous rationalization of land-use as a "permanent revolution of territory":

The permanent revolution of territory, while associated with other forms of monitoring, and without necessarily resulting from a concerted decision, would not be a mere consequence of changes accomplished in the political, economic and social spheres, but rather a tool. From spatial instability there results social docility.⁸

Moving in step, albeit in complex and not at all necessarily obvious ways, with the process of economic, technological, and spatial transformation is the process of subjective and inter-subjective accommodation to the process of economic development.

The specific mechanism of local control in Singapore is often difficult to appreciate. At first glance, the city seems a maelstrom of activity. Moreover, the rulers of Singapore are by and large too intelligent to believe that they can actually control all local content. It is more a matter of making certain allowances and then severely penalizing any expression beyond what is permitted. Thus, it is possible to find websites that are critical of government policy, but these are allowed to exist under the rubric of a club and are meant for inter-member communication. Should the "club" be deemed to be proselytizing, or should it be considered dangerous, the government can use one of its many legislative tools to dismantle the association.

Perhaps the most Orwellian example of the control of public expression comes from journalism where the government routinely threatens the foreign press for even the slightest hint of criticism. In the past these threats have been carried through, so there is a generalized understanding that the government will act on its threats. While foreign presses are largely accommodating to the government's position, the local press is completely controlled. The actual mechanism of censorship is deeply internalized and nothing even vaguely threatening appears in the Singaporean press, or in the many scholarly works that originate in Singapore. Because control is so complete, the government actually answers ongoing international criticism about the lack of journalistic freedom by saying that it eagerly hopes for the emergence of a more engaged journalistic culture in Singapore. But, in a remarkable stroke of self-

orientalization, the government attributes the lack of criticism to the Confucian inheritance of the population and the intrinsic Chinese respect for authority.⁹

The government can institute inter-subjective surveillance systems via rewards and repressive measures, which instill an unfortunate inter-personal distrust amongst Singaporeans. But, the ever-ruling People's Action Party knows that local expression cannot entirely be controlled and that it is better to safeguard such expressions by ensuring that they do not spread. The possibility of hybrid becoming is circumvented, and control is maintained by clarifying expression and ensuring that the content is within clearly established boundaries. Moreover, the PAP is just as intent on keeping identities clear and distinct. As a multiracial society there is widespread support for multicultural programmes, but the government supports clarity and discreteness of racial identity. The government promotes not only clarity of dress and hairstyle, but also clarity of heterosexual orientation—endorsing discrete but obvious signs of hetero-identity—and also promotes clarity of religious and ethnic identification.¹⁰ It is a way of both admitting indeterminacy and multiplicity yet, at the same time, tempering the radical possibilities inherent in all the interrelations within the multiplicity and all the potential emergent complications. Clarifying and limiting every possible line of expression and every mode of being prevents the interstitial emergence of political organizations, as the breadth of community groups are narrowed along racial and religious lines, and communication between groups is monitored and controlled.¹¹

Perhaps the clearest expression of Singaporean totalitarianism is the cult of positive expression. The cult of positive expression has two main facets. First, there is a gentle request to affirm the arrival and success of Singapore. Second, locals often repeat government propaganda about personal grooming or the need for discipline as if they were offering some personal insight. Beyond this, the people are, as one might expect, more polite than friendly and tremendously well groomed and well dressed. All of these issues are the subject of detailed public education campaigns. There is a generalized affirmation of Singapore and whatever criticism one hears is usually tempered and reduced to a practical and, hence, temporary problem, which will be overcome. The cult of positive expression is built on the sanctions against criticism and the rewards for actual expression. So little is allowed to be said that what remains is the party line. The strange thing is how effective it all seems. The means of transgression are made so difficult, and the rules are so specific, that a hegemonic and conformist culture has been created. It is as if mundane affirmation forms a safe social bond beyond which, in public, few dare to go.

One of the most interesting things about Singapore is that this bustling metropolis is actually quite boring - at least for anyone looking for that little moment of alternative culture, some sign of rebelliousness or even just cultural eccentricity. These cannot be found in Singapore. And there is, behind the cult of positive expression, fear. The citizenry know too well what is and is not permissible, and they know too that every transgression is treated harshly and without the slightest self-doubt on the part of the authorities. On one of my walking tours around the city, I got, as usual, slightly lost in a city that has been constructed more for cars and public transit than for long walks in the tropical heat. Spotting one of the Central Zone markers, I decided to walk towards the city centre down an affluent residential street. I decided to take a picture. Unaware that there was a police checkpoint nearby, and that I was in a no-photography zone, I was quickly apprehended and kept under the watchful eye of two sub-machine gun-wielding officers, while the senior officer checked out my ID and repeatedly asked me in no uncertain terms if I was a journalist. The machine guns were particularly unnerving as I realized that this was a time neither for levity nor charm.

What is novel in the state of Singapore is not the intense demands that are made on the public, nor is it the attempt to harness the breadth of the population and the depth of each individual toward compliance with the state-led developmental agenda. Nor is the cult of positivity such a great novelty, as it is nothing more than a slightly exaggerated version of the facile inter-subjective expressions of happiness, which one finds amongst the entrepreneurial class in any thriving metropolis. What is new and striking about Singapore is that all of these things are grafted onto a sort of ethic of flexibility, which relates the individual to an ever changing set of psycho-normative demands, all of which are, in turn, guided by what state planners deem are the practical exigencies of future development and continuing economic growth.

The question of local expression cannot be restricted to how local communities struggle against censorship, press restrictions, and a hegemonic culture of positive expression. It also involves appreciating how local expression is pre-empted and the ways in which the state seeks out all expression and actively rewards input and artistic creativity. For it is in this positive aspect that the means of governance are the most insidious. It is the totalitarian feedback loop, which elicits information and then shaves off the excess only to begin a new loop from the ever more finely tuned flow of information. But the system is so constructed that nothing radical or contrary can make it through the filters, which effectively pre-form the answers through the controlling nuances that inhere in the questions.

The extension of the locational logic of being between to the processual logic of continuing functional adaptation has resulted in the creation of a set of features that characterize the Singaporean locale. While there are clear limits to expression, communication, and movement, there is a sense in which control is more fully exercised through an invitation to expression and by rewarding mobilization within the pre-established limits. The concept of locality is, therefore, dynamic, open, and mobile mirroring the government's aims of producing a flexible and aspiring citizenry. At the same time, the local in Singapore is secretive and reserved, paranoid and constraining. The local is Janus-faced. Singapore shines brilliantly and pretends publicly that this illumination casts no shadow.

Here the local is caught not merely in a set of totalitarian demands, but in a fluctuating set of totalitarian demands. Transgression will be identified before it is anything more than a slightly unkempt mustache. The local is made strange to itself and becomes unhomely for all the wrong reasons.

Notes

- 1 See Agences France Press, Singapore Window at www.singapore-window-org/sw01/010601af.htm and www.chewing-gum-removal.com/chewing_gum_banned_singapore.htm for details of the negotiations with the U.S. on lifting the ban on chewing gum imports as a sticking point in their free trade negotiations.
- 2 A. Cortesao, ed., *The Suma Oriental of Tomé Pires*, 2 Volumes, trans. Tomé Pires (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1944), cited in Janet L. Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250-1350* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 291.
- 3 Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, trans. Charles Levin (St. Louis, MO: Telos Press, 1981), 178.
- 4 Regis Debray, *Transmitting culture*, trans. Eric Rauth (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), or see his *Introduction à la médiologie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2000), especially the chart on p. 15.
- 5 J. Kathirithamby-Wells and John Villiers, eds., *The Southeast Asian Port and Polity: Rise and Demise* (Singapore University Press, National University of Singapore, 1990).
- 6 Janet L. Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony*, 294.
- 7 Frank Viviano, *Dispatches from the Pacific Century* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1993), 100.
- 8 Rodolphe de Koninck, *Singapore: An Atlas of the Revolution of Territory* (Reclus, Montpellier, 1992), 10.
- 9 For a discussion of self-orientalizing strategies in Chinese narratives of modernity that includes some details on Singapore, see Aihwa Ong, "Chinese Modernities: Narratives of Nation and of Capitalism," *The Cultural Politics of Modern Chinese Transnationalism*, eds. Aihwa Ong and Donald Nonini (New York and London: Routledge, 1997).
- 10 Nirmala Puru Shotam, "Disciplining Difference: 'Race' in Singapore," *Southeast Asian Identities; Culture and the Politics of Representation in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand*, ed. Joel S. Khan (London and New York: Tauris Publishers, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, 1998).
- 11 For the notion of interstitial emergence see Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power, Volume 1: A history of power from the beginning to A.D. 1760* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 16.