"And I Am Also Gay": Illiberal Pragmatics, Neoliberal Homonormativity and LGBT Activism in Singapore

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Abstract: For decades, members of Singapore's LGBT communities have been unsuccessfully advocating for rights. However, since the state introduction of the Internet, there has been a profound shift in the relationship between LGBT Singaporeans and their nation. In this article I examine recent Internet-influenced developments in LGBT activism and position them within the framework of illiberal pragmatics, which highlights the ambivalent logic employed by Singaporean authorities when formulating social and legal policy. I describe how illiberal pragmatism, in combination with a Singaporean-specific neoliberal homonormativity, has changed strategies of LGBT activism and provided new ways to think about rights.

Keywords: Singapore, illiberal pragmatics, homonormativity, LGBT social movements, Internet, citizenship

Résumé : Pendant des décennies, les membres des communautés LGBT de Singapour ont revendiqué leurs droits sans succès. Pourtant, depuis la mise en place de l'Internet par l'État, les relations entre les Singapouriens LGBT et leur nation ont connu une réorientation profonde. Dans cet article, j'examine l'évolution récente de l'activisme LGBT, influencé par l'Internet, et je positionne cette évolution dans le cadre des pragmatiques antilibérales, ce qui met en lumière la logique ambivalente utilisée par les autorités singapouriennes dans la formulation de politiques sociales et législatives. Je décris comment le pragmatisme antilibéral, combiné à une homonormativité néolibérale spécifique à Singapour, a changé les stratégies de l'activisme LGBT et fourni de nouvelles manières de penser les droits.

Mots-clés : Singapour, pragmatiques antilibérales, homonormativité, mouvements sociaux néolibéraux, Internet, citoyenneté

Introduction

On 8 September 2007, a 38-year-old science teacher at Raffles Institution, a prestigious all-boys secondary school in Singapore, posted the following at the end of a longer entry on his personal blog:

> So here it is: I, Otto Fong, have always been and always will be a gay man ... I am not going back in the closet ... When you ask me who I am, I will answer: I am a son, a brother, a long-time companion, an uncle, a teacher, a classmate, a colleague, a part of your community, a HDB dweller,[1] a Singaporean. And I am also gay." [Fong 2007]

Almost immediately after being posted, the entry was picked up by other Singaporean bloggers who then reposted it on their own sites. Socio-political blogs with large readerships—including Singabloodypore, The Online Citizen and Tomorrow.sg—also republished the entry. Within hours, mainstream media outlets became aware of the story and, in a matter of days, the Ministry of Education requested that Fong remove the entry.

Under normal circumstances, a posting such as this would have gone mostly unnoticed. Despite the illegality of male homosexual practices and the cultural stigmatization of non-normative sexualities in the city-state, many Singaporeans who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) are "out" in the sense that the word is used in Singapore and in the west. There are local television and radio personalities, poets and playwrights, and several academics and entrepreneurs who have been forthcoming regarding their sexual orientation.[2] Yet, in this case, the person publicly declaring his sexual orientation was a locally raised high school science teacher at one of the nation's most well-respected secondary schools, one that had produced two of the three prime ministers who have led the nation since its formation in 1965. Further, because Fong was not perceived as the stereotypical gay man portrayed so consistently in Singapore's state-owned media as a drug-

taking, hard-drinking, sexual deviant (Alkhatib 2013; Singh 2010), the public pronouncement of his sexual orientation became more meaningful and more threatening for the average Singaporean. Fong was, by all accounts, a respected educator, well-liked by students, parents and administrators. He was not stereotypical nor was he a western expatriate; he was as "Singaporean" as any of his fellow citizens.

The entry also took on greater meaning because it appeared at the height of public debate surrounding Parliament's decision to consider the repeal of Section 377A of the penal code, the section that criminalizes sex between consenting adult men.[3] This law, part of the penal code established while Singapore was a British colony, makes acts of "gross indecency" between men a crime punishable by up to two years in prison. The 2007 review was the first in over 20 years and generated considerable public debate; according to the Ministry of Home Affairs, the feedback from the general public was "emotional, divided and strongly expressed" (Soh 2007:n.p.).

The above vignette speaks directly to the often contentious and well-documented relationship between LGBT identity and national identity in general (Boellstorff 2004, 2005; Bunzl, 2004; Parker, 2009), as well as to specifically non-western LGBT politics of identity and difference (Boellstorff 2003; Dave 2010, 2012; Gaudio 2009; Lorway 2008; Manalansan 2003), similar to that detailed by many of the LGBT Singaporeans with whom I interacted during my time in the city-state. Fong's blog entry and the subsequent attention from the state-controlled mainstream media and the Ministry of Education also signal the increasingly important role of social media in attempts by LGBT Singaporeans at the reconfiguration of this relationship.

Fong ended his entry with the brief but significant sentence "And I am also gay." It is not his primary subject position, but one of many. By setting it apart from the other subjectivities, it becomes almost an afterthought, as if to make clear that his sexual orientation is a *part* of who he is, rather than his complete identity. At the same time, I suggest that it speaks to a growing trend within Singapore in which LGBT activists are rejecting the conventional antagonistic binary of "us versus them"[4] and replacing it with a more harmonious, culturally relevant and, more importantly, neoliberal discourse of "us *and* them." Most significantly, in terms of this article, is the fact that Fong's closing sentence hints at the degree to which the "new homonormativity" of neoliberalism has demanded a gay identity that doesn't challenge "dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them"

(Duggan 2002:179). While this may appear to be a straightforward case of Fong being interpellated by a rhetoric of neoliberal assimilation, I argue here that, in the case of Singapore, it is not that simple. The unevenness of 1990s neoliberalism (Berlant 1997; Warner 1999) and the resulting lack of ideological homogeneity produced neither ideal citizens nor a "singular type of neoliberal subject" (Rofel 2007:6) in Singapore or elsewhere. In the case of Singapore, neoliberalism and the accompanying ideology of homonormativity, in combination with illiberal pragmatics, state control and a culture strongly influenced by Confucian thought, complicates matters in a way that demands we consider non-western LGBT political and social activism, enacted within this complex framework, in a different light.

In the remainder of this article, I do three things. I begin by examining the Internet in Singapore and briefly explore how the introduction of social media has come to influence the increasingly complex relationship between LGBT Singaporeans and their nation. I then situate the current state of LGBT activism in Singapore within a framework of illiberal pragmatics (Yue 2007), which highlights the irrational, ambivalent and contradictory logic employed by Singaporean authorities when formulating policy relating to these minority citizens. I highlight the effects of social and participatory digital media on LGBT activism, through an analysis of Indig-Nation and Pink Dot, LGBT events that demonstrate the utility of working within a Singaporean-specific logic of illiberal pragmatics. I conclude by thinking about the combined effects of illiberal pragmatics and homonormativity and the implications of this on LGBT activism in Singapore.

Internet in Singapore

The opening vignette, drawn from my dissertation fieldwork, demonstrates the conflicted relationship that many LGBT Singaporeans have with their nation and how some have turned to various types of new and emerging media as a corrective. This relationship was the central focus of my research, which was conducted in Singapore during the summers of 2004 and 2005 and again from July 2006 to September 2007. Sites of research included governmental agencies responsible for developing social and legal policy, LGBT rights organizations that were actively involved in contesting these policies, online gathering places including LGBT websites, chat rooms and discussion forums, and LGBT-owned pubs and coffeehouses that served as physical-world gathering places for LGBT Singaporeans. Data were collected through a combination of participant observation, interviews, textual analysis and the creation of an archive. This

multi-sited, multi-method ethnographic approach thus generated data from a diverse set of sources.

Singapore is one of the few countries in Asia that has yet to decriminalize homosexual behaviour, yet has a LGBT scene (including bars, dance clubs, saunas, businesses and resource centres) that rivals other more liberal cosmopolitan centres. In fact, in 2003, the international press was writing of the potential of Singapore to become the new capital of "gay" Asia (Agence France-Press 2003) due to the proliferation of international gay "circuit" parties hosted within the city-state (Yue 2012). Singapore can be imagined in a variety of ways, including as a node in international circuits of capital (Chang et al. 2004) or even "Disneyland[5] with the death penalty" because of its perceived authoritarian leadership (Gibson 1993). These descriptions of Singapore attest to the nation's complex relationship to modernity and its accompanying neoliberal projects. Further, because of an ethnically diverse population[6] and the city-state's lack of history as a nation, the government has made efforts to forge one unified national identity, yet is caught between conflicting ideologies. Singapore's government has consistently worked to inculcate ideas of modernity and technological prowess, yet many members of its majority Chinese population are deeply affected by contemporary ideologies of Confucianism and intolerant of challenges to state authority (Yue 2006). As such, while courting international business and tourism on the one hand, the government is constantly defending its social and legal policies that exclude its LGBT citizens on the other, thus highlighting the difficulties inherent in enforcing such contradictory policies.

Singapore's government has been building an information technology infrastructure to facilitate a knowledge-based economy since the early 1990s. This effort, the purpose of which was to maintain the city-state's advantageous position created in the aftermath of the economic crisis that hit the Asian region in 1997–98 (Lee 2005; Rodan 1998), boosted the nation's economy and provided low-cost Internet access for average Singaporeans who were expected to use it primarily for commercial and educational purposes (Ho et al. 2002). One unintended consequence of the universal nature of the Internet in Singapore is that it has led to new types of local and global engagements for citizens. This is relevant in that Singapore is a nation in which all forms of mainstream media are tightly controlled by the government and strict codes ensure that few print publications or television programmes reach out to LGBT communities.[7] The Internet thus serves as a vital source of alternative information.

Non-normative sexual practices remain illegal in much of the physical world (including Singapore), and there has been a history of viewing them as "virtual" or "apparitional" (Castle 1993; Vaid 1996). In Singapore, as elsewhere, the Internet has thus also allowed for the creation and utilization of various online sites that serve the needs of diverse LGBT communities. These include interactive forums such as RedQuEEn and Sayoni, aimed at queer women; SiGNeL, used primarily by gay men; blogs such as Yawning Bread and PLURAL; and LGBT lifestyle sites such as Herstory, Fridae and Trevvy.[8] As such, many LGBT Singaporeans, including Otto Fong, have been able to use the Internet in a manner other than was originally intended and have moved beyond the simple exchange of information to create a virtual public sphere in which to discuss issues of concern to their communities.

The Singaporean cybersphere has also become inundated with independently produced digital content such as personal and community blogs, websites and interactive groups on social networking sites such as Facebook. Individuals and groups are also creating video archives on YouTube to document the history of LGBT Singapore; using Twitter to convey vital up-to-the minute information, in situations where mainstream media is absent or slow; and writing informational entries related to LGBT Singapore within dedicated pages on Wikipedia. Interactions within these discursive sites have allowed many LGBT Singaporeans to network with one another as well as with those outside of their home communities, including Singaporeans abroad and non-Singaporeans, some of whom at one time lived or worked in the city-state. While beyond the scope of this article, it should be noted that the Internet also serves the needs of minorities, such as Malays and Indians, *within* the predominantly Chinese LGBT communities. For many with whom I interacted, the transnational nature of these multi-sited interactions was the spark that ignited a renewed interest in participation in the public sphere.

The Illiberal Pragmatics of Sexuality

When Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong gave his final speech to Parliament regarding Section 377A in October 2007, he framed his administration's hesitation to overturn the law around the idea that maintaining it was in tune with current "social mores and attitudes" (Lee 2007). In the same speech, however, Lee highlighted the fact that his government was listening to and acting in response to public debates surrounding the issue. He spoke directly of Otto Fong's blog entry and acknowledged the fact that his own government recognized that the lives of its LGBT citizens are often difficult:

We should recognise that homosexuals are part of our society. They are our kith and kin ... and I would add that among them are some of our friends, our relatives, our colleagues, our brothers and sisters or some of our children. They too must have a place in this society and they too are entitled to their private lives. We shouldn't make it harder than it already is for them to grow up and to live in a society where they are different from most Singaporeans. [Lee 2007]

Prime Minister Lee concurred with the widely held public opinion that Singapore is, by and large, a conservative society and that an outright repeal of Section 377A could lead to an irreparable division within the nation. As such, Section 377A was maintained. However, in recognition of the contribution of LGBT Singaporeans to the nation, he pledged that the law would not be actively enforced. I have suggested elsewhere (Phillips 2008) that, by preserving the law while simultaneously pledging not to enforce it, Lee was perpetuating the long-standing strategy of "pragmatism" (Chua 1995) that has come to inform Singaporean policy since the founding of the nation in 1965 (Liow 2011). Chua Beng Huat, a leading Singaporean sociologist views this pragmatism as "practical rather than philosophical ... always contextual and never based on principles of political philosophy ... (and consisting of) discrete and discontinuous acts" (Chua 1995:69). Simultaneously, the ideology of pragmatism allowed for the incorporation of a neoliberal "political rationality" (Liow 2011:243), which naturalizes these types of policy implementations as necessary and legitimate. I further argued that in adopting such contradictory policies, Lee was attempting to maintain the fine balance that exists between several antipodes that frame Singaporean culture and inform many policy decisions: cosmopolitans versus heartlanders,[9] Singapore versus the west, Christians versus others and tradition versus modernity (Phillips 2008). Chua noted the nonsensical and incongruous nature of these policies when he observed that "a particular intervention in a particular region of social life may radically alter the trajectory that an early intervention may have put in place" (Chua 1995:69).

Following Chua's lead, cultural theorist Audrey Yue (2007) took the idea of pragmatism further with her formulation of what she termed "illiberal pragmatics," perhaps a more precise framework within which to view Lee's statement. Yue argued that central to the pragmatism practiced by Singapore's government is "the logic of illiberalism where interventions and implementations are potentially always neo-liberal and non-liberal, rational and irrational" (Yue 2007:150–151). At the heart of this argument is an underlying notion of "ambivalence," which

can be clearly seen in Lee's decision to maintain but not enforce Section 377A. At the end of his speech, Prime Minister Lee quoted Singaporean activist and entrepreneur Stuart Koe, who likened the situation to having a "gun put to your head and not pulling the trigger. Either put the gun down, or pull the trigger" (Lee 2007). It is in the face of such illogical and ambivalent situations that many LGBT Singaporeans conduct their everyday lives and, by extension, their activism.

Yue recognized this collapse of binaries (rational/irrational, neoliberal/nonliberal) in her theory of illiberal pragmatics and, as she argued, most LGBT activism that has emerged in recent years in Singapore is not "based on the Western post-Stonewall emancipation discourse of rights, but through the illiberal pragmatics of survival" (Yue 2007:151). For many of my interlocutors, western LGBT subjectivity and, by extension, western LGBT rights were based on individual autonomy and a specific language of rights, prioritized the individual and called for a radical form of assimilation that required overt social acceptance. Within Singaporean culture, heavily influenced by Confucian thinking, activism that challenges the authority of the state is impractical. As such, many with whom I interacted embraced an LGBT subjectivity that included cultural references, focused on maintaining social balance and looked beyond the homosexual/heterosexual binary.

In March 2007, I experienced the logic of illiberal pragmatism first-hand when I attended a public talk by transsexual woman, Leona Lo, in which she hoped to rebuke what she referred to as the "culture of shame" that surrounded transsexuals in Singapore. I was quite interested to hear what she had to say in that, while homosexual practices are illegal and culturally stigmatized, Singaporean surgeons perform sex reassignment surgery and the state allows transsexuals to marry and change gender categories on their national identity cards. After the talk, I approached her, explained my dissertation research on LGBT in Singapore and asked her if I could contact her at a later date for an interview. Her reply took me by surprise. "I was born with a medical problem and that problem has been corrected with surgery and drug therapy," she told me. "I am now a heterosexual woman. I am neither L, G, B nor T; so what exactly does your project have to do with me?" The brashness of her response was tempered by a realization that illiberal pragmatism, the framework within which Lo's transition was performed, is not concerned with assisting non-normative individuals to legally marry spouses, it is not interested in responding to calls for the bureaucratic or legal acceptance of sexual minorities, nor does it recognize and acknowledge indigenous gender

traditions. Rather, in this instance, it pathologizes and psychologizes the subjectivities of trans individuals; it turns trans subjectivity into a medical problem with a medical solution, ultimately heteronormalizing non-conforming sexual subjectivities, including that of Lo.

Yue argues that Singapore's illiberal pragmatics of sexuality "involves an active engagement with cultural politics and criticism" and that "this engagement with pragmatism, coupled with the contradictory logic of the illiberal, has enabled [LGBT Singaporeans] to actively use, fit in and twist the governmental framing of culture" (Yue 2011:252–253). As outlined in the sections that follow, this critical hermeneutical concept is being played out by LGBT individuals in contemporary Singapore who are embracing a value system that, in many respects, rejects them and their non-normative sexuality. Through the innovative use of state-owned infrastructure, they are attempting to affect change.

ContraDiction and IndigNation

On 4 August 2005, I attended the first ContraDiction prose and poetry reading at Utterly Art, a small gallery located above a traditional medical shop on South Bridge Road in the Chinatown section of the city. ContraDiction was the first event of many that took place that August at IndigNation, Singapore's newly created pride month. The ContraDiction reading that night, as well as the event of the subsequent year, which took place at Mox, an upscale gay bar and lounge, took on a decidedly grassroots feel. Organized by poet Dominic Chua and writer Ng Yi-Sheng, the events of 2005 and 2006 featured local LGBT writers reading their work; in between, young musicians took to the stage with guitars and showcased their talents. In 2005, audience members began the evening by perusing local artist Martin Loh's *Cerita Budak-Budak*, an exhibit of Peranakan[10] paintings recently commissioned to illustrate a children's book. Just before the start time of 8:00 p.m., people began to fill the folding plastic chairs neatly arranged in semi-circular rows framing the small stage at the front of the gallery space; because of the large number in attendance, those who could not find chairs sat on the floor below the single microphone stand. Prior to the beginning of the reading, bottles of wine, plastic cups and plates of cheese and crackers were passed from one person to the next creating a sense of camaraderie among those of us in attendance. In 2006, audience members at Mox sipped on wine and cocktails while reclining on comfortable, overstuffed chairs and large daybeds arranged in the dimly lit attic space on the third floor of a pre-war shop house. In both instances, writers took the stage and read their work to an appreciative audience.

It is too simplistic to claim that the events of 2005 and 2006 were only about prose, poetry, music and community for, in fact, IndigNation, of which ContraDiction was the inaugural event, was organized in response to the banning of the annual gay Nation Party earlier in 2005. When asked about the origins of the events, Alex Au, a well-known gay activist and blogger and one of the organizers of the first IndigNation replied, "The gay community is indignant and extremely unhappy. All the talk about society opening up is just empty words" (Au 2005). When I asked what he was hoping to achieve with the first ContraDiction, organizer Dominic Chua responded that "gay and lesbian people need to begin to see themselves and their lives reflected in words, and to begin to shed some of the homophobia that they pick up and internalize from the culture around them." The first ContraDiction event was simply subtitled "A Night with Gay Poets," whereas, the second, dubbed "Queer Words spoken in IndigNation," indicated a distinct change in tone. The works, given a rating of RA-18 (restricting the audience to those over the age of 18) by the Media Development Authority (MDA), spanned a variety of topics including erotic trysts, the myriad difficulties involved in having same-sex relationships, circumcision and the sex lives of Filipina maids. The ContraDiction events of 2005 and 2006 were certainly political in nature. The fact that these events had been staged suggests a very political claim on public space. Yet, at the same time, they were respectful and restrained.

In 2007, however, the mood at the third annual ContraDiction was different. It was held at 72–13, a new arts venue located in a converted rice warehouse on the banks of the Singapore River. Instead of the intimate venues of years past, the 2007 reading took place in a vast gallery space, accommodating a much larger crowd; long rows of plastic chairs filled the cavernous gallery illuminated by glaring incandescent lights. Rather than a relaxed feel, this year's event took on a decidedly edgy and overtly political tone. At the beginning of the evening, writer Ng Yi-Sheng, wearing only a pair of shorts and draped in a rainbow flag, a universal symbol of LGBT pride, went to the front of the room and announced that yet another in that year's line-up of Indig-Nation events had been cancelled due to the inability of organizers to obtain the required permits from authorities. He then had the audience count with him the number of events that had been banned that year. "One ... the film *My Brother Nikhil* ... two ... the talk by Doug Sanders ... three ... the talk by the Reverend Troy Perry ..." The events were counted and the crowd chanted along until they had reached the end of the list that had numbered 10 in total.[11] Next, Alex Au took the

stage to show slides of five sets of photographs whose public exhibition had not been approved by the MDA. The images were part of a larger exhibition, entitled *Kissing*, which was deemed inappropriate by authorities because it promoted "a homosexual lifestyle."

Indeed, many of the events that were part of the 2007 IndigNation were cancelled due to the inability to obtain permits from the Police Entertainment Licensing Unit or the MDA. Some were refused permits because governmental entities felt that they were "against public interest," while others were refused due to the fact that organizers had not filed the necessary paperwork or made proper safety arrangements. LGBT rights activists had a field day with these cancellations, charging censorship and discrimination, creating a buzz within the Singaporean press, both online and off, and generating dozens of reports and interviews in international media outlets. Yet, it was not just governmental regulators who took exception to the IndigNation events of 2007. Some within the LGBT communities in Singapore felt that the organizers of that year's events had gone too far; rather than sticking with the original intent of IndigNation, that of commemorating and embracing diversity, of showcasing to the rest of Singaporean society the "other side" of LGBT life, they had turned, in the words of one interlocutor, "aggressively political." Many of my acquaintances, who had actively participated in previous celebrations, would have nothing to do with the events of 2007. One young woman with a history of involvement with the community said of IndigNation,

> It's giving us some visibility but I'm not sure if fighting is the way to go ... I made a conscious decision not to be a part of it because I feel that pride; we don't need the cancellation of a party [meaning the 2005 Nation Party] to be proud of who we are. I think if you want to do pride, it should not be prompted by something negative; there should be a positive reason. So, for me it is a radical step to not be part of IndigNation.

For many LGBT Singaporeans, like the young woman quoted above, situating LGBT subjectivity as an imagined dividing line where cultural and social mores are created and positioned in terms of difference was not an effective manner by which to conduct activism. They were simply not comfortable with this confrontational "us versus them" framework within which IndigNation was being enacted. Some of these individuals chose instead to work toward a neoliberal model of activism that attempted to include "us *and* them." Compounding the alienation that some participants felt was the fact that, at all of these events, the audience was largely Chinese,

middle-class, English-educated/speaking, liberal (commonly known as CMEL) and male, a demographic that reflects the dynamics of the larger public LGBT community in Singapore in which racial classification is used as a means of identification as well as exclusion (Phillips 2012).

Pink Dot: The Illiberal Pragmatics of Activism

In August 2008, Singapore's government took the decision to allow public demonstrations at the Speakers' Corner within Hong Lim Park without having to obtain a police permit. The Speakers' Corner originated in 2000 in response to critics' claims of government censorship and was created as a space in which individuals could publicly articulate their opinions. It was used often when it first opened; in 2000 over 400 people signed up to speak, but this number dwindled to 26 in 2005, a decrease that can be attributed to the availability of the Internet as a means of expressing opinion and dissent. Yet, with the decision to allow groups to hold demonstrations, and the absence of the requirement to obtain a permit from the police department, interest in using the Corner increased noticeably (William 2009).

Almost immediately, members of Singapore's LGBT communities began organizing their first official public pride celebration. Interested individuals met regularly at a local nightclub and discussed logistics online in preparation for the event. There was much debate, in both cyberspace and the physical world, regarding just how to go about presenting a positive face of Singapore's LGBT communities to a public that, by and large, still misunderstood them. Initially, some participants had suggested a western-style LGBT pride celebration complete with the formulaic elements—disco music, drag queens, rainbow banners and speeches calling for the granting of rights. Eventually, others within the community questioned this tactic and organizers found a different approach. On 16 May 2009, over 2,000 LGBT Singaporeans along with their family members and supporters publicly gathered to celebrate their nation's diversity at an event dubbed Pink Dot.[12] Rather than staging the event as a protest, the organizers framed the event as one that promoted the freedom of all Singaporeans, including LGBT Singaporeans, to choose whom to love. The website promoting the event made sure participants understood that

> It is NOT a protest. It is a congregation of people who believe that everyone deserves a right to love, regardless of their sexual orientation. Fear and bigotry can get in the way of love—between friends, family

and other loved ones—so this is an event for everyone who believes that LGBT individuals are equally deserving of strong relationships with our family and friends. [*Pinkdot.sg* 2012]

In addition to advertising the event on the group's website, a YouTube channel was established so that videos of the event could be shared, and a Facebook page was created and users were encouraged to pledge their attendance. The event was covered internationally but received minimal coverage from Singapore's government-controlled media (Leyl 2009; US State Department 2010).

Pink Dot was staged again in May 2010 and had over 4,000 participants; the 2011 celebration, over 10,000. Organizers expanded the 2009 theme of "freedom to love" to "love within families" to emphasize the diversity of Singaporean families and the importance of kinship. Perhaps most significantly, the Pink Dot website featured several LGBT Singaporeans and their families in a series of online videos that told of the initial difficulties faced by parents of LGBT children and their eventual acceptance into the family unit. These videos accomplished two things. First, they put a human face to LGBT in Singapore by showing parents and children discussing the process of maintaining the cohesiveness of the family in what is often a difficult situation. Second, and perhaps more importantly, the videos emphasized "traditional" Singaporean familial relations, in which being a son or daughter of one's parents takes precedence over publicly declaring oneself as LGBT. I suggest that the ambivalence that characterizes this celebration, which at once focuses on and simultaneously turns away from LGBT concerns and fits within the framework of illiberal pragmatics is key to the success of this event. As with the events that were part of IndigNation, participants in the Pink Dot video series, at least initially, were largely CMEL, an important factor that will be given more consideration in the concluding section of this essay.

Unlike the IndigNation events, there is nothing overtly sexual about Pink Dot. In fact, Pink Dot comes off as a large picnic, with groups of family and friends relaxing on blankets, a sing-along (the 2011 song was "I Want to Hold Your Hand" by the Beatles), and children playing ball. It could be argued that the desexualisation of the Pink Dot celebrations, as well as a lack of a distinct activist agenda, have led the Singaporean LBGT movement into the trap of being "respectably queer" (Ward 2008), but I argue here that what Pink Dot represents is not necessarily the "mainstreaming of gay and lesbian liberation" (Duggan 2002; Vaid 1995; Warner 1999) under the sign of the neoliberal project but, rather, a very specific form of activism enacted within a framework of illiberal pragmatics.

Conclusions

Historically, LGBT Singaporeans have had a conflicted relationship with the nation. By working within the current social and legal systems and through creative uses of new and emerging media, many activists are taking the first steps in the reconfiguration of this relationship. In the above example involving Pink Dot, I described how creative and committed socially marginalized groups and individuals have, within the frameworks of illiberal pragmatics, turned the Internet into a powerful tool to facilitate the re-thinking of rights within the existing legal and social structures of the Singaporean city-state. These practices are crucial to activists who are contesting current policy through their strategic use of pre-existing government-created and maintained infrastructure and public space.

Concomitantly, these actions are challenging attitudes *within* Singapore's LGBT communities and encouraging individuals and groups to question deeply held notions of what it means to be LGBT. Through the production and consumption of culturally attuned media, many LGBT Singaporeans have also been enabled to participate in critical forms of social reflection and engagement and have come to rethink their own identities. Ideas of what it means to be LGBT, a resident of Southeast Asia and a citizen of Singapore are thus being reconstituted and given new meaning. Citizenship, Brenda Cossman argues, is "about a process of becoming" (Cossman 2007:2). My research has shown that this is the case with LGBT Singaporeans. But, I would argue, it comes at a price. For many of my interlocutors, notions of citizenship have come to revolve around becoming recognized as full citizens of the nation without having to sacrifice their LGBT identity. Deliberations and communications in cyberspace and subsequent activism in the physical world surrounding LGBT rights have certainly come to increase the scope and scale of traditional Marshallian notions of citizenship (Marshall 1950) and replaced them with remediated ones. These new iterations cast doubt on the utility of older definitions of citizenship through the creation of new notions of LGBT rights, which have been translated into a homonormative, Singapore-specific discourse.

The formation of a these new types of "do-it-yourself" citizenship call into question the hegemony of the state as well as state-defined notions of what it means to be "authentically" Singaporean. For the majority of the city-state's citizens, being "Singaporean" is framed around, among other things, issues of Asian

values (Englehart 2000; Sen 1997), a contentious set of constraints that focus on family and society and in which collectivism and communitarianism take precedence over the idea of the autonomy of individual members of a nation. Some of my interlocutors saw these efforts as an attempt to strip individuals of the very traits that make up their subjectivity—race, ethnicity, sexual orientation—to create a monolithic Singaporean citizen. But a vast majority came to see that re-appropriating those values that had come to form a dividing line between themselves and the rest of society lessened the feeling of difference. It allowed them to work within the system, to show their fellow citizens that, while they claim a LGBT identity, they simultaneously embrace a similar value system that demonstrates that they are as "Singaporean" as anyone else, once again demonstrating the shift from "us versus them" to a very homonormative "us *and* them."

Yet, this shift in thinking, as productive of change as it may appear to be, is not beyond critique. In addition to the homonormativity that has become imbricated within the activism of some LGBT Singaporeans, there are other issues at hand. As noted earlier, a significant number of participants in the IndigNation events are CMEL and, as such, have much less to lose than their minority counterparts. Otto Fong had, in fact, studied in Beijing and, along with his partner, secured permanent residency in Australia. Ng Yi-Sheng, one of the founders of IndigNation, studied comparative literature and writing at Columbia University in New York. Living a life centred on four very privileged axes of identity gives many activists the freedom and opportunity to challenge the sexual politics of Singapore, a freedom not afforded to their less entitled counterparts. Further, I argue that, although Pink Dot has an activist veneer, it is simultaneously feeding into the "economy of appearances" (Tsing 2000), in which cities stage sites of cultural diversity to attract the creative classes. As Tan (2009) reminds us, the Singaporean state has been behind the construction of numerous sites of difference, including the ethnic enclaves of Little India and Chinatown. While the state has certainly not openly condoned or encouraged Pink Dot, it has also not condemned it.

These criticisms aside, Singapore's LGBT communities have, through their innovative use of technology and without explicit permission, successfully challenged the boundaries put in place by their government. The individuals involved in Pink Dot have used an approach to LGBT rights that illustrates not only a Singapore-specific homonormativity, but also Yue's conceptualization of illiberal pragmatics. In claiming a remediated citizenship within this framework, LGBT Singaporeans are more easily able to negotiate rights within the very

system that has, since the formation of the nation in 1965, rejected them. In the process many LGBT Singaporeans, like Otto Fong, are becoming "also gay."

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Notes

1 HDB is Singapore's Housing Development Board, a governmental agency responsible for the building, sale and maintenance of units within the public housing estates that house approximately 80 per cent of Singapore's population.

2 This is a privileged group of individuals who are not representative of the overall LGBT community in Singapore. Fong, who studied film in Beijing and is an Australian permanent resident, would be considered part of this group. For the most part, this group is male and represents a Singaporean culture centred on ideas of Confucianism and "Chineseness," which normalizes the ethnic Chinese male as the prototypical Singaporean citizen.

3 Section 377A. Outrages on Decency. "Any male person who, in public or private, commits, or abets the commission of, or procures or attempts to procure the commission by any male person of, any act of gross indecency with another male person, shall be punished with imprisonment for a term which may extend to 2 years" (Singapore Statutes Online 2014). It should be noted that, after much debate within Parliament and input from the public, it was decided that Section 377 of the Penal Code, which criminalized oral and anal sex between consenting heterosexual couples, would be repealed.

4 In the case of Singapore, "us versus them" generally refers to the divisions that exist between those Singaporeans who openly express or support a LGBT identity and the desire to have Section 377A repealed and those who do not.

5 Gibson asserts that, on the surface, Singapore, like the American theme park Disneyland, is considered by some to be "the happiest place on earth." Further, he suggests that in reality, like Disneyland, Singapore is sterile, conformist and lacking in any type of substantial authenticity or originality. Additionally, he notes that while Singapore is, on the surface, a clean and well-run city-state, it is in fact a technocratic, authoritarian state with a draconian legal system.

6 Chinese are the largest ethnic group in Singapore (74 per cent) followed by Malays (13 per cent), Indians (7 per cent) and Other (3 per cent) (Statistics Singapore 2013).

7 For policy guidelines, see http://www.mda.gov.sg/Policies/Pages/default.aspx.

8 See SiGNeL: https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/signel/info; RedQuEEn: https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/redqueen/info; Sayoni: http://www.sayoni.com; Yawning Bread: http://www.yawningbread.org/; PLURAL: http://www.pluralsg.wordpress.com/; Herstory: http://www.herstory.asia; Fridae: http://www.fridae.asia; and Trevvy: http://www.trevvy.com. All sites last accessed 23 October 2013.

9 The term "heartlanders" was popularized in 1999 by then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, when he used it to characterize the majority of Singapore's population. He was using it to describe a demographic who are generally less educated, members of the working class, inhabitants of HDB housing and distinctly local in their perspective on most issues.

10 *Peranakan* is a term used for the descendants of the very early Chinese immigrants to parts of Southeast Asia who have adopted Malay customs in an effort to be assimilated into the local communities. Its meaning has extended to cultural customs as well.

11 The complete list includes the public lecture by Douglas Sanders, the In the Pink Picnic in the Botanic Gardens, the *Kissing* photo exhibition by Alex Au, the Pink Run, four scheduled movie screenings, the talk by Reverend Troy Perry and the public reading of the story *Lee Low Tar* by Ng Yi-sheng.

12 Pink Dot is a play on the phrase "little red dot." This phrase is an epithet for Singapore in that it describes how the city state is indicated on most world maps. Pink, often associated with non-normative sexual subjectivities, is also the color that results from mixing the two colors of the national flag, red and white.

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