Mispronouncing Resistance:

Uncovering Tales and Lessons in the Production of Creative Cultural Expression in Singapore

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Abstract

This paper is the author's endeavor to understand Singapore and the ways that ordinary residents express alternative views in a highly politically controlled but affluent environment. Unlike actions of resistance elsewhere, Singaporeans engage in less aggressive activities of non-confrontational or covert resistance to avoid inconveniences with the law. By looking into cases of non-confrontational *cultural resistance*, I suggest that ideas of resistance in authoritarian countries as solely created to oppose the ruling class or the state should be reconsidered. Although non-confrontational resistance in my case studies may be read as criticisms of the state, they are also examples of power relationships between residents of different ethnicities and social class, and between corporations/ international organizations and the people. To investigate why and how people resist covertly or indeed resist, I propose to look into the conditions that influence their views and decisions. This includes the ways that global and local activities and connections affect the individual's knowledge and perspectives.

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Acknowledgments

I did not expect this paper to cause me so much frustration and time. After all the sweat, tears and moments when I thought I would 'vomit blood and die', I felt accomplished, happy and relieved at the end of the journey. However this research paper was written not alone but with the help of many others who encouraged and supported me, and inspired, pushed and questioned my ideas. Without them I am quite sure I would have become road-kill- squashed in the middle of jaywalking, defeated by the truck that carried my torment. It is with this realization that I am grateful to all those who helped me through one of the important crossings in my life.

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Foreword

Journal entry: Resistance in Singapore is very much alive!

I am in a restaurant called Food#03 tucked between the alleys of Little India. Next to it is the Post Museum, an art gallery and events space owned by a group of artists. The owner of Food#03's affiliation with Post Museum allows flexibility in event programming between the two. The restaurant, its owner says, is a project inspired by the artist Gordon Martha Clarke who opened up a kitchen for communities to cook and meet. Indeed Food#3 has been a place of gathering for me ever since I have returned to start interviews for my research. I am acquiring information, attending events and meeting people here. It is a great way of exploring a side of Singapore that somehow seems less concerned with attaining the [1] 5Cs and more dedicated to addressing cultural and social issues. For most Singaporeans like me it is a 'world' that I have not seen before but it is one that I hope to experience and learn about.

Today I am here for an evening event at the Post Museum. The "Food not Bombs" event in Singapore is organized mainly by members from the local [2] DIY culture who are fundraising food and monies for the poor and homeless migrant workers in the area of Little India. With these funds, they have planned to serve free meals to workers at Food#3 every Monday night. The fundraising is a small

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[1] The 5Cs is a term derived from a popular joke in Singapore and is used widely to describe materialism. Its rationality relates to an unstated cultural obsession and aspiration to acquire things that the 5Cs stand for. They are namely Cash, Credit card, Car, Condominium, and Country club membership (or Career in a different version of the joke).

[2] DIY culture (or Do It Yourself) is a broad term that refers to a wide range of elements in non-mainstream society, such as grassroots political and social activism, independent music, art and film.

private event filled with music, poetry readings and a film screening; it is against globalization and corporate greed, and in support of sustainable community food sharing programs; the organizers and its crowd are young, punk, frustrated, and looking for a platform to express themselves; they are rebellious, calling for anarchy and declaring protest.

Earlier today, a friend and I visited an art gallery called "Your MOTHER Gallery" across the street having seen its flyer at Food#03. Converted from someone's living room, the gallery is showing an exhibition entitled "Extra Value Meal" by three local artists. Creepy and child-like at the same time, images of Ronald Macdonald, meaty burgers and fiery fries in sketchy and colorful screen prints of neon glow-in-the-dark ink hung on the walls. We watched two stop motion animations on a DVD player that would not stop skipping. It was something about Super value meal transformers (that were really super cute paper models)- that could transform from your average value meal to robots who were trying to destroy the stage that they were on. And the other, an experiment on the different ways to modify your burger- adding a Mac Chicken in a burger, adding ketchup soaked fries in a burger, and finally adding a prata wrapped burger in a burger! Playful, irrational, and appropriating.

Back to Food#03 after viewing the exhibition, we walked into the middle of a discussion and were invited to join in. The discussion was organized and attended by gay activists and other individuals and had about ten or more people sitting around connected tables in the hot afternoon. I was surprised to meet the author of the popular blog Yawning Bread who writes about cultural, gay and

political issues and who many credit with starting the gay movement in

Singapore. We sat together briefly as everyone ate late lunches and recounted

stories, experiences and thoughts that they had on homophobia in the city.

By the time Food Not Bombs is over, I am pretty much exhausted. As I

recall my day in Little India, I see that there are a variety of creative means and

ways that people use to express subversion without being overt. I think to myself,

"resistance in Singapore is very much alive!" Keeping in mind the insane

political controls of the government in the country, I marvel once again at this

oxymoron.

Author's location: The annoying issues

Despite my obsession with the idea of resistance, the study and research of

this paper is in fact a conscious decision to pave a path towards home. Leading up

to that decision were some annoying issues that confronted me while traveling

and living between the cities of Toronto and Singapore during more than six years

of studying in Canada. These physical journeys, especially those traveling back

home to Singapore were torturous as I waited for them eagerly but lived them

with anguish. Home with all its familiarities will always be a great place to be.

But my increasing disappointment with the government and people made it

unbearable at times. I recognized that this was caused by a shift in my

perspectives. It is something that did not have the opportunity to develop before

I left Singapore, but became inevitable when I started moving between two

countries. Living at a distance, the shortcomings of the Singaporean society suddenly jumped right out at me.

Instead of acknowledging the rapid development, unfaltering efficiency, and 'world-class' status that Singapore has acquired for itself, I was concerned about the high-stress and high-cost environment in which people were living. This is the matter that annoyed me the most- the irony of living in an affluent country but struggling to cope with the anxieties of the rat race. People here survive on ceaseless complaints, quick-fix vacations and retail therapies- temporary relief that cannot help us understand the root causes of our problems. Further more I think that the culture of consumption brings pseudo wealth to the population. Indeed citizens are materially rich, but they have unwittingly consumed a life of debt.

Other issues trickled along as if linked by a connecting chain. I was frustrated by the individualistic, 'minding one's own business' attitude towards things that people have. The importance of material wealth, it seems to me has overshadowed other aspects of living such that the population lacks cultural and social awareness. Inequalities at work and in the society are brushed off as facts of life. More often than not people stick to their unhappy routine because they believe that there is nothing they can do about it. On the other hand, increasingly those with higher paying jobs and education practice a form of elitism, believing in their superiority over others. A certain depth is missing in our way of life.

Like everyone else, I have my own issues with the government. It is easy to link the controlling ways of the nanny state to the shortcomings of the society

because the lack of political and individual rights allows the authoritarian government to shape the country and the people through its policies with little hindrance. Our shortcomings, one can say, are created 'collectively'. Strict political control prevents people from expressing dissident views but the government's omnipresence is such that it is involved in all issues that will be addressed. In this sense, all alternative views no matter what are dissident, making it difficult for people to express themselves without upsetting the authorities. When we are not to ask questions, how can people learn to be critical in this restrictive environment?

Admittedly during those summer vacations, the shock of coming home probably left me deranged, criticizing everything Singaporean and preaching to innocent bystanders. And so some people around me attributed my discontent and 'reverse' rationalizing of normalized paradigms as symptoms of a 'sickness' that often plague those who have lived and studied abroad for too long. Others repeatedly advised me to take the opportunity I had to leave the country because they believe Canada is 'free-er' than Singapore. But I disliked the negative feelings that I had when viewing Singapore with my new perspectives and I disliked the ways that people thought of me because all these made me feel alienated in my own home. That was when I realized that each trip back was bringing further me away from home instead of closer.

However that dismaying thought somehow made me even more determined to find a way to return. I was not going to disconnect myself and run away, only to find myself smack in the middle of another identity crisis. (What

then is the point?) And so I set out to understand what I was rejecting, to perceive it with a constructive attitude, and to discover ways of existing with it. I started to explore what others were doing to express their concerns about the society. I wanted to understand the cultural resistance that was already in action in Singapore. Therefore the question this paper addresses is this: how do people express themselves and raise opposing or alternative opinions without risking prosecution in a highly politically controlled environment? I am interested in who these people are and what local and social locations they come from. What motivates them? What are their perspectives? What tactics do they use and with what results? I set out to answer this question through a study of works by artists, performers and other individuals that I have got to know during my internship and fieldwork in Singapore.

My cases are selected from works that are both interactive and engaging with the community. In this paper I present them in two groups, one is involved with live community arts in specific locations (in the case studies of Drama Box and Migrant Voices), the other is concerned with web-based self expression and voicing discontent (in the case studies of the *Action Figures' Protest* and the *Four Million Frowns project*) to a broader public. They are different in the sense that the first group aims to help and educate others with a larger objective in mind, while the second group seeks to communicate their views to the public and are projects created in response to happenings in the society. Therefore this paper is informed by four case studies and personal interviews with artists, bloggers, and other individuals who are involved in cultural resistance.

What influenced me to approach this research by investigating cultural resistance in Singapore was my interest in art and then later my observations in popular media like local blogs and films. As a person who creates artworks, I often ponder about the role of the artist in society. The desire to find out how artists can contribute to a society lead me to explore community arts and other related art practices involving gift giving and exchanges, interaction with the public and engagement with issues. Hence I took an internship at Migrant Voices, an organization that uses art as a tool to empower migrant workers in Singapore. I also found that artists in theatre and visual arts are addressing current issues in their practices like the play *The Good People* by The Necessary Stage which looked into religion and the death penalty in Singapore, and the project *Raised- A mini carnival at Little India* by a group of visual artists including Amanda Heng. The project challenged the notion of public art and raised awareness on migrant workers issues by interacting with their audience. These artworks addressed critical issues even though they might encounter difficulties because of government censorship. As a viewer, I found that frequently messages silently slip through cracks in the law and needed to be reinterpreted by the audiences. Thus I saw that these works were subverting from within the system.

In the mean time I started to observe the ways in which ordinary people express their views on social and political happenings - this I did by getting my daily news feed on Singapore from Canada through reading people's blogs on the internet. One of my favourites is MrBrown.com where Mr Brown (the blogger) and his friends publish their funny podcasts (web-based audio broadcast). Mr

Brown began by writing about his life and thoughts on the happenings in the society. Then he started to podcast audio skits, film reviews, and more recently he has begun to video podcast reviews of events. His podcasts are hilarious parodies and satires with made-up news and silly songs on things we read in the front-page news. These funny tactics indirectly criticize the dominant and the powerful. Yet in an environment ruled by a government that is obsessive with political control, Mr Brown and his gang are able to get away by disguising criticism in humour. Therefore I began to see a trend of humourous 'resistance' in other blogs, websites and online forums, and also in local-made films like comedian/actor/director Jack Neo's film *I not stupid* which can be read as a criticism of the education system in Singapore, and Royston Tan's *Cut* which is an erratic short film created in response to a national record of twenty-seven censorship cuts made to his previous film *Fifteen*.

How are these works resisting? And what are the conditions in the environment that have supported or encouraged such covert ways of resistance? As outlined in my Plan of Study, I am interested in non-confrontational resistance and the many factors that have contributed to its manifestations, including state ruling, globalization, consumerism and their influence on the ways that people think. Because works that resist often display some form of opposition towards the authorities (as I have explained before this is quite unavoidable if one wants to address critical issues for the reason that the government is omnipresent), in this paper I will use the term 'political' specifically to mean the decisions and behaviour of the government. Thus I find that cultural works that resist are not

overtly political but at the same time I propose that their critical views are an undisclosed demonstration of rebellion. In the next section, I will layout the theories of resistance that I have applied to the case of Singapore.

The Argument: Ideas of Resistance

James Scott who I discuss in detail in chapter one describes an art of resistance that is non-confrontational and that transmits messages through codes and disguises. My study was influenced by the hidden transcript theory because it has a similar ring to what is happening in Singapore. According to Scott, the hidden transcripts are covert messages that subordinate groups perform in order to resist dominant views without risking persecution. (Scott 136) The meanings of these messages are accessible only to an intended audience for they are subtle and require interpretation. Furthermore, even when the excluded audience (the powerful) understands the messages, they find it difficult to react because it is clothed under seemingly innocent intentions. (Scott 158) In other words there are beneath the surface of the official and the public, different sorts of attitudes and ideas circulating that are shared among the ordinary people. Interpreting cultural works at face value will not tell us the whole story. One needs to read between the lines. Then again when one reads between the lines, meanings become uncertain because they are not immediately apparent or are ambivalent and covert. The resistance that individuals and artists perform in Singapore survive because they are ambiguous. BUT… I am not wholly satisfied with Scotts' idea of the hidden transcripts. While it explains how resistance can be subtle, some of the examples I

examined were not necessarily opposed to either ruling elites, the government or the state of Singapore.

In what follows I argue that resistance in Singapore has different goals. Censorship and control by the government affects the decisions that people make. There are many other factors affecting resistance and that makes the whole issue very complicated. What the hidden transcript theory lacks when applied here is dimension. With the hidden transcript theory, we assume that everyone has the same vision and reasons for resisting and therefore they are propelled towards the same goal to revolt against the upper class or the state. I argue here that resistance is understood in different ways and in a paradoxical city like Singapore, not all resistance is against a common oppressor- the state and its authoritarian rule. Causes may even contradict themselves and each other. For example while people are fighting for their individual rights, they may not be aware of the rights of other marginalized groups who are further repressed as a result of their actions. This is shown later on in chapter two, where I discuss how Serangoon Garden residents are opposed to the government transforming an old school into a dorm to house the increasing numbers of migrant workers in the city. As well, to be critical of the state does not necessarily mean to rebel.

There are of course political activists like Chee Soon Juan from the oppositional party SDP (Singapore Democratic Party) who put their lives on the line and protest overtly. These small groups of people are self-consciously political and deliberately protest against the state. However in this paper I will not be talking about them. I am instead interested at looking into resistance that is

subtle and non-confrontational, those that are made without endangering the lives of its creators. They are the tools available and affordable to the ordinary and the weak, who appropriate with cleverness and trickery, and who may or may not be conscious of their political innuendos.

Mapping the chapters

In the first chapter I map out some of the theories that I use to inform my work and further describe the different ideas of resistance on which I have drawn. I discuss the work of James Scott. In particular I examine his hidden transcript theory and De Certeau's idea of tactics as the main theories in non-confrontational resistance that have influenced my research. In addition to that I discuss the implication of using art to resist and examine Bakhtin on carnivalesque humour and laughter, Gandhi's notion of non-violence, and finally Freire's ideas of education as a mode of resistance. I will also look into Appadurai's article on cultural flows and discuss the heterogeneous affects of globalization and its influence on the ways that people resist overtly.

In chapter two I will describe for the reader the Singaporean context in order to show how non-confrontational resistance may have developed. I address the political, social and economic make up of Singapore, and briefly describe the cultural work that is in action. Here I propose that the country's leaders attempts to rapidly modernize and develop Singapore since independence depended on strict and controlling strategies which prevented dissent. While Singapore excelled in economic growth, the human cost of this was the problems and

reactions of the people to these policies. I propose that the Singaporean model can be explained by pressure to conform to Eurocentric expectation in a reordered world combined with fear of being attacked or absorbed by neighbouring countries.

In chapter three I will discuss censorship and how overt repression affect artists and the tactics that they choose for resistance by looking into two case studies - the forum theatre play *Trick or Threat!* by Drama Box and the art event *Integrate* by Migrant Voices. Here we will see that artists manipulate censorship and address critical social issues as a tactic of non-confrontational resistance. They turn their attention to educating the people instead of acting against the state, demonstrating their ideas about long-term global projects for social change.

In chapter four I will discuss how some bloggers seem bolder in their resistance as they bypass state censorship. This is discussed through the case studies *The Action Figures' Protest* and the *Four Million Frowns project*. The parodies that these individuals create result in ambiguous messages and produce multiple readings that sometimes seem subversive, and other times not. I suggest that this tactic of using humour and ambiguity is a form of trickery, but it is also connected to complex ways of knowing produced by changing local and global connections.

And lastly chapter five will close by discussing the main ideas of cultural resistance and my thoughts on it in Singapore. Here I reiterate the lessons about resistance that my study has shown and suggest further research that can be done to develop particular areas which I have not been able to fully explore here.

Chapter 1

Understanding Non-confrontational Resistance: Art, Power and Resistance

In this study I use the case of Singapore to explore theories on non-confrontational resistance and some of the tactics that are employed in a highly politically controlled environment. I argue that covert resistance may not be just a safety valve or an outlet for people to express bottled up frustrations without getting into trouble. They are also envisioned as long-term plans for social change and to create awareness of alternative views in the society. I further argue that ideas of resistance in authoritarian countries as activities solely created to oppose the ruling class or the state should be reconsidered. This is because the power to repress exists in relationships other than between people and the state. Although non-confrontational resistance in my case studies may be read as criticisms of the state, they are also examples of power relationships between residents of different ethnicities and social class, and between corporations/international organizations and the people. Thus I propose that to understand why and how people resist covertly, we must look into the conditions that influence their views and decisions. This includes the ways that global and local activities and connections affect the individual's knowledge and perspectives. Through this literature review I hope the reader will acquire a clearer picture of my area of study.

Non-confrontational resistance is discussed by James Scott in his theory of the hidden transcripts and it is this idea that has started my analysis of resistance. However it cannot wholly explain what is happening in Singapore and I have

adapted my approach to include other viewpoints. Aside from Scott, I also look

into De Certeau's theory on the oppositional practice of everyday life and his

discussion of the difference between tactic and strategy; tactic is developed for

non-confrontational resistance by the ordinary people while strategy is used for

revolutionary reforms. Both tactics and hidden transcripts are thought of as the

weapons of the weak but they are different in some ways. Let us first review these

two main theories. Following that I will review other ideas that may help explain

why people have chosen to be indirect, and some techniques that are used for non-

confrontational resistance.

De Certeau: Tactics

> Such activities perhaps correspond to a timeless art which has
> not merely survived the institutions of successive
> sociopolitical orders but reaches back well before our own
> histories and finds strange solidarities beyond the very
> frontiers of humanity. Indeed, such practices present curious
> analogies- as though in immemorial intelligence- with the
> simulation, strikes, and tricks that certain fish or certain plants
> execute with prodigious virtuosity. The procedures of such art
> can thus be found as far as life itself exists, as though they
> transcended not merely the strategic separations of historical
> institutions but also the very break inaugurated by the
> institution of consciousness itself. They thus assure the formal
> continuities and permanency of a memory without language,
> from the ocean's depths all the way to the streets of today's
> megalopolis. (De Certeau 8,9)

De Certeau in his essay <u>On the Oppositional Practice of Everyday Life</u> explores how ordinary people in everyday life subvert exploitation and repression by dominating powers. As the quote above illustrates, oppositional practices in everyday life are not new inventions, nor are they practices of the past, but ones that are found in the art of survival. For De Certeau, oppositional practices can be unconsciously political but most importantly these practices are made for the self in mind- to survive and/or release frustration and tension by creating mischief. Hence they are not necessarily made to free their creators from the system that represses them.

To further explain his theory, De Certeau distinguishes the difference between two forms of resistance, strategies and tactics. A strategy is an action that manipulates the relations of force in order to seek and establish power. It transforms and distinguishes places of "its own power and will" and depends on these spaces of power "to acquire advantages, prepare for future expansions and to give itself thus an independence in relation to the variability of circumstance". (5) Through this it creates knowledge by transforming the "uncertainties of history" into readable spaces. Strategies are therefore a type of knowing that determine their power by establishing proper places as opposed to establishing time. (5) By establishing an autonomous place, it has mastered time and has no need to worry about being under its control.

A tactic on the other hand has no proper place of establishment and acts within the spaces of the powerful, playing according to the rules which govern it. Always in the enemy's line of vision, the use of tactics allows little chance to

accumulate resources and depends on opportunity and occasion to strike and create surprises. Tactic therefore utilizes the opportunities in time to resist but because of this fragmentation it lacks a global vision. (6) In other words, tactics are the weapons of the weak and can be seen in dwelling, walking, spelling, reading, shopping, cooking- ruses and surprises which are performed within the realm of the strong. (8) In such a way, the resistances of the ordinary person in everyday life are tactics that are different from the strategies of activists and oppositional parties. Ordinary people therefore subvert the grind of everyday life (which is the result of repression by the ruling class) by appropriating activities not intended for resistance to subvert and demonstrate their defiance.

The difference between a strategy and a tactic is clear; the former is determined by the presence of power while the latter is determined by the absence of it. Because of this lack of power, a tactic is not essentially performed to pressurize and overthrow the powerful. For De Certeau, this weakness causes its effectiveness to be fragmented. It relies on opportunities given by time and therefore it is unable to envision widespread changes in the society.

However I do not agree that this lack of power necessarily prevents people from formulating global visions. In my interviews with artists and other individuals, some have expressed ideas about social change even though they are using tactics to resist. While I agree that non-confrontational resistance does not necessarily aim at revolt, I think that De Certeau does not consider the use of tactics to pursue visions of change as a long and gradual processes. In De Certeau's theory, tactics cannot make significant change in the system. Thus he is

unlike Scott whose theory suggests that the weak have an inherent tendency to oppose the ruling class and that their resistance will ultimately create revolt. Let us now turn to Scott and some of the techniques that are used for covert resistance.

James Scott: Hidden transcripts

> By the subtle use of codes one can insinuate into a ritual, a pattern of dress, a song, a story, meanings that are accessible to one intended audience and opaque to another audience the actors wish to exclude. Alternatively, the excluded (and in this case, powerful) audience may grasp the seditious message in the performance but find it difficult to react because the sedition is clothed in terms that also can lay claim to a perfectly innocent construction. (Scott 158)

In James C. Scott's book <u>Hidden Transcripts: Domination and the Arts of Resistance</u>, he argues that resistance has its roots in the hidden transcripts of the subordinates. In Scott's analysis, we are lead into the realms of transcripts. A transcript, Scott explains, is a complete record of what was said and this also includes nonspeech acts like gestures and expressions. (Scott footnote 2) Here, the public transcript is known by all but controlled by the dominant. The hidden transcript on the other hand exists off-stage within the circles of both the dominant and the subordinate groups, hidden from each other's views. The public transcript is, Scott writes, a "self-portrait of dominant elites as they would have themselves seen" (18). The discourse is lop-sided and controlled by the elites in

order to conceal unmentionable acts of their rule and to neutralize the perceived power of the dominant. Although the public transcript requires obedience from the subordinates, this obedience is just an appearance. (33) We know this as Scott continues to describe the hidden transcripts of the subordinates. The hidden transcripts of the subordinates unlike the public transcript are produced under different influences of power and for different audiences. (5) It is where they vent suppressed anger and frustration, and act upon fantasies. According to Scott, messages in the hidden transcripts are encoded and read by 'insiders' who understand the codes in order to resist dominant views without risking prosecution. (136) These messages are unclear and require interpretation precisely because they need to retain the safety of the messenger. Sometimes the message is disguised, and sometimes it is the messenger who is disguised instead. At other times, unintended audiences are able to read the message but are unable to react because of its seemingly innocent construction.

Scott lists various ways of expressing views that are non-confrontational to the dominant powers. The list includes gossip, rumor, euphemism, grumbling and folk culture. He also talks about Bakhtin's analysis of carnival festivals as a form of indirect resistance where the carnival's use of reversal, satire, parody and a general suspension of social constraints are subversions with 'hidden' qualities. Although Bakhtin explains the comic and grotesque behaviours in the carnival as derived from an ideology of universal wholeness that seek to degrade everything that is high, spiritual, ideal and abstract to the sphere of the inseparable material of earth and body, he also observes that this unruly characteristic of the unofficial

is a protest against the dominating official world. (Bakhtin 6) These carnivals as he analyzed in his book <u>Rabelais and His World</u> are comedic ritualistic performances by ordinary folks in the Middle Ages to "oppose the official and serious tone of medieval ecclesiastical and feudal culture" (Bakhtin 4). The element of humour is crucial in resistance. Not only does it oppose the serious tone of the official, by producing a 'laughter of the people' it laughs with the official and causes the sense of hierarchical relationships between the people and the ruling class to diminish. Thus comic behaviours in the carnivals are free from the rules of the authority even though they parody and ridicule the official. In this sense, humour and laugher in satires, parodies and roles of reversal play a part at disguising messages with ambivalence and transmitting them through the hidden transcript.

The example of Bakhtin's analysis in carnival festivals also shows that art is one of the tools used to send messages in the hidden transcript. It is used to disguise and encode messages in songs, stories, parodies, satires and role reversals in carnival festivals. The use of expressive arts as a way to communicate subversive messages is one of my main concerns and the case studies that I have chosen in this paper use artistic elements to indirectly resist. Thus let me now sidetrack a little to further explain how art may be used to resist covertly.

Art and covert resistance

Scott's analysis suggests that art is used in performances, stories and crafts to transmit hidden messages. Indeed, such ways of transmitting messages

are also apparent in my case studies. But I find that his analysis is situated in a context where concepts of art are different from the ways that people view art in Singapore. In Scott's book, art and life are more intricately woven together. The subordinates perform and express themselves in real life; stories are told in gossips and rumours, messages are encoded in designs of clothes, and performances are acted out in carnival festivals. However in the developed and 'westernized' cities today, dominant modes of thinking have conditioned people to think of art as "specialized objects, created not for moral or practical or social reasons, but rather to be contemplated and enjoyed". (Gablik 74) Art is thus seen as separate from life and cannot influence the society. I suggest that in this context, some artists use their tools to lash out because they feel separated from real life. Increasingly they reconsider their roles in the society and use art as a tool to reconstruct relationships "between individuals and community, between art work and public". (Gablik 76) Here I bring to attention two ways of how art challenges dominant ideologies and participate in social change (which I will describe with further detail in the following paragraphs). In these techniques, artworks are created to question contemporary ways of living, they also engage and educate the community in addressing issues in the society. Although these examples are admittedly used with different levels of aggression, I find them to resonate in the covert resistance of my case studies. Artworks may be seen as non-confrontational resistance because dominant ways of perceiving art do not take it seriously and it is also a way to cloak seditious messages with multiple meanings and ambiguity. I suggest that in the context of the modern and capitalist

world, art communicates non-confrontational resistance in different if not more ways from those that Scott describes.

Some artists who resist may be influenced by Guy Debord's words from The Society of the Spectacle, "all that was once directly lived has become mere representation". Debord's theory of the spectacle articulates 'contemporary alienation', of living in a world that is not real but a representation so that everything we see is in fact a 'spectacle'. This almost perfect illusion of the real world that so completely veils and replaces it is the product of "the combination of industrial modernity, capitalist economics, and mediated culture". (Purves 29) Hence artists 'battle' with weapons that are influenced on one side by art movements (what Purves calls to be 'quasi-heretical') which includes Guy Debord and the Situationists, Fluxus, Allan Kaprow and happenings, art-life-body experiments, activist protests, punk music and so forth. On the other hand they are informed by social and anthropological reforms, especially in gift systems, alternative economies and precapitalist societies. (Purves 27) Therefore artworks that grew out of these influences are a mixture of gift giving or exchanges, performances that cross boundaries into living experiences, experiments that involve interaction, building relationships and community spirit with others, and works that aim to shock audiences into awareness. At the core, these art works aim to challenge and problematize prevailing ideas and practices that perpetuate the society of the spectacle.

The other example of using art to resist is the practice of community arts. In her article An introduction to Community Art and Activism from the

Community Arts Network website, Cohen-Cruz suggests that the artist's job in

community art projects is to help shape information, ideas and feelings with

participants and communicate them to the broader audience in order to make

change happen. To do this it is important that participants retain complete mental

control of the process and participate in producing the work. Cohen-Cruz raises

two things in community-based art- the crucial process of involving people in the

creation of the work, and the context in which it is situated. She argues that art

should be public, accessible, and geared towards a specific audience and time.

    Central to the literatures written on community arts is Antonio Gramsci's

notion of hegemony. (Barndt, Cohen-Cruz, Cavanagh, Ford-Smith) Gramsci

argues that hegemony is domination by consent and not by force. In a sense

community arts projects are developed to break this domination by consent.

Consent happens when dominant groups use ideological and political leadership

to exercise their influence in order to make aspects of social life acceptable and

supported by people. Mayo explains this influence by dominant groups and

consent by subordinate groups as garnered through a process of 'learning'. He

argues,

> For Gramsci, every relationship of hegemony is essentially an
> educational relationship. The agencies that, in his view,
> engage in this educational relationship are institutions forming
> civil society, which constitute the cultural bedrock of power.
> These are ideological social institutions such as law,
> education, mass media, religion and so forth. Gramsci argues
> that, in Western society, the state is surrounded and propped

up by a network of these institutions, which are conceived of as 'a powerful system of fortresses and earthworks' that makes its presence felt whenever the state 'trembles'. As such, social institutions such as schools and other educational establishments are not 'neutral'; rather, they serve to cement the existing hegemony, and are therefore intimately tied to the interests of the most powerful social groups, especially the bourgeoisie. (Mayo 36)

Through these 'educational institutions' people are therefore influenced to consent to their repression- a social life that is supported by dominant groups. Thus with community arts, artists, activists and social workers attempt to counter hegemony by empowering participants and encouraging critical and analytical learning. In the book Wild Fire: Art as Activism edited by Barndt, examples of community arts include, mural painting, photography, performances, poster making, theatre and so forth.

Changes in the hidden transcript, ideas of resistance

The ways of using art to resist as I have explained above are quite different from those that Scott described in his book. Art has been used here to question our present ways of living, to connect and educate people, to help in social change and also to criticize the dominant. Thus I find that Scott's theory of the hidden transcript needs to be changed somewhat in order to understand the present light of things. There are two things that I propose we should reconsider. The first is that non-confrontational resistance works in many ways and in some

of them the hidden transcript is not used with much 'hidden-ess'. This is mainly because although resistance is covert, it attempts to publicize its performance and reach out to as many people as possible. As I have explained what some artists and other individuals have tried to do, their agendas are to educate and to create connections and awareness. Furthermore the Art example shows us that the idea of the hidden transcript is complicated with criss-crossing levels of 'hidden-ess'. As art becomes a commodity and is disconnected from society and life, people cannot understand it or read it well. In a sense art exists in a different 'transcript', available and enjoyed by people who can afford the leisure or have acquired an interest to contemplate them. To reconnect art to the community and society, messages in artworks need to be reasonably obvious or it will risk losing its meaning. On some levels artists and audiences share and are connected by the same hidden transcripts, on others they are not. For example in the case of Singapore they are connected because all fear the state, but they may not all share the same social class or have the same interests hence understood different codes in different forms of hidden transcripts. In the meantime artists in authoritarian societies have a tricky job of creating artworks with messages that do not offend the state, but are still readable to audiences from different cultural and social backgrounds. Therefore in order to reach the general public, works are not exactly hidden from dominant groups. From my case studies I find that they are instead presented in an ambiguous manner so that interpretations are left to the viewers who then decide what possible messages are being transmitted.

Secondly and more importantly, I propose that covert resistance is not necessarily made against the state or dominant groups. As De Certeau's idea of tactic shows, techniques in resistance may not be employed for the purpose of retaliation. Artists' efforts at educating and creating awareness are two things which suggest that concerns are turned towards issues other than and in additional to that of the dominant. This is contrary to Scott's belief that subordinates will eventually revolt against those who oppress them, implying that power resides only in one bloc- the ruling class. Instead artists are concerned with the affects of capitalism, consumerism and development, and of marginalization due to race, religion, gender and social class. This demonstrates that power also exists beyond that of the authority and in relationships between people. Thus Foucault suggests that power is something that circulates in a chain where individuals are the vehicles of power. (Foucault, 98) It is like a web that affects all area of life. Not only is power not stagnant in an individual or group but the individual/group is always simultaneously undergoing the effects of exercising power. (Foucault, 98) Power then by flowing through language and social institutions shapes subjectivity and the body. What this means is that although the state and ruling class are powerful, the complex ways that power works through the languages of institution regulates individuals. Hence we will see in later chapters that the case studies focus their resistance on issues in social prejudices caused by the ways that individuals exercise and are affected by power.

The discussion I have laid out so far lead me to understand that non-confrontational resistance may be used for long-term plans in social change, to

criticize and subvert the dominant as well as to educate and create awareness in the people. Hence the global scope of this calls for a more 'open' hidden transcript in order to reach out to the general public but still remain safe from authorities. In addition we now know that not all resistance is targeted at the state and the ruling class. However while theories inform me that people resist covertly because they are afraid and because it may help them relieve stress or demonstrate their defiance, it did not explain the moral dimensions of choosing a non-confrontational approach. I am curious about ethics and morality in resistance because in my interviews with artists, volunteers and other individuals, many told me that they have no intentions of rebelling against the government. Although they did not deny their fears and criticize the authority and dominant groups, their approach is always one that avoids conflict. Thus I think that it is worthy to consider how one's moral concerns may influence approaches to resistance.

Non-violence, the Moral dimension of resistance, and Education

The moral dimension of resistance is often discussed in theories on non-violence, in writings on and by Mahatma Gandhi and his philosophy and leadership in the struggle for India's independence from British colonization. I will also here look into the Dalai Lama's views and decisions in Tibet's struggle for autonomy from China, and Thich Nhat Hanh's writings on non-violent actions in the Buddhist movement for peace in Vietnam during the war in the 1960s. Therefore my readings on non-violence are steeped in Asian philosophy.

Non-violence is used in these causes because the people who choose to use it realize the futility of violence. The Nobel Committee Chairman Egil Aarvik who announced Dalai Lama's Nobel Peace Prize award said of non-violence, "Of course you may say it's (non-violence) a bit too unrealistic, but if you look at the world today, what is the solution to conflict? Will violence or military power be the solution? No... the path of peace is realistic..." (qtd in The Dalai Lama and Chan 46) Hence the main commonality in the methods that these people use to resist is to refrain from hurting the other.

The moral concerns that guided the route to non-violent resistance can be found in the practice of love and compassion, and the belief in the concept of interdependence. Gandhi believed that love enables life while hatred leads to destruction, thus he hoped to reform and resist the British system of government in India through love and loving ways. (Mahatma Gandhi 168) He believed that by showing compassion and preventing hate and further violence, conciliation becomes more attainable. Therefore one must have compassion for the enemy. But it is the understanding of interdependence that helps a person perceive love and compassion. Interdependence proposes that all objects, living things, phenomenon etc. are connected and dependent on each other, and a ripple in this web will eventually have an impact on all parts. (The Dalai Lama and Chan 108) Thus it is used to explain and understand the causes of misunderstandings in order for one to learn about forgiveness, humanity and co-existence, and to diminish hatred.

But what causes the act of non-violent resistance? When do resisters

practicing non-violence decide that they have to resist? For Gandhi, the oppressed

have the duty to right the wrong-doer (or the oppressor). To allow themselves to

be oppressed is to participate in the actions of the wrong-doer. (Mahatma Gandhi

135) He says, " If a government does a grave injustice the subject must withdraw

cooperation wholly or partially, sufficiently to wean the ruler from wickedness."

(Mahatma Gandhi 135) Thus it is also the responsibility of the oppressed to resist

so that the oppressor will know not to oppress. Similarly, Thich Nhat Hanh says

that the law of interdependence shows that everyone is responsible in one way or

another for the Vietnam war and thus having understood the suffering that has

been caused, should take steps to stop further violence and hatred. (Nhat Hanh 94)

In short, the act of non-violent resistance is also an act of love.

Whether cultural resistance in Singapore is consciously incorporating

ideas of non-violence theorized by Gandhi and the others still needs to be known.

However the emphasis of education and awareness by some artists and social

workers suggests an avoidance of violence and force, and an importance in

understanding and self-realization. Perhaps what influence non-confrontational

resistance in some works in Singapore are the ethical views of providing

knowledge and alternatives, and allowing viewers the opportunity to reflect as

oppose to imposing ideas on them. Paulo Freire discusses this approach in his

book The pedagogy of the oppressed. He says,

> " It is not our role to speak to the people about our own view
>
> of the world, nor to attempt to impose that view on them, but

rather to dialogue with the people about their view and ours.

We must realise that their view of the world, manifested

variously in their action, reflects their *situation* in the world."

(Freire 96)

For Freire it is important in education to be aware of the realities that others are

living in and not force ideas upon them. The result and the cause of force is a lack

of understanding in each others' views. Thus that dialogue is necessary in order

to understand each other and to create social change. And for dialogue to happen

there must be reflection and action, what he calls praxis. (Freire 85) Only then

will people having truly understood the situation ask for and work towards

change. These theories imply that it may be possible for non-confrontational

resistance to create change by transforming people through non-violent actions

and dialogue. Indeed some artists and social workers that I interviewed have

adopted these ideas.

Until now I have discussed the tools which people use to resist covertly.

However how do they arrive at the practice of non-confrontational resistance and

adopt certain tactics and theories to resist? In order to understand this, I will in the

next section look into global activities that might affect the individual's

knowledge and perspectives.

Globalization

Rosenau in his article <u>The Relocation of Authority in a Shrinking World</u>,

proposes that the skill revolution which is "due largely to the advent of powerful

new technologies for generating, circulating, sifting, depicting, and storing information" will lead to the expansion of people's analytic and emotional skills. (Rosenau 262) For Rosenau, the emergence of global communication and information technology may slowly but surely erase state sovereignty. Although evidently we have seen that authority in Singapore has not 'relocated', what interests me here is the idea of globalization as a tool of learning as well as an instrument for the creation of knowledge. As information technology advances and communication becomes easier and more efficient, do the windows it opens influence the ways that people perceive politics and society? For the purpose of this paper, this is one point that I am interested in looking at- globalization and how it causes changing ways of thinking.

To look at globalization as flows of information, I turn to Appadurai's article Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy. Appadurai suggests that globalization is imagined by people to cause homogeneity but in fact although globalization involve instruments of homogenization, they are absorbed and 'repatriated as heterogeneous dialogues'. (Appadurai 596) Hence we have disjuncture in cultural flows causing the overlapping, crisscrossing, moving and growing of the five landscapes- ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes and ideoscapes. All five landscapes affect each other. For example people may look at the same term but understand it in different ways depending on how they are influenced by different 'scapes'. The illusion of homogeneity, that the rebellious actions of people are caused by globalization, overly simplify

and underestimate the ways people understand the social and political environment that they are in.

Kelly on the other hand, suggests that social processes happen at all scales- the global, the local and the individual at the same time and not exclusively at any one of them. (Kelly 10) To claim that only the global scale influences social processes places too much emphasis and importance on the global and neglects the other forces. The theories of Appadurai and Kelly therefore suggest that if people are affected by globalization, their thoughts and actions also depend on other factors that are happening in the situations that they are in. Influences and affects by globalization should not be seen as an independent force but one that is interdependent with other factors.

Thus to merge Appadurai and Kelly's ideas together, imagine the landscapes of cultural flows in their webs of complexity crossing the local and global scales of sensibilities. Take for an example, the blogger. Reality causes her to take into account how landscapes may warp as they enter different scales- the global, the local and even the individual, each scale affecting the other. As images and narratives on the mediascape inform the ideoscape and ideas on the ideoscape influence the mediascape, the scales gives us another dimension of how these interrelated landscapes are perceived with varying, inconsistent and changing mindsets, hence we have 'heterogeneous dialogues'. Therefore cultural flows in these landscapes cut across all scales at once and cause social processes within them simultaneously.

	global	local	individual
ideoscape			
mediascape			
ethnoscape			
technoscape			
financescape			

The interrelation of 'scapes' and scales

To bring back the question of resistance, perhaps globalization has indeed influenced the way people think. But this has to be considered with the actions of other things including the government's attitude towards resistance and how that attitude might have changed in sight of current affairs, and the individual- her interests, fears and ambitions and how all these might again have been shaped by the environment that she is in.

Conclusion

The theories of hidden transcript and tactic form the basis of my research. They inform us that resistance is performed covertly to avoid inconveniences when people are under repression. Scott's hidden transcript theory and Bakhtin's analysis of the carnival suggests that humour and art are some of the tools that are used for non-confrontational subversion. These are indeed some of the techniques that the case studies in this paper have used. Foucault's idea of power flows however suggests that resistance do not depend on a sole source of power. The state is not the only entity that people are resisting or are repressed by.

In another vein, the philosophy of non-violence help us look into the moral dimension of resistance, suggesting how some people decide to resist on the basis of love and not anger or hatred. Freire's theory of dialogue furthers this approach to resistance where education is used to encourage reflection as oppose to imposing ideas onto people. Finally the flows of culture in globalization theorized by Appadurai explains how complicated flows of information may influence people's ways of thinking. This may help explain why some people may choose certain ways of resistance and not others.

Having reviewed the relevance of these theories to the research, the next chapter will look into the details of the context of Singapore.

Chapter 2

The Singaporean Context or the Price of the 5Cs

A popular Singaporean joke refers to the prevailing importance of wealth and social status to which most citizens aspire. Singaporeans talk about the 5Cs – Cash, Credit card, Car, Condominium, and Country card membership. The purpose of this chapter is to acquaint the reader with the circumstances which made these aspirations common-place. I summarize the history and development of Singapore since colonialization and focus on its cultural development. I address how people are repressed and give the reader an idea of why and how some of them resist. First I will discuss the country's views of itself and the world, the goals and beliefs of the authoritarian government and what caused them. I then investigate how the government proceeded to meet their goals through violent and overt repression in the early days of independence. This then leads me to probe into the problem caused by social control- that is the production of a generation of citizens who are depoliticized, stressed-out, unimaginative and individualistic. Finally I will look into the government's effort to revitalize the people and create a 'culturally vibrant society', a decision that is influenced by the competitive and globalized world.

Forming the image

> Present day Singapore is decidedly different from old
> stereotypes. Modern perceptions would include the
> observations that "things work" – that it is an easy place to

visit, a good place to shop, and, for most, a good place to live
– and that there are no really ancient buildings, as there are in
several other places in Southeast Asia. Singapore bears the
stamp of PAP rule for over forty years. It is safe and orderly,
and one of the first places to adopt new ideas that increase
efficiency: the pedestrian waiting at a crossing for the traffic
lights to change is informed by a digital clock telling precisely
how many more seconds the wait will be. (Mauzy and Milne
2)

The above description of Singapore by Mauzy and Milne in their book
<u>Singapore politics under the people's action party</u> represents the vision that the
Singaporean government gives of the city/country, and it is also what the rest of
the world perceives. (Indeed the book was approved and praised by ministers of
the state.) A city that is immaculately clean, orderly, safe, efficient, comfortable,
proficient in English and culturally entertaining and fun; all of which should
contribute to the attractiveness of the city to the global world and distract them
from the criticisms of its authoritarian governing. This is but one version of the
city-state that has been grossly over emphasized, embellished and packaged to be
promoted, its spotless image is unfortunately pretentious and devoid of 'soul'.
The impression of affluence that Singapore has given to international audience
does not reflect the underlying stress and repression in the society. In fact, the
state works hard at retaining this sellable image and obliterates anything that may
tarnish it.

History and Independence

To understand the state's hard work of keeping up such an image, a brief account of its history is needed. Situated in the region of South East Asia, Singapore is a city state country, a small island at the southern tip of the Malaysian Peninsula with only a total land area of 707.1 square kilometers (in 2007). It became a British colony in 1819 and after 123 years of British rule, was occupied by the Japanese during the Second World War from 1942-1945. When the British reoccupied Malaya, the British Government pledged to prepare Malaya (including Singapore) for independence. Hence in 1945, nine Malay States were constituted to form the British Crown Colony called the Malayan Union, which later became the Federation of Malaya. (Yeo and Lau 117) This did not include Singapore because the scheme was made in the interest of the mainland Malays who were "concerned (about) the inclusion of Singapore's large Chinese population in any political reorganization of the Malayan region" (Yeo and Lau 117, 118) Singapore, along with the states of Sabah and Sarawak in northern Borneo finally merged with the Malaya Federation to form Malaysia in 1963. However soon after the merge, Singapore which had been self-governing since 1959 realized that Malaysia did not allow it the economic and political latitude that its leaders wanted to pursue. Problems arose because of the ambiguity of the terms in the merger and also because of the increasingly racial nature of the conflict. (Yeo and Lau 114) The governments of Malaysia and Singapore finally decided a little less than two years later that the only amicable alternative was separation.

Thus Singapore separated from Malaysia in 1965 without first securing

social stability, self-defence, and economic growth. The independence of

Singapore brought about a public discourse of fear. Kenneth Paul Tan lists the

dangers that are perceived to encroach on the country.

> One such enemy is 'nature', which has not endowed
> Singapore with resources such as land space and drinking
> water, and now threatens the global spread of disease and
> disasters, and the terrible economic consequences of these. A
> second enemy is the 'foreign aggressors' who have included
> Malaysia and Indonesia as well as Western liberals and human
> rights activists campaigning against Singapore's
> conservatively communitarian and security-centered
> institutions and practices. A third enemy is the 'extremists'
> and 'terrorists' who have advanced a campaign of violence
> and hatred in multiethnic and multireligious, but secular and
> pro-America Singapore. And a fourth enemy is the 'economic
> competitors' whose lower cost structures are attracting foreign
> investors away from Singapore. (3,4)

Hence for the predominantly ethnic Chinese state, compulsory military service (or

'national service') is required of all male citizens to secure its defense in the

Malay-muslim region against the possibility of war with neighbouring countries

and other 'extremists' and 'terrorists'. To keep 'western liberals' and human

rights activists at bay, the government devised the Asian Values ideology to

promote communitarism, encouraging citizens to be self-reliant individuals,

families and communities and to place nation above self. (Sim 49) Its emphasis on

consensus over conflict legitimizes the demonizing of ideological pluralism and

the rejection of western ideas of liberalism. (Sim 49)

But the decision to nurture a 'globally attractive' image is largely due to

the conviction that with no agriculture and only a small domestic market,

Singapore needs to utilize fully its human resources and depend heavily on

international trade and investment for economic growth. (Sim 46) Therefore from

the early days of independence the government has been building the economy by

aligning its agenda to "international standards" so as to transform the country into

an attractive 'global city'. It never tires of reinventing the city in order to attract

foreign investors, workers and holidaymakers. Singapore was the international

headquarters of transnational corporation in manufacturing and services in the

1980s; an e-commerce hub for hi-tech companies, an educational center for

international institutions, a regional medical centre, and a 'tourism capital' in the

1990s; and proceeding since the 90s- 'a global city for the arts' where local,

regional and international arts and culture are displayed and consumed. (Chang,

2000: 818) This image is the result of several historical cultural issues which I

will articulate below.

Colonization, Orientalism and Singapore

This sparkling perfect image of the city is caused by a multitude of

complex influences and occurrences including the effects of Singapore's colonial

history and the dominance of European thought. British colonization of Malaya

have contributed to the present competitive attitude of the state by introducing the hegemonic idea that the west is always more progressive in every sense of civilization than others in the world. This feeling of inferiority still persists although with Singapore's current success in development, the myth may have waned somewhat.

Singapore saw a need to catch up with the modernity that other developed countries have attained. This idea was a product of development discourses which depend on the concept that non-developed countries (in the eurocentric sense of development) inherently begin at a stage of backwardness and disadvantage. In an article on social representation and development in Nepal, Stacy Leigh Pigg argues that development is associated with moving forward and the fear of being left behind. (Pigg 507) Although Singapore is no longer labeled a developing country and is categorized as a newly industrialized country (NIC) today, this feeling of needing to catch up is still prevalent. The government continues to find ways to promote the country as a globally attractive city and competes for economic advantage with other Asian countries with similar views.

The idea of being inherently disadvantaged can be framed within the discourse of Orientalism and Arif Dirlik's idea of self-Orientalism. According to Edward Said, orientalism depends on three things - "the changing historical and cultural relationship between Europe and Asia…; the scientific discipline in the west… specialized in the study of various Oriental cultures and traditions; … (and) the ideological suppositions, images and fantasies about a currently important and politically urgent region of the world called the Orient." (qtd in

Dirlik 105-6) Said emphasizes that the concept of Orientalism gives rise to the divide between the Orient and the Occident. This divide serves to represent Occidental power favourably and redistributes geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological texts". (qtd in Dirlik 107) Thus,

> Non-European societies were characterized in this reordering of the world not by what they had but by what they lacked; in other words, the lack of one or more of those characteristics that accounted for European development. Rather than provide contemporary alternatives to European development, they were perceived predominantly to be located at some rung or other of the ladder of development that Europe already had left behind. (Dirlik 108)

It is important to note that this reordering of the world that has now dominated the reality of much of non-European societies is not an intrinsic phenomenon as many have now grown to believe. It is a view that homogenizes characteristics of development by discarding or preventing the growth of contemporary alternatives. By placing European development at the pinnacle, it created a view that non-European societies are inherently inferior and need to be improved. This view of inferiority has created a love-hate relationship in the Orientals for the Occident. Much of Singapore and South East Asia remains in awe of the powers and abilities of the West, embracing westernization as a model of progress. At the same time they resent their repression and inferiority as subordinates at the

workplace and on the global stage, and rebel against ideas and actions of the West. Thus they, including the Singapore government criticize Western liberal democracy as a 'representation of itself as democratic and all others as un/pseudo-democratic' (Sim 47), rejecting it as a foreign aggressor that will pluralize ideology and fragment the society.

However the creation of Orientalism is also aided by how Orientals receive, respond and represent themselves to the ideas of power that the Orientalists (or the Occident) present. This is dependent upon the changing power dynamics of both parties. (Dirlik 107, 109) The relationship between the Orientalist and the Orient has created a contact zone in which Orientalists will become increasingly Oriental-like and Orientals will become increasingly Orientalist or Occident-like. How much like each other they will become will depend on the power structure of the relationship. (Dirlik 119) The acceptance of this reordering of the world is then the result of Singapore inching its way to a more Orientalist- like position, accepting and perceiving itself from a 'Western' point of view. Hence by enacting self-Orientalism, the Singaporean state is anxious to succeed at modernity and is constantly pushing its limits by attempting to 'globalize' the city. The picture perfect image that the government projects to the international audience is a move to ascend the ladder of European development and minimize the gap of power between them.

Behind the image

The dominant party, the People's Action Party or PAP has been leading

the government of the country for the past 43 years since Singapore's

independence and separation from Malaysia in 1965. Helmed by the then Prime

Minister Lee Kuan Yew, it was (and still is) infamous for its authoritarian rule.

With survival as their primary goal, the PAP prioritizes economic progress but

suppresses any expressions of political ideologies deemed to be potentially

subversive for social stability or economic progress (Quah 27). This unfortunately

makes it difficult for artists and other individuals to culturally resist. Furthermore

the government's early emphasis on science and technology means that it has

neglected the arts and cultural segments of the country. These segments have only

begun to develop in the last two decades. Thus capitalism and economic growth in

Singapore did not trigger liberal democracy in the authoritarian state as Francis

Fukuyama predicted in his book The end of history and the last man. Under the

capitalist state, the increasingly educated and affluent middle class citizens did not

resist the state's authoritarian rule like he had believed. (Fukuyama 40)

Culture, Violence, and Repression

In the 1960s and 1970s, Singapore theatre was highly politicized by the

Chinese-educated theatre companies who were more radical than the English

educated theatre because of their alignment with the communist-leaning workers'

and students' movements that began in the 1950s (Peterson 34). The involvement

of theatre with politics was inevitable at that time because of the radical economic

and social changes in the fast developing nation that caused people to be psychologically unprepared. Chinese language theatre thus turned its attention to pockets of the population who were affected by the rapid urbanization and industrialization process, and their plays were very well received by the people (Peterson 35). However this socially committed workers' theatre was seen as a threat to the security of the state. While Singapore was rapidly modernizing, the war in Vietnam and the Cultural Revolution in China gave reminders of the dangers of communism. Furthermore, because theatre was deemed to be the handmaiden of communist ideology in China, Chinese socially committed theatre in Singapore was perceived to be a threat (Peterson 36).

In January 1976, the government arrested and detained 50 people under the [3]Internal Security Act (ISA) to suppress political ideologies. They were charged for regrouping two factions of the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) in Singapore. (Langenbach 206) Many of these political, social and student activists were tortured and detained without trial under the Act (qtd in Peterson 38). Among those arrested were left-wing Chinese-language artists for their critical content. The principal of the Practice Theatre School (PTS) (and later renamed the Practice Performing Arts School (PPAS)), ballet dancer Goh Lay Kuan, and her husband who had set up the school with her in 1965, playwright-director Kuo Pao Kun. Goh was released after a televised confession on 28 May 1976 while Kuo remained in detention until October 1980. These arrests "represented a mopping up of the Trade Union movement, student unions and organizations, and

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[3]The Internal Security Act (ISA) is a legacy from the British colonial government that allows the state to detain suspects without trial.

Non-Government Organizations (NGO)" (Langenbach 205) As Quah remarks, politically activist theatre ceased to exist after 1976. (Quah 34)

Singapore thus became increasingly depoliticized with resistance and opposition nipped in the bud. The incident was seen as an example of the consequences of resisting government ideology. This is reflected in the fact that the history of socially committed worker's theatre has been 'forgotten' and is virtually unknown to Singaporeans under forty (I had no knowledge of activist movements in the 1970s until I met relatives in Canada who had been in the movements). Because socially committed worker's theatre and activist movements at that time were seen as opposing the government, no one in Singapore attempted to document this occurrence. (Peterson 35)

However again in 1987, 22 people were arrested in the 'Marxist Conspiracy' incident under the ISA. This time they were accused of 'being Marxists, working with the opposition party – the Workers' Party – to politicize the Law Society and using theatre to articulate political convictions." (Chong 5) Many of these individuals were associated with the Roman Catholic welfare organization. Among the arrested were theatre practitioners from the Third Stage who had by this time staged socially critical plays such as *Corabella* (a satire on the government's childbirth policy which favoured graduate mothers) and *Esperanza* (a satirical play on the plight of Filipino maids in Singapore). After signing their confessions, members of the Third Stage were released after which they disbanded.

The consequence of making your oppositional views public is clearly exemplified by more recent opposition party member Chee Soon Juan who was sued by the then Prime Minister Goh Chock Tong and then Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew for public slander in 2001 general elections. As a result he declared bankruptcy in 2006. Chee was also charged and imprisoned several times for 'attempting to hold a rally without a license', and 'speaking in public without a permit' in 2002 and 2006.

One form of social control then is to create fear by heavily punishing selected individuals who become public examples of wrongdoing. Fear of the government exists in the collective memories of the people even though the younger generations have not experienced the violence of the 60s and 70s. After the 'Marxist Conspiracy' incident in 1987, the ISA has not been used in such drastic and unreasonable ways to spark fear in the public. But people are still cautious of the state's unclear political 'out of bounds' markers (OB markers). In some cases the government has administered disproportionately heavy punishments to people who appear to be quite harmless. And in other instances it has demonstrated unexpected tolerance towards actions that are bold in political terms. This unpredictability on the part of the state results in a society that resembles the prison architecture analyzed by Michel Foucault. Here people are caught in a situation in which they censor themselves as a result of an all powerful panopticon. Thus the exercise of coercive power in later years is mostly unnecessary because the unpredictability and reputation of the state has created a climate of anxiety that causes Singaporeans to regulate themselves.

The people: depoliticized and desensitized

        The dominant discourse of vulnerability, survival and success help justify the government's rule of the country. (Tan 5) The violence of Singapore's past nevertheless suggests that repressive measures were also used to force people into accepting coercive power. Hence it is possible that older people in their forties and above have kept silent and are law-abiding because they still fear the state in a very real sense. Today however the younger generations who have no memories of the state's violence are produced in a sanitized environment and are taught to accept its ideology. They have been brought up to 'rationally' agree to their suppression in exchange for peace, security and affluence. Thus it seems that pragmatic and materialistic Singaporeans realistically believe that the authoritarian government, having proved its ability to excel and succeed in the economy and development of the country is the best choice to maintain and improve widespread security, wealth, and comfort.

        Unfortunately, problems appear when the state is politically controlling, and dictates every aspect of its citizens' lives with its policies, from the language they speak to the money they save for old age. There emerges a widespread lack of self-reflexivity, creativity and political-consciousness among the majority of the population. Many prefer to be left out of political and community discussions to pursue individual comforts of the private sphere. Tan argues,

                Contrary to theories that link democratization with the rise of

                the middle class, the majority of embourgeoised Singaporeans

                would appear to regard public or political participation not as

> a right to be reclaimed from an anarchronistically
> developmentalist government, but as an imposition on their
> 'real' freedom, which is their right to an undisturbed private
> life, to live in a 'shoppers' paradise' where hard work is
> rewarded with the capacity to buy 'happiness' by choosing
> from among the latest range of products. (6)

A generation of people are brought up to become depoliticized consumerists. In the quote above we see that they have come to prefer consumption to democracy. This consumer lifestyle was encouraged by the government when the then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong in his 1996 National Day Rally Speech declared that "Life for Singaporeans is not complete without shopping!" (qtd in Chua 17) This declaration is of course tied to the state's motivation to increase the material wealth of its people. The expansion of consumerism is connected to building tourism as a national industry in the 80s. (Chua 12) Later consumerism was encouraged again because of the grim economic outlook for the retail sector in the mid 90s. (Chua 13) In short consumerism is linked to the capitalist ambition of building the economy of the state and the material wealth of individuals.

But in believing that they have now acquired middle class status, people have lost sight of and consented to unreasonable work conditions - long hours, high-stress levels, unequal wages and social prejudices, an obsession with productivity etc- in order to earn a salary that can satisfy their consumption 'needs', afford and sustain a 'high maintenance' desirable lifestyle, and acquire commodities that indicate their social class. Ironically these are lifestyles that are

encouraged by the state to build and maintain a society that is capitalist and affluent. Thus results in high cost and fast-paced living.

Race, Multiculturalism, Segregation and Prejudice

The government's project to build a national identity in a multi-ethnic society is a model that is idealized and celebrated as 'Chinese-Malays-Indians-Others' or in short CMIO. To give an idea of the ethnic distribution in Singapore, in 2007 there was 75% Chinese, 13.7% Malay, 8.7% Indian and 2.6% Eurasians and other minorities in the population. (Department of Statistics)

The acceptance of CMIO at the national level is caused by the fear of interethnic conflict without widespread authority and control to maintain order and peace. This in turn is reinforced by the collective memory of interethnic riots during the colonial periods and early decades of independence in Singapore. However the simplistic and rigid CMIO model homogenizes and overlooks differences within ethnicities. Indians for example can be Hindu, Sikh, Muslim, or Christian. It grossly stereotypes differences between ethnic groups at the same time. Malays for example are stereotyped as the 'lazy natives'. The model of CMIO has been implemented in policies, national discourses, ethnicity-related legislations and institutions so as to create the idea that differences such as those of religion and class are perceived as common sense. (Tan 29) One example is the co-relation of CMIO to the languages that are taught to students in school. Here, Chinese students are taught Mandarin, Malay students are taught Bahasa Melayu and Indian students are taught Tamil. All are to adopt a homogenizing language

that represents their ethnicity. However the English language is envisioned as a common language that helps Singaporeans to communicate between ethnicities. It is also adopted to expedite Singapore's integration into the world economy. Hence English is the first language of the people and the language of instruction in schools and in government administration. With the prioritization and the elevated importance of the English language, prejudices emerge from how well one can speak and write English. There is a perceived social class difference between English-speaking Chinese citizens and Mandarin-speaking Chinese citizens.

To summarize, a quote from Tan,

> As practice that aims to contain the permanent vulnerability believed to characterize Singapore's multiethnic society, CMIO multiracialism has turned into a restrictive, divisive, unimaginative, and sterile way of life, driven by underlying fear, suspicion, and the urge to stereotype, but celebrated on the surface through platitudes and superficial expressions of harmony and mutual tolerance. (30)

The 'celebrated but superficial expression' of multiculturalism in Singapore as harmonious is an official policy that blankets underlying tensions among ethnicities. This perfect picture of harmony masks prejudices and stereotypes which are never addressed in public discourse. Marginalization in this way cannot be revealed and acknowledged. Hence in light of this, artists often cautiously raise ethnic issues in the society.

The marginality of migrant workers in Singapore is also related to racial

issues in a way but they are more blatantly revealed in society. It is not

uncommon for locals to perceive foreign workers as dangerous and immoral as

the example of Serangoon Gardens shows (this case will be explained in the next

paragraph). However the problems that they face are becoming increasingly

debated and has in recent years developed into a heated topic. The national

newspaper frequently publishes and sensationalizes news reports about abused

domestic workers. The unsafe conditions and unsanitary housing for construction

workers is also frequently reported.

Discrimination of foreign workers can be seen in a recent incident

(September 2008) when residents of Serangoon Gardens- a upper-middle class

neighbourhood- signed a petition against the government's decision to house a

thousand workers in an old school in their estate and gathered 1600 signatures

from more than 4000 households. Residents claimed that they felt unsafe living at

such close proximity to workers as they will 'spike crime, drunken and disorderly

behaviour and traffic congestion to the neighbourhood, and that the value of their

properties will be hit'. (Sim & Ang, "Green light for dorm plans") Finally to quell

residence's discontent, a 'compromise' was made. The government will go ahead

with their plans of converting the school into a dormitory but it will also create a

buffer zone in the area. This means that an access road will be constructed leading

to the dormitory in order for transport buses to avoid winding through the estate.

Noise control, security and other measures will be enforced in the building and

adequate amenities and provision shops will also be on site, hence leaving little

reasons for workers to leave their dorms. (Sim & Ang, "Green light for dorm plans")

Very clearly, residents were trying to keep their spaces clean away from foreign workers and have succeeded in a way. But the workers were not asked how they felt about the incident, their voices disregarded in matters of the society. Not surprisingly the issue created a public debate of sorts with people on the other side of the argument disagreeing with such actions and bringing attention to the xenophobic and class views that people have towards foreign workers. Despite the fact that the government has expressed the need for Singaporeans to co-exist with foreign workers and not segregate themselves from them, its actions to pacify citizens without regarding the choices of foreign workers demonstrates its perception of foreign workers as third class residents. Its decision to create a "buffer zone" forces workers and citizens to co-exist physically, but in a way that it furthers the effect of social segregation.

Cultural development and globalizing the city

In April 1989, the soon to be Prime Minister, Goh Chok Tong said in a written response to the report of the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts, "We (Singaporeans) have reached a stage in our economic and national development when we should devote greater attention and resources to culture and arts in Singapore. Culture and the arts add to the vitality of a nation and enhance the quality of life" (qtd in Renaissance City Report (RCR) 11). Artists responded by observing that the business-oriented society puts monetary value on

everything including the arts and this has resulted in a people that are culturally

unsophisticated. (Tan 39) Furthermore the deadening arts scene pushed artistically

talented Singaporeans in the early decades of independence to leave the country

for better career prospects overseas. (Tan 38) When the decision to support the

arts and culture was brought up later in the 80s and 90s, it was to restore

motivation in a 'mechanical' and 'demoralized' nation obsessed with the

economy and basic survival, and to serve the nation-building purpose of sparking

yet again economic growth. Ironically the cultural desert was created by the

state's early single-minded policy of enhancing the economy. This decision came

about due to the PAP's loss of its parliamentary monopoly in 1981 and an

economic recession in 1985.

Therefore in 1992 the Economic Development Board conceptualized the

"Global City of the Arts" vision to boost local arts and cultural industries and turn

the state into a global cultural hub. It was spearheaded by the Singapore Tourism

Board and supported by the National Art Council and the National Heritage

Board. (Chong, 556) The goals of this vision as outlined in the Renaissance City

Report published in 2000 is to meet two things, first to establish Singapore as "a

cultural centre in the globalized world", and second to "strengthen Singaporeans'

sense of national identity and belonging". (RCR 4) Hence Chong suggests that,

> Arts and culture was envisaged and packaged as a "pull
>
> factor" in the increasing international competition for skilled
>
> foreign workers and global capital, while, as an extension of
>
> its previous nation-building role, a more vibrant arts and

cultural scene might help retain highly skilled and globally

mobile Singaporeans (556)

The plan was not only to attract skilled foreign workers and retain highly skilled

Singaporeans, but as the 1989 report of the Advisory Council on Culture and the

Arts suggests to "broaden our minds and deepen our sensitivities" and "improve

the general quality of life". (RCR 12) The nurturing of a more gracious nation

with exciting festivals and happenings thus also acts as a beautifying element to

attract foreigners and retain locals who have started to leave the country for

greener pastures overseas resulting in Singapore experiencing a brain drain. The

government then began to systematically loosen censorship regulations in the

1990s for it realized that the local arts would not meet international standards if

censorship was to remain impossibly restrictive.

Although things may seem to have brightened for artists with the

loosening up of censorship and governmental support for the arts, geographers

Chang and Lee argue that the arts policy is too economically focused and

infrastructure-heavy. They concentrate on building and providing spaces to house

artists and events, to enhance tourism and economical opportunities, but neglect

in creating a social environment that cultivates and liberates artistic talents.

(Chang and Lee 128) Similarly, sociologist Chua mentions that 'Singapore

remains largely a space of cultural consumption, rather than of cultural

production.' (Chua 232)

Despite a relaxing of authority, many argue that the state is in actual fact

using a softer approach to exercise its power. The formal liberation of censorship

in the arts does not mean that artists are free to express political views that are

anti-hegemonic. Artists are instead encouraged to practice self-censorship. In the

example of theatre, self-censorship is enforced through the threat of withdrawing

funds. As the National Arts Council (a state controlled organization) is the main

funding source for theatre companies, it will be potentially disastrous for smaller

companies to suffer a fund withdrawal. (Chong 10) Chong also mentions other

forms of self-censorship, one of which is through policing by quasi-state

institutions – this includes the press and trade unions that are aligned with state

interests- whereby the press asserts political pressure on individuals by publishing

damaging headlines and critical articles.

One such example is in the suppression of a Forum theatre production in

the mid-90s. When the English language theatre company The Necessary Stage,

lead by Alvin Tan and Haresh Sharma attempted to stage a forum theatre in 1994,

an article in The Straits Time (the national newspaper) entitled 'Two pioneers of

Forum Theatre trained at Marxist workshops' by editor Felix Soh on February

1994 accused them of being Marxists as they had attended a workshop with

Augusto Boal in New York. Soh reported,

> "(the workshops) were conducted by the Brecht Forum,
> a Marxist cultural and public education organization
> whose founder Augusto Boal has declared that all theatre
> in necessarily political and that it is a "very efficient
> weapon for liberation". The company's publications, like
> its programmes and newsletters, explain the Forum

Theatre concept but do not say that Mr Sharma and Mr Tan were trained in the art form at the Marxist Brecht Forum… So is The Necessary Stage, which went professional only in 1992, using theatre for a political end?"

The Necessary Stage was however 'saved' by the then Chairman of the National Arts Council (NAC), Tommy Koh who wrote a response to the forum page of The Straits Time declaring his support for the company and its good track record but also emphasizing that the NAC will not provide any funding to stage forum theatre. This thus allows the state to come across as less authoritative and less hegemonic, but it is still able to assert its powers through indirect means.

Others forms of such indirect involvement include withdrawing the National Arts Council logo in promotional materials but still providing money to demonstrate the state's reservations but support for the arts. Finally, works are also regulated by public opinions. Hence authorities borrow the interventions of non-state institution or organized-interests 'to check local theatre within the public sphere" (Chong, 17) This new direction of performing power and control causes Chua to conclude in his article <u>Culture and Arts: Intrusion in political space</u> that "the liberalization of the cultural sphere has, until now, not affected the iron-clad control that the PAP has over the political arena and this is unlikely to change in the conceivable future". (Chua 244)

Conclusion

Due to the history and geography of Singapore, the government developed the country based on a public discourse of fear. The decision to nurture a 'globally attractive' image is largely due to the conviction that with no agriculture and only a small domestic market, Singapore needs to utilize fully its human resources and depend heavily on international trade and investment for economic growth. I suggest that this belief is also supported by self-orientalism in which Singapore perceives itself in a western-point of view. The impression of affluence is a move to ascend the ladder of European development. Therefore to achieve its goals, violence and social control were used to make citizens accept the state's coercive power. The authoritarian government's political control has however resulted in a generation of people who are desensitized and depoliticized consumerists. It plans to revitalize the people through cultural development but this decision is mainly economically driven and influenced by globalizing factors. In the end the loosening of censorship laws and procedures does not mean that individuals are free to express themselves. Artists instead practice a form of self-censorship.

Thus we see the paradoxical nature of Singapore. It is an affluent but highly politically controlled country. Its people are repressed but they are also depoliticized. With the opening up of the cultural sphere, a few questions come to mind. How have people's exposure and experience of 'new' forms and ways of public intervention affected their approach to commentary and discussion on social issues? And how has the destabilization of the state's moral censorship

affected the ways that people think? Finally in light of the situation in Singapore, how do the changing ways of thinking and the political control of the government affect tactics and ideas of resistance? In the next two chapters I will address these questions in two sets of case studies.

Chapter 3

The cases of Drama Box and Migrant Voices: Manipulating Censorship and Addressing Critical Issues in Cultural Production

It was evening and my friend Jia and I were at an outdoor open space area in front of the People's Park building, Chinatown. A breeze generated by huge transportable electric fans relieved the hot and sticky air. We took off our slippers and sat on the straw mats that were placed on the floor in front of a make-shift stage. A few young women started to serve people small paper cups of tea. We could hear the excited chattering of curious passer-bys who had stopped to see what was happening. Then finally a man stood on the stage and greeted the crowd in Singaporean-accented Cantonese, Hokkien, Mandarin and English. He welcomed the audiences to the Community Performance tour by Drama Box but apologized that one of the two plays that were planned for today would be cancelled. The forum theatre "Trick or Threat!" he said was cancelled because they had received a facsimile from the Media Development Authority (MDA) that the license for the play had not been approved the evening before. He stressed that the notice arrived at the eleventh hour even though their scripts were sent to the censors way ahead in advance. Because they were given such short notice he apologized that Drama Box could not make alternative plans for "Trick or Threat!" to be performed today. But arrangements would be made for it to be staged later in the future. The audience did not jeer but listened silently.

The paragraph above is a journal entry of my first attempt to watch the forum theatre *Trick or Threat!* by Drama Box. Although I did not get to watch the

play that day, I know that it was cancelled because the authorities had prevented

its performance. The exposé was one of Drama Box's tactic in dealing with

censorship. Drama Box and Migrant Voices are two case studies that I will look at

in this chapter. They both resist and collude official censorship and laws. I

propose that the limitations that these two organizations face direct them to find

creative ways of transmitting messages and cause them to focus their efforts away

from subverting the state to educating the audiences. They result in two main

ways. First they manipulate censorship and second they create spaces in which

people can cross social boundaries and discuss critical issues. In these ways

cultural workers adopt a non-confrontational stance. To analyze people's

responses to overt repression, I will look at two examples, the forum theatre *Trick

or Threat!* by Drama Box and the art event *Integrate* organized by Migrant

Voices.

Case descriptions

Drama Box and the forum theatre *Trick or Threat!*

Drama Box is a Mandarin theatre company in Singapore. In 2007, it held

the *Community Performance Tour '07* from the 4th to 8th July in open public areas

around the heartlands of [4]HDB neighbourhoods. It was a multi-language

performance and was acted in Mandarin, English, Malay (Bahasa Melayu) and

other Chinese languages including Hokkien and Cantonese. The admission was

free and passersby were encouraged to attend it. The first play in the performance

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[4] HDB stands for the Housing Development Board- HDB flats also refer to government housing
lived in by the majority of Singaporeans.

tour was entitled *Dua Dai Ji* (a Hokkien title) or *News Busters!* (English title),
and was a satire of recent headline news in the style of Italian impromptu street
theatre and family soap opera. It included discussions of the pay increase of civil
servants, the Goods and Services Tax hike and the holding of Formula One races
in Singapore; the other was the Forum Theatre *Trick or Threat!*. It was directed
by Kok Heng Leun, the artistic director of Drama Box and Aidli 'Alin' Mosbit,
and was performed in collaboration with fellow Malay freelance actors. Although
"Trick or Threat!" was not staged during the performance tour because of
licensing problems, Drama Box was able to perform it later in a public setting.

The forum theatre created by Augusto Boal is a technique that allows
audiences the power to change the script of a play by replacing the actors' roles
and solving problems in the play. What happens is that a short sketch depicting an
unresolved problem is acted out. It is then staged again but this time with
audiences participating in it, taking over the roles of particular characters and
trying out different scenarios to solve the problem. *Trick or Threat!* was
performed in this way. For the purpose of this paper, I shall describe only the
original script of *Trick or Threat!* and not the entire performance, which would
have included the audience's participation.

The original script of *Trick or Threat!* is set on the week after a terrorist
bombing has occurred at a train station in Singapore. The scene begins in a train
car with a Malay man in traditional clothes (this emphasizing his Islamic
religion), another Malay man and his colleague – a Chinese lady, and an Indian
girl (who was played by a Malay woman) and her Chinese boyfriend. All

characters are Singaporean. When the train stops suddenly and the lights goes out, the Chinese boy receives a text message on his cell phone informing him about a rumour that a bomb has been planted in a train. Everyone panics and starts to suspect that the Malay man in traditional clothes is a terrorist and that the black bag he carries contains a bomb. The sketch ends with the arrest of the 'terrorist' and an announcement that the train is in fact only experiencing technical difficulties. The forum theatre as we can see addresses race issues and the recent amplified awareness of terrorism in Singapore.

Trick or Threat! encountered some difficulties when the Media Development Authority (MDA) informed them that license for the forum theatre was not approved. This information was given to Drama Box the day before the tour was scheduled to begin. The reason given was that "the theme of terrorism and racial stereotyping was sensitive in the light of recent events (the detention of self-radicalized Singaporean in early June and the recent London and Glasgow bomb attacks)" and that the nature of forum theatre "could create unforeseeable tensions and reactions from the public". (Hong par. 8) They were advised not to stage the performance in an open public space but to hold it indoors for 'better crowd control'. The artistic director of Drama Box took this opportunity to explain in response to the MDA that the aim of the forum theatre was to help people rehearse their roles in a possible terrorist attack. In the end, the play could not be staged in the tour because they were not given enough time to seek an alternative. However it was performed a month later on 28 July under a big enclosed outdoor tent in Woodlands town. Although it was not a tour and was

only performed once, the venue is situated right outside a busy train station and a shopping mall, and the tent was quickly filled with people.

Migrant Voices and the event *Integrate*

The second case study for this chapter is an art event named *Integrate*, organized by the non-profit organization Migrant Voices. Migrant Voices is an organization that provides an artistic platform for [5]foreign workers to express themselves. They aim to do two things. The first is to empower foreign workers by giving them a space to express themselves and to inform them of the services that are available to them, and the second is to create awareness among the general public of the issues that the workers face. Hence their audiences include both foreign workers and Singaporeans. Although there are members in Migrant Voices who are foreign workers, the executive committee members- middle class Singaporeans- are the people who make decisions and organize activities. The organization is entirely run by volunteers and activities include cultural events in dance and music, and story telling through theatre, photography, creative writing and drawing.

As part of the Labour Day celebrations in May 2008, *Integrate* was organized as a two-day weekend event and was held at an artist-run gallery, Post Museum, in Little India. At the event, there were screenings of migrant related films, music playing, dancing, poetry readings and a couple of plays. There was

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[5] The term 'foreign workers' in Singapore is used on migrant workers who are manual labourers. These contract workers are from neighbouring Asian countries like India, China, Thailand, Indonesia etc and often work as construction workers and domestic helpers or 'maids'. Workers who frequent Migrant Voices are Bangladeshi and Indian construction workers, and Filipino and Indonesian domestic helpers.
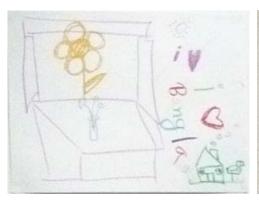
also an exhibition of photographs, drawings and creative writings that Migrant

Voices did with the workers in their past workshops. Many of the showcased

works were created and performed by foreign workers.

The artworks at *Integrate* were a mix of entertainment, aesthetic, therapy

and advocacy. Poetry expressed resistance and hardship, although many were

written in the context of another country and recited in a foreign language.
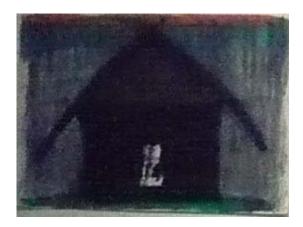
Dances, music and other displays of cultural activities brought fun and

entertainment as well as cultural exchange and reminiscing about home. The

creative writings and drawings that were exhibited on the walls were works from

workshops facilitated by Singaporean volunteers. They mostly illustrated the

workers' loneliness and yearning for their homes and patriotism for their

countries.

Creative writings and drawings done by migrant workers exhibited at the event *Integrate*

* images by author

The play *Ovibashi Jeewan* or *The Migrant Life* was performed and directed by male workers living in the H.O.M.E (Humanitarian Organization for Migration Economics) shelter. It tells the true story of one worker's experience. In the play, we see a construction worker in the first scene reporting to the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) that his employer did not pay him for his work. Not believing the worker, the MOM officer calls the employer and is reassured by the employer that the worker will be paid. However in the next scene the employer is seen asking a gangster to repatriate the worker. When the worker comes into the office to ask for his pay, the employer promises to pay him if he agrees to pack his bag and leave. The gangster then leaves with the worker. But sensing that something is not right, the worker asks to go to the washroom and runs away. The final scene is a monologue in which the worker laments that all he wants is to earn his money like any other worker.

Workers from the H.O.M.E shelter performing a play that is based on real-life experiences
* image by author

Having volunteered at Migrant Voices before, I observed that the people who attended the event were mostly the converted- they were friends of those involved. The venue was in Little India which South Asian foreign workers frequent at the weekends, and so many of them walked in. Overall, it was not a large event but there were supporters for every performance. Volunteers also actively invited passersby (who were mostly South Asian workers) to watch the play. The ordinary middle-classed Singaporeans however were visibly absent. Most of us who were there were connected to the organizers in one way or another.

Works that Migrant Voices produced are subjected to censorship of the authorities as all art works put on public display in Singapore are. Thus all film screenings, creative writings, drawings, play scripts and poetries exhibited and

performed at *Integrate* had to be vetted (inspected) by the MDA. This caused

inconvenience to the event with some poetries not being vetted in time and two

major films not passing the censorship.

Analysis

In this section, I analyze how Drama Box and Migrant Voices resist

covertly. Their resistance can be seen in two things. First, both manipulate

censorship in order to find alternative ways of performing and exhibiting works

that have difficulties passing the censors. Second, both Drama Box and Migrant

Voices raise critical social issues by creating spaces where people can cross social

boundaries and engage with each other. I suggest that by manipulating censorship,

these case studies resist from within the system. At the same time the sensitive

issues that they raise are hidden behind other concerns to 'fool' and deflect the

attention of the authorities and also to make their messages palatable to their

audience. However artists and organizers are not rebelling against the

government, instead they are educating the people and helping them develop a

critical social consciousness. Therefore they address critical issues not to confront

the state but to encourage dialogue between people. In this sense, their resistance

may be seen as preparing the ground for organization and action later on.

Censorship Manipulation

"We have to apply for license at MDA and we will say on

paper what needs to be said and we will alter things that may

be sensitive. And if MDA tells us 'no we don't want', we alter

it again on paper. But when it's the actual day, we don't care

whatever exchange we just had with MDA and do what we

originally wanted. So in essence we have to manipulate the

system, we have to lie to them." (personal interview with

anonymous informant)

As the quote above shows, in many cases organizers manipulate

censorship in order to exhibit and perform their works. On the surface, artists may

seem to obey the authorities but they sometimes lie, look for loopholes in the

system, and publicize the state's censorship strategies to minimize its effect. The

manipulation of censorship is a tactic in De Certeau's sense of the word. For De

Certeau, the weak have no spaces of their own and are always under the

surveillance of the powerful. They have to work within the systems of the

dominant and make use of opportunities to strike. Therefore unable to avoid

censorship, artists attempt to appropriate the law for their purposes. In this

section I analyze how Drama Box and Migrant Voices deal with censorship.

Drama Box

The MDA's last minute announcement of the unsuccessful application of

the play's license is a technique to prevent it from being staged in the

performance tour. By explaining the exchange that went on between MDA and

Drama Box to the public, Drama Box embarrassed the authority by exposing their

hypocritical actions. The authority suggested that they could perform the play in a

'confined venue', but this was impossible because of the short time given to the theatre company to find an alternative.

To expose the authority was not only a way of being accountable to the audience that came to watch the play, but it also raised the consciousness of the audience by revealing the difficulties that artists faced because of unreasonable censorship matters. By suggesting a 'confined venue', perhaps the authority had meant them to perform the play indoors, in a building or in a proper theatre away from unpredictable crowds in the public. Then again, an indoor performance means that only regular theater-goers would know about the play and that the audience would probably have to pay for their tickets. Drama Box however wanted to reach out to the ordinary people who would not normally go to the theatre. That was why they set up their shows in HDB neighbourhoods where human traffic was high, hoping that passersby would stop to watch their play. MDA's censorship of *Trick or Threat!* was an attempt to restrict the number and the kinds of people who could watch it because they were afraid that its critical content would cause tensions in the crowd. Thus when Drama Box was told that they could only perform *Trick or Threat!* in a 'confined venue', they resisted by interpreting the term 'confined venue' to mean the inside of a tent pitched out of doors next to a busy train station so that curious passersby could easily walk in. I see the performance in an out door tent as a mischievous way of looking for a compromise between the theatre company's goals and the authority's will.

Migrant Voices

The organizers of Migrant Voices needed to send their poems to be vetted for the event *Integrate*. However because of this cumbersome procedure they could not get all their poems in on time. To solve this problem, organizers then changed part of the poem reading session into an open mike to allow un-vetted works to be recited. This alternatively also meant that if the content of poems read during the open mike were deemed too provocative, the organizers, who had no control over them, could not be held responsible for them. Migrant Voices also attempted to change the screening of their films into a private event to maneuver around the censorship of their films- a loophole in the system that they found from past experiences. Unfortunately, that did not work this time around and two major films could not escape censorship.

The manipulation of censorship is covert and can be seen as a silent 'attack' on a system that tries to regulate artists' creative expressions. Thus with censorship manipulation, people attempt to irritate the system by using its rules against it. However, the downside of this is that sacrifices needed to be made. Although artists may sometimes outwit authorities, the fact is that they are always subjected to censorship and self-censorship in order to be in the game- to perform and display their works in public legally. Therefore because of this, their works are often coded and laced with humour. Audiences have to read them closely in order to pick out and understand the critical issues that are being addressed.

Addressing Critical Issues

> Don't need to talk about government and people, people and
> people already things are not working well! [6] (Personal
> interview with AT)

In my interviews with artists, some like AT expressed their concerns about the egotism and indifference of the people. They saw that many times people are not listening to others around them. Thus they sought to address 'people and people' issues before looking into 'government and people' issues. The main issues raised in the two cases are therefore problems of racial and class divisions in the society. The techniques that are used to address these issues resonate with Scott's theory of the hidden transcript, and De Certeau's theory of tactics. De Certeau describes that tactics are tools of the weak and are used to resist by relying on time and opportunity. Because of people's lack of power, time is of importance to tactics. In the case studies, this is seen in how artists and organizers have cleverly used current affairs to pursue issues that are of concern to them. Drama Box addressed current concerns of facing terrorism in order to talk about racism in the society and Migrant Voices took advantage of the increasing news reports of abused and neglected migrant workers to further advocate awareness of workers' situation. However as I have explained in the first chapter, not everyone shares and reads the same hidden transcripts. The organizations in my case studies

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[6] This is AT's response when discussing about the critical issues that are addressed in plays. Here he is referring to issues about the government (government and people) and issues in the society (people and people).

want to reach out to the general public but without offending dominant groups

and the state. Thus raising issues can be tricky. These sentiments are therefore

brought out subtly and without direct accusations by hiding behind other issues

and images. Drama Box lessened the spotlight on its criticisms of racial problems

by emphasizing how people can deal with terrorism, and Migrant Voices

illustrated the lives of workers by using heart-warming images instead of

shocking ones to bring attention to the xenophobic attitudes toward foreign

workers. Therefore their messages are indirect and not given to the audience.

Instead, audiences have to understand the implications of these subtleties and

work at uncovering and interpreting their significance. By codifying issues into

related but less sensitive topics and images, the case studies apply elements of the

hidden transcript into their works. In the following I will explain how messages

are 'hidden' and how we may interpret them.

Drama Box

It is quite apparent that *Trick or Threat!* used the opportunity of escalating

terrorist concerns to educate the people about racism in the society. In his

response to the MDA's censorship of the play, the artistic director explained that

the play was created out of concern about "the ability of Singaporeans to deal

with crisis caused by terrorism". (Hong par. 12) But he further argued that if not

now, "there is never going to be a right time to talk about these things (racism and

terrorism)". (Hong par. 11) Hence he suggested that the fear of interethnic conflict

in public discourse has given the state reason to sweep such social issues under

the carpet for far too long. Using authoritative methods to control the actions of people will not let them understand the reasons and effects of racism. "There is never going to be a right time" because the state is too cautious about such issues and so the people will never learn to deal with crisis. In the end the play demonstrated that the ability to 'deal with crisis caused by terrorism' is also the ability to recognize and react to racism.

Three things in the play lead me to believe this. First, to prepare the audience for its key scenes, the oppression of minorities in the society is hinted in the side stories of the original sketch. For example, the lack of opportunity at work for the Malay colleague as compared to the Chinese colleague, and the objectionable actions the Chinese boy's mother made towards his Indian girlfriend (in one conversation we know that the mother sprays air freshener in every room that the Indian girl was in).

Later in the sketch, the passengers in the train confront the Malay man in traditional clothes suspecting him to be a terrorist. The storyline in this scene focuses on how suspicion and fear gripped the passengers on the train causing them to be irrational, and then their attempts at finding out whether the Malay man in traditional clothes is carrying a bomb in his bag. All the passengers are cautious of the Malay man in traditional clothes because his clothes and ethnicity symbolize his religion is Islam and hence a possible connection to Muslim extremists. While his clothes and facial hair, and the inability to speak English alienates him from the norm and makes him suspicious, the black bag he carries is a characteristic that stereotypes dangerous men bringing suspicious objects onto

trains. This black bag often appears in terrorist prevention videos played in all train stations and the black bag in the play could be a reference to that.

In this act I suggest that race related issues are not only shown in the racial stereotyping of the 'terrorist', it is also brought out in the oppression of the Malay colleague. In the forum theatre, the facilitator emphasizes the importance of this character because of his potential to negotiate as a middle person between the passengers and the suspect. However I think that in the original script, fear causes the Malay colleague who is of the same ethnicity, believes in the same religion and speaks the same language as the suspect, to oppress himself. He is asked to confront the suspect about the bag because of his ability to speak Bahasa Melayu (the language that they both speak). But possibly because of the pressure he gets from the other passengers, he becomes afraid that the others may accuse him of being in cahoots with the suspect thus of being a terrorist. He is also afraid of the suspect for the same reasons that the other passengers are and speaks to the man with fear and distrust. In the end in order to fit into the dominant group and remain safe, he unconsciously adopt the dominant perspective. And by fearing and disbelieving the other Malay man, the Malay colleague suppresses his identity.

Finally in the last scene of the sketch, right after the Malay man in traditional clothing is apprehended as a suspected terrorist, an announcement on the train informs us that the blackout is due to a technical fault. Thus the accusation of the Malay man is unfounded. This final scene may interpret three things: 1) that over-paranoia about terrorism may inversely cause racial tensions;

2) that racial discrimination exists and is very real; 3) that the government's approach of using fear and authority to prevent racial conflict can result in a people who have become deeply racially divided. Because of the emphasis on terrorism in the play, the first interpretation is perhaps the most obvious. The second interpretation is understood if the audiences are able to grasp the oppression and difficulties that minorities face. And the third interpretation is understood if people knew about the authorities' attempts to censor the play, is able to connect the play to anti-terrorism videos in train stations and/or is aware of state repression.

Migrant Voices

Migrant Voices strives to provide artistic tools for migrant workers to express themselves because these workers are often forgotten and neglected by the society. Their audiences include both Singaporeans and foreign workers. I propose that in the case of Migrant Voices, critical issues are brought out in ways that depend on who their audiences and creators are. At *Integrate*, the creative writings and drawings that were exhibited are examples of works made by workers but facilitated by Singaporean volunteers. The play on the other hand is an example of a work that is wholly created by foreign workers (in this case male workers from the H.O.M.E shelter). There is a significant difference between the two. The first brings out issues in a subtle manner and the second does it in a straight forward, matter-of-factly way.

The drawings and writings that were exhibited at the event are made in workshops with male and female workers at the H.O.M.E. shelters. Because facilitators are Singaporeans, they are very concerned about how other Singaporeans will react to the works. One Singaporean volunteer, SB told me in a personal interview, "The general population (do) not like their faces to be rubbed in dirt. So whatever (that) we do is subtle". The mostly middle-class Singaporean volunteers of the organization will no doubt feel pressured by the public and use subtle ways to address issues. Therefore the collection of drawings and writings are heartwarming images that can be interpreted by audiences as a window into the workers' world. These humanizing images allow them to view foreign workers as human beings who laugh, cry, worry about their families and love their countries, and may cause some audiences to sympathize with foreign workers and change their stereotyping ideas of them. In a sense the heart warming images are also hints to bigger issues and criticisms. Further interpretation may suggest to the audience that too often people stereotype workers as immoral, unintelligent, and dangerous. Hence they are often not treated equally although as the drawings and writings show, they are human like everyone else. By focusing on the personal emotions and hardship of workers, volunteers attempt to indirectly bring attention to foreign workers' marginality in society.

The play on the other hand is a reenactment of a real incident that happened to one of the workers in the shelter. Unlike the drawings and writings, it attempts to expose bad employers and shows how foreign workers are repressed and bullied. It expresses the feelings of the victimized worker but it is not subtle

or heart-warming. In fact it is blatant in a way that it shows the audience what happened. A few Singaporeans and a large number of South Asian workers attended this play. At the end of the play actors got together with a drum and started singing with the crowd. After the singing was over, one actor was inspired to talk about the humanitarian organizations and services that are available to workers and gave out brochures on them. It is uncertain if the creators of the play knew the demographics of their audiences before they created it, but the outcome was a performance that attempted to outreach to workers.

This play in a way is a unique performance because by presenting the story as it is, it did not hide behind pleasantries to pacify audience who might get offended. This is probably because the organizers and creators knew who their audiences would be- South Asian foreign workers. After all, the event was held in Little India. The creators of the play were also workers from the shelter who wanted people to know about their stories. As a result, it contrasts with the drawings and writings that were exhibited on the walls.

Resistance by Education

For both Drama Box and Migrant Voices, addressing critical issues is a way of educating the people about racism in the society. Their efforts at education are to encourage critical thinking in both the oppressed and the oppressors on racism. By bringing up critical social consciousness in the people, they pave the ground for future activities in subversion. Thus the organizers envision change as long-term global projects and resist by educating their audiences. Freire said,

"Likewise, the oppressed (who do not commit themselves to the struggle unless they are convinced, and who, if they do not make such a commitment, withhold the indispensable conditions for this struggle) must reach this conviction as Subjects, not as objects. They also must intervene critically in the situation which surrounds them and whose mark they bear; propaganda cannot achieve this." (Freire 67)

In short it is important that education encourage both the oppressors and the oppressed to reflect and think critically about their social situation. With understanding and awareness will they then have the conviction to initiate change on their own. Furthermore Freire points out that in order to communicate effectively, one must "understand the structural conditions in which the thought and language of the people are dialectically framed". (Freire 96) Therefore to help people reflect and think critically both Drama Box and Migrant Voices attempt to communicate in ways that their audience will understand, that is to create scenes and images that people can connect with or have experienced in their own lives. For example in the beginning of *Trick or Threat!*, conversations in the train are ordinary everyday chit-chat. But when presented in the play, the audiences were able to see how such simple everyday activities and 'logical' actions may cause oppression. At *Integrate*, Singaporean audiences may sympathize with workers who did the drawings and writings because they have experienced those same feelings themselves. Likewise, foreign workers watching the play could have been through similar situations and may seek help for themselves, or realizing now that others have the same difficulties may seek to help them. Thus although it may not

be obvious, education in cultural resistance may have some impact on people. Awareness of foreign workers' issues is increasing as people debate them in public forums and in newspapers. The state too has begun to step up on ensuring proper housing for workers. Race issues are however still invisible in the public and are monitored by the government. Perhaps the impacts of racial issues on people are at an individual level.

Aside from its ability to help people to reflect, I like to bring out the point that education is also a non-violent technique. By "non-violent" I mean that artists and organizers were not angry or hateful, nor did they want to hurt those that they resist in their works. To be motivated by these feelings is a kind of violence that Gandhi calls "passive violence". Our case studies are non-violent because 1) they do not exhibit anger, 2) they do not endanger themselves, and 3) they do not use force. This care for the self and others display a belief that kindness will render the other party receptive to new ideas and suggestions. Thus Drama Box and Migrant Voices aim to maintain a good relationship with those whom they oppose and at the same time take care at not endangering themselves. They do not believe in forcing their ideas on those whom they resist because using 'force' cannot make others revise the ways that they think. One informant, JW, explains this approach in the sketch that he drew for part of our interview.

JW's sketch

"So we are like the people here, trying to influence this guy. … And its music notes, cause we are doing (it) in a very heart warming kinda way," he explained. In this sketch he and other volunteers were persuading the 'guy' to change the blueprint of a half built house. The volunteers' voices are depicted with music notes above their heads indicating as he said that they are doing it in a very 'heartwarming' way. Therefore in *Trick or Threat!* and *Integrate*, Drama Box and Migrant Voices chose to address social issues by illustrating the difficulties that the marginalized encounter. They did not attack with accusations and prefer to educate.

Conclusion

Both the manipulation of censorship and the addressing of critical issues show that artists and organizers from Drama Box and Migrant Voices attempt to resist in indirect ways. I suggest that these case studies demonstrate two things. The first is that resistance is not always directed at the state. Second, they address critical issues in order to educate people.

In the case studies, we see that Drama Box and Migrant Voices subverted both the state and the people. However the ways in which they address social issues are more apparent at revealing the shortcomings of the people than the state. As Foucault argues, power is not endowed in a singular bloc but rather it is something that circulates through discourse, language and the institutions which produce meanings, making individuals the vehicles of power. (Foucault, 98) Therefore power does not only exist in the state. Drama Box's and Migrant Voice's educational objective show that resistance can be directed at the non-dominant who are also part of this web of power.

Unlike what many think of resistance, Drama Box and Migrant Voices did not involve themselves with protest nor were the artists and organizers obsessed with opposing the authority. Both examples were instead interested in social change. They brought up critical issues to educate their audiences. Although these issues were never so obscure that audiences missed the point, they are still indirect and hidden in some ways, and audiences have to work at interpreting and understanding the messages.

However educating for social change through cultural resistance in Singapore has its limits. For Freire, the key to resisting oppression and gaining liberation is dialogue. Dialogue is a combination of reflection and action, or praxis. Only when reflection is practiced with action can change take place. Freire said,

> "When a world is deprived of its dimension of action, reflection automatically suffers as well; and the word is changed into idle chatter, into verbalism, into an alienated an alienating "blah". It becomes an empty word, one which cannot denounce the world, for denunciation is impossible without a commitment to transform, and there is no transformation without action." (Freire 87)

I suggest that perhaps a lack of action is the reason why even though our case studies attempt to set the ground for organization and change, very little transformation happened visibly in the society. People are not actively trying to make a difference. This may not be all the fault of Drama Box and Migrant Voices who worked as best as they can under the surveillance and censorship of the government. By making a forum theatre play, Drama Box did try to get their audiences involved and practiced different ways of solving problems. Although Migrant Voices could create works that are more interactive with the audience, it nevertheless told the stories of workers and is an organization where people can actively volunteer and help out. The lack of action may be attributed to the people's perception of their world, which is in turn shaped by state control and

other global influences. (The affect of global and local connections will be further

discussed in the next chapter.) Thus their inaction is an attitude that is developed

from the effects of their environment. Possibly, most do not see a need to actively

raise and address issues and participate at a level that is unconsciously political,

individual, and when their survival depends on it. The hidden-ness of messages

too may have contributed to the slow process of things, for to 'hide' messages

means that there will always be people who will go away without understanding

the main points of the matter.

Non-confrontational resistance in this sense is a means of educating

people for social change. But the question is even with knowledge and critical

thinking, will people really begin to act? There are perhaps other factors involved

that are not discussed here. In the next chapter I will look into what I think is the

missing link, the ways in which our perspectives and identities are changing with

growing global and local connectivities.

Chapter 4

The Cases of the *Action Figures' Protest* and the *Four Million Frowns Project*: Bypassing Censorship and Expressing Discontent in Spontaneous Projects

In the past few years, weblogs (or most commonly known as blogs) have been used as a tool for subversion in Singapore. Unlike art companies and organizations who aim to educate people, individuals and groups use the World Wide Web as a domain for discussion, organization and publication, and create works and events to comment on happenings in the society. I suggest that these spontaneous projects bypass censorship to express their discontent. Their works are parodies with ambiguous messages hence they are able to escape the authorities. These case studies show that there are different ideas of resistance and in order to understand the intentions and causes of them, we have to look at how global and local connectivities influence people's ways of knowing.

Case Descriptions

The case of the *Action Figures' Protest*

In late August 2007, eight young people decided to hold a photo-shoot of their action figurines (complete with mini placards) illustrating a protest against the local anime distributor Odex at the Youth Park in downtown Singapore. They called this event the <u>People's Action Figures Party</u> PAFP which is also a play on the name of the dominant governing party, the People's Action Party or PAP.

Odex is a local anime DVD distributor who attempted to take legal action against people who download free fan-subs (or anime that are subtitled by

volunteer fans world wide) from the Internet. Most of these anime series were not

released in Singapore as yet but Odex claimed that the downloading of fan subs

had rendered the need for distribution obsolete. They pointed out that downloaded

anime is an infringement of copyright and demanded local internet service

providers disclose the identities of 'illegal downloaders'. (Ng par. 6) Needless to

say, local anime fans did not think that Odex had the right to ask downloaders for

compensation because it was not the original copyright owner and they only had a

lease of the copyrights. The court case of Odex will continue into 2008 in which

Odex will seek to represent major anime producers from Japan in order to prevent

illegal anime downloads. In the mean time in August 2007, the online community

of anime fans had decided to express their displeasure.

The photo-shoot of the *Action figures' protest* was led by a blogger who

uses the moniker Zer0. He documented in his blog that he and seven other

bloggers started out by discussing on their blogs what they thought were the

unjust actions of Odex and then decided to act upon it. At the venue however,

they were met with four riot buses and plain-clothed police officers. The police

allowed them to do what they sought to do, but advised them to leave as soon as

they were done. They also took down the identity card information (which consist

of their identity numbers, names and addresses) of some of the participants and

video-recorded their activities. Zer0 also let it be known in his blog that the police

continued to trail them after the photo-shoot was over. The event was not widely

reported in local media initially although Reuters did mention it. However the

Action Figures' Protest did not end with the photoshoot, it continued to be

discussed on the internet and in other media. Photos from the shoot were later uploaded by the participants onto their blogs accompanied by detailed descriptions of their experiences and thoughts. Hence information of the unknown 'protest' was mostly circulated on the Internet through emails and local, personal, satirical and political blogs. I too received news of this event in a forwarded email from a friend and read about it on someone else's blog. A few weeks after Reuter's report, two local free print media– *Today* (a newspaper), and *I-S* (a magazine) published articles on it too. Later, *Channel News Asia* (a television news network) also featured the "Action figures' protest" in a program call *Get Real* focusing on the Odex incident and privacy in the digital age.

Action figures 'protesting' at the Youth Park

* Images by Zer0.
Used with permission.

Action figures 'protesting' at the Youth Park

Plain-clothed police officer (seen here behind the effigy of Odex's president) video recording the
"Action figure's protest" • The red riot buses parked in the vicinity

* Images by Zer0. Used with permission.

Although Zer0 and his group wanted to pressure Odex to stop them from

demanding compensation from downloaders, they were afraid of the law

enforcers. On his blog and in my interview with him, Zer0 professed that he was

fearful because he was not sure if he was breaking the law. In the interview, he

relegated this fear to being raised in the 70s and 80s when the ISD (Internal

Security Department) had detained a number of people for the 'Marxist

Conspiracy' Case.

Thus Zer0 and his group not wanting to cause any trouble for themselves, tolerated the surveillance of the police and its intimidation tactics. The group acted quickly during their public protest as they felt the need to leave as soon as they were done. They then made clear to the blog sphere that they were doing a photo shoot of the toys and not a political demonstration, hence indicating that they were only making 'harmless' art. In his blog and comments posted at other people's blog entries Zer0 emphasized that he did not, at any time, blame the police. He wrote in the blog entry titled "「ODEX倒す！！」:the making",

> As much as I had my rights as a free Citizen, I also did not
> want to impose on the police. They're just doing their job(s).
> … I'm sure the police and the riot squad was there because of
> the Anti-ODEX protesters. Maybe they had turned out in full
> force expecting that there would be a group of rabble-rousers
> carrying banners and pickets, threatening to burn stuff.

In this quote Zer0 differentiated himself from 'anti-Odex protesters' and reasoned that the police were at the site of the event because they thought there was going to be a demonstration (which did not happen) and that that was not their purpose. Very clearly, Zer0 told his viewers that the *Action Figures' Protest* had no intentions, political or not, to carry out a demonstration and was not doing anything illegal. However, it is also arguable that these actions of abiding to the

law enforcers are a form of deception to mask seditious messages interpreted from their satirical photo-shoot.

The Case of the *Four Million Frowns project*

The *Four million frowns project* is a blog that was created in June 2006 by an art student in response to the *Four million smiles* advertising campaign sponsored by the Singapore government. The *Four million smiles* campaign was launched to encourage Singaporeans to smile more in preparation for the 61st annual meeting of the International Monetary Fund, World Bank Group, and their 16,000 delegates that was to be held in the country that September. Singaporeans were asked to send pictures of their smiling faces to the official website of the campaign with chances for participants to win several lucky draws. These images were eventually put together into a huge mural to welcome foreign delegates. MT, the creator of the *Four million frowns project* on the other hand, asked people to send in their frowns. Participants were told that they were free to interpret what a frown would look like. Hence drawings and pictures of animals were also accepted. Updates of images and names of contributors were put up on the project's blog as well. Finally images of frowning faces were put together to form the letters F, R, O, W, N. The creator and his project were also featured on an article in The Straits Times.

The completed montage of frowning faces

A closer look at the alphabets 'o' and 'w'

* Images collaged by MT. Used with permission.

It was reported by Bangkok Post that the government spent 60 million US dollars on the event. ("NGO Ban") Preparation included giving the venue, Suntec Singapore International Convention and Exhibition Centre, a face-lift and beautifying parts of the island especially those around the vicinity of the convention centre with tropical flowers, shrubs and trees. Security was stepped up and of course the *Four million smiles* campaign was used to publicize and to prepare the service sector for the event. Despite efforts at smartening the city's image, the controversy of the IMF and World Bank annual meeting was an

international attack on the city's stringent laws that do not allow outdoor demonstrations. Twenty-eight civic activists were denied entry to the country and international activists were not allowed to protest even though they were from accredited civil service organizations by the IMF and World Bank. Appeals to the government were rejected as the government cited security reasons including potential terrorists' threats. Pressure from international NGOs (who threatened to boycott the meeting) and World Bank president Paul Wolfowitz (who criticized Singapore for banning accredited activists) did not succeed but a concession was given allowing activists to protest indoors in a fourteen by eight meter space in the building's lobby. However, only accredited activists were allowed in the space and they could only hold placards. (Levett par. 11) Local activists took the opportunity to condemn the government's lack of human rights once again.

Another art student who was actively opposing the IMF and World Bank meeting created a second online project called *Four hundred frowns* in August. It also called for people to send in pictures of their frowns but this time in response of the IMF and the World Bank meeting. The site cites that it did not favour 'globalism, neo-liberalism and capitalism in general' (Palay par. 3) A factsheet on the IMF and the World Bank is also available for download on the website. The creator of this online project was detained (and later released) when he attempted to distribute printed versions of the factsheet in public during the IMF and World Bank meeting.

Thus the *Four million Frowns project* was created during a time when tension between the state and international organizations was high. The

government was very aware of human rights criticisms made of them. This resulted in a double standard where international activists were allowed to protest in regulated forms but local activists were detained when they attempted to do the same.

And so MT told me that he did not want the project to be interpreted as opposing the state and he did not want people to think that he was just a kid who was angry at the authority. (E-mail interview) On the first entry of the project's blog, he wrote, "Call it a parody, a chance to show your displeasure. Whatever. But don't take it too seriously. Just have fun while you are at it". Thus he stated his intentions and turned the project into a satire. Even so, there was still a sense of fear. Some people sent in pictures that had their faces covered and others asked that their names not be published on the blog so that they could remain anonymous. MT himself was afraid when he heard that the other art student who created a similar project was detained and his computer was confiscated for investigation. He expected that the police would call on him for questioning but that did not happen.

Analysis

In this section I will analyze how the "Action Figures' Protest" and the *Four Million Frowns Project* resist in a non-confrontational manner. Although they seem bold by bypassing censorship and creating possibilities for self-expression, the meanings of their projects have elements of the hidden transcript. Their non-confrontational resistance is brought out with the use of carnivalesque

masks, parodies, and role of reversals. By producing carnival laughter, which

Bakhtin describes as directed at everyone including the creators and is

simultaneously gay and mocking (11,12), it asserts the ambiguous character of

their projects. This is because carnival laughter "asserts and denies" and "buries

and revives" at the same time. (Bakhtin 12) Hence the people in these case studies

use the ambiguity of parodies and humour to criticize the state in a covert manner.

I suggest that this form of resistance is caused by people's ways of knowing

developed from local and global connections. This includes sensibilities learned

from living under strict political control and exposure to ideas and happenings in

the global world, in this case I emphasize experiencing the global through the

internet.

Bypassing Censorship

Both the *Action Figures' Protest* and the *Four Million Frowns Project* did

not send their works to MDA (Media Development Authority) for vetting. They

were spontaneous personal projects and were not tied to any organizations or

companies. In a way their publicized independent projects represent the

alternative opinions of the people. By bypassing censorship, the contents of the

projects were not controlled by authorities. Thus Zer0 and MT had more freedom

to express themselves and their messages were harsher and less veiled in the sense

that they were sarcastic and not concealed behind pleasantries. The "Action

Figures' Protest" was clearly a 'protest' against Odex even though protesting is

not allowed in Singapore. The *Four Million Frowns Project* was also clearly a parody of the original *Four Million Smiles* campaign by the government.

However the repercussion of this 'freedom' was that both bloggers were more fearful of the authorities because they were not sure if they were breaking the law. Zer0 told me that he "broke out in sweat" when he saw the riot buses parked nearby and was approached by a plain-clothed policeman before he started the photo-shoot. He was intimated by their surveillance. (Personal Interview) MT also said he was afraid when he realized that someone else who had created a similar project was detained, although he later found out that their agendas were different. (Email Interview) Thus both Zer0 and MT self-censored to make their messages indirect. For example, Zer0 used the photo taking session of toys 'protesting' to mask a real protest, and MT chose to make fun of the government campaign and parodied it in a role reversal. In a way, it is fear of the state that causes the creation of projects that are infused with humour and laughter.

Expressing Discontent

Zer0 and MT created the projects because they were motivated by feelings of frustration and anger, and wanted to act out their opinions on the matters concerned. MT said that the original 'smile' campaign made his 'blood boil' because it portrayed Singaporeans as people who would "bend over backwards for money" and welcome the ambassadors of the IMF and World Bank with fake smiles. (Email Interview) On his blog, Zer0 said he 'snapped' after reading an article in *The Straits Times* on how Odex was getting court orders to force local

internet providers to release the identities of users who had allegedly downloaded anime illegally online. (Zer0 "Odex goes to hell" par. 3) Not only did he feel that Odex was 'extorting' money from kids, he felt that their legal actions endangered the privacy of internet users and the legitimacy of sharing information (as oppose to piracy).

Therefore the projects of Zer0 and MT brought the issues that they found unreasonable to the foreground. Furthermore the interactive nature of blogs allowed people to contribute to the project thus spreading awareness and discussions around these issues. Zer0's 'protest' motivated discussions in many political and non-political blogs and forums. The incident was also published on newspapers, magazines and even re-enacted on a news channel. MT's project was featured on newspaper too and hyperlinked to Wikipedia. His project also allowed people to participate and express themselves by sending in their pictures and debating the issue on the blog.

However, I like to explain a little about the atmosphere in the environment while these projects were taking place. Despite their expressions of discontent, the bloggers always made a point to emphasize that their intentions were not to oppose the state. Indeed, in my interviews with Zer0 and MT, they said that part of the reason for creating their projects was for fun. In real life, their attitudes toward the government were not hostile although in their projects they were challenging the state. The projects created some impact as people in the blogsphere started to talk about it. Soon knowledge of the events was picked up by other media, for example the newspapers, magazines and a news channel.

Although they helped greatly in spreading news and discussions, all these mediums are state controlled. Of course articles here avoid mentioning criticisms that were made of the state.

My analysis of the way that the case studies express their discontent is that perhaps it is necessary for Zer0 and MT to declare their harmless intentions. This is an act to 'legalize' their projects so that they will not be brought down by the authorities and people are able to spread the news and talk about them with better ease. In public and official publications, none mentioned about how these projects might be challenging the state. However in non-political blogs, most times discussions in this area were interestingly contradicting. There were some who reacted by expressing their opposition to the authorities and others who disagree with this opposition pointing out that Singapore is not a place where one can oppose. Although I did not read of any comments that analyzed how Zer0 and MT might criticize the state, the discussions that they had created in the blogsphere were obsessed with the subject of the government. Thus I believe that people somehow understood that the two projects were challenging authority even though it was not mentioned. In this way, their messages were hidden and evidence of them were seen in the discussions that they had inspired. In the next section I will explain the ways that the two projects express themselves and resist using ambiguity to transmit their hidden messages.

Ambiguity in Non-Confrontational Resistance

Unlike Drama Box and Migrant Voices, Zer0 and MT's goals were not social change. Instead, their objectives were to create a version of reality alternative to that of the official story. By wanting to contest official realities, they were being subversive. However at the same time they were careful not to offend and get into trouble with the official. It is in this sense that their projects have a 'hidden' nature. Thus I propose that the case studies in this chapter resist the state covertly by transmitting ambiguous messages through the use of carnivalesque humour. Specifically, they created parodies of real life events and situations to express their concerns. The parody according to Bakhtin is created in the disguise of legalized activities. But in actuality, it penetrates official ideology and ritual in a comic aspect. (Bakhtin 13) Therefore as I have mentioned before, both bloggers stated their 'harmless' intentions in order to legalize their projects and label them as parodies so that they could make a point covertly.

The "Action Figures' Protest"

When I interviewed Zer0, he drew me a sketch of the cheeky wink emoticon meant to be read sideways on the computer. The cheeky wink symbolizes his connection to the digital and the internet and at the same time it represents mischief and humour.

;-)

The 'cheeky wink' sketch by Zer0

It is not surprising that Zer0 considered the importance of a 'cheeky wink attitude' when resisting, for humour bestows on him a different position from that of a political critic because of its apparent lack of seriousness. The *Action Figures' Protest* is a parody because toys were used to symbolize a real life protest.

Unquestionably, the *Action Figure's Protest* was a protest against Odex for the toys were holding anti Odex signs and slogans in their 'hands' and raising their arms against the effigy of Odex's president. Yet this also carried messages that can be interpreted to be poking fun at the state. The issue of an illegal outdoor demonstration of five people or more has been constantly questioned and brought up by activists. Thus the photo-shoot of numerous toy figures protesting is in fact a parody of this strict law. In the photo-shoot there were not just five 'people' protesting but numerous toys demonstrating and holding placards, donning 'war gears and machines', possessing 'supernatural powers and advanced technologies'. In a way, the performance fantasized a people with immense power and hitting back with all that they have with nobody to stop them. By calling their toys the 'People's Action Figure Party' (PAFP), Zer0 and his group were also

referring to the dominant political party, the People's Action Party (or PAP). This

humorous take of course can be read in several different ways and it is impossible

for one to miss the implied joke in the name PAFP. The unspoken thought in

many people's minds was: were Zer0 and his gang making fun of the state? So

then with the photo images of the toy figures posted on their blogs, were they

resisting Odex and/or the government? Was it resistance at all? Was it just for

fun? Similarly, during their performance it was because Zer0 and his group were

not holding placards themselves and seemed to be only taking pictures that police

officers that were on site were unsure of the situation and were unable to act

towards them.

The *Four Million Frowns* project

The *Four Million Frowns* project parodied the government *sponsored*

Four Million Smiles campaign. It mocked the official by copying the campaign

and directing frowns instead of smiles back at the government. The project

exposed what many might have secretly thought- that the government has

launched yet another ridiculous campaign. We may interpret this in the mass

pictures of frowns that MT put together in a collage. In a sense they were funnier

to look at since people do not generally take photographs of frowns. It also shows

in a mischievous way, a refusal to conform. Thus MT commented on the silliness

of the original campaign by inverting the smiles. With the frowns, he also

criticized Singapore's lack of backbone against international organizations and to

put it bluntly, money. If the 'smiles' campaign was meant to welcome foreign

delegates, then to frown in MT's project can also mean that participants in the project disagree with the event and its supporters. However at the same time the project was comic and funny because of its reversal of the original. Responses to the blog/project were mixed. Some people thought the idea of the project was 'cute' and humorous. *The Straits Times* newspaper even featured the story in its lifestyle segment. Others thought MT was a rebellious kid who should know better than to criticize the authorities while there were those who got into a heated debate on the blog. Again, people may ask the same questions. Is the *Four million frowns project* just a clever project made for fun? Or is it really an act of resistance?

In politically controlled Singapore, the ambiguity of humour makes it possible for the individual to escape from overt repression or in other words, to bypass censorship because it is never made explicitly clear who the object of their wit is even though it is unmistakable to the public. As Hart says, "after all, "fools" should not be taken seriously and replying in a serious manner to a joke is generally "not done"." (Hart 1) Indeed the authorities did not 'hijack' these projects and left them to their devices. Furthermore the carnivalesque characteristics of the projects allow bloggers to mock the official by rejecting conformity and turning things inside out without getting into trouble. Thus the two projects were able to resist covertly.

Globalization and Ways of Knowing

I propose that the ambiguous approach to resistance is a result of bloggers' perspectives on the state. They are informed by the complexity of today's globalized world and this knowledge in turn shapes their identities and thoughts, guiding them in their actions of resistance.

In both case studies, the usage of blogs for resistance shows the common practice and influence of the Internet and its tools on a younger generation of people. Therefore I would like to bring to attention Richard Kahn's and Douglas M. Kellner's suggestion in their article <u>Oppositional politics and the internet</u> to look at the importance of analyzing the relationship between globalization- in this sense the globalizing effects of the Internet- and local resistance. They argue that

> Hence, an important challenge for developing a critical theory of globalization, from the perspective of contemporary technopolitics, is to think through the relationships between the global and the local by observing how global forces influence and even structure an increasing number of local situations. This in turn requires analysis of how local forces mediate the global, inflect global forces to diverse ends and conditions, and produce unique configurations of the local and the global as matrix for thought and action in everyday life. (710)

Besides understanding how globalization informs people's local environment, we need to also take into account how local environments and happenings might

affect their ideas of globalization. Thus approaches to resistance, we might say, are influenced by both global and local activities. With easy access to information and people on the Internet, bloggers are able to expand their knowledge and ability to criticize the state, their choices and forms of expression also increase with the tools available on the Internet. However the strict and politically controlled environment of the local scale, at the same time, causes bloggers to carefully observe their distance from outright political commentary and to appear non-confrontational. We can argue that it is because sensibilities in the global inform the local and sensibilities in the local inform the global that we see conflicts coexisting in the projects of our examination.

Inderpal Grewal further explains how this confusing trend of things evolves. In her book Transnational America, she suggests that activities like technological progress and the rapid connections and movements of capital, goods, media and labour around the world have affected the ways that individuals, organizations and states perceive their identities, make decisions and act. She sees these identities as informed by transnational connectivities. She explains the notion of connectivities:

> Connectivities enabled communication across boundaries and borders through articulations and translations of discourses that circulated within networks. Subjects were constituted as discursive nodes within uneven and heterogeneous transnational processes. Comprising histories of various kinds, of new and old forms of globalization, transnational connectivities enabled multiple nationalisms and identities to

> coexist as well as to shift from one to the other. They
>
> produced institutions and subjects, places and identities out of
>
> circulating discourses. (36-37)

It is important to note that for Grewal, transnational connectivities are heterogeneous processes as opposed to homogenous notions of globalization. Furthermore production of knowledge about cultures and nations may differ with the varied backgrounds of subjects, including their class, gender, race, and sexuality which are all part of this production of knowledge. (Grewal 45) Hence Grewal's theory of transnational connectivities suggests that 1) people articulate and translate ideas differently depending on their varied backgrounds to create knowledge; 2) because of this process, people have multiple identities that "coexist as well as shift from one to the other".

Therefore I propose that ambiguous messages in our bloggers' projects are created with the rationality of multiple identities. They were not confused but in fact, their multiple identities helped them to survive and resist indirectly in their environment, as they could perceive from different angles through different identities. The result is a non-confrontational resistance.

Conclusion

The case studies in this chapter illustrates a form of covert resistance that is bolder and more provocative than the other cases because they bypass censorship and are able to express themselves with less restrictions. Their ambiguous messages transmit clearly the ironies of the matter but not their stance

in it. Unlike the case studies in the previous chapter, the main concerns of the bloggers in this chapter were not to create social change, and they do not question the systems that they are living in. Perhaps this is because our bloggers were not anxious over political and social issues.

But I propose that the ambiguity of their resistance is the result of their ways of knowing. The complexity and the heterogeneous processes of globalization and the varied backgrounds and locality of the people caused them to perceive the state, their positions in society, and the act of resistance in different ways. These are views that they consulted when creating expressive projects to resist. Thus reasons for ambiguous messages and non-confrontational forms of resistance can be found in people's ways of knowing, as we can see a very complicated process that involves influences on the global, local, and the individual scale. This therefore suggests that resistance exists in different forms and that one has to investigate it by looking at its geography. Non-confrontational resistance cannot be categorized and formulated; its forms in Singapore can be different from that of another country, its cases of resistance also vary from one another.

Conclusion

Revisiting Ideas and Thoughts on Singapore

In Singapore although the infiltration of liberalizing ideas has not affected the PAP's control on politics, cultural resistances here do still criticize mainstream paradigms as long as it does not upset the government's political control. Issues in regard to the state and its politics are avoided or watered down even though they have a part to play in people's reasons for resisting. This is mostly because the people fear of being prosecuted by the authoritarian government. But in order to survive the grinds of everyday life and express their concerns about the society, some use education and humour- ways that are less aggressive to create awareness of the repression that goes on in the society.

The theory of the hidden transcripts by James Scott helps explain some of the ways of covert resistance. In the case studies critical issues are disguised under less sensitive topics and communicated in an ambiguous manner in order to transmit messages to their audiences. These are done through hints and codes in artworks- hidden transcripts, some more obvious than others. However they are not always only pitted against the ruling class or the state. As we can see, both Drama Box and Migrant Voices focused on raising issues on racism and social class prejudices within the city. De Certeau's idea of tactics suggests a different form of non-confrontational resistance, that which is related to the art of survival. It strikes silently within the system and relies on time. One can say that in a sense our case studies 'pilfer' from the state when they take the opportunity to address

issues in current affairs and manipulate censorship in order to exhibit and perform

works that have problems with the censors. By knowing the system well, they are

able to find ways of manipulating the law and not get into trouble. Thus the

limitations that artists and individuals face only push them to find creative and

non-violent solutions in cultural production.

Two main points emerge from my analysis of the case studies. First artists

and social workers from Drama Box and Migrant Voices start to educate for

social change. Their approach resonates with Freire's <u>Pedagogy of the Oppressed</u>

and ideas are not imposed on their audience but are communicated in a way to

help the audience reflect on them. This move attempts to encourage critical social

consciousness in people, therefore preparing the grounds for future organization.

Additionally, the focus on educating people brings forward the idea that the state

does not hold all power. Power does not reside in one entity but is distributed

through a web of relations. Repression, as Drama Box and Migrant Voices show

in their works also exists in racial prejudices in the society.

The case of the *Action Figures' Protest* and the *Four Million Frowns

Project* demonstrate the next point. These projects are performed with carnival

humour, laughter, and parodies, and reflect Bakhtin's analysis of the carnival.

Their ambiguity causes multiple interpretations of their works and allows them to

resist covertly because it is never very clear what their intentions are. The nature

of internet-based blogs also inform us that attitudes toward non-confrontational

resistance may be produced by changing local and global connections, what

Grewal calls transnational connectivities.

The topic of transnational connectivities is interesting because it suggests that global developments in economy and politics, and local policies and ideologies have influenced people's multiple shifting identities and their decisions about resistance. I did not investigate this question in detail because I think that more research and in-depth interviews are needed to explore the connections and identities that caused for example Drama Box and Migrant Voices to focus more on the people and less on the state, or that caused Zer0 and MT to adhere to the laws of the country. I would like to however bring out some possibilities related to global and local connectivities that may cause people to resist covertly.

Unquestionably, people fear the state and that is one of the main issues to think about but it is perhaps not the only reason that resistance is non-confrontational. Aside from the restrictions on local activities, global and regional developments are also taken into consideration. For example people may be aware of competition in the economy from rising neighbouring countries or they may be mindful of the government's efforts at keeping up with the competition to maintain the affluence of the country. These official efforts are nevertheless seen as beneficial to the individual and this may be considered when producing cultural resistance. On the other hand the government's decision to 'globalize' the city (again this is to further the development of the country) and capitalize the cultural sector could have helped in creating the conditions for covert resistance to surface. While art events and performances are encouraged to beautify and sophisticate the city, covert cultural resistance can also be used to boast the state's tolerance towards criticisms and resistance. These factors add to the positive

image of Singapore and push the 'global city' project forward. Therefore by looking at global and local connections, we are able to see the larger picture. This reveals the fact that not all resistance comes about as a result of the desire to improve conditions for all local groups. Equally, not all resistance is necessarily based on self-less motives.

What the above discussion and the case studies in this paper remind us is that there are different ideas of what resistance means and different approaches to how one can resist. Much depends on the context of the situation and the many forces that affect it. This is why I think that Scott's theory of how seditious messages in the hidden transcript are created to eventually overthrow the local ruling class needs to be re-thought. Resistance may no longer be contained within the concept of the nation state. Under a highly politically controlled state, people in Singapore have sought ways to resist with tactics and considerations that go beyond the boundaries of the state. After having looked at the causes and practices of non-confrontational cultural resistance, perhaps the next step is to further research the impact that it has on the society.

Finally, allow me to end this paper with some thoughts on Singapore. This city is paradoxical in every way. The omnipresence of the state is coupled with its affluence and wealth. The citizens of a materially rich society are burdened by their fast and expensive living. The desire to progress on the global stage contradicts the commitment in conservative moral principles. With all these complications and confusions collapsed into one small island, the absurdity of life seems to jump right out at you.

Through the research of this paper, I have learned a lot more about this city. It is not one from the pages of George Orwell's novel *1984*. Its material comforts and creative festivals do not make it a paradise either. However now I realize that there is more than endless shopping and festivals happening in Singapore. Rather than remain programmed and obedient, 'renegade' residents have started to stir within the contradictions, peering through the 'protective blanket' both to question and to discover. They take risks, serving experimental potions concocted discreetly for the unsuspecting. The need for critical expression persists despite the barriers that our renegades face, even when these expressions seem to be merely harmless entertainment and nothing else. There is much more happening in Singapore than I thought.

But perhaps more than to subvert, performances are also made to inspire and to create a presence, saying, 'yes there are people who bother with stuff like that'. Like minds attract and on this small island it is not difficult to find each other and lend support for bigger creations. It is at this positive point that I think with excitement that our cultural dessert is gradually blooming.

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