

The Significance of Queer Space

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Abstract

Queering Chinatown: Significance of Queer Space

This dissertation is motivated by an interest in portraying the Chinatown area as a queer site. I feel a need to challenge our heterosexual perspective of Chinatown as presented by governmental bodies through historical texts and travel brochures which I feel are unsubstantial because these sources are limiting in addressing the multi-faceted nature of such a diverse environment and homophobic in concealing the actual history of this place. These official histories and narratives constructed by dominant authoritative bodies are polarized and geared towards either the marketing of Chinatown as a site for tourism by presenting the area as a site of Chinese heritage, or biased by selectively preserving the history of dominant heterosexual culture. Being a site of diversity and dynamism as seen in development of the area into the heart of a gay scene, or a site of high fashion shopping, our ideas of this site might be static and outdated. I believe that a queer discourse would aid in furthering architectural discussion about spaces in Chinatown by shedding light on embodied experiences within the area which are less well known and probably misunderstood. Through a queer discourse on the site we can come to an understanding on how queers interact and make meaningful spaces in the modern metropolis.

Aaron Betsky's concept of queer space explains that queer individuals are able to redesign and imagine existing spaces and structures of the city through appropriating certain material aspects of reality into a synthetic space like the space of a reflection in the mirror. Acts of sexual transgression committed in these constructed 'mirror' spaces enables queer individuals to rebel and dissolve the material world that is suppressive, bringing back consciousness to the body through seduction.

Criminalization of queer sex in Singapore since 1872 when Singapore was a British colony and the subsequent cultivation of a conservative society with traditional values have resulted in queer histories

being displaced, concealed and distorted. Being alternate in nature, the idea of queer resists conventional analysis. Therefore we gain entry into this mythical and complex queer space through alternative means: from the perspectives of queer individuals, via poetry and fictional stories which provide architectural evidence and aid in the piecing together of a queer narrative.

Through Betsky's theories on queer space and with the aid of the above mentioned queer sources which not only describes spaces but also activities, memories and emotions, we can begin recognizing and analyzing the role that architecture and urbanism plays in the formation and maintenance of queer subculture in contemporary society. This dissertation will discuss the various ways in which the built environment contributes to the 'construction' of queer sub-culture and articulate how both architectural space and the city can represent ideas such as queerness. In a climate of increasing tolerance of queers, it documents a queer space that is rapidly disappearing.

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Introduction: Queering Heteronormativity

Queer

*1 a: worthless, counterfeit <queer money> b: questionable, suspicious 2 a: differing in some odd way from what is usual or normal b (1): eccentric, unconventional (2): mildly insane: touched c: absorbed or interested to an extreme or unreasonable degree: obsessed d (1) often disparaging: homosexual (2) sometimes offensive: gay (3): not quite well*¹

According to the Merriam-Webster online dictionary, the term queer has a wide range of definitions besides it being used as a derogatory term to brand homosexuals. The expression 'queer' today is a reclamation of the offensive and homophobic term conventionally used to brand effeminate gay males. Synonymous with both 'gay' and 'homosexual', it is also a proud claim to being different and alternate. David Halperin, a queer theorist asserts that when used as direct reference to any particular sexual identity, the term queer is limiting and functions no more than a mode of categorization.² He, together with other leading queer theorists such as Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick present the idea of 'queer' as an alternative approach to challenge our traditional perception of sexuality where only heterosexuality is viewed as normal and correct.^{3 4} To these theorists, the notion of queer derives its

¹ Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary. "Queer" 2009. Merriam-Webster Online (Accessed 17 Aug. 2009) <<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/queer>>.

² Turner, William Benjamin. "Shrinking History: Queer Theory, Psychoanalysis, and Genealogy" in A Genealogy of Queer Theory (Temple University Press, Philadelphia 19122, 2000), p. 134.

³ Butler, Judith. "Introduction" in Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex" (New York: Routledge 1993), p. 3. Here the term "heteronormative matrix" was used. "the regulation of identificatory practices" as directly related to constructed notions of gender and "sex" compounded here with the self-consciously defined ideals imposed upon the modern city form, which is designed to enforce and valorize a framing of the family unit.

meaning from being alternative to the norm, to being different from being hetero-normative. This idea of queer theory has enabled more mobile and intense discourse by allowing theoretical concepts initially applied to issues of sexual identity and the oppression of sexual minorities to be repositioned in studies of other social subgroups as well as in studies of the written and spoken word, the built environment, material objects, and other products of culture.

With the idea of queer being unconventional, having an ability to make questionable what that is traditionally accepted, this dissertation aims to explore queer representation of Singapore's Chinatown by identifying of Chinatown as a queer site via narratives of queer individuals. Local sites will be discussed in relation to theories proposed by spatial theorists such as Aaron Betsky and Diane Chislom. This discussion works to challenge how Chinatown has been presented to us historically and how these histories have affected our contemporary notions of this space. Discussing and exploring spaces from a queer perspective, we are able to provide further discourse on the site of Chinatown because “the term 'queer' reflects an inclusive stand- point based on *difference* from or opposition to the ideology of heteronormativity.”⁵

It is not difference which immobilizes us, but silence.

And there are so many silences to be broken.

(Lorde 1984, 44)

⁴ Turner, William Benjamin. “Shrinking History: Queer Theory, Psychoanalysis, and Genealogy” in *A Genealogy of Queer Theory* (Temple University Press, Philadelphia 19122, 2000), pp. 134-135.

⁵ Warner, M. “Introduction” in *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. xxiii.

Breaking the Silence: A Need to Embodying Queer Difference

Power has been described to exploit difference in fragmenting opposition.⁶ Joan W. Scott in her book *Politics of the Veil* for one discusses the banning of Muslim women from wearing their traditional headdress in France amidst other European Nations.⁷ Scott identifies this opposition as a political tool, discriminating against Islam through the identification and subsequent amplification of racial and religious difference. She has suspicions about the intentions to protect France as a nation conceived to be one and indivisible where sameness is exalted, putting forward the idea that, "We need to acknowledge difference in ways that call into question the certainty and superiority of our own views."⁸

The Singapore government has also exploited difference by maintaining a perspective that frames homosexuality as a "western issue" especially with regards to human rights. During his speech at the World Human Rights Conference in Vienna in 1993, Singaporean Foreign Minister Wong Kan Seng stated that "Homosexual rights are a Western issue, and are not relevant at this conference."⁹ Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew has also maintained that there is a "fundamental difference between Western concepts of society and government and East Asian concepts", with the core of this difference being that Singaporeans have "little doubt that a society with communitarian values, where the interests of society take precedence over that of the individual, suits them better [than democracy]."¹⁰ Lee's critics have

⁶ Sawicki, Jana. "Foucault and Feminism: Toward a Politics of Difference" in *Hypatia*, Vol. 1, No. 2, (Indiana University Press, Autumn, 1986), pp. 23-36.

⁷ Scott, Joan W. "Introduction" in *The Politics of the Veil* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2007)

⁸ Ibid, p. 3.

⁹ Berry, Chris. *A Bit on the Side: East-West Topographies of Desire* (Sydney: Empress Press, 1994).

¹⁰ Bell, Daniel A. "A Communitarian Critique of Authoritarianism: The Case of Singapore," *Political Theory* (1997) p. 16.

highlighted that in order to justify his authoritarian style of governance, Lee had sought to integrate his "Asian values ideology" with a particular interpretation of Eastern philosophies such as Confucianism.¹¹

Simple minded oppositions towards difference is ignorant because not only are they capable of silencing realities of the lives and beliefs of queer others and blinding ourselves and but they also create false realities that can impinge on our own self-understanding. A worldview organized in terms of chaste versus perverse, straight versus queer, morally upright versus ideologically compromised, us versus them, is one that we inhabit in danger. It leaves us without room for self-criticism and to contemplate change, or open up ourselves to others. By refusing to accept and respect the difference of these others we turn them into enemies, fabricating that which we most fear about them in the first instance.

French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy elucidates that to consider community as a common essence, a common being, is erroneous because it "is in effect the closure of the political."¹² He asserts that we must be conscious of the fact that we all share "being-in-common," which "has nothing to do with communion, with fusion into a body, into a unique and ultimate identity." Common being presupposes sameness while "being-in-common" articulates only that we all exist and that our very existence is defined by our difference from others. Paradoxically, it is difference that is universal to us all.

Fragmentation of opposition occurs not only within groups but also within the individual, Audrey Lorde who is a lesbian mother as well as a partner in an inter-racial civil partnership has a unique insight into

¹¹ Gordon, Uri. "Machiavelli's Tiger: Lee Kuan Yew and Singapore's Authoritarian Regime," in Singapore Window. March 2000. (Accessed 20 Sept. 2009) <<http://www.singapore-window.org/sw00/000614ug.htm>>.

¹² Lacoue-Labarthe, Philippe and Jean-Luc, Nancy. "'Cher Amis': A Letter on the Closure of the Political" in Retreating the Political (Routledge, 1997), p. 143.

the conflicts and divided allegiances which put into question the possibility of a unified women's movement.

*I find I am constantly being encouraged to pluck out some one aspect of myself and present this as the meaningful whole, eclipsing or denying the other parts of self*¹³

(Lorde 1984, 120)

Michel Foucault also has observed the ambiguous power of difference in modern society.¹⁴ While asserting that difference can be the source of fragmentation and disunity, he recognizes as well that difference can also function as creative source of resistance and change. Hence, difference is not necessarily counter revolutionary because learning to live and struggle with our differences may very well be key to disarming the power of heteronormativity which we have all have somehow internalized in varying degrees.

This dissertation proposes to orient the discourse of queer studies towards the built environment and the culture of Singapore, opening and discussing a series of questions. These include: What is queer space and what role does it have in the social, cultural, and political constructions of 'queerness'? How does the built urban environment support or discourage the formation of queer identities? Is there still a need for a distinct gay culture within an increasingly diverse and accepting wider society? How does gay culture's shift from being peripheral (hidden, clandestine, and exclusive) to being centralised (widely accepted, even 'mainstream') affect the way in which gay/queer culture is realised within the built environment? How is the relationship between queer public and private space negotiated? How does

¹³ Lorde, Audre. "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference" in *Sister Outsider* (Crossing Press an imprint of Ten Speed Press, 1984, 2007), p. 116.

¹⁴ Sawicki, Jana. "Foucault and Feminism: Toward a Politics of Difference" in *Hypatia*, Vol. 1, No. 2, (Indiana University Press, Autumn, 1986), pp. 23-36.

queer culture imagine and invent its own versions of the city? How can queer history and memory, especially as associated with specific spaces and places, be understood, recorded, and represented? In summary, the aim of this dissertation is to queer (make strange, frustrate, challenge, de-legitimize and camp up) existing knowledge about spaces, the city and our built environment.

Part One Defining And Redefining Queers And Their Spaces In Singapore

Problems in defining homosexuality: A Reader

In attempting to define male homosexuality in Singapore, we examine Foucault's *History of Sexuality* which explains that sexuality is a product of society.¹⁵ Foucault describes that in ancient Greece, sexual relationships between younger and older men did not necessarily identify these men as homosexuals; many of them were married and had children. Homosexuality in this light is perceived as ad hoc acts instead of a fixed sexual identity or a complete lifestyle as it is more commonly deemed today. Previously and even now to conservative parts of the populace, men in Singapore have traditional roles in building a family and in procreation. Queers in Singapore now are experiencing a transitional moment as homosexuality is becoming more widespread and tolerated.

In Alfian Saat's play, *Kings of Ann Siang Hill*, protagonist Wee Kim explains the reason for dual roles queer men take on in a conservative society:

At that time, thirty already, not married, you just invite people to gossip. So, what to do, my mother chose the bride, I just followed. Last time not like now. Cannot argue with your parents. Last time we respected people older than us.

¹⁵ Foucault, Michel trans. Hurley, Robert. "1: An Introduction" in The History of Sexuality (New York, 1981), p. 43.

In a society which is largely conservative, we have suppressed husbands, fathers and sons who engage in homosexual acts but also perform heterosexual roles. Cyril Wong in his poem *Ann Siang Hill* portrays the men cruising in Ann Siang Hill as fathers, sons, teachers and students.

*I think the last guy
was my P.E. teacher from JC.
Wonder what my wife is doing now.*

...

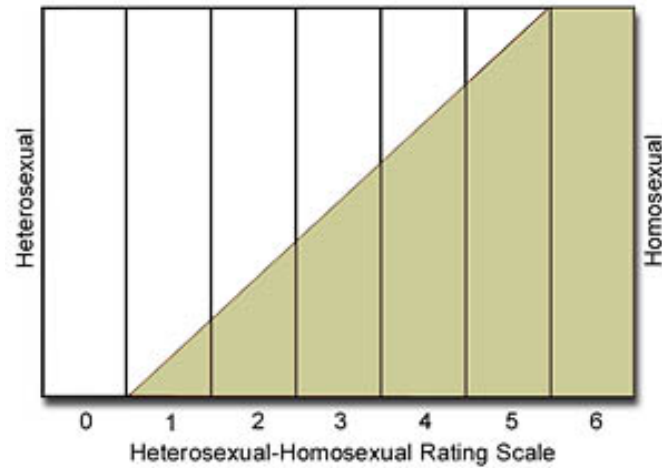
*Remember
a muscled kid I masturbated once
behind that alley. Two years
older than my son now.*¹⁶

There are currently no available statistics on how many gay people there are in Singapore or what percentage of the population they are likely to constitute because of difficulty in defining homosexuality and social stigma involved. All we know is that they exist and the proportion of homosexuals in Singapore is likely to be similar to that in other countries, although there is little hard data to support this fact.

The Kinsey Institute for research in Sex, Gender and Reproduction in illustrating that homosexuality is mobile rather than a fixed sexual identity, proposed a scale in attempting to describe a male person's sexual history or episodes of their sexual activity at a given time. It used a scale from 0, meaning exclusively heterosexual, to 6, meaning exclusively homosexual.

¹⁶ Wong, Cyril. "Ann Siang Hill." *Poetry Billboard*. 2003. (Accessed 17 June 2009)
<<http://www.poetrybillboard.com/read.asp?id=8>>.

1 The Kinsey Scale



- 0- Exclusively heterosexual with no homosexual
- 1- Predominantly heterosexual, only incidentally homosexual
- 2- Predominantly heterosexual, but more than incidentally homosexual
- 3- Equally heterosexual and homosexual
- 4- Predominantly homosexual, but more than incidentally heterosexual
- 5- Predominantly homosexual, only incidentally heterosexual
- 6- Exclusively homosexual

According to the research conducted, 11.6% of males (ages 20–35) were given a rating of 3, which is of about equal heterosexual and homosexual experience/response throughout their adult lives.¹⁷

¹⁷ Kinsey, Alfred C. et al. "Sexual Behavior in the Human Male, Table 147" in Sexual Behavior in the Human Male (Philadelphia: W.B. Saunders; Bloomington, IN: Indiana U. Press. 1948/1998), p. 651.

Parts of the Kinsey Reports regarding diversity in sexual orientations are frequently used to support the common used estimate of 10% for homosexuality in the general male population. Therefore if Singapore's current population comes up to 4.8 million and if 10% of the male population can be said to be homosexual, the 233 846 of male homosexuals accounts for close to 5% of the total population, more than the 15 000 Sikhs residents in Singapore.^{18 19} Although this number is significant, voices of queer expression are silenced by outmoded statutes which criminalize queer sex, a conservative government and society.

Fragmentation of Queer Individuals by the State

Being gay has often been described as being difficult in Singapore; queer individuals deny coming out of the closet and expressing themselves openly for fear of prosecution and social stigma. Although acknowledged as present and recognized as part of society, they are prohibited from openly expressing their homosexuality.

Mr. Otto Fong, a Singaporean teacher at Raffles Institution posted a blog entry coming out and making a plea for greater acceptance of gay people by society.²⁰ Shortly, Mr. Fong was pressured by the Ministry of Education to delete the entry as the Ministry "does not condone any open espousal of homosexual

¹⁸ Ministry of Trade and Industry. "Singapore in Brief 2009." Statistics Singapore. Singapore Government_ 2009. (Accessed 19 June 2009) <<http://www.singstat.gov.sg/pubn/reference/sib2009.pdf>>.

¹⁹ Wikipedia. "Sikhism in Singapore." 26 June 2009. Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia (Accessed 19 June 2009) <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sikhism_in_Singapore>.

²⁰ Otto Fong, 38, wrote this 'open letter', as he called it, on 8 September 2007. It quickly caught the attention of the blogosphere. On 10 September, he took the post down. A copy of the post is available at Yawning Bread. Fong, Otto. "Otto Fong's Open Letter." Sept. 2007. Yawning Bread. (Accessed 19 June 2009.) <http://www.yawningbread.org/apdx_2007/imp-350.htm>.

values by teachers in any form" as "teachers are in a unique position of authority" and "are often seen as role models by their students." ²¹

In the entry, Mr. Otto Fong wrote:

Being in the closet, pretending to be straight, trimming our true selves to suit the whims and expectations of others, is just like being a human bonsai tree. By staying in the closet, we cannot even hope to be average, much less above and beyond average.

Fear of expressing one's homosexuality is also seen in view of section 377A of our Penal Code used in the prosecution against homosexual offenses. ²² Section 377A was established in 1872, derived from The Indian Penal Code which in turn was based on British criminal law. The section reads:

Any male person who in public or private commits or abets the commission of, or procures or attempt to procure the commission of any male person of any act of gross indecency with another male person will be punished with imprisonment for a term which may extend to 2 years.

This means that homosexual acts, even if they were committed between consenting adults in private is an offence. This legislation has since been decriminalized in 1957 in England and more recently in India when the High Court in Delhi, ruled on the 2nd of July 2009 that India's penal code Section 377's prohibition of homosexual activities no longer applies to consenting adults.

Acceptance of homosexuality has been a hot topic in Singapore especially during the Parliamentary Debate on whether section 377A should be removed following a petition from Nominated Member of

²¹ Tan, Sylvia. "Singapore Teacher Removes Coming Out Blog Under Ministry Pressure." 10 Sept 2007. [Fridae](http://www.fridae.com/newsfeatures/2007/09/10/1972.singapore-teacher-removes-coming-out-blog-under-ministry-pressure). (Accessed 19 June 2009) <<http://www.fridae.com/newsfeatures/2007/09/10/1972.singapore-teacher-removes-coming-out-blog-under-ministry-pressure>>.

²² Singapore Penal Code. Chapter XVI (Offences Affecting the Human Body), Section 377 (Cap. 224) (2009). [The Statues of the Republic of Singapore](http://statutes.agc.gov.sg/non_version/html/homepage.html). (Accessed 9 August 2009) <http://statutes.agc.gov.sg/non_version/html/homepage.html>.

Parliament Mr Siew Kum Hong. The debate was fiercely contested with the most vehement opposition to the petition voiced by fellow Christian NMP Thio Li-ann, calling homosexuality an “abomination to God” and imploring the government to retain section 377A. There were also Members of Parliament of the ruling party, however, who spoke up in support of repealing section 377A or to highlight its legal and moral inconsistencies, such as PAP MPs Charles Chong, Baey Yam Keng and Hri Kumar Nair.

In his concluding speech, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong highlighted the point that Singapore remained, as a whole, a conservative society uncomfortable with the notion of homosexuality. Thus to repeal Section 377A could result in a severe schism within the nation. However, in recognition of the fact that homosexuals do contribute to the country, Section 377A would not be actively enforced. Homosexuals would be left to lead their private lives without harassment. The Prime Minister explained, "The decision on whether or not to decriminalize gay sex is a very divisive one and until there is a broader consensus on the matter, Singapore will stick to the status quo."

The eventual decision by Parliament was to retain Section 377A. Though the Section still remains valid, it stands but only symbolically enduring legal untidiness and ambiguity.

Liberal ideas and practices of the Western world (homosexuality) were deemed unsuitable to Singapore because of emphasis on individual rights and adversarial politics. Moreover, these elements were thought to cause "the social and economic decay in the West." Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew believes that if Singapore adopts a "Western-style democracy", "We'd go down the drain, we'd have more drugs, more crime, more single mothers with delinquent children, and a poor economy"

Society at present can be said to be tolerant of homosexuality but this has been due to efforts of activism. The criminalization of homosexuality together with the homophobic and conservative parts of the populace sought to drive expression of queer culture underground. Queer art and literature is also being controlled by bodies such as the Media Development Authority which heavily censors films with

GLBT (gay, lesbian, bisexual and transsexual) content. Furthermore, in this microstate, inter-relationships and links between individuals and families create a “small world” where connections can be easily traced, pushing queers further into the closet. In such a climate, the spaces of the city can be assumed to be designed in catering for hetero-normative priority. In Prime Minister Mr. Lee Hsien Loong’s concluding speech, he asserts:

*Singapore is basically a conservative society, the family is the basic building block of this society. It has been so and by policy we have reinforced this and we want to keep it so. And by family in Singapore, we mean one man, one woman, marrying, having children and bringing up children within that framework of a stable family unit. If you look at the way our Housing Board flats are, our neighborhoods and our new towns, that’s by and large the way Singaporeans live and it is not so in other countries, particularly in the West anymore, but it is here.*²³

The queers focused upon in this dissertation therefore are men who do not specifically identify themselves as homosexuals. They are shaped and constructed by social, cultural and political forces living in an urban environment built for heterosexual families. I will examine the space of Chinatown; a site with a unique patriarchal history of colonial and Chinese heritage and with its own unique blend of rules, codes and regulations. Chinatown, I argue, also forms a part of the urban environment closely connected to the queer male.

Critique on Hetero-normative Representation of Chinatown and on Queers

In the search for a queer narrative, documentation and written records of the history of queer spaces in Chinatown have proven difficult to retrieve and there is reason to believe that such information could be distorted, manipulated or concealed due to local conditions. In both books *Chinese Heritage* and *Chinatown: an Album of Singapore Community*, published in Singapore, we sense urgency in

²³ Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong states his government's position on the debate over Section 377A of the Singapore Penal Code. This speech was delivered on 23 Oct 07, the video was uploaded by Groyn88. “PM Lee Hsien Loong states PAP's stand on 377A - Part 2.” 5 Nov. 2007. [Youtube](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zC8KYm8B0z4&feature=related). (Accessed 6 Sept 2009) <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zC8KYm8B0z4&feature=related>>.

consolidating pictures and documenting old Chinatown before urban renewal changed Chinatown into what it is today.^{24 25} We see that these documentations are highly polarized as they only recognize and record hetero-normative history. There were details of erotic and hedonistic activities such as opium smoking, prostitution, slavery and secret societies but not a single mention about homosexual activity. In *Colonialism and Sexuality* however, a book published in New York where censorship is less intense, Robert Aldrich, through a series of provocative accounts was able to examine associations between homosexuality and Western Imperialism in Asian colonies in the period between the late 1800s and decolonization.²⁶

The earliest mention of queer spaces was involving the transvestites of Bugis Street. This may be gleaned from the interviews done in the 1950s and currently recorded in the National Archive. Gay history prior to that was a blank. Today, we primarily come across information about homosexual cruising hot spots through police cases in newspaper articles, which present these spaces in a negative perspective, frequently portraying gays as perverts and sexual deviants.²⁷ Not only are these spaces seen in bad light, many also choose to ignore the activities within. Mr Lim Jim Koon, editor of the Chinese morning daily *Lianhe Zaobao* commented that “since public ignorance is bliss to gays, and public wisdom

²⁴ Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan Associations, Chinese Heritage (Singapore: Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan Associates & EPB Publishers Pte Ltd, 1990).

²⁵ Times Books International & Archives and Oral History Department. Chinatown: An Album of a Singapore Community (Times Books International, 1983)

²⁶ For a thorough account of salacious liaisons between the colonizers and the colonized. See Aldrich, Robert. Colonialism and Homosexuality New York (New York: Routledge, 2003)

²⁷ 意外组报道 (Yiwai Reporting Team), “挤温泉健身院、暗‘房’ 50 壮汉疯狂杂交” (50-Men Orgy in Spa’s Private Room). 晚报(Wan Bao Newspaper). 9 Jul. 2004.

is threatening to gays, the standpoint of the newspaper is to remain neutral. We do not wish to disturb this group of minority, just like the majority does not wish to be disturbed by them.”²⁸

As it has been mentioned, a search of the historical archives did not yield *categoric* evidence of a gay scene or that of a cruising culture in the Chinese quarter during the early colonial period, when the British enforced laws criminalizing sodomy. We could however, suggest that queer culture could have existed as early as then by evidence presented in the following sections.

²⁸ Ng, King Kang. The Rainbow Connection: The Internet & The Singapore Gay Community (Singapore: KangCuBine Publishing Pte Ltd, 1999), p. 27.

Queering the History of Chinatown

Telok Ayer, where the present Ann Siang Hill area is located, was the first place where Singapore's colonial founder Stamford Raffles had racially segregated the Chinese in the early days of Singapore.²⁹

The majority of the Chinese population here in the early colonial period were single young men or husbands who had left their wives and families in China to work here. It is noted that the ratio of male to female Chinese was 14 to 1 in 1890 and the gender imbalance continued for the next 70 years.³⁰

Many of the women who were here were also prostitutes.

Table 1
Chinese Migrants to Singapore Between the 1870s and the 1900s

Years	Total Chinese Migrants to Singapore
1871–74	76,657
1881–84	233,357
1891–94	424,970
1901–04	653,077

2) Chinese migrants to Singapore Table 1

Prostitutes Entering or Leaving Brothels in Singapore, 1887–94

Leaving for:		Entering from:	
Johore	1,740	China	2,650
China	693	Hong Kong	1,946
Borneo & Netherlands Indies	594	Johore	1,302
Federated Malay States	397	Borneo and Netherlands Indies	544
Straits Settlements	312	Straits Settlements	381
Hong Kong	127	Federated Malay States	329
Japan	28	Japan	305
Total for 8 years	3,891	Total for 8 years	7,457
Annual Mean Average	486	Annual Mean Average	932

Source: Compiled from statistics of the Registration Office, Contagious Diseases

3) Prostitutes entering or leaving brothels in Singapore, 1887-94

Situational sexual behavior could have resulted in these men relieving their sexual tensions with each other even if they identify themselves as heterosexual. Historically, male homosexual culture was

²⁹ Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan Associations. Chinese Heritage (Singapore: Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan Associates & EPB Publishers Pte Ltd, 1990), p. 1.

³⁰ Jaschok, Maria and Miers, Suzanne. Women and Chinese Patriarchy: Submission, Servitude, and Escape (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1994), p. 82.

neither foreign nor especially frowned upon in China. The Hokkien ethnic group for one had been known to institutionalize gay marriages in their cultural practices.³¹ Unknown however is if some of them could have adopted and practiced this subculture locally when they migrated here.

The urban history of the Ann Siang Hill area reveals to us that it used to be a hilly area and one of the highest points in Chinatown. Prior to it being named Ann Siang Hill, it was called Scott's Hill.³² Urban planning maps from the early 1900s depict this area as surrounded by shop houses constructed rear to rear with back lanes in between. The shop houses contained clan houses and exclusive social clubs where men socialize.³³ These social clubs and clans also had links to activities of secret societies, which were at the time, pervasive in Singapore³⁴. The intense bonds of Chinese triad brotherhood could have also led to sexual liaisons between those with a homosexual orientation.

The back-facing aspect of these shop houses also meant that a labyrinth of back lanes existed, snaking across the hilly nature terrain comprising of nutmeg and clove trees. These back lanes were first built as a form of fire protection for escape, and also for the collection of night soil. Back lanes thus provided for the base functions of shop houses. Besides being associated with crime, as the site for illegal gambling, robbery and murder, the back lanes today serves as routes for entering the brothels through the backdoors of shop houses in Singapore's two other well known red light areas, Geylang and Desker Road. The existence of a large population of male Chinese congregating within this area, the network of

³¹ Hirsch, Bret. Passions of the Cut Sleeve: the Male Homosexual Tradition in China, Chapter 6, (California: University of California Press, 1990), p. 131.

³² Times Books International & Archives and Oral History Department. Chinatown: An Album of a Singapore Community (Times Books International, 1983), pp. 28-29.

³³ Wikipedia. "History of Ann Siang Hill." 29 Aug. 2009. Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. (Accessed 30 August 2009) <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ann_Siang_Hill>.

³⁴ Lim, Irene and National Heritage Board. "A Brief History of Secret Societies in Singapore" in Secret Societies in Singapore (Singapore: Singapore History Museum, 1999), p. 9.

back lanes deprived of proper lighting at night, avoided by pedestrians together with the 'park like' nature of the hill would have contributed to the area being an ideal site for homosexual activity in the colonial period.

Part Two Reconstituting Queer Fragments In Mirror Space

Only one moment separates Narcissus from echo.

Let the distance die, let time end;
desire for love becomes death for desire,
my other is my fellow, my fellow is my other.³⁵



4) Contemporary Figurative Painting by Richard Baxter

³⁵ "Ortigue, 71" quoted in Lemaire, Anika trans. Macey David. "The role of Oedipus in accession to the symbolic" in Jacques Lacan (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), p. 81.

Queer View Mirrors

Aaron Betsky suggests that queer space starts within the closet and forms itself in the mirror.³⁶ Using Betsky's description of the closet being the ultimate interior where interiority starts and containing both the building blocks for our social constructions and disused pieces of the past, Dennis Cheok in his dissertation identifies the space of Chinatown as the closet where queer space starts.³⁷

However, he does not elaborate further on how queer spaces are formed within the mirror. So what exactly constitutes this mirror?

Firstly, we understand the mirror as where we are presented to ourselves through acts of self-admiration and self-observation together with gestures of posing and grooming. Although we only see a transient and momentary reflection, everything that is real from our world appears as it seems to be in the mirror but only in reverse.

Betsky describes mirror space:

*"Mirror space is an alternate world that is unreal. Mirror space is free and open, shifting and ephemeral and yet constrained by its lack of reality. The mirror is good for nothing else than appearing: as soon as you look away from it, it ceases to function. You can't live in the mirror".*³⁸

This mirror space thus is not a real physical space. It exists within the boundaries of each individual's imaginations. Hence, it is inadequate to speak of a mirror space purely as a reflection; due to its lack of reality it is virtually good for nothing. A mirror space's true essence lies in what it does for and within the

³⁶ Betsky, Aaron. "Closet Cases and Mirror Worlds" in Queer Space (New York: William Morrow and Company Inc, 1997), p. 17.

³⁷ Cheok Khang Wee, Dennis. A Hemisphere in Her Hair Or, Chinatown: A Peculiar Inquisition pp. 24 – 27. Unpublished dissertation. (Singapore, NUS September 2006)

³⁸ Betsky, Aaron. "Closet Cases and Mirror Worlds" in Queer Space (New York: William Morrow and Company Inc, 1997), p. 17.

mind. A mirror lies within each of us and through acts of self reflection, we are able to imagine and create other worlds.

From Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic point of view, he sees the mirror as an important tool for self identification and self construction.³⁹ He explains that during the "mirror-stage" of infancy when an infant sees himself in the mirror for the first time, he becomes aware of himself as a whole individual entity. Previously, he was only able to perceive himself in pieces, in a fragmented and incomplete manner because he was still unable to coordinate movements and functions of his own body and to define the boundaries between himself and others, especially with his mother whom he closely associated himself with. Upon seeing his complete image in the mirror, he perceives the image he sees to be whole, perfect and in control. He sees this double of himself in the mirror as more than he is of himself. In this situation, he is overcome with a permanent sense of being imperfect, feels alienated from himself and is driven to seek the perfection he sees in the image.

The act of creating architecture today is said to be geared towards the construction of a utopian world, opening windows into this perfect world through works of architecture and intentions of architects.⁴⁰ But this act of creating bits and pieces of an ideal world is fragmenting in itself as it has a tendency to both homogenize and repress. It proposes abstractions independent of daily life.⁴¹ These abstractions abolish established meanings without regard for a world with a multiplicity of messages, codes and operations.

³⁹ Lemaire, Anika trans. Macey David. "The role of Oedipus in accession to the symbolic" in Jacques Lacan (London Henley Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), pp. 81-82.

⁴⁰ Lemaire, Anika trans. Macey David. "The role of Oedipus in accession to the symbolic" in Jacques Lacan (London Henley Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), pp. 81-82.

⁴¹ Ibid p.20.

Henry Lefebvre asserts that these spaces of pieces of perfect worlds are ultimately dominated not by the direct users but by authoritative bodies.⁴² Through these spaces, the direct users are manipulated, thus, forced to fragment themselves from what they truly need:

*Not that this space 'expresses' them in any sense; it is simply the space assigned to them by the grand plan: (they) find what they seek – namely, a mirror of their 'reality', tranquilizing ideas, and the image of a social world in which they have their own specially labeled, guaranteed place. The truth is, however, that this space manipulates them, along with their unclear inspirations and their all-too-clear needs.*⁴³

The entire process of creating space is driven by the world of commodities which entails mechanical aspects such as *accumulation and growth, calculation, planning and programming*. This process in turn “*transports the body out of itself in a paradoxical kind of alienation*”.⁴⁴ Fragments of utopian visions create an urban reality that is disjointed, ephemeral and destabilizing, alienating its inhabitants. Just like the child who sees himself whole for the first time through the aid of a mirror, the queer individual who is fragmented and suppressed in a biased and homophobic world can utilize mirrors to create an alternate world which is free and open, shifting and ephemeral. In this transient mirror space, a queer individual is able to reconcile his repressed sexuality and piece together himself to constitute a more sensuous whole that he is alienated from.

*How did they end up at that stairwell? Did they not meet each other in broad daylight, at a bus-stop, a transit-point for hundreds of passengers each day? Why then this furtive search for these perilous corners, these hiding places?*⁴⁵

Poet Alfian Sa’at’s protagonists in his short story “*This Was Where*” find sexual fulfillment in a secluded

⁴² Lefebvre, Henri, trans. Nicholson-Smith, Donald. “Contradictory Space XI” in The Production of Space (Australia: Blackwell Publishing, 1991), p. 309.

⁴³ Ibid

⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 308.

⁴⁵ Sa’at, Alfian. “8” in *This Was Where: Weilong and Derrick: A Topographic Diary* (Copyright Alfian Sa’at 2006)

stairwell when they failed in their search for a perfect toilet to perform the act. The two boys in his story were overwhelmed with the need for a private space, space for queer inhabitation which is denied. A police officer chased them away from a playground pavilion where they were enjoying one another's company, space where heterosexual couples were given the right to occupy.

Queer space thus operates in opposition to forces of fragmentation, utilizing mirrors to bring us back to ourselves. Through this act of mirroring, queers can continuously search and establish within the existing built environment spaces for expression, for spaces of desire that "perfect" works of architecture and planning do not provide.

This brings to mind Michel Foucault's idea of the mirror as a heterotopia:

It is a place without a place. In it, I see myself where I am, in an unreal space that opens up potentially beyond its surface; there I am down there where I am not, a sort of shadow that makes my appearance visible to myself, allowing me to look at myself where I do not exist...

Hence the mirror functions as heterotopias, since it makes the place that I occupy, whenever I look myself in the glass, both absolutely real – it is in fact linked to all the surrounding space – and absolutely unreal, for in order to be perceived it has of necessity to pass that virtual point that is situated down there.⁴⁶

In societies, heterotopias function as mirrors to our own culture. They become condensed modes of mirroring where we are able pass beyond the bounds of time and place, queering reality to provide a place to live in without leaving those spaces.

When queer space establishes itself, it surrounds us in a space that is as invisible or as thin as the surface of a mirror. Mirror space is a strangely haunting space, a space where the world is reflected back to us in a reversed manner. Everything is still there in the reflection, in place but also out of place. As a result, mirror space is capable of being both affirming as well as confusing or destabilizing.

⁴⁶ Foucault, Michel. "Other Spaces: The Principles of Heteropia." In Lotus 48/49 (1986), pp. 10-24.

Transient Quality Of Queer Spaces

If the notion of queerness is an indescribable concept of opposing dominant culture and as an ideal that is amorphous and subjective, seeking to defy definition, then is not the idea of a concrete queer space considered an oxymoron?

A queer space is a uniquely different space charged with sexual energies; it is a space that is transitory in nature, having no identifiable physical form and never persists beyond the sexual act. Aaron Betsky identifies queer space in a homophobic light:

A queer space is a useless, amoral and sensual space that lives only in and for experience. It is a space of spectacle, a consumption, a dance, and obscenity. It is a misuse or deformation of a place, an appropriation of buildings and codes for the city for perverse purposes. It is a space in between the body and technology, a space of pure artifice.⁴⁷

*There Is No "Queer Space," Only Different Points of View*⁴⁸

During the 1994 Queer Space Exhibition in New York, this caption was developed as a running marquee along an acrylic screen which presented photographs of diverse sites in Manhattan. This exhibit at the Store Front for Art and Architecture in New York presented the notion that queer space has the potential to manifest itself anywhere in public space and that queer spaces are produced via queer people's appropriation of public spaces through their individual, ever-shifting perspectives. Queerness is thus constituted, not in space but in the body of the queer in his/her inhabitation, in his/her gaze. As Jean-Ulrick Desert theorizes,

⁴⁷ Betsky, Aaron. "Introduction: Some Queer Constructs" in Queer Space: Architecture and Same-Sex Desire (William Morrор & Co. Inc. New York 1997), p. 5.

⁴⁸ McGrath, Brian with Watkins, Mark and Lee, Mao-jung. Queer Space Exhibition (New York: Store Front for Art and Architecture, 1994)

*Queer spaces crosses, engages and transgresses social, spiritual and aesthetic locations, all of which is articulated in the realm of the public/private, the built/unbuilt environments.*⁴⁹

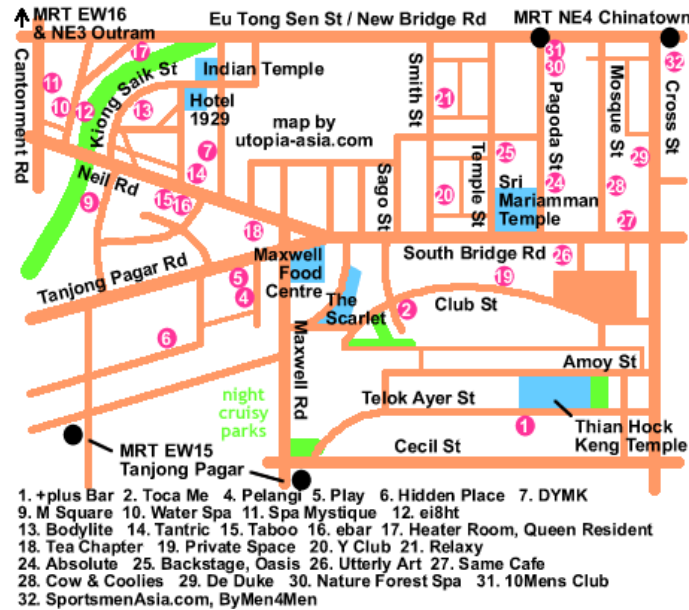
Though any space can be queered, there are also clear indications of established queer space, both built and symbolic with saunas and gay bars among the former, rainbow flags and pink triangles stickers among the latter. A singular sign is unable to create a space in itself but through their accretion and together with trajectories of the desires of queer individuals, certain streets can easily be discernible as queer.

The website utopia-asia.com offers queer resources for gay and lesbian travelers visiting Asian cities.⁵⁰ In the section under Singapore, a map of numerous queer establishments and spaces, ranging from pubs, saunas and night cruising parks juxtapose hetero-normative touristic sites of interest with spaces of queer desire in Chinatown. It should also be noted that on the website there was a comment from a website subscriber proclaiming that Ann Siang Hill still functions as a site for picking up men.

"Ann Siang Hill alley benches, just sit and relax and someone will just talk to you and voila you have a date for one frisky early morning action." -- riverrobes, Apr 19, 2009

⁴⁹ Desert, Jean Ulrick. "Queer Space" in *Queers in Space* (Bay Press (WA), June 1997), pp. 20-22

⁵⁰ Utopia, "Utopia: Gay Asia and Asian Gay and Lesbian Resources." Utopia. 1995-2009. (Accessed 30 August 2009) <<http://www.utopia-asia.com>>.



5) Chinatown Utopia Map

In order to explain how ideal spaces can be created in already established ones we can observe the ancient Greek festival of Adonia. In it, we can observe a method of re-appropriating suppressive architectures of the city to create a reality to live in. Ancient Greek women who were the marginalized populace of the city by virtue of their lower body heat were, silent, almost invisible and confined to their households and to their roles as wives and mothers while men of higher body heat were free to do as they pleased.⁵¹ By virtue of this festival, women were able to redesign and imagine the space of rooftops, on houses where they were contained into an alternate space. Still protected within their houses, they were audible and visible from the roofs. Women mourn the death of Adonis by congregating on rooftops, drinking and wailing and beating their breasts all day and through the night. This carried their loud and riotous voices out of their prison-like homes and throughout the ancient city and streets which were filled with people during summers when this festival was celebrated. It too

⁵¹ Sennet, Richard. "Body Heat" in *Flesh and Stone: The Body and the City in Western Civilization*, (W.W. Norton & Co. March 17, 1996), p. 40.

brought great unease to the men and interrupted sessions of the Assembly.⁵² The nature of the festival was one of sexual license and women could choose who they wanted to hold private celebrations with regardless of if they were wives or courtesans, or even lesbians.⁵³ Under the cover of religious practice and ritual, marginalized women in a city of male authority were able to congregate and be empowered, thereby reclaiming the male dominated city.

If ancient Greek women rebelled against the structures and strictures of society through the subversion of the space of the rooftop by virtue of religion, how do gay men appropriate the already designed spaces of the city for queer occupancy and activity? Perhaps we can observe some of the queer establishments in Chinatown from the utopia map.

Most bath house establishments such as *Absolute bathhouse* and *10 Mens Club* (labeled 24 and 31 respectively on the utopian map) along the bustling Pagoda Street have chosen to confine and hide themselves behind the seemingly innocuous façades of shop houses. These establishments are vertically removed from street activity being on the upper floors and horizontally distanced by temporary stalls which spill out from the five-foot-ways. Though hidden from sight, these bath houses re-appropriate the upper floors of traditional shop houses which once housed Chinese immigrants and their families crammed into tight cubicles.⁵⁴ Historical heterosexual functionality is now replaced by queer use. When I was an intern in an office along the adjacent Mosque Street earlier this year, I observed that *Absolute*

⁵² Keuls, Eva C. "Wailing for Adonis" in The Reign of the Phallus: Sexual Politics in Ancient Athens. (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), pp. 23-30.

⁵³ Dillon, Matthew, Girls and Women in Classical Greek Religion. (London and New York: Routledge, 2002.) p. 167.

⁵⁴ This book illustrates the squalid living conditions of shophouses in Chinatown. Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan Associations. Chinese Heritage (Singapore: Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan Associates & EPB Publishers Pte Ltd,1990)

bath house operates till late into the night after the shops and restaurants along the street have closed for the day. The door at ground level leading to the bath house situated on the upper floor always remain open, saturating the immediate areas with the scent of aromatherapy oils and cooling the humidity of the night with its air-conditioning. One could also hear popular tunes and occasional voices from the naturally ventilated open-air terrace on the roof. Under the cover of darkness and in the after hours queerness extends from the interiority of these shop houses onto the street and claiming the heterosexual city.

Backstage Bar (labelled 25) situated in Chinatown at the junction of Trengganu and Pagoda Streets has also re-appropriated an existing shop house by housing a bar on the upper floor of the shop house. Backstage Bar unlike conventional bars which mostly are on the ground level utilized the balcony space of the shop house to create a naturally ventilated sitting area. Queer individuals though distanced from the street level are still able to observe pedestrian movement and saturate the airwaves with their music.

Campy Chinatown, Queer Effects Of Urban Renewal

In the context of contemporary Chinatown, It is also significant to discuss the association between queerness and renovation.⁵⁵ Why the idea of renovation and not restoration or conservation one might ask? Restoration and conservation implies reverting old buildings and structures faithfully to the aesthetic qualities and uses that they were first constructed. Renovation however, alters what dominant culture has left behind, explicitly juxtaposing the old the new.

⁵⁵ Reed, Christopher. "Imminent Domain: Queer Space in the Built Environment" in Art journal, Vol. 55, No. 4, We're Here: Gay and Lesbian Presence in Art and Art History, (Winter, 1996), p.68.

A campy homosexual exhibits exaggerated effeminate gestures and mannerisms but “Camp” can also be perceived as an absurdly flamboyant style which fuses aspects of popular and high culture, an esthetic that is artificial, affected and out of date.⁵⁶ Thus it is possible that exaggerated renovated architecture can incorporate ideas of “camp”.

Historically, in Singapore’s Chinatown, overcrowding and unhygienic living conditions set off housing programmes and urban renewal during over Singapore’s nation building years, leading to what Rem Koolhaas described as the “dismantling of Chinatown”.⁵⁷ The de-vehicularization of Pagoda Street into a pedestrian mall, development of specific areas for public housing and en masse distribution of original inhabitants and establishments resulted in “substantial changes to the physical environment of the once uniform streetscapes of Chinatown.”⁵⁸ In 7th July 1989, Chinatown was given conservation status as a Heritage Site. Although shop houses in Singapore’s Chinatown are retained, most of them no longer served as spaces for living. Many today are instead housing clichéd oriental restaurants, souvenir shops, offices and even spas. Campily splashed with a riot of colors and denied of their original use, the hollowed out shop houses which were once derelict with use can be seen as decked in drag and rather queer.

⁵⁶ Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary. “Camp” 2009. Merriam-Webster Online (Accessed 10 Sept 2009) <<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/camp>>.

⁵⁷ Koolhaas, Rem and Mau, Bruce. “Singapore Songlines, Portrait of a Potemkin Metropolis...or Thirty Years of Tabula Rasa” in S,M,L,XL (Rotterdam: 010 Publishing, 1995), p. 1033.

⁵⁸ Singapore: Urban Redevelopment Authority. Chinatown: Historic District (1995), p. 23.



6) Contemporary Chinatown, shop houses in a riot of colors



7) Squalid and derelict conditions of historic Chinatown



We can already establish the fact that queer space is the collective creation of queer people. Though acts of appropriation by these queers are transient, queer mirror spaces don't just vanish without a trace when these individuals leave. These spaces do persist beyond the sexual acts committed. I am intrigued by the ways queer traces of evidence remain to mark these spaces, telling a story and for others to discover. Perhaps through an investigation of these sources and informed by queer narratives, our understanding of city spaces can be furthered.

*“What did you see? What did you miss? Traces. What is this evidence?
It is important to cultivate a forensic imagination. Crumpled tissue in the stairwell.
Stains on the weathered cement, like wax-drips or...a condom wrapper,
teeth marks in the foil. And those times, when you arrived on the scene,
the air still warm with the warmth of bodies, that warm smell of the smell of bodies.*

*And somewhere, squeak of rubber soles, a door closing.
Not far away. Far away now”⁵⁹*

A jangle of keys announced the presence of a security guard. They could hear him walking down the steps. The two boys became fugitives once again, hastily slipping out of the door, leaving behind two crumpled balls of tissue paper on the floor. If the security guard had not known better, he would have thought that someone had found in the stairwell a place to cry.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Sa’at, Alfian. Collection of Short Writings. Ref. to appendix 4.

⁶⁰ Sa’at Alfian. “8” in This Was Where: Weilong and Derrick: A Topographic Diary (Copyright Alfian Sa’at, 2006)

Part Three Queer Spatial Practice Of Cruising

Michael Sibalis in his study of queer cities has noted that queer society and culture is a product of the modern metropolis, theorizing that “urbanization is a precondition to emergence of a significant gay culture”⁶¹ The gay scene was thought to have first surfaced in the 19th century when appealing sites for meeting and contact were provided by city architecture and spaces in the populated American and European cities. Historically, the cities of the old world always provided both spaces for paid and casual sex in the forms of brothels for the former and parks and quays for the latter.⁶² The modern metropolis though afforded the same but also offers a whole new plethora of new spaces for queer men to practice “cruising” in airports, alleys and rest stops.⁶³ Betsy traces the emergence of this spatial practice of cruising from as early as the 17th century in the annals of the courts of Netherlands.

The word ‘cruising’ derives from a Dutch word, and designates the areas where men would find each other in the burgeoning cities of the Lowlands... often right in the

⁶¹ Sibalis, Michael D. “Paris” in Queer Sites: Gay Urban Histories Since 1600. (Paris: Routledge 1999), p. 11.

⁶² Chislom, Diane. “Introduction. Sodom and Gomorrah in the Era of Late Capitalism; or, A Return to Walter Benjamin” in Queer Constellations: Subcultural Space in the Wake of the City, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 2005), p. 12.

⁶³ The space of cruising is most ardently documented in the magazine *Steam: A Quarterly Journal for Men*, which records where one might find the best rest stops in Pennsylvania, the best cruising grounds at Los Angeles Airport, or the best sex in the alleys of Bellingham, Washington. *Steam* even ventures into theory with such articles as John Paul Ricco’s “Jacking Off: A Minor Architecture,” Steam, Vol. 1, No. 4 (Winter 1994), pp. 236-42.

*heart of the central institutions of the Dutch state, including the courthouse, the meeting places of the councils, and the stock exchange.*⁶⁴

This event of cruising usually occurs where the strictures and structures of the city are at its weakest.⁶⁵

These can be spaces of recreation or relaxation from stresses of the metropolis and can include both urban and rural. Here in Singapore can range from the desolate Ford beach to festive Chinatown and populous Raffles City Shopping Centre, which queer men affectionately name HQ.⁶⁶ Raffles City, conceptualised as a city within the city with its internal winding streets provided a labyrinthine site for gay men to cruise. These sites also present themselves as voids and schisms within the urban fabric in the form of deserted structures and quiet back lanes and dark alleys.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Betsky, Aaron. "Aesthetic Escapades and Escapes" in Queer Space (William Morrow and Company. Inc. New York 1997), p. 59.

⁶⁵ Betsky, Aaron. "From Cruising to Community" in Queer Space: Architecture and Same-sex Desire. (William Morrow and Company. Inc. New York 1997), p. 147.

⁶⁶ SgWiki. "Singapore gay venues: contemporary." 27 October 2008. Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia (Accessed 20 Aug. 2009) <http://www.sgwiki.com/wiki/Singapore_gay_venues:_contemporary>.

⁶⁷ Betsky, Aaron. "From Cruising to Community" in Queer Space: Architecture and Same-sex Desire. (William Morrow and Company. Inc. New York 1997), p. 147.

A Personal Exploration of Ann Siang through Practicing the Art of Cruising / Combining Queer Narratives with a Site Study

10pm Friday June 2009 Humid



I entered the concealed enclave of Ann Siang via a narrow 1-way street along South Bridge Road, it was as if a schism had formed between the tightly packed shop houses, revealing a hidden world. The first thing that captured my attention was the distinct change in topography as the land slowly rose following entry. The narrow pavement forced me against the stark external party wall of a shop house. With the headlights of cars blinding my vision and the skin-like warmth of concrete on my back, I could imagine how men here used to await for cars to pick them up.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Untitled. Dir. Loo Zihan & Kan Lume. Loo Zihan. MiniDV/DV, 2005. In the film, the male protagonist Loo is picked up at this area by a stranger in a passing vehicle.

Those inside cars believe they are the ones with power.

Their headlights burn through veils of shadow.

Pupils contract. The pedestrians step behind pillars.

But they don't possess the gift of vanishing around the corner.⁶⁹

The immediate areas above the slope are occupied by pubs and bistros, well lit and lively. These shop houses reminded me of watering holes in Dublin. As clan houses convert to western styled watering holes, expats replaced local Singaporeans. Soft chill-out music wafted in the air.

Around here, a gay bar stands

Humming to its blue around the corner.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Sa'at, Alfian. Collection of Short Writings. Refer to appendix 4.

⁷⁰ Wong, Cyril. "Ann Siang Hill, Stanza (vi)" Poetry Billboard. (Accessed 17 June 2009)
<<http://www.poetrybillboard.com/read.asp?id=8>> Poem by Cyril Wong brings an idea of how Ann Siang Hill, now a gentrified area consisting of restored shophouses used to be like during the time when it was a cruising haven. Ref. to appendix 2



Arriving at Ann Siang Hill Park, physical qualities of the space change as tiled pedestrian paths and tarmac roads lining the fronts of conserved shop houses gave way to a planted pocket park. Built on what which clearly used to be the back lane between two rows of shop houses facing back to back. It is deserted and dark, mysterious, sensuous and beckoning, a sanctuary in the heart of the city. I wonder if it were these specific urban qualities that attracted homosexual men here to cruise.

*To understand it you must understand something about the nature of alleys.
We are talking about recesses, as if carved in rock.
If the sky will act as a roof then the alley is a tunnel.
If there is a waterfall where the entrance is then we will be safe.
We are in a hiding place but we want to be found.⁷¹*

I cannot but question if the intention of building this pocket park was an effort by the government in discouraging cruising activity as such a spatial practice would evidently be in competition with dominant heterosexual capitalistic ventures.⁷² But despite implementation of public lighting, well planted

⁷¹ Sa'at, Alfian. Collection of Short Writings. Refer to appendix 4.

⁷² Lifestylewiki. "Ann Siang Hill Park" Lifestylewiki. (Accessed 17 June 2009)
<http://lifestylewiki.com/Ann_Siang_Hill_Park> Ann Siang Hill Park was completed in 2004.

landscaping, provision of benches and plaques displaying historicity of place to promote the area as parkland for people to relax, the area following the entering of Ann Siang Hill Park remains deserted at night.



A spiral staircase leads to a route to the left along the slope of the hill to a small sitting area and the alleys of shop houses along Amoy Street below. The path is interspersed with dark pavilions where I almost jumped out of my skin noticing someone laying alone on a bench in darkness. Is he awake?

*Pretended to be sleeping, on a bench, pretended not to see.*⁷³

⁷³ Sa'at, Alfian. Collection of Short Writings. Ref. to appendix 4.



In the middle of the park, near the highest part of the existing hill, a flight of timber stairs runs down from a timber deck to the right along the side of the last shop house at the end, leading down to the back of the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) Building. This shop house used to be the site of a former gay bath house, its rainbow flag once waving proudly in the wind now in tatters, immobile in the humid evening heat framed by the backdrop of the CBD in the near distance.⁷⁴ Remembering the time when the sauna was still in operation during the earlier part of the decade, was this where hookups would eventually lead to?

Scattered throughout these locations were solitary men sitting alone in the dark, mostly middle aged and dressed casually. Upon sensing my approach I could feel myself being watched by them, glasses and eyes glinting from an unknown light source. I was much too terrified to meet their gaze much less even to summon enough courage to ask them what they were doing there.

⁷⁴ Blowing Wind Gay Forum. "Raw Bath House" [Singapore Local Links](http://www.blowingwind.org/forum/index.php?showtopic=7). (Accessed 20 June 2009) <www.blowingwind.org/forum/index.php?showtopic=7> Raw Gay Bath House was previously located at #02-00, 324 New Bridge Road, Singapore 088760.

*A few men
turn to watch,
their eyes
sudden stars.*⁷⁵

I sat down and lit a cigarette. In the distance I see a Caucasian man and woman approach, holding hands and laughing softly. They were obviously in love. Did this hidden sanctuary also allowed men to behave intimately?

*The exhibitionists love the audience; it's the very nature of their specific arousal.
But what to make of those chastely hugging, stealing kisses...smiling?*

*I used to think it was out of spite.
To clarify the desolation of those who watch.
How dare they hold hands in a place like this.
But what they profaned was the space, not us.*⁷⁶

I snuffed out my cigarette stub and explored further, more back lanes and alleys with exits firmly shut. In which one of these sealed up shop houses did some men once find love? Suddenly I hear a shuffling of steps behind.

⁷⁵ Wong, Cyril. "Ann Siang Hill, Stanza (i)" Poetry Billboard. (Accessed 17 June 2009)
<<http://www.poetrybillboard.com/read.asp?id=8>>

⁷⁶ Sa'at, Alfian. Collection of Short Writings. Ref. to appendix 4.

*My ear
begins to trace
a moan
or the sound of somebody
coming*

*up from behind me,
his footsteps
matching the muted
drumbeat under my chest.*

*I stop.
He pauses,
then begins again.
And stops, his breath
louder now.*

He waits.⁷⁷

I turned around and there he stood, a dozen steps or so away. A strange courage overcame me and I approached in his direction. He started towards me as well.

*It is a carousel. They walk in different orbits. We walk in different orbits.
There's a three-second-rule. Or maybe it's the three-step rule.
After that initial eye contact, as you walk away from him, count 1-2-3.
Or take three steps.
On 3—a footfall, a breath—look behind you.
If he's turned around as well, he's yours, he's yours, he's yours.⁷⁸*

A couple of steps before we rubbed shoulders he slowed to a halt and I could read a faint smile in his eyes. I took a few more steps past him and glanced behind my right shoulder; he was still rooted in the exact spot, beckoning me to approach. All I could feel was the perspiration down my back and a wild thumping in my chest. I hurried on my way, occasionally peering behind to see if he was following only to find him walking further away, looking at me as I did.

⁷⁷ Wong, Cyril. "Ann Siang Hill, Stanza (i)" Poetry Billboard. (Accessed 17 June 2009)
<<http://www.poetrybillboard.com/read.asp?id=8>>

⁷⁸ Sa'at, Alfian, Collection of Short Writings. Refer. to appendix 4.

The Flaneur And Queer Navigation Of Space

It is through the act of cruising that Walter Benjamin's notion of the nineteenth-century flaneur, the walker of Paris's boulevards, arcades, alleys and other public space is evoked by queer individuals navigating the urban landscape of Ann Siang,⁷⁹ Through subversion, these queer individuals create mirror spaces which offers respite from suppressive forces of society. For Benjamin, practicing the art of straying was also central to understanding the city. Believing that the urban environment could provide a dialogue with the flaneur:

“Signboards and streetnames, passersby, roofs, kiosks and bars must speak to a wanderer like a twig snapping under his feet, like the startling call of a bittern in the distance, like the stillness of a lily standing erect at its centre”⁸⁰

Benjamin attributed the subversion of straightforward navigation of the streets to the snaking, twisting “flaneries” of the legendary labyrinth, where the act of wandering frees the mind for imagination.”

Spacing The Self Out Onto The City

If the relationship between queer subjects and humanity is clearly urban, how do these marginalized sexual minorities function in modern inner cities such as Chinatown where destruction and gentrification is most intensive? When a locality undergoes gentrification, the destruction of his habitat, of its architecture and spaces, which have a much longer lifespan than himself causes the lone

⁷⁹ In *A Berlin chronicle*, Benjamin searched the city of living memory as a site of emancipation from capitalist self-deception that even today has us catastrophically spellbound. He showed us how memory of city objects and spaces and spaces, especially childhood memory, subverts reified reason by conjuring remembrances otherwise lost to bourgeois history. City memory displaces time-conscious autobiography by evoking discontinuous moments in space.

⁸⁰ Walter, Benjamin trans. Jephcott, Edmund. “A Berlin Chronical” in *Reflections* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch, 1970), p. 598

inhabitant to feel that a part of himself is being destroyed as well.⁸¹ How then does city space function to contain and collect queer memory?

We can describe the activity of cruising practiced by queers as both a spatial practice utilizing the existing urban fabric as well as a creation of queer space through its subversion. But besides understanding cruising as combing the city for sites where acts of sexual transgression can be performed, this art of “losing oneself in a city” is also the art of spacing out, of aligning oneself into city spaces through “miming the porosity of space”.⁸² Certain city spaces and architectures are richer in meaning to specific individuals so when a route is retaken and the spaces are re-experienced in a different time, almost forgotten memories can be triggered.

“Time is irretrievable, but space and architecture persist, and where there is persistence, there is the possibility of recurrence... A person who enters such a site finds himself in the space of a re-enactment--which is a kind of rehearsal, after the performance...The other's script is inscribed on the walls, scattered across the floor, pinned on a park bench--like a 'wet paint' sign--even after the paint has dried, has flecked to reveal the hidden color underneath.”⁸³

In this chapter, where the above extract is taken, Alfian Saat discusses the relationship between protagonists Derrick and Weilong are established in relation to the architectures and design of the city. The durable urban structures outlive their inhabitants and their relationships, a background is preserved where a foreground is no more but in the memories of the inhabitants of the modern metropolis. Derrick would visit spaces where they had spent time together to remember Weilong.

⁸¹ Halbwach, Maurice trans. Ditter, Francis J. and Ditter, Vida Yazdi. The Collective Memory (New York: Harper and Row, 1980), p. 76.

⁸² Ibid, p. 109.

⁸³ Sa’at Alfian. “10” in This Was Where: Weilong and Derrick: A Topographic Diary (Copyright Alfian Sa’at, 2006)

Conclusion

Prior to the urban renewal of Chinatown, there were efforts by structured bodies such as Chinese clans and associations as well as the state in documenting of culture through collection of photography, interviews and maps. These sources constitute much of the historicity that is available to the general public in the form of history textbooks and travel brochures. But because of the existing legal Statutes which criminalized homosexuality, coupled with a homophobic government and society, efforts of recognizing and collecting hetero-normative history and evidence though valiant can only be perceived are biased in their approach.

We have also come to recognize the formation of queer spaces in the city as a reaction of queer individuals against dominant culture. In Singapore, hetero-normative dominant culture and politicians frame homosexuality as a construct of the “West” which may corrupt the nation’s traditional Asian values. In such a homophobic climate, queers are at best only just tolerated. And although they contribute to the economy in various ways and are even employed to positions in governmental jobs, these queer individuals are prohibited from flaunting his or her sexuality. Queer sex is no longer criminalized but Section 377a still stands symbolically as an inheritance from Singapore’s colonial history. Singaporean queers remain sealed within their closets. Silenced and denied the spaces for expressing their sexualities, repressed queer individuals are forced to seek out schisms and weaknesses in the city’s urban fabric. In these urban spaces, queers create mirror spaces where they put together the pieces of themselves that dominant culture had fragmented and deprived, re-imagining and manipulating the existing urban fabric to create a habitat for reprieve and through the thrill of orgasm queer hetero-normative spaces, rebelling against social orders.

We also observed that the queer subculture is greatly determined by urban factors such as architecture and planning. This was witnessed in Chinatown by the growth of queer establishments after urban renewal and the rise and fall of Ann Siang Hill as cruising space. Initial stages of massive redevelopment created a 'ghost' of old Chinatown, a reflection of urban reality where freedom for queer expression was offered when patriarchal presences were removed. Subsequent efforts by the Urban Redevelopment Unit in the construction of Ann Siang Hill pocket park and provision of ample lighting eventually led to its decline. We also came to see how through urban renewal, city spaces and architecture can exhibit aspects of queerness through evoking a "campy" architectural style by virtue of renovation. Where once worn out and derelict shophouses were ostentatiously decked in vibrant colors similar to the queer idea of drag (cross-dressing). A style that is flamboyant and artificial, even after new tenants have moved into the Chinatown that is conserved, traces of queerness has remained in the forms of bathhouses, gay clubbing areas and the hint of cruising activity on Ann Siang Hill.

Queer space is a highly specific mode of space, with its own complex meaning and significance because it has its own unique rules and codes of a non hetero-normative culture. It is always already a contested form of space, not only because of the often marginal character of queer subcultures and activities, but because of the contestedness of queer identities themselves - balanced between a desire for rights, recognition, and acceptance on the one hand, and distinction, difference and alterity on the other.

Queer spaces are able to exist because they continuously remain distinct and differing from heterosexual spaces though manipulating the existing spaces.

Currently, there is need to urgently document and archive queer space because queer culture is experiencing a "crisis" and unique queer spaces might face extinction. The AIDs epidemic for one has

elicited a panicked response from cities, resulting in the blaming and subsequent closure of bath houses. In 1984, the New York City Health Department ordered the city's gay bath houses closed and but heterosexual sex clubs to remain open.⁸⁴ AIDs has also undoubtedly diluted the intensity of queer sex. The fear of infection has abated queer desire, gratification and the thrill of communal sex and random hookups inevitably leading to the destruction of queer communities as their members fade into anonymity.

Queers are also becoming decreasingly alternate and different and they are gradually assimilated into societies which are becoming increasingly tolerant. This is apparent in countries such as Spain and some states of USA which allow same-sex marriage. These queer individuals less restrained by homophobic culture seek a closely heterosexual lifestyle through adopting children and building families. Their queer spaces comprising of counseling and therapy rooms, bars and clubs are becoming in no way different to those of a hetero-normative community. The concept of masculinity in queers have also developed to the point that drag is no longer a complete lifestyle, effeminate queer male of the past is slowly disappearing as more queer men prefer straight acting partners.

Queer space thus plays a central role the construction and maintenance of community, society and culture in a diverse slice of contemporary society. A discussion of queer space aids in furthering our understanding of Singapore's Chinatown and how inhabitants of a city may negotiate their environment. It is imperative that this role be understood as this knowledge of queer space is able to lead to queer space as a form of advocacy, dispelling myths and improving qiueer life and experience in the city.

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[Source: Kinsey, Alfred C. et al. "Sexual Behavior in the Human Male, Table 147" in *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (Philadelphia: W.B. Saunders; Bloomington, IN: Indiana U. Press. **1948/1998**), p. 651.]

2) Chinese Migrants to Singapore Table 1

[Source: Jaschok, Maria and Miers, Suzanne. Women and Chinese Patriarchy: Submission, Servitude, and Escape (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1994), p. 85.]

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6) Contemporary Chinatown, shop houses in a riot of colors

[Source: *Chinatown, c. 1970s. Copyright National Archives of Singapore and Urban Redevelopment Authority*
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[Source: *Chinatown, c. 1970s. Copyright National Archives of Singapore and Urban Redevelopment Authority*
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Appendix 1

The Kings of Ann Siang Hill⁸⁵ by Alfian Sa'at

WEE KIM, 53

ALAN, 19

(The roof of a bathhouse. Evening. A young boy, ALAN is sitting on a bench, smoking. An old man, WEE KIM sits next to him. Silence. WEE KIM takes a few glances at ALAN. Silence)

WEE KIM: What time did you reach here?

ALAN: (Silent)

WEE KIM: (Smiles to himself. Looks at ALAN) You...

ALAN: What time did I reach here, did I come here alone, what time am I leaving, where do I live, how many rounds already...

WEE KIM: (Startled) Sorry?

ALAN: Try something new.

85 Play by Alfian Sa'at for Wildrice! Production for Asian Boys Volume 2: Landscapes. The scene for which is a gay bath house at Ann Siang Hill, hence the name.

WEE KIM: I...

ALAN: Be direct. You want to have sex is it?

WEE KIM: Are you asking me?

ALAN: I'm asking for you.

WEE KIM: But I wasn't going to ask that.

ALAN: Then?

WEE KIM: I wanted to ask for the time.

ALAN: That's nice. But I don't have a watch.

WEE KIM: Which is why I asked what time you reached here.

ALAN: I don't know.

WEE KIM: So do you...

ALAN: No.

WEE KIM: You don't know what I'm going to ask.

ALAN: Whatever it is, the answer is no.

WEE KIM: OK.

ALAN: So?

WEE KIM: So...what?

ALAN: Aren't you going to leave me alone?

WEE KIM: If that's what you want me to do.

ALAN: That's exactly what I want you to do.

WEE KIM: OK.

(WEE KIM is about to leave. But he turns around and addresses the ALAN again)

WEE KIM: Sorry.

ALAN: (Irritated) Yah?

WEE KIM: I didn't get your name.

ALAN: Why would you want to know my name?

WEE KIM: I'm Wee Kim. (He extends his hand to ALAN)

ALAN: Alvin. (He doesn't shake WEE KIM's hand)

WEE KIM: Real name?

ALAN: No.

(An attractive YOUNG MAN enters the space. He starts to walk around the area, casting glances at both WEE KIM and ALAN. WEE KIM smiles at him. ALAN tries to look nonchalant. The YOUNG MAN leaves)

WEE KIM: How old are you?

ALAN: Look, I'm old enough to be your son, OK?

WEE KIM: You mean I'm old enough to be your father.

ALAN: I'm really not into dirty old men. Please.

WEE KIM: That's good.

ALAN: I mean it.

WEE KIM: I'm an old man. Sure. I'm 53. But where did the dirty part come from?

ALAN: The only reason the management lets people like you in is because you have to pay higher prices than all of us. You walk around, trying to grope people in the dark rooms. You take up the space in the cubicles for sleeping because you can't get anyone, and please don't deny it because I can hear all the snoring.

WEE KIM: Actually, it's my first time here.

ALAN: You should make it your last time.

WEE KIM: I don't know. The people here have too much attitude.

ALAN: Please. It's something else if you looked like that guy just now.

WEE KIM: You like him? He's your type?

ALAN: Why would you care if he's my type?

WEE KIM: He is, right?

ALAN: Look. I'm 20. By definition that's young. You were young too. And you had your time. Now is my time.

WEE KIM: If I told you that the boy looked like me when I was young, would you believe me?

ALAN: You're asking me to imagine.

WEE KIM: Yes.

ALAN: I didn't pay ten dollars to come here to imagine. If something is there, it's there. If it's not, it's not.

WEE KIM: I had my time.

ALAN: Yes.

WEE KIM: But during my time we didn't have places like these.

ALAN: And is that my fault?

WEE KIM: Why do you sound so angry?

ALAN: Because you don't seem to get the idea. As long as you're hanging around, nobody's going to come up to me. You saw that guy just now. He walked around, and then he left.

WEE KIM: So why don't you go after him?

ALAN: I don't do the chasing here.

WEE KIM: Well, you could pretend to chase him. And if he responds, you can pretend nothing happened. And then you let him chase you.

ALAN: I know what I'm doing.

WEE KIM: You've all lost the art of playing the game.

ALAN: Who?

WEE KIM: Your generation.

ALAN: I don't like games where people don't understand what a 'no' means.

WEE KIM: During my time, we knew how to flirt.

ALAN: You said there weren't places like these.

WEE KIM: Of course there weren't. But we had Pebble Bar. Treetops. At hotels along Orchard Road. A lot of Ang Moh's. They'd give us money and presents. At that time if you were gay, you could either be those ar-kwa's on Bugis Street, or you could be one of those boys at Orchard Road, who were more Westernised, who could speak English. They called us the Orchard Road Queens.

ALAN: But being gay doesn't mean you have to be a queen.

WEE KIM: At that time, how we know? We just did whatever was attractive in the eyes of the Ang Moh's. Shaved our legs. We went tanning. They liked dark-skinned boys. You know how much some of us can earn in one month? \$200. That was a lot of money.

ALAN: So, what, you all started out like some kind of...male prostitutes?

WEE KIM: The money was just a bonus. But we enjoyed what we were doing. And then later, in the 80's, there was Hong Lim Park, Fort Road. But at that time I wasn't too active. I got married. Got one son. And then my wife died.

ALAN: Go and write a book.

WEE KIM: At that time, thirty already, not married, you just invite people to gossip. So, what to do, my mother chose the bride, I just followed. Last time not like now. Cannot argue with your parents. Last time we respected people older than us.

ALAN: Just because you respect people doesn't mean you have to sleep with them!

WEE KIM: I never asked if I could sleep with you.

ALAN: Then why did you come up to me for?

WEE KIM: I just wanted to talk.

ALAN: But at the end of the day, you're just going to ask me to go into some cubicle with you, right? But let me tell you something. My generation has self-respect. We don't have to package ourselves for any Ang Moh's. You can flash \$200 in front of my face right now and I still won't sleep with you.

WEE KIM: Why are you getting so angry?

ALAN: This is a spa. Everyone is here for sex. Nobody comes here just for the chance to walk around in towels, because you can do that at home! Don't give me that bullshit about getting to know me better, asking me the time, because I've heard it all already.

WEE KIM: So you're saying I'm not allowed to come here and talk to people?

ALAN: I'm really wasting my time talking to you.

WEE KIM: So you're here just to look for sex?

ALAN: If you really want to hear it, yes. Like that guy over there who's been staring at you for the last few minutes.

WEE KIM: (Looks at where ALAN is looking) He's looking at you.

ALAN: No. Please. He's your age. He's staring at you.

WEE KIM: No, really. See? He's trying to smile at you.

ALAN: Oh my God. Thanks to you I've now become a magnet for uncles.

WEE KIM: He just wants to talk to you.

ALAN: I think talking to one uncle in one night is enough for me.

(ALAN stands up to leave. He adjusts his towel)

WEE KIM: Don't you want anything more?

ALAN: More than what?

WEE KIM: Than sex.

ALAN: Like what?

WEE KIM: You tell me. It's thirty years since I had my first encounter with another man. This Ang Moh tourist. In a hotel. I felt something for him. I even felt like going back to where he lived, but I knew he wouldn't ask me. It seemed at that time that if you wanted to follow your heart, you had to follow it to some other country. So the only thing we could have that was closest to a relationship was sex. It doesn't take long. Just one night. Because the next day they'll be gone.

(The attractive YOUNG MAN appears again. This time, ALAN moves away from WEE KIM and parks himself at another spot. The young man cruises ALAN, and then walks towards WEE KIM. He smiles at WEE KIM, and then he gestures to WEE KIM to indicate that he will be waiting 'downstairs'. The YOUNG MAN leaves)

ALAN: I don't believe this.

WEE KIM: It's been thirty years. And what has changed? Now you have places like this. It's so much easier to meet people like yourself. You deserve better. You have every right to demand something more than a one-night-stand.

ALAN: Can you please stop talking?

WEE KIM: You don't like to hear what I'm saying.

ALAN: I don't like to listen to you, and I don't like to look at you. Don't you understand? Thirty years. Thirty years from now and I'll be just like you.

WEE KIM: And you're scared of that?

ALAN: An old man in a sauna! What kind of fate is that? Where's the dignity? And I see myself like this one day, wrapped in a towel, my stomach sticking out, a bald patch on my head, wrinkles...and liver spots...looking at all the young ones, my hands crawling near to them, begging for a chance...

WEE KIM: It doesn't have to be that way. You could settle down with someone.

ALAN: Sometimes when I look at old men like you walking around me, I keep telling myself I want to die before I'm forty.

(The attractive YOUNG MAN appears. He looks at WEE KIM)

WEE KIM: Five minutes and I'll join you, OK?

(The YOUNG MAN leaves)

ALAN: How much did you pay him?

WEE KIM: I just paid for his entrance.

ALAN: Ten dollars? He must be pretty desperate.

WEE KIM: I pay for a lot of other things too. His school fees, his clothes, his food.

ALAN: So, this is one of those father-son relationships?

WEE KIM: You can say that.

ALAN: You're lucky then. You have money to support a young boy. But what if I get old, and earn barely enough to support myself? How do I find a lover young enough to make me forget how old I've become?

WEE KIM: Oh, that boy isn't my lover.

ALAN: He's not?

WEE KIM: My lover is actually the other guy who smiled at you. We've been together for about 20 years now. I met him a year after my wife passed away.

ALAN: And the boy?

WEE KIM: I told you my wife gave birth to a boy. That's him. Me and my lover raised him together. He's our son. Of course we never expected him to turn out gay. But since he did, so be it.

ALAN: Your son?

WEE KIM: His name's Edwin. We're pretty proud of him. He entered OCS just last month. It was his idea to come here actually. As a kind of family outing. He's never been to such places before.

ALAN: I don't believe this. A family outing.

WEE KIM: Edwin's a bit shy. So just now he asked me to come and talk to you. You see, while you're here looking for your one-night-stand, I was here looking for a son-in-law. But you're right. This isn't the best place to look for someone to settle down with.

ALAN: So you were going to introduce me to your son?

(The attractive YOUNG MAN appears)

YOUNG MAN: Pa. Uncle Heng has dressed up already. He's waiting downstairs. He wants to take us for supper.

WEE KIM: I'm coming.

ALAN: Wait, wait. (Pause) Can I give you my number?

WEE KIM: What for?

ALAN: I know I might look really desperate now, but I didn't know where you were coming from, and...

WEE KIM: It's all right.

ALAN: I'd never met a gay family before.

WEE KIM: (Smiles) You have all the time in the world to make your own. You're still young. (Turns to leave) It's nice meeting you. (Pause) Alvin.

(ALAN watches WEE KIM leave. ALAN sighs. He lights up a cigarette)

END

Appendix 2

Cyril Wong

Ann Siang Hill⁸⁶

I slip into a deserted shophouse
like a ghost. My ear
begins to trace
a moan
or the sound of somebody
coming

up from behind me,
his footsteps
matching the muted
drumbeat under my chest.

I stop.
He pauses,
then begins again.
And stops, his breath
louder now.

86 Poem by Cyril Wong brings an idea of how Ann Siang Hill, now a gentrified area consisting of restored shophouses used to be like during the time when it was a cruising haven.

Last accessed on 17062009

<http://www.poetrybillboard.com/read.asp?id=8>

He waits.

A few men
turn to watch us,
their eyes
sudden stars.

(ii)

Not many ang-mohs come here.

That guy looks like he's from China: Too fair,
without the dirty tan

of Singaporean men like me. And walks
like he's only passing through -

shirt pausing at his navel, belt of flesh
above the elastic mouth of shorts
sucking at his pelvis.

(iii)

Forgive me
if you are unable to catch up.

Forgive me
these firecracker spokes
of wrinkles from my eyes, this loosening
sack of my belly. I have nothing

against your hard,
pubescent body, except that I
looked like you once
and don't.

(iv)

How I long for a lean man.
Who is to say I do not deserve one?

I will not let another
chub come near, starved
for angular symmetry
in a face, a body

buttoned all the way
up with muscle and bound
by ropes of stark veins.

Maybe a chub-
chaser is waiting at the end of this
tapered alleyway of shadow
long as an outstretched arm
of a beautiful slim piece of man
willing to slide his hands
lovingly along the fat of me,

the much of me there is to love.

(v)
Not
the same boy.
Cuter, more straight-
acting.

One stroke
of his thigh and he is
stiff as a stick-shift.
We grope

along some staircase
down his jeans.

Another guy
cigarette in one hand,
my ass in the other joins in.

***Then another.
I think the last guy
was my P.E. teacher from JC.***

(vi)
Wonder what my wife is doing now.

Around here, a gay bar
hums to its blue around the corner.

Shadows reach in parallel lines
across the road, slide
wetly up along my stomach.

***Remember
a muscled kid I masturbated once
behind that alley. Two years
older than my son now.***

Not very crowded for a Saturday.
Few shadows swooning over a wall.

Hairline glint of someone's spectacles.

White shirtsleeves gracing dark biceps.

(vii)
The courtyard is a chessboard
with silhouettes for pieces.

Visions cross like live wires in the dark.

There stands a King but
really a Queen.

Manly Knight kneels before Bishop,
gold crucifix hanging off his collar.

All are pawns in the end: always
checkmate, never soulmate.

(viii)
As a child, I thought trees
could love
and love me back.

When the truth came
out, that tree
outside my window
became a father.

Now, as a tongue
shivers up my neck, I
don't know why I remember that tree.

I feel like the saint in that painting,
his body splintered against a tree,
arrows raying from his ribs, while

gazing up at the unblinking stars
of a different father's eyes.

(ix)

Remember where we first met?
Our first date behind the bushes,
your wild hands
clinging on to my head, like a buoy
on a wild ocean, as if terrified
of drowning,

while your dick
was a clapper
within the bell of my skull,
shuddering, filling it
with waves of a pure white ringing
I call love
for always that lack
of a better word

Appendix 3

This Was Where: Weilong and Derrick: A Topographic Diary

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- 1) Weilong and Derrick met at a bus stop. The date was the 4th of September 2004. The time was around 3 in the afternoon. It was a Saturday.

We will now attempt to describe the encounter with some degree of precision. At 3.05 pm, Weilong, after a tuition session with his 12-year-old cousin, reached the bus stop. Around 2 minutes later, Derrick appeared, fresh from an energising workout at the neighbourhood swimming pool. We can say then that the encounter took place at 3.07 pm.

But this would not be entirely accurate. To say that the two boys were in proximity is not to say that they had met. As a matter of fact, nothing seemed to happen for the next 2 minutes. Weilong looked at his watch, the direction of oncoming traffic, as well as a photocopied poster of a missing girl. Its base was cut into strips; on each strip was a telephone number. It reminded him of a comb with missing teeth. Derrick looked at how constant exposure to chlorine had turned the hair of his arms a golden down, the direction of oncoming traffic, as well as a girl who was sitting on the edge of a bus stop seat, her feet dangling above the ground. She smiled at Derrick, even though she had a few missing teeth.

And then suddenly, Weilong and Derrick looked at each other. The time was 3.09 pm. Can we say that this was the moment of their encounter? Except that we think of the meeting as an active event, two bodies reducing the distance between them. It is deceptive to talk about eyes meeting--this event is nothing more than a signal that two people are conscious of one another's presence.

And so we wait. At 3.11 pm, Derrick smiled at Weilong. Weilong smiled back. Was this then the definitive moment of the encounter? But shall we designate it as the moment when the smile was initiated, or when it was returned? 6 minutes later the boys were deep in conversation, so deep that they did not notice how their buses had passed them by. What did we miss? The moment when Weilong started moving from his position, towards Derrick, who also started closing the gap between them. The moment when someone first spoke. 'Do you live around here? It's a nice day for swimming. Where are you off to?' Searching each other's faces for clues. Derrick thought, 'If I were blind, I would run my hand over his face, and I would know the moment he kisses my fingertips.' Weilong thought, 'If I were deaf, I would know by reading the way he moves, his posture, the timing of his smiles, because the body is more honest than

words.'

Or perhaps we can mark the moment of their encounter as the time when they exchanged numbers, when they allowed a piece of themselves to be inserted into a handphone, something that had weight, palpable, but more precious now, because it carried the weight of a promise, of anticipation.

Between the time Weilong and Derrick occupied proximal space, and the time they parted, lies a stretch that is endlessly divisible. But the bus stop is there. Its presence can be expressed by a pair of coordinates. It will not shift, however minutely, along these perpendicular axes. We propose then, a system of documentation reliant not on slippery time, but geographical touchstones. The pages of a journal filled not with calendar dates but maps, diagrams, vectors. We do not deny the status of synchronicity (and time) in the orchestration of an encounter, but would like to concentrate on space, and its elements, as a mnemonic.

Months later (How many months? It doesn't concern us, not any more), Weilong would ask Derrick what made him flash that fateful smile on the day they first met.

Weilong would say, 'Because I felt happy that day.' What he meant was that a girl with an incomplete set of milk teeth had smiled at him first, had shown to him how easy it was.

And Derrick would say, in reply to why he had smiled back, 'Because I felt lonely that day.' What he meant was that he had seen the photo of a missing girl, had placed himself in her shoes and rehearsed her confusion and sadness. And that when he saw Derrick smile, he smiled back as if to a face that was longed for, recognised, a sign that he could finally rest his tired feet.

- 2) When Weilong returned home on that day, the first thing he did was log on to the Internet. He and Derrick had exchanged a few SMS'es on their respective bus rides home. Among the questions that Weilong had asked was, 'When is your birthday?'

With that piece of information at hand, Weilong started to surf for horoscope sites. He needed, at this point, some external affirmation of their compatibility. Their SMS exchange had suggested a certain chemistry, with that stuttering of boldness and diffidence that characterised the language of courtship. ('You have nice eyes. Ha ha.'--always the 'Ha ha' to insure against the absence of the mutual compliment, how early lovers strain with effort to be casual).

But it wasn't enough for Weilong, not just yet. He needed the constellations as an impartial jury. And thus he typed his own zodiac sign in a box, beside Derrick's, clicked on the option that said 'For Lovers', and waited. Derrick was also logged on, but whether it was the same time as

Weilong, we will not speculate. One coincidence in a day is serendipity; two would be contrivance. Derrick was at the Google Earth site, which allowed users to zoom in on any part of the earth's surface, to visualise cloud cover, terrain, rooftops, sometimes even moving vehicles. Earlier, he had made Weilong slightly puzzled with his request for the latter's address, complete with street name and block number. ('To visit you. Ha ha.' was his less than honest answer.)

What the two boys were doing was to try looking at the other from a vantage angle. For Weilong, this was a kind of sleuthing, an attempt to lift the curtain of civility and gentlemanly first impressions to peer into Derrick's latent, irreducible nature as predicted by the alignment of celestial bodies. For Derrick, a kind of spying, but one that made him feel protective, as if he was some angelic presence hovering over Weilong's L-shaped block.

Weilong consults the night sky, searching for a certain essence of Derrick imprinted in the stars. Derrick, from the point of view of a satellite, peers down onto the Earth, searching for Weilong. Planets and stars slip in and out of one another's orbits; at a certain precise position of geometrical relations a boy called Derrick Chan was born. A cursor roves across a slightly pixellated map; at a precise longitude and latitude it will point to where a boy called Lin Weilong is daydreaming on his bed. Through the stratosphere, along a vertical axis, across the infinite virtual galaxy that is the Internet, Weilong's and Derrick's eyes meet. We have mentioned that this is nothing more than a signal that two people are conscious of one another's presence. No, no longer 'nothing more'. Their gazes lock. And linger.

- 3) There is an inventory of First Times: the first time two people meet, their first date, the first moment they held hands, the first quarrel. For their first date, the agreed-upon rendezvous site was the 'Orchard MRT Control Station'. Yet both boys knew that they would drift from this central location--it was merely a signpost, and they would stray from it to claim a spot at the periphery. The Control Station, as a meeting-point, was an awkward space--there were people who queued up to make enquiries, to ask for directions, to lodge complaints. To wait in such a vicinity was inauspicious, as it was a place for the lost, the agitated, the distressed.

Besides, it was too conspicuous. And here we encounter a puzzle. Why choose a meeting-point with such dense human traffic? Indeed, why avoid immediate notice by the other? However secluded, however remote, it was still possible to give precise directions to a place of less distraction, to navigate the other via a reassuring voice on the handphone.

Firstly, despite the nature of their relationship, there was still a desire for orthodoxy, a yearning to claim citizenship to a larger community of couples. When the boys asked each other where they should meet, they were actually asking where it was that couples usually met. They would perform the pilgrimages--table for two at the restaurant, the two-player at the video-game

arcade, the back row of a cinema, the seats already warmed by the lovers before them.

Secondly, without realising it, they were subjecting each other to a test. Fate had made it easy for them, by placing them in such proximity that it was impossible to ignore the other's presence. The scenario would be repeated, but with the stakes raised--they would have to find one another across a sea of faces. To be able to be picked out in an instant was proof of desirability--in other words, a singular luminosity.

Weilong, who arrived earlier, felt his pulse race as each time a train unloaded its cargo of passengers, surging against the gantries. He had believed that being the first at the meeting-point would mitigate the vulnerability of being The One Who Searches. But he realised that he was searching too, albeit from a stationary position, his eyes roaming across the throng that swept towards him and ebbed with the arrival of each train. He watched as meetings were consummated, and tried to distinguish, from the posture of the approach, the eager glow of eyes, an irresistible brush of hands--the couples from the friends. He noticed how a transfer occurred: The One Who Waited was awakened from his inertia, now alert and shining, as The One Who Searched decelerated, in the shade of an oasis. The couple was a self-sustaining cosmos: energy cannot be created nor destroyed, merely transformed from one form to another.

As Derrick walked past the Control Station, five minutes late, he slowed down, panicking suddenly--should he just call Weilong to ascertain his location? What if, in searching through the multitude, he were to commit an injury--to overlook? There was also the fear: mean and irrational, that the person he was seeking would not match that image he had preserved in his head and embellished over the course of late-night conversations. And then the blinding thought: if he could not find Weilong, he would lose him forever.

Beside a red public telephone, leaning against a wall, in a blue T-shirt, smiling. The fears, the wanting, the waiting, the searching. It was all over. Love is the absolute absence of doubt. The two boys exited the station. To their left, the conical glass obelisk of Wheelock Place, twinkling in the dusk. To their right, the pastel rainbow escalators of Wisma Atria. They walked down the steps from the station and when one of them made a turn, the other followed.

- 4) Parting, in the first few weeks, was difficult. Weilong and Derrick still did not know how to properly conclude a date. If this was at a later phase of their relationship, they would have ended up at their respective homes (Your place? My place?), but it was not yet time for such obvious destinations. Nothing, at this stage, was obvious.

The ending to a date was a deferral, a promise to pick up the thread and resume what had

momentarily been put aside. But neither knew at which point, to use a charming phrase, *to call it a night*. A reliable gauge would have been a mutual feeling of satiety, but this could so easily be misunderstood as them being bored of each other. And was satiety even possible, when the conversations they had kept on leading to more questions, to more mysteries and curiosities?

Thus the two boys left such decisions to external occurrences: when the waiter visited their table and asked for 'last orders', when the lights began to dim, when the security guards started stationing themselves at the exits to the bookstores, like traffic policeman converting two-way roads into one-way streets. They were agents and emissaries of time, gently nudging them to heed the night's desire: to be called a night.

The endless migration of lovers, perpetual displacement. Doors were closed, shutters were drawn, escalators froze as if their mechanical hearts had stopped. From the cinema to a coffee joint, from the coffee joint to a 24-hour café, Weilong and Derrick eventually found themselves strolling aimlessly. But this would not be truthful, because the aimlessness was simply a front for a specific goal: to prolong the time spent in each other's company.

Many times, they found themselves sitting by the side of the road, under a streetlamp, half-scanning the road for the blue lanterns of taxitops. When a cab swerved towards their direction, the two boys found themselves in a state of suspense—which of them would raise his arm, signal the inevitable severance? Weilong watched as Derrick raised his hand, but with his arm close to his body, to the level of his chest. He felt loved as Derrick waved the cab away, smiling cheekily at the frowning cab-driver.

'Why didn't you take that cab?' Weilong asked.

'I'm waiting for my Mercedes cab,' Derrick answered.

'You just can't bear to leave me, right?' Weilong teased.

Derrick flicked Weilong's nose with his finger. Of all their partings, there was one that Weilong remembered the most. They were at City Hall MRT station, close to midnight. Derrick was headed West, Weilong to the East. After passing through the gantries, Weilong looked up at the signs and said, 'We're going in different directions.'

The handshake was too formal, the hug too effusive. And yet the goodbye had to be capable of expressing a plethora of emotions: reluctance, fulfillment, anticipation of the next meeting. Derrick said a soft 'bye' and they turned their backs to each other. Weilong felt a change in his composure, a kind of liquefaction. He could have melted as he gazed at Derrick's dancing eyes during dinner, had even pinched himself on his thigh as he spotted Derrick's peekaboo dimple, admonishing himself: be strong. Now, alone, replaying these very moments in his head, he could allow himself to be deliriously weak.

Suddenly, he found himself taking the downward escalators, and just opposite him, another escalator was drawing Derrick towards him. Weilong was confused—they had already said their one goodbye, with all the ceremony it required, was he now supposed to say goodbye a second time? This meeting was too premature, too sudden, he had no time to prepare for it, to adjust the expression on his face—wistful, melancholy—to one that was open, welcoming. He had just retired to his bedroom, and was now forcibly summoned to greet a guest.

It was awkward, the second goodbye. When they were at a point of maximum proximity, Derrick scrunched up his face, and Weilong laughed. And then their backs were turned to each other, once again, but this time while being borne by the inexorable momentum of the escalators.

- 5) Before marriage, or rather, co-habitation, a couple already discovers the need for those things upon which they could claim equal ownership. This finds its extreme manifestation in the offspring, which is a combination of genetic components that cannot be reduced to constituent parts. There are other examples, of course, from the technical: title deeds, joint bank accounts, to the abstract: a shared happiness, or sorrow, for instance, although this is often a sentiment rather than a strict case of co-possession. What the term really implies is empathy, since two people cannot possibly have the same feelings. The miracle of a phrase like 'I love you' lies in the fact that the person who echoes it back to you means it in a completely different way, with his own motivations, a system of rationales, his own sense-perception.

Weilong and Derrick were browsing in a music store one day when they suddenly heard a song (played over the speakers) that they had been listening to (over a pair of headphones) a few minutes ago. They had listened to Track 3 from a CD booth on the second floor; they liked it so much they replayed it, with Derrick clarifying with Weilong a certain lyrical phrase he could not make out. Now all the shoppers on the first floor could hear it. Weilong looked at Derrick; often this was enough for him to transmit his thoughts, but Derrick often responded to these subtle gestures as if they were cues. He was still untutored in the art of tacit communication, and believed that proof of a telepathic current passing between them had to be expressed in the form of an utterance.

'It's our song,' Derrick said.

Weilong nodded. He had half-anticipated Derrick to state 'the song just now', but felt a buzz of joy at the mention of the word 'our'. How did it become their song? There was something uncanny, of course, in how the same song was being repeated, the way it seemed so much like a stray dog that had trailed them from the second to the first floor, as if to follow them home like a pet. But more than that was the fact that what had been listened to, in private, was now being

broadcast to so many people. There was a sensation of expansiveness, of copiousness, their love had overspilled its confines. The time for discretion was over: it was an announcement. So was the time for humility: the song was a dedication by the two boys to themselves. Something unseen had blessed their equally invisible relationship.

The song made various appearances: in a taxi, a watering hole, and it was even performed live, once, at a makeshift tent by a contestant with a numbered cardboard star pinned to the side of her waist. Each time it played, Weilong and Derrick felt as if their relationship was being acknowledged. It expressed so many things: there was a concurrence between the lyrics and their situation, the melody was mutually agreeable, but most of all, it spoke out where they could not. If Derrick were to play the song repeatedly at home, it was to tell his parents that he was in love; if Weilong let his best friend listen to it over an earbud, a comment like 'it's nice' became an oblique endorsement.

The girl who had serenaded the two boys had won second place, even though many agreed that she was far superior to the eventual champion. But she was slightly overweight, was told by the judges that she had not smiled enough, she was too self-conscious that her skirt did not hide a scar on her left kneecap.

When she got home that night, she thought about those two boys who approached her after her set, who shook her hands and told her how beautiful her rendition was, and how touched they were. One of the boys was very tanned, with broad shoulders, and the other had eyes that seemed to sparkle, but with a certain sadness, if that were ever possible. Had her singing brought him to tears? She told herself that she should work harder, if only to win the attention of those who would never have noticed her if she had not stood on a platform with a microphone in her hand. She had tried to look for them after the prize-giving ceremony, but they had vanished. Sometimes when she sang the faces of Weilong and Derrick came back to her; she had summoned them once with her song, she could summon them again.

- 6) Why did it matter, Weilong had asked Derrick several times, that they could not hold hands in public? What was hand-holding anyway, but a kind of exhibitionism, though one has to admit, a contradictory kind--the exhibitionism of solitude? Weilong often wondered what hand-holding meant to Derrick. It was about proprietorship, on one hand, the signal to others that Weilong belonged exclusively to him, and him alone. But on the other hand, it was not about exerting one's territorial grasp on the other, but a projection of a simple, sincere image of inseparability.

Derrick wasn't concerned with emblems. For him, the act of holding Weilong's hand was simply an impulse he had to continually refrain from, and it made him ache. Weilong pinched himself to convince himself that the vision in front of him was real--for Derrick, the confirmation was less

solipsistic. Reach out for Weilong's hand, slip his fingers into the latter's, feel the assenting clasp. Walk with the person, adjust your gait to the other's, vary the distances between your bodies, experiment with different pressures (when one hand becomes lax, the other would naturally squeeze, as if to revive it--but the final goal is to lose this consciousness, to feel as if the gentle swing of the conjoined arms derived its motor from a combination of harmonies), but never let go. Derrick often mentally enacted a scene where Weilong and him would lock hands, and start playing 'their song' in their heads. To keep pace.

'When you reach the chorus, squeeze my hand, OK?' he would tell Weilong.

'All right.'

Sometimes to avoid a clash with a hurrying pedestrian there would be a tug. Their shoulders touching. People would tend to skirt around them most of the time, with bowed heads, as if their arms were a barrier that should not be trespassed. Derrick carefully subtracted all the possible responses of the pedestrians in his scenario: there was no disapproval, scorn, disgust, shock. The people in the crowd were faceless.

'Have you reached the chorus yet?'

'No.'

'I'm halfway through it already!'

'I'm doing the acoustic version. It's got a longer intro.'

And Weilong would squeeze his hand. And then one day, Weilong called Derrick up and suggested that they meet near Tekka Market. It was a place that Derrick had never been to before, although he knew that one of his aunts lived in the area. When he arrived, he saw a scaffold that had the word 'POLICE' on it erected beside a bus stop. As the two boys walked along the perimeter of the market, past goldsmiths, provision shops, an aquarium, they noticed how parapets were designed with steep inclines, so as not to allow people to sit on them. They passed a staircase with a sign that prohibited people from sitting on the steps, the first such sign either of them had ever seen. It seemed to be a hostile environment that Weilong had brought him to.

It was a Sunday. As the two boys turned into a corner, the crowd--previously scattered, of migrant Indian workers--swelled. It was already dusk, and there were people sitting at a coffeeshop (watching a Bollywood video on a small TV screen, eating murukku off paper plates), on pavements, at the doorways to shophouses, on railings placed around grass patches. Most of them, however, were standing, but looking completely comfortable--they did not need a wall, or a pillar, in their vicinity.

Before Derrick had time to protest, Weilong grabbed his hand and started weaving through the crowd. Derrick could feel his heart beating faster as Weilong dragged him into this incomprehensible buzz of people, whose very function at that moment was not to loiter, nor to mingle, but simply to be the constituents of a crowd, to provide it with its shape and texture. A spotlight was trained on a grocer's piles of fruits and vegetables: because of this, Derrick saw faces harshly illuminated, and also silhouettes, depending on how they faced the light. When they finally broke through, onto a curved street, Weilong released Derrick's hand.

'What was that about?' Derrick asked, although he found himself already missing Weilong's touch.

'We're not alone,' Weilong replied.

'I know we're not alone, which is why...'

'Look,' Weilong said, and nudged his head in the direction of a pair of migrant workers. They were holding hands. Neither of the boys knew how to read the gesture: was it a fraternal sign, a cultural code, or were they lovers like them? They counted at least eleven other pairs holding hands. In their relationship, perhaps only two kinds of spaces mattered: the safe ones, and the dangerous. Weilong had found a safe place for them, a refuge. They moved through the throng like a pair of tourists who had picked up a local habit. For that briefest of evenings, they felt each other's hands, not flaunting their difference, but blending in. Another couple walked past them, hands interlocked, and if Weilong knew their language he would have asked, not why or how, but 'Bring us to your king.'

- 7) Our explorations on spaces might have generated another entry (and a different ending) if both Weilong and Derrick had been able to bring each other home. But this was not possible. Weilong had never brought anyone home, not even his close friends, and doing so would raise suspicions. An invalid grandfather ensured that the house was always inhabited. Derrick, on the other hand, feared that his mother had caught both he and his ex in an intimate moment once when he left his bedroom door unlocked. He was daring enough to bring that ex back after the incident, but realised that his maid would then start fussing around in their proximity, cleaning vases, wiping glass cabinets, and to Derrick's query on why she was busy, offered the loaded reply: 'Because Ma'am ask me.' At that moment, Derrick realised that home was a dangerous space.

When Derrick insisted on accompanying Weilong home, or vice-versa, the boys found themselves confronted with a certain limit, a barrier that only one of them was able to cross.

'Which one is your flat?' Derrick asked, and Weilong would point at a lit window. There was once when Derrick told the taxi driver to wait as Weilong ascended the elevator, back to his house. After five minutes, he called Weilong's handphone.

'I'm still downstairs,' Derrick said.

'What?'

'Just wanted to make sure you got home safely.'

Weilong moved to his window and saw the parked taxi. He pulled up his blinds and waved. Derrick saw a silhouette on the seventh floor. It wasn't that he doubted Weilong's description of where he lived. But he wanted to retain an image of Weilong, forlorn and remote. What did that bedroom look like? Did Weilong set aside a space for him? It could be anything--a shelf that held all of Derrick's gifts, or perhaps they were scattered around: in Weilong's wardrobe, beside his computer, on his bed. And perhaps these items were the actual substance of the room, their prominence hidden innocently as in an acrostic puzzle, where the first letters of lines of verse would spell out words and phrases. Words--the actual words that Derrick had written to Weilong; he wondered where Weilong kept his letters--in a drawer, or a box, but definitely hidden from view. Maybe they were interspersed with the nondescript--camouflaged among telephone bills, or else, quarantined along with other contraband items: some pornographic VCD's, or magazines. What station did Derrick prefer: as a banality, or a taboo?

Derrick lived in a bungalow, so Weilong did not need to pick out his residence from the anonymous facade of a HDB block. There was a time when Weilong insisted on alighting along with Derrick, as a dare, to step right to the edge of what separated their life together from their lives apart. An Alsation suddenly bounded to the gate, lurched upwards on its hind legs, and started barking viciously. Weilong backed away, as Derrick scolded the dog, using his leg to shepherd it back into the house. He threw an apologetic wince at Weilong, who was forcing a smile on his face. The dog's instinct was unerring: Weilong was an intruder. Would the day ever come when the dog would place its snout in his hand, recognise his place in Derrick's life, with its own animal understanding, stripped of human biases?

And so the two boys found themselves skirting around the other; boundaries had appeared where there was none. There was an aspect of the other that would remain stubbornly unknowable. An insurmountable distance, not metrical, but forbidding: a shadow at a grilled window, a guard dog. The simplest pleasures became the most impossible. They had to imagine that other stranger, who opened an album of childhood photographs, or an exercise-book filled with doodles, who loaned out clothes and a towel from a wardrobe, who apologised embarrassedly for the cartoon-prints on the bedsheets, or a pile of laundry on a Stairmaster, who adjusted the air-con or fan, as the other sweated or sneezed, who served water in a glass or a mug, water that tasted the same and yet so different from the one at home.

- 8) There were times, overwhelmed by a need for privacy, that Weilong and Derrick would linger in a public toilet. They would face the mirror, washing their hands, and suddenly, unable to bear it any longer, one of them would touch the other--perhaps a finger-graze on the elbow, or a brush on the posterior. And then they would enter a cubicle, ensuring that it was the one at the corner, whose squat-lavatory ensured that there was a platform that prevented the occupant of the adjacent cubicle from witnessing the shuffling of two pairs of shoes.

This situation, however, involved a compromise. A clean toilet meant that there was a toilet cleaner, vigilant, assiduous, like the ones in Raffles City or at Ngee Ann City, who the boys believed also performed policing functions. On the other hand, a toilet with lax supervision meant that it was bound to be dirty, with wet footprints on the floor, or empty toilet-roll dispensers.

The search for the most suitable toilet thus became a rather sordid version of house-hunting. There were certain conditions that had to be fulfilled: hygiene, security, and when these were fulfilled other esoteric criteria came into the picture: soft lighting was preferred over grubby fluorescent, matte tiles over reflective ones, and unsullied cubicle walls over those decorated by anatomical squiggles. This last criterion was somewhat hypocritical, since the vandalism merely mirrored out their own love-making. But the boys thought that those were distorting mirrors, products of fevered fantasies, exaggerations in proportions, disembodiments of cannon-shaped phalluses and cave-like mouths. They did not like their reflections in them.

Once, the two boys discovered a stairwell, as they went from one toilet to another, like squatters searching for their piece of unreal estate. Frustration, exhaustion, desire: Derrick reached out for Weilong's hand, pushed him against the wall, and kissed him hungrily. Weilong did not resist but placed his hands on Derrick's flanks. At any one point of time, either one had to play sentry, keeping watch for the slam of a door, for the echo of footsteps, which was also to keep watch against his own bliss. They embraced tightly after they were done, their hearts pumping not only in exhilaration, but also fear. Weilong buried his face in Derrick's hair.

'Oh, Derrick, Derrick,' he whispered.

A jangle of keys announced the presence of a security guard. They could hear him walking down the steps. The two boys became fugitives once again, hastily slipping out of the door, leaving behind two crumpled balls of tissue paper on the floor. If the security guard had not known better, he would have thought that someone had found in the stairwell a place to cry.

Weilong and Derrick were silent as they walked out of the shopping mall. The initial excitement

of the illicit was now giving way to sullen contemplation. ***How did they end up at that stairwell? Did they not meet each other in broad daylight, at a bus-stop, a transit-point for hundreds of passengers each day? Why then this furtive search for these perilous corners, these hiding places?***

'It was dirty,' Derrick said, although compared to their previous locations, the stairwell was the cleanest place that they had found.

At a chalet, a few months later, Weilong played a game of truth or dare with his friends. He was asked if he had ever made out in public spaces. Swimming pools? Yes. Shopping centres? Yes. Public toilets? Yes. They then launched into a discussion of whether it was more strategic to have sex in a male or female toilet; someone suggested that the handicapped toilet was the best...it was a single cubicle, there were railings, a private mirror. They cheered Weilong for his bravado, made him drink a few rounds, goaded him to tell them if they were noisy, if the girl was especially voluble.

'No', Weilong said, 'We were very quiet.'

- 9) They were almost caught, once. They were at a pavilion near a playground one night, after midnight. Weilong was sitting beside Derrick, his head on Derrick's shoulder. Suddenly, they heard bicycle bells ringing, and two neighbourhood policeman swerved up to them. Weilong straightened up.

'What are you doing here?' one of them asked.

'Nothing,' Derrick replied.

'If nothing then go home,' the policeman shot back.

Weilong and Derrick vacated. Later that night, Derrick had a long talk with Weilong over the phone.

'The policeman wouldn't have bothered about us if we were a couple,' Derrick complained.

Weilong could feel his voice sticking in his throat.

'But we *are* a couple.'

'I mean, if they saw a guy and his girl.'

Weilong did not want to pursue the conversation. He knew that Derrick had his share of girlfriends before. It was a scrap of information he had always relegated to the back of his mind. A week later, Derrick started talking about 'turning straight'.

'It's all in the mind. You can do it too,' Derrick said.

'In *your* mind, Derrick,' Weilong said, and hung up. He knew what these conversations were like. First there would be the endless self-justifications. And then, inevitably, the prescriptions. We can do this together. We can wrench ourselves away from each other, deny how much we really want each other, court women, get married, have children. Together. Together as what? Sidelong glances at the wedding? Names murmured when a disguised life is unbuttoned?

The next few months were rocky. Each time Derrick made mention of turning straight, Weilong would cut off all contact. In denying Derrick's past, he had also made a reciprocal gesture of denying his own. His first boyfriend had left him on the same grounds. He should have known better. Didn't he learn his lesson before? How hard it was to keep clinging on, how selfish it had made him feel, when all the other person wanted was to claim back all the lost spaces, to expand his dominion, to walk free out of the prison of duplicity and shame.

But maybe Weilong had learnt it, but naively. Maybe for him the trick was not to avoid the species altogether, but at the crucial moment, to try a different strategy. Faced with the same challenge, to succeed where he had failed before. Weilong realised how much hurt he had been carrying from his former relationship. Why couldn't he have chosen a different challenge?

Because: he wanted to rewrite the ending. Because: he could not accept its findings and conclusions. Because: he felt he had not tried hard enough.

After the third time Derrick threatened to 'turn straight'--Derrick often spoke of the matter as a plea, but to Weilong it was always a threat--Weilong told Derrick they should meet, perhaps for the last time. He chose, at random, an MRT Station in the North, a place that was not their haunt, and which hopefully, they could avoid in the future. He brought Derrick to a void deck.

'Why here?' Derrick asked.

'It's a neutral space,' Weilong answered.

The spaces that they had been to were charged with past scenes; it could influence the direction of their meeting. They had walked past HDB blocks, arranged to face one another for maximum surveillance. Weilong had thought about the woman who had called the police to complain about a man walking about naked in his bedroom. Weilong suddenly thought how ugly the city was: benches with globular ornaments to prevent bodies from lying on them, the patrolled

beaches, the absence of back-alleys. Some people run out of words, some run out of time. Weilong and Derrick had run out of space. There were tears, please, a second chance, you're hurt me too much, won't you even let me try? Each time someone crossed the void deck a face was lowered, a sob stifled.

And then the moment came, when they let the space be filled with their silence, pressing against the pillars, the bicycle stands, the wall shielding the letterbox. When a lift door opened, the lift swallowed up a piece of the silence, carried it upwards, and released it along a corridor.

10) We had been playing a risky game when we considered the settings for these events, when we forced our protagonists into an awareness of their surroundings. Time is irretrievable, but space and architecture persist, and where there is persistence, there is the possibility of recurrence. We say possibility, as a background is preserved where a foreground is no more. A person who enters such a site finds himself in the space of a re-enactment--which is a kind of rehearsal, after the performance. The lines are spoken once again, but the other is not present to read them; what was once a lively dialogue is now an inconsolable soliloquy. The other's script is inscribed on the walls, scattered across the floor, pinned on a park bench--like a 'wet paint' sign--even after the paint has dried, has flecked to reveal the hidden colour underneath.

In the city that we inhabit, time has offered precious few touchstones. Our memories of the encounter are not shaped by yellowing leaves, by the lengths of shadows, by breaths visible in the air. The weather oscillates from sun to rain and back again; between these binaries is monotonous, forgetful mist. In a city without seasons, the spaces are tasked as the custodians of our memories.

On certain days, Derrick would visit the places that he and Weilong had spent their time together. Sometimes this was out of necessity--a meeting place coincided with one of these places. The presence of other people--friends, family--would often conceal the real space, but only for a while. Derrick would then notice the seats they had occupied, and it was easy to reconstruct a body, an elbow on a table, a chewing motion, bermudas lifted to expose a thigh...

'Look under the table,' Weilong said.

'What's that? A bruise? How'd you get that?'

'It's all your fault.'

'Why's it my fault? What did I do?'

What did he do? He knew what he had done. Derrick stood at the bus-stop where they had met a year ago. He scrolled down the Inbox messages in his handphone.

'Good morning! You're the first thing I thought of today!' Delete. 'Are you home already? I just brushed my teeth. Do you remember those tumblers they gave you in Primary School? I still have mine! Clean Teeth, Never Decay haha.' Delete. 'I promised myself never again.' Delete. 'I don't care anymore. It hurts. I love you. It hurts to love you.' Delete.

And then: 'I'm here...'

Derrick's thumb hovered over the keypad. He felt that this was the only message that he would keep. Weilong must have sent it while waiting for him. Derrick was always late. He imagined Weilong, alone, impatient...or perhaps not impatient, expectant, guiding him, drawing him closer...

'I'm here...'

But where? A childish thought: in the handphone, a captive, like a genie. A jealous one: in whose arms, whose bed? Where was he waiting? How much later did it take for Derrick to arrive? How could he have let Weilong wait for him, how could he have trained Weilong to tolerate, to become accustomed, to his absence?

Derrick watched as the buses filed past. Was it a year ago? But this was where...he was sure of it. He decided to wait a bit more before he called it a night.

Or else,

11) Derrick had his hands over Weilong's eyes. He said, 'I'm going to show you a place.' The two boys walked, Weilong in front, smiling with incredulity, and Derrick behind, peering from behind Weilong's head. The ground was soft. Somewhere they could hear the sound of running water. When Derrick lifted his hands, Weilong was struck dumb by what he saw--a thousand stars suspended across the night sky, inscrutable and merciful, merciful, merciful.

Appendix 4

Simei, January 2006



*It is a carousel. They walk in different orbits. We walk in different orbits.
There's a three-second-rule. Or maybe it's the three-step rule.
After that initial eye contact, as you walk away from him, count 1-2-3.
Or take three steps.
On 3—a footfall, a breath—look behind you.
If he's turned around as well, he's yours, he's yours, he's yours.*

Among frozen statues, the hands fumble for signs of life.

*Yes, I think, first the belt, a tug, the tooth of the buckle slipping out,
loose now, the horizontal girdle, and the vertical axis, fabric crumpling down,*

*a pair of thighs, sprinklings of hair, the musk, the oblivion, forget who you are,
forget who you were, because this needs to be forgotten too, or at least
when you remember it, you can say you cannot remember who you were,
what you were doing there, and why that hunger,
that inconsolable hunger for forgetting.*

Transmigration of loneliness, or rather, exchange from body to body.

Those inside cars believe they are the ones with power.
Their headlights burn through veils of shadow.
Pupils contract. The pedestrians step behind pillars.

But they don't possess the gift of vanishing around the corner.

Just enough to be seen, the shadows move.

What did you see? What did you miss? Traces. What is this evidence?
It is important to cultivate a forensic imagination. Crumpled tissue in the stairwell.
Stains on the weathered cement, like wax-drips or...a condom wrapper,
teeth marks in the foil. And those times, when you arrived on the scene,
the air still warm with the warmth of bodies, that warm smell of the smell of bodies.
And somewhere, squeak of rubber soles, a door closing.
Not far away. Far away now.

Pretended to be sleeping, on a bench, pretended not to see.

The exhibitionists love the audience; it's the very nature of their specific arousal.
But what to make of those chastely hugging, stealing kisses...smiling?

I used to think it was out of spite.
To clarify the desolation of those who watch.
How dare they hold hands in a place like this.
But what they profaned was the space, not us.

To be embraced like a crumbling pillar.

***To understand it you must understand something about the nature of alleys.
We are talking about recesses, as if carved in rock.
If the sky will act as a roof then the alley is a tunnel.
If there is a waterfall where the entrance is then we will be safe.
We are in a hiding place but we want to be found.***

Someone is counting and each numeral is a second, a minute, years.