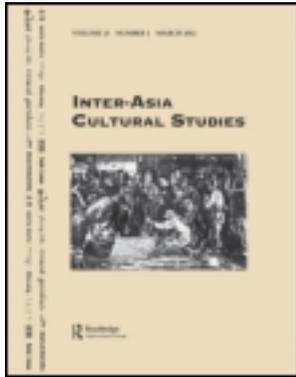


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Multicultural carnivals and the politics of the spectacle in global Singapore

Daniel P.S. GOH

ABSTRACT *Carnivals have historically played an important role in the multicultural life of Singapore society. This article looks at multicultural carnivals that today play a key role in the transformation of Singapore into a “global city” and its attendant cultural politics. I invoke as my starting point Bakhtin’s observation that formerly subversive carnivals have become mere spectacles. I analyze two carnivals that engage emergent racial-class fissures on the terrain of the Debord-ian spectacular. The first is the annual Racial Harmony Day carnival organized by the state in a model public housing town, which facilitates the integration of the concentrated and diffuse forms of the spectacle to suture the racial-class fissures with cosmopolitan interpellations and imaginations of the “global city.” The second is a two-month carnival organized by a group of artists to make visible an elided aspect of the fissures—low-wage foreign workers—to critically engage the new “global city” society of the spectacle.*

KEYWORDS: Multiculturalism, carnivals, spectacle, cultural politics, global city

Introduction

If there is one distinction between post-imperial multiculturalism and postcolonial multiculturalism, it is that the specters of colonial racialism live on in the latter in transmuted forms and cannot be reworked for nostalgic consumption as they have in the former. Racial ghosts continue to haunt postcolonial multiculturalism, taking up room, as Sneja Gunew (2004, 123) puts it, “in a particular language and change it by their presence as they progress from being tenants, to citizens, to the historical continuity of community provided by the living dead.” While Gunew focuses on the literary and idiolectic presence of ghosts, architectural historian Anoma Pieris (2009) finds them in the dialogic landscape of Singapore’s plural society. Pieris writes a history of the Indian convict laborers who built Singapore in the early nineteenth century, focusing on the spatial co-evolution of the prison system and the city. An important implication is that Singapore’s acclaimed multiculturalism traces its lineage to the colonial disciplining of race for the development of the city. She shows that colonial urban planning responded to local street festivals and sought to manage the intercultural interactions that occasionally spun out of control as multiethnic gangs fought each other over political and economic control of the city. In other words, racial ghosts are hidden in the very production of the city itself by both the state and its technologies of government and the plural masses and their “unruly” practices.

The postcolonial is however increasingly giving way to the global in Singapore and this new *transfiguration* (Gaonkar and Povinelli 2003) portends, I argue, a multicultural politics of the spectacle in which the racial ghosts are still not available for nostalgic recovery but they no longer remain hidden in the texts or landscapes. Instead, they leap out into the realm of images circulating with the capitalist flows of commodities. New racial-class divisions have emerged. This article analyzes two recent carnivals celebrated in Singapore seeking to

engage the new politics of the spectacle and racial-class divisions in different ways. Here, I invoke Mikhail Bakhtin's (1984) argument that the separation of participants and spectators in modern-day carnivals has turned potentially subversive events into mere spectacles as my theoretical starting point. But the mere spectacles are no less political. They have changed the terms of the social, such that even before we could completely grasp the postcolonial we need to invent new conceptualizations of agency and praxis. In particular, I argue that the subversive potential of the idiolectic and the dialogic in the carnivalesque texts and landscapes highlighted by Gunew and Pieris are giving rise to a new dialectic that seizes the multicultural carnival itself as the site of struggle.

The first carnival I discuss is the annual parade and carnival organized by local authorities in suburban public housing estates to commemorate Racial Harmony Day. Reflecting the ambivalence of a developmental state embracing neoliberal globalization and a consumption society emerging from bureaucratic authoritarianism, I argue that this carnival marks an important cultural interface between the state and the everyday life of the working masses and facilitates the integration of what Guy Debord (1994) calls the concentrated and diffuse forms of the spectacle to suture new racial-class fissures emerging with globalization. The second carnival was a carnival organized in Little India in 2007 by a group of artists to make visible an elided aspect of the new fissures—the presence of hundreds of thousands of low-wage guest workers. I discuss the carnival as comprising what Giorgio Agamben (2000, 73–89) calls improvisational gestures in response to Debord's spectacular. I argue that the artists' gestures subjected the divided space of the global city to the direct experience of time and raised questions of race.

A conspiracy of carnivals

Like many migrant towns with creolizing cultures, colonial Singapore was a city of festivals. Although organized and celebrated by specific ethnic groups, they were public affairs that elicited intercultural interactions and formed the fabric of multicultural life. These festivals sometimes erupted into riots between gangs allied along interethnic lines rather split along racial lines, for example, as Pieris documents, the 1867 Indian-Muslim Muharram festival that sparked fighting between Chinese secret societies struggling over control of labor and tin mines in Malaya just as direct British colonial rule was established in the Straits Settlements of Singapore, Penang and Malacca (Pieris 2009, 165–187).

However, by the twentieth century, the pluralist logic was reshaped by the disciplining racial grid of the colonial state, which separated the ethnic groups and imbued them with racial self-consciousness. This became fatal as competing nationalisms sought to define the postcolonial future (Goh 2008). In 1964, at the height of the nationalist politics of decolonization, the annual Prophet Mohammad's Birthday procession broke down into Chinese-Malay riots. Singapore had joined the former territories of British Malaya and Borneo in the Federation of Malaysia. The left-leaning People's Action Party (PAP) government of Singapore elaborated a nascent ideology of multiracialism that emphasized formal racial equality and the promotion of a hybrid Malaysian national culture. This clashed, head on, with conservative Malay nationalists heading the federal government. Racial demographics became politicized. General elections in 1964 turned ugly and led to the procession riots. Continuing political conflict led to the expulsion of Singapore from the Federation in August 1965.

Since the riots, the postcolonial state has been closely regulating local festivals. It has also been actively organizing and sponsoring festivals of representative ethnic communities, thereby tapping into vernacular sentiments and sensibilities for the subvention of its multiculturalism (Goh 2011). After 1965, the state's multiracialism was not only driven by the idealism of creating a hybrid national culture, but also by the fear that, left alone, pluralism would

naturally and inevitably degenerate into racial conflicts. This meant that racial identity was ascribed by the state, with ethnic customs, traditions and practices to follow closely the old colonial “CMIO”—Chinese, Malay, Indian and Others (often represented by Eurasians)—grid. This gave the state a stable cultural substrate to embed its multiracial nation-building program in and, also, the capacity to monitor and manage identity politics made predictable by the ascription. Ethnic cultural education was to take place in the family, comfortably housed in public flats, while national cultural education took place through state schools and community centers situated in the housing estates. PAP rule evolved into paternalistic government with a peculiar emphasis on social policies. A large part of its legitimacy is derived from the promotion of home ownership and close attention paid to maintaining the public townscapes to keep the public housing market competitive (Chua 1997). As such, public housing became state-subsidized commodity as well as social welfare entitlement.

Circumstances changed in the late 1980s. Intensifying global economic competition led to economic reforms to transform Singapore into one of Asia’s financial centers, a model of non-liberal democratic governance and a cosmopolitan city of multicultural exuberance. Unlike other global cities, Singapore has experienced gentrification without the attendant ghettoization (Sassen 2001, 257). Urban renewal of the city center and adjacent waterfront districts has led to the Singaporean *nouveau riche*, expatriate executives of Western multinationals and Southeast Asian tycoons coming together to form a new class cluster of cosmopolitan elites. Upwardly-mobile middle-class Singaporeans moving out from public housing estates to private condominiums in the suburban belt immediately around the city center are joined by immigrating skilled professionals from around Asia. The developmental state has not allowed old public housing estates to decay. Upgrading works are constantly done to old estates while newer estates are often given “re-branding” makeovers. Instead, the ghettos are found in the temporary dormitory concentrations in the northern and western outskirts of the island housing “unskilled” male foreign workers and scattered in isolated small backyard rooms where foreign domestic maids sleep. These guest workers make up about a third of the workforce.

The changing demographics pose immense challenges to national identity. The government frets about talented citizens choosing to leave Singapore for more liberal environments and to escape competition with favored “foreign talents.” Yet it is worried about the growing class and cultural divide between “cosmopolitans” and “heartlanders.” As a result, state multiculturalism has bifurcated according to the sociospatial logic of global city-making (Poon 2009). The middle classes are called on to embrace the world, celebrate hybridizing multiculturalism and become fully cosmopolitan in outlook. But they are also cajoled to remain anchored in the ethnic heritages that the outlying public housing heartlands now represent in living colors. Ascriptive multiracialism remains the key principle in the heartlands, for the preservation of ethnic heritage now assumes a primary function for grounding the globalizing middle classes as well as providing the content for the promotion of Singapore as a multicultural global city.

The Chingay parade reflects the shift. Chingay was a creolized practice adopted by the nineteenth-century migrant Chinese communities in colonial Malaya. It involved the holding of religious processions in honor of popular deities, after the passing of a communal calamity such as plague or during special events and festivals. In the 1900s, the practice was banished from the influential Thian Hock Keng temple by Confucian reformers in Singapore and went into disuse, although it survived in Penang as an expression of local Malayan Chinese identity. When it was first revived as a state-organized carnival in Singapore in 1973, the intention was to compensate for the ban on the firing of crackers that year and the curtailment of street festivities after independence. Urban development saw the extensive

resettlement of citizens into spanking new public housing estates, which took turns to host the parade. Chingay's revival by the state to commemorate Chinese New Year entailed its secularization, although the vernacular sentiments it expressed were pressed into service for nation building. Official translation of Chingay, a creolized transliteration of *qian*, praying for peace, is changed to *zhuangyi*, dressed for a masquerade. Cleansed of religious meanings, Chingay is appropriated as narrating the nation's coming of age, with the state as protagonist in the narrative. Modern and traditional Chinese artistic performances, and later, performances by Malay, Indian and other cultural troupes, were combined in the procession to liven up the new concrete landscapes and build a new communal spirit through revelry under the state's watchful eye. Separately portrayed but existing in the same processional space, the modern and the traditional represented the very progress of the nation. The carnival form allowed for the suspension of space and time, so that ethnic cultures could be pulled away from their unconscious everyday firmament and be combined with each other and the modern in specific ideological ways for conscious consumption. Citizens were interpellated through resonant aesthetic practices into an uncanny realm of mixed familiarity and strangeness, called by the state to become multicultural.

From 1985, the parade moved to the downtown shopping and civic districts. In the 1990s, Chingay grew increasingly elaborate. Globalization was picking up momentum and Chingay became increasingly a tourist event where citizens would perform for the world and showcase the blend of modern architecture and conserved heritage buildings in downtown Singapore. The performances moved away from the binaries of the traditional and the modern towards their hybridizing fusion in multiple creative directions. Foreign cultural troupes became a staple feature, while corporate sponsorships and the presence of foreign dignitaries in the audience became the norm. Chingay became a key event in the calendar of arts and festivals planned by the state to promote Singapore as a global city. It was re-branded as Asia's Mardi Gras. Caught up in global capitalist circuits, the carnival has taken its place between the industrial and shopping complexes of contemporary capitalism. Distinct from the commodification of time and space for the production of commodities and the production of time and space for the consumption of commodities, Chingay used to suspend everyday space and time to cultivate citizens with the vernacular practices and symbolisms of ethnic cultures for nation-building. Now it does so with the *images* of global culture, so that citizens would know how to be good consumers and tourists, how to party with commodities and foreigners in their midst. The transformation of Chingay has taken place just as the Singapore developmental state has shifted gears from industrialization and nation-building to forging a consumer-oriented, high-tech manufacturing and financial services economy in the embrace of globalization.

But the embrace does not make Singapore a neoliberal polity. The Singapore state remains very much an interventionist developmental state with deeply embedded control of urban spaces, the population and social institutions. It has managed to calibrate its ruling strategies to the dictates of sustained economic growth and globalizing waves. In the 1990s, in the face of the post-Cold War wave of democratization, the state layered a communitarian democracy of public consultation and citizenry mobilization framed by conservative "Asian values" on top of its authoritarian state apparatus (Chua 1995). In the 2000s, as economic globalization deepened, the state promoted a "baroque ecology" of rejuvenated urban spaces, networked social institutions and decentralized orchestration of multiple activities to cultivate "effervescent citizenship," as Singapore is made into a global city (Ong 2006). The carnival is complicit in the manufacturing of the baroque ecology across the sociospatial divide of the global city. In the fortnight after the main Chingay parade in the downtown area, a couple of public housing towns would take their turns each year to host "Chingay in the Heartlands," where the spectacle can be watched from high-rise flats.

In contrast, the National Day Parade remains the premier nation-building spectacle—less a carnival than an elaborate dress parade focused on military display and bringing together the state and quasi-state apparatus for a rededication ceremony. The Parade, held in August, complements Chingay, which is usually held during the Lunar New Year, in January or February, in the calendar of state events.

Chingay has inspired governmental grassroots organizations in the housing estates to organize their own local carnivals. In Punggol town, the Racial Harmony Day Parade has become a staple event since 2005. Racial Harmony Day commemorates the day the 1964 riots began during the Prophet Mohammed's Birthday procession. Punggol town is a significant site in the state's baroque ecology. Planned as "Punggol 21" in the 1990s, it was to be the model suburban public housing development of the twenty-first century that combined condominium-style residential life with accessible community facilities, quality shopping amenities, state-of-the-art light rail transportation, and waterfront parks. But the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis and the 2003 downturn derailed the housing market. In 2007, only a fifth of the town had been built and the town lacked the promised amenities. The delayed plans not only threatened political dissatisfaction among the residents who bought the state's marketing of the new town, but, as the downtown boom accelerated and festivities intensified, they also exposed the sociospatial divide and bifurcated multiculturalism of global city-making. The Racial Harmony Day carnival became a spectacular conspiracy of promises.

Spectacular multiculturalism and pseudo-festivity

The confluence of detached images afforded by imaging technologies and the "surplus collaboration" of workers in the mass consumption economy are the keystones of Debord's (1994, 12, 30) theory of the society of the spectacle. In the new commodity fetishism of late twentieth-century capitalism, images have attained an autonomous material force from lifeworlds and, flowing into the streams of capital movements around the world, have come to be attached to commodities in promiscuous ways, moving among them but nevertheless always coupling as image-commodities. Crucial to Debord is the fact that the spectacle, complementing money in the sphere of exchange, is the generalized equivalent of all image-commodities. It is "money for contemplation only," where "the totality of use has already been bartered for the totality of abstract representation," where through the mediation of images use value has become explicit in exchange value (Debord 1994, 33, emphasis in original). What this means is that the logic of needs as defined by the vernacular cultural traditions of everyday life is appropriated, inverted inside-out and brought into the sphere of exchange via the spectacular to promise the fulfillment of desires, dreams and hopes that the spectacle incites itself. Everyday life is not colonized and hollowed-out by the state and capitalist systems, but the spectacle, whether the regular programming of the television or the calendar of periodic festivals, now mediates the truck of image-commodities between state, capital and the everyday. In turn, image-commodities increasingly mediate social relations.

Debord is decidedly more pessimistic than Bakhtin on the Renaissance and its carnival-esque festivals. The historical consciousness that arose from the breaking away from the eternal cyclical time of the medieval was a necessary secularization of time, but it was inevitably transient. While a lamentable historical fact for Bakhtin that had to do with the differentiation of participants and audiences, from Debord's vantage point of the late capitalist present, subversive carnivals were bound to become spectacles, "mass pseudo-festivals, with their travesty of dialogue and their parody of the gift," not because of the differentiation of social relations but in their mediation by image-commodities. Cyclical time appears again as the pseudo-cyclical time of recurring spectacular festivals. Spectacles

must not only keep up the incitement of desire but also the reiteration of promises vis-à-vis the always-receding horizon of fulfillment. The “publicity” of time has replaced its reality (Debord 1994, 113).

Debord is also more pessimistic than Habermas (1989) on the communicative rationality of publicity in offering the seeds of freedom from state and market domination. While Habermas recognizes the structural transformation of the public sphere through the colonization of public reason by money and power, but asserts that public reason is inherently redeemable, Debord sees public reason as completely undermined by spectacular images. It is not the public sphere that is transformed, but the very constitution of publicity itself, which turns the reasoning subject into celebrities and the discursive relay into the gift-like reciprocity of the image-commodity. Both the state and the market conspire, but it is not merely their intrinsic tokens—power and money—that mediate social relations. Both mediating tokens are now organized and carried by images, such that publicity is transformed into public relations and marketing. This double transformation of publicity is more clearly seen in Singapore because of its post-authoritarian governance of neo-liberalism, as the developmental state meets the free market.

The celebrity principle

The Punggol Racial Harmony Day carnival takes its place annually about half a year from the Chinese New Year and the Chingay Parade and a few weeks before the National Day Parade. In the cyclical time of global city-making, it functions as a mini-Chingay and a prelude to the National Day celebrations, orienting the residents of a town at the northeastern edge of the island toward the city center in the south. The carnival offers a fresh imagination of itself every year, whether through the design of its flyer, the combination of children of different ethnic heritages in the totem headed by political celebrities, the games and food offered, and the imbrications of daily and periodic spectacles in the prizes of a television and supermarket vouchers (Figure 1). However, the thrust of its component activities remains the same in their travesty of dialogue and parody of gifts between neighbors of different religions and ethnic cultures. As an instance of spectacular multiculturalism, the carnival incites the desire for multicultural harmony and vibrancy and promises fulfillment through the image-commodities pervading it.

The centerpiece of the carnival is the street parade, which takes the form of a competition of dance items between schools in the neighborhood. Choreographed and managed by teachers, children from pre-school crèches to high schools act as live naïve representations of harmonious inter-racial friendships and dangerous primordial racialism. The variations of dance, costumes and narratives are many, but they are predictable. The children are often decked in colorful costumes portraying the four “CMIO” ethnicities (Figure 2). Sometimes they wear traditional costumes. Sometimes they come decked in modern interpretations with clues to the represented ethnicity in their hairdo or carried accessory. Dance-wise, the children could be doing folk dances, while the more creative contingents would integrate other vernacular practices into the dance, for example, martial arts such as Chinese sword-play and Malay *silat*.

The most unconventional dance item in 2007 was that performed by the tenth contingent of female teenagers. Dressed in male *baju melayu* (Malay costume) of cream-colored short dress around the waist and silky long-sleeved shirt and pants, and carrying white cloth and sticks, the girls performed an avant-garde dance of ghostly screens and veils and mechanical pillars and gears. The dance could be interpreted as a critique of modernity, sending traditions to their graves and then desecrating the graves, in the process replacing traditional Malay matriarchy with patriarchy. As such, the dance transgressed gender and ethnic

conventions. But there was no change in response from the placid audience, whose excitement came from camera-armed parents of performing children.

The dance item that elicited the loudest applause and cheer in the three years I studied the carnival was a spectacular item by a mix-gender contingent of teenagers in 2009 (Figure 2). The performance began with a loud Chinese lion dance number surrounded by stilt-walkers dressed in traditional costumes, all of largely male cast. The lions and stilt-walkers then



Figure 1. Publicity flyer and poster for the 2009 Racial Harmony Day carnival (author’s photograph).



Figure 2. A hybrid dance item, 2009 (author’s photograph).

moved to the back and sides, while four groups of female dancers took turns to perform in the center. The Malay dancers performed a Javanese-style dance, the Chinese performed a fan dance, the Indians an energetic Tamil Bollywood number, and girls in street clothes and silver caps representing the modern “Other” danced hip-hop. They then combined in the finale pop music item, weaving in and out of each other with their respective dance movements, to end in a burst of firecrackers and collective pose.

The spectacular logic at work here is the coagulation of vernacular symbolisms and practices into representations of celebrities. The carnival celebrities proffer the right lifestyles, views and sentiments of bifurcated multiculturalism and the audience identifies with them in proportion to the spectacular value of the performance. Prancing ethnic mascots powered by a person inside, which have made annual appearances at the carnival, represent the logic in its abstraction (Figure 3). Wearing traditional costumes symbolically accentuated, they moved in the streets posing for the crowd or the sidewalks among the crowd, always smiling with arms wide open, even when children and adults alike poked and hit them in curiosity. They bumped into each other as they walked together to represent happy citizens of the “CMIO” races living harmoniously together. Their larger-than-life size and features marked them out as spectacles of celebrity. Although interactions with them were inevitably silent, crowds reached out to touch them, some even shaking hands, while parents sought to have their kids pose with the inflatable of the same race for photographs, becoming domestic celebrities in the process (Figure 4).

Real-life celebrities come in a hierarchy. The dancers of the parades, representing symbolically accentuated vernacular culture, are the most immediate celebrities, as local children momentarily pulled out of their everyday life in the schools and neighborhoods to become stars of the parade. Next in the hierarchy are the volunteers and leaders of local para-state grassroots organizations. In all three years, a smooth-talking male compere warmed up the volunteers through dance exercises and loud pop music for an hour before the street parade. The crowd of residents milled around, some standing to watch the volunteers dressed in uniform T-shirts taking to the street as local representatives of the state. Their goodwill and socially engaged spirit represent the right multicultural sentiments. At the climax of the dance exercises in 2009, the compere played soft music and ask



Figure 3. “Chinese,” “Indian” and “Malay” inflatables posing for carnival audience, 2007. The “Eurasian” inflatable failed to inflate that year (author’s photograph).

the volunteers to close their eyes, meditate on their breathing and put on a little smile before turning around to shake hands with each other to say “thank you,” “soft word, a word that is so kind,” for racial harmony. Afterwards, the volunteers were then tasked to bring one resident each from the crowd, across the metal barriers, to participate in a mass dance of 500 people to enter into the Singapore Book of Records, to achieve national fame.

At the apex of the hierarchy is the pecking order of state and business representatives, from the cabinet minister and the members of parliament of the electoral region to other diplomatic guests, such as the Philippine ambassador in 2007, and leading corporate executives invited to judge the parade competition. Led by Malay hand drumming, Indian barrel drumming and a Chinese lion dance (Figure 5), these “VIPs” (very important persons) would make a grand entrance to the flashes of a platoon of cameramen after the warm-up dances and record-breaking attempt. In 2009, they were not only welcomed “spontaneously” by the grassroots volunteers, but also by “CMIO” balloon totems whose



Figure 4. Chinese children posing for a photograph with the “Chinese” inflatable, 2009 (author’s photograph).



Figure 5. Ceremonial lions welcoming Members of Parliament and other official guests with a dance, 2008 (author’s photograph).



Figure 6. A father taking a photograph of his child in front of the Indian, Chinese, Eurasian and Malay balloon totems, 2009 (author's photograph).

waving hands were animated by air pumps. As an expression of ultimate celebrity identification, after the VIPs took their seats in the grandstand, a father got his young child to pose in the middle of the streets and took photographs of him from various angles (Figure 6). Individuals could also become celebrities in other ways, for example, by publicly signing their names to a large pledge billboard and participating in the racial and religious heritage quiz to win prizes. In 2007, a quiz show with audience participants instantly winning supermarket vouchers was held to fill the longer interval between the warm-up dance and arrival of the VIPs.

The image-commodity gift

Commodity gifts were universally held out as enticements to citizens to visit the carnival in the first place and then to participate in the educational exhibitions. The heritage exhibition was improved from laminated homemade printouts in 2007 to sleek posters in 2009. But viewership remained low. In 2009, the crowd in the exhibition area comprised a long queue of residents waiting to get the free popcorn that was supposed to be the enticement for the exhibition; they paid little attention to the exhibits. Similarly, talks by religious leaders after the parade in 2007 fell on the distracted ears of residents keener on collecting their free dinner at different stalls offering ethnic-themed foods. The parody of the gift made for the travesty of dialogue.

It was the same for the stalls featuring religious institutions in the neighborhood and the wider region. The idea was to promote inter-religious dialogue between the institutions sharing the carnival exhibition space and between institutions and residents. But to entice residents, the institutions adopted the publicity approach and offered free gifts. In the three years, Chinese folk religion temples, Buddhist temples and Christian churches offered free food, snacks and drinks (Figure 7), while a Hindu temple offered free henna hand painting and Indian sweets. The most popular stall was that ran by the evangelical Central Christian Church because of its spectacular gifts: sticks of fruit dipped in chocolate flowing from a large fondue fountain, and colorful balloon sculptures (Figure 8). Its

nearest competitor in 2007 was the stall of Loyang Tua Pek Kong Temple, a Chinese temple dedicated to a local deity, which gave out free bags of small colorful fishes scooped out of two large plastic pools. On the other hand, the stall ran by a mosque suffered from inattention for the lack of free gifts other than informational brochures. This is doubly significant due to the stigmatization of Islam in the wake of rising regional security concerns with Al Qaeda-inspired terrorism after the attacks in New York and Bali in the early 2000s. Discursive responses by Singapore Muslims to combat the stigmatization and show Islam to be a



Figure 7. Kampung Tengah Thian Hou Keng temple volunteers serving out free local drinks to residents from a traditional hawker stall, 2009 (author's photograph).



Figure 8. Free balloon sculptures at the Central Christian Church stall, 2008 (author's photograph).

peaceful and moderate religion fall on deaf ears because the Muslims have remained faithful to the old publicity and not switched to the visuality of the commodity-gift.

That the travesty of dialogue should happen was not surprising since social institutions in Singapore, including public institutions, have generally adopted the marketplace framework and the accompanying strategies of publicity. This “banalizing trend” of the society of the spectacle reduces everything to image-commodity consumption, so that the religious and familial institutions of transmission of class power “can now be seamlessly combined with the rhetorical advocacy of pleasure *in this life*” (Debord 1994, 38, emphasis in original). Thus, religious stalls could sit comfortably alongside commercial stalls whose main consumers reside in the heartland, for example McDonald’s burger restaurants and the local cable television company Starhub. The confluence of images and commodities can be seen in their juxtaposition. Religious institutions gave out commodity gifts to entice residents to consume the images of their religious buildings and practices, while McDonald’s and Starhub sold commodities laden with overt images of happiness and personal fulfillment that religion otherwise offers.

In turn, religious and commercial stalls sat comfortably next to government stalls. The police and military made regular appearances to advertise career opportunities and publicize their social function, sometimes exhibiting their revolvers, batons, handcuffs and traffic police motorcycles as celebratory tropes. Agencies of the ministries of community development, national development and environment took respective turns to hold exhibitions and give out free gifts through games and quizzes in the three years of the event. But more than personal fulfillment and the publicity of function, the state is concerned with its political legitimacy in the heartland. Legitimacy lies today in selling the global city-making project to the citizens, which here entails residents metonymically connecting their everyday domestic life in Punggol to the larger imagination of Singapore as “our global city, our home,” as banners and flags blanketing the carnival grounds proclaimed.

As the developmental state embraced globalization, the concentrated form of the spectacle—that “imposes an image of the good which is a résumé of everything that exists officially”—which Debord (1994, 42) argues characterizes bureaucratic capitalism, has become more diffused. In the diffuse form associated with the abundance of commodities, the spectacle is “an apologetic catalog,” in which “each commodity considered in isolation is justified by an appeal to the grandeur of commodity production in general.” The collusion of the developmental state with neoliberal capital means the increasing integration of the concentrated and diffuse forms of the spectacle. An apologetic catalog is exactly what the carnival was, but with the state remaining the imposing author of the catalog. At the carnival, each racial image achieved its meaning and value only in relation to the imaginary “CMIO” multiracialism ascribed by the state, each temple or church to the commodity-linked succession of temples, churches, companies and government agencies, each multiracial heartland town to cosmopolitan global Singapore.

There was one problem: the delayed development of Punggol. At the 2007 carnival, Punggol’s member of parliament took the opportunity in her speech to tease the crowd with bits of the plan to revive the model town development. She emphasized that the enhanced Punggol plan would only “be building the hardware” and that “what we need to do is to build the ... heartware of this community.” Speaking after her, the cabinet minister who was the guest of honor affirmed that “to open up our hearts” and “our minds” to each other, as the residents were doing in the carnival, was more important than the hardware of “lovely new buildings that makes Singapore a good place to live in.” The PAP leaders were half-apologizing for the very backdrop of the carnival—the half-built Punggol town—as a failed spectacle and called instead on the residents to focus on enhancing their multiracial communal life. It was not a sustainable situation. As long as the residents could not relate

to the larger global city-making and viewed Punggol as a failed promise, ascriptive heartland multiracialism would be the very symbol of the emerging socio-spatial division and their lower social status in the new economy.

Two months later, the government announced a comprehensive nation-wide program for "Remaking Our Heartland," in which the original model town plan would be enhanced as "Punggol 21-plus." A new canal would be carved through the town to link two dammed rivers to create more waterfront residential living and leisure activities. Since then, the momentum has been maintained with roving and virtual exhibitions that kept gaining in imaginary sophistication. In May 2009, the "Remaking Our Heartland" program became part of the Urban Redevelopment Authority's "My Endearing Home" exhibition of its upgraded global city-making plans. The exhibition was staged at a neighborhood shopping center in Punggol in August 2009, to the delight of photograph-snapping residents enthralled by the colorful pictures of proposed amenities and lifestyle facilities. The onslaught of images of enhanced consumption of commodities, whether the conspicuous consumption in the making of a leisure class or the consumption of public housing commodities as a propertied gentry, means that the officials no longer need to apologize, for the spectacle is now complete and promises for eventual fulfillment have been reinvented.

The carnivalesque gesture of raising race

Other than the emerging sociospatial divide between the global city and the heartland, another sticky issue has been the housing of hundreds of thousands of male foreign workers from South Asia (Indians, Bangladeshis), Southeast Asia (Thais, Myanmarese) and East Asia (Chinese) on low-skilled work permits and their presence in public spaces. Heated protests by middle-class suburbanites worried about property value and safety and complaints by public housing residents have pushed most of the dormitories for foreign workers to the far edges of the western and northern heartlands. Some have been built deep inside industrial estates or within enclosed construction sites in public housing estates. Still, many of these workers would travel relatively great distances to the old ethnic enclaves, for example Little India, or specialized shopping centers in the city center, where they can find goods imported from their countries and the full range of services they need.

Part of the reason they do not make use of neighborhood amenities closer to their dormitories is because of the friction with local residents over the use of public space. A common complaint by residents is of foreign workers congregating in small groups to eat and drink, sitting on any patches of lawn they can find, staring indiscriminately at passers-by and leaving behind rubbish. Another worry is that the male workers would get involve in sexual trysts with female foreign domestic workers from the Philippines and Indonesia, which could cause employers to lose their security deposit with the government guaranteeing the good behavior of their maids. Foreign workers know they are not quite welcomed in the heartland neighborhoods and that the governmental call to residents to welcome foreigners does not apply to them but to the middle-class "foreign talents" and expatriates of multinationals. Thus, despite the free food given out, there were no foreign workers at the Racial Harmony Day carnivals, except for those municipal employees picking up after the residents, domestic maids running after the children of their employees and, in 2007, a contingent of "Overseas Filipino Workers" performing the Igorot tribal dance at the street parade.

The last event exemplified the doubled racial logic of the postcolonial multicultural spectacle. The presence of foreign workers at the carnival is only possible when they appear as fraternal multicultural subjects masking their denigrated status in the global racial hierarchy of labor migration. Yet, the Filipinos are unable to become multicultural subjects unless they

tapped into the image memory bank of the spectacle, which is conditioned by the history of colonial racism. Not coincidentally, the Igorot dance has had a long career as a popular carnival performance and circus act representing the Filipino native other that began in the American colonial period and the 1904 World's Fair in St Louis (Vaughan 1996). Therefore, either way as servants cleaning up after the carnival or as performers in the carnival, the foreign workers could not escape being marked as racial objects.

Championing migrant labor rights was for a long time hazardous in Singapore. The last major crackdown on civil society in 1987 saw the extrajudicial detentions of social workers and activists working on migrant rights and social justice on allegations of a "Marixst conspiracy." It was only in the liberalizing political atmosphere of the 2000s that new civil society groups have emerged to carry on the work in a gingerly manner. Their work is further hampered by a largely unsympathetic citizenry more concerned with undisrupted everyday consumption and property value. In this context, a group of intrepid artists, comprising veterans Cheo Chai-Hiang and Amanda Heng and six young artists, organized a two-month "mini art carnival" in Little India, which they named *Raised*, for the 2007 Singapore Art Show.

The Singapore Art Show is a biennial national show for the visual arts funded by the National Arts Council, whose slogan is "Developing a Distinctive Global City for the Arts." The Show alternates with the Singapore Biennale for international visual arts. The 2006 Biennale was a grand affair, stretched over 18 venues in the city center, held in conjunction with the IMF–World Bank boards of governors meeting in Singapore and to showcase global Singapore. Jeannine Tang (2007, 367) criticizes the 2006 Biennale as a "sentimental register" of the integrated spectacle of Singapore society, displaying the soft, cultured and aesthetic side of a bureaucratic authoritarian state caught in the circuits of neoliberalism. One exception she singles out is Amanda Heng's *Worthy Tours Co (S) Pte Ltd* for "strategically mobilizing parodic absurdity towards effective critiques of governing structures" (Tang 2007, 370).

But as Giorgio Agamben (2000, 77) observes, "Debord's discourse begins precisely where satire becomes speechless." When the spectacle is everywhere, when language and the imaginary have become fully falsified and manipulated, parodies and satires of the spectacle merely reiterate the spectacle that has already predicted and preordained them. Instead, Agamben finds Debord's situationism, "of subjecting space to a directly experienced time" (Debord 1994, 126), in the gestures of improvisational theater, particularly in the stereotyped mask of the commedia dell'arte. The mask "insinuates itself between the text and the execution," enabling improvisation and destroying both the role's and actor's identity, thus rendering the space and time of the situation *immediate* and filled with possibilities (Agamben 2000, 79, 78).

For my argument here, it means that art achieves its potency when it destroys itself as such and becomes integrated with spectacularized everyday life through the deployment of image-commodities as gestural masks in the play of events. We can already see this in the *Raised* collective's self-representation (Figure 9). Based on an actual group photograph taken at a stone table in the open space at the ground floor of a public housing block, the images of the members are colored over in pastel hues, thereby masking the figures in an allusion to Warhol's Marilyn prints—the artists disappearing into the spectacular world of celebrity images. The open space is technically termed "void deck" by the housing authorities and has been symbolically appropriated as metaphor and metonymy for Singapore society by many local poets, critics and artists in their work. Here, the void deck and its ubiquitous stone table fade into gray, while the terrazzo stone bench retains its definition and pairs up with a traditional, wooden coffee-shop chair to signify the repressed public sphere and the artists' dialogic intent. Shoes and a bag stand out as defined objects, as image-commodities that have come to define identity.

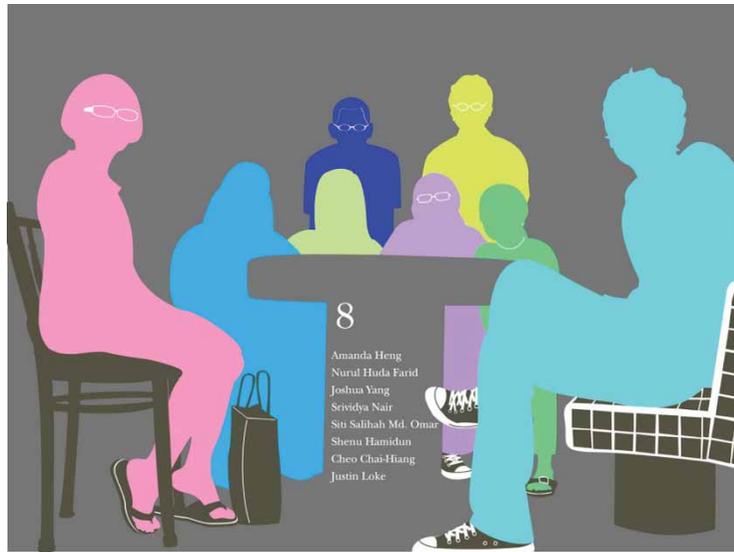


Figure 9. The *Raised* collective's gestural self-representation (image courtesy of the artists).

The collective was initiated by Cheo Chai-Hiang, who was invited by Sculpture Square under its Curating Lab project to curate the production by a group of artists of “art for the masses,” to “take prime retail spaces ... and change these interrupted spaces into platforms for them to interact with the public” (Tay 2007, 2). A pioneer of the modern art scene in Singapore whose critical political views and artistic engagement with the everyday put him at the margins, Cheo left Singapore in 1971 and became a recognized artist-scholar in Europe and Australia. He returned to Singapore in 2003 and was immediately impressed by Heng’s *houseWORK* project that engaged artists, feminist activists and the public in conversations over domestic work, women’s issues and foreign maids through community exhibitions and actual domestic help service provided by the artists. As a sequel to *houseWORK*, Cheo and Heng brought together a multicultural cast of young artists to engage male foreign workers and the public on conversations on migrant labor issues (interview with Cheo and Heng, 7 June 2009). With Cheo as coordinator of the mini-carnival, the artists developed their own component projects and installations in conversations with each other and collaboratively realized them.

The key feature of *Raised* was the move away from the formalism of conventional art, the didacticism of activist engagement and the combination of both in activist art. Instead, the artists sought to strategically inject gestures in significant spaces that would seed improvisations and interactions with indeterminate and snowballing outcomes. The carnival was held on late afternoons on Sundays in the open field in Little India opposite a popular shopping center to coincide with the off-day for male South Asian foreign workers. Little India is a low-rise shop/house precinct just north of the colonial town and the current downtown central district that rose from the settlement of South Asian migrants in the nineteenth-century. The precinct went into slow urban decay but has recently been revived by the influx of the new foreign workers, who would travel from their dormitories to visit the precinct on their off day. At the same time, it is zoned as a heritage precinct in the state’s urban plan, representing the “CMIO” Indian counterpart to Chinatown, Kampong Glam (“Malay”) and the Civic District (“Others”). It is therefore a site for heritage tourism and education activities and events organized by the state.

One installation was not wholly located at the Little India site. Artists Justin Loke and Joshua Yang of the Vertical Submarine group sculpted two concrete statues representing a foreign worker at work, which they called *Foreign Talents* in reversal of the hierarchy of migrant work visas. One statue was placed facing the monumental statue of Sir Stamford Raffles, the East India Company officer who founded Singapore, at his mythical landing site by the Singapore River (Figure 10). Named Robert, the statue was shorter than Raffles and gave off a contrastive hue of gray to Raffles' immaculate white, but a gray that matched the skyscraper backdrop in reference to the global city the foreign workers were building. Robert's inscription (right) mimicked Raffles' (left) in response:

On this historic site	On this obscure site
Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles	And many others
First landed in Singapore	We landed on Singapore soil
On 28th January 1819	Since time immemorial
And with genius and perception	With our labour and toil
Changed the destiny of Singapore	Changed your genius and perception
From an obscure fishing village	From a mere idea
To a great seaport and Modern metropolis	To a concrete reality

Significantly, Robert looks down before the imposing colonial with his visionary gaze. It was an unequal dialogue that *mimed* Singapore's postcoloniality and provoked the curiosity of locals visiting the rejuvenated riverfront as domestic tourists. I was there visiting a carnival sponsored by Citibank when my own curiosity was piqued by the statue. With no directions or indications of purpose, the curious visitor was forced to determine its significance through acts of research to discover *Raised*. Robert was the mime that pointed towards Little India.



Figure 10. Vertical Submarine's concrete statue of a foreign worker (post-accident) facing the statue of Sir Stamford Raffles along the Singapore River. A Citibank-sponsored flea market and carnival was taking place in the area (author's photograph).

The second statue, named Rajnikanth, was placed at the *Raised* site, at the corner of the field facing traffic (Figure 11). Treating it as a spectacular image, the state-owned media could only recognize it as “a tribute to foreign workers” and featured a photograph of a foreign worker looking up at Rajnikanth, as though it was Little India’s and the foreign workers’ very own Raffles, thus reinscribing the sociospatial division between Singaporeans and foreign workers (*Straits Times*, September 8, 2007). But Rajnikanth also faced the skyscrapers at the Singapore River in the distance, and thus the pair of Robert and Raffles, a gesture that connected the global city and the foreign worker enclave.

The improvisational potential of *Foreign Talents* was brought out by an accident. Early into the carnival, Robert was knocked down by a delivery truck and its arms were broken. When asked to comment by a state-owned newspaper, Loke responded that he was speechless. The newspaper published a semi-satirical item titled ““Migrant worker” knocked to ground” quoting the National Arts Council’s statement and featuring the spectacle of the broken statue on the ground, concrete bits splattered, and Raffles continuing nonchalantly (*Today*, August 4, 2007). It was significant that Loke was speechless, because the Debordian gesture can only begin when satire is silent.

Instead, the artists posted a note on Robert’s situation on the *Raised* blog, “He [the driver] seemed remorseful and has agreed to pay for all the medical expenses required to nurse Bob back to health. However, despite the lightning quick reaction of the emergency rescue team, Bob may lose his right hand permanently, in which case he will be claiming worker’s compensation. Being a good sport, Bob will resume his position opposite Raffles for the duration of the Singapore Art Show with an arm sling on” (8 Artists 2007). Eventually, the statue did lose the right arm. The artists moved the shovel up, hoisted on the shoulder, and the pedestal was painted with red and white diagonal stripes. Without playing into the publicity of the accident as spectacle, the artists turned the event to mime the real-life risks that foreign construction workers undertook daily.



Figure 11. Foreign workers milling about a second concrete statue at the site of the *Raised* Art carnival (author’s photograph).

For Yang and Loke, *Foreign Talents* suggested the connection between dark-skinned foreign workers and Raffles as “foreigners who contributed to the island.” Siti Salihah Bte Mohd Omar’s *We are all Raffles!* started from this connection and wondered about the consequences, “What if we call them “Raffles?”” (Cheo et al. 2007, 5). Foreign workers were invited to put their head through cut out figures of Raffles on a billboard painted to represent a history textbook. Photographs were taken and the workers were asked to return the following week to collect them. The textbook tells the story of the fictitious Rajnikanth who landed in Singapore on August 1965, his travails as a construction worker and his signing of the 6 February 1987 treaty with the Governor of Singapore for the provision of better social welfare.

The manipulation of the dates—Singapore became independent in August 1965, 6 February was the date Raffles signed the treaty with the Crown Prince of Johor to acquire Singapore, and 1987 being the year of the “Marxist conspiracy” crackdowns—and the reference to the governor played on Singapore’s postcoloniality and opened different readings of history. In effect then, foreign workers, the “them” were being scripted as image-commodities *par excellence* of globalization to act as the masks of Rajnikanth for locals, the “we,” to ponder on the question. But it was at this point that the improvisation came in. In one permutation, a foreign worker posed for a photograph in front of the billboard with his friend posing playfully as Rajnikanth (Figure 12). Obviating the text, like a real-life figure leaping from the pages of a book, this improvisation questioned the very writing of history and the objectification of foreign workers in any scripting of “them” in historiography, liberal or otherwise. In another example, a foreign worker responded with appreciation to Siti Salihah’s gesture and recorded his thanks on one of the art boxes spread around the field, voicing a “we” that answered the question as a peer (Figure 13).

Voice and mask were two aspects explored under the carnival tents (Figure 14). Amanda Heng’s *Our Lives in our Hands* combined the questioning of identity, something that pervades her art, and the ethics of “hard work with bare hands.” Citing Muhammad Yunus, Heng believed that “the poor have as much energy and creativity as any human being” and



Figure 12. Foreign workers posing for their photographs to be taken by Nurul Huda Farid at Siti Salihah’s *We are all Raffles!* Installation, *Raised* (author’s photograph).



Figure 13. One of the several art boxes at the *Raised* carnival (author's photograph).



Figure 14. Artist Amanda Heng making masks and, in the background, foreign workers sketching and drawing for artists Srividya Nair and Shenu Hamidun's visual diaries project, *Raised* (author's photograph).

sought to learn from them through the making and painting of masks. The improvisational gesture began thus with its very production. As the foreign workers are often subjected to racial prejudice and discrimination in public spaces because of their dark or tanned skin, the Fanonian white mask took on a very different sensibility here (Fanon 1967). When worn collectively and playfully at the carnival, they assumed a naïveté that mimed the state's frequent use of children of the constituent races to represent "CMIO" multiculturalism. Individual identities of the wearers took on the non-persona of painted colors that signified nothing and, thereby, were erased for the instance to make way for the salient racial color of the rest of the unmasked body. Race, in the skin colors of the performing limbs of masked individuals, is revealed in its bare life.

Srividya Nair and Shenu Hamidun's *That Sense of Our Own Life... Which We at Every Moment Possess* assumed a certain temporal immediacy. They invited foreign workers "to share their lives and stories in the form of visual expressions and diaries" (Cheo et al. 2007, 6, 7), so as to transcend the language barrier that separated them from Singaporeans. While the visual diaries provided for a good archive of voices, the vertical boxes provided for more interesting and highly visible interactions between foreign workers and locals (Figures 15 and 16). Locals, specifically students, painted figures of foreign workers, giving visibility to an otherwise ignored sector of the population lost in the spectacle of image-commodities, as image-commodities consumed in the production of the other image-commodities. Foreign workers responded with images of home, flowers and cityscapes, impressing their aspirations upon a society that did not usually hear them.

The public nature of the art boxes provided a visible record of the dialogues that remained open to interpretations and riposte. Each Sunday, by dinner time, the carnival became submerged in the "everyday" activity of the field, where groups of foreign workers would gather for communal meals (Figure 17). The publicity of the painting acts



Figure 15. An art box showing urban tower blocks rise out of the Singapore national flag painted in the shape of the island, while a foreign worker artist paints below the image at the *Raised* carnival (author's photograph).



Figure 16. A student artist painting an art box, *Raised* (author's photograph).



Figure 17. Food hawkers sharing the field with the *Raised* carnival (author's photograph).

permitted a degree of audience participation. Crowds of foreign workers who were going about their weekend routine, locals visiting the carnival as an art event and even tourists, “foreign talents” and expatriates gathered and held impromptu discussions as they watched. In the moment and on the field in Little India, art and the everyday were fused in a multicultural instance.

Coda: post-situationism

When asked, in collegial interviews published in the project catalog, by fellow artist Srividya Nair, how different *Raised* would be from artworks in the Singapore Art Museum highlighting “the lives of foreign workers of the past,” Cheo answered, “I hope that what we do will be less predictable than those works we see in the art museum. I hope what we do would help to generate some cultural debate in contemporary Singapore” (Cheo et al. 2007, 30). Two years later, when I interviewed Cheo and Heng, they had an interesting discussion about the impact of *Raised*:

CCH: ... it made an impact but probably for the wrong reason. People started to talk about it. When I go meet people in the art world, they remember this project, but ...

AH: Why do you say it's for the wrong reasons?

CCH: As an art event, do you know what I mean? I would have hoped that people would start to talk about it. “That’s a good idea. Shall we do it?” “Maybe next time we do it, a dance kind of festival in Little India or whatever.” “Or we do a forum as extension of *Raised*.” “Or maybe we offer,” I don’t know, “free services of some sort.” It is still full of possibilities.

AH: I think the impact on individuals is important. Salihah, Huda, the three young Malays, they became my students last semester. And I see some difference in them, some changes, the way they look at things, talk about art. I see some changes, some difference. I think it is this kind of impact that is more important for me. One that you don’t see, but I think it shows in their lives, in their work, in the way they conduct themselves.

The tête-à-tête says a lot about the depth with which the spectacular has penetrated Singapore society. Cheo was disappointed that *Raised* did not spark a chain reaction of further improvisations beyond the space of Little India and the time of the carnival. Instead, the carnival was assimilated, as it were, into the memorial circuits of image-commodities as an art event in the calendar of festivities of global city-making. Wized in her decades of local art practice, Heng seemed to understand the limits of artistic interventions into the Singapore society of the spectacle. The Debordian situationism of subjecting space to a directly experienced time cannot be sustained when the diffused form of the spectacle meets the concentrated form in the hegemony of the developmental state, when the carnivalesque gestures of a handful of artists must go up against the cultural programming of the state to regularly integrate the spectacular through its own carnivals at the local level of the everyday.

Gestures change the gesturers—the young artists who sought further education with Heng—who achieve a certain clarity about their identities as outlined by the currents of desires and dreams carried by image-commodities. Like the world imaged by the texts of migrant worker news (Figure 18), their own ascribed imaginary identifications with state-promoted multiculturalism appear illusory and they pursue knowledge to seize their own destinies. The crucial question for this post-situationism is how, as Cheo might ask, can the gestures take on a life of their own, tearing away from the embodied experiences of the gesturers, sending improvisations through the circuits of spectacular image-commodities and overloading them with the weight of history?

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