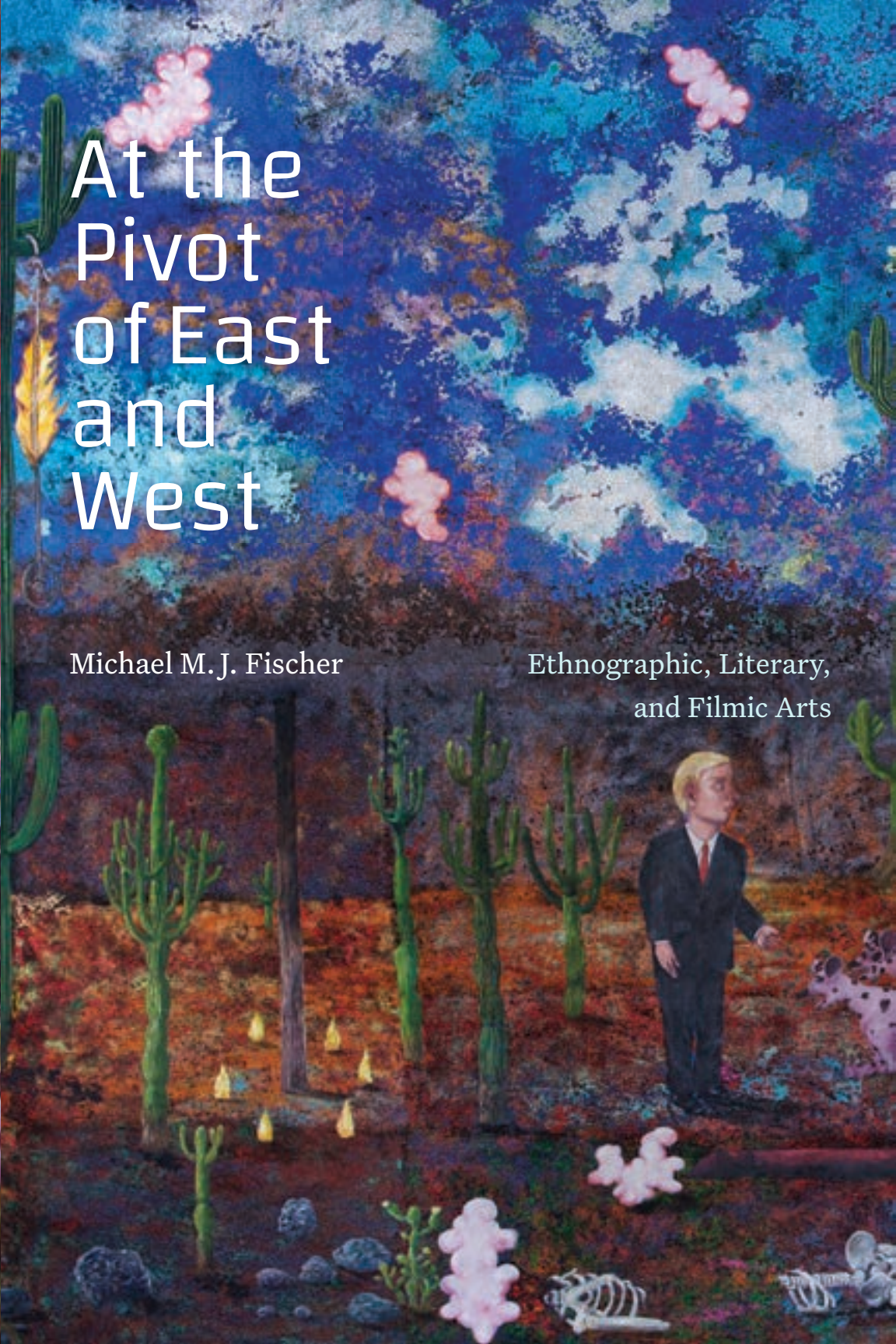




At the Pivot of East and West

Michael M. J. Fischer

Ethnographic, Literary,
and Filmic Arts

At the Pivot of East and West

BUY



EXPERIMENTAL FUTURES

Technological Lives, Scientific Arts,
Anthropological Voices *A series edited*
by Michael M. J. Fischer & Joseph Dumit

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At the Pivot of East and West

Ethnographic, Literary,
and Filmic Arts

MICHAEL M. J. FISCHER

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Duke University Press Durham & London 2023

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TO MY HOSTS AND GUIDES IN THE
LITERARY, THEATRICAL, AND FILMIC ARTS
for affordances and accompaniments
during the pandemic of 2019–2022
providing key notes, entertainments,
and further beckoning into the
third spaces of situated *hantu* (ghosts)
and global *gentayanagan* (wanderings)
worlds of *bayangan* (both shadow and imagination)
neither here nor there, always both

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Acknowledgments

This book, along with *Probing Arts and Emergent Forms of Life*, was written in the spring of 2020 as the COVID-19 pandemic was breaking across the world and the dire predictions of the Buddhist sermon that concluded *Probing Arts were coming to pass*. The immersion in these two volumes was supported by my wife, Susann Wilkinson, not only with good food and general comfort, but with a daily mantra and reminder of how lucky we were to have a roof over our head, heat and electricity, access to food, and the ability to quarantine in a safe environment. The COVID-19 pandemic was a more virulent reprise of experiences with the earlier SARS pandemic, avian influenza pandemics, and threat of a MERS pandemic experienced in Singapore (Fischer 2013), and, of course, of the Ebola and Zika pandemics elsewhere (in West Africa and Brazil, respectively). We had run just ahead of COVID-19 after a wonderful exploration of Batak country in Sumatra, after which I had spent five weeks in Singapore until the Chinese New Year, at which the Buddhist sermon was a part. I left just as the pandemic was arriving (having been identified in late November or in December 2019 in Wuhan, China). We managed a second wonderful trip to Ecuador, leaving there in early March just as the terrible outbreak of COVID-19 overwhelmed medical services in Guayaquil.

All the more thanks to these textual and visual artworks as spaces to inhabit and explore. I would like to thank in particular those whom I was able to meet, hang out with, or interview, or exchange notes with. Tan Pin Pin and Sandi Tan did public presentations I was able to attend at Singapore's National Archives and at the Brattle Theater in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Jasmin Ng spent a delightful long afternoon with me filling in some background on both, as well as on her own remarkable career, at the Forty Hands Cafe in Tiong Bahru, across from Books Actually (the home also of Kenny

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Leck's Math Paper Press) in Singapore, places well known to any booklover who has lived there. I corresponded briefly also with Sophia Siddique Harvey as well as Sandi, giving all three filmmakers drafts of my writing for comment, and was also delighted to meet with Dr. Sharon Siddique, who was then at the Singapore University of Technology and Design's LKY Centre for Innovative Cities, and who provided welcome wisdom, context (and contacts) about the joy of Sophie, Sandi, and Jasmine's filmmaking in the early 1990s. Kevin Martens Wong similarly spent a lovely evening talking about his project to keep the Kristang language alive (I visited one of his classes), as well as talking about his novel *Altered Straits*. Daniel Hui accompanied filmmaker Thorsten Trimpop and myself on a scouting trip to Papua New Guinea (PNG) for Thorsten's next film. I thank Thorsten for many conversations about film, both in and following a class on ethnographic and experimental film that we taught together at MIT. The trip to PNG filled in some contexts in relation to trips Susann and I had made to Sulawesi to visit Toraja and Bugis communities (trips made possible by Prof. Muhammad Nasrun at Tadulкао University in Palu, and by Prof. Sulfikar Amir of Singapore's Nanyang Technological University, who arranged an international Science, Technology and Society conference at Hasnuddin University in Makassar). The PNG trip also provided some broad contexts for the trip we made to Australia to attend a spectacular 4S (Society for the Social Study of Science) meeting in Sydney (with a side trip to Uluru, immersion in the precolonial history of Sydney, and two extraordinary museum shows of Aboriginal art, including a retrospective of the bark carvings of John Mawurndjul at Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art and the Art Gallery of South Australia). Prof. Nazry Bahrawi, then still at the Singapore University of Technology and Design, introduced me to a circle of Malay writers, playwrights, and literary figures in Singapore, expanding my interest in Malay plays and generally the wider Malay world. I thank Li Lin Wee for introducing me to Boo Junfeng, and Junfeng for spending time with me at the Goodman Arts Center talking about his Art in Transit project, described in the afterword, his film *Apprentice* about the death penalty in Singapore, and his then upcoming plans to direct the National Day Parade in a new way.

Since finishing this book, more works have been published within the scope of these explorations, and I have tried to accommodate some of them, including especially Sandi Tan's second novel, Laksmi Pamuntjak's third novel, and Intan Paramaditha's first novel. Special thanks to Laksmi Pa-

muntyak and the flurry of emails we exchanged as this book was going into final proofs.

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Introduction

Reader's Guide and Manifesto

When history and historiography fail to articulate the atrocities and absurdities . . . whe[n] history fails to address man-made and natural atrocities, fiction arises to bear witness to the immemorial and unthinkable. . . . It is fiction that is capable of facilitating history's power of imagination and judgment. . . . —DAVID DER-WEI WANG, *WHY FICTION MATTERS IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA*

The first violent film I saw was not a kinky B movie, nor did I see it at an appropriate age. The image of the slashing woman, stuck in my head for many years, comes from *Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI*. . . . Every elementary school student of the period was required to see [it]. —INTAN PARAMADITHA, "THE WILD CHILD'S DESIRE"

This spring, memory laws arrived in America. Republican state legislators proposed dozens of bills designed to guide and control American understanding of the past. —TIMOTHY SNYDER, "THE WAR ON HISTORY IS A WAR ON DEMOCRACY"

I turn from textbook theories
toward listening to strangers in my office
their mute underworlds
articulating
through speech and body.
—LYDIA KWA, "UNSPOKEN" IN *SINUOUS*

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Pivots come from geopolitical strategies
(followed as well in competitions via art
markets, science, and education).

Knots come from the psychology of
unexpected outcomes of action.

Hinges come from changes of consciousness
that are accumulative and slow, often recognized
as dramatic shifts only post facto.

This volume complements and expands an earlier volume, *Probing Arts and Emergent Forms of Life* (Fischer 2023), on the arts as complements *alongside* or *in conversation with* ethnographies, and as partial keys to: forms of emergent consciousness, common sense, *sensus communis*, epistemes, habitus, and structures of feeling in the globally interconnected, politically, semiotically, and media-fraught, Anthropocenic twenty-first century. Anthropology is positioned often as a target because it can deploy potent ethnographic tools to analyze, clarify, and make legible the social dramas surrounding films, controversial novels, pandemics, global protests, popular culture inter-references, and historical accounts that have not been settled, and periodically return to haunt the living.

The first three epigraphs above signal some of the political and cultural stakes of witnessing through other means, when erasures of history are enforced by either propaganda of governments or psychological repression of personal trauma, or both. Intan Paramaditha's reference to "Wild Child," the 1959 song by The Doors, is particularly sharp:

Natural child, terrible child
Not your mother's or your father's child
You're our child, screaming wild

It is her metaphor for the rebellious and "lost" generation after the fall of Suharto in Indonesia.¹ It is a generation with analogues across the globe, from the 1968 generation in France and the United States, to the 1360/1980s generation in Iran (Behrouzan 2016). The title of her novel, alluded to in this book's dedication, *Gentayanagan* (translated into English as *Wanderings*),

can refer to wanderings between worlds of all sorts, mystical as well as epistemological, cultural as well as historical. But the accent in the novel is less historical hauntology (verticality) and more cosmopolitan youth or young adult (horizontalty)—their references beyond the national, their changing of generational experience, their constraints and potentials, enthusiasms and frustrations. As Lydia Kwa puts it, this requires listening for the often mute knots of being caught in circumstances, social forces, family pressures different from those of parents, and gender relations that are intersectional, unpredictable, and pressured, buffeted by geopolitical, global, and planetary shifts, mediated by new algorithmic communication technologies.

By linguistically fraught, I am thinking of such diagnoses as digitally enabled “post-truth” conditions of “equiprobability, where virtually any statement can be challenged at very low, or no cost” (Cesarino 2020), and where cryptographic models of proxy social media dissemination disappear sources as part of hybrid warfare and politics that are inserted into national political systems (Leirner 2020; Fischer 2023). By anthropology as a target, one thinks of resistance to the compensatory politics of attention to those who have had low social and economic capital, seen as inimical to radical neoliberalism and so subject to attack as relativist, sentimental, impractical, opposed to progress (as measured in GDP without serious concern for accompanying growth of inequalities or environmental damage). This issue of anthropology as a target has been trenchantly addressed in a series of sharp essays on Brazil by Brazilian anthropologists pointing out their struggles, along with those of filmmakers, other social scientists, and cultural producers against the presidential regime of Jair Bolsonaro (Almeida 2020; Cabral de Oliveira and Marini 2020; Cavignac 2020; Neiburg and Ribeiro Thomaz 2020).

Films and novels, like ethnographies, provide workspaces for tracing how taken-for-granted common sense changes over time, creating fissures and frictions in the process. Watching new fragments of common sense form and coalesce, while other bits of familiarity fall away, can simultaneously track signals of the future, which is why some novels and films seem prescient. It is as if they are corralling the signs before they surface in public awareness. It is as if they have a kind of foresight. Thus sometimes, it is said, rather than art representing reality, reality seems to follow art. Art can reveal events foretold. Some generations experience rapid social change, and either its accompanying disorientation and alienation, or, alternatively, they can experience heightened hopes for further speedy change toward anticipated

outcomes. Friction and differences in experience-grounded common sense can be exacerbated in such speed of change, not just between generations but also between different strata of society: between on the one hand political leaders, elites, and academics, and on the other hand citizenry. Such differences constantly raise questions of proper governance, transparency, accountability, and legitimacy.

Indeed, a thread that runs through many cultural, and postcolonial, discussions in Asia is the competition between forms of authoritarian, centralized governance and unified nationalism versus forms of democratic, decentralized governance and celebrating the strength of diversities of experience. Each political stance has its theoretical advantages and disadvantages, but also each has its hold on different segments of the populace. Indonesia provides a recent clear example of attempts to decentralize, with legacies still in place of entrenched authoritarian local governance and Cold War anti-communist defensiveness. Such is the defensiveness of those “who still cannot utter the acronym for the Indonesian Communist Party—PKI,” as Laksmi Pamuntjak writes early in her extraordinary 2013 novel, *Amba: The Question of Red*, “without flinching, without feeling obliged to show disgust” (Pamuntjak 2014, 26). There are two levels of such competition, that of realpolitik (driven by the forces of the political economy) and that of philosophy (rhetorical framings of politics and its legitimations). These competitions are often evoked in the names of Han Fei, the Chinese legalist scholar of the Warring States period (476–221 BCE), who is said to be a touchstone for Xi Jinping, the current leader of China, versus John Locke and Jeremy Bentham, the founders of theories of liberal and social democracy. The Singapore of “Harry” Lee Kuan Yew (popularly known as LKY), the country’s Cambridge-educated prime minister from 1959 to 1990 (then senior minister and minister mentor from 1990 to 2011), was somewhere in between. Singapore served as a partial model for China’s previous leader, Deng Xiaoping (paramount leader from 1978 to 1989), who visited it in 1978, opened China to capitalist reforms, and whose statue along the Singapore River in front of the Museum of Asian Civilizations commemorates his visit and his call for China to emulate Singapore. In 1985 Deng invited Singapore’s former deputy prime minister, the London School of Economics-educated Robert Goh Keng Swee, to advise on special economic zones (SEZs), which became the initial growth engine for Shenzhen and Guangdong province’s “capitalism with Chinese characteristics” (Vogel 1989, 2011). Lee Kuan Yew began as a social democrat (his People’s Action Party was for a time part of the So-

cialist International, an organization of European social democratic parties), but increasingly adopted a more meritocratic disciplinary vision akin to Han Fei's, as for instance in his address to the Socialist International Congress in Uppsala in 1966 (Lee Kuan Yew 1966). Both Singapore and Indonesia (since the fall of Suharto, who ruled from 1967 to 1998) are cautiously liberalizing and democratizing within the pressures and constraints of a global neoliberal economy, in the pivot geopolitically between East and West, between China and the United States.

In *Probing Arts*, I explored how artworks (installations, exhibitions, novels, painting, dance, video, and film) provide para-ethnographic access to changing worlds, anticipating changes as much as registering them, and often doing so as much through their tactics and strategies of composition as their ostensive content (see Fischer 2023). Art worlds and comparative literature discussions often revolve around strategies of composition or questions of form, and how they relate to the historical conjunctures out of which they arise. Anthropologists, likewise, have long debated their own arts of writing—to what extent is the pen a form of power over the people being described; to what extent can ethnographic writing be dialogic or polyphonic; to what extent can ethnographic writing adequately stage (as in theater) competitions for hegemonic power, legitimacy, and common sense; what poetic, genre, and stylistic competencies do linguistic, cultural, postcolonial, and de-colonial translations require? Insofar as ethnographic writing attempts to do something other than simply transmit information, the arts of ethnographic writing are a matter of constant discussion, and the forms have changed as the subject matter and goals have.²

In this volume I explore how documentary filmmakers and novelists deal with many of these same issues. What makes some experimental films ethnographic? Given that cultural and postcolonial or de-colonial forms increasingly depend on digital platforms, are the lecture-videos of Hito Steyerl and the digital films of Harun Farocki or Xu Bing as important to present-day ethnographic film debates as Third Cinema was to ethnographic film debates in the 1960s and 1970s? Are there novelistic tools of character development (life histories), social analysis (gender, power, genres of speech, visual and spatial markers, class formations), and compositional tactics (omniscient narrator, linguistic code switching, use of visuals, parallel columns, sidebars, or alternating chapters with different narrators to present counterarguments and different perspectives) that can energize ethnographic writing? And can the arts become textual twins (similar but different) to ethnographies, illu-

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minating, interrogating, and reenergizing one another? Indeed, filmmakers, novelists, and playwrights often talk about the importance of their “research”—interviewing, hanging out, observing, sometimes participating—in identical or similar ways as do ethnographers. Verbatim theater puts on stage actual, if edited and shaped, interview transcripts, just like the long-form interviews that ethnographers collect and sometimes also experiment with as publishable forms of encounter, dialogue, or document.³

In *Probing Arts*, feminage (feminist cutting and sewing) of modernist Dada puppets and female pirates, and young girls’ self-cutting (in Sally Smart’s art) conversed with the language of intestines, multiple eyes, and post-wayang superheroes in an Indonesia struggling (in Entang Wiharso’s art) to fend off terror past and present (see Fischer 2023). Park Chan-kyong’s *Belated Bosal* sent the Buddha off on a funeral pyre in a post-Fukushima irradiated forest; and his *Anyang Paradise City* mixed Asian Gothic, shamanic, and post-*minjung* (people’s) art to deal with the national psychological traumas of the 1988 Greenhill Textile Mill fire (in which twenty-two female workers died locked in a dormitory, ironically when the labor movement was at its height) and the 2014 Sewol Ferry sinking (killing 245 high school students and fifty-four others on their way to Jeju Island). Ayoung Kim used her animist and animation art to analogize the Yemeni refugees on Jeju Island twisting in limbo with spinning cubes of precious metals mined and torn from the mother rock in Mongolia. Charles Lim’s decade-long video and installation project provided a sea-based view of Singapore’s technocratic sublime, including its underground and undersea expansions and its “safe seas” missiles. Malay Archipelago life reemerged in Zai Kun-ing’s ghost ships, *ghazal* music, and *orang laut* (sea peoples) operas. Kumar Kiran and Chandralekha reinvented Indonesian and Indian dance as inquiries into masculinity and femininity, historical codes, tantric roots, repression, and expressive potentials.

I made a claim in *Probing Arts* for a new language of art emergent in Asia that I called synthetic realism, akin perhaps to synthetic biology and its bioartists (Fischer 2023). Synthetic biology is the redesigning of organisms for new abilities, or the creation of novel organisms that have never previously existed.⁴ Synthetic realism, in what I suggest is perhaps a new language of art, is open on the one hand to the technological future, and simultaneously to a critique of the transnational present. It is partly made up of gritty survivorship of war, both World War II and the Cold War, with its guerrilla insurgencies and brutal security-state responses. And it is partly made up of

an ability to metabolize transnational cultural and de-colonial circulations both to comment on local-regional dilemmas, and to participate in synthesizing new forms of gaming. Gaming, artificial intelligence, bodily practices, and growing molecular and ecological knowledge all contribute to emergent Asian sensibilities that do not eschew, but rather recruit, shamanic wisdom, shape-shifting animal companions and symbolic hybrids along with attunement to the “movementality” of the Earth (earthquakes, volcanoes) as well as extraction and mining, and engage with transgressive viscerality, desires, winds, religious shadows, and ghosts of the unsettled dead.

All these continue in the present volume but with different media. Documentary filmmaker Tan Pin Pin maps Singapore’s urban life through ambulatory sound with and without people, and with literal and figurative time capsules. Women novelists re-narrate Southeast Asian political worlds with surround-sound cinematic motifs, the colors of fauvist and cubist painting, and emotional and psychodynamic intelligence. Daniel Hui’s experimental films dissociate, become multiple, and stage gendered psychodramas of political leadership and film directing. Daren Goh reinvents the detective story for the age of artificial intelligence and psychopharmacology, pushing Weberian hyperrationalities beyond the dialectics of Enlightenment, not toward old-style strong-man dictatorships, but locating structures of feeling as social democracy policy goals slide into post-human meritocracy. Analytic monsters reinvent merlions and antabogas (the Ananta Shesha of Hindu texts) as bioengineered, hive minds, and Gestalt social psychologies, and re-narrate archipelagic battles of the geopolitical past and future. Nuraliah Norasid fuses the Greek Medusa with the Chinese White Snake to deliver a critique of racism, ethnic stratification, and erasure of ethnic cultural histories in the meritocracy.

Ethnographic nuggets come as lightning strikes or illuminations of recognition and often sound an alert or fire alarm (*après* Walter Benjamin [1928] 1979, 84; see also Löwy 2005), a warning, a call for help, or for doing something new. I had such a flash of illumination when I googled Matisse’s *Woman with a Hat* and instantly recognized through its colors what novelist Laksmi Pamuntjak was describing about the portrait of her protagonist’s mother in the novel *Fall Baby* (2019). The protagonist, Siri, provides an account of the colors, but only with a better understanding of the goals of fauvism did I fully grasp *and feel* the synesthesia of grief in the nonnaturalist colors of green with some red. I felt it as not just conceptually clear but emotionally powerful. It was for me a moment of illumination, but it also clari-

fied some things in the plot about the dynamics of Siri and her mother with their quite different psychologies, secrets, defense mechanisms, and melancholias in relation to a missing husband and father. I had a similar flash of illumination when Sandi Tan described in published interviews that she wrote the female-perspective novel, *The Black Isle* (S. Tan 2012a) while listening to a loop of favorite film scores. Again, when I tracked down the films she mentioned, their scores and soundtracks suddenly unlocked for me the emotion-rhythms of her novel that was not just another fictive family saga re-narrating Singapore's history. They deepened my ability to track the obsessive and charismatic features of "the Singapore story," and its gendered power and legitimacy struggles, for Singapore but also beyond Singapore.⁵ *Flashpoints* are as important as lightning strikes. Flashpoints illuminate deep-play social dramas unfolding in state reactions and public counterreactions to certain artworks that seem to violate often hidden, variable, and moveable, but also tacitly accepted, if contested, "out of bounds" (colloquially called "OB") rules, such as *To Singapore, with Love* (Tan Pin Pin 2013) or Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* (see Fischer 1990, 2014; Fischer and Abedi 1990).⁶

Ethnographic nuggets or revelatory illuminations can come also in the form of dance, through which generation-defining changes in cultural, gender, and de-colonial sensibilities are both registered and shaped. In *Probing Arts*, I opened a discussion about this with Kirin Kumar and Chandralekha's choreographies (recognizing different forms of masculinity, femininity) and with Edith Podesta's *Indices of Vanishment* (Fischer 2023, ch. 6). The latter is a choreography that is almost calligraphic, with ink line-drawing minimalism and conceptual vigor, that is narratively about the emotions of a couple having to move out of their long-occupied flat. The topic of displacement and moving from long-occupied homes comes up again in the present volume in Jing-Jing Lee's novels. Podesta's choreography might be read along with them. Podesta's calligraphic dance reappears in this volume's first chapter on film, in a scene in Tan Pin Pin's film *Singapore GaGa* (2005) about silences, ambient noises, and visuals—all being different kinds of ethnographic brushstrokes. There are two more dance explorations that resonate across *Probing Arts* and *In the Pivot of East and West*: Oliver Tarpaga's *Declassified Memory Fragment* on contemporary violence (that both Singapore and Indonesia have deeply embedded in their body politic as danger points like touching a hot stove); and Steven Page's account of Bangarra Dance Theatre in the documentary film *Firestarter* (Blair and Minchin 2020), us-

ing dance as an anti-racist pedagogy and monitoring index of cultural and social change.

Artists have the initial advantage. They are allowed to present unfinished, enigmatic, and unexplained works. Anthropologists return the serve, but are required by peer review and editors to frame and explicate, often reductively, things evasively called theory or narrative (modernization, globalization, neoliberalism). Not that theory is bad, but it must be built up from the ethnography and empirical ground-truthing, not deduced from itself. Theory and ethnography are dialectically related. Less can often be more: an editor-friend advises to focus on “the film not the footage.” But for the anthropologist the footage *is* the film. It is what one goes to films to see, or at least what I go for. The footage is or contains the object of desire, however much, in Lacanian fashion, the object may be elusive. It is the traces, the semantic slippages and allusions that are the substance of the conjuring. “The film” is but a frame device, sometimes suggesting a point of view, or a “take,” on the richer complexity (“real world”), to which one again returns. Or perhaps better is the analogy with the move in documentary filmmaking to dispense with voice-overs (the theory, narration, or interpretation that overwrites the ethnography.) As Carlos Fausto, the Brazilian anthropologist who has written one of the most exciting books of the past several decades on Amazonian art, puts it: “The complexity that interests me here is . . . that of the form itself and its power to evoke its non-visible parts and convoke an act of looking, setting off an imaginative projection” (Fausto 2020, 22). What is “most exciting” for me about Fausto’s book is its dedication to and respect for the ethnographic material (the footage, not the film)—not in some romantic or nostalgic way, but in a way that also pursues historical change, migrations, borrowings, and exchanges.⁷ A second important book in a similar vein is Edgar Garcia’s interpretive survey of the poetics of North American petroglyphs, Anishinaabe pictographic birchbark scrolls, Nahuatl dialectical parallelism, Maya glyphs as productive, hermeneutically powerful art forms that are not mere “mnemonic cues but also creative prompts” (Garcia 2020, 100). At issue in both books is an artistic creativity that engages and creates social and ecological worlds, that resists cataloguing but demands imaginative participation.⁸

A really good film, theater piece, novel, art installation, or ethnography can be a serious play-space, a place for mind storming and immersion

in other worlds. Ethnographic and anthropological commitments to probing what is “actually the case” place simple constraints on such forms, raising the bar above journalistic “human interest” vignettes (that at best ignite more in-depth interest); travel literature’s usually thin engagement with locals (better for the ethnography of the travelers’ own culture than of local, native points of view); or speculative fantasy fiction’s relaxation of reality constraints (as opposed to “hard” science fiction which probes the limits of the feasible). These commitments to the real, the actual, the empirical, and ground truth can enliven other forms of future-thinking such as scenario-building, ecological-, systems-, and design-thinking, and artificial intelligence. Ethnographic (and comparative) thinking and open-ended participant observation (reality-checking, asking questions *in situ*) can aid in policy work. It can help, for instance, in redesigning the internet (against government and corporate intrusiveness, bias in algorithms and in very large-scale data governance) so as to keep decision-making driven by “big data” from turning human beings into surplus and ghost labor—as already Germaine de Staël worried in 1813 about the mechanisms of Napoleonic bureaucracy (Staël 1818), and Mary Gray and Siddhart Suri in more recent times about Silicon Valley (Gray and Suri 2019)—and to protect against political tyranny sold as management efficiency. These last worries are raised by various theorists of efficient tyranny from Plato’s philosopher-king and Khomeini’s variant thereof, as well as Han Fei’s “realist legalism” and Xi Jinping’s or Lee Kuan Yew’s variants; or Taylorist and neoliberal management-speak variously analyzed for the present by Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello in *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (1999), by Naomi Klein in *The Shock Doctrine* (2008), and several other recent books (Zuboff 2019; Gray and Suri 2019; and McGhee 2021).

Singapore plays an important role in contemporary debates on all these issues, as if in a battle royale, or superpower-ideological competition, with Han Fei in one corner and John Locke or Jeremy Bentham in the other. The Singapore model is discussed intensively by those who would reform and strengthen China (Deng Xiaoping’s call for China to emulate Singapore in opening up to capitalism with Chinese characteristics; Xi Jinping’s return to Han Fei-inspired strong central control plus imperial expansion via Belt and Road projects across Central and Southeast Asia, similar initiatives along the Pacific Rim to New Guinea, Indonesia, and Australia, and across Africa and Latin America). The Singapore model is likewise discussed by Western theorists who fear the end of the promises of social democracy, that those prom-

ises are being overwhelmed by increasingly specialized, mutually implicated systems, and fragility of critical infrastructures of twenty-first-century society. But it is in novels, films, and ethnographies that these theories are broken down into actual lives, scenarios, and alternative outcomes.

In the following three sections, I expand a bit about pivots (in geopolitical space), knots (of the psyche and social psychology), hinges (of history), and portals (to the future). They are metaphors or concepts that may be helpful in thinking about historical changes in consciousness, common sense, the *sensus communis*, habitus, culture, structures of feeling, and communities of practice.⁹ Concepts are, in fact, metaphors, transposable frameworks that allow movement across particular examples.¹⁰ They usually fail after a time through obsolescence, overuse, erosion by changes in the worlds to which they are applied, or sheer academic industry needs for novelty, like any other capital, needing renewal and faster or wider circulation. They can be analytics for a time, temporary logical operators. They perform better in the plural: always try in a sentence to pluralize the nouns to see if that makes a logical difference. Singularizing tends to be a philosopher's sleight of hand to imply substance and to overcome having to deal with contingency, limitations, and situatedness.

For "pivots" in geopolitical space, art markets and commissions serve as initial loci to think with. Other key loci are advertising and political messaging (ideology), also science and universities, to which I return in the book's afterword. In all these ventures, Singapore is a global soft-power player, looking to both the West and East. As first examples of sites of constant pivoting, looking both east and west, I draw upon Woon Tai Ho's satirical novel *Riot Green* (2013) and his commentary on the polymath painter, poet, and sculptor Tan Siew Hian, *To Paint a Smile* (2008).

For "knots," I use clinical psychologist Lydia Kwa's novel *Pulse* ([2010] 2014), and then follow out the theme of feminist and intercultural knots in a series of women-authored novels. I am looking there for a writing style analogous to Helene Cixous's notion of *écriture féminine*, which as I will explain below has different valences than "women's writing," ones that not only involve writing with the body, but retain the tensions and ambiguities of what dancer Steven Page calls "cultural fuels."

For "hinges," I use the evolution of the dance troupe led by Page, an evolution pivoting and navigating between tradition and avant-garde, "blak"

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and white Australia, rural and urban Aborigines. It is a particularly good exemplar of what I call a “hinge” in history: persistent slow change that only retrospectively seems dramatic and that remains unfinished, still swinging back and forth. Hinges are a counterpoint to the notion of “critical events,” or even just “events,” without the modifier “critical,” as philosophers sometimes distill it in their singularizing fashion.¹¹ Critical events are more often markers than producers, moments of revelation of processes that have long been working relatively unobtrusively. One thinks of Karl Marx’s notion of social revolutions that take a century to unfold, exploding in a moment when *anciens régimes* are swiftly swept away, and new constitutions confirm and give legal force to the social relations that have been changing for a long time.

While the Bangarra Dance Theatre provides a fulsome example of a hinge over time, chapter 1 suggests that Tan Pin Pin’s documentary films can also illustrate such a hinge of history, as does chapter 2’s juxtaposition of Sandi Tan’s film *Shirkers* with her novel *The Black Isle*. I hope by the end of the book, especially with chapters 7 and 5 (for Indonesia), that the opening three chapters will show this kinetics as historical movement and not just moments in history. Indeed, throughout I am arguing that the novelists and filmmakers discussed are trying to set free *frozen historical narratives*, to bridge the gap between worn-out narratives and the weaving of more flexible new ones, incorporating ongoing changes. In Singapore, this desire is repeated over and over by artists. Many of them fall back into the trap that contesting a frozen narrative tends to reinscribe it. I try to deal with that puzzling dilemma especially in chapter 6. That chapter also contributes to the changing structures of feeling that chapters 2 and 3 foreground.

Dance, as noted above, often carries, reflects, and performatively changes the deep-play dilemmas in society in a largely nondiscursive medium. They emerge here from the margins especially in the post-afterword Exergue. While the afterword is about portals to the future, the post-afterword returns to hinges of history. As just said, Bangarra is a key example for me of how culture changes slowly, yet in retrospect dramatically, but yet always with more work to be done. I dub this, after Jacques Derrida, a *hinge* that slowly moves in one direction, and often back, before (perhaps, no guarantee) swinging further open. Hinges squeak and move back and forth, but also allow differences to manifest for negotiation. In Derrida’s use, the hinge (*la brisure*) is an act of unfolding, a reawakening. It “enacts a recognition that . . . differing and articulating, is performative: to begin is to open; to open is to inaugurate; and to inaugurate is to create (again, anew)”

(Protevi 2005, ix). The work of the Bangarra Dance Theatre is an example worth thinking with back over this volume, even if, like Tarpaga's *Declassified Memory Fragment* from Burkina Faso (see Fischer 2023, 204), it is geographically a bit further afield in Australia and the Torres Strait. Some readers might insist on zombie concepts that would exclude Australia from this volume's centers of attention, but there are deep historical connections between the Malay world, the Melanesian one, and the Australian Aboriginal one. It is the conjunctural and historical geopolitics of the last four hundred years that has separated and continues to separate these places into different cultural spheres. Bangarra's engagement with intercultural relations, protocols of respect, and agency through art are in many respects parallel to those in Singapore and Indonesia (as well as the United States and its indigenous nations). In any case, as a methodological matter of ethnographic reinvigoration, this example of a hinge of history may perhaps prove to be a foreshadowing also of part of the story I want to tell in a future third volume on *Risky Theater and the Ethnography of Life*. That story is about the theater in Singapore and the slow but steady movement for gay rights, fuller intercultural recognition, and the remapping of structures of feeling in a fast-changing society.

Pivots have to do with geographical and topological mobilities, spaces of exchange, the shuttling of threads into new fabrics. This is the world of migrants, diasporas, émigrés, population shifts, cultural influences and exchanges. It is also the world of cultural fuel or tinder, and of art effects. In recent years it has also become (again) a term in global strategy, as in the United States pivoting from protecting oil in the Middle East to protecting sea lanes in Southeast and East Asia, making Singapore key in both versions of global visioning.¹² Singapore from the inside also sees itself as a pivot between East and West, playing a keystone role in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, as well as readying its population for dealings with the West and China (asking citizens to be proficient in both Mandarin and English), and also forging an observer role in Arctic Circle diplomacy on which, as an economy dependent on logistics, it may have a future interest as Arctic sea lanes open.

Knots have to do with mental health, constructions of personhood, gender relations, pain and joy, with not so much nineteenth-century British utilitarian debates over individuals versus society, but rather with post-Freudian (Malinowskian, or Durkheimian) always already psychosocial beings operating within worlds of hinges and pivots.

PIVOTS: EAST AND WEST ART MARKETS/COMMISSIONS,
ADVERTISING, SCIENCE, UNIVERSITIES

Poor girl, Chinese in every aspect, yet she doesn't speak a word of her mother tongue. Not connected to her roots, her heritage. . . . Ah Poh has seen enough disconnected souls. When a strong wind blows, their illusive identities are swept away like fallen leaves.

WOON TAI HO, *RIOT GREEN*

The complexity that interests me here is not that of occult meanings, but rather that of the form itself and its power to evoke its non-visible parts, and convoke the act of looking, setting off an imaginative projection.

CARLOS FAUSTO, *ART EFFECTS*

An obvious place to think about the pivoting between East and West, if you are not going to do finance or logistics, advertising or higher education, or science, might be the art markets. Each of these topics can be mirror worlds and pivot sites in which both actors and spectators can lose themselves.

A simple entry point might be Woon Tai Ho's satirical novel, *Riot Green* (2013), on the art market, and his commentary on the artist Tan Swie Hian, *To Paint a Smile* (2008). Woon Tai Ho has himself transitioned from being a founder of Channel News Asia to marketing consultant, along the way becoming an art collector, as well as a friend of Tan Swie Hian; both Woon Tai Ho and Tan Swie Hian grew up in the Singapore neighborhood of Geylang, where the latter still lives. *To Paint a Smile*, apart from its wonderful title, is a confection of observations loosely built around often astute engagements with the work of Tan Swie Hian, one of the polymath painters and poets of Singapore.¹³ Among Tan Swie Hian's many honors, from both West and East, are being the third Asian to be named a correspondent of the French Academy of Fine Arts (after I. M. Pei and Kenzo Tange), as well as being invited to carve a portrait of the poet Qu Yuan (340–278 BCE) on the walls of the Three Gorges, and to carve the Heart Sutra on a twenty-story-high cliff above an 8-kilometer climb with calligraphic tributes to famous Eastern and Western figures along the path up.¹⁴ The novel *Riot Green* resonates in part with Indonesian novelist Laksmi Pamuntjak's more intricate *Fall Baby* (2019), discussed in chapter 5, in its reflections on color, the art market, and the psychological struggles out of which striking art sometimes emerges. It also resonates with Lydia Kwa's more intricate use of both vernacular and classical Chinese cultural fuel in *Oracle Bone* (2017), discussed in chapter 3:

both draw upon the *Shan Hai Jing*, or *Guideways through Mountains and Seas*, a compilation from the Warring States period to the Western Han period, fourth century to first century BCE (see the translation and commentary by Strassberg [2002]).

Woon Tai Ho's books are time stamped: 2008 is the time of the global financial crisis that began with the US subprime mortgage collapse (a bubble created by efforts to create new "structured finance" mortgage-backed bonds intended to spread risk into disappearance). And 2013 is a time when Southeast Asian art suddenly began to shatter auction house prices: in 2011, Philippine artist Robert Ventura's *Greyground* sold for US\$1.1 million, and Indonesian artists also began to pass the US\$1 million mark in the years after 2008.

Riot Green is the story of a child prodigy painter, Melissa, who paints stunning green canvases in a lyrical, abstract style that express deep inner turmoil and family dysfunction. Her paintings break through and achieve new high auction prices. The color green she explains is not a primary color, and when it dominates primary colors it can take on a "rare, even mystical dimension . . . people seem to think the green paintings are more layered and powerful" (Woon 2013, 87). They are layered with many colors and shades of green. She paints them in a trance-like state during which she hums a Buddhist-like incantation. Among the most intense are the green canvases in which the green eyes of her cat are captured staring back.

Many of the painters mentioned in *Riot Green* are so-called practitioners of "lyrical abstraction," trained in China and then Paris (painters such as Zao Wou-ki and Chu Teh-Chun, both born in the early 1920s and both recently deceased); or they are of a younger generation, born in the 1950s and deeply affected by the psychological turmoil of the Cultural Revolution (such as Zhang Xiaogang and Wang Guangyi). These are all painters who are popular among foreign investors, notes Melissa's gallerist, who owns pieces of their work or represents them. While nothing more is said explicitly in the novel about their paintings, they are reference points for those who hover in and around the market.

Zhang Xiaogang, known for his "Bloodline: The Big Family" series, was inspired by photographs of his mother as a young vibrant woman, contrasting with the sickly schizophrenic woman she became. He has said, "For me, the Cultural Revolution is a psychological state, not a historical fact. It has a very strict connection with my childhood, and I think there are many things linking the psychology of the Chinese people today with the psychology of

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the Chinese people back then. We all live ‘in a big family.’”¹⁵ Although *Riot Green* is set in Singapore, not China, the dysfunctional family, and the distorting psychology of the market, that Melissa’s painting reflects are similar. And similarly, Wang Guangyi is known for his cycle of works, “Great Criticism” (1990–2007), which combines Cultural Revolution propaganda images with advertising logos as two forms of brainwashing. He stopped the series when he felt his international success was compromising the original meaning of the work, advertising negating the meaning. I will return below briefly to advertising as another key pivot site, but here register the resonance with the work experiences of Woon Tai Ho (Channel News Asia, art market participation, and marketing consultancy).

The child prodigy painter, Melissa, is the object of psychological warfare among those who would control her painting destiny in a market that is heating up for young Asian painters. Hong Kong has just become the third Art Basel venue (in 2013) and Art Stage Singapore began in 2011 (lasting for the next decade as a global art fair with a Southeast Asian focus). The stock market collapse in 2009 allowed for money to move into gray markets of the art world, in which the novel’s gallerist has successfully played, securing her collection (as has Woon Tai Ho himself) in Singapore’s Free Port vaults—themselves marketed globally as a hyper-secure alternative to Switzerland (Woon 2013, 48). In the novel, Indonesian collector Kevin Gunawan (a nod perhaps to high-selling Indonesian painter Hendra Gunawan) visits an auction at the Regent Hotel in Singapore, musing that “auctions are still the best platform to determine the public worth of an artist” (171) in otherwise informal and loosely organized Southeast Asian markets. The mark of arrival in the top rank on the international stage in the first two decades of the twenty-first century was said to be an artist being able to command a US\$1 million dollar sale, which a number of Indonesians had.¹⁶

While Hong Kong may be the auction capital in Asia, Indonesia, the third largest country in Asia after China and India, has organized successful auctions for nearly two decades now. This follows the burst of young artists, particularly in Jogjakarta who have found an artistic language that departs from that of their Dutch colonial past. While modern masters like Affandi still rule, fresh images have emerged that spring from youthful abstract minds, influenced by prevalent trends from the West. Their Indonesian roots may still be present, the execution is clearly contemporary and unprecedentedly conceptual. (170)

The pressure on Melissa comes from both hidden family dynamics and “the senseless swordplay of hidden intent and conspiratorial jostling” in “the club of predators gyrating around Melissa” (141). Already at age twelve, Melissa had produced an oil painting of her mother, “a young girl’s take on confusion, her precocious knowing of her dysfunctional family” (141). Only five years later would her father disclose that he was gay, allowing her to reassess what she has felt as danger coming from him, and allowing a reconfiguration of the family system dynamics of her mother and grandmother on one side, and her gallerist’s efforts to align market forces on the other. As the latter puts it, “in the art world, good is not good enough . . . you have to be . . . manipulatively good” (165), or, differently expressed, “it’s art, subjective and totally open to patronage or dismissal, support or neglect and it needs buzz, it’s the auction house” (105).

The key scene in this strategic jostling of hidden intents—grandmother and mother trying to protect a vulnerable girl; gallerist, collectors, investors trying to align a market—is transposed into the language and forms of the world of spirits and ghosts, in which the non-English speaking (Hokkien-speaking) grandmother, the adult most protective of her granddaughter, is the most intuitive. A proxy battle is fought between a fortune-telling Taoist priest (using squares, calculations, and almanacs) consulted by the grandmother, and a computer- and Facebook-using immigrant from mainland China consulted by the gallerist. Each occult master extracts maximum payment utilizing their intuitions and guesses about the fears of the principals. In the end, it is the gallerist who has a nervous breakdown, trading places with Melissa, whose manipulated madness is lifted. It was important, the gallerist had admitted, to have a mysterious backstory about a mad genius girl so that the over-hyped high prices her paintings command, as a teenager, could have a future. One could engineer thereby a withdrawal from the market, and a return some years later, using the story of a volatile mad genius who could disappear again at any moment, thus generating another investment opportunity bubble.

It is fascinating that although Hong Kong is a modern rival to Singapore and receives most attention, Guangzhou and Fujian—from where the grandmother comes, as do many Singaporeans in previous generations—remain the focus of mystified nostalgia and charismatic forces. Rivalry with Hong Kong seems to overwrite the alternative universe of reality in which Singaporean and other Southeast Asian overseas Chinese money has been flowing back to villages and towns of Fujian, rebuilding temples, reigniting shaman-

istic practices (Dean and Zheng 2009, 2010). It also overwrites Shanghai (before Hong Kong) as the center of Chinese modernism in the 1920s and 1930s. As with advertising, this is in part a function of the dynamics of being in the pivot between East and West in a contemporary hinge of history.

Advertising is another arena in this pivoting field of seeing or losing the self in mirrored others. Jacques Lacan suggested that infants pass through a developmental stage of first recognizing themselves in a mirror as an objective whole apart from the mother—that is, misrecognizing themselves as whole, autonomous, omnipotent beings with desires that must be met (Lacan [1949] 2006; Johnston 2018). But more generally Lacan insisted it was not so much a developmental stage as a general process of self-misrecognition and alienation that can be manipulated by the disciplining and marketing industries—that is, by ideology and fantasy, both operating through desire or fear. Lee Weng Choy, drawing in part on the ideas of sociologist Chua Beng Huat (1995, 2017), notes that in official Singaporean rhetoric, “the frequent othering of the United States is symptomatic of what Chua describes as the anti-liberal democracy of the ruling People’s Action Party,” as if (now quoting Janadas Devan) “a young Singapore still in its mirror stage” (Lee Weng Choy 2001, 97). Key texts here could be any number of speeches by Lee Kuan Yew or his son Lee Hsien Loong. Lee Weng Choy chooses the 1994 National Day rally speech by then prime minister Goh Chok Tong in which America is described as declining due to losing its traditional values and adopting a liberalism in which all values are open to negotiation. For a short period, Singapore attempted to reinvent a tradition of Confucian Asian values as a counterpoint. What Lee Weng Choy finds fascinating is that this “ideological othering of America by Singapore’s leaders may seem contradictory, since the United States is hardly a political, military, or economic threat but rather an important ally in all three regards” (Lee Weng Choy 2001, 97).¹⁷ Writing at the turn of the twenty-first century, he uses “the term ‘McNationalism’ to designate the complex of tensions between nationalism and the forces of rationalization and globalization” (Lee Weng Choy 2001, 98); and in fact Singapore is ever more positioning itself as a hub for capital accumulation by multinational corporations, now both American and products of the growing state capitalism of mainland China. While Choy’s examples of media campaigns from the mid-1990s are now dated—and have been subjected to wonderful ironic, analytic, and nostalgic poster exhibits of state and commercial advertising (held at Singapore’s National Library)—his general account is well taken.

This pivoting tension is nowhere more coiled with pressure than in the restructuring of university education, caught between redoubling down on the production of engineers and designers to feed global multinational market competition on the one hand, and on the other an effort to rebuild a twenty-first-century humane society with more egalitarian stability and environmental sustainability.¹⁸ The coiled tension is intensified and complicated by the drive to create a high-tech knowledge society drawing upon and competitive with a global pool of scientific personnel (Fischer 2013, 2018a). Singapore's drive to become a global arts city is partly driven by its educated middle classes, but also by its need to appeal to so-called foreign talent attracted to live and work in the city-state. See, for instance, the aspirationally titled *Art Cities of the Future* (Byrd et al. 2013) and *From Identity to Mondialisation* (TheatreWorks 2013).

Suppose you had an opportunity to create new universities in the middle world between East and West. What kind of vision for them would you design? Two such projects fell into my ethnographic vision during the decade between 2009 and 2020, at the oldest and newest flagship universities in Singapore. One was shaped by a humanistic STS (science, technology, and society) vision of dealing with big social issues on the intimate scale of cross-disciplinary teaching. I participated in that project by teaching a class on Biomedicine and Singapore Society with students whose backgrounds ranged from architecture and business to social work, bioengineering, law, sociology, and the visual arts. We used popular role-playing pedagogies, and produced final team projects on designing a multigenerational apartment complex, and a theater piece with video on negotiating end-of-life decision-making between hospital lawyers, doctors, finance administrators, and family members (Fischer 2018c). This was at Tembusu College, one of four new residential colleges of the National University of Singapore pioneering the breaking down of disciplinary silos in undergraduate education to give students a feel for working across disciplines on real-world issues. The other was helping coach a very different interdisciplinary model at the new Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD) built around the integration of engineering and architecture, with supplementary tracks in the humanities and social sciences and later biology and chemistry. Though both had connections with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), the difference and tension between the two models might be signaled by two quotations. One is from Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam: "We are still a little too much of a hierarchy based on what happened to you

at age 18, what scores you had, what qualifications you had, which course you could go to” (Chan 2013). The other is by the sitting prime minister, Lee Hsien Loong, at the official opening of SUTD on May 8, 2015:

[In the first fifty years of independent Singapore, we] channeled people towards STEM, we invested in this. We made sure that our students received good education in maths and science in the primary and secondary school levels and in the post-secondary education whether in the ITE, Polytechnics or Universities. We weighted our whole education system heavily towards STEM. We strongly encouraged students to master STEM subjects, *rather than softer fields of study*. You may ask me which are the softer fields of study but I think I shall be polite today and leave it to you to imagine them. . . . At Silicon Valley, the parents are all scientists, mathematicians, IT engineers, married to mathematicians, scientists, IT engineers. Their children go and do mind expanding liberal arts. Nothing wrong with that but if everybody does that I think the balance has shifted and we have to maintain the right balance. . . . SUTD must ride this wave and champion science and technology. *Technology is in your name so you must live up to it.* (Lee Hsien Loong 2015)

You can imagine how this was heard by a faculty that had been hard at work trying to create a new interdisciplinary curriculum that included “the softer fields of study.” A short time later, the president of MIT, Susan Hockfield, came to visit and gave a (somewhat obviously) enthusiastic speech about how all new cutting-edge fields at MIT were built around the new biological sciences; SUTD had none of this.

These two quotations by Singaporean leaders are only minor signals in a much deeper and wider discussion of the proper directions for training and higher education, not only in Singapore. Exploring this is beyond the scope of this volume. I invoke them here only as part of the pivot situation of not only universities in Singapore but universities everywhere driven (perversely, many think) by international ratings based in Shanghai and London that can affect money flows and recruiting.¹⁹ Constantly pivoting between West and East.

KNOTS: *ÉCRITURE FÉMININE*, WRITING, AND SEXUAL
DIFFERENCE — THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL STAKES

The pleasure that comes from pleasurable surroundings is
not true pleasure.

Only with the pleasure obtained in the midst of suffering
Can one see the true movements of the mind.

HUNG YING-MING, QUOTED BY KWA IN THE
“SOJOURN” SECTION OF *SINUOUS*

one thousand and one nights
ceases to be a romantic notion
when these tales of suffering keep me awake
wondering what else is beneath
frantic despair

LYDIA KWA, FROM THE SECTION “UNSPOKEN” IN *SINUOUS*

Écriture féminine served me as an umbrella title for chapters 2 through 4 as the French seemed to resonate quite differently from the American “sexual difference and writing.” Until it ran into disciplinary police. So I have used them both here and try to indicate how *écriture féminine* resonates for me in pushing, beyond the Euro-American canon, to novels from elsewhere (*écriture féminine otherwise or elsewhere* seemed too inelegant), which will require also some close reading, lest these novels get slotted simply into other quick-at-hand rubrics of women’s writing in American reviewers’ categories, without exploring what I think of as their ethnographic or para-ethnographic work—their situatedness geographically, culturally, socially, and in their historical horizons more fully. *Jouissance*, another French term, plays a role here. It means extreme pleasure, sexual orgasm, and the legal right to enjoy the use of something. For the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan it was the split in desire between instinctual drive (need) and the demand for it to be satisfied by the Other, hence also more often than not an intersubjective mobility pursued in suspension, slippage, or transference.

Écriture féminine is often tightly bound to the work, writing style, and 1970s politics of Hélène Cixous, who coined the term her in her essays “The Laugh of the Medusa” (1976) and “Coming to Writing” (1977), though it is a style shared or overlapping with those of others, especially Clarice Lispector and Jacques Derrida; and developed in slightly different ways by Julia

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Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, and Monique Wittig in France, but with affinities to such American literary feminists as Gloria Anzaldúa and Audre Lorde, and elaborations by such American feminist critics as Barbara Johnson, Gayatri Spivak, and Donna Haraway.²⁰ Laksmi Pamuntjak's essay "On Reading Woman" (2007) draws on Cixous, and much of her writing in essays, plays, as well as her novels, draws on these ideas as well.

Cixous's poetic writing attempts to show, and forge, how openness to the play of the gendered body, its unconscious and libido, can create differences between female and male writing and in the use of language and textuality: "Write yourself. Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth" (Cixous 1976, 880). Or: "*Je suis là où ça parle*," "I am there where it/id/the female unconscious speaks" (quoted in Jones 1981), sometimes in the "white ink" of the mother's milk (Cixous and Clement 1975, 94). Kristeva's version conceptualizes this as a *chora*, or prelinguistic signifying or "semiotic" with the mother, and a sexual pleasure (*jouissance*) that breaks the grammar of symbolic language (figured as male), disrupting rationality and order, and which is also explored in avant-garde experimental writing (James Joyce being a key example for her, as well as providing Jacques Lacan with an allied notion of *jouissance*). For Irigaray, this *parler femme*, "womanspeak," and women's *jouissance* originates in the polymorphous erogenous zones of the female body in contrast to male unitary phallic pleasure and linear thinking. Friedrich Kittler's version for an earlier period of women's writing—when mother's tongue was being overshadowed by father's tongue, the novel was coming into formation, looking back to that history through surrealism, symbolism, and structuralism—was *écriture féminine automatique* (Kittler 1992). Charles Baudelaire, in his short poem "Correspondances," neatly illustrated the poetic rhythm and personal prosody central to such writing, and, I will suggest, features in Lydia Kwa's novels as well as her poetry.

In all these speculations about *écriture féminine*, there is a weaving back and forth between essentializing woman (as difference) and the anti-essentialism inherent in the wild adventuresome, unboundedness of the unconscious, the libido, and openness to experience: "Her libido is cosmic" (Cixous 1976, 17). These theories merge sometimes uneasily with concerns about affects as socially created circuits that can be manipulated into repressive ideological instruments of capitalism, neoliberalism, biopolitics, and reproductive demands that constrain women and marginalize nonnormative gender identifications.

In efforts to clarify the political stakes, Barbara Johnson (1987, 2003; see also Damrosch 2020) shows how a purely rhetorical analysis of the insights and blindness of texts (undoing their own claims), such as those of Paul de Man, can erase gender, class, and race differences. But she further shows—in even such feminist novels as those of Nancy Friday’s *My Mother/My Self* (1997) about women trying to gain independence from maternal figures, and Dorothy Dinnerstein’s *The Mermaid and the Minotaur* (1976), showing that because parenting falls more on mothers, resentments do as well—that more complexities are involved than simple empowerment aspirations, and that, as with Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, the creation of mother-daughter relations can be complex “monstrous” knots. In Shelley’s case there is a set of knots: Mary Shelley and her creation of *Frankenstein*, *Frankenstein* and his creation, Mary Shelley’s relation to her own mother who died in birthing her, and Mary Shelley’s own stillborn child (Shelley [1818] 2018).

Finding a political voice in such complexity is also the concern of Gayatri Spivak’s analysis of Devi’s story of Draupadi, in which Devi and Spivak, rather than identifying with Draupadi against patriarchy, both identify themselves with the police interrogator Senayak. “Whatever his [Senayak’s] practice, in *theory* he respects the opposition. . . . Thus he understood them by (theoretically) becoming one of them. He hopes to write on all this in the future” (Spivak 1981a, 394). This is a position, Spivak suggests, like that of feminists in the First World. David Damrosch (2000) points out in his readings of Johnson and Spivak that in the *Critical Inquiry* special issue on “Writing and Sexual Difference” in which Spivak’s “Draupadi” piece appeared, hers was the only essay with a non-Western focus. Spivak elsewhere calls for a stance in which “feminist alternative readings might well question the normative rigor of specialist mainstream scholarship through dramatization of the autobiographical vulnerability of their provenance” (Spivak 1981b). Donna Haraway makes such complexities and dialectics explicit, saying that she remains committed to three imperatives even though they may conflict, and when that happens one just has to “stay with the trouble”: commitments to feminism, to democratic socialism, and to science (Haraway 2016).

The stakes for me, however, are not to harmonize the definitions, characteristics, theories, or positions like those above, but rather are ethnographic. Aside from descriptions of places, peoples, and time horizons, what do women writers and intellectuals have to say about the developments in the

societies in which they are psychologically invested? How might they guide us in their emotional rhythms, para-linguistics, and behavioral scripts? Might they introduce us to the “heart of what’s the matter,” the semiotics of illness and health, to the vernacular gendered codes in times of war and conflict as well as in daily life (Good 1976; Good and Good 2013)? How can we use the creative writing of women about their lives and societies to paint, and understand, their societies not as essentialized cultures, but as changing, friction- and conflict-filled, worlds and social fields that often are counterpoints and deconstructions, if not contradictory to, or separated from male, official, or “normalized” (adhering to public norms) stories? Novelists are often para-ethnographers, particularly helpful when writing about their own societies with an eye for mapping worlds that lie athwart male worlds.

While the prelinguistic or the maternal is theorized as being an anchor point in *écriture féminine*, especially in the formula of the “m(other)” or the “not me within-me,” which can include males,²¹ a second important focus, genre, or topos is the *wise old woman* (Begum 2015, 71) who narrates, and provides a defiant counter to accusations of the female as hysterical. Or, as Cixous puts it, *écriture féminine* inverts the accusation of hysterical into a positive openness to the world rather than a pathology of not fitting into (male) constraints. In more technical terms, perhaps, the narrator turns the hysterical into hysteresis, the dependence of the state of a system on its history, on a lag between causes and consequences, and the memory that is retained despite the lag or delay.²² Such memories in psychoanalysis (and reality) are open to distortions, displacements, “secondary revisions,” but also, crucially, contain gaps, holes, and absences, particularly of traumatic events.²³

Wise old women often are the truth-tellers who sift through the distortions, recovering connections that have been severed. Thus, accused sometimes of sorcery, of being witches or shamans, they are often marginalized in a constant dialectic of historical repression and recovery. On the other hand, wise old women are often lost to grandchildren through language changes, “listening through gaps for the occasional, recognizable word,” from a poem whose very title is evocative of the ambivalent play of patriarchal and maternal, and between past and present, “Father:Mother:Tongue” (Kwa 1994b, 38).

Of technological note in these dialectics are the historical markers of writing (when do women’s texts appear historically?) and when do cassette

tape recorders become available (which, like letters and time capsules, may be hidden away and only come to light at a later time in a different context, interacting with Freud's *Nachträglichkeit*)? Writing can be a process of self-discovery, also an aide-mémoire, but texts, as often, lose orality's feedback and contexts, and frequently need interrogation, deconstruction, and situating. The novel might be seen as an attempt to incorporate rich contexts, but novels, too, provide the grounds for multiple readings and interpretations. The tape recorder, as a literary device in novels, often functions as a time capsule to be rediscovered at a later time, promising a "live" voice, often with a questioner who helps elicit and clarify the narrator's meaning, now lost in fading turns of phrase, allusions, idioms, and references. Text messaging is a newer device that begins to appear as a channel of intimacy, and as Lydia Kwa writes, "if a text message seems disembodied, it's only because the receiver knows little or nothing of the sender's facial expressions, the nuance revealed in the way someone uses his body" (Kwa [2010] 2014, 84).

HINGES: FREEING UP FROZEN HISTORICAL NARRATIVES

Dance is a better *pedagogy* for the classroom than reading a text.

JASMINE NG, JANUARY 19, 2020, INTERVIEW

Dance is easy, compared to negotiating the cultural protocols.

STEPHEN PAGE, IN *FIRESTARTER*

The documentary film *Firestarter: The Story of Bangarra Dance Theatre* (Blair and Minshin 2020)—*bangarra* means to make fire, or to ignite, in the Wiradjuri language—is about how this Aboriginal dance company is determined to teach Australians a different way of seeing their Aboriginal consociates, and newly recognized fellow citizens, by creating a fusion of authentic tradition, honest history, and creative modern dance. The film shows Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's 2008 apology to the Aborigines for settler colonialism. The film encourages white Australians to recognize alternative migration histories going back forty thousand years, as well as alternative ways of living on the land *with* the ecology, rather than against it, particularly now under conditions of climate change.²⁴ The aftermaths of the atomic bomb tests in Australia, recalled in one of Bangarra's dance performances, parallels Park Chan-kyong's film *Belated Bosal*, described in *Probing Arts* (Fischer 2023), which staged a funeral for the Buddha along with constant testing for radiation levels in the radioactive dark forest of our post-

Fukushima nuclear meltdown world. More recently there have been further parallel forms of the need for constant testing and monitoring in the coronavirus pandemic-stalled world of 2020–2022. In the Australian desert, radiation effects are marked on the land in glassy fused silicone embedded in the parched, cracked desert surface. The effects are also in humans and other mammals. They are in memories of white X-ray flashes that revealed one's bones. The flashes warned of proleptic dead men walking with hidden cancers.²⁵ Today, we have a few tests and sentinels for the changing external nature, habitat, or ecology within which we live. There is recognition that the Aborigines had some smart environmental management techniques for both agriculture on land and marine environments. There are monitoring tests for our internal nature, immune systems, microbiomes, and cell memories of past viral and bacterial agonistes. These constitute two of the *four natures* to which I have argued we should be paying attention (Fischer 2009, 114–58). Perhaps there will be further monitoring and tests for reconstructing our social bodies, for healing our structural inequities and disparities, not only at the level of aggregate socioeconomic statistics.

But, for now, novels, films, and dance are among our probing arts: probing our psychologies under different forms of governance, using different analytic monsters, myths, and ritual processes to map lines of stress and fracture. *At the Pivot of East and West* continues the discussion of *Probing Arts* (Fischer 2023) about the role of modern dance that can reignite the cultural fuel or tinder of generations of experience, and locate hinges of change—the hinges between different communities of common sense and sensibilities—attentive both to the sensoria and to the cultural logics, both to movement and to narrative.

Four claims made by Stephen Page in *Firestarter* (Blair and Minshin 2020) may serve more generally as methodological touchpoints for para-ethnographic social and cultural analysis of the novels and films in this volume.

First, “You can’t tell the story of Aboriginal Australia without featuring Bangarra.”²⁶ While this is a specific claim for Australia, I read it more generally as saying both that you cannot tell the history of a place without its central art forms and, further, that the arts are where historical hinges are often to be found most clearly articulated. This is somewhat different from older symbolic anthropology.²⁷ The historical hinge finds in the arts not a key paradigm or stable symbolic structure, but rather positionings betwixt and between larger complex contemporary worlds.

Second, the arts are a primary way that people are educated to accept others as having something interesting to share and teach, and to achieve acceptance. It is a claim I am making more generally for the role of the arts in changing general common sense and sensibilities in this volume, with films showing the state of conflicts, and novels working through details of lives and the ways in which choices are structured by historical circumstances. Conflicting norms of common sense constitute a politics both in the usual sense and in the sense of Michel Foucault and Jacques Rancière (or that of Marx, Weber, and Gramsci) of making some things more thinkable, or seeable, recognizing differences, and understanding dissensus as active politics.

The third claim is a warning for those who would describe, account for, or characterize others: “You don’t define who I am, you don’t get that, I’ll define it in my language through my art.”²⁸ This is the highest ethical standard and challenge in the writing of ethnography, intensely debated over the years. It is a methodological principle of respecting the local native point of view, allowing it (or them, in the plural) voice, allowing it on stage, and also getting it right. It is, as well, a postcolonial and de-colonial demand.

The fourth claim is about the situated form of knowledge that the arts and artists assert: “The thing we loved the most was creating, the thing we loved the most was our culture and feeling it through a contemporary expression.”²⁹ As with all the dance forms in *Probing Arts* and in this volume, this is about the creation of a new language that is recognizable to carriers and maintainers of traditions, and simultaneously in conversation with all that is changing in the world. It is a warning against museumification, against not contextualizing, against not respecting the conditions of production. In *Probing Arts*, installations, painting, feminage, cut-outs, sculpture, performance, and dance were foregrounded (see Fischer 2023); in this volume, novels and film take front stage, including their staging of oral narratives, writing (hegemonic, minority, and gendered), and filmmaking (documentary, experimental).

Both volumes explore three kinds of critical cosmopolitanism. First, traveling cultural resources that take on additional, new, or different resonances in new settings (for example, the Chinese conceptual term *qui-shen*, which can mean “ghosts-spirits” but more abstractly “contractions-expansions,” or “outreach-return,” as discussed in relation to the work of Lydia Kwa in chapter 3). Second, appreciating different modalities of art effects and poetics (including such dance figures as the Indian *krauncha*, which names a bird but is also the conceptual origin of the arts in the *Ramayana*).³⁰ Third, tra-

versing thresholds of political-economic systems that challenge and change, even transform, common sense.

The terrains of these hinges, cosmopolitanisms, and artistic probes are geographical places and regions, land- and seascapes, and today's electro-mechanical extensions (internet) and computational intensifications (geo-spatial intelligence) that are increasingly recognized as a "pivot between East and West," centered on, or intersecting in, Singapore but not contained within that one island (or set of islands). In simplest terms, Singapore is a meeting point of the Malay world with the Chinese, Indian, Melanesian, and Euro-American ones. Melanesian influences from the East already figured in the Malay worlds explored in *Probing Arts*, and they extend further into the worlds of Bangarra dance (incorporating the Torres Strait as well as mainland Australia). That China now has long leases on the port at Darwin in northern Australia and Hambantota in Sri Lanka only further brings the Chinese connections into these sea worlds beyond the old silk and spice roads, beyond merely art circulations.

<i>Chapters:</i>	FILMS	NOVELS	FILMS	NOVELS
	(documentary)	(historical)	(experimental)	(speculative)

The chapters in this volume explore the cultural tinder or fuels that give character and orientation to lives, even when ostensibly treated (by outsiders, by planners) as increasingly technocratic and without much need for the softer fields of study. And yet it is in the realm of the softer disciplines that fundamentalisms sometimes fester, unable to access the philosophical inclusiveness of their civilizational cultures. Such fundamentalisms may be religious, but they may also be impoverished rationalisms (for example, of engineering "solutions," not that we do not need good engineering where appropriate), drowned in localized certainties, deprived of the joys of discovery and wider perspectives that can unsettle prior knowledge (science and humanities). I am drawn to explorations of centuries' worth of exchanges, experiences, and knowledges of the habitats in which, and of the companion species—plants, animals, insects, birds, microbes—with which/whom we live. I write this volume during the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, which is rapidly expanding scientific knowledge of viruses, cross-species transmission, and immune systems, but also the politics and difficulties of organizing public health responses, with conflicts over centralized versus participatory, and efficient versus equitable governance. In *Probing Arts and Emergent*

Forms of Life, I argued that artists often work with parallel ethnographic instincts with those of anthropologists, frame their work as research-creating sites, work in labs and other scientific research facilities, and help us find access points for ground-truthing complex interactions in our emergent forms of life (see Fischer 2023). I continue that argument here.

In chapter 1 I explore the use of documentary film through the work of Tan Pin Pin to get below the surface of life and find “hinges of history,” looking for the ways in which modes of “common sense” (or the *sensus communis*) are slowly shifting to accommodate multiple other changes from climate change, habitat transformation, internet and digital media (including hacks, infrastructural competitions, and geopolitical maneuvers); and the competition over governance and political-economy formations. Tan Pin Pin is one of Singapore’s most distinguished documentary filmmakers, in part because her films often hit deep nerves, and yet over time become part of conventional understanding. She is an important figure in the arts community, and a close colleague of Jasmine Ng, who figures both here and in chapter 2. The controversy over Tan Pin Pin’s film *To Singapore, with Love* (2013) is an indexical example of shifts in common sense. Tan Pin Pin’s persistence in fighting for its role in the political education of the populace is one of many such struggles in the arts community that has steadily expanded public debate. Political education in this context is often the understanding that allowing older generations to talk about their experiences need not be upsetting to contemporary social peace, but on the contrary can be a way of strengthening the bonds across generational experiences and social diversity, of allowing people to listen to one another, and to build resilience and flexibility for dealing with new conflicts. *Singapore GaGa* (2005), another of Tan Pin Pin’s films, is the most “ethnographic” in the conventional sense—that is, in footage of people and places, dialects and language usage, song and sounds—and includes two time capsules twenty-five years apart. The time capsules are distinctive time stamps not just in what they contain, but where they are set: in front of a nineteenth-century classical Palladian civic museum (once a library and museum); on the sidewalk outside an upscale twenty-first-century shopping mall. Her other films are equally ethnographic in helping to explore the common sense and structures of feeling of the place as they change. Her early film *Moving House* (2001) and the short *Gravedigger’s Luck* (2003) explore the exhumation of graves to clear land for development.

The next four chapters form a quartet in pursuit of the phenomenology of women’s worlds and *écriture féminine*. Chapter 2 deals with the work of the

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first member of the quartet, filmmaker and novelist Sandi Tan, who explores daemonic or charismatic figures in women's lives, representing three tropical or anti-colonial archive fevers: of autochthony; of warfare or tribute; and of rationalisms and their hauntologies. She rescues the emotional soundscapes of political history from the 1920s to the 2000s, and probes the ephemerality of archives and the documentary record. (Nota bene: I use "daemon" for a charismatic figure, "demon" for an evil one.) This chapter is in two main parts, one dedicated to a lost film, *Shirkers* (S. Tan 2018d), that is remade around the new center of loss, recovery, and psychodynamic mystery; the second is structured around musical movements that are also psychological reconfigurations of the main characters from striving immigrant, occupied subject, and the struggles and internecine battles to create national political independence, with countermelodies in Malay mystical minor keys. Much is recorded not on documentary or narrative film, but by the tape recorder of a now old woman who desires not to be erased by official histories. A new novel published just as I was finishing this book provides a smaller canvass of Asian immigrants (not Singaporeans) to California and Florida, with echoes of the comedic from the film *Shirkers* (the title itself is an echo: *Lurkers*), and with another daemon figure much like the teacher in *Shirkers*.

The second quartet member is clinical psychologist and novelist Lydia Kwa, the subject of chapter 3, who explores the psychodynamic knots of life (generational conflict of common sense; migrant efforts to escape parental superegos; immigrant efforts to write new life scripts); and the legacy cultural tinders available through rereading and reinterpreting the classical Chinese stories that still inhabit the literary and filmic imaginaries of Chinese culture and structures of feeling. Her four novels come in two parts inter-braided with her two books of poetry that extract minimalist elements of the novels like fine calligraphy. A fifth novel still being written will continue the cultural and psychological tinder from the past into the future through science fiction. Two of the novels are about migration (to Singapore, to Canada), and the frayed, but maintained, ties to points of origin. Two of the novels are exquisite reworkings of stories from the time of the Warring States, incorporating gender fluidities repressed under modern Christian influence. The "beastly" genre *Guideways through Mountains and Seas* (*Shan Hai Jing*), together with the *zhiguai chuangi* (strange tale) genre, and the *I Ching* are all neatly woven into the two contemporary novels, while the historical novels play with gender fluidity and their psychosocial implications. The Forest of Illusions is partly from these Chinese

traditions, while also a nod to Victor Turner's *The Forest of Symbols* (1967), which in turn comes from Charles Baudelaire's poem "Correspondances" (1857), and involves a quasi-Freudian understanding of strange tales and symbolic discourse as modes of dealing with psychodynamic problems and social dramas. The cultural fuel or tinder here is partly the fracturing of cultural knowledge through the generations. "I cannot remember a time I thought in Hokkien, it has always been English, the language of foreigners, of colonialism," Kwa says in a poem (Kwa 1994a). And it is partly a clinical psychologist's listening to the struggles of her clients, turning the gaze often back upon herself.

The third quartet position is inhabited by two writers, Jing-Jing Lee and Danielle Lim, with two short texts each, and which form the focus of chapter 4. Lee gives us a pair of finely worked miniature studies of housing displacements (from kampong or village to high-rise apartments, and from long occupied apartments to small senior housing). The longer of her two novellas is built around the reverberations across generations of secrets—a penetrating psychological account of a baby found after a Japanese massacre at the end of World War II, and who is adopted and kept by a woman whose own child had died, despite knowing that a father was desperately looking for the child. Lim gives us accounts of upsetting illness in the course of Singapore's history: leprosy in the period between the 1930s and 1950s, SARS in 2003, and schizophrenia and mental illness. Her work complements an earlier essay of mine on aging society (Fischer 2015), in which I draw upon Dr. Kwa Ee Heok's novelized account of treating elderly men at the Woodbridge Institute for Mental Illness, next door to the leprosy asylum where Lim's story is set. Lim's is a story of a young woman banished until a cure is found, and then released into a world that has partly moved on without her.

In chapter 5 I turn to the fourth quartet member, the Indonesian novelist Laksmi Pamuntjak, who in three novels accomplishes a trajectory across fifty-five years, paralleling the first quartet member Sandi Tan's *The Black Isle*, again exploring daemonic or charismatic figures in modern women's lives, the hauntologies created by anti-communist campaigns, Islamic fundamentalist demands, and bureaucratic infighting. Instead of music, painting provides a central aesthetic key. The first volume intertwines a love story from the *Mahabharata* (an account of war, paralleling the anti-communist struggles in Indonesia); the second continues the generational story with a daughter of the protagonist of the first volume, still sporting a name from the *Mahabharata*, but now focused on modernist art, both Indonesian

and European; and the third substitutes for the *Mahabharata* two classics from the Perso-Islamic repertoire—Attar’s *The Conference of the Birds* or *Mantiq ut-Ṭayr* (hence in one English translation, “birdwoman”) and al-Ghazali’s *Book of Etiquette and [Moral] Reason* (*Kitab Adab al-Aql*), while satirizing Indonesian bureaucracy today (combining an anti-HIV/AIDS campaign with a road trip in search of the most delectable local foods in Indonesia). The charismatic figure around which Amba, the narrator of the novel of that name, subtitled *A Question of Red* (communism), is drawn, is an East German-trained Indonesian physician who ends up in the concentration camp on the island of Buru (Pamuntjak 2013). There are powerful scenes of the Bumi Tarung (a left-leaning artists’ colony) made up mainly of graduates of the National Fine Arts Academy of Yogyakarta; the concentration camp holding 12,000 prisoners on Buru, the third largest of the Maluku Islands; and the journey by Amba and two ex-prisoners in search of the grave of her husband Bhisma. The sequel, *Fall Baby*, shifts focus to the daughter of Amba. The *Mahabharata* (except for the name of the daughter, and perhaps her fighting spirit) is replaced by a modern story of a group of women with shifting marital and sexual relationships. The centrality of a network of women suggests implicitly a possible rereading of the *Mahabharata*, in which the key figures are not the male warriors but the two central women, Dhraupadi and Gandhari, who foresee and attempt to repair the damage caused by their husbands (Fischer 2017b). In *Fall Baby*, the daughter, Siri, becomes a painter, dividing her life between Jakarta and Europe (Berlin, Madrid).

The novel shifts to a series of contemplations about portraiture and color: capturing complex emotions in painting, trying to paint from a photograph a father she has never met, and contemplating a series of famous Indonesian and European paintings as clues to her own artistic search. There is Djoko Pekik’s *Tuan Tanah Kawin Muda* (an anti-colonial painting about unequal power relations) by one of the famous artists from the Bumi Tarung group described in *Amba*. There are Sindu Sudjojono’s *Ibuku Menjahit* or “Mother sewing” (a portrait of his first wife Mia Bustam) and his *Malle Babbe*, after Frans Hals’s painting of that name, used to contemplate how many faces of different ages can be seen in one painting. Pieter Bruegel the Elder’s *Netherlandish Proverbs* substitutes for the *Mahabharata* as a resource for symbolism and the ways life plays out in contrast to normative social fictions. Above all, there is Matisse and his fauvist use of color, providing a lovely key to the use of greens and reds for a melancholy that Amba calls “blue” in her portrait, and Siri, her daughter, decides is a semantic usage from Amba’s years

of studying English and American poets' use of that word. She suggests that this semantic displacement "might have also cast a shadow over the other emotional range that was her native palette" (Pamuntjak 2013), that in a sense she no longer visualizes her emotion of melancholy like an Indonesian.

A third novel initially seems quite different, a kind of food travel book set in the midst of an avian flu pandemic (a satirical device for skewering bureaucratic infighting over control of vaccine production). But instead of the *Mahabharata*, the *Netherlandish Proverbs*, and Matisse, it uses two Perso-Islamic texts—Attar's *The Conference of the Birds* and al-Ghazali's *Book of Etiquette and [Moral] Reason*—for reflections on friendship, taste (common sense), and heaven on earth (food, sex, and differences). One of the ethnographic delights is that the narrator says she knows Attar through her Minangkabau grandmother (from the "West"—that is, the western part of Sumatra and Indonesia, and the Western influence from Persian and Arabic writing). The novel is a wonderful meditation on the ways in which food (pride in local cuisine) does and does not pay attention to political demarcations (most dishes have variants in other communities). The quest for the "heaven on earth" taste of regional foods is a quest just like that of the thirty birds in Attar's work who seek the legendary *Simorgh*, only to discover that wisdom and the *Simorgh* are located in their collective selves (*si-morgh* means "thirty birds" in Persian).

My interest, in part, is watching how deep cultural tinder is reignited and becomes a resource- and reference frame for living in the contemporary world, and how ethnic mixtures operate underneath, around, and in violation of categories, stereotypes, and politics, but also can be weaponized in illusory quests and battles that can do real damage. The social and cultural psychologies, affects and emotions, are brought out by novelists for inspection in complex knots.

Chapter 6 turns to filmmaker Daniel Hui, who returns to the dissociations and repressions of the official Singapore national narrative, and in his most recent film, with the almost overdetermined title *Demons*, turns directly to power dynamics (those of film director, charismatic leader, and dictator mirroring one another) and the limits to which a theatrical performance (theater state) can allow itself to push its actors (citizens). Hui's three films—*Eclipses* (2011), *Snakeskin* (2014), and *Demons* (2019b)—are each richly developed, with references to film histories as well as to contemporary Singaporean issues. There is a continuing concern with rewriting the history of Singapore around a charismatic male leader who reincarnates time

and again, as if the society can neither get rid of such a figure nor recount its history except through him. The violence at the founding of states and corporations (as we have been taught by Walter Benjamin and Jacques Derrida) here is transfigured into the violence of what film can show or eclipse, and how it can profoundly affect what people know about their politics and history. Pamuntjak invokes the propaganda film (especially its music) shown every year in schools in Indonesia during the period of the Suharto regime to reinforce the president's official story of the violence at the founding of his New Order rule (as does Intan Paramaditha in the second of the chapter epigraphs, above). There is a moment in *Snakeskin* when the leader threatens to come back from the dead if the film is not edited in his preferred sequencing. As in Sandi Tan's *Shirkers*, this uses the device of being given reels of film in (or from) the past, and having to decide how to reconstruct the images into a legible montage or narrative.

In *Eclipses*, the making of the film is emotionally transfigured into a struggle over how to reenter society after depression. Daniel says the initial story line is a tribute to Roberto Rossellini's *Europa '51* (1954), and the return to society with an appreciation of its variety of social classes is a tribute to Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929). These are both socio-political stories of emergence from war (World Wars I and II for Vertov and Rossellini, and the Cold War for Hui). *Europa '51* is about the repression of a saintly woman who is committed to an insane asylum rather than allow her to do philanthropy and community work among the poor. It prefigures the shadowy story in 1980s Singapore of Operation Spectrum in which a liberation theology effort of the Catholic Church to help the poor was repressed as a "Marxist conspiracy" — a story that appears through its exiles in Tan Pin Pin's *To Singapore, with Love*. *Eclipses* (a kind of study for *Snakeskin*) is also patterned on the filmmaker's own experience of depression and struggles to reenter society. In *Snakeskin*, these themes are expanded and focused on the film medium: both in the opening and a half hour into the film, film stock is literally put into a fire in order to kill the evil that it contains, a kind of echo of the evil in the figure of the charismatic Georges Cardona in Sandi Tan's *Shirkers*.

Among the important stories told in *Snakeskin* is the destruction of pre-World War II Malay cinema, a multiethnic industry in which, as famous lyricist Yusnor Elf puts it, the finance was Chinese, the technical talent (including directing) was Indian, and the aesthetics (and song) was Malay. Another important story in *Snakeskin* appears also in Sharlene Teo's novel

Ponti (a singleton first novel): the life of a now fading or deceased actress who lives on in the psychology of the next generation. A photograph of the actress in her prime is the object of a desire for animation and knowing what the earlier life was like. Aspects of this appear as well in Sandi Tan's *The Black Isle*, and Lydia Kwa's *Oracle Bone*: they both use the device of the wise old woman, the sorceress, the Cassandra.

Daniel Hui's third film *Demons*, inspired by Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Demons* (in which a murder is used to create solidarity among the perpetrators), pushes power games of filmmaking even deeper into the realm of psychodrama. Hui claims to be obsessed with his contradictory positioning as both victim and privileged holder of power. As a gay cis-male living in a state where homosexuality is still illegal, he occupies a victim position vis-à-vis power holders; but as a film director, he is a privileged power holder able to make actresses do his bidding.

Chapter 7 continues the exploration of popular modern genres (road trips, horror films, ghost stories) with three novels published in 2017 that interrogate the meritocratic state and the Smart Nation (as Singapore now brands itself): a detective novel by Daren Goh (used to explore governance with the aid of artificial intelligence and psychopharmacology); a science-fiction novel by Kevin Martens Wong (used to explore Singapore's aspirations in biotechnology and to provide synthetic realist life to a lifeless tourist icon); and a mythic mashup of Greek and Chinese myths (used to protest racial disparities). All three pivot back and forth between East and West with interested watchers from across the world from China to Rwanda and Burundi (all places that have hired Singaporean design firms to aid in their own economic adventures). Its own efforts at constantly upgrading its "human capital" and learning in alliances with British, American, and Chinese universities is itself a fascinating example of such pivoting between East and West—SUTD, for example, established with the help of MIT, from almost the beginning established an exchange with Zhejiang University.

Daren Goh's novel *The HDB Murders* (2017) is in effect a rewriting of Michael Young's classic satire *The Rise of the Meritocracy* (1958), slightly updated with contemporary technologies from artificial intelligence to mood modulators (from beer to high-tech pharmacological biochemistry). The novel is a good reminder of newly independent Singapore's social democratic roots grounded in British Fabianism and post-World War II Labour Party planning for social reconstruction. It is thus also a good vehicle with which to think about the contemporary restructuring of the political economy that

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both Britain and Singapore are undergoing as each attempts to find its footing in the shifting sands of the post-twentieth-century world.

Kevin Martens Wong's novel, *Altered Straits* (2017a), reimagines the premodern history of the maritime Malay world of sea peoples and sultanates through the gamification of contemporary technological warfare, including future biological and genetic modifications. Outside the novel itself, Wong is a member of CoLang (the Institute on Collaborative Language Research), which tries to help communities preserve endangered languages, in his case Kristang, the Portuguese-based creole of his Eurasian ancestors.

There is a hint of this sort of linguistic project as well in Nuraliah Norasid's *The Gatekeeper* (2017), but Norasid's novel is a gesture in a different direction: that of game worlds that might eventually move into a video game or virtual reality space. Norasid tries to invent a language as part of her "world-making," and sprinkles it throughout the text to give readers a feel for what it might be like to enter an underground ghetto (literally as well as metaphorically), separated from the elite Chinese worlds above. It can be read both as a sharp criticism of class and ethnic discrimination as inequality grows in Singapore, and as a pivoting fusion or alternation between the Greek mythology of Medusa and the Chinese mythology of Madame White Snake. Perhaps the leading exponent of putting myths from East and West into juxtaposition and dialogue is Singapore-born, Boston-resident opera director Cerise Lim Jacobs, who has conceptualized, written, produced, and staged a three-opera cycle, the Ouroboros Trilogy—comprising *Naga* (2016), *Madame White Snake* (2010, 2016), and *Gilgamesh* (2016)—with Beijing-born, American composer Zhou Long and other composers, brilliantly putting Chinese and Western music into conversation. The myth or legend of Madame White Snake has been staged in ritual, opera, and film numerous times, and most recently and exuberantly by the Wild Rice theater company in Singapore as a musical called *Mama White Snake*, with lyrics by Alfian Sa'at and starring gender-bending Ivan Heng and Glen Goei as the "sister act" of Green Snake and White Snake, and set in a pharmakon-pharmacy, or poison-healing shop (Chan and Sa'at 2017). Lim Jacobs's opera company has since moved to activist productions on immigration, racism, and the separation of families. Her production *I Am a Dreamer Who No Longer Dreams: An Immigrant Story* (2019) stages the tension between Rosa, an undocumented Mexican small-business owner and community activist, who is jailed for a crime she did not commit (a fire set during a demonstration that kills a fireman)—and threatened with deportation and separation

from her young American-born daughter—and Singa, her court-appointed attorney (and corporate lawyer), a green-card-holding ethnic Chinese woman from Indonesia who at the beginning of the opera has little sympathy for her client but as their stories unfold reveals that she has foregone having a child in order to maintain the model minority drive for success and the green card giving her legal residency in the United States. The knots of today's struggles to gain a better life in East and West are never more painful, and the *jouissance* of workable solutions and recognitions of one another never more important.³¹

And so we return to the four goals of this volume: locating engaging pedagogies; locating cultural resources/fuel; exploring media of conveyance (here, film and novels), and playing in the sandbox of three kinds of cosmopolitics (traveling resources; art effects and poetics); locating hinges of history, pivots of exchange, and trauma-slipping-and-releasing knots. Insofar as this introduction is a manifesto, its aim is to reclaim literary and filmic productions as worthy of full incorporation into anthropological accounts of contemporary culture. Once anthropologists privileged participant observations (what people actually do) over literary accounts—I well remember being chastised by an eminent member of an earlier generation for my effort to read Iranian short stories and films in an ethnographic context as an articulation of an intellectual class caught between its village roots and its European education, and as cultural critiques of Westernization and modernization (*Gharbzadegi* or “West-struckness”), landowner repression (feudalism or patrimonialism, respectively in Marxist or Weberian theorizing), and clerical conservatism (Fischer 1984; 2004, 151–221).³² The rationale was that so many epic tales in Europe were manufactured out of nostalgia, or constructed for nation-building, or both, and did not reflect an acknowledgment of what Malinowski called mythic charters for action. It was to uncover those motives “for action,” for legitimation of authority, and other purposes that anthropologists were called upon to evaluate, as stories were put into social action, told to specific audiences. In oral societies without, or with restrictive, literacy, this was an important methodological injunction: not taking literary, or even archival, accounts at face value; and observing how formulaic epic recitations are tailored to specific audiences, as well as how literary texts and paintings were modified to suit patrons' political interests. In literate societies of all sorts, we need a whole suite of methodological tools, and the dismissal of readings by anthropologists of arts and literature as somehow reductive can no longer be allowed

to pass, any more than mere thematic or “content analysis” can be sufficient for anthropological readings. Indeed, as we move into virtual-reality worlds, artificial intelligence, and face-and-movement synthesis with generative adversarial networks, the need for critical tools increases, not only to distinguish manufactured images, truths, enhanced paranoid reasoning, and altered common sense; but ethnographically to track down how, why, by whom, when, and for what calculated and miscalculated purposes and effects.

In the afterword, I look to portals signaling, and opening into, the future: to universities pivoting in geopolitical space, to the Singapore underground mass rapid transportation system (MRT), the world’s largest driverless system, with its stations marked by artworks by leading Singaporean artists, and to the peopling of technologies for worlds we want to live in.³³ Geographically as well as historically, I move (*à la* Tan Pin Pin’s *Singapore GaGa*) across the urban landscape, first from arrival in Chinatown carrying the arts of calligraphy (and a mural by Tan Swie Hian); then to Tembusu College, the successful liberal arts, humanities, and science, technology, and society college, established in 2009—along with three other such colleges within the National University of Singapore, with a lively student body, public artworks, and intellectual forums on controversial issues; and third, to the relatively new Singapore University of Technology and Design, with a stunning series of fingerprints at its MRT portal that raise questions about encryption, information technologies, and identities in intriguing ways, not unlike Daren Goh’s novel.³⁴

In the post-afterword Exergue, I return to the Bangarra Dance Theatre to flesh out the discussion initiated above about historical hinges, the role of dance as a shaper of communal identity, and, importantly, a powerful example of change by people taking charge of intercultural positions so as to change the nature of interactions, to command respect, full recognition, and to do all this with a sense of humor as itself a device of inclusivity. The insistence on *cultural protocols* is gradually both a phrase and a practice that is disseminating from Australia, New Zealand, and Papua New Guinea to other parts of the world. It is good to have that recognition and not just “consent,” for it to be a political project and not just an individual tacit or explicit assent. Bangarra, for me, at the moment, is one in a series that includes experiments in Indian dance such as those of Chandralekha, Kiran Kumar, Aravinth Kumarswamy, and Malika Sarabhai (in their very different ways), or of Oliver Tarpaga and Esther Baker-Tarpaga, and Edith Podesta.

The contemporary contexts that they register and shape are not stable or enduring but capture that ephemerality of longer and shorter durations, cycles, innovations, fusions, bricolage, and variations in the materiality of life, growth, and change, despite all constraints, reverses, and catastrophes.

For those who want quick refreshers on Singapore as a location, and on the post-World War II history of the region, two brief sets of reminders follow.

QUICK LOCATION REMINDERS

Close your eyes. Pretend you have never heard of Singapore.

Pretend you have not visited the fifth most-visited city in the world (according to Mastercard) with one of the perennially best-rated airports: 14 million tourists in 2017, 18.8 percent from China, 15 percent from Indonesia (Wong 2018). Pretend you have never availed yourself of the medical services that serve 200,000 foreigners a year. Pretend you have not heard of its six universities, two in the top five in Asia, and top fifty globally; or heard of its Biopolis, Fusionopolis, and Mediaopolis, funded by and overseen by the Agency for Science, Technology and Research, comprising a series of globally competitive institutes in biotechnology and engineering; or that it was the headquarters of the Human Genome Organization from 2007 to 2013, turning its mission toward exploring medical applications of genomics and systems biology; and helping build aspirations and genomic capabilities in countries beyond the initially scientifically dominant ones (see Fischer 2013).

Pretend you do not know that it is the world's second busiest port (after Shanghai) in shipping tonnage and the world's busiest transshipment port (transshipping a fifth of the world's shipping containers, half of the world's crude oil), that it is the world's biggest ship bunkering or refueling hub, among the world's top three export oil refining centers, the world's largest oil rig builder; and that its Maritime and Port Authority, in a joint venture with Turkey's Afken Holding, operates the international port at Mersin, Turkey. Pretend you do not know that the port (in 2021) used 1,250 self-driving trucks.

Pretend you do not know that Singapore is fast emerging not only as a financial center rivaling Hong Kong (with 200 banks' regional

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headquarters) but also as a fin-tech center (blockchain, cryptocurrency, and other digital trade technologies). Pretend you do not know that Apple built the Apple II computer in Singapore in 1981 or that the iMac was also built in Singapore, or that Singapore was, and is again, home to global computer chip foundries (Global Foundries, Micron); or that it is home to Lucasfilm's Sandcrawler building, one of the first buildings, along with a small Pixar building, to anchor Mediaopolis.

Pretend you know nothing of its ethnic diversity and its peoples' history of migration from South China, southern India, across the Malay world, Britain, and elsewhere; their multiple religious institutions—Hindu temples, Buddhist temples, Taoist shrines, *gudwardas*, mosques, synagogues, and churches; or the twenty-plus languages spoken—Teochew, Haka, Cantonese, English, Singlish, Tamil, Mandarin, Kristang, Bengali, Hindi, Tagalog, Burmese, Khmer, Thai, and more. Pretend you do not know the official national language is Malay; and that the three other official languages are English, Mandarin, and Tamil. Pretend that you have never seen the four-mile-long Thaipusam parade with hundreds of pilgrims, bodies pierced with hooks and spears, carrying huge *kavadi* on their heads, doing feats of ascetic devotion to Murugan, son of Shiva; that you have not seen the Monkey God trance-divinations, lion dances, or the Hungry Ghost festival traditions (burning hell money, making offerings to the ghosts, staging operas for the ghosts, and *Getai* or popular song performances). Pretend you have never heard of the Chettiers, the money-changers and financiers of South China operating from Singapore to Burma, who built one of Singapore's monumental temples. Pretend you have not seen the Chinese praying with their joss sticks in front of the Krishna temple next door to the Kwan Im Thong Hood Cho temple in natural syncretic devotion. Pretend you have not seen the day-long lines of Buddhists doing prostration, step forward, prostration on Vesak Day (the day of the Buddha's birth, enlightenment, and death) circumambulating the large Kong Meng San Phor Kark See temple and monastery.

Pretend you know nothing of Singapore's history in the Cold War (see below). Perhaps you are aware of the post-World War II efforts to build a new nation, and of Singapore's role as a temporary economic opportunity for guest workers from poorer economies around the region. But perhaps you are less aware of the cycles of economic change

that have buffeted the working classes, destroyed Singapore's pre-World War II centrality to multicultural Malay cinema, deprivileged Chinese-medium education, privileged English, and encouraged Mandarin. These are all realignments as the global economy moves from artisanal manufacturing, family entrepreneurship, and state-guided capitalism (through two sovereign funds among other instruments) into the Industrial Revolution 4.0 (IR4.0) of automation through digitalization and artificial intelligence.

Open your eyes and ears. Look, listen *and*
Think about what and how film can reveal.

QUICK HISTORY REMINDERS

Pretend you know nothing of World War II in Southeast Asia or its aftermaths across the Malay Archipelago.

Close your eyes again. Pretend you cannot remember teenage life in the 1990s or imagine Asian immigrant lives in the United States in the 2010s. Pretend you do not know much about the past century of Asian and Southeast Asian history. Pretend you are not interested in ghost stories, or do not know much about shamans or *bomoh* (Malay healers); or about charisma, war, or trauma.

Pretend that you have not noticed the Southeast Asian world pivoting in a different way between East and West, with the steady expansion of China's Maritime Silk Road, notably the new Chinese ports in northern Australia (Darwin) and Sri Lanka (Hamanthota and Colombo's International Container Terminal); also the 24-square-kilometer new Smart Port City Project of Gwadar, in Baluchistan, Pakistan, to link to Xinjiang in western China; and plans for a deep-sea port and special economic zone in Kyaukpyu, Myanmar, with oil and natural gas pipelines to Kunming.

Pretend you are a little vague about World War II in Southeast Asia. Pretend you never heard of the dramatic drive by the Japanese forces down the Malay Peninsula using bicycle infantry to move through the rubber plantations; or the surprise attack on Singapore from the north from Johor, instead of from the south by sea, toward which the British cannon were pointed. Or the ground fighting by Malay, Indian, and Australian defense forces against the invaders.

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Pretend you have forgotten the dramatic and near simultaneous Japanese attacks by air on Pearl Harbor, Manila, Singapore, Penang, Surabaya (on December 7, 8, and 11, 1941), and Darwin in Australia (two months later on February 19). Pretend you have forgotten that the British had pulled back most of their naval forces from Singapore, to defend the English Channel, the North Atlantic, and the Mediterranean; and that three days after Pearl Harbor, the HMS *Prince of Wales* and HMS *Repulse* were sunk off the east coast of Malaya, leaving little naval defense of Singapore. Pretend you have forgotten the British naval defeats off Palembang (southern Sumatra) on February 13–15, 1941, and in the Sea of Java and Sunda Strait between February 27 and March 1, leaving Java open to invasion, and meaning control of Java's food production, the world's fourth-largest oil-producing area, plus a huge pool of labor to be forced into service. (By January 1942, Japanese troops controlled parts of Sulawesi and Kalimantan; in February they encouraged Aceh (north Sumatra) to rebel against the Dutch, took Ambon, and landed in Timor.)

Pretend you have forgotten or repressed the ground campaigns: Japanese troops landed on Kota Bharu (northern Malaya) on December 8, 1941, began moving into Burma on December 12 (the capital Rangoon fell in March). After a few hours' battle on December 8, Thailand agreed to allow Japanese passage through its territory, then use of Thai railways and roads, its airfields and naval bases, and other facilities. Thailand then was forced to declare war on Britain and the United States, and sign a treaty of submission to Japan. Japan would station 150,000 troops in Thailand and build the Thai-Burma Death Railway with Asian labor (including Javanese) and Allied prisoners of war.

Pretend you have forgotten, or are too young to remember, that on February 14, 1941, Japanese troops entered the Alexandra Hospital in Singapore killing 300 patients, doctors, nurses, and patients by bayonet. General Yamashita had the responsible Japanese executed at the hospital. The next day, the British in Singapore surrendered to Yamashita. Then, from February 16 to March 2, the Japanese instituted "the Great Inspection" (*Daikensho*), or what the Chinese would call "the Purge" (*Sook Ching*), massacring between 25,000 and 50,000 Chinese men. The rationale was to get rid of sources of support for Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist government, and all Chinese were suspect, having earlier provided financial support to China's resistance.

Perhaps you have forgotten that Lee Kuan Yew, the future long-serving prime minister of Singapore, having barely escaped the *Sook Ching*, and having survived, at first in the informal economy of petty trade in jewelry and other valuables, then worked for the Japanese occupation as an English translator (in the Cathay building, now a mall and multiplex cinema). In his memoirs he says he learned the most important lessons of his life in the three and a half years under Japanese occupation: that terror and brutality kept the crime rate low, made people behave as the Japanese wished, and even adjust to long-term prospects of Japanese rule (having their children educated in the new system's language, habits, and values). He admired Japanese organizational discipline, logistics, and administration; and after the war, he invited Japanese companies to return to Singapore to help build the economy.

Lee Kuan Yew derided faith in simplistic democracy. "Look at Malaysia or Indonesia. Is that the democracy and corruption you want?" was one of his retorts. Another was that governance by polling or plebiscite (echoing in this the French sociologist Émile Durkheim) is neither exercising leadership nor building the social institutions that true democracy requires (which was Durkheim's point). He derided ethno-nationalist politics such as Malaya was instituting. He derided the idea of the media as a fourth estate, seeing it as instead an important nation-building tool for explaining government policies. In Asian regional security affairs, he saw a need for a balance of powers: Japan's financial and economic power to complement the military and diplomatic power of the United States, with Singapore using trade and diplomacy as its primary tools, while also building a military defense force.

He came to deride the idea of the welfare state. Singapore is not a nanny state, he would say, while ensuring basic health care and housing for all (see Chua 1997, 2017). Japan was not Lee Kuan Yew's only education. He was trained in law at Cambridge, and absorbed the ideals of social democracy there and in London. Singapore has many of the trappings of European social democracy in its postwar housing policies, its basic health care provisions, and its efforts to ensure retirement funds. The People's Action Party was for a time (until 1976) a member of the Socialist International, an organization of social democratic parties.

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Speaking of regional security and alliances, pretend you have forgotten the brave days of the April 1955 Bandung Conference for a Non-Aligned Movement, with twenty-nine new nations in attendance representing 54 percent of the world's population. Key organizers were President Sukarno of Indonesia and Jawaharlal Nehru of India, but also Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai from China. Perhaps you have forgotten the guerrilla fighting by the anti-colonial communist Malayan National Liberation Army in Malaya to help hasten independence, and the British response (the Malayan Emergency), instituting "new villages" in which civilians were interned (a strategy that would be called "strategic hamlets" in the American Vietnam War). Perhaps you are too young to remember the battles over communism, socialism, and democratic constitutionalism in the formation of the new Singaporean state, whose legacies survived through the period of Lew Kuan Yew's rule in harsh security laws, and which remain visible in films such as *To Singapore, with Love* (see chapter 1) and videos of some of Charles Lim's *Sea States* (see Fischer 2023, ch. 4).

Perhaps you have forgotten or repressed the parallel struggles for independence and democracy in Indonesia, that the Japanese were initially welcomed by many as liberators from the Dutch, that many local officials and elites cooperated with the Japanese who in turn fostered and trained Indonesians to prepare for a future independence (under Japan's intended Co-Prosperity Sphere). Independence leader Sukarno was released from Dutch detention by the Japanese and worked with them to build popular support, in expectation that they would support independence, which he and Mohammad Hatta declared immediately upon Japan's surrender to the Allies in 1945. Meanwhile, the Japanese conscripted between four and ten million Indonesians for forced labor in Java, and another 200,000 to half a million were sent from Java as far as Burma and Siam (Thailand). Estimates are that four million people died due to famine and forced labor during the occupation. Sukarno led the resistance to Dutch recolonization, and tried unsuccessfully to lead resistance (armed confrontation) to British efforts to create the Federation of Malaysia, which he saw as a form of recolonization inimical to the consolidation of a new state of Indonesia, or to an independent, unified, single Malay state in Borneo. In attempting to balance domestic political factions, he advocated for a "guided democracy," which increasingly became allied with the rapidly

growing Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI), in turn triggering the coup that overthrew him, the 1965 massacres, and the creation of Suharto's New Order dictatorship, which used the showing of a film every year in schools to inculcate its official story of how and why the coup and massacres happened.³⁵

Finally, close your eyes and think about the formation of the map of Southeast Asia. Once upon a time, it was the guarded and patrolled sea lanes of the Hindu and Buddhist navigators from Majapahit and Srivijaya; and of the Bugis sea lords and the *orang laut* or “sea peoples” (see Fischer 2023). Later, it was divided between the British (based in Singapore) and the Dutch (in Batavia/Jakarta and Surabaya). After World War II, and with the wars in Korea and Vietnam, both the sea lanes and the Southeast Asian mainland came under American postwar protection. Today, China is systematically building a new Maritime Silk Road of state-of-the-art ports from Qindao (Tsingtao), Tianjin, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Hong Kong, Xiamen, Ningbo, and Dalian, south to Darwin (on a 99 year lease), and west to Colombo, Hambantota (controlling equity and a 99 year lease), Kyaukpadaung, Gwadar, Djibouti, Sokhna (Suez Canal) to Haifa (25 year management contract) and Piraeus (67 percent stake) and even Hamburg (35 percent stake). At the same time, a new overland Silk Road is being built across Central Asia, but also with hydroelectric dams and mining projects across Southeast Asia and down the Pacific to Papua New Guinea and Australia.

Open your mind's eye.

*Think about what and how novels can reveal
what goes on behind the history outlines
alongside ethnographic investigations.*

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Notes

INTRODUCTION

- 1 Intan Paramaditha is an Indonesian film scholar and critic who has also authored a book of short stories and a first novel (see Paramaditha 2007, 2014, 2018a, 2021). I chose this striking image from her writing for two reasons: the more obvious is the impact of the film that every Indonesian child had to watch every year to reinforce the ideological legitimization of the Suharto regime. In feminist terms, as she puts it, “The ethical problem of showing violence to children was never an issue, as every elementary school student of the period was required to see Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI . . . and it was through violence that they were expected to learn about their own vulnerability. . . . [It was] one of the tools of the state to educate citizens about how fragile the nation could be without a strong paternal figure” (Paramaditha 2014, 139). The second, more intriguing, reason is that Paramaditha, in interviews about her short stories, says that as a child, she was fascinated by folktales and fairy tales, both Indonesian and Western, and, like many children, she especially “loved the Brothers Grimm because they were, well, just so grim (*laughing*), really dark and I love the part that is not really Disney, where everything turns violent; it is just so wild for a child’s imagination, there is always mutilation involved; I found those stories interesting” (Paramaditha 2020). Indeed, she has said of her short story “Apple and Knife” (Paramaditha 2018a, 165–76), “I wanted to talk about . . . disobedient women, women who have vengeful and monstrous characters, basically to show that there are certain structures that shape the way they behave, why they are really monstrous” (Paramaditha 2020). Her novel *The Wandering* (2021) takes its motif from Hans Christian Andersen’s “The Red Shoes,” a story she points out that involves the paradox of women’s desire to travel while at the same time being punished for that desire, and some of the stories in that novel play out women’s intense rivalries that lead them to destroy one another. There is, in other words, a deep interest in the psychodynamics of violence in patriarchy, in the ordering of

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the state, in rivalries, and in mother-daughter relations. See also her reading of Nan Achnas's celebrated feminist film *Pasir Berbisik/Whispering Sands* (Paramaditha 2007).

- 2 For instance, at a foundational level, Bronislaw Malinowski's ethnography was celebrated by his students for providing a sense of "being there" quite different from earlier "armchair," encyclopedic, and synoptic ethnographic efforts. This was in part due to exploring the linguistic and cultural genres of the Trobriand Islanders, their point of view and epistemologies, providing transcripts of their discourse, glosses of lexical and phrase meanings, and then deeper cultural explanations of semantic networks. It was also in part due to his methodological requirement of inquiring if and how what are often separated by theorists as different institutions affect one another, such that, as in ecology, one cannot change *only one* thing, but other things are implicated (what he called after a mathematical function "functionalism" —e.g., the kula system simultaneously implicating economics, politics, ritual, regional integration, etc.). His several volumes of ethnography were also celebrated for being information rich beyond what he himself could understand or properly theorize, so that future generations could return to his texts, reanalyze the information, and come to different or better conclusions. This has fruitfully been the case: see, e.g., Annette Weiner's reanalysis of rituals with a much richer access to women's roles, perspectives, and ideological understandings (Weiner 1976); and with more recent issues, Lepani on HIV in the Trobriands (Lepani 2012). Malinowski's ethnography of the ceremonial exchanges of the kula ring became a basis for Marcel Mauss's *Essai sur le don* (in English, *The Gift*; see Mauss 1954) and for the proliferating field of exchange theory, as well as inquiries into how political structures can emerge otherwise than from social contract theory. Similarly his essay on magic, science, and religion (Malinowski 1925) spawned debates over modes of pragmatism and rationality grounded in empirical observation and comparison, rather than mere philosophical thought. For an account of how the explanatory forms with which ethnographies have coevolved, see Fischer (2009, 1–113).
- 3 See, e.g., the eight-volume series *Late Editions*, produced by a collective under George Marcus's editorship (Marcus 1994–2000).
- 4 Synthetic biology is the attempt to bring engineering principles to biology, for instance, to build biological systems with standard interchangeable parts, called bio-bricks. This version of synthetic biology is promoted in a college and high school competition, the International Genetically Engineered Machine (iGEM), with teams from all over the world. In 2010, in a slightly different sense of synthetic biology, the J. Craig Venter Institute claimed to have created a synthetic cell, one that can divide and reproduce, from man-made genetic instructions. In 2021, the artificial intelligence company Deep Mind in collaboration with the European Molecular Biology Laboratory produced Al-

phaFold, a protein-folding predictor, and public data base that will help “shot on-goal” pharmacology, and largely replace the slow work of crystallography, or at least speed it up. The promise is to make novel molecules, new materials, novel uses for known biological systems, and in general to be able “to write biology,” not just read or decipher it.

- 5 *The Singapore Story* is the title of Lee Kuan Yew’s two-volume autobiography and account of his role in the making of modern Singapore. But it is also a colloquial term for what elsewhere is more generically called the “official story.” It is built around two founders, Sir Stamford Raffles, the founder of British colonial Singapore in 1819, and Lee Kuan Yew, the leader of independent Singapore. As in all such stories or mythic charters, the roles of others are occluded, as are those of opponents.
- 6 “Deep play” is the notion that Clifford Geertz (1972) developed in reaction to Jeremy Bentham’s reduction of gambling to utilitarian ethics (Bentham wanted to outlaw gambling, arguing that the stakes rapidly become so high that no rational person should engage in it). Geertz pointed out that what is important in gambling is the way a series of deep existential and social meanings are worked out; that gambling, from betting on sports to financial investments, in short is not irrational (said and done) but is meaningful, and often the higher the stakes the more they expose what is culturally important or is contested in a society. The investments are psycho-symbolic, not just calculative. “Social drama” is the notion that Victor Turner (1974) developed from Freud’s analyses of symbolic investments, from Max Gluckman’s analyses of legal cases, and from Arnold van Gennep’s ideas about the processual form of rituals, with stages of separation of a celebrant or initiand, a liminal stage, and a move into a new social or ritual status. He stressed the liminal phase in rituals is one of con-fusion (fusing together) of bodily, visceral, emotional poles of meaning together with cognitive, semantic, and symbolic meaning. The processual form of social drama has proved to be productive for many analyses of conflicts and how conflict resolutions play out.
- 7 Fausto quite incisively reviews the “so-called anthropology of art” debates among Alfred Gell, Philippe Descola, and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, noting archly (and correctly in my view) that models of art “cannot resolve to two terms and cannot be stabilized by a foundational anthropomorphism” (Fausto 2020, 13). Quite to the contrary of Gell, Descola, and Viveiros de Castro’s premature theoretical reductions (“the film, not the footage”), Fausto suggests the Amerindian problematic or ambition involves “generating the most complex and paradoxical images with multiple referents, recursively nested, oscillating between figure and ground” (22). This, it strikes me, is a far more felicitous basis for a general anthropology of art that is not forever bound to Christian theological obsessions with images and presence—which both he and, even more in depth, Carlo Severi analyze. It is a fascinating dis-

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cussion, but my net is wider than Fausto's. Fausto frames his inquiry around "the genesis of presence in ritual" (2020, 8). He wants to undo the Protestant Reformation (Bruno Latour's purifications), and so to reverse the undoing of Amerindian cosmologies and rituals by missionaries, both Protestant and Catholic. Fausto's work builds, in a way, upon Claude Lévi-Strauss's fundamental understanding that binary oppositions, like those in linguistics, are generative rather than static, and so is able to build upon his work, as well as situate his analyses of Amerindian myth and ritual within the much larger and growing corpus of ethnographic work.

- 8 Garcia builds upon the work of three sets of scholars and artists, *Native Americans* (legal scholar John Borrows; Anishinaabe poet, novelist, and scholar Gerald Vizenor; Acoma Pueblo poet Simon Ortiz; Cherokee artist Jimmie Durham; Modoc healer Kate Gordon; and Ojibwe novelist Louise Erdrich), *ethnographers and anthropologists* (Frances Desmore, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Dennis Tedlock, Michael Taussig, Marisol de la Cadena), and *modern poets* who are in an artistic dialogue in more than superficial ways with these artistic languages (Jaime de Angulo, Charles Olson, William Burroughs, Cecilia Vicuña, Gloria Anzaldúa). Garcia is engaged with some of the central issues of contemporary anthropology, poetics, and postcolonial or de-colonial theory, including the work of "the *Writing Culture* group" (he does not cite me, but my essay in that volume fits neatly with what he does here, especially on Gerald Vizenor and the importance of irony), Elizabeth Povinelli, Nancy Munn, Carlo Severi, and Walter Dignolo.
- 9 I use these terms as overlapping pluralizations of one another. The terms have slightly different valences and genealogies, but form a semantic network or family of resemblances. Gadamer (1960) provides a magisterial overview of the notion of the *sensus communis*, roughly translated as "common sense," developed especially by Giambattista Vico as a kind of social constructivism, that we know the world insofar as we make it, and that this is the basis of civic life and civilization. *Common sense* has at least three sources: (1) widely held opinions, beliefs, sensibilities, practical judgments, and moral sentiments that evolve as society does; (2) hegemonic understandings of how things naturally are or how legitimate domination works (Karl Marx, Max Weber, Antonio Gramsci); (3) active democratic or anti-monarchical civic formation, the sense of the populace as the foundation of good governance, and of the public as not a preexisting entity but rather as what is called forth during crises or government failures (Thomas Paine, C. S. Peirce, John Dewey). *Structure of feeling* is the gap between official discourse and popular responses, resistances, or alternative sources of legitimacy, often rooted in everyday class or ethnic difference (Raymond Williams). *Culture* as anthropologists developed it was in resistance to elitist definitions of taste or high culture as the best an art or culture produces (Matthew Arnold). As a counter to such upper-class efforts at

naturalizing their taste cultures as a mode of domination, anthropologists pioneered ideas of culture as changing as social formations do rather than as universal achievements, and thus also as fields of contestation (see Fischer 2009, 1–49; and, for a case study of Iran, Fischer 1980). *Consciousness* or the *con-science collective* as formulated by Émile Durkheim, and used by social anthropology, is simultaneously socially formed and viscerally felt. It is in Durkheim’s pun both consciousness and conscience. It is viscerally felt such that if for instance a food taboo is violated, it might cause one to vomit; but it is also a set of cognitively and publicly justified moral sentiments. *Habitus* (viz. habit) is similarly the embodied dispositions that organize how people perceive and act in the world (Marcel Mauss, Pierre Bourdieu). *Communities of practice* is a term developed to acknowledge differences among disciplines, focusing both on what people do more than what they think their words mean, and on their specialized linguistic usages that differ from ordinary language, or the same terms used by a different community with different meanings (Lucy Suchman, Melissa Cefkin; the Ethnographic Practice in Industry Conference).

- 10 The discussions on “concept work” perhaps begin with Gilles Deleuze’s manifestos that philosophy should be a machine for producing new concepts, not just a scholastic commentary on European philosophy since Aristotle and Plato; and Michel Foucault’s historical and historicizing work showing how concepts in European discourses—from mental health and medicine to penal systems and technologies of disciplining the self—have arisen and are replaced, rather like Thomas Kuhn’s notions of paradigms in the history of science. Ulrich Beck has shown how many concepts in sociology have become zombie-like in outliving their original relevance, and now exert a false sense of scientific legitimation. In anthropology, Paul Rabinow has been among the more forceful in promoting the idea of concept work, perhaps most successfully as a pedagogical tool for training graduate students who have produced innovative work on new topics. More recently, drawing on Wittgenstein, Andrew Brandel and Marco Motta (2021) have edited a volume on *concepts*, and one might assimilate to this discussion Bruno Latour’s efforts to add to American pragmatism’s understanding of concepts (Dewey, Peirce) the French names Gilbert Simondon and Gabriel Tarde. Concepts, like words, often take their meanings through differentiations in semantic networks rather than as singular terms or mathematics-like axiomatic definitions.
- 11 This is not to say that critical events, or chains of critical events, within evolving sociopolitical dynamics cannot be useful rubrics, but like dates in history that students memorize to help understand heuristic periodization, historians themselves are always reevaluating their terms of significance, and marking new evaluations with new dating markers. My use of social dramas and hinges of history is an effort to include the social processes underlying the markers.
- 12 See, e.g., Lattimore (1950) and Wheatley (1971). Lattimore was among the

earliest inspirations for my interest in Asia as an undergraduate, Wheatley being an influence somewhat later at Chicago. Important recent follow-ups on Lattimore include my former colleague Peter Perdue's wonderful survey of Qing period Central Eurasian politics (Perdue 2005); Judd Kinzley's account of resource investment and competition between Russia, the Qing, Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalists, and the People's Republic of China (Kinzley 2018); and Rian Thum's account from Uyghur sources of the history of Altishahr or the oases and trade routes in southern Xinjiang (Thum 2014).

- 13 The title *To Paint a Smile* is taken from that of a 2008 painting by Tan Swie Han, which at first sight seems purely decorative, with blue birds above, and flowers and red lava flows below. A yellow stripe moderates one's perception of the red, as the painting (sequencing of colors) proceeds to deep green. Tan Swie Han comments, referring to the Sichuan earthquake: "When the earth is torn apart we also see the flight of a hundred birds and a hundred flowers bloom. . . . This painting shows the complete *smile*, an understanding that there are both joys and sufferings [*satori* and *dukkha*]. What is most important is we know they are intertwined and we must transcend it, so that the necessary pain is shorter and the joy or happiness is sustained" (Woon 2008, 201–3).
- 14 Symbolically the crowning achievement of these monumental calligraphies is the boulder inscribed with Tan Swie Hian's celebratory essay for the birthday of the Yellow Emperor, placed at the entrance to the 180 steps up to the oldest imperial tomb in China. All three of these astounding sites are described in Woon (2008, 146–57). See also Tan Swie Hian (2017a, 2017b), the first a video of a Tan lecture and explication of a poetic image that has persisted across centuries of Chinese meditations, the other a retrospective catalog of some of his work.
- 15 Wikipedia, s.v. "Zhang Xiaogang," last modified August 20, 2022, 19:26, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zhang_Xiaogang.
- 16 These are comments I heard from gallerists in Singapore. They are of course hyped up. But I. Nyoman Masriadi's *The Man from Bantul (The Final Round)*, painted in 2000, was among the first of the new generation to command more than US\$1 million. In 2008 it sold for \$8 million at Sotheby's Hong Kong. Hendra Gunawan's *Ali Sadikin Pada Masa Kemerdekaan (Ali Sadikin during the Independence Struggle)*, painted in 1978, sold in 2014 for \$4.29 million at Sotheby's Hong Kong; and his *Pandawa Dadu (The Dice Game from the Mahabharata Epic)*, painted in 1971, sold in 2015 for \$3.39 million at Sotheby's Hong Kong. Of older painters, Raden Saleh, Sindudarsono Sudjojono, and Afandi also have sold for multimillion-dollar amounts. But other well-known Indonesian artists like Heri Dono and Entang Wiharso are no strangers to the international stage.
- 17 For an overview of Singapore's swings in positioning between East and West, see Barr (2020) and Meaney (2021).

- 18 See, e.g., Fischer (2015) on the growing aging cohort of seniors in Singapore as a pressure point.
- 19 The three main rankings are the Shanghai Ranking Consultancy Academic Ranking of World Universities, the Times Higher Education University Ranking, and Quacquarelli Symonds World University Ranking.
- 20 Other developments include those of more recent American feminists and queer theorists. Elizabeth Freeman's "erotohistoriography" (Freeman 2010), for instance, is a touchstone for Narumi Naruse's work on Singaporean novels, read through the lens of the ways in which the diaspora is positioned by the state as a fungible or retrievable resource (Naruse 2014). More inventively, cross-linguistically, and cross-culturally, Jing Wang (2021) juxtaposes "sonic feminine new materialism" or "speculative realism" and "agentive realism" of critics such as Karen Barad, Rosi Braidotti, and Salme Voegelin with, and in contrast to, *contemporary* Chinese *qi* thinking about sound, by way of electronic and experimental music. Indeed, her account of *qi* is consistent with its use by Kwa (2014). I find it useful to think with the older work of Cixous et al. for two reasons: (i) it still seems a useful reference frame for later feminist (I think especially of Gayatri Spivak and Donna Haraway) and queer "waves" of thinking; and (ii) there is a literary aesthetics to the writing of these authors which I would like to find in the Southeast Asian novels, not as copy of form but as fusion of style and content, in which the very language is itself transforming and generative. To my ear (or fantasy of sound) *écriture féminine* does different work than the English "women's writing," something creatively embedded in the linguistic liveliness, not just a token of gender. I hope that at least some of the novels show that potential, especially through their play with multiple languages and idioms, and with cultural references that operate philosophically and not just descriptively. I am committed to the appreciation of, and *deconstruction* and *reinterpretation* of, the cultural references, rather than flattening them into mere illustrations of theories about neoliberalism, capitalism, and patriarchy.
- 21 Aside from Derrida, Cixous celebrates male writers who write in forms of *écriture féminine*: Genet, Shakespeare, Rilke, Kleist. Moreover, for her, the pre-linguistic fetus can become either sex, the body is bisexual. And in any case, any rooting in a hypothesized pre-Oedipal stage is a site of the imaginary.
- 22 There actually is a connection between the two words. Hysteria comes from the Greek for uterus, *hysterā* (ὑστέρα); hysteresis from the word for delay, *husteros* (ὑστερος). The delay of the expelling of the placenta after the birth of a child was the connection between the two (Jimenez 2017).
- 23 Hence, the hysteric's speech is full of gaps, sequences of events are scrambled, connections lost, and s/he cannot clearly speak the story of the trauma suffered. Or as Pierre Janet put it: "It is only for our convenience that we speak of it as a 'traumatic memory.' The subject is often incapable of making the necessary narrative which we call memory" (quoted in Kwa 2013, 26).

- 24 The literature on Aboriginal land and marine management is growing. Two introductions are Sveiby and Skuthorpre (2006)—the former a management professor and the latter a Nhunggabarra elder, painter, and educator from northern New South Wales—and Pascoe (2014), a subaltern-style rereading “against the grain” and “meta-analysis” of early colonial accounts of Aboriginal agricultural and environmental management modes by a writer of Bunurong, Tasmanian, and Yuin heritage. A growing number of university dissertations and academic articles explore this topic both in relation to “pre-contact with Whites” as well as for contemporary sustainable use, e.g., Ayre (2002), Ayre and Verran (2010), Ayre and Mackenzie (2012), and Hoverman and Ayre (2012).
- 25 There are several books on Australia’s atomic bomb tests as well as government inquiries, e.g., Bayly (2009), Walker (2014), and Tynan (2016). Bayly’s account of surveyor and road-builder Beadell’s work is particularly well illustrated, with a helpful map, and corrects prior accounts as well as one misconception in Tynan about whether Beadell had been present at the first test.
- 26 Stephen Page, quoted from *Firestarter* (Blair and Minchin 2021).
- 27 Symbolic anthropology was the name given to the research program at the University of Chicago in the 1960s and 1970s. To be clear, symbolic anthropology stressed the performative (Victor Turner was one of the key figures at Chicago), and symbols were part of a Piercean hierarchy of signs, icons, and symbols. Symbols could grow and decay, just as metaphors can. Still, the effort often was to locate key symbols that organized constellations of metaphors and meanings, and were thus socially constituting or constructing the epistemologies and phenomenal worlds for extended periods of time. The work of Berger and Luckman (1966) was an important popular translation from the German tradition of phenomenology, foreshadowing the language of social constructivism. But the primary figure for Chicago was Alfred Schutz (1967) and his attempt to provide a philosophical foundation for the sociology of Max Weber. Symbolic interactionism was also an influence stemming from the work of Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1957), which in turn drew from and fed the study of symbols in advertising and psychological persuasion (Cefkin 2010).
- 28 Stephen Page, quoted from *Firestarter* (Blair and Minchin 2021), at 29:29.
- 29 Stephen Page, quoted from *Firestarter* (Blair and Minchin 2021), at 29:38.
- 30 The story is that the sage Valmiki saw a hunter kill the male of a mating pair of *krauncha* birds; the female burst into such wrenching wailing that Valmiki spontaneously recited a *sloka* (or poetic verse), and as he did so his disciple committed it to memory so that he could recite it further to the community. With this poetic form, Valmiki began the *Ramayana*. See the extraordinary *krauncha* dance pose in *Sharira: Fire/Desire*, choreographed by Chandralekha and performed by Tishani Doshi (Fischer 2023, 186).

- 31 During the 2020 pandemic lockdown, Cerise Lim Jacobs initiated Sing Out Strong, with the call letters SOS, a community initiative to pair young composers and writers, and to experiment with how to produce concerts with performers in different places synchronized through Zoom or Zoom-like video conferencing platforms. Her company further developed this technology for three operatic productions: *Alice in the Pandemic* (2020), fusing animation with remote performances by three live singers (a novel use of a game engine making this technically possible); *Death by Life* (2021) on systemic racism and incarceration, using texts by prisoners and scores by five black composers; and *A Survivor's Odyssey: The Journey of Penelope and Circe* (2021) on sexual violence, women's stories, and 3D environments created by the game development program Unreal Engine.
- 32 The work in question was, however, praised by the literary critic Edward Said, and there was talk of doing it as a short book in a series he was contemplating. He also praised my first book on Iran. I also remember being marked down in an English class at Johns Hopkins by an overzealous teaching assistant in thrall to the then dominant rules of "new criticism" for trying to read Shakespeare plays in their historical context. "Read only what's there in the text. Don't do any research on historical contexts: that is not literary." New criticism would shortly be overturned by new historicism (borrowing heavily from anthropology) and deconstruction. Such also is historical context.
- 33 The artworks have been made available on the web by the Land Transit Authority by the name of the station, as well as in a series of coffee-table books under the Art in Transit program. For an overview, see LTA (2022).
- 34 The fingerprint artworks are by Boo Junfeng, who is also a filmmaker and the director of *Apprentice* (2016), about the death penalty in Singapore. Delicately handled, the film is the story of a chief executioner (hangman) retiring and teaching a young Malay former prisoner to take his place. Coercion and compassion are omnipresent: the young man needs a job in an environment where he is discriminated against on several grounds; the hangman wants to teach him how to make hanging as humane as possible while still making sure that the job is done properly. The filmmaker is aware that public opinion in Singapore favors the death penalty, so he does not try to persuade them otherwise but explores what it means for everyone involved, beginning with the perspectives of the hangmen. Boo was put in charge of the National Parade a few years later, and tried to make it also something that people might think about and not treat as purely entertainment or merely a state show.
- 35 Regarding this film, see the chapter epigraphs by Indonesian writer Laksmi Pamuntjak to the introduction and to chapter 6.

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