

3rd Graduate Research Symposium on Gender and Sexuality
Hosted by the FASS Gender and Sexuality Research Cluster (GSRC)
National University of Singapore

Abstracts

Panel 1: Deconstructing dominant discourses

- Singular ‘they’ in Singapore English
Alamelu Venkatachalam & Rebecca Lurie Starr

Recent studies of American English and other Inner Circle varieties have observed an increase in acceptability of singular ‘they’ when referencing specific and definite antecedents. This study explores the linguistic and social factors influencing singular 'they' in Singapore English. The findings indicate that singular 'they' is experiencing a rise in Singapore similar to its trajectory in Inner Circle varieties. The data also suggest that ideological stances associated with particular social groups, rather than prescriptivist attitudes, constrain the acceptance of singular 'they'. The uptake of singular 'they' in Singapore English illustrates the multifaceted influence of the Inner Circle on this variety.

Biography:

Alamelu Venkatachalam is currently pursuing her BA at the National University of Singapore in English Language and Linguistics and Economics.

Rebecca Lurie Starr is an Associate Professor in the English Language and Linguistics program at the National University of Singapore.

- Unpacking homophobia: analysis of anti-gender rhetoric in institutional discourse
Hafiz (they/them)

In 2022, the Singapore state announced the repeal of Penal Code 377A, which criminalised men’s same-sex relationships. While made as a step towards greater inclusivity, the repeal has become a cause for amplifying conservative voices by some institutions. Given this context, this presentation explores the hidden homophobic and anti-genderism discourses found in selected publicly available information that is broadcasted weekly, specifically in the weeks following the announcement of the repeal.

Drawing on theoretical concepts of affective regimes and indexicality, the paper analyses the ways in which institutions construct and reinforce subtly negative attitudes toward LGBTQ+ individuals. This paper argues that these institutions align with the cisheteronormative national ideologies to promote a narrow definition of family, marriage, and parenthood, which contribute to the perpetuation of homophobia and anti-genderism— discourses that we should refuse in the greater scheme of refusing heteronormativity society at large.

The study presents a linguistic analysis of how institutional discourses influence society— to identify these less conspicuous, heteronormative discourses that we should reject. The research aims to contribute to the ongoing global scholarly discussion on anti-genderism, inclusivity, and diversity by providing a timely and relevant example of the issues faced by LGBTQ+ individuals in Singapore. The findings suggest that homophobia and discrimination against sexual minorities are still highly prevalent in post-377A Singapore. Thus, from a viewpoint of dominant discourse and language and power, there is a need for continued efforts to combat and reject systematised discrimination against minorities, while promoting their acceptance by the public.

Biography:

Hafiz is a Master of Arts Candidate by Research (English Language & Linguistics) at the Department of English, Literature and Theatre Studies at the National University of Singapore (NUS). Their research interests include language, gender and sexual identity, Colloquial Singapore English, and Singapore Malay. They are also part of the team that developed and manages the Corpus of Singapore English Messages (CoSEM)— a monitor corpus of Singapore English online text messages collected between 2016 and 2022.

- Flushed margins: Decoding toilet cultures and social disparities in Singapore
Wi En (she/her)

Toilets, often perceived as mundane fixtures, possess deeper socio-cultural connotations than we might realize. In this paper, I contend that toilets transcend their functional roles, emerging as terrains of surveillance, confinement, and, occasionally, exclusion. Their design, accessibility, and regulation often unveil them as abject spaces, echoing oppressive infrastructures and reinforcing societal hierarchies where gender, class and disability converge. Drawing on what Sylvia Wynter terms "Man-as-human", I illuminate how toilets have been historically anchored in the culturally constructed image of the Western man, who is seen as the quintessential human and the paragon of civility. More than markers of civility, toilets also serve as instruments reinforcing prevailing societal norms. They transform into arenas where cultural norms are both adhered to and contested. I argue that such spaces have evolved into unacknowledged infrastructures of oppression, warranting a radical re-understanding. Through looking at what I refer to as Singapore's toilet cultures, this study unravels how state-driven policies shape can and reinforce societal disparities through the toilet, crafting an ideal citizenry while simultaneously side-lining those who deviate from this prescribed ideal.

Biography:

Wi En (she/her) is an student at the National University of Singapore, where she is working towards her Master's degree in Communication and New Media, following her Bachelor's in Social Sciences (Hons) from the same institution. Her research interest focuses on exploring the impact of media technology use on embodied experiences and how it shapes communication and daily interactions. Her current work seeks to examine the impact of virtual fashion in the metaverse and its influence on gendered presentations and experiences. In her spare time, she enjoys reading science fiction novels, testing the limits of her spice tolerance and dreaming of her next travel destination.

- Spectres and migrations in Daryl Qilin Yam's *Kappa Quartet*
Khairi Irwan (he/him)

Shuttling between scenes in Singapore and Japan, Singaporean author Daryl Qilin Yam's *Kappa Quartet* is distinguished by the plurality of its ambitions. If the field of Singaporean literature might be indexed to rehearsing a particular performance of Singapore identity, I am interested in how this work instead conducts a queering of such a display. Yam's chief figure of investigation is the figure of the kappa sourced from Japanese mythology, transposed

across time and space to signify a dangerous queerness, capable of fraying the unspoken pacts of the nation, heteronormativity and readerly expectation. By taking reference to theories of world literature as well as those that theorise a relationship between horror and queerness, I intend to think through the generative capacities of Yam's literary output: what happens when a figure like the kappa is made to migrate across national spheres to question another country's relationship to gender?

Biography:

Khairi joined the Masters (Research) program in literature this semester. As a scholar of literature and cultural studies, he is interested in thinking through the different ways by which literature might apprehend and intervene in unresolved cultural and political questions. He explores questions of vulnerability, subjectivity and politics as they emerge in horror fiction across the literary traditions of the Arab and Malay worlds. This exploration is nourished through conversations with world literature, gender studies, Global South studies, and Arabo-Islamic aesthetics.

Panel 2: Exploring new practices of healing

- Familiar strangers: Migrant women in Southeast Asian Chinese Cinema — taking Anthony Chen's *Ilo Ilo* and *Wet Season* as examples
CHENG Xueyan (she/her)

In 2013, Anthony Chen's *Ilo Ilo* became the first Singaporean film to win an award in Cannes International Film Festival. Set in Singapore during the 1997 Asian financial crisis, this semi-autobiographical feature delves into the lives of an ordinary Singaporean middle-class family and their Filipino maid, Teresa, with particular focus on the relationship between the 12-years-old boy Jiale and Teresa. It examines the relationships between the live-in domestic female helpers and the employing families. After six years, his second feature, *Wet Season* (2019), also focuses on the identity of the migrant female Ling, a Malaysian Chinese teacher in Singapore, who struggles to conceive through in vitro fertilisation and also takes care of her father-in-law. These two films both bring up the problems of migrant women and family labor.

Using these two films as entry points, this research will focus on the representations of migrant women in Southeast Asian Chinese cinema. I argue that these migrant women are like “familiar strangers”, with senses of intimacy and alienation both existing in their identities. Intersectionality plays a pivotal role in understanding their identities, as their identities are formed within the intersections of otherness and motherhood. This research will focus on three questions: For inter-Asian migrant women, what are the meanings of borders and boundaries? What are the transnational forces behind their border-crossing migratory trajectories? And what are the dynamics between the paid and unpaid family labors? The negotiations with home countries and resident countries, with motherhood and labor, with foreignness and intimacy, always exist in their complicated identities. It is important to explore the meanings of borders, boundaries and transnationalism through gendered perspectives.

Biography:

Xueyan Cheng is a second year PhD student in Cultural Studies in Asia program, with an academic background in global media and communications. Her research interests include Chinese cinema, Asian cinema, and transnational narratives. Her current research focuses on transnational Chinese cinemas in Southeast Asia.

- Examining the potential of Theatre of the Oppressed for gay, bisexual and queer men
David Puvan (he/him)

Applied theatre interventions, including Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed (TO), have gained global recognition as a catalyst for change within social work. These interventions serve as powerful tools for educating, transforming, and empowering marginalized communities. TO, in particular, offers a safe and aesthetic platform for addressing social and personal challenges.

This study focuses on TO as a group work intervention for sexual minorities, specifically gay, bisexual, and queer (GBQ) men in Singapore, aiming to reveal its transformative potential on their critical consciousness. Employing a cross-sectional quasi-experimental design with a pretest-posttest non-equivalent comparison group, this study meticulously assesses TO's impact as a dynamic applied theatre method.

To provide a comprehensive exploration, a mixed-methods approach with an emphasis on qualitative methods is employed. This approach facilitates an in-depth examination of the experiences and evolving perspectives of GBQ men who engage with TO. Utilizing pretest-posttest surveys, arts-based techniques, and focus group discussions, this study employs a concurrent triangulation mixed-method approach, gathering both quantitative and qualitative data.

TO, with its interactive and theatrical nature, creates a non-judgmental and playful environment, encouraging self-expression and the exploration of complex identity and societal issues. Our research aims to uncover the extent to which TO enhances critical consciousness, sparks personal growth, and fosters community building among GBQ men in Singapore.

This research contributes to the literature on applied theatre and the broader discourse on empowerment and social change for sexual minorities. It highlights the vital role of creative and participatory interventions in fostering inclusivity and equity within society, shedding light on TO's potential as a transformative tool for marginalized communities.

Biography:

David Puvan (he/him) is a second-year student pursuing a Master's in Social Work by Research. With a keen interest in Applied Theatre and its intersection with social work, David concentrates his research on the effects of theatre-based interventions within social work practice. Prior to his academic journey, David served as a social worker at a Family Violence centre, where he directed and presented a Forum Theatre performance to the public. This performance aimed to address the crucial issue of bystander intervention in Family Violence cases. Alongside his academic journey, David continues to perform on stage from time to time.

- Augmenting with interpolated creatures and glitching bodies: Data feminist strategies in AI art

Nurul Huda Binte Abdul Rashid (she/her)

The data feminist response to rapid datafication of big data is an intersectional approach to account for 'missing bodies' via more equitable representation (D'Ignazio & Klein, 2020).

This project of ‘filling in the gaps’ has been undertaken by digital feminist artists who employ the use of new digital technologies in their art-making processes as a response to inequity. Building from the foundation of technofeminism (Wajcman, 2004), digital feminist artists subvert the normative use of digital technology to evoke new iterative forms, bodies, and materials that generate new feminist aesthetics. This paper will analyse the works of two Singapore-based female artists, Juria Toramae and Priyageetha Dia, and their (mis)use of GAN and CGI tools to augment normative datasets. The process of augmentation seeks to multiply, extend, or aggravate datasets as responses to hierarchy, singularity, and misrepresentation. As visual artists, they have become critical of image documentation in photography which often capture and merely repeat existing structures. By translating the image to data, their new material of image-as-data is fed through AI and digital-image technologies to construct new forms against automated narratives. Toramae’s manipulation of GAN in *Pelagic Dreams* (2021) and *Feathered Islands* (2021) presents an interpolation of non-species forms as resistance against hierarchical datasets of nature photography. Dia’s exploration of CGI in *Long Live the New FLESS\$SSH* (2020) and *The Sea is a Blue Memory* (2022) introduces glitches as pathways into new speculative identities. This paper will discuss how data feminist strategies in art create new feminist aesthetics and allude to the creation of a digital Nusantara (Malay archipelago) as an alternative cartography that challenges the continental orthodoxy of nation-state formations.

References

- D’Ignazio, C., & Klein, L. F. (2020). *Data feminism*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.
- Wajcman, J. (2004). *TechnoFeminism*. Cambridge ; Malden, MA: Polity.

Biography:

Nurul Huda Rashid (she/her) is a PhD candidate in the Cultural Studies in Asia programme at the National University of Singapore. Her research engages images of Muslim women through varying modes of reproduction – from the daguerreotype to the data turn – and in workshop activations with self-identified Muslim women. Prior to the dissertation, this research has been presented in iterations of photographic exhibitions and performance-lectures via projects such as *Hijab/Her* (2012 – 2016) and *Women in War* (2016-ongoing). Nurul nurtures the importance of connecting research and practice and hopes to adopt a cat someday.