Being family, doing family : inquiring the discourse of family in Singapore literature

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**NANYANG
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SINGAPORE

**BEING FAMILY, DOING FAMILY:
INQUIRING THE DISCOURSE OF FAMILY
IN SINGAPORE LITERATURE**

**GERALDINE TAN LE TING
SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES**

2021

Being Family, Doing Family: Inquiring the Discourse of Family in Singapore Literature

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School of Humanities

A thesis submitted to the Nanyang Technological University
in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of
Master of Arts

2021

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At several points in the course of writing this dissertation, it seemed impossible. I am only submitting this dissertation because it is due, and I present it with a nagging sense of its incompleteness and its imperfections. The best laid plans were thrown off course with the announced lockdown for Covid-19 in spite of the pettiness of being unable to write when backdropped against a global pandemic, it was a truly terrible experience, one I would be glad never to experience again. This is a fervent wish to live in uninteresting times.

In a paper about families and what they should or might mean, I am grateful to my parents and younger brother for their grudging support of my life choices. Without my parents, this paper would have been practically unfeasible, but beyond that, this paper draws from my own observations and experience of families, and my own is at its center. In so many ways, my family has indelibly shaped the person I am today. Dad and Mom, you may not have had intended for me to choose to major in English and to take it even further after my bachelors, but for what it is, I hope you are a tiny bit proud you raised me.

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SUMMARY

This dissertation is driven by the impulse to better understand families. To do so, I read the representations and negotiation of ‘family’ in selected Singaporean fiction, with the aim of considering what precisely is defined and understood as family. Family is everywhere, and the meaning of the word seems *prima facie*. My interest is precisely prompted by this axiom of family, and how it forms a dominant ideology that superposes and determines lived experiences of families despite its incommensurability. I adopt a framework of queering the discourse of marriage and family in Singapore, looking to “definitions and understandings of the term “family” as topics of inquiry in their own right and part of the process of analysis” (Morgan 93) What I mean by queering is not for an exploration of homosexual families presented in Singapore Literature, since doing so would reconfirm and constraint a binary of homosexuality/heterosexuality. Rather, I draw upon queering as Natalie Oswin does in her analysis of the critical geography of home in Singaporean housing, analyzing the heteronormative logic governing Singaporean home spaces and the attendant “properly familial Singaporean subjects” (261) which extends beyond the policing of a heterosexual-homosexual binary to perpetuate “prevailing notions of respectable domesticity and proper family” (257). To do so, I read literary renderings of familial and marital forms that comply with the dominant image of the conjugal Family but recast the meanings of family by turning these images on its head to explore the complexity of the nuclear unit.

INTRODUCTION

This thesis begins with questioning the common-sense parlance of what family means. Seemingly axiomatic, what is meant by the term family and its importance is *prima facie* and consequently left unclarified. Yet, the capaciousness to what ‘family’ could mean is evident from its dictionary entry in the OED – a mass noun, it varyingly denotes consanguinity (in being connected by blood), a collective group differentiated based on the household (including retinue of servants), and yet could also refer to a group of non-related individuals – resisting any singular understanding. If this commodiousness ought to translate well in a milieu of varied kinship systems and living arrangements for its non-distinctiveness, the plurality of famil(ies) has instead been homogenized and hypostatized into a monolithic ‘Family’. As David Morgan, whose notion of ‘practices’ and attention to how family life is ‘done’ informs the critical basis of this thesis and whose ideas are explored in greater detail in chapter two, points out, there is a need to conceptually extend understandings of family in their different configurations, to consider family as a form of practical knowledge. Morgan’s observation, and the underlying impulse of this paper, highlights how the common delineation of family with a definite article – as in ‘the family’¹ – is a woeful misrepresentation of families. In spite of its inadequacy as category and classification, such a concept is still useful and worthy of further consideration, particularly in a realization and exploration of the instability of the subject. As Gergen and Gergen conclude in their stocktake of the postmodern relationship, “simply because these concepts stand to be deconstructed does not require their dissolution” (234). In the same vein,

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¹David Morgan in *Rethinking Family Practices* cautions against the reification of the family, to give it a “thing-like quality” (3). He raises the important distinction between “ideas about and understandings of the family on one hand and actual day-to-day family living on the other.”, and points to John Gillis’s distinction between ‘the families we live by’ and ‘the families we live with’.

rather than dismissing the concept that continues to hold much relevance and sway in political and everyday imaginaries, a critical interrogation of the discourse of Family functions to open up a space from which to re-examine and re-conceptualize what family means, to look at the process through which a family is considered as much.

In spite of (or perhaps because of) these multitudinous meanings meant in the definition of family, what family has come to mean in the commonplace is what it has been *taken to mean*. For its indeterminacy, Family is discursively constructed through state rhetoric and scholarly engagements, and performatively reified through social practices. In other words, the meaning of family is contingent on “particular configurations of conventionalized practices used in discourse” (Ng 146). This hypostasizes family into Family, which in turn, mediates what is seen and determined as family – non-traditional familial forms identified with prefixes of ‘modern’ or ‘alternative’ posits the Family as a stable referent² to which other kinship configurations are measured against, whilst the diverse lived realities of families which do broadly conform to the heteronormative form of Family are glossed over. This relation between Family and families (all otherwise queered by that logic) echoes Stevi Jackson’s observation of the “double-sided social regulation” (105) that heteronormativity effects, which “regulates those kept within its boundaries as well as marginalizing and sanctioning those outside them.” (105)

Owing to its pervasiveness, how the notion of Family finds expression is intertextual. Nirmala Purushotam writing about the ideology of the middle class reified in the construct of the ‘normal’ family notes, “the Singaporean family does not come with an actually available

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² As Nicholson observes in “The Myth of the Traditional Family”, distinctions in the traditional/modern dichotomy “functions not descriptively but normatively, legitimizing certain family types over others on the basis of dubious historical assumptions” (28).

text,...[it] is enshrined in nebulous texts, from nebulous sources” (161) marking its influence more insidious. The contradictoriness of the concept of ‘Family’ is such that even as a subject of extant analysis, its meaning has not been explicitly clarified. Focusing on the meaning of family therefore, each of the following chapters refigures the meaning of family, drawing attention to the lived complications of families and the manifold significances and meanings of what, and how family is already understood. In short, this paper aims to complicate articulations of families: to interrogate what family *means* and to understand the frames of interpretation which thus far has been uncomplicatedly allowed to determine what family *is*.

In my taking stock of existing research on Family done in Singapore and elsewhere, a distinct trend becomes almost immediately apparent. Where scholarly inquiries into F/family outside of Singapore have had to contend with shifting trends in the conception of family, such as the contested demand for the recognition of alternative family arrangements and the legitimization of same-sex marriages, these topics are less prominent in Singaporean discourse. That is not to say that it has been absent: discussions of sex education, spousal abuse, and single parents remain highly contentious topics inviting much studies and research. Yet, significantly, regardless of the furor, the marriage-based nuclear family model celebrated as an ideal and established clearly in state and social discourse is the undergirding premise. Family when referred to within the Singaporean national context, almost uncomplicatedly takes as referent on the ideological form of the ‘normal family’ (PuruShotam 2002), defined by a nucleus core of a heterosexual monogamous couple. Even as the literature exposing the fallacious understanding of the nuclear, monogamous family characterized as traditional and ideal have been extensive³,

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³ Look at *Marriage, a History. The Marriage-Go-Round. Families as They Really Are. Beyond (Straight and Gay) Marriage, Unhitched*.

social policies in Singapore are still firmly grounded in the same model of family, and other family configurations dismissed and permutations of kinship experiences ignored. The role of this ‘normal’ Family and its operation as a regulatory fiction in its function as part of the national apparatus has been the subject of much research. Notably, Family is the differential basis for a number of socio-economic formal policies and is the determinant factor differentiating access and cost to housing policies (Ong 51), tax rebates, and reliefs bearing on childcare-related matters (Wong et al. 47). These formal policies in turn have cascading impacts on lived experiences of families: bearing upon the gendered division of works in families who do fit into the normative dimensions (Purushotam 2002) or the marginalization of other experiences of parenthood/family (Wong et al. 54). Here, even without going into too much detail, the echoes of how an ideology and discourse of Family functions as an “structuring structure” (Bourdieu 72) is already becoming apparent.

Scholarly considerations of the Singaporean family for the most part have considered the relationship between state-society, adopting a more distinctly sociological/geographical perspective and consequently, have proceeded from the State’s premise. These studies, conducted with the goal to defamiliarize an understanding of family usually look to moments of rupture⁴ – as Teo Youyenn analyzing the state-family relationship in “Shaping the Singapore family, producing the state and society” (2010) observes of how instituted family policies produces structural contexts, Teo locates the family as a site in which society and the state are reified, and which citizenship is articulated (338). In these arguments, the relationship between the state and the citizen is modelled on the Foucauldian conception of discipline, with power not entirely exercised from above but laterally, dependent upon subjects’ participation in the process

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⁴ Refer to Michelle Angela Mohabeer’s analysis of the ‘perverse familial’

of self and mutual surveillance. As Teo elaborates elsewhere, “[it is] the way family policies generate certain mechanical habits and taken-for-granted norms...compel[ling] shared negotiation, that truly give[s] form to the state as an institutional disciplinary-entity.” (Neoliberal 79 emphasis mine) Inasmuch, the relation between state and citizen is conceptualized as interrelated and symmetrical, and as Teo and Oswin observe, is overlaid by a self-conscious identification of the Singaporean as citizen and privy to participating in these processes.

Despite the centrality of the heteronormative nuclear family formation in Singapore literature, studies of the literary representations of the Singaporean family are few and far between. Even where they exist, inquiries into the Singaporean family dismiss the intimate space of the family and look at the family as *gestalt*, adopting a bird’s eye view to consider the Family as a category. The reading of ‘home and family’ in Caroline Nicole Garsten’s dissertation *Political Reading of Home and Family in English-Language Singaporean Novels* considers the spatial dynamics of the novels, using it as a lens to consider political development. Koh Tai Ann’s “Social Mythology in the Singapore Novel” (1989) does analyze family relations in selected novels⁵, identifying the topos of the Chinese family common to these novels as also structuring its thematic concerns. Summarily, this takes the form of a binary drawn up between social conservation vis-à-vis social transformation. In these texts, tradition takes the form of Confucian values and traditional rituals and superstitions, one in conflict with the individualism and materialism characterized of ‘modern development’; and the ideological conflict enacted within the space of family. This binary is reminiscent of state rhetoric espousing the need to stay true to ‘Asian’ roots, and links state rhetoric and narrative focus:

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⁵ The texts studied are: Michael Soh’s *Son of a Mother*, Goh Poh Seng, *If We Dream Too Long*, Catherine Lim, *The Serpent’s Tooth*, Lim Thean Soo’s *Ricky Star*, Christine Su-Chen Lim’s *Rice Bowl*, Philip Jeyaratnam’s *Raffles Places Ragtime*, Robert Yeo’s *The Adventures of Holden Heng*

“These novels may also thus be interpreted as dealing consciously or otherwise, with the social institution, the family as such, and hence with “universal” questions of authority and universal values of obedience, duty and obligation. In short, that the family may be seen as metonymic of a larger social reality, that is, society or the state” (280)

The intergenerational conflict within these families characterizes generations as representative of the milieu to which they ‘belong’, and are structured as binaries, with older traditional ‘Asian’ values (Confucian in nature) held vis-à-vis younger ‘western’ individualism. Familial tension plays out as a microcosm of wider tensions within the imagined national family, and the resolution concentrates on how these tensions are resolved to promote family/national cohesion. Garsten’s and Koh’s readings, although different for its subject, share a similar way of considering the family. Family in both studies are approached as a modular unit, presented as a consolidated character through which to read a condensed national allegory, becoming a space in which socio-political issues and dynamics can be negotiated.

That is not what this project is.

This project is the first extended treatment focusing on the heteronormative nuclear family formation, and is less interested in the relationship between Family and the State so much as it is taken with everyday imaginings of family. To that end, it is appropriate to return to literary texts, because it is one of the few ways of research that considers the family from within itself. The strength of looking to fictive explorations of the family is apparent – by virtue of its subject, the texts already self-reflexively invoke and engage with an ideology of family, but it is in the variations of family practices represented within families that instinctively qualifies as ‘familial’ that challenges and questions the invoked Family.

The first chapter responds to the intersection between an ideology of Family as it is articulated in Singapore and the way in which family is lived, reading how ‘family’ is used in the 2007 parliamentary debates over §377A as an instantiation of existing rhetoric on Family in state discourse. Reading government rhetoric of Family is to investigate how official discourse provides a structure of knowledge from which to situate conceptions of families and is important for the way institutional understandings have and continue to overlay lived experiences, understandings, and construction of families. The debates present a site from which to consider the political-legal discourse of Family, one made especially relevant for its overlaps with social discourse. The recourse to the ideal Family as the regulating principle in deciding the exclusion and sanctioning of sexuality clarifies the borders of what Family includes, bringing it into stark relief such that we can begin to consider it. If the logic of Family anchoring a discussion of sexuality is remarkable in itself, its employment as a vindication both for and against the repeal of the penal code insinuates an understanding of Family as a floating signifier. My reading is partially derived from Butler’s notion of sexuality as a regulatory principle, which I use to consider the function of a rhetoric of Family. The prominence of a discourse of Family in Singapore marks it as a significant site where power is negotiated, simultaneously also marking it as a site of resistance; this perspective draws from Michel Foucault’s conception of discipline, which notes how resistance could “function outside, below and alongside the State apparatuses, on a much more minute and everyday level” (60). This chapter looking to consider the ‘knowledge’ proceeds from the critical basis in which Foucault conceives of power effected “at the level of knowledge” (59), highlighting through the debate the ‘knowledge’ that surrounds how we think of Family. To disambiguate the meaning(s) of Family meant within an institutional context, this chapter traces the different denotations and connotations of family that vary with the

context of its use. Picking up from the way that the parliamentary debates permit an incursion into the reading of the meaning of family, I consider the lexical differences in the use of ‘family’ throughout the debate. My identification of the multitudinous and often contradictory meanings in the use of ‘family’ is intended to trouble the normative notion of family by revealing the family as “a continually contested fiction that masks its own histories of becoming” (Taylor 202), thereby situating Family as a critical site from which to consider the processes of ‘family’.

I observe that the term ‘family’ and derivative terms based on ‘family’ as an adjective (such as in familial values) is used in the debate act as a catch-all, therein obscures the complexities of meaning associated with it and works to perpetuate a singular and exclusive notion of family. The pretext of using Family as a point of reference implies a stability to its meaning that is flawed on two tiers: firstly, for its incommensurability to lived experiences of families, which gestures to larger issues – the problem with the exclusivist definition of what family ‘is’ excludes families that do not fit into that prescription, even though they might ‘practice’ family; and secondly, for the inconsistencies inhered within the ideology of Family itself. The implications of the first problem, dire as it is, is better explored from a sociological perspective, and has been written about much better than I can. My first chapter therefore focuses on the second problem and seeks to begin to destabilize the institutional understanding of Family by exposing those gaps. Curiously, Family is deployed as a justification both for and against the repeal of §377A, which prompts a closer analysis of the way in which the concept is availed to – and from which to parse out the instability of the meaning of Family in its use within the parliamentary debates that is a reflection of the instability in the refrain of the traditional Family itself, one that is always-politicized.

My conclusion at the end of Chapter 1 of the incoherence of a professed unitary meaning

of Family ‘queers’ the traditional conception of the family; even so, its imposition as a cultural presupposition that traces out the understanding of what family means cannot be ignored. To establish the culturally imagined Family and the prominence of that construction in Chapter 1 is to identify the Family as it is categorized and fixed within this particular epoch, and serves to clarify the ideological configuration of Family that functions as an overriding metanarrative, which provides the baseline from which we can consider how fictional works about family can respond.

The biggest assumption underlying this project is that fictional representations of family offer a means to consider the bottom-up discursual processes that respond to the top-down framing of state rhetoric, effecting a counter-discourse that presents an interstice from which to investigate these constructions even as it creates new possibilities. Certainly, that relationship is the root tension in all the works of fiction studied in this dissertation. What sets the chapters apart from each other is the ways through which that relationship is negotiated in coming to the same conclusion, be it working through acts of re-seeing and re-knowing (Chapter 2), through its re-writing (Chapter 3), or its performances (Chapter 4).

The different ways through which family comes to know itself in these works are also intricately linked with the medium through which it finds itself: Chapter 2 reads dramatic portrayals of marriage and family in Faith Ng’s *for Better or For Worse* comparatively with Eleanor Wong’s *Mergers and Accusations*. These examples of marriages and family which do cohere to the state’s model but are failed examples of doing family expose the flaws in the limited interpretations, before turning in Chapters 3 and 4 to consider how family is represented in the form of short stories, reading selected stories from Su-chen Christine Lim’s collection *The Man Who Wore His Wife’s Sarong: Stories of the Unsung, Unsaid and Uncelebrated in*

Singapore. These literary portrayals of the complex interactions within the family offer us a new way of reading the family that has bearings on the way that we understand what family means.

So, let's read about families.

CHAPTER 1 FAMILY?

Analyzing the Rhetoric of Family in the 2007 parliamentary debates over Section 377A.

“The sanctity of the family unit is not a value unique to Singapore. All major faiths consider this a cardinal virtue. The family is the fundamental building block out of which larger social structures can be stably constructed. It is the group within which human beings most naturally express their love for parents, spouse and children, and find happiness and fulfilment. It is the best way human societies have found to provide children a secure and nurturing environment in which to grow up, to pass on the society’s store of wisdom and experience from generation to generation, and to look after the needs of the elderly.” (White Paper on Shared Values 109)

“Any male person who, in public or private, commits, or abets the commission of, or procures or attempts to procure the commission by any male person of, any act of gross indecency with another male person, shall be punished with imprisonment for a term which may extend to 2 years.” (Section 377A of the Penal Code)

The epigraphs quoted above are ostensibly disparate: the first is the expounded value of “family as the basic unit of society” from the *White Paper on Shared Values*⁶. Regarded as the most endured value⁷ of five shared values laid out in the *White Paper*, the conception of family here conspicuously modulated – and continues to modulate – socio-economic policies following

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⁶ The white paper is explicitly designed as an official evocation of national identity such that “...Singaporeans of all races and faith can subscribe to and live by...to evolve and anchor a Singaporean identity.” (Government of Singapore 106). For a more detailed introduction on the development of the White Papers, look at Tan, Charlene. ““Our shared values” in Singapore: A Confucian perspective. ” *Educational Theory* 62.4.

⁷ Terence Lee notes that the value is “Singapore’s best-remembered” in making the point of the familial paradigm echoed in official discourses in the conflation between civic and civil society in his discussion of a “Singapore idea” of civil society

it⁸, as in the motto of the Ministry of Community Development⁹. For its promulgated importance of Family and with its stated aim “to evolve and anchor a Singaporean identity”, the *White Paper* presents a significant articulation of family from which the State’s imagined family can be construed. The opening description of the family’s ‘sanctity’ extolled as a ‘cardinal virtue’ imbues a sacrosanct universality to Family, one transcending religious and national boundaries. Beyond stating the established importance of Family, the phrasing of it being ‘not a value unique to Singapore’ segues by implication of it as an already forged Singaporean consensus, the language resting on a presumption that it is a value *of* Singapore. Family depicted as much employs a specious reasoning: the importance of Family is established on account of its being already established as important. For its putative tone, Family in the *White Paper* is only explicitly defined as a fundamental principle of social organization –in its function to care for the young and the aged, and emphatically vital for its role of social reproduction to ‘pass on...wisdom from generation to generation’. Yet, despite its indeterminacy, formulations of families that could measure up to these established parameters are precluded; that demarcation is denoted in the caution of Singaporeans against “...uncritically adopting ‘alternative lifestyles’ such as casual sexual relations and single parenthood, which weaken the family unit” (White Paper on Shared Values 110). Such admonishment portrays the Family as besieged, susceptible to threats of being reshaped and ‘weaken[ed]’ by a deliberate willfulness and non-compliance of

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⁸ Benedict Sheehy has argued that the *White Paper* is significant for its quasi-constitutional status. He writes, “[the *White Paper*] is a quasi-Constitution because it sets out fundamental principles suitable for organizing many aspects of a society such as those found usually in the preamble of a constitution...The importance of this quasi-Constitutional document, the *Shared Values*, in communicating to the Singaporean community and the world at large can be seen in its ubiquity: it has been integrated into all the Governmental ministries.” (73)

⁹ We believe that the state of our families, the building blocks of any society, determine not only the moral tone of the society but its economic health as well. As our families prosper, so does the nation. And cohesive families which impart positive values are crucial to the success of our social development. (Ministry of Community Development qtd. in Oswin “Modern Model Family” 260)

‘uncritical adoption’.

Seemingly incongruous, the second epigraph quotes in full Singapore’s male sodomy law provision. Though distinct, the two epigraphs are linked by the same idiom of Family. Section 377A was the subject of public furor due to the lobby for its repeals during the Penal Code reforms of 2007. The ensuing campaigns and debates culminated in a compromise: §377A was (and remains to this day) retained, but with a caveat of ‘non-enforcement’ – despite the letter of the law, the provision would not be proactively enforced against consensual private acts. The reformation of a legal prescription criminalizing homosexual behavior though not overtly related to families bore down on Family, which was the locus of the controversy. The language of the final ruling also revolved around a perceived necessity to preserve the Family – keeping the section was expressed as representing a “basically [] conservative society” (Column 2397), to which the decriminalization and repeal of §377A signaled a legitimization of alternative kinship systems portending the breakdown of Family.

The parlance of the *White Paper* read alongside the moral panic over §377A’s repeal reveals an identical idiom of Family, which provides an inroad to consider the exclusionary, heteronormative Family ideal that is reified and shored up through political enactments. A comparison of the two epigraphs, that is in “disentangling [the] multiple layers of context of subtle traces of subtext as well as historical and synchronic intertexts of texts of Singapore culture” (Chew and Kramer-Dahl 3), surfaces interrelations crucially connecting understandings of Family and the nation in the definition of family *qua* family. This chapter intends to read the meaning of Family as it is produced and reproduced through negotiations with political and historical formations (Chew and Kramer-Dahl 4), adopting Phyllis G.L. Chew and Anneliese Kramer-Dahl’s analytic framework of critical discourse as a critical concept with which to do so.

Tracing the meaning of Family as it morphs in various contexts in its multiple use throughout the parliamentary debates over §377A, I observe how ‘family’ functions as a deixis even within an institutional construction of Family. Linked as it is with a myriad of meanings, the use of the term Family envisaged as unicity ignores the underpinning plural understandings. Given the expansive meanings of family, what is understood by Family is molded by normative discourse in which meaning is manufactured in its articulation – in other words, Family is recognizably a fabrication in the sense that Judith Butler means. In exposing the discrepancies within an institutional construction of Family, this chapter intercalates a violability to the hitherto unitary notion: such a frame allows for the possibility of contesting and reformulating dominant imaginaries to rework and resignify them from within.

1. “We live and let live”: compromising on/ a compromised §377A

The basis of repealing §377A¹⁰ was predicated upon its unconstitutionality on the grounds of legal discrimination in the criminalization of male-male anal and oral sex coterminous to the decriminalization of the same acts performed by heterosexual couples. Framed both as an infringement upon individual rights and a violation of Article 12(1) which guarantees equal protection under the law, Siew Kum Hong¹¹ argued that the curtailment of civil rights to defend the nation’s moral boundaries is fallacious, and the section’s retention in the absence of specifiable harm is unjustifiable. The proposed repeal of §377A and its failure thereto have figured prominently as a milestone in critical discussions of the development of queer subjectivities¹² in Singapore. Afterall, legislation is by far one of the most apparent indexes of

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¹⁰ History of the code’s review: https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_1639_2010-01-31.html

¹¹ Nominated MP Siew Kum Hong submitted the petition for the gay community utilizing a “seldom used parliamentary process” (Chua 55). Ansly, Ng. *A Rare Petition and a Spirited Debate* This was also the first attempt made to repeal the law, and are followed by two more attempts. For more details regarding the process, see Chua “Singapore in 2007”

¹² Refer to George Baylon Radics

the political stance on queer acceptance, not to say of the implications extending beyond enforcement to its socially constituting role¹³. In this vein, discussions of the topic have been taken with the public campaigns leading up to the debates, and/or the resultant compromise.

Recapitulations of the entire process of repeal reads the conclusion of a legally encoded ‘compromise’, as a rule of thumb citing Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong’s speech, and similar for its précis. Read as a legal pronouncement, the salient points identified (taken as the tenets of the state’s policy on queerness) are the Prime Minister’s justification of a conservative majority and the attendant social mores as the impetus to keep the code, with the appended concession to gay citizens’ contributions to the economy in an assurance of non-enforcement.

That the resolution to §377A’s repeal is problematic is a given; even taking for granted that it is indeed a compromise¹⁴, scholars have noted the contradictions in the mixed legislative impact, legislative intentions, and statutory interpretations of the code. The dissension over §377A’s constitutionality championed by the camps for and against respectively at its core is an irreconcilable disagreement over the purview of legislation bisected on a binary of liberal rationale¹⁵ vis-à-vis a communitarian rationale¹⁶ – the former arguing that the law should uphold the constitutional right to equality and the individual’s autonomy while the latter argues that the law should be evaluated based on its social value. Beyond that, as Mr Hri Kumar Nair¹⁷ stated in

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¹³ Arvind Narrain examines the role legal reform plays in making social changes, questioning the efficacy of legal interventions’ implications on political and social realities. Narrain argues that the legislative implications of Section 377A extend beyond its use as an enforcement and has a socially constitutive role, providing the example of how legislation is used as a justification for homophobic attitudes in India. (256) With that analysis, Narrain observes that legal decriminalization of homosexuality must be conjoined with a depathologization of homosexuality in the wider national community to effect any substantial social change. (261) Yulius et. Al has also noted the negative impacts the keeping of Section 377A has on the gay community (184)

¹⁴ Jianlin Chen has argued that the resolution was a ‘true’ compromise, since the government’s “rejection of the “homosexual agenda”...was accompanied by the rejection of a strong moral condemnation of gays” (114)

¹⁵ For more, Shing, Lynette J. and Chua Kher

¹⁶ For more, Lee, Yvonne CL; within the debates, Ms Indranee Rajah’s speech

¹⁷ Hri Kumar Nair’s speech rebuts the common arguments levied by opponents of the repeal.

parliament, the section evaluated upon the measures of clarity, consistency and concreteness “fall short of what a good law is or should be”. Michael Hor analysing the section’s mechanisms points to the questionable serviceability of the code: given §377A’s legislative distinction of “indecenty” (46) and its being limited to the prosecution of non-consensual acts rather than on the basis of sexual orientations, rendering it “operationally redundant” (47), with other legislative provisions better serving the same purposes. Kumaralingam Amirthalingam analysing the jurisprudence and prosecutorial policy similarly notes a lacuna in the law that does not encapsulate anal sex in the definition of gross indecenty – this analysis prompted a government issued clarification emphatically stating the inclusion of anal sex between male persons in §377A. (Toh). In a word, the policy is “messy” (*Channel News Asia* qtd. in Hor 45). It bears noting that this “misshapen offspring of governmental compromise” (Hor 13) is deliberate – in the Prime Minister’s words, “[t]he current legal position in Singapore reflects these social norms and attitudes...it is not legally neat and tidy” (Column 2402) – exemplifying what scholars have identified as “illiberal pragmatics”¹⁸ (Philips 48; Obendorf 9, Hor), one plausibly driven by “electoral secularism”¹⁹ (Abdullah 240).

As I have detailed above, academics focusing on the corollary of keeping a ‘non-enforced’ §377A have considered its legislative logic, identifying the subsequent vitiation of the code, and the concomitant implications on sexual citizenship. These observations are pertinent to

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¹⁸ Audrey Yue conceptualizes LGBT policies and right claims within a Singaporean context to be governed by ‘illiberal pragmatism’, “characterised by the ambivalence between non-liberalism and neoliberalism, rationalism and irrationalism that governs the illegality of homosexuality in Singapore” (2). Yue reads the development of queer culture of Singapore as “[having] been constituted, not as a result of the recognition of rights and liberation, but through the disjunctive acceleration caused by economic and cultural reforms” (18)

¹⁹ Walid Jumblatt Abdullah suggests that the State’s ambivalent response is motivated by electoral concerns, terming the final decision ‘electorally secular’: one “designed to appease both the liberal and conservative segments of society” (240). Such a stance is adopted when the state “has no clear ideological preference on the matter” (251), which he suggests is evinced in the contradictory stances that state actors/agencies adopted, citing the HPB and NLB incidents. (251)

contextualize my discussion on the importance of Family, and inadvertently reveal a gap in existing scholarship. Given the decision to undertake such ‘messiness’ was *for* the Family, these analyses drawn from the concluded state of §377A have only cursorily read the Prime Minister’s speech, neglecting the prominent motif of Family. This is an important realization, since the repeal’s rejection is officially (and repeatedly) claimed to preserve Family. Reading the speech in its entirety therefore reveal the process of negotiation that clarifies the rationale underlying the final legislation – the final decision in the language of legislation merely the conclusion to that process. Furthermore, Jianlin Chen’s conclusion that the Prime Minister’s expressed stance (also, as it has been conventionally read, equivalent to the State’s position) “to retain the law while stripping most of its moral content” (120), as aligned with the ‘true’ centrist majority of neither approving nor condemning homosexuality, all the more situates the Prime Minister’s speech as the intersection of state and social rhetoric of Family, becoming a mediated site from which the notion of Family can be read through.

For the multiple references to family throughout the debates, it is only in the Prime Minister’s speech in which an explicit definition is stated:

Many members have said this, but it is true and it is worth saying again. Singapore is basically a conservative society. The family is the basic building block of our society. It has been so and, by policy, we have reinforced this and we want to keep it so. *And by “family” in Singapore, we mean one man one woman, marrying, having children and bringing up children within the framework of a stable family unit* (Column 2397-8)

Family here characterized as a nuclear, conjugal, heterosexual, and productive unit; or that

definition unequivocally ascribed as a platitude is unsurprising²⁰. The listing of gender-specific stakeholders in characterizing what constitutes family points to Family as identified through its outlined contours, that is, through its appearance, one confirmed by a legal ascription of ‘marrying’. This particular definition when set within the speech’s context is especially telling: immediately posed to clarify the rhetorical question “[h]ow should these attitudes [towards homosexuality] and values be reflected in our legislation?” (Column 2397), it adduces Family as underpinning the political rationalities of §377A’s compromise.

In the explicit clarification of ‘our’ attitude, as “the Government’s attitude and Singaporean’s attitude too” (Column 2397), the unmarked identity of ‘Singaporean’ is revealed to be heterosexual, with those within these marital units that are rhetorically encapsulated by the identity ‘Singaporeans’. Chen’s interpretation of §377A’s ruling has questioned the interpretation of the repeal as a rejection of the ‘homosexual agenda’ as the “boldly defined...vision of state and society” (Lee qtd. in Chen 114), pointing to the overlooked pragmatism undergirding the expression to ‘live and let live’. Chen’s interpretation is a perceptive one, but I suggest that the explanation of ‘pragmatism’ is also only a partial reflection of the episode which does not account for the undue emphasis of and the contextual background that the Family was in the repeal’s outcome, be it in the Prime Minister’s call for compromise or the more hardline stance of keeping it. The heteronormative²¹ undertones is especially explicit in the description of the ideal ‘heterosexual stable family’, an expressly familial, “what parents

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²⁰ Heng and Devan has noted how the belief of a ‘quality’ population eugenicist ideas to encourage the form of families that is deemed desirable by the state.

²¹ Here, my use of heteronormativity draws on Berlant and Warner’s definition, in which “the institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientation that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent – that is organized as a sexuality– but also privileged...its privilege can take several (sometimes contradictory) forms: unmarked, as the basic idiom of the person and the social; or marked as a natural state; or projected as an ideal or moral accomplishment.” (548)

want their children to see as their children grow up” (Column 2398), analogous with the rejection of “[homosexuals] actively promoting their lifestyles to others, or setting the tone for mainstream society” (Column 2400). The intermediary compromise therefore, what Hor observed in passing as an act of “broker[ing] peace (between the pro- and the anti-377A lobbies)” (1), is therefore to “strive to maintain a balance, to uphold a stable society with traditional heterosexual family values, but with space for homosexuals to live their lives and contribute to the society” (Column 2399-2400) Indeed, what can be made of from the State’s disposition towards Family is inhered in the discourse of “space” and “limits” (Column 2400), even as the declaration of ‘family values’ is suspect. Evidently, Family is the demarcated ‘limit’ – homosexuals, defined by their ‘practices’, are Othered by virtue of their sexuality, depicted as encroaching upon a ‘heterosexual’ space and upending ‘traditional heterosexual family values’ and therefore must be restrained and excluded from “*our* mainstream way of life” (Column 2175).

The popularity of this rhetoric is evident in the speakers’ articulated argument of ‘family values’ referring to the same public sentiments²² as substantiation of their points. Dr Ong Kian Min states: “[t]he overwhelming sentiment of Singaporeans is that they are not prepared to compromise their conservative family values by opening up to alternative sexual behavior, nor allowing it to permeate across time honoured boundaries into the conventional family sanctity” (Column 2377), directly quoting a concerned resident who prefaces her objection to repealing §377A with a reproductive rationale “this is a place where my children and children’s children would grow up in” (Column 2377) to substantiate his argument. Dr Muhammad Faishal Ibrahim citing concerns from the Malay community also provided the example of a concerned mother

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²² Arguments of the same citing constituents voicing their disapproval of the repeal were made by Zaqq Mohamad (Column 2312-2316) as well as Lim Biow Chuan, (Column 2420-2021)

worried about undue influences on her son's sexual orientation and anxieties about the topic during National Service, from which he extrapolates to express a broader sentiment, "[this is] a genuine worry of many parents and reflects the sentiments of the society towards this issue" (Column 2394-2395).

Throughout the debate, as in the above quoted arguments, 'family values' is evidently contiguous or equivocal to Family – particularly, the championing of family values expressed as a need to "protect children/family/marriage". For being constantly repeated, there is no clarified meaning of what is meant by 'family values'. Notwithstanding its adjectival use of 'family' that pertains nebulous values as being *of* Family and indubitably associates it with Family, nothing in the given definition of Family explicitly lays out neither directly relates nor cues what these values might be, leaving it indeterminate. Relating back to how Family is constituted, this delineation touted as upholding 'social morality' suggests how the Family is in imminent crisis is from the potential of accruing homosocial units, demonstrating how sexual regulation is bound up with an ideology of Family but raises more questions on what Family *means*.

2. *"Traditional heterosexual family values": Parliamentary debates over the repeal of §377A*

To understand what is meant by 'family values' with which to consider the meaning of Family, it is necessary to look to the debates as a whole. Where Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's speech has only been read for its conclusion in rounding out the entire process of repeal, even less attention has been paid to other speeches, with only Professor Thio Li-Ann's being an exception. This is amiss. The inherited turn-taking format of parliamentary debates tacitly frames it as a dialogue – one when read reveals itself to be a conversation about Family that has gone unremarked upon by most analyses.

The debates present a good platform to unravel the dimensions inhered to the references of Family and ‘family values’: in being employed as supporting evidence or justification to advocate arguments both for and against the repeal, a denaturalizing of a presumed common-sense understanding of ‘family’ is effected. The process of debating and crafting the relevant arguments compels elaborations and clarifications of what Family means specific in the context of its utterance, which can unveil the ideological motivations informing its use and understanding. In this sense, the use of Family in the various arguments presented in the debate represents footholds from which to untangle the various meaning attributed to Family. Patently observable from the relevance of the argument of Family applied in different contexts is its flexibility and cues an understanding how the meaning of ‘family’ should be recognized as a pastiche and the way in which naturalized, invisible assumptions concerning the family are illuminated.

Further, the choice to focus on reading the parliamentary debates is also made in consideration of its formal characteristics. As Cornelia Ilie identifies in his study of parliamentary deliberation practices:

Parliamentary debates are audience-orientated in that they are enacted by fellow parliamentarians before a wide (present and virtual) audience that is comprised, not only of parliamentarians, but also of members of the electorate, the general public and the media. If we envisage the debate as a rhetorical enterprise, parliamentary debates should be regarded as institutionalized rhetorical modes of action for collective decision-making (311)

Ilie’s identification of the properties of the context to which the debates are heard underlines the

audience-orientation of the arguments, as well as of the way the debates are intended as part of a process of legislation. The debate itself, understood as voiced discourses – in the explanations and justifications clarifying the rationale underlying the decision-making process – thus functions to organize and convey social meaning. As Emma Henderson writes, “[p]arliamentary debates are an important and effective form of social “education” – an arena in which complicated power relations between social groups leads to explicit declarations of competing and often contradictory “truth claims” or “ideologies”” (Henderson qtd. in Chan 289) The impact of this aspect of social education is necessarily circumscribed by its audience; in this case, as current scholarship has identified, the proposed repeal of §377A resulting in a “culture war”²³ evinces both its highly publicized nature as well as the extent of the public’s reaction. The parliamentary debates at once articulate the socially constituted meaning of family and socially constitutes the family in its translation into praxis that reifies the meaning of family, participating in the normalization of a particular notion of family through its re/production of Family.

3. The Idea of Family as Metonymy of Nation

Neither the observation that homosexuality has been construed as a threat to the family institution²⁴ new, nor is the rallying cry to ‘save the Family’ unique to Singapore. Yet despite the commonalities between the Singaporean Family and discourses of the ‘crisis of the family’ echoed elsewhere, what is distinct is how a core tenet of being Singaporean is enacted and claimed through Family.

Family, with all its attendant rules, have been observed to essentialize Singaporean-ness

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²³ Jianlin Chen “Singapore’s Culture War over Section 377A: Through the Lens of Public Choice and Multilingual Research”

²⁴ Leong, Laurence Wai-Teng. "Walking the tightrope: the role of Action for AIDS in the provision of social services in Singapore." *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services* 3.3 (1995): 11-30.

in its function as models of normalization that invokes even as it comprises Singaporean citizenship. This is evident in Natalie Oswin's observation of the "properly familial Singaporean subjects" (261): a role created by the heteronormative logic of Singaporean home spaces that reinforces "prevailing notions of respectable domesticity and proper family." (257) Analogously, Teo observes there is "an extraordinary degree of consensus" (Shaping 344) in deeming the norm for familial practices. For Teo,

...ways of thinking and doing 'family' [] are experienced as Singaporean...people self-consciously frame certain practices as unique to their national culture – even when they are not – suggest that family policies have complex effects that go well beyond explicit demographic or ideological outcomes. (Shaping 343-4 Emphasis in original)

These observations identify the effect of social policies in demarcating and organizing the definition and performance of what constitutes family, and its reaffirmation of a recognizable more. Therein, in/effectiveness of state policies cannot be merely evaluated through empirical and statistical data linked to specific policy goals, but in its latent function as an instrument which continually create a habitus in Singapore – that is, as Bourdieu defines it, the durable deposition of societal structures internalized through its embodied dispositions. Habitus, "a system of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures" (72), at its core locates interactions between social structures and individual agency and reflexively draws attention to the frames of understandings through which meaning is interpreted through.

How the notion of Family bears out as a frame of understanding is explored in Teo and Oswins' analysis of the social function of the model of family – their identification of how a

socio-familial order is established points to the function of social adjustment that the Family performs. From such an understanding, family values could be interpreted literally – as a valuing of Family. ‘Value’ here is therefore an indication of its importance, with family values therefore understood as the importance of family and an encouragement to sustain participation in processes of Family. Analyzed as a civic practice, the emphatic importance of institutional definitions of Family is explained to be due to its normative commitments that organizes state-society relations and gives form to the state. Embedded into the common-sense knowledge of Family is also its realization as a hegemonic condition, therein positing Family as an ideological concept that regulate and reproduces behaviors of citizenship. While this interpretation sufficiently rationalizes an understanding of family values and its rhetorical connection to the state, it still fails to account for discussions of morality that pervade these discussions.

Reiterations of the family as the basic unit of society and its function as the linchpin of the nation belie the rhetorical equivalence of the Family to the national community. Accordingly, the earlier interpretation of how the breakdown of the Family impacts national security is broadened – more precisely, a threat to the family *is* a threat to the nation. With the nation at stake, the false simplification of the decision into a binary between celebration and criminalization condensing the gradation of possible legal and political stances becomes defensible. The contradictory portrait drawn of Family – as established bulwark against an erosion of national identity and as fragile and battered institution vulnerable to external pressures – logically follows. Afterall, narratives of crisis focused upon the fragility of the family similarly befits the postcolonial narrative of the vulnerable state threatened by exigencies. The characterization of this repeal as an inapplicable import of gay organization in which the moral

‘Asian’²⁵ Singaporean family is dialectically defined against a degenerate ‘West’ is similarly incidental to this narrative. The particularization of Family as Singaporean is its being “our” in political rhetoric and held up as a manifestation of Asian values is worth remarking upon. Notionally, difference is re-constituted as ‘Western’ through a recourse to traditional ‘Asian’ values; these reified notions of ‘Asian’ and ‘West’, despite containing little resemblance to the complexities of time-space, come to consolidate the boundaries of family/nation. Family values as the demarcation of public morality insinuates that sexual morality outside that framework is immoral. Yet, despite references to the family as determinant of ‘moral tone’ and as the disseminator of ‘positive values’, what these values *are* still remains unsubstantiated.

What can be logically concluded is this much: familial values symbolized by the Family act to provide the operative standard of right behavior that delimits anti-social behavior. In the missing discrete understanding of family values and in its function as a rhetorical measure of permissibility in the state’s management of sexuality, the discursal configuration of Family and the attendant family values is realizably fabrication, understood as Butler defines it. Butler’s definition of ‘fabrication’ refuted an internal coherence between sex and gender, in which she challenges the *a priori* conception of the body, arguing that gender is always in the process of becoming – “public regulation of fantasy through the surface politics of the body, the gender border control that differentiates inner from outer, and so institutes the integrity of the subject” (Butler 417). Butler’s critical consideration of the ‘integrity’ focuses on the performative aspect of gender that concentrates on an analysis of identity as surface, arguing: “[s]uch acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that

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²⁵ The rhetoric of Asian values used by the Singapore government has been repeatedly problematized by scholars and has been argued as a strategy with which to secure political and socio-economic stability in the country. Specific to the notion of sexuality, look at Laurence Leong “Asian Sexuality or Singapore Exceptionalism”.

they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. ” (417). This understanding of identity as fabrication, constituted through its performance rather than an expression of an inner essence lends itself to an analysis of the identity category of Family. To think of Family as a fabrication is not to deny its material experience that returns later in this discussion and which any understanding of family cannot ignore, but rather to deconstruct an understanding of family as a descriptive term and to draw attention to an understanding that Family is in itself an utterance already framed by power structures. Butler’s notion of fabrication therefore provides a framework with which to enable a reconsideration of the given understanding of family by asking what is ‘regulated’ in order to produce what ‘subject’. The rhetorical conflation of public morality to family suggests that the production of Family through the regulation of sexual autonomy that excludes homosexuals articulates a vision of ideal citizenship that is structured in its approximation of Family.

4. The Nation as a Family: Complicating the Politics of Regulation

The Family understood as the nation writ small accounts for much of the rhetoric: the ideological emphasis on the family that is enmeshed with nationalist discourses is naturally defined upon the basis of normative desirability and imbricated with normative expectations of appropriate citizenship behavior. Yet this understanding is an incomplete portrait of the relationship between the state and Family. It fails to account for the conciliatory acceptance towards the homosexual community insisted upon. Existing scholarship analyzing sexual citizenship have established how the sphere of civil space is a heteronormative site, and in tracing the relationship of sexuality to nationalism commonly read the imaginary homosexual figure as Other to the national community. As Zubillaga-Pow observes, negative representation of homosexuals in news reports work as part of a governmental apparatus regulating

homonormativity by positioning the queer subject as ‘a priori anti-national’, one used as an impetus for nation-building. Clare Hemmings examining the relationship between gender, ethnicity and nationalism similarly argues for the anti-national queer subject. Hemmings observes the “suturing [of] nation to heterosexuality” contextualized by a national context which permits homosexuality “framed as a betrayal...of appropriate gendered and sexual citizenship, and as a marker of Western influence.” (Hemmings qtd. in Chan 286). Withal echoes of the same Othering of the foreign ‘West’ that Hemmings identify within Singapore’s rhetoric, the conception of the queer subject in Singapore actually resists both the denial and Othering of the queer subject as dialectically defined to national familism. Inhered in the language of the compromise of deciding to continue to do what is ‘right’ by “uphold[ing] the family unit...[and also] to accommodate homosexuals in our society, but not to allow or encourage activists to champion gay rights as they do in the West” (Column 2407), is instead an enunciation of the queer subject and the expressed tolerance throughout the debate. The nuanced difference shifting from condemnation to both the attitude of and the demands for reticence discloses a muted acceptance of the existence of the queer subject.

Although the muted acceptance of resistance within a system might be unsurprising and recall a Foucauldian model of power to which resistance is notably integral to a system rather than antithetical, I propose that the situation in Singapore plays out differently. In reading the distinction drawn between lines of Singaporean ‘Asian’/Western in the desire ‘to accommodate...but not to allow activists’, a simplified distinction that bifurcates between hetero/homosexuality obfuscates the complexities of the situation. Tellingly, unlike portrayals of the queer subject as extra-marital by definition and therefore intolerable that characterizes the homo/heterosexual binary, the controversy in Singapore is marked by the fear of queer demands

to participate in the processes of family, one evident in the pre-emptive censure of an imagined queer organization for the right to marry. Putting aside the can of worms that is the complicated politics inhered in a discussion of queer negotiation of structures of marriage, and which is far beyond the focus of this paper, the socio-political determination that the decriminalization of homosexual acts would evolve into the legalisation of gay marriage and adoption interestingly situates sexual relations as part of the same principle distinction of marriage and children, suggesting a certain homogenous national culture perpetuating the same notions of marriage and family that reflects the pervasiveness of the heterosexist in shaping our cultural imaginary which corroborates Teo and Oswin's account of the heteronormative ideals undergirding Singapore's stance.

This reading of homosexuals situated within part of the national community is corroborated below in the portrait drawn of the nation as an extension of the family. In it, the family is rendered a microcosm of the nation, and the controversy characterised as a rift between siblings:

Sir, I was reflecting on this issue and I realized that the Government is very much like the parents in the household. With a brood of children, born of the same parents, but with totally different characters, how do the parents ensure that within the family, there is space, tolerance and balance and peace and harmony in their co-existence? Of course, there are principles and values that parents must instill. But when they are disagreements, it is not enough to know what is wrong, but it is important to know how to fix the problem as well. *How could the parents do this without excluding any member of the family?"* (Column 2373 emphasis mine)

The metaphorical comparison of the nation to the nuclear family provides a frame of reference that analogizes the role of the state in relation to its people, constituting the state-citizen as parent-child. The familism conjured here emphasizes the patriarchal structure of the family, naturalizing the disciplinary role of the state into and within the domain of family relations. This paradigm quite neatly fits in with my earlier reading of the family as metonymy of the state. As above, the familial model is used a signifier of the nation, and the familial and the national are fused together. In the clear visual literalization offered in the above speech, the personification of different sexualities as siblings explains away differences in attitudes as a matter of differences in personality, who remain at the core members belonging together and sharing the same loyalties. The use of this metaphor of the immediate family unit downplays the differentials in attitudes and simultaneously naturalizes the presence of these differences. This drawing upon a paradigm of family affection that defines familial bonds as ineradicable reaffixes the focus on the need for familial/national harmony and peace. Evidently, the queer subject is not rhetorically excluded²⁶ from a Singaporean space, which implies a measure of heterogeneity that is both recognized and accepted as part of its citizens' experience of family, one that stands in contradistinction to Family.

Nevertheless, there is an underlying difference in the role of the state; the parental role of the state in the portrait drawn above is a subtle shift from its earlier role *as* the family. The significance of what is only a slight reposition is its attestation of a shift in state-citizen relationship in Singapore, one that recasts a context in which state practices are only tied to an all-powerful state. Integral to this observation is the inherent instability to ideology of Family

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²⁶ Admittedly, such a conciliatory stance could be linked to economic pragmatism. Consider notions of cultural citizenship and the notion of illiberal pragmatism as Audrey Yue writes in *Queer Singapore*

that permits us to question it as a coherent organizing category.

5. Concretizing the experience of Family: The affective function of family as challenge to Family

The ideology of Family – by which I mean its rhetorical abstraction— is further contested upon the terms that it is established upon. This disjuncture in understanding ironically arises from a faithfulness to the habitus of family, and resistance against the repeal works from within the framework of a familiar discourse of family. Chiefly, it is the state’s construction of the virtues of Family as that of primary caregiver, the imbued self-conscious identification of its members as belonging to itself and emphasis upon the Family’s essential social function. This is nowhere more observable than in the evoked importance of family in arguments for the repeal of §377A; if arguments against the repeal bemoan the besiegement of Family with the repeal, arguments for the repeal turn that notion on its head by emphasizing the dissolution of existing families because of §377A’s retention.

These arguments are noteworthy for its common appeal to the affective functions of family. Siew Kum Hong questioning the cost of keeping §377A rhetorically questions, “...but what about the human cost to gay person and their families? What about the cost to Singapore from those who leave Singapore because of this law?” (Column 2242) Siew’s illustration of ‘costs’ in keeping §377A directs attention to the stakeholders of the families and the nation. Accordingly, he substantiates his argument via family testimonies rather than through accounts presented in first-person focalization of the queer subjects. The mediation of queer experiences through the perspective of family situates the queer person as already belonging to a family unit and reframes the identification of them as already within a family unit. Of the different case studies he mentions, only one example takes a confessional, first person voice: even then this

example of Mr Alex Liang focuses not on the individual defending his homosexuality or pleading his case but of his rationale to depart from the national-family community.

Baey Yam Keng speaking for the repeal similarly draws upon familial love experienced between parent and child, rhetorically recasting the queer individual as already belonging to the heterosexual kinship formation. Baey identifies the Chinese adage of filial piety and the importance of having descendants, but counters that with the unwillingness of parents to support the criminalization of their child even in light of their perceived failure to conform to normative behaviors. His argument reframes the positions of celebration vis-à-vis criminalization; through the vexed reactions of parental-figures, particularly fretting mothers, he implicitly expands the available positions that can be taken in relation to homosexuality for their families and by association the wider national community. The representations of unapproving family members is thus offered as a concession to public morality, even as it argues for acceptance of the queer subject. The exploration of reactions and effects of keeping §377A and their undesirability is associated with the family rather than with individual rights. Siew and Baey's accounts relate to the abstraction of family in its interaction with familial values but concretizes the Family by framing an understanding of family in situ that does not violate the cultural values of the family's importance. In that the arguments in justifying the keeping of and repeal of §377A are the same, there is no simple unitary meaning to family.

6. Conclusion

My close-reading of the debates intended to provide an overview of the socio-cultural biases in the narrative of Family realizes that it presents a moment of rupture. The contentious issues of gay rights reframed and overlapped with discourses of family and nation building opens a space from which we can begin to consider the concept of 'family' as it is employed and

perceived in political and social rhetoric. In detailing and considering the arguments surrounding ‘family values’ to parse out what it means, I do not arrive at a satisfactory answer, only managing to trace out how the lines dividing the binary in a we/they structure of rhetoric becomes muddled as the debate unfolds. These links drawn in the official rhetoric between family and nation makes imagining the family as political an act as imagining a nation. The realization that the legitimacy of family formulations turns on an undefined Family thus opens a space from which to interrogate the hegemonic power of identifying a family. In this first chapter then, I have established the concept of family as a basic and intrinsic element of national discourse and began to question the basic assumptions of this discourse.

To continue reading these representations of family against the grain, I turn to Eleanor Wong’s *Mergers and Accusations* and Faith Ng’s *For Better or For Worse* in the next chapter to consider the complexities of conjugal relations encapsulated within the simplistic contour of the typical nuclear outline of father, mother and child as family set out in Chapter 1. In looking at the definitions of family in the second chapter, I pay close attention to the invoked disquiet from the performance of family from which I begin to reconfigure an understanding of families.

CHAPTER 2 MARRIAGE OF (IN)CONVENIENCES:

Dramatizing the Vicissitudes of Family Relations in the Spouse-hoods of For Better or For Worse and Mergers and Accusations

Midway through *Mergers and Accusation*, Ellen quips to the accusation of being in “a marriage of convenience” (Wong 75) with “I imagine there are days when [Jon] finds me extremely inconvenient.” (Wong 75). The light-hearted play on ‘convenience’ conveys Ellen’s self-depreciation, but in the conversation’s context is also an honest assessment of the vexed state of her marriage. Her marriage to Jon, a pragmatic arrangement that both entered with full knowledge (and in spite of) her homosexuality, *is* undeniably a marriage of convenience. Yet, Ellen’s sidestepping the characterization of her marriage as a façade implicitly, and revealingly, denies her marriage as ‘unreal’. This claim to a bona fide marriage situated within the unique marital arrangement blurs conventional understandings of marital intimacy and family relations and reveals practices of kinship, opening a space from which we can re-consider notions of conjugal sexuality and negotiations of family.

This second chapter picks up from the contradiction inhered in the witticism of an (in)convenient marriage to consider the portrayal of married, familial life in Eleanor Wong’s *Mergers and Accusations*, hereafter *Mergers*, and Faith Ng’s *For Better or For Worse*, hereafter *Better Worse*. Though the subject of family relations and domestic spaces is not an uncommon focus in Singaporean plays²⁷, the choice to analyze these marriages is for the staged focus on marital life situated within the context of family. Withal the flagrant differences between the marriages – Ellen and Jon’s nominal marriage in *Mergers* vis-à-vis Swen and Gerard’s more conventional, albeit equally unhappy, marriage in *Better Worse* – any attempt to establish a

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²⁷ As Paul Rae lists in ‘Leet lor’, plays that have family as its subject matter include Stella Kon’s *Emily of Emerald Hill*, Leow Puay Tin’s *Family*, Alfian Sa’at’s *Homesick*. In that article, Rae also analyzes Haresh Sharma’s *Fundamentally Happy* and Faith Ng’s *wo(men)*.

binary of un/real is thwarted by more salient similarities interplayed between the two relationships.

Cursorily, the organization of the plots along a cultural perception of life's trajectory, unfolding through a series of familiar signposts: stages of courtship, a decision to wed, and processes of married life over time is far from revolutionary. In these pasteboard characterizations and rigid codifications of spousal-hood equated to and bound up with parenthood, the plays perform a heterosexual marriage script recognizably Singaporean. Yet, even as the marriages reflect the prevailing ideologies of the Singaporean Family in how it *looks*, what emerges from the plays' delving into the intimate domain of the family is an interlaced relationship between the Family-lived-by and the families-living-with, opening up a space from which the binary between ab/normal families can be unsettled. As Heather Brook writes, "the government of marriage does not exist outside of or above its subjects; rather meaning is produced, reiterated and contested by the same conjugal subjects it governs" (57). The plays' exemplification of this interplay between Family/families traces out an important realization: for even as the reified 'normal family' modulates the norms and shapes the appearance of the families in the plays, the dynamic and sometimes conflicting everyday negotiations in the family intersperses and resists that reification, recasting how the *doing* of family can be thought of. Through a close-reading of the marital breakdowns in both plays, I point to how the partiality and instability of the de facto family contests normative assumptions about Family.

1. "If I agree to be godfather, does that make us husband and wife, mother?" (Wong 18): *Passing (off) as Family*.

This question, which Jon jokingly poses to Ellen in the first scene of *Mergers* (and which quietly foreshadows the state of his marriage to her), succinctly enunciates the thematic core of

conjugality in both *Mergers* and *Better Worse*. For both plays, the overt references to marriage rituals coming as it does at the start of both plays establish a narrative that sets the audience in the middle of family processes and the idea of conjugality.

The mise-en-scène of *Better Worse* and its opening on the subject of impending nuptials conspicuously emphasizes the theme of conjugality. The couple is visually privileged throughout the play – the stage directions stipulate for two actors playing Gerald and Swen, which translates to the other characters with whom the couple interacts as being incorporeal. This staging thus has Gerald and Swen interacting and responding to empty space, which has the effect of a spotlight that establishes a focus on the couple as the center (and essentially only) characters. The forefronted couple is not an isolated unit though, but firmly established within the set-up of a family. The first scene is replete with reference to conjugated relations – the couple invited to dinner receive news of their daughter’s engagement, and Gerald receives a phone call from his mother. The play’s oscillation between the past and present is anchored by the dramatic present of their daughter’s impending nuptials, which highlights the dominant theme of marriage even as it provides a foil to her parents’ marriage explored throughout the play.

Mergers similarly begins with a marriage proposal – the opening stage directions has “Jon [] on his knees in front of Ellen and Mary” (Wong 17) and his injunction to “[m]arry me, marry me...Marry me and have my children.” (Wong 17) – or at least the appearances of one, with Jon’s actions and pattern of speech invoking the conventions of a marriage proposal. If the proposal is ludicrous – for the impossible proposal to ‘princesses’ in the plural, exaggerated with the overblown theatrics of singing, dancing and posing, and its general incongruity within the immediate context of the appointment of Mary’s son’s godparents – and might support an offhanded dismissal of the proposal as Jon’s extemporaneous antics, the metaphor of marriage

viewed as a framing device from which to read Mary's nomination of Ellen and Jon as godparents to her newborn son has significant bearings on re-conceptualizing the implications and meanings of marriage. The role of godparents, out of an ecclesial context, is an extra-consanguineal designation with no legal sanction: objectively therefore, it is a role with little to no functional significance, merely ceremonially determined on an affective basis between the godparent-godchild. Yet, the playful banter in which Mary is cautioned against the possible risk of "psychic trauma" and "psychological damage" (Wong 18) to the child by naming Jon and Ellen respectively as godparents suggests more than this main relation thread. The implication underlying the risk of such effects points to a manner of influence and interaction with the godchild that is tied to the godparent role, and almost assuredly links with the nucleus family of the child. Appointing the godparents therefore weaves a nexus of relationships binding the adults, a relationship more pertinent and extending beyond any potential relationship between godparent and godchild. In this context, Jon's irreverent question to Ellen about becoming husband and wife recasts Jon's mock proposal in a different light. The process of becoming godparents to a friend's child establishes them in roles bound together: veritably, what happens in a marriage.

Be it the false proposal of *Mergers* or the barbed comments telling of the tensions in the marriage between Gerald and Swen in *Better Worse*, these portraits of marriages drawn up in the opening scenes of the two plays draw the audience's attention to the affiliative links between people forged through the interface of marriage, even as it already begins to recontextualize the meaning of marriage for an introduced undercurrent of ambiguity that turns on the familiar form of marriage and the family that effectuates. In thinking about these marriages, the notion of 'conjuality' that Srimati Basu and Lucinda Ramberg defines aptly provides a critical vocabulary

to describe this momentary defamiliarization with the idea of marriage. The use of ‘conjugality’ disjoins it from ‘marriage’, and refigures its meaning in relation to the root word ‘conjugations’, that is, “the grammatical exercise of developing a verb into a variety of forms and possibilities”. Conjugality could therefore be thought of as “the organization of intimacy as well as to track a range of social and institutional sites (medicine, law, kinship, religion among them) where relations proliferate and are disciplined – that is, are conjugated.” (Basu and Ramberg 12-13).

Teasing as it is, Jon’s extrapolation of the relationship of husband-wife from the roles of father-mother highlights the practical equivalence of these roles, gesturing to how these distinct roles are abutting, emplacing marriage within a wider context of kith and kin. The decision to be married performed in *Mergers* and recounted in *Better Worse* exemplifies this conflation of marriage with the intention to form a family – forming a family being turning on having children.

In *Better Worse*, irrespective of the differing accounts that Gerald and Swen respectively provides in identifying who was responsible for instigating the proposal – “So Swen suggested that we get engaged first, just to appease her mother” (52)/“*You* were the one who asked me if getting engaged would make my mother happy” (52) Their accounts on why they got married are similarly impelled by social propriety, one premised on the mere possibility of having a child. The underlying rationale of the need to have their relationship legitimized as a precursor to travelling together points to a social pattern of expectations revolving around appropriate expressions of sexuality and relationships; marriage explicitly embarked for the *possibility* of a child establishes the ideal definitional categorization of a ‘good family’ rests on the form of a heterosexist marriage. Significantly, the integral consideration prior to their engagement is

forced by the situation, and on account of rational considerations. Markedly, the factor of romantic love is not given as a determining factor.

The same could be said of Jon and Ellen's decision-making process as it is staged in *Mergers*: read immanently, Jon's proposal to Ellen is not a request for her hand so much as it is a process of calculated considerations. At the crux of that negotiation is Ellen's contradictory desire for the comfort of a home metaphorized in the ideal of a marriage and the discrepant pursuit of being a career-oriented lesbian. The contractual terms of marriage is especially apparent for the separation of romantic and sexual commitments delineated from domestic commitments in Jon's pledge, when he tells Ellen that "so long as your first commitment is to our family, you can do whatever you want, see whomever you like, bring home whatever you fancy, man, woman, animal, mineral vegetables" (Wong 56). Ellen's acceptance of the proposal and the expressed giddiness in being able to "see [her] dreams come true" (Wong 50) thus ratifies Family in the moment of deciding to be married, since the decision to be married is simultaneously the decision to make a family. For both plays therefore, the moment of deciding to be married is metaphorically also the moment in which they become parents, again reinforcing the conflation between marriage and family.

If the unsentimental recount of Gerald and Swen's decision to be married might be explained, and the romantic undertones of the desire to travel together be what prompts the decision to be married, the couple's attitude towards marriage evident in their reaction to the announced engagement is undoubtedly economic and pragmatic. Upon hearing about their daughter's engagement, Gerald and Swen react to consider the economic viability of the marriage. Although Swen's evaluation of the size of the ring read on its own could possibly be dismissed as a casual materialism, Gerald similarly zeroes in on the economic abilities of his

daughter's fiancé, highlighting the act of marriage being managed as an economic performance. He launches into a series of calculations, indexing the numerous items that goes into purchasing a home that ends as it begins, "So Aaron, you sure you got enough money?". For their strained relationship in the present, the overlapping conversation that each of them has with one half of the newly engaged couple has them sharing the same opinion, a rare moment to note. Swen begins with "It's not that I don't like him..." in the same moment that Gerald says "It's not that I don't approve..." (48) The repetition of the phrase, "It's not that I don't like him/approve" sets up an echo between the couple, and similarly identifies how their daughter's lack of a job and poor financial prospects bodes poorly for the newly engaged couple. Patently, marriage presented as an indexed list of numbers is viewed through an economic framework.

What emerges from this portrayal of marriages is a play on the meaning of a marriage of convenience: if colloquial understandings of 'marriage of conveniences' sometimes conflates its meaning with 'shot-gun marriages', the marriages of Gerald and Swen, Ellen and Jon entered into on the expressed basis of wanting children performs a warped version of that. Sexual and social reproduction instated as necessarily circumscribed within the heterosexual system of marriage as the underlying logic for marriage in the two plays rehearses the State's core narrative of family – in which the only acceptable consummation between the heterosexual married couple, the institution linked with the imperative of reproduction coded to the nuclear family²⁸.

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²⁸ More could also be said about the foregrounded 'sexless' marriages of *Mergers* and *Better Worse*. Basu and Ramberg have noted the "compulsory sex at the core of marriage" in relation to the conjugality. It is interesting that the model of Family constructed in state legislation although is designated as the site of reproduction, is also a site that desexualized. Besides the obvious delineation of physical from emotional intimacy that although agreed upon in *Mergers*, decreased more organically in *Better Worse*. The outburst that Swen has in the fitting room where she links her perceived sexual unattractiveness to being 'O-lan' and 'unloved' and the outburst Jon has at the end of the failed dinner party with Lesley. "...I am jealous of the fact that you say you love me but I can't seem to give you what you need, that you'd destroy your self respect by fucking anything in a skirt that will have you rather than be content with me." (99) There is clearly a link

In setting up the form of marriage that fits into socially acceptable frameworks, the marriages seemingly serve to reiterate the Family as ‘normal’.

In thinking about how the conventional appearances of these marriages permits them to easily pass off as family, the critical notion of ‘passing’ that Jo Grzelinska proposes is helpful. Derived from the notion of racial passing for its focus on embodiment and bodily politics, Grzelinska reframes ‘passing’ from being an act of deception to becoming an act of signification. For Grzelinska, the value of the embodied performance of ‘passing’ is in its being perceived, since “[r]ather than a subject who is able to blend incongruously into different contexts or communities, passing actually brings visibility into stark relief.” (139); ‘passing’ is thus defined:

“the active or passive interpretation of another’s performance, a political gesture which locates and fixes the performance within one’s own contextual boundaries, in an ad hoc dialogic interaction which relies on pre-existing structures and values to deliver an objectification” (139).

In being precisely the kind of families evoked by Family particularly potent to the contestations of official notions that presume neat delineations of ab/normal families. This notion of passing is more readily apparent in *Mergers* than in *Better Worse*, and has been picked up by critical interpretations of the text. Wernmei Yong Ade has noted in her reading of *Mergers* that Ellen and Jon have a “queerly straight family” (114), suggesting from how “Ellen and Jon cannot speak about their relationship in terms other than those of cliché and the law, suggesting that there is nothing that lies beyond the performance that can authenticate the truth, or call out the

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between sexual relations and the ties of emotional intimacy that binds the married couple together that extends beyond the notions of kinship. As the subject of this paper is kinship however, I will not explore these ideas further here.

falsity, of their performance” (113) that they are “playing at” family. This notion of gendered scripts constitutive of family roles is highlighted in the inversed gender roles that Jon and Ellen undertake: Nirmala PuruShotam lays out the the female-coded trajectories of marriage, childcare and homemaking that defines gendered roles within the household, Mary Susan Philip’s thesis reads it as a re-interpretation of ‘authority constituted identities’ tied to a state-ordered discipline of gendered bodies. K.K. Seet reads *Mergers* as a parody of the phallogentric model in the reversal of gendered roles, with Jonathan Chin as the one with the maternal instinct and Ellen as a phallic authority, and Lo similarly argues that the play “unsettle and challenge dominant assumptions about sexuality and gender within the context of a mainstream culture which tends to portray the lesbian as the outside and/or deviant” (100) In “Re-constituting Body and Family in *Mergers and Accusations*”, Philips returns to consider the formulaic Family, looking to how “specific forms of embodiment [] of both male and female gender and sexual identities within the family” (28), based upon the premise that the inscribed body can negotiate those inscriptions. Philips celebrates Ellen’s unequivocal identification as a lesbian, reading it as “a strong challenge to the invisibility of lesbian bodies within state discourse” (Re-constituting 29).

These interpretations pick up on the same element at how the contrasted differences based on a common model brings out and highlights differences to the model. Yet, in another sense, it could also be said that the inversion of roles performed between husband-wife does not disturb the function of the family as a whole. While telling of gendered and sexual dynamics therefore, it should be noted that the form of the family remains similar in its function to Family. The reading of Ellen and Jon as ‘playing at family’ more cogently consider the disjunction between public and private realities; just as the presumption of Ellen being in a marriage of convenience is interpreted from the clarification of her sexuality. The identification of who

counts as family is preconditioned on the married couple who forms the core and provides the shape of the family. The interpretation that Ellen and Jon not being a real family only arises from them not engaging in sexual intimacy and not being in a monogamous relationship. As PuruShotam obliquely touches upon, the inversion of gender roles is complete: “Because Jonathan is precisely like a mother and housewife, his gender as male recedes and the gender behind mothering and housework takes over. Ellen is the financial provider, living like a man in the world that Jonathan makes for her at home. She even uses the home like men would” (153). Even in the scene that marks the transition from the pre-nuptial state to the connubial state in *Mergers* takes on the form of a “calendar of life” (Purushoam 161), the photographs taken are all in accordance with the usual milestones of family. ‘Passing off’ in *Mergers* therefore retains its meaning as pretense; Ellen and Jon, not like other families because of the added element of Ellen’s sexuality, pretends to be like other couples.

This same notion of ‘passing off’ finds a different form in *Better Worse*. The marital discontent between Gerald and Swen is apparent from the opening scene; but what is interesting is also how the couple in the present is persistently unable to communicate with each other. In the first private scene between Swen and Gerald when Gerald tells Swen about the rough day he had from being let off from work, the comfort that she wanted to offer in response to the indignity that Gerald is feeling is aborted: “Swen stretches out her hand, wanting to hold Gerald’s hand, or pat it. Something in her decides against it.” (Ng 56). The awkwardness of being unable to decide how to comfort a partner, and the inability to decide on a relatively innocent touch is telling, but her words of comfort “Don’t worry lar Gerald...You just got to trust God” (Ng 57) ends up void of their intention to comfort and becomes a sore spot for Gerald instead. That episode ends badly, “Swen decides not to say anything. She turns the volume of the

radio up./ Gerald drives on in silence, his eyes red” (58) with both of them sitting in silence, the desire to comfort and the desire to be comforted left unresolved. Incidents like this are abound throughout *For Better or For Worse*. Good intentions are constantly misinterpreted, and the expression of comfort and support miss their mark. In spite of being a family and being married legally; the marital discontent and inner workings of their family could not possibly be counted as acts of doing family. Yet, by virtue of how they be, the question over whether Gerald and Swen are a family is never called into question.

Returning to Grzelinska’s notion of ‘passing’, the critical distinction Grzelinska offers is for spotlighting the constituted relationship between the perceiving ‘audience’ and the performance of sexual identity (139): this dialogic element echoes Finch’s notion of ‘display’, but provides an elasticity particularly apropos in considering dramatic performances of marriage; that is, for the realization of the individual as occupying and enacting multiple subjectivities. This underscored relationship constituted between in Grzelinska’s definition, similar for its dialogic element to Finch’s notion of ‘display’, additionally provides an elasticity that is particularly apropos in considering dramatic performances of marriage; that is, for the realization of the individual as occupying and enacting multiple subjectivities. Grzelinska describing passing as being “co-constructed and coexisting, constantly citing the forms and maintaining the relationships” (140) equally aptly describes shifting identities of the couple as it is enacted across time and context within the plays. The diachronic development of the couple on stage reminds us that multiple subject positions simultaneously distinct and overlapping exists within a single identity and is an invitation that a situation can be read in multiple ways.

2. *Performing (Un)Familiar Relations*

The couples’ non-performance of conjugality bound within marriage permits a

consideration of the affective relationship of marriage and family that is otherwise enigmatic. The experience of the formed family as modular, and the marital couple as subsumed within that model is interrogated in the performances of *Mergers* and *Better Worse*. If family is as family does, then theatre provides an opportunity for the question: what is done?

The theatrical form as political has been noted by scholars; explaining the title in the introduction to *Theatre and the Politics of Culture in Contemporary Singapore*, Peterson tells us that "...theatre cannot be divorced from politics just as culture in Singapore cannot be seen apart from the political apparatus that seeks to contain and shape it" (3) Charlene Rajendran reflecting on the process and politics of performance also proposes that the theatre as a site to reimagine culture rather than merely representing a culture as it is allegedly 'known'. (81-2) – "In other words, by playing characters that belong to different spheres and enacting stories which bleed into each other, intersecting across time and space within a production, the performers enact the interconnectedness of the human condition which is often overlooked in the bid to define lines of belonging and dispossession." (83)

Performances of the closed space of families in theatre therefore permits an apprehension of multiple aspects of the characters' self being performed, pointing to the fluidity and multiplicity of character that inform and overlap each other even as they remain distinct. A single identity performed as different identities permits a recuperation of this modularity in thinking about marriage – "If marriage makes two into one, the supplement returns that one to a space of possible others." (Schwarz 10). In *Better Worse*, this takes the form of changes to the relationship over time. *Better Worse*'s narrative structure of oscillating between present and past configures married life as persistently belonging both in the past and the present; and the repeated motifs has the past continually clings to the present and has indelible effects. Presented

in this fragmented temporal order, *Better Worse* therefore demands that we see them as different characters.

3. *Conclusion*

The poignancy of the endings of *Mergers* and *Better Worse* is not a sense of regret from the relations having failed, but a bittersweetness in the knowledge that to make family an end in itself would end in failure; the tragedy is, there is no other model. Glegen and Glegen's rumination of the postmodern relation is applicable here: to be a family, to be married, can no longer be taken as "a given fact", so much that it is "a line taken from a play about relationships that is appropriate to particular occasions, and a resource for possible relations" (233).

While *Mergers* and *Better Worse* cannot be mistaken for expressing a sociological reality, the constant re-articulation by the couples' who insists on the status of family despite all evidence to the contrary – as it is performed for a silent audience or as noted by others within their diegetic world – puts into place a new kind of family. If family can only be known as a matter of habitual togetherness, then the tragedy is for the sustained mediation of a marriage that continues in the vain hopes of and the impossibility of achieving what was desired within the relationship set out in the context of marriage.

The marriages/families of Chapter 2 make apparent that even as a family looks like the family political and cultural pressure determines it as, their lack of doing family does not disqualify from being counted as much. These interpretations, however, still revert to a model of negative relational understanding – that is, we only come to understand what a family is not, but not what it is. To answer this question of what a family might be, I turn to consider the model of being/doing family that David Morgan and Janet Finch raises.

CHAPTER 3 FAMILY IS AS FAMILY DOES.

1. *A Critical Framework: Being/Doing/Displaying Family*

At the end of the first scene in *Mergers and Accusations*, Mary wryly notes that her son, “Yushio’s just going to have to get used to being an orphan, god or otherwise.” (Wong 21). The suggestion of Yushio’s orphaned status, rather than being rooted in the reality of his parents’ demise, reflects the absences of his (god/) parents in his life for their job that necessitates frequently going away and long hours in the office. Though not objectively an orphan in that his parents are still alive, Yushio spoken of as such reflects her predicting the disjointed and missing parental influences in his life. That is, even *being* his parents in the biological and legal sense, they are impeded by their work schedules from *doing* the care and time of parenting in the every day – bereft of that *doing*, the *being* pales in significance. This mismatch neatly encapsulates the differences between being family vis-à-vis doing family that David Morgan proposes which forms the critical framework from which my dissertation proceeds.

In analysing the question of what family means and intending to complicate its understanding, I have found the reading of Morgan’s notion of ‘doing family’ and Janet Finch’s notion of ‘displaying family’ useful. Through the theoretical foci of using ‘family’ as an adjective and a verb, Morgan delineates it as conceptually distinct from ‘being’ family, proposing an understanding of family not as a defined state but as ‘doing’ – the distinction is most succinctly expressed by Deborah Chambers of being “a shift of focus from the family as an *institution* to a set of *social practices*”. (emphasis mine 42) Such an approach is conceptually useful for its elasticity – turning away from a formalistic understanding of Family refuses a static model of kinship formation, and turning to the underlying workings of families encapsulates a broader range of intimacy and care practices that includes configurations of kinships and relationships which might not have been traditionally considered.

What then, are family practices? For Morgan, “[p]ractices are often little fragments of daily life which are part of the normal taken-for-granted existence of practitioners. Their significance derives from their location in wider systems of meaning.” (Morgan 190) This definition of practices clarifies an emphasis on the minutiae of the everyday, drawing attention to the interpretative element within ‘doing’ that necessarily locates it within a broader context through which meaning is derived. The understanding of family as constituted through its actions foregrounds the performativity of family identity, and thinking with this notion of practices unravels three threads that guides how this thesis is organized. Firstly, identifying and extending upon the performative element of ‘doing’ family, nuancing it by thinking of how it is ‘displayed’. Secondly, a closer consideration of the notion of practices critically grounded in Bourdieu’s theory of habitus reflexively pointing to the structuring of perception and interpretation troubles the framework’s applicability to interpreting heteronormative-appearing families that might be contrary in its doing. Thirdly, drawing upon the element of performativity, I consider how thinking of practices in the terms of Judith Butler’s sense of performativity could offer an avenue to reconsider the presuppositions of Family.

I argue that while the model of Morgan’s ‘doing’ and Finch’s ‘displaying’ is valuable for how it reframes an understanding of family, its function is inclusive. In other words, in a binary of Family vs. Other, more configurations of kinship categorized as Other would be recategorized as Family on the basis of its behaviors. The problem is this: even in this act of re-considering the Family, the normative Family stubbornly remains as a criterion which evaluates what count as familial care and intimacy, which leaves it barely disturbed as the center defining term. Worse of all, this notion of Family, in the critical vocabulary that John R. Gillis’ provides, as the Family-we-live-by, is thought of as immutable even at the moment of its reimagination. Using Gillis’

framework that distinguishes the Family-we-live by and families-we-live-with, and drawing on Butler's notion of performativity, this chapter establishes the critical framework that guides the reading and interpretations made in the following chapters, aimed at muddling that distinction to reveal the inherent queerness in the experiences of families. It should be clarified that my pointing to the gap between the understandings of 'official' and 'practical' kinship is not intended to diminish the significance of theories and abstractions; rather, such a focus on 'practical relationships' follows Morgan in the hopes of more specific considerations of the particularities and complexities inhered in the abstract of family, with the end of "replacing certain kinds of abstractions with other that are more capable of dealing with the complexities of everyday life" (21-2)

Finch's notion of 'display' extends upon Morgan's notion of 'doing' as embedded in the routine and 'family practices' as subjectively determined by the individuals, highlighting the performativity inhered in the concept – since 'display' is marked by "the meaning of one's actions ha[ving] to be both conveyed to and understood by relevant others if those actions are to be effective as constituting 'family' practices" (66). Family thought of as constituted through 'doing' and 'displayed' has immediate applications to the re-definitions of family configurations that do not fit into a normative paradigm, which she delineates as chiefly amongst other situations, being located in the same household or the fluid nature of family roles that shifts with time. Finch clarifies the necessity of 'display' in relation to non-conventional family relationships in a section on its own, observing that the concepts of 'displaying' and 'doing' family gains more prominence in family models which differ from the more readily recognizable relations but qualifies that assessment to assert that 'displaying' family is equally important for conventional relations since the aim of display fundamentally to sustain the quality of relations

and to reconcile morphing individual identities into coherent family-relations is equally relevant. As Finch summarizes, the necessity of display is to ascertain “this is my family and it works” (70), regardless of the conventionality of the family form.

In thinking about families as meanings constituted through ‘practices’, families could be understood “as sets of activities which *take on a particular meaning*, associated with family, *at a given point in time*.” (emphasis mine Finch 66). Morgan’s emphasis of the particular here understands meaning as situated and reflexively draws attention to the context it is found within. This attention to context is evinced in Morgan’s extended examination of Bourdieu’s notion of habitus in locating the critical meaning of practices. For my purposes, Bourdieu’s theory of habitus allows me to ground Morgan’s framework of understanding family within a Singaporean context. To read Morgan within a Singaporean context requires a conceptualization of the norms of ‘doing’ family as situated within this particular socio-cultural milieu, and the system of meaning imputed. Specifically, the ‘social structures’ in place with regards to the discourse of family in Singapore has been established in the first chapter’s analysis of the rhetoric of Family in Singapore, but the basis of practices placed on the conceptual ground of habitus reveals some pitfalls in the consideration of hegemonic-appearing families.

Drawing together the two threads of discussion – the development of the concept of practices rooted in Bourdieu’s notion of habitus and Finch’s notion of display – it becomes readily apparent that the use of ‘doing’ or ‘display’ to recognize how family is shaped by its practices must recognize that these practices are in turn shaped by the ideal of Family. How then, do we consider this model with relation to the practices of families which *do* fit into the ‘dominant’ model? In paying care not to privilege what Morgan labels the ‘cornflakes packet’ family image – consisting of a heterosexual married couple with children – and raising it as the

evaluative standard, this model of understanding the family still perpetuates the ‘ideals’ associated with the model of Family, since the act of interpretation, and here I am returning to Bourdieu, is already enmeshed and bound within the scheme of perception influenced by its particular habitus. If family is as family does, a “facet of social life...a quality rather than a thing” (Finch 62), then family must be recognized as citational for being “performatively constituted by the very “expressions” that are said to be the results” (Butler), and what is considered as family is based upon normative standards of behaviour associated with (justifiably or otherwise) an ideal Family. Even granted that the individual freely relates with these normative standards on their own terms, that process of negotiation is always held with reference to ideal of a ‘cultural-norm’.

That problem is compounded when applying the framework on heteronormative appearing families: for the easy identification of these families as family for their appearances, they constitute a blind spot in the model of being/doing-displaying family that Morgan proposes. By virtue of the cohering display of these families to the nuclear idea, these families are exempted from being considered with the same standards of display and doing family that other relationship configurations are considered through. In other words, the negative-doing of hetero-families do not discount them from being seen as a family for their being of a family, as is apparent in my analysis in the previous chapter.

Even so, to think of family as performatively constituted also opens an alternative space to challenge these notions, since the iterability of performativity is a theory of agency, one that can disavow power as the condition of its own possibility (Butler). In other words, if family is as family does, then what families (unquestioningly determined as such) *do* questions the normative fiction of Family that is heralded.

2. “Appearances deceive.”: Re-viewing and Re-knowing the Family in “Christmas Memories of a Chinese Stepfather”, “The Lies that Build a Marriage” and “The Man Who Wore His Wife’s Sarong”

This chapter reads “Christmas Memories of a Chinese Stepfather”, “The Lies that Build a Marriage” and “The Man Who Wore His Wife’s Sarong” from Su-chen Christine Lim’s collection *The Man Who Wore His Wife’s Sarong: Stories of the Unsung, Unsaid and Uncelebrated in Singapore*. The decision to draw these three short stories together and read them comparatively is for their thematic focus on the family, specifically in the similarity for being stories of the family. These stories have in common a first-person narration of family depicted via intermingling temporal layers – this effect a foregrounding of the act of writing/witnessing/storytelling the family – from which we begin to consider the basis of kinship as narratively constituted. To interrogate the cultural norm of a taken for granted understanding of family, I engage with this to-be-looked-at quality of families emphasized within the diegesis of the short stories through Finch’s notion of family displays to consider how family is represented in the short stories. I argue that all three stories self-consciously engage in what Finch has identified as displays of family, differing only by the extent of the reader’s position (alongside the narrator) in relation to that display. The protagonist of “Christmas Memories of a Chinese Stepfather”, hereafter “Christmas Memories”, engages in a self-conscious performance of family to communicate the legitimacy of his family identity. This is different in “The Man Who Wore His Wife’s Sarong”, hereafter “Sarong”, where the protagonist is placed on the end of identifying and deciding that a family who might have a ‘non-conventional’ appearance of family be decidedly considered as family from being up to measure. In “The Lies that Build a Marriage”, hereafter “Lies”, family display is again engaged, but for the purpose of consolidating the boundaries of family in spite of marriage infidelity, and its protagonist located within that

display. Yet, despite these differences, the traditional heteronormative model of the nuclear family similarly looms large as a standard of measurement, even as the process of narration reveals that the presented ideal of family are sustained only on the basis of downplayed internal inconsistencies – of marital discord (“Christmas Memories”), infidelity (“Lies”) and non-normative gender performances (“Sarong”). If the narrators’ discovery of an underlying actuality of the experience of family in the façade of an ideal image of family is not a new notion to be represented in literature, what sets these stories apart is its presentation of a paradoxical coexistence of the veneer of an attained ideal image alongside its multitudinous truth of families represented through its temporal and narrative structure. Thought of in relation to Finch’s assertion of display in which the main crux of familial displays lies in its underlying intention of legitimizing and being recognized as family vouches for the conventional understanding of family that indicated by an affective family unity, this chapter responds to the lacunae to consider portrayals of tensions and unhappiness fixedly located within the context of the familial. In other words, these stories suggests that it is not in spite of the narrative disclosure of the profound gap between the actuality of family experience and its ideal display that privileges either and allows for that to stand as the definition of family. Rather, the meaning and understanding of ‘family’ is located in the space between the ideal and the actual and is precisely simultaneously the impossibility of reconciling the two states and its state as being already reconciled that becomes what family *is*. The presentation of family in the three short stories therefore challenge normative expectations of family by revealing the complex site of the family as accommodative to conflicting values.

Querying the heteronormative ideal image of family vis-à-vis its unrepresented experience that, in spite of being melded within the ideal, remains unheeded, I begin from the

observation of the common form to these stories being of/about the family as cohered past memories re-examined in time. This quality betrays a self-reflexivity of the story in the foregrounded insistence of itself as retelling, since the status of these family stories as retold raise questions of re-presentation in the process. In a bid to represent their family stories, the narrators' position of looking simultaneously places themselves to be looked at, and narratively weave a nexus of mirrored (re-)lookings through which we come to (re)see the links between family. It is precisely through this specific focalization that the story of the family is narrated: all three stories possess the same underlying model of themselves in the present looking at themselves in the past. In "Lies", adult-Girl relooks the scene where child-Girl slips into Mei's room, looking at herself thinking about looking at Mei. The present/narrator adult-Bob in the "Christmas Memories" looks at the way child-Bob is looked at and looks at past-StepfatherBob. Now-Molly in "Sarong" looks at the way her mother reported the various looking at of Uncle Kim Hock's marriage, and in her revisit of her childhood home re-looks what child-Molly saw. In these moments, the onlooker (the narrating voice) is also subjected to the same looking-at, and the act of telling is pronouncedly an act of a re-telling. This precis of the relayed looks within each story is already reminiscent of Morgan's emphasis on the "process" (Morgan *Rethinking* 5) of 'family practices'. As Morgan states, the value in rethinking the meaning of family as constituted through its practices is located in how it "open[s] up possibility of movement between the perspective of the observer and the perspective of family members." (Morgan *Rethinking* 6).

This constellation is also significant to think with alongside this chapter's consideration of how family is communicated: the qualification of the family as performed and thereby observable amalgamates with Finch's notion of 'display'. The interpretations of display used to

assert the ‘familial’ nature of family configurations that do not outwardly coincide with the ‘ideal’ is distinct at the end of “Sarong” from Molly’s justificatory tone in “Sarong” when she ‘reads’ and in her interpretation categorizes the display of Uncle Kim Hock’s family to conclude that they *are* a family. Looking at the funerary processes in which Uncle Kim Hock’s sons defended his right to dress unconventionally, she muses:

“...[T]hat was *filial love* for a parent who was *different from other parents*...I say, judge a man by how his children treat him after his death. Tommy and Johnny loved their father. Ya, ya, I know. People said their mother was a witch... [but] if you think about it, Uncle Kim Hock loved his wife and she him. Not in the way the world expected. Not in the way Uncle Kim Hock’s mother and sisters had expected. *But it was love nevertheless*. The love that accepted him for who he was. I can’t claim to know him well. I can’t claim to know his wife...*But she was the mother of Tommy and Johnny, and the grandma of their four children*. Witch or no witch, she must have taught them something about love. They didn’t judge their father, why should we?” (Lim 74 emphasis mine)

As I have already noted, the description of what Molly witnesses in the conflict over Uncle Kim Hock’s funerary attire is distinctly interpretative; the rhetorical question she poses taken to be the indicative focus of her thoughts marks the inflection of her reasoning to be significant. Intended to convey an acceptance of differences (non-judgement of Uncle Kim Hock’s lifestyle), the inherited recourse to normalcy in Molly’s language in the sketched out familial relations is all the more notable since the qualification of “filial” already implicitly aligns Molly’s ‘reading’ of the ‘display’ as familial. The vindication of Aunt Gek Sim from ‘witch’ is also invoked in that same performance of ‘filial love’, since for Molly, that is the tenable premise through which one can identify ‘familial’ behaviour. Manifestly, the underlying rationale is the same: the grounds for

differences (both Uncle Kim Hock's non-conventional dressing and Aunt Gek Sim's notoriety) are nullified since the family identifiably demonstrates a familiar basis of family, one couched in the language of 'love'. In spite of their differences, the family's ability to engage in normative behaviours recognized as conventionally of family therefore suggests that they are not so much different, and therefore, is acceptable. Molly's moment of identifying family, in the moment of her decision and justification exemplifies the purpose of display that Finch clarifies: "[i]t is not simply a matter of identifying who belong and who does not...Display is the process by which individuals, and groups of individuals, convey to each other and to relevant audiences that certain of their actions do constitute 'doing family things' and thereby confirm that these relations are 'family' relationships." (67) Accordingly, what should be realized that Molly's looking to this moment as a moment of doing family marks it as a display, and is what actively constructs the legitimacy of the family

The perspective through which family is looked at is different in "Lies" – if the spectatorial position Molly finds herself in "Sarong" engages with an external mode of looking in, communicating the social element of recognition tagged to family and in the process articulating the index through which who family *is* measured upon, "Lies", although engaging with the same social element of display and the means through which it constitutes the family, contrariwise complicates any simplistic equivalence of love as the determiner of the validity of a marriage/family. The protagonist of "Lies" realizes that she is unknowingly positioned as part of a display of family from the belated realization of her father's marital infidelity that I will later examine for the way it exposes the assumptive conventionalities conducted in the appearance of a nuclear family. Speaking to the by now adult-narrator nearing the close of the story, the narrator's mother accuses her husband of being a 'rake' at his funeral, in the process clarifying

the truth underpinning appearances of the relationship between her parents and her childhood lodger. In a moment of revelation, she confesses: “I even had to bring one of his women home to live with us....I knew what they were up to behind my back...But I treated her well. Never let on that I knew...I let our room to her so *she could see him for what he is*—a lazy, arrogant layabout.” (Lim 286 emphasis mine) The disjunction between appearances and reality in the above is telling, especially for the emphasis placed on ‘seeing’ as a method of divulging the ‘truth’, for “what he *is*”. This expressed tension in the double-entendre of the way things appear and the obscured truth is a recurring theme in “Lies”: indeed, it could be said that “Lies” is a story of misinterpretations ensued from looking at the face of things. As a child, the narrator warned against falsely pitying the landlord for her father’s ‘humiliation’ of him is taught that “[a]pppearances deceive.” (Lim 253). Succinctly, this extends to all the narrator’s interpretations of the happenings with Aunt Pak Mei and her parents that she witnesses. The narrator’s discovery of the extra-marital relationship between Aunt Pak Mei and her father and her father’s gallivanting ways explains the antagonism of her parent’s marriage, and morphs her original interpretation of her mother as brow-beating and bullying. An illustration of this double-entendre effect the reveal has on the interpretation of past events is her childhood supposition of her father’s moralistic disapproval of Aunt Pak Mei’s lifestyle that could (after the disclosure) just as easily be his disgruntled jealousy. Most importantly, and to the interest of this thesis, the guise of ignorance that her mother’s adopts to her father’s affair and the continued perpetuation of ‘family’ calls attention to family as a spectacle in which what is ‘done’ does not match up with what is ‘displayed’.

Returning to Finch’s argument in which ‘displaying’ family argued as an extension of ‘doing’ family is counterpart to ‘being’ family, the ending of “Lies” challenges these neat

distinctions by revealing a display of family contrary to family as it is done. In fact, the display of family (that draws upon the formalized status of being) is intended to whitewash the marital infidelity that threatens the integrity of its doing/being. This is evident in the narrator's monologue at the story's end, when she responds to her mother's confirmation of her suspicions regarding the illicit triangulated relationship between her parents and Aunt Pak Mei:

“And we stay married. To the end.’ I heard the note of pride in her voice, a woman's pride – he had loved her first and last...’That is love, Ma.’...Did she love him? Did he love her? Does it matter now? What is love? Is it fidelity? The act of staying together till death do us part? In the end, everything must end in death and forgiveness. If not, how do we live?” (Lim 286)

The pride that the narrator's mother takes in maintaining her marriage till the end marked by the passing of her spouse emphasizes the state of ‘being’ married. Reading this against the framework of being/doing/displaying family, the prioritizing of the status of the marriage, that is of ‘being’ married, focuses on the outcome of the marriage that subsumes the unhappiness in the marital process within it. If “Sarong” suggests that the meaning of family is located in acts of love and understanding, “Lies” questions that logic through this moment, where the narrator's quick reassurance of her mother by affirming her mother's stance that remaining married is an act of love immediately oppugns her words with a spiralling list of questions that casts the inapprehensible nature of love once separated from the conventional markers of fidelity that marriage represents. The inhered contradiction of the inimical presence of marital infidelity and marital unhappiness encapsulated within a deliberate perpetuation of the state of marriage complicates the framework that I began with in which displaying/doing family is seen as more important and a better index to determine a family rather than its formal status in being family.

Ma's expressed triumph at maintaining her marriage till the natural death of her spouse and the narrator's delayed discovery of the truth forces us to reconsider the common-sense association of doing/displaying/being a family.

This confusion of the links between doing/display/being a family is exacerbated in the representation of family in "Christmas Memories". To examine the staging of family in "Christmas Memories", and with the intention of using it as a generative text for my argument, I turn to consider Tamara S. Wagner's²⁹ interpretation of "Christmas Memories" in full. Taking a comparative approach premised upon the generic conventions of the Christmas tale, Wagner isolates the leitmotif of the multi-cultural family to argue how the short story "works through dynamic repetition with a self-conscious emphasis on excess that renders the narrated process of retelling at once tongue-in-cheek and peculiarly tragic." (59) Observing that the story has a circular narrative structure which revolves around Christmas Eves, she suggests that the event is used to anchor the recurrent experiences of abandoned children of absentee fathers extending "over the years, across generations, and cultural boundaries." (59) In this reading, this cycle of failed marriages is doubly evident in the inter-racial (re-)marriage that grants the protagonist his eponymous role as a 'Chinese Stepfather', one "all too predictably engender[ing] yet again the same impasses [of ethnic boundaries and racialization]" (60). The narrative structure of the Christmas story is what permits a breakthrough of this perpetuated cycle of unhappy families. Wagner concludes that "[r]ecourse to the genre of the Christmas tale allows it to leave behind the

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²⁹ Tamara S. Wagner in "'Old Marley Married a Chinese Writer': Towards an Aesthetics of Confident Intertextuality" pairs "Old Marley Married a Chinese Writer" and "Christmas Memories of a Chinese Stepfather" by virtue of the short stories' reference to Christmas, and analyses these short stories within the "genre of the Christmas tale" (62). Situating her analysis within a post-colonial revisionist context in which local writing has been critiqued for engaging with a problematic self-exoticization, Wagner argues that the self-reflexivity of the two stories can be read as moving away from that self-exoticization, and as an example of what she terms "aesthetics of confident intertextuality".

bitter endings that characterize often thinly fictionalized social critique... [and alternatively permit] narrative structures of a traditional sentimentality” (62) and reads the end of “Christmas Memories” as “primarily a reassertion of family values across various ethnic and cultural divides as well as beyond traditional definitions of family structures, [...] successfully break[ing] through a circle of repeated break-ups.” (60).

Wagner’s claim of the story presenting “a reassertion of family values...beyond family structures” (60) is interesting for the contradiction that it represents, if not least for the evidently heteronormative family that Bob sets up with Alice. Left unelaborated upon in Wagner’s argument and unspecified within the story, there is no grounding referent for its understanding, consequently calling both the meaning and function of familial ideology into question. Within the story, the ideal of family and the lived reality are held in a binary; the ideal evoked in Bob’s familial imaginary of consanguineous living – in “[a]n executive flat with three bedrooms and a utility room that could be converted into another bedroom. All of us under one roof.” (Lim 236) – which never materializes. The consciousness of space in the above proposed living arrangement drawing attention to the envisaged order in the setting up of a single co-residence is not only unfulfilled. Far from it, the extended household is characterized by static chaos and unhappiness,

“Two years had passed, and we were *still* stuck in the same apartment with Kit, Ma and the maid. Trouble every day. The maid and Ma. The maid and Alice. Alice and Ma...Every day *kenna* listen to your mother and wife complain, complain, complain could drive a man to murder. I didn’t know marriage could be like this.” (Lim 240 emphasis mine).

The truncated sentences listing the conflicting stakeholders in quick succession creates an effect

of rapid-fire urgency that conveys the overwhelmingly jarring situation at home. Bob's devolving into colloquialism in the repetition of 'complain' as emphasis and the use of '*kenna*' is also poignant, since just before, Bob speaks of his pride in being a self-directed learner and his proficiency in speaking 'proper' English. The sudden lapse into informal language could be read as an indication of Bob's exasperation and an indication of his flustered state of mind as part of his thoughts, yet its significance extends further for Bob's expressed cognizant of its use. His self-acknowledgement confirms a self-conscious use of colloquial language, underlining the inadequacy of 'proper' English to demonstrate the extent of his frustration – "My nerves were frayed. *Koyak*! How do you say it in proper English? My heart aches?" (Lim 240). The punctuated emphasis of '*Koyak*' contrasted to the subsequent rhetorical question provides a loose translation to its meaning, but the shift in tone pointedly refers to the word's untranslatability and the inadequacy of 'proper' phrasing to convey his experience. To make a claim for 'family' being upheld at all is incongruent to the actual unfolding of the story. The family conflict persists till the end of the short story, as we see Bob failing to resolve the ongoing conflict in the household, to the extent of a dissolution of the ideal household when the living arrangements are split up, with Bob, Alice and the boys moving out. This results in his estrangement on both ends – the reader knows of Alice's acrimony from her frostiness towards Bob, "And Alice still doesn't talk to me. I'm still sleeping in the boys' room." (242) and can also infer the continued tension between Bob and his mother from being told that he experiences "[m]y first Christmas without Ma and Kit" (242).

On that same thread, and returning to Finch, reading displays of family in "Christmas Memories" is seemingly inchoate. A discussion of the way family is displayed on the story level of "Christmas Memories" provides slim pickings: if the prototypical image of family is

envisioned in moments of commensality, family meals in Bob's household is fraught and illuminates the tensions in the household. This is nowhere more apparent than the disastrous Christmas Eve dinner, which is worth closer analysis for its location in the sequence of narration that sheds light on the implications of what is depicted. The occasion, narratively contextualized by the finalized paperwork on the adoption of the boys that symbolically and legally cements the familial relationship, provides diegetic clues which orientates the reader into realizing that this is not the first day the families have moved in together, but the full description of the meal imbues it with an especial significance. The emphasis on the boys' taking of Bob's surname (Lim 236) and their use of familial address, "Dad" and "Nai-nai" (Lim 236) before segueing into a full description of the dinner limns the approach to the dinner – I suggest that the emphasis on the formalized relationship preceding the description of the meal intentionally posits it as 'family' meal, one established and recognized by its participants as much. Ironically, the conflict is precisely about them not behaving like *a* family. If the conflict begun as a minor matter of enforcing dinner table etiquette, the context of the disagreement illuminates the domestic dynamics and organization within the household. To illustrate this point, I have quoted the scene at length.

After telling Ben off for not sitting appropriately at dinner, Ma says:

'Eat up, Ben. Eat, Seb. Eat as much as you want both of you so you won't act like hungry wolves afterwards,' Ma said.

She scooped two large pieces of stewed pork into the boys' bowls. Using her chopsticks, she picked up two large fried prawns and put them on a side plate for each boy.

'Eat now. Eat all you want so you don't have to dig into my biscuit tins looking

for something to eat later. They're always so hungry. Don't know why!'

'Boys, say thank you to Nai-nai.' Alice's frown had come on. A bad sign.

'Thank you, Nai-nai!'

'Now say sorry to Nai-nai. How many times have I told you not to be greedy little pigs? Say sorry! Why didn't you eat the biscuits in our room? How many times do I have to tell you not to touch Nai-nai's things in the kitchen? How dare you disobey me!'

'I didn't, Mummy! Seb did it!'

Alice slapped Ben who was nearer to her than Seb. The boy bawled holding his cheek. She slapped him again.

'Stop it! Stop crying!'

'For god's sake, it's Christmas Eve, Alice!' I yelled.

'Why don't you tell that to your Mother? She hates my boys!'

'No, Alice, Mother was trying to teach them manners.'

'Oi! You two. Mother, mother! I might not understand English but I know you people are talking about me! What's that woman of yours saying?' Ma asked in her crisp sharp Hokkien voice. Of course that made it worse. (Lim 237)

This moment is also significantly framed as the impetus to future conflicts. The reader is told: "I didn't know what else went wrong after that. One thing after the other." (Lim 237) If the family in this moment has been officially assembled, the dynamics reflected here figures an apparent insider/outside differentiation. Alice interprets Ma's doling out food and admonishment for the boys to eat as insidious criticism of the boys. Her responding injunction to the boys to verbalize their gratitude and their apologies shades the behavior as forced and unnatural, per polite behavior exhibited to outsiders, and is further exacerbated by her lecture to the boys. In her

scolding, there is a discernible shift of the reason the boys are faulted: the mistake made is not in eating outside of mealtimes, but for trespassing an already stated boundary into what does not belong to ‘them’: the nuclear unit made up of the boys, Alice and Bob. Despite staying within the same household, there is a distinct demarcation – whatever outside of the room does not belong to the nuclear unit, and the kitchen, although conventionally functioning as communal space upon the premise of a household under one roof, in this case belongs to Grandma and is proscribed. This delineation is painfully clear when Alice slaps the wrong child; from this, it is evident the offending party is less important than the offense, paralleled by Ma’s accusatory ‘woman of yours’. Clearly, with the formalized status of the family and an intended development of a family consciousness, the language distinction becomes an apt metaphor of the lack of incorporation between the two previously separate family units. The overt expectation of and appearances as family on a festive occasion contrarily reveals the divisive family structure in place.

Ostensibly, apart from a little now-and-then description of parent/child routine at the story’s close, little in the content of “Christmas Memories” supports the claim that the story be read in a way that confirms the family. If the record of dysfunctional, unhappy families accrues for the family unit associations of brokenness and conflict, that surely renders the optimistic celebration of ‘family’ at the story’s close ambivalent. Relating this back to Finch’s framework, the un-familial behavior demonstrated in “Christmas Memories” purportedly punctuates the importance of ‘doing’ family over ‘being’ family. Even so, the ubiquitous theme of family in its reiterative insistence (as noted in Wagner’s interpretation) gives pause to any dismissal of the significance of family legacy, and instead points towards the necessity of looking at the context of the story in order to determine how family is expressed in the story.

CHAPTER 4

TELLING IT AS/TO BE FAMILY: Re-Writing the Family

“The importance of narratives in social life generally is that they enable people to both formulate and communicate understandings of their own social world.” (Roberts qtd. in Finch 77)

Looking to the context of the story to delve further into the meaning of its narrative and how that comes to impact the way in which family is presented is not exclusive to “Christmas Memories”. Noticeably, all three short stories are not about the individual, but rather takes the family as its subject. This is an important qualification, since it shifts the focus of what the story is about and how the reader reads it. As in “Christmas Memories”, where a reading from the perspective of Bob might suggest, as Wagner has, that the story reinforces a prototypical family, reading these stories for their depictions of the family actually presents a counter-image to how the family is understood. Although not immediately apparent, given the fixed internal focalization and homodiegetic narrators that seemingly present individual recounts, a closer-examination of each narration nonetheless let on the scant textual attention on individual experiences not directly linked to the family story, and evinces the peripheral role of the narrator that undercuts any presumed reading of them as the narrative’s protagonist. In both “Sarong” and “The Lies”, notwithstanding the autobiographical recollections of the narrators as the premise of the story, the narrators are relegated to passive roles from not being direct actors of the family episodes that they narrate. “Christmas Memories” provides an exception to that rule, since the story is an autodiegetic narrator’s recount of his past Christmas memories. Even then, as I shall demonstrate in greater detail later, the recounted memories are not of the individual so much as of the family, and arguably can be viewed as a means to shore up his familial role as ‘(step)father’ rather than the development of a sense of personhood. As I will go on to

demonstrate, the formal whole of all three short stories embeds each of the story in specific narrative contexts situating family at the centre of the narrative, and cues a reading of the stories more intricately as acts of familial displays, situating the stories themselves to be enactments of familial relations.

The act of re-looking/reading the family to come to a re-knowing of family is distinctly connected to its writing, for it is through writing that such family history can be reframed and retold. Walter Benjamin thinking about storytelling pinpoints this same notion of (re)telling:

“We have witness the evolution of the ‘short story’, which has removed itself from oral tradition and no longer permits that slow piling one on top of the other of thin, transparent layers which constitute the most appropriate picture of the way in which the perfect narrative is revealed through the layers of a variety of retellings.” (92)

Benjamin’s essay about the figure of the storyteller posits the function of stories, drawing attention to the act of narration. Here making a point of the function of storytelling and lamenting the death of the ‘storyteller’ in the age of information, Benjamin conceives of the short story as antithetical to oral storytelling. Given that the short stories read in this chapter contra Benjamin’s notion of the short story in their approximation of orality, Benjamin’s conception of the function of storytelling, to which understandings of life is constituted through stories, aptly provides a model from which we can focus a reading of these familial stories, routing into an examination of the complex relationship in the role of the storyteller to the story told in the reading of these family narratives.

Firstly, the layering invoked above provides a visualization of the narrative structure of the short stories, on both the levels of story and discourse. On the level of its story, the temporal structure common to all three stories of the protagonists’ recitation of childhood memories

impels the reader alongside the older narrative voice to re/interpret trace evidences of childhood to make sense of the ‘now’ posits the narrator as ‘reader’; in this sense, the text can be said to be performative, since the act of writing itself is presented as a process of reading. On the extradiegetic level, the different experiences of families seen and experienced encompassed within the single narrative of *a* family as its stated subject essentially works within an indisputable frame of a family already defined as much to begin with opening up and complicating notions of familial relations. If as Benjamin posits, “[*m*]emory creates a chain of tradition which passes a happening on from generation to generation” (emphasis in original 98), the “chain of tradition” formed by the act of ‘retelling’ draws upon a genealogic analogy which is especially pertinent to a discussion of family stories – essentially, in how family history constituted through its retelling is done for the express purpose of being retold. The short stories’ re-writing of family presented and understood *as* stories suggests that family histories can only be known in an embodied experimental process made discoverable through a cumulative logic.

Further, the act of retelling that Benjamin highlights is also helpful to think with in my argument. By now a truism, narration inhered in the process of retelling posits by itself already always an interpretation of the story events. As Benjamin puts it,

“[Storytelling] does not aim to convey the pure essence of the thing, like information or a report. It sinks the thing into the life of the storyteller, in order to bring it out of him again. Thus traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel.” (5)

In these short stories, the selection and ordering of the narrative that attests to the mark of the ‘storyteller’ on the level of story, becomes meaningful in themselves beyond what is explicitly conveyed through the content of the stories. As earlier established, the three stories apply the

same formula of narratorial flashbacks and commentary. Working from the assumption that the structure is deliberate, the choice to constitute the family story in this manner opens up and subsequently complicates stories of familial relations. Situated alongside the narrator-reader, the real reader engages in a reading alongside the narrator that makes the fictional world as real to the narrator as it is to the reader. Inasmuch, these stories can be said not to be just stories about family but are distinct in being family stories. Therein, the topic of analysis expands from analyzing what has been written to a consideration of what is conveyed in the writing; in essence, the question becomes: what is the significance of using storytelling to make sense of the family? Further, how does this representation affect the way we think of family? I argue that the analysis of the formal characteristics of each short story not only situates ‘family’ as the subject matter, but also elucidates the underlying thread common to those depictions – the narrative process of the stories (as recounts) posits familial experiences and consequently the way we come to know of the family as engendered through writing – highlighting how the process of narratively reconstructing the family is just as important as the family depicted in the narrative.

1. *Telling Family Frames in “The Lies that Build a Marriage” and “The Man Who Wore His Wife’s Sarong”*

“The Lies that Build a Marriage” and “The Man Who Wore His Wife’s Sarong” have at their core the same obscured narrative of the family: the story and structure of both centre on uncovering family ‘secrets’ through a process of remembering. Curiously, characterizing what is uncovered as family ‘secrets’ – a non-gender conforming uncle in “Sarong” and troubled marital relations in “Lies” – can only be understood thus in the loosest sense of the word, since the unfolding development of each story does not in its course actually reveal any new ‘hidden’ information. Rather, the imbricative structure employed in the short stories contrasting past misunderstandings to present revelations makes obvious how renewed understandings and

significance of the familial past is due to a change in interpretative framework. What is recovered is the *significance* of events, and not the uncovering of previously withheld information. Looking to the internally composed layers of the narrative structure that present the layers inherited to the contested meanings of family, this process of un-concealing in “Sarong” prompts us to reconsider our understanding of what is hidden in the encapsulated meaning of ‘family’. The narrative form of “Lies” similarly structures two narrative vantage points past-present to reveal how it is only in the repositioned vantage point through which access to a previously unavailable truth in the earlier experience can be achieved. Therein, close-reading the narrative structure and story raises questions of in/visibility, and resonates with wider understandings of the heteronormative family. From the realization of the unstable nature of familial memories, it stands to reason that wider understandings of set definitions and meanings of family are similarly open and partial.

My earlier discussion of “Sarong” pointed to the interpretative moment Molly deciphers of her uncle’s family from the funeral scene: I argued that her framework of evaluation is conjunctive with Finch’s notion of familial display, preliminarily suggesting that the scene be read as definitive of what the text suggests family be constituted as. Yet, such an argument is flawed at its premise for singling out that scene; afterall, Molly’s rumination is only a vignette at the close of the story. When situated within its context, that scene in actuality is Molly arguing for how family *should* be considered. The conclusion in itself is only arrived at from a revision of the larger family ‘myth’ repeated in her mother’s narration, and in no small part from a consideration alongside the other families presented, and therefore only reflective on the other discussions of family units told about. In order to gain a deeper understanding of how family is represented in “Sarong”, my analysis takes its cue from the narrative structure, and positions that

specific image in relation to the wider narrative in order to push for a deeper understanding of the text. Noting the discrepancy of having a meandering story that although meant to be read as centred upon its titular character misses its mark, I argue through an analysis of the formal properties of “Sarong” that the mechanisms locates Kim Hock’s story as part of a wider nexus of ‘love stories’ and shows the (re)workings of familial memory, and points us towards a reconsideration of familial ideologies. I therefore argue that the contrasting multifarious complexities of family experiences belying the heteronormative appearances of families presented in the story challenges the heteronormative conception of family at its core.

To begin thinking about “Sarong”, it seems pertinent to establish an understanding of Uncle Kim Hock as the central character. This argument is not contentious, but remains important as the premise. “The Man Who Wore His Wife’s Sarong” names the story’s focus from the onset. Firstly, the title structured in this way points to the discrepancy of a man ‘cross-dressed in his wife’s clothes; this is especial, since the sarong is not particularly gendered female for being worn by both men and women in Southeast Asia. Any incongruity due to the sarong being implicitly gendered is thus only for its ‘belonging’ to his wife. The introduced motif of the sarong in the title, a non-gendered article of clothing only gendered on account of its perception, thus already marks out a thematic concern of the text. Secondly, the title’s form immediately substantiates a reading that sets Uncle Kim Hock as the story’s protagonist. The story’s beginning in media res, “Our family went to his wake and funeral.” (Lim 53), is quickly followed by an introduction of dialogue that situates ‘the man’ under discussion as kin, “Uncle Kim Hock” (Lim 53) spoken by “[m]y mother” (Lim 53). The initial introduction of the possessive adjective form “his” in the opening line presumes an antecedent, of there being an already specified noun priorly referred to. It is therefore not a stretch to suggest that the title in

this case functions as part of the story, linking the title to the first line of the short story proper as an enjambment. The ‘his’ thereby refers to ‘the man’, to which the reading of the story as being told of Uncle Kim Hock, with the focus on his cross-dressing, is granted even before reading further.

If Uncle Kim Hock is the established protagonist of the story, the lack of access to his interior life due to the narrative structure inversely marks him as subject in the story, which modulates our approach to the story. The narrative is divided into three segments of an unmarked frame narrative, followed by subheadings delineating “My Mother’s version” (Lim 56), and “My version” (Lim 61), which are respectively focalized. Such a division, and the plurality of narrative voices presented, has the effect of jarringly shifting the reader to occupy different positions. Besides destabilizing the reading of a single narratorial position, the narrative flow is similarly disrupted, and through it reveals different perspectives directing the reader to consider Uncle Kim Hock’s story from different spectatorial positions. Oddly, despite Kim Hock’s story being the narrative’s focus, he does not focalize the narrative. Even the only moment of direct speech presentation by Kim Hock is retold on his behalf, subsumed as a fictive moment for its location as part of a larger moment of re-vision by Molly; occurring as Molly who visits the old house in a bid to “exorcise [her] guilt” (Lim 68) – the language clearly implying a desire to re-know the past – by confronting her brother’s passing. She chances upon a senile Kim Hock, set out in “a time warp [with] [e]verything was as [it was] thirty years before” (Lim 70), who mistakes Molly for his dead wife and speaks to her as if situated in the past. The protracted present of experience in this moment of Kim Hock’s re-enactment of the past is at odds with the retrospective lens characteristic of the rest of the story, and calls attention to this moment as a standalone moment. This narrative lens, particularly, also denies Kim Hock the chance to create

any unity and participate in the telling of the story of and for himself even when he does speak; this lack of a sustained narration from his perspective thus posits his story as only ever surmised and already interpreted on his behalf. This realization carries through into the larger frame narrative: being at his funeral also guarantees that his voice is permanently silenced – thereby, what should be realized is how the story is told *of* Kim Hock in the form of a family narrative in which he is spoken for. Throughout, the externally focalized story of Kim Hock’s life positions itself as precisely that, a story *about* him. With this lack of internal access to him, any understanding of his story even when he is speaking directly is always already deferred. Here, the reading of Kim Hock as the subject of the story gives way to an additional layer that instead marks the *reading of* Kim Hock as the story’s focus – in as much, the way in which history of an individual is steeped in fiction becomes increasingly evident, an important notion that will later come to bear upon the way we think of family.

My making the case for the interpretations *of* Kim Hock’s life to be the story’s subject is tenable, if only because looking to the story as being told of him is also similarly frustrated by the narrative structure which gestures away from the specific of Kim Hock’s story to point at family structures in the general. Attempting to read the story selectively for only his story is impossible, and cues us into realizing its emplacement in a ‘story-within-story’ structure. This structure re-routes a reading of his story in a circuitous detour, and is an extension of the polyphony already identified within his story: although the overarching frame narrative begins and ends in the first-person narrative voice of Molly positioned in the narrative-present of Uncle Kim Hock’s funeral, descriptions of the funeral is interwoven with details about the ‘love story’ of her parents, contextualized by the cultural background of the figure of the “*suay-ee*” (Lim 54). Molly interjecting in the frame narrative the importance of knowing other familial configurations

as “part of our cultural lexicon” (Lim 54) extends the focus of the story from beyond the specific to the general. Curiously, she finds it fit to tell us how even “staid” (Lim 54) Singaporeans have always had a history of polygynous relationship arrangements: “[o]f course, we still have them today, *known by different names*...Human nature has not changed” (Lim 54 emphasis mine). Her language emphasizes the invariability of these constructions, and points out how although they are irreconcilable with the heteronormative family, have always existed alongside and within it. Positioned early in the frame narrative, this observation echoes and further extends the motif imbued in the sarong, and brings to attention the same notion of naming as a mechanism of superficial reframing. The contextualization of Kim Hock’s life story alongside these cultural details and the descriptions of other family configurations points us to considering the dialectical relationship between these stories, a notion extended for the communicative framework that the story holds.

Observably, the narrative structure foregrounds how “Sarong” itself acts as an act of communication. The imbricative narrative structure of “Sarong” echoes Benjamin’s image of stories “piling one on top of the other” (92): both for how the reconstitution of writing/reading as telling/listening, and also as scaffolding an model of reading that assembles the disparate pieces laid out in the story to construct a whole. The oral dimensions of the story highlighted early on in the frame narrative grounds the reader’s position in relation to the text; before it segues into Uncle Kim Hock’s story, the reader is addressed conversationally in the second-person: “Anyway, I was going to tell you *another* successful love story, but my mother is the better storyteller. Let her tell you about Uncle Kim Hock and his wife.” (Lim 56 emphasis mine) This moment of deflected narrative agnizes Mother’s narration as an already repetitive account (from the narrator’s familiarity of it in the expressed comparison), indicating the integration of this

account as part of a wider family myth. Therein, the narrative's emphasis of its orality in this moment places the reader to inhabit an overlapping space between reading and listening, and engages the reader to participate in a shared memory. This consideration of the narrated family in "Sarong" as an act of communication establishes the mode in which we consider the story.

Smart's conclusion from Blokland's argument on narrative practices as processes of 'social identification' identifies how storytelling is by its nature is a "...social activity, not simply in the sense that it involves at least two people – teller and listener – but that it produces sociability and socialness through connecting people at the level of shared (or comparable) imagining and experiences" (82). This conversational aspect of storytelling and its purpose as memory transmission is evident through the inserted phrases of address in the story's telling, most interestingly the rhetorical questions which ends Molly's mother's account. She questions Molly: "Do you remember, girl? You don't? Maybe you were too young then." (61) The implication in this cue that Molly should have remembered corroborates the given account as truth and having had happened. Even in the negative response of the matter having been forgotten, the prompting suggests that the narrative has already been shared in before, and functions as a reminder to recall and thus re-share in the given narrative. The question directed at Molly also functions to actualize a position for the reader that is apart from Molly, positioning the reader alongside Molly to listen to, and come to know, the story as it is repeated in the family. This understanding also extends to the relationship that Molly shares with the reader in her version of the story that extends throughout the story; if her mother's version features a three-way interaction between the reader, herself and her mother, her version moves away from engaging in dialogue with her mother, but the speech pattern as it is in the concluding line of the story, "[b]ut that's just my view. Call me unfilial if you like" (Lim 75), continues to engage with the reader in a manner that

seemingly invites dialogue. The implication that this has on the conclusion of the story is significant, since the act of reading linked as an act of hearing positions us to be engaged in an interplay of shared memory – Molly’s narrative calls attention to the verbal reconstruction of these family stories, as well as to the structures of perception within the narrative. In inserting her voice at the end of the story, Molly recreates a new narrative framework that recognizes new modes of doing family and which allows the reader to understand and share in how family is done.

If the narrative is woefully inconsistent in telling us the story of Uncle Kim Hock, the common thread that runs through the entire story is its focus on how changing times implicates what is perceived. The shifting marker of what is un-/sanctioned is inherited in the language contrasting past interdictions to what has become passable in the present. Examples reprising the same notion echo through the different sections in “Sarong”. Molly describing her parents’ marriage notes the shift in perception of the marital union, “[i]t is no longer a scandal these days, but it was a huge scandal during my mother’s time” (Lim 53), and the difference to how her mother is perceived, “From despised second wife in conservative Penang to admired grandma...in modern Singapore” (Lim 56). Mother echoes the same gist of changing times in her observations on what is socially accepted, neatly summarizing it as “Singapore has changed” (Lim 74): in her conclusion on the matter of boys wearing earrings and its bearings on religious traditions, she notes “It’s an upside-down world. Seesawing like fashion. Even our religious beliefs have changed.” (Lim 57), which she reiterates at the close of the story, “Nobody says such dressing is abnormal. If you live long enough, you’ll see all kinds of things. And that’s progress, lah.” (Lim 75). Resonating throughout the story is the same idea in which meaning changes with its articulation in different time periods, but also how reinvention is made possible

with time, and in time. This thematic repetition in this sequence of past/present-un/acceptable binary further structures the perceptions of the narration, calling attention to the visual nature of revision through which reconstitution is made possible.

In as much, the verbal reconstruction of family history we are reading is made material via the accentuation of the underlying structures of perceptions. As in the observations made above, the framework of contrasting the past to the present plays out on a macrocosm in the contrasting version of Molly's and Mother's recounts. A difference I suggest can be read for the way that it reconstitutes the family. 'My Version' begins with a declarative disavowal, "I remember things differently" (Lim 61) before presenting a contravening account of the same characters that Molly's mother describes. Although it is immediately apparent that Molly describes events that happen in a different time period, the most distinct difference is embedded in the meaning read into what is observed of the various stakeholders to account for Kim Hock's crossdressing. In Mother's version, the development of a schism between White-hair Granny and Kim Hock is resultant from Gek Sim's subterfuge. Mother dramatizes it as such: "[Gek Sim's] heart grew hard. She plotted against my aunt...In the end [Kim Hock] turned completely against his mother" (Lim 61) Mother's depiction of the stakeholders is organized as an archetypal storyline, populated by stock characters and dramatic tropes: recognizably, Gek Sim fills the role as the mild mistreated daughter-in-law abused by her domineering mother-in-law because of her family's poverty. Notably, this rendition stands as the putative version of events despite the inconsistency that Molly identifies: "[m]y mother seems to have forgotten what a shrew Gek Sim was. *All our relatives knew* that she was a timid little mouse when she first came into the family. Over time, she turned into a termagant who fought with her mother-in-law." (Lim 62 emphasis mine) This omission of this development in Gek Sim's character in this shared

memory arrests her characterisation, mythologizing her as a fixed character. My isolation of and exploration on the narrative element inhered in Mother's tale which stands as the supposed version draws attention to the falling back on folk knowledge as a mode to understand and justify what is observed. The story's almost fable-like quality stems as much from these justificatory reasonings: her narration falls back on symbolic meanings interpreted on the basis of traditional beliefs – using the derivative meaning of the Chinese characters (as with 'Gek Sim' meaning 'heart of jade') and reading it to be indicative of personalities, and pointing to the zodiac signs as ostensive of how Gek Sim would 'get ahead' of White-hair Granny – which ultimately casts Gek Sim as fatalistically antagonistic. While not directly mentioned in Mother's account, the groundwork laid in this account also sets the stage for the later fearmongering in which Gek Sim is literally named 'witch', and maps out the overlay which obscures the given fact of Kim Hock's preferences lying at the root of all the misunderstandings.

Upon closer reading, the reason underlying this reprised accusation of Gek Sim being engaged in witchcraft is the family's observation of changes made to Uncle Kim Hock's behaviour. Molly recalling a conversation between her parents delimits such an opening from which the basis of this accusation against Gek Sim is clarified; Molly's mother confides to her father:

“‘[My aunt] says [Kim Hock] swallowed his wife's spittle...She wears the pants now and he wears her sarong and embroidered *kebaya* blouses...[My aunt] suspects he's been charmed. Said he must've drunk her breast milk and spittle. That's why he listens to her and acts so...so strange. He used to be such an obedient son, you know...Now he doesn't care what my aunt says...He's truly drunk his wife's spittle. Listens to everything she says.’” (Lim 66)

This passage points to the charge of witchcraft levied against Gek Sim, exposing the basis of which these claims of foul play originate. Building on a traditional understanding of relationships between family members as demonstrated in Mother's version, the suspicion of 'improper-ness' in Gek Sim is from the anomaly of non-heteronormative dress preference. It transpires that Gek Sim's fault is due to a perceived displacement of proper gendered behaviours from the inversion of fe-/male roles between the couple. Kim Hock confirms this later in the story, anchoring Kim Hock's mother's impatience with Gek Sim for what is Kim Hock's initial impotence and failure to propagate. Molly's father's rejoinder where he teases Molly's mother in response is also noteworthy; when he cautions her to stay out of other's affairs, he gently refutes the claims of insanity: "...I listen to everything you say. I left Penang because of you. People think I've drunk your spittle too" (Lim 66). The parallel of 'drinking spittle' drawn between the 'irregular' relationship of Kim Hock and Gek Sim and Molly's parents reveals the common narrative of men charmed and led astray from propriety as the governing rationale explaining indecorous male conduct in relationships; and is also a reminder of the evaluative components in family stories that is apart from the actuality of events denied in that narrative – both the love relationship Molly's parents shared that spurred him to leave his first wife, as well as the revealed truth of Kim Hock's preferences for feminine-coded outfits through which Gek Sim's acceptance of permitted the couple to conceive. In so much that communicated family stories are interpretative evaluations then, and knowledge of the past can only be experienced through framework of interpretations; these stories about the family and how we come to see them as such therefore have the potential to be continually rediscovered as a source of new interpretations – the same notion taken up in Molly's legitimating impulse of Kim Hock's family. This realization of the different types of family loosely fitted into the classification as

heteronormative – evinced in the reference to Kim Hock and Gek Sim as ‘the man’ and his ‘wife’ insistently situating their atypical relationship within the cultural model of a long-term heterosexual union – in turn revealing the inherent instability of the term as a variable turns what is known of the family on itself: in the same way that Kim Hock’s birth family relied and reframed his cross-dressing impulses as evidence of witchcraft rather than accepting his decisions as they were, the restrictiveness of the term ‘family’ in its disciplining impulse ignores the manifold and myriad experiences of family that do come under an outward appearance of the man-woman coupled families.

Comparatively, the narrative of “Lies” is analogous to “Sarong” and “Chinese Stepfather” for its presentation as a recited family story. This is explicitly referenced mid-story when the narrator states: “[w]e lost touch with Mei. And it would be more than forty years before I knew the rest of her story.” (Lim 279). The diegetic markers present in this sentence is interesting – in the act of reading the ‘story’ in its entirety, the reader is positioned proleptically. From this instance of ‘double temporality’ (Genette), the narrated events of the protagonist’s childhood is not unfolding in real time as it is initially presented, but in the temporal logic of the story is already a retracing – therein, the significance of the narration in its entirety is only revealed after we read the subtended texts. The telling of her childhood is therefore a re-telling already encoded with the discovery about the truth of marital infidelity underlying the tenant-landlord arrangement: the protagonist in her retelling of the events are re-reading and re-interpreting what was witnessed with a different slant. A further reading of “Lies” could concentrate on reading the desire of family prominent in Pak Mei’s character through the alternative account re-constructable in light of the narrator’s revelation that permits a re-evaluation of kith.

The narrative of “Lies” as an act of remembrance through which childhood understandings of family are reworked, featuring a narrating persona acknowledging discomfiting partial knowledges about family. In spite of the newly realized contradictions that themselves challenge the heteronormative definitions of family, the narrative resolutions for both show the narrator coming to terms with, and continuing to reaffirm the natural legitimacy of the family, opening up a space from which we can rethink ideas of family. Where my earlier discussion of “Lies” considered the portrayal of marital/familial discord – in the adult-narrator’s revelation that the virulence behaviour of her parents contradictorily, and ironically, is what keeps up the family – to argue that such a depiction of family is interesting for how it confounds and tangles the concepts of being/doing family, that argument could be extended through an analysis of the narrative structure to reveal the assumptive conventionalities conducted in the appearance of a nuclear family. Afterall, the ‘secret’, suppressed by the narrator’s mother in an act best described in Konrad’s term of ‘active not-knowing’ (161), is only perpetuated on account of being masked for the presumed normality derived from being recognizable in a ‘family’ form. Therein, the ‘secret’ takes the form of a non-visible, silent, but felt presence in the narrator’s family life: only the disclosure of that near the end of the narrative clarifies the marriage subjected in the title to be of the narrator’s parents. More accurately therefore, the story is an event of attestation that testifies and makes the invisible visible. The narrative’s reworking of the past alters the interpretation of the described events in revealing the narrator’s childhood memories of Pak Mei set up as the stage for her family’s self-reflection. Pinning down this initial misinterpretation, it can be realized that the operating rationale plays on the blind spot of the ‘normal’ appearing nuclear family, the realization of which exposes and disrupts the embedded heteronormativity undergirding the perception of family. Further, the impulse behind “Lies” to

set the record straight done through writing and the disclosure of family done through narrative suggests that any concrete sense of knowing the family's history and past is rooted in literary imaginings, even as the family is portrayed as tangled up as an irreconcilable conflict of meaning.

2. *Meta-display of Family in "Christmas Memories of a Chinese Stepfather"*

From the title alone, "Christmas Memories of a Chinese Stepfather" most apparently presents itself to be a story 'of', in the sense of belonging to, the autodiegetic narrator, Bob Lim. Yet, my claim of reading it as an account of family history rests on a consideration of the geneses underlying the account clued from its form. First, the self-referentiality of the title deliberately naming (and therefore defining) the familial role 'Stepfather' and its autobiographical tone functions to declare the role as *his*, which positions the short story to stand as an enactment of that role. Such an interpretation is further bolstered by the accompanying subtitle "For Seb & Ben" (Lim 225), whom we learn in the course of the short story are the nicknames of his step-children. Read in aggregation, the confessional mode of the short story is imbued with an additional layer of intentionality. The specification of the story's intended-audience be the narrator's stepchildren modulates the reader's interpretation of reading in its design. In short, the frame suggests to the reader that the story we are reading *of* family is *for* family, which sets up a particular disposition that bears on its interpretation. The subtitle written in the conventional structure of a dedication emphatically situates a relationship between whom the narrative is from and for whom the narrative is for – having the focus to be on the stepfamily-stepchild relationship that undergirds the narrative. This emphasis on stepfamily construction in the form posits the narrative of personal memories as constituting a larger family history.

This reading of the story being about family is further substantiated with the observation

of the temporal structure of “Christmas Memories”, which abides by the typical narrative structure of the formation of the family. Structured as an act of retrospection, the story begins in the past, “I was minding my own business *that* Saturday afternoon, Christmas Eve, when Alice George walked right into me on the stairs.” (Lim 227 emphasis mine), and ends in the narrative present, “And Christmas was here again. Yesterday...But hey, what the heck? It’s just a day after Christmas. It’s still Christmas.” (Lim 242-3). It is perceptibly organized along the stages of family development – from the first meeting between Bob, Alice and her children (Lim 227), the development of a relationship between him and Alice, the confession of love and growing intimacy (Lim 233), followed by marriage and setting up house with Bob’s mother and brother, Kit (Lim 236). Then, it is the troubles of living together which result in the eventual dissolution of the wider family unit when Alice moves out with her sons and Bob following suit (Lim 241). Here, two things are worth noting: firstly, the structure of the narrative takes on a stream-of-consciousness³⁰ manner in so much that the narration of incidents (and the milestone progression) shifts by association, and is not clearly demarcated. Secondly, that if marriage is generally seen as the denouement of romance, Bob’s recapitulation does not focus on the dyad of Bob and Alice or describe a love that is amatory in any sense. Conspicuously, there are little private moments between Bob and Alice – in the development of their relationship, the boys remain a fixture, such that Bob even “practically living in her flat, ...took all his meals with her *and the boys*” (Lim 233 emphasis mine). Even the confession of love is reactionary, brought upon because of a conversation about Seb’s abuse by his stepmother. To Alice’s frustrated

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³⁰ The definition and use of ‘stream-of-consciousness’ has been highly contentious, and it has been suggested by Robert Humphrey that the characteristic of such novels must necessarily include the representation of prespeech levels of consciousness. Humphrey defines it as such “exploration of prespeech levels of consciousness for the purpose, primarily, or revealing the psychic being of the characters.” (4) My use of it is for lack of a better word to describe what I identify primarily to be a logical but associative link between the narrated events. If for the sake of discussion I have artificially segregated and termed them, this is not reflective of the way that the short story reads.

accusation that ‘You Chinese are so bloody racist!’, “I kissed her burning lips. Her back was stiff like a cat about to fight, and then suddenly she put her head on my shoulder and cried. I kissed her again and again. ‘Not all Chinese are racists.’” (Lim 233) The phrase ‘Not all Chinese are racists’ in this moment although contextually reads as a romantic confession of love from Bob to Alice, in its repetition is also a direct response to the unfair treatment that Seb has suffered – in Bob’s denial and exoneration of himself as ‘not racist’, there is a sense that the commitment he is making extends beyond her as a romantic partner to a commitment to protect and care for the children. Indeed, it is hardly a stretch to suggest that his commitment of the role as the children’s father supersedes his feelings of love for her, since the latter is left unmentioned. Anecdotal moments are then interwoven into the trajectory above, and results in the narrative’s episodic sensibility – this leaves glaring the implications of these privileged moments and its expository function. The case for family being the overarching narrative is clear in the analeptic moment of narration of one of the Christmases in Bob’s childhood – in the most distantly located memory in relation to the trajectory traced above, Bob remembers a Christmas from his childhood that his father left, and the discomfort he felt at a relative’s celebration because of his identity defined for being fatherless. Yet, that moment of recalling is not standalone and is evoked as a moment of identification with Seb and Ben, “...those two doughnuts reminded me of Kit and I when our father left us.” (Lim 230). Ordered at the beginning of the narrative, after the couple’s first meeting but before the development of relationships between the couple, this moment of identification is situated as part of the impetus that Bob offers Alice a helping hand and by extension, the reason why their relationship develops. The main story-strand oriented towards the family especially on its creation holds up a reading of “Christmas Memories” as an instance of storytelling, particularly a story about the origin and formation of the stepfamily.

Returning to the earlier argument identified: the cyclical structure pivoting upon Christmas that Wagner identifies as the underlying structure of the story is only accurate in so far that the text is approached from a drawn-out perspective, a model of reading that elides significant sections of the text. Her reading “the cyclic nature of the ruptured family repeats itself” (Wagner 60) considers in detail the reiterated ‘old’ story of failed marriages, and accurately summarizes the external structure of the text. Yet, such a reading bypasses significant sections of familial negotiation in the text that is evident in the temporal structure of the recounts. Her focus only on the narrated episodes does not account for its narration, an important consideration for the narrative’s salient self-reflexiveness. One of these moments is the temporal anachronism in the narration of Ben waiting up for Bob (Lim 240) that is misaligned with the wider, mostly linear narrative – a marked spatio-temporal shift that imbues it with an eidetic quality.

To consider the narrative effect of the temporal anachrony in that moment and to locate Bob’s position vis-à-vis the recounted narrative, a closer look at the narrative order is pertinent. The lead up is fairly typical of the rest of the narrative; grouped as instances of disciplinary issues, Bob recounts his punishing Seb, and his guilt in the aftermath. The subsequent resolution, “I promised myself that I wouldn’t whack the boy again.”, is undercut in its being immediately followed by, “[b]ut when Ben was six he stole a classmate’s pen...I whacked him hard and proper too.” (Lim 239). We are told briefly of the fall out,

“Alice wailed. She wanted to move out that very night. I handed her the cane, left the flat, got into the car and went for a long drive. Had I become an abusive father? Then I wondered if the boys had inherited bad genes. Their genes were not mine. Maybe I’d made a mistake. Their grandmother was a gambler. Poor buggers. Their own father had

given them up. *They needed a father but they only had me.* I wished I'd done better."

(Lim 239 emphasis mine)

On the emotionally charged task of discipline, Bob's conflicted thoughts revolves around his role and the responsibility he holds in the role as 'father'. His bid to rationalize the feelings of inadequacy turns to a justification of the boys' misbehavior in terms of consanguinity, drawing a distinction between the boys' biological father and himself. This moment discursively reveals how Bob thinks of the role of father: as an external function, one taken on and not a salient part of his identity. The narrative then continues past this moment, "[t]wo years had passed," (Lim 239) with a description of the multiple problems plaguing the household and marital disagreements between Bob and Alice. Abruptly, and without context, the narrative again returns to the same incident of the night of Ben's punishment, diegetically linked by the same mention of Bob leaving to go on a drive.

"I drove for hours that night after whacking Ben. When I reached home past midnight, Ben was asleep, slumped in the armchair that he must have placed near the doorway. I locked the front door. The soft click woke him.

"Ben, are you waiting for me?"

Without a word, he hugged me before padding off to bed." (Lim 240)

This incident displaced within the narrative sequence is characteristic of a temporal rupture for not being temporally affiliated to the narration immediately preceding or following itself. Significantly, for the rest of the story, no further mention of this fragment of an incident is made. Insofar that it recalls a prior event of 'that night' that the reader has already been introduced to, this return introduces the aftermath of that and presents new information that fill in the gaps of

what was previously unnarrated. Within the narrative, its sequence as an isolated moment imbues this moment with a telling significance that is oddly unremarked upon. Left unexplained and without further comment by Bob, the reader is accorded the space to interpret this cryptically silent moment in a variety of ways. Plausibly, what could be deduced from this tender moment could be Ben's fear of abandonment or Ben's assuagement of Bob's guilt, but here I suggest that a more holistic reading would be to see it as contextualized by Bob's monologue on fatherhood for the echoes to the previous section, and thereby its significance on our understanding of the narrative as a whole. Notwithstanding the different equally valid conclusions that could be drawn from that moment, it is inarguable that the structure of the narrative visually and thematically demarcates this second-telling as a parenthesis. Regardless of the reticence of the narrative on this core moment, its presence still opens up questions of thinking about the narration itself. Responding to Wagner's reading of "Christmas Memories", I therefore suggest that more can be made from situating the narrated moments in its narrative order, a more coherent reading necessarily better accounting for such anachronic moments in the narrative. To clarify, my response to Wagner's argument that concludes a recuperated family at the story's close by problematizing that reading for the claim's refutability is not intended to suggest the invalidity of the argument. Instead, my reading points to what she has charted in the broader pattern of disintegrated family unit and the undercutting and breaking away from the cycle of the unhappy family as laying out what the text expresses: in short, what Bob is saying about, and in other words, does *display* of his family.

The notion of family in "Chinese Stepfather" then becomes fitting to consider in the interests of this paper for the way that family is articulated, in which family is ascertained by an origin and established through a line of continuity. Reading inductively, I suggest that a way to

conciliate the hitherto disparate elements – both the contradiction of the claiming of un-family behavior as family and the temporal and narrative structure of the story – is to think of “Christmas Memories” as scaffolded in the structure of a family album. Such an interpretation would best reconcile Bob’s incongruous claim of family in spite of all evidence to the contrary: since meaning is located not merely within the stories themselves but more significantly in the logic of ‘familiality’ that underlies the arrangement of the stories’ combination. This “familial gaze”, as it is termed by Marianne Hirsch, is “the conventions and ideologies of family through which they see themselves” (xi), a mode of thinking and looking “[which] situates human subjects in the ideology, the mythology of the family as institution” (114). Fittingly, the chronological unfolding of the story accompanied by moments of interruption is essentially a narrated family chronicle, one intended, as indicated by the paratexts, for posterity. Considering the representation of family in “Christmas Memories” underpinned by the notion of the familial gaze highlights how the choice of the manner in which the narrative is told affects the narrative itself, interrogating the process of retelling and the always already implicated position of the person retelling to ultimately suggests that the narrative meaning of these pieced together moments lay with the individual. Anette Kuhn’s reflections over the open interpretation of a family photograph distils the essence of this temporal structure: “Family photographs may affect to show us our past, but ...how we use them – is really about today, not yesterday. These traces of our former lives are pressed into service in a never-ending process of making, re-making, making sense of, ourselves – now.” (19) These moments in the family archive assembled with the intention to piece together a family story to locate a filiality between himself and his step-children therefore reads and senses as such – the telling of personal memories of family here is translated into family memory, and account for the sense of family that Wagner identifies, and

similarly emphasizes this same sense of the *now* – stories of the past rather than standing merely as acts of documentations are reread into the future. The narration as a whole thereby constitutes constitute a meta-display of family that presents even as it represents family and permits us to tap into a deeper intention that underlies the familial display.

The foregrounded writerliness of the text and the betrayed desire for family connection that the constructed narrative reveals challenges the validity of the externally determined meaning of family in its being. Even as the foregrounded adoption performs a family form, the performativity of the role as ‘father’ in its being a choice and not denoted by biology introduces an element of uncertainty. In the repeated emphasis of his status as ‘step-father’ – inherited in the title that permits the entire story to stand as a statement of his role and in the final letter than he composes to Kit that serves as the epiphany of the story itself, to which the last line is a claim of ownership: “From Seb I learn persistence. From Ben I learn simplicity. My boys.” (243) – the narrative enacts the process of Bob repeatedly adopting himself in the search for family, the process ironic for its being located at the point when family is already formed. Yet, in being never-there but never-not-there, we see the abstractedness of family definitions and the uncertainty of knowing. If we accept that the narrative of “Christmas Memories” actively construct the family through its telling, the process through which the meaning of family is construed is also illuminated. The intertwining past and present narrative structure could therefore be read as the writing of a new chronology, creating a sense of lineage that becomes the family’s story, even as the stories featured within it (of Bob’s marriage and of his parents) present marital discord and the breakdown of families, revealing the recognition of family and desire for a connection *as* family to be distinct from the performances of family. The project of the narrative and its telling is therefore a means with which Bob provides himself with that

family, a notion that raises interesting implications for the way we understand family.

3. *Conclusion*

All three stories, indubitably different for their engagement with the notion of family, feature at their core an older narrative voice reciting childhood memories that is a re-viewing of the past through which they reinterpret the understanding of what family is. Their narration functioning as an act of reviewing discloses what is known of the family to turn that understanding in upon itself and interrogates those taken for granted understandings of family. The texts themselves ostensibly do not pose a challenge to heteronormative ideology, in all three, the form of a model nuclear family sustained through a married heterosexual couple is maintained till the end of the story: and it is precisely in this instance of deliberate upkeeping despite the internal contradictions that opens up new ways of viewing the family. The narrated familial stories in its act of recount provides a literary stepping away from the experiences of family history that even as is experienced forces its review. Families, which can only know themselves through memories and narration, thus discourage a reading of themselves as static or stable, situating the temporality that governs the knowledge of family as one in which interpretations of the past are witnessed and reread into the present.

CONCLUSION:
Re-viewing, Re-knowing Family

In thinking about families and at the end of this short exploration of fictional families, I find myself drawn to the last scene of Eleanor Wong's *Jointly and Severably*. While this dissertation does not explore that play, the plot traces the trajectories of problems of sexual infidelity coming to a head. In the final scene then, the thorny dynamics between the various characters is dramatically reflected in an over-crowded stage, when Ellen, her partner Zee, Zee's girlfriend, Ellen's daughter, Sam, all occupy the same space, and are all interconnected in different ways. Notwithstanding the miscommunication and unhappiness that led to the symptom of such a convoluted arrangement, the play ends on a heartfelt moment, with Ellen telling Zee "You are my family." (Wong 248). Ellen consoles Zee:

"It's alright, darling. Remember what Lesley always said? *There's no rulebook for us. No guide. No one to tell us how to live. Or how to die.* So who's to say there's only one model for a family or one way to love? For God's sake, look at me. Sam and Jon. Lesley. Us and our dwarfs. I've never exactly had the typical household. Why should I change in my old age?" (Wong 249 emphasis mine)

Most evidently, Ellen pointing out to Zee that family is many things to many people puts into words the underlying premise of this thesis, that is the socially constructed element inhered to the claim of family. Her list of the different experiences of kinship that she has experienced presents a diverse cast of lived models of family, all as valid as the other for her recognition as an experience of family that she treasures, the argument that I make at the end of Chapter 4. On that note, this moment is perfect for considering as the end to this project.

More than that though, this is a telling moment for another reason: Ellen's avowal given after Zee's betrayal – is neither an attempt to deny the complications nor a confession of love that marks a new beginning for their relationship – but an acceptance of the complications in family dynamics and experiences. Her assertion of being family at the end of the play is thus in essence the acme of doing family.

This dissertation looked to understand the meanings of family through the critical perspectives of display and being. For all the attention that scholars have given to thinking about Family, the private domain of family *relationships* is something that is left unattended to: social analyses thinking and relating to the ideology of Family are caught on the surface, and cannot get at the experience of family. My reading of the national rhetoric in Chapter 1 contextualizes the dynamics at play in the works of fiction to consider how each respond, anchoring the following chapters discussion of family. Pointing out how formulations of famil(ies) even in their difference turn on their comparison to Family as a way to legitimize their experiences of kinship, To step away from the binary of 'ab/normal' families, I looked to reveal the queerness of 'normal' families through literary writings of family, suggests that these present a site from which to consider ordinary experiences of family and hoping to show that family relations are actually "diverse, fluid and unresolved" (Stacey). Rather than consider the different type of gender dynamics in 'unconventional' families, I attempted to recast the dominant ideology surrounding these discussions to get at a more meaningful understanding of the complexities in determining what family means in Singapore. Since the family is always politicized, these ordinary experiences are in themselves noteworthy as a response to these official narratives. The workings of family that we are privy to in these fictional imaginations of the family puts into dialogue the opaque unified myth of family with the mutable experiences of family, and is what

suggests a complexity to understanding the family. While the goal might have been to expand meanings of family, it ought to be realized that this is merely a game of catch-up: families have always been diverse, and have always taken this many forms; these modes of doing and belonging are already lived, even as they remain under the surface and might go unrecognized or unnamed.

The glaring limitation of this project lies in the selection of texts: although looking to queer the normative Family, none of the selected texts selected feature accounts of queer or alternative family formations. Additionally, all the works in this project are written by Chinese, female authors (Su-chen Christine Lim, Eleanor Wong, Faith Ng). Although this was not a conscious choice, the decision to not expand the selection of texts to include amongst others, Koh Jee Leong's poem "In his other house", queer family formations in short stories such as "My Two Mothers" and other plays that explore queer themes include "Tango" by Joel Tan, Johann S Lee's "Quiet Time" was deliberate. This is to keep to the original impulse of the paper, which was an attempt to queer and destabilize the unremarked centre term of Family. As David Halperin working through the definition of what 'queer' meant has suggested: the notion of queer, like family, does not possess a referent. It is instead "by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant", in as much "there is nothing in particular to which queer necessarily refers" (62). While stretching the meaning of queerness presents a risk of diluting it as an identity category, this mode of thinking allows what, as Jessa Lingel writes, "a relational rejection of straight practices" (401). To include examples of queer families would therefore shift the focus of an insistent questioning of Family as a known category.

Additionally, responding to the thematic coherence of the thesis, as explained in Chapter 1's reading of a political/socio-cultural discourse of Family, Family is indubitably coded in

‘Chinese’ Confucian values, and in a discussion on doing, would open up questions of other manner of doing that would be inflected by racial categorization. This choice to limit to reading female authors is also done in consideration of the gendered roles within the Family. Studies done on the Singapore Family has emphasized the gendered social policies in place, with an undue emphasis on regulating the role of women, and with the discourse of Family disproportionately assigning responsibilities of Family to women. (Heng and Devan, 1999; Teo, 2015; Purushotam, 1998)

Ultimately, this project focused on strained familial relations that are situated within the family unit to consider how family is negotiated, and suggest that new meanings of family can be arrived at through a consideration of them as in the process of becoming.

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