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Yong, Ade Wernmei

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Chapter 6

Becoming Ellen Toh: The Politics of Visibility in *Invitation to Treat: the Eleanor Wong Trilogy*

by Wernmei Yong **Ade**

The matter of visibility of female same-sex relations occupies a central place in Eleanor Wong's trilogy of plays *Invitation to Treat*, comprising *Mergers and Accusations*, *Wills and Secession* and *Jointly and Severably*, as it does in studies of lesbian relationships in Singapore in general. While the obvious associations between visibility and "coming out" hardly call for explication, the degree to which lesbians in Singapore enjoy or have access to visibility does. Shawna Tang, for instance, remarks that while ethnographic studies of lesbians have appeared across Asia, the case of Singapore remains missing within these accounts¹. Tang credits this invisibility to how "Singaporean lesbians embody a more complicated model of transnational sexuality that neither assumes a position of local resistance nor global gay embodiment, but a contradictory, complicit and contingent negotiation of the local and the global."² Tang's thesis alludes to the complexities and difficulties of being gay in a country that continues to criminalize male homosexual activity. While Section 377A of the Penal Code is not actively enforced, and does not impinge upon female homosexual activity, it is however widely interpreted to make all forms of homosexuality illegal in Singapore³. Even so, lesbian women face other forms of discrimination, particularly where their material lives are concerned. Housing laws, marriage laws (which also determine whether women are eligible for IVF treatment), adoption laws, recognition of lesbian unions for taxation, care of children, access to care for an ill partner, issues of death and dying, wills, next-of-kin arrangements¹ etc., are just some of the structural impositions that define what being gay (for both men and women) means in Singapore. Eleanor Wong's plays tackle these issues head on; but what makes Wong's work particularly significant at the time it was written and produced, was the choice to locate the negotiation of lesbian

¹ Shawna Tang (2012), "Transnational Lesbian Identities: Lessons from Singapore?", *Queer Singapore: Illiberal Citizenship and Mediated Cultures*, edited by Audrey Yue and Jun Zubillaga-Pow (Hong Kong University Press, Hong Kong), pp. 83-96, 83.

² Ibid., 84

³ Ibid., 87

identity within the legally sanctified space of the family unit, and in doing so, to present lesbian relationships in a healthy, acceptable and normal light.

Written and first produced in the 1990s, Wong's plays emerged at a time when Singapore was attempting to reinvent itself as a global city. The start of the 1990s marked a shift in the nation's socio-political landscape: in 1991, Lee Kuan Yew, longstanding Prime Minister and Singapore's chief architect since independence, was succeeded by Goh Chok Tong. As observed by Poon, Holden and Lim, "[t]he patriarchal state epitomised and embodied by the overwhelmingly dominant Lee was replaced by a more avuncular mode of governing. The new political dispensation presided over by Goh took pains to advertise itself as more consultative and welcoming of different views"⁴. As far as what the "welcoming of different views" meant for non-normative sexualities, such a shift can be read in terms of a turn towards what Audrey Yue calls "illiberal pragmatism", understood as "the ambivalence between non-liberalism and neoliberalism, rationalism and irrationalism that governs the illegality of homosexuality in Singapore"⁵. In an interview with Time Magazine in 2003, then Prime Minister Goh spoke about a quiet change in policy towards gay employment in public service, in response to one interviewer's observation that the criminalisation of male homosexuality would exclude a "certain proportion of foreign talent." Where in the past gay individuals would not have been employed to sensitive positions in the government, it was now open to doing so as long as gay individuals declare their sexuality openly. Goh had explained that disclosing one's sexuality would avoid risks of being blackmailed, an explanation that belies the fact that full disclosure would allow for ease of policing and the surveillance of homosexual bodies. Goh had also attributed the apparent openness towards gays in public service to the rather patronising acceptance that some are just "born that way" and being a practical government means "we allow those things."⁶

⁴ Angelia Poon, Philip Holden and Shirley Geok-lin Lim (2009) *Writing Singapore: An Historical Anthology of Singapore Literature* (NUS Press Singapore and National Arts Council Singapore), 360.

⁵ Audrey Yue (2012) "Queer Singapore: A Critical Introduction", *Queer Singapore: Illiberal Citizenship and Mediated Cultures*, edited by Audrey Yue and Jun Zubillaga-Pow (Hong Kong University Press, Hong Kong), pp. 1-28, 2

⁶ http://www.yawningbread.org/apdx_2003/imp-116.htm. Extract of PM Goh Chok Tong's interview with Time magazine. This extract was released by the

The carefulness with which Goh publicly acknowledged the contribution gays can make towards nation building, and the manner in which homosexuality was presented as a form of otherness (“We are born this way and they are born that way but they are like you and me”), betrays an ambivalent attitude towards gays that characterises the illiberal pragmatism identified by Yue. Set against this backdrop of ambivalence, the reservations and anxieties about coming out expressed by Wong’s main protagonist Ellen Toh, though understandable, stand in contrast to the ease with which her English partner Lesley embraces her own sexuality. This chapter evaluates the first two plays of Wong’s trilogy, as exemplifying coming out for the Singaporean lesbian woman as a “contradictory, complicit and contingent negotiation of the local and the global”⁷, rendered through Ellen and Lesley’s relationship. Wong’s plays eschew the reified notion of personhood as a basis for justifying equal access to visibility, in favour of what Roberto Esposito identifies as a practice of “the impersonal” that values “multiplicity and contamination over identity and discrimination”⁸. This distinction is also the difference between “being” gay and “doing”⁹ gay as outlined by Gary Dowsett, where the former refers to asserting sexual identity in the face of oppression, and the latter to questioning and deconstructing sexual identity¹⁰. I read the contradictory negotiation of the local and the global, evident in complex performances of sexuality by lesbian women, as epitomising Esposito’s practice of the impersonal, and Dowsett’s “doing” gay. In the wider context of the cultural representation of female same-sex relations, Wong’s plays also augur an emergent visibility of lesbian bodies whose absence had until then gone unremarked upon in popular culture. As Poon, Holden and Lim assert, the 1990s also experienced “a certain liberalisation of the arts [...] alongside the continued exercise of control through less obviously punitive measures and more indirect hegemonic means.”¹¹ Only six years before in 1988, the Ministry of Community Development had withdrawn funding for the staging of Wong’s *Jackson on a Jaunt* and Chay Yew’s *Ten Little*

Prime Minister's Office to the press, at the request of the press, on or before 3 July 2003.

⁷ Tang, 84

⁸ Ibid., 145

⁹ Yue, 15.

¹⁰ Michael Flood, interview with Gary Dowsett, “You Show me Yours” *XY: men, sex, politics*. Autumn 94 (Canberra, Australia) p. 24-26, 25.

¹¹ Poon, Holden and Lim, 360.

Indians by Theatreworks, outraged that homosexuality was being put forward in the plays as “a natural and acceptable form of sexuality”¹². The almost one hundred and eighty degree turn in attitude in those five short years towards the presentation of non-normative sexual relations within the otherwise acceptable boundaries of family life again bears testimony to the “illiberal pragmatism” identified by Yue.

In analysing this question of visibility granted or obscured by various social, legal and political structures, I have found the reading of Roberto Esposito’s understanding of personhood as the “dispositif” of the person¹³ against Monica Casper and Lisa Moore’s conceptualisation of an ocular ethic useful. The ocular ethic is a critical lens used to examine the ways in which bodies are rendered visible or invisible by public discourse. Its aim is to “reveal, resituate and recuperate” bodies rendered invisible, or bodies gone missing, through the processes of “focusing, magnification, and visualising”¹⁴. Citing Judith Butler, Casper and Moore remind us that positioning a particular body involves a “process of materialisation that stabilises over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity and surface.”¹⁵ This effect of a body fixed in a particular time and space, in turn informs how one is made present or visible. Both these processes of situating and visualising bodies are thus disciplinary fields that determine the legitimacy of bodies. Wong’s plays address the ways public discourse can render certain bodies invisible, turning them into bodies that *do not* matter or, in a manner of speaking, render them missing; at the same time, public discourse can also be appropriated to grant visibility to missing bodies. While I make no claims to Wong doing the work of ocular ethics, I do see her plays as attempting to “reveal, resituate and recuperate” lesbian bodies through a self-reflexive staging and performing of lesbian experience, understood as a strategy for subverting the existing structures that determine the degree of one’s visibility.

The politics of visibility and personhood

¹² <http://www.fridae.asia/gay-news/2006/08/01/1680.a-look-back-on-gay-theatre-in-singapore>

¹³ Roberto Esposito (2012) *Third Person: Politics of life and philosophy of the impersonal*, translated by Zakiya Hanafi, (Polity Press, UK & USA), 9.

¹⁴ Monica J. Casper and Lisa Jean Moore (2009) *Missing Bodies: The Politics of Visibility* (New York University Press, New York & London), 15

¹⁵ Judith Butler, cited in Casper and Moore, 7

In developing an ocular ethic, Casper and Moore are primarily interested in how contemporary society “exhibit[s] and celebrate[s] some bodies, while erasing and denying others,”¹⁶ a process that also determines the legitimacy of bodies. The ocular ethic is based on a way of looking that “refuses to assign political value to some bodies at the expense of others, one that treats ‘human subjects’ in the fullness of their lived, embodied experiences.”¹⁷ The focus on the practices and operations of erasure in Casper and Moore’s work is emphasised by the notion of bodies being, what they call, “*affectively missing*,”¹⁸ referring to how bodies that might have once been visible, are now lost. One such practice that contributes to the “going missing” of bodies in Singapore, specifically homosexual bodies, is the erasure and re-writing of Singapore’s queer history. Aaron Ho, for instance, identifies a little known fact of Singapore history: the specific importation of Hainanese boys to service the needs of male migrants, in the wake of a ban on female prostitution in Singapore in the late 19th century. He goes on to point out that while “Singapore’s history of robust heterosexual prostitution is enshrined and even winked at with a sense of pride [...] queer existence on Bugis street is quietly effaced.”¹⁹ If visible bodies, “in materializing the norm, qualify as bodies that matter,”²⁰ then bodies that do not materialise the norm cease to matter, or go missing. The razing of Bugis Street in 1985, where drag queens and transsexuals solicited during the 1950s-1980s, testifies to the institutional erasure of such bodies. A more recent example can be found in the decision by the National Library Board in 2014 to remove and pulp three children’s books (*And Tango Makes Three*, *The White Swan Express: A Story About Adoption*, and *Who’s In My Family: All About Our Families*) deemed threatening to the pro-family stance taken by the State. An ethical project like Casper and Moore’s thus focuses on recuperating bodies such as those that used to populate Bugis Street prior to “going missing”, and those that fall outside the norms of what constitutes a family.

¹⁶ Casper and Moore, 3.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 14

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 3

¹⁹ Aaron K. H. Ho (2012) “How to Bring Singaporeans Up Straight (1960s-1990s)”, *Queer Singapore: Illiberal Citizenship and Mediated Cultures*, edited by Audrey Yue and Jun Zubillaga-Pow (Hong Kong University Press, Hong Kong), 31

²⁰ Butler, cited in Casper and Moore, 8

In addition to granting visibility to bodies gone missing, the ocular ethic is also meant to supplement fields of study that tended to “reduce the understanding of human bodies and experiences to auditing operations. Establishing rates, odds, ratios, and cost/benefit breakdown of bodies [that] erases personhood and subjectivity in the name of the aggregate.”²¹ Casper and Moore thus imply that current academic discourse on bodies reproduce apparatuses of erasure, a short-sightedness their ocular ethic hopes to correct. One however questions their claims to enabling erased personhoods and subjectivities to be seen and heard “in situ and on their own terms.”²² Granting marginalised groups access to modes of representation has always been viewed with suspicion. Casper and Moore anticipate such objections, acknowledging that “on the one hand visibility can mean legitimacy, rescue from obscurity or other aspects of exploitation. On the other, visibility can create reification of work, opportunities for surveillance, or come to increase group communication and process burdens.”²³ They also recognise forms of resistance, for instance from postcolonial feminist Trinh Minh-Ha, who views privileging vision as a dominant way of knowing that is hegemonic. To Trinh’s objections we might add those of Gayatri Spivak, who takes a similar stance where speaking is concerned. These objections can be traced to what lies at the heart of Casper and Moore’s ocular ethic, to what Roberto Esposito refers to as a “privileged reference to the notion of the person,” (Esposito 2013, 113) a notion central to any discussion of rights-based politics, such as lobbying for equal access to the law. This is where an intervention by Esposito’s understanding of personhood into the politics of visibility informing the ocular ethic can produce some fruitful results towards appreciating what coming out, or becoming visible, constitutes for the lesbian woman in Singapore.

A closer evaluation of the ocular ethic which aims to restore dignity to the subject as person reveals an internal contradiction, exposed when we consider Esposito’s understanding of the person, as the “dispositif” of the person²⁴ where the term *dispositif* refers to various institutional, administrative and physical mechanisms and systems of knowledge that not only ensures an exercise of power over, but also circumscribes and constitutes, the person. Now if,

²¹ Casper and Moore, 9

²² Casper and Moore, 15

²³ Susan Leigh Star and Anselm Strauss, cited in Casper and Moore, 12

as Butler concedes, bodies that matter or visible bodies are bodies that self-police, being subject and subjectivated to the law; then as *dispositif*, a person must be a body that matters, or a visible body, one already within the law. As *dispositif*, Esposito's conception of the person shares the constructivism of Butler's notion of a body that matters: both are constitutive of self-policing, and subject to a degree of self-objectification. Opposed to the perception of the person understood as "whole, master of itself and of its acts,"²⁵ as a potentially universal and transcendental notion capable of extending fundamental rights to every human being, Esposito's conception of person as *dispositif* highlights "its performative role [...] a role productive of real effects."²⁶ He traces the concept of person back to its origins, where it had referred both to the mask and to the face that wore the mask, where "through the interpretation of a role, by molding an individual that, little by little, the mask was imprinted on the face of the wearer, until they corresponded in every detail."²⁷

Understood thus as *dispositif*, an ocular ethic grounded in personhood would necessarily incur the risk of, if not imply, the impossibility of allowing bodies to be visible, "in situ and on their own terms" as Casper and Moore had hoped. Citing the work of Hannah Arendt, Esposito points out that the law allows entrance only to those who are *already* part of a political community, which makes the paradox clear: only a person (as *dispositif*) is allowed entry into the law, which paradoxically disqualifies anyone not *already* within the law:

For those who have been excluded because they do not fall into any category, therefore, the only way to get back inside is negative: by breaking the law rather than by complying with it. In other words, since the law will not admit them through any positive avenue, their only option is to violate it. Only this way, by voluntarily taking on the status of the criminal, by losing a state of innocence that is impossible to keep because the law does not

²⁵ Jacques Maritain cited in Esposito, 72. Jacques Maritain had a leading role in the drafting of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 9

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 74

recognise it, can someone with no other prerogatives come to enjoy at least the rights granted even to offenders.²⁸

Arendt's observations are spot on in describing the relationship between gays and the law in Singapore, where gays are compelled, through Act 377A of the Penal Code, to voluntarily take on the status of a criminal. This recognition in the negative granted the gay person, presents a constraint placed on being gay that concurs with Loretta Chan's hypothesis that "the only depictions of lesbians and gays in Singapore that are sanctioned and tolerated, albeit with copious cuts and advisories, are if the portrayals of the LGBT community are unsavoury and contentions, thereby reifying the need for government scrutiny and public surveillance."²⁹ Clearly, there is no provision within the law for being gay, specifically a gay *person* (a visible body that matters) in any positive way. In place of privileging the notion of reified personhood, Esposito advocates instead a practice of the impersonal:

...the impersonal is situated, rather, at the confines of the personal; on the lines of resistance, to be exact, which cut through its territory, thus preventing, or at least opposing, the functioning of its exclusionary dispositif.³⁰

A self-conscious doubling occurs in the practice of the impersonal, where the individual, rather than become the mask s/he wears, becomes "the actor of one's own events."³¹ The individual actualises events by "counter-actualising" them, meaning s/he either enters into opposition with the original meaning or in duplicating it, repeating it, transforms meaning into its opposite. Extrapolating from Esposito, I thus understand Dowsett's "doing" gay as exemplifying the practice of the impersonal that effects a counter-actualising of what it means to "being" gay. In the absence of any space to legitimately and positively *be* gay, one must consider the option of "doing" gay, through a practice of the impersonal. This involves focusing on the ever-shifting margin, on that point of intersection when a (gay) person *becomes* a (gay) person. The practice

²⁸ Ibid., 70.

²⁹ Loretta Chen (2012) "The Kids Are *Not* All Right: The Curious Case of Sapphic Censorship in City-State Singapore", *Queer Singapore: Illiberal Citizenship and Mediated Cultures*, edited by Audrey Yue and Jun Zubillaga-Pow (Hong Kong University Press, Hong Kong), pp. 175-186, 176.

³⁰ Ibid., 17

³¹ Ibid., 143

of the impersonal is particularly apt towards reading Wong's plays where characters are seen to be actors of their own events, and where multiple layers of mirroring and self-reflexive playing forestall the process of stabilisation that produces reified persons subject to surveillance and policing. If public discourse delimits what being gay, or what being a gay *person* is or can be, then Wong's plays subvert these structures through a practice of the impersonal. Key to this practice is Wong's appropriation of legal discourse to speak about an experience rendered invisible by that very same discourse, understood as an instance of appropriation in the ironic mode that reflects the contradictory and paradoxical experience characterising lesbian existence in Singapore. Wong subverts the structures that delimit what it means to identify as gay (*being* gay) in Singapore, precisely by transforming into its opposite what these structures mean for the gay individual (*doing* gay).

Doing gay, becoming person: the case of Ellen Toh

In Singapore, matters of law and society that delineate being gay are anchored in ideologies of family values and heterosexual social cohesion. As such, one's sexuality, as David Halperin points out, "is not a somatic fact; it is a cultural effect"³². Citing Foucault, Halperin draws attention to sexuality as a set of effects produced in human bodies, experienced as a product of discriminatory social, political and legal restrictions in place. For instance, gay persons experience their sexuality as an effect of matrimonial laws that do not recognize their union. Heterosexual persons hardly question what they assume to be a natural right to legal union; gay persons, on the other hand, are *made* gay through being denied the right to legal union, just as they are, recalling Arendt, *made* gay through Section 377A of the Penal Code. This has an impact on other aspects of their material reality, which further impinges on their access to visibility. One respondent interviewed by Tang, living with her partner in her family's HDB³³ flat, for instance, ruminates, "If housing becomes easier in Singapore, I guess a lot more

³² David M. Halperin (1993) "Is There a History of Sexuality?" *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, edited by Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale & David M. Halperin, (Routledge, New York & London) 416-431, 416.

³³ HDB refers to Housing and Development Board, the statutory board of the Ministry of National Development responsible for public housing in Singapore. Up to eighty percent of Singapore's resident population live in HDB accommodation.

gay people would come out.”³⁴ The concern regarding accessibility to housing for individuals whose living arrangements do not materialise the norm, saw recent revival in debates over the availability of public housing for single mothers. While not made with respect to lesbian women, Minister for Family Affairs Tan Chuan Jin’s announcement in July 2015 that the government would give more help to single mothers but not grant them equal rights as married couples, is grounded in the same pro-family discriminatory practice that does not legally recognise the union of two gay individuals, thereby excluding them from being eligible for new State-subsidised flats. While Tan admits that as traditional family structures change calling for policies to be relooked at, the long-standing principle of the Singapore Government will remain that policies should support and encourage parenthood within the context of marriage. In his statement, Tan expressed concern over the kind of signalling a change in policy would send, but mitigated his concern with his personal belief that giving the same help to single mothers would unlikely encourage “that particular lifestyle to develop.”³⁵ Tan’s apparent openness to alternative family structures is undercut by his reference to these arrangements as a “lifestyle” choice, implying the onus of being excluded is to be borne entirely by the one who has made the choice to live that way. Treated as a choice that one intends and acts upon, exclusion from law inadvertently becomes part of the process of self-policing that characterises being gay in Singapore.

These issues of exclusion, marginalisation and desire for visibility lie at the heart of Eleanor Wong’s *Mergers and Accusations* and *Wills and Secessions*. As a successful young urban professional in the 1990s who is gay, Ellen’s characterisation speaks directly to the non-normative sexual bodies whose contributions towards Singapore’s growth as a global city-state were beginning to be acknowledged, but whose presence was still marginal, merely tolerated, and certainly regulated. Ellen’s desire for visibility as a gay person lies in conflict with the heteronormative values she grew up with, resulting in her choice not to openly disclose her sexuality for fear of stigmatisation. Arguably, it is this desire for visibility that perhaps explains her willingness, albeit with some reluctance, to marry Jon. In one of their final clandestine

³⁴ Cited in Tang 2012, 92

³⁵ <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/coordinated-support-for/2012662.html>

meetings in the airport, Ellen confesses to Jon that she had never been able to “kiss someone goodbye at the airport. [...] Never even held hands in public. Does a tree make a sound when it falls if there’s no one around to hear it? Does a relationship exist if it isn’t known to or acknowledged by anybody other than the immediate participants?”³⁶ Being in a heterosexual relationship allows her to publicly demonstrate her love for another person, a visibility cemented in her marriage to Jon. Heterosexual coupledness serves as a surrogate experience, where, as one half of a partnership legally recognised by the law, Ellen now enjoys the visibility that she is otherwise denied as a gay person. Her newly acquired visibility is further emphasised by the display of pictures of herself, Jon and Samantha growing as a family unit: “*During the interval or just at the start of the second act, show the following family pictures with the indicated handwritten notes of when they were taken, etc.*”³⁷ The displayed pictures trace the path from wedding to honeymoon, to being at home; Ellen pregnant at four months, Samantha at three weeks old and again at three years old, and Ellen making partner at her law firm, a visual affirmation of the socially acceptable family unit, and of its members within.

Lesley’s perception of Ellen’s marriage to Jon as a “marriage of convenience” and Ellen’s facile reply that “there are days when he finds me extremely inconvenient,”³⁸ however expose the lie beneath the façade of the healthy, normal family life she and Jon lead. Beneath the performance of heterosexual coupledness, theirs is a queer family, both in terms of the subversion of conventional gender roles and the permissible sexual arrangements that repudiates the veneer of normality they take pains to preserve. Jon voluntarily quits his career and stays at home to parent Samantha and manage the household, while Ellen takes on the role of provider and continues to pursue her profession, finally making partner at her firm. Ellen is also at liberty to have sexual affairs with other women, as long as she continues to put family first. As legally married persons (in Esposito’s sense of *dispositif*) in the eyes of the law, both Jon and Ellen act their roles out as husband and wife, in a complex heterosexual performance which includes the enactment of gender role reversals. In repeating and reproducing gender roles in a way that

³⁶ Eleanor Wong, “Mergers and Accusations”, *Invitation to Treat The Eleanor Wong Trilogy*, edited by Ng Kwang Cheng (First Fruits, Singapore), pp.11-106, 47.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 58.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 75.

subverts them, Jon and Ellen's performance constitutes a practice of the impersonal, entering into opposition with the original meaning of these roles, to produce new subjectivities that function as forms of resistance. This is particularly true of Ellen, who is now able to "have it all,"³⁹ hinting that the arrangements have, as Jon promised, made "[her] dreams come true,"⁴⁰ perhaps at the expense of Jon's, and later Lesley's, happiness. The title *Mergers and Accusations* is itself a play on the legal terms mergers⁴¹ and acquisitions⁴² where the conditions under which Ellen and Jon marry allude to the "merger" of the title, in which Ellen arguably benefits from the arrangement more so than Jon. Before they decide to separate, Jon confesses that "I don't like what I've become with you, Ellen. My whole life revolves around you and Sam. I have nothing else. I feel useless and redundant."⁴³ Wong suggests that the marriage contract is, for all intents and purposes, no different to that of a merger, where one party always benefits at the expense of another. Incidentally, when we first meet Ellen and Jon, they are both working on a merger between two companies, and the conversation they have at the end of Act one, when Jon has asked Ellen to marry him, resembles the scrutinisation of a due diligence checklist prior to two parties entering into a contract.

That they are merely playing at happy family is also apparent in the various forms of mirroring throughout the play, one of which is the parallel between the merger of the two corporations Tomatsu and Wan Cheong Holdings, and Jon and Ellen's marriage. Constant references to happily ever after, dreams coming true, and other allusions to popular narratives of heteronormative romances further stress their playing at happy family. 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

³⁹ Ibid., 87.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 56.

⁴¹ A merger refers to "the fusion or absorption of one thing or right into another; generally spoken of a case where one of the subjects is of less dignity or importance than the other. Here the less important ceases to have an independent existence." Law Dictionary: [What is MERGER? definition of MERGER \(Black's Law Dictionary\)](http://thelawdictionary.org/merger/) <http://thelawdictionary.org/merger/>

⁴² An acquisition refers to "The purchase of one company by another in order to fulfill particular strategic goals related to revenues, market share, product/service offerings, or competition." Law Dictionary: [What is ACQUISITION ? definition of ACQUISITION \(Black's Law Dictionary\)](http://thelawdictionary.org/acquisition/) <http://thelawdictionary.org/acquisition/>

⁴³ Ibid. 100.

falsity, of their performance. While not metatheatre in the strict sense of the term, the many instances of mirroring throughout the play certainly suggest a self-reflexivity similar to that of meatheatre, in which persons are aware of their own theatricality, and where life itself is seen as already theatricalised. Act one, for instance, opens with a mock marriage proposal, with Jon on his knees, asking Ellen and Mary to marry him: “Marry me, marry me. My glorious princesses. Make me the happiest man on earth. Marry me and have my children.”⁴⁴ Mary jokingly reminds him that polygamy is a crime, and that she is already a married woman. More than comic relief, the opening scene introduces possible unions that do not fit into an acceptable norm: polygamy and adultery. Mary proceeds to remind Jon and Ellen of the christening of their godson the coming weekend, to which Jon glibly replies: “If I agree to be godfather, does that make us husband and wife, mother?”⁴⁵ This pretend play on queer family making prepares the stage for the queerly straight family of Jon and Ellen later. Through this self-reflexive playing, Wong inverts the meaning and value of dominant ideas about sexuality, through an appropriation of the master discourse, giving it a new and positive turn, moreover one that can benefit Ellen’s strategic goals. In doing so, Wong rejects the hegemony of dominant stereotypes about being gay, as well as stereotypes about being heterosexual.

This playing at family is, I want to suggest, part of the negotiation that constitutes doing gay in Singapore. Tang observes that because of limited access to housing, a large number of lesbian women are compelled to engage in complex heterosexual performances within the home, in order to pragmatically navigate within the heteronormative family unit⁴⁶. The structure of a play within a play, or playing within playing, means that the lines between what is authentic, which essentially only means legal, and what is put on (the mock proposal at the start; the parodic performance of walking down the aisle at the end; the sudden bursts into song and dance routines from iconic heteronormative cultural productions) is blurred; both marriages are equally performances, and equally fictional.

Just as her marriage to Jon is beginning to show cracks, Ellen meets Lesley, who later becomes her lifelong partner. Lesley is from England, and unlike Ellen is not shy about

⁴⁴ Ibid., 17.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 18.

⁴⁶ Tang, 93.

disclosing the fact that she is gay. Ellen's resistance to coming out is apparent in the conversation she and Lesley have in Act Two, where the differing attitudes towards the matter of coming out fall almost too neatly into a binary that pits the local (read naïve and constrained) against the global (read progressive and liberated):

Ellen

I appreciate that you may be used to a certain level of directness where you come from but...

Lesley

Ellen, at the risk of sounding naïve and simplistic, being in the closet is being in the closet wherever you are.

Ellen

I think I would rather not continue this conversation....

Lesley

(Very gently)

What are you afraid of?

Ellen

(Suddenly angry)

Are you kidding? Do you really need to ask me that? Don't you know how people talk behind your back?

Lesley

Oh, they're quite willing to talk in front of me too.

Ellen

And it doesn't bother you?

Lesley

Sometimes. Though I know it shouldn't.

Ellen

Well, it bothers me.

Lesley

You realise that no one can threaten you with the exposure of something you willingly disclose.

Ellen

It's different here. I don't expect you to understand.

Lesley

Try me.

Slight silence.

Ellen

I've seen the mask of polite distaste come over the faces of people I thought were my friends enough to know that complete openness is not an option.

Lesley

People are usually uncomfortable with something they don't understand.

Ellen

Well, I don't see why I should be the one to educate them.

Lesley

If you don't, who's going to?⁴⁷

The intervention of the relatively freer “Lesley, the lesbian lawyer from London”⁴⁸ representing Western tropes of coming out and gaining visibility, into the life of the anxiety ridden closet gay Ellen, can be construed as a form of neo-colonial liberation, as evinced in the exchange above. Although Ellen eventually moves to London to be with Lesley, she does however return to Singapore, with Lesley, in the second play *Wills and Secessions*, where she is forced once more to negotiate the difficulties of coming out on home ground. The return presents an important moment in her development as a gay person, to address issues about her sexual identity that were unresolved at the end of the first play. The final act of the first play concludes with Jon and Ellen in a parodic performance of walking down the aisle into marriage, one that mirrors Jon's performance at the start of the play: “*They link arms and do the Wizard of*

⁴⁷ Ibid., 73-74.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 62

Oz walk. At the end of the aisle, they stop, embarrassed, awkward, wrong. They part."⁴⁹ Ellen has come full circle, but this time both her and Jon play with an added awareness of the bad faith that props up their performance of heterosexual coupledness. If playing at family constitutes part of negotiating one's identity within the bounds of a deeply entrenched heteronormativity, as Tang's interview of local lesbian women suggest, then Wong's play of complex straight and queer performances effects a deconstruction of sexual identity itself. This might also offer us some insight into Ellen's query: does a relationship exist if it isn't known to or acknowledged by anybody other than the immediate participants? A relationship might be acknowledged by everybody and the law, but it need not exist as it is recognised, as the queering of the apparently straight family unit demonstrates; conversely, relationships that do not enjoy legitimate status do exist as real connections formed on the basis of love, as Ellen's later commitment to Lesley demonstrates. We are thus compelled to question the role of the law and the arbitrariness with which it grants visibility to certain bodies while excluding others.

It is in the second play *Wills and Secessions*, when Ellen and Lesley (who is dying of cancer) are forced to move back to Singapore, that Ellen confronts the realities and the practicalities of what it means to love another woman. For Ellen, as with the women interviewed by Tang, one of the key difficulties about being gay in Singapore, is the "genuine question of how one might pragmatically live with one's family."⁵⁰ This issue is addressed in the second play, with reference to working hard to bridge differing attitudes towards sexuality and family, but also in terms of care-giving responsibilities and dealing with the practicalities of a dying spouse not legally recognised as such. *Wills and Secessions* opens with the recent death from cancer of Ellen and her sister Grace's mother, and of them going through her old things, sorting out their mother's insurance policies, title deeds, what to do with the house and the money in her bank account. As with the first play, the title *Wills and Secession* is a play on two terms usually used together in legal discourse, wills and succession, referring to a situation where in the absence of a will, what is left by the deceased will be given away based on the Succession Act. In the case of Lesley and Ellen, whose marriage is not legally recognised, making a will is all the more urgent because they do not fall within the purview of the Succession Act. But the will of

⁴⁹ Ibid., 105.

⁵⁰ Tang, 91.

the title can also refer to the power of choosing one's own actions and the power to be in control of one's own actions. If we take the second meaning of will, we might then read the secession⁵¹ in the title to refer to Ellen's withdrawal from the heteronormative ideologies that, through a process of othering, define what it means to be gay.

These heteronormative ideologies produce in Ellen feelings of shame and rejection that she comes to associate with being gay, feelings so strong that at one point Lesley admits "I haven't been made to feel ashamed about what I am for a long time, Ellen. But sometimes with you..."⁵² These ideologies also underpin the ongoing conflict between Grace and Ellen, and the different views both women have towards the idea of family. Ellen tries to make Grace see that her family with Lesley is just as legitimate or as Grace's family with Gary, or the family they grew up in. When she and Lesley get married, Grace does not show up, a gesture of rejection Ellen interprets as her family having forsaken her. In the absence of support from her natural sister, Ellen turns to the community of gay women, sisters through affinity, for emotional support. Grace's insistence that Ellen and Lesley are not *really* a family, at least not in the sense that she and Gary are, is grounded in a discourse of legality that, as shown in the first play, proves quite arbitrary in which relationships it chooses to recognise. This is something Grace comes to realise by the end of the play: "I can't help but rejoice knowing that these past few years my cranky sister finally found someone who could put up with her biting tongue and smarting wit. How could I close my heart to a love like that?"⁵³ Ellen's triumph must however be taken with a pinch of salt; Grace's response to Ellen's disavowal of natural family ties cuts through layers of self-justification to get to the core of Ellen's problem: "You always have to make it about being gay. [...] Why does it always have to be about being gay? [...] You used being gay as an excuse to shirk the hard work it takes to be part of the family." To this end, returning to Singapore is a necessary move towards Ellen's growth as a lesbian woman: that coming to terms with her gay identity means working hard at *doing* gay, rather than running

⁵¹ The term refers to "withdrawing from a membership in a group or organisation." Law Dictionary: [What is SECESSION? definition of SECESSION \(Black's Law Dictionary\)](http://thelawdictionary.org/secession/) <http://thelawdictionary.org/secession/>

⁵² Wong, 88

⁵³ Eleanor Wong, "Wills and Secessions" *Invitation to Treat The Eleanor Wong Trilogy*, edited by Ng Kwang Cheng (First Fruits, Singapore), p.101-170, 170.

away because of the shame she is made to feel about being gay. Ellen is brought back home to face up to the complexities of her own lesbian existence, as she is placed once more within a queer family arrangement, where she has to look after her father, the patriarchal figurehead of the traditional Chinese family, and her lesbian partner Lesley, who is dying of cancer.

Upon her death, Lesley leaves a will, a portion of which reads:

I wanted to write it all down. That you would have the right to choose what I wear, what wood the coffins' made of, what kind of funeral I should have. So that no one could interfere. No one can take away any right you have over me just because I am gone.⁵⁴

Ironically, Lesley appeals to the law to ensure that in death, Ellen will be recognised as the one with rights over her, even if in life, that same law had denied both women that right. In the act of making her will, Lesley appropriates the very discourse that in life had denied them visibility as a married couple. Lesley's writing of the will thus constitutes a final gesture of the impersonal, in transforming into its opposite what legal structures signify for the gay individual – exclusion, invisibility, erasure and criminalisation - thus effecting a counter-actualisation of what it means to be gay. In a country where there is no provision for the gay person to be recognised in a positive relation to the law, Lesley's will that grants Ellen the power to assert her right over her lover thus makes an emphatic, though poignant, statement about gay visibility.

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⁵⁴ Ibid., 168

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