Of *Diminishing Memories* and *Old Places*:
Singaporean Films and the Work of
Archiving Landscape

Gaik Cheng Khoo
School of Modern Languages and Cultures
University of Nottingham, Malaysia

Abstract

The Singapore socio-cultural and historical landscape has undergone such rapid development and constant change that it has spurred a strong interest in heritage and nostalgia. This paper considers the role of digital independent Singaporean documentaries as part of "an ecology of associated hypomnesic milieus" (Bernard Stiegler), more specifically their role in archiving the disappearing and disappeared Singaporean landscape. This ecology of memory consists of blogs, social networking sites, and other uses of digital technology and the Internet. The personal stories found here include those of growing up in Singapore as late as the 1980s, and assert a sense of continuity and belonging, an affective experience derived from occupying Singapore's past. I suggest that rather than merely documenting, archiving, and recreating the past and present, some of these nostalgia projects in effect act as premature archives, mourning a future loss and farewelling the present. But can nostalgia be productive? In what ways and for whom?

Keywords

Introduction

This paper begins with the premise that the changing Singaporean landscape is the most highly and visibly contested terrain in the media and popular imagination today. The increasing population density through immigration (5.31 million in mid-2012, projected to be 6.9 million by 2030),[1] and the rapid urbanization and physical transformation of the city through demolition of old buildings and construction of taller and higher-density buildings, land reclamation, public works construction, and constant renovations, have disoriented and estranged the locals. Space in the city as experienced by long-time Singaporean residents seems to be shrinking and ever-changing, spurring an urgent desire to document the present and remember the past. A proliferating number of blogs, documentaries, and films contribute to this growing archive. The whole endeavor to archive Singaporean architecture and its historical and socio-cultural landscape has become more democratic and popular, due to developments in digital recording devices (video cameras, mobile phones), the Internet, and social media. In this paper, I consider the role of digital independent documentaries like *Diminishing Memories* and *Old Places* as part of what Bernard Stiegler calls "an ecology of associated hypomnesic milieus" (Stiegler 84), that is, technical memory aids or memory devices external to the human brain that help articulate an embodied way of remembering (anamnesis). These civic actions, some fostered by calls from the state for public participation and some quite independent, are mainly motivated by nostalgia. They include personal stories of growing up in Singapore as late as the 1980s, and assert a sense of continuity and belonging, an affective experience derived from occupying Singapore's past. This collective strategy indirectly marks its identity and difference from migrants new to Singapore who do not share such affective ties. I suggest that rather than merely documenting, archiving, recreating the past and present, some of these nostalgia projects act as hospices housing the soon-to-be-dead subjects, facilitating visits and goodbyes to the marked-for-death. This makes them premature archives, mourning a future loss and farewelling the present. For example, it had already been estimated that half of the forty-five locations filmed in *Old Places 2* would be demolished by the time the film would

---

[1] For more information, see "S'pore Population Up at 5.31 Million, 82% Residents Live in HDB Flats" published by *Channel NewsAsia* on 28 Sept. 2012: <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/singaporelocalnews/view/1228473/1/.html>.

be released in June 2012 (Vasko).[2] How useful then is nostalgia? I conclude that nostalgia is productive in providing Singaporeans temporal and spatial anchoring. But for the state, nostalgia projects usefully articulate the idea that Singaporean identity can be split into the historical and geographical (and still function). Thus the geographical landscape can remain the domain of the present future, understood to revolve around economic development, while the past is relegated into digital archives.

This paper is divided into three sections. First I briefly discuss the Singapore state's shifting strategies with regard to urban conservation and development, and how space (its use and meanings) is constantly being negotiated and renegotiated between citizens and the state. The second section deals with the interconnected roles of blogs, social media, and film in forming "an ecology of associated hypomnesic milieus," or the ways in which these "milieus" collectively function to document and archive the Singapore landscape through articulating embodied and affective ways of remembering. The last section discusses the question as to whether nostalgia can be productive if "its enactment in practice is oriented towards the present and the future as well as towards the past" (Blunt 722).

Development: Attitudes and Strategies

The premise of this paper, namely that the ever-changing Singaporean landscape has emerged as the most highly and visibly contested terrain in the media and popular imagination today, is already very clear from the current news coverage in Singapore of campaigns to save the Bukit Brown Cemetery[3] and convert the former KTM Malayan railway line into a Green Corridor.[4] Although these two

---

[2] *Old Places 2* was renamed *Old Romances* and premiered at the National Museum of Singapore in mid-December of 2012.

[3] While only one section of the cemetery is being destroyed and less than 4,000 graves disinterred to make way for road construction beginning in early 2013, the whole cemetery is slated for redevelopment to make way for a housing district (Chua). This cemetery houses the graves of Singapore's early pioneers (the earliest from 1833). Activists lobbying for its preservation as cultural heritage also warn that destroying the forest would interfere with the bio-diversity, increase global warming and the risk of flooding. See <http://sosbukitbrown. wordpress.com/>.

[4] KTM (Keretapi Tanah Melayu) is the Malaysian railway. A land swap agreement between Malaysia and Singapore in 2010 entailed Malaysia's giving up the Tanjong Pagar train station it owned near downtown Singapore in return for six land parcels in the city-state to be controlled by a company jointly owned by the two countries (Kennedy). Environmentalists, the Nature Society,

places are not really known to the majority of Singaporeans, the discourse concerning them adds to the ever-expanding sense of loss when it comes to one's spatial (and by implication historical and cultural) identity and integrity. This is because, unlike issues which may not affect the average Singaporean on a daily basis such as the death penalty, sexual minority or migrant rights as human rights, the ever-changing environment that Singaporeans traverse through and interact with impacts them physically: it emplaces them in its history and emplots a national identity that is rooted in the unique particularities of time holding for them personal memory and emotional significance. I use the term "Singaporeans" to refer to citizens born in Singapore rather than naturalized citizens. But the ever-changing urban landscape and the loss of heritage also concern architects residing in Singapore, environmentalists, and long-time residents (permanent residents). Land shortage and overcrowding resulting from higher population density[5] due to the government's population targets and liberal immigration policy, especially the Foreign Talent policy, have led to public outcry over the high numbers of foreign nationals admitted.[6] While the work of archiving social memory may seem unrelated to xenophobia towards foreigners (and new migrants), being able or unable to recount personal narratives about growing up in Singapore, and share personal photographs and other evidence of one's stake in Singapore's spatial past, indirectly marks the difference between those born in Singapore on the one hand and, on the other, new migrants and naturalized citizens who do not share this affective affinity.

Long-time Singaporean residents complain of feeling confused and alienated by the rapid urbanization and physical transformation of the city through demolition of old buildings and constant renovations (G. Lee). Blogger Jerome Lim of *The Long and Winding Road* writes about his visit back to Queenstown where he had

---

avid cyclists and bird watchers want the former KTM land left undeveloped—to be converted into a green corridor, to be precise—arguing for its social, historical, and environmental values. The government is currently negotiating with the local civil society.

[5] The 2010 population census survey shows a relatively modest increase between 1970 and 1980: from 2,074.5 mill to 2,413.9 mill. Thereafter, the population figure has shot up by nearly a million in each subsequent decade: 1990—3,047.1 mill; 2000—4,027.9 mill; and 2010—5,076.7 mill. The 2013 Population White Paper further projected 6.9 million by the year 2030, and provoked heated debate. See <http://population.sg/>.

[6] Writing in 2009, Opposition MP Pritam Singh who writes the blog *Singapore 2025* pointed out that the effects of the Foreign Talent policy were felt in earnest especially between 2002 and 2007 and was slightly relieved after 2007 due to recession at the time. See "Foreign Talent Policy Remains Contentious, and for Reason Too," *Singapore 2025*, blog, 18 Aug. 2009 <http://singapore2025.wordpress.com/ 2009/08/18/foreign-talent-policy-remains-contentious-and-for-reason-too/>.

lived in a rented HDB (Housing and Development Board) flat in his earliest childhood: "There is very little left to remind me of the place I had once called home, even the blocks of flats in the neighborhood—all of [those] which are still there bear little resemblance to the ones that I have known, having been through a round of upgrading which has also seen a new market building built in place of the old."[7] Concerned that the state's utilitarian attitude towards urban planning has undermined the sense of attachment that many people who have built their lives in Singapore have to places, artist Debbie Ding asks, "What happens to our memories of a place when a building is destroyed?" (Ding). Singaporeans do not see the benefit of some of these changes: for example, the replacement of the Old National Library (built in 1960) by "an ugly tunnel" in 2004 (nicely captured in the lyrics by the Complaints Choir of Singapore),[8] which would alter forever the road layout Singaporeans had known for decades.[9] Although supportive of the state's heritage conservation efforts, they perceived such efforts as prioritizing economy (the tourist dollar) over local heritage, resulting in museumizing some heritage buildings like Empress Place, and making others like Raffles Hotel elite and removed from local experience and identification, affect, and senses (Teo and Huang 611). It is hard to dismiss these concerns as mere nostalgia: for example, the Singapore Sports Hub that will house a New National Stadium among other sporting facilities, aside from being more modern than its demolished predecessor (built in 1973), will also interestingly hold an additional 41,000 square meters of commercial space for leisure, shopping, and dining activities (Y. H. Tan). This suggests that even renovated public recreational spaces need to at least optimize if not maximize their commercial potential. As for decisions about what to do with the KTM land, development-weary Singaporeans would prefer "recreational spaces and nature reserves instead of more shopping malls, apartments and industrial zones" (Wang). Academic Liew Kai Khiun has remarked that "[o]ther than merely nostalgia, these concerns actually reflect the undercurrent desires by more Singaporeans for more stability, ownership and continuity in a country that they would like to call home instead of an exploitable asset" (qtd. in Wang).

---

[7] "A Long Forgotten Place," *The Long and Winding Road*, blog, 24 Feb. 2012 <http://thelongnwindingroad.wordpress.com/2012/02/24/a-long-forgotten-place/>.

[8] The performance of the Complaints Choir of Singapore can be viewed here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3S0mEJ-aajM>.

[9] Icemoon, "How the Fort Canning Tunnel Altered Our Road Landscape," *Second Shot*, blog, 28 Feb. 2012 <http://2ndshot.blogspot.com.au/2012/02/how-fort-canning-tunnel-altered-our.html#more>.

Increasing public dissent from a better educated populace, along with what we may identify as an "information revolution," led to the government acknowledging the necessity to adapt to the changing expectations and demands of the electorate (T. K. Tan 3). This is evident from its 1997 "Singapore 21" vision statement for planning the nation's post-millennial future (T. K. Tan 2). The "Singapore 21" document outlined five ideals that represent Singapore's vision for the future, which included wanting to see citizens take a more active role to make a difference in community and civic affairs (volunteerism as part of what it means to be a good neoliberal citizen); and fostering passionate feelings about Singapore (Velayutham 100). These ideals were followed up in the 2003 "Remaking Singapore" recommendations, some of which are reflected in current urban planning policies. Singapore urban planners learnt from past mistakes, noting that decreasing tourism revenue was due to the city's placelessness and loss of character. The government found that becoming any-city-in-the-world did not make Singapore globally competitive or attractive, nor did it "endear" it to its own populace.[10] Thus the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) changed its strategy in 2001, introducing "place identity" to brand Singapore as a distinctive city (Yuen 832). In line with the ideal goals outlined in "Singapore 21," a document whose rationale is to create "a citizenry with both emotional and economic stakes in Singapore" (Velayutham 97), the URA made concrete attempts to consult citizens and stakeholders in drafting up a place-based Master Plan 2003. More than 100,000 people from all walks of life purportedly visited and responded to the proposed plan (Yuen 846), suggesting that heritage was valued by the community members who were interested in actively participating in the formation of place identity. The "Remaking Singapore" document includes enhancing a heritage program by identifying significant "memory" sites around the island and developing a series of social and cultural history museums, in order to foster a greater sense of proprietorship and pride in communal spaces, and to promote increased civic involvement (Velayutham 101).[11] The Urban Redevelopment Authority's tagline today is "to make Singapore a great city to live, work and play in," and its Concept Plan included "My Endearing Home," a photography competition in 2009 that was meant to encourage people to capture what "home" and "heritage" mean to them and to share their thoughts with

---

[10] Sensitive to this response and keen to build affective ties between citizens and the nation, the Singapore Housing Development Board uses the word "endearing" twice to describe the estates and the types of homes it would be building. See its homepage, "Remaking Our Heartland: Home—Where the Heart Is" <http://heartland.hdb.gov.sg/index.html>.

[11] See "The Report of the *Remaking Singapore* Committee," available at <http://vivian.balakrishnan.sg/pages/remaking-singapore-2003>.

the URA: "It could be in the context of personal, everyday lives, and shared memories." Obviously this language shows that the URA recognizes the importance of place-making and that Singaporeans need to have or develop feelings for a particular space in order to feel at home.

Recent examples of such reckoning with the residents' emotional geography and the need for a more consultative approach, one that engages the "citizen stakeholders," include the arts community project Civic Life: Singapore that was begun in 2010; [12] the Singapore Memory Project initiated in 2011; and, optimistically speaking, the Green Corridor. Social media in this regard has played an incipient role in raising public awareness and influencing public policy. Granted there were precedents of struggles and negotiations between civil society and the state in the early 1990s, [13] those earlier contestations did not get as much publicity as the ones taking place since the emergence of digital technology and the Internet. Affordable and easy-to-use digital technology has significantly facilitated the making of documentaries and short films. And recent years have witnessed a rise of such productions focusing on documenting and remembering the Singapore landscape: the short films from the "Where The Heart Is" competition (2010); [14] the 2008 feature *Kallang Roar the Movie*, which was shot in the closed old National Stadium slated for demolition (see K. Y. Lee); *Remember Chek Jawa* (dir. Lin Youwei Eric, 2007); [15] many works by documentary filmmaker Tan Pin Pin, including *Moving House* (2001), *Singapore Gaga* (2004), *Invisible City* (2008), *The Impossibility of Knowing* (2010), *Yangtze Scribbler* (2012); *Diminishing Memories I* and *II* (Eng Yee Peng, 2005 and 2008, respectively); *Old Places and Old Romances* (Royston Tan et al, 2010 and 2012, respectively); and several films by Royston Tan including *Hock Hiap Leong* (2001), *The Old Man and The River*

---

[12] See <http://civiclife.sg/>.

[13] For example, the government's plans for an industrial park at Sungai Buloh were foiled and, instead, the land was set aside for a bird sanctuary in 1993; a plan to build two 18-hole golf courses at the Lower Pierce Reservoir was nixed in 1992 when the Nature Society of Singapore went public with the issue and put pressure on the government (Kadir 340).

[14] This film competition is part of the Civic Life Singapore arts community project. Partners include the National Museum of Singapore, the British Council, Arts Council England, Urban Redevelopment Authority, DepicT! (ninety-second short film competition), and Encounters International Film Festival, among others. See <http://www.civiclife.sg/about-partners.html>.

[15] The beach of Chek Jawa on the island of Pulau Ubin was to be reclaimed in 2001. It is a collection of six distinct natural habitats—coastal forest, mangrove, sandy beach, sand, and mud flats—clustered within an area of one square kilometer. A joint-action public campaign led to the Ministry of National Development's decision to defer the land reclamation works.

(2003), and *The Blind Trilogy* (2004). *Old Places* features callers to a radio program talking about the old places in Singapore which they have been emotionally invested in. These places and the memories that come with them are what Royston Tan wants to capture. While some of these films were independently funded, others were directly or indirectly supported by the state through the National Museum of Singapore, the Singapore History Museum, the National Library Board, National Heritage Board, and Media Development Authority.

These films help to collect, collate, document, preserve, and archive memories of these places in the race against time and development. They are "memory practices" that "counteract the triumphalism of modernization theory in its latest guise of 'globalization'" (Huyssen 36). Andreas Huyssen elaborates that these practices culturally "express the growing need for spatial and temporal anchoring in a world of increasing flux in ever denser networks of compressed time and space" (36). When conservation and renovation projects end up collapsing present and past with a view to rendering heritage ambient-worthy for retail purposes, they violate the idea that the urban landscape and architecture function as a vital archive of social memory.[16] Failure to also consider preserving more modern buildings with architectural and historical value from the 1970s will eventually contribute to obvious gaps in Singapore's urban conservation record. In effect, what makes clear today the threat of losing these spaces is the sense of the potential loss of Singapore's unique identity, one that is moored to a shared multicultural history embracing its colonial identity and the new possibilities offered by postcolonial modernity. This is captured in iconic buildings built in the late 1970s like Futura and Pearl Bank Apartments, which represent, according to Ed Poole, an American architect and resident at Pearl Bank, "the transition from a colonial past to a modern future" (qtd. in Chen). However, such 1970s modernist buildings with architectural value are considered too recent to have heritage value. This nostalgia that shapes Singaporean longing and belonging coalesces around the 1950s to the 1980s, the childhood times of the current generations of bloggers, writers, filmmakers, and architects.

Digitalizing Memory

The whole endeavor of archiving Singaporean architecture and its historical, socio-cultural landscape has become more democratic and popular, due to

---

[16] This is the view of architect Richard Ho about the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus. See W. C. Lee.

developments in digital recording devices (video cameras, mobile phones), the Internet, and social media. French philosopher Bernard Stiegler optimistically considers the Internet Age as signaling an era of the breakdown between producers and consumers. For him, digital devices like the Internet, cameras, blogs, and social networking sites are what he calls hypomnesic devices capable of containing the memory that our brains cannot contain. They are external hard drives, if you like, but what distinguishes these digital devices from earlier communication/memory-storing devices is the possibility of creative agency they offer the user-consumer. In this case, they afford ordinary citizens a way to record their personal thoughts and memories of experiencing Singapore's spaces rather than merely functioning as passive containers or interceptors of history. As producers of memory themselves, filmmakers and bloggers write themselves into the national history, infusing the disappearing landscape and urban environment with meaning and emotion. Aside from the films mentioned above, nostalgia blogs abound: *Times of My Life*, for "anyone growing up in 1970s Singapore," features forty links under the theme "nostalgia blogs," most of which pertain to life in Singapore and are written by individuals or set up to become a social networking site where others of like interests can contribute. These are people who have lived or grown up in Singapore in the past and have memories to share and old friendships to rekindle. They are written with posterity in mind as the bloggers' rationales usually include leaving a legacy for their children and grandchildren as well as filling in the gaps of history and writing about lost landmarks.[17] Not only citizens, sometimes nostalgia blogs can include Australian and British expatriates and military and air force personnel and their families who were based in Singapore in the 1960s and early 1970s and who have kindly scanned and sent old photographs from their family albums and souvenir postcards to the blogger or social networking site.[18] Facebook sites like Jerome Lim's *On a Little Street in Singapore* (also the name of a 1930s' jazz song) state that they are "[a] place for all to share memories and experiences of that Singapore before the invasion of the skyscrapers, shopping malls and more recently the super modern resorts of Marina Bay and Sentosa. . . ."[19] The *On a Little Street in Singapore* Facebook page is an open group where members post photographs and solicit information about a specific place or a cultural practice no longer in existence. This usually sparks a string of interchange whereby people trade stories

---

[17] *My Chew Joo Chiat Story* is a good example: <http://mychewjoochiat.blogspot.com.au/>.

[18] See *Memories of Singapore* at <http://www.singas.co.uk/index.html>.

[19] <http://www.facebook.com/groups/183252211695508/photos/>. Ellipsis in original.

and recount their spatial practices in that location or its vicinity, or their memory of a certain now-outmoded practice.

In that sense, "when associated with anamnesis [embodied act of memory], hypomnemata [these technical external memory drives] facilitate the deployment of memory in the constitution of meaningful symbolic practices and communal formations" (Hansen 66). Films like Royston Tan's documentary *Old Places*, which was the highest rated documentary screened on Okto Channel in 2010 (Vasko), generated discussion and succeeded in evoking shared memories and creating a sense of belonging and connection. *Old Places* is specifically mentioned in the Green Corridor Proposal on the latter's website and used to justify how the Green Corridor can also help to "preserve our shared memories."[20] The film has inspired a few blogs keen on capturing memorable places and raising awareness about fading heritage and vanishing landmarks.[21] As editor Mark Hansen sums up in his introduction to Stiegler, "memory aids hold the promise of expanding our capacity to produce meaning and to form communities open to the future" (66). Not only do "communities open to the future" exist in civil society websites like The Green Corridor and its Facebook page, *We Support The Green Corridor in Singapore* (showing 7,737 likes at last count on March 29, 2012), state bodies also organize their own nostalgia sites. Examples include the National Heritage Board, which launched *Yesterday.sg* in March 2006, to "[help] unearth a rich store of stories and memories of the Singapore of old with the support of a group of heritage enthusiasts called the Friends of Yesterday.sg (FOYers)"; as well as *MyStory*,[22] an "online platform for anyone who wants to know more about Singapore's heritage and to discover and share Singapore's rich multicultural heritage."

To an extent limited agency is evident in the independent digital films, nostalgia blogs, and social networking sites that have sprung up within this "ecology of hypomnesis and anamnesis," which articulate an embodied way of remembering. For example, *Diminishing Memories* resonates beautifully with what Stiegler says of "a crutch for understanding, a space of intuition" (Stiegler 74), rendered possible for the filmmaker Eng Yee Peng in the process of making the film. The documentary illustrates how hypomnesis and anamnesis are articulated. As hypomnesic memory, the film is indispensable to the filmmaker and to her passage into action—her anamnesis. The process of making *Diminishing Memories*

---

[20] <http://www.thegreencorridor.org/about/>.

[21] A well-organized blog on Singapore's urban landscape directly inspired by *Old Places* is *Remember Singapore*: <http://remembersingapore.wordpress.com/category/about-remsg/>.

[22] <http://mystory.sg/>.

II arguably helps Eng work through her own feelings of nostalgia and to come to terms with the loss of her childhood village Lim Chu Kang as she is documenting her memories of it. Eng had to leave the village at the age of nine and had had happy memories of growing up in nature surrounded by greenery, animals, and relative freedom before being moved into a HDB flat. This sense of being torn away from village life forms the trauma behind the making of *Diminishing Memories*. Subsequently, plans to convert Lim Chu Kang and Kranji into an agri-tainment attraction which would include "farm-stays, spa treatments, guided strolls through plantations and hands-on farming activities" (Lim) prompted her to revisit vestiges of her haunting childhood for the second time.

In *Diminishing Memories II*, the filmmaker begins by taking a moralistic and slightly antagonistic approach towards the newcomers whom she regards as part of the capitalist encroachment of her beloved simple rustic childhood life. But gradually, after interviewing the new investors and current tenants of Lim Chu Kang, including a resort developer and farmers who are trying to make a living in a climate of increasing costs and strict regulations and who also want to see the area keep its rustic charm, Eng is forced to admit that she was unreasonable in imposing her personal views about what would make the place authentic. Her voiceover explains how she suddenly "feels ridiculous" and realizes that she is "contradicting herself" by expecting the business owner to replicate a sense of kampung authenticity which was not there originally, by insisting that he should build a water well and have objects that evoke a sense of rural living.

Eng's sense of identity is very much connected to the childhood village she grew up in and the affective ties she still has for the place. In an interview, she explains: "You know, it's hard to know what I mean if you have never lived in a kampung. Growing up in a kampung, my bare feet walked, jumped and ran on the soil beneath me. I played in the rain. I heard it on the zinc roof, I smelled it and touched it. I felt at one with the environment. In a flat, I think you cannot feel the same kind of attachment to the soil and to the land" (qtd. in T. Y. Ng).

So strong is the affective and sensual memory of Lim Chu Kang captured in the film in the brownish family snapshots of a simpler, innocent and happy time that it pulls the subject back into its cocoon, so to speak. Nostalgia is often denounced as "reactionary, regressive" (David Lowenthal; qtd. in Blunt 720), perhaps even paralyzing. This is captured in a scene in *Diminishing Memories II* where the filmmaker's mother despairs seeing her daughter losing weight while making the film: "Making this documentary has been extremely draining. It's time-consuming,

exhausting. . . . it tsk . . . it breaks my heart to see you like this. I'd rather much you quit the media industry."

For the mother, nostalgia is regressive as it relies on the "disabling fictions" of childhood. As Gayle Greene explains, "nostalgia is a forgetting, merely regressive, whereas memory may look back in order to move forward and transform disabling fictions to enabling fictions, altering our relation to the present and future" (298). When Eng off-camera asks tearfully if her mother did not know why she wanted to make the second film, her mother replies:

> You keep revisiting your childhood memories, you can't let go. You still haven't come to terms with the fact that times have changed. You must learn to accept change. Look, when you come to my age you must learn to let go of a lot of things. Lim Chu Kang isn't what it used to be. There's no way we could. . . . You grew up there, so naturally you miss the place dearly. . . . Growing up in the countryside is so much more blissful. But my advice is still the same. To move on, don't dwell on the past anymore.

Sociologist Chua Beng Huat in his article "Nostalgia for Kampungs" explains how Singaporean nostalgia for the kampung is a symptom of the "politicisation of stress" (qtd. in W. C. Lee). Rather than signaling a desire to return to its specific reality of an impoverished past (based on material disadvantages), the nostalgia for kampung indicates "the desire to 'rest,' to be content with one's lot after having strived for long and arduous years, instead of striving for just that little bit more" (qtd. in W. C. Lee). Since the government's legitimacy is predicated on ceaseless economic development, then for Chua such nostalgia is pointless. The mother's practical advice shares the same logic, for she recognizes that Singapore's national identity and development rest inevitably on change; thus looking back to an irrecoverable past is regressive and ultimately self-defeating.

In a bid to move from a paralyzing state of regressive nostalgia to more enabling memory work, a self-reflective Eng then admits that her second film, which had set out to be a "protest against Lim Chu Kang becoming an ersatz rustic idyll[,] is a response to [her] emotions and nostalgia for the old Lim Chu Kang." Strategic emotional detachment from the issue, she rationalizes as much to herself as to the audience, would make Lim Chu Kang "just another place on the map."

Part of the process of doing memory work includes some form of ritualistic, symbolic activity that signals acknowledgement of temporal passing and marks

closure, an event that separates the living from the dead, the present-future from the past. In that sense, the funeral is a common metaphor. For example, Lim Chu Kang the place is personified as a beloved dead relative by her narration: "the agri-tainment projects are like a desecration of a loved one's grave." Eng deploys the funeral metaphor towards the end of her documentary in a voiceover:

> I had bawled my eyes out when I was making *Diminishing Memories I*. My college professor said, if someone didn't attend the funeral of a loved one who had passed on, he would need a longer time to come to grips with the death.
> Is the authenticity of Lim Chu Kang more important than the people living and working there? What does the future hold for the farmers and their livelihood? The people, the spirit and the landscape have faded into history but for years, the funeral of the old Lim Chu Kang didn't take place. Not in my heart, anyway. Today I am finally willing to attend its funeral, a funeral that should have taken place 20 years ago.

Eng's conclusion notably expresses sympathy with the urgent concerns of the living in terms of the viability and sustainability of agrarian farming in land-short Singapore. The new farmers are also changing the name of the former village from Lim Chu Kang to Kranji, and she wonders if this would mean that the name would disappear from social memory in the not-too-distant future, "given Singapore's rapid pace of change." What is plain is that she regards this film resignedly as all that she can do for her childhood village.

A certain tone of fatalism permeates the discourse of nostalgia projects, a sense of hopelessness against the juggernaut of progress and the impending future. This is reflected in *Remember Chek Jawa*, the Bukit Brown Cemetery documentation project, and the impetus behind *Old Places*. For example, in early 2001, the National Parks Board announced that Chek Jawa, an area at the eastern end of Ubin Island, was to be reclaimed by November. The Raffles Museum was approached to make a "salvage collection."[23] According to Lin Youwei Eric, who

---

[23] The Research Officer of the Raffles Museum of Biodiversity Research at the National University of Singapore defines salvage collections as "an attempt to provide a last physical record of a threatened ecosystem, to make the worst of a bad thing, to leave a scientific memory

filmed the volunteers' efforts in *Remember Chek Jawa*, "The data collected was meant to serve as a permanent record of what would be lost if reclamation was carried out, as well as for submission to the government to reconsider the fate of Chek Jawa. At that time, most of the volunteers and supporters of the natural environment felt that this record would simply serve as an obituary for Chek Jawa, as the reclamation was to begin in just a few months." That words like "salvage collection," "obituary," and "foregone conclusion" were also used in the documentary to describe the fate of Chek Jawa shows that such nostalgia projects act as premature archives mourning a future loss.

In a more recent case, in September 2011 when the Land Transportation Authority announced plans to build a highway through Bukit Brown Cemetery, the Urban Redevelopment Authority commissioned the documentation of some 5,000 affected graves and publically notified relatives to register their claims before exhumation (Chan). The documentation process of photographing the existing sites, and noting down family histories, stories, and memories associated with the particular graves, was researched and made available by grassroots historian and tomb researcher Raymond Goh.[24] While the effort to save the cemetery from the government's development plan continues, the archiving project serves to bring to the public's attention all too fleetingly a glimpse of Singapore's forgotten history—the history of its early pioneers and, more importantly as architect Lee Chee Kien reminds us, the history of the Nanyang Chinese, some of whom are buried here.

Other nostalgic documentaries like *Old Places* play an important role in commemorating and celebrating everyday spaces that embody decades-old banal cultural practices which, even if still existent, might disappear very soon. As part of the last generation to have moved from a kampung to a HDB, filmmaker Royston Tan has seen a lot of things disappearing: "So what I cannot control in reality, I want to capture at least on film" (see his interview with Ng Yi-Sheng). Tan narrates his personal reasons for making *Old Places*, attributing an incomplete sense of self in history to the loss of his childhood place in Lorong Chuan: "I feel like part of my life is gone" (Y. Ng). After all, it is said that "[n]o one can become what he cannot find in his memories" (Jean Améry; qtd. in Young 1). Naming his film production company after this lost childhood lane "Chuan Pictures" thus becomes, for Royston Tan, an act of spatial and temporal anchoring, linking self to memory and place.

---

of the place. Unlike normal research collections which have specific targets, everything is collected and preserved" (Sivasothi).

[24] <http://bukitbrown.org/>.

This raises the question of the usefulness or productivity of nostalgia (homesickness), a condition that does not improve the health of a society in perpetual mourning. Even poet Ng Yi-Sheng describes Singaporeans as "not only exiles of the past, but refugees of the present," as if the present is already changing and becoming lost to them.[25] Under such circumstances, what does productive nostalgia look like?

Productive Nostalgia

Alison Blunt defines productive nostalgia as a longing for home that is embodied and enacted in practice (i.e., homemaking). This nostalgia, along with its enactment in practice, may be "oriented towards the present and the future as well as towards the past" (Blunt 722). In other words, nostalgia can be productive if it values the present and looks to the future. In a way, a close reading of the "memory work" undertaken by concerned Singaporeans demonstrates productive nostalgia at work. Thoughtful letters and comments mention how material history (in the form of the Bukit Brown Cemetery, Chek Jawa, urban landmarks like particular playgrounds and buildings from an earlier era) is critical in providing historical continuity and ecological sustainability. Conservation is not about prioritizing the past over the future but rather envisions a better future, one seemingly at odds with the kind the state has in mind for the nation. Ng Yi-Sheng suggests that instead of mourning the past, Singaporeans should focus on experiencing the present landscape because it is impermanent: "Imagine yourself in the future, remembering this moment in the present. Savour it."[26]

While not wanting to downplay the important contribution these films and blogs have made in archiving social memory, we cannot deny that these nostalgic projects only act as premature archives mourning a future loss and facilitating visits to "marked-for-death" places, for they have circumscribed their own potential agency within the teleological discourse of national development. Pursuing further this line of thought, I would suggest that perhaps the government's decision to defer reclaiming Chek Jawa had less to do with the strengthening of the public sphere, or a belief in sound ecology, than with economy—it was deemed not cost-effective to

---

[25] <http://civiclifetiongbahru.com/2011/05/09/gone-home-by-ng-yi-sheng/>.
[26] <http://civiclifetiongbahru.com/page/7/>.

reclaim this area because it is too small, and so far it did not seem to be obviously required for further development projects.[27]

Nostalgia projects can also easily be harnessed by the capitalist state for the purpose of nationalism. This is precisely what the Singapore Memory Project (SMP) does: it converts personal memories into an investment for future Singaporeans. The SMP is an ambitious "national initiative started in 2011 to collect, preserve and provide access to Singapore's knowledge materials, so as to tell the Singapore Story. . . . The SMP aims to collect 5 million personal memories . . . by 2015."[28] This goal is ambitious and reflects the state's inflated sense of bio-power: the population currently stands at slightly above the 5 million mark, and should the project aim for one memory per person, it would surely have to include donations from toddlers and new migrants! Visitors are invited to "share" their personal memories on the *Singapore Memory Portal*—an initiative sponsored by the National Library Board as part of the Singapore Memory Project. "Just as abstract, capitalizable money is nothing but the credit accorded the future in advance, so too is memory nothing but the future time of the mass audience," warns Stiegler about the culture industry (81), a reminder that applies to the role of the state in the case of Singapore. An advertisement for the Singapore Memory Project reads:

> Whether these are old photographs filled in shoeboxes or an oral account from your grandparents, the Singapore Memory Project hopes to find a home for these vignettes of memory, where everyone can see it, hear it, add to it, discuss and use it to build up an understanding of Singapore.
> Let your memories live on for future generations.
> Deposit your memories at SingaporeMemory.sg.[29]

There is something unwittingly Orwellian about the invitation above: not unlike a dystopic sci-fi, the memory work being done here harnesses the past in order to move forward and enable a fictional future (fictional because we are not there yet and are creating it as we go along). The directive "Deposit your memories at . . ." seems to imply that the project is a state-run bank and citizens are making an investment in the national future. This discourse feeds into the state's utilitarian

---

[27] See point 6 from the Ministry of National Development's press release dated 14 Jan. 2002, available at <http://chekjawa.nus.edu.sg/articles/defer/21.htm>.
[28] <http://www.singaporememory.sg/help-info>.
[29] <http://www.singaporememory.sg/help-info>.

pragmatism, one that disassociates the memory/object from the person/subject so as to convert the personal memory into a universal currency, a currency no longer limited to individual use but meant instead for the common social good. On one hand, this project is laudable in that it is deploying social memory in a consultative way (participatory democracy in action?). The state obviously recognizes its need to use emotion for nation-building, and the Singapore Memory Project literature demonstrates this in its choice of words: "This will build a culture of remembering which will nurture bonding and rootedness."[30] On the other hand, the virtual archives also literally displace memory by delinking it from urban space.

Conclusion: Time and Space Unhinged

I would therefore argue that the archive of the disappearing physical landscape supported by hypomnemata (technical memory aids) is an incommensurable substitute because temporal space (historical recounting and personal memories captured by film, blogs, photographs existing in a virtual digital site) falls short of providing the experience of being in an actual living geographic space. The virtual archive (*The Museum of Me*, for example) is but a poor substitute for living physical space. It is as if a forward-looking vision literally lacks the room for allochronic existence, and the time and identity of Singapore rest in future space while its somewhat more banal past (excluding designated heritage sites) exists only in digital archives in the form of nostalgia, souvenirs, and memorabilia. This much is evident in the 2012 budget speech of the Minister of State in charge of national development, Tan Chuan-Jin, who has the unenviable task of trying to find a balance between advancing the nation's development and preserving both the environment and Singaporean heritage and history. In justifying the state's decision to continue with development plans for Bukit Brown, he says: "Clearly, conservation is but one part of a larger story to celebrate our history and heritage. We should also focus our energies on ways to document our stories and to share them. To be proud of the history and heritage we already possess."[31]

Such a logic severs history (stories, memories) from present geography and relegates it to the archives under the rationale of "documenting and celebrating our history and heritage." By way of introducing the role of the Singapore Memory

---

[30] <http://www.iremember.sg/?page_id=59>.
[31] <http://www.mnd.gov.sg/BudgetDebate/Speech_by_Minister-of-State_Tan-Celebrating_ and_ Co-Creating_a_Rooted_Community.html>.

Project, he claims that "stories and memories make all the difference" in giving Singaporeans a unique identity and that the advancement of technology allows them to record memories in ways never before possible. He further appeals, "We can weave our heritage together, individual by individual, memory by memory. And I think we need to move fast, because with the passing of time, as the older generation passes on, we need to capture those stories before it passes on. . . ."[32]

This emotionally calibrated speech demonstrates a failure to grasp the idea that the constituent parts of identity—spatial and temporal, geographical and historical—are heavily intertwined rather than separate components. History has to be located in a geographic space/place that continues to exist, that embodies traces, resonances, accruals of different times for different people as they inhabit that space, interact with it and in it in cognitive and non-cognitive (e.g., affective) ways. Returning to Stiegler's essay on memory is appropriate here with regard to the work of archiving landscape and development in Singapore, for Stiegler has theorized how human life evolves via exteriorizing memory (85n15). He foretells the danger of locating humanity's past, its very roots and sense of emplaced identity, in the virtual archives. If I may paraphrase Stiegler to fit Singapore's case, if "cognitive technologies, to which we consign a greater and greater part of our [social] memory, cause us to lose ever-greater parts of our knowledge," perhaps these parts of our knowledge are no longer "in psychical memory but only in that of the [Singapore state] apparatus" (68). Stiegler warns about how the development of massive technologies represents a displacement of memory: "A displacement that renders our memory the object of knowledge-control" (68).

It is in this light that we can regard the SMP: for while ostensibly attempting to give space and expression to popular sentiments and memory via the archives, it actually simultaneously renders social memory the object of the state's knowledge-control. As Gilles Deleuze presages, the age of hypomnesis facilitates the move from discipline societies to control societies. Writing on Michel Foucault, Deleuze observes that "We're moving toward control societies that no longer operate [purely] by confining people but through continuous control and instant communication" (174). Deleuze gives examples of how discipline societies and confining institutions such as schools and hospitals have been liberalized through (neoliberal economic) reforms that introduce open hospitals, home care, continuous assessment instead of exams and continual monitoring and training of worker-schoolkids or bureaucrat-students (175). This in a way sums up Singapore as the model "control society,"

---

[32] <http://www.mnd.gov.sg/BudgetDebate/Speech_by_Minister-of-State_Tan-Celebrating_ and_ Co-Creating_a_Rooted_Community.html>.

one keeping up with the next phase of capitalism and "directed towards metaproduction," i.e., a system which buys finished products and assembles them from parts, a system geared towards selling services and buying activities as opposed to buying raw materials and selling finished products (Deleuze 181). In the control society that is Singapore, the open channels of communication between the state and civil society also signal a different mode of operation that may not necessarily be more democratic or progressive than the discipline societies of old. Rather, control societies are more open yet subject to continuous control: the Internet Age as "an age of hypomnesis constituting itself as an *associated* technical milieu" (Stiegler 83; emphasis in original), I argue, paradoxically frees us but also enslaves us. To sum up Stiegler's point, Hansen writes, "reliance on artificial memory aids makes us vulnerable to manipulation if the technologies of memory are controlled by industries intent on exploiting our desire for their gain; yet on the other hand, . . . these same memory aids hold the promise of expanding our capacity to produce meaning and to form communities open to the future" (66). In the case of a control society like Singapore, it is the state rather than industries that exploits "our desire for their gain" (66). For acknowledging literally the "capacity" of hypomnemata to document and keep an infinite record of Singaporean socio-cultural and urban life in a way relieves the state of its burden of conserving existent physical structures and natural landscapes that might have historical (and environmental) value.

If the detritus of history and memory are to be excised from living geography, dis-placed and consigned to the virtual realm of the digital archives, does this signal a schizoid identity? Or does living in the "industrial hypomnesic milieu, where the human element of geography is associated with the becoming of the technical milieu" (Stiegler 83) merit reconceptualizing identity in a completely different manner, one that is enmeshed with the *very becoming* of the technical milieu? Huyssen cautions us that "cyberspace alone is not the appropriate model to imagine the global future" (38). He distinguishes between the memory it offers ("a false promise") and "lived memory" which is active, alive, embodied in social and, I should add, physical space. I leave the last words to Huyssen, who best sums up my point: memory "cannot be stored forever, nor can it be secured by monuments. Nor, for that matter, can we rely on digital retrieval systems to guarantee coherence and continuity. If the sense of lived time is being renegotiated in our contemporary cultures of memory, we should not forget that time is not only the past, its

preservation and transmission" (38). Rather, time lives on outside the archives in the Singapore landscape.

Works Cited

Blunt, Alison. "Collective Memory and Productive Nostalgia: Anglo-Indian Homemaking at McCluskieganj." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 21.6 (2003): 717-38.

Chan, Joanne. "LTA Announces Finalised Alignment for Bukit Brown Road Project." *Channel NewsAsia* 19 Mar. 2012: n. pag. 2 June 2012. <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/singaporelocalnews/view/1189968/1/html>.

Chen, Jennifer. "Modernist Architecture at Risk in Singapore." *New York Times* 29 May 2007: n. pag. 2 June 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/29/realestate/29iht-resinga.1.5892531. html?_r=1>.

Chua, Grace. "Development of Bukit Brown Cemetery Will Proceed as Planned." *The Straits Times* 4 Feb. 2012: n. pag. 12 Aug. 2012. <http://www.straitstimes.com/BreakingNews/Singapore/Story/STIStory_762675.html>.

Deleuze, Gilles. *Negotiations 1972-1990*. Trans. Martin Joughin. New York: Columbia UP, 1995.

Diminishing Memories I. Dir. Eng Yee Peng. 2005.

Diminishing Memories II. Dir. Eng Yee Peng. 2008.

Ding, Debbie. "A City with No Memory (2007)." *Dreamsyntax*. Dreamsyntax.org, 15 Sept. 2007. 2 June 2012. <http://dreamsyntax.org/2007/a-city-with-no-memory/>.

Greene, Gayle. "Feminist Fiction and the Uses of Memory." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 16.2 (1991): 290-321.

Hansen, Mark B. N. "Introduction to 'Memory' by Bernard Stiegler." *Critical Terms for Media Studies*. Ed. W. J. T. Mitchell and Mark B. N. Hansen. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2010. 64-66.

Huyssen, Andreas. "Present Pasts: Media, Politics, Amnesia." *Public Culture* 12.1 (2000): 21-38.

Kadir, Suzaina. "Singapore: Engagement and Autonomy within the Political Status Quo." *Civil Society and Political Change in Asia: Expanding and Contracting Democratic Space*. Ed. Muthiah Alagappa. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2004. 324-54.

Kennedy, Alex. "Singapore, Malaysia Agree to Land Swap." *The Jakarta Post* 21 Sept. 2010: n. pag. 2 June 2012. <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2010/09/21/singapore-malaysia-agree-land-swap.html>.

Lee, Gwen. "On Identity: Singapore's Auditory Thumbprint." *Civic Life: Singapore*. Civic Life: Singapore, 4 Sept. 2010. 2 June 2012. <http://www.civiclife.sg/blog/?cat=8>.

Lee, Khai Yan, "National Stadium To Be the Set for New Movie." *Channel NewsAsia* 1 Mar. 2008: n. pag. 2 June 2012. <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/singaporelocalnews/view/332217/1/.html>.

Lee, Weng Choy. "Time, Landscape and Desire in Singapore." The Bodiless Dragon Exhibition. 1998. *Singapore: Views on the Urban Landscape*. Ed. Lucas Jodogne. Antwerp: Pandora, 1998. <http://www.lucasjodogne.net/BD_IN4.HTM>.

Lim, Jean. "Farmlands in Lim Chu Kang." *National Library Board Singapore*. National Library Singapore, 30 Nov. 2009. 2 June 2012. <http://infopedia.nl.sg/articles/SIP_1611_2009-11-30.html>.

Nature Society (Singapore). n.d. 2 June 2012. <http://www.nss.org.sg/about.aspx?id=2>.

Ng, Tze Yong. "The Kampung Girl Who Beat the Odds." *Diminishing Memories I & II*. Diminishing Memories I & II, 16 Sept. 2008. 2 June 2012. <http://diminishingmemories.wordpress.com/2008/09/17/the-kampung-girl-who-beat-the-odds/>.

Ng, Yi-Sheng. "*Old Places* Out Now on DVD." *Civic Life: Tiong Bahru Project*. Civic Life: Tiong Bahru Project, 5 Aug. 2011. 12 Aug. 2012. <http://civiclifetiongbahru.com/2011/05/08/old-places-out-now-on-dvd/>.

Old Places. Dir. Royston Tan, Victric Thng, and Eva Tang. 2010.

Old Romances. Dir. Royston Tan, Victric Thng, and Eva Tang. 2012.

Sivasothi, N. "Chek Jawa, Pulau Ubin: From Research to Education." *The [NUS] Alumnus*. National University of Singapore, Apr. 2002. 12 Aug. 2012. <http://chekjawa.nus.edu.sg/articles/Chek_Jawa,_Pulau%20Ubin-from_research_to_education-Alumnus_Apr2002.pdf>.

Stiegler, Bernard. "Memory." *Critical Terms for Media Studies*. Ed. W. J. T. Mitchell and Mark B. N. Hansen. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2010. 66-87.

Tan, Tay Keong. "Social Capital and State-Civil Society Relations in Singapore." *IPS Working Papers No. 9*. National University of Singapore, 1 Sept. 2001. 2 June 2012. <http://www.spp.nus.edu.sg/ips/docs/publications/wp9.pdf>.

Tan, Yo-Hinn. "Sports Hub to Open April 2014." *Channel NewsAsia* 26 Aug. 2010: n. pag. 2 June 2012. <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/singaporelocalnews/view/1077161/1/.html>.

Teo, Peggy, and Shirlena Huang. "Tourism and Heritage Conservation in Singapore." *Annals of Tourism Research* 22.3 (1995): 589-615.

Vasko, Lydia. "Capturing the Past." Special Report. Look Back in Wonder. *The Straits Times* 26 Nov. 2011: n. pag. 2 Aug. 2012. <http://www.preshigh.edu.sg/teachers/laick/Singapore/Things%20from%20the%20past/Look%20back%20in%20wonder.aspx>.

Velayutham, Selvaraj. *Responding to Globalization: Nation, Culture and Identity in Singapore*. Singapore: ISEAS, 2007.

Wang, Simin. "Development-weary Singaporeans Back 'Green Corridor.'" *AFP*. Google News, 21 Feb. 2012. 12 Aug. 2012. <http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5jKZGJ9boc9WRPgSZwv0C1qnSeYoA?docId=CNG.3191dc24cc5938d2422343290ecaad45.131>.

Young, James Edward. *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1993.

Yuen, Belinda. "Reclaiming Cultural Heritage in Singapore." *Urban Affairs Review* 41.6 (2006): 830-54.

About the Author

Gaik Cheng Khoo (Associate Professor, Film and Television Studies at the University of Nottingham, Malaysia) has written extensively on independent filmmaking in Malaysia and is founder of the Association of South East Asian Cinemas, a biennale conference held in the region since 2004. Her essays have appeared in journals (*South East Asian Review*, *Asian Cinema*, *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, *Asian Studies Review*) and as book chapters with Routledge, Palgrave Macmillan, and Cornell-SEAP. She has also co-edited a book and journal special issues on Southeast Asian Cinemas. Her current project is a co-authored book on food, space, and identity in Malaysia and Singapore.