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Introduction: Pink Dot: Ten Years On

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The Southeast Asian city-state of Singapore has a paradoxical relationship with its LGBT citizens. Despite being one of 72 countries that continues to criminalize same-sex relations, Singapore also has more gay bars per capita than many other “open” societies in the West. LGBT Singaporeans face significant legal discrimination and inequalities in several areas, including employment and housing but the current Prime Minister, Lee Hsien Loong, has also stated that “whatever your sexual orientation, you are welcome to come and work in Singapore” (The Independent 2019). The nation’s leaders have also assured LGBT Singaporeans that laws such as 377A, which criminalizes sexual relations between consenting adult men, will not be enforced, while reassuring conservative Singaporeans that such laws will remain in place.

Audrey Yue (2007) makes sense of these seemingly contradictory sets of statements as well as (official and unofficial) policies through her concept of “illiberal pragmatics,” which she argues structures Singapore’s governance of homosexuality. Yue builds on and extends the vast literature on how the dominant ideology of governance in Singapore is “pragmatic” by demonstrating how “illiberal pragmatics” both explains the paradoxes of Singapore’s governance of homosexuality and informs LGBT activism and resistance: “Central to pragmatism is thus the logic of illiberalism where interventions and implementations are potentially always neo-liberal and non-liberal, rational and irrational” (Yue 2007:150-151). Pragmatism in Singapore is intrinsically tied to a discourse of vulnerability that Singapore’s leaders often reference in order to justify authoritarian

policies and their undemocratic style of governance. Within such a context of the “illiberal pragmatics of survival,” queer Singaporean activism, she argues, has not taken place within a post-Stonewall framework of rights or freedom, as in Western countries. Rather LGBT activists in Singapore, like other civil society actors, have had to adopt a non-confrontational and incremental approach to advocacy rooted in assimilation and patriotism.

For most of the 1990s, LGBT activism took place in the interstitial space between the formal public square and the private sphere (Phillips 2020). In 1993, a group of activists, People Like Us, produced a community newsletter that individuals would photocopy and distribute from person to person. By the end of the 1990s, with the commercial availability of a nationwide high-speed broadband network, the newsletter was replaced by the Singapore Gay News List (SiGNeL), a moderated online forum founded in 1999. SiGNeL represented the first time that a relatively large group of LGBT Singaporeans, unbounded by spatial constraints, could freely share, critique, and comment on events in the region and internationally as well as communicate with one another in the relative safety provided by the new technology. Essentially, during this time, the only form of LGBT activism that appeared possible was distinctly non-public.

Since the 2000s, however, LGBT activists began gradually carving out a space for themselves in the Singaporean public sphere, through events and initiatives. These include large public events such as the Nation Parties (2001-2003), and smaller gatherings including IndigNation (2005–), a series of academic and other talks and workshops designed to showcase the “other side” of LGBT life. It is perhaps unsurprising that the most successful of these initiatives has been the annual Pink Dot gathering (2009–), which has, for most of its existence, adopted (strategically or otherwise) a homonormative, homonationalist, assimilationist, and non-confrontational stance vis-à-vis the government.

In 2008, a few years after the first IndigNation events, a group of activists began to develop the gathering that eventually became Pink Dot. The organizers took advantage of the 2008 Public Entertainment and Meetings Act that removed the previous requirement for a permit issued by the Singapore Police Force to hold demonstrations at the Speakers Corner in Hong Lim Park. Early on, organizers were keen to avoid being perceived as staging a ‘Western-style’ protest, which was precisely how some had begun to characterize IndigNation. Instead, the organizers carefully emphasized what they understood to be local norms by focusing on themes such as consensus, community, and family. Thus, since its first iteration in 2009, Pink Dot has marketed itself as a family-friendly event featuring performances by local artists and groups and ending with aerial photographs of pink-clad participants forming a dot. As outlined in the papers in this issue, Pink Dot has been remarkably successful over the last decade. The first Pink Dot in 2009 attracted approximately 2,500 people, while Pink Dot in 2016 recorded some 25,000 participants, which remains a record for events at Hong Lim Park. This numerical success has translated to greater visibility in public discourse and media coverage in Singapore. Additionally, the concept has also spread to other parts of the world, with Pink Dots being organized in London, Montreal, Utah, Okinawa, and Hong Kong (see Rowlett and Go in this issue). As the papers in this special issue demonstrate, the manner in which language is used has been key to the success of Pink Dot.

For example, in light of the authoritarian constraints in Singapore, it is likely that Pink Dot’s significant success has been due, in part, to its longstanding avoidance of the language of rights (Phillips 2013). Rather than demanding the abrogation of laws that criminalize same-sex relations or legal protections from discrimination, Pink Dot consistently adopts a language of “local” values. Participants used their bodies to form the word “love” at the first Pink Dot in 2009. The following year, Pink Dot’s official theme was “focusing on our families.” In 2012, the theme was a hopeful

“someday.” Since then, subsequent themes include “For Families, For Friends, For Love,” “Where Love Lives,” and “Celebrating Our Everyday Heroes.”

The first decade of Pink Dot has now come to an end. It is clear that the annual event has had an important impact in terms of increased visibility. At the same time, despite the successes of Pink Dot, very little has concretely changed in Singapore for LGBT individuals. Accordingly, in exploring the use of language in the Pink Dot movement, the articles in this special issue simultaneously grapple with the past decade of Pink Dot and explore whether LGBT activism in Singapore might be evolving beyond the relatively ‘acceptable’ approach of Pink Dot’s strategic assimilationism.

Sexuality and Language in Singapore

For the past few decades, several authors have contributed to the available corpus of writings on LGBT language in Southeast Asia. Of note is the work of Tom Boellstorff (2004a; 2004b; 2005) on gay and transgender language in Indonesia and Benedict Rowlett (2018; 2019) on same-sex language in Cambodia. In recent years, academics focused on language and sexuality in the context of Singapore have also produced a good deal of writing. Much of this literature has focused on the sexual politics of the city state. Beginning in the latter part of the twentieth century, scholars from diverse fields started making connections between such markers as sexual identity, gender, and race and national belonging (Heng & Devan 1995; Offord 1999), critiquing government policies as well as linking them to issues of human rights. More recent work has been more specific and finely focused on divorced and lesbian mothers (Tang & Quah 2018), transnational lesbian identities (Tang 2012), and queer Indian-Singaporean men (Phillips 2012; Prankumar, Aggleton & Bryant 2020). Still others have provided insights into postcolonial LGBT identities (Tang 2016;

Oswin 2010). Even though Pink Dot is rather new, there are some notable writings on the movement that have addressed issues of cultural and sexual citizenship (Tan 2015; Tan 2016) as well as the effects of neoliberal homonormativity (Phillips 2014; Phillips 2020) and neoliberal heteronormativity (Oswin 2014) on the movement. Others, Singaporean writers with their own histories within the movement have critiqued the fine line between conservative politics and neoliberal activism in which Pink Dot is situated (Ng 2017).

Scholars have also produced works relating to the connections between the utilisation of language and the success of Pink Dot. Phillips (2013) writes of how the language used to frame the Pink Dot rallies is intended to help non-normative genders and sexualities more palatable to older Singaporeans. Others, such as Michelle Lazar (2020) explain how Pink Dot organizers use “linguistic homonationalism” in order to position LGBTQ interests alongside those of the greater nation where homonationalism functions as a manifestation of “pragmatic resistance” (Lazar 2017: 420).

In This Issue

There are four articles that make up this special issue on the discursive constructions, contestations, and formations relating to Pink Dot. Whilst all these articles speak to the deployment of language and discourse surrounding Pink Dot, they do so in different ways. Vincent Pak and Mie Hiramoto compare Pink Dot’s discourse to that of a conservative Christian ministry TrueLove.Is – in particular, focusing on how both organizations mobilize discourses of love in relation to sexuality. Employing Peterson’s (2016) approach to homophobic discourse analysis and a comparative discourse analysis as methodological tools, they demonstrate out how both groups urge LGBTQ Singaporeans to engage with their sexuality in different ways and to different ideological ends.

They suggest that Pink Dot uses the universal positivity of love to decentre the dominant heteronormative construction and understanding of love in Singapore. It leverages this to demonstrate the compatibility of minoritized sexualities with the nuclear family unit that is given primacy of place in Singaporean state policy. TrueLove.Is presents an interesting contrast in that it too uses love as a point of departure – even to the point of ostensibly welcoming and accepting queer Christians. But, as Pak and Hiramoto argue, this is entirely contingent on queer people disavowing their non-heterosexual desires and rejecting the legitimacy of non-heterosexual coupling. Activating the discourse of love in this way – whilst ultimately geared towards entrenching a heterosexual understanding of love – makes it particularly difficult to critique as an instance of homophobia and this article functions as a starting point in developing a contingent sexual politics grounded in the Singaporean context.

Robert Phillips focuses on the media discourse around Pink Dot to investigate and compare how non-normative sexualities and LGBT-related issues are discursively constructed in state media and independent media in different ways. Through a preliminary exploration of the collocational environments and the concordance lines accompanying keywords, he shows how sexuality is discursively contested in the two media environments. In state media, Pink Dot is often delegitimized because it is associated with foreign influence thus positioning heterosexuality as Singaporean and minoritized sexualities as external to the nation. *The Online Citizen*, on the other hand, orients towards notions of care and emphasizes the well-being of the LGBT community in Singapore as well as a significant contestation of heteronormativity through condemnation and rejection of processes such as conversion therapy. Significantly, Phillips also shows how notions of multi-religiosity and secularism – foundational governing principles in Singapore – are used in state media to effectively militate against non-normative sexualities and preserve

heteronormativity in the name of maintaining social harmony. Whilst the scope of his article does not extend to exploring the governing ideologies that might explain why state media and independent media (re)produce these competing discourses, it provides an insightful and detailed look at how in these two media environments, the language used in relation to sexuality is mobilized in different ways to reinforce or challenge the dominance of heterosexuality in Singapore.

Pavan Mano examines Pink Dot discourse and how Pink Dot represents itself by focusing on a Pink Dot flyer from 2017. Instead of analysing the use of written language, he focuses on the semiotics of colour, layout, and typography in relation to sexuality through an eclectic multimodal analysis. Pink Dot, he argues, chooses not to foreground minoritized sexualities or even directly call attention to them. The extent to which heterosexuality has been naturalized through dominant state and policy discourse means that Pink Dot's message that aims to unsettle heteronormative constructions of love in Singapore risks coming across as dissent – something that poses a problem in a country where the mainstream public is extremely averse to overt displays of dissent. Mano suggests that Pink Dot's underlying tactic is to discursively attenuate the potentially discordant elements of its message such that it is able to attract mass public support for Pink Dot and by extension, the LGBT community. His analysis shows how the multimodal features in the flyer work together with each other and the Singaporean context to produce meanings of positivity, warmth and inclusivity. Non-normative sexualities are consequently positioned as compatible with notions of social harmony and diversity that are important in Singapore. Admittedly, one could critique Pink Dot for attempting to assimilate into the mainstream rather than liberating itself from it but one should situate this critique within the context of a state that has successfully shaped the appropriate manner of registering dissent as one that is non-confrontational and emphasizes social

harmony. Pink Dot's backgrounding of sexuality and LGBT issues could thus be read as a function of the field of power it is embedded in – and Mano thus suggests reading Pink Dot's assimilationist stance as being marshalled to function as resistance.

Finally, Benedict Rowlett and Christian Go call attention to the fact that Pink Dot has expanded beyond Singapore and thus represents a rare queer Singaporean 'export' – with Pink Dot events having taken place in the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Canada, Malaysia, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. Rowlett and Go attempt to map one aspect this transregional queer discursive flow through a multimodal analysis of two videos for Pink Dot Hong Kong that examines how minoritized sexualities are represented in comparison to Pink Dot Singapore. They find that Pink Dot discourse in both cities converge – particularly when viewed through a queer Sinophone lens – but they also diverge quite significantly when it comes to appropriating nationalistic discourse. Like Pink Dot Singapore, Pink Dot Hong Kong uses love as a central theme and foregrounds its universality. It also emphasizes social harmony and highlights the importance of the family unit in accepting LGBT people. Minoritized sexualities are also represented as compatible with the family unit and thus assimilable. However, unlike Pink Dot Singapore, Pink Dot Hong Kong is far more ambivalent towards homonationalism. Rowlett and Go highlight that unlike Pink Dot Singapore – where the strategic appropriation of homonationalism is very much the result of Singapore's socio-political context and a delegitimization of a directly confronting the state – Pink Dot Hong Kong is far more willing to diverge from state ideologies particularly on notions of sexual citizenship. This, they suggest, is possibly (at least in part) the result of the socio-political context in Hong Kong where confronting and even defying the state is increasingly seen as a viable way of securing rights. In highlighting the similarities and differences in how Pink Dot has manifested in Hong Kong and Singapore, Rowlett and Go challenge readings of the

transnational Pink Dot movement as a universally homonationalist or homonormative project and gesture towards the idea that such a stance ought to be read more as a response to the particular context within which the movement is located.

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