

**THE LESBIAN COMMUNITY IN POST-INDEPENDENCE SINGAPORE**

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## **DECLARATION**

I hereby declare that the thesis is my original work and it has been written by me in its entirety. I have duly acknowledged all the sources of information which have been used in the thesis.

This thesis has also not been submitted for any degree in any university previously.

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Caryn Tan Shan Ting

30<sup>st</sup> July 2014

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## Summary

This study on *The Lesbian Community in Post-Independence Singapore*, explores how women who choose to be lesbians overcome everyday life challenges through individual and collective actions. Drawing from recent scholarly debates on queer theory, global capitalism, neoliberalism, and citizenship studies I argue that neoconservative heteronormative sexual regimes of truth are actively enforced in the daily lives of lesbians, but middle-class lesbians who are able to rearticulate their personal worth in neoliberal market criteria are able to establish themselves as neoliberal exceptions to existing sexual regimes.

Through an ethnography of the lesbian community, I focus on documenting emergent lesbian self-help, support, and advocacy groups in the community that have sprung up to address specific problems pertaining familial and religious rejection, harassment, homophobia and lack of lesbian representation in the lesbian and broader LGBTQ community. The circulation of narratives of love, hope and vulnerability become empowering counter-hegemonic discourses for emergent lesbian selfhood and kinship in the community. However, I point out two things.

Firstly, existing racial and class barriers continue to impede the formation of deeper interracial and interclass queer hybridities. Secondly, the neoliberal emphasis on market competitiveness and individualism, together lesbians' economic successes have opened up what I call neoliberal lines of flight for those who can increasingly afford to buy private homes, go on regular holidays, book private hotels and work/travel abroad. As a result, despite facing real and potential oppression from family, friends and religious networks, middle-class lesbians are able to escape punitive neoconservative sexual regimes.

However, the neoliberalization of lesbians generate a greater impulse toward homonormativity, the desire for domestic privacy and marriage equality as end goals in themselves. I argue that the neoliberalization of lesbians in the community obfuscate existing oppressive neo-conservative sexual regimes of truth, without actually transforming them into more democratic and diverse opportunities for doing familial and intimate life in post-independence Singapore.

Lesbian activism, however, challenges homnormative impulses through using traditional gender norms of relationality, empathy and care as qualities for a radical queer politics of difference, diversity and inclusivity. Through efforts to document discrimination, adopt a human-rights based approach to LGBTQ rights, build local and transnational alliances with ASEAN SOGIE Caucus and ILGA-Asia, and conduct local Coming Out Campaign and Vagina Monologues readings, lesbian activism is bound up with (1) visions of inclusive diversity and (2) the need for the democratization of Singapore's socio-political climate. Going against trends of homonormativity and neoliberalism, lesbian activism is one of the new queer frontiers of Singapore's emergent LGBTQ movement.

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# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Introduction

Who are lesbians? How do lesbians organize themselves in the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) community? In January 2013, in an interview with *Gay Star News*, lesbian activist Jean Chong bemoaned the lack of any lesbian role models in Singapore and said: “for a long time, lesbians were treated as wallflowers often included to soften the image of an LGBT organization (Leach, 2013).”

In post-independence Singapore, the historical memory of the LGBTQ community is often traced back to the cross-dressing *ah* quas, (a widely used pejorative term for all gay men) of Bugis Street during the 1950s, the AIDS panic and police entrapments at popular gay men cruising areas such as Tanjong Rhu’s Fort Beach Road during the 1980s-1990s, the political entanglements of Singapore’s first LGBT rights group People Like Us (PLU), and heated debates on SiGNeL (PLU’s online forum) over Church of Our Savior’s derisive banner indicating that “homosexuals can change in the 2000s (Tan & Lee, 2007). To academics studying the LGBTQ community, lesbians are observed to be elusive and invisible (Leong, 1995; Lyons, 2004). To LGBTQ activists, lesbians and the broader LGBTQ community, there is an ignorance or disinterest in what lesbians are saying..

One key motivations of writing this thesis is to fill up this gap, and argue against the absence of lesbian presences and influences in the LGBTQ community. This study takes the lesbian community as a site of inquiry, tracing how heteronormative regimes of truth about sexuality in post-independence Singapore creates different kinds of challenges for women who choose to be lesbian. Also, this study looks at how lesbians through individual and collective actions overcome some of these challenges.

Drawing from scholarly debates on how global capitalism and rising levels of affluence has created more global and regional interconnections between lesbians and gays, I show how lesbian activists within the lesbian community tap on regional LGBTQ activist networks for their human rights and advocacy cause, and build local forms of solidarities with other non-LGBTQ groups.

I argue that not all lesbians face equal challenges of “coming out” or “being” and “doing” lesbian. Middle-class lesbians who embody neoliberal economic successes are more easily valued, accepted and *excepted* from corrective punishments from networks of family, religious leaders and friends. Lesbians embodying neoliberal market values and attaining economic successes in the neoliberal market economy, has carved out entrances into equal citizenship and nationhood without necessarily subverting heterosexist regimes of truth, or expending definitions of citizenship and nationhood to include gender and sexual diversity. While neoliberal middle-class lesbians are complicit with heteronormative values, and gay activism engages in a politics of assimilation and normalization, inclusive and diversity oriented visions of lesbian activism charts a different vision and trajectory for the LGBTQ community.

## 1.2 Research Questions

In writing this thesis, I am interested to find out (1) some of the different challenges of choosing to be lesbian in post-independence Singapore and (2) some of the ways in which lesbians overcome these challenges that arise from choosing to be lesbian.

## 1.3 Historical Context

Within the broader post-independence history of Singapore and the history of Singapore women's movement, the notion of impossibility (Gopinath, 2005), can be used in thinking of a lesbian subject position. During the earlier stages of Singapore's industrial development, many women were poorly paid part-time wage workers or unpaid workers at home (Tremewan, 1994: 60). With the need for more wage labour, women were pushed into the workforce (Chan, 2000). Through the 1980s-90s, literacy rates and income levels of women were rising as evidenced by both the increased enrolment of women in tertiary institutions, higher percentage of economically active women, and rising income levels of women (Chan, 2000).

However, embedded within the neoconservative patriarchal logics of the heterosexual nuclear family where a woman is primarily defined as a wife to her husband, childbearer and homemaker, the option to choose to be a "nonheterosexual lesbian woman" is still a position of unimaginability and impossibility within Singapore's post-independence historical narrative.

To attempt to locate lesbians within the history of Singapore's women's movement is a futile cause because lesbianism is a taboo and "off limit (Lyons, 2010)" topic. Using Lam's historical framework, there are two main periods in the history of Singapore's women's movement (Lam, 1993 cited in Lyons, 2004). The first was the struggle against polygamy and the struggle for independence in the 1950s. During this first period, the Singapore Women's Federation (SWF) was formed in 1955 by Chinese-educated and working class women who worked in textile factories, with the aim of uniting all women to fight against colonialism for national independence and equal socio-political status in society (Chew & Sze, 1993: 117-118). Groups such as the Singapore Council for Women (SCW) also actively campaigned for right to equal and monogamous marriage by recommending that polygamy and adultery be punishable by law (Chew & Sze, 1993).

During the second period, the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE) was established in reaction to the Great Marriage Debate in the 1980s (Lyons, 2004). AWARE set up forums and support groups for Malay and Mandarin-speaking women, women in abusive relationships, expatriates, and singles which ran together with their other campaigns against sexism and stereotyping of women in the media were started (Lyons, 2004). But in order to stay within state defined boundaries of what constitutes appropriate feminism (feminism that is avowedly heterosexual), AWARE had to dissociate the image of lesbianism from feminism by presenting a public heterosexual image (Lyons, 2004: p. 114).

Any open discussion of lesbianism would be divisive because it would ‘break social norms surrounding the discussion of sexuality and open up the potential for conflict between women (Lyons, 2004: p. 115).’ Lyon’s observation came true during the AWARE Saga, when the Christian-right wing faction of AWARE took over the executive council of AWARE due what was perceived as a pro-gay agenda amongst the liberal left-wing AWARE faction (Chong, 2011).

After the AWARE Saga, lesbians and lesbian representation were further consigned to the silence within feminist organizations such as AWARE. In what is later called the third period of Singapore’s women’s movement by Lam (1993) in her contribution to *Voices and Choices: The Women’s Movement in Singapore* (1993), “the new world order” that is imagined is a heterosexual world order, where ‘women and men’ would join forces to build a society “where women and men are equal partners (Lam, 1993: p. 16-17).” Lesbians, as shown, occupy a position of impossibility in the heteronormative historical narrative of both Singapore and the Singapore’s Women’s Movement.

However, global capitalism and neoliberal market policies have opened up new opportunities for lesbians to reclaim a sense of citizenship, nationhood and belonging in

Singapore. Scholars working in areas of LGBT politics, identity, activism and queer theory have argued that sexuality can no longer be studied within bounded territorialized notions of culture and cultural production (Povinelli & Chauncey, 1999; Mackie & McLelland, 2015). There is increasingly, the need to trace and map how vernacular lesbian and gay subjectivities are inflected by global capital and other cross-border, regional and inter-Asia exchanges and interconnections (Jackson, 2011; Johnson, Jackson & Herdt, 2000, Lim, 2005, Altman, 1996). New globalized and “diverse interconnections and intercultural comings and goings” can create, support or even undermine existing discourses about gender and sexuality (Johnson, Jackson & Herdt, 2000).

In post-independence Singapore, lesbian expression historically excluded from the national historical narrative and the women’s movement finds its liberating expression by being reconnected with global gay and lesbian cultures. Global and regional queering takes place through the consumption of gay films such as the *Spider Lilies* (2007) *L-Word* (2004) *Blue is the Warmest Colour* (2013), nightclubs and parties such as *Two Queens Asia* and *HerStory*, internet portals such as the *Sayoni Forum*, *Fridae* and *okcupid*. In addition, with rising popularity of social media platforms such as Facebook, various lesbian LGBTQ social groups such as *Herstory.ws*, *Les Cake: Queer Grrrls Takeover* and *Lesbian SG Confessions* (over 14 000 likes) has emerged as key ways through which lesbians come together to organize private social meetings and gatherings.

The post-independence state’s interest to develop Singapore’s creative economy has liberated pockets of space within public culture such that lesbians can find new outlets to engineer lesbian subjectivity, and claim rights to cultural participation through consumption (Yue, 2010). In this thesis however, I will show the global interconnectedness of lesbians not through their consumption practices, but through transnational alliances that lesbian activists form with the ASEAN SOGIE Caucus and

ILGA-Asia networks. Through regional and transnational alliances with other LGBTQ groups, lesbians are able not only able to learn new ways to lobby the government for LGBTQ rights, but also learn to build community capacities and solidarity within the local lesbian and LGBTQ community scene.

Since post-independence, the Singaporean state has adopted a neoliberal free market economic policy. Neoliberalism as an economic policy relies on the market rather than the state to distribute public resources (Ong, 2005). As a market rationality, it promotes and values individualism and entrepreneurship (Ong, 2005). Rather than relying on the state to govern the subject, as a technology of self-governance, subjects learn to govern themselves through “an array of knowledge and expert systems” in order to enhance “efficiency and competitiveness” in market conditions (Ong, 2005: p. 6). For Ong (2005), neoliberalism interacts with regimes of ruling and citizenship to produce uneven zones of inclusion and exclusion.

In this thesis, I will argue that privileging neoliberal market rationalities and values create uneven and unequal zones of inclusion and exclusion within the nation, such that where more economically successful and well-educated middle-class lesbians are simultaneously included, accepted and *excepted* from heteronormative disciplinary regimes.

### 1.3 Conclusion: Mapping the lesbian community

The lesbian community that emerges in post-independence Singapore is imbricated within and shaped by both global capitalism and neoliberal market rationalities. Taking into account global capitalist and neoliberal market forces, through my interviews and fieldwork observations with lesbians, I trace the emergence of the

lesbian community through everyday forms of challenges that arise from choosing to be lesbian.

In chapter 4, I will argue that heteronormative regimes of truth about what encompasses normal or abnormal sexuality are coercive disciplinary forces (Foucault, 1995, Ferguson et al, 1981) set up and preserved by the post-independence state, in order to ensure that women undertake their biological roles to secure the heterosexual reproduction of the nation (Heng & Devan, 1995). Lesbians who deviate from state-defined biological roles of what a woman should be incur various kinds of coercive penalties and punishments.

In chapter 5, I frame the lesbian community as a space made up of different lesbian and LGBT groups such as Women's Nite, Sayoni, the Free Community Church, LesFIT and Young Out Here (YOH) where lesbians can "come out" as lesbian, explore their lesbian subjectivity (Altman, 1982; Weeks, 2001) and forge important friendship bonds and networks characterized by feelings of camaraderie and fellowship. Friendship bonds and networks play an important role in providing important emotional and material support for lesbians to affirm their new sexual subjectivities.

In a society where lesbians are misconceived as shameful, immoral and punished for being lesbian, being part of the lesbian community creates a sense of solidarity, safety and belonging for Singaporean lesbians. Through the collective participation of lesbians in events, activities and self-help groups, lesbians are able to generate new discourses on love, hope and vulnerability. These discourses become powerful narratives of resistance against heteronormative regimes of truth in Singapore.

In chapter 6, I study lesbian activism within the community and show how lesbian activism uses traditional gender traits, such as the caring and relational qualities of women as important qualities for a queer and radical politics of inclusivity, diversity and difference. Because lesbian voices are marginalized within the male-dominated



LGBTQ community and feminist organizations such as AWARE, lesbian activists actively form local as-well-as transnational alliances with other LGBTQ groups from ASEAN SOGIE Caucus and ILGA-Asia in order to build bases of solidarity to fight for the human rights of LGBTQ peoples in Singapore.

In this chapter, I document some of the visions of lesbian activism and the ways in which lesbian activists fight for broader structural changes in Singapore. For example, I document how lesbian activists see need to abolish the censorship of LGBTQ peoples in mainstream media and fight for the democratization and deregulation of both the internet and the broader socio-political climate, so that LGBTQ peoples can maintain a queer space of difference in Singapore.

In chapter 7, I conclude by problematizing how middle-class lesbians as neoliberal exceptions with homonormative desires do not contest neoconservative heterosexual norms, but rather, through collusion and complicity with these norms, obfuscate its oppressive effects. I argue that inclusive citizenship cannot be constructed exclusively around reproductive heterosexuality and nuclear families but must be expanded to include the cultural representations and social membership of different gender identities and sexual orientations in post-independence Singapore.

## **2 Literature Review**

### 2.1 Theoretical Literature

#### 2.1.1 Sexual identities, behaviours and subjectivities

Foucault in the *History of Sexuality (vol 1)* has argued that category of “sexuality” is a social and historical product. During the seventeenth century, together with the rise of the Victorian bourgeois society, there was also an emergence of a great quantity of discourses about the truth of “sex” and “sexuality.” The Victorian bourgeois society Foucault notes, saw an impetus to privatize sexuality (into the sphere of the home) for the utilitarian function of reproduction.

Foucault contends that the construction of the category “homosexuality” is itself a seventeenth century product of Western history. His work has set the foundations for what can be called a social constructionist theory of sexuality: the argument that sexuality and sexual meanings are produced through religion, ethnicity class, gender, family, political conditions and ideologies of reproduction (Blackwood, 2000: 224).

Scholars have pointed out that the analytical distinction between homosexual identity (who I am) and behaviour (what I do) must be distinguished (see Weeks, 1987; Altman, 1996; Boestellorf, 2005; Weston, 1993: p. 347ff). Altman (1996: 81) for example, points out that homosexual behaviour not identity is widespread in Latin America “where what is crucial is not gender but whether a man is “active” or “passive.”

In anthropological debates, scholars have brought up the issue of how some cultures may practice semen transactions or boy-insemination rites as an induction ritual into adulthood (see Herdt, 1984), but they need not necessarily perceive themselves and construct their selfhoods as “homosexuals.” To call these sexual practices “ritualized

homosexuality” imposes western meanings of sexuality and personhood upon the Anthropologist’s ethnographic subjects in Melanesian societies (Elliston, 1995; Weston, 1993). Also, Dede Oetomo (1996) studying “banci/waria<sup>1</sup>” or gender behaviour and/or gender identity nonconforming men in urban centers of Indonesia (namely, Surabaya) has pointed out that out that “men who love “banci” fiercely” and/or those who form long term relationships with banci “refuse to be labelled as homosexuals.” By showing how banci/waria do not identify as homosexual even though they have sex with men<sup>2</sup> (and in some cases even take on the identity of the dominant gender in erotic sexual relationships), Oetomo (1996, 2000) has complicated our understandings of the variations across the lines of sexuality, gender and class lines.

Despite the contribution of queer theories and activism in deconstructing and destabilizing sexual and gender identities (Sedwick, 1993; Warner, 1993; Butler, 1990; Bersani, 1995), sexual identities or collective identities such as “gay” and “lesbian” have important strategic uses in terms of recruiting and mobilizing of peoples and organizational actors together in urban settings for purposes of attaining sexual/queer rights and social justice. This is so in the West (see Bernstein, 1997, 2003; D’ Emilio,

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<sup>1</sup> In addition, Banci/Waria see themselves as a third gender in addition to *laki* or *laki-laki* (male) and *perempuan* (female). They see themselves as “women trapped in men’s bodies” and embodying elements of both maleness and femaleness (Oetomo, 2000: 54). Amongst the banci/waria, they divide men into two categories called the laki “men” or laki asli “real men” and the gay men. Most of the waria/banci are not interested in having sex or forming relationships with men they perceive as gay although, Oetomo (2000) highlights that the more *kasar* banci often aggressively pursue their men and once they decide to have sex, the *laki asli* may willingly and even eagerly ask to be the penetrate (annually and orally).

<sup>2</sup> Men who love banci/waria see homosexuals as a Western middle-class construction and banci as a lower-class one (Oetomo, 1996: 263). Elsewhere, Oetomo notes that “waria-loving men do not identify themselves and refuse to be termed homosexual. They actually form an unmarked category. If they know of “homosexuals” (“homo”) at all, they perceive these latter as men who have sex with males usually more Westernized, more middle class, wealthier, more likely to hang out at expensive discos, and so on. I therefore suggest that we are dealing with a difference in social construction between two socio-economic groups in Indonesian society; the “waria” is a working class construction and the “homo” is a middle class construction.”

1983; Newton, 1993, Esterberg, 1997) as it is in East Asia where the adoption of sexual identities such as the ‘lalas’ in Shanghai and ‘tongzhi’ in Taiwan and Hong Kong (see Martin, 2003; Erni, 2006; Tsang, 2012; Ching, 2010; Sang, 2003) has played a powerful role in contemporary sexual/queer and cultural rights based social movements.

Taking into account the analytical distinctions between homosexual identity, behaviour and identity politics (gay and lesbian rights)<sup>3</sup>, I will follow the approach Boellstorff (2005) adopts, to eschew using the language of identity/behaviour and place more of my focus on 1) *subject positions* as extant categories of selfhood, and 2) *subjectivities* as the various senses of the self (including erotics, assumptions about one’s life course etc. that one takes on when occupying a subject position whether partially or completely, temporarily or permanently) (Boellstorff, 2005: 10). This as Boellstorff (2005) points out, will bring our attention to the total social fact of gay and lesbian selfhood rather than remain at the level of identity based issues, politics and contestations.

### 2.1.2 Global capitalism, Neoliberalism and Sexual Subjectivities

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<sup>3</sup> I am not claiming that identity politics or gay and lesbian rights are unimportant (although it is controversial within the context of decades of feminist criticisms about the institution of marriage and the family). However, my fieldwork data has shown that not all lesbians engage in gay and lesbian rights debates or identity politics. In fact, only few take on that course of rights based action and direction in life.

Suffice to note here, there are many lesbians whom I have interviewed and/or conversed informally with who are (or otherwise, intend to have or be in) long term same-sex partnerships but do not identify with the identity of “lesbian.” Some choose not to be labelled, others call themselves queer or gay because the identity category “lesbian” is too depressing or diseased (fieldwork memos). While this may be an issue about identity and identity labels, there are also instances where lesbians who are involved in relationships cognitively deny their everyday behaviours of being with a same-sex relationship. The term/identity lesbian may be contested, rejected and denied, but my informants are still most familiar with the ‘lesbian.’ What I am interested in is not the lesbian identity but the how the lesbian subjectivity (senses of self and selfhood) is shaped and produced. Also, who gets to occupy this subject position?

With global capitalism and rising levels of affluence amongst the middle-class, same-sex experiences and intimacies can no longer be fashioned solely through local cultures and communities, but through a greater interconnectedness of the world (Plummer, 1992). The middle-class sensibility shaped by consumerism and advertising argues Boellstorff (2007), has a significant effect upon the conception of modern Southeast Asian sexual selfhoods. Scholars have used concepts such as ‘global queering (Altman, 1996)’ and ‘glocal queering (Lim, 2005),’ to trace how vernacular lesbian and gay subjectivities are inflected by global capital and other cross-border, regional and inter-Asia exchanges and interconnections (Jackson, 2011).

Johnson, Jackson & Herdt (2000) have used the term ‘critical regionalities’ to map these new globalized and ‘diverse interconnections and intercultural comings and goings’ which can create, support or even undermine existing discourses about gender and sexuality. Povinelli & Chauncey (1999: p. 440) have similarly argued using the term ‘transnational sexualities’ to show how sexuality and intimacy are complicated by globalization, which has increased the “scale, intensity and density” of global economic, political and social connections in “affecting social practices, identities and imaginaries of people around the world.” Studying sexuality transnationally, demands “the bounded territorialized concept of culture and cultural production” to be substituted with a more “circulatorially based concept (Povinelli & Chauncey, 1999: p. 443).”

Global interconnections, argue Blackwood & Wieringa (2007), link gay and lesbian communities and networks together and “create new visions of and spaces for women’s and men’s same sex cultures and lives.” However, global capitalism as Mohanty (2006) reminds us, can also result in the generating, mobilizing or consolidating of new forms of sexual, gender and racial hierarchies both within and across nations.

The manner in which new sexual, gender and racial hierarchies are consolidated can be understood through Ong’s discussion of neoliberalism and ‘neoliberal exceptions,’

in her work on *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty* (2006). Here Ong (2006) highlights that neoliberalism is a “specific kind of progressive modernization” which relies on the market rather than the state to distribute public resources (Ong, 2006: 11). Neoliberalism is based on a return to principles of “economic efficiency and ethical self-responsibility,” and an individualism that is “‘competitive,’ ‘possessive’ and construed often in the terms of the doctrine of consumer sovereignty (Ong, 2006: p. 11).” Ong highlights that “the neoliberal exception gives value to calculative practices and self-governing subjects as preferred citizens” while “other segments of the population are excepted from neoliberal criteria and thus rendered excludable as citizens and subjects (2006: p. 16).”

For Ong, while migrant workers and labourers are considered “exceptions to neoliberalism,” or in other words, exceptions to living standards created by market-driven policies, the concept of “exception” or “neoliberalism as exception” is deployed by Ong (2006) in a broader sense as also “a positive decision to include selected populations and spaces as targets of calculative choices and value-orientation associated with neoliberal reform (2006: p. 5).” Ong’s argument is that subjects who are able to rearticulate their discursive practices and claims in neoliberal market rationalities, as economically competitive and efficient living resources that can be harnessed and managed by governing regimes (2006: p. 6), can open up new forms of inclusion and citizenship rights for themselves.

Merging the theoretical insights how of cross-border, regional and inter-Asia exchanges and interconnections are increasingly playing a bigger role in the shaping vernacular sexual identities with Ong’s idea of ‘neoliberal exceptions,’ and how global capitalism can generate, mobilize and consolidate new forms of sexual, gender and racial hierarchy, two important points can be made.

Firstly, sexual subjectivities cannot be theorized within bounded and territorialized concepts of culture. Theorizations must take into account broader and more complex transnational and intercultural social, political and cultural flows, configurations and connections. Secondly, sexual subjectivities are not accorded equal amounts of freedom or inclusion in their respective social and cultural milieus. Questions of freedom or inclusion are largely contingent on whether the sexual subject is able to articulate his or her selfhood or subjectivity in terms of hegemonic neoliberal criteria.

### 2.1.3 Citizenship, Nationhood and Belonging

Citizenship has been linked by Marshall (1950) to three sets of rights: civil or legal rights (rights to own property, freedom of speech, thought and faith, right to justice) political rights (institutionalized in political systems and includes the right to vote, and participate in the exercise of political power) and social rights (includes rights to economic welfare, security and right to live the life of a civilized being according to existing societal standards) (Richardson, 1998).

The idea of citizenship has been expanded by feminists who pointed out the exclusion of gender in citizenship studies (Walby, 1994; Yuval-Davis, 1997). Turner (1993) emphasizes on the social aspects of citizenship, defining citizenship as both a set of social practices which defines social membership and participation in a particular society or nation-state, and “a social status that determines how economic and cultural capital are redistributed and recognized within society (Turner, 2008: p. 14).” Turner’s definition of citizenship focusing on social membership and participation in a society or nation-polity raises questions such as: What is a nation? Who belong to a nation? Pakulski (1997) extends and deepens Turner’s definition of social citizenship further, by arguing for the need to expand the cultural dimensions of citizenship.

Cultural citizenship involves the right to unhindered and legitimate representation, and propagation of identities and lifestyles through information systems and in public fora. One can detect within them three sub-streams: the right to symbolic presence and visibility (vs marginalization); the right to dignifying representation (vs stigmatization); and the right to propagation of identity and maintenance of lifestyles (vs assimilation) (Pakulski, 1997: p. 80).

Some scholars have also argued that rather than focusing on the legal, social and cultural aspects of citizenship, citizenship studies should focus on consumerism because increasingly, citizens in a capitalist world realize themselves through acts of consumption (Campbell, 1987). When we implicate sexuality or more specifically put, the sexual rights discourse into citizenship, Richardson (2000: p. 107-108) argues that three sub-streams appear: the rights to various forms of sexual practice in personal relationships (the right to campaign for sexual freedom and safety), the rights to self-definition, and the development of gay identities (e.g. the right to be gay and lesbian) and the rights to gain access to social institutions such as having public validation of various forms of sexual relations (e.g. same-sex marriage).

The concept of sexual or intimate citizenship is a 'sensitizing concept' because it forces us to consider the impacts of heterosexual/homosexual binarism, the institutionalization of heterosexuality and the question of equity and justice for sexual minorities (Weeks, 1998: 39). But other scholars highlight how practices or acts to incorporate oneself into the nation, such as marriage-equality can reinforce heteronormative privileges and hierarchies (Berlant, 1997; Richardson, 1998; Duggan, 2005). Placing sexuality back into citizenship studies again (as Turner, 2008 points out) raises questions of inclusion and belonging in the nation.



I argue that what is relevant to this study is also then the question of: 1) how sexual minorities incorporate themselves into the nation? and 2) what are some of these social implications of sexual minorities incorporating themselves into the nation?

#### 2.1.4 Neoconservative sexual regimes of truth

The term neoconservative is often used in scholarly literature to refer to a kind of ‘intellectual sensibility (Grondin, 2005)’ or ‘political rationality (Brown, 2006)’ that took shape amongst influential intellectuals cum policymakers in America during the 1960s<sup>4</sup>. The term political rationality refers to a specific form of ‘normative political reason’ that organizes ‘the political sphere, governance practices and citizenship (Brown, 2006: 693).’ There are a few characteristics of neoconservativism which Brown (2006) points out such as:

1) the desire for a strong state and preference for intrusion, censorship and regulation for the underclasses and underclasses, 2) the opposition of state redistribution of wealth, 3) the encouragement of family values which allocates economic and personal roles along traditional gender lines (e.g. women’s place in the domestic sphere; man’s place in the public sphere) and 4) the belief in the state’s role in setting the moral-religious compass for society and the world (which then calls for a strong revival of patriotism, military and expansionist foreign policy in America; the allying with religions and religious groups).

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<sup>4</sup> For an extensive discussion of how neoconservative currents of opinion evolved in America, see Vaisse, Justin’s (2012) work on *Neoconservatism: The Biography of a movement*, where he discusses three ages of neoconservatism and the backgrounds of neoconservative intellectuals such as Irving Kristol, Norman Podhoretz, Jeane Kirkpatrick, Michael Novak and Charles Krauthammer. These intellectuals as Vaisse argued, had a major role to play in influencing America’s domestic and foreign policies.

However, I use and discuss neoconservatism not just in terms of a political rationality, but in terms of it being a sexual ‘regime of truth.’ I will use regimes of truth interchangeably with ‘discursive regimes’ or ‘sexual regimes.’ Sexual regimes of truth, condition what we see, our systems of belief, representations, discourse and practices. Regimes of truth as Foucault writes, are a given set of “rules which at a given period and for a given society define: the limits and forms of the *sayable*: What is *possible to speak of*... the limits and forms of conservation: What utterances are put into circulation, repressed and censored? Which discourses can be reactivated, retained, valued or reconstituted (Foucault, 1994: p. 59-60).”

Sexual regimes of truth produce the effects of truth (or falsehood) in both discourse and practice<sup>5</sup>. It determines the meaning, regularity and intelligibility of statements, discourses and practices in every social and historical context (Foucault, 2010: 212), provides the reasons and principles for everyday kinds of discourse and practice, and therefore makes *certain* kinds of discourse and practice acceptable at a given moment (Foucault, 1991: p. 74). I argue that neoconservative sexual regimes of truth are preserved and institutionalized in the heterosexual nuclear family and thus, play a major role in shaping how lesbians think of what comprises normal and abnormal sexuality.

#### 2.1.4 Conclusion

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<sup>5</sup> As Foucault writes: regimes of truth are a given set of “rules which at a given period and for a given society define: the limits and forms of the *sayable*: What is *possible to speak of*... the limits and forms of conservation: What utterances are put into circulation, repressed and censored? Which discourses can be reactivated, retained, valued or reconstituted (Foucault, 1994: p. 59-60).”

Using these three main theoretical bodies of work, I argue that neoconservative sexual regimes of truth are challenged, undermined and transcended in two ways. Firstly, through the formation of new transnational, international and intercultural networks and secondly, through the articulating of abnormal lesbian subjectivity in hegemonic neoliberal terms.

## 2.2 Scholarship on Homosexuality

In the Singapore context, I argue that scholarship regarding the oppression of homosexuality can be categorized into three broad streams.

### 2.2.1 The oppressive state discourse

The first stream of scholarship on homosexuality draws implicitly or explicitly from what Foucault would call, “a theory of rights or repression (Foucault, 1994: p. 121-123)” focusing on how the state as sovereign, oppresses or prohibits homosexuality. The oppression of homosexuality by the state is exemplified by the police raid on gay men and censorship of homosexual themes in mainstream media (Au, 2009: p. 403). This stream of scholarship reveals an emerging LGBTQ movement and community fighting for human rights and the repeal or retention of colonial penal code S377A within the context of rising religious conservatism amidst the promise of a more liberal, consultative and consensual leadership style in the Goh era of the 1990s (see Chua, 2003; Chua, Hor, 2012; Obendorf, 2012, Offord, 1999; 2004; 2005; Lim, 2004; Loh, 2012; Lee 2008; Yue, 2013; Chua, 2012; Leong, 1995; 2008; 2012; Tan, 2009; Heng, 2008).

Scholars show that the state does not only oppress homosexuality but shapes the kind of strategies of resistance that gay activists adopt. For example, besides organizing

gatherings for recreation and leisure, restrictive laws concerning association and assembly makes it extremely difficult for gays and lesbians to organize on the basis of social and political causes (Leong, 1997). The restrictive political climate in Singapore has driven gay activism to using the internet as a means of organizing, mobilizing and expressing their identities (Ng, 1999). While there is a promise for more consensual governance in the Goh era, Chua's (2012) work highlights that gay activists have to adopt a kind of "pragmatic resistance" that avoid direct confrontation and that does not wage an open war on principles for greater rights and democracy.

### 2.2.2 Neoconservative Asian and Family Values discourse

The second scholarly stream of scholarly work frames the oppression of homosexuals within the discourse of Asian Values and the Family, and studies the effects of the state's discourse on Asian Values and the Family on the expression of homosexuality in the public and private space (Yue, 2006, Leong, 1996, Leong, 2012; Chan, 2009; Tan, 2003; Lim, 2004; Oswin, 2010a; 2010b; Teo, 2010; Purushotam, 2010; Hudson, 2013). The Asian Values discourse materializes in two main ways. Firstly, it materializes in the Chinese-Malay-Indian-Other (CMIO) "racial community" discursive framework that every Singaporean is supposed to be grounded in (Chua, 1996). Because each "race" is supposed to be defined by a "traditional racial culture" which represents Singapore's "unique and quintessential multiracial Asianness (Ang & Stratton 1995)<sup>6</sup>," scholars such as Goh (2008: 244), has observed that the discourse of multiracialism has

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<sup>6</sup> Scholars such as Ang & Stratton (1995) have pointed out that ironically, predefining racial cultures and identities and culture has reified denaturalized racial cultures rather than allowing them to grow organically.

made homosexual Singaporeans unrecognizable, turning them into “the basis of a social problem, named variously as Westernization, deracination or communalism.”

Secondly, the Asian Values discourse is materialized as a set of traditional neoconservative family values discourse where the patriarchal, dual-sex dual-gender<sup>7</sup> heterosexual structure of the family is reproduced and enforced in the everyday Singaporean life. The state’s housing policies aimed at housing those with a “proper heterosexual family nucleus” comprise of a kinship group of man, wife and children is a form of social control of the Singaporean populace (Oswin, 2010). Preserved and extended from colonial times, queers and produces the “heterosexual” and the “homosexual” subject in the post-colonial period<sup>8</sup> (Oswin, 2010b: p. 138).

The neoconservative Asian Values discourse has forestalled the state’s own ability to legislate against the unequal and discriminatory treatment of homosexuals in Singapore. The Asian Values discourse created a conservative moral majority in the post-colonial period, from which the ruling party has set itself up as “guardian (Goh, 2008: 249) of this Asian communitarian compact.” By speaking up for the discrimination of homosexuals, the state will be viewed as standing with the liberal section of homosexuals in a traditional and conservative Singapore society. Instead, the state’s rhetoric and political strategy has been to insist on the privatization of both religion and sexuality so as to continue to act as the arbiter standing above a conservative and multi-racial and multi-religious public sphere (see Goh, 2014: p. 125).

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<sup>7</sup> By dual-sex dual gender roles, I refer to how women are compelled by gender discourses, to take on “natural” roles of the care-giver, nurturer and house-maker and, men are to take on the role of being the primary breadwinner of the family engaged in providing and protecting the family (Hudson, 2013).

<sup>8</sup> Oswin (2010) argues heterosexual stable family is a norm that had historical connections to Singapore’s colonial past, and S377A is *merely* a legislative additive to this colonial context.

### 2.2.3 Creative Industries and the global queer discourse

The last stream of scholarship highlights the contradictory impacts of creative industries on homosexuals in Singapore (Yue, 2006; 2007; 2012; Obendorf, 2012; Tan 2009). The rise of creative industries came hand-in-hand with the Singaporean state's ambition to turn Singapore into a "Renaissance City" and "Global City of the Arts (Obendorf, 2012: 103; Kwok & Low, 2002)." Following the state's global city ambitions, homosexuals are welcome to work in a range of industries in business and finance, architecture, arts and music and entertainment (Florida, 2012) as an indicator of the a diverse and creative culture, even though, in the broader Singaporean society (Tan, 2009; Yue, 2012), homosexuals are still marginalized and discriminated against. Yue (2012: p. 2) argues that the simultaneous acceptance and marginalization of homosexuals is due to the state's "illiberal pragmatism (Yue, 2012: p. 2)."

Illiberal pragmatism argues Yue (2012) places continued material success and economic growth above principles of liberalism, social justice and human thus resulting in state policies that are both "highly contextual and instrumental (Chua, 1995: p. 69 cited in Yue, 2012)," and conducted *in situ* to achieve the end of economic success. As a result, homosexuality is accepted only in the selected industries and socio-cultural spaces opened up by the state's "official cultural infrastructures developed as part global media hub's "livable city agenda (Yue, 2006; 2011)."

Yet, so long as most of the permitted LGBTQ spaces are commercial spaces, there will be high socio-economic barriers of entry for LGBTQ persons to participate in LGBTQ social life (Obendorf, 2012). In addition, bearing in mind how the state constructs cultural citizenship not through political and social participation, but through "consumership [that] produces the citizen as an informed [and active] consumer (Yue, 2006)," the "global queer identity (Lim, 2005)" is more likely to be mediated through

consumer culture and neoliberal market logics rather than local social and political activities integral to community and nation-building.

#### 2.2.4 Conclusion

I argue that a shift in perspective is required from seeing the state as an oppressor of homosexuals (stream 1), to seeing the neoconservative Asian Values and Family discourse, as determining meanings of normal/abnormal sexuality and legitimizing everyday forms of oppression from family members, religious leaders and friends (stream 2). The opening up of pockets of commercial spaces and the emergence of creative industries with an environment welcoming to homosexual peoples (stream 3), does not ameliorate the constraining and oppressive effects of neoconservative Asian Values and Family discourse.

To pose the problem of oppression in the terms of the state is to frame the problem of oppression in the language of the sovereign and the law<sup>9</sup>. This limits the source and scope of oppression to the state and the law which makes it difficult to discuss the oppression of lesbian and transgender peoples since “the courts have never actually

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<sup>9</sup> The problem with the oppressive state discourse is however, not wrong or unimportant, but lacking. This is not to say that the state has no responsibility in creating unequal social conditions for the lives homosexuals. Scholars working on gender and sexuality related issues in Singapore have pointed out how the Singaporean state’s policies on gender, sexuality and the family has a heavy hand in shaping heteronormative discourses about gender and sexuality (Kong & Chan, 2000). This echoes broader trends in the Southeast Asian region observed by scholars such as Peletz (2006), Wieringa (2000) & Blackwood (2010) where the state has taken on a key role in controlling sexuality through the production of discourses on what comprise a normative sexual life.

Peletz (2006) has for instance, noted that the increased centrality of the state in nations such as Malaysia and Indonesia have created a social atmosphere “unfriendly to all phenomena deemed to be ambiguous or liminal with respect to gender, sexuality or anything else unless they have, folkloric, touristic or other clear market value (2006: 316).”

convicted lesbians” and lesbianism is only “in principal prosecutable under Section 20 of the Miscellaneous Offences (Public Order and Nuisance Act) (Tan, 2003: 138).”

As a result, scholars such as Lyons, (2004) & Leong, (1995) for example, highlight that lesbians are elusive and invisible. There is little or no scholarly discussion (except Tang, 2012) on how lesbians are discriminated against and oppressed, and the ways in which lesbians partake in individual or collective acts to overcome some of these challenges.

Further, from the perspective of queer theory<sup>10</sup> which contests the binary of homo/heterosexual identities and subverts ideas of social normality, scholarship that frames gay activism as forms of resistance against the oppressive state (Leong, 1997; Offord, 2005) does not adequately problematize the assimilationist and normalizing goals of gay activism’s desire to be accepted into mainstream society (Yue, 2007: p. 151).

### 2.3 Final Conclusion

With reference to the theoretical bodies of scholarly work mapped out above and existing scholarship on homosexuality in Singapore, I argue that while the state may create and maintain unequal social conditions of life for homosexuals in Singapore and to a certain extent “oppress homosexuals,” what is more academically interesting is 1) how sexual regimes of truth are reinforced, not by the state but by ordinary citizens such as family members, religious leaders and friends, 2) how middle-class lesbians try to reintegrate themselves as respectable neoliberal citizen-subjects in order to overcome neoconservative sexual regimes of truth and 3) the implications of this neoliberal

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<sup>10</sup> Queer theory argues for the importance of rejecting (1) the hierarchy of identities, (2) stable and binary identity categories of homosexual-heterosexual and (3) the need to assimilate and normalize gay and lesbian identities through asserting equal civil rights and/or the “sameness” of homosexual with heterosexual identities (see Warner, 1993).



orientation and behaviour in community formation and activism in post-independence  
Singapore.

### **3. Methodology**

This research project on the lesbian community in Singapore is undertaken both as an outsider researcher and a volunteer in queer women advocacy group Sayoni. This research on the lesbian community in Singapore began as a result of interests in wanting to learn about how lesbians “come out” in Singapore, and how does one be lesbian in the heterosexual nuclear family? I wanted to study how lesbians negotiated their everyday lives in heterosexual nuclear families; what are some of the problems lesbians faced; what are some of the strategies of coping and forms of resistances? As my fieldwork progressed, I found that participating in different self-help groups, activities and events was a way lesbians could make important friendships that established an important support structure for their everyday lives and, which also created a sense of community amongst lesbians in Singapore.

Since there are currently very few studies on the lesbian community in Singapore, I wanted to compose an ethnography of the lesbian community in Singapore, study lesbian activism within the community and to document the difficulties of choosing to be lesbian in Singapore. To do this, I kept a fieldwork memos where I recorded my fieldwork observations and a separate fieldwork reflections that contained my own personal reflections and interpretations of events that I participated in during my fieldwork.

I generated data during my fieldwork through a combination of participant observations (ethnographic fieldwork) and semi-structured interviews (N = 47) to gather life story narratives of lesbians in Singapore. Most of the data presented in this study comes from my interviews with lesbian informants. Each of my interviews lasted for 1-2 hours and they were conducted in the homes of lesbians and at restaurants and cafes, over meals I arranged with lesbians. I used a combination of snowball sampling and purposive

sampling to select my interviewees. I selected using purposive sampling four lesbian activists whom I knew in the community to document their experiences in doing activism. I asked my informants for referrals to whom amongst their lesbian friends I could potentially speak to.

I tried to interview as diverse a range of lesbians as possible in terms of age and racial and ethnic profile, but I only managed to interview three Malay-Muslim lesbians, one Malay and one Indian lesbian during the course of my fieldwork. Most of my informants are Chinese, middle-class, university students and working professionals, who fall within the age range of 20s to 40s (see Appendix A).

With hindsight, I found that my fieldwork experience was shaped by my own gender, sexuality, race and class. As the lesbian community is dominantly composed of Chinese middle-class lesbians (fieldwork memos), being female, bisexual, Chinese and middle-class made it easier for me to participate in lesbian based community activities and events. It also gave me an ease of access to a network of Chinese middle-class lesbians that a male researcher, for instance, may not be able to gain access to.

Because the lesbian community is dominantly Chinese in racial composition, I had difficulties trying obtaining a more representative sample in terms of race and ethnicity. For instance, I could not locate working-class lesbians or working-class Malay lesbians in the community to obtain a more representative sample of the lesbian community. This quandary however, led me to problematizing the class and racial composition of the lesbian community in Singapore later on.

Because there are no fixed physical spaces where lesbians organize themselves, during my fieldwork, I tried to attend as many lesbian organized events and activities as possible. These may take place overseas in the form of camps and retreats; talks at Indignation festivals; poetry readings and book launch events; meetings and parties at

private homes of lesbians; dinners at coffee shops, cafes and restaurants; Bugis Street cafes; Rented Art studios; Free Community Church.

Through my interviews with lesbians, I learnt about lesbian self-help groups, events and activities. Because some lesbian activities can only be known by “word of mouth” and others only took place once a month or once a year, I tried to attend as many events and activities as possible. During my fieldwork, I did participant observation in the Free Community Church (FCC) during Sunday Services, I visited the Pelangi Pride Center (PPC) to interview a lesbian activist, attended two Women’s Nite monthly gathering, Indignation gay pride festival events where some of my lesbian informants gave talks and speeches, The Virginia Monologues reading organized by Sayoni and EtiquetteSG, I Will Survive book launch, and social gatherings with lesbians organized by lesbians from Sayoni, LesFIT and the Free Community Church (FCC).

### 3.1 Life Story and participatory model of doing Interviews

Most of my fieldwork data is generated based on my interviews with lesbians. I adopted a life story interview approach to generate life story narratives of lesbians. A life story narrative is an account of one person’s life that can be generated and collected through various sources: biographies, autobiographies, letters, journals, obituaries and interviews (Plummer, 2001: p. 18-19). A life story narrative can be about a specific significant aspect of a person’s life (Chase, 2008). This may revolve around an epiphanal event or a turning point in a person’s life (Denzin, 1989; Chase, 2008).

In a life story interview, Atkinson (1998: 9) argues that “the interviewee is a storyteller, the narrator of the story being told, whereas the interviewer is a guide, or director in this process. The two together are collaborators, composing, constructing a story the teller can be pleased with (1998: 19).” Blumer (1969: p. 73) suggests that the

benefits of adopting a life story approach to interviews is that the life story approach enables researchers to “take the role of the actor and see the world from that stand point.”

I adopted a life story narrative approach to my interviews during my fieldwork because as a researcher who is a volunteer with queer women advocacy group Sayoni, I was privy to discrimination that lesbians may face in their daily lives and I found it important to document life stories of lesbians. In addition, I found it important to allow my informants to give voice to their own struggles, thoughts, emotions and interpretations of their lives as lesbians during the interview.

I asked my lesbian informants a series of questions including how did you first know that you are lesbian? Is “coming out” important to you? How did you “come out” to your family? What were your family’s reactions? Is community important to you? In what ways are community important to you? How do you think the community has contributed to your well-being (see Appendix A)? I did not however, stick to my interview schedule strictly. When I interviewed lesbian activists from Sayoni for instance, I crafted specific questions to elicit their thoughts and opinions on human rights and discrimination of lesbians in the community (see Appendix B).

Because I understood that some questions to do with “coming out” and “family” may revive painful emotional struggles, I used a participatory model of conducting interviews. The participatory model of conducting interviews aim at establishing a mutual interaction between the researcher and informant such that the researcher adopts an open attitude and shares something of herself by also talking about her own experiences (Oakley, 1981; Letherby, 2005).

During my interviews, I shared some of my own life experiences and struggles “coming out” with my informants. This helped me to establish a more mutual and reciprocal flow of interaction between the researcher and informant. I found that by sharing my own experiences and struggles, the hierarchy of power and formalities

between the researcher and informant became less obvious (see Letherby, 2005) and both my informants and I were able to share and learn from each other's experiences.

### 3.2 Thematic Analysis and Grounded Theory Approach in Data Analysis

After generating life story narratives, I transcribed all my 47 interviews and I identified common themes or concepts that appeared in my interview data. I used a thematic analysis and grounded theory approach to identifying common themes or concepts that were in my interview transcripts. The grounded theory approach uses coding to generate an emergent set of categories and properties from raw data. Open coding argues Strauss and Corbin (1990: p. 62) is "part of the analysis that pertains specifically to the naming and categorizing of phenomena through a close examination of data (1990: p. 62)."

Part of the open coding process includes constantly comparing various categories to draw out similarities and differences between the coded data (Glaser & Strauss, 2006). Through this process of constant comparison, higher levels of conceptualization from overriding or integrating categories (Glaser & Strauss, 2006: p. 36-40). Through a process of what Glaser & Straus (2006) calls theoretical sampling, the researcher can also return to the field to collect new data needed to generate new data to develop the emerging theory. The process of constant comparison and theoretical sampling is a dynamic and iterative process that would help researchers to bring up patterns in raw data (Ryan & Bernard, 2003).

Analyzing my interview data transcripts, I coded the data initially with categories which I went on to refine through my coding process. In one of my interviews with Emmie (Chinese, early 30s) for instance, I had codes that read "struggles with parents at home" "no progression in relationships" "participated in LUSH," "FCC-activities,"

“FCC-strong social cause,” “community- for fishing for lesbian partners,” “goes to pinkdot every year,” “community-as support system,” “avoid going to hostel with partner to be respectful of place,” In another interview with a lesbian, codes such as “family-telling white lies,” “no progression in lesbian relationship,” “community-as support system,” “Sayoni-Human Rights Documentation (HRD),” “Sayoni- vacation, chalet, summer camp,” “Oogachaga Bee event,” “Marriage gives a lot of benefits,” “marriage-kids, adoption, social legitimacy, support for relationships,” “no protection to lesbians by the state” emerged.

From these categories that emerged out of my initial codings, I created broader categories such as “what is community to lesbians” and “why is community important to lesbians” and sorted examples such as “support system” and “fishing for lesbian partners” under the latter category. I also formed a typology of what self-help groups were there and what events and activities were organized. This contributed to my ethnography on the lesbian community in Singapore which was structured according to the typology of self-help groups, activities and events that appeared repeatedly in my interview transcripts and fieldwork participation with lesbians in the community.

While I coded my data to bring out common and repetitive themes that appeared in my interview transcripts, I also took note of metaphors and analogies that my lesbian informants used to represent their thoughts, behaviours and experiences. For instance, some of my informants used metaphors of the “wall” and “cocoon” to describe meanings of community. Metaphors helped me to look at underlying themes such as stigma and discrimination that the lesbians face that result in the production of these metaphors (see Ryan & Bernard, 2003).

### 3.3 Researcher positionality and Fieldwork dynamics

Ethnographic fieldwork, or ethnography, as Ortner (1995) suggests, is an attempt at understanding another life world using the “self as an instrument of knowing.” The “ethnographic stance” argues Ortner (1995: p. 174), is as much an intellectual (and moral) positionality, a constructive and interpretive mode, as it is a bodily process in space and time.” In ethnography, “the researcher is the research instrument *par excellence* (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983: p. 18).”

Positioned within the field, researchers are always in a way, complicit in trying to establish rapport with their informants to generate data (Marcus, 1997). The idea of complicity for Marcus (1997) “forces the recognition of ethnographers as ever-present markers of outsidership (1997: p. 97) in the field of research. It also forces the researcher to reflect on the “changing conditions of research (Marcus, 1997: p. 97)” and how look at the researcher’s positionality in the field shapes what she is “positioned to see, to know and to understand (Chiseri-Strater, 2002: p. 123).”

Feminist, post-structuralist and post-modern contributions to theoretical and methodological aspects of social science research has paved way for greater a “self-reflexivity” in qualitative research methodologies. There is greater awareness now in how fieldwork is determined by an evolving relational space and the relational dynamics that shapes relations between the researcher to her informants (Gustavson & Cytrynbaum, 2003). Representational choices that researchers make during fieldwork for instance, shape how informants would perceive researcher in the field (Gustavson & Cytrynbaum, 2003). This in turn shapes what kind of information and stories informants would share with the researcher.

The self-reflexive turn in ethnographic fieldwork has motivated researchers to take into account representational choices and relational dynamics during fieldwork. It has influenced some researchers, to include an autoethnographic account (see Delamont, 2009; Foley, 2010, Behar, 1993; Behar, 1996) of their own fieldwork experiences that



“acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality and the researcher’s influence on research rather than hiding from these matters of assuming they don’t exist (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011: p. 274).”

During my own fieldwork, I had to constantly negotiate between my position as a researcher, a volunteer of Sayoni and also a familiar figure in the lesbian community. I was a volunteer with Sayoni before I embarked on this research project. I contributed and participated actively in events, meetings and activities organized by the LGBTQ community. For instance, I participated in the Oogachaga BE(e): Believe, beloved and beyond event organized by OC Women and Sayoni in 2010 which contributed to my honours year thesis work. In addition, I also participated in Sayoni’s 2012 “Airing the Closet” talk show during the annual indignation LGBTQ pride festival and represented Sayoni Singapore at the International Lesbian and Gay Association Asia (ILGA-Asia) meeting in Thailand in 2013 together with three other Sayoni lesbian activists. I also work on a collaborative research project with a combination of volunteers and activists from Pinkdot, Oogachaga and Sayoni.

By participating in lesbian organized events and activities, and sharing my own stories of struggle as bisexual with my informants, I was able to establish trust amongst my lesbian informants in the field. My volunteer experience with queer advocacy group Sayoni shaped how I design, craft and approach my interviews with lesbians.

My volunteer experience with Sayoni sensitized me to the lop-sided power relations between gays, lesbians and transgender peoples in the LGBTQ community. Lop-sided power relations between gays and lesbians in the community means that the stories and voices of lesbians are often less heard. Because I was aware that lesbian voices and experiences of discrimination are often sidelined in the LGBTQ community as well as feminist organizations such as AWARE in Singapore, I wanted to document the voices of lesbians in the lesbian community in Singapore in this research project. I also

crafted my interview questions in a semi-structured and open-ended way to give my lesbian informants a greater sense of control in narrating and shaping the interview outcomes.

But as Atkinson & Hammersley (1994: p. 253) have pointed out, the field scene is not just composed “of an oppressed and oppressor group but of a diversity of individuals and groups motivated by various ideals and interests, and pursuing various political strategies.” Our informants have their own project of self-realization alongside our own ethnographic objectives as field researchers (Dwyer, 1977). Also, because fieldwork is often embedded in unequal relations of power, feminist Anthropologists such as Abu-Lughod (1991: 153) have argued that ethnographic writings should not “smooth over contradictions, conflicts of interests and doubts and arguments and changing motivations and circumstances.” Creating generalizations produces a false sense of coherence in the field by homogenizing differences, struggles and conflicts amidst different stakeholders and interest groups (Abu-Lughod, 1991; Narayan, 1998).

As a researcher, I started my project to study lesbians in the community. One of my key objectives was to produce knowledge about the participation of lesbians in the community in groups such as, Women’s Nite, Young Out Here, Free Community Church (FCC), RedQueen and Sayoni. I wanted to represent the diverse and conflicting views regarding community for lesbians and saw this as separate from the practical advocacy goals of Sayoni. Although being a volunteer in Sayoni sensitized me to discrimination and power relations between males and females in the LGBTQ community, it did not make me, using Abu-Lughod’s terms, “smooth over” the incoherences and conflicting interests in the community between my other lesbian informants and Sayoni.

There has been numerous methodological debates over whether it is more effective to conduct fieldwork as an “outsider” or “insider” (see Aguilar, 1981; Naples, 1996). For me, being a volunteer at Sayoni privy to “insider politics” gave me insights to

the internal politics of dominated groups. This helps me as a researcher to avoid reifying and romanticizing my subjects as subjects of oppression or resistance (see Ortner, 1995), and allows me to articulate points of disjuncture between different lesbian groups in the community. However, the insider/outsider division was not always clear cut. As Naples (1996: p. 84) has put it, “insiderness” and “outsiderness” are “not fixed or static positions” but rather, they are “ever-shifting and permeable social locations that are differentially experienced and expressed by community members.”

My own “insider” and “outsider” position in the field had to be constantly negotiated. Although many of my informants know me as a volunteer and member of Sayoni, my association with academia and doing research work on lesbians in the community made some of the volunteers in Sayoni cautious about my presence (fieldwork reflections). On the other hand, on other occasions, I found that my association with Sayoni discomfited other lesbian informants who did not belong to Sayoni.

Dealing with competing goals and demands of various lesbian groups proved to be a very challenging task. During an interview with an activist from another lesbian group for instance, upon mentioning my volunteer work with lesbian group Sayoni, she immediately drew back from me and her interactions with me during our interview turned harsh, distrustful and hostile. I could not understand why this was so but after sharing this incident with another older lesbian volunteer from Sayoni, I learnt about the “bad blood” between the two lesbian groups (fieldwork reflections).

This incident showed how as a researcher, I was not immune to the insider politics of the lesbian community. As a researcher, I am always embedded within relations of power within the community and this conditioned the kind of data that I was able to generate with different groups of lesbians in the field.

### 3.4 Ethical and Political Dilemmas

During my fieldwork, I was also faced with tremendous ethical dilemmas. As mentioned, I found that my own “insider” and “outsider” division was not a clear cut, but a complicated one. For instance, before my fieldwork began, in my own personal capacity, as bisexual, I participated in Lesbian United for Self Help (LUSH) to study Christian interpretations of homosexuality. During my own experience of LUSH, I found that there were family rejections and animosity toward lesbians. But I knew that as a member of LUSH, we had already agreed to keep the contents of LUSH “within the four walls” of the Free Community Church (FCC).

As a researcher, I struggled with wanting to capture these stories on my fieldwork observation memos but I knew that I had to stick to my side of the agreement to keep all contents in LUSH private and confidential. Hence, in order to capture these stories, I asked lesbians privately for an interview instead. To my surprise, most lesbians gave their consent willingly and helpfully.

Several informants and lesbian activists of Sayoni who showed concerns about how fundamentalist Christians and the public may interpret my data regarding the lesbian activism and the lesbian community (fieldwork reflections). As a researcher engaged in trying to produce knowledge of a highly stigmatized community, I struggled with the issue of making visible in academic writing the existence of such a community (fieldwork reflections). At various points of my fieldwork, I struggled with whether my academic work with lesbians in the lesbian community would violate the safety and privacy of my informants in the community.

High levels of stigma against homosexuality, implies that, firstly, many of the lesbian events, activities and self-help groups are private and opened to only lesbians, bisexuals and queer women because of the need to both maintain a safe space for women

to discuss “personal problems of being lesbian” and, to avoid religious and political attention. Secondly, visibility of lesbian identities and community may imply the increased the risk of public censure and discrimination against lesbians. Because lives of lesbians are so secretive and private, this posed tremendous ethical dilemmas for me as a researcher who wants to document problems that lesbians in the lesbian community face.

To deal with this, methodologically, I relied mostly on my interviews where I had attained the consensus of lesbian informants and lesbian activists to compose my ethnography and studies. I also used pseudonyms to ensure the anonymity of my informants and used age ranges instead of specifying the exact age of my informants so that the identity of my informants cannot be guessed by their age. I also avoid specifying the locations of events and activities.

### 3.5 Conclusion: Feminist theory and politics

My research project is informed both by my volunteer experience with queer women’s advocacy group Sayoni, and feminist theory and politics in doing research. Feminist theory and politics, argues Gordon includes a “pragmatic, incremental effort to fight for state resources and a more visionary awareness of both what resources to fight for as well as how to build coalitions that extend toward transforming daily life (Gordon, 1993: p. 439).” Although I agree with Hammersley (2000) that the immediate goal of research is to produce valid knowledges of lesbians and the lesbian community, I suggest through my own fieldwork and volunteer experience that the boundaries for me as a researcher between academic research and practical research is more ambiguous and overlapping than clear and distinct.

Since all research is located within a field fraught with historically constituted relations of power and knowledge, and as researchers, we are engaged in reciprocal

relations with our informants in the field. In designing this research project, I found that as a researcher I cannot escape being involved in the field and accountable to my own informants (see Mani, 1990; Enslin, 1994). Following a feminist method of doing research, I suggest that my own research must be accountable and responsive to community struggles for self-representation (Visweswaran, 1996: p. 12).

Accountability and responsiveness implies that I censor and keep private and confidential information that my subjects do not want me to present in the fieldwork data. Data and knowledge generated of the lesbian community in Singapore is produced as a result of my own situated position as a volunteer and researcher within the lesbian community. It is also contingent on the collaboration between me as a researcher and my lesbian informants. Hence, this research project does not claim to make universally valid claims of all lesbians in Singapore or of all lesbian communities but situated and partial ones based on my access to the lesbian community as both a researcher and volunteer of Sayoni.

## **4. Challenges of choosing to be lesbian in Singapore**

### 4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I pay attention to some of the challenges of choosing to be lesbian in Singapore. I argue that regimes of truth about what constitutes normal or abnormal sexuality in Singapore, shapes society's perceptions of lesbians, policy-making practices, and gives precedence for the different forms of coercion, corrective penalties and punishments imposed upon lesbians by family members, friends and religious authorities. However, based on my fieldwork data, I also show that not all lesbians are equally punished and economically successful and culturally competent neoliberal lesbian middle-class subjectivities are more valued and accepted over others.

### 4.2 Regimes of truth about normal and abnormal sexuality

In my first section, I look at the ensemble of discourses that forms a certain regimes of truth about what constitutes normal or abnormal sexuality in Singapore and the state's role in preserving and extending them. I argue that colonial regimes of truth about heterosexuality as a marker of socio-economic progress and modernity is built upon, extended and articulated in new ways by the post-independence state through three ways: (1) the institutionalization of the heterosexual nuclear family, (2) multi-racial Asian Values discourse and (3) other political practices that forms the new ensemble of discourses and practices that reinforces heterosexuality as the governing norm and regime of truth in the Singapore society.

As a regime of truth or norm about organizing intimate life, heteronormativity has profound effects on how my lesbian informants experience their everyday life in

Singapore. The neoconservative Asian and Family Values discourse in Singapore sets up the patriarchal dual gender and dual sex, heterosexual structure of the family as the only virtuous and normal subject position in Singapore. Women are expected to take on the role of being primary caregivers, house-makers and nurturers of the family married to men who are supposed to provide for and protect the family (Chan, 2000; Kong & Chan, 2000; Tan, 2003; Quah, 2008; Huang & Yeoh, 1996; Chew, 2008; Teo, 2007; 2010; Hudson, 2013; Lyons, 2004; & Heng & Devan, 1996).

Adopting the role of a daughter or the nurturing role of mother and wife in the private domain of the family is seen as the “normal” and “correct embodiment” of womanhood and traditional conservative Asian culture in post-independence Singapore (Purushotam, 2002; Lyons, 2004; Chew, 2008).

The dual gender, dual sex monogamous heterosexual nuclear family discourse preexisted post-independence times. Colonized elites had in the colonial period pushed forth heterosexual monogamous nuclear family norms in place of what was viewed by the British colonial masters as “abnormal population dynamics,” characterized by a lopsided number of single male migrants and the practice of polygamy and prostitution (Oswin, 2010). Oswin (2010) points out that heteronormativity is part of a broader politics of intimacy in late-colonial period that had the aim of reforming the “backward colonized other” into progressive and modernized colonial subjects.

The post-independence state’s practice of perpetuating and preserving conservative heteronormative values thus extends late-colonial regimes of truth about heterosexual intimacy and sexuality into post-independence times.

Heteronormativity, existing in colonial times, is extended into post-independence present also through the state’s discourse of multiculturalism, built upon a multi-racial framework, which does not recognize raced homosexual individuals, and treats homosexuality as a sign of westernization or deracination (Goh, 2008: 244; Ang &



Stratton, 1995). It is also maintained through policy and political practices such as the retention of colonial penal code S377A and heteronormative housing policies that are aimed exclusively at housing only those a “proper” heterosexual family nucleus comprised of a kinship group of man, wife and children (Oswin, 2010: p. 138). This ensemble of discourses and practices that constitutes heterosexuality as a regime of truth about normal or abnormal sexuality, and as I will argue, has profound effects how the state thinks about lesbian intimacy or partnership.

For example, when I was doing fieldwork and working as a volunteer in 2012, lesbians from Sayoni organized themselves to attend a town hall conference titled “Our population, Our Future.” Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean and ministers Grace Fu and Tan Chuan-Jin were on the panel. Lesbians from Sayoni who attended the town hall asked the ministers about “second parent adoption and whether a lesbian woman who has a baby through artificial insemination can adopt the child as a legal parent (fieldwork memos).” The reply offered by Grace Fu was that: “The government needs to draw a line at society’s values and that most people in society will regard getting married to a different gender and having children as preferred so the government would need to consider the needs of the majority (fieldwork memos).”

The act of prioritizing and considering the needs of the majority shows how the state protects, invests, extends and codifies, preexisting neoconservative Asian and Family Values discourse, at the expense of other intimate forms in this post-independence period. As a result, heteronormativity is preserved and entrenched, giving unequal institutional access and legal rights to lesbians in post-independence Singapore<sup>11</sup>.

When heteronormativity is the only governing principle of organizing intimate life in Singapore, there are many *other legal-institutional implications*. Firstly, it means

that legal entitlements and laws around the CPF Savings and housing schemes are blind to emergent lesbian partnerships. So for instance, my lesbian informants report having to always go one step further to “work around” the laws to ensure, that their CPF Savings and estates are properly distributed (fieldwork memos).

For example, because CPF savings will be distributed by the Public Trustee to the deceased’s family under the Intestate Succession Act, lesbians in a partnership have to make sure they nominate their partners and spouse as beneficiaries of their CPF Savings (Attorney General Chambers, 2013). Under the rules of distribution of The Intestate Succession Act (with specific reference to Section 7 Rule 5 to 8), parents, siblings, grandparents and relatives will inherit her estates by default.

In order for her estates to be distributed to her partner upon her death, lesbians have to make a will to indicate who upon her death, should get the estate. However, wills can be subject to contestation by family members and is therefore lesbians cannot be guaranteed that they will get their partner’s estates in the event their partner passes on before them (fieldwork memos). Secondly, it means that New Reproductive Technologies such as the In-vitro Fertilization (IVF) treatment is only legally accessible to heterosexual and not lesbian couples (Ministry of Health, 2013).

For instance, in 1996, the Women’s Charter (Attorney General’s Chamber, Women’s Charter, 2009) was amended to specifically prohibit same-sex marriages under Section 12(1) which states that: “A marriage solemnized in Singapore or elsewhere between persons, who at the date of the marriage are not respectively male and female shall be void.” In addition, under section 5(1) of the Women’s Charter, the state does not recognize a marriage certificate from other countries.

Regarding the legal rights of the parents to his or her child, under Sections 92 of the Women’s Charter, a child of marriage refers specifically and only to “any child of the husband and wife.” Based on Sections 123-125 of the Women’s Charter, custody of the

child to his or her parent is guaranteed upon the nullity of marriage. By implication, lesbian co-parents whose same-sex partnership is not recognized under the law do not have access to shared legal custody of their children upon separation.

Based on the perceived need to protect the nuclear heterosexual family unit (Oswin, 2010), lesbian intimate partnerships are excluded from public housing, legal marriage and reproductive technologies. Public housing notes Teo (2009: p. 539), is not only supposed to be equally available to all Singaporeans, it is also a symbolic marker of citizenship and social worth.

Through my interviews and conversations with lesbians during fieldwork, I found that unequal access to public housing and support for family formation, forms part of the reason why lesbians feel frustrated and unequally valued as citizens, entitled to equal rights and equal access to public housing subsidies in Singapore.

Take the instance of Kimberly Ng, a successful insurance agent who markets herself widely as an insurance agent for lesbians in the lesbian community. Kimberly came out as lesbian in her teens when she was a student at St Nicholas Secondary School has had numerous female romantic partners before. Friends of Kimberly call her an “EB” which stands for, “Ex-Butch.” Kimberly now identifies as “an andro” (short-term for androgynous lesbian). She had an intense but frustrating romantic relationship with the daughter of a highly ranked government official for nearly two years.

Kimberly describes this relationship as a highly closeted one where her partner’s parents, colleagues and friends who were less close from their circle of artist friends were completely kept unaware of their relationship. Kimberly however, has various close-knitted group of friends and family whom she has taken the trouble to “come out” as lesbian. Having gone through what she terms as “all the major coming out phases,” Kimberly still thinks that being lesbian is a lonely life and “sucky choice.”

We won't ever have a family, we are not like the L-word, we can't adopt kids so easily. We won't ever go through the life cycle where we have our children and we watch them grow like mothers. We are missing out on our life cycle.

Whenever my straight friends think they can just convert me to heterosexual, I tell them what is the matter-of-fact. That to be us, lesbians, is very lonely. You are discriminated against, you are viewed as an object of curiosity, people see you as abnormal, there's a lot of social restrictions and discrimination in a conservative society, you can't buy a house till you are much older, there is less subsidies, so many red tapes. It's not an easy life and if it is a life, this must be the suckiest choice (Kimberly Ng, Chinese, early 30s).

To the extent that the state's housing policies has shaped the norms of what comprises of a normal, progressive, intimate and private family life where adults get married, settle down and buy a house (see Teo 2009; 2010), my lesbian informants are not exceptions to this norm. Despite assuming a lesbian subject position, most of my lesbian informants' desires are in fact, shaped by heterosexual regimes of truth.

For example, when I interviewed Agnus Lee, a close friend of Kimberly Ng, during our interview session, I found that Agnus's life story is heavily layered with the narrative of how she desires to live a "normal life," where lesbians can eventually get married like heterosexuals. Being in her late 40s, Agnus was brought up in a Christian family when she was younger. She only had a "real lesbian relationship" at the age of 26 and came out as lesbian later in life, at the age of 28.

Agnus identifies herself as a very religious person. She attributes her late coming out to her conservative Christian socio-cultural environment which "made things hard." Through her growing up years, Agnus has always been "more comfortable" with females even though she had two boyfriends and was proposed to once at the age of 23. Agnus however, rejected the marriage proposal. She later on studied abroad in the UK. Coming

home to Singapore, Agnus had worked at British Airway and a prestigious law firm where she is completely out as lesbian to her bosses.

Agnus is also out as lesbian to her parents and family who are accepting of her. However, some of Agnus's partners are very closeted and so, family acceptance is a privilege rather than a given. According to Agnus, she does not force the social fact that she is lesbian in a romantic partnership with their daughter "in their faces." But in situations where her romantic partner's parents finds out accidentally about their lesbian partnership, Agnus would sometimes come into contact with familial hostility. When she was dating her first partner for example, her partner's parents found some letters they wrote to each other with terms of endearment in an unlocked locker and according to Agnus, they "went ballistic."

Their romantic partnership was ended because her partner decided that she could not handle the familial pressure. Since they broke up, her ex-partner has "moved on" in life. She has "turned straight," gotten married and already has a son. Agnus still meets her husband and family on some occasions and introduces her new partners to them. Being lesbian for nearly two decades, Agnus's longest romantic partnership to date has been 9 and a 1/2 years, a legendary length of time for a lesbian.

Because it is challenging to maintain relationships without support networks from one's familial, friendship and religious networks, there is a saying amongst lesbians that one year of "lesbian time" is equivalent to 5 years (sometimes 7 years) of "straight time." (This makes Agnus's 9 and 1/2 year long relationship translate into an equivalent of 47 1/2 years of straight time)! Agnus's other romantic partnerships lasted from a range of a 13 months to two years. Her current partner Christine is a closeted lesbian, who is working as a teacher in one of the primary schools in Singapore. While Agnus can imagine a future with Christine, Agnus says:

Choosing to be lesbian is difficult because there is no progression in lesbian relations in that sense of a straight partnership where you date, live together and get married. Even if you go abroad to get married and come back, it is still not recognized here and there is no rights for you. You can draft wills and legal power of attorney and stuff, but it is still different. I am in a relationship with Christine, I can see a future with her but she wants to have a family eventually... I don't think its right at the moment and neither does she and she has to come to terms with that. Her family still hopes that she turns straight get married and have kids (Agnus Lee, Chinese, Late 40s).

Agnus Lee's (Chinese, late 40s) articulation reflects how the lack of legal rights only form part of the puzzle for why choosing to be lesbian in Singapore is challenging. When the nuclear heterosexual family is set up as the only way of organizing intimate life, lesbian partnerships become by default, unrecognized within personal familial and social networks. It becomes treated as a "passing phase" or "correctable condition (fieldwork memos)." For example, throughout my interview with Agnus, Agnus recalls many instances of her partners desiring to get married and have a family and facing pressures from family members to turn straight, get married and have children.

My second girlfriend always wanted a *bai ma wang zi* sweet talk off her fate have a family like of thing and even though we could have had a family in the sense of the word. I'm sure if Singapore would be you know be open and make it okay for lesbians to have family and stuff, we could have a family. In a society like Singapore it's challenging because you know gay relationships or lesbians are not widely accepted. She had a boyfriend before but even though she had two long term female relationships, a girlfriend for six years and another girlfriend for four years, her family hopes that she would be straight and marry and have kids (Agnus Lee, Chinese, late 40s).

The irony is that having a family and being lesbian are conceived as dichotomous possibilities. Lesbians or partners of lesbians may desire to in the end, choose to marry a *bai ma wang zi* or “charming prince” *in order to* have a family. Having a family with children is not a straightforward or easy option for lesbians. Wanting to set up a family or have children is challenging for lesbians like Agnus Lee (Chinese, late 40s) not only because of unequal institutional support or inhibitions but also because heteronormativity means that lesbian relationships are not “widely accepted,” and lesbians face isolation and/or the lack of social support from preexisting social and familial networks, which in Agnus’s partner’s case, also puts added pressure on her to turn straight, get married, have a heterosexual nuclear family and children.

By codifying, establishing and institutionalizing the heterosexual nuclear family institution as the only dominant institution for organizing intimate life (Family First: State of the Family Report, 2009), the state sets up pre-existing heterosexual relations as the only regime of truth for organizing intimate life in post-independent Singapore.

This creates the terrain of power relations between heterosexuals and non-heterosexuals. It also imposes a “standard of homogeneity” across a possible diversity of intimate relationships and sets up heterosexuality as “the principle of the rule to be followed,” while turning lesbians and lesbian partnerships not only into a differentiated act, but also, a forbidden and abnormal one that must at all times be corrected, kept secret and separate. As a result, anyone who occupies the heterosexual subject position (the position of power), can punish lesbians “who deviate” from the heterosexual norm.

It is thus, inadequate to claim that the state discriminates or punishes lesbians. The state as Foucault argues, does not occupy the entire field of actual power relations (Foucault, 1994: p. 121-123). Power “is not an institution and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we endowed with (Foucault, 1990: p. 93).”

But rather, power is a form of and it is many kinds of power relations, techniques and strategic relationships between particular individuals in society. Power is thus everywhere and since heteronormativity is a discursive regime of truth, codified by the state, it is put into play against women who are seen to occupy the lesbian subject position by parents, family members, relatives, religious leaders and even friends.

### 4.3 Consequences of Coming out as Lesbian

In this section, using coming out stories of lesbians collected during fieldwork, I will show how this unequal terrain of power between heterosexuals and lesbians play out by showing the different kinds of punishments lesbians face for choosing to “come out” as lesbian. Using my fieldwork data, I will also look what kind of lesbian subjectivities are valued and which are devalued, and study how lesbians are punished and disciplined and made to conform to heteronormativity.

#### 4.3.1 Coming out

For most of my lesbian informants, choosing to be lesbian is often framed within “coming out” discourse. My lesbian informants related their “coming out” stories to me with adjectives of whether they are “tough enough” or “ready” to deal with the consequences of “coming out.” However, not every lesbian chooses to “come out” as lesbian and “coming out” is neither perceived as an easy, straightforward, nor a necessary option. “Coming out” for my lesbian informants refers to the process of coming out to different stakeholders including oneself, family members, friends and colleagues.

“Coming out” is not a one off event or action but an ongoing process of negotiating one’s lesbian subjectivity with oneself and/or others. “Coming out” has to be



assessed pragmatically for its value and benefits because “coming out” can result in the termination of financial and/or social and emotional support from one’s network of family, friends and colleagues.

You do what you think is best for you. If not coming out to your family is best for you then do it. You come out only when you’re ready because nobody else has to bear the consequences of your coming of as yourself. That’s how I feel that’s why I never insist that my partners recognize me outside the comfort zone or tell their family or come out to their family or whatever it is. No because ultimately they’re the ones that deal with their family not me. Whether you choose to come out or not, there are consequences. You choose not to come out, consequences and you do what is right for you. I believe very strongly in that. Because I believe that when you’re ready as tough as it might be, you will have the tools to manage the toughness. When you’re not ready you come out just for the sake of coming out you have to live with it. A lot of people students for example, they’re very dependent on their family to support them financially and emotionally. Some will even say I can come out and leave the home. But if they leave the family, then what? What if the relationship doesn’t work out (Agnus Lee, Chinese, mid 40s)?

Heteronormative regimes of truth shapes the “coming out” discourse of lesbians, the reception of lesbians by others and more importantly also, how lesbians view themselves. During my fieldwork, I have met lesbians who denied their own lesbian subjectivity (both the identity and behavioural aspects) even though they could be in a lesbian partnership for long periods of time. My fieldwork data reveals that heteronormative regimes of truth affects how lesbians perceive themselves, their relationships and behaviors in everyday life.

My interviewee Diane Wong (Chinese, early-30s) for instance, tells me about her frustrations with her ex-partner Aida Lo whom she was in relationship for 7 years, but who denies her lesbian subjectivity and same-sex partnership to herself. Aido Lo works in one of Singapore's biggest media companies as a producer and she met Diane when Diane was still a teacher in one of the Junior Colleges in Singapore.

When I asked if she could come to the launch of GASPP, she said no I can't come I just don't know how to be gay. Another time at a conference dinner, someone said so and so is gay, and she immediately said no way! This confused everyone who thought isn't this girl obviously gay? So you just spend a lot of time negotiating these denials. 7 years, I just let her be and do her own thing I was just happy being around her, I didn't need her to come to any realization that she is gay. Can you believe it 7 years I knew her, we only ate lunch together like 3 times (Diane Wong, Chinese, early-30s).

Where there are a lot of "Christians or married women" in the workplace, lesbians such as Ying Yi (Chinese, mid-30s) who teaches in two of Singapore's University take on a "more careful and guarded" approach to dealing with her sexuality<sup>12</sup> My lesbian informants who are teachers in the Ministry of Education (MOE) tend to report the need to keep their sexuality or personal lives separate from their workplaces.

For example, when I first met Hui Min and Edna, they have only just started seeing each other for not more than a year. Hui Min (Chinese, early-30s) is a MOE government scholar who completed her scholarship several years ago and now teaches in a secondary school. She told me that one day, she got very "nervous and stressed" when

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<sup>12</sup> Ying Yi (Chinese, mid-30s) explained: "I mean, I attend conventional churches and the things they preach about such as the 6 bible verses and at times there are also anti-gay books in church... (Ying Yi, Chinese, mid-30s)"

her partner Edna Ang (Chinese, early-30s) sent flowers to her because her colleagues started to ask her who sent the flowers?

But Hui Min also added that her sexuality is not an issue “because I teach in a school that is not near where I stay so I won’t really be seen.” Lesbian sexuality is tolerated so long as it is privatized and kept out of sight in education institutions. Other informants such as Katy Tan (Chinese, early-40s) who is a popular figure in this lesbian community and who has been a teacher for over two decades fears that equal opportunity will not be given if she is known to be lesbian.

Why should we want to come out and be seen in a different light? I think it is stated that we are not supposed to be out. All my teacher friends are not out to management and you can’t because of the profession. I think we have a new code of conduct that my principal haven’t shared with me yet. And because we are supposed to be role models so we must be as conventional as possible in a way. I am not sure equal opportunity will be given if I out myself in terms of promotions (Katy Tan, Chinese, mid-30s).

#### 4.3.2 Foucault’s concept of Punishment

Foucault argues that there are three main purposes and ways to exercise the power to punish. In the first way, punishment is “a ceremonial of sovereignty,” a redress for the injury done by the condemned man or the offender to the King. Public execution or forms of ritual marks on the body restores and re-establishes the King’s power and acts as a revenge for the affront to the King (Foucault, 1995: 48-50). This mode of punishment is irregular and discontinuous.

With the increase in wealth, capital accumulation, new relations of production and legal status of property (Foucault, 1995: 85-88), two forms of punishment which

punishes more regularly and continuously became more prevalent to protect these new relations and rights. The second model of punishment punishes not as a “vengeance of sovereignty” but in the name of the “defense of society” to restore social order, public morality or the “humanity of society (Foucault, 1995: 111).”

Here, a reasoned discourse on the preservation of social order (Foucault, 1995: 110)” and representations becomes the “vehicle of the law: the constant principle of universal recoding (Foucault, 1995: 110)” of wrongdoing, to turn the offender into an enemy of society who must be re-educated into social-life (Foucault, 1995: 110). The third form of punishment is a kind of disciplining of the body to produce obedient or “docile bodies” with high the economic utility (Foucault, 1995: 138) through a range of disciplinary techniques such as the normalizing gaze and surveillance regimes, in order to produce a body of knowledge about individuals usable for the ends of economic production in the capitalist economy (Foucault, 1995: 221).

#### 4.3.3 The role of Family, Religion and Friendship Networks in enforcing Heteronormativity

Punishment in this context acts as a way of reforming or reeducating of lesbians who do not conform to heterosexual familial norms, and a means of producing disciplined neoliberal lesbian bodies amenable to Singapore’s highly modernized and capitalist economy. Scholars not limited to Salaff (1988), Teo (2010), & Hill & Lian (1995), Purushotam (2002) have observed that the Singaporean family values or morality is “not incompatible with those associated with the bourgeois middle-class family (Hill & Lian, 1995: 155)” that emphasizes strict morals, individualism, competitiveness and economic success.

Teo (2010) who studied family policies in Singapore has most aptly argued that the Singaporean heterosexual family morality and formation is not dichotomous to economic modernization (spearheaded by the Singaporean state), but rather, it is shaped by and geared toward economic production. The primacy of economic production as a goal to be pursued in a Singaporean's everyday life, endorses the principle of neoliberalism which narrowly rewards those who are able to produce certain forms of economic worth, while penalizing, excluding or degrading the personal worth of those who fail to adequately reproduce (Teo, 2010).

Neoliberal middle-class lesbian subjectivities are more acceptable than working-class lesbian subjectivities in the family. Some of my lesbian informants have reported that parents would assess the socio-economic statuses of their partners or girlfriends whom they bring home. Ada Tan (Chinese, early 30s) for example, is trained as a psychologist and currently working at one of Singapore's public hospital. Ada has come out as lesbian almost 6 years ago to a conservative Christian mother who constantly tells her she is going to hell and that she is unfillial for being lesbian.

Her mum would verbally attack her for being lesbian very randomly for nearly a year. She would bring up how being lesbian is simply wrong while watching a Korean drama with wretched lovers for example. Ada was under tremendous psychological stress and had to see a counsellor to "sort out" things for herself. She also wrote a blog to challenge her mother's assumptions with regards to being lesbian.

However, what is interesting is that according to Ada, punishments and corrective penalties imposed upon her and her partners whom she brings home are lessened and relaxed when partners she bring home have a socio-economic status (SES) which is on par (equal) or higher than hers and her family's. If however, she were to bring home girlfriends who look like "delinquents," or who do not match their education and financial background, her parents will be more disapproving.

Mums are sadly very practical probably because my mum is a dependent and so for her my partner's SES is very important. She wants her best for her daughters she doesn't want me to end up with someone whom I have to support. Among my friends they would tell me their mothers don't like their girlfriends because she doesn't match up to her daughter. Whether in terms of education, financial home background. My friends always get it. I know of another person who is a surgeon who acquired a new girlfriend and her mum doesn't like her girlfriend because she said that she is not another surgeon unlike her ex-girlfriend who was another surgeon. They want you to be compatible you know! It's important! My parents are cordial with Wee Li because Wee Li is my dad boss's boss. And my mum is like oh so she isn't a delinquent or something. (Chinese, Ada Tan mid-30s)?

What my fieldwork interviews from lesbians such as Ada Tan (Chinese, mid-30s) show is that corrective penalties are not equally imposed by family members on lesbians who do not follow heterosexual norms. It is not about punishing deviant lesbian sexuality per se, but also, the protection and reproduction of a set heterosexual middle-class family status, morality and values that is at stake. Thus, lesbians who have higher socio-economic attainments will be more easily accepted and valued by family members than others who are not as economically successful.

My informant Kimberly Ng (Chinese, early-30s) for example, regularly reminds me during my fieldwork that "it is very important for us lesbians to be successful. As long as you are successful economically, you can transcend these heterosexual norms, and no one will fault you or dare to do anything to you (fieldwork memos)."

However, for most of my informants, because choosing to come out as lesbian still goes against the neoconservative traditional Asian and family values discourse of being a good filial heterosexually married daughter, they are subjected to punishment by

family members such as aunties, siblings and parents of lesbians who will take on the role of disciplinary agents to correct “abnormal” lesbian behaviours.

This is done through specific corrective penalties on lesbians such as condemning them in front of the entire family, throwing uninviting glares, ignoring them at the common dinner table, being out-rightly rude to lesbians, refusing to talk to lesbians for long durations of time and chasing lesbians out of the house. Punishments and corrective penalties can sometimes extend beyond the familial space.

In order to study this enforcement of heteronormativity, the receptivity of lesbian presence and visibility within the private domestic heterosexual familial space (Oswin, 2010), must be studied more closely. After attaining domestic self-governance, the People’s Action Party (PAP) led government has launched a comprehensive housing programme under the Housing Development Board’s (HDB) 1964 ‘home ownership scheme<sup>13</sup>,’ and has successfully housed over 80% of Singapore’s resident population<sup>14</sup> to date (SHS, 2010).

Public houses come in varying sizes from 1-room to 5-room and Executive units. Upwardly mobile and middle-class Singaporeans can choose to purchase private residences (Condominiums etc). According to the *Singapore Housing Survey* (SHS, 2008), most households in Singapore are comprised of a nuclear type family unit – a heterosexually married couple with or without children; a family consisting of immediate related members, without the presence of a married couple (single parent with their unmarried children).

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<sup>13</sup> The homeownership scheme “allows owners to purchase a 99 year lease on their flat instead of ownership in perpetuity... Under this scheme, land is retained by the state in inalienable public ownership, leaving it free to compensate and resettle any lessee if or when redevelopment becomes necessary (Chua, 1997: 13).”

<sup>14</sup> According to the HDB Sample Household Survey (2008): “HDB Resident Population refers to Singapore Citizens and Singapore permanent Residents residing in HDB flats. It excludes maids and subtenants who rent rooms or the whole flat from the lessees.”

Because the government's aim is to promote family formation and reproduction - the 'normal family model' comprised of a kinship group of man, wife and children (Oswin, 2010: 263), - the most common living arrangement captured by census data and household surveys is that of married residents living with their unmarried children, until they eventually get married heterosexually (SHS, 2008). The effects of heterosexual domesticity and family on the integration or alienation of lesbians, as well as the reception of lesbian presence and visibility in the heterosexual family has been less subjected to exploration and critical analysis.

Take the case of my informant Theresa Loh (Chinese, mid-30s) for example. Theresa Loh came out as lesbian at the age of 30 when she was in London for work after completing her accountancy degree at the Nanyang Technological University (NTU). Theresa is an assiduous person. She took on three jobs when she was a university student, working as a rugby coach, insurance agent and a tuition teacher. Being in London, was for Theresa, a wild and open experience where she would explore places such as *Soho* and *Kingscross* and pick up women from clubs and bars there.

However, back home in Singapore, things are not so smooth. She once dated someone whose father was a taxi driver. Her partner's father who works as a taxi driver later on found out about their romantic relationship, got hold of her name card and went to her company to "threaten and hassle" her until they finally broke up, thinking that Theresa has bewitched his daughter. In her other lesbian partnership, Theresa recounted how her lesbian partner was condemned, shamed and chased out of the house.

When she came out, she got chased out of the house. When she told her parents there was a huge quarrel for the next one year. She got ostracized, her elder brother and sister refused to talk to her. We were together for seven years but they didn't talk to her for nearly a year. Her aunty is also forever condemning her and one day she condemned me in front of the entire family. She said a lot



of demeaning stuff in front of her mother, sister and me. She would openly berate her mother and say how can you let your daughter do this kind of things? You bring shame to the family. She used very strong words. She glared at me and I told her, if you have nothing good to say, then don't say anything. She completely ignored me after that and she became very rude. She would talk to everyone at the dining table except me. Most of the time it is her ego and pride, pride meaning a family thing because pride comes from the pride of the family norm (Theresa Loh, Chinese, mid-30s).

Theresa's lesbian presence is interpreted as bringing shame to her partner's family pride. Punishment here effected through specific forms of "corrective penalties" imposed on lesbians, aim not so much at restoring social order or public morality, but more specifically, strives to restore the moral grounds of the heterosexual nuclear family anchored upon the respectability of an unspoken norm, to get married heterosexually, be a wife and bear children.

My interviewee Adila Mohammed's (Malay, mid-30s) describes these acts of punishment as a kind of "jihad." Adila comes from a upper-middle class Malay-Muslim family. When she was younger, Adila studied at a CHIJ convent school and she has spent 4 years studying in Australia. In Australia, Adila had the opportunity to explore her sexuality. She met Singaporean lesbians in Australia and visited different LGBTQ groups. When Adila came home to Singapore, she settled down in a 4 year long partnership where she and her partner rented a home near Bukit Batok, lived together and co-owned five cats.

Since she came home to Singapore, Adila has been working at *The Substation* as a part-time Artist/Curator and teaches full time at a tertiary arts institution in Singapore. Because things did not go well with her partner, Adila has broken up with her, moved out

and also started to date another lesbian. However, when she brought her new partner home, Adila's parents did not receive her presence well.

My parents just did the jihad on me. They said why are my nails painted red?

Why are you not praying correctly? Have you been praying? Who are these people? Are you one of them? I went, what do you mean one of them? Do you mean am I gay? Yes I am gay. It's like being gay, is like being a gang.

Immediately after, my dad went down the stairs in his sarong and called my friends a swine and chased them out of the house. Out! Out! He screamed! My partner was there but she was quite chill. She told my dad to take care and left the house. By the way, it is like my 5<sup>th</sup> time "coming out" to them and my father said that I was a shame to the family and the entire community (Adila Mohammed, fieldwork memos, Malay, mid-30s).

The family is a site where the normalizing judgment is imposed on lesbians by aunts, family members and siblings to discipline lesbians to comply with heterosexual norms. Normalization or the "normalizing judgment" argues Foucault, is a disciplinary technique that establishes the normal as "a principle of coercion (Foucault, 1995: p. 183)" through comparing individuals to an unspoken about heterosexual norm, differentiating and hierarchizing those who follow the norm from those who do not, and imposing the heterosexual norm as the rule of homogeneity upon all subjects (Foucault, 1995: p. 183-184).

The normalizing judgment is more intense on lesbians who transgress gender expectations and behaviour. Gender is deployed as an apparatus of power used in reconstituting and establishing heterosexuality (Butler, 1994). In specific, gender is used to control sexuality (Blackwood, 2007), in this case, through comparing lesbian bodies and dressings to normative gender scripts, such as wearing dresses and having long hair.

Normalizing judgments are passed on lesbians who dress more ‘boyishly’ or have ‘short hair.’ Take for example, the case of Marilynn Ng who is a fresh graduate of one of Singapore’s top Junior Colleges and has just started her undergraduate studies at the National University of Singapore. Marilynn Ng comes from a well to do middle-class family of Christians. She is a young activist who is vocal with her thoughts and opinions. During my interview with Marilynn, she told me about how her mother would confront her with sadness and anger whenever she cuts her hair.

Whenever I cut my hair my mum would go into her room and cry. My mum would get so mad and wont talk to me for about a day when I just cut my hair. She will be like you cut your hair again? ...the way I cut my hair and the way I dress, they would ask me why did you cut your hair like that? What made you cut your hair like that? What damaged you to such epic extend? Did you do it for hair for hope? And I tell them no hair for hope doesn’t do MoHawk. They would ask me why do you dress like that can I take you shopping? I think they think that I would look very pretty if I just wore a dress that sort of thing (Marilynn Ng, Chinese, early-20s).

The family is a disciplinary institution which exacts continuous supervision and surveillance correct abnormal sexuality through visible gender deviance. Being lesbian is perceived as being influenced by others who “lead lesbians astray.” Religions such as Christianity and Islam and religious authorities are often harnessed to pressurize lesbians into conforming with heterosexual norms, subjecting lesbians to an entire network of “non-egalitarian and asymmetrical systems of micro-power” that Foucault also calls, “disciplines” or “infra-law” which penetrates into the “infinitesimal level of individual lives” attempting to integrate lesbians, through a relation of constraints, into nuclear family heterosexual norms.

Another of my informants Yuan Mei (Chinese, early-30s) for example, is a free-lancing piano teacher who has just turned Christian recently. Yuan Mei has dated several of her male suitors including an Australian fitness instructor but finds herself more attracted to females. During my interview with Yuan Mei, she constantly talks about her partner and her own “homosexual struggles,” “self-denial” and “emotional baggages.” Yuan Mei tells me about how she tries not to date her partner when she is “very near her house area,” and avoiding public forms of intimacy such as “holding hands” because her partner’s colleague might see them together.

Yuan Mei said when her cousin found out that she was gay, she started giving her a bible book and encouraging her not to engage in homosexual activities which she interprets as a sin in god’s eyes. She wanted Yuan Mei to “choose to be celibate for God’s glory (Yuan Mei, Chinese, early-30s).” My lesbian informant Ada Tan (Chinese, mid-30s) also shared how her aunts, uncles, pastors and cell group leaders would harass her partner who is lesbian.

They called her up when they know she is gay and hounded her. They called the entire network of extended family aunties and uncles to hound her they invited the pastor and cell group leaders and members to call her. How is that for harassment? They got the extended family to tell her the same thing. They called her day in and day out they invited her out for events to talk to her and they just had that silly idea that if you are gay it can’t be right with Christianity. They kept telling her to go back to church and she brought me along and we had a very interesting conversation with the cell group leader who decided that I was the one leading her astray. I was like she was gay way longer than me. The cell group leader told me I was abnormal, but I asked them a lot of questions (Ada Tan, Chinese, mid-30s).

Normalizing judgments and surveillance is not only imposed upon Ada Tan and her ex-partner by her parents but also, by pastors and cell group leaders. The gaze of surveillance registering (Foucault, 1995: p. 195-196) lesbians as abnormal or immoral is everywhere. Lesbians are subjected not to one disciplinary “center of observation,” surveillance and coercion for the performance of normal sexuality but multiple ones that spreads out from the family unit to religious networks. Further, surveillance of lesbian behaviour does not only take place within closed institutions, but also outside, in public spaces.

Even though lesbians like Adila Mohammed is in her mid-30s and works as a lecturer in one of the private universities in Singapore, one day, when Adila Mohammed’s parents saw her with her partner Olivia in a taxi near Thompson Road, they made a U-turn and tailed their taxi to “check on” where they are going (fieldwork memos).

As Foucault observes, society is penetrated with mechanisms of surveillance or what he also calls, the “panoptic schema” which unceasingly and continuously organizes bodies, especially irregular and heterogeneous bodies, according to normative relations of power (Foucault, 1995: 208) and heterosexual regimes of truth. Power, argues Foucault “has its principle not so much in a person as a certain concerted distribution of bodies, surfaces, lights, gazes; in an arrangement whose internal mechanisms produce the relation in which individuals are caught up.”

Any individual, including friends of lesbians caught up within heteronormative relations of power can effect disciplinary punishments and penalties on lesbians. For instance, when one of my interviewees, Atikah Mohammed (Malay-Muslim, mid-30s) who was previously married to a man and has a daughter “came out” to her best friend of twenty years, he immediately berated her for bringing shame upon her family and according to Atikah Mohammed, began seeing her as a “pariah.”

I think they question me he asked me what was all these you are doing how can you bring shame to your family what is going to be happening to your daughter is she going to follow in your footsteps? It was devastating because you have known me for 20 years and you love me for the person that I am so why now this discounting me? Rejecting me? Why am I now a pariah to you (Atikah Mohammed, Malay-Muslim, mid-30s)?

Sometimes, my informants report that there are no outright hostility or rudeness but lesbians will be treated as separate entities that cannot be integrated into the family. Disciplinary power works by organizing a space in order to locate, assess and judge individuals. Forms of separation or isolation are effects of the exercise of disciplinary power. As Foucault notes, there are “two ways of exercising power over men (Foucault, 1995: p. 198).” One, is to “control their relations” and the other, is to “separate out dangerous mixtures (Foucault, 1995: p. 198).” Forms of separation notes Foucault, bears directly on individual bodies (Foucault, 1995: p. 198).

This separation of bodies within the familial space is reported by my informant Candice (Chinese, mid-30s) who describes to me in our interview how she “goes straight away into the room,” “peak out,” “loop back,” to go to the toilet in the house of her Malay-Muslim partner Intan (Malay-Muslim, mid-30s).

When I interviewed Candice and her partner Intan, they have been seeing each other for almost half a year. Candice is half Chinese and Intan is half Malay. Candice’s father travels widely for work and her mother is open to her lesbian subjectivity. Candice did not “come out” as lesbian in her previous lesbian romantic partnership until she met Intan and knowing that Intan is “the one” for her meant that she could not hold back from her mother, Intan’s presence in her life.

Intan is welcomed in Candice's home. However, Intan's family has been extremely hostile to Candice and her presence in the familial space. Intan's brother is a strict and pious muslim who goes to the mosque, prays and recites the Koran everyday.

Candice describes Intan's family as "more religious than the typical Malay family; it's one step higher!" Her brother studies at a well known Islamic University and Intan herself, did Islamic Studies when she was studying in one of Singapore's polytechnic. Intan's brother is very protective of their mother. He does not want Intan to upset her mother with the fact of her lesbian homosexuality and sends Intan Koran messages about learning how to mix with the "right friends and people to get closer to God," on facebook and phone messenger application (app) *whatsapp*.

He also attacked Intan's career as a health professional suggesting that she should see a psychologist for her "abnormal behaviour." Intan felt harassed and threatened to make a police report to bar him from his daily harassment. Intan visits Candice's home often without hostility or harassment from any of her family members. However, when Candice visits Intan, she reports that:

We go into the house and we straight away go into the room that kinda thing. It's straight away. On a good day I'll greet them and say hi but on days they don't even wanna look at me, I won't say anything! Because they don't even wanna look at me! So I go straight away to the room and relax in the room. When I want to go to the toilet, it gets very uncomfortable so I'll peak out first. I'll tahan until they are all sleeping. But if cannot I'll peak out first and see are they walking around but if they are walking around then I don't want to walk pass them. Sometimes I'm like oh they're there and so I'll like loop back and when Intan sees and ask hey I thought you're going to the toilet? I'll just say oh later later (Candice, Chinese, mid-30s).

Disciplinary power argues Foucault (1995: p. 187), works through visibility: “in discipline, it is the subject who have to be seen. Their visibility assures the hold of the power that is exercised over them. It is the fact of constantly being seen, of being able always to be seen, that maintains the disciplined individual in its subjection.” As such, even if there were no observers, Foucault points out that subjection to power, can be born from a “fictitious relation” to an imagined relation of coercion and constraint (1995: p. 202). Beyond the confines of the room, the familial space is neither relaxing nor comfortable for lesbians, which makes even simple acts of going to the toilet an uncomfortable journey that one embarks on only at night when everybody is sleeping or, when no one is seeing.

For lesbians, entering into the familial space beyond the privacy of the room, is akin to entering a “field of visibility,” or a “panoptic mechanism (Foucault, 1995: p. 200),” where their bodies, movements and gestures are arranged and separated spatially, and subject to surveillance and observation. Within the space of the family, through the uninviting or hostile gazes of parents, bodies of lesbians, are differentiated and individualized, marked as abnormal or immoral, and induced with a heightened “state of conscious and permanent visibility (Foucault, 1995).” Lesbians learn to automatically observe their own movements and separate themselves through acts of avoidance, such as, “looping back” into the room to avoid being seen going to the toilet and to avoid awkward confrontations or outright hostility.

In order to exempt oneself from the imposition of coercive heteronormative relations of power from the family, other informants such as lawyer Julian Berry (Chinese, mid-20s) avoids going to her partner Hui An’s (Chinese, early-30s) home completely. Hui An has completed her PhD in the life sciences several years ago and she met Julian Berry through an auction event at Sayoni queer women’s Anniversary party held at the gay and lesbian club *Play* at Tanjong Pagar. Julian Berry is out as lesbian to



her sister who went to a San Francisco park filled with gays and lesbians and even encouraged her to come out to her parents, who hint occasionally that homosexuality is a natural phenomenon within the human population. Hui An stays over at Julian Berry's home most of the time.

However, back in Hui An's home, because Hui An's mother views Julian as an immoral influence (*bu dao de*), bringing Julian to her home for a meal is not a reasonable option for both Hui An and Julian, unless the couple is prepared to face hostility from Hui An's mother. Yet, for Hui An, coming home to eat what her mother cooks is a symbolic marker of being filial and dutiful daughter. Hui An experiences a divergent pull between choosing to stay at her partner's home and being a filial daughter to her mother by going home to eat. This is ultimately resolved by going home to eat "occasionally" as a form of respect for her role as a daughter in the family.

"I rarely go to her place. Her parents are not accepting. They would keep making insidious allegations. Don't get influenced by your friends. You are a smart girl. Don't be influenced. Don't make me worried! She said in Chinese once, *gao tong xing lian, nan de xi huan nan de, nu de xi huan nu de shi bu dao de* (Julian Berry, Chinese, mid 20s)."

"When she said that I was *bu dao de* I was more angry than hurt. We avoid talking about this whole section but she was very angry with me last week because I stayed at Julian's place most of the time. She always cooks for me and wants me to come home to eat. I tell her don't worry about me. I know how to take care of myself. Whatever she wants me to do I have already done it so I need some freedom and time on my own but she says she is only doing it for the good of me. I would go home and eat her food once in a while (Hui An, Chinese, early-30s)."

At the level of the everyday life, lesbians are compelled to make decisions between choosing to have dinner with their family or partner. The two are mutually exclusive. A conversant from one of the European countries, Taralene (early-50s) during my pre-fieldwork interview with her partner observes that “it is still very difficult to be lesbian in Singapore. Coming out in public in a lesbian relationship openly would mean breaking with your family and possibly with your culture. From what I have seen I have not encountered many lesbians here yet who are fully integrated in all fronts.”

Because “coming out” as lesbian means straining, offending, upsetting, or even breaking off with current religious and familial relations, in order to maintain cordial relations, my lesbian informants do not always “come out” as lesbian to others. Instead, lesbians learn to police their own behaviours, movements and gestures in their everyday lives. My informant Atikah Mohammed (Malay-Muslim, mid-30s) who is seeing Tarlene as a romantic partner for instance told me: “at home no kissing of course. In some places, where it is the norm to have higher number of Malays, I have asked Taralene not to kiss or hold my hand. Tampines for example I would ask her to be more discreet.”

Another informant Kaley (Chinese, mid-30s), a sporty looking lesbian who studied in Saint Anthony’s Convent Girls school and now owns a printing company, told me that she “came out” as lesbian when she was in her teens. She was with her ex-partner for nearly 10 years. But she said that because her ex-partner would get very nervous around her neighborhood, rather than spending time at home, or at neighbourhood malls, they would go to places such as Sentosa, the beach or the zoo which are further away.

She is very closeted lah. Her parents don’t know about us at all. It’s very tough lah. She get very nervous when I’m around near her area. When we go shopping, we won’t even go around that area. It is very extreme one you know she’s quite extreme like if her aunty stays in junction 8 we also wont go over there. We go to

places like the beach or the zoo. Every weekend, we go to sentosa since we love to sun tan. (Kaley, Chinese, mid-30s).

Lesbians learn to internalize a “permanent field of visibility” from which even outside the space of the family, lesbians would impose forms of self-supervision and self-surveillance upon themselves because they do not want to sour pre-existing relationships by being known or seen as lesbian.

So lesbians like Kaley (Chinese, mid-30s) and Atikah Mohammed (Malay-Muslim, mid-30s) would go further away to spend time with each other and deliberately avoid being seen around their own homes or neighbourhood. The panoptic self-surveillance mechanism, is therefore exercised by lesbians themselves who internalize forms of self-supervision and self-surveillance to avoid incurring censure from friends, family and familial authorities.

In sum, when power is conceived as specific forms of mechanisms and techniques and a relational force between individuals, set up and shaped by discursive formations or regimes of truth, and codified by institutions of power such as the state, more complicated answers to why is it challenging to be lesbian in Singapore emerges. It is not the state or the law which oppresses lesbians but rather, the range of corrective penalties and omnipresent surveillance imposed by family, friendship and religious networks, invested in both the production of the traditional heterosexual nuclear familial status and morality which makes choosing to be lesbian in Singapore challenging.

#### 4.3.4 Neoliberal Complicities and Lines of Flight

As Ong (2005) points out, neoliberalism understood as a market rationality promotes and values individualism, entrepreneurship, the ability to govern oneself through “an array of knowledge and expert systems” in order to enhance “efficiency and

competitiveness” in market conditions (Ong, 2005: p. 6). I argue that the embodiment of values of individualism, entrepreneurship and the ability to self-govern can be read as a kind of middle-class cultural competency or cultural capital valued, recognized and consecrated by the middle class family, educational and economic system (Bourdieu, 1990: 124). The embodiment of such neoliberal traits produces a lesbian subjectivity that is exceptional to disciplinary regimes and respectable in society.

For example, during my fieldwork, I had the opportunity to interview Diane Wong who completed her tertiary education in English Literature the UK. Diane is a very independent, cosmopolitan and successful career woman in her early 30s, currently occupying a senior managerial role in a prestigious organization. Diane speaks in a confident and authoritative manner and dresses in a trendy and professional style.

She has travelled to many countries including Europe, parts of Africa, Vietnam, Cambodia and Tibet. During her past-time, she runs marathons and does yoga on a regular basis. She is a creative and prolific person who has written poems and essays, some of which are published in gay anthologies and thus, has a presence in the local literature scene in Singapore.

Diane also helps to organize various LGBTQ events and runs a non-profit organization in order to give voice and visibility to different margin communities in Singapore. Diane is very well-respected in the lesbian community. She is consulted by younger LGBTQ students who come to her for advice on how to set up youth gender and sexuality related discussion groups in a socio-politically “conservative” Singapore. At her various work place organizations, Diane is openly lesbian even though she had her fair share of coming out woes when she was younger with her dad trying to send her for counselling.

However, Diane is not frustrated by her parents attempt to turn her heterosexual. She told me during our interview, “it’s ok because I am privileged, I make enough money

to live on my own and have my own life. I am not obliged to hang out with my family all the time. I made a very conscious decision to move out early on at the age of 18. I don't really care if my parents know and accept my partner. We just need to be a more progressive country, HR policies in local companies must be like MNCs and American and European companies who have co-partnership care policies for your child etc.”

Diane is the exemplar of a Chinese middle-class cosmopolitan lesbian who is very well-spoken, well-travelled, successful career woman who has established a network of LGBTQ accepting friends. In addition, she is fortunate to work in a more liberal setting where her work-place colleagues are accepting of her lesbian sexuality. Diane is also independent of her family, having moved out from home at 18.

Being able to move out of the heterosexual family unit, study in a prestigious college in the UK, return home to Singapore to work in a managerial position, volunteer and set up a non-profit organization allows her to articulate and express her middle-class lesbian sexual subjectivity in the language of economic and cultural capitals consecrated by the neoliberal economic and educational system.

Having economic and cultural capital to navigate the economic system in Singapore, Diane does not need familial acceptance and support but as she says, only need corporate policies to become more progressively open to gays and lesbians. Being able to move out of the home, earn her own keep, study abroad and leverage on cultural capital to build gay and lesbian friendly social networks makes Diane a neoliberal exception to the disciplinary norm. She is able to build and integrate herself into a social and cultural network accepting of lesbian subjectivity outside of the normative institution: the heterosexual family.

Unless lesbians are rich enough or economically successful enough to fulfill neoliberal economic expectations and to adopt various lines of flight, the majority of lesbians who do not follow heteronormative scripts to organize their intimate and daily

life, will witness the “swarming in (Foucault, 1995: 211)” of a full range of disciplinary mechanisms described above, aimed at reforming perceived abnormal behaviours of lesbians. Because the family is an oppressive disciplinary institution for lesbians, lesbians do not have the luxury of lazing around, chilling and spending time together in the privacy of the home watching TV or watch a film (Yuan Mei, Chinese, 30s; Wen Ting, Chinese mid-30s). In order to spend time together without incurring punishments, some of my lesbian informants report spending most of their time in public places; staying in each other’s homes when their parents are away; booking private hotels regularly; going on regular holidays together.

I have friends who would like book hotels to spend time together. But it’s like why do I want to spend so much money just to spend time with you? It’s hard to save money when you are lesbian unless your parents travel. It’s always this like when are your parents travelling? Oh my parents travel from this period to this period, so you can come so if you want you can stay over if you like but after that you gotta go. So it’s difficult really, you just feel so imbalanced all the time. With my ex, we spend time together by just going out all the time and its very tiring to me cause I feel sometimes I don’t have the energy level to keep up (Yuan Mei, Chinese, late-20s).

Heterosexual norms and the network of corrective penalties that comes with being lesbian in Singapore implies that seemingly mundane acts of watching TV or relaxing in the comforts of the familial space becomes an exception rather than the norm for lesbians unless they can afford their own home before the age of 35 or afford booking hotels and holidays regularly. For some of my informants such as Intan (Malay-Muslim, mid-30s) and her partner Candice (Chinese, mid-30s) who feel that they cannot have a “proper life” in Singapore, if they were well-educated enough, lesbians can plan to leave

the country altogether to side-step both legal prohibitions and the network of disciplinary mechanisms which enforces heteronormativity.

Intan: We do but we do not plan to get married in Singapore, definitely not. We are already thinking of going to Canada together.

Candice: We will go to any country that is accepting. For me I just wanna go wherever she goes. I'm not particular about the places we will go and for me my teaching cert is international. It is a UK cert. It's not NIE. You might not get accepted. My postgrad is in a UK university at Sunderland university so I am hoping with that I can teach anywhere and her counseling she can practise it anywhere. We can get a job anywhere in this world it is not that hard. We want to go to Canada so that you can have a proper life lah you can get married you can have children. The stuff that heterosexual people can get in Singapore but we still can't? (interviewees, Intan and Candice).

Mobile cosmopolitan lesbians who hold a job which allows them and/or their partners to travel around, can evade heteronormative social constraints. For example, my informant Theresa Loh wants to get married with her partner working permanently in Thailand, in New Zealand. Theresa told me:

Why bother about Singapore? The world is your oyster, just go overseas and make that place your home. You stay here but you travel around the world. You can make other countries your home too. Home is where the heart is. I usually bring girls to different parts of the world for a holiday, Malaysia, Malacca, Penang. During that time when there was no gay group, I would go to Macau, Malaysia. If my partner lives in Thailand, I will go to Thailand and I will feel home too because home is not a house, it is about the person and people.

*Remember, this country is a home, not a jail, don't let it be a jail."*

#### **4.4 Conclusion**

Lesbian partnerships often constructed as belonging to the private sphere. But when the 'private sphere' is associated with the 'family,' and 'family' is constructed by heterosexual regimes of truth, even the private sphere is an exclusionary and oppressive site for lesbians. The institution of the family is both, an oppressive site where lesbians are disciplined to conform to heteronormative regimes of truth and also a site where heterosexual neoliberal middle-class family status and values are policed and reproduced.

Therefore, only lesbians who are more economically successful and who embody consecrated forms of cultural capital are more accepted than others. They can more easily escape punishments and adopt various lines of flight such as, buying their own private homes, going on frequent holidays or booking hotels in order to spend time together. To mobile cosmopolitan middle-class lesbians, the country is indeed a home and not a jail. However, I would venture to say that for lesbians who do not have such economic and cultural abilities to adopt these lines of flight, choosing to be lesbian in Singapore implies exclusion and separation from pre-existing familial, friendship and religious networks. For lesbians who cannot afford to make Singapore their home, the country becomes a jail and not a home anymore.



## **5 The Ethnography of a Lesbian Community in Singapore**

### 5.1 Introduction

Every relationship of power, as Foucault argues, contains “a means of escape or possible flight;” “a point of possible reversal;” “a point of insubordination (Foucault, 1994: p. 346-347).” There are different ways in which subordinate groups resist structures of power and domination. Where state power and heteronormative regimes of truth about normal or abnormal sexuality is hegemonic, resistance need not always necessarily come in the form an organized and systematic collective action or direct confrontation (Scott, 1985: p. 290-292). While regimes of truth about heteronormativity justifies coercive penalties on lesbians to conform to heterosexual scripts, domination, is never complete (Foucault, 1979: p. 219).

Using my fieldwork experience and interviews conducted with lesbians, I compose an ethnography of a lesbian community in Singapore, documenting the emergent role self-help, support and advocacy organizations such as Sayoni, Women’s Nite, LesFIT, Free Community Church (FCC) and Young Out Here (YOH) in fostering a sense of community group solidarity. I point out that lesbians find friendship, kinship and support through participating in these self-help, support and advocacy organizations. Organizations supply a platform for lesbians to come together and question heteronormative regimes of truth and generate new self-narratives of emerging lesbian subjectivities in post-independence Singapore.

Narratives of hope, love and vulnerability in this lesbian community become different kinds of “everyday resistances (Scott, 1985)” and “discursive strategies (Foucault, 1995)” that lesbians use to counter oppressive disciplinary measures imposed by family, religious leaders and friends. In brief, in this chapter, I will pay attention to the

lesbian community as (1) a space where new narratives about one's life course and selfhood as lesbian is collectively generated and (2) as a site of resistance where alternative discourses about lesbian subjectivities are produced through the collective participation in community organized events, activities, self-help, support and advocacy groups.

However, I will argue that class and race divides in this lesbian community are pervasive. This lesbian community in Singapore set up around more formal organizations and groups is a largely educated and middle-class lesbian and Chinese community. Scholars such as Kennedy & Davis (1993) studying the Buffalo lesbian bar community in America point out in their seminal work *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold* (1993) that during the 1950s, class divisions were tenuous and very prominent in lesbian community life between the working class dykes and tough bar lesbians and the middle-class lesbians<sup>15</sup>. In post-independence Singapore, career-oriented middle class lesbians in this

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<sup>15</sup> Studying bars like Carousel, Kennedy & Davis (1993: 143) observed that “the more affluent, status-conscious lesbians tended to stay in the front, at the bar, where men also congregated, The younger rough and tough lesbians were in the back room, if they were not barred, while the older ones were comfortable in both areas. Class-based distinctions were elaborated by a discourse which heightened the differences in all aspects of culture – appearance, manners, sexual expression – and encourage distance.” Working class lesbians who are the “tough bar lesbians” and “dykes” would disdain the upwardly mobile middle class lesbians and two groups of lesbians would often find little common ground (1993: 143). Rough and tough lesbians for Kennedy & Davis (1993) were actually the ones who played a major role in expanding the lesbian consciousness and unity during the 1950s because during the 1950s when the economy grew, tough bar lesbians did not have to worry about keeping any one particular job. As tough bar lesbians mostly worked in blue-collar work, “if they lost one job, they could always find another.” However, it was the white collar work lesbians who seized middle class careers had to emphasize discretion more strongly in order to keep good jobs. Being found out as lesbian would be costly for their careers. These tough bar blue collared working class lesbians also reinforced class divisions “by challenging the double life and defending themselves physically when threatened.” Kennedy & Davis (1993) notes that tough bar lesbians had the “desire to be more obvious, more physical and more explicitly sexual when socializing.” Middle-class lesbians however aimed to contain all that was “disruptive and troublesome.”

lesbian community have in Bourdieu's (1995) terms, accumulated varying but significantly large amounts of economic, social and cultural capital.

Lesbian activities and discussions in this community are often shaped race, class and socio-cultural standings. Activities and discussions on long-term financial planning, same-sex parenting, patronizing clubs, bars and restaurants, organizing overseas leisure trips and devoting time to engage in community volunteerism and activism are for example, activities and discussions that some of my working-class lesbian informants who do not have such economic and cultural capital found hard to engage in.

Therefore, while this ethnography of a lesbian community tries to study how lesbians overcame oppressive disciplinary regimes and social hardship through participating and thereby forming a network of self-help, support and advocacy groups and organizations, membership to this lesbian community is still ridden with class and racial divides. The unspoken currency of membership in this lesbian community is one's educational and cultural and economic standing in social life.

## 5.2 A Short History of this Lesbian Community and the emergence of Family Cliques, RedQueen, Women's Nite and the Pelangi Pride Center (PPC)

During the 1990s, learning how to fight and forming "family-cliques" to look out for each other was a life survival skill for lesbians. Ah bengs at Takashimaya and Suntec would often find trouble with butchy looking lesbians like Jeraldine Tan (Chinese, early 30s). Waiting for the police or security guards to diffuse the fight is a futile endeavor. Butchy looking Lara Chen (Chinese, mid-30s) calls these family-cliques a kind of "lesbian brotherhood" where lesbians would wear baggy Alien branded jeans, put beer bottles in their empty pockets and bind their breasts in order to demonstrate group loyalty to her fellow lesbian friends when they got into fights outside Moon Dance Bar at

Tanjong Pagar. Before the owner of Far East Plaza committed suicide, older lesbians would also hang out at Crocodile Bar or Vincents in Lucky Plaza to sing rock ballads.

By the late 1990s, Looking Glass, a counselling group was started as a support group for lesbians in reaction to the suicide of two lesbian women. The SigNeL mailing list was too gay male dominated for lesbians such as Eva Tan (Chinese, early-40s) who decided in September 1988 to start a Yahoo group RedQueen. RedQueen and Internet Relay Chat (IRC) channels such as #LesbianCafe and #RedQueen key points of contact for lesbians who wanted to get to know each other.

RedQueen started not out of a “noble cause” but because during the 1990s, the butch-fem gender binary in the lesbian world was too stark and lesbians like Eva Tan (Chinese, early-40s) who could not fit neatly into these groups was hard pressed to find support for herself. However, RedQueen was limiting because lesbians began to hide behind their nicknames and avatars and the lesbian presence was limited to a virtual space. As such, Women’s Nite was formed so that lesbians could appear in a real and visible space with their real names.

We set a rule that women who attend Women’s Nite have to use their real names. By using their real names, lesbians were forced to be themselves. This is not coming out. It is just learning to be authentic by using your real names. I think inherently if you only use your nicknames, it sends a message to yourself that you are not a good person and you are shameful of yourself that’s why you hide and use a nickname. But I think it is basic manners if you want to come to events that people organize to use your real names so that people to know who you are (Eva Tan, Chinese, early-40s).

Women's Nite<sup>16</sup>, attended by 10-30 women each time, is organized by volunteers every last Saturday of the month for about 2-4 hours every session. No alcoholic drinks are allowed because Women's Nite is supposed to be a space where lesbians can come together in a sober state, beyond the drinking and party night-club scene to discuss sexuality and LGBTQ related issues. Lesbians who attend Women's Nite have to bring one kind of food or non-alcoholic drinks to contribute to the potluck.

When I attended Women's Nite, there were markers and stickers for lesbians to write their real names to be placed at visible parts of one's shirts and blouses. A wide spectrum of issues related to identity, dating, financial planning, health, sex, love, faith and coming out to friends and family is discussed. At one Women's Nite session on health of lesbian women, Madelene Chua (Chinese, mid-30s) together with Sabina Wong (Chinese, mid-30s) were facilitating the session raising questions such as:

“How do lesbians ensure that they can financially afford to take care of their health and well-being at various stages of their lives? What can the community do to help improve the health and well-being of lesbians and bisexuals?” Raising questions about health for discussion, for example, allows lesbians to take a reflexive position about their own smoking, drinking and exercise habits as well as emotional stresses that come from coming out to their family (fieldwork memos).

The Pelangi Pride Center (PPC) is a LGBTQ community space and resource center hosting queer Asian and Western, fiction and non-fiction books and resources started by Eva Tan (Chinese, early-40s) and another of her lesbian friend Denise (Chinese, early-40s) so that LGBTQ people can start to own physical and tangible things such as books to empower themselves with knowledge of their own LGBTQ heritage. Maintaining PPC was difficult because of financial constraints and there was no space to

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<sup>16</sup> In the past, Women's Nite was held in a private apartment near Little India and recently in a rented art studio space owned by another lesbian artist.

house the library of LGBTQ resources. Maintaining PPC was akin to a “squatter-like” experience where lesbians had to continuously find new spaces amongst their gay men and activist friends to house the library.

Denise and I always felt that LGBTQ people needed something physical and tangible for people to hold on to as a form of heritage. Also, information is power. PPC was set up so people can just come here and pick out any sort of information they want to empower themselves with them. But we have always been squatters, We moved 8 times for the whole duration when we are around. We were in a friend’s house with the birds, we were in gay bars, we were in several places at Tanjong Pagar, we were at DYMK until they could not afford the rent for us as well and we lost 150 books to termites while we were in storage at Alex Au’s office (Eva Tan, Chinese, early-40s).

### 5.3 Defining the Lesbian Community: A Walled Garden?

For many lesbians, the lesbian community is a place where lesbians feel a sense of belonging, safety and instant camaraderie forged out of the shared experience of being punished and discriminated for choosing to be lesbian in Singapore.

Community is the sort of place where people can really understand what you are going through when you tell them hey my life sucks because my girlfriend’s parents are homophobic. When your straight friends tell you ya so sad that you are lesbian, it’s like shut the fuck up man, you can get married, you can buy your own house, move out without needing to explain to your family who you are moving out to, the government loves you so much, so shut the fuck up, how do you know what I am going through? Most of my gay friends are from Sayoni and even though they are not very close, you will

always feel safe when you are talking to them. They would definitely be able to empathize with you and it feels damn good to know that there is a whole community out there that has your back (Jillian Berry, Chinese, mid-20s).

Choosing to be lesbian can be traumatic especially if parents and siblings reject, shame, coerce or harass lesbians to turn heterosexual. In place of the heterosexual nuclear family, friendships that lesbians make with each other in the community offer lesbians who are uprooted or marginalized to feel confirmed and affirmed in who they are (Weeks, Heaphy & Donova, 2001). Sometimes lesbians feel an “instant fellowship” amongst other lesbians or “People Like Us (PLUs) (Kimberly Ng, Chinese, mid-30s).” Friendships with other lesbians and gays become alternatives that challenge the inevitability or necessity of conventional family life and the potential loneliness of old age (Giddens, 1992). As Jane Yue (Chinese, mid-30s) says:

Friends are like my family. It is about being real because being queer a big part of yourself who value honesty and accept you for who you are so they are important because you don't want them to judge you. Most lesbians don't have any children so all the more it is important to develop a lesbian kinship network to walk you through with life, something which married people will never get because they will have their families and children. There will be a split at some point because your heterosexual friends will get married and have their own lives and children (Jane Yue, Chinese, mid-30s).

However, lesbians often use metaphors such as “wall” and “cocoon” that invokes strong visual imageries to describe their own experiences of what it means to be in the lesbian community. At a volunteer group discussion with members of queer women advocacy group Sayoni, activist Kathryn Ang (Chinese, mid-30s), joked that the community is a “beautifully walled garden” where LGBTQ news and updates are posted only on the private Sayoni facebook wall for “internal queer women consumption” and

not “public consumption.” Cindy Tan (Chinese, mid-40s), a divorcee, mother of one daughter and who is currently in a long distance partnership with someone from Penang also said:

I’m in the community. I’m very cocooned. I have wrapped this cocoon around myself and that’s how I stay happy. Just about everybody sees that I am gay from somewhere so I don’t have to deal with homophobia. I knew very consciously and clearly that I was choosing a new life for myself, I’ve done that quite consciously and I threw myself in by devoting myself to FCC. I gave myself very much a large part of it. I joined cell groups and make gay friends and use it as part of my support system (Cindy Tan, Chinese, mid-40s).

Some lesbians like Cindy Tan (Chinese, mid-40s) would rather not deal with homophobia at all by surrounding herself only with gay and lesbian friends. The need for boundary maintenance between lesbians and the broader public is constantly being reproduced by lesbians themselves because of homophobia. While being in the community in the co-presence of other lesbians creates a sense of safety and comfort, the lesbian community is not homogeneous. For instance, Katy Tan (Chinese, early-40s) insisted to me in our interview that sexuality and one’s identity as lesbian is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for close friendships.

Sayoni and Women’s Nite do good work to get people in for discussion. All these are good platforms for people who are not exactly out and just want to find out more, it will create a safe space for people to communicate. This is very important for someone who is new or isn’t very comfortable, fear for their lives and who is afraid. But just because we are lesbians right people assume that we can get along we will be best of friends I think it is all BS (bullshit) because our sexuality is only one commonality but we might have different values different thought processes, we might not even get along as friends. Doesn’t mean we



attend such functions we will become best of friends. I feel that sometimes we belong to a community we assume that everybody will get along but that is not true (Katy Tan, Chinese, early-40s).

#### 5.4 ADLUS & LesFIT: “Fishing” for a partner and the role of sports in this Lesbian Community

Lara Chen (Chinese, early-40s) and Sabina Wong (Chinese, mid-30s) are members of Adventurous Like Us (ADLUS). Members of ADLUS comprise of gays and lesbians who would bag pack to places in Malaysia, play beach volleyball, take diving trips, conduct running training sessions at HDB staircases and swim with each other. A prideful collective spirit and a sense of identification and belonging in the community between lesbians and gay men emerges through collective participation in sports activities.

When we go clubbing or trekking with ADLUS, the guys are still guys they are stronger so they would help the females carry more of the heavy stuff. Every 4 years there is gay Olympics so the guys would field a volleyball team in 2002, 2008 and 2012. In 2006, the girls’ softball team went and participated in the games with other countries. In 2002 when it was held in Sydney I sent them off (Lara Chen, Chinese, early-40s)!

Although Slang and ADLUS are no longer in existence, they are replaced by newer groups such as LesFIT started by lesbians such as Qing Ni (Chinese, mid-30s). Events and activities are usually publicized and organized through social media platforms such as facebook. Through participating in sports and a neoliberal consumption culture, lesbians are able to contest negative stereotypes of lesbians.

People always look down on lesbians. They say lesbians are fat, lesbians get into fights, lesbians get drunk, there are always these stereotypes in society. That lesbians only do promiscuous things together. But in lesFIT we want to create good vibes, we do what we can. We can't influence the whole society but I think sports can create a good image of lesbians (Qing Ni, Chinese mid-30s).

Lesbians from LesFIT organize paintball trips to Desaru, cycling, dirt-biking events in Malaysia, basketball, futsal, weekly badminton sessions, running events around the Marina Bay Gardens and Marina Bay Sands (Mei Yee, Chinese, mid-20s). Affluent, well-educated lesbians with cultural competency about the nighttime lesbian economy spend their leisure time at clubs, bars, cafes and restaurants like *Tokame* and *Play*. These lesbians reproduce a lesbian subjectivity complicit with neoliberal consumption culture. In this neoliberal consumption culture, older lesbians and lesbians who are from a lower socio-economic status in the community are less valued than younger and more well to do lesbians. There is also a higher demand for “fems” rather than “butches.”

I've seen a spectrum of lesbians across all walks of life. But I feel that the lesbian economy is still about class and looks. Age and experience does not hold as much weight as class and looks. And Fems are more hot high in demand in the lesbian economy. That's why when a fem and fem are together, it's like such a waste, already so short in supply you know what I mean (fieldwork memos)?

Lesbians sometimes feel that the “real reason” why people participate in community events and activities is to “fish” for a partner. The metaphor of “fishing” suggests how lesbians join the community because they are looking for a romantic partner. While lesbian subjectivity is based on a (physical, emotional and/or erotic) same sex attraction, butch fem identity markers, economic status, educational levels and age are important criterias in this fishing (romantic partner selection) process for most lesbians.

Lesbians express their sexual desires and imaginations through butch-fem gender roles and ideal types, even though empirically there can be much deviation and variation. A butch can be imagined as someone who takes on a more traditional male role, of being more aggressive, initiative-taking, rational and strategic. She can be imagined as having short hair, moving in bigger strides, and taking on a dress style in tandem with popular male fashioned shirts and pants. A fem is imagined as someone who displays a complementary set of nurturing, caring, gentle characteristics. She is also someone who puts in more effort in dressing up, sometimes putting on make-up and accessories.

Someone who embodies a variation of butch-fem characteristics is termed 'androgynous.' Those who are androgynous can either be 'andro-but' or 'andro-fem.' In the lesbian economy, fems and andro-fems are more valued over butches and andro-butches because lesbians prize the nurturing and gentle traits of a fem female. There is the perception that butches are too "hard-core," aggressive and sometimes lacking in the desired fem gender traits (fieldwork memos).

Younger, more educated and good looking lesbians are also more highly valued and prized than others. After one has "fished" for a partner, lesbians often "disappear" into their own "little private worlds" until they "break up" and come out "fishing" again.

As a result, this lesbian community faces a high attrition rate because lesbians who have "finished fishing" retreat from the community into their "private lives." Because the lesbian community is small, there is also a tendency for lesbians to date each other's ex-partners and hence, some of my informants think that relationships formed within the community is "incestuous." Serial monogamy rather than polygamy or polyamory is the norm.

#### 5.5 Sayoni: The Sayoni Summer Camp and Same-Sex Parenting Indignation Talk Show

Lesbians from Sayoni also organize social gatherings, Anniversary Parties and the Sayoni Summer Camp. Most lesbians whom I eventually got to know have been through the Sayoni Summer Camp. There has been to date three Sayoni Summer camps held at vacation hotels in places like Batam. Lesbians join the Sayoni Summer Camp in order to know more lesbians<sup>17</sup>. Because of the fast pace of life and homophobia that lesbians may experience in Singapore, taking time out from Singapore gives lesbians space and time to reflect on issues related to their own sexuality.

For example, in the camp, members of Sayoni conduct seminars and discussion sessions ranging from coming out to one's family and friends; how to prepare one's family when you are coming out; how to confront fears of being disowned and how to distinguish fears of being disowned from the actuality being disowned; how to accept one's self and plan one's own finances. Lesbians are also introduced to learning about sex through sex workshops organized by Sayoni members at the summer camp. A younger member Evonne Ong of Sayoni said:

I learnt that there is the dildo, the vibrator, the rabbit, the egg, the butt plug, the beads and most importantly I learnt that you can colour up and reinvent your sex life when you are experiencing bed death! I remember in one year we were also showed a huge montage of different vaginas in different shapes and sizes and we were taught that all these are natural looking vaginas too (Evonne Ong, Chinese, mid-20s)!

At the Sayoni Summer Camp, lesbians are introduced to sex toys that can liven up their sex lives. Lesbians also relearn the anatomy of their body such that they can identify female biological parts like the clid, lavia, and uterus as parts of themselves.

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<sup>17</sup> For example my interviewee told me: "When I attended the first Sayoni camp, it was because a friend broke up and I wanted her to go out and meet people. We came across a flyer advertising the camp so I cajok her to attend the camp! (Agnus Lee, Chinese, late 40s)."

While the state defines women's bodies in reproductive terms (Heng & Devan, 1995), lesbians who participate in Sayoni's Summer Camp learn to take pleasure in sex beyond functional reproductive ends.

Even though many lesbians would be reticent at first during the summer camps, after ice-breaker games and through the course of several seminar sessions in the day, lesbians would get to know each other, warm up to each other and build an important support network with each other. Younger lesbians like Evonne Ong (Chinese, mid-20s) would learn from older and financially successful lesbians, ways to become financially independent. For Evonne Ong (Chinese, mid-20s), it is especially important for lesbians to plan their own finances because there is no state based institutional support and protection for lesbians:

There was a talk by Xin Ni on how to be financial and investment savvy through buying bluechip funds, penny stocks, buying insurance, trust funds, and mutual funds. We also discussed how we can invest in real estate and talked about the different financial products we can buy from the real estate market. All lesbians have to learn how to plan for their own finances because there is no institutional support and practically no financial benefits and protection for you. So if you don't take care of yourself, no one will (Evonne Ong, Chinese, mid-20s)!

At a Sayoni organized indignation Same Sex Parenting talk show held at the DYMK café and bar at Duxton Hill, lesbians shared strategies of how they could conceive a child through Intra Uterine Insemination (IUI) and Intra-Vitro Fertilization (IVF) in Johor Bahru, Bangkok, Taiwan or the United States, or try to do Surrogacy in India, Thailand and the United States. Speakers shared their knowledge of gay friendly clinics and doctors, and reputable agencies for couples interested to try Surrogacy.

For IUI in Bangkok per cycle it is about 1500 sing dollars doesn't include accommodation and flight for IVF we are looking at more than 10 k a round. So

if you try IVF for a few rounds every time you get a go at it it is at least 10k. The thirty K figure is actually for if you see a particular doctor in Singapore and you do the insemination in JB that is also the average cost per cycle if you go to the states actually it's just that the travel and accommodation to the states is more expensive. For those who do medical procedure you will buy sperm, sperm averages about 700 per round and in any given procedure you may need one or two vials per time sometimes up to three or four not to forget if you are not doing this in the states you will actually have to ship this sperm somewhere ok so if you are shipping to Bangkok the entire cost of shipping will be slightly over a thousand dollars USD and if you want, ok, it is more cost efficient to ship a few vials at a time. You buy a few ship it there, we actually have one vial in Bangkok, and the hospital will actually look after it for you so they will freeze it in the freezer and of course you will only use it once but the problem is actually it is very expensive each vial can cost at least 700. Better profile, more expensive and stuff like that (fieldwork memos, transcription).

#### 5.6 Free Community Church: Love, Hope, Life and Vulnerability

Many lesbians I have met during fieldwork practice their Christian faith at the Free Community Church (FCC). The Free Community Church (FCC) is a LGBTQ inclusive church that celebrates diversity regardless of race, class, religion, gender and/or sexuality. For many lesbians as well as gay, transgender and queer peoples, FCC is a space where all LGBTQ people can be affirmed as human beings with equal dignity even if they were rejected by their previous churches for being homosexual or stigmatized for contracting HIV. FCC for lesbians such as one of my interviewees Jane Yue (Chinese, early 30s) is not just a kingdom where Christians meet to worship and pay their respect to

God, but also a church where kinship amongst other LGBTQ peoples can be found. Participating in FCC allows lesbians like Jane Yue to also reconcile her Christian faith with her sexuality. Jane Yue describes her experience at FCC as a “double return (Jane Yue, Chinese, early 30s)” both to God and to her own lesbian subjectivity:

At FCC, people come and expose their positive. People can say they are HIV positive. Here the feeling of being expelled from mainstream church and being reabsorbed into a new exile church is very powerful. In fact, it is no longer about kingdom but *kindom*. My first experience of FCC was very radical. I became conscious of God not as just masculine but also feminine in form. This is different from other churches and other nomenclatures where God is always referred to as “he” or “him.” At FCC, sometimes we talk about God in gender neutral terms. When you come to FCC, it is not only the bible, the biblical home coming. You are not just returning to God but to your self as well. When you come to FCC it is not just about reconciling your faith and sexuality but rather, understanding your God in new eyes. Out there in the “real world” you always feel a gulf between the Christian theology taught to you and your lived experiences. It doesn’t match up with your lived experience as homosexual and creates all forms of guilt complexes in people who are gay. Reconciliation when you come to FCC is very strong, it is here that I experience spirit and body as two wholes coming together (Jane Yue, Chinese, early-30s).

Where God as exclusive and judgmental of LGBTQ persons in mainstream churches, at FCC, God is reinterpreted as the God of love. For Jane Yue, God at FCC is not only non-homophobic. God at FCC is read in feminine terms counter balancing the usual masculine address of God in most churches. This allows Jane Yue to subjectivate her lesbian selfhood with her Christian self in a non-homophobic and a more gender

equal way. In addition, in one of my interviews with a FCC council member Edda Chua (Chinese, early-30s), FCC is described as a church with a radically inclusive social cause.

At FCC, there is a strong sense of empathy toward other margin groups beyond the LGBTQ community, such as the sex workers in Geylang and Migrant workers from HOME. Making a comparison with mainstream churches in Singapore, Edda Chua told me about how her cell group organized a goodie bag distribution activity for the sex workers at Geylang and brought women from HOME out on a tour in Singapore:

In other normal churches you don't help people whom you think are sinful like people with HIV or prostitutes. But FCC has a very strong social cause. In our cell, we went once to give packs of goodies to girls in geulang where they are trapped in the system and the pimp just gets money out of them. For international Women's day Service, we organized women from HOME and took them out around Singapore to give them a tour. We took them around Kampong Glam. Our Christmas offerings also went to migrant workers from HOME (Edda Chua, Chinese, early-30s)!

At annual events such as the FCC Women's Retreat, lesbians come together to reestablish their bonds with God and each other. At the FCC Women's Retreat, lesbians get the opportunity to affirm each other as welcomed and beloved by God. For instance, in the mornings after worship and prayer, lesbians start of the day with pastor Yun-Li reminding and each other that they are the beloved of God. Lesbians conduct activities and perform a short skit using themes such as *Love, Hope and Life* to remind themselves that in their struggles with their faith and sexuality, they are never abandoned in their journey with God<sup>18</sup>. During events such as the FCC Women's Retreat, lesbians get to

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<sup>18</sup> For example, at sharing sessions, preacher Janet Chan (Chinese, late 30s) would remind lesbians of their relationship with God which are often, forgotten because of all the struggles that lesbians have to go through with their own lesbian or queer identity:



share stories about their own struggles with their sexuality and form close knit bonds with each other. A jocund preacher Paige Lee for instance, shared about how her own “coming out” to her parents has helped her to reconcile her own sexuality with familial life to the group of lesbians.

The experience of showing up and speaking truth to my parents about something very difficult for them and for me but it helped me understand the deep connection between vulnerability and courage. Vulnerability is not just about coming out it is in essential in all our significant relationships if we want them to be meaningful and it is about letting someone we love see us for who we really are (Preacher, Paige Lee, Chinese, early-40s).

In Paige Lee’s life story, narratives of love and vulnerability become key transformative narratives in her ability to reconcile her own lesbian subjectivity with her family. Coming out as lesbian for Paige Lee is not just about establishing her own lesbian visibility and asserting her lesbian subjectivity, but also about establishing meaningful relationships with her family and loved ones through being true her own lesbian self, and hence, vulnerable to rejection.

Outside of FCC cell groups, lesbians and other women who are exploring their sexuality are invited to learn about different ways of interpreting the bible through the Lesbians United For Self Help (LUSH) support group. The LUSH support group meets weekly to discuss a number of issues not limited to the controversial bible verses; same sex partnerships; how to love one’s own gender identity and sexual identity; how to love

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We need to relate to each other not just in ways people tell us so. LGBT people struggle so much with identity that sometimes they forget they are in a loving relationship with God, that God loves you. As an individual, I see myself as God’s beloved. As a community we see each other as God’s beloved. Our imperfections and brokenness, God accepts fully and will enable us to accept the other’s imperfections and brokenness (Preacher, Janet Chan, Chinese, late-30s).

one self and find affirmation and love amongst Others; how to maintain Christian relationships; how to maintain healthy sexual relationships; how to have children and bring up children in a gay family.

At LUSH, lesbians come together to collectively question and reinterpret bible verses. Facilitators guide lesbians through the process reinterpreting bible verses that condemns homosexuality by raising a series of questions about how abomination and sin is interpreted in mainstream churches and what constitutes sexual morality and immorality today.

In Leveticus 18:22, the bible says do not have sex with a man as one does with a woman: that is detestable. In Leveticus 20:13 If a man has sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable. They are to be put to death; their blood will be on their own heads. If so, if people use sex to worship the pagan God, is it still a sin? Must sex only be for procreation? If the intention is for procreation if you are using sex for pleasure, is it a sin? Is Levicitus 18 about lying with a man or is it about sexual misconduct, is it the intention or the act that matters? Is it wrong to be lesbian or wrong to have sex with woman? Is it about straight sex or making love? So if one can be a girl and be celibate is it still a sin? Is it wrong? Why does the bible use the word if a man “iyish” also lie with mankind as he lieth with a woman, both have committed an abomination “tow’ebah? ” What is abomination and why is it disgusting? In the past it was disgusting morally because it was about having sex with someone from a lower class from you, but how about today in today’s context? What comprises of sexual morality and immorality? (Janet Chan, facilitator for LUSH 9).

### 5.7 Young Out Here (YOH)

Young Out Here (YOH) is a mix-gender youth oriented support group, started by Elaine Xu (Chinese, mid 20s) with two other gay-male friends. YOH youths and facilitators meet twice a month for 4-6 hours to conduct YOH Support group sessions to plan, teach, learn and share about how youths can cope better with being LGBTQ in Singapore. YOH engages LGBTQ youths to start deliberating on issues such as: coming out to their families if they are considering coming out to their families; ways to be committed in gay and lesbian relationships; have safe sex; build community bonds amongst LGBTQ peoples in the community. YOH recruits external trainers to run their safe sex workshops:

We teach our girls how to turn a condom into a dental dam, we teach them the effects of STDs on their bodies and we also teach them places like DSC clinic at Jalan Basar where they can go to get tested anonymously (Elaine Xu, Chinese, mid-20s).

The selection process for every run of the YOH support group consists of selecting youths who do not have any gay friends and have very low self confidence to be part of YOH: “Many of these youths we take are teens with very low self confidence, they have no gay friends or no gay development (Elaine Xu, Chinese, mid-20s).”

YOH deploys counselling tools and conducts role playing, scenario playing and validation games to induct youths into developing a positive wholesome gay and lesbian subjectivity: “Using counselling tools, we give youths a structured process for them to think through for themselves what contributes to being LGBT, happiness in life and love. (Elaine Xu, Chinese, early-20s).”

At YOH, youths are also taught to imagine a better future for themselves and the LGBTQ community: “We talk about the immediate future like 6 months after YOH, where do you see yourself, how have you changed as a person (Elaine Xu, Chinese, mid-

20s)?” Seniors from YOH’s previous support group runs would contribute to a “coming out kit” to youths from new support group runs. This “coming out kit” consists of notes of encouragement, plastic toys and gifts that would be passed on to the newer generation of YOH youths as symbols of hope and encouragement. Elaine Xu (Chinese, mid-20s) and her volunteers were very encouraged by letters that YOH seniors wrote to their juniors. She recalls:

“I remember one youth saying courage is the first step to everything. It will get better and we all cried in the hotel room reading it (Elaine Xu, Chinese, mid-20s).”

Senior members of YOH who had previously attended YOH and benefitted from YOH also return to volunteer as facilitators in other YOH support group runs. Mei Yee (Chinese, age 26) for instance attended YOH three years back and returned to YOH to contribute as a facilitator nearly one to two years ago. In my interview with Mei Ee (Chinese, mid-20s), Mei Yee said:

I was a facilitator for Young Out Here for run 4. I think you learn new things while facilitating and there is a constant renewal leadership and help toward others. I find it important to do this because I know that being alone and if you don’t have the right frame of mind to face realities of being LGBTQ, it can be quite damaging (Mei Yee, Chinese, mid-20s).

For many LGBTQ youths and older folks alike, “coming out” as LGBTQ can be a stressful and damaging one where LGBTQ peoples face fears and threats of being disowned, alienated and rejected by their families and friends. As such, for Mei Yee, the lesbian community serves as a crucial safety net for lesbians and LGBTQ peoples (Mei Yee, Chinese, mid 20s). But for Elaine Xu, YOH is more than just a safety net for lesbians. YOH is also a space where LGBTQ youths from different gender, class, race and educational institutions meet to form new friendships and working partnerships with each other.

YOH is a place where kids from all walks of life, LaSelle, NAFA, MDIS, main universities, RGS, neighbourhood schools all come together. I have this Chinese RGS girl who is going to Oxford who came to YOH and became good friends with this Malay-Muslim poly student who is working at Shangri-La and they have decided to conduct a whole YOH support group run by themselves! I was from a circle of SCGS girl friends who went to top local and overseas universities and have lunch at Jones the Grocer, but only through YOH could I ever get to know so many other different people. YOH is like an equalizer (Elaine Xu, Chinese, mid-20s).

Elaine Xu's articulation shows how YOH functions as a support structure that opens up new hybrid spaces for LGBTQ youths from different class, race and educational institutions to meet, learn and work with each other. In other words, self-help and support groups such as YOH act as a meeting point where youths from different socio-economic, ethnic and educational backgrounds come together because to understand their own LGBTQ sexuality together. More importantly, at YOH, LGBTQ youths from different backgrounds are able to come together to build confidence in their own LGBTQ sexual subjectivity and futures. It is through the process of attending YOH that youths are given the chance to discover for themselves new ways of understanding their LGBTQ identities.

#### 5.8 Challenges: Gender, Race and Class inflections in the lesbian community

However, participation in the lesbian community through volunteering at different self-help and support groups require economic, social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 2010) that not all lesbians are able to afford. Some lesbians tell me that they may choose to relay their cultural differences and contestations through their own

intimate circle of friends, rather than through participating in different kinds of volunteerism and activism in the lesbian and LGBTQ community.

Evelyn Tay (Chinese, late-20s) for example, lived for many years in a rented HDB home. Evelyn comes from a neighbourhood school and a family of famous hawkers. Through her life, Evelyn had to wrestle with parental and familial problems at home. She recalls having a difficult time as a child when her parents could not give her school allowances and being forced to work at a young age. Though Evelyn is currently completing her PhD in natural sciences in the National University of Singapore today, she said in a vehement outburst:

I'm the nesting kind, I would rather stay at home than go out. Like I said, women are nursing animals, we sit at home and nest. Sayoni people are quite scary and they are very loud. It's quite scary that what you like about women is their nurturing personal qualities and then you go to these forums and gatherings and everyone is fighting to have a say. I am thankful for all these people who will fight for my rights because they are the ones with the mouth and the resources. But for me, I will live my point through my friends. I will lay my ideas through my friends. Will I put myself out there? No. I preserve my energy to preserve my wealth and to work towards being wealthier because I am the second generation that came out of poverty. So I am not ashamed that I am not interested because of my own personal history. Some lesbian once asked me why didn't I go to the AWARE Saga and I'm like no I didn't. I told her I was not interested in all these and she was like how can you do this? All these people fight for your rights all the time and you just forget about supporting them? It was basically a lecture on how you can be so apathetic. But then, I was already quite involved in FCC and I am the second generation coming out of

poverty, I rather reserve my resources for something else! (Evelyn Tay, Chinese, late-20s).

Evelyn Tay's claim to be someone who "nests at home rather than go out" and her views of lesbians from Sayoni as being loud and scary, deviating from their nurturing gender role demonstrates how lesbians may not contest existing gender stereotypes of women as primary caregivers and nurturers in the home (Heng & Devan, 1996). Gender stereotypes internalized by lesbians discourages lesbians from participating in public forums and discussions on lesbian and LGBTQ related issues that would make lesbians be seen as scary and loud<sup>19</sup>.

Most lesbians who are visibly and actively volunteering and participating in LGBTQ events and activities tend to be well-educated, middle-class, Chinese lesbians who have financial, educational, social and cultural resources to do so. Being lesbian is not in itself a sufficient condition to be an active participant in the community. My informant Evelyn Tay's life story shows that having financial resources and security is often necessary for volunteering and participating in lesbian and LGBTQ events and activities.

In the lesbian community, "rigid, discrete, bounded, non-overlapping and mutually exclusive racial and religious differences in the state's discourse of multiracial and multireligiosity (see Sinha, 2009: p. 103; Goh, 2010; Chua, 2003)" are not translated into a deeper, more substantive intercultural and interracial queer mixing. For example, I observed during fieldwork that there are very few Malay-Muslim peoples in this lesbian

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<sup>19</sup> As activist Kathryn Ang observes: "Women generally feel that politics and being on the frontline is not for them and you have to see this in the context also of a lack of participation in government institutions because they have to deal with sexism and so they have double discrimination, if you are ethnic minority, triple, if you are disabled, quadruple discrimination and so then class just adds another layer (Kathryn Ang, Chinese late-30s)."

community. My interviewee, Adila Mohammed (Malay-Muslim, mid-30s) told me that in the lesbian community, Malay representation is a kind of “tokenism.” Other interviewees like Intan (Malay-Muslim, mid 30s), instructed to me to “come down a few levels” to find Malay-Muslim lesbians.

There is a lot of tokenism that’s why recently whenever I am asked to do something for the community, I’m like are you asking me just because my name has a Mohammed in it? Really? And people will be a bit embarrassed they will be like no lah no lah I asked you because, and I just cut in to say lets talk seriously and be honest, if it is important to have me inside because I am Malay then just say so lah! (Adila Mohammed, Malay, mid-30s).

It is hard to find Malay lesbians in this community but if you come down a few levels and you go to clubs, you’ll see that there are a lot of Malay lesbians.

Higher educated lesbians focus on career and everything else but when I was in poly, I knew Malay lesbians they are all around. I mean as far as you can say our community is secular, race does matter you can see most of the community stick with their own races and in fact my friends and I are one of the few that mix around most races (Intan, Malay-Muslim, mid-30s).

Intan and Adila’s articulations reflect how “racial” categories that crystalized and reified during the colonial and post-colonial period are not transcended and hybridized by lesbians but refracted and reproduced as lines of exclusion within this lesbian community. In Singapore, “race” and socio-economic class status are issues intertwined together as a result of various complex and interrelated cultural, historical and structural reasons. Li (1989) in her seminal work *Malays in Singapore: Culture, Economy and Ideology* notes that pre-1959 for example, in order to become a professional elite, one needs to have an education in English.



However, colonial policy during the late nineteenth and twentieth century restricted the Malay masses access to English education fearing “an over-educated indigenous population (1989: 101).” As a result, Malays were slower in establishing their own educated clerical and professional classes in Singapore (Li, 1989: 102).

During the 1960s-70s, compared to the Chinese, Malay households fared worse economically because of lower female labour force participation rates (Li, 1989: 104). While Chinese females were employable in Chinese-speaking trade and manufacture sector, it was the growth in manufacturing in the multinational sector in the late 1970s that provided mass employment opportunities for Malay women (Li, 1989: 104-105). However, in the subsequent decade, because of the Singapore government’s economic plan, the multinational manufacturing sector will be displaced by high-technology, skill-intensive industries resulting in Malay women retrenchment and redundancies amongst female workers.

Culturally, there are beliefs and practices that tilt the relative economic standing of Malay and Chinese households to the latter. For example, Li (1999) notes that “Malays do not consider wealth to be essential to salvation nor is it proof of holiness or social or moral worth. Muslim businessmen are concerned to avoid infringing religious rules and they try to conduct their businesses in a steady, honest manner, taking few risks and gambles, avoiding debts and bankruptcy. Their strongest motivation to expand their businesses is “pride in their personal achievement and this is weighed against various disadvantages to expansion such as the loss of time to spend on prayer or with the family and some social costs (Li, 1999: 83).”

For Malays to be engaged in an “openly calculative business contract with a spouse, child or sibling” threatens the kinship and the whole Malay relationship basis. Some of these less individualistic and capitalist practices resulted in Malays being outnumbered by the Chinese in formally and informally declared private entrepreneurship (Li, 1989:

107). Further, while Malays were positively favoured by the British colonialists in areas such as the uniformed services, clerical, transport and personal services sectors, the post-independence Singapore government who took over did not renew contracts of Malay uniformed personnels resulting in the decline in Malay incomes during the 1970s (Li, 1989: 108).

While the project of queer theorization and activism is sometimes to blur racial, sexual and gender categories and binaries, in the Singapore context, economic disadvantages accumulated by the Malays since the post-independence period are not transcended, displaced or translated into new forms of kinship and social collaboration in this lesbian community.

The network of community self-help, support and advocacy groups are comprised of career driven and successful middle-class Chinese lesbians to the exclusion of lesbians who are educationally and economically less well off. As Intan observed, in this community, Chinese lesbians often do not mix around with Malay lesbians and the only Malay lesbians who actually participate in community events and activities are often university educated, economically successful Malay lesbians who have gained the cultural competencies of the middle class.

This I argue, poses a limitation to the form of cultural hybridization that cultural theorist Homi Bhabha (1994) argues will reverse the current structures of power in the racial and class histories of Singapore, such that new forms of counter-hegemonic and queer third spaces can emerge in the lesbian community.

## **5.9 Conclusion**

By participating in lesbian self-help, support and advocacy groups, lesbians are empowered to question, reinterpret and relearn both religious and non-religious regimes

of truth about sexuality in their everyday lives, thereby, generating alternative discourses about lesbian subjectivities in Singapore.

Participating in lesbian organizations self-help and support groups allows lesbians to feel that they are not alone but part of a community of people who share a common struggle against social and institutional discrimination and homophobia. Yet as I have shown, while participating in lesbian activities, events and self-help and support groups gives lesbians a space to explore, relearn and rethink their sexuality in safe environments, the lesbian community is still dominantly middle-class and Chinese in composition with very little interracial and interclass mixings.

## **6 Lesbian Activism**

### 6.1 Introduction

Within the lesbian community, lesbian activists mainly from Sayoni, have taken on a more active role in bringing forth issues related to discrimination and censorship to other LGBT groups, the state and regional activist networks. In this chapter, I look at the emergence of lesbian activism and how lesbian activists have changed the trajectories of LGBTQ activism in Singapore. Using fieldwork data and my own experience as a volunteer, I suggest that there is a need to pay attention to the effects of gender and gender differences in LGBTQ activism. I show how lesbian activists use gender values of relationality and care that traditionally keeps women subservient in patriarchy, as values for a queer politics of difference, diversity and inclusivity for all LGBTQ peoples in Singapore.

I also pay attention to the visions and strategies of lesbian activists regarding coming out, human rights and censorship and the discrimination of LGBTQ peoples. In this chapter, I will explore how lesbian activists use transnational activist networks and work with local community groups outside of the LGBTQ community to build support to fight for the human rights and equality of all LGBTQ peoples, and the broader civil-liberties and freedoms of other marginalized groups in Singapore.

### 6.2 The Historical Background of Sayoni

Sayoni is a queer women's group that is started as a result of the lack of representation and visibility of lesbians in the LGBTQ community. The term 'queer' is used by lesbians in Sayoni to represent women who are lesbian, bisexual and transgender

and/or women who are gender non-conforming (queer) in Singapore. In this chapter however, to avoid the confusion of identity labels, I differentiate between ‘lesbians’ to refer to all lesbian, bisexual and queer women and ‘lesbian activists’ to the core group of lesbians in Sayoni who actively organize events, activities and do advocacy work.

Most lesbians in Sayoni are socially well connected, financially well-to-do and/or educated. Lesbians in Sayoni comprise of lawyers, artists, healthcare professionals, financial planners, teachers, lecturers, self-employed entrepreneurs, and students in tertiary institutions. Sayoni was formed to bring lesbians together to empower lesbians to speak up for themselves because during the early 2000s, there was still few organizations in the LGBTQ community who would speak for lesbians and the gay male voice.

As one of the founders Indratan (Indian, mid-20s) says, gay voices often “drown out” voices of lesbian women. Indratan identifies as bisexual. Being trained in law at the National University of Singapore (NUS), Indratan has assisted human rights lawyer M Ravi with the S377A constitutional appeal. During the 2009 AWARE Saga, Indratan was one of the left-liberal voices opposing the Christian takeover of AWARE. Indratan used to organize social gatherings every few months when she was volunteering with Sayoni. One of the key aims of Sayoni for Indratan is to groom lesbians to be leaders and movers in the community through activities and programs such as the Sayoni Summer Camp.

Sayoni is about queer women. Lesbian as opposed to gay men because most activists are gay men they are the louder voice. But Sayoni is just about queer women for women. Sayoni was started out of a whirlwind because this guy started posting odd stuff like lesbian can be cured like a dick when a few of us were on a mailing list. So Jean and Ada responded to him, we met, talked and decided we wanted to set up our own space for women. We aim to get people to be involved in doing their own events, empower them, and give them a sense of leadership, insight and experience of being involved in what we do. Some

lesbians have stepped up as leaders in their own rights leading their own events. 3 years ago we met this girl called Teng who was recovering from a very bad relationship. We helped her out. Recently she started rebuilding her life and in fact, she is the one who started the Sayoni summer camp (Indratan, Indian, mid-20s).

Through programs such as the Sayoni Summer camp, lesbian activists are able to build leadership and confidence in lesbians regarding their own lesbian subjectivity. Sayoni also advocates for the equality in well-being of all individuals regardless of sexual orientation and gender identity by engaging the state. For instance, in 2012, three lesbians from Sayoni met Law Minister K Shanmugam to discuss issues of censorship and the discriminatory policies in terms of employment, housing and family of LGBTQ peoples (Jean Chong, 2012).

The significance of the formation of Sayoni lesbians in the LGBTQ community must be contextualized within the context of the lack of representation and support for lesbians within feminist organizations such as AWARE. Whenever I mentioned AWARE to lesbian activists, a sense of uneasiness and awkwardness usually emerges. While AWARE is formally inclusive of all women's issues, lesbian activists from Sayoni find AWARE "dancing around" the lesbian issue. Another founder of Sayoni, Kathlyn Ang (Chinese, mid-30s) told me:

Post AWARE Saga, fear of lesbians and same-sex relationships seem to have taken root and I know it will take some time for this fear to be outgrown but it seems like no amount of argumentation will get them to overcome their fear. I see AWARE as doing a dance when it comes to lesbians, bisexuals and transgender people. Sometimes it seems to me that AWARE would do this self-check and ask oh is this content too lesbian for the public? After all our talking with them they are still so scared, they do this dance and they can't be more

open. Some of the people in Sayoni are just so frustrated and people tell me why should I still bother... That is the idea of inclusion for AWARE. We let you have this little bit of space and that is supposed to be inclusive. But if you expect them to intervene and take the perspective of sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) issues in their research and advocacy, I don't think they are prepared for it. Their volunteers are not sensitized to SOGI. It does not even occur to them to think about the SOGI perspective so how do you expect them to be inclusive (Kathlyn Ang, Chinese, mid-30s)?

Kathlyn Ang is a very respectable lesbian activist in lesbian community. Lesbians I know look up to Kathlyn Ang as a "community *kakak*." The semantics of this Malay term "kakak" refers to a sisterly character/personality. Being schooled in one of the top schools in Singapore and working as a civil servant, Kathlyn would look out for the mental health of her fellow activists/volunteers, regularly reminding them to lead a healthy and balanced life comprised of having sufficient sleep, nutrients and play. Kathlyn is well versed in the colonial and post-colonial history of Singapore. During our interview, she frequently talks to me about her concerns with regards to class based social problems and human rights related issues in Singapore. She constantly refers to Carl Trocki's work *Paths Not Taken: Political Pluralism in Post-War Singapore* (2008) to talk about the lost socio-political activisms of the 1950s-60s.

For Kathlyn, two issues related to sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) are often sidelined in AWARE. First is the ways in which domestic violence affects lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender peoples. Second is the ways in which institutionalized discrimination works against singles, and its effects on women in same gender relationships. At one of the roundtable discussions on a survey that AWARE had worked on with a local polytechnic on violence against women, activist Kathlyn Ang

recalled (Chinese, mid 30s) raising questions about their survey with reference to violence within same-gender relationships.

In reply, a young AWARE volunteer who was one of the project team members said: “oh yes we didn’t cover mother-daughter relationships, domestic worker employee relationships...” However, it did not strike the young AWARE volunteer that Kathlyn Ang (Chinese, mid-30s) was referring to women who were in same-gender intimate partnerships. To Kathlyn Ang (Chinese, mid-30s), this showed how AWARE did not have the capacity to deal with issues that lesbians bisexuals and transgender people faced.

In 2007, lesbians in Sayoni submitted a separate report on the state’s institutionalized discrimination of lesbians and transgender peoples to the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and argued for the rights of lesbian, bisexual and transgender peoples to be free from the state’s discriminatory policies. In 2008 when AWARE held a seminar on CEDAW, lesbians from Sayoni took part in AWARE’s CEDAW meeting and prepared power point slides to cover perspectives of queer women. After the meeting, activist Kathlyn Ang recalled how members of AWARE looked surprised as if “they were not expecting the in-depth reportage on queer women and it was new to them.”

When AWARE decided to only include one paragraph or an appendix on lesbians, this incurred the wrath of lesbians from Sayoni who felt that their needs were inadequately represented by AWARE, and that they could submit a full separate CEDAW report by themselves. As a result, even though the United Nations would rather NGOs work together to produce one report about women in Singapore, In 2007, AWARE and Sayoni sent separate CEDAW reports. Young Marilynn Ng who is an outspoken student at the National University of Singapore (Chinese, 21, early-20s) volunteering at both Sayoni and AWARE finds this confounding and ironic. She said:



I don't understand because AWARE likes to do the whole intersectionality of discrimination approach. We speak for elderly women, we speak for lower income women, disabled women, women of minority ethnicity but when it comes to LGBT minority, suddenly it just becomes very silent. It's not that AWARE wants to represent mainstream women only but sometimes LGBT is just very controversial to them. Amongst civil society groups AWARE has the most bargaining power. I volunteered for them and worked on the AWARE CEDAW report which did nothing about LGBT women and so Sayoni had to come up with their own report. It's really ironic considering a third of the volunteers in AWARE are LGBT women so I don't really understand. It's not that volunteers in AWARE are homophobic but they just don't want to talk about LGBT and I don't know why they are so scared... Every time I asked a question about LGBT, I don't know why I have this feeling that they were trying to dodge around the issue and no one wants to answer me honestly. I feel like there is no inclusion or conclusion to LGBTs in AWARE. They always say they are busy with other intersections of discrimination (Marilynn Ng, Chinese, early-20s).

There are no full time activists in Singapore like that of Thailand, Cambodia or Vietnam because most lesbians in Singapore have full time jobs and place their careers above activism. Majority of the lesbians in Sayoni volunteer in Sayoni's various committees for varying durations to do research, organize social events, and work on public education. Due to high monthly rental costs, there is no permanent physical space where Sayoni is based. Although having a physical space where Sayoni members can gather can generate stronger and deeper group ties, the wish of having a physical space is often outweighed by the need to ration funds to events, workshops and summer camps. To save costs, lesbian activists meet in their own private homes or cafes.

Being a “full time activist” or a “gay rights activist” is an uncanny occupation to have for lesbians in Sayoni. Few volunteers of Sayoni actually consider themselves as activists or feminists. For those who do activism, the process can be a thankless and painful job which must ultimately be self-oriented and self-motivated. For some lesbians I spoke to, doing activism is to reduce the suffering of other LGBTQs and make life better for future generations (fieldwork memos).

But I have also interviewed those like Lara Chen (Chinese, early-40s), a Sayoni volunteer who feels that activism can be disenchanting. She said to me during my fieldwork: “What’s the point of doing all these! I tried to rope in lesbians but no one actually bothers about rights. What rights? People don’t care! (fieldwork memos). I joined Sayoni because I got conned in! My stand is I support you I am not doing any of the involvement but anything else I will support. I come for events, I will show my face. As a volunteer to do the leg work everything. But if you ask if I am activist? No. That’s my stand. I only started doing logistics and events last year. I told you I got conned in. I only help to make sure the food is catered this kind of thing but then after that people kao peh horrible food (Lara Chen, Chinese, mid 30s)!”

The conception of lesbians in Sayoni within the lesbian community however, remains ambivalent. Most of my interviewees have told me that they are “thankful and respectful” of lesbians in Sayoni who “help to fight for their rights” but they also find lesbians in Sayoni “too loud, conservative, not as fun, serious, somber, boring and argumentative (interview transcripts).”

### 6.3 Local Alliances and Community Projects: Coming Out Coming Home (COuCH)

In 2013, lesbian activists from Sayoni launched a Coming Out Coming Home (COuCH) on couch.sg to encourage the local Singaporean LGBTQ peoples to Come Out,

and allies of LGBTQ peoples to also Come Out in support and celebration of their LGBTQ friends and family members. Coming out stories were recorded through either a video recording or an interview, which is later on transcribed and written up by Sayoni volunteers and published in couch.sg. Through publicity efforts on social media facebook, twitter and couch.sg, autoethnographic stories of LGBTQ peoples can reach a wider audience. Coming Out as LGBTQ has political benefits.

Coming Out will empower LGBTQ peoples to tell their own stories of discrimination and struggles of being LGBTQ in Singapore, so that everyday forms of prejudice and discrimination on the basis of gender and sexuality in the family, at workplaces and in schools can be made manifest and hopefully, tackled and reduced. Public opinions for lesbian activists can be changed only if every LGBTQ person is willing to take a step forward in their own social networks, to come out as LGBTQ.

For example, activist Kathryn Ang (Chinese, late 30s) said: “There is a presidential council for minorities and LGBTQ people should be on that council and so should disabled people but in practice, who sits on the council is very narrow. Minorities are still very narrowly defined even though in fact, there are many kinds of minorities not just sexual orientation or race... As long as people are marginalized in terms of their sexuality, I think sexuality it is a legitimate area of concern. Discrimination is discrimination... Everybody has a social network of 150 to 350 on their facebook so if 1 person knows they are queer or ten persons, that is a lot of awareness and in the long run, public attitudes will change. There is a correlation between how much they know someone and the change in public opinion toward the attitudes of homosexuality in Singapore (Kathlyn Ang, Chinese, late 30s).”

The COuCH campaign is aimed at helping LGBTQ peoples who maybe considering “coming out” to do risk assessment and plan for contingencies in worst case scenarios, since there is always a chance that families of LGBTQ people reject or abandon

them after “coming out.” The main idea of the campaign is to help LGBTQ peoples systematically work through the process of coming out (Kathlyn Ang, Chinese, late 30s). Lesbian activists recognize the risks of Coming Out and understand that Coming Out is contingent on a person’s socio-economic status and “racial” community in Singapore (Kathlyn Ang, Chinese, late 30s). Not everyone can Come Out as LGBTQ with equal ease. For instance, one of my Malay-Muslim interviewees who attends Sayoni events and functions told me during a pre-fieldwork interview:

If my religious leaders know, they might send me for counseling I am sure. They might condemn me regardless of what I say. They probably send me to the psychiatrist. It has never happened to a lesbian but they were trying to reform gay guys. At the mosque nearest to my home, some gay guys were supposed to be reformed. They began regularly going to the mosque again, they found God again and were supposed to go back to the straight path (pre-fieldwork interview, Aatikah Mohammed, Malay-Muslim).

Sayoni’s Coming Out campaign is contentious within the lesbian community. In the instance of Aatikah Mohammed, the political aims of “coming out” both in the public and private domains of everyday life has to contend with the indigenization of the Malay-Muslim identity in Singapore, as exclusive of homosexuality. Malay-Muslim LGBTQ peoples often endure pressures from religious authorities to “reform” LGBTQ peoples. For Aatikah Mohammed, coming out may not be immediately psychologically beneficial and positive to her since “coming out” would attract animosity from her Malay-Muslim community members who go to the same mosque as her.

In addition, the neoliberalization of lesbians mean that most lesbians view Coming Out as personal choice and not a socio-political act for human rights and community solidarity against homophobia in Singapore. The tendency for lesbians to wall and cocoon themselves also makes Sayoni’s “Coming Out” campaign controversial

amongst lesbians simply because Come Out increases the visibility of lesbians and put lesbians in the public spotlight where prejudices and discrimination towards people of a different sexuality is still prevalent. However, for lesbian activists, the risks of Coming Out does not outweigh the psychological benefits of Coming Out as LGBTQ.

Coming out is psychologically beneficial to the person who is doing it themselves not because it benefits us or groups who encourage people to come out but just being able to live without constant fear, anxiety and dissimulation thinking of how to hide, what kind of lies to come up with and then living an ever-growing homophobic web of lies that you have to remember takes a psychological form of stress (Kathlyn Ang, Chinese, late-30s).

In order to broaden bases of solidarity, lesbian activists from Sayoni do collaborative projects beyond the lesbian and LGBTQ community. A case in point is event called *The Vagina Monologues* (TVM). TVM is a reading of Eve Ensler's play adapted and presented by Sayoni in collaboration with gender and arts collective EtiquetteSG to celebrate V-Day Singapore. Originally, V-Day is a global activist movement that aims to end violence against women and girls through organizing creative arts, films, events and campaigns to raise awareness of the violence against women. Through encouraging non-profit organizations and community groups from all around the world to host V-Day events such as the reading of Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues*, global activist social movement V-Day aims to raise awareness of violence against women and girls (V-Day, 2014).

Sayoni's adapted V-Day reading of Eve Ensler's *Vagina Monologues* was aimed at raising funds for Sayoni's events and activities (V-Day Singapore, 2012). But through the celebrating of V-Day, lesbian activists from Sayoni get to raise issues of social diversity, inclusivity, and justice regarding the discrimination of women in Singapore. The *Vagina Monologues* reading organized by Sayoni and EtiquetteSG brought together

sixteen female, active civil society activists and volunteers of different sexual orientations, ethnicities and occupational backgrounds together to raise awareness and eliminate stigma against all minority and margin groups, including disabled and transgender peoples.

The reading was held at The Arts House, a multidisciplinary arts and literary space which was open to all members of the public. Women dressed in white spoke evocatively, dramatically and powerfully. It was interspersed with strong feelings of anger, sorrow, agitation and humor. Women used hand gestures covering their lips, wagging their fingers, punching their fists in the air to demonstrate playfulness and agitation. Three themes stood out.

Firstly, Women's vaginas were interpreted in plural. The Vagina Monologues was a journey of dialogue and discovery of the diversity of vaginas through getting "older women, young women, married women, lesbians, single women, college professors, actors, corporate professionals, sex workers... (vagina monologues script)" to talk about their vaginas in less medical and politically correct ways.

Secondly, women's vaginas were interpreted and read in playful way. In one part of the group reading for example, women's vaginas were relabeled and renamed as "powderbox, poochi, poopi, peepe, poopelu, poonani, pal, piche, coochi, snorcher, cooter, labbe, mongo, mooky, pajama, fannyboo and a mushmellow (vagina monologues transcript)." Thirdly, women's vaginas were also recontextualized in local terminologies as "a appam in Ang Mo Kio, a cheebye is Chua Chu Kang, a duku in Desker, a yoni in Yio Chu Kang, a nonok in Newton [and] a pepek in Punggol (vagina monologues script)."

Toward the end of the reading, women also parodied and mimicked the different kinds of moaning such as "the hokkien moan, the makcik moan, the Bollywood moan, and the Singapore moan (wah! Shiok!) (vagina monologues transcript)." At the final

closing of the Vagina Monologues reading, in a symbolic act of solidarity for various forms of unequal treatment of women in Singapore, all sixteen women stood up from their seats at the center stage and read their “I am rising” message (see Appendix C):

I am rising because my own country treats me like a second-class citizen simply because I'm gay. I am rising because as a transwoman it is often impossible to get a job just because of what we are. I need to have this right to survive to stay alive... Give us jobs! I am rising because I think it is ridiculous that 'Asian values' is still an acceptable reason to subjugate women and gender minorities. I am rising because family should not be defined as one man, one woman and 2.1 children.

The Vagina Monologues demonstrates how lesbians are able to borrow and tap onto global activist movements and transnational flows of knowledge about gender and sexuality, to articulate their own local lesbian sexual subjectivities and visions of diversity and inclusivity. The reading by put together by Sayoni and EtiquetteSG also demonstrates the new kinds of local alliances and solidarities formed by lesbian activists with other non-LGBTQ advocacy groups. By “rising” against heterosexually defined gender and sexual norms and heteronormative structures of the family, defined as “one man, one woman and 2.1 children,” lesbian activists reject heteronormative family values and aim to achieve the inclusion of diverse forms of socio-familial structures and sexual subjectivities in Singapore.

Thus, even though lesbian representation maybe marginalized within feminist social movement organization AWARE, through collaborative work with other activist and arts and civil society groups, lesbian activists are able build support for the acceptance of diversity and equality of all marginalized groups in Singapore.

#### 6.4 Transnational Alliances: ASEAN Sogi Caucus & ILGA-Asia

Through Sayoni's participation in regional ASEAN SOGIE Caucus and other international organizations such as the International Lesbian and Gay Association Asia (ILGA-Asia), lesbian activists are able to gain valuable knowledge and support from activists in the region on how to advocate for LGBTQ rights, and improve the lives of LGBTQ peoples in Singapore. Through the ASEAN SOGIE Caucus network, lesbian activists from Sayoni, together with the other ASEAN SOGIE Caucus LGBT groups are able to support each other to fight for the democratic principles and human rights of LGBTQ peoples at the regional ASEAN level.

For example, when the National Organizing Committee (NOC) of Brunei Darussalam restricted LGBT groups from the discussion and civil society spaces at the ASEAN Civil Society Conference/ASEAN People's Forum 2013, because views about sexual orientation and gender identity, sex work and sexual reproductive health rights, were not aligned with the state's, as part of the ASEAN SOGIE Caucus, lesbian activists from Sayoni issued a statement to Brunei's NOC to depathologize SOGIE, promote psychological well-being of LGBTQs, repeal laws that criminalize SOGI, and establish national mechanisms to review human rights instruments (Sayoni, 2013).

However, transnational activism is not without its obstacles or difficulties. Together with other LGBTQ activists and groups, Singaporean lesbian activists who were at the 4<sup>th</sup> ILGA-Asia conference in Surabaya were threatened by Muslim fundamentalists.

At the ILGA-Asia 2013 conference held in Thailand which I participated as a volunteer with three other Sayoni activists, Singaporean lesbian activists and I had the opportunity to mingle with other activists from the Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Japan, Taiwan and China. As a volunteer-participant, we learnt about how Cambodian LGBT group *RoCK* reached out to Muslim and indigenous LGBTQ peoples in Cambodia to do group projects together, mobilize LGBTQ support through involving the Buddhist monks to do monk blessings, create short films such as



“Inspired by Courage” to portray LGBTs positively, build legal cases when transgenders and lesbians were arrested, and conduct ASEAN Pride Week in Cambodia.

Lesbian activists from Sayoni are strategically more aligned with members from ASEAN SOGIE Caucus and thus, LGBT groups from Southeast Asia rather than East Asia. This is because of both the real and perceived cultural similarities and differences between Singapore and Southeast Asia, and Singapore’s own geo-political position in the region.

ASEAN has a long history and ASEAN is strong and the kind of training and people’s movements they are kind of familiar with people’s culture. The politics are similar. East Asia’s politics are different, the government is very different and the people are very different.... They have nothing similar to us except that our ancestors are from China that is why the PRCs and Chinese Singaporeans can’t really get along. Do not think we share the same ancestors that means we grew up on the same plot of land (Jean Chong, Chinese, early-30s).

Because Singapore is a member of the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR), through the ASEAN SOGIE Caucus, lesbian activists from Sayoni lobbied together with other ASEAN SOGIE Caucus LGBT groups from Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia and the Philippines for the inclusion of SOGI issues in the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration. Attaining the inclusion of SOGI rights at the ASEAN regional level puts pressure on the Singaporean state to review the criminalization of male homosexual activities under colonial penal code S377A and protect the equal rights of all LGBT people in Singapore.

More importantly, participating in ASEAN SOGIE Caucus and ILGA-Asia groups, lesbian activists are able to learn how activists in other regional states advocate their state, train volunteers, build community capacities and solidarity and fight for policy changes. Friendship and support gained through participating in the ASEAN SOGIE

Caucus gives a new boost of confidence to lesbian activists fighting for LGBT equality and Human Rights in Singapore – something which they may not be able to get from the lesbian and gay community.

#### 6.5 Sayoni's inclusivity and diversity orientation

We make a conscious choice at Sayoni to include LGBTQ people and you know it is a strange phenomenon that women will speak for gay men but have you seen any of the gay men speaking up for lesbian women? I hope to be proven wrong. [But] in the closet or out is to be considered seriously. Each of us have to weigh out the consequences of honesty, deception, secrecy and openness for ourselves. In Sayoni I just want to say that we are queer like you and we call out to you to hold the space where LGBTQ people [can come out safely]. My humanity is bound up in yours for we can only be human together (fieldwork memos, Jean Chong in Faith in the Future, 2013). Do you see the LGBT community speaking for women? No. I think we try to include all kinds of women we have straight volunteers Geraldine and Sherry, we include the whole LGBT community I think the women are more progressive than the men. Li Choy said that the lesbian women are always looking for a future and the men is always thinking about gay pride... That's why I don't think pinkdot's display of the gay discourse is right... now they all want to be normal (Jean Chong, Chinese, mid-30s)!

Jean Chong is a more public figure in the lesbian community who recently left Singapore to study Human Rights as a post-graduate Masters in an Australian University. Being one of the founders of Sayoni, Jean is an activist who constantly pushes for the inclusion of lesbian and transgender peoples' welfare and rights in the language of LGBTQ community and activism in Singapore.

At the opening event of Indignation 2013, *Faith in the Future*, when activist Jean Chong told the audience that gay men spoke up very little for lesbian women, no gay men in the panel and audience stood to contest her claim. Gay activism is, to use Duggan's concept, "homonormative (Duggan, 2003)." By homonormative (Duggan, 2003), I refer to gay activism's lack of contestation with heteronormative assumptions of state institutions and how it upholds and sustains patriarchal socio-familial norms in Singapore in legally restrictive conditions where civil-political liberties are limited (Chua, 2012).

In other words, gay activism fights for the inclusion and integration of gay people into mainstream society on the grounds of gay people being 'normal and good citizens,' and the idea that gay people are 'the same' in terms of having families and sharing 'common' family values, rather than the idea of equality in spite of differences (Richardson, 2004: p. 392).

In the aim to be integrated and normalized, gay activism has paid little attention to building deeper coalitions with lesbians and transgender peoples. It has also failed to address how existing oppressive norms, practices, institutions produces heterosexism and homophobia (Boling, 1998). Gay activism's lack of interest in contesting heteronormative gender hierarchies reproduces patriarchal gender politics between men and women to the benefit of gay men in a position of power in the gender hierarchy.

In Singapore, patriarchy mean that men are privileged as protectors and actors of the nation, while women are constantly urged to take on a separate domestic role as reproducers and nurturers (Tan, 2001; (Goldberg, 1987; Purushotam; 1992; Heng & Devan, 1995; Teo, 2009; Teo, 2007; Chan 2007; Kong & Chan, 2007; Tan, 2008; Tan, 2001; Hudson, 2013).

As McClintock, points out, "no nation in the world gives women and men the same access to the rights and resources of the nation-state (McClintock, 1995: p. 353)." Gender argues Strathern (1988), "reaches far beyond relations of men and women to

structure the whole of social relations and events (quoted in Callaway, 1992: p. 34).

Reading gender politics into LGBTQ activism reveals complicities of gay men in sustaining patriarchal gender orders, and shows how lesbian activist use gender traits such as relationality, empathy and care for a queer politics of difference and diversity.

For example, for lesbian activists like Jean Chong as well as others, the well-being and humanity of lesbians are always perceived as relationally “bound up” with gay, bisexual and transgender peoples in the entire LGBTQ community. Lesbian activists are more likely to view the rhetoric of sameness<sup>20</sup> or the desire to integrate into society critically because it may come at the expense of excluding other community groups.

In fact if you see all around the world in Europe and Thailand, the sex worker movement have been great alliances of the LGBT movement. But here, the community sees the sex workers as dragging and pulling them down because the community just wants to be part of society. We create one norm at the expense of everyone else. For me, I see the transgender sex worker cause as part of the LGBT community. I work primarily with transgender people so I see it as completely intrinsic. But when I spoke to a gay man in Pinkdot about challenges the transgender sex worker community face and letting the transgender community join Pinkdot, he told me that we have funders to report back to and they are not gonna like this. Also, he told me that Pinkdot is a family event. At that point, I just blew my top at him! I said this is exactly what straight people do to gay people! Do you not see that!? Do you think transgender people do not have families? That they do not take care of families? When we were having a group discussion elsewhere, someone asked what does the gay community think about the sex worker community and the same guy said the gay community just

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<sup>20</sup> By the rhetoric of sameness, I am referring to the argument that gay people are *just like* or *same as* everyone else.

wants to integrate into mainstream society. So much for celebrating difference  
(Jazlyn Chen, Chinese, late-20s)!

Lesbian activism advocates for the acceptance of difference rather than a straightforward acceptance of the sameness of all sexual subjectivities. Feminist theory tends to draw a distinction between the ‘sameness approach’ that argues for the need to respect the common humanity of every human being as opposed to the ‘differences approach’ that concentrates on the uniqueness and distinctiveness of all identities (Hackett & Haslanger, 2006; Marinucci, 2010; Yeatman, 1993).

However, as a word of caution, it would be wrong to argue that lesbian activists in Sayoni practice a brand of activism that emphasizes differences over sameness of all sexual identities. The mutual exclusivity of the ‘sameness approach’ and the ‘difference approach’ need not necessarily be true.

During my interview with lesbian activist Jean Chong (Chinese, early-30s) for example, I found that the discourse about “sameness” of the LGBTQ peoples who like everyone else in Singapore should be accorded equal human rights, often overlaps with the discourse about the “differences and uniqueness” of LGBT related social problems and sexual identities. Lesbian activist Jean Chong (Chinese, early-30s) recognizes that the LGBTQ community is different. Issues related to bullying, violence, sex, promiscuity and transgender sex workers, are unique to the LGBTQ community in Singapore. It is impossible to overlook these specific problems in the LGBT community and hence, impossible to claim that the LGBTQ community is “same like everyone else.” Yet, this does not mean that lesbians and LGBTQ peoples should not be accorded equal rights and respect like every other Singaporean citizen.

Our community problems are very unique to our community. For instance, we have so many transgender people in sex work, we deal with problems of promiscuity, the sex we have is different, the problems we face are not like those

faced by straight people! I think part of the rhetoric as a community is that I am also like everyone else I am also just a human being and I need to be treated with respect but I am also saying that part of the discourse of the community involves thinking deeper about identity and who we are and not just try to say we are like everyone else. I am saying that we should share the same rights but everyone is different, you and I we are different and it is important to recognize that diversity even among our community and other communities. I am saying that even if you are different, you should be treated with the same rights as everyone else (Jean Chong, Chinese, late-30s).

#### 6.6 Discrimination, Censorship and Human Rights

Sayoni has produced three Sayoni Reports documenting the needs of lesbians in areas of relationship, health, comfort with sexual orientation and gender identity, financial income, coming out to family and friends, and coming out at school and work places. Sayoni's CEDAW Report brought a number of issues not limited to discrimination on the basis of gender expression; censorship in mainstream media; homophobia and bullying in schools; discrimination in sex education curriculum; discrimination at workplaces; unequal human resource policies; lack of maternal benefits as a result of being restricted by marital status; restricted health care and medical rights, discriminatory public housing policies; unequal support for parenting and adoption; prohibition of same-sex unions for women; denial of access to family planning rights to the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.

The aim of the Sayoni's CEDAW Report is to achieve the elimination of social and institutional discrimination of lesbians in Singapore (Kathlyn Ang, Chinese, mid-30s). In the past, the discourse regarding discrimination is often limited to gay men

hinged onto the retention of colonial legal code S377A. However, through Sayoni's efforts at CEDAW, their Human Rights Documentation (HRD) work and focus group discussion interviews to document queer/LGBTQ youth experiences in the families (Sayoni, 2013), lesbian activists have changed the discourse of discrimination from gay men only, to how discrimination affects lesbians and all LGBTQ peoples. The discourse and language of discrimination of lesbians and LGBTQ peoples within the LGBTQ community is thus relatively new. Prior to Sayoni's CEDAW Report, lesbians are often treated as if they were nonexistent and the discrimination against lesbians is assumed to be non-existent.

We need to explain the consequences of discrimination. In 2007, the rhetoric was just gay men are discriminated. But after Sayoni went to pinkdot, it became the whole LGBTQ community is affected. The rhetoric has changed and I credit it to Sayoni because we are able to show that discrimination does affect lesbians, bisexuals, queer women and transgender people other than gay men (Jean Chong, Chinese, early-30s).

When I interviewed lesbian activist Yu Ying (Chinese, mid-30s), her concerns about discrimination and the LGBTQ community is not just hinged on existence of colonial legal code S377A that criminalizes sex between mutually concerning adult men, but rather, the effects of social discrimination toward all gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people. Homophobic discrimination for Yu Ying does not just come from S377A but comes from the family, condemnation from religious groups, work place discrimination and also in terms of gossip behind a lesbian or gay person's back by virtue of her or his gender and sexual nonconformity.

There is a lot of family rejection. Also the LGBT community gets a lot of condemnation and rejection from religious groups. So firstly LGBT people lack support and then they get condemnation from religious groups so that is an

additional stress and in the work environment, stories of discrimination are so common so either you are directly discriminated against or else you're in the closet and you can pass for straight. But there is always a stress about being found out. And for certain people homophobia will be internalized and they will see themselves as inferior. Also if you are visibly lesbian or gay, you know in our Asian society people will start saying all kinds of things behind your back (Yu Ying, Chinese, early-30s).

Lesbian Activists from Sayoni prioritize the effects of censorship on the positive representation of LGBTQ peoples in Singapore and the broader Singapore society as a whole.

I think when we did the CEDAW lobbying, we prioritized censorship because we realized that it is something we have to take out of the legislation. It is not so much that people can't get their information from other media sources. Of course they can but the existence of this policy means something for society as a whole. We recognize the cascading effects of censorship on the representation of LGBTQ people in Singapore. It tells society that the existence of censorship is ok. But we want to make it clear that censorship is not normal and is wrong (Kathlyn Ang, Chinese, early-40s).

For lesbian activists, issues of censorship and discrimination of LGBTQ peoples are more important than marriage equality (Kathlyn Ang, Chinese mid 30s) that most middle-class lesbians in the community, such as Evonne Ong (Chinese, mid-30s) desire:

Marriage gives you a lot of benefits. Sometimes going through the marriage and thinking about going through the marriage makes people reconsider their stance on whether they should divorce their spouse or not. Marriage acts as a glue to glue two people together a lot of old couples right now they stay with each other solely because they are married and not because they love each other right? If



you want to talk about kids, you wanna get IVF and artificial insemination it is so difficult in Singapore unless you have a sham marriage and go and ask for an adoption. So do I want to get married? Definitely. If they give me the marriage entitlement, I will take it and swallow it so hard in their face. I want to get married who doesn't want to get married and have all the priorities that the married couple will have (Evonne Ong, Chinese, mid-20s)?

Lesbian activists from Sayoni however, take a critical stance of global movements toward marriage equality for gays and lesbians. For lesbian activists, most middle-class lesbians in the community have high socio-economic status and value and thus, live in their "little bubble" where it is difficult for them to imagine the importance of human rights or anti-discrimination for other LGBTQ peoples who do not have financial resources or education to "rise above" and "fend off" prejudices and discrimination: "Most lesbians are so comfortable and they think that there is not much discrimination but it is only when people don't have resources or financial abilities that they become very vulnerable (Jean Chong, Chinese, early-30s)."

Lesbian activists however, prioritize the removal of censorship laws in Singapore and the discrimination of LGBTQ peoples in employment over marriage equality of gays and lesbians in Singapore. Removing censorship laws would increase the positive portrayal of lesbians and gays and reduce public forms of prejudices against all LGBT peoples. For lesbian activists, marriage equality should not come at the expense of the more important need to change broader social policies that also discriminates against single peoples who do not follow heterosexual marriage norms. Marriage equality does not address how the homosexual/heterosexual binary is an issue not only to LGBTQ peoples but 'of continuing determinative importance to the lives of people across the spectrum of all sexualities (Sedwick, 1990: p. 8).'

We know the community at large wants marriage equality. But the most pressing thing is issues like censorship and discrimination in employment. We don't want to be asking for marriage equality so that you can have access to all the benefits that married couples have. This does not change the discrimination that single people face whether they are straight or not (Kathlyn Ang, Chinese, mid-30s).

Lesbians activists from Sayoni are aware that the rights-based discourse is controversial in Singapore because Singaporeans are educated and socialized to think that the human rights is not relevant to Singaporeans (Kathlyn Ang, Chinese, mid-30s). When I was doing fieldwork for example, I was told by a lesbian who said to me:

I don't believe in what these lesbians from Sayoni are doing. I mean what are they doing? We are Asians! human rights are the West! I don't believe in human rights. So long as my parents accept me, invite my partner for dinner that is most important for me. Why should I want to state to recognize me or wait for the state to give me my legal rights? What Human Rights? I have worked hard on two legs by myself and I have never relied on anyone to give me anything. I don't believe we need political rights and all that kind of shit, all I need is my family to accept me. Why do you force things down people's throats so aggressively? I don't believe in going to pinkdot or attending these collective movement because why do you need to be so upfront and outright? This is a Western thing. We are Asians, we are not confrontational. So long as our family accepts us, why do we want to antagonize others? I believe that my sexuality is a private thing, I don't need to show it off to others. I know so many women who are gay but they don't show it off to others. Why do I need to tell everyone that I am gay? I don't. We are Asians our family is the most important thing, not political rights (fieldwork memos).

Therefore, it is important to highlight that lesbian activism which plays up advocacy to the state and human rights of LGBTQ peoples, is not popular amongst lesbians because many lesbians have internalized the idea that Asian Values are external to human rights and the human rights discourse is therefore not relevant to Singaporeans who are “Asians.” But for lesbians activists from Sayoni, the rights-based discourse is used as a strategic means to fight for the dignity of every human being regardless of their gender and sexuality in the nation (Jean Chong, Chinese, late-30s).

Human rights is about the dignity of the individual and it is to some extent about empowering every person to speak for themselves and to assert their own right and to seek respect of their rights (Kathlyn Ang, Chinese, mid-30s).

Lesbian activists in Sayoni show active concern towards issues such as the democratization of the social and political climate in Singapore, and the freedom of speech and expression of all Singaporeans. For instance, because Sayoni recognizes that LGBTQ communities and websites do not conform to heterosexual norms in Singapore and exist in an internet space outside of state sanctions, when the Media Development Authority (MDA) changed their licensing frameworks to regulate online news sites that cross the 50 000 visitors threshold (Media Development Authority, 2013), lesbian activists from Sayoni issued a voice of concern:

LGBTQ websites, too, exist in a precarious alternative space. They are allowed to exist, are tolerated but not really acknowledged, somewhat like the queer community here – and lives are constructed in those gaps. So what happens when you redraw the boundaries between what’s allowed and what’s not? What happens to the grey areas in between? As a minority that’s already under existing constraints, we stand to be disproportionately affected by it, and that’s why I hold that we should care about this issue very, very much (Nei, 2013).

Lesbians activists recognize that LGBTQ peoples in Singapore cannot exist freely in Singapore unless there is a broader democratization of the entire socio-political climate. They also recognize that discrimination and discriminatory state policies toward LGBTQ peoples will not change unless all Singaporeans are entitled to the freedom and rights to speech, expression and association (Kathlyn Ang, Chinese, mid 30s). As Kathlyn Ang says:

What we want is the change in policies where there is discrimination and change in policies when it discriminate against queer persons. But this is tied to a lot of other things such as the freedom of expression, freedom of association, rights to education and rights to choose the person whom you want to live with (Kathlyn Ang, Chinese, mid-30s).

## **6.7 Conclusion**

Sayoni's lesbian activism challenges homonormativity and thus, represents the queer frontier of Singapore's lesbian and LGBTQ community. While gay and LGBTQ activism in Singapore does not contest the socio-political status quo, and aim strategically to be normalized and accepted in the Singapore Society, Sayoni's lesbian activism uses gender norms of relationality, empathy, and care which traditionally keeps women subservient in patriarchy as values for a radical queer politics of difference, diversity and inclusivity. Sayoni's approach to Human Rights, the Coming Out Coming Home (COuCH) campaign, The Vagina Monologues reading, the CEDAW reportage aims at empowering and prioritizing the dignity of every individual, and the acceptance of a diversity gender identities and sexual orientations (SOGI).

However, the neoliberalization and privatization of middle-class LGBTQ peoples in the LGBTQ community means that more and more LGBTQ peoples see their

individual fates as separate from the collective welfare of others and thus, see the need for marriage-equality of lesbians and LGBTQ peoples as an end unto itself, rather than a sign of urgency to address broader socio-political structural inequalities of everyday life in Singapore. While Sayoni's lesbian activism is bound up with the greater democratization of Singapore's social and political climate and the welfare of other marginalized community groups, building up community support by getting lesbians interested in a community effort to fight for the human rights of LGBT peoples, socio-cultural equality in treatment in everyday life, and the reduction of prejudice and discrimination against LGBT peoples, Sayoni's visionary aims and projects severely hindered by neoliberalization of lesbians and gay peoples in the LGBTQ community.

## 7 Conclusion

### 7.1 Introduction

The dominant conceptions of a woman in Singapore is to be a heterosexually married mother and wife, who sets up a nuclear family, and takes on caring and nurturing role in the private sphere of the family (Chin & Singam, 2004). Empirical evidences gathered in this study has shown on the contrary, that women are not as compliant, and they can choose to be lesbian. Lesbians are self-determined and active agents of change in the lesbian community. As shown, lesbians actively form their own support groups and challenging heteronormative regimes of truth about sexuality in Singapore.

Choosing to be lesbian is neither easy, nor is it a romantic subject-position of resistance. Choosing to be lesbian is challenging because the subject-position of lesbian goes beyond neo-conservative boundaries of sexual morality, which results in everyday forms of punishments and coercion to turn heterosexual. Embedded within asymmetrical power relations of everyday life, structured by heteronormative regimes of truth, lesbians “engender their own complicities as well as practices of dissent (Mohanty, 2006: p. 16).” However, economically successful and well-educated neoliberal middle-class lesbians who are globally employable, able to travel, book hotels, buy private homes, and go to night-time lesbian clubs are able to use their economic success to put themselves in spaces which transcends (or are exceptions) to heteronormative sexual regimes of truth, where neo-conservative and traditional heterosexual familial norms continue to govern everyday life and sexual conduct.

This study on the lesbian community documents the challenges of choosing to lesbian, charts the trajectories of lesbian community formation, and the practices and visions of lesbian activism within the broader LGBTQ community. By doing so, I

highlight not only the changing roles of womanhood, but also raise broader questions about citizenship, nationhood and belonging in Singapore. Framed within a context-specific inquiry about the lesbian community, I suggest that we can raise several questions such as, who belongs to the nation? What is the role of neoliberalism in constituting new relations between sexuality and citizenship, nationhood and belonging? How has global neoliberal logics opened up new spaces of belonging for lesbians in a heterosexual nation?

### 7.2 Citizenship, Nationhood and Belonging

Referring to the emergent debates about the relations between capitalism, class and sexuality (Binnie, 2011), sexuality and citizenship (Weeks, 1998; Plummer, 2003), and also studies that interrogate citizenship's inclusive promise and exclusionary tendencies (Lister, 2007; Isin 2005) to shed light on this study of the lesbian community in Singapore, a more complex picture of who gets to be considered a citizen and a part of the nation emerges. Bearing the ideals of inclusive citizenship in mind, social citizenship, with its emphasis on the set of practices that define social membership in a society (Turner, 1993; 2008) and Pakulski's (1997) definition of cultural citizenship in terms of 'the right to be "different," to re-value stigmatized identities and to embrace them openly and legitimately hitherto marginalized lifestyles (1997: p. 83)' has theoretical appeal here.

If we take citizenship, in a narrow sense, to refer to practices that define social membership in the nation, or simply as practices that determine one's sense of belonging in a particular nation, the practice of choosing to be lesbian or "being" and "doing" lesbian, simultaneously interpreted as deviant and immoral in the private sphere, framed as a threat to national security and stability in the public sphere, and interpreted as Other

to the nation, exists in an extremely circumscribed and precarious state in the nation polity.

The basis of common membership in a shared community such as the nation (Turner, 1993) where lesbians can equally exist and be represented in the media and popular culture without stigmatization or forceful assimilation (Pakulski, 1997) is undermined not as public discourse dictates, by lesbians (or other non-heterosexuals), but by narrowly framed, neoconservative Asian Values and familial regimes of truth, policed by well-meaning family, friends and religious authorities (chapter 6) and preserved by state campaigns around heterosexual romance, marriage and the family (Lyons, 2004, Hudson, 2013). In post-independence Singapore, citizenship tied to the imaginations of nationhood, is constantly constructed around reproductive heterosexuality, motherhood and the formation of a nation of exclusive nuclear families.

WE, THE people of Singapore, pledge to build strong and happy families. We affirm the commitment of marriage between husband and wife. And take responsibility to nurture our children, and respect our elders. We celebrate and honour the roles of each family member. And uphold the family as the foundation of our lives, and the building block of our society (The Family Pledge, National Family Council, 2013).

At one level, the sexualization of citizenship (Richardson, 1998) as exclusively heterosexual, undermines values of inclusive citizenship (Lister, 2004) articulated in terms of the fair treatment of people (justice), recognition and respect of differences (recognition), ability to exercise a degree of control over sexual and intimate lives (self-determination), and the capacity to identify and act in unity with others in claims to justice and recognition in the broader nation polity (solidarity). At the level of everyday life, the sexualization of citizenship implies an automatic othering and exclusion of lesbian intimate relationships and the lesbian community from society.



However, when we take into account the effects of neoliberal modernization, when citizenship is sexualized, values of inclusivity and equal treatment in the nation-polity are not totally suspended or deflected away when it comes to lesbian subjectivities. Rather, values of inclusivity become negotiated on a contingent basis through neoliberal market logics, which establishes economically productive middle-class lesbians as valued neoliberal exceptions in the nation polity.

### 7.3 Middle-class lesbians as neoliberal exceptions

As mentioned, neoliberalism argues Ong (2006) is a “specific kind of progressive modernization” which relies on the market rather than the state to distribute public resources (Ong, 2006: 11). It is based on a return to principles of “economic efficiency and ethical self-responsibility” and an individualism that is “‘competitive,’ ‘possessive’ and construed often in the terms of the doctrine of consumer sovereignty (Ong, 2006: p. 11).” Ong argues that “the neoliberal exception gives value to calculative practices and self-governing subjects as preferred citizens” while, “other segments of the population are excepted from neoliberal criteria and thus rendered excludable as citizens and subjects (2006: p. 16).” The concept of “exception” or “neoliberalism as exception” is deployed by Ong (2006) in a broader sense, as “a positive decision to include selected populations and spaces as targets of calculative choices and value-orientation associated with neoliberal reform (2006: p. 5).”

Ong’s argues that subjects who are able to rearticulate their discursive practices and claims in neoliberal market rationalities, as economically competitive and efficient living resources that can be harnessed and managed by governing regimes (2006: p. 6), can open up new forms of inclusion and citizenship rights for themselves.

Using similar neoliberal market logics, my study on the lesbian community has shown that, lesbians who are able to rearticulate their personal worth in neoliberal middle-class values and market criteria, are able to disarticulate meanings of sexual immorality, and establish themselves as neoliberal exceptions to neo-conservative heteronormative sexual regimes of truth. In a socio-cultural environment with high class consciousness and where neoliberal middle-class values are central to everyday familial life (Teo, 2010), lesbians learn that in order to transcend or except themselves from negative judgment and corrective penalties, as a result of choosing to be lesbian, they have to be economically successful.

As Binnie, (2011) & Heaphy, (2011) argues, class has a normative effect in shaping how people perceive what are desirable and practices, ways of life, objects and behaviour. Middle-class lesbians as my fieldwork data reveals, are often complicit with neoliberal capitalist market principles valued by the society and the neoliberal middle-class family, because obtaining a higher class status, taking the form of economic and educational success, compensates for their sexual abnormality in a global neoliberal capitalist state. Following global trends in gay and lesbian politics (observed by Warner, 1995, Bawyer, 1993; Sullivan, 1995), middle-class lesbians in Singapore do not deviate far from mainstream heterosexual aspirations and lifestyles.

Lesbians desire to lead a respectable, private and normal heterosexual familial lives and hope to one day be “be recognized and accepted as ‘good sexual citizens (Richardson, 2008).’” Desires and aspirations of middle-class lesbians and reflect what Duggan calls ‘the new homonormativity (1995: 190)’ where lesbians claims to freedom and equality increasingly means, access to marriage institutions, equality in access to public housing, reproductive technologies and domestic privacy as end goals in themselves.

#### 7.4 The problem with middle-class lesbians as homonormative neoliberal exceptions

Because of homophobia, the lesbian community is still separated from the broader heterosexual population as evinced by the use of metaphors such as the “wall” and “cocoon” by lesbians. Lesbians in the community still face rampant problems related to internalized homophobia, self-denial and self-rejection as a result of what Young (1990) would call, cultural imperialism: “to experience cultural imperialism means to experience how the dominant meanings of a society render the particular perspective of one’s own group invisible at the same time as they stereotype one’s group and mark it out as the Other (1990: p. 58).” Groups that face cultural imperialism experience “oneself as invisible at the same that one is marked out as different” and experience the dominant culture imposing “on the oppressed group its experience and interpretation of social life (1990: p. 60).”

Cultural imperialism of lesbians (and other non-heterosexuals) in the LGBTQ community takes the form of censorship of positive portrayals of lesbians (chapter 8) and corrective penalties and harassments from their family members, relatives and friends to help lesbians “turn heterosexual (chapter 6).” This injects a heightened sense of separation and difference amongst lesbians which as many studies other have shown, causes low self-esteem, increased internalized homophobia and other related mental health problems such as anxiety and depression amongst the LGBTQ peoples (Jordan & Deluty, 1998; Szymanski & Chung, 2001; Peterson & Gerrity, 2006).

When middle-class lesbians adopt neoliberal lines of flight, socio-structural conditions of everyday life, disrespectful to gender and sexual diversity, are not transformed, but obfuscated. While one can validly argue that lesbians and gays should have the choice of marriage, fighting for lesbian marriage as an end goal in itself, would reinforce dominant heterosexual conceptions of the familial and intimate life, as a

normatively better way of life (Richardson, 2004, Sedgwick, 1990), to the continuous exclusion of a diversity of familial or intimate possibilities of doing everyday life.

As my fieldwork data has shown, the heterosexual family is an exclusive and oppressive site where neoliberal class boundaries and patriarchal gender and sexual norms are policed and reproduced. Achieving marriage equality will not challenge the oppressive and exclusive heterosexual familial norms in Singapore but rather, as pointed out by writers such as Plummer (1995), Butler (2004), Richardson (2004), and Ferguson (2007), “will co-opt us into supporting an institution of marriage that will continue to oppress women” and “create a new hierarchy of socially acceptable gay marrieds versus the queer abjected Others, whose chosen kin and sexual practices,” falling outside of new standards of normativity, “will continue to be despised (2007: p. 48).”

Secondly, the structuring of the private/public divide where women’s role, circumscribed to the private sphere, associated with the “family,” has made women’s participation in the public sphere and formal politics difficult (Okin, 2000, Walby, 1994; Mohanty, 1997; Miles, 2001). In post-independence Singapore, because of the privatization of homosexuality, the public sphere has been able to be heterosexual (Goh, 2014). However, whilst lesbians are constituted as belonging to the private sphere and said to be “free and entitled to lead their private lives (PM Lee, 2006),” as my fieldwork data has shown, this is a largely a myth because the private sphere, associated with spaces of home and family life, are exclusively heterosexual spaces (Richardson, 1998: p. 90), resulting in the continued double exclusion of lesbians from both private and public life.

So, while middle-class neoliberal lesbians have the financial means to transcend heteronormative sexual regimes and reintegrate themselves as respectable neoliberal citizen-subjects, the heterosexualization of the private and public sphere, producing oppressive social conditions for other non-heteronormative citizens are not transformed, but obfuscated.

### 7.5 The Inclusive Visions of Lesbian Activism

In order to build bases of solidarity, lesbian activists actively form local alliances with groups such as EtiquetteSG and, transnational alliances with other LGBTQ groups from ASEAN SOGIE Caucus and ILGA-Asia, to fight for the human rights of lesbians and LGBTQ peoples in Singapore. Traditional gender traits such as the caring and relational qualities of women which in the past made women compliant nurturers in the private sphere, are used by lesbian activists, as important qualities for a queer and radical politics of inclusivity, diversity and difference. In lesbian activism, the “politics of assimilation and sameness” is replaced by a “politics of solidarity in difference (Lister, 2004),” which is inclusive of other marginalized groups such as the transgender peoples, singles, and other queer and lesbian subjects.

For lesbian activists, the sexualization of citizenship does not signal a drive toward integration or assimilation but rather, the need for a broader democratization of the socio-political climate in post-independence Singapore, so that the LGBTQ community can live in a more inclusive society that respects differences in SOGI. Human rights as a strategy is used by lesbian activists, as a means to reinscribe equal ethical and moral worth of LGBTQ peoples into the nation. Also, human rights, insofar as “they are extrapolitical or supersocietal rights which have legitimacy beyond the state,” are also “crucial in providing normative grounds (Turner, 1993: p. 182)” on which LGBTQ peoples can be protected against everyday forms of corrective penalties and punishments, which are justified by neo-conservative sexual regimes of truth (see Chapter 6).

### 7.6 Conclusion

Lesbians and the lesbian community are not romantic subjects of resistance (Ortner, 2005) against heteronormative ideologies, neoliberal market logics or global capitalism (Mohanty, 2006). The lesbian community inflected by and complicit with neoliberal market rationalities, makes issues of cultural or symbolic injustices, rooted in patterns of misrepresentation, interpretation and communication or what Young (2006) calls, “cultural imperialism,” separated from those rooted in the economic structure that arise as a result of, socioeconomic maldistribution (Fraser, 1995: p. 71-75). The implication of middle-class politics in sexuality means that lesbians complicit with global capitalism, need not necessarily see cultural injustices as linked to redistributive remedies that require changes in the political economy.

With the neoliberalization of lesbians in the lesbian community, “injustices of misrecognition requiring remedies of recognition” are separated from “injustices of class,” requiring remedies rooted in changes in the political-economic structure that generates economic marginalization and exploitation (Fraser, 1995: p. 78). At the level of everyday life in the lesbian community, this also means that lesbian friendships, partnership and intimacies formed within the lesbian community, would reproduce middle-class partnerships, rather than subvert or create new kinds of queer lesbian hybridities, which transcend socio-economic class fault-lines.

Lesbians therefore, using Mohanty’s words (2006: p. 13) “engender their own complicities as well as practices of dissent.” Lesbians who are co-opted into and complicit with neoliberal market logics, may secure some degree of private freedom, and have homonormative desires to be given equal access to marriage institutions, public housing, reproductive technologies and domestic privacy. But neoliberal market logics, we must be reminded, have carved out for lesbians, entrances into equal citizenship and nationhood (Ong, 2006) without subverting heterosexist ideologies or opening up pockets of space for gender and sexual diversity.

In addition, within the dominant framework of neoliberal market logics which puts a premium on economic productivity, and works best in stable political conservatism, lesbian activists who advocate for human rights in the community, are viewed as too aggressive, scary, loud and radical. Therefore, while the lesbian community is a space where lesbians can “come out” openly, share sexual stories (Plummer, 2003) and form important friendship and kinship networks that will resist pressures to conform to heteronormativity, there are emergent disjunctions that are not just between the lesbians, the LGBTQ community and the nation, but also between lesbian activists and neoliberalized lesbians in the community who increasingly share separate visions of a good life.

The way toward a more inclusive and diverse society, is not through integrating into pre-existing standards of neoconservative normality, but to act against neoliberal tendencies by building new kinds of local alliances or community solidarities and friendships across class and racial fault-lines, to continually question the normalization and codification of neo-conservative regimes of truth about sexuality and nuclear family formation, and to critique all forms of reifying, essentializing and exclusionary tendencies of citizenship and nationhood.

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## **Appendix A**

### Interview Questions

#### Coming out

1. How did you come to know about your own sexuality? When did you come out as lesbian?
2. Do you think it is necessary to come out?
3. Did you come out at work to any of your colleagues or bosses? Why or why not?
4. What were some of your parents/extended relatives reactions to your coming out?
5. What were some of your friends reactions to your coming out?
6. What were some of your religious leaders reactions to your coming out?
7. What were some of your parents reactions to bringing your partners home?
8. Were there particular challenges you faced coming out?
9. How did you cope with them?
10. What are some of your partner's family reactions when you go to her home?  
What are some of the things they said or do?
11. What are some of your own family's reactions when you bring your partner to your home? What are some of the things they said or do?

#### Community

1. How did you get to know about the lesbian community?
2. What was the lesbian community like in the past?

3. Can you describe some of the activities, events and support groups you have participated in?
4. What are some of the reasons as to why you participated in these activities, events and support groups?
5. How do you think being in the community has helped you cope with coming out and being lesbian?

*Sayoni*

1. How did you come to join Sayoni?
2. What are some of the activities and events organized by Sayoni? Could you elaborate on them?
3. What are some of the things you have done as part of Sayoni?
4. Do you think Sayoni has helped you with coming out and coping with being lesbian in Singapore? What are some of the ways in which Sayoni has helped you?
5. Did you participate in the Sayoni Summer Camp? What were some of the issues discussed and activities at the Sayoni Summer Camp?
6. What do you think about activism?
7. Do you consider yourself an activist in the community?

*FCC*

8. How did you learn about FCC?
9. How long have you been at FCC?
10. How is FCC different from mainstream churches?
11. Can you describe what are some of the cell groups and activities you have participated in at FCC?
12. How do you think FCC has helped you learn or reconcile with your sexuality?  
What was particularly helpful?

*YOH*

13. When did you start Young Out Here?
14. What were the motivations for starting Young Out Here?
15. How long are each session?
16. What are some of Young Out Here's activities and events during each support group sessions?
17. How did participants feel about Young Out Here? What were some of their reactions and thoughts they had after participating in Young Out Here's support group?
18. What kind of participants does Young Out Here recruit?
19. How have some of them given back to Young Out Here?

#### Others

1. Do you think marriage equality is important? Do you want to get married in Singapore?
2. Would you consider having children in Singapore?
3. Would you consider migrating out of Singapore in the near future?
4. Have you gone for any gay pride or visited any gay clubs and cities around the world?

#### Questions to Lesbian Activists

1. Why do you do activism work?
2. I observed that lesbians more invisible and gay men more assertive. Do you think this observation resonates with you?
3. What kind of discriminations do lesbians face in their everyday life?

4. How is Sayoni's relations with other LGBT groups internationally and with groups in Malaysia?
5. What do you learn from joining the International Lesbian and Gay Organization? (ILGA)
6. What motivated you to do CEDAW?
7. Why does Sayoni use the discourse of Human Rights? What is the importance of Human Rights for lesbians and LGBT peoples in Singapore?
8. What are some of the challenges of using the Human Rights discourse in Singapore?
9. What do you think about marriage equality for lesbians and LGBT community?
10. What do you think about regulations regarding censorship in Singapore? How does it affect lesbians and the LGBT community?
11. Is having an anti-discrimination law for LGBT peoples important?
12. In what ways do you think Sayoni has contributed to the LGBT community?
13. Did you collaborate with any of the feminist organizations in Singapore such as AWARE or SCWO?
14. How has AWARE dealt with same-gender issues or issues related to lesbians?
15. Are lesbians excluded from the broader feminist movement in Singapore?
16. What are some of the challenges you think the community face regarding the health and mental health of LGBT peoples?
17. What do you think about singles and transgender peoples?
18. Do you see the transgender sex worker community as part of LGBT community?
19. What are some of the challenges that older lesbians in their 40s, 50s, and 60s face?
20. What do you hope to see changed in Singapore?
21. Is gender and sexuality a key area of concern for the Singapore in the future?

22. Do you think that the family is one of a key sites where LGBT peoples face discrimination?
23. Is it important for LGBT peoples to Come Out? What are some of the importance of coming out?

## Appendix B

### List and profile of Interviewees

**N (Total Interviewees) = 47**

(Pseudo) Name	Age Range	Ethnicity	Industry
1) Ying Li	Mid-30s	Chinese	Teaching
2) Agnus Lee	Late-40s	Chinese	Banking
3) Zubaidah	Early-30s	Malay	Research
4) Katy Tan	Late-30s	Chinese	Teaching
5) Edda Chua	Mid-30s	Chinese	Research
6) Aatikah Mohammed	Mid-30s	Malay	Events Management
7) Taralene	Late-40s	Other	Research
8) Edna Ang	Early-30s	Chinese	Finance
9) Hui Min	Early-30s	Chinese	Teaching
10) Yuan Mei	Early-30s	Chinese	Freelance
11) Sabina Wong	Mid-30s	Chinese	Media & Publishing
12) Madelene Chua	Mid-30s	Chinese	Health
13) Yu ying	Early-40s	Chinese	Finance
14) Paige Lee	Late-30s	Chinese	Freelance
15) Intan	Mid-30s	Malay	Teaching
16) Qing Ni	Mid-30s	Chinese	Teaching
17) Ying Yi	Early-40s	Chinese	Teaching (Tertiary)

18) Kimberly Ng	Early-30s	Chinese	Finance
19) Kaley	Mid-40s	Chinese	Freelance
20) Kit Chen	Late-30s	Chinese	Freelance
21) Cindy Tan	Early-40s	Chinese	Hotel & Services
22) Candice	Early-30s	Chinese	Teaching
23) Tahira	Early-30s	Other	Writer
24) Ellis Chen	Mid-20s	Chinese	Teaching
25) Ada Tan	Late-20s	Chinese	Health
26) Marilyn Ng	Early-20s	Chinese	Student (Undergraduate)
27) Jazlyn Chen	Mid-20s	Chinese	Activist
28) Jeraldine Tan	Mid-20s	Chinese	Media
29) Adila Mohammed	Early-30s	Malay	Teaching
30) Tiffany Tan	Early-20s	Chinese	Student (Undergraduate)
31) Theresa	Mid-30s	Chinese	Finance
32) Diane Wong	Early-30s	Chinese	Administration (Tertiary)
33) Lara Chen	Late-30s	Chinese	Finance
34) Eva Tan	Early-40s	Chinese	Freelance
35) Evelyn Tay	Late-20s	Chinese	Student (Graduate)
36) Evonne Ong	Mid-20s	Chinese	Finance
37) Mei Chen	Early-30s	Chinese	Finance
38) Janet Chan	Mid-30s	Chinese	Electronics



39) Jane Yue	Early-30s	Chinese	Teaching (Tertiary)
40) Jillian Berry	Mid-20s	Chinese	Law
41) Hui An	Late-20s	Chinese	Research
42) Kathryn Ang	Late-30s	Chinese	Health (Activist)
43) Jean Chong	Early-40s	Chinese	Freelance (Activist)
44) Indratan	Mid-20s	Indian	Lawyer (Activist)
45) Mei Yee	Mid-20s	Chinese	Teaching
46) Elaine Xu	Mid-20s	Chinese	Finance
47) Wen Ting	Late-30s	Chinese	Finance

## Appendix C

### The Vagina Monologues Transcript: I am Rising

*I am rising because I feel more women should love themselves warts wrinkles and all.*

*I am rising because my own country treats me like a second-class citizen simply because I'm gay.*

*I am rising because as a transwoman it is often impossible to get a job just because of what we are. I need to have this right to survive to stay alive... Give us jobs!*

*I am rising because it's still acceptable to hide behind religion to persecute on the basis of gender and sexuality.*

*I am rising because I think it is ridiculous that 'Asian values' is still an acceptable reason to subjugate women and gender minorities.*

*I am rising because if I cannot have safe and consensual sex without being stigmatized, criminalized, shamed and discriminated against, then it is not my revolution.*

*I am rising because I think it is time we stop living our lives and judging others based on gender stereotypes.*

*I am rising because family should not be defined as one man, one woman and 2.1 children.*

*I am rising because I'm tired of this neutral and sanitised talk about gender equality and sex discrimination. It's time we call a spade a spade and talk about women's rights.*

*I am rising because we are still unable to recognise the right of an individual to an honest life free from censure. I am rising because there are still women enslaved in our homes deprived of their dignity and full expression.*

*I am rising because as a queer woman, I am still on the receiving end of, "Let me help you get used to cock."*

*I'm rising because the revolution is real. And it's gonna be fuckin' fabulous. I'm rising because I'm here.*

*I'm rising because there's no freedom till we're all equal.*

*I am rising because I am tired of the false idea that women with disabilities are unfit to be mothers, wives, lovers and most of all, contributing members of society.*

*We are rising because there is still so much work to be done.*

*We are rising because the world will not change until we do.*



