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Commentary

Contentment or Containment? Consumption and the Lesbian and Gay Community in Singapore

(Singapore Studies)

International coverage of this year's National Day celebrations and of Lee Hsien Loong's assumption of the premiership was almost outshone by news of a very different social (and some may argue political) ritual: the fourth annual gay and lesbian dance party Nation 04.

Monday, 25 October 2004

by Andrew Lek and Simon Obendorf

Melbourne's *Age* newspaper proclaimed it's case of kick up your heels in Singapore, the new mecca for Asia's pink dollar? (14 August 2004) while the Reuters agency reported that 6000 people turned out for a festival of international DJs, podium dancers, pumping music and packed dance floors?. (8 August 2004).

Elsewhere, media reports on the second PM Lee's policy platform drew parallels between the greater visibility of gay and lesbian Singaporeans and the installation of the new administration as evidence of social and political liberalization. From London, the *Independent's* analysis of the political handover proceeded under the headline of 'Gum, gays and gambling?' (26 August 2004).

Certainly observers of contemporary Singapore would have noticed the emergence of a sophisticated and self-confident community of gay and lesbian consumers. Services and products, some specifically designed for a gay and lesbian clientele, others referencing broader modes of Singapore consumption such as the 5 Cs (car, condominium, credit card, cash and country club) are enthusiastically consumed by Singapore's gays and lesbians.

Singaporean advertisers increasingly utilise globally circulating symbols and linguistic terms such as Pride, the rainbow flag, the pink triangle, as well as locally signified markers like the phrase People Like Us (?PLU?) to target gay men and lesbians.

This heightened visibility has also been reflected in Singapore's arts scene, with commentators Heng and Devan describing Singapore's artistic community as 'obsessed with things sexual in the arts?.

In recent years there has been an explosion in the numbers of homosexually themed plays being brought to the Singapore stage. Singaporean playwrights and theatrical practitioners appear to have carved out a niche for a visible, political theatre directed to exploring issues faced by sexual minorities. (An incomplete list of such plays would include *Asian Boys Volume 1*, *Asian Boys Volume 2*, *Mardi Gras*, *Top or Bottom*, *Abuse Suxxx!!!*, *Invitation to Treat*, *Mergers and Accusations*, *Wills and Secession*, *Crystal Boys II*, *Beautiful Thing*, *Rent*, *The Wedding Banquet*, *Bent*, *M Butterfly* and *Shakespeare's R & J*). Similarly, homosexual themes have been explored in other art forms in Singapore such as the cinema and the visual arts.

These factors seem to contradict the conventional image of Singapore as a strait-laced nanny state marked by social and political control. How, then, should we explain both the

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increased visibility of a gay and lesbian community organised around modes of consumption and an increased visibility of the gay and lesbian community and its political issues in Singapore's art scene?

Part of the answer, it seems, lies in the very aspirations of the Singapore government to present Singapore as a global hub for the arts and a cosmopolitan, diverse and exciting tourist and cultural destination. A thriving gay and lesbian consumer culture and both homegrown and international arts projects referencing homosexual themes can act as markers of Singapore's cosmopolitanism, sophistication and urban chic.

More significantly, given the superb economic credentials of successive Singaporean administrations, both homosexuality and the arts have been figured in public discourse as economically useful to a 21st century Singaporean economy. The Renaissance City report specifically sees a vibrant arts scene in Singapore as contributing to worker creativity, to attracting tourists and above all to the national bottom line.

Recent comments by senior government leaders indicate that the Singapore government is aware of, and attempting to manage, gay and lesbian communities in Singapore. It was recently announced that the Singapore civil service would hire gay men and lesbians, provided that they were open about their sexual orientation.

Lee Kuan Yew has signalled an approach that suggests that provided there are no attempts to craft a politically active gay and lesbian community aimed at achieving political rights or social recognition that the government will not harass or impinge on gay and lesbian events, consumption practises or venues.

Senior government figures as well as social commentators seem to be of the opinion that attracting gay and lesbian foreign talent and nurturing a local, creative homosexual community is both desirable and economically prudent. One commentator described liberalising Singapore's attitudes to, and regulation of, homosexuality as being 'not about gay rights' [but] about economic survival' (*Straits Times* 9 July 2003).

Other reports have focussed on the so-called pink dollar, highlighting the amount spent by visiting gay and lesbian tourists or by local homosexuals (*Straits Times* 17 August 2003) while the gay and lesbian community has justified its contribution to Singapore's economy by stating that the latest *Nation* party was worth 10 million dollars in tourism revenue (www.fridae.com).

While these developments appear progressive and seem to hold significant promise for both gay and lesbian Singaporeans and gay and lesbian residents, workers and visitors to Singapore, the reality is more nuanced. Section 377 of Singapore's penal code continues to outlaw consensual male homosexual and there appears to be no governmental intention to alter this situation. Even the statement by then-PM Goh that gays and lesbians would be employed in the civil service was given with the proviso that such individuals would have to self-identify as gay or lesbian, and admit to what arguably would amount to criminal behaviour.

The considerable public protest from ethnic and religious groups over perceived liberalisation on issues of sexual morality has been met with regular statements from government leaders stressing the conservatism of Singapore society over issues of homosexuality and assuring citizens that the views of the majority of society will continue to direct policy making in this area.

Thus, the Singapore government's tolerance of homosexual communities and gay and lesbian visibility in Singapore is both strategic and limited. Most notably, while tolerating gay and lesbian consumption and forms of artistic representation, together with homosexual subcultures' contributions to national economic objectives, the government seems prepared to intervene to prevent the formation of a political gay and lesbian community or to prevent social organisation in the cause of arguing for gay and lesbian rights.

The lobby group People Like Us has repeatedly been denied registration as a society by the Registrar of Societies on the basis of the conservatism of mainstream moral values of Singaporeans. Similarly, censorship authorities recently banned the Taiwanese gay film *Formula 17* on the basis that it promoted a homosexual utopia. The Media Communications Authority has also recently questioned the free street magazine *Manazine* for its homosexual content and for seeming to 'promote homosexuality as a lifestyle' (*Straits Times* 28 August 2004).

What then are lessons that can be drawn from the current situation facing gay and lesbian communities in Singapore?

It appears that there has emerged a strong culture of contentment on the part of Singaporean gay men and lesbians. A strongly controlled political and social culture combined with limited liberalisation and a *de facto* if not *de jure* tolerance of same-sex sexual acts in private between consenting adults has made both individual risk and social organisation to the ends of legal and social reform less, not more, likely.

In the absence of overt oppression (legal, civil or governmental) there are few rallying points around which to develop a political consciousness or community aimed at political and social reform. And it seems that there are dangers in the continuing attempt to connect gay and lesbian rights, consumption and visibility with economic growth and national strategies of international legitimacy.

Gay men and lesbians in Singapore appear content to prioritise availability of consumer goods and services, lifestyle comfort and the availability of artistic representations over civil and political rights and social/political change. Contentment here acts as a powerful strategy of political and social containment of gays and lesbians who continue exist under the shadow of governmental erasure, censorship and oppression.

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