Lost Futures, Screens, and Stars: Exploring Fantasy-production in Southeast Asian Short Stories

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Abstract

The threads of abandonment, suffering, and desire connect the characters in "Old Movies" by Ian Casocot and "The King of Caldecott Hill" by Amanda Lee Koe. The television screen acts as a fantasy space for these lost characters to project their fantasies and form desires for companionship against an indifferent and globalizing society. These fantasies, while an escape from the world and their afflictions to abandonment, also reveal a deeper connection with the work of dreams produced in their respective nations. To explore these connections, this study echoes Neferti Tadiar's fantasy-production to analyze whether 'the global order of dreamwork' pervades fiction and affects the ways of dreaming held by literary characters. This study contends that the dreams of fictional characters, specifically, the way their fantasies are constructed, are symptomatic of the kinds of imagination (re) produced to construct the Philippines and Singapore as nations. Moreover, the (television or wide) screens and their star figures function as a site of national and personal fantasy construction, leading to discord between political and economic dreamwork and personal dreams. In the Philippines, the fantasy of an American rescue haunts the character's chance of a beautiful life. In Singapore, the fantasy of legitimacy is brought by a reckoning with a conflicted existence, reflecting the country's narrative of survival. These stories reveal that the fantasy and desire of the characters reflect the project of creating the nation while simultaneously confronting its readers with the kinds of living administered by these imaginations.

Keywords

Fantasy-production, literary criticism, Philippine short story, Singapore short story, national imagination

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Abandonment, suffering, and desire thread the stories of Ian Rosales Casocot (Philippines) and Amanda Lee Koe (Singapore). These brief narratives of life in contemporary Southeast Asia reveal the entrenched aftereffects of their colonial history in the confined spaces of the family home and its television screen. For the lost characters in these stories, the screen acts as a tool for psychic survival. Screens also transform desires for companionship into fantasies for the movie or television stars. However, while fantasies seem autonomous and self-conceived, these imaginations are shaped and limited by "the international order of political and economic dreamwork" (Tadiar 5). Critical theorist Neferti Tadiar coins this dreamwork as fantasy-production, positing imagination as a form of work sponsoring the interests of global capitalism. Given that imaginations are not arbitrary, this study inquires whether these logics govern literary renderings of dreams and desires. Since literature allows a more imaginative and perhaps freer way of dreaming, could narrative dreams also be subjected to fantasy-production? More importantly, in analyzing narrative dreams through this lens, what is revealed to its readers about how dreamwork operates in the inner workings of our lives?

This essay explores the connections between narrative dreams and the real national imaginaries of the countries where the stories occur to uncover how entrenched fantasy-productions are in literature. It posits that the dreams, or fantasies, of literary characters are also shaped by the fantasy-productions of their nations. Echoing Tadiar's focus on the Philippines, this study analyzes dreamwork in two short stories from Southeast Asia.

The focus on the region foregrounds Southeast Asia as a vulnerable subject to a global order in flux to reveal how systems of production are felt, even, or more so, in the so-called peripheral areas. In connection, short stories in English have a particular literary and cultural merit in the region. In the Philippines, the short story in English is a product of American colonization, which has been appropriated and developed by Filipino writers ever since. Despite the small print run in the country, short story production continues to

increase in a range of styles (Hidalgo 163). Indeed, "Old Movies" by Ian Rosales Casocot garnered a Palanca Award for the Short Story in English, the most prestigious literary award in the Philippines. Similarly in Singapore, the short story became the narrative form, aiding the postwar development and citizenship of the country (Holden 102). Despite the similar decline in readership, Amanda Lee Koe's collection *Ministry of Moral Panic* received multiple literary awards and briefly revived the genre in Singapore a few decades after its peak of popularity. Thus, if a literary analysis of the project of fantasy-productions from Southeast Asian literature is to be done, then it would be fitting to consider these brief narratives.

Desire, in Lacanian terms, provokes dreams or fantasies. In Slavoj Zizek's explanation of the concept, desire is produced from a "dialectic of demand" for an object to satisfy one's need (5). The object's use value is converted into its exchange value, wherein desire is born out of a demand for what the object represents in this process. Fantasies direct that desire, which Tadiar argues to be part of a larger power structure at play. Fantasies are the "hegemonized expression of desire", the alienated means of production (Tadiar 6). In other words, fantasies are the expressions of desire and desire-actions co-opted into the national imaginary and support broader capital logics. Dreams, on the other hand, are personal expressions of desires and desiring-actions by the individual that may be constrained by material realities and have the potential to be subsumed under the international dreamwork (6). This means that dreams empower individuals and nations, but fantasies co-opt their desires towards promoting and reproducing particular power structures.

Tadiar's theory posits that under a logic of power structuring the world, such as capitalism or imperialism, imagination is a form of work subsumed in this dominant order. Fantasy-production operates as a mode of production and a signification (10). The global order at play organizes societies to produce fantasies that sponsor its interest while categorizing the laborers of this production, that is, its dreamers. Fantasies are thus manufactured, but these fantasies function in the realm of actions, not just imagination; individuals embody these imaginations through their desiring actions, where "gender, sexuality, and race are constitutive principles of organization as well as practical effects" (7). On the one hand, these positionalities organize one's relation to power and the mode of production. On the other hand, these relations occur precisely because of the powerful grip of a common imaginary on the global level. This means that one's gender, sexuality, and race dictate and constrain how one can act, imagine, and move within society.

To interpret dreams in fiction, then, would require an examination of how gender, sexuality, and race interplay in the imagination of a character. These positionalities dictate how characters dream, move with respect to their desiring-actions, and function in a narrative. In answering these, the essay examines the national histories and imaginaries of both the Philippines and Singapore to compare how the racialization and feminization of these nations affect the kinds of dreaming possible for fictional characters. Analyzing the text alongside these contexts reveals how their actions and inactions perform the work of dreams or fantasies. Moreover, given that the fictional characters in both stories spend a significant amount of time with film and television screens, this essay examines how the work of imagination functions through the screens. In particular, it looks at how the television and wide screens work as fantasy space, in Zizek's terms, an empty surface to stage desire (8), given that these media screens themselves are empty, yet reproduce fantasy for the audiences.

Mother, the "Movie Star": The fantasy of rescue in Casocot's "Old Movies"

"Old Movies" is a short story by Ian Rosales Casocot that won him his first Palanca Award in 2002. It was subsequently published in his short story collection entitled *Old Movies and Other Stories* in 2005. Spanning from the 1960s to the 1990s, the story examines the life of a small-town family in the Philippine provinces and the harrowing secrets that plague the protagonist's distant relationship with his mother. The title refers to movies produced during the golden age of Hollywood and Filipino cinema, which is heavily referenced in the narration. Following the literary merits of "Old Movies," the short story was anthologized in several works, including a collection of the literary appearances of Ava Gardner. As this anthology demonstrates, Hollywood movies and stars occupy the literary and social life of the Philippines. Films are considered a national pastime. But while the commercial and independent film industry releases more than 100 films a year, Hollywood and international films dominate the commercial cinemas and the imagination of the Filipino.

In speaking of the history of film in the Philippines, Rolando B. Tolentino draws parallels from the United States' imperial conquest of the country to its transformation into the multinationalism of the Asia Pacific. He writes that film during the US colonial period was a product of necessitating and supporting the imperial project in need of new markets from its surplus of production ("Empire" 27). With film as a surplus product, Filipino subjects

become audiences to America's imperial desire for conquest and fantasies of heroism and purity through the intrusion of Filipino elements in their film. In turn, Filipino audiences are laid open to colonial representations of their history and identity. Furthermore, Filipino filmmakers introduced to the industry practices of Hollywood were not only burdened by the local industry's technological dependence on the US, but also felt inferior to the cultural success and creative practices of Hollywood films (Deocampo 294-95).

Hollywood's studio system, star system, and film genre remain an integral part of making movies in the Philippines. The colonial beginnings of film in the country ushered in an industry patterned, organized, and produced with American film structures and makers. Copying film genres from the US and appropriating them in the country created new ways for narrating Filipino lives. Consequently, Philippine films also vie for local representations of Filipino realities and other nation-building projects. Local audiences, then, are subjected to the colonial imaginations of both its colonizers and fellow Filipinos. As film studies scholars such as Tolentino contend, film functions as the new technology to imagine the nation ("National/Transnational" 27). Therefore, the interplay of imaginaries at play in the visual space of the cinema provides a ripe space for audiences to form their own dreams or fall into fantasies.

In my analysis of the interiority of the characters' dreams and fantasies amidst imperial capitalist pressures and nation building efforts, I turn to Tolentino's works on media as a vehicle for subject formation in the national and transnational[1] spheres, wherein the intersection of these two spheres is displayed through media representations, "in which the narrative of capital is effaced and affected from within the Philippine nation-space" ("National/Transnational" viii). Likewise, my focus in this analysis lies in how films function as fantasy spaces to realize dreams and form subjects in relation to US imperial relations and developing multinational capitalism, instead of highlighting their larger economic manifestations in the global order.

Casocot's "Old Movies" examines the overconsumption of these filmic narratives in the

1 In Tolentino's preface, he defines transnational as "the various contending ways that capital, systems of power and knowledge, cosmopolitanism, urbanity, modernity, and postmodernity are penetrated within the nation's own being" whereas the national speaks of "the disjunctures, primarily those generated from within, in which the nation—imagined as an organic entity—comes into being and ceaselessly defines itself into a coherent being" (vii-viii). As such, the use of the term transnational throughout this essay refers to the cultural logics and productions enabled by multinational capitalism that shape citizens' subjectivity.

interiors of a household. The story centers on a small-town family from Dumaguete, Negros Oriental, particularly on the atypical relationship between Jaguar Silayan and his mother, Charo. The story begins with Charo's water breaking during a family dinner. The family blames her then lover, Travis, for the premarital affair and unexpected pregnancy. Not only does Travis flee back to Cebu on the night of Jaguar's birth, it is at the same time that Charo's father, Lolong, suffers from dementia. In their family home, Jaguar is then raised by his aunties and seldom by his drunkard mother, who spends most of her life in her room weeping and watching Betamax movies. These movies become a constant background in Jaguar's life: the only bond he has with Charo is through watching old movies on their home television or seeing her dress up as old Hollywood stars. As Jaguar grows older, he copes with the absence of his father, Travis, the emotional absence of his mother, and the deteriorating state of his family in their equally dilapidated house. The story ends with Charo dying from ovarian cancer as she and Jaguar, in a dream state, finally connect with each other. The ending implies that Jaguar's birth was from incest and rape by Lolong, and that Travis promised to save Charo from this fright. This promise was not kept, and so Charo grew distant and weary from Jaguar's birth.

Influenced by the Hollywood film genre, the story takes its cue from the Philippine melodrama. Nick Deocampo contends that the melodrama, a genre of cinema appropriated from the American colonization era, became a national expression of Philippine cinema (498). The Philippine iteration of melodrama mixes other film genres, creating an "extremely sad" movie that has singing, comedy, and eroticism. Several factors led to the appeal of this genre to the Filipino sensibility: Catholic influence (492), the central role of the family (483), and the suffering inflicted on women and children (494). The narratives of sacrifice and enduring suffering appeal to the Filipino audiences indoctrinated with centuries of Catholic teachings and narratives. Furthermore, the female child is usually the character sacrificed by the family. In a melodrama, it is typical for a story to center on a female character, typically a young wife or mother who has to endure suffering for the family by sacrificing herself, her dreams, and her desires.

Indeed, "Old Movies" portray these themes found in a melodrama. Charo is described as the beautiful child among her siblings, yet as a mother, she is "a weeping shadow". Her budding romantic relationship with Travis was curtailed by Lolong's patriarchal influence, who was known to be "capable of anything, even when he was getting old" (Casocot 168). This romantic endeavor cements Charo as the tragic female figure in the melodrama. She

sacrificed her desire to be with Travis by remaining in the confines of her home, exhibiting the domestic feminine value of *tiis*, or endurance. Her endurance is manifested in multiple ways, one in waiting for Travis to come back and fulfill his promise, and two, as she refused help during her sickness.

The melodramatic structure of this small-town story also signals the dissolution of the family under transnationalism. Tolentino writes that, as late capitalism ushers in the breakdown of the family, so too does the small town turn into a stage where morality can be interrogated ("Postnational" 137). The story of Charo reflects the typical melodrama protagonist wherein "a virtuous woman or couple is victimized by social circumstance involving the family" (Deocampo 493). However, Casocot turns the head of the family, Lolong, into the assailant who victimized Charo. The intersections of a small-town incest melodrama highlight the contradictions of the family that prefigure the nation. Lolong's dementia and the slow deterioration of the house and the family members portray the physical collapse and the consequences of the family due to Lolong's assault. At the same time, these contradictions open spaces to negotiate new relations between the family. Charo becomes a contradictory character. On the one hand, she is entrapped in the home, symbolizing her virtue and filial piety. On the other hand, she refuses to adhere to her maternal positioning by being a terrible mother to Jaguar. The suffering in the family is incestuous instead of social. Charo passed down the suffering she endured from Lolong to Jaguar by failing to perform her maternal duties to him.

Trapped in the confines of her home, she turns to old Hollywood movies and Filipino films depicting a beautiful life amidst sadness. The Betamax films replaying on their television screen operate as a fantasy space for Charo, translating her need to escape home into a desire. With Travis' promise of return, and the images of rescue on screen, her need to escape the home is translated into a fantasy of rescue.

In examining post-war Philippine cinema, Jose Capino looks at the American fantasies embedded in how the country processed its colonial history through films. Of particular interest is the American rescue fantasy that recalls General Douglas MacArthur's promise of return to the Philippines (Capino xiii). This political reality made ripples in Philippine cinema of the post-war era, with more narrative imaginations of any American element as a rescuer of the damned Filipino. Consequently, as screens and political narratives visualize an American rescue, the imagination of a promised return is racialized in the Filipino mind.

Charo dreams of Travis, described as a James Dean lookalike with a "peacock masculinity", to come back and save her from the horrors of her home. The feminized tragedy of Charo sets up a fantasy of an eventual rescue by the "American" hero, Travis. Interestingly, Charo also imagines herself as an American counterpart.

In Mary Ann Doane's work *Economy of Desire*, she posits that a woman is commodified and sold as a particular feminine image in cinema to the female viewer (29). Actresses portray particular characteristics of the ideal woman. In Charo's case, the likes of Ava Gardner, Kim Novak, Bette Davis, and Lolita Rodriguez portray beauty despite tragedy. The aesthetics of whiteness in old movies sells a particular self-image to Charo. Even the Filipino actresses carry this whiteness, given that a majority of Filipino actors are born from colonial interracial marriages. The whiteness of these actresses makes them beautiful and desirable, as opposed to their tragic provincial and colored femininity. Charo acts on these feminine images by dressing up and pretending to be a famous Hollywood actress. "On good days," she slips on an Ava Gardner attire with an "ice maiden stance perfected after so many nights watching Kim Novak in Vertigo" (Casocot 160). Her fantasy to be like the movie stars is two-pronged. The female characters of her desire not only embody beauty but also end with their designated love interest, despite the hardship they endure. Even if the movies end terribly, these actresses visualize the notion of an ideal woman. The trope of the happy ending sold by Hollywood provides meaning to Charo's emotional turmoil. Furthermore, the tragedy she faces sets up the eventual rescue promised by the movies.

The fantasy of being a movie star is an excess of the fantasy of rescue, which functions to necessitate her suffering and keep her believing in the beauty of Hollywood and American life. Even when Charo attempts to watch new movies, the cinema landscape of their time "[is] almost always violent and terrifying" whereas the old movies are "the romance of the present" (163). It is apparent that Charo consumes movies for escapism, despite them also being the cause of her entrapment.

The rescue that Charo fantasizes alongside her dream to be removed from the fright of her home remains desired. After Lolong dies from old age, Charo soon follows due to sickness. She dies without confronting Lolong or seeing Travis again. In a failure to dream beyond the narratives of these old movies, Charo participates in her own oppression. On bad days, the cinematic fantasies of a beautiful life are not enough to shield Charo from her

powerlessness in her own situation. She oscillates between the object of her desire, a star of a Hollywood movie, and the desiring subject, a woman trapped in her family home. This failure to conjure new dreams reflects the anxieties of representations and imaginations that play in the film industry. Since Hollywood movies and their iterations in Philippine cinema do not provide the means to imagine possible avenues to resist American power, Charo remains a ghost in her own life. While these genres could be fashioned with the Filipino sensibility, such as the melodrama, the female character remains the tragic abandoned figure in this story. Despite the attempts to resist heterosexual subjectification, the contradictions of the woman and mother performed by Charo are imaginary, cementing her position as the colonial dreamer. As imperial desire empowers the rescue fantasy, Charo's belief in the rescue fantasy justifies American imperial narratives.

Exposed to the heteronormative melodrama of his mother's life, Jaguar's queerness stands in distinct contrast. While this essay does not provide a detailed discussion of the possibilities in queer dreamwork, I hope to outline how gender structures the dreams and fantasies of the characters. As the narrator of the story, he does not describe things, but rather provides film references for them. Every person is a character, and every situation is articulated as a movie plot. Charo's fantasies portray the US-Philippine imperial relations, while Jaguar's world displays the transition into multinationalism. The excessive movie references in the story signals his subsumption into transnational identity. He has internalized the world through the language of film and is fluent in the social categorizations imposed by old movies. For example, his mother is busy being Bette Davis, Auntie Nida is a willowy Delia Razon, while he is a young Philip Salvador. Films also inform Jaguar's own sexual awakening, as in his realization from watching *E.T.* that "[t]here is something about Elliott that makes [him] understand" (166). But while Jaguar's queerness shows potential to break away from the heteronormative fantasies of his mother, he is not exempt from familial desires.

Instead of talking about his anxiety in coming out to his mother, he imagines her as Faye Dunaway, "[m]other becomes a crazed Joanne Crawford … as Mommy Dearest shouting, 'No more wirehangers!' I picture her with a glass of Scotch in her hand, spilling liquor down my face." (165). Charo's abuse of Jaguar comes in the form of emotional absence, puffing smoke, or spilling liquor on his face. While his boyfriend insists that queerness is more accepted in the 1990s, Jaguar maintains a reluctance to be out and free. He remains implicated in the morality play of his small-town family situation.

Jaguar's dreams cope with the transnational fragmentation of the family. As Auntie Nida informs him of his mother's death, the character Death in "The Seventh Seal" flashes on the screen. "The coincidence of moments is suddenly too strange: death coming in as I am seeing Death–hooded and ominous, cinematic" (167). The film stands in as the arbiter of his feelings. Death comes in contact with Jaguar as he tries to comprehend the passing of his mother, someone whom he supposed "must die from something. She has already been dead a long time" (167). Despite his hopeless upbringing, he attempts a negotiation with an imagined Charo. In this dream state, Charo reveals truths about Travis and her reason for loving old movies. Here, he also imagines Charo making a final promise to be a good mother to him. Jaguar sleeps with a concrete image of his happiness: with his extended family and Travis before everything turns sepia. Unlike Charo, he does not ascribe the fantasy to Travis, but finds satisfaction in togetherness. He dreams of an ordinary family situation defined by completeness and togetherness.

With Jaguar's world situated in the flux of Hollywood and Filipino film settings, his dream is also situated elsewhere. This desire for the family is a response to the time before its dissolution, a time he was unable to witness. As his very birth symbolizes the time that cannot be returned to, Jaguar's dreams remain deferred, as the family situation can never be repaired. His desire for the home signifies his growing abandonment, while holding hope for its reconciliation. Jaguar internalizes the contradictions of the transnational space that he inhabits, yet unable to decide his position in it.

Films functions as a short respite from the realities of life, but they also operate to author desires. With continued transnational cultural exchange, dominant narratives of a happy and beautiful life plague the imagination of Filipino dreamers. Fraught with the American codes of happiness and beauty, Charo fantasizes a life removed from her reality. Her dreams of safety from the horrors of the household, subsumed into state-sponsored fantasies, turn her life into a nightmare. Consequently, she brings up Jaguar as an audience to these entanglements and the limitations of subscribing to imperial fantasies. His fluency in the world of movies and ambivalence in life portray the internal contestations that transpire in dreamwork and subject formation.

Action Star as the father, brother, and lover: The fantasy of legitimacy in Koe's "The King of Caldecott Hill"

"The King of Caldecott Hill" is a short story by Amanda Lee Koe published in the *Quarterly Literary Singapore Review,* and as part of the short story collection, *Ministry of Moral Panic* in 2013. The short story collection won numerous prestigious awards, such as the Singapore Literature Prize in the English Fiction category in 2014. Published two years before the Golden Jubilee of Singapore, the collection serves as a critique of the moral values of Singaporean society and an antithesis to the growing national celebrations by housing stories of failure, alienation, and confusion amidst an important milestone of the city-state. "The King of Caldecott Hill," set in the 2000s, examines the alienation from longing for a home through the fall of a local television actor and the entanglement of his unnamed fanatic.

The governing principles of Singaporean society forward multiculturalism and meritocracy to advance its political narrative of survivalism and competition. In an effort to establish legitimacy as a nascent nation, the Singapore government positioned itself as a neutral state through the Non-Alignment Movement. In the non-alignment movement, Singapore reinforces the narrative of survivalism by putting forward its national interest through interdependence between nations of the world (Rajaratnam). This early construction of Singapore underpins the country's desire for global legitimacy and continues to affect current imaginations of the government and its citizens.

Several reconstructions and reimaginations of Singapore's history work to support the national project of establishing the narrative of survival after its separation from Malaya. For the Singapore government, the origins and history of its nation are malleable depending on the current definitions of the international order, for political and economic motivations, before sociocultural benefits. As Terence Chong explains, three major reimaginations of Singapore's history called for history as: (1) "tabula rasa through self-inflicted amnesia", (2) "recalling the great civilizations of China and India as the cultural homelands of Chinese and Indian Singaporeans", and (3) a history spanning 700 years (325). These reimaginations first ushered in an erasure of the histories of the Chinese and Indian coolies to put forward meritocracy and multiculturalism as pillars of the newly established nation. However, the lack of Asian cultural influence and the growing Westernization of the citizens led to a recognition of the great civilizations of China and India against Westernization. In

the 2000s, China's vigorous presence in Southeast Asia threatened the notion of neutrality of Singapore, which furthered the city-state's positioning in the region of Southeast Asia. Yet, the heightening thrust towards multinationalism contests these reimaginations further, especially alongside local identities.

In speaking of media, the Singapore government balances reproducing the discourse of survival and encouraging competition and meritocracy by appeasing their anxieties of separation through the television. Television dramas, in particular, have historically been constitutive of the nation-building projects of the Singapore government. MediaCorp, a state-owned media conglomerate popular for its television channels, had a role in the national imagination of a newly established Singapore. The Mandarin serials of MediaCorp's Channel 8 had the most successful foray into creating a national culture through the local production of Singaporean narratives (Tay 99). As opposed to the East Asian serials in MediaCorp's channel, these local dramas derive narratives from the historical and contemporary experiences of Singaporeans, providing its concerned citizens a mirror to the rapid transformations of their society while forwarding the agenda of modernization (102). Local television series thus capture a visual depiction of the problems of the common Singaporean, which is used to comfort their worries while building a national identity. Furthermore, local celebrities show Singaporean youth that they too can share their own narratives and have their own celebrities (99) as opposed to their Asian counterparts. This shows that celebrities are important state actors to reinforce state narratives and dreams.

Here, I analyze how "The King of Caldecott Hill" provides an insular examination of the notions of a local Singaporean identity amidst an intensifying transnationalism of the city-state through Mandarin television serials, actors, and their audiences.

The short story deals with a chance encounter between a famous Mandarin drama actor, Mr. Li, dubbed the King of Caldecott Hill[2], and an unnamed young woman. Abandoned by her father and abused by her mother, the protagonist turns to the nightly television appearance of the just and kind-hearted hero of the Mandarin dramas played by Mr. Li.

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2 Caldecott Hill was the Media Hub of Singapore, where MediaCorp., which owns the Mandarin Channel, operated until 2015. Lee Kuan Yew celebrated the opening of the television studio as part of his broader "campaign in education – to inculcate new attitudes, values and norms" as the country moves forward in modern society ("New home for TV…").

The protagonist, at seven years old, forms a one-sided intimate relationship with Mr. Li as she fantasizes about him as her father, sometimes her brother, or uncle, and even her lover to save her from the troubles of her real life. At 21, the protagonist meets Mr. Li at the Japanese restaurant where she works. Their brief conversation at the hotel restaurant turns into pillow talk in the actor's hotel room, where she opens up about the troubles she experienced growing up. While her time with Mr. Li ended civilly, Mr. Li shot himself after the protagonist left his hotel room. Alarmed by the multiple transgressions of this incident concerning a celebrity, the police investigated the suicide attempt and her mysterious involvement on the night of Mr. Li's attempt. Five years after the police investigation, the protagonist succeeds in integrating into society, finding a job and a partner. However, she secretly visits the hospice where Mr. Li has remained unresponsive since his failed attempt.

Television is central to the fantasy-production of the protagonist. For Singaporeans in lower-income households, the television is an important appliance providing entertainment in an expensive global city (Teo). In the single-parent household of the protagonist, the television not only acts as the main entertainment for the family, but also as a space to form her desire. The television aids in conjuring her fantasies of Mr. Li as a relative, always saving her before the abuse hits her body. The television projects her desires for safety and morphs them into a fantasy for Mr. Li. This transubstantiation of the desire into a fantasy is revealed by the protagonist in the police investigation.

> When my mother hit me when I was little, I used to imagine that he was my father. Or my uncle. Or my older brother. Or my lover. It didn't matter which one he was. He was a good guy. He was the good guy. He would have protected me. I watched every show he was in. It made me feel closer to him. I felt safe thinking of him. I could imagine him saying my name, putting himself between my mother and me, taking me in his arms, looking at my wounds. (Koe 54-55)

What the young protagonist desires is safety. But her desire for safety and the end of her mother's physical abuse is morphed on the television screen through the constant appearance of the male hero embodied by Mr. Li. The safety she desires is translated into a fantasy for Mr. Li as a father, older brother, lover, etc., who would protect her from the abuse.

Mr. Li's role as the typical good guy, "[e]ven as an anti-hero, he is the good guy character" (49), reflects the ideal masculine hero and communicates the ideal masculine figure of a nation. Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar argue that male characters in Chinese films embody Confucian values, namely, filial piety, brotherhood, and loyalty, which function as "mythic symbols of national identity, ideal masculine behavior, [and] institutional governance" (135-136). Given the large ethnic Chinese demographic in the country, the archetypes and characterization in Mandarin serials echo the mainstream cultural and narrative traditions of China. Of particular note is how this runs contrary to the aim of MediaCorp's local Mandarin serials, which is to distinguish Singaporean sensibilities from their East Asian neighbors. Moreover, despite the nation's push for multiculturalism, the ideal masculinity in Singapore is traced to Confucianism. *Wen-wu*[3], the expression of masculinity in Singapore, emphasizes intellectual and cultural attainments. The values of these achievements or successes, as Angelia Poon writes, are "only *that* which ensures the country's relevance to the world" (217). This means that the male hero is not an empty icon. Rather, male heroes communicate for the government how its citizens should be and how it envisions itself alongside other nations.

Indeed, the many characters of Mr. Li embody an ideal masculine behavior of Singapore. In the gambling serial, he seeks revenge for the misfortunes of his family, embodying filial piety and loyalty. Whether with friends, lovers, or enemies, he is "confident and coasting … a man of honor, keeping his word" (Koe 52), portraying the egalitarian aspect of brotherhood. Moreover, Mr. Li's embodiment of masculinity transcends his characters. Mr. Li reveals that he always plays the good guy because the media industry determined that "he has a good-guy face" (49). The character of Mr. Li adheres to traditional Chinese ideals of a masculine man, while his actor persona receives the financial and cultural merits of being famous. His being heralded as the King of Caldecott signals his attainment of the idealism of a Singaporean masculine figure. Whether on screen or off screen, Mr. Li can traverse the demands of the ideological work that operates in Singaporean television production. He represents Singapore, both for its government and its citizens.

For action dramas, these serials not only construct the masculine hero but portray a complicated narrative of belonging and exclusion embodied by the hero (Tasker qtd. in

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3 Lyons and Ford define wen-wu as "a balance between intellectual and cultural achievements and physical and martial strength" (141).

Berry and Farquhar 140). As the embodiment of the successful Singaporean man, Mr. Li's character reinforces the value of meritocracy and competition for audiences, like the protagonist. Furthermore, Chua Beng Huat argues that television has the most cultural impact on an audience because of its regular viewing structure that demands attention and participation from its audience (89). Television serials, then, provide more than comfort and an object of desire. The nation's political narratives and imaginations embedded in the television serials provide the codes to form an identity and promote a narrative of belonging in one's community. Despite her obsession with Mr. Li, the protagonist also dreams of social integration; she wants to do more in her life than become a better waitress (Koe 48). The lack of parental support in her life is supplemented by her citizenship through the screen. While the protagonist struggles with the desire to belong, she settles it by acclimatizing to the Singaporean codes of success.

By the same token, the flexibility of her dreamwork, where the actor becomes either a father, an uncle, an older brother, or a lover, represents the larger work of imagination that structures and upholds Singaporean society. The unnamed protagonist has a malleable fantasy for Mr. Li because the dreamwork of her nation is shaped by reconstructions, reimaginations, and reconfigurations underpinned by survival. Similarly, her fantasy for Mr. Li, as any protective masculine figure, is a result of, and a consequence of, the breakdown of her family and her need for survival. The state captures her desire for belonging and subjects her to the Singaporean value of meritocracy. While the dreams and fantasies formed from the television screen help her survive, they emphasize the need for a masculine figure and reinforce *wen wu*. In turn, the cause of her suffering remains ignored.

Despite ruling the suicide attempt, the police interrogated the protagonist for long hours to "carryout thorough investigations" (54). Through this investigation, her desire for Mr. Li was met by the authorities with indifference.

> *(pause) Did Mr. Li exhibit any odd behaviour in your company?*
> No, besides that, I thought it odd that he would want to talk to me.
> *Did he seem emotionally unsound?*
> No.
> *What was his behavior like?*
> He was calm. Charming. A little wistful.
> *Did you at any point see the gun, or were you given the knowledge that he*

had in his possession, the gun?
No.
Do you know that it is illegal to possess a gun in Singapore?
Yes.
Do you know that it is illegal to be in the knowing company of someone in possession of a gun in Singapore?
No. (Koe 55)

As the protagonist waxes about the actor's behavior, the interrogator questions her possible complicity in the crime. Through this interrogation, the police's motivation is revealed; the State only cares about order. A suicide attempt is enough to cause a moral panic; the possession of a gun is unlawful. The aftereffects of a broken family, however, can be ignored. A seemingly illicit relationship concerning its male icon cannot be ignored. The interrogation always circles to her possible sexual relationship with Mr. Li. The layers of moral transgressions in her brief interaction with Mr. Li further alienate her in society.

The treatment experienced by the protagonist reveals the imbalance between the nation's dreams and the individual's dreams. As Singapore fantasizes legitimacy for itself in the international order, its people fantasizes legitimacy for themselves in a nation that orders them. Despite the fantasy of legitimacy plaguing both the nation and the individual, a less-than-ideal fate awaits the female dreamer. In an authoritative and patriarchal society, the needs of women are transformed to forward masculinist national fantasies. Even though the State, through the police, learned about her experience of child abuse, they remained indifferent to her experience. The police interrogation scene emphasizes this stark difference between the masculine nation and the feminine subject. Her concerns are largely ignored as the police function to keep order in check. Unbeknownst to her, the safety she dreams of is a state authoring how to belong in society; she is once again neglected by her parents, i.e., the State, who abandoned her childhood struggles and dictated how to be a legitimate child.

In Philip Holden's analysis of "The King of Caldecott Hill", he argues that the story puts to question the idea of a single national narrative of survival (111). While it is true that the short story critiques the encroachment of national narratives on individuals and their dreams, the reimaginations of Singapore's history show that a single national narrative is a myth. The reimaginations of Singapore's history to fit the geopolitical landscape are a

testament to the national narrative that has become adrift. In this case, audiences are not the only ones who are subjected to state discourse, but even its main actors fall under the pressure of keeping with the national narrative.

Mr. Li's suicide attempt portrays the cracks in the Singapore identity. It became a widely publicized event where "everyone's talking about it, even the Malays and Indians, though he only appears on the Mandarin channel" (Koe 52). While the nation values meritocracy, neutrality, and an ideal masculinity to earn its legitimacy in the global order, the nation's actors cannot keep up. Mr. Li's unsuccessful attempt shows his failure to maintain the standards of the male ideal. Throughout the story, Mr. Li remains a celebrity figure. His conversations with the protagonist revolved around his actor persona and how being a good guy saved her from her mother's abuses. His real identity remains mute to the protagonist, despite needing the same human connection that she needs.

Poon asserts that these narratives of failed masculinities beget a questioning of the narratives of modern Singaporean identity (218). The alienation that both the protagonist and Mr. Li feel goes back to the failure of their national fantasy. The historical reimaginations and national narratives of Singapore trace international definitions of legitimacy that are always in flux. In turn, citizens of the city-state forced to adhere to its government mandates feel trapped living in a life they do not desire. Mr. Li's alienation signifies the conflict in being a state actor. The protagonist offers enough context to connect her alienation to the contradictions in a transnational identity. In their first encounter at the Japanese restaurant where she works, she wishes for Mr. Li to speak in Mandarin, unlike his contemporaries, who speak in English off-screen. This bias for the language is displayed in the Mandarin dialogues of Mr. Li, footnoted in the story. Moreover, the multiculturalism in their meeting place intensifies and reinforces the protagonist's desire for belonging found in the shared culture of the Mandarin serials. But, similar to Jaguar's dream of the family, her desire for a shared monolithic identity cannot be returned to. This desire for sameness, after all, signifies a desire for human connection, which, for a moment, was met but was never pursued completely.

While multiculturalism is one of the pillars of Singapore society, its manifestation in cultural productions creates contesting reverberations, felt by both its successful and marginal citizens. The story ends with the impotence of Mr. Li, where the protagonist fulfills her desire to be intimate with the actor by frequenting his hospice. She rests in this

ambivalent position of adhering to Singaporean markers of success while hiding her real desires. Indeed, she continues to hide her love for Mr. Li from her husband and remains unknown, much like how her name is kept from readers. This is because personal dreams that run contrary to the state's fantasy of legitimacy result in antagonism. Her partial rejection of the fantasy of legitimacy by caring for a terminally ill Mr. Li signals a possibility for fulfilling wayward desires.

Visions and Illusions

At the risk of viewing Southeast Asian stories and characters as allegories of the nation, fantasy-production examines the sources of this mirroring. In reading these brief narratives from the Philippines and Singapore, I examine how specific media ushers particular ways of dreaming, and the uneven ways dreams are captured by imperial or multinational capitalist relations. At the onset, characters at the peripheries of their nation's developmental strategies feel the contradictions and entrapment of these policies greatly. In particular contexts, the Philippines is haunted by the American colonial legacies expressed in media, which in turn keeps Filipinos trapped in the reproduction of American fantasies. On the other hand, Singapore contends with legitimacy through controlling national imaginaries, affecting how its citizens conduct themselves. As the intersection of national imaginaries with transnationalism and other dominant structures pervades in dreamwork, characters at the margins dream of belonging. Yet, their media landscape offers state-mandated codes for belonging that contradict their human desire for connection.

In both "Old Movies" and "The King of Caldecott Hill," citizens are stretched thin in the attempt to keep up with cultural transitions of their respective countries. These ways of dreaming, marked by their particular histories, leave characters with lost futures, trapped in the makings of their own and their nation's fantasies. Desiring actions, then, may very well keep dominant powers at play. But given how these subject formations occur through media, the two stories call for more imaginative ways of dreaming. Literature, for one, remains cognizant of these small resistances and ambivalence that underpin their struggle for belonging. As the thread that binds their fantasies, and ultimately, what binds the stories of Casocot and Koe is an enduring hope. This comparison of the Philippines' and Singapore's short stories, then, perhaps, speaks of the broader call to dream outside of nationalist fantasies.

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