Linggu Skundidu: On the elision of the Kristang language, culture and identity from mainstream public view and academic scholarship in independent Singapore (1965-2023)

Abstract

Kristang (iso 639-3: mcm) is a critically endangered creole language spoken primarily in Malaysia and Singapore by around 1,000 people, including the author; it is also the name of our community, the *Jenti Kristang* or *Portuguese-Eurasians*, who are descended from coercive intermarriages between arriving Portuguese colonisers and local Malay residents following the conquest of Melaka by the former in 1511. I am the gay, non-binary Kabesa or leader of the revitalised Kristang community in Singapore, having coordinated the grassroots Kodrah Kristang ('Awaken, Kristang') revitalisation initiative since 2016 (K. M. Wong 2019a) which has led to massive, unprecedented success and dramatic awareness of Kristang's existence in just seven years (e.g. T. Wong 2017).

However, the Singaporean ecosystem incorporating Kristang is so fraught with trauma, abuse and elision that both the culture and language itself are considered *sigredu* ('secret') to a degree that even younger Kristang like myself are often brought up completely dissociated from both; I, for example, myself only discovered that I am the great-great-great-grandson of our people's first great Singapore progenitor and one of the first local Straits Settlements legislative councillors under the British, Edwin Tessensohn, and the great-great-great-great-great-great-grandson of de facto *Raja Muda* and last governor of Dutch Melaka, Adriaan Koek, on my own as an adult in 2020. This paper thus explores why this might be the case through oral history records examined through the Kristang lens of 'what is not said is often far more important than what is said': ultimately, a protracted history of covert grassroots resistance against the newly independent state's over-essentialising race-based policies under the semi-authoritarian Lee Kuan Yew regime (1965-1990) led by my great-grandmother, Mabel Martens née Tessensohn, is illuminated, together with the deep trauma visited on the community by the state's response in 1989 that still continues to haunt us today.

Introduction and positionality

This paper is presented by the author in his two major public-facing capacities as an Otherised independent scholar-practitioner who calls himself and is generally known as the last Merlionsman of the Republic of Singapore, and the Kabesa or leader of the Kristang or Portuguese-Eurasian community in Singapore, a minority creole/indigenous ethnic group descended from the August 1511 conquest of the city of Melaka by a Portuguese fleet led by viceroy Afonso du Albuquerque, whose member soldiers then intermarried, often coercively, with local Malay residents to create the mixed class of people then known as the *casados* (Portuguese for 'married') and today known as the *Jenti Kristang* or Portuguese-Eurasians of Southeast Asia. Also very prominent in both the Singapore public sphere and more generally on an international level for his speculative fiction writing set primarily in Singapore and Southeast Asia, and for being the first and still only openly gay and non-binary civil servant, government scholar and government school educator in Singapore starting from 1 September 2021 while homosexuality was still criminalised under Section 377A of the country's penal code, the author is the direct descendant of three major Kristang personages in Singaporean and colonial Southeast Asian history: his great-grandmother, Mabel Martens née Tessensohn (1905-1999), who I called Nanny and was a similar de facto and covert grassroots leader of the Kristang community under the repressive Lee Kuan Yew-led administration (1965-1990), the first government of independent Singapore following its expulsion from Malaysia in 1965, his great-great-great-grandfather and Martens's grandfather, Edwin John Tessensohn OBE (1855-1926), who was prominently and publicly recognised in the same capacity, especially for his founding of Singapore's Eurasian Association (EA) in 1918, and for his becoming the first-ever Eurasian and one of the first few indigenous people ever to sit on the Straits Settlement Legislative Council under the colonial British administration from 1923 to 1926 (Tessensohn 2001, pp. 32-35), and Adriaan Koek (1759-1825), the last acting governor of Dutch Melaka in 1795 who facilitated a peaceful and non-violent transfer of power to the British after their landing in the area, and who was similarly also honoured as the de facto *Raja Muda* of Melaka by local Malay rulers in the area (De Witt, 2005, pp. 36).

The starting point of this paper as a site for an autoethnographic excavation of personal and collective history, and wider explorations of why history as a construct is often fundamentally epistemologically and ontologically uncertain in a way that is also manifestly creole/indigenous and Kristang in nature, is the very simple fact that the author did not know *any* of the history detailed above until 2020, when he was twenty-eight years old, and after sustained sexual and psychoemotional abuse from a close friend in the Kodrah Kristang Core Team prompted not only his entry into therapy for an entire year (August 2019 to August 2020), but a complete renegotiation of and questing after a fuller and more holistic conception of who he was and why, despite being of 'not entirely Kristang' origin with a Chinese (Hakka / Peranakan) father, he had been permitted to initiate, led and develop to its fuller extent a complete and unprecedented revitalisation movement for the critically endangered Kristang language in 2016 (K.M. Wong, 2019, p. 30).

Reducing contact from his family from December 2021 as part of that post-traumatic renegotiation of his self, and upon learning of the above in at least a fuller and more comprehensive fashion by July 2022, the author then independently pursued an exploration of a second-order, and far more complex question: why had this arguably critical and almost fundamental history (to say nothing of it likely ordinarily being a matter of pride for most other families in other ethnic communities) been elided from him by not just his own family, but by literally and unmistakeably every single Kristang and Portuguese-Eurasian person he had met and worked with throughout his life? This paper first provides a summary of the original history of the Kristang and Portuguese-Eurasians in Singapore as articulated by the state and the state-led welfare organisation representing the Eurasians in Singapore, the aforementioned Eurasian Association founded by my great-great-great-grandfather Edwin Tessensohn; it thereafter attempts a recounting of how the author came to uncover and consolidate the elements of this history that appeared to have been elided, and ultimately provides a new approximation of the critical events that shaped not only the future of the Kristang community in Singapore in the 1980s, but that of Singapore itself, especially with regard to the formative and highly traumatic state-led operation known as Operation Spectrum.

The state-sponsored history of the Kristang and the Portuguese-Eurasians in Singapore

Born on 1 October 1992 in Singapore, I grew up in what my parents would later retrospectively call an 'aracial' household, where my two younger brothers and I were encouraged to think of ourselves in entirely national terms (i.e. Singaporean) and religious terms (Roman Catholic), and with 'no ethnic identity' to speak of whatsoever; we all three knew we were a mix of Chinese and Eurasian ethnicities, but had almost no affective, cultural or even tangible lived connection to either term. I was also the only one of the three of us to have sustained contact with my great-grandmother Mabel or Nanny to me, who by that time was mostly bedridden in my Kristang grandmother's house; I retain very few conscious memories of my interactions with her till today, except for her death on 31 October 1999, which I remember with vivid, startling intensity as one of the first times I gained a clearer (and more sobering) view of reality.

Prior to 2015, the history of the Kristang community that we did know of was minimal and restricted mostly to highly specific dates and events, and vague, nebulous allusions, which I continued to present as the history of the community from February 2016, when I first initiated the Kodrah Kristang revitalisation effort for the Kristang language, which I had learnt from Nanny as a child between 1992 and 1999, forgotten in the trauma of her death and another incident of abuse that occurred in 1996 or 1997 from a family member, and then only recovered knowledge of in 2015 in my second year of undergraduate study of linguistics at the National University of Singapore (NUS), when while doing research for a publication on endangered languages in our region, I stumbled upon a mention of the language in the NUS Library. A sketch of this original historical narrative as I, and most other Kristang or Portuguese-Eurasians of my age would have known it, is presented below in its contemporaneous form as still propagated by the state and the EA at the time of writing in March 2023.

> The Portuguese-Eurasians today are considered one of four major sub-strands or sub-identities of Eurasian, which is the informal fourth major supra-ethnic/racial category that the state has promoted since independence from the British in 1965, after Chinese (the majority), Malay and Indian, and which is often substituted and/or incorporated into the much larger (and completely unironic) alternate fourth category of Other (with the organising framework thus known as CMIO in Singapore); the other three sub-identities are the Dutch-Eurasians, originating from the 1641 conquest of Portuguese Melaka, the British-Eurasians, from the 1795 takeover and then 1824 possession-transfer of Melaka by the British, and the New Eurasians, another broad-basket category that generally seeks to incorporate all mixed race people descended especially from more recent immigration to Singapore (Rocha & Yeoh, 2021, p. 62). The Portuguese-Eurasians are therefore the oldest constituent sub-identity, with their genesis in the aforementioned 1511 conquest of Melaka; they are mostly known by other Singaporeans (if at all) for the tangible identity markers of sugee cake and other types of food, the song *Jingkli Nona*, the *branyo* dance, ethnic costumes that were actually borrowed from Portugal in the 1950s during an earlier attempt at revival, and a predominantly and quite strongly Roman Catholic religious inclination.

The retrospectively-consolidated history of the supra-Eurasian community in independent Singapore as is traditionally presented is well summarised in this extract from Rocha & Yeoh (2021), the former of whom is an independent scholar, and the latter a prominent faculty member of the Department of Geography at NUS, both of whom often collaborate:

> By the 1980s, the Eurasian community, and the mixedness it encompassed, were all but rendered invisible in the multiracial Singaporean nation. The community remained conspicuously absent from the racialized representations of nationhood portrayed by the state, with hybrid roots not fitting easily into the multiracial model, and the European roots of Eurasian identity seen as distant from the resurgent Asian values of the country (Pereira 1997, 2006; Rocha and Yeoh 2019). The EA fell out of favor, seen as not relevant to the new nation, or to the younger generation of Eurasians. However, in the latter half of the decade, a small but vocal group sought to re-establish Eurasian identity, using the EA as way to consolidate the

> community, to promote representations of mixedness as a legitimate identity claim, and to establish Eurasian as recognized "race" at the government level. By 1989, aggressive campaigning and publicity resulted in an increased membership of 800, rising to 1300 by 1992 (Barth 2017) (p. 57).

What was the particular impetus for the "aggressive campaigning and publicity" that Rocha & Yeoh (2021) mention? Per Pereira (2015), in a text that was intended to serve as an authoritative and accessible introduction to the Eurasian community in Singapore published under *Singapore Chronicles* imprint marking Singapore's 50th year of independence, this sudden and unprecedented 1989 shift occurred because of an incident that Pereira (2015) calls the "Kenneth Jerome Rozario" incident:

> "Kenneth Jerome Rozario" is both the title of a short story as well as the name of the lead character in Catherine Lim's collection *Or Else, the Lightning God and Other Stories*. The collection of short stories was first published in 1980, but it was little known to Eurasians until it was selected as an O-level literature text in 1988. In the short story, a Eurasian, Rozario, is characterised as a "lazy, disco-going, good-time Charlie whose [Eurasian] godmother was perpetually drunk and besotted with her brutal and mercenary European lover (*The Straits Times*, 8 February 1990, cited in Pereira, 2015, p. 48).

According to Pereira (2015), who also served as the President of the EA from 2017 to 2022,

> Eurasians were upset firstly that such a negative stereotype was published, and secondly, that the Ministry of Education had chosen this collection of short stories for a national examination. (…) [It] was the lightning rod which fired up Singaporean Eurasians at two levels. At the first level, many Eurasians turned to the EA to act as the community's collective voice. At the second level, it triggered several Eurasians to enter into "cultural production" (Pereira, 2015, pp. 49-50).

Pereira (1997, 2006, 2015), Rocha & Yeoh (2021) and a number of other scholarly texts and news articles all thereafter cite this incitement as the turning point for the Eurasian community; Rocha & Yeoh (2021), in particular, state that

> the community, led by the Association, began a process of re-representation, revitalization and resurgence, by formalizing and promoting a distinctly "Eurasian" culture, and by transforming the EA into the "self-help" (social welfare) group for the community, and thus the official representative institution of the Eurasian "racial" group (Pereira 2017). To fit more easily into the CMIO framework as an established and unique racial group, Eurasian identity needed to be more clearly conceptualized: to be an official race, there needed to be an official language, religion, cuisine and culture. A unique mélange of characteristics was chosen to make up this new representation of authentic mixedness—drawn from local history, borrowed from other groups in the region and even invented to fit the new narrative of belonging. Selecting which forms of mixedness to include and which to overlook, the EA made a break from their colonial history, and opted to promote aspects which were largely linked to Portuguese (rather than British) heritages: Kristang (a patois of Portuguese and Malay originating in Malacca), the branyo (a traditional dance), Catholicism, and foods such as sugee and devil's curry (Pereira 1997, 2006; Rocha 2011) (p. 57).

Theseira et al. (2022), in the EA's centennial publication *Standing the Test of Time: Celebrating 100 Years of the Eurasian Association, Singapore* (which also prominently features Edwin Tessensohn on its front cover), after a detailing of the incident mainly based on Pereira (2015), also further claim that

> The association had reached a new frontier in 1989 and excitement was in the air. The Spirit of '89 team knew the community had great untapped potential and wanted community members on board with it on this defining journey (p. 43).

However, Pereira (2017), in an edited volume entitled *The Singapore Ethnic Mosaic: Many Cultures, One People* that again purported to serve as an authoritative treatment on the Eurasians for the average reader, curiously omits the Kenneth Jerome Rozario incident in its entirety, despite Pereira (2015) arguing that it was *the* seminal incident that incited Eurasians into renegotiating their status and that of the EA in 1989; instead, the book simply says this:

> In the 1980s, there was a surge of interest among many Eurasians, especially those who were born after independence in 1965, to learn about their heritage and identity. This period is known as the Eurasian Awakening. The impetus behind this was the Singapore government's "Asian Values" drive, which encouraged Singaporeans to learn more about their ethnic heritage. So, as the Chinese, Malays and Indians began to search for their roots, so too did the Eurasians.
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> It was around this time that the Eurasian Association (EA) saw a surge in its membership, many of whom wanted to learn more about Eurasian culture. The EA leaders thus had the mandate "... to co-ordinate projects for the advancement of Eurasians in Singapore and to undertake public education and awareness programmes for them," as stated as one of its objectives (p. 236).

Even more noticeably and very suspiciously, in spite of the above suggestions that the EA visibly promoted Kristang from the 1990s, there are almost no mentions of the language or the culture in academic work dating from the period, including the critical and seminal Wee (2002) paper, which in a paper entitled 'When English is Not a Mother Tongue: Linguistic Ownership and the Eurasian Community in Singapore' manages to omit all discussion of Kristang in spite of its declared focus on naming a proposed mother tongue of the supra-Eurasian category, and in spite of its author being one of the most well-known and respected members of NUS's Linguistics department (who this author also had very few opportunities to interact with, despite the later prominence of Kodrah Kristang in 2016 and 2017 while both were in the same department). The closest this paper ever gets to Kristang is in the following gloss:

> The category 'Eurasian' was originally created by the colonial bureaucracy to 'signify colonial subjects who were offspring of European fathers and Asian mothers' (Rappa, 2000: 157, 162). Gupta (1994: 37) notes that the 'European component of a majority of Eurasians had been Portuguese, British or Dutch, and they were mostly English speaking'.
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> Citing Braga-Blake (1992), Gupta (1994: 37) also states that (f)amilies with Portuguese, British, and Dutch surnames, and Indian, Macao, Malacca, Bencoolen, Burmese, Siamese and Ceylon origins inter-married ... so that from disparate origins a unified, Christian, English-speaking community had emerged before the end of the nineteenth century.

And finally (and also discernible in Rocha & Yeoh, 2021, p. 64), on the ground, there has been widespread informal disdain, if not occasional outright dislike and hate of the EA, from Eurasians of all sub-identities, but especially from Kristang and Portuguese-Eurasians, since I was a child growing up in the 1990s post-Kenneth Jerome Rozario incident, to the extent that the EA tried to over-steer the author's independent Kodrah Kristang revitalisation initiative during a meeting in April 2017 just before the latter organised Singapore's first-ever Kristang Language Festival on 20 and 21 May of the same year. Some of this tension, 'officially', can be glimpsed around the developments surrounding the publication of Scully & Zuzarte (2004), the first Singapore Kristang dictionary and only Kristang publication known to ever have been issued in independent Singapore, which developed out of language classes conducted at the EA by the authors, Valerie Scully and Catherine Zuzarte, together with a group of other Kristang ladies, with the support of the EA. At least three Kristang people not related to the EA unexpectedly wrote in May and June 2004 to *The Straits Times*, bypassing the EA directly, to ask if Kristang could be made a mother tongue for the Eurasians by Singapore's Ministry of Education (MOE); it is not so much that the EA then issued a formalistic reply in *The Straits Times* that said this would not be feasible (K.M. Wong 2017, pp. 373-374), but that the EA had to communicate with the

community via *The Straits Times* at all, that suggests how tenuous its relationship with the community it is supposed to serve actually is on the ground.

Documentary contradictions

However, even and in spite of these community dynamics, it was only the paper from Wee (2002), and the last sentence about the 'unified, Christian, English-speaking community [that] had emerged before the end of the nineteenth century' that finally gave me pause after I embarked my own pioneering research in the National Library's NewspaperSG e-archive in 2018 and 2019 which revealed that Kristang had not only been extant in Singapore since at least 1886 (Coelho, 1886) and later since 1864, but had maintained a presence so strong that at least 55 plays in Kristang had been performed in prominent venues in the city centre from 1892 to 1926 and documented in almost all major Singaporean newspapers in the colonial period (K.M. Wong 2019b), including several by the Portuguese Amateur Dramatic Company (PADC), a name that the author had previously noted but not really explored as a passing mention in earlier an earlier public-facing non-fiction anthology of vignettes about Eurasian life by one of the author's cousins based in Malaysia (Tessensohn, 2001) – a mention that, in fact, our common ancestor, Edwin Tessensohn, had not only served as the PADC's patron, but that the PADC had indeed performed plays in Kristang (all boldface emphases Tessensohn (2001)'s own):

> In 1918, the **Eurasian Literary Association** was formed with E. J. T. as its Patron, and its meetings were held in his home at 9 Sophia Rd. … The association at his home, its interests stretching into community matters, later renamed itself the **Eurasian Association**. (…) As the EA changed direction to be more of a self-help organization, E. J. T. encouraged the formation of the **Portuguese Amateur Dramatic Company of Singapore**. He agreed to be its Patron, with its address once again at his home. There is hardly any record of the Company's productions, but it is probable that it would have staged plays in Kristang, with music and singing on the side (pp. 34-35).

I soon discovered that Edwin Tessensohn had been apparently so prominent and so respected in colonial Singapore that it was not just that at his funeral "all available seating accommodation in the Cathedral of the Good Shepherd was occupied when the cortege, which left the deceased gentleman's residence, 47, Amber Rd, at 7.30, arrived" (*The Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle*, 1926); as *The Malaya Tribune* (1926) goes on to describe:

> The death of the Hon. Mr John Edward Tessensohn, member of the Legislative Council of the Straits Settlements, which occurred at the General Hospital yesterday morning, has cast a gloom over all local communities, particularly the Eurasian community, which body he represented on the [Straits Settlements Legislative] Council. (…) The funeral was one of the biggest ever seen in Singapore[,] the very large attendance being a tribute to the popularity of the deceased gentleman. Hundreds of motor-cars followed the wreath-covered hearse and those who assembled around the graveside to pay their last tributes were numerous.

Even the title of the *Tribune* article, 'Mr. Tessensohn Dead', suggested just how prominent and respected my great-great-great-grandfather had been. Why hadn't my family told me anything about him, and what had happened to the Kristang language, community and culture he had so thoroughly championed? As if in further defiance of the Wee (2002) article, I found an even more confusing and paradoxical mention of Kristang in the same database several days later:

> Everybody knows that an archaic patois is still spoken by the Portuguese Eurasians of Malacca and Singapore and that there are many Portuguese words in the Malay language, but there are other traces of Portuguese influence in present-day life which few people have recognised (Anak Singapura, 1937).

Similarly, even if both articles were exaggerating, their existence, together with the staggering amount of data documented and consolidated in K.M. Wong (2019b), suggested that Wee's characterisation of

the Kristang community as a 'unified, Christian, English-speaking community [that] had emerged before the end of the nineteenth century' was thoroughly and quite unbelievably wrong – a particular emotional affect that I was also able to recognise from dealing with traumatic, reality-eliding abuse after completing therapy in late 2020.

Personal contradictions

In my capacity as Kodrah Kristang leader, I also discovered, mysteriously, that few, if any of the numerous older Eurasians who joined our revitalisation classes even recognised the name 'Kenneth Jerome Rozario', to say nothing of mentioning anything that had happened in 1989; it was almost as if nothing had happened, as if there was nothing there, even though to me, these emotional reactions did not match what one would expect from a period that had supposedly roused the great ire of the Eurasians regardless of sub-identity strand. I already knew that most older Eurasians also regarded Kristang as a *linggu sigredu*, a secret language not to be passed down to younger generations, but did not make any connections between these two separate observations.

And then in early 2021, my Kristang grandfather, Peter Rowsing Martens, Nanny's son, began to decline quite precipitously, having already struggled with what appeared to be early-onset dementia. I was unexpectedly the only member of the family he recognised and could communicate with, to the extent that front-desk staff taking care of him in the hospital where he was warded knew who I was before I even knew who they were when I went to see him for the first time, because he kept asking for me. After hypothesising that his dementia was being greatly worsened by a fear of death, and a fear of working through trauma that he had resisted for many decades caused by the Japanese invasion of Singapore in early 1942, I was able to maintain some sort of semblance of conversation with him and develop more extended moments of lucidity, to the extent that I also came out to him as gay in a leap of faith months before I did so on a public level, receiving as much of his proud, unconditional love and approval as he could manage while hooked up to machines and tubes, two days before he passed away on 7 April 2021.

Grandpa, even when he had been more conscious and lucid prior to 2021, had always claimed that the Eurasian Association had never respected his mother, or Nanny, as we knew her, and that she had never received the recognition she had deserved from the community for everything she had done. As he passed away, he repeated these assertions to me in spite of being in tremendous pain, and I for the first time began to seriously consider that I had been completely unaware of quite a bit of my own family's history and story. For a search for mentions of Nanny in not just the extant EA material from the 1980s in the National Library and Archives, but in the *Rally* magazine of St Joseph's Church at Victoria St, which I also already knew had been one of, if not the central institution where Kristang people had gathered prior to the 1990s, and in all and any other material adjacent to these two sources that mentioned Eurasians, turned up no mentions of Nanny's name whatsoever, not even in executive committee lists or thank-you acknowledgements. Nothing. Not a single mention.

But then I did remember that the Singapore's Oral History Centre, founded in 1983, had recorded Nanny (Mabel Martens, 1984); I had only happened on this, again by accident, while searching for more data on colonial-era Kristang toward compiling what would eventually become the K.M. Wong (2019b) paper. They had even spelled her name as Mabel Martin, something which I happily wrote off without a second thought as an accident at the time when I emailed them to ask for a correction. I knew almost nothing of Nanny's history, other than that she had raised my grandfather and his siblings singlehandedly after their father, Frederick Martens (1888-1944) and their eldest brother Reginald (1928-1944) had passed away during the Japanese Occupation, and had retired in 1968. But I never saw this as a lacuna in my own knowledge until Grandpa's passing, more as just tardiness on my part to get acquainted with my complex family history and culture.

What had Nanny done between 1968 and 1989? Where was her presence in the historical narrative, if Grandpa was telling the truth (and I believed he was, based on his very strong propensity to directly curse and swear quite straightforwardly at people he did not like)? What had happened to the

Tessensohns? How come nobody had heard of 'Kenneth Jerome Rozario'? And why did nobody want to talk to me about what had happened in 1989? Even the biography of Grandpa, co-authored with my grandmother and self-published posthumously, says nothing about the subject (P. Martens & Maureen Martens, 2021); in fact, the only mention of the entire 1980s period is a single acknowledgement that my grandmother had a very good girls' hockey team captain at the school she was coaching in in 1981 (P. Martens & Maureen Martens, 2021, p. 104).

It was only when I finally came to understand something fundamental about both Kristang identity and Singaporean identity in 2022, after separating myself from my family, that all of the pieces were finally assembled. It can be very easily conceived of as a principle, which can be seen in this personal communication sent to me on Instagram from a non-Eurasian student I did not teach but who had friends in my classes in the government school I taught and came out in; she originally messaged me to thank me for accidentally being a queer role model to one of my transsexual students who had transitioned successfully, but went on to explain that, in the context of some of my Instagram posts disclosing abuse from the state and from the school I had taught in:

> This is an ESSAY wow I'M SO SORRY. UM. Wait on the topic of sorry – I apologise also bc I really feel like I cannot leave comments on your page. I really feel like they may be used against me (hence this essay, written PURELY BECAUSE I COULDNT GO TO THE COMMENTS SECTION AND SAY FUCK YES GOOD JOB AND FUCK THEMMMMM) (personal communication, 11 March 2023).

In itself, this confirmed what I had long suspected, but never had any 'concrete' evidence for, and so I wrote back, as a further verification:

> Thank you so much for your lovely words … it's also really validating to hear that yall are all following what's been going on so closely --- my husband is much better with the vibe stuff so he's always been the one telling me that yall are watching and affirming but just quietly because of fear of reprisal, so when you mentioned that just now it really helped me to recognise that that was true (though now he's gonna be like see baby I told you so HAHA). And can totally relate on the not commenting but fuck them part too hahahaha, that's how I've survived al these years too (personal communication, 11 March 2023).

And the next day, the student replied:

> We are. Very intently. Watching and affirming. (but quietly, sigh).

The principle that is at the centre of Kristang and to a lesser extent Singaporean identity is therefore very simply articulated as follows:

> ***What is not said is far more important than what is said.***

I never learned this way of being and living because of my highly atypical 'aracial' upbringing, and likely also because I have long had other things to struggle with in my very unique positionality as a gay, non-binary Kristang leading the revitalisation effort, as Edwin and Nanny's descendant, and therefore as an 'Other of Others', which is also why this is the first time this information and these hypotheses are being disclosed in any kind of academic sphere or context – it took someone who was so completely oblivious to the deep, painful trauma that had so permanently damaged both the Kristang community and Singapore, while still being embedded in that context, to so obliviously and inadvertently blunder into what this paper has been able to excavate from a thorough and rapid application of this principle to everything that I have collected and consolidated above. (I also note that something similar is obtained for the global pandemic of sexual abuse, which deserves its own paper.)

Singapore, state, academic and even counter-institutional narratives either implicitly or explicitly encourage the disconnection of events from their contexts; for the first three, elision is careful and

measured, lest a paper like this appear, such that it can be claimed that there was no such elision to begin with, while the threat of reprisal is so strong for the fourth that self-censorship is even more widespread than existing scholarship will suggest. And this disconnection, and privileging of seeing major traumatic events as discrete incidents, reaches its apex in the form of Operation Spectrum, which took place in Singapore in May 1987. Almost nothing has been said in this fashion about what happened in the 1980s to the Kristang community, especially in the lead up to Spectrum, its immediate aftermath, and the aforementioned revival of the Eurasian Association in 1989; but in my talks and discussions with students, grassroots community members and others, I have found that all indications point to just how terrifying and damaging that period was.

Nanny's interviews with the Oral History Centre in January and February 1984

The period in question leading up to the events of Operation Spectrum in 1987 and the reboot of the Eurasian Association in 1989 appears to begin with the unprecedented electoral win of Workers' Party (WP) Secretary-General Joshua Benjamin Jeyaratnam in the 31 October 1981 Anson Single Member Constituency (SMC) by-election, where he became the first non-People's Action Party (PAP) Member of Parliament (MP) elected to Parliament in independent Singapore's history with 51.93% of the vote. Prior to this, the PAP had successfully governed Singapore as a single-party state, securing 100% of Parliamentary seats and popular vote margins well above 60% in the General Elections of 1968 (86.72%) , 1972 (70.43%), 1976 (74.09%) and 1980 (77.66%) that to most Singaporeans are just a fact of life (if they are even aware of these margins), but to others in many other countries are stunning, almost unbelievable – and indicative of the way the PAP governed Singapore with an almost iron fist. At the time of Jeyaratnam's win, Nanny would have been 76 (and would uncannily pass away on the same day of his win in 1999).

Nanny's sole appearance in the historical record does not come in 1981, but in January and February 1984, when as mentioned earlier she was interviewed by the Oral History Centre. Blackburn (2009) has already previously observed that the Oral History Centre was not a neutral or completely objective institution, as one might again expect from its name:

> Singapore's Oral History Centre, founded informally as the Oral History Programme of the Ministry of Culture in September 1978, was officially established as the Oral History Unit in December 1979. Projects undertaken its early years were largely focused on interviewing former government members and senior civil servants to get their "authoritative" version of the national past. This was in keeping with the ministry's domination of the arts and humanities in Singapore to ensure that versions of the past and artistic impressions of life in that country were acceptable to the government (p. 32).

As Blackburn (2009) goes on to quite strongly imply, this was not only observable merely in terms of the broad direction of the Oral History Centre, but even in terms of how questions were phrased and interviewers were asked to conduct their research:

> Lim How Seng, the coordinator of these projects, later acknowledged that the interviewing instructions handed down to the unit by Singapore's political leaders were flawed. Interviewers were not given the freedom to ask challenging questions, even if they had felt brave enough to do so. Certain areas of inquiry were clearly off limits, such as eliciting criticism of Lee's decisions even when they had patently been mistakes. Following official policy, important archival records were closed and so could not be consulted in preparing questions. The interviewer simply asked a series of nonthreatening questions, and the interviewee responded in a way that put himself or herself in the best possible light or told a story that he or she thought followed the PAP-endorsed version of the past (p. 34).

The last sentence can be glossed as an extended version of the original principle developed in the previous section for working with oral history (and indeed any kind of history) within the Kristang community and to a lesser extent in Singapore, that ***what is not said is far more important than what***

is said: the extended version is ***only say things that put yourself in the best possible light or tell a story that follows the PAP-endorsed version of the past***.

Nanny's interview, like many others in the Oral History Centre which are all publicly available and accessible for free online today, appears ostensibly placid and a little banal from the metadata, which is organised by the six reels of her interview as follows:

> Reel 1: Family background. Description of grandfather's house in Oxley Rise. Social life of Eurasian girls in pre-war Singapore. Eurasian girls given more freedom when compared to girls of other races. Description of Christmas and New Year dances. Style of dressing then. Other social activities like birthday parties. Type of food served at parties. Pahit parties in past similar to present cocktail parties.
> Reel 2: Further elaboration of pahit parties. Description of vicinity in Amber Road. Eurasian enclaves moved from Queen Street, Victoria Street to Katong, Serangoon and Bukit Timah; richer Eurasians stayed in Tanglin district. Description of houses in Queen Street. Recreational activities. Itinerant hawkers. Youngsters required to help in house. Typical Eurasian food - feng curry and devil's curry.
> Reel 3: Her education at Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus. Recollection of some schoolmates and teachers. How she travelled to school. Discipline in school. Amount given as pocket money. School activities. Girls/boys relationship after school. Subjects she took at Junior Cambridge.
> Reel 4: Not accepted for training as a teacher. Took up shorthand and typing in YWCA. First job in East Asiatic Company. Description of areas around D'Almeida Street and Raffles Place, The Arcade and Change Alley. Kind of things available in shops like Robinson, John Little. Occasions when hats were worn.
> Reel 5: Recollection of how she knew of First World War (WW I) . What she remembered of Indian mutiny. Her work life; started in East Asiatic Company. Changed jobs a few times before staying with Maclean's Watson Company until retirement in1969. Reasons for not joining company union. Social activities after marriage. Husband's career. Christmas and New Year celebration. How a typical Sunday was spent.
> Reel 6: Evacuated from home during Japanese Occupation. Moved to several places to seek refuge. Later returned to her home in Gilstead Road. Condition her house was in. Husband and a son died in 1944. Living conditions during Japanese Occupation. Started work to support family after war. Not involved in any club (Mabel Martens, 1984).

However, when subject to Conversation Analysis (CA), which is ideal because it brings to light an awareness of "indigenous social and cultural constructs" (Goodwin & Heritage, 1990, p. 283), the evolution of the conversation between Daniel Chew (DC in the reels), the Oral History Centre interviewer (who is also mentioned in Blackburn, 2009, p. 36) and Nanny (MM in the reels) comes off as rather awkward and uneven, with relatively long pauses on the parts of both interlocutors when one listens to the audio tapes of each interview (also accessible online); Nanny's rather lengthy pauses, in particular, suggest that with some questions, she is quite noticeably awkward and uncomfortable, and searching for the right words rather than letting the discussion flow freely, which does otherwise happen elsewhere. Two examples of this are shown one after another in the extract from Reel 5 below; using the conventions of CA, the numbers in brackets indicate the length of the pauses in between each section of the conversation, with a dot indicating a micropause, and the equals sign overlapping sections of the conversation where both interlocutors talk over each other; it otherwise follows the (admittedly occasionally somewhat over-corrective) transcript provided by the Oral History Centre for Mabel Martens (1984).

> MM: (*completing the answer to a previous question*) i left wordleys to get married (.) i married in nineteen twenty (.) seven (6)
> DC: what kind of company was the east asiatic company
> DC: =when you took your first job
> MM: =oh they were a big company

MM: they did shipping they did import export um (1) dealing in rubber and everything (2) they were quite quite big here and they were also the (1) the office was (.) the (.) the manager was also the (2) tsk (3) uh (1) representative of the danish government here is what you call it is it the ambassador here not an ambassador then (2) (sigh) yeah he would be (5) mm (1) dealt with passports and things like that (2) for their own nationals (5)

DC: what were working conditions like

MM: good (2) i mean your the same nine to five hours one now one (.) one to two for break for lunch and you got your (.) annual leave (.) and things like that (2) my c (.) c (.) conditions where i was concerned (1) not so very much (Mabel Martens, 1984, Reel 5 of 6, 00:07:26 – 00:08:38)

It is of course possible that Nanny's pauses emerge from her being bored, tired or disinterested; however, when one considers the particular context of the Oral History Centre's existence as articulated by Blackburn (2009), an underlying, almost-Pinteresque feeling of dread and tension (e.g. M.A. Lowe, 1976; Paul, 2016) is palpable in the audio recordings of the proceedings, especially considering that an analysis of the information that Nanny does volunteer borders on the hyper-trivial so strongly that in conjunction with her extended pauses, it is quite possible to hypothesise that she was volunteering such information *deliberately*, toward diverting or parrying the attention of her interviewer, crafting an illusory image toward being able to escape the interview unscathed (Paul, 2016, p. 229), a feeling that again emerges with her response to DC's second question above. Even more compelling evidence for this comes at the very end of the interview in Reel 6; bold underlining here indicates an excessively stressed syllable.

DC: so after the war you started working to (.) support the family

MM: yes that's when i started working (.) and until i retired in nineteen sixty eight then i saw the children through school (.) during that period (.) my son tommy was then only about five years old (1) all of them had to finish school (5)

DC: = wh

MM: = then (1) then (.) uh (2) then olga (.) then they started working (3) and uh (1) it eased uh it eased the the situation a little bit (.) it was enough money for us to live and we had some problems and (.) we managed alright and today they're okay (.) they're all on their feet (1) and i live with i live (.) as i think i told you i'm living now with my one son peter (.) his wife maureen and my two grandchildren melanie and jillian (.) and i'm very happy (.) and i'm very lucky (2)

DC: well have your children been grown up to your expectations

MM: (1) uh ye**s** how much can you expect i mean they say they have their own lives to live (1) they are good they are working and that's all they had (2) kept up they have not had any serious trouble or anything they've kept their jobs (2) and they've got their own families and they got their children (.) oh yes (.) maybe (1) i expected them to perhaps they (1) they did all (2) have a go at going to the university (2) but they didn't go throu- they didn't finish (2) the course as it were (1) i don't think that through my (2) through much fault of their own (.) but maybe in those days i didn't pay much attention because i was working and they were studying and i (.) it was not easy to (.) to bring up five children (.) on a salary of four hundred and fifty dollars (7) oh the boys are (.) my boys are good (.) and my daughter also and my grandchildren are very very wonderful and i have great-grandchildren (.) (*inhales*) marc phu spelt p h u and kim phu (.) one is seven and the other is four (8) they are my daughter's grandchildren (8) (Mabel Martens, 1984, Reel 6 of 6, 00:20:38 – 00:23:18)

The (5), (7), (8) and (8) pauses in Nanny's utterances above are profoundly lengthy and come at arguably fairly natural points in the conversation where one would ordinarily expect the interviewer to quite easily take up the interview with another question (or 'turn', as is known in CA); yet Chew does not volunteer any further question, almost as if, again, in a manner very reminiscent of the works of

Pinter (Paul, 2016, p. 229), trying to draw out further information from Nanny. Chew finally follows on with a different question that is even more revealing:

> DC: uh (2) after the war did you have much to do with the eurasian community
> MM: oh i we were still we were eurasian community we're quite well knit community i mean you met each other you moved in your you moved in your different circles and your societies your (.) your (.) clubs or anything like that (.) a lot of eurasian (.) people were members of the src (.) and then at that time the singapore catholic club was still in existence it was at the junction of queen street and (.) bras basah rd which i believe now is uh (.) post office (.) oh yes and then you had your church (1) organisation and things like that (2) eurasians are quite plentiful we mixed with each other (3) they have (2) there's still (.) plenty of (.) families a couple of families quite old here (2) i mean (1) must be third generation also (.) or fourth generation eurasians (1) ancestors from malacca (.) from (4) maybe india even burma (.) some (7) catholic club (.) used to be (2) had quite a lot they had billiards and they used to have (2) early days in the early days they used to have an annual dance (.) at christmas (.) which was very well attended (1) very nice (.) so the parties[? – *inaudible*] i don't know how many eurasians we have now in singapore i don't think there are very many (5) i (2) **th**ink you got all the information you wanted about the association from one of the other members (3) of the (1) association (.) of the eurasians (Mabel Martens, 1984, Reel 6 of 6, 00:23:18 – 00:25:09)

Even without CA, one can see that Nanny *never actually answers Chew's question*, which is "did Nanny have much to do with the Eurasian community after the Second World War"; everything she says not only avoids the question to a very strong degree, but in her final lines presented above, which are frighteningly abrupt and have almost no connection to what has appeared before in the rest of the interview, she betrays what appear to be her real concerns, and those of the interviewer: the actions of the EA, and those of its members, which have not been mentioned in any form throughout the preceding twenty minutes (Mabel Martens, 1984).

Lower Six and Upper Ten: The creole culture that time, and the state, forced us to forget

It seems from all of the above that the EA was nothing like the EA we know today; before whatever happened in 1989, it was a grassroots organisation in the 'true' sense of the word that had no connection to the state, and which the state could not control. Considering both Edwin's overt initial association with the EA, and Nanny's covert connections to it as excavated from the above and from my own personal and family history, the EA was also likely much more Kristang or Portuguese-Eurasian than it is today, both in terms of its appeal to our particular community, and in terms of its presentation and self-perception: vastly more irreverent, community-oriented and community-aligned, and creole-celebrating.

Again, it is only through fortuitous chance, and the hard work of others both inside and outside of Singapore and our community, that I have been able to understand a further layer and edge to these dynamics. Lowe (2018), writing about the emigration of Eurasians from Southeast Asia after World War II, and Gaspar (2020), writing about our cousin culture in Macau, the Macanese, also provided critical observations about the Kristang community here that again changed much of my own perceptions of not just my own work with Kodrah Kristang, but of myself as a Kristang person, and how I situated and framed myself with reference to my own history and that of the community. J. Lowe (2018) provided an immensely helpful framework and schemata for understanding Othering in relation to not just the Eurasians, but to the Kristang:

> Against the backdrop of the state-sanctioned geopolitical positioning of fixed racial identities that display predictable signs, most specifically phenotype or colour as the central marker of difference, the very notion of mixed race challenges the fallacious, pseudo-scientific idea of discrete, pure races. The CMIO categorization's reduction of racism to discrimination on the

> grounds of visible differences serves to deny the existence of anti-Eurasian racial discrimination. In this process, Anglo-Indian and Portuguese Eurasians, who could be easily mistaken for Indian or Malay Singaporeans, are rendered culturally invisible (p. 432).

Why would skin colour or visible difference be of concern? Again, thanks to my 'aracial' upbringing, I very rarely conceived of myself as brown and 'different' or marked before 2020 and my entry into therapy; I conceived of myself primarily in terms of the identity markers 'Eurasian', 'Singaporean', 'gay', 'non-binary' and 'human'. And this is exactly the elision that J. Lowe (2018) talks about, because the supra-identity 'Eurasian' elides the otherwise substantial differences that do exist between the Kristang and the other sub-identities – especially our skin colour and all its attendant prejudices that have existed for hundreds of years. This colour and identity was once called Lower Six, in contrast to the Upper Ten identity, which was characterised by a whiter skin tone and a stronger approximation to British middle-class identity. Identity, as in all creole and liminal communities, was fluid, malleable and performative, and dependent on other factors such as accent; however, skin tone appears to have still encoded a variety of stereotypes and prejudices, chief among them that browner-skinned Eurasians tended to be coarse, immoral, promiscuous and uneducated, and lighter-skinned Eurasians more enlightened, educated, refined, civilised and virtuous (Rappa, 2000, pp 168-169). It is therefore quite hard to take Pereira (2015) at face value when he claims:

> To recapitulate, by 1990, there was a new generation of Eurasians who had grown up within Singapore's ideology and policy of multiracialism. To many younger Eurasians, they saw that the other communities had their own distinctive traditional historic culture, while the Eurasians did not seem to have any. … Up until that point, traditional or historical Eurasian culture appeared not to exist in Singapore (p. 62).

And this is true, but only because the label 'Eurasian', as Pereira (2015) and other authors mentioned earlier seem to be using it, is a new, state-level construct that when over-applied in this fashion elides and obscures the heritage, traditions, language and identity of the constituent communities it collapses together; it is like saying that there was Singaporean culture appeared not to exist before 1965, which can also be technically true if one means the nation-state, since there was no nation of Singapore before 1965. I am far more inclined, instead, to consider the observations of Gaspar (2020) as more nuanced and thorough in their reflection of the particularly Kristang struggles in Melaka that began in the 1950s, where she notes that

> Multiple identities of the Kristang began to assume a more essential nature, and the previous 'creole' identity aspect, with more explicit Malay elements, was suppressed while they 'exaggeratedly' adopted a new Portuguese identity (p. 77).

A great deal of work has already been done by researchers examining Melaka (e.g. Sarkissian 2000) in this regard (and often to the ire of the community there); though the process by which this happened in Singapore is different, occurring in a more top-down than bottom-up fashion, the end result has been the same, and to an even higher degree in Singapore, where the separate, brown, creole nature of the community has been almost entirely elided following the events of 1989. My own personal trauma further attests to this, where I literally thought I was too white or light-coloured to be considered Kristang until 2020, when a discussion of my brownness with my Malay husband and two of the remaining Kristang speakers finally excavated this perplexing and reality-warping idea from the depths of my psyche.

This finally somewhat answers the equally perplexing question of why I not only had no knowledge of my culture, identity and the fact that I could even speak Kristang, but did not even know that I had no knowledge of my culture, identity and the fact that I could even speak Kristang. Yet one even more terrifying question remained: why had the state even sought to elide and deconstruct Kristang at all?

Kristang in Singapore in the 1980s: The 'invisible' age

The premise of this paper has been to excavate possible links between otherwise over-discretised and decontextualised phenomena and entities that are a particular function of state-level control in Singapore in conjunction with the principle of ***what is not said is far more important than what is said.*** And the treatment of the Kristang above must be reconnected and recontextualised to its time and place, and to the natural and instinctual reactions of Singaporeans to phenomena they surely must have been privy to, even if these were not documented; only an analysis of the same has facilitated both our deeper understanding of Nanny, and my own understanding of myself.

As mentioned, Jeyaratnam's election win in Anson SMC undoubtedly prompted a wider wave of counter-institutional and counter-PAP work in Singapore starting from his win in October 1981 (Chan, 1982; Tan, 2019); one of the more visible manifestations of this has been the academic acknowledgement of the primacy of liberation theology in Singapore (e.g. Barr, 2008, 2010), a Roman Catholic movement which had its roots in Latin America (e.g. Rowland, 2019, pp. 1-2) and which sought to challenge the top-down, heavily-patriarchal methods of the Lee Kuan Yew government through a championing of the poor and grassroots community development – the forerunner of not just many of our modern social justice frameworks but of language and cultural revitalisation itself. The connection to the Kristang that has often been elided, however, is that the interest in liberation theology in Singapore happened contemporaneously with Gaspar (2020)'s observations above – in other words, liberation theology became popular at a time when a reclamation of interest in the Portuguese parts of Kristang identity were also becoming popular. The result? Personal communication also suggests very strongly that the Roman Catholic Kristang community as a whole was also very strongly invested in liberation theology, and therefore in the counter-institutional movements that took shape in the 1980s. Suggestions of this, again, are not to be found overtly, but in asides and at angles, even in the work of fairly explicit writers such as Seow (1990), who comments on the arrest of Patrick Seong under Operation Spectrum by noting: "It is a far cry from advising and counselling Filipina maids on their legal rights and social problems to communism!" (p. 5).

In Singapore, we are taught in the compulsory Social Studies subject in school about one of the PAP government's major early missteps, the Stop At Two initiative, which sought to control the birth rate from 1972 (Curriculum Planning and Development Division, Ministry of Education, 2005, p. 51); however, by the early 1980s, it was also simultaneously becoming very clear to the PAP that the campaign had been so successful that the birth rate was falling. Nothing makes this more abundantly clear than a series of newspaper articles in the early 1980s that literally feature the almost Orwellian effects of this campaign, including this article in *The Singapore Monitor* from August 1983 that stated unabashedly that

> STOP at two is the slogan that those in the Family Planning and Population Board have pushed hard over the years. But what happens when a woman on the board goes beyond the norm? Like Mrs Yu-Foo Yee Shoon, chairman of the National Trade Union Congress and a member of the board. Now bearing her third child, she is thought to have resigned from the board rather than stay on and become an embarrassment. It is not known whether she will now reconsider her decision in the light of the Prime Minister's address on the need for well educated women to have more children. Mrs Yu-Foo is a Nanyang University graduate (*The Singapore Monitor*, 1983).

As a speculative fiction writer, it is not just the almost outlandish actions that the PAP managed to get university graduates to do rather than suffer social shame that makes this article so interesting; it is also the mention of the Graduate Mothers Scheme, announced just days earlier, that sought to encourage educated Singaporean women to increase the birth rate through financial incentivisation – and *only* educated Singaporean women. The reader is encouraged to remember that Nanny raised five children without a university degree on a salary of SGD 450, and that many other Singaporean women, especially from minority communities, must have been in similar positions, because four critical events that happened in rapid succession thereafter suggest that the scheme was extremely unpopular (Quah, 2000,

p. 15; Chao, 2020, pp. 71-72): a stunning 12.6% vote-share drop for the PAP in the General Election of 22 December 1984 to 64.83% — not just the lowest percentage for the ruling party since independence but the first time it had gone below 70% — the unprecedented creation of a Feedback Unit within the state in March 1985 (Quah, 2000, p. 15), the unprecedented rescindment of the Graduate Mothers Scheme itself in April of the same year, one of the few times that the state has ever directly reversed course on an enacted large-scale national level public policy, and the second after Stop at Two, and the formation of Singapore's first-ever ostensibly grassroots advocacy organisation for women's rights, AWARE, in November (AWARE, 2023). As Chao (2020) puts it:

> While the unpopularity of these policies could reasonably have been anticipated, the extent of the backlash was not. Citizens were particularly outraged by the priority school choice policy, given that it appeared to compound advantages enjoyed by a social and genetic elite, while consigning others to perpetual under-class status. The policy was as unpopular among its beneficiaries as it was among those who would have lost out as a result and contributed to a shock election result in the same year (p. 72).

The two years that followed, 1985 and 1986, are characterised by more of what appear to be nebulous allusions to what was actually going on on the ground in both the academic literature related to Kristang and in the media from the period: Pereira (2015), for example, says that

> Being a newly independent state, loyalty and allegiance to the new nation of Singapore was paramount to the Government. However, as the 1970s came to an end, with Singapore's national identity more stable, the Government decided to promote ethnic identity more. This new shift in emphasis, which this book will term "middle multiracialism", would have a dramatic impact on the main ethnic communities in Singapore, including the so-called "invisible" Eurasian community (p. 46).

Although the observed action taken by the government is clear, we have no understanding of *why* the government undertook those actions, and what they might have been in response to. There is even more unsaid on the next page, after a litany of state-led co-optations of what had previously likely been more grassroots approaches to arts and culture:

> The impact of middle multiracialism was the ethnicization of Singaporeans; in other words, Singaporeans were generally more ethnically aware and proud of their identity from the 1980s onwards. Previously, under conditions of early multiracialism, most people would identify themselves as "Singaporeans"; under conditions of middle multiracialism, most would identify themselves with a hyphenated identity such as "Chinese-Singaporean", "Singaporean-Malay" or other similar combinations (p. 47).

A similar sense of elision is palpable in Rappa (2000), with the same use of anthropological jargon to obscure what would otherwise be technically straightforward to articulate:

> Between 1987 and 1998, the ethno-political map of Singapore changed to an extent that it rendered it virtually unrecognizable to social scientists from a generation earlier (p. 163)… Braga-Blake suggests that there has been a significant decline in the Eurasian community between the 1970s and 1980s (Braga-Blake and Oehlers et al., 1992). This is true but only represents one side of the political picture. The Eurasians who remain were always present; it is just that participation in EA activities…was lower in the first two decades of political uncertainty after Singapore's independence in 1963 through the Federation of Malaysia, and then after being ejected from the Federation for political reasons in 1965. The Eurasians who migrated in the 1970s and then again in the 1980s are transients who have lost their own stake-holding in late modern Singapore (pp. 168-169).

Again, in both sources, dating from around twenty years ago, we are given no understanding of the full context, and do not understand *why* Singaporeans suddenly became more ethnically aware and proud

of their identity from the 1980s onwards (Pereira) or why there might even be contestation over whether there was a 'decline' in the Eurasian community or not (Rappa). The wording of Pereira makes it sound like the state is responsible for the former, while the wording of Rappa makes it sound like the latter is a mere perspectival shift; but as one has hopefully been able to quite consistently observe in this paper, there is actually much more by way of lived experience, and much more that is critical to include.

Once more, contemporary approaches to how Kristang has been dealt with allow us to gain a better sense of what has been happening, and also highlight just how ironic it is that Pereira (2015) identifies Eurasians as an 'invisible' community. Since I came out as gay and non-binary on 1 September 2021, disclosed manifold homophobic abuse from the leadership at my government school after resigning from the civil service on 31 August 2022, and married my Malay Singaporean husband Fuad Johari on 6 December 2022 in Sydney, all the while retaining my very public and well-known position as the head of Kodrah Kristang, all state-led media reporting on Kodrah has gradually and unexplainably not only ceased, but appears to have been retracted, with at least two articles previously mentioning Kristang and/or my speculative fiction writing now suddenly no longer in the public domain. Even more glaring is the publication of a recent *BiblioAsia* magazine publication purporting to discuss the linguistic legacy of the Portuguese in Southeast Asia – that relegates Kodrah to a footnote outside the body of the main text, while only including the Scully & Zuzarte (2004) dictionary and its connections to the EA, even though both Kodrah and the dictionary have had arguably at the very least the same level of impact on the country and community:

> In Singapore, Kristang has been supplanted by English, Malay, Tamil and Chinese, although there have been efforts to keep the language and culture alive. The Portuguese-Eurasian community has been promoting pedagogical and cultural activities to revitalise the Kristang language. In 2004, Valerie Scully and Catherine Zuzarte published a Kristang dictionary in Singapore because they wanted to "to help all those interested in this fascinating language learn more about it, and thereby remember our roots". Interestingly, in their acknowledgements, they noted that, as children, they had been "discouraged from using Kristang for fear that we would not be able to master the English language that was taught in schools" (Oliveira, 2023).

And this in spite of the fact that I was featured at Singapore's National Day celebrations in 2018 just five years prior with posters that literally said 'I am revitalising a language'. What the state cannot comprehend, categorise and control, they elide; attestations that the Kristang community were 'invisible' in the 1980s, therefore, are technically true, but elide the fact that the state ensured that this would be the case, to the extent that when the new, pan-Eurasian supra-identity was coalesced in 1990 after the reboot of the EA, Pereira (2015)'s claims that there was no visible Eurasian culture to speak of could also be given truthy weight.

Why doesn't anyone speak up about this, Eurasian or otherwise? Why are even academics with little emotional connection to Kristang invested in keeping these parts of Singapore's history quiet? Because the state's efforts to silence its own people culminated in Operation Spectrum (21 May – 20 June 1987), whose true, devastating psychoemotional impact has likely always been known by all Singaporeans alive to witness and suffer through it, but has never been articulated so straightforwardly until now. Even the normally forthright Barr (2008) glosses it as:

> These extrajudicial arrests proved to be a critical turning point in the Singapore government's management of dissent and public discourse. They marked the beginning of a new era where Singaporeans became conscious of the operation of what later became known as out-of-bounds (OB) markers in politics. On the one hand, people were encouraged to enjoy a new sense of political freedom, but on the other hand, they had the example of Operation Spectrum to remind them if they overstepped the mark (p. 229).

This is again true, but the detachment the state encourages from our history and our lived experiences in Singapore is so strong that we do not even stop to consider the emotional implications of these words: that when Lee Kuan Yew declared that there was some form of Marxist conspiracy to overthrow the

state, an idea so incredulous that even other members of his cabinet acknowledged it was quite beyond real, concrete evidence, he essentially forced every single Singaporean alive to confront the psyche-ripping idea that Singapore had reached the point where it did not care about real, concrete evidence. That it was going to tip over into North Korea, or Pol Pot's Cambodia, or anyone of the other nightmarish regimes and failed states that had collapsed into genocide and/or persecution. Activists already report the tremendous fear of a repetition of Spectrum and or the arbitrary detentions that accompanied it that impedes their work (Kaur & Yeo, 2017, p. 47); what more the general population?

And what made Spectrum even more destructive and nightmarish was that it seems to have been intended to be that way. There is already very strong extant evidence that Lee Kuan Yew did not believe in his own assertions, calling the supposed leader of the conspiracy a simpleton (Seow, 1990, p. 5; Barr, 2008, p. 229). How do we square this contradictory behaviour? It is not contradictory if one derives the logical conclusion that Spectrum was absolutely intended to traumatise and psychoemotional blitz Singapore back into submission after four years of quiet, clandestine activism and inter-racial, counter-institutional unity. *What is not said is far more important than what is said*; and why can't the state make use of the same principle? Presenting the image of someone who believed, ferociously and thoroughly, that there was a Marxist conspiracy, was arguably even more frightening than if Lee Kuan Yew had actually truly believed there was, because it also sends the message that *we know the game you are playing. Don't try it, or we will try this*. Hence what we call (and in so calling arguably conceal as) OB markers today; till today, discussion of Spectrum remains mostly "tucked into academic discussions" (Alvin Tan, 2015, cited in Lim et al., 2017, p. 84 as personal communication) in Singapore, such as this one, and even then is not confronted in full, because of the tremendously strong racial and religious sentiments, and very deep trauma, it continues to engender. The connections to the inter-racial and inter-religious unity that undoubtedly sprang up between 1983 and 1987, and the centrality of some of Singapore's communities to Spectrum, including the Kristang, the Malays, and the Roman Catholic community, are likely also elided due to the very sensitive nature of interracial and interreligious harmony in contemporary Singapore.

The Kristang people, likely at the centre of liberation theology and the counter-institutional movement, seem to never have recovered from Spectrum. Even from when I began my fieldwork on just the Kristang language, in 2016, I found such tremendous reticence to be documented on the part of the older people in my community in spite of being welcomed into their homes and being treated with respect as a real, authentic Kristang youth who wanted to bring back his culture and language. And this is to say nothing of even trying to bring up the 1980s, and asking about our history, and the EA, or even Nanny; almost all older Kristang have either pointedly ended the conversation or take it in a very different direction, with even one of our close friends, after telling us in a similar over-discretised fashion about how her father had been called up by Singapore's Internal Security Division in the 1980s, suddenly asking if she could help wash our dishes for us. The same pattern should now be quite detectable in Nanny's Oral History Centre interview (Martens, 1984).

Conclusion

The effect of talking about Operation Spectrum and its effects on the population is so palpable in Singapore that the first time I did so in a public-facing workshop on Kristang one week prior to the writing of this paper, I had such an intense headache that I spent the rest of the day in a painful, fearful funk, trying to understand why it was so bad, and so hard to talk about it. Only later would I understand and be able to name both that horrifying, paralysing fear of reprisal, and the paradoxical, emergent and uncontrollable sense of pure, unbridled, finally-released hope, that simultaneously emerged when I said that all of us had been so very deeply affected by it.

But we can talk about it now, because since Lee Kuan Yew's death in 2015, the psychoemotional space for Singaporeans to express themselves and their emotions has widened significantly; all of the major revitalisation efforts beyond Kristang, as well as the repeal of Section 377A of the Penal Code and further changes to the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act, have shown that we are past the time of Operation Spectrum, and the covert control and devastating trauma it enacted on the Singaporeans who

were alive at the time. Kodrah Kristang has also continued to be part of that vanguard as one of the few completely independent grassroots initiatives that still continue to retain a strong presence in the public eye, despite what appear to be continuing, if thankfully far less intense efforts, by the new state leadership to occlude it from view. Younger Singaporeans like myself, born after Spectrum into the millennial, Generation Z and Generation Alpha generations in Singapore, have been a very strong component of this wave of cultural, linguistic and psychoemotional revitalisation, and it is my hope that this paper has made it clear why this is the case: because we never lived through Spectrum and the silent trauma of the 1980s, we are still unconsciously cowed by them, but are not beholden to and even trapped by them, as many older Kristang and Singaporeans still seem to be.

I began my academic work in linguistics, speculative fiction writing and teaching and education, and it has since broadened to archeoastronomy, non-Western and accessible approaches to creole/indigenous analytic psychology, history, ethnography and intergenerational trauma, because there is no way forward without incorporating an understanding of all of these into my classrooms, whether non-Kristang or Kristang. It is likely the same for many other communities around the world; our elders, ancestors and community leaders are psychoemotional prisoners to their own histories and stories, even when, like in the case of myself, one can even be completely oblivious to those deep, inconceivable and unconceptualizable emotional cages, to the extent that one believes one's life can and should evolve without them. But that is also why I wrote this paper, and why I informed the organising committee of History Across the Disciplines of my extremely visceral and strongly positive emotional reaction to this paper's acceptance. We can find ways forward for all our communities that are not only true to our emotions and feelings, but to how we interpret and interact with those aspects of our lives as human beings which remain hidden and concealed out of shame, fear and self-loathing, and which must be reintegrated and respected for us to grow as communities, and as people who are part of a wider species that seeks also, on a larger level, to find a way through this complex and turbulent period in the twenty-first century.

It is in the words of my great-grandmother, Nanny, Mabel Martens née Tessensohn, who of all my ancestors was the least respected, and least well-known for all of the work that she did, and therefore most subject to the totalising, unbearable pressure of suppressed, elided silence, and who I also now name and honour as the last Merlionswoman of the Republic of Singapore, that I conclude this paper:

> At my age, you'll find that when a thing has to be done, you do it. There's no point in grumbling. There's no point in saying, 'Why should I do it?' It has to be done. You do it. And I don't mind it that way (Martens, 1984, Reel 2 of 6 / transcript p. 24).

This paper is dedicated to all those in Singapore and elsewhere who still struggle in silence, for fear of reprisal, shame, self-loathing and pain. There is no guarantee that we can avoid any of those things; but it has been the experience of this Merlionsman, and his brave, unstoppable family, Kristang community and fellow non-Kristang Singaporeans, that when we are brave enough to take the first step in spite of them, we will not be alone, and others will follow. *Na pasadu, nus sa istoria kung linggu skundidu: agora, olotu dos-dos ja mostrah pra tudu.*

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