

Reclaiming Agency

**The Construction of Singaporean National Identity in the
Rhetoric of Lee Kuan Yew from 1965 – 1970**

by

Bao En Toh

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For Singapore

and for Lee Kuan Yew, in appreciation of his lifetime's work

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Abstract

On the 9th of August, 1965, Singapore was expelled from the Malaysian Federation and became a sovereign country. The concept of Singapore as a nation had not existed prior to independence, yet overnight a sense of national identity had to be aroused in the hearts of the newly-defined Singaporeans. This thesis examines how then-Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's rhetoric in the first five years of independence served as a vehicle for the production of national identity. Lee could not draw on a homogenous native culture or a common history, since Singapore had a diverse immigrant population and a history defined by successive periods of colonization and subjugation. Rather than having the past serve as a source of pride, therefore, Lee looked to the future as he described what it meant to be Singaporean. His rhetoric can be understood as a process of reclaiming agency from a disempowered past by locating national pride in a brilliant shared future that all Singaporeans would contribute to and thereby own.

In Chapter 1 I examine and deconstruct the theme of multiracialism. In his rhetoric Lee focused on managing issues of race, emphasizing the equality of all races in Singapore and constructing Singaporean identity in a way that patched over ethnic differences and incorporated racial allegiances. Each hyphenated Singaporean identity—Singaporean-Chinese, Singaporean-Malay or Singaporean-Indian—became an affirmation of the culture and values of each ethnic group, while emphasizing the shared ownership of the country and the group's role in ensuring a successful future for Singapore.

In Chapter 2, I discuss the recurring motif of threat and survival. Singapore faced many external and internal threats at the time of its independence that were objectively real, but also heavily played up by Lee to create a sense of fear and thus exigency for his audience. In response, Singaporeans were expected to manifest the will to survive—the willingness to work hard, to sacrifice short-term comfort and to defend the country, in the interests of success for Singapore and its people. Lee focuses on the roles of the worker and the fighter in particular, representing the economic and military defense of the nation respectively.

Chapter 3 shows how the character of the Singaporean state becomes itself a source of national identity. Economic and political independence, permanence and the freedom to run Singapore as its people choose are held up as points of pride. Defining Singapore in opposition to Malaysia has the effect of carving out an ideological space where Singapore and Malaysia are crucially different despite vast similarities. Multiracialism is portrayed as the cornerstone of an integrated Singapore society, in direct contrast to the communalistic politics of a fragmented Malaysia. In Lee's rhetoric, Singapore is imagined as a leader in the region and among Third World and postcolonial countries. A new mythology of nationhood is created that, instead of drawing from historical narratives, situates Singapore's story in a glorious future that is in the process of creation. The proactive and forward-looking Singaporean mentality idealized throughout Lee's rhetoric is a reclamation of agency and emphasizes ownership, as it places the responsibility as well as the credit for success firmly on Singapore and its people.

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Short Titles

All texts are by Lee Kuan Yew and taken from the National Archives of Singapore's Speech-Text Archival and Retrieval System (STARS).

Lee, Kuan Yew. Speeches and interviews. *Speech-Text Archival and Retrieval System*. National Archives of Singapore. Web. 21 Mar. 2011.

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MJTS 65: Press Conference of the Prime Minister, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, with Malay Journalists at the Studio of TV Singapura on Wednesday, August, 11, 1965

ITN 65: Transcript of an Interview of the Prime Minister, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, with Mr. Gerry Seymour, Resident Correspondent of Independent Television News (ITN), August, 11, 1965

SMCH 65: Transcript of the Proceedings (Slightly Edited) when Singapore and Malaysian PAP Leaders Met Followed by a Press Conference at Cabinet Office, City Hall, on 12th August, 1965

TSI 65: Transcript of an Interview Given by the Prime Minister, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, to Four Foreign Correspondents on August 14, 1965, at the Studios Of Television Singapura

IFC 65: Transcript of an Interview of the Prime Minister, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, with Foreign Correspondents, at TV Singapura at 1130 Hours, August, 30, 1965

SNS 65: Transcript of a Speech Made by the Prime Minister, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, at the Sree Narayana Mission in Sembawang on 12th September, 1965

CP 65: Transcript of Prime Minister's Interview with Members of the Chinese Press in Hokkien Recorded at TV Singapura Studios on 13th September, 1965

- VT 65: Speech by the Prime Minister, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, to Senior Civil Servants at the Victoria Theatre on Thursday, September, 30, 1965
- CCC 65: Speech by the Prime Minister, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, at the 28th Anniversary Celebrations of the Liquor Retailers' Association, Held at the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, October, 3, 1965
- LRTA 65: Translation of the Speech by the Prime Minister, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, Made in Chinese, at the Liquor Retail Traders Association's 28th Anniversary Celebrations, October, 3, 1965
- COC 65: Transcript of the Prime Minister's Meeting with Representatives of the Four Chambers of Commerce at City Hall on 5th October, 1965
- SDS 65: Transcript of a Speech by the Prime Minister of Singapore, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, at a Dinner at Sri Temasek on Friday, 8th October 1965, In Honour of Shri Dinesh Singh, Deputy Minister for External Affairs of India
- TUH 65: Speech by the Prime Minister, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, at the Opening of the Trade Union House and Singapore Conference Hall, at Shenton Way, October, 15, 1965
- SPEU 65: Speech by the Prime Minister, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, at the 15th Anniversary Celebrations of the Singapore Printing Employees' Union, at the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, October, 17, 1965
- STC 65: Speech by the Prime Minister of Singapore, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, at a Reception for Afro-Asian Delegates Given by the Singapore Traction Company Employees' Union, October, 22, 1965
- EPHE 65: Speech by the Prime Minister, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, at the Opening Ceremony of Everton Park Housing Estate, November, 8, 1965
- NSCC 65: Speech by the Prime Minister, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, at the First Anniversary Celebrations of the Nee Soon Community Centre on Sunday, November, 14, 1965

- ICC 65: Speech by the Prime Minister, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, at a Dinner Given in Honour of Him by the Indian Chamber of Commerce at the Auditorium of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, November, 16, 1965
- PH 65: Transcript of a Speech in English by the Prime Minister at a Luncheon Given by the Pasir Panjang Residents at Perak House on 5th December, 1965.
- SGC 65: Speech by the Prime Minister, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, in English at the Serangoon Gardens Circus on Saturday, December, 11, 1965
- YDPN 65: Speech by the Prime Minister, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, when he Moved the Motion of Thanks to the Yang DiPertuan Negara for his Address in Parliament, December, 14, 1965
- BSF 66: Talk by the Prime Minister, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, On The Subject "Big And Small Fishes In Asian Waters" at a Meeting Of The University Of Singapore Democratic Socialist Club at the University Campus, June, 15, 1966
- NDR 66: Speech by the Prime Minister, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, at the National Day Rally Held at the National Theatre, on the Eve of National Day, August, 8, 1966
- TATS 66: Speech by the Prime Minister, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, at the Opening of Third Asian Teachers' Seminar at the Singapore Conference Hall, November, 20, 1966
- UASR 66: Question and Answer Session after the Prime Minister, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew's Address on "University Autonomy and Social Responsibility" at the Historical Society Meeting at the University of Singapore, November, 24, 1966
- ILO 66: Speech by the Prime Minister, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, at the International Labour Organization 13th Session at the Singapore Conference Hall on Monday, November, 28, 1966
- KEH 66: Speech by the Prime Minister, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, at a Dinner Held by Residents of King Edward VII Hall, December, 1, 1966

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- HRP 67: Hari Raya Puasa Message by the Prime Minister (11 Jan 1967)
- SC 67: Transcript of Speech by the Prime Minister, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, at the Third Centenary Birthday Celebrations of Sri Guru Govind Singh Held at Singapore Conference Hall, January, 14, 1967
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- SNG 67: Transcript of Speech by the Prime Minister, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, at the Sri Narayana Mission in Celebration of the 113th Birthday of Sri Narayana Guru, August, 20, 1967
- AA 67: Address by the Prime Minister, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, to the American Association on Friday, November, 10, 1967

NSTP 68: Speech by the Prime Minister, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, at a Send-Off Dinner for National Servicemen at the Tanjong Pagar Community Centre, March, 23, 1968

KKCC 68: Summary of Speech by the Prime Minister, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, at the Celebration of the 3rd National Day and its 7th Anniversary at the Kampong Kapor Community Centre, August, 31, 1968

SAOB 68: Speech by the Prime Minister, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, at the Reunion Dinner of St. Andrew's Old Boys' Association, September, 7, 1968

TPCC 68: Speech by the Prime Minister, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, at a Dinner Held at the Tanjong Pagar Community Centre, In Honour of National Servicemen, September, 15, 1968

NYM 69: Prime Minister, Mr Lee Kuan Yew's New Year Message – 1969 (1 Jan 1969)

SICC 69: Speech by the Prime Minister at the Banquet Given by the Singapore International Chamber of Commerce to Mark the 150th Anniversary of the Founding of Singapore - February 6, 1969

RI 69: Transcript of Address by the Prime Minister, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, at the Raffles Institution's Speech Day, on June 6, 1969

NDB 69: The Prime Minister's National Day Broadcast – 1969 (8 Aug 1969)

SB 69: The Prime Minister, Mr Lee Kuan Yew's Speech at the State Banquet in Celebration of National Day and the 150th Anniversary of the Founding of Modern Singapore, Held at Singapore Conference Hall on August 8, 1969

TPB 70: Summary of Speech by the Prime Minister, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, at the 16th Anniversary Celebration of the Tanjong Pagar Branch of the P.A.P. on 12th July, 1970

RELC 79: Address by the Prime Minister Mr Lee Kuan Yew to the Ministers, Ministers of State and Senior Civil Service Officers at the Regional Language Centre on 27 Feb 79

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Map of Southeast Asia, 3

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A typical public housing estate in Singapore, 3

Introduction

On 9th August 1965, Singapore was expelled from the Malaysian federation and became an independent country. The separation was so traumatic that Singapore's Prime Minister at the time, Lee Kuan Yew, broke down and wept at a press conference given after the proclamation of independence—"You see, the whole of my adult life... I have believed in the merger and the unity of these two territories. You know, it's a people connected by geography, economics, and ties of kinship... Will you mind if we stop for a while?" (SBC 65). The footage from this episode is now one of the iconic images from Singapore's history and has even been incorporated into the National Education curriculum.

After he had recovered his composure, Lee continued the press conference with a renewed spirit of rebelliousness. "I am nobody's stooge. I am not here to play somebody else's game. I have a few million people's lives to account for. And Singapore *will* survive" (SBC 65), he asserted to both his immediate audience and the invisible forces of coercion. Switching to Mandarin, he reiterated, "No one has the authority to boss us around. We will decide Singapore's destiny ourselves" (SBC 65). Then in English, he spoke of a Malay woman who waved her child's hand at him, in order to emphasize the support of the Malay community—"They know that what we say, we mean; that this is an equal society" (SBC 65).

Politicians in general seldom display deep emotion or vulnerability; in Asian or Singaporean society especially, it is considered unmanly to cry. Yet not only was this moment of weakness captured on film, it was and continues to be broadcast to the nation. Lee Kuan Yew writes in his memoirs, "I asked [the director] to cut the footage of my breakdown. He strongly advised against it. The press, he said, was bound to report it..." (*The Singapore Story* 16). An anecdote from a blog also suggests that this scene was treated by the press as an opportunity, rather than an embarrassment—"Chandra Mohan, a young producer then

producing this event, said he was stunned for a moment. And against all the rules of production that such shots of him should be avoided, he instructed the cameramen to dolly in to get a close-up of him” (Tay). The press’ broadcast of this scene, which encapsulates the major themes in the rhetoric of national identity that I will discuss in my paper, was calculated and sanctioned by Lee. While I do not believe this episode was staged either by Lee or the press, as a piece of rhetoric it was deliberately crafted and subsequently milked for political and propagandistic ends.

i. Historical Context

Singapore is a small country of 270 square miles, located at the tip of the Malayan Peninsula in Southeast Asia. It is separated from Malaysia by the Straits of Johor, which is 1.7 miles across at its widest point.¹ Situated at the crossroads of important maritime trade routes, Singapore was peacefully colonized by the British in 1819 and converted from a sleepy fishing village into a bustling and cosmopolitan trading port. Singapore’s population as of 2010 is 5.1 million people, compared to 1.9 million in 1965;² its racial composition has been fairly consistent at around 77% Chinese, 14% Malays and 8% Indians. The population is almost entirely of immigrant stock since the flourishing port attracted people from China, India and across Southeast Asia who were in search of trade or work. Singapore’s GDP per capita was US\$52,200 in 2009, making it one of the richest countries in Southeast Asia by far; in contrast, Malaysia and Indonesia have a GDP per capita of US\$14,900 and US\$4,000 respectively.³ Their populations, relatively unaffected by colonial era migration save in the urban centers, remain largely indigenous Malay. As such, Singapore is a small, affluent, secular and predominantly Chinese city-state sandwiched between two large, relatively undeveloped and predominantly Malay countries with strong Islamic identities. Geographical

1 ITLOS Case Record 27.

2 Statistics Singapore website.

3 All statistics are from the CIA World Factbook, except for those cited otherwise.

location, demographic composition and economic position are major factors that contribute to Singapore's conception of itself and its position in the world. Politically, Singapore is effectively a one-party state that has been ruled since independence by the People's Action Party (PAP), which has consistently achieved landslide victories of 61 – 87% in elections held every four years and generally acknowledged as free from fraud and corruption.⁴ Lee Kuan Yew, the founder of the PAP, was elected as Prime Minister in the 1959 elections held when Singapore obtained self-government from the British, and retained his seat until he stepped down in 1990.



(Anti-clockwise from top: Map of archipelagic Southeast Asia; Singapore's Central Business District; a typical public housing estate in Singapore⁵)

⁴ There are at least 7 active and 20 registered political parties; however, since independence, none of them have posed any threat to the PAP's dominance. Figures from the Singapore Elections website.

⁵ From Hicken, AsiaNews and ArchitectureYP respectively.

In the 1950s, Singapore struggled for independence from the British, and in 1963 achieved this goal through merger with Malaya, to form Malaysia. Prior to and during the period of merger with Malaya, Lee directed all his energies toward calling for a united Malaysian identity.⁶ The campaign for merger with Malaya as a stepping stone to independence focused on the similarities of the two territories, which are till today almost indistinguishable geographically and culturally. The persuasiveness of this campaign resulted in the Singapore electorate returning 70% in favor of merger just two years before separation. However, the governments of Malaya and Singapore had severe disagreements chiefly over the treatment of race in politics. Finally, in 1965, Singapore was expelled from the Malaysian Federation, thus becoming a sovereign country. Faced with the challenge of building a new nation separate from Malaysia, when just two years before he had convinced Singaporeans of the necessity of merger, Lee Kuan Yew had to address and talk about Singaporeans as a distinct group from Malaysians, and reassure fearful citizens that a separate existence—a separate identity—was feasible.

Political scientists have long struggled with the question of what defines a nation or a community, or what causes diverse individuals to identify themselves with a particular group. Nationalist movements from those of Greece and Hungary in the 1800s to the ongoing dispute between Israel and Palestine drew legitimacy from the internationally-sanctioned belief that national sovereignty hinges on a group's sense of shared history or culture. As Charland notes, citing McGee, "the term 'people' can rhetorically legitimate constitutions" (36). Many rhetorical critics point out the constructed nature of such group identities, and have argued that political rhetoric plays an important role in mobilizing societies and shaping identity, even to the extent of calling groups into being. As perhaps the only country in the world to have had independence imposed upon it, Singapore is a fascinating anomaly.

⁶ A good example is the speech at the Royal Society of International Affairs in London, May 1962, titled "What Does Malaysia Mean to Us?" in *The Man and His Ideas* (279-284).

Singapore's case is interesting first because the thrust of political rhetoric on national identity was forced to reverse abruptly at the point of Singapore's sudden expulsion from Malaysia. Second, Singapore consists of many diverse ethnic groups and does not have a distinct unifying historical or cultural tradition, as many other nation-states have. As Chua and Kuo put it, "Once [independence] was a *fait accompli*, it was necessary to construct a 'nation' *tabula rasa*" (1). If we were to apply Anderson's famous conceptualization of nations as "imagined political communities... imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (6), we might say that Singapore at the moment of independence was the hollow shell of a legally limited and sovereign state that had to be immediately inhabited by an imagined nation. Nowhere is the "imaginary" and contingent nature of nationhood more evident, or more obviously an artificial product of the discourse emanating from powerful elites. Examining how a Singaporean identity was imagined in political rhetoric could therefore shed much light on the construction of nations and national identity.

To date, Lee has received extremely little attention from the field of rhetorical criticism, which might lead some to wonder why I deem his work worthy of study.⁷ Lee has several times pointed out the amount of thought and effort he puts into his speeches (IFC 65). I often describe Lee's persona as straight-talking and down-to-earth—this image is not a result of his natural brusqueness but one that he consciously cultivates: "I made the speech off the cuff. In that way I sensed the mood of the gathering and pitched my thoughts in a way which made my listeners receptive" (RELC 79). Political success often hinges on effective rhetoric—as Lee puts it, "If I had not been able to reduce complex ideas into simple words and project them vividly for mass understanding, I would not be here today" (RELC 79).

⁷ I am not the first to apply rhetorical analysis to the speeches of Singaporean leaders, however. To my knowledge, Ong Siow Heng and Nirmala Govindasamy-Ong are my sole predecessors. Both my thesis and their book, *Metaphor & Public Communication: Selected Speeches of Lee Kuan Yew & Goh Chok Tong*, seek to demonstrate that the rhetoric of Singaporean politicians is intentional, carefully constructed and worthy of study. However, the book was designed to be an accessible textbook for students and could provide little more than moral support for my thesis.

ii. Critical Context

Most scholarship interested in the intersection of rhetoric and national identity focuses on the United States, with occasional contributions discussing South Africa, China and the *Québécois*. According to Maurice Charland, claims for Quebec sovereignty base themselves upon the asserted existence of a “*Québécois*” subject who inherently supports sovereignty and whose existence is justification for sovereignty. That subject and the collectivized *peuple québécois* are “interpellated” as political subjects through a process of identification in rhetorical narratives that “always already” presume the constitution of subjects (Charland 134). The case study of the *peuple québécois* is similar to the case study of the “Singaporean polity” in that a group is called into being that had not discursively existed before, and that the creation of the group necessitates specific action on the subject’s part. However, there is a fundamental difference—the ideological *peuple québécois* precedes a physical boundary, but the Singaporean nation was first geographically carved out, and then discursively described. In the same vein, the *peuple québécois* were defined on the basis of a similar history and culture, while those were precisely the ingredients that a Singaporean national identity at the time of independence lacked. Thus, the Singaporean case study engages with the *Québécois* story in interesting ways, not contradicting it, but demonstrating how the process of identity construction might operate where rhetoric functions to fill the space of a national boundary rather than to delineate its own boundaries.

Studies of the United States probe how a national identity was created out of a territory that encompassed a diversity of religions, cultures and ethnicities. One scholar, Vanessa Beasley, is interested in how an American national identity is represented in ritualistic speeches such as State of the Union speeches, which implicitly draw on and create an ideal American collective identity that is enduring but also subtly shifts to accommodate social movements. Beasley claims that US national identity is founded on principles rather

than group identities, since the diversity of its people required them to rally under “an ideational standard... that could easily accommodate diverse constituents” (15). In Singapore’s case however, principles alone do not seem adequate to support a national identity because of the absence of an existing shared value system. While Beasley’s claims are very specific to the US, the questions she raises are thought-provoking in any study of rhetoric and identity. In a country with a diverse population, she asks, what do rhetors tell the people they have in common? This study is informed by Beasley’s suggestions, but also explores other ideas around which identity can coalesce out of diverse groups.

An answer to the question, “How was national identity constructed in rhetoric?” in Singapore’s case cannot be found in prior scholarship on the subject, since the answers other scholars have suggested in the cases of the *peuple québécois* and the United States point to ideological or cultural resources Singapore did not have. Never having developed a sense of a unique culture, a distinctive history or a collective set of ideals, the only thing that all Singaporeans shared at the point of independence was the fact of their new citizenship, whether they liked it or not. In “Postcolonial Interventions in the Rhetorical Canon: An ‘Other’ View,” Raka Shome takes issue with this blindness of Western scholarship to perspectives from the margin, pointing out that rhetoric as a field draws unthinkingly from “white universalistic rhetorical paradigms” (599) that are in fact inadequate to describe the postcolonial experience. Indeed, the belief that ethno-cultural communities have the right to self-governance and territorial integrity belongs to such a paradigm.⁸ Yet, Singapore was denied both the liberty of delineating its own borders and of defining itself according to its particular cultural heritage, first by colonization and again by separation. Anna Michalska articulates this uniquely postcolonial dissatisfaction when she asks, “Colonial states were often artificially created: they were composed of different national, ethnic and religious

⁸ The UN formally expressed this principle in the statement, “All peoples have the right of self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development” (*International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*).

groups... Can such an exercise of the right to self-determination... fully satisfy peoples?" (qtd. in Summers *xl*). The discourses of the US and the *peuple québécois* use the principle of self-determination as an fundamental philosophical warrant; Singapore produced a rhetoric of nationhood despite being denied the exercise of self-determination.

Shome calls for an approach to rhetorical criticism that challenges the canon by integrating works from the margins (592). In particular, Shome highlights the need for theories that "address the rhetorical situations and experiences of disjunctured diasporic cultural identities... in hybrid borderlands and cultural spaces" (601). Singapore is just such a transcultural space, at the crossroads of several diasporas as a direct result of the colonial endeavor. Not only that, Lee's rhetoric is self-consciously non-Western and clearly demonstrates the influence of what Shome calls neo-colonial and racial forces (592).⁹ The influence of East Asian precedents and cultural tropes is obvious when comparing Lee's rhetoric to Sun Yat-Sen's, as examined in Xiao's essay, "Sun Yat-Sen's Rhetoric of Cultural Nationalism." As such, Singapore is an important case study for rhetorical theorists and postcolonial theorists alike.

I feel that this thesis also has a role to play in challenging a common attitude in postcolonial theory and criticism—that a subject must be a subaltern in some state of dire oppression and exploitation to be considered *Postcolonial* and thus worthy of attention.¹⁰ Well-meaning Western academics then consider it their moral responsibility to wax eloquent on the behalf of those who are "not authorized to speak" (Young 1). According to this mentality, Singapore is not a *Postcolonial* country since it has flourished and is now generally considered a First World nation. It is painfully ironic that those academics define their *Postcolonial* subjects as those who require their charity and refuse to acknowledge that a

⁹ See Chapter 1.3 for an example of borrowings from Chinese culture in Lee's rhetoric.

¹⁰ "Postcolonialism, with its fundamental sympathies for the subaltern, for the peasantry, for the poor, for outcasts of all kinds, eschews the high culture of the elite... The sympathies and interests of postcolonialism are thus focused on those at the margins of society" (Young 114).

successful country like Singapore was historically a post-colony that emerged out of its *Postcolonial* status despite lacking most of the power or advantages that First World countries enjoy.¹¹ I think that such an attitude in fact perpetuates discursive imperialism, in which the West continues to demonstrate imperialistic or neo-colonial tendencies through their constructions and representations of post-colonial countries or oppressed peoples (Shome 593). It would be far more instructive to examine the conditions and methods that helped Singapore succeed—including its rhetoric of nation-building—and that could perhaps also benefit postcolonial countries which are still struggling today.

iii. Singaporean Scholarship on National Identity in the Founding Years

Many arguments in this paper are heavily indebted to Chua Beng Huat, the only scholar I have encountered who has thought deeply and critically about the construction of national identity in Singapore immediately following independence. In his 1991 paper, *The Making of a New Nation: Cultural Construction and National Identity in Singapore*, co-authored with Eddie Kuo, Chua lays out why Singapore's case is so interesting to scholars of nationalism, as I have done. He points out that prior to Singapore's independence, "Singapore" and "Singaporeans" were not even discursive objects—they were created overnight, and overnight had to be imbued with a unique character. Singapore's unusual history allows the process of the state's construction of those discursive objects from scratch to be seen "relatively free from layers of historical and cultural memories" (5). However, to Chua, discourse (narrowly understood as rhetoric) is only one factor that contributed to the development of a Singaporean identity. Most of his paper describes the impact of social, political and economic policies that set Singapore apart from other countries and rooted Singaporeans firmly in a geographical and ideological space. Chua also shows how economic

¹¹ In Chapter 3.2 and 3.3 I show how Lee firmly identified Singapore with Third World and postcolonial nations, but envisioned it as a leader among those nations and was determined not to depend on foreign assistance.

policy contributed to a multiracial national identity, claiming that it deemphasized race and instead generated a new social order characterized by rationality and prizing achievement.

Chua continues his incisive analysis of Singaporean multiracialism in his 1995 paper, *Culture, Multiracialism, and National Identity in Singapore*. Here, Chua traces the way in which the Singapore government constructed new racial boundaries around hybridized and heterogeneous ethnic groups. The government first insisted on differences and enforced them through education and political discourse, then positioned itself as external to these divisions and therefore a disinterested protector of national interests. Chua's paper also highlights ways in which the government utilized racialized discourses—for example, those around “Westernization”, “Confucianism” and “Asian values”—to articulate a distinct national identity and support economic development. The arguments in this paper, although unpolished in many respects, have been extremely influential in my thinking on the issue of multiracialism. Chua's work made me aware of many assumptions and overarching structures that, as a Singaporean bred in an education system designed to reinforce particular perceptions of race, I am blind to.

Chua's work clearly attributes the creation of national identity largely to policy rather than rhetoric. Although I do not disagree with Chua, I wish to pick up instead on the role of rhetoric—given Singapore's pressing need to define and assert itself in the immediate term, policy could not have had the galvanizing effects on national identity that rhetoric was capable of. As the physical manifestation of Lee's ideological concepts, policies both arose out of and fed into his rhetoric. Lee's discussions of his policies put them in the context of national identity, even as his rhetoric drew on policies he had implemented in support of his arguments. My intention in this paper, when I do discuss policy, is to examine how Lee talks about major policies in a way that contributes to national identity.

ix. Thesis Outline

In many ways Singapore was a nation constructed by external forces—its demographic composition and economic role in the region was a legacy of the British colonial era, while its very independence was imposed on it by Malaysia. Instead of being a source of pride and identity therefore, the past was more readily understood as a site of disempowerment, weakness and even embarrassment. Whereas the Western narratives seen earlier draw from the past and project into the future, the Singaporean narrative is forced to break with the past to find definition in a common future. Where the stereotypical postcolony might have remained mired in a mentality of victimization and dependency, Lee's rhetoric of agency empowered Singaporeans to take control of their own future. In the process of discursively defining what it means to be Singaporean, Lee's rhetoric tells the story of a people's coming into its own and reclaiming the agency that had been denied them in the past, albeit, critically, a story that had yet to be written.

The process of reclaiming agency in Lee's rhetoric may be broken down into three main parts, all of which feed into a sense of ownership and encourage a proactive mentality, around which national identity is developed. These are the themes of multiracialism, threat and survival, and the character of the state. Even in the short fragment of footage I highlighted at the beginning of my introduction—a hastily conceived speech given during an emotional moment—these three themes are clearly evident. Lee's concern with multiracialism and his desire to appeal to specific groups can be seen in his use of two languages and his specific mention of the Malay community's support. His emphatic statement, "I am not here to play somebody else's game... Singapore *will* survive" (SBC 65), is emblematic of the dialectic of threat and survival that runs through Lee's rhetoric. Finally, Lee's assertion that "[Singapore] is an equal society" (SBC 65) suggests how the character of the Singaporean state can itself become a focal point for national pride. I have ordered these

themes in such a way that they build upon each other, not with the intention to argue that one theme precedes or outweighs another. In fact, the three elements are present together in the majority of Lee's speeches, and are intricately intertwined such that they reinforce each other.

In Chapter 1 I examine and deconstruct the theme of multiracialism. Race relations in 1960s Singapore were very tense but not usually violent, in large part a legacy of divisive Malaysian politics. In his rhetoric Lee focused on managing issues of race, continuing to emphasize the equality of all groups in Singapore and constructing Singaporean identity in a way that patched over ethnic differences and incorporated racial allegiances. Ethnic categories were subsumed under racial groups, so that the terms "race" and "ethnicity" are used interchangeably in a Singaporean context.¹² Each hyphenated Singaporean identity—Singaporean-Chinese, Singaporean-Malay or Singaporean-Indian—became an affirmation of the culture and values of each ethnic group, while emphasizing the shared ownership of the country and the group's role in ensuring a successful future for Singapore. By calling for the cooperation of all in the proactive creation of a meritocratic multiracial society in spite of the inherited diversity of people that had "foregathered" in Singapore under British rule (NDR 66), Lee reclaims personal and national agency, which feeds into national identity.¹³

In Chapter 2, I discuss the recurring motif of threat and survival. With the benefit of hindsight it is easy to take Singapore's economic success for granted, but for the vulnerable Singapore of the 1960s, survival was far from a given. Its small size meant that it had very limited land space, a modest population and no natural resources. Internally, Singapore faced the threat of racial violence, as well as Communist efforts to subvert government. Externally, there was always a sense that neighboring countries Malaysia and Indonesia could easily invade Singapore. These threats were objectively real, but also heavily played up by Lee to

12 Sociologically, "race" generally refers to an ethnic or cultural distinction that can be seen (e.g. White, Asian), whereas "ethnicity" refers to cultural heritage (e.g. Puerto Rican, French).

13 Meritocracy in Singapore's context refers to the idea that the state should first create a level playing field and then reward individuals according to merit or performance.

create a sense of fear and thus exigency for his audience. In response, Singaporeans were expected to manifest the will to survive—the willingness to make sacrifices in the interests of success for Singapore and its people. Lee focuses on the roles of the worker and the fighter, representing the economic and military defense of the nation respectively. In spite of Singapore's resource limitations, its unceremonious expulsion from Malaysia and the issues it had been saddled with by history, Singapore and Singaporeans can take clear and decisive action to reclaim agency over their collective future. In Lee's words, "The world does not owe us a living" (VT 65)—the success of Singapore is the responsibility of its people, and a testimony to the vitality and mettle of each Singaporean.

The last theme, discussed in Chapter 3, is the character of the Singaporean state, which functions as another source of national identity. Political autonomy, economic independence, and permanence are held up as points of pride. Multiracialism is portrayed as the cornerstone of an integrated Singapore, in direct contrast to the pro-Malay affirmative action politics of a fragmented Malaysia. Defining Singapore in opposition to Malaysia has the effect of carving out an ideological space where Singapore can exist on its own terms in spite of vast similarities with Malaysia. Furthermore, Lee does not understand Singapore to have been kicked out unwillingly, but suggests instead that it had to leave Malaysia as a result of a principled adherence to its convictions. In Lee's rhetoric, Singapore is imagined as a leader in the region and among Third World and postcolonial countries. A new mythology of nationhood is created that, instead of drawing from historical narratives, situates Singapore's story in a glorious future that is in the process of creation. Lee idealizes a proactive and forward-looking mentality and emphasizes citizens' ability to make choices about their own society. This is an act of reclaiming agency and contributes to a sense of ownership of the country, since Singaporeans collectively make it what it is.

x. Qualifications

I have limited my scope to the speeches of the first Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, a charismatic and intelligent man who is often equated with the country he almost single-handedly built up. Focusing on the dominant rhetor and political figurehead allows a more thorough analysis to be made of Lee's persona and its relationship to Singaporean identity. I have also decided to focus on speeches made in the first five years of independence, from 1965 to 1970. This was before a widespread identity had taken root and therefore a period when national identity was most actively being created from the top down. Furthermore, rhetoric had to bear the greater part of the immediate burden of creating national identity before the full effect of national policies was felt. Thus, the founding years would demonstrate most clearly the role of rhetoric in the construction of national identity.

The fact that I am a Singaporean who grew up in Singapore under the influence of the very persuasive rhetoric examined in this paper necessarily means that I am not an impartial critic. For almost the whole of my life, I have believed in the division of society into four racial groups, the fundamental value of meritocracy and the existence of an Asian work ethic, among other things. I began this paper so that I could come to a truer understanding of my country and the ways in which my (and others') sense of self is both artificially constructed and deeply genuine. I have tried to question my own assumptions on history or the nature of things and look to other scholars, such as Chua, for ways out of my own ingrained ways of thinking, but it is possible that I may have taken for granted particular interpretations or ideas, having ingested them wholesale since youth. To a discerning and questioning reader, these blind spots of mine will, I hope, be the most convincing demonstration of the subtle ways in which Lee's rhetoric has shaped the ideas of generations of Singaporeans.

Chapter 1: Multiracialism

1.1 Introduction

Singapore in the 1960s was home to a great number of ethnic groups from all over South, East and Southeast Asia. From China, there were Hokkiens, Cantonese, Teochews and many more. From across the Malay Archipelago were Malays, Javanese, Sundanese and so on. Among those from India and other parts of South Asia were Tamils, Gujeratis and Punjabis. Although some of these have always been considered dialect groups, they usually had distinct cultures and mutually unintelligible languages. Today, most Singaporeans see the country's ethnic diversity in terms of four main races: Chinese, Malay, Indian and Other.¹⁴ Although there is a very diverse population in Singapore, as well as a rather dominant majority culture, the country has been able to keep peace between the various minority groups while ensuring that the Chinese majority does not overwhelm other groups either politically or culturally. Prior to independence, Singapore had experienced major race riots between the Chinese and the Malays in 1950 and again in 1964. Yet only one incident of overt racial conflict has occurred in 45 years of independence—the 13th May 1969 riots, which were a spillover from violent outbreaks in Malaysia.

Malaysian politics was and continues to be divided along communal lines. Political parties such as the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) ostensibly represented ethnic communities, although Malay political dominance was unquestioned. The British refused to consider Malaysian independence until the racial conflicts between the two major Malay and Chinese communities had been smoothed out (Owen 320 – 321). Under the compromise negotiated between UMNO and the MCA with British support, the Chinese would have citizenship rights and maintain their economic position in Malaysia, while the Malays would

14 “Other” is usually taken to refer to Eurasians.

enjoy political and symbolic dominance (Hicken). In contrast, Singapore's PAP was always assertively multiracial in its policies and undermined the constitutional agreement by struggling for an integrated "Malaysian Malaysia", partly because Singapore's majority Chinese population would find Malay dominance unacceptable. The 1.4 million Chinese in Singapore also threatened the delicate racial balance in the Malaysian federation that maintained a slight majority of Malays and justified their privileged position. Lee's stubborn insistence on rocking the boat eventually led to Singapore's being expelled from Malaysia.

In this chapter I look at the theme of multiracialism in Lee Kuan Yew's rhetoric. I argue that Lee's treatment of multiracialism can be understood as a four-step process in which tensions between diverse ethnic identities are defused and channeled into a hyphenated Singaporean identity. Like a series of Russian dolls, individuals are located within groups and groups within the nation in order to help individuals identify with the nation. The first step involves constructing four distinct and separate racial groups out of a potpourri of ethnic identities and essentializing the values and qualities of each. The second step is to convince each Singaporean to identify with his or her designated racial group by emphasizing each group's achievements and promulgating a philosophy of "rootedness" and pride in one's own culture. In the third step, individual groups are positioned within the nation as Lee assures each group of an equal position in a just and meritocratic society. In the fourth and final step, ethnic identities are channeled toward a cohesive national identity. Each group's qualities are portrayed as critical to the continued success of Singapore, thus empowering individuals to shape a shared future and developing a sense of ownership of and belonging to Singapore via identification with an ethnic group. In this nested process of constructing identity, individuals become hyphenated Singaporeans—Singaporean-Chinese, Singaporean-Malay, Singaporean-Indian and so on.

1.2 Constructing Racial Groups

The simplistic formulation of Singaporeans as belonging to four groups—Chinese, Malay, Indian and Other—as well as the fact that Singaporeans today define themselves according to those terms, masks the rhetorical sleight of hand that took place early in Singapore’s history, beginning even before merger but fully consolidated post-independence. This first step, which laid the foundations for Singaporean multiracialism as a rhetorical motif and a political concept, took place when “the boundaries of each ‘racialized’ group were redrawn and (re)enforced in order to attribute to it a ‘homogenized’ existence” (Chua, *Culture, Multiracialism and National Identity* 8).

The Malaysian constitution includes a rather circular definition that a Malay is “a person who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language, [and] conforms to Malay custom...” (Constitution of Malaysia 131). Following the Malaysian definition of the Malay race and the British and Malaysian precedents of ethnic divide-and-rule, Singapore adopted and even extended the boundaries drawn around ethnicity, religion, language and custom. Chinese were typified as speaking Chinese (i.e. Mandarin) and following Confucianism, Buddhism or Taoism. Indians were generally portrayed as Hindu by religion, and the Tamils, as the largest dialect group, came to represent Indian interests and the typical Indian language; however, minority Indian cultures continued to be recognized.

The “Chinese, Malays, Indians and Others” pattern of representation that occurs throughout Lee’s rhetoric on race can be seen in such statements as, “We found we had more in common with the Indians, Malays, Eurasians who came from Singapore and Malaysia than with the Chinese from the other parts of the world” (SNG 67). The association of each racial group with a particular language can be seen when Lee says, “If you know only one language, whatever it may be, Chinese, Malay, Tamil or English and no other language, then in this society, you will find yourself a problem” (ENB 66). A further example of the discreet

equation of a Chinese language with Mandarin Chinese occurs when Lee criticized supporters of Chinese supremacy, saying, “They begin to speak out like a hero, saying that there are 80% Chinese in Singapore; as such Chinese should be one of our official languages” (CCC 65). Lee reinforces the idea that Chinese speak the Chinese language, but while most Chinese of that time would have had different understandings of what a Chinese language was, Lee simply assumes that Chinese is Mandarin.

Lee’s treatment of the Indian community is slightly different in that he recognizes its heterogeneity—he does not equate Tamil with the entire Indian community, although he does use the Tamil community to represent his concern for the Indian community as a whole. In a speech given at the opening of Changi Tamil School, Lee said, “I am a friend not only of the Indians here but of the Indian people and a great admirer of their civilization and their culture” (CTS 66). In addressing a group of Tamils, Lee felt justified in taking them to represent the entire Indian community and addressing the community as a whole. He went on to argue for the preservation of cultural differences in a strangely candid manner:

I do not care that your children should be different from mine.... I may not want my children to learn how to dance with the fingers going like that because Chinese fingers are short, you know, and they cannot turn up! I have been watching Indian dancers over the years and I say only Indian fingers can do that! But I would defend your right to do that. (CTS 66)

To a mind wary of stereotyping various races, such trivial and sweeping statements on the length and flexibility of different races’ fingers are somewhat crude. However, these generalizations are in fact fundamental to Lee’s construction of the four racial groups, particularly in this first step wherein he sketches out a distinct identity for each group. Here, Lee’s rhetoric is not intended to work as a stereotype or offend either Indians or Chinese who

are self-conscious about their digits; rather, it is an anecdotal and humorous way of saying that each race has its own unique culture and distinctive strengths.

In an address to the Sikh community, Lee tailors a similar message specifically to a small and tightly-knit community with a strong sense of collective identity. He tells them, “The Sikh community represents, to me, one of the stirring sagas of human history—a small but a very dynamic and vigorous community” (SC 67). This example demonstrates Lee’s flexibility in accommodating and playing to existing ethnic loyalties, but also highlights general patterns in his addresses to various racial communities, whether narrowly or broadly inscribed. The same process of essentialization is at work, albeit with a smaller group. Lee’s endorsement of the Sikh community would be likely to generate pride in the group and a sense of loyalty to an appreciative leader; in generating broad categories of racial identity that each Singaporean identifies with, Lee achieves the same effect with broad swathes of the population. Charland’s concept of constitutive rhetoric is especially enlightening here. In the same way the *Québécois* subject who inherently supports sovereignty is rhetorically constructed and “interpellated” with the collectivized *peuple québécois* (Charland 134), Lee generates the four racial categories and then, using generalized but culturally-recognizable positive traits, “hails” his audience so that the individual “recognizes and acknowledges being addressed” (Charland 138). The shorthand of “Chinese, Malays, Indians and Others” becomes a line all Singaporeans can see themselves in and signals Lee’s recognition of the personal concerns of (racialized) individuals in a compelling yet manageable form.

1.3 Deepening Individuals’ Identification with the Group

After defining the four ethnic groups by their traits and qualities, the second step in the construction of multiracialism was to deepen individuals’ identification with their groups. Having already generated in group members a pride in their own culture, Lee went on to

portray “ethnic values” as essential for a well-adjusted and moral character in members of each group. Lee often used the phrase “life-line” to describe individuals’ connectedness to their cultural heritage—“Let everybody keep that life-line with his culture, his language, his tradition, his values” (SNG 67). The phrase brings to mind a rope thrown out to a drowning person in rough waters, a metaphor that is echoed in Lee’s assertion that “there is a necessity for preserving for each child that cultural ballast and appreciation of his origin and his background” (ENB 66). This maritime metaphor is especially compelling given that Singapore was an island nation and a safe port for ships from all over.¹⁵ Almost all Singaporeans were of immigrant stock or even first- or second-generation immigrants, drawn to Singapore by work opportunities at the bustling port and familiar with its workings. The metaphor would remind those immigrants of where they came from, but also why they came to Singapore and the promise of security and progress it offered them.

Maritime metaphors reinforce the message of this anecdote emphasizing the importance of retaining one’s links to one’s cultural heritage— “[My Sikh friend] threw his past away: he shaved his beard; he threw away his turban; he had a hair-cut. No harm at all. But something happened to him and in next to no time, he was doing foolish things. He lost his anchorage” (TF 67). Lee used this story at least three times in speeches to predominantly Indian audiences. It is told in a casual tone, punctuated by conversational expressions like “you know” which simulate closeness and request engagement from his listeners. The nameless protagonist is a character whom Singaporeans, especially those from the same community, could easily imagine or even recognize in their acquaintances, friends or relatives, giving them a way of interpreting their individual situations. At the same time, the protagonist is a striking figure, with the familiar yet distinctive features of a Sikh¹⁶. His actions, emphasized by repetition, are violent and decisive—he “threw his past away” (TF

15 See Chapter 3.3 for another maritime metaphor of the lighthouse beacon.

16 Sikhs are members of a small community from Punjab in India whose men are usually recognized by their uncut hair hidden under turbans and their prominent beards. Typically, Sikh men have ‘Singh’ in their name.

67), “threw away his turban” (TF 67), and “threw off his beard” (SC 67). In a 1965 rendition of this story, Lee mentions that “Mr. Jamit Singh” was the leader of the Harbor trade union (COC 65). For people aware of this contextual information, it would have been heavily ironic that the leader of the Harbor union should not know the importance of an anchorage. The anecdote makes Lee’s point more immediate and memorable for his audience, asks them to contribute to a personal understanding of the moral and lends a human dimension to otherwise abstract concepts. At the same time, the anecdote subtly reinforces Lee’s position as a friend and supporter of the Sikh community, as when Lee, on another occasion, frames the story as “the lesson which a Sikh friend of mine impressed upon me” (SC 67). Lee concludes with the moral, “it gets very difficult for a ship without anchor in a harbor when it gets stormy” (TF 67). This has the ring of a proverb and compellingly draws a general principle—as Lee understands it—from a situation which may have multiple interpretations.

Lee’s emphasis on cultural identity is reminiscent of Chinese traditions—Sun Yat Sen emphasized the need to return to “China’s old moral standards” (Xiao 173) in his speech advocating Chinese nationalism; these standards included “Loyalty and Filial Devotion” which “involved people’s natural duties to people’s origins” (Xiao 173).¹⁷ There is a well-known Chinese proverb, 饮水思源, that means, “When drinking water, reflect on the source.” Elaborating on the need for cultural ballast, Lee expressed, “[Each child] must know from whence he came and how it is that he is where he is” (ENB 66); on another occasion Lee said, “You must give [the child] some life-line to his past. He must understand his beginnings” (UASR 66). These words recall those used by Sun and call to mind this

17 There is an interesting contrast with the US, which forged an identity out of rejecting British colonization and pursuing liberty—“American students have long been taught that the new nation was founded by colonists who had fled Tudor-Stuart England and Hanoverian Britain in search of religious freedom and economic opportunity, taking up arms to escape British imperialism” (Walter A. McDougall, qtd. in *NEWS*). I do not think this contrast is accidental; in later years Lee’s rhetoric became distinctly anti-Westernization, as in this statement from 1995: “It is this sense of cultural supremacy which leads the American media to pick on Singapore and beat us up... American principles and theories have not yet proven successful in East Asia.” (Lee, qtd. in *The Man and His Ideas* 206). Manifestations of this rejection of Western supremacy can be seen in this idealization of cultural inheritance and in the anti-colonial rhetoric I discuss later in this section and in Chapter 3.2.

traditional Chinese proverb, especially given the cloud of metaphors around water. Lee's technique of drawing on Chinese cultural sensibilities resembles what Xiao describes as Sun's "rhetoric of cultural nationalism" "firmly grounded in Chinese cultural concepts and methods" (177). At the same time, by demonstrating his awareness of and identification with Chinese heritage and values, Lee enacts the kind of mentality he wants his audience to have. Lee himself came from an upper-middle class, English-educated family background and attended university in Britain (*The Singapore Story*).¹⁸ Such rhetoric was intended to boost his *ethos* as a man of the people and generate pathetic appeal for the less well-to-do, Chinese-educated people who made up the bulk of Singapore's population.¹⁹

In an address at the University of Singapore to well-educated, most likely English-speaking students, Lee described the responses of two privates from the Peoples' Defence Forces as they thanked the neighborhood community for their gift of several television sets. While the English-educated private thanked the community leaders for providing them with entertainment, the Chinese-educated private thanked them for their concern for the soldiers and expressed his delight at the growing rapport between the community and the armed forces. Lee reflected on the difference between the two, saying, "[The English-educated private] was not thinking, you know... [The Chinese-educated private] never went beyond primary school but there were cultural values and attitudes which make up a civilization" (UASR 66). The colonial English-based education system was associated with an "emasculated", "de-culturized" and "enervated" populace, while a Chinese-based education emphasizing cultural values was linked with "toughness" and "backbone" (UASR 66). In this collection of anatomical metaphors, the society permeated with colonial influence seems to

18 This occasionally comes through in his speech—for example, in an example in Chapter 2.4, Lee uses the quaint phrase "physical jerks" to refer to physical training.

19 In the 1960s, Singaporean-Chinese were generally either Chinese-educated or English-educated, referring to the language of instruction in the school systems they attended. The English-educated were typically from the social and economic elite, whereas the Chinese-educated majority was seen as coming from a lower social class.

be dehumanized and disintegrates into an automaton that can neither think nor reproduce, while native culture and heritage is revealed as the core of an enduring body politic.

Lee went on to accuse the “British English-educated schools” of producing “a generation of assistants” by making them believe that colonized people were “inherently inferior” (UASR 66)—by implication the students in the audience, as well as Lee himself. It is puzzling why Lee should want to antagonize his audience while seemingly ignoring his personal background, an irony not lost on the students, who questioned Lee on his English-based education with a measure of acrimony. I propose that Lee wanted to play the devil’s advocate in order to engage the students in a thought-provoking and meaningful debate, while setting himself up as a model whose attitudes and opinions they should emulate.

In the debate with the university students as well as in other speeches, there is a palpable element of anti-colonial feeling underlying Lee’s philosophy of cultural rootedness:

But, at the same time, never forget that you are not an Englishman, and I am not an Englishman... We must keep a part of ourselves—the part that leads us back to our histories, to our cultures, to our civilizations from whence we came and out of that, the past, we will together create a present and a future worthy of a people that have come from very ancient cultures and civilizations. (TPCC 67)

The parallelism of “you are not an Englishman, and I am not an Englishman” is aesthetically pleasing, but in drawing the audience’s attention to the nationality of the Prime Minister, Lee also subtly points out that Singapore once was but is no longer a colony of the British.

Having discreetly reminded the audience of this humiliating period of subjection, Lee quickly provides them with a basis for regaining pride in themselves—the expansive richness of the ancient civilizations they originated from. Lee draws a direct line from a past that stretches beyond memory to “a present and a future” that is “worthy” of a great people—skipping over the colonial period. In contrast to the bland words he uses to describe English, the language

he uses in his vision of the past and future is epic in scale, almost mythological.²⁰ Relative to the eons of ancient civilization and the infinite future, the period of colonization diminishes into insignificance and is overtaken by the agency of a newly-empowered people. This passage is a clear example of how Lee uses the rhetoric of cultural rootedness to deepen Singaporeans' allegiance to their racial groups. At the same time, focusing on cultural heritage and identifying with powerful ancient civilizations can be a direct method of reclaiming agency from a disempowered colonial past.

1.4 Positioning Groups within the Nation

After persuading individuals to identify with their respective racial categories, those racial groups were then located within the nation. This positioning of groups within the nation—whether it was preferable to have a multiracial society where all groups were equal or an implicit social contract where racial groups had their respective spheres of dominance—was the main point of contention between Malaysia and Singapore in the lead-up to separation. This affected Lee's presentation of the concept of equality since he had to underscore and even exaggerate Singapore's commitment to a multiracial society in black-and-white terms, so that nuances and complexities of the subject were glossed over. In Chapter 3.3 I will elaborate on how Singapore was differentiated from Malaysia chiefly through an emphasis on their contrasting racial policies; in this section I will concentrate on how equality as a concept was constructed rhetorically.

The ideal of equality is at the heart of Singapore's treatment of race and citizenship, at least rhetorically. It is enshrined in the national Pledge and represented as a star on the Singapore flag. Lee demonstrated his insistence on this point when he said:

²⁰ Here and later on in this chapter I use the word "mythological" to describe some of the elements of Lee's rhetoric. These are instances of the rhetorical creation of a national mythology, a theme which I will explore more thoroughly in Chapter 3.4.

We are an equal society. You are equal to me; I am equal to you. Nobody is more equal than others. In some places, they say, ‘We are all equal.’ But what they mean is they are more equal, you see—which makes life very difficult. But here, when we say ‘equal’, we really mean it. (SNS 65)

Lee repeats the word ‘equal’ seven times, each time adding a new shade of meaning to the term. He begins with the trite abstraction of an equal society, one that has been rehashed over and over by politicians both crooked and straight. He then sets himself apart from the run-of-the-mill politician by returning seriously to the concept of equality and making it immediate for his audience. “You are equal to me,” he says, addressing his audience directly using forceful monosyllables, and implicitly raising each listener to the importance of the Prime Minister. The parallelism of the next phrase, “I am equal to you,” invites the listener to think even more deeply about the concept of equality, and advertises Lee’s image as a man of the people, one who understands them and represents their interests. Other phrases like “you see” and “we really mean it” are consistent with this straight-talking, down-to-earth persona.

Lee’s next use of the word references the society of Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, in which “All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others” (108). A learned listener would recognize that Lee was distancing his society from Orwell’s dystopia, but even a person hearing the oxymoronic phrase “more equal” for the first time would find it thought-provoking and perhaps reach a deeper sense of the meaning of equality. Lee then points to a vague “they”, dishonest politicians in “some places”, who speak of equality but create a society in which they, or their groups, are more privileged—an indirect criticism of Malaysia. In contrast, every Singaporean—as Lee imagines—truly believes in equality. The use of the word “we” in combination with Lee’s “man of the people” image suggests to listeners that Lee is speaking for all of Singaporean society and generates a sense of solidarity. In fact, Lee is simply modeling the ideal Singaporean for his audience, and in a way, constituting them as

the kind of citizen he wants them to be—“hailing” them (Charland 138), drawing them into a narrative of “them” and “us”, then defining the attitudes of the subject he has constructed.

On another occasion, Lee tells Malay journalists, “I make this promise: you will be of equal status with me. And I promise you your special position” (MJTS 65). This masterful statement balances the tensions of “special but equal,” lending itself to different interpretations that can placate Malay hegemonists while reassuring other ethnic groups that they will not be subordinated. The word “equal”, as I have shown, is loaded with significance in Lee’s rhetoric, and would be both familiar and resonant to Singaporeans. The reaffirmation of the concept of equality would soothe members of other races who were concerned about Malay dominance. At the same time, this message, directed at the Malay community, suggests to a Malay audience that they would be elevated to a status on par with the Prime Minister, echoing the guarantee of Malay political dominance in Malaysia. Rhetorically, this statement is extremely vague—however, its counterpart in policy is the very explicit Article 152 of Singapore’s Constitution, which guarantees “the special position of the Malays” (Constitution of the Republic of Singapore).²¹ How can Lee’s rhetoric on equality be understood in the light of such contradictory policies?

There have been accusations from critics that Lee never believed in equality; I believe these contradictions arise out of the vagueness inherent in the concept of equality.²² Interviews with Lee in 1994 and 1995 demonstrate his awareness of the difference between an equality of opportunity and an equality of outcome (*The Man and His Ideas* 159). However, even though the word “equality” encompasses a number of distinct concepts, we scarcely see Lee elaborate on the nuances of this term or acknowledge the potential

21 It continues that “it shall be the responsibility of the Government to protect, safeguard, support, foster and promote their political, educational, religious, economic, social and cultural interests and the Malay language” (Constitution of the Republic of Singapore).

22 In support of this claim, the documentary *Success Stories* featured a 1960s video recording of Lee saying, “The human being is an unequal creature. This is a fact. And we start off with the proposition: All the great religions, all the great movements, all the great political ideologies, say, let us make the human being as equal as possible. In fact, he is not equal. Never will be” (Lee Kuan Yew, *Success Stories*).

contradictions between his policy and the rhetoric of equality. We see in Lee's rhetoric, on one hand, an asserted distinction between various meanings of the word "equality", and on the other hand, a neglect of the practical implications of the term.

McGee's concept of the "ideograph" provides excellent insights into this complex and even contradictory treatment of the word "equality" in Lee's rhetoric. McGee defines ideographs as words that, like symbols, "signify and 'contain' a unique ideological commitment" and "suggest that each member of a community will see as a gestalt every complex nuance in them" (428). "Equality" is just such an ideograph—in fact, it is one of the ideographs that McGee devotes particular attention to. In Lee's rhetoric, it represents an unquestioned ideal and an absolute good—Singapore is "an equal society" (SNS 65) where groups have "equal status" (MJTS 65). In spite of the fragility of "equality" as a principle, one is not "permitted to question the fundamental logic of ideographs" (McGee 429). From the word's elevated and sacrosanct position as a rhetorical ideograph comes its persuasive force and its ability to "cloud" and "hinder" (430) multiple and complex meanings.

If ideographs are not supposed to be questioned, then why does Lee probe at the various meanings of being equal in the passage where the word is used seven times? McGee, in his essay, addresses this question directly when he points out that both the USSR and the United States claim a belief in "equality"—but this is "not the same word in its meaning or its usage" (430). He writes that "one can therefore precisely determine the difference between the two communities, in part, by comparing the usage of definitive ideographs" (430). For Singapore as much as for the USSR and the US, "equality" was a "definitive ideograph", a critical part of the nascent national identity that Lee was shaping. By molding an understanding of "equality" that differed, at least by assertion, from neighboring countries' definition of the same word, Lee mobilized the power of ideographs to help create a new national community that was both self-consciously and subconsciously distinct.

1.5 Channeling Group Identity toward National Identity

Given the impossibility of conjuring up a pure and distinct Singaporean race out of a profoundly divided society, Lee chose to further emphasize, mitigate and take advantage of existing perceptions of racial difference. In this final step in Lee's process of constructing national identity through the concept of multiracialism, the Singaporean identity arises out of individuals' sense of affiliation with their particular racial groups. The ultimate goal remains a society free from discrimination based on ethnicity, yet even in his most visionary moments, Lee is careful never to suggest the erasure of cultural difference, but limits himself to the development of commonality across groups.

When tackling issues of race, disparities in education and economic level between racial groups were of especial concern to Lee because "if groups [were] left behind either on the basis of language, race, religion or culture, and if with these groups, the line of division coincides with the line of race" (NDR 66), fault lines would develop in society. Lee undoubtedly had in mind the status of indigenous Malays in Malaysia and Singapore. While the Chinese had moved into urban centers and benefited from the booming economy during the period of British colonization, the Malays had been largely established in villages in rural areas and maintained there by the British, who encouraged the persistence of "a vigorous and self-respecting agricultural peasantry" through land titles and even "Malay reservations" (Owen 313-4). As such, Malays at the time were typically poor, uneducated and rural-dwelling, while Chinese were richer, better-educated and concentrated in cities like Singapore. This entrenched inequality was a factor that made the "melting pot" approach to nation-building infeasible for Singapore, as those disparities would simply be ignored rather than addressed. Ethnic pride and the often irreconcilable cultural and religious differences between groups also made a Singapore free of racial distinctions impossible in the immediate-term. Instead, Lee advocated the "salad bowl" approach, in which individuals

whose allegiances lay with Singapore maintained their separate ethnic identities.²³ Borrowing from American terminology, I would describe Singaporean citizens as having hyphenated identities—Singaporean-Chinese, Singaporean-Malay or Singaporean-Indian, for example.²⁴

On several occasions, Lee channeled group members' pride in their community into a sense of identification with Singapore by praising the qualities and traits ascribed to their racial group. In an address to the Sikh community, Lee said, "I have ten thousand people of Sikh descent or Sikh immigrants in Singapore; and I would like all of Singapore to know that they are a valuable contribution to the life, the vitality, the success and the prosperity of our society" (SC 67). The phrase, "I would like all of Singapore to know," conjures up an invisible audience of other races as witness to the contributions of the Sikhs and situates the Sikh community within the larger Singaporean society. The list, "life... vitality... success... prosperity," reads as a list of qualities possessed by the Sikh community and generates a sense of ethnic pride in Lee's immediate audience. Yet, the phrase "our society" curbs *exclusively* ethnic pride and directs it toward identification with Singapore—in Lee's formulation, Sikh success only exists through the collaborative efforts of all Singaporeans. At the same time, Lee assures and reminds his primary and secondary audience respectively that small though a community may be, it must be valued in Singapore. Singapore and the credit for its success is shared between groups but owned by all.

Lee's message to the Malay community on Hari Raya Puasa reveals the same pattern of carefully controlled and directed ethnic pride in the line, "Let us remember that Islam, like other great religions, represents man's eternal quest for equality and brotherhood between all

23 The "salad bowl" refers to a local dish called "rojak".

24 Years ago, perhaps in the early-2000s, there was a debate raging regarding this hyphenated identity and whether Singaporeans should call themselves "Chinese-Singaporean" or "Singaporean-Chinese", etc. The question was whether Singaporeans identified themselves primarily by race or by nationality—that is, where their loyalties lay. I was barely politically-sentient at the time but this discussion made a strong impact on me. Unfortunately, I have not been able to find the relevant speeches or articles and can only depend on my hazy memory for the gist of the debate.

peoples regardless of race, language or culture” (HRP 67).²⁵ While describing and praising Islam with grandiose phrases like “eternal quest,” Lee subtly locates Islamic teachings within the framework of Singaporean civil society with words that are overt reminders of signature Singaporean ideals. As I have discussed earlier, the word “equality” carries strong resonances from much of Lee’s rhetoric on the character of Singaporean multiracialism. In particular, the phrase “regardless of race, language or culture” repeats almost word for word a line in the Singapore pledge, “regardless of race, language or religion.” The unfamiliar replacement of the word “religion” with “culture”, while a politically-sensitive choice, would nevertheless invite the more thoughtful to reflect on religion as an element of culture and the extent to which Islam advocated harmony between followers of different religions. In a masterful combination of high praise and deflation, Lee compares Islam to “other great religions,” elevating Islam while simultaneously reminding Muslims that they share a globalized space with other great religions. As with the praise of the Sikhs, in this example the qualities and beliefs of the Malay community are co-opted in support of Singaporean ideals and a hyphenated but nevertheless Singaporean identity.

Although Lee relied on existing ethnic allegiances that were easy to mobilize and build upon to generate a rudimentary sense of national identity in the short-term, his ultimate goal was still a united society that could look beyond ethnic groups and identify, first and foremost, as distinctively Singaporean. This dynamic is summed up in the passage:

So, to each what he originally had—his culture, his language, a link with his past, his heritage. And to each something added, so that they can meet and talk and understand, laugh at the same things, be pained and disturbed by the same things, and eventually integrate into one society. (TATS 66)

²⁵ This Muslim festival, also known as Aidil Fitri or Eid ul-Fitr, marks the end of Ramadan, the fasting month.

Lee recognizes that the initial phase of the creation of national identity occurs through what each individual “originally” has—“his culture, his language, a link with his past, his heritage.” As the list goes on, the audience is forced to consider the nuances of similar items in order to arrive at a deeper understanding of the necessity of cultural rootedness. The image of the “link with his past” recalls Lee’s favorite metaphors of the “life-line” and the “cultural ballast”, suggesting that the past is a source of strength and stability. The parallelism of “to each what he originally had... to each something added” maps the second sentence onto the first to suggest a new collective culture that would augment existing identities, while conveniently positioning Lee as a benevolent ruler who dispenses gifts twofold. Where the first sentence consists of abstractions, the second sentence vividly enacts daily life in a utopian society in which people not only meet but talk, not only talk but understand, and, like a family, share their joys and sufferings with each other. This may be Lee’s own “imagined community” (Anderson), but in describing it in such a cinematic manner Lee invites his audience to imagine and partake in the same Singaporean community.

At times, Lee seems to struggle to elucidate the distinctions between the existing segmented Singaporean society and his ideal of a united Singaporean community in such a way as to convey his vision without threatening communal interests:

We [believe]... that that salvation lies in an integrated society. I use the word advisedly – “integrated” as against “assimilated”... But I say integration is possible – not to make us one grey mass against our will, against our feelings, against our inclinations, but to integrate us with common values, common attitudes, a common outlook, certainly a common language and eventually, a common culture. (NDR 66)

“Integration”, which implies unity and solidarity, is set in opposition to “assimilation”, which suggests the absorption of minority cultures into a majority culture, and, in Singapore’s context, alludes specifically to Malays’ fear of Chinese culture overwhelming their culture.

While the difference between “integration” and “assimilation” is extremely fine, it is not the words but the assertion of difference that is significant. For all the features that Lee hopes Singaporeans would share, their society should never become a dystopian “grey mass” devoid of color and individuality. Lee does not elaborate on how a people can have so much in common while retaining individuals’ unique traits, but the florescence of commonalities suggests an intricate and multifaceted character whose personality is given free and full expression, rather than constrained “against” his or her nature.

1.6 Conclusion

In this chapter I have broken down Lee’s construction of multiracialism into four steps—first, the construction of racial groups; second, the identification of the individual with the group; third, the positioning of the group within the nation; and finally, the channeling of group identity toward a national identity. The four-step construction of the hyphenated Singaporean identity was a process through which Lee could “interpellate” (Charland 134) existing ethnic identities with the newly-created Singaporean identity, and in that way “hail” (138) his audience in ways they were somewhat familiar with. At the same time, Charland’s theory of constitutive rhetoric alone is inadequate to explain how a Singaporean identity, rather than merely ethnic identities, was produced. Raka Shome would likely point out that Charland’s theory lacked “a consciousness of the borderlands” (595)—the important recognition that, unlike the traditional Western subjects of rhetorical inquiry, postcolonies are sites of cultural intersection and ambivalence. While Charland nimbly draws out how the rhetoric of the *peuple québécois* was a process of the “essentialization” of nations (Shome 595), his analysis is less useful for understanding situations of cultural hybridity and diasporic identity (Shome 594) that postcolonies like Singapore had to deal with and that the relatively more homogenous *peuple québécois* did not.

Singapore's social milieu was a matter of inheritance, not choice. Out of "the many different kinds of people who foregathered here in over 150 years of the British Raj" (NDR 66), Lee attempted to forge a distinct Singaporean identity, and challenged Singaporeans to make his vision a reality through shared ideals and experiences. I have argued that Lee's rhetoric wove the success of the group together with the success of the country, and that any sense of ethnic pride generated was always inextricably linked with national pride. Individuals, as part of racial groups, were portrayed as essential to the success of the country, giving them not only a sense of ownership of Singapore but also a sense of freedom and agency—that Singapore was a place where their hard work would pay off and where their contributions would be significant and recognized. I have offered a hypothesis of how the rhetoric of national identity arising out of a country at the intersection of multiple diasporas functions, and I hope that it can provide a more complex and faceted view of how identity may be created in the absence of clear cultural and historical commonalities.

Chapter 2: Threat and Survival

2.1 Introduction

The months following Singapore's independence in 1965 were a critical period where Singaporeans as well as the outside world were looking to Lee Kuan Yew for a sense of the country's future. Singaporeans had, until 9th August 1965, been told that their survival was dependent on merger with Malaysia. Now that Singapore was on its own, how would it survive? There were several possible futures for Singapore, besides survival and success. A likely possibility was internal unrest and bloodshed as a result of racial tensions or a Communist takeover. Another was the collapse of Singapore's economy as a result of its small land size and population or its lack of natural resources such as water or forests. Furthermore, Singapore could no longer depend on Malaysia, its traditional hinterland, for a market for its goods or for traffic through its port. All these factors made governing Singapore a challenge and any sign of mismanagement would shake investor confidence. A weak Singapore could mean a return to Malaysia, either in humiliation on Malaysia's terms, or by forceful annexation. Invasion by Indonesia was also a possibility, as Indonesia was at that time engaged in armed "confrontation" with Malaysia over territorial issues (Owen 416, 433). While Singaporeans looked to Lee for reassurance and a sense of direction, the international community was also concerned about the fate of Singapore—whether business interests there and in the region were still viable, whether Singapore would become dependent on Western aid, or whether it would become a Communist country, for example.

With the benefit of hindsight, some of these threats might admittedly seem far-fetched, but one can only speculate on their likelihood in 1965. Of greater interest to this thesis is how Lee's rhetoric acknowledged this sense of real *and* imagined danger and even emphasized the threats Singapore faced, creating a siege mentality that heightened Singaporeans' fear of looming alternate futures. Having created such a strong sense of

exigency, Lee immediately reassured Singaporeans of their collective ability to overcome those threats as long as they possessed the will to survive and the willingness to endure hardship. Lee's constructions of the threats were designed to arouse Singaporeans' pride and stubbornness and were always followed by affirmations of Lee's personal resolve and his confidence in Singapore. Implicitly, Lee portrayed himself as the solution to the problem, the decisive and capable leader who could deliver Singapore from these threats and ensure its survival. More than that, he played the model citizen whose resolute determination and will to survive had to be emulated by all Singaporeans, in order for the country to survive. Two of the main ingredients of this will to survive, as Lee described it, were Singaporeans' hard work to keep the economy prosperous and their ability and willingness to defend the country.

2.2 The Construction of Threat

In this section I show how Lee brought certain threats to the forefront of his listeners' awareness. The siege mentality generated would gel Singaporeans together in response to a common danger and prime them to welcome the solutions that Lee proposes, discussed in section 2.3 and 2.4. As discussed in Chapter 1, Lee saw issues of race as the greatest internal threat and took pains to manage racial tensions. He shares his vision of the destruction racial conflict could cause if Malaysia had taken over the government of Singapore:

But I tell you what deterred us: that in a moment of anger, race conflict takes place in Singapore. The Malays here are in a minority. The Chinese thinking that well, if this is it, to hell with constitutionalism, they will beat up some completely innocent people who have nothing to do with this. Troops come down; Malay troops come down, shoot the Chinese. (TSI 65)

Lee's use of the phrases "to hell with constitutionalism" and "completely innocent" convey the extreme attitudes that various sides might hold and enact the violence of the situation,

jarring listeners into attention. Such language is also consistent with Lee's image as a brutally honest and direct politician—rather than seeming like propaganda, those impassioned phrases support his assertion of personal investment in the country and his desire to act in its best interests. Lee is, as always, careful about his representation of the various races. Having first imagined the Chinese as the instigators of violence against Malays, he names Malays as the perpetrators of brutality against the Chinese, a balancing act made obvious when he corrects himself, saying, “Troops come down; Malay troops come down.” In asserting that such conflict takes place “in a moment of anger,” Lee highlights the potential for any ordinary Singaporean to be roused to violence and thus the ever-present threat.

The major and most immediate external threat Singapore realistically faced was re-annexation by Malaysia. Singapore's economic vulnerability was also in large part a product of bilateral tensions. I will first look at Lee's portrayal of Malaysia, then discuss the threat of economic collapse before moving on to the threat of re-annexation by Malaysia. The territories of Malaysia and Singapore were intimately connected “by geography, economics and ties of kinship” (SBC 65), as Lee himself repeatedly stated. This made Singapore highly susceptible to antagonistic Malaysian policies. Singapore has no natural water resources and has always depended on Malaysia for imports of freshwater, while Malaysia has never been shy to use this fact for political leverage.²⁶ The two territories' close proximity and relative sizes meant that a physical invasion was likely to be quick and easy.

A rebellious Lee protests against the power differential in this relationship when he says, “This business of twisting arms whenever they [Malaysia] do not get their way: well, I do not think Singapore will take it any more” (SMCH 65). This personification of the two

²⁶ Only in the past decade have new technologies been utilized to decrease this reliance. In 2002 the bulk of Singapore's water was imported from Johor, Malaysia, augmenting the meager amount harvested from its limited water catchment areas. In 2003, reclaimed waste water (termed NEWater) was introduced for non-potable use. Singapore's first desalination plant was opened in 2005, but the technology is relatively expensive. Today, besides the two traditional water sources, Singapore also uses desalinated water and NEWater to meet 10% and 30% of its water needs, respectively. Source: PUB website.

countries brings to mind two boys in a tussle over trivial matters. Colloquially, both Singaporeans and Malaysians—whether with derision or with the expectation of deference—describe bilateral relations as an *abang-adik* (Malay for “big brother/ little brother”) relationship, a term that captures both the closeness and the unequal power dynamics between the two countries. Lee’s depiction of Malaysia as a bully who “[twists] arms” when he “[does] not get [his] way” taps into the *abang-adik* metaphor and insinuates that Malaysia’s approach to bilateral relations is petty and immature. Conversely, Singapore is represented by the younger sibling who is coming of age and standing up for himself.

Drawing attention specifically to Singapore’s economic vulnerability as a result of separation from Malaysia, Lee asserts:

You see, some Malaysian ministers believe that if they don’t allow our products to go in, then they can control our rate of economic advance. I don’t think it’s true. You know, a good people cannot be kept down that way. If you don’t want to buy, we will sell to the world... And, after that, we’ll say, “You’d like to share my prosperity? Now, we’ll talk”—with the positions of strength recognized. (PH 65)

This use of apophasis allows Lee to describe one of the ways in which Singapore’s economy depends on Malaysia, while ostensibly distancing himself from such an opinion. In the process, he sets up “some Malaysian ministers” as bogeymen, the human adversaries to whom the archetypal Singaporean speaker can retort, “You’d like to share my prosperity?” This turns an abstract economic and political issue into an interpersonal exchange with familiar dynamics, much as the *abang-adik* conception of bilateral relations does. In this way Lee subtly references and reverses the *abang-adik* status quo, insisting on a new relationship in which “positions of strength [are] recognized.” The idea that “a good people cannot be kept down” borrows from existing allegorical narratives and clearly situates Singaporeans as the protagonists in a cosmic morality play in which good inevitably triumphs.

Throughout his rhetoric, but especially in his construction of threat, Lee makes generous use of eating metaphors.²⁷ In my opinion (and many Singaporeans would agree), perhaps the most distinctive and endearing thing about Singapore is its gastronomic culture. A mind-boggling variety of food is both cheap and plentiful, while friends and families invariably gather around food. In employing eating metaphors, Lee taps on and nurtures a budding local culture by making use of a topic the vast majority of Singaporeans already bond over. In a speech made in Hokkien, Lee described Singapore as having hard and not soft bones (CP 65) while on another occasion he compared Singapore to a particularly tough chicken's neck (SPEU 65). Another idiosyncratic food metaphor is that of the infamous durian—“[Malaysians] could have just squeezed us like an orange and squeezed the juice out... [But] it was more like the durian. You try and squeeze it, your hand gets hurt” (SNS 65). A durian is a spiky green fruit about the size of a football which resembles a medieval torture device and which has a pungent smell which many find unpleasant. However, it is a cult favorite among Singaporeans and Malaysians, making this a positive and humorous metaphor to Singaporeans that, like an in-joke, evokes a sense of commonality and community. This demonstrates how Lee's choice of metaphors was clearly targeted at a specific audience and fosters an *ethos* of him as a politician who understands his people.

The metaphor of the predator and the prey, a subset of eating metaphors, is active when Lee talks about regional threats, referring to Indonesia as well as Malaysia. Lee describes the political dynamics of a Southeast Asia just emerging out of colonialism:

The stage is set for local big fish to settle terms with small fish, and small fish with shrimps. And we, having the smallest area in the region, must naturally be concerned.

There are various types of shrimps. Some shrimps stay alive... Some shrimps are poisonous: they sting. If you eat them, you will get digestive upsets. (BSF 66)

²⁷ See Chapter 3.3 for a discussion of the use of the coffee-shop (a ubiquitous type of communal eating place in Singapore) in Lee's rhetoric.

Once again, Lee implicitly highlights the threat posed by Singapore's miniscule size—it is so small as to warrant its own category of shrimp, right at the bottom of the food chain.²⁸ The shrimp's only defense is an internal mechanism of poison that is only effective after it is eaten. In nature, predators learn to avoid poisonous shrimp after having eaten one, but since there is only one Singapore, Lee must flaunt its defense mechanisms in a way that deters potential invaders from testing them, such as through rhetoric.

Lee confronts Singaporeans with the dire threat from neighboring countries to reinforce the exigency of his arguments, but not before asserting that they have the strength and power to protect themselves—“your hand gets hurt” (SNS 65) and “some shrimps stay alive” (BSF 66). Thus, Lee avoids panic while ultimately reassuring the people that in spite of Singapore's apparent defenselessness, it will not be attacked. Implicit in the concept of an internal, invisible defense is the idea that the Singaporean character is the source and mechanism of the country's strength, rather than such visible resources as geographic barriers, land size or population. In this way Lee opens up a discussion of what this necessary Singaporean character consists of and how Singaporeans can and must contribute to the nation's survival.

Lee tends to caricature the external enemy, in contrast to his careful maneuvering in his portrayals of an internal enemy such as racial conflict. In discussing the possibility of the Indonesian Confrontation with Malaysia continuing with Singapore, Lee tells his interviewer:

If anybody thinks he can come into my compound and with knives and knuckledusters beat me up and take the apples and pears and the suits and the television set and the radio and the refrigerator and the furniture and the curtains and the carpets, I say: over my dead body. (ITN 65)

²⁸ What Americans call “shrimp” Singaporeans call “prawns”; to Singaporeans “shrimp” are less than an inch long.

The metaphor of the house is one Lee repeatedly returns to, in which he imagines Singapore as a personal space that belongs to him and that he has the right to do with as he likes.²⁹ This sense of ownership is reflected in the colloquial grammar and vocabulary, which suggest that Lee is talking casually about his personal life rather than about a political entity. The list of goods Lee has in his compound is so extensive and rambling as to be comical, particularly when emphasized by the polysyndetic use of “and the” in place of commas. The sing-song rhythm of the list builds up into a forceful climax—“over my dead body”—that is made more striking by contrast. The items in the list create a mental image of a modern and affluent home, representing the Singapore Lee wants his audience to envision. Such a list would also remind Singaporeans of their own homes and the personal stakes they have in the defense of their country. In contrast, the attackers are armed with “knives and knuckledusters,” obsolete weapons that suggest a gang mentality and a small-minded, backward culture that depends on picking on others for its own survival, much like the arm-twisting bully seen earlier (SMCH 65). Lee’s rhetoric raises the specter of a real and immediate threat to Singaporeans’ personal lives, one that is violent and dangerous even as it is crude and ignoble.

2.3 The Will to Survive

In this section I examine how Lee presents having “the will to survive” as the only appropriate response to the manifold threats that Singapore faced and portrays Singaporeans as having the necessary qualities for survival. His confident rhetoric reassures Singaporeans and international supporters while deterring potential antagonists. The paternalism of Lee’s leadership style (incidentally also an accusation frequently leveled at the PAP government by observers of Singaporean politics) emerges in these displays as he positions himself as the model Singaporean and the sole leader who can ensure Singapore’s success.

²⁹ See Chapter 3.2 on the metaphor of the house and its relationship to public housing policies.

The “shooting stick” was perhaps Lee’s favorite metaphor to describe Singapore’s resilience and will to survive:

[Merger] would have been like a stool on three legs. A three-legged stool: firm; stable. Now I have only got one leg... [Now] we are resting on a shooting-stick. But let me just add this and I hope you won't think I'm immodest about my people. I am proud of them. They've got steel in them, and that shooting-stick is made of steel. It may not be as comfortable as the stool, but it will stand. (TSI 65)

Here, the merger arrangement is initially presented as a three-legged stool while an independent Singapore is symbolized by a shooting stick. Comparing the stick to the stool as a part to the whole, one would see the stick as merely “one leg” of a stool that cannot even balance upright. However, Lee only sets up this fatalistic interpretation of the situation so that he can more emphatically demolish it. The wooden stool’s lost leg is reimagined as the steel shooting stick—a horizontal gun that may be unstable and “not as comfortable,” but that possesses strength and power, and presents a threat to others (such as Malaysia). The image of the gun relates to the siege mentality generated by the continuous stream of reminders that Singapore is in a threatened position. It is as if Lee wants Singaporeans to see themselves in a wartime situation with all the associated deprivations and demands. In such a hostile environment where its very survival is at stake, Singapore must be a martial society, prepared to fight and to suffer. The metaphor of the shooting stick also points to Lee’s emphasis on national defense, one of the sacrifices Lee charges Singaporeans to make.³⁰

The relationship between Lee and “[his] people” is another fascinating element that emerges later in this speech. Lee proclaims, “I am not neutral where my survival is concerned: my people's survival. I am determined that they will survive; and I think they’ve got enough grit in them” (TSI 65). In the phrase “my survival,” Lee uses himself as a

³⁰ See section 2.4.

metonym for the country, equating himself and his interests with the country and its interests and thereby modeling the ideal attitudes of Singaporeans toward the country. He goes on to link his personal survival with “[his] people’s survival,” claiming ownership and responsibility over Singaporeans when he says, “I am determined that they will survive.” Through the use of the word “they”, Lee underscores that this is an address to external observers on behalf of Singaporeans, thus positioning himself as the intermediary between Singaporeans and the harsh outside world, the father and protector of the nation. This paternalism is also at play when Lee tells the interviewer, “I hope you won't think I'm immodest about my people. I am proud of them” (TSI 65). In my experience Chinese parents generally are more likely to display “false modesty” and refrain from praising their children in front of outsiders—the qualification, “I hope you won't think I'm immodest,” seems to arise out of this convention. Lee’s unabashed praise of “[his] people” to an external audience is in stark contrast to this practice and would be significant to many Singaporeans. They would feel proud of themselves and grateful to the person who delivered the praise, perhaps subconsciously seeing him as a more affirming version of their father figure.

Lee’s speeches concerning “the will to survive” were often pointedly directed at Malaysia in the rhetorical equivalent of giving Malaysia the finger. The question of Lee’s about-turn with regard to the necessity of merger would have been foremost in both Singaporeans’ and observers’ minds—if Lee had previously argued so impassionedly for merger, how would he justify his new claims that Singapore could in fact make do without Malaysia? Lee’s rhetoric on the issue of survival apart from Malaysia was hard-pressed to account for and reconcile his contradictory positions. Frequently, Lee simply denied that merger was actually necessary for Singapore’s survival; the “will to survive” is again held up as the panacea for the ills Singapore was expected to suffer after separation:

So, the calculations of some of those who wanted our expulsion may go very wrong. They think because we told our people to accept merger and Malaysia, that without it we will die. They are grievously wrong if they believe that. This is a people determined to survive with the will and the verve to do it. We shall strike out in new directions. How, you will find out. But you can only succeed if you are prepared to make the sacrifice. (TUH 65)

Here, Lee portrays Malaysian politicians as malicious schemers who “calculated” that “without [Malaysia] [Singapore would] die,” rather than pragmatic people who simply considered separation to be in their best national interest. The words Lee chooses, such as “expulsion”, “very wrong” and “grievously”, are exaggerated and emotionally-charged. The oddly incoherent phrase, “How, you will find out,” suggests that Lee does not know how to deal with the problem, but such bravado contributes to the recklessly defiant tone of the speech. These lines enact Lee’s sense of being deeply wronged, bring out strong feelings of resentment and injustice in Singaporeans and demand a commensurate reaction that is almost vengeful in character. Lee then lays out what this reaction should be—determination to survive and the willingness to make sacrifices—in order to prove Malaysia wrong and thereby get back at those who wished to do Singapore harm. The persuasiveness of the trope of “the will to survive” derives its momentum from the sense of threat Lee generates. This again shows how Lee harnesses the emotive potential of his audience through rhetoric, in order to persuade them to behave in self-denying ways.

In contrast, Lee plays down the effort he had put into fighting for merger, using bland words like “told” and “accept” to suggest that Singapore was passive, almost reluctant, in the decision to merge. This shifts the attention and therefore the blame away from Lee as possibly the main architect of merger; in this reframed history, Singapore was oppressed by Malaysia and lacked the power to influence either merger or separation. In contrast with the

affected pre-independence stage of lacking agency, therefore, Lee's construction of an independent Singapore that possesses agency becomes even more stirring; independence comes to mark a sharply-defined division between a free and an oppressed people.

Singapore's economic dependence on Malaysia was another concern that Lee had to address, which he does in a way that is flawed yet compelling—"We must first dispel the illusion that because we wanted merger in Malaysia, therefore we are vulnerable without merger... Economically it does not follow that it is within the dispensation of our neighbors to decide our economic destiny" (YDPN 65). Lee tries to cover up the weakness of his claim using a very rational argumentative structure—"before... first," "because... therefore" and "it does not follow"—perhaps attempting to convince his audience with the form of *logos* rather than the substance. Again, we see the theme of national agency used to rally Singaporeans around the newly independent nation when Lee denies that "it is within the dispensation of our neighbors to decide our economic destiny." The emotive power of the promise of agency serves as a moving coda that perhaps overshadows an incomplete logical argument.

"Destiny" is a powerful word, mythological in scale and spiritual in its intensity. On another occasion, Lee uses the word to great effect when he imagines Singapore's future—"Students of history know that the destiny of a people is not pre-ordained. It is not pre-determination but determination which decides what happens to a people" (NYM 69). The words "destiny", "pre-ordained" and "pre-determined" have religious and mythological overtones that lend the statement grandeur and gravity. Yet, Lee brings up these ideas in order to reject them—the wordplay in "not pre-determination but determination" literally replaces old fatalistic notions with the new and empowering belief that a society possesses the agency to direct itself and to succeed through sheer willpower and hard work.

Lee attempted to reconstruct and re-understand merger and separation in such a way that Singaporeans and international audiences would be convinced that Singapore could

survive. The extent to which this project was successful remains, I feel, a matter of debate and personal opinion. More importantly, we see how Lee imagines a pre-independence arrangement characterized by a power dynamic ranging from dependence to oppression, against which the post-independence emphasis on personal and national agency as determinants of Singapore's future may be contrasted.

2.4 The Worker and the Fighter

When elaborating on the sacrifices that Singaporeans are expected to make as part of “the will to survive”, Lee repeatedly returns to the two roles of the worker and the fighter. The worker keeps the economy booming through hard work and perseverance, while the fighter ensures Singapore's peace and political stability by being physically able and mentally prepared to defend the country; all Singaporeans have to fulfill both of those responsibilities. In Lee's own words, “Every citizen has a dual role. He is a worker contributing to his country's economy; he is a fighter contributing to his people's security” (TPCC 68).

In this passage outlining some traits necessary for survival, Lee shifts between grammatical subjects to bring his audience into agreement with controversial policies:

I believe that the survival of a people depends on the quality of its people—the quality, the drive that motivates its people, and the steel in the leadership, the ability to meet problems and not flinch from unpleasant decisions. And, a thousand years from now, we shall be here if we do not flinch from some of the sacrifices we have to make. (NSCC 65)

The need for “unpleasant decisions” is expressed as a personal mantra signaled by the words “I believe”, making it easier to swallow; however, this principle is clearly intended to be applied to Singapore, making Lee the leader who would implement decisions unpopular with Singaporeans—his audience. The parallelism of “flinch from unpleasant decisions” and

“flinch from... sacrifices,” with the shift to the first-person pronoun “we”, makes the connection between the general principle and the specific situation clear. More than that, it conflates the unpopularity of imposed regulations with the internally-motivated discipline of sacrifice. Thus, statist authoritarianism is obliquely repackaged as necessary yet voluntary sacrifice, making Lee’s audience complicit in justifying and mandating the many unpopular policies that Lee foresaw that he would need and later implemented. Some of these policies essentially enforced sacrifices from citizens in their roles of the worker and the fighter, and included the consolidation of all unions under the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC), harsh clampdowns on strikes and compulsory military service, termed National Service (NS).

A diligent and persevering work ethic was portrayed as the decisive factor that would set Singapore apart from other countries in terms of economic potential:

But, for Singaporeans, for you and I, we will go to sleep early; we will wake up early; tomorrow we work hard. If you go for a massage and tomorrow your bones are weaker we will never succeed. Let the other fellow have a good time. Never mind.

We will give the full red-carpet treatment. But, for Singaporeans, I say, “First thing in the morning, physical jerks – P.T.” (STC 65)³¹

The lifestyle that Lee proscribes for Singaporeans is decidedly Spartan, both disciplined and physically strenuous. Whereas consumers and investors from other countries might feel they deserve a “massage,” a “good time” or “red-carpet treatment,” Singaporeans gain an edge with their willingness to work hard—in fact, they take advantage of others’ sloth by providing them with the highest standard of luxury and profiting from it! Lee’s description of the worker’s routine is reminiscent of life in barracks, where soldiers sleep early and wake up to jumping jacks. Since the siege mentality Lee creates through his construction of threats

31 See footnote 18 on the interesting use of the phrase “physical jerks”. It is also worth remembering that in Lee’s metaphors, strong bones are critical to Singapore’s survival—see section 2.2 on food metaphors.

demands a militaristic response, it is appropriate that the workers of Singapore are portrayed as the economic army poised to defend Singapore against economic collapse.

Similarly, the military defense of Singapore was the second key aspect of the will to survive as Lee described it; this was intended to counter the threats of annexation posed by neighboring countries. To motivate Singaporeans to sacrifice their time, energies and even their lives in defense of the country, Lee reminded them of the Japanese Occupation from 1942 – 1945, during which Japan invaded Southeast Asia and wrested control of Malaysia and Singapore from the British. The occupation resulted in the persecution and suffering of many Singaporeans, especially those of Chinese descent.³² Lee puts the events of that period in the context of disempowerment and agency when he says, “You remember what happened to Singapore when the Japanese troops came in? The people were defenseless. We were spectators. Then we were the sufferers. This time we are the participants. We will defend ourselves” (NSTP 68). Most of Lee’s audience would have personally experienced the trauma of the Japanese Occupation, since it had occurred only twenty-three years prior. He reminds Singaporeans of this ordeal in order to awaken strong emotions in them, adding to the pathetic appeal of his speech. Lee clearly links being “defenseless” with being a “spectator” and a “sufferer”—to lack the ability to defend oneself is to be a passive observer of one’s own life, therefore (in Lee’s construction) making pain unavoidable.

In direct contrast, to “defend [oneself]” is to be a “participant” who possesses agency over his or her own life in order to direct it toward a desirable outcome. During the Japanese Occupation, the British had control over Singapore’s defenses; Singaporeans could not defend Singapore in order to prevent their own suffering. Lee points out that an independent Singapore offers Singaporeans the opportunity to reclaim this agency over their own

32 This was because Japan was at that time also at war with China, and Singaporean Chinese were naturally suspected of being anti-Japanese. All male Singaporean Chinese between the ages of 18 and 50 were rounded up and inspected in an ethnic cleansing operation called “Sook Ching”; many were arbitrarily selected for execution and were forced to dig their own mass graves before being shot and buried in them.

happiness, on the condition that they defend it. By showing that the happiness of the individual is dependent on Singapore's well-being, Lee persuades his listeners that national defense is not only a necessary but a desirable sacrifice.

Lee's ideal of the Singaporean who is both a worker and a fighter is effectively captured in the lines, "Work by day, train by night. Drop your hawkker's pitch at the sound of a whistle, pick up your gun and run—to fight" (SGC 65). The reference to the hawkker signals that even the poorest and least-educated have a role to play in Singapore's success. These lines are riddled with verbs which, coupled with the rhythm and parallelism of "work by day, train by night," create a mental image of frenetic and incessant activity. The rhyming pairs of "night"/ "fight" and "gun"/ "run" are catchy and memorable, while the elongated forms of the hawkker's pitch and the gun virtually morph into each other. These aural and visual devices in Lee's speech evoke the complementary and inseparable pairing of the worker and the fighter—two essential halves of one whole.

2.5 Conclusion

In this chapter I have shown how Lee uses the discourse of threat and survival to help develop a sense of national identity in Singaporeans. Lee frequently draws attention to political, social and economic threats that Singapore faces in a way that creates a sense of uncertainty and makes his concerns exigent for his audience. He draws on the *abang-adik* image in response to Singaporean and Malaysian attitudes to bilateral relations and to help make the issues he discusses more human and immediate for his audience. The siege mentality generated from Lee's focus on external threats from Malaysia in particular creates the sense of a wartime situation that requires martial qualities and a survival mentality from Singaporeans. At the same time, Lee always reassures Singaporeans of their collective

ability—under his leadership—to counter the threats they face, as long as they put in the effort and are prepared to make sacrifices.

Having made Singaporeans aware of the severity of the threats they face, Lee presents the will to survive as the only appropriate response. We have seen Lee play the strong and decisive leader, the paternal figure who knows best, the emotionally-invested patriot, and the archetypal citizen who embodies the ideal fighting spirit Singaporeans should have. In each of these roles, Lee's *ethos* as a rhetor demonstrates his conviction and dedication, even as he persuades his audience to look up to him and accept his leadership unconditionally. Aware that his previous campaign for merger undermines his arguments and credibility post-independence, Lee attempts to play down his role in pushing for merger, framing pre-independence as a time when Singapore lacked the agency to advocate or resist merger. In Lee's rhetoric, 9th August 1965 is the point in time when Singapore was freed from bonds of oppression and endowed with the agency to chart its future course as its citizens wished.

The rhetoric of the will to survive is harsh even as it is triumphant; it demands physical, mental and economic sacrifices. Lee envisioned the ideal Singaporean in the dual roles of worker and fighter, and called upon his audience both to defend the country and to work hard so that the economy could surge forward. The wartime imagery associated with the siege mentality permeates the entire discourse of threat and survival, so that even the economy becomes a battlefield in which workers are economic warriors. Lee also persuades his audience to defend Singapore by showing how personal interests are linked to national interests. Whereas previously they depended on others to defend them and therefore suffered, with independence Singaporeans have the freedom and responsibility to defend themselves.

Sacrifice may be thought of as a form of agency—the freedom and ability to exert an effort that will result in change. In Lee's rhetoric, Singapore before independence lacked the agency to direct its own future. In contrast, an independent Singapore is a place that

Singaporeans have the power to contribute to and affect. Against the backdrop of a disempowered past, Lee's rhetoric reclaims agency for Singapore and Singaporeans. The act of making sacrifices for Singapore in turn contributes to Singaporeans' sense of ownership over Singapore and therefore the development of national identity.

A particularly interesting implication of this chapter is how rhetoric supported the authoritarian character of the Singaporean government. Historian Osborne's relatively objective take on the threat and survival theme is that the newly-independent Singapore indeed faced "great difficulties", and that its success "reflects the skills and the commitment" of leaders who believed that national interests "frequently require a substantial limitation on the exercise of individual freedom" (235). Lee has appalled human rights activists by imprisoning dissidents without trial and imposing the death penalty for drug trafficking; there are also many policies which intruded directly into Singaporeans' personal and domestic lives. An example is the "Stop at Two" procreation policy which has since been replaced by a national matchmaking agency called the Social Development Network (SDN), which for many years focused on pairing graduate women with graduate men. Other examples are the infamous ban on chewing gum, enforced bilingualism and compulsory military service.³³ Lee's rhetoric is heavily paternalistic in tone and riddled with domestic and family images, such as the *abang-adik* reference, the cluster of food metaphors and the metaphor of the house. Even the devices of the siege mentality and the construction of the roles of the worker and the fighter situate Singaporeans in particular living conditions. The Singaporean nation is imagined as a family with Lee as the father-figure who knows what is best for his children. Such rhetoric makes it seem natural that in circumstances which threaten the domestic happiness of the nation, the government should have a say in citizens' personal matters and therefore justifies the intrusive and heavy-handed nature of many of Lee's policies.

³³ However, *medical* chewing gum is now legal.

Chapter 3: The Character of the State

3.1 Introduction

In this final chapter I will look at how Lee talked about the character of Singapore as a nation in such a way as to direct his audience's loyalties toward Singapore. In the founding years, 1965 – 1970, policies had barely been implemented and had not had much time to take effect. Since Singapore was a newborn nation and its defining traits were far from set in stone, there was substantial leeway for Lee, in his rhetoric, to imagine the kind of nation he and his colleagues would create. The first section generally focuses on how Lee portrayed Singapore's inherent qualities of political autonomy, permanence and economic independence in ways that fostered citizens' pride in and sense of belonging to the country. The second section deals with rhetoric in which Lee elucidates the nature of Singapore's relationship with Malaysia and the international community. Lee differentiates Singapore from Malaysia chiefly by emphasizing the contrasting approaches to the issue of race. He also imagines a stable and successful Singapore as a model for other Third World and postcolonial countries. In the final section I look at the creation of a nation-building narrative, or mythology, that reclaims agency from the weakness and humiliation of a disempowered past by envisioning instead a brilliant and utopian shared future which Singaporeans have a role to play in shaping. This chapter draws heavily on the themes of the previous chapters and my analysis of Lee's rhetoric in this section is premised on an audience that sees Singapore as a multiracial nation as well as a country under threat but with the will to survive.

3.2 Economic and Political Independence

For Singapore, independence was neither sought nor desired. Singapore is a post-colony, but its path from British colonization to independence was far from direct. Although Lee held anti-colonial views and campaigned for Malayan independence (*The Man and His*

Ideas 31-32), he did not see Singapore as a nation in its own right until 1965. Singapore was granted self-government in 1959, but the British were concerned that Singapore would succumb to Communist subversion and only granted it independence as part of the strongly anti-Communist Malaysian Federation (Owen 415, 422-3). Thus, although Singapore participated in 20th century anti-colonial movements, its *own* independence came as a surprise and was neither a result of nationalism nor anti-colonialism.

In speeches like this one given at a reception for Afro-Asian delegates, however, Lee does not hesitate to borrow from the rhetoric of anti-colonial movements:

You can beat me, you can kill me, you can lock me up. But I cannot surrender my birth-right. I am here, you are here. We built this together. It belongs to us together. We will prosper together. And, nobody is going to intimidate us. (STC 65)

The harsh monosyllabic verbs of the first sentence conjure up a sense of immediate threat, of violence to the speaker and indirectly to citizens of Singapore. The images of physical brutality and the concept of the “birth-right” seem appropriate in the context of conflicts in the Middle-East, or coming from nationalist leaders such as Vietnam’s Ho Chi Minh or Indonesia’s Sukarno, who led violent struggles against their European colonizers—far less so in the context of a territory that had sovereignty imposed upon it. Lee’s rhetoric is more opportunistic than accurate and demonstrates his willingness to draw from powerful global narratives to impart Singapore’s independence with some of that heroism that it lacked in reality. In his persona as the valiant leader and archetypal citizen, Lee models the resolve and the patriotism that he wants Singaporeans to have. This projection of Lee’s attitude onto his listeners occurs when he says, “I am here, you are here,”—like it or not, Singaporeans are all in the same boat—and is made explicit with the use of the pronouns “we” and “us” and the repetition of “together”. These lines emphasize the sense of ownership and unity all

Singaporeans should feel, having collectively “built” and contributed to Singapore in the past, being responsible for it in the present, and sharing in its future “prosperity.”

In this speech Lee returns to the metaphor of the house and compares Singapore to a personal compound over which the owner has absolute control:³⁴

Although our house is small, in our house, how we arrange the tables and the chairs and the beds is our own affair. Not our friends' or our neighbors' affairs... This is our house. Although it is small, it is our property. It is the right of the people of Singapore to manage Singapore as the people of Singapore want it to be. (MJTS 65)

Lee’s speech on the virtues of self-government echoes rhetoric from communities that struggled for independence from their colonizers, such as the *peuple québécois*, who wanted “a responsible government... that would guarantee once and for all the existence and progress of the Quebec *peuple*” (qtd. in Charland 145). Ironically, while anti-colonial rhetoric begins with the premise that peoples have the right to self-determination, Lee is faced with independence as a given and then has to remind Singaporeans that they can now “manage Singapore as [they] want it to be.” Thus, the repeated line “although [our house] is small” has an air of disappointment rather than triumph. Nevertheless, Lee’s tone is upbeat and shows his determination to make the best of the situation. Lee continues, “How we arrange [the furniture] is our affair,” emphasizing the positive side of separation—Singapore’s newfound agency in making its own policies. He also reminds his audience that “[Singapore] is our property,” encouraging them to take ownership of their country. Nationalist rhetoric is only activated retrospectively in order to inspire Singaporeans—artificially and out of necessity—to deal with and value an independence that was foisted upon them.

The metaphor of the house is an especially powerful one in Singapore’s context because of the popularity and success of public housing. Public housing in Singapore is

³⁴ See Chapter 2.2 for another example of the metaphor of the house.

managed by the Housing Development Board (HDB), which was set up in 1960 to address acute housing shortages in land-scarce Singapore. By 1970, HDB had solved the nation's housing issues.³⁵ Today, 84% of Singaporeans, including myself, live in HDB apartment flats, which are of a very high standard and situated in convenient housing estates.³⁶ Thus, most of Lee's audience would have been owners of their own homes and able to identify with Lee's assertion of personal choice in domestic matters. In this way, Lee's rhetoric depends on national policies for some of its effectiveness; conversely, national policies depend on Lee's rhetoric to be understood in terms of ideological ends and to achieve their full success.

Lee explained in his memoirs that public housing in Singapore was not just an answer to a physical problem, but was introduced partly in order to give Singaporeans a tangible stake in the nation and a sense of ownership of the country—"I had seen the contrast between the blocks of low-cost rental flats... and those of house-proud owners... I believed this sense of ownership was vital for our new society which had no deep roots in a common historical experience" (*From Third World to First* 116). In this speech made at the opening of a public housing estate, Lee takes the opportunity to talk about the permanence of the new nation and his commitment to ensuring its continuance. This is a striking example of how Lee talks about practical issues in a way that furthers national identity and, through his rhetoric, helps his audience understand national policies as manifestations of ideological commitments:

We are sovereign, independent and as the phrase goes, "forever and ever." That means a very long time in the history of man. So far as you and I are concerned, "forever and ever" means for your lifetime, your children's lifetime, your grandchildren's lifetime, for lives and lives in being, and for a thousand years thereafter. And these buildings are a part of the guarantee for you and for me—that we intend to stay and fight.

(EPHE 65)

35 According to the HDB website, at least.

36 The dates and figures are from the Housing Development Board website; the testimonial regarding the comfort of the HDB flats is my own.

There is a fascinating mix of the idealistic and the pragmatic in this passage. Lee begins with a rousing proclamation of independence, using lofty words such as “sovereign” and “the history of man.” The phrases “forever and ever” and “a thousand years thereafter” seem to come from a fairytale or mythological narrative. These words position Lee’s audience as protagonists with noble aspirations in a quest for a golden future and represent the idealism of the goals Lee has for Singapore. At the same time, this imagery is tempered with a liberal dose of realism and dry humor, as when Lee defines “forever and ever” as “a very long time” and further qualifies the phrase by limiting it to “so far as you and I are concerned.”

In order to bridge the gap between the mundane physical reality of the new housing estate and the distant vision he has of Singapore’s future, Lee takes his audience through a journey in time, beginning with their own lifetimes and drawing their imaginations into their children’s and grandchildren’s lifetimes and beyond. The extent of Singapore’s existence is couched in terms of human “lives and lives in being,” highlighting the symbiotic relationship between the individual and the nation. This also links to the broad claim of section 3.4, that the Singapore’s nation-building mythologies, are located not in a fragmented past but in a glorious imagined future, since the past is marred by defeat and humiliation. Finally, in a masterful use of *kairos*, Lee infuses the buildings around him with profound significance, transforming them into visible, tangible symbols of an intangible “guarantee,” daily reminders of the commitment Lee expects Singaporeans to make to the country.

Another of Singapore’s defining traits among post-colonial nations, as Lee saw it, was its high standard of living and economic self-sufficiency—what Lee termed the “no begging bowl” approach (*From Third World to First* 74). In this excerpt Lee describes the policy to transform Singapore into a “Garden City” by painting a utopian vision of Singapore that simultaneously distances it from other postcolonial countries which required foreign aid to stay economically solvent:

We will keep [Singapore] trim, clean and green. Flowers will bloom and ferns will grow where there was dirt and tarmac. Other governments can give you fountains or stadiums or monuments. But they can't give you the capacity to organize and discipline yourselves. No donor country can give via Colombo Plan or Asian Development loans what you must have in yourselves: the self-discipline to keep in good condition what you own. (KKCC 68)

Lee envisioned a fundamental transformation in Singapore's environment, in which pleasant physical surroundings reflected the capability and discipline of the people. The image of life blossoming from barren land is both literal and symbolic—again, this demonstrates the complementary relationship between policy and rhetoric in Lee's speeches, in which policy comes to function as a physical metaphor for rhetorical concepts, while rhetoric elucidates the deeper significance of policy. In contrast to the organic greenery that springs up through Singaporeans' efforts, manmade concrete edifices represent foreign aid, which Lee considers a superficial and temporary measure, like the Colombo Plan or Asian Development Bank loans—useless without the intrinsic motivation of a people to make good.³⁷ Lee distinguishes Singapore from other postcolonial countries by claiming that Singapore does not need the crutch of foreign assistance. The words, “No donor country can give... what you must have in yourselves,” are a clear and compelling assertion of national and individual agency, in which Singaporeans alone can determine whether or not the country prospers.

This fierce independence and self-sufficiency is a major source of pride in Lee's construction of national identity—by not even accepting others' charity, Singapore can claim full credit for its successes (or failures) and earn the right to hold its head high in the

37 The Colombo Plan is a “cooperative venture for the economic and social advancement of the peoples of South and Southeast Asia” which emphasizes the “transfer of physical capital and technology as well as a strong component of skills development” (Colombo Plan website). The Asian Development Bank (ADB) “offers grants and loans at very low interest rates to help reduce poverty in ADB's poorest borrowing countries” (ADB website). On the other hand, some critics claim that “many bank projects have... undermined communities' rights to determine their own needs” (Oxfam Australia website).

international arena. Lee declared on more than one occasion, “The world does not owe us a living. And the corollary is also true: that we do not owe the world a living” (VT 65, COC 65). The axiom, “The world does not owe us a living,” harks back to the theme of threat and survival, in which Singaporeans are in an endangered position and have no one to depend on but themselves. This warning pressures Singaporeans to take responsibility for their own future, in the process developing a sense of ownership over the country. The antimetabolic structure completed by the phrase, “We do not owe the world a living,” underscores the intimate relationship between taking responsibility and reclaiming agency. Other countries that accepted IMF loans, Asian Development Bank loans or aid from the Colombo Plan were saddled by conditionalities—they had forfeited some of their agency in exchange for easy but superficial solutions from external parties. Lee asserts that by making the difficult choice to bear full responsibility for their own country and future whatever the sacrifice, Singaporeans do not need to answer to any external power, whether friend or enemy, on how they wish to run their country. Once again, an independent Singapore is the site of newfound agency, pride and a sense of ownership—all powerful elements of national identity.

3.3 Singapore's Position in the World

Lee conceived of Singapore’s position in the world primarily in opposition to Malaysia. The extensive similarities between the two territories made it critical that Lee elucidate how Singapore’s identity was distinct from Malaysia’s, in order to develop a national identity that was Singaporean and not generically regional. The soured bilateral relationship after merger and separation contributed to the part of Singapore’s identity that, as Lee constructed it, was based on the rebellious and almost vengeful attitude that “what Malaysia can do, Singapore can do better.” Lee was also compelled to justify Singapore’s existence as a separate state retrospectively—rather than conceding that the country was an

unwanted accident of history, Lee sought to reclaim agency by giving Singapore a meaning and purpose in its life as a nation on the global stage. This defiant preoccupation with excellence and one-uppance diffused beyond the relationship with Malaysia into a Southeast-Asian and international context of postcolonial, Afro-Asian nations (LRTA 65), so that Lee also imagined Singapore as an inspiration to and an example for other countries.

In Lee's rhetoric, Singapore's identity in relation to Malaysia was shaped primarily by its racial policies, which were the primary point of contention between the two territories that led to separation. Singapore's ideals of meritocracy, minority rights and the equality of all races were contrasted against Malaysia's insistence on racially-segregated politics and Malay political supremacy.³⁸ In contrast to Malaysia, which had Malay as its sole official language, Singapore named Malay as its National Language but recognized the four official languages of English, Mandarin Chinese, Malay and Tamil.³⁹ Lee was also a strong proponent of bilingualism and all school-going children had to learn both English and their "mother tongue".⁴⁰ Besides multiracialism, economic success—or *projected* economic success—was another characteristic that Lee felt could distinguish Singapore from Malaysia and other postcolonial and Third World countries.

38 As discussed in Chapter 1.4, the complexity of these issues was not fully dealt with in Lee's rhetoric. On occasion the protection of minority rights takes the form of subtle need-based affirmative action, such as through scholarships and bursaries, which technically compromises meritocracy. In any case, the complexity of the issue foregrounds how Lee's rhetoric was tailored to contrast Singapore and Malaysian policies.

39 Lee is vague on the exact role of the "National Language". On one occasion he insists that Malay is the language that every Singaporean should have in common, although today that language is undoubtedly English. In practice I think it is a symbolic concession to the indigenous status of Malays; for example, the National Anthem is in Malay. English was and is the language of education and the civil service, although most government publications or public service messages are translated into the other three "official languages".

40 In Linguistics and in the common use of the term, "mother tongue" is synonymous with native language or the first language that a child learns to speak and speaks at home. However, for many Singaporeans, their first language could be a regional language, dialect or even English. "Mother tongue" has therefore taken on a usage specific to the Singaporean context, meaning the official language attached to a person's heritage by the government. For example, I am ethnically Chinese and therefore have to learn Mandarin Chinese in school, even though my first language is English. There are some exceptions—Singaporeans of non-Tamil Indian heritage can opt (via a very troublesome process) to learn an Indian language besides Tamil, such as Bengali or Hindi, while Singaporeans of mixed heritage or categorized as "Other" are free to choose Mandarin Chinese, Malay or Tamil as their second language, to fulfill the bilingualism requirement.

Singapore's expulsion from Malaysia was humiliating for Singapore because, just two years before, Lee and his team had convinced 70% of Singaporeans to vote in favor of merger and even up till the weeks before separation were still maintaining that merger was necessary and desirable for Singapore. Many Singaporeans still interpret separation as Malaysia's attempt to "punish" the PAP for rocking the boat of Malaysian communal politics. In Lee's rhetoric immediately after independence, we see him struggling to understand the humiliation of separation in a way that reclaimed agency for Singapore.

In this speech comparing and relating Malaysia and Singapore's economies, Lee begins by analyzing the psychology behind Malaysia's decision to separate—"But this is what hurts them: fear. It is not so much envy as fear. They envy us, yes, up to a point. But more important, they fear us... This was the reason they refused to cooperate even after merger, even after Malaysia, till in the end they said, 'Get out!'" (SPEU 65). If Malaysia is envious of Singapore, Singapore must be more successful than Malaysia—thus, Lee's rhetoric elevates Singapore while pointing out Malaysia's relative poverty. However, while envy is merely petty, fear is powerful. The claims that Singapore can "hurt" Malaysia and that Malaysia fears Singapore are controversial given the countries' relative sizes and the obvious fact that Malaysia had just expelled Singapore. Lee's statements invert the positions of power that are assumed in the dynamics of expulsion and in the *abang-adik* relationship, suggested by the anthropomorphic portrayal of the two countries. The idea that Malaysia allowed negative feelings to come between the two countries speaks of the smallness and immaturity of Malaysia's character and, conversely, Singapore's understated power.

Lee's controversial claim that Singapore has the power to harm Malaysia would increase the audience's interest in hearing Lee's explanation. Singapore is imagined as possessing the higher moral ground—Lee claims that Malaysia fears "what an effective, efficient administration which is not clogged [up] and bogged down by corruption can do"

(SPEU 65), generating in his audience a pride in and appreciation for Singapore's good governance. At the same time, Lee implies by contrast with Singapore that Malaysia's politics is inefficient and corrupt—his listener comes to realize that Malaysia's fear is the fear of the guilty, a horror of being exposed. Like a light shining into dark corners, Singapore's clean politics has the capacity to reveal Malaysia's corruption. More than that, Lee envisions Singapore's administration as one "which, by its results, will convince millions around us that [they] should similarly do likewise" (SPEU 65), thereby positively influencing Malaysia and the region—a theme that comes up repeatedly in Lee's rhetoric.

While the previous example demonstrated a way of understanding separation that placed Singapore in a position of power, on other occasions, Lee clearly presented separation as an inevitable and even triumphant outcome of Singapore's adherence to moral principles. A month after independence, Lee said, "We were patient; we were tolerant. We put [up] with it hoping that they would see the light. But we had to be firm. We could not give in. So, as a result we are out" (SNS 65). In this construction of the events of history, we see Singapore playing the role of the noble and upright protagonist—"patient", "tolerant" and in possession of "the light" of wisdom. In contrast, Malaysia is portrayed as the morally-decrepit dependent that Singapore altruistically "puts up with"—reminiscent of the *abang-adik* relationship discussed earlier, except that once again the hierarchy is inverted to put Singapore in the position of moral superiority. Lee acknowledges that Singapore preferred merger, but claims that it accepted separation as the necessary "result" of *choosing* to stay true to its convictions and moral principles. Independence becomes a site of triumph, where good, represented by the religiously-inflected image of "light", does not "give in" to evil. Singapore becomes almost the martyr who gains honor in loss, while the persecutor's earthly victory simply reveals the baseness of its corruption. Ultimately, Lee's rhetoric paints a picture of separation in which Singapore is released from the confines of evil and oppressive Malaysian politics

with a greater consciousness of its power and the freedom to pursue its idea of good and upright governance—both critical elements of the young state’s newfound agency.

In line with his *ethos* as a man of the people, Lee was able to make the contrast between Malaysia’s and Singapore’s racial policies immediate and understandable to listeners who came from varied classes and racial backgrounds:

We are going to build up a system in which... nobody can say, “*Satu Bangsa, Satu Bahasa, Satu Agama.*”⁴¹ You know what that means? One race, one language, one religion... Because if you go to any coffee-shop, you will hear more than one language. That is what we are trying to do. I hope we will sort of be a little beacon—a small beacon but I hope a bright one for Malaysia. (SMCH 65)

The line, “*Satu Bangsa, Satu Bahasa, Satu Agama*” echoes various Malaysian nationalistic catchphrases, ranging from a patriotic song, “*Malaysia Berjaya*,” to the UMNO slogan.⁴² Lee starkly differentiates Singapore from Malaysia when he insists that, in contrast to Malaysia where such race-based slogans proliferate, in Singapore “nobody can say” such things—either because he will find no support from others, or because they are manifestly untrue. By asking, “You know what that means?” Lee draws attention to the fact that not everybody in Singapore speaks Malay, or any other “racial” language for that matter. His translation of the phrase into English—a neutral language not associated with any of the racial groups—demonstrates the kind of inclusivity that he wishes Singaporeans to have. The use of the

41 “*Bangsa*” may be translated as “race”, “nation”, “people” and sometimes “family”—all these senses of the word could plausibly be active here for an audience who understood Malay. It is also worth noting that Singaporeans, Malaysians and even Indonesians often use the shorthand “*Bahasa*” (“language”) to refer to “*Bahasa Melayu*” or “*Bahasa Indonesia*” i.e. Malay. However, it is difficult for me to capture the nuances of these words as I know very little Malay.

42 There are few resources today that shed light what exactly Lee’s phrase references, in the culture of 1960s Malaysia and Singapore. A quick Google search suggested that the UMNO slogan was “*Satu Bangsa, Satu Negara*” (“One Race/ People, One Nation”) and that the popular song “*Malaysia Berjaya*” contained the lyrics “*Satu bangsa, satu bahasa*” (“One people, one language”). An online Malaysian current affairs journal, *The Nut Graph*, features an interview with Malaysian-Chinese politician Lim Keng Yaik, in which he says, “We went through a period of early nationalism based on ‘*satu bangsa dan satu agama*’ [‘one race and one religion’], which was based on the official religion – Islam – and *bangsa*, which is attached to language [i.e. Malay].” Whatever the exact phrase, we can be sure that the construction of “*satu –, satu –*” was a nod to Malay-centered Malaysian nationalism and had strong resonances with both Malaysians and Singaporeans in those years.

coffee-shop as an example prompts his audience to think of an everyday situation that is close to home and close to heart, thus making a political and ideological message more accessible to the average Singaporean.⁴³ Through his rhetoric, Lee both describes and enacts the ideological difference between the two countries, purposefully carving out a space where Singapore can have its own identity in spite of extensive similarities with Malaysia.

The final image of the “beacon” is the culmination of the other light metaphors we have seen, representing a positive and far-reaching influence beyond the shores of Singapore. The metaphor of the lighthouse is particularly apt as Singapore is an island at the tip of the Malayan peninsula and at the intersection of major shipping lanes, a place where lighthouses are typically situated. Singapore’s port was also one of its biggest industries, meaning that many Singaporeans would be familiar with this maritime metaphor.⁴⁴ While this passage envisions Singapore as an influence on Malaysia specifically, Lee also imagines a broader role for Singapore at a regional and global level.

Lee recognized and perhaps even emphasized the societal and cultural similarities of Malaysia and Singapore in order to address the issue of multiracialism more decisively. He played down the urban and predominantly Chinese character of Singapore as opposed to the predominantly rural and Malay character of much of Malaysia, saying, “So far as we are concerned, we are one people in two countries. All that separation has done is to divide the one society into two not altogether dissimilar parts” (YPDN 65). The phrase “so far as we are concerned” reaffirms Singapore’s identification with the Malaysian people and subtly places the blame on Malaysian leaders for dividing families and communities. This increases the

43 The coffee-shop in Singapore is not a place where students or young professionals lounge in sofas and sip fancy \$3 lattes. In Singapore, these hot, noisy and somewhat dingy gathering places are found at every corner in every housing estate—families with young children start the morning with a cheap and hearty breakfast from the “downstairs” coffee-shop, while old men in singlets slouch in plastic chairs all day, chatting, chain-smoking and nursing cups of thick black *kopi* to be had for a couple of cents each (US\$0.30 at 2010 prices).

44 See Chapter 1.3 for more on maritime metaphors in Lee’s rhetoric.

emotional pathos of the speech by positioning Lee's audience as the victims of events outside their control and primes them to wonder if there is a purpose in such a painful separation.

Having raised in Singaporeans' minds the question of whether their existence as a nation has meaning, Lee then frames the separation as an "experiment" that would ultimately contribute to the good of humanity as a whole—"Now there are two experiments being carried out in these two halves... experiments on how to find a solution to the problems of multiracialism, multilingualism and a multiplicity of religion" (YDPN 65). Lee's previous assertion of the similarity of Malaysians and Singaporeans also allows him to set up the conditions for an "experiment" that is almost scientific in form, in order to persuade his audience of the value of independence by appealing to *logos*. It is interesting how Lee presents Singapore and Malaysia as "halves" that share the same conditions and are of equal importance. Lee emphasizes the significance of this "experiment" by expanding the issue of multiracialism into component parts—"multiracialism, multilingualism and a multiplicity of religion." Another of Lee's speeches, four years and a measure of success later, reiterates in even clearer and more confident terms this determination to be a force in the world and a model for postcolonial and Third World nations, many of which had recently coalesced out of the jumbled scraps of colonial possessions—"We shall continue to thrive, to prosper and to uphold values which we consider critical to the survival of new nations which embrace within their frontiers more than one race, more than one language, more than one religion"⁴⁵ (RI 69). Most countries in the world are indeed plagued by issues of race, language and/ or religion—the pervasiveness of those three separate and important problems means that, according to Lee's rhetoric, Singapore can make a unique and important contribution to the resolution of conflict worldwide, as a model of a stable and successful multiracial nation.

⁴⁵ Unlike, say, in the post-war reconstruction of Europe, national borders in Southeast Asia were not drawn according to racial or ethnic distributions, but were simply the fossilized boundaries of colonial territories (Osborne 71, 92). This characteristic of postcolonial countries, coupled with the inherent diversity of the regions, meant that there would be many races, languages and religions within any one country, as well as groups distributed across national borders.

3.4 A New Mythology

Most, if not all, nations or peoples who have established a shared identity depend on nation-building historical narratives to rally their members and to justify or argue for their status as a distinct nation. During Kennedy's inauguration in 1961, Robert Frost recited his poem, "The Gift Outright," in which he imagines American history according to the narrative of a chosen people and a Promised Land: "The land was ours before we were the land's./ She was our land more than a hundred years/ Before we were her people." The White Paper that petitioned for Quebec's independence told the story of the *peuple Québécois* and concluded that "Its struggles, its successes, and its ordeals had given it an awareness of its collective destiny" (qtd. in Charland 140). Charland insightfully points out the importance of national narratives, saying, "In the telling of the story of a *peuple*, a *peuple* comes to be. It is within the formal structure of a narrative history that it is possible to conceive of a set of individuals as if they were but one" (140).

However, if, as in Singapore's case, a country's history was one devoid of triumphant victories or moments of deep shared suffering, or if it was characterized more by the fluidity and formlessness of migration than by rootedness to a given place, how could the new nation use history to imagine its people as a unit? If, as in Singapore's case, a new nation had either no shared culture, or shared a broad regional culture with other countries, how could culture be used as a defining characteristic of the nation? Prior to independence, there had not even been a conception of "Singapore" as anything more than a city, and even less of a conception of "Singaporeans" as a group with a distinct and particular identity. I argue that Lee resolved this problem by locating Singapore's national narrative in the future rather than the past—instead of borrowing from a collective ancient history to inspire retrospective pride, Lee generated a new mythology that envisioned Singaporeans *creating* history together.

Although the past was not very useful as a direct source of national pride, Lee embraced the very passivity and aimlessness of Singapore's history, against which he contrasted the drive and agency of an independent Singapore. In the 1966 National Day Rally, Lee frames his message by addressing "the many different kinds of people who foregathered here in over 150 years of the British Raj" (NDR 66). The mention of the colonial period is a reminder of a long history of subjugation under a foreign ruler, while the word "foregathered" reminds Singaporeans that they had no hand in the initial formation or development of the city and reinforces the lack of agency associated with pre-independence. On another occasion, he describes Singaporean society as "those who were here when the British were in control and those who are, willy-nilly, now rooted in this corner of Southeast Asia and whose destinies are interwoven" (YDPN 65). Lee again highlights the arbitrariness of Singapore's development under a self-seeking colonizer that was uninterested in the territory's long-term welfare. Lee's rhetoric exemplifies "a consciousness of the borderlands" (Shome 595) which recognizes that postcolonies are sites of cultural intersection and ambivalence. The past is used to underscore the investment of present Singaporeans in their own nation and "destiny"—they are "rooted" and "interwoven" whether or not they like it.

Having acknowledged and even highlighted the less-than-ideal conditions bequeathed to the country by a succession of external rulers—first the British, followed by the Japanese during WWII and finally the Malaysian federal government—Lee sets out to reclaim agency from this disempowered history. He does this in part by reinterpreting the past in terms of a bright future, as when he says, "One of the by-products of a migrant community is that it produces a population of tryers... Having left tradition, their history and their past behind, they have only the future to go in quest of" (ILO 66). While most people would associate migranhood with transience and the lack of identification with a place, Lee reshapes his audience's understanding of the term—and therefore, of themselves as migrants or of migrant

stock—by portraying migrants as having the strongest drive to succeed and the greatest investment in the future. Lee transforms what many would see as a disadvantage inherited from colonialism into a critical ingredient of Singapore’s success, while suggesting how his audience can reconcile the unrooted mentality of the migrant with a Singaporean identity. More than that, by imagining an individual who has “left... [his or her] past behind” Lee actively decouples the future of Singapore from a past characterized by subordination, and subtly presses his audience to reject old allegiances in favor of loyalty to Singapore. Lee’s recognition of the complexities of a postcolony’s “diasporic identity” (Shome 594) allows him to effectively appeal to his audience and contributes to the success of his rhetoric.

The emphatic dissociation of the historical past from the future as history in creation—but also the paradoxical connection between the two—is also evident in the lines:

That is how history began for you and for me. But I am not quite sure whether that is how history will end. We don’t know. It began a certain way, but it ends the way we decide it. Never believe in pre-destination, though it is comforting. (ICC 65)

As earlier discussed, in Lee’s eyes, Singapore’s history was marred by oppression and a lack of agency. At the same time, the effectiveness of his rhetoric depends on the interplay between the past and the future—on the presence of the past as a foil for the future. The repetition of the words “history” and “way” to refer to both past and future and the satisfying narrative arc of “began”/ “end” suggest that past and future are two contrasting but interdependent halves of a whole, like *yin* and *yang*, or darkness and light. Lee traces the progression of history in order to forcefully resist its trajectory—he refuses to believe that Singapore’s postcolonial status means that it is destined for underdevelopment or instability.

The concept of pre-destination comes up many times in Lee’s rhetoric, and each time is emphatically rejected (KEH 66, NYM 69, SB 69). In this passage, Lee’s words, “I am not quite sure,” and “we don’t know,” showcase his realistic and pragmatic attitude to leadership

and his refusal to sugar-coat facts, traits that align with his persona as an honest and straightforward politician. This makes his audience more likely to be convinced by his claims, so that when Lee tells them “never [to] believe in pre-destination,” they can accept both the loss of a “comforting” sense of entitlement as well as the empowering responsibility for directing their own future. The phrase, “it ends the way we decide it,” is a powerful assertion of agency on behalf of all Singaporeans and a clear rejection of pre-destination, which condemns nations to repeating cycles of historical precedence. In this way, Lee’s rhetoric frees Singapore from the stereotypical narrative of the failed postcolonial state.

If a historical narrative of colonial oppression points to a future of postcolonial struggle, then Lee’s rejection of the entire trajectory leaves a void in the story and an uncertainty which Singaporeans by their own agency must fill, and which thereby becomes a source of exuberant hope. Independent Singapore becomes a blank canvas, a fresh page which Singaporeans can fill with their own heroic stories. This is evident in Lee’s rousing words, “Nobody in Singapore should find life uneventful. An exciting and challenging time in one of the most momentous periods of change in Southeast Asia is ahead of us. The past is being sloughed off quickly. The future is what we make of it” (TPB 70). Lee not only gives Singapore’s existence meaning (as discussed in section 3.3), but gives meaning to the existences of individual Singaporeans by identifying them as forces of change and progress on the cusp of an “exciting”, “challenging” and “momentous” large-scale movement, an epic narrative that extends beyond Singapore’s own shores to include the region. To an independent Singapore as Lee constructs it, the past is something that hampers the full expression of self and that needs to be “sloughed off” like an old skin in order for the organism to grow. This is almost an image of rebirth that conveys the newness and purity of the young nation. In place of the lifeless past, “the future is what we make of it”—here we clearly see a new mythology of the nation emerging that offers citizens a role to play in a

legend that is in the process of being created. This new Singaporean mythology does not passively rest on laurels (which it does not have) but is vibrant, alive and built on the action and engagement of each Singaporean in the present moment.

Lee's rhetoric not only generates this "historical" narrative based on the future, but also imbues it with greatness, so that it becomes truly an epic and inspiring mythology worthy of a nation and a people. Spatial metaphors of upward movement characterize this idealistic passage which depicts Singapore's efforts as a glorious chapter in human history:

[Singapore] will give cause for satisfaction to all those who chart man's progress and who will find corroboration in Singapore's performance that this *climb up the face of the cliff* to a *higher* level of civilization, to a better life in a more gracious world, depends on man's constant and ceaseless striving for new and *higher* goals, depends on man's restless, organized and unending search for perfection. (SICC 69)

This speech was made at an event commemorating the 150th anniversary of the (British) founding of modern Singapore on the 6th of February 1819. This date calls for a reflection on the achievements of Singapore as a city since its origins as a backwater fishing village, but also recalls the British colonial period. It is interesting that Lee, on this occasion, portrays the 150 years since founding, which were mostly colonial years, as merely the preamble to a long and brilliant history that is to come. The repeated use of the word "will" signals that Singapore's story is not yet written, even as Lee borrows from the triumph of the occasion to support his assertion that the story will be one of continued success.

At the same time, congruent with Lee's rhetoric on pre-destination, the success of the story hinges on the character of the people and their willingness to take action and make sacrifices. Words such as "constant and ceaseless" and "restless... and unending" create a sense of a society in perpetual motion that rejects sloth, while "progress", "striving" and "search for perfection" are action words that highlight the nobility and idealism of

Singaporeans' goals and the effort which they put into their pursuit of a utopian society. With the use of upward metaphors and a relatively complex lexicon, the pitch of Lee's rhetoric here is much more elevated than in most of his other speeches, which have a conversational or down-to-earth tone. Lee imagines Singapore's efforts and achievements as part of "man's progress," "man's... striving" and "man's... search," thus rhetorically inscribing Singapore's story in the annals of human history as a testimony to the power of the human spirit.

The national mythology that Lee creates places Singapore on the same level as other countries with an established history and character, and, to a certain extent, justifies its existence as an independent nation with its own unique identity. This in turn provides Singaporean citizens with that critical "formal structure of a narrative history" (Charland 140) by which individuals can be "hailed" and "constituted" (138) as subjects, and around which personal self-identities can coalesce.

3.5 Conclusion

The third and final piece in Lee's construction of national identity was his portrayal of the state itself as an entity which Singaporeans could feel proud of and develop a sense of belonging to. Independence was portrayed as a turning point between a past in which Singaporeans lacked agency and a future in which citizens had the opportunity and the agency to chart their own course. Singapore was not only independent and autonomous, both politically and economically, but permanent and therefore worthy of commitment and investment. I also show how policy and rhetoric mutually support each other in Lee's speeches—rhetoric is used to help Singaporeans accept and understand the deeper significance of policies, while policies in action are used to reinforce the points Lee makes in his rhetoric, often becoming physical metaphors for the ideological concepts Lee espouses.

However, it is perhaps more interesting to examine how Singapore's own identity on a national level was created—what it imagined itself as and what defined it as a nation relative to other nations. The answer to this question in itself contributes to Singaporeans' understanding of themselves and their internal sense of national identity, but also has broader implications for other countries facing situations similar to Singapore's. One major influence on Singapore's self-definition was its similarity to Malaysia on many points, and its diametric opposition to it on other points. Lee is preoccupied with differentiating Singapore from its relatively large and overbearing neighbor to the north, which he does primarily by focusing on the differences in racial policies. Since its expulsion from Malaysia was a rather humiliating event for Singapore, Lee also needs to help his audience understand it in a way that can be reconciled with national pride. In Chapter 2.3 I showed how Lee channels some of the rancor from separation into the drive to survive and succeed; here, I explore how he reframes separation as a struggle between right and wrong, in which Singapore may have lost the battle but won the moral war. Light is a dominant metaphor in Lee's discussion of this issue—Lee imagines Singapore as a positive influence not only for Malaysia, but in the region and even globally. This analysis of how Lee creates national identity through the construction of difference could be of relevance in other contexts as well—in the cases of Pakistan, Southern Sudan and East Timor, for example, which were created by secession. I would imagine that there are similarities between Lee's rhetorical techniques and themes in nationalist rhetoric from countries strongly influenced by larger or more powerful neighbors, and that need to grapple with that relationship in order to fully explicate a national identity.

Postcolonialism is perhaps the most important influence on Lee's rhetoric on Singapore as a state—Lee clearly sees Singapore as historically postcolonial, as having to deal with particular problems as a result of colonization, and as sharing certain similarities with other postcolonial nations. Singapore's identity is fundamentally postcolonial in its

origin, although it differs from the postcolonial identity and historical trajectory imagined in Western academia precisely due to the assertion of agency. There are heavy borrowings from anti-colonial nationalist rhetoric in Lee's speeches on political autonomy—emotively effective despite being logically incongruous. Lee locates Singapore within the community of postcolonial nations and expresses solidarity with it through his rhetorical patterns and his focus on the uniquely postcolonial nature of Singapore's problems. At the same time, Lee sets Singapore apart as a leader of the Third World, by virtue of its capacity for economic success and model methods for dealing with diversity of race, language and religion.

The creation of a new mythology of nation demonstrates most clearly the impact of postcolonialism on Lee's rhetoric and, by extension, Singapore's identity. While most national narratives studied in Western academia are historical and rooted in past achievements, Singapore's mythology is based on the future rather than the past. I argue that this is because Singapore's history prior to independence was entirely one of colonization and disempowerment, useless for generating pride in a nation except as a foil for a new and brilliant, self-directed future. The presence of a colonial past makes Lee's rhetoric of rejecting the past and reclaiming agency relevant and compelling. Other countries display what may be read as a similar pattern of reaction and denial—Vietnam, facing a “void left by the collapse of traditional Confucian values” in the face of colonialism, turned instead to the cultural and religious emptiness of communism (Osborne 142); Indonesia “maintained rage against the Dutch” and demanded that it “should matter on the world stage” (Owen 433), claiming leadership of the Malay world on the basis of its precolonial greatness during the Majapahit empire. Of course, a study of nationalist rhetoric from other postcolonial countries would be necessary to support this hypothesis—this is simply a first step in introducing postcolonial texts into rhetorical study, in line with Shome's call for an approach to rhetorical criticism that recognizes the influence of neo-colonial and racial forces (592).

Conclusion

Lee Kuan Yew, for all his flaws, was undoubtedly a great statesman who led Singapore from a Third World country to its present developed status. One of the key challenges facing the new nation-state in 1965 was the creation of national identity where none had existed before. Lee's rhetoric helped Singaporeans see themselves as part of one nation—from a diverse population, Lee forged a community that has remained relatively free from racial disharmony since independence. His rhetoric on race and ethnicity first constructed several main racial groups and then situated individuals within the groups and the groups within the nation, in this way linking individuals to the nation as a whole. Lee also persuaded Singaporeans to make the necessary efforts and sacrifices for the country's progress, by highlighting the threats Singapore faced but also asserting that Singaporeans had the will and capacity to survive. This showed citizens how essential it was for individuals to do their part by working and fighting for their nation. Finally, Lee used the autonomous and multiracial character of the Singaporean state as another source of national pride, contrasting it against Malaysia and envisioning Singapore as a role model for Asia and the world.

The theme of agency runs through Lee's rhetoric—I have shown in each chapter that Lee recognizes and solicits the contributions of individuals to the country in different ways, generating pride and a sense of ownership in them. His dominant message is that while Singaporeans in the past faced oppression and subjugation, an independent Singapore is a place where they can forge a bright future for themselves and their descendants. Through his rhetoric, Lee reclaimed agency for Singaporeans, freeing them from the disempowerment of a colonial past and the expulsion from Malaysia by creating a new mythology of the nation based on a glorious collective future rather than a humiliating past.

Thus far I have examined Lee's rhetoric to draw out the dominant themes and techniques that he used to generate a sense of national identity in Singaporeans. This nation-

building was constant and pervasive, but was mostly oblique and indirect—it underlay the bulk of Lee’s rhetoric even when he was not discussing it directly. There are, however, a few occasions when Lee talks about national identity as a topic, and explicitly describes what defines a person as Singaporean. Lee discards conventional indices of belonging, claiming instead that a Singaporean identity “does not depend on your being born and bred here or having taken citizenship, but on your own conviction that Singapore is your future” (NTUC 67). On another occasion, Lee reiterates, “The acid test of who is a Singaporean is whether the person is so committed to Singapore that he is prepared to stick it out and fight for Singapore” (SAOB 68). A Singaporean identity is neither a technicality nor a product of circumstances—it is an act of personal choice and a heartfelt “commitment.” It involves an affirmation of faith in Singapore’s “future” and its national mythology, backed up by the willingness to sacrifice and even to lay down one’s life for the country, in order to ensure that that future comes to be. This unambiguous definition aligns perfectly with the Singaporean identity created indirectly through Lee’s rhetoric as a whole, since being Singaporean cannot be imposed by external forces, circumstances or laws but must come from the individual exercise of agency and an internal motivation to work and make sacrifices for the nation.

Given the limitations of this paper, I have confined my discussion of political rhetoric to material from a single rhetor from a single country over a brief five years. Productive analyses could certainly include a broad study of rhetoric from Singaporean politicians in general, comparative studies across countries (whether Asian, postcolonial or neither) and a longitudinal study of how Lee’s rhetoric evolved over time. In particular, comparative analyses would advance the cause of introducing texts from the margin into Western-centric academia that Raka Shome advocated and that I hope this thesis has contributed to. I have pointed out moments when I felt Lee’s rhetoric was uniquely Singaporean, Asian or postcolonial, and would be extremely interested to see if analogous—or contrasting—patterns

recur across Asian or postcolonial nations while being notably absent, altered or even counter-intuitively similar in First World discourses around national identity.

There is a rich body of material produced by and about Lee Kuan Yew that could easily fuel a project to trace his development over time—Lee has written two memoirs, *The Singapore Story* and *From Third World to First*, and contributed extensively to a biography featuring extensive interviews called *The Man and His Ideas*; as recently as January 2011 a new collection of interviews, titled *Lee Kuan Yew: Hard Truths to Keep Singapore Going*, went into circulation. The National Archives of Singapore houses a collection of audio and video footage of Lee's speeches, which would add much nuance, depth and interest to any future study of Lee's rhetoric. As mentioned in the Introduction, Lee spoke not only in English but also in Malay, Mandarin and Hokkien. I have largely ignored Lee's non-English speeches since I lack the linguistic ability to analyze them. However, a comparison of Lee's rhetoric in those four languages would certainly reveal new and fascinating layers of complexity, since each language was associated with a particular economic class and racial demographic, allowing Lee to tailor his messages to specific segments of the population.

While in this paper I can merely speculate on the success of Lee's rhetoric, I hope that future studies could look at reactions to Lee's rhetoric either in the media of the time or in the opinions and feelings of Singaporeans. One direction of study that I believe would be extremely fruitful is a survey of Singaporean national identity today in order to draw out similarities and contrasts between present discourse and the rhetoric of the founding years. If Lee's rhetoric was indeed as successful as I have argued in this paper, then I would expect Singaporeans from all walks of life to reproduce (consciously or not) the ideas that grew from the seeds Lee planted in the psyche of the newborn nation.

The 5 Jan 2011 edition of *NEws* featured a section called, “What Shapes a National Identity?”⁴⁶ According to the article, some of the elements of national identity are “meritocracy, racial and religious harmony,” “Singapore's union with and eventual divorce from Malaysia,” and the “Singapore Spirit” which Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong described as “the daring to try new things, the confidence to face fierce competition, the willingness to always give our best.” I solicited my friends’ opinions on this article in a very informal poll, asking them what they thought were the defining elements of a Singaporean national identity. Among the answers they suggested were some that had uncanny resonances with Lee’s rhetoric. One person cited multiracialism as a factor that shaped identity and added, “Our nation started in a time of crisis... we learnt, we built, we upgraded, we defended in order to save ourselves from becoming a Third World country.”⁴⁷ Two people felt that pragmatism was the single most important trait Singaporeans shared—that is, “acknowledging the need to survive, doing things that are functional, taking opportunities as they arise, creating opportunities.”⁴⁸ The main themes I identify in my thesis—multiracialism, threat and survival and the state as a site of newfound agency—all emerged independently in my friends’ discussion of national identity. Either Lee had an incredibly sensitive finger on the pulse of Singaporean society and the world it existed in, or his rhetoric has percolated through generations of Singaporeans and critically shaped national identity as we know it today; I am inclined to believe the latter.

One of the gravest challenges to Singapore’s future, as I see it, is the weakening of a fledgling national identity due to falling local birth rates and rising immigration.⁴⁹ This has led to resentment and “growing unease”⁵⁰ from many Singaporeans, who feel increasingly

46 *NEws* is an online publication designed to be a resource for National Education (NE) practitioners.

47 Lorance Chang, from a discussion online.

48 Gabriel Pang; Bernice Lee, from the same online discussion as above.

49 Foreign nationals comprise 31% of the workforce today. Source: Reico Wong, "Budget 2011: Mixed Reaction to Foreign-worker Levy Hikes."

50 "AFP: Singapore to Slow down Hiring of Foreign Workers."

unfamiliar with and disconnected from the society they find themselves in. As recently as March 11th of this year, an article in a Singaporean political blog picked up on Lee Kuan Yew's comment in *Hard Truths* that Singapore was "not yet a nation," and quoted a 23-year-old as saying, "I feel that there is a dilution of the Singapore spirit in youth... We don't really feel comfortable in our country anymore" (Singam). The problem of economic dependence on foreigners is exacerbated by the "brain drain" of a significant number of Singapore's talents who never return home after going overseas for work or study.⁵¹ Many Singaporeans deplore the state's authoritarian rule, the high cost of living or the stressful lifestyle and have escaped Singapore's confines for the freedoms of Western countries. Singapore began as a nation of unrooted immigrants and continues to depend on human resources, global exchange and open borders for its economic success. It is hugely ironic that so many citizens, having developed some measure of national identity, now resist foreign immigration, while others who feel no attachment to the country find it just as easy to emigrate.

Forty-six years ago a new country was unhappily born out of conflict, violence and disempowerment, the bastard child of colonialism and idealism. Today, that country ranks among the most successful in the world in terms of economy and human development.⁵² Who knows what will become of it half a century on? Whether it was real or imagined at the time, today the existence of the inclusive yet committed national identity that Lee set out to create is critical to the sustained success of Singapore and its citizens. I hope that this study has revealed some elements of our national identity that Singapore's leaders can capitalize on, at a time when the question of what makes a Singaporean is again the subject of intense debate. More importantly, by closely examining how Lee used rhetoric to bind a nation's people together in the most difficult of circumstances, we can learn from both his weaknesses and successes in order to manage current issues and to continually build up a sense of nationhood.

51 Julia Ng, "MM Lee Says Singapore Facing Brain Drain Problem."

52 Singapore ranked 27th on the Human Development Index in 2010 and had a GDP per capita of US\$52,200 in 2009, the 6th highest in the world. Sources: UNDP and the CIA World Factbook.

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- “Transcript of a Speech in English by the Prime Minister at a Luncheon Given by the Pasir Panjang Residents at Perak House on 5th December, 1965. ”
- “Speech by the Prime Minister, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, in English at the Serangoon Gardens Circus on Saturday, December, 11, 1965.”
- “Speech by the Prime Minister, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, when he Moved the Motion of Thanks to the Yang DiPertuan Negara for his Address in Parliament, December, 14, 1965.”
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