

## **Keeping Memories Alive: Maintaining Singapore Nationalism Abroad**

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# Keeping Memories Alive: Maintaining Singaporean Nationalism Abroad

**Abstract.** Singapore uses the active remembering of its heritage to instil in its citizens a sense of nationhood. While this is not an uncommon feature of any national agenda, Singapore – concerned with a declining local skilled workforce as a result of emigration – uses memory of heritage and place as a means to promote and maintain nationalism among its citizens abroad. The practice of remembering is aided by inventive and sometimes well-funded government initiatives such as the annually held Singapore Day — a one-day event held in cities outside Singapore which have a significant diasporic Singaporean population.

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## Introduction

Like other sovereign nations, Singapore considers loyalty to the state as representing a fundamental tenet of citizenry. The Southeast Asian nation undertakes elaborate measures to ensure that nationalism and nationhood are intrinsic values woven into cultural and community discourse. These values are instilled and maintained by the government through various avenues such as education (public and curriculum), national policy (conscription), the media (news and entertainment) and commemoration (events, festivals, monuments and exhibitions). However, the transnational movements of people linked to global capitalism have challenged Singapore to develop new strategies that foster loyalty to the state. How does Singapore instill and maintain nationalist sentiments among its transnational citizenry in a globalizing world? What are the measures undertaken by Singapore to ensure that its transnational citizenry are loyal to their home country? As will be shown in this paper, rather than expressing anxiety towards the global redistribution of its people, Singapore has developed inventive ways to propagate and maintain nationalist sentiments among its citizens abroad. A key feature in Singapore's transnational nationalist agenda is the use of active and official remembering, particularly with organized events abroad such as the annual Singapore Day (SG Day).

The significance of remembering in diasporic communities has generated a growing scholarly literature (e.g. Ong and Nonini 1996; Ong, 1999; Hirsch, 1999; Huyssen, 2003 and Aviv and Shneer). Work in the area often considers remembering in transnational space, highlighting the impact diasporic communities' collective memory has had on their host nations. The Jewish and Chinese diasporas are major sites of such research. In theorizing the effect of Jewish memories of the Holocaust, Huyssen suggests that the Jewish diaspora has had a direct impact on the national memory of host nations. Here she explains that diasporic memory plays a part in forming the evolving national memory of the host country (p. 151). Ong and Nonini illustrate the challenges faced by the Chinese diaspora in North America in maintaining cultural identity through remembering, such as in the practice and performance of rituals. However, the above works, while helpful for understanding memory and its significance, examine permanent settlers in a host nation rather than temporary residents who have not severed connections with their homeland. They do not investigate the active links between nations and their transnational citizenry abroad, which is the subject of this paper.

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Investigating the links between nations — particularly those newly formed after World War II — and their transnational citizenry is necessary in understanding the ways in which once colonised nations instil and maintain nationalist and patriotic connections with their citizens abroad. Nora (1989), for example, observes the significance of memory (customs and tradition) as a link with the past, particularly with newly formed nations. He explains that “[a]mong the new nations,

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independence has swept into history societies newly awakened from their ethnological numbers by colonial violation” and that “a process of interior decolonisation has affected ethnic minorities, families, and groups that until now have possessed reserves of memory but little or no historical capital” (p. 7). Realizing the importance of memory as a form of nation-building, Singapore — a country that gained independence only in 1965 — actively incorporates remembering (oral testimonies, archival film, commemorative days, festivals, rituals, museums, exhibitions, memorials and plaques) as part of its everyday national and community discourse. The active remembering of its multicultural heritage and culture, its collective experiences of trauma (Japanese Occupation and post-World War II race riots) and its government and community contributions to Singapore’s exhilarated economic growth and attainment of first world living standards instil strong patriotic sentiments in its citizens. Likewise, Singapore uses this complex state-cultivated sense of memory to remind its citizens abroad of their connection to home and duty to state.

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### **Singapore’s Transnational Citizenry**

Fox (2005) explains transnational citizenry as being a curious and complex term. It is interpreted in different ways, depending on the discipline (political sociology, geography, or anthropology) and the author in question. In his discussion of the different approaches to unpacking transnational citizenry, however, Fox observes that the term broadly refers to both physical and non-physical cross-national and multi-national crossings. While interpretations of transnational citizenry are fluid, a key aspect of the condition, Fox infers, is the ability of individuals to identify with a particular nation and its values even though membership is not apparent due to geographical displacement (pp. 179-180). Furthermore, geographical displacement does not prevent these individuals from forming communities overseas, unified precisely by their common connection to a distant nation (pp. 186-187). The Singaporean diaspora exemplify the key characteristics of a transnational citizenry, with their relative ease in maintaining ties to their homeland no doubt largely due to Singapore’s own historical experiences as a transnational center of trade and cultural exchanges.

By the early twentieth century, British colonists had recognized Singapore’s advantageous geographical position at the tip of the Malaysian hinterland and between the East-West trade routes (Owen, 2005, pp. 139-141). The British thus invited traders and indentured laborers from the region and elsewhere to develop Singapore into a cosmopolitan entrepôt and trading hub. Traders from various regions of Asia and the Middle East saw Singapore’s potential for trade with an eager West that craved “Oriental” goods in the form of spices and silk. Indian and Chinese migrant laborers, meanwhile, had no trouble finding work in this growing city in areas such as infrastructure development or as hired hands facilitating the movement of goods traded at the mouth of the Singapore River (pp. 312-313). Most often, the traders and laborers were temporary migrants whose stay in Singapore was transitional. However, push factors such as armed conflict, poverty and natural disasters in their home countries, and pull factors primarily relating to colonial Singapore’s abundance of work and its ability to provide a safe environment for entrepreneurship, encouraged many transitional migrants to become permanent settlers. Capitalizing on its colonial experience, post-colonial Singapore enhanced its status as a transnational and transitional space by developing its manufacturing and export industries (p. 424). Singapore has also evolved into a tourist hub, promoting itself as an exotic and safe destination for leisure as well as a point of exit for travel around the region.

Singapore’s transnational heritage is the subject of valuable scholarship on culture and everyday life in the nation-state. Past works have investigated the nation-state’s urban space (Yeoh, 1996, 2003), media and identity (Khoo, 2005), material culture (Yue, 2006, 2007) and expatriate community. Work on Singapore’s expatriate community frequently investigates foreign domestic

service in the nation-state and is presented within a gender, class and race framework. Often, research on the current employment practices of foreign domestic workers in Singapore reveals social tensions between local employers and transient migrant workers (Ford & Piper, 2006; Kaur, 2007; Yeoh, Huang, & Gonzalez, 1999). Singapore's engagement with transnationalism, however, is not confined to the domestic sphere. Singapore is aggressively involved on the global business stage as it invests heavily in projects and companies overseas. In Australia, for example, Singapore owns SP AusNet, one of that country's largest publicly listed power companies as well as Optus, Australia's second largest telecommunications provider.

The state has also been making its mark through the transnational movement of its people. To date, Singapore estimates that 150,000 Singaporeans citizens live, work, and study overseas (Neo, 2009). Many overseas Singaporeans are permanent residents of their host countries while others are possess temporary work or study visas. Although their numbers are not officially included in official estimates, Singaporeans who have become permanent residents in other countries may also be anecdotally included as part of the overseas Singaporean community.<sup>1</sup> This is because a large proportion of this group are spouses or children of citizens, and some of the services offered by the Singaporean government for overseas Singaporeans such as advice and tools relating to Singapore citizenship are geared specifically toward permanent residents.

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The government is very concerned about maintaining ties to its transnational citizenry and enticing back Singaporean professionals and students from abroad. Its reliance on its people as its only natural resource motivates the government to encourage overseas Singaporeans to return home to offset the nation's "brain drain." According to the Asia Pacific Migration Network, Singaporean citizens have increasingly been migrating to countries such as Australia, Canada and the United States since the late 1980s. Often, these émigrés decide to stay broad permanently after initially traveling for business or study purposes. Émigrés express various reasons for leaving Singapore. These include a desire for a slower-paced lifestyle and better career prospects, and the wish to escape from Singapore's high living costs, uncertain future and regulated lifestyle (Seah, 2008). Singapore initially responded to the brain drain by launching the "My Singapore" campaign in the early 1990s. Emphasizing a strong sense of national pride and achievement for those who stay in Singapore, the campaign proved highly successful and remains ongoing. It usually increases in momentum around June to August as a lead up to Singapore's National Day on August 9th. During this period, the national dailies such as *The Straits Times* run stories of Singaporeans who immigrate back for reasons of national pride, family, ethnic culture, employment, Asian values, material comforts and low crime. Singaporean leaders also refer to "stayers" (Singaporeans who remain) and "quitters" (Singaporeans who emigrate) in National Day speeches, such as one made by former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong in 2002. To prevent further brain drain, the Singapore government makes strident efforts to maintain ties with Singapore's diaspora in an attempt to woo overseas Singaporeans back to their homeland.

Singapore keeps in contact with overseas Singaporeans through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), the Singapore International Foundation (SIF) and Contact. Both SIF and Contact are sanctioned by the Singapore government. In 1992, SIF launched its Overseas Singaporean (OS) program to reach out to overseas nationals. However, according to SIF, the increasing number of Singaporeans abroad led to this program being replaced by the Overseas Singaporean Unit (OSU) on January 1, 2006. Established in January, 2006, the OSU aims to directly "address issues relevant to Overseas Singaporeans and coordinate multi-agency programs and initiatives aimed at engaging the Overseas Singaporean community." According to a fact sheet published by the Ministry of Home Affairs, the OSU, under the auspices of the Prime Minister's Office, encourages and facilitates the practice of Singaporean nationalism outside the nation-state by

(a) Organising programmes to keep the Overseas Singaporean community apprised of the latest economic, political and social developments in Singapore; (b) Providing a channel for Overseas Singaporeans to communicate their aspirations; and (c) Developing channels to facilitate the return of Overseas Singaporeans who wish to do so (MHA, 2006).

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The unit, for instance, funds the maintenance of online Singaporean communities such as those facilitated through the Overseas Singaporean Portal (OSP) (<http://www.overseassingaporean.sg>) and organizes events such as Singapore Day as held in Melbourne during 2008.<sup>2</sup>

The government's efforts to encourage and facilitate nationhood amongst its transnational citizenry have resulted in the creation of imagined and gated Singaporean communities abroad that take both virtual (online) and corporeal (organised clubs and events) forms. Some of these communities are funded by the OSU while others are not. However, while all these communities emphasise practical advice for the Singaporean overseas, the idea of collective national identity is often couched through active remembering of identity and heritage. The OSP encourages Singaporean collectives to apply for funding from the OSU on its website. Some of these communities are corporeal organizations while others are virtual, or set up and maintained online. Communities listed on the Portal also take the form of business networks and student societies. Associations such as The Merlion Club and The Temasek Club in Australia are set up for the primary purpose of fostering business networks with former-Singaporeans, current Singaporeans or Singaporean permanent residents living overseas. Student societies germinate in universities where there are large numbers of Singaporean students, as is the case in the UK, the US and Australia. With their fundamentally nationalist agenda, the student societies organize Singapore-related events that foster Singaporean nationalism. These include social gatherings that remember and commemorate Singapore's National Day and celebrate cultural festivals such as the Chinese Moon Cake Festival and Chinese New Year — [events that allow Singaporeans abroad to maintain links to the homeland through cultural practice and ritual](#). The student societies also organize regular meetings with staff from Singaporean consulates or missions. While membership for all these organizations is not compulsory, Singaporeans who join benefit in incidental ways such as through exposure to familiar languages and the development of values as an imaginary collective.

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The success of the government's efforts in creating national pride and nationhood among Singaporeans abroad has also led transnational citizenry to form non-government-funded communities. These communities which express Singapore nationalism within the transnational space are most evident online through social networking websites such as Facebook, where active groups include Overseas Singaporean Expats, Singapore Women Overseas, Returned Overseas Singaporeans in Singapore (R.O.S.S), Overseas Singaporeans and I Miss Singapore Food.

**Comment [U8]:** Up to here, you have set a good case for Imaginary collective identities... but you have referred to memory since your opening.

The global redistribution of Singaporeans outside of their homeland has proved to be a challenge requiring inventiveness from Singaporean authorities concerned with nationhood and allegiance to the nation-state. As we shall see below, Singapore's global mission of nationalism and nationhood through its formation, encouragement and maintenance of gated corporeal and virtual Overseas Singaporean communities is strongly aided by active remembering of place, heritage and culture back home [for the purpose of maintaining Singapore nationalism abroad](#). Official and active remembering utilizes its domestic space to inculcate nationalist and loyalist sentiments towards the state in ways other nations have also used memory as a device for national agendas, as has been shown in theoretical work and case studies on modernity, nation,

**Comment [U9]:** I'm not sure this is the remembering that you were taking about earlier with collective memory, perhaps giving a definition earlier or here would make this clearer.

**Comment [U10]:** See above comment.

community and memory (e.g. Anderson, 1991; Assman, 1995; Tanaka 1994; Appadurai, 1996; Huyssen, 2003; Olick 2008).

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### State and Memory

Organized community remembering in the modern era is often complex. Modernity creates conceptual and practical challenges to the stability of the nation. Appadurai observes that a symptom of modernity is the global cultural flow of people, media, technology, finance and ideas. These transnational exchanges have resulted in the creation of imagined communities, for example, of people who form national or ethnic groups outside of their geographical boundaries. The idea of nation thus becomes complicated when conventional physical barriers collapse. Anderson explains that his understanding of the nation is complex as it departs from ideas of colonial struggles, with ideas of nation informed and complicated by events in history, geography, regional politics, migration, and demographics (p. 4). Anderson notes, however, that because of globalization, nations are now not limited to physically confined spaces but instead can be entities of imagined political communities that are “both inherently limited and sovereign” (p. 6).

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Most work in the area of memory thus focuses on the efforts of groups such as governments, organizations and individuals to commemorate the past (events and individuals) in the present. Some scholars such as Assmann argue that cultural memory functions as a kind of nationalism that preserves both society and culture from forces that threaten – or are imagined to threaten – the collective as a whole (p. 125). Similarly, others such as Nora (1989) warn that the quest for modernity has allowed memory — often associated with the pre-modern — to be displaced by history. However, memory still exists in certain sites where there are historical gaps. Those historical gaps, which Nora refers to as *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory), allow links to the past to take place. Explaining further the significance of memory and the bonds it makes to the past, Nora states:

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Memory, insofar as it is affective and magical, only accommodates those facts that suit it; it nourishes recollections that may be out of focus or telescopic, global or detached, particular or symbolic — responsive to each avenue of conveyance or phenomenal screen, to every censorship or projection. History, because it is an intellectual and secular production, calls for analysis and criticism. Memory installs remembrance within the sacred; history, always prosaic, releases it again. Memory is blind to all but the group it binds — which is to say, as Maurice Halbwachs has said, that there are as many memories as there are groups, that memory is by nature multiple and yet specific; collective, plural, and yet individual. History, on the other hand, belongs to everyone and to no one, whence its claim to universal authority. Memory takes root in the concrete, in space, gestures, images, and objects; history binds itself strictly to temporal continuities, to progressions and to relations between things. Memory is absolute, while history can only conceive the relative (p. 8-9).

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Demonstrating this theory, Tanaka (1994), for instance, examines the role played by art “in the formulation of belief in the nation” (p. 24). Nation-states, Tanaka explains, rewrite their histories in order to ground themselves in waves of modernity. The instruments of anchorage are their artefacts (such as fine art). By using the example of the Meiji period in Japan, Tanaka suggests that fine art provides a space for the development of the modern/contemporary and as such fine art pieces become artefacts that link the past to the present without temporal limitations or constrictions (p. 26).

Comment [U13]: I would look for Nora’s “site of memory concept” for a broader conception of the material, symbolic, and social use of objects/spaces for collective/social memory creation. I wouldn’t be surprised if Tanaka was referencing this idea.

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Studies on remembering shed light on the ways in which memory is used as a tool by both nations and diasporic communities to unite people who share common histories and want to educate those

outside these communities. Within memory studies, a significant body of work is dedicated to memory and trauma, with particular focus on the Jewish Holocaust (e.g., Huyssen and Olick). A possible reason for the significance of the Jewish Holocaust in memory studies involves the settling of the Jewish diaspora after World War II. Despite being dispersed throughout Europe, America and Australia, the Jewish diaspora retained their memories of the Holocaust through personal testimonies, commemorative events, monuments, literary works, film and television. The film *Schindler's List* (1993) and the television miniseries *Holocaust* (1978) captured international popular imagination. Through these tools of remembering, both Jewish and non-Jewish people are kept familiar with the atrocities of the Holocaust and its powerful symbols such as the Auschwitz concentration camp. Moreover, the artefacts of memory also function as a powerful and an emotive tool that emphasises and actively maintains certain community perspectives. The literary classic *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl* by eponymous heroine and diary-writer Anne Frank, first published posthumously in English in 1952, has been made into a theatrical play and a film and has appeared in other media forms as well. Likewise, there are works that specifically examine the way governments and powerful national figures manipulate remembering for the purpose of ideological advantage, political gain and nationalist advancement. Forest and Johnson (2002), in their work on the reinterpretation of Soviet monuments in the post-Soviet era (from 1991 to 1999), for example, argue that commemorative artefacts such as monuments are successfully manipulated by political elites for ideological control. Often such work involves the revisiting of traumatic and historical events for a particular effect in the present such as the monument at Poklonnaia Gora in Moscow that commemorates the Soviet defeat of Nazism. Certain events, in other words, are remembered over and above others, habitually as a result of ideological, political or nationalist reasons.

**Comment [U15]:** (Isn't memory though more that just familiarity, but invested with a particular point of view or interpretation of events, thus distinguished from history proper and its recount of events.

**Comment [U16]:** It might help to mention a monument or event they discuss to give a better sense what they mean.

### Memory is “serious” business

Singapore takes remembering very seriously. Like most nations, Singapore uses its past as a tool for nation-building. Singapore is discerning when it comes to the inclusion and exclusion of artefacts. The artefacts and exhibitions included in its museum collections emphasise the primary role played by the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) in Singapore's road to independence and economic progress, and the collective willingness and cooperation of Singaporeans to follow and support the party's national directives. However, other players in Singapore's progress to independence, for example, are portrayed as either bit players — e.g. David Marshall, Singapore's first Chief Minister (1955) but associated with the rival Workers' Party — or as questionable leaders — e.g. Singapore's second Chief Minister Lim Yew Hock (1956-59) and also of the Workers' Party whose tough stance against Chinese communism led to his political downfall and the rise of the PAP. The artefacts and exhibitions in the Singapore museums — like those in U.S. Holocaust museums studied by Patraha (1999) — are highly interactive, encouraging the visitor to progress from silent spectator to witness of the events on display. The Singapore museums, like the Holocaust museums thus perform a particular and a purposeful version of the past.

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To aid in this national agenda, Singapore has actively developed its heritage sector. In 1993, the Singapore government merged the National Archives, National Museum and Oral History Department to form the National Heritage Board (NHB). According to its website, the NHB promotes active remembering of Singapore's past with its vision of making “heritage an enriching part of everyone's life” and its mission “to foster nationhood, identity and creativity through heritage and cultural development.” Under the NHB umbrella, Singapore now operates seven museums and galleries. These include the Asian Civilizations Museum and the National Museum of Singapore, which showcase Singapore and regional histories through original and recreated artefacts, oral history and anecdotal stories. The centerpiece of the National Museum is the 2,800 square meter Singapore History Gallery. While the gallery recreates the history of

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Singapore from the fourteenth century to today, the exhibition is strongly nationalistic as it focuses on the development of the city as a politically stable and economically successful nation-state. Here, the exhibition emphasizes three major themes: the struggles of settlers during the early years of British colonialism in the 1800s and early 1900s; the significant national events of the twentieth century highlighting both trauma (Japanese Occupation and race riots) and triumph (the formation of the ruling People's Action Party and its role in nation building); and the personal stories of individuals, whether recreated or exhibited as part of Singapore's ongoing oral history project. Fitted with a multimedia handheld "personal guide" known as "The Companion," visitors to the gallery cross a bridge in an IMAX DOME and experience 24 hours of Singapore compressed into a 5-minute montage. The Singapore Art Museum, also an NHB project, features work by both Singaporean and regional artists in its collection.

The museums and galleries are supported by two heritage institutions: The Heritage Conservation Center (HCC) and the National Archives of Singapore. While the HCC functions as a repository for all museum and gallery collections, the National Archives provides a rich source of archival material that documents Singapore from the pre-colonial era to the present. This collection includes valuable oral history recordings of individuals and their experiences during events of national significance such as World War II and the Japanese occupation, British colonialism, race riots and independence. Included in the oral recordings are descriptions of everyday life in colonial and postcolonial Singapore. The NHB also is proactive in encouraging and engaging public participation of personal recollections when it comes to interactive remembering of Singapore's past. In May 2008, for example, the NHB website announced the launch of <http://www.yesterday.sg> – "a blog about Singapore's heritage, history and museums" – inviting public discussion on personal memories of space and place in Singapore.

Since 1997, according to the Central National Education Office (NEXUS) website, there has been an active campaign known as "National Education" to "educate" Singaporeans about their history and to promote nationalism. National Education was initially promoted through public exhibitions where attendance was made compulsory for those working in government service and educational institutions. National Education is also currently a compulsory subject in the Singapore school and university curriculum. The National Education campaign's history of Singapore is essentially equated with the history of the ruling post-independence People's Action Party (PAP). The colonial history of Singapore (ironically for a nation that takes remembering very seriously) does not receive the more extensive attention and coverage it deserves. This aspect of National Education has affected the way that Singapore approaches its colonial heritage. *The Online Citizen* reported a call, in December 2006, by Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong to replace streets named during the colonial period with the names of (current) prominent Singaporeans. Such a move would eradicate the contributions made by both colonists and non-colonists such as the *Peranakans* (Straits-born Chinese) to Singapore's rich colonial history (Yeoh, 1992).

Since the early 1990s another form of active remembering of Singapore's past has been taking place outside the government-sponsored sphere. Singaporean literature set against the backdrop of British imperialism found popular and critical successes through works of popular fiction such as *The Shrimp People* (Shelly, 1991), *The Bondmaid* (Lim, 1995) and *Abraham's Promise* (Jeyaretnam, 1994). This genre of writing has become more common through the establishment of Singapore-based independent publishers Horizon Books (in 1998) and Monsoon Books (in 2003). Besides publishing fiction such as *The Rose of Singapore: An Epic Tale of Love, Loss and Sexual Awakening in 1950s Malaya and Singapore* (Neville, 2005), *The Flight of Swans* (Bai, 2006), *The Red Cheong-sam and Other Old Tales of Malaya and Singapore* (Modder,

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**Comment [U21]:** popular fiction?

2006) and *The Red Thread: A Chinese Tale of Love and Fate in 1830s Singapore* (Farnham, 2007), these publishers have begun publishing colonial memoirs. In 2007, Monsoon Books published John Dodd's *A Company of Planters: Confessions of a Colonial Rubber Planter in 1950s Malaya* and Edwin A Brown's *Indiscreet Memories: 1901 Singapore through the Eyes of a Colonial Englishman*. While these works present an Orientalist perspective on colonial Singapore and Malaysia, their recent emergence is significant in demonstrating, at the very least, a publishing interest in memory of the colonial past.

Like most nations, Singapore uses its past as a tool for the development of nationalism. Here, Singapore emphasizes certain themes in the creation of national unity. These include the active remembering of Singapore's early pioneers and their work ethic. Reflecting the city's settler society heritage, these pioneers were migrants from North Asia, Southeast Asia and South India. Singapore prides itself on its multinational heritage by drawing attention to the experiences of the different races that contribute to its national makeup. While Singapore creates national unity by commemorating a common migrant heritage, this form of remembering also highlights difference. Because Singapore's population is 75 percent ethnic Chinese, remembrances of their contributions and experiences in both the colonial and postcolonial periods predominate over those of other ethnic groups (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2008). For example, exhibits in the National Museum of Singapore on working women in early twentieth century Singapore feature almost exclusively ethnic Chinese women. Here, Chinese working women are represented by the Cantonese black-trousered and white-shirted *amahs* and the *mui tsais* (girl slaves), performance artists such as vaudeville entertainers and songstresses, and manual labourers such as the distinctively red-hatted *sam sui* women.

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Singapore also successfully utilizes traumatic events from the past to inculcate a sense of nationhood and maintain law and order. For example, the destructive effects of communal politics – defined by race and religion – resonate in Singapore's remembering of its past. Events in Singapore's history such as the race riots of 1950 and 1964 are used as tools for instilling nationalism and nation-building, and as a means to encourage political stability, in this multiethnic settler society. Such events are remembered through exhibition, commemoration and personal testimony. One key event often remembered is the 1950 Maria Hertogh riots, which witnessed Malays attacking Eurasians and Europeans following a Singapore court ruling that 13 year old Maria Hertogh be returned to her biological Dutch Catholic parents after being raised Muslim by her adopted Indonesian mother (Hughes, 1980). Another much remembered event is the 1964 Prophet Mohammad Birthday riot, in which Malays attacked ethnic Chinese (Lau, 2000) due to increasing ethnic tensions.

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his occur?

While both of these events were politically motivated, emphasizing Muslim nationalism in Singapore, they are remembered in the local public sphere as examples of racial intolerance and disharmony. These themes appear in exhibits at the National Museum of Singapore and are commemorated yearly during Harmony Day on July 21st. The riots are also recalled by Singapore ministers during times of perceived racial tension, particularly whenever Malay Singaporeans attempt to be heard through displays of peaceful dissent and resistance. One such example occurred in 2002 when a small group of Malay parents publicly challenged the Ministry of Education's (MOE) strict policy on school uniforms (Davie, 2002). Their actions inadvertently became seen by the government as a form of resistance to the state. The parents sent their three primary one children to school wearing the *tudung* (headscarf) during the first days of the school year. The *tudung* is not part of any official school uniform under the umbrella of the MOE. However, the children were turned away by the school and told to conform to the official policy. The tension between parents and the school garnished significant media attention. The Prime Minister at the time, Mr. Goh Chok Tong, and various members of his

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cabinet publicly dissuaded the parents from continuing their actions while defending the MOE's policy. The government explained that the policy was aimed at better educating the young on racial equality in Singapore. Facing a losing battle, the parents then enrolled their children in *madrashas* (Islamic schools) which allowed them the freedom to express their religious convictions (Davie, 2002). As the above examples from the public sphere reveal, active and official remembering thus plays a significant role in the propagation and maintenance of nationhood in Singapore itself. The activities woven into the Singapore Day event, discussed below, show how similar tools are used in upholding national loyalty among the Singapore transnational citizenry.

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### A Day to Remember: Singapore Day 2008 (Melbourne)

Singapore Day is a one-day annual event that is hosted in different major cities outside of Singapore where large numbers of overseas Singaporeans are present. First hosted in 2007 in New York, SG Day was held in Melbourne in 2008, with London the designated city for SG Day 2009. Aimed specifically at the Singaporean diaspora, SG Day is part of the nationalist project organized by the Overseas Singaporeans Unit (OSU). SG Day's mission thus is to maintain contact with Singaporeans abroad and attract professionals and students back to the nation-state as part of the skilled workforce. While the New York SG Day attracted an estimated crowd of 6,000 Overseas Singaporeans, the event at Melbourne boasted a crowd of 11,000 Singaporeans (Ee, 2008).<sup>3</sup> Entry into an SG Day event is free but attendees are required to register online where they are asked to provide their National Registration Identification Card (NRIC) number.

The program for SG Day is generally formulaic and based on common experiences familiar to Singaporeans. Participants are treated to free items such as food, beverages and show bags. SG Day also includes entertainment by popular Singaporean film and television personalities and exhibitions that showcase the city's infrastructure and housing developments, job opportunities in the civil service and current school-based curriculum practices. The SG Day in Melbourne followed this format and included food served from three separate pavilions. Each pavilion was host to hawkers offering Singapore favorites such as *satay* (barbequed meat on a stick), *ice kacang* (sweetened ice shavings served with red beans desert), *chendol* (coconut and molasses ice desert), *hokkien mee* (a fried seafood and pork noodle/vermicelli dish), chicken rice, chilli crab and others. Some of the hawkers were flown in from Singapore specially to lend to the aura of cultural authenticity. There was live entertainment throughout the day with iconic Singaporean entertainers taking the stage, including singer-composer Dick Lee, Asian Idol winner Hady Mirza, and the cast of the very popular English-language television show *Phua Chu Kang* in character. The entertainers performed song and dance numbers as well as comedy skits that reminded audiences of their national and cultural identities. National songs such as *Home* and *We are Singapore* were sung to evoke nationalist sentiments while the cast of *Phua Chu Kang* used Singapore English (Singlish), reminding the spectators of everyday Singaporean culture.

SG Day actively uses official remembering as a means to generate and nurture nationhood among its transnational citizenry. In lieu of the usual tools of official remembering available on home ground such as museums and monuments, Singapore relies on more concise and practical ways to instil nationalism through memory. At the SG Day in Melbourne, memory of Singapore's shared heritage and culture as a nation was a thematic device employed throughout the event. Rather than the event highlighting food and entertainment, the official theme "Rekindle and Rediscover" dominated the day's discourse. "Rekindle and Rediscover" was

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conceived to elicit feelings of nostalgia by evoking a sense of a romanticized childhood for adult overseas Singaporeans. All show bags, for example, included a small eraser of the type that has been popular with primary school children growing up in Singapore for decades. Show bags also included a *chatek*, an erected feather joined at the shaft to two pieces of rubber used in a local schoolyard game by tossing it into the air non-stop with the side of one foot while balancing on the other foot. While nostalgia made its presence felt at SG Day, so too was official remembering through folktales.

Children at SG Day were encouraged to attend storytelling sessions featuring “The Beaded Slippers” and “The Attack of the Swordfish.” These stories – examples of active and official remembering – together commemorate Singapore as a multicultural yet united society. The stories also emphasized the importance of home and heritage as the following online synopses found on the SG Day website indicate:

*The Beaded Slippers*

This is a fascinating story of a young six-year old girl, Puteh, who discovers a pair of "magic" beaded slippers in her home. With it [sic] she can enter new worlds and travel to the past as well. The story gives a glimpse into the rich heritage of the Peranakans in Singapore.

[For children aged 6-9 years old]

*Attack of the Swordfish*

This is an exciting story of how a village in ancient Singapore worked to fight off the attack of swordfish that terrorised their beautiful beach. Heroic and tragic at the same time, this tale will enthral every child.

[For children aged 8-12 years old]

Storytelling is not an unusual tool for remembering. Through storytelling, the cultural, religious, political and social identities of a group are communicated and shared among its members. Storytelling also plays an important role in educating younger members of a community about their heritage. The Australian Aborigines, for example, have relied on storytelling as their primary tool for communicating their complex cultural identity. Known as “Dreamtime” and “Dreaming,” these are composites of ancient and sacred stories (Lawlor, 1991). Dreamtime traces the supernatural history of the creation of life while Dreaming refers to the sacred stories of individual Aboriginal communities or nations (pp. 1-13). Storytelling thus maps the history of a group’s struggles and successes. Often, such stories are moralistic, expressing the values of a community. The “Attack of the Swordfish,” for instance, is a story with moralistic and historical links. This story, according to the UNESCO portal, can be traced to the *Sejarah Melayu* (Malay Annals) – a literary piece of work documenting the historical rise and fall of the Malaccan Sultanate in the Malay Peninsula – and promotes the values of community spirit particularly in times of trauma. “The Beaded Slippers,” however, is a new story that was first published in Singapore in 2008. It is based on author Adeline Foo’s memories of being raised by her Peranakan grandmother. A major theme in “The Beaded Slipper” is the importance of returning to the Singapore homeland. The recitation of these stories at SG Day can arguably be seen as thinly veiled attempts to inculcate nationalist sentiments in the very young.

The use of a memory-nationhood framework can also be seen in the purposeful use of Singaporean place names as signposts at SG Day. Melbourne’s Sydney Myer Music Bowl, the venue for SG Day, was transformed into a microcosm of Singapore with the reproduction of some familiar locations such as Clarke Quay, Marina Bay and Buona Vista as pathways and Fort Canning, Newton Circus, Rochester Park, City Hall, Tanglin and Dempsey Hill as

exhibition pavilions. The use of familiar landmarks is important in this discussion as being a tool for the building of nationhood among Singapore's transnational citizenry. On one level, the landmarks function unquestionably as familiar signifiers of Singapore as they are sites frequently visited by Singaporeans. Places such as Clarke Quay, Rochester Park and Marina Hill are host to popular entertainment nightspots while Newton Circus is a well known hawker center. Buona Vista is the site of a massive public housing estate while Tanglin and City Hall are generally shopping venues. Some of these landmarks have been in existence since the colonial period and have been maintained as heritage sites by the Singapore government. Fort Canning, for example, was built by the British in 1859 for their military needs. Established originally as a site for army barracks, arms store and hospital, Fort Canning today is maintained for commemorative and historical purposes because of its role in the fall of Singapore in World War II. The site was used in 1942 as the command post for Lieutenant-General Arthur Ernest Percival in his ill-fated attempt to defend Singapore from the advancing Japanese troops. Fort Canning thus functions as a reminder of colonial defeat and surrender in times of national trauma. Clarke Quay is familiar to locals and visitors to Singapore as a night spot because of the many bars and restaurants that occupy former warehouses along its waterfront. However, the quay is also a heritage site that commemorates Singapore's early history as a commercial hub and trading post. Clarke Quay, named after the second governor-general of colonial Singapore, Andrew Clarke, is located at the mouth of the Singapore River. During colonial rule, the quay was a hive of activity as goods were transported by lighters from ships berthed in Singapore's sheltered harbor. These goods were then traded and stored in the warehouses that lined the edge of the quay. The area commemorates the hard work of Singapore's early pioneers, many of whom were Chinese coolies responsible for transporting the goods from the lighters to the warehouses.

The exhibition pavilions feature key areas of concern for returning overseas Singaporean families in terms of life in the city. Linking everyday Singaporean culture with symbols of nationhood such as commemorative landmarks, they arguably are potent tools for invoking sentiments of nationalism and patriotism. At SG Day Melbourne, there was an exhibition pavilion dedicated to providing overseas Singaporeans with snapshots of the opportunities available to them in their home state. This pavilion offered career advice from government departments such as the Housing Development Board and from government-backed companies such as the Singapore listed multinational real estate company CapitaLand. There were pavilions that featured Singapore as a super city with detailed plans to "makeover" older public housing townships in favor of new and improved ones.<sup>4</sup> The makeover includes updating individual flats and buildings as well as providing overall improvements to the townships themselves. The upgrading of the townships would be part of an infrastructure overhaul creating easy access to transport, schools and other amenities. The pavilions featuring national service in Singapore mapped military conscription since its conception in 1968 to the present day and showcased advances in uniform design.<sup>5</sup> The education pavilion, like the exhibition featuring national service, provided a history of schooling in Singapore, emphasizing primary education in particular. The centerpiece of the exhibition was a futuristic interactive classroom with mock lessons conducted by four Singapore primary school teachers.

## **Conclusion**

Singapore's foresight in harnessing rather than discarding [certain aspects of](#) memory as a device in its quest for modernity serves to instil a sense of nationalism in its multicultural society. Acknowledging the importance that active and official remembering of heritage and culture plays in the propagation and maintenance of nationhood in the domestic space, the Singapore government employs similar principles in upholding national loyalty among the Singapore

transnational citizenry. This is evident in the Singapore Day event. Singapore's heritage and culture, grounded in transnationalism due to the nation's history as a settler society, is not lost in the context of this discussion on memory and transnational citizenry. The nation-state's sophistication in proactively presenting its transnational past to its citizenry abroad is thus as well planned as it is purposeful. Singapore's global mission of nationalism and nationhood through active remembering is effective as it is efficient due to awareness of the significance of memory as a tool to unite [and maintain order of its](#) multicultural society.

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**Comment [U28]:** This paper has a really great and interesting case study for the examination of the institutional construction of memory for the purposes of nation building. I would really like to see you develop/clarify your use of memory, however. If it is the theoretical lenses that you use to decode these events, use aspect of memory not just the word, to provide the analysis. Memory studies, as conceived by Zeitzer, differs from history because of its emphasis on the process of the construction and social use of the history. I would suggest explicitly write about the constructed nature of this presentation of the past and link it to the earlier transnational debate that you so strongly discussed.

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<sup>1</sup> Singapore permanent residents have the same rights and expectations as citizens with certain exceptions. Permanent residents are not eligible in any way to take part in state elections or receive certain tax benefits or government grants. They also do not have full access to the public housing and are required to pay slightly more for education and medical treatment.

<sup>2</sup> In addition, the Portal contains very useful online services to assist expatriate Singaporeans such as online passport renewals. The portal also provides returning Singaporeans with practical advice on assimilating back into Singapore society with information on jobs and professional associations, children's education and other general matters affecting the returnee.

<sup>3</sup> There are an estimated 40,000 Singaporeans living in Australia with 10,000 in Melbourne alone.

<sup>4</sup> About eighty percent of Singaporeans live in high-rise public housing in sprawling estates.

<sup>5</sup> National service is compulsory for all Singaporean male citizens and permanent residents who reach the age of eighteen and lasts for two and a half years although there are plans to reduce this to two years. Conscripts then become military reservists once they complete their national service.