

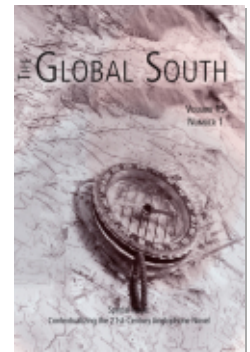


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Neoliberalism and Two Novels of Speculative Fiction from Singapore

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ABSTRACT

This essay discusses two novels from Singapore—Tham Cheng-E’s *Surrogate Protocol* (2017) and Nuraliah Norasid’s *The Gatekeeper* (2017)—as speculative fiction (sf), a broader term for narratives that contain science fictional or fantastic qualities but are particularly invested in socio-political questions rather than resolutely celebrating a techno-scientific future. Through extrapolation and speculation, Singaporean speculative fiction snatches truth from the jaws of reality. Because these novels rely on imaginative speculation and extrapolation rather than historical verisimilitude and authenticity, they describe and invent a world that is similar to but a few steps removed from Singapore’s status quo. Such estrangement allows the novels to create a cognitive space in which readers can assess and question this status quo and sidestep the government’s out-of-bounds or OB markers. By extrapolating from Singapore’s present, they may evade a censorious state regime because their narratives imagine possible futures rather than revisit a politically sensitive past. *Surrogate Protocol* and *The Gatekeeper* raise questions about Singapore’s ethno-racial politics and state-sponsored promotion of biomedical technology and research. They employ technoscience and myth as novums (Darko Suvin’s term) to speculate about socio-cultural structures and strictures in Singapore. Although the novels do not offer explicit blueprints for socio-cultural change, through the cognitively estranging processes of extrapolation and speculation they question accepted norms regarding racialization, biopower, and gendered identities in Singapore. The novels’ protagonists try to resist the self-optimization called for by neoliberalism’s technology of subjectivity, even if they may eventually be compromised by its technology of subjection.

Writing in 1984, historian Donald K. Emmerson muses that Southeast Asia is one of those “names that simultaneously describe and invent reality”: “those who first named and depicted the region as a whole wrote, without realizing it, a kind of science fiction, in which ‘Southeast Asia’, like ‘spaceship’, labeled something that did not exist—but eventually would” (1). While the stakes of Emmerson’s essay are the shifting contours of what constitutes the geopolitical region of Southeast Asia, his offhand remark that an act of naming has the discursive power associated with science fiction to describe and invent reality is pertinent to my examination of two novels from the Southeast Asian city-state of Singapore. I regard Tham Cheng-E’s *Surrogate Protocol* and Nuraliah Norasid’s *The Gatekeeper*—each released in 2017—not only as science fiction but as *speculative fiction*, a broader term for narratives that contain science fictional or fantastic qualities but are particularly invested in socio-political questions rather than resolutely celebrating a techno-scientific future. Speculative fiction (henceforth abbreviated sf) is not a newcomer to Singapore’s literary scene, nor is it imported wholesale from the West. Nadia Arianna bte Ramli’s historical survey shows that “the genre is certainly no stranger” to the country: the earliest local sf publication was a 1953 Malay-language comic, and since 2000 there has been an increase in the number of published sf magazines, fiction anthologies, and novels (32). Singaporean sf, however, is dwarfed by realist fiction. Philip Holden and Rajeev Patke observe that during the 1990s and early 2000s fiction published in Singapore consisted primarily of realist historical novels (a few exhibiting flashes of metafictional reflexivity) and short stories exploring quotidian struggles of Singaporeans at home or in diaspora (157–62). As a result, Singaporean sf is severely understudied. Scholarship on sf from Southeast Asia in general is sparse (Reyes; Satkunanathan; Herrero), and the only two Singaporean sf texts discussed by scholars are the film *Cyber Wars* and Sonny Liew’s comic *Malinky Robot* (Harvey; Bahng). This essay hopes to begin filling the intellectual gap regarding Singaporean sf.

Through extrapolation and speculation, Singaporean sf snatches truth from the jaws of reality. These two actions are key to sf’s status as what Darko Suvin famously calls “the literature of cognitive estrangement” that introduces a “novum” into the storyworld, a term Suvin borrows and adapts from the Marxist thinker Ernst Bloch (4, 63). A novum or “cognitive innovation is a totalizing phenomenon or relationship deviating from the author’s and implied reader’s norm of reality” (64). Simply put, a novum is an object or a person or an idea so radically new that it bends or transgresses the content and laws of reality as we know it. It constructs “an imaginative framework alternative to” our “empirical environment” (8). The novum extrapolates from existing objects and phenomena (i.e., *where could we go with this?*) or speculates about alternatives to the reality we inhabit (i.e., *what if this were otherwise?*). The critical potential of sf in Singapore must be understood within the context of

the actions taken by the country's authoritarian government in recent years. In 2015 and 2016, the National Arts Council withdrew funding from a graphic narrative and a realist novel respectively that delved into the histories of left-wing politicians and political movements in Singapore (Poon 139). In 2013 a documentary featuring interviews with Singapore's political exiles was banned by the country's Media Development Authority (Khoo). During a 2019 parliamentary session a minister quoted lines from a lyric poem by Alfian Sa'at out of context, weaponizing the poet's words to cast him as disloyal and seditious (Pan). Such censoring of sensitive political matters and voices of protest in film and literature further chilled the country's artistic scene in which there is already considerable self-censorship regarding politics and race. This is where sf novels such as *Surrogate Protocol* and *The Gatekeeper* have a part to play. Because their genre relies on imaginative speculation and extrapolation rather than historical verisimilitude and authenticity, they describe and invent a world that is similar to but a few steps removed from Singapore's status quo. Such estrangement allows the novels to create a cognitive space in which readers can assess and question this status quo and sidestep the government's "out-of-bounds" or OB markers, which are "intended to limit political engagement, civic action, and participation, and anything else remotely linked to domestic politics in Singapore" (Lee, "Gestural Politics" 144).

The island that is today Singapore was a key trading port during the Srivijaya (8th to 12th centuries CE) and Majapahit (late 13th to 16th centuries CE) empires and also during the Malacca sultanate (1400 to 1511 CE). In the nineteenth century British officials of the East India Company colonized the island; the resulting port-city remained a British colony (except for a brief period of Japanese military occupation during World War II) up until 1963, when Singapore became part of the Federation of Malaysia. Two years later, Singapore split from the federation and became its own independent country under prime minister Lee Kuan Yew, who became internationally renowned for his authoritarian governance and relentless pursuit of technological and economic development as guarantors of national security and social cohesion. In more recent times, the Singaporean state's key initiatives to turn the country into an Intelligent Island (in 1992) and then a Smart Nation (in 2014), together with its 2003 establishment of a massive biomedical and pharmaceutical research center called Biopolis, all point to a climate of technoscientific exuberance that would not be out of place in a classic science-fiction narrative. These intelligent, smart, and biopolitical initiatives are part and parcel of the Singaporean state's neoliberalization of the country's territory and population. In her study of neoliberalism in East and Southeast Asian countries, Aihwa Ong highlights how closely the economic and political aspects are connected through "technologies" of "subjectivity" and "subjection": the former is "an array of knowledge and expert systems to induce self-animation

and self-government” among citizens so they “can optimize choices, efficiency, and competitiveness in turbulent market conditions,” while the latter is set of authoritarian “political strategies that differently regulate populations for optimal productivity” (*Neoliberalism as Exception* 6). With regard to Singapore specifically, the country’s leaders wish to inculcate in Singaporeans “a culture of ‘technopreneurial’ practices” so that they will aspire to be “risk-taking entrepreneurs who help attract investments from global firms” (*Neoliberalism* 181, 183). However, the state’s designs of turning Singapore into a global city attracting an international creative class conflict with its desires to maintain strict control over its populace. For Terence Lee, “the fashionable rhetoric of creativity has been mobilized to demonstrate to the world that Singapore has become more open and innovative” in the first decade of the twenty-first century, and there is also a “deliberate depoliticization of creativity” such that its “attendant discourse of openness” only applies to the open flow of intellectual and economic capital rather than open-minded discussion of matters social or political (“Industrializing” 46, 47). Singapore’s brand of neoliberalism encourages creativity as a means towards capitalist production rather than thought-provoking critique.

Speculative fiction’s creative world-building through non-mimetic style may gain political traction while evading official censure in Singapore’s climate of techno-scientific exuberance and authoritarian governance. Sf, as Sherryl Vint observes, “encourages examination of the irrational and affective dimensions of experience as well as logical extrapolation” and “rethinks the discourses by which we understand commonplace reality” (90). According to Marek Oziewicz, the term arose during the 1970s in the US to name a body of cultural and literary texts that resist a “specifically Western, post-Enlightenment, androcentric mindset,” which dismissed not only “stories that failed to imitate reality” but also “the cognitive value of speculative visions of a world formulated from a postcolonial or minority perspective.” The term speculative fiction was further elaborated upon by women writers and writers of color, such as Judith Merril, Margaret Atwood, and Samuel Delany, who generally pushed back against “hard” science fiction, which Vint defines as fiction that is “generally enthusiastic about technology” but “worrying little about the potentially detrimental social consequences of progress defined as increased technology and wealth” (24). Speculative fiction, in contrast, is more concerned “with human actions in response to a new situation created by science or technology”; it includes “non-mimetic genres—genres that in one way or another depart from imitating consensus reality”; finally, it “opens a new discursive space for the voice of minorities and ethnic others . . . without relegating them to the ghetto of ‘ethnic’ literatures” (Oziewicz). Speculative fiction’s porousness, its dynamic and capacious character, and its critical attitude towards different types of developmentalist logics make it a more appropriate term to use

for non-mimetic writing by authors from postcolonial societies who question power relations regarding race, gender, and sexuality. Eric D. Smith argues that since 2000, there has been a “phenomenal efflorescence of narratives written within a speculative framework” that addresses “the exigencies of postcoloniality and globalization in a way that challenges the hegemonic order” of postcolonial nation-states and transnational structures of global capitalism (5). Smith highlights how sf, “born in the imperialist collision of cultural identities and taking as its formal and thematic substance the spatial dislocations that inhere in the imperial situation,” can “undertake the twin operations of a critical *cognitive mapping* of the present and an imaginative cartography of utopian possibility” (4, 16). From a postcolonial or Third World perspective, Ericka Hoagland and Reema Sarwal point out that sf can train “critical attention to how imperialist history is constructed and maintained” (10) and, in the hands of writers from the Third World, sf can be used “to reimagine themselves and their world” and “dismantl[e] the stereotypes that science fiction in part has helped to support” (6) by employing local or native cultural materials in the process of extrapolation and speculation.

Turning to the Singaporean context, Kirpal Singh’s 1982 essay about “Singapore and The Uses of Science Fiction” stands out as the only work by an academic that considers sf locally, although he makes no mention of any Singaporean texts. Singh recommends Singaporeans read sf so they “can become better informed and better equipped to understand the changes that are rapidly taking place” (13). But sf is not simply about future-proofing Singapore. Singh also hints at sf’s potential to diverge from state-sponsored narratives of development and progress, for it can “take us out of the dull monotony of a routine existence” and “bring some sense of adventure our way”; sf “offers us new modes of perception and creates a new sensibility” (14). Singh is not only speaking of sf’s cognitive function in terms of creating perception and knowledge; he is also stressing sf’s emotional aspects to estrange readers from familiar routines and help them cultivate a consciousness willing to venture into new ideas and milieus. Exactly thirty years later, the editors of two Singaporean sf anthologies echo Singh’s comments. In his introduction to *Fish Eats Lion*, Jason Erik Lundberg sees Singapore’s iconic Merlion (a lion-headed fish statue) and the state’s repeated narratives about patriotism and progress during annual National Day celebrations as laying the groundwork for cognitive estrangement: “there is an inherent strangeness in constantly telling your own story that lends well to the writing of sf” (14). Asking their contributors to imagine “if birds could travel between universes and timelines, what might they see in alternative visions of Singapore?,” *Ayam Curtain’s* June Yang and Joyce Chng “showcase the potential of speculative fiction writing” in Singapore as “a rich tool for expressing our inner flights of fancy as well as for exploring local issues people care about” (15).

Sf is a set of literary-cultural narratives that can inspire and instigate readers to imagine and explore possible socio-political configurations other than the one they currently exist within. Such fictional inspiration and instigation is necessary given that Singapore's current political climate requires literature wishing to critique the status quo to write obliquely rather than directly. Tham Cheng-E's *Surrogate Protocol* and Nuraliah Norasid's *The Gatekeeper* introduce novums that invite readers to ask *what if things were otherwise* instead of turning to *what has gone before* or *what is my identity*. By extrapolating from Singapore's present, they may evade a censorious state regime because their narratives speculate about possible futures rather than revisit a politically sensitive past.

Surrogate Protocol

Tham's novel is grounded in and extrapolates from the lived reality of twenty-first-century Singapore, as many locations, landmarks, and events in the novel correspond to the country's official history and geography. It creates a fictional Singapore similar to its real counterpart except in one key speculative aspect: the presence of chromomorphs, people who do not age and have to morph or change their identities at regular, fifteen-year intervals. Through the experiences and memories of its protagonist chromomorph Landon, *Surrogate Protocol* evinces a skeptical attitude towards Singapore's official policies of multiracialism and racial identification as well as its recent emphasis on becoming a global hub for bioengineering and biomedical research. Landon's immortality is due to a sophisticated technological substance in his blood called the Serum (the novel's novum). This Serum surreptitiously records the life experiences of those who carry it, but its side effects include improved health, slowed aging, and amnesia. It is eventually extracted by agents of the Coterie of Discarnate Extra-Terrestrials (CODEX) so its data can be used to solve an enigma called The Unknown, something not explored in the novel. What triggers Landon's adventure is a schism within CODEX, which subtly tracks and (when necessary) eliminates chromomorphs, and which is headquartered in Singapore. One faction wants to extract the Serum from Landon and then kill him; the other wishes to rehabilitate him into normal life after extraction. Landon is assisted mainly by two CODEX agents: John, a former police officer, and Hannah, a chromomorph herself who was Landon's former lover when he lived under an earlier identity named Arthur.

As Landon regains his memories, the novel presents snapshots of his earlier existence where he meets Hannah and is present at key moments in Singapore's history. He also discovers that the CODEX faction trying to kill him is led by Marco, who bears a personal grudge against Landon because the latter almost killed Khun (Marco's former identity) for assaulting Hannah back in 1964. In

a final standoff Marco/Khun shoots John and apparently slays Hannah but gets eliminated by CODEX agents from the other faction. Reaching CODEX headquarters, Landon has the Serum extracted from his body to regain a normal life. At the novel's end, Landon receives a mysterious note from Hannah, hinting that she lives and wants to reunite with him in due course.

Because of his physical appearance, Landon appears to be of indeterminate racial or ethnic origin and thus confounds the Singapore state's categorization of its populace according to the Chinese-Malay-Indian-Other (CMIO) racial schema. This is remarked upon in the early sections of the novel. When Landon is questioned by a police detective over a stolen identity card, the latter "articulates a name in a Mandarin dialect followed by an IC [identity card] number, which Landon affirms as his own." However, the detective says that Landon does not "look Chinese," to which Landon replies that he is "part Malay, part Chinese and a dash of Dutch" and "everything's blended so well" (Tham 19) to produce his uniquely youthful yet indeterminate appearance. Landon also states that he's "mainly Chinese and Malay" (56) when questioned by Marco/Khun at (what Landon believes to be) their first meeting. During his encounter (as Arthur) with Hannah in 1955, Landon/Arthur says he has "a bit of everything" in him when she remarks that he does not "look very Chinese" (209). Readers discover in the novel's epilogue (dated 1844) that even Landon's adoptive parents are unsure of his ethnic or racial origins. With his "large, sienna pupils" the five year-old boy was of "a peculiar ethnicity" his father-to-be "couldn't place" (365). Furthermore, Landon's adoptive father and mother, Qara Budang Tabunai and Sayuri, are Mongolian and Japanese respectively. Whatever genealogy Landon possesses, Chinese ancestry plays little or no part in it. The novel also makes the ethno-racial identity of most of the other major characters indeterminate. Only two characters, Hannah and Amal, are clearly marked. The former is Chinese because her original name is Ning Yan and she was born in Hubei in 1712 (318); the latter (another CODEX agent and Landon/Arthur's friend who dies in World War II) is Indian because he is described as a "Kling" (299), a racially charged term that in colonial-era Singapore referred to coolies from southern India (Nor-Afidah and Cornelius).

This deliberate omission of many characters' ethno-racial identity and the emphasis on Landon's non-Chineseness is important because it complicates a highly essentializing racial schema employed by the Singaporean state, wherein "one's race is defined strictly by patriarchal descent; one's race supposedly determines one's culture" (Chua, "Racial-Singaporeans" 35). This designated racial identity is recorded on all official documents related to the individual, including the compulsory identity card or IC issued to all Singaporean citizens. This racial schema is a legacy of British colonialism, and by adapting it in the name of "racial equality," the postcolonial Singaporean state also

reproduced the divisions and stereotypes corresponding to the colonial-era categorizations (Velayutham 457–58). Because of a surge of immigration from southern China during the nineteenth century, Singapore’s population today has a 74.1% Chinese majority with its Malay and Indian communities comprising 13.4% and 9.2% respectively. The inheritance of colonial-era racial stereotypes coupled with economic inequalities after independence “has led to strong social stigmas and stereotypes associated with race” and “a pervasive belief” both among state officials and the general populace “that the Chinese are more intelligent, hardworking, and economically astute than other racial groups” (Moore 343). This has, in turn, led some to argue that “Chinese privilege” exists in Singapore because “considerable resources and power have been invested into the Chinese majority,” and “Chinese ethnicity alone provides a distinct upper-hand in education, politics, socio-economic mobility, and life-chances” (Hydar Saharudin). Non-Chinese, especially Malays, face both social and systemic demands of assimilation that are “uncomfortably extensive,” although the process of assimilation may still be “incomplete” (Barr and Low 182). Despite official celebrations of diversity and multiracialism, “for a member of a minority race” in Singapore “racism is accepted as inevitable and one cannot speak against it because there are no spaces to do so” (Velayutham 473).

Therefore, when an agent at CODEX headquarters tells Landon that “the world forces [an identity] upon you,” thus forcing “you to groom yourself to be seen” and “defined by the world because you care too much about what people think of you,” his words are more than an existential rumination (Tham 342). In the Singaporean context, it can be understood as a disapproving statement about how citizens have a racial identity forced upon them at birth and are required to groom and present themselves to society at large according to this identity, which in turn reinforces this pre-defined racial self. Multiracialism and racially prescribed identities are instruments of social control, so “to claim a Singaporean identity without racial boundaries . . . is immediately to take a political position against the state” (Chua, “Multiculturalism in Singapore” 60). Although the novel does not overtly criticize Chinese privilege or stage a polemic against official multiculturalism, Tham Cheng-E’s choice to obfuscate racial identities and to stress his protagonist’s decidedly non-Chinese ancestry may be a subtle departure from a vision of Singapore as “a society dominated by overt manifestations of ‘Chineseness’” (Barr and Low 165).

Surrogate Protocol also expresses ambivalence about Singapore’s investment in and self-positioning as global center for biomedical research, most notably with the 2003 establishment of Biopolis. According to Aihwa Ong’s ethnographic study, Biopolis is a massive conglomerate of physical buildings and knowledge clusters “that is at once embedded in the Asian tropics and densely connected to biomedical science sites around the world” with the mission of “unlocking the enigma of life” (*Fungible Life* 1, xii). Landon’s longevity and

youthfulness is the result of the Serum in his blood, “an advanced form of nanotech” made up of “cellular cybernetic organisms.” These organisms turn their bearers into “human black boxes” so that “all that they saw and heard would be tracked and recorded” to help CODEX unlock the great enigma of The Unknown (Tham 117). The Serum also has powerful medical benefits; as John explains, “it starts a morphological process that spreads like a cancer. But instead of killing you it renews your cellular composition and ends up slowing the ageing process”; “with the right programming the Serum has been observed to reverse the effects of many deadly ailments” (202). Because of its life-extending properties, over centuries “a black market” sprang up that “peddled Serum duplicates [. . .] and the wealthy had paid fortunes for rogue operatives to deliver them into their blood” because some of the Serum’s side effects such as “infertility and an immunity to venereal diseases were attractive perks to longevity” (256). The specific origin of the Serum’s advanced nanotech is unknown, but John muses that “its source might still be human” (117). Speculatively speaking, a biomedical research conglomerate such as Biopolis could have created this technology initially as a powerful cure for various diseases that later evolved into a physiological black box when repurposed by CODEX. The researchers at Singapore’s Biopolis “are amassing and gathering for the first time millions of data points on Asian vulnerabilities and variations, so that other scientists can develop drugs and therapies tailored to the needs of bodies within Asia” (Ong *Fungible Life*, xii). *Surrogate Protocol* extrapolates how such therapeutic biomedical research founded on vast amounts of data about Asian bodies can morph into a data-gathering and tracking technology implanted into Asian and other bodies for surveillance, regulation, and elimination. As Marco/Khun states, “*Chronies are supposed to be tracked. It’s in their darn blood to be tracked!*” (Tham 61).

For Landon, the Serum’s longevity is paired with amnesia, which makes his life miserable. As he writes a journal entry at the start of the novel, he feels that he “doesn’t die and doesn’t really live either. He just sort of . . . exists” (2). His amnesia prevents the forming of long-lasting friendships to accompany his long life and what little he remembers are “fragments that hold little meaning” despite his diligent journaling (3). As Landon admits to John, “each time” he tries “to build something it gets whittled down to nothing” (133) because of time’s passage and memory’s failure. Landon’s misery accords with scholarship in science and speculative fiction on the topic of immortality. While immortality may be “the beginning of limitless opportunity,” it also “represents the ultimate stagnation and the end of innovation and change”; “boredom and sterility must eventually set in” (Stableford and Langford). Landon’s sense of frustrated isolation reinforces the observation that “in science fiction, alienation from society is the standard cost of immortality or extended youth” (Rosen 130). The ubiquitous presence of CODEX agents in different time periods and

locations lends credence to reading of sf texts about immortality allegorically: they explore the increasing encroachment into our lives of “vast transnational corporations, bigger than most governments,” whose “faceless anonymity” and technological resources enable individuals’ biological longevity but also thwart “individualistic rebels and heroes of a classic populist-style revolt” (Jameson 41). *Surrogate Protocol* extrapolates from the existing research conducted at Biopolis to imagine the potential of a future technology enabling the bio-policing of immortals functioning as organic data collectors.

This biopolice is undoubtedly CODEX, a “quasi-government” body that began as “an inner circle of scholars in 1627” to study The Unknown and extra-terrestrial phenomena (Tham 115) but evolves into a clandestine paramilitary agency in the twenty-first century. This evolution is enabled by the Serum’s nanotechnology: all CODEX agents are equipped with an “omni-cron,” an egg-shaped nanotech instrument that functions as a recording device, a scanner, and also a weapon tailoring poisons to someone’s genetic code when agents are “tagging” or killing chronomorphs (202, 136). (In the epilogue it is hinted that an earlier version of Landon named Aldred—the name Landon reverts to at the end of his storyline—may have existed at an earlier time and could conceivably have passed Serum technology to CODEX.) By the nineteenth century CODEX has become a powerful and secretive organization located in British colonial-era Singapore. The military Fort Fullerton “was built” in 1829 “over [the] very chamber” housing CODEX’s underground headquarters (117), suggesting that CODEX had influence at the highest levels of the colonial government to safeguard its assets and operations. The continuity between colonial power and CODEX’s paramilitary strength is reinforced in the twenty-first century when Landon enters the agency’s facility through a secret entrance hidden underneath “a large gun emplacement” left behind by the British (339). So powerful is CODEX that, in the novel’s present time, the struggle between “factions [that] were born of a rift inside” the agency causes a corresponding “rift in the [Singaporean] government,” leading to acts of “home-grown terrorism” by one faction that could “destabilise this country” (116). A feud between scholarly special operatives may inadvertently result in regime change. *Surrogate Protocol* speculates that a research organization can potentially become a quasi-governmental paramilitary agency with its own political agenda, if one extrapolates from Biopolis’s current portfolio of responsibilities.

It is no secret that researchers at Singapore’s Biopolis are closely associated and aligned with the state in various ways. As Aihwa Ong observes, many Biopolis scientists are “state employees” who “take the lead in corralling scientific objects and findings about a variety of life forms in the region before they fall into the hands of drug companies” (*Fungible Life* 9). After the outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in 2003, “Biopolis was recast as a

center for biodefense” playing “a dual role as biocapitalist and biosentinel, ever alert to managing uncertainties in the market and in nature that threaten the nation and surrounding region” (10). Biopolis scientists are therefore the front-line of Singapore’s defenses against biological warfare and play a central role in safeguarding genetic material from the country and region from falling into unfriendly or exploitative hands. In *Surrogate Protocol* CODEX agents play a similar guardian-enforcer role, combining their scientific skills with covert operations training to ensure that the curative and life-extending powers of the Serum will not be “abuse[d]” by those who show “deficiencies in restraint and discipline” and sell or buy the Serum on the “black market” (Tham 257). In 1933, for instance, Hannah is part of a CODEX “dragnet” to eliminate Serum abusers (257). Hannah, playing the *femme-fatale*, targets a wealthy Serum abuser named Song. She uses her nanotech equipment to program “a cybernetic infusion” that “mingled with his Serum,” and Song dies from a heart attack triggered by this specially bioengineered weapon (260). Tham’s novel thus imagines a technoscientifically dystopic world in which CODEX exists as a more sinister and aggressive version of Biopolis: a research and regulatory agency acting as both biocapitalist and biosentinel that attains an immense amount of clandestine power over the fate of countries, individuals, and life itself.

However, *Surrogate Protocol*’s critique of Singapore’s status quo only extends so far. While not a standard time-travel story, Landon’s storyline in twenty-first century Singapore is interspersed with chapters set during the twentieth and nineteenth centuries when Landon lived under other surrogate identities, all the way back to his childhood in 1852, when his adoptive father transfused the Serum into his bloodstream after a tiger mauled him. While Landon himself is not a chrononaut who ventures across time, readers witness his presence at key historical events, where his interventions might alter Singapore’s future and present. These events include the bombing of MacDonald House by Indonesian military saboteurs in 1965, the massive fire that destroyed the slums of Bukit Ho Swee in 1961, and the massacre of civilians at Alexandra Hospital by invading Japanese troops in 1942. But in almost every instance Landon is a confused spectator who cannot prevent or alter what happens before him. Outside MacDonald House Landon locks gazes with one of the bombers, whose eyes “burned with tension, as though the man were anticipating something tremendous and imminent,” but Landon is knocked out by the subsequent explosion (Tham 126). Landon goes to Bukit Ho Swee to obtain a new surrogate identity and “tried in vain to locate his bearings” because he “knew nothing of the route” to exit the blazing slums (188). At Alexandra Hospital Landon escapes the massacre thanks to his friend and CODEX agent Amal; Landon is “scurrying up the incline” beside the hospital to safety while Amal sacrifices himself to hold off advancing Japanese soldiers (242). In

1923 Landon even meets a man named Lee Chin Koon, father of Singapore's future prime minister Lee Kuan Yew. When the elder Lee shows Landon and Amal his baby Kuan Yew, Landon only feels "discomfort" when asked his opinion about the baby's name (284, 285). The chapter ends there, with the meeting between Landon and Lee Kuan Yew's family having no tangible significance for either Landon or Singapore's future.

William Burling's study of time travel sf stories distinguishes between "the temporal dislocation form and the temporal contrast form" (7). The latter form "emphasizes not an abstractly scientific meditation on the "how" of time travel, but rather a dynamic historical critique" (12). The temporal dislocation form, on the other hand, focuses only on the science and technology enabling time travel; such stories "have no interest in social critique" and "have little to say about the ideological dynamics of science" (11). *Surrogate Protocol* is narrative of temporal dislocation—or, given Landon's amnesia and confusion, one of temporal discombobulation. Landon's haplessness at key historical moments suggests that these chapters function as scaffolding elements to authenticate the novel's fictional world with Singapore's politico-historical reality, rather than as moments of politico-historical contingency that could alter Singapore's future if Landon intervenes. The focus of each nineteenth- and early/mid-twentieth-century chapter becomes how and when Landon will encounter Hannah (his CODEX tracker and lover), whether their romance will persist or fade, and how he will survive or escape the catastrophic event that is about to occur. The larger socio-political circumstances leading to or resulting from this catastrophe remain unexamined and unchallenged.

This is not surprising given the general climate of political apathy or aversion in modern Singapore: "the ambiguity of the government's stand" on civil society "activities" has "acted to discourage the young from such participation," and "civil society development remains weak . . . because citizens see volunteers' work as essentially support for government initiatives" rather than advocacy for meaningful change (Ooi and Shaw 76). Singapore's "soporific political culture" results from the state having found "the soft-authoritarian sweet spot" (George 109, 112). By balancing the provision of "a high standard of living" with "an authoritarian impulse" restricting "political rights and civil liberties" the state ensures that "Singaporeans feel no need for such risk-taking behaviour" as protest demonstrations or civil disobedience (George 113, 114). This soporific attitude towards politics may explain why *Surrogate Protocol* avoids portraying an alternative history that could critique the country's status quo. Tham's novel certainly raises questions regarding the desirability of and potential problems related to present-day Singapore's multiracial and biotechnical projects. But it stops short of imagining otherwise the social, political, and economic circumstances that undergird these racial and biopolitical initiatives, preferring instead the familiar trope of star-crossed (and memory-loss) lovers.

The Gatekeeper

A strangely familiar sight greets Singaporeans readers of Nuraliah Norasid's *The Gatekeeper*: a map of the island-city-state of Manticura, where the novel is set, shows that Manticura has geographical contours similar to those of the actual Singapore. Compared to Tham's novel, *The Gatekeeper* builds a more extensive speculative world and assays a more incisive analysis of state power and ethno-racial relations in modern Singapore. The novel's protagonist, a young medusa named Ria, petrifies an entire village when she tries to protect her older sister Barani (also a medusa). To avoid human retribution, the sisters seek refuge in an underground settlement called Nelroote. Nelroote is home to many other non-humans: the Screeans, Feleneese, and Cayanese are all bipeds with strong ophidian, feline, and canine features respectively. Because these non-humans are looked down upon as animals by humans, they face discrimination on the surface where humans comprise Manticura's demographic majority. Decades pass while humans wage an intense and bitter war over Manticura during which Ria grows to adulthood and volunteers to guard the underground city's entrance, petrifying any soldiers who stumble upon it before they reach Nelroote. Ria encounters Eedric, a young human male with some non-human blood, who by sheer accident escapes being petrified. The two form a friendship that develops into a romance, but things turn sour when Nelroote is raided by an overwhelming force of Manticuran soldiers intent on capturing the medusas. Eedric takes Ria to his family home, where he has sex with her. Ria, however, realizes that she does not desire Eedric's protection and petrifies Eedric's father as well as his neighbors. Ria returns to Nelroote without bidding goodbye to a devastated Eedric, intending to kill Barani so as to prevent her sister from becoming a pawn of the Manticuran military, but she herself is captured. The novel ends with Ria being forced to fight a gauntlet of other prisoners as the Manticuran authorities test her powers as a living weapon.

Nuraliah uses a common sf strategy of representing ethno-racial divisions and colonizer-colonized relationships through the differences between distinct species. The medusas and other non-humans co-exist uneasily with the humans who colonized Manticura and the surrounding lands, and who are "always quick to see when someone was different" (Nuraliah 159). As Jessica Langer argues, in sf "otherness is often conceptualized corporeally, as a physical difference that either signposts or causes an essential difference," and this "often dovetails with the colonial discourse of the Other"; while such "physical difference" in sf "generally denotes different species, the parallel often has much to do with race" (82). Discrimination against non-humans comes across in the attitudes of two human characters. Adrienne, Eedric's girlfriend, comments that because non-humans have "so many programmes out there to help" them they "just

need to work harder” to better themselves and stop having children at an early age (Nuraliah 77); at the same time, she “would not go to a particular cinema because it had an ‘*anjing*’ (read: Cayanese) smell” (83). Eedric’s father Henry makes his disgust clear when a Feleneese is appointed state minister for “youth and welfare development” (230), stating that he “[doesn’t] want to believe that [the country’s] youth are going to grow up on policies sanctioned by” a Feleneese that eventually lead to “Human genocide” (231). While it is not possible to match the different species in the novel to Singapore’s CMIO racial schema, Adrienne’s and Henry’s attitudes may be typical of those held by some Chinese Singaporeans towards minorities. Inherited colonial-era racial stereotypes are still present in postcolonial Singapore and are “producing an image of the Chinese as intelligent, hardworking and economically forward” while Malays are stigmatized and stereotypes as “lazy, unintelligent and unambitious” (Velayutham 465). The fear of a human genocide due to increasing non-human birth rates and political involvement seems to mirror the Singapore state’s fear that “as minority birth-rates overtook the Chinese in the post-1980s” the overall “racial balance” would be upset; for this reason, “immigration policies were liberalised for East Asian immigrants to preserve” the country’s Chinese demographic majority (Hydar Saharudin). Compared to *Surrogate Protocol*’s more circumlocutionary skepticism of official multiracialism, *The Gatekeeper* pulls no punches in calling out resentful attitudes reflecting Chinese privilege.

Furthermore, the language, culture, and social relations of the medusas and other non-human groups appears to deviate from colonially inherited norms. Linguistically, the “lingua franca” of Manticura and “the Layeptic region” is Sce’*dal*, a language that connotes “familiarity” and operates by “breaking words, shortening sentences, barely obeying the laws of grammar” (Nuraliah 3). Sce’*dal*, by flouting grammatical rules, seems to be close to Singlish or vernacular Singaporean English often used colloquially, which truncates words and sentences. This contrasts with the “colonial-born” language, Ro’*dal*, the equivalent of which would be Standard English spoken with Received Pronunciation (3). Furthermore, the Sce’*dal* language contains strong elements of spoken Malay. For instance, “in colloquial Sce’*dal*, the word *cerita*” means “story,” which is its meaning in Malay (3). Young Ria refers to Barani as “kakak,” herself as “adik,” and their grandmother as “nenek,” Malay words that mean “sister,” “younger sibling,” and “granny” respectively (16). The fact that medusas, Screeans, Feleneese, Cayanese, and even some humans (such as Eedric) speak and are more comfortable speaking Sce’*dal* instead of the official tongue Ro’*dal* suggests resistance towards Singapore’s mother tongue language policy. This policy assigns a specific language to each racial group (Mandarin for the Chinese, Malay for the Malays, and Tamil for Indians) and prizes English as a neutral language for administration and business. Socially, the “shanty town” of Nelroote is a refuge for “those finding themselves in Manticura without the

proper papers and those who'd been ousted with nowhere to go" (156). But its inhabitants are not plunged into abject poverty and despair. Ria describes Nelroote's distinctive smell as "the smell of waste and wasting, but it was the smell of living too" (155). There is life in the scent of "banana fritters being fried in big batches by someone trying to make a living selling them; soap for bodies wishing to be clean in spite of the place they were living in; the flowers people always hung in doorways and windows" (155). There is no established system of law and order in Nelroote, because "there was little by way of rent to pay and most people had to scrape by anyway, so anything illegal was generally ignored unless it hurt someone directly" (156). While certainly not ideal or an idyll, subterranean Nelroote offers those ostracized by surface humans an opportunity to live with some dignity, and to recognize and respect the mutual need to live and let live.

In creating Nelroote, Nuraliah expresses sentiments similar to what Nazry Bahrawi illuminates in his study of Malay Singaporean writers Suratman Markasan and Mohamed Latiff Mohamed. Nazry argues that these two authors' representations of Malay culture and kampong (village) life are neither meant "to reproduce the practice of 'gotong-royong,' or 'mutual help' displayed by the kampong folks of yesteryears" nor an escapist longing for such halcyon days (515). Instead, the authors' "lamentations" about socio-cultural loss "are directed at unveiling the contradictions of modernity" resulting from the teleological narrative of national development and progress (516). This narrative is espoused by characters who are allied with the Manticuran state. After their grandmother's death, Barani's boyfriend, together with some police officers, try to persuade the medusas that "development is coming" and "everyone is going" to "the city" because it is "a place of opportunity" (Nuraliah 37). The police presence suggests that although Barani's boyfriend assures the medusas they will be "protected there" (38), chances are they will be incarcerated and experimented upon in the city. Eedric, living on the surface, remarks that Manticura is "big on the clean-up" of remnants of its checkered past (78), replacing them with "skyscrapers, digital and new-everything" (102). This neoliberal attitude of modernization and optimization affects people as well. Ria's teacher, another maternal figure early in the novel, "left shortly after Nenek's death to take up the post she'd been offered at a government school in the city" (41). Eedric starts off wanting "to do as many things in a day as he possibly could" and to "do everything right in any one day" (63); his father spends a lot of money on "private tutors" and music teachers to "groom [Eedric] for elite society" (68, 69); Eedric's "good-looking and well-groomed" girlfriend Adrienne is "a validation of his sense of self and of his worth as a man" (181). In contrast to this vision of societal and personal development, Ria heeds her teacher's parting words to "protect what you can protect" as Nelroote's gatekeeper-guardian (119), while also serving as a funeral director preparing Nelroote's dead

for cremation and interment in “family urns” near the underground entrance (118). Ria thus defends Nelroote’s messy lives and afterlives from encroachment by Manticura’s neoliberal developmental imperatives.

Through Ria’s character, Nuraliah also offers a feminist critique absent in Tham’s novel, one that accords with H  l  ne Cixous’s essay on “The Laugh of the Medusa.” Cixous criticizes Freudian readings of female subjectivity that are “riveting” women “between two horrifying myths: between the Medusa and the abyss” (885). Instead, in Cixous’s reformulation, “you only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she’s not deadly. She’s beautiful and laughing” (885). Cixous rejects the phallogentric binarism of death and oblivion, insisting that a woman “must write herself” through “the invention of a *new insurgent writing*” (880, emphasis original), one that explores the “infinite and mobile complexity” of femininity (signified by the beautifully laughing Medusa) and narrates “the adventure of such and such a drive, about trips, crossings, trudges, abrupt and gradual awakenings” (885). In *The Gatekeeper* Ria’s gaze only petrifies when she wills it; she can choose to look at people and be looked upon normally. Ria is referred to using two words from ancient Tuyunri (a language invented by the author) that sound alike: “*me-tura*” and “*met  ra*” (Nuraliah 271). The former means snake-woman but the latter means storyteller, writer, or inscriber. Ria the medusa is also a teller and subject of stories. As Nelroote’s gatekeeper-guardian she safeguards the lives and stories of Nelroote’s inhabitants living and dead, becoming a figure both feared and revered: “hers was the face of stories told to children to get them to behave, and the name incited to quell injustice and violence in the settlement” (118). Ria also becomes a “tutor” to Sani, a half-Screean boy, because she sees in him the same “intellectual capacity and hunger for knowledge” she once had (159); by educating Nelrooteans, Ria enables them to tell their own stories.

Furthermore, Ria’s artistic sensibility can be seen when Eedric discovers her “stone garden” (119) filled with statues of those she petrified. Ria has sculpted some of them: one male statue’s “entire chest area [was] carved out into the crude beginnings of breasts, mounds rough but unmistakable” and “on the span of its back, someone had brushed ‘Ria was here’ in thick red paint”; “another aimed down his gun’s sight, blooming with roses against the pitch black background of him from his toes right to the crown of his helmet”; a third “small figure of a woman . . . had the hips and legs of the man she had been carved out from” (130–1). Rather than see Ria’s sculptures as desecrations of victims’ corpses, the novel depicts Ria’s art as self-affirmation (“Ria was here”) and an insurgent writing that carves or inscribes feminine forms onto masculine bodies and turns instruments of harm into beauty. In her artistic inscriptions that draw the feminine out of the masculine, Ria performs what H  l  ne Cixous terms the “other bisexuality” of a feminine practice of writing “which doesn’t annul differences but stirs them up, pursues them” (884). So different from the

exquisitely groomed Adrienne, whom Ria sees in a photograph as “a perfect marble statue with skin so fair and polished smooth” (145), Ria’s sculptures are unfinished, rough, and (like Ria herself) marked by violence caused by humans on the surface.

This legacy of violence informs Ria’s decision not to stay with Eedric after Manticuran soldiers raid Nelroote to capture the medusas. In reviewing *The Gatekeeper* Inez Tan “can’t make sense of Ria’s motivations” to spurn Eedric’s protection and petrify his father and neighbors (“Medusa in Singapore”). A close reading reveals that Ria fears Eedric will become like Barani’s boyfriend who assured her of his protection but betrayed them. A young Ria observes that her lovestruck sister has become “soft, fragile, and silent as a corpse” (Nuraliah 36). When Eedric has sex with Ria, he finds her body “impossibly soft” (224); she “laid back, unmoving” and “was quiet” throughout (225). Ria’s softness and silence echoes Barani’s lovelorn state, and it is unclear whether she consents to sexual intercourse because the scene is narrated from Eedric’s perspective. We might surmise that Ria’s first sexual experience shakes her confidence in Eedric and his promise that they can “run away from all this and make a life somewhere” else (237). Another important reason for Ria’s departure is the social injustice caused by rich humans such as Eedric’s father. When Ria and Eedric arrive at his house, they are discovered by the family’s domestic worker, Suri. Eedric tries to intimidate Suri but Ria instead “explain[ed] her situation to Suri, with vulnerability, even kindness” and found “solidarity” with the maid. Eedric remembers that his family “ruled” Suri “rather strictly” and she suffered “punishments . . . over the slightest mistake”; furthermore, by not standing up for Suri Eedric “was only perpetuating the injustices she experienced day after day” (219). Eedric, unsurprisingly, cannot fathom how a non-human like Ria could bond with a lowly servant and bribes Suri with money to keep Ria a secret. But when Ria is leaving Eedric she is aware that in every house in this wealthy neighborhood “there would be a woman just like Suri. Whether Human, Tuyun or Screean, local or foreign, they were all the same—young, uprooted, frightened” (240). It is clear that, having endured discrimination and persecution all her life, Ria sympathizes with downtrodden women like Suri and her anger at their common plight motivates her second mass petrification, “for the world seemed bent on making the same things happen, over and over again” (241). While this does not excuse Ria’s killing of Eedric’s father and neighbors, it does help explain her spurning of Eedric. According to Tine Van Bortel et al.’s 2019 study, Singapore has about 230,000 female migrant domestic workers; many of them “experience high levels of social isolation and stress” due to harsh working conditions coupled with physical and verbal abuse from their employers (3). This psychological study accords with Suri’s circumstances in *The Gatekeeper* and explains Ria’s anger on her behalf. Ria’s fate, reduced to a military test subject who is “no more than a severed head stuck upon the shield

that the nation-state sought to build,” is therefore tragic and perverse: Ria’s fellow prisoners are promised “a president’s pardon” if they can slay her first, forcing her to petrify them in a “new sport” that makes her “disgusted” with Manticuran authorities (277).

Conclusion

Sherryl Vint sums up speculative fiction as a literary category that “emphasizes social and cultural change as much as—if not more than—technological change,” and whose “themes are about the cultural power of myths of science and technology” (90). Tham Cheng-E’s and Nuraliah Norasid’s novels can indeed be read as cultural narratives that employ myth (the medusa) and technoscience (the Serum) as novums to speculate about socio-cultural structures and strictures in Singapore. Although the novels do not offer explicit blueprints for socio-cultural change, through the cognitively estranging processes of extrapolation and speculation they question accepted norms regarding racialization, biopower, and gendered identities in Singapore. They also present readers with protagonists who try to resist the self-optimization called for by neoliberalism’s technology of subjectivity, even if they may fall prey to or be held captive by its technology of subjection. To return to Kirpal Singh’s comments in “Singapore and The Uses of Science Fiction,” if sf is “the perfect antidote to the curse of specialisation” (14), then the genre’s increasing popularity in Singapore suggests that it appeals to a broader, more general readership than specialized, highbrow literary fiction. Singaporean readers can follow the speculative adventures of Landon and Ria to arrive at a new mode of perception and sensibility, thinking and feeling their way toward meaningful questions about official multiculturalism, biotechnological research, and class distinctions in a subtly subjunctive rather than overtly subversive fashion.

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