

## **Negotiating belonging and perceptions of citizenship in a transnational world: Singapore, a cosmopolis?**

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**Abstract:** The complex mappings of inflows and outflows of people, capital, images and ideas in global city spaces create particular challenges for nation-states that are deeply embedded in the international circuit of capital. Through an empirical study of Singapore, an aspiring global city-state, I offer an analysis of how the state-sponsored cosmopolitan project is contested by Singapore citizens. I also present evidence to highlight the contradictions of belonging and citizenship in a transnational world, with particular reference to the postcolonial racial and nationality dynamics that inflect these discourses.

**Key words:** belonging, citizenship, transnational mobility, cosmopolitanism, Singapore

### **Introduction**

Accelerating globalisation and time-space compression allow some individuals more opportunities to switch abode internationally, or even have multiple abodes in different geographical locations simultaneously. Such individuals may form a sense of attachment to multiple 'homes' and develop complex identities based on their intertwining experiences. Even if individuals are sedentarily fixed to one site, their perceptions and attitudes of home are shaped by a bombardment of information and images from around the globe. As an aspiring global city, Singapore is a place where complex mappings of inflows and outflows of people, information and images converge and diverge. The Singapore government wishes to transform Singapore into a 'world-class' *cosmopolis* that would be 'a magnetic hub of people, minds, talents, ideas and knowledge' (Goh 1999a). However, plans to position Singapore internationally for ostensibly economic reasons also come with a set of social, cultural and political concerns.

Using the example of Singapore, this paper explores how perceptions of mobility and cosmopolitanism affect one's construction of belonging and citizenship to a nation-state. Rather than focusing on transnational cosmopolitans, I examine the group of Singaporeans that remain in the nation-state but whose perceptions of citizenship are

invariably influenced by the real and imagined impacts of mobility and cosmopolitanism. Although the Singapore experience is historically and contextually specific, Singapore's global footprint far exceeds its population size and physical dimensions. Insights into its experience of grappling with the conflicting demands of globalisation and nation-building hold valuable lessons for other emerging global economies and their nation-states.

In the following sections, I elucidate first, the politics embedded in the discourse on cosmopolitanism. Next, I consider how the nation-state and the institution of citizenship are being impacted by globalisation and transnationalism. I subsequently discuss the discourse and government policies devised to propel Singapore towards cosmopolitan global-city status, and problematise the implications for belonging and citizenship. I then turn to an analysis of some empirical material obtained from focus group discussions with Singapore citizens. I identify ways in which hegemonic state discourses in Singapore are contested by citizens, and problematise the cosmopolitanism discourse in Singapore, an aspiring 'cosmopolis'. In the concluding section, I highlight the implications of this study for our understandings of cosmopolitanism, difference and citizenship.

### **Cosmopolitanism or 'cosmopolitics'?**

The geographies of flows and connections associated with globalisation intersect national boundaries to produce people with affiliations to social, familial, political, economic and religious networks that incorporate them into two or more states (Dwyer 1999:288; Glick-Schiller 1999:202). Such persons can be considered 'transmigrants' who occupy 'transnational social spaces', which 'exist above and beyond the social contexts of national societies' (Pries 2001:23), though not excluding them. It is argued that due to their transnational orientations and positions, the territorial referents of civic loyalty for transmigrants are increasingly divided because the practicalities of residence are often incongruent with the ideologies of home, soil and roots (Appadurai 1996:47). Within the category of transmigrants is a sub-group of people described as 'cosmopolitans'. The cosmopolitan is someone who possesses 'a way of being in the world, a way of constructing an identity for oneself that is different from, and arguably opposed to, the

idea of belonging to or devotion to or immersion in a particular culture' (Waldron 2000:227). In its older-style political and philosophical ideal, cosmopolitanism was regarded as a universal utopian humanism that transcended particularism, whether defined territorially, culturally, linguistically or racially (Robbins 1998a; Waldron 2000).

The concept of cosmopolitanism has, however, recently been reactivated by a broad spectrum of social and political theorists elucidating on its content and extent, and exposing its inherent contradictions and ambivalences. Today, the concept of cosmopolitanism is more typically identified with images of 'someone who [claims] to be a "citizen of the world" by virtue of independent means, expensive tastes, and a globe-trotting lifestyle' (Robbins 1998b:248). Such cosmopolitanism resonates with power relations and ideology naturalised along class, racial/cultural and gender lines (Clifford 1997:84; Robbins 1998b:248). The figure of the cosmopolitan is also akin to the *flaneur*, a clearly masculine image and often symbolic of the more sophisticated West juxtaposed against a denigrated Other (Morley 2000:231). The notion of a universal cosmopolitanism – popularly associated with Immanuel Kant or Martha Nussbaum – is further criticised as European in origin and rooted in Greek and Enlightenment values (Morley 2000:231). The idea of a cosmopolitan citizenship that subscribes to universal rights and obligations is similarly contested. Linklater (2002:319) argues that such a concept is 'vacuous in a world of multiple bounded political communities with their different mores, their pronounced opposition to transferring sovereign powers to global economic and political institutions and their warranted scepticism that anything resembling democratic citizenship can be developed outside the nation-state'.

The politics inherent in cosmopolitanism has been well-noted by scholars such as Cheah and Robbins (1998), Cartier (1999), and more recently, Isin (2002), Ley (2004) and Yeoh (2004). As a space of diversity (Soja 2000 cited in Isin 2002), the 'cosmopolis' should be similarly scrutinised for such 'cosmopolitics' (Cheah and Robbins 1999), particularly in the light of immigrant populations converging (and diverging) with local and national populations. Transnational flows of people and cultures create politics and spaces of inclusion and exclusion that jar with the discourse of cosmopolitanism invoked in the

cosmopolis vision (Yeoh 2004). Isin (2002:265) further argues that in the cosmopolis, citizenship is subject to change as new members expand their claims while other forms of segregation and violence emerge to counter those advances. This poses questions of how the nation-bound concept of citizenship is challenged by the emigration of citizens overseas, and the immigration of newcomers who may pose a perceived threat to the citizens that remain.

### **The nation-state and citizenship in a globalising world**

The essence of the nation-state, as we know it, is the institution of citizenship, namely ‘the integration of all the inhabitants of a territory into the political community and their political equality as citizens’ (Castles and Davidson 2000:2). Isin and Wood (2000:4) define citizenship as ‘both a set of practices (cultural, symbolic and economic) and a bundle of duties (civil, political and social) that define an individual’s membership in a polity’. Painter and Philo (1995:113-115) also suggest that conceptualisations of citizenship should encompass a political side, which relates to ‘the individual’s position vis-à-vis an overarching political body’; and a social-cultural side pertaining to ‘questions about who is accepted as a worthy, valuable and responsible member of an everyday community of living and working’.

The concept of citizenship has always been ambiguous and prone to change and contestation. This arises partly from the contradiction between *citizenship* and *nationality*, wherein the citizen is assumed to be a member of some national community sharing common cultural values (Castles and Davidson 2000:11). More recent scholarship on citizenship also seeks to approach it as a process and interrogate it as a set of subjective and contradictory discourses and practices (Holston and Appadurai 2003; Waters 2003; Secor 2004). Understanding citizenship ‘as a non-static, non-linear social, political, cultural, economic, and legal construction that is best rendered in terms of a *citizenship formation*’ (Marston and Mitchell 2004:95; emphasis original) creates the possibility of scrutinising state-citizen power relations in the *production of citizenship*.

Given the intensified interconnectedness and accentuated transnational mobility of the world today, it is even more imperative to question and unpack the idea of citizenship. Aihwa Ong's (1999) seminal work on 'flexible citizenship' practices amongst the transnational Chinese capitalist class draws attention to how individuals circumvent and benefit from different nation-state regimes by selecting different geographical sites for investments, work and family relocation. A wealth of recent scholarship by geographers (Mitchell 1997; Nagel 2003; Waters 2003; Ley 2004; Nonini 2004), however, show how local geographies, place and settlement remain salient amidst the seemingly unfettered transnational shuttle of these cosmopolitan figures. Mitchell (1997:229), for example, argues that new Chinese immigrants to Vancouver not only have to assume legal citizenship, but also *cultural citizenship* by becoming attuned to local nuances of 'class lifestyle, state formations, neighbourhood histories, and conceptions of race and ethnicity'. In this paper, I draw on the example of Singapore to illustrate how citizenship is contested within a political context where 'cosmopolitanism' is staged amidst the outflow of Singapore citizens and the inflow of new immigrants.

### **Staging Singapore as a vibrant cosmopolis**

In an age of integrating capital, technology and information across national boundaries, staging Singapore as a 'vibrant cosmopolis' has become an imperative for the governing elites in the country. Since Singapore gained independence in 1965, the ruling party, the People's Action Party (PAP), has governed and charted Singapore's evolution. The development of Singapore as a nation-state through government decisions tends to be conflated with the party's directives. The globalisation of talent is of particular concern for the Singapore government – both inflows of foreigners to Singapore and outflow of Singaporeans to other countries – because human capital is treated as a key determinant of the country's competitiveness. In the Singapore context, 'talent' refers to highly skilled and professional labour, technopreneurs, entrepreneurs and investors. I argue that this two-pronged approach to catapult Singapore into the status of an global city is encapsulated in the Singapore government's Internationalisation Strategy and Foreign Talent Policy respectively.

The Internationalisation Strategy refers to the government strategy of encouraging Singaporeans to work overseas to expand the Singapore economy beyond its territorial limits (Goh 1997). The government believes that this internationalisation of Singaporean talent would also enable Singapore to be more globally competitive as cosmopolitan Singaporeans ‘acquire the international experience, gain relevant exposure and the ability to cross culture and work with talents elsewhere’ (Lee 2000). However, the concomitant worry is that ‘Singapore risks becoming like one of those well-run, comfortable international hotels which successful business executives check in and out’, rather than a home ‘where the people feel they belong, where they are king and where they can decorate and arrange the furniture the way they like’ (Goh 1999b). The idea of a hotel, a place of transit that operates on market principles, is a fitting contrast to the idea of home, which connotes a devotion to a place because of the personal stakes involved (Douglas 1991).

In relation to the home-hotel analogy are two expressions popularised by the former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong in 1999 — ‘heartlanders’ and ‘cosmopolitans’. The term, ‘heartlander’ refers to the conservative majority in Singapore who live in public housing estates. They tend to be rooted in their cultures and traditions, respectful of authority and less vocal in their demands. Their concerns centre on their livelihood and children’s education rather than abstract notions of artistic and political space (The Straits Times 2 March 2002). While heartlanders speak ‘Singlish’<sup>1</sup> and make their living locally because their skills are not marketable internationally, the ‘cosmopolitans’ speak English and have skills that command high incomes. Cosmopolitans have an international outlook that enable them to work and be comfortable anywhere in the world (Goh 1999c). Cosmopolitans are by implication likelier to treat Singapore as a hotel because of their mobility and rootlessness whereas heartlanders see Singapore more as a home because of their attachment to the homeland, or simply due to the lack of choice. Their purported differences in socio-economic status, values, outlook and mobility prompted the Prime Minister to project a vision of Singapore as a home where the cosmopolitans and heartlanders should bond and identify with one another (The Straits Times 23 August 1999).

The second strategy, the Foreign Talent Policy, refers to government efforts to draw foreign professionals, investors and entrepreneurs (popularly termed ‘foreign talent’) to Singapore. The government’s rationale is that foreign talent is needed to create jobs and strengthen the country’s competitiveness in view of Singapore’s small and ageing local population (The Straits Times 8 November 2001; 9 November 2001). Foreigners can also fill gaps where locals lack the required skills, enabling the economy to adapt to fast changing economic and technological trends. To make Singapore more attractive to foreign talent, the government implemented some initiatives. These include enhancing Singapore’s international image through advertising and building recognisable icons like the Esplanade Theatres on the Bay<sup>ii</sup> (Seah 19 January 2003); institutionalising a six-tier immigration system to make it easier for businesses in Singapore to employ foreign talent (The Straits Times 6 September 1998); and encouraging foreign talent to obtain permanent residency or citizenship in Singapore (Wong 2004).

The ensuing hotel-home analogy and cosmopolitan-heartlander debate alert us to the paradox of aspiring to be a cosmopolitan society (going global) while simultaneously wanting Singaporeans to still feel a strong sense of belonging to the country (staying local). It also signals the difficulty of maintaining cohesion when transnational mobility appears to be accentuating social divides. However, I also suggest that the extent to which Singaporeans perceive ‘the go global, stay local’ stratagem as a win-win outcome is contentious. Whilst the Internationalisation Strategy has created debate about overseas Singaporeans’ emotional commitment to the country, the Foreign Talent Policy also caused resentment towards the privileging of foreigners over Singaporeans. These controversial government initiatives has a ripple effect on how Singaporeans construct their sense of belonging and citizenship in relation to the state.

### **Negotiating Singapore as ‘a field of citizenship’**

There is a plethora of geographical literature addressing the different logics of globalisation in Singapore, ranging from the economic, (Findlay *et al* 1998; Beaverstock *et al* 1999; Yeung *et al* 2001) to the social and cultural (Huang and Yeoh 1998; Yeoh and

Huang 1998; Baum 1999; Kong 1999a and 1999b; Yeoh and Willis 1999; Yeoh *et al* 2000; Yeoh and Chang 2001). Most of these works draw attention to the often neglected informal, micro-scale and qualitative aspects of globalisation. However, those focussing on transnational migration have typically studied the experiences of transmigrants situated outside of the sending nation-state (Kong 1999a and 1999b; Yeoh and Willis 1999). This neglects the perceptions of those remaining behind who have to negotiate the spaces and people flows emanating from emigration and new immigration. In this paper I seek to address this gap in the literature through a study focusing on first, the implications of transnational processes on a sense of belonging to Singapore as home for Singapore citizens living in the country. Second, I look at the potential conflicts between citizens and non-citizens with respect to how new rights of citizenship are negotiated as the new entrants compete in and shape the city as political space.

The empirical material for this study was generated through six semi-structured focus group discussions conducted in 2002. The focus group method was chosen because it allows the researcher to observe interactions between participants while simultaneously explore the content of verbalised views, opinions, experiences and attitudes (Berg, 1995:71-72). Focus groups also provide an interactive setting to gain interpretations that would not be obtained by simply aggregating individual replies or accounts (Goss and Leinbach, 1996:121). Focus groups were thus particularly appropriate for the nature of this research which sets out to uncover contestations of state ideological discourses and tease out citizen interpretations instead.

Thirty-two participants were recruited through friendship networks from educational institutions and housing neighbourhoods using a snowballing technique. The participants were all Singapore citizens from the majority Chinese ethnic group in Singapore (henceforth referred to as 'Singaporeans'). The participants were selected based on their age and educational qualifications. The discussions were divided into three age categories – the 'younger generation' (18-30 years old), 'middle-aged' (35-50 years old) and 'older generation' (55 years old and above). This helped to probe how material and social progress have influenced Singaporeans' sense of belonging. Each age category was



further sub-divided by the educational qualifications of the participants to comprise separate focus group discussions. The educational level of the participants was taken as a research variable in light of the cosmopolitan-heartlander debate, which hinges on skill-level as one of the defining criteria. Some of the participants had lived overseas previously but were mainly resident in Singapore at the time of the research. All of the focus groups had fairly equal numbers of male and female participants.

Each focus group was made of up four to eight people to allow participants ample time to express their views and question one another. The discussions lasted between one and half to two hours, and were facilitated by the author with the assistance of a co-facilitator who also took down notes. The focus groups were conducted in the university and the homes of volunteer participants (for groups who found the university inaccessible). All of the discussions, except for one, were conducted in English. That discussion consisted of the older and less-educated generation who tend to be less conversant in English so the focus group discussion was conducted in a mix of Mandarin and other Chinese dialects<sup>iii</sup>. The focus group discussions revolved around first, what makes (or does not make) Singapore a place of belonging for the participants. Second, how cosmopolitans and heartlanders regard Singapore as hotel or home; and third, views towards the influx of foreigners (both temporary migrants and permanent residents) to Singapore.

### **‘Cosmopolitan’, ‘heartlander’, or simply ‘citizen’?**

Smith (2001) argues that conceptualisations of the ‘global’ and the ‘local’ tend to ascribe particular binary attributes to these terms; this is evident in the Singapore state discourse on cosmopolitanism. The ideological state discourse points to how the identity of ‘cosmopolitan’ or ‘heartlander’ (based on mobility, education and worldview) affects whether Singapore is seen as ‘hotel’ or ‘home’. In the focus group discussions, I asked whether they see themselves as more ‘cosmopolitan’ or more ‘heartlander’. The typical difficulty of fitting into either categorisation is illustrated below:

Keith:           How do we divide them into such categories?

Elaine:           That’s a very good question. To what extent do you think people fall easily into such categories?

Corrine: A lot of us still have problems differentiating between them and putting them into distinct groups.

Keith: In a sense every Singaporean must be a cosmopolitan and every Singaporean who considers himself a cosmopolitan must be a heartlander.

Peter: Our stereotype of heartlanders is someone who only cares about what's happening on the island whereas our impression of the cosmopolitan is he knows everything and has a world-view. But you'll find that many of us are cosmopolitan-slash-heartlander. Where do you draw the line who is a cosmopolitan and who is a heartlander?

(Focus group with young, better-educated)

Rather than being distinctly 'cosmopolitan' (global) or 'heartlander' (local), for these participants, the global and the local dissolve into closely related versions of each other (Ley 2004:156). The focus group participants from the same age group with lower educational qualifications were less contesting of the cosmopolitan-heartlander definitions, but they also found such categorisations problematic:

Hui Ping: I think that that it's not very nice. It cause some sort of division.

Elaine: Does the use of these terms create problems because they divide society? You nodded your head, anything you want to add?

Wenyong: Because like in primary school they also have EM1, EM3<sup>iv</sup>.

Hui Ping: Actually it's very hard to say. I mean whether they are cosmopolitan or heartlander, it depends on their integrity when it's their own country having problems to stay and help. It doesn't matter whether they are cosmopolitans or heartlanders they will stay in Singapore to help when you have the heart to help.

(Focus group with young, less-educated)

The above dialogues show how the state's definition of cosmopolitanism (and non-cosmopolitanism) is called into question. Hui Ping's comment that 'it doesn't matter

whether they are cosmopolitans or heartlanders... when they have the heart to help' indicates that the purported relationship between being cosmopolitan and an eroding sense of belonging should be problematised. Although it is argued by the Singapore political leaders that mobile cosmopolitans are prone to seeing Singapore as a 'hotel', Debbie (62 year-old female, better-educated) highlights that Singaporeans who have lived overseas would appreciate their homeland:

The cosmopolitans may work overseas but they are basically Singaporeans even if they have a different outlook. When they come back they appreciate it better because they can see the difference. They may have a chance to settle elsewhere but what happens if the country they are going to gets into a jam? The first people it will kick out are the migrants. It doesn't mean that the person who has gone overseas and been given a chance to settle overseas will be less filial to Singapore.

Debbie's sentiment resonates with Kong's findings (1999b) showing how Singaporean transmigrants in China have a sense of enhanced national identity as a result of their transnational locatedness. The growing popularity of cosmopolitanism as a discourse and way of life belies how notions of the nation-state as home remain salient, despite (or even because of) hypermobility, displacement, hybridity and cosmopolitanism. Territory continues to be vital to the national imagination as 'deterritorialisation' generates various forms of real or imagined 'reterritorialisation' (Appadurai 1996:50).

Debbie also endorses a 'rooted cosmopolitanism' where there is 'the possibility of a world in which everyone [...] is attached to a home of her own, with its own cultural particularities, but taking pleasure from the presence of *other, different, places* that are home to other, different people' (Appiah 1997:175; emphasis mine). Conversely, a person who is geographically sedentary and immersed in his/her own culture can still possess a cosmopolitan outlook and lifestyle as long as those cultural norms and practices are not regarded as non-negotiable attributes of identity (Waldron 2000). The focus group exchanges show how the participants construct their sense of belonging and citizenship differently from the hegemonic state discourse that globalisation undermines nation-

building efforts if Singaporean cosmopolitans emigrate with little care for their national obligations. It is instructive however, as I shall discuss later, that when it comes to the presence of *other, differentt people* in Singapore, the attitudes expressed by the participants were more contentious.

The focus group discussions also revealed that rather than based on mobility ('cosmopolitan') or sedentarism ('heartlander') as suggested by the state discourse, the notion of Singapore as home is tied to the perceived rights and privileges of citizenship *for Singaporeans*.

Annie: Here I am a first-class citizen. Elsewhere I am a second-class citizen. There is nothing like being a citizen of your own country where you have all the rights

June: When you are at another place, you are very uncomfortable, and especially because we have our CPF<sup>v</sup> here. It is like our nest with the golden eggs! Anywhere else you go you will lose out to persons who are citizens.

Cheryl: This is the way that government control us!

(Focus group with middle-aged, less-educated)

Although the rights and privileges associated with citizenship run the spectrum from the political to the civil and social, the tangible material benefits of citizenship was a recurring theme during the discussions. Jenny (63 year-old female, better-educated) relates her sister's experience:

I think I can vouch for my sister. She has PR<sup>vi</sup> in the UK but she is a citizen here. Whenever she comes back to Singapore, the first thing she does is to get medically checked. Compared to elsewhere, medical care in Singapore is quite cheap if you are a Singapore citizen, because they give subsidies for senior citizens. In my sister's case, she comes back because she has the opportunity to get everything that belongs to a Singapore citizen.

The above discussion corroborates Kong's (1999b) argument that the use of citizenship rules keep Singaporeans bound to the nation-state by dispensing privileges. Being a member of the nation-state and seeing Singapore as home, relies not only on an affective sense of being 'included' in a polity (and for some, feeling 'excluded' from other polities), but also the material benefits received as citizens in Singapore. Interestingly, the focus group participants did not mention their responsibilities as citizens until the discussion turned to foreigners living in Singapore and their lack of citizen responsibilities vis-à-vis the privileges received. The mutually constituting relationship between the social-cultural (the affective) and the political (the legal status and material benefits) dimensions of citizenship (Painter and Philo 1995; Marston 2004) are complicated when citizenship privileges appear to be threatened by an inflow of new immigrants to Singapore.

### **Singapore, a cosmopolis?**

In its picture of Singapore as a cosmopolis, the government envisions that Singapore should be a world-class home for Singaporeans and foreign talent (Goh 1998). The above discussion shows, however, that Singaporeans regard Singapore as a home *exclusively for 'us'*. This attitude is paralleled in sentiments towards foreign talent where there is significant resentment regarding the privileges to attract foreign talent and the question of their long-term commitment (The Straits Times 1 March 2003). Jenny (63 year-old female, better-educated) who earlier stressed the importance of health care subsidies for senior citizens, argued that:

At this moment I agree that we need foreigners to come and help us because we don't have people with those qualifications yet. I think we need people like them so that we can compete and have great ambition but you should restrict the foreign talent coming in to certain fields – only those we need but not too many. Anyway, aren't they supposed to be temporary? They are so talented that they won't stay here for long!

Inherent in unwelcoming attitudes towards foreigners is the idea that Singaporeans are discriminated in employment opportunities because of the new competition:

Yongwei: Although the government claims that they are welcoming these people because they are talented, what the private sector is practicing is a different matter. They hire cheaper labour from other countries but who are not as skilled as locals, and give privileges to these foreigners, which in a way is discriminating against locals. They want us to make Singapore our home but they are discriminating against Singaporeans.

Jim: I feel that we are getting sandwiched. On the lower end we have the Bangla (Bangladeshis) coming in to take lower-level jobs and on the higher level we have the foreign talent who really have what it takes.

Yongwei: Yah, but this bank CEO who just resigned it seems that it is because the bank is not doing well. So if you bring in foreign talent it depends on whether [they] can work and not just qualifications. They have qualifications but they cannot perform as well as our locals.

(Focus group with young, better-educated)

The remarks of these participants indicate how they contest the Foreign Talent Strategy put forward by the Singapore government. First, in contrast to the government's hopes that these foreigners would settle in Singapore, Jenny expects them to be a transient workforce because their 'talents' and aspirations would draw them to other destinations. Second, unlike Jenny and Jim who agree that these foreigners will contribute to Singapore's economic growth, Yongwei was less accepting of the government's proposition that they are contributing as effectively as Singaporean workers.

The presence of foreign talent also creates a sense of displacement for citizens, as Wenyong expressed (20 year-old male, less-educated):

You bring more foreign talent into Singapore then one day we won't feel that Singapore is a place for us anymore. We will migrate to other countries. Heartlanders may feel that foreign talent are given the best

whereas heartlanders work very hard for ten or twenty years to contribute to society but end up like the middle-class only!

The social, economic and cultural contestation between Singaporeans versus foreign talent is thus projected onto lived space. The identities of 'citizen' and 'non-citizen' become markers that stake out position in the contest over rights and belonging through city spaces (Secor 2004:353):

Elaine: Do you think permanent residents (PRs) should be given the same privileges as Singaporeans?

Diana: So far they are not getting the same thing, which I think is not fair to them. Why do you give someone permanent residency and when they have to buy housing there is no subsidy?

Vincent: I feel it is fair. If you want certain rights, there are certain obligations

Annie: I feel that citizens always come first.

Vincent: Unless they are Singaporean, really Singaporean

Diana: Tell me, what is the difference between a PR and citizen?

Annie: They are not born citizens that's why they are called PRs.

Vincent: At least our grandparents built the country.

June: In any other place you go we also lose to other people who are citizens

(Focus group with middle-aged, less-educated)

Irene from another focus group (37 year-old female, better-educated) who spent a number of years living in Canada also said:

I feel very sad because overseas they tend to protect their own. They would rather sacrifice the foreigners first. So when I came back I was very unhappy that the government gave foreigners first. All this talk about loyalty to the country but how loyal is the country to me? What kind of policies do they have for me at the end of the day? I can get a job here or elsewhere, so why not? Who wants to stay here?

A sense of citizenship for Singaporeans (both as a place of belonging and in terms of rights and privileges) emerges in a dialogical relationship with its alterity (Isin 2000:4), represented by transient foreigners and permanent residents living in Singapore. It is interesting that the participants' responses map neatly onto Isin's (2002:22-33) typology on ways of being political. *Solidaristic* (group affiliation; Vincent: a common ancestry), *agonistic* (competition; Irene: sacrifice the foreigner first) and *alienating* (isolation; Annie: they are not born citizens) strategies are variously used to occupy positions within the social space of Singapore to delimit belonging to the polity (Isin 2002:32).

However, both Isin (2002) and Secor (2004:354) emphasise the act of 'being political' from the perspective of the non-citizen as one who negotiates the power relations, tension, contradictions and ironies of being defined by what is constructed as 'citizenship'. This optic may be ontologically useful and possibly politically emancipating, but it falls prey to reifying the category of 'citizen'. The focus group participants indicated that the proximity of immanent others creates instability and uncertainty within the category of 'citizen', causes a sense of displacement from the imagined and spatial boundaries of citizenship, and prompts reconsiderations of how they see themselves as citizens. Although resentment towards new immigrants also takes place in other parts of the world, what is significant about the Singapore example is that this is happening against the backdrop of convergent past diasporas that comprise the national fabric of present-day Singapore society.

The focus group responses also illustrate the slippage between government-purported advantages of encouraging foreign talent to settle versus the response of citizens who feel threatened and marginalised. State practices may be authoritative but they are also 'open to emotion, desire, interpretation and conflict' that impinges on enforcement and non-enforcement (Marston 2004:8). The on-going production of citizenship as a contested state-citizen relationship is reflected in how the Singapore state responds to assure Singapore citizens of their primacy over other resident categories. The Singapore Housing & Development Act and accompanying Polling Rules was amended in 1996 to exclude Singapore permanent residents (SPR) from voting for the government-subsidised



programme improving older housing estates in Singapore. Government subsidies that were previously available to SPRs for alleviating the costs of housing improvement were also retracted. SPRs either paid the full costs if their precincts voted in favour of the programme<sup>vii</sup>, or sold their flats to the government at market rates (HDB 2005). By ensuring that citizens 'have more privileges than PRs, who will in turn have more privileges than other foreigners' (Wong 2004), the Singapore state effectively differentiates between citizens, partial citizens and non-citizens

### **'Racialised' cosmopolitics**

The multiracial ideology that independent Singapore was founded on is today intertwined with a state-propagated cosmopolitan ethos that on one level, creates Singapore as a material place for cosmopolitans; and on another level, exhorts Singaporeans to adopt a cosmopolitan outlook (Yeoh 2004). The multiracial project in Singapore, as a key national narrative of coherence and unification for a nation of immigrants (Mitchell 2003:391), is still far from complete as evidenced in persistent state pronouncements and media and public speculations on racial harmony (Today 28 April 2005; 30 April 2005; 4 May 2005). This is further complicated by the stresses accompanying the positioning of Singapore as a cosmopolitan society. The preceding discussion on exclusionary attitudes towards foreigners already begs the question of whether Singapore is truly a cosmopolis; yet the cosmopolitan project is fractured not only in terms of 'citizen' versus the 'non-citizen', but also inflected with racial and nationality dynamics.

In a quantitative analysis of 501 skilled foreigners employed and living in Singapore, Yeoh and Huang (2003) found that more Asian employment pass holders were willing to settle permanently in Singapore than non-Asians. According to a survey of 363 firms conducted in 2001, such 'Asian foreign talent' form the typical profile of the expatriate community in Singapore now, rather than the Western prototype of yesteryear (The Straits Times 2 March 2003). It is telling, however, that during the focus group discussions it is towards the new Asian immigrants that strongest resentment was expressed:

Corrine: The impression I get is that the Singapore government is trying to get foreigners to come in and regard Singapore as home as well.

Derrick: At my work place there are Chinese and Indian nationals who are all permanent residents here. Masters of multiple degrees and all that, while some of my local colleagues are just normal university graduates. One thing for sure is that foreign talent from developing countries cost less which is the reason why even government jobs have been given to them!

Jim: Basically we have those Mainland Chinese who come here and talk loudly on their handphones in the bus. They carry on their way of life as it is in China – things we local Singaporeans cannot understand. Then we have those Bangla (Bangladeshis) who get on the bus like there is no tomorrow. We cannot understand why they do this kind of thing because we wouldn't understand their way of life. Conversely, they cannot understand why we are so angry with them. In a way there is a sort of cultural clash.

(Focus group with young, better-educated)

There is a common misconception that Asian societies integrate other Asian immigrants more successfully because of the supposed cultural similarities between Asian cultures. In fact, 'an Othering' is prone to take place. Jim's comments indicate that in the popular perception, there is a conflation of racial and class categories with regard to these 'other' Asians. His observations refer more typically to the Asian work-permit holders in Singapore rather than employment pass-holders<sup>viii</sup>. The majority of these work-permit holders originate from the Indian sub-continent or the People's Republic of China. They arrive in Singapore with short-term contracts for low-skilled and low-paying jobs. The employment pass holders may come from these same countries but they hold professional or highly skilled jobs.

The catch-22 situation for Singapore is that while Singaporeans expect foreign talent to contribute to Singapore, they are unwilling to embrace a new wave of immigrants from

the same countries that their immigrant ancestors had come from decades ago. Yeoh (2003:376) argues that although postcolonial Singapore ‘found it relatively easy to forget (or at least to selectively remember) its colonial roots in many ways’, when it comes to dealing with ‘migrant others, there is some sense in which the relationship between “nation” and “migration” continues to be interpreted (and critiqued) within colonial frames of reference drawn from Singapore’s history as the product of overlapping diasporas’.

Isin and Wood (2000:104) conceptualise the global city as a ‘field of citizenship’ inflected by class conflicts that bring about changes in the content and extent of citizenship, thereby shaping the city as political space where new rights of citizenship are negotiated. However, the changing nature of citizenship arising from the new spaces of flow in global cities is more than a matter of class or professional distinctions (Isin 2002). Rather, as the Singapore example shows, it is further inflected with the dynamics of race and nationality. The accentuated flows of migration converging and diverging in the global city exacerbates baffling questions of national history, culture, identity and ultimately citizenship, particularly when the Other is one that is *almost* similar to self.

The ideology of cosmopolitanism has its roots in a European legacy that emerged through several ‘global design[s]’ of cosmopolitanism (Mignolo 2002). The Singapore experience indicates that, rather than assuming a singular cosmopolitanism, there are plural histories, cultures and particularities (Pollock *et al* 2002:8) to be taken into account. Each of them is the unique outcome of specific geographical processes (Cartier 1999:284). These ‘discrepant cosmopolitanisms’ co-exist with one another but are also juxtaposed against each other (Clifford 1997:36). As an aspiring global city, forms of cosmopolitanisms – rather than cosmopolitanism as an honorific term – are played out in Singapore and negotiated as ‘a domain of contested politics’, or cosmopolitics (Robbins 1998a:10-12). This also alerts us of the need to think less in terms of a universalised cosmopolitan citizenship, but more with regards to the *cosmopolitics of citizenship*.

## **Conclusions**

The Singapore example shows how state attempts to address the challenges of globalisation via the two-pronged movement of people *into and out* of Singapore presents another layer of complexities to be addressed: a dual challenge to ensure that the citizens continue to feel at home in Singapore both affectively and materially. This paper underscores how the concept of citizenship is contested between the state and citizens, and accentuated by the inflow of newcomers and the privileges granted to them. Whilst Singaporeans demonstrate a form of ‘rooted cosmopolitanism’ that is open to gradations of belonging and mobility, the mobility of foreigners *into* Singapore can have a detrimental impact on whether citizens feel that Singapore is home. The study further shows that within Singapore, an Asian society, reactions towards other Asian newcomers are mixed. The new immigrants to Singapore come from the same countries (and ethnic groups) as the Singaporean ancestry. However, the differences between the new immigrants and Singaporeans are amplified in contemporary times through the accumulative process of decades of nation building that ironically, contradicts the multicultural ethos that Singapore was built upon (Yeoh, 2004).

These findings support the idea of cosmopolitics advocated by Cheah and Robbins (1998). There are two levels where ‘actually existing cosmopolitanisms’ (Malcomson 1998:238) are contradictory. First despite the state-sponsored propaganda that Singapore should be cosmopolitan, the form of cosmopolitanism that the Singapore government is willing to offer is uni-directional: Singaporeans should encourage foreigners to look upon the country as home, but Singaporeans abroad should not sink roots elsewhere. Second, at the level of the citizenry discourse, Singaporeans challenge the state’s hegemonic construct of what it means to be cosmopolitan and they are reluctant to extend to foreigners the same sort of cosmopolitan welcome that they would like to receive elsewhere. These findings point to a need to interrogate the ‘cosmopolis’ ideal, which is messier and more complex in reality than portrayed by both the Singapore government and the prescriptions of cosmopolitanism associated with Immanuel Kant and Martha Nussbaum. It is important to hold up what Massey (1998:21) terms are the ‘power-geometries of time-space’, where allowance is made for imaginations of ‘the spatial as the sphere of the juxtaposition, or co-existence, of distinct narratives, as the product of

power-filled social relations'. It is negotiations of forms of cosmopolitanisms that we should be alert to, and for which there should be greater accountability.

Looking at Singapore as an example of a 'field of citizenship' refracts what Gregory (2004:262) describes as the 'multiple ways in which difference is folded into distance, and the complex figurations through which time and space are threaded into these tense constellations'. The empirical material provided in this paper may be specific to the Singapore case-study in terms of the ideological discourse on cosmopolitanism (and non-cosmopolitanism), racial tensions and citizenship negotiations. However, what has been made clearer through this paper is that the criss-crossing flows of transnational processes and people mean that what counts as citizenship is no longer just figured in terms of how we see 'others *outside* "our" space' and 'others *within* it' (Painter and Philo 1995:118; emphasis original), but also how we see '*ourselves*' when *beyond* as well as *within* our space.

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<sup>i</sup> 'Singlish' refers to a form of pidgin English commonly used in Singapore.

<sup>ii</sup> The Esplanade Theatres on the Bay is Singapore's premier performing arts venue. It was constructed by the government with the vision of thrusting Singapore into the international arena as a global city for the arts.

<sup>iii</sup> The mix of languages employed created two challenges. First, the limited dialect fluency of the author sometimes restricted effective communication with the participants. Second, although terms such as 'cosmopolitan' and 'heartlander' could be translated into Mandarin by referring to the Chinese language newspapers, there was no direct translation in the vernacular dialects. The terms had to be interpreted into colloquial speech, hence inevitably altering their nuances for subsequent discussion. These difficulties highlight the complexity of executing group discussions in a multilingual setting. Fortunately the interactive setting of focus group discussions helped circumvent these difficulties by enlisting the co-facilitator and other more multilingual participants to communicate difficult questions and thoughts.

<sup>iv</sup> Young school children in Singapore are segregated according to their learning abilities: the brightest students go to EM1 and the weakest students are streamed to EM3. The majority of students end up in the band in-between called EM2. There is considerable parental and societal pressure for children not to end up in EM3.

<sup>v</sup> The CPF, or Central Provident Fund, is a compulsory savings account administered by the Singapore government and consisting of contributions from employers and employees. CPF funds are used to purchase homes as well as pay medical bills and children's tertiary education, provided enough money is left for retirement. It is the cornerstone of the social compact between the Singapore government and its citizens.

<sup>vi</sup> PR is an acronym commonly used by Singaporeans to refer to permanent residency.

<sup>vii</sup> The full cost of upgrading a flat is estimated to range from S\$42,400 to S\$67,200 (<http://library.thinkquest.org/C006891/hdb.html>, accessed on 3 June 2005).

<sup>viii</sup> The Singapore government has installed categories of passes for the employment of foreigners: holders of work-permits are unskilled or semi-skilled foreign workers, whereas holders of employment passes normally possess acceptable degrees, professional qualifications or specialist skills, and earn above S\$2500 per month.