

*People Like Us: Sexual Minorities in Singapore*. Edited by Joseph Lo and Huang Guoqin. Singapore: Select Publishing, 2003. 149 pp.

*People Like Us: Sexual Minorities in Singapore* is a book so right on time that it might have in fact arrived a little too early. Like the fabulous party guest who comes at the time stated on the invitation only to find himself or herself the first person there, but who shrugs off the embarrassment and sets about helping the host, the book appears just as Singapore seems ready — but not too ready — to think but not talk about alternative sexualities. The book is thus likely to find itself in the midst of a cautiously receptive atmosphere, even as it will work hard to make that milieu even more welcoming.

After all, it was just recently that the Prime Minister of Singapore, Goh Chok Tong, revealed to the Asian edition of *Time* magazine that his government now permits a certain amount of gay culture — or at least businesses (bars and saunas) — to exist and even flourish, and has also silently begun allowing “gay employees into its ranks, even in sensitive positions” (Elegant 2003, p. 36). Such good news cannot, however, be received without red flags. One reason to be sceptical is that this new governmental policy — at least as *Time* interprets it, rightly or wrongly — is mostly framed in the economic context of Singapore’s desire to attract more “foreign talent”. “The change in policy”, the magazine notes, is “inspired at least in part by the desire not to exclude talented foreigners who are gay” (ibid.). But what is more eyebrow-raising about the news item is that, while the ending of workplace discrimination against gays and lesbians is presented as no big deal, *talk-ing* about the policy — and about gay and lesbian lives and cultures — is still something to be wary of. Thus, while the policy has been implemented, it has been done “without fanfare ... to avoid raising the hackles of more-conservative Singaporeans” (ibid.). As far as the Singapore government is concerned, therefore, homosexuality might be fine; the entry of homosexuality into public discourse in Singapore, however, is still a matter for some caution or reservation.

In this light, this collection of essays, edited by Joseph Lo and Huang Guoqin, is an important one precisely because it attempts to create a

space for such discourse. The book takes its name from, and is an initiative by, People Like Us (PLU), a Singaporean gay and lesbian group that existed in its strongest and most tangible form between the years 1993 and 1997. Because a *raison d'être* of the group was its desire for a place in civil society, PLU's final achievement (the submission of an application to the Singapore Registrar of Societies, requesting that the group be officially recognized as an organization) was also the reason for its demise (when the application was turned down; for a record of this application process, see the essay "Copernicus Revolution in PLU" [pp. 132–37 of the volume], and "Brief History").

This book now represents another of the group's legacies. As co-editor Lo details in his Introduction, in January 1999, several members of PLU organized the "Millennium Project Forum" to discuss the place of the gay community in Singapore. Consisting of two closed-door sessions — one titled "Rights, Responsibilities and Civil Action", and the other "Identity, Consciousness and Values" — the forum has finally been transcribed, and these transcripts form the first two parts of this book. Rounding off the volume is a third section, "The Voices of the Sexual Minorities", which attempts to document aspects of Singapore's fledgeling gay histories. This third section is a little haphazard, as even its catch-all name might suggest: it includes reprints of essays that originally appeared in the PLU newsletter, several academic and analytical articles, a couple of more personal and proclamatory essays, and interviews with various gay Singapore artists.

Even though it is the most random of the three sections, the third probably contains the strongest work. William Peterson's "The Queer Stage in Singapore", one of the essays in this section, undertakes the important task of recording the history of Singapore's "pendulum of liberalisation and repression" (p. 87) through a survey of gay characters and themes in Singaporean plays. Peterson discusses, in a straightforward but solid manner, the reception and histories of plays by Michael Chiang, Russell Heng, Tan Tarn How, Eleanor Wong, and Ovida Yu, as well as an infamous 1993 performance art piece by Josef Ng that, partly because it was envisioned as a protest against police entrapment of gay men, landed its artist in trouble. (One thing that such a list

crystallizes is the extent to which the history of gay Singaporean theatre almost *is* the history of Singaporean theatre *tout court*.) Nicely dovetailing with Peterson's essay are the conversations between playwrights David Drake and Chay Yew, and playwright/academic Russell Heng and artist Jimmy Ong. Taken together, these three articles provide both a picture of individual responses to obstacles that would limit artistic endeavour, and a bigger picture of Singapore's oftentimes *ad hoc* policy on the censorship of gay materials.

It is when the volume tries to do too much that it runs into trouble, and the first two parts of the book, in particular, leave something to be desired. Since these papers were first presented as talks, we can perhaps grant them a certain latitude, but some of the problems are striking. They mostly begin with the fact that almost all of the articles here — with the possible exceptions of David Birch's meditation on the challenges gay people pose to civil society, and Thomas Ng's somewhat staccato account of Singapore law and homosexuality — tend less towards being precise arguments, and more towards opinions pieces that do not rely on any kind of reasoned analysis. It is not that these essays are too "personal"; rather, they often substitute personal claims and unsupported assertions for analyses, and because of this do not exhibit a sense of how their thoughts relate to ongoing dialogues. One contributor, for instance, declares that she "always believe[s] in [editor] Joseph's famous motto: the personal is the political" (p. 16), as if Lo invented a political slogan that in fact came out of the American feminist movement of the 1970s. In another essay is the following claim: "In my opinion, being gay is a simulacrum. There are similarities but there is no precedent. As a social construct, gayness has little in its existence that is common with other social identities" (p. 46). As a gloss on Plato's or, more probably, Jean Baudrillard's term "simulacrum", this definition ("similarities but no precedent") is not completely terrible (although a case can be made that a simulacrum really has a precedent but no origin), but surely it behoves the writer to offer to his readers a proper definition and attribution of the term, and, most importantly, a sustained argument about it? To put it another way, it is bad enough that the writer drops into his sentence a concept that is undeveloped and thus

seemingly half-baked, but to do so without an argument about the *significance* of seeing gay identities in this way — except to say that it is his “opinion” — makes the exercise even more frustrating.

The problem with essays that are merely assertions and devoid of any argument, of course, is that opportunities for debate and productive dialogues are lost. At several points in the book, for example, a number of writers draw, and state that they subscribe to, a key distinction between “Western” and “Eastern” notions of homosexuality. “I believe”, one contributor states, “Mr. Lee [Kuan Yew, senior minister of Singapore] is absolutely right in rejecting the advocacy of an aggressive gay rights movement in Singapore, the sort that has achieved so much (but also so little) in other parts of the world” (p. 8). Another writer likewise suggests “we need to have a model of our own because we cannot simply adopt any existing model, such as the Australian or American model. Many people in Singapore try to adopt foreign models; for example saying that we should have a pride-march ... I feel that this is not the right way of doing things” (p. 13). Such positions depend, in the first place, on a simplistic understanding of “Western” gay movements as always privileging the public over the private when in fact recent academic work in the United States has been trying to challenge the very divisions between private and public (see, for instance, Clarke 2000, and Warner 2003). Furthermore, and perhaps more disappointingly, because these essays in the book do not reason out their positions, or only do so circularly (*we need to have our own model ... because we cannot adopt another's*), they forego the chance to ask more penetrating questions about how Singapore's gay movement can connect with kindred movements in the rest of the world (for example, how does Singapore's almost obsessive focus on “civil society” compare with discussions in the “West” — in Clarke's and Warner's works, for example — about the “public sphere”?)

But to complain, as I am doing, about the assertive and proclamatory style of writing in *People Like Us* may be churlish. Maybe the volume is assertive because it recalls a particular genre. The cover of the book depicts a hand, photographed with its palm open, turned to face the viewer. The gesture is suitably ambiguous: on the — so to speak —

one hand, it seems slightly confrontational, an in-your-face, talk-to-the-hand gesture that invites you to stop and think. On the other hand, an open palm can signal willingness and trust. But I am also reminded that the hand is almost a representation of that most assertive of literary genres, the manifesto, since “manifesto” is etymologically derived from *manus*, Latin for hand (plus *festus*, meaning “able to be seized” or “plainly comprehended”). One of the book’s editor says as much; enumerating the possible functions of the book, Lo suggests that the book “could function as a manifesto providing new goals and directions for the community, especially for those who welcome the new dawn — an exciting era of change, possibilities and uncertainties” (p. 2). The volume, ultimately, does not quite fulfil one of its other stated intentions of being a “rigorous investigation of issues” (p. 2), but as manifesto, we could do worse than this provocative book.

## REFERENCES

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