Rethinking the heteronormative foundations of kinship: the reification of the heterosexual nuclear family unit in Singapore’s COVID-19 circuit-breaker restrictions

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 global pandemic necessitated nationwide lockdowns in many countries and Singapore was no different, announcing an eight-week ‘circuit-breaker’ in the beginning of April 2020. When it ended, the Singaporean government announced that restrictions on physical interactions would be eased in three phases. In Phase 1, all physical interactions between households continued to be disallowed with exceptions made for visits to parents and grandparents so that families could provide mutual support to one another. This article argues the permissibility of certain interactions hierarchised social ties according to a heteronormative logic where heteronormative kinship structures were elevated above others – thus excluding multiple constituencies that either did not have access to these kinship structures or for whom they did not provide support. Reading this instantiation as part of a larger reification of the heterosexual nuclear family unit in Singapore, this article posits that the demonstrable inability of heteronormative kinship to fulfil everyone’s support needs signals the urgency of rethinking extant heteronormative foundations of kinship in Singapore. Queering kinship in this way extends the existing body of queer studies scholarship in Singapore which has largely focussed on the effects of heteronormativity on LGBT lives by demonstrating how heteronormativity shapes non-LGBT lives as well.

KEYWORDS
Heterosexual nuclear family unit; heteronormativity; kinship; Singapore; COVID-19 global pandemic

Introduction

Few events in recent history have engulfed the world in as total a way as the COVID-19 global pandemic has. Like many other countries, in 2020, Singapore entered into an eight-week national lockdown (locally referred to as a ‘circuit-breaker’) which plunged virtually everyone in the nation into an extended period of physical isolation. When it ended, whilst attempting to balance mitigating this isolation and the risk of triggering new chains of transmission, the Singaporean government adopted a phased exit that prioritised some physical interactions over others. As such in Phase 1, only visits to parents or grandparents were permitted whilst all other physical interactions continued...
to be disallowed. I read this conditional restriction on the nature of permissible interactions as a particular manifestation of ‘heteronormative familism’ (Cho 2017: 245) that calls for a critical intervention centred upon the general reification of the heterosexual nuclear family unit in Singapore by examining the notion of kinship itself.

**Queering kinship in Singapore**

*Queer* is often taken up in contemporary times in an identarian sense to refer to LGBT people, communities and movements (for a genealogy of the term see Jagose 1996); as a critical tool and concept, however, it invites us to consider ‘that sexuality isn’t always or only about sexuality, that it is not an autonomous dimension of experience’ (Warner 1995: 368). The focus on heteronormativity’s considerable force in shaping lives beyond dimensions of sexuality has thus become a central concern of queer studies, and scholars working in this tradition have shone a light on ‘the ways in which discourses of sexuality are inextricable from prior and continuing histories of colonialism, nationalism, racism, and migration’ (Gopinath 2005: 3; see also, for example, Chiang & Wong, 2017; Duggan 2003; Hanhardt 2013; Puar 2007; Rao 2015, 2020).

Over the last two decades there has been a considerable growth in scholarship advancing queer readings of the Singaporean state and state policies that highlight the marginalisation of sexual minorities (see, for example, Chua 2014; Lim 2005a; Lazar 2017; Lo and Huang 2003; Phillips 2020; Radics 2019; Tan 2009; Tan and Lee 2007; Yue and Zubillaga-Pow 2012). Plenty of this critical attention has been directed towards the state’s ambivalence and dissonant attitude towards queer citizens that is summed up as: ‘we’ll leave you alone so long as homosexuality is not encouraged and is no more than a marketplace commodity’ (Lim 2005b: 298; see also Yue 2007). The vast majority of this body of work has focussed on the effects of heteronormativity on the lives of LGBT people and communities (a notable exception here is Oswin 2019) without quite taking up the opportunity to queer kinship itself. I suggest the hierarchisation of social ties in exiting the COVID-19 circuit breaker provides us with an opportunity to see how the force of heteronormativity presses down and shapes the lives of non-LGBT people as well, and functions as a catalyst to rethink the heteronormative foundations of kinship.

Heteronormativity here is understood as ‘both those localized practices and those centralized institutions which legitimize and privilege heterosexuality and heterosexual relationships as fundamental and “natural” within society’ (Cohen 1997: 440). And it is worth remembering that “nonnormative” procreation patterns and family structures of people who are labelled heterosexual have also been used to regulate and exclude them’ (Cohen 1997: 447, emphasis in original). In this vein, Natalie Oswin (2019: 107) puts forth a queer reading of Singapore that pays close attention to ‘the process of “queering” that results from heteronormative governance’. She argues that the operation of heteronormativity in Singapore means that ‘many more than LGBT persons are “queered” in the sense that they are put on a different trajectory of life and death than those cast as licit and proper through the maintenance of narrow familial and domestic norms’ (Oswin 2019: 107).

It is in this sense that we could read the Phase 1 restrictions on who one could physically interact with as an opportunity to extend our understandings of the effects of heteronormativity on Singaporean life. They demonstrate how the state’s heteronormative
understanding of kinship privileges the heterosexual nuclear family unit as the preeminent cache of support, whilst simultaneously minimising the validity and legitimacy of other forms of social arrangements and kinship ties as circuits of care. Thus, in Phase 1, access to physical structures of support and care was restricted to those who firstly, had access to such heteronormative kinship structures and secondly, to those for whom these structures actually functioned as reservoirs of support and care. Instead of reading the Phase 1 restrictions as reflecting the government’s recognition of the need for mutual support, then, I read them as an imperative to question the heteronormative kinship structures within which social support and care are exclusively and exhaustively imagined. The distribution of permissibility according to whether social ties figured within the heterosexual nuclear family unit allows us to see the stratification of the social in Singapore, where only heteronormative kinship structures are regarded as legitimately capable of conveying support and care.

In this article, I argue that the permissibility of certain physical interactions hierarchised social ties according to a heteronormative logic where heteronormative kinship structures were elevated above others – thus excluding multiple constituencies that either did not have access to these kinship structures or for whom they did not provide support. The state’s reification of social ties contained within the kinship structures of the heterosexual nuclear family unit in an attempt to activate circuits of care (Abu Baker 2020) simultaneously deprived multiple constituencies of that very care during Phase 1 of Singapore’s circuit-breaker exit. It bears noting at this point that the Phase 1 restrictions themselves only lasted 17 days. As such, it would be overstating the point to suggest that those who continued to be physically isolated in this additional period were severely affected as a direct consequence of the restrictions. After all, even though physical interactions were prohibited, virtual interactions certainly were not. Many around the world made use of various information and communication technologies (ICTs) to meet their social interaction needs amidst stay-indoors mandates (Nguyen et al., 2020). Plenty of Singaporeans thus were able to mitigate in some way the effects of physical isolation during the circuit-breaker and Phase 1 by availing themselves of ICTs such as Zoom, FaceTime or even the telephone for those who were slightly less technologically savvy. Whilst it has been observed that this was not the case for everyone, particularly amongst the elderly (Wong 2020; Wee 2020), it is fair to say that the uptake of ICTs certainly did mitigate the physical isolation for a significant number of people. Nonetheless, even though in and of themselves the Phase 1 restrictions were not necessarily onerous in the extreme, my intervention here is to suggest that the rationalisation and naturalisation of social ties within the heteronormative matrix as eligible for physical interaction points to a hierarchisation of social relations guided by an extant logic of heteronormativity. It is this hierarchisation of social relations – of which this manifestation is merely one instantiation – that this article focusses on. Taking this instantiation of heteronormativity as a point of departure, I suggest this illustrated insufficiency of extant understandings of kinship in Singapore demands a rethinking of kinship itself. The slightly longer deprivation of physical visitations and support for some was a direct consequence of the reification of the heterosexual nuclear family unit – demonstrating the fallacy of not just imbricating the imperative to care with kinship but the heteronormative foundations of kinship structures themselves.
This article is a space-clearing gesture that lays the ground for a retheorization of kinship as it is currently understood in Singapore—a model of kinship that is not limited by ontological ‘relations of being’ (Schneider 1984: 131, emphasis in original) deriving from heterosexual coupling and consanguinity. It calls for a broader, more expansive understanding of kinship that, unencumbered by the weight of heteronormativity, is able to accommodate relations of ‘doing’ (Schneider 1984: 131) and undoes the rigidities of heteronormative kinship structures. What follows is a brief intervention that productively perturbs the hegemonic conception of kinship in Singapore and lays down a challenge to reimagine it in a more ambitious way. I provide an account of Singapore’s Phase 1 restrictions in exiting the COVID-19 circuit breaker before contextualising them against a backdrop of the state’s efforts over the decades to consecrate the heterosexual nuclear family as the paradigmatic social unit. I show how this must be understood as a historical process where households were domesticated in units that only accommodated the heterosexual nuclear family unit. Finally, I offer some potential trajectories on rethinking kinship in Singapore.

COVID-19, Singapore’s circuit-breaker, and a background of its three-phase exit

When the COVID-19 global pandemic first broke out in the beginning of 2020, Singapore’s robust response based around an extensive contact tracing programme successfully limited the spread of the disease and attracted considerable international praise (Firth 2020; Kurohi 2020). But by the end of March, controlling the disease’s spread was proving to be a significant challenge. On the 3rd of April 2020, with COVID-19 infections (and untraceable cases in particular) rising, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong announced a nationwide circuit-breaker from April 7th to May 4th (Mohan and Ang 2020). This was later extended to June 1st. The eight-week circuit-breaker ‘required not only the closure of schools, offices, restaurants, and most public places but also one of the most restrictive social distancing policies in the world, including a restriction on even private gatherings’ (Abdullah and Kim 2020: 774). Residents were told to leave the house only for the most essential of purposes and social interaction between different households was prohibited.

As the 1st of June approached, the government announced the country would exit the circuit-breaker in three phases that would incrementally loosen restrictions on social and economic activity. In Phase 1, all physical gatherings and interactions between different households continued to be disallowed. The exception, however, was visiting parents or grandparents. The rule was that:

Each household can visit their parents or grandparents staying elsewhere. However, all households are limited to one visit per day, and not more than two persons who must be from the same visiting household. Dropping off children at parents’ and grandparents’ homes for childcare will be allowed. (gov.sg 2020)

According to the government, this would ‘allow families to spend time and provide support to one another’ (Abu Baker 2020). It was only later in Phase 2 that social interactions between members of different households were permitted in small groups of up to 5.
Restricting interactions between households in Phase 1 according to the nature of the relationship of its members offers a glimpse of the ‘deeply foundational heteronormative logic’ where ‘a specific family norm is positioned at the centre of Singapore society’ (Oswin 2019: 17–18). The anointment of heteronormative kinship structures as containing the only set of permissible physical interactions demonstrates the very tangible way heteronormativity compels one to ‘turn toward the objects that are given to us by heterosexual culture whilst also having to “turn away” from objects that take us off this line’ (Ahmed 2006: 21). Here, after having been (justifiably) made to turn away from all physical social interactions for eight weeks, the Phase 1 restrictions meant that the act of turning toward was guided by a heteronormative logic where one had to turn toward the heterosexual nuclear family unit for relief from solitude; and, at the same time, one had to continue turning away from all other relations that could not be inscribed within the existing matrix of heteronormative kinship structures.

To be clear, this is not an argument for the categorical repudiation of the heterosexual nuclear family unit. Although there is certainly a good case for it (see, for example, Barrett and McIntosh, 1982; Lewis, 2019), such a task lies beyond the scope of this article. It is certainly the case that for many people the opportunity to see one’s parents and grandparents again after living in isolation for eight weeks brought welcome relief. What I am arguing against, however, is the partial assignment of permissibility that hierarchised and privileged heteronormative kinship structures at the expense of other social arrangements.

Contextualising the Phase 1 restrictions through a brief history of the heterosexual nuclear family unit in Singapore

As a necessary emergency measure to bring the COVID-19 pandemic under control, the circuit-breaker enforced eight consecutive weeks of isolation upon everyone in the country. It has been well-documented that this ‘social isolation leads to chronic loneliness and boredom, which if [sustained] long enough can have detrimental effects on physical and mental well-being’ (Banerjee and Rai 2020: 525; see also Abbasi 2020; Chen, Sun, and Feng 2020). Whilst ICTs did offer a degree of relief for a significant number of people, the Singaporean government clearly appreciated the very real need amongst the population for physical interaction, support and care at the end of the circuit-breaker. This informed the Phase 1 rules allowing some interaction across households. The decision to restrict that interaction exclusively to parents and grandparents, however, is shot through with a narrow heteronormative understanding of kinship that assumed networks of support and care mapped neatly and exclusively onto the heterosexual nuclear family model. Its circumscription of permissible social interactions imbricated social support and care in the kinship structures of the heterosexual nuclear family unit and thus placed social ties into a hierarchy that privileged the heterosexual nuclear family unit as the sole legitimate unit of interaction above all others.

Conceiving of the heterosexual nuclear family unit as the sole repository of support and care has also been observed in other countries and, in particular, Asian societies where states have rhetorically combined it with ‘Asian values’ (Kuo 1996) to make it appear a function of a ubiquitous Asian tradition. In South Korea, for instance, the ‘revalorisation of heteronormative familism has been seen as crucial to ensuring the state’s
own viability’ (Cho 2017: 245). Similarly, in Taiwan, the idealised heteronormative vision of the nuclear family unit has been so central that queer people often resort to adopting a ‘strategic normativity’ because of how the ‘[r]eproduction of the heterosexual family is entwined with notions of social stability and upward mobility’ (Brainer 2019: 81-83) resulting in queer kinship being inflected by the pressures of heteronormativity. In Singapore, the state has worked very hard for decades to promote and naturalise a version of ‘Asian values’ whilst vaguely linking it with the concern and obligation to care for one’s immediate family (Kuo 1996). Whilst difficult to pin down exactly what it denotes, it is clear that ‘Asian values’ signals ‘some shared orientation toward the importance of family in Singapore’ (Teo 2009: 548) that has been sedimented as part of a national culture. Thus, the primacy of the family and privileging of kinship is regarded as a marker of identity in Singapore – to the extent that it has been argued that it informed medical responses to COVID-19 (Ong 2020). The naturalisation of ‘Asian values’ with the notion of family builds upon ‘the idea that there is something fundamental and organic about Singaporean culture that should lead to behaviors different from those in the West’ (Teo 2009: 548). One of these major differences is the apparent significance that the family is afforded, and the priority it is given in terms of the obligations of support and care that are inscribed within it.

This abstract concept of the family, however, is coloured in, and given meaningful substance through, a heteronormative understanding of the family unit as comprising a father, mother and their children. In 2007, whilst speaking in Parliament to announce the government’s decision to retain Section 377A of the Penal Code (a colonial-era law that criminalises sex between men), Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong (2007) reaffirmed the nuclear family unit when he said:

> [t]he family is the basic building block of our society. It has been so and, by policy, we have reinforced this and we want to keep it so. And by ‘family’ in Singapore, we mean one man one woman, marrying, having children and bringing up children within that framework of a stable family unit.

Lee’s words leave little to the imagination. They make it quite clear that the ‘Singapore family is a nuclear one, built around an opposite-sex cisgender couple, full stop’ (Oswin 2019: 85). This is central to how contemporary Singaporean society is organised and, importantly, it corresponds to an extraordinarily high degree with the dominant domestic living arrangements that have been instituted through the country’s public housing programme.

**Turning households into nuclear family units**

When Singapore became independent in 1965, multi-generational living situations where extended families lived in the same household were common (Salaff 1988). These domestic arrangements were often depicted and viewed as unruly and unsanitary at the time (see, for example, Kaye 1960). Loh (2007: 12) argues that the Singaporean government ‘inherited the colonial regime’s fixation with overcrowding, insanitation and spatial control’ and this was one of the reasons that led to it instituting a comprehensive public housing programme to resettle the population. Helmed by the Housing & Development Board (HDB), Singaporeans living in kampungs (villages) and other communal settings were displaced and redistributed into newly built HDB flats. Through the
reconfiguration of space and domestic living arrangements, this huge nationwide project dissolved predominant kinship structures and extant social ties to create newer and much narrower ones (Clancey 2003). Primarily, this was because HDB flats were not designed for large extended families – they were designed to accommodate nuclear family units. As a result:

forced resettlement in HDB flats not only split up communities but, as the flats were designed for nuclear families, also split up generations and ensured that the nuclear family became the basic social unit. Thus, HDB residents were moved from an extended family context with an active community life of mutual support and a sense of local identity and security into serried ranks of self-contained concrete boxes (Tremewan 1994: 50).

More than 80% of Singapore’s resident population lives in HDB flats today and the HDB is ‘effectively the monopolistic and universal housing provider for the nation’ (Chua 2017: 75). Crucially, access to public housing is predicated on heterosexual marriage and forming a ‘proper family nucleus’ (Housing & Development Board 2017) which is a key eligibility condition to purchasing an HDB flat. In this way ‘the monopoly of housing provision has been used to shore up the family institution, which the government has ideologically adopted formally as the “fundamental” institution of society’ (Chua 1997: 141). It is also one of the most significant means by which the state’s heteronormative imagination of family is continually reinscribed and reproduced.

Thus, when the government announced Phase 1 restrictions governing the nature of permissible physical interactions, they carried behind them the force of the work that heteronormativity in Singapore had already carried out over many decades in shaping households, living arrangements and dominant local understandings of social support and care. This is why kinship needs to be rethought. As Shane Phelan (2001: 157) argues:

the imbrication of kinship and citizenship, and the heterosexual formulation of kinship that defines gays and lesbians (as well as unmarried adults) as either outside kin networks or unable to form new ones … suggests that kinship will have to be rethought.

The elevation of heteronormative kinship structures and their inadequacy in offering circuits of care to everyone was evident in the aftermath of Singapore’s COVID-19 circuit breaker. In the final section, I set out some reflections to help begin thinking of new trajectories of articulating and understanding kinship.

Rethinking the heteronormative foundations of kinship

In Antigone’s Claim (2012: 57), Judith Butler famously reads Antigone as an unintelligible figure who cannot be articulated through the existing language of kinship because she ‘is caught in a web of relations that produce no coherent position within kinship’. Butler’s Antigone multiplies into the lives of countless Singaporeans – not, of course, as the result of a similar incestuous misfortune, but because of the state’s chronic inability to imagine forms of kinship outside of the heteronormative linguistic categories that structure it. It is an understanding of kinship that privileges ‘relations of being, not doing’ (Schneider 1984: 131, emphasis in original) and, at the same time, collapses the distinction between being and doing by expecting the ontological relations of kinship to ceaselessly perform and live up to the acts and expectations of support and care. In other words, the Singaporean state persistently (mis-)reads and confuses relations of being as relations of
doing and imposes this confusion upon the population through public policy. Of course, for many people, this heteronormative formulation works quite well – their nuclear families indeed function as an adequate source of mutual care and support. Equally, for many others, their nuclear families do not or cannot provide sufficient mutual care and support – and it is these people who are rendered relationally unintelligible, unable to be placed in relation to others, as a consequence of the state’s stubborn insistence on a heteronormative understanding of kinship.

The Phase 1 rules in Singapore that specified one could only visit one’s parents or grandparents living in other households, reproduced the state’s flawed vision of society comprising a neat series of heterosexual nuclear family units. These rules cannot be made sense of through any epidemiological or public health logic. After all, any visit between households constitutes a physical interaction and thus presents a potential opportunity for the transmission of COVID-19; this risk holds regardless of the nature of the relationship between members of the households in question. Any variance would arise from the nature of the interaction itself between people rather than the relationship between people. To paraphrase David Schneider (1984), COVID-19 transmission is a consequence of relations of doing, not being. Thus, the reason for limiting the permissibility of social interactions to the nuclear family unit should be read as stemming from ideological rather than epidemiological reasons. Any sense-making mission must set off from an understanding of the role of heteronormativity in elevating the heterosexual nuclear family unit and how it works to arrange and legitimise kinship in particular ways. The government’s decision reflected a deep institutional conviction that the kinship structures of the heterosexual nuclear family unit ought to be privileged over and above all other social arrangements. It also put on display its assumption that circuits of care and support were necessarily imbricated within those kinship structures. Taken together, this mode of thought foreclosed all other possibilities of social intimacy and relief from differentially configured social ties. Obviously, this affected LGBT people; but it also affected people, for instance, who did not have surviving parents or grandparents; or those who did not have a supportive relationship with their parents or grandparents; or people whose families lived in another country.

Because the rendering of mutual support was imagined purely through the kinship structures of the heterosexual nuclear family unit – whether this was parent–child or grandparent–child – anybody who typically found the solace and care they needed in other kindred spirits had to put up with the limitations on physical visits for some time more, because the language of the law could not escape the (heteronormative) language of kinship. Of course, in this specific instance that lasted little over a fortnight and was tempered by the widespread availability of ICTs – they did not necessarily precipitate significant additional difficulty. But instead of reading them in isolation, they should be located as part of the heteronormative logics that influence state policy and conceptions of kinship and care more generally. Those who rely on circuits of care located outside of the heterosexual nuclear family are often left wanting because care is persistently imagined within heteronormative kinship structures (Teo, 2011). The Phase 1 rules were simply a vivid illustration of this as the regulation and relaxation of physical interactions were guided by the reification of the heterosexual nuclear family. It is precisely in this sense that ‘many more than LGBT persons are “queered”’ (Oswin 2019: 107) – the force of heteronormativity shapes lives of non-LGBT people as well as LGBT people by
compelling everybody to live according to a heteronormative logic. The value and validity of individual social lives and their attendant relations are distributed according to their ability to fit into heteronormative kinship structures; social ties that conform to these structures are elevated and privileged above those that do not.

Singapore’s Phase 1 restrictions thus demonstrated the dire need to reimagine kinship as it is understood in the country. The exclusionary force contained in a heteronormative imagining of kinship was realised in a material way through the loneliness and solitude that continued to tail those who could not access the reserves of physical care that were stored in social relations outside the nuclear family unit. The problem that heteronormativity presents in Singapore is, strictly speaking, not that it produces the heterosexual nuclear family as a unit of social relation per se; rather it is the fact that it produces the nuclear family unit as the paradigmatic unit of social relation along with the state’s continual inability to contemplate, or imagine, other legitimate forms of being with and relating to others. What this suggests is not just that other social arrangements should be treated in a similar way to kinship; instead, it suggests that the language of kinship itself ought to be rethought and reimagined beyond its current dependencies on heteronormative logics such as consanguinity and heterosexual coupling. It requires a more expansive notion of kinship that goes beyond displays of ‘strategic normativity’ (Brainer 2019: 82) which, whilst entirely understandable, still returns us to the limited domain of heteronormative kinship and forecloses the possibilities of relations of doing that are a matter of fact for many people. Even though there are already diverse familial practices and people who articulate kinship differently in Singapore (see Quah 2015), ‘heteronormative governmentality and norms inscribed by “official” knowledge close in and re-establish that singular model and institution of the family’ (Tang and Quah, 2018: 659). As a consequence, the heteronormative foundations of kinship – understood through the heterosexual nuclear family – are legitimated and reified by the state, thus rendering queer other forms of kinship and social relations.

This article extends the existing body of queer studies scholarship in Singapore, that has largely focussed on the effects of heteronormativity on LGBT lives, by considering its effects on society more generally. It offers a queer reading of the circumscription of physical interaction in a time of crisis, when it was precisely what was needed in response to a period of physical isolation. In this way, it surfaces the power of heteronormativity in organising social life. Beyond making this visible, it also sets out to destabilise the elevation of heteronormative kinship structures above all other social relations by arguing that the inability of kinship to fulfil the necessities of care signals a need to reimagine the limits and language of kinship itself. Finally, whilst the pressures of space and time limit this article from going further, it sounds a clarion call for articulating new understandings of kinship, by scaffolding a productive agitation of dominant understandings of kinship structures in Singapore. In so doing, it provides a building block for the foundations of a future not constructed on the slippery sands of a heteronormative understanding of kinship.

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