Silent citizenship: choices, tactics and claims-making among sexual citizens

Terri-Anne Teo

School of Geography, Politics and Sociology, Newcastle University, UK

ABSTRACT

The pluralities of silence speak to political undercurrents otherwise neglected or unheard. Questioning how and why people remain silent debunks assumptions that silence is passive or apolitical. In the context of sexual citizenship, this study explores how silence reveals forms of contestations and claims-making that are not always captured within voices privileged as ‘political’. Through interviews with non-heterosexuals in Singapore, this article draws attention to what being silent means as a matter of situated choice and form of self-expression, its agency found within the very subtlety of its manifestations. The wherewithal of silence also emerges in how state laws and policies that otherwise limit the access of citizenship rights and privileges for non-heterosexual Singaporean citizens are overcome through economic position and privilege. The quiet rejection of heteronormative ways of being a Singaporean citizen reveals political positions opposed to the status quo, a recognition of unequal citizenship and a desire for change. At the same time, these narratives are buoyed by claims to citizenship through articulations of national belonging, home and the desire for equal citizenship. These agentic practices demonstrate the political dimension of silence and the strategies and claims that belie it.

Representational politics and rights-claims occupy a key theme within scholarship on sexual citizenship. They are central to contesting and changing normative and legal barriers to equal citizenship, seeking the recognition of sexualities, overturning problematic heteronormative assumptions and making rights claims. Alternative and creative forms of being political are explored through scholarship on acts of citizenship, bringing attention to the presence of activism among groups otherwise not traditionally recognised within the sphere of citizenship (Isin 2008; McNevin 2011). Less understood are the practices and subjectivities of those who choose to remain politically and publicly silent, a position often incorrectly assumed to reflect an absence or neglect of civic identity (Ferguson 2003; Gest and Gray 2015). This article speaks to those who do not seek political participation or public debate on non-heterosexual politics. This distance is neither passive nor apolitical; rather, they reflect decision-making processes that are political, strategic and civic. Reflecting on how sexual citizenship is critiqued for reproducing heteronormative assumptions about citizenship, this study is a nod to the ‘project

CONTACT Terri-Anne Teo

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of sexual citizenship’ by ‘broaden[ing] and open[ing] up our conception of the citizen’ (Bell and Binnie 2000, 143). We now recognise that ‘dissent and disidence need not be considered inappropriate stances for citizens to take’ by disputing binaries such as ‘good/bad citizen’ or ‘queer/citizen’ (Bell and Binnie 2000, 143). I further argue that not dissenting in conventional ways can also constitute practices of citizenship and being political. I do so by demonstrating how silence is made political through individuals’ careful analyses of Singapore’s sexual regime and its limitations, where agency is held within decisions to remain silent, which are steeped in political acumen and positionality opposed to state governance and status quo.

This article draws on the observation that ‘some feelings are deemed to be proper ones for citizenship, while others are not’, creating a hierarchy of how ‘the truth of citizenship as well as the truth of the citizen’ should look (Fortier 2016, 1040). Civic engagement and the empowerment of both citizens and non-citizens through rights-claiming are important as a political act and as an enactment of citizenship (Zivi 2005). However, conflating silence and disempowerment is inaccurate as it removes possibilities for agency that can exist despite or because of suppression. Also, ‘[s]ilent citizenship reflects a decision when citizens actively choose silence from among their available political options, instead of voice’ (Gray 2015, 475, original emphasis). The recognition that silence can represent a political choice disrupts the traditional understanding that voice is the only means for political engagement and empowerment. Further, the meaningful significance of silence can be understood as a form of collective agency. This notion is illustrated where ‘we make silence together[...] we speak in turns, but silence can only be meaningfully produced and maintained among and between people’ (Vieira MB, Jung T., Gray SWT and Rollo, T., 2019, 445). Understanding the various reasons why individuals choose to be silent therefore further troubles the binary of political/apolitical, where ‘the closer citizens’ motives for silence come to reflecting active decisions about politics, the more politically engaged these silences are likely to be’ (Gray 2015, 475). This treatment of silence recognises the potential for agency within silences, moving beyond an otherwise reductive understanding of voice as either absent or present.

Pulling aside the curtain of silence, I am interested in the motivations behind those who do not ‘engage in public displays, do[es] not organize street parades, do[es] not regularly express their [its] views on television chat-shows, and do[es] not write opinion columns for the serious press’ (Turner 2015, 515). This research adds to an otherwise one-dimensional landscape of sexual citizenship in Singapore where voice is valorised, particularly among ‘vocal minorities [who] might be said to engage in public spectacle’ (Turner 2015, 515). Whilst recognising the spectrum of ways in which people make claims, this article specifically refers to ‘voice’ in relation to the public in order to engage directly with existing scholarship on Singapore, which focuses on the non-heterosexual community as a collective.

The empirical case of Singapore continues to contest two assumptions within scholarship on contestation. First, that contestation cannot take place in ‘non-liberal’ societies. Like others, this article demonstrate how contestation takes shape in seemingly uncompromising political contexts. Second, that sexual politics is ‘identitarian’ and conforms to ‘classically liberal models of political participation’ (Sabsay 2012, 605). The connection between sexual citizenship and political participation can be productive in its articulation of the specific needs and rights of sexual minorities. However, it is problematic when
sexual citizenship is ‘cast under the framework of political liberalism in order to conceive
the subject as entitled to be a potential claimant of sexual rights’, imposing ‘orientalist
ideas of the sexual rights-bearing subject’ (Sabsay 2012, 606). This assumption excludes
those who do not adhere to liberal norms of participation, erasing their identities and
agency as sexual citizens. As such, a more accurate understanding of sexual citizenship
beyond its usual metrics of political participation calls for analyses to also include those
who do not participate in contestation as conventionally understood. While there are of
course those who are disinterested or ignorant, this article highlights a segment of the
population who actively make the decision to be silent.

Examining what silences say, this article both critiques and adds to scholarship on
silent citizenship and sexual citizenship in Singapore, where the latter tends to focus on
voice and political participation. Questioning reasons and motivations behind silences
expands practices of citizenship that can conflate silence with passivity and totalising
oppression. The argument proceeds in two parts. The first outlines sexual citizenship as
a conceptual framework, addressing its relationship with rights, claims-making and silent
contestation, as well as how non-heterosexual experiences are mitigated by factors such
as access to economic resources. The second describes the political context of Singapore
broadly and in relation to sexual citizenship, highlighting heteronormative policies and
laws that govern the sexuality of its citizens and residents, and how non-heterosexual
activism in Singapore seek realignments through tactical approaches that have been
coined practices of ‘pragmatic resistance’ (Chua 2014a). Drawing on interviews con-
ducted with non-heterosexual Singaporean citizens, the second part addresses what it
means to be silent within Singapore’s small but vocal non-heterosexual scene.
Contextualising sexual citizenship in Singapore, I examine how silence takes plural
forms when recognised as a situated choice and form of self-expression. This section
also reveals how silence is made possible by economic privilege, and how silence is rich
with narratives of claims-making.

Sexual citizenship as a conceptual framework

By considering how sexuality affects and is affected by citizenship, sexual citizenship is
conceived as either an added component to T.H. Marshall’s tripartite of rights or as
cutting across civil, political and social rights (Evans 1993). Rights-claiming is also a key
part of sexual citizenship discourse, with the public recognition of sexual rights, such as
the right to marry, and rights to property, inheritance and medical care being core to the
development of equal citizenship Diane Richardson’s critical exploration of sexual
citizenship provides the starting point for this section, with the view that non-
heterosexuals are ‘only partial citizens, in so far that they are excluded’ from citizenship
where understood conventionally as a set of civil, political and social rights (Richardson
2000b, 75).²

Singapore

A raft of heteronormative policies and political narratives shape sexual citizenship in
Singapore, embodying the way in which ‘ideas of citizenship are based upon certain
assumptions about sexuality, in particular hegemonic heterosexuality’ (Richardson
2000a, 257). This section outlines the conditions of sexual citizenship in Singapore, the political terrain it operates within, and how contestations find their place. Understanding this context allows for the examination of how activism manifests in Singapore as well as the decision-making processes for those who step away from overt contestations by remaining silent.

**Governing sexual citizenship**

Singapore, variously described as authoritarian, semi-authoritarian and an illiberal democracy (Chua 1995; Mutalib 2000) places boundaries on citizenship rights as traditionally understood in the ‘west’, such as freedoms of speech and a free press. This political landscape means that the difficulty of rights-claiming is not one solely experienced by specific marginalised groups. Formal laws inhibit civil-political rights and place limitations on collective mobilisation. Advocacy groups for various causes face similar and particular challenges in their respective policy spaces (e.g. Gwynne 2013; Piper 2006). These boundaries are both intrinsic and operate in parallel to the limitation of sexual citizenship. Heteronormative policies are coupled with laws prohibiting public assemblies and therefore protests, restricting available arena for the same kinds of rights-claiming activities that often characterise ‘acts of citizenship’ in the Anglophone West. These institutional fences are further buttressed by hegemonic narratives of national fragility and the central role of the heteronormative family in the maintenance of social order. This way, practices of governance coalesce at the intersection of sexual citizenship, denying equal rights and limiting efforts to contest for change.

Section 377A of the Penal Code is one example of how sexual minorities, particularly gay men, are institutionally marginalised. Singapore criminalises consensual sex between men, which is perceived to lead to social upheaval should there be any permissiveness toward homosexuality (Yue and Zubillaga-Pow 2012). That 377A only applies to males harkens to the gendered nature of sexual citizenship (Lister 2003). It prohibits acts of ‘gross indecency’ between males ‘in public or private’, with penalties up to two years of imprisonment. While the state argues that there is no ‘proactive’ enforcement, the existence of the law has blatant ramifications from criminalisation, ambiguous application of the law, to ‘[afflicting] the spectre of everyday homosexual life’ (Hor 2012; Yue A, 2012, 20). Sanctioning 377A reinforces narratives of heterosexuality as ‘normal’ in Singapore and part of how a ‘normal citizen’ or even ‘good citizen’ would look, reinforcing the relationship between the state, heterosexuality and family policies, through which the nation is ‘reproduced’ (Mottier 2008, 84–86).

Same-sex marriage is not legally recognised in Singapore, affecting both self-identified genders. As such, whilst women are not directly governed by 377A, non-heterosexuals regardless of their self-identified genders are not permitted to marry, even if they were married abroad in a country that has legalised marriage. The nuclear family forms the backdrop for the governance of sexual citizenship. The heterosexual notion of the family is a form of social control, instituted through family policy, housing policy, stigmatisation of single parents and utilised as a tool that minimises the status of homosexuality in Singapore (Kong and Yeoh 2003; Oswin 2010, 2014; Teo 2010). The heterosexual privilege of marriage for Singaporean citizens is connected to that of parenthood, a relationship that is significant to understanding how citizenship is constructed in
Singapore (Richardson 2000b, 10). The state is explicit about not supporting the formation of families by gay parents (Au-Yong 2019).  

As Singapore’s Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong once put it, ‘The 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 2007). The valorisation of the heteronormative family affects economic potentials. Legal recognition of kinship affects taxation, inheritance rights, healthcare privileges and access based on kinship, immigration and protection from domestic violence (Chua 2014a, 38). Exclusionary policies and laws create a nested effect that ‘make outlaws of same-sex partners[…] and alienate their forms of being from political society’, akin to how kinship rules demarcate certain individuals ‘aliens’ of a country based on kinship rules for citizenship (Stevens 1999: xv). Among the aforementioned ramifications of family policies in Singapore is the relationship between the nuclear family construct and heteronormative housing policies that add to the unequal treatment of non-heterosexual Singaporean citizens. The purchase of public housing – known as Housing Development Board flats (HDBs) – is conditioned by several factors, one of which being that the applicant must ‘form a proper family nucleus’ that excludes same-sex domestic relationships.  

The lived experiences of the economically privileged maps onto scholarship. Where ‘gaybourhoods’ are not as prevalent in Singapore, the relationship between sexuality, class and space is salient. The exclusions of everyday spaces like gay bars are evident in their location – many are found in Singapore’s conserved Chinatown area, close to the Central Business District, and the price of their beverages that are skewed toward middle-class consumption. While providing an ‘architectural closet’, for those who can afford them, these spaces also represent exclusionary neoliberal norms (Tan CKK, 2015b, 2212). Some are also able to negotiate the partiality of Singapore’s policy landscape by purchasing private property instead of publicly subsidised housing, tactics of which are further explored in later sections. These options remain available for those who are financially able and have access to resources, reflecting broader, intersectional societal stratifications.

**Pragmatic contestations**

Non-heterosexual contestations are conducted creatively, subversively and strategically (e.g. Chua 2014a; Luger 2019; Tan C, 2015a; Yue and Zubillaga-Pow 2012). These practices of contestation in Singapore originated with Lynette Chua’s (Chua 2014a) conceptualisation of ‘pragmatic resistance’ through her exploration of Singapore’s non-heterosexual activist landscape. As a theoretical framework, pragmatic resistance informs how ‘[s]ocial actors turn to their contextually embedded knowledge and experiences as resources to respond to problems and sometimes creatively adjust them to accommodate emerging exigencies’ (Chua 2014a, 16). While there are different manifestations of practices that contest heteronormativity, for the purposes of this article, I focus on the central role of voice within discussions of non-heterosexual mobilisation in Singapore.

Pragmatism, as an approach to governance, has been appropriated through scholarship on non-heterosexual contestations and ‘pragmatic resistance’ in Singapore. Despite heteronormative laws, policies and narratives that govern ‘illiberal’ Singapore, non-
heterosexual individuals and groups draw on strategies of contestation balanced precariously between the rejection and reproduction of state narratives (Chua 2003, 2014b; Hor 2012; Lee Tsen-Ta 1995; Sanders 2009; Tan and Lee 2007). As Yue puts it, ‘LGBT subjectivities and their attendant claims to representation and cultural production are produced in and through a logic of queer complicity that complicates the flow of oppositional and grassroots appropriation’ (Yue A, 2012, 2).

The political terrain of non-heterosexual politics in Singapore operates through the paradigm of pragmatism as an approach to government. Pragmatism takes specific form within the political rhetoric of Singapore’s ruling party, the People’s Action Party (PAP), in its justification of laws and policies. The action-oriented and consequentialist approach of state-developed national narratives bears traces of the philosophical roots of pragmatism where it ‘embodies a vigorous economic development orientation that emphasises science and technology and centralised rational public administration as the fundamental basis for industrialisation within a capitalist system, financed largely by multinational capital’ (Chua 1995, 5). While pragmatism is ultimately part of a political ideology and agenda of ensuring state dominance, it is conveyed as a ‘rational and scientific mode of public administration’ that justifies state practices (Chua 1995; Tan KP, 2012b, 68).

The logic of pragmatism serves two purposes for the governance of non-heterosexual politics. First, the failure to decriminalise homosexuality and the prevalence of discriminatory policies is persistent with the rationale that Singapore’s multi-religious society requires maintenance of status quo to preserve social harmony. Second, the co-existence of otherwise contradictory narratives is made possible by the logic of pragmatism in Singapore, ‘characterised by the ambivalence of between non-liberalism and neoliberalism, rationalism and irrationalism that governs the illegality of homosexuality in Singapore’ (Yue A, 2012, 2). While homosexuality is legally criminalised, this policy position is softened by an official stance of tolerance toward homosexuality and the prevalence of queer bars and night-life, rationalised as a pragmatic move that presents an accommodating and hospitable cosmopolis for ‘foreign talent’ (Luger 2019, 226; Oswin 2014, 424). Singapore is made habitable to sexual diversities only to the extent that it fulfils the neoliberal agenda of economic progress. Indeed, it is

[...] through complex and dynamic ideological negotiations that take place within the broader and inherently contradictory trend of political and economic liberalisation, homosexuals are “tentatively” interpellated as gay Singapore subjects who are part of a community that is rejected by an imaginary mainstream and yet grudgingly relied upon by a state anxious to appear sufficiently open-minded in order to attract global capital and talent’ (Tan and Lee 2007, 184).

While inspired by strategies of resistance elsewhere, particularly in Western contexts such as the US, non-heterosexual activists in Singapore recognise that a careful approach is necessary to avoid retaliation from a state ‘known to curb basic civil-political liberties that facilitate and protect collective action in the first place’ while ensuring the survival and progress of the cause (Chua 2014a). For instance, activists rely on approaches that utilise legal procedures and avoid direct confrontation with the state to preserve the movement’s legitimacy while demonstrating that it does not pose a threat to the ruling
party’s authority. These approaches allow space for contesting voices to be heard. The following are two hallmarks in Singapore’s queer movement.

The first collective challenge posed by gay activists in Singapore was to petition for the repeal of Section 377A, which was ignited in 2007. As Chua (2014a, 109) put it, Repeal 377A ‘remains the movement event with the most extensive local media coverage, giving voice to campaign leaders and their supporters’. The Repeal 377A campaign was started in 2007 when Section 377, ‘on carnal intercourse against the order of nature’, such as consensual oral and anal sex in private, was (successfully) proposed to be removed from the Penal Code, whilst Section 377A was left untouched. In 2007, 2, 519 Singaporeans signed a petition in favour of repealing Section 377A, which was met by over 15,560 signatures that sought to retain the section (Radics 2013, 80). Since then, various efforts to contest Section 377A included speeches, petitions and debates among queer activists and allies.

There was a notable resurgence in 2018 when the #Ready4Repeal petition was launched after India repealed Section 377 in the Indian Penal Code that criminalised homosexuality, which it had also inherited from British colonial rule. Alongside this petition, a town hall discussion was organised for queer organisations and allies to voice their support for the repeal. This town hall discussion led to a challenge being filed against Section 377A, led by veteran diplomat Professor Tommy Koh, Ambassador-at-Large in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (see Radics 2019). While this challenge was ultimately unsuccessful, it demonstrates the most recent articulation of protest among Singapore’s queer community and its allies.

Singapore’s first public gay rally, Pink Dot, took place in May, 2009. Its name signifies the mixing of the colours of Singapore’s national flag, which is red and white. Since its inception, it has been an annual event that publicly demonstrates the visibility and support for the non-heterosexual community in Singapore. The event is a day picnic with speakers and performances, culminating in participants gathering together with torchlights to form a ‘pink dot’ to signify support for the cause. There are also videos and photos of the ‘pink dot’ formation that are distributed online alongside promotional videos co-created with artistes and allies. Pink Dot has in this way created a space, online and offline, for collective voices to be represented.

Pink Dot is pragmatic in that while taking place at the same time as other Gay Pride celebrations elsewhere, Pink Dot does not officially coin itself as a non-heterosexual or LGBTQ+ rights event but instead, strategically presents itself as a cause that advocates social harmony in Singapore through ‘the freedom to love’. This approach treads the fine line that permits celebrating ‘LGBTQ life’, but not the promotion of an ‘LGBTQ agenda’ (Luger 2019, 237).

Strategies were taken to avoid being shut down by the state and to encourage people to attend the rally. Choices were made to use terms such as ‘freedom’ rather than ‘rights’ in public-facing content, as the latter could be seen as challenging the state’s legal structure and potentially derailed (Wang 2016, 10). As public assemblies, and therefore protests, in Singapore are illegal, organisers of Pink Dot characterised the movement as family-friendly, and the rally itself was organised with state permission and held at Speakers’ Corner in Hong Lim Park. In addition, Pink Dot adheres to state law, registering speakers, and the event itself, with the police as a public assembly event. Moreover, Pink Dot was limited to only Singaporean Citizens and Permanent Residents, with additional
restrictions introduced in 2016 that prevent non-Singaporean companies and multinational companies from sponsoring the event. In this way, Pink Dot was able to ‘overcome a negative cultural perception against public rallies’ and while often seen as a ‘party in a prison yard’, organisers chose to use the limited space to their advantage by capturing Pink Dot formations and distributing the images widely online, expanding the material constraints of the space through digital platforms (Chua 2014a, 128).

Adding to these explorations of pragmatic contestation in Singapore, I argue that there is further value in understanding those who do not participate in these practices, remaining silent and appearing non-participatory. In dealing with forms of contestation within among activists and non-activists, scholarship on non-heterosexual citizenship in Singapore focuses on the vocalisation of claims through national rallies like Pink Dot, digital media and altering mind-sets through dialogue (Chua 2014a; Luger 2019; Tan CKK, 2012a; Tan C, 2015a; Yue and Zubillaga-Pow 2012). This approach inadvertently privileges more prominent voices within the non-heterosexual community, reinforcing the value of speech while lacking an understanding of why others choose silence, that is, those who do not subscribe or participate in acts traditionally recognised as ‘political’ through the vocalisation of claims.

Methods note

From June 2018 to May 2019, I conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with 50 non-heterosexual individuals in Singapore. The only limitations to selection were that respondents should be above the age of 21, held Singaporean citizenship and should identify as non-heterosexual. There was an even split in self-identified genders, ranging from ages 21 to 48. While the initial objective was to have an even distribution of ethnicities, the demographics of the respondents reflect Singapore’s ethnic proportion as understood within the state’s racialised census. 68% of respondents self-identified as Chinese, 18% as Malay, 6% as Indian and 14% as ‘Other’, in relation to Singapore’s census that uses the aforementioned categories. Those in the latter three categories further identified themselves based on more accurate ethnic descriptors such as Malayalee and Javanese, which are conflated within ‘Indian’ and ‘Malay’ categories respectively. Interviews were conducted in English, recorded, and then transcribed anonymously.

Semi-structured interviews were grounded in a ‘receptive’ style of interviewing, allowing respondents more control over the way they chose to answer questions (Brinkmann 2013, 31). Open-ended questions encouraged flexibility in exploring the lived experiences of respondents, allowing for elaboration on tangentially-related subjects. Several questions were also framed to understand the life histories of respondents, serving as a narrative tool to understand the ‘small stories’ and ‘big stories’ that refer to everyday interactions and episodic events respectively (Bochner and Riggs 2014). This approach provided insight into how respondents reflected on their past, defined processes of identity-formation and how they coped with challenges that emerged through everyday interactions and more significant events.

Interviews lasted between 60 to 90 minutes each, with occasional follow-up conversations if respondents had more to add. All respondents were provided information and consent forms on the study in English, which highlighted the anonymity and confidentiality of their data. All interviews were recorded with the consent of respondents, which
were then anonymised with a unique identifier for transcription and storage in a password-locked hard drive. After transcription, data was qualitatively analysed through the code-based program NVivo. This analysis occurred through several cycles that accounted for first-level codes (descriptive), second-level codes (analytic) and in-vivo codes (vernacular used by respondents) that established patterns, themes and possible disparities across the data. This approach enabled both a broad understanding of commonalities across respondents while identifying nuances within their choices, silences and voices.

**Pluralities of silence**

The following sections explore several ways in which silence is an active choice. Respondents recognise the difficulty of change and the potential costs of speaking up, while occupying a political position against the status quo. While choosing not to participate in the political arena, they seek freedoms and equality in other forms, practices and modalities that while silent are also strategic and subversive. Rather than being passive observers, they recognise how they are unequally treated based on contestory claims of citizenship. As such, silence cannot be ‘reducible to one singular function’, whether it is ‘resistant, or oppressive’, ‘salutary or sinister [...] it both embodies and transcends these neat categorisations’ (Ferguson 2003, 58). In recognising that the intrinsically subjective nature of silence is neither reducible nor universal, findings here refer to plural articulations of silence that reflect its non-binary nature, which manifests in ways that are passive and active, empowered and disempowered.

**Silence as a situated choice**

Insofar that queer resistance in Singapore is characterised by pragmatism, traces of the same logic echo across respondents who prefer not to speak out or publicly about their claims based on their evaluations of the political and social climate in Singapore, perceived costs and potential risks. These calculations resonate with Bonnie McCoy’s notion of ‘situated choice’ that emphasises the ‘embeddedness of the individual and rational choice in larger contexts and in particular situations that can only be known through investigations into history, political dynamics and social structure, culture and ecology’ (McCoy et al. 2002, 361). This section provides some insight into how respondents’ decisions are deeply situated in the specificity of their institutional and social ecologies, such as understandings of socio-political rules, the possibilities of institutional change, and individual-environment interactions.

A key reason for deciding against vocalising contestations was an awareness of Singapore’s political environment and their inability to do anything about the status quo, resonating with McCoy’s observations about the relationship between decision-making and individual-environment interactions. Forms of public contestation were seen as unlikely to stimulate change in Singapore’s socio-political context, and therefore there was no utility in their participation. When asked, for instance, what they felt about queer activism in Singapore, respondents often refer to the dominance of the PAP, Singapore’s ruling party since its inception, which they see as a roadblock to change. The belief that the status quo is unlikely to alter explains why some respondents see no
point in participating in public events like Pink Dot. For instance, a respondent does not participate in the event as he feels that the state’s stronghold over the status quo renders it a merely symbolic cause rather than one that can effect policy change. He referenced a state policy that was introduced in 2017 to halt foreign companies from sponsoring Pink Dot, and that only permitted Singaporean Citizens and Permanent Residents from assembling at the Speakers’ Corner.

[...] look at Pink Dot. Ten years already right, the government has consistently tried to push it down more and more. I mean all the public [foreign] sponsors are gone now, and you have to rely on locals. I mean that’s a good thing, you’re trying to promote local community, more aware[ness] of this but you can see the government’s efforts in trying to silence [us] [...] No matter what we do, they’re trying, always trying to silence us what, just pushing us down, further and further and further down, so what’s the point in trying to get more activities out when the government is not gonna be standing behind it?

The sense that change is unlikely in the foreseeable future due to Singapore’s political climate resonated across respondents who see non-heterosexual rights as an electoral issue that neither the incumbent nor opposition parties would risk supporting. In particular, respondents view the incumbent’s position on non-heterosexual rights as contingent on maintaining their political dominance. This dominance is perceived as being largely reliant on the conservative vote that is pro-family and heteronormative, a hegemonic narrative that respondents do not see as changing anytime soon. The significance of maintaining the status quo on non-heterosexual rights in Singapore for the PAP contributes to the sense that there is no point in calling for change.

And being the minority, our voice can never be heard. Because both of us [respondent and her partner], for example, if we were to step up and say eh, we are [hypothetical] activists of LGBT and Q, and can you imagine the norm- the number, okay I’m just giving a fake number lah, it’s maybe five to six thousand, who do you think will win? No matter how both of us sit down do a PowerPoint slide, do our sharing session, six thousand people, they’ll be like, “Hey girl, hey dude, you know, don’t waste your time. You know what, because in Singapore we’ll believe in procreating, and you know it’s always about men and women. [The PAP] want[s] to be pro-family so they like, it’s very big a thing – so it might affect votes and everything, so they don’t want to offend people, because majority of the Singapore still don’t know what gay people are, so they’re very afraid of that, and they’re very afraid of, I think Singapore is quite afraid of change as well. That’s the thing that might affect them, in a way. Cause votes for them [the PAP] is dropping already, most of the votes are borderline already, so they are afraid that one more and it’ll just push them to the other side.

This view is compounded by a certain resignation that the incumbent government ‘cannot afford to offend the “rightist right”’, a catch-all term used to refer to conservative secular and religious groups in Singapore. The respondent surmised that effecting policy change with regard to familial and sexual rights for non-heterosexuals would ‘affect their votes’, concluding that he ‘[didn’t] think the government will change, make laws or change things’, such as Section 377A of the Penal Code. These views are not entirely unfounded, as there were various counter-movements organised by conservative secular and religious groups opposing the repeal of Section 377A. Since 2007, opponents of the repeal argued that it would result in splits in the family (Teng and Lim 2007). Other incidents, such as a ban on a children’s book that featured gay penguin parents in 2014
(Hickey 2014) – which was also instigated by conservative groups – were also cited as examples of the state’s seemingly immutable position on existing laws.

The cost of vocalising contestations resonated among those in government service. The risks (perceived or otherwise) posed to employment were prevalent where respondents stated they were not permitted to take public positions on political issues due to their place of employment. For instance, a respondent interviewed for a position in the military was hesitant about talking about her sexuality and her partner at work, having known other non-heterosexuals in civil service who ‘cannot be open’. Another respondent was interested in taking part in a True Love campaign started by a church seeking to provide resources for Christians interested in learning more about non-heterosexual issues, but demurred due to conditions placed on him because of his employment in the civil service. He feared having ‘my face all over [on publicity material]’ would entail losing his job because, according to him, ‘civil service [servants] are not allowed to go to the press and it’s in our code of conduct, which we were told to memorise’.

Responses reinforce the communicative dimension within silence, where not speaking out does not always convey approval. While cohering with the general notion that silence is a consequence of suppression, where ‘people are no longer willing or able to speak’ (Gray, in Vieira, Jung, and Gray G et al. 2019, 433), here we witness fear and opposition co-existing within the same space of silence. Contrary to the characterisation that silent citizens refer to those who neglect public issues, commentaries provided by respondents demonstrate the extent to which they oppose the political ecosystem and societal code of conduct. This section shows how non-heterosexual respondents are keenly aware of political rights in Singapore, as well as its political constraints. While silence may at times be a consequence of power through force or coercion, it is also a ‘strategic response to oppression[…] one that acknowledges that, under certain circumstances, speech might not be empowering, let alone sensible’ (Ahmed 2010: xvi). These voices speak to a context of choice where ‘silent citizens come to believe that they do not control what is done in their name, they grow disaffected and lose faith’ in what the system, while remaining in opposition to it (Gest and Gray 2015, 466).

**Silence as self-expression**

The choice of silence can be a strategic one, constituting a form of contestation, agency and action in itself. The utility of silence sits within critical scholarship that identifies the ‘power inherent in silence, whether as a form of subjugation, resistance, or motivation’ (Ferguson 2003, 50). While none of the respondents wanted to speak out, they found different ways to contest the status quo.

Art and images were used to express sexual identities and political positions. This portrayal speaks to Rivera’s (2013, 122) argument that aesthetic modality is not ‘merely a matter of speech, but of subject-formation, that is, the sacrificial risk of truth-telling . . . is a means by which one can enter the social world’. While these efforts were distinct from coming out, in that respondents did not explicitly seeking public recognition, they were attempts to normalise non-heterosexual identities in ways that were seen as ‘safe’. A respondent who described himself as a ‘silent activist’ related how he identified more as one of the ‘nameless victims on the battlefield[…] I know that I clip my heart in many different ways’. He said,
There are ways for me to . . . fight? I show my works, I show the things that I want to talk about through my work, through the works I produce, my art, my films, my photography, my sculptures. There are a lot of hidden meanings behind it[. . .] I did this installation and there are hidden messages under the sculptures[. . . for example,] the word “be gay,” was there.

Where the role of art as an avenue for contestation is not new, cinema and television in particular hold significance in Singapore, reflecting both the possibilities and parameters of what can be created and received. They engage with Singapore’s political past, presenting alternative views, revisionist histories and ‘other’ politics that include but far exceed state-constructed notions of race, sexuality and nationhood. The significance of these media lies in their very existence within a landscape where ‘oppressions, repressions, exploitations, contradictions, tensions, and crisis tendencies have been contained, controlled, manipulated, and hidden by deeply entrenched authoritarian institutions, practices, beliefs, habits, and instincts’ (Tan 2008: xv). The recognition that art in its various forms are subject to control, affecting what can be distributed and consumed, is reflected in the ‘hidden’ nature of the above respondent’s art, where there is a desire to articulate but a manipulation of what is seen and heard, and by whom.

Through virtual, symbolic and tactical manoeuvres, respondents reveal ‘an anticipatory illumination of a queer world, a sign of an actually existing queer reality, a kernel of political possibility within a stultifying heterosexual present’ (Muñoz 2009, 49). Surveying digital and material queer spaces in Singapore, Luger (2019, 242) ruminates that ‘queerness in Singapore is embodying the potential micro-resistances at the same time it internalises repressive power’. Likewise, these visual representations of the self simultaneously recognise the limitations of being non-heterosexual in Singapore, while actively taking steps toward authenticity and self-formation.

So there’s something I did recently, my phone I use for, for my work and um, personal life, so like . . . so essentially it’s my same WhatsApp account. So, so my display picture is like a, like a, the Fibonacci cycle, and then whenever there’s an event coming up I would put like a decoration on it. I guess to theme it, like something fun to play around with . . . ’cause like June is Pride Month, right, so what I did was put like a small rainbow flag, rainbow, rainbow flag, on like, on like one, and then I made the guy wear like a rainbow hat. But like it’s small, so like my colleagues, like someone would probably have to tap in to see it. So it’s like my quiet way of, of saying this is who I am. But like I don’t dare to put something big . . . I had that contention with myself . . . like why am I not comfortable putting a bigger sign, like just a gay pride banner? Like on my display picture. Like I wish I was comfortable with, with doing that. But I wasn’t. So that’s a bit of a struggle there. I mean that’s not even like touching the surface of activism. But like for me - that’s the kind of - I guess that’s as far as the activism I’m comfortable with doing, but I think for me, this is the kind of activism in the context of my life, what I really wish I could do. And why I want to reach out, I guess, is to share, to just be open with myself. Like this is who I am.

The concept of ‘online embodiment’ explains how online spaces are key to identity-formation. While digital media creates spaces for exploration, self-discovery, political engagement and sexual encounters for non-heterosexuals, it is still a site of governance, risk and vulnerability (Calvancante 2019). In a study exploring Christian and queer youth, researchers found that Facebook profiles were of great importance, where descriptions on the ‘About’ page and photographs and images of the self were ‘equally important in the construction of their embodied identities online’ (Taylor, Falconer, and Snowdon 2014,
1143). Similarly, a respondent referred to placing an ‘equal sign on my [Facebook] profile picture’, which he found more symbolic than ‘post[ing] something on Facebook and then like “rah rah” [cheer] about it’, finding greater significance in the reclamation of identity rather than protest as conventionally understood.

These narratives add further nuance to the public-private debate, which is present in both scholarships on digital media and sexual citizenship. The intersection is evident where Taylor, Falconer, and Snowdon (2014) found that respondents perceived Facebook as a public space that needed careful curation when it came to their sexual identities. While my interviews reinforce the understanding that Facebook identities are seen to affect how non-heterosexuals are perceived and treated, they also show how small declarations on the same platform afford a sense of empowerment, autonomy and selfhood. It allows respondents to tread more finely on the line dividing the public and private. Social media platforms afford forms of expression that are carefully calibrated to be subversive and contestory while allowing their owners to control what they choose to reveal to specific audiences.

These online practices are a reminder that while ‘silence and secrecy are a shelter for power, anchoring its prohibitions; [but] they also loosen its hold and provide for relatively obscure areas of tolerance’ (Foucault 1978, 101). Respondents show how they have found spaces within spaces where they are able, as one said, ‘to just be open with myself’ while protecting themselves from the potential consequences of revealing their non-heterosexuality that they are sharply aware of. The ability to carefully calibrate what is seen through interpretation moreover allows for a deniability of the literal, and the potential consequences it may entail. This observation of what is ‘done’ over what is ‘said’ reinforces political thought on silent citizenship that questions the hierarchy of liberal social contract traditions where deliberation (i.e. speech) is inaccurately privileged over embodied practices and interactions (Rollo, in Vieira, Jung, and Gray G et al. 2019, 436–7).

Unearthing the politics of silence allows us to step away from exclusionary conceptions of the silent, sexual citizen. As Sabsay (2012, 617) argues, ‘when the sexual rights-bearing subject becomes the referent by which to measure every sexual subject[…] this referent forecloses what can be considered political’. The notion that to be a sexual citizen is to be rights-bearing and rights-claiming panders to a Eurocentric treatment of sexual citizenship where it regards those without rights as ‘victims’, a rescue narrative that dangerously edges on homonormative forms of nationalism and scholarship (Puar 2007; Sabsay 2012, 607). Among respondents who described aesthetic sensibilities of expression, they often addressed these signifiers as ‘small’, ‘quiet’ and ‘subtler’, which one contrasted to an attitude of, ‘Ah! let’s fight, let’s stand here, let’s march!’ These narratives demonstrate how the bearing and claiming of sexual rights are not the only forms of being political. While explicitly seeking to be silent, respondents do not see themselves as victims or vulnerable, but rather as empowered and in control of their expressions of identity.

**Silent economies**

Economic power emerged as a tool that non-heterosexual respondents wield to negotiate the limitations of Singapore’s heteronormative landscape. It was almost uncanny how
similar state narratives of pragmatism and neoliberalism appeared in conversations with respondents who articulated economic success as the key to living comfortably in Singapore. Socioeconomic status was seen as a way to overcome rights and benefits not afforded to non-heterosexual citizens by the state, particularly those who are in same-sex partnerships.

For some context, state subsidies for public housing in Singapore are only offered to married heterosexual couples or individuals aged over 35, meaning that non-heterosexuals under the age of 35 whether married or unmarried, who cannot afford private property, either rent or live at home with their parents. Although Singapore’s intestacy rules entail the distribution of a deceased individual’s estate to their spouse and children, same-sex partnerships are excluded because they are not legally recognised in Singapore. It is only possible for same-sex partners if they have drafted a will, or children born to a same-sex couple will be regarded illegitimate and ineligible for assets. Moreover, monies from an account holder’s Central Provident Fund (CPF) (similar to pensions) cannot be distributed through a will or the Intestate Succession Act, as they are distributed only in accordance with the account holder’s nomination. If individuals do not draft a will or make a CPF nomination, assets will automatically be distributed to their immediate family members (as defined under Singapore law) as same-sex marriage and parenthood are considered voided in Singapore. These policies support a state-centric vision of the heteronormative family, extending feminist theses on the ways in which gendered and sexualised ways of being remain ‘constituted by and through the state’ (Stevens 1999, 215; also see Brown 1995, Chapter 7).

While critical of heteronormative policies, respondents saw financial means as a way out. Career success and socioeconomic mobility were seen to level the playing field by enabling non-heterosexuals to buy private property instead of relying on public subsidies and hiring lawyers in the creation of wills to overcome the Intestate Succession Act.

So your properties, you know, inheritance and all that, there are a lot of issues but obviously there are a lot of ways around it, you have, you know, wills and laws […] like in anywhere [sic], right, the more privileged you are in life, the less you actually have to deal with all these — you either throw money at it, or you get a lawyer to sort it out somehow.

Rationalising her ability to cohabitate comfortably with her partner in a co-owned property, a respondent described her ability to ‘make a choice’ as ‘a privilege, [and] a blessing’ although policies were not ‘in favour’ of her as a non-heterosexual citizen. She added that ‘if we really hated it here, we can try to find a job overseas and leave […] I would not work for a ‘low-growth’ company, I’d work for a company that can take me overseas’. This narrative of pragmatism is at once subversive and reproduces state-centric values of neoliberalism, reinforcing Yue’s (2012, 12) observation that ‘Singapore’s performance principle has irrationally also created an environment where the non-liberal local gay discourse of catch-up has emerged to replicate the homonormative values of neoliberalism in the West’. The belief that economic measures are more beneficial and practical than political advocacy resonated with respondents, one of whom said, ‘there is no point even having Pink Dot, I think it’s dumb,’ questioning the realistic objectives of the movement, that is, policy change. She argued,

If you really want equal rights, you really want to have a voice, […] you do it through economic [ways], meaning that, let’s be practical, this is Singapore, if you do well in your
career, you have money, you have influence, you have power, you think people will care two hoots whether you are gay or not?

One could ‘work the system if you’re privileged,’ such as gaining access to spousal healthcare benefits through private means. These particularly applied to those who worked in multinational companies (MNCs) rather than local companies, with the former at times extending corporate insurance policies to domestic partnerships, recognising same-sex relationships even if they are considered void in Singapore. These company policies provide a way around state-run heteronormative policies, as well as access to communities and resources such as ‘diversity and inclusion networks’ within the MNC space, such as non-heterosexual alliances like InterBank, InterEnergy, InterAlia and InterTech (networks for financial services, energy, legal and technology firms respectively). These networks were mainly brought up by respondents working in these fields, or in relationships with partners employed there. It should be noted that these respondents were cognisant of their socioeconomic privilege, highlighting inequalities within the non-heterosexual community. As one put it, ‘[t]here’s always a way around things. But if you have less means, you’re in a bit more of a spot, right?’

While these socioeconomic narratives allude to Singapore’s neoliberal ethos of governance, they appropriate capitalist market rationalities to subvert heteronormative policies and efforts. As a final example, another respondent described part of his business plan as capitalising on the ‘pink economy’ by connecting brands with a ‘diversity audience’, that is, the non-heterosexual community in Singapore, stating matter-of-factly that companies ‘see the commercial value in it [...] because at the end of the day, it’s great because then they are not judging, they’re not seeing you, just because you’re gay, but just because we have all this untapped disposable income’. While reproducing the pragmatic narrative of neoliberalism, he argued that ‘that’s an opportunity to not just have fun but create something more of value as well, and to make the lives of the LGBTQ community a bit better,’ relating to the provision of spaces for free sexual expression, interaction and a sense of belonging for non-heterosexuals.

These narratives illustrate how sexual citizenship, while governed by state practices, is also embedded within ‘everyday material practices’ that provide possibilities for alternatives. As Nikolas Rose puts it, the ‘games of citizenship today entail acts of free but responsible choice in a variety of private, corporate, and quasi-public practices, from working to shopping’ (Rose, cited in Bell and Binnie 2000). While not vocal or demonstrative of their political subjectivities, interlocuters here are continually ‘negotiating different situations and identities, and articulating [themselves] as distinct from, yet similar to, others in [their] everyday lives’ (Isin and Nyers 2014, 4) resonating with acts of citizenship that connect these ways of being to a ‘social struggle itself through which a sense of rights and duties vis a vis a “polity” can be established’ (Ni Mhurchú 2016, 158). In these ways, the heteronormative constraints of Singapore’s landscape are readjusted and sometimes even removed through silent yet strategic economic choices.

**Silent claims of citizenship**

Where silent in their claims-making, it was made clear that access to rights was warranted by way of citizenship. First, these claims to citizenship rights were articulated via issues,
such as marriage. Second, the right to rights also emerged as the right of a taxpaying citizen. Third, citizenship was articulated as a choice.

Dissatisfaction with Singapore’s laws on same-sex marriage alluded to the access it provides individuals and spouses to other citizenship rights, rather than the right to marry in itself. These responses cohere with the pragmatic approach taken by feminists who while ‘maintaining a critique of patriarchal familialism’ agree that access to marriage rights can make available other resources, such as legal and medical rights, that non-heterosexual individuals may need, particularly those in less-advantaged socioeconomic positions (Richardson 2000a, 267). That marital rights are a pragmatic way to being treated equally was articulated by respondents who are emphatic that while they are not personally keen on marriage, they see it as an equality claim in principle, and as a way in which they can gain access to property subsidies and other rights.

Rights and entitlements brought up in relation to marriage included welfare, medical access and decision-making power for partners, housing benefits and other public subsidies that would otherwise be made available to them as heterosexual citizens, particularly if they were in a heterosexual marriage. Respondents described marriage rights as a matter of ’legal rights for each other’, where the legalisation of marriage is akin to a basket of rights and privileges otherwise withheld from non-heterosexuals in Singapore.

Marriage is so important because it affects so many things [...] like the house, the assets, whatever [...] if something were to happen to the other person, imagine the kind of pain the partner will go through - because you know in Singapore, it’s [visitation rights between same-sex couples] not legalised right, and you can’t make any [medical] decisions.

The subjectivity of a taxpaying citizen emerged several times. Respondents were unhappy about having to adhere to citizenship practices without benefiting from the trade-off. For instance, a respondent said that while she was ‘paying the same tax rate’ as other heterosexual citizens, it felt as though she was ‘subsidising your [heterosexual couples’] kids, I’m subsidising your entire family, but you’re not subsidising mine’, alluding to the laws that do not recognise children of same-sex couples as they do not form a legally-recognised family unit, with a landmark case as the exception (Au-Yong 2019). Examples of such ‘subsidies’ include education for the children of Singaporean citizens and public housing. As one respondent put it,

Why must I wait till 35 [to be eligible for the purchase of public housing]? And I don’t get subsidy. And then I still pay the same amount of tax right? No, I might actually pay more tax, because some married people have more subsidy and more deductions [sic].

There was a sense of indignation among respondents that the state was, as a respondent lamented, ‘ignoring a part of Singaporean society that are contributing, paying tax, doing all things that we need to do and we’re all, you know law-abiding, contributing citizens adding to the economy’. These conversations cohere with the notion of fiscal citizenship, that is, the ability for the tax system in shaping civic identity, and in this case, justifying civic rights. Writing about tax consciousness in the US, Lawrence Zelenak (2013: 17) describes that a ‘return-based’ tax system has the ability to foster fiscal citizenship, relating ‘a tax return’ to ‘a ceremony of fiscal citizenship, analogous to voting as a ceremony of political citizenship’. The principle of ‘doing one’s part’ by paying taxes
creates a sense of belonging where obligations are formalised among a community and symbolises a contribution of one’s ‘fair share’ to the economy, thereby supporting ‘the political community of which one is a member’ (Zelenak 2013, 17). The process of paying taxes is in this way ‘a concrete instantiation of the social contract that exists between citizens and their state’ (Mehrotra 2015, 949). When the individual pays their taxes, therein lies the expectation that the state should fulfil its duties and responsibilities. The unfairness of paying taxes while not receiving equal returns as a citizen is deeply felt by non-heterosexual respondents, who moreover feel as though they are contributing to the benefits received solely by heterosexual citizens.

Finally, where there was general consensus that non-heterosexual citizens are treated unequally in Singapore, they remained situated in the choice one makes to be a Singaporean citizen and to live in Singapore, despite the inequalities and difficulties that accompany living as a non-heterosexual citizen. Among reasons provided, the safety and stability resonated among respondents. To illustrate, one said,

> As long as I can work, I’m . . . I’m actually okay to live here as a [Singaporean] citizen . . . , there’s this balance of safety, and efficiency, you know? . . . It’s just a balance of how efficient everything is. You know in Singapore everything is efficient and safe, that’s why I— I don’t really try to . . . I’m not really angry with PAP, dehumanising that some of their decisions are [sic].

A sense of national identity and belonging was a factor. While discussing economic hardships her family underwent, a respondent still said that she was ‘thankful for this country. I love this place’, having refused her partner’s desires to migrate to a place that would allow them to marry because it would feel like she would be ‘abandoning the place that I love’. These beliefs co-existed with criticisms of aforementioned policies such as housing subsidies that are only accessible to married heterosexual couples while she had to ‘wait till [she] was 35 and buy a more expensive sales flat and don’t enjoy the subsidies that BTOs come with[. . . ] you see your heterosexual counterparts, it’s like, ‘Eh, how come I so 辛苦 [xīnkù; experience hardship], you are not?’ She then said, ‘And it’s a choice. I cannot really blame anyone for it. I can complain, but it’s still a choice that I made. I am a citizen of this place and I am also a part of this’.

Where sexual citizenship is often situated within the framework of liberal citizenship, it has developed certain lenses through which certain ways of being and rights-claiming makes it possible to be a sexual citizen, where only ‘certain kinds of personal choices can be regarded as a legitimate expression of sovereign autonomy’ (Sabsay 2012, 617). These discussions demonstrate the knotty texture of sexual citizenship, where governance co-exists with individual autonomy that finds expression in patriotism, pragmatism and privilege.

**Conclusion**

To conclude, this article sets out alternative ways of being sexual citizens, while overturning confluences of silence and passivity or being apolitical. Revealing the intentions, politics and actions within silence troubles political ontologies that ‘assumes a hierarchy of being in which speaking agents are paramount’ (Rollo, in Vieira, Jung, and Gray G et al. 2019, 438). The recognition that silence is political adds complexity to otherwise
‘simple lines [drawn] between active participation (voice) and passive nonparticipation (silence)’ (Gest and Gray 2015, 469). With this understanding, this article has shown varied and intersecting reasons why citizens remain silent as a matter of political choice, while at the same time reinforcing how ‘choice’ is one contingent on economic privilege.

On a broader level, these questions are salient today where societies are often described as polarising, neglecting what has been termed ‘silent majorities’, which may well constitute sets of political identities and subjectivities that choose to be silent for various reasons. The disaffected are often written about as passive, non-political and non-actors. Exploring what silence means, whether as indifference, a form of contestation or an outcome of a strategic decision-making process, would benefit future research on citizenship and how claims are understood.

Troubling binaries of active/passive, political/non-political and participation/non-participation implies the need for more careful analyses of claims-making. This agenda suggests expanding what we understand as ‘acts of citizenship’ while also considering what we have come to valorise within scholarship as representing forms of agency, choice and legitimate voice. Further, if silences are meaningful, then we must question what is not participation, and moreover what this means for citizenship studies where democratic participation bears a key role.

Lastly, treating silence as subjective, strategic and agentic contributes to understanding how sexual citizenship looks in polities usually judged to lack democratic norms, sexual rights and other normalised standards of queerness. Questioning silence uncovers an array of political calculations, expressions of self, economic agencies and practices of claims-making that exceed any measure of passivity. As silent actors and sexual citizens, individuals negotiate limitations of exclusionary and heteronormative policies through different strategies. Silence is made political through considered readings of a sexual regime that while out of their control, is self-managed to some extent through the decision to remain silent, one that is ultimately grounded in a conscious political orientation opposed to the status quo and state rationalities.

Notes

1. I refer here to heteronormativity as a certain social order that takes for granted heterosexual relationships, families and categories, where the ‘doing of’, ‘being’ and ‘becoming’ heterosexual as well as its privileges that are institutionalised through policies and normalised through media such as popular culture (Jackson 2006; Marchia and Sommer 2017).

2. While sexual citizenship and sexual rights are intertwined, I focus here only on sexual citizenship with the view that the latter is not always how rights are perceived by queer citizens, particularly the respondents here.

3. Transgenders – while still subject to discrimination and stigma in various forms – can legally change their gender identity and are permitted to marry legally, as of 1996. There are notable cases where marriages have been voided if either partner had a reassignment surgery after being legally married as the marriage would then be considered same-sex (e.g. Kok 2017).

4. This statement arose in the context of a landmark case where a gay father was permitted to adopt his biological son born via surrogacy, of which neither gay adoption nor surrogacy are ordinarily permitted in Singapore (Ong 2018).

5. Oswin (2010) further argues that other ‘non-proper’ family formations such as single parents and unmarried individuals, as well as migrant workers, are also rendered ‘queered’
through housing policy. The queering of groups is however differentiated, as pointed out by Audrey Yue, who demonstrates how the governance of sexuality through housing policies is mitigated by the introduction of property law where individuals and same-sex couples can co-purchase subsidised public housing when over the age of 35, which has in some measure enabled non-heteronormative sexual partnerships and domestic arrangements within Singapore’s heteronormative parameters (Yue A, 2012, 6–7).

6. This article uses the term ‘non-heterosexual’ rather than ‘queer’ or ‘LGBTQ+’ as various respondents identified as ‘non-heterosexual’ but did not identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or intersex. The use of ‘non-heterosexual’ is as such a preferred term among respondents and in no way refers to or reproduces problematic binaries between homo/hetero or straight/LGBTQ+ (Altman 1971).

7. Establishing an even split across categories of sexuality was not sought given the fluid nature of sexualities where various respondents did not identify themselves with the usual categories of lesbian, gay, bisexual or queer. For instance, some questioned the meaning of these identities or simply did not see themselves as falling within any of them. Fieldwork did not include transgender and intersex individuals, as they occupy a distinct legal landscape in Singapore that may warrant an independent study.

8. True Love is a ministry of a church in Singapore that seeks to provide LGBT resources for Christians (3:16 Church 2018).

9. My thanks to Terrell Carver for highlighting this point in particular, among your many other astute observations.

10. See Rajeswani (2017) for further detail.

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Notes on contributor

Dr Terri-Anne Teo is Lecturer in Politics of Race and Ethnicity, School of Geography, Politics and Sociology, Newcastle University, UK

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