

Orientation Programme

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Beneath a starless sky,
a procession of cabbies usher in the new year,
the new beginning. Hope.

We the citizens of Singapore...

They are a sea of neon green taxi tops.

Status: available. open.

Based on justice and equality.....

Luckily they are not police sirens.

Two men fall into a cab and

many more out of love.

They sit on all sides of the pavement

regardless of race, language or religion...

possessed by bitter spirits (ingested)

and the disapproving ghosts of their ancestors,

immobile.

Beyond the charm of shophouse facades

a boy extricates himself from corridors of

headless torsos in towels,

on his knees.

Later: a fire will break out.

The dawn will only bring

burning questions,

buzzing journalists: buzzards.

Even later: The only victims are the living

who work *to build a democratic society*.

Inside a club

people tap their feet and watches, sipping

on their cocktails.

A fag hag and her date lean against the wall

as two queens work the stage.

pledge ourselves as one united people...

"I don't do that".

Twenty meters away

is a place where other humans

worship another half-naked body –

so as to achieve happiness

prosperity and progress...

and get on their knees

to pray –

love thy neighbor indeed.

And just hours ago, a family decided

on dinner at Maxwell.

The mother would not stop gushing about the food

and the father remarked that it was a

good, affordable place

for his son to take his future girlfriend,
for our nation.

Context

Set in the immediate vicinity of Singapore's LGBT-popular Tanjong Pagar and Chinatown neighborhood, "Orientation Programme" explores the impact of the country's current socio-political climate on the LGBT community and the various community-specific challenges that have arisen as a result. The title itself lays the groundwork for readers to navigate and engage with these possibly alien experiences. Against the backdrop of recent constitutional challenges to Section 377A of the Penal Code (which criminalizes homosexual acts) and heated public/religious discourse, this poem seeks to, on a larger level, encourage new perspectives towards the LGBT community.

Why is it significant?

Comprising a series of vignettes narrated by the persona, the poem hopes to capture the colorful nightlife and symbolism of the Tanjong Pagar district, while offering lessons to be learnt.

This poem is one part a critique of the LGBT community's prevalent divisiveness and hypocrisy. It's important to recognize that while the community is by no means a monolithic bloc, it is one that ultimately demands equality and acceptance. Yet within it remain strong undercurrents of transphobia, ageism, bisexual discrimination, bullying, objectification and commodification of love and lust. If the community itself cannot practice what it preaches, is it not unreasonable to demand it from others? Separately, close examination yields a desensitized lull coursing through the stanzas, pointing to a worrying normalization of hedonistic behavior.

Recent times have also seen newscasters and journalists lambasted for their insensitivity and ignorance toward the reporting (or lack thereof) of LGBT elements. In part, the poem was inspired by a need to reject the State's paternalistic censorship of LGBT voices – In the second stanza for example, a deadly fire outbreak in a gay sauna presents a multi-faceted dilemma to both silenced survivors and the media.

Of note too are verses of Singapore's pledge that have been incorporated as a central motif. The pledge is used as a tool to critique Parliament's clumsy and inconsistent pursuit of its espoused ideals. It is also an equally pertinent critique of the LGBT community who seems to struggle with practicing the pledge's values amongst themselves. The result is subversive and rightly so, challenging the government to acknowledge the local LGBT community's burgeoning presence as a litmus test of national maturity. This could pave the way for policies to address the community-specific challenges faced by its members.

Like it or not, the LGBT voices in our society bear the same degree of ubiquity possessed by our national pledge, as illustrated in the final stanza. These invisible voices are no less important in our nation's past as they are now. Our priorities should then center on fostering a 'Singaporean' identity rather than one demarcated along the lines of sexual preference or religious leanings

Biography

Currently serving the army and disappointed that it has taught him nothing about navigating his last year as a teenager, Kenneth loves a pen in hand as much as he loves his tequila shots.

Kenneth is also a freelance actor for both stage and screen. He has since worked with ex-faculty of the *Lee Strasberg Theatre and Film Institute* and done work for NYU's Tisch School of the Arts Asia, Singapore Art Museum, MTV Asia and Lady Gaga. His debut screenplay, *I Am Jonathan*, exploring the convergence of faith and sexuality, premiered its trailer at the ASEAN International Film Festival 2013.

He is also part of Buds Theatre's Youth Program and hopes to publish his first collection of poetry in the near future. He may be reached at kenneth_cjh@hotmail.com for coffee or collaborations.