

Transformations in the Relationships Between Identity and Cultural Performance in Singapore

Sarah Weiss

Associate Professor of Humanities (Music) and Rector, Saga Residential College, Yale-NUS College, Singapore



While the distinct identities of the “four” cultures of Singapore have always been important in the rhetoric about community and nation - a “unity in diversity” as Culture Minister Lee Koon Choy noted in 1967 – there was an acknowledgement and even an encouragement of cultural mixture of various sorts at the beginning of Singapore’s independence. “So great was the part played by borrowing that no culture in the present state was not the result of co-operation and mutual influence between different people” (The Straits Times 23 July 1967). Yet, over the fifty years during which Singapore’s identity as a nation has been solidified, there has been a gradual retreat from the hybridities of the middle of the twentieth century — the cultural elements that were already mixed and mixing on the island — toward an aesthetics of cultural distinctiveness articulated through

separation. This has been accompanied by the cultivation of so-called “pure” or “authentic” traditions of the various “home”lands of Singapore’s primary ethnic groups. Based on archival research in Singaporean newspapers in multiple languages as well as ethnographic data, I describe this trend and suggest reasons for the shifts.

Sarah Weiss holds a BA with honours in Music History and Theory from the University of Rochester and Eastman School of Music and MA and PhD degrees in Music (with Distinction) from New York University, winning the Dean’s Dissertation Award in 1998. An active scholar of Southeast Asian performance and culture, Professor Weiss has taught world music theories, music research methodologies, gender theory, ethnography, hybridity and postcolonial studies, world music surveys, and Javanese gamelan performance in the Departments of Music at the University of Sydney, the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, Harvard University, and Yale. She is delighted to continue her teaching and research activities here at Yale-NUS College.

In her role as the inaugural Rector of Saga College, Professor Weiss strives to encourage and develop a sense of community and college identity among the students, faculty and staff who live, study, and work in Saga Residential College.

Professor Weiss is also an active musician. She regularly performs with Gamelan Singa Nglaras housed in the National University of Singapore’s Southeast Asian Studies Department and has started a faculty *a cappella* group called *The Lecture Notes*.

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12:00 Noon

Room 203, Luce Hall, 34 Hillhouse Avenue