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#### Citation

WOODS, Orlando.(2021). (Un)tethered masculinities, (mis)placed modernities: Queering futurity in contemporary Singapore. *Sexualities*, , 1-15.

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# **(Un)tethered masculinities, (mis)placed modernities: Queering futurity in contemporary Singapore**

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Published in *Sexualities*, June 24, 2021, Advance online, pp. 1-15

DOI: 10.1177/13634607211028111

## **Abstract**

This article considers how socio-political prescriptions can bring about the queering of futurity in Singapore. In Singapore, state-sponsored narratives of progress view futurity in terms that are bound to place, and reproduced through the heteronormative family unit. These factors have caused constructions of masculinity to be tethered to the family, and placed within public housing. Recently, this narrative has become an increasingly inflexible and marginalizing construct that can cause straight males to be queered by their prescribed futures. In contrast, gay males are more likely to be untethered from their families, and thus occupy “unplaced” positions in Singapore’s social structure.

## **Keywords**

Queering futurity, (un)tethered masculinities, heteronormativity, Chinese families, Singapore

## **Introduction**

In recent years, socio-economic shifts have led to a fundamental rethinking of the norms, assumptions, and expectations that structure everyday life. These shifts have caused modernity to become a fractured construct that has been reimagined in ways that go beyond reproductive futurism (Edelman, 2004; Muñoz, 2009). This fracturing is pronounced in Singapore, where modernity has long been defined by a state-sponsored narrative that, through its policy regime and legal frameworks, views futurity in terms that are bound to place and reproduced through the heteronormative family unit. For reasons explained later, this narrative resonates particularly strongly among Chinese families, wherein males tend to fulfill clearly defined roles. Indeed, Oswin (2010a: 132, emphasis added) suggests that, as an “ideological mechanism of social control... it would be difficult to *overstate* the importance accorded to the institution of the family in contemporary Singapore.” The institutionalization of the family has caused heteronormative values to become embedded within both public and private domains, and has contributed to a well-defined set of expectations concerning the acceptable “placing” of masculinity. For most, masculinity is tethered to the family, which, as a construct through which modernity is reproduced, is placed within Singapore’s public housing. Given that more than 80% of Singapore’s resident

population lives in public housing, the home has therefore become a key mechanism through which state-sponsored social values and control are expressed (HDB, 2015). Yet, as much as the family stabilizes the vision of modernity in Singapore, so too can it become a system of constraint that can “queer” the futures of those implicated within it. Paradoxically, then, it is “not just gays and lesbians [that] have been ‘queered’ in the city-state” (Oswin, 2010a: 139), but, in times of socio-economic uncertainty and change, straight males as well.

As a result of this contextual framing, my engagement with queer theory goes beyond identity and considers instead how “queering” can be a marginalizing *effect* of structural constraints. I use “queer” not as a noun, but as a transitive verb that is indexed to futurity, and is constantly, therefore, in process. As verb, queering relates specifically to the (re)production of masculinity in Singapore, and its increasingly variegated deviations from the narrative of progress from which both the state and family draw strength. This offers a point of distinction from Edelman’s (2004: 4, original emphasis) interpretation of queer futurity as a counterpoint to “reproductive futurism,” and thus a form of “resistance, internal to the social, to every social structure or form.” Edelman’s (2004) notion of queering builds on the premise that gay men are precluded from participating in social reproduction; they are external from the social (structure), and therefore resist it from the position of an outsider. In Singapore, however, I contend that *queering* can be a response to the structuring effects of society, and of politico-economic structures more broadly, within which *all* men are implicated. Queerness is an outcome of the ways in which men respond to structural constraints; it involves the reconfiguration of masculinity in response to forces that are beyond one’s control. Indeed, my empirical focus is on the pressures and struggles faced by straight Singaporean Chinese men, who are centrally placed within the socio-familial and politico-economic structures *through which* they are queered. My intention, then, is to move the analytical focus of queer theory beyond identity, and to explore the more expansive structuring logics of “queerness” instead. Through this line of argument, I bring queer theory into conversation with normative constructions of masculinity, family and futurity in Singapore.

While there has been growing scholarly interest in gay activism in Singapore (Chua, 2014; Yue, 2012), there has been no consideration of the everyday ontologies of gay Singaporean men in relation to their straight counterparts. By bringing otherwise distinct understandings of sexual citizenship into conversation with one another, I argue that the constraints of heteronormativity can queer the futures of straight Singaporean men. These constraints are reproduced through the state-family nexus, which establishes the expectations of males as *en*placed stakeholders within Singapore’s social structure. This nexus causes futurity to be clearly and rigidly defined, which “generates generational succession, temporality, and narrative sequence... in the service of representation” (Edelman, 2004: 60). It offers a vision of how the future *should* unfold, and how the male *should* be defined in relation to each stage of the life course. Failing to meet these expectations—or even the anticipation of failure—is a source of

anxiety, and can trigger a queering effect. In contrast, gay males—who are more likely to be “untethered” from their families—are precluded from this narrative, and are therefore relatively freer to pursue futurity on their own terms. They are emancipated from a future that is defined for them by others; one that, through their sexual orientation, they are forced to reject. As the mechanism through which queering operates, (un)tethering highlights the multiplicity of masculine identities in the contemporary world (Berg and Longhurst, 2003), and how “certain ‘ways of being a man’ challenge—or not—dominant understandings of masculinities” (Hopkins and Gorman-Murray, 2019: 302). “Queering futurity” is a theoretical position that explains the subversion of these dominant understandings. It reveals how, in an uncertain world, the tetherings of the family can be a source of masculine vulnerability rather than strength.

In the sections that follow, these ideas are empirically illustrated through qualitative data that reflect the views of young Singaporean Chinese men. Before that, however, I introduce the contextual frame of Singapore, and then provide an overview of the methodology employed.

### **(Re)thinking masculinity, family and futurity in contemporary Singapore**

#### *Placing the family within Singapore’s narrative of progress*

Since the formation of the Republic of Singapore in 1965, the ruling People’s Action Party has taken direct and effective steps to modernize the country and its people. Modernization has thus been rapid, and government-prescribed. Normative understandings of the family are engineered by the state, with the family being a site of “production,” or a “space where ‘society’ and ‘state’ come to take specific form and content” (Teo, 2010: 338). For a long time, the family has been depicted as the cornerstone of national stability and progress; it is described as “an important institution... [it] contribute[s] to social stability and national cohesiveness as [it] help[s] develop socially responsible individuals and deepen[s] the bond Singaporeans have with our country” (Ministry of Community Development and Sports, cited in Teo, 2010: 339). Here, we can not only see the importance of the family as a social institution, but also its integral role in nation-building. It is a clearly defined, singular, and often hegemonic, vision of social formation. The centrality of the family is reified by various government policies that aim to “valorize a nuclear, heterosexual, middle-class family ideal” that has resulted in the Singaporean family being described as “quite a remarkable feat of social engineering” (Oswin, 2010a: 132). Policies are often place-based, with clearly defined, and easily accessible, pathways to acquiring a home foregrounding the reproduction of family. These policies tie public housing allotments and subsidies to marriage and a willingness to live in close proximity to one’s parents, institutionalization of a national matchmaking agency, aggressive antinatalist measures that worked all too well and have been followed by pronatalist

initiatives, and constant exhortations via the state-controlled media to marry and (then) procreate (Oswin, 2010a: 132).

In particular, policies that involve the provision of, access to, and incentives for, public housing have caused the home to become the place of state-prescribed social modernity in Singapore. The Housing Development Board (or HDB) flat is not only home to the vast majority of Singapore's resident population but is also a place in and through which the state's heteronormative understanding of the family is reproduced (Teo, 2010). Until relatively recently, newly built flats could only be bought by engaged or married couples, with these cohorts being able to access housing grants and subsidies that are of greater value than those available to unmarried applicants (The Straits Times, 23.02.20). As a result, HDB flats have become the mechanism through which the heteronormative logics of the state, and the "absolute value of reproductive futurism" (Edelman, 2004: 3) are transferred to society. Enforcing these logics is the illegality of homosexuality in Singapore, which can be interpreted as symptomatic of the state's "illiberal pragmatism" (Yue, 2012: 2) regarding matters of sexual citizenship. Affiliation to, and alignment with, the social group—often defined along ethno-religious or national lines—is preferred. Indeed, while the illegality of homosexuality is "unenforced," it is discouraged through more indirect policy mechanisms that ensure inequitable rights and benefits when it comes to issues like government subsidies pertaining to tax and inheritance, access to adoption and parenting services, and visa sponsorship, among other provisions (see Yue, 2012: 6–9; Chua, 2014: 38 for overviews).

In many respects, however, the state is not just an influencer, but also a mirror of cultural values. With nearly 75% of all Singaporeans being ethnically Chinese, these heteronormative, family-first government policies find a clear sense of cultural alignment and resonance. It has been argued that the "'ideal Singaporean male' has long been constructed upon racial lines" (Pugsley, 2010: 173), with Chinese patriarchy providing a dominant framework for structuring the expectations imposed upon males. Within this vision of the "ideal Singapore male," the son in particular, and filial piety in general, plays a central role (see Woods and Donaldson, 2021). Social liberalization outside of this prescriptive framework has long been seen as a threat to Singapore's social stability and futurity. Liberalization continues to be associated with the West, and is frowned upon due to its potential to undermine traditionally Chinese, or more generally, "Asian" values. As a result, "individual consciousness [is] often at cross purposes with the collectivist policies of the state" (Pugsley, 2010: 178) and, by extension, the Chinese family. Put differently, the government defines the desired social order, and then places it through its family-oriented policies. In doing so, both the state and the family cohere to "reproduce the constraining mandate of futurism" (Edelman, 2004: 4) within which straight Chinese males are implicated. Placed within this mandate, and tethered to their families, these constraints have recently become a source of vulnerability rather than strength.

*Masculine anxiety in changing times*

Recent decades have brought about a number of shifts that have called Singapore's narrative of progress into question. Economic development has started to outpace social development, with the aggressive pursuit of upward mobility—enshrined in the local term *kiasu* (literally, “afraid to lose”)—resulting in the individualistic desire to be better than others. In particular, the economic take-off of the 1980s ushered in an era in which “new elitism surged” and “education, middle-class aspirations, and global mobility defined and classed Singaporean men by their academic merits and socio-economic status” (Cheng et al., 2015: 871). As much as this has contributed to social polarization, so too has it repositioned Singapore as a global hub for capital, ideas, and talent. It has embedded Singapore in the global economy, the ramifications of which are felt throughout society. Futurity is becoming less predictable, and more a response to the increasingly globalized, and thus competitive, marketplace for qualifications, jobs, and even spouses. Recognizing—and, arguably, prioritizing—the fact that economic stability foregrounds socio-political stability, the Singapore government has been quick to respond to the demands of the global marketplace in which many Singaporeans are embedded. While the government once sought to “cultivat[e] industriousness, dedication, and loyalty” (Ong, 2004: 185) among its citizens, active measures have since been taken to develop a workforce that is more independent and entrepreneurial instead. Traditions are being eroded, with the “flight from marriage” among well-educated women being a harbinger of broader problems concerning changing socio-familial norms, and the inefficacy of the state's pro-marriage (and pronatalist) policies (Jones 2005, 2012).

In many respects, this departure from state-mandated futurism forces some people into a position of relative precarity, many of whom are ill-equipped to deal with its psycho-social effects. These effects are subtle, pervasive, and can sometimes quite profoundly change the ways in which individuals view the self in/and society. For reasons elucidated below, these effects are pronounced among young Chinese males. While it was once understood that “career, marital, reproductive, and financial success are key elements of what it means to be ‘a man’ in contemporary Singapore” (Williams et al., 2008: 79), these “elements” have since become destabilizing forces. Embedding Singapore's society and economy within the global landscape of competition and uncertainty has resulted in a situation whereby “changing notions and cultural ideals of masculinity in Singapore have become a source of masculine unease, as many men are caught in a rapidly changing terrain of gender norms and marriage expectations” (Cheng et al., 2015: 868). While the social positioning of Singaporean men is increasingly defined in relation to forces originating from outside Singapore, society continues to exert the same norms and expectations upon them. The space of negotiation that emerges as a result causes futurity to become a source of masculine anxiety. The changing terrain of gender norms and expectations means that Singaporean men are still expected, but increasingly struggle, to reproduce “respectable domesticity and proper family” which can, in turn, render ‘a range of subjects ‘queer’ (Oswin, 2010b: 257). The queering of futurity

thus emerges in response to socio-economic change, and the need to manage state-reproduced, culturally entrenched and family-reinforced expectations of masculinity.

## **Methodology**

To illustrate these ideas, I draw on qualitative data collected from various projects, and through formal and informal interactions with male Singaporean university students. Indeed, the idea for this article stems from these interactions, during which students often share with me the worries they face about both the present and the future, and the constraints they face through their families and living arrangements. To better understand the insights that emerged from these interactions, in mid-2019 I conducted eight interviews with Chinese males in their early and mid-twenties. While these males were all well-educated (to university level), they came from diverse backgrounds—ranging from working-class, “traditionally” Chinese families, to those whose parents were well-qualified, more cosmopolitan, professionals. Of these, five identified as straight, three as gay; of the straight cohort, two had an openly gay relative within the family. The interviews explored the struggles that young Chinese men face throughout their daily lives, the expectations they (feel they) are expected to meet, and their hopes and fears for the future. The interviews also sought to situate these males within their peer groups of friends, classmates and other communities, as well as within their family structures, the aim being to identify and understand how aligned or not they were with broader Singapore society.

While these interviews provide the main corpus of data that this article leverages, the themes that emerged from them overlap with two research projects—one on dancehall culture in Singapore, the other on the new forms of religious diversity taking root in Singapore—that I am/was working on concurrently. The first project was conducted in the second half of 2018, and comprised nineteen in-depth interviews, 11 of which were with males. Of these, five were Chinese and six were Malay; all Chinese participants were in their late-teens or early twenties, identified as straight, and came from low- to middle-income families that identified as “traditionally” Chinese. These interviews primarily explored the ways in which dancehall provided a performative release from the pressures of everyday life (see Woods, 2020, 2021). The second project commenced in mid-2019, and is ongoing. While the project explores the diversity within different religious groups in Singapore, the cohort most instructive for this article is the “nones”—individuals that do not identify as religious—among whom 17 interviews have been conducted. Most relevant to this article are four interviews conducted with male Singaporeans in their early-to mid-twenties, two of whom were Chinese and one was Chinese-Pakistani. These interviewees tended to be better educated than those from the dancehall project, and from less “traditionally” Chinese families. They also tended to be highly critical of normative social, and government-imposed, community structures, and thus provided insight into the untethering of the self from the community-at-large.

The eight interviews conducted for this article, and all interviews for the dancehall project, were conducted by the author. The interviews for the religious diversity project were conducted by a Singaporean Chinese (female) research assistant. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed as soon as possible upon completion. The eight interviews conducted for this article were first analyzed for themes using an open coding approach; subsequently, I recoded the interview transcripts from the first two projects according to these themes. Combined, this created a broad and richly insightful dataset. Drawing on these data, I explore below how the pressures that young males face can lead to the queering of futurity in contemporary Singapore.

### **Queering futurity in contemporary Singapore**

#### *Tethering masculinity to the family*

The futures assigned to straight Chinese males are tethered to the progress and reproduction of the family, society and the state: three constructs that in Singapore are self-referential and self-reinforcing. These tethers can restrict and control lives through the expectation and pressure to conform. Futurity can therefore be seen to be funneled according to a singular life course that is prescribed by others. This funnel starts with education, then career, then marriage and signing up for public housing, then children, then repeat through the next and subsequent generations. The government intervenes at strategic stages to ensure these steps are followed, while the family intervenes on a more everyday level. In Chinese families, males are typically expected to take on the role of providers, with provision relating primarily to financial resources. Responsibility for the provision of these resources can span multiple generations; for many, it includes both progeny and parents. As Cheng et al. (2015: 873) observe, “the normative structure places men at the head of the family as the main provider... Ensuring adequate provision and earmarking money for both the marital home and the wife’s natal family after marriage remain central to managing hard-earned financial resources.” As such, there is an expectation that young males must work hard in order to secure well-paying jobs and thus fulfill their obligations to the family. This sentiment was echoed by all of my interviewees. For example, Adam,<sup>1</sup> a straight social sciences student, explained how:

In Chinese families, boys are usually the ones that have to take care of the parents, and I’m the only son, so then, financially, that is the main pressure on me. I feel that is a very huge responsibility.

This sense of responsibility is pervasive, and translates into various forms of expectation. For example, Ryan, a straight law student, told me that his parents “hope I can get into a good job with a stable income, so that I can provide for myself and my family,” while Darren, a straight business student, spoke of how his parents’ expectations of him achieving good grades and securing a well-paying job after



graduation was detrimental to the pursuit of his interest in dance. He explained how, “when I first started dancing... my parents were, like, ‘why are you dancing? Can you earn money?’”. In this case, his parents worry that dancing will make him a less competitive student, with their remarks being an expression of control over how he should spend his time. Muñoz (2009: 22) provides insight into this dynamic, reasoning that “straight time tells us that there is no future but the here and now of our everyday life.” Alternative visions—those that may not cohere with the pragmatism of the “here and now”—such as those manifested through dance, are less likely to be tolerated by the social structure; by the family. William, a gay law student provided further insight into how this idea of provision translated into control. Speaking of his own father, he explained how “the money part is interesting, because it sort of over-reaches to what I do with my properties, so the notion of property is not as distinct between family members.” Here, William explains that because his father provides for the family, he has a controlling influence over the other family members. Autonomy and independence are, as a result, curtailed.

Altogether, these ideas of provision and control encapsulate what I mean by the “tethering” of masculinity to the Chinese family. Pressure is put on males to provide, but provision affords them the ability to unite the family, and in turn to reproduce their values across generations. Tethered masculinities result in stronger families, but they are also underpinned by, and serve to reproduce, a number of heteronormative biases. While it is the responsibility of women to bear and raise children, men are expected to provide for them. Adam explained how “since young, you know, having a family and kids has been, like, the end goal, because that’s the typical thing people do,” while Jonathan explained that when his father suspected his older brother of being gay, he “couldn’t stand the idea felt it was embarrassing the world, embarrassing himself, don’t know what he did to deserve this.” Both of these excerpts emphasize the heteronormativity of Chinese families; Adam states that having children is the “typical thing people do,” while Jonathan highlights the “embarrassment” associated with (suspected) homosexuality. The reproduction of heteronormativity through the family, then, casts it—and the males implicated by it—within a rigid framework of reproductive futurism. Developing this sentiment further, Marvin, a gay business student, revealed the consequences of outing himself to his parents:

At the end of the day, there’s always an expectation that they want a son that is normal, a normal heterosexual son that gets married by a certain age, has children by a certain age, then retires and dies with the children. You know, that kind of idea of what a normal family is. I can’t fulfil that because I’m not that, right? And it’s a pity, because we see instances of families... being torn apart because of this struggle and this lack of acceptance of who their sons really are.

Marvin highlights here the reproductive futurism that underpins the expectations of males within, and constructions of masculinity through, the family. The desire to “die with the children” insures the parents against the uncertainties of the future; it de-risks futurity. Contrariwise, homosexuality “is not only the

opposite of masculinity; it is a corruption of it... [it] poses a threat” (Cantú, 2009: 130) to the strength and succession of the family. Yet, this goes beyond “resist[ing] existing meanings of... social institutions, such as gender, family, and work” (Chua, 2014: 15) and involves the active *rejection* of them instead. These are provocative ideas that might be grounded in gay alterity, but which find increasing resonance among straight males that have been “queered” by their families as well. I now expand on these ideas by exploring what it means for futurity to be reproduced through the family.

### *Reproducing futurity through the family*

Singapore’s modernization is, in many respects, orchestrated by the government in ways that are meant to consolidate the strengthening of society in concert with economic development. Both economic growth and social modernization are top-down processes that have successfully translated into material improvements in living conditions, and access to opportunities. This has resulted in a situation in which “most [Singaporeans] can be considered upwardly mobile—having received significantly more education and being employed in more high-status and secure professions compared to their parents” (Teo, 2010: 342). While upward mobility has become a normative trope in Singapore, it does not, however, reflect incremental improvements in education and employment over each generation; rather, it reflects processes of each generation leapfrogging developmental stages. As a result, situations emerge where Singaporean youths are sometimes several steps removed from their parents in terms of educational and professional prospects, while their parents have high expectations regarding what their children can achieve. For example, Adam described how he comes from a “middle-low, low-middle income Chinese family.” He went on to explain how.

My parents didn’t have a lot of education, like, both of them, I think my mum studied until secondary? Then my dad was, like, primary. So they didn’t know much about education. But my parents do know the importance of education, so since we were maybe, like, 6 years old, she has been sending us for tuition.

While Adam has access to education and, consequently, opportunities that his parents did not have, pursuing these opportunities paradoxically resulted in the future becoming a marginalizing construct for him. He spoke of being at university and feeling “inferior” to his peers, of being “not confident of the stuff I’m going to say,” and that “I’m intimidated... I feel that I’m ignorant.” Upward mobility has thus had a marginalizing effect on Adam, which suggests that males like him, from lower income families, are relatively more likely to be queered than their middle-class counterparts. He went on to explain how “I feel like I’m losing out in this rat race with all the [university] kids, my batchmates and everything... I’m still trying to train myself to be able to handle this, because I know when I go out into the workforce, it’s still going to be this way.” This recognition of the fact that uncertainty will not stop when he leaves

university, but will continue through to the workforce, was a widely expressed source of anxiety. For Adam, and many others like him, the anxiety that he speaks of can be interpreted as an outcome of the fact that (apparently) upwardly mobile Singaporean males are expected to adopt a *promissory* identity, one with which [they] can never succeed in fully coinciding because [they], as subjects of the signifier, can only be signifiers [them]selves, can only ever aspire to catch up to whatever it is [they] might signify by closing the gap that divides [them] and, paradoxically, makes [them] subjects *through that act of division alone*. This structural inability of the subject to merge with the self... necessitates various strategies designed to suture the subject in the space of meaning (Edelman, 2004: 8, original emphasis).

In other words, because male futures are prescribed by the state and reproduced through the family, and because masculinity becomes a tethered construct in response, it is something that can never be fully realized. There will always be a disjuncture—a “structural inability”—to reconcile the male subject and the male self, thus causing the male self to be objectified by the future within which it is ensnared. In this vein, Ryan expressed concern about “whether I can keep up with the changing and evolution... I’m concerned I might lose my competitive edge... it just gets more challenging for each generation.” According to Cheng et al. (2015: 868), it is “within this juncture of change and continuity” that “money emerges as a vehicle through which Singaporean [males] construct ‘manhood’ within the household.” Taking these ideas even further, I suggest that money becomes the vehicle through which futurity can be queered. To this point, Alec, a graduate who recently started working for an international consultancy firm, reiterated this sentiment, stating that “it’s a very unsure future that I’ll be entering, and yeah, like things change quickly.” He went on to explain how these concerns manifested in the lead up to him starting his job:

I was feeling very depressed the week right before I started work. There were just too many things going on in my head, like, I was worrying about whether I can afford a house in the future, how I’m going to start saving up, will my job still be there in 50 years’ time because everything’s going to be automated and all, like, how am I going to match up my skills to the workforce in the future? My own retirement plan, my parents’ retirement plan, who’s going to take care of my parents?

Ironically, the week before he was about to enter the workforce, he was plagued by insecurities about the future. Through these examples we can see how the developmental logics of the Singapore, and the upward mobility experienced by Singaporean families in particular, have resulted in a “mode of straight time that produces multiple queer asynchronies” (Oswin, 2014: 417). Young Singaporean males that are following the path of upward mobility—some through incremental means, others through leapfrogging stages of socio-economic progression—are nonetheless queered by their asynchronous, and unexpected, feelings of anxiety. While it is unknown whether or not these anxieties will be realized, the point is that processes of tethering and placing create the structural conditions through which they are reproduced. In

turn, the inability of Singaporean males to reconcile these structural conditions with their masculine selves can force them into a position where they desire to subvert Singapore's narrative of progress. Put differently, the masculine anxiety that emerges in response to their futures being queered can cause them to reclaim agency by wanting to deviate further from the narrative.

The irony, then, is that amid socio-economic shifts, Singapore's state-sponsored narrative can cause straight males *with* a "future" to disavow it. Adam, for example, explained how "sometimes being so worried about money makes me think that maybe I shouldn't have a family at all, that kind of stuff. Because, like, getting married, buying a house, everything revolves around money, and having a kid, yeah, that kind of scares me." Adam is inadvertently queered by the socio-political structures within which he is embedded, causing him to express the desire to reject the path of futurity he is expected to follow. Being tethered to his family only exacerbates these concerns, as they amplify the pressures on him to act as the male provider. Jonathan elaborated on this sentiment, explaining how "in a parent's position, you're so vulnerable... It's not like you can just walk out and leave. I think that really scares me." In this view, the queering of futurity can cause the family to become a point of vulnerability rather than strength. It is because they are so centrally implicated *within*, and tethered *to*, the social structure that they are queered by it; they are not positioned as resistant outsiders (after Edelman 2004), but as situated stakeholders in the very futures through and by which they are queered. In contrast, gay males, who are more likely to be untethered from their families, and thus occupy *unplaced* positions in Singapore's social structure, are precluded from the "reality" within which their straight counterparts are embroiled. They are, therefore, relatively freer to pursue alternative futures on their own terms.

*(Un)tethered masculinities, (mis)placed modernities*

While tethered masculinities are queered by their responsibilities to, and the expectations of, their families, untethered masculinities are those that are less encumbered by these responsibilities and expectations. Ironically, untethered masculinities are more likely to be associated with gay males, and are less likely to be "queered" by socio-economic uncertainty. Thus, because queering (as verb) is a process of becoming other, or marginal to dominant narratives, this application sees the *effects* of queering being pushed to a logical extreme. That said, tethered and untethered masculinities should be understood in terms of their overlaps as much as their distinctions. While heterosexual males are, for the purposes of my argument, associated with tethered masculinities—and homosexual to untethered—this is not an easy or unproblematic dichotomy. Rather, it is a theoretical position from which we can begin to understand the intersections and outcomes of institutional structures, reproductive futurism, and masculine anxiety in contemporary Singapore.

Both William and Marvin, for example, spoke of how their homosexuality caused them to be set emotionally and relationally apart from their families, even if they still lived in the family home. William told me how “I wouldn’t say that I’m very close [to my family], it’s just functional, I guess... I mostly avoid them,” while Marvin shared that “after he [his father] realized that I was not going to be the son he envisioned, then he just, yeah...” before going on to explain in more concrete terms that “we don’t really meddle with each other’s lives... we don’t acknowledge each other’s presence, because there’s nothing to acknowledge.” This sense of separation, which, in both cases, stems from their homosexuality, caused them to be untethered from their families. Marvin went on to reveal how “society doesn’t accept me for who I am, my family doesn’t support me for who I am... so I have to be alone.” William expressed similar sentiment, sharing how, because he is gay,

there is nothing to protect... because heterosexuality and family is contingent on legacy, right? If you don’t have that legacy, then everything stops when your life ends, right? So the time that you have here is really for you to make the most out of... there’s less responsibility, less liability, and you’re able to take more risks.

Untethering means that William is able to live his life on his own terms; as he put it, “I don’t feel pressured by my parents or anyone else.” This process of extraction, of isolating himself from his family, and thus building confidence in himself and his ability to look after himself, was accelerated by his coming out, but did not start there. Rather, William spoke of how distancing himself from his family started at a much younger age, when he began to reject their Christian faith. His refusal to attend church in his teenage years marked the beginnings of his transition away from unthinking social and cultural observance, to more conscious and rational decision-making. This resolutely untethered approach to masculinity—making conscious decisions, forging his own values, and expressing agency—sets him apart from his tethered counterparts. As William put it, the expectations imparted on males by their families is “a matter of tradition, and tradition doesn’t always reflect... the truth, so I’m not threatened by it.” Accordingly, this independence forged in him—and in Marvin as well—a sense of resilience that decoupled them not just from the broader socio-political context in which they live but also the precarious economic environment as well. From this, we can see how “‘queer’ subjects are multiple, they are differently positioned in relation to the dominant heteronormative order along lines of race, class, gender and more” (Oswin, 2012: 1627). In this case, while people like Alec and Ryan are queered by the heteronormative values by which they live, William draws a sense of resilience from his ability to cope with precarity.

This sense of resilience stems from the fact that homosexuals—and homosexual *males* in particular—are excluded from the narrative of modernity in Singapore. As a result, their modernities are implicitly less place-based; in many respects, they are resolutely *unplaced*. As William explained, while “the

government still prioritizes family above everything else... for me, I don't see the need to change things." The "change" he speaks of refers to public debates surrounding the lack of recognition for homosexuals in Singapore; he rationalizes that "because there is no way the family unit [for homosexuals] will materialize, even if there were policies that were directed toward [homosexual] families, they wouldn't be useful." William's last comment reveals the freedoms that come with being untethered. Through the mechanics of policy, the home—and, by extension, the family—becomes overly rigid constructs. Xueyuan, a masters student and future civil servant, reiterated this sentiment, lamenting the "very rigid ways that I feel, like, the government is kind of functioning on... especially housing, there's a very normative way of how you define a family." This "normative way" involves the provision of financial subsidies for married couples to buy an HDB flat, and the occlusion of unmarried (and therefore homosexual) Singaporeans from buying one until they reach the age of 35 years. While these provisions ensure access to affordable housing for all Singaporeans that fit the state's definition of family, so too do they reproduce a restrictive, and *restricting*, psycho-social frame that can both enshrine, but also queer, the futures of those they implicate.

## Conclusions

This article has identified and explored two modalities of masculinity that have emerged in Singapore; one is tethered to the family and the other is untethered. Those that are tethered can, in some instances, be seen to struggle to reconcile the expectations placed on them by their families with the uncertainties they face in the future. Queering futurity encapsulates the positions of precarity that they find themselves in when navigating these struggles. Processes of "queering" can, in this sense, be seen to reflect the "desire for another way of being in both the world and time, a desire that resists mandates to accept that which is not enough" (Muñoz, 2009: 96). In Singapore, "enough" is determined by the state-sponsored narrative of progress, yet there is evidence to suggest that such a narrative, forged in Singapore's post-independence years, is becoming unwieldy and restrictive in the contemporary era. The benefits of tethered masculinities are being obfuscated by the benefits of alternative narratives and life trajectories, and seemingly "irrational" impulses. Reconciliation of personal, familial, and state narratives of the future are needed if the state is to retain its efficacy in sculpting Singapore's (post)modernization. Times are changing, society is changing: the narrative must also change.

In Singapore especially, but in many other countries in which the state intervenes both directly and indirectly in matters of sexual citizenship, there is a need to explore the forms and effects of "tethering" in more detail. Untethered masculinities, in particular, and other untethered forms of identification more generally provide the starting point(s) from which a more radical politics, and social justice agenda, of the self in/and society can be forged. In many respects, this speaks to Edelman's (2004: 3) view that "queerness attains its ethical value precisely insofar as it accedes to... accepting its figural status as

resistance to the viability of the social while insisting on the inextricability of such resistance from every social structure.” The point I have made in this article is that, in Singapore, queerness provides a lens that can be trained on *any* social group, *especially* those that are implicated in the state-family nexus. The sooner the applied effects of this theoretical intervention can be recognized, the sooner the “possibility” that “multiple forms of belonging in difference adhere to a belonging in collectivity” (Muñoz, 2009: 20) can be realized as well. Without it, masculinity will continue to be tethered to the family, and the future will continue to become a marginalizing construct.

### **Declaration of conflicting interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the Ministry of Education, Singapore under grant: MOE2018-T2-2-102, “New Religious Pluralisms in Singapore: Migration, Integration and Difference”.

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Notes: All names have been changed to ensure anonymity.

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