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## Worlding the Singapore Story: Sonny Liew's *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye*

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### ABSTRACT

Sonny Liew's *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* has been read as an allegory of the nation, a hymn to comics, or a satire on the Singapore Story. In this article it is suggested that by presenting one excerpt after another of the unfinished comics of the fictional comic artist Charlie Chan, Liew's mock documentary comic assembles various birthing moments of both a nation and art itself, suggesting that in the act of creation the artist is moved by forces that go beyond the logic of either the nation or the market. The issue at work in Liew's assemblage of "Chan's" artwork is that of the art of comics, especially the ability of comics to make and form the world differently by activating the expansive potentiality of the medium. The birth of art, shown in Liew's novel as an analogy of the birth of the nation, describes a mutating process that assembles various moments of birthing, with each moment unleashing a flood of sensations in the artist. It is when this force is translated into artwork that art itself becomes a force of worlding. Art then is politics and assumes a force with the potential to effect change.

**KEYWORDS** braiding, documentary comics, sensations, worlding, dissensus

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*Ex-position*, Issue No. 43, June 2020 | National Taiwan University  
DOI: 10.6153/EXP.202006\_(43).0007

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*Ex-position*  
June  
2020

The transformation of Singapore from a colonial fishing village to a cosmopolitan port city has been famously documented in *The Singapore Story*, the first volume of the memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore's founding prime minister. As a memoir, *The Singapore Story* is about the coming-of-age of an exceptional individual as well as the coming-into-being of an exemplary nation-state. The story of Singapore's success is repeatedly told, in different guises and mediums, to celebrate the tough leadership of Lee Kuan Yew and his benevolent pragmatism. Singapore's own tale of its birth, its proud adoption of state capitalism, as well as its unapologetic implementation of illiberal democracy, follows a causal trajectory in which a heroic figure guides a newly established nation-state through a series of crises—both political and economic—to eventual success. It is a tale with two foci folded into one narrative arc: one personal and the other collective, with the personal being allegorical of the national, and the collective being filtered through the lens of the personal. As historians Michael D. Barr and Zlatko Skrbis point out, Lee's "Singapore story," lauded as the "official" history of Singapore's nation-building project, has been elevated by the ruling elites as "a secular nationalist narrative" (20), with its narrative momentum sustained by a dialectical movement between a hard-earned present—political stability and economic prosperity—and the prospect of losing it all. At the heart of the Singapore story is then a teleological progression and development, an upward trajectory towards the realization of the Singaporean Dream. It is a story of the nation and, in making it the official or signature story of Singapore, it has shaped a certain type of individual—pragmatic, rational, and entrepreneurial—fit for the continual emplotment of the Singapore story of economic success and political stability. Pragmatism, along with the logic of calculation it endorses, limns and limits the boundaries of Singapore's worldly imagination as well as the Singapore story, the "biography" it tells of itself.

It is this narrative of the Singapore story that Sonny Liew problematizes in his *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye*, a 2017 Eisner Award-winning graphic novel. As the book is about the "art" of a fictional comics artist, Charlie Chan Hock Chye, it has been read by some reviewers as a metacomic that uses the comics-within-the-comics device both to offer a reflexive look at the history of comics and to celebrate comics as a medium.<sup>1</sup> As the book also includes a series of unfinished comics that the fictional Charlie Chan has drawn about the historical events that shaped Singapore, it has also been read by some reviewers as a graphic novel that

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<sup>1</sup> Leonard Rifas compares Liew's novel with Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* since both use "comics as a means of expression for talking about comics as a subject matter." Tom Murphy, in his review, concludes that Liew's novel should be read as "a hymn to how comics can reflect the world."

allows alternative histories of Singapore to leak through.<sup>2</sup> Drawing upon those insightful readings, this article reads Liew's *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* as a mock documentary comic, which not only uses comics to read history "through the lens of documentary" (2), as Nina Mickwitz so defines documentary comics, but also mocks the conventions of the documentary through the use of the biography of a fictional character to bear witness to significant events of the past. The remediation of documentary in comics emancipates the documentary from its slavish dependence upon given facts while actualizing the potential to engage with issues that go beyond the factual and the experiential, and in Liew's case, to open up historical possibilities that Lee's Singapore story disavows. By using documentary comics as a filtering device to reimagine the Singapore story, Liew's work punctuates the coherence and closure of the Singapore story with the plasticity of comics as a medium, the re-worlding potentials of artistic encounters, while experimenting with alternative ways of reading and writing the Singapore story.

Meanwhile, by borrowing freely from the conventions introduced by comics artists around the world, Liew articulates a worldly sentiment that contrasts with and critically comments on the centripetal and constricting affects that underlie the formation of the rational and pragmatic subject needed for the smooth operation of Singapore's state capitalism. As an assemblage of works both by the "presenter," Sonny Liew, and by his fictional double, Charlie Chan, *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* is simultaneously an artwork about failures—Chan's failure to publish his mostly unfinished comics; the failure of Lim Chin Siong, a union leader and Lee Kuan Yew's one-time archrival, to build a nation-state for the workers; and Singapore's failure to actualize freedom and democracy—and an artwork that uses comics to celebrate Chan's failure as a productive lesson on the risk of overidentification, a risk that renders art a reflection, rather than reorientation, of politics. In Chan's failure is instead spelt Liew's triumph as an artist, as Liew shows how Chan's many experiments with comic styles should be taken as an ongoing and open-ended project of reworlding through the foregrounding of the graphic novel's capacity for capacious braiding.

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<sup>2</sup> Ian Johnson, in his *New York Times* review, praises Liew's novel for presenting "an alternative history of Singapore." In an interview with Alex Dueben, however, Liew says that "I call it more inclusive than alternative because I think it's not about overturning the current narrative, it's about kind of making a richer and more complex version of it."

Ex-position  
June  
2020

## One Mountain Cannot Abide Two Tigers, Can it? Interviews and Gaps

Divided into eight chapters, *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* is bracketed by two endpapers. All four pages of the endpapers are drawn in four-by-five grids of talking heads, and all of them carry the header “一山不容二虎” (“One Mountain Cannot Abide Two Tigers”).<sup>3</sup> Additionally, inserted in between the “One Mountain” endpapers and the first chapter are three short comics, two of which are interviews with Charlie Chan by an off-panel interviewer, presumably Sonny Liew himself. The last of the short comics is a three-page excerpt of the first comic drawn by Chan at a young age.

As a multi-layered novel in which the personal is analogous with the historical and the artist’s career is mapped onto the island nation’s political struggles, the novel’s most prominent feature, however, is the ongoing conversation and collaboration between Liew and his protagonist, Chan. Interviews are also deployed as framing and structuring devices for dialogues between two of his characters, the two “tigers,” whose competition for power shaped Singapore’s destiny in the 1950s and 60s, as well as between well-known comics artists whose innovative styles are reflected in the comics Chan makes throughout his six-decade career. By framing his novel as a series of ongoing interviews and dialogues, Liew allows those who are separated by time, space, or sensibility to enter into imaginary conversations. As the novel moves from one interview to another, whether conducted by Liew or presented as dialogues between characters, the novel becomes overloaded with interviews or dialogues which are themselves loaded with layers of infinite possibilities of convergence and divergence: what has been, what might have been, and what will be, fold and unfold into each other. Together with this creative deployment of interviews as a structuring principle comes a sequence of disjointed vignettes—documents, autobiography, and archives. These are short in length, various in style, and open-ended in content, overlapping with one another while leaving a number of cracks that suggest stories and possibilities not depicted in the novel. The glue that connects all these otherwise open-ended vignettes and excerpts in Chan’s comics is ultimately the constant change in perspectives and orientation that the interview form calls for. In other words, an attempt to reimagine how stories are kneaded together and how untold stories are simmering beneath those that are told emerges through the interviews. All these told and untold stories enter into a web of connectedness, simultaneously together and apart.

Let us look at the three short comics that make up the opening section as

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<sup>3</sup> Henceforth abbreviated as “One Mountain.”

examples. They introduce Charlie Chan and his art, as if Chan were only accessible as an artist when what he utters in his interviews is juxtaposed with and read alongside the comics that he has drawn. Words and images work in tandem and come into a productive tension; together they form a web of words and images which open onto multiple paths and connections. Emerging out of this collage of interviews, archives, and artwork is what Jacques Rancière calls “the conflict of two regimes of sense, two sensory worlds” (*Spectator* 58); that is, according to Rancière, the artist conflates these two regimes in order to create a new community of sense by bringing together the multiple complexity of the current community and the equally multiple complexity of a dissenting community. The audience or readers encounter the conflation of these two regimes and construct their own sensory response which cannot be predicted or forecast in advance. To illustrate: in Liew’s novel, Chan is caught in between the conjunction and disjunction between two ways in which he makes sense of his world. The first sensory world is populated by Chan’s spoken testimony regarding what actually happened in the past (thus supplementing the official history with a layman’s perspective), and the second sensory world is revealed as testimony to the very condition that makes history possible (thus making legible the drive for spiritual emancipation). Chan emerges out of these imagined interviews as a dissenting figure who, though reduced to a cartoonish abstraction, nevertheless impresses the reader as the impossible subject lacking in Singapore’s history. His desire for change and efforts at using comics to make sense of the important events in Singapore’s past not only give the reader another version of Singapore’s history but also draw to the reader’s attention those drives and sensations that allow Lee, Lim, and others to commit themselves to Singapore’s emancipation and nation-building projects. In so doing, Chan exposes those alternative paths that Singapore may have taken. Similarly, even though the sketchiness of these pages, in which Chan talks to an off-panel interviewer, only gives readers a hazy understanding of Chan’s motivation and aspirations, the dialogues still help readers understand how the reading of his comics, far from being a static and passive experience, is a dynamic, immersive, and worlding experience that contests the existing world by pointing to other worlds to come.

In a similar vein, the “One Mountain” comics—the talking heads interview sequence that frames the endpapers—not only set up the physical boundaries and structural framework of the graphic novel but provide the reader with the essential key for understanding the irresolvable rivalry between the two “tigers” featured in the endpapers: Lee Kuan Yew, the much-admired long-term prime minister of

Singapore, and Lim Chin Siong, a charismatic workers' leader who was later imprisoned, exiled, and eventually died in obscurity. The suggestion that in the formative narrative of Singapore there are two leaders competing for power and dominance and two possible trajectories of worlding, one actual and one virtual, that Singapore could have followed in its growth and development, is further explored, expanded, and complicated throughout this graphic novel, as the "talking heads" interview format used in "One Mountain" is reused, in different guises and contexts, throughout the novel.

Three panels in the first "One Mountain" comic, using only highlighted and bold-faced texts, especially stand out. First of all, on a thematic level, the first two text-only panels ask two significant rhetorical questions, "Who are you?" and "Were you right?" These are questions that register the sense of perplexity, time of reflection, and moments of awakening characteristic of the birth-of-the-nation narrative. The last text-only panel, however, includes an emphatic assertion, "No We Must Not," rather than a question, thereby yielding evidence of the strong will of the newly born nation to monitor, channel, and disavow the ambivalence that is at the root of its birth. Secondly, on the level of syntax and semantics, ambiguity is pervasive when floating pronouns such as "you" and "we" are repeatedly used. Furthermore, on a narrative level, as the two "One Mountain" comics in the endpapers respectively sketch, in a condensed manner, the life stories of Lee and Lim, they place Lim's nationalist agenda next to Lee's, thereby exposing the possibility that, at the time of the nation's birth, growth, and development, other possibilities of shaping the nation into being than the one proposed by Lee existed, but were eventually outlawed and forgotten. Finally, on a meta-fictional level, the presence of an invisible hand that places these two "talking heads" pages side by side and the intrusion of an off-panel voice that poses these questions suggest the mediation of Chan's comics as a form of narration and presentation that, while reviving memories suppressed by the assertive will of the "talking heads" demanding "we must not," opens up the possibility of other narratives through which the Singapore story could have been written and may still be written in the future, intimating a subject formation along axes that are neither nationalistic nor patrilineal, but are aesthetic, multi-layered, and worldly.

Accordingly, a closer examination of the three questions/statements ("Who are *you*?" "Were *you* right?" and "No *we* must not") found in the "One Mountain" comics suggests an immanent rupture within the affective movement of each page, as indicated in the shift from the pronoun "you" to the pronoun "we" and the change in tone from the probing perplexity of the first two questions to the authoritarian command of the final assertion. If each one of the "talking heads"

sequences constitutes a trajectory for the narrative—real or speculative—of the nation/self, there is an implicit movement from growing perplexity to excessive certainty, a movement that is taken by Liew to be a reduction of the multiplicity of the self’s being in the world and an exclusion of “alternative or dissenting voices” (232).<sup>4</sup> It is this rupture in the narrative trajectory of the nation/self, as well as the disavowal of detours and cacophonies, that constitutes “the mystery motives” (232) in the emplotment of the story of the nation/self.

What drives *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye*, a graphic novel doubling as a work of metahistory, back to the sites where histories were being written, societies formed, is not the impulse to repeat, in comics, the Singapore story as a fully realized story, but the impetus to capitalize on the medium specificity of the comics—its intermedial use of words and images to activate a staccato movement gesturing towards both linear sequentiality and spatial-temporal disruption—and rearticulate the movement of history, not as a linear, monologic, monocular story of progress and success, but as an ambivalent movement that shuffles uneasily between inclusion and exclusion, pedagogy and performativity, engaging the actual, the virtual, and the speculative. What then emerges out of this doubling or splitting is a perpetual movement that opens up the disjuncture between these two questions (“Who are you?” and “Were you right?”) and the negative imperative (“No we must not”) posed in the “One Mountain” comics of the book’s endpapers. Although the verso page and the recto page of this comic are almost identical, the variation in context—i.e., the different talking heads, their different responses, the uses of darkened figures, and the erasure and disappearance of the talking heads in the three panels towards the end of the Lim section—and the reference of both to each other—all of these call for a more layered account, rather than a linear understanding, of the story of the nation/self. Contradictions emerge out of the first “One Mountain” comic featuring Lee, as the ruthless, aggressive, and peremptory tone of “No we must not” contradicts, if not cancels out, the tone of searching deliberation found in “Who are we?” and “Were you right?” While a sense of unquestioning certainty gradually creeps into and defines the texts found inside the speech balloons of each subsequent panel, this comic is also marked and conveyed by the rigidity of the lines drawn around Lee’s face as he ages. It is this reduction of the possibilities from probing uncertainty to adamant resoluteness—a reduction that is coded here as a radical transformation of affects—that engenders the feeling that, as Philip Holden perceptively points out, “both lives (Lim’s and Lee’s) are imprisoned by the narrative grid” (519), as both are prisoners of their strong

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<sup>4</sup> Henceforth all references to Liew’s novel will be cited in parentheses and included in the text.

will to write the young nation into a script that fits their own political agendas.

However, the repetition on the recto page of the very format that structures the verso page of the endpapers, with Lim replacing Lee as the one who talks, highlights the differences as well as potential sameness between Lee and Lim. As such, there are gaps and tensions between the verso and the recto pages that pair Lee's and Lim's respective responses to the interrogative inquiries posed either by each other or by the off-panel interviewer. From these gaps emerges a supplementary logic of contingency that does not valorize history as it has been written and used as a pedagogical lesson. Instead this logic revives and keeps open the sense of perplexity that haunts history at the moment when it is being written, the kind of perplexity that forms the very basis of the worlds of art and literature and also informs another comic, called "Eraser," in this novel, when the same talking-head interview format is recycled to link politics with art, the making of the nation with the worlding of art.

In "Eraser," the same questions previously posed to Lee and Lim are posed to Sonny Liew's avatar, portrayed here as a spectacled sprite with a head comically out of proportion with his slim body. In this 4x5 grid panel page are also found the three text panels that are featured in the two "One Mountain" comics: "Who are you?" "Were you right?" and "No we must not." In a way, the repetition of this familiar page layout reiterates, across chapters, the foundational logic of the national allegory so that it can be interrupted and disrupted. Quite surprisingly, rather than featuring as its interviewee Charlie Chan, whose art is, after all, the main subject of this graphic novel, the "Eraser" comic presents Sonny Liew, also the presenter of this novel, as the interviewee, as if Liew is in a position to answer the questions about identity (Who are you?) and politics (Were you right?) and can speak on behalf of all the "yous" in Singapore, while voicing their joint discomfort with the disappearance of the "communal kampong spirit" (232). In "Eraser," Liew presents Charlie Chan's politically sensitive comics as an example of how all "dissenting voices" are censored either by the government or by artists who choose never to publish their comics.

Meanwhile, Liew also uses "Eraser" as a metaphor for the nation's tendency to use violence to secure the nation-building project over "all the other things we've had to give up along the way" (232). To do so, Liew symbolically erases all facial features of his avatar to make it appear featureless and defaced. The defacement of Liew's avatar, especially when paired and read together with the disappearance of Lim from the "One Mountain" comic in the endpapers, raises significant questions about what Jenny Edkins has elsewhere called the "face politics," a proposition derived from her engagement with Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guatarri's theory of

“faciality,” which posits that the face is produced socially and is inherently political. To be visually defaced or to be disembodied carries politically ambivalent significance, what Edkins terms the “paradox of the face” (1). Because the face has always been taken as “an emblem of political personhood” (3), it is through the working of “face politics” that citizens acting as categorizable, knowable, and autonomous individuals become visual objects of discipline, control, and administration. An image of a missing person, or an image of a person with all facial features erased, Edkins argues, works empathetically precisely because “that face is able to be both there and not there at the same time” (6), and thus tellingly performs the paradox of the “absence of presence” of contemporary identity politics, or the biopolitics of the face, which gives a person a face, and therefore an identity recognizable by the power regime, only to strip it away or render it faceless should the person become excepted, or excluded from the power regime.

In the “Eraser” comic, the defacement of Liew also resonates with and mirrors the facelessness of the subject of his comic, Charlie Chan, who, even though he has drawn a number of rather politically controversial comics throughout his career, has “never sought to publish these comics” (232), nor has he garnered any recognition. Why? Liew offers several possible explanations to account for this curious fact, including Chan’s awareness of “the futility of challenging the state media,” his “fear of censure and arrest, given the PAP’s notorious antipathy towards political caricatures,” or even “his unwillingness to allow his work to be judged in the public eye” (232). Behind Liew’s featureless face, or Chan’s simultaneous presence in and absence from the contemporary political scene of Singapore, looms a more serious question about the “mystery of motives,” or why Chan continues to draw comics without publishing any of them. Moreover, what does this comic, which mirrors the “One Mountain” comics, intimate about the ethical and political “motives” embraced by politicians on the one hand and by artists on the other? If Lee and Lim are both interested in and devoted to the building of a nation, is it possible that artists, while they are not indifferent to the nation-building project, are more interested in furthering the world-making potentials that are implicit in Lee’s and Lim’s nation-building projects, especially potentials which end up being disavowed, forgotten, and repressed once the nation gains independence? Is this ongoing attempt to open up a world that offers people a different mode of being-in-the-world precisely that which prompts Chan to experiment with newer genres and mediums to register and articulate not the certainty of art, politics, or life, but the complexity, multiplicity, and ambivalence of living, writing, and worlding?

These three comics use the same format, two of which appear as endpapers

and one of which is inserted into chapter seven. These each resonate with one other, not to render invalid Lee's state-sponsored ways of doing and thinking politics, but to add other equally valid, therefore equally flawed, concepts to it. It may seem to some readers that Liew is engaging in a revisionist reading of Singapore's history by speaking for Lim and criticizing the paternalistic politics implemented by Lee through the pairing, folding, and braiding of these three comics. However, Liew makes it clear that, as a comics artist, he is interested not in exploring the disavowal implicit in "No we must not" but in taking a detour through Chan's imaginary trajectory in order to show the similarities and differences between Lee's and Lim's divergent autobiographical designs and worlding projects so as to expose the mystery, perplexity, and ambivalence of the desire to create new and newer forms of living and writing.

### **Braiding, Movement, and Worlding**

It is this perplexity, rather than certainty, of living in the present that Charlie Chan, Sonny Liew's imaginary double, speculates upon, as if by so doing, he may then explore through his comics various possibilities of world-making disavowed by Lim's espousal of communism and Lee's championing of statism. To register this perplexity as well as to develop the multiple layers of meaning for Chan's worlding project, Liew's graphic novel uses the talking-heads interview layout both as a framing device and as a braiding device to build up and complexify the "additional and conspicuous relation between contiguous or distant panels" (Groensteen 43). The braiding is achieved through the linking of the political and the aesthetic in a manner which invites the reader to carry out "a very volatile kind of reading that, by shifting back and forth, will bring to light the greatest possible number of relationships among all the pages, and make them resonate" (Groensteen 81). As series or sets of panels enter into dialogue across the pages and chapters, a mode of reading that operates less on linearity, sequentiality, and causality than on the unfolding of images, panels, and pages is activated. It is when comics activate the dissonance of perspectives through the associative deployment of braiding as an aesthetic device that, in the case of Liew's novel, alternative answers to such founding questions of the nation as "Who are you?" and "Were you right?" are graphically brought to light. The braiding of the "Eraser" comic with the two "One Mountain" comics produces a number of specific effects. First, it unsettles the hierarchies between the authoritative voices of the leaders and the dissenting voices of the people. Second, it heightens the tension between words and images (what is said and what is shown), as well as the contrast between speech and muteness (the

blankness found in the second “One Mountain” comic and the erasure of facial features in “Eraser”), and finally it foregrounds the uncanny correlation between politics and aesthetics (the persecution of Lim and the self-censorship of Chan). The result of this braiding procedure is a democratization of the ways in which the comic’s art brings into visibility voices that we have learned not to hear and faces that we have learned not to see.

Through the braiding of talking heads and the blending of imaginary and virtual voices, Liew’s novel dramatizes the power of the graphic novel to engage and to expand the past, both real and imaginary, by visually staging a dialogue among those who have not had the chance to speak to each other, and working out their divergent perspectives. It is thus this expansive, interactive, democratizing, capacity of comics as documentary that Liew maximizes in *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye*. Accordingly, there are several entries into and exits from the stories of Charlie’s life imaginatively depicted in the novel. In the first of the three short comics inserted in between the two “One Mountain” comics and chapter one, a three-page comic that also deploys the talking-heads format, Chan talks to an off-panel interviewer and discusses several “birthing” events that had launched his career as a comic artist: first, Singapore as a constitutive part of British Malaya (“Did you know that the ‘si’ in ‘Malaysia’ comes from Singapore?” [1]); second, the birthing of manga in Asia as a trans-Asian event (“In the beginning, there was Tezuka”); and finally, Charlie’s own birth in 1938 which, according to him, is a significant year only because it was “the year that *The Beano* first appeared in the UK . . . and *Superman* made his debut in the United States” (2). If this short comic placed before chapter one is about “birthing,” it also makes explicit that before the birth of the nation-state, there are other birthing events that are causes for celebration.

In the second of the three short comics inserted in between the two “One Mountain” comics and chapter one, Charlie tells the off-panel interviewer that Osamu Tezuka’s *New Treasure Island* was a formative influence on his artistic style: “that book really opened my eyes” (7). Then, a four-page excerpt from Charlie’s early comics, *Ah Huat’s Giant Robot*, and *Ah Huat’s Giant Robot: Awakenings* are appended as if to serve as factual evidence to substantiate his claim. These three short comics punctuate the opening of the novel, two of which are documentary comics done in an interview style and feature “talking heads” as a rhetorical trope to link all three comics together, both thematically and formally. Moreover, they literally enact the episodic, associative, nomadic style that marks both Chan’s life and his artwork, for in Charlie’s works, old photographs from his past function as archival evidence to produce the effect of the real and to substantiate Charlie’s own claim that “[Tezuka’s] book really opened my eyes.”

Movement and immersion, in other words, are what Chan finds in Tezuka's cinema-inspired comics, and it is also this effect of movement and this aura of immersion that open up extant potentialities in him. Chan then uses four decomposed panels to graphically explain how he is affected by a series of scenes in which a car is seen going downhill, with action lines drawn around it and a nearby electricity pole swaying as the car speeds by it (7). In the text balloons that accompany these four decomposed panels, Chan explains, "[a]ll I knew was that the comic really seemed to *move*. . . . It felt like . . . you were actually . . . driving in the car!" On the one hand, the visualized images in Tezuka's comic seem to come alive and actually be "moving"; on the other hand, the moving images also move the young Chan, causing him not only to identify with the comic's characters and feel what the character must have felt, but also to go beyond this initial response and sensation. As a young reader, Chan no longer saw the comics' images as static representations capturing, in iconic abstraction, given events and known feelings. Rather, he is transformed from a passive reader into an active participant. In these four embedded panels Chan illustrates how he comes to realize the potential for movement, plasticity, and immersion that the dynamic lines are capable of imparting. A sense of flow is generated when the movement of the speeding car is decomposed into a series of images seen from different angles and then recomposed, thereby animating space and time, producing a sense of the car rushing forward, as if about to break loose of the frame that restrains and contains it. Tezuka's comics emancipated the young Chan. And emancipation is also the affect that Chan wants to register in his own comics.

If, as Chan claims, "[Tezuka's] book really opened my eyes," it suggests that Chan was so affected by reading Tezuka's book that he was "moved" to learn from him, even to model aspects of his style on the techniques he identifies in Tezuka's comics. A viral movement of artistic styles is thus initiated, leading to modifications in Chan's habitual ways of being, thinking, and feeling, while relating him to a world not of his own and to a different mode of being in the world. Comics, especially comics à la Tezuka, become new avenues for harnessing and channeling this "eye-opening" affect of being moved into a positive and affective experience of creative forces. The event of this eye-opening encounter with Tezuka's comics tickles Chan in such a way that he has to give full vent to this creative energy by drawing a comic of his own. Thus, in 1956, Chan writes, or draws, a thirty-four-page comic, aptly named *Ah Huat's Giant Robot: Awakenings*, a juvenile imitation of Tezuka's influential *Tetsuwa Atom*, excerpts of which are inserted throughout the first three chapters of the work, in which Liew traces Chan's early artistic developments.

Excerpts from *Ah Huat's Giant Robot: Awakenings* are inserted not merely as evidence of the influence of Tezuka's comics on a burgeoning young artist, but also to dramatize the problems of translation, transformation, or, better still, artistic movement. In Tezuka's manga, Chan sees something he had never seen before, something so dynamic that it awakens and enables his burgeoning aesthetic sensibility for an art that breaks out of its confinement of stagnant expressions. As an artist, Chan is moved not only by the availability of new technologies and the artistic styles they open up, but also by the changes occurring in the public sphere. The dynamic and plastic intensity that he sees in Tezuka's manga gives expression to the kind of artistic practices that he has always aspired to; that is, to reworld the world by bringing about the transformation of sensibility through experimentation with innovative artistic styles, modes, and techniques that he has learned, throughout his long career, from comics artists around the world. This innovation in turn produces a rupture, or disconnection, between what one has known, seen, and felt in the past and what the work of art allows one to know, see, and feel, a rupture that results in, to use Rancière's language, a "redistribution of the sensible," which is itself the prelude to bringing together "a community of dis-identified persons" (*Spectator* 73), as they are able to, with the help of the connections and disconnections achieved through the redistribution of the sensible, "reframe the relation between bodies, the world where they live and the way in which they are 'equipped' for fitting in" (*Spectator* 11).

The link that Rancière finds between the transformation of sensibility and the upheaval of the political climate resonates with the connection that Pheng Cheah finds between the "emergence of new subjects" (309) and the creative use of the novel form to bring about something new. In *What Is a World?*, Cheah takes issue with how world literature is defined by comparative literature scholars, focusing instead on how worldliness is initiated by the search for freedom immanent in the novelistic form itself which, as he defines it, is the "power of originating something and a meaningful life it leads to" (194). For Cheah, the worldliness of literature is activated neither by its circulation in a global market nor by its social and mimetic functions. Rather, literature is worldly when and only when it "enacts the unending opening of a world as a condition for the emergence of new subjects in spite of capitalist globalization" (309). Given Cheah's conception that the world is "a movement of opening" and "a limitless field of conflicting forces," world literature brings these conflicting forces into play by interweaving and overlaying many stories on top of one another so that the insertion of yet one more story has the power of altering the dynamism of the field in which all these stories are conjoined. So conceived, the world is then "an open-ended web of authorless stories" (152)

which allows neither the protagonists to claim themselves to be the authors of their actions nor the authors to take up a god-like position by dictating actions and shaping the plot. Instead, literature is world-making because the world itself has a “literary structure”: open-ended, with everything in its web of stories constantly entering into mutually affecting relations with each other. The conflicts, gaps, and contradictions in these relations can then be made visible and legible by those inviable traces of a world-to-come, which ensure that the invisible exist in the first place. Whereas literature can register these thematic and formal conflicts of relations in order to open up the world to different possibilities as well as to initiate aesthetic breaks for purposes of reworlding, comics also have the potential to enact worldliness, as the very specificity of comics renders the gaps between words and images, panels and stories, a structural principle of their very constitution.<sup>5</sup> The interactions of words and images leak through the gaps, along with the subject’s loud voice and the object’s mute speech. Moments of freedom, fleeting as they may be, can be perceived, and the movement into a different time is made visible.

As such, the affective intensity brought about by the use of such innovative aesthetic practices as Tezuka’s is political since it brings about a new form of writing one’s self into being, a new mode of identification, and a new medium of worlding the self. This newness is simultaneously open-ended and aporetic since it is not only about the arrival of the new and the fading of the old, but also, and more importantly, about the ambiguous relation between the new and the old. Chan, for example, is so moved by Tezuka’s innovative artwork that, in making up his mind to “become Singapore’s greatest comics artist” (4), he has developed a new sensibility and acquired a new identity. Throughout his artistic career, he is defined not only by the banal activities of the everyday but also by his comics, which register his original and contextualized responses to the everyday. His resolution to bring in the new rather paradoxically motivates him to emulate the artistic styles of artists from around the world, thereby recycling what already exists and reprocessing modes of expression that are simultaneously original and borrowed. Accordingly, he starts to draw comics that stylistically reflect the influence of a range of comic artists—from Osamu Tezuka, Wally Wood, Walt Kelly, Winsor McCay, Carl Banks, etc.—but in content, his comics simultaneously reflect, document, and examine key moments in the history of Singapore from its birth as a nation to the present day. Chan’s comics career—in style and in subject

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<sup>5</sup> Scott McCloud calls these gaps between panels “gutters” and he claims that the task of reading comics entails bringing a closure to those gaps. See chapter 3 of *Understanding Comics*.

matter—both maps out and resonates with the history of Singapore and establishes zones of contact with a global comics world. As a result, it is hard not to read his various comics as national allegories (McClellan) and a graphic manifesto of the “world republic” of comics.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, although only fragments and excerpts of his comics appear in the novel, they are open-ended and contain promises for the reworking of past failures. As such, the failures encountered and the disappointment felt by the protagonists of Chan’s different comics articulate stories that are disavowed by the Singapore story, thereby opening up a world pushed to the periphery of Singapore’s collective consciousness. Chan’s world, a world shaped by his imagination, exists alongside the pragmatic and calculating society that he actually inhabits and, with Chan’s willingness to take risks and experiment with new means of self-expression, it is a world that can truly deliver promises for actualizing the kind of freedom which, as Jacques Derrida has explained, spells the arrival of a “pure event.”<sup>7</sup>

While Chan’s comics exhibit his artistic talent for appropriating other comics artists’ styles and his eagerness to respond to topical events, Liew’s presentation of excerpts of Chan’s mostly unpublished comics follow the same principle of intertextual and intermedial dialogue with which he has structured the rest of this graphic novel. To begin with, Liew inserts extensive footnotes at the bottom of each page of the excerpted comics, both to clearly situate the depicted historical events and to give authorial commentary. In addition to using footnotes to set up a dialogue between Chan’s comics and Liew’s authorial interpretation, Liew also sets up intermedial and intertextual dialogues by using different mediums to retell the same event from different perspectives. In his review of the book, Jon Hogan analyzes Liew’s creative use of pastiche as a formal principle of the novel. The use of pastiche, Hogan asserts, reveals the novel’s thematic concern with connectedness: “In perhaps the most vivid example of Liew’s repetition, a demonstration against compulsory British army service is shown from three different perspectives.” In the first of these, in Chan’s autobiographical comics, a girl that he likes encourages him to join the student protest. Then, the protest is documented in *Ah Huat’s Giant Robot*. Finally, in a comic drawn by Liew the presenter, the elderly Chan, in a dialogue with an out-of-frame interviewer, revisits the site where the

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<sup>6</sup> Pascale Casanova’s *The World Republic of Letters* traces the “internal workings of the world republic of letters” (6) and treats “the world republic of letters” as a field of struggle not only in terms of linkages and influences but also in terms of competition and revision.

<sup>7</sup> Pheng Cheah suggests, in his explication of Jacques Derrida’s understanding of worldliness, that worldliness should be taken as a gift of time, whereas “time’ as the pure event should be understood through the figure of a gift that comes from the entirely other” (166). This means, Cheah further explains, “[A]n event cannot be one if it is anticipated in advance, if we can tell when and from where it is or will be coming” (166).

May 13 incident occurred. Hogan suggests that these “three perspectives may diverge, but their overlap foregrounds the facts necessary to understand how these events impacted Chan.”

This same strategy—the use of multimedial pastiche—is repeatedly used throughout the novel to maximize both the dialogue among divergent perspectives and the clash between different forms of representation: reportorial, autobiographical, and speculative. Midway into the excerpted comic *Invasion!* is inserted *A Beginner's Guide*, which is a reader's guide put together “from an interview transcript dated July 14, 2012” (115). This guide includes images taken from Chan's comics written in 1957, and the annotations given by the elder Chan in a 2012 interview. In his explanatory notes, Chan summarizes the plot—the attempt made by the citizens of Lunar City to achieve independence from an invading alien race, the Hegemons—and explains why he has departed from his initial intention of writing an adventure story and decided instead to pepper his adventure comics with “political scenes in Singapore.” Meanwhile, a so-called “editor's” note” also appears at the bottom of some of the excerpts to give the reader more in-depth understanding of the historical background of Singapore during that time. In between the pastiche of Chan's excerpted comics, the explanations given by Chan, and the additional notes rendered by the “editor,” there is an epistemological fissure that cannot be closed with editorial annotations or authorial commentaries. Instead, a profound sense of undecidability emerges from the repeated use of pastiche to highlight the incongruity of multiple perspectives. On the one hand, in Chan's excerpted comics, there is a sense of optimism implicit in the joint efforts made by the colonized in their fight against the invading Hegemons for freedom, justice, and autonomy; on the other hand, after the Lunar City residents have successfully ousted their alien invaders, there is a profound sense of postcolonial melancholia. In fact, *Invasion!* ends with the arrest of Lim Chin Siong, as if the moment of the birth of the nation is tainted by an ineradicable stain—the state's use of violence to silence and exile political dissidents—that threatens to unsettle its future as a democratic nation-state.

With its independence, Singapore enters a new phase of reimagining its future afresh. While Lee adopts an anti-communist stance, from which he sees the rise of communism in South East Asia as a threat to Singapore's economic prosperity and social stability, Lim takes up a socialist strategy in defending the workers' interests. Rather than intimately collaborating with Lim Chin Siong, whom Lee now labels a communist, Lee not only parts ways with Lim but also purges the burgeoning nation-state of all such potential figures of contamination, thereby “restricting what futures could be imagined,” to cite Jini Kim Watson (174), to the one planned

by Lee himself. Given that Liew's novel is structurally built around the pairs of contrasting characters—Charlie Chan vs. Bertrand Wong and Lee Kuan Yew vs. Lim Chin Siong—their estrangement comments rather tellingly not only on the failure of the idealism embodied by Chan and Lim but also on the inadequacy of interview and dialogue as a means of forging solidarity and intimacy. In this sense, Watson argues that, given Singapore's valorization of the Cold War ideology of dichotomized rivalry and the accompanying rhetoric of containment, each of Chan's comics is inevitably marked by failure, as they fail to find an audience or a market to appreciate Chan's dissenting views. "(E)ach failed comic," however, Watson argues, "demands to be read in two ways: in its own right as revisionist political commentary on the events of the time and as evidence of Chan's inability or refusal to create art that would circulate as a commodity" (180). Accordingly, *Bukit Chapalang*, an allegory about Singapore's failed merger with Malaysia, concludes with the shattering of its animal characters' desire to go to the hinterland to hold concerts (an allegory of the Singaporeans' failure to use Malaysia as their backyard), and *Roachman* ends with the fall of the superhero Roachman, his betrayal by his collaborator, and the shattering of his ambition to "rid this world of its iniquity" (158) at the hands of his one-time friends who now see him as "an incessant thorn" (176) (an allegory of Lim's betrayal by Lee, once his political ally).

All these excerpted comics are accompanied by comments and annotations given by the presenter Liew, thus setting up a choreography of voices between Liew and his fictional double, past and present, and art and politics. In this way, Liew's artwork embodies Rancière's idea of "being together apart" (*Spectator* 51), a concept inspired by his reading of a poem by Mallarmé. Investigating the tension between "being together" and "being apart," Rancière argues that the aesthetic community is able to reconcile the paradoxes of "being together apart" by allowing each individual to form his "apartness" while maintaining a contingent relation with the network of subjectivities of the community. It is the "being together apart" that makes the paradoxes visible and renders the dissensus manifest. The series of political crises experienced by Singapore, through the immanent backdrop of Chan's graphic comics, are so explicitly annotated that a lost history of political conspiracy is rendered legible. As a result of the overlaying of the verbal commentaries given by the presenter and the graphic presentation of allegories, the reading experience becomes a space for a "distributive affect," a concept that Debjani Ganguly develops in her analysis of the "contemporary novel as global form," the subtitle of her book, *This Thing Called the World*, that generates both cognitive understanding of the ever confining vicissitudes of history and affective comprehension of the profound sense of loss and melancholia they give rise to. Out of this

clash between history as it has become and the affect of melancholia that the reduction of history generates arises the question of “what if.” That is, if all the allegorical comics end with a sense of failure and disappointment, and if Chan’s own career as a comics artist also ends in disappointment, the question of what possibilities failures open up to necessarily arises. Would history have taken a different turn if it had been Lim, rather than Lee, who had won the 1963 election, become the first prime minister, and been in the position to author the course of actions taken by Singapore? What differences would this replacement of leadership have made? This is the question that the speculative “Days of August,” a self-published comic Chan writes in 1988, proposes to answer.

“Days of August” begins with pages of panels featuring one TV interview after another. Brief as it is, it is stylistically complex as it not only uses the talking heads of the media world as a visual storytelling device but also transforms comic book panels into television screens. The screen-like panels are layered, as the reporter, the interviewee, and those individuals featured in the interview often appear in the same panels, with some occupying the foreground and the others taking up the background. Two pages into the comic, however, the screen-like panels featuring Lim Chin Siong as the interviewee who is on screen defending his policies and his decision to exile Lee Kuan Yew are interrupted by panels which do not show talking heads and do not look like television screen. On these oblong imageless panels appear words of accusation, as if a mysterious protester is voicing his protest from beyond the frame of the panel and accusing the interviewee of being a “charlatan,” a “thief,” and a “usurper” (276). The reader is then led to see the text-only panels as a different kind of screen that allows a parallel world to intrude into and intersect with the present one. Meanwhile, as Lim is inside the studio defending his actions, the world outside of the studio suffers a drastic change as a fire blazes up and “a man in white”—the specter of Lee Kuan Yew—appears from beyond the actual world to blur the boundary between reality and fantasy. At this point in the comic, Liew’s avatar appears in one vertical strip to explain what has motivated Chan to write this speculative comic (279). In the middle section of “Days of August,” text balloons highlighted in yellow are inserted in between the panels to annotate the complex follow-up story in which the real (the exiled Lee stages a miraculous return to reclaim his leadership) becomes indistinguishable from the fictive (a character whose name is Charlie Chan Hock Chye is working on a speculative comic in which the exiled Lee actually wins the 1963 election and becomes the first prime minister).

The blurring of the boundary between reality and fiction is accompanied by a stylistic shift as the screen-like panels are replaced by panels which look as if

they are floating adrift in space. These panels depict the city besieged by terrorists and undergoing bombing. In addition to showing fragments of another speculative comic embedded within “Days of August” that Chan was then working on, exhaustive notes are appended and scattered across the pages, as if Chan the editor is too impatient to allow the story depicted in the embedded comics to unfold by itself and has to intrude to elaborate upon, to an excessive degree, the political ramifications of the events depicted in the embedded comics and to reveal the authorial intention behind them. Authorial design collapses in the face of the impossibility of shaping the future according to the author’s own will. Instead, at any moment, there are always multiple possibilities to write the future, none of which is flawless. Those possibilities, which always lie dormant in the present, allow a spectral force to “reassert itself, to force history back onto the path it was always supposed to have taken” (283). It is at this point in the embedded comic, when an alternative reality asserts itself, that another stylistic shift occurs: “with the 4x4 panel grid previously used in the book abandoned in favor of looser configurations” (284), and with all the panels previously drawn in color abandoned in favor of stark black and white. With this stylistic change, both “Chan and Lim Chin Siong now find themselves thrown back in time to pre-independence Singapore” (284). Young, poor, and unknown, they walk again on the streets, except that Chan is now burdened by painful foreknowledge of Singapore’s future.

“Days of August” gives the story of the rivalry between Lee and Lim three twists and turns. The comic begins by turning the history of Singapore on its head by making Lim the first Prime Minister and Lee the political outcast. However, given that within this speculative comic is embedded another speculative comic whose author also bears the name Charlie Chan, another twist occurs in this embedded comic, where Lee wins the 1963 election to become the first Prime Minister, making fiction a pale imitation of reality. With this series of twists and turns of the plot, reality and fiction become so blurred that foreground and background become indistinguishable. Any twist is now meaningless because no matter how strenuously one tries to reimagine Singapore’s past and speculate on its future, the alternative Singapore may be “a prosperous Singapore apparently identical to the actual one,” as Watson observes. Given that “Days of August” ends by suggesting that no matter who becomes the Prime Minister of Singapore, the island nation is going to run the same course, Watson thus concludes that “Liew’s graphic tale . . . knowingly plays on the fact that it is almost impossible to imagine the future of Singapore otherwise, even had its political history turned out differently” (181). Indeed, Watson makes a compelling argument that Chan’s intention in writing “Days of August” “is not merely to offer a case of ‘what could have been’

but is also to provide a more radical insight about Cold War decolonization: the very task of imagining, from the present, the postcolonial state as vehicle of emancipative, redemptive futurity is at once absolutely necessary and almost impossible” (181-82).

At the end of “Days of August,” another twist occurs when Chan and Lim find themselves miraculously “thrown back in time to pre-independence Singapore” (284). Miracles may not happen in reality, as Lim has been largely forgotten by history and Chan has never existed in history; but Liew’s comic unleashes the gift of time and reworlds Lim’s lost world by throwing him into another speculative comic and making him, once again, stand at the crossroads of history. Then, when he finds out that it is May 12, 1955, the day of the Lock Lee bus incident, that he has returned to, without any hesitation, Lim decides to join the rally. Surprised by Lim’s decision, Chan asks Lim why he persists in doing the impossible when he already knows that “everything you were, or are working towards . . . it all fails in the end!” Lim responds by saying, “Well. . . *Perhaps*. . . That may be. . . But . . . these things that we’re fighting for . . . the welfare of the workers, our freedom, our dignity. . . Whatever the costs, they’re still worth the while, are they not?” (286-87; emphasis added). Lim’s “perhaps,” which indicates his willing suspension of calculation and his readiness to take actions without anticipating any return, comes very close to Pheng Cheah’s understanding of the worlding potentiality of “perhaps” or “otherwise,” which suggests a willingness to embrace equivocation and contingency. This is, as Cheah elaborates, because contingency comes from the nonhuman and divine gift of time and because “this equivocation constitutes reality” (186). The willingness to allow “perhaps” to determine one’s action thus carries the potentials to usher in a better future. In other words, Watson may be correct in saying that “Liew’s intricate narrative and visual folding signify the graphic novel’s potential in reimagining those *other* futures of decolonization that were discarded in the nation’s race to success and prosperity at the same time that it gestures toward the very difficulty of doing so” (182). What needs to be further stressed is that Chan’s comics can enact this potential of “reimagining those other futures” precisely because they are not only about failure but also about how failure can crack open another world. In a world that only values pragmatism, another world is implied that is oriented towards uncertainty and the use of “perhaps.” As such, Chan’s failed comics exemplify, rather conspicuously, the aporetic relation between the failure of the past as well as the failure’s openness towards the future-to-be.

Indeed, the first half of “Days of August” moves in a self-enclosing circularity when, in the alternative world where Lim assumes leadership of Singapore, he

reproduces the authoritative strategies and pragmatic approaches of the real-life Lee. Loud and clear is the suggestion that if Lim had assumed leadership, he would have become but another Lee and the history of Singapore would not have been different. However, in the second half of the black and white section of the comic, despite his knowledge that nothing but hardships, betrayals, imprisonment, exile, and death in ignominy awaits him, Lim still walks bravely into the rally. As Chan wanders around in the streets of his childhood neighborhood, he sits down to read a comic book at a comic book rental stall by the roadside. He is then taken by “a feeling that I’d forgotten” (290), which is “[t]his simple pleasure of reading comics” (291). It is at this moment when overtaken by this overwhelming urge “of wanting to draw, of wanting to tell stories” (291) that Chan makes up his mind to dedicate himself to a career in the art of comics that promises no return; or to put it differently, he decides to surrender himself to the uselessness and purposelessness of, to use Rancière’s phrase, the “pure sensations” (“Emma” 241) that comics bring to him: “But for now, let me draw all the comics I have yet to draw . . . [t]he life I have yet to have. . . . And of my country, that is yet to be” (292-93).

As Lim and Chan are thrown back into their youth in this speculative comic, they both have to face their own failures. With this unexpected turn of events, they then experience the same sensations that once tickled them, and each decides to devote himself to a career in art and politics. This sensation that seizes them has no bearing on the machinations of politics or the purposefulness of art. It is a sensation, or better still, a flood of sensations, that reworlds the world in multiple ways, none of which is dictated by the pragmatic concern of the everyday or the economic logic of the market. This moment in which Chan is moved by a feeling that he has forgotten brings the narrative back to a key moment in the beginning of the novel when the elder Chan excitedly tells an interviewer about how he had been so moved by the dynamic force of Tezuka’s comics that he decided to draw his own comics. Each one of these moments when Chan is assaulted by an overpowering feeling “of wanting to draw, of wanting to tell stories” is significant, because each moment when art descends into the everyday and becomes reality, however fleeting, it becomes politics and assumes a force with the potential to effect change.

## Conclusion

Sonny Liew’s *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* is a work that uses comics to celebrate comics and to document the history of comics. It is also a work that offers a witty, but harsh, critique of the dominant ideologies of Singapore—individualism, neoliberalism, and pragmatism. While it is possible to read Liew’s

mock documentary comics as an allegory of the nation, a hymn to comics, a satire on pragmatism, this article suggests that, by presenting to the reader one excerpt after another of Chan's unfinished comics about failure—comics that are braided together through the use of such structuring devices as interviews, Liew implicitly practices an aesthetic that focuses on each moment when art emerges as an assemblage of sensations. Each one of Chan's excerpted comics serves to register those moments in his life when he was seized by a flood of sensations and, once the force of such a seizure is translated into artwork, art itself becomes a force of worlding. Art then is politics.

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*\*\*Manuscript received 14 Oct. 2019,  
accepted for publication 24 Apr. 2020*

