INTRODUCTION

“My generation,” Singaporean playwright (and USP alumnus) Joel Tan remarks, “is sick with nostalgia.” That the nation in recent years seems to be in the grips of nostalgia—whether “organically,” or prompted by state-sponsored initiatives like SG50 that encourage us to look back on our past—is probably easy to observe and agree with. But to what extent is such nostalgia a “sickness”?

Tan is not alone in characterizing nostalgia as affliction, or more generally, as negative: numerous cultural and intellectual historians, geographers, literary critics, political thinkers, and sociologists have argued against nostalgia, though just as many have sought to rehabilitate it. Accordingly, we will survey arguments about nostalgia’s complicated relationships with capitalism, consumerism, history, heritage, memory, nation, politics, progress, and sentiment. These more theoretical essays will come from Kevin Blackburn, Alastair Bonnett, Svetlana Boym, Chua Beng Huat, Fred Davis, Paul Grainge, Linda Hutcheon, Fredric Jameson, Michael Kammen, Loh Kah Seng, Pierre Nora, Kimberly Smith, Kenneth Paul Tan, Brenda Yeoh and Lily Kong. Do these critiques and debates apply in the case of Singaporean nostalgia? Or can the instances of nostalgia in Singapore help us rethink the potential and power of nostalgia?

The instances of nostalgia that this module will study are largely drawn from Singapore art, expansively defined: ad campaigns, documentaries, essays, films, graphic novels, poems, TV movies, and short stories. The artists we will examine include Boey Kim Cheng, Boo Junfeng, Eric Khoo, Koh Jee Leong, Theophilus Kwek, Oh Yong Hwee and Koh Yong Teng, Alfian Sa’at, Tan Pin Pin, Royston Tan, Simon Tay, and Kelvin Tong. And while this module pays particular attention to the years around SG50, it more broadly looks at post-1965 Singapore. We will in fact begin by discussing, as part of an attempt to define and historicize nostalgia, an early (but perhaps enduring) instance of Singaporean nostalgia, what sociologist Chua Beng Huat calls “nostalgia for the kampung.” Subsequently, we will analyze: the nostalgia of exiles and émigrés; the political uses of nostalgia in art that responds to Singapore’s new demographic makeup, occasioned by immigration; the national mood during the SG50 celebrations; and the place of nostalgia in heritage conservation and history.

SCHEDULE

Aug 13
Seminar 1.1: Introduction


Aug 16
Seminar 1.2: Histories, Definitions, Conditions (I)
Aug 20
Seminar 2.1: Histories, Definitions, Conditions (II)


Aug 23
Seminar 2.2: Histories, Definitions, Conditions (III)


Aug 27
Seminar 3.1: Histories, Definitions, Conditions (IV)


Aug 30
Seminar 3.2: Singaporean Inflections—The Kampung (I)


Sep 3
Seminar 4.1: Singaporean Inflections—The Kampung (II)


Sep 6
Seminar 4.2: Singaporean Inflections—The Kampung (III)

Sep 10
Seminar 5.1: Exiles and Émigrés (I)


Sep 13
Seminar 5.2: Exiles and Émigrés (II)


Sep 17
Seminar 6.1: Exiles and Émigrés (III)


Sep 20
Seminar 6.2: Politics of/and Nostalgia (I)


Mid-term Break

Oct 1
Seminar 7.1: Politics of/and Nostalgia (II)
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i-Sj7M-7a-Y

Oct 4
Seminar 7.2: Politics of/and Nostalgia (III)


Oct 8
Seminar 8.1: Politics of/and Nostalgia (IV)


Oct 11
Seminar 8.2: Sentiment and Memory (I)


Oct 15
Seminar 9.1: Sentiment and Memory (II)


Oct 18
Seminar 9.2: Sentiment and Memory (II)


Oct 22
Seminar 10.1: Sentiment and Memory (IV)


Oct 25
Seminar 10.2: Heritage, History, Historicity (I)
“Seletar Airbase—Singapore’s Secret Garden.” Youtube videos. Directed by Li Xiuqi. 25 Jun 2009, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ZZoWm7Hk3Q&t=9s (Part 1) and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rs4Sm9X2w4o (Part 2).


Oct 29
Seminar 11.1: Heritage, History, Historicity (II)


Nov 1
Seminar 11.2: Heritage, History, Historicity (III)


Nov 5
Seminar 12.1: Heritage, History, Historicity (IV)


Republic of Food. Webseries. Directed by Kelvin Tong, 3 Mar 2019, https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLTUuk75GWHXYaEDB0YGFGfoBZ0MiB6PX


Nov 8
Seminar 12.2: Heritage, History, Historicity (V)


Nov 12
Seminar 13.1: Conclusions (I)

Nov 15
Seminar 13.2: Conclusions (II)
RESOURCES

Information Technology

The module is listed on the USP website (at http://www.usp.nus.edu.sg/curriculum/usp-modules/singapore-studies-singaporean-nostalgia/), though this will be largely a static page. It also has a presence on Luminus, though the main tool that we will utilize is its workbin (see below). The primary and most active IT tool we will use is a class blog, at http://blog.nus.edu.sg/2019uhb2212, so you will have to register as a user of blog.nus. Not only will I post instructional materials and updates on the blog, but a couple of your assignments, as explained in the “Requirements” section below, will have to be completed on that platform.

Readings and Other Materials

We are reading *The Garden of Foolish Indulgences* in full. You should preferably purchase your own copy from the NUS Coop, although the USP Reading Room and NUS Library also has copies.

Several films and videos we are discussing can be streamed online (e.g., “Seletar Airbase—Singapore’s Secret Garden,” *The Provision Shop, Republic of Food*). Three are however only available as DVDs:

- *To Singapore, with Love*: one DVD copy available in USP Reading Room
- “Koridor”: two subtitled DVD copies available in USP Reading Room. The NUS Central Library also has a copy, but that has no English subtitles.
- *7 Letters*: one DVD copy available in the USP Reading Room, and two in the NUS Central Library

All other readings are available as pdf files from our Luminus workbin. I’ve provided pdfs even for essays that were published, and are accessible, online (e.g., Shouse, Hutcheon) because these pdfs will be easier to refer to during our class discussions. The one exception is the news article by Hicks (Seminar 12.1)—that you should read online, since it includes embedded videos that you’ll need to also watch.

REQUIREMENTS

There is no final exam for the module, which is 100% CA. The CA is in turn based on five components, as follows:

1. Attendance, Engagement with Readings, and Seminar Participation (10%)

Attendance of seminars is mandatory. You are allowed one unexcused absence; anything beyond that will negatively affect your grade. If you need to be excused from a class for good reason—family emergencies, documented illnesses—let me know, in advance if possible. When you miss a meeting, you are still responsible for doing the readings for the day (especially since the readings tend to refer to and build on each other), and for completing any work assigned during the class.

The assigned readings and viewings are a key part of the module: we will learn a lot of information from them, but also from questioning and pondering them. The requirement is therefore that you carefully read and think about the assigned readings before each class. The onus is then on you to thoughtfully demonstrate, during our seminars, that you have indeed done so. This is usually done by participating in the seminar discussions—by answering or posing basic questions about the readings, analyzing and interpreting them, and so on. Even when you find a reading difficult, you can still think and speak about how it is difficult, where in the text the difficulty arises, why this difficulty might be significant, and so on.

2. Introductory and Orienting Comments (10%)

Over the course of the semester, we will be engaging with several works of Singapore art, including:
• Alfian Sa’at’s story, “Corridor,” and Abdul Nizam Khan’s TV adaptation
• Tan Pin Pin’s documentary To Singapore, with Love
• Boey Kim Cheng’s poems
• Theophilus Kwek’s poems
• Koh Jee Leong’s poems
• Royston Tan’s telemovie The Provision Shop
• Oh Yong Hwee & Koh Hong Teng’s graphic novel The Garden of Foolish Indulgences
• the SG50 anthology film 7 Letters
• essays by Simon Tay
• Kelvin Tong’s webseries Republic of Food

During each of the seminars that feature these works, one or more of you will provide some introductory and orienting comments about the artists and/or the text. The substance of these comments will be lightly planned with me beforehand. But in general, the comments will not have to be analytical, just background about either the artist (e.g., his or her biography or oeuvre), or the work (e.g., relevant histories and contexts, or reception of the artwork). Your comments should be brief (no more than 5 minutes), and chiefly oral (as opposed to, say, a powerpoint presentation).

3. Blog Entries: Making Connections and Article Review (20%)

You are expected to contribute to the class blog at https://blog.nus.edu.sg/uhb22122017 in two ways.

Blog entry #1 (no specified length; throughout the semester): Nostalgia is not simply an academic subject, but often part of everyday discourse. Over the course of the semester, you should post to our class blog interesting examples of, or discussions about, nostalgia that you come across in the non-academic sphere. These do not have to be restricted to the context of Singapore. Your contributions should be several, and span this spectrum: in some cases, you can simply provide a link to a newspaper article on nostalgia that you’ve come across, without too much commentary. In at least one instance, however, you should provide a more extensive response. You should also capitalize on the medium of blogging, and comment on and respond to your classmates’ posts. One aim of this assignment is to help you make connections between our classroom discussions and the world “outside” of it, and it is also a way of building up a resource bank for the module.

Blog entry #2 (300-500 words; by Week 11): Your second blogging assignment requires you to review an academic article or book about nostalgia that we are not reading in the module. Many of the assigned readings are broader considerations of nostalgia; in contrast, you should select for this assignment an article or book that utilizes a case study. Your specific task is to reflect on how the article/book moves between its case study and broader conclusions about nostalgia. One objective of this review is to get you thinking about how academic arguments move between the specific and the general—and thus prepare you for your own final paper, when you will likewise have to do so.

Since these are blog entries, they are not expected to be highly rigorous, though they should still be reasoned. Furthermore, since you’ll be able to read each other’s entries, you can and should also respond to and converse with your classmates.

4. Paper 1 (25%)

3-4 pages (or self-defined length for creative projects); due Week 4/5: your first paper requires you to demonstrate your understanding of the formal qualities of nostalgia. You will have two options for how to do so. One will be to analyze an existing text that is (commonly recognized as) nostalgic, in which case your task is to explicate how that text evokes—or comments on, or undercuts, etc.—nostalgia. A second option is creative: here, you would actually author your own nostalgic text. This text can be in any medium: hence, you can write a short essay or story or poem that is nostalgic, or you could submit a video, photograph, painting, etc.

5. Paper 2 (35%)
10-12 pages; due Reading Week: your final paper should be an argumentative essay. In it, you should pose an interesting question about some form or aspect of Singaporean nostalgia, and then—through research and the analysis of textual evidence—make an original and intriguing argument about that work, and about how your analysis might advance our understanding of nostalgia.