

## **“Browsing Madness” and Global Sponsors of Literacy: The Politics and Discourse of Deterritorialized Reading Practices and Space in Singapore**

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### **Abstract**

Drawing on empirical data collected from interviews, focus groups, surveys, and participant observation, this article explores the intersections between cultural globalization, transnational booksellers and print cultures in Singapore, placing the changing nature of textual practices and reading audiences within the “micropolitics of local/global interactions.” In doing this, the article considers how and why various sponsors of literacy in Singapore (local, global, corporate, and individual) attempted to propagate their ideologies of reading through affirmation and censure. More specifically, it is a case study of the well-known browsing controversy at Borders Bookstore Singapore, which was debated in *The Straits Times*, online, and elsewhere for almost a decade. In these forums, Borders employees, newspaper editors and “good patrons” censured “rough book browsers” for dog-earring magazines, clogging book aisles and failing to return magazines where they belong. In this way, practices and discourses surrounding the browsing debacle at Borders became “boundary drawing” activities that divided “good patrons”/“civilized behavior,” and “a cosmopolitan mindset” from “bad patrons”/“uncivilized behavior” and “a provincial mindset.” By engaging in this “discourse of difference,” these social actors began to construct a cosmopolitan identity through negation that positioned them as sponsors of literacy. As with other cultural conflicts, the Borders browsing controversy became a site for the reworking of class and ethnic stereotypes, revealing how everyday media practices such as book browsing are tied to larger socio-economic structures and meta-narratives (e.g., survival = globalization).

**Keywords:** Audience studies; Class, Consumption, Cosmopolitanism; Cultural globalization; Intercultural communication; Islandness anxiety; Qualitative methods; Racism; Reading.

## **Introduction, Key Questions & Findings**

During the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, Borders Group and other transnational mega-bookstores such as the Japanese-based Kinokuniya began expanding their operations overseas. Significantly, these booksellers were doing more than just selling books and CDs. They were re-engineering local print cultures and teaching people new ways to conceptualize, consume and interact with the printed word (Trager-Bohley, 2010). In Singapore and elsewhere, these transnational book retailers emerged as global sponsors of literacy.

Diane Brandt (1998) developed the concept ‘sponsors of literacy’ to refer to a wide variety of agents that “enable, support, teach and model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress or withhold literacy – and gain advantage by it in some way” (p. 166). I have found Brandt’s work on sponsors of literacy extremely useful in considering how individual textual practices (e.g., reading, publishing, and writing) are tied to larger socio-economic structures (e.g., consumer capitalism). It has pushed me to think more deeply about the ways in which particular textual practices emerge, develop, and modify following the “transformations going on within sponsoring institutions as those institutions fight for economic and ideological position” (p. 177).

Does it matter that transnational corporations such as Borders Group and Amazon.com emerged during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century as major sponsors of literacy in the United States and abroad? Does it matter that their political economies are tied more directly to the structures of global commerce than traditional sponsors of literacy such as public libraries and schools? Yes, it does. Transformations in literacy sponsorship are significant because different sponsors of literacy operate in differential economies, face different ideological pressures, and are driven by different goals (Brandt, 1998). These differences and others greatly affect “private textual activities as well as public finished texts” (Brandt, 1998, p. 183). Given this, Brandt (1998) pleads with scholars to think about “who or what underwrites” occasions of reading (p. 166). This article does just that.

More specifically, it considers some of the ideological pressures and goals that prompted both global and local sponsors of literacy in Singapore (e.g., Borders Group, *Straits Times* editors and soc.culture.singapore posters) during the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21 century to promote their practices of reading through affirmation and censure. In turn, it explores how various members of Singapore’s print culture understood and responded to these intersecting and sometimes competing practices and ideologies.

This area of inquiry is of particular interest to scholars of cultural globalization and print cultures.<sup>1</sup> Thus far, though, Brandt’s (2001) work on sponsors of literacy has focused on local, regional and national sponsors of literacy in the United States of America. She has not examined the ways in which sponsors of literacy, such as Borders Group, may be agents of contemporary cultural globalization. Certainly, my extension of her concept raises some

issues of currency in transnational analyses of reading practices and reading communities (see *Participations*, 5(2)) that resonate with and drive other international media audience studies (see *Participations*, 3 (2)). For example, what particular opportunities, tensions and discourses does the deterritorialization of a corporate media model and its accompanying practices engender? How do local audiences and sponsors of literacy conceptualize and react to this deterritorialization? And, finally, in what ways, are the local practices and discourses surrounding deterritorialized media practices informed by larger socio-economic structures and national meta-narratives?

These three questions structure my research and are pursued in the concrete context of a case study, the well-known book browsing controversy at Borders Bookstore Singapore, which illustrates the way in which apparently mundane media practices and discourses are politically and culturally charged.

This article aims to capture the way in which the everyday politics of space and place sometimes reveal larger social tensions that exist among different actors inhabiting different positions on the global-local fault lines. My overall findings support other cultural globalization studies that have shown that though contemporary modes of deterritorialization may quickly erase spatial boundaries, allowing Singaporean consumers to participate in a transnational activity that connects cappuccino-sipping, magazine flipping, cosmopolitans across the globe, they do not erase long-standing cultural tensions (Georgiou, 2006; Parameswaran, 1999; Skalli, 2006).

The Borders browsing debacle reveals the way in which essentialist stereotypes against low-income Singaporeans (heartlanders) and Singaporean Malays were reworked and reasserted through the politics of space and place and the discourse of difference. Through these particular cultural practices and discourse formations, “others” were constructed and then criticized for violating cosmopolitan lifestyles and practices. I argue that explicit and implicit discourses about class and ethnicity in Singapore bubbled up around everyday activities such as book browsing because the People’s Action Party (PAP) and its supporting institutions (e.g., *The Straits Times*) stifle frank discussions of these topics.

This study contributes to audience research by examining the ways in which readers and sponsors of literacy delineate and discipline one another based, in part, on their own ideologies, biases and aspirations. In so doing, it considers the cultural histories, constraints and external conditions that unite and divide local and transnational reading communities.

This study aims to further extend the field of audience research by examining contemporary reading communities outside of Europe and America. While there is an emerging body of English-language scholarship on late-20<sup>th</sup> and early-21<sup>st</sup> century bookstore and print cultures (Miller, 2006; Mitchell, 2006 Striphos, 2009; Trager, 2005; 2010), few of these

works look at bookstores beyond the U.S. borders. Consequently, scholars interested in non-Western print cultures and international audiences are left with a deeply Americo-centric understanding of the current global retail book business. In response to this intellectual lacuna, this study chose to place contemporary print cultures more squarely within the transnational, intra-Asia cultural studies fold.

### **The Borders Singapore Book-browsing Controversy**

When Borders Bookstore opened its doors in Singapore on November 1, 1997, during the maelstrom of the Asian financial crisis, many local booksellers still encased their print merchandise in shrink-wrap. But Borders laid all of its books and magazines naked on the shelf and ushered in an age of unbridled browsing in this equatorial island. On its website in 2005, this transnational bookseller boasted: “We took the wrappers off and uncovered a new world of exploration for shoppers there.” In general, Singaporean print professionals and consumers affirmed this claim.<sup>2</sup>

With its initial stock of more than 120,000 book and 2,000 magazines, Borders’ “social, sensual” model of reading and bookselling was unequivocally viewed as the format innovator among consumers and print professionals in Singapore (Trager Bohley, 2010; Trager 2005). One integral aspect of Borders’ model of bookselling was browsing. This reading practice encouraged an intense, experiential (“hands on”) shopping experience for consumers (Trager, 2005). And Borders’ executives, calculated that it would translate into increased consumption in its domestic and overseas stores. In general, Borders’ social, sensual– browsing-friendly– model of reading was well received by many Singaporean and expatriate readers (Trager-Bohley, 2010). Reportedly, in its first year, Borders “sold just over 600,000 books, and sales exceeded substantially the target of \$25 million” (Wong, 2002).

A number of Singaporean consumers, however, handled Borders’ printed material in a fashion different from what this self-avowed “leading global book seller” expected or desired. One representative of an international publishing house in Singapore told me in an interview “I don’t think they [Borders] understood the psyche of Singaporean consumers; they didn’t understand their conception of browsing at all.” Aghast, the management team of Borders Singapore fought to reclaim its space through multiple disciplinary measures. In doing so, this store, at times, had to implement policies and practices that deviated from its standard operating procedures in the United States.

The book-browsing controversy at Borders Singapore was debated in the media, on-line and in public for almost a decade. In these forums, Borders employees, newspaper editors and “good patrons” censured “rough book browsers” for dog-earring magazines, clogging book aisles and failing to return magazines where they belong. In this way, practices and discourses surrounding the browsing debacle at Borders became “boundary drawing”

activities that divided “good patrons”/“civilized behavior,” and “a cosmopolitan mindset” from “bad patrons”/“uncivilized behavior” and “a provincial mindset” (Bauman, 1992, p. 677). By engaging in this “discourse of difference,” as Wodak (1997) calls it, these social actors began to construct a cosmopolitan identity through negation and positioned themselves as sponsors of literacy and arbiters of proper book etiquette in Singapore.

As with other cultural conflicts (Mallinson & Brewster, 2005), the Borders browsing controversy and its accompanying “discourse of difference” became a “fertile ground for the reworking and reassertion of essentialist stereotypes” (Simmons & Lecouteur, 2008, p. 668), including class and ethnic stereotypes. The various discourses of difference surrounding the browsing conflict at Borders reveal a host of cultural anxieties in Singapore and are suggestive of a broader set of discourses flowing in the second smallest country in Asia, including what I call islandness anxiety, which refers to the cluster of fears and concerns Singaporean cosmopolitans have about living in a small, multi-ethnic (Chinese, Malays, Indians and others) postcolonial island that has yet to receive first-tier global city status, despite its astounding economic success.

Their islandness anxiety is fueled, in part, by the government’s (The People’s Action Party) “survival=globalization” narration, which stresses the necessity of cosmopolitanism. Significantly, this meta-narrative set the parameters of the “Borders debate” that played out in *The Straits Times*, Singapore’s partially government-owned, English-language newspaper.

This article is organized in five parts. Section one sketches the details of my data collection and ethnographic approach. It also presents the major theoretical assumptions that ground this study and discusses previous work from print studies (or the history of the book) that inform and historically contextualize my research on global sponsors of literacy. The second part of this article explores the ways in which Singaporean cosmopolitans construct their fragile identities through negation and socio-spatial distinction. It pays special attention to the larger socio-economic structures and meta-narratives (e.g., survival = globalization) that help inform this group’s aspirations and anxieties. The third part of this paper returns to the Borders in Singapore controversy. More specifically, it explores the “the politics of space and place” that ensued when some customers attempted to define and use Borders’ space in a manner that conflicted with Borders’ corporate goals (Morley, 1992). Within these sites of contestation, various discourses concerning the confrontation bubbled up.

The fourth and main part of this paper examines the discourses of difference that swirled around the Borders controversy. It analyzes three particular strands of this discursive formation. The first strand considers the integral role that *The Straits Times* editors played in casting the main characters of the Borders debacle, including the 2002 “No sitting on the floor” debate. In general, rural, economically disadvantaged Singaporeans often called “heartlanders” were used as scapegoats and positioned as the badly behaving “others,”

while editors and their like-minded cosmopolitan readers constituted the “us” or “we,” a group of gracious, urbane citizens. Given the demographics of Borders’ customers and the *Straits Times* readers, though, I argue the editors were not just scolding heartlanders but censoring middle- and upper- class Singaporeans who displayed unrefined, heartland behavior.

In newspapers, online and in my individual and group interviews, many cosmopolitans who defended Borders echoed *The Straits Times*’ pro-globalization, pro-transnational corporation argument. Similar to *The Straits Times*’ editors, they used “othering” language and behavior when criticizing browsing offenders. The second discursive strand considers the islandedness anxiety and ideological motivations that direct their talk and behavior. Name-calling was one distancing and censoring technique that marked their discourse of difference.

Several of my informants as well as multiple web posters on soc.culture.singapore blamed the browsing problems at Borders on the “kiasu” (Hokkien word that literally means ‘fear of losing’) customers. The third discursive strand focuses on the attacks raised against the kisu/kiasi book browsing offenders. Though some Singaporean Chinese banter the word kiasu around in a playful manner to poke fun at one another, it can be an ethicized, charged word when used by non-Chinese Singaporeans in a disparaging manner. While my interview and group interview informants were somewhat guarded in discussing a link between ethnicity, kiasuism and bad browsing, this relationship quickly became emotionally charged and fueled by racism on soc.culture.singapore. Soc.culture.singapore, in contrast to *The Straits Times*, was one forum in which ‘out of bounds’ discussions concerning the relationship between ethnicity and the cultural act of reading emerged.

I conclude this paper by revisiting some key arguments raised in the body of the article.

### **1. Data Collection, Theoretical Assumptions & Historical Contextualization**

The specific methods used in this case study are interviews, group interviews and participant observation. During my year in Singapore (2005-2006), a former British colony that is now an island nation state in Southeast Asia with a population of more than four million, I conducted open-ended interviews with more than 80 individuals associated with Singapore’s print culture, including publishers, writers, librarians, booksellers, everyday readers, and government officials. Though I interviewed print professionals and consumers associated with Singapore’s Chinese, Malay and Tamil book sectors, this article focuses primarily on those affiliated with the country’s English print culture.

For this project, I recruited two types of interviewees: representative interviewees and targeted interviewees. The first group is composed of individuals who are representatives of or belong to a particular print subculture (e.g., Borders Bookstore customers) examined in

article. The latter group is composed of individuals who possess special knowledge on a particular aspect related to the study. The former Chairman of the National Book Development Council, R. Ramachandran, for example, is an example of a targeted interviewee because he is viewed by Southeast Asians in the book industry as an expert on reading and literacy in Singapore. The average length of the interview varied substantially based on the interviewee's affiliation group. For instance, my interviews with Singaporean publishers tended to be much longer (average length: one hour) than my interviews with readers (average length: 45 minutes).

In addition to one-on-one interviews, I interviewed more than 20 individuals in group-sessions. I conducted group interviews with 1) Malay librarians, 2) Wardah book buyers, 3) Readasia Book Club members, 4) Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) students, and 5) waitresses/waiters who worked at the Cellar Door. Each group contained four to six participants. The average length of the group interview was one hour.

Following in the spirit of textual cultural studies, an interdisciplinary field informed by print studies, literary criticism and discourse analysis, the present case study explores the way in which discourses surrounding the Borders book-browsing controversy can be linked to others sites and meta-discourses in the circuit of culture that go beyond the local situation (Benwell, 2005, p.147). By tracking various permutations of the Borders browsing discourse, which played out in multiple sites (in print, online and interviews) among a variety of agents (Borders employees, publishers, customers and editors) for almost a decade, intertextual movements and disjunctures are discovered that provide insight into the interpenetration of culture and textual practices such as reading and bookselling.

One important assumption that underlies this article is that textual activities such as writing and reading are "as much about ideologies, identities and values as ... skills" (Luke, 1994, p. 9). Certainly, this notion anchors most projects associated with print studies, which demonstrates the way in which variables such as class, gender and ethnicity intersect with textual practices and discourses about them. My conceptualization of Singapore's print cultures as a contested terrain on which various actors compete to propagate their preferred values is in line with the findings of several leading scholars of contemporary bookselling (Miller, 2006; Mitchell, 2006 Striphas, 2009; Wright, 2005) who have also shown how people legitimate their cultural taste, express their distinction and classify others through book acquisition and reading habits (Bird, 1992; Enstad, 1999; Gere, 1997; Long, 1986, Reed; 2002; Sicherman, 1993).

Historically, sponsors of literacy have frequently censured marginalized groups for reading in a manner that deviates from their expectations and goals (Denning, 1987; Long, 1986; McHenry, 2002; Nord, 1995). During the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Western traditional sponsors of literacy taught the masses in their home country (Soltow & Stevens, 1981) and abroad

(Mackenzie, 1993; Mofokeng, 1987) that reading was a serious activity and tamed unruly readers by imposing discipline on the body. For purposes of social control, public libraries in post-bellum America, for example, enacted strict silence policies and distributed how-and-what-to-read guides to their patrons. Though there were certainly readers, social organizations and commercial force that challenged the serious, silent, disciplined model of reading (Kelley, 1996; McHenry, 2002; Sicherman, 1993), it was transported to the twentieth century and gained institutional and cultural legitimacy over other conceptions of reading in most Western countries and their colonies, including Singapore, which was a British colony until 1959 when it obtained limited self- government.

Until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, most independent bookstores in the West propagated the serious, solitary and discipline model of reading. Wright contends (2005) that traditionally, these institutions have been “a space where the semiotic context is driven by notions of respectability, based upon a conception of the correct performance of emotionality” (p. 297). In such a context, proper reading was associated with aesthetic pleasures not sensory pleasures. Readers motivated by the later were rebuked by bookshop clerks and proper book buyers.

In the 1990s, American mega-bookstores such as Borders and Barnes & Noble began to promote a conception of “good reading” and “good bookselling” that distanced itself from the didactic functions of independent bookstores and other traditional sponsors of literacy (Miller, 2006; Mitchell, 2006; Trager 2005; Wright, 2005). Similar to the eighteenth century cafes in Western Europe (Habermas, 1989, Haine, 1996), mega-bookstores invited noses, ears and taste buds to participate in the reading experience. Moreover, they encouraged patrons to use their store space as a place to meet and talk with others. In an effort to increase sales and attract consumers, Borders Group, in particular, ushered in a social, sensual model of reading that promoted book browsing as a fun leisure activity, as detailed in my ethnographic case study of a Borders bookstore in the Midwest (Trager, 2005). Borders’ conception of reading was attractive to Singaporean cosmopolitans who viewed it as compatible with their aspirational lifestyles.

## **2. Cosmopolitanism, Socio-spatial Distinction & Leisure Reading**

At 3 p.m. on a Sunday afternoon, three Chinese Singaporean women who are between 19 and 21 years old walk into the outdoor seating area of Starbucks on Orchard Road, the posh shopping district in Singapore. They are all clad in designer jeans that are rolled up in big cuffs and anchored by open-toe high heels. In their left hands, they are holding blue, plastic shopping bags from Borders Bookstore on Wheelock Place off Orchard Road. Two of the women enter Starbucks, while the other woman sits down at a table, pulls out her new book, *Sex & The City*, and begins to smoke. I soon strike up a conversation with her and learn that she goes by the name Coco and attends the National University of Singapore.

Coco has just spent an hour browsing at Borders Bookstore, which is one of her favorite places to “just hang out lah.”<sup>3</sup> Going to Borders is a weekend ritual for Coco. “This time, I bought a [book] but sometimes I just look at magazines,” Coco explains. As she points to her new paperback book with a mischievous smile, she adds, “I really wanted it [*Sex & The City*].” The show *Sex and the City* had been banned in Singapore until 2004. Coco’s Sunday ritual, sponsored by two American transnational corporations, differs from the leisure practices of Hsien Min, a dialect-speaking heartlander “uncle,” whom I observed and spoke with three days earlier. Hsien Min reads *Lian He Zao Bao*, the largest Singapore-based Chinese newspaper, at the same *kopotiam* (local coffee shop) in Toa Payoh every day, amid the competing smells of roti prata, chai tow kueh, and nasi lemak. As he sips his 60-cent *kopi-o* (black coffee), a choir of Singlish – “*Ai-yo*,” “*Si Meh*,” “*Ya loh*” – can be heard in the background.

Though some Singaporean heartlanders still drink their coffee out of plastic bags and read their newspapers in neighborhood *kopotiams*, their cosmopolitan counterparts, people like Coco, often prefer the “infotainment” and “lifestyle” approach to retailing associated with American transnational corporations such as Starbucks and Borders Bookstore, which celebrate individual taste while de-emphasizing any one specific ethnicity, race or religion. Borders stands in contrast to the dozens of Chinese bookstores located in Singapore’s Bras Basah Complex, which are full of printed material, décor, and music that reinforce these retailers’ “Chineseness.” Borders also stands in contrast to, say, Haji Hashim Bookshop in the Kampong Glam. All of the Singaporean Malay librarians in one of my group interviews insisted that Haji Hashim was rooted to their childhood and an affirmation of their Singaporean Malay Muslim identity. To the disgruntlement of booksellers in the Kampong Glam area and at Bras Basha area, Singaporean youth and cosmopolitan consumers tend to view these outlets as outdated and flock to the “modern, big stores,” as Yeng Pway Ngon, owner of Grassroots Book Room, explained in our interview (translated by Enoch Ng Kwang Cheng): “Border has not affected us [Chinese booksellers] but Kino[kuniya] has because Chinese students go there now. . . It is more attractive to them.”

In the words of Singapore’s former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, cosmopolitans are more international in their outlook than their heartlander counterparts who have a Singaporean orientation and local interests (Goh, 1999). In actuality, these labels are really code words for “upper/middle class” and “lower class,” respectively. They are devised to downplay the growing class stratification in Singapore. Cosmopolitans (or cosmos) earn good incomes in jobs such as banking, engineering and information technology. They are well educated bilinguals who feel comfortable speaking English at work and in play. Heartlanders, on the other hand, have had limited education and hold local jobs as taxi-drivers, hawkers and provision shop owners. Many speak only broken English and converse mainly in Mandarin, Hokkien or another dialect.

While the PAP expounds the value of heartlanders and cosmopolitans, it links Singapore's progress with cosmopolitans. In regards to this, Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew said, "Without trying to make as many of our sons and daughters cosmopolitans, we will not progress nor can we take our place in this knowledge-based economy; and all the heartlanders will suffer, if we don't have those who make the higher heights" (qtd in "Singapore 21;" 1999). In general, then, the PAP promotes Singapore as a cosmopolitan city (not a heartlander city), and its meritocratic system reward cosmopolitans more than heartlanders (Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong: <http://www.mita.gov.sg/>; MITA, 2000, p.10;)

Singaporean sociologist Kwok Kian Woon and others have asserted that the divide between the so-called cosmopolitans and heartlanders may be overdrawn because it doesn't take into account that a large numbers of individuals lumped into the former category grew up in the Housing Board heartlands, speak to their grannies in Hokkien, know their Singlish and eat satay at hawker centers (Chua, 1999). These individuals have the resources and skills to weave in and out of a cosmopolitan identity based on their needs and desires. While there are many different conceptualizations of cosmopolitanism ("openness to the world"), this paper stresses its contextual, relational and performative dimensions. It explores the tenuousness of a cosmopolitan identity that is expressed in "relation to something or someone else" (Madianou, 2005: p. 24). For the PAP, that "something" or "someone else" is often the West, Singaporean academics and citizens have charged.

In Singapore, as in other post-colonial Asian societies, cosmopolitans "experience their identity ... as fragile and in need of constant reinforcement" (Saavala, 2006, p. 394). As mentioned, many of these upwardly mobile individuals grew up in the heartlands without much money, status and social capital. They are anxious about their economically less advantaged roots, the political stability of Southeast Asia, and the positioning of Singapore in the global mainstream. Similar to Saavala's fieldwork findings of middle-class Hyderabadis (2006, p. 394), my informants frequently built up their identities through the negation of something or someone else.

They also supported their acquired social positions through consumption and lifestyle practices. For some middle- and upper-class Singaporeans frequenting transnational mega-bookstores constituted a strategy of socio-spatial distinction in which they aligned themselves with "the global" and distanced themselves (perhaps only momentarily) from their ethnic moorings, which the PAP reinforces by tracking students and others into particular paths based on their ethnicity. One could argue that the heavy American accent of Borders nationalizes its store space, but for many Singaporeans, American popular culture is viewed as international or global culture (Chua, 2005).

Their enthusiasm for these transnational booksellers is in harmony with the pro-globalization, pro-multinational corporation stance of the PAP and its supporting

institutions, including *The Straits Times*. While the PAP has frequently critiqued Western materialism and popular culture (Chua, 1999; Chew & Kramer-Dahl, 1999; Chong, 2003), it has also consistently generated and privileged written, oral, and visual texts that promote the free-market economy, globalization, entrepreneurship, transnational corporations, and neoliberalism (Wee, 2001). This assembly of pro-global capitalism discourses support and constitute the grand survival=globalization discourse that the PAP has strategically used when framing Singapore's success story and in mobilizing support.

When Singapore was "ousted" (separated constitutionally) from the Federation of Malaysia in August 1965, the future of this tropical island looked bleak. Forced to exist on the periphery of the Malay Peninsula alone, Singapore lacked physical resources and a non-colonial history to unite its multicultural population fragmented by ethnicity, religion, and language. In *Singapore's Foreign Policy: Coping with Vulnerability*, Michael Leifer (1999) states that "The acute sense of vulnerability experienced [by Singapore] on separation [from Malaysia] served to justify a state-led philosophy of 'survival' that has never been fully relinquished." (p. 4).

To overcome its vulnerable position, the Singapore government adopted a pro-business, pro-foreign investment approach (K. -Y. Lee, 1998; Menon, 2007, p. 3). Sociologist Chua Beng Huat (2005) states, "From the very outset the PAP government decided that the only road to 'survival,' in every sense of the word, as an island-nation, was to embrace global capitalism through export-oriented industrialization fuelled by multinational companies and state-owned enterprises" (p. 123). In general, Singapore's survival=globalization plan has worked phenomenally well. Under the uninterrupted rule of the PAP, Singapore has been transformed from a Third World Society (with a per capita GNP of US \$443 in 1960) to a First World Economy (with a per capita GNP of US \$32,940 in 1997). When Borders made plans to expand in Southeast Asia (prior to the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis), Singapore was the fourth richest country in the world. But Singapore's cultural, artistic scene has not grown in harmony with its economy.

As Singapore strives to eschew its international reputation as a "cultural desert" and build itself into "a global cultural city," a phrase the PAP incessantly uses, it has ardently encouraged the arrival of foreign cultural-entertainment venues, such as Starbucks, Crazy Horse, and Las Vegas Sands. In 2005, second minister for finance, Raymond Lim stated, "We [Singapore] need to compete on the full range of lifestyle choices that global cities like New York, London, Paris and Shanghai offer." In this speech, Lim specifically mentioned Borders Bookstore (and the Japanese-based Kinokuniya Bookstore) as part and parcel of the PAP's cosmopolitan lifestyle package designed to catapult Singapore into the upper echelons of the global city hierarchy.

Borders' arrival and success in Singapore reflects the expanding culture of consumption in the region that is propelled by upper- and middle-class cosmopolitans (Chua, 1985, 2005; Goh, 1999). Of this contemporary reading culture, Southeast Asia Studies professor Michael Montesano said in our interview, "Borders is a sign of a new Singapore. Look at who is there. Look at what they are wearing. Look at what they are reading." And I would add: Look at how they read. Montesano's comments invite exploration of the ways in which macro-social forces such as global consumer capitalism and transnational corporations impact micro-practices such as reading, affecting what, where, why, and with whom people read.

### **3. Borders in Singapore: The Politics of Space & Place**

While there are many different reading publics in Singapore, which certainly include voracious readers, multiple readership surveys by the National Arts Council, the National Library Board and the National Book Development Council of Singapore have indicated that the majority of Singaporean readers take a practical, utilitarian approach to reading. During one of our interviews, the former Chairman of the National Book Development Council (NBDC), R. Ramachandran, said, "I think reading is still looked upon essentially as a way to obtain information. [Singaporeans] read for self-improvement and for education." In general, then, a large number of Singaporeans have not grown up associating reading with leisure and pleasure. Given this, many individuals inside and outside of the book world doubted that the 32,000-square-foot Borders store in Singapore would thrive. "Nobody thought Borders would make it," said the managing director of Marshall Cavendish in Singapore during our interview. Some questioned whether Border's social, sensual model of reading would resonate with such practical, utilitarian readers. In questioning whether Borders could adapt successfully, one local bookseller said, "Borders is relevant to the US, they have to make themselves relevant here. The way we do things is different" (quoted in Ong, 1999, p. 5).

Despite the initial predications of local booksellers and publishers, Borders Singapore was financially successful and wildly popular in Singapore. In the fall of 2006, for example, Borders Singapore announced that, out of the 559 Borders stores worldwide, it was the "No. 1 revenue generator" in terms of sales dollars generated per sq ft ("S'pore Store," 2006). Hundreds of Singaporeans and expatriates integrated this bookseller into their lifestyles, as these comments from two of my interviewees illustrate:

Alvin: (Singaporean Chinese, NUS student): Borders is my Orchard Road meeting place.

Aisha (Singaporean Indian, housewife): Borders has become part of my weekend routine.

Many Singaporeans have appropriated Borders' space to fit their needs. For instance, several Borders booksellers described to me the way in which some Singaporeans "use" store space as a childcare center. Here is one representative comment from a former, twenty-three year old Borders bookseller whom I interviewed:

It was a pretty common site to have a mother and father leave their kids with a Filipina maid at Borders while mom and dad go shopping somewhere else. Pretty common thing. Sometimes, especially on weekends, Borders became a childcare center.

Of course, for Borders' social, sensual model of reading to be lucrative, consumers must be disciplined so that they will fulfill their end of an implicit contract (i.e., treating Borders' material and store space with respect and, at some point, buying something). Customers, however, do not always conform to management expectation and corporate campaigns to modify consumer behavior are not always successful, as other ethnographic studies on transnational retailers have shown (Fantasia, 1995; Watson et al., 1997, pp. 27-31).

To Borders' dismay, a number of Singaporeans were rough book browsers who read in a manner that was at odds with its objectives. Several employees and former employees whom I interviewed described the typical scene at Borders, especially during the weekends, as chaotic. Here are two such examples.

When I was working there the situation got so bad because when people were sitting there they clogged up the aisle, and it made it hard to work effectively.

Singaporeans sitting on the floor was a big problem. I had European and American [customers] who were pretty surprised to see Singaporeans sitting on the floor.

From 1997 to the present, many Borders' patrons have given similar accounts of the chaotic environment of Borders. Here is just one of many examples from a *Straits Times* reader (H. C. Tan, 2003):

MY FAMILY was at Borders Bookstore last month, around 9:30 pm. As much as I had expected to see a crowd in the store, given that it was a Saturday night, what greeted me was a complete shock. Adults and children were sitting and standing all over the place and kids were running all over. Magazines had somehow found their way to the book section, and cooking books could be seen in the children's section. Lovers were cuddling up on comfortable benches browsing through magazines. Dog-eared magazines were falling off the shelves,

and freebies were being ripped out of the pages. . . . Needless to say, my husband, son and I left without purchasing a single item.

Given the rough treatment of printed material by some consumers, the Borders in Singapore decided early on not to allow its customers to take unpaid merchandise into its café. In Singapore, the café area is called Borders Bistro. Borders' decision to prohibit customers from taking unpaid material into its bistro was a major deviation from the bookseller's standard operating procedure in the United States of America where its stores encourage patrons to take unpaid material into its cafés. Borders' decision to prohibit newspaper browsing in its Singapore shop is another deviation. Collectively, these types of deviations create a different type of shopping and reading experience than those experienced in the United States of America. In the United States, for example, the café is the primary site where Borders customers browse through unpaid material. In this environment, browsing through stacks of unpurchased print material becomes intertwined with drinking coffee, eating biscotti, and talking with café patrons, as my ethnographic study of a Midwestern Borders in the United States vividly shows (Trager, 2005).

While Borders offers a social, sensual model of reading in all of its stores, it adapts and modifies this model to ensure that it is lucrative. Borders' decision to prohibit unpurchased print material in the Singapore Bistro was, in part, a pre-emptive move to curb rough browsing in its store space. But a group of American female expatriates drinking iced coffees in the Borders Bistro told me that the format adaptation engendered the loss of a key strength embedded in the original home format (Goldman, 2001, p. 222), and it did not solve the browsing problem, at least not entirely.

To Borders' dismay, mad browsing and other customer behavior was still a problem in Singapore five years after its arrival. In 2002, the marketing manager of Borders in Singapore, Christopher Tong, contended that some customers were abusing the store's browsing policy. Moreover, he asserted that some patrons were engaging in inappropriate behavior and were not treating the store environment with respect (quoted in M. Ho, 2002):

Borders has become a park. People come to the shop like they are having a picnic with food, sitting down on the floor. This gets in the way of the comfort of most other shoppers, so we will have to re-educate them on common courtesy. We have had a lot of customer feedback that it has since become very hard to shop with so many people sitting around casually on the floor. . . . So it's really just a matter of re-educating our patrons.

Interestingly, this remark stands in contrast to an earlier comment made by the same manager in 2001:

We designed Borders as a destination shopping store. We want customers to browse books, have lunch, then come out and listen to some music. . . We want them to spend as much time as possible in the store. (quoted in Tan, 2001, p. 2)

Why did Tong's tone change so dramatically within a year? According to some professionals in Singapore's print culture, Borders became concerned that it was getting a bad reputation in the book world and losing its patrons to Kinokuniya. Several individuals involved in Singapore's book world whom I interviewed referred to the browsing at Borders as "madness." In response to this browsing madness, Borders tried to discipline its consumers in various ways, including store announcements and "employee loitering patrol," as two former employees of Borders recount:

We had to play an announcement over the PA system that said please kindly refrain from sitting on the floor. But nobody listened. So the next policy was patrolling.

I did walk-throughs. You ask them [customers] very kindly to get up. But it was very awkward, even though you knew that person shouldn't be sitting there. So it created a bit of brouhaha. ... The policy was implemented for, I think, 6 months ... I think the security guards now help patrol.

In addition to store announcements and employee loitering patrol, Borders has also attempted to discipline its patrons through signs. Throughout Borders, customers are barraged with "dos and don'ts," as my field-notes reveal:<sup>4</sup>

**May 10, 2006.**

*I found a total of eight "disciplinary signs" through Borders Singapore on Orchard Road. Here are three:*

The newspapers are for purchase only. Please be considerate of our books, newspaper and magazines. (This sign is located above a newspaper rack.)

For the safety and shopping ease of our customers. Please keep the aisle floors clear. We invite you to browse and enjoy in the seating areas provided throughout the stores.

Share reading time with your children. Do not leave children unattended. (This message is painted in the children's section.)

Borders wants to project a relaxed environment that encourages people to stay and explore its space. Therefore, Borders is fine with a little mess and chaos in its stores as long as the little mess and chaos are translating into sales. But when consumer behavior affects profit margins and when potential buyers say things like “needless to say, my husband, son and I left [Borders] without purchasing a single item [because of the chaos],” then, Borders takes disciplinary actions to curtail problematic practices. All of the employees (former and present) whom I interviewed thought that Borders’ actions were justified. I think this particular quote by a former Borders bookseller sums up their collective sentiments on the matter:

You have to understand this policy in light of local culture. Borders wants to make it very conducive for people to browse books and ultimately buy them. Singaporeans, not being able to appreciate this policy, tend to treat Borders as sort of a park. I’d say this policy was necessary to move all these people along.

Though transnational space engendered by transnational corporations, immigration, tourists, information technology, and other forces has become a part of everyday living for most Singaporeans (Chua, 2005; Yeoh & Chang, 2001), sometimes the deterritorialization of cultural practices can lead to what David Morley (1992) calls “the politics of space and place” (p. 282). In such situations, a battle to define the nature and proper use of a particular space ensues. In Singapore, there has been a group of consumers – so-called “bad browsers” – who have persistently used Borders’ store space in a manner not in harmony with this corporate sponsor of literacy’s goals. As shown, the management team of Borders fought to reclaim its space and discipline wayward browsers in numerous ways, including through signage that explicitly stated the proper behavior expected in various designated areas.

As a scholar what intrigued me most about the browsing controversy was not the initial behavior or response but the sustained and, at times, highly charged discourse regarding the bad browsing offenders by various local sponsors of literacy, including *The Straits Times* (ST), an English, daily newspaper.

#### **4. Discourse of Differences – Sanctioned Discourses: Editorializing the “No Sitting on the Floor” Debate**

Today, *The Straits Times*, which was established on July 15, 1845, is the highest circulating paid newspaper in Singapore. It is owned by Singapore Press Holdings (SPH), which publishes sixteen other Singapore-based newspapers in four languages (i.e., English, Chinese, Malay and Tamil), thereby, creating a virtual local newspaper monopoly. Though a corporate entity, the ST has historically shared close ties with the government (Ang, 2007; Bokhorst-Heng, 2002, p. 563). Indeed, some of the most influential journalists, editors and

directors at the ST and SPH have worked for the government. In addition to influencing the editorial makeup of the ST, the PAP has also influenced its content. For example, it has set the 'out of bounds' (OB) markers that limit what the press can print about race, religion, government policy.

From the beginning of the Borders "browsing debacle," *The Straits Times* editorialized about the problem.<sup>5</sup> This *The Straits Times* clearly put its weight behind the global bookseller and admonished "bad" readers. Consider the following *Straits Times* editorial by Yeong Ah Seng (1997) written 25 days after Borders arrived:

To be sure, there are still many Singaporeans who behave badly in this new intellectual oasis [Borders Bookstore]. Hopefully, the outcry of public disapproval and peer pressure will help to curb such behaviour and cultivate respect for other people's property. As more and more Singaporeans travel overseas and observe the conduct of others, they might perhaps be persuaded to behave better.

In this passage, the editor begins his "discourse of difference" with a definitive statement (i.e., "To be sure") to establish his authority and the veracity of his upcoming claims. Then, he discursively draws a line between acceptable and unacceptable behavior, clearly placing himself in the former category. For the editor, one difference between the badly behaving "others" and the urbane, gracious "us" centers on traveling. Here, traveling – an activity that marks the cosmopolitan lifestyle – is associated with civilized, respectful individuals. In contrast, the editorial implies that Singaporeans who travel less, individuals who are more tied to their own land, such as the heartlanders, are more likely to be rude and disrespectful of other people's property.

One specific trope that is introduced here and is found elsewhere in my analysis is the "possibility of change" (Simmons & Lecouter, 2008, p. 668). Though the editor views badly behaving Borders consumers as "others," he holds out the possibility that their behavior can be changed. In this case, he views travel or guidance from the well-traveled as a possible remedy. I view the "possibility of change" theme as strategic because it legitimates the editor's discourse of censure and tutelage. The editor's presumed encouragement of "public disapproval" and "peer pressure" by civilized, well-traveled Singaporeans seems more justified if it safeguards an "intellectual oasis." Note that in this editorial and the following one, Borders is positioned as a victim of the browsing debacle rather than one side of an intergroup conflict.

Despite the editor's confident tone, his islandness anxiety seems to creep in as he discusses the conduct of overseas "others." Clearly, he is concerned that many Singaporeans don't behave as well as citizens from other countries. Most likely "overseas" is a reference to the

West, which is often constructed by cosmopolitan Singaporeans as more civilized than Southeast Asia. This type of islandness anxiety was woven into multiple editorials on the Borders debacle. For example, in the following *Straits Times* 1997 editorial, the editor suggests that the unruly behavior at Borders revealed that Singapore was not yet a fully developed “gracious” society:

For all the advancements we have made in other areas, it looks like the civic consciousness department is non-existent. Unfortunately for Borders, it is light years ahead of the local yokel. ... Please, you guilty ones out there, don't abuse this system and spoil it for the rest of us. ... It would be good to be known for being a gracious and dignified race together with all our achievements rather than that of a selfish, unrefined bunch. (quoted in Cheong, 1997)

In this passage, the editor draws on group identity construction forms (e.g., “we,” “us”) to make a contrast between the decency of “the rest of us” and the “unrefined bunch” who abuses Borders’ system and is thwarting Singapore’s advancement. While the editor doesn’t directly name his reference group, he uses a list of words that index the culture of heartlanders. For example, the editors’ use of the word “local yokel” is particularly revealing. The word “yokel” is a disparaging term that refers to people who live in the country and embrace a simple, “unrefined” life. It is a term associated with heartlanders, which is the more en vogue, politically correct term propagated by the government when referring to rural Singaporeans of a lower-socioeconomic background.

Given the demographics of Borders’ customers and the *Straits Times* readers, though, I think it quite possible that the editor is not just scolding heartlanders. Through othering language and distancing techniques, I think the editor is also challenging the cosmopolitanism of middle- and upper- class Singaporeans who display “unrefined,” “yokel-like” behavior. Rather than reinforcing the identity of cosmopolitans who may have grown up in the heartlands without much money and social capital, his editorial feeds into their islandness anxiety.

For the editor, then, heartlanders—and unrefined middle and upper-class Singaporeans who behave as yokels— appear to be the bad browsing Borders culprits. They are criticized for violating values of the civilized class and exploiting a respected business. Their unacceptable behavior is attributed, in part, to dispositional characteristics, such as selfishness. In this way, the editor seems to favor a character explanation for the bad behavior at Borders over, say, an economic explanation (e.g., Bad book browsers cannot afford to buy all the books that they desire for, say, their children’s education. So, they browse through as many books as they can in their limited amount of leisure time). Interestingly, the editor also seems to attribute the local’s bad behavior to cultural factors, such as the lack of exposure to refined culture. Here, the editor seems to usher in “the possibility of change” theme into the

passage. With proper guidance from “true” cosmopolitan Singaporeans, the local yokel (heartlanders and other unrefined Singaporeans) could be reformed. Significantly, in this passage and the other, the “local” is associated with provincialism. This editorial theme extends beyond people.

In several of *The Straits Times*' editorials, local bookstores are depicted as inefficient and behind the times. In contrast, Borders is equated with the global, modern and progressive. Observe what one forum editor of *The Straits Times* wrote about Borders' arrival, modern bookstores and foreign talent:

A GOOD thing happened to Singaporean book-lovers this month. Borders Bookstore, which opened on Nov 1, seems to be the answer to every book-lover's wish – to browse in comfort-in a well-stocked store and to be able to lay one's hands on the latest books . . . .While these features might be a basic requirement of any good modern bookstore, they were sadly missing in the pre-Borders era. The message to *Times* and MPH is clear. They had better shape up or they will be rolled over quickly. If this is what “foreign talent” brings to Singapore, I am all for it. (quoted in Yeong, 1997)

In this editorial, Borders' arrival to Singapore seems to be viewed as an indicator and component of Singapore's cultural progress. In contrast to the media in Korea, for example, *The Straits Times* valorized foreign talent while it simultaneously criticized local talent.

Given the enthusiasm for globalization and transnational corporations that *The Straits Times* repeatedly express, it is not surprising that denunciation of multinational corporations in Singapore is uncommon in public discourse. In analyzing the discourses surrounding the Borders controversy among Singaporean consumers, the pro-globalization, pro-transnational corporation discourse of *The Straits Times*, which echoes the policies of the Singapore Government, must be considered because it seems to have delineated the range of views and actions expressed on the matter. This becomes evident when considering the spirited “no sitting on the floor” debate in 2002 that took place in *The Straits Times* (both online and in print), *The Business Times* and on the web. The debate was triggered by Borders attempt to curb undisciplined consumer behavior by implementing a policy that forbade customers from sitting on the floor.

Though some Singaporeans blame Borders' “desire to be different” as the source of the browsing problem, a substantial number of readers whom I interviewed defended the global bookseller and seemed to critiqued their “unrefined countrymen.” Consider the following two comments from two separate group interviews:

(Riki) It bugs me when you see *aunties* clogging up the magazine aisles and hoarding books they won't buy. Poor Borders.

(Edward) There use to be a bunch of *ah sohs* that would allow their screaming brood to raise havoc at Borders. The policy was necessary.

In the following two passages, aunties and ah sohs seem to be used in a derisive manner. Though the terms 'auntie' and 'ah soh' can be used as a polite or neutral term to address a middle-aged or elderly woman; they are also sometimes associated with middle-aged or elderly woman from a lower class. Both terms are also associated with women who embrace an old-fashion mentality. In short, they aren't words that conjure images of hipness, cosmopolitanism or sophistication.

The hegemonic discourse that emerged from the 2002 Borders debate asserted that: Borders' disciplinary policies and actions were justified. The following comments made in *The Business Times Singapore* (Voicemail Box section) encapsulate this view:

Let's be fair to Borders. While it has taken customer service to a new level, it has not been rewarded with consideration from patrons. (Tan, 2002)

There have been mixed reactions to the issue of Borders not allowing patrons to sit around the bookstore to read its books and magazines. I visit the bookstore occasionally, and it is disturbing to see people sitting all over the floor reading. If most of them just spend the whole day there reading but not buying, how is Borders going to survive? (Leong, 2002)

These responses and others like them are in harmony with the pro-globalization, pro-multinational corporation stance of the PAP and its supporting institutions, including *The Straits Times*. Significantly, those who critiqued Borders' browsing policies in *The Straits Times* and elsewhere remained within the parameters of the PAP grand survival=globalization discourse. Some critics of Borders' "no sitting on the floor policy" were simply upset that an activity that they enjoyed had been altered. Along with this, other customers expressed disappointment that Borders' new policy was not in line with the corporations' sensual, social conception of reading. This passionate comment seems to exemplify such a view:

What a disappointment! Borders had revolutionized the culture of reading at bookstores in Singapore. Reversing the trend would essentially be killing the joy of reading and browsing Singaporeans have grown to enjoy because of Borders. (Foo, 2002)

In this message to *The Business Times*, the Borders customer appears to be venting her disappointment in a corporation she previously respected. I think that this particular patron also seems to feel mildly betrayed by Borders. Interestingly, she draws on Border's own rhetoric when objecting to the way in which this bookseller broke a contract with customers that it had created. Thus, she is challenging Borders' reversed practice based on the corporations' own standards.

Other customers more explicitly argue that Borders' actions violated the implicit contract the corporation had with Singaporean customers. They did not, however, attack the ethics of this corporation. Rather, they questioned its business strategy. Several readers of *The Straits Times* thought Borders' 2002 policy was a bad business move. Consider this comment:

Borders was built on the "lifestyle" bookselling concept back in the US. The basic concept is that customers are encouraged to use the bookshop as a social and community venue and the aim is for the potential buyer to not only browse among the books but to relax in the shops. There is no pressure to buy and the bookstore becomes an attractive meeting place, something, well, like a park. And that was what Borders *promised* [my italic] when it opened in Singapore in 1997. In a market where bookshops wrapped up magazines to discourage browsers, Borders was like a breath of fresh air. ... Borders today is turning its back on what made it unique. (quoted in W. K. Wong, 2002)

This critique of Borders certainly does not challenge possible contradictions and problems with foreign talent and transnational corporations. Nor does it demand any sort of action or apology from Borders. Though it is far from a radical critique against Borders and its policy, it does subtly creep toward issues of social responsibility and corporate citizenship by accusing Borders of breaking a promise that it had with Singaporean consumers. This type of critique against Borders, however, was seldom voiced in the Borders browsing saga.

In analyzing the Borders browsing debate among Singaporean consumers, the survival=globalization discourse by the PAP and its supporters must be considered because it seems to have delineated the range of views and actions expressed on the matter. It likely influenced what was not heard or done, too. For instance, specific complaints about Borders' policies were not linked to larger concerns about foreign talent, globalization, and cultural preservation. This stands in contrast to debates about McDonalds in Korea in which specific issues raised against the American restaurant quickly triggered larger debates about cultural homogenization and regional protectionism.

## **Cosmopolitan Aspirations, Islandness Anxiety & Reform**

The next discursive strand examined in this article captures the islandness anxiety of Singaporean cosmopolitans who – underneath their strategies, admonishments, and lectures – wonder whether they really are living a gracious, cosmopolitan lifestyle. Their concerns mirror the island-ness anxiety expressed by the media (i.e., *Straits Times* editor) and policy leaders in Singapore who link cultural practices such as reading to the developmental status of a nation. For example, Dr. Koh said, “I dream of a day when the average Singaporean has a love for music, for arts, for books, that approximate the level in advanced countries” (quoted in “Evolving Into,” 2001).

Unlike consumers in less developed countries of Southeast Asia, such as Indonesia, Singaporean consumers, especially the young upper-and middle-class consumers are attracted to foreign products and companies (Hamin, 2006). Country of origin effect studies and other works have shown that socio-economic and educational background play a significant role in the way in which people from the same country perceive and respond to local and foreign media (Grixti, 2006, p. 110). While individuals of a lower socioeconomic status often prefer local products, their middle- and upper-class urban counterparts often prefer foreign products.

In contrast to the print professionals whom I interviewed for this project, the majority of the cosmopolitan consumers whom I spoke with did not express a desire that transnational booksellers would localize their products, practices, and environment more (Trager Bohley, 2010). In fact, many consumers were attracted to the “globality” of transnational booksellers. In regards to this motivation, consider the following comment from a male Singaporean Malay reader in my Wardah Books (English Islamic Bookstore) group interview:

People are enjoying this moment. They can go to a huge bookstore like Borders in between shopping and going to a movie. And they can feel like they are a part of this global culture.

As mentioned earlier, Borders provides a transnational space where Singaporeans can display and embody a cosmopolitan identity through their consumption and reading practices. Yet, they face obstacles. As shown in the previous sections, so-called bad browsers have apparently invaded their space and transformed an urbane, cosmopolitan lifestyle into a chaotic, uncivilized activity. Since space is so sacred in densely populated Singapore, especially on Orchard Road, this infringement, from a practical and socio-cultural standpoint, matters to them. Consequently, “good” Borders consumers spent a great deal of time online and offline discussing possible disciplinary measures. Consider the following spirited exchange that took that took place on soc.culture.singapore in November of 1997:

Tayan: What if we became some kind of volunteer “Book Bug”? [Maybe we could] get Borders to start and/or support a group of volunteer book lover-buyers who pledge to educate other book browsers on the finer nuances of handling unbought books.

keyBoArD cowBOY: I think the only way to get the message through to Singaporeans is for *The Straits Times* to do a number on such behavior. It’s become the norm in this country. Well, maybe there are people. . . . reading this thread that could take the initiative.

cyberiad: No, no, what we can do is to form that “Bookshop Vigilante Gang” that Livia was talking about, hunt down in-store offenders, and put their names and faces on this huge “Unrepentant Sinners of the Printed Word” display board outside the store. I say, string the motherfuckers up!

These are just some of the many posts on soc.culture.singapore, a web forum devoted to Singaporean culture, that brainstorm ways to discipline bad browsers at Borders. At least three different types of complaints against bad browsing emerged on-line, in *The Straits Times*, and in my group and individual interviews. The first two complaints operated on the individual level and are motivated by pragmatic concerns. In contrast, the third type of complaint seems to be driven by larger social concerns.

First, some patrons were angry that bad browsers and loiterers ruined their shopping experience. The following comment made by a Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) student who participated in one of my group interviews illustrates this type of complaint category:

Ai Lin: I find that a lot of times at Borders I have trouble finding stuff because they have been misplaced in other areas by people who have browsed through them.

Second, some patrons were upset that browsing offenders might prompt the American bookseller to start shrink-wrapping their material. Several web posters on soc.culture.singapore expressed this concern:

Tayan: I hope Borders won’t be discouraged by this obscene behavior and start shrink-wrapping everything. I think they will. Very, very soon.

Finally, some good customers were embarrassed by the uncivilized behavior of bad browsers because for them it suggested that Singapore was not yet a fully developed First

World, “gracious” society, as the following soc.culture.singapore posts written in 1997, 2002 and 2002 respectively, illustrate:

Phoebe: How sad that we must resort to public shaming to bring out an awareness of ungraciousness. We are a long way from becoming a gracious and civic society.

Pepper: [Singapore] has a lot to catch up with Western countries in terms of social etiquette. Such a bookshop in US/UK/Germany/Switzerland [sic] would not have such a problem. The people are a LOT more civilized.

Keith: Hehe. . . First world desired but THIRD world mentality?

In 2006, islandness anxiety seems to influence some of my informants who still worried that bad behavior at Borders indicated that Singapore was not as culturally advanced and gracious as other countries, as one of my interviewees explained:

Li: It is just sort of embarrassing that it [browsing problem] has lasted so long. The Borders stores in Australia don't have so many problems.

At times, good patrons positioned themselves as local sponsors of literacy enlightening the mass on the proper way to read. Consider the following messages by web posters on soc.culture.singapore, which were written in 1997 and 2002, respectively:

Wolfie C-Y: While I was there, I could not help but notice some folks opening the books all the way. . . . This action causes a ‘cut’ in the spine of the book. In the case of a paperback, it weakens the binding and it is definitely not a pretty sight.

Clip: Before we lament *their* [my italic] *unruly behavior* [my italic] of sitting around and messing the place up, have you seen how some adults leaf through the pages of a book on sale [sic]? With the thumb and index finger, they grasp the page and forcefully flick it over. The correct way to turn a page is gently placing one finger by the edge of the page.

Similar to the *Straits Times* editors, these posters distance themselves socio-psychologically from behavior and groups they deem as undesirable through identity construction forms (e.g., some folks, their) and negation. The posters’ “discourse of difference” draws boundaries between “good patrons/civilized behavior” and “bad behavior/uncivilized behavior.” If the others are “unruly,” which is the antithesis of cosmopolitanism and urbanity, they are refined. The posters seem to attribute the bad browsers behavior, in part,

to cultural explanations, such as the lack of exposure to proper reading. This explanation is strategic because it introduces the “possibility of change” theme into the discourse and legitimates the posters’ discourse of tutelage and censure.

It is important to note that a couple of soc.culture.singapore members did hold Borders responsible, in part, for the browsing chaos, consider the following post:

Chris Cochrane: You cannot blame these ah sohs and their brats. Borders should be blamed for this mistake. They tried to be different than the rest of the bookstores. ... well, it is obvious [ly] not the wise thing to do. They provide lounging chairs, wide carpeted areas and unwrapped books free to be browsed, so what do you expect?

This spatial analysis by Chris Cochrane is interesting in several ways. First, he correctly points out the way in which physical space influences social practices, in this case browsing. Second, he suggest that Borders’ social, sensual model of reading confused some Singaporean customers because it did not conform to preexisting conventions that framed local book buying practices. For example, before Borders arrived in Singapore, most bookstores shrinkwrapped their books, and they did not provide chairs and carpeted areas for their customers. According to Chris’ theory, the inclusion of these “foreign” objects in a bookstore triggered behavior at odds with Borders’ expectations (e.g., customers sitting on floors because for some Singaporeans carpet signals a place to sit). His analysis is noteworthy because most posters, Straits Times readers and interviewees constructed Borders as a passive (sometimes heroic) party in the browsing debacle, thereby emphasizing the one-sidedness of the event. In contrast, Chris seems to consider the actions of at least two parties: Borders and its customers.

Interestingly, though, Chris’ analysis seems to imply that only certain customers—“ah sohs, and their brats”—had problems understanding and interpreting Borders’ social, sensual model of reading. As noted earlier, ah sohs is a Singlish term that means middle-aged or elderly woman. But it is also a word associated with woman from a lower class and/or old-fashioned. While Chris asserts that the browsing problem at Borders stems from this transnational bookseller’s desire to be different through the importation of its social, sensual model of reading/bookselling, he also implies that the ah sohs’ inability to correctly interpret certain cultural cues and cosmopolitan environments contributed to the chaotic situation. In its vagueness, the use of the term ah sohs is difficult to undermine or challenge. Though it attributes blame to a broader group in Singapore (socio-economic challenged Singaporeans), it avoids explicit prejudice against the group as a whole.

Collectively, the discourse of difference in this section of the paper captures the way in which the everyday politics of space and place sometimes reveal larger social tensions that

exist among different actors inhabiting different positions on the global-local fault lines. Clearly, the posters' frustration with mad browsing and other bad behavior at Borders is tied to deeper islandness anxieties that they possess. Their postings and comments can be interpreted as an attempt to reclaim a space and practice that they value, while also allowing them to perform a cosmopolitan identity that positions them as modern sponsors of literacy and arbiters of proper behavior. Their classism focuses on the way in which heartlanders (and folks who behave like heartlanders) violate cosmopolitan practices and lifestyles.

### **The Reworking of Racism & the Kiasu Offender**

The final discursive strand examined in this article centers on a particular type of offender blamed for the browsing problems at Borders – the *kiasu* offender. As noted earlier, *kiasu* is a Hokkien term that means the “fear of losing out.” Observe the following charge against *kiasuism* from one of my interview informants:

Felix: Unfortunately, *kiasuism* is still very present in Singapore. You saw it in action at the subway. So, it is not surprising to find it at Borders.

The topic was also popular online. Consider this comment from a poster on [soc.culture.singapore](http://soc.culture.singapore):

Asean Observer: When they [Borders] started this new “liberal” bookshop I was certain it was a matter of time before S’poreans showed themselves so *kiasu*, thickskinned and selfish that even Borders would have to impose some order. I’m just wondering when they’ll have to wrap up all of their books like the other bookshops have had to do.

Was the browsing debacle at Borders fueled by *kiasuers*? Is *kiasu* an unfair stereotype against Chinese Singaporeans? Does it capture a national characteristic of many Singaporeans? Perhaps whether *kiasu* is a “real” trait or not does not matter. What is important is that many individuals and institutions inside and outside of Singapore believe it to be real. For example, both the government of Singapore and businesses in Singapore, such as McDonalds, waged campaigns that centered on *kiasuism*. Moreover, several individuals in Singapore’s print culture, including a representative of a well-known international publishing house, implied that *kiasuism* triggered the browsing problem at Borders.

Interestingly, one Borders bookseller (Singaporean Chinese) whom I interviewed suggested that *kiasu* parents who associate books and reading with “getting ahead” in school and in life probably drove the browsing madness at Borders. He thought this because the most

chaotic browsing at Borders took place in the children's section. Plus, he grew up with a "kiasu mom" who went to great lengths to acquire books for him:

My mom had the kiasu mentality. My kid must read, read, read, read [so he can] be number one in primary school and secondary school. She made me read more than I actually wanted to. In Singapore, you can get a library card that lets you borrow four books. So, my mom applied for a library card for herself, my dad, my elder brother, and myself. I had four library cards.

In this passage, the bookseller's mom clearly associates books and reading with getting ahead. Her apparent islandness anxiety, marked by a desire to "get ahead," is likely informed, at least in part, by the state's entrenched political discourse of survivalism, which has been lined linked to globalization and foreign talent. It seems as though this mom was willing to bend some rules and engage in some rebellious library practices in an effort to improve her son's chances for success. For her and perhaps other parents, the ends justify the means. And their children often appreciate or at least understand this mentality.

While Singaporean Chinese frequently banter the word 'kiasu' in a playful and even endearing manner (Ee, 2005; C. Lim, 1978; H-H. Tan, 2002), it can be an ethicized, charged word when used by others in a disparaging manner. During my fieldwork in Singapore, several Singaporean Indians, Singaporean Malays, expatriates, and others explicitly stated or suggested that kiasu Chinese patrons were the main browsing culprits at Borders. They viewed the bad behavior at Borders as another example of the pushy, "get ahead," kiasu attitude that marked the privileged, majority, ethnic group of Singapore – ethnic Chinese, which constitute approximately 77% of the nation's population. The Chinese occupy the highest stratum of the ethnic stratification in Singapore. In the upshot, Chinese Singaporeans are viewed to be industrious with strong business acumen. But some of their minority counterparts view this ethnic group as too materialistic and aggressive.

On [soc.culture.singapore](http://soc.culture.singapore), Borders' browsing problem quickly became ethicized and fueled by racism. Consider this exchange among three different posters in January 2002:

Apu Neh Neh: The disgusting habit of the Chinese of reserving seats can best be seen at Borders Bookstore. You will see the Chinese people take piles of books and bring them to the sofa to read the books for hours. They usually do this in pairs. When one needs to go to the toilet they will put the books on the sofa and their partner will "guard" the seat for them. Sometimes they will be gone for 15 mins to 30 mins and later come back with a new set of books. You will never see a Malay or Indian indulging in such anti-social behavior. Now it has almost become a culture at Borders.

Knoneneh: Nothing new. Indians and other races do that too. Just another of your racist anti-Chinese posts.

ChengThng: I go to Borders quite often and can verify that most of the borrowers are non-Malaysians and Non-Indians. I asked a Malay colleague why and she tells me there are no Malay books there.

In the above exchange, Apu Neh Neh begins his “discourse of difference” by taking on a moralistic tone that positions “the Chinese” as the badly behaving “others.” He discursively draws a line between the “disgusting,” anti-social behavior of “the Chinese” and the proper behavior of Malays and Indians. In Apu Neh Neh’s diatribe, Borders and non-Chinese patrons are positioned as victims rather than participants of an intergroup conflict. Significantly, Apu Neh Neh seems to attribute the disgusting behavior of the Chinese to dispositional characteristics such as selfishness and aggression rather than economic and cultural factors (e.g., parents concerned about their children’s education). Unlike the cosmopolitan Borders patrons and the *Straits Times* editors who seem to assert that bad heartlander browsers can be reformed through the proper tutelage of sponsors of literacy, Apu Neh Neh doesn’t consider change as an achievable outcome because he links kiasuism/mad browsing to ethnicity, a stable characteristic that cannot be altered.

Knoneneh’s comments (“Nothing new,” “Just another”) imply that he and Apu Neh Neh are regular participants of soc.culture.singapore. They also attempt to challenge the accountability of Apu Neh Neh as a unbiased poster by pointing out Apu Neh Neh’s history of making racist charges against Chinese Singaporeans. Knoneneh responds to Apu Neh Neh’s charges by attempting to uncouple kiasu/bad browsing with ethnicity, pointing out that other non-Chinese Singaporeans also engage in such behavior. In an “objective” tone that draws on legalistic terms (e.g., verify), ChengThng challenges Knoneneh’s rebuttal. Though ChengThng doesn’t directly accuse Chinese Singaporeans as the kiasu offenders, his comments suggest their guilt by way of deduction. After ChengThng clears Singaporean Malays and Singaporean Indians of bad browsing by drawing on the opinion of an insider (i.e., Malay colleague) and long-term observation (“I go to Borders quite often”), there are only two other social groups in Singapore to consider: Singaporean Chinese and “others” (e.g., Europeans, expatriates). Given the fact that there wasn’t a single post or interviewee that charged bad browsing on “others,” it seems unlikely that ChengThng would do so. Moreover, if ChengThng disagreed with Apu Neh Neh’s assertion, he would most likely state so in his reply post.

To better appreciate the online exchange between Apu Neh Neh, a Singaporean Malay, and the other posters, it is important to note that Singaporean Malays are a minority. They constitute approximately 14% of Singapore’s population (approximately 8% of Singapore’s population is ethnic Indian). Singaporean Malays are considered to be the most socio-

economically disadvantaged group in the nation (Rahim, 1998). At times, non-Malay Singaporeans have stereotyped them as “lazy” and “intellectually challenged” (Chiew, 1991; Li, 1998; Mattar, 2003). For this reason and others, some Malays resent Singapore’s social structure and its majority demographic group (Mattar, 2003; Rahim, 1998). Since the Singaporean government stifles frank discussions about ethnic and class inequality, discourses on these topics are kept underground or bubble up around seemingly mundane acts such as book browsing, as this section and the previous one highlight.

## **5. Conclusion**

In this article, I have shown the diverse ways Singapore’s print culture responds to and inflects contemporary forces of cultural globalization such as cosmopolitanism and deterritorialization. One theme that runs throughout this article is that deterritorialization has reconfigured print cultures in Singapore and triggered Singaporeans to reconceptualize their relationships and activities with social texts. Though technology and global sponsors of literacy such as Borders Bookstore are powerful drivers of this process, their influence is not inexorable because deterritorialized textual practices and products are articulated within the “micropolitics of local/global interactions” (Kraidy, 2002). The undefined, “displaced,” and shifting nature of deterritorialized practices, spaces, and products often prods local actors to claim, appropriate, modify, define, and sometimes reject these once-foreign elements in ways that advance their interests and reflect their cultural identities (Giddens, 1990).

Certainly, a large number of Singaporeans appropriated Borders’ store space in a way that would suit their needs. Some parents, for example, used Borders as a childcare center where they could drop off their kids. For other Singaporeans, who might be labeled *kiasuers*, Borders was a space full of resources that could potentially be used “to get ahead.” Here, though, it is important to remember that local actors’ responses to deterritorialization and other forces of cultural globalization vary due to their specific social locations, material resources, and cultural capital, as Massey (1993) has pointed out:

Different social groups and individuals are placed in very distinct ways in relation to ... [global] flows and interconnections. This point concerns not merely the issue of who moves and who doesn’t . . . it is also about power in relation to the flows and movements . . . some are more in charge of it than others; some initiate flows and movements, others don’t; some are more on the receiving end of it than others. (p. 61)

For many educated and affluent Singaporeans, Borders constituted a spatial conduit for the articulation and performance of their cosmopolitan identity. Inside Borders, local elites tried to define the nature and proper use of the store’s deterritorialized space and products in a manner that fit their understanding of a cosmopolitan lifestyle. Unruly browsers, however,

behaved in ways that were at odds with their aspired lifestyles and, at times, even stifled their global imaginations.

The “politics of space and place” that erupted among “good” patrons and others (e.g., heartlanders and kiasuers) were connected to pre-existing class, race, and ethnic tensions. Essentialist stereotypes were reworked and reasserted through the discourse of difference that swirled around the Borders browsing debacle. Through these particular discourse formations, “others” were constructed and then criticized for violating cosmopolitan lifestyles and practices.

The discourse of differences were informed by and perpetuated the PAP's pro-globalization, pro-transnational corporation, pro-cosmopolitan rhetoric, characterized by islandness anxiety. I argued that *The Straits Times* had an influential impact on the public conceptions of the browsing debacle. Its editorials framed the official problem and cast the villains and heroes of the conflict. Given the ‘out of bounds’ (OB) limitations of the ST, it is not surprising that the editorials did not *directly* define the problem in class or racial terms. In regards to class, the editors often chose to use vague terms and language (e.g., yokels, unrefined), which cannot be easily challenged. The vague terms also shielded the ST from direct charges of classism. Significantly, the “possibility of change” was a recurring trope in the ST editorials. It suggested the browsing problem stemmed from the heartlanders' conditions, which could be changed through, say, education. This was a strategically sound move because it legitimated the discourse of censure and tutelage by these self-appointed sponsors of literacy. In regards to race, the editors chose to remain silent.

In general, the discourse of differences expressed by ST readers, my interview informants and soc.culture.singapore posters tended to echo *The Straits Times* browsing debacle narrative. However, there was a strand of discourse on soc.culture.singapore that racialized the problem. Its direct inclusion of ‘out of bounds’ (OB) topics by non-journalists in a commercial venue was significant in and of itself because it suggested that new modes of discussing the browsing problem and issues related to it were emerging and challenging older forms (i.e., *The Straits Times*) and official discourses. While the perpetuation of essentialist, racial stereotypes about Chinese Singaporeans is unfortunate and wrong, an increased awareness about the frustration of Singaporean Malays through online postings may be one small step that leads to productive discourses about racial inequality in Singapore, a taboo topic.

The comparative and longitudinal nature of this project provided an interesting venue to explore the interpenetration of culture and textual practices such as reading and bookselling. It also captured some of the competing ideologies of textual practices circulating in Singapore as cosmopolitan book consumers, print professionals and various

sponsors of literacy expressed their acceptance and/or rejection of particular transnational bookselling practices.

Significantly, in 2007, Borders Group, a global sponsor of literacy in Singapore, announced that it would halt its international expansion. A year later, Borders reported that it would sell its 30 bookstores in Australia, New Zealand and Singapore to pay off debt. The current state of Borders Group illustrates the potential instability of transnational booksellers' sponsorship overseas. This instability stems from the fact that the political economies of these corporations are tied more directly to the structures of global commerce than most traditional sponsors of literacy such as libraries.

### **Biographical note:**

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Print culture is an umbrella term used to describe the individuals, institutions, and businesses that are involved in the production, distribution and consumption of printed material.

<sup>2</sup> Partial transcripts from my interviews in Singapore that support the claim.

Borders made a big impact in terms of the browsing experience. There were all of these new possibilities – ‘Hey, I can hang out in this bookstore for a few hours and just look at stuff.’ [The chairman of the 2005 Singapore Writers Festival] Overall, Borders brought a more egalitarian and “hipper” approach to bookselling something which caught on with a new generation of locals and expats. [A book distributor for Asia Publishers Distribution] Borders revolutionized the book browsing culture in Singapore. And it injected the lifestyle concept of reading into Singapore. [Young artist of the year for literature in 2005]

<sup>3</sup> Lah is a particle commonly used when speaking Singaporean English (known as Singlish). It is used to convey the mood of the speaker.

<sup>4</sup> Due to space limitations, I only included three disciplinary signs.