Toxic Military Masculinities and the Politics of Conscript After-Death Remembrance in Singapore

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Abstract

This article discusses the relationality between death and masculinity in economically prosperous Singapore. In positioning the Singaporean male conscript, spatially disciplined by the state in both life and death, this article discusses how the reproduction of militarized masculinities through National Service (NS) in Singapore is co-constitutive of geopolitical tensions that contour how the space of the male body is reproduced. In the aftermath of four training-related deaths, this article examines the extent to which the authoritarian state is selective in exercising necropower by denying slain military bodies their existence as bodies-as-space. Granted that bodies-as-space are generative of emotions and affects, the final section of this article discusses how the Singaporean state exercises necropower to enhance life-giving conditions. It does so by deciding which military cadavers are most worthy of communicating affects and emotions for the purposes of preventing future deaths from training and ensuring support for conscription.

Keywords

necropolitics – Singapore – National Service/conscription – masculinities – memories – affects
Introduction

In contributing to the literature on memory-making and the Singaporean state's assertion of its rights to narrate memories of the past that buttress authoritarian rule, this article brings to the fore the dead conscript and the state's powers to discipline the ability of militarized bodies to communicate memories and affects to the living. Currently, in Southeast Asian societies, there exist anthropological and sociological insights into how the affective agency of the dead controls collective understandings of community, belonging, and cultural identity (Peters 2016). Within the microcultures of the military, deaths are also capable of disrupting or presenting changes to how the identities of enlisted personnel are affectively performed. Hence, positive and compassionate responses to combatant fatalities are choreographed to preserve the military's legitimacy in the parent society (Rolls and Harper 2016). Vinitzky-Seroussi and Ben-Ari (2000:394) point out that militaries are responsible for the control of soldiers' bodies as well as the disposal of dead bodies. Because militaries are the only organizations endowed with mandates that legitimize the uses of violence, combat deaths are unlike deaths in civilian society and carry special meanings. The distinctions made between 'good' and 'bad' military deaths are determined by cultural scripts (Ben-Ari 2005). While the notion of a 'good' military death being distinguishable from a 'bad' one rests upon cultural scripts valuing combatant deaths as creating life-giving conditions in the military and civilian world, there are few insights from cultural studies of death and military studies that address how 'good' military deaths are socially produced by tropes of manliness, sacrifice, war's violence, and the gendered repertoires of masculinity. This article's focus on the Singaporean government's management of military deaths directly engages with how the affects of masculinity are carefully controlled to maintain support for compulsory National Service (hereafter NS).

In the nexus between injuries and death in the militaries of countries which have departed from conscription, there is much credence surrounding hegemonic masculinities embedded in the capacity of the 'war hero' to enact militarized violence (Tidy 2015). Because hegemonic masculinities revolve around 'honored ways of being a man', which subordinate femininities and feminize marginalized masculinities (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005:832), the life-giving characteristics of anti-war and non-violent masculinities are subordinate to the life-taking warrior. The hegemony of the warrior prototype is the dual root cause of feminists' failed attempts to use the military as a catalyst for peace as well as the pressure for men to live up to the norms of this respected masculinity (Duncanson 2009:65). In Britain, the deaths of sol-
diers in conditions of combat are framed around tropes of heroic masculinity which legitimize state-sponsored campaigns for the civilian public to support troops stationed in Iraq and Afghanistan (Kelly 2013). According to Martin-Baron (2014:52–53), militarized funerary performances in the United States of America justify the violence of warring when the military corpse, through hyperbolic performances of masculinity, nationalism, and homosociality, is accorded the status of a ‘beneficiary’ endowed with a special honour and privilege.

Militaries in the Anglosphere construct fatalities in combat as being clearly superior to those in training (Caddick et al. 2021:512). This hierarchical order of deaths in the brotherhood of arms validates the hypermasculinist warrior as an archetypical militarized masculinity in life, which accords greater advantages, rights, and honours in death. While military masculinity and combat are an empirical ‘given’ in the literature, Millar and Tidy (2017) stress the need to avoid reproducing myths of the archetypical heroic soldier by first interrogating the assumptions behind combat as an empirical reality entwined within ‘socially valued masculinity, civil–military relations, violence, physical geographies, and the state’ (Millar and Tidy 2017:146). In Singapore, the smallest and most militarized nation in Southeast Asia (Walsh 2007), combat, being an empirical and theoretical category, does not exist in the manner represented in Western studies of military masculinity. It is not possible to reify the archetypical Singaporean heroic soldier as a combat warrior when no conscripted soldier has ever fought in armed conflict.

While there are elite combat vocations demanding higher levels of physical strength that stimulate conditions of warfare, all fatalities and injuries since Singapore’s independence have only taken place during training. This does not negate the fact that hierarchies of combat-oriented masculinities exist in the city-state’s armed services. The Singapore Armed Forces (hereafter SAF) is undoubtedly the most masculine institution in the country. It influences the privileging of masculinities in civilian culture that subordinate femininities and marginalized masculinities (Lowe 2019). Duncanson (2015:235) claims that the physical toughness, heterosexual virility, and aggression needed to subdue an enemy force are embedded in combat masculinities which have material consequences beyond the military. However, Tidy (2018:3) explains that anti-war masculinities which might be deemed antithetical to the military’s violence have confounded the warrior model. To illustrate, Duncanson (2009:76) argues that the hypermasculine warrior model of masculinity cannot capture the complex demands of peacekeeping operations, which require combat skills in conjunction with the winning of hearts and minds to establish peace and security. In singular representations of masculinity, scholars have noted that,
as a singular account of gender, hegemonic masculinity falls prey to homogeneous accounts of male behaviour, which limit our understandings of men’s actions, thoughts, and affects underscoring practices of masculinity (Haywood and Mac an Ghaill 2012).

Theory-led empirical work pointing out the need for hegemonic military masculinity to be differentiated from violence and hypermasculinity (Ortega 2012) resonates strongly with the class-conscious and elitist Singapore society that adopts neo-liberal ideologies to fast-track the career progression of military officers who studied on government scholarships (Chan 2019). In summary, Connell (1995:224) argues that ‘the gender practice of the general is different from the practice of the front-line soldier, and armies acknowledge this by training them separately’. Because the military is the accepted proving ground of masculinity for Singaporean men, militarism was not foisted upon males; it emerged as a geopolitical strategy to countenance threats from what is supposedly a hostile and belligerent Nusantara. Against the backdrop of fragile civil-military relations and Singapore’s geopolitical tensions in Southeast Asia, this article analyses the state’s unequal treatment of four conscript fatalities to disavow the violence of hegemonic military masculinities valorized in nonconscription militaries. Human geographers such as Gormon-Murray (2008) and Atherton (2009) have highlighted the limits of singular representations of masculinity in their theorizations of how gendered subjectivities are heterogeneously formed in relation to the body’s (re)negotiations of geographies of absence and presence. As there is a need to examine how masculinities are produced by the body ‘in place / or as place’ (Hopkins and Gormon-Murray 2019:305), this article first discusses how the Singaporean government’s appeals to crises in geography have determined how the military maintains and reproduces the male body in a cartographic space. This serves as a prelude to locating the nexus between the state’s necropolitical power and the SAF as an institution of heteronormative masculinization responsible for transforming boys into men, encapsulating Gormon-Murray’s (2013:138) argument that male bodies and masculinities are spatially disciplined and empowered in relation to the feminine within spaces of home, work, and play. In examining the conscript’s dead body ‘as space’ with the capacity to govern the living, the second section specifically answers questions posed by Achille Mbembe (2003:12) in his articulation of necropolitics, namely: ‘What place is given to life, death, and the human body (in particular the wounded or slain body)? How are they inscribed in the order of power?’ It will be argued that the government exercises necropower in its hierarchization of conscript deaths that disallows chosen slain bodies the capacity to control the living by communicating affects/emotions. This is broadly representative of a state-led attempt to distance respectable
military masculinity from risk-taking warrior traits deemed acceptable in non-conscription militaries.

2 Reproducing Military Bodies in Southeast Asia

In arguing that gendered bodies should be conceptualized as bodies in/as space, Gormon-Murray (2013:138) emphasizes that the personal space of the male body is subject to being normalized by spaces wherein bodies and spaces co-constitute each other: ‘bodies are always performed, enabled, and/or constricted in particular places’. During NS, the male enlistee’s body must conform to a regimented repertoire of bodily movements and disciplined code of conduct deemed necessary for defending Singapore’s economically advanced urban metropolis which, through imaginative geographies, has always been represented as susceptible to geopolitical crises. Grosz (1995:250) establishes a clear case for a city’s spatial structure co-constituting the body, through which the body and city, by interfacing with each other, can transform cities. Grosz’s thesis about gendered bodies being inscribed by geographical space does not deterministically conclude that people are passively conditioned by their environments (Karamkar and Sarkar 2021:496). Rather, the futurity of Singapore’s sovereignty in Southeast Asia is premised upon a gendered order which exercises agency in disallowing the tropical environment’s traits to leave inscriptions upon the male citizen. Despite the lack of natural resources and its small size, Singapore’s ruling party have encouraged Singaporeans to view themselves as more privileged than their neighbours in Nusantara but also as more strategically vulnerable. In 1965, two years before conscription was legislated through the National Service Bill, resulting in the very first batch of able-bodied males aged 18 and over being drafted into the SAF, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew announced his intentions to build a ‘rugged’ and ‘tightly-knit’ society capable of ensuring survival in a ‘dangerous part of the world’ (Barr 2000:316).

The goal of this policy, which silenced dissenting voices, was primarily to unite its multicultural population with a sense of loyalty to the newly birthed country and to defend the city-state’s sovereignty from threats of invasion (Blackburn 2013). Lee’s Sinocentric outlook towards Southeast Asia was also informed by racial/cultural eugenics. Barr (1999:158) notes that Lee established an economic linkage to the race and genes of Singapore’s ascendant Chinese population battling Southeast Asia’s debilitating humidity after ‘moving from a superior to an inferior civilization’. The founding prime minister’s personal disdain towards Singapore’s tropicality is evidence of a sense of colonialist superiority typically expressed towards native peoples by their colonizers. In
establishing the relationality between a nation’s identity and its material environment, Ejdus (2017) explains that ruling elites can either introject a country’s geographical attributes to identity narratives or project narratives onto its spatial and material attributes. Projection occurs when the people read themselves onto the natural environment (Ejdus 2017:27). In transforming Singapore into a global city, Lee Kwan Yew’s introjections of Singapore being located in an ‘inferior civilization’ disavowed a national identity narrative that depicted the region’s tropical landscape. Instead, he projected an identity narrative of Singapore being ‘made’ and ‘transformed’ by disciplined bodies that were not economically or demographically defined by the region’s tropicality. As Cherian George (2021) argued in Air-conditioned nation revisited, Singapore’s global elites have emulated the economic progress of the temperate world in the cartographic tropics. The combat ruggedness required of recruits during basic military training to overcome the suffocating jungle and stupor-inducing humidity culminates in the ‘making’ of men and masculinities capable of overcoming the pernicious environment (Lowe 2021a). After over five decades, it should be highlighted that the male Singaporean’s rite of passage into manhood fits within a masculinized identity narrative that projects the accomplishments of male bodies in carving out and defending a metropolis that exhibits the living standards of the temperate world despite being in the tropics.

In maintaining the SAF as Southeast Asia’s most formidable military force through conscription, NS has legitimated the authoritarian ruling party’s construction of Malaysia and Indonesia as belligerent threats to national security. In reproducing masculinities characterized by self-control and obedience to authority that resist impulses to challenge the state, NS has a latent societal function beyond its manifest function of mobilization against invasions by foreign powers that cannot be thwarted by diplomacy and deterrence. Before a state can carry out its political, military, or economic functions, Loveman (2005:1656) argues that its legitimation to wield ideological power is first contingent on the state’s symbolic power, ‘exercised through the naturalization of the practices and cognitive schemes’. Through the accumulation and exercise of the state’s symbolic power, what started out initially as a controversial and unpopular practice of conscription is now a tradition. Hamilton-Hart (2009:265) points out that there are few reasons to accept the unsubstantiated claim that Singapore is strategically vulnerable to Indonesia. Nevertheless, in a ‘very strong hegemonic state’ that eliminates the possibilities of independent activism and agenda-setting in civil society (Ortmann 2012:13), nobody has questioned the myth of Singapore being a fledgling city-state forced to survive after acrimonious ejection from the Malayan federation. In an admission
made to Melanie Chew (1996) during an interview, Singapore’s first minister of defence, Dr Goh Keng Swee, disclosed the classified ‘Albatross files’ containing information that he initiated negotiations for Singapore to voluntarily secede from the merger of 1965 with Malaysia.

Militarization is best described as ‘a multilayered process through which military approaches to political problems gain elite and popular acceptance’ (Kuus 2009:546). In the case of Singapore, the geopolitical problems of neighbouring Malaysia and Indonesia opposing the city-state’s sovereignty are myths invented to legitimize a top-down command-and-order authoritarian militarized solution (Lowe 2021a). Acceptance of the military as a deterrent solution to the amplified threat of armed hostility was not widespread in the late 1960s (Blackburn 2013). Support for conscription was progressively garnered through the state’s homilies of the moral need to defend Singapore’s economic and demographic exceptionalism in economically mediocre Southeast Asia (Barr 2016). With Indonesia and Malaysia imagining Singapore as a ‘Chinese dot in a sea of green’ (Hamilton-Hart 2009:253), Singapore’s militarization of its male citizenry empowered its state elites to engage in the reverse-orientalism of strategically essentializing Malaysia and Indonesia as large Muslim countries needing to ‘know their place’ in the region. It is noteworthy that the republic’s military was established with the assistance of the Israeli Defense Forces. Malaysia and Indonesia have traditionally rejected the legitimacy of Zionism and continually refuse recognition of Israel as a nation-state. Singapore’s strong diplomatic and military relations with Israel reinforce the imaginative geographies of its regional identity as the ‘Israel of Southeast Asia’s Malay world’, delineating mental maps of the island as the smallest but most militarized country in the region. In arguing for nationalism to be conceptualized as competing masculinities, where the masculinities of other countries are deliberately marginalized and represented as subordinate, Slootmaeckers (2019:260) argues that the imagining of one’s nation as superior is part of this othering process. In the case of Singapore, the process of dis-identifying with Malaysia comprised the machination of an imaginative geography for its internal audiences that reorganized Malaysia and Indonesia—in geopolitical terms—to create a new national identity and narcissistic geography of its own territorial borders as vulnerable to invasion.

From the perspective of time geography, Edensor (2006:532) highlights the important role of repetitive and routinized habits in strengthening affective and cognitive links within the temporal-spatial synchronicities of the nation-state as a cultural community. Beyond the two-year full-time NS stint, the state also demands that its militarized civilians perform reserve duties up to the age of 40 (or 50 for commissioned officers) up to a maximum of 40 days a year. Thus,
the regimented and repetitive nature of foot drills, crew cuts, marching, and the display of arms in military events symbolize the importance of self-discipline and constitute un-reflexive habits culminating in shared conventions about in/appropriate ways of behaving as male Singaporeans within the physical borders of the city-state. These temporal elements reinforce geographical boundaries between Singapore and its neighbours that are accentuated by cultural and religious differences. The age of enlistment for males is the time during a male's life deemed by the government as fitting for him to begin his compulsory rite of passage into manhood. Following Benedict Anderson's (1991) notion of nations as imagined communities that structure NS as a rite of passage into adult masculinity, nationalism shapes how men also imagine their fellow male citizens and their masculinized ways of being.

In Anderson's work, the nation determines how time, according to calendars, is used to discipline the lives of citizens. For males in Singapore, 18 is the statutory age for enlisting in the armed services, with deferment usually granted until the male citizen completes his pre-university studies or polytechnic diploma. Beyond that, deferment is seldom granted. This is, however, judged on a case-by-case basis and allowances are made for the purposes of representing Singapore in highly exceptional cases of sporting talent, such as that of Olympic gold medallist Joseph Schooling (Lowe 2018:438), who was deemed capable of bringing pride to the nation in international competitions. The nationalist regulation of the life-course of males from entry into manhood and through reservist duties up to the age of 40 (and 50 for officers) constitutes an integral part of the Singaporean nation-state's calendrical time that maps national spaces with diurnal rhythms of behavioural practices. Beyond the spaces of Singapore's militaries, these rhythms include the singing of the national anthem and the recitation of the national pledge during school assemblies, which cultivate positive affects of national belonging—a state mechanism that mentally instils the obligation for male students to obediently complete their militarized stints into manhood. Masculinities acquired through NS 'speak' nationalism in a manner that masculinizes national identity in 'the simultaneity of past and future in the instantaneous present', which to Anderson (1991:24) is fundamental to the perpetual existence of the nation-state. On a large calendrical scale, the annual National Day Parade in Singapore is a militarized ritual including the display of military arms that reinforces a strong sense of place in Southeast Asia (Kong and Yeoh 1997:216). As enlistees must swear an oath that they will be prepared to die for the country, the public display of arms soothes the country's insecurities by communicating its power to neighbouring countries and its sovereign right to protect itself by maintaining a military largely dependent on conscripts. As employers are also required to
accommodate the reservist obligations of their male employees, their organizational practices must also correspond to the military’s needs.

In Singapore, the grieving parents of conscripts who died during training have stimulated an impetus for senior commanders to review how they should transform boys into men when hazing, sleep deprivation and certain physical punishments—deemed normal and beneficial in strengthening regular soldiers for the rigours of deployment in war—are no longer deemed appropriate in the reproduction of the space of the male body. Walsh (2007:280) comments that the pandering of SAF senior commanders to such fears exhibits a needlessly ‘undue attention on safety’. This obsession with safety is certainly responsible for controlling militarized spaces traditionally responsible for producing warrior-like hegemonic masculinities. Atherton (2009) points out that the British army’s living quarters are muscularized and disciplined spaces but nevertheless require soldiers to immerse themselves in regimes of cleanliness, including the preparation of fatigues and personal grooming, and regular inspections. While these activities might be tied to feminine practices that pertain to the giving of life rather than the taking of life, they are transformed into masculinized activities in male spaces which prepare soldiers for the latter (Woodward 2003).

The SAF’s recent prohibition of hazing and sleep deprivation—traditional hallmarks of muscularized practices in Anglophone non-conscription militaries which are instrumental to enhancing a soldier’s survivability—is emblematic of an intended de-masculinization of military spaces that place the male body in a double-bind. In militaries around the world, it is not uncommon for physical inadequacies, such as illnesses or weaknesses arising from injuries from training, to be derided as ‘girly’, ‘gay’, or less manly (Hockey 2003). On the one hand, therefore, the obsession with bureaucratic safety protocols is producing the desired outcome of an aversion to the ‘no guts, no glory’ or ‘tough soldiers don’t report in sick’ hypermasculinity that is synonymous with non-conscription militaries which are training regular soldiers for deployment in wars. Yet on the other hand, the obsessive and undue emphasis on safety, as Walsh (2007:280) points out, results in the SAF’s training standards being unrealistically restrictive and poorly equipped for mobilization in an actual war.

Tan (2009) has been forthright in arguing that the Singaporean state casts a phallocentric image of itself as masculinized through institutionalized practices which reinforce male narcissism and the imposition of patriarchal values upon the society it infantilizes and femininizes to justify its subordination to masculinity. Since hegemonic nationalism undergirds the state’s capacity to mobilize its military for war, the ‘phallocentric economy’ (Wadham 2013:222)
of the military is the locus of masculinities marked by warrior-like forms of manliness which prepare soldiers to kill or die at the frontline for the glory and honour of the nation. In a proving ground of masculinity, it is acknowledged that risk-taking in the military, which repudiates femininity or vulnerable masculinities, is how masculine hegemony is reproduced (Richardson 2010). Prior to the clamp-down on risk-taking within the internal politics and microculture of the elite guards battalion to which the late Dave Lee belonged, having the stamina and strength to endure hazing activities exemplified the hyper-masculinity of a respected combat vocation recognized as requiring a greater degree of physical strength. In summary, an official inquest found evidence of breaches to training regulations which, in conjunction with the denial of early treatment of Dave Lee’s symptoms of heatstroke, had caused his death (Lowe 2021a:483).

The unofficial power relations enacted through sadistic hazing and his commander not permitting Lee to be evacuated confirm Pendlebury’s (2020) argument that masculine enculturation in an elite military corps is often dramaturgical, especially in terms of the performativity of manliness in the face of illness and feminine weakness. Wadham (2016:282) explains that despite their carnivalesque nature, hazing, violence, physical punishments, and bastardization in Anglophone militaries serve a core purpose in solidifying the military’s exclusively male culture. It could be argued that sleep deprivation and hazing prepare recruits to survive the predictable realities of war. The ability to withstand a high degree of pain might certainly constitute one’s right to a ‘hard-bodied’ hypermasculinity in the military. Nevertheless, while the masculinized tolerance of pain underlying the visibility and wounding or even bodily deaths, of soldiers is used as a resource of the state to engender responses in civilians that substantiate the need for war in Anglophone countries (Dawney 2019), bodily pain in the context of Singapore’s conscription military is subject to state erasure. The military cadaver that endured bodily pain represents the state’s power to wield violence upon the conscript and his surviving family. Thus, pain and wounding in Singapore cannot be subject to the processes of masculinized hero-fication in Western countries. In a city-state where questions surrounding the sacrificial costs of conscription can potentially destabilize support for paternalistic rule, conscripts who have died in training are necessarily positioned as victims rather than as heroes.

Walklate, Mythen, and McGarry (2011:143) have stated that the media’s labelling and representation of fallen British soldiers as victims is inherently problematic and contradictory when soldiering is traditionally evocative of masculinity. In Singapore, nowhere was this more contradictory than in the military elite’s condemnation of the sadistic treatment to which Lee and his
platoon mates were subjugated when they were punished with outdated, gruelling exercises that had been banned in the SAF. As Lee’s death was caused by his inability to withstand the pain and suffering inflicted, the state unwittingly placed his body within a narrative of victimhood. In short, the state absolves itself of ‘owning’ conscript deaths by refusing to recognize the tolerance of pain as a signifier of hegemonic military masculinity. A raft of enhanced safety measures has now been implemented to control the SAF’s spaces of work/training, rest, and play that discipline the self-gratifying pursuit of hegemonic, warrior-like masculinities. Gormon-Murray (2008) argues that when the masculinized body negotiates feminine domesticity, there is usually a reconfiguration of the masculine identity or a new engagement with feminine elements that results in masculinized domesticity. It is therefore likely that the SAF’s obsession with safety will result in the conscript’s personal space becoming more domesticated. The upshot of this would be military masculinities being placed in a state of flux when safety concerns contest the normative masculinized imaginaries of gendered performances surrounding ‘hard-bodied’ roles embedded in the spatial practices of elite vocations.

3 Necropolitics of Militarized Bodies as Space: Dead Conscripts as State Resources

For Grosz (1995:248), the relationality between bodies and cities is not causal but, rather, established through assemblages. Thus, in Gormon-Murray’s (2013:139) reading of Grosz’s perspective of the body as a centre of insight into its spatial surroundings, the gendered body is the site of receiving, responding to, and producing emotions. In his own words: ‘This adds to understanding the body-as-space; it is an emotional locus. Moreover, emotions are posited as connective tissue between bodies and spaces.’ In response to the questions posed by Mbembe (2003:12), interpolated in the introduction about the status of the slain/wounded body and its inscription in state power, this section discusses the hegemonic state’s economies of necropower in ascribing value and meaning to its dead male military bodies-as-space that are capable of transmitting various affects and emotions.

In the case of the SAF, which has never been mobilized for territorial armed conflict, instances of conscripts succumbing to death in training for whatever reason can arguably be represented as by-products of the legitimating ideology’s necropower. Mbembe (2003:21) argues that conditions of people being ‘kept alive but in a state of injury’ as the ‘living dead’ constitute the wielding of necropower to ensure political and social outcomes. In Mbembe’s articulation
of necropolitics, the wounded body is conferred the status of the ‘living dead’. The ontology of necropolitics rests in ‘the body-as-wound traversing the boundaries between the human and nonhuman, matter and form, technology and body’ (Emerson 2019:8). While the SAF promotes a strong culture of safety that seeks to preserve life-giving conditions during peace-time training, the caveat needs to be inserted that necropower, as evidenced by the accidental deaths of Lee and Pang during training, is not totalizing. Emerson (2019:6) provides a good explanation of the ontological commitments of necropolitical theory, positing that violence is not always mediated by sovereign power when ‘[d]eath also encompasses the energies that move in and through bodies, creating surfaces and contoured bodies as it passes through them’.

This is because while the state can determine which soldiers are placed in frontline roles with a higher risk of death, it does not arbitrarily choose which ones should die. While Mbembe’s thesis of necropolitics originated in government policies and practices exposing life to the power of death, it has resulted in problematic interpretations that now include non-totalizing powers of death, such as, for example, the stigma surrounding the drug-related and sexually transmitted diseases of sex workers. This study’s use of necropolitics is nevertheless relevant for a better understanding of the co-constitutionality of male Singaporean bodies-as-space because, as Emerson (2019:4) argues, necropolitics and the politics of death are appropriated by governments to enhance life-giving conditions. In short, the power of life is buttressed through necropolitics. Besides these two, non-regular soldiers dying in training accidents, there were two other deaths arising from safety lapses reported in the news media. In the death of Gavin Chan, aged 21, vehicle commander of an infantry vehicle during an exercise in Australia’s Shoalwater Bay, safety omissions were responsible for his vehicle landing on its side while he attempted to navigate out of difficult terrain. This fatality took place on 15 September 2017. In a similar lapse in safety on 3 November 2018, Liu Kai, aged 22, a Singapore Permanent Resident and son of migrants from China, was operating a military passenger vehicle when he died. After it was revealed that his vehicle failed to maintain a safe distance of thirty metres from the artillery tank he was trailing, the vehicle’s commander, a captain, was subsequently charged with responsibility for his death for failing to ensure that the deceased kept a safe distance.

1 Where Mbembe’s theory has been wrenched from the context of his manifesto and applied in more extreme ways, there are instances of the concept being used to capture inequalities resulting from exposure to the moderate chance of death through self-inflicted illnesses caused by drug-taking (see Tsang 2020).
There is a noted scholarly interest in the affective agency of certain military corpses that are nevertheless capable of controlling the world of the living (Dawney 2019). As Deleuze and Guattari (2004:288) broadly define affect relationally as the capacities of bodies ‘to act and be acted upon’, the capacity for memories of slain militarized bodies to communicate affects is also determined by meanings assigned to the dead by the state. Bednar (2013) coins the term ‘killing affects’ to describe the necropolitical power exercised by the state to kill public memories of the dead, which is insensitive to surviving loved ones and denies them the legitimacy of grieving. He argues that economies of necropower are embedded within the state’s construction of certain deaths which are deemed more mournable and worthy of memorialization than others (Bednar 2013). Bednar’s notion of ‘killing affects’ dovetails with Gormon-Murray’s (2013) notion of the body-as-space transmitting emotions and affects. In Singapore, the authoritarian government has often used neo-Confucian ideologies and ‘Asian Values’ to quash demands for democratization (Pezutto 2019). Thus, the state’s policies on conscription are, by definition, necropolitical exercises that intently enact political death on bodies—dead or alive—that have the capacity to challenge the coercive functions and mechanisms of the paternalistic state. The conscript’s cadaver, together with its adornments, is loaded with rhetorical force which, if not controlled by the state, will pose a challenge to the state’s mythologization of regional exceptionalism and vulnerability. While the generic slain/wounded body posited by Mbembe is not disaggregated in terms of gender, ethnicity, or race, the SAF’s unequal remembering and forgetting of slain conscripts does not merely disguise and expose the real stakes of NS as a masculine sacrifice for the nation.

While these deaths resulting from safety lapses during training—not armed conflict—are undoubtedly a financial liability, as family members will be offered compensation, the fact is that confidential sums of money are involved and, even if reluctantly accepted, these constitute ‘an impersonal relation of exchange’ (Deflem 2003:77), thereby divesting the personhood of the deceased as expedient for the purposes of legitimizing authoritarian rule. The transformative power of money as a fungible means of compensation, according to Simmel’s Philosophy of money (2004 [1907]:344), is that it amounts to the ‘atomization of the individual person’. Based on Deflem’s (2003) reading of Simmel, money as detachment transforms objects and human bodies into commodities. The SAF’s power to bring closure to deaths through payment amounts to an exercise of sovereign necropower that, despite the tragedy, reduces slain bodies as replaceable for the purposes of training for operational readiness during peace-time. Ostensibly, financial compensation, offered on the part of the Singapore government, assigns to the dead conscript the status of victimhood.
Mbembe’s original arguments were about the power of policymakers and colonials to discursively produce bodies for a ‘morbid spectacle’ (2003:35). In the SAF, the state displays its power by ascribing rhetorical meaning to corpses of its dead as unfortunate victims and sacrifices that could have been prevented through safety protocols. While this offers little consolation to the deceased conscript’s family members, it quells demands for conscription to be abolished with public apologies, confidential sums of financial compensation, and official announcements of enhancements to the SAF’s safety culture and punishment of culpable parties.

In the tragedy claiming the life of actor Aloysius Pang in early 2019—who died as a reservist in New Zealand rather than as a full-time NS serviceman—that presaged the much-discussed safety timeout across the army and far-reaching changes, it is unsurprising that the civilian public exemplified a greater sense of conviction in their emphatic calls for the SAF to prohibit risky practices and punishments. In summary, Pang, aged 28, suffered severe crush injuries to his chest and abdomen whilst diagnosing a technical fault in a self-propelled Howitzer during his reservist training at a SAF live-firing operation conducted in Waiouru, New Zealand. After Pang succumbed to his injuries five days later, on 24 January 2019, his body was repatriated to Singapore the very next day. Following a privately held vigil for family members and friends, the public were allowed to offer their condolences a day later. A full military funeral took place prior to the cremation on 27 January. In May 2019, the findings of an inquest established that this unfortunate death resulted from lapses in safety that were the fault of Pang and two other servicemen during their reservist duty. Within three weeks of Pang’s death, sweeping reforms to training were marked by the inauguration of the Office of the Inspector-General of the SAF (held by a high-ranking brigadier-general) empowered to scrutinize, investigate, and enforce safety processes. In February 2019, it was announced that enlistees, regardless of rank, could call a hotline to report safety breaches and ‘near misses’ of commanders on a confidential basis and even go so far as to demand a stop to training in the event of non-compliance.2 That these sudden measures were implemented months before findings of an official inquest into Pang’s death were released in May 2019 suggests the state needs to maintain public support for male conscription.

The state’s elitist treatment of Pang’s military death amounted to the rather arbitrary privileging of non-hegemonic combat masculinity. Due to Pang’s

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fame and, in particular, his familiarity from local state-sanctioned television dramas that indirectly supported the state's authoritarian rule, his death was that of a hero and was, in contrast to those of Dave Lee, Liu Kai, and Gavin Chan, treated by the state as more grievable. This unequal treatment of military deaths is not unique to Singapore. For comparison, the British Army’s celebration of the courageous acts of its soldiers in the Afghanistan and Iraq wars through sporting events between civilians and servicemen, as Kelly (2013) explains, has ‘hero-fied’ and galvanized public acceptance of militarism. In short, the pro-military media’s juxtaposition of the heroic sacrifices of combatants with the defeat of religious extremists and the freedoms enjoyed by British civilians normalizes an acceptance of war (Kelly 2013:724). Because militaries are not always consistent in how they privilege certain forms of masculinity, Enloe (2000:289) argues that they implement practices ‘by manipulating the meanings of both femininity and masculinity’. By refusing to transform the non-celebrity deaths of Lee, Liu, or Chan into ‘good deaths’, the Singaporean government chose to accord a disproportionately greater degree of privileges and honours to Pang’s death in a reservist support role. His death was ‘hero-fied’ by state-censored media, which juxtaposed his performance as a child praising the government’s strict policies with his personal sacrifice of deferring filming in a romance drama. As a loyal citizen who did not request deferment to further his personal goals, the sacrifice of his life was marshalled by the government as an exemplary form of manhood. Unlike British militarism, Pang’s death was not placed within a narrative of victimhood when ‘hero-fication’ was possible due to the mediatized masculinity of his civilian career. It was one exemplifying the proselytized collectivist ‘society over self’ mantra used by the authoritarian state to preserve its dominance. The SAF effectively appropriated his fame to suppress questions about the necessity and true costs of male conscription. The consumability of Pang’s ‘good’ military death therefore overshadowed those expected of an armament technician, which, by definition, is a non-combat vocation.

Through the profuse apologies from the SAF’s leadership and politicians, the recency of Pang’s demise transformed the deceased into an ideal citizen who was deemed worthier of life right from the outset. By comparison Dave Lee, Liu Kai, and Gavin Chan remained positioned by both the state and the media as forgotten victims who had suffered ‘bad deaths’. At Dave Lee’s military funeral, his grieving mother released a press statement calling for commanders to be harshly punished and deterred from meting out severe physical punishments, such as the nightly ‘turnouts’ for gruelling and outdated exercises endured by her son’s platoon. She said: ‘If I have to sacrifice my only son to bring this message across, make sure it is one that brings forth solid changes to the seemingly
perfect training systems.'

Sadly, even though Lee's mother never called for an end to conscription, her request for an end to unauthorized punishments did not garner positive responses from the SAF's senior commanders. Pang's death, in contrast, exuded rhetorical power by triggering a safety timeout after admissions from the chief of the army, Major-General Goh Si-Hou, that things 'cannot be business as usual'—the temporary halting of field training and live-firing activities culminated in an official decision to implement shorter training and reservist stints in the longer term.

In writing about the manner in which highly visible, flag-draped coffins are used by the British government to substantiate the losses of war, Dawney (2020:1107) argues that the concealment of the wounded military bodies lying beneath 'contributes to the affective force of the coffins and the demand for recognition'. Wounds not only engender affects but can also arouse visceral reactions in viewers (Lowe 2021b). Singapore's state-censored news media provide a fleeting visibility of the military funerals of conscripts slain in training. The state is, however, authoritative in silencing the demands of grieving family members for public recognition of the sacrifices and losses they shoulder when their sons die. Harsh disciplinary actions meted out against culpable commanders clearly frame slain conscripts as victims who died at the hands of vicious commanders. In the exceptional case of Pang, however, his hero-fication exemplified the symbolic rhetoricity of 'governing' the SAF's living that rendered his passing worthier of permanent commemoration. By comparison, the deaths of Dave Lee, Gavin Chan, and Liu Kai were quickly forgotten; they were considered victims who had died in unfortunate accidents and at the inquests of whom nothing particularly newsworthy had been reported in terms of positive reform. While a broad-minded reading of the state's narrative in the news media implies that it was the cumulative effect of the four deaths occurring within eighteen months that provided the impetus for safer training procedures, the celerity with which the minister for defence announced new measures to heighten safety in the SAF after Pang died confirms the idea that future enliesters will fondly remember the actor as a hero.

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The authoritarian state exercises necropower by deciding which corpses of its slain soldiers deserve a political life after death, measured in terms of their grievability. This is also about the state’s necropower to render the slain soldier’s cadaver incapable of being a locus of emotions/affects and no longer a body-as-space. In a similar vein, the British army embodies outward hierarchies of grief towards the deaths of combatants who willingly risked their lives to protect the living (Zehfuss 2009). The British army has, unlike the SAF, been mobilized for combat in important wars. However, the unequal treatment of conscript deaths in Singapore is pledged to obviate preventable training deaths rather than the rationalization of war violence, as is the case in Britain (Zehfuss 2009:420). Hence, Pang’s corpse, as body-as-space, transmits emotions and affects in a manner that normalizes safer practices connotative of domestic femininity within the SAF’s masculinized spaces.

With Pang’s death resulting in a markedly safer SAF, albeit one that has chosen to distance itself from warrior-like masculinity, military spaces enjoyed by future male enlistees elevate Pang’s dead body as a rhetorical subject with a ‘louder’ political voice. In the nexus between the authoritarian state’s power to ascribe meaning to the bodily remains of its military dead, the mass outpourings of sadness and condolences from a mourning public legitimized far-reaching measures that would amount to an affective memorialization of Pang’s death within the spaces and hierarchical structures of the SAF. The importance of Pang’s death in the SAF’s denunciation of masochistic masculinities is evidence of the ruling party’s elitism. In the ministerial speech\(^5\) encapsulating justifications for enhancements to safety processes made by Dr Ng Eng-Hen, defence minister, in Parliament on 6 May 2019, it was never mentioned that the totality of four conscript deaths in an eighteen-month period was cause for concern in the SAF’s history. This is tantamount to an admission that the deaths of non-famous conscripts did not result in substantial losses, whereas it was Pang’s death that was a real loss. In the words of Morse (2018:248):

> Deaths that are not avowed as losses make no demand for a grieving for the dead and so construe these deaths as non-grievable, which means negating the ‘humanness’ of the dead. The opposite is also true: deaths that are avowed as losses reinvigorate the ‘humanness’ of those who died.

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The ministerial speech clearly attributed the rationale for radical changes to just one death, but because his mattered the most, it undoubtedly elevated his ‘human-ness’ and gave Pang’s cadaver a life of its own. Inevitably, the recency and mediated ‘celebrity effect’ of Pang’s death in this ministerial press release refracts any future (re)interpretations of subjective meanings originally assigned to the slain bodies of Chan, Liu, and Lee.

In this age of the new media, Patricia Clough (2008:16) argues that ‘the circuit from affect to emotion is attached to a circulation of images meant to simulate desire-already-satisfied, demand-already-met, as capital extracts value from affect—around consumer confidence, political fears, etc’. Pang’s dead body was endowed with the capacity to arouse and transmit agency in attuning the spatial and gendered behaviour of male conscripts in the world of the living. To anxious parents and wives sending their sons and husbands for full-time NS and reservist training, a new culture of safety for the SAF in the aftermath of Pang’s death constitutes the allaying of fears as a demand and desire fulfilled, at least in part. His death was conveniently used by the state to preserve public support for NS as a legitimating ideology. Clearly, the capacity to contain and communicate emotions/the affects of Singaporean nationalism within the SAF through the memories of the three other slain soldiers, who were not famous, was subject to a ‘slow killing’ by the state—the subtle exercise of necropower.

4 Conclusions

Against wider debates on combat in military masculinities being susceptible to reification, this article’s East Asian militarized perspective decentres the importance of reducing hegemonic military masculinity to the rigours of combat. While Millar and Tidy (2017) have called for combat, as an empirical reality, to be understood within the nuances of a country’s civil-military relations and geography, this article contributes a perspective on how military masculinities in Singapore will most likely become co-constitutive of the male body’s (re)negotiation of the femininity associated with risk-adverse safety procedures. From a spatial perspective, imaginative geographies of Southeast Asia remain integral to the city-state’s authoritarian governance-by-crisis legitimation, which stresses the need to prepare for armed crisis through military training. Through conscription, the Singaporean male enlistee, as a body-in-space, is required to enact the performances expected by a wealthy city-state that is economically and culturally superior to its neighbouring Muslim nations, which are geographically imagined as poorer, economically mediocre, and hostile.
In the wake of four training-related deaths, within an eighteen-month period, that were fully preventable, warrior-like forms of hypermasculinity in the SAF, exemplified by hazing and macho risk-taking practices within the microcultures of platoons/battalions and companies, are now identified as training risks. As a result, safety measures have been newly introduced that might be construed by non-conscription militaries as unrealistic. While the authorities do not want their intentions to be mistaken for a lowering of training standards that compromise the untested capabilities of the SAF in territorial warfare, the changes certainly represent the fragility of public support for conscription, marked by a renewed need to placate the anxious parents of conscripts (civil-military relations), and will recalibrate the manner in which conscription makes men. It is therefore necessary to theorize about fluid forms of military masculinities in Singapore that sever the ‘hard-bodied’ traits of combat manliness in Anglophone militaries, which are the primary interpretive frames of reference. The gendered subjectivities of male conscripts in Singapore might eventually be determined to a greater degree by leadership roles and rank, with a reduced emphasis on physical prowess. As the enhanced safety measures, in the form of more hours of sleep and rest, and the removal of stigma surrounding the practice of reporting in sick, that comprise spatial practices within the military’s masculinized spaces are connotative of feminine domesticity, it is likely that the pursuit of male masculinity by Singaporean male conscripts will be reconfigured through the negotiation of these feminine spatial entanglements within the masculine. It is therefore likely that the caring military masculinities deemed necessary for zero fatalities can be gradually (re)negotiated until such time that they can co-exist alongside the warrior-like traits of masculine endurance that are nevertheless essential for the purposes of military training.

For Gorman-Murray (2013), the ability of the human body to communicate emotions/affects is its precondition to function as a body-as-space. This article’s study of four deaths within an eighteen-month period in the SAF sheds light on how the state wields necropower to discursively ascribe meaning to its slain bodies and determines the extent to which one of those bodies was most mournable and important in changing the spatial practices of the SAF. From a geographical perspective, the art of memorializing one death over another is to immolate the rhetoricity of less-significant dead bodies by disallowing their bodies to communicate affects. In this regard, the concept of necropolitics is useful for the purposes of understanding how the authoritarian state appropriates accidental death to sustain better life-giving conditions by discouraging the pursuit of hypermasculinity. The rider inserted is that given the efflorescence of work that adapts Mbembe’s original concept,
which is now popular with geographers and sociologists, future research into the reaches and limits of necropolitics in East Asian cultures and their military settings should avoid turning necropolitics into a conceptually nebulous dumping ground for a wide range of non-totalizing death risks forced into the category of ‘letting die’. Indeed, future research can examine the reproduction of military masculinities that take into consideration, using qualitative insights, how spatial practices of riskiness or exposure to death have culminated in regimented military spaces becoming representational spaces of elite masculinities and misogyny. In addition, this article hopes to stimulate empirical work that yields deeper insights into the ways that NS constitutes a male rite of passage that is spatialized and which links the country’s urban landscapes with male-ness.

References


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