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Blurring the future: AI regurgitation and the Singapore Muslim community

Mcgrail, J.M.

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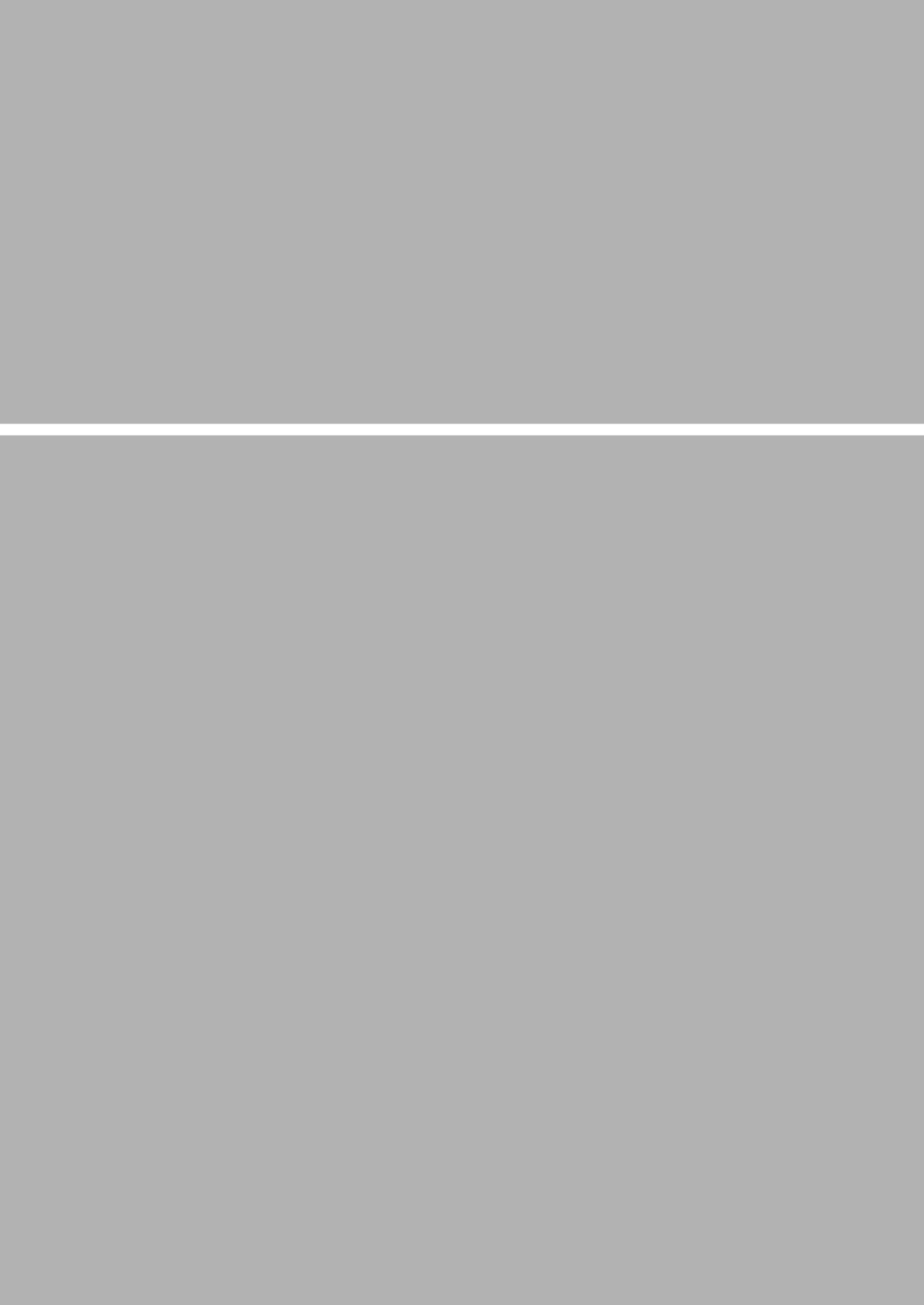
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Chapter 5

“Act Blur, Live Longer”

INTRODUCTION

In September 2022, I attended the Septfest arts festival in Singapore to see a new play by writer and activist Alfian Sa’at. “The Death of Singapore Theatre” critiques state censorship of the arts through malicious compliance. By staging the process of having a script approved by the IMDA (Infocomm Media Development Authority), Alfian blurs the line between onstage Singaporean arts, and backstage bureaucratic wrangling. As a researcher interested in how technology intervenes in the way Singaporean Muslims imagine the future, I wanted to see how one of Singapore’s more outspoken writers challenged the Smart Nation. By staging his censorship, Alfian was able to rightly, though facetiously, argue that he had done exactly as the state asked. However, Alfian was not the only performer at Septfest using “blurring” as an artistic method to critique the state.

In fact, all of that year’s Septfest was blurry. Founded in 1990, the arts centre Substation, that organises Septfest, was one of the first independent art spaces in Singapore. For many years it served as a hub for artists who could not, or did not want to, find space in state sponsored galleries. However, that year’s festival was different. After over thirty years at its location on Armenian street, the Substation board received news in July 2021 that the building would be closed by the National Arts Council for renovations (Substation 2021). Whilst an offer was extended to return, they were informed they would be one tenant among many. The board declined the offer, meaning that Septfest 2022 went ahead without a location. Instead, the community blurred beyond the walls of Substation, spreading to independent art spaces across the city.

The content of the festival also blurred. Having been removed from Armenia Street, the organizers announced that the theme would be uproot/rootless with Substation’s website asking, “When something is removed from a place, what remains?” (Substation 2022). The closure of Substation was never explicitly referenced, but the presence of that decision could be felt in every event. As the program stated, “Now, more than ever, we need to unearth the lessons that reside in...roots” (Substation 2022). Artists throughout the program took this opportunity to critique the state for their resettlement of indigenous groups, surveillance policies of the Smart Nation and relations with Malaysia – all in a suitably blurry manner.

It was within this wider milieu, that I found myself at a performance by Nurul Huda Rashid: A Singaporean Muslim artist. In *Nodes* Rashid critiqued how images of Muslim women become circulated and entrenched online. During the artist talk which followed, she argued that algorithms created the bounded category of “Muslim woman” who is either liberated or oppressed. Whilst the categorization of Muslims by the state has a long history within Singapore, as I will go on to explore, such histories were not mentioned in her performance, nor was religion. This was a result of an IMDA request for the removal of references to religion. Nevertheless, Rashid used blurring to infer her critique of the state and its categorization Muslim women. Given my research focus on Muslim responses to AI in Singapore, Rashid’s performance spurred me to explore how other Muslim artists used blurring to resist state categories.

I derive the concept of blurring from the phrase “act blur, live longer” which originates in the Singaporean military as advice for new recruits. In both Malaysia and Singapore ‘blur’ is a common epithet for someone seemingly clueless. In the case of military service, it is a reminder not to be a ‘smart-ass’ and incur the wrath of senior officers. However, given that national service is mandatory for Singaporean men, the phrase escaped its military origins, becoming advice for parents, managers, and politicians alike. In this expanded context acting blur refers to tactically implementing plausible deniability. Giving the appearance of cluelessness can be a useful tool. In the arts, blurring allows practitioners to skirt state censorship and still perform their work.

Blurring, I assert, is a practice of making oneself less visible to government surveillance without disappearing. Visibility can be a double-edged sword. Whilst being recognized by the state can grant access to rights, it can also lead to increased violence (Cárdenas 2017). Further, visibility can easily render one amenable to unwelcome forms of categorisation. This is particularly true when states use technology to make their citizens visible. Under Smart Cities, the data captured by cameras must be made computer readable for algorithms to sort and parse. As I will show, this Smart Nation sorting ‘objectifies’ categories by turning identity into bounded, countable data points. This reinforces the dynamic Rana (2011) illustrates, whereby Muslims are constructed as a racial category in opposition to the normative citizen. Therefore, the algorithmic reason accompanying Smart Cities entrenches, rather than produces derogatory categories like the racialized identity ‘Muslim’. Being blurry can make categorization difficult by resisting the imposed boundaries of identity.

Blurring is unlike Browne’s (2015) dark *sousveillance* where surveillance is undermined whilst keeping out of sight, because blurring is about being unclear publicly. In Browne’s dark *sousveillance*, the gaze of surveillance is inverted, the watcher becomes the watched. This inversion is performed whilst remaining out of sight (Browne 2015, 21). For example, Ali (2021) shows that the Muslim community in New York post 9/11 obscure their political participation, by having discussions about NYPD surveillance in private spaces. In contrast, I show that Singaporean artists make themselves visible to surveillance but act blurry by performing outside expected categories of the state. By performing publicly, blurring allows these Muslim artists to expand the category ‘Muslim’ by asserting a blurrier definition. This illegibility has the added bonus of offering plausible deniability. It is more difficult to censor work that cannot be clearly defined, as we see with Alfian’s “Death of Singapore Theatre.” Blurring, therefore, can help describe how Muslims resist the definitions of identity imposed by racialization.

By looking at the artistic works of Nurul Huda Rashid, Noor Iskandar and bani haykal, I explore how these Muslim artists not only evade censorship but also blur the categories of the state. In Rashid’s *Nodes* she blurs the simplified category of “Muslim woman” as constructed by algorithms. Iskandar’s *nur* blurs the walls of the mosque to imagine a Muslim community that transcends the boundaries which divide. Finally, haykal’s *momok elektrik* blurs the lines of Muslim religious practice to explore the possibilities of syncretism.

Why are Muslims so Visible in Singapore’s Smart Nation?

Singapore’s Smart Nation initiative began in 2014 with the data spark project. A collaboration between the government and telecoms business Singtel, the initiative installed 1000 sensors all over the city (Kong and Woods 2018). They tracked everything from air quality to traffic levels and crime rates. This network was expanded in 2016 with ‘Polcam’ and ‘Polcam 2.0’ projects which installed 7300 cameras (Koay 2017). Additionally, data from buses and trains are collected through tap to pay systems. This network of cameras and sensors, referred to as the “Smart Nation Sensor Platform”, forms the sensing part of the Smart Nation.

The collected data flows into GovTech, which assumes two crucial roles (GovTech 2019). Firstly, they develop software and services like “Singpass,” a platform enabling Singaporeans to access various amenities, from healthcare to public swimming pools. These services, in turn,

generate even more data. Secondly, GovTech sorts, parses, and anonymizes this data before disseminating it to government agencies and State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs). Within the government, this data fuels the creation of fiscal, technological, and social policies. The SOEs use the data to create innovative products for industry and government. These organizations, government and otherwise, represent the thinking part of the system. Together, the sensing and thinking parts of the smart city create a feedback loop which automates and rationalizes governance (Shelton, Zook and Wiig, 2015, 13).

Singapore's Smart Nation Project is driven by what some call the "imperative to be smart," (Calder 2016, 20) and others less charitably call "techno-anxiety" (Chong 2021, 247). Singapore is small, and poor in physical resources. Consequently, the ruling PAP (People's Action Party) has argued that the country is economically vulnerable and must be efficient and disruptive to survive. By many measures, the Smart Nation has achieved these goals. As Ang-Tan and Tan (2021) argue, Singapore's Smart City has been successful because the state's interventionist approach allows for seamless work between SOEs, government and private industry. During the Covid-19 pandemic, for example, digital infrastructure facilitated an effective state response (Koh, Lim, Tan 2020, 4). This has led some to view Singapore's Smart Nation as a laboratory for exploring urban governance challenges.

However, responses to Smart Nation projects have not been universally positive with many Singaporeans seeing it as surveillance. As Kong and Woods (2018) show, the Smart Nation project "ShineSeniors", which aimed to help older people live independently for longer by installing cameras and sensors in their homes, was widely resisted. Many participants resorted to covering cameras with towels. At a dinner during my first week in Singapore, friends described a time when their acquaintance had thrown a cigarette butt on the floor. No one was around, but like clockwork their fine arrived days later. Everyone agreed there must have been a camera watching. As Ho (2017) argues, whilst a sensing city creates efficient data feedback loops, it also creates a panoptical effect.

Racialization in Singapore

Of course, Foucauldian governmentality is not new in Singapore. As Abdullah argues, Singapore's key governing paradigm has long been state surveillance paired with multi-racialism, which argues that "ethnic and religious diversity is a problem that needs to be conscientiously

managed” (Abdullah 2016, 214). Consequently, ethnicity is made visible in Singapore’s everyday politics. Ethnicity is printed on identity cards, determines school subjects, and shapes quotas in the electoral system. These bureaucratic systems are arranged along the lines of the racial categories Chinese, Malay, Indian and Other⁸⁵ (CMIO). As Babcock (2023) shows, the CMIO is also entrenched in the visual culture of Singapore where the four races are represented in cultural dress and tied to their associated religious affiliation. For example, Malay racial identity is frequently conflated with Muslim faith. Consequently, Singaporeans are expected to occupy hyphenated identities like Singaporean-Malay and these identities should be perceptible. Therefore, Babcock (2023) argues that Singaporean citizens, along with the state, watch the boundaries of each other’s racial identity.

All Singaporeans are racialized in this way. However, Singaporean Muslims find themselves in a double bind. As Babcock (2023) and Chua (1996) argue, in the hyphenated racial identities of Singaporeans, the Singaporean should come first, followed by race. Muslim-Singaporean identity disrupts the hierarchy of the CMIO by complicating racial identities, as Muslims may be Malay, Indian or others (Tschacher 2018). Abdullah (2016) argues, therefore, that public displays of piety by Muslims risk destabilizing the carefully managed racial harmony of the public sphere. Therefore, all public acts of piety are scrutinized, regardless of how seemingly innocuous. This includes Muslim Singaporeans refusing to say Merry Christmas, which the PAP labelled as “exclusivist” in 2019. This term, ““exclusivist,”” is used euphemistically here to suggest that an act is the beginning of a slippery slope towards extremism (Abdullah 2021, 245). Müller (2018) refers to this labelling as ‘classificatory power’ where the state outlines expected behaviours which encourage normative compliance and that it surveils to ensure are carried out. If the cameras of the Smart Nation represent the physical manifestation of the panopticon, policies like the CMIO are its social manifestation.

However, the focus on religious identity is a relatively new phenomena in the racialization of Singaporean Muslims. Prior to independence, several race riots occurred, which the state claimed were sparked by Malay Muslim agent provocateurs from Malaysia and Indonesia. Consequently, race became the “primordial fault line” (Hong and Huang 2008, 22) of the country. The Malay community, whose identity was and still is conflated

85 Widely referred to as the CMIO, these categories emerged under British colonial rule but were maintained after independence by the PAP.

with Islam, were consequently perceived as a potentially destabilizing minority. This idea stems from the perception that Singaporean-Malay loyalties are divided because of their shared racial heritage with the majority population of Malaysia. This racial fault line resulted in Singapore's multiracial governance wherein Malays are frequently framed as a 'problem'.

The racialization of Singaporean Muslims shifted after 9/11 when Muslims around the world, and especially in minority contexts, were pressed to "prove their normalcy" (Echchaibi 2018, 58). As Rana (2011) argues, this pressure placed upon Muslims was part of a process of racialization in which they were constructed as a disposable racial type to be held in opposition with the normative citizen. Of course, in Singapore, Muslims were already racialized. Their presumed divided loyalties positioned them as in opposition to the normative citizen, who put their Singaporean identity ahead of all else. However, as the Singaporean state scrambled to align themselves with America, their multiracial governance shifted towards a more proactive surveillance of Singaporean Muslims in an attempt to pre-empt the influence of fundamentalism (Febrica 2010, 576). Under this new outlook, what primarily marked the Muslim community as deviant, was no longer race, but religion. As former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew argued "I would say today, we can integrate all religions and races except Islam" (Abdullah 2016, 222).

In 2003, the Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (MUIS),⁸⁶ the Islamic religious authority and statutory board of the government, introduced the Singapore Muslim Identity, (SMI) a list of ten attributes the Muslim community should embody to be good citizens. Chief among them was the need to put their Singaporean identity above their religion. Signs that Singaporean Muslims may be heading down the path to extremism can be as innocuous as not eating with non-Muslims (Ab Razak 2019). More seriously, critiquing the state could make you a "bad Muslim" under the SMI (Hassan and Abdullah 2022). The SMI principles were written and distributed by MUIS. The agency controls many aspects of Muslim religious life including Friday sermons distributed across all mosques. These sermons are written in consultation with the Minister of Muslim Affairs and are often used to espouse the SMI. Therefore, the boundaries of ac-

86 Formed in 1968 MUIS is a statutory board of the government which reports directly to the minister of Muslim affairs. MUIS is governed by a council whose members are nominated from the countries various Muslim organisations and appointed by the president of Singapore. It is widely acknowledged that MUIS is co-opted by the Singaporean state (Abdullah 2013).

ceptable Muslim identity and behaviour are made perpetually visible, and the community's behaviour constantly scrutinized for perceived failures to “integrate”.

These SMI are an everyday reminder to Singaporean Muslims of how the state expects them to behave. As Ali (2016) showed in the campus surveillance of Muslims in New York, the creation of the good Muslim, bad Muslim dichotomy (Mamdani 2005) intensified the panoptical effect of state surveillance. When the accepted boundaries of behaviour are made explicit Ali (2016) found that self-disciplining increased, and political participation decreased. In Singapore, this dichotomy is made explicit through the SMI. The creation of an official “good Muslim” made all Muslims hyper-visible. In turn, by trying to live by the SMI, the dichotomy is strengthened, and Singaporean Muslims become “complicit in (re)producing the states classificatory power” (Müller 2018, 220). It is hardly surprising then that the installation of thousands of cameras and sensors was perceived as a surveillance system by the Muslim community.

Technology and Racialization

In fact, at times it appears that the Singaporean state invites such conclusions. On a poetry tour of Little India, our guide stopped next to a riot van parked by a police camera and pointed to a street sign which reminded us that a moment of anger could lead to a lifetime of regret. Surveillance is particularly intense in Little India after a protest in 2013 which was sparked by a bus driver hitting and killing a migrant worker. The neighbourhood is a centre for the migrant community, many of whom are Bangladeshi Muslim. As we stood there, our guide read this poem:

“What I learned in Malay class
is that mata is eye while mata-mata⁸⁷
is the police, a plural of eyes everywhere,
surveilling our suspicious lives.
Yet when aunties are congregating illegally
over mahjongg tables, when uncles are hustling
fake virility pills, when the warning siren blares,
“Mata lai liao!” what it really means is that eyes
are coming, eyes in blue and baton

87 As mentioned in the introduction, mata-mata is translated elsewhere in Southeast Asia as spy not police. This further cements the suspicion of police in a Singaporean context.

that tase illicit action from our bodies,
mata that become eyes through which
we see this country more clearly.”
(Nair 2023)

As the poem states, in Malay, the language widely spoken by Singaporean Muslims, the term for Police is mata-mata. Interestingly, when the police released wheeled robots to patrol Singapore, they named the machines MATAR. The choice to make this allusion in the language predominantly spoken by the racialized Muslim community reinforces an association between Smart Nation technologies and surveillance.

Such associations also have historical precedent, given the logics which empower the Smart Nation. As Whittaker (2023) argues, the theoretical roots of “data governance” lie in plantation management, where workers and crops were transformed into interchangeable units allowing plantation owners to manage them from a distance. This approach to governance was applied to colonies like the Malayan Peninsular where data gathering was common practice, including the use of census and mapping (Noor 2019). Such strategies have been reborn in cities like Singapore, where technology networks extract data to govern “from above” without engaging with the specificities of the city and its inhabitants.

The Smart Nation is the newest tool in top-down governance. What has changed is the asymmetry of access to these technologies. Citizens cannot hope to access the volume of data or scale of infrastructures held by states (Powell 2021). In the past, people could theoretically challenge state narratives with their own information. However, creating a competing Smart Nation is less feasible. This raises the question of what Singaporean Muslims can do to resist the categorizing logics of racialization and the Smart Nation? Further, how can these critiques be made without falling foul of the seemingly all-seeing SMI?

Public Resistance and Art

In the literature on resistance, such panoptical governmentality has often been shown to force activists into the shadows. As Ali (2021) shows state surveillance can force political participation into private venues. Likewise, Browne (2015) and Mann (2013) demonstrate how the surveillance induces resistance which respectively operates from outside visibility and seeks to invert the panopticon. However, it is not always the case that surveillance results in compliance, or forces activists out of the

public sphere. As Yonucu (2023) describes in Turkey, state suppression of activism impels activists to become more visible and active in public. Activists, Yonucu argues, choose to remain, or even become more visible, partly in deference to the martyrs of the movement who preceded them. In this way, the behavior of activists is influenced more by a desire to ethically align with their predecessors, than by the effects of panopticon. Such deference to predecessors also appears in the articulations of Singaporean artists. As Alfian Sa’at, author of “Death of Singapore Theatre” told me; “There is a historical lineage...theatre has always been political in Singapore, it’s always been this space for dissent.” He went on to list the arrests of several playwrights through Singapore’s history: Kuo Pao Kun in 1976, Third Stage in ’87, and Necessary Stage in ’94.

Whilst visible resistance exists under regimes of surveillance, they need not be overt. As Abu-Lughod (1990) argues, acts of resistance can be quiet, personal and every day. Further, as Ihmoud & Cordis encourage us to remember, resistance does not need to come in the form of “masculinist martyrdom or self-effacement” (Ihmoud & Cordis 2021 826). They encourage anthropologists to focus on acts of living rebellion in which people struggle to survive under the conditions of white supremacy, settler-colonial, and capitalist power “while also tending to the forms of expansion, imagination and rearticulation that always already exist in and beyond this frame” (Ihmoud & Cordis 2021, 813). The artworks in this paper occupy the blurry spaces between these overt and covert resistances that emerge from surveillance. The artworks presented here aim to affirm the complexity of Muslim Singaporean experience from within a system of surveillance which demands uniformity and legibility. They are acts of living rebellion which demonstrate how Muslim experiences fall outside the limiting imagined categories of the state.

The Singapore art scene may not seem like fertile ground for resistance to state surveillance. Censorship is common, for example, all plays must be read by the Infocomm Media Development Authority (IMDA) before being staged. The state has become increasingly invested in the arts attracted by the economic draw of the global art market, and tourism. Starting in 2000, the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth ran a program called “the Renaissance City” which aimed to use arts to make “the leap from an industrial to a knowledge economy” (National Arts Council 2021). In 2023, this was replaced by the National Arts Councils “Our Arts Plan” (Ministry of Culture Community and Youth 2023). In both cases, the arts are part of the state’s national plan for economic growth. Consequently,

the National Arts Council has become a central hub of arts funding in Singapore. This breeds its own censorship, as two artists explained to me: “a lot of art making relies on government grants... it is a psychosis in itself ...things are heavily funded by the government [so] people play by the rules in order to get a commission.” At this point, the other artist chipped in, “artists don’t even want to put themselves at risk of trying.” However, as Alfian pointed out there is a lineage of artist/activists in Singapore. This is in part because of arts’ dismissal by politicians. In 1968, former PM Lee Kuan Yew, called poetry “a luxury we cannot afford” (Gui 2018, 10). This dismissal of art as unnecessary, means that whilst artists are widely censored, there is also leeway for their work to critique the state because the importance of their work is downplayed⁸⁸. How can Muslim artists conceal their critiques of that state, whilst opening spaces in the Smart Nation to critique the racialization of Muslim Singaporeans? In the “Onlife Manifesto,” Hildebrandt (2015) asks how citizens can create “empowering opacity of the self...that incorporates the need for self-expression, identity, and performance as well as the generosity of forgetfulness, erasure and the chance to reinvent oneself?” (Hildebrandt 2015, 185). For Singaporean Muslims, living within a pan-opticon with strict boundaries, this question is particularly pressing. Fortunately, an answer already exists in Singapore: blurring.

Nodes: Blurring the Figure of the Muslim Woman

In a room of the gallery T:>works, I attended the SeptFest performance Nodes. Nodes, by Nurul Huda Rashid was one half of a performance called Sillage, the other half provided by Nicole Phua’s Nizalia. The room was split in half: on one side Phua repeatedly prostrated before a large urn placed on its side allowing white powder to spill out onto the floor. On the other side of the room, in tandem with Phua’s piece was “Nodes”. Pieces of diamond mesh fencing, rolled into cones and connected with wires, were scattered across the room. As Phua repeated her ritual movements, Rashid moved through the space attaching search terms about Muslim women to the wires. Each one connecting Muslim women across the world together, each binding them to identity markers. Having created the network, Rashid moved among the crowd. Imitating machine vision, she drew sketches of audience members accompanied by a handful of words which aimed to classify them. This included me, still masking in

88 It is of course worth pointing out that the state is not a monolith. As ethnographies of the state explore, they are full of nuance, contradiction, and complexity. However, this article is not an ethnography of the state. Instead, it focuses on how my interlocutors respond to a state which they frequently experience as, and which often asserts itself as, a monolith.

the midst of the pandemic. I immediately felt the acute discomfort of being watched. The sketches were then handed to the respective audience members. Having collected all the information, Rashid began cutting through the connections causing the ‘data’ to spread across the floor.



Figure 11- Phase 1: Performative, Women in War, activated in Nodes (2022) Photo by Nurul Huda Rashid

A key theme of 2022’s Septfest was surveillance, although, of who and where, remained blurry. In Rashid’s ‘nodes’ she connects the surveillance of Singapore to how Muslim women’s identities are circumscribed. In Singapore, the ten desired attributes of the SMI outline a particular vision of how “good” Muslims should act. Number five of the SMI list is, “Progressive, practices Islam beyond forms/rituals and

rides the modernization wave” (MUIS 2006, i). If the process of racializing Muslims “trades on pejorative characterizations of religious groups” (Meer and Modood 2010, 83), perhaps the most pervasive pejorative of the Singaporean Muslim community is that it requires modernization. At the centre of this characterization is the tudung, a style of hijab common in Singapore, which for many years has been “set in antagonistic

terms with the modern” (Zainal and Wong 2017, 109). Frequently, it has been argued that the tudung, as a visual symbol of difference, upsets the balance of racial harmony. For this reason, wearing tudung was banned in public sector jobs for many years (Baharudin 2021). As Rashid writes for the Singaporean blog “Beyond the hijab” this discourse around the tudung creates a dichotomy between oppressed tudung wearers and liberated modern women (Rashid 2016). In her artist talk after *Nodes*, Rashid stated that the cutting of the wires represented breaking away from these binaries which disregard “all other possible narrative threads that make up ‘Muslim women’” (Rashid 2016).

Nodes is situated within Rashid’s wider work on the imagery of Muslim women. At a retrospective talk on her work, Rashid reflected on how her artistic practice has changed. In an early work called *Hijab/Her* (2012), Rashid photographed Muslim women in hijab to reflect on issues they face in Singapore. However, considering these images in conversation with colonial archives she concluded that her images recreated colonial imagery. As Rashid explained, during the French colonization of Algeria, photographers were disappointed to find Muslim women did not look like the orientalist images they were used to. Consequently, they posed women in studios to conform to their imagination (Alloula, Harlow and Godzich 1986). These images then circulated via post-cards solidifying the orientalist image of Muslim women. These images were not neutral snapshots but carried ideology which shapes the racialization of Muslim women to this day.

For Rashid, it was both the creation and circulation of these images which created the liberated/oppressed binary of Muslim women. Likewise, the good/bad binary of our time is perpetuated by the circulation of images online. All online images are tagged with metadata, allowing them to be sorted. This means that the online archive of images of Muslim women is sorted to create an aggregate image. Like the orientalist images of French photographers this metadata contains biases. As Just and Latzer (2017) argue, algorithms shape the communities they govern. Developers design software, which is encoded with bias from their social setting, which in turn informs what information is deemed more relevant and displayed to more users. In the Smart Nation, similar processes are followed. How data is tagged and sorted reflects existing categories of good/bad Muslims and liberated/oppressed Muslim women. Under these binaries, the tudung is equated to being Muslim. This despite many Singaporean Muslim women not wearing it. The state views tudung as anti-modern, and therefore the

Smart Nation categorizes women in tudung as anti-modern Muslims. In *Nodes*, Rashid turns these categorizations on her audience. The audience who are normally voyeurs intimately experience this process of being tagged and sorted. Their faces are sketched alongside questions such as “race? identify? self”. When handed these sketches audience members feel the usually invisibilised process of racialization in action.

In *Nodes*, Rashid blurs her critique of racialization by the Singaporean state. Whilst it is clear that *Nodes* critiques the limiting categorizations of Muslim women; Rashid avoids the claim that she is a “bad Muslim” by generalizing her critique. While the Singaporean state and its infrastructures are actively engaged in the racialization of Muslim women, Rashid does not name them. I would learn later that this was not only an artistic choice, but a direct response to the IMDA. As Rashid told me:

“When I first submitted our artist statement...it was perceived as being solely about religion as we were using performance to speak about images of Muslim women... We then had to re-prioritize our topics”

The shift to speaking generally about technology rather than Muslim women, allowed Rashid to present her ideas whilst skirting state interference. Further, this blurring was enhanced as *Nodes* was performed during Septfest, one of several performances obliquely prodding at the state and its surveillance infrastructures. Her work also blurs categorizations about Muslim women. In *Nodes* she literally cuts the ties that bind identity markers to Muslim women. Finally, she blurs the line between systems which circulate racialized images of Muslim women and the consumers of those images. In this way *Nodes* is a reminder that the categories of oppressed/liberated Muslim women are empowered and (re) produced by us, not systems – Smart Nation or otherwise. Ultimately, Rashid shows how technologies, like the camera, the internet, and the Smart City, can empower racialized categorizations, by circulating and perpetuating images of Muslim women. While Rashid was forced to adapt her work, she still performed her critique by blurring.

Methodological Interlude 1

After Rashid’s performance at Septfest 2022 I went to speak with her. She had already heard of my project; a friend sent her the call for PhD applicants in 2021. She was friendly but understandably suspicious of a British man from a Dutch University studying Islam and AI in Singa-

pore. We agreed to talk again via skype a month later. Little did I know this meeting was to “check if I was cool” as Nurul would explain later. Luckily, she concluded that whilst a bit too serious, I was trustworthy. When I returned a year later it was via Nurul that I met most of the Singaporean artists I know. She emailed both haykal and Iskandar on my behalf, and behind the scenes assured others that I could be trusted. In Singapore, where there is what a friend jokingly called “snitching culture⁸⁹” communities of trust like this are vital. This is particularly true when communal spaces like Substation close. In a context like Singapore, community can look like a network of friends and peers, who can verify new faces.

nur: Blurring the Institution

After Rashid connected us via email, I met with Iskandar at a biriyani place in the basement of Funan Mall. It was the first of many such dinners, after which we would wander around the city. One evening while walking, we passed an advertisement for a play being performed in Fort Canning, a park and military base on a hill in central Singapore. “I would never go there at night” Iskandar commented, “too many jinn” (beings concealed from the senses). Such stories of the unseen, or al-ghaib, swap hands frequently among Singaporean Muslims. It is believed that Fort Canning is particularly haunted, as former Malay sultans built their palaces on its peak, were buried there, and forbade others from entering. Such beliefs are frowned upon by MUIS and its SMI which promotes modernity, not superstition. However, it is on the esoteric, and spiritual which Iskandar’s artistic practice dwells.

An interdisciplinary artist and poet, Iskandar’s practice focuses on “themes of losing, death and forgetting.” Since 2015 Iskandar has researched and photographed mosques around Singapore for his work *nur*. The project explores the absence of Islamic art within ritual spaces in Singapore. Given the centralization of mosques, Iskandar told me that these buildings “boil down to a very moderate form of standardization” tending towards aesthetically neutral spaces which embody sanitized state approved representations of Islamic faith. In *nur* Iskandar “attempt[s] to reconcile the beauty in such encounters of losing.” (Iskandar 2021) This is reflected in the images of mosques which slowly blur and brighten into a beautiful array of colors.

89 Beyond state surveillance, there is also various forms of citizen surveillance in Singapore. For example, the now defunct website *stomp* paid for videos of people breaking social norms (Abidin 2017).



Figure 12–Image from nur exhibition. Photo by Noor Iskandar

Since 1975, all mosques in Singapore have been built and refurbished under MUIS’ Mosque Building fund (MBF) (National Library Board 2023). The MBF is a non-mandatory fund for constructing the replacements to kampong (village) Mosques. This fund was part of a wider move to encourage citizens out of the kampong (National Library Board 2023) and into newly built urban developments known as HDB⁹⁰. Seng (2009) argues that along with rapid urbanization, centralization also aimed to integrate semi-autonomous kampongs into the main citizenry, thereby increasing state control. This policy was a success, with most mosques relocated, rebuilt, or refurbished. Through these centralized Mosques MUIS espouses its brand of Islam, concerned with ‘modernization’ and upholding the SMI. Since 1968, sermons delivered at Singaporean Mosques are read and vetted by the Minister of Muslim Affairs and frequently contain government talking points.

However, there remains a sense of loss within the community for kampong mosques. This is particularly evident in the Facebook group “Lost Mosques of Singapore” which archives images of these mosques (Ibrahim 2023). The overriding opinion in these groups is that whilst current mosques receive more funding, they have become standardized and now lack the beauty, and idiosyncrasy of their forebears. With this also comes

90 Named for the “Housing Development Board”.

a loss of autonomy within communities to define their faith. It is this sense of loss which Iskandar explores in *nur* through the sufistic concept *fanāʾ*.

The word *fanāʾ* comes from the Arabic *faniya* meaning obliteration (Wilcox 2011, 96). Wilcox (2011) argues that unlike similar terms which appear in Buddhist, Vedic, and Judeo-Christian traditions, within Islamic Sufistic traditions this term is paired with the concept *baqāʾ* which translates to subsistence or survival. *Fanāʾ*, therefore, is not just the negation of the self through detachment, but the possibility of existing closer to Allah by disconnecting from the material world. Ahmed ties this concept of disconnection from the material world to *alam al-ghaib* arguing that “Sufis aspire [to] the uncorrupted pure Truth of the Unseen non-material reality to which material reality and its truth stand in a figural or metaphorical relation” (Ahmed 2016, 20). For Iskandar this concept was central to understanding the loss of aesthetic diversity in Mosques.

Within Islam, *Alam al-ghaib* refers to “what is unseen, imperceptible, covered, veiled, concealed, internal and hidden.” (el-Aswad 2019, 279) Whilst this category includes ghosts and *jinn*, it also includes the mundane like WIFI signals. This means that parts of the Smart City, usually invisible, like cables and electrical currents can be found in *alam al-ghaib*. Instead of assuming that everything can be explained by what can be perceived, *al-ghaib* guides the mind outside what is visible (Bubandt, Rytter and Suhr 2019). The unseen is a common theme in Malay Muslim art where the concept is used as “one way of contesting the systematically hegemonic ways of seeing rationally and considering modes of seeing which have been left out” (Iskandar 2019, 263). People, buildings, and categories can blur at the edges by imagining how they extend into *alam al-ghaib*.

By blurring walls in his images, Iskandar imagines a mosque without them, and with it blurs the institution. In this way, he critiques the centralized, and racialized framing of Islam espoused in the mosque through the SMI. By losing the mosque, it is also possible to move closer to the pure Truth which is not represented in physical ritual spaces. For example, Iskandar points to how gender inequalities are emphasized by the limitations of Singapore’s mosque aesthetics. Whilst men get to look at beautiful fractals as they pray women are often left to look at blank

walls⁹¹. By imagining the mosque as a “placeless entity” Iskandar, “flattens out that...hierarchy”. In the mosque without walls, it might also be possible to remove binaries like good/bad Muslim as constructed by the SMI by moving beyond spaces controlled by the state.

During the early years of the pandemic this mosque without walls shifted from theoretical possibility to reality. As Iskandar explained, in 2021 during Syawal prayers “everyone was at home...every household turned on their TV then they had this kind of congregation... it’s so profound. This constellation of congregations where people are not physically together but are together in virtual space.” For Iskandar then, the technological is a possible route to blurring distinctions. By moving into virtual spaces, through digital technologies, something closer to the pure Truth of Sufism can be reached. Reflecting on this pandemic experience Iskandar told me, “That was the first awakening I had where it was like, maybe this is the future”.

During the writing process for this chapter, Iskandar re-read this section and asked for a caveat to be added. In his view, the wall-less mosque existed somewhere outside our experience, “it alludes to a sense of dreaming or something more afterlife-ish, [it] alludes to that sense of impossibility, or of a melancholic dream, a utopia which will never materialize”. For one, he pointed out that the virtual mosque negates religious and spiritual aspects of physical congregation. For example, the reward of prayers is greater the larger the congregation. As Barbrook (1999) argues, hierarchies in the physical world prevent cyberspace from liberating everyone, instead privileging those with power and access. As Iskandar told me, “That is something I am aware of that’s why I mention my idea of a mosque without walls is utopic...because there are all these unresolved aspects”. The mosque without walls then exists, in a realm we cannot reach.

Through blurring Iskandar critiques the States fixed categories about Muslims and their prayer spaces. However, Iskandar only references MUIS in the online description of the work stating: “This can hopefully encourage concerning bodies like MUIS to augment the aesthetic experience” (Iskandar 2021). Instead, his critique of the bounded mosque is implied through his literal blurring of the walls of Singaporean spaces of worship. By criticizing the aesthetics of Singaporean mosques, Iskandar

91 Prayer spaces allocated for women are often relegated to side rooms of the Mosque, marginalising them physically and socially.

is also able to critique the bounded categorization of Islam espoused in these spaces. As Iskandar concludes in nur's accompanying essay "One can also yearn that the margins of Islamic experience can position itself as valuable" (Iskandar 2021).

Unlike in *Nodes*, technology holds an ambiguous, melancholic position in nur which is emblematic of Iskandar's artistic practice. Through Iskandar's experience during the pandemic lockdowns, he imagined technology being used to blur boundaries, not enforce them. As he put it "I want a placeless, wall-less mosque...now with AI people of the world could construct this idea of the mosque". As we see in Rashid's work, technologies all too often, replicate, reinforce, and circulate negative tropes including racialized identities of Singaporean Muslims. nur critiques current technological systems by imagining radically different ways of using them. However, for now, the Mosque without walls exists beyond reach, a ghostly dream.

Methodological Interlude 2

After being vetted over skype, I was invited to a workshop run by Rashid called "How to see like a computer". The great and good of the Singapore art scene, plus me, brought along images which we labelled as if we were computers tagging them for a database. My interest in tech and art prompted Rashid to recommend I meet with haykal, a sound artist whose work looked at the uncomfortable intimacy between machines and human labour. With Rashid's seal of approval, we would later meet at a café in Kampong Glam to discuss among other things, his work "momok elektrik." A year after that meeting haykal and Iskandar would collaborate on a workshop. The workshop focused on encryption, a core idea within haykal's artistic practice. In the Singapore art scene, knowledge of how systems of control work, and how to negotiate with them are shared via such workshops and public works. Learning to blur, therefore, is a dialogical process.

momok elektrik: Blurring Categorisation



Figure 13– momok elektrik, in 2021. Photo by bani haykal.

In an ominous dark room of SAM (Singapore Arts Museum), the audience encounters seven figures covered in burlap sacks. Each sack is stamped with Jawi, the vernacular Malay writing system, and obscures a speaker from which disembodied Malay chants emanate. Each of the voices is controlled by a sampler which selects the next audio clip based on BPM. However, each sample is interdependent, meaning that they trigger one another to play. This creates a shifting soundscape partly controlled by machines and partly controlled by the human voice. The result is a haunting cacophony of voices disconnected from a perceptible source. Several of the gallery sitters at SAM describe the experience as scary (Singapore Art Museum 2022). The piece was conceived by haykal, not as scary but as a meditation on the categorization of Muslim identities in Singapore.

haykal instructed the singers who performed for Momok Elektrik to imagine they were spellcasting. When I met with haykal to discuss his practice he explained this was a reference to syncretic forms of Islamic practice: “It doesn’t have to be this way...when Islam came to the region syncretic forms of practicing Islam were encouraged.” However, as religious authority became centralized at MUIS throughout the 1960s, and religious practice was guided by ideas of modernization, certain religious practices became prohibited. Still, as haykal told me “Syncretism does still exist today the difference is that there are state laws which start to determine that certain things are Islamic and certain things are un-Islamic... like cultural practices...which involved trance are suddenly not considered Islamic”. haykal is referring to the banning of Kuda Kepang, a traditional Malay dance, which was labelled unislamic by MUIS (MUIS 2025). The Malay chanting of momok elektrik acts as a form of resistance to such limiting categories of what Islam can be. In redrafting this

section, bani asked me to include this description of how the chanting in momok elektrik resists the capture of Islam by limiting frames and machines.

“the chanting heard thru [sic] momok elektrik is, for me at least, a testament to the importance of oral tradition, where passing of knowledge, sharing of information, healing, knowing etc is concerned; that the voice is what machines desire to capture but voices will escape, be amplified and repeated beyond the confines of capture.”

haykal has first-hand experience of the limiting categories of race and religion in Singapore. As we have seen, the CMIO has been used to assert the states classificatory power (Chua 1995, 110). Race is used to assign which language students learn as their mother tongue. Malay is taught to Malay students, Mandarin to Chinese students and Tamil to Indian students. However, this creates problems for those who do not fit these neat categories, like haykal who is Indian Muslim. As he explained, “I was subjected to this when I was a lot younger being identified on my ID card as Indian but Muslim, you are Indian, but you are not in Tamil class for instance, why is that?” With Malay being the dominant language of Islamic institutions in Singapore, Indian Muslims frequently find themselves in a strange no-man’s land (Tschacher 2018). The use of Malay and Jawi chanting in momok elektrik, refuses both the conflation of Malay and Islam, and that of Islamic practice and what the state proclaims it to be.

Perhaps because of his experiences with language, and state categorization, Jawi script plays a central role throughout haykal’s work. In momok elektrik, for example, Jawi appears as a form of encryption. As he explained it to me, Jawi contains six unique characters which he uses to encrypt his works. For example, in the piece “sifrmu” haykal’s poetry is encrypted into these six unique Jawi characters. The result is poetry which is unreadable without the cipher and knowledge of Jawi. Jawi was not chosen at random but relates to haykal’s early experiences of reading the Quran. Like many Muslims I met in Singapore, haykal learned to recite the Quran but not to read Arabic. For haykal, this meant that he did not consider himself to be reading the Quran, unless he was reading it in Jawi. The Malay script transformed the Quran into something intimate for haykal. This is the core of encryption: the transformation created by intimacy. Language can be a form of encryption, not only because of the

way it excludes, preventing some from reading, but also how it draws those in who can understand.

Whilst *momok elektrik* is about the intimate relations between the Muslim community and its language and culture, it also reflects on how the state abuses, intervenes, and disrupts this intimacy using machine technology. In supplementary material to *momok elektrik*, haykal writes a (haykal 2024) in which he discusses non-consensual forms of machine intimacy. As he writes “how much of our essence is now stored and held captive in these devices through numerous sensors and processed by big tech” (haykal 2021). The sensors he refers to here include Singapore’s Smart Nation. Through these sensors, Singapore is frequently extracting data from its citizens. This data then flows into GovTech, the government body which manages the Smart Nation. Here haykal is reflecting a concern which is widespread. As Couldry and Mejias (2019) have argued, data extraction is becoming increasingly invasive occupying more and more of our lives, not just in the public spaces, but also in our private lives. As they argue, data is the material produced by “abstracting the world into categories” (Couldry and Mejias 2019, 6) and is not inherently bad or new. What has changed is the normalization of social relations in which data extraction is constant and happens without people’s awareness. The Smart Nation is an example of such pervasive data extraction. Singaporeans intimately engage with the Smart Nation every day, because even walking down the street turns individuals into data points. This intimacy transforms Singaporeans into interchangeable units or as haykal terms this process, “tokenization” (haykal 2022). haykal proposes that Muslims resist this categorization by becoming less visible, or more encrypted, through intimacy with language and culture. By representing syncretic forms of religious practice, haykal suggests that Muslims blur the boundaries of the “Singaporean Muslim”.

This theme of resisting categories re-emerges in haykal’s other work. In 2015 haykal created *necropolis* for those without sleep: an installation in which two mechanical hands play chess (Singapore Art Museum 2015). Upon arrival at the gallery, viewers are randomly assigned one of two kinds of tickets. One allows the viewer to roam freely around the space, while the other allows only 50 steps. Entering the room is another ominous experience. It is dark, and the chess game, lit with bright white spotlights, is flanked by two lifeless orange boiler suits. Bodyguards without bodies. The hands themselves move about over the game, heavily wired, as if on life support. If the viewer has the luxury of

free movement, they might notice that the game is unbalanced. As the works description at the Singapore Art Museum (SAM) notes “the orange team is significantly disadvantaged, consisting only of Pawns, a Knight and a King” (Singapore Art Museum 2015). Stay long enough, and viewers may notice that the hands play seven identical games on repeat, not automated but following a script.

necropolis alludes to Von Kempelen’s “mechanical Turk⁹²”. The fraudulent chess playing automaton later revealed to be operated by a person hidden within the machine. The parallel haykal is drawing with the Smart Nation is clear in how government offices discuss tech governance. In May 2023, I attended an AI workshop run by the government funded tech business “AI Singapore”. At the event, the host described AI, and its underlying infrastructures, as models of the real world. The more data in the model, the more accurate its simulation. Soon, with the help of Smart Nation data extraction, near perfect models of the real world would be created, rendering theory obsolete and generating objective policy. In the same breath, the host also described a major pitfall: bias in the existing data set. What haykal’s “necropolis” reflects on is that this bias is created by human made scripts and categories like CMIO, and the SMI which is the replicated by the Smart City. As haykal put it to me, this “machinery validates what is and isn’t [for] the state or tech corporations, these are entities which are constantly desiring to ensure that there is some form of control over how this information surfaces and gets regurgitated”. The machine of the smart city is the false automaton, simply moved by the hand of the state and its categorizations.

Throughout haykal’s practice he undermines state categories by blurring them. While the state uses language to enforce racialized boundaries, in haykal’s work, Jawi is used to resist them. Whilst MUIS defines syncretic practices as “un-Islamic”, bani’s ‘momok elektrik’ embraces syncretism through reference to spellcasting. Suddenly, the boundaries of what Islam is, and can be, are blurry. At the same time, Jawi with its unique characters acts as a cipher, drawing in the Muslim community of Singapore, whilst keeping out the prying eyes of the state. For the state, clear boundaries help to maintain categories which both ensure self-policing, as in the SMI, but also make citizens countable or tokenizable. These categories make the operation of the Smart Nation possible. By refus-

92 An allusion also made by Amazon’s online market for piece work MTurk.

ing to be tokenized, haykal argues Singaporean Muslims can resist state racialization. In other words, they can act blur to live longer.

Methodological interlude 3

The knowledge of acting blur described in this chapter is a product of public negotiations made by artists within the surveilled environment of Singapore. This knowledge was shared to the community at public events like Septfest and built through workshops where artists collaborate with each other, and members of the public, to imagine in the blurry spaces of Singaporean governance. Whilst it is standard in social science is to anonymize, I felt that removing bani, Iskandar and Nurul’s names from this chapter would, as Svalastog and Eriksson (2010) argue, excluded them from genealogy of that knowledge. As Kolankiewicz (2022), whose work focuses on anti-Muslim racism argues, participants in research deserve the right to speak in their own name. In particular, to research and write about the dialogical community of artists in Singapore as a monologue felt limiting at best. Consequently, the process of writing this chapter meant checking in with these three artists to ensure that their work was well represented, and that they were still comfortable with being named. This chapter is, therefore, an effort to collaboratively represent how artists in Singapore deal with the limiting categories of race enforced by regimes of surveillance.

This is not to imply that I did not have concerns about the implications of this paper. As the possibility of publication became more real, I consulted with to my interlocutors repeatedly, perhaps to the point of being annoying. They affirmed that they were happy to be included but it continued to weigh on me, even when my supervisors reminded me that my responsibility was to the wishes of my interlocutors. Still seeking reassurance, I co-worked with a friend from Singapore and explained my anxieties. What if the government reads my thesis? What if it caused problems for the artists? What if they were censored because of me? “Maybe this helps” they said: “Nothing you have written is a surprise to anyone in Singapore”. It was a humbling reminder that cultural anthropology, as Michael Herzfeld argues, is in part the comparative “study of common sense” (Herzfeld 1997, 301).

CONCLUSION

As I have shown, blurring is an act of being unclear publicly to contest the rigid categories produced by the state, and the Smart Nation. Such categories have long existed in Singapore where the Muslim minority is framed as a threat to racial harmony, and where race has been simplified into four categories. However, the Smart Nation gives these categories a new technological sheen. Not only are racial divisions asserted by the state but objectified by machines. By blurring artists and activists disrupt these boundaries. Blurring in these examples, is the act of appearing as a member of a category whilst acting in ways which blur that categories limits. These artists appear as Muslims in the public sphere whilst not conforming to the expectations of the SMI, CMIO, MUIS, or the state, which have collectively constructed racialized category of “Muslim” in Singapore. Such categories exist elsewhere therefore the concept of blurring can be used to explore how the racialization of Muslims, as described by Rana (2011), are resisted elsewhere.

In Mann’s (2013) *sousveillance*, techniques are used to invert surveillance, allowing the many to watch the few. Whilst Browne’s (2015) dark *sousveillance* undermines surveillance from the shadows. Blurring likewise seeks to resist surveillance, however it does so by undermining the categories which empower surveillance networks. Those blurring become less legible, by acting in ways contrary to those enshrined by surveillance. Blurring is done publicly where it can be perceived by state apparatus, but it disrupts, unsettles, and confuses state categories. In this way, blurring is a resistance akin to Abu-Lughod’s (1990) romantics of resistance which do not aim to overthrow whole systems, but to subtly destabilize hierarchies of power. However, where Abu-Lughod’s acts of resistance may occur privately, blurring is a public act of refusing limiting state categories and surveillance.

The Singaporean state uses MUIS to construct the figure of the “Singaporean Muslim.” The expected behavior of Singaporean Muslims is spelled out in the SMI. These expectations are in turn circulated via Mosque sermons, express themselves in policing of religious symbols like the tudung and codified through language in CMIO policies. The creation of the “Singaporean Muslim” emphasizes the panoptical effect of the state. If the state defines what behaviors are acceptable, then citizens have clear ideas of how-to self-discipline. This panoptical effect is further entrenched by Smart Nation technologies which act as physical

manifestations of the States watching eye. Whilst the Smart Nation does a great number of things, it is its surveillance role which is felt most acutely by the already heavily monitored Muslim community. Further, the logics of Smart Nation categorization, transform citizens into interchangeable units. This logic replicates the racialization of all Singaporeans, and particularly of the Muslim minority.

Smart Cities are reliant on the ability to turn everything into interchangeable units (Whittaker 2023, Powell 2021). If this were not possible, then the multifarious data it collects would not be computable. Therefore, these systems are reliant on clearly bounded categories. The Smart Nation, therefore, prioritizes the visible and quantifiable. With this prioritization of the visible comes the implied need to be visible, to be counted. Each of the artists presented here resists this process of racialization. Rashid interrogates Islamic identity beyond obvious visual markers, like the tudung. Iskandar questions the hierarchies created by the MUIS defined space of the walled mosque. Whilst haykal proposes ways to become encrypted, and un-tokenizable through syncretism. All these works run counter to Smart Nation ideology. Rashid, Iskandar, and haykal blur the lines of categories, introduce ambiguity to them, and blur themselves.

Centralization and bureaucratization are not new products of Singapore’s Smart Nation project. As haykal told me, “The data involved is just meant to embolden specific desires of the state”. By blurring categories artists resist their imposition by the state and its machines. Muslim women cannot be reduced to the visual symbol of the tudung. Islamic spirituality cannot be controlled centrally in the mosque. Singaporean Islamic religious practice can be complex and syncretic. Unsettling state racialization of Muslims makes these artists, and their work, hard to categorize, endangering the frictionless multi-racial governance of the Smart Nation. Blurring then does not only resist the Singaporean state, but the process of racializing Muslims in general.

Blurring offers a way to explore how people resist state categorization, by reflecting on the complexity of their own identities. In *Seeing like a State*, Scott argues that modernist schemes of legibility fail because “the progenitors of such plans regarded themselves as far smarter...than they really were and...regarded their subjects as far more stupid and incompetent than they really were” (Scott 1998, 343). This applies not only in highly technological cities like Singapore, but all neoliberal contexts

where states use simplified categories to divide and control citizens. By blurring, artists can operate within the state, perhaps even receiving its funding, whilst maintaining their critique. These are the kinds of critique which arise under authoritarian states with technologies of surveillance much more advanced than Scott described. As the use of AI technologies by states proliferate, the need to blur as an act of resistance will only increase. By considering how blurriness might be strategic it is possible to consider other ways of resisting hegemonic discourses not only in Singapore but other technocratic states.