

## Title

### Race and Nationalism in “Flamingo Valley”

What do gender, race and nationalism have to do with each other? In *Race, Ethnicity, and Sexuality*, sociologist Joane Nagel examines the interaction between these concepts. Her main claim is that sex and gender are essential in constructing racial, ethnic and national boundaries, and conversely that codes of sexual conduct and gender presentation relate to racial, ethnic and nationalist concerns. In this essay, I investigate how well Nagel’s ideas on ethnicity and nationalism apply to the Singapore as constructed in Amanda Lee Koe’s short story “Flamingo Valley.”

Ethnicity and nationalism are intimately related concepts for Nagel. She defines ethnicity as “the differences between individuals and groups in skin color, language, religion, culture, national origin/nationality, or sometimes geographic region” (6). Nationalism refers to “an ideology that professes a common history, shared culture, and rightful homeland, and often is marked by ethnocentrism where nationalists assert moral, cultural, and social superiority over other nations and nationalisms” (148). Thus for Nagel, “ethnicity, race, and nationalism are closely related, yet different facets of the same phenomenon” (7). Thus I will be looking at both race and nationalism in the sequel.

There are a number of conceptual frameworks that Nagel draws upon in her study. Firstly, Nagel views the *boundary* as the fundamental object of study for ethnicity. “Ethnicity can be thought of as a series of moving boundaries that crisscross populations, shifting to divide people into different categories at different times by different people” (44). By defining the boundary, one also defines what is inside and outside, who belongs and who does not.

A related concept is that of *performativity*. The concept of *performance*

might be more familiar, wherein individuals act according to what they perceive as socially appropriate to their gender or ethnicity. A performative, on the other hand, is a social convention, usually unspoken and invisible in daily life, which informs the performance of gender or ethnicity. According to Nagel, the difference between performance and performative is that of “conscious and unconscious, intended and unintended, explicit and implicit” (51).

In her Singapore Literature Prize-winning short story collection *Ministry of Moral Panic*, Amanda Lee Koe presents the tale of musician Deddy Haikal in “Flamingo Valley”. In the eponymous hospice, Deddy meets his teenage sweetheart Ling Ko Mui, who is senile and has forgotten about him. In the course of the story, Deddy recalls – and helps Ling recall – their short-lived romance, when he performed at her father’s pub on Friday nights, and took her out to supper after his sets. Deddy also recounts how Leong Heng, Ling’s future husband, sent men to beat Deddy up, forcing him away from Ling but also spurring him to become a successful musician. At the end of the story, Ling’s miraculous (partial) recovery from dementia seems to be undone by Deddy leaving the hospice, which Ling sees as a personal rejection; Deddy, even as he returns home to three wives and seven children, thinks about writing “songs for an eighteen-year-old girl” (22).

Following Nagel, I first examine interactions along racial boundaries in Koe. When Ling first meets Deddy in her father’s pub and asks him “why it’s always the Eurasians and you Malays” who perform at bars, and Deddy replies “you Chinese are too busy trying to be businessmen. Making real money” (3), I see casual racial stereotypes being exchanged. The surrounding conversation also suggests to me that neither party is interested in questioning these assumptions. Thus I believe that the above scene is consistent with Nagel’s formulation of performativity, as an example of the “abstract, hidden, unthinking, habitual ways” (53) that racial performativity appears in daily life.

In fact, in my view, Koe crafts the tragedy of her story precisely on the

grounds of such racial performativity. Even when Deddy became successful and “had the adoration of schoolgirls and young women: Malay, Chinese and Indian” (6–7), he still believed in Leong Heng’s words that Ling “would never have been mine” (7). As I interpret this statement, even when Deddy had no problems with wealth or status, his success could not change his race. Hence he could never pursue Ling, under the implicit, unspoken rule that forbids interracial relationships.

In spite of the above insights that Nagel has provided, Koe appears to me to have a retort to Nagel’s idea of nationalism. Deddy shares the story of nationalistic pride in public funding of the building of the National Theatre: “Rich businessmen made phone calls arranging for direct contributions, trishaw riders called in to the radio with their day’s savings earned through backbreaking work, and went hungry after” (18). As sensitive to matters of race as Deddy is, he does not attempt to guess at the race of these contributors. To me, this reveals a conception of a nation united on some other basis than race. Comparing this with Nagel’s analysis of sex and nationalism, where her main examples come from World War II (140–1), white supremacism in the US (144–5), and colonialism in India and Puerto Rico (149–55), where ethnicity is always the main divisive force, I believe that Nagel’s analysis fails to take into account nations such as Singapore, where different ethnicities coexist in ways such as Deddy describes.

Art, such as Koe’s short story, can elicit strong emotional responses from the audience (it surely did from me). However, art can also reveal more than is evident at first sight, such as by following the lines of inquiry above under the framework of Nagel’s theory. To my mind, perhaps such depth is one way in which we can measure the value of art.

(912 words)

## Works Cited:

Koe, Amanda Lee. "Flamingo Valley." *Ministry of Moral Panic*. Epigram Books, 2013, pp. 1–22.

Nagel, Joane. *Race, Ethnicity, and Sexuality: Intimate Intersections, Forbidden Frontiers*. Oxford University Press, 2003.