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Who, or What, is Lost: Singapore's Impressions of Christmas Island, c. 1960–1990

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Abstract

Although Singapore no longer governs Christmas Island, either on behalf of its British colonial administrators or for itself, some Singaporeans continue to regard it as a lost territory and have false impressions that it once belonged and should again belong to Singapore. By examining this complexity related to Christmas Island and its possible implications for Singapore's national psyche, this paper surveys the newspapers of Singapore and oral history records of Singaporean ministers and officials for accounts of Christmas Island. It suggests that Singaporean newspapers' portrayal of Christmas Island as a neglected Australian overseas territory contributed to some Singaporeans' perception that Christmas Island might actually be better off with Singapore; others even had a misconception of Christmas Island as a lost territory. Such opinions have never really dissipated because the government has never publicly clarified the transfer of Christmas Island and rejected claims about its "sale" to Australia.

Keywords

Australia – Christmas Island – memories – Singapore – sovereignty

1 Introduction

Christmas Island is an Australian external territory located off the shores of Java in the Indian Ocean. The Australian government's promotion of Christmas

Island as a "natural wonder" and tourist destination has disguised much of its history as a phosphate mining site (see www.christmas.net.au). The discovery of phosphate in 1888 guided the island's destiny for a whole century. British settler George Clunies-Ross (1842–1910), with the expertise of naturalist John Murray (1814–1914), developed the island's phosphate industry. They imported a workforce of Chinese, Malays, and Sikhs, who endured appalling conditions to build basic infrastructure and mining facilities. In 1888, Clunies-Ross, who had been ruling Christmas Island as his fiefdom, formally founded a settlement for British annexation to pre-empt any other possible claim to the island's valuable phosphate deposits. After claiming the territory as its own, the British Crown leased it back to Clunies-Ross and Murray to mine the island, contributing laborers and policemen to help manage the new settlement (Burstyn 1975, 5–34).

In 1900, the British began to administer Christmas Island from their colony of Singapore, making the island a dependency of Singapore, which belonged to the Straits Settlements under the British Empire. The colony of the Straits Settlements was a cluster of several territories including Melaka, Penang, Singapore, Christmas Island, the Cocos (Keeling) Islands, the Dindings, and Labuan. As a matter of convenience, the administrative center was in Singapore. In other words, sovereignty over Christmas Island remained with the British and was never transferred to colonial Singapore, which, until at least the 1950s, was not even expected or prepared to become an independent nation (Lee 2008). In 1958, the island was transferred to Australia. Singapore, then under Chief Minister Lim Yew Hock (1914–1984), received an *ex-gratia* payment of twenty million dollars from the Australian government. Throughout the negotiations between Britain and Australia, Lim Yew Hock and political leaders of Singapore were not consulted. They were merely informed, two months before the talks concluded, about the transfer of Christmas Island. As Acting Chief Minister Abdul Hamid Jumat (1916–1978) conceded, Christmas Island had never belonged to Singapore: "The Colony was asked to administer it and nothing more" (The Straits Times 1957a, 7). But according to Acting Financial Secretary Harold Shaw, "There must have been talks with [officials], politicians. Lim Yew Hock must have been involved, obviously. And no doubt, he would bring in his cabinet." Shaw revealed that "it was tacitly agreed" that Singapore, as a primarily Chinese colony, had enough problems of its own and should harbor "no imperial ambitions" to set up a government on Christmas Island (Oral History Centre 1998, 118).

This paper surveys news articles about Christmas Island published from around 1960 to 1990 in Singapore in order to understand how and what Singaporeans knew about Christmas Island and its somewhat ambiguous

relationship with Singapore. Under Singapore's founding leaders such as Lee Kuan Yew (1923–2015), press freedom was heavily restricted in Singapore, so the newspapers expressed opinions that either reflected the government's own or those that were at least endorsed by the state (George 2012). Singapore's newspapers thus complement archival sources in Australia, Britain, and Singapore in conveying what the Singaporean government wanted Singaporeans to know (or did not mind that they knew) about Singapore's relationship with Christmas Island. In essence, this paper examines the presentation of Christmas Island in newspaper reports and how Singaporeans viewed Christmas Island based on those reports. This paper does not claim to provide an analysis of the Singaporean newspaper reports, because no interviews with journalists have been conducted and reports on Christmas Island are a small sample. Moreover, the sources reveal what Singaporeans were told by the newspapers rather than what Singaporeans actually thought. That said, this paper shows that while most Singaporeans did not think that Christmas Island was politically part of Singapore (Lim 1996), they did imagine its cultural and emotional attachment to Singapore. Some Singaporeans also believed that Christmas Island might have had a brighter economic future with Singapore than with Australia. Rather than irredentism or a surge of ethno-nationalism, their sentiments reflected their pride in Singapore's rapid economic growth "from Third World to First" under the premiership of Lee Kuan Yew (Lee 2000).

In effect, this paper examines, in the context of postcolonial Singapore, what philosopher Maurice Halbwachs (1992) has called "the social frameworks of memory." Although Halbwachs concedes that individuals live in different circumstances and hence possess their own memories, he believes that individual memories are basically social because they are ultimately related to the thoughts that come to us from society. According to him, social groups form and understand themselves through their collective memories of the family, religious organizations, and social classes. Only in such frameworks of memory are individual memories rendered meaningful. But for historian Pierre Nora (1996), the social implications of collective memories are actually much wider. For Nora, modern societies no longer experience memory directly; they do so via history, which destroys or suppresses memory. In response to such destruction by history, Nora proposes the concept of *lieu de mémoire* (site of memory), which refers to "any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community" (Nora 1996, xvii). The sites Nora has in mind include events, monuments, museums, or anything that can hold collective memory. But just as history can do to memory, collective memory can homogenize local memories to become a singular national memory. And there is always the possibility that sites of memory can become so-called

invented traditions (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). But despite the broad range of sites proposed by Nora, all are located within the nation-state that is being remembered and do not include external sites. And while the concept of *lieu de mémoire* accounts for the permanent evolution of memory, it has less to say about the so-called poetic nature of history. The linguistic turn in the humanities and social sciences in the 1970s has led historian Hayden White (1973, 2) to suggest that historical work is "a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse that purports to be a model, or icon, of past structures and processes in the interest of explaining what they were by representing them." Historians select, process, and arrange events into stories that are narrated via plot structure and explained through discursive, explicit, or formal argument to express a particular ideology. Considering together the arguments by Nora and White in studying Singaporeans' impressions of Christmas Island suggests that not only historians but also journalists as well as politicians can, often unwittingly, create memories and construe meanings about an external site of memory that nonetheless remains a constituent of nationalism.

2 Colony, Nation, and Territory

The Australians played an active role in ensuring that they would receive Christmas Island from the British in the event of or prior to Singapore's independence. For the Australian government of the 1950s, the so-called Asian Penetration was real. Worried about the Communist threat from China and Indochina as well as the recent independence and emergence of Indonesia as a regional power, Australian leaders felt the need to maintain national security behind a peripheral screen of islands (Chambers 2011, 20–21). In addition, given the depletion of phosphate deposits on Nauru and other Pacific islands, which had supplied most of Australia's requirements, those on Christmas Island were much coveted (The Straits Times 1957g, 4). By convincing Britain that Christmas Island might be held to ransom by the soon-to-be ex-colony of Singapore, with its socialist sympathies, or taken over by Indonesia, which was hostile to newly independent Malaya, Australia turned Cold War politics to its favor. On January 1, 1958, Christmas Island ceased to be administered from Singapore and was governed directly by the British government. Then, on October 1, 1958, Australia officially took over Christmas Island from Britain (The Straits Times 1957g, 4), and Christmas Island became a territory of the Commonwealth of Australia under the Christmas Island Act.

Australia's continued sovereignty over Christmas Island derives from British occupation and administration of the island, a valid transfer by complementary legislation, and continual governmental and judicial activities by Australia

(Chambers 2011, 20–21). Most importantly, for the purposes of this paper, neither Singaporeans nor the people of Christmas Island, many of whom had ancestors hailing from colonial Singapore, have challenged Australian sovereignty over the island. No irredentist Singaporean nationalism, or an overt form of it, has realistically emerged. Singaporeans occasionally discuss and mention the transfer or "sale" of Christmas Island to Australia, but they have never campaigned for the island's "return" to Singapore or lobbied their government to demand such.

Perhaps this is because Singaporeans never had the choice. Singapore was not yet a nation-state when Christmas Island was handed over to Australia. When Singapore first gained independence in 1963, it was as a part of Malaysia. It only became its own independent nation-state in 1965, when it was expelled from the federation. Realistically speaking, the debate over whether Christmas Island should remain part of Australia should have been among Malayan/Malaysian leaders and not between Singaporeans and Australians. But post-independence Malaya/Malaysia barely uttered a whimper, as if in tacit acknowledgement that Singapore had been administratively separate from Malaya (save for Melaka and Penang) until 1963. Throughout the 1960s, with the ongoing Indonesia-Malaysia confrontation, or Konfrontasi, that threatened the independence of Malaya/Malaysia and Singapore, the sovereignty of Christmas Island remained a low priority for the region's governments. And with Christmas Island located between Java Island and the Malay Peninsula, Malaya/Malaysia and Singapore also seemed to lack a geographical reason for claiming Christmas Island. One can only wonder if Christmas Island would have shared the fate of East Timor – been invaded by Indonesia – had Australia not assumed control, but the idea of Christmas Island being part of post-independence Singapore did not appear feasible even to Singaporean political leaders.

3 The Ties That Bind

For some people in colonial Singapore, it was Singapore rather than Britain that had transferred Christmas Island to Australia, and the payment was proof: Christmas was ceded, not transferred. The controversy continued for weeks after the transfer, and Australian and British officials had to issue statements in defense of the transfer (The Straits Times 1957c, 4). The Australian government clarified that it had paid Singapore twenty million dollars for the loss of royalties on the phosphate (a key ingredient in fertilizer widely used for agriculture in Australia and New Zealand) deposits on Christmas Island, not for

Singapore's supposed loss of sovereignty. When their oversight came to an end, British colonial administrators in Singapore emphasized that Singapore had no claim to Christmas Island, which had been administered from Singapore simply as a matter of convenience. For them, Singapore's relationship with Christmas Island was strictly administrative and also commercial, given that most of the phosphate miners on Christmas Island were Chinese, who had moved first from China to Singapore and then from Singapore to the island. The costs to Singapore for the administration, they reasoned, were small, composed chiefly of a district officer's salary, the pay of a small police detachment, and the expenses of the island's school and other basic amenities. Administration, not sovereignty, was transferred from Singapore to Australia, and Singapore should be content with the sum it was paid for the transfer. The Australian Minister of External Affairs added that Singapore was being relieved of a burden, which Australia will "cheerfully and willingly [bear]" (The Straits Times 1957b, 6).

For some on Christmas Island, separation from Singapore was difficult. In December 1957, the British colonial administration of Singapore dispatched a small naval fleet to Christmas Island to help register those eligible for Singaporean citizenship. Although Christmas Island would be administered by Australia, and the inhabitants could become Australian citizens, their existing citizenship rights remained unaffected, and they were free to return to their own territories (The Straits Times 1957d, 2). And although Christmas Island did not fall under any electoral district of Singapore, and the islanders were not required to cast their votes, Christmas Islanders could register as Singaporean citizens. Those who had been living in Singapore before the electoral roll was completed could cast their vote in Singapore (The Straits Times 1957e, 2). In the end, more than five hundred residents of Christmas Island registered as Singaporean citizens; most were China-born Chinese. Some Christmas Islanders were rejected for Singaporean citizenship for failing to have the necessary residential qualifications (The Straits Times 1957f, 2).

Despite the administrative and political separation of Christmas Island from Singapore, informal ties between the two remained. Christmas Islanders contributed 2,700 dollars to the Kampong Koo Chye Fire Relief Fund after a devastating fire broke out in Singapore (The Straits Times 1958a, 11). Chinese laborers working in the island's phosphate mines patronized the gambling and opium-smoking rings operated by Chinese secret societies from Singapore (The Straits Times 1958b, 11). In 1961, after a conflagration destroyed a major settlement in Singapore, the Christmas Island Gospel Hall contributed a hundred dollars to the Bukit Ho Swee Fire National Relief Fund (The Straits Times 1961a, 4). Singaporean teachers remained in demand because most school

children were Chinese and Malays; Australian teachers were reluctant to work on Christmas Island because it was too remote for them (The Singapore Free Press 1962b, 4). Singapore policemen, mechanics, and technicians also showed an interest in jobs on the island due to the higher pay there (The Singapore Free Press 1962a, 4; The Straits Times 1964, 7; The Straits Times 1966, 4), maintaining Christmas Island's connections with Singapore.

As the Australian External Territories Minister William Morrison (1928–2013) suggested in 1973, most phosphate miners and those on fixed-term contracts enjoyed stronger ties with Singapore than with Australia and were likely to move or retire there: "They have clear rights to go to Singapore, Malaysia or Indonesia through their possession of the citizenship of those countries" (The Straits Times 1973, 12). Until 1979, Christmas Island remained ruled by the ordinances of colonial Singapore, unless specific provisions had been otherwise made (Business Times 1987a, 11).

4 Sold On the "Sale" of Christmas Island

Given Christmas Island's lingering ties with Singapore, it is perhaps unsurprising that the trope of Christmas Island as a lost territory of Singapore appeared in the politics of Singapore from time to time. In 1959, the People's Action Party (PAP) won a landslide victory in the general elections and began the self-rule of Singapore; it would continue to govern Singapore through the merger with Malaya and independence era to the present. Convinced that only a merger with Malaya could secure the future of Singapore, the PAP prepared the legal and political processes for it. Opponents of a merger argued that while Lim Yew Hock had sold out Christmas Island, PAP chief Lee Kuan Yew was selling out Singapore to Malaya. Although Lim's government had indeed received payment from the British as compensation for losing income from Christmas Island's phosphate exports, many people in Singapore believed that he had pocketed the money for himself – a point shared by PAP members (Oral History Centre 1983b, 666–667). The idea that Christmas Island was sold by corrupt politicians to Australia against the best interests of Singapore, or merely the idea that Christmas Island had been a part of Singapore, became a salient political issue in Singapore during the late 1950s and early 1960s. The socialist and anti-colonial Barisan Sosialis Party, for example, argued that Singaporeans should not become federal citizens in Singapore and lose the right to vote or stand for election in any part of the Malayan federation. If this right were to be denied, it continued, the people of Singapore would suffer a status lower than that of Christmas Islanders before the transfer (The Straits Times 1961b, 6).

Throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, Singapore maintained a degree of contact with its former dependency. Singapore eventually merged into Malaya with Sarawak and North Borneo (Sabah) to form the Federation of Malaysia in 1963, only to separate from the federation two years later in 1965. In 1968, with Australia's blessings, Singapore's Housing and Development Board (HDB) sent 150 workers to Christmas Island to work on a million-dollar housing project. Its objective was to build one thousand houses for workers employed in the island's phosphate industry, most of whom remained Singaporean citizens. By undertaking the project, the HDB suggested that it was helping to reduce Singapore's unemployment rate and provide Singapore's economy with the "opportunity to look outwardly for avenues to expand" (The Straits Times 1968, 7). As the HDB proudly claimed, it was a recognition of the board's unqualified success in public housing – "the first time that professional services offered by Singapore had been utilized elsewhere" (The Straits Times 1969, 8) – this statement from the HDB was one of the few accounts that saw Christmas Island as separate from Singapore. The construction of multi-story flats on Christmas Island provided an example of how Singapore exported its professional expertise to neighboring countries (The Straits Times 1970, 21).

The impression that Christmas Island remained somewhat Singaporean and not quite Australian persisted in the 1970s. In Australia, the opposition Liberal Party claimed that Prime Minister Gough Whitlam (1916–2014) was negotiating with the Singaporean government to transfer sovereignty over Christmas Island to Singapore (New Nation 1974a, 1). The Singaporean government clarified that Whitlam had merely had an informal exchange with its leader Lee Kuan Yew on the feasibility of Singapore building an iron and steel mill on Christmas Island to provide alternative employment for Singaporeans hired in phosphate mining should rock phosphates run out within decades (The Straits Times 1974, 17). The Liberal Party's charge, at least in terms of geopolitics, was not entirely baseless. It became clear that the United States and the Soviet Union were engaging in a show of force in the Indian Ocean, and Indonesia alarmed Australia by annexing Portuguese East Timor in 1975. The Australian government feared that the Cocos and Christmas islands, which were geographically closer to Indonesia than to Australia, would be invaded. In response to what he and observers saw as Jakarta's ambition to forge a "Greater Indonesia," Whitlam conducted informal discussions with Indonesian President Suharto (1921–2008), in which Suharto expressed his concern that for a nation as small as Singapore, it might be difficult to prevent the Soviet Union and the United States from undue intervention in the Indian Ocean, hinting that Indonesia's seemingly aggressive military operations and foreign affairs policy were actually a strategic defense (New Nation 1974b, 8).

Indonesian officials believed that if Australia wanted to relinquish its overseas territories in order to remove the stigma of colonialism, it would do better to hand them over to Indonesia because those territories, namely the Cocos Islands and Christmas Island, were strategically more important to Indonesia than to either Australia or Singapore. In response to the prevalent belief that Singapore had a stronger claim to Christmas Island than Indonesia, Indonesian officials said that Indonesia could also claim a stake because many Christmas Islanders were of Malay origin or had migrated from Java to work in the phosphate mines (New Nation 1974b, 8). As debates over the depletion of phosphate deposits on Christmas Island raged on in Australia, the handover of the island to a carefully chosen foreign power appeared increasingly real. Some Australian senators asked that their country be relieved of the burdens of governing an island located in a geopolitical hotspot and allowed to relocate its residents to the mainland. How, when, and where to resettle 1,450 inhabitants when the Christmas Islanders' only source of income was gone was, as Australian Minister for Administrative Services Reg Withers (1924–2014) put it, "a hell of a problem" (The Straits Times 1976, 25). For several years, Australian officials worried about an Indonesian attack on Christmas Island and were inclined to surrender it unconditionally in the event of an invasion (Singapore Monitor 1984, 10).

Unlike Australia and Indonesia, which had voiced greater geopolitical concerns over the security of Christmas Island in the Cold War, Singapore appeared more interested in harvesting imagery for domestic politics. The PAP government deployed, to good effect, the argument that Christmas Island had been sold to Australia. Almost all the ministers and officials who referred to the 1958 transfer of Christmas Island when making a point had considered it a "sale" and thus perpetrated that erroneous impression. Some insinuated that the deal was a result of corrupt government, bad decisions, and desperate times, and they seemed to suggest that the PAP would not have "sold" Christmas Island had it been in power then. As historian John Drysdale suggests, a key component of the PAP's political legitimacy lay in the "impermanency and inadequacies of previous governments" of Singapore. For the PAP, which had the benefit of hindsight, government reserves were low in the 1950s under incompetent leaders, and the "puny sum" received from the sale of Christmas Island, when set against the island's phosphate deposits and rich fishing waters, was a heavy price to pay (The Straits Times 1984, 18). In 1983, when a Malay dance troupe from Singapore performed on Christmas Island as part of the island's Territory Day celebrations, the state-controlled The Straits Times erroneously wrote that Christmas Island had been part of Singapore. "The younger Singaporeans," the report continued, "may not be aware of this fact as it is far away and is now

Australian territory" (The Straits Times 1983, 4). On a separate occasion, Defense Minister Goh Chok Tong, who would succeed Lee Kuan Yew as Prime Minister in 1990, said in a speech that before independence, Singaporeans were forced to work on Christmas Island because they could not secure better jobs at home (Business Times 1984, 3): "Christmas Island belonged to Singapore until it was sold away" (Goh 1984). Lee Khoon Choy, a diplomat and long-time PAP cadre, appeared to concur: "Because the country was almost bankrupt, Christmas Island [was] sold" (Oral History Centre 1981, 380–381), even though Singapore was not yet a country when Christmas Island was transferred. And according to Singapore's foremost foreign minister S. Rajaratnam, the PAP knew that Lim Yew Hock and his government would "mismanage the affairs of the country" and that he had "signed away this Christmas Island . . . to make money" (Oral History Centre 1982b, 220). Othman Wok, a senior PAP minister, also suggested that Christmas Island had been sold. He believed that the "sale" of the island contributed to the downfall of Lim Yew Hock (Oral History Centre 1982a, 96).

But there was a twist to the PAP narrative. During the 1990s, when the Oral History Centre of the National Archives of Singapore interviewed a broad spectrum of Singaporeans, from former civil servants to ordinary citizens, to create a database for scholarly research, some of the respondents who lived through the transfer of Christmas Island claimed that the PAP "had to sell [Christmas Island] for 25 million miserable Singapore dollars" (e.g., Oral History Centre 1993, 34), even though, as mentioned earlier, it was Lim Yew Hock who agreed to the transfer, and the twenty million Singapore dollars he received from the British on behalf of his government had little to do with the actual transfer. This shows that some Singaporeans not only thought that the transfer of Christmas Island resulted from a sale but also believed that it was the PAP rather than Lim Yew Hock that had sold the island. But perhaps who or which political party had committed the dishonor of "selling" Christmas Island did not matter as much as the so-called memory that the island had been sold. As former member of Lim Yew Hock's Singapore People's Alliance (SPA) Jumabhoy Mohamed Jumabhoy suggested, "The PAP would take care so the people would still remember, not forget easily; the Christmas Island sale as you call it and all these things" (Oral History Centre 1983a, 675). For the PAP, the "sale" of Christmas Island fed their logic that Singapore had a "crisis of national survival" at its inception (Chia 2015, 47). Notwithstanding the anachronistic use of terms and confused sequence of events in the minds of its cadres and members, memories of a sale kept alive a negative example that the PAP government promised it would avoid for the nation as long as it was returned to power in every election.

5 Mining Woes

From the 1960s to the 1990s, as Singapore was developing into a successful economy, trouble was constantly brewing on Christmas Island. In August 1979, 1,500 phosphate miners, mostly Malaysians and Singaporeans, went on strike, demanding a pay rise to bring them on par with their counterparts in Australia, who earned three times as much as they were receiving (The Straits Times 1979, 7). As employees of the British Phosphate Commission, which was jointly run by the Australian, British, and New Zealander governments, they were frustrated that they might not receive the resettlement claims promised them by the Australian government prior to their arrival on Christmas Island. Working on the island, some laborers alleged that they suffered "something like slavery" (The Straight Times 1981, 9). Workers and their unionists demanded the extension of Australian Commonwealth industrial laws to the island, but the Australian government rejected the idea, preferring to keep labor costs low as the costs of mining phosphate against declining output increased over the years (Business Times 1987a, 11).

In January 1980, the Australian government released the Sweetland Commission Report, which blamed the deteriorating labor relations and working conditions on the British Phosphate Commission. The report criticized the racism and wage discrimination against Asian workers on Christmas Island as "outmoded, colonial, and repugnant." It proposed that Asian workers be paid the Australian minimum wage. The mainland representative of the Union of the Christmas Island workers added that the Australian government should also develop alternative manufacturing industries on Christmas Island to sustain rather than resettle the population when the phosphates ran out. The island, he suggested, was too strategically important for Australia to relinquish or leave unpopulated. He supported the idea of granting the Asian workers Australian citizenship so that Christmas Island could be transformed from an island of enforced transients into a home of permanent residents (The Straits Times 1980, 3).

In the 1980s, when it became clear that phosphate deposits on Christmas Island were running out faster than expected, the Australian government considered developing the island into either a casino-resort or a military base (Business Times 1987b, 11). Given Christmas Island's proximity to Southeast Asia and its wealthy gamblers, building a casino appeared economically more viable. Moreover, having a defense base on the island might raise undue tensions with Indonesia, which had been sensitive to Australian military facilities at its doorstep. Cabinet papers of the 1950s, declassified in 1985, revealed that Australia wanted to continue its control of Christmas Island for strategic

reasons rather than economic benefits. Whether or not the Australian government would use the island as a military base, it was unlikely to relinquish it to a foreign power (Business Times 1987b, 11). The question was how Christmas Island could break its heavy dependence on phosphate deposits and survive economically without overburdening the Australian government.

In December 1987, with the exhaustion of the phosphate deposits, the Australian government closed the mines (The Straits Times 1988, 20). At Australia's invitation, some Singaporean businessmen set up manufacturing operations on Christmas Island, where they capitalized on a new ruling that relieved them of all duties on finished products entering Australia if at least fifty percent of the value added was derived from operations conducted on the island. Singapore thus became the premier source of foreign investments for the island because of its communications and traditional ties with it (The Straits Times 1989, 45). Building on the earlier HDB project on Christmas Island, Singaporean businessmen, most probably with the blessings of the PAP government, were trying to replicate Singapore's success model and restructure the island's economy from mining to a more sustainable form of manufacturing. However, to the present day, Christmas Island has remained dependent on Australian aid, and Singaporean investments on the island have been minimal in absolute value. Therefore, it seems that Singapore is more interested in the idea of Christmas Island than it is the reality of it. For Singapore, the value of Christmas Island lies in the fact that it was "given" away, rather than that it is currently accessible for economic development.

6 Conclusion

Returning to the opening title, who, or what, is lost as suggested by Singapore's impressions of Christmas Island? It should be clear by now that Christmas Island has never been a lost territory of Singapore – this is indeed a misconception, as suggested by some scholars. More importantly, this article has revealed that it is Singaporeans, notably some of their political leaders, who are lost in their understanding of Britain's 1958 transfer of Christmas Island to Australia and have, often inadvertently, misled their compatriots into thinking that sovereignty over the island had rested with and should belong to Singapore.

This brief survey of newspaper accounts of and oral histories on Christmas Island in Singapore shows that the postcolonial PAP government never publicly clarified the transfer of Christmas Island by London to Canberra. In fact, its ministers and officials, as well as the state-controlled news media,

perpetuated many Singaporeans' misconception of the island as a lost territory of Singapore. That said, while attentive to the exhaustion of phosphate deposits and the worsening of labor relations on Christmas Island, Singapore's newspapers did not contain editorials and commentaries that revealed a latent irredentism among Singaporeans. Whether such editorials and commentaries existed or were censored from print may never be known. With the advent of the internet, which has, to some extent, provided netizens with an anonymous and freer platform to publicize ideas without going through conventional, censored media, sporadic opinions on whether Christmas Island was a lost territory of Singapore resurfaced. Online articles located on Google by using the keywords "Singapore and Christmas Island" display a misperception of the circumstances surrounding the island's transfer. Although the lack of historical knowledge among Singaporeans is a culprit (Loh 1998), the absence of a formal disavowal of interest in Christmas Island by the PAP government constitutes the main cause. Perhaps more importantly, a kind of irredentism disguised as historical fact might have been embraced by some Singaporeans for the mere joy of imagination. Although this might not have geopolitical implications, the confusion among these Singaporeans concerning their nation's relationship with Christmas Island reflects the amnesia or selective memory they have when viewing their past.

In the realm of memories of Christmas Island's relationship with Singapore, the social reality of geopolitical vulnerability and economic growth underlie the textual forms of historical representation in newspapers and oral history transcripts. As Hayden White has famously asked, "Could we ever narrativize without moralizing" (White 1987, 25)? The answer is emphatically no – but we can do even more than that. PAP cadres and ministers, either intentionally or unwittingly, have not only moralized the transfer of Christmas Island; they have also shown that an island outside Singapore can be a site of memory for sustaining national narratives and political legitimacy. For them, the "loss" or "sale" of Christmas Island is useful, even when, or precisely because, it reveals the vulnerabilities of the Singaporean nation. Although Singaporeans have not designated either Australia or Britain as the so-called evil other who "robbed" Christmas Island from them, and although they have not nursed a grievance or developed it into a manifest nationalism, nonetheless, they believe that with good government, Christmas Island might have stayed with Singapore. Though this government did not yet actually exist, with some creative projection onto the past, it would undoubtedly have been the PAP. No matter the continuing aspirations or assumptions, one thing is certain: Singapore did not lose Christmas Island, for it was never in its possession.

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